

Ready to roll

Local teenagers gear up for wheelchair hockey tournament

By TIM SMITH
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Toronto, Ontario, awaits the players of the Wheelchair Hockey League, which features the honest slogan "Just Don't Sit There, Play Hockey!"

Among suburban Detroit players headed for Canada this weekend are Farmington Hills resident Gary Bartle, 14, and Farmington's David Rosen, 17 — both afflicted at birth with muscular dystrophy and confined to wheelchairs.

Before leaving, however, is a tune-up game at 6:30 p.m. tonight, at the Oakland Community College-Orchard Ridge campus.

Gary and David could mope about their situation. Instead, they prefer gearing up for floor hockey competition with their team, the Cobras.

Earlier this week both Gary and David, students at Warner Middle School and Harrison High School, respectively, got in a little practice time in the parking lot at Lanigan Elementary School. They held plastic sticks and deftly controlled their \$15,000 motorized chairs, turning and weaving and enabling them to build enough momentum for passes and shots.

Actually, good wheelchair hockey players do just that — maneuver — because they really can't do more than grasp their sticks. There's no such thing as actually moving their sticks to propel the plastic ball.

"These kids have no arm strength," said Farmington resident John Frendorst, David's stepfather. "Hanging onto the stick is a major, major accomplishment. It's hard to do because they can't squeeze too hard."

According to Gary's grandfather, Don Bartle of Farmington Hills, being able to participate in the WCHL is a real blessing, because it helps build their self-esteem, self-confidence and feeling of belonging.

"They live for this, really," Bartle said.

Chance to excel

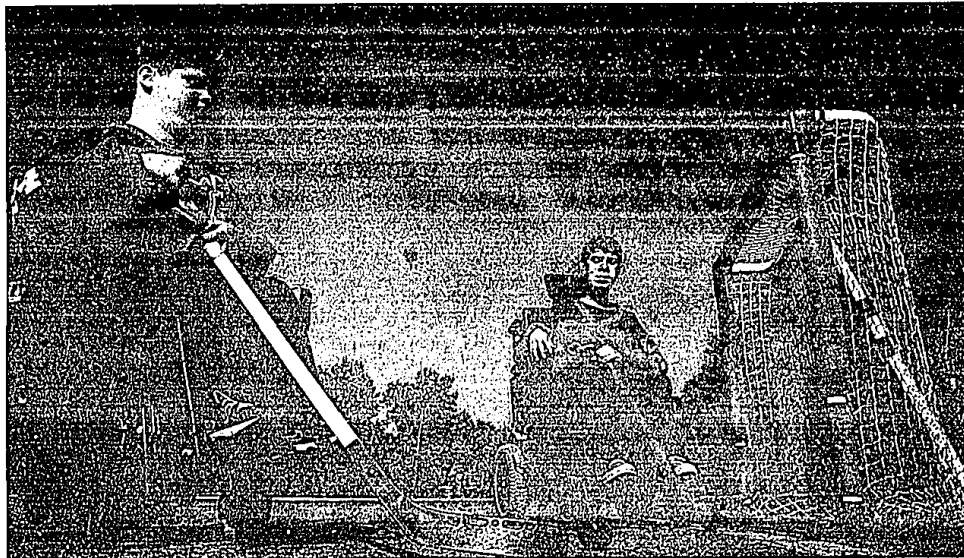
During the Toronto tournament, where the league is sending a 10-player, all-star squad, Gary and David will divide time as goaltender. That will take some getting used to. Canadian league rules dictate that goalies are used, which is completely different from the Michigan league, where, instead, defensemen patrol with an eye on keeping the ball out of their net.

During their Lanigan practice session, Gary and David worked on passing back and forth, despite an uneven asphalt surface.

"Positioning is real important," Gary, who is team captain of the Cobras, said about being a defender. "You like to have them hit it (the ball) right at the wheel or the stick."

Concurring was David, who noted that, in situations where an opponent is coming toward a defender, "you back up and get them to shoot at the wheel."

Meanwhile, both teens said they relish having an opportunity to play in the WCHL, which is



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BARBER

Practice time: Cobras captain Gary Bartle (left) and David Rosen scrimmage in the Lanigan Elementary School parking lot in preparation for this weekend's big tournament in Toronto. Gary and David are part of an all-star squad representing the Wheelchair Hockey League. The Cobras are one of four teams who comprise the WCHL, which is based in metropolitan Detroit.

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Gary Bartle
—Hockey player

under the leadership of president Andy Siwarski, vice president Tom Martin and Andy's mom, Mary Lou. The league, which now has 33 active members, gives them a sports outlet.

"I love playing hockey, and I get to do that with the kids in the neighborhood, but I can't excel," said Gary, who was the seventh player to join the league in 1995. "But in the WCHL, where everybody has some kind of disability, I can show them what I have."

Players either have MD, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, spinal cord injuries or suffered a stroke.

David, a four-year league veteran, added that the WCHL gives him a different kind of outlet, too.

"I was glad when I realized this was available and I like the friendships you get. Everybody is similar to you and you get to talk with each other,"

he said.

Siwarski, a graduate of Westland John Glenn High School, said he and a good friend of his, the late Todd Pasant, came up with the idea to create

a wheelchair hockey league that perhaps could go national someday.

After Todd died, Andy really put his energies into getting the idea going.

"In high school ... we didn't think anything like this (league) was out there," said Andy, recalling how he and Todd talked about the concept. "We just wanted to get out and play hockey."

Five years later, their idea is taking hold nicely. Teams compete in regular four-on-four contests and practices, mostly at Ward Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Northville Township. The league is sponsored by the Southfield Hockey Club.

And, besides this weekend's Toronto tourney, the first international games in the league's brief history, there is a nifty Web site, which can be found at www.scorezone.com/wchl.

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