

POND OF DREAMS: BUILD IT, AND THEY WILL COME

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Just over half a million kids play organized hockey in the United States, and it's a lot of fun, but not half as much fun as disorganized hockey.

We're deep in the dead of winter. And for most of us, there's not a lot to do, and not much to look forward to for the next couple months. But if you're a hockey player—scratch that, if you're a *pond* hockey player—this is the best time of year.

When I was growing up—not *that* long ago—we'd come home from school, slip our skates onto our sticks, throw the stick over our shoulders like hobos carrying their knapsacks, then trudge through the apple orchard behind our neighborhood to a pond in the middle of the woods. We'd lace 'em up and play until it was too dark to see, then put our boots back on and head home for dinner.

On weekends, we'd spend the whole day down there. Friends of mine who lived near Burns Park and Thurston Pond would skate all day, walk home to eat dinner with their skates on, then go back onto the ice for more.

We got more ice time in a single day on those ponds than we got in weeks of indoor practices and games. And it was more fun, too. No tryouts, no scoreboards, no whistles, no drills, no lines, no benches, no coaches, no refs—in fact, no adults at all—and no nets. Just a pair of boots at each end to mark the goals.

I don't recall once coming back from the pond upset that we'd lost. That's because we played about a dozen games a day, and whenever one team lost too many in a row, we'd just change teams. I also can't recall much about the hundreds of indoor practices I had, but I can remember those long, happy days on the pond like they were yesterday.

But when you drive by those very same ponds today, you won't see many kids. They're all packed in vans, being dragged to some travel team

tournament two hours away. As soon as they get back, they'll run inside to play video games.

We're not only losing the spirit of the sport, and all the fun that goes with it, we're also losing our competitive edge. Herb Brooks, the mastermind behind the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team's upset over the Soviet Union, known as the Miracle on Ice, said it best: "I think we have too many elite [hockey] camps for the kids today, and as a result, we are creating a bunch of robots. We need to make it fun for the kids and let them learn to love the game the way we did."

When my old high school teammate, Pete Read, put together his third annual Michigan Pond Hockey Classic at Whitmore Lake last weekend, one of the nation's biggest outdoor tournaments, it was no surprise that almost all of the five hundred-some players who signed up were over thirty years old.

Read laid out fifteen rinks, separated only by snow banks. We played four-on-four, with no goalies or fancy nets—just a flat box of two-by-sixes. Everyone got dressed in one big tent, where hay bales were set up for benches. A hockey locker room is one of the few places on earth where the smell can be improved by fresh hay. The guys getting ready to play could see their breath, while the guys who'd just come back in the tent from their games could watch the steam coming off their pads as they stuffed them back into their bags.

My team, consisting of a bunch of former high school teammates, got our butts kicked in the first two games by margins like 21-14—football scores. In our last two games, however, we staged heroic rallies to lose by a little less.

But we all had a blast. Until our last game, that is, when the volunteer scorekeeper—God bless 'im—decided to play full-time ref, and rule on every out-of-bounds play and every goal. Before we realized what we were doing, we started sniping and hacking at each other, and the once-friendly match quickly devolved into—well, a little league hockey game. When we finally told the would-be ref we could officiate the game ourselves, we got back to playing pond hockey—and that's what we love.

One of my friends brought his son along, but he couldn't play with us because he had to play a travel team game later that day.

Poor kid doesn't know what he's missing.