

Outtake from the initial manuscript for Hardy and Holman, *Hockey: A Global History*.

For over a century, critics have wondered, worried, and complained about the amount of money and energy American colleges invest in athletics. “So wasteful,” they say; “So anti-intellectual.” There are two simple explanations for this distinctly American infatuation. One historical, the other emotional.

Sports as we know them, particularly team sports, were imported or invented during the same stretch of time (roughly 1860-1910) when American colleges and universities were growing rapidly and competing for students, publicity, prestige, and money. How could a little Catholic school in South Bend, Indiana get on the map? Well, you know the answer. It was a match made in heaven (for some) and hell (for others).

But despite the repeated scandals, the obvious commercialism, and the dismal graduation rates of big-time athletic programs, we continue to embrace and love college sports. Sid Watson’s career explains why. The eternal and compelling story is about coaches and their relationships with athletes, boosters, students, faculty, alumni, fans, and fellow coaches. The great ones like Sid are redeemers—cleansing the sins of the cheats, the scabs, and the loafers. The great coaches succeed because they touch our emotions in ways that personalize our relationship with them. They also get to the right place at the right time.

The post-WWII decades saw new sports dynasties at the collegiate level, as a young wave of coaches emerged to take the reins from an earlier generation. Sid Watson and Bowdoin College hockey are one example. The Polar Bears had iced a varsity team since 1919, first on the “Delta” (an outdoor rink on the north edge of campus), briefly in Quonset huts on the post-WWII Brunswick Naval Air Station, and after 1956 in “The Arena”—a simple but highly functional building with 2500 bench seats and a hard, superb sheet of artificial ice. From 1946 to 1957 the varsity was coached by “Deacon” Dan MacFayden, who had played hockey in high school but was better known as a major league pitcher. MacFayden also coached baseball, and in both sports, he represented the first generation of “professional” coaches who were less interested in recruiting than in working with young men in a competitive yet gentlemanly environment. His counterparts included Cooney Weiland at Harvard and Murray Murdoch at Yale.

Bowdoin’s generational change occurred when Sid Watson arrived in early 1959 after a sterling collegiate and professional sports career. A star football player at Northeastern University, where he earned the moniker “Century Sid” for his rushing feats, Watson had played 4 years in the NFL. While less well-known as a hockey player, he had achieved All-New England status as a defenseman. His peers remembered him as a fast-charging, hard-hitting, two-way player. As a 1961 profile noted, Watson immediately began to make Bowdoin a small-college power that could compete favorably with the bigger University teams.¹

¹ “A College Profile/Bowdoin College, Brunswick Maine,” *United States Amateur Hockey*, February – March 1961, 18 – 19.

His efforts to develop himself as a hockey coach represented transformations in the larger hockey market that typified the postwar decades. Watson later recalled the state of coaching during his playing days and the start of his coaching career. In his words, Northeastern was “three on twos and get the puck upstairs when you were in; that’s the two things I remember.... No patterns.” When he took the Bowdoin job he “went out and bought Eddie Jeremiah’s book.” He remembered that Murray Murdoch and Dick Vaughn (Princeton) also had books. And then there was the “big book” by Lloyd Percival. In discussing Jeremiah’s book, Watson recalled learning about the ways to execute and defend against various patterns of two on ones, three on twos and one on ones. “He taught you the two on one. I had never seen that before. The one-on-one. How the defenseman could play it.”

