

Drawings by Ted Larsen

Don't Tilt The Rink

A report from the World Table Hockey Championships



Stan Fischler and his wife, Shirley, donned traditional Rangers' jerseys as a psychological edge.

By Stan Fischler

IT WAS four hours before the World Table Hockey Championships were to begin and my partner — who also happens to be my wife, Shirley — turned fearfully to me and downed two Aspirins.

"Are you sure we did the right thing?" she said, obviously doubting my game plan. "Just because Gordie Howe once did it doesn't mean it'll work for table hockey."

Instead of preparing a pre-game meal of steak and salad, I had insisted that we each have a chocolate milk shake. Howe once told me that he had done that before a game when he was a rookie up from Omaha and scored a couple of goals. "What's good enough for Gordie Howe," I told her, "is good enough for me!"

Who could blame her for having butterflies? After years of playing in the minor league of table hockey, we would soon be up against the best knob-turners and rod-pullers in parlors from Montreal to Manhattan.

Meanwhile, only a mile away, in a cavernous apartment on New York's West Side overlooking the Hudson River, the world champion "rinks" were being prepared. "Mister Hockey" (he even copyrighted the name), Pierre Delfausse, a handsome gray-haired man from Montreal, supervised workmen who were adjusting the springs on the two championship tables. What better man to do it? It was Delfausse who introduced the sliding players to the sport and thus took the game out of the bush leagues.

Although Delfausse helped design the modern game, tourney play itself developed under the stewardship of Ira Gitler, a New York jazz writer, Michael Hopp, a young plastics industrialist and Joseph Breu, a publicist who has kept a bottle of champagne in his refrigerator for 30 years, stoically awaiting the day the Rangers would win the Stanley Cup.

"While waiting for the Rangers to win the Cup," said Breu, "we thought we owed it to ourselves to enjoy the thrill of a New York hockey championship."

So Gitler and friends launched a table hockey tournament on an informal basis seven years ago and it immediately caught on. Each year more and more players demanded invitations and two years ago a trophy was offered to the winning team. The trophy happened to be my wife's pewter gravy bowl, rechristened The Harold Cup (named after Harold Bock, president of the New York Hockey Writers' Association) for the occasion.

For two years the team of Gitler and Robert Blume, a page at the National Broadcasting Corporation, annexed the Cup. However, mounting

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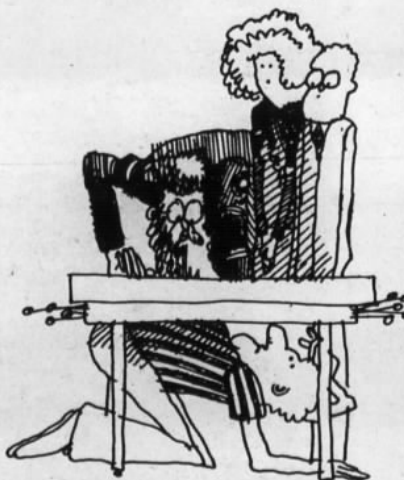
criticism of the tourney's "shabby-tweedism", and my wife's desire to take the Harold Cup out of play and return it to the roast beef, inspired a revolution in contemporary table hockey.

A meeting of the Board of Governors was held at McSorley's Tavern last summer. Despite protests that it would result in a dilution of talent, the czars voted to expand invitations into Canada and offer a cash prize (\$40) to the winning team. Now that table hockey had gone professional, a new trophy was struck and the game was officially big league.

"I'm worried about those ringers from Montreal," said Shirley as our cab deposited us in front of the tourney entrance. "I hear they practise this game with real ice."

Players had begun filtering in for some tune-up matches while referee-in-chief Richard Friedman in his black-and-white striped shirt checked the underside of each game for tampering.

My wife's fears were well-founded. Thinking we had obtained a psychological edge by wearing our traditional New York Ranger jerseys, we were stunned when the team of Christopher and Jonathan Cerf, sons of publisher Bennett Cerf, entered wearing the official regalia of the Pittsburgh Penguins.



Chief referee Richard Friedman checked the underside of each game.

I immediately realized that the Cerfs were not to be treated lightly. Of the 26 competing teams they were placed seventh, at 9-1 odds.

Tops among the Canadian entries was the team of Montreal television actor Dino Narizzano and his artist-wife, Aileen.

