

By Jack Kelly / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

There's now a second team in Pittsburgh in which children with special needs can learn to play hockey.

"I have two autistic children who love sports," said John Stevenson, 51, team manager of the Pittsburgh Emperors. "Seeing the reaction of these kids when they score goals, that's my joy."

Any child with special needs — autism, Down syndrome, those suffering from traumatic brain injury, others — aged 5 to adult may play for the Emperors, Mr. Stevenson said. The team started in August with seven participants. Now up to 23 attend practices Saturday nights at Bladerunners Bethel Park, 305 Church Road.

According to the 2007 American Community Survey, more than a million Pennsylvanians over the age of 5 have a developmental disability.

Pittsburgh already has an ice hockey team for children with special needs, the Steel City Icebergs, which practices Wednesday nights at Robert Morris University's Island Sport Center on Neville Island. This team is supported by, among others, the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Bill Pellegrino's son Sean, 9, who has Down syndrome, joined the Icebergs this year.

"This program is great," Mr. Pellegrino said. "Sean shows very little emotion, but we know when he enjoys something."

Denise, the mother of 15-year-old Freddie, who has autism, said her son has been a member of the Icebergs for five years.

"I love the program," said Denise, who declined to give her last name or home town to protect her son's privacy. "Freddie wasn't able to skate before he came. It's really improved his confidence."

The most challenging part of working with children with special needs "is getting them to learn the basics of the sport," said Howard Smith, 53, who is in his first year as coach for the Icebergs. He works in administration for UPMC and has coached hockey for 22 years.

"To hold the stick properly, to get up after they fall, to make a pass is a major achievement for these kids," Mr. Smith said. "To see the smiles on their faces when they accomplish these small tasks is so rewarding."

Teaching the children how to stand on the skates is the most challenging, said Mr. Stevenson, the Emperors team manager who works as a welder at Bechtel Marine Propulsion Corp. "A lot of them have joint problems, leg problems. Once you teach them how to balance on the skates, they move very rapidly."

“We’ve found that having them push a chair around the ice works quite well,” said Gary Verwer, 56, the Emperors coach. “They’re eager to learn, to improve. We had one kid who’d never been on skates before. After 20 minutes, he tried to abandon the chair.”

Mr. Verwer, who works for a sheet metal company and lives in Venetia, volunteers his time because he has “a passion for hockey,” and because his 16-year-old daughter has been diagnosed with high functioning autism.

My son played hockey through high school,” Mr. Verwer said. “My daughter absolutely idolized her brother. She grew up with hockey. When she discovered she was able to play hockey, there was no end to it until I got her involved.”

For many of the children on the Emperors, the practices Saturday night are the highlight of their week, Mr. Verwer said.

“I’ve had parents tell me the kids will actually run from the car to the rink, anticipating what’s coming,” he said.

The Emperors now have a tool other than a chair to help teach participants how to skate. Before practice last Saturday, UCT, a nonprofit financial services organization, presented the team with a Kaye trainer, a \$2,500 physical therapy device designed originally to help people recover from traumatic leg and hip injuries. It plans to donate a Kaye trainer to every team in the American Special Hockey Association.

For both the Steel City Icebergs and the Pittsburgh Emperors, the coaches donate their time and sponsors donate virtually all equipment and pay for rink time, so there is little to no cost to the athletes and their families.

For more information about the Steel City Icebergs, contact steelcityicebergs@gmail.com or visit www.pittsburghspecialhockey.org.

For more information about the Pittsburgh Emperors, visit <http://pittsburghemperors.org> or call Mr. Stevenson at 412-389-7381.