

# HOMETOWN HOCKEY

## “Who Says You Can’t Come Home?”

*By Andy McNerney*



Winnetka is my hometown. I grew up on Rosewood Ave. with both sets of grandparents less than three blocks away. My parents went to New Trier, got married on Hibbard Rd., and raised 4 boys here. Now they live within walking distance of their grandchildren. Although Winnetka is my hometown, I have spent many years living in other parts of the country. And yet, with each move, hockey always made me feel like I was home.

In 1992, as a 7<sup>th</sup> grader at Washburne, my parents gathered the family in our living room—an act typically reserved for Christmas morning. I knew something was wrong. “We are moving to Minnesota” my dad said. He kept talking. Something about his job, a good opportunity, you guys will love it, blah blah blah. As he explained why we were moving to a different state I thought of my friends and the fear of making new ones. I thought about my hockey team. I loved everything about being a Winnetka Warrior: The locker room before a game, my patched corduroy green jacket, out of town tournaments, getting the post tryout phone call and learning that I had made the team. I even loved 6:00am practices. We were on the heels of a

season in which we won NIHL and State with a young coach named DJ behind the bench. Making friends in Minnesota would be hard but doable. Taking Warrior hockey away from me? Not gonna happen! What would I do with my corduroy jacket?

That’s when my mom said something that caught my attention. She laid out pictures of our new house on the table. “Do you see that?” she said. “It’s a pond in our backyard, and it will become our own hockey rink in the winter. The basement room can be a locker room. Our new town, Edina, has 11 full outdoor rinks.” I was scared but intrigued.

The beginning of 8<sup>th</sup> grade was awkward. But then hockey tryouts started. They instantly gave me confidence—not in my game but in the locker room and the hallways at school. For the first time since moving to Minnesota, I was part of a team. If anything, my confidence as a player was tested—I went from being a good Illinois player to being on B2. I found myself practicing on our pond most nights. I had to work hard to keep up with the ~30 other kids that made the A and B teams. But I embraced Edina quickly because whenever I skated on our pond or headed to practice, I felt home. Two years later I was in the Minnesota State High School Hockey Tournament playing for the Blake Bears and competing against the Warroad Warriors (Pop: 1,600, Olympic Hockey Silver or Gold Medals: 9).

Near the end of high school, I entered my college counselor’s office with clear priorities: I wanted a great education and to keep playing the game I loved. I had no illusions of making hockey my career or even pushing for a Division 1 offer. I simply wanted to be a valuable part of a competitive hockey team and a hockey community for as long as I could.

I landed at The Taft School in Watertown, Connecticut, for a post-graduate year. Once again, I found myself sharing the ice with players more skilled than me. My teammates were good. Ultimately, one ended up in NHL, twelve went onto Division 1 schools, and seven went to Division 3 schools. Coincidentally, one player, Dennis Nam (future Yale Captain), was a former Winnetka Warrior teammate of mine. DJ referred to Dennis as "Maine to Maui" to describe his ability to take the puck from behind our own net (Maine) and weave it 'cross-country' towards the opposing goal (Maui). Once he started his ramp up I knew what to do. It wasn't to find space and call for the puck. I was simply to let him create (a repertoire of dekes and toe-drags) and then lurk by the goal for an easy rebound. He'd inevitably get to Maui without enough energy to bury it himself. I never got to test this approach at Taft because sharing the ice with Dennis would have taken me way from my very important checking line duties.

After Taft I went to Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. I fit in well on the hockey team and I liked it because the program was much more than hockey. It was tied to the college tradition and had a special relationship with Brunswick. The rink, Dayton Area, was filled every Friday night. During Thanksgiving, Brunswick residents hosted meals for me and the new friends I found on long bus rides to away games around New England and upstate New York. Those friendships would be tested our senior year when we lost 6 of our last 8 games after being the only undefeated NCAA team (DI or DII) through the first week in February. The Bowdoin hockey team became another family. In Brunswick, a community that had been watching hockey for almost 100 years, I felt home.

I moved back to Winnetka 7 years ago. Some things have changed since my dad told us we were headed to Minnesota. The Sweet Shop and Charles Variety are gone--but at least we still have Lakeside Foods. Although I thought moving back to Winnetka would be easy, I still needed hockey. I only fully reacclimated when my two sons suited up for house league three years ago. There are rare moments in adult life when we find ourselves completely content...a feeling of being home. Sitting behind the bench during a Mite house league and introducing this wonderful game to my sons are these moments for me.

Every Christmas eve my extended family drives to the Winnetka Ice Arena for a traditional pickup hockey game. Each time I glance up at the banners I think about how my grandfather helped to build the rink and about the hockey program that my father helped to grow. I think about my dad coaching me and my brother to a Winnetka house league championship in 1985. I think about the patches on my jacket and the plays and games that earned them.

Although my new house doesn't have a pond in the background, there's space for a backyard rink—exactly what I needed to make it feel like I was really home.

Maybe hockey isn't unique. Perhaps other sports can build confidence and a sense of community. But for my family and me, it is. The love I have for the game and the town that nurtured it clearly lives on within my 8-year-old, a gritty rebounding forward who would play every day if I let him. He looks pretty good in used green corduroy too.

