

# Dal women's hockey club headed for Nationals in Edmonton

by Lisa Timpf

It's the end of practise and time for wind sprints. Helmeted, hockey-gear-clad figures assemble on the end line and take off as the whistle sounds—blue line, stop, blue line, stop, end line, push those legs, already tired after a two-hour practise.

The coach calls out the instructions for the next set of sprints, sounds the whistle, and the players are off again, skates scraping against the ice.

It is a typical Canadian scene. The game is part of our national psyche, our subconscious. Canadians were weaned on *Hockey Night in Canada*. Most of us grew up believing the NHL stars could beat the Russians any day, until this myth was called into question in 1972.

The scene described earlier calls into question another myth, hopefully held by less people, but still cherished by a few-- the myth that girls and women are not interested in playing hockey.

For the players described are, indeed, women and they are, in fact, members of the Dalhousie Women's hockey club, under the tutelage of coach Kim Houston.

Although women have been playing ice hockey since the turn of the century, albeit in somewhat different garb than today's puck-chasers, attitudes towards women's involvement in the sport have not always been supportive.

"A lot of people who don't really know what it's all about have certain negative stereotypes of female hockey players," noted Dal club team player Heather McLean. "But it's a lot more supportive atmosphere now than it was a couple of years ago."

A second player adds, "Some guys think it's a real joke when I tell them I play women's hockey. They don't really believe girls can play."

"Hockey for women doesn't seem to be as well organized or accepted," added another. "It doesn't really bother me-- I like to play and I don't see anything wrong with it."

"I think it's hard for some people to accept that women do play hockey," noted Lynn Hackett, president of the Dal club. "A lot of people are ignorant of the fact that women do know how to play."

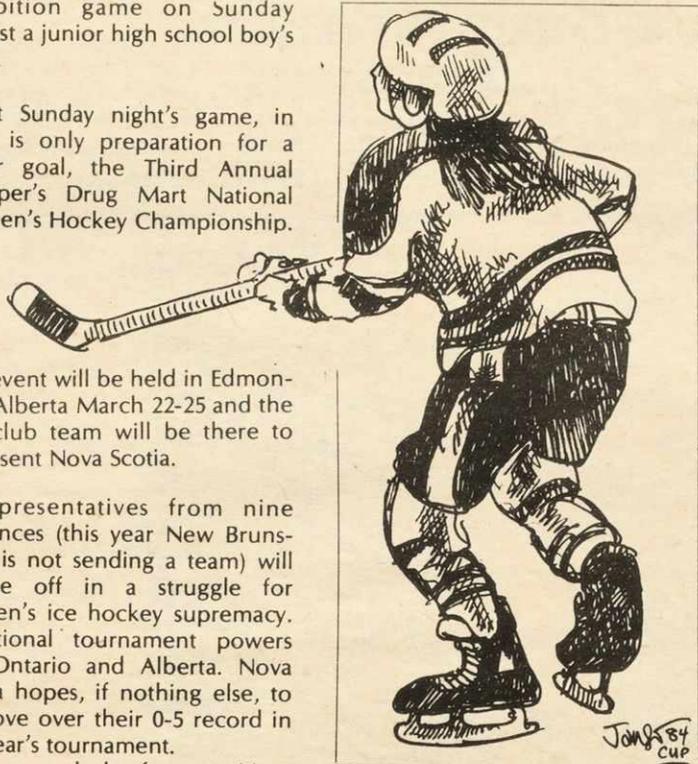
"The femininity thing is part of it. A lot of people are shocked that you can look feminine and be a good player," she said. "I tell people I play hockey, and they say, 'but you don't look like a hockey player...'"

Talk in the dressing room is quiet, sporadic as the last few players put their gear on before heading out on the ice. The quiet aura is partly a function of the time. It is 10:30 on a Friday night, the start of the Dal club's usual two hour practise slot. The Dal rink is deserted except for the players, coach, a handful of friends, and the odd curious spectator who wanders in, watches for a few moments, and wanders out.

Skating, passing, and shooting drills are executed under the watchful eye of coach Houston. The team is preparing for an

exhibition game on Sunday against a junior high school boy's team.

But Sunday night's game, in turn, is only preparation for a larger goal, the Third Annual Shopper's Drug Mart National Women's Hockey Championship.



The event will be held in Edmonton, Alberta March 22-25 and the Dal club team will be there to represent Nova Scotia.

