

How I Learned to Play Hockey

By Manny Gonzalez

Part One

You could sort of call me a “serial sportsman”.

Which is to say, I flit from one sport to another, showing great enthusiasm for each new activity, until failing at it and then moving on.

When I was 10, like most boys in the Philippines I played basketball. But eventually it became undeniable that I was going to be what is today known as “vertically challenged”. This was sort of fair, I reasoned, given how talented I was in almost every other respect. If God had made me tall, too, I might have become an insufferable, conceited snob.

Instead of the lovable, warm, fuzzy person I am today.

In my high school class, chess became a serious vogue. I lost with relentless regularity. Undeterred, I saved up my allowance to buy chess books, and read them cover-to-cover. Do you know what the Ruy Lopez opening is? The Sicilian? *Zugzwang*? I did. Not that I actually won any more games, but I sure could talk about chess. However, girls seemed sadly uninterested in this line of conversation.

When I went to college, my father refused to back my plan to invoke flat feet and skip out of ROTC, even though mine are flatter than pancakes. But if you were in a varsity sport you could get an exemption. This gave me the bright idea to apply for the swimming team, which had so few applicants that I was accepted.

In those days I could swim forever – 2 hours doing laps without ever touching the side of the pool, so I wasn’t wholly untalented. The coach however noted that I was perpetually stuck in low gear, so he put me in an event that no one else on the team wanted, the 200-meter breaststroke. This involves crossing an Olympic pool four times; and in all the meets I was ever in, by the time I turned around for the last lap, all the other contestants were already out of the water at the other end, impatiently waiting for me to finish already.

The humiliation was deep, but at least I wasn’t in ROTC.

Some years later, living in a rural area with many country lanes, I took up cycling. Bought a middling-good bicycle (two, actually, in a socially-optimistic frame of mind), a strap-on water bottle, helmet, etc., etc. But cycling never caught on in my imagination.

First of all, I never met anyone except irate cyclists shouting at me to get out of their way. Second, I always forgot the water bottle at home. And third, in that particular rural area in summer, there were insects. These were not dainty, faint-hearted insects biting in self-defence. These were hard-boiled, industrial-strength insects with a mission. They bit hard, deep, and often.

It was not long before I retreated to raising bulbs. (Tulips, daffodils, amaryllis – you name the bulb, I tried to raise it.)

On one trip home to the Philippines, I took up scuba-diving. The lessons were in someone's house in Dasma, and there were one or two comely fellow students. Scuba I did more or less okay in, and it offered a chance to see women in bikinis. So long as someone else was in charge of the equipment and the log-books. Me, I could sort of remember that if you went no deeper than 30 feet, you were probably safe. My dive certification even came in handy once or twice in the Caribbean. This was the extent of my ambition.

But I never truly fell in love with this sport. In some part, this was due to the fact that I got seasick and threw up practically every time I went diving. Sometimes in the boat, and sometimes 20 feet under water.

Once upon a summer, I rode horses. But it was mostly to keep up with a certain young lady who kept them on her ranch. I have no recollection of how well I rode, only that despite my never falling off, she dumped me when summer was over. Oh yes, once in Hyde Park I took a horse out on Rotten Row, but it paid no attention whatever to my commands, and another time in Central Park my horse knelt down and rolled me in the mud, evoking laughter from the other riders in the vicinity. New Yorkers are not nice people.

Many years later, undoubtedly trying to retro-compensate, I took riding lessons. I bought a mare named Bright, an ex-polo pony who was 14 hands or so high. Then I had the great good luck to get a fine instructor, a Frenchman named Jean-Claude, who by a roundabout way had come to the Philippines and wound up giving lessons at the Manila Polo Club.

Bright ate a lot, needed de-worming regularly, and cost a bundle to stable. But Mang Munding did most of the hard work, and I looked great in riding breeches and boots. The riding crop made me feel more virile, too. So I put a certain amount of energy into the lessons, extended the stirrups, stretched my heels, rested on the balls of my feet, and developed a pretty darn good "seat".

