

VINEYARD GAZETTE

Archived Edition: Friday, March 9, 2012

Day in Life of Martha's Vineyard Ice Arena

By IVY ASHE

It's nine in the morning on a recent Saturday, and if you look closely at the group on the ice of the Martha's Vineyard Arena, you can see the future.

Their jerseys, helmets, pads, and skates are pint-size — as are the players themselves, as if a full-size hockey player was put in the dryer for too long. Their knees wobble and their legs splay out as they come to slow, careful stops. They hold their sticks uncertainly, and their swats at round plastic balls more often than not throw them off balance and onto their rears.

There is a lot of falling.

But there is also progress.

“He's gone from not being able to skate at all to shooting,” Steve Tully of West Tisbury says, pointing out his son Jack, age six, who is wearing a purple Vineyard jersey and looking up at the stands every once in awhile to make sure his parents are watching.



Participants in the hockey instructionals program.

Jack is one of 33 kids taking part in instructionals, a free-of-charge offshoot of the Martha's Vineyard Youth Hockey program that focuses on skill-building as opposed to gameplay and competition. The youth hockey program is, in turn, one of no fewer than a dozen Island groups (not including the various birthday parties that take place at the rink) that use the ice as home base during the arena's nine-month season.

In the midst of one of the high school's most successful hockey seasons ever — the boys and girls teams made it to their post-season tournaments before both finally lost last week — the arena is bustling with myriad skating groups, some of them hoping to follow in the skate ruts of their high school heroes.

Today, besides morning instructionals, there is a figure skating class, public skating, a youth hockey game, two high school hockey games and a tournament (noticeably absent from the lineup are adult league games and learn-to-skate classes, which take place throughout the week). Arena general manager Kurt Mundt began creating the schedule for this Saturday last August, when the high school hockey teams first learned what their seasons would look like, and ice times for each group were virtually locked down by early fall.

Beth Blankenship-O'Connor works with two of the groups. She's one of 10 teachers for the instructionals program (working with those who don't yet know how to stop), and is a coach with the Martha's Vineyard Figure Skating Club.

She wears her figure skates to instructionals on Saturday morning; there's no time to change to hockey skates between classes.



Audrey Pollys returns skates.

At 9:40 a.m. on Saturday, Ms. Blankenship-O'Connor and fellow coaches Stephanie Andrade and Kaelin Nelson, lead 10 more wobblers to the ice. They're the youngest class of figure skaters, most no older than six, and are bundled up in winter gear and helmets, looking more like they're about to hit the slopes than practice their routine for the club's upcoming ice show at the end of March. The class navigates around short orange traffic cones and painstakingly follows the paths Ms. Andrade has etched into the ice. There are no toe loops or axels yet, but as with the earlier group, the potential is all right there in the barely-broken-in skates.

"I love that age," Ms. Blankenship-O'Connor says after class. "They just want to learn so much."

For the next hour, activities cease and the rink is quiet.

At quarter till noon, the future starts to come into focus a bit more. There's change on the ice. The players are slightly bigger — these are the Squirts, the 10-and-under players of the youth hockey travel program. They still fall down quite a bit, but the will to learn has been supplemented by the skills that come with practice. When the Squirts skate up and down the ice, chasing pucks and scoring goals, there is confidence in their strides.

There are two Vineyard Squirt teams, the Purple and White squads; typically, they play other Squirts from southern Massachusetts, but their schedule today pits them against each other — making a "Go Vineyard!" cheer from the stands a bit confusing.

Youth hockey plots out its ice times after Mr. Mundt pencils in the high school teams' blocks; once their schedule is set, a different kind of booking takes place — hotel reservations. When the arena hosts tournaments — there are two annually for travel teams — Vineyard hotels start to fill up, offering much-needed business in the off-season. In January, according to Mr. Mundt and arena development director Christine Todd's count, over 1,000 people came through the arena (500 capacity) in one day during the Ryan Mone Memorial Tournament.

