

Lucky Torontonians get to skate in the rain

January 15, 2012 - 4:35am BY RYAN LUM AND MARK DANCE | OPEN ICE



Equipment rental at Dufferin Grove Park in Toronto offers new Canadians the chance to learn to skate. (MARK DANCE)

Our outdoor hockey road trip seemed to be taking a turn for the worse as we drove through the pouring rain into Toronto. The temperature was well above freezing and conditions looked more favourable for a swim than for a skate.

But as we got farther into town, we started to spot games of shinny hockey in large, well-lit outdoor rinks. We soon discovered Canada's metropolis has the best winter can offer: 51 outdoor rinks, all outfitted with refrigeration systems — the most compressor-cooled outdoor rinks of any city in the world.

This means that one of Canada's warmest places has one of the country's longest skating seasons. The cooling system can keep the surface hard and smooth up to 15 C, so T-shirt hockey in March is common.

The outdoor rinks are well-used and well-maintained. The majority of rinks are flooded by Zambonis, ensuring a smooth coat every time.

But the system does not come cheap. Each double pad rink, one half of the surface for skating and the other for shinny hockey, costs more than \$1 million to build. Utilities for the whole system can cost up to \$3 million each season.

And we discovered another cost — the high traffic and big investments demand a certain level of operational structure. The system needs rules.

On our first visit to a Toronto city rink, we were immediately greeted by a city-employed rink attendant, a kind of rink sheriff. He informed us unequivocally that our over-17 age group had another 20 minutes before we could start playing.

While we waited, we examined the list of guidelines for rink use: approved helmets only, no food, no headphones. The list went on.

No sooner had we finally skated onto the ice than the sheriff threatened to remove the nets if several teens did not leave after they had failed to produce proof of age.

Most Toronto rinks we played on had the same strict regulations. We eventually came to grips with the idea that outdoor hockey in Toronto is a service and services come with rules. We realized that in a city of 2.5 million, there might be no other way for people to play.

But just as we started to reconcile ourselves to the Toronto bureaucracy, we found Dufferin Grove Park. Located in the city's west end the park sits at the intersection of different racial and economic groups, making it the perfect spot for an experiment in community participation.

Locals host a farmers market in the rink's shack every Thursday afternoon and the Zamboni garage houses the props of a local

theatre troupe. There's a cantina that sells homemade goodies. Those who can't afford their own equipment can rent skates and sticks.

But instead of applauding these efforts, community activists say the city has often reacted with hostility. Local organizer Jutta Mason says the struggle for more autonomy has been lengthy.

"The city went after us and told us we weren't doing things right," she says. "There were six months of negotiation where the city was telling their staff that they were working too closely to the community."

So far, the park has remained strong. However, Mason notes that a looming labour dispute between the mayor and the city workers' union could mean the end of outdoor ice: the city will "turn off the compressors and lock the gates," she says.

But Mason raises the possibility that at some Toronto rinks, in the event of a labour stoppage, "union members could help neighbourhood people to flood."

As Dufferin Grove shows, collaboration between community members and city employees can lead to more vibrant community rinks

Mark Dance and Ryan Lum are travelling through Eastern Canada to find the best outdoor hockey experiences.

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