

FACE DOWN HOCKEY

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It's a cold January morning in the deep freeze of a long, snowless winter. I walk gingerly on an ice-covered bike path in the residential section of a small city. Some winters are defined by ice. A snowstorm morphs into freezing rain. A thick, mild rainstorm is followed by very cold weather. Roads are always slippery. Every step is perilous. You yearn for snow, but there is only ice.

The bike path sits on an old railroad bed, so it is slightly elevated above the surrounding landscape. On one side of the path there's a row of modest houses. A shallow, but steep depression separates the path from the houses, so the backyards form a bowl. A few days ago, a flooding rain preceded a snappy freeze, the perfect sequence for a frozen topography. These shallow backyard bowls are now mini ice skating rinks.

I observe two young boys, perhaps ten or eleven years old, sprawled on the ice, lying about forty feet apart. They're wearing hockey jerseys and handling hockey sticks. From their prone position, laying face down on the ice, they're sliding a hockey puck back and forth, in a laid-back rhythm, as if they are marking time. "Let's call this face down hockey," one boy yells. "No, let's call it lazy man's hockey," the other responds.

Several months later, during the lime green days of New Hampshire Spring, the ice is gone, an ephemera, replaced by a tidy, green lawn. There are roughly a dozen balls scattered around the premises—tennis balls, wiffle balls, soccer balls, all species of balls—marking the arrival of a new season, and hence, new sports, too. In the corner, I notice a netted backstop, and the boys, now joined by several friends, are playing some backyard baseball variant. Nearly every afternoon the boys are outside playing ball, forming their own narrative of players and teams, emulating major leaguers, engaged in the tangible delight of their home grown game elevated to the fantasy of a world-class championship scale.

On returning from a late May vacation, I notice that during my absence a trampoline appears. Throughout the summer, the trampoline is teeming with neighborhood kids, both boys and girls, animating the landscape with their incessant jumping. The baseball continues, enlivened with the springing motion of youngsters bobbing up and down.

With Autumn and the changing foliage of maples, oaks, and birch, the glorious colors are framed by a mottled, leafy lawn, with goal posts on either end, deftly placed around two soccer nets. On alternate days, the boys practice kicking field goals or playing one on one matches of soccer. Sometimes there are groups of a dozen boys (and a few girls) playing touch football.

My prevailing memory of this four-season collage is observing two boys practicing many different sports, spending their childhood outdoors, through all kinds of weather regimes, enduring and enjoying the elements as the dynamic backdrop for their cavalcade of

sports. There is much to reflect on here about the purity of play, the virtues of their pursuits, or the celebratory relationship between atmosphere, landscape and play.

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Why is it fun to lay face down on ice, during a cold dark evening, shoveling a hockey puck back and forth? Although there is a relaxing rhythm in the regularity of a relaxed toss, it does tend to get boring after awhile. Far more compelling is the sensory delight of feeling the ice. The play challenge is unremarkable without the novelty of the ice.

A few nights after observing “face down hockey” I decide to try the same activity, without the hockey sticks—face down ice sprawling. Why is it so much fun to do this? The sheer visceral sensation of lying on frozen water is amazingly pleasurable. Ice is simultaneously wet and dry, sticky and smooth, bumpy and flat, hard and soft, fragile and strong, slippery and supple. In just a few moments you notice all of this and marvel at the remarkable variety of contrasting qualities. As a field of play—frozen water—it is infinitely interesting because of its visceral complexity. Pushing a puck back and forth is only fun on ice because the puck is designed to respond to these qualities. The puck is an elegant and graceful human-designed play response to the mystery of ice.

Ice as frozen water is a biospheric medium of great power and mystery. Water’s ubiquity displays an elusive mobility. Typically, we observe liquid water in various movement forms. Ice reduces the pace of water’s movement to a grinding halt, almost as if it is also freezing time, or at least reducing the flow of events to very slow motion. Ice provides a visible record, a history, of water’s most recent movement. Every crack and bump indicates a change in temperature. When you lie on the ice on a cold winter night, even if you don’t consciously observe these things, you just know they are true. Such direct knowledge comes with the experience. Ice is a phase of water in a place you are visiting and you know what it’s like to experience that place frozen.

Ice’s mystery is enhanced by what it hides and reveals. Ice displays gradients of opacity, translucency and transparency. Sometimes you can see the depths and levels of frozen water, or plants that lie just below the surface. Other times you can’t see a thing. Ice masks depth. It can be a mirror of glass or a sheath of white.

