

Diversity on the Ice program aims to get entire community to lace up

As coach of the Central York Panthers girls' hockey team for more than a decade, Keith Higgins has seen the diversity among his team grow with each passing year.

But, for some communities, barriers are still in the way of seeing Canada's national winter sport represent the diversity of the country ? and that's where Diversity on the Ice hopes to bridge some of those gaps.

Diversity on the Ice, an initiative of the Aurora Black Community Association (ABC) held in conjunction with Black History Month for the second year in a row, will take over the ice at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex this Monday, February 20 ? Family Day ? to encourage more families to lace up.

It's another way the ABC, following the launch of its I Can Swim program, is aiming to expose more people to sports they might not otherwise have access to.

This will be the second year Higgins has led the program and he's excited for what he and his team of Panthers can bring to new skaters young and old.

?I think it is great to give more people the opportunity to play,? he says. ?I think it is really great that they get the opportunity come out. When Phiona [Durrant, founder of the ABC] and the Town of Aurora reached out to me directly to say they wanted us to do it again, I knew it was a good thing and I am finding that in the Panthers organization, we are getting way more diverse than when my daughter first started playing.?

Higgins is no stranger to helping first-time skaters find their feet. He works with the First Shift program with the Panthers, which is sponsored by Bauer and tailored to kids between the ages of six and 10 playing hockey for the first time. He's also involved with the Esso Fun Days program, too, which also helps give kids the opportunity to get on the ice.

?The weirdest thing for me is when you look at sports in general, at about the same time the first Black people started to play in the NBA in the 50s, now their statistic is about 70 per cent of the players are Black. When you switch over and look at something like the NHL, I think one of my favourites, (New Brunswick-born) Willie O'Ree was the first Black player in the NHL in 1958 (for the Boston Bruins) ? and there have been Black players in the NHL and the NBA for roughly the same time.?

He adds he's not sure whether it's an opportunity barrier or a financial barrier that keeps people from the ice, but it's an issue that needs to be tackled.

?Last year, Diversity on the Ice was run outside because of COVID and they had close to 30 people ranging from little kids of five- or six-years-old and even Phiona was out there on the ice for the first time. I probably had the sorest back I ever had after that day, and my stomach was sore because I was laughing so hard, but it's an awesome opportunity and nice to have any group of people go out and try a new sport. I had a group of girls from the Panthers who came out and actually helped out. To me, that is probably one of the most important things. Those girls are rep hockey players and they're on the ice four or five times a week and I don't think they really realize the age they're at? what the community is going through and kids not having the opportunity to do things. It's a great chance for them to give back and see the other side of the story, sometimes.

?Hockey is a lot cheaper than a lot of the other sports running in the Town. I would love it if I could get a couple of girls from this group to come back and be a part of the Panthers this year. I think it would be a huge measure of success. When people come out on Monday, there will be a bunch of girls instructing different centres on the ice; we're starting off as an entire group event to get people comfortable just to stand because probably half of them won't know how to stand. We're going to get them standing on the ice, feeling comfortable ? and just doing it for an hour or 30 minutes isn't going to make them excellent skaters, but if they have a safe environment to do it in with people who know what they're doing my hope is they would continue trying it or maybe go out and

get more lessons. Or even just come to public skates. I want to give them a safe environment for people who have never tried this sport, or people who are fairly new at it.?

For more on the Diversity on the Ice program, including how to register, visit aurorablackcommunity.com. The day's programs start at 2 p.m. at the SARC.

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