

Downsview Stories

SPORTING TRADITIONS

Downsview is the home of a thriving sports and recreation scene, including the soccer facilities where Toronto FC practices, the BMO Training Ground. Clustered in and around Carl Hall Road are several indoor and outdoor facilities where thousands of parents, kids and athletes come each week to work out, shoot hoops, throw axes, climb walls, go-kart and play ultimate frisbee. It may seem like a modern phenomenon, but the fact is, you can't swing a bat, club, or racquet in this neighbourhood without hitting an intriguing bit of history about Downsview's sporting traditions.



A map of the Sports Centre at Downsview Park



Users of the Downsview Hangar

“Sports were not neglected” in the 1880s, writes J.P. Bull in his book *From Oxford to Ontario: a history of the Downsview community* (Toronto, 1941), “lacrosse, shinny, baseball and cricket were all played in the pastures and on the frozen ponds of Downsview. Skating, swimming and shooting were also popular.” Men played on the Downsview Football team against other teams in the Toronto Association, such as the Islingtons, the Strollers and the Marlboros.

Sadly, gender parity in sports was a long way off. “Croquet, the only outdoor sport considered ladylike, is said to have been played at the home of James Duncan, who had the first set in the neighbourhood,” writes Bull . Fast forward 130 years and the local gentry would likely be



The Downsview Gun Club, which was active from 1880 at the shooting range in Wardlaw’s Bush

scandalized by the women’s flat track roller derby league that operated out of Studio 3 in the Downsview Supply Depot for several years in the 2010s. Teams such as the Death Track Dolls, Chicks Ahoy, Bay Street Bruisers and Smoke City Betties jammed, blocked and skated for glory in the Toronto Roller Derby League. Now with administrative offices still at Downsview, this entertaining contact sport for women continues to gain in popularity.



Posters for the Toronto Roller Derby held at the Hangar at Downsview Park

A lesser known sports connection involves Elton John and Bobby Riggs, two-time US tennis champion (1939 & 1941). Claiming that the female game was inferior, Riggs challenged the reigning female champ, Billie Jean King, to a televised match in 1973, dubbed the Battle of the Sexes, which he lost in straight sets (6-4, 6-3, 6-3). Riggs, a consummate self-promoter who travelled widely making money in exhibition games, showed up in Toronto in 1976 and discovered he was staying at the same hotel as Elton John, an enthusiastic tennis aficionado and good friend of Billie Jean's (he penned the song "Philadelphia Freedom" in tribute to her liberating command of the game). Riggs contacted Elton and invited him to a friendly match at the Wingfield Indoor Racquet Club in Downsview, just up the street from present day Mayfair Racquet Club on Chesswood. Game on, but according to a Toronto Star report, Rigg's notorious baseline and long game was too much for the Rocket Man, who shrugged off inquiries about how he played with a curt "don't ask".

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