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## Black Ice Hockey

How pond hockey has grown from a children's game to a serious sport with a fanatical following



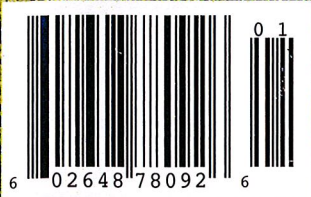
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# The Allure of Black Ice

It wouldn't be the "fastest game on Earth" without the magical properties of good ice. "Black ice hockey" refers to the diamond-hard clarity of the frozen surface beneath the skate.

*By Bill Burke*







In 1883, St. Paul's School in Concord held the first ice hockey game in America. From those icy roots the school went on to beat college teams from Princeton and Harvard. Hall of Fame member Hobe Baker (below), who started at St. Paul's, is now a patron saint of pond hockey.

**T**here's something about a frozen pond that compels people to shoot across its slick surface.

Unleash a pack of kids onto a patch of ice and a spontaneous game will break out. Tree branches gripped in gloved fists — makeshift hockey sticks — are used to flick stones or pine cones around and slippery-soled boots will send participants gliding unsteadily into each other.

The allure is not relegated to those with youthful exuberance, however. Send a group of adults out there and competition is all but guaranteed. They may call it pond hockey, pickup or shinny, but the endgame remains consistent: hockey will happen.

It's an athletic urge with a long history. It's said the Micmac Indians played a game similar to lacrosse on the iced-over lakes of Canada in the 18th century, and the first hockey game in the US was said to have been played on Nov. 17, 1883, on the Lower Pond at St. Paul's School in Concord. So it's no surprise that hockey players

flock to the Granite State to breathe life into their inner Gretzky, Lemieux or Orr each winter.

For some it starts during early morning practices. For others, it's late-night men's leagues. There is a different breed of hockey player, however, who fell in love with the sport outside. One way or another, you never really get hockey out of your blood.

Just ask the players who make an annual pilgrimage to New Hampshire's frozen waterways to take part in two major outdoor hockey tournaments that take place in the Granite State: The Black Ice Pond Hockey Championship in Concord and the Pond Hockey Classic on Lake Winnepesaukee in Meredith.

"People are embracing how it all started," Scott Crowder, executive director of Restore Hockey and organizer of the New England Pond Hockey Championship, says. "It's taken off so well. It gives people the opportunity to play the sport the way it was originally played."

Crowder is the son of former college hockey coach and







Photos by By Kathie Fife

Behind the nets, the Puckaneers from Boston wrestle for the puck with Mainstay Solutions from Belmont, NH, at the Pond Hockey Classic on Lake Winnepesaukee in Meredith.

Boston Bruin Bruce Crowder, who spent his formative years playing the game outdoors.

"Anybody who ever put on a pair of skates knows it's special doing it outside," Crowder says. "The ability to play outside is very rare. There are a lot more kids growing up playing indoor, structured hockey. But people my father's age — he grew up in Canada playing on frozen ponds and rivers for hours and hours every day."

Now hockey players from across North America flock to celebrate their sport in its purest form.

"I adore pond hockey," Vicki Chase, of Canterbury, says. "I love being outside, I love the fresh air, I love everything about it."

Chase has played in the women's division of the Black Ice tournament for the past two years as part of a team called the GAL-oots.

"I prefer pond hockey," she says, citing the outdoor game's simplicity. "I like playing outside and using a pair of rubber boots as the goal."

With fewer players and a smaller surface area, the speed of the game can be impressive.

"My favorite part about pond hockey is the pace of it all," Heather Sondrini, a Rochester native and veteran of three previous Black Ice tournaments, says. "The game is a lot more challenging, which is really great. Pond hockey is a totally

different game from full-ice. It's a lot faster than full-ice and it is a lot harder to score in the little holes of the net. Playing four-on-four keeps it more wide open even though the ice surface is a lot smaller. Since there are no real boards you have to make a lot of on-ice passes or small saucer passes."

Compared to its indoor, much-more-finely-groomed sibling, pond hockey is a simple if a bit rough-around-the-edges version of the fast-moving game. All that's needed is a pair of skates, a helmet, a stick, a puck and a few friends. But most importantly, there needs to be ice.

This is the most unpredictable part of the Concord and Meredith events. Without ice, the contest would become a little, well, damp.

"It's pretty much impossible to determine exactly what the weather will be like," says Ryan Breton, better known online as 'The Atkinson Weather Guy.' "But traditionally that is one of the more stormy periods of the winter in New England."

The threat of uncooperative weather is the one thing that nags at the back of Scott Crowder's mind.