For the boys, the ice is a matrix of safety. In their backyard, the water is shallow enough that even in the most misleading of circumstances, if they were to break through the ice, they would get wet and cold, but emerge safely and walk a few feet home. However, walking into the middle of a frozen pond no matter how cold it’s been and how solid the ice appears, or how well you think you know the places of running water that no freeze will thwart, there is an element of danger, even if it resides as a modest uncertainty in the depths of your imagination.

Recently, I have taken to skiing the four-mile circumference of a local pond. I know that when snowmobiles and ice fisherman have left their mark, it’s surely safe enough for me. There’s an island in the middle of the pond and I ski to it often. There is a stretch between

shoreline and island when you are far from shore. No matter how frozen the pond appears to be and how free you may feel, there are moments of vulnerability. This mystery of ice reflects freedom and vulnerability and the combination of the two, in the right proportion, is one measure of why playing on ice is fun. For some people play is enhanced as the vulnerability factor is increased. They are most free when most vulnerable. For others, the opposite is true.

When I am biking down a hill at twenty-five miles an hour on a balmy summer day, I know that there is some danger. I've had a blowout in such a circumstance and took a resounding and painful fall. Yet that doesn't stop me from riding fast. I continue to ride down that hill, despite, or perhaps in relationship to that danger, because I feel free when I do so.

Ice hockey (which I've never played) had its origins on frozen ponds and streams. The idea of skating at great speeds while handling a puck and firing it at a net is both dangerous and beautiful. I imagine it's the ice that makes the game fun. In the Harry Potter novels, Quidditch is a type of ice hockey in the air, played in a different medium, with a touch of magic. It's a game that is simultaneously elegant and dangerous.

Perhaps it's a great leap to compare "face-down hockey" with Quidditch. What I wish to convey is that they are games played on fields of nature and it is the fields that provide the mystery, the challenge, and the fun. Whether you are lying face down on the ice, or skiing at a modest pace around a shallow pond, or cruising your bike down a long flowing hill, or flying through the air on a broomstick, you are engaged with a biospheric medium. It's the mystery of that medium, scaled to the activity of your game, which is the source of your play. I suggest that the heart of the sport, so deeply rooted in our Pleistocene origins, is the sheer joy of experimenting with our bodies and minds, while feeling free in the fields of biospheric play.

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From childhood through adolescence and even into my adult years, my most vivid, enthralling and engaging landscapes of play revolved around making, erasing and reformulating boundaries in a seemingly unbounded setting. Wild settings were the ultimate challenge. Play became a confluence of landscape and imagination. Improvisational flexibility was intrinsic to both rule making and play narrative. Improvisational play was erecting boundaries (and rules) in a wild landscape.

I grew up on the south shore of Long Island, only fifteen minutes from Rockaway and Atlantic Beach. I spent hours inventing games on a sandy beach at the boundary between ocean and land. I admired the daunting spectacle of power and change, the inexorable shifting of surf, tide, and sand. Until early adolescence (I was the same age as the eleven year old face-down hockey players) my favorite activity, transcending even baseball, was to experiment with the magnificent variations of the shoreline. I remember an inlet, only about ten feet wide, and how much fun it was to build dams, only to see them succumb to the force of an incoming tide. I enjoyed low tide because you could always dig just a

short distance and create a pool of water. My friends and I created underground networks of pools and tunnels, but it would only last until the tide came in. Our structures finally crumbled, slowly at first, and then catastrophically. Watching the structures disappear was as much fun as creating them.

Creating, modifying, directing, and channeling watercourses were fine early lessons in understanding the flow of landscapes. It was a great day in my suburban neighborhood when someone chose to wash his car. The stream of water coming off the car flowed downhill and we followed the runnels and channels to see where and how far they went, how long they lasted, and how we might direct them. Each runnel seemed to have its own personality so we named them as befitting the character of their idiosyncratic course.

As an eleven year old, I built enormous “ball castles” on the beach. I would dig a large hill, packed with mud and sand, making it stable enough to carve tunnels and paths. The challenge was to create a series of roads and runways so a tennis ball placed at the top of the castle slowly rolled down, disappearing for awhile, and then mysteriously emerging from a network of invisible paths. These were very hard to build as the tunnels would constantly cave in. But we had an unlimited supply of sand and water and all the time in the world.

We would invent baseball games, too. There were games that involved playing at the boundary of the incoming or outgoing tides, in which your challenge was to catch the ball before it hit the water. How spectacular it was to make a diving catch as you were falling into the ocean. We devised miniature baseball diamonds, with the ocean boundaries serving as the outfield wall.

