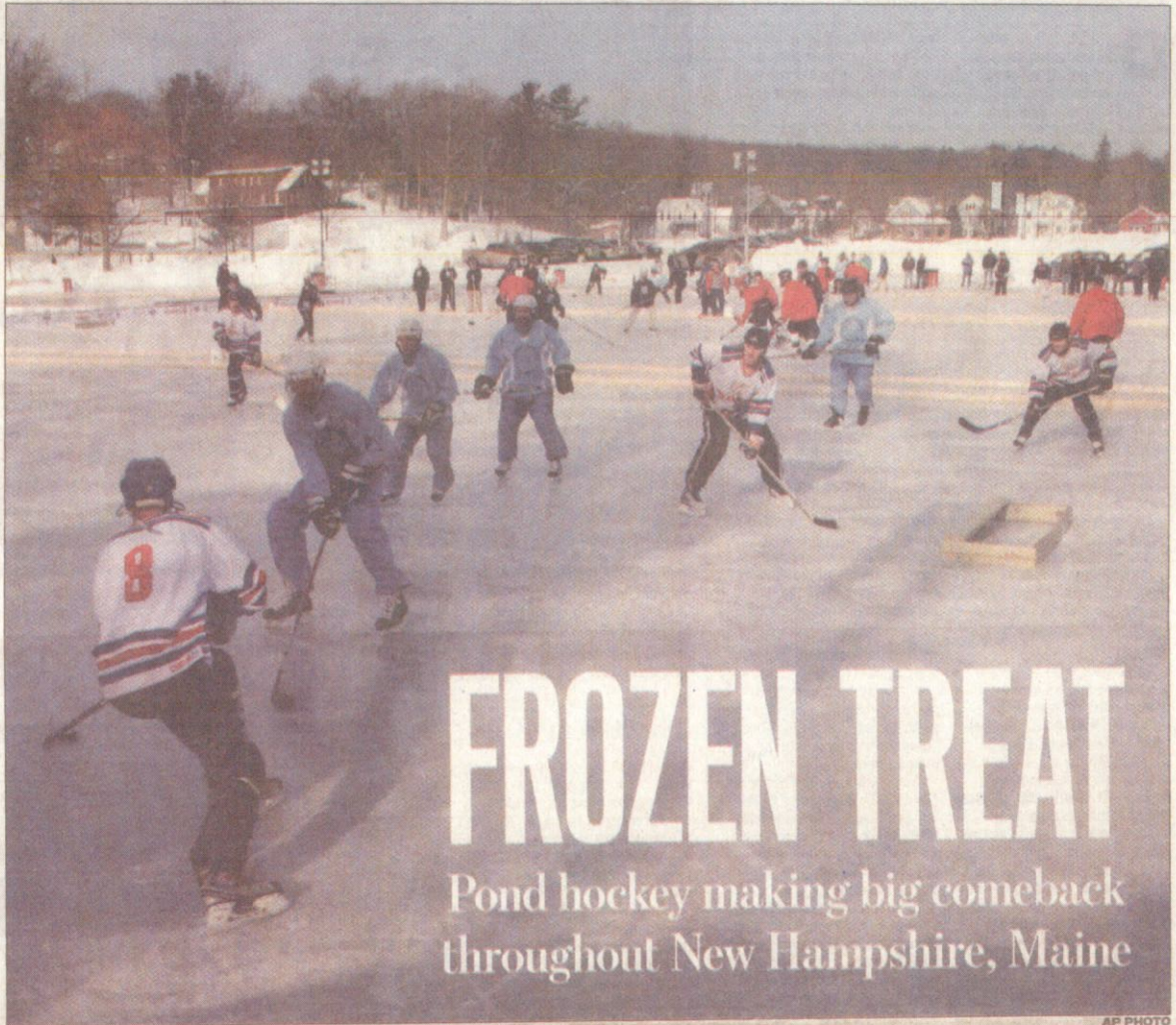


sports



HE LEFT AN
INDELIBLE MARK
ON THE CITY



FROZEN TREAT

Pond hockey making big comeback throughout New Hampshire, Maine

AP PHOTO

Players start the first round of play during the Black Ice Pond Hockey Championship tournament on White Park Pond in Concord on Jan. 28. The National Hockey League's annual Winter Classic game has helped create a resurgence of pond hockey throughout New England.

