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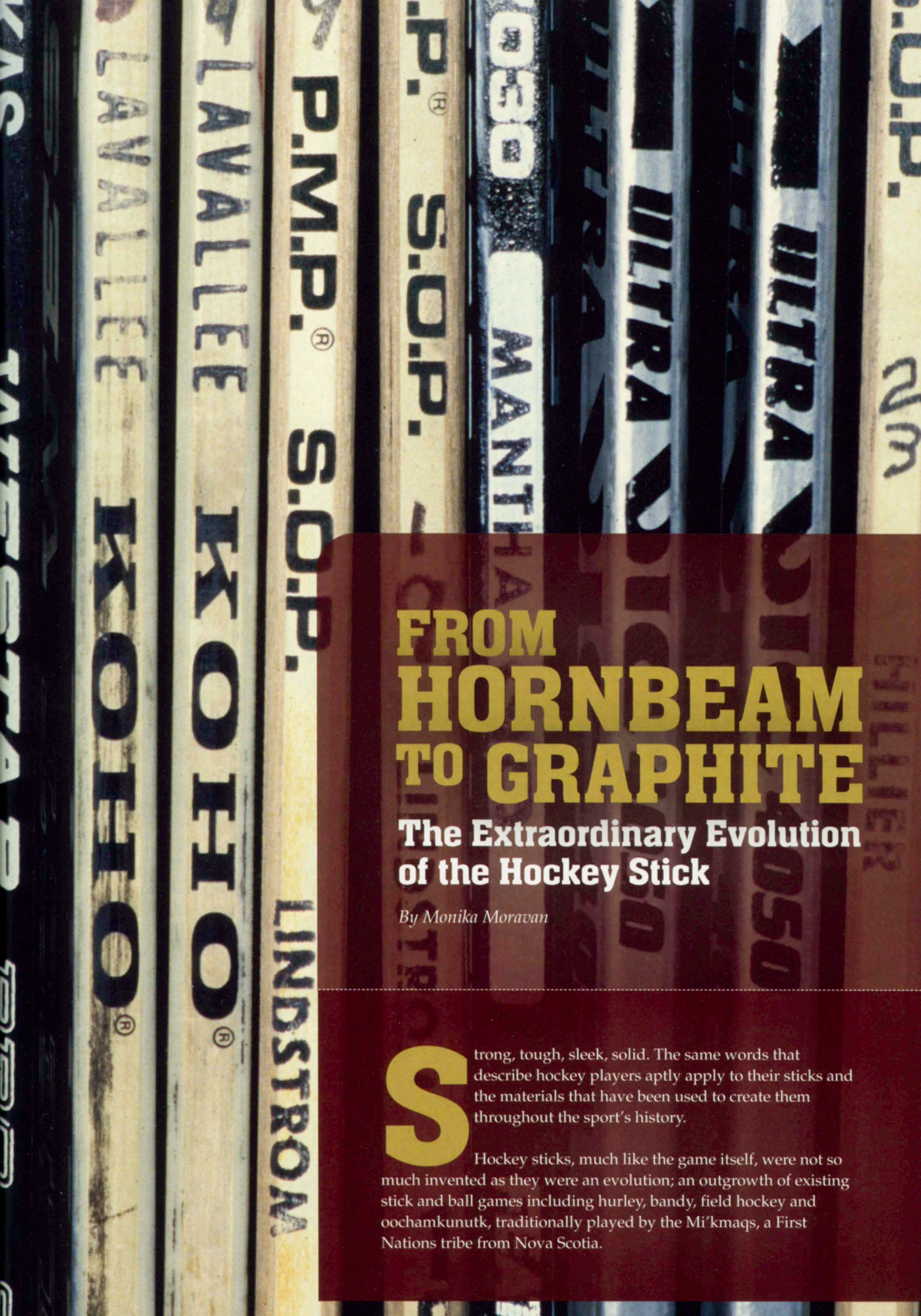
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FROM HORNBEAM TO GRAPHITE

The Extraordinary Evolution
of the Hockey Stick

By Monika Moravan

Strong, tough, sleek, solid. The same words that describe hockey players aptly apply to their sticks and the materials that have been used to create them throughout the sport's history.

Hockey sticks, much like the game itself, were not so much invented as they were an evolution; an outgrowth of existing stick and ball games including hurley, bandy, field hockey and oochamkunuk, traditionally played by the Mi'kmaq, a First Nations tribe from Nova Scotia.