"It's the hardest thing with these events and it's a huge factor that we can't control," he says. "It's the reason people play hockey indoors — the weather. You can control the climate."

A lot can happen to a lake once the ice starts to form. Warmer temperatures can leave everything soft, too much snow can



bury the surface and rain can turn everything to slush.

Some years, a late snowstorm has necessitated an "all hands on deck" effort to clear the rinks. Other years everything came together perfectly. Organizers keep a close eye on WMUR's weather reports and fill their smartphones with weather-related apps.

There have been some picturesque afternoons on the lake. By Saturday afternoon one year, players were zipping across the ice in the middle of a snowstorm — which looks great but can add some additional labor to tournament organizers.

"People loved it," Crowder says of the unexpected snowfall. "It's a great atmosphere, but then we have to clear it, re-flood it and get it ready for the next game."

Last year Mother Nature threw a little of everything at them. On the Monday before the tournament, 18 inches of snow fell. On Wednesday there was a downpour that washed away the snow piled around rinks to act as boards. By Thursday it was 50 degrees outside and water was pooling on top of the lake. But then, by the playoff beard of Zdeno Chara, everything came together. Temps dropped and everything froze solid. The surface was playable, safe and, best of all, crowded. As the last players left Meredith, Crowder was able to breathe easy before looking ahead to next year's tournament.

"It's a crap shoot," he says.

Once the elements cooperate, it's all about strategy. "There are teams that are made up of guys in their mid-20s, still in shape, and can fly around and really play," Crowder says. "They might play a team of guys in their 30s who are out of shape, but can control the puck and can skate into open areas. It's a different style, and it's funny to see that teams have figured out certain strategies — whether they play a box, move the puck around — it's kind of a cool thing."

For Crowder, a true hockey evangelist, growing a pond hockey tournament was a natural post-college step. After finishing his hockey career at the University of Massachusetts and earning a degree in sports management and marketing, he began putting together what would become the Pond Hockey Classic. Work on the tournament began in earnest by Oct. 1 of 2009. As word of the idea began to get out, hockey players throughout New England began contacting Crowder. Seventy-seven different teams sought to take part, necessitating the creation of a waiting list. Three months later

the puck was dropped and 45 teams came to Meredith to play in the inaugural Pond Hockey Classic. Now there are nearly four times as many teams taking part and scores more on hand for the spectacle itself.

"A lot of people come down," Crowder says. "If it's a beautiful day, by Saturday afternoon there could be 4,000 people out on the ice."

The real secret, according to participants, is coming to the ice with the proper perspective.

"Teams come up here with the right attitudes," Crowder says. "From my perspective it's not solely about winning. It's really about teams that have a great time — teams that come up and have fun playing hockey."

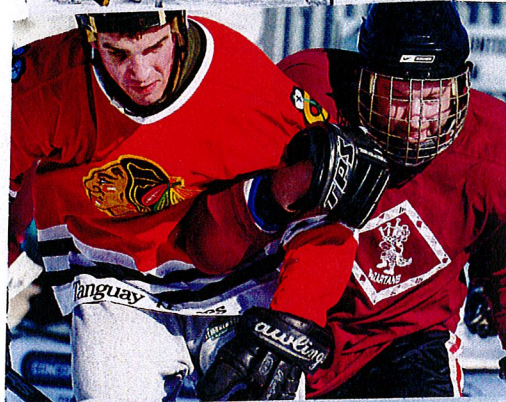
The list of past team names hints at this. The Concord event has seen squads with names like The Longshots, Babes of Glory, Pond Jovi, Against Medical Advice, the Pylons and Scared Hitless — all ready to compete, but without taking themselves too seriously.

What is it, then, that draws people out of perfectly warm homes and drops them onto a sometimes bone-chilling pond to relive past hockey glory?

"I think people like pond hockey because it allows for inexpensive participation in an exciting but cost-prohibitive sport," USA Hockey on-ice official Mike Sullivan says. "Growing up in the suburbs of Boston during the transition from the Bobby Orr era to the Ray Bourque era, every kid wanted to play hockey. And being able to get out on the ice, whether in a rink or on a pond, brought you closer to those NHL players you emulated. Pond hockey is the purest form of ice hockey. It's how the sport began and the connection to that past can really be experienced by getting out there and playing a game."

