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# Teaching and Learning in Cold Places

## Ice Hockey at Bridgewater State College

by Andrew C. Holman



In the splendor of their royal blue, gold and white uniforms, the fourteen members of the Connecticut College team took the ice at Bridgewater Ice Arena in January 2004 to play a Northeast Collegiate Hockey Association (NECHA) game against the local Bridgewater State side. Their uniforms were taken from the design of the Charlestown Chiefs, the notorious fictionalized minor-pro hockey team in the classic movie “Slapshot,” the best parody of hockey culture ever produced. The humor of the likeness was not lost on the Bridgewater fans or players; happily, that was as far as the likeness went (there were no Hanson Brothers on the Connecticut College team, and none dared to assert fistic prowess). But as interesting as were the team’s colors was the word emblazoned on the uniforms’ crested front: “CLUB.” One word. That was all they needed to identify themselves to the world. One word said it all.

In U.S. college athletics, this one word evokes a variety of images and responses. Though they have been a part of campus life for almost as long as there have been American colleges, club sports are alternatively tolerated and ignored, celebrated and denigrated. “Club sports” is an omnibus term for a wide range of activity: from ultimate frisbee, the martial arts and cheerleading to competitive team and individual sports. Club sports house athletic activities that are superbly administered in some places and poorly run in others, but they do hold one attribute in common. Club sports are poor siblings to varsity athletics, the place where students and alumni across America see their identities with their institutions represented in bold and stark tones. “Bowl Week,” “March Madness,” and the “Frozen Four” bring out this sort of filiopietistic pride in clear and unobvious ways. Alternatively, club sports operate under the radar. Most club athletes, volunteers and coaches are resigned to the fact they must make do with less: low budgets, poor practice times, and limited schedules. All of this is bearable, of course, because it is balanced by an important reality: any chance to play is better than no chance at all. Athletic departments that stretch their resources to offer club sports expand opportunities for grateful students to experience the pure joy that comes with

participating in intercollegiate sport. Importantly, club sport also offers them an alternative site to engage in the real work of the university: teaching and learning.

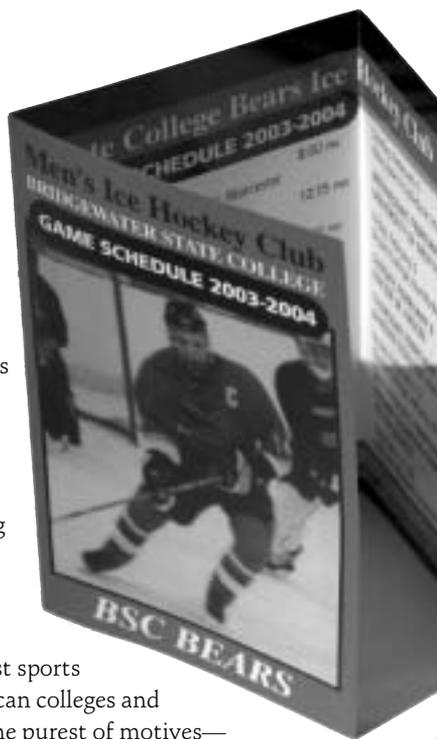
I have been a part of this culture for the past six years as the coach of the Bridgewater State College Hockey Club. It has been the best six years of my life. It has been so because coaching has taught me much more about sport than playing ever did; because administering and fundraising for a fledgling (and often losing) team has challenged my resolve and pushed me out into parts of the community I would never have gone. And it has taught me more about teaching and learning than hours of lecture preparation, grading, pedagogical workshops and seminar discussions ever could.

