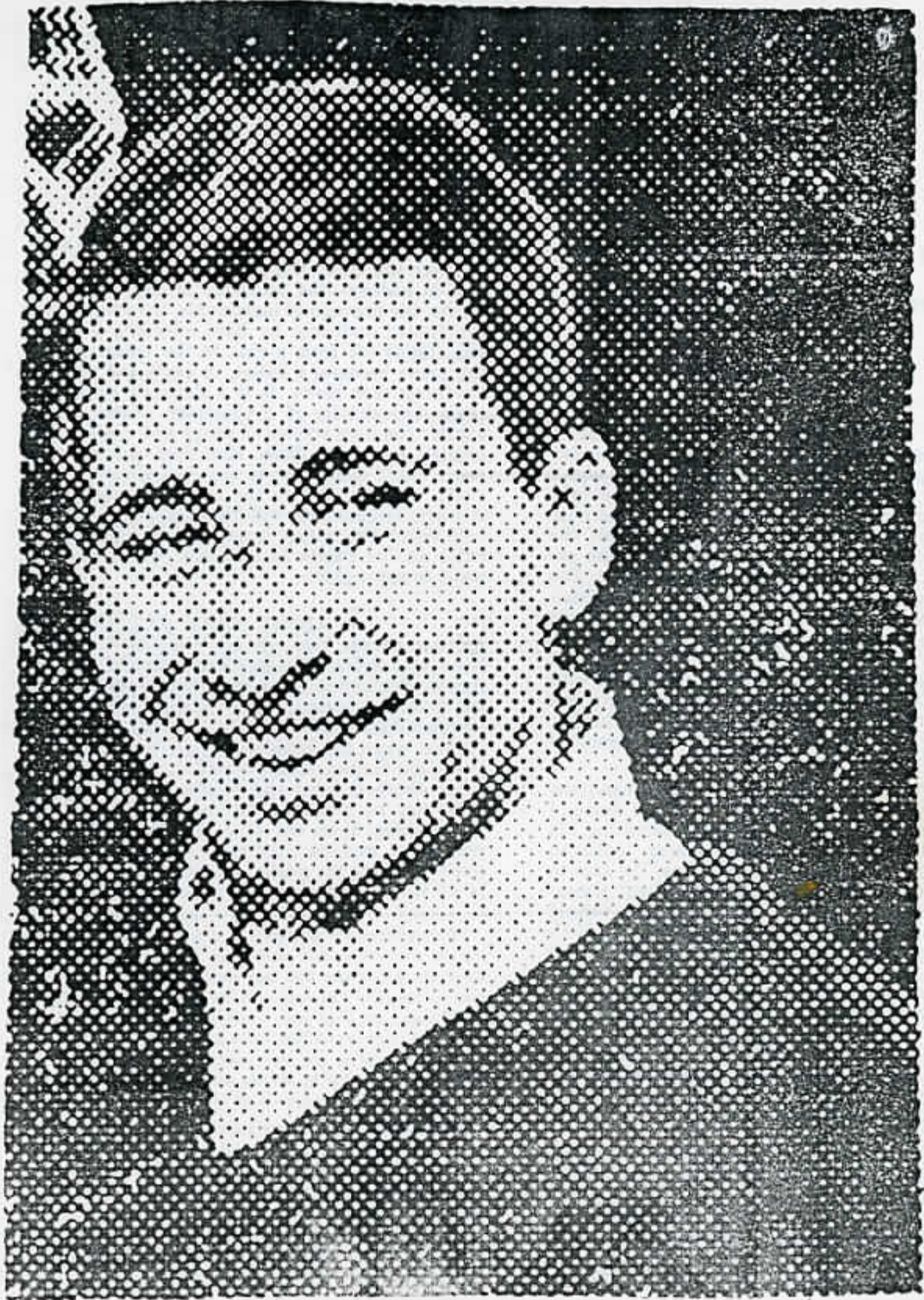


Ivory Tower



Mit

and a
rink i
The
half ;
the c
thin
plosio
playe
tions
unific
their
and o
the r
again
bewi
feint

O:
only
could
mov
has
him:
in n
two
doui
the
two-
cloc
right
the
The
soli
dle.

T
the
boy
run
ten
pla
ion

"IVORY TOWER"
MAGAZINE
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
2/1/1965

TWO ON HOCKEY

a conversation with
Minnesota center Doug Woog

by Garrison Keillor

BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITY and a house I used to live in, there was a hockey rink in a park I passed on my way home at night. The rink was illuminated only by a streetlight half a block away; in that dim light, I could hear the chunk and bite of skates in full flight, the thin crack of sticks against the ice, and the explosions of the pucks shot against the boards. The players were very young, and wore odd combinations of makeshift pads and the remnants of old uniforms. Some had wrapped cardboard around their legs under their long socks. They played on and on into the night, as if the ice would melt with the next full moon, hurling themselves again and again at the goal, slipping on their dull blades, bewildering imaginary goalies with ingenious feints and maneuvers.

One night, when it was quite past dinner-time, only one player was there as I walked home. I could hear him from the sidewalk, narrating his moves in the style of a radio announcer. "Johnson has the puck behind his own blue line," he said to himself skating down the ice slowly, bent almost in half. "Thirty seconds left. Minnesota behind two to one in this—the final game of the N-C-double-A playoffs against North Dakota." He let the puck slide far in front of him. "It's one-on-two—across the blue line—twenty seconds left, the clock's running out—he stops, he fakes to the right—fifteen seconds—now he's coming in from the left side—five seconds—he winds, he fires!" The puck skittered slowly into the goal, and the solitary man of the hour skated back to the middle, his stick raised to the crowds.

The few times I've watched hockey games at the University, I've thought of that rink and of boys playing into the night, their noses red and running, their feet numb, their movements intense and hopeful. Such cold and lonely beginners play, it seems to me, because they have had a vision of grace and talent; there, on the rink at

night, they are playing out what they have seen.

There are many things to catch one's imagination in hockey—the geometry of rapidly-moving forms, the bravado of individuals, the long sweeps punctuated suddenly by hard checking—but if one stands off from a rink in the half-darkness, the game becomes a ballet, as swift and clean as anything that blows. It is a dancer's game: the cross-step shuffle of defensemen skating backwards; the long strides of wings and centers; the goalie's hops and slides. Man does not skate by brute force alone, nor is the goal always to the swift, nor the puck to the strong. Someday, the Athletic Department will hire a choreographer to help coach the hockey team, and we will have to build an Ice Palace to hold the people who will want to see it play.

