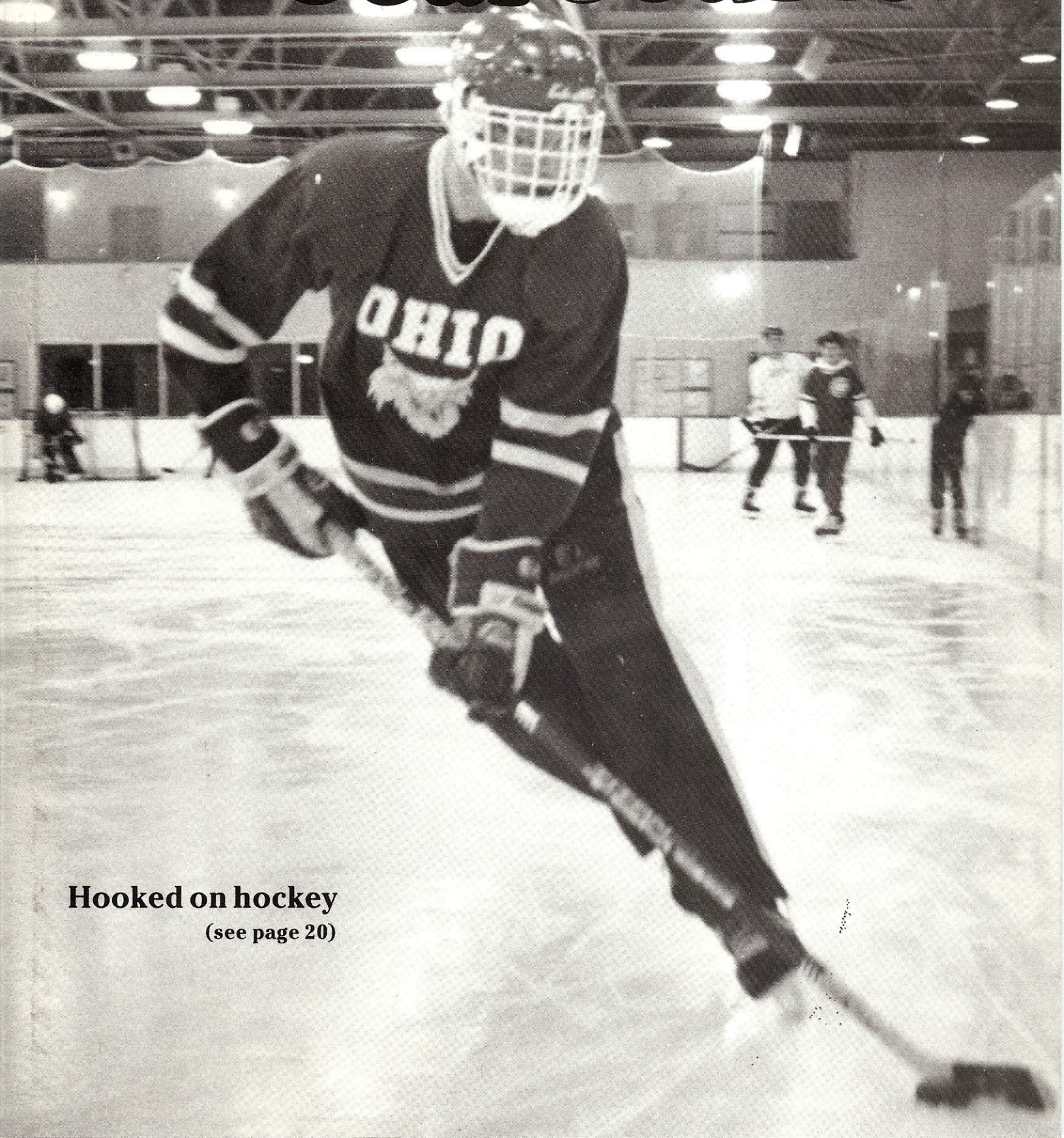


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Hooked on hockey
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Hooked on hockey

Meigs Division's Jim Tompkins, Henry Tulodzieski lead ice contingent

"SKATE! SKATE! SKATE! Find your position! Dump it in! Get back! Get back!"

