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# FROM DESERT TO DEK

By: Steve Scian

## THEY'RE BALLIN' IN TEXAS

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The sport of ball and street hockey is beginning to flourish in the great state of Texas. Yes, you heard that right, Texas is growing the game of ball and street hockey. Most people do not think of hockey when they think of the southern land, but don't tell that to the members of Texas Ball Hockey and Dallas-Fort Worth Street Hockey. According to Harry Sye, a member of DFW Street Hockey, ball hockey is growing in popularity in Texas, and there are plenty of opportunities to play.

Ball hockey in the Austin area was originally run by a group called the "Streetbirds," who were playing hockey outdoors on tennis courts in the Texas heat. When the league runners moved out of town, Dan Skemp was one of the few remaining members trying to keep hockey afloat in the area. Skemp, along with others, such as Lemar Ortiz, currently manage Texas Ball Hockey, formerly known as Austin Street Hockey.

At the time of his move to Texas, Lemar Ortiz worked in retail management, setting his own hours of work, flexible enough

to help manage the growth of the league. He grabbed the reigns in running most operations; scheduling games, contacting players, promoting online, collecting funds, ordering merchandise/jerseys, and organizing the social events. Ortiz, now an executive board member of Texas Ball Hockey, grew up in New Jersey, and discovered ball hockey right around the time he was in college. "As someone who enjoyed watching ice hockey, but had never learned to skate, I loved the accessibility of the game," he says. "You could just pick up a stick and



walk out there.” Ortiz and the Austin boys started off playing monthly, then weekly before moving to twice a week, which evolved into a competitive league. “When I moved to Austin from New Jersey, I just had two knee surgeries and was on the shelf for a bit, but still searched online to see when I could start playing again. But there was no ball hockey league to speak of,” Ortiz shared. Like most warm-weather hockey communities, roller and ice hockey have a presence in these towns, “but I didn’t see anything on social media for the sport I love to play,” he continued. “Luckily, about a year later, when my knee had healed, I did another search and noticed a Facebook group had popped up thanks to Dan Skemp (our current league president), who was trying to resurrect the street hockey presence that Austin had a couple years prior.”

Skemp, Ortiz, and the gang, realized they had to start somewhere. “Our group in Austin started as 6 or 7 of us playing pick-up ball hockey on a mini-rink with rubber filled wiffle balls. Sometimes we’d have only one goalie, sometimes we’d play with the nets down, yet, no matter the circumstances, we had a core handful that were showing up for the pure love of ball hockey,” Ortiz tells us. Those who play the game anywhere in the world can relate. The Austin crew understood that playing ball hockey in any form is far better than no hockey at all.

As the sport began to grow in the Lone Star State, so did the amount of players, and the organization made the move to play indoors at Austin Sports Arena, a risky move at the time. Considering, up until that point, hockey was free of charge, there were doubts about the commitment with a cost factor now in play. Those worries were quelled quickly, and the league gained players due to a closer proximity to downtown Austin, plus the perk of being indoors, away from the desert heat. Ortiz credits the uprise of a major city, and the timing of it all, as lucky contributors to the program’s rising success. “I think we knew that with Austin becoming one of America’s fastest growing cities, we would have other folks, like myself, moving here from places where ball hockey was a locked in part of their weekly life. We were in a great position to be the ones providing that experience if we stayed focused and worked hard to promote.”

The year of 2016 turned out to be huge for hockey in Texas, as Austin Street Hockey was renamed “Texas Ball Hockey” and became an official non profit organization thanks to the work of many passionate volunteers, specifically, Jim Nicholson. Nicholson made a huge push for the league to become a recognized 501(c)7 in the state, which has led to great opportunities, including fundraising with the Texas Stars

AHL minor league ice hockey organization. With all those moving pieces and a career move for Ortiz from retail into education, responsibilities were spread to a now 10 person executive board. “Having a group of guys and girls who are as emotionally invested in our league, and are willing to carry some of the workload, has made everything a lot more manageable, and we’ve seen great overall results because of their efforts,” Ortiz credits his team.

