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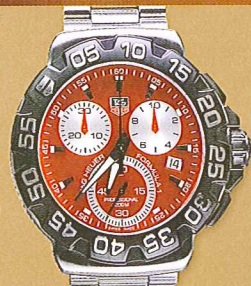
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by Bryant Urstadt

OUT THERE

The Missing Rink

Welcome to the U.S. Pond Hockey Championships, where the game is pure, the ice is dangerously uneven, and the beer is very, very cold

WE'D HAD DREAMS of winning the 2008 U.S. Pond Hockey Championships, but now we just wanted to live. It was January in Minneapolis, 8:30 A.M. on a Friday, and the wind-chill was hovering at 17 below, with a sharp breeze sending snow dust billowing over the surface of the frozen lake.

The cold was actually the least of our problems. We were playing the first of a terrifying roster of teams, including, in our second game, last year's champions, a group of hardened locals called the Whiskey Bandits; rumor had it they were drunk when they'd signed up. One of my teammates, Pete Stoddard, lives near Minneapolis and had heard a lot about the Bandits. He described their strengths this way: "The thing about them is that they are young and they are talented."

So we had that to look forward to. At the moment, though, we were standing on the ice, eyeing our first opponents. They were called the Jets, and they were a group of friends from Winnipeg, Manitoba. We were in the open division, and you never quite knew who was going to show up. There were also divisions for seniors, women, and more casual players. The Jets looked serious, with matching jerseys and black helmets.

The only thing that matched about us was the six green practice jerseys I'd ordered online the week before. We called ourselves the Green



Mountain Boys, because four of us play in Vermont. We're all in our thirties and forties, and this was our first time competing together in a real tournament. It would have been nice to draw one of the other duffer teams from a non-hockey place like St. Louis or California, or maybe the Minnesota squad named Team Fat. But as with youth and talent, luck was not on our side. We also lacked size, speed, and, perhaps most important, experience.

Games were forming on 24 other rinks set up on the massive surface of Lake Nokomis, on the southern outskirts of Minneapolis. You could see the players in the distance—silhouettes gliding around, steam from their breath rising, the ice stretching out behind them toward trees half a mile away, the morning sun brilliant but useless.

On our rink, ice was forming on the goatee of my teammate Ian Bartrum. My four days of stubble, which I'd sprouted in a panic when I saw that it might go down to minus 20, was doing nothing against the cold. Clem Powers, another teammate, was taking a similar beating; his face was bright red. Peter Otto, the last of the Vermont four, stood still and quiet. He had good reason: He'd forgotten his stick. It was in his living room in Salem, Oregon, and he was holding Clem's backup stick, a wooden number Clem had scored used at a sale where they were going

two for \$12. Worse, Peter had dislocated his shoulder in a game three months ago and hadn't been playing.

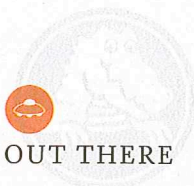
The referee, a woman bundled in infinite layers, called us over and explained the rules. We listened carefully.

"Na wanna, ha na," she said, then added, "ony been go... Aye aye?"

That was the gist of it. It was hard to hear her through her scarf, which was wrapped over her balaclava, which was covered by her hood, but we nodded anyway. Pond hockey doesn't really have any rules, other than teams of four try to put the puck in the goal, a six-foot-wide wooden box that's only four inches tall and lies flat against the ice, with two foot-long slots on the front, one on each end, where you can sneak in a shot. You can't score from more than halfway across the ice, and you can't stand in front of the goal. If there's a dispute, the ref is likely to yell something like "It's pond hockey, boys! You figure it out!"

THE UNITED STATES isn't much of a hockey nation, and that's how most hardcore American fans prefer it. It's like how a guy from New Orleans might feel about crawfish. He loves them, but that doesn't mean he wants to see them on the dollar menu at McDonald's.

