

RINGETTE!!

THE LA PASSE AND WESTMEATH GIRLS WIN WITH RINGETTE IN THE MID 1980'S & 90'S!!

Balancing a family's recreational needs with three older sisters, a young brother and a younger foster brother was the reason Ringette was first introduced to Westmeath and La Passe and then to neighboring Valley towns. As young adolescents, it wasn't long before my three daughters noticed that Dad was spending much of his spare time supporting the recreational interests of his son, their younger brother and the "boys sports." The girls were certainly involved in swimming, figure skating, gymnastics, tap dancing, ball, piano etc. but mostly because of their Mom! However, they also enjoyed skating and learning to play a little hockey on the outdoor rink built on the river at our home in La Passe. Whereas, their younger brother was involved with Dad in hunting, fishing, canoeing, camping, hockey, baseball and Boy Scouts! The girls picked up on this imbalance and pressured Dad for more of his recreational time. The major "balancing challenge" came when Dad, as Leader of his son's Boy Scout Pack, started to build a Log Club House in the backyard to serve as a meeting place for his Boy Scouts' Troop. The girls insisted on having access to it for their use, as well. However, Dad explained that with all the Scouts gear in the Clubhouse, sharing it would not work! So, the girls came up with the idea of a second storey level, built on top of the boys Clubhouse. Dad agreed and with their help and that of his Assistant Hockey Coach, Terry Blackwell, at that time, it was built and there it sits to this day, well used by both genders!

Balance achieved? No, the girls didn't stop there! They wanted a Girl Guides Group and to Play Hockey, as well! There was some interest but no leadership at that time for the Girl Guides. That came later. And, in those days, with few exceptions, there was no way girls would be allowed to play on the boy's hockey teams. One of those exceptions was the outstanding Girl Goalie on the Westmeath Mosquito, Atom, and Pee Wee 'Boys' Hockey Teams that I coached! Challenged with dressing room issues and the rougher body contact play at the next levels of hockey she, Jenny Marleau, transitioned from the Boys' Pee Wee Hockey Team to the Ringette Team for more exceptional Goalie action! Sorry boys, your loss!

By coincidence, one of my daughters heard, from a girl at high school, about this game called "Ringette for Girls," which was started in North Bay, in 1963. With her other two persistent sisters, they challenged Dad again to look into this and organize it for them and the girls in the area. Dad obliged and this resulted in the introduction of Ringette for "Girls," to the La Passe/Westmeath area and eventually to many of the Valley Towns. This new and exciting "girls ice sport" enjoyed immediate support and popularity and continues to be played in Renfrew County to this day.

Of course, the motivational element of the Ringette story, shared above, was the push by the girls in a local family for more acceptance in local community organized hockey. But instead, they got Ringette! Following are a few highlights/memories of how Ringette got its start in the Valley at more the "Ice Level and Community Development" of the game of Ringette.

The North Bay Ringette Association was very helpful in introducing us to this new "Game for Girls" dubbed "Hockey's Sister Sport." They provided us with written materials from the Ontario Ringette Association and contact information for the Ottawa Ringette Association, for follow up; Ottawa being closer to the Valley and the Rink in Westmeath. While reviewing the information, received from North Bay, I must say that as a ball and hockey player and coach, I was very impressed, first with the game's resemblance to hockey and especially the very high skills levels that players needed to develop, with the proper coaching and training. Because there was no body contact and no offsides in the game, the skating speeds, stick handling and shooting skills would make for a very fast paced game. The fact that the "Ring" had to be picked up by stabbing it and not with the blade of a hockey stick meant that a whole new set of hand/eye co-ordinations skills had to be mastered! As a result, Ringette is a very fast moving, wide-open, high-powered, highly skilled sport with the emphasis on playmaking and thus very exciting to watch!

The Ottawa Ringette Association was very pleased to send us a few of their coaches on several occasions, in the winter of 1984, to show us and the girls we initially recruited, how to play the game and develop the required skills. The few local girls who came with some hockey experience to our Ringette practices, helped encourage their teammates to master these new Ringette skills. After a few training sessions, we reached out to and included girls from Beachburg and Cobden in the Westmeath practices. Eventually, Shawville heard about it and joined us, as well. The girls, with minimal training, in turn

went back home and pressured their parents to help organize this “new game for girls” at their home rinks—in their local communities.

