

FALL/  
WINTER  
EDITION

# USABH MAGAZINE

INSIDE

**SPOTLIGHT  
PROGRAM**

Common Goals:  
How Ball Hockey  
Has Flourished  
in the Jewish  
Community

**SEPARATED  
AT BIRTH**

Ball Hockey  
& Ice Hockey

**PLUS**

The Emergence of  
the NDA 3-on-3  
Game in Iowa

COVER STORY

**LOOKING FORWARD TO LOOKING BACK:**

The 2019 Women's National Silver Medal Team



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## **REGISTER TODAY**

# LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT



Greetings to all,

As we end 2021 and move into a new calendar year, we see that the NFL is gearing up for the playoffs, the Atlanta Braves are World Series Champions, the NHL and NBA are back in full swing, and before we know it, the holiday season has arrived! What that also means is that thousands of ball hockey players around the U.S. are awaiting the start of winter seasons in their local communities, and our national teams have begun preparations for the 2022 ISBHF World Championships. While reflecting on this past year, I can't help but to be anything but proud of endless highlights and monumental moments our sport discovered.

USA Ball Hockey partnered with various rinks in nearly a half dozen states including Florida, California, Pennsylvania, New York, and Washington, D.C. We will continue the work to provide education and resources for league development while supporting communities across the United States.

At the end of August, we saw the Future Stars Invitational Tournament in my hometown of Buffalo, New York. Our goal of bringing youth ball hockey to the city of Buffalo, along with providing a unique experience with a world championship atmosphere to some of America's top prospects was a smashing success. Congratulations to all of the players, coaches, general managers, and of course, our incredibly talented tournament organizing committee for all of the dedication that went into such a tremendous event. We have recently announced that August 26-28 will be the dates to save for the 2022 Future Stars Invitational.

We also saw some of America's top talent compete in the inaugural Spittin Chiclets and Barstool Sports Hockey Fest 3-on-3 Street Hockey Tournament in Detroit, Michigan. NBHL all-stars, full of Team USA experience, provided us with a thrilling final, defeating one of the NHL's elite defensemen, Zach Werenski, and his Columbus Blue Jackets. Team NBHL is excited to be invited back to the event next year as it heads to Las Vegas, Nevada.

Lastly, our partner, the National Ball Hockey League closed out its first season as Divisional Champions and Finalists participated in the first ever Mylec Cup in Marlton, New Jersey. This event saw 17 teams competing across 2 divisions, and in a historic fashion, hosted representatives from Texas, Washington State, Los Angeles, Chicago, DC, Buffalo, New Jersey, multiple regions across New England, and Pennsylvania. The NBHL has quickly captured the gold standard of ball hockey, not just in America, but the across the world. We are very proud of all the players, coaches, staff, and organizers for putting together an incredible and unprecedented season. Look for information soon on NBHL expansion in 2022.

Have a safe and prosperous fall, and good luck on the rink!

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Banks". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a white background.

*Chris Banks*  
President  
[cbanks@usaballhockey.com](mailto:cbanks@usaballhockey.com)



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# LOOKING FORWARD TO LOOKING BACK

By: Jen Free

## The 2019 US Women's National Silver Medal Team

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The backdrop for the 2019 ISBHF World Championships was beautiful Košice, Slovakia; a robust, old-world town that showcases the best of historic and contemporary Europe. On June 14-22, 2019, athletes from around the globe gathered at the Steel Arena, an 8347 capacity, state-of-the-art facility, to play nine intense days of championship ball hockey against some of the greatest athletes to ever play the sport.

During off-competition years, the management and coaching staff of the US Women's National Team hold open evaluation camps for women ages 16-34 with dreams of representing their country in the world championships. During the camps, prospective players are evaluated on fundamental skills, hockey IQ, speed, agility, commitment

level and effort, leadership on and off the rink, and overall attitude.

The 2019 USWNT was comprised of 22 of the sport's most elite athletes from across the United States.

After a long flight full of excitement and anticipation, Team USA touched down in Slovakia and immediately got to work. Their days were highly structured, with hour-by-hour itineraries for wake-up times, breakfast, team walks, team meetings, rink reporting times, and uniform requirements for the day. Game day preparations were intense, including reviewing game video of their opponents' strategies and viewing previous world championship games to understand each opponents' unique playing style.

However, the USWNT coaching staff's main focus was to hone in on what was within their control- what Team USA could do to win against their opponents. With no practices in between games, adjustments needed to be made on the floor from game-to-game. Some players were meeting for the first time, having never played together before their first game, so the coaching staff had their work cut out for them to ensure that players were in sync with each other early on.

Although they were there primarily to work, the players and staff had plenty of opportunities to enjoy some off-rink fun together. During their downtime, the team would watch other games and cheer on as many other teams as they could. They



spent little time sightseeing, as they needed to conserve their energy for the intensity of each game, but did find time to tour the town together, often seeing entire teams proudly wearing their country's name on their jackets. Alessandra Glista, one of two goalies for the 2019 USWNT, thinks back to the time spent with the team, "It was a lot of fun and all of the women come from various hockey backgrounds. The team bonding was great; we would get dinner and come back to the hotel for games or trivia in the evenings." On trying new foods or sampling the local cuisine, Glista chuckled, "An international competition is not the time to try new foods. Stick with what you're used to so there are no surprises."

