

Young stars shine during Minor Hockey Week

More than 8,500 players will take to the ice

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Curtis Smith, left, and Nicolas Beland with their trophies are two of the Wayne Gretzky Award winners, the third winner, Andrew Stewart, was not available.

Photograph by: Rick MacWilliam , The Journal

Edmonton Minor Hockey Association general manager Dean Hengel summed up the emotions the 8,500-plus seven to 17-year-olds participating in Edmonton Minor Hockey Week will feel.

"It's their week to be Taylor Hall, Jordan Eberle, Devan Dubnyk, or Nikolai Khabibulin. Above all they have a lot of fun," Hengel said.

The 48th annual tournament kicked-off Wednesday with a salute to the three 2011 Wayne Gretzky Award recipients and the 3,000-plus volunteers who are an invaluable part of the event. The tournament starts Friday.

"Our volunteers' dedication and commitment is instrumental in making this tournament happen," explained chairman Rod McMahon.

The awards are presented annually to players who best exemplify sportsmanship and dedication to the game as well as scholastic achievement and community involvement.

One recipient, 14-year old Nicolas Beland, said he's grateful for the \$750 scholarship that comes with the prestigious award.

Beland plays for the KC Voyageurs Bantam AA team and volunteers at the Mustard Seed with his family. His fondest memory of competing in EMHW came in 2005 when he was playing in Atom.

"I scored the game-winning goal in double-overtime to send my team to the finals," recalled Beland.

The other award winners were Curtis Smith of the North Edmonton Red Wings Junior B team and Andrew Stewart of the Seera SE 509 Midget Hockey Team.

Stewart wasn't, however, able to accept his award on Wednesday. He was writing a high school diploma exam.

In addition to congratulating the Gretzky winners, Hengel thanked tournament sponsors, including title sponsor Quikcard which is in its 13th year supporting EMHW.

The first of 741 games will commence at the Sherwood Park Arena on Friday, but 19 other arenas and 29 other ice surfaces will play host to the 515 teams from Edmonton and surrounding areas.

This includes the four rinks at the new Terwillegar Recreation Centre, which the City of Edmonton has offered EMHW the exclusive use of for the tournament finals Jan. 22-23.

“One-third of the games this year will be played at the Terwillegar Recreation Centre. This will bring a new level of excitement to have all the finals in one place,” said McMahon.

The opening ceremonies will also be held at the centre on Saturday and will feature a game between local media and former EMHA and NHL alumni at noon.

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