

Southern-style hockey needs improvements

Hockey Night in Carolina? Please! Hockey Night in Canada? Yes! The Montreal Canadians and the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Saturday nights of my youth spent in front of the television. After all, it had been two weeks since I had arrived from Toronto for grad school, and I missed the pickup hockey games; the thud of an errant slapshot striking the boards; and the postgame retirement to a local bar for heated debates on who's the best fighter in the NHL or who should be named MVP of the league.

Of course, all of the talk being a vicarious exercise for those who fell far short of their boyhood dreams of Stanley Cup glory. Even though we are in our 20s, my friends Gareth and Frank and I can still ponder over a beer the "what ifs," like Kevin Costner in "Field of Dreams."

By their early 20s, most Canadians have dropped their hopes of making it to the big leagues. For the persistent few, there's the spot farther down the professional ladder: the East Coast Hockey League, where Canadians, Americans, Russians and Europeans all converge to give it one last chance at the professional level. It's like minor league baseball, but the scars are more numerous courtesy of the pucks, sticks and opponents' fists.

With any live game being better than late-night reports on CNN, it's into the car armed with a radar detector for the drive north to Charlotte to see the first-year Checkers do battle against those invaders from the frigid, unfriendly north...the Dayton Bombers.

We soon arrived and found our seats in a remote corner of Independence Arena and settled in for the Carolinian version of hockey night in Canada. The Charlotte fans have the requisite energy for this new sport and applauded and cheered when one of the Checkers flattened an opponent against the boards. They jeered and screamed when the referee made one of his many inexplicable calls.

The separation anxiety from not having seen a game in far too long was quickly gone as we watched the puck fly back and forth and bodies flail, proving that man can indeed fly, at least for seconds, if he's tripped while skating at high speeds.

Although tedious for the first two periods, the game reached great heights of sporting excitement by going into overtime tied at 4-4. Five minutes of overtime

Nigel Ravenhill

GUEST COLUMNIST

action was fruitless, and the game was finally decided by a penalty shootout, which, although it doesn't exist in the NHL, is great fun for fans and stressful for

the players. Dayton scored on two of their three shots and was declared the winner.

Unfortunately, Independence Arena is a terrible place to watch hockey. The chief problem is that the angle of the seats is far too shallow; if only one fan stands up, the field of vision is blocked for everyone behind him. It's nothing like Chicago Stadium, which has frighteningly steep seating affording everyone a great view of the action. The stadium is pleasantly intimate, if you can say that about the loudest arena in pro hockey.

My second complaint about Independence Arena is the absurd price of beer. At \$3.25 a can, I thought I had fallen asleep and woken up in Toronto's Skydome, which undoubtedly serves the most expensive and tasteless suds in the known world. I hope organizers of Columbia's expansion group take heed of these points if they're ultimately awarded a franchise.

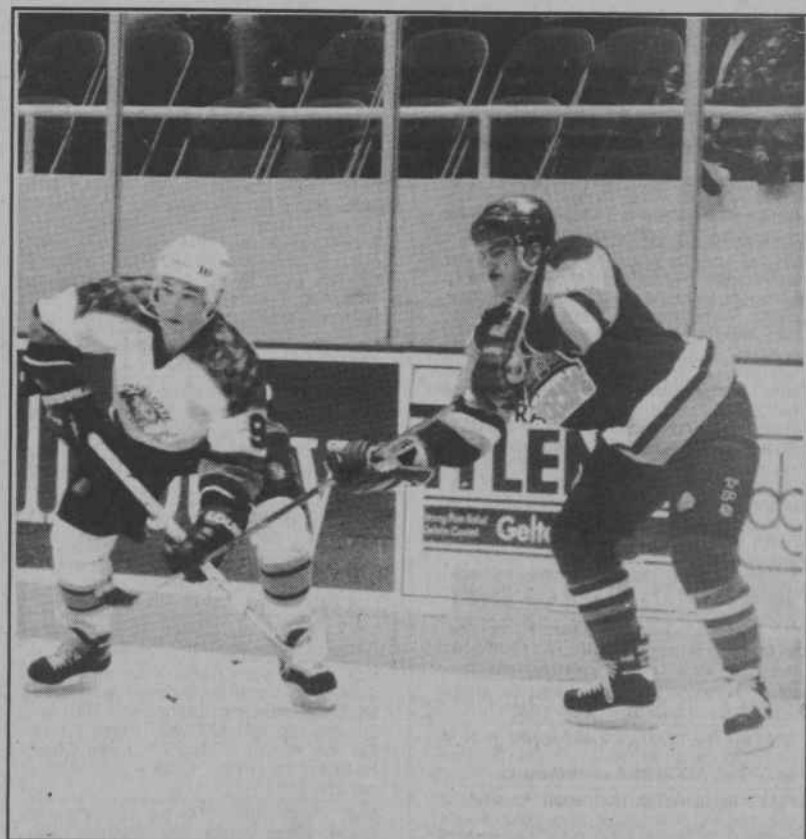
Charleston, home of the ECHL's

Stingrays, has proved that minor-league hockey in this state can be successful. The Stingrays have a new arena and are selling out most of their games in a 9,000-seat arena. It can happen here in Columbia.

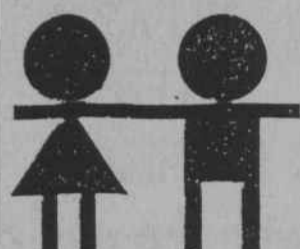
On Saturday night, we saw players who are driven by a love of the game; at a few hundred dollars a week, it's hardly the land of untold riches. The level of play is above Canada's junior hockey, and for only a \$7 investment, we got back a mix of bodychecks, raised sticks and flurries of controlled violence.

Coke and Pizza Hut can keep their Nancy Kerrigans and Katarina Witts and sell a few more value meals, but when I pay to see people on skates, I want them dressed like gladiators with wooden sticks primed to send a piece of vulcanized rubber at 100 mph toward another human being whose job is to stop it with his body. That's hockey, and it's a wonderful sport to play, watch or just talk about.

Nigel Ravenhill is host of "Maple Leaf Rag," which airs Fridays from 10 a.m. to noon on WUSC-FM.



A Charlotte Checkers player battles with a Raleigh Icecaps player at Independence Arena in Charlotte.



Safety

- Go out with friends and keep track of each other. Don't broadcast your name, address or plans in front of others.

- On a first date, plan to meet in a public place. Let people know where you plan to be and let your date know that others know. Stick to your plans.

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Correction for October Social Program "South of the Border Fiesta Dinner Anne Linstead / Patrick Fortenberry	