BY MIKE ZHE
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Back in the day, all hockey players had a patch of ice to call their own.

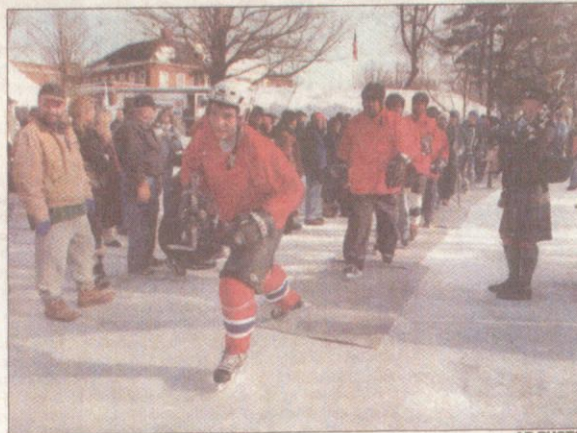
For Jake Gaffey, the senior co-captain at Division III Trinity College, it was Eel Pond in Rye, just a frigid slap shot across the road from Jenness Beach.

For University of New Hampshire coach Dick Umile, it was Ell Pond in his native Melrose, Mass. Games there half a century ago would see bonfires set up and players snacking on oranges between shifts.

For Don Garrison of Hampton, the joy of skating on his family's backyard rink in Connecticut and the lingering memories helped spur a successful new business.

Sure it was cold, with your breath spilling out in front of you, wind slicing into your face like a blade and skates that needed coaxing to be removed. But there was also the warm knowledge that after shoveling off your section of ice, you could skate for hours and not have to give it up when a horn sounded.

Outdoor hockey is hot, and not just



AP PHOTO

Players take to the ice at Concord's White Park Pond for the Black Ice Pond Hockey Championship on Jan. 28.

at the warming huts. In New Hampshire and Maine alone, four separate pond hockey tournaments are being held this winter, including the big one,

the 2nd annual New England Pond Hockey Classic on Lake Winnepesaukee this weekend.

The National Hockey League's

"Going out skating on the pond on a great day, with the ice nice and the sun out, there's nothing better than that."



Dick Umile

UNH men's hockey coach

climb back into the consciousness of casual sports fans has been buoyed by the magic of its annual Winter Classic, the New Year's Day outdoor game that last year had everyone seeing Fenway Park in a new light.

In nine days, Gaffey will be playing outdoors again, smack in the middle of a 40,000-seat stadium, when his Trinity team battles NESCAC rival Wesleyan under the lights at Rentschler Field in East Hartford, Conn.

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SPORTS

FROZEN: Pond hockey makes comeback throughout New Hampshire, Maine

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"It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," said Gaffey, who grew up in North Hampton. "I'm really excited it's going to happen my senior year, when I'm here."

That outdoor game is one of several — at various levels — that will be held during Whalers Hockey Fest, the latest big production from Hartford Whalers founder, former owner and movie producer Howard Baldwin.

While the two-week-long event, headlined by an AHL game and an exhibition between Whalers and Boston Bruins alumni, is part of an ongoing litmus test to see whether the Hartford market could ever welcome back an NHL franchise, it also offers a nice in-season treat to under-the-radar players like Gaffey. He'll be among the hundreds of college and prep school players who get to take a competitive spin on a big stage as part of the undercard.

These days, there seem to be more big stages. Michigan State-Michigan drew more than 113,000 fans to the Big House — a hockey attendance record — in December. More games are on the way.

