



The Sporting Life

5,6, Pickup Sticks

Hockey at its best is a cool, clear night, an outdoor rink, and a gaggle of strangers

by Daniel Sanger
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Winter, the most depleting of seasons, can arrive any number of ways, some disarmingly pleasant. The most enchanting beginning is with a snowflake, then another, drifting down outside the classroom/office/kitchen window just about the time the mid-afternoon doldrums are kicking in. As daylight dwindles, the scattered snowflakes become a full-on storm, with drifts forming, cars spinning and skidding, and a rare euphoria in the air.

Those who didn't catch the morning's forecast, or who just failed to process it, slide and skate their way home in loafers and pumps, grinning at perfect strangers all the way. Meanwhile, those who left the house prepared march triumphantly through a world gone wild, but one from which they'll emerge unscathed thanks to their Sorels and parkas. The kids among us—male or female, child or long past—fire off a few snowballs. We know that, contrary to all logic, the first throws of the year will be the most accurate and that we'll nail, no problem, the stop sign at the corner, the telephone pole across the street, the maple two houses down.

Maybe the snow slacks off by ten or eleven, when it's time to take the dog out or grab some milk for the morning. Maybe it continues deep into the night, leaving a foot or more of beautiful, blinding whiteness for first light.

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Either way the world is transformed, softened, and, it seems, warmed up by all the little flakes rubbing against each other as they fell. The grey glum of late autumn is done with, even if all the snow does melt away by the weekend.

That's the storybook start to winter, and, objectively, a very pleasant way for it to announce its arrival. But for people like me, it's the absolute worst way winter can begin.

The best way involves cold—lots of it—and cold alone, no snow, coming down like a hammer and not going anywhere, as soon after Halloween as possible. That means ponds and lakes freeze over like sheets of glass, the municipal parks departments begin getting the outdoor rinks in shape, and, sooner rather than later, it becomes possible to enjoy that most sublime of Canadian activities: open-air, pickup hockey.

Hockey in general has become a flame cliché in Canada. The tall foreheads at the CBC feel the country needs some national healing? Commission a unifying special or, better yet, a series. The prime minister's handlers decide he needs some humanizing? Organize a photo op of him tying up little Chad's skates. Tim Hortons wants to pitch a new soup-and-sandwich combo? Wal-Mart wants to promote a new line of kids wear made in Burmese sweatshops? The Royal Bank wants to justify the billion or so it made in profit last week? Marketing's automatic reflex: wheel out a hockey backdrop.

The game in all its guises is invoked, the more sentimentally the better: street hockey with a tennis ball on Happy Valley Crescent; Fred, Ed, Ted, and the boys and their beer league; the future superstar, age two, ankle-skating around the backyard rink.

At the same time, our practical notion of hockey—the money, time, and mental energy we spend on it—increasingly revolves around the game as played in organized leagues, whether by the pros in the NHL or the Atoms of the Kirkland Lake Minor Hockey League: inside an arena, inside cum-

bersome equipment, most of the players on the bench most of the time, behind which a pacing, anxious coach barks out orders, behind whom one or more idiot fans or parents take it way, way too seriously. The players are said to be *playing* hockey, but judging by the limited laughter and smiling, there is little play involved. Rather, organized hockey is about following instructions, executing set plays, confronting opponents, scoring, and winning.



Open-air pickup hockey on the other hand, is a game of endless variety, spontaneity, adaptation, and unspoken rituals. With no coaches telling players what to do and no prescribed way to play, it lends itself to an often beautiful creativity. With no referees and few hard-and-fast rules, it insists upon self-regulation and, in so doing, encourages accommodation and tolerance. Pickup hockey is always unpredictable and almost always instructive, even edifying, in a life-lessons kind of way. And as social interaction, it's unique: virtually no other activity involves strangers gathering in a public place, with no prior organization or commercial exchange, and engaging in a pleasurable pursuit together. Playing.