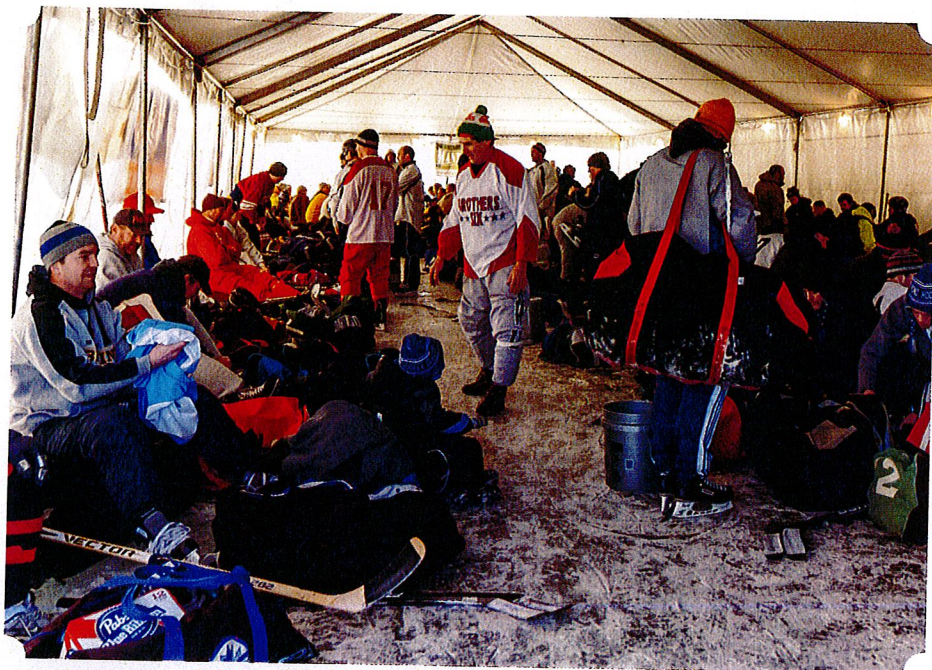
Part of the draw is the opportunity to play hockey, of course, but there are also those who use it as an excuse to reunite with friends.

"A lot of teams that come up are groups of guys who played youth hockey, high school hockey, college hockey, or they work somewhere where people play," Crowder says. "They create



From top: A group shot of the Climate Change Crew; opponents in a clinch at the Black Ice Pond Hockey Tournament; Boston's Puckaneers face off against Belmont, NH's Mainstay Solutions team; a member of the Blackhawks sets up a shot in the 50+ division.





More than 200 teams getting ready to hit the ice in Meredith, at the New England Pond Hockey Classic

friendships and a common ground. People rally around the game and grow their friendships. There are a lot of teams coming up that are made up of people who have been friends for 20 to 30 years."

And while it is outdoors, there are a few comforts built in to the proceedings. Vendor tents, food and drinks have become part of the experience.

"They do a really good job," says Chase, who spends her days working with an engineering company. "There's a tent for players and it's pretty cool. There are lots of old photos set up on the inside from old pond hockey players and tournaments

and so on. And with Concord being such a small town, you're bound to see 100 people you know."

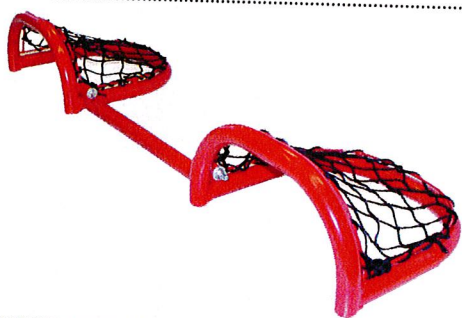
The sport is transformative to those who have succumbed to its rugged charms. Games that start when most everyone else is asleep are embraced, bruises are worn as badges of honor and that nasty, familiar smell wafting off the decades-old canvas hockey bag is a potent pheromone. It triggers memories of countless hours spent at rinks and on ponds until the lungs burn, the legs turn to rubber and teammates nurse cuts and then beers. It's certainly been borne out in the interest the tournaments have generated.

At the Pond Hockey Classic, teams who played the year previously are al-

lowed to take part in a pre-registration period until Oct. 1. After that, registration opens to the public. Last year 200 teams played in the Pond Hockey Classic and organizers expected a 90 to 95 percent return. An additional 20 to 25 new teams will be welcomed into the fold at this year's event.

"One of the hardest things is that the event is so successful — and I'm not complaining — but it's hard turning teams away. We can't make 80 rinks because of the size of the undertaking and the uncertainty of the weather. It sells out, so we have to cap it."

Players and fans bring coolers, grills, lawn chairs and fire pits, making for quite a scene if the weather cooperates. There are often skills competitions — hardest shot, accuracy — and an



## The pond game

While a pair of boots may work as a net in a backyard pond hockey game, the organized tournaments have standardized the format and the equipment somewhat.

