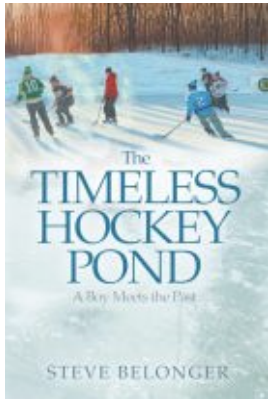


The
**TIMELESS
HOCKEY
POND**

A Boy Meets the Past

STEVE BELONGER



It's the ultimate hockey pond where kids still play outdoors. But this pond at the edge of the woods is also mysterious. Hockey greats from the past appear on the ice to help two young boys deal with fear, courage and dedication.

Timeless Hockey Pond

by Steve Belonger

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A Boy Meets the Past

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The Timeless Hockey Pond

This book is dedicated to the memory of my mom and dad who always provided us with pucks, sticks, bats, gloves, footballs, helmets and anything else necessary to play sports.

Steve Belonger

The Timeless Hockey Pond

Also by Steve Belonger

The Goliath Agenda: The Attack on Individual Effort

Steve Belonger

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Anna Dickison for her diligent editing and proofreading of the manuscript. I'm impressed with how many times she read over the entire book. She improved it.

Thanks to all my friends (and my brother) that I grew up with in Neenah, Wisconsin and Belvidere, Illinois. They were always willing to play sports outside in a neighborhood yard or city park.

I am grateful to Terrence Fogarty for letting me use his artwork, "Mork's Pond", for the cover. When I saw the painting, I thought, "That's the ultimate outdoor hockey pond!"

Thanks to Lisa Hainline of Lionsgate Book Design for designing a cover that captures the spirit of the frozen pond.

I appreciate God, who created ice and then gave people the ingenuity to create skates, sticks and pucks. Hockey might be the primary reason He created ice. It's arguable.

Steve Belonger

The Timeless Hockey Pond

As a Midwesterner and hockey mom of 40 years I feel qualified to recommend this novel to players, parents and fans who have had a spiritual connection to the tradition of outdoor hockey. From its introduction, I was transported to the days when my fingers and toes froze standing in a rink side snow bank cheering on my two boys as they learned the game and its values: winning with modesty, acceptance of losing, overcoming physical and mental obstacles, and working as part of a team. These are life lessons that continue to serve them well through the ups and downs of adulthood, both on and off the rink.

My boys have played club hockey on some of the finest manicured indoor rinks in Minnesota. Yet, every winter, when most in these parts resort to treadmills and cable TV, they head to the pond, to an outside rink not much different from the one where I used to freeze my appendages. I've never seen them more refreshed and happy than returning from an all age pick-up game under a cold North Star night. In that same way, Jimmy skates through our hearts in this story that has divine intervention playing a role that inspires and gives us perspective. This book is a testament to the timeless power of Hope, History and Hockey.

Judy Norby, Hockey Mom

Steve Belonger

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Chapter 7

A Goalie Mask Changes Everything

Ryan and his dad were at practice at the rink where Jimmy would normally be that night, but he was under “house arrest” as he referred to it with a tint of humor. His mom had a couple of lady friends to the house to linger over coffee and womanly conversation, something Jimmy never understood. “How can you have someone over and not do anything?” he once asked her.

He went out to the pond and sat on a chair replaying all that had happened on the ice, mystified about the ways of God. He was guessing that it had to be God behind all this. He felt like he was part of a cool Sci-fi movie or the Twilight Zone, which had that eerie music that creeped him out. Those episodes didn't seem to end very favorably so he went with the cool Sci-fi thought instead. For the first time, with all seriousness, he asked God, “Am I ever going to be able to tell anyone about this? Will you make them believe me?”

A few snowflakes settled on his black hoodie sleeve and dissolved into wet spots but snow was a regular occurrence so it didn't catch his attention. After he finished yanking on the laces of his right skate and tying it tight over the two pair of thick yellow socks, he heard a scraping on the ice. In front of the net, on the far end, there was a goalie roughing up the ice. He did this so that when he maneuvered back and forth to block shots, his skates would not slip over a smooth surface. He was expecting to play goal, now. “Here we go again,” Jimmy said softly. He felt nervous tingles in his stomach and heart.

