Introduction

BY THE TIME I ARRIVED HOME that Friday afternoon my dad was already there, listening to the game. I found him in the kitchen, leaning over the small RCA solid state radio. The game was scheduled to be shown on television later that night, on tape delay. But true fans, dedicated fans, heard the live call over the radio that afternoon.

The date was February 22, 1980.

The "Miracle on Ice" has been celebrated as an upset without equal. *Sports Illustrated* dubbed it the greatest event in sports history, surpassing Ali and Foreman, Jesse Owens in Berlin, and Roger Bannister's four-minute mile. For my dad and me, among the relatively few Americans who experienced the game live, there was a sense that something special was happening. I cannot remember any specific words of radio announcer Curt Chaplin, nothing like Al Michael's iconic call on TV later that night—"Do you believe in miracles? Yes!" I do recall that we were riveted. We did believe in miracles. As late afternoon gave way to the darkness of a winter evening, we stayed in the kitchen—him leaning against the counters, me sitting on the linoleum floor—listening out of a belief in the impossible.

At the same time, we were surprised the game was so close. We didn't understand why Soviet goaltender Vladislav Tretiak was on the bench after the first period, but we knew that it helped the Americans' chances. We were relieved that the Soviets led by just one goal after the second period and held hope for a comeback. Still, after Mark Johnson's tying goal midway through the third period and then, just over a minute later, the go-ahead goal by Mike Eruzione, we were stunned. They could actually beat the Soviets. I remember our nervousness in the final minutes, waiting for the clock to run down, hoping they could hold the lead. At the same time, I remember that the anxiety

was mixed with exhilaration, with the realization we were listening to history being made.

And our celebration? I don't remember. I can't recall what we did or said when the final horn sounded. My dad had to leave shortly after the game ended. He refereed high school and college hockey in the area and there was a game that night. I often went along when he officiated, but not this Friday. I stayed for the delayed TV broadcast of the game, to watch what I had just heard. Already knowing the outcome, I could watch with joyful anticipation. That feeling stuck with me as I watched the US team defeat Finland on Sunday morning to win the gold and then the medal ceremony later that day, when Eruzione called his teammates to the podium after the anthem. I eagerly read the newspaper and magazine stories. When the new issue of *Sports Illustrated* arrived later that week, its cover went up on my bedroom wall: Heinz Kluetmeier's famous photograph of the players in their white USA jerseys celebrating after the win over the Soviets. Even ten months later, when I unwrapped my own USA hockey jersey for Christmas, my joy had barely diminished. No one in my neighborhood had a jersey like that.

Why was this game so meaningful to me? First, I understood its political importance. Even at age eleven, my path to becoming a historian was ordained. I was a news junkie who watched Walter Cronkite every evening and pored over issues of *Time* and *Newsweek*. I knew of the American hostages held in Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the emerging Abscam corruption scandal swirling around members of Congress. When the 2004 film *Miracle* told the story of the 1980 Olympic team, it opened with a montage of news clips from the 1970s: Nixon's resignation, the fall of Saigon, inflation, fuel shortages. The montage closes with Jimmy Carter's televised address from July 1979, his warning that the United States was facing a "crisis of confidence." All accounts of the US team's victory at Lake Placid paint the same background: the country was at a low point in winter 1980. This was true—at least from the viewpoint of a precocious fifth-grader. The hockey team's win over the Soviets, America's Cold War rival, was a needed dose of good news.

But the gold medal at Lake Placid was important to me for more personal reasons. At the time, hockey had limited, regional appeal in the United States. Among the four major team sports in America, hockey was firmly in fourth place, behind football, baseball, and basketball. The rare times the sport gained national attention were when Snoopy and Woodstock faced off on a frozen birdbath in the comics pages. Even the TV broadcast of the US-Soviet game did not draw that large of an audience. Yes, it's one of the most-watched

hockey games in American television history, but that's not saying much. In the Nielsen ratings, that night's Olympic programming ranked only twelfth. The latest episode of *Diff'rent Strokes* and the movie of the week, *Harper Valley P.T.A.*, earned higher ratings than the Miracle on Ice.[1]

Hockey was not America's game. But it was my game. When the *Sports Illustrated* cover went on my bedroom wall, it joined team pennants and hockey cards, featuring the likes of Guy Lafleur, Bryan Trottier, and Marcel Dionne. Thanks to my subscription to *Hockey Digest,* I knew the game's records and lore. My dad made me watch the Hartford Whalers when they were on TV, just so someday I could say that I had seen Gordie Howe play. He told me of the time he sat next to Bobby Orr at a bar. I never saw Orr play, but I knew that was important.