I ADMIT THAT ALL OF THIS did not parade through my mind as I watched Minnesota defeat Michigan Tech on a Saturday last month. Hockey is not a sport that suggests long and careful sentences, each holding the tail of the sentence before in its trunk. It is hard, fast, and furious when the stakes are high, something like the Light Brigade under attack by a band of guerrillas—both ordered and chaotic: a sustained attack may be broken up by determined defensive skirmishing, then, out of a thicket of sticks and players at mid-ice, may come one man with the puck charging the goalie, and all at once the game is as simple and primitive as a medieval joust.*

**But perhaps not as simple as it looks: the man charging the goalie is seldom more than 30 yards from the goal when the goalie sees him and realizes he must protect the goal by himself. The man with the puck is skating perhaps 20-25 miles an hour and, when he decides to shoot, can make the puck travel 100 miles an hour with a good slap shot. The goal is six feet wide; the goalie can protect about two feet of it by simply standing where he is. Protecting the other four feet is all reflex and instinct.*

Most goals, of course, are attempted when the goalie has other players in front of him to cut down some of the shots and break up plays, in which case he has other problems. His vision is often blocked and many times he sees the puck for only a fraction of a second before it is shot, if, indeed, he sees it at all. Even if he blocks a shot, there are other offensive players close by to slap the puck in if it bounces off the goalie's stick or pads.

Ivory Tower

It is a game which demands extraordinary reflexes of its players, and a certain endurance of spectators. I left my seat at the end of the first period, walked shakily to the stairway, then walked back and sat down.

I decided to watch one player in the second period to see if I could make order of the game by following closely only a fragment of the action. I picked out a center, a playmaker, Number 3, Doug Woog, a junior from South St. Paul, the program said. I remembered seeing him in 1959 when he played tailback for his high school football team (which was in the same league as the school I went to). He was a sophomore then, small and very fast, a runner who would plunge with abandon into the line, gain three yards, pick himself up after the tackles and guards had unpled, jog back to the huddle and do the same thing a play later.

Minnesota came on the rink for the second period, leading Michigan Tech 2-1. The players skated around their goals, huddled briefly and went to center ice for the face-off. The crowd was unusually quiet; it has seemed to me in the past that Minnesota fans expect their players to fumble or run the wrong way, so as to be pleasantly shocked when they don't. If the spectators expected a sudden set-back, they got it. Michigan Tech scored two goals in the first 34 seconds. The Minnesota side of the Arena vibrated with anguish. I tried to watch Woog, but he was at the opposite end, the Minnesota end; his team was having difficulty clearing the puck, and he couldn't seem to get a play started. The puck came up toward the middle, then two Michigan Tech defensemen sprang toward their own goal, skating furiously backwards, and a moment later, Woog hurtled toward them, his head up, the puck drifting along at his right. He came about ten feet past the blue line (I couldn't see any Minnesota forwards near him), cocked his stick and slapped. The puck went between the legs of the right defenseman and into the corner of the goal. The Michigan Tech goalie, who hadn't come out from the goal, didn't move an inch.

Minnesota won the game, 5-4, on the strength of some frenetic and excellent work by goalie John Lothrop in the third period, and the following Monday, I called Woog at his dormitory. He suggested I come to hockey practice Wednesday afternoon. He wouldn't be able to talk to me then, he said, but would meet me at the dormitory after dinner.

ON WEDNESDAY, OUTSIDE Williams Arena, the air was dank and gray with melting snow and mud. I stood in the middle of University Avenue, trying to cross, and was almost run down 17 times by cars and trucks driven by 10 wings and 7 centers from old Minnesota hockey teams. I went inside and walked up to the press booth high above the ice.

Twenty-two players were bunched around

Coach John Mariucci at center ice. He was on skates dressed in what looked like Army surplus underwear. The players stood in a loose circle brushing the ice with their sticks, shuffling, their heads down. The air, the Arena lit as if for a championship game, everything was clean as ice. Once, when I was young, I put a pint of lemon sherbet in a garbage disposal drain so I could breathe the lemon sherbet air. It was like that in the Arena.

The practice was a series of stereotyped drills, each one ended and begun with a bleat from Mr. Mariucci's whistle.

In the first, two wings and a center skated toward a goal against two defensemen and a goalie, made a shot and skated back to make way for another line and two more defensemen to do the same thing. They went through it quickly, using simple patterns, seldom taking time for second shots and scoring few goals. The passing was hard and accurate, and they seemed to be satisfied with that.

The whistle blew twice and they went to the next. A puck was shot into the end zone, a team of five men chased it and brought it back. Each team used the same pattern, trying to pass quickly and accurately.

During the practice, the coach skated randomly around the middle as players streamed back and forth by him, calling to some of them like a man hailing a cab, skating in little circles, lifting a foot out in front of him with each stride, stepping-over like an old vaudevillian.

Whistle again. Players lined up on both blue lines and shot steadily at the goalies. Lothrop stopped the first few, then put his stick aside and stopped most of the rest with his gloves and pads. A hard slapshot hitting the boards in the Arena sounds like a small howitzer, and the air rang with explosions.

Whistle. The final drill, a one-on-nothing or one-on-the goalie drill. I learned later, was the Daily Jackpot Elimination Contest (worth \$2.20 to the lucky winner). Mr. Mariucci took up stick and gloves and started it. Everyone took a turn skating against the second-string goalie. The coach, skating slowly and deliberately, faked him to one side and scored. He—and others who scored against the second goalie—then turned to Lothrop. The coach, skating with great dignity, was blocked. Those who scored against Lothrop went against the second goalie, and so on, until all but one player was eliminated. The winner had managed to fake Lothrop to his knees in the fourth round, slipped around him and scored easily, with a shrill cry and his arms raised; each player paid him a dime.

The practice broke down then into casual play, idle shots at goalies, slapshots against the boards and good-natured duels, the players chasing each other, wrestling, playing keep-away, holding each other's sticks and arms. From the ice to the press booth came the faint aroma of sweat, the resur-

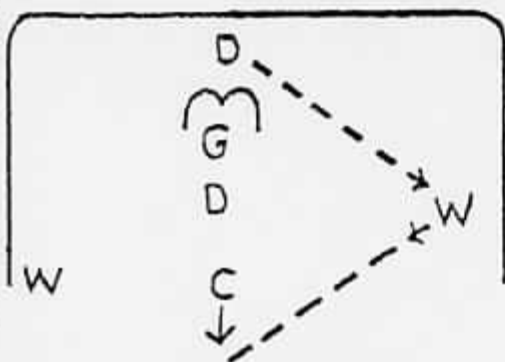
ing machine came in, the lights dimmed and the practice was over.

WOOG WAS SITTING in the Pioneer Hall lobby when I arrived that night, looking over the front page of the afternoon paper, and we went down to a lounge in the basement. "I once played hockey myself, you know," I did not say, but I could see us both in uniforms—on opposing teams—and could not imagine any possible situation in any conceivable game in which he would not be able, without taking thought, to put me, the puck and all of my friends into the goal. There is a difference between a light man and a small man; Woog is light. The bridge of his nose was scraped, and I asked him about it, and about Hockey Injuries He Had Had.

