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Local athletes hope to make a splash with underwater hockey

Ithaca club one of 50 across the country



ITHACA — On a recent Tuesday evening, seven members of Ithaca’s underwater hockey club gathered at the pool in Cornell’s Teagle Hall. Sporting masks, snorkels, fins and water polo caps, they lined up — three against four — at opposite ends of a small pool.

“Sticks up!” someone called, and each lifted a glove-clad hand holding a foot-long plastic stick to signal their readiness. “Go!”

Fins waved frantically as players sped toward the middle of the pool, sticks outstretched in an attempt to be the first to reach the puck lying on the floor.

Soon bodies were weaving over and under, swirling and kicking to push and flick the plastic-coated disc to each other, away from the opposing team, and toward the goals at each end of the pool.

But underwater, the game's muffled soundtrack — some bubbling, the high click of sticks on tiles and the lower clack of the puck hitting the floor — seemed oddly disconnected from the frenzied movements of the participants.

At the surface, there was limited evidence of the competition raging at the pool bottom. A few capped heads at a time circled like sharks above a school of fish, spraying water from their snorkels before taking a deep breath and diving back down into the fray, fins hitting the water with a thud and splash.

Underwater hockey may not be an ideal spectator sport, but its players are immersed in enthusiasm. Twice a week, members of Ithaca Underwater Hockey at Cornell gather to hone their skills, play scrimmages and lift their sport a little more out of obscurity.

But for engineer Vincent Kiernan, the obscurity is part of the attraction.

“When I tell people about underwater hockey, they think I’m lying,” said Kiernan, an Elmira resident, who drives more than an hour from his job in Pennsylvania to attend training sessions.

Club president Laura Lange, a Cornell graduate student in fiber design and a former synchronized swimmer, agrees, but wishes more people knew about the sport. “It would be easier to play,” she said.

While attendance at the club's practices ranges from a handful to a dozen, regulation games of this co-ed, non-contact sport — sticks may touch only the puck, not other athletes — are carried out by six players at a time on each side, with four teammates subbing in and out. Players hold their breath for as long as 15 seconds to dive to the pool bottom and try to move the puck into the trough of the three-meter wide goal. Tournament rules vary, but games typically feature two 15-minute halves.

Ithaca's group is one of more than 50 governed by USA Underwater Hockey, which estimates that more than 1,000 players are active across the country. Worldwide, as many as 12,000 underwater hockey enthusiasts partake in clubs in more than 28 countries.

Invented by Alan Blake in the early 1950s as “Octopush,” underwater hockey slowly spread from Britain around the world as individual players moved and started new clubs.

The sport reached Ithaca in 2007 with the arrival of Maki Inada, an assistant professor of biology at Ithaca College, and Meghan Cerveney, who works for Cornell Cooperative Extension. Cerveney, a former competitive swimmer and water polo player, happened upon underwater hockey at the University of Florida in 2004, while Inada had been training since her graduate school days in San Francisco.

“I tried it once and was hooked,” Inada said. “When I found out I was moving to Ithaca, the underwater hockey network put me in touch with Meghan. We did a lot of ground work together getting the club sport set up since most people have never heard of it and are really skeptical.”

Even though neither woman is playing — both recently had children, and Inada has battled with non-smoker’s lung cancer — the Ithaca club is going strong. At every training, members spend the first hour warming up with laps and then drilling skills needed for the game.

Top on the list is slowing down one’s breathing to every 10 to 15 seconds. One-lap exercises with acronyms such as HUHO (half under, half over the water) and BOGDAT (breathing once, going down and touching) help.

For beginners, learning to get their air through a snorkel is one of the greatest challenges.

“I didn’t even use the snorkel for the first month,” Lange said. “But then I started realizing that it really slows down your game, because you can’t see what’s happening when you go up to breathe and take your head out of the water.”

Oxygen intake in place, players practice handling the puck, shooting and flicking it from the wrist, ideally with subtle movements that conserve energy.

“But there’s always more to work on,” said Lange, be it curling one’s body to change direction and protect the puck from an opponent, or remembering to keep the fins going during play to stay at the bottom of the pool.

“There are people who have been playing for a long time who still can’t do multiple things at the same time,” Vincent Kiernan agreed. “I tell them to never stop kicking, because as soon as you start floating up, you’ve lost the puck, especially if you’re playing in a higher-level game.”

Several club members regularly play in tournaments around the country. Because the group is too small to field its own team, they usually operate as “free agents.”

Alessandro Farsi, for example, an Italian graduate student in applied physics at Cornell, competes about four times a year. And last weekend, Kiernan joined his “parent team” from Atlanta (where he began playing 21/2 years ago) for the Atlantic Coast Championships.

Club co-founder Meghan Cervený was even selected for the national team that traveled to Sheffield, England, for the 2006 world championships.

“One major thing I love about underwater hockey is the community of people,” she said. “It’s like a mini-reunion two to three times a year.”

The Ithaca group hopes to expand by starting a group at Ithaca College and gaining access to its new Athletic Center pool.

“It is a fabulous bottom surface for underwater hockey play,” says Maki Inada, and closer to the ideal 7-to-10-foot depth than Teagle’s 4 feet.

In the meantime, anyone is welcome to attend trainings at Teagle, where club members hope beginners will get hooked once they take the plunge. Inada, for one, is “trying desperately to get back into shape” so she can rejoin the action.

“The people who play are such interesting folks,” she said. “We always go out (after practice). Super fun times.”