Representatives from nine provinces (this year New Brunswick is not sending a team) will square off in a struggle for women's ice hockey supremacy. Traditional tournament powers are Ontario and Alberta. Nova Scotia hopes, if nothing else, to improve over their 0-5 record in last year's tournament.

Due to a lack of competition, the team had played only two games prior to last year's championships. Other teams at the tournament had been playing regular schedules against women's teams, and were better prepared.

Two years ago, the Dal club had a handful of other women's teams to compete against. St Mary's University fielded a team, as did a local high school and an independent club. The women's league has since folded, and Dal is the only women's club actually registered with the Nova Scotia Hockey Association.

This year, the team has turned to local boy's junior high school teams for competition.

"We went to a women's tournament in New Brunswick last year, and got beaten badly," said Kate Connors, Dal club team captain. "This year we came back and surprised a few people—we went undefeated until the finals, and lost the championship in the last three minutes."

One factor in the team's turnaround has been the efforts of coach Houston. "Before, we had very little hockey sense," noted Connors. "We've really learned a lot from him."

The existence of a national tournament for women's hockey has done a lot for the game. "Before that, it was all pick-up tournament," noted Connors. "Now there's more interest, better organization and better publicity."

Increasing public awareness of women's hockey is, according to Hackett, crucial to the continued survival of the sport. Girls' hockey was at one time part of the minor league system, but a move to make the teams more competitive, plus the advent of the sport of ringette, combined to spell the demise of minor hockey for girls. Team members acknowledge that without the efforts of Hackett, women's hockey at Dal would also likely not exist.

Without growing public awareness of women's ice hockey, and a chance to erode some of the negative stereotypes associated with it, the sport could

be dying a slow death in Nova Scotia.

It's 5pm on Sunday night, game time. The Major City boys' team takes to the ice against their female rivals.

The figures on the ice are anonymous, almost sexless, the white uniformity of the Tiger-crested Dal sweaters contrasting with a mixture of colours on the visitors' side.

The girls, for the most part, are bigger; the boys, for the most part, quicker skaters. The game is body contact, slapshots allowed. Both teams spend a roughly equal amount of time in the penalty box.

Parents and friends of players from both sides look on and call encouragement to the participants. The boys are supported by cheerleaders who hail the scorers and exhort the team to get more. An interesting contrast; girls in the stands, cheering, girls on the ice, playing—the traditional versus the non-traditional.

The first period ends 4-0 for the boys. They break free, sidestep checks, find themselves open in front of the net. But they are working for it; they arrive at the bench looking for air and ready to watch for a moment.

Despite an emerging scoring disparity, a watching father of one of the girls is pleased. "This sort of game really helps them," he says. "When they go back to playing against women, they have a little more time to react."

The boys' shutout is finally broken in the third period as Patti Meehan is turned loose on a power play breakaway, and finds the net.

The final buzzer goes. The teams engage in the traditional post-game handshake, both having hopefully benefited in some manner from the encounter.

With one exhibition game remaining before the Nationals, the team is looking forward to travelling to Edmonton.

Game time for the final preparatory match is 5pm at the Dal rink, for anyone who wants to see Rookie, Mad Dog and Mom prove that women can, indeed, play ice hockey—and enjoy it.



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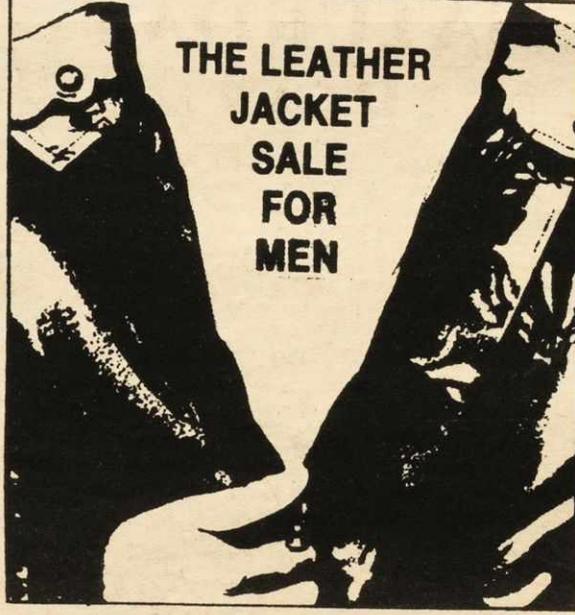
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