"My lifetime total of stitches is 50," he said. "And I've had a shoulder separation, I think, and some torn ligaments. Most of them were nuisance injuries, not serious, but once a guy was on the rink in high school with buckle overshoes on, and I got kicked in the head with an overshoe and had ten stitches taken."

"A hockey player is pretty well padded," he said. He ticked off a list of protective gear: shin, shoulder, hip and elbow pads; headgear, mouthpiece, tendon guards on the backs of skates, supporter, steel toes on skates. "Breezers have pads, too," he said. "They're hockey pants, actually—long shorts padded like football pants."

Over the phone the Monday before, he had agreed to draw diagrams of basic plays and formations. He took scratch paper and a soft pencil and started to draw.



"This is one of the patterns you saw at practice, right?" he said, bending over the table. "Here we're clearing the puck, getting it out of our half of the rink and into theirs, so it's both defensive and offensive. Some of the best scoring plays start here, when you're able to get the puck moving before the defense gets set."

"Here, one defenseman gets the puck behind our goal, passes to this wing who passes to me—you follow me?—and we release, we start down-ice."

"There are any number of variations on this," he said. "If that wing is covered, I can break to

one side—I'm the center here—and take a pass from the defenseman, or he can bring it out himself."

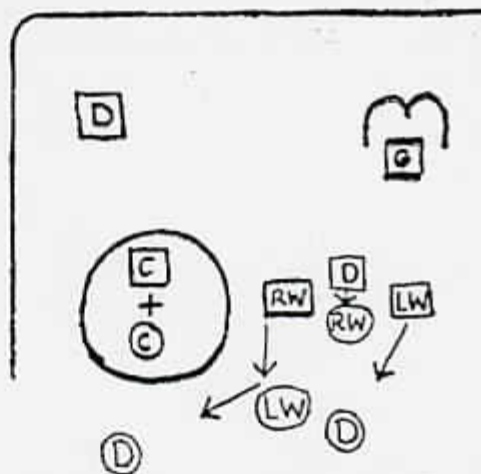
"Isn't it a rule that defensemen aren't supposed to come out in front of their own goal with the puck?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "at least, he shouldn't pass it in front, where someone could easily intercept it. But there are enough variations on this play so that he shouldn't have to do that. For example, you've probably seen a defenseman pass around the boards. He shoots the puck into the corner, or rather to the inside of the corner of the boards, which are curved there, and the puck goes around and up to this wing just like it's on a track."

"What is that called?" I asked. "It's a round-the-board pass," he said, smiling slightly. "Everyone hates it because it's a slow pass and it gives the other team time to get right on top of you."

"If we have trouble clearing the puck, the goalie will try to hold onto a shot, or fall on the puck, to force a face-off," he said. "Or he may hold onto the puck if the team is disorganized—if people are leaving their defensive positions, or if the players are tired, or when the pressure's on."

"How do you know when the referee is going to drop the puck for the face-off?" I asked. "It's always seemed to me that—" "You watch his hand," he said. "When it tenses up, you know he's about to throw it down, and you try to time your swing to hit it about an inch off the ice. But here, I'll show you."



"The defense is boxed, the offense is circled. All right, the centers, who are facing off, both try to draw the puck back—the offensive center to the defenseman behind him, the defensive center to the defenseman behind him or to the left wing. If the offense gets the puck, the right defensive wing checks the left offensive wing if he has the puck, then moves to cover the left offensive defenseman. The left defensive wing moves to cover the right offensive defenseman. There's a rule now that the defensive center can't check, or make contact with the offensive center in the

Ivory Tower

face-off circle. He used to be able to, but he can't any more. From this basic formation, you see the offense is in good position to set up a play and the defense to clear the puck, depending on who gets control of it."

WHAT DOES THE GOALIE DO?"

I asked. "I mean, what chance does he have without defensemen to help him? Or is that a stupid question?"

"No," he said. "That's called a one-on-nothing situation. One offensive player skating in alone on the goalie. It's not a good spot for the goalie to be in—you figure, on the average, the man will make his shot about half the time, although I've skated in alone on a goalie eight times this season and only made one goal, not very good. So the goalie, if he's smart, can cut down the chances somewhat."

He started another diagram.



"First of all, the goalie has to consider the possibilities. The offensive player can make a shot, or he can try to deke the goalie. That means stick-handling by him for an easy shot. Faking him out. The goalie has to consider the ability of the player charging him. If the man's a good shot, he'll gamble on him shooting. So he moves to cut down the chances."

"See this angle? The puck has to be inside this V to score. So—by moving out from the cage to here—" he drew an X. "the goalie can protect more of the goal. Right?"

"Here, the man is coming in on the goalie's left. The goalie moves to the left to protect that side (and anticipates a shot to his right), and comes out to cut down the angle. He can't come out too far, or the man will get in behind him. You can see it's really a matter of geometry. The goalie cuts down the angle, but if he commits himself—if he comes out too far—the man can outmaneuver him and create a new angle, get an open shot at the goal."

"Forget diagrams a minute," I said. "I'm wondering now what the difference is, specifically, between a very good player and an average one?"

For example, exactly how and in what ways are you better than somebody else on your team?"

He frowned. "How are you going to publish this?"

"I'm not asking you to compare yourself with another player," I backpedaled. "I mean, what makes a good hockey player better than an average player?"

He hunched down in his chair, thinking about it. "First of all, the feet," he said. "You want a wide base at the feet. Not bow-legged, but a good spread, for good balance. Otherwise, you have trouble shooting, checking and everything else."

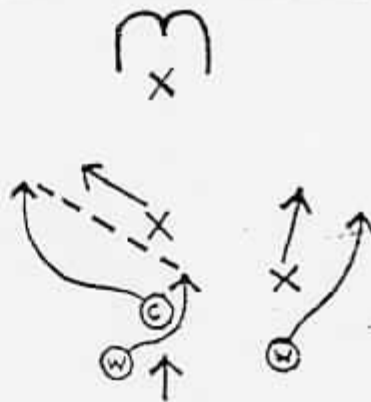
"Stick-handling. That's simply advancing the puck without passing it, not necessarily fancy-work. For that, you have to be able to keep your head up to see the play; you can't look at the puck."

"There's also something I'd call instinct, which is actually just good athletic sense. Things you're taught in just about any sport, fundamentals like 'Go to the open spot,' 'Feed the open man,' 'Anticipate others players' actions and reactions.'"

"You have to have skating ability, obviously, but it's a special one—maneuverability. If you can't move your body easily, and go just where you want to go, you can't stickhandle."

"Finally, I'd say you need a fine sense of organization, but I have to draw a diagram for that."

"The basic part of organization is playing your position—right wing on the right side, center in the middle and so on. But it's more complex than that."