A typical evening of pickup hockey in Montreal: coming home from work or school, the thought occurs that conditions are ideal. It's not a case of remembering that it's Monday and you and your buddies have ice reserved at 11:05 p.m. at a rink in suburban Boisbriand or Brossard. Instead, you simply

note that there's no sign of snow and it's not so bitterly cold that your toes will get frostbitten. So you go home and change your plans—cancel the movie, convince your girlfriend that there'll always be another parent-teacher night (and that, yes, she can, actually, record *Deadwood* for you). Until suppertime, the local rink will be aswarm with the after-school crowd, so you do other chores, perhaps making dinner for the family in order to earn the evening pass. Finally, seven, seven-thirtyish, you slip out and head to the rink, skates on stick, stick over shoulder, puck in pocket.

Even if it's ten blocks away and the rink lights are turned off at ten, you walk—it seems somehow sacrilegious to drive—the snow crunching under your boots. On the way, you pull your stick off your shoulder to fire a small chunk of ice into a snow bank or across the street. As the rink comes into view, you squint to see if there's a game going on. It's impossible to know. One night, you'll be alone, or virtually. The next—same temperature, same high-pressure system making for a similarly perfect, starry winter night—there'll not only be a six-a-side match with three subs per team in full swing, but also a more casual spillover game taking place in the dark on the adjacent, unlighted pleasure-skating rink.

Still, usually, if your timing's right, people will just be beginning to congregate. Some of the faces might be familiar. Maybe the guy you call the Bumblebee because of the way he defies the laws of physics with his split-second stops, starts, and turns. With any luck, the bright-eyed, sweet Laurence—the best woman player to frequent the rink—will show too. You never see enough of her. Then there are the archetypes: as often as not, there will be a really big—as in fat—guy who plays like a cat, all deft passes and slick, minimal manoeuvres and very little actual skating. But one of the best things is that the players will never be the same from one evening to the next.

In the changing room, one or two will be putting on their skates, but there

is little chatter—at most a “ça va bien?,” a “la glace a l'air bonne,” or a “crisse, mes patins sont plus serrés que jamais.” Everyone is eager to join the four or five others already on the ice, busy practising their shots, playing hog, or otherwise waiting for a game to begin.

Once the magic number—six if people are particularly impatient, more often eight—has been reached, someone will corral whoever is on the rink to gather at centre ice and throw their sticks into a pile. Then the youngest—universally accepted as the least devious (as well as he to whom menial tasks are assigned)—drops to his knees and gathers the sticks in front of him. Closing his eyes or making a show of looking above or off to the side, he then throws a stick toward one net with his right hand while throwing another toward the other net with his left. In this way, teams are drawn.

If someone is hung up on formalities, there'll be a faceoff. More often, a player on one team will just slide the game puck over to someone on the other team as the signal to start playing. The first minutes tend to be chaotic and

confused, as players figure out who exactly their teammates are, who is playing where, and who is worth passing to—all the while skating too hard, too fast because it feels so good to be out on the ice again.

Gradually, the game evens out and hits its stride. Coordinated rushes explode out of own zones as if practised for months. Rinkwide passes land on the blades they were intended for as if sent FedEx. Shots wend their way through impossible forests of skates and sticks as if pulled by an invisible thread.

Some nights, the nights when the rink is dominated by eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds blessed with endless cardio and strong hockey skills, it will be almost forbiddingly fast. Other nights, when the mix is, well, more mixed—an eleven-year-old tagging along behind his older brother and his buddies, a few women in figure skates, maybe another not-so-young dad out on evening leave, perhaps a guy who is even older, creaking around for what is clearly the first time in years—it will be, if anything, too slow.

But usually a game will be both fast and slow. In the unwritten code of pick-

up hockey, democracy is primordial: anyone who shows up gets to play. If a player isn't very good, the game might whirl around them at a dizzying speed. But once they pick up a loose puck or are fed a pass, the game will decelerate abruptly. They'll be allowed to skate a little, take a shot, or make a pass themselves. It's a nurturing gesture one wouldn't expect from a group of mostly young men, and it suggests that their own first forays onto the intimidating ice to play with the big kids are still fresh in their memories. And if someone is so unschooled in rink etiquette as to strip the weaker player of the puck as soon as he gets it, that person—typically a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old hotshot—will usually have the puck unceremoniously stripped from him, often by his own teammate, and see it returned to the weaker player.

