

# Joy and magic

Teaching hockey to a Yemeni boy is what Canada's game should represent



THOMAS FROESE

SANA A YEMEN ♦ Confession time. Don't tell my wife, but I live in a hockey book. OK, I live in a few. They're not like my living room, where I lounge my feet on as many tables as possible. They're like an open space, where I romp around and discover things.

My first relationship, if I can call it that, with a hockey book involved *The Bobby Orr Story* – a gentle read by John Devaney. Fronted with a colourful photo of the stealthy Bruin in action, it was a Christmas gift from my grandmother in Berlin. I was 8.

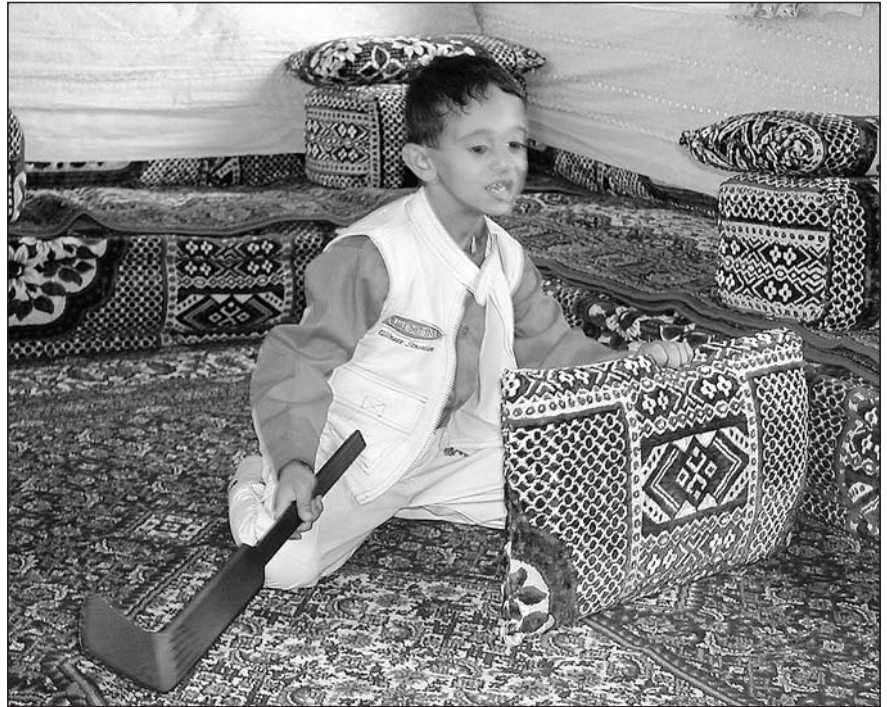
I idolized it. Pored over it. Embraced it. I loved skating. I loved playing more. But reading this book helped me appreciate the finer virtues of the game. Indeed, *The Bobby Orr Story* never imprinted my flailing Pee Wee body into the boards of the local rink, like the Tow Truckers did. Memories.

Eventually, I moved into *The Game*, Ken Dryden's deftly-penned, behind-the-scenes look at the Montreal Canadians and a particular hockey era. You see, #4 Bobby Orr aside, I was a terribly enslaved Canadiens fan. And in the late '70s, the prime of my wonder years, they were soaking in Stanley Cups like drunken sailors.

Day and night with my buddy Paul, on the street outside our school, Maple Crest, I excitedly announced the play-by-play: "Robinson to Savard to Lafleurrrr!" while Paul flopped around as Leafs' rubber-goalie Mike Palmateer. Later, I'd replay the goals in my mind, slow-motion, like the first time I kissed a girl. It felt so ... Canadian.

Years later, I actually read *The Game*. It was like discovering new rooms in the sprawling, country home where one had grown up. And Dryden had such keen insights, like, "He trudged along, unknowing what he sought, whistling as he went, for want of thought."

OK, that's poet John Dryden. But



THOMAS FROESE, SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

**Covering the angles while playing in goal is Abraham Al-Dowah, a Yemeni boy who to whom Thomas Froese is trying to teach the basics of hockey in Sana'a, one of the more unlikely places to find a love for Canada's game.**

Ken is better. And these things have all helped me adjust, somewhat, as a hockey nomad in a place like Yemen. It's not easy getting up at 3 a.m. for playoff games two days old, called by strange Yank sportscasters who can't follow the puck.

Thankfully, I'm now shackled up in another book. Dave Bidini's *Tropic of Hockey* is a manic look at Canada's game in weird places. If San Jose bothers you, you may not want to know of Ivory Coast, Beijing and Transylvania. Our game is even being born anew in the type of global outbacks where you need to bring your own toilet paper.

The United Arab Emirates, an oil-rich piece of earth that could cover its ice-pads with gold, has an annual Mighty Camels tourney. They were started by the so-called Father of Arabian Hockey, Chris Reynolds, from Calgary. Desert Yzermans named Yasser and Ahmed play for what the NHL has lost: the pure joy and magic of the game.

In Yemen, where some folks think that sitting on a rock is a good time, my ambitions are more modest. With a few other Canadians here, I need to simply teach the basics. I'm starting with my landlord's boy, Abraham. He's 9. Like most Yemenis, he's a bit small.

OK, he's dwarfed by Sleepy and Sneezy.

So we've started with rug hockey, played in the place of honour in Yemeni homes, a top-level, lavishly-carpeted and cushioned room called a muffridge. Later, for respect, and maybe for ball-hockey, Abraham, should have a Team Canada jersey.

I wear mine regularly. Jean says that on my first visit to Sana'a, greeting me at the airport, with my fire-red shirt amidst the white robes, she asked "Lord, what have I done by bringing this guy here?"

Another time, at Frankfurt's airport, a clerk who let me in the airport's private business lounge must have confused me for a Team Canada player.

Anyway, oddities like Jamaican bobsledders or Eddie the Eagle aside, the task is large. If the Calgary Flames win hockey's Holy Grail this year, maybe Reynolds can help bring it to Yemen for viewing.

Otherwise, little Abraham may be my only hope.

I guess, in the end, though, if all else fails, I can always resort to getting him you know what: A good hockey book to live in.

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