

A tradition that began 53 years ago on Deal's Pond

Cathy Nicol

It was the winter of 1927-28. The ice on Deal's Pond in airview was strong and smooth.

Young men from all over the Halifax-Dartmouth area raved the cold to gather at the pond. With numb fingers they laced on their skates, laced up their hockey sticks and wheeled around the ice.

"They didn't realize it but when the first puck was rapped to open that game, a tradition had begun which would last over half a century.

Although this hockey incident wasn't known as the Suburban League until the winter of 1930-31, Everett Joddall remembers that the game grew out of this first game.

The league began with six teams - Waverley, Windsor Junction, Bedford, Rockingham, Fairview, and Beaver Bank, says Walter Smeltzer, manager of the Sackville team during the 1940-41 season.

"Sackville got into the league after Beaver Bank backed out around 1936-37," he said.

Mr. Smeltzer was only directly involved with the league for one season, but he was a fan for many.

"We used to pay 10 cents to see three games. It cost us 25 cents for the bus to the game and after the games we would spend another 25 cents for fish and chips at Wilman's on Agricola Street."

"A lot of people went to the games. In fact if there had been a fire on Saturday night, there wouldn't have been anybody around to put it out!" he remembers.

Mr. Smeltzer says Beaver Bank dropped out of the league after six or seven years and that's when Sackville came into the picture.

During the second World War, Windsor Junction dropped out of the league and Armdale stepped in to fill the gap.

Waverley resident Art Rand came to the area in 1936 from Amherst. He joined the Waverley Gold-diggers for the 1936-37 season as goalie.

This was the first year Waverley won the league championship by beating out Bedford in the finals. The Gold-diggers managed to repeat that performance in the 1937-38 season.

Mr. Rand says they lost in the semi-finals to Windsor Junction in 1938-39. But Bedford defeated Windsor Junction to take the trophy.

Waverley reclaimed the trophy in 1940-41 by defeating Rockingham, he remembers.

"We played in the Halifax Forum every Saturday night. And we always played to

1,500 or 2,000 fans during the season and up to 3,000 during the finals," says Mr. Rand.

The league moved its play to the Shirley Street arena after the outbreak of the Second World War. And during this time, the Suburban league teams were allowed to play five outside players because so many of the team members were overseas, said Mr. Rand.

"Before you had to live in the district for six months before you were allowed to play with the team. And you couldn't play senior hockey. If you did, you had to wait three years before being reinstated in the Suburban League," he explains.

Mr. Rand says the team of 1936-37 was as good as any today.

"Morris Oakes and Ray Sawler from Waverley were Junior A boys!" he recalls.

But things have changed over the years. For a few years Mr. Rand said the league was running with a bunch of mediocre players because they weren't allowed to bring in outside players.

One rule which has changed over the years was the one regarding senior players. Now any senior player can play in the Suburban League.

There have been other changes too.

"At that time we were only allowed to dress 10 players - now they have 15 to 18. We also had to scrounge for our basic equipment like skates and sticks."

"The game is played differently now - it's much faster. You really can't compare the 1936 team to the 1980 team," he said.

Mr. Rand said Windsor Junction won the first league playoffs in 1930-31 by downing Rockingham.

The Windsor Junction team that year was a family affair with three Meagher brothers, three Nelson brothers and three Stevens brothers.

But they weren't the only team playing families. Mr. Rand said Waverley had the four Sawler brothers, while Bedford had the three Hartlen brothers and two Goodwin brothers.

Mr. Rand also coached the Waverley Gold-digger for one season and they won the league title that year.

"I had the five best Junior hockey players in Halifax. I picked up a whole front line from St. Mary's school - Kenny Kehoe, D.D. Frawley and Jimmy MacManus. I also had goalie Terry Hanrahan and Dugger MacNeil on defence.

"The next year Frawley was killed overseas so I picked up another guy for defence - Alex Allen. I also

got Doug Moriarty from the city," he recalls.

That year Waverley lost the championship to Sackville - the first year the Sackville squad had been able to get it together.

"Before that season began, Sackville's best player Doug Peverill came to me and asked where he could get a coach for his team. Johnson Fraser was an ex-pro hockey player and a friend of mine from Amherst.

"I knew he had been out of senior hockey for three years and was eligible to play. So Johnson took over the Sackville team, coaching and playing himself. Then Sackville turned around and beat us," laughs Mr. Rand.

Mr. Rand says a lot of top-notch players went through the Suburban League over the years, many who had potential like Jack Innes from Bedford.

Of times the name of Bob McDonald becomes synonymous with the Suburban League.

Well, he hasn't always been around but Mr. McDonald says he's been involved with it for 35 years, 30 of those years as a player with Waverley.

"I played centre for 20 years and then switched to defence," he says.

Mr. McDonald remembers the years the league played in the Shirley St. arena as very exciting times.

