

Blue Ice

Blue Ice

The Story of Michigan Hockey



John U. Bacon

Ann Arbor

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Preface

A professor of mine once said nothing exists in a vacuum. She was talking about the history of Western art, but the theory applies just as well to the history of the Michigan hockey team. By exploring the trials and triumphs of the Michigan hockey program, it's easy to recognize the impact eight decades of unprecedented changes on campus and around the country have had on a small band of college hockey players.

With that in mind, I've tried to avoid presenting one of those simple year-by-year chronologies, which usually are little more than glorified laundry lists of the big names and the big games, in favor of a broader story, one that includes the historical context of the pivotal moments in the program's growth—and sometimes its survival—and the individual experiences of a wide variety of players, not all of them stars.

I was also guided by the belief that the many successes and occasional disappointments of the Michigan hockey program were not inevitable, nor were they simply the result of broad trends carrying the team along. I believe that a few remarkable individuals have made a huge difference—from famed athletic director Fielding Yost in the 1920s to fourth-line player Kent Brothers in the 1990s—and that the outcomes of certain events—including big games, byzantine recruiting trips, and even administrative gambles—were crucial to the program's surviving, and thriving.

If coach Joseph Barss hadn't won Michigan's first game, which attracted a big crowd for the second; if coach Eddie Lowrey and Fielding Yost hadn't installed artificial ice before the Depression; if Vic Heyliger hadn't organized the first NCAA tournament in a New York hotel room; if Al Renfrew hadn't persuaded Red Berenson and his Regina buddies to eschew Fargo, North Dakota for Ann Arbor; or if Mike Legg hadn't scored his magical goal, still the most miraculous in hockey

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history—well, things would have been very different for the Michigan hockey program.

Other college teams didn't have such men performing such feats, and things *were* very different.

One night in 1996, I went down to see some old friends who owned Rick's American Cafe, when I noticed the Michigan hockey players quietly celebrating their first NCAA title in 32 years. While I watched them, I realized there was something special going on there. They didn't attract the insipid entourages or gawkers the basketball players did, but they seemed to savor their achievements on a deeper level than the Fab Five ever could.

After having spent so much time with big-time athletes and their big-time ways, I found it refreshing, to say the least. And when I tried to buy a few of them some huevos rancheros at the Fleetwood Diner at four A.M., and they refused because they didn't want any potential trouble with the NCAA to spoil their celebration, I knew I was onto something. Five years and 400-some pages later, I'd say I was right.

A couple notes:

In the program's first decades, most quotes from newspapers are identified only as a 'local paper,' because in the Michigan athletic archives it is usually impossible to determine if a particular story appeared in the *Michigan Daily* or the *Ann Arbor News*. Where I have been able to determine the source, I've listed it accordingly.

Also, I have chosen to refer to individual All-American players as just that, "All Americans." I refuse to use the sobriquet "All-America," as in, "He was a three-time All-America," simply because it sounds so stupid and snobbish. I hope the authors of the style guides will forgive me.

Acknowledgments

All authors need lots of help, of course, but I've probably needed more than most just to get my brain around the sprawling subject of the Michigan hockey program.

First, thanks to Jim Russ, my former editor at the *Detroit News*, who gave me the green light to write a Sunday feature story on the 1996 Michigan hockey players' "undercover" status on campus, a week after they won Michigan's eighth NCAA title. In doing so, Russ broke a number of unwritten rules at the paper, including: we don't cover college hockey; we don't write big Sunday features about it; and we definitely don't do any of those things a week after the season's over. As was so often the case, however, Russ didn't care, placing a higher value on the story's merits than its demographics.

In 1997, two editors who had already produced a book on Michigan State's hockey team asked me if I was interested in doing a similar book on Michigan's program. I was too busy at the time, but when they asked again a year later I remembered how much I enjoyed writing the feature story on the 1996 team, and decided a book would be easy and fun to do. Well, it has been fun, even more fun than I expected. But easy? To paraphrase Rick in *Casablanca*, if I thought it was going to be easy, I was misinformed. This project has required much more time and effort than I had anticipated. Coach Berenson once told me that if he knew what he was getting into when he took the Michigan job, he might have thought twice—but he's glad he didn't, because then he might have missed out on a great opportunity. That describes my feelings about this project exactly.

By the time I finished a 300-page draft in the fall of 1999, however, the publisher had gone out of business, but had failed to notify me of this development. Enter the University of Michigan Press and its heroic

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interim director, Mary Erwin. She not only understood what I was trying to do—write a professionally researched and written book that just happened to be about a college hockey team, instead of cranking out one of those hastily produced “buff books” written only for die-hard fans—she also was smart enough to give the project to her first-rate editor, Kelly Sippell, whose passion for accuracy is matched only by her passion for sports.