"Here's our line—Bruce Larson, whom I've played with since I was 13, Gary Hokanson and myself. We're skating against two defensemen, a three-on-two. You always try to improve your odds on this play by turning a three-on-two into a two-on-one. This right wing tries to draw one defenseman off to his right. Then I cut to the left. Automatically, the left wing should reverse behind me, come to the right. This is something

very good hockey player should do every time, and because I've played with Larson so much, I know just when he'll do it, and just where he'll be and that, if he's covered, he'll shout at me and cut off the pass."

I HAD JUST A FEW random questions left—on Canadian hockey, "getting up" for games, and playing away from home.

CANADIAN HOCKEY: "Canadians have some advantages. Their hockey season is about a month-and-a-half longer than ours. And they play with their heads up. They have to. In Canada, you can check all over the ice, not just in your defensive zone as it is here. So, they tend to be stronger, strong legs, they're hard to knock down and they play hard."

"In fact, there's just one American player in the National Hockey League—Tommy Williams of the Boston Bruins. He's from Duluth."

GETTING UP FOR GAMES: "It's a combination of many things—getting psyched for a game. You want to put on a good performance. You have pride in yourself and in your team, and you want to play well. You come to respect the opposition. And you try to play with some goal in mind—a 'must' game, a play-off game you have to win, that sort of thing. For example, this next weekend we know we have to take two games from Michigan State to stay in the running."

"Sometimes, you can think you're up for a game, and you aren't. Before last Friday's Michigan game, it seemed as if the team was really up for it. Everybody was tense in the locker room, nobody laughing, people walking around—going into the john, that sort of thing. Then we went out on the ice and Michigan Tech made us look like a pee-wee team in the first period, and beat us four to one."

PLAYING AWAY FROM HOME: "In this league, you have to win at home if you're going to win. Road games are tough. For example, going to Michigan State, we're on the train about 16 hours and nobody sleeps very well. Sometimes the strange rinks hurt your playing: the Michigan State rink is smaller, and the arena is kept quite warm inside which makes a difference; the North Dakota rink is small, and the rink at Michigan Tech is very small. It's inside what seems like a converted warehouse, a large match-box. You know the dimensions of your home rink, and you're used to playing on it."

"You miss the home crowd, too, you really do. When the play slows down at the Arena, when the players are tired, and the whole crowd gets excited and starts yelling, the tempo picks up and it helps your play. You're in front of people you know. You know that a winning home team helps the box office. You want to put on a good performance for them. You don't want to look like a stewbum in front of a crowd."

PACKING UP MY THINGS. I tried to think of a question about the aesthetics of the game. "How do you feel when you skate?" I asked. "What do you mean?" he said.

Do you dance? I almost asked him. "It seems like a sort of dance to me," I said. Walking up the stairs to the lobby, he thought about it. "I don't know exactly what you mean," he said at the front door, "but maybe I do. I mean—you don't want to be a showboat, a fancy man, but there's a certain feeling when you skate, when it's easy and fun for you, that there's a grace to it, a fluidity of motion. It's when your body and all your movements are under control." He said he didn't know if that was what I meant, but it was and we said good-bye.

On the way home, I thought that playing hockey well may be a small talent. If it is, then the people who write or coach sports had better not try to make of it or any other sport a symbol of The Good Fight, or a training-ground for Life. If they do, and I think they usually do, they miss an important point.

All of us, for all our sometime pessimism, prefer the professional, the competent, the talented, to the helpless or mediocre who have never pulled anything off in their lives. By "competent," I don't mean those unfortunates who have filed themselves down to a pencil-point, those who are skilled at counting things and putting them in alphabetical order. To me, the talented, the competent, are those who have seen for themselves, even in a limited thing, a measure of grace and power, and then turn themselves to the mastery of a hundred details and techniques, and, by so doing, make a sport what they have seen in it, something which merits our pleasure and respect.

In sport, which is more formal and fair than competition in business or war, we respect such people, knowing they have come by their rewards honestly. And in hockey, in which skill is always more important than size or speed, in which no one of considerable skill can ever appear heavy or dull to the eye, we are caught up by the players, remembering dark rinks and hopeful skaters, knowing how and whence the talented have come to such lightness, syncopation and style. □

THE BIG SKY

THE STORY involves Mifune, captain of the guard of a medieval family, who leads his mistress to safety in a neighboring province, but not before dispatching some grubby samurai. Cinemascope has been seldom equalled in the immense skies and deserted mountains of Kuyshu as the story takes on cosmic meaning amid the arid decor.

—from a University Film Society advertisement for "Hidden Fortress"



I
wi
th
lat
su
of

fol
wi
ag
an
an
Fo
Mi
Ur
th
sot

A
ves
an
No
bu
in
Mi
tea
fo
suc

I
pec
on
nar
ter
rin
anc
boy
The
kic
fou
me

Monday, April 5, 1965

The People, The Game, and The Spirit

by Garrison Keillor

1.

Hockey can be played exactly and deductively, like a debate between theologians, but there are those who long for the religious wars, and hockey con brio. Several thousand of them gathered in Grand Forks, North Dakota, last month to see two hockey games and the resumption of hostilities between the Universities of North Dakota and Minnesota.

This old quarrel, which began in 1929, is part folk drama and part ad hominem argument, in which men play against each other and not against the verities (the net, the boards, the odds and angles), in which three traditional 86-proof animosities are played out. A small town (Grand Forks) gets its chance against Zenith (played by Minneapolis); a small college plays a Big Ten University; and North Dakota—which suspects that Minnesota is an urban state—plays Minnesota, which thinks North Dakota rustic.

Of the three, the second is most intoxicating. A Big Ten athletic department is a wealthy investor. It has money in a variety of industries, and can expect some profit even in a tight year. North Dakota, on the other hand, is in the hockey business. Its other teams play small schools; only in hockey can it take on the giants—Michigan, Michigan State and Minnesota. A North Dakota team could win but four games in a season, the four against Minnesota, and consider itself successful.

I was reminded of all these things when I stepped into the Grand Forks Winter Sports Arena on the day of the first game. (The Arena is misnamed: it is a hockey rink—there is but one winter sport in Grand Forks.) A janitor circled the rink, pulling a contraption made of oil barrels and a brush that spread water on the ice. Two boys were kicking a tennis ball in front of the goal. The smaller played goalie, and the older boy was kicking the ball by him so quickly the goalie found himself lunging at each shot with the move meant for the one before.

Their father sat nearby in the first row. He turned his face from the wire netting as I came in. "The game's sold out," he said. I told him that I had a ticket. "Both of them have been sold out for three weeks," he said. "We couldn't get tickets, but my boys insisted on coming over to see how the ice is. It's pretty warm out." Water from melting snow on the roof was dripping onto the ice and stands.

