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Before the Storm: Youth Hockey in North Carolina Ahead of the NHL's Arrival

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Before the Storm: Youth Hockey in North Carolina Ahead of the NHL's Arrival

by

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the development of youth hockey in North Carolina before the coming of the National Hockey League's Carolina Hurricanes in 1997. Although the American South with its warm weather and lack of snow or ice seemed inhospitable to such a wintry sport, ice hockey found a niche in Charlotte, the Piedmont Triad, and the Research Triangle in the mid- to late- 20th century through a combination of minor professional teams, local boosters, and northern transplants who all worked together to organize youth and amateur hockey associations as well as advocate for accessible ice rink facilities in order to grow the game. As a microcosm of the New South and postwar America, the story of North Carolina hockey reflects larger homogenization and migration trends across state and regional borders in this time period. Moreover, while minor professional hockey sparked a lifelong love for the game, participation in youth hockey produced long-lasting communities and shaped North Carolina hockey into a viable major league market.

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Introduction

In 1989, 10-year-old Joshua Littlejohn of Prospect Hill, North Carolina, suddenly came up with the idea that he wanted to play ice hockey, even though he had never skated before. His father, a renowned indigenous American flute maker, took the idea in stride, signing him up for early-morning youth hockey in Hillsborough, fifteen miles away. There, before the sun even rose, Littlejohn joined not only Northern transplants but also other North Carolinian children on the ice. His enthusiasm was infectious – in just a few months, his mother and younger sister followed his lead and learned to skate as well.¹

The story of the Littlejohns echoes that of many others in late 20th century North Carolina, discovering hockey for the first time. As a so-called nontraditional market, North Carolina is usually far from anyone’s mind when thinking about ice hockey, despite the presence of a National Hockey League team and multiple minor professional programs. Certainly, its icy nature seemed foreign to the warm Southern climes when it first came to the Carolinas in the middle of the 20th century. However, hockey’s local boosters worked together with transplants from the northern United States as well as Canada to organize youth and amateur hockey associations as well as support initiatives to build rinks in order to grow the game. Although minor professional hockey provided a solid foundation for hockey fandom to grow in this nontraditional market, youth hockey

¹ Scott Hoffmann, “Blade Runners - Hockey Brings Families Together,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 25 February 1990.

in all its forms truly brought the game into the community. Through the Polar Palace, Eastland, and Pineville rinks in Charlotte, the two waves of hockey in Greensboro, and the town of Hillsborough in the Research Triangle, youth hockey manifested itself in the community through and in response to outside pressures, municipal politics, and a love for the game.

Over the last decade or so, hockey as a field of academic study has begun to shift focus from a source of identity (largely Canadian) to more tangible scholarship regarding the people who actually play the game.² While this shift originated in the social sciences, it has indeed impacted historical scholarship as well. This article builds off that trend, focusing on people who actually played and lived the game in the absence of professional pay, masses of fans, or any real hope of building a career.

Nevertheless, the majority of historical scholarship regarding ice hockey still focuses on its longstanding presence in Canada, Northern and Eastern Europe, or the northern United States.³ What little scholarship there is regarding hockey in the South exclusively addresses the sport's various professional incarnations. Although not strictly academic works, Jim Mancuso's *Hockey in Charlotte* and Jon Stott's *Hockey Night in Dixie* both provide decent overviews of the history of professional hockey in Charlotte

² Julie Stevens and Andrew C. Holman, "Rinkside: New Scholarly Studies on Ice Hockey and Society," *Sport in Society* 16, no. 3 (April 2013): 251.

³ Of course, this makes sense due to the sheer number of participants – for example, in 1970 there were at least five thousand youth hockey participants in the greater New York City area alone. Twenty years later, the entire state of North Carolina still had less than a thousand amateur players. Gerald Eskanazi, "East Side, West Side, 5,000 Boys Play Hockey Around the Town and Suburbs," *The New York Times*, 8 March 1970; Chris Peters, "Raw Numbers: Hockey's Growth in the United States — 1990-2010," *United States of Hockey*, 23 May 2011, accessed 12 March 2021. Peters' numbers are sourced from the official USA Hockey participation database. Also see: USA Hockey, "USA Hockey Registration 1990-1991 Through 2012-2013."

and the evolution of minor hockey leagues in the South, respectively, but fail to consider the impact of youth or recreational programs.⁴ Similarly, studies of contemporary fan culture in the South have elucidated much of the modern situation, but fail to discuss the historical background.⁵ Finally, the focus of this work on the built environment lends itself well to studies of rink design and presence such as Howard Shubert's *Architecture on Ice*.⁶ Again, however, such works largely focus on professional incarnations of the sport and associated imagery, rather than the practice and community rinks integral to recreational play.

Youth hockey, moreover, also lies fairly fallow as an avenue of historical research, with most scholarly discussions focusing on child development, bodychecking and injuries, or girls' and women's hockey, rather than history or historical context.⁷ Even then, the story of youth hockey in North Carolina is still important to understanding the landscape of Southern ice hockey that would bring the NHL in the form of the Carolina Hurricanes by 1997, not to mention these organizations' role in laying the foundations for what would eventually become a thriving and successful youth hockey community.

⁴ Jim Mancuso, *Hockey in Charlotte* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2006); Jon C. Stott, *Hockey Night in Dixie: Minor Pro Hockey in the American South* (Victoria, British Columbia: Heritage House Publishing, 2006).

⁵ Brandon Mastromartino, "Skating in the Sun: Examining Identity Formation of National Hockey League Fans in Sunbelt States," MS thesis (University of Georgia, 2016).

⁶ Howard Shubert, *Architecture on Ice: A History of the Hockey Arena* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016). Shubert begins his analysis with recreational rinks in the 19th century, but by the time he moves on to the late 20th century his focus is almost entirely on sports-entertainment complexes.

⁷ Carly Adams and Jason Laurendeau, "'Here They Come! Look Them over!': Youth, Citizenship, and the Emergence of Minor Hockey in Canada," in *Hockey: Challenging Canada's Game – Au-Delà Du Sport National*, ed. Jenny Ellison and Jennifer Anderson (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2018), 112-3.

Sports communications experts Robert Bellamy and Kelly Shultz argue that youth participation in sports cannot be linked to adult spectatorship of that same sport, citing the failure of soccer in the United States to draw anywhere close to the level of popularity enjoyed by football or baseball as spectator sports, despite its nigh-on ubiquity among American children.⁸ While there certainly are parallels between soccer and hockey as second-tier spectator sports in the United States, the difference lies in the structure of the professional leagues. Professional men’s soccer has had a rocky history in the United States marred with decades without any major professional leagues and a minor-league system only a decade old, while minor professional hockey has continuously been around in some form for over a century. Because of the (comparatively) low visibility of professional soccer in the United States, the vast majority of soccer-playing children played not because they wanted to imitate heroes they saw on the pitch, but because their parents thought it was a good form of exercise, or their friends played, or they simply thought it could be fun. In sharp contrast, many youth hockey players in North Carolina developed interests in the sport *after* they attended minor-league games, directly tying teams such as the Greensboro Monarchs into their lifelong love for hockey.⁹ Additionally, NHL loyalties also found (and continue to enjoy) footing among young hockey players, many of whom not only look up to specific players as role models but

⁸ Robert Bellamy and Kelly Shultz, “Hockey Night in the United States? The NHL, Major League Sports, and the Evolving Television/Media Marketplace,” in *Artificial Ice: Hockey, Culture, and Commerce*, ed. David Whitson and Richard Gruneau (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 167-68.

⁹ Chris Ashley (former inline hockey player) in discussion with the author, 8 September 2020; Todd Taylor, “Youth Hockey Might Be Ready For A Local Boom,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 10 July 1997.

also follow certain teams almost religiously.¹⁰ Recent empirical studies have shown that sport participation does play a large role in developing fans for a sport in a *niche region*, which applies to this study.¹¹

Moreover, even had we accepted the contention that youth players indeed never turned into a real spectator base as adults, youth hockey is still valuable in its own right for painting a picture of a “nontraditional sport” in a “nontraditional market.” Examining how hockey found a footing in North Carolina in any way would help better an understanding of the history of the sport as a whole, and even if youth hockey did not generate fans, it still generated participation in the sport itself in a place that, at first glance, seems highly unlikely to host any substantial iteration of hockey.

