

SPORTS FEATURE



By JAMES HOGGETT

Every other Friday evening at the Bloorview Children's Hospital, six teams from Metro Toronto and the surrounding areas battle in the Canadian Electric Wheelchair Hockey Association (CEWHA). It is the only league of its kind in Canada and is currently seeking charitable status from the Federal Government.

For Corinne Kagan, a third year psychology and law in society student at York, Friday nights at Bloorview mean a lot more. "It gives me a chance to get together with other people like myself and participate in sports." Competing in sports is something most of us take for granted. Kagan, however does not. For Kagan has been confined to a wheelchair for most of her 21 years as a result of a genetic disease called Spinal Muscular Atrophy. The disease attacks the muscles in the body, making them weak. "I've had this problem since I was born," Kagan said, "it's basically not a dangerous disease if you look after yourself."

A Wheel-Trans bus picks Kagan up at her home every game night and drives her to Bloorview. She checks the playing schedule for the evening to find out when her team the "Buckeyes" will play their 30 minute game. This night she had a long wait as the team was playing third. But it also gave her a chance to relax after a tough week at York and to chat with her friends.

Currently the league is made up of six teams. Two teams are from Bloorview Hospital: the Buckeyes and the Scavengers (whose play resembles that of the Philadelphia Flyers of the mid-70s). Both teams are mainly made up of kids from the hospital, but there are a few outsiders like Kagan.

The rest of the league is made up of the Villa Wheelers (from the Villa Hospital), the Kitchener Rangers, the West Toronto Warriors and the Canadian Chargers. The latter is prim-

Funding a major problem

arily made up of two different high schools in Toronto.

An electric wheelchair is one of the few requirements to play in the league. Unlike participants in other leagues that use manual wheelchairs, the players in the CEWHA all have limited strength because of muscular diseases and need the assistance electric wheelchairs provide them.

The league originated 11 years ago from exhibition games between schools including the Villa Hospital, West Toronto, Aurora High and Monarch Park. As interest in these exhibition games grew, teams were then formed. Over the league's 11 year history, it has expanded from its original two team format to its current six teams. The league has officially been called the CEWHA for the last two years.

Kagan first joined the league five years ago. "I just came to watch a few of my friends play," Kagan said. "I really didn't have an interest other than just primarily coming to socialize. I never realized that I could be one of the players, but then one day someone asked me if I wanted to join and so I did."

The league's season starts in September, lasts until April, and culminates with the finals in May.

"These kids take these games quite seriously," said Albert Rossi, vice president of Operations for the CEWHA. "They like a structured league that parallels something that they see on television, and that's exactly what we've tried to do."

Rossi has been involved with the league for the last five years and his main duties are to ensure that Friday nights go off as scheduled. This means making sure that the referees arrive, the kids are prepared and ready to play, that they're able to get onto the Wheel-Trans at night.

"We follow the basic rules of hockey," Rossi said, "and these games can get pretty rough as there is a lot of ramming with chairs and dirty play. You're allowed to ride a player off the ball, you just don't want to hit him or her."

The only NHL rule that the CEWHA does not follow is icing, as the gym is too short. But they do call offsides and even give out penalties for going too fast. This makes the game more evenly balanced allowing the players who own the older models of chairs to keep up with the people with the newer models which can reach speeds of up to 10 miles per hour.

The biggest problem facing the league right now is money. Fundraising has become a big priority. One event the league holds each year to raise money is their Wheel-A-Thon. "This year our wheel-a-thon is on March 15, at Variety Village," said Jon Wagner, who is in charge of fundraising for the league this year. "It's an event where each of the kids obtain sponsors and they complete laps of an indoor



FELLOW STUDENTS TOO: Corinne Kagan with one of her two coaches of the Buckeyes, Jim Stieben, a third year psychology major at York.

track. We then collect money on the basis of the number of laps they complete."

Last year's wheel-a-thon was a great success, raising \$4,500 and Wagner is hoping to exceed that amount this year.

"It's a great time," Wagner said, "all the kids enjoy themselves and they get a chance to get out on a weekend and they do something associated with the league."

Currently the league is in the process of applying for charitable status with the Federal

Government. "Once this comes through," Wagner said, "we should get a lot of corporate sponsorship and larger donations because we can issue tax receipts."

One other problem facing the league is in making the league known throughout Metro. "Peter Gross from City TV came down, filmed some highlights and did a 30 second segment which publicized our league a little bit," Wagner said, "but we haven't got a large response from the public. Basically the people who are involved right now are the friends of relatives of the people who started it off in the beginning."

"We're also trying to get some pamphlets together and distribute these at a mall such as the Scarborough Town Centre or Woodbine Centre where we would have an information centre. This would stimulate interest and publicity about the league. Unfortunately right now we just don't have the funding to make up pamphlets so that's one of our future plans for next year."

And what does the future hold for the league? Like other leagues, the CEWHA hopes to expand. "We eventually hope someday to have a team in each city across Canada and compete against each other in a national championship," Wagner said.

So far the only team from Kitchener has expressed interest in starting a Kitchener-Cambridge area league; it feels they could get together at least a four team league.

"It's going to take a little bit of time," Wagner said, "but I think eventually we could expand. At first throughout Ontario and then hopefully to larger cities outside, like Montreal and Vancouver."

To Corinne Kagan and the other players, the CEWHA, is a very important element in their lives. "It makes us feel very independent," Kagan said, "and it gives us a chance to release our frustrations."

If anyone is interested in finding out more about the CEWHA, or wish to join, become a volunteer or to sponsor any of the youths, please contact Jon Wagner at 581-3431 or league president Rob Carmichael at 229-6265.



CLEAR THE TRACK: Corinne Kagan takes a pass from one of her teammates and moves in on goal. Kagan has played with the league for five years. The league is currently charitable status with the Federal Government.