A Heart on Ice: My Complicated Relationship with Minnesota’s Favorite Game

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Content warning: violence and homophobic language

As a consequence mostly of climate, many cold places are unified by their love of ice hockey. Whether you live on the windswept plains of Saskatchewan, in some frigid suburb of Helsinki, or nestled deep in a Siberian valley, you’ve probably come into contact with hockey culture in some capacity. Growing up in the (self-proclaimed) “State of Hockey,” it was basically unavoidable. Although I didn’t play until I was in middle school, I was immersed in the sport practically from the moment I was born. The son of two talented hockey players, the grandson of a former Minnesota golden gopher, and the eldest of three hockey-obsessed boys, hockey is in my blood.

As a child, I’d spend my weekends at the rink watching my brothers or dad play. At home, we’d fight over who got the good stick in knee hockey, or who played goalie on our tiny backyard sheet. To relax we’d play hockey video games or watch highlight reels of our favorite players. I fell asleep watching Minnesota Wild games so frequently that the voices of Tom Reid and Bob Kurtz became an auditory glass of warm milk. It would be hyperbole to suggest that hockey is, or ever was, my life, but it was certainly a big part of it. It was something I could always count on, a way to relate to my family, and something to do with my brothers and neighbors. Hockey helped me feel like I belonged. In this paper, I’ll discuss features of hockey culture, the intricacies of hockey in Saint Paul, Minnesota, how and why I identified with it so strongly in the past, and how the dark side of hockey - hazing and conformist pressure - taught me a lot about myself.

Although, as I discuss further below, every region, town, and even neighborhood has a unique cultural identity expressed through hockey, Minnesota as a whole values many of the same things inside its ice rinks as it does in greater society. In a 2016 essay called “People Like Us,” author David Lawrence Grant dissects the concept of “Minnesota Nice” and reveals a lot about Minnesota culture in the process. When speculating about the reason why a neighbor of his might not understand the plight of people of color living in the area, he describes a Scandinavian family who “made the clothes they wore and who ate, almost entirely, only the food they grew themselves. People for whom life was hard . . . but who never complained,” (211). The origins of hockey in Minnesota aren’t too different. Early ice hockey, a mix of Irish hurling and the Native American game of lacrosse, was brutal and demanded a level of sacrifice. Played outside in subzero temperatures on frozen rivers or lakes with hand-carved wooden sticks and sweaters knit by a mom or an aunt, disasters weren’t uncommon: players fell through the ice or were cut by crude iron skate blades. Sorrow and pain were built into the very fabric of the sport.

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1 This autoethnographic essay was submitted for the final paper in Hum 3108: Community Interpreting. In fall 2024, Eischens, majoring in French and minoring in Computer Science at UMN Morris, will begin the M.A. Program in Community Interpreting and Translation at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee.

2 My research suggests that this designation was born of an ad campaign that launched the return of pro hockey to Minnesota in the late 1990s, with the launch of the Minnesota Wild.
Hockey is also very physical. Full body checking is allowed, so hockey has one of the highest rates of head injuries of all youth sports.\(^3\) Danger and hardship (even if a consequence of your decision to play in the first place) are seen as a crucial element of the game. Much like the Minnesotan in Grant’s story, hockey players value toughness and stoicism above all else. My grandfather poked fun at my brothers and I for playing indoors because he grew up freezing his ass off playing pond hockey in Detroit Lakes. Every weekend in countless dive bars across the state, former hockey players try to one up each other with stories of on-ice fist fights, broken noses, and lost teeth. This is due to Minnesota’s somewhat unique place in the hockey landscape. Canada produces the most superstars, Northern Europe, the most technically gifted players, and Russia the most physically imposing. Minnesotans (who make up around 18% of all American-born pros)\(^4\) are known for their tenacity and propensity for self-sacrifice.

