

# Mites

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teams of mostly 8-year-olds were ready to enjoy a once-in-a-lifetime experience. And that's exactly what they did.

First of all, the teams played each other, competing for their own "Stanley Bucket," on the same playing surface used by Scotty Bowman's Stanley Cup champion Detroit Red Wings.

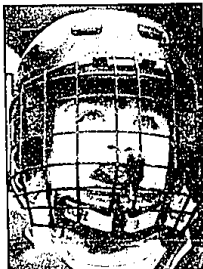
Then, after the first period of the Wings-Calgary Flames National Hockey League contest — with 20,000 fans watching — six players from each squad participated in a one-on-one shootout. Public address announcer and hockey Hall of Famer Budd Lynch introduced each player as the player skated to the center ice dot, in the middle of the huge Hockeytown logo. The shooters fought off knock-kneed nerves and the urge to glance up into the stands at their moms and dads, and skated in to try and score on Erik Zeldes and Andy Bray, the Eagles and Stingrays goaltenders, respectively.

Both the game and shootout were won by the Tom Ostin-coached Eagles, both by 2-1 outcomes. The coach of the Stingrays is Tom Hamilton. The Red Wings invite teams to play before every home game, part of the continuing commitment to youth hockey always shown by Mike and Marian Ilitch. Teams selected for the honor receive a block of tickets to that day's Wings game.

"I really just saw the opening," said 8-year-old J.R. Mooney, the Eagle player who scored the shootout winner by sliding the puck past Stingray goalie Andy's right skate. J.R., a third-grader at St. Fabian, did say it was cool to "skate on the Red Wings' ice."

To the Joe. For the unique experience to come off without a hitch, the teams needed to scramble, rush and make sure they were following their busy timetable, mapped out for them by Mary Greener, who oversees the youth hockey program for the Red Wings organization. Consider the following: n Around 9:30 or 10 a.m., from homes all over Farmington, Farmington Hills and surrounding communities, players jumped into cars and minivans while their moms and dads flung bags of hockey gear into the vehicles. From there, it was off to Joe Louis, amid steady rain and even some fog.

n The hockey entourage negotiated their way past police officers and past barricaded Jefferson Avenue to the Joe Louis parking structure — logistical measures due to last Sunday's Detroit Free Press running



**Waiting in the wings: It won't be long before Eagle player Andy Buchanan, 8, of Farmington Hills gets his chance.**

marathon. It was about 10:30 a.m., an hour before the Eagles and Stingrays were due to start their game.

n In small dressing rooms located at the end of the arena where the Zamboni enters and exits to clean the ice, coaches and parent helpers assisted the young players with their pads, jerseys, skates and other protective gear.

"Remember Colin, pizza tastes better with a 'w' in front of it," said assistant coach Chris Costello of Farmington Hills, helping his Eagle son get dressed for the contest.

Ostin, whose 8-year-old son Drew (Our Lady of Sorrows) plays on the team, didn't really need to motivate his players. But he tried anyway.

"Do you want the Stanley Bucket?" asked Ostin, referring to the painted puck bucket, symbol of the friendly rivalry between the Eagles and Stingrays. "How much do you want that bucket? You get to skate on the same ice as Steve Zaerman, Sergei Fedorov, Chris Osgood... It doesn't happen all the time. Let's make the most of it today."

In the next room, Stingrays coach Hamilton, a friend of Ostin's, was implying his ranks to keep in mind why they were there in the first place. "Today we're going to have a lot of fun. That's the goal."

n Shortly before 11:30 a.m., Greener, who worked with the coaches in setting up the game, stopped by to make sure everybody was ready to go, and to remind them to get off the ice no later than 12:30 p.m. The reason? The Red Wings would follow them for a pregame practice.

Meanwhile, just down the corridor, the Zamboni driver was getting ready to clear the ice, following a morning practice involving several Calgary Flames players who weren't playing against the Red Wings.

**Dream team**

Within minutes, both youth teams stepped out of the dressing rooms and waited for the signal. They were anxiously chomping at the bit, and on their mouth guards. Soon they were on their way, proceeding in single file toward the gate, where awaiting on the other side was the dream of a still-short lifetime. Players couldn't hold back their smiles as they skated out onto the gleaming white surface.

"This is coooool!" said one Eagle.

During the game, the players couldn't help but stand up in front of their respective benches to watch. Even coaches and parent assistants had trouble containing themselves.

"It's excellent," said Farmington resident Mike Ferriss, whose son Michael, 8, (Longene Elementary) is on the team. "It's a big thrill... We're very fortunate to have this opportunity. And I don't know who is more excited, the kids or the dads. We have fun with this too."

It showed. Ferriss and a few other dads who had Ostin had better with a 'w' in front of it, said assistant coach Chris Costello of Farmington Hills, helping his Eagle son get dressed for the contest.

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**It's theirs:** After the Eagles defeated the Stingrays 2-1, winning Mite team members Drew Ostin (left) and Colin Costello, both of Farmington Hills, hoist the "Stanley Bucket."



**Cornered: Chris Sarkesian (right), of Farmington Hills, digs the puck out of the corner with two defensemen from the Stingrays closing in on him.**

first goal. Andy Buchanan, 8, of Farmington Hills, fed a perfect pass to linemate Colin Costello. He took a wrist shot into the net.

