

# ADDISON COUNTY INDEPENDENT

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December 30, 2004

## **Crashing Into The Glass For Fun**

"It's the best thing about Middlebury College," according to my son, David, 22, a senior.

He's not talking about the academic quality and rigor, though I'm sure that's just an oversight.

He's talking about . . . intramural ice hockey. David (with his friend, Dan) is the Commissioner of the Intramural Ice Hockey League at the College, which runs from late November through February.

As Commissioner, he makes out schedules, keeps records, hands out helmets, resolves an occasional dispute. He (or Dan) is at the rink when there are games and oversees the action.

"I usually have my skates on," he says, "so if a team is shorthanded, I'll play. Otherwise, I sit in the penalty box and do my homework."

There two leagues, an "A" league with eight teams, and a "B" league with 18 teams. Both leagues are coed. "Most teams have girls," he says. "Some teams in "B" League are mostly girls."

Games are 45 minutes long, running time, no checking, no ref. "Rarely" are there arguments, he says, "only in the A league."

He told me that the last week of class before the holiday break, he played intramural hockey on four nights. In my role, I asked about his schoolwork.

"Dad, it's my *job*!"

I ran into Bob Smith, Director of Intramurals, and asked, "Are you paying my son to play hockey?"

"Absolutely," he said. "What could be better? The Commissioner is out there on the ice."

Though he was born in Middlebury, he never learned how to skate, until he came back to go to College. He lived with his mother in Boston during the school year and became a fan of the game if not a participant.

I remember the first College game he saw as a three-year old in the frigid Duke Nelson Arena. He was transfixed when the teams first came out on the ice in their colorful uniforms and skated circles around the rink, really fast.

In pre-game practice, the sounds absorbed him. The swishing and scratching of the skates against the ice, the sound of the slapshot - wooden stick meeting the rubber puck, then, boom, the puck banging off the boards behind the goalie.

The first check in the game, right in front of us, a defenseman slamming an attacker into the boards, made him jump. When his mother asked him after the game what he liked most, he said, "crashing into the glass."

His spring breaks in Vermont always seemed to coincide with Middlebury's annual run to the National Championship in men's hockey. From ages 11 to 15, he saw the Championship games, all Middlebury wins. He even took the trip to Plattsburgh in the blizzard in 1998.

He was hooked.

Four years in, he skates pretty well now. "I can stop, and even skate backwards a bit. I play defense, pass a lot and occasionally rush up the ice and try to score. Every once in a while I get a goal, in a B league game."

He's very proud of his "B" League team, Flying Bula, winner of the league in 2002, and a contender this year ("We'd get crushed in "A" League"). The crux of the team has been together for three years. "We have some good "B" league players, and some guys who can hardly skate."

"Bula" is a Fijian word that means many things – "hello, good-bye, I love you," like the word "Aloha" in Hawaiian. At least that's what David claims.

Bula has an administrative hierarchy. David is the "Coach," so he sometimes wears a sport coat when he plays. They also have a General Manager, a Director of Hockey Operations (they call him the "Doho"), and a Captain, Max Jones, the team's organizational genius and progenitor.

They have beautiful new hockey jerseys this year, patterned after the old Red Army uniforms. Bula is written in Cyrillic in the front below a hammer & cycle. So much for the Cold War.

Players have their names and numbers on their back. There are some duplicate numbers ("Who cares?"). David's name is Karetov, which roughly translates to "Coach, or Son of Coach;" The Doho, Jeff Stauch, is "Staucharianov." Max Jones is "Maxyzch." Former Middlebury resident, Buck Sleeper, has "Buckov" on the back of his shirt.

The season lasts until preparation for the Winter carnival Ice Show takes up most of the free skating time. "This year," David says, "we hope to have our playoffs after the Ice Show."

It was suggested to me that I write my column this month on the steroid scandal in baseball. So I did. This is it, an account of college kids playing sports for fun. Sports is not essentially about spectacle and money: it's about having fun, being fit, and making friends.

And crashing into the glass.