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London Devilettes goalie Danielle LeBer makes a save during a game against Stratford Saturday at Argyle Arena.

# Girls' league takes shape

By Eric Bender  
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London Devilette girls hockey teams have joined a newly-constituted league, an amalgamation of the Central West and Southern Ontario associations.

"Teams in the Toronto area have been well-organized for a while now," said Bev Harper, spokesperson for the Devilettes. "Outside of Toronto, we haven't been able to get together until now."

Named the South Western Girls Hockey League (SWGHL), eight Devilette teams from novice to midget are playing Sarnia, Bluewater, Stratford, Woodstock, St. Thomas and Chatham.

While some centres don't have a team at a certain level, other levels are engaging in interlocking play with more distant teams from Kitchener, Brantford, Guelph, Niagara Falls, Hamilton, Buffalo and Detroit.

"There's a bit more travel in some divisions," Harper said.

But the new league seems to be meeting the approval of players and parents. It was set up during the summer

after the constitutions of the Central West and Southern Ontario leagues were combined.

"Women's hockey has really revolved around tournament play," said Chris Higgins, select league convener and SWGHL executive member. "Historically, teams went into six, seven, eight tournaments a year and played in loose leagues that didn't mean much."

Women's hockey in Toronto developed a better calibre because it had meaningful leagues, he said, and teams outside a 50- to 75-kilometre radius of Toronto were excluded.

"Toronto plays better hockey all the time because of it," Higgins said.

League play outside of Toronto was best organized in the Hamilton area, he said, and there have been off-again, on-again leagues across southwestern Ontario. Teams from Windsor and Sarnia tended to play Michigan teams.

It was decided this year to establish the SWGHL to address the problem and try to raise skill levels through sustained competition.

The higher age levels began play at the beginning of October and the lower

age groups began after Thanksgiving.

Higgins is responsible for balancing the league. Teams that appear too strong will be moved up and those who are losing will be moved down.

Senior teams are not involved in the SWGHL.

Of 600 Devilette players registered this season, 168 are playing competitive. The rest are in the house league program.

Harper said registration has reached a plateau but expects the numbers to go up after the women's world championship in Mississauga in the spring. A satellite game between the United States and Finland will be played at Western's Thompson Arena.

Higgins said the establishment of girls' hockey programs in smaller centres around London is repatriating some of the girls who have been playing with the Devilettes and accounts partially for the registration plateau.

There are no boundary restrictions in female hockey.

The Devilette organization is again holding its annual tournament in February that will see more than 80 teams from Canada and the U.S.