



# On Golden Ponds

by Steve Rushin

**I**F YOU'VE ever played goalie on a frozen lake—your blocker made from wood paneling duct-taped to an oven mitt, your Stanley Cup an empty Cool Whip tub wrapped in aluminum foil—you'd find the U.S. Pond Hockey Championships in Minneapolis perfect in every detail, except that parkas aren't used for the goalposts. "That wasn't practical," says tournament founder Fred Haberman, "because the pucks get buried in the jackets, and then..." And then a 15-minute argument ensues.

Also, there are no goalies in this four-on-four tournament, whose 116 teams this year includes NHL alumni, New York City firemen and slobs with smiles like half-emptied ice cube trays. Every one of these players was required between games to shovel one of the 25 rinks set up on Lake Calhoun. This fleet of human Zambonis included Brian Bellows, who amassed 1,022 points in an NHL career that included 10 seasons in Minnesota, where he often stunned locals by playing in pickup pond games between his North Stars games. "I still love it," says Bellows. "It takes you right back to being a kid."

As a kid Mike Crowley played on his friend's backyard pond in Bloomington, Minn., so he knows hockey on a pond beats hockey at The Pond, home of the Anaheim Mighty Ducks, for whom Crowley played for three seasons after starring at the University of Minnesota, where he was a two-time Hobey Baker finalist. "The pond is where I learned my skills," says Crowley. On the pond an errant pass could glide for half a mile, a strong incentive to be accurate.

Minnesotans so esteem pond-hockey skills that a former governor, the current governor and the mayors of Minneapolis and St. Paul all competed—and talked trash—on Calhoun last weekend. "They play hockey like they play politics," Governor Tim Pawlenty said of the mayors. "They're a couple of hacks."

But more than for the pros and pols, the first-ever U.S. Pond Hockey Championships were for everyone who has ever stood impatiently on a snowbank, waiting to get in a game. The players came from every region of the country. There were reunited college teammates from Amherst who had scattered to Los Angeles and Chicago and Jackson Hole, Wyo., where John Frechette, 27, plays in a beer league and can identify every species of pickup player. "There's always one guy who thinks he's Guy Lafleur," says Frechette, who—as coach of the Mass Holes—resembled an alfresco Al Arbour.

Fans spoke reverently of pickup legends like Dave Shute, whose 15 minor league seasons in places like Medicine Hat and Muskegon have enhanced his reputation



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as "the Earl Manigault of pond hockey," as one spectator put it, citing the near-mythic figure of New York City playground basketball.

The analogy is apt. "Minneapolis is to pickup hockey what Harlem is to pickup basketball," says Haberman, a 39-year-old Minnesota marketing executive whose backyard bleeds into Minnehaha Creek, on which he has a rink. It follows the contours of the waterway, a serpentine Saddle dome that's roughly 100 yards long but only 15 yards wide, giving a stickhandler just one chance to deke a defender.

Says Haberman of his tournament, "I look at this as the backyard writ large." He wants Lake Calhoun to be for pond hockey what Sturgis, S.D., is for Harley-Davidsons—the site of an annual, almost illicit celebration. And so on Calhoun last weekend, spectators pulled children on sleds, dogs gamboled off leashes, a lone man rode his bicycle across the lake. If Currier & Ives had been paired defensemen, this would have been their scene. As Haberman said, his lungs full of bracing air, "It's almost a spiritual feeling out there."

And everywhere was a babel of hockey sweaters: A black woman wore a vintage Gretzky Oilers jersey. Six guys in CCCP shirts wore their names in Cyrillic on their backs. A lone Swede wandered among the rinks in a yellow-and-blue sweater that said SVERIGE. *Pond* rhymes with *bond*.

Ask Dave Bidini, a guitarist for the Canadian rock band the Rheostatics and author of *Tropic of Hockey*, in which he discovers the outdoor game in the unlikely places, including Mongolia. There his host was a kindly emissary named Pujee, who took Bidini to an outdoor rink in Ulan Bator. "I remember after the face-off getting the puck behind our own net and thinking, Man, I am skating down a rink in the Gobi Desert. This is the greatest moment of my life!" says Bidini. "And then Pujee hit me. He came out of nowhere and laid me out flat in a snowbank, dazed me."

On Sunday the Almost Forty club won the Pond Hockey title and its apposite trophy, the Golden Shovel. But checking is barred from this tournament, and the only concussive force issued from an air horn, calling a mournful halt to games that nobody wanted to end. □



LeadingOff

## Cold Faithful

On 25 rinks marked off on frozen Lake Calhoun in Minneapolis, 116 teams—which included former NHL players and New York City firemen—competed last weekend at the first U.S. Pond Hockey Championships (page 2). The winners of the three divisions (open, women's and senior) had their names etched into the Golden Shovel.

*Photograph by Eric Miller/EPA*



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