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MONTANA

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POND HOCKEY CLASSIC

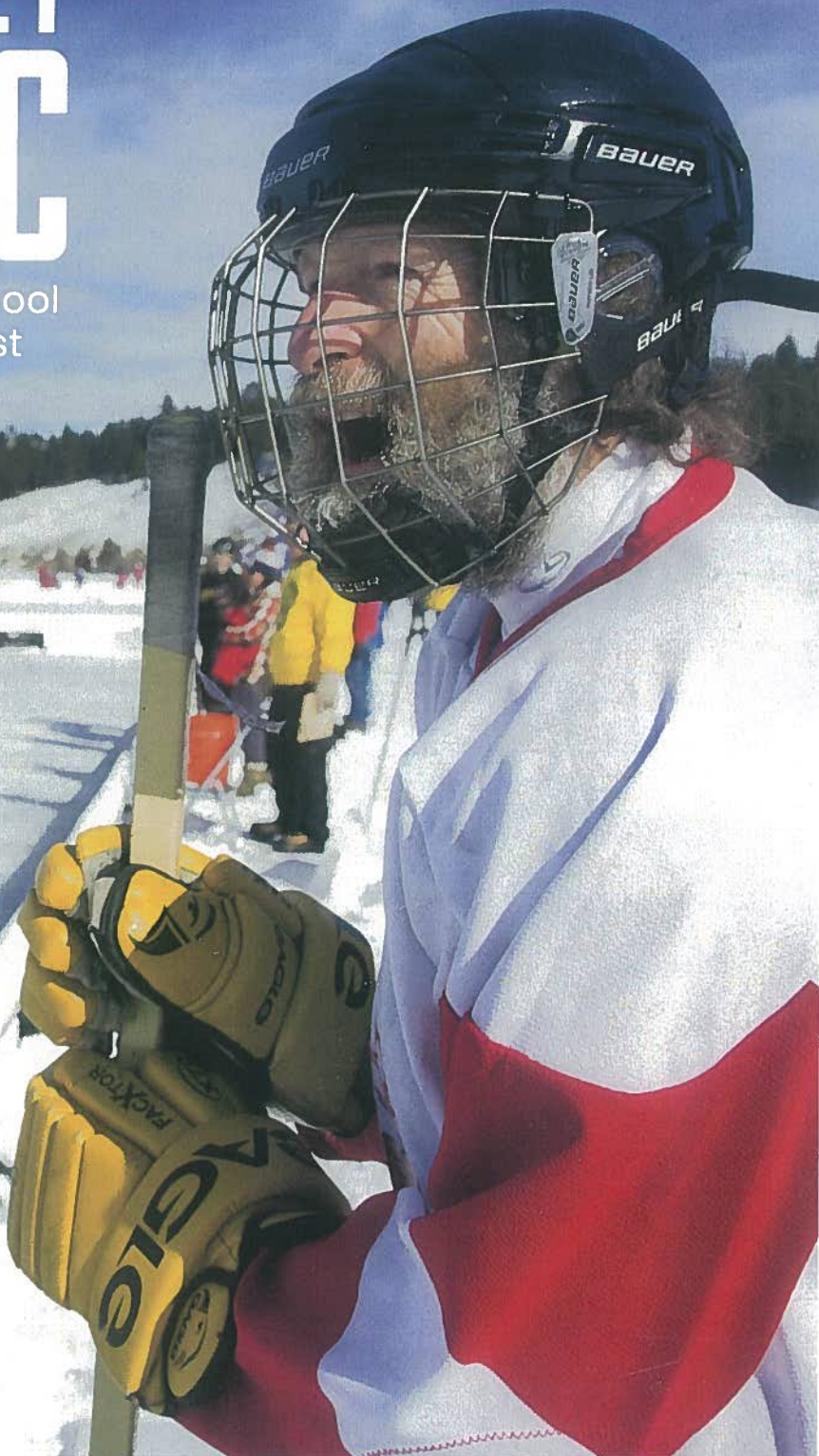
Winter tournament is old-school
Montana hockey at its finest

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POND HOCKEY CLASSIC

Story by LACEY MIDDLESTEAD Photos by CRAIG MOORE



The players' breath lingers in frozen clouds above them. Chapped hands busy themselves lacing up skates and winding white tape around stick blades. The morning sun is just beginning to dance across the wet ice of the freshly plowed rink. With the plunk of a puck and the furious scraping of skates on ice, the game begins – the way hockey was meant to be played.

Pond hockey embraces the heart of a sport that was born on frozen lakes during the coldest of winters. Montana is fortunate enough to host an annual tournament that pays tribute to hockey's origins, and to anyone who ever slung a stick and a pair of skates over their shoulder and trekked out to a frozen pond to skate.

The Montana Pond Hockey Classic is a three-day event that unites die-hard fans, former professionals and anyone who loves the feeling of a stick in their hands. The culmination is a beautiful and nostalgic testament to what hockey is all about — camaraderie, teamwork, and competition.





Previous: Teams battle for the puck under the mountain sky at the Inaugural MTPHC tournament. Above: Teams from Montana, the Pacific Northwest and Canada battle it out for a chance to win the coveted Monty Cup.

With the drop of a puck, the Classic will commence this February 19 at Foys Lake in Kalispell. With upwards of eight to 10 different rinks and 75 teams, it will be a weekend that does the sport proud. The Kalispell tournament is just one of four pond hockey events that the Pond Hockey Classic helps put together annually.

