

HOCKEY

A Nelson stick handler takes our beloved national sport back to the pond with a weekend tournament in Rossland.

story and photography: Steve Ogle

Streaking down the right wing toward the net, the only sound in my frost-nipped ears is that of cold steel grinding into ice. With so much at stake, I have blocked out every distraction—the fans, the hotdog vendors, the potential scouts—to focus on the game.

Ralphie calls to me, desperate for the puck: “Ogle! D-man!” Interpreted for the non-hockey set, this means my defenseman Brian Ralph is open for a pass.

This is the big time, I think. I’m eyeballing a tape-to-tape saucer pass to my teammate when, suddenly, a manhole-sized divot in the ice catches one of my blades, sending me butt-over-teakettle into a corner snowbank, nearly upending our team’s beer cooler.

“Put another pylon over it,” shouts the scorekeeper, without much sympathy. This is pond hockey at its best.

My team, the Nelson Mighty Ducts, has travelled to Rossland to compete in the Western Regionals, en route to the Canadian National Pond Hockey championships. We’re down 3 to 1 against the Gilnockie Ruttin’ Bucks from South Slocan. It’s not looking good. They have at least one ex-pro on their roster and they’re wearing matching uniforms. But we’re keeping our sticks on the ice—or at least below knee height, which is one of the rules.

Fierce pond-hockey competition is common on frozen lakes throughout British Columbia’s heartland, though crowds such as the two Ducts fans present are an anomaly. Most games are disorganized gatherings of friends, a few happy stick handlers breaking the silence of an otherwise serene outdoor setting. Instead of cramming into a claustrophobic rec centre smelling of dirty socks, things are more real out on a pond. There’s no scoreboard and no referees. The rules are simple: keep the sticks down, no slapshots, and the game ends when mom calls for dinner. Helmets, skates, gloves and sticks are usually the only equipment. The whole feeling is quite liberating—almost spiritual. Curious moose wander past and ravens caw overhead. At night under a floodlight the other side of the boards might as well be pristine wilderness, not a concession stand. This weekend, though, the players from Prince George are the only wildlife, and rink-side hoots and cheers drown out any ambient sounds of nature.

For most of the several hundred players here, this tournament is the culmination of a youth spent on skates. We plied the frozen waters of local ponds and community rinks, developing our game stories and collecting the scars to prove them. (I took five new stitches in the chin last April.) The most talented kids long ago went on to the big leagues, while the less gifted dropped out or became Zamboni drivers.

Playing “shinny” as the pastime is also known, is a great way to stay young. There are few sports where you can drink in almost unbearably cold air while at the same time exuding buckets of perspiration. Injuries are seldom an issue because the fun of the game outweighs the pain of an errant puck in the shins. Or a tumble in the corner. The list

goes on. Indeed, the sport breeds toughness. There's no whistle to stop the play and little mercy from opponents anyway. My life was shaped by pond hockey from the first time I licked the metal shovel while clearing off the backyard rink with my dad.

In my greatest fantasy, I'd be on the Canadian men's ice-hockey team at the upcoming Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games. Some 20,000 fans are expected to pack Canada Hockey Place in Vancouver to watch the gold-medal men's game between Canada (we hope) and some other country. I would, of course, be the one to score the winning goal.

The hockey matches are expected to draw more attention than any other sport in the 2010 Winter Games. This year, the North American teams will have the unusual advantage of playing on an NHL-sized rink instead of the larger international dimensions—perfect for our Canadian style of play.

Many of our hockey greats began their careers on small ponds like this one in Rossland. For me, this semi-final game is the next step on my road to glory. I'm giving it my all.

"Come on boys, play as a unit!" our left-winger shouts, while retrieving some duct tape that has fallen from his tattered jersey.

The Bucks have put a few more goals on the imaginary scoreboard, and our two substitute players are already into their first beers. Victory seems unlikely.

I'm not ready to quit, though. For the last five minutes of this epic match-up, I'm going to play my heart out. For me, it's overtime in the Olympic gold-medal final, and the only sound I hear is the zing of my blades on the frozen pond.

Info: (www.canadapondhockey.ca)