People have played such games in regions all over the world for thousands of years, and still do, but it was in North America where they moved from fallow fields to frozen ponds en route to creating the sport we now recognize as ice hockey, and the stick that symbolizes it.

"There are records of hurley being played on the ice from the 1800s, resulting in the hurley stick evolving into the hockey stick," said Brian Logie, a London, Ontario hockey stick historian who owns one of the world's largest private collections of these iconic items. The combative cudgels used in both sports at that time had some similarities, most notably a curved blade. Around the 1860s, 'hurleys started being called 'hockeys,' which has caused more than a few headaches for curators and collectors alike.

"From an evolutionary standpoint, what happened was that the handle length, the blade thickness and the shape gradually changed to become more of what we associate with the ice hockey stick," Logie explained. Hockey blades were originally narrower than their hurley cousins.

Many things about the origins of hockey are locked or lost in the twin mists of lore and legend, but Logie stated, "We know that Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq were the first to make the sticks commercially, and they were all hand made. These were originally sold in Halifax and Dartmouth. They were made out of hornbeam trees, sometimes called ironwood because of its heft and hardness. The wood had a natural bend from where the roots grew out from the trunk, out of the ground."

The Mi'kmaq made full use of the massive forests in their midst and had

long been renowned as skilled wood carvers and craftsmen. They preferred using second-growth trees because they combined the strength of their parents with youthful flexibility. This lumber was cut and then hand-shaped, patterned after hurley and field hockey sticks to get the required design.

While the Mi'kmaq had cornered the commercial market, many players (or their dutiful parents) made their own sticks. These had no markings, no

Mark Presley, and another is the Rutherford, held for nearly 160 years by Gord Sharpe's family.

Sharpe, aged 45, remembers when his great-uncle Melville Rutherford handed him an ancient looking, battered piece of wood. The nine-year-old instantly recognized it as a hockey stick. What the resident from Gore's Landing, 90 minutes northeast of Toronto, didn't recognize for quite some time, was the historical and



(Imperial Oil – Turofsky / HHOF)

labels, nothing to indicate where or when they had been crafted. Once these sticks had worn out their usefulness for hockey, they were either turned into smaller items or, more often than not, tossed onto the hearth or the bonfire.

Such practicality is understandable but makes it harder than hornbeam to determine who can lay claim to owning the world's oldest stick. One contender is the Moffatt, owned by

financial value of the family heirloom. It wasn't until Sharpe wanted to insure the stick that had spent 30 years, in his words, "sitting around the house," that its true worth came to light. Phil Pritchard, Vice President and curator of the Hockey Hall of Fame, and a leading authority on hockey artifacts, asked Sharpe for evidence to support his claim of possessing the oldest stick. Sharpe headed to Lindsay, Ontario where his great-uncle's grandfather, Alexander Rutherford Sr., had settled

Above: Nick Metz of the Toronto Maple Leafs examines his all-wood, straight blade sticks during the 1940s.

in the 1850s. After extensive research at the Lindsay Public Archives, Sharpe concluded that Rutherford Sr. carved the stick sometime between 1852 and 1856.

The 'Rutherford' has often been displayed at Wayne Gretzky's Restaurant in Toronto. It has twice been put up for auction, most recently at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver. Its current location and exact ownership is unknown, but Pritchard makes no secret of his wish. "We'd love to have it here," he said. "But, as long as the stick is preserved, that's what is important."

There's no such mystery surrounding the stick owned by Mark Presley of Berwick, Nova Scotia. It appeared on the hockey history horizon in March 2008 when Presley bought it from a North Sydney, Nova Scotia barber shop where it had been displayed. He was familiar with the item through working for a brief time as an antiques dealer.

"I was in the hospital visiting my father-in-law," began Presley. "After awhile, I'd had enough of hanging around the place so I walked into town." Presley had heard the barber would soon be retiring, so he popped into the shop, curious as to whether or not the old stick was still there. It was, and he struck up a conversation with the shopkeeper. "He told me a story and I asked if he'd be willing to sell the stick," Presley recalled.

"I had a comprehensive collection of old skates and a few one-piece sticks, maybe three or four, but nothing quite like that one; nothing as primitive," said Presley. "Quite honestly, I wasn't even sure it was a hockey stick or just something from another stick and ball game. It was just a neat thing that it was still even there. I'd mentioned it to other dealers when I was in the business. I told all kinds of folks,

pickers and dealers alike." With a chuckle, he added, "People have kidded me about it, and some said, 'If you didn't buy it, we thought it wasn't all that good.'"

