



Wolfe Island's Lake Ontario milk jug

As recreational hockey players, Torontonians are spoiled, coddled and babied. Our dressing rooms are soft, warm, and moderately stinkless. We have attendants to empty garbage pails, wash players' benches, fill candy machines, and repair boards, matts and netting. Once, at my home rink – McCormick Arena – the custodians honoured our request to pipe in the overtime period of Leafs-Hawks over the rink's p.a. system during our regular Sunday night game. Jeremy Roenick scored to beat the home Blues, but we still left the rink feeling like hockey aristocrats, as distanced from our deep woods' ancestors as Nik Antropov from Shrimp Worters.

So, it was with an eye to challenging our soft hockey lives that, last February, 24 Torontonians from two teams – the Gas Station Islanders (named after a friend's recording studio) and the Toronto Morningstars (my team, named after musician Dale Morningstar) – barreled down the highway three hours east of the city to stand at the edge of the Kingston ferry dock and take the evening's last boat bound for Wolfe Island, the largest of the region's thousand islands. As the ship's prow bumped huge slabs of blue ice running across the confluence of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River, I stood along the rail and imagined that I was an explorer, maybe Franklin or Frobisher. The ride is supposed to last twenty minutes, but after reaching the frost-bitten dock on the other side of the water, it felt like 200 years.

The focus of our journey was the Lake Ontario Cup, which isn't so much a trophy as a milk jug that someone hauled out of someone else's barn to replace the shimmering golden chalice that nobody got around to commissioning. The jug had spent two years sitting at the Island Grill Bar and Restaurant adorned with but a single championship nameplate: the Morningstars. We'd won it two years ago, but last year's tournament was cancelled because of warm weather, so it was with a vague sense of purpose that we hauled ourselves out of bed the next day – half of the team slept at a local hunting camp; my wife and I stayed with Teppy the boatbuilder – and made our way to the rink on a cold and sunny winter morning.

The rink in Marysville – Wolfe Island's small village with two variety stores, a post office, church and library – has no scoreclock, Plexiglass or candy machine. It doesn't even have benches, or a dressing room, for that matter. The tournaments' four teams – the others were the Lake Ontario Keeper team, organized by my friend, the environmental lawyer Mark Mattson, whose grandparents' settled on the island in 1889; and the Wolfe Island All-Stars, made up of local hockey anti-heroes – were required to change in a small utility room behind the rink, and forced to sit on top of the boards or stand in corners beside the net when not involved in the play. Whenever a puck came into my feet, I treated it like a rolling grenade, unless, of course, one of my rushing team-mates wanted it, in which case I booted it forward. The nature of the ice surface meant that pucks hiccupped and spun at strange angles, and that goaltenders had to play the disc for what it wasn't suppose to do, rather than what it did. My notion of skating in an idyllic and perfect natural setting was challenged in more ways than one.

The rink was crafted atop the island's baseball diamond. Its creator was a fellow named Ben Woodman – the island's bus driver and occasional commercial fisherman – who wore a camouflage jumpsuit and baseball cap tucked low over his eyes. Ben had spent the better part of three weeks standing alone in the frigid, middle-of-the-night cold spraying the rink with a hose from the island's fire truck, which Ben had borrowed for these purposes. The rink was charming in all of its imperfections: ice-clawed, waist-high, graybrown boards; rusty-bolt doors; old haggard nets; a crude snow-lined path that ran from the dressing room to the ice; and scrub players in every vintage of equipment, including Gordie Howe flowerpot helmets, peewee shoulder pads, and wooden sticks that spanked the puck like a hammer on a bedslat. Bleachers stood on the south side of the rink, and behind them, rows of pickup trucks and ATVs idling within puck-striking distance of the ice. One of these trucks – owned by Danny Mosier, the gravel-voiced island gatekeeper who runs the local gas station – parked beside one of the nets, where it blasted songs by Boston and Meatloaf out of a small p.a. that Danny's brother, Vinnie, had assembled on the truck's flatbed while dressed in hockey pants and socks.