The rules of the game required the girls to wear “boys hockey skates.” So, for a time, they borrowed hockey skates from their brothers or friends. Also, I filed the picks off many girls’ figure skates until they were able to acquire their own hockey tube skates. We made and painted our own Ringette Sticks from discarded hockey sticks. These athletic girls exchanged their figure skates for tube skates, picked up ringette sticks and learned quickly to play Ringette with speed and skill!

Realizing the challenges ahead that would be required to introduce this new game to our young female players, their families and the community at large, the help of an experienced High School Sports Coach was also enlisted in the person of Ingo Leinen. He was a tremendous help in those early years. Robert Gervais, with two daughters playing, also assisted occasionally with practices and skills development, as well as, a few other Dads with hockey experience. Likewise, we benefitted at our practices, in the next few years, from the assistance of Brenda Benson, a young, skilled Provincial Level Ringette player, who had recently moved to Pembroke from Montreal. And, I might add, that as a player on the Pembroke Ringette Team, she was a real challenge to play against!

So, in the winter months of 1984, with coaching help from the Ottawa Ringette Group, the local coaching volunteers were successful in training and recruiting enough girls from local communities to pique their interest and commitment to form a fledging Ringette League for the 1984-85 fall and winter season. We enjoyed our first season of organized House League Ringette with teams from Westmeath, Beachburg, Cobden and Shawville. It turned out to be a season of ‘learning as you go,’ for the girls, parents, coaches, referees, rink attendants and spectators! And it caught on! These new and exciting girls’ only ice sport - Ringette, dubbed “Hockey’s Sister Sport,” enjoyed immediate support and popularity. In the next few years Pembroke, Petawawa, Renfrew and Arnprior came on board, with Renfrew quickly becoming the nucleus for Ringette in the Valley with their banner team - The Renfrew Radicals - about 1985-86. Also, a Pembroke parent and coach, Bob Schreder, shared that he remembers how Westmeath would win handily over the Pembroke teams in those first few years!

By 1987-88 we had formed a full-fledged Upper Ottawa Valley Ringette Association (UOVRA), with Nancy White from Westmeath, as its Founding First President.

WESTMEATH RINGETTE JUNIOR-BELLES TEAM 1984-85



Back Row: Murray DeRuiter, Karen Gervais, Leanna Gervais, Anna Norlock, Jody Kitson, Christine Gervais, Nancy White
Front Row: Angie Dupuis, Jody Gervais, Jennifer Marleau, Natalie Gervais, Louise Norlock.

In those days, there were seven different categories of teams from Bunnies to Ladies, 5 years and up, with an age spread of two years between each Team Level. For starters, the Communities concentrated on forming teams in the middle age levels, Novice, Junior and Belles Teams 12 to 17 yrs. of age, where the most interest among the girls was at the time. We encouraged all ages of girls to show up at our practices. We allowed the teams to add younger promising players, who demonstrated adequate skills, to the next team level, in order to make up the complement of about 10-12 players with a maximum of 18 players per team. That was permissible, in the day, at the House League Level, which in Westmeath, came under the umbrella of the Westmeath & District Recreation Association (WDRA). Also, if another Ringette Community in our League was trying to form a team at a particular age level, but did not have enough girls, we encouraged the girls from other Ringette Communities, not already on a team, to join the other Community Teams in formation. The principle was that – **Ringette is a Recreational/Participatory Sport for Girls, not a Competitive Community Rivalry, so prevalent in our hockey even today!** Many of the girls took advantage of this community player sharing and, as a result, went on to play at advanced levels for various Competitive UOVRA Teams!

WESTMEATH RINGETTE JUNIOR-BELLES TEAM 1986-87



Back Row: Murray DeRuiter, Karen Gervais, Jen Everly, Jody Kitson, Paula Spotswood, Vicki Fletcher, Anna Norlock, Tracy O'Brien, Leslie Gervais, Leanna Gervais, Paula Kenny, Louise Norlock, Nancy White.
 Front Row: Trych Shields, Dana Dupuis, Samantha Gervais, Jennifer Marleau, Christine Gervais, Heidi Robinson, Amy Ethier, Angie Dupuis.
 Missing: Mary-Lynn Ethier, Aline Lachance, Natalie Gervais.

