

Snow flurries possible for NHL's first outdoor game

Nov. 21, 2003

SportsLine.com wire reports

EDMONTON, Alberta -- For the Edmonton Oilers and Montreal Canadiens, their game Saturday will be just like old times -- a throwback to when the players were kids and raced from school to a frozen pond.

And they never cared how cold it was.

So, with no concern for the thermometer, the league is throwing an 86th birthday party for the NHL. The Oilers and Canadiens will play at 55,000-seat Commonwealth Stadium in Edmonton, the first outdoor game in league history.

The Heritage Classic will be the second half of a hockey doubleheader with teams of Edmonton and Montreal alumni, including Hall of Famers Wayne Gretzky and Guy Lafleur, playing the first game.

Forecasts Friday called for a temperature of about 15 degrees with possible snow flurries when the puck drops at 5 p.m. local time, two hours after the alumni game starts.

"It's about a celebration of hockey and our roots to the game being outdoors," said Oilers general manager Kevin Lowe, who will play in the old-timers' game. "It's nice to have Gretz here and Mark (Messier) and Guy (Lafleur), but most of us are just thinking about the spirit of the game."

Messier, who still plays with the New York Rangers, received permission to skate one more time with the teammates from one of hockey's greatest clubs.

Lowe said the real appeal is the reminder of childhood days of numb toes and runny noses while playing until sundown.

The first practice Friday looked like a pickup game, with players in wool caps passing and shooting with the enthusiasm of kids.

"In a way, it's like time stood still," Messier said. "It's amazing to come back and see how easy it is for everybody to just fit in."

The event is a sellout and Oilers officials said they could have sold 500,000 tickets priced from \$45 to \$101.

Workers spent two weeks building the regulation-size rink with ice 2 inches thick in a stadium that normally hosts football and other events, such as the 2001 World Track and Field Championships.

League officials say the NHL game could be postponed if the weather turns bad. The old-timers' game will take place, no matter the weather, and that's fine with them.

"I never really played indoor games until I was 8 or 10 years old," said Montreal's Larry Robinson, who won six Stanley Cups. "I hope we get a lot more help cleaning the rink off than we did back then. It never failed -- you'd get the last shovel of snow off the ice and everybody showed up."

It will be Gretzky's first game since retiring as the game's greatest player in 1999, and he insisted this week it also will be the final one. He last played for Edmonton in winning the Stanley Cup in 1988 before being traded to Los Angeles, then moving on to St. Louis and New York, where he ended his career with the Rangers.

"This will be my last game," Gretzky said Monday. "I just thought that probably it was only fitting that I play one more time and my kids had an opportunity to see me in an Oiler uniform."

That's enough for Randy Gregg, a defenseman on five Stanley Cup teams with Edmonton.

"Just being in the dressing room with him again will be an experience to treasure," Gregg said.

While it will be the first outdoor NHL game, other hockey games have drawn larger crowds. In October 2001, Michigan State and Michigan played to a 3-3 tie before 74,554 on an outdoor rink at Spartan Stadium in East Lansing, Mich., to set a world attendance record for hockey.

That broke the mark of 55,000 at Moscow's Lenin Stadium for a 1957 world championship game between the Soviet Union and Sweden.

AP NEWS

The Associated Press News Service