

Women's Hockey in Penetanguishene

By Waxy Gregoire - PSHOF

Hockey has always traditionally been viewed as a man's game, and that was certainly true in the very early days of the sport, but even back then, there were well springs arising that there was a female spirit to participate in the pioneering sport.

In the 1890's, women took interest in this 'new' game and many began playing on open ponds and outdoor rinks, joining teams and forming leagues, and were vying to be champions at the turn of the last century, in the early 1900's.

In the early years, like many of their male counterparts, women used no protective equipment whatsoever. Heavy long wool skirts, fancy toques, wool or leather gloves and turtle-neck sweaters, appeared to be the chosen outfits of these early pioneers of the game. Gradually over the years, as with the male players, the uniform developed according to the introduction of rougher play and the development of various pieces of protective equipment. By the 1930's season-end photos show the women wearing short trousers and long stockings, shin pads and padded gloves, and almost looking like, god forbid - the men!

Women's hockey in Penetanguishene first had developed as a girl's high school hockey team in 1936-37. In April of 2006, a member of that local pioneering team, Mrs.

Peggy (Brophy) Dupuis, explained the atmosphere of that team and the conditions that existed.

"One of the teachers who was suppose to be in sport, she was very fragile and we thought she could not skate but could she skate," said Mrs Dupuis. "She recruited Norbert Gignac and Art Cook to kind of shuffle us around, coach us and then she organized the team.

"There was no organized ward system for the girl's teams but there were three teams to play with from different parts of town. There was a rink behind the church and sometimes we played at Huronia Park. The girl's team did play against Midland and Stayner. Stayner would white wash us ... they played all the time and we were just getting started.



“The team lasted for a couple of years,” she continued. “All the girls had tube skates no picks and we bummed goalie equipment from the boy’s hockey teams. The girl’s did get the opportunity to play at the old Osborne rink we couldn’t skate very well but it was fun. The teacher just wanted us to play hockey... anybody who wanted to play just signed up. At the time there was race distinction, (but if you played) you would be known as a Tom Boy.”



The 1936-37 Girl’s High school team

Back row L – R – **Kay Parker, Helen Dubeau, Helen Maurice, B. Dubeau, D. Smith, M. Brophy**

Front row L – R – **M. Thiffault, A Dion, E. Stewart, M. Bailey, L. Leroux, J. Manson.**

Absent L. Marchildon (photographed at the Osborne Rink, site of present day Beer Store exits)

Despite the fact that women’s hocked blossomed during and between the great wars, especially after WWII, but even into the 1950’s and 1960’s it was looked upon with little more than passing curiosity because hockey was assumed to be the preserve of boys and men. This stringent and fixated attitude was confirmed in 1956 when the Ontario Supreme Court ruled against young Abby Hoffman, a nine-year-old girl who challenged the ‘boys only’ policy in minor hockey.



But young Hoffman, (pictured at left) did it the hard way. Having already played most of the season with a boy's team, she had disguised her sex by dressing at home and wearing her hair short. She was as talented as some of the boys and nobody caught on. But they eventually did and barred her from participating and the court challenge was on.

Though she lost the landmark challenge, young Abby Hoffman, who loved hockey as much as any boy, set a precedent, an example that would lead the way for others. Interest by other girls to play the 'boys' game only intensified and by the 1960s many girls throughout the province attempted to join boy's hockey teams. They were rejected but their time was coming.

Around 1965-66, some women in Penetanguishene decided to have fun, explore their love of the game and at the same time,

ironically, raise money for their minor hockey sons.

The ladies organized a simple Sunday night game at the Penetanguishene Memorial Arena between two teams that would be open for the general public to come and watch. Of course it was all in good jest and picked the interest of family and friends and it must be said, many other locals to come and watch between 7 and 8 p.m. Cost of admission was a monetary donation.

Watch the spectators did, and the two teams, would play on Sunday nights from 7 to 8pm. By the end of the year the two teams, sponsored by the Brule and Commodore Hotels, raised \$900.00 in aid of minor hockey, boys minor hockey. The trophy for competition was an old chamber pot that sat proudly in the Ladies and Escort "section" of the Commodore Hotel. You see even then, the men and women couldn't even drink together!



