

WINTER RECREATION SEASON BEGINS AT BELMONT

Winter sports and recreation are back on track in Armstrong County, after a cooling problem at the Belmont Complex threatened to sink the season before it ever started.

In early September, the ice arena in East Franklin was well on course for the 2019-2020 winter season. The rink's schedule was filling up, and teams were looking forward to the completion of a brand new girls changing room.

Then, in September, the ice rink's cooling system began to fail, sending administrators scrambling for a viable fix. Chairman Pat Fabian, of the Armstrong County Board of Commissioners, said officials from multiple departments worked quickly to solve the problem.

"It was really a team effort, between the board (of commissioners), the planning department and Gary (Montebell)," he said.

According to Fabian, the group consulted with the National Hockey League as well as arena and ice rink professionals from across the country. After researching and deliberating, a decision was made and an ice mat was installed.

The ice rink was only out of commission for a little over six weeks.

"We're pretty pleased with the timing," Fabian said. "We've been able to salvage the season, not just for AAHL use, but also for the community. There are a lot of kids involved in the Learn to Skate and Learn to Play (Hockey) programs. I think we're all pretty grateful this worked out so well and so fast."

Though administrators were relieved by the speed of the ice mat installation, Fabian acknowledged the hardship the ice rink issue had placed on local athletes and their families. Armstrong Amateur Hockey League (AAHL) teams, which rely heavily on the facility, were forced to travel to rinks in other counties while they waited for the situation to be resolved.

On Thursday, Armstrong County Board of Commissioners Vice Chairman Jason Renshaw watched Belmont staff spray a fine layer of water onto the rink surface. As he watched the ice begin to form, Renshaw talked about what the facility means to local families.

"The Belmont gives residents access to recreation and social opportunities at a time of year when those activities can be hard to come by in western Pennsylvania. Public Skate is a popular weekend activity here, and I'm glad we were able to find a way to keep programs like that going."

The ice rink opened for practice on Thursday and for public skating on Friday evening. It is expected to remain open for the rest of the skating season.

Also opening for the 2019 season is the new girls changing room. The changing room was added to accommodate females playing on mostly-male teams. Belmont Executive Director Gary Montebell said there is no issue when all-girl teams play one another, as the whole team can use the locker room facilities. Complications can arise when a few girls are playing on a team with boys, which happens with some frequency. The new changing room makes participation more hospitable for all players.

“Equal access to sports is important for young girls and their families,” said Armstrong County Commissioner George Skamai. “We see more and more involvement of girls in winter sports and this changing space is something we really needed.”

Every year the number of girls playing youth hockey increases, according to Darcee Purvis. Purvis is the executive director of the Pittsburgh Amateur Hockey League (PAHL), of which the local AAHL is a member. The PAHL works with its member groups and the Pittsburgh Penguins to encourage young girls’ participation in the sport.

The Belmont Complex rink is used by the Girls 14U PAHL Team, which includes area girls, ages 11-14. Montebell said local girls youth hockey continues to grow in popularity, and he is pleased with the additional facilities now available to female athletes at the Belmont.

For information on the Belmont Complex and its ice rink schedule, visit www.belmontcomplex.net. Details on local girls hockey can be found under the programs tab at www.armstrongarrows.com.

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