



BATTLE OF LITTLE BIG PUCK

IN A GAME UNLIKE ANY OTHER IN ALL OF HOCKEY, PLAYERS FROM MAPLE CREEK AND THE NEKANEET FIRST NATION MEET ONCE A YEAR TO HONOR A RELATIONSHIP THAT'S LASTED MORE THAN A CENTURY



At its best, hockey connects people, crosses cultures and builds bridges between communities. THN's editor at large, **Ronnie Shuker**, witnessed this firsthand on an eight-month cross-country road trip through more than 50 hockey towns in Canada - none more so than in postcard picturesque Maple Creek, Sask., and the surrounding majestic Cypress Hills. The following excerpt, taken from his book, *The Country and the Game: 30,000 Miles of Hockey Stories*, picks up Shuker mid-winter in Big Sky Country of the Canadian Prairies on his way to watch the 40th edition of the Battle of Little Big Puck and to take in the annual event's sartorial third period.

BY RONNIE SHUKER

FROM LUMSDEN, Sask., I head west on the Trans-Canada toward Alberta, meandering through yellow fields blanketed white and on past active and abandoned grain terminals, the mascot of the Prairies. About half an hour from the border, I turn south on Highway 21 and follow it into Maple Creek, a square grid of bungalows and two-storey homes dominated by a terminal on its northern edge,

PHOTO BY RONNIE SHUKER

where the train runs through town. "Where Past is Present," is the motto of Maple Creek, a place where the momentum of its long history slingshots you outside town into the Cypress Hills, along rolling roads through ranch country and all of its implements and residents: farm equipment, old Chevy and Ford trucks, fencing, haybales, irrigation lines and signs for the ranching families ("Bohners," "Lawrences"), their cattle and fields.

I check into my hotel and then drive to Maple Creek Arena at the edge of town. As the lobby fills up ahead of the big

game, the line at the entrance begins extending outside into the blue twilight. Happy faces are stamped on every hand, and cowboy hats bob along the crowd as if they're surfing aloft a throng of fans. One is a cream-colored cowboy hat on a well-seasoned rancher, Tom Reardon. Overtop his black and blue plaid shirt, he's wearing a black leather jacket with "Battle of Little Big Puck" written on it, the name he gave to Maple Creek's annual hockey game 45 years ago at the town's old watering hole.

"The Commercial Hotel," he tells me as we walk outside to

talk. "It's no longer in action. It's still standing, but it's empty, the old Commercial."

Away from the growing din of the lobby, Tom pulls out a cigarette, puts his pack on the hood of a pickup truck beside us and recounts the day he came up with the name.

In midsummer 1978, Tom and his friend Nick Demchenko were having beers with their buddy Raymond Anderson from the nearby Nekaneet First Nation. The conversation started with a simple question. Who's better at hockey: the rodeo athletes or the Nekaneet? What began as harmless bar-

room banter ended with a friendly wager and plans for a game.

"I invented the name at the Commercial," Tom says. "I was in the washroom, making room for more beer when I thought of it. I come out and Raymond and Nick were sitting at the table, and they both were just taking a drink when I said, 'And we'll call it the Battle of Little Big Puck.' Well, they both just sprayed beer all over the table. I remember that plain as day."

After that night at the Commercial, the three of them cut in Raymond's brother Wilbur to help organize the event.

None of them were trying to be visionaries. They were just planning a Sunday afternoon of hockey. They thought the game would be a one-off, on that cold January day in 1979, but it went so well they had another the following year.

With each side winning one game, the founding fathers were fine to leave it at that. "Well, that's good, let's leave 'er sit," Tom recalls as he pulls on his smoke. They did for a few years. But then players began calling for a rubber match. So after a three-year hiatus, a third game was held. It wouldn't stop again until the pandemic.

Now 75, Tom was born in Maple Creek, and he'll die in Maple Creek. He was gone for 20 years when he ran a community pasture elsewhere in Saskatchewan for the provincial government. But he never really left. No one here ever does. He came back for every branding, every weaning, every wedding, every funeral, any excuse he could find to come home.

"I was always a Maple Critter," he says. "It's a pretty magical place and good people, and a lot of them, well, they've been here forever, like this band here the Nekaneet. The government tried for years to force them to move because of policy and whatnot. They just said no because they didn't wanna leave the Cypress Hills. To me this band has the most interesting history in all of Canada."

