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POSTED ON 04/02/06

## He shoots, he slips, he scores

**This winter's puddles, slush and balmy climes aren't killing shinny -- at some rinks, attendance is actually up**

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Jonathan Binstock chuckles as he recalls a recent game of shinny hockey in the rain. "It's like getting stung in the face repeatedly: You're going pretty fast, skating into the wind and the pellets are hitting you in the face. It can really hurt. And I wear glasses, so it's impossible to see."

Mr. Binstock, a 25-year-old English-as-a-second-language teacher, may sound fanatical, but he's hardly alone.

In a city that has 49 artificial outdoor ice surfaces -- more than any other in North America -- Mr. Binstock is the norm, playing through puddles as record-setting climes have descended on Toronto's rinks. With an average temperature this January of -0.4 degrees Celsius -- a record high, well above the Toronto average of -6.3 degrees -- and day after day of above-zero temperatures, you'd think this would be an abysmal year for outdoor hockey. But so far, it's been business as usual.

"Our numbers across the board are consistent with what we've had the last three years," says James Dann, the parks and recreation administrator who oversees the city's rinks. "Some of our locations are actually growing."

In fact, with only four city-wide rink closings this year, the city's artificial rinks have actually been open for one day more than they had been at this point last year. Using compression systems under the ice -- a grid of pipes flowing with a sub-zero chemical compound -- to keep cool, most rinks can stay frozen up to at least five or six degrees, depending on the sunlight.

But the quality of the ice changes constantly, and on many days, what's soft and slushy at 2 p.m. is smooth and hard by 8 p.m. It's up to the players to adjust.

"When it first got hot, Scadding rink [at Bathurst and Dundas] rapidly deteriorated, and the area near the boards became deep puddles of water," Mr. Binstock recalls. "People were still playing, but you'd get water in your skate boots, and ruin your stick quickly. As opposed to fighting for the puck in the corner, one guy would tiptoe in and get it out."

"There are big chunks missing," Mr. Binstock adds. "If you're not looking, it's easy to fall. I've gone down a couple times. I had a nice bruise on my elbow."

Jamie Silverberg, a 30-year-old sales manager, agrees. "You have to avoid patches of bumpy and broken ice or even slush on warmer days. If your skates get caught, you can twist an ankle, and you can't stop properly. You can really get hurt. I've seen lots of people skate hard into the corner, hit a patch and crash awkwardly into the boards."

Some purists argue that shinny just isn't meant to be played in weather this balmy. "People will skate on anything if they want to skate, but it's better to play in the cold weather," says Dave Bidini, an avid shinny player and the author of the hockey books *The Best Game You Can Name* and *Tropic of Hockey*. "There's a

sense of accomplishment, and a cold, still night is beautiful. It's not so beautiful when it's plus six and slushy."

The real victims of the heat wave are the Toronto's 20-odd natural rinks, such as those at Fairmount Park and Glen Manor Ravine, which are city-sponsored but community-run. The rinks -- many of which are built on baseball diamonds, and don't have boards -- haven't frozen this year. But with minimal facilities, they aren't shinny hot spots.

Some environmentalist groups are even tying their global-warming campaigns to the melting rinks. The Toronto Environmental Alliance, in a coalition led by the U.S.-based Global Exchange, staged a mock funeral for outdoor hockey at the Montreal Climate Summit in November. The response was so strong that TEA is continuing its "Save Hockey" campaign, with another event planned for mid-February.

What if this mild January was a snapshot of winters to come? Could that ultimately defeat Toronto's shinny spirit?

Unlikely, Mr. Bidini says. "We had this party at Dufferin Grove a few weeks ago. We had the ice until 11, when they shut the lights, and we went inside the rink house and were hanging out. We heard some noises from the rink. Three or four kids had climbed the fence and were just playing. That's the spirit of shinny. You'd have to do a lot to kill that."

### **Even if February's like January, somebody's dropping the puck. Here are five sweet shinny rinks for all skills and sizes**

Best rink to make like Hayley Wickenheiser

Greenwood Park (Dundas Street and Greenwood Avenue)

This east-end rink offers 4½ hours of women's-only shinny each week -- the most in the city. On Wednesday nights, join one of four teams of women -- ranging from amateurs to experts -- for two hours of round-robin play. The rink's a bit run-down, but it doesn't stop local families from congregating.

Best rink to match up against a Leaf

Ramsden Park (Yonge Street and Pears Avenue)

At the high-level evening games at this Rosedale rink, the veteran-heavy crowd is just serious enough to make for great competition. The experts agree: Pat Quinn, the Lindros brothers and Mike Myers have all been spotted here. Shinny's unwritten rules thrive here, where there is seldom more than one puck on the ice during a game, and shifts happen efficiently and without argument.

Most beautiful surroundings

High Park (Colborne Lodge Drive)

Nestled among the trees of Toronto's largest park, the rink is almost incidental to the beauty that surrounds it. The hockey here is mostly of the casual, family-friendly variety. Being close to nature must be good for the soul, because players and staff alike always seem to be in a good mood here. Excellent, clean facilities and well-maintained ice.

Friendliest rink

Dufferin Grove (Dufferin Street and Sylvan Avenue)

An eclectic, welcoming group of players reflects the neighbourhood's diversity, but the rink house is where it's at. A log is always on the wood-burning stove, and the fresh, cheap, vegetarian-friendly food includes English muffin pizzas, cabbage rolls and cookies. With stacks of books and old New Yorkers scattered about, it feels more like grandma's cottage than a hockey rink.

Best rink to start a hockey dynasty

Riverdale (Broadview Avenue and Montcrest Boulevard)

Think you're the next Hull clan? This family-friendly rink offers 12½ hours of ice time for parent-child (under-13) shinny each week. The sparsely populated rink is sunken into a valley, with the roaring engines of the Don Valley Parkway emanating from the west side of the park. Standard amenities, good ice, but the rink can feel a bit lonely sometimes.

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