

THE SPIRIT OF NEW ENGLAND HOCKEY IS IN ITS SCHOOLS

By Bob DeGemmis

What makes New England hockey and sports so special? It's not Stanley Cups, Super Bowls, World Series or NCAA titles. It's not cold winters and natural ice, and it's not Boston's legacy as an "Original 6" city. All of these characteristics are significant elements of New England hockey culture, but they are only part of the reason why New England hockey is so special.

To me, what makes New England so special is that our long hockey history was born on campuses. The roots of hockey here were planted in the late 1800s, well before the NHL game even existed. Seasonal team sports on New England campuses included hockey, crew, football, lacrosse, rugby and soccer, and they all trace roots back to students organizing themselves and gaining formal institutional support. These students and their newly minted programs were not seeking stepping stones to advance individual professional athletic careers. Such a thing didn't even exist yet. They were building sports, including hockey, to be a part of something and to leave a small mark on school history. This is the New England scholastic sports ethos.

To accommodate this urge for school-based team sports, New England schools recognized and supported teams, including hockey. Because there are so many schools of varying sizes in New England, we have the most models of scholastic and collegiate hockey programming anywhere. New England high school and college hockey includes public, parochial, prep, NCAA Division 1, NCAA D-3, ACHA college and women's versions. All of these levels are recognized

and supported by the schools and their governing bodies. How many NCAA hockey teams do you know of in Chicago or Detroit? How many NCAA D-3 hockey programs are there in Michigan? That's right — nothing rivals New England scholastic and college hockey.

Although NCAA D-1 hockey is one form of hockey in New England, it is not a defining one. One can find D-1 college hockey in Michigan just as well as you can in Massachusetts. It's not about Frozen Four titles or filling 100,000-seat stadiums. It is about the 100-plus years of hockey history at countless small colleges and high schools that support the sport. "Anystate" University with no hockey culture can instantly jump-start a program with a deep-pocketed donor, but it can't buy a century of vibrant hockey culture. Even Minnesota, which prides itself on its scholastic and college hockey, does not have as many NCAA D-3 programs as New England does and was 30 years behind New England in women's hockey development.

Speaking of women's scholastic and college hockey — we started that, too. And we have every scholastic level possible for the ladies. New England is the leader in women's school hockey. The female students at Brown University were not waiting for someone to invite them to play. They started the program and were playing in 1967 before Title IX was enacted in 1972. Take that, "State of Hockey"! Gustavus Adolphus (NCAA D-3) was not even playing until 1987, and the University of Minnesota didn't even begin until 1997-98.

And then there is Michigan (the state of), which has no NCAA D-1 women's hockey, saw the women's program at Wayne State cut and has only two NCAA D-3 teams. North Dakota, home of the

Olympic stars the Lamoureux sisters, isn't doing any better. UND just cut the women's program at the end of the 2016-17 season with zero notice. Meanwhile, CW Post University in Connecticut just played its first NCAA women's hockey season.

These days, I come across some coaches and dads, mostly men ages 40-60, who played New England scholastic and college hockey between 1970-95, and they complain that high school hockey was "better then" and grumble that today's high school hockey and sports are "not that good" and that you "need" to play juniors or AAA "these days." Give me a break, I say. Hobey Baker would roll over in his grave.

What they are referring to is the period between 1970-95 when New England scholastic and college hockey became a legitimate NCAA D-1 and NHL feeder. There were "Miracles on Ice" led by Massachusetts guys, first-round NHL draft picks from high school hockey, NCAA D-3 players to the NHL and two-sport athletes through high school being drafted by NHL and MLB. This "new normal" was not to last. A whole host of circumstances made that period pos-

sible (NHL expansion, no Russians yet), but an end was foreseeable with new competition coming from abroad and new players sprouting up in the U.S. following Sun Belt expansion.

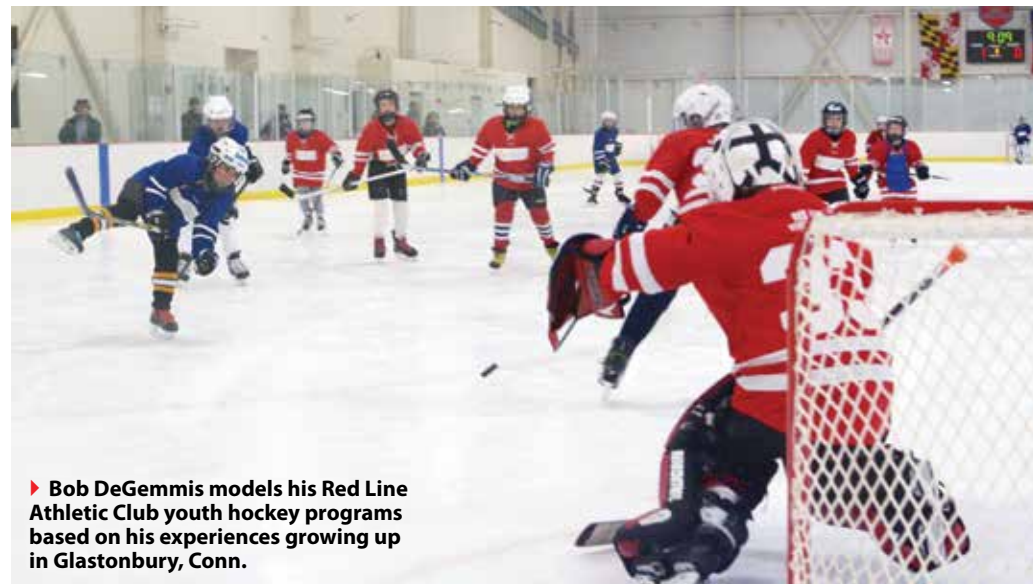
Since the late 1990s, New England scholastic hockey has returned to its original form with expectations more in line with a "New England education." Today, rather than going from high school to NCAA hockey, players go from high school to non-NCAA ACHA college "club" level teams. Clubs such as Bates, Bryant, Fairfield, Keene State, Rhode Island and Roger Williams are akin to what NCAA D-3 teams were 20, 30, 40 years ago. Just as Hobey Baker once did, more student-athletes are rediscovering the art of playing multiple sports seasonally, in the only place a student can — through high school hockey and other high school teams.

The negative old guys pining for the "golden era" don't know these kids today. But I'll tell you: These student-athletes today do know what New England scholastic sports and hockey is really all about. **H**

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▶ Bob DeGemmis models his Red Line Athletic Club youth hockey programs based on his experiences growing up in Glastonbury, Conn.

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