What used to be pick-up hockey at the park, became a league with set rosters and the first championship trophy, “Lord Danely’s Pint.” So what was the trick? Programs all over the country, with similar stories, want to know the secret to how growth works. The answer, EFFORT! “We maximized our social media content and really pushed word of mouth with our players, offering things like discounts to players who recruited newcomers to the league. We printed business cards, then gave everyone a stack to pass out to anyone they bumped into at bars downtown or Texas Stars games that had



an interest in playing,” Ortiz tells us. He continued, “We hosted free nights of hockey as ‘Kickoff Parties’ for new seasons, so that anyone on the fence about joining could give it a test drive first. Typically, about half the folks who attended those ‘one-time’ events would immediately sign-up for their first season that night.” Now, six years later, they have over 60 players in their Wednesday Night League, 20-30 playing in Sunday pick-up, 10-15 girls in their women’s program, one successful youth summer program under their belt, and three national tournaments that have grown exponentially each time they’ve hosted. In November of 2016, Texas Ball Hockey hosted their first event, “Anarchy in Austin” and sent their first travel team away to play in a tournament outside of the city. In just a few short years, this group of casual pick-up hockey players created a home for ball hockey that had to now find a way to avoid turning away participants and a way to increase their capacity as they faced a major dilemma.



With a league, now fully maxed out, there were no time slots available to play. Then, in 2017, everything was put to a halt by the closure of Austin Sports Arena – Texas Ball Hockey’s home. This sent the league to Cedar Park until a final decision was made on ASA. Luckily, ASA was reopened thanks to the Rockin’ City Rollergirls and former league tenants who invested together to gather the funds. The current home of Texas Ball Hockey has since been renamed “Rock Sports Arena.”

Despite the difficulties at the end of 2017, Texas Ball Hockey came back, and when they did, they were bigger than ever. Since 2018, TBH has increased enrollment tenfold, they have established their first ever Women’s league and have formed a partnership with the Texas Stars, the minor league affiliate of the Dallas Stars. During all of these accomplishments, there was another Texas based organization forming, Dallas-Fort Worth Street Hockey.

Dallas-Fort Worth Street Hockey (DFW Street Hockey), originated in 2019, and just so happened to also be founded by a group of players who had also relocated from the Northeast. DFW Street Hockey currently hosts Sunday pick-up ball hockey, which sounds all too familiar to the players in Austin. The hope is that DFW will be able to host, at minimum, a 4-team league in 2021, as well as their very own national tournament. In 2020, DFW traveled to Austin to participate in a very popular rivalry series called “The Clash of the Texans,” which consisted of DFW All-Stars squaring off against Texas Ball Hockey’s best in a 2-game event, where each side won a game. Dallas-Fort Worth Street Hockey and Texas Ball Hockey are currently working out the logistics to incorporate Schreveport, Texas (Red River Hockey Club) and Beaumont Ball Hockey in the plans to become the next division of the National Ball Hockey League.



There are many recognizable names leading the charge for Dallas-Fort Worth. Those names include Mike Magliola (Long Island Demons), Mike Tesauo (New Jersey Riots/Lunatics/Hired Guns/Suns), Nick Stenderowicz (Philadelphia, Team Justice, The Wizards, Team Chill), Tory Bratton (South Jersey, Team USA Women’s, Ice Hockey at Holy Cross), Harry Sye (Pittsburgh God’s, Team USA Masters). Tory Bratton has been working within the community of Haslet, Texas to resurface a rink, organize youth and adult leagues, but most importantly to “grow the game.”

This is incredible progress in such a short amount of time, in a state that is not known to be a hockey hotbed. “My biggest piece of advice to someone looking to grow a local league, and I told this to Mags (Mike Magliola of DFW) when he was starting things up there, is simply this: JUST PLAY!” says Ortiz. “Set a day and time weekly and show up and play with what you’ve got. It doesn’t matter if it’s half rink, single goalie, no goalie, goalie wearing a baseball glove and a pillow for a cup (actually happened once). JUST PLAY!” he continued. “You’ll have a lot of folks asking, ‘Well, do we have enough players?’ ‘Is it worth me coming?’ ‘Do we have two goalies?’ If you start flaking or canceling because of poor turnouts, it’s not going to last long. Tell them to show up! Those who flat out love the game will be there, and the rest will follow suit when they know your league is built around dependable and passionate individuals.”



For those of you who are interested in playing ball hockey in Texas, Texas Ball Hockey has hosted the Anarchy of Austin tournament each of the last 3 years. This tournament is primarily for the love of the sport, socializing, and getting to see the great city of Austin, which, to the people in this proudful town, is much more commendable than winning a shiny trophy. The future of ball hockey is promising in Texas!