Yukigassen comes to Edmonton

(by Nathan Vanderklippe)

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There is a small field on a farm west of Saskatoon where the snow has been cleared. It measures 10 m by 40 m. It has been made by Joel Rempel, a construction worker who devoted 40 hours to it.

The field serves as a training ground for some of the new titans of Canadian winter sport hoserdom. Mr. Rempel and his friends are among the most menacing snowballers in the land, a posse of power-throwers whose exploits would be legendary if anyone had ever heard about their sport. In Japan Yukigassen, or “snow battle,” has emerged as a fast-paced, aggressive – and, yes, hilarious – winter alternative to any number of other pursuits. It sits somewhere between paintball and grade school playground.

Now, more than two decades after its founding, it has come to Canada.

This weekend, nearly a thousand people attended the first-ever Yukigassen Canadian national championships in Edmonton. They came from across the West, strapping on ski helmets and Sidney Crosby jerseys and thick cold-weather gear. They came to fight the pain of being pelted by icy snowballs capable of drawing blood and chipping teeth. They came to fight for top spot – and the chance to attend the world championships in Japan.

“There’s lots of old guys out there – and strangely enough, they’re the most hardcore. Maybe they’re trying to relive their high school quarterback days,” Mr. Rempel said. “But what guy doesn’t want to get involved in a snowball fight?”

And Yukigassen is unlike any other snowball fight. Its rulebook extends to 13 pages. Each team has seven people, who battle over a trio of three-minute periods. They win by either knocking out opponents – a player is out when hit – or by running into enemy territory to capture a flag, which creates an instant win when touched. Fueling it all is snow mixed with water and pressed into steel snowball moulds that form snowballs 45 at a time. Each ball must be between 6.35 and seven centimeters in diameter, or slightly smaller than a baseball. Teams get 90 per period, which works out to 540 snowballs for a single game and a staggering 250,000 for the entire Edmonton tournament, which despite bitter temperatures attracted hundreds of spectators.

Among them were four Japanese founders of the sport, guided by Gordon Ferguson, the Penticton, B.C., hotel manager who chanced upon a magazine article on Yukigassen and decided to bring it to Canada.

Though it is already played in Finland, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands and even Australia, “I couldn’t think of anything more Canadian,” Mr. Ferguson said.

He now owns the North American rights to the sport, which also saw its first U.S. national championship in Anchorage this weekend. But the Edmonton event, held at the Fort Edmonton Park, was “history in the making,” he said. In Japan, where Yukigassen has been played since 1988, the national championship typically brings out 150 teams on eight or nine fields. The first Canadian tournament, held in Saskatoon in January, brought 19 on two fields. The Edmonton championship brought 101 teams on 10 fields – even though most had never so much as played a single game.

The strong turnout has stoked big hopes for Mr. Ferguson, who is seeking a national corporate sponsor and laying plans to roll out Yukigassen across the country.

“It was a no-brainer that this would be a huge hit in western Canada. We’re probably going to be expanding to eight to 10 cities,” he said. Calgary is on board, as are Saskatoon and Regina. Other possibilities include Winnipeg, Montreal, Toronto and several ski hills – including Whistler-Blackcomb.

The sport, Ferguson said, is designed “for those cities that are trying to help boost their winter festivals, and to get people outdoors in winter in Canada.”

The Edmonton event raised more than $6,000 for charity.

What skills make for a star Yukigass-thlete? Mr. Rempel, whose Goonies won in Saskatoon and were among the top teams in Edmonton, says it’s part general nimbleness, part throwing accuracy, part ability to tolerate pain.

“If you get hit in the face, you got blood coming,” he said.

But in a country where millions tune in every hockey night to watch the occasional spatter of blood on ice, Mr. Rempel is convinced Canadians will quickly make snow battles a pastime.

“For sure. Guaranteed,” he said. “All the guys on the team love it. There’s been talks about starting professional leagues.”

<http://theglobeandmail.com/news/national/prairies/yukigassen-the-snow-battle-comes-to-edmonton/article1931924/>