Seasoned observers agreed that the Canadians would have difficulty capturing the shiny gold T. J. Rugg Trophy, symbol of world table hockey supremacy. The Rugg commemorates the nervous breakdown suffered by the Detroit team of Rugg and Rugg during the 1969 semi-finals.

Already the metallic clinking of players could be heard in the background as warmup matches got underway. Sal Marchiano, a sportscaster with WNEW radio, and Sheldon Sakowitz of Associated Press moved over to rinkside where the Gitler-Blume team was tuning up. "Tenacity and utter concentration are the keys to the championship," said Gitler in an interview. "Tilting the board doesn't hurt either."

With split-second speed, referee-in-chief Friedman produced the "Rules of Play". Sure enough, tilting was illegal under punishment of a penalty shot.

The selection committee announced that our opening-round foes would be the Cerf brothers.

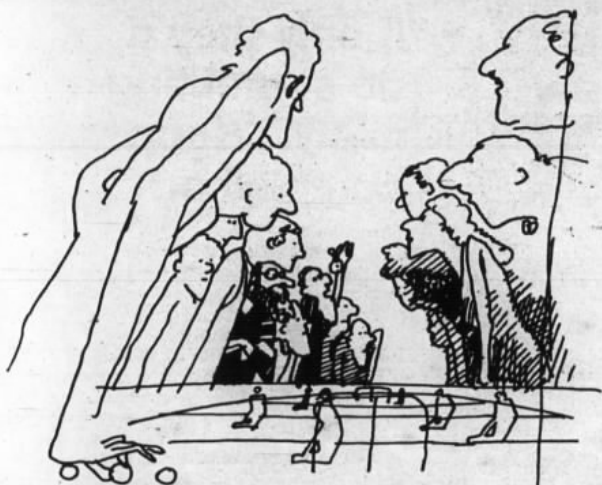
Suddenly, a hush fell over the room, the house lights dimmed and from the hi-fi set came the strains of The Star Spangled Banner followed by O Canada. "I'm touched," said Robert Stampleman, another Montrealer entered in the tourney. "I'm going out to win this one for The Rocket." Only later it was learned that he was referring to Rocket Robillard, his bookie, who had bet \$10 on Stampleman to win.

Now it was game time. Our strategy was simple enough. I manned the three metal rods on the left side of the table which moved the left wing, left defense and goaltender. Shirley handled the other three—centre, right wing and right defense. We decided to use the game plan which had worked so well in the Harold Cup matches during our amateur table hockey days; both the left and right wings would feed passes to our centre, hoping for a direct shot on goal. But already the Cerfs were beginning to employ the psychological warfare which ultimately would destroy us.

"I hear she doesn't back-check," Christopher whispered to Jonathan, just loud enough for us to hear them.

"That's right," Jonathan acknowledged. "And they tell me he's afraid to mix it in the corners; a real snow thrower."

Back-checking. Snow throwing. Surely they couldn't be serious. But, then again, maybe they were, and I



Referee Friedman dramatically pulled out his stopwatch; he would give Breu two minutes to return or forfeit the championship.

began worrying. Before I knew it the referee had dropped the puck and the rinkside crowd was roaring.

"Skate, skate!" I shouted to my wife, losing all control of my mental processes. "Sorry, dear, I mean, push, push."

The Cerfs quietly launched their attack, controlling the puck as if it were magnetized. "They are playing textbook table hockey," murmured a rinksider as Christopher skimmed a pass to Jonathan in the centre.

Within two minutes the Cerfs had built up a 4-0 lead and it appeared only a protest or irregularity would save us. I considered reaching under the table and snapping all the springs on their forwards but Shirley said that that might appear obvious. Besides, it wouldn't be right to threaten the tournament with scandal.

Apart from a crusade for female participation, the tournament has been shaken by only one major scandal. Two years ago Garrison Frant of Detroit was caught attempting to substitute his own game for the official championship model. Frant's version was an exact replica of the original except that he had carefully filed down the sides of the centreman's opening. On cross-examination later, Frant explained his ploy: "I calculated that by natural friction of 10 minutes of heated play in the finals the centre opening would be widening by a fraction of an inch, but just enough to allow the centreman to fall through the aperture. Since rules state that in the event of injury, play continues until the next face-off I figured I could score at least one goal and thereby win the game." The action, of course, disqualified Frant.

To avoid a repetition of a similar

scandal, each game now is moved directly from Pierre Delfausse's factory to a safety deposit vault until two hours before tournament time.

The Cerfs maintained their bombardment throughout our game and led 5-0 with one minute remaining. "Let's pull our goalie," I urged my wife, "and play with six skaters. At least we might break the shutout."