One of the most important aspects of participating in a nine-day international tournament is preparedness. Sarah Hughson, a player with the Connecticut Whale ice hockey team, was a late addition to the 2019 USWNT. A fellow teammate, Colleen Murphy, encouraged her to go to an evaluation camp. "The next thing I knew I had a month to train for the World Championships!" Hughson's intense training served her well during the world championships. "I played left/right wing with Taylor Steadman and Julia Bronson and was on a power play unit and a penalty kill unit, so I did a good amount of running while in Slovakia that year!"

Lindsey Bitler, a winger from Fairfax, Virginia, was relatively new to the sport when she joined her teammates in Slovakia in 2019, having only begun playing the sport just after college. "For me to find a new sport, train intensively, make the team, and compete at the world stage was a very unique and unexpected experience for me."

Not only did each individual player have to train and condition on their own time leading up to the trip to Košice, they also needed to be prepared for the unexpected during the tournament as well. In their first round robin game

against Great Britain, the UK's goalie passed out from the heat in the rink. Luckily, one of Team USA's goalies and a doctor by trade, Carli Bekkering, jumped into action and was able to immediately attend to the goalie to help her get situated before gameplay resumed.



## In It to Win It

Jason Kelly, General Manager of the 2019 USWNT, recalled the energy leading up to the gold medal game against Canada. "The feeling was electric. The players had a private, closed door, player's only meeting to get themselves ready." On the day of the gold medal game, Kelly recalled that "the players were all fired up. We went into the game with a bit of an edge, having lost to Canada in the preliminaries. Every player was ready for a battle. We were back in the gold medal game for the second consecutive time in two years, showing the ball hockey world that we belonged there."

The USWNT had previously lost to the Czech Republic in the 2017 World Championships, placing for the first time in the top three and taking a silver medal back home to the US that year. Glista recalls, "2017 was a heartbreaker. But we came back in 2019 and won against the Czech Republic in the early

brackets, so to beat the gold medal team was a big deal and it set us up well for the rest of the tournament." After the round robin games, there were several rounds of playoff games where Team USA battled hard for a chance to play in the gold medal game. Glista and her teammates met up with Team Slovakia in the semi-finals to determine who would advance to the final championship game. "Because we were in Slovakia, all of their games were played in the larger arena and were televised. The local news showed highlights of their games and it was cool to see highlights of our games against them on the news."

The game was a must-win in order for the US to have a shot at the gold medal. Kelly recalled a key moment from the tournament: "We were playing a hard-fought game and the Slovaks took us to overtime, even though we outshot them by a large margin in the first three periods. One of our leaders, Karen Levin, had a set warm up regiment. One part of that was having her partner throw her high balls that she would catch, quickly place down, and step in with it to simulate keeping the ball in the zone. She practiced that religiously. Early in overtime, the Slovakian defense attempted to clear a ball. Karen tracked it, caught it in front of the center line to keep it in, stepped and shot a wristlet from the blue line that found the back of the net and won us the game. It was a pivotal moment for our club."

Lindsey Bitler vividly recalled Levin's game winning goal in OT. "We were almost tripping coming over the bench to swarm her - absolutely unbelievable. It's the type of play that every athlete dreams about as a kid and it couldn't have come to a more deserving person - she is one of the hardest working, intelligent players I've ever had the privilege of playing alongside." Levin's OT goal propelled Team USA to the main event, a chance to play in the World Championships gold medal game against Team Canada.

# 2019 USWNT ROSTER

- #31 CARLI BEKKERING
- #35 ALESSANDRA GLISTA
- #4 LIANE DIXON
- #5 BECKY DOBSON
- #7 STEFANIE CABAN
- #8 SARAH HUGHSON
- #9 KAREN LEVIN
- #10 COLLEEN MURPHY
- #13 CHERIE STEWART
- #15 WITLEY NICHOLS
- #17 TES SIARNACKI
- #18 JULIA BRONSON
- #20 COURTNEY LANGSTON
- #21 EILEEN MESLAR
- #24 TAYLOR STEADMAN
- #27 PAM BILGER
- #33 KATHARINA HELING
- #55 SADIE ST. GERMAIN
- #62 HANNAH SPRUNK
- #67 DANIELLE STROHMIE
- #77 LINDSEY BITLER
- #87 MARLEY MCMILLIAN

## NORTH AMERICAN SHOWDOWN: USA V. CANADA

Bitler remembered the energy during the start of the gold medal game: "Surreal. The screaming fans brought a whole new level of pressure to an already high-pressure situation. It was an absolute blast."

