



CONCORD

Pond hockey tourney planned for park

January contest goes to game's roots

Grab your stick and sweater. Pond hockey is back in the city where it's said the sport was first played in the United States.

Organizers hope 50 or 60 amateur teams, and many more fans, will flock to the pond in Concord's White Park in late January for the first 1883 Black Ice Pond Hockey Classic.



BEN LEUBSDORF
CITY LIMITS

The tournament, set for Jan. 28-30, is being organized by Chris Brown, the 39-year-old president and chief operating officer of New Hampshire Distributors, who has been working on it since the spring

with David Gill, the city's recreation director.

Brown grew up with hockey and still plays in an adult league Thursday nights at Everett Arena. A big outdoor tournament on a frozen pond, he says, won't just be fun for players and fans — it will connect citizens with the long history of hockey in Concord, and generate improvements to skating facilities across the city.

"I've been involved in hockey for quite a long time in Con-



Monitor file

Players compete in the New England Pond Hockey Classic on Meredith Bay in Lake Winnepesaukee last winter.

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cord, growing up in the city, and I think we've seen a lot of these tournaments pop up, whether it's in New England or the northern states. . . . Playing hockey myself, and playing with a group of guys, we thought it'd be a great idea to have a game in Concord," he said.

The tournament won the city council's endorsement Monday when it voted to give City Manager Tom Aspell the authority to work out a legal agreement with organizers on the use of city parks and other details.

Gill said there will be no direct cost to taxpayers, since team fees and sponsorships are expected to cover the tournament's operating costs as well as provide tens of thousands of dollars in profits that will go toward improving out-

Capital city, black ice

Hockey was born in Canada, but it's believed to have made its first appearance in the United States at St. Paul's School in Concord. The boarding school says the first organized hockey game in U.S. history was played by students there on the Lower School Pond in 1883. (The year is referenced in the name of January's tournament.)

St. Paul's became a prep-hockey powerhouse. The legendary Hobe Baker, a 1909 St. Paul's School graduate and the namesake of college hockey's top award, was a star there before going on to excel in football and hockey at Princeton University. A decorated fighter pilot, Baker died in a crash in France in December 1918, just after the end of World War I.

Bill Matthews, the retiring rector of St. Paul's School, is a former hockey player and coach there who, along with Baker, was inducted into the New Hampshire Hockey Hall of Fame in 2006. Even after the school's first official rink

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sharp skates to skate well on black ice," Matthews recalled. "It was an advantage for St. Paul's teams that knew this ice well. When college teams would come up to play, they weren't quite prepared for the quickness and the slickness of the ice."

Organized hockey moved indoors in the modern era, with enclosed rinks tended by Zamboni machines and unaffected by sun, snow or wind.

But there's something special about skating outside, Matthews said. When he was a St. Paul's student, he said, the then-rector would sometimes declare a "black ice holiday," and students would skate and play shinny, or pick-up hockey. From a mile away, Matthews said, the boys could hear the hard ice settling on the pond.

"It was really a magical sight," he said.

Enthusiasm for hockey's outdoor roots has risen in recent years. The National Hockey League, established in 1917, began playing an annual outdoor game on New Year's

January's tournament, Brown said, will nod to hockey's heritage as well as offer concessions and all the trappings of a modern event.

"There was such a rich history of hockey in the city that a lot of people really didn't know about," Brown said.

'A gentleman's game'

Gill said he expects the city and the classic's organizers to enter into a legal agreement for the tournament by the end of October, and team registration could begin in mid-November.

Brown expects the event to feature four divisions: men's and women's open divisions, plus men's 40 and over and men's 50 and over classes.

Teams can bring seven players, with four on the ice at a time. Games have two 15-minute periods, and each team will play two games each Friday and Saturday. The playoffs in each division will be played Sunday.