The high school girls' team visiting today from Marshfield isn't spending the night, however. They arrive midway through the Squirts game and head to the locker rooms to gear up for a 1 p.m. game against the Vineyard girls' varsity squad.

At 12:30, a camera crew from MVTV arrives and begins setting up their equipment in the press box. By 12:50 the White team has taken a 5-2 victory, and the Zamboni emerges from its den to resurface the ice.

Jon Dore has been helming the arena Zamboni for a year now — he alternates shifts with fellow part-time driver Mike Hathaway — and has arguably the best job in the house.



The Zamboni makes the rounds.

"A lot of people say that's what they've always wanted to do — drive a Zamboni," he says.

When the girls' teams hit the new ice, a time warp takes place. The skill levels of the players leap light-years forward — no wobbles here — and the stakes elevate in response. If the Vineyard wins today, they qualify for the state tournament for the first time ever.

The girls take home a 2-1 victory an hour and a half later, their cheers mingling with the celebratory music that sound man Bill Davies has cued up in the press

booth. Mr. Davies, a former Atlantic Connection DJ, is in his second season providing the soundtrack for high school hockey games (both varsity and JV). His son, daughter and two nephews all play in the high school program.

“It adds a lot to their experiences,” he says, adding that “the kids [really] pick the music ... some spend a lot of time making mixes.” Musical selections range from Black Sabbath to Florence + the Machine, in addition to the mysterious content of a CD simply labeled “Cool New Stuff 2011.”



Pictures by Emily Coogan, four, watches Zamboni resurface ice at Arena.

Mr. Davies will be back for the boys' tournament games later this evening, but for now the arena soundtrack is that of FM radio. It's public skate time.

Familiar faces are here; the Tully family from instructionals are back for skating, as are other families whose children were in the morning programs. All told, about 50 skaters are on the ice or lacing up. Some have skates of their own, others rent from the Cutting Edge, the arena's pro shop. Some are regulars, others haven't set foot on a rink in years. All are looking for a way to pass time during this mild, but still sluggish, winter.

“You need something to entertain yourself,” says skater Marketa Morgnerova, here with daughter Samanta, age six, who is nursing a cup of hot chocolate.

“People are very seasonal; when it's cold [they] start to think about ice and skating,” says Lois Craine of the Cutting Edge (son Rob Searle rents the space for the pro shop from Mr. Mundt).

And where there is ice and skating, hockey generally follows. The Zamboni makes its rounds again after the public skaters leave, clearing the way for the first game of the 15th Annual Fairleigh S. Dickinson, between the varsity boys of Dennis-Yarmouth and Masconomet. Dennis-Yarmouth wins, and celebrates their victory by buying half the cookie stock of Vineyard Girl Scout Ashley Biggs, who is doing brisk business during the tournament. The arena is packed with fans, both Islanders and visitors, who fill the stands and line the perimeter of the rink.

The Vineyard varsity boys play in the second game against number-two ranked

Lynnfield. The fuzzy future seen several hours ago is in sharp focus now, as it was during the girls' game; this team is a product of the learn-to-skates, the public skates and the travel squads. They are fast skaters, made even faster by the higher level of play demanded of them by their powerhouse opponent, and they are playing as a tight unit tonight.

They are also role models. In between the first and second periods, the Mites, another youth hockey group, scrimmage. It is a highly anticipated event for the younger boys.

"They really look up to the high school players," says coach Dan Townes.

"They were probably as excited for this as for the Bruins game," adds coach Jevon Rego [the Mites played a three-minute scrimmage at TD Garden earlier this year].

Lynnfield eventually wears down the Vineyarders, taking the 2-0 victory at 8:40 p.m. The arena slowly empties. The Zamboni makes one more sweep; Jon Dore walks through the stands collecting the handmade signs fans have left there.

The players are the last to leave, carrying their huge equipment bags out to their cars and throwing them in the beds of pickup trucks or the backseats of parents' minivans.

Tomorrow, at 9:30 a.m., a new cycle begins.

© 2012 Vineyard Gazette