Team USA scored the first goal of the game off the stick of Cherie Stewart during a power play in the final minutes of the first period. Canada would score two goals in thirty seconds midway through the second period, with their third coming later in the period on a breakaway. Team USA answered back with what would be their final goal of the championship game from Lindsey Bitler, making the game 3-2 in favor of Team Canada at the end of the second period. "I was smothered by my linemates. I ran down the bench and high-fived the whole team. That memory, being able to contribute at the pinnacle of our sport, is something I'll never forget."

Canada netted their fourth goal on an early power play in the third period. Hughson recalled, "I remember it being very close, very back and forth with a lot of close goal scoring chances from both sides. I remember being out there at the very end and every one of us

going 100% until the very last whistle." Although hard-fought by Team USA, the game ended with a final score of 4-2, with Team USA earning the silver medal and players Becky Dobson, Stefanie Caban, and Cherie Stewart, all earning individual honors as Best Forward, Best Defenseman, and All-Start Team, respectively.

Hughson recalled how she felt when the final buzzer sounded. "It was hard. It was emotional. It hurts to be that close to your goal of gold and not getting it. Even though we came up short, I am extremely proud of our hard work and effort throughout the tournament. To wear 'USA' on your jersey is one thing, but to show the world how good this team is and come back from the title game with silver is something I will never forget."

Glista reflects back on the loss in the final game: "Team Canada was a talented team. It just didn't work out for us that day. In the moment, we were upset and questioned what we could have done differently. But as an athlete, we take it one game at a time and worry about what needs done in the moment. I don't think people realize how hard it is to actually win. There is a whole day of preparation and so much more going on outside of the game, so you're only seeing a tiny glimpse of things. Everyone always says, 'Go win that gold!' but actually getting to that point is hard."



Bitler looks back on the 2019 World Championships with gratitude. “Taking home a silver medal is an unbelievable achievement. There was so much effort put into the team prior to landing - hours of physical training, camps, film study. It was the culmination of months (and years) of hard work. I would not have had a chance to be on team USA without support from our local coaches (thanks Cupcakes!), my family, teammates, and friends who never stopped encouraging, challenging, and guiding me throughout the process. To come home with hardware showed that their belief in me was well-founded. One of my favorite expressions is ‘winning is the most fun’ and although we did not achieve the ultimate victory, we still won a silver medal and that was a hell of a lot of fun.”

## LOOKING FORWARD TO 2022

Glista’s advice to the next USWNT: “It goes by really fast. It’s important to enjoy every second. Don’t look too far ahead in the competition, be in the moment. It’s hard to do as an athlete; we’re always striving and listening to the chatter of ‘win that gold.’ You need to shut that out because you can only control what is happening in the moment. Be very poised and very present in the moment that you are in, in the game that you are playing. Embrace the times outside of the rink as well. You’re going there to work; it’s not a vacation. You need to take care of your mind and body and be ready to go when you’re called upon.”

We asked USWNT General Manager, Angelo Terrana, about his goals for the next team that is currently being scouted. “My overarching goal for putting together a team for the World Championships is to put together a team in the truest sense of the word. We aren’t trying to assemble a bunch of stars. We are evaluating players on a whole range of attributes ranging from fundamentals, to speed, to leadership. All of the parts have to move together



towards one goal. We need 100% buy-in to what we are about and that involves more than skill, it requires dedication and leadership. When you put a jersey on with USA on the front, you have to live up to those standards on and off the rink. We think we have assembled a team, including the coaching staff, that will provide our players the absolute best chance to win.”

Evaluation camps for the USWNT that will represent the United States in Manitoba, Canada in 2022 kick off in July of 2021 and registrations are already pouring in from women all over the country. Over the next few months,

the management team and coaching staff for the USWNT will be hard at work uniting the next team of women who will not only compete for the gold but will have the opportunity to be a part of something bigger than themselves as players; even bigger than the team itself. They will compete against women from across the globe, celebrating cultural differences and similarities while sharing both new and timeless traditions. Language barriers will fade away, leaving behind a melting pot of passionate athletes who all speak the same language on the rink: pride, determination, and a shared love of the game.

# SPOTLIGHT PROGRAM

By: Ian Gordon

## NDA 3v3 in Iowa

Welcome to Tent City. Roughly 176 miles of flat land, smack dab in the middle of Iowa. Picture pulling your car up to a baseball field complex in a Midwest town to see two hockey rinks standing at 100 x 50 feet, with smoke from a massive grill run by a local friend filling the air, the sound of music from a DJ entertaining the crowd, and a sea of canopy tents wrapped around the lot. You'd think that you were attending a Hawkeyes tailgate. Taking a 12-hour drive from a megamarket ball hockey city like Pittsburgh, PA, or a 17-hour hike from the mecca of dekhockey, Leominster, MA, might not seem tempting, until you experience this new world of passion, love, and desire for a special version of the game of ball hockey.

The National Dekhockey Association (NDA) is the only 3v3 league in the United States. Based out of Iowa, the NDA brings together dedicated players of all levels, from beginner to elite. Started by the Levesque brothers, Pat and Nic, the NDA currently runs leagues in 3 different locations.