But most coaches were not thinking of “patterns.” At annual AHCA meetings, the older coaches like Snooks Kelley (Boston College) and Cooney Weiland gave their clinics. “We all had pads of paper” to get their wisdom, Watson recalled, “because they were so great.” But the information was often less than compelling. “I went to my first coaches convention and they had asked Cooney [Weiland] to speak on the power play, and he just got up and said, ‘you just get five great guys and put ‘em out there and they move the puck.’”²

Watson’s eastern cohort of younger coaches included Jack Kelley (Colby and BU), Bob Priestley (Norwich), Bill McCormick (Williams), Jim Fullerton (Brown), Len Ceglarski (Clarkson and BC), Jim Higgins (Colgate and Princeton), Charlie Holt (Colby and New Hampshire), and Eddie Burns (Arlington HS). Most had played football. They wanted more science in the game. They were all interested in “patterns” and “systems” of forechecking, power play, break out, and defense. Their western counterparts included Bob Johnson (Colorado College and Wisconsin) and Herb Brooks (Minnesota). In their collective hands, college hockey would become a more deliberate and systematic game. They all had great success. Watson coached the Polar Bear hockey team until 1983. He also coached football and lacrosse. He served as athletic director from 1983 until his retirement in 2000. In his 24 seasons on the hockey bench his teams won 326 games, with a .604 winning percentage. He was honored with multiple awards as New England and national small college coach of the year. He died in 2004.³

His players, fellow coaches, and friends all have stories. Like many, I often felt a special relationship with Sid. I may be the only person who served as one of his captains, coached against him, and worked with him as a conference administrator. So many memories of things Sid said to me. After my first, dismal period on his team: “Stephen. Take that helmet off. Is there any sweat in that helmet!” Or after my Amherst team came within 4 seconds of upsetting his 1976 ECAC DII champions: “Helluva coach.” Or when he gave me a new “B.C.A.D.” sweatshirt: “This is for all the great officials you’ve sent

² Sid Watson, Interview with Stephen Hardy, September 11, 2000, in Box 1, MC 213, Charles Holt Archives of American Hockey, Dimond Library, University of New Hampshire.

³ Ibid.

us.” Sarcasm and wry wit, wrapped around inspiration. To me anyway, that was Sid.

He inspired many of us to get into coaching. In one way or another, we mimicked his style. At practice, Sid was usually dressed in grey sweatpants and sweatshirt. Sometimes he wore a windbreaker. He always wore a black, wool, Bowdoin “B” ball hat, the brim slightly curled. He kept his practice notes in a little notebook, stashed along the boards. I still have my notebooks. They always made me think about the way Sid organized every minute of practice, probably every shift of a game, in ways we could only imagine. He and his dear friend Charlie Holt were way ahead of their time with their various forechecks, breakouts, and neutral zone plays (known as “pie in the face” to the 1968-70 teams). Like Charlie, he sent dozens of disciples off to advance the game of hockey, at all levels. We all tried to be Sid. We always thought to ourselves: What would Sid do?

What Sid would do was prepare us to play. There was little time wasted in his practices: warmups, one on ones, two on ones, three on twos, in-zone, man-up, man-down. BOOM, BOOM, BOOM! And then the sprints. In my time as a player, he used “over and back” sprints. A loud whistle and Sid would point to the side boards. “Make ‘em good,” he’d say. “Over and back.”

With that command, the long line would charge across the ice, stop, and turn at the far side, our sticks tapping the boards that we showered with a blizzard of ice chips. Driving along the center red line, Ken Martin would usually lead us back to our original position. The rink would be deadly silent, except for light panting along the boards.

“Twice,” Sid would yell dryly.

The line would push off again, its uneven curl moving like the rush of waves on a beach. Over and back, two times. Then three times, then four, then five, with only twenty-second breaks. Ken Martin or Ed Good in the lead, quickly recovering their breath amid the choking, coughing gasps of their teammates. Our eyes would beg, “Don’t make it six.” Sighs of relief when Sid snapped “Four times,” with some disdain. It might be ten minutes of hell. Not long by a stockbroker’s watch, but an eternity on skates. At that pace, the legs quickly turn to painful, stinging jelly—a victory of lactic acid over muscle tissue. But it was all part of playing for Sid; part of being prepared.

Sid was one of a handful of deeply connected mentors I have been blessed to work for and with. I imagine that thousands feel the same way. He was a coach and educator in the best of ways. Just thinking about Sid explains why Americans love college athletics.