

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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Physically Challenged Kids Attend Hockey Clinic

October 16, 2003 (Hartford, CT) -- They come from Connecticut, New York, Massachusetts and Rhode Island to do one thing, play hockey. "I just like to be out on the ice and moving fast," said one eager participant. "Hockey is the only sport where it's okay to roughhouse," said another. The players are kids and young adults and an occasional adult. They are athletic, strong-willed, courageous, determined and physically challenged.

The hockey they play is by all look and feel the same hockey you'll see on the rink at Wolf Pack games. There are goals and hat tricks to be made. Players are penalized and put in the box. Players push and shove and do what they can to advance the puck.

It is called Sled Hockey and it is the rage in Canada and Europe, where it had its beginnings as Sledge Hockey. The concept is catching on in New England too, and teams are being started in Connecticut for youths, juniors and adults.

"Come on, come on, we're waiting for you," said an eager player, as his buddy was being strapped into his sled and lifted onto the ice. "Gimme a break. The strap is loose," replies the straggler.

These players were students in a hockey clinic that was held to raise awareness and funds for the emerging sport in Connecticut. Any Saturday or Sunday when they can get ice, the Connecticut Sled Hockey organizers draw hockey enthusiasts who have disabilities. They come to learn how to move on the ice and how to compete. With friends, supporters, and family members standing by, the participants are taped or strapped into specially constructed sleds, which look like a giant ice skate, and placed on the ice. Instructors come from hockey teams and organizations like the **Hartford Wolf Pack**, **USA Sled Hockey**, and **The Connecticut Whalers**, and they are as dedicated as the players.

“There are not too many sports I can play,” said a paraplegic participant. “I need to build my upper body strength,” he added. The hockey sticks are taped to his hands because he has trouble holding on to them. The sticks look like short hockey sticks with metal picks on the other end, which are used to propel the sleds across the ice.

This is more than a sport for these participants. It is independence and freedom. For all the help and attention they receive from their caretakers, this they do alone. Out on the ice no one is there to assist. It is just the player, the sled, the sticks, the puck and the competitiveness. “My son loves hockey,” said a proud parent. He was born with spinal bifida and a lot of things are beyond his reach. He loves hockey and wants to be a goalie with the Wolf Pack. Now he has a chance to do exactly what he wants to do.”

Tom Brake, USA Hockey board member and president of USA Sled Hockey was at the first clinic held two weeks ago. “The Philadelphia Flyers have been very supportive in building sled hockey in the Philadelphia area and interest in Connecticut is growing rapidly,” he added. Our organization is committed to supporting Connecticut Sled Hockey. Support comes in many ways. One is the backing of corporate sponsors and grass roots organization. The two Connecticut co-ed sled hockey teams have the support of the Connecticut Wolf Pack, The Greater Hartford Jaycees, and Connecticut Chapter of National Spinal Cord Injury Association. The effort is being spearheaded by Chariots of Hope, a Connecticut-based nonprofit organization that provides refurbished wheelchairs free to confined individuals.

The next clinic is scheduled for Sunday, October 5th from 7 to 8:30 pm at the Veterans Memorial Ice Rink in West Hartford immediately following the preseason Wolf Pack vs. Ice Cats game and is free to the hockey students. Participants can register at the door or in advance by going on line to www.chariotsofhope.org and click on events.

For more information on the clinic or on the sled hockey teams call Pat Carney at 860-844-8646 or Ken Messier at 860-249-4673.

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