And indeed, the state of North Carolina has a history with ice hockey that reaches further back than one might expect. On April 18th and 19th, 1952, North Carolina State University hosted the first professional hockey games ever played in the South. Featuring the (professional, despite its name) Eastern Amateur Hockey League’s Boston Olympics against the New Haven Tomahawks in a back-to-back showcase, these games cost only \$2 per ticket.¹² A few years later, the Baltimore Clippers of the same league (now renamed the Eastern Hockey League) played to a sold-out crowd of 10,363 (with three thousand more turned away at the gate) at the new Charlotte Coliseum after their home stadium in Maryland had burned down. After such a successful first showing, the idea of

¹⁰ Jessica Westphal (USA Hockey Southeastern Division Associate Registrar) in discussion with the author, 5 October 2020.

¹¹ Brandon Mastromartino, Tyreal Y. Qian, Jerred J. Wang, and James J. Zhang, “Developing a Fanbase in Niche Sport Markets: An Examination of NHL fandom and Social Sustainability in the Sunbelt,” *Sustainability* 12, no. 3 (2020): 12.

¹² “Eastern League - Ice Hockey,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 15 April 1952; “South’s First Ice-Hockey Games To Be Played This Weekend, Raleigh,” *Carteret County News-Times*, 18 April 1952.

bringing professional hockey to the South no longer felt like such a pipe dream, and indeed the Clippers permanently moved to Charlotte to start the next season in 1956.¹³ Since then, the club (now known as the Charlotte Checkers and playing in the highest level of North American minor hockey in the American Hockey League) has enjoyed a steady presence in the city. At first, its “surprising popularity” could be ascribed to the novelty of both the team and the sport (a trend that has persisted in Southern minor hockey teams to this day), but the Checkers’ on-ice product as well as off-ice marketing ensured that the franchise enjoyed moderate success, selling out some game and employing new (at the time) strategies such as giveaways.¹⁴

Charlotte was never the only hockey town in North Carolina, either. The Piedmont area (Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and High Point) also boasted its fair share of minor league teams, including the Winston-Salem Polar Twins and the first iterations of the Greensboro Generals (arriving just three years after the Clippers did) and the Carolina Thunderbirds. While many of these minor league teams did not withstand the test of time, they (like their peers in Charlotte) did draw a considerable amount of both children and adults to the game of hockey, building communities that pushed through times of struggle and change to thrive and succeed even on an international level. Moreover, roller hockey – while present all across North Carolina – enjoyed a unique niche in Greensboro specifically due to the city’s trials and travails associated with the long journey to build a free-standing, independent ice rink.

¹³ Mancuso, *Hockey in Charlotte*, 9.

¹⁴ Bill Sharpe, “From Murphy to Manteo with Bill Sharpe,” *State*, November 1958; Stott, *Hockey Night in Dixie*, 193-4; “Jamie Ivey Wins Mountain Bike,” *The Kings Mountain Mirror*, 15 December 1971.

Today, the heart of Carolina hockey lies in Raleigh, due not in part to the efforts of the NHL and the Carolina Hurricanes. However, the Research Triangle region (the area around the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, North Carolina State University in Raleigh, and Duke University in Durham) began its hockey journey in somewhat different fashion. Its first professional hockey team, the Raleigh IceCaps, did not arrive until 1991, long after youth and recreational hockey already had a foothold in the community.¹⁵ Instead, hockey first flourished in Hillsborough, a small town of only 6,000 in Orange County whose private ice rink made it a target for ice sports enthusiasts all around eastern North Carolina.

This narrative history examines the development of youth ice hockey programs in North Carolina from the advent of the first Charlotte Clippers/Checkers franchise in 1956 to the coming of the NHL's Carolina Hurricanes in 1997. Once major league hockey arrived, the landscape and visibility of the sport changed drastically. Now that the NHL had a vested interest in growing the popularity of the game (and the Hurricanes had more resources to do so than any minor league team had had before), programs such as Learn to Play ballooned in enrollment.¹⁶ Nevertheless, today North Carolina is still considered a "nontraditional market" with plenty of room left to grow the game.

The presence of youth hockey in the state fits into larger themes of Southern development and regional cohesion. During the tail end of the 20th century, North Carolina felt the reverberations of rapid change that brought not only hockey but also major cultural upheaval. This study fits into a network of extensive study on the

¹⁵ Doug Hoogervost, "If It Wasn't So Hot, Raleigh Could Become Southern Hotbed for Hockey," *The Daily Tar Heel*, 12 November 1991. His title was prophetic.

¹⁶ Jessica Westphal in discussion with the author.

development and nature of the New South as described by Numan Bartley and other scholars.¹⁷ Although the appellation had found use since the end of the Civil War, its prevalence accelerated with rapid Southern development throughout the Cold War and beyond.

Throughout the 20th century, the character of the South changed dramatically into a relatively urban region – if less densely populated than Northern cities – that often had more in common with the rest of the United States than it did with the South of the 19th century. John Egerton’s *The Americanization of Dixie* exemplifies this concept.¹⁸ Here, I begin at the apex of the modern arc of the New South that had started with wartime revitalization due to increased defense and manufacturing jobs and culminated in urban renewal and local boosterism.¹⁹

Hockey uniquely exemplified this “Americanization of Dixie” as a Northern sport, unsuited to the Southern warmth, that nevertheless found a not inconsiderable following in North Carolina. Such homogenization, of course, included a sizeable amount of new Southern residents with Northern roots moving to the Sunbelt, attracted by the rapid growth of the New South.²⁰ Moreover, alongside more popular pastimes such as football and auto racing, hockey also catered to the “seemingly insatiable appetite” for sports that had seen a meteoritic rise in the South in the 1960s.²¹ This appetite shaped the consciousness of a region that had not previously seen much in the way of organized

¹⁷ Numan Bartley, *The New South: 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995.)

¹⁸ John Egerton, *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America* (New York: Harper’s Magazine Press, 1974).

¹⁹ Bartley, *The New South*, 146, 431.

²⁰ Bartley, *The New South*, 430.

²¹ Egerton, *The Americanization of Dixie*, 179-180.

sport, compared to the more storied sports cultures of the North and Midwest, and hockey still stood to benefit in a similar way as other sports, albeit perhaps not on the same scale.

Along with population and manufacturing growth also came the melding of its smaller cities into urban regions, blending their “identities and functions” together to create areas such as the Triangle and the Triad.²² This also led to an explosion of suburbs, which not only fostered the economic conditions for parents to afford to send their children to hockey practice but also provided the land and the municipal political arenas to build rinks to host the teams. Although this time frame also occurs concurrently with urban renewal movements popular in Southern cities, such movements largely impacted city centers and thus fall out of my direct scope. Nevertheless, a connection can be drawn between the increase in public rink space in suburbs and efforts to revitalise municipal economic growth through urban renewal at the expense of poor minority communities.²³ That story, however, is for another work.

Although the trajectory of development of youth hockey programs varied from region to region, the people who played the game were mostly homogenous in race, class, and gender. Despite the presence of Black figure skating pupils in programs such as Charlotte’s IceCapades, for the most part they did not participate in hockey programs.²⁴ Other minorities were similarly underrepresented – Joshua Littlejohn and his Cherokee family were the exception, not the rule. This lack of racial diversity was consistent with

²² David R. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region: 1607-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982): 145. Goldfield extends this further into a chain of small cities, known as a *conurbation*, which he defines somewhat flippantly as “a formless, horizontal urbanlike settlement sprawling across the southern landscape”.

²³ Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers*, 147.

