



## Markham Waxers



By Michael Cox

For the record, I love hockey. I played the game as a youngster and Hockey Night in Canada was always a Saturday tradition while I was growing up. Until recently, it still was, although admittedly, the tradition has morphed into a good excuse to get together with the guys. I'm certainly not a fanatic, but there was a time when I may have been accused of being one. I had jerseys, autographed sticks and even shared some season tickets for the perennially disappointing Toronto Maple Leafs. Unfortunately, over the years, the lustre on the professional game has dulled considerably. We need to look no further than this past, lost season, to be staunchly reminded that professional hockey, despite its illusory marketing, is simply entertainment. Only occasionally, during playoff runs, world championships or Olympic games does it ever transcend to something of any lasting consequence. For the most part its aims are mercenary; it is a business and profit is the motive. Connectedness between players and their fans have been lost in its pursuit.

Hockey is a game, but the broader sport has a profound impact in communities, large and small, across our country. It is here, in chilly arenas festooned with banners, scattered with cheering family members, where the purest form of hockey can be found. These local ice rinks and community centres are places of tradition, a gathering place for local heroes and a shrine to their achievements. This past season, on many Friday nights, that is where you would find me, at the local arena. In this case Markham Centennial Arena, the home of the Markham Waxers, our own Ontario Provincial Junior A franchise.

My journey began innocently. Needing my hockey 'fix', I thought I would reacquaint myself with the Waxers and take in a few games. After all, they had a renowned pedigree and a proud past. Several alumni from the team have gone on to NHL careers including Mike Palmateer, Steve Liut, Rick Tabaracci as well as other well-known names such as

Ron Wilson, Charlie Huddy and Adam Oates. My own personal favourite was Steve Thomas, perhaps because he toiled with the Maple Leafs on two separate occasions and distinguished himself as an extraordinary hockey overachiever.

After a couple of Friday night games, I was hooked. The names of players became more familiar as were their inclinations and habits on the ice. It was hard to miss the energy of diminutive forward Josh Jacobs, threading his way through the opposing team, the dippy-doodling Gaulrapp brothers, James and Joel, offensive threats on every shift, speedy captain Derrell Levy, blazing across the rink like a waterbug, or the intimidating presence of lanky, six foot five inch defenseman Chris Korte. As time went on, like many other armchair experts in the crowd, I had opinions on all the players and whether they had what it takes to be a real player. The hockey I witnessed was fast, furious and exciting. Whatever might have been lacking in elite precision was compensated for by the unbridled effort of the players. The view from the stands was great and the game was unimpeded by commercial breaks and contrived spectacle. It was inexpensive and it was fun.

As the season moved on, I found myself checking in on the team website for updates on the out-of-town games. I quietly hoped for their success. I found myself reliving moments in my own life when hockey was exhilarating and how I couldn't wait for the next game. It was a fleeting time when anything seemed possible and you were at the centre of your own universe.

The Ontario Provincial Junior A is one tier below the Major Junior A. In the majors, most players are vying for direct ascension into professional hockey. In the Ontario Provincial Junior A league, often referred to as Tier II, many players may have these same goals but more likely, they are looking to play the highest caliber of hockey they can and perhaps parlay their skills into a University or College scholarship or a move to a Major Junior A team. They can be as young as sixteen, or in some cases even younger, but players such as Darell Levy and Brandon Rubeo who turn twenty-one this year have played their final season.

The league draws together a wide range of communities in its complement of 36 teams. Not ►►



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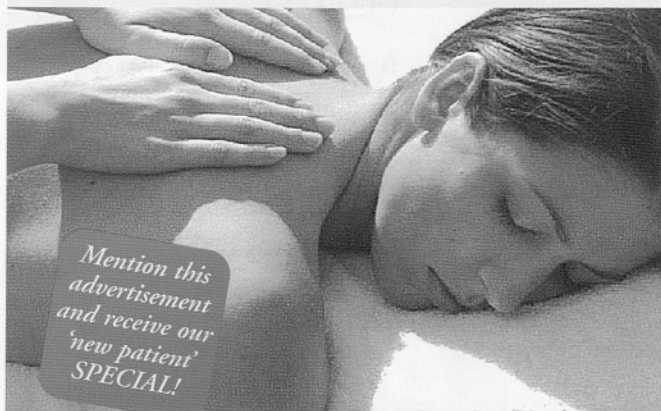
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## WAXER'S

only do they come from larger communities such as Markham, North York and Mississauga but from smaller communities such as Couchiching, Lindsay and Bancroft. Buffalo and Syracuse, New York are also part of the league. Each team is an enterprise with owners willing to foot most of the cost in icing a competitive team. Although the hope is to generate some revenue from ticket sales and gain the support of other corporate sponsors in the community, it is safe to say, the mission of any owner is one of stewardship, not profit.

