

Hockey Truly Is For Everyone



Youth hockey players from Ice Hockey in Harlem enjoy a session of skills and drills during a special *Hockey is for Everyone* clinic.



Ice Hockey in Harlem teammates prepare for their shift during a scrimmage in New York, NY.

The Philadelphia Flyers and the New York Rangers may be pumped about squaring off outdoors in the 2012 Bridgestone NHL Winter Classic, but they might not be as excited as the youngsters who'll take to a separate ice surface inside Philly's Citizens Bank Park and show the stadium crowd and TV audience that hockey is indeed for everyone.

Members of Philadelphia's Ed Snider Youth Hockey Foundation and New York's Ice Hockey in Harlem will play a little shinny hockey on a small ice surface while Claude Giroux, Jaromir Jagr, Marian Gaborik, Henrik Lundqvist and the boys tend to their business on the nearby NHL-sized rink.

The presence of the Philly and New York skaters on the little man-made frozen pond is a big deal. Male, female, black, brown, yellow or white, from families struggling to get by financially, these kids represent the changing face of hockey and the power and promise of what can be, if given a chance.

Snider Hockey and Ice Hockey in Harlem are part of "Hockey is for Everyone," an NHL initiative that provides support and unique programming to some 30 nonprofit youth hockey organizations across North America, offering children of all backgrounds the opportunity to play hockey.

The initiative has exposed more than 45,000 boys and girls to the sport, and Snider Hockey and Ice Hockey in Harlem are

While the Flyers and Rangers play the Winter Classic, kids from Snider Hockey and Ice Hockey in Harlem will skate alongside the big boys and show the world the diverse, ever-changing face of youth hockey in North America

BY WILLIAM DOUGLAS



Flyers forward Daniel Briere pays a visit to his young fans during the 2009 NHL Winter Classic.



Snider Hockey youth salute Flyers fans during a special intermission skate.



Flyers superstar forward Scott Hartnell joins his young friends at Snider Hockey.

at the forefront of that effort. These programs not only teach kids to compete on the ice, but also, to compete in the game of life off ice by focusing on education and developing skills to help make the children successful, productive adults.

"We do it because we think it's the right thing to do," NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman said. "I happen to think diversity is a strength of our game, particularly since our players come from over 20 countries. But more than anything else, I believe our game represents the virtues of hard work, team work, and discipline and physical fitness, all things that are vitally important to children in this day and age."

Established in 2005, the Ed Snider Youth Hockey Foundation works closely with the School District of Philadelphia and the



Rangers Artem Anisimov, Marc Staal and Ryan Hollweg sign autographs during an Ice Hockey in Harlem fundraiser.

Department of Parks and Recreation to offer a cutting edge program that blends hockey with a rigorous off-ice life skills curriculum and additional educational services to help enhance the academic skills of more than 2,500 children.

"We're trying to impart skills that help

the children grow up to be productive citizens," said Scott Tharp, Snider Hockey's president. "Communication skills, the simple things that are taken for granted: the ability to introduce yourself; to look a person in the eye; give a firm handshake; the ability to carry on an open-ended conversation rather than a closed conversation."

The kids in the program don't want for anything: Skates, equipment, ice time, and instruction — both hockey and educational — are free.

Though Snider, the 78-year-old Comcast-Spectacor chairman, owns two Stanley Cup rings and presides over a sports and entertainment empire, he refers to his youth hockey program as "my legacy."

"It's the only thing I've ever put my name

on," Snider said. "We're going to fund it properly and when I'm no longer around hopefully it will be a program that will go on forever. When I see what we've done for young children who otherwise may not have been able to accomplish what they've accomplished, what greater satisfaction can you get in life?"

Snider has backed his words with deeds. Snider Hockey contributed \$6.5 million to match a grant that enabled a \$13 million restoration project that renovated three run-down public rinks — the Laura Sims Skatehouse, the Scanlon Ice Rink, and the Simons Rink.

The three facilities are now fully enclosed and feature NHL-caliber lighting, boards and glass. They also have new classrooms, learning labs, and expanded public space for community use. The enhancements now allow the once-seasonal rinks, which opened in November, to operate year-round.

"We couldn't have done this alone, not in these economic times," said Susan Slawson, Philadelphia's First Deputy Commissioner for Recreation and Programs. "Our kids realize they're worth a lot more when somebody takes this kind of money and puts it here in their neighborhood."

Snider's gift was altruistic but also necessary in order for Snider Hockey to achieve its next goal: to double its enrollment to 6,000 children without sacrificing quality or service.

The 2011-12 season marks Ice Hockey in Harlem's 25th anniversary of giving inner-city kids a shot at learning and playing a game they could otherwise not afford. Founded in 1987, by Dave Wilk, Todd Levy and former New York Rangers player Pat Hickey, IHH has attracted thousands of children by using hockey as a hook for them to stay in school, see



Ice Hockey in Harlem youngsters enjoy a day of skills and drills outdoors at Lasker Ice Rink in Central Park.