Kelly believed in this project from the outset and fought many internal battles for it over the past year—and I have since learned that she fought a lot more battles than I was aware of at the time. Where the University of Michigan Press’s more academically minded writers turn in their work well in advance of deadlines and make few, if any, revisions, I was in the habit of getting everything in at the last second—if that—and making each page bleed red every time they gave me a chance to revise my work. After a while most of them got wise and quit letting me look at it, but Kelly always afforded me the chance to make one more “final” revision if it meant improving the book, and even though it invariably meant more work for her. The highest praise I can give her is that she cared about this book as much as I did, and proved it by working more than a few weekends and late nights to help me get it right. She infused the project with consummate good cheer and exceptional editorial savvy, making enough good catches to earn a gold glove, maybe two. I simply couldn’t have had a better editor.

Thanks also to Kevin Rennells and the many other people at the University of Michigan Press who work in copyediting, production, marketing, and distribution for all of their important work on behalf of this book. My agent, Carol Mann, helped me switch publishers without a headache.

The biggest reason this project was hard was the complete lack of books already out there on Michigan hockey—but that’s also what made it fun, because almost everything had to be learned from scratch. This heightened the sense of discovery at each turn, and allowed me to meet over a hundred memorable guys, ranging in age from 18 to 93, and to hear thousands of great stories, some of which I could actually print. Unlike many jaded modern athletes, the Michigan men were unfailingly open, honest, and self-effacing.

First and foremost were Michigan’s former coaches, all of whom endured endless interviews and follow-up questions without complaint. Michigan’s first coach, Dr. Joseph Barss, passed away years ago, but his son, Dr. Joseph Andrew Barss, filled in wonderfully and repeatedly

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for his late father, providing hard-to-find facts, stories, and insights about his father.

Vic Heyliger, Al Renfrew, Dan Farrell, and Red Berenson all patiently painted vivid portraits of their tenures behind Michigan's bench. Since four of them also served as Michigan captains, they had to perform double-duty by discussing their playing days, too. Renfrew, Farrell, and Berenson endured the longest interviews of any of the books' hundred-plus subjects, and plenty of second-round questions, too.

I feel compelled to point out that Coach Farrell first performed yeoman duty on my behalf when I was a talkative 14-year-old boy, long before this book was a twinkle in my eye. He agreed to drive me from his hockey camp in Traverse City back to Ann Arbor, and along the way found himself enduring an impromptu interview at the hands of a junior reporter. It's said that the truest test of a man's character is how he behaves when he thinks no one's watching, and there goes your proof.

I would also like to give Coach Berenson special recognition for giving me far more time than I asked of any other subject. Without his complete cooperation, this book simply would not have been possible.

Coach Berenson often says the head coach of any team gets too much credit, and the assistants not enough. So too was it with this book. The assistant coaches I interviewed provided the kind of insider information, perspective, and anecdotes I could not have gotten from either the head coaches or the players. Mark Miller, another former Wolverine captain, Mel Pearson, Rob Palmer, Dave Shand, and Billy Powers were all immensely helpful.

Of course, the heart of this book is the players' experience. The list here is very long, but the conversations were often longer because I enjoyed them so much. Listening to someone recount the happiest years of his life is a pleasure—and even more pleasurable when he tells you so many great stories off the record. Suffice it to say, if any of the players I interviewed becomes president, I'll be able to pick any cabinet post I wish.

In alphabetical order, the players who shared their stories included: John Arnold, Bubba Berenzweig, Russ Blanzky, Roger Bourne, Rob Brown, Justin Clark, Greg Daddario, Dave Debol, Don Dufek, Chris Fox, Wally Grant, Steve Halko, David Harlock, Bobby Hayes, the brothers Helber (Tim and Mike), Matt Herr, Connie Hill, Les Hillberg, Kevin Hilton, Dan Hoene, Alex Hood, Pat Hughes, Dave Huntzicker, Willard Ikola, Billy Jaffe, Wayne Kartusch, Ben Kawa, Mike Knuble, Jerry Kolb,

Acknowledgments

Mike Legg, Joe Lockwood, Warren Lunning, Joe Lunghamer, Kris Manery, Wilf Martin, Kip Maurer, the May family (Dennis, Doug, and their father, Ed), Brad McCaughy, Mark Miller, Angie Moretto, Brendan Morrison, Billy Muckalt, Myles O'Connor, Ryan Pardoski, Mark Perry, Marty Read, Rudy Reichert, Sean Ritchlin, Alex Roberts and his cousin David, Mark Sakala, Harold Schock, Steve Shields, Mark Sorenson, Ted Speers, Don and Mike Stone, Ed Switzer, Marty Turco, Jeff Urban, Mel Wakabayashi-san, Frank Werner, Bill White, Bob White, Gordon Wilkie, Ricky Willis, and last, but far from least, Brian Wiseman. Thanks to their candor, I learned of the qualities that make the Michigan hockey team unique among college athletic programs.

