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MIAMI-DADE

Disabled kids may get their shot at ice hockey

Hockey, with a few changes, is adaptable to accommodate the disabled. And they may soon be playing the game in South Florida.

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For physically challenged kids who can't use their legs, the idea of playing ice hockey may seem a distant dream.

But now, thanks to something called sled hockey, the disabled can make their own miracles on the ice.

The Mapet Foundation, a nonprofit group that helps provide wheelchairs and scooters to disabled kids, wants to bring the sport to Miami-Dade by starting a league called the Mapet Angels.

Sled hockey resembles hockey in that the players sport helmets and pads and give their all to control the puck and score goals.

But instead of skates, players scoot around the ice strapped into small sleds that have a backrest and two blades on the bottom.

Instead of using one long hockey stick, the players use two short sticks to propel themselves across the ice.

When its time to push the puck, the players just turn their wrists

and handle the puck using side to side movements with the blade ends.

The sleds are also high enough off the ice so that each player can easily pass and catch the puck under him.

"I wanted to form a southeast team because there isn't one and the sport itself is what our foundation is based on -- increasing mobility," said Mario Perez, Mapet Foundation president.

Once called sledge hockey, the sport was born in Canada in 1971 to meet the emotional and physical needs of disabled kids by building upper body strength and teamwork skills.

Eventually its popularity grew and it spread to the United States and has now trickled down to Florida.

With up to 14 leagues in different states, the sport of sled hockey is no secret to organizations that help the disabled.

Perez decided to start the South Florida league when he found out that a man he knew, Tom Brake, had started a league in Connecticut.

Perez hopes to play games at the Miami Ice Arena near North Miami Beach, the Miami Arena and the Incredible Ice Arena in Coral Springs.

Perez also said he is working to line up sponsors like the Florida Panther and Miami Manatee hockey teams and he estimates that players would pay about \$100 for a season, which would cover uniforms, insurance and registration with the United States Hockey Association.

Already, with the help of volunteers and donors, Mapet has purchased 20 sleds from Canada.

"We're making purchases with what we have," said Rony Curvelo, who works as a special advisor to Mapet. ``Hopefully, we'll get the rest of the stuff in the next couple of weeks."

Although the league is still being born, it already has a mascot: a

baby lion.

The idea of the lion came from Mapet's creative director, Ray Palacios, who chose the lion because the animal symbolizes power and leadership.

"We want everyone to know that our players are going to be the kings of the jungle," Palacios said.

The fledgling league is still in negotiations with its potential sponsors and hopes to take off at the end of March.

"This league is going to be something big and great," said Jean Marshall, community development manager for the Florida Panthers, ``but there are still things to be done and discussed."

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