In the late 19th century, the government forced many First Nations out of the Cypress Hills near the American border and onto reserves elsewhere in Saskatchewan. The Nekaneet stayed, without reserve land or treaty funding. It wasn't until 1913 that the Nekaneet First Nation received reserve status. By then, they had formed strong relationships with the local ranchers, working alongside them and learning to rodeo.

"Everybody here is a cowboy of some sort," Tom says.

I thank Tom and go back inside. The lobby is now overflowing, as are the stands. I walk toward the dressing



rooms and run into Joe Braniff, who has Dale Mosquito and Bradley Goodwill with him. Joe and Dale are each wearing a black cowboy hat, while Bradley's thick black hair is pulled back in a braid. All three have on blue jeans and cowboy boots. Both Joe and Dale have played in so many of the games they've lost count, while Bradley, a third-generation player, is on his fifth.

To get away from the crowd, the four of us go into an empty dressing room to talk about the game and about the relationship between the people of Maple Creek and the Nekaneet. With few bodies to absorb our words, our conversation echoes off the concrete walls.

"We don't want to make it sound like we are this little Shangri-La community where everything is unicorn farts and fairy dust," Joe says. "But for the most part there is that mutual respect. One thing I still laugh about, years ago when

the Commercial was still going, I had a friend of mine that came from out of town, and he walked into the bar and he was looking for me, and he said, 'There were two cowboys, two Indians and a biker sitting at the same table drinking beer.' He said, 'What was with that?' I said, 'Well, what do you mean?' He goes, 'Well, does that happen every day?' And I said, 'Yeah, pretty much.'"

The Battle of Little Big Puck

is about remembering and recognizing a relationship that has carried on for more than a century. Many of the players, on both teams, have known each other their entire lives. Their parents knew each other and, for some, even their great-grandparents knew each other.

Like all relationships, individual or collective, the people of Maple Creek and the Nekaneet have had their ups



and downs over the years, but they've found a way to make it work. The recipe is simple. All it takes is a town, two teams, a hockey rink, a game and a long-standing tradition.

"It's an energy," Dale says. "There's a certain type of energy that gets emitted when people are in for the same cause. And for us, you can't define that. You have to be a part of it. That energy is there. I can

everybody has that camaraderie and that emotion in hand," Bradley says. "It could be the Cowboys beating the Indians, it could be the Indians beating the Cowboys, but at the end of the day we still shake hands. That's the best feeling in the world that, out of everything that we do, is that truth and respect for one another."

When I arrive over Family Day weekend, Maple Creek



feel it. It's hard to describe unless you're there."

Dale uses a Cree word to describe the relationship: *intchuwahm*. He says it means discussing anything as friends without offense but with the mutual understanding of openness and sharing. It sounds to me like the Cree word for chirping.

"At the end of the game, we have a major handshake that

is celebrating the 40th edition of the game. In all that time, there has never ever been a fight, just a hard-fought hockey game, with a twist

between the second and third periods. Some players go back three or four generations, somebody from the Nekaneet working with some rancher somewhere. Then the next generation comes along and they end up working on the haying



crew and playing in the Battle of Little Big Puck.

"Never had a fight, and I don't ever wanna see one," Joe says. "But if it was to happen, heaven forbid, it wouldn't be because it's Cowboys and Indians. It would be because it's two Canadian teams playing each other, and it's hockey. It's hockey."

Every year, to make sure nothing gets out of hand, Joe and Dale give a speech to the players on their respective teams before the game. "If you don't think you can stay in control," they tell their teammates, "maybe this game isn't for you."

"We're now at the point where people are trying to pattern this in other communities," Dale tells me. "And we don't say, 'No, no, no, you guys shouldn't do that.' We offer them a helping hand. 'This is how we do it, or this is what we do, and if you guys want to pattern yourselves after that, by all means have at it.' Because I think the world can use more battles out there."

"Good battles," Joe adds. I leave the three of them to get ready for the game and go out to find a seat. There are none. I manage to find a spot to stand behind the glass at the near end of the rink, just outside the lobby.

PHOTOS BY RONNIE SHUKER



above the dressing rooms, on the other. "Definitely the biggest crowd that's ever been in here," I overhear someone say behind me. The Maple Leafs and Canadiens are playing at the same time on *Hockey Night in Canada*, but more than half of the town's 2,000 people are at Maple Creek Arena for the Battle of Little Big Puck.

The announcer breaks the wait.

"Introducing first, the Cowboys!"

The rodeo athletes, each of whom has to be a member of a rodeo association to participate in the game, come out wearing white jerseys trimmed in black and gray.

"And now, time for the Indians!"

