



PATRICIA COLEGA

## SPORTS

Our man Jensen, in the white jersey, slashes and dashes but somehow eludes the puck at his Major League Roller Hockey tryout.

# Where asphalt runs in their blood

## Pro roller hockey league comes calling by Bill Jensen

Flying through the thick, sweaty air of Pennsylvania's Pine Hill hockey arena, I made a mental note to thank the player who had just relieved me of the burden of gravity. C.J. Yoder, a second-year pro from the St. Louis Vipers, had just taken it upon himself to welcome me to the world of professional roller hockey with an open court check that catapulted me over the blueline. This was Yoder's hometown, his home rink, his whole family watching in the stands. I was the lone Long Islander in a sea of Pennsylvanians, all vying for a chance at this try-out camp to become a professional hockey player for the brand spankin' new pro circuit, Major League Roller Hockey.

As my usual 3:1 ratio of hits given to hits received was quickly being sucked down to 1:1, I found myself on the court as often as I showed my opponents to their seats. After two games, I knew it was done. Needing a change of luck and a change of breath, I ate one of the hundreds of free peppermint Tastetations, the new hard candy from Hershey's which were in mass abundance at this hockey arena in Hershey country, and took the floor in the final game just looking to have fun. Three assists, a clanger off the post and three solid hits later, my trip to Chocolate World was salvaged. After sliding in front of an open net to block a wrist shot in the

chest to preserve a 3-3 tie, I looked up at the pro scout perched in the stands to see if he was writing down any of my achievements. He wasn't. The early birds got the worm, and I went home with a handful of Tastetations.

On the four-hour trip back, I contemplated cashing in my second chance at the next week's try-out camp. But that meant going into the lion's den. Going into the place where asphalt runs in the blood of its goateed inhabitants. Going into Long Island.

"When we were organizing these free-agent try-out camps, everyone told us we had to come to Long Island," explained Dr. Arnie Willis, a urologist and chairman of the board of the young league. After all, before Californians discovered Rollerblades, the New York area was the center of the roller hockey universe. The Long Island camp would bring together 50 guys who wouldn't shy away from hitting in a very small hockey rink, all in competition for the opportunity to be part of a six-week tour showcasing roller hockey throughout North America and Great Britain.

Major League Roller Hockey's "Rollin' Thunder" tour will thrust six teams of 17 players on a hockey bus tour down the East coast of North America and across Great Britain. Each stop on the trip will have a festival atmosphere, featuring clinics and Fashion Extreme, "a hybrid music/fashion/aggressive skating spectacular."

If the idea smacks of a Grateful Dead tour, then that is the atmosphere the organizers want to create. "Every day has to be a Woodstock," said Vice President of Player Personnel Dan Delaney. "If you think you are going to fill a building just with roller hockey, you better get your head out of your ass." Delaney is in charge of selecting the 100 players who will make up the rock 'n' roll hockey caravan this summer.

The objective of the tour is to create a buzz and a fan base for the league's first full season slated for 1998, which will feature a minimum of 12 teams in the United States, Canada and Europe. Billing itself as "The World's League," Major League Roller Hockey is threatening Roller Hockey International, an existing professional organization, by offering the chance for amateur roller hockey players to earn a paycheck on wheels. RHI employs only former and current minor league ice hockey players who see roller hockey as a way to stay in shape in the summer while earning some spending cash. RHI's lowest-paid players make \$180 a game, about what the new league will pay. MLRH realized that if you played true roller hockey, players who were not moonlighting on the ice in the winter, they would skate until their toes fell off, and be grateful for the opportunity to do so.

While amateur roller hockey has no hitting, the professional game is full contact, and from the drop of the first puck at Bulldog Arena in St. James, the Long Island players took full advantage of this newfound freedom. Bulldog's virgin boards were getting their first taste of heavy hitting action, sparking a spectator to joke that "they'll have to re-tighten all the bolts on the boards tomorrow."

The best player at the camp, and perhaps one of the best players on the Island, was Matt Spronk, who plays amateur hockey for the St. James Kuzak Bulldogs. Spronk, described by former teammate and Smithtown native Joe Ondrush as "the most modest hockey player you will ever meet in your life," greatly impressed head scout Delaney and will undoubtedly find a place on the tour along with a few other gems in the rough at Bulldog.

As for me, I again started slow. Finding no Tastetations in the un-Hershey realm of Suffolk County, I was forced to eat a Peppermint Patty instead. I finished strong, but my fatigue held me back. There's something about a black roof over an un-air-conditioned building that produces humidity on a 65-degree afternoon.

With my professional career in limbo, I left St. James a tired hockey player, with welts and bruises as evidence of slashes I couldn't remember receiving. My only comfort was in the confidence that I did my share of loosening some of those bolts on the boards. ■