

PICKUP STICKS

NO PADS, NO HELMETS, NO SCOREBOARDS —
HIGH-COUNTRY POND HOCKEY WITH
LOCAL PUCKSTERS AND AN NHL STAR

BY LUKE CYPHERS / PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIKA BAILEY

THE SWIRL OF ACTIVITY ON CHAPEL POND IS, when you break it down, just a bunch of meat-heads going at each other in a pickup hockey game. But the scene belongs in a coffee table book. Icefalls cling to the massive gneiss slab a few dozen yards from the frozen pond's edge, and red-clad climbers in turn cling to the ice—their meticulous movements up the wall a periodic distraction from the perpetual hockey motion below. The smallish body of water is idyllic, too, covered in four inches of fresh powder, save for the neatly shoveled 50-yard square that serves as the rink.

Most striking, though, is the sound: the rumbling swooshes and delicate swishes of two dozen skate blades meeting lake ice, an ensemble of random noise that over time starts to sort itself into rough-hewn music, as the athletes glide, turn, brake, and rapidly accelerate—some forward, some backward—all in pursuit of a black rubber biscuit.

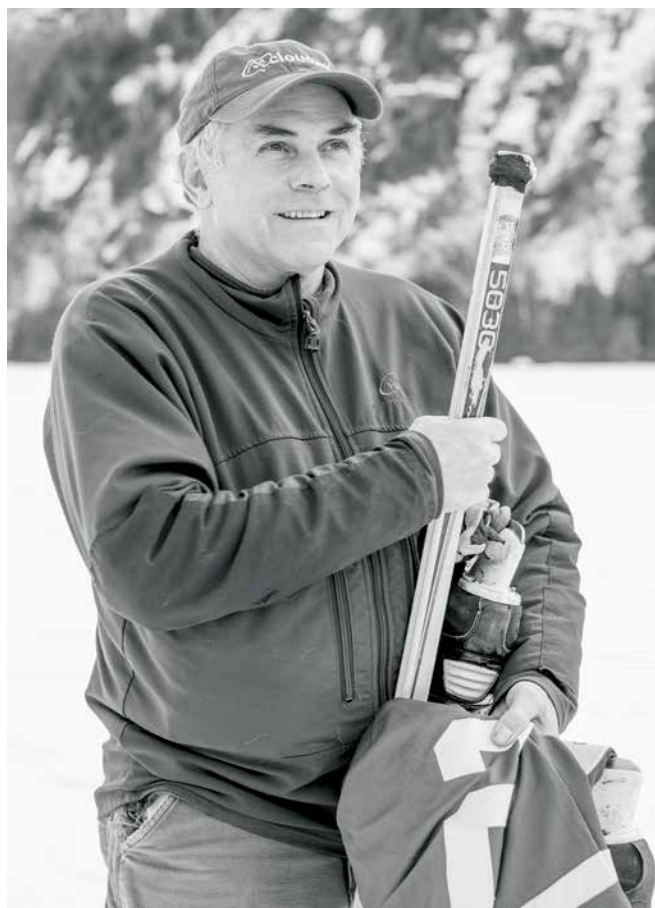
Hockey is a game, a distraction, an expensive human artifice that these days requires precision-engineered equipment and sophisticated, energy-guzzling machinery to create and maintain a playing surface.

But here, in the Adirondack High Peaks, just two days shy of Christmas, it feels as if Mother Nature herself has shooed these overgrown kids outside to play.

With no pads or helmets on the players, no boards on the ice, no scoreboard save the frequently disputed one in people's heads, and goal mouths marked by discarded winter boots, this is as pure and natural as hockey gets.

Best of all, at a time when climate change threatens outdoor winter sports, these games produce no carbon emissions other than the drive to the pond, the exercise-induced respiration, and the frequent belly laughs.

Every winter, a gathering of older men and their progeny, and their progeny's friends, and whoever else is invited, seizes the rare days when it's cold enough for Adirondack waters to freeze but dry enough to access the ice. Over breaks, especially around Christmas, they play pond hockey every chance they get, any place they can.



and forever endearing himself to the city of New York when his outstanding goaltending helped the Rangers win their last Stanley Cup, in 1994. But this may be the most exclusive hockey he's ever played. Asked when the group recruited him into the fold, he replies: "I don't know if they ever did. I'm still trying to break into this posse."

The players seem to at least tolerate Richter's presence, if not for his U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame credentials, then perhaps because he sprang for those sweet jerseys.