²⁴ Jeri Harvey, “Tammy Oates Looms as Queen City’s First Black Skating Star,” *The Charlotte Post*, 15 September 1977.

the nature of hockey in the North and in Canada, and most likely had the same major cause in a lack of existing representation and major league role models.²⁵

Moreover, hockey also has a very high entrance cost due to extensive equipment (pads, skates, jerseys) and ice time, which sets income barriers for its hopefuls.²⁶ Before the game gained even a modicum of popularity, equipment would have been even more difficult to come by, allowing only the well-off to play. As will be discussed later, however, some players did turn to roller hockey instead, which had a lower cost of participation.²⁷

Finally, although girls' programs can be inferred to exist by the definition of "boys' programs", they often went unmentioned. This invisibility in the historical record itself shows that the girls' game did not warrant as much interest or acclaim as the boys', but does not preclude the inclusion of girls on majority-male teams. Their relative lack of participation is consistent with a national consensus, lasting at least until the 1990s, that ice hockey was generally a masculine game.²⁸

Through surveys of digital newspaper databases covering communities all over North Carolina as well as interviews with people integral in jump starting many of these youth and community hockey initiatives, I hope to construct a cohesive narrative of the development of various youth hockey programs across all of North Carolina. These

²⁵ John Valentine, "New Racism and Old Stereotypes in the National Hockey League: The 'Stacking' of Aboriginal Players into the Role of Enforcer," Chap. 4 in *Race and Sport in Canada: Intersecting Inequalities*, edited by Simon Darnell, Janelle Joseph, and Yuka Nakamura (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2012): 117.

²⁶ Mastromartino et al., "Developing a Fanbase in Niche Sport Markets," 12.

²⁷ Chris Ashley in discussion with the author.

²⁸ James Hannon, Sonya Soohoo, Justine Reel, and Thomas Ratliffe, "Gender Stereotyping and the Influence of Race in Sport Among Adolescents," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 80, no. 3 (September 2009): 677.

databases included both those of individual sources such as the *Greensboro News and Record* as well as collections such as North Carolina Newspapers, located in the North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, housed at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill. Although this use of newspapers serves both to recount events as well as determine the relative importance of events, it also excludes events that were *not* deemed newsworthy. Secondary sources in this analysis are useful not only for contextualizing developments in the larger scope of youth sports and professional hockey, but also to place this story in the larger picture of the New South.

For the purposes of general, local interest, newspapers often covered controversies over individual rinks and public ice surfaces, elucidating struggles to obtain ice time experienced by every program. In this paper, such struggles serve to demonstrate parents' commitment to the sport and subsequent involvement in municipal politics, as well as municipal pushback and deprioritization. Moreover, while the focus of this thesis does not quite align with professional or college hockey, players from those levels did also play an important role in providing financial, coaching, or simply roster assistance that does bear mentioning. Both professional and college club programs also provided plenty of support and patronage to local ice rinks, which also helped to make them available and accessible for public use.

Chapter 1: “The Birthplace of Professional Hockey in the South”: Charlotte

Charlotte’s status as an early southern regional center also granted it the first professional ice hockey organization in North Carolina, which in turn sparked the earliest instances of recreational hockey programs.²⁹ In Charlotte, professional and recreational teams were tied to each other through both official support and unofficial interest, which preserved both types of organizations into the 21st century.

The original incarnation of the Charlotte Clippers/Checkers, arriving in 1956, enjoyed considerable success and helped generate the first wave of children interested in ice hockey themselves. As early as 1965, the Checkers organization sold hockey sticks as merchandise, allowing children to start trying out ball hockey in their own spaces (and sometimes in the halls of the Charlotte Coliseum, as dangerous as that could get.) Moreover, by 1969 the Checkers were already hosting youth exhibition games in the intermission between periods.³⁰

The interest generated by the Checkers culminated in a permanent public ice rink, finally providing consistent and reliable practice space for youth programs. As the first standalone rink in Charlotte, the Polar Palace Ice Arena off McAlway Road in the south was first envisioned in 1969, although it was not built until 1973. This was the first permanent home for the Charlotte Hockey Association, which had started playing on

²⁹ Bartley, “The New South”, 435.

³⁰ “Checker Briefs,” *The Charlotte Observer*, 4 January 1969.

Coliseum ice in 1969.³¹ Although the CHA was not a standalone youth program, it featured two youth divisions – peewee for children (functionally only boys) under 13 and midget for those under 17 – as well as a senior team that enjoyed the skills of a few former Checkers players.³² By the time the arena opened, the CHA had indeed split into a separate youth program with six age divisions from 4 to 19, headed by Rick Craven (who was also president of the Polar Palace project.)³³

Even early in its life, the CHA enjoyed enough funding and participation to allow its players to compete against their peers all across the South. Together with the Charlotte Coliseum, the Polar Palace played host to the Southeastern Silver Stick Peewee and Bantam Hockey tournament just before Christmas 1973, featuring teams from Roanoke, Greensboro, St Petersburg, Washington, DC, and Charlottesville. The winner of the tournament won a bid to an invitational international tournament in Michigan.³⁴ The next year, the CHA joined organizations in Atlanta, Knoxville, and Huntsville, AL in order to form the Southern Hockey Association, and in 1975 enjoyed the honor of hosting Amateur Hockey Association of the United States (the precursor to USA Hockey) regional playoffs for the same district that comprised the SYHA.³⁵ Like most other youth

³¹ Nellie R. Dixon, “Council OKs Skating Rink Plan,” *The Charlotte Observer*, 11 January 1972; “Hockey Team Has Opening for Youths,” *The Charlotte Post*, November 7, 1974; Bob Baker, “Hockey Instills High Ideals,” *The Charlotte Observer*, 24 December 1972.

³² Larry Tarleton, “Local Kids Learning to Play Hockey,” *The Charlotte Observer*, 25 December 1970.

³³ “Investors Bet on Ice and Skates,” *The Charlotte Observer*, 24 January 1973; Harold Warren, “400 Help Open Charlotte’s First Public Ice Rink,” *The Charlotte Observer*, 30 September 1973.

³⁴ “Coming... Southeastern Silver Stick Peewee and Bantam Hockey Tournament,” *The Charlotte Observer*, 5 December 1973.

³⁵ Bob Moore, “Checkerboard,” *The Charlotte Observer*, 24 November 1974; Glenn Rollins, “Youth Hockey: Bambis on Skates,” *The Charlotte Observer*, 13 February 1975.

and recreational programs, the CHA featured both house leagues that competed against each other and travel teams that actually participated in SHL play.³⁶ By the end of the decade, the CHA regularly hosted the Queen City Invitational tournament featuring teams from all over the Southeast.³⁷

Hosting a regional tournament required more than one ice surface, however, and indeed there was another one available. The Eastland Mall, which opened in 1972 with a built-in skating rink, also played an important role in building youth hockey in the city, serving as another venue for CHA ventures.³⁸ Operated by the IceCapades Chalet Division, the Eastland rink offered skating lessons in various disciplines, reaching an average of 400 students per semester even as early as 1977. The IceCapades company, although focused on figure skating, did also provide training for hockey instructors.³⁹ This rink was situated at basement level with balconies from the first and second floors that extended over the ice, accessible only by stairs from the food court (this was before the American Disabilities Act, so often rink staff had to carry skaters with disabilities down the stairs for them to access the rink.)⁴⁰ As the balconies dipped and projected to provide good views and seating above the ice, this allowed for built-in spectator space and marketing for both the rink and any sponsors, as any patrons of the mall would be exposed to the presence of the rink and any activities (figure skating, public skate, or

³⁶ Mark Wolf, “For Kids, Hockey Is A.M. Sport,” *The Charlotte Observer*, 13 December 1978.

³⁷ Richard Sink, “Kid Hockey Stars Play by Dawn’s Early Light,” *The Charlotte Observer*, 19 February 1977.

³⁸ Kyle McIntyre (skating director at the Pineville Ice House in Charlotte, NC) in conversation with the author, 16 October 2020.

³⁹ Harvey, “Tammy Oates Looms as Queen City’s First Black Skating Star.”

⁴⁰ “Survey and Research Report on the Eastland Mall Signs,” (Charlotte-Mecklenberg Historical Landmarks Commission, June 2017), 6; Kyle McIntyre in discussion with the author.

hockey) it was hosting.⁴¹ For example, in 1978 the rink hosted a six-week youth hockey school, sponsored by the CHA and providing children with either one or two sessions of intense training a week, depending on age.⁴² Events such as these not only raised the profile of hockey to nonparticipants but also gave players unique opportunities to challenge themselves.

