

Opinion | The Hamilton Indoor Games are cancelled. Possibly forever

Burst pipe at armoury, \$120,000 rental fee at arena means no competition this year.

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Runners whip around the bend at last year's Hamilton Indoor Games at the John Weir Foote Armoury. This year's event has been cancelled after a water main break at the facility and organizers say it might not come back.

Cathie Coward/The Hamilton Spectator



By [Scott Radley](#) Columnist

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A week from now, close to 1,000 young athletes should be racing around the track at the Hamilton Indoor Games, the way thousands before them have done nearly every year since the Model T car was invented.

But they won't be. And they might never be again.

A water main break at the John Weir Foote Armoury — where the event returned last February after decades at the city's downtown arena — has forced the [cancellation](#) of this year's event. And has thrown its future into serious doubt.

"I don't know if we can come back next year," says 91st Highlanders Athletic Association president Kevin Daley. "Sadly, we may have to call it quits from here."

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When FirstOntario Centre (now TD Coliseum) was shut down for renovations a couple years ago, a new home for the meet had to be found. After much searching, it was returned to the armoury, which had been home to the competition from 1908 to 1986.

Last year, competitors and fans [raved](#) about the new-old setup. The venue was intimate, had a historic feel and worked well. That made it a natural for a return this year.

But last week, Daley received an email from the Canadian Armed Forces saying the recent extreme cold weather had led to a water main break that had led to damage inside the building which couldn't be repaired in time to host the meet.

That's not a small obstacle for organizers.

Tom Roden is executive director of the 91st Highlanders Athletic Association. He's been involved in the meet since 1965. He says there aren't a lot of other places in town the track could fit. None, in fact.

Organizers have looked. Daley says as recently as last summer they'd asked if the vacant Bay store at Lime Ridge Mall could be used, but were told it's tied up.

They also reached out to TD Coliseum in the fall to see if a return could be worked out. An October email to Roden from OakView Group said the requested dates weren't available. On top of that, it said the daily rental rate going forward would be \$120,000 per day.

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Roden — who says he suspects they wouldn't ultimately have been charged that much — says prior to the renovation it had been \$20,000 for the entire event.

So with nowhere to go, the call was made to cancel this year's indoor games. Making it just the third time this has happened after they were shut down for the Second World War and COVID.

What makes this announcement so poignant isn't merely the fact that it's a historic event now teetering on the brink. It's the sheer volume of city residents who've participated in it over the decades.

Many of the athletes who competed last year were following in the footsteps of their parents and their parents' parents and *their* parents before them. Not to mention, some of the greatest track stars in the world.

Ben Johnson made his return from his Seoul-Olympics steroid ban at this competition. Jesse Owens ran here. Same with the entire 1996 gold medal 4 X 100 Canadian men's relay team. Go back further and Paavo Nurmi — the top track athlete of his time — was competing here in 1925.

Daley says his own son ([Myles Misener-Daley](#), who's been a [scholarship runner](#) at UCLA and a star on the international stage for Canada) had his breakthrough at this meet. And he points out that if you look closely at the record book, you'll see that the name of the midget 100-metre holder is some guy named Wayne Gretzky.

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There's a ton of history here. This year's event would've been meet No. 98. Everyone involved really wanted to [make it to 100](#).

Now getting there seems highly unlikely.

"I don't see us being revived for next year," Daley says.

First of all, a new track is desperately needed. The current one (that was once used in Maple Leaf Gardens for the indoor games there) is now roughly six decades old and is barely hanging on. Trouble is, a new one will cost something in the neighbourhood of \$2.5 million.

Even if one could be purchased, organizers would have to find a place to use it. The past few years have shown that's not easy.

Then there's the issue of the volunteers. After spending endless hours putting everything together for next week, this cancellation has been excruciating.

"It's kind of frustrating," Roden says.

Asking them to do it again would be asking a lot.

One solution would be a permanent new indoor facility, which members of the local track community have been after for years. There's been discussion about a multi-sport venue (including a track) at Mohawk Sports Park for ages.

Trouble is, the city doesn't have money for such a thing. Anyone who's been paying attention to the ongoing budget process knows this. It would have to come primarily from higher levels of government and private investment.

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So far, that's not arrived.

Which means this annual tradition, that dates back to the year "Anne of Green Gables" was first published and the year before Albert Grey commissioned the Grey Cup, appears to be on its deathbed. Which is too bad.

"It's a sad time," Daley says.