Today, college athletics in America faces difficult challenges, but to make that assertion is hardly to make a novel point. It is hard to argue with those commentators and critics who since the 1930s have lamented the decline of the old gentlemanly ethic of university athletics. Before Red Grange’s defection to the money of the Chicago Bears (and all of those since who have “left early”), before the push to recruit all-everything track athletes from Africa and hockey players from Canada, before the flood of commercial sponsorship, television hype, and the branding of sport, before Bobby Knight’s tantrums and recruiting “favors” at the University of Colorado—in other words, before the push to win at all costs and cash in—collegiate sport meant something different. College athletics in the age of Princeton great Hobe Baker (1911-14), John Davies tells us, “was amateur in the pure sense of playing the game *pour le sport*.” “Our primary concern” NCAA rules committee chairman Louis Keller reminded his audience in 1952, “is in a game that conforms to educational ideals and promotes such attributes as sportsmanship, cooperation, respect for authority and the like.” Since those days, university athletics has been lamentably permeated by the worst features of professional sport: greed, unwarranted adulation, violence, and cheating. The spotlight creates monsters, and perhaps because the spotlight rarely shines on club athletes, the train of abuses is commendably absent. I am convinced that club sport continues a grand tradition and reflects the original intentions for

athletic competition in America's colleges and universities. At the nation's largest colleges, varsity athletics have left the house that Harvard's Ralph Winsor and Chicago's Amos Alonzo Stagg built in the early twentieth century. Club athletes are among the remaining tenants.

The Hockey Club at Bridgewater State College began as most sports clubs begin in American colleges and universities, out of the purest of motives—grassroots student interest. In September 1998, management major Greg Rich organized twenty-five students into a hockey group, booked games and practices, and even bought uniforms. What they had neglected to do was recruit a coach and gain recognition by the College. Accomplishing the first of these was easily done. When the 6'2" Rich loomed in my doorway I assented quickly, without knowing the depth of my commitment and without consulting my wife (I have regretted both of these facts repeatedly). Given the time of year and the fact that budgets had been settled, gaining the college's approval was more challenging, but amicably resolved. Initially a self-financed body, funding the club wasn't an issue; the bigger task was to convince college officers that this club wouldn't be a passing fancy and had potential for a perennial presence. "Why can't they just play as an independent, off-campus group?" one vice president asked. To her credit and after some discussion, she seemed convinced by one simple answer: "Because they want to play for their school."

For six years, Bridgewater students have played hockey for their school and represented it in a meritorious way. Bridgewater's skaters are not professional prospects, but they are able athletes who have determined that they did not want to end their competitive sports careers at high school. For the past five years, these student athletes have competed in NECHA, a twelve-team league that includes representatives from such schools as MIT, the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, WPI, College of the Holy Cross, and Springfield College. They belong to the American Collegiate Hockey Association, a club



organization that shadows the NCAA and, like it, sponsors an annual national championship tournament. The club's twenty-game schedule involves road travel to such locales as Lyndonville VT, New Britain CT, and Albany NY. With thrice-weekly practices that commence at 10:00 PM, the club is not for the marginally dedicated sportsman. At home games, few spectators other than family and friends attend, though occasionally a Thursday night home tilt will bring out a hundred or more students interested in prefixing their end-of-the-week celebrations with an

athletic event. These athletes are rewarded for their commitment and representation of the College in only small ways, but especially in the thrill they attach to participating in competitive hockey. Arguably, they are also rewarded by the feeling that they are part of a larger tradition. Among the biggest supporters of the hockey club have been the BSC alumni who played hockey for the College when it was a varsity sport, 1970-80. There is an interesting reciprocity here: the presence of the "Friends of BSC Hockey" informs the current team members that they are treading a well-worn path; the presence of the hockey club, I think, reminds BSC hockey alumni that even after the varsity team's demise, the college has not forgotten them.

So what is it then that hockey players at Bridgewater State College actually learn from their experience? It is presumptuous for me, one of the "instructors" in this exercise, to detail this. But I think from watching my student athletes—the ways they carry themselves, juggle their schedules, and treat one another—I can draw some fairly tenable conclusions. In one respect, club athletes learn from their sporting experience the same sorts of things as anyone engaged in competitive sport, including varsity athletes. At the risk of mimicking a recruiting spiel, I'll be brief. Even in abridged version, the list is instructive.

