

For the love of the game

Old Timers hockey league focused on fun, friendship

SHELDON BIRNIE (Article courtesy of Canstar)



Lou Mainella, 80, has been involved with the North Kildonan Old Timers Hockey League for 45 years. While he says his playing days are behind him, he books the icetimes and keeps the league going for the love of the game.

It's been called 'the game of our lives,' and for good reason.

Every winter for nearly 50 years, teams in the North Kildonan Old Timers League have been taking to the ice across northeast Winnipeg to chase the puck around the ice with nothing on the line but a good time. "It's a love of the game, that's about

it," Lou Mainella, organizer of the North Kildonan Old Timers Hockey League, said. "It's a perfect league for a guy who wants to come out and enjoy it, meet some new people." Mainella, 80, joined the league 45 years ago. At that point, the league had been running for a couple of years, and was based out of community centres in North and East Kildonan. For years, Mainella suited up with a group out of Bronx Park.

"I just played on a real great team with great guys," Mainella said. "We still get together. We just had a good time and enjoyed it. I finally quit because someone broke into my garage and stole my equipment! I didn't want to break in new pair of skates."

Currently, the league is made up of six teams from Birds Hill, Transcona, North Kildonan, Morse Place and Melrose Park. Membership over the years has hovered around six to eight teams. In the early days, players had to be 35 and over, while now the league is 45 and over. Teams play about 35 games in the season, or about three every couple weeks, mostly out of Gateway Recreation Centre (1717 Gateway Rd.) and East End Community Centre (517 Pandora Ave. E).

"The ice-times are good, most of the guys are still awake for them," Mainella joked.

What sets the league apart from other adult rec leagues is that while there is a referee for every game, the clock runs for a straight 60 minutes and there's no official score keeping.

"It's really not competitive," Mainella said. "It's about going out with the boys, when we're done and we've had some exercise, we're going to go for a beer. We don't care if you score 100 goals or none. We don't ask who finishes first or second."

"The teams, for the most part, are fairly good," said Len Daenick, 58, who has been playing with the Morse Place Eagles for nearly 15 years.

The casual nature of the games keeps it fun, even as guys lose a step or two over the years.

"We're all getting older," Daenick admitted. "Though there may be a team that will dominate, that happens."

"But it never fails, you always get a guy who thinks there's still a scout in the stands," Mainella added with a laugh. "Forget it!"

The weekly games provide not only a reason for older men to stay active, but also to remain social.

"In this day and age, it's tough for guys getting into that back half of life to stay active," Paul Kochanski, 46, said. "Often guys who are maybe out of shape and used to play as a kid kind of give up. But this gives a segment of that population a reason to get together, be active and have some fun."

Kochanski, who manages the Morse Place squad, admits it can be hard to keep a league like the North Kildonan Old Timers going, and praised Mainella and the other team managers for their efforts.

"It's always a challenge, keeping guys committed," he added.

With the puck is about to drop on another season, Mainella said he's hoping the league can continue to plug away, and maybe even grow.

"There are a half dozen or more new guys looking for guys to play with," he said. "We're hoping they'll play in the league this year and form a team. The league is open to it, and we're definitely looking for goaltenders!"

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The Bronx Park Old Timers team, pictured here in 1982 competing at a tournament in Saskatoon, Sask., played in the North Kildonan Old Timers League for decades. From left, back row: M Lavalee, L. Marwardso, G. Kenney, W. Mezies, K. McDonald, B. Stastook, N. Regoski, J. Seepish, K. Graham, Al Jorgensen (manager). From, from left: L. Mainella, A. Sobkowich, E. Herniak, T. Nakano, F. Kollar, B. Hanson, L. Sanderson.

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Paul Kochanski is one of the organizers of the North Kildonan Old Timers Hockey League, a 45+ men's recreational league that plays out of Gateway Recreation Centre and East End Arena throughout the winter. (SHELDON BIRNIE/CANSTAR/THE HERALD)

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For more information on the league, email ldaenick@shaw.ca

Sheldon Birnie

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