

Adults skate to new youth

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Written by Clayton Johns

It's 7 a.m. on a chilly November morning. The players on the ice can see their breath in the frigid arena. The high-pitched sound of a whistle fills the rink as an instructor in a black tracksuit strolls on to the ice. Practice is about to begin.

These hockey players aren't what you find at a typical hockey camp. Adults from across Ottawa and Gatineau have convened at Carleton University's Ice House for their weekly hockey skills session.

Ottawa Adult Hockey Skills has been operating at the Ice House since 2008. The weekly camp gives adults the opportunity to learn basic hockey skills and improve their existing abilities. Professional instructors help teach the game to adults as old as 60.

"There's a lot of reward for seeing people come through Adult Hockey Skills and how they improve," said Ryan Medel, the lead instructor at the camp. "We have the Monday beginner class and the Tuesday advanced class.

Our goal is for those who are just starting out in hockey to graduate from the Monday and go on to the Tuesday class. Then after a couple years or couple semesters in the Tuesday class, join leagues around the city. That's the rewarding part for us."

Many of the players in the class had never played hockey before taking the ice with Ottawa Adult Hockey Skills. Among them is John Touliopoulos, 48, an accountant with the federal government. Touliopoulos never played hockey as a kid,

but always enjoyed the sport. Now with two children who play hockey, the game is a big part of his life.

“Like a lot of us guys here, and the ladies, our kids play and we’re at the rink who knows how many time a week. That’s what drove me to go on the ice and try it out,” said Touliopoulos.

Thienny Mah, an associate professor at the University of Ottawa, has also taken up hockey with the help of the Carleton-based camp. Mah ran competitively during her childhood and, despite a love for hockey, admits she was scared to skate. That hasn’t stopped her from learning the game as an adult.

“I just started playing hockey and realized that for an amateur, well for an adult, there aren’t many venues to get better,” explained Mah.

Ottawa Adult Hockey Skills is another avenue for Mah to live a healthy and active lifestyle. In addition to running and playing hockey, Mah is a mountain biker, skier, and swimmer. She wears an old black, orange, and yellow jersey, the colours of her hometown Vancouver Canucks in the 1990s. Playing in the hockey camp is one of her favourite ways to stay active.

“It’s just so much fun doing the drills. If you’re playing shinny, you might not touch the puck that often but, Tuesday mornings, I get to touch the puck all the time and play. Definitely my skills are improving,” explained Mah.

Mah isn’t the only player who stays active playing hockey. Franceso Palozzi, a 40 year-old gardener, also uses the camp to keep fit. Unlike Touliopoulos and Mah, Palozzi grew up playing hockey in Ottawa. He’s played every position, but now

sports red goalie pads at the camp. Although Palozzi has played hockey his whole life, he enjoys the weekly challenge.

“By the end of the practice, I’m drenched,” said Palozzi. “My philosophy has always been to get a good sweat once a week. My grandma lived until 96 and she said ‘if you don’t move it, you lose it.’”

Palozzi takes the philosophy literally. He straps his goalie stick to his bicycle and rides to the arena each week with goalie equipment on his back. Even during the deepest snow of the winter.

“I just like to bike everywhere. I don’t own a car, I never have,” said Palozzi. “I live downtown and you gotta find a way to get to the rink.”

Staying active is one thing, but learning a new sport on skates is difficult. When Touliopoulos began attending the camp, he was uncomfortable on the ice and lacked the confidence to stop properly. Gaining the confidence to master the basics can be difficult for first time players.

“I was really very much a beginner,” said Touliopoulos. “I couldn’t stop on both sides, I couldn’t skate backwards, couldn’t do crossovers. Now I can do all that.”

Overcoming mental obstacles can be equally tough for others.

“Sometimes they are a little bit embarrassed or they’ll be quick to get down on themselves,” said Medel. “You almost have to build their confidence back up to believe in themselves.”

There is a natural fear of getting hurt that comes with trying a new activity as well. It’s a fear that is amplified for some older players.

“At my advanced age, at the beginning it took me a little while to figure out I was fully protected with the equipment on. I was just scared of the fear of falling and getting hurt,” said Touliopoulos. “I can tell the difference, when I’m skating without equipment. I’m a much better skater with equipment because I’ll take more chances with it on.”

Today, the players learn to take a snap shot. Much like a wrist shot, the player drags the puck from beside them and then snaps their wrists quickly to release the puck at the net.

“I want you to watch my stick really carefully,” instructs Medel to the group of 20 players. “Make that snapping noise. You should be able to hear that noise on the ice.”

The camp provides an interesting dynamic, as most of the instructors are younger than the players. The campers though understand the councilors have played hockey at elite levels. Medel played junior “A” hockey for the Nepean Raiders before competing for the Carleton Ravens in university hockey. The age difference is irrelevant though because the players are excited to be on the ice.

“The neat thing is the adults want to be there. They pay their own money. It’s not like mom or dad is sending a kid to camp,” said Medel. “They go on their own dime and they’re there to learn. They’re eager to eat up any advice that we have or any pointers that we can teach them.”

Ultimately the camp is a unique avenue for adults to stay active while learning a fun sport. It’s a chance to feel like a kid again.

Clayton Johns is a fourth year journalism student at Carleton University. From Ajax, Ont. he is a lifelong hockey fan and now works as the equipment manager for the Carleton Ravens Men's Hockey team. He is also a stock car racing fan and writes regularly to www.ondirtracingnews.com. Clayton is also the public address announcer at Brighton Speedway in Brighton, Ont.