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The Fairmount Park ice masters take pains to make ice — and winter



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A sign just went up at the top of Fairmount Park. It reads: “Winterfest. Feb. 11, 2 to 5. Hockey. Toboggan. Music. BBQ. Prizes.”

At the bottom of the park near Coxwell Ave. and Gerrard St. E., a group of men pace around a mud pit, penned in by wooden boards. This is the hockey rink they built back in November and have been diligently flooding since New Year’s Day with nothing to show for it.

“It’s only negative 2 degrees,” says Jeff Smylie. “Is it worth trying again?”

“It’s going up to 4 degrees tomorrow,” counters Ray Bernard. “We flooded it three times last night and had some nice ice going. Look at it now.”

“I have 10 baseball mitts,” says Keith Rudyk.

“Anyone have a croquet set?”

A couple nights to Winterfest and still no winter.

What to do?

The winter that never was has been a boon for runners and cyclists and coyotes. For the natural ice rink aficionados across the city, it’s been misery.

We go up to the local bar to drown our sorrows.

“We’ve only had four days of skating this season,” says Bernard, an ex-linebacker with the Saskatchewan Roughriders, sipping some light ale. “Last year, we had ice the week before Christmas. Last year, we had winter.”

The story of the Fairmount Park ice masters is one of community spirit and legacy.

Their two rinks — one for shinny, the other for pleasure skating — are among the oldest natural ice rinks still running in Toronto.

Locals say they've been built every winter for at least 50 years. Until the early 1990s, city parks and recreation workers managed them — erecting the boards, hooking up the hoses at night, spraying down enough water for a good base and later smoothing out the ruts with steel scrapers. Then came the city cuts, and “frills” like natural ice rinks were axed from the budget. It seemed that Fairmount Park would become an empty wintry field, and locals would fall asleep without the comforting nightly sound of pucks clattering off the boards.

Instead, the ice masters were born.

“We all grew up skating on natural ice rinks,” says Barry Ross, a real estate executive. “We wanted to carry on that tradition.”

City workers trained them to work the scrapers, run the hoses and thaw the fittings with propane torches. That first winter, they started with a handful of volunteers. Last year, their number had grown to 40. This year, they have a roster of 60, divided into crews with captains.

Who says community spirit is dead in this country?

Over the years, ice rinks have become the village square. That's where neighbours gather on weekends. It's where they send their kids, knowing another parent will watch over them and shepherd them home if they get hurt. At night, it's where friendships are sprayed down, gelled and smoothed.

“After we do an actual flood and have a couple beers,” says Paul Hart, a documentary filmmaker, “we walk home past a pristine sheet of light with the moon on it. It's nice.”

A few members got to talking about music during one ice-making shift and formed a band called Wendy and Her Lost Boys. They debuted that first Winterfest three years ago.

Ross lugged over the antique woodstove from his garage to brew hot chocolate and cider. Bernard rolled over his barbeque for hotdogs. Someone donated a wooden stage for the bands.

There wasn't enough snow on the hill that weekend, so some ice masters roared over to the nearby Ted Reeves Arena in their trucks and scooped up enough Zamboni tailings for two toboggan tracks down the hill. They held Olympic races.

Clearly, this is not the crew to be dissuaded by a little unseasonal weather.

Since I left them, the ice masters have been checking the forecast hourly, emailing each other fallback schemes and blue-sky scenarios.

Suddenly, the cold snap looks like it might stick.

Their latest plan: to flood every hour throughout the night and Saturday morning. Then, at 6 a.m., they will head to the arena for more toboggan fodder.

“We're committed,” says Bernard. “This could all somehow work out.”

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