Hockey, like any distinct culture, has its own rich language that helps illustrate both its good and bad tendencies. In her 2016 article “Love in Translation,” Lauren Collins writes about the relationship between culture and language saying, “A language carries within it a culture, or cultures: ways of thinking and being” (58). Hockey jargon reflects its culture. First is its origin. Most hockey slang comes from Canada, which seems to be the most hockey-obsessed nation on earth and the default producer and exporter of hockey slang. Spread through social media or TV shows, it’s why, whether you’re in Moncton or Missouri, you’ll hear hockey players find ways to work *eh* into nearly every sentence. Second, in Minnesota, hockey talk is rife with the monophthongized o’s and raised æ’s that you might hear in an utterance like, “Eh buddy, you’re so effing bad.” Most Minnesotan hockey players are trying to sound Canadian (because they’re the best) when they exaggerate features of their upper-midwest accent. Third, consider the sheer number of terms for a hockey player’s appearance on the ice. *Flow or lettuce* (sometimes *lechuga*) refers to well-groomed long hair that peeks out from under a helmet; a *lip sweater* or *muzzy* can be translated as mustache. Hockey players won’t hesitate to call someone a *duster* if they lean on their stick when they skate, a *sieve* if they allow lots of goals, or a *bender* if their ankles bend inwards. Every hockey player wants to be a *beautician*, to score lots of *clap-bomb ginos bar Mexico where mama keeps the cookie jar*.\(^5\) They’d rather die than be caught wearing a *bubble* or *fishbowl*.\(^6\) Notice the focus on physical form in almost all of these terms. Finally, is the glorification of hard work and personal sacrifice. Words like *plumber*, *grinder*, and *sled dog* get thrown around for players who, despite not being the most talented, still give it their all. *Goons* or *enforcers* are players who never see the ice except for when a fight breaks out. And, as a pervasive cultural mantra, there’s *FTB, for the boys*, invoked whenever someone does something selfless or to rally the troops in a moment of hardship.

Herein lies the principle contradiction of the hockey world. On one hand, hockey is incredibly superficial and conformist. One must have a certain type of hair, equipment, accent and temperament to avoid being called a *hoser*, *pylon*, *home-dresser* or worse. On the other hand, hockey enshrines the values of hard work, selflessness, and teamwork above all else. Theoretically, the rink functions as a meritocracy where the players who work the hardest are

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\(^3\) Pfister et al, 2016.

\(^4\) Quanthockey, 2024.

\(^5\) A flashy player who scores a lot of heavy slapshot goals that deflect into the top corners of the net off the underside of the crossbar.

\(^6\) “Bubble” and “fishbowl” both refer to a style of plastic face shield which is often considered dorky or tacky by hockey players.
rewarded, but, as the abundance of slang based on physical appearance suggests, it doesn’t matter unless you look good doing it.

In the cultural landscape of Minnesota hockey, Saint Paul is undeniably the capital. Sure, there are arguments to be made for Warroad, Duluth, or even a smattering of Twin Cities suburbs, but nowhere loves hockey as much as Saint Paul. Although it’s about three-fourths the size of Minneapolis, it’s home to about five times as many hockey teams, including Minnesota’s professional franchises. On frigid winter evenings, you can hardly go a mile without bumping into an outdoor rink teeming with people playing pond hockey under blinding floodlights. Each neighborhood has its own youth club, and each neighborhood’s team is an embodiment of its identity. Whether it was the so-called physical, passionate hockey played on the east side or the quicksilver, arrogant game played by the children of Summit Hill, the on-ice product of any team in the city can teach you a lot about the complex cultural fabric of Saint Paul.

When I started playing organized hockey in middle school, I naturally chose the team that reflected the values of myself and my community. In religious terms, both metaphorically and often literally, West Saint Paul and Frogtown play protestant hockey, Summit Hill and Groveland are Catholic, Langford and Midway are some sort of unitarian sect, and my neighborhood is largely agnostic. It’s possible that the divine realm of heaven (a state championship) awaited us if we just went to church (the rink) enough, but without definitive proof, we figured it wasn’t worth the effort.

