

My Hockey Adventure
Baker Lake January 2017

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking; we have now landed in Baker Lake where it is 7:50pm local time. The temperature tonight is -56 in the wind, please ensure that you have all your carry on belongings and have a pleasant evening.”

These words spoken by a Calm Air Pilot marked the end of a journey that had begun in Ottawa some twelve hours earlier, landed me in Winnipeg for a few hours layover then north to Rankin Inlet and now to Baker Lake, the exact geographic centre of Canada. Twelve months earlier, at a Hockey Canada Conference in Toronto I had been introduced to Debbie Strome, Technical Director for Hockey North and over the course of that weekend, she shared stories of her experiences delivering clinics in the north which were by times spellbinding, chilling and exhilarating. I had been to Iqaluit once to deliver clinics and as we were leaving she said almost in jest, (I thought) “I just might need someone to go to Baker Lake next year, are you interested?” I had no idea where Baker Lake was, so of course I said yes. Fourteen months later my northern adventure had begun.

I was greeted at the airport in Baker Lake by Mike, the manager of the Nunamuit Lodge in Baker Lake which was to be my home for the next five days, and Jeff Seeteenak who was one of the lead coaches in the Baker Lake Minor Hockey Association. Jeff and I had chatted several times on the phone and it was good of him to come out to the airport just to meet me under such conditions.

It turned out, I was to be the only guest in the hotel Wednesday and Thursday night and as Mike showed me around he gave me three keys, one for my room, one for the lobby and one for the restaurant. Dinner was served at the lodge from 5:30-7:00 every night, and as I would be in the rink from six until nine the staff prepared a meal for me each afternoon, left it in a fridge in the dining room along with instructions for operating the micro wave oven. Mike left me to dine in solitary splendour and what a feast it was!!

Thursday morning I was up as soon as the dining room opened in part because I wanted to assure the hotel staff that the previous night's supper was delicious, but way more than I could manage. Andrew, the cook smiled shyly at my apology and promptly served up a tremendous breakfast. This visitor was definitely not going to starve in Baker Lake! Later that morning, I went for a walk in balmy (relatively) -35 degree temperatures. As I climbed one deserted street, a pick-up truck slowed and the driver enquired if I wanted a lift anywhere. When I assured him I was just out for a walk, he shook his head and asked “Why?” before driving off.

Our first clinic, Coach 2 was scheduled to start at 6:00 pm, and by 5:30 I had all my AV stuff set up, ready for business. I could hear lots of voices in the lobby but it turned out these folks were coming for a big caribou feast, not to listen to a hockey presentation. There were also scores of kids who had accompanied their elders, and like kids everywhere, they couldn't be bothered to sit still and eat. Jeff and his group of eight coaches had to strain to hear me above the clamour in the lobby but at least it was cheerful. To my delight, when I returned to the hotel I discovered that Andrew had prepared a similar feast for me....caribou!!

Friday night the surroundings for the clinic were much quieter and at the end I watched the first period of the Friday night Gentleman's Hockey League which was well attended by fans of all ages. Walking back to the hotel the wind was howling and when I checked the temperature on the Weather Network it was registering -59.

Saturday morning we ran an IP Clinic and after lunch I joined first the Novices then the IP coaches and kids on the ice. At first the kids were very shy but as they watched me pulling on my skate boarder knee pads and then my elbow pads, they crowded around my bag, mesmerized by this old man's "paraphernalia". I had brought along a collection of rubber chickens (for passing and stick handling drills) and when the kids unearthed these treasures, I could do no wrong.

After the ice sessions Jim Kreuger, the IP Head Coach introduced me to a group of perhaps twenty parents and I spent half an hour with them discussing Hockey Canada's new initiatives with the IP program and fielding questions about minor hockey in general.

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Sunday morning was billed as "Pucks and Pancakes Day." We started with the IP kids, then the Novices before we broke for brunch. Nothing more Canadian than the smell of bacon, maple syrup, coffee and pancakes all served up in the confines of an arena lobby. We didn't even take off our skates!!! In the afternoon we ran a checking clinic for the Pee Wees, Bantams and Midgets. During and after each ice session, I was reminded what a great game this is. The looks of determination, frustration, delight and sheer joy on the kid's faces that accompany a successful deke, a great pass, an accomplished crossover, or the squawking of a well thrown rubber chicken are the same, no matter whether you are in Ottawa or Baker Lake. There can be no greater thrill for a teacher or coach than to see youngsters in their care succeed in their endeavours and though the temperature in the rink was no more than -20, the obvious warmth and appreciation of the community watching their kids progress was something I will never forget.

Sunday night I joined the Kreugers, Laurel and Jim for dinner and my hosts regaled me with stories of life in Baker Lake, especially about life in the summer when the sun never sets and the mosquitoes and black flies abound in June and July. Monday morning, under brilliant blue skies and howling winds, Mike drove me to the airport. As we sat on the plane prior to departure little rivers of snow were being blown under the plane and at first it appeared we would not be leaving. Evidently a tiny window of opportunity presented itself and the plane took off headed for Rankin Inlet, Winnipeg and then on to Ottawa. I arrived home just before midnight, and on the way home my cab driver shivered when he told me it was -18 in the capital. Beach weather I thought to myself.

Over the weekend, I had occasion to check in the NHL All Star game festivities on TV, and I was struck by how much fun these players, who are the very best in the world were having, playing their game. The respect for each other and the game itself was evident on so many occasions. At the same time, I was mindful of the camaraderie and team building being established with the kids in Baker Lake with their parents and coaches. There is something about our game that does that whether in Los Angeles or Nunavut and I always feel so fortunate to be involved in working with the next generations of players and coaches.

When I was chatting with Debbie later in the week, bringing her up to speed on the week's events, she asked if I'd go again. I said, "In a heartbeat, except maybe not in June or July!"