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Ball hockey goes global

Team Pakistan takes on the world at shinny showdown of 16 countries
All but three of squad's members are from Toronto,

Talk about hockey with someone who's just moved from Pakistan and you'll probably trigger images of fields, short sticks and guys in shorts.

But, to a person of Pakistani background who's been here awhile, the mention of hockey will likely bring to mind the images with which most Canadians are familiar.

Meet Team Pakistan, which is competing at the World Street Hockey Championships in Pittsburgh.

While the players will represent that country, they might as well stitch a red Maple Leaf on their green uniforms. The team is made up mostly of young men born in Canada, and all but three players are from Toronto.

Those who aren't natives of this country are on the Team Pakistan roster because their parents were born there.

Those in the lineup have been playing hockey since they were young, but they'd never get to represent this country on the international stage because there are so many strong Canadians in the sport, says coach Dr. Naveed Mohammad. Playing for Pakistan gives them a chance to compete against the world.

And, Team Pakistan is doing just that in the Pennsylvania city where the street hockey showdown began Monday and continues until June 18.

"It's about ball hockey supremacy," says Mohammad, a physician at William Osler Health Centre.

"I wanted to see how I compare with the elite in ball hockey," says Khurram Sher, 23, one of three Montrealers who have made trips up and down Highway 401 at their own expense for the tryouts and many practices in Toronto the past several months.

Other teammates are playing for Pakistan because they weren't recruited by the squad representing this country.

"You kind of go where you were asked to go," says 27-year-old Christopher Pinto.

"You know what? Team Canada didn't call me," says goalie Dilshad Alvi, 32.

So, he and his teammates jumped at the chance to represent Team Pakistan when tryouts began last November. In all, 95 hopefuls showed up. Twenty-five made the team which has a roster that includes doctors, a registered massage therapist, teachers and students.

The experience is costing each player between \$800 and \$1,000, even after the team collected \$7,500 from sponsors.

The squad faces an uphill battle after its first game against No. 2-ranked Slovakia, which ended in a 6-3 loss Monday night. Sixteen countries are represented in the championship, including a team from India, a fierce rival of Pakistan. There are also squads from the host U.S., Great Britain, Mexico, Greece and other nations not noted as bastions for street hockey.

Coach Mohammad is out to change that in Pakistan where he'll fly in October to promote this iceless version of hockey.

Even though there is a Pakistan Ball Hockey Federation, there are only three venues where the sport can be played in the country where field hockey is much more popular.

"You don't see kids just picking up sticks and balls and playing on the streets (in Pakistan)," says Mohammad, who's been playing ball hockey in Toronto for the past 30 years.

Mohammad's love for the game isn't the sole motivator for his long-time involvement in it.

He believes the sport is "just another means to bring youth together so they're on the right path.

"We find that here in Canada too. It gets a lot of our...youth involved in the right things."

Mohammad came to Canada at a time when hockey's popularity might have been at an all-time high. The famous 1972 Canada-USSR Summit Series had just ended and just about everyone was a fan of the sport, if not a player.

But the prohibitive costs of ice hockey — for equipment and rink rentals — led many young immigrants to ball hockey.

"I think that's the main reason that a lot of kids of Indian and Pakistani immigrants have developed into excellent ball hockey players," Mohammad says.



DICK LOEK/TORONTO STAR
Team Pakistan practises at Mississauga Valley Arena before leaving for the World Street Hockey Championships on now in Pittsburgh.

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