

Canada's 'religion' spreads to HK

A growing number of people in this city are being converted to ice hockey, writes **John Carney**

The one criticism levelled at the media when it comes to ice hockey has always been: "Why do you constantly use photographs of players fighting? It's like all we ever do is fight."

Good pictures though it makes, to see two players firing punches at each other is only a small part of an enormously skilful sport. Of course, the other thing is the lack of knowledge the average Hong Kong sports fan has about ice hockey.

If you're not Canadian or haven't been brought up playing the game as a youngster, ice hockey is normally filed under "minority sport". The NHL play-offs come a very distant third to the English Premier League's final matches and the NBA play-offs at the moment.

That is doing it a disservice. At its best ice hockey is one of the toughest and most exciting sports you can watch. It's not for the faint-hearted, but in no way is it all about brute strength either – the skill factor is even more important.

All this was on display at the Hockey 5's finals at Mega Ice in Kowloon Bay last weekend. The competition attracted 59 teams. Club sides from Germany, Canada, the Philippines, Singapore, China, Macau, Thailand, Japan and Hong Kong took part at a variety of levels and age groups.

Tournament organiser Keith Fong Gee-

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Hockey 5's organiser Keith Fong is a true believer

kay has seen the game grow steadily in Hong Kong over the years.

"There's been ice hockey events held every year in Hong Kong for the past 15 or 16 years," he said. "The sport is definitely getting bigger. Here at Mega Ice we now have an international-size rink which allows us to do more development programmes for youngsters and to hold international events."

"The Hong Kong Ice Hockey League is also thriving. Games are played over four divisions – Division One being the highest level and Division Four for beginners. In total, 28 teams compete and we have between 350 and 400 players."

"Over half the players are local Chinese. You'll find that the expats will play in Division One because their level is pretty good, but in the lower divisions we have a lot of Chinese players who want to learn the game, so it's very encouraging."

Fong is originally from Vancouver and came to Hong Kong 10 years ago. When he arrived he had to get his head around the fact that ice hockey was barely on the radar. "It's always a challenge to get it out there that ice hockey is actually being played in Hong Kong," he said.

"In Canada, hockey is on television everywhere. Even people who start off not being really into it start getting interested because it's being shown so much. We don't have that kind of exposure here, but we're working on it by trying to get more media coverage and the game is growing. "Canada is a great blueprint for hockey and we want to do the same at a grass-roots level here."

"We need to get more children playing and set a solid foundation to build on. We play hockey six nights a week at Mega Ice

already so hopefully we're heading in the right direction."

The Hockey 5's certainly lived up to its billing, though for a few of the game's connoisseurs there was one thing missing – full-contact.

But in Hong Kong it's only to be expected, considering insurance issues and the fact that those playing also had jobs to go to when the tournament was over.

"The game not being full-contact does take away a certain defensive aspect but it also creates more offence," said Carl Wong Fook-wai, 25, of the Hong Kong Tigers.

"In North America, at all levels physical contact is a major part of the game, but here it's more about speed and skill which is good too. In a way it's more technical as you have to go for the puck instead of the man when you're playing."

"Asian players in general have a lot of speed and that's the way they play. Until they add some bulk they'll never be able to play on a physical level so they have to play in a way that suits their style best."

It's not all about being competitive, though. For Neil Ng Wai-hang – who played in the tournament for the Avida Admirals – getting on the rink was the perfect way to bond with his 13-year-old son, Cory.

"My son started skating at around four or five years old," Ng said. "Compared to when I played here years ago, my son and his friends have many more facilities available to them and it's great to be able to get out on the ice with him. It's good that we can go out on the rink and practise together. Playing hockey can be a great family day out."

The 45-year-old tunnel engineer and former Toronto native also believes the game has a future in Hong Kong.

"It's a niche sport, but there are more opportunities now. We are trying to get the kids playing at a younger age compared to before, so that they get a taste for the game early on and they are really enjoying it," he said. "Whatever happens I'll keep playing until I can't play anymore."

Not that it's a totally male-dominated sport as a women's competition ran alongside the men's at the Hockey 5's. Kristy Yew Lim-fong was a member of the Dosuki Sumo side who were beaten 2-1 in the Asian women's final to CCHA Warriors.

"It's so different. It's very exciting and it's not like an individual sport, it's all about teamwork," Yew, 29, said.

"I play in defence so you can get hit more often with slap shots. If the puck hits you low around the ankles where your legs are not protected it can hurt and sometimes you're out with an injury for a few weeks but it's part of the game," she said. "You have to be strong, to take a hit and give out a hit as well."

Many players in the tournament were either born or raised in Canada and started playing hockey there before coming to Hong Kong but Ivan Chan Gi-fung, who played for Typhoons, was an exception as he was brought up in Vancouver but only started playing hockey full-time in Hong Kong.

"There's always hockey on TV in Canada but I never really played that much. That changed when I moved to Hong Kong for high school. I was walking by Festival Walk and saw a game being played so I decided to join and I've been playing here ever since," Chan said.

The 15-year-old, who attends the International Christian School in Sha Tin, is now making up for lost time.

"I play with adults as there are not many kids my age that are playing, but it's a good experience as you learn quicker," he said.

"You get much more ice time in Hong Kong, that's for sure. You could play five or six nights a week if you wanted to. If you enjoy the game it's perfect, because you can play as much as you want."



Beijing Peng Han's Yi Hanlin has Hong Kong Tigers' Anthony Devolz pinned to the board during the Hockey 5's final at Mega Ice in Kowloon Bay. The Hong Kong Tigers won 4-1. Organisers were delighted with the response to the tournament and predict the sport will continue to grow in Hong Kong. Photo: Jonathan Wong