Among the hockey cognoscenti, however,



OUT THERE

the devotion runs deep, and there definitely seems to be some sort of pond-hockey mania going on. One measure: All 160 spots in the open division of the 2008 U.S. Pond Hockey Championships (USPHC) were filled a day after registration opened the previous October.

The USPHC, inaugurated in 2006, is the premier tournament in the country, attracting some of the most talented players in North America. Dozens of other tournaments have popped up in places like Lake Placid, New York, and Eagle River, Wisconsin. Not surprisingly, pond hockey's biggest tournaments are in Canada. Founded in 2002, the World Pond Hockey Championship, in Plaster Rock, New Brunswick, hosts 120 teams from all over the world. The Canadian National Pond Hockey Championships, in Muskoka, Ontario, is in its third year and now fields 272 teams who play more than 700 games.

In both countries, the appeal is the same: Hockey is better outside. *Pond Hockey*, a doc-

umentary released on DVD this fall by Minnesota filmmaker Tommy Haines, argues that the outdoor game—with its emphasis on skill and speed over size—is true hockey. USPHC founder Fred Haberman certainly agrees. He likes to describe pond hockey as “hockey the way nature intended.”

I met Haberman right after the Jets pummeled us 12–3. He was standing on a deck outside the beer tent, a structure built on a temporary scaffold over the beach fronting Lake Nokomis. Before him were the 25 rinks, 150 by 75 feet, which he and about 100 volunteers had been working on all week, scraping, shoveling, and watering them down. Haberman, 42, is a big, tall guy with a neat red beard, and for most of the weekend he wore a watch cap with the USPHC logo stitched on it. He runs a PR company in Minneapolis that represents Volvo and other national brands. (Our teammate Pete Stoddard works for him.)

“How’s this for a midlife crisis?” Haberman

asked. “Because that’s basically how it started.”

Haberman spent his childhood playing hockey on ponds in Wisconsin. He thought the scene there was pretty good, until he moved to Minnesota when he was 23. He likes to draw an analogy between pond hockey in Minnesota and pickup basketball in Harlem, and admits to putting together the USPHC after being inspired by Canadian pond tournaments. Haberman copies their game times, with two 15-minute periods and a five-minute halftime break (NHL games have three 20-minute periods), and speeds up the pace by adding boards around each rink, so the puck keeps moving rather than getting lost in snowbanks. “It seemed like we ought to have a U.S. version,” he says. “I just had no idea how much work it would be.”

From day one, his tournament has attracted ex-NHLers, college players of the first rank, and career minor-leaguers. Phil Housley and Brad Bombardir played this year on a team called RBC Dain Rauscher, after its sponsor.

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OUT THERE

Housley, 44, is one of the legends of American hockey, an all-time great defenseman who played for the Buffalo Sabres and the Calgary Flames before retiring in 2003. Bombardir, 36, played for seven seasons in the NHL, most of them for the Minnesota Wild.

"That's one of the great things about pond hockey," says Haberman. "You might play a kid and you might play a legend. It doesn't matter. You just play!"

FOR OUR SECOND GAME, we played Team Wood. They had matching helmets in a reflective yellow and wore weird-looking maroon pants.

"Those are Goldsworthy helmets," said Pete Stoddart. "And they've got Cooperalls!" The Goldsworthy helmet is a strange padded contraption that was worn by Bill Goldsworthy when he played in the seventies for the Minnesota North Stars. Cooperalls are full-length padded pants that were introduced, jeered at, and quickly retired sometime in the eighties; they remain the AMC Pacer of hockey, beloved for their awesome ineptitude.

Team Wood played angry. They were young and cocky and quick, and they muscled us off

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the puck, pounding dangerously hard shots down the center of the ice. The shots were dangerous because pond ice features hills and valleys and crevices. One puck hit a crack, popped up, and winged Ian in the shoulder, leaving a purple bruise. We lost something like 12-1.

