

New ice rinks take Chicago by storm

By Neil Versel



been forgotten. Two sprawling new complexes in DuPage County are opening this year. The first of two rinks at Blades Ice & Fitness in Addison opened in mid-October.

The rest of the 92,000-square-foot center makes its debut on Nov. 1. This includes a wider, Olympic-size ice sheet, full-service sports bar and grill, a coffee shop, three retail stores (one just for hockey and one exclusively for licensed apparel), a 9,000-square-foot membership fitness center, plus a huge aerobics room. The staff includes dance and ballet teachers.

Thinking of renting either rink? Get in line or get ready to lose some sleep. Blades spokesman Rick Carlson said that all prime-time ice slots have been rented on three-year contracts since March, so the good times are essentially gone until 1999. But early and late shifts are still available—the building will be open from 5 a.m. to 2 a.m. daily.

Not to be outdone, the Darien Park District has teamed up with a private firm to bring the enormous Darien Sportsplex to the western suburbs. Two NHL-size rinks practically get lost in the 130,000-square-foot facility, but they help meet the burgeoning demand for ice time throughout the region.

Also within the Sportsplex are two field houses almost the size of ice rinks themselves, which will host indoor soccer from November through April each year. The AstroTurf will be removed for other activities during the spring and summer, including in-line skating.

Among other amenities are a restaurant, fitness equipment, publicly available meeting rooms, a sports rehabilitation center affiliated with Loyola University's Medical Center in Maywood and a branch of Chicago-based Brad's Gym, offering personal training services.

Both the Darien Sportsplex and Blades offer public skating sessions and ice skating lessons, in addition to rentals for hockey and figure skating. ■

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Ice skaters, rejoice! Whether you're a serious figure skater, hockey junkie or once-a-year recreational skater, you have a sudden increase in options to satisfy your frozen desires as more than a dozen new rinks open this winter.

The Chicago Park District is leading the way, investing \$6.5 million in eight new outdoor ice rinks throughout the city. Private ventures are also getting into the act, as four first-class indoor facilities with a total of seven rinks are getting set to open across Chicago and the suburbs.

More than 300,000 people visited Sears Skate on State last year, the city's free, outdoor rink in the Loop, enough to convince the Daley administration to bring ice skating back to city neighborhoods. So look for similar Olympic-size rinks—complete with skate rentals and concession stands—to open in Garfield Park, Fuller Park, Lincoln Park (at Waveland Avenue), Mount Greenwood Park, McKinley Park, Riis Park, Rowan Park and on the Midway Plaisance right around Thanksgiving.

Unlike the Park District rinks of the past, which were built by hosing down ballfields or black-tops, the new "portable" rinks will have their own refrigeration systems.

"With hoses, the rinks were unreliable," Park District spokes-

woman Nora Moreno explained. "It took maybe two weeks to freeze, and if the temperature rose above 32 degrees for a couple of days in a row, we had to shut it down." The new rinks should be good through St. Patrick's Day.

Some of the rinks, which are constructed on pavement, could remain year-round, welcoming in-line skaters during warmer months—"If the park is willing to give up part of its parking lot," Moreno noted.

And come next winter, expect to see the pucks flying.

"Next year, we have money in the budget to add features to some of the rinks to make them standardized for hockey," Moreno explained.

But a solution to the perennial shortage of ice time for hockey is much less than a year away, as two primarily hockey facilities are preparing to open their doors.

Hockey players may actually be celebrating the demise of the dingy University of Illinois Chicago practice rink on the Near West Side, complete with its soft ice, dead boards, broken scoreboard, crooked glass and lack of locker rooms and parking. That building, at Roosevelt and Halsted, is being converted to a gym now that UIC has dropped its hockey program.

Just a couple of miles away, the shiny, new Johnny's Ice House is rising at Madison and

Loomis, in the shadow of the United Center. Operated by Kevin Mann Hockey, which also runs the Barrington Ice Arena, Johnny's will feature a single regulation hockey rink (200 feet by 85 feet), covered parking, seating for 275, a pro shop and four locker rooms when it opens Jan. 1.

There will be no public skating sessions at Johnny's Ice House, which will be dedicated to figure skating and hockey—including some Chicago Blackhawks and visiting National Hockey League team practices. Rink operator Kevin Mann reports that 100 percent of prime ice time is already booked.

At American Heartland Ice Arena, slated for a Dec. 1 opening in Lincolnwood, don't expect to see anyone but hockey players. "It's strictly hockey," said President and CEO Steve Morrow.

In addition to a standard rink with more than 300 seats, the American Heartland complex boasts a 110-by-120-foot training sheet, which can be subdivided for skills training, goalie training and shooting lanes. Predictably, the facility will host hockey camps and offer lessons. It will also serve as home base for the Chicago Young Americans, the local entry in the nation's highest level of amateur youth hockey.

Suburban recreational skaters, take heart. You haven't