It simply would not be possible to produce a book on the history of the Michigan hockey program without the constant help, and prior research, of Michigan's Sports Information Department. Having worked with several dozen such departments around the country, I can tell you unequivocally that Michigan's is by far the best in the business. Bruce Madej is the department's director, but he wasn't afraid to roll up his sleeves to help me with my research when I needed it most. Jim Schneider gave me a lot of great quotes, stories, and documents from his time as the hockey S.I.D., which spanned from the end of Farrell's tenure through the beginning of the Berenson era.

Easily the saddest day of this journey was Friday, January 8, 1999, when I learned that former hockey sports information director Brian Fishman had died the day before due to a faulty circulation system in his apartment. Brian had worked as the hockey team's S.I.D. from 1995 to 1998, before leaving to work with the USA Hockey program in Ann Arbor. That didn't stop him, though, from compiling a one-foot-high stack of photocopied newspaper clips from 1911 through the 1960s, and giving it to me with no strings attached. He didn't ask for money, or even credit, but suffice it to say, the copious work he'd done provided the backbone of this book's research, without which I wouldn't have even considered embarking on the project in the first place. Brian was one of those great spirits who poured his whole self into his work, and it is my sincere hope that some of his incredible energy and enthusiasm lives on in these pages.

Jason Gerdom had the unenviable task of following the popular Fishman as both Michigan's hockey S.I.D., and the principle research resource for this project, and he did so with exemplary professionalism, remarkable responsiveness, and equally endless patience with my end-

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less requests for materials and access. In short, I put the poor boy through hell, and he never so much as squealed. To you, Jason, a heartfelt thank you.

No one exhibited more good humor more often than the lovely De Aronson, the hockey team's secretary. Her warmth never flagged despite weekly, and sometimes daily, phone calls over the better part of three seasons. I now know the coaches' secret, that day in and day out De Aronson is the most indispensable person on that floor.

The book also benefited from the perspectives of many people who touched the Michigan athletic program in other ways. These include former CCHA Commissioner Bill Beagan; NHL legend Scotty Bowman; former U-M athletic director Don Canham; unofficial team attorney Paul Gallagher, who first suggested using the winged helmet; equipment manager Ian Hume; current Michigan hockey radio announcer Jim Hunt; former radio announcer Ken Kal; current athletic director Bill Martin; Bo Schembechler (if you don't know who he is, you should kindly put this book down and select another); Kip Taylor, who scored the first touchdown in Michigan Stadium and later managed the Coliseum; Nate Weinberg, son of the Coliseum's founder; long-time public address announcer Glen Williams; and arena manager Craig Wotta, who told me some things about the House that Yost built I never learned in my books.

There were still others outside the program who provided special knowledge of the people and places mentioned in this book. I list them here in the order of their appearance. Dr. Al Cain, Dr. David Dickinson, and Dr. John Segall helped with one of the most difficult profiles, that of the late Dr. Eddie Kahn, because Dr. Kahn was so loathe to talk about himself. The Schlanderer family trusted me with letters, documents, and other keepsakes of Art Schlanderer, '31, the team's first Ann Arbor captain. Ted Heusel and Sister Yvonne Gelese offered some interesting takes on Dr. Rudy Reichert. Barton Hills golf pro Doug White chipped in some valuable information on the golf course architects at the University of Michigan and the Broadmoor Hotel. William John Foster, Wally and Mickey Grant, and Rhonda Collins assisted me on the sections covering the Upper Peninsula, Minnesota's Iron Range and Regina, Saskatchewan, respectively. NHL Hall of Famer Ted Lindsay told me some good stories about the old Wolverine-Red Wing exhibition games, and Joy Berenson shared some biographical information about the current head coach that only she could have known.

Acknowledgments

Forbes magazine once calculated that Yoshiaki Tsutsumi-san was the richest man in the world, but he still took time out of his busy schedule to grant me a very rare interview, and a 30-minute one at that. His handlers were as surprised as I was, but the guy loves hockey and Mel Wakabayashi so much, he couldn't help himself. To him, a sincere *domo arigoto gozaimas*. (And thanks also to Hiroko Hara for translating for this *baka gaijin*.) George and Florence Cavender, Dave Finn, and John Wilkins answered my many questions about Michigan's heralded hockey pep band, while Chuck Legg, Mike's dad, told me some things about his son's well-publicized Miracle Goal that, incredibly, had never been printed before.