I learned the game from my dad. He had old hockey gloves of soft leather and a wool sweater he kept at the bottom of his dresser drawer, its numbers coming unstitched at the corners. He and I usually had our first skate in November, when the ice on the bay was so smooth that the puck would glide forever, off in the direction of the big ore ships frozen at their docks. We moved to the neighborhood rink once it was ready. I spent the winter months there, either in practices for my park team or in Saturday-afternoon pickup games. But often I was there with my dad, who would get me away from the TV by telling me to grab my skates. Our annual ritual was to go for a skate on Christmas morning, after the presents had been unwrapped. The ice was ours alone, and I usually had a new stick that had been leaning near the tree that morning.

Hockey was a niche attraction in the United States in 1980. But I was among the initiated. The Olympic team's win was important to me because I had been raised on the game. More than that, I was a hockey player from Minnesota. As an eleven-year-old, I was aware that I lived in a remote part of the country. The places I would see on television—New York, Washington, Los Angeles, Chicago—seemed a world away. Whenever my hometown was mentioned in popular media, it was usually as a joke. Duluth was synonymous with the distant, frozen North. People who live in the Duluths of the world, the marginal places, often take pride in being set apart; we like to tell ourselves that we have a different ethic than those who live in centers of wealth and power. At the same time, there is a longing for recognition from those at the center. This is a constant theme in Canadian culture as well. As novelist Douglas Coupland writes, Canadian popular media regularly tries to stir national pride by listing all of the actors and athletes who have become successful in the United States. "Does Illinois torture itself about how many

famous actors come from Illinois?" Coupland asks. "No. But Canada cares about how many Canadian actors come from Canada."[2] So does Minnesota.

For many people in the state, including me, the Olympic team's triumph was an instance of fellow Minnesotans stepping onto the world stage. This was our team. Of the twenty players on the Olympic team, twelve were from Minnesota, as was the team's coach, Herb Brooks. They were from towns and neighborhoods we knew. Newspaper articles told of the celebrations of parents and siblings, uncles and aunts, high school classmates and college roommates. Reporters visited Brooks's parents, Herbert and Pauline, at their home on St. Paul's East Side. "Herb has come a long way from Hastings Pond," his mother said. "I remember when he was 10 or 11 and my husband said he would help him learn to play hockey. And now he's brought a lot of honor to our country."[3]

When the coach and his Minnesota-raised players returned home after their visit to the White House, they were paraded through the streets of St. Paul and Minneapolis. Local papers printed photos of fans lining the parade route and described the players as humble, hometown boys. "This is better than going to Washington," Mike Ramsey told a reporter. "In Washington, there was the president and everything. But being here and seeing all the real people is unbelievable."[4] Ramsey and his teammates spoke of their Olympic triumph in awestruck, appreciative terms. They were grateful to have been part of such a historic event. But now they were happy to be home—soon to be out of the limelight. "There's a point of getting too much attention," Ramsey said. A few of the players from towns in northern Minnesota skipped the parade altogether. They chose instead to get home right away.

One of these players, Phil Verchota, lived in my hometown. A few months after the Olympics, my dad and I had the chance to meet him at his family's home. I remember being struck by the fact that his house was an ordinary house. His parents were ordinary parents. And Verchota himself was an ordinary guy. But he had been part of something extraordinary. I saw his gold medal. I saw the white USA jersey he and his teammates had worn in the game against the Soviets. This was someone from the place where I lived, who played the sport I played, who had gone on to accomplish the remarkable. Maybe, I dreamed as an eleven-year-old, maybe I could do something remarkable, too.

At age eleven, I dreamed of being an Olympian. At age twelve, I reached my peak. I was a short, stocky forward, but I made up for it by being slow. I ended up having more success as a historian than as a hockey player.