Situated smack dab in the middle of Highland Park and West Seventh, two middle class neighborhoods on the city’s south side, Edgecumbe’s laid back, liberal approach to the sport was highly reflective of its surroundings. In contrast to the rest of the city, we’d only practice twice a week, we never had teams higher than the “C” level (the lowest rung on the youth hockey ladder), and were one of the only associations with co-ed bantam teams. None of that is to say we were bad or we didn’t care, but rather that we played hockey simply because we thought it was a fun pastime. The barrier to entry was kept low to include the maximum number of people. Our parents understood that sports are supposed to be fun for kids: a venue for making friends, getting some exercise, and maybe learning the importance of hard work and comradery along the way, but not much more. Nobody screamed at refs over blown calls or launched obscenities at children after a mistake. Edgecumbe practiced a polite brand of hockey that honored our city’s reputation as boring. When I was on the ice with my neighbors and friends, being cheered on by our parents, all of us united by geography and our enjoyment of a game that’s esoteric to great majority of the world beyond the hyperborean sliver of the world’s habitable surface where it’s practical to play, I felt a deep sense of connection to my city. Even defending our turf against the snotty kids who lived in the old Victorian part of town or the hippies from Como, I couldn’t help but feel at home within the mosaic of Saint Paul.

This euphoria was short-lived however. After two seasons at Edgecumbe, I decided I wanted to play more seriously. In order to become a more pious observer of the game of hockey, I transferred to an association that, despite being only one of many youth hockey clubs in the city, called themselves the Capitals. The majority of my teammates were God-fearing lifetime Catholic school kids with close-cropped hair, insane parents, and a distaste for anyone who deviated from their view of what it meant to be a 15-year-old hockey player. As an atheist public
schooler going through my emo phase, I stuck out like a sore thumb. As a white man, it wasn’t often that I felt like an outsider, but in that locker room, I might have well been from Mars.

Despite my lack of friends, I was drastically improving as a hockey player. Quickly, with at least 8 hours of on-ice practice a week, I began racking up the best numbers of my short career. Although it wasn’t uncommon for me to return to the locker room to a shower of jeers or to find that my gear had been dumped in the trash, I was satisfied with my personal success and thought that with enough good performances and an undying commitment to FTB, I’d eventually earn the respect of my teammates. After all, “Hazing [...] has long been a part of hockey culture. [...] a rite of passage after making the big team, part of the process of being accepted into the tight circle that can be a hockey team,” (P.D. Grant, 2022). If only I pushed through it, fought in enough locker boxing matches or fished my shoes out of the trash enough times, I believed I could work my way into that tight circle and find acceptance.

This all changed, however, when we went to Hibbing for a tournament. That Saturday afternoon, I was alone in the locker room with one of my younger teammates. His name was Walsh and he was one of the only people on the roster whom I liked. Unlike the rest of the team, he never bothered me; a real sweetheart who couldn’t stomach the slurs and hazing and even if he never said anything in my defense, his sympathetic glances always meant a lot to me. I think that’s why when he got up to leave and turned off the lights as he went, it hurt even more. It was a common, relatively harmless prank, one I was used to as a goalie who started getting ready well in advance of the others, but not one I expected from someone I considered an ally.

My sense of betrayal propelled me to my feet and I ran, as gracefully as one can in skates and goalie pads, to the door. I flung it open and yelled, “What the f*** did you do that for?”. Walsh looked back at me with an embarrassed grin and started walking back over, probably to apologize, but I was furious at this point. An entire season of intense bullying and isolation was welling up inside me and spilled over into a firm push. The rest of my team, smelling blood in the water, began to circle and egged us on. There’s nothing a hockey player likes more than a fight. Getting to his feet, Walsh took a wild swing at my face. I responded with a solid punch to his jaw. Dazed, he grabbed my jersey and pulled it over my head and started wailing on my chin as our teammates giddily cheered him on.

When our coaches eventually ran over to break it up, we both lay bloodied and wheezing on the ground. My nostrils were full of a metallic odor and the cold, sweaty smell of the rubber mats that line every hockey rink. I was disgusted with myself. I had stooped to violence to try and solve my problems and had given them exactly what they wanted. I had stood up for myself in the only way hockey players understood, but in defying the social order of the team, I had made everyone hate me more.

