



OPINION

In a winter of lockdown, the local ice rink has been beating with life

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If April is the cruellest month, February is the coldest. City winters are more obstacle course than pastime, more wind tunnel than wind chime. There is typically a hard measure to the first days of the new year. *In, out, cold, warm, office, home.* This year, just home.

It's been difficult to accept the rhythm of the days we once knew is gone, that even winter has been taken away. The gluey things that bound us together before the pandemic – idle, unremarkable chats with acquaintances, long coffees with old friends, Super Bowl parties – are distant memories. Whether you are riding this out solo or staring down the barrel of another day with three kids under 5, we are all one thing this winter: inside.

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There is quite simply nowhere to go and nothing to do. But one activity has been saving our Canadian bacon, and from my ninth floor apartment overlooking the Regent Park Athletic Grounds in Toronto, I watch it spring into action from dawn until dusk: the rink.

Smoke billows skyward in the Toronto core's east end. Streetlights guard the darkened oval like older brothers. Lights blink. An ice resurfacers emblazoned with a FOREVER LEAFS logo meanders its way from Sumach Street like a dawdling grandfather, two fluorescent city workers minding the doors. The prince of winter, the Zamboni, has arrived. An orange glow rises above Lake Ontario. Sharp blades slice the top layer before lining the surface with hot water, every new wash a chance to put down the perfect sheet. Sunlight hits the far boards. Shadows descend from overhanging trees. A clean white sheen beams back.

The prince exits stage left and trundles toward the flatbed parked on the street. The thankless, less regal job of snow removal falls to the waiting plow. Winter's worker bee, the Caterpillar, zigzags through awkward entryways and parking lots. My friend, Ryan, drives one. From street level one day, a shovel waves to us nine storeys up, an extreme but very physically distanced hello.

Shaving, washing, layering, spreading – I binge-watch the ceremonies of the Zamboni, staring out the window of my makeshift office for signs of life.

I have an admission: I can't skate. I grew up in Vancouver – rain and ice make duelling bedfellows and I took to the soccer pitch instead. If I were born in North Battleford, Sask., or raised in London, Ont. – home to the highest number of NHL players in the country per capita – a backyard rink may well have become routine. I have one now, sort of.

My wife and I moved at the end of 2020 to accommodate a baby on the way, our first, and the second bedroom overlooks the grounds below: a soccer pitch alongside the local rink. The rituals of that rink – hand-holding, skate-lacing, backward crossovers – remind me that life isn't a wordless curbside pickup or another episode of *Bridgerton*. Life is on the ice.

Ontario's stay-at-home order means indoor rinks are "closed to reduce the spread of COVID," according to the City of Toronto's website. Outdoor rinks, however, have sprung to life throughout the Greater Toronto Area, minus the potentially superspreading shinny.



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Kathy Saldanha has a passion for excellence in customer service. For the past seven years, she has been the lead of client services at Healthcare Insurance Reciprocal of Canada (HIROC). "It's all about taking care of the client and responding to their requests for information and support," she says.

HIROC is Canada's leading provider of healthcare liability insurance. A non-profit organization, its mission is to provide insurance, risk management and innovative solutions supporting safety and collaboration in healthcare.

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There are rules: The maximum number of skaters is 25. Masks are mandatory. Reservations at peak hours are in high demand. Last lap around the rink is 9:45 p.m. No sticks or pucks, nets or fights; skating for skating's sake. It's a rite of passage for many new Canadians, including in Regent Park, where the Ryerson Rams have played host to several community skates – by the looks of it this winter, we could all use a lesson, myself included. I've listened to enough yawn-inducing beer league recaps from my friends without a drop of envy – until now.

Is something else driving my will to lace 'em up?

Fear of embarrassment is a strong motivator. Daddy can't fix a roof is somewhat forgivable, but daddy can't skate? I'd rather remain in lockdown, thanks, than showcase my lead feet. And yet there's nothing quite like a fresh sheet in the early hours of a blushing winter day to get my blood pumping.

Ask any hockey player, read Roy MacGregor's stories or *The Hockey Sweater* – there's a romance to that shimmering natural pond touched by first sunlight, the legend of Wayne born beneath the flood lights of Wally's Coliseum, the Gretzky patriarch's famous backyard rink, Sidney's golden goal.

We Canadians are a sentimental lot when it comes to ice: Winter reflection is in our blood. Christopher Plummer, the famed actor who died this month at 91, writes eloquently in his memoir *In Spite of Myself* about a childhood skiing and tobogganing down Montreal's Mount Royal, "snow drifts as high as tidal waves." I once lived across from Parc La Fontaine and can attest: No public skating rink looks quite as fairy-tale-like, no Canadian city does winter better.

Closer to home, I notice a figure skater one afternoon holding court among a group of children. Generating speed, she twists and rises in the air like a firecracker, lands a double salchow. Every day a frozen poem rises in the frigid air; every day, the next Kaetlyn Osmond falls flat on her butt and gets back up. Every day, more skaters arrive.

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I poll Facebook: A resounding chorus of city dwellers echoes back. Yes, *we are skating!*

Gargi's family rink-hops – “can't bar-hop,” she says – from North York to Etobicoke, an excuse to travel and avoid high-density parks such as Trinity Bellwoods. Backyard rinks are thriving, from Binbrook, Ont., to downtown Toronto, and in Alberta, where ice is queen, Danielle and her daughter opt for a quieter skate through Adopt-a-Rink, a volunteer-run program that responsibly floods local ponds in Calgary. In Ottawa, there's the Rideau Canal, but Tracey tells me after months of online learning, “the kids wanted to go to our neighborhood rink knowing there was a good chance they'd see a friend there – it really is the heart of the community.”

Hundreds of frozen hubs across the country are teeming with life despite the virus waging war against our communities. We are Canadians, and this winter, dammit, we are skating. We are Sunday night rec players without a game, figure skaters with no ice time, moms with edge-skills that rival Tessa Virtue, midnight dads with a hose-in-hand.

I feel a kinship with the newest skater on the block – the nighttime knee-buckler, the flailer, the sledge-pusher. My mom spent her childhood skating outdoors in Edmonton; her back issues began when she first plopped me on the ice. “I would bend down to hold you up and you would fight me and drop down, or wrestle away,” she texts me. Forty years later, I'm still wrestling with the truth – that stubborn toddler is still me.

Last Saturday morning, the temperature minus 17 C with wind chill, a trepidatious little girl is first on the ice. For several minutes, she's got a clean sheet all to herself. She dips and twirls, leans down and lifts a leg to the sky. I start googling snowsuits for toddlers. He may not be a hockey player, but I know one thing: My boy is gonna skate. And so will I.

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