As our player roster grew, so did our volunteer coaching staff. Volunteer coaches, referees and team managers came on board to help establish this new game for girls. A few of us coaches were certified at the Provincial Level. Others coached under the umbrella of the WDRA Community House League. Some of the Coaches that come to mind and carried the game into the 90's in Westmeath/La Passe were: Nancy White, Murray DeRuiter, Bernie Ethier, Bryan Dupuis, Jodie Kitson, Tim Watson, Vince Gervais, Louise Norlock, Lyle Dupuis, Ron Nicolai, Gord Laverty, Christie Laverty, Robert Graham, Art & Maggie Plume, Jan Tobio - often the adult female on the bench, and others. Jeanne Timm and Sally Ethier did the bookings. Even parents, like Art & Maggie Plume, with minimal coaching experience and, with the assistance of Greg Spotswood as their Trainor, volunteered as Coaches to keep Ringette going in the Westmeath area for the girls well into the 90's!

Owners of local businesses and companies, such as Gord Laverty of the Sugar Shack in the Pembroke Mall, provided the White Ringette “Sugar Shack” Jerseys. John Norlock & Sons of the Norlock Siding & Roofing Company provided the “Grey Jerseys!” The WDRA provided their Hockey Sweaters, as well. The Ringette Girls bought their own Jackets.

Getting referees for Ringette was a real challenge! Because it was a new game in town, nobody had any experience with “Hockey’s Sister Sport.” Of course, none of the girls or their mothers even had experience refereeing or coaching hockey in those days. Nor was the “macho sports mentality” at the time very supportive of the “boys” refereeing a “girls” ice game, especially among young rough and tough competitive hockey players, with sites on the NHL! However, with some coaxing from their sisters, parents and hockey coaches, we were able to get enough boys and an occasional girl to cover the first seasons. Again, the Ottawa Ringette Club came through for us and included us in their ongoing Ringette Referees and Coaches Training Sessions. Some of the early volunteers that received their Ringette Referees Qualifications were: Greg Spotswood, Derek England, Greg Gervais, Leanna Gervais, Tim Watson, Murray DeRuiter, Albert Norlock, Vince Gervais. Some others, who provided Community Level Refereeing, were Faye Campbell, Durell Chaput, Bernie Ethier–WDRA Sports Director, Terry Ethier - Head Referee and others.



Karen Gervais (L) Vicki Fletcher (R)

The young male referees often referred to the girls’ game of Ringette as the “Click and Clack” or “Hack & Slash” game! The “Click” was the sound resulting from the stabbing of the Ring on the ice by a player. However, if a girl missed stabbing the ring on the stick of the opponent player, her stick would often slide up the shaft of the opponents stick, making a “Clack Sound” and giving the Referee the impression that it was a “Hack & Slash” on the pads, deserving of a penalty. Sometimes this call turned into a “boy-girl” or a “brother-sister” challenge for the referees! Referees were not always available and the coaches occasionally had to both referee and coach from the ice!

According to the referees, these two girls: Karen Gervais and Vicki Fletcher racked up the most penalty minutes per game whether playing on the same or opposing teams!

WESTMEATH RINGETTE JUNIOR/BELLES 1988-89



Back Row: Vince Gervais, Paula Spotswood, Tracey O’Brien, Angie Dupuis, Louise Norlock, Tim Watson.
 Front Row: Valerie Wassing, Samantha Gervais, Jenny Marleau, Leanne Gervais, Christine Gervais.
 Missing: Mary Lynn Ethier, Paula Kenny, Kristy Laverty, Jody Kitson, Karen Gervais, Shannon Smith.

A major highlight in those early years of Ringette in the UOVRA chapter, was the hosting of the Eastern Ontario B & C Championships in April 1989, by the Pembroke-Petawawa Ringette Association. Fifty-nine teams participated and the games were played at arenas in Pembroke, Petawawa, Cobden and Beachburg. It certainly had an impact on raising the awareness of Ringette in the area!

Since Westmeath only had House League Teams and not Competitive Level Teams, many of our players were picked up by the Pembroke, Cobden and Beachburg teams and had the opportunity to play in the Tournament. Leanna Gervais, Paula Spotswood, Mary Lynn Ethier, Tina Leblanc, Jennifer Marleau played on the Beachburg Upper Ottawa Valley Belles B Division (ages 16-17). The Upper Ottawa Valley Junior C Division (ages 14-15) picked up Samantha Gervais, Paula Kenny, Louise Norlock, Tracey O'Brien with Nancy White as Team Manager. Upper Ottawa Valley Petite C Division had Patricia Shields on that Team. Heidi Robinson played on the Cobden Tween C Division (ages 12-13) which won the gold medal in that Division!

