



HOMETOWN
CAMBRIDGE
Hockey
REDHAWKS

SEVEN BEER-LEAGUE BUDDIES DREAMED OF OWNING A TEAM. SO THEY WENT OUT AND BOUGHT THE LOCAL JUNIOR FRANCHISE, AND NOW THEY RUN THE WHOLE SHOW, FROM RECRUITING PLAYERS TO TICKET SALES TO MASCOT DUTIES TO THE CRAP SHOOT

BY RONNIE SHUKER

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAMBRIDGE REDHAWKS AND CENSATORY PHOTOGRAPHY

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IT'S NEARLY THREE HOURS before puck drop, but a handful of fans have already gathered outside Galt Arena for a critical Game 4 in the Sutherland Cup playoffs, with their Cambridge Redhawks down 2-1 in their first-round series with the Fort Erie Meteors. As planned, Jason Stangl meets me out front of the 103-year-old arena. The likes of Gordie Howe, Bobby Hull, Terry Sawchuk and Syl Apps have passed through these doors on their way to the NHL, a fact the lobby's meticulously organized display case – filled with jerseys, photos, newspaper clippings and even an original program from the grand opening in 1922 – reminds fans immediately upon entry.

I follow Jason down the hallway, past the Redhawks' dressing room, where he greets a couple of players preparing for the game, and around to a storage room at the back of the arena. He pops open the double doors, pulls out a few crates of various Redhawks paraphernalia and then deftly maneuvers a massive portable toilet out of the room into the hallway and then over to one of the gates to the ice surface in preparation for the 'Crap Shoot' during the first intermission.

"It's 'Hit The Crapper' night tonight," says Jason as he stands the toilet upright and then steadies it as it rocks back and forth until it settles into place. "We put it where the net is, and all they got to do is hit it to win."

"What's the prize?" I ask.

"A voucher for a night at the Cambridge Hotel."

This is not exactly what Jason and six friends signed up for when they bought the Cambridge Redhawks of the Greater Ontario Junior League, one of several feeder circuits for the OHL, for a cool \$400,000 in the summer of 2024. But by then, they knew well the unglamorous grunt work that would come with

owning their hometown team. For all the cachet and prestige that comes with owning an NHL team, none of it trickles this far down in hockey's hierarchy. Sure, there are cheques to stroke and fermented beverages to sip in the owners' "suite," but there's no real money to be made. The seven of them are doing it for hometown pride and to live out a collective dream.

A bunch of beer-league hockey players just decided, 'Hey, let's just buy a junior-hockey franchise'

— CAMBRIDGE REDHAWKS PART-OWNER JASON STANGL

"A bunch of beer-league hockey players just decided, 'Hey, let's just buy a junior-hockey franchise.'"

I follow Jason back around to the lobby and wait for him to finish organizing the Redhawks' swag and putting up signs at the entrances. We then head upstairs into Alumni Hall, which features photos, murals and jer-

seys of stars and teams from yesteryear and also doubles as the bar. There, we're joined by fellow majority owners Rob McIntosh and Eric Boissonneault.

"If it wasn't for beer league that one night, none of this would've happened," Rob says. "It was so Canadian how some beer-league guys got together and decided to buy a hockey team."

None of the seven quite knew what they were about to get themselves into when Ryan Reynolds, the Hollywood face of an ownership group trying to buy the Ottawa Senators, popped up on the screen one night in 2023 at the Moose Winooski, their local hockey haunt in Cambridge. As the group was putting back a hearty helping of post-game beer 'n' wings, Rob looked up at

the screen and joked, "Wouldn't it be cool if we owned a hockey team?"

All of them thought it was a throw-away comment and began playfully arguing over who would get to play Reynolds in this impromptu ownership fantasy of theirs. Everyone, that

GROUP OF SEVEN

The Redhawks ownership group aims to have at least five of the seven co-owners at each home game.

is, except Eric, who wasn't smiling or laughing.

"Hey guys," he said, as he broke up the banter. "If you're serious, I know how we could buy a team."

The table fell silent as Eric detailed the inner workings of what owning a junior team would cost and look like. For years, he'd been on the board of



directors for another GOJHL club, the Waterloo Siskins, and had been wanting to strike out on his own for some time. With visions of Reynolds swirling in their heads, and Eric's food for thought to chew on, the seven of them left the conversation that night at spitballing and fantasy. Then Rob called Eric the next day and said, "Tell me more about that, because I'm definitely interested." The two of them laid out a framework, then invited the rest of their beer-league crew to a follow-up meeting. Having been in business most of his adult life, Rob knew enough to know there was no money to be made in what they were about to do.

"I said, 'If any of you are in here to make money, let's have a separate conversation. I'll tell you where to invest your money. It's not here,'" Rob told them. "If you want to ride this out, be part of something cool, own a hockey team and not lose money, then let's have some fun for the next decade and see where this goes."

A week later, the group had a letter of

TALKING WALLS

Among the hundreds of Cambridge hockey alumni are many former NHLers and Stanley Cup winners.

intent to buy the Brantford Bandits, in Wayne Gretzky's hometown, just half an hour away from Cambridge. They knew they'd have their work cut out for them.

