

Kids embracing new hockey craze

■ ROLLER HOCKEY:

Tri-City League got too big for apartment parking lot before heading for Vista Boys & Girls Club

BEN STURTEVANT / *For the Times Advocate*

VISTA — Unlike their northern brethren, Southern California kids can't experience the joys of skating on frozen ponds.

That hasn't prevented them from taking to the game of hockey, however. All over the North County, the roller hockey craze is taking local youngsters by storm.

In-line roller skates, hockey sticks, helmets, gloves and pads are selling like hotcakes at local sporting goods outlets (Play It Again Sports, for example, reported hockey equipment sales have more than doubled in the last year).

Parking lots during the week become makeshift hockey rinks on weekends. Kids who once wore the colors of their favorite baseball teams now don apparel splattered with Mighty Ducks,



DAN RIOS / *Times Advocate*

Blades coach Pat Hill congratulates one of his players for scoring a goal during a recent game.

Barracudas, Bullfrogs and Gulls.

The roller hockey rush is on in Escondido where youth leagues have sprouted at the YMCA and Ups and Downs roller rink. To the west, the Tri City In-Line Hockey League serves the skate-crazy youngsters of Vista,

San Marcos, Carlsbad and Oceanside.

Some might think roller hockey is just a fad destined to go the way of the hula hoop. But a visit to the Vista Boys and Girls club, home of the Tri City

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League, any Saturday between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. will dispel that notion.

Scores of kids, ages seven through 17, lace up their in-line skates, slip into their pads and take to the linoleum tiles of the Boys and Girls club.

"It's fun," said Ricky Marquez of Vista. "I've tried (basketball and baseball). It's the only sport that I've tried that I like. It's the speed, movement and action I like. I want to go to the pros."

Marquez is a right wing for the Quakes of the squirt (10-11 year olds) division. There are three other age groups: mosquito (7-9), peewee (12-13) and bantam (14-17).

The league commissioner is Blue Gomez, a New York native who played junior and minor league ice hockey. He helped start the league a year ago after noticing some neighborhood kids (Chibon Cully, Larry Ward and Kyle Peterson) playing roller hockey in the parking lot of his apartment complex.

Gomez, who claims to be the first Puerto Rican hockey player to reach the minor leagues, offered to teach them more about the sport. Other kids got involved so Gomez bought larger nets and more equipment. Word of the hockey games got around the schools and soon there were too many players for the apartment complex rink.

After a meeting, Gomez and other parents decided to start their own league. They got the sanctioning of the National In-line Hockey Association and found better roller hockey facilities at the Vista Boys and Girls Club and the Armory.

Last September, the league began play with 70 kids. Now there are 267 players, including five girls, on 18 teams. Gomez says the Tri-City League is the largest in North County.

"It's a nice thing," Gomez said. "This is a new sport to Cal-

ifornia. We're not putting too much pressure on the kids. We teach them the fundamentals. We use pro techniques."

And the kids can't seem to get enough of it. After a game between two rival squirt clubs, the goaltenders rushed to watch instructional videotapes featuring professional netminders.

The coaches, mostly newcomers to the sport, are just as enthusiastic.

Roger Rogerson, a coach for the squirt division All-Stars, said his hockey experience is "none, other than the couch." That didn't stop him from getting involved once his two sons took up hockey.

"The excitement level has been incredible," Rogerson said. "I can't get my kids out of their skates. You look at baseball, and there's not a lot going on. Even soccer, a lot of the kids are standing around. In this sport somebody's involved in the game all the time."

Best of all, for parents who don't have much time, the games are short — usually less than an hour.

"It's not like a baseball where it lasts two or three hours," Rogerson said. "It's really not a big commitment. The games are an hour and we have one practice for an hour."

Youth leagues aren't the only places where roller hockey's popularity has grown. Roller Hockey International, the top professional league, doubled in size from 12 to 24 teams this season. The San Diego Barracudas are in their second season, and club owner Fred Comrie has big plans to build an outdoor arena for his team — possibly in Escondido.

"We'll have an outdoor stadium for between 3,000-5,000 next year," he said. "You have to give them something outdoors. San Diego's so different. Look at the Over-The-Line Tournament. Who wants to sit inside?"