

Immersed in the Game

It may have limitations as a spectator sport, but underwater hockey is making a splash with fitness enthusiasts

BY GAIL HELGASON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DUSTIN DELFS



The Octopushers demonstrate the fine points of underwater hockey at Coronation Pool

Picture a game of hockey. Then remove the ice and replace it with a swimming pool. Bring on the players but toss out those skates and heavy sweaters and replace them with itty-bitty trunks, Speedos, fins and snorkels.

The sport you're looking at is underwater hockey. And (surprise, surprise), it's not all wet. Plunge in and you just might find serendipity in getting soaked.

That's the word from Gilles Benoiton, a 31-year-old Edmonton guitar teacher and president of the Octopushers Club for adult underwater hockey enthusiasts. "It's easy to learn and it's like you're in another world," he says of the sport. "You can't really communicate with anyone verbally. You have to hold your breath and sort of fight against yourself."

Strong swimming skills are not required, he says. You just need to be able to swim 50 metres continuously – half the length of an Olympic-sized pool – to sign up as a beginner.

Benoiton wasn't a strong swimmer when he dove into the sport six years ago. He became interested in scuba diving after reading the novels of American action/adventure writer Clive Cussler, but he found opportunities for that sport to be limited in Edmonton. A friend then suggested underwater hockey, so he showed up at a weekly club game and got hooked. "It was very welcoming," he recalls. "There were maybe 20 people playing it and they were all so inviting. It just blossomed from there."

Benoiton, his wife Connie and at least 100 other Edmontonians are active participants in this relatively inexpensive sport, which appears to attract men and women equally.

The game is played in a shallow swimming pool. Players chase a weighted puck underwater to try to score goals at either end. Two teams of six players are each equipped with fins, mask, snorkel and a small plastic hockey stick shaped like a wide "S." They compete underwater for two 10 to 15 minute periods, trying to avoid penalty calls. Players come up frequently for breath, usually staying underwater for 10 to 15 second intervals. Teams are distinguished by the colour of their caps and sticks. (And no, there are no goalies.)

"It's exhilarating," says Jim Jones, a 54-year-old entomologist from Sherwood Park. "There's a lot to learn. Like all team sports, you play with other people and you have to learn their patterns of play."

Learning the basics takes only two or three practice sessions, says Benoiton. The key is to be able to swim low enough so that other players can't swim beneath you to carry off the puck.

Both the fitness and competitive aspect attract Chris Alenuik, 23, who plays on the Canadian Men's Underwater Hockey Team. "It's a very cardiovascular game," he says. "But anyone who can swim can have fun. I know a few players who would probably drown if they didn't have fins," he jokes.

The game is popular in Australia and some European countries, but is less well-known in North America. Most Canadian cities have two or three clubs. The Edmonton area now has four. In the city, enthusiasts from eight years of age to 60+ take part in the Edmonton Underwater Hockey Association's two local clubs, the Octopushers (adults) and the Amphibians Club (youth). Activities include weekly beginner and competitive games at Coronation and Kinsmen Pools, training sessions, tournaments and more. New clubs have started recently at the University of Alberta and in Spruce Grove and Sherwood Park.

The sport is non-contact and relatively injury-free. It's also affordable. Local clubs provide equipment free during a trial period, and you can buy a mask, snorkel and fins for under \$100.

"It's a good workout," says 16-year-old Dominique Adams, a Grade 12 student at Strathcona Composite High School who plays two or three times a week. "You have fun and get fit and meet cool people."

Getting Started: Visit the Edmonton Underwater Hockey Association's website to find schedules for the Octopushers Club (adults) and the Amphibians Club (youth 8 to 17). Adult beginners are welcome to the Octopushers' Tuesday evening orientation sessions and games (7:45 p.m. to 8:45 p.m.) at the Kinsmen Sports Centre. The Octopushers

also has a competitive adult group that plays Monday and Thursdays at Coronation Pool (7:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.). Bronze level swimmers age 15 to 18 may also participate on Monday. Amphibians play Saturday afternoons at Coronation Pool. Times vary depending on your age division. Bring a mask, snorkel and fins or call ahead if you don't have equipment. Equipment, including sticks and gloves, can usually be provided free for a trial period. Club membership is \$25 annually plus \$50 per term for each night of the week you attend regularly (September to January; February to June); the cost is \$25 total per term for kids and students.



PUCK



SNORKEL



STICK

Points of Contact: The website for the Edmonton Underwater Hockey Association is at www.edmontonunderwaterhockey.com. For more information, contact Gilles Benoit at gbenoit@aol.com or call 780-465-2007.

Health Benefits

Underwater hockey offers a rare combination of fitness advantages, says Kelly Mackenzie, a sessional lecturer in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the U of A.

"It's definitely a great cardiovascular activity, because you're moving all the time," she says. The sport is also excellent for strengthening and overall toning. Both legs and arms benefit. That's unusual, because few sports provide such good workouts for both the upper and lower limbs. Poor swimmers can obtain even more of a workout because their movements will be less efficient!

The explosive activity of diving underwater to get the puck provides anaerobic (without oxygen) training as well. Although we hear more about aerobic training, anaerobic training is also important, says Mackenzie. This type of training increases the ability of your muscles to use fuel sources when oxygen is not present.



FINS

MASK

The Fitness Edge is a regular column that profiles a unique or unconventional fitness activity that people in the Capital Health region can get involved with.