"We just put in money we could afford to lose because we were buying a franchise that was drawing like 70 people," Jason says. "But we brought that up to about 150 people by the end. Then, the next year, this happened."

The group wasn't looking to move on from the Bandits. But when the Redhawks came up for sale the following summer, they jumped at the chance to own what in essence is their home-

town team, as all seven of them live in the tri-cities area of Kitchener, Waterloo and Cambridge, just west of Toronto.

"It's a whole new ballgame when you go from a franchise where you draw 150 fans to one where you're averaging over 650," Jason says. "This year, we averaged 90 fans per game more than last year, so maybe I am doing something right."

It was only natural that Jason, a sales manager working in the film industry, took on the sales and marketing roles. As the former CEO of an oil-and-gas company and a sanitation company, Rob put on the president's cap, while Eric, who played Jr. B in Timmins and Kapuskasing in northern Ontario, assumed the hockey-operations duties. Jason handles everything from sponsorships and social media to organiz-

SEAT UP, PLEASE

The Crap Shoot is a first-intermission staple in Cambridge. Fans delay their own visit there to watch.

ing 50/50 draws and fundraising, and even doubles as 'Hawkey' when the team's regular mascot can't make a home game, which happened a dozen times

this season. As part of the board of governors for both the GOJHL and the Ontario Hockey Association, Rob deals with the league and the other franchises, while Eric oversees the GM, scouts, coaches and players.

"We came into this because of our passion for hockey, our passion for this level and above," Eric says. "The hardest part is knowing when to separate your full-time job from your other full-time job and your family. And that's what it comes down to. That's the hardest thing. We all struggle with that, all three of us. If I look at the last two years, probably the only time we've fought with each other is the time it takes when I need Rob or Jason to do something that achieves what I need to do, then it goes to him, and now you have that yelling match, and we go for a beer and figure it out."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAMBRIDGE REDHAWKS AND SENSATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY



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— CAMBRIDGE REDHAWKS PART-OWNER ROB MCINTOSH

Members of the ownership group are in their 40s and 50s and have jobs. Yet Eric calls owning the Redhawks the group’s “retirement project.” But it’s a personal investment, not a financial one. All of them have a stake in the franchise, and everyone has a role to play. Jason, Rob and Eric run most of the day-to-day operations, while the others help with accounting and events and wherever else they’re needed. Running a franchise at this level, it’s not like the OHL. With no draft, players can go to any one of the 23 teams in the GOJHL or to another league altogether.

“So the only way we can attract and retain the best talent is to run the best program,” Rob says. “Do all the things that maybe other teams don’t do, and make it a better experience for them so that they’re going to choose our program over somebody else’s.”

That includes parents trips, which is unheard of at this level. For the moms trip this season, after wining and dining the mothers at a nice restaurant in town, the ownership group Ubered them all to Galt Arena and had them line up on the red carpet for a pre-game ceremony, adorned in black scarves with the Redhawks logo on them and jerseys with their sons’ names on the back.

“What they didn’t know is that we ordered flowers for all the kids to bring out to their moms,” Rob says. “The moment when the first player stepped up, grabbed a bouquet of flowers and skated out to his mother, the moms were all in tears. It was 600 people at the same time going, ‘Aww.’ It was awesome.”

If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a community to support a junior team. For the Redhawks,

that includes a vast network of volunteers who keep the team running, everything from ticket-booth operators and merchandise sellers to the mascot and the team’s play-by-play caller.

“Johnny, come over for a second,” Eric says as he gestures to a man in a blue suit sitting at a table nearby, poring over his pre-game notes. “This is Johnny Molson. He’s our play-by-play guy. He’s the voice of us. We’ll never get rid of him.”

Johnny was with the ownership group in Brantford and followed them over to Cambridge when they bought the Redhawks. He gets his gas and food covered, and calling games helps him with his learning disability.

“How long have you been broadcasting games?” I ask him.

“Thirteen years,” he says. “I started with Caledonia. I was there seven years. I’ve had a variety of different teams – three now. This is the right fit for me. It’s the best arena in the world. The fans are close to the ice.”

A huge selling point for the ownership group, whether for drawing new fans or recruiting future players, is Galt Arena. Howe, Hull, Sawchuk and Apps all played here with the Galt Red Wings, the feeder team for the Detroit

Red Wings during the NHL’s Original Six era. And lesser lights such as Matt Moulson, Brian McGrattan and Marty Turco have all gone on to the NHL after playing junior in Cambridge. Even in today’s social-media age, the history of their home barn isn’t lost on current players, who follow a strict, and self-imposed, no-shoes policy in the team’s dressing room.

“If you’re a real believer in hockey, there’s no other place like Galt Arena,” Eric says. “You feel the ghosts in here. You feel the spirit. The history. Just look at any wall in here; it doesn’t matter which one, there’s history on it.”

With the game about to start, I leave the three of them and go for a walk around the rink to take in that tradition. As the longest continuously operating arena in the world, these walls have seen it all, everything from cat shows, concerts and circuses to the annual public-school skating races that have been running here for nearly a century and the various incarnations of junior and senior teams that have called Galt Arena their home, from the Shamrocks all the way through to the Redhawks.