These accommodations, coupled with constantly changing lineups as new players come and winded players go and trades are made to even out teams in terms of strength and number, mean that nobody takes the score seriously, if they bother keeping track of it at all. It is thus understood that all goals are not equal—players will pass up an easy tap-in and instead try an elegant deke or spinarama, a drop pass, or a tic-tac-toe. In this way, pickup is more about the beauty of hockey than any final result.

And if no one takes the score seriously, no one takes the game too seriously either. This makes the hockey more imaginative and the whole atmosphere at the rink less competitive and more celebratory—of the sport, of winter, of the country, of the culture.

Often, midway through a game, there'll be a pause. No buzzer or whistle will sound, no announcement will be made. It will just happen, after a goal or when the puck has flown out of the rink and whoever shot it is digging through the snow to find it. During such a break, some people will hoist themselves up to sit on the boards while others will stand about steaming in the night air. Some will stare down at the ice or gaze at the lights in the houses and apartments bordering the park. Others will small-talk, strangers an hour ago and strangers in an hour's



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time but partners in the same enterprise now. The lull allows everyone to catch their breath and affords us a moment's reflection—to worship the game, the night, our lives, and our good fortune in bringing them all together.

All this is not to idealize the game of pickup hockey, at least not unduly. Tempers do flare, blood does get spilled. Unlike organized hockey, however, rarely does the blood follow the anger. When someone loses his temper—about every half-dozen games or so and as the result of a cheap shot or a bad day, or perhaps of being embarrassed once too often by that dipsy-doodling fourteen-year-old who hasn't yet learned how to humiliate in a graceful, self-effacing manner—the responsibility for keeping things under control is everyone's. Usually, through good-natured chiding, the collective admonishes whoever is deemed to be out of line. It's not as if a meeting is held, and the group rarely divides along team lines. Instead, players who have an opinion say their piece, and invariably things work out. There's very occasionally pushing and shoving—testosterone, after all, is abundant—but never, in countless excursions to the rink over three decades, have I witnessed a real fight, let alone a brawl. In my three or four years playing serious organized hockey (during the Broad Street Bullies era), brawls were a regular feature.

The collective also does its thing to ensure that there is no reckless raising of the puck. That, after all, is what usually leads to blood. Even if it flows very rarely, accidents do happen. Several years ago, I made the same guy bleed twice in the same evening. After the second incident, caused by a deflected puck, we got the message and called it a night. The only anger expressed was at having an otherwise perfect night ruined.

In Montreal, the night begins to end when the rink worker walks onto the ice and pushes the nets toward the lamppost to which they will be shackled until the next day. This is usually done contritely. The rink worker, male or fe-

male, is often a player, or, if not, a fan, and knows that the game is generally at its best just before closing. The young kids and quarter-milers have gone home, the creakiness and cobwebs have been shaken out, and players have built a rapport, a relationship, solid if fleeting, with their teammates.



They'll know to pick on the give-and-go, be ready for the drop pass, cover the net for the defenceman with a taste for rinklong rushes.

The nets gone, most call it a night. Whereas before the game, the change room was an entirely functional place, now it is transformed. Having played together, we're all pals. We talk about the game, tools of the trade, anything that comes to mind.

"*Tes Bauers—sont-ils pas pire?*" one guy will ask.

"*Ils n'sont pas pas pire—ils sont d'la marte,*" comes the reply.

Eventually, though, the rinkie will want to shut down the shack, and we'll head home, the night clearer, the atmosphere less full of static than two or three hours earlier. By then the big lights will have been switched off. Still, especially if it's late in the season, a hard core will sometimes play on, shadows dashing across the ice, less visible than audible by the skates cutting dryly into the ice, the puck banging against the boards.

Like corn on the cob, pickup hockey has to be gorged on when it's available, because it won't be around long.

The season is short and fickle. A thaw, a bit of rain, or a big dump of snow can mess things up for days. If it happens late enough in the season, it might just spell the end of the season. In this way, the need to fill up on pickup grows toward the end of February and the beginning of March, when the ice along the south- and west-facing boards gets rotten and mushy in the day and freezes unevenly at night. Then those of us with the bug are out there as often as possible, neglecting family, work, school if need be, desperate to get our dose before the gravel, asphalt, or grass starts poking through the ice and the long, long, much-too-long off-season begins.

