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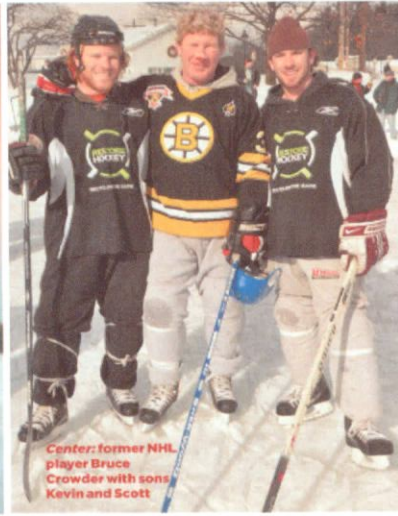
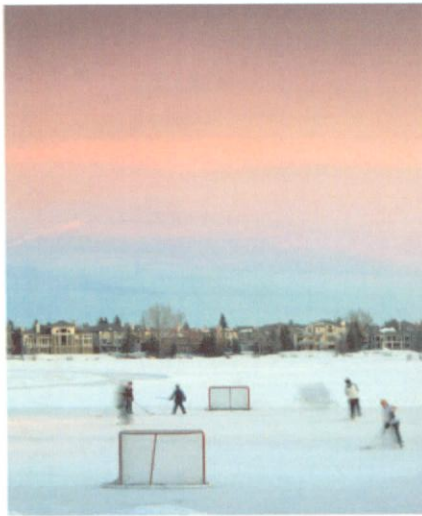
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EXPLORE / ADVENTURE

JANUARY, 2012

On Frozen Pond

Brion O'Connor



Center: former NHL player Bruce Crowder with sons Kevin and Scott

PHOTOS (FROM LEFT) BY ANDREW PENNER/GETTY AND STEVE SALFANO/COURTESY OF POND HOCKEY CLASSIC

Ben Smith, the former USA Olympic women's hockey coach, is convinced that hockey pucks are imbued with magical powers.

"It's unbelievable," says Smith, who grew up playing on the frozen quarries of Cape Ann, Massachusetts. "Players will chase after a puck anywhere, no matter how exhausted they are."

Still, any supernatural qualities a puck might possess are bound inextricably to the exquisite element of ice. Sturdy enough to support an 18-wheeler, yet also able to accommodate the slicing edge of a tempered steel skate blade, ice can have an almost infinite variety of textures, from sandpaper snow to diamond hard. At its best, ice is as smooth as glass, offering no resistance to a skittering six-ounce puck and allowing skaters to fly.

"We'd play for hours and hours," says Boston College hockey coach Jerry York, 66. "People have that in other parts of the country with baseball or basketball. But here it was a New England tradition, getting dropped off at a pond and just playing hockey."

Pond ice gave rise to this rugged sport, long before the advent of refrigeration or Zambonis. It's pond ice that courses through the veins of any player who squeezes on a pair of skates while sitting on a rickety bench, desperately trying to thaw numb fingertips, breath heavy with frost. Players can't wait to get on the ice for the sole purpose of pursuing a puck — and perhaps, in a moment of unrivaled joy, corralling it long enough to score a goal.

"People are coming back to enjoying being outside, just the pure pleasure of being out there, in a game, where you can lace them up and skate forever," says Bill Matthews, former rector at the St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire. The school is believed to be the site of the

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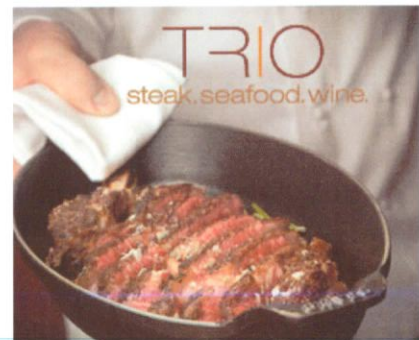
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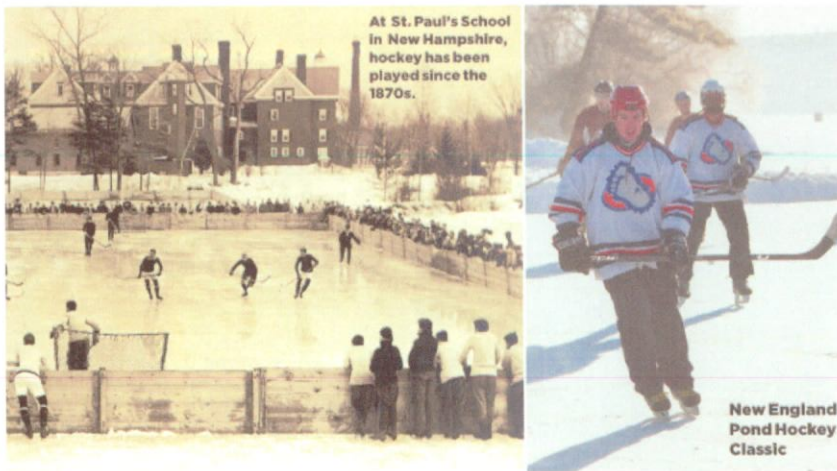
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ENGAGE



