



Photos by JOHN TULLY/MONITOR STAFF

From left, Tom Painchaud, Tom Dustin and Gregg Fournier work to piece together wooden frames to build six hockey rinks Thursday afternoon at White Park in Concord. Players and volunteers worked to assemble the rinks for the start of the Black Ice Pond Hockey tournament that started Friday.

Freezing the puck

Hockey tourney takes players back to roots

By CAMERON KITTLE
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Hockey's pre-game ritual is always the same: Players strap on pads, tighten skates and tug jerseys over their shoulders.

But the moment changes when a 100-foot tent becomes the locker room, snow shovels displace Zambonis and organized hockey turns from the rink to the pond.

More than 350 players will skate out in the brisk January air this weekend to compete in Concord's White Park for the city's first 1883 Black Ice Pond Hockey Championship, which started Friday and will continue today and Sunday.

Chris Brown, a Concord native and one of the tournament's organizers, said the games will bring back Concord's "historical allure," which shows that the first official game of hockey was played in the city at St. Paul's School in 1883; hence, the tournament's name.

"It's a very interesting history for a small town," Brown said. "This tournament is there to rekindle that history, to honor it."

Brown said he has played hockey all



Players and volunteers, from left, Brad Sawyer, Tom Dustin and Gregg Fournier, joke around while working to set up the frames of six hockey rinks at White Park in Concord on Thursday afternoon in preparation for the weekend's hockey games.

his life, and grew up playing on city ponds. Now, at 40, he knows how lucky this generation has it and wanted to

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the old ways.

"With indoor facilities and hockey rinks in every town, we've been spoiled," he said. "This is a return to the purist way of the game, from where it started."

The ice at White Park will feature six rinks, Brown said, which measure about 65 by 120 feet each. Teams of seven men or women will play four-on-four with no goalies and no nets. Goal scorers will have to slide the puck into a small, 6-by-2-foot box that rises only 6 inches off the ground.

It changes the game in a big way, Brown said.

"It's about stick skill and finding the open space," he said. "In regular hockey, some guys can take a slap shot and barrel it past the goalie. Those guys won't be very good at this."

Other old-school rules will be in effect too, which means no referees.

"The teams police themselves," Brown said. "There's a

set of rules we hope everyone abides by, just like we played when everyone was growing up."

Outdoor hockey games have been on the rise across all levels of the sport. The National Hockey League started the annual Winter Classic game on New Year's Day in 2008 and has had huge success each year since. The U.S. Pond Hockey Championships in Minnesota had more than 250 teams from 33 states and four countries play last week in just its sixth year of competition.

"There's been a renaissance of interest in playing hockey outdoors," Brown said.

The first New England Pond Hockey Classic on Lake Winnepesaukee in Meredith last February localized Brown's idea and made it seem more realistic for Concord.

"Ours is not as big as some others, but this is year one," Brown said. "It's all been done through grass roots and by mouth. We haven't spent really any money."

Concord's tournament will

feature 50 teams, including 33 from the city, in five age and gender divisions. And if the games on Lake Winnepesaukee last year are any indication, the 1883 Black Ice Pond Hockey Championship will be an even bigger attraction next year.

About 140 teams have already signed up for the Meredith tournament next month, which doubles last year's total. The New England Pond Hockey Festival in Rangeley, Maine, has also jumped in popularity from eight teams in 2007 to 42 in 2011.

"Pond hockey tournaments have been up and coming around this area," said Jim Hayes, director of the state's hockey hall of fame, the New Hampshire Legends of Hockey. "It brings you back to a place in time where a lot of us started skating."

Hayes, 57, was born in Concord, and said the tournament will bring players back to relive their old playing days.

"It gives you time to reminisce about how it used to be,"

Hayes said. "You didn't play 60 or 70 games during the season like some youth leagues do now. You skated after school until you had to come home for dinner."

The money raised will be pooled to help other skating spots, too, Brown said, especially run-down parks in and around Concord.

"There used to be skating in every park," he said. "Our wish is to put the money back into some areas that the cities and towns don't have the money to maintain."

"If people come and have a great time, then next year it can continue to grow and become an economic boost to the city, as well as a revenue opportunity to maintain the parks."

The winning teams in each division will take home a custom trophy, made to honor more of Concord's hockey history.

In the sport's early days, St. Paul's high school students would travel to New York City to play college teams, such as Yale or Princeton, in an annual Christmas tournament.

The winning school received a special wooden stick made to replicate the one used by Hobey Baker, who was a St. Paul's alum from the early 1900s and a talented player at Princeton. He's now known for having his name represent the award given to the best college hockey player in the country each year.

Baker's stick was straight, with no curve, Brown said, and the winning pond hockey teams this weekend will each get a similar model of their own, just like the old trophies.

"We had a local cabinet maker make these sticks out of ash that would look like the old relic," Brown said. "We also had a local artist etch onto them in an old style that we thought would be kind of neat."

Joe Farrelly, 55, is a Concord native who was part of the five-man board that helped organize the tournament. He has lived in the state's capital for 20 years, since he moved back with his wife, and played hockey since fourth grade, much of it outdoors. This tournament will bring

him back to his young skating days, he said.

"It's shiny with an organizational twist to it," he said. "As a kid, I spent hours doing the same thing."

This time around, he joked that he'd have "a lot less stamina" on the ice, but he's anxious to play his first organized outdoor game.

"The closer I get to it, the more excited I'm getting," he said. "We all know we're running out of games. It's a great social thing to get a little exercise with a group of guys."

It'll put the city's focus on hockey for a weekend, when there's no football on the Sunday schedule.

"It's taken a dead weekend between the playoffs and the Super Bowl where there's typically nothing going on, and the town is buzzing about it," he said. "Everybody I see said, 'This is going to be great.'"

"We're anticipating a lot of people coming to this thing."

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