

Icing PTSD: Hockey Remains 'A Remedy'

'It's a great opportunity for those fellas with PTSD to play with their buddies in front of family and friends'

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When former VFW Post 2146 Commander Bob Akins of Idaho Falls, Idaho, created the Veterans' Appreciation Hockey Game in 2006, the motive was personal.

As a Canadian native, Akins joined the U.S. Air Force in 1963 and served at Da Nang Air Base in Vietnam from July 1966 to July 1967 with the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing Squadron. After returning to the States, he found that playing hockey helped him cope with his own PTSD.

From his leisure play to coaching youth hockey teams in Idaho Falls, Akins understood the benefits of the game. But he wanted his fellow veterans to join him.

"I had played hockey for many years, so I figured I could get other veterans involved in playing when I became Post commander in 2006," Akins said. "I believed they would get the same kind of enjoyment from the game that I often got."

Since its inception in 2006, the Veterans' Appreciation Hockey Game has become a staple among the veteran community in Idaho Falls, running strong for 15 consecutive years, which includes this year's game played on Feb. 27, 2021.

Each year, Akins noted, the game continues to blossom relationships and a sense of camaraderie among local veterans in and around Idaho Falls.

"It's a great opportunity for those fellas with PTSD to play with their buddies in front of family and friends," said Akins, who at 82-years-old continues to play. "I know some of these guys go through stuff in their lives. I go through stuff myself, but this is as good a remedy as any to help us veterans unwind."

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The event is annually held at the Joe Marmo/Wayne Lehto Ice Arena at Tautphaus Park, an 85-foot-by-190-foot ice rink that Akins said he helped build. The arena was dedicated to Marmo and Lehto, both war veterans.

The Idaho Falls Parks & Recreation Department, along with support from VFW Post 2146 and Brady's Inc., a veteran-based business in Idaho Falls owned by VFW Life member Brad Brady, sponsored this year's game.

The teams were comprised of veterans and several active-duty members from the local Idaho Army National Guard. The 10-man teams each included a young goalie that volunteered on behalf of their veteran family member.

"Most of the skaters in the game are VFW and/or American Legion members," Akins added. "It's usually a pretty good group of us."

In standing with the annual tradition, Post 2146 incorporated its food drive, which generated more than 275 pounds of food at this year's event. Attendees and the local branch of Albertsons food store in Idaho Falls donated the food.

Akins and Post 2146 have already started working towards next year's event, which is slated for February 2022.