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WEST ROXBURY

## Shamrock Shootout street hockey tournament expected to draw record crowd, local politicians to West Roxbury on St. Patrick's Day

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Surrounded by throngs of cheering parents, grandparents and siblings, a record 500 children are expected to converge on a quarter-mile stretch of a closed-off, holiday-decorated street on Saturday to play in an annual neighborhood street hockey tournament.

Five years after its inception, the Shamrock Shootout has mushroomed into a beloved St. Patrick's Day tradition for many West Roxbury families and that large turnout in the Boston neighborhood known for its high voter turnout has drawn support, appearances and some participation from local politicians.

This year U.S. Senator Scott Brown is scheduled to drop the first puck – well, actually, a tennis ball – at 10 a.m. alongside lifelong active resident and neighborhood funeral parlor owner Richie Gormley, who was voted “Mayor of West Roxbury” this year in an election for the mock-position.

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“It’s come a long way five years ago when it was 75 kids, a few pizzas and some water,” said Marc Sanders, who co-founded and co-manages the event alongside fellow resident and friend Mike O’Brien.

Each of the two fathers reminisced about playing “old-fashioned” street hockey during their childhoods. They are proud to do what they can to keep the pastime alive for younger generations and to allow some of the neighborhood’s youth a few fun afternoon hours away from modern distractions.

Sanders said that the Boston Bruins’ recent championship victory may have rekindled some passion for the sport for some local children.

But, he said he believes the real motivator is that, “A lot of kids are just anxious to get out from behind their iPhones and laptops and want to get some fresh air and interact with other kids.”

“It harkens back,” he said. “It’s the same magic when you were playing out in the street as a kid.”

The event has also raised thousands of dollars each year to aid a local cause or a neighbor in need. This year, donations will be collected to benefit a 1-year-old who has a brain tumor; she is the daughter of Boston firefighter.

Registration to participate in the event, reserved for children from age 5 to 12, was fully booked within one hour when sign-ups were held weeks ago.

The event is free for all who participate and attend and relies on donations, sponsorships and volunteers. Each player is handed a green T-shirt that features a print describing the event and their own hockey stick. The sticks are cut down to size – just under each youngster’s chin; the rough edges on the top of the sticks are taped over.

The youth are divided by age into four divisions and then into teams, each with about 15 players and each group with Irish-themed names, like “the banshees or the shamrocks.”

Running on sneakers and shooting around tennis balls with holes drilled in them to reduce their bounce, the children will play across 16 different rinks featuring shamrocks painted at center ice and set up along a temporarily-shut

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down section of Temple Street lined with St. Patrick's Day banners, signs that say "West Roxbury Classic" and American flags.

The hockey arenas are lined with barriers to help corral rolling and flying "pucks." Outside each arena, family members are expected to gather. In past years, some elderly residents who live at homes along where the rinks are staged, pitch a lawn chair in their front yard and watch the proceedings. There is face painting, Irish step dancing and music, including bagpipes performances, is expected to be played by the Boston Gaelic Fire Brigade.

"It's a great community event, and a great event for families," said O'Brien.

And, "All the politicians I'm sure will be there shaking hands," said Sanders. "I'm sort of shocked about how popular it's become. It's sort of taken on a life of its own."

He said Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino, City Councilors John R. Connolly and Matt O'Malley, State Representative Ed Coppinger and State Senator Mike Rush, all of whom have attended and helped support the event in prior years, are expected to stop by again this year.

After each 25-minute contest, one team is eliminated from each division, until the field is narrowed to two finals squads in each of the four age groups.

Then, it's lunchtime. The children, along with an anticipated 1,000 spectators this year, will feast on pizzas, cookies and chips.

When play resumes, the remaining competitors will square off to win their age group's title and, in doing so, will enter into eternal street hockey glory when their team's name is engraved alongside past winners on the Shamrock Shootout Trophy some have nicknamed the "Pot of Gold."

"It's basically our version of the Stanley Cup," Sanders said.

The cup is on display at nearby venues year-round, including having briefly visited City Hall and the trophy has spent large chunks of time at two West Roxbury locations that are major sponsors for the event, Corrib Pub and Mt. Washington Bank.

"I've lived in the city all my life, and I've never seen anything quite like this."

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He said among his most favorite moments of the day comes after the official games have ended and the trophy's been hoisted.

"The kids play way past the tournament," said O'Brien. "Once the tournament is over, they're still out there having a blast."

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