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The skinny on shinny

The first and best rule is that anyone can show up and play. Hey, isn't that Gord Downie in net?

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The sun is shining, but it is cold enough on the outdoor rink at Greenwood Park for players to be wearing balaclavas under their helmets.

Men ranging in age from teenaged to middle-aged drop their sticks in a pile at centre ice. The lumber is then quickly separated into two groups, an age-old method of randomly divvying up the teams. No one speaks.

Play begins, with only the sounds of skates scraping ice, pucks smacking sticks, and the hollow metal ding of a goal being scored echoing off this east-end rink.

This is shinny, hockey's pure, original form, as played on one of the city's 40-odd outdoor rinks, largely clustered in the old city of Toronto and the former city of Etobicoke. No other city in North America has as many outdoor artificial ice rinks, open to all comers, at all skill levels and -- still -- free.

"They are a jewel," says Don Boyle, director of the parks department's south district, and a venerable hockey player in his day who grew up playing in Montreal with former Canadiens star Denis Savard. "They've always been very popular."

Considering how much ice time the sport gets in musings about the Canadian identity, it is no wonder the city sees the rinks as a "core service," as Mr. Boyle puts it.

Each rink costs about \$20,000 a year to run, meaning this "jewel" costs taxpayers only about \$800,000 a year, not counting repairs or renovations.

Rinks with two ice surfaces usually have their own Zamboni, and get flooded four times a day. Most get treated twice a day by

shared Zambonis that make rounds. At a random selection of rinks inspected by The Globe and Mail recently, the ice won rave reviews from players.

Even the city's new emphasis on helmets -- they are technically compulsory for shinny on city rinks, but enforcement is lax -- doesn't seem to have caused a fuss. Mr. Boyle says the new helmet policy is being phased in, although at rinks in East York and Etobicoke, it has been enforced for years.

The rinks, some of which have two ice surfaces, post schedules for shinny, restricting hours for various age groups, as well as for plain old pleasure skating. One of the most popular innovations is time set aside for women's-only shinny, usually a couple of hours once or twice a week at selected rinks.

Indeed, shinny and recreational hockey is no longer, if it ever was, something reserved for beefy guys and toothless goons. Adult women's leagues, co-ed shinny games, even gay and lesbian hockey leagues and a tournament for local musicians have all sprung up in recent years, although most play on the city's indoor ice surfaces.

Dave Bidini, author of the book *Tropic of Hockey*, guitarist with the rock band the Rheostatics and a long-time shinny addict, says Toronto's outdoor rinks reflect the city's diversity.

"You would have some old Polish guy and a little black kid, and they would be your line mates," Mr. Bidini says.

The outdoor rink -- its place in hockey lore having been dramatically illustrated in the recent National Hockey League Heritage Classic outdoor game played in Edmonton between the Oilers and the Canadiens -- also attracts celebrities with a hockey bug.

The parks department's Mr. Boyle doubts the hockey-fan uber-fantasy of running into Mats Sundin on your neighbourhood ice, but he says well-known Leafs fan and comedian Mike Myers has been spotted at the Kew Gardens rink in the Beaches.

A music-industry source says Gord Downie, lead singer of The Tragically Hip, has been known to play shinny at an east-end rink, his identity kept hidden by his goalie mask.

And former Leafs captain George Armstrong, now in his early 70s, reportedly joins shinny games with kids who don't even know who he is.

Back at Greenwood Park, the game is fast and furious -- without an ex-NHLer in sight.

Regular Ricky McCulloch says shinny's first and best rule is that

anyone can show up and play.

"It's all just for fun. There's people who come out who don't know how to skate sometimes -- they just shoot the puck around in the corners," he says, standing tall on his skates as heads back out onto the ice.

The shinny top five

In a city of shinny rinks, not all are created equal. Here's our roundup of Toronto's top places to play:

1. Wards Island

It doesn't get much more Canadian than playing the national game on a Great Lake, a Wards Island tradition for more than a century, old-timers say. But with balmy winters, the lagoon freezes less reliably, so islanders also tap a fire hydrant to create a homemade rink in the park. All-age co-ed teams vie for the coveted Mallard Cup, named for the ducks that sometimes squat on the melting rink. Mainlanders should be prepared to help shovel off the ice.

2. Nathan Phillips Square, City Hall

During normal hours, shinny here is strictly forbidden, but, with a wink from city authorities in offices just metres away, after 11:30 p.m. or so, an illicit late-night game begins. How can the mayor -- rumoured to have been spotted, stick in hand, at a Rosedale rink -- resist a few rushes after a long day running the city?

3. Dufferin Grove Park, Dufferin Street south of Bloor Street West

This park's rink house has essentially been taken over by a local community group. Instead of the usual broken vending machines and musty smell, the change room here is more like a café, with tables and chairs and a working wood stove. You can buy a buttered slice of freshly baked organic bread for just 25 cents.

4. High Park, Colborne Lodge Drive

Though skating on Grenadier Pond, surrounded by snow-encrusted trees, would seem a shinny venue to make Roch Carrier weep, parks officials and the police marine unit strongly discourage it. Apparently, a fast-flowing route to Lake Ontario makes the pond unstable. But no problem here, since High Park has a nice artificial ice rink that is close enough to the Grenadier Café and Tea House for a hot chocolate after some heavy on-ice heroics.

5. Prince of Wales Park, Etobicoke

Prince of Wales is the closest you can get to playing on Lake

Ontario without risking an icy drowning. Mere metres from the shore, fast-paced games take place with the entire skyline of Toronto splayed to the east.

For more information, visit <http://www.city.toronto.on.ca/parks> or call 416-338-7465.



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