Tennis balls were soon surpassed by the Frisbee which had the unique quality of riding microthermal air currents. Once you learned how to toss it (easier than learning to ride a bike), but not quite so simple as throwing a ball, you could experiment with it in many interesting ways—throwing it so it would return to you, tossing it so it would bounce and hop, flipping it so it would make successive upward hops, and flinging it so it would start out traveling in one direction and finish in another. The Frisbee is a wonderful biospheric toy because it is designed to ride the wind. Your mastery of the Frisbee depended on more than your skill as a thrower and catcher, but also on your ability to read the weather, not just the wind speed and direction, but also the humidity. Every unique weather situation and landscape subtly influences the flight of the Frisbee.

There were probably hundreds of Frisbee related games, with regional variations, eventually condensed into more formal rules systems such as “Ultimate Frisbee.” On the beach we played Frisbee football, Frisbee running bases, and various track and field type events involving distance, speed, and accuracy.

Years later, when I moved to a small house deep in the New Hampshire woods, my then pre-adolescent son and I devised a Frisbee golf game. We played it every Sunday morning before watching New York Giants football. We each had a Frisbee and alternately found landmarks between fifty and one hundred yards distant—tall trees,

mailboxes, boulders, protruding branches. You'd try to reach and hit the target in as few throws as possible. Each week we'd find different courses and challenges, all emanating from our house. However, the final "hole" was always the basketball hoop on the garage. You'd have to make a basket with the Frisbee.

Forested landscapes and all varieties of settled and/or wilderness settings provide terrific backdrops for tossing a Frisbee or tennis ball. Throw either object through the rows of a parking lot or the tall trees in a forest, in each case, figuring out the space available, the obstacles to be overcome and/or incorporated, the openings for flow and movement, and the slight possibility of danger and loss. Watch the Frisbee sail beyond your grasp into the valley below. Watch the ball roll under a car or into a busy street. Feel the remorse as either Frisbee or ball gets stuck in a thick tree, or lost in an impenetrable thicket. And who hasn't inadvertently broken a window?

Several years ago I was with some new colleagues, traveling from Los Angeles to the High Sierras to teach a Sense of Place workshop. We stopped in a desert town in Southern California, piled out of the van, and after relieving ourselves and refueling accordingly, we tossed a tennis ball around a funky parking lot at the edge of the desert, undaunted by the heat and sagebrush. We did this with great glee, becoming friends while doing so.

To this day, and perhaps later today when I take my walk, I derive great pleasure from bouncing a tennis ball, and then on the homeward, mostly downhill journey, dropping the ball down the hill seeing how long it will follow the path, staying within the boundary, using gravity until it comes to rest, waiting for me to pick it up and once again initiate its passage.

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From my earliest childhood days, I have always loved throwing, catching and navigating balls. Playing ball has always been intrinsic to my life experience, as genetic as the color of my hair. An object relations psychologist will insist that the matrix of warmth and play represented by rolling a ball to my mother and father, and the support and love surrounding the activity was the source of my pleasure. An evolutionary psychologist will argue that my ball-playing predisposition reflects a Pleistocene practice, a way to prepare my eye-hand coordination for hunting and other survival skills. A cultural anthropologist may suggest that I grew up in a culture surrounded by toys, one of which was balls, and that I learned to play with balls because of their ubiquity and as a way to adopt to the cultural rules of play that I learned in infancy and early childhood. And they will all tell me that there's no way I can objectively dispute their interpretations based on the impression of memory, and the biased retrospection of my life narrative.

But I will insist anyway that all of these interpretations (each of which may convey some measure of truth), both for me, and for all ballplayers, are incomplete. I love playing ball because it is an amazingly engaging way to come out of myself and into nature, to learn about movement and pattern. Balls are agents of exploration and discovery. As I watch a

ball float through the air or down a hill, or perhaps disappear into the brush, or land in a mitt, I realize that the ball's life story and mine are inextricably entwined. We are the same being, rolling down the hill together, swishing through the hoop, traveling through many hands. Balls, too, are agents of mystery and wonder. Is it too far-fetched to suggest that balls taught me about the infinite varieties of landscapes, weather systems, and environmental change, about the intermingling of air, earth, and water, that they were tools for learning about the biosphere? And more importantly, they were a means to engage and participate in biospheric play. Or still further, they taught me to celebrate life.

When I realized at age four or five that the ball would be the subject of a broader story or game, the focus, for example, of baseball, and eighteen players could play a fascinating game in an enclosed playing field, all interacting together around a common devotion to the ball, I realized there was a deeper narrative of meaning and participation. I vouch no overblown sacred qualities to these games. I declare no metaphorical significance. I only suggest that something about playing with balls, and doing so with others, taught me about my place in the world, and taught me to appreciate the world, and celebrate my place in it.

