

Goal is confidence in this league

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Face intent, hair and wheels flying, Alex McLean breaks away, stickhandling toward the net, going in for the goal.

If you think electric wheelchair hockey isn't intense, think again.

McLean, who celebrated his 14th birthday Thursday, is a member of the Toronto Power Wheelchair Hockey League's junior division, which plays Sunday afternoons at Sunny View Public School.

The league is one of the ways kids with limited strength in their upper bodies can get in the game. And get in they do, boys and girls together, no holds barred.

Watched by a vociferous gallery of family members and friends, cheering, whistling and shouting out advice, the kids whirl around the gymnasium armed with lightweight plastic hockey sticks in pursuit of the rubber ball that substitutes for a puck.

They fight for possession in the corners, deke around the net and try for that crowd-pleasing breakaway.

Most sticks are taped right to the electric wheelchairs, so manoeuvring is the key.

"I never thought I'd be able to play hockey because I have a brittle bone disease," says a grinning Carlos Medina, 15. "Did you see me out there? This game is the greatest."

The biggest scores in wheelchair hockey come in confidence, says Esther Dzura, president and jack-of-all-trades for the league, which is managed by her partner Paul MacDougall.

"We hear it from all different sides," she says. One boy's teacher noticed such an increase in her student's confidence that she mentioned it to his family. "They told her it must be the hockey," Dzura says.

"My son had to have spinal surgery," says Kimberley Chan as she watches 14-year-old Ilish tend goal. "The first question he asked after surgery was: 'When will I be able to play hockey?'"

It's the same at the Canadian Electric Wheelchair Hockey Association, where players aged 13 and up have been competing for more than 20 years.

"It's all about networking and life skills," says marketing manager Dana Aube.

The association, partially funded by Ontario's Trillium Foundation, has five divisions across the country, including eight teams in the Toronto area. Each group is partnered with a minor league team, such as the Toronto Marlies.

Games, which include players of all ages, take place at Bloorview Kids Rehab facilities. Then there are the social events, including pizza nights and trips to Marlies' games.

The annual registration fee is \$30, which includes a team jersey but not equipment. The plastic hockey sticks cost somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$10, Aube says. And since there's no body-checking, there's no need for pricey padding, specialized helmets and much of the other regalia associated with the hard-hitting ice version of the game.

Still, keeping the teams going takes a lot of work. "We charge a registration fee of \$50 a year," says Dzura. That's supplemented by fundraising efforts, such as 50/50 prize draws. It's not easy making ends meet after insurance and gymnasium rental fees but parents and players are committed.

For many, like referee Abdullah Aumeer, it's a family affair. His 11-year-old daughters Aaliyah and Amina are in the Toronto league.

Some players travel long distances for the Sunday afternoon games. Braden Martz, 14, comes all the way from Cambridge but his dad, Paul, says he wouldn't miss it.

For families, too, the contact is important. "We network," says Liza Raounak, cheering on Ramin, 14. "It's important."

For more information on the Toronto Power Wheelchair Hockey League, see tpwhl.com or call 416-690-1412. For info on the Canadian Electric Wheelchair Hockey Association, see cewha.ca or call 416-757-8544.