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February 16, 2007

Pond hockey evokes nostalgia

Tim Twentyman / The Detroit News

Matt Hambright's favorite activity growing up in Grosse Pointe was rounding up the neighborhood kids for a little pond hockey.

No fancy arena, no Zamboni -- just a few boys, and their weathered and worn pads and sticks.

"We would get the neighborhood kids together on the lake or we would take four-by-fours, a tarp, and a hose and build our own rinks in the backyard," Hambright, 31, said. "That was a great time for us."

Today in Wisconsin, Hambright and longtime pals Brian Bonsall, Andrew Scriver, Kurt Bergstrom and Doug Black will be transported to their childhood roots. They make up team Hantz Group, a bunch of middle-aged men playing in the second annual Labatt Blue Pond Hockey Championships on Dollar Lake in Eagle River, Wis.

In a scene similar to one found in an Ansel Adams portfolio, hundreds of men flock to the secluded community for a weekend of pond hockey and partying.

"Eagle River is kind of like a Northern Michigan atmosphere," said Rick Chadwick, a member of team Hantz Group in 2006 who couldn't make the trip this year. "I think of it like a fraternity up there. Everyone is very friendly, and all the guys hang out at the bar each night."

Brighton's Rich Renko, 44, is traveling to the tournament for the first time this year with a team from his hometown.

"It is a good excuse for guys to get away for a few days in winter," he said. "I can just imagine what it is like to have a bunch of guys in a secluded town playing in a hockey tournament sponsored by a beer company."

Forty-one teams -- including the Hantz Group -- from a dozen states participated in last year's tournament. Former Ford Motor Company chairman Bill Ford was a captain for the Ford team, which finished first in the 40-and-over division.

This year, the tournament doubled in size, and 80 teams will participate on 12 rinks (there were seven rinks in 2006).

"It was an awesome time had by all last year," said Ashley Bevan, director of adult hockey for USA Hockey, which runs the event. "We had some teams asking to immediately sign up for this year's tournament after the first day last year.

"This tournament is about camaraderie with friends and bringing back great memories."

Pond hockey tournaments such as the one in Eagle River are sprouting up throughout the northern states. Labatt Blue Light is sponsoring a similar tournament Feb. 24-25 in St. Ignace, Mich. The tournament will be on Moran Bay overlooking Mackinac Island.

Today's forecast for Eagle River calls for a high of 23 degrees with partly sunny skies. By comparison, that's going to be downright balmy for players who endured temperatures of 15- to 30-below in Eagle River last year.

"It was so cold last year that one of our guys had to take a hockey sock and cut holes in it so he could put it over his head and face and play," Chadwick said. "But once the puck drops and the adrenaline starts flowing, you don't feel a thing."

The tournament does have heated tents and plenty of refreshments provided by Labatt.

Michigan will be represented by 10 teams. Kregg Richardson, 39, and his Triple A Electric team from Lake Orion are one of the 40 new teams in this year's tournament and will compete in the Silver 30-and-over division.

Richardson learned about the tournament after winning a Labatt Blue Pond Hockey jersey at a USA Hockey tournament in Kalamazoo.

"I grew up playing pond hockey," he said. "We played pond hockey whenever we could as kids.

"This will be like reliving my childhood again."

You can reach Tim Twentyman at ttwentyman@detnews.com.

Annual tournament

What: Second annual Labatt Blue Pond Hockey Championships

Where: On Dollar Lake in Eagle River, Wis.

When: Today-Monday

Format: 4-on-4

Tournament features teams of adults 21-years and older in eight no-check divisions. It is structured in a round-robin format with each team guaranteed three games. Prizes are awarded to the champion and runner-up from each division.

Registration includes a Labatt Blue/USA Hockey winter hat, a commemorative jersey and postgame refreshments.

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