At a break in play, I walk around to the west wall in the Redhawks’ end, where a large mural celebrates Cambridge’s Allan Cup victory in 1983. Next to it are two 10-foot paintings: one of Kirk Maltby, who brought the Stanley Cup home to Cambridge four times during his career with the Detroit Red Wings, and the other of Howe, who spent one season with the Galt Red Wings before moving on to Motown.

During the first intermission, after a scoreless opening period, it’s time for the Crap Shoot. I watch as one lucky fan muffs his first two shots from the far blueline, then throws caution to the wind and lofts a high wrist shot that arcs from the neutral zone and bounces off the top of the portable toilet, bringing new meaning to the phrase “hitting the head.”

I venture downstairs to grab some of the “best fries in the league,” an older Redhawks fan tells me as we pass each other on the stairs. In the lobby, I meet with one of the other owners, Greg Shoniker. An accountant by trade, Greg works as treasurer and secretary to balance the Redhawks’ books, no easy feat in a league where every penny counts. Player equipment (gloves, sticks, pant shells, jerseys and socks – players pay the rest), post-game meals, bus rentals, practice time, gym

passes for dryland training – none of it is cheap.

“I didn’t really have a clue how it was going to come together, and learning it from the ice right up to the box office has been a fun experience,” Greg says. “This being our first year in Cambridge, we’ve certainly exceeded on certain expectations, and we’re pretty excited how it’s going to turn up in the end here. Now, with a little bit of playoff experience and playoff money coming in, it’s going to be very positive here.”

The Redhawks’ goaltenders have helped the cause. At mid-season, in the span of a few weeks, the team’s backup, Brandon Balcar, got a shout-



out from *Spittin’ Chiclets* after a goalie fight with his Caledonia Corvairs counterpart caught the eye of the popular podcasters. That came on the heels of starting goalie Lennart Neisse, who’s pitching a shutout on this night, getting a mention on TSN as an emergency backup for Germany at the 2025 world juniors.

The ownership group gladly took the free publicity, because it takes anything and everything just to break even in a league like the GOJHL: golf tournaments, toy drives, Crap Shoots, Chuck-a-Pucks, skates with the Redhawks players, Paint the Rink, Military Night, mini-skates, ceremonial puck drops, even a Walk ‘n’ Roll event at a retirement residence. If all goes well, the Redhawks will avoid being in the red and may turn a profit of \$15,000 or \$20,000. But the ownership group won’t see any of it. It’ll all go back into the team.

“None of us are in it to walk out with a profit every year,” Greg says. “We’re in it to build an organization, something we can grow upon. We want it

to be the junior-league franchise that people are going to want to play for because of the services and the things that we provide.”

As Greg and I talk, the Redhawks find their game and pump three goals in succession behind the Meteors’ goalie, bringing life into the old building. By the time we’re finished chatting and the second period is over, they add another to go up 4-0. It’s the last goal the Redhawks will score this season.

I head back upstairs for the third period and join the ownership group in their “suite,” which is just a couple of high bar tables in a corner of the rink, where fans are free to meet and greet

one of the seven not here tonight is Troy Futher, who helps out with game-day support.

“Because you have an investment, you’re more emotionally invested in watching the games,” Blake says. “It’s funny, because you don’t have kids on the team, and yet I cheer as though I do. We’ve had viewing parties at my house to watch a road game, because we could be playing in Fort Erie. It’s a long way to go. So we set up a screen in the backyard and watch it there. You’re invested, and the wives get invested, and the siblings get invested.”

The rest of the period goes scoreless, as the Redhawks cruise to a 4-0 win. The GOJHL’s Group of Seven are all smiles as their team ties the series 2-2. Two nights later, the Redhawks bus down to Fort Erie for Game 5. They lose a 1-0 heartbreaker to the Meteors and then lay a stinker, a 5-0 loss, back home in Game

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— CAMBRIDGE REDHAWKS PART-OWNER ERIC BOISSONNEAULT



their team’s owners and give them their two cents’ worth, which many of them do on occasion. There, Jason, Rob, Eric and Greg are joined by fellow owners JP Boileau, who runs the booster club, and Blake Sicard, who helps out with special events and pushed out the portable toilet tonight for the Crap Shoot. To make sure they’re visible to the community, at least five of the seven owners represent the group at every home game, and all of them rock some combination of a Redhawks cap, hoodie, shirt and jacket. The only

6. Their season is over. But the work for Jason, Rob, Eric and the rest of the Redhawks’ ownership group is just beginning. Over the spring and summer, there are players to recruit, staff to hire, prospect camps to hold, fundraising events to put on, sponsorships to chase down and plans to put into place for next season.

“It’s none of our full-time jobs, but it’ll always be a full-time job,” Rob says. “We all remember as kids when we played hockey in tournaments. That 16- to 19-year-old time frame, you remember so much of your life. Every one of these kids is going to remember this time. We’ll never know those conversations, but we hope we’ve made a difference. That’s really the reason.” **H**

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