"You were more noted for your fisticuffs in those days than your ability to play hockey. What you lacked in ability you made up in brawls," he says.

The crowds in the early days were much better, remembers Mr. McDonald.

"Everybody used to bundle up on the back of an old three-ton freight truck filled with hay. Most of the fun was getting to and from the games."

"It was really the only occasion people got to go out. There wasn't much else to do - everybody looked forward to Saturday nights," he says.

Mr. McDonald feels some of this spirit has survived in Waverley because it's a smaller community which hasn't grown so much like Sackville and Bedford have.

"Waverley has more fans that go to games consistently," he claims.

Mr. MacDonald says he has seen the League undergo changes with each team having its moments of glory.

"We're at our peak now. We may not peak again for another 10-15 years. Rockingham, Armdale and Fairview have a lot of college players. They're going to be strong.

"It's interesting to watch

the various teams go through eras when they build up or slack off," he says.

Mr. McDonald feels the brand of hockey is much better now than it used to be. He says teams win games on playing ability now, not their knock them down ability.

He also says the ice surface has changed considerably over the years especially with all the new ice making equipment.

Sackville's Gilbert Cook has been with the league for 25 years, the past few as chairman.

"I played goalie with Sackville 90 percent of the time, but I did play with Bedford for one year," he explains.

Mr. Cook says 1980 is the fifth year that the league has played for the Halifax Herald-Mail trophy.

"Nobody is quite sure when the league actually started. It's fairly definite that it began one or two years before the trophy was presented.

"The league was once known as the 'hatcher league' but it's changed. It's a lot faster now - more speed than hitting."

"I'm quite happy with it now. The referees say it's one of the best around," he says.

The league has played in numerous places over the years including the Shirley St. arena, the Forum and in Dartmouth, Fairview and Bedford.

"There was a lot of interest in the league but about eight years ago I felt the league was close to being caput. The whole executive was from the city."

"Then Garth Scott took over the chairmanship of the league and he changed it around. I consider he saved the league," remembers Mr. Cook.

The first year he ever played in the finals for a playoff berth, Rockingham took 43 shots on him during the first two periods but his team was ahead 4-3.

"But we blew it in the third period. I guess we lost steam," he says.

Mr. Cook gave up playing himself in the 1971-72 season.

"I had the best goals against average so I decided to get out."

"One of my most disappointing years as a player was the year I played for Bedford and we won the league schedule but Sackville beat us out in the semi-finals."

"My biggest thrill came in the 1969-70 season when Sackville won the cup. When the siren to end the game went, everybody was on the ice," he recalls.

When Mr. Cook gave up playing he almost got out the league completely but then he

decided to stay involved.

"I was vice-chairman of the league for three or four years before I became chairman," he says.

Vern Wyatt was president of the league before it switched over to being a chairmanship.

He says he began his job in 1955 and remained in that post for four years.

Previous to that he had been a goaltender but had to give it up when he was badly injured during the 1951-52 season and wasn't able to play anymore.

"It was a rough league but it was good hockey. There were better crowds then than there are now."

"I went to the game every weekend when they played at the Shirley St. arena. We used to come back on the 11 o'clock train or The Suburban as it was called."

"Also Bob Brushitt used to have an old Ford truck with hay in the back for travelling back and forth. That cost you 25 cents," remembers Mr. Wyatt.

Mr. Wyatt remembers that the highlight of the season every year came when the league winners travelled to Antigonish to play their

league winners.

He also remembers Reg Beasley who refed the games for over 20 years. "He used to ref all three games alone!"

In 1952 Les Mayo began looking after the Sackville team as their manager.

But he was always interested in the league and remembers the Shirley St. arena fondly.

"Those were big days. When we left that arena, the league wasn't as popular. Expenses grew and it became harder to raise money," he says.

None of the teams are allowed to have sponsors although people were welcome to donate money.

Mr. Mayo says he thinks the Sackville team began in 1930 as the Beaver Bank team.

"When they played at the Shirley St. arena people from the six districts really patronized the league. The place was divided into six sections which were always completely full."

"When they moved to the Forum, it was too big and people weren't close together. There wasn't the same spirit after the Shirley St. arena was torn down."

Maybe it will trigger memories

Through the co-operation of the executive committee of the Halifax Suburban Hockey League we present a look back at some of the highlights of the oldest continuously operating league in North America.

During this, the 50th year of operation, many events have been planned to draw attention to the historic league.

With the help of Francis Mitchell we have gathered scrapbooks, clippings and old newspapers in an effort to produce a readable account of some of the years.

Unfortunately many of the years could not be accounted for. As a result we have attempted to use the best material at our disposal and hope that it will trigger memories of days gone by.

Perhaps too, this paper can act as a foundation to the building of a history of the Halifax Suburban Hockey League- Al Hollingsworth