

Bill Rea ? Street hockey?s Canadian too

I confess I was a little surprised, and very pleased, that the pond hockey tournament went ahead pretty much as planned Saturday at the Fire and Ice festival at Alton Mill Arts Centre.

Forecasts during the week had been ominous. We were told to expect a mild weekend, and such conditions would not be conducive to good ice for skating.

The ice was water for last year's event. On the other hand, organizers were able to come up with Plan B pretty quick, and changed it from pond hockey to street hockey. It was not quite what people had been expecting, but the important thing is it worked. Games were played and participants and spectators alike had a good time.

Don't argue with success.

As I drove to the Mill Saturday, aware that temperatures were a couple of ticks above freezing, I was ready to take pictures of more street hockey action. Such, however, was not the case. The ice was there and people were playing on it.

The fine old tradition of pond hockey was secure.

But is there really anything wrong with street hockey? It, too, is a Canadian tradition. Perhaps not as time-honoured as playing on a pond, but with pretty broad roots. I predict there are a lot of people out there who grew up in this country who may never have learned how to skate, but who still played a lot of street hockey as kids. In a lot of cases, all one needs is a street.

I was lucky enough to pretend to grow up on a cul-de-sac in the west end of Toronto, and few places are better suited for street hockey. For the most part, people living there were accommodating. If there's a game going on, and a lot of kids are taking part, the local parents know roughly where their offspring can be found, knowing also that they are reasonably safe.

True, there is some potential for injury, but kids are used to that. All kids occasionally fall down and go boom, with the odd scrape or bump. We usually played with a tennis ball, and stopping a such a projectile when it's propelled by a slap shot can sting, especially if the ball is wet.

I once launched a mighty shot (more of a golf-type shot actually) with a soaking wet tennis ball. It was a little after dusk, so the visibility wasn't very good, but the shot was. I felt good connection and a fine follow-through. Next came a sudden ?whap? sound somewhere near where I fired my missile, followed by one of the most horrible screams to which I have ever listened. I hit a poor kid named Andy in the thigh, and he spent the next minute or two trying to amputate my head with his hockey stick. He might well have succeeded, but owing to the owiee I administered to his leg, he wasn't able to run very fast. On the other hand, I was lucky, because he could very easily have caught up with me in those circumstances. It's hard to run very fast when you're laughing as hard as I was at the time.

Incidentally, I bumped into Andy at a high school reunion in the fall, and we chatted for at least 20 minutes. I think I've been forgiven. No, I did not bring that incident up in the conversation.

And it was a good shot.

By the way, don't get the wrong idea that these street hockey games end in the high ideals of good sportsmanship and fair play, the way adults are supposed to act.

No, being kids, we behaved the way adults actually do act. The winners were obnoxiously sanctimonious, while the losers attributed their lot to things like cheating, breaking the rules or luck. Blows were frequently exchanged at roughly the time our parents called us in for dinner.

You see that behaviour a lot at municipal council meetings, as well as in a lot of other settings that attract adults. As I have often stated, if you want your kids exposed to adult behaviour, don't let them hang around adults.

I actually encountered an even better connection between politics and street hockey about 20 years ago, during the days when I was working in Toronto. At that time, one of the hot issues was traffic calming, especially in residential areas.

One of the City councillors in the area was a very nice guy and one of the purest populists I ever met. He often made a point of working in the words ?power to the people? when I interviewed him.

His way of gleaning public input into traffic calming was through a series of front lawn meetings. He got obliging constituents to host Saturday morning sessions on their front lawns. He showed up with the appropriate boards and information, and he let the people take over.

At one such session, two men got into a heated argument. One complained that there were already enough obstructions to cars with kids playing street hockey. The other guy pointed out this is Canada, and it is the God-given right of every Canadian youngster to play street hockey. His opponent objected to the fact that God was dragged into the debate.

If God was watching from His Heaven, I'll bet He was amused. The councillor, being the man he was, let things unfold. I was

entertained.

And street hockey still goes on.

Pond hockey is still fun, and will be played as long as there is ice. But street hockey will be played as long as their are streets.

How Canadian.