Those are the sounds ringing out of wintry Athens, Ohio, on an early Saturday morning. They are the sounds of hockey coaches trying to mold aspiring young athletes into budding hockey stars.

Where do you go to find a good hockey coach in Ohio? How about your local coal mine? Sound absurd? Don't bet on it.

Yes, hockey is alive and quite well in Ohio, and folks have discovered it's a sport that crosses all age barriers.

"I never played organized hockey until I came down here. Moving to Athens was a dream come true for me," says Henry "Hank" Tulodzieski, an underground mechanic at Southern Ohio Coal Company's Meigs No. 1 mine, who coaches and plays hockey in a number of different programs -- all in Athens. "It's something we can do as a family. Our kids play, I play and coach and my wife, Barb, works here in the concession stand and is a board member of the Athens Hockey Association."

"Here" in this instance is Bird Arena, home of Ohio University's club hockey team. It's also home to numerous youth and adult hockey leagues and countless hours of ice-skating lessons and leisure ice time.

Saturdays in the winter begin early for Tulodzieski and his hockey-loving clan, as they roll out of bed, gather up all their sticks, helmets and pads and head for the arena at 5:30 a.m.!

"We like to get there early, get the gear out and play against each other," Tulodzieski explains.

While Henry and his sons Scott (17), Brian (14) and Joey (9) are warming up -- if that's possible in

an arena that remains a frigid 20 to 30 degrees -- the youngest group of hockey players is shuffling in.

Then, at 7:30 a.m., Henry and his assistants are on the ice tooting whistles, shouting instructions and



Jim Tompkins ushers several of his hockey "Squirts" into the players' box at Ohio University's Bird Arena in Athens during a Saturday morning contest. The squad Tompkins coaches will play approximately 16 games per season.

taking 5-to-8-year-olds through the paces. Tulodziecki's charges are known as the "Mites" of the Athens Hockey Association. The AHA also offers programs for Squirts (9-11), Peewees (12-13) and Bantams (14-15). The Bantam team serves as the "junior varsity" for the Athens Hockey Club, which is comprised of players from the area high schools.

When Tulodziecki's group is finished at 9 a.m., on come the Squirts and hockey coach Jim Tompkins. By day, Tompkins works as vice president and general manager of Southern Ohio Coal's Meigs Division. Whenever time permits, though, the Canadian-born Tompkins is on the ice, both as a coach and player.

Another Meigs Division employee, Bob Koch, also spends a healthy portion of his winter on the ice. The Meigs Division's supervisor of mine planning and systems is chief of the Hockey Referees' Association of Athens and is also an avid hockey player.

While Thursdays and Saturdays are primarily reserved for the youngsters, the men get down to some serious hockey playing the other five days of the week. Yes, it is possible to play ice hockey seven days a week in Ohio, especially if you live in the Athens area.

"That's why I love Athens," admits a smiling Tompkins, who grew up in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia and graduated from the Technical University of Nova Scotia before moving to the United States. "When I was growing up, skating was like going to a dance. If you wanted to meet girls, you met them at the rink. And, everybody played hockey. We would find a pond and play all day.

"Ohio University is just super because of all the ice time they give the kids," Tompkins adds. "The kids have an opportunity to get out here and skate when they're not playing hockey. The ones who take advantage of that are the ones who improve the most."

Since he coaches many boys and girls who are lacing up their skates for the first time, Tulodziecki sees that improvement every week. "The thing I like about this group is that the first time we put them on the ice, they fall right on their butts. By the end of the season, they're skating around the rink without falling down and they're scrimmaging."

Wait a minute! Did he say both boys and girls? Yep. Move over Wayne Gretzky, here comes Amy of the Athens Hockey Association! Henry says three girls participated last year in the Mites program and three more are on the ice this winter, two in Mites and one in Peewee.

"In youth hockey, there is a good following," Tulodziecki notes, "but it seems like the older the kids get, the more that interest drops off."

"The whole concept when I got here was to make the high school program strong, then the younger kids would have something worthwhile to work towards," adds Koch, who coached the Athens Hockey Club team for eight years and helped in the operation of the youth leagues, as well as the formation of

the referees' program. "We worked hard for a lot of years, trying to get kids interested, calling coaches in other towns and trying to get games scheduled."