I did make it to the Olympics, though, as a spectator at the 2018 Pyeongchang games. A lot had changed in hockey by that time. The Soviet Union no longer existed, yet the Russians were still the strongest team in the tournament. They were also still cast as villains, after multiple investigations had revealed a massive doping program in Russian sport. No longer was the United States represented by a team of college players; instead, pros were allowed to compete. But for the first time since 1998, the National Hockey League (NHL) did not pause the season and allow its players to participate. With revenue topping $4.5 billion, Commissioner Gary Bettman and league owners no longer saw the benefit of players risking injury while their arenas sat empty. As a result, attendance was disappointing at the new arenas in Gangneung, on South Korea's northeast coast.

Yet even without NHL stars, Olympic hockey still drew a big audience back home. Since being introduced at the 1998 Nagano games, women's hockey had become one of the marquee events of the Winter Olympics, and the rivalry between the Canadian and American national teams was touted as one of the best in sports. Team USA's shootout win over Canada for the gold medal set records for late-night TV ratings in the United States. In Canada, the game was the second-most-watched program of the year, beating out the Academy Awards, the World Cup final, and the Maple Leafs in the playoffs.

But I was not at the 2018 games to watch the traditional powers of women's and men's hockey. Instead, I was following the Koreans. For the first time ever, South Korea's men's and women's teams were playing in the Olympics. The International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) had made the unprecedented decision to grant the host nation an automatic bid to the Olympic tournament, rather than requiring the normal qualification process. To hockey fans in North America and Europe, the addition was surprising. "They play hockey in Korea?" plenty of people asked me. The answer was yes—just as they play hockey in Mexico, Australia, and South Africa.

In his travelogue of the world's unlikely hockey nests, journalist Dave Bidini writes that sport, "like dandelion seeds sown on the wind, has the tendency to settle where you least expect it."[5] The seeds of hockey had first settled in Korea in the 1920s, carried over by American missionaries and teachers. After the war, hockey took root in high schools and universities in the South. The South Korean national men's team first competed in 1979, and the women's team in 2004. Although speed skating is Korea's most popular winter sport, hockey has gained a dedicated following. Pro teams compete in the Asian League against opponents from Japan and the Russian

Far East. One of the league's top teams, Anyang Halla, is made up mostly of Korean players, with a handful of Canadians and Americans—coached by a Czech.

Korea's small hockey community is avid. The problem was, with a pool of only three thousand registered players, the national teams were not strong enough to compete in the Olympics. The men's and women's teams regularly competed in the second or third tiers of world hockey. Jumping to the Olympics and playing the likes of Canada and Russia would be potentially embarrassing. To prepare for the sport's biggest stage, the Korean Ice Hockey Association turned to Jim Paek as director of hockey operations and coach of the men's team. Paek, born in Seoul, had been raised in the Toronto suburbs after his parents emigrated. He started skating at the park across from his family's home in Etobicoke and climbed the ladder of Canadian minor hockey. Eventually joining the Pittsburgh Penguins, Paek became the first Korean-born player to have his name inscribed on the Stanley Cup. After a sixteen-year playing career, he coached for the Red Wings' farm team in Grand Rapids before taking the position in Korea. In interviews, he spoke of returning to his family's home country as an honor.[6]

The Korean federation imported players as well as coaches to strengthen its teams. When the men's team took the ice at the Olympics, the roster included five Canadians and one American. But these were not sons of immigrants; instead, they were big white guys who were naturalized as Korean citizens. Korea's North American players drew plenty of attention. On the ice, they towered over their teammates. Off the rink, there were a few raised eyebrows. "They thought I was representing North Korea," said goalie Matt Dalton of the questions he got back home. "They just didn't know the difference."[7] In Korea as well, where national identity had long been linked to a notion of ethnic homogeneity, the idea of blonde, white North Americans representing the country was perplexing.[8] The addition of the foreign players was made possible by a 2011 change in citizenship laws, allowing people with special skills to fast-track through the process. One aim of the law was to improve the country's performance in international sports, and among the first naturalized citizens were an African-American basketball player, a Kenyan marathoner, and a German luger. Still, citizenship was not easy to earn. Candidates had to read and write in Hangul characters and sing the national anthem in Korean.