(You can tell if you have a good seat if, when the horse is galloping, your ass doesn't bounce up and down but instead looks like it's glued to the saddle. Look at the scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* where Indiana Jones chases a Nazi convoy on a white Arabian; that's what a good seat looks like.) I eventually got good enough to ride bareback (though not rein-less).

But riding is not for everyone.

In the Philippines, at least, it involves a lot of sweating. And once, at one end of a polo field, Bright got it into her head to relive her polo-playing days by bolting for the far side. Now, polo fields are very, very long, especially if you have lost one stirrup (very bad, because if you fall you will get dragged) and are hanging on to the pommel in blind panic. On another occasion, in Jamaica, a rental horse saw a snake (really!) reared up, and then did a Bright, except that it was bigger than Bright and harder to stop, and it was not a polo field of soft grass but a highway shoulder with cars whizzing past doing 70.

After a few such experiences you hang up your stirrups if you are smart. I will still ride occasionally, but only on moth-eaten nags that mostly like to walk, or better yet, amble.

Moving right along, I once got offered a second-hand jetski in “like-new” condition. The advantage of jetskis is that, if you fall off, it is not usually onto a highway. The disadvantage of the Yamaha I bought was that it was a “sport” model, which means that it will tip you over if given the slightest excuse. If this happens often enough, you might get a little seasick. Which I did.

However, I persevered, got better, and later even did stand-up jetskis, which are much harder yet. This was because at about the same time I had tried water-skiing and kept getting dragged on my belly and losing my trunks. I needed to prove to myself that I could stay up on *something*.

The trick to stand-up jetskis, should you ever need to get up on one, is to get it in motion before trying to board. Then bring one knee up, the other knee, one foot, the other foot. And suddenly, you have stood up! (Try not to lose your trunks before getting the first knee up.) Even so, the second your concentration wanders, you will wipe out. But I am proud to say that I have done Mactan to Hilutungan and back on a stand-up jetski and only lost my trunks once.

Jetskis, however, break down with stunning regularity, each time worse than the last. After spending mounds of money on repairs you eventually give up, leaving you with a 300-pound piece of junk on your beachfront.

Part Two

Eventually, someone tried to get me to take up golf. I diligently spent 2 days a week driving, putting, and doing the first 6 holes of a Par 65 course. Only the first 6 holes, because by then I had usually used up my bagful of balls for the day and needed to get back to the clubhouse to ransom another bag.

Now, obviously, golf has its fans. But I did not become one of them. It just takes too long. You get a whack, walk 5 minutes, then get another whack. Imagine how sex would be if it were conducted at the same pace as golf. Stroke. 5 minutes. Stroke. 5 minutes. . .

I know lots of people like golf. But to me it was like watching paint dry.

So when financial reversals compelled me to look for some quick cash, it was without too much emotional pain that I sold my country club share.

Shooting was next.

There is something faintly distasteful about rubbing down phallic symbols with oil, caressing them, and proudly asking other men if they want to look at and touch yours. On the other hand, there is something empowering and well, you know, *invigorating*, about cradling a well-balanced firearm in your hand and having the option to make it pop. Not just once, but repeatedly.

Never one to tiptoe when I can dive, I immediately bought a Glock-17 9 mm and a Benelli semi-automatic shotgun – a handgun and a long arm, what you are allowed under Philippine law.

The Glock was light, almost jam-proof, and had little kick, which is important when you have fine, delicate hands like mine, well-endowed for some kinds of play, but not gunplay. The Benelli also proved to be a good choice. “Semi-automatic” means that unlike most shotguns carried by security guards, you only need to cock once. After chambering the first round, you can just keep pulling the trigger for each shot. If you need to defend your home in the middle of the night, the Benelli is a good choice, as you are almost sure to hit something, such as a wall or a ceiling.

But my love affair with firearms was short-lived. For one thing, I am squeamish about killing things, especially animals that look at you in the eyes with faint surprise, just after you have pulled the trigger, and just before they drop dead. And for another, after firing the guns a few times, I realized that I am terrified of loud noises.

Speaking of terrifying, this brings me to ice-skating, which is somewhat related to hockey (see title of this article).

