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Style Publishing Group

P.O. Box 1676

Frisco, Texas 75034

Phone: 972.335.1181

Toll Free: 877.781.7067

Fax: 214.722.2313

E-mail: info@friscostyle.com

Web: www.friscostyle.com

Ad Sales: (972) 335-1306



Chris Fritchie faces off against Texas Tornado Ryan Fuller

photo by Chris Johnson

Mid-Life Crisis or Hockey Star?

By Chris Fritchie with Rafael Hernandez

THE SOFT SNOWFLAKES drifted down endlessly as my eyelids batted in slow motion glancing over the frozen pond. On my uncle's pond just outside the secluded town of Alexandria, Nebraska, my hopes that the wind blowing across the prairie was cold enough to freeze the water had been realized. My tiny feet could feel the frozen wavy ripples under my skates as I glided out onto the icy plateau. For the next hour or so, I would be Roger Wilson or J.P. LeBlanc as I gloried in the fantasy of being a hockey player.

My name is Chris Fritchie and I am the Staff Photographer for *Frisco STYLE Magazine*. Ever since I can remember I wanted to play hockey. As a kid, I'd always wished for a cold snap to mercilessly engulf North Texas. When it got really cold, my dad would create the "Farmers Branch Coliseum," like the Fair Park Coliseum where I grew up watching hockey and the mighty, now defunct, Dallas Blackhawks. My dad would spend hours spraying water over our large concrete patio in the backyard so it would freeze. Once he

put several layers of ice down, we would glide on with homemade goals, sticks and pucks and, with a few buddies, we'd play backyard hockey. We would have such a blast! I'd always play goalie just like Michel Dumas of the Dallas Blackhawks.

As opposed to many of my friends back then, my heroes weren't Superman, Roger Staubach or David Cassidy. My heroes had no teeth.

Countless times, I dreamed of gliding full speed down the rink, tapping the "biscuit," "dekeing" the defense and confusing the

opposing team, shooting into the “basket” and score. Ahh, the glory of the score and the crowd going wild throughout the arena as I held my stick high and smiled at some loyal fan missing his front teeth, chanting “Fritchie” over and over again. It’s good to dream, which was mostly what I ended up doing, as far as hockey was concerned. When I was growing up there weren’t many hockey resources in North Texas and with only so many cold snaps, I shelved my hockey dreams for a while. That is, until I caught wind of the Dallas Stars landing their headquarters right here in Frisco.

So at the tender age of 43, I decided to head over to the Dr Pepper StarCenter and see what they could do for me. I had tried refining my skating skills at Stonebriar Centre’s ice rink, but there are only so many people you can knock over before you

risk getting into an actual hockey-like brawl with feral parents or angry teens. Now, I know what you’re thinking. You’re probably wondering why am I trying to get my head knocked around inside a hockey rink instead of worrying about bone density loss and receding hairlines. Perhaps it’s some mid-life crisis thing. Well, its not like I’m buying a red convertible and a lifetime supply of Just for Men so I can cruise down Preston Road, donning slick Ray-Bans, as I look over at you with a sly smirk while we both wait for the light to turn from red to green. This is just a guy wanting to explore his dream a little, OK? Well... I could use the cool points, too. Did I mention I was 43?

A WORLD ON ICE

January 17, 1:30 p.m. The Dr Pepper StarCenter has a comprehensive skating school offering a full spectrum of



Chris Modene coaches Chris Fritchie and a young hockey student

photo by Andrew King

programs ranging from basic ice-skating and hockey training to specialized figure skating coaching. The school offers both beginner and advanced classes for skaters of all ages, starting as young as three years old. Training programs run for a 10-week semester with classes available on weeknights and weekends. The StarCenter also includes a prestigious staff of more than 80 skating instructors including U.S. Gold Medalist Sarah Sullivan and Nick Traxler, a triple U.S. Gold Medalist in Freestyle, Dancing and Moves-in-the-Field to mention a few.

As I entered the Deja Blue training area, the rink was divided into cross-sections that hosted numerous training sessions: children stumbling on their skates on the south end, figure skaters practicing jumps and footwork, adults conducting skating drills and adult hockey techniques on the north end. I was even more taken aback

when I learned the main arena rink is open to the general public literally every day for both open skating and adult pickup hockey! I clenched my jaw, flared my nostrils and almost sprinted to the front desk.

The enrollment process was absolutely effortless. The staff was genuinely accommodating and friendly despite my spastic excitement and endless questioning. For just under \$150 I had come one step closer to hockey glory. My next task was to find the right equipment. The clerks directed me to the equipment store inside the StarCenter. A young man waiting in line with a few friends carrying sticks and skates turned to me and said, “The team in there will take care of ya’. They’ll fit you properly; get you the right stick, the whole nine yards. Oh, and don’t forget to ask for padding. LOTS of padding.” As I thanked them, walked off and flicked them the

peace sign, I heard some of them chuckling under their breath. I’m sure they were thinking just how rad I am. Kids still say ‘rad’ nowadays, right?

SUITING UP

January 18, 2:00 p.m. Finding the right equipment is arguably one of the most crucial elements to becoming a successful hockey player. Many people often feel inclined to purchase equipment online and who can blame them? Everybody has a story about that awesome couch they bought for \$3 on eBay or how they found the entire Kenny G catalog for \$15 on Amazon. (What? Kenny G still rocks!)