Jimmy joined him on the ice and began to skate up to him but the goalie banged on the ice with his wide wooden stick letting Jimmy know that he should shoot, not talk. Jimmy reached behind him and slipped the puck into

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a shooting position and lofted a weak, fluttering shot that dropped to knee high by the time it reached the goalie. The man cocked his stick back and swung it, batting the puck out of the air as easily as shooting away a pesky fly.

Jimmy retrieved the puck and, embarrassed by his first effort, slapped one as hard as he could. The puck caromed off the goalie's brown leather left leg pad back to Jimmy, who followed with another slap shot which the man snagged in his catching glove.

Jimmy didn't really expect to score on this guy but he kept shooting since the silent man didn't seem to be complaining about Jimmy's inability to challenge him. His curiosity got the best of him, and since the snowfall interrupted his 20/20 vision, he started to skate closer to the goalie and to attempt some point blank shots and get a better look at him. Mostly, he was intrigued by the man's plain, tan mask which only covered the front of his face unlike the masks of today which are helmets that surround the entire head. Contemporary goalie masks are decorated by professional artists who paint on team logos, favorite rock musicians, past hockey greats, city skylines, even the names of the goalie's kids. No, this mask was artless and humdrum with a couple of roughly hollowed out ellipses for the eyes and a breathing hole for the mouth. Though the mask was barely over 50 years old, it looked ancient, like an artifact dug up by an archaeologist in search of lost hockey civilizations.

Jimmy stood ten feet in front of the crease entranced by the antique nature of the goalie equipment. The leg pads, the blocker and the glove were all made of heavy brown leather. A wooden goalie stick had a blade heavily taped in black. He wore minimal padding on the shoulders and under the jersey.

"Allez! Un petit effort!" the goalie finally cried out and waved his hand to invite another shot. Jimmy didn't understand any of those words but he thought the accent was French because he remembered similar intonations from the cartoon skunk Pepe LePeu and from Inspector Clouseau of the Pink Panther movies. He never could endure to watch the whole, supposedly

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zany, movie with his parents. He would excuse himself while they were laughing at stuff that wasn't even close to being funny.

"Vous parlez francais?" the man asked impatiently.

"Uh, I didn't quite get that," Jimmy said shyly, thinking that this was not going to be a productive visit if the guy was a foreigner.

The goalie raised his mask so it rested on top of his dark hair. He had a good-looking face altered by a few scars around the nose and chin. He gazed at Jimmy and slowly said, "So, this is not Québec, am I right?" He ran his glove along his long sloping jaw line.

"Yeah, you're right," he replied. "It's Minnesota."

"Hmm," he looked around at the farmscape, "North Star territory, yes?"

"No," Jimmy quickly corrected him, "Wild territory."

"Wild?" the goalie responded, "You call this wild?" He fixed his gaze on the beautiful but tame woodlands.

"The Minnesota Wild is the NHL team in Minnesota."

The man was surprised. "What happened to the North Stars?" he inquired.

"Moved to Dallas, Texas."

"Hockey down south?"

The goalie contemplated it for a moment hesitant to ask what other teams still existed. Jimmy was starting to guess who this guy was. "Did you ever play against Bobby Orr?"

"Of course. Phenomenal hockey player. I usually didn't have to worry about defenseman shooting on me too much, but when I played against Orr,

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it was like they had four forwards on the ice instead of three. He could go coast-to-coast with no one able to touch him.”

“You think he was the greatest player ever?” Jimmy asked excitedly.

“Yes. Probably. Howe's right up there, though. And the Rocket.” He squinted with concentration to see if he wanted to add anyone else to the list. Snow was accumulating on the mask he now wore like a hat.

“You never heard of Gretzky, did you?” Jimmy queried. He remembered Gretzky's memory was restricted by the age of the body he showed up in.