After our drubbing, we filed off the ice, stunned. At the corner of the rink, we ran into a huge friendly-uncle type with a gray beard, glasses, and a fur-lined parka. "You guys just played the former high school state champions!" he told us, giggling. "That was the Holy Angels team. They won it all in 2002!"

"Maybe we should play in Arizona next year," said Peter Otto.

"Or maybe there's a tournament in Belize," said Ian.

Back in the beer tent, the scene was one of Dickensian cheer, with guys in their base layers sharing stories about their games. There were many women, too; some were spectators and some were playing.

"I just love how the girls look in the cold, with their woolly hats and their hair all falling over their parkas and their flush faces," said Peter Otto, surveying it all.

In a way, Peter was the reason I was here. Along with Clem, Ian, and me, he's a regular at a New Year's Day game of pickup hockey that we've held with family and friends at a nameless pond in central Vermont for about 15 years. I remember, about nine years ago, watching Peter, who was skating at a good clip, lean down to scoop up a bouncing puck with his glove, and then drop it gently in front of his stick as he continued on. He did it with such ease that I had to learn how to do it, too. I'd skated a fair amount, but I'd never played organized hockey. So I started an apprenticeship of clinics and late-night games. Now my game is like Microsoft Windows: Usually it works all right, but from time to time there's a sudden, unexpected crash.

Our New Year's game waxes and wanes from about ten in the morning to nearly five, although we've gone later, with help from glowing pucks and spotlights. It's the highlight of my year, and I think of theirs, too. We talk about the previous game throughout the

winter and spring. Around July 1, we start to talk about next year.

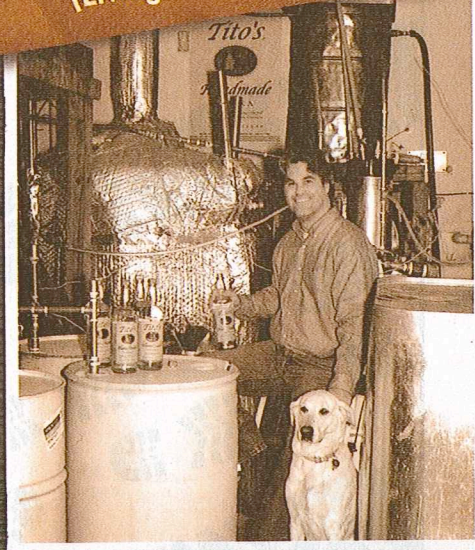
Pond hockey is similar to ice fishing in its ratio of convenience to reward. Prepping a pond can be grueling. In Vermont, for hours at a time, we've shoveled wet snow that weighed 15 pounds a scoop. We've spent days trying to figure out how to improve nature's ice. One of my cousins, Randy Leavitt, built a crude but highly effective Zamboni out of a 50-gallon drum. He laid it on a wheeled cart and attached a spigot to the back, which fed out to an old maple-syruping hose full of drilled holes. You'd fill the drum with water and skid it around on the ice.

But pond prep mainly means shoveling, so we understood exactly why the award granted to the winner of the U.S. Pond Hockey Championships is a gigantic golden shovel.

AT THE USPHC, strange uniforms were common. There was a team called the Party Posse that had taped extra-tall party hats

Hi. I'm Tito.

(Living the American Dream)



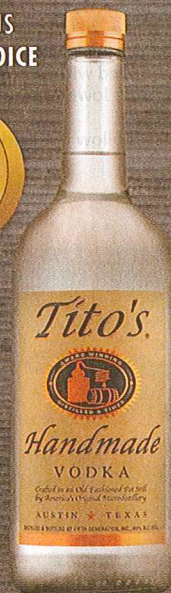
I saw micro-breweries and boutique wineries and thought the next step was a micro-distillery, going back to handcrafted techniques. I may have been self-taught and a little ahead of my time (and my credit cards), but fifteen years later, Tito's Handmade Vodka is an overnight success.