A few coaches from other schools contributed unique insights, including Michigan State's Ron Mason, former Ferris State and Michigan Tech coach Bob Mancini, and coaching legend Herb Brooks, who led Minnesota to three NCAA titles in the 1970s, the U.S. Olympic team to the gold medal in 1980, and several NHL teams in the eighties, nineties, and aughts. He'll be wearing the whistle again for the U.S. Olympic team in 2002. Likewise, a handful of Wolverine opponents offered a view from the "other side," including Michigan State's Brian "Sandy" McAndrew, Denver's great Keith Magnuson, Wisconsin's all-time leading scorer Mike Eaves, and North Dakota's Justin Duberman.

I also enlisted the aid of numerous professional researchers, including the outstanding reference librarians at the Ann Arbor Public Library, the University of Michigan Graduate Library, especially Holde Borcherts, and the University of Michigan's Medical Library, who answered my arcane questions in minutes, again and again. (And I promise to return Dr. Kahn's autobiography this week. Honest.) The research staffs of the Halifax Maritime Museum; the University of Michigan Hospital; St. Joseph Mercy Hospital; Albert Kahn and Associates; Minnesota's Mayo Clinic (especially Renee Ziemer); the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado; the United States Hockey Hall of Fame in Eveleth, Minnesota; the Saskatchewan Sports Hall of Fame in Regina; the chambers of commerce of Eveleth, Regina, Houghton, and Halifax; the NCAA, the WCHA, the CCHA, the ECAC and Hockey East; and some two dozen college athletic departments have earned my gratitude for their considerable help to ensure the accuracy of this text. MSU's hockey S.I.D. Nate Ewell deserves special mention.

Special thanks to the Bentley Historical Library, particularly Diane Hatfield, who pitched in from her posts as both an archivist and a Decker

Acknowledgments

devotee, and Greg Kinney, who is simply the nation's best sports archivist in charge of the nation's best sports archive. I benefited greatly from the work others painstakingly performed in that library decades before this book was conceived. I also relied on the Bentley and the Michigan sports information department for numerous photos, available nowhere else, which you see in these pages. I also solicited photos from Wally and Mickey Grant, Alex Roberts, the Schlanderer family, and the late Bob Kalmbach.

A few professional journalists saved me days of fruitless searching by directing me to exactly what I needed. Ed Swift (better known as E.M. Swift to *Sports Illustrated* readers) is not only one of the very best in the business, he's one of the field's nicest guys, too. He pointed me toward some valuable information on Hobey Baker, Minnesota high school hockey, and the 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey team, on which he wrote the memorable Sportsmen of the Year cover story. Former *Ann Arbor News* beat reporters Doug Hill and Marty Frank gave some colorful material for the sections on the CCHA. A few civilian researchers pitched in with crucial kernels of data, including Steve Armstrong on Pioneer high school hockey records, Andreea Marinescu on Ploesti, Romania, and Eddie Pocock on Albert Kahn.

My writing friends were generous enough to read some very rough drafts of the manuscript, tough enough to be honest about it, and kind enough to encourage me anyway. Rick Ratliff and Dave Stringer had the toughest job—slogging through the first edition—while my former editor Jim Russ and my former players Peter Uher and Ryan White fine-tuned the later drafts. Many other coaches, players, and insiders read part or all of the manuscript for accuracy, leaving the judgment calls to me. To all of them, a hearty thank you for performing a vital task with vigor.

I must also thank the Fraser's Institute of Sporting Research (FISR) and its outstanding staff of research assistants, who provided an excellent forum for discussing the history of Michigan hockey, and, unlike so many research institutes these days, also provided cooling beverages for my interview subjects and me for a nominal fee.

Finally, thanks to my Canadian grandparents, my parents, and former Michigan goalie Ross Childs for cultivating my love for this great game at any early age. Because of them, I grew up spending just about every winter weekend playing and watching hockey at Yost Field House. When I had to wait for my brother's games to end, I liked to roam the concourse, gazing at the framed photos of the Decker Hall of Fame play-

Acknowledgments

ers and reading their biographies, again and again. I was captivated by their peculiar hair styles, their antiquated equipment, and their confident, clear-eyed expressions staring back at me. I wondered how they played the game, and what their lives were like. Now I know their stories are far more fascinating than anything I could have imagined then.

John U. Bacon
Ann Arbor, Michigan
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