Established in the fall of 2009 by New Hampshire native, Scott Crowder, the Pond Hockey Classic began as a dream that paired together two of his loves: hockey and the lakes region of New Hampshire.

With Crowder's father being a former Boston Bruin and college hockey coach, he grew up in an avid hockey family. His love of the sport motivated him to later pursue a degree in sports management and

marketing from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

Upon graduating, Crowder began pondering the idea of organizing a pond hockey tournament for the New England region. With his background and education and a passionate local hockey community, he felt confident that such a tournament would thrive.

In the winter of 2009, after only a few months of planning, registration opened for the inaugural New England Pond Hockey Classic. Word of the tournament spread quickly. By the time registration closed, 77 teams were on board, and 45 more on the wait list. The New England Classic was an instant success.

The following year, participation

soared to 152 teams, with over 100 more wait-listed. The event struck a chord with hockey lovers; the need to expand was undeniable. Over the next few years, Crowder grew the Pond Hockey Classic to also include annual events on Lake Champlain in Vermont and Bryant Park in Manhattan.

In 2014, the Pond Hockey Classic set its sights on the Big Sky State after being approached by Diane Medler, director of the convention and visitor bureau for the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce. Looking for a winter event to draw visitors to the area, Medler felt that pond hockey would be a perfect match.

"Pond hockey is real unique and takes the sport back to its roots," said Medler. "The sport is in line with what Montana is all about — being outside and nothing fancy."

Medler contacted Crowder and

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BEFORE THERE WERE FANCY ICE ARENAS AND ZAMBONIS. ”

JOSH TOWNSLEY
Owner of Tamarack Brewing Company



Competition is fierce but light-hearted as all games end with a team handshake line.



proposed bringing a tournament to the Kalispell area. Crowder was eager at the prospect of a tournament so far west and having a partnership to help bring it to fruition.

The first Montana Pond Hockey Classic was held on Foys Lake in February 2014. The event drew 51 teams from California, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, British Columbia, Alberta and, of course, Montana. Like the other inaugural tournaments, it was an instant success.

"Players enjoy the event because they get to play on a natural ice sheath — that's not something they get to do very often," said Medler. "For people who grew up playing hockey, that's how they played. They went out to the local frozen watering hole with their buddies to play."

For many of the participants, Medler explained, the tournament encourages them to visit Montana for the first time. "When you tell someone you live in Montana, they get excited," she said. "People are in awe of Montana. It's a place that is on people's list to visit someday. There's a certain mystique to it."

Crowder explained that the participants are split by generation. The older group learned to play the game outside and therefore find the tournament nostalgic. "It brings them back to their childhood," he said.

For the younger players, they get to experience the game in a new and exciting way. "Hockey is unique in that anyone who has ever laced up a pair of skates can appreciate that there's something special about playing outdoors," said Crowder.

"It's a fantastic event," said

Josh Townsley, owner of Tamarack Brewing Company in Missoula. Townsley likewise comes from a big hockey family and has participated as well as sponsored teams in the MTPHC for the past two years. "Pond hockey takes the sport back to its roots before there were fancy ice arenas and Zambonis," he said.

Townsley recalled that after school while growing up, he and his buddies headed to the nearest flooded park or frozen pond every day in the winter. "You played until the street lights came on," he said. On weekends, they'd aim their car headlights toward the rink so they could skate long after the sun went down. The Montana Pond Hockey Classic helps Townsley relive the hockey of his childhood.

The third annual Classic is just around the corner and registrations have been brisk.



With divisions broken into “Open” for A and B level players, “Shinny” for C players, a women’s division and a new “Twig” division for D and E players not quite ready to compete against former professionals and college players, there is an opportunity for everyone. With pre-registered team names like “Shady Puck,” “Red, White and Brew,” “Small Cus It’s Cold,” and “Turnin’ Hat Tricks,” this year’s games are bound to be just as interesting.

At the end of the weekend, the winning teams of the Classic are awarded the coveted Monty Cup. This unique wooden sculpture, crafted by renowned Montana carver Jeff Fleming, features a black bear grasping a hockey stick and a can of beer. The Monty Cup evolved from a tale of hockey folklore.

The story goes that a group of friends, who frequented Flathead

Lake in the winter for epic games of pond hockey, caught a bear rummaging through their gear bags one afternoon. Upon discovering their stash of beer, the bear clawed holes in the side of every can and licked up the frosty beverages. They nicknamed the bear Monty.

Whenever the group returned to the lake to play, Monty would appear and claim the chilled beer they always left for him in the snowbank. The names of the tournament winners are carved into the base of the trophy each year and join Monty forever in hockey legend.

What began as a dream has flourished into a series of games that brings together hockey players from all across North America. The Pond Hockey Classic aligns with a recent move in the sport over the last decade to embrace its roots.

As Crowder put it, “Pond hockey tournaments are the purest form of the sport.” When all is said and done and the skate blades are wiped dry, the Montana Classic is about spending a weekend playing hockey with friends — both old and new — and sharing laughter and a cold beer or two out of the snowbank.

“All hockey players are cut from the same cloth,” said Crowder. “Regardless of your education or occupation, whether you’re rich or poor, young or old, experienced or novice, everyone is the same once you’re on the ice.” **M**

Pond Hockey action is 4-on-4 on rinks 150 feet by 75 feet surrounded by plastic boards. Teams score in small goals with no goalies.