The de facto commissioner of this "league" is McClelland, co-owner of The Mountaineer outfitter store in Keene Valley and keeper of the on-the-fly schedule. Like any good czar, he's decisive, and a wee bit paranoid. One condition he placed on this article was that *Adirondack Life* not reveal certain secret primo spots. The ones he will acknowledge—Cascade Lakes and Chapel Pond down the road from Lake Placid, Augur Lake near Keeseville—are close to main thoroughfares, if not always convenient.

"One year we went to Augur Lake," recalls Richter, "and I remember it was freezing cold. Vin said it made great ice. He's like, 'You gotta go there.' And I'm thinking, Why are we going 45 minutes away? The whole way I'm cursing him."

McClelland jumps in. "Then we get there, and the ice is so black, you could see fish swimming underneath it," he says, relishing the memory.

Black ice, in addition to creating optimal aquarium viewing, usually means a smooth, clean surface. It's God's own Zamboni. "It was like glass," Richter marvels. "You don't get to experience that very often."

Other spots, especially McClelland's top-secret favorites, require a hike through snowy woods, packing in and packing out sticks, pucks, snow shovels and, of course, beer. It's exhausting, but the payoff is worth it. "I'd never get a workout like this on my own," Richter says. "Your tongue's dragging by the end of it, and night's falling, and you're freezing and you can't feel one foot. But

Most of the time, the teams are random collections of mountain folk. On a given day, you might face off against Bill Beaney—the retired Middlebury College coach who led his teams to eight NCAA Division III championships—or a six-year-old kid. "And everybody passes to the six-year-old so he can get a goal," says Vinny McClelland, the Keene Valley native who often organizes the outings. "That's the magic of the thing."

The squads on Chapel Pond are slightly more organized, Keene versus Lake Placid, with snazzy jerseys and everything—Keene in green, Placid in blue.

Retired NHL star Mike Richter, who lives in Connecticut but spends two weeks every Christmas at his Lake Placid camp, has long been a regular at these games. "It's really the highlight of my year to come out here and play with these nerds," he says. "By the time January comes, I need to get home and get back to work so I can get a rest."

Richter has excelled at the highest levels of the sport, playing in three Olympics

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Mike Richter and his sons prep the ice at Chapel Pond. Facing page: Keene Valley's Vinny McClelland, de facto commissioner of this "league."



The Keene team is full of former competitive Nordic skiers, many of whom—Sophie, Zander, Matt and Scotty Jr., facing page—are related to Vinny McClelland or his brother Scott.



it's just fun to keep playing. And to be in this physical beauty, it's crazy."

The company's good, too. The Keene team is full of former competitive Nordic skiers, many of whom are related to Vinny McClelland or his brother Scott. "All those people are Nordies," says Vinny, pointing out on the ice at Sophie, Scotty Jr., Zander and Matt McClelland, and Simon Thomas-Train, who's gone on to a choreography career in New York City. The younger Keene players poormouth their own hockey abilities. "We're all cross-country skiers; we're kind of out of our element," says Scotty Jr.

That's not all they poormouth. The younger McClelland boys wax nostalgic about the time they decided to shore up the ice on Joe Pete Wilson's pond in Keene, borrowed a sump pump, and coated the playing surface with water. Trouble was, the water they used was from the same pond, so the beautiful new ice suddenly had nothing below to support it, and collapsed. "We thought we were geniuses!" laughs Scotty.

Still, against Lake Placid, the Nordies appear to compensate for deficits in hockey and engineering skills with the ability to skate for weeks at a stretch.

Placid, meanwhile, generally has deeper hockey roots, with many tied to Northwood School in some way. There's Richter, who attended the Lake Placid boarding school in the 1980s, and two of his three sons, Tom and Beany, slender, ruddy-cheeked Connecticut schoolboys who seem to have been born with sticks in their hands. Their brother Jim, though not here today, is also a frequent competitor. Perry Babcock, who played college hockey at Middlebury College, worked at Northwood for years before moving on to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, in Troy.

"I remember when some of these guys were born, been skating with them since they were little tots," Babcock says. "And now they're a lot bigger and stronger and faster than we are."

Babcock jokes that he and his cohort of elders know how to compensate by playing dirty. "As you get older," he says, "you get a lot more creative with your stick."

There are definitely two different styles. The Lake Placid players, featuring the Richters and Babcock, operate in tight spaces, maneuvering the puck through tiny creases in the defense. They produce an array of nifty shots, including the goal of the day, when Babcock deftly handles a pass behind his back, then in one motion delicately banks the puck off an opponent's skate



POND HOCKEY HAS BOOMED DURING the past decade, with tournaments springing up all across the northern U.S. to lure beer leaguers outside. But last year was a rough one for Northern New Yorkers, with rain in late January and February forcing cancellations of individual games and even entire events. If it's cold enough, though, pucksters will flock to these pond-fests that take place within or near the Blue Line—the Adirondack Park one, that is.