PIONEERS! HOTEL BRULE WOMEN'S TEAM (circa 1965)

Back row L-R: **Jim Pearson, Anne Desjardin, Doris Robillard, June Kennedy, Anne Leroux, Nancy Berthalot, Rita Hook, Diane Pearson, Charlotte StAmant, Teresa Forget, Joan Butson, Joyce Brooks, Bernie Robillard, Stella Forget, Gert Beausoleil.**

Front row L-R: **Sally Duquette, Evelyun Lacroix, Helen Yates, Francis StAmant, Rita Moreau**



PIONEERS! COMMODORE HOTEL WOMEN'S TEAM (circa 1965)

Back row L-R: **Gary Livingston, Billy Stewart, Marg Desroches, Pat Lefaive, Mary Lou Graham, Barb Puddicomb, Marlene Brunelle, Joan Leroux, Eleanor Beaudoin, Neil Bourgeois,**

Front row L-R: **Mona Yule, Helen Cole, Eva Desjardins, Fanny Beaudoin, Marg LeCamp**

Abigail Hoffman, one of this country's outstanding track and field Olympians, made Canada-wide publicity a couple of years ago when it was revealed that she played hockey in a boys' league in Toronto. But Penetanguishene also had its own secret trailblazer, Linda Duquette, a girl who covertly played using the name of "Les" in the Penetang Little NHL's AHL 'A' (Pee-Wee) division.

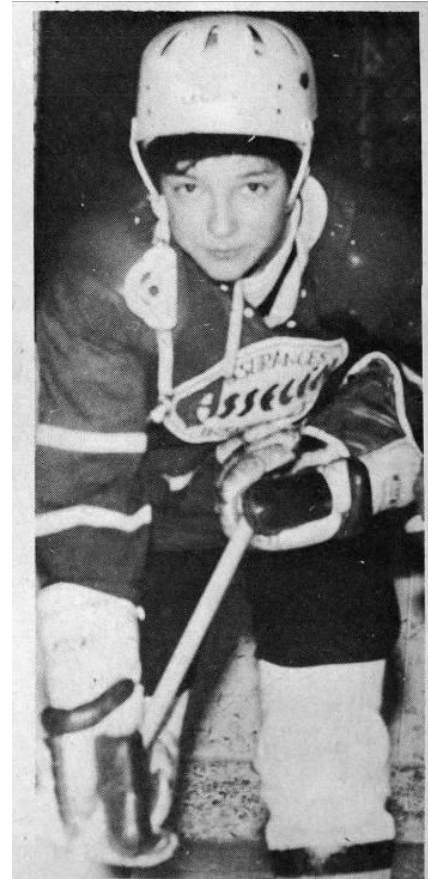
Eleven year old Duquette, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Duquette of RR#3 Penetang (at the time), not only played in the league against the boys but was one of the top players. This hockey playing drama could conceivably go unnoticed in larger rural towns or urban cities but in small town Penetanguishene, the scenario quickly unraveled. It was trailblazing at its finest.

"My dad worked out some kind of deal with some of the executives in town who would know (who I was)," Duquette explains these many years later. "I was assigned to a team coached by Ralph Labatt but of course this was just house league. I would dress at home and arrive at the rink ready to play. I used the office to put my skates on and then to the ice.

"I always wondered what my teammates were thinking. My mom would carefully pin up my long hair and carefully secure it under my toque. Things went very smoothly, surprisingly. But one day, one of the coaches from the rep team approached me and thought I should be moved up to the A division but I politely declined.

"I did however play one all star game with the permission of the executive but I am sure the opposition were not aware I was a girl," Duquette continues. "The cat was out of the bag though soon after, when a strand of my hair came out from under my helmet during one of the games and one of the boys from the other team let every one know that I was a 'girl'. With the permission of the league I was allowed to complete the season but informed that I would not be allowed to come back next year."

