

Hockey's little sister on the rise in Prince George

by Scott Stanfield
This Week Staff

It's been a quarter of a century since ringette - that unique winter sport played with bladeless hockey sticks and a hollow rubber ring - first took shape in Prince George.

Back in 1980 there were only 22 participants, but these days the Prince George Ringette Association registers well over 100 players each season. Although dominated by girls and women, there are a handful of boys who also participate in the local league which consists of several divisions accommodating a variety of ages.

"When we first started, my daughter was playing as a young one on an older team because there weren't teams in her age group," said Keith Sullivan, who coaches and serves on the PGRA executive. "But now we've got two bunny (five to seven years) teams, two novice, two petites and two tweens. The first time ever this year we'll have an open (19 and older) team."

"It's an interesting game," longtime executive member Brian Crandall said. "I took me a while to get my mind wrapped around it because I was a hockey guy from way back when. But it's a great game."

A truly Canadian sport, ringette had its beginnings in 1963 when the first game was played in the Northern Ontario town of Espanola. It is now played in several other countries around the world.

Sometimes referred to as 'the little sister to hockey' or 'floor hockey on ice,' ringette teams

typically consist of 11 to 17 players on a team. Like hockey, there are six skaters on the ice while a team is at full strength.

In Canada, the sport is especially popular in Alberta, Ontario and Quebec.

"There's a national ringette league," Sullivan said. "We've got one girl who just moved to town - she actually played on Team Alberta in that league last year."

Two seasons ago, ringette in Prince George took a bit of a hit when a number of players switched to ice hockey, inspired by the Canadian women's team which won gold at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. However, most have since come back.

A number of Prince George girls attended a recent tryout camp for the B.C. team which will compete at the 2007 Canada Winter Games in Whitehorse. It is approximately a two-year process to put the 25-member team together.

"That's an ongoing thing right now," Crandall said. "I think they had about 100 girls they sent letters to, and they're going to cut it down to about 40 to 50, and then there's going to be three more tryouts October, November and December in the Lower Mainland."

"There's some good potential with our girls up here," Crandall added. "I figure there's probably at least six that could make it to the latter round of cuts."

Sullivan coaches the northern zone team which competes at the B.C. Winter Games this February in Trail. Ten of the 17 members are from Prince George.

"For a lot of them it's their first time ever playing double-A ringette, so it's a big learning curve for them," Sullivan said.

Next month, the association hosts the 14th annual Joy Hoffman Memorial invitational tournament at the Kin Centres. A total of 27 teams attended last year's tournament, which commemorates the memory of the woman who was instrumental in establishing the Northern B.C. Ringette League in the mid-'80s.

"Joy was one of the founders of it here, not just in Prince George but in the north too," Sullivan said. "Her and

her daughter and the kids would travel to Houston, Terrace and Kitimat, trying to get it going. It was successful for a few years."

Hoffman also helped organize the first provincial ringette tournament in Prince George about 17 years ago. The provincials have since been held here on several other occasions.

"We had the nationals here in 2000," Sullivan said. "It was extremely good for the city with 40-some teams coming into town."

For more information about the Prince George Ringette Association, check www.pgringette.org.



A couple of young ringette players take part in a skating enhancement program at the Coliseum. The ringette season starts this month.

Scott Stanfield photo