To this day, reflecting a life long pattern, whenever I see people playing ball, I turn my head to watch them. If I am passing them in a train or car, I hope for traffic so I get to observe them for awhile. If I'm taking a walk, I'll stop and watch (as long as I am unobtrusive). Whenever I see a game of baseball or basketball, regardless of the age group, even as a fifty-five year old, I long to join them.

Surely there are dozens of reasons why people long to play ball—to compete and test oneself against peers, to find community and identity, to work through aggression, to accomplish something or to gain recognition—you name the reasons. I, too, have played ball for all of these reasons. But transcending these explanations, there is a deeper level of engagement. I play ball to know my place in the landscape, to ground myself in the topographical logistics of my mind and body, to engage with weather, landforms, and watercourses, to enter a state of biospheric awareness and participation that I can't surpass in any other way.

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John Muir, the great environmental archetype of American wilderness writing describes his glee and fascination with rolling rocks and boulders down scree slopes in the High Sierras. Muir would in no way have been inventing baseball games (although he may have known about baseball). Muir didn't roll those rocks to score points or achieve some navigational goal, he was just interested to see what would happen as the rock made its way down the slope. Who wouldn't love to do something like this? Muir was undoubtedly intrigued to observe that each toss was different, and that each corresponding path varied as well. But patterns began to emerge, determined by landscape, soil type, slope, and gravity. He could become the rock, vicariously experiencing the same journey, a geomorphological probe. When you sit on a sled and careen down a hillside, sure the speed is a rush and the navigational challenge is fun, but

the finest sledding moments are the most carefree when you can just close your eyes and float freely, noting where you might arrive as if you are a pebble bouncing down a scree slope in a high glacial valley. I can't say for sure that this impulse is at the core of Muir's playfulness, but he was a keen observer of nature and he surely did love to play.

Muir was also known for his classic tree-climbing adventures in the middle of snowstorms. Perhaps he was the nineteenth century equivalent of today's "extreme sports" participant. He wanted to place his body in the elements, not only to practice agility and alacrity, but simply to experience his body swaying with a tall tree, in the wind together, merging with the snowstorm by playing with it.

Snowstorms are turbulent weather phenomena, the result of clashing, interpenetrating weather systems that span the tropics and the arctic. In their convergence they sweep moisture from the ocean, pushing it skyward high into the atmosphere, freezing the moisture and turning it into snow which falls to the landscape as it is driven by the wind—a pressure gradient pushing air across vast landscapes. Are snowstorms merely a form of biospheric play?

When a snowstorm strikes, there's little you can do. Cars grind to a halt. The streets are quiet. Commerce diminishes. Transportation stops. Sometimes there are power outages. The biosphere sweeps over you and you are powerless to stop it. What better way to pay homage to the grandeur of such a process than to go outside and play with it, to walk face first into the wind, and then to turn around and have it push you? Look skyward and count the snowflakes before the daunting infinity of scale and variation completely overwhelms you as you feel a snowflake land on the tip of your nose. Every child knows that there is nothing more fun than snow. It's delightful to watch because of the beautiful patterns it beholds. It's fun to play with because you can mold it and shape it as you require. Yes, there are snowballs, too, and all kinds of games you can play with them. You can jump in it or glide in it or use it for recreational transportation. It's only the most cold-hearted, work-hardened, indifferent person who forgets the great celebration of playing with snow.

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Remember the boys who were playing face-down hockey? Well, five years have now passed and I never see the boys outside anymore. Perhaps they're involved in organized sports now. Or maybe, God forbid, they've moved inside to use their Playstations. Perhaps other demands of adolescence have rendered their backyard too small for their expanding cognitive horizons. Or maybe the family has moved. I'm reminded of the beautiful, but sad lyrics by Gene Lees for the famous Bill Evans tune, "Waltz for Debby."

"One day all too soon she'll grow up and she'll leave her dolls and her prince and her silly old bear. When she goes they will say as they whispered good-bye. They will miss her, I fear, but then, so will I."

Surely their forays into biospheric play will never be as naïve and innocent as they once were. Yet I am confident that any childhood that entails biospheric play nourishes a person for life, and that for these boys, whatever their future beholds, they will always have a foundation for both participating in sports and observing nature.

In their darkest and loneliest moments, they may fondly remember shoving a hockey puck back and forth on a cold, icy night. When they have young families of their own they may provide their children with the space and time to play outdoors. As they ponder various life choices and possibilities, they'll have face-down hockey as a measure of purity and participation, as an aspiration and a possibility for how to live well. In the ritual of their outdoor games, they will celebrate the landscapes of their lives—with every toss of a ball, fling of a frisbee, or bike-riding descent of a long, steady hill.