

LIVING WELL



Photo courtesy Mighty Penguins

The Mighty Penguins sled hockey team is based at the UPMC Lemieux Sports Complex in Cranberry.

LEMIEUX FACILITY OFFERS OUTLET FOR ALL ABILITIES

BY KAREN PRICE

WHEN PITTSBURGH PENGUINS EXECUTIVES FIRST ENVISIONED A NEW PRACTICE FACILITY, they imagined not an exclusive rink that would cater only to the NHL team, but an inclusive, community rink where players of all ages and abilities — including adaptive athletes — could thrive.

The end result is the UPMC Lemieux Sports Complex in Cranberry, and on a cold Monday in January, the Mighty Penguins sled hockey team was on the ice for practice. For the players to know their needs were included along with everyone else's, said Mighty Penguins president and hockey mom Michelle Humphreys, means a great deal.

"To be able to come to a place where you can play the game you love and you're included and playing like everyone else is, it's huge for their self-esteem and their well-being," she said.

The accessibility features of the \$70 million-plus complex, which opened in August and sits just off Interstate 79, begin at the main entrance, where athletes enter through wide sliding doors on a level entryway with no steps to negotiate. While that may be simply part of the building code, it is still a welcome change from older ice rinks which often have

doors that must be pulled open.

The doors to the locker rooms are also wide and accessible to those in wheelchairs and other adaptive equipment, and there are no steps or other impediments to get from the locker rooms to the ice.

The greatest adaptive features for the athletes are in the bench areas.

In many older rinks, sled hockey players have no way to get off the ice onto the benches, so they are forced to stay on the ice lined up in front of the bench when they come off their shifts. It not only often interferes with play, but is also dangerous.

At the Lemieux facility, the benches move to become sled-accessible and players are able to transition from the ice to the benches utilizing synthetic ice. Once there, they can still follow the action because the dasher boards in front of the benches have windows at eye level for players in sleds.

"It gives our players a sense of playing like the pros play," Humphreys said. "The

guys who play sled hockey on a national or international level, that's what they're used to."

The accessible benches, funded in part by Pittsburgh-based ATI, were such an unfamiliar feature that Fox Chapel grad and U.S. Paralympic hockey team member Dan McCoy had to show fellow members of the Mighty Penguins how to use them. Other sled hockey teams that come in for tournaments also occasionally need a tutorial.

Penguins chief operating officer Travis Williams said it may be a simple answer and sound clichéd, but making sure the adaptive hockey community was provided for at the new facility was just the right thing to do.

"If there's a group of young men and women that want to play hockey, no matter what their physical challenges are, we want to give them the ability to do it," said Williams, who said they hope to eventually host some national-level sled

hockey events at the new facility.

Humphreys said there's something special about the people in Pittsburgh and the Penguins, and that the type of support showed the adaptive hockey community here is not the norm across the country. She knows firsthand how much it means to the people involved.

"Our family is very active and we play a lot of sports," she said. "I knew at 18 weeks that I was going to have a child with spina bifida and I kept thinking how life was going to change and how this was going to affect not only him but my three other boys. For him to come and find a place he loves and feels a part of and looks forward to getting out and having the opportunity to play hockey just like his brothers, the benefits for him and the whole family are immeasurable."



Photo courtesy Mighty Penguins

The Mighty Penguins are looking for new teammates. "Learn to Play Sled Hockey" event will be held on Saturday, Feb. 27 from 3:30-6:45 p.m. at the UPMC Lemieux Sports Complex. Anyone interested in the program is invited to attend. Register at www.sledhockeyfunforall.eventbrite.com.