

# RETURN OF THE ICE AGE

BY JOHN CUDMORE  
Staff Writer

Here's a bold un-Canadian statement: minor hockey is not the fastest growing sport in the country.

While that's a claim other activities are eager to make — soccer, for instance claims the most registrants nationwide — it seems little sleep is being lost in the minor hockey community.

Given the rabid popularity hockey maintains in our culture, that's not a huge surprise. Still, there are cracks appearing in the armour of the mighty hockey machine.

Despite its status as the country's No. 1 sporting pastime, growth in minor hockey has been relatively flat in recent seasons following an intriguing dip in numbers.

It's easy to make a case the sport is a victim of its own popularity and could not possibly maintain the hectic pace it had set, particularly among females.

While far from a panic mode, officials in minor hockey circles are at least cognizant their sport may have hit a wall.

"We seem to have hit a plateau," said OMHA executive director Richard Ropchan. "One thing we're trying to do is encourage new participants in to the game. In Toronto and even north, we think everyone knows all about hockey."

Three or four years ago, the OMHA's registration numbers were close to 133,000, including players, officials and team officials. Last season, that figure dropped to approximately 129,000. Finding an explanation is no simple matter.

"I can't tell you why the numbers change," said Mr. Ropchan. "We know hockey is Canada's pastime, but those coming into the country aren't necessarily thinking about it that way."

Newmarket Minor Hockey Association president Stephen Paine is aware of the decrease. In fact, the NMHA projects 1,800 registrations for the 2007-08 season, about 100 fewer than last season. Just a few years ago, the organization was burgeoning on 2,200 players.

"I'm not sure if it's demographics as much as a cyclical thing," said Mr. Paine, pointing to heavy graduation at the upper age groups and slower registration rates at the entry level.

Some might have thought it strange the NMHA participated at Canada Day celebrations to promote its game.

"We're trying to get people not thinking about playing hockey to get thinking and playing hockey," Mr. Paine said. "A lot of us grew up playing the game, no questions asked."

Mr. Ropchan is confident kids will fall in love with hockey once they start to play, but getting started is sometimes the problem.

"If a kid shows interest, we should provide opportunities to play. I know there are kids

## ARE YOU READY TO HIT THE ICE?

Athletic therapist Mark MacDougall BSc. CATC of Upper Canada Sports Medicine in Newmarket compiled a checklist for adult players to consider before jumping into the hockey season.

- ▶ Consult your doctor. Your mind may say 20, but you're really not that young stud anymore.
- ▶ Be aware of any history of heart disease in your family. If you haven't had a recent physical or if you have any concerns, it is always best to get clearance from your physician before you begin a new season.
- ▶ Usually that annoying low back pain that flairs up three or four times a year or the twinge in your shoulder the day after playing can be rectified by a trained professional. It probably is not as complicated as it seems. A biomechanical analysis, one or two treatments, a stretching and strengthening program to correct any muscular imbalances may be all that is necessary.
- ▶ If you're in relatively decent shape and have cleared the first two points, strongly consider a cardio program before you even step on the ice. Fifteen minutes three times a week is recommended. Whether it is a brisk walk, treadmill, stationary bike, elliptical or light jog, activity can establish a good base for your upcoming season.
- ▶ Stretching is a necessary evil. Stretching is uncomfortable, maybe even painful and most people avoid it at all costs. Most players don't realize the benefits of stretching until they are injured. Simply by stretching a muscle twice for 30 to 40 seconds over a period of two weeks can be a preventive measure. Hockey players should focus on the groin, hamstring, quadriceps, hip flexor and gluteal muscles.
- ▶ Stretch before you play. Too many players run into the rink five minutes before game time. The best time to stretch is when your core body temperature has risen two degrees or when you have broken a sweat. Skate around the ice for a couple of minutes, break a sweat and stretch in front of the bench before the puck drops.

on waiting lists in a lot of centres. Still, hockey registrations, by and large, remain a comfortable fit for the number of facilities available. In Whitchurch-Stouffville, numbers appear on the

upswing as a projected 800 kids are expected to register for the 2007-08 season.

But even with a new rink slated to come on line in 2009, Whitchurch-Stouffville Minor Hockey Association president Mike Humphreys wonders if registration will zoom at that time.

"I don't think the population will reflect in our numbers as Stouffville grows," Mr. Humphreys said. "It's just too expensive of a sport for a lot of families to pursue."

Eric Kopsala agrees, noting the East Gwillimbury Minor Hockey Association registration numbers have fluctuated in recent seasons.

"We were nervous because our prices are going up and we're always worried about pushing hockey out of reach for those wanting to try it for the first time," said Kopsala, the secretary-registrar for the EGMHA which projects a slight decrease from last season's 681 registrants. "Then you have to throw in the cost of equipment."

He noted numbers last season were on par with the 2004-05 season (683) prior a decrease of nearly 10 per cent for the 2005-06 season (620).

The fact remains, though, hockey is competing with far more other athletic activities for member. Often those activities are better for a family budget, too.

"We are attempting to reach those families who have not enrolled again this year to determine why their children are not playing," said Richmond Hill Hockey Association president Rahul Shastri, who, despite static overall numbers of 2,000 to 2,100, including Oak Ridges, is anticipating reduced registration for the younger age groups.

Despite a growing population in the area, numbers at the registration tables don't reflect an increase in Markham, said Markham Waxers vice-president Harry Brailsford, pointing to close to 2,000 players based on house league numbers in Markham, Unionville and part of Thornhill which falls under the Markham umbrella.

"There are groups which don't play or embrace hockey at all," he said. "I wouldn't want to admit losing (numbers), but it's a fact of life."



### PICK-UP, ANYONE?

Whitchurch-Stouffville pick-up hockey  
...Stouffville Arena... Age 14 and older, Tuesday and Friday, 11:10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Starts Oct. 2  
-townofws.com



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