In 1978, the Polar Palace closed, leaving the Eastland Mall skating rink as the only ice surface available to skaters in Charlotte for almost twenty years and the sole home of the Charlotte Hockey Association.⁴³ For those twenty years, youth hockey in Charlotte operated in much the same way it had before – hosting the Queen City invitational, seeing modest growth, and playing games or practicing in the wee hours of the morning or far after midnight because of the unavailability of ice time at other times.

Eventually, dissatisfaction with the way the youth program operated drove a group of hockey parents (both locals and transplants) to form Blue Line Ventures, Inc. in 1995 and open the Ice House of Charlotte in Pineville, a southern suburb. Led by Rick Mack and John Grassinger, they had originally planned to open two separate ice surfaces at Pineville, although (like many other grandiose rink plans in North Carolina in the 1990s) this did not pan out, despite hopes that there were enough transplants from the north that the new facility would enjoy plenty of patronage.⁴⁴ As a matter of fact, the early days of the Pineville rink were slow – advertisements were non-existent and the marketing of the facility and its programs relied on snail mail and word-of-mouth.

Although the youth league did pick up the next year, the skating school took years to gain

⁴¹ “Survey and Research Report on the Eastland Mall Signs,” 7.

⁴² “Ice Hockey Group Opens Youth Signup,” *The Charlotte Observer*, 23 August 1978.

⁴³ Wolf, “For Kids, Hockey is A.M. Sport.”

⁴⁴ Kyle McIntyre in discussion with the author.

momentum – at the beginning, no more than 75 students were enrolled during peak times, falling down to 25 in the summers.⁴⁵

Moreover, although the organization did not get involved in the first initiatives to build the rink, the Charlotte Checkers (then still in the ECHL) used the Pineville facility as their practice rink until 2006. In return, they provided exhibition space for youth teams to play during intermissions of Checkers games and sent their mascot, Chubby, to public skate sessions, which helped boost attendance numbers for the rink.⁴⁶ In addition, they allowed the local travel teams to use the name “Charlotte Jr. Checkers,” which has continued to this day.

By 1996, the Charlotte area also had a few youth roller, or inline, hockey leagues.⁴⁷ The Levine Jewish Community Center hosted one at its outdoor rink and the Cleveland County YMCA sponsored another one.⁴⁸ Different from street hockey, roller hockey required the same skating skills that ice hockey did and was also played with a puck, not a ball. While this dry-land variation on the sport never gained as much traction in Charlotte as it did in a few other places (most notably Greensboro, as seen below), its presence still indicates an interest in hockey – in any way, shape, or form – and a market among children for finding a way to play it.

Despite low numbers and a few setbacks, youth hockey in Charlotte stayed largely consistent in participation. As the Checkers grew in popularity, so did the sport

⁴⁵ Kyle McIntyre, “History of Pineville Ice House/Hockey in NC,” email to the author, 9 October 2020.

⁴⁶ Kyle McIntyre in discussion with the author. Both the woman who played the mascot in the early 1990s and her daughter took skating lessons with Kyle at the rink.

⁴⁷ “Wood Joins First Union,” *The Kings Mountain Herald*, June 20, 1996.

⁴⁸ “Youth Roller Hockey Leagues Forming,” *The Charlotte Jewish News*, April 1997; “Roller Hockey Leagues at Cleveland YMCA,” *The Kings Mountain Herald*, 9 October 1997.

they played. Limited mostly by the costs of participation, most notably rink time, Charlotte's hockey community still managed to survive and persist in creative and entrepreneurial ways.

Chapter 2: Disappearance and Revival: The Piedmont Triad

Youth hockey in the Piedmont Triad encompassed a community that often practiced in the same facilities, played together frequently in both Mid-Atlantic League games as well as larger all-star teams, and partnered together to grow the game. Nevertheless, while hockey in Greensboro was plagued with issues and drama over ice time and rink construction, Winston-Salem enjoyed far more peace. Even then, both cities' programs managed to prosper with assistance from their respective minor league teams as well as local homegrown support. Such assistance – and interest in the game – ebbed and flowed as minor league teams entered and left the region. More than any other region, the support of and revenue from minor league professional hockey outlined the story of recreational youth hockey in the Triad.

Greensboro has perhaps the longest association with amateur and youth hockey in North Carolina. However, the timeline of youth and amateur hockey in Greensboro can be split into two distinct eras that coincide with two different minor professional franchises in residence at the Greensboro Coliseum – the Greensboro Generals of the Eastern Hockey League (and then the Southern Hockey League) from 1959 to 1973 and the Greensboro/Carolina Monarchs of the East Coast Hockey League (and then the American Hockey League) from 1989 to 1995, when the Coliseum was taken over by the new Carolina Hurricanes franchise while they waited for their new stadium's construction in Raleigh.

Mentioned in student newspapers as early as 1964, the Greensboro Youth Ice Hockey League featured not only local high school age students but also five students from Guilford College in their upper age divisions.⁴⁹ With support from the Greensboro Generals, this league attracted both local children as well as northern transplants looking for a place to play. Many later leaders in Greensboro's recreational hockey community got their start during the Generals years, some as young as six years old at the time.⁵⁰

Moreover, Greensboro featured one of the most popular ice rinks in North Carolina in the 1970s. Because of the high cost of ice at Hillsborough, a local Triangle suburb, the Piedmont Sports Arena often hosted the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill club hockey team for practices and games in the first few years of its existence.⁵¹ The Greensboro Coliseum, moreover, featured early tournaments between the “Big Four” hockey clubs, as they termed themselves – UNC-Chapel Hill, Duke, North Carolina State, and Wake Forest – despite three of these teams hailing from the Triangle area.⁵²

Despite an early boom, after the Generals folded in 1977, winter sports faded out of fashion in Greensboro for the next decade. Even the presence of the Winston-Salem Thunderbirds only an hour away was not enough to spur great interest in the game.

Although some of the children who had begun playing during the original Generals era

⁴⁹ Ric Schumann, “Guilfordians in Hockey League,” *The Guilfordian*, 16 December 1964.

⁵⁰ Lisa Mickey, “Amateur Hockey - Monarchs Inspire Comeback of Adult, Youth Leagues Here,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 6 February 1991.

⁵¹ John Hopkins, “Hockey Club ‘Breaks the Ice,’” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 16 April 1975; “Sports Briefs,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 29 October 1975; “Puck Happy,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 27 February 1976.

⁵² “The Big Four College Ice Hockey Tournament,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 24 January 1977; Grant Vosburgh, “Hockey Makes Power Play on Tobacco Road,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 25 January 1977.

did continue well into adulthood, they were far and few between. Ice time was hard to come by without any rinks in the city, as both the Piedmont Sports rink and the Ice Chalet at Carolina Circle Mall shut down during the drought.⁵³ Moreover, without a pro team bringing in revenue, keeping an ice surface at the Coliseum was impractical, even though the physical equipment was technically still there and available for use. Not until professional hockey returned to Greensboro in 1989 in the form of the Greensboro Monarchs, owned by ECHL co-founder Bill Coffey, was the sport revived on a youth and amateur level.⁵⁴ Playing in the Greensboro Coliseum, the second-largest hockey arena in North America, the Monarchs set an East Coast Hockey League attendance record of 13,445 in a 1992 matchup against the Winston-Salem Thunderbirds.⁵⁵ Their popularity contributed to a ballooning of renewed interest in recreational hockey, reinforced by youth exhibitions during intermission that drew even more children to the sport.⁵⁶

Unfortunately, by this time all of the organizations that had offered youth hockey during the first wave of interest had disappeared. Greensboro Ice Sports, largely run by locals, helped fill the gap (and offered opportunities in adult recreational hockey and figure skating as well.) Founded in 1987 (a year or two before the return of professional hockey to Greensboro) by a core group of about five people, GIS soon became the

⁵³ Todd Taylor, "Games Bring Father and Sons Together - Adult Hockey at the State Games Gives Area Skaters the Chance to Keep Competing," *Greensboro News and Record*, 24 June 1997; Taft Wireback, "Construction Starts on 'Ice House,'" *Greensboro News and Record*, 7 December 1996; Taft Wireback, "Anticipation: Skaters Await Rink," *Greensboro News and Record*, 20 December 1996.

