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INUVIK KIDS EMBRACE CURLING!



Young curlers are keeping things busy at the Inuvik Curling Centre in the Northwest Territories. (Photo, Nick Saturnino)



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YOUTH CURLERS TAKING ADVANTAGE OF INUVIK CURLING CENTRE OFFERINGS

One might think that there's not much to do in a small town in the far north of Canada. But for the youth of Inuvik, a town of 3,000 people in the far reaches of the Northwest Territories, the thing keeping them from curling was that they had too many other options.

“There are numerous things for the kids to do here. We knew that if curling was at 6 p.m., and basketball was at 6 p.m., we probably wouldn’t get them on the ice,” said Nick Saturnino, president of the Inuvik Curling Centre.

He knew that offering one typical Sunday afternoon junior curling session wasn’t going to cut it. Instead, Saturnino looked at the free ice time in the club’s schedule and made it available to youth curlers, who are welcome to show up as often as they like.

“We’ve got people who come once a week and some who come four times,” he said. “It’s been very successful; giving them the option has allowed them to make it fit in their schedule.”

With the help of his older juniors, Saturnino offers four nights of youth curling a week. He also runs half-sheet curling for younger kids, and special one-off events over the course of the season.



Pearl Gillis, middle, offers instructions to youth curlers Miquel Castillo-Drescher, left, and Aerayana Reardon. (Photo, Nick Saturnino)

“Nick is really open to us bringing new people,” said Pearl Gillis, one of Inuvik’s junior curlers. “He’s always trying new things to try to get new people into curling.”

Gillis, 15, has competed at three New Holland Junior National Championships, winning the mixed doubles event two years ago. Her team helps teach the younger kids, which also offers them some other opportunities.

Inuvik Youth Curlers - Pearl Gillis, Adrianna Hendric...



Inuvik youth curlers Pearl Gillis, Adrianna Hendrick, Alex Testart, Reese Wainman talk about why the sport is so special to them.

“Our team has keys to the club,” she said. “So we get to go practise anytime.”

“Because of COVID, a lot of them have extended lunch break,” said Saturnino. “A bunch of them come every day and throw rocks for a half hour or so. You can see huge improvements from those guys, because they’re playing every day. They blast music on the speakers out there, and they practise on their own.”

Reese Wainman, a 12-year-old curler in the program said, “We have scheduled practices, but there’s also a lot of time for free ice. So we can play when we want to. It’s nice to have that choice.”

Aside from expanded schedule offerings, the Inuvik club also offers different events aimed at different age ranges. Saturnino started running half-sheet games for 5-to-8-year olds, allowing some of his older kids to earn some money for helping out with the three-on-three games.

“I call it Smash Up Derby,” said Saturnino. “There’s no real technical instruction, we just let the kids push the rocks down half the sheet, and play a really quick game. We’ve had anywhere from 25-50 kids in those.”

The half-sheet league runs for eight weeks, from October to December, and culminates in the one-day Rock Star Festival in February.

“The kids play for a giant, six-foot trophy,” said Saturnino. “We stole the idea from the Hit Draw Tap contest that they started in Ontario. The kids love it.”

This season, Saturnino started a one-on-one league as yet another opportunity for kids to curl.

“I’ve always wanted to run a junior league, but could never get enough commitments from full teams,” he said. “We started running a one-on-one league for U-15 and U-12 divisions. It’s been very popular, and the kids love it. We’ve got 15 kids in those leagues, and they’re playing for cash.”

Saturnino is trying to build his program, so there’s always a next step, and someone to look up to. The young kids look up to the older kids as examples, and they, in turn, look up to the competitive curlers.



The Inuvik Curling Centre has produced numerous NWT champions over the years. (Photo, Nick Saturnino)

“We’ve had teams from Inuvik go to the national championships, but in U-21 and U-18,” said Saturnino. “We’ve had good representation there for the last 10 years or so.”

And with those NWT titles, come championship banners.

“We’ve had kids come in and say, ‘I want my name on one of those banners, how do I do that?’ and some of them went on to several U-18 and U-21 Nationals,” he said. “For the younger kids, they see their coach’s name on the wall and it ripples through. Now those kids want to be on a banner.”

Of course, it’s not just the banner.

“It’s a good way to travel,” said Gillis. “I’ve been all over Canada — there’s always competitions everywhere. It’s great getting to play against people from Alberta or Ontario, or whatever.”

Saturnino knows that’s the fun part for the kids, and for him too. His own competitive career took him across the country, and coaching his daughter Carina’s team allowed him to do it again with her. Coming from the far north, however, is not cheap.

“By the time our girls were getting really competitive, we’d have a team budget of \$40,000 to \$50,000. Each year we really had to focus on fundraising.”

Regardless of the cost, Saturnino’s effort keeps curling vibrant in Inuvik.

“Any leagues we have running at the club, half of the curlers are juniors,” he said. “They’re keeping the club going.”



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