Growing up in the French speaking area of Quebec, Canada, Pat and Nic Levesque were raised as ice hockey players. Both brothers played professionally. Pat played for 10-years including 3 seasons in the ECHL, while Nic most recently in 2019-20 put up 52 points in 46 games playing with the Danbury Hat Tricks in the FPHL.

During Pat's last season, he found himself playing in Iowa for the Quad City Mallards. That's where the two brothers started the first 3v3 dekhockey league in the United States. Starting in the summer of 2012, the NDA was originally headquartered out of Bettendorf, Iowa. It has currently expanded to multiple

locations throughout the Quad Cities (Springfield and Waterloo).

**"Building the excitement for the game is easy, simply because we love this sport so much. People feel our love, energy and passion for dek hockey."  
- Pat Levesque**

The two brothers take great pride in the effort around the development of unique elements that add to this ever so popular league, such as implementing a tracking system for live stats, video coverage of games and player interviews. Their goal has always been to grow the sport of ball hockey, and realized that to do so, they had to place a major emphasis on keeping the league professional and making the players involved feel as though they were playing at a professional level. "From day one, our mission was showing that we can hold 'dekhockey' to a professional standard," said Pat Levesque. The league started with around 100 players and has grown to over 3,000 across various levels of play. "If you come to play in our league or events, you'll see that the NDA is legitimate. It's like playing professional hockey," continued Levesque. He went on, "All skill levels are treated and promoted the same, and the top talent isn't the focus. Everyone gets to experience the excitement of being treated like a pro regardless of their skillset or experience."

Pat and Nic made it clear that their love for the game came a lot from the ice hockey lifestyle they lived through. One of the biggest ways they have learned to draw a crowd and involve as many players as possible is by offering their leagues a degree of hospitality, time, and effort. Leagues run from March through October. During the offseason, NDA recently started a Winter Classic style event to add another tournament to their calendar and give players the opportunity to play during the break. While things shut down during the winter months, the men keep working. Nic updates the NDA website and social media to prepare for the next season, while Pat meets with each school in the area and pushes into their gym classes to introduce the sport to local students throughout the region. "Building the excitement for the game is easy, simply because we love this sport so much. People feel our love, energy and passion for dekhockey," Pat told us. "We are lucky enough to open our doors to people







to match our dedication to the game,” he continued.

Each championship team is awarded the league cup. Their team names are engraved on it and the team receives a cash bonus to be divided amongst each player. Aside from the season, the NDA also runs multiple tournaments throughout the year. Their biggest event being when they host the NDA Summer Tournament. The NDA awards the prize for this tournament in the amount of \$18K to the top division. Since their inception, the NDA has awarded over \$40K in league and tournament prize winnings.

With over 15 levels of play for the men, women and kids, the league does their very best to promote the teams and give them the feeling of playing in a high-profile league. A big part of the reason why there are so many divisions within the NDA is their desire to create parity within the league and across all their tournament events. The NDA not only logs teams based on skill level, but individual players as well. If a particular squad is dominating one season, they would likely move up for the next and drop down if they were struggling. “Anyone who comes to our leagues or tournaments, are ranked under the NDA or undergo

to the process of emailing us so we can look into their background as a team to make sure that they’re in the right divisions. The goal is to keep everybody in on the competition,” shared Nic Levesque.

The interesting part about the promotion/relegation system in place is that individual players can rise and fall through different levels each season. If players are over or underperforming compared to other players at their current level, they are not required to move up or down with their entire team. To add a little more balance to each division, the league has also assigned salary value to each player based on their skill assessment. They also require teams to fit into a specific salary cap bracket based on the division they play in, like the salary cap system in the National Ball Hockey League.

Across the entire league this season there are around 85 teams and 12 divisions. The league consists of a 24-game season with every team making the playoffs. The playoffs are double elimination with each winning team passing the cup around each season.

All-Star weekend is another fan favorite experience, and one that each division gets to experience which includes an All-Star Game

and Skills Competition. Due to the league’s popularity, hundreds of fans arrive to be entertained as the top players compete in contests such as hardest shot, accuracy shooting and a breakaway competition.

The NDA, with Pat and Nic’s leadership, continues to grow the game of ball hockey to players who never knew the sport existed. While the 3v3 and the 5v5 game have differences that we will touch on another day, the similarities are obvious and the goal of putting a hockey stick in new players’ hands are mutual.



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# SEPARATED AT BIRTH

By: Carl Ellis

## Ball & Ice Hockey



The game of hockey at its core is a simple game. It's simple in the way you try to shoot either a puck or ball into a net. For those who have played hockey, you know all too well that hockey is far more complicated. Think about all the skills you've had to learn. Stickhandling, passing, shooting, shooting while running or skating. Learning to protect the ball from opponents. Not to mention, learning to skate, learning to run with the ball, learning different systems such as a breakout, power-play, or forecheck.

What about the countless hours you spend in the gym, training your body to be faster stronger, more flexible? Or the time it takes to develop your speed, agility, conditioning, and strength. The truth is, being a hockey player is all about discipline, sacrifice, and determination. Despite hockey having a simple concept, being the best hockey player requires a tremendous amount of knowledge and practice.

