

SHOCK & AWE

As It Was Meant to Be Played

Inside the U.S. Beer Hockey Championships

I sat in a lawn chair in the middle of frozen Lake Nokomis, nibbling on chicken kabobs and sipping a tequila slushy, thinking, *How serious can this pond-hockey thing be?*

A minute after the puck dropped in my first game, I immediately regretted my warm-up smorgasbord. This pond-hockey thing was apparently very serious. We were playing a team named the Whiskey Bandits, an ass-kicking juggernaut of players in handsome red jerseys who were definitely in it to win. My crew, the Arden 6, was there to play and to party. While the Whiskey Bandits were a team of sculpted Adonises in their mid-twenties, the Arden 6—made up of a forklift driver, two office maxes, a stay-at-home dad, and a couple of slackers—looked like a bunch of Chris Farleys on skates.

The Whiskey Bandits skated with crisp, robotic efficiency. We chased them like slobbering dogs, somehow managing to score a lucky goal before the onslaught began. Within moments of the opening face-off, we were losing 10-3. A Whiskey Bandit made a wicked tic-tac move on me, twisting me right, then left, then right. I almost pooped my pants. The referee called out the score. "27-5." Slight pause. "28-5." They scored more than a goal a minute. The final tally, 37-5, represented one of the worst defeats in the two-year history of the U.S. Pond Hockey Championships.

The beleaguered Arden 6 headed into the massive party tent to regroup over a few beers. We were baffled by the extreme drubbing we had suffered because we thought we had a pretty good squad. All of the players on my team played high school hockey in the Twin Cities. Nick Brown, our ringer, even played at Dartmouth and has fantastic speed and silky moves. As we sat and sulked, the Whiskey Bandits strolled in without a hint of arrogance; they came over to apologize for the slaughter.

"Sorry 'bout all that," a fresh-faced Bandit said sheepishly. "I had to get a waiver to come play here this weekend."

"A waiver from what?" I asked.

"I play pro hockey in Oklahoma," the guy said. He took a giant chug from his plastic keg cup. "Most of my teammates played in the minors, too."

My posse spit up their beers.

"You guys are pros? Big deal," I said facetiously. "Our right-winger is a thirty-eight-year-old stay-at-home dad who calls himself The House Admiral."

I walked outside to the patio that overlooked the entire tournament. Bright sun filled the blue-



berry sky with blinding light. A horn blew across the frozen lake, signaling the start of another round of play. All at once, on twenty-four rinks, forty-eight teams accounting for 288 players started playing hockey the way it was meant to be played: wide open, four-on-four, with no offsides, no goalies, and no hitting.

Before our next game, I made my way to a giant board containing the tournament schedule and scores from all of the games. It gave me hope to see that many of the other teams had pathetic names like A Lot Better than Last Year, Fattys, and Foot-long Meatball Sub on White with Double Pepper-jack Cheese!—indicating they probably wouldn't be as awesome as the Whiskey Bandits.

We held a team meeting over doughnuts, hot-dogs, and more beers while The Admiral talked to his babysitter on a cell phone. Back on the ice, the junk food in our systems worked like magic. We spanked our opponents, the Campbell Avenue Crawlers, a team that traveled from Connecticut just to get whopped, 20-3, by our sorry asses.

The day ended with more hockey, more beer swilling, and a funk band named the Prophets of Soul jamming tunes like "Ain't That a Bitch!" and "Skin Tite!"

The next morning, cold air burned my lungs like shots of vodka; an orange sunrise painted a few white clouds the color of a dreamsicle. Our game against the Flying Saucer Attack was hard fought with lots of slashing and chipping, but we eventually lost 14-8.

That afternoon, the beer garden bristled like a busy trading session on the New York Stock Exchange. Hordes of sweaty bastards, grown men still wearing breezers and shin pads long after their games were over, waved dollar bills to pay for beer. I asked an old-school guy in a vin-

tage helmet how his team was doing. “I ain’t playing,” he mumbled. He pointed to the helmet and said, “I just fall down a lot.”

Later my team stood rink-side and watched the Whiskey Bandits dismantle Kari Takko (a team named after a Minnesota North Stars backup goaltender) to win the championship game 10-2.

“Next year, I think we should use steroids,” I suggested to my teammates. They chuckled and ambled on sore legs back to the beer garden.

—*Todd J. Smith*
