



Winnipeg Jets inspire newcomers to try free skating lessons

W AJDI HADDAD AND HIS BROTHER, Amjad, saw their very first hockey game on television when they arrived in Canada from Syria in December 2022.

They remember watching in awe as the Winnipeg Jets took on an American team. The way the players coordinated with each other, and the effort they put in for their teammates – and for their country – inspired the Winnipeg newcomers to brave the unfamiliar cold weather, and explore hockey and winter sports both as spectators and participants.

But it wasn't easy.



WEST END BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT ZONE,
MANITOBA

Canada

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Skating instructor Charley showing participants how to stand back up when you fall during skating.



Skate class in Central Park.

Winnipeg Jets tickets were too expensive. They couldn't afford to participate in the city's sports programs. The brothers even tried looking for free lessons, like snowboarding, but these searches came up empty.

Then, they discovered the West End Business Improvement Zone's (West End BIZ) free skating lessons being offered at Winnipeg's Central Park.

"It was a dream come true," says Wajdi, who registered for the program immediately with Amjad.

The Haddad brothers were given this opportunity thanks to the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association's Reaching Each and Every One: A Community Sport Intervention program. This program, which was funded by Sport Canada's Community Sport for All Initiative, seeks to remove barriers and increase sport participation rates for equity deserving groups across Canada.

The grant helped West End BIZ offer free skating lessons to newcomers across Winnipeg, which was led by a skating instructor and included skate and helmet rentals.

Aurora Debreuil, communications and marketing coordinator for West End BIZ, says that the non-profit organization has run Learn to Skate for newcomers since 2019 – but this year, the funding allowed the group to expand the program.

"We were able to do two classes a week, and that's something we had never done before," says Debreuil, adding that the group was also able to purchase new equipment which led to more participants. "In the past, we had to really limit the amount of participants because we only had a certain amount of equipment."

She says that access to the free equipment and lessons helped newcomers, like the Haddad brothers, overcome a major barrier to skating: its cost.

"A lot of folks want to learn, but they don't want to invest in a \$200 pair of skates. Even second-hand ones can be quite expensive," she says. "This is a great way to give them the resources and the equipment needed to get them to figure out if they like skating, or if this is something they want to keep working at."

She adds that the program also served another important purpose: helping newcomers connect and socialize with one another.

"I heard from a lot of participants that it can be quite lonely coming over to a new country. They don't know anyone, and they might not speak the same language. There's a lot of adjustments that they need to make," she says. "These programs, big or small, are just so important and impactful for disadvantaged or marginalized communities. This funding was very valuable."

Amjad agrees that the program was a great opportunity to meet others, and helped him and his brother adjust to their new home.

"This experience provided us with a great opportunity to integrate into society," Amjad says, adding that the Jets players' determination inspired them to keep going on the ice. "Whenever we got tired, we remembered the Winnipeg Jets when they were tired and wanted to achieve their goal."

Wajdi says he loved learning how to pick himself up when he would fall, and how his fellow participants supported him as he perfected this skill.

"It's like a baby who learns with the help of his family how to walk, and falls to the ground several times until he masters walking," he explains, adding that he feels grateful to have had this experience. "We thank the Canadian government for supporting newcomers, helping them integrate into society, and giving us this opportunity." 🍁