When Koch left the coaching ranks in 1984-85, the Athens Hockey Club was part of the I-75 League, which still exists today and includes teams from areas such as Dayton, Cincinnati, Columbus and Troy. The league takes its name from the interstate which runs north and south through Ohio. The formation of the league, says Koch, has given the younger kids something to shoot for as they progress and has created a thriving youth program.

Tompkins' group differs from Tulodziecki's in that Squirts actually play games, complete with referees, a scoreboard and penalties. The Squirts find most of their competition from areas such as Charleston, W. Va., and Columbus, Ohio. Henry's Mites settle for an intra-squad scrimmage to close out the practice session.

"I make sure the kids get an equal amount of attention and ice time," Tompkins says. "We don't play any



Henry "Hank" Tulodziecki, a mechanic at the Meigs No. 1 mine, skates with his group of 5-to-8-year-old "Mites" during a scrimmage session in Athens.



Does this look like a hockey-loving family? You bet! In the back row (from left), Scott Tulodzieski (17) plays and referees hockey, Barb runs the concession stand at Bird Arena and serves as chief organizer and cheerleader while Henry coaches youngsters and plays in several men's leagues. In the front (from left), Joey (9) is in the Squirts program and Brian (14) plays in the Pee wee program.

games against other teams for the first six weeks. We concentrate on improving their skating ability, then we get them to learn to play their positions. After that, they are ready to play other teams.

"The hardest thing to do is get kids this age to make that second effort," adds the "rookie" coach, who has Tulodzieski's youngest son, Joey, in his Squirts program. "It's a real thrill, though, to see the younger kids improving. They're a fun bunch to work with."

Koch has built the ranks of the referees' program from three last winter to 13 this year, including Scott Tulodzieski and Mike Daniels, a Bantam player who is the son of Jeff Daniels, a section supervisor at Southern Ohio Coal's Meigs No. 2 mine. He says it's important for coaches like Tulodzieski and Tompkins to impress upon the youngsters

that fighting has no place in today's hockey.

"They see fights break out at OU games, they see it in the NHL (National Hockey League) and they think it's all right to fight," Koch explains. "That kind of thing trickles down from the top. We need to change that thinking."

"We have real strict rules down here," Tulodzieski adds. "We constantly preach to them that no fighting will be tolerated. We tell them that we play hockey out here. It's not a boxing match."

Koch says it requires real dedication and love of the sport to work as a referee at any level of hockey.

"It takes a special kind of person to come down here, get paid peanuts and have fans, parents and players yell at you," says Koch. "It's a pretty thankless job."

How about coaching young hockey

players for the first time in your life?

"It's definitely a learning experience," admits Tompkins, who has 17 Squirts under his tutelage this winter. "I've played the game a long time, and what you learn (as a coach) is that it's hard to teach what you know."

In order to practice what they preach, Koch, Tompkins and Tulodzieski hit the ice (literally, on occasion) whenever possible and mix it up with other hockey enthusiasts of the "older" generation.

For example, in a given week, Jim may play Sunday night in a men's league with the likes of Tulodzieski, Koch and Frank Zbacnik of the AEP Fuel Supply Department's video services group. He'll also play Monday and Wednesday along with Koch in an OU intramural league; coach Thursday night; sometimes play Friday night in an Athens-Portsmouth men's league with Tulodzieski; then return to coach again Saturday morning.

"As long as my son, Geoff, remains in the program (Geoff plays in the Pee wee group along with Ryan Lawrence, son of Bill Lawrence. Bill works as a longwall maintenance supervisor at Meigs No. 2.) and my wife (Ronald) remains patient, I'll stay with it," Jim says with a smile. "I don't play all the time due to job responsibilities, but it gives me the flexibility to choose when I play."

"There's not a lot of contact in our leagues," he adds. "There's some, but it's mostly just people who like to get out there and play for a couple of hours."

Why sacrifice all that valuable time for coaching?

"Aside from being fun," answers Koch, "several times we've had kids who were on their way to becoming bad kids. To turn them around and see them go on to become good kids, get good jobs and become good people, that's very rewarding."

On the ice, they call that a "hat trick," don't they?

— by David P. Waitkus