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with streamers to their helmets. There were Maxwell's Demons, made up of grad students from the University of Minnesota. "Maxwell's Demon," they explained, was a thought experiment in thermodynamics proposed by Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell. Never mind the details. The team wore matching tweed jackets with numbers sewn on back. They didn't look like they'd played since childhood. There was also a team in red-and-black flannel hunting jackets. They were pretty good.

On Saturday morning, with the temperature at minus 14, we played our third game against the KARE-11 All-Stars, a group made up of employees from a local television station. They wore plain white uniforms, and some of them were in their forties. Like us, they'd lost their first two games, and we thought we just might take them. We played well and led 6-2 early in the second period. But we got greedy for more goals and forgot to keep a guy back on defense. The All-Stars put in seven quick goals before we came to our senses, and then, in the last minute, with the game tied 10-10, they scored off a long pass.

That afternoon, the Wiskey Bandits creamed us, racking up ten goals in the first half and eliminating us from the tournament. Still, I managed an impressive goal. About two minutes into the second half, I took a pass from Peter Otto and, as two Bandits closed in on me, cut right and took a long wrist shot. It sailed into the little opening some 50 feet away. We were too tired and overwhelmed to really celebrate.

After the game, we were in dire need of an ego-salving beer. There were three taps in the tent, with women in referee jerseys pouring a very tasty local ale, and the brews powered our upbeat postgame analysis: If we had stuck to the 1-2-1 formation, we all agreed, we could have beaten those newscasters. But nobody at this event took their losses too hard, as I discovered when I bumped into a friend of a friend from New York.

"How did you do?" I asked.
"We lost," he said, brightly. "To Phil Housley!"

A little later, a team of Canadians found a spot next to us. They had won the 2007-08 Canadian championships, and Haberman had invited them down as special guests. One of them, a buzz-cut thirty-something named Tighe, started chatting with Ian about the high quality of play here at the U.S. championships. A few minutes later, Tighe looked at his watch and said, "Game time. Gotta go." He

took out his upper front teeth, put them in a special box, stowed the box in his bag, and clomped out on his skates.

SUNDAY WAS a relatively warm three below zero, and we simply bundled up and went out to watch the playoffs and finals. The cold of the last couple of days had resulted in far fewer spectators than originally predicted. In 2007, nearly 20,000 people had shown up to watch, but this year, media warned citizens to stay inside. Still, the reporters ignored their own advice: Local TV stations started filming weather segments on the ice, with anchors chuckling about the loonies on the pond.

Many of the fans did look a bit unusual. There were a number of enormous snowmobile suits, in colors like olive camouflage and safety orange. There were a variety of dead animals on people's heads: Some looked roughly like hats; many looked like something that just decided to winter there. One spectator got drilled in the side of the knee by a wandering pass and hobbled off like Ahab.

Among the players, there were a number of bloody noses and cut lips. One game in the senior division was marked by nearly constant pushing and shoving—a bunch of ex-Princeton players were going up against some aging former Olympians—and it devolved into a bona fide fight at the end, though the gloves were never dropped, it being too cold.

The finals were played in front of the beer tent and featured the Bandits and a team sponsored by a local builder, Wright Homes. Wright had a secret weapon, a minor-league veteran named Dave "Shuter" Shute. He played with a jerky, hopped-up style and wore a helmet that looked like it had been assembled from a pair of old football pads. He dashed around the goal like a squirrel and put enough pucks in to defeat the Bandits 8-4.

In the final moments of the weekend, Haberman, his right arm in a sling thanks to a broken wrist he'd suffered in a game on Saturday, awarded the Golden Shovel to Wright Homes. Shuter, looking like a delighted kid who'd built his own space suit, babbled into the cameras about the cult of hockey. The Wright players, one by one, skated stately and solemn circuits of the rink, pushing along the golden shovel in a mockery of the ceremonial tours with the Stanley Cup.

It was all very ridiculous, and beautiful, and I was already thinking about next year.

MANHATTAN-BASED BRYANT URSTADT WROTE ABOUT SATELLITE RADIO IN JUNE.