Winter began perfectly in central Canada in both 2002 and 2003. The first year we were living in Toronto, a city which, in my books, cemented its place as a bastion of civility and clear thinking by constructing dozens of refrigerated outdoor rinks in the 1950s and 1960s, thus insulating to a very large degree pickup hockey from the vicissitudes of the weather.

In 2002, however, no refrigeration was necessary: the cold arrived, as if ordered off eBay, the moment November ended. After a day or two, my brother determined that Grenadier Pond would be skateable. So he collected some sticks and a few pucks, pulled the Tacks out of the basement, picked up his two sons after school, phoned me, and we all headed west to High Park. The pond was a perfect mirror, allowing for the most exquisite skating imaginable, even if the ice was no more than seven or eight centimetres thick and creaked and groaned as we glided across it. We weren't entirely imprudent—the kids were there to keep us sensible—and we stuck close to shore, ending the game when the last puck slid too far out to be retrieved. After that, we just skated around looking at the leaves and the little sardine-like fish—smelt I think—frozen in the ice.

The cold kept up that week, and Richard, Malcolm, and Louis hit the pond every day, my stepson, Ariel, and I join-

ing them two or three times. Each outing, the ice was a little thicker and we could venture farther from the shore. By Saturday, the whole pond was skateable, and others had begun to follow our lead. A glorious game of pickup, the kind with kids, adults, and the occasional overexcited golden retriever, broke out about 11 a.m. and continued until dusk. At one point the Toronto Police Marine Unit (there is such a thing) drove their SUV down to the edge of the pond and tried to spoil the fun. Eventually, they admitted they had no authority to kick us off, but Malcolm, rebel that he isn't, refused to keep his skates on.

A week or so later, Toronto's soggy winter weather returned and messed up the pond, but by then the switches had been thrown on the city's refrigerated rinks so the outdoor hockey continued. (Alas, Toronto isn't the pickup mecca that it might be: many of its outdoor rinks are reserved for permit play most evenings. And during those few hours when it is "open hockey," players descend in such numbers that a reasonable game is often impossible.)

By December 2003 we were back in Montreal, and the hammer came down on the 2nd. It was a real cold—mean daily temperature of about -10°C . Even then, without my brother around to spur me on, it took me almost the entire week to realize that where Toronto has Grenadier Pond and Ottawa the Canal, at the top of Mount Royal, Montreal has Beaver Lake. Finally, after phoning almost everyone I knew, I had drafted enough players and we made the trek up the mountain. Again, it was perfect, at least for a while. Then one of my best friend's plastic Micron skates—he'd had them since we first met in the mid-1980s—literally broke into pieces. Shortly afterward, the first fast-falling flakes of what would be a foot of snow began to descend. That was that.

Still, that winter and the next turned out to be superb seasons of pickup in Montreal, with a minimum of climatic interruptions before spring finally arrived when it's supposed to and not before: in mid- to late March. I had an ever-eager companion in Ariel, and often, when we were feeling like a change of scenery, when our regular

rink in Outremont was feeling just a little old and bourgeois, we'd pile our skates and sticks into the Ford Escort (cognizant of the sacrilege) and head northeast or southwest and find a game in Petite-Patrie or Saint-Henri.

One of those years, we set ourselves the challenge of never losing if we ended up playing on the same team together and actually pulled it off (not that anyone was taking it seriously, of course). At thirteen and fourteen years old those winters, Ariel was a long, skinny joy to watch, his play exponentially more creative, more playful, than for his hard-luck school team. And even if pickup didn't come with all the same perks—the team sweaters

and bags, the trips to Toronto where the team stayed in a hotel with buffet meals—and even after taking a puck in the face in a game in Saint-Henri (lots of blood, no stitches), Ariel eventually decided to give up organized hockey. The boy has a very cultivated sense of pleasure, and it just became clear to him: if playing hockey is about having fun, pickup has no competition. ❁

Montreal journalist and author Daniel Sanger shoots right.

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