

Ice-Hockey

by E.F. Benson

Many of the Swiss winter-resorts can put into the field a very strong ice-hockey team, and fine teams from other countries often make winter tours there; but the ice-hockey which the ordinary winter visitor will be apt to join in will probably be of the most elementary and unscientific kind indulged in, when the skating day is drawing to a close, by picked-up sides. As will be readily understood, the ice over which a hockey match has been played is perfectly useless for skaters any more that day until it has been swept, scraped, and sprinkled or flooded; and in consequence, at all Swiss resorts, with the exception of St. Moritz, where there is a rink that has been made for the hockey-player, or when an important match is being played, this sport is supplementary to such others as I have spoken of. Nobody, that is, plays hockey and nothing else, since he cannot play hockey at all till the greedy skaters have finished with the ice.

And in most places hockey is not taken very seriously: it is a charming and heat-producing scramble to take part in when the out-door day is drawing to a close and the chill of the evening beginning to set in; there is a vast quantity of falling down in its composure and not very many goals, and a general ignorance about rules. But since a game, especially such a wholly admirable and delightful game as ice-hockey, may just as well be played on the lines laid down for its conduct as not, I append at the end of this short section a copy of the latest edition of the rules as issued by Prince's Club, London.

For the rest, everybody knows the "sort of thing" hockey is, and quite rightly supposes that ice-hockey is the same "sort of thing" played on a field of ice by performers shod in skates. As is natural, the practice and ability which enable a man to play ordinary hockey with moderate success are a large factor in his success when he woos the more elusive sister-sport; another factor, and one which is not sufficiently appreciated, is the strength of his skating. It is not enough to be able to run very swiftly on the skates: no one is an ice-hockey player of the lowest grade who cannot turn quickly to right or left, start quickly, and above all, stop quickly. However swift a player may be, he is practically useless to his side unless he can, with moderate suddenness, check his headlong career, turn quickly, and when the time comes again start quickly.

I have often been asked whether ice-hockey is "bad" for skating. Most emphatically it is not: on the other hand, it is extremely good for most skaters, since it gives them strength of ankle and accustoms them to move at a high speed. Strength, as we have seen before, is not the prime need of a skater, but balance: strength, however, is a most useful adjunct. But though hockey is good for the skater, he will certainly find that he will not skate well or accurately immediately after playing hockey, any more than he will skate well the moment he has taken off his skis. But the feeling that to play hockey unfits the skater for that which he may regard as his more artistic job, is, as far as can be seen, unfounded.

It is a wonderful and delightful sight to watch the speed and accuracy of a first-rate team, each member of which knows the play of the other five players. The finer the team, as is always the case, the greater is their interdependence on each other, and the less there is of individual play. Brilliant running and dribbling, indeed, you will see; but as distinguished from a side composed of individuals, however good, who are yet not a team, these brilliant episodes are always part of a plan, and end not in some wild shot but in a pass or a succession of passes, designed to lead to a good opening for scoring. There

is, indeed, no game at which team play outwits individual brilliance so completely.

But such is not the aspect of the game that will strike the observer who watches the usual pick-up or inter-hotel match on the rink, which generally begins as soon as skaters hear the curfew of the tea-bell. Here will be found the individualist who, sooner than pass when he has once got the puck, would infinitely prefer to fall and be trampled on; and you will see him, while still sitting on the ice, hacking wildly at the beloved india-rubber, in flat contravention of the rule. Common, too, are the “non-stops” (like Wimbledon trains) who, once having got up speed, are practically brakeless. Indeed, it was in connection with non-stops that the present writer saw the most ludicrously comic incident that it has ever been his good luck to encounter in these winter places, where so many funny things happen. And it was in this manner. A round dozen of these delightful non stops had made up a hockey match. The rink where they played bounded on three sides by snow-banks; on the fourth, at the edge of which was one of their goals, an extremely steep descent (caused by the levelling up of the ground to make the rink), about 15 feet in height, plunged into the snow-covered field below. It was a very cold afternoon, and (so rightly) the two gentlemen who were deputed to keep goal preferred to plunge into the fray and go for the puck whenever they could catch sight of it. In general, there were some four or five out of the twelve players on their feet simultaneously: the rest were momentarily prone. All this was delightful enough, but I had no conception how funny they were all going to be.

It so happened that the puck was in the neighbourhood of the goal away from the steep bank down into the field: it so happened, also, that all the twelve were on their feet. Somebody in the mêlée near the goal hit the puck with such amazing violence that it flew half-way down the rink. The whole field, with ever-increasing velocity, poured after it, spreading out on both sides of it. Another whack brought it close to the goal at the edge of the steep bank, and again at top-speed every player on the field was in pursuit. Faster and ever faster they neared the goal: somebody, with stick high uplifted in the manner of a three-quarter swing at golf, made a prodigious hit at it, but completely missed it. The next moment every single one of those players had poured like a resistless cataract down the steep snow-slope into the field below, leaving the rink completely untenanted except for a small innocent-looking puck, which lay a few yards in front of a yawning goal.

For a little while this impressive stillness and depopulation lasted. Then the first “strayed reveller” returned, heavily limping. He took his time, and with a superb, lightning-like shot sent the puck whirling through the unguarded goal. Simultaneously he sat down. Simultaneously a second player showed his head over the ice-bank and shouted “Offside!” Simultaneously also, the puck hit him in the face. It is hard to believe, I know; but I assure the reader that it was harder to stop laughing.

Source:

Benson, E.F. “Ice Hockey.” *Winter Sports in Switzerland*. London: George Allen & Company LTD., 1913. 129 – 136. Electronic.