

Get off the panic button, eh – hockey's only a game

Listening to the critics and the skeptics, you'd think we had a real-life national crisis on our hands.

As if we were lamenting the Third World state of some of our First Nations communities or the pox that is youth unemployment in Canada.

But we're talking hockey.

Sport.

A pastime.

Fantasy.

Hockey.

Hey, I love the game. I grew up on a park that was ice half the year. Was on the board of the Jr. A Spirit for 11 years. I'm all over the Olympic games today and tomorrow. Been to about 10 NHL rinks.



Off The Top

with Jim Mason

But does it really matter if fewer Canadian kids are playing the game?

That it's No. 3 in youth sport registration numbers in the land? That we might lose our supposed grip on global domination of hockey?

Hey, 1972 called. It wants its near-national catastrophe back.

Ex-NHLer turned commentator Brad May was on a panel on Sportsnet that discussed solutions to the problem this week.

When "May Day" was an elementary school kid knee-high to Don Cherry and growing up in Stouffville, this was a rural village. It was also a different era. You split your sporting year between hockey and softball, if you were a boy. Girls hockey and soccer came later.

Now, soccer registration outnumbered or at least rivals hockey here,

just as it does across the country.

Blame it on hockey-like pro dreams if you want, but many other sports are also offering year-round experiences and expectations.

Stouffville kids can play the likes of baseball, soccer, golf, badminton, basketball and tennis indoors within a half-hour of their homes in most cases. Stouffville has its own martial arts, fine arts and dance studios.

And then there is the gaming and computer crowd that stole so many hockey players.

Stouffville may be the reigning fastest growing small burgh in the land. But have you seen a class photograph or the line-up at a school bus stop lately? How about a census? Many of you weren't born here. You

might not know hockey from curling. Nothing wrong with that.

Chances are you grew up with soccer or cricket.

You'll pass that on to your kids, the way many fourth-generation Canadian moms and dads do hockey.

We know hockey's more expensive than most sports. But municipalities and private operators aren't likely to drop the price of ice rentals. Same for the companies making \$300 sticks, gloves, helmets, pads and pants.

It's reality, Canada.

And it's just a game.

Jim Mason is editor of The Sun-Tribune.

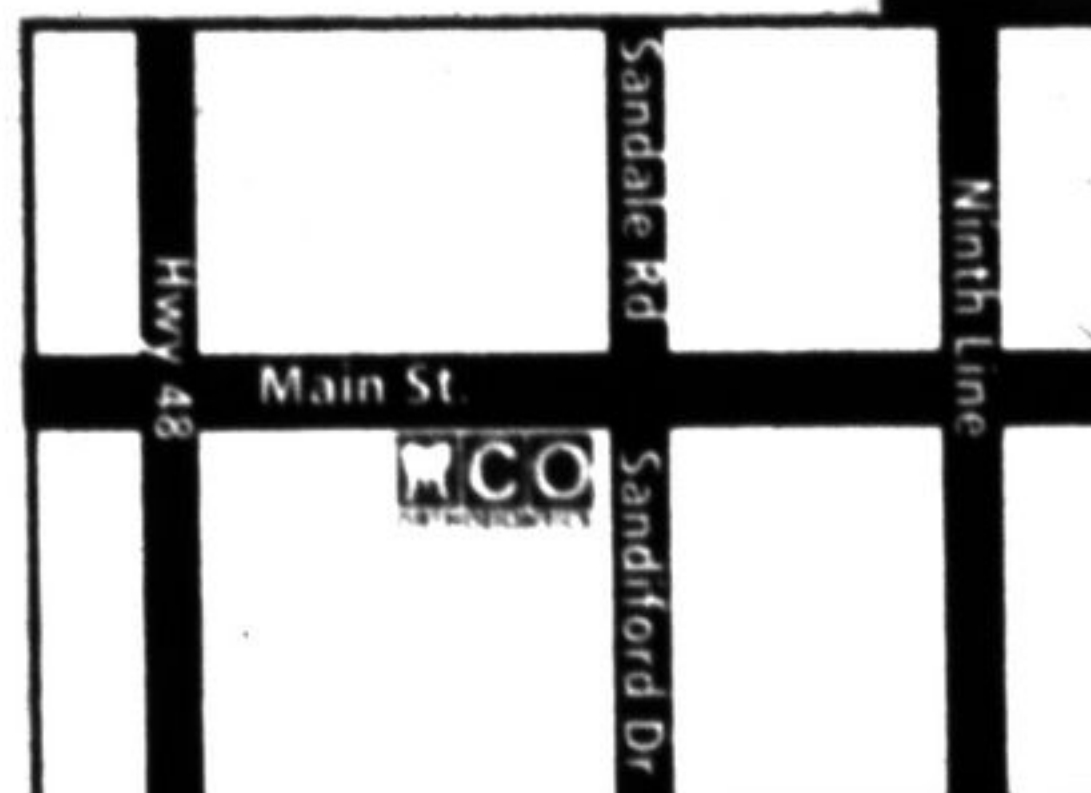
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