

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DEREK SHAPTON

TAKING THE ICE

Across the country, women who have never played hockey are coming to the national pastime with a passion all their own, challenging Frank and the boys for ice time on a Saturday Night By Deirdre Hanna

In 1984 an 11-year-old girl named Justine Blainey tried out for a Metro Toronto Hockey League Pee wee team, the Toronto Olympics, and made the roster. When it came time to play games, though, the MTHL and the Ontario Hockey Association banned her from dressing. The problem? Her gender. She had played MTHL games through the early 80s, skating in exhibition games with whatever team her brother David had made. Complicit coaches had tacitly listed the talented player on the roster as “Justin” Blainey, a fiction she became progressively less comfortable with as time passed. In the fall of 1985, facing the prospect of no longer being able to play against male competition, the now 12-year-old girl decided to fight for her rights; the rest, quite literally, is history.

Justine initially lost her case at the Supreme Court of Ontario, but in 1986 she won in the Ontario Court of Appeal. (The decision was written by Charles Dubin, who subsequently conducted the famous inquiry into sprinter Ben Johnson’s fall from grace.) The OHA promptly applied to the Supreme Court of Canada for leave to appeal the Ontario Court of Appeal’s ruling; leave was denied, thereby upholding the Ontario precedent. It was only at this point that Justine was in a legal position to make a complaint to the Ontario Human Rights Commission. In 1987, she finally won the right to play with the boys.



Today, “ordinary” women across the country are picking up sticks and embracing the game as a birthright. They’ve made women’s hockey the fastest growing sport in North America

“I didn’t have a clue that it was going to be so difficult,” Justine (now Dr. Blainey-Broker) reflects. “At home, everything my brother got, I got, so when the OHA wouldn’t let me play it seemed ludicrous. I wanted to play on the best team I could make, because it was fair. I didn’t know then what would happen; that I’d be followed by rapists, or pushed down stairs, or lose all my female friends. I’d get to the arena and women — the worst were women — would actually spit on me.”

By age 15 Justine had lost her size advantage (she stands 5-4) and had gone three seasons without playing games with boys at a competitive level. Still, she was able to make the cut on elite boys’ teams in the MTHL, earning spots on the Scarborough Young Bruins, Etobicoke Canucks and East Ender Ti-Cats before she was “legal.” In breaking hockey’s gender barrier, Justine did more than simply pave the way for players like Manon Rheume and Hayley Wick-enheiser, or provide an acting vehicle for Megan Follows (then at the height of her fame as *Anne of Green Gables*), who portrayed Justine in a TV movie based on the landmark case.

I have inside information. It was my mother, lawyer J. Anna Fraser, who represented Justine throughout the three-year legal ordeal. As a result, I’m acutely aware of the far-reaching legal impact of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms case known as *Re Blainey and Ontario Hockey Association* (1986), which boasts a legacy reaching well beyond the realm of sports and has become part of the canon of Canadian law. Better known is a secondary effect of the case: this month, 19 years after Justine made headlines, the Canadian national women’s hockey team, reigning world champions and Olympic gold medalists, are skating for their country at the eighth International Ice Hockey Federation Women’s World Championships.

Perhaps even more important, today “ordinary” women in rinks across the country are picking up sticks and embracing ice hockey as a birthright, making it one of the fastest-growing sports in North America. And these aren’t little girls, but adults old enough to be their mothers and grandmothers — grownups who have, for the most part, never played before but who, for a gamut of reasons, some traditional, some surprising, have taken up the national pastime.

I’m one of those women, a mother of two going out twice a week to William H. (Bill) Bolton Arena in downtown Toronto’s Annex neighbourhood, for skills classes Sunday nights and games on Mondays in a six-team house league that fields four teams through the summer. Playing hockey in a heat wave is sweet, and by the time this article appears the summer league will be long sold out.

1972 WAS A LANDMARK YEAR for me: my brother Zak was born, my parents set out on the road to divorce and Canada beat the U.S.S.R. in the legendary summit series. It was thrilling hockey, but it didn’t get me hooked, even though my father, a sociologist, hauled me out of class to watch the games at a steakhouse near Jesse Ketchum Public School. When Team Canada returned triumphant to a cheering mob at Toronto’s Nathan Phillips Square, we were in the thick of the frenzied adoration. But once it was over, it was over. Hockey simply wasn’t an option for most women of my generation, although we grew up fully aware of the fact that hockey transcends national obsession, that it is part of the Canadian soul.

How could we not know? Years later, while interviewing New York-based Weimaraner photographer William Wegman for an article on dog breeding, I

would listen to him talk more about hockey than about art or dogs, unable to resist boasting to a Canadian that he was related to legendary Habs goaltender Georges Vézina, “as in the trophy.”

