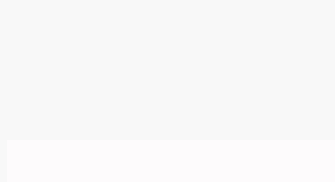


LOCAL: NEWS

# COVID-19 sweeps through Newmarket men’s hockey league



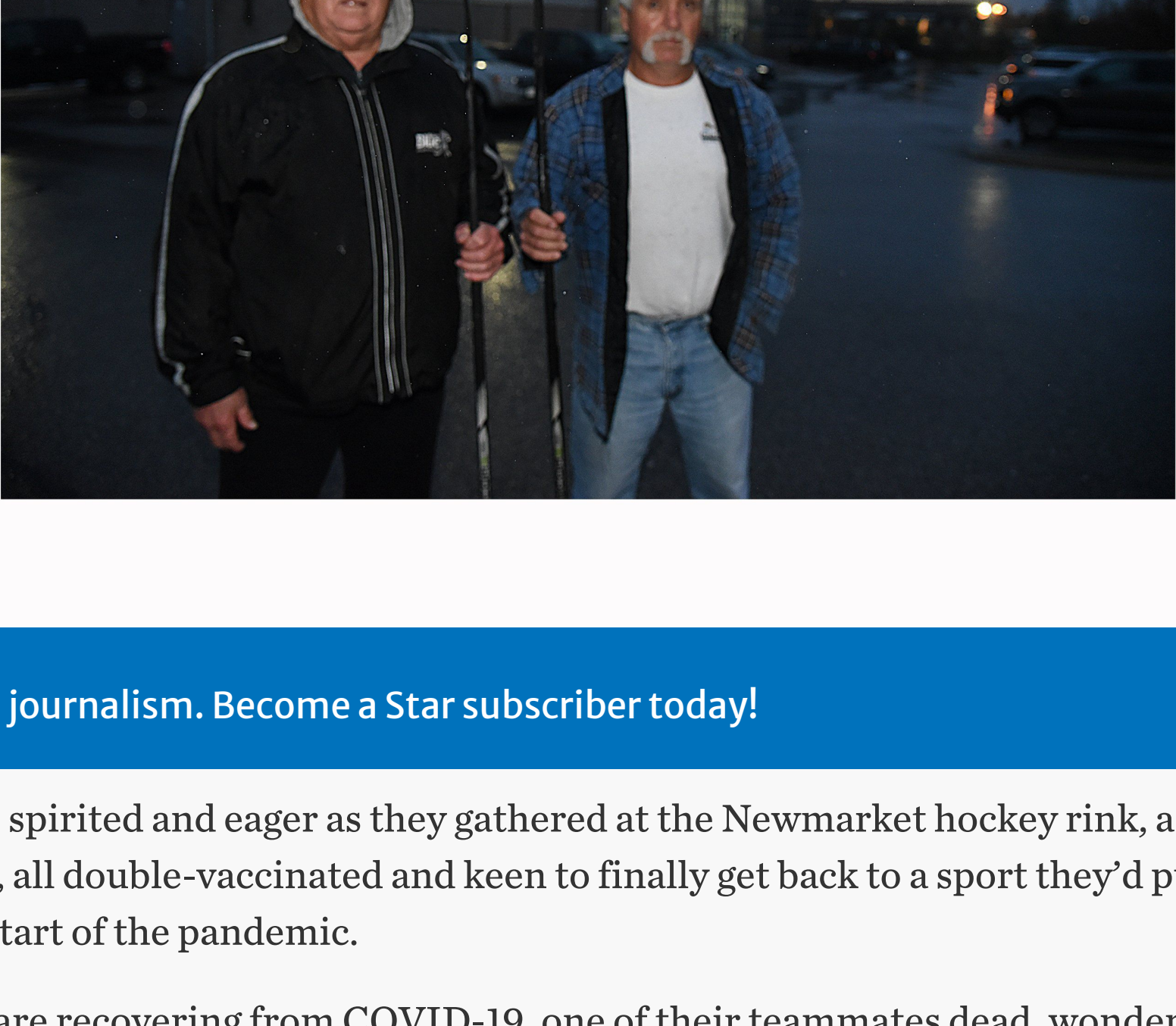
By **Kim Zarzour** Reporter

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Set Newmarket as My Local news

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They were spirited and eager as they gathered at the Newmarket hockey rink, a league of older men, all double-vaccinated and keen to finally get back to a sport they’d put on ice since the start of the pandemic.

Now they are recovering from COVID-19, one of their teammates dead, wondering if this tragedy could have been averted.

“It’s just strange,” mused Brian Dunn, of Thornhill. “15 guys who played separate nights, different change rooms, days apart, one tragic death. We vacillate between absolutely pissed off and sad ... I lost my best friend.”

Dunn knows for certain only what happened to him when he returned to play with the Midas 3-on-3 league Sept. 30.

The over-50 league plays Mondays and Thursdays at the Stellar Drive rink: four teams, eight players each, play two games each evening on one of the two modified ice pads.

The league had just resumed play Sept. 27 after the pandemic shut things down in March 2020.