Snider Hockey youth are taught respect, responsibility and integrity for the game.

beyond their surroundings, and reach for success.

"We say 'If you want to skate, you've got to go to hockey class.' Hockey class is once a week. It's not school, there's no homework, but it's an opportunity to learn geography by where's Calgary? Its math by learning to tally up points," said Levy, IHH's chairman. "Our greatest success stories are the kids now, 25 years later, who have jobs. To see outcomes, the power of seeing outcomes — that started on the ice, that started in the classroom."

IHH players who excel on the ice and in the classroom have earned program-provided scholarships to hockey camps in the United States and Canada. The program has also sent kids to prestigious prep schools on scholarships.

Harlem skaters Umar Khan and Sage Mason spent a week in Montreal last August at Lower Canada College's Hockey Camp. Asked by reporters about what benefit does he derive from IHH, 14-year-old Umar responded "Well, it can get me a job."

Like Snider Hockey, IHH provides free equipment, ice and instruction to its participants. But accomplishing that year after year as a nonprofit group without a major benefactor isn't easy.

"The days of getting free stuff — it's rough out there in this economy," Levy said. "We're struggling for every penny, but we make it work."

And the New York Rangers players, alum, management, and broadcasters actively lend a hand by giving their time for fundraising events and occasionally lacing up their skates to hit the ice outdoors with IHH kids at Central Park's Lasker Rink.

"It's safe to say the Rangers are



Snider Hockey seeks to instill life-enhancing values such as teamwork, positive self-esteem, the importance of hard work and academic success, and respect for themselves and their teammates.



Snider Hockey coaching staff gives out pointers to his young understudies during a game in Philadelphia, PA.

responsible for raising 20 percent of our cash budget," Levy said. "The NHL is similar to the Rangers — they're just a good partner. Money is sent our way through different channels whether it's buying a portion of our golf tournament or buying tickets to our event or making an outright donation."

Adam Graves, a member of the Rangers' 1994 Stanley Cup team, said working with IHH has been a labor of love for the Rangers organization.

"The best part is over the years seeing kids that you kind of got to know in the program, to see them getting older and going off to university, college," said Graves, a Rangers special assistant for prospect development and community relations. "I know they've had kids in the program that have come back full circle to give back to the program, mentor younger kids, and more or less pay it forward."

Raymond Padilla hopes to return this season to his Lasker Rink roots this season and mentor kids who aren't too much different than he was when he joined the program in 1987 as an 11-year-old from a tough block in Spanish Harlem.

He quickly took to hockey and heeded the off-ice lessons which led to trips to attend several hockey camps and clinics in California and Canada. They were life-changing journeys.

"The thing that caught my eye from those experiences is that growing up in Spanish Harlem, you're taught that's what life is and there's nothing else out there," said Padilla, a married 34-year-old father of two who lives in Westchester County, N.Y., is a hedge fund administrator, and helps coach his 11-year-old son's hockey team. "What Ice Hockey in Harlem did for me was expose me to the rest of the world. Ice Hockey in Harlem opened the door, and I walked through it."

Padilla's story epitomizes what IHH, Snider Hockey and other "Hockey is for Everyone" programs are all about: producing successful people first and good hockey players second.

"As nice as it would be to have graduates of these programs actually play in college (or the pros), the fact that there are children in these programs who stay in school and go to college is more important than whether or not they're actually still playing because to me this is about life's lessons," said Commissioner Bettman.

But some programs have produced people with both academic and hockey pedigrees. Ralph Featherstone played for Washington's Fort Dupont Ice Hockey Club, the nation's oldest minority youth hockey program, and later became captain of the U.S. Naval Academy's hockey team. Tarasai Karega, Detroit Hockey Association alum who

helped power Amherst College to a NCAA Division III women's hockey championship in the 2008-09 season, now serves as a hockey operations coordinator for Snider Hockey.

Michael Chism, 19, a recent Snider Hockey graduate, is a freshman this year at Pennsylvania's Shippensburg University and a forward on the school's hockey team. Virlen Reyes, another Snider Hockey grad, is a 19-year-old sophomore philosophy major at West Chester University and plays defense on the women's hockey team.

"Before I started to play hockey, I didn't care much about my grades or school," Reyes admitted. "But through hockey, I've learned things about effort and dedication."

"Hockey is for Everyone" officials are looking for ways to bolster the program's educational impact. They're exploring partnerships with the Thurgood Marshall College Fund and some of the nation's 105 Historically Black Colleges and Universities that could someday lead to scholarships for qualified students and ice hockey programs on some black college campuses.

"We're in the very early preliminary stages," said Kenneth Martin, Jr., the NHL's Vice President of Community Affairs and Diversity Programming. "We're looking to provide four-year scholarships for kids to continue their education and still be involved in the sport that they love."