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PICTURE PERFECT

Hockey was played at iconic Soldier Field in Chicago for the first time and the game's participants couldn't have been more proud

BY SAL BARRY

THE TEMPERATURE WAS A FROSTY 14 DEGREES FAHRENHEIT (-10 Celsius), with a light breeze coming off Lake Michigan. Snowflakes danced around the black night sky illuminated by the bright lights of the empty stadium as the teams prepared to play the first-ever hockey game at Soldier Field, home of the NFL's Chicago Bears.

Feb. 1 in Chicago was perfect outdoor hockey weather. But taking to the ice weren't NHL or collegiate players. They were all-stars representing the north and south sides of the city from the Chicago Outdoor League, an adult recreational outfit that's rapidly grown in popularity. "It was amazing," says COHL founder Sean Campbell. "The players were so excited with this amazing opportunity to come out and play in this huge stadium."

Kyle Fischer, captain of the Northsiders squad, was named the game's first star with a hat trick and two assists as the Northsiders beat the Southsiders 7-2 in the COHL All-Star Game. Only dedicated friends and family showed up to see them play, but the empty seats didn't take away from the experience. "It was a blast," Fischer says. "It was really cool when it started snowing."

In fewer than two years, the COHL has grown from a dream to a phenomenon in the city. Campbell, a lifelong Chicago resident, loved playing hockey outdoors, but was frustrated with searching for pickup games - indoors or out - that fit his schedule. In 2010, he founded Rat Hockey Chicago as an online resource to help recreational players find games in and near the city. The

idea exploded, with just over 2,000 registered members to date. A year later, two new outdoor rinks opened, and Campbell took action. "I saw an opportunity to open an outdoor league that could become a success," he says.

After communicating with members of Rat Hockey Chicago and negotiating with three outdoor rinks, the COHL was born. In 2011-12, the league launched with 16

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- Sean Campbell

teams. This year, the COHL has grown to 26 teams. One secret to Campbell's success is scheduling games to accommodate working adults, whereas most recreational leagues in Chicago are shoe-

LET IT SNOW

The weather co-operated nicely on a memorable night for rec league players.

horned around public skates or other events. COHL games are slotted for Friday and Monday evenings and Saturday and Sunday mornings. "I travel for a living, so it's hard for me to play in other leagues," says Brian Herbert, a second-year player in the league. "This one worked out perfectly. I can make it to these games."

Another draw of the league is that games are outside. "It's the best. It's refreshing," says Joel Grauer, a first-year COHL player. "Being raised in Chicago, being outside in winter doesn't hurt. It beats being cooped up inside."

Ironically, the only problem the COHL has faced is the weather. Last season, Chicago experienced its warmest winter in 80 years, causing some games to be cancelled. This winter hasn't co-operated, either. Several games were cancelled due to rain and unseasonably warm temperatures.

Fortunately, the weather met expectations in time for the COHL's All-Star Game, which kicked off the OfficeMax Hockey City Classic Winter Festival. It was an 18-day gala culminating in mid-February with an NCAA double-header at Soldier Field: the University of Notre Dame beat Miami University 2-1 and then the Wisconsin Badgers beat long-time rival the University of Minnesota Gophers 3-2.

The games marked the first time college hockey was played outdoors in Chicago. But it was the city's outdoors enthusiasts who got to play the first-ever hockey contest at the renowned football stadium. "It was awesome," says Taylor Paine of the Northsiders. "I had a great time. The snow (slowed us) a little bit, but it made everything kinda cool." 