Teaching and learning happens on all of the fields of play at Bridgewater State, and at the many different levels of organization. Athletes at Bridgewater State learn courage, poise, confidence, trust in their teammates and

trust in their own abilities. They learn to set goals and plans with which to achieve them, and they learn about price that is paid for not following plans. They learn the merits of versatility and flexibility; of independent thinking and action; of changing aims and methods in mid-stream. They learn how to fit individual talents, tasks and tactics into a master strategy. They learn the benefit of sheer shoulder-to-the-grindstone hard work—and more. If these outcomes sound familiar to my fellow instructors at BSC, it is because they know them well. These are some of the most important attributes that we seek to instill in all of our students. They are the attributes that we detail in our own individual course outlines and they are the ones in which we strive to demonstrate achievement to our state and national accreditation bodies. Sport is no academic discipline, to be sure, but it can be a useful tool for the sorts of lessons we want to teach.

But if organized and administered well, club sports can extend the list of teachable values. These are many, but all of them are connected to identity: who students think they are, and how others see them. Club athletes at Bridgewater State learn humility, the sort of humility that comes not only with losing seasons and goals unachieved, but the humility of being a member of a team that is “just Club.” It is a phrase that gets repeated often, by varsity athletes, by opponents, by referees and by fellow students. Are you “just Club?” or “still club?": it reflects the wider notion that club athletes mean less and it reflects an expectation that some day—perhaps soon and if the team does exceptionally well—they will be able to escape that purgatory and join the ranks of the officially sanctioned, NCAA-anointed. But if by humility we mean the willingness to recognize one’s status, own it and then make it better, then humility is certainly something we should be teaching our students. Connected to this is pride. Club athletes are pushed to be proud of things of which others might not be. They are proud of their counter culture; proud to be part of an entity that is sometimes seen as tangential to the school’s formal athletic mission. And they are intensely proud of each other.

Club athletes also learn lessons about the world out there and the labels we regularly generate for others. Insularity is an unfortunate characteristic among most of our students and getting them out of southeastern Massachusetts makes this plain. The hockey club puts students “out there” as representatives of the college



**Coach Holman and Club Founder Greg Rich.**

and its broader reputation, unprepared for a sometimes hostile environment. These students are, after all, emblems of what *U.S. News and World Report* calls a fourth-tier regional service institution. When the club plays in Burrillville RI against Bryant College, chants of “safety school” routinely fill the air. A few years ago when we traveled to Hanover NH to play Dartmouth College, Bridgewater players were incredulous that they were taunted as “trailer trash.” Class matters, even on the rink, and what amazes me is the transformation that takes place among students when they realize this fact. Some players who as freshmen and sophomores looked forward to facing off against the “smart kids” from Harvard and MIT, UNH and Bates, begin by their junior and senior years to see them instead as “privileged.” And when officiating favors the private schools we play over us, it is hard for students to attribute that systemic pattern to any factor other than class. These are necessary lessons, but they are painful ones. My pedagogical challenge is to encourage these students to

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recognize class and to resist responding with resentment or pettiness. In my history classroom, I could never teach about the reality of social class in America with the precision or gravity that these on-ice lessons bring. And that is why we continue to go to those cold places.

Club hockey is hardly the most important thing we do at Bridgewater State College, but it may be the most important thing that I do here. In a moment of unguarded candor, I once made this statement to an academic officer at the College, whose response was a quizzical “Oh yeah?,” a ponderous look, and an uncomfortable pause. Not long afterwards, I made the same statement to my Athletic Director, whose response showed that he understood immediately what I meant. Club sports have provided me a perspective on how ubiquitous is the mission of the college and it confirms for me a belief that there are and must be a variety of sites, on and off-campus, in classrooms and on cold ice rinks, where that mission—teaching and learning—can take place. The Bridgewater State College hockey team is a club; “just club” to some. But to me that simple four-letter word, the same one emblazoned on the jerseys of the Connecticut College hockey team, is tremendously rich with meaning.

—Andrew C. Holman is Associate Professor of History and a former varsity athlete.