

Sports This Week: Sport(?) of rod hockey still popular



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a day ago



Action from the Winnipeg Table Hockey League. | Courtesy Sal Capizzi / Yorkton This Week

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YORKTON - Few things are more Canadian for kids than dragging out a rod hockey game and

playing a few games with siblings, family, or friends.

Of course some players never really grow up, and the game remains an interest, if not a passion, where what may seem a board game to most, evolves to be closer to a competitive sport.

The latter group are the likes you will find shooting plastic pucks in the Winnipeg Table Hockey League.

The league has been around for years formalizing in 1989, with their 'original six' players making it the fourth oldest Table hockey leagues in the world, explained Sal Capizzi the President of the WTHL since 1989 and the current President of the Canadian Table Hockey Association (CTHA) since 2015. The same 'original six' players -- Sal Capizzi, Tony Capizzi, Mike Capizzi, Antonio Capizzi, Brian Clement and Zachary Mesman -- continue to play in the league today.

"We played before that in the 70s when we were young," he told *Yorkton This Week*.

Capizzi said most came to the game in what he suggested was a pretty typical way.

"They start like most Canadian kids, your brother or Dad gets you into the game," he said, adding it was pretty normal ". . . at Christmas or gatherings to pull out the table hockey game."

That's not surprising considering Capizzi notes table hockey has been a national pastime for decades since it was invented in the 1930s by Donald Munro.

As the early players aged, they decided it was time to take things a bit more seriously, tracking scores and keeping stats.

"It is a hobby we try to keep it going. We try to keep involved in the game," said Capizzi.

Capizzi's efforts to keep the game alive includes teaching it to students in phys ed.

"They love it. It's a good skill to learn because of the hand-eye coordination," he said, adding that transfers nicely to games like tennis or badminton.

Capizzi added that table hockey has been described as chess at 700 miles per hour.

It's also a game for life.

Capizzi said it's not unusual having a 10-year-old at the table against a player in their 60s.

The Winnipeg league just builds on all that foundational effort.

"It's taking it to a different level," offered Capizzi, adding this past season they had 22 players and have had more than 40 in past years.

The Winnipeg league, while being around for years, is not unique. Capizzi said there are 16 organized leagues he is aware of in Canada.

"The majority of them are in Quebec," he said, adding that he knows of a league in Edmonton and Kelowna, although at present no formalized one in Saskatchewan.

It is in Europe where table hockey is truly thriving though.

"In Europe tournaments can get 150 people (playing)," he said, adding the game/sport is particularly popular in Finland, Sweden, Germany and several Eastern countries.

There is also a World Table Hockey Association (worldtablehockeyassociation.com).

The ITHF World Tour includes in 21 countries, and today more than 10,000 players are registered.

A world championship is held every two years, and 200 players can be involved.

"They're more serious about it," offered Capizzi, adding it is seen more as a sport in Europe, whereas in Canada it is largely a board game.

"It's what level you want to take it."

Capizzi is certainly serious in the sense he has over the years collected 30 different table hockey boards, including an early model from 1955.

As a league, the WTHL is still unique in that it is a multi-table league which uses various models of the game instead of just one specific game as most other leagues. They use games in their league dating back to the 1950s all the way up to today's date. They have used 49 different models to date over the years in their tournaments.

But, like younger players the core idea is not so different, a bit of fantasy that a player is in the NHL.

That will be part of the fun at the upcoming 2024 WTHL Challenge Cup in Winnipeg, a charity fundraiser now in its 13th year.

The WTHL tries to do their part and give back to the community, offered Capizzi, be it working with local charities, raising money for cancer research with the WTHL Challenge Cup tournament (this year is the 13th edition), providing educational opportunities for children or recently raising funds for the crisis in Ukraine.