

This past June, Craig Ludwig, a freshman defenseman from NCAA champion North Dakota was drafted in the third round by the Montreal Canadiens. The wire services reported that Ludwig hailed from a small town in Northern Wisconsin. To the uninitiated, that small town, Eagle River, has a hockey tradition that could match many a hockey town of Canada, Minnesota, or Upper Michigan.

Eagle River, Wisconsin, located in Vilas County, near the Upper Michigan border has long been a summer and winter vacationland to thousands of Wisconsin and Illinois residents as well as tourists from other parts of the country. This tourist industry is closely connected to the development of ice hockey in Eagle River.

Hockey in Eagle River dates back to 1926. In that year the Iceland Wasps, a high school team, was formed and during the late twenties played teams from neighboring communities. Members of that first team were Gib Sanborn, Bud Renk, Walter Richmond, Harold Giese, Chas. Dotson Sr. and Jean Petit. In 1930, the Wasps gained national headlines when they were on the losing end of a 33-0 shellacking administered by the college boys from Michigan Tech. During this same period, the powerful Wausau Vets blasted the Wasps 22-0.

By the early 1930's the Wasps improved. The front page of the Vilas County News-Review of February 11, 1932 offered the following report:

"Who is the Boss of the Hockey Field in Northern Wisconsin? A week ago the Wausau Veterans of Foreign Wars used this significant slogan to advertise their first meeting (of the year) with the Jack o' Lantern Wasps. Eagle River answered the question by taking the game 2-1 on the Vets' own ice. To dispel further argument, the return game here Tuesday night was won when the Wasps administered a 9-0 drubbing to the highly touted Vets, the largest score ever piled up against the former champions."

These victories prepared the Wasps for their first appearance in the state tournament. The News-Review of February 25, 1932 offered this account. "The Jack o' Lantern Wasps Monday night were proclaimed hockey champions of Wisconsin when they beat the highly rated Wausau Veterans of Foreign Wars 3-2, in the final game of state play-offs at Wausau. Friday night they defeated the Wausau Bankers and Sunday night went a step further when soft ice prevented play and Madison forfeited the semi-final game because they couldn't stay and wait for colder weather."

Within a year of the Tech shellacking

Eagle River's senior hockey team were state champs. What accounted for this incredible turn of events? Credit must be given to C. F. "Chuck" Taylor and Gib Sanborn.

In October, 1931 Taylor offered to locate the team at the winter sports complex he was developing at his Jack o' Lantern Lodge. Taylor envisioned Eagle River as a winter sports center as well as a summer vacationland. Arrangements were made with the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad to bring guests from Southern Wisconsin and Chicago. On Taylor Lake, ice shows and hockey games would provide unusual entertain-

who became known as the Falcons, dominated Wisconsin senior hockey winning the state tournament seven consecutive times from 1932-1938. In 1939, the Falcons didn't participate in the state tournament. The title went to their chief rivals, the Wausau Vets. In 1940, a revised Falcon team hosted the state tournament but lost in the final to Wausau 5-1.

The architect for the successful Falcon teams of the thirties was Gib Sanborn. Sanborn operated as the general manager. His philosophy "if you can't beat 'em, hire 'em" accounts for Eagle River bringing in a number of top notch Canadian and Minnesota hockey play-

ers. Although Wausau, Madison, Rhinelander, Fond du Lac, and other Wisconsin communities developed some fine amateur teams, Eagle River's proximity to the U. P. was an added advantage. Second, in January, 1933 "Chuck" Taylor broke ground to begin the building of the Eagle River Stadium, a sports arena that would house boxing exhibitions, horse shows, circuses, and hockey games. This indoor facility, the first of its kind in Wisconsin provided more control over winter's elements. The 1933-34 Falcons, for example, skating in the new arena played twice as many games as the team a year earlier. The '33-34 Falcons won 27, lost 3 and tied 2.

Taylor's Sports Arena, a clear span wooden structure, became the home of the Falcons, and an entertainment center for Northern Wisconsin. The first season under the domed structure was not without problems. The 1933-34 state tournament had "its labor troubles. The kids who scrape the ice between periods of the games in exchange for season passes, went on strike after the first four games on Saturday. Their battle cry was 'More hot dogs' and until they got them they did no more scraping."