The Arena looks like a home for old quarrels. It has a metallic skin, out-sized steel bin that it is, but its heart is all wood which shows marks better. The runways from the dressing rooms to the ice are gouged and splintered, the boards are black and blue from old scrapes, even the seats are marked from direct and sustained blows. The lobby, low-ceilinged and plank-floored, bedizened with refreshment signs and emblems, smells of dust and sweat long since retired to the woodwork. Dim, cold, rough-hewn, the Arena belongs to the pre-comfort era of sports palace design. It is where hockey is played for The People. (The word "people" has more meanings than I care to know. I use it to refer to North Dakota spectators in its political sense, to mean a proletariat of hockey. There are no \$4 seats in Grand Forks.)

The man was gathering his boys as I got up to go, and we left the Arena together. "Minnesota has lots of fight and spirit, you have to say that for them," he said, which is to say that he hoped North Dakota would not win both games too easily.

In the lobby of the Dacotah Hotel at 6:45 that evening, the Minnesota players collected themselves, red-eyed and stiff from their pre-game nap. We left the hotel five by five in cabs, and found the streets around the Arena jammed by cars an hour before the game was to begin. Inside, as I found my way to the press box, the stands were half full. The box commanded an excellent view of half the rink, and, by throwing myself across the press table, I could see the outline of the other. At 7:15, 45 minutes before the whistle, the enthusiasts began to call for blood, stamping and hallooing the janitor who was inspecting the

Ivory Tower

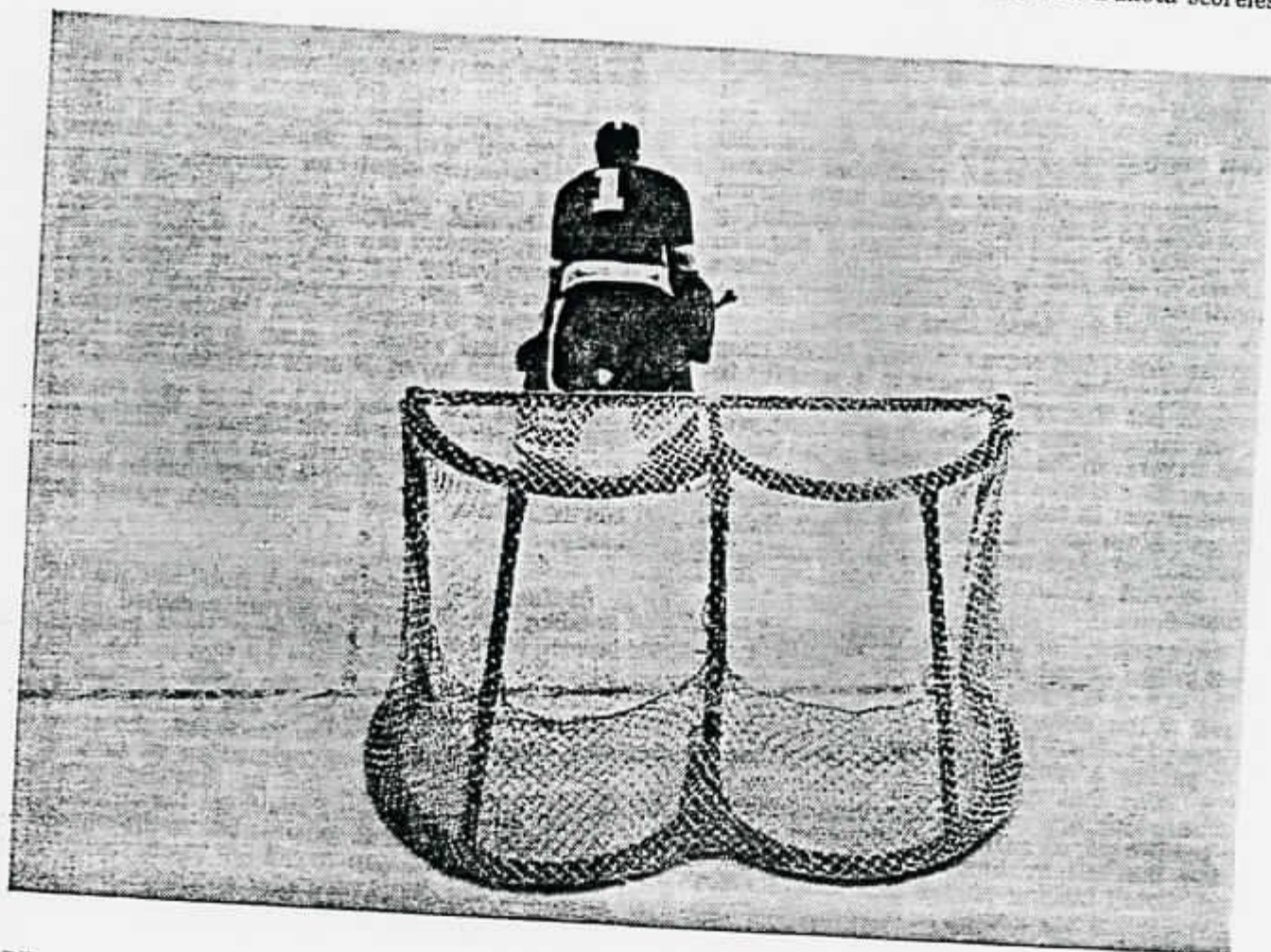
ice. The farm director of a local radio station, who was in the box, said that a group of students, unable to get tickets, had broken down a side door and come in.

From the box, I looked upon the people. In the fragments of noise which gathered intensity as game-time approached, they looked as comfortable as a steady drinker in his favorite chair. Their team could lose on the ice, but it could not lose in the stands, in the hearts of its countrymen. They opened thermos jugs, pulled blankets about their legs, and waited for questions of great consequence to be settled. With the entrance of the North Dakota team, led by the goalie who was passed by fast-skating forwards as they hopped on the ice, the people came to their feet with appropriate calls of admonition and admiration.

A crowd at a game fought to a thin edge is a fine stimulant, but a crowd at a game won 6-0 by the home team is good company. North Dakota scored three goals in the second period, three in the third. "Luck, luck! It bounced in!" shouted a fat man after the fourth goal. Boos and catcalls were only moderately warm, and precipitation was light. The arena announcer declared that North Dakota had clinched the championship of

the Western Collegiate Hockey Association, and the enthusiasts went home or drove to the downtown bars. I rode back to the hotel with a Minnesota man who was taking hard pulls on a miniature bottle of whiskey. "It's a potato barn," he yelled into my ear. "That's why they want to build a new arena. The price of potatoes is going up to 20 cents a bushel."

