

National championships in city

Canada's best teen speed skaters strut their stuff in Hespeler

By Bill Doucet, Times Staff

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It's taken 22 years, but the Canadian Age Class Short Track Championships are returning to the city.

Last hosted by the Cambridge Speed Skating Club in 1987, the national event for skaters age 12 to 18 is considered a springboard for future members of the Canadian squad. According to Cambridge club president Cathy Pardy, the championship is thought of as one of the first steps of getting to the top of the mountain in amateur sports.

"The athletes you'll see, the 16 to 18 year olds, are striving for the 2014 Winter Olympics," Pardy said.

"The older skaters are going to be looking for a national ranking, then onto the national team and the Olympics. I think every skater that's competed in the Olympics has competed at this competition."

The event will be held March 27-29 at the Hespeler Arena.

Pardy added that spectators will definitely see the best of the best at the nationals. Qualifying skaters must place well in four Ontario Cups –the season opener is held annually in Cambridge –and finish in the top four in their age class at the provincials. The Ontario championships are March 14-15 at the Waterloo Rec Complex.

As proof that the championships will be hotly contested, at last year's Canadians in Sherbrooke, Que., 18 Canadian records were broken.

"Athletes will be training and performing at their peak that weekend," said event committee member Britta Wright, adding that female skaters tend to mature faster in the sport, so there could be some surprises at the championships.

"While it would be rare, it's not out of the question that one of the times could be fast enough to qualify for the Canadian team trials. This really is a big deal."

Pardy said it was quite a coup for the club to get a chance to host the championships, since the event only comes to Ontario maybe once a decade, as each province gets a chance to host. A bid was put together two years ago to Speed Skating Canada, with the emphasis put on the perfection of the venue for short track speed skating and accommodations in the city. The estimated economic impact on the city is \$1 million.

In addition, the club has a history of hosting big events. Besides the '87 championships, the 1994 World Short Track Championships –held at Conestoga College –and 2004 North American Short Track Championships were awarded to Cambridge speed skating.

"The size of the ice is really important, as the kids go at good speeds and need that room around the sides for safety. There aren't too many Olympic size ice rinks around," Pardy said.

"I think the success of the club helped, as we have put a number of kids on the Ontario team and the national team. We have members that have gone to the North Americans and the Olympics."

Wright added, "We also have a city big enough to handle the 150 coaches, officials and volunteers, as well as 200 athletes. And we have a rink with amplified seating for the event."

In fact, seating may be the only snag that hits the event committee. Originally slated for rink 1, the championships had to be moved to rink 2 after levelling problems arose with the concrete slab. The only drawback to rink 2 is that it doesn't have the same seating capacity. The city has said they will remove the glass around the rink and try to erect some bleacher seating to make up for the shortfall.

"The city has really been working hard on this with us," Pardy said.

"They're also going to scrape the ice down to the bare minimum, take off all the hockey lines and paint the track blue so it is easy to define. It will look quite different and will be something to see.

"We're hoping to have upwards of 1,000 people out to watch during the weekend."

Preparations for the championships have been going on for a year, according to Wright. The event committee has been working on sponsorships and donations to create a workable budget.

They've also been piecing together the opening and closing ceremonies, as well as the annual banquet on March 28. Some awards will be handed out at the dinner, with the remainder set for the closing ceremonies. That's when the overall champions will also be crowned.

"We're really working to see the seats completely full," Wright said, adding that city schools will be invited to Friday's daytime races.

"There also won't be a charge to get in all weekend. Anybody wanting to watch the competition can come. We're really trying to be proactive in filling the stands."

What could make the event even better is a strong contingent of local skaters competing.

"Cambridge has the potential to have six to 12 athletes on the Ontario team," Pardy said.

"It should be really exciting."



(Left to right) Jacob Wright, Eric Fackoury and Bennett Wiancko, members of the Cambridge Speed Skating Club, go through the paces at practice this week. The club is hosting the Canadian Age Class Speed Skating Championships in March at the Hespeler Arena.