By this time, however, she wasn't even talking to me. And, as the siren wailed, ending the game, she stalked away in a snit, closely followed by reporters. "Punch Imlach was right," she told interviewers. "There's no way a man can play winning hockey wearing a beard, no way!" Before reporters could get to me I slammed the door to the foyer.

After a four-minute pout I finally allowed the reporters in. I admitted that the Cerfs had shown me table hockey nuances that I had never dreamed possible. They had truly brought stickhandling and pattern passing back to the game. The newsmen were not impressed. "Obviously, you haven't seen some of the other east division teams," said one of them. "The Hopp-Breu combine looks like a real threat and so do the professional champions of Long Island."

I quickly consulted my program. The Long Island team consisted of Stan Isaacs, sports columnist for Newsday, and Marvin Kitman, author of George Washington's Expense Account. They were seeded eighth. As things turned out, however, the Long Island champs were wiped out in an early round without so much as gaining a misconduct penalty. But the Breu-Hopp team slashed their way to the finals against the redoubtable

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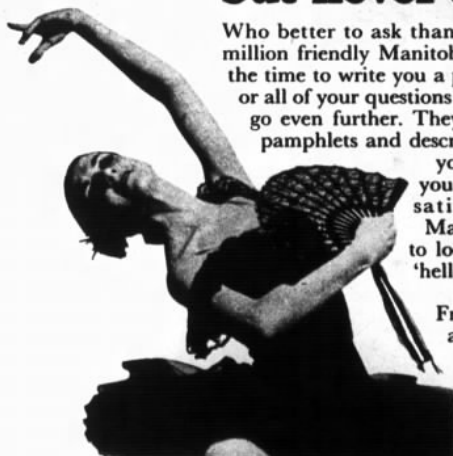
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"If only they'd do something nasty," Hopp complained

Cerfs, who had defeated the defending champs—Ira Gittler and Robert Blume—1-0 in sudden-death overtime on a disputed goal which rapidly bounced in and out of the cage.

It was now 1 AM and an air of controversy hung over the finals. Midway in the tournament it was discovered that Breu was wearing a plaster cast over his right arm. Veteran hockey observers remarked that it was a case of gutsyness rivalled only by Dickie Moore of the Montreal Canadiens who won the NHL scoring championship in 1958 while playing with a cast on his arm. However, table hockey skeptics charged that the cast was nothing but an illegal ploy.

"The cast definitely gives him an advantage," said Michael Widener, whose team was defeated in the semi-finals. "It's too much weight to contend with. Besides, we didn't want to beat a man with a broken arm."

Meanwhile, attendants surrounded the rink, checking all the equipment. Two workmen cleaned the ice surface with a chamois; the stage was set for the finals. Breu and Hopp each downed a glass of mineral water while the Cerf brothers conferred with their chief scout, Jim Benagh, who had been spying on the Breu-Hopp team throughout the night.

Then the opponents lined up for the opening face-off. As expected, the Hopp-Breu team charged bullishly at the smaller Cerf brothers but the Cerfs dilly-doddled around their bigger foes like Max and Doug Bentley of yesteryear.

"I can't get mad at those little guys," Hopp complained to his teammate. "If only they'd do something nasty."

With one minute remaining in the first period, Christopher Cerf's centre flung a backhand past Breu, giving them a 1-0 lead. They added another goal in the second period, forcing Breu and Hopp to open up. Meanwhile Jonathan Cerf, the goaltender, dancing and dodging, blocked the best shots his foes had to offer. Only later did he reveal that he had revolutionized the game with a new technique.

"I handle four rods, leaving Chris with only two," said Jonathan. "I operate the goalie with my left hand and the other three with my right."

Sure enough, the Cerfs had broken the traditional style in which each player covered three rods and only too late did Hopp and Breu discover this. The Cerfs pumped home a third goal in the last period and won the opening game of the best-of-three final, 3-0.

Now it was time for the second game of the finals. The Cerfs had returned to their face-off position and so had Hopp. But where was Breu?

Referee-in-chief Friedman dramatically pulled out his stopwatch; he would give Breu two minutes to return or the championship would be forfeited.

Suddenly, a messenger arrived with a communiqué: "HAD TO LEAVE STOP OUR BABY SITTER THREATENED TO QUIT IF WE DIDN'T GET HOME STOP SEE YOU NEXT YEAR BREU!"