Dunn did not play that first day, but he was on the ice Thursday as was his buddy, Garry Weston, of Oro-Medonte, who sat beside him in the dressing room.

It was a chance to get back to “normal” — and it felt that way until Sunday, when the sore throat and headaches began.

On Tuesday, Dunn said, Weston tested positive for COVID-19 and on Wednesday, his own results came back positive.

Turns out, some of the other players had also been feeling ill, and several who’d played on the Monday night were sick, too.

Craig Adlam, one of the league organizers, said news of the COVID-19 outbreak began trickling in from players who had been on the ice Sept. 27, 30 and Oct. 4.

“I suggested we pull the plug on this before it goes any further,” he said. Play shut down for two weeks.

York Region Public Health spokesperson Patrick Casey confirmed an outbreak was declared Oct. 8 with 15 cases to date — 13 residents in York Region and two from Simcoe.

“At least 10 of the guys were basically bedridden for most of the time,” Adlam said. “It wasn’t just like sniffles or anything like that.”

In some cases, players tested negative and later, positive. Some spouses also caught the virus; in other cases, entire families became ill, he said.

Because many of the men play with multiple groups, three more Newmarket-Aurora leagues that play elsewhere in York Region shut down as the virus spread: the 5-on-5 leagues for over 35, over 50, and over 60s, Adlam said.

“People are getting a false impression, ‘I’m double-vaxxed ... nothing can happen to me’ and as we can see, in our league 30 per cent got infected ... And, unfortunately, Garry took the brunt of it.”

“Most of the guys got through their symptoms without any lingering effects, which is what you hope for with the vaccine,” said Dunn. “But with Garry, it was unbelievable. It went sideways for him very quickly.”

On Oct. 20, his daughter, Krista Weston, posted on Facebook: “Garry had a severe stroke while fighting the pneumonia caused by COVID. As a family and in respect of his wishes, he will be removed from life support.”

When they heard that, Weston’s friends demanded answers.

“A lot of us are confused,” Rick Grisdale said. “We’re filled with all kinds of emotions, including anger.”

Grisdale has known Weston for 40 years and played on the same team for 20.

“This man was a leader, he knew people everywhere, people respected him, what a pillar this guy was in life and in sports ... a really smart gentleman. Why has there not been a word about this in the broader community? The rink stayed open, what’s going on? Garry’s gone and we don’t want this thing to slide under the table.”

Grisdale and many of the players have questions. Was the rink cleaned adequately? Aired out between play? Were enough people notified in time?

In an email to YorkRegion.com Oct. 25, National Training Rink (NTR) Newmarket general manager Andrew Shorkey expressed condolences and asserted that the privately operated facility follows all provincial protocols.

Casey said NTR confirmed they followed COVID-19 protocols, which apply to both municipally run and private rinks — cleaning and disinfecting of frequently touched surfaces and areas such as entrances, counters, benches and change rooms.

All spectators or players must sign self-assessment waivers and show proof of vaccination before entering the building

Masks are required except for when players are on the ice and participants can only enter the building 20 minutes before ice time and must exit 20 minutes after leaving the ice, Shorkey said.

The 40,000-square foot, 22-year-old building has continuous air circulation that runs 24 hours a day, he said.

“Unfortunately, none of the players who tested positive notified our facility of their results until Oct. 7,” Shorkney said. One day later, York Region Public Health reached the rink to obtain contact tracing information.

According to Public Health, all high-risk contacts — those who played at the same time as a confirmed case — were identified and contacted directly.

Those who played in the session prior and after would not have been called as they were not high risk, Casey said.

It’s a mystery, the men say, how players contracted the virus despite being in separate dressing rooms.

Wendall Harrison, of Sutton, runs the league with Adlam and played Sept. 27.

The two men who sat next to him in the change room caught COVID-19, as did the goalie who sat across the room, but none of the other five players in the room got sick. One of the players in the opposing team’s change room also contracted COVID-19, he said.

Did the virus come from the younger players, the not-yet-vaccinated under-12s, who used the rink before, he wonders.

When leagues first resumed play in the summer, there were stricter rules, “but that changed when younger age group training started,” he said. “It became busier, all kinds of people coming and going and kids running around.”

Anyone who’s been in a hockey dressing room knows ventilation is questionable, Dunn said.

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According to Public Health, the virus is transmitted through large respiratory droplets and smaller aerosols.

Players who are on the ice at the same time, with frequent face-to-face interactions, are at higher risk than those who enter the facility an hour later, Casey said.

However, he added, “we are noticing a concerning trend where individuals are not going for testing right away when they develop symptoms.”

Vaccination is very effective, he said, but there is still a chance you could both contract and spread COVID-19.

“It’s important to remember COVID-19 still remains active within our communities.”

That was a hard lesson for all the players, Grisdale agreed.

“Everyone wanted to play again, but it’s still a gamble out there. This story is tragic and it’s not as safe as everyone’s saying out there, even if you’re double-vaxxed.”

This past week, most of the players returned to the ice and the game they love — but not all.

A handful of men say they just won’t come back, Harrison said.

“People are just trying to get back to normal, but we need to be aware. This pandemic is not over.”

— *For more questions and answers from York Region Public Health regarding what happened, see this story.*

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