I first recognized hockey’s true allure while watching the Leafs practise one day at Maple Leaf Gardens in the early 1990s, waiting to interview a rookie for a celebrity/fashion column. The precision and grace of the drills struck a chord. I managed to scrounge some tickets and saw Detroit, led by a mesmerizing Steve Yzerman, crush Toronto. By the time I featured Wayne Gretzky in “What I Wear” — an opportunity created when Number 99 put his name on a menswear line for the Bay — I felt silly using my one-on-one with the Great One to quiz him on his designer shoes.

Given my personal awareness of the Blainey case, it was inevitable that I would initially perceive hockey as a political metaphor. I wasn’t the first. Playwright and journalist Rick Salutin had won a Chalmers Award in 1978 for his play *Les Canadiens*, written with an “assist” by Ken Dryden and serendipitously staged within months of the Parti Québécois’s ascent to political power. My politics, on the other hand, reflected those of my generation: disappointment at the failure of our parents’ youthful idealism. Some generation-Xers responded with bitterness, while others of us embraced feminism and nationalism as rights to be reclaimed. For me, hockey crystallized issues that were powerful and emotional.

It was in this “empowered” spirit, in January 2001, that I wrote an article on the difficulty of finding hockey skates designed for women. While doing the research — on Mission Skate’s just-launched and dubiously named “Betty Flyweight” — I discovered a program called Women’s Hockey Skills for Beginners. It was taught by Dave McMaster, who had coached the Canadian women to a 1990 gold medal in the first IIHF-sanctioned world championships. Intrigued, I enrolled.

I might have started hockey for cerebral reasons, but it had always been in my blood. Once I played, I was hooked.

TONIGHT’S GAME has the pressure of redemption. A week ago, we had an amazing Sunday night skills class, at which several of us (including Judy Pfeifer, executive assistant to Ontario Minister of Municipal Affairs John Gerretsen, and myself) finally mastered backward crossovers. Despite the great lesson, when my team hit the ice Monday, chaos reigned. It was only our second game together after regrouping — the league mixes up lineups every 10 games — and we still hadn’t sorted out lines by the time the puck dropped. We played like losers, once actually leaving ourselves short-handed with a sloppy shift change, which we didn’t notice until we’d given up a goal. Tonight we’ve got something to prove to ourselves: dignity demands it.

My league mates have come to the game from diverse backgrounds and for many reasons. My friend Brenda Marshall, office manager at *NOW Magazine*, took up hockey after watching the youngest of her four daughters play. (Brenda considers skating on a line with her daughter Allison in the Bolton summer league one of her life’s highlights.) Blue-liner Dr. Tanya Petter has a background in competitive figure skating and eats up the ice with her stride. Goaltender Rula Radie, who works for Citizenship and Immigration Canada, gave hockey a shot after hanging out at rinks with her boyfriend Deryk. (She also regularly plays shinny with him. The day they made an offer on a house in Mississauga, Rula started researching the local rinks.) Musician and TVOntario video editor Suzanne Nuttall played ringette as a teenager in Dol-



The author’s team, in white, in defensive mode

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lard-des-Ormeaux. Oxford University Press sales rep Bridget Wiley took up hockey for the exercise and stayed for the thrill. Pharmaceutical marketing consultant Cindy Mersky bought a front-loading washing machine because its store display showed it loaded with hockey gear; it’s now loaded with Cindy’s hockey paraphernalia. A group of mostly male colleagues at the Ontario Science Centre invited Donna Francis to join them for their lunch-hour ball hockey sessions, and when a nearby wetlands pond froze over they assured her that the real fun was just starting. A strong overall athlete but not a confident skater at first, Donna signed on for skills classes — and quickly became confident.

The litany goes on. Lawyer and all-round-jock Shelley Hobbs plays goal on the soccer field and won a gold medal in recreational softball at the 2002 Sydney Gay Games. Liz Pead and Suzanne Holman are among a growing number of league members who have taken time off while pregnant but have been quick to get back in the rink. Many of us had years of ballet training, but little experience with team sports. Georgina Watts is one of a minority of women who were into ice hockey as children; she plays with the same intuitive ease as the men who lace up after our league, most of whom learned to skate before they could read.

Why are we here? Ellen McNeill jokes that she took up the game because, “I had one-year-old twins at home and I needed to get out of the house.” But her tone is more sober when she talks about wanting to inspire her eldest daughter. “Her dad is 6-8 and by five it was obvious that she was going to be tall, so I thought hockey would be a good sport for her. She didn’t have any role models, so when I signed her up I signed myself up. Now the twins play, too.”