For the North American hockey players, Korean citizenship brought a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. As journeymen pros, they knew chances were

slim of playing in the Olympics for their home countries. At the same time, as Dalton explained to me, their new passports provided something else that was rare for pro athletes—stability. Like each of his naturalized teammates, Dalton had taken a meandering path through the hockey world before landing in the Asian League: from his hometown in rural Ontario to junior teams in Montana and Iowa; college hockey in Bemidji, Minnesota; farm teams in Pennsylvania and Providence; a brief stop in Boston with the Bruins; and then Podolsk and Nizhnekamsk in Russia's Kontinental Hockey League—eight teams in nine seasons. After signing with Anyang Halla, Dalton and his wife quickly appreciated life in the Seoul suburb where the team was based. The money was good, his team won, and he became a fan favorite. The decision to become a citizen ensured a steady place for the first time in his hockey career. He was no longer designated an import player, at risk of being cut if the team's fortunes turned.[9]

By contrast, the players imported for the South Korean women's team all had family connections to the country. Former Princeton player Caroline Park was a first-generation Korean-Canadian from Brampton, Ontario. Randi Griffin, who played college hockey at Harvard, grew up in North Carolina with her Korean mother and white father. The player who drew the most media attention before the games was Marissa Brandt, who had been adopted from Korea by a Minnesota couple when she was a baby. Brandt played as a member of the Korean team, while her sister Hannah played for Team USA. Unlike the naturalized players on the men's team, who had all played pro hockey in Korea for years, the imported women received surprise invitations to join the national team. Many thought their days of organized hockey had ended after college. Park, who was in medical school, dismissed the Korean federation's email as some joke from her father. Weeks later, she was at tryouts in Korea.[10]

For two and a half years, the mix of Koreans and North American imports trained together for the games. Then, just three weeks before the opening ceremony, the news broke: twelve players from North Korea would be added to the South Korean team. For the first time since Korea was divided after World War II, athletes from North and South would compete together in the Olympics. The International Olympic Committee and the IIHF had discussed the possibility of a unified team for five years. After Moon Jae-in became president in 2017, South Korea had a leader willing to make such a gesture to the North. Public opinion, however, was at first strongly opposed. According to one survey, more than 80 percent of young Koreans opposed

the inclusion of North Korean players. Critics derided the move as a propaganda stunt for the North's benefit. Others called out the apparent sexism—that officials would have never dared add North Koreans to the men's team.[11]

Despite the initial criticism, the atmosphere was charged for the unified team's first Olympic game. Outside the Kwandong Hockey Centre, volunteers handed out thousands of small white flags with the same logo as the team's new jerseys: a blue image of the Korean Peninsula, with no boundaries. Behind the arena, I found hundreds of people lining the service entrance, waving their flags and singing in anticipation of the expected dignitaries—President Moon of South Korea and Kim Yo-jong, sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

Along with a delegation of officials, North Korea also sent a troop of more than two hundred cheerleaders. These carefully screened young women, all from families with impeccable Communist Party credentials, were regularly sent abroad to cheer North Korean teams at international sporting events. There were no short skirts, pom-poms, or acrobatic routines. Instead, the North Korean women dressed demurely in matching track suits and sat together in large groups, filling entire rows of the arena. They sang traditional songs, accompanied by synchronized swaying and arm movements. Occasionally, a woman in each group performed a dance routine in a *hanbok,* the traditional Korean gown.

Other than the noodle bowls for sale at concession stands, the Kwandong Hockey Centre was much like any other arena in the hockey world. A handful of Koreans wore team jerseys. I met one father and daughter dressed in Anyang Halla jerseys with Matt Dalton's name on the back. As in arenas in North America or Europe, hard rock blasted during breaks in play. What stood out were the North Korean cheerleaders. As an AC/DC or Metallica riff sounded, the smiling women performed their choreographed songs. When the familiar "stomp-stomp-clap, stomp-stomp-clap" of Queen's "We Will Rock You" thundered over the speakers, the crowd instinctively joined in. But the cheerleaders sat still. They did not know the song. Or they were forbidden to know it. Later in the game, I caught sight of a cheerleader clapping along to a pop song during a stoppage. Her neighbor gave a discrete elbow. She put her hands in her lap.

Even without the cheerleaders and dignitaries, the unified team's contests were more like political rallies than hockey games. During the team's second match, against Sweden, I sat among a pro-unification group whose members had traveled from as far away as Pusan, on Korea's southern tip. Like many