Markham has had junior hockey since the 1930's. In 1961, the team became a non-profit corporation and secured their first major sponsor, the International Wax Corporation and hence the team was named the 'Waxers'. International Wax has continued to be a sponsor but today the team is owned by Restoration Environmental Corporation, represented by Don Bremner and Lewis Hollett. Don is a Vice-President of this business located in Markham, one that prides itself in its community ties and family values. Those ideals are strikingly represented in the manner in which Don has lead the Markham Waxer hockey team. ►►



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## WAXER'S

In Don's mind, it is all about tradition, heritage and community and these are not just platitudes. A visit to Markham Centennial Arena is a trip down a memory lane of Markham Hockey. Vintage pictures, trophies, banners and walls of fame ensure that past heroes are recognized and honoured in their own way. Don expects his players to be ambassadors for the Markham community and he strongly believes that they will remain so, long after their playing days are over. It is common to see members of the team at local events, making their own contribution to the community. At the annual "Teddy Bear Toss", just before Christmas, fans are encouraged to bring stuffed and other toys and throw them onto the ice where they are collected and donated to Markham-Stouffville Hospital. This is just one event held by the Waxers in support of the community.

Over the years, Don has rebuffed offers from other potential owners and investors because they have not shared this same belief in tradition and heritage. For example, Don is determined to maintain the Waxers logo and colours as a reminder of their past affiliations and proud history. These features are a reminder of the team's previous affiliation with the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Toronto Marlboros Junior "A" hockey clubs. One has to look no further than the return of the Toronto Marlboro name to the Toronto Maple Leafs American League franchise that will play in Toronto next season, to see how a team name can have a lasting legacy.

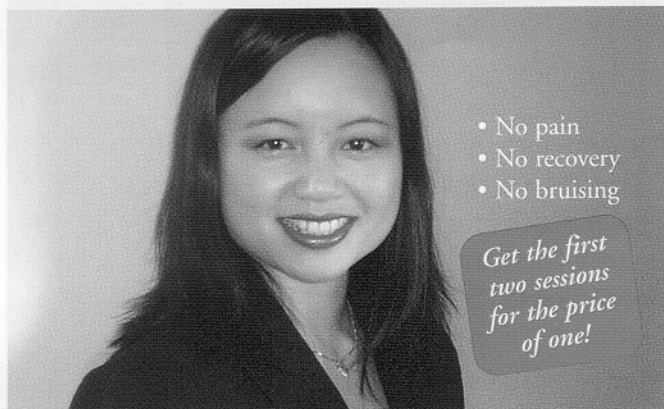
Most of the players are developed locally in Midget AAA but teams are permitted to ice players from outside of their community, including the United States. This year's Markham Waxer squad features brothers Joel and James Gaulrapp from Minnesota, and Brandon Rubeo and Brett Molnar from Ohio.

On a given Friday night, the spectators in attendance form an eclectic group of interested observers. Certainly many are family members, friends and schoolmates of the players from both sides. However, there are also family members of the referees and linesmen as I discovered one evening, reminded me that the league not only develops players but officials as well. I must say, the officiating was excellent in all the games I saw. Of course there were also the members of the 'Wax Pack', a group of kids, some of whose interest in the team was prominently displayed on their blue ►►



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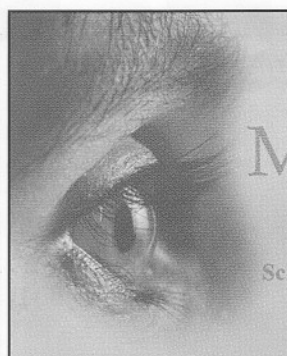
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Waxer hockey jackets and a bunch more who just came with their family for a good time. As the team entered and left the ice, the players were greeted by a cordon of cheering youngsters, eagerly engaging them in traditional good luck tap on their hockey gloves. The towering teenage gladiators tried their best to be 'cool' but beneath their cages and masks, there were grins and smiles. No matter what the score, for that moment, they were all heroes.

The team had a great season, winning 30 of their 49 games in the regular season. In the first round of a grueling playoff season, they managed to overcome the Pickering Panthers in 6 games but could not advance past the division leading Wexford Raiders. Although the games were close, in the end Wexford came out the victor. The last game I saw was their home ice victory against the Raiders. Despite being down 3 games to 1 in the series, the team played with a dogged determination that was present all season and they came away with a win. It was a marvelous, entertaining hockey game, as was the entire season. Well done, boys... and thanks for saving my hockey season! ☺☺






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