

Sledge hockey Paralympians bring sport to Red Square

The Toronto Star

January 23, 2010

By Helen Henderson - Disabilities Reporter

When it comes to hockey, Canada-Russia rivalry is legendary. But teamwork was the hallmark last summer when a couple of Ontarians travelled to Izhevsk to take to the ice.

Todd Sargeant and Sigmund Bernat of the London Blizzard Sledge Hockey team went to introduce the Russians to a highly specialized form of the game, one that is drawing increasing crowds.

It will be front and centre at the Paralympics in British Columbia in March. But you can catch the fever at the 2010 Ontario ParaSport Winter Games in Kingston this weekend. And again next weekend in London at what's billed as the world's largest sledge hockey tournament, running Jan. 29 to 31 at the Western Fair Sports Centre.

Sledge hockey is as rough-and-tumble as anything you will see on ice. The basic rules are the same as the NHL, except many teams, including the London Blizzard, are coed.

Players sit on a narrow sled that has skate blades attached to the bottom. They propel themselves using two specially constructed hockey sticks, about one-third NHL length, with picks on one end.

In the big games, each sled is carefully crafted to fit each player. The Russians started out sharing Canadian equipment but are ordering 84 brand new Canadian-made sledges to help build their national team.

Since Russia will be hosting the 2014 Winter Olympics and Paralympics, there is now a concerted effort underway there to become competitive on the international stage.

"They're determined to be contenders," says Sargeant, who is head coach of both Sledge Team Ontario and the Blizzard as well as being president of the Ontario Sledge Hockey Association.

"They're building the sport using players who have already reached Paralympic status in other sports. And they've already been playing in Red Square."

Under the auspices of the Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO), a volunteer group funded by the Canadian International Development Agency, the Canada-Russia sledge hockey effort is building momentum.

In November, four Russians visited Ontario to see how this province is building the sport and Sargeant, for one, has high hopes for the future.

But, these days, his focus is on building support for the burgeoning Canadian game.

Next weekend's London tournament will feature some 500 players, with 30 teams from all over Ontario as well as Edmonton, Montreal, St. John's, Michigan, Pennsylvania and New York.

Players will compete in two age classifications: juniors, up to age 15, and intermediates, aged 16 and up.

"These are the Paralympians of the future," says Sargeant.

As such, they have something to live up to. Sledge hockey has been a Paralympic sport since the 1994 games in Lillehammer.

The Canadian Paralympic sledge hockey team unveiled this month by Hockey Canada includes 13 players who won gold four years ago in Torino.

For more information, see:

www.ontariosledge.com

torontosledgehockey.com/news/2007.htm

[www.parasports.net/Sledge Hockey/tabid/61/Default.aspx](http://www.parasports.net/Sledge%20Hockey/tabid/61/Default.aspx)

[www.londonblizzard.com/ HockeyLinks.html](http://www.londonblizzard.com/HockeyLinks.html)

[www.hockeycanada.ca /index.php/ci_id/4192/la_id/1.htm](http://www.hockeycanada.ca/index.php/ci_id/4192/la_id/1.htm)

[www.hockeycanada.ca/ index.php/ci_id/16980/la_id/1/ss_id/60000/nr_id/70073.htm](http://www.hockeycanada.ca/index.php/ci_id/16980/la_id/1/ss_id/60000/nr_id/70073.htm)

CBC Radio Producer Ing Wong-Ward will be the keynote speaker at a free symposium on parenting with a disability and the legal system, from 3 p.m. to 9 p.m., Feb. 3 at the Law Society of Upper Canada, 130 Queen St. W.

The session is sponsored by the Ethno-racial People with Disabilities Coalition of Ontario (ERDCO) in collaboration with ARCH Disability Law Centre, the Law Society of Upper Canada and community groups.

Judges, lawyers, child protection workers, advocates, social workers and parents with disabilities are invited.

To register, email: rticzon@lsuc.on.ca, phone: 416-947-3413 (voice) or 416-644-4886 (TTY). ASL, attendant services and real-time captioning will be provided.

Last week's column on the unfortunate treatment I received from a technician administering a mammogram at a major downtown hospital drew a flood of responses.

Next week, I will share some of them, along with ideas on how to improve the relationship between people with disabilities and health care professionals.

Helen Henderson is a freelance writer and disability studies student at Ryerson University. Her column appears Saturdays. helenhenderson@sympatico.ca