Presley brought his find to the 2008 "hockey stick summit" hosted by the Society for International Hockey Research (SIHR) in Kingston, Ontario, but not before going to extreme measures to back up his claim. In addition to following up on local history that showed the stick belonged to the Moffatt family of Pottle Lake, Nova Scotia, he employed the science of dendrochronology, a high-tech version of dating trees via their rings. Testing done by Colin Laroque and his staff at the Mount Allison Dendrochronology Laboratory indicated that the wood was not only from the mid-1800s but also from the Pottle Lake area. That research has placed the 'Moffatt' as the leader in the race for oldest stick.

As the emerging game spread from small towns like Pottle Lake to cities, the Kahnawake band near Montreal began making hockey sticks that were fashioned after the Robertson field hockey stick, which was crafted from mulberry wood.

In a clever marketing initiative that illustrates a keen business sense has always been part of the game, Starr Manufacturing initially sold these sticks, a perfect complement to their own product. Starr, based in the Halifax area, was Canada's first skate company. In 1865, they patented the spring or lever skate, which fit onto a boot. They dominated the market for both skates and sticks.

As demand increased in the 1900s, Starr began to manufacture their own sticks because the First Nations were unable to keep up with the pace of

production as the game's popularity skyrocketed in Ontario. By 1887, hockey was big enough for E.B. Salyard to start making sticks in Preston, Ontario (now part of Cambridge), the earliest stick making in Ontario. With the introduction of mass manufacturing, production switched over to rock elm. According to Brian Logie, "Instead of following the root of the tree, they took a block of rock elm, steamed in big steamers, placed it in a vice and bent just the one end. Imagine a 2 x 4 only five times bigger. After bending, it would go into a kiln for drying before being sliced into sticks, using saws and drum sanders." Sometimes, yellow birch, which also had a natural bend, was used. The 1904 Eaton's catalogue featured yellow birch 'Mic-Mac' sticks. That name was used by several companies, including Starr Manufacturing, Hespeler and Sher-

(Mecca/HOF)



Wood in homage to the original makers. In 1909, Spalding had a one-piece model called the 'Wigwam,' which they called "the product of a

Above: A craftsman puts the finishing touches on a hockey stick blade.

tribe of Indians in Canada” and “Indian hand-made.” That would indicate they were yellow birch hockey sticks from Nova Scotia.

It was around this time that goaltender sticks started to take on their current form. The now familiar paddle was not in common use. Netminders and blueliners used what was called a built-up goal and defence stick. “They used similar sticks with just a slightly heavier blade than a forward stick,” explained Logie. “It wasn’t until the early 1900s that they took the one-piece hockey stick and added another piece of wood on top of it. Now you had a one-piece stick with a piece of wood on top to make the blade taller and to make half of a paddle. That was definitely an innovation.”

The two piece goalie sticks were listed fully in Spalding’s catalogue by 1910-11 and still show in some stick supply catalogues from the 1920s. It wasn’t until 1922 that the three-piece goalie stick, the one goalies use today where the addition is on both sides of the shaft to make a paddle and a big blade, was patented by St. Mary’s Wood Specialty products from St. Mary’s, Ontario.

The wood used also changed from hornbeam and yellow birch to rock elm and white ash, depending on quantity and availability. Rock elm was the most popular for one-piece steamed and bent sticks. “They were largely handmade even until the 1940s, because the process was still similar,” stated Logie. Later on, more precise machinery cut handles down to size. Logie has some examples where the handle is not uniform. “You can see where someone sawed and sanded it, a bit thinner in one spot, a bit thicker in another. I spoke to someone a few years ago and he said that’s all he did – got paid ten cents an hour to sand hockey sticks.”

Sticks evolved by getting longer, and the game changed around that. Goaltenders originally had to play standing up because rules denied players from lifting the puck. Blasting the puck and shooting for the top corner came about due to increased stick length and longer blades. “Shooting the puck with a great deal more velocity came more through the length of the stick than anything,” commented Logie.

Another innovation was Hespeler’s patent for pinned blades in 1899. A pin was driven right through the top to the bottom of a blade so that if it cracked, the pin, a small nail, would keep the two pieces from fully separating.