“No.”

“A lot of people say he was the greatest ever.”

“I doubt it,” the man said matter-of-factly.

Jimmy felt a kinship with this man now but he felt badly he couldn't come up with the guy's name immediately. He wasn't wearing a jersey with a logo on it, just a crisp white practice jersey. He needed to play 20 questions to narrow down the guy's identity.

“That's an old style mask, isn't it?”

“The oldest, I'd say,” and he slipped it off the top of his head, shook off the snow and handed it to Jimmy. There wasn't much to examine, except a few cracks and scuffs.

“How come you didn't decorate it?” Jimmy wondered, unimpressed by the lack of color and pizzazz.

“Decorate it? Just putting it on shocked the hockey world!” he explained, “Oh my, if I had painted it too, they would have accused me of making a complete mockery of goaltending.”

Now, Jimmy knew who the visitor was. Jimmy's grandfather had told him the story before. His grandfather would regale him with tales about

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how different hockey was in his own time. All players used wooden sticks. No one wore helmets. And no masks would shield the goalies' faces. Then, one man decided he didn't care about what other goalies had always done or what people would say about his choice. Jimmy's grandfather spoke admiringly of Jacques Plante's decision on November 1, 1959.

Andy Bathgate of the Rangers shot the puck high at Plante and it met his maskless face, cutting a gash in Plante's unprotected nose. The game was halted while Plante was taken to the locker room to get stitched up. There were no backup goaltenders in those days and teams and fans waited around for an injured goalie to get medical attention and then be sent back out on the ice so the game could continue. The organist was ready to play a whole list of songs to keep the crowd entertained. Murmuring amongst the fans was partly, "I wonder how bad it is?" and partly, "When is he going to get out here and play?"

But that night, Plante would change the face of goaltending by refusing to go back to the net after the doctor finished with needle and thread. The coach of the Montréal Canadiens, Toe Blake, was furious with him because Plante had laid down an ultimatum. "I'm not going back into the goal unless I wear the mask." He had worn it in practice so he was used to the slight obstruction it caused with his ability to track the puck, especially when it was at his feet.

"No goalie of mine is going to wear a mask in a game! No goalie has ever worn a mask! You're stitched up, let's go!" Blake demanded.

"No. I'm not playing without the mask," Plante stood firm.

After much wrangling, the coach finally relented when he realized Jacques was not going to back down so Plante skated out onto the ice. When he arrived at the crease he pulled the covering over his face and astonished the fans, radio announcers and players with a first in the long history of hockey.

"Whoa," Jimmy held the mask like a baby that one is careful not to drop, "Is this it? Is this the first mask?"

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“Oui. I mean, yes,” he replied.

“And then everyone started wearing them because you did?”

“Oh, no. No, no, no,” he cautioned, “It took many years for it to become common. I was reviled for wearing a mask.”

“What?”

“The first night I wore it, a fan in the stands, our own fan mind you, shouted that I was afraid because I wore it. What would you call it now, a ‘chicken’?”

“A wimp,” Jimmy informed him, nodding his head.

“Okay, a wimp,” Plante shrugged.

“A pansy,” Jimmy continued a list that he was creating in his head.

“All right.”

“A loser.”

“Bien assez!” Plante pleaded holding up his hand to stem the tide of possible insults to his manhood. “Yes, and the sportswriters skewered me for what I did. They said I was a blot on the goaltending profession. They said it would last a few games then the silly stunt would clear away like the sun burning off the morning fog. But I won 11 straight games from the time I put on that mask.”

“So then it was okay? People didn't bug you anymore?” Jimmy asked. He kept running his two thumbs over the rough gouges in the mask and tried to imagine how much it hurt to be hit in an unprotected face with a rocketing puck or sliced by the blade of a stiff, cold hockey stick.

“No. I received a lot of opposition for quite a while but I knew that I was fed up with having this handsome face be a target for the slap shots. It was

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my face, my health, my life. Why should other people make that decision for me?" he reasoned.