Most visitors familiar with the island are required to stop at Danny's gas bar after landing there, not the least being island resident Don Cherry, Danny's sometime fishing companion. It was because of Danny's suggestion that Grapes donated 500 jackets signed by the Plaid One himself, which Ducks Unlimited are in the process of auctioning for the purposes of sustaining the rink. A former factory worker in Kingston who was downsized several years ago, Danny bought his gas station and garage hoping that he could sustain life on an island that generations of Mosiers' had called home. It turned out that his new business would allow for all of that and more. In fact, the idea for the Lake Ontario Cup came together around smokes and coffees at the gas bar's countertop, okayed and supported by the island's amiable totem before it proceeded any further.

Just after 12:30 pm, Danny handed a microphone to Chris Mattson, his retired brother-in-law, who held it suspiciously, as if it were a firework about to be lit. Chris announced the start of the event, calling us "the North Stars," as Bill, the tourney's lone referee, blew into his whistle and dropped the puck along a spraypainted black line that ran across the gray ice.

We won our first game, defeating the Keepers 6-1. This wasn't easy, not because these bladed environmentalists were particularly gifted with puck and stick, but because my wife, Janet, was playing with them. I was lucky to not have too many shifts against her, because my game is always conflicted, cheering hard for her to score, but only once a Morningstars victory appears in hand. So, because we scored early and often against the Keepers, I was able to enjoy the game's scene: the bleacher crowd sitting with thick blankets covering their legs and feet, drinking rum and whiskey out of thermoses; packs of young island kids sitting atop snowbanks that, at certain points, were higher than the boards themselves; and a stand of trees heavy with snow that filled the players' view whenever you gathered for a face-off.

Since there was no timeclock, Uncle Chris and Danny used their watches to time the games. Whenever a match ended, Chris barked into the mic: "And that's the end of the game!" Pucks sneaked under the boards, were swallowed by snowbanks, got chased by dogs. By the fifth game of the day, the sun had set directly in front of the Gas Station Islanders' goalie –Sean Markle – even though, as his team's coach, he'd had the players rub grease paint under their eyes. He'd also passed out Hot Shots for their hands and toes, but no measure of gamesmanship could level the impact that the forces of nature had on the play. And despite using the ball diamond's light standards for the tourney's final match – the Morningstars vs. the Wolfe Island All-Stars in what approximated a championship game – they emitted nothing more than a dull, misty glow, which meant having to skate in half-darkness for much of the game.

Still, there was a certain dreaminess to the play. Because the ice surface had barely survived five hours of consecutive hockey – the day's sunshine had made it a challenge for Ben to repair holes that had grooved deep into the ice – you were required to stickhandle up the ice while not getting caught in one of the ruts or losing the puck through a hole in the boards. Still, these challenges made for exciting, if perilous, hockey. The player had to work the disc as if it were a lively dancing tennis ball, tapping it across chunks and fissures of cracked ice, and since both teams were competing on the same adversarial playing surface, we shared in each other's difficulties like footballers scrumming in the mud or soccerists running through rain.

About 100 islanders crowded the bleachers for the final game. Along the snowbanks, chilled beer cans and bottles peeked over the top of the boards. Both teams battled hard, and the score was tied 5-5 going into the 3rd period. The Island team's goalie was a fortysomething used car salesman named Cathy Kennedy. Cathy was the first player I'd seen when I'd arrived that morning, running to her truck across the snow dressed in nothing but a black athletic unitard. If Wolfe Island hockey was atypical of modern hockey, Cathy was atypical of the modern player.

I was put in a difficult spot when, near the end of the game, the puck found my stick at the blueline – which is to say, the blackline – and gave me the chance to shoot on the Island's heroic goalie. Because the ping-ponging disc rarely settled against one's stickblade, the last thing I wanted to do was throw it away in haste, but I was loathe to change what, I thought, was a perfect tournament result: a championship tie.

I cradled and stilled the cookie for a moment – savouring its moment of stasis – but one of the Islanders tried chopping it away, so I had no choice but to fling the puck into the air. It climbed through the gloomy light, arced in front of the net, then tumbled like a fat dead mouse into the net's sagging mesh. There was some groaning, laughter and then cheering from the crowd. If I had to play the hero, this was as good a place as any.