Having no relevant loyalties of my own, but having travelled to Grand Forks with the Minnesota team studying and playing buck euchre in the seats around me on the train, I had wanted them to win. The game they'd lost had recorded itself on my brain, and when I went to bed, it began again in small fragments like frames of an old silent movie. In the first frame, John Lothrop, a small goalie who crouches before the cage, stood in the milling crowd, his arms and legs snapping about as he looked for the puck, fought off players who crowded him, and caught every first period shot that came near him. My notes for that period consisted of a large, black L, which I had decorated with flourishes as the period went on and Lothrop's saves became more and more heroic. He had held North Dakota scoreless



until the second period, when lines of forwards seemed to descend on him in waves, and had made 47 saves in the game.

In the second frame, Roy Nystrom, a forward, was checked jarringly into the boards, and the camera caught a flutter of absolute consternation on his face. His face was followed by another, a defenseman's as he skated a treadmill, North Dakota players streaming by. Then, the game turned into an old British war movie I had seen the night before, and I fell asleep.

Entr'acte

I was awakened the following afternoon by a maid who had stopped cleaning my room to have a cigarette and watch an old movie on television. She left me a copy of the Fargo Forum which I read as I dressed. One headline—"Shanley Raps Wops, 86-76" (the Wops, I learned, were from Wahpeton)—woke me up, and I remembered I was to meet John Mariucci, the Minnesota coach, in the lobby.

Mariucci, born in Eveleth on the Minnesota Iron Range, had come to the University in the late Thirties, and played football on Bernie Bierman's 1940 national championship team. He also played hockey, and, offered contracts for professional football and hockey, chose the latter because, as he says, "it was more of a challenge. Everyone else on the 1940 team went on to play professional football, but there weren't many Americans playing professional hockey." He played defense for the Chicago Black Hawks for five seasons in the Forties, and was the only American to captain a National Hockey League team. He is the son of Italian immigrants, a boy-made-good. "When I went to Italy in 1956 as coach of the Olympic team," he told me, "I wrote home, 'Mama,' I said, 'I'm glad you didn't miss the boat.'"

I went to the lobby to find him in session, sunning himself before the Dacotah's high front window, moving around, lighting his pipe, thick, hoarse, still powerful at 50. Players, their parents and wives who had come up on the train came and went around him like fish. Joe Cooper, a tall, grim man who had played with Mariucci on the Black Hawks and who had come from Winnipeg to see the games, sat with his son in the middle of the room. Mariucci sat on a sofa under the window with one of his younger players, Dennis Zacho, and Don Vaia, the assistant coach, who had been a Minnesota goalie in the Fifties.

"I was talking to Bryan Hextall," Mariucci told Zacho. "He played for the New York Rangers a long time ago, now his boy plays for North Dakota. I was kidding him about an old stick he used to score 19 goals. One stick. It got so it was frayed down at the end, like this—" he held his fingers an inch apart. "We used to threaten to break it. Hextall's good luck stick. Now you kids are breaking sticks all the time."

"They don't make them like they used to,"

Zacho said. "These laminated sticks break easier. Sometimes I break three a day."

"So you're the culprit." Mariucci turned on him. "You—you use it like a warclub. A stick is a delicate instrument, a work of art, like a violin. You should handle it like a Stradivarius."

We sat, weighing the silence. Mariucci told me he had come from a luncheon of the Grand Forks Arena Boosters Club which was raising funds for a new arena. He had sold \$20 worth of booster buttons that morning to Minnesota fans for a dollar apiece, 50 cents above market value. "I've got to do something for them," he said in his irreverence. "They've got the worst hockey rink in the United States. Somebody's got to have the worst, I told them, and they've got it. Jimmy!"

A boy came from behind a pillar and walked over to the sofa. His hands were twisted and came only to his waist. "We were just talking over old times," said Mariucci, poking him in the stomach. "You're getting fat. When you get to be my age, you talk over old times." "What position do you play?" asked Zacho. Jimmy said he played goalie. "I've got to go upstairs," he said.

"This series is nothing like it used to be," said Mariucci. "When I started coaching here 13 years ago, the University faculty committee on athletics was thinking about abolishing it. There were fights every game—players, spectators, everybody. One big donnybrook. Six-hundred North Dakota fans would come down to games in Minneapolis and almost tear the arena roof off. Once, the North Dakota players were introduced before a game—most of them Canadians—and Minnesota students unfurled a huge sign—'God Save The Queen.' But not any more. Lots of noise (that arena keeps the noise bottled in), lots of kidding and jostling I get from the fans, but not like it used to be."

"Did you hear about last night's state tournament game?" Vaia said. "Bloomington and St. Paul Johnson. Bruce Larson (a Minnesota forward) called home last night and heard about it. You won't believe it. They were tied 1-1 with three minutes to go, Cotroneo of Johnson pulled his goalie and Bloomington made one of those long, carom shots and it went right in the empty net. 2-1."

"Did they haul him away from the Arena in the wagon?" Mariucci asked. "Cotroneo pulled his goalie," Vaia said again.

"No," said Mariucci. "No, no, no, no, no, he couldn't have done it. He wouldn't do it. Nobody would do that. That can't be true. That would be like me, leading 2-1, deciding—'Well, we really ought to beat this team by more than this' and pulling the goalie. No, you go back and find out what happened."

Mariucci returned to his motif, his arm around Zacho. "Things were different when I was playing, Denny," he said. "Now, we give hockey players a good deal, a kid may get several offers from colleges and pick the best one. I came down from the Iron Range to play hockey during the Depres-



sion. They gave me a bank job, \$50 a month for tuition, books, everything. No scholarships, no grants-in-aid. I played like hell to keep that job. I was hungry. I wanted to get ahead, I knew I couldn't get ahead with the pick and shovel, and I knew if I didn't play well it would be back to the iron mines."

"Mr. Mariucci," said the loudspeaker. "Mr. Mariucci, telephone."

A boy and his sister came from the restaurant, placemats in hand, for Zacho's autograph. "I used to go to all the hockey games," the boy said.

"Three things I'm going to tell you," Mariucci said when he came back. "Listen."

"Number one. Hockey is a game of the spirit. Last night, remember? the game was zero-zero at the beginning of the second period. When they got that first goal, North Dakota just started coming in waves, one after the other. Spirit! I saw a state tournament game the other day between Roseau and International Falls. Falls won, but Holy God! those Roseau players skated twice as fast as they'd ever skated in their lives. No, I'll take mediocre talent and a lot of spirit any day. Any day." He leaned forward, his hands raised, his fingers spread. "If spirit counted 50 and talent counted 50, I'd take the kid with 50 per cent spirit and 25 per cent talent to the other way around. What does that add up to? A good hockey player."

"Two. When you're winning, coaching is easy. But when you're losing and your team is near the bottom, waiting for the end of the season, no play-offs to look forward to, there's an emptiness in your playing. Then it's hard, very hard, but you can only do so much. Earlier this season, we couldn't seem to win on Friday nights. Everybody was wondering why. We talked about it and talked about it, trying to figure out what we were doing on Saturday that we weren't doing on Friday. Then we won three straight and nobody mentioned it again."

