

---

---

# Good Day at Plaster Rock

by Bryan Gruley | 20 February 2004 | *The Wall Street Journal*

© 2003, Dow Jones & Company, Inc.

---

---

Plaster Rock, New Brunswick—LIFE IS GOOD when you can skate into the beer tent.

The tent sat on a frozen lake ringed by snow-covered pines in Eastern Canada. Carved into the ice were 22 hockey rinks shimmering beneath flood lamps. I stood there sweating two weekends ago, with a hockey stick in one hand and a Labatt Blue in the other. Three friends and I had come 850 miles from Washington, D.C., to this little mill town to play in the Third Annual World Pond Hockey Championships. We wound up back in our childhood.

I'd heard last year that Plaster Rock, population 1,200, hosts an outdoor hockey tournament. Eighty teams, four skaters per team. No goalies. Goal nets only 10 inches high. The champs get their names etched on a wooden trophy sculpted in the shape of the Stanley Cup, the venerable championship trophy of the National Hockey League.

I couldn't sign up fast enough. I've played hockey for 40 years, but I hadn't played on a pond since my Dad built a rink in our backyard in Detroit with nets made from pine boards and chicken wire.

My team was the Y.A.N.K.S.—Your Average No-talent Knuckleheads from the South, made up of guys I play with on Thursday nights. Nick Carone, age 38, a home remodeler from Buffalo, N.Y., won an NCAA title playing for Harvard in 1989. Vancouver native Greg Buchanan, a 30-year-old private equity investor, played at Union College in Schenectady, N.Y. Mortgage broker Tony Gray, 43, runs our weekly skate in Rockville, Md.

With my snowshoe speed and stone hands, I was easily our worst player. But I'd had the foresight to rent a cottage on Roulston Lake, where the tournament is played. While other teams shlepped from motels half an hour away, we crunched through the snow a few hundred yards to games, and came home to Alpine Lagers and ketchup-flavored potato chips. Next door was the Settlers Inn, home of the Frisbee-size omelet. Before a puck was dropped, I was MVP.

The rinks glistened in the sun when we walked down on our first morning. We sat on hay bales lacing our skates, the 10-degree chill stinging our faces. "Man, this is awesome," Nick said. Smart

aleck that I am, I'd worn gym shorts because a cameraman from Canada's Weather Network had come to see how Americans handle cold. I handled it by catching a rut in the ice and taking a swan dive. Pond ice, I remembered, is really hard.

Other memories flooded back when the games began. Our skate blades started to squeak as the temperature dropped below zero. The cold burned our nostrils even as sweat trickled down our necks. We struggled to see the puck in the twilight shadows. We dug it out of snowbanks and argued over which team should get it. After each game—we won three of six, finishing tied for 17th—we shook hands and took photos with our rivals. During games, though, there was always "that little edge that comes with playing hockey," as Tony put it.

Afterward, we glided past the two giant inflatable Labatt cans to the beer tent for beverages and steamed Atlantic mussels. On Saturday night, most of the town showed up for a dance at the high-school gym. "First high-school dance where I didn't have to hide my rum-and-coke," one skater said. By

---

night's end, I was on stage singing with the Downtown Blues Band and Greg was cooking hot wings at the Timber Town Lounge. We weren't our sharpest for our 10 a.m. game, but we probably wouldn't have won it anyway.

The locals made us feel like locals ourselves. Peter White, proprietor of the Settlers Inn, shuttled us around in his minivan. Bank executive Mike Haley swapped me his cool Royal Bank of Canada jersey. A woman gave Greg a can of fiddleheads, a fern that people cook with butter and vinegar.

But the best part came Friday night. Losing by six goals in the middle of a game, we were waiting for a face-off when snow began to fall. We all looked up to see millions of flakes spinning out of the black velvet sky. "This is perfect," whispered one of our opponents, a young man named Bellissimo.

In an instant, I was on my backyard pond in Detroit again. Dinner was over and my homework was done. I was standing in my skates in the light spilling from my Mom's kitchen, slapping pucks into the dark end of the yard. The rest of the world disappeared. ❖

---

*Learn about Bryan Gruley and his new mystery, Starvation Lake* | ➔ [bryanruley.com](http://bryanruley.com) | ➔ [starvationlake.com](http://starvationlake.com)