"Didn't it bother you... you know," Jimmy looked down at the mask averting Plante's eyes, "when people made fun of you. Wasn't it hard to be..." he fumbled for words.

"A nonconformist?" Plante suggested.

Jimmy snapped to attention, "Yeah, my mom and dad use that word all the time," he rolled his eyes, "They tell me I don't have to do what other kids do, to be my own person."

"Kind of like the situation with Gordon Bergstrom?" Plante asked and tilted his head knowingly. He finally revealed the reason for which he visited the pond.

Jimmy stared and gasped. "I don't get how you guys know this stuff anyway," and he fidgeted with his stick, scraping the blade back and forth on the ice pushing a couple small clumps of snow to the side and reducing them to powder. "I figured you were here so I could learn to shoot or something," and his voice trailed off as the guilty feelings mounted. Plante didn't pick up the conversation to rescue Jimmy from his discomfort. He let him think about Gordon's name. It was a shameful black mark in Jimmy's history. "I know, I know. I still feel bad about it. And my parents weren't happy about it at all," he confessed.

Gordon Bergstrom was the same age as Jimmy and they had been going to school together since kindergarten. They hit it off immediately because they both loved to talk about sports and their favorite players. They collected and traded football, baseball and hockey cards with each other. And since they went to the same church, they went to Wild hockey games and Twins baseball games together when the church would purchase group ticket packages and make the bus journey to Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Playing sports with Jimmy and the other boys was a challenge for Gordon. On account of a muscular disorder, he dragged his left leg stiffly

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and his left arm was underdeveloped in length and muscle tone. He couldn't throw or catch with it. Sometimes he couldn't even pick up a pencil off the floor. He relied on his right side to do just about everything.

To make matters worse, Gordon's lack of physical activity made him overweight. Even his chubby cheeks held the extra pounds. His hair didn't hide any of his pudgy face because of his uneven, short cropped blonde bangs, thanks to his mom's own scissors. It made his face look rounder. The only compliments he ever received from a girl was from his cousin, Christine, who told him she liked his bright blue eyes, and other female relatives who commented that he was getting taller every year. Everyone would bet that this kid was never going to go to prom when he reached high school.

Jimmy urged him to try and participate in games and asked the other kids to cut him a break and slow down the activity to let Gordon "fit in". They let Gordon try to kick the soccer ball without stealing it from him. They wouldn't throw him out at first base when he was chugging down the line, as if in slow motion, pulling his leg along as best he could. Most of the time the kids would allow the "Gordon rule" into the games at recess. The game action would temporarily stop as if everyone except Gordon was posing for a still photo.

But as the years progressed and the boys grew, the pace of the games got faster and Gordon's pace stayed the same. Competitive boys will be patient for only so long. Accommodating Gordon made the game unfair for the team that had to let him "succeed". Letting Gordon score became an automatic score for one team and not the other.

By third grade, Jimmy was running with different friends and in fourth grade the guys convinced him not to invite Gordon into the activities anymore. "You can't have a real game with Gordon in it," they would say. Jimmy gradually floated away from the friendship because of Gordon's weakness. Jimmy didn't want to give up on his other friends or stop playing sports just because Gordon couldn't participate. Sometimes, Gordon would sit on the sidelines for a while waiting to be invited to join the game. The boys, though, learned to ignore him. With silent unity they pretended

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Gordon wasn't there. They didn't look at him or talk about him. Eventually, he would wander off on his own and occupy himself with something he didn't want to do.

Though Gordon was used to rejection, he was hurt by the distance Jimmy had put between them. Jimmy used to be one of the few people who saw Gordon and didn't look past him or try to avoid him. To a lot of people, the malfunctioning arm and leg became an obstacle to seeing the rest of Gordon.

A few months ago, in the midst of a spectacular tri-colored October, Gordon had his mom drive him over to Jimmy's house. When he got out of the car he was holding a small, brown paper bag. Jimmy was involved in a three on three football game when his sweat-shirted friends noticed Gordon's appearance. One said to Jimmy, "Tell me you didn't invite him over."