Semi-pro and amateur hockey in Wisconsin flourished during the 1930's in many communities. Newspapers, including the Milwaukee Journal, covered the games and described the intense rivalries that developed among hockey teams.

America's entrance into World War II brought a quick halt to the hockey activity. The war ended hockey in many communities. The first era in Wisconsin hockey was over.

Following the war, in 1946, a new team and a new coach, former Falcon Pat Patterson were recruited. After a five year hiatus, the Falcons joined the Michigan-Ontario-Wisconsin league. Again the Falcons operated as a semi-pro team recruiting Canadians and Minnesotans to play in the tough M-O-W league.

In 1948, Eagle River again hosted the state senior amateur tournament. The Falcons, a semi-pro outfit, did not participate but later played an all-star outfit. Milwaukee beat Superior 5-4 in the championship game. The Superior team was coached by Bill Boya who would become well known throughout Wisconsin as a hockey promoter. To illustrate the strength of the Falcons, in an exhibition game they defeated state amateur champion Milwaukee 10-2.

During 1949-50 the Falcons played in the Northern States League along with the Milwaukee Flyers, Marquette, and the Canadian Soo. The team was known as

EAGLE RIVER HOCKEY CAPITAL ☆ OF WISCONSIN ☆

ment. To improve the team, a few talented hockey players were recruited by Gib Sanborn. The era of semi-pro hockey arrived in Eagle River.

During the winter holidays of 1931-32 Taylor Lake hosted the college squads from Michigan Tech and Wisconsin. On New Year's Eve 1931, Tech defeated Wisconsin 3-2; a day later the teams tied 2-2. Earlier in the week, the Jack o' Lantern Wasps, as the newly sponsored team was named, avenged the embarrassing 33-0 debacle by beating Tech 3-1. The team went on to capture its first state championship.

Throughout the 1930's, the Wasps,

ers. One of these, Connie Pleban of Eveleth, Minnesota scored a goal to beat the Falcons one year and became a five-year regular for the Falcons the following year. Another young man was Pete Elko who skated for the Chicago All-Stars in '37 and the Falcons in 1938. The Falcons also recruited an outstanding goaltender, Sig Wick.

Two other factors were important in developing Eagle River into a top-notch hockey community. During the thirties the Falcons participated in the Northern Michigan-Wisconsin league. This league including teams from Calumet, Portage Lake, Marquette, and Escanaba pro-

the Northernaires Falcons since Carl Manty, owner of the Northernaires lent financial support.

Although Eagle River participated in a State Junior Tournament sponsored by the American Legion in 1939, youth hockey experienced only sporadic development in the thirties and forties. In most communities young high school players of any promise were groomed by the senior team. Very little outside competition occurred for the youth. The organized inter city competition of today did not exist.

Throughout the thirties and forties, although Eagle River had an enclosed stadium, youth hockey in Wisconsin was not well-promoted and the kids in Eagle River were no exception. Since the rink was privately owned and located a few miles outside of the town, the kids in Eagle River were not able to use the Stadium.

Eagle River did sponsor a high school team in the late forties. Other teams in the state were Wausau, Rhinelander, Country Day (now the University School), and Shorewood. In Eagle River's first game, the Eagles tied the Hodags of Rhinelander 3-3.

In 1949-50, the Lions Club built an outdoor youth hockey rink. Under the guidance of Rollie Thomas and Falcon player, Jim Siefert, a youth program was organized. One of the first players, Mike Bradford, recalls a big thrill in traveling to Ironwood and playing at the Colonial. "I think that was our only outside competition."

By the early fifties, the semi-pro Falcon Northernaires, beset by financial problems, folded. Some of the players remained and eventually became permanent residents. Players such as Art Brunetta, Vic Cerra, Bill Mundell, and of course, Pete Elko contributed significantly to the development of youth hockey and the revival of senior hockey in Eagle River.