Film and TV business analyst Marla Boltman states bluntly that going out for hockey as an adult was a matter of opportunity. “I’m a tomboy all grown up, and I realized I had the option to play. For years I didn’t.”

Why do we stay with it? Nurse Karen Delaney-Laupacis sums it up succinctly: “Camaraderie. Camaraderie and fun.”

Most of us may be neophytes, but we take the game seriously. I bustle into the arena late, dumping my kids with tonight’s babysitter, an Atom A player who seems thrilled to be *paid* to watch a game — even at our level. The Bolton lobby often looks like a day-care centre when the women play. There are only four minutes to the flood when I get to the dressing room; Lisa Gibson, whose chest protector has wound up in my gear bag, pounces on me. Most of my team mates have come straight from work; a couple of business suits provide evidence of life off the ice. I make a crack about how I’m about to lose my manicure as I pull on my gloves, sparking a quick debate about the pros and cons of getting hockey pedicures.

I don’t know what men’s dressing rooms are like. I’ve only been in one, the Leaf’s palatial facility at the Air Canada Centre. The ACC change rooms are as far removed from the Bill Bolton experience as the Taj Mahal is from a Tim Horton’s. I suspect that the locker-room talk of the men who play at Bolton and other community arenas may not focus around children’s music lessons, an upcoming kitsch dyke night cabaret, wanting to get good enough to play with our spouses, or how to get breast milk out of protective equipment.

Whatever talk goes down among the boys or girls, however, it’s all just a prelude: the game’s the thing. This week’s game comes as a welcome contrast to last week’s fracas. When we step on to the ice we seem completely organized. I’ve been assigned right wing, my preferred position. The first period speeds by, scoreless, but we keep control of the puck, play our positions and



The Start: Justine Blaney celebrates her victory in court



The Finnish: Hayley Wickenheiser plays the men's game

seriously outshoot the competition. With time running out, one of the players on our first line works herself free for a clear shot at net, lets it fly and *scores* — a split-second after the buzzer sounds.

THERE’S NOTHING NEW about chicks with sticks. In the late 19th century, women’s teams sprang up in parallel with men’s teams at universities including McGill and Queen’s. A photo dating from 1890 shows Isobel Stanley playing hockey on the flooded grounds of Rideau Hall. In 1893, her father, Canada’s sixth Governor General, Sir Frederick Arthur Stanley, first Baron Stanley of Preston and 16th Earl of Derby, purchased the \$50 silver cup (actually a bowl) that has become hockey’s holy grail. He bought the cup because he, his wife and their 10 children loved playing hockey with family friends. In the peculiar maelstrom of liberation history, Canadian women could play hockey before they could vote.

Blaney photo: CP/Toronto Star (Andrew Stawicki) Wickenheiser photo: CP (Jussi Nukari)

One of the hardest—and most valuable— things that girls learn is “calculated aggression”



Ice Time: will novice adult women's leagues become obsolete?

The women's game dropped into obscurity in the mid-20th century with the change in women's roles that accompanied the post-war baby boom. In 1956, future Canadian track star Abby Hoffman, then 8 years old, was discovered playing boys' hockey in the Toronto Hockey League. The league quickly cut her career short, refusing to let her play the following season. The case made headlines, but women's profile in the game stayed underground.

It only resurfaced again with the Blainey case. There were those, both inside the all-female Ontario Women's Hockey Association and out, who felt that desegregating hockey would kill the women's game. Instead, it *made* the women's game. Still, liberation movements have a nasty habit of creating intolerances of their own. In 1992, when Justine was 19, she switched to women's hockey. The reception was icy. For two years she was the most penalized player in the league, in part because she was used to a more physical style of play, but also because of her name.

By this point, though, the juggernaut was unstoppable. Over the next two

decades women's hockey would grow at a phenomenal rate, an estimated 500 per cent expansion (some estimates claim up to 40 per cent a year), and the best players, at the national level where the Canadian women rule, would come to enjoy an intimate household-name status, a grass-roots version of the stratospheric glory enjoyed by the National Hockey League's male players. (Today, at age 30, in fact, Blainey-Broker occasionally plays for the National Women's Hockey League's Brampton Thunder, one of the premiere teams of the four-year-old amateur organization. The Thunder's regular lineup includes Olympic medalists Vicky Sunohara and Jayna Hefford, whom NWHL president Susan Fennell describes as “the Gretzky of women's hockey,” and who scored Team Canada's unforgettable 2002 Olympic gold-winning goal.)

It would also become clear that, as in tennis, the presence of women in hockey was not only integrating the game but with rule and style differences (intentional body-checking is disallowed in the women's game, for one thing) possibly creating an *improved* product.