In the case of the Pond Hockey Classic, the games are played on the frozen surface of Lake Winnepesaukee. It's a four-on-four format, played with no goalies. Each team can have two substitutes, and the goal is to shoot the puck into a pair of small, 6-inch by 12-inch nets. Teams register for one of several divisions, among them the open division, 30-plus, 40-plus and "the Legends," who are 50 years or older. Snow is cleared to create rinks that measure about 150-feet by 75-feet. The list of rules is short — no checking, no

slap shots, keep the puck below knee level and no goaltending (standing directly in front of the small nets).

In the Black Ice tournament in Concord, teams play four-on-four for two 15-minute, running time halves. Minor penalties result in a change of puck possession, while major penalties result in ejection. There's no checking, fighting, offsides or icing, and any form of goaltending is also not allowed.

Games are, for the most part, self-officiated. In Meredith there are rink monitors who stand nearby, ready to mediate any disagreements, and a referee will watch over the Black Ice games. Despite some highly competitive hockey, the spirit of the event tends to override disputes.



on-ice tournament village where people can indulge in some hot chocolate, chowders, sausages and drinks.

The Black Ice tournament, held at White Park in Concord, similarly offers rink-side food and drinks, but goes the extra mile by offering a shuttle bus to take players and fans to several downtown restaurants.

"It's a totally electric and fun atmosphere," Chase says of the Concord event.

According to those who have taken part in the pond hockey tournaments, it becomes addictive. Between the competition, the camaraderie and the celebration of the sport, it's no wonder the events are getting bigger every year.

"Playing indoors is easier, but it seems like the sport is taking a swing back outside every winter now," Crowder says. "At least to participate in a pond hockey tournament. It's a cool side of the sport a lot of people don't want to let die." **NH**

*The Black Ice Pond Hockey Championship takes place in Concord Jan. 24-26. [blackicepondhockey.com](http://blackicepondhockey.com)*

*The Pond Hockey Classic is held on Lake Winnepesaukee in Meredith Jan. 31-Feb. 2. [pondhockeyclassic.com](http://pondhockeyclassic.com)*



More than 1,400 hockey players meet up at the NEPHC. For many it is a time to get together with friends they haven't seen in a long time. Players from more than 20 states and five provinces get together for the weekend on Lake Winnepesaukee, Meredith Bay at Mill Falls. A number of welcome parties were thrown by some of the sponsors including Labatt Blue and Bauer, which has its global headquarters in Exeter. The population of Meredith Bay increases by about 5,000 people during the weekend.

## Women's hockey

Want to impress someone at one of the regional pond hockey tournaments? Play like a girl.

One of the growing segments of the recent tournaments has been the women's divisions. At one time the sport was dominated by men. But since the women's Olympic gold medal win at the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan, rinks have been packed with girls looking to take up the sport.

It's not a new phenomenon, but it is continuing to grow. Strong college programs have led to a powerhouse US National team — including Wolfeboro native Kate Buesser and UNH standout Kacey Bellamy — and even a women's professional league. The lone American franchise in the Canadian Women's Professional Hockey League, the Boston Blades, won the Clarkson Cup (the women's version of the Stanley Cup) last season. With years of success and a clutch of role models to

emulate, it's all trickling down to ice level.

"When I was a kid, I had a really positive experience one time playing pond hockey with a bunch of neighbors," Vicki Chase, of Canterbury, says. "I was 8, and it was completely formative. All of a sudden I knew wanted to play hockey. So my parents gave me a stick and pucks and I looked for any opportunity to play — and it was pond hockey back in those days."

Now, 38 years into her hockey career, Chase has seen the popularity of women's hockey grow.

"It was big in prep schools and big in college," she says. "But now it's very popular. Now I would say the difference is that a lot more little girls see it as a possibility."

Chase has played in the last two Black Ice tournaments, sometimes against women who are slightly younger and a little quicker.

"Certainly the level of play has gotten way better," she says. "So when we play the Black Ice tournament we get crushed by these

youngsters. But we're out there to have a good time; it's totally recreational. For my age I'm not bad, but I see these youngsters who are so good and so fast and so talented."

One of those younger players, who once played for her high school team, is a frequent pond hockey tournament player and attributes that style of play to her early development.

"I played a little pond hockey here and there before I really started," Heather Sondrini, of Rochester, says. "Then once I really got playing, during the winter, when I wasn't at the rink I was at the Lion's Club pond in Somersworth playing. They had a small man-made pond and had some old nets and lights to play when it got dark."

Sondrini has played in the Black Ice Pond Hockey Championship since its inception, and has experienced some success there.

"I played with the NEWT women's hockey team, and since we won the Black Ice tournament every year we need to keep defending our titles," she says, laughing.



Wolfeboro native Kate Buesser



UNH standout Kacey Bellamy  
(see Blips interview, page 32)



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