The rest of the season, I hardly spoke to anyone having anything to do with my team. My status as an outsider had been fully solidified by my unwillingness to stay silent amidst a constant barrage of “initiation rituals” - abject bullying - and now my only recourse was silence. It’s why I didn’t say anything when my teammate called me a “faggot” from the passenger seat of his

7 Locker boxing is when two hockey players fight, usually their own teammates in the locker room, with their gloves and helmets on. Oftentimes, older players force newcomers to fight each as a form of hazing.
father’s Mercedes Benz as I walked past his $80,000-a-year Catholic school on my way to the
bus stop, when I was kicked out of a hotel room by teammates for being “queer,” or when they
accused me of being homosexual because of my haircut. Most nights, the only sounds that came
out of my mouth were the sobs that bubbled up in my diaphragm and escaped through my lips
alone in my garage after practice.

In the space of one winter, the beautiful game of hockey had been stolen from me. Playing with
my family and for my neighborhood youth team, I didn’t realize it, but among competitive team
sports, hockey is one of the most toxic, suffocating environments in sports. I wasn’t alone in my
realization either. According to an ESPN article about a particular hazing scandal at The
University of Vermont, “current and former players at all levels told ESPN.com that the type and
severity of the activities [handing over their phones and chugging beer naked] that the Vermont
upperclassmen asked the freshmen to engage in are nothing new to hockey,” (Farrey, 2016).
After my season from hell, I came to realize that the mantra of every hockey player, for the boys,
wasn’t about sacrifice and hustle, it was about giving up your entire personality and life outside
of the rink to be just like your teammates.

Hockey culture is fascist. This might sound dramatic, but hockey is a sport that seeks to
eliminate variety in order to create harmony. In pretty much every realm of life, we recognize
that the best teams are the ones composed of a collection of different pieces. People with various
viewpoints, personalities, and skill sets coming together to achieve something that they wouldn’t
be able to accomplish as individuals. Hockey is different: I was threatened with demotion to a
lesser team until I bought a helmet that matched the team’s color scheme. It’s an all-consuming
machine that grinds people down with torment and bullying until they feel too scared to speak
up.

So powerful is this assimilatory pressure that it’s become an integral “part of the game.”
According to former professional goaltender Ken Dryden “‘Hazing is like fighting -- part of the
game,’ he said. ‘Part of the game that people who haven't played it just wouldn't
understand.’”(Farrey, 2016). In other words, if you don’t accept violence and bullying in the
locker room, you’re not a real hockey player.

I wish I could say that after a while, I learned to love hockey again, but it’s simply not true.
Every time I watch an NHL game, I’m reminded of the cruelly conformist nature of the sport.
Everyone sits in a neat line on the bench, not particularly paying attention, only reacting when
they’re supposed to. Night after night, big, untalented players lumber out on the ice to fight
because their coach has instructed them to do so. Compared to the NBA or MLB, it’s remarkable
how little personality seeps through in interviews with hockey players. Everyone uses the same
platitudes about skating hard for the team and playing gritty, “pucks-in-deep” hockey. Nobody
wants to stand out or recognize their own accomplishments. Everyone dresses the same: suits
before the game and athleisure wear afterwards. And everyone shares an unmistakable
emptiness. It’s not that they’re without a personality or preferences, but rather, their hard-knocks
history “with the team” has taught them that they must not let who they are as individuals shine
through at the rink.

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Thinking back on it now, cutting my hockey career short was the right decision. It’s sad that I couldn’t continue to play the game I loved because of one bad experience, but that bad experience is inherent in the sport, a “part of the game” that won’t be remedied unless there’s a massive effort to protect young hockey players. When my equipment was stolen out of our garage that summer, I was relieved. Never again would I have to deal with the pressure of pretending to be someone I wasn’t or complying in order to appease my tormentors.

Originally a game for which my love sprung organically from the many outdoor rinks that dot my frigid little city, a game which sprouted a connection between me and my neighborhood, friends, and family, hockey turned out to be a superficial, rotten mess of hormones, bullying, and broken aspirations. My experiences with hockey have shaped fundamentally who I am today. It taught me the importance of teamwork, dedication, and sportsmanship. It also showed me the ugly nature of coercion, violence, and a lack of individuality. Living in Minnesota, I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to leave hockey completely behind. It’s a large part of our identity. But I’ve long since realized it’s not a culture I want to identify with anymore.
WORKS CITED


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