

Panthers set to host prestigious Silver Stick tournament



By Jake Courtepatte

The best of the best on ice are headed to Aurora.

The Central York Girls Hockey Association and the Aurora Panthers announced last week that for the twentieth straight year, the Town of Aurora will host the International Silver Stick tournament from Feb. 1-3.

Opening ceremonies will kick off at the Aurora Community Centre on the Friday afternoon, before 52 teams from all levels of the Atom and Bantam age levels take to the ice to determine the top minor hockey programs in North America.

"We initially had only Atom and Bantam A and AA divisions," said Bruce Bennett, scheduler and tournament manager for the majority of Aurora's tenure as host. "About five years ago, we added the BB divisions" and we now have teams on waiting lists. Six Aurora squads will be looking to defend home ice, while three American teams will be joining the competition: the Anaheim Lady Ducks, the St. Clair Shores Saints, and the Colorado Rocky Mountain Lady Riders.

"Despite much of the crowd being player families and friends, interest in the tournament continues to be strong," said Don Bailkowski, who has worn a number of different hats over Aurora's twenty years as host. "One growth area is the number of scouts from both Canadian and US universities, interested in watching the Bantam AA games (ages 13 & 14 years). It's the highest level for girls of that age."

A staple on the minor hockey calendar for the past sixty years, the Silver Stick tournament has grown from a four-team festival to the behemoth it is today, with regional tournaments held across North America, before culminating in the International final.

"In the beginning, it was a scattering of getting people together," said Bailkowski. "We had some struggling years, where sometimes things didn't go as planned, but at the end of the day we got through and volunteers have really come through."

"I would say for the last fifteen years, the Silver Stick tournament has been tremendous. Great turnout, the public has been so supportive, and the volunteers have been fantastic."

Bailkowski said it now takes approximately fifty volunteers to put on a smooth show of this magnitude.

"When you take into consideration timekeepers, the registration desk, everything from making sure everyone's fed to what's on the ice."

The tournament will be spread among the Town's various ice pads, including the Aurora Community Centre (AAC), the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex (SARC), and a few games at LaBrier Arena on the St. Andrew's College campus. Hockey-related displays will be featured at both the ACC and SARC locations, and a unique silent auction will be held at the ACC until 3 p.m. on Saturday February 2. Vendors will also be on-hand.