⁵⁴ Anna Hooker, "Greensboro Now Has Ice, Let's Take Advantage of It," *Greensboro News and Record*, 11 February 1990.

⁵⁵ The largest arena at the time belonged to the Tampa Bay Lightning of the NHL – no other major league hockey arena was as large as Greensboro's.

⁵⁶ "Tickets Going Fast for Run at Record," *Greensboro News and Record*, 2 January 1994; Marc Harper, "Youth Hockey Has a Hold on Triad," *Greensboro News and Record*, 2 April 1995.

predominant recreational hockey and figure skating organization in the city.⁵⁷ President Dick Michaud had been organizing youth hockey in Greensboro since the 1960s, and Philip Segal, longtime vice president of the organization, had roots in the city stretching back to the 1930s.⁵⁸ Mike Jordan and Ken Whitaker, directors of the youth and adult programs respectively, also got their starts in the sport during the Generals days when they were children.⁵⁹ Far from dominated by northern transplants, the Greensboro programs had grassroots support and leadership from the (new) start.

And it only got bigger from there. Despite a slow start with only the modest aspirations of joining the Triangle Youth Hockey League at first, with assistance from the Monarchs organization as well as former Generals players who had stayed in the area after retirement, by December 1990 the program was already able to ice at least four separate youth teams in games against the Winston-Salem Youth Hockey Association's teams.⁶⁰ With a total of 200 member hockey players by February 1991 (the next season after the winter games), the program, which played in the Mid-Atlantic Youth Hockey League, drew players from all across the Piedmont Triad as well as Reidsville, Elon College, and even Raleigh.⁶¹

These teams also included a few transplants from up north. For example, the 1991-1992 season featured an exchange student from Quebec, Francois Proulx, who not

⁵⁷ Thomas A. Barstow, "Push Made for Fundraising Skating Rink," *Greensboro News and Record*, 17 March 1993.

⁵⁸ Lisa D. Mickey, "Soccer, Ice Sports Show Potential For Growth," *Greensboro News and Record*, 15 September 1990; Philip Segal, "Greensboro Needs Its Coliseum," *Greensboro News and Record*, 25 September 1990.

⁵⁹ Mickey, "Amateur Hockey."

⁶⁰ Hoffman, "Blade Runners"; "Youth Ice Hockey Taking Registration," *Greensboro News and Record*, 2 October 1990; Lisa Mickey, "Youngsters to Display Their Ice Hockey Skills," *Greensboro News and Record*, 17 December 1990.

⁶¹ Mickey, "Amateur Hockey."

only dominated the boys' 14-17 division in the GIS league with an average of two goals a game, but also brought a substantial amount of hockey know-how to the table, helping coaches and players alike in their understanding of the game.⁶² Similarly, Matt and Jon Kenney, brothers from Boston who moved to Greensboro in 1989, brought their skills from years on the ice up north to contribute not only their own playing skills, but also advice for skating and conditioning.⁶³ Proulx and the Kenneys were the exceptions on the ice, though, not the rule – most of the youth players in the GIS system were locals who maybe only had a few years of experience at the most.

Despite the blossoming of interest in ice hockey, however, ice time still remained severely limited. Because the Greensboro Coliseum hosted the only public ice in the city at the time, GIS games and practices had to be scheduled not only around the Monarchs' practice and game times, but also other events at the Coliseum. Youth games were often held in the early morning (sometimes as early as 6:30 am), while adult games lasted long after midnight.⁶⁴ Even then, the ice was only open during the winter during the Monarchs season.⁶⁵

In order to mitigate this problem and give community members more access to ice time, in 1990 the city announced plans to build a "mini-arena with ice-making equipment" in the Coliseum's exhibition hall, among other renovations intended to turn the Coliseum into a viable bid for the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) collegiate

⁶² Lisa D. Mickey, "Canadian Adds New Dimension to Youth Hockey," *Greensboro News and Record*, 6 March 1991.

⁶³ Lisa Mickey, "Brothers Move South, Get Icy Welcome," *Greensboro News and Record*, 22 March 1992.

⁶⁴ Mickey, "Amateur Hockey."

⁶⁵ Wireback, "Construction Starts on 'Ice House'."

basketball tournament.⁶⁶ Financed by bond, the referendum for which passed voter approval with the rink plans in place, the construction plans eventually did away with the ice-making equipment, citing impracticality and high costs.⁶⁷ The original idea had put in a temporary ice surface in the rink, not a permanent one that could be covered by boards for non-skating purposes. However, Greensboro city manager Bill Carstarphen claimed that, because of the extensive grid of utility wiring and piping that would lay under the floor, any temporary ice surface would be incompatible.⁶⁸ This decision met with ire and concern for the process from citizens who had voted yes to the referendum specifically for the additional ice surface for their children, some of whom wrote into the *Greensboro News and Record* to express their displeasure at the omission and suggest boycotts of the Coliseum in favor of a new facility in Winston-Salem.⁶⁹ In response to the public outcry, Greensboro city officials halfheartedly suggested converting the former Justice Building (fairly close to the Coliseum) into a skating rink in an effort to keep their promise to build another ice surface, but those plans never panned out.⁷⁰

Other Greensboro residents also cared enough about hockey programs to suggest rinks for other new recreational buildings, such as the Leonard Recreation Center financed in 1988 but not opened until 1996, but those ideas never moved past the

⁶⁶ Bea Michael, "Hockey Fans Upset with Coliseum Schedule," *Greensboro News and Record*, 7 January 1992.

⁶⁷ Mark McLaughlin, "Loss of Ice Rink Will Hurt Skaters," *Greensboro News and Record*, 13 July 1991.

⁶⁸ Ed Hardin, "Group Angry City Altering Building Bond," *Greensboro News and Record*, 28 January 1992.

⁶⁹ Jeff Dinkel, "Why Cut Recreational Skating Rink?" *Greensboro News and Record*, 19 July 1991; Barbara Goff, "Mad About Ice Rink," *Greensboro News and Record*, 27 July 1991.

⁷⁰ Thomas A. Barstow, "Greensboro Considering Skating Rink in Building Near Coliseum," *Greensboro News and Record*, 27 February 1992.

brainstorming stage.⁷¹ Although these disgruntled voters and avid hockey fans were certainly a small subset of the population, unlikely to reflect the overwhelming opinion of Greensboro residents, they cared enough about giving their children a place to play hockey to write letters to the editor.

As a matter of fact, instead of getting the additional ice surface they thought they were voting for, Greensboro hockey enthusiasts instead lost *any* access to ice time within their home city. As construction proceeded on the Coliseum, the main rink also closed from April to December 1992, forcing the Greensboro Monarchs out for the first half of the 1992-1993 season and leaving GIS participants without anywhere to play or practice. Again, “hockey moms” came out to express their anger with the way city management handled the ice issue, albeit in vain.⁷² Such was the nature of public hockey in North Carolina – in sharp contrast with more popular sports such as football, baseball, or basketball, hockey’s supporters often could not leverage enough political pressure to see projects all the way through.

This did not deter them, though. Even without local ice to play on, however, the league pushed forward with plans to play a fall season anyways (on ice in Winston-Salem).⁷³ Meanwhile, the GIS travel teams began practicing at Hillsborough, a Raleigh

⁷¹ Cindi Andrews, “Residents Give Ideas for Rec Center,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 10 November 1996.

⁷² Michael, “Hockey Fans Upset with Coliseum Schedule;” Terri Breedlove, “For Kids’ Sake, Save the Ice,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 23 December 1991. The Coliseum renovations continued to suffer from timing and financial issues. When it reopened for a college men’s basketball game between UCLA and NC State, it met neither building regulations nor fire codes because it was still incomplete. The city council fired both the Coliseum manager and the contractors responsible for completing the renovations.