Once upon a time in Boston, Paula invited me to go ice-skating. Paula was as cute as they come, and had even let me do her homework occasionally. “It’s easy,” she assured me, before shoving me out into the rink –

- straight into the path of a couple of skaters. In a flash, we were a tangle of bodies, and I narrowly missed getting my fingers decapitated – if “decapitate” is what you call it when a sharpened skate blade runs over your hand and thereby separates one or more fingers from the rest of your body.

Having gotten off to a bad start, I never recovered. Paula wound up having to hold me at the waist for the rest of the session. This made my waist feel good, but it did not impress Paula, who subsequently let it be known that she would need no further assistance with her term paper.

The next time I attempted to skate was in Breckenridge, Colorado. The arena was absolutely empty and the attendant gave me a chair-like PVC frame that I could use to keep my balance. This worked up to a point. The point was when I leaned too hard on it and it collapsed, quickly followed by me. This resulted in a rather painful shoulder pull which begat a sebaceous cyst, which Edgar some years later cut out of my back, leaving a scar which is actually rather macho-looking, though not as good as an eye-patch.

Now, I have lately found myself spending significant amounts of time in Canada, where babies are taught to ice-skate at the age of 1, and to play hockey by 2. I held off for some time, but sooner or later I had to be a man and go out on the ice again.

Now, the first thing about ice-skating in Canada is that, while you can go to a rink, if you have any self-respect you find yourself a nice frozen lake. Which I did, but it brings up several challenges.



Caption: To ice-skate, first you find a frozen lake.

For one thing, in case you didn't understand, a frozen lake is not indoors but outdoors – it is, in fact, a lake that froze because the temperature was 10 below for several weeks. So, no matter how cold you may think an ice rink is, a frozen lake is much, much colder.

Second, lakes do not freeze smooth like an indoor rink whose ice just got Zamboni-ed. They have all sorts of bumps from wind and refrozen snow. Any one of these bumps can send you flying, if your weight is on the wrong skate. Also, if there is in fact snow on the ice (which is most of the time), you have to get out the snow-shovel and clear your own rink.



Caption: Before attempting to skate, make sure the ice is thick enough by sending your dog out and watching what happens (or by waiting until someone else has left footprints).

Third, there is usually no convenient bench where you can change from street shoes into skates. So you have to sit on the ice (Brrr!) or balance on one foot while trying to change the other (Oww! when you fall).

When I finally got the skates on my hips were already black and blue, and I discovered something else. Real outdoor ice is a lot slipperier than ice-rink ice. So you are more likely to fall. And it is harder. So it hurts more when you do.

During my first hour I never fell even once. I just sort of crept around one inch at a time. . . During my second hour I figured out that you have to get your center of gravity out in front of your feet so that if you fall it will be on your knees and elbows (not too bad), rather than your head (not too good). Nonetheless once I started to actually move around, I still fell on my butt repeatedly (see picture). . . And during my third hour (this was several days later) I was approached by a nosy skier (yes, you can ski on frozen lakes and other somewhat level areas; it's called Nordic skiing) who said "You haven't skated much, have you?" However he was sympathetic when I told him I was from the tropics and to mind his own damn business.



Caption: The author demonstrates grace and confidence under pressure.

And by my fourth hour I was gliding along just like in the movies.

That was when these kids challenged me to a hockey match.

I suppose you have seen hockey on TV. Do you know that all those players need a full set of false teeth by the time they're 18? This is why, if you are going to get suckered into a hockey match, don't do it with grown Canadians. Do it with half-grown or better yet pint-size Canadians (see picture). And even so, stay away from their hockey sticks.



Caption: Clara (7), Sasha (6), and Garbanzo(2) – the right kind of Canadian to play hockey against.

Confident that I could hold my own against 7-year-old (and younger) opponents, I didn't play for blood. Which is why they beat me 6 to Nothing. And also why I am taking up a new sport: Alpine skiing. See picture. That handsome guy who looks like an astronaut is me, getting ready for my first ski lesson.



Caption: The author modeling the latest in Alpine ski attire, ready for his next sporting adventure.

And the best part about skating on a lake, or Alpine skiing, or any winter sport, is that *afterwards*, you get to sit by a warm fire.



Caption: A roaring fire at Camp Snowflake: a nice way to end a sporting day.