Sweepstakes



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ST. PAUL'S SCHOOL ARCHIVES AND BY STEVE SALFANO/COURTESY OF POND HOCKEY CLASSIC

Matthews, who played (class of 1961) and later coached hockey at the prep school, knows the images and the sounds of pond hockey intimately. They are, in fact, indelible. Winter light is fluid, fading from the bright cerulean hues of late morning to the haunting shades of gray near sunset. Yet pond games are often heard before seen: the tap-tap staccato of a puck dancing on stick blades, the crunching rhythm of skates carving turns, and the resonant moans emitted by pressure cracks in the ice. And, of course, there's the laughter. There is an unmitigated joy that wells up in those who brave winter's sting to play such an elegant, enticing game.

"It's shinny hockey, like we used to play when we had nothing else to do on a Saturday afternoon in the winter years ago," says Tom Painchaud, a Concord native who attended St. Paul's. "You didn't have referees or a bunch of grown-ups running interference. You just went out and played the game, and settled it however it needed to be settled."

The pond game is much more primitive, more instinctive, than its indoor cousin. The conditions are unpredictable, which results in an unpredictable game. The weather, and the ice, can change without notice. Pucks that slide straight and true one moment will bounce and dart the next. There's no clock, no face-off circles or blue lines, no boards or Plexiglas, and no monstrously padded goalie. Actually, there's usually no goalie at all, and rarely a regulation hockey goal. More often than not, two spare boots suffice.

"We learned to play the game differently," says Boston University hockey coach Jack Parker, 66, who will occasionally drop in on local pond-hockey scrimmages. "Kids had fun learning to play, instead of having organized pressure on them all the time."

That sense of unbridled freedom has sparked a meteoric rise in pond-hockey tournaments throughout North America. The granddaddy is the World Pond Hockey Championship in Plaster Rock, New Brunswick, but tournaments are also held in hockey hotbeds such as British Columbia, the New England states, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and the home of the "Miracle on Ice," Lake Placid, New York.

"When you have a tournament like this, it can have a competitive flair, but it's really going back to the roots of your childhood and the roots of the game," says Chris Brown of the 1883 Black Ice Pond Hockey Championships in Concord.

Pond-hockey tournaments offer a sublime mix of wistfulness and bravado, spiced with a dash of Peter Pan Syndrome. Scott Crowder, a former college player, struck gold when he introduced his New England Pond Hockey Classic on New Hampshire's Lake Winnepesaukee two years ago. Held under pristine conditions just a month after the NHL's Winter Classic game at Boston's Fenway Park, the inaugural tourney drew 77 teams. In 2011, the event hosted 152 teams, with another 90 on a waiting list.

"With people my age, or 40 and up maybe, it's about nostalgia," says Crowder's father, former NHL player Bruce Crowder, 54. "It's just going back to being on the pond. But with the people who are 35 and under, it's 'Wow, this is new.' It's a novelty."

"You can see the passion that these guys have when they're out there," says Scott Crowder, now 26, of his dad's generation. "There's no structure, no whistles, no horns, no time. You're outside. It's pure. It's raw."



And it's that simplicity that draws crowds. Concord's 1883 Black Ice tournament is a great example. The name is drawn from a phenomenon that every pond-hockey player dreams about, when a quick cold snap freezes ponds solid before the first snowfall. At the exclusive St. Paul's School, students would celebrate black ice "holidays" on Lower School Pond. Classes would be canceled on the first day that the ice set, and students would grab sticks, scarves, sweaters, and skates and head outdoors.

Fortunately, pond hockey isn't relegated to tournament play. Good-natured competition and camaraderie can be found at almost any game. Ken Fellows of Kittery Point, Maine, is the septuagenarian ringleader for a merry band of winter enthusiasts that migrates between several ponds dotting the jagged coastline.

"There is a whole raft of reasons why pond hockey remains so appealing to me," says Fellows. "A prime one is the association with my youth, when spending an afternoon skating until it was too dark to see anymore was not only the most enjoyable four to six hours I could imagine, but was a period of seemingly boundless energy that I only discovered later was quite confined to adolescence.

"Another appealing feature of pond hockey back then, and even now, is that the game allows guys like me, not the biggest or the strongest, to compete with speed and finesse compensating for the differences in reach and power," he says. "Finally, when I get back on the pond, I'm a kid again. No problems, no worries."



WRITER BRION O'CONNOR
(RIGHT) AND SEAN O'CONNOR
IN THEIR EARLY HOCKEY DAYS
(PHOTO BY CHRIS O'CONNOR)

Boston-based writer Brion O'Connor is a longtime hockey player and coach who considers any day that includes ice time a good day.