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Photo courtesy of MIKE ALBERICI



By MIKE ALBERICI

For the Monitor

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My Turn: Behind the scenes at Black Ice

By MIKE ALBERICI

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It's a cold, rainy Saturday morning in early January. The Black Ice Pond Hockey Championship tournament is still a few weeks off, and I've met organizer Chris Brown at an industrial garage off Regional Drive. Behind the garage are two large storage containers, each the size of a semi-truck.

The Black Ice tournament lives in quiet solitude for most of the year – 361 days, to be exact – inside these two containers. Each year, on the final day of the tournament, everything is quickly disassembled and put into the containers. The containers are trucked behind the garage and left for most of the year. Then, a few weeks before the next tournament, a group of volunteers meets to take inventory and fix any broken equipment from last year. Today is that day.

If you've attended the raucous weekend hockey tournament in White Park, or even driven by in the warmth of your car, you've no doubt wondered how in the world the organizers pull it off. That's what I wanted to find out, too – which is how I found myself on Regional Drive inspecting an unlikely heap of hockey equipment.

Brown has arrived early and has opened the containers for me to inspect. The first one is packed tight. The sideboards for the tournament's eight rinks are stacked like firewood. Behind them are half a dozen wheelbarrows piled to the ceiling. Sponsors' signs fill the left half of the unit. Two dozen double-wide shovels are lined up down the middle.

The other unit is even more crowded. Here sit the iconic symbols of the hockey tournament: the goals, made of pine boards and painted Black Ice blue. Twenty of them sit in a pile of semi-shattered wood, the remnants of last year's on-ice assault. A stack of 5-gallon buckets full of pucks from the previous tournament sits next to a bin of safety netting. There's a large roll of carpet used so players can walk from the locker room to the ice without damaging their blades. Players' benches fill the rest of the container.

Inside the garage more equipment is waiting. Rolled-up carpet remnants lie by the back door. These were used inside the players' tent last year and now need to be cleaned. A pair of fire barrels, engraved with the Black Ice logo wait for their turn to burn brightly. And then there are the pucks, the most coveted, and often pocketed, souvenir by Black Ice patrons and children. Ten cases of them, more than 1,000 total, sit along a wall, newly printed with the Black Ice logo on one side and the sponsors' name on the other. Brown busts open a new case and hands me a fresh puck. I feel like the boy in *The Polar Express* when Santa gives him the bell.

The door opens and a group of Black Ice volunteers enters with coffee and doughnuts in hand. There's a little small talk, then the guys get to work. They have all done this before. Three guys grab a huge carpet and roll it out on the garage floor. It's a mess from last year, covered with sand, muck and tiny bits of rolled up hockey tape. John Stevenson dons a backpack vacuum cleaner and gets to work.

Meanwhile another group of volunteers begins moving the goals from the container to a makeshift workbench inside the garage. Though they are made of solid wood, most cannot withstand the constant assault from pucks over the three-day tournament. Almost all are in bad shape. The fronts that face the shooters are shredded, and large pieces of wood are missing around the foot-wide scoring slots. Many of the backs are blown out completely. The guys descend on the goals with power tools in hands: cutting, nailing and replacing broken boards.

After a few hours, the work is completed. The freshly cleaned carpets are rolled up and stacked. Newly assembled shovels are lined up inside the containers. The repaired goals are stacked up to the ceiling. The containers will sit locked for a few more days.

Gorgeous shine of blue gray

On the morning before the 2014 Black Ice tournament, White Park is relatively quiet. Aside from a small crew of city workers applying a final layer of water onto the pond, there's little evidence that one of Concord's biggest events of the year is about to take place.

It's brutally cold, only 3 degrees, but the ice is a gorgeous shine of blue gray: nearly perfect, without a single blade mark on it. On the east end of the pond the concession tent is already up, and workers are inside laying down a plastic-tile floor.

The parking lot is filled with power generators and mobile light units. It's still quiet, but not for long.

Brown arrives on the scene with a trailer towing a brand-new John Deere "Gator" ATV, donated to the tournament for the weekend. As city workers finish spraying the ice, an army of volunteers arrives at the park.

As if on cue, dozens of them, all dressed for the arctic weather, descend on the containers and begin to unload. It's hard to recognize a familiar face, as they're all wearing hats, hoods, ski-goggles and face masks to fight the bitter cold.

