

An Overview of Inline Hockey

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Inline hockey, based on the rules of ice hockey, is played on skates designed with their wheels in a line, unlike traditional roller skates or “quads,” which have a pair of wheels in the front and a pair of wheels in the rear. Other names for the sport include roller hockey, street hockey, and skater hockey (in England). The hotbeds of inline hockey are in North America and Europe, with increasing growth in Australia, South America, Asia and Africa.

Brief History

Roller skating became very popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and quad-skate roller hockey quickly followed. Inline hockey, however, has a much more recent history and has been played with ever-increasing sophistication since the early to mid-1980s. In 1979, Scott Olson of Minneapolis, Minnesota, found an old pair of inline skates, improved on the design, and marketed the skate as an off-season training device for ice hockey players. In 1984, Minneapolis businessman Bob Naegele, Jr. purchased Olson’s fledgling company, and named it Rollerblade, Inc., and effectively marketed the skates to the general public.

With inline hockey taking off in parking lots, cul-de-sacs, and tennis courts, entrepreneurs soon saw it as a potential moneymaker. In 1992, Joe Mireault founded the National Inline Hockey Association along with Bob Naegele III, whose father had created Rollerblade. That fall, Roller Hockey International, an aspiring professional league, had its first exhibition, with Team USA playing Team Canada at the Great Western Forum in Inglewood, California.

In the summer of 1993, David McLane created the World Roller Hockey League (WRHL), which played all of its games at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida, and *Roller Hockey Magazine*, the first glossy publication to cover the fledgling sport nationally, debuted. At the end of that busy summer of 1993, RHI concluded its first 12-team season, with the Anaheim Bullfrogs defeating the Oakland Skates to win the Murphy Cup, named after one of its founders, Dennis Murphy.

Also in 1993, Paul Chapey, a long time quad roller hockey player, created the Koho California Cup, a regional inline hockey series for amateurs. The following summer, in St. Louis, Missouri, Chapey and his partners produced the first North American Roller Hockey Championships. Nicknamed “NARCh,” the event would grow to become the premier amateur inline hockey tournament in the world.

About this time, the United States Amateur Confederation of Roller Skating became aware of the inline craze. Long having administered quad roller hockey, USAC/RS felt that it was the obvious organization to lead the sport. It was played *on*

wheels, after all. USA Hockey (which eventually purchased the assets of the NIHA) and its inline offshoot USA Hockey InLine, disagreed. It was *hockey*, after all. Complicating matters, there were also international governing bodies competing for the hearts and minds of players—the Federation Internationale de Roller Skating and the International Ice Hockey Federation, which both created world championship events in the mid-‘90s.

In 1996, according to the National Sporting Goods Association, inline hockey participation in North America had increased 47 percent to 3.2 million, surpassing ice hockey's 2.5 million participation level for the first time. Inline hockey, it seemed, had it made.

In 1998, Bill Raue created Major League Roller Hockey to take advantage of Roller Hockey International's one-year hiatus. The Anaheim Bullfrogs organization won its third pro inline hockey championship, defeating the Orlando Surge.

When inline hockey first began to become popular, the players were almost all men, but many more women now play. Because inline hockey can be played outdoors and in so many different places, many more players can participate than in ice hockey. In 1998, according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturing Association, inline hockey's participant numbers (3.8 million) actually surpassed those of ice hockey in North America. Those numbers have since decreased, but there are still about 2.7 million inline hockey players in the United States and Canada. That slowing in growth was the result of several factors -- the demise of the professional leagues of Roller Hockey International and Major League Roller Hockey; the overproduction of equipment by manufacturers; the focus on elite players by tournament operators and sponsors; and the lack of cooperation between competing tournament organizations and governing bodies.

Inline hockey has seen few controversies or scandals; however, at the 1999 Pan American Games, Steve Vezina, the goaltender for Team Canada, tested positive for several banned substances and Canada was stripped of its gold medal. The major ongoing controversy facing inline hockey is the confusion concerning which organization is the sport's leader.