Mike Klatt, Bob Schreder, Walter Benson, Muriel & Abby Morrow and Nancy White were among the key organizers, with Mayor Terry McCann welcoming and congratulating all players and volunteers for a "fine effort." King Sports were the key sponsors.

WESTMEATH RINGETTE BELLES 1990-91



Back Row: Christie Laverty, Valerie Wassing, Louise Norlock, Charmaine Thomas, Erin Trimm, Megan Severin, Marlene Tait, Gord Laverty, Coach.
Front Row: Samantha Gervais, Angie Dupuis, Amy Ethier, Marsha Bertrand, Kelly Smith.

Many of the Westmeath girls, like girls from the other Valley Towns, quickly learned the game, gained experience playing for different communities and progressed from the House League level to the Competitive Levels, sometimes referred to as the Travelling Teams, under the banner of our Local Association - the Upper Ottawa Valley Ringette Association (UOVRA). Following are the names of only a few of the local girls who got their start in Westmeath House League and ended up playing at the UOVRA Rep Levels, Provincials and even National Competitive A, AA & AAA Levels: Heidi Robinson, Katie Robinson, Joanna Wassing, Christine Wassing, Jessica Nicolai, Rebecca Nicolai, Candice Nicolai. These girls were on winning provincial teams on several occasions! For example, Katie Robinson played for UOVRA, Cumberland and Gloucester. Katie won several Provincial and National titles, winning Gold at the 1998 and 2000 Canada Winter Games! She is still playing today in the Open A level! The Wassing girls played AA Competitive

for UOVRA and for the Gloucester AA Level and at the Provincials. The Nicolai girls played both Rep Ringette and Rep Hockey throughout Ontario! Some of these players are now Coaches, Trainers, Referees and serve on the UOVRA Ringette Executive. Heidi Robinson, was quick to share that she had lots of really good memories playing Ringette!

WESTMEATH RINGETTE NOVICE 1994-95



Back Row: Louise Norlock, Lyle Dupuis – Coaches
Centre Row: Shannon Laderoute, Emily Bertrand, Ashley Watson, Jessica Nicolai, Jennifer Dupuis, Rebecca Nicolai
Front Row: Joanne Wassing, Michelle Ladouceur, Candace Nicolai, Ashley Bertrand, Christine Wassing.



Two other girls- Jenna and Alexis McBride played their Ringette in Montreal and Ottawa. However, with family ties to Westmeath, they were supported by local family members including grandma Nellie Bromley and Aunt Emma Desjardins. They followed them around to the Provincials and Grandma Nellie even went to Finland, to watch Jenna play at the international level!

Grandma Nellie Bromley with granddaughter Alexis and great granddaughter Autumn watching granddaughter Jenna play at the World Ringette Championships in Finland.

Kudos to the parents for supporting their girls and driving them all over Ontario and even to other provinces to compete: Harko & Geppe Wassing, (Harko even made an ice pad in the back yard for them to practice!) Ron & Sharon Nicolai, Billy & Lois Robinson...and so many other parents!

WESTMEATH RINGETTE JUNIOR BELLES 1996-97



Back Row: Ron Nicolai, Ashley Bertrand, Emily Bertrand, Jessica Robinson, Rebecca Nicolai, Louise Norlock.
Front Row: Joanne Bromley, Jessica Nicolai, Candice Nicolai, Ashley Watson, Caitlin Foy

Ringette is not as popular in the Westmeath/La Passe area now, because many of the young girls have grown up and/or moved away. Another factor is the lack of House League Teams and the cost associated with the Travelling Teams. Also, since Hockey has eliminated some body contact at certain levels, the girls with their new ice skills can play up with the boys in hockey now!

The Valley Ringette Executive (2023) tells us that Ringette is continuing under the original banner of the Upper Ottawa Valley Ringette Association – UOVRA- and includes Valley Towns from Renfrew to Deep River. It currently draws about 80 players, from these Valley Towns to form competitive teams. This is a notable increase in a positive direction this year, due likely to the lifting of Covid restrictions. They play some games within their league, but mostly against Arnprior, Ottawa and Gatineau teams. Arnprior has their own Association.

The current challenges for the UOVRA are: attracting more Girls, recruiting female coaches (a few more this year), recruiting Referees (again, a few more getting qualified), booking ice times, especially in Cobden-Whitewater Twp., where Hockey still gets top priority! However, there are more practice opportunities for Ringette this year in Cobden, with the occasional game to be played on Saturdays! So, Renfrew has now become the Home Rink for Ringette in the Valley. Very special for this year is the formation of an under 16 years of age UOVRA Provincial Level Team. This team will be travelling widely in Ontario and Quebec! We wish them good luck and safe travel!