Colin scored the second goal, poking in a rebound halfway through the third period, before the Stingrays made it close late in the game. Erik made a couple more saves, and the Eagles cleared the zone to protect the lead.

Following the game, both teams lined up and completed the traditional center ice handshake, and then Greener presented the Eagles with the "Stanley Bucket." Up in the stands, parents applauded. Down on the ice, the coaches were just as thrilled.

"A beautiful game, a great game," said Hamilton, whose Stingrays last year won the bucket trophy.

**Hungry and happy** Now, everybody had to hurry up, go to lunch and get back before the 3 p.m. Wings game.

Around 1 p.m., after getting dressed into their street clothes, it was time to go to Greentown's Pizza Papalis and Nikki's for lunch. But with the People Mover not in use, they were forced to take restaurant shuttles. Ostin also made two trips from the Joe, filling his minivan

with hungry players.

The Eagles and their families ate at Pizza Papalis. Among the parents were Erik's, Sharon and Michael Zeldes. Understandably, they were very proud of their son, who was named the game's first star by Ostin.

"Words really can't describe how I felt," Michael Zeldes said, about his son's sparkling performance. "I've never been so excited."

Conversely, Erik, who attends Pleasant Lake Elementary in the Walpole Lake school district, seemed almost nonchalant about the experience.

"This whole thing was like, 'It's no big deal,'" Zeldes said. "It didn't even faze him."

At a nearby table, 8-year-old Matt Zulch (Wood Creek Elementary) and his parents, Penny and Tom Zulch of Farmington Hills, reminisced between bites of stuffed pizza and salad.

"I thought it was fantastic," Penny Zulch said. "We had a pretty good crowd, too."

Tom Zulch noted that "I think the whole thing's great for all the kids, it's great to have the opportunity. I'll remember it and I'm sure he will."

According to Matt, playing on the Joe Louis Arena ice was a privilege that "a lot of kids don't

get." During the contest, he said he focused more on making correct plays than on where he was. But it was starting to soak in. In a couple hours, he'd be back on that ice, one of five Eagles and five Stingrays trying to score in the shootout. That's what had him feeling anxiety.

"I'm a little nervous," Matt said, thinking about skating out in front of a capacity crowd. Matt's butterflies didn't stop him from scoring a goal in the shootout.

Later, all the Farmington Hills Hockey Association contingent had to worry about was sitting back and enjoying the last two periods of the Wings-Flames contest, watching from the cheap seats in Section 227B, at the end high above Osgood. And, getting down to the dressing rooms afterward to collect their gear.

Ostin, and his wife, Karen, finally could take a breather, and take in everything that happened during this unforgettable day.

"We skated on the same ice they are, and we sat on the same benches," Ostin said, looking down on the NHL action. "It's really incredible when you think about it."



## Players sell tickets for Great Lakes Invitational

BY TIM SMITH  
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For the Eagles and Stingrays, last Sunday's experience of playing hockey at Joe Louis Arena remains fresh in their minds. Now, players and families of the two Farmington Hills Hockey Association Mite division teams have a chance to really show their appreciation to the Detroit Red Wings organization, and at the same time help their own league.

All players in the association, about 1,100 of them, between ages 5-17, will be given four \$12 general admission tickets — to sell — for the Great Lakes Invitational college hockey tournament, slated for Saturday and Sunday, Dec. 26-27, at Joe Louis. A portion of ticket sales will go back to the association, making the fund-raiser a win-win situation, said Stingrays coach Tom Hamilton, who is overseeing the endeavor.

"We do a lot for them and they in turn do a lot for us," said Hamilton about the connection between the association and Red Wings. This is the third year the

association is selling tickets to the GLI, a longtime holiday hockey tradition.

Hamilton, whose 7-year-old son, Tommy, plays defense for the Stingrays, is confident the organization will sell its goal of 5,000 tickets. In the first two years, ticket sales were 4,000 and 4,400, respectively.

"They have been the most successful association in this program," said Mary Greener of the Red Wings group sales department. She also coordinates the visits by youth hockey teams. "Last year, they made about \$12,000 for their association."

That success was one reason the Red Wings invited the Eagles and Stingrays to play a youth game before last Sunday's Wings-Calgary Flames contest. Players from both squads also participated in a shootout after the first period of the big league game.

Greener emphasized that Red Wings owners Mike and Marian Ilitch have long made it a top priority to promote the game to young people, to get them interested in playing and in following the sport.

"It definitely starts with Mr. and Mrs. 'I,'" Greener said. "They're really behind this program. They're pro youth, pro community."

This is the seventh year of the program, where youth teams are invited to play before Red Wings games. The GLI has been played at Joe Louis throughout the Ilitch ownership of the club.

"Everybody knows Red Wing tickets are a tough ticket," Greener said. "Especially for kids. We really want to get the kids down here, because we feel kids are an important part of our fan base."

Of course, there is an incentive to sell a lot of tickets to the tournament, which this year includes teams from Michigan, Michigan State, Northern Michigan and Michigan Tech universities. Whichever association sells the most will come back to the Joe, for another chance to skate at a Hockeytown shootout.

"It's obviously a carrot for parents and kids to get out and sell tickets for this fund-raiser," said Mite Eagles parent and coach Tom Ostin.

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