

# **On the Road Again**

## **Looking Back at 35 Hockey Trips**

This year I decided to return to my roots and take my Pee Wee team to a town in Wisconsin named Waupun. There are only two reasons you would have heard of this town twenty miles from Fond Du Lac (or Fondy as it is called); first, you are a bird lover and go to the Horicon Marsh to visit migrating birds on their way south. The other reason is you are a visitor to the Wisconsin State Penitentiary.

Oh, they play hockey in Waupun, in a rink all run by volunteers. Zamboni drivers, rink cleaners, concession stand workers; all volunteers. Great place...

And so in year one of my coaching career, I decided to take my Squirt A team in mid-January to the twin cities of Waupun and Fondy for some games. Back then tournaments weren't critical; we just wanted to play some games. Back then, the players did not stay in waterparks. The parents stayed in a hotel, the Holiday Inn in Fondy, for your information. The kids? They did this thing called billeting; they stayed in the homes of the Waupun players. Did I mention for three days the temperature never went above -15? Did I mention that some of the kids stayed on a farm? And so, young Willy Gardner, who had just moved up from the Gold Coast of Chicago, got up at 6:00am and milked the cows in -15 degrees. The rinks were not heated, and we had to leave our engines running all night long.

But we made friendships and they came to our town where there were no cows to milk and we went back up there.

Fast forward two years to Bloomington, Minnesota, where I took my Squirt team up for some friendlies. Saturday night we take in the Minnesota North Stars vs. the Edmonton Oilers and a guy named Gretzky. Afterwards we are hanging in the bar and in come the Oilers and about 10 future Hall of Famers. The players were down from their rooms in a minute and the players signed everything in front of them...what a memory.

The trips started getting longer; three trips to Toronto and then I thought it would be good to go to Quebec and a French speaking town named Granby. Somehow I didn't get the memo that "AA" in Quebec is what we call "AAA" here in Illinois. We walk into the rink with my group of 7<sup>th</sup> graders to see our opponent in Game # 1: Drummondville. Holy crap these kids have beards already! Well, suffice to say it was men vs. boys and the final score was 22-3...but, I really believe those four whippings (we got better each game) made that team better, tougher. We would go on to win state and missed going to Nationals by a goal.

We also billeted when we went to Granby. Two kids spent the weekend in the funeral home.

We also learned a unique way of playing hockey up there: the games would be running clock and when the local team got ahead in a tight game, a soccer-like fake injury would occur and take 5 minutes off the clock.

A couple years later and I'm coaching the New Trier JV Team and we are in Green Bay over Christmas. We had a morning game then nothing until the evening, and yes it was cold and unless you like the Packers, Green Bay isn't that exciting. So, the boys say "we are going to the Indoor Mall" and I suppose back then we didn't worry about things like we do today. We agree to meet back in the hotel at 5:00. I was then greeted by 20 boys who decided to get their ears pierced and get an earring. That was my only year at New Trier.

Back to Minnesota a couple years later with a Bantam team. I somehow convinced the parents that going to Edina was better than Beaver Creek or Cabo. We play in the Edina Tournament which was kind of a big deal. However, the folks in Edina didn't really care so much that we traveled all the way up there to play and give us a day off in the middle of the tournament. NO hockey for a day in Minnesota. The Moms want to go to the Mall of the America (ironically in the location of where we watched the North Stars play a few years earlier) but I wanted no part of that.

So I asked the concierge - "hey where do you go to play pond hockey around here?" He directed me to this place called Lake of the Isles in Minneapolis; imagine Winnetka except with a big lake right in the middle that had two rinks with boards out on the ice. I see ten guys my age (at that time) out playing and I say: "hey, kids vs. adults?" They say "game on" and for five hours we play pond hockey in the most beautiful place you can imagine. Those kids cannot tell you a thing about any of those games but they can tell you about the time they played pond hockey all day.

Oh the places you go: more trips to St. Louis and Detroit than I care to remember. Boston. Providence. Indy. Nashville (a cool place). Four trips to Marquette, Michigan in the UP on Lake Superior. Oswego, New York and Omaha, Nebraska for National Championships...did I forget Sioux City and Waterloo, Iowa? Been there and done that.

But for reasons I cannot fully understand I have chosen this year to return to Waupun and Green Bay.

These trips are fun; fun for the kids, and fun for the parents. They don't last forever and when your kid hits High School they sometimes don't want you on their trips....enjoy them they don't last forever.