In 1952-53, the Eagle River Northernaires, an all local amateur team entered the north division of the Wisconsin Hockey League. With a few hold-overs

from the semi-pro Falcons, senior hockey as it is played today in Eagle River began that year. Player coach Art Brunetta and former Canadian now U. S. citizen Vic Cerra took a group of high school kids "the rookies" and developed a senior hockey team. One of these rookies, Dunnie Richter, was recently inducted into the Wisconsin Hockey Hall of Fame.

In that first year, the Northernaires lost to Antigo 15-7 in a protested game because Antigo had four Minneapolis imports. Rookie Mike Bradford scored 3 goals in that game—his first in amateur hockey according to the Vilas County News-Review.

The revived Northernaires skated against Mosinee, Ironwood, Rhinelander, and Stambaugh in the northern division. Rhinelander, led by the four, big Jatoaki brothers, were the powers of Wisconsin amateur hockey in the early fifties.

Eagle River did not immediately experience the success of the thirties. In a community where hockey had thrived over twenty years, success was expected. The January 21, 1954 News-Review discussed this dilemma. The News-Review pointed out that hockey was reviving but four problems existed. Increasing costs of hockey and enlarging the senior league were mentioned. Third,

there "must be a recurring supply of hockey players to replace those moving out of the area, retiring, etc." and finally, "a longer term agreement must be reached with the stadium owners for development and improvement of the Eagle River Stadium."

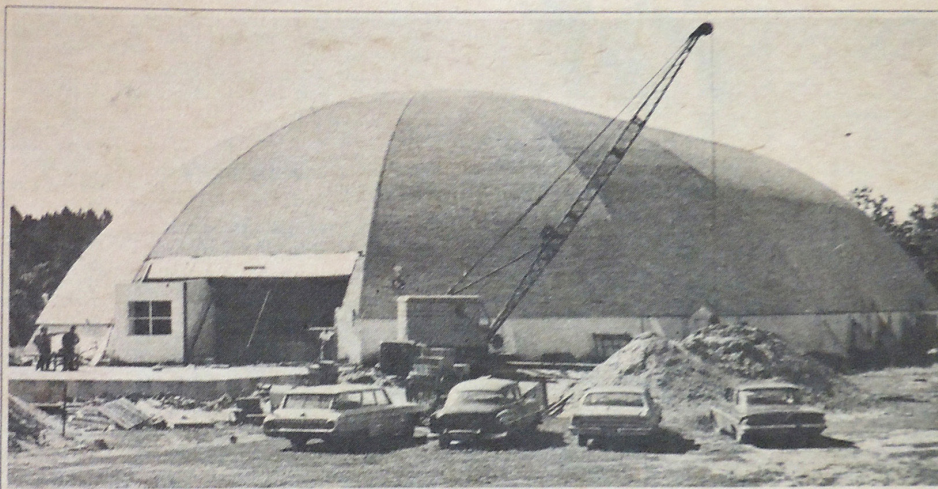
By 1955, youth hockey development and stadium acquisition and improvement became primary goals of the Northwoods Recreation, Inc. which since 1952 had operated the rink under an agreement with the owners—Jack O' Lantern Lodge. This agreement gave Eagle River youth more of an opportunity to skate in the stadium. In 1954-55, Eagle

River laid claim to the state pee wee title as it hosted a three team tourney with Rhinelander and Ironwood. During the season of 1957-58 a group of 75 youth hockey players participated in a pee wee league (ages 14 and below) under the guidance of Gene Richter who deserves a great deal of credit for the development of youth hockey in the fifties.

By 1959 Eagle River High School revived high school hockey but this came at a time when other schools were dropping the program. Lack of facilities and unpredictable Wisconsin winters were responsible for this.

Meanwhile, the senior team won the Jensen Cup, symbolic of leadership in the Michigan-Wisconsin league four times in the late fifties. But, it wasn't until 1963 that Northernaires again captured the Wisconsin state amateur hockey title—the first in twenty-five years. 1963 was a significant year during this second period of Eagle River hockey. The junior team led by Jim Petruzates and Tom Obrodovich won the state crown; the pee wee team finished second while the state

continued on next page



Top: Eagle River Stadium with new roof and lobby addition under construction.

Bottom: The Eagle River Stadium in the early 1960's before remodeling.

continued

champion Northernaires hosted and won the National Intermediate senior title.

This success did not lead to