The Nekaneet, who must either live or have lived on the reserve to play, wear navy jerseys with white and baby blue trim.

Both teams have nicknames like "Chipboy," "R.J." and "Rubber Jack" on their nameplates, in memory of Robert Anderson, "a proud mem-



The puck hasn't even been dropped yet and the energy Dale talked about is all around. The rink has a low metal ceiling, with gray, creaky, wooden seats on one side and standing room only,

THIRD-PERIOD CHANGE

Cowboy gear becomes the uniform for Joe Braniff, second from left, and the other Maple Creek players.



ber of the Nekaneet band and a proud cowboy!" the program reads.

Maple Creek's mayor and the Nekaneet chief both speak before the game, after which the national anthem is sung in both Cree and English. Then the good battle begins.

Right from puck drop, the energy of the crowd fuels the intensity of the players. Neither team is taking it easy. Although it is a charity event at heart, with strict no-hitting and no-fighting rules, both teams are playing to win. (To keep the game flowing, penalties result in penalty shots.) At one point, there is a flareup at center ice. For a moment, it looks like it might ignite the first fight in the event's history, but Joe and Dale's pre-game speeches win out.

The rodeo athletes jump out to an early lead and carry it into the intermission. While the



STRONG AS AN OAKES

Larry Oakes is one of just three players who skated in the first Battle in 1979 and are still suiting up.

Zamboni is cleaning the ice, I walk around to the other side. I find the exit door propped open, with players from both teams standing outside, half-dressed and having a smoke together.

Before the start of the second period, I walk over to the concession stand to get some food. In the middle of the lobby, two Welcome to Maple Creek banners hang beside Saskatchewan and Canadian flags, with various Maple Creek Hawks championship banners spread throughout, the town's hockey logo almost identical to that of the Chicago Blackhawks.

Encased in glass are the jerseys of two players from Maple Creek who made it to the NHL: Barry Dean of the Philadelphia Flyers and his nephew Zack Smith of the Ottawa Senators.

Nekaneet control the pace and gradually cut into the lead. Then with the game close heading into the final period, the real show is about to begin.

Before the game, Joe and Dale invited me to come into their dressing rooms during the second intermission. I go first into the Nekaneet's room and find the players in various stages of transformation. Wives, girlfriends and children are helping the players paint their faces and get into headdresses and moose hides.

In one corner, Larry Oakes is sitting on the bench, half-dressed and dripping sweat, still trying to catch his breath.

"It's intense," he says. "You gotta keep your head up out there. But that's hockey. We're Canadians, eh! We're not just gonna go out there and give the other guys the game."

Larry is one of three players from the original game in 1979 who are still playing.

"Where you from?" he asks me.

"Toronto."

"Oh good, ho-ly, they should have one like this over there. Try it. We'll go help you organize it."

Other towns across the country have tried to copy Maple Creek's blueprint but couldn't make it work. I was told most don't even bother because there would be too many fights.

"The politicians will be against it," says one of Larry's teammates.

"Yeah, this would never fly in Toronto," I say.

That is when Dale, who's put his cowboy hat back on, pipes in to the conversation.

"That's where it's needed," he

says. "Maybe that's where it's needed."

I go into the rodeo athletes' dressing room and find the players putting on their best western wear. Most are wearing flannel shirts and cowboy hats, but a few have added chaps into the mix, while one is wearing a buffalo jacket given to his grandfather from the North-West Mounted Police, precursor to the RCMP. In previous years, some have gone as far as attaching spurs to their skates.

"How do you guys manage to skate in that?" I ask.

"Horribly," Joe replies.

"We all fall down about four times before we get used to it," adds one of his teammates.

I go back out and stand behind the benches as the players make their way back onto the ice. The score is almost inconsequential. This is what the fans have come to see. Hockey mixed with headdresses, war paint, cowboy hats and plaid shirts. Even the referee, an RCMP officer, gets into the spirit, stripping out of his stripes in favor of a Stetson and red serge.

As the third period gets underway, I can't decide which team has it harder. Picture playing hockey in an elaborate Halloween costume. With the players in their respective regalia, the pace slows. The Nekaneet take over the game and go home with a 13-10 win. Just as Bradley said, the teams line up at center ice to shake hands.

After the game, I go back into the Nekaneet's dressing room to congratulate them on their victory and then walk across to the connecting rodeo athletes' room to see Joe.

"The wheels kind of fell off for us," he says. "We got lots of excuses, and they're excuses. This ain't our first time on this side of the battle." **H**



PHOTOS BY RONNIE SHUKER