"Of course not," Jimmy replied trying to sound more callous than he felt. He pretended to be annoyed at the suggestion and wrinkled up his nose like he smelled the stink of cooked broccoli. He put his hands on his hips for emphasis.

"Good," another added, "I don't want to pretend to fall down while I miss tackling a kid who can barely shuffle down the field." The others laughed and turned their backs to Gordon so he wouldn't think the humor was at his expense. But he knew. He had seen this scenario before.

Gordon was standing behind the car and raised his good arm and motioned Jimmy over. Jimmy reluctantly tossed the football over his shoulder to another guy and jogged over to him. Gordon's mom sat sadly and rigidly in the car alone, staring straight ahead. She was experiencing a mix of anger and embarrassment. She was familiar with the scenario, too.

"Hey," Jimmy said when he arrived.

Gordon held out his arm, the bag dangling from his fingers. "Here. I don't want these anymore," he said plainly.

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Jimmy took the bag and opened it and raised his eyebrows. Inside were two very special trading cards that were not easily obtained. A 1969 Harmon Killebrew, Twins Hall of Famer, and an autographed Dino Ciccarelli card from when he was on the North Stars. Jimmy had given them to Gordon a couple of years ago saying, "I want you to have them," and that was all the reason a friend needed to give. It was a sure sign of unselfish friendship. What Jimmy misjudged was that Gordon's disability was in his two limbs, not in his emotions.

Blushing with shame, Jimmy tried to force the bag back to Gordon but he would have none of it. In a hushed tone Jimmy said, "It's okay. You keep these."

"It's not okay," Gordon answered with a voice loud enough for his friends in the background to hear, "and I'm not stupid, like I don't know what's going on." With that, he turned his back and joined his mom in the car. Grim-faced and continuing the same stare, she drove out of the driveway. When Jimmy returned to join his friends, his eyes began to water and he rushed by them yelling, "I gotta put this in the house!" waving the bag so they could see his paper excuse.

"So why am I here?" Plante asked like a teacher drawing an answer from the student.

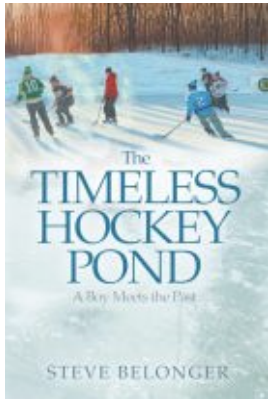
Jimmy shrugged sheepishly.

"I made the decision to wear the mask," Plante continued, "and a lot of people didn't like it. My own Montréal fans who cheered me so lustily, booed me. Even some of my own teammates disagreed with my action. But it took courage for me to withstand the criticism. Do you know what the opposite of courage is?"

"Fear?" Jimmy answered, unsure if he had the right answer for anything now.

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“No,” Plante said, “the opposite of courage is conformity. You get it? When you broke up your friendship with Gordon and gave in to your other friends you conformed and gave up the courage it took to be a loyal friend to Gordon. It’s easy to conform. But it’s time for you to have courage, even if others criticize you.” Plante skated back to the goal feeling confident that his work was done. Jimmy was about to ask if he should continue shooting but Plante bent into the goalie stance slowly, slid the mask down over his face again and faded away beginning with his skates, up his body until only the mask was left without a face behind it. It was suspended in the air, no longer attached to the man. Jimmy watched the spectacle trembling, his stomach tightened and he wanted to give in to the escape reflex but the mask held his attention. Suddenly, it morphed into a shape that resembled Gordon’s sad face. Then it melted in the cold air and dripped down, blending into a milky patch of ice. He wondered if there was going to be a permanent stain on the ice, a constant reminder of his betrayal every time he played hockey. Jimmy poked at the spot but it was normal, hard and slippery. He noticed the snow had ceased. He knew he had to come up with a solution to the “Gordon Problem”.



It's the ultimate hockey pond where kids still play outdoors. But this pond at the edge of the woods is also mysterious. Hockey greats from the past appear on the ice to help two young boys deal with fear, courage and dedication.

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