Playing hockey at high, competitive

level takes hard work, passion, and love for the game. Dedication that often takes place outside the playing arena. For many ice hockey players, training to get better takes a great deal of time off the ice as well. Many years ago, USA Hockey put out a training video for stickhandling. First, they demonstrated the drills on ice, but then the video switched to dryland training. The same drills such



as developing expansion of reach, or mastering a toe drag could be practiced in your driveway with a ball.

The question for both ice and ball hockey players is whether ball and ice are similar or are they very different. In other words, if hockey was on a spectrum, where would the variations fall? Would they be very close together or would they be on opposite sides?

Of course, there are many different opinions out there. There is no doubt that both games are different. One requires ice, the other requires a composite plastic tile. Then there are different rules, such as floating blue line, touch up, and in ice hockey,

off-sides focuses only on the blue lines. Strategies can also vary from the abundance of many, to virtually not many at all. Regardless of those differences, if you were to take a deeper look at the game, one question pops out. Are the skills transferable to each version of the game? For example, stickhandling?

Who better to ask than the individuals who've played hockey at very high levels, both in ball and ice hockey?

**Jonny Ruiz** is a name that everyone knows in the world of ball hockey. Jonny recently signed a contract with the Danbury Hattricks of the Federal Prospects Hockey League a semi pro ice hockey team. Jonny played his collegiate career at University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth and has represented the Men's National Ball Hockey team several times and, most likely, will continue to represent the team at future ISBHF events. I asked him if he thought ball hockey helped him to be a better ice hockey player.

"I absolutely believe that ball hockey has helped me to become a better ice player. There are so many skills that you can work on while playing ball hockey. Practicing my stickhandling on a driveway really helped to learn how to adjust my hands to make sure I could control the ball and avoid the small rocks when playing on a driveway. You really learn how to control the ball and adapt. Also, both games require hand-eye coordination. To me it definitely helps."

I also asked Jonny about the differences.

"The biggest thing of course is that

there isn't any glide, the minute you stop running, you stop. In ice, you stop moving your legs and at least you can glide forward."

I asked Bobby Houser, on a podcast one time, what challenges ice hockey players faced when playing ball and dek. He had a very similar response to Jonny.

*"Ice hockey players definitely have that challenge when playing dek that they don't have that ability to glide. When you can skate you have an advantage, but on dek everyone can run, that can equalize the playing field."*

What about playing goalie?

Jagger Maving has been playing junior ice hockey in the Buffalo area. He was set to be the goalie for the U20 USA Ball Hockey team prior to the pandemic. We talked about the differences between each game as well as goalie skills can be transferable to one another.

"I definitely feel playing ball hockey helps your fundamentals for ice. I started to learn very quickly, when playing ball, that I had to adjust. I couldn't slide like I could on the ice without 'sliders.' The ball can curve where a puck stays straight and true, unless of course it's tipped. In ball hockey, I've had to use different muscles in my legs, which has helped me become a better ice hockey goalie. Ball hockey definitely helps with fundamentals."

Jagger's biggest advice for both ice and ball hockey players, "Have fun, work hard, and don't beat yourself up too much. Just enjoy the game."

Backing up Jagger's point was Alessandra Glista. Alessandra has represented the US Women's National team as a goalie for nearly a decade and also reiterated, "The ball can curve, which is very different from a puck which usually just moves straight

and you can telegraph where it's headed. It takes some adjusting."

We know there are similarities in the games, but when it comes to the differences, sometimes those differences are on a smaller or medium size scale. A person that knows so much about both ice and ball hockey is

## Andrew Hildreth.

Hildreth played college hockey at Southern New Hampshire University in Manchester, NH, and was a member of the only U.S. team to win a gold medal in the 2006 ISBHF World JR Championships. Andrew was also the captain of the 2015 Men's National team that won a silver medal in Zug, Switzerland, Hildreth's second home, where he played professional ball hockey. Talking to Andrew is interesting because he has a very deep understanding of the game. Not only on the big scale, but even the micro facets of the game.

"For me ice and ball have some similarities, but they are very different games. In ball hockey there is more of a flow to the game, whereas in ice hockey it can be more system based. I know the Gods (Pittsburgh Gods) run systems, but sometimes ball can be more about flow. Ice obviously has many systems. Even playing on dek, or in smaller rinks, you really have to learn how to control the ball and keep it away from opponents. You get in these tight areas, and you need to learn quickly how to avoid players. Not only that, as a defender you can't check, so you have to learn how to lift sticks and position yourself to break up a player."

Hildreth also talked about training and how much dedication there is to get your body in shape for ball hockey. "When I'm training, it's unique because you have to be able to run a marathon, but also have the ability to sprint. For me, I'll run as if I'm training for endurance, but then add in those



45 second sprints."

