

Tom Sheehan

The Ice of Old Lily Pond

The man was raw-boned, sleek, could skate like the wind that blew out of Canada on days like these around the corner of Appleton and Summer Streets, near cliff faces where the Montreal Tunnel holds forth. His hair was dark, his eyes held stories recessed and reserved, but he wore a magnificent pair of hockey gloves. Great, shiny black elegant things, tools of the trade. If he stood still you'd swear you could smell the new leather of them.

Unlike our battered hand-me-downs or older brothers cast-offs, his stick was always new, the blade daily wound with clean tape, and his name, barely legible if you wanted to stare closely at its small letters, was burned into the high handle. His neat Chinos, telling you he might be a veteran of the war just over, were neatly bloused about his bulky shin pads with rubber bands cut from inner tubes, the bottoms of the pads visible and deep red as they hunkered above white skate laces. Only his mean skates were throwbacks into other wars of ice; scarred, ugly things, tears apparent, repairs, only the blades of them shiny.

He was not from town, not from Saugus, and carried a few pucks of his own, never to be without. But two days during the school week, and every Saturday and Sunday in skating weather, which seemed to be forever in those days, he was on the ice of Lily Pond. Waiting for a game, he'd fly about the pond like something out of Hans Brinker and Hans' miles of canals, snapping, dragging, coaxing a puck, standing it on its ear. When a game started he was first into it, then, as the games grew in number and spread across the face of the pond, he'd slip off to one with better talent, more challenge.

For the games did grow, especially on a weekend and the skaters coming out of Melrose and North Revere and Lynn to enjoy the hockey on Lily Pond with us Saugus skaters. There'd be ten or twenty games at one time spread across all the sections of the pond; by the boat house where canoes and rowboats were put away, in the cove by Cliff Road where we've skated as late as May of the year in the shadows of the cliff, out beyond Fiske's Icehouse, up near the Turnpike, at the head of the Island, over by Frank Evans' Beach on Lily Pond Road, down by the dam, over by Rippon's Mushroom House that used to be Monteith's Icehouse. Hockey everywhere. Pond hockey. Wide-open hockey. Pucks careened out of one game and into another. Quite often we raced to retrieve our one last puck after we'd lost others down in watering holes where we quenched our thirsts, keeping the holes open all the day.

The pond is what brought the dark man with the great gloves. They said he once skated with the Boston Olympics, had been hurt in the Boston Garden, once was a Bruin for a cup of coffee. When I first heard that I wondered where they had breakfast. But on the pond he'd shift into gear easily in a game with our best players: Lonnie Green, Brother Parker, Jackie and Charlie and Googie Prentice, Neil Howland, Eddie Ayers, Jimmy MacDougall, Mike Harrington, Billy Falasca, Randy Popp, Red Parrott, Dickie Weeks, fifty or sixty friends out of East Saugus and Cliftondale and Saugus Center as the games grew, multiplied, spread to all ends of the

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pond like a precursor to an Olympic Village in Lake Placid building up in dreams.

If and when it snowed, we'd shovel rinks out of the snow, and Lily Pond, from a distance, from up Pressburn Hill, would look like a battlefield filled with square or rectangular bomb craters. Rocks or logs would be our goal posts, or someone's shoes, and occasionally, in early spring, the ice still on the pond, you'd have to be alert for old goal posts having sunk part way into the surface. Once an old pair of knee-high boots lasted until the spring thaw took them down past the last goal scored.

But when the pond was free and clear and the ice smooth, there'd be hockey all of daylight. And then at night, under the stars or the moon pressing down on us their inevitability, trysts in the making, life-long friendships being developed or remembered forever, there'd be a whip with fifty or sixty kids holding hands, and the skater on the end better be a good skater because he or she would be snapped off to the winds, a solid rush of breath into lungs, speed sometimes paralyzing a pair of legs. Later there'd be cocoa and doughnuts at Frank Evans' pond side camp or a game of hide and seek so you and your girl could be hidden for a while, away at the dark edges of the pond.

But younger, when the pond began to be a thing in my life, friends and I would walk to the pond on a Saturday morning, skates slung onto the blade end of hockey sticks, shin pads slipped over the other end and paired up with inner tube bands. We'd walk up Appleton Street, past Appleton's Pulpit ("Where in 1687 Major Appleton of Ipswich made a speech denouncing the tyranny of the Royal Governor Sir Edmund Andros..."... I memorized that sign over 75 years ago) the ever-wind against us, anxious to see the ice condition, hurry in our pace, and a dryness in our throats as we generated our own excitement. We'd pull on and lace up skates, play hockey until noon when, in my case, my father would arrive with a sandwich and hot cocoa in the back seat of the car, loosen my skates, turn me loose in half an hour, come back at supper time with the same deal, saying as he left me, "Be home before midnight."

Trust was in the air, flowed about us as fully as the wind on the pond. Those were the days when a sleep was a sleep, a deep humming thing, when hockey was the spring in your legs, the sound at the back of your head, the excitement at both ends of a snowstorm, and rain, drizzle or sleet was looked upon as punishment being exacted for a forgotten sin.

And the dark skater with the great new gloves, almost as thick as boxing gloves, dreams in themselves, would be there, just as he is remembered today, flying across the ice with a puck on the blade of his stick, and never looking down at it. Never once. And he has skated off to his forever, the wars and panics and storms between now and then, but he'll never know that I still remember him.