

AMHA player heads to Sochi ahead of Olympics ? playing bandy for Somalia



By Jeff Doner

Six years ago, Anwar Hared laced up his skates and stepped out onto the rink for the very first time.

The young athlete honed his craft on skates playing hockey in the AMHA, but it wasn't long before he decided to try out a similar ice sport called bandy.

Now 17, Hared is headed to Sochi, Russia this week to take part in the bandy World Championships to play for Somalia ? the country his family emigrated from in 1991.

?The fact that it's my first time ever playing on a world stage, it's amazing,? an excited Hared said. ?There are no words to really describe how excited I am and the fact that people are going to be watching all over the world is really exciting. I hope I'll have another opportunity in the future to participate in this event.?

This year bandy will be showcased at the Olympic Winter Games as a demonstration sport with 17 nations sending their best for the competition.

It will also mark the first time Somalia will have a team participating in a winter sport.

Although he didn't receive an invitation to play for the Canadian squad, Hared is more than happy to suit up for his native Somalia, something his family back in Africa think is somewhat outrageous.

?At times they make the odd joke that I'm the odd man out in the family, but it's something that can make me stand out and I think it's an awesome opportunity for me,? he said.

?Bandy helps me get my mind off stress and also it's an amazing opportunity to support the country of my background on a national scale.?

There aren't many bandy players in the area, so when he's not playing hockey, Hared practices either in the rink or outdoors when he can.

But Hared said it was tough task in itself to convince his parents to help him enroll in hockey so that he could learn to skate.

?It was a long process actually,? he explained. ?I had to convince my parents because they didn't want me to play. They were worried I might face racism or problems, but I pushed through and decided to sign up myself.

?After doing so, the exact opposite of what my parents were worried about happened and the hockey community showed me a warm welcoming, love, care and showed me how to play the game.?

Hared said the coaches and administrators immediately took him under their wing, making sure he had bought the right equipment and had the right instruction.

He still plays hockey in Aurora, but Hared said his interest in bandy has only grown.

The sport is similar to ice hockey, but has different rules, different sticks, less body contact, fighting is not allowed and it is played with an orange hockey ball.

He said he hopes that others in the community will see him on this trip and be inspired to give bandy a try.

?It's an exciting thing, I use it as motivation to keep playing and maybe help other youth from the community to get into it, especially the African community, because they generally aren't big on the winter sports,? he said. ?I believe the winter sports are great activities that anyone can participate in. It provides awesome opportunities and I feel that more youth in our community should get involved.?

Hared, a grade 12 student at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School, said he'll also be paying attention to how the Canadian hockey team is doing in Sochi, as one of his role models will be there competing for gold.

?I'll be honest, when I started playing hockey I watched the World Junior Championships every Christmas break and there was a couple African-Canadian players that took part, so to see guys like Evander Kane and PK Subban play was a big inspiration for me to play the game and dedicate my time,? he said.

?Those guys and the fact that they succeeded, even though my chance of making the NHL are like 0.01 per cent, it just made me realize that no matter who you are and where you come from, you can do anything. No one can hold you back.?

For what has become an amazing experience, Hared wanted to give a shout out to some of the people that made the trip possible. ?I would like to give a special acknowledgement to my first team, both of my hockey teams in Aurora and of course my bandy coaches.?