Nature of the Sport

Inline hockey is played four on four, with goalies, unlike ice hockey, which has an additional skater. The object is to put the puck or ball past the other team's goaltender. With two fewer skaters on the playing surface, there is more room to maneuver, enabling smaller finesse players to thrive. Puck control is very important; if you have possession of the puck, the other team cannot score. With an emphasis on offense, shutouts are rare, and goalies rate their play more on wins than on goals-against average.

While the basic rules of inline hockey are similar all over, there are variations. Leagues split the game into two halves, three periods, or four quarters. Amateur leagues have a no-tolerance attitude toward fighting, and body checking is permitted in semipro leagues. Another major difference between inline hockey and ice hockey is the elimination of ice hockey's blue lines. The center red line remains, but most amateur

games have dropped the offsides rule completely, and there is no prohibition against clearing the puck completely out of the defensive zone and deep into the offensive zone when under heavy pressure. This effectively opens up the game, making long breakout passes and breakaways possible.

Many of the first facilities used for inline hockey were recreational roller hockey rinks and ice hockey rinks converted for the purpose by melting the ice and playing on the concrete subsurface. A polyurethane substance called Roll-On was often painted on concrete to facilitate wheel grip and stopping ability. As the game moved indoors, companies like Sport Court and Ice Court created smooth plastic surfaces, and pucks were specially designed for those surfaces. Other important pieces of equipment include skate frames (chassis), which moved in design from steel to plastic to high-quality lightweight aluminum; better wheels (designed for grip and durability); and new composite and one-piece sticks.

Size is not as important a factor in the amateur game because of the open space on the playing surface, the prohibition against checking, and the speed and ability of those smaller players. As a result, skating, stick handling, and passing and receiving the puck are paramount, making inline hockey a great game for smaller players, including girls and women.

Inline hockey has never been an Olympic sport, and its path to any potential Olympic glory is a murky one. This is because there is not one established world governing body and because the International Olympic Committee is trimming sports from the Olympic program.

While RHI and MLRH floundered in the late '90s, semipro leagues continued to attract top players such as Gerry St. Cyr, Rob Laurie, and CJ Yoder.

Outlook in the Twenty-First Century

Inline hockey's skyrocketing growth reached a plateau in the mid- to late '90s and the early part of the 21st century. However, many people are confident that inline hockey will continue to grow in the future as the result of better cooperation between various organizing bodies; less emphasis on the elite players and more focus on the grassroots participants; and the continuing passion and commitment of inline hockey's players and organizers. Inline hockey administrators like Gary Del Vecchio of USA Hockey InLine believe that future growth of inline hockey will be based upon the creation of more community-based programs via parks and recreation departments, YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs, and the introduction of the sport to school children via physical education classes, marketing and instruction.

Between the efforts of governing bodies, tournament directors, founders of pro leagues, coaches and players with a passion for the sport, inline hockey has grown into something quite unrecognizable from its early days on tennis courts. Inline hockey has great potential, and with better cooperation between the sport's administrators in the future, the sky is the limit.

International Governing Bodies:

Federation Internationale de Roller Skating (FIRS): <http://www.rollersports.org/>
International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) Inline: <http://www.iihf.com/inline.htm>

North American Governing Bodies:

USA Hockey InLine (USAHIL): <http://www.usahockey.com/inline/main/home/>
USA Roller Sports (USARS): <http://www.usarollersports.org/>
National Inline Hockey Association (NIHA) - Canada: <http://www.niha.ca/>
Canada Inline (CI): <http://www.canadianhockeyinline.com/>

Further Reading

<http://www.sgma.com/reports/2004/report1081955240-11847.html>
<http://nsga.org/public/pages/index.cfm?pageid=159>
http://www.rollerskatingmuseum.com/museum/homewrk_pg.htm
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