Recently, the NBHL sent some of their stars to compete in the Barstool Summer Hockeyfest Tournament in Detroit. The team competed against some NHL players and won the 3 vs 3 tournament. For me I was not surprised, but for Ryan Whitney, former NHL player and host of the Spitten Chiclets podcast, said it best, "I'm so impressed, unreal game, they were nasty. It's a completely different game. These guys still have skill, and they make sick plays." I couldn't agree with him more. It goes to show, that ball hockey players are in a league of their own when it comes to playing on the street.

Regardless of the variation of hockey you play, hockey is always fun, competitive, and challenging. With challenge comes growth, and we don't grow unless we are challenged! People that play hockey are incredibly passionate and love the game for all its worth. There are so many life lessons to be learned from each sport. It truly is a privilege to be able to play and be a part of. Whether on the ice, on the dek, or in the street, you're still playing the greatest game on earth, so enjoy it. Game on!



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# COMMON GOALS

By: Dan Coldwell

## How Ball Hockey has Flourished in the Jewish Community

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**“We thought we were the only people who played ball hockey.”**

- Michael Liss (Forward - HANC class of 1999)

It's your senior year of high school. The building is packed with hundreds of fans. You've been waiting years for this moment. It started in middle school, then through junior varsity, and now you're playing in the varsity championship game. Fans from both teams have been bussed in, filling every seat, step and balcony where a view exists. The pregame introductions charge the atmosphere with electricity. It's been a 7 month journey to get here. 14 regular season games and 4 playoff rounds later... the ball drops... and the championship game begins...

For most of us, this is a scenario we would have loved to have seen played out in our actual lives, but can only imagine.

For some players in the Metropolitan Yeshiva High School Hockey League (MYHSHL), this scenario plays out year after year.

*“The atmosphere was crazy. People were packed in. It was extremely hot. No one could breathe. Everyone was screaming. We had a lot of fans and they had a lot of fans. Everyone stood in the bleachers, screaming back and forth.”* -Tom Poleyeff (Defense - TABC class of 2012)

Poleyeff's TABC varsity team lost in the semifinals in both his junior and senior years. Losing in his senior year in the semifinals 1-0 in OT was particularly devastating. “It was brutal, I remember lining up after the game. I was crying. It was so heartbreaking. We thought we were going to win it all that year.

It was truly heartbreaking. We line up and shake hands like the NHL which is nice. But getting into that line was brutal. Varsity is a 14-game season, starts September and the championship game is in March. We practice twice a week. It's a grind.”

The MYHSHL consists of teams from Jewish private schools – also known as “yeshivas” or “yeshivot,” which maintain dual-curricula of religious and general studies – from North Jersey, New York, Brooklyn and Long Island. Going on roughly 40 years, it is easily the largest ball hockey community that few know about.

*“It's somewhat out of view in the sense that while we all know each other in the Jewish ball hockey community, people outside of it don't know about us.”* -Samuel Bazian (Forward - JEC class of 2005)

Most of the schools transform their gym into a makeshift hockey rink. There is no checking, but the games get very physical. The rinks are small, so the game is played 4-on-4. There is no neutral zone, resembling more like dek hockey rules with center line offsides.

In 2019-20, the MYHSHL consisted of 16 varsity teams, 14 junior varsity teams, and 12 women's teams. By any measure, what the MYHSHL is doing with organized high school ball hockey is light years ahead of any reasonable comparison. In some parts of the country, the game is growing exponentially at

the youth level. Pittsburgh, South Jersey, Iowa, Long Island... programs are in place to get kids involved in ball hockey at an early age and have the structure in place to grow and develop their players until they are past their teenage years. What makes the MYHSHL different is that it is a long-thriving league pulling teams from individual schools and that the journey for these players begins much earlier. Many of these players are introduced to ball hockey as young kids in summer camps. They play in youth leagues that have cropped up in Jewish neighborhoods and then they go on to play organized ball hockey in middle school.

“To see an organized program that already exists with box scores and highlight reels, to us that’s pretty new but the MYHSHL has been doing it for 40 years. They are a model for a lot of programs around,” said USABH Director of Operations Cory Herschk.

The women’s division in the MYHSHL has also grown rapidly over the last decade. In its last full season the women’s division had 12 teams. Established in 2013, Heschel High School are the reigning back-to-back champions.

DRS, SAR, Frisch, TABC, HAFTR... folks familiar with the MYHSHL associate these schools with their successful hockey programs. Jared Kushner, son in law of former president Donald Trump, actually played for Frisch in Paramus, NJ while he was in high school. “Some schools have reputations for being incredible year after year. The students know that going into it, and they care about it. These schools are known commodities when it comes to sports,” said Liss.

“We always thought of it as the best version of hockey. I didn’t want to play any other version. I think in our community it’s always been that way. For most of us, it’s been the only option, probably because it’s much simpler to set up. You don’t need ice and it’s more affordable. It’s also easier for people who are generally athletic to pick it up,” said Bazian.

Michael “Mo” Fuchs is the head coach of TABC (Torah Academy of Bergen County). TABC has won 5 varsity and 9



JV championships in his 27 years since starting their hockey program. “I have been coaching longer than anyone in the history of the league,” said Fuchs. “I was there in its infancy when all out hitting was legal, everything went.” Since 1998 all out checking has been banned but the physical play that has been a trademark of the MYHSHL has remained.

