

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE GREATER TORONTO HOCKEY LEAGUE & ITS MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS

breakout

MAGAZINE

SPECIAL ISSUE:
CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION



**GTHL ALL-STAR TEAM
OF THE CENTURY**

- ★ DON CHERRY
- ★ LEAGUE HISTORY
IN PHOTOGRAPHS





OPENING DOORS

THE GTHL REALIZES THAT INTRODUCING NEW CANADIANS TO THE GAME OF HOCKEY IS KEY TO FUTURE GROWTH
BY MONIKA MORAVAN

Hockey and Toronto make a perfect pair; they're both incredibly diverse.

Common names from the GTHL's rookie season 100 years ago like Miller, Smith, and Cook still adorn jerseys but they now play alongside new Canadians. Adding these new branches to hockey's family tree has taken on greater importance as immigration boosts our population yet league registrations decline in certain areas. According to Scott Oakman, GTHL executive director, there's a good explanation for this conundrum.

"You have people who are not only new to Canada but they're coming from countries where they've never heard of the game of hockey," says Oakman. With all the struggles involved in adjusting to life in a new land, walking into an arena to find out what's going on inside the large, chilly building isn't a priority for immigrants or those with financial challenges.

It is a priority for the GTHL and its affiliate, the Mississauga Hockey League. Last year the MHL started the Tim Hortons Got Hockey program to get kids who have never played hockey on the ice.

"We started at two facilities in Mississauga," says Jon Kursikowski, MHL Director, Marketing and Community Relations. With equipment

donated through an Ontario Trillium Foundation Grant and the NHLPA, kids can borrow all necessary equipment for the duration of the eight-week training program at Mississauga Valley and Malton arenas. The only cost to participants is \$35 for insurance and it's working. "We get them hooked on the game and playing from there," Kursikowski says.

Scarborough, in Toronto's east end, has benefited from an influx of cultural diversity but there have been some growing pains. So much so that in 2009 a "Task Force on the State of Hockey in Scarborough" was created to address the reasons why the national game was falling off the local radar in an area that has given the NHL many players, including Wayne Simmonds, Anson Carter, Mike Ricci, Peter Zedel, and Rick Tocchet.

Ward 37 Councillor Michael Thompson co-chaired the committee along with Oakman. A lifelong resident of Scarborough and seventh-generation Canadian, Thompson knows firsthand about the changes.

"When I was a boy, there were very few young black kids that actually played hockey," he says. "When I played house league in Scarborough there were very few people who looked like me and we didn't have quite the diversity we have now."



“Sports is beyond any racial barrier. Hockey, or whatever sport it may be, is dependent on just one thing, and that’s how good you are and how hard you want to work to become a great player or a great team.”

Part of that diversity is reflected in Vinay Virmani’s film, “Breakaway.” A second generation Canadian whose parents were born in India, Virmani has played hockey since childhood.

“I’m a huge, huge hockey fan,” he says. “I love hockey so much and saw so many talented boys within my own community that all these things added up while I was writing the film.”

One of the themes addressed in “Breakaway” explains why some parents are reluctant to get their kids involved.

“My character wants to become a professional hockey player and he’s torn between the expectations of following his parents’ dreams and his own dreams,” says Virmani. Once his father saw Virmani’s drive and willingness to work hard for his goal, the support came more easily.

Digging deep resulted in collaboration between the Don Mills Civitan Hockey League and Toronto Police Services 54 Division to create the Pro Action Hockey League in 2009.

David Croutch, DMCHL president, had been trying to put together the program for some time to address the significant demographic shifts in Flemington Park and Thorncliffe Park.

“At one time we had 15,000 participants,” recalls Croutch, talking about the DMCHL. There were roughly 180 or so when he joined the organization 25 years ago.

PAHL started with 64 players and has doubled, but the best measure of success is parental involvement. Adil Patel, whose nephew plays in the league, is the new president. Previously, police volunteers served on the Board of Directors.

Patel was born in England and came to Canada in 1974 as a child, originally settling in Cambridge. While unfamiliar with hockey at first, he took to it quickly.

“In a smaller community, you’re pretty well born and raised playing hockey,” he says. Growing up Patel remembers him and his brother





being the only South Asians playing in his neighbourhood, a far cry from the league he now heads. “There are so many different cultures and people from different backgrounds.”

Moe Rutherford, a goalie coach and member of the Task Force on the State of Hockey in Scarborough, is working to maintain and expand that diversity by making equipment more affordable to all families. He’s the Hockey Project Coordinator for the Hockey ReUse Equipment Bank.

A partnership between Goodwill, the GTHL, the City of Toronto and equipment cleaning company Fresh Gear, the pilot program accepts hockey equipment for resale.

At present the program is only available at one Goodwill location, (350 Progress Avenue, Scarborough) but Rutherford plans on expanding over the next few years.

“Cost is an issue for many families, especially newcomers,” admits Rutherford. He recalls his blue-collar parents couldn’t really afford hockey but saw the long-term benefits. “My dad said, ‘The reason we put you in hockey was to keep you off the streets and out of trouble.’”

Constable Bob Alvey, 54 Division, talks about how hockey has helped break down communications barriers between the police and the community.

“It’s really opened up the community,” says Alvey, a volunteer PAHL coach. “Parents come up to us and casually mention things that are happening in their building and certain problems they may be having.”

With less than 10% of Canadian kids registered in hockey programs, Oakman sees potential, not problems.

“That creates an incredible opportunity for hockey to grow if we just reach out and do it properly, give people the information they need to have to realize how great of a game it is,” he says.

Vinay Vermani sees the same thing.

“Sports is beyond any racial barrier. Hockey, or whatever sport it may be, is dependent on just one thing, and that’s how good you are and how hard you want to work to become a great player or a great team,” the filmmaker says. “The colour of your skin or your appearance is irrelevant when it comes to playing the game, any game.”

Hockey fans have known this all along. After all, the only colours that matter are those on the jersey. ●