The rinks need to be set up first, and all the pieces are taken out of the containers and sorted on the banks of the pond. Each of the eight rinks at the tournament has about 40 separate sections, which are bolted together on the ice, like Legos.

Steve Arndt oversees the sorting and gives instructions to the volunteers.

Corner pieces go in one pile, doubles in another, flats in a third, and broken ones go in a repair area, where a crew removes the bolts and replaces parts. It's chaos for a few minutes until everything is all laid out.

'Labor of love'

Just getting the hundreds of 12-foot sections out onto the ice is difficult. They're long, awkward and heavy and must be walked out one at a time across the frozen pond. The cold and the wind make the walk even more difficult, but the crew works slowly and cautiously with smiles on their faces.

"This is a labor of love!" I hear a volunteer say to another as they pass on the ice.

A neighbor who lives across the street from White Park arrives. He introduces himself as Dave and says he saw the workers setting up in the cold and thought they could use a hand. He immediately gets to work moving boards onto the ice.

There is an enormous sense of community at White Park pond on set-up day. "These are all volunteers from the Concord area," Arndt says. "At other for-profit hockey tournaments, these guys are all paid. At Black Ice, they're all local volunteers who all love the game and the local history. That's what makes this one different."

By 10 a.m. the park is a flurry of activity. A truck towing the Black Ice merchandise trailer arrives and backs into its spot on the north shore of the pond. White Street is closed off, and a crew of workers is busy raising the players' tent. Heating units are installed in the concession tent.

Moose on fire

Along the south shore a fire pit has been arranged containing the huge moose sculpture that used to sit in front of Steve Duprey's downtown Smile Building. It's a 30-foot upright moose made of woven branches and twigs. It will be the centerpiece of a huge bonfire on the first day of the tournament.

"Steve called me with the idea," said Brown, "So we dragged it over here and we're going to burn it!"

Meanwhile a piece of Concord history is being made. Two new signs are being erected in White Park just in time for the start of the tournament. Designed by Andy Hodgkins of United Sign Associates, the signs are beautiful additions to the park and feature the iconic White Park bridge arching between two stately posts of Swenson granite.

Hodgkins is on site, putting the finishing touches on the sign, cutting a sliver of material off the arch, before raising it into place with a crane. He smiles proudly and gives the double thumbs-up.

The rinks are still being assembled. The crew puts the last pieces into place like a giant jigsaw puzzle.

Meanwhile more and more equipment is being dropped off at the park, much of it donated by local vendors.

A truck with two dumpsters arrives. Crowd control fences are dropped off. Propane tanks to heat the players' tent are connected to a massive furnace. Picnic tables are set up around the park, as are lighting towers, sponsor signs and dozens of trash cans. There are more generators than I can count.

Two-dozen wheelbarrows, used to remove snow from the rinks, appear. The pucks arrive. Safety netting is raised. Stacks of firewood are delivered. Carpets for the players' tent are rolled out. Stacks of tournament programs are being moved into the main office. A PA system and tournament scoreboard is raised.

Staggering amount of work

The amount of work to be accomplished in a single day is staggering. But the volunteers do it all, gladly, each year, despite the cold and the wind.

As I watch White Park slowly transform into Black Ice, I feel the sense of pride that Concord takes from the tournament. Only in its fourth year, the community quickly embraced it and made it ours. Black Ice feels old, as if it's a part of our longer history, already.

Most of the volunteers I meet are hockey players who play in other tournaments across the country. Many tell me that Black Ice feels special. And it's true. Black Ice is our one little weekend of winter community magic. It's a reflection of our values as a community. There are those who say there is nothing to do in Concord. But there's plenty to do if you are willing to get motivated and engage yourself in the people, culture and history around you. Black Ice is the essence of that Concord spirit in every way.

Today, after the last puck is dropped, the volunteers, already exhausted from four days of work, will remove all traces of the tournament. Vendors will disassemble and collect their equipment and remove it all. By tomorrow morning, the only evidence of the tournament will be the two new signs at White Park. All the equipment will go back into the containers and will be shipped up to Regional Drive. Black Ice will rest silently in the dark, leaving us only a weekend of rich memories, until next year.

(Mike Alberici lives in Concord.)

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