“When I played in the early 1980’s we had 6 teams. 2 years ago we had 17,” said Fuchs. “Kids are playing younger now. I believe that the talent level is higher because we have kids playing at a young age.”

To play for TABC and Fuchs, respect is paramount. Respecting your teammates, your opponents and yourself. “When you do anything in life, be the best you can be. If we go 0-14 so be it. I don’t care as much about winning and losing as much as I care about these guys being the best they can be at everything they do. I try to get them to understand that approach applies to playing ball hockey, or how you are as a husband or in business. It doesn’t matter what you are doing, learn to be the best you can be at everything you do. So if you are going to show up to our practice, work hard and get yourself in shape. We only practice twice a week so you have to be working out on your own time.”

Many players in the Jewish elementary schools will also take into consideration the status of the hockey program of a high school when considering where to continue their education.

“That is true, not an exaggeration,” said Bazian. “I remember I went to a TABC open house before graduating from 8th grade, which was one of the high schools I was considering. One of the promotional videos they showed us contained highlights of their floor hockey team. TABC is a yeshiva like all of the schools in the MYHSHL, and although it’s not generally advertised as a hockey school, everyone knows it has one of the best hockey programs in North Jersey. The kids that go there are super into it, and I’m sure many applicants think about this stuff when picking schools.”



“The rivalries come about because you are talking about private schools that recruit kids,” said Fuchs. “TABC, Frisch, MTA... they are all fighting to get the same kids. It’s a recruiting thing in addition to the rivalry between kids who grew up playing together and now split off into different high schools. It just adds to the rivalry.”

Sam Bazian and his twin brother, Barry, both played varsity for all four years of high school at JEC, the Jewish Educational Center. “Every team has four lines. There are a lot of players. Generally, teams run mostly three lines, and there is a lot of talent, especially on the first two lines. It is very hard to score, not just because of the smaller size of the net, but also the smaller size of the court. We often call it Yeshiva-league style hockey – it’s a lot of dump and chase. Dump it into the corner, and fight for it.”

*[When rivals in the Five Towns section of Long Island play, “the whole town shuts down” for games that can attract hundreds of spectators, said David Kolb, a hockey writer for MSG Networks and the operator of Camp Dovid, a summer hockey camp in Pennsylvania where campers wear the names of their yeshivas on their jerseys.]*

*“In some New Jersey yeshivas, floor hockey is more popular than basketball,” said Yoni Stone, the varsity coach at the Yeshiva University High School for Boys. “Forget high school – every single day school has a team, and the kids start in the youth leagues.”]*

- Corey Kilgannon, New York Times

“There is a ton of pride,” said Bazian. “On game day we used to all have to wear ties. Everyone in the school knows who is on the team and they go to support their friends. A lot of families come as well – we all took it very seriously.”

The rivalries between schools can reach intense levels.

“Especially for local schools,” said Poleyeff. “Whenever HAFTR and DRS play it’s physical and the games get a little chippy. The players see each other outside of school and the rivalry extends off the court. The championship game is at a school in Lawrence, NY. It’s paid admission and the gym holds about 1,000 people. It’s a public school and they hold the championship because our gyms aren’t big enough to fit everyone.”

“It’s a very passionate league. Our fans are rabid,” said Fuchs.

“We have “The Pit” in our games and our fans are nuts. But they cheer positively for our team. To me the code of conduct is important. It’s a fun league. I just find in general that hockey on a pro level and all the way down is just a passionate sport. Hockey players have a different mentality. Even though it is ball hockey, if you take that passionate mentality to the business world, you will have a lot of success.”

The Inline Skating Club of America (ISCA) is one of the most competitive local ball hockey leagues in North Jersey. Since 2013 the Cliftons have been a perennial contender in this league, having won 7 league championships. The Cliftons are almost entirely made up of former Yeshiva high school league players.

It’s not an exaggeration that the Yeshiva high school hockey league has developed the best players we will never see. Since most of the players on the Cliftons observe the Sabbath, they do not play Friday night at sundown to Saturday night after sundown. This is why you won’t see former Yeshiva players at local or national tournaments, typically held all weekend. There are thousands of former players living in the greater New York City area.

“For the Sunday night ISCA league, to be able to compete with the top players there showed us – and it was exciting for us as a Jewish hockey community to see – that there is life after high school hockey and that we can contend a little bit,” said Bazian.

Originally called the “Yeshiva All-Stars”, the team was formed in the early 2000’s before moving to ISCA in 2007. With a lot of the players being around the Clifton, NJ area... the team name gradually changed to the Cliftons. Over 40 different former Yeshiva league players have played for the Cliftons since their inception.

There is a waiting list to make it onto the Cliftons roster. That list at the moment is about 20 players deep. They play a finesse style, mixing speed and passing that you can’t pull off in a small gym and 4-on-4 format. While not a physical team, they play tough and don’t shy away from contact.

