

GAME CHANGERS

IN THE LAND OF 10,000 INNOVATIONS, VISIONARIES FROM THE GREATER MSP REGION ARE CHANGING THE WAY SPORTS ARE PLAYED.

Profile: The U.S. Pond Hockey Championship

Fly over Minneapolis' Lake Nokomis in late January and you'll be greeted by an astounding sight: over a quarter million square feet of ice cleared to form 25 rinks, each hosting a chivalrous game of pond hockey where love of sport and pride in team dominate.

PROFILE > U.S. Pond Hockey Championship

TYPE > Sporting event

STORY THEMES > Entrepreneurship
Government involvement
MSP sports culture
Non-profits
Winter sport

OVERVIEW > The internationally-famous U.S. Pond Hockey Championship, held each winter on Lake Nokomis in Minneapolis, draws 2,000 amateur hockey players and tens of thousands of spectators every year. Entering its 13th year, the tournament started as the vision of one man, Fred Haberman – himself a lover of pond hockey – who wanted to create a not-for-profit tournament where people could reconnect with the joy of hockey in its purest form. With the support of government officials and a thriving local hockey community, the tournament has grown into a major event, now operated by SportsEngine, itself a success story of entrepreneurship.

KEY PEOPLE > Fred Haberman, founder of tournament and founder/owner of Haberman – Modern Storytellers
Justin Kaufenberg, SportsEngine
R.T. Rybak, former Minneapolis mayor

KEY QUOTE > *“So much of sports is about structure. I wanted to create this major celebration of outdoor hockey, unstructured play, and reuniting with our youth.”*
- Founder Fred Haberman

WEBSITE > uspondhockey.com

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Profile: The U.S. Pond Hockey Championship



Fly over Minneapolis' Lake Nokomis in late January and you'll be greeted by an astounding sight: over a quarter million square feet of ice cleared to form 25 rinks, each hosting a chivalrous game of pond hockey where love of sport and pride in team dominate.

Think of it as the anti-Super Bowl: a free-for-all amateur tournament, with no coaches, played outside on a natural surface by hundreds of teams for low stakes, where spectators can watch for free and the championship game's halftime show is just a few minutes long, includes shoveling and has 100% fewer international pop stars.

And it came about because of one person's idea and a supportive community of fellow hockey lovers, government officials and business sponsors.

"So much of sports is about structure," said founder Fred Haberman. "I wanted to create this major celebration of outdoor hockey, unstructured play, and reuniting with our youth."

From that simple idea has emerged an annual Minnesota tradition, now in its 13th year, that ESPN called one of 101 sporting events to experience before you die, bringing out tens of thousands of spectators and thousands of players from across the country and around the world.

Haberman is pleased to see what his vision has become, and the positive image it presents of his community. What makes Minneapolis-St. Paul a great place to launch a new idea, he said, "I always come back to the people. They're hard-working, kind, respectful, dependable people. People here have a real desire to help each other, and that meshes well with our tradition of unpretentious success."

AN ENTREPRENEURIAL IDEA TURNED CULTURAL PHENOMENON

When he first came to the Twin Cities and founded his full-service public relations and communications agency in 1994, Haberman was delighted to find people who shared his passion for the sport, which he played in his youth.

"I couldn't believe that this paradise for outdoor hockey existed," Haberman said. Dropping by the local lake or stream, he said, "I would get to play this unbelievable level of pickup hockey. And you don't really know who you're playing with." Games might mix college students with CEOs, people who drove to the lake in beat-up pickups or luxury sedans, men and women and kids.

But love of unstructured play or no, an event like this doesn't happen by accident. In many ways it's a classic entrepreneurial story and a tale of developing a product that captures and then comes to define a culture, Apple on ice skates or Red Bull in pads.

FROM CONCEPT TO REALITY WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM FELLOW HOCKEY LOVERS

When he decided to launch the tournament in 2006, Haberman's first stop was the City of Minneapolis, where the Parks and Recreation board bought

off on his idea. Then to build awareness and support, he reached out to local politicians: then-Gov. Tim Pawlenty and the mayors of Minneapolis and St. Paul. While they may have been of different political stripes, Haberman's idea was one they could rally around.

"Hockey is in our culture, it is so much a part of our social fabric," he said. "But then you have these government officials who want to support it. We have a park system that revolves around hockey in the winter, and communities that rally around hockey rinks."

"I decided to go big," Haberman said. "That first year, instead of buying one or two rinks, I bought 25." It was a gamble, but the pent-up demand made it seem like a no-brainer: In its inaugural year, the 96 team slots were filled quickly, with 200 more on the waiting list.

The teams came from across the country, and the tournament was set up to make sure everyone who wanted to could compete. Divisions for different ages and skill levels ensure everyone has fair competition, and players put together their own teams. The tournament follows official Pond Hockey rules – 4 on 4, no goalkeeper, no checking or slapshots – designed to make the game fair and safe for all.

The tournament has expanded to 3 days and some 250 or so teams. Sponsors, Haberman said, have come less from gear companies and more from local businesses.

"The local business community is very friendly to something like this," Haberman said. "A lot of executives here in town play hockey, and many sponsors are those businesses whose senior executives play."

GROWING STRONG AND MOVING ON

When he started the tournament, Haberman also saw it as a chance to show off his firm's capabilities, and employees of Haberman volunteered for the event and helped promote and organize everything from registration to setup.

The tournament also reflected Haberman's social mission – a non-profit event, any profits generated are donated to charitable causes.

But eventually it became more than Haberman and his team could handle along with their regular workload, and true to the entrepreneurial storyline, the tournament was sold to SportsEngine, a local sports-tech firm that handles scheduling and back-end administration for youth sports leagues across the country.

But despite getting bigger, some things won't change. The grand prize of the tournament is getting the team's names etched on the permanent trophy, the Golden Shovel. "The shovel is the most important implement in pond hockey. Without it, you can't play," said Haberman. "If you question why having your name on the Golden Shovel matters, you don't get it."

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