“The best hockey has a mix of the flow and thinking and play-making of the European style, combined with the toughness and passion of the Canadian game,” observes Hayley Wickenheiser, who made history in 2003 when she became the first woman to record a point playing hockey for a pro men's team, Salamat, in Finland. “Sometimes we get it right in the women's game, which makes it great to watch. As a spectator sport it's entertaining, and you never know what to expect. The game flows quicker, there are fewer scrums after the whistle, more ebb and flow. The thinking and finesse can give a breath of fresh air compared to the clutch and grab of the men's game.”

Today, Ivy League scouts regularly head north recruiting Canadian girls for their collegiate teams, just as Canadian boys have been recruited for years. And little girls in hockey gear are being used to sell everything from credit cards to doughnuts. We're finally seeing a generation of women who grew up with the game reach adulthood. Not all of them skate for Team Canada, just as not all men make the NHL. With thousands of young women who have been playing since they were tiny, I wonder if they'll stick with it, and play pickup as adults like so many of the men I know.

I ask Brenda Marshall if her daughter Allison, now attending Brock University and focusing on academics rather than athletics, is still playing. Brenda laughs. Of course she is: Allison loves hockey. She's in house league for fun. I try to imagine Allison not playing, and realize that the more likely scenario is adult leagues at my level becoming obsolete. I contemplate my own imminent extinction.

ONE OF THE HARDEST THINGS

for women who are new to hockey to learn—and one of the most valuable things, if you listen to the parents of girls who play—is calculated aggression. I may have been told countless times that if I don’t want the puck I’ll never get it, but until now that knowledge has been largely theoretical. I’m not quite comfortable with being really hungry for it. Yet as my line takes the second period’s second shift, I find myself too focused to obsess over theory, instead charging to the corner and picking up the puck. Three things happen now that surprise me perhaps more than anyone else. I glance toward the net and actually notice my left winger, the very adept Tracy Heffernan, standing in front of it. We actually make eye contact; I actually make the pass. And, nirvana, she scores.

My game stays surprising. On our next shift I get a clean shot on goal, which I naturally send directly at the goalie’s stick. Minutes later, off a face-off in our opponent’s zone, I take a pass from our centre, Liz, and rather than shoot backhand I opt for a tight turn, not quite a 360, and lob the puck at the net. It hits the post, a fact to which my kids and their Atom A babysitter, sitting 10 feet away, will later attest.

When I first started playing I had no clue what I was doing. I’d watch NHL games to try to figure out where I was supposed to be, swallowing my pride and asking my husband to talk me through the nuances of offside and delayed penalty rules. Nothing beats the excitement of a live game, though (especially a good one) and recently I went to see one: not NHL, but NWHL. It was an exhibition game in Scarborough between two of the league’s top teams: the Calgary Oval X-Treme and the Toronto (formerly Beatrice) Aeros. Sharing the ice were no fewer than nine of the female Team Canada players who were part of the Olympic championship team in Salt Lake City. It was a remarkable game, played with ferocity and finesse. From a fan’s perspective it didn’t get much better than this. Naturally the arena was sold out — all 600 seats.

By NWHL standards it was a good crowd. The Aeros, arguably the most famous club in women’s hockey, have chronic trouble filling the 1,200 seats on their home ice, the York Ice Garden. The NWHL is an amateur league; the players receive nothing for playing. Team Canada’s carded members are paid \$1,100 a month. Danielle Goyette really did work at Home Depot — it wasn’t just an ad. It’s one of the truly exasperating things about the state of the women’s game. How hard can it be to market a team with a roster stacked with Olympic gold-and-silver medalists, members of the reigning world champion Team Canada, in a country as hockey-crazed as Canada? Particularly when the game—relying on skill not brawn — is arguably better?

A few weeks later, talking to Maple Leaf goalie Trevor Kidd, I’ll hear an



incidental rationale. “There’s no question that a woman can play at this level,” Kidd will say. “Many of the top female players skate as well as Owen Nolan, Bryan McCabe or Mats Sundin. But can a woman shoot the puck at 100 miles per hour, bench press 400 pounds and get up after being slammed against the boards by someone weighing 225?”

Can she? Does it matter? What matters more, it strikes me, is that at age four my daughter started boycotting McDonald’s because “none of their hockey cards have girls on them.” I’m still wondering what matters when, on my way out of the ACC, Leafs coach Pat Quinn asks me the one question that really seems important among men who love the game: “You play?”

OUR GAME at Bill Bolton ends in a tie. We get complacent in the third period, go into a shell, the other team scores with moments to go and we can’t turn it around. But for me it’s been a great game: I got an assist.

Photograph by Tkitttkitttkitttkitttkitttk