“It takes skill to play physically but also understand where the line is. Anyone can just play dirty, but being able to play smart and physical hockey is much harder to do,” said Bazian.

“We try to play as physically and intensely as possible, but not dirty,” adds Poleyeff.

The idea of an NBHL division starting in North Jersey next





spring could start to mobilize the Yeshiva player base and shine a light on this deep and talented player pool.

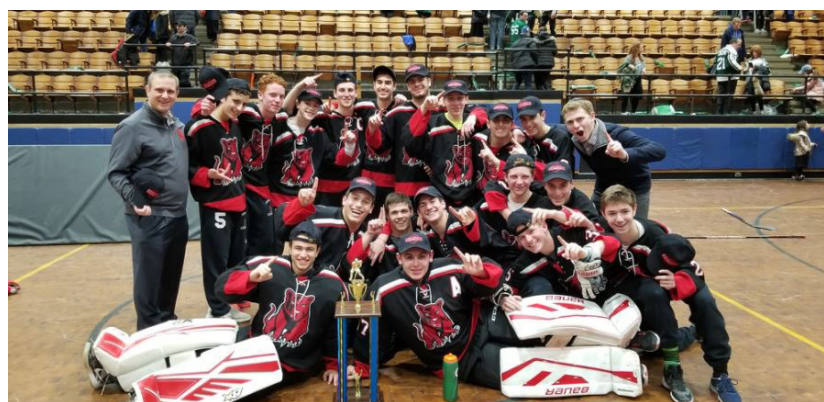
“There are probably 10 times the amount of former MYHSHL players not playing in ISCA and would love to continue playing ball hockey,” said Liss. “If people know it is an option and the NBHL is coming, there is going to be a lot of serious interest. There are several players in New Jersey that would be interested, let alone those that may come out from Long Island.”

Bazian added, “I love the idea of a more official, longer season. I don’t like ice as much as ball hockey, but I do prefer how official the ice leagues are, which makes it feel more real and competitive. Our team [the Cliftons] would definitely be up for the NBHL, and there would be a lot more players looking to create additional teams.”

“The NBHL would welcome the Yeshiva hockey players into our league with open arms,” said NBHL commissioner Anthony Sanrocco. “We have seen the skill level through the YouTube videos and think that any teams they entered would instantly make a name for themselves. These players are extremely talented and it would be an honor to have them join the NBHL. We think it would be a great opportunity for the Yeshiva players to further grow the sport within their communities and showcase their skill sets by becoming a part of the NBHL.”

Like so many other aspects of society, the MYHSHL was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2019-20 season was cancelled just prior to the championship game. The 2020-21 season was cancelled altogether. “My seniors this year I felt bad for since we were one of the 2 favorites in the league,” said Fuchs. “I’m sorry they had it wiped out. This upcoming season in varsity will be extremely competitive. Us (TABC), SAR, DRS, MTA and Frisch will all be competitive. It’s going to be a great league.”

Seeing what has been accomplished over the last 30 years, there is no doubt the MYHSHL will continue to flourish for a long time.



# PREVIOUS EVENTS



**OCT**  
8-10 **FORCE FALL HOCKEY CLASSIC**  
GLOUCESTER TWP, NJ | MENS B, C, D, NOV, WOMENS A/B

**OCT**  
15-17 **BALLHOCKEY.COM WOBHC**  
BARRIE, ONTARIO | MENS 35+, CO-ED, MENS D

**OCT**  
22-24 **U.S. OUTDOOR CHAMPIONSHIPS**  
FITCHBURG, MA | MENS A, C, NOV, WOMENS A, B

**OCT**  
23-24 **OCTOBERFEST TOURNAMENT**  
TIVERTON, RI | WOMENS A, B/C, 16U

**NOV**  
5-7 **BALLHOCKEY.COM 50+ SUPER SERIES**  
BARRIE, ONTARIO | OVER 50

**NOV**  
5-7 **DEKHOCKEY CAN AMS**  
LEOMINSTER, MA | MENS A, NOVICE, WOMENS

**NOV**  
5-7 **STREET HOCKEY FALL CLASSIC**  
MT. PLEASANT, PA | REC A, B, C

**NOV**  
19-21 **BALLHOCKEY.COM CLASH OF TITANS**  
ST CATHARINES, ONTARIO | MENS A

**DEC**  
3-5 **COOL HOCKEY EVENTS HOLIDAY BASH**  
FEASTERVILLE, PA | MENS NOV/REC, COED A/B, WOMENS A/B

**DEC**  
10-12 **COOL HOCKEY EVENTS HOLIDAY BASH**  
FEASTERVILLE, PA | MENS A/B, MENS C/D





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A large, stylized logo for USA Ball Hockey is printed on a light-colored fabric, possibly a flag. The logo features the letters 'USA' in a large, bold, sans-serif font, with a white ball and a red and white swoosh below it. Below the 'USA' is the word 'BALL HOCKEY' in a bold, sans-serif font, all contained within a red and white border. The background of the image is a blurred, bright outdoor scene with a blue sky and white clouds.