"I think it's all started from the NHL doing the Winter Classic, especially last year at Fenway," said Gaffey. "It really kind of brought it back. It's been great from the NHL right down to youth hockey."

Of course, some amateur leagues and players in their 40s and 50s have never left the great outdoors. Seacoast teams had taken part in pond hockey tournaments long before this current boom, but all of a sudden, it seems everyone wants to get back outside.

And, players say, with good reason.

"Going out skating on the pond on a great day, with the ice nice and the sun out, there's nothing better than that," said the 62-year-old Umile. "I was brought up on it. Organized hockey had really just started when I was in high school. ... In the evening, we'd have a little fire going on. You'd bring oranges and stuff like that, play pick-up games. It was fun."

"The resurgence of outdoor rinks," he added, "in yards and on ponds, is terrific."

Do it yourself

Wednesday's snowstorm was winding down in the late morning, and Garrison and his children were about to go clear off their backyard rink for some skating.

Garrison grew up in Connecticut and had a rink in his backyard. When his son started playing youth hockey on the Seacoast, he installed one behind his house, near the Exeter line off Route 101. And that's where the idea for a new business was born.

"It actually started with my partner, Jim Wolford," said Garrison. "I had a rink growing up as a kid. I have a lot of great memories. My son started playing hockey locally, and I just wanted to do something where I could let him skate more and have fun."

Soon, he and Wolford were helping other team dads install rinks. That led to the creation of a commercial business — Home Rinks — that can be found in hockey pro shops in 21 states and Canada, and at www.homerinks.com.

"We asked, 'What if we developed a rink-in-a-box, do-it-yourself kit?'" said Garrison. "We went out and found the right suppliers."

Garrison and Wolford sell a rink-building kit that includes things like a liner, brackets and ice resurfacer. Buyers provide the lumber and do the installation. Rinks come in three different sizes, and how long they last each winter depends on the weather. Garrison said he got 83 days of skating last year on his backyard creation. On Michigan's Upper Peninsula, there were Home Rinks that were set up as early as Nov. 8.

Next year, Garrison said he



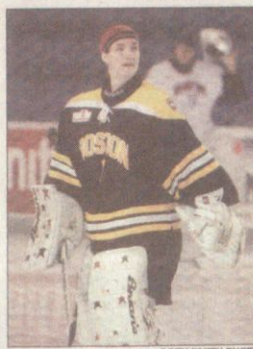
The White Park Hockey Club plays a game against the Cheers Chiefs during the Black Ice Pond Hockey Championship on Jan. 30.



In this Jan. 11 photo, students at St. Paul's School in Concord play hockey on the Lower School Pond. The school claims the first organized hockey game in the United States was played on the pond in 1883. More than 100 years later, outdoor hockey is making a return across the country.



TRINITY COLLEGE ATHLETICS/COURTESY PHOTO
North Hampton's Jake Gaffey, a senior co-captain at Division III Trinity College, will lead his team in an outdoor game against Wesleyan in nine days in East Hartford, Conn.



GODY SMITH PHOTO
Mandy Cronin of York, Maine, currently plays for the Boston Blades of the Canadian Women's Hockey League. Growing up in York, she skated around her family's backyard when the ice froze.

hopes to move his product into the larger retail stores.

"We were probably represented in every major hockey pro shop this winter," he said. "What we want to do is take it to the next level, the Sears and Costco."

Though the season to market the product is short, the timing couldn't be better, as hockey players are rediscovering the allure of the outdoor game.

"It brings it back to its roots," said Garrison. "As a kid, that's how we skated. Ice time was so expensive. But it was a lot of fun (outdoors) and I have a lot of friends who share the same memories."

"Then the NHL came out with the Heritage Classic (the outdoor game between Edmonton and Montreal in 2003) and now the Winter Classic is an annual event. I think that's brought a lot back. A lot of pond hockey tournaments have come out of that."

