

EVERYONE GETS ICE TIME:

Special needs hockey program in Pembroke invites kids of all abilities to play



By **MARK TORPEY**
The Patriot Ledger

PEMBROKE - The players trickle out of the locker room, gliding across the milky surface of Hobomock Arena. As they cavort with teammates, their coaches gather at center ice to discuss the morning's practice.

The scene is played out at dozens of other rinks on a frigid Saturday morning: Kids with boundless energy, watched by proud parents, up at dawn to indulge a passion for hockey. But what is unique about the Boston Bear Cubs is that this team is composed of special needs children. While their needs are special, their dreams are common: play a little hockey and have a lot of fun.

Starting out

John Quill lives and breathes the sport. The 37-year-old Norwell resident played at North Quincy High, still plays in a men's league, and coaches his 11-year-old daughter Megan's South Shore Seahawks team.

Like other hockey parents, John and his wife, Julie, wanted to pass their love of the game to their three children.

But there was a hurdle: John's son Sean, 10, is autistic. They knew it'd be hard to have Sean in a traditional youth hockey setting, so they looked for alternatives.



"My son has always loved to skate. He started skating when he was 3 years old," said Quill, an immigration attorney. "I tried to find a hockey program for him, but couldn't find a team for kids with special needs."

In 2005, a co-worker of Quill's told him about the American Special Hockey Association in Washington, D.C., which had designed a program for children with Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorders, or other developmental disabilities.

The program's director, Mike Hickey, told Quill there were many special needs hockey programs throughout the country, but none in the Boston area.

Quill urged Hickey to start a local program. "I told him I wasn't a coach. He said being a coach wasn't necessary, but being committed was," Quill said.

In the fall of 2005, Quill founded the Massachusetts Special Hockey Association, otherwise known as the Boston Bear Cubs. The Cubs hit the ice for the first time on February 4, 2006.

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Volunteer Steve Pugsley of Braintree hugs 14-year-old Zack Campbell of Quincy during practice at the special needs hockey program at the Hobomock Arena in Pembroke.
(DEBEE TLUMACKI/The Patriot Ledger)

Reaping the benefits

Quincy's Sean Campbell peers onto the ice with a sparkle in his eyes and pride in his voice as he watches his 14-year-old son, Zach, skate with 13 other Bear Cubs.

Zach, who is autistic, is in his second year with the program. His father says the benefits have been immeasurable.

"His brothers play hockey (but) he wouldn't go watch them play, he wouldn't watch hockey on TV," Campbell said. "Since he got involved ... his confidence is

unbelievable. Now he has something to boast about with his brothers. He's got something more in common with them. "He feels like he fits in somewhere now," Campbell added. "He knows he is different, but now he is not looked down upon. He is equal and that helps his confidence."

Barry Pulsford of Woburn wakes up each Saturday at 5 a.m. and drives an hour to bring his 14-year-old son, Ian, to Hobomock Arena.

"Ian thinks he is there to learn how to play hockey. But as a parent of an autistic kid, I see him learning much more," Pulsford said. "Learning the concept of teamwork, learning to cope with disappointment as an individual and as a member of a team. Ian's social skills have vastly improved. And, lastly, a little exercise always helps."

Most of the kids had never played hockey. Parents dressed them for practice, and then watched many stumble on the ice. Now, they fly around the rink and have made social, emotional and physical progress.

“Just having autistic kids standing there, listening to this, you never would have believed it,” Pulsford said from the rink. “My son has nothing but smiles. He gets up everything Saturday morning with a smile and says, ‘All right, let’s go, it’s hockey time!’”

Doing their part

The Bear Cubs are never alone on the ice. Volunteers - many of them young people themselves, most with no history with special needs children - join them.

“I’m constantly amazed at how many kids will get up early on a Saturday morning every week and come to the rink and help out,” Quill said.

Those lending a hand include the Mitchell brothers of Scituate - Matt, 15, Andrew 14, and Cam, 11 - as well as Norwell’s Kelly Campbell, a 14-year-old Notre Dame Academy freshman.

Then there’s Steve Pugsley, a retired State Trooper from Braintree. On this morning, he takes charges, not with whistles or loud commands but with gentle guidance.

“The enjoyment of seeing these kids with a smile on their face, going out there and getting more involved, actually participating in the drills, the games,” Pugsley said, “I get more out of it than the kids.”

Donors help cut Bear Cubs costs: Founder calls support ‘vital’

PEMBROKE - The Boston Bear Cubs welcome all comers - be they players or donors of time or money.

Currently, the program consists of 14 players, ages 7 to 15. Last season, there were 18 players, and program director John Quill hopes to expand to more than 20 players this season. All are welcome, he said.

The program runs from September through April. The fee for the season is \$145 - a relatively small amount compared to most other hockey programs, due in large part to donations.

Quill said the donors include:

- Massachusetts Hockey
- Sean McDonough Charitable Foundation
- Brandeis Judges hockey club
- Flatbread Pizza (Bedford)
- Boston Bruins
- Boston Red Sox
- Good Sports

“The support for our program is vital, because hockey is such an expensive sport, and families with special needs children have so many expenses for education, doctors, therapies, and many other things that can easily be taken for granted,” Quill said.

What are not taken for granted are the time and effort Quill has put into overseeing the program. Parents’ voices drip with reverence when asked about the program’s founder. “He’s phenomenal,” said Sean Campbell, whose son plays in the program. “This program is a godsend, as are John and his wife.”

The Boston Bear Cubs

WHAT: Massachusetts Special Hockey Association, also known as the Boston Bear Cubs, a program for children with Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorders or other developmental disabilities.

WHEN: Saturdays, from September through April, 7:20-8:20 a.m.

WHERE: Hobomock Arena, Pembroke

FOR INFORMATION: Contact program director John Quill at jquill@specialhockey.org

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