To her credit she never let the situation dampen her love of the sport and a few years later Linda joined a burgeoning girl's team from Port McNicoll and played locally for a few years. She had found a niche, but girls interest to play with the boys would not be dampened.





**Girl
pucksters are
champions**

WINNER OF the Ontario junior girls hockey championships, held at Keswick recently was this team representing Port McNicoll. Coached by Ernie Quesnelle, the team also has members from Midland, Penetang and Victoria Harbour. Front row — Gail Valcheff, Joan Mayer, Gail Lizotte, Andrea Deschamp, Dale King and Brenda Fournier; back row — Mary Larmand, Judy Rice, Jane Dignard, Lauraine Marshall, Sue Heels, Dona Champion, Pauline D'Aoust and Coach Quesnelle. Linda Duquette and Gwen Morrison were absent when the picture was taken.

—Staff photo, K. Somers

As more and more girls showed interest in hockey, it was only a matter of time when a girls right to play with boys would be legally challenged. Was this an issue of discrimination on the grounds of sex when the OHA defended what it saw as its inalienable right to bar girls from boys' teams? We would find out in the 1970s.

The first of these landmark cases began in 1978 when a ten year old girl registered with a house league team in Huntsville and was taken on as its goalie. The house league level didn't raise much, if any, opposition, as they weren't eligible to play in OMHA playoffs. But when tryouts were held for an All-Star team that would compete in the OMHA playoffs and she made the team as its goalie, that's when the issue boiled to the surface.

The OHA constitution stated that it was its prerogative to "promote, encourage and govern hockey for boys in the province of Ontario." As a rule of its law, the OMHA and other OHA affiliates could only grant hockey playing certificates to males. The young girl from Huntsville filed a complaint to the Ontario Human Rights Commission on the grounds of sex discrimination and an inquiry was ordered. The girl won her complaint and her right to play on the boys' team.

The OHA and OMHA lost the case but felt obliged to appeal to the Ontario Court of Appeals. Some clubs thought they could handle mix teams at a young age but beyond puberty they didn't want the extra difficulties, including matters such as separate dressing rooms. The OHA appeal was allowed and went before the court's three justices who ruled:

“... the services or facilities of the OMHA are not open for use by the public at large, but are accessible only to those who qualify under the rules and regulations of the OMHA and as girls do not qualify, the refusal to grant the girl a registration card does not breach the Human Rights Code.”

The Ontario Women's Hockey Association supported the girls' case in 1978 not because it wanted to share its game with men but with no specific girls team in her home town she had to play with the boys or not at all. It just didn't seem fair.

The 1978 ruling on the Cummings case echoed nine years later when 13 year old Justin Blainey's case occupied the courts for two years until another three judge panel of the Ontario Supreme Court ruled 2 to 1 in her favour. The OHA then went to the Supreme Court of Canada seeking permission to appeal, they were denied. They were forced to abide by the ruling.

The fundamental truth remained that while girls may be automatically allowed to play house league or now called Local League hockey, they still had to qualify on All-Star or Rep on the pure basis of ability, like any normal child. The minor hockey world moved forward.



Dial-a-Movie Stars

Dial-a-Movie Stars won the regular season title in the Penetang-Midland Ladies Hockey League and now advance to the championship series after a thrilling sudden-death win over the Brule this weekend. The team is made up of (back L to R) Ann Casey, Janice

Holmes, Laurie Paille, Michelle Morrow, Nicole Bellisle, Front row (L to R) Jennifer Lemieux, Shona Rowe, Patsy Laurin, Gayle Johnson and Carmen McNamara. Katherine Nicholls was absent. Staff photo



Howe Construction Petra 1991-92

Women's hockey slowly grew in popularity and locally the Women's League expanded requiring more ice time in for the popularly growing hockey league.

Around 1985, the Penetang Midland Ladies Hockey League was formed and in 1989, the Penetanguishene-Midland Ladies Hockey League Rep. team, the 'How Construction Petras' were on the road playing teams from Bracebridge, Gravenhurst, Parry Sound, Keswick, as part of the North Eastern Ontario Ladies Hockey League.