Of special note: the Ontario Winter Games are being hosted by Renfrew County this year from February 2-5 & 9-12 2023. Ringette will be included as an official game this year! Ringette is scheduled to be played in Arnprior. Contact County of Renfrew for more information and scheduling at www.countyofrenfrew.on.ca or Tele-1-800-273-0183.

I am also told by the current Ringette Executive, that there have been some significant changes to the game we knew back in the 80's & 90's. Check this out on their websites, along with lots of great info and game scheduling -- Google: UOV Ringette Association: www.uovringette.ca; the UOVRA League President—president@uovringette.ca, National Capital Region Ringette League (NCRRL); Eastern Region Ringette Association (ERRA); Ringette Ontario; Ringette Canada.

The current UOVRA Executive is gathering and preserving digitally “everything Ringette.” So, if you have a story, an experience, a special game, a picture etc. that you could contribute to the Ringette Story contact the UOVRA: www.uovringette.ca;

Here is an interesting fact I found in a Wikipedia article: “The Canadian sport of Ringette, created in 1963, by Sam Jacks of North Bay, is the last team sport in history to have been created exclusively for the female sex.” Ringette does not have a male category! Other sports that females currently participate in were first all-male sports. Despite this fact, gender disparity still exists in the world of organized sport! By the way the first game of Ringette was played in Espanola, by High School Girls, under the guidance of Red McCarthy who was working closely with Sam Jacks to develop this new game.”



Trophy presented to Coach Vince Gervais 1988-89

The Canadian Women's gold medal win in hockey at the 2022 IIHF and again this year, at the girls under 18, 2023, U18IIHF World Championships, has proven once again that women/girls can excel in all sports! So, girls be proud of your humble start in pioneering and playing Hockey/Ringette in your home towns and away and all that you have achieved in recreation and competitive sports! You have become an elite base of female team sports players!

Permit me a few acknowledgements: Thanks to all the volunteers for catching the spirit of this new game and making it happen for the girls! Thanks to the Ringette Players, Coaches, Parents and Volunteers for their initial support, the walk down memory lane and those who shared information, pictures and helped me put this article together.

A big thank you to the Ringette Players that I coached each year who always gave me a Thank You Card with a note of appreciation which included all their signatures! I still cherish these! And “you local girls,” can be very proud of the fact that you were the pioneers and the first participants that introduced the sport of Ringette in the Valley!

We appreciate the past and current Executive Members of the Upper Ottawa Valley Ringette Association for sharing some thoughts on Ringette in the 1980's & 90's, as well as, on the present status of Ringette in the Valley. We are very grateful to the current group of Ringette enthusiasts who are continuing to promote and support “Hockey's Sister Sport.” and the Valley Girls who continue to participate in Ringette!

It warmed my heart to learn recently that a young, 15 year old girl, “Jayda Boldt,” with family ties in La Passe, is currently playing House League Ringette on an Ottawa Team!

We believe that the spirit of “Volunteerism,” so characteristic of the sports-minded people in the Westmeath-La Passe Communities, gave us the confidence back then to go for it!

Also, special thanks to the Westmeath & District Recreation Association and Editor of their Newsletter, Lynn McMullen, for featuring this original Ringette Article in the 2022 WDRA Newsletters.

Terry McCann, former Mayor of Pembroke, who welcomed the first Eastern Ontario B & C Ringette Championships to Pembroke, in April 1989, shared this comment after reading the Ringette Article published in the WDRA Newsletters.

“Hi Vince: Wonderful story of dedication and commitment. Great to highlight Championships in April, success of the local girls, recruitment of coaches-referees, and support of parents, and growth of a team sport created exclusively for females. Vince you are a local girls ringette pioneer! Congratulations for telling your story. Cheers Terry”

Thanks to my daughters for their strong sense of gender equality and for pushing their Dad into action to achieve gender balance in their sports world! And, my daughter Christine, shared her appreciation: “It’s a nice story and it’s nice that you’re reflecting on gender equality and the contribution you made to it through Ringette. Thanks for starting it in the valley for us :-)!”

Catch a game! It is fast and very exciting to watch!

Please feel free to contact me (Vince Gervais) by phone (613-587-4838) or E-Mail (vgervais@nrtco.net) with additional information!