The next big evolution was sliced or laminated hockey sticks. From the 1930s on, rock elm became scarce so ash was used much more than in the one-piece era. With ash, the stick handle was made separately and a second, short piece of handle material was glued on at the bottom to make it sturdier, then the blade was made as a separate

piece and mortise and tenon joints were cut into the handle and on the blade before gluing into place. Once the glue set, the stick had its modern shape. These were referred to as laminated or sliced hockey sticks. A CCM catalogue touts “the patented process of lamination eliminates steaming or boiling necessary for a bent stick.”

Over time, this process didn’t really change, but the materials certainly did. Laminated softwood replaced ash for the handle and plywood and ash went into the blade, along with fibreglass reinforcement so that blades were thin and able to be curved. Brad Park was the first player to use an aluminum shaft in an NHL game when he debuted the stick in 1982. Even though the material changed, it was still the same process but the stick was cut shorter and then glued into the shaft.

Randy Kligerman owns Jara International, a firm that has done work for Sherwood, Salming and Trilage. He is hesitant to call himself a stick designer. “That’s a tricky word because the design of the hockey stick, with the exception of Salming, who has added some unique characteristics – some geometry – hasn’t changed since inception,” he said. “It’s about being innovative in how you utilise materials.”

He has fully embraced creating the composite sticks that now command 80% of the retail market dominated by Bauer, Easton, Reebok, CCM and others. “Composites in the past 10 years have become better. We’ve been able to incorporate other materials into them to increase their durability. Over the past five years, we’ve been able to build them so that if they crack, they’re not sharp so there won’t be an injury. We’ve been able to design and mold them with cavities in the middle to inject foam,” he said. Kligerman looks



forward to the next evolution in stick development and predicted, “We’re working with material now that will become the start of a new generation. The materials that are going to come out now, that’ll be exciting! Ultimately, it will make the stick more ergonomically designed for the consumer, not so much in the shape but in the characteristics.”

The current composite characteristics leave fewer and fewer NHLers using wooden sticks. Jason Spezza, star centre with the Ottawa Senators, was one of the more notable holdouts – he didn’t switch from wood to a composite until 2008 after Sherwood-Drolet, who had been making his sticks since his junior days with the Windsor Spitfires in 2001, moved production out of Quebec. “I tried diligently to keep using wooden sticks but the consistency kept getting worse,” he lamented. “At first, I hated the feel of graphite but the companies have made such great strides that it would be tough for me to go back now. The mechanics would be all different for me.”

Mechanics of a different sort now dominate the life of Patrice Brisebois, who spent 16 of his 18 seasons as an NHL defenceman with his hometown Montreal Canadiens, including their 1993 Stanley Cup win. Following his hockey retirement at the conclusion of the 2008-2009 season, he literally switched gears by entering a new career as a driver on the NASCAR Canada circuit, so it would be hard for anyone to make a case that he isn’t willing to try new things.

Like Spezza, Brisebois was reluctant to switch from the old-school wood sticks. “I love the wood feeling,” he

declared. “When the curve is right, when the stiffness is right, the wood stick is the best tool to play hockey. Sometimes I’d get a stick that felt so great, like ‘I’m gonna score one or two tonight’ because you just had that feeling in the wood stick.”

Ultimately, he made the switch because, “The big advantage with carbon fibre is that you always have the same curve; always the same flex so you know every time what you’ll get,” he admitted. “I remember ordering five or six dozen (wood) sticks and maybe

Both Spezza and Brisebois see the professional benefit of composites but still see a crucial role for the traditional wooden stick. “Younger kids won’t get as much out of a composite,” said Spezza, a new father of a baby daughter. “My kids will use wood until they’re teens.”

Brisebois likes that in theory, but in practise, admitted “That’s going to be hard, to be honest with you. Sometimes when I go to a tournament, all the kids are playing with carbon sticks. The future NHL

(Matthew Murnaghan/HOF-IHF Images)



24 were good. I don’t want to say I was really picky but the stick-to-stick difference was huge.”

While his new career sees him working a different kind of stick shift, Brisebois makes it a point to play road hockey with his two daughters as often as he can. Like father, like daughter, “They have wooden sticks,” he said. “When they’re playing with me, they have wooden sticks.”

guys, those kids now, they’ve already played with those sticks.”

Whatever hockey’s future, whatever wondrous materials lie ahead, rinks and driveways will still be filled with the sounds of sticks slapping pucks, of goal scorers celebrating and yes, of goalies grimacing.

Monika Moravan is a Toronto-based freelance writer and an editor with the Society for International Hockey Research (SIHR).

Above: Jason Spezza was one of the last hold-outs in the NHL, using wood sticks until 2008. “I love the wood feeling,” he stated.