

□ TAKE YOUR SKATES WHEN YOU GO ON POSTING □

As you are no doubt aware, hockey is more than a sport for Canadians; it is a national institution for which we are well known abroad.

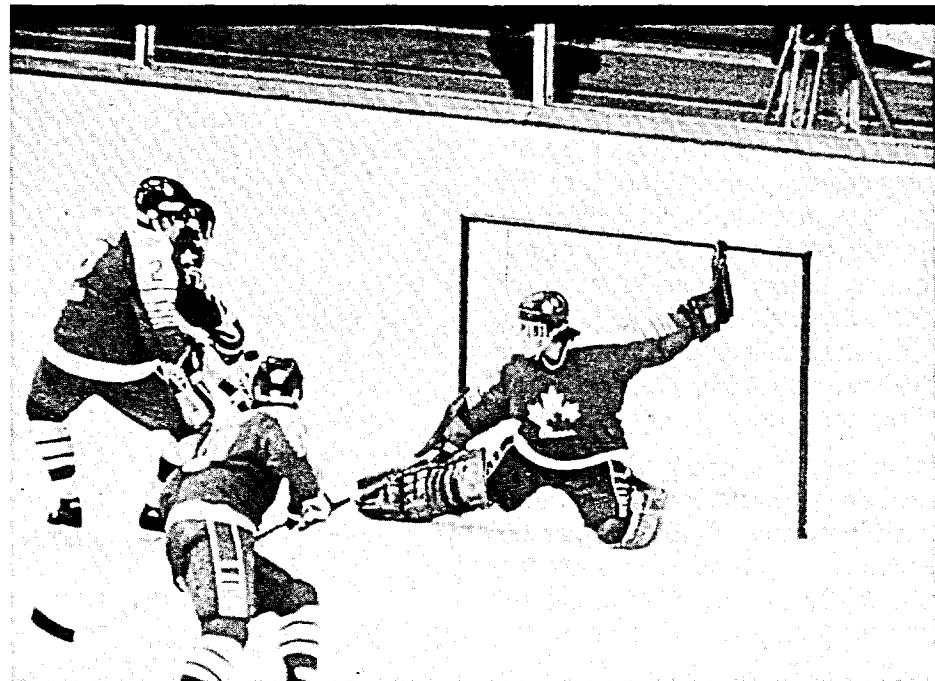
Since two of my four children — one boy and one girl — began playing hockey when we were abroad, I felt that I would write a few thoughts that might interest the readers of LIAISON.

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Myths die hard. One of the most persistent has it that Canadians are born with an innate ability to play hockey better than other people.

Are we really better, do we really have this innate ability? You would often think not, looking at Canadian children playing hockey in other countries where their parents are on posting. Many are those who, because they are ill-informed about the recreational services abroad, or because they are poorly prepared, become discouraged and forever abandon a sport that is not only great recreation, but is something that identifies them more than anything else with their native land.

The days are gone when a posting abroad meant that a Canadian would have to forget about what we consider to be our national sport (although strictly speaking, lacrosse is the national sport by Parliamentary decree). Nowadays, most of the posts abroad are located in cities that have at least one arena. There are arenas in the hottest parts of the world, even in tropical places like Abidjan.



You will rarely find in these places the high-calibre adult teams of Sweden, Czechoslovakia, the USSR and other northern countries, but the level of competition among the minor leagues in Europe and the United States is often surprising. Ten years ago, you would expect a game between a Canadian Pee-Wee, Bantam or Midget AAA team and a French one to be lopsided, but now we often meet our match in France.

Hockey is becoming a more popular sport internationally, but trying to make a team in another country can be disappointing. In some countries there is a process of elimination that is often dictated by the number of places available on the teams. Only the best players remain, and newcomers must prove that they will strengthen the team, or that they have the potential to learn rapidly. Otherwise they will be set aside in favour of nationals.

In some countries girls are allowed to play on boys' teams, while in others this practice is prohibited. You should inquire about this before leaving.

Some preparations should be made beforehand in order to avoid disappointment for your child and for the prospective team in the other country. Canadians who have never played but who have the basic skills required to start and to learn the techniques rapidly have an excellent chance of being accepted. Those who can hardly stand up on their skates might well be told to go home and learn the basics first.

To begin with, the boy or girl has to be very fond of the sport, and the decision to play must be the child's, not the parents'. The child must also agree to follow a certain training program before starting to play, in order to learn the techniques of skating, keeping the head up, shooting, stickhandling, passing, etc.