⁷³ “Signups for Hockey League Begins Oct. 3,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 27 September 1992;

suburb almost an hour away with private ice, a commitment that would have been difficult for some players and families.⁷⁴

Nevertheless, GIS and local ice sports enthusiasts were not yet ready to give up. In early 1993, the organization received a \$500,000 grant from the city of Greensboro in order to construct the proposed Greensboro Ice Sports Recreation Center, which they were required to match with fundraising within an unspecified timeline.⁷⁵ Although GIS leadership expected to have the cash on hand by the end of the spring (already past the February 1993 deadline that the city had set), progress on the proposed rink fell far behind schedule – by June, the organization only had one-fifth of the money they needed on hand.⁷⁶ A year later, the Greensboro city council set an ultimatum – if GIS could not match the grant money by June 1994, then it would be withdrawn. At the time, GIS only had \$135,000, having raised a minimal amount over the past year.⁷⁷ Almost miraculously, however, by the time the city council checked back in, GIS (now under the leadership of John Marko – Michaud had stepped back) was within \$50,000 of their goal and had found an anonymous benefactor to make up the difference.⁷⁸ With a 9-0 vote, a plan to

⁷⁴ Craig T. Greenlee, “Youth Hockey Beat Some Long Odds,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 22 April 1996.

⁷⁵ Lisa Mickey, “Area Skaters May Soon Get Their Own Rink,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 22 March 1992; “Recipients of Grants Announced,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 30 January 1993.

⁷⁶ Barstow, “Push Made for Fundraising Skating Rink”; Steve Politi, “Proposed Rink Could Be Put on Ice - Group Short of Fund-Raising Goal,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 3 June 1993; Thomas A. Barstow, “Ice Skating Rink Fund Raising To Continue,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 21 February 1994.

⁷⁷ Barstow, “Ice Skating Rink Fund Raising To Continue.”

⁷⁸ Joe Kelleher, “Ice Arena Team Praised,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 12 July 1994.

renovate the second floor of an old warehouse just across the street from the Coliseum finally got the green light, and many thought that that would be the end of the saga.⁷⁹

They were wrong. City government claimed that it could not find an available contractor to physically build the rink, and cost estimates had risen yet again, putting the project as it stood in June 1995 at least \$300,000 over budget.⁸⁰ So ice sports in Greensboro continued in a familiar holding pattern, still fighting with the Greensboro Monarchs and city events for minimal ice time at the renovated Coliseum (when they were not driving an hour to other cities to practice instead.) Finally, in early 1996, the Monarchs organization (and one owner, separately) contributed to the initiative in a bid for a practice facility of their own, getting the project back on track. Between the Monarchs' funding and assistance from Blue Line Ventures in Charlotte (the same outfit that had built the Ice House of Charlotte), the city was only responsible for \$250,000 of the proposed \$2 million budget, a far more manageable sum than the original expectations for the second rink in the Coliseum.⁸¹ Even after land was purchased for the construction of the proposed "Icehouse of Greensboro," however, the city still kept pushing the project to the back burner, refusing to announce a date for groundbreaking on

⁷⁹ John Cochran, "Greensboro On Ice - New Rink May Be On The Way," *Greensboro News and Record*, 30 June 1994; Thomas A. Barstow, "Greensboro Ice Rink Given OK," *Greensboro News and Record*, 1 August 1994.

⁸⁰ "Don't Look Now, But That Rink Is Gone Again," *Greensboro News and Record*, 23 April 1995; Kelly Simmons, "Plans For Rink Still On Thin Ice," *Greensboro News and Record*, 3 June 1995.

⁸¹ Thomas A. Barstow, "Skating-Rink Plan On Thin Ice Behind Schedule," *Greensboro News and Record*, 12 February 1994; Kelly Simmons, "Greensboro Could Have Ice Rink In '96," *Greensboro News and Record*, 26 March 1996; Kelly Simmons, "Plan, Funds Materialize for Ice Rink," *Greensboro News and Record*, 8 May 1996.

the facility.⁸² Construction started in December, and by late September 1997, Greensboro finally had year-round standalone ice.⁸³ While the drama surrounding rink construction in Greensboro shows that ice surfaces did not enjoy high priority in parks and recreation management and that city managers clearly did not believe that there was enough demand in the community to warrant expensive new facilities, it also exhibits the passion that players, families, and local boosters had for keeping ice hockey in the city nevertheless.

Even as they were struggling for ice time, GIS teams still found considerable success in competition. The Junior Monarchs (GIS' travel teams) all either won or came second in Mid-Atlantic Hockey League playoffs in 1996, when just five years before other league teams thought of a Monarchs game as an almost sure-fire win. Moreover, at that year's Gladiators' Tournament (a nationwide youth hockey invitational), the Bantams (15 years old and under) won their entire division, the Squirts (11 and under) won second, and the Peewees (13 and under) placed third, all more than holding their own against teams from the North with far more resources (and year-round ice time).⁸⁴ In July 1997, just a month or so before the planned opening of the Ice House, the Junior Monarchs travelled all the way to Lake Placid (site of the legendary Miracle on Ice almost two decades before) to compete in the Can-Am Games, another prestigious hockey invitational, as the only team from the American South. There, this year's Bantam

⁸² Craig T. Greenlee, "City Will Finally Get Its Year-Round Ice Facility," *Greensboro News and Record*, 14 October 1996; Adam Colborne, "The City Slipping on Responsibility for Ice Rink," *Greensboro News and Record*, 19 October 1996.

⁸³ Craig T. Greenlee, "Junior Monarchs More Than Held Their Own," *Greensboro News and Record*, 28 July 1997.

⁸⁴ Craig T. Greenlee, "Junior Monarchs Blossoming - Youth Hockey Has Come A Long Way In 5 Trying Years," *Greensboro News and Record*, 15 April 1996.

team, as well as the Squirts (10 and under), won a silver medal for their division, shocking both the competition and their own expectations.⁸⁵

While roller hockey enjoyed parallel popularity with ice hockey during this time period throughout North Carolina, the second round of hockey in Greensboro also brought about an uniquely active roller hockey community – the largest in the state. (Other cities did not have nearly as much trouble with ice time coupled with rapidly increasing interest that drove children to find hockey wherever they could.)⁸⁶ In early 1992, the YMCA Outdoor Center sponsored the construction of the first roller hockey court of its kind in Greensboro, sealing cracks in the pavement of old tennis courts and organizing four youth and four adult teams with the help of former Greensboro Generals player John Voss.⁸⁷ Many of these players had been displaced from Greensboro Ice Sports programs when the Coliseum temporarily shut down, finding a new outlet for their love of hockey on the pavement.

The YMCA program was not the only one, either. Upon retirement from the Greensboro Monarchs in the early 1990s, player Jamie Nicolls not only owned and operated a roller hockey rink in the area but also served as administrator, instructor, and game official of its resident league, the Piedmont Roller Hockey League.⁸⁸ This league started out in the same way as the YMCA program did – a former player remembers that

⁸⁵ Greenlee, “Junior Monarchs More Than Held Their Own.” The significance of their location had definitely been on organizational coaching director Steve Strachan’s mind, as he compared their success to “the U.S. beating the Russians in the 1980 Olympics. They had no idea they would come out the way they did.”

⁸⁶ Kyle McIntyre in discussion with the author.

⁸⁷ Lisa Mickey, “Street Hockey Players Now Off The Streets,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 5 April 1992.

⁸⁸ Craig T. Greenlee, “Getting Same Thrill in Different Surface - Jamie Nicolls Finds Satisfaction in Running a Local Roller Hockey League,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 2 December 2002.

they “played on paved over tennis courts with plywood for boards.” Even with this rudimentary setup, enough children were interested to field at least five different teams over three age groups.⁸⁹ Soon, Bill Horn, another former Monarchs player, joined Nicolls in coaching duties, lending credibility and professional expertise to the league.⁹⁰

Yet another roller hockey league popped up in the Greensboro suburb of Jamestown in the spring of 1993. Starting out with just 45 children over four teams, the Jamestown In-Line Hockey Association enjoyed support from Mike Wrike, owner of the local Bicycle and Sports shop and key player in getting the original YMCA league off the ground in Greensboro. By that fall, Wrike expected to see enough players for three age divisions with four or five teams each.⁹¹ This league’s home rink, constructed behind Jamestown Elementary School, eventually hosted summer outdoor play for the Piedmont league as well.⁹²

More and more leagues followed in parks and suburbs – theoretically, anywhere there were open areas of pavement, there could be roller hockey, even in the Coliseum parking lot!⁹³ Even when ice at the Coliseum finally accepted skaters again, roller hockey kept the interest of children and adults alike.⁹⁴ By 1994, Greensboro had produced enough youth inline hockey talent to field a travel team, known as the Greensboro

⁸⁹ Chris Ashley in discussion with the author.

