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Hespeler Olympics gold standard for holiday hockey tournaments

Waterloo Region Record
By [Justin Fauteux](#)

Once the presents have been opened and the turkey's been eaten, the next holiday tradition on the minds of most young hockey players is getting on the ice for a Christmastime tournament. And the rinks in Waterloo Region will certainly be busy this holiday season.

The region will play host to four holiday hockey tournaments between Christmas and New Year's, with more than 380 teams and nearly 6,000 young players hitting the ice in Kitchener, Waterloo and Cambridge.

While holiday tournaments have long been a staple in Waterloo Region, one local tournament is celebrating some particularly impressive longevity. This year marks 50 years for the Hespeler Olympics, run by the Hespeler Minor Hockey Association.

The Hespeler Olympics tournament was established in 1966 and was the brainchild of Stan Moore, who had moved to the area shortly before starting the tournament. Moore later moved to Tillsonburg in 1972, and was inducted into the Tillsonburg Sports Hall of Fame as a builder last year for his contributions as an advocate for minor hockey in the area.

Over the years the tournament became a marquee event in Ontario and has played host to numerous future professionals, foremost among them Wayne Gretzky, who would routinely put up eye-popping numbers in the relatively short tournament as a visitor from Brantford.

"We're pretty central in our location, we're not too big, but not too small, and you really still get that hometown hockey feeling," said John Murray, president of the Hespeler Minor Hockey Association, explaining the draw of the tournament for out-of-town teams.

While the tournament is a longtime staple of the Ontario hockey scene, as the number of holiday tournaments in the province ballooned through the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the Olympics started to see a drop in participation a little more than a decade ago.

"The number of tournaments at Christmas time in Ontario has doubled in the past 20 years," said Murray. "That's one of the reasons why we've really concentrated on getting the word out a little bit more than we used to."

With a renewed focus on recruiting teams from across Ontario and the northeastern United States, the tournament has grown in each of the past three seasons. This year's edition will see 78 teams take the ice, up from just under 60 a year ago, which was an improvement on the more than 40 teams that took part in 2014.

"We had far more people in the stands during last year's tournament than we've had in a number of years," said Murray. "We're really excited with the growth."

With the tournament celebrating its 50th year — 2016-17 also marks the 80th anniversary of the Hespeler Minor Hockey Association — this year's edition will feature celebratory events, such as alumni games; ceremonial puck drops from former HMHA players, longtime members of the association, city officials and members of Moore's family. Commemorative pucks are also being given out to the Hespeler teams participating.

The lone rep tournament in the region this holiday season, the Hespeler Olympics will host A, AE, MD and select teams, ranging in age from tyke to midget. In addition to local teams from Hespeler, Cambridge, Kitchener, Waterloo, New Hamburg and Woolwich taking part, the tournament will also see visitors from the Greater Toronto Area, as well as east and southwestern Ontario.

The Hespeler Arena will be the tournament's main hub, however the recent growth of the event has meant expansion into four additional rinks: Cambridge Sports Park, Karl Homuth Arena, the Preston Memorial Auditorium and the Galt Arena Gardens.

- Also in Cambridge this holiday season, the Cambridge Minor Hockey Association will be holding its annual house league tournament. Featuring 45 teams and nearly 800 players from all of the association's house league divisions, the event will take place at the Dickson Park Centre, Duncan McIntosh Arena, Karl Homuth, the Preston Auditorium, with many of the tournament's championship games being played at the historic Galt Arena Gardens.

- In Waterloo, RIM Park will once again host the Waterloo Minor Hockey Association's House League Christmas Tournament, which will see 60 teams and more than 1,000 young players hitting the ice.

- Marking its 22nd anniversary in 2016, the Kitchener Minor Hockey Association will be hosting the annual Jason Cripps Memorial Tournament, using all of the city's rinks.

Jason Cripps, a local hockey standout, was 14 when he was killed by a drunk driver in 1988. Six years after his death, the KMHA renamed its annual holiday tournament in Jason's honour. The Cripps family remains involved with the tournament and — along with MADD Canada, which has been involved with the event since the beginning — promotes the crucial message of drinking responsibly and not drinking and driving.

Always a massive event, the Jason Cripps Memorial will see more than 200 boys and girls house league teams — about 2,800 players — take part.

All local tournaments will be running Dec. 27-30.

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