

Bandy squad off to worlds

CHAD SCARBROOK
For The Sun

Imagine if the Manitoba Moose held training camp on a high school rink. Or if the Winnipeg Goldeyes played spring training games on a softball diamond. This is one of the challenges the Team Canada bandy squad has faced this year.

The team, made up mostly of Winnipeggers, will travel to Kazan, Russia, for the world "B" pool bandy championships beginning Jan. 30. The thing is, they've been practising on hockey rinks. Bandy is played on an ice surface the size of a soccer field.

Rookie Mark Priestley will see a regulation-sized rink for the first time when he arrives in Stockholm, Sweden, for training camp.

"I've watched DVD after DVD of professional games," said the 20-year-old former hockey player. "We're playing in a hockey rink which is a fourth of the size of a real bandy rink. It's hard to imagine how big the size of a real bandy rink is."

Combination

The sport, which originated before ice hockey, is a combination of field hockey and soccer. There are 10 skaters per team who use a stick similar to the one in field hockey. Players have long skate blades like the ones speed skaters use, so play is incredibly fast. Goalies man the nets with only their hands. Canada will compete against Belarus, Hungary, Estonia, Mongolia and the Netherlands.

Priestley was forced to postpone his second semester of university in order to play.

"I've only known I've been going to Russia for sure for less than four months," said Priestley. "To try to get the money together in that time has been very difficult. I've actually been working three jobs and it's absolutely crazy trying to save all my money."

Although the team did fundraise, players still had to kick in about \$1,400 each to get to Kazan. It's a commitment not lost on coach Goran Svensson, who arrived from Vanersborg, Sweden, Tuesday. He said this is the best Canadian team ever on paper and expects to contend based on their ability and competitive spirit.

"The Canadian way of thinking is different from the European style," said Svensson. "Here, they want to do it for their country and they are very committed. It can rain, it can snow, it can be 30 degrees (below). They do it anyway."

Kelly Morris is one of those guys. The 31-year-old, who's been playing since 1998, is excited to play in his third world championships.

"It's an opportunity to play at a higher competitive level of sport," said Morris. "I was a hockey player growing up so it's an easy transition to bandy. The opportunity to represent your country and play abroad is pretty alluring."

Canada's first game is against Hungary on Jan. 30.