Garrison's team — "Home Rinks," of course — is competing in the New England Pond Hockey Classic on Lake Win-

nepesaukee. That event, the brainchild of Nashua native and former UMass-Amherst player Scott Crowder, debuted last year with 77 teams. This year, there are 152 — including several from the Seacoast — that will battle on 14 rinks over three days.

"I saw guys flying all across the country to play in these things and thought, 'Why not have a big pond hockey tournament in our backyard,'" Crowder, the son of former UNH and Boston Bruins player Bruce Crowder, told New England Hockey Journal.

An Exeter-based women's team — Seacoast NEWT — won its division at the Black Ice Pond Hockey Championship in Concord last weekend. Other major tournaments will be held this weekend in Rangeley, Maine (the 5th annual New England Pond Hockey Festival); Feb. 12 in Manchester (the Inaugural Monarchs Pond Hockey Classic); and Feb. 18-20 in Burlington, Vt. (the Lake Champlain Pond

Hockey Classic).

Often, the players and teams best suited to these outdoors events are the guys in their 40s and 50s who learned the game outside, not the younger ones who grew up skating in one-hour blocks at the local arena.

"As kids, that's how we skated," said Garrison, who's 48. "My nephew, who is 30, had no concept of playing outside. Everything was indoors."

Back to the roots

It's already been a historic season for Mandy Cronin of York, Maine, the goalie for the Boston Blades of the Canadian Women's Hockey League. With the team's inaugural season entering its stretch run, both the Blades (8-9-1 heading into Saturday's game against Toronto) and Cronin (7-7-0, 907 save percentage) were more than holding their own.

As the team tries to market itself and ensure a long-term future, one of the ideas pitched to the players was taking part in a quest to set a new world

record for the longest outdoor game. The requirements — which proved a little too daunting — would have required 20 players at all times skating for 14 straight days.

"We'd actually kicked around the idea," said Cronin. "We were going to get a bunch of our team to be in it. ... It would have been a blast. Everyone loves pond hockey."

Growing up in York, Cronin would take to her family's backyard when the ice froze, skating around the weeds as she honed her skills. And growing up in the girls' game meant plenty of off-the-beat-en-path surfaces.

If anyone can understand what Gaffey's going through these days, it might be UNH women's coach Brian McCloskey.

His team received the honor of playing Northeastern at Fenway last winter in the week after the Winter Classic. But as the special day got closer, he was forced to acknowledge it was a one-shot deal, never to happen again.

Gaffey has been part of the Hartford build-up since Baldwin announced the games in the fall. He and fellow captain Adam Houli attended a media day event at Rentschler, which seats 40,000 for football.

"My junior year in high school (St. John's Prep in Danvers, Mass.), I played at (TD Garden) in the semifinals of the (Massachusetts) Super 8 against Arlington Catholic," said Gaffey. "It was something else. But nothing like this is going to be."

The biggest adjustment to playing outside, Gaffey thinks, will be the wind. With an 8 p.m. starting time, it doesn't figure to be all that warm, either.

Not that hockey players get worked up about a few elements. The UNH women shook off the cold and snow flurries at Fenway last year to beat Northeastern, 5-3, and would jump at the chance to do something like that again.

"There's something outdoors that's impossible to capture at an indoor arena," said McCloskey. "Even Jackson's Landing (in Durham) — I love it."

McCloskey ventured that the resurgent popularity of outdoor hockey is in response to a society where kids enjoy fewer and fewer freedoms.

"My only guess is that our world today is so structured, so controlled and organized, that there's no risks anymore," said McCloskey. "If you were a skier, you went off the back side of the mountain. If you did that now you'd be in jail."

I can see how it would appeal to people. It's like returning to your roots. I can see kids loving that. ... When I was a kid, I went out in the neighborhood. My parents had no idea where I was. I just had to be home for dinner."

Skates on the stick, stick on the shoulder.
A wonderful image. Frozen in time.