"No when Doug Woog and Gary Hokanson and Bruce Larson, Larry Stordahl and Lorne Grosso and Craig Falkman—when those guys are going good, everybody tells me I'm a great coach. When we start losing, everybody wants to know 'Why don't you teach these kids how to skate?'"

"A coach can only do so much. It's my job to know what to say to them to get them up for games. Last night, I said very little. I told them we'd lost to a good team, but we'd come back the next night. Sometimes you have to alibi for them. North Dakota's all one hell of a better team than we are, but I'd never tell that to my players. I'd never tell that to my players."

"Three."

"You were right, John," said Vaia from the door. "He was behind 2-1 when he pulled his goalie." Mariucci looked pleased. From the street entrance came a shout and two men from Minnesota who wanted Mariucci to speak at a banquet in their town which was trying to raise money for an indoor hockey arena. ("I make about 125 speeches a year," Mariucci told me later. "My missionary work. I tell stories, I tell boys to work hard and obey their coaches, and I tell the men that a good hockey program means a program that starts with boys 8 or 9 years old and an indoor hockey rink to play and practice on.") He pulled a bundle of papers from his pocket and looked at a calendar. They haggled briefly over the date of the banquet and the fee, which Mariucci didn't expect, commiserated over the Friday night game and the men left.

"Three," said Mariucci. "Talent in hockey isn't like talent in basketball or football; you don't call off Defense No. 1 or Play No. 2. Nothing is set. The play is contingent on multiple factors. It takes years and years to learn good hockey sense, which is: on offense, go to the open spot; on defense, go where the pass is going to go. You go where you're supposed to go, that's all I'll say about hockey strategy. You learn it, maybe someday you'll play with the professionals. You go to play for the Black Hawks, let's say; you come in right now and somebody tells you to dress for the game, you'll be playing on so-and-so's line. You don't ask 'Where do I go?' You go where you're supposed to go."

"Four. It's a wicked circle—playing hockey. The more you learn, the more you want to play;

Monday, April 5, 1965

the more you want to play, the more you practice; the more you practice, the more you play; the more you play, the more you learn, the more you want to play. You never quit. I'd love to play. I don't care what team. I'd like nothing better than to play for some get-up team, just to get out on the ice with a stick in my hand."

He took up an imaginary stick and flipped it twice with his wrists. "I've got to go to bed," he said. We walked toward the elevator as the door opened and several players walked out. "Grosso!" he called, and a short, puckish player with black hair and eyes walked back to us. "This is Lorne Grosso, the only Canadian on the team," said Mariucci. "you ought to be talking to him instead of me. He was in seminary studying to be a priest, he came to Minnesota, got married within a year, now he doesn't want to go back to Canada."

"I didn't know there were any Italians in Minnesota," Grosso said.

2.

As the Minnesota players came on the ice that night, the band played "Minnesota. Hats Off to Thee" and the people put up some applause. It would have confused a man from Minneapolis I had met the night before who had been disgusted with them. An unruly crowd, he said, spoils the aesthetics of the game—"fine points" was his term, a crowd has no appreciation of the fine points. He seemed like one of those Better Government schoolmarmers who wish that politicians would discuss the issues and not play up to the crowds. Such people are embarrassed by winners. Losing is always more noble when you don't need the money.

The people did not expect to lose, but they wanted to see a good game. They agreed that North Dakota had the better team, but Minnesota—one must always grant something to the loser—had, as a local sport put it, "lots of fight." At last, when the loudspeaker had ground out a recording of "The Star-Spangled Banner," the puck was dropped.

North Dakota began with the deliberate style it had employed successfully the night before, using a sort of basketball offense—the defensemen passing the puck near the blue line like guards until the forwards could shake themselves loose for a pass and a shot. Against this calm pattern, Minnesota put two players to covering the puck which, as it was passed quickly, they followed from side to side, waving their sticks, but finding few opportunities to check or intercept the play. Controlling the puck in this way, North Dakota scored early in the period.

Minnesota's style was more individualistic and, hence, less reliable. It depended on stickhandling more than passing to advance the puck, and on its centers, Doug Woog (later named to the All-American college hockey team), Lorne Grosso, and Jack Dale. Midway in the period, a wing on the first line, Bruce Larson, brought the puck to

the North Dakota zone, then slowed the play, circling the defense to give Woog time to get close to the goal. Larson shot, and Woog shot the rebound in off the goalie's skate.

Ingenious as centers may sometimes be, the best things happen by chance. With half a minute remaining in the period, North Dakota began a drive, a defenseman holding the puck behind his goal, the center coming by and, picking it up, passing it further up the line. The pass, blocked at mid-ice, was regained by North Dakota and lost again. In the scramble, a North Dakota defenseman picked it up and took two full strides up-ice, only to have it stolen by Roy Nystrom who was skating fast the other way. Nystrom catapulted into the North Dakota zone with Dale and Zacho beside him and only one defenseman in his way. He scored with three seconds left.

The people had been watching 20 minutes of play, unaware of the larger issues. Shocked by this sudden turn of events, Minnesota leading 2-1, they glared at the scoreboard as if even the machine had betrayed them, called upon the name of the Lord, and took to the lobby.

Trading was brisk at the popcorn stand. Smoke hung thick and low. Between clumps of people and around posts, a gang of small boys played touch-and-go. A fat man stood in the middle, holding three cups of hot chocolate and two hot dogs, standing on his toes to see over the heads. "Mel says to me on the way over, 'They're going to get it tonight'" a woman said, fishing for cigarettes in her purse. Her friend lit the match. "I wish the referee would see what they're doing over in our corner," she said. "They're butting them with their heads." "They ought to butt right back," said the first. I hadn't noticed players butting each other, but in folk dramas, I expect, it is safer to keep your head down.

The people came back to the game with bad advice. They counselled blood and fire, which is not always the winning combination. North Dakota was called for two penalties in the first three minutes, and Dennis Zacho scored the only goal of that period on the advantage.

In the box, the radio announcer gave the microphone to his assistants for commentary, one of whom was Cliff "Fido" Purpur who had played hockey for the St. Louis Flyers in the Forties, and had coached North Dakota in the Fifties. Purpur, a gently-receding man with a nasal twang, told the people at home that "Mariucci is probably one of the most colorful men in sports." I tried to imagine the locker room, a dusty place in the basement lined with old folding chairs, where Mariucci was. The locker room scene is supposed to be colorful, too, but I did not imagine that it was. "As long as I've played or coached," Mariucci had told me that day, "whenever I'm nervous, when I come to a game, I retch. I don't vomit. I just retch. Every time. I came to the game last night with Joe Cooper and his boy, and as soon as I got out of the car at the Arena, I

Ivory Tower

started to retch. Joe turned to his boy, and said, "Look at him, just like I told you. Just like on the Black Hawks."