Today, women's hockey has mushroomed in popularity and grown into the mainstream as evidenced by the meteoric rise of the Canadian Women's Olympic Hockey Program which culminated in Canada's Olympic gold medal won in Lake Placid in 2004.

Penetanguishene has long been known as a hockey town, so it was just a matter of time before one of her own girls would truly excel at the sport.

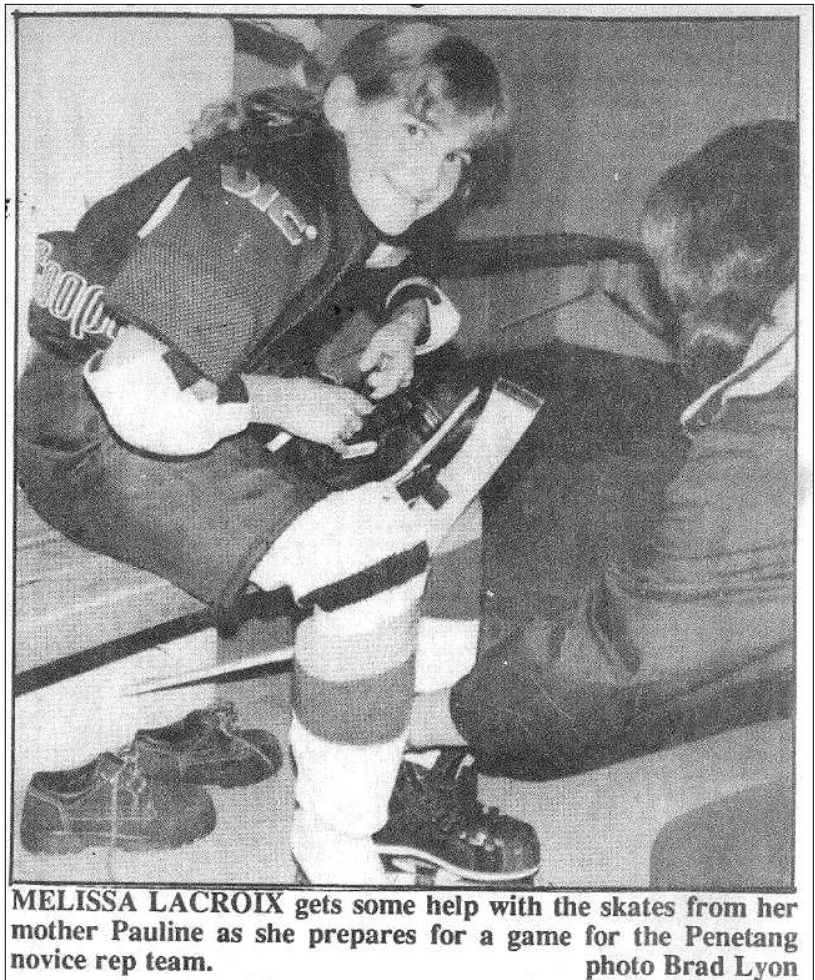
Melissa Anne Lacroix started playing hockey when she was 4 years old and because of the pioneers before her throughout the province, she played on a boys team in the Penetanguishene Minor Hockey system in 1993-94.

She continued playing minor hockey in Penetanguishene with boys until 2001 before she made the transition to girls' hockey in Coldwater, playing for the "BB" Pee-Wee rep team where she dominated as a forward. In 2003, she started playing defence and the move paid dividends as she later tried out for and made the Toronto Aeros Midget "AA" team.

Melissa's move as a defence'wo'man has taken her far by being offered and accepting a full hockey scholarship at Mercyhurst College who play in the Division 1 – CHA division. In addition to her scholarship and many other awards, she was a member of the 2006 National Women's team in the Canada Winter Games held in the Yukon.

Girls' and Women's hockey is one of the fastest growing games in the world, suggesting that future fans and players will likely view these past few decades as the infancy of a popular and widespread sport.

*L. Waxy Gregoire
Penetanguishene Sports Hall of Fame*



MELISSA LACROIX gets some help with the skates from her mother Pauline as she prepares for a game for the Penetang novice rep team.
photo Brad Lyon