Hockey equipment, however, won’t fit in with the rest of these online bargains. As my instructor, Chris Modene, explains hockey gear has to fit right. “The body position required for good skating is critical and it requires the use of muscles that do

not get used as heavily in regular daily activities. If your gear doesn't fit properly it will seriously hamper your skating, stick handling and shooting and lead to injury." Hockey equipment is specifically designed to maximize performance and reduce risk of injury, so proper fit is imperative.

For example, the right size hockey skate isn't necessarily the same as your shoe size. Most hockey skates are sized smaller than a normal shoe size and hockey skates need to be tighter to offer more stability and less abrasion when skating. And that's just for starters! Wait until you get to the stick, shin pads and hockey pants.

(For more information on hockey gear and fit, please visit www.blog.friscostyle.com)

After picking up some initial pieces at the StarCenter I headed over to Play It Again Sports, a fantastic sports equipment depot that also specializes in new and used equipment. At the Plano location, store manager Melvin Jones and team went all out to ensure that every piece of my gear fit exactly how it was supposed to. Looking like I had just walked out of an American Gladiator's closet, I asked for a black mouthpiece for added intimidation. They politely refused my request reiterating the importance and advantages of simply staying alive.

FIRST CLASS SESSION

January 22, 5:25 p.m.

I was so excited about my first session I got to the StarCenter almost an hour early. Remember that getting in all the gear takes at least 15 minutes, let alone maneuvering around my pudgy belly.

6:15 p.m. As I glided out onto the ice, I realized I was the only one inside the rink in FULL gear. The entire rink froze as everyone turned and looked at me for an instant. It's OK. I don't mind being the one everyone looks up to.

6:20 p.m. Moving around does feel a bit awkward with all this gear on. It's reminding me of my junior high school days in football practice. How in the heck am I supposed to move, much less fight over a puck? I'm so tired, so tired...

6:25 p.m. Thank my lucky stars Mel had me pick out the elbow pads with the hard plastic cups in them. I honestly have to say it doesn't hurt when your feet are above your head and you catch the ice with your elbows!

6:30 p.m. I can't stop! Somebody grab

me! Where are the brakes?! Help me!

6:35 p.m. Why am I flat on the ice again? Can't breathe...

6:45 p.m. I dragged myself to the locker room, out of breath and feeling like I had just sprinted a marathon, fought in a Judo tournament and babysat 13 toddlers. Note to self: bring oxygen tank next time.

AMBITION OR OVERCONFIDENCE? YOU DECIDE...

The next day, albeit feeling sore, I wasn't in the physical misery I had anticipated all night. I believe a lot of it had to do with the gear protecting me and fitting comfortably. Still, I was pretty sore and with my back making noises I hadn't heard before, I took the next few days to recuperate. On the other hand, I was unequivocally euphoric. I had just glimpsed at a lifelong dream up close. I had lived it and breathed it. The feeling was as intoxicating as it was fulfilling. All I could look forward to was being on the ice again during the weekend.

Hockey equipment is specifically designed to maximize performance and reduce risk of injury, so proper fit is imperative.

January 26, 9:15 a.m.

On this beautiful Saturday morning, I was ready for another sizeable dose of training at the Deja Blue rink. I wandered into the main arena where adult pickup hockey was in full throttle and open to the public. I felt the exhilaration as adrenaline coursed through my veins and utterly impaired my judgment. I found myself gearing up and getting ready to play with some big boys... and girls.

For such a tough sport, it's remarkable how supportive and encouraging everyone from the staff to the instructors to aficionados can be. And it's a proud sport. As I sat inside the waiting box players whizzed by, sporting sticks and helmets covered in stickers like amulets and written phrases like war cries. Two

players immediately caught my attention. The first was a big guy sporting a helmet that read "Mayhem" on both sides. He had that Belushi-in-Animal-House thing going; I thought someone had resuscitated poor Jim. Loud and lovably obnoxious, Mayhem was really spicing things up. The other player was a tall mysterious figure wearing a caged helmet. This player was so fast I couldn't tell. Man, woman or cyborg? And before I could think of anything else, I was up for play.

As I skated onto the ice alongside other players I started feeling great, remembering my instructor's advice about technique and shuffling through the images of my hockey heroes so I could look super cool on the ice. I caught a pass, picked up speed and passed it on to one of my "teammates." I was so good.

Well, not for long. After my fourth knockdown, thanks to Mystery skater, I was starting to wonder if I had jumped the gun on this pickup hockey thing. It didn't help my confidence when I noticed Mystery skater stop for a drink and remove the caged helmet to reveal a full head of blond hair as she wiped the sweat off her delicate brow.

Now, ten minutes later, I'm breathing hard and someone passed me the 'biscuit.' In a split second, everything seemed to be in slow motion. I turned to see the goalie preparing for my shot. Before I could ready myself to make the shot, I suddenly saw Mayhem charging me full speed, seconds away from impact. Coming from the other direction, Mystery girl was also flying towards me. All sound started to fade out. My heart was pounding. Faster. My hands steadied, gripping my stick. Mayhem was closing in fast, laughing. Mystery girl, closer by the second, her eyes set on the puck. One droplet of sweat slowly tumbled off my brow. Me, frozen in time, wondering what to do. Mayhem closer. Nobody around, but the three of us. Mystery closer.

As Mayhem and Mystery close in, I tighten my grip and clamp my eyelids down tightly.

(Follow Chris' progress and get more details on local hockey resources by visiting our blog at www.blog.friscostyle.com)

Rafael Hernandez is a Frisco freelance writer who accompanied Chris Fritchie on his hockey endeavor.