⁹⁰ Pat Chambers, “A Job Well Done,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 20 September 1994.

⁹¹ Marc Harper, “Roller-Hockey League Is Picking up Steam - Community Support Is Strong,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 5 August 1993.

⁹² Marc Harper, “Three-Year-Old Teams with Dad for Archery Win,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 27 May 1995.

⁹³ Tom Steadman, “Coliseum Parking Lot Is Site for Summer Hockey,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 30 June 1995.

⁹⁴ “Hockey Applications Available,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 28 August 1994.

Comets, that played for two years without losing a game and played in the North American Roller Hockey Championships in 1996.⁹⁵

During the early years, inline hockey actually enjoyed more popularity among youth players than ice hockey, in part due to its lower cost. Ice time was expensive and scarce compared to roller rink time, especially with all the drama and closures surrounding the Greensboro Coliseum's ice and the long, difficult slog to finally build the Greensboro Ice House.⁹⁶ As roller hockey never really took off in other places with more available ice such as the Triangle or Charlotte, this was probably the main contributor to the growth of the sport in Greensboro.⁹⁷ Even then, the demand for rink time outstripped supply, with skaters often co-opting any flat surface they could find (often tennis courts, like the ones that had been converted into rinks in the first place.) Conflicts between tennis players and roller hockey enthusiasts came to a head after the city's Parks and Recreation department revealed plans to convert three of eleven tennis courts at Oka T. Hester Park into a roller hockey facility in 1993. After local members of the Greensboro Tennis Association campaigned against the renovations, the plan was dropped, but the incident still goes to show how popular roller hockey had become in Greensboro.⁹⁸ Moreover, roller hockey players did not need as much equipment as ice hockey players did. While high-quality inline skates often cost the same as ice skates did (around \$300 for a pair), inline hockey did not require the extensive padding that ice hockey did.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Chris Ashley in discussion with the author.

⁹⁶ Jennifer Kronstain, "Greensboro Organization Warming To Ice Age," *Greensboro News and Record*, 18 December 1995; Simmons, "Plans For Rink Still On Thin Ice."

⁹⁷ Kyle McIntyre in discussion with the author.

⁹⁸ Marc Harper, "Tennis Courts Being Invaded By Rollerblades," *Greensboro News and Record*, 14 March 1993.

⁹⁹ Brian Holloway, "Rollin' On - Roller Hockey Catches On in the Triad," *Greensboro News and Record*, 22 September, 1997.

A large portion of roller hockey's popularity also stemmed from (and, in turn, bolstered) its large body of local grassroots support. Rather than northerners looking to revive an old favorite from their memories (as was often – but not always – the case with ice hockey programs), local parents and community members who just had “a genuine interest in giving kids a place to play” played instrumental roles in getting roller rinks off the ground.¹⁰⁰

When the Carolina Hurricanes arrived in North Carolina in 1997, they had no home in Raleigh (which had always been their intended destination.) The Greensboro Coliseum, still one of the largest stadiums in the region, opened its doors to the “Canes” for two years, jolting the steadily rising youth hockey numbers into skyrocketing upward through both natural interest as well as NHL money.¹⁰¹ Moreover, their arrival coincided with the opening of the Ice House of Greensboro, which – although not directly related to the NHL – drastically changed the landscape of available ice time and dedicated community space. In addition, the Hurricanes' tenancy in the Coliseum meant that the Monarchs (having just finished their second season in the American Hockey League as the Carolina Monarchs) had to search for a new home.¹⁰² Their absence grated on some people who believed that the loss of the Monarchs heralded a loss in city pride and intense local rivalries (not to mention drove the ticket price for live hockey sky high), and certainly marked the end of an era of minor league hockey in the city.¹⁰³ By 1998, hockey

¹⁰⁰ Chris Ashley in discussion with the author.

¹⁰¹ Taylor, “Youth Hockey Might Be Ready for a Local Boom.”

¹⁰² Scott Michaux, “Monarchs' Future Still In Limbo,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 16 May 1997.

¹⁰³ Chuck C. Hurley, “Bring Back ECHL Hockey, We're Not Ready For The NHL,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 27 April 1997; “Whalers Won't Be Welcomed By All,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 14 May 1997.

in Greensboro had changed dramatically and irrevocably, poised to rocket into the 21st century with resources it had never seen before.

Just an hour away, Winston-Salem also benefited considerably from their own minor-league hockey team, the Carolina/Winston-Salem Thunderbirds (active from 1981 to 1992), which played in the same league as the Monarchs did and enjoyed a healthy rivalry with their Greensboro counterparts.¹⁰⁴ The Winston-Salem youth community also enjoyed some assistance from the Greensboro Monarchs (seemingly more than their counterpart in Greensboro ever benefited from the Winston-Salem Thunderbirds.) At least a few of their players first found their love for the game at Monarchs intermission exhibitions before bringing it back to Winston-Salem and getting involved at home.¹⁰⁵

Moreover, the youth and recreational community was fortunate that Winston-Salem had its own standalone rink at the Lawrence Joel Coliseum Annex. Built by referendum in 1989 – similar to the original plans for the Greensboro Coliseum but without any of the accompanying drama – the Lawrence Joel rink hosted not only local programs but also skaters from Greensboro, looking for practice time when the Coliseum was otherwise occupied.¹⁰⁶ As a matter of fact, because of its year-round ice, Winston-Salem also often hosted programs for the entire Triad community, such as the Piedmont Ice Hockey development camp that featured not only former Thunderbirds players but also experienced collegiate coaching staff from northern programs, invited down to North Carolina for a week.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Another team now plays in the Federal Prospects Hockey League as the Carolina Thunderbirds, an homage to this original franchise.

¹⁰⁵ Harper, “Youth Hockey Has A Hold On Triad.”

¹⁰⁶ Holloway, “Rollin’ On”; L.A.A. Williams, “Plans for New Coliseum Include Memorial Wall,” 27 March 1986.

¹⁰⁷ “Sports Camps,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 1 June 1991.

Another one of the earliest youth organizations, the Winston-Salem Youth Hockey Association, was founded in 1974 by Greensboro native John Clapp. By 1981, Clapp had also put together the North Carolina Eagles, an adult (over 40) amateur team that won three straight national championships in the early 2000s and often featured former professional players who had retired from the local Greensboro Generals or Winston-Salem Thunderbirds.¹⁰⁸ Teams from WSYHA often faced rivals from GIS in Mid-Atlantic League play as well as exhibition games. Unique to the Winston-Salem program, the youth teams also enjoyed free marketing from the First Night Piedmont programs every New Year's Eve, when the entire Winston-Salem community would descend on the area surrounding the Lawrence Joel Coliseum complex for a night of alcohol-free festivities. Among other skating exhibitions and public ice time, First Night Piedmont often featured WSYHA exhibitions in its scheduling.¹⁰⁹ Like Greensboro, Winston-Salem also featured its own roller hockey organization at the Arena Sports Center, but it never gained nearly as much popularity as the multiple Greensboro programs.¹¹⁰

By and large, however, the Triad programs were the most vibrant and present in the record throughout this time period. Ebbs in popularity during the absence of professional teams only serve to reinforce the link between professional presences and amateur participation. At the end of the century, although Greensboro lost the Carolina

¹⁰⁸ Victor Hannak, "WSYHA Has a Long and Rich History," Winston Salem Youth Hockey Association, 23 January 2018; Larry Keech, "Old Pros: Love of the Games Keeps These Players on Ice," *Greensboro News and Record*, 4 May 2004.