CAN/AM TOURNAMENT

January 25–28, Lake Placid

The pond-hockey version of glamping, this tourney showcases the sport at its most luxurious, and draws players from all over the U.S. and Canada. CAN/AM holds tournaments all year long, usually indoors and often for junior travel teams, but the company pulls the goalies, and pulls out the stops, for its lone outdoor event, a massive gathering on Mirror Lake. Bring sticks, skates—and wallet. The entry fee alone will set you back \$215 per team member. www.canamhockey.com

ADIRONDACK CUP

February 2–3, Boonville

Technically not in the Adirondacks (it's a few miles outside the park) and technically not on a pond (organizers set up rinks on the Oneida County Fairgrounds racetrack a couple of weeks ahead of a major snowmobile race), at this three-on-three jamboree, it's the outdoor venue and the spirit that matters. Organizer Anthony Pettinelli, who started the tournament last year, hopes to expand from the inaugural event's 10 teams. With the \$175 per team entry fee, he says, "You've got money left over for beer." And if you win, there's an actual Cup trophy to drink from. www.oneidacountytourism.com

CASEY MCHUGH TOURNAMENT

February 11, Bloomingdale

Part of the Saranac Lake Winter Carnival, this event honors a late, beloved local teen, and raises money for a scholarship in McHugh's name. All ages can enter for the bargain basement price of \$40 a team, but this tourney's focus is on the kids, with girls and boys ages 10 and up taking over the Bloomingdale Park ice. www.saranaclakewintercarnival.com

into the goal. "Happy birthday," a Keene player mumbles.

Keene, meanwhile, prefers to thread long passes down ice to open teammates for breakaway scores past their worn-down foes.

What all the players have in common is a love of the game, and of trash talk. When it's pointed out to Richter that his team is impressive despite often playing short-handed, he disagrees. "I think any team that has Vinny is playing short-handed."

In the end, though, Keene bests its rivals from Lake Placid, as it often does. (Full disclosure: Vinny McClelland may or may not have urged *Adirondack Life* to publish the previous sentence, which may or may not be accurate.)

On these frozen ponds, keeping score isn't really the point. Preserving something important is. Pond hockey's inherent informality breeds a creativity all too rare in an over-coached, over-organized sports world. The games aren't work; they're pure enjoyment, and that inspires more time on task, and better skills. It's practice that doesn't feel like practice at all. "When you play pond hockey," Richter says, "and I heard this from everybody I ever played with in the NHL, and every other kid who's ever put on a pair of skates, it's just fun."

Vinny McClelland coached junior hockey for several years. "The kids who played on the pond went on to play college hockey," he says. "The kids who didn't went nowhere."

The realization isn't lost on people at the higher echelons of the sport. Junior hockey has become an expensive pastime, with travel-team costs, equipment and crack-of-dawn rink rentals driving some parents to spend upwards of \$50,000 a year per young athlete.

Out on the ponds, the ice is free.

That doesn't mean it's abundant. Climate change has seen to that, something Richter knows well. Growing up outside Philadelphia, he remembers playing on frozen ponds every winter. "We didn't pay a dime," he says. "We just came out, shoveled it, and played."

That doesn't happen anymore, and the NHL knows it's losing future talent to the expense of indoor rinks and travel-team programs. "Socio-economically you get a smaller subset of people entering the sport," Richter says. "It's unhealthy all around."

If that sounds wonky, it should. After he retired from hockey in 2003, Richter went back to school and earned a degree in



CAN/AM POND HOCKEY TOURNAMENT PHOTOGRAPH, FACING PAGE, BY SHAUN ONDAK

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Ethics, Politics and Economics from Yale, with a concentration in environmental policy. He has since become an outspoken activist against global warming, founded an investment firm that specializes in sustainable energy, and joined the Adirondack chapter of the Nature Conservancy's board of trustees.

He's worked with the NHL on ways to limit the league's carbon footprint, and applauds league-wide recycling and energy conservation initiatives. "It's not just lip service," he says. "This sport grew up on free ice. It's got a great history to it. It's really romantic to come out and skate on these frozen ponds, lakes and rivers in North America. But what's ended up happening is they freeze later and melt earlier. And there's just

less opportunity to do it."

That may be why Richter and this fun-loving band of Adirondackers make the most of every skate-able moment during these increasingly unreliable winters.

In their own way, with every clack of a stick and flip of a puck, they preserve a culture that's under threat. They're keeping the game going, even as a sun that is suddenly too hot sets on it. ▲

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