

Embracing Hockey the Duluth Way

By Tom Gullen

The attached article is about youth hockey in Duluth, Minnesota. I find it fascinating in many regards:

- A few years back they went away from travel hockey at the Squirt level. In its place are “neighborhood” hockey teams from around six different neighborhoods in Duluth. Kids that go to school together playing hockey together.
- Yes, there are many indoor ice rinks in Duluth. However, these squirt-aged kids play the vast majority of their games outdoors. The older boys and girls and the High School teams get the indoor rinks.
- The outdoor rinks are located throughout each neighborhood. The parents maintain the rinks; they put up the boards, they plow the snow, they flood the ice, and run the Zamboni.
- From this rather simple system of outdoor ice comes one of the top High School teams in the state: Duluth East, and a plethora of Division 1 and Division 3 college players.
- Yes, it is cold and Minnesotans by and large embrace winters.

Many, many years ago, Glencoe had its own hockey program. They had travel and House teams. What those teams gave up in terms of length of the season was made up for with almost unlimited ice for those three months when Watts was open. Eventually the Glencoe program merged into Winnetka.

But we still buy, and use, the Watts Rink over 20 hours a week. There are also abundant times where kids can play pick-up hockey on the small rink and practice countless hours. Soon we will have Gullen’s Pond up and running with another opportunity for daily unstructured hockey time.

In other words, we are blessed with not one, but two, outdoor REFRIGERATED ice rinks in our communities. This is where all our players can hone their skills: practice stickhandling, practice shooting, and just playing and having fun. The opportunities are endless.

We can’t quite do things the Duluth way, but we certainly can do things the Winnetka way....so my advice for the next three months; **Get out and Play!**

Winter classic: Duluth youth hockey keeps it old-school, outdoors

[By Dan Kraker, MPR News](#) - Just a couple of blocks off Lake Superior Wednesday night, Duluth's Portman Park filled with 8- and 9-year-old hockey players and their parents.



The sign at a nearby bank read 14 degrees.

But that didn't faze Portman's 8- and 9-year-old Mites as they took the ice against a team from Glen Avon, another neighborhood park just three miles away.

"Loud and proud ... one, two three, Portman!" they cheered before the game began.

As the kids zoomed around the ice, parents perched atop snow piled high alongside the boards. Nicki Siebert clutched two hand warmers.

"They're for my son, who's the goalie," she said. "His hands are cold, so I'm going to give them to him at halftime."

But despite the numbing temperatures, Siebert said, her son Ben wouldn't have it any other way.

So she and other parents learn to dress for it.

"You don't go anywhere without snow pants, long underwear, warm gloves," Siebert said. "We've all invested in really good, warm outside gear."

Nearby, Laurie Zappa and her husband cheered on their son Wyatt.

"We are full-on hockey parents," Zappa said. "I've got the button, I've got two pairs of socks on!"

She said Wyatt also prefers outdoor hockey.

"There's just the atmosphere of it. They're itching to get outdoors," she said. "They don't care what the weather conditions are."

As youth hockey in Minnesota moves increasingly to cozy but expensive indoor arenas, Duluth stands out: The city is home to one of North America's last all-outdoor youth hockey leagues.



It has seven independent youth hockey organizations that play at their own volunteer-run neighborhood rinks.

"We are set up in a different way than any other organization in our state — and possibly even our country, from what I've seen," said Brett Klosowski, president of the Duluth Amateur Hockey Association.

Klosowski, a full-time hockey referee who travels the country officiating college games, said Duluth is the only city he knows of with neighborhood-run teams that consistently schedule games outdoors.

"You go down to the Twin Cities metro, [and there are] outdoor rinks, but they're just kept up by the cities and the various suburbs and city governments, and the kids can go skate if they want," he said, but the youth hockey associations don't have outdoor programs.

Edina Hockey Association president Mike DeVoe said the weather is just too unpredictable for frequent outdoor games — plus, he said, many kids now play year-round.



"They're not as used to the outdoor skating," he said. "They're more used to indoor skating."

But in Duluth, the kids' outside games require a lot of work from their parents.

Every night the temperature drops below freezing, parent volunteers crank open a giant water hose and flood the rinks at the city's Portman Park. They often stay well past midnight.

"The colder it gets, the better," said Portman Amateur Hockey Association president Todd Ching. "When it gets to 10 to 15 below, is when we do the majority of our flooding."

Tony Maki is the volunteer rink director.

"I think I have pictures as a kid here in 1978," he said.

Back then, Maki was just three years old. His parents flooded the rink, ran fundraisers, drove the Zamboni, sold concessions — all so he could play hockey.

"And so I figure I have to do this now," he said, "because I owe it to the rest of the people that did this all for me when I was growing up, and I didn't realize how much work it was."

Maki said it's worth it for his kids to play outside with their friends from the neighborhood, "and it's not just once in a while, like a novelty," he said. "We have teams come up, and it's kind of neat for them to play a game outside, and their parents take a million pictures. We play that every day!"

Playing outside isn't just an adventure; it also makes hockey more affordable. Indoor ice time in Duluth costs around \$200 an hour. Outdoor hockey — for which parents maintain the rinks and the city pays for water and lights — is mostly free.

Fees for young players run around \$200, said Nicki Siebert, Portman Hockey Association's vice president and concessions director. Kids who play solely inside can pay five times that amount.

"We couldn't make it if we didn't play outside," she said. "You can charge your families (\$500) or \$600, and a lot of our families honestly couldn't afford that."

"It's a selling point for us," said Klosowski, the hockey association president. "By allowing our kids to play outdoors and cutting that ice bill down, it really does reduce the entry-level costs for the mite- and the squirt-age players and their families."

But that's not to say there aren't challenges to playing outdoors. Coach Quentin Roth describes a game at Portman last week that started in the pouring rain — and finished in snow.

"The kids had fun," he said. "They went from not being able to skate and pass the puck because of the slush, to not being able to pass the puck because they couldn't see the puck because there was so much snow on the rink."

But teams have lost a lot of practice time this year because of the warm weather, he said. The same thing has happened in the past two years, too, but then it was often too cold to skate.

Still, after finishing up his game, 8-year-old Wyatt Zappa said there's no place he'd rather be than Portman Park.



"If I miss a game, I literally start crying," he said.

He'd much rather play outside, he said, even if he can't really explain why.

"I don't know why. It's just always came to me that it's better playing outside than inside."

And with that, he turned and skated a few laps around the rink, not quite ready yet to go inside the warming house.