¹⁰⁹ "Children & Family Fun," *Winston-Salem Chronicle*, 23 December 1993.

¹¹⁰ Holloway, "Rollin' On."

Hurricanes to their permanent home in Raleigh, the foundation was set for a long-lasting youth and recreational community.

Chapter 3: Today's Center: The Research Triangle

Although now the Research Triangle area is the heart of Carolinian hockey, it was relatively late to the game compared to Charlotte or the Piedmont Triad. Two separate threads came into play during the development of its community: the collegiate teams mentioned previously that, despite playing some games in Greensboro, hailed from local universities such as UNC-Chapel Hill and North Carolina State, as well as recreational youth and family programs in the suburbs.¹¹¹ Both of these groups came together to provide the impetus for rink construction and continued maintenance.

Founded in about 1978, the Triangle Youth Hockey Association was unique in that, far from finding its roots in a major city, it was headquartered in Hillsborough, the Orange County seat and a town of about six thousand people.¹¹² However, its community members had access to resources that other organizations did not. Because of a perceived historic association with the explorer Daniel Boone, Hillsborough featured a pioneer-themed amusement park and shopping center known as the Daniel Boone Village. Notably, the complex included two privately-owned ice rinks known as the Daniel Boone Twin Ice Rinks, which presumably drew in the majority of its revenue from UNC and NC State students.

¹¹¹ "The Big Four College Ice Hockey Tournament."

¹¹² "Calendar and Announcements," *The Carolina Times*, October 2, 1982.

While the high cost and demand for of ice time at Hillsborough was long bemoaned by various youth programs all over North Carolina, the rinks nevertheless hosted many an organization that lacked its own consistent ice time. While Greensboro travel teams came into the Triangle to practice there, area collegiate club teams usually did not have the funds to regularly practice at Hillsborough in the 70s and 80s.¹¹³ Games, however, usually did take place at Daniel Boone, which boasted the title of “Home of ACC Big Four Ice Hockey” upon its opening as a dual rink in 1979.¹¹⁴

Even before TYHA was officially founded, however, Daniel Boone management already looked for ways to incorporate hockey into their programming. As early as 1971, before the second ice surface had arrived, the rink already advertised looking for hockey instructors.¹¹⁵ As the program grew, it attracted players from all over the region, such as Joshua Littlejohn, all playing in TYHA. By 1990, TYHA had grown large enough to take over management of the rink, and now the issue for out-of-towners was more simply one of travel time rather than high costs.¹¹⁶ As a matter of fact, this may have inspired hockey parents in other parts of the state to advocate for ownership of their own rinks, instead of leaving them up to businesses to run – both Pineville in Charlotte and the Ice House of Greensboro also enjoyed management under local organizations with vested interests in the rinks.

¹¹³ “Puck Happy”; Simmons, “Plans, Funds Materialize for Ice Rink”; Charlotte Wray, “Daniel Boone Village Sold,” *The News of Orange County*, 11 September 2018.

¹¹⁴ “Daniel Boone Twin Ice Rinks,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 8 November 1979; Jill Anderson, “Ice Hockey Keeps 61-Year-Old Feeling Young,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 2 March 1982.

¹¹⁵ “DTH Classifieds,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 11 November 1971.

¹¹⁶ Andrea Cashion, “Parents Run Ice Rink for Hockey-Playing Kids,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 5 April 1993.

While Raleigh's first taste of professional hockey did not come until 1991, the arrival of the IceCaps had the same explosive effect on the youth hockey scene as the Monarchs and Thunderbirds had in the Triad or the Checkers in Charlotte.¹¹⁷ Before their arrival, TYHA was the only game in town. However, by 1995, multiple other leagues had sprung up around the area.¹¹⁸ Like its other minor-league counterparts in North Carolina, the IceCaps enjoyed a flurry of supporters in its first few years, which also helped introduce the game to a wider audience than before.

The Carolina Hurricanes did not arrive in Raleigh proper until 1999, and then only to a lukewarm welcome. However, through a combination of financial assistance, marketing, and training, the 'Canes helped guide the Raleigh hockey scene into a period of unprecedented growth, accentuated by their eventual Stanley Cup win in 2006. Even before that, however, the presence of the NHL (as controversial as it had been to some) meant that youth and recreational hockey could enjoy a much higher profile and more access to resources than the programs ever could before. By the 2009-2010 season, the number of registered USA Hockey players (both youth and adult amateur) had skyrocketed to 5,598, over five times the number from twenty years prior.¹¹⁹ Such an increase changed the scope of the local game forever.

¹¹⁷ Mary Beth Phillips, "Ice Rink Complex Coming In Fall 1998," *The Morrisville & Preston Progress*, 25 September 1997.

¹¹⁸ "Bringing Hockey to the South," *Technician*, January 20, 1995, NC State University Libraries' Rare and Unique Digital Collections.

¹¹⁹ Peters, "Raw Numbers." For comparison, during the 1996-1997 school year 20,183 North Carolina boys played on high school football teams, 9,399 on baseball teams, 8,991 on basketball teams, and 7,490 on soccer teams. National Federation of State High School Associations, "1997 High School Athletics Participation Survey," 1997, 4-5, 7.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Although geography did divide various programs into their respective cities, occasionally it could also bring them together. In 1993, an all-star squad of ten- and eleven-year-olds from Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and Raleigh played in the Canadian-American Challenge Cup tournament as the Carolina Kings, winning the bronze medal for their age division by trouncing teams from Pennsylvania, New York, and Rhode Island.¹²⁰

The level of hockey competition in North Carolina had only developed so far by 1997, however. Certainly, talent did emerge from many of these programs, but by the time they were old enough to enter high school, most of the youth with any sort of future in hockey moved away or went to boarding school in places such as Minnesota, Michigan, or Massachusetts, where they could get better support and play in front of more college and professional scouts.¹²¹ Nevertheless, their success and the level of talent that many of these pioneers possessed still showed that the North Carolinian programs were able to build a solid foundation for these players.

¹²⁰ Lisa D Mickey, "Bringing Home the Hockey Bronze a Big Thrill," *Greensboro News and Record*, 11 April 1993.

¹²¹ Kronstain, "Greensboro Organization Warming to Ice Age"; John Seelke, "Area's Best Hockey Players Headed North," *Greensboro News and Record*, 18 June 1995; Jessica Westphal in discussion with the author.

Youth hockey was not only present in Charlotte, the Triad, and the Triangle, but also found a foothold in Fayetteville and Fort Bragg, Wilmington and the Cape Fear region, and other, smaller communities that fed off the larger programs. However, less material is available on these programs, some of which only started in the mid-to-late 1990s (compared to the 1970s inceptions of the Charlotte, Triad, and Triangle programs.) Nevertheless, they do deserve a mention, as the phenomenon of hockey in North Carolina was not only limited to these three areas. Further research may illuminate different trends.

Moreover, considering how important ice surfaces and rink facilities were to the development of these hockey programs, there could be an avenue for further research regarding built environment and memory of the facilities that have since disappeared. Furthermore, the college club hockey scene in the Atlantic Coast Conference seems to have been around for as long as (if not longer) than youth hockey and could also produce some robust research. Finally, recreational roller hockey deserves a deeper dive as well, considering its impact on the hockey scene in the South as a whole.

While hockey may have started as a northern phenomenon, the amount of early local support for both recreational and minor professional hockey in North Carolina shows that it had indeed found a footing there. The number of rinks, their management methods, and the success of local youth teams all come together to show that hockey – while it may not have achieved the same heights of popularity as more well-established (and cheaper) sports had – was truly a community endeavor. It brought people together, some staying involved far beyond their playing years (or those of their children), during a

perceived time of community dissolution.¹²² Through the tireless efforts of local hockey boosters, minor professional teams and players, and parents who just wanted a place for their children to play, youth hockey grew into a substantial endeavor that, while still lagging behind more traditional sports for the region, laid a solid foundation for both fandom and participation for the Carolina Hurricanes to eventually leverage into a passionate fanbase and support system.

¹²² Jessica Westphal in conversation with the author. For in-depth considerations of community or the lack thereof, see Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

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