I'd asked Mariucci then what players think about in the locker room. "They're tired and very quiet," he said, "and they have this awful thirst. We've tried everything to quench it—fruit juice, soda pop, everything—but there's only one thing that will do it. Beer."

On the ice, a line of 20 boys circled the rink with brooms and shovels, scraping up large piles of ice flakes which they shovelled over the boards.

The players came back steaming, but with some of their first fine edge worn off. They turned on each other with sticks, elbows, and hard checks, and even in the press box I could sense secret duels and jousts being waged on the ice, players remembering the faces and numbers of enemies who had slashed or hit them on the sly. Thirty-two minutes worth of penalties were called, and much of the period was played by five man teams. North Dakota scored in the first minute when Minnesota was missing a man, and tied the game two minutes later when their own team was short. The people rose to this occasion, standing whenever the puck came to their end of the rink, standing on their seats when it was in the other. The Dakota center intercepted a pass and took the puck like a tenor beginning a tortuous aria, every fake a trill, and the chorus came to life in the stands, all Italians gesturing furiously and helping him over the difficult passages until he hit a wrong note. The Minnesota defense fled with the puck and left him, alone for a moment, skating toward the masked Lothrop unarmed.

"Listen to that crowd!" the announcer in the box yelled after every North Dakota goal and penalty, sticking the microphone out to pick up the vox populi. I listened, and had to respect it for the number and variety of its insults, and the power it sustained from beginning to end. Just then, an enthusiast below put together two old words in a stunning new combination, and the microphone was yanked back. "Now back to the game," the announcer said.

Before the full-throated populi, the Minnesota players seemed like MacBaths looking at Birnam Wood. With every play, they faced the distinct possibility that they might be facing a hundred North Dakota wings and defensemen on the next. The sound of the people was elemental. They had come, not for comfort and entertainment, but for agony and salvation. A girl below me knew the names of all the North Dakota players and recited them endlessly, like the Jesus prayer: "Come on Denny. Come on Gerry, come on, Jim, let's go, Bob, let's go, Joe." The people stood, they leaned to, swore, pounded the air, and slowly the game began to re-arrange itself to their deep vibrations.

I imagined that they lived in the houses I had seen two days before as the conductor called "GRAND Forks," houses on the edge of town,

lonely and cold in the silence of the fields, the yards strewn with waste and age, dog pens, abandoned cars, American Flyers and trash burners. Neither rural nor urban, they have neither neighbors nor land, sidewalks nor trees. Bared to the prairie wind, beaten by hard winters, they are in the hands of the flatland except now, seated before the white purity of the rink where the prancing players and their schoolboy ferocity are a great shout against the enervating bleakness of the prairie.

"The game should be decided by the players, not the officials," a referee told me once. "In close games, particularly ones when the crowd is tense from start to finish, you'll see twice as many infractions as you could ever call. You just have to decide which ones affect the game materially and which don't."

Midway in the period, the score tied 3-3, the referee had to decide. After a scuffle in the North Dakota end, North Dakota brought the puck back and a forward was checked into the boards near the Minnesota goal by a defenseman, Dick Haigh. He lay on the ice, players massed around him, and the crowd, already on its feet, took its stand.

(In the Arena, the poles which support the wire netting are placed inside the netting, not on the outside as on most rinks where the players are protected from them. The forward had been knocked headlong into a post, and left the game bleeding from his forehead down over his face. Haigh was given a five-minute penalty, the referee ruling that the infraction was intentional, and North Dakota scored two quick goals in his absence.)

A crowd is always undecided whether to boo or applaud when a visiting player draws a penalty. In a tight game, it will applaud minor penalties and boo only if the player has done something immoral, like hit a player on the home team. But one never knows how others will take it. Booming might be taken as indictment of referee rather than player; applause might be taken as approval of player rather than referee. So, the people made a long, broad, flat and guttural noise which meant disapproval of Haigh for what he had done, and of referee for waiting so long to call him for it. But they were disappointed. The game was won, but not the quarrel (which had become a technical argument: was the infraction intentional? and was it an infraction?). Such things are frustrating for the victors who like to leave no questions unanswered.

Minnesota rallied here and there, but only when it was too late did they score. Nystrom worked himself into the Dakota zone when his team was short a man, and shot with only the goalie around to see it go in.

As time trickled away, players began to check and shove with more feeling and expression. With every scramble for the puck, someone landed an extra blow and the officials hardly knew what to expect or when. Usually there are cooler heads who pull combatants apart before they are hurt,

Monday, April 5, 1965

but with a minute left, a fight began around Haigh, sticks flew, the officials disappeared in the melee and I could see no one trying to untangle. A North Dakota man drew a five-minute penalty for his enterprise, but it was too late for Minnesota to score. The people waited a moment at the buzzer for a fight in which they could join, but the players shook hands and left the ice.

Three fathers of Minnesota players stood by the locker room door when I got there, and two young boys in the open doorway listened to the showers and the awful silence beyond. "At least they played a lot better than last night," said one father, and the others nodded. Nystrom came out first, his face bleak and red, and went to call a cab. I stood in the lobby, waiting for another. Two men in coveralls stood nearby, eating popcorn and debating oil filters, and next to them stood two girls in tan raincoats. "Who's married in your class?" asked one, and the other thought. "Marlene, Delores, Janice—she's got a baby already, Laverne." Inside, in the stands near the lobby door, a man, his wife and a granny sat, looking at the bright ice and the thin haze that hung under the lights. A boy stood on the rink near one goal, pushing the snow around it into little piles with his feet.

Outside, near the door, Lorne Grosso, his eyes rimmed with dark blue marks, his nose scraped, called a cab and we rode back to the hotel with Jack Dale. The players went upstairs, I went to the lounge, and slowly the noise in my head subsided. "The guy who designed the Arena should've gotten the penalty," I heard Mariucci roar at a table near the door. I tried to straighten my back. Then someone clapped me hard on the shoulder. "Don't be so downcast," said Mariucci. "You look like a coach who's lost a game," "Two games," I said.

"I'd like you to meet the worst referee in the Western Collegiate Hockey Association," he said, and the worst referee appeared at my other shoulder. "Andy Gambucci of Colorado Springs. I tell him he's a very nice fellow except he doesn't know the rules of hockey." Gambucci looked straight at me, his face set, his gaze steady. He shifted his cigar to his mouth and shook my hand. "He's got a nephew at Minnesota," said Mariucci. "Very smart boy, a freshman, fine hockey player." Gambucci, an insurance man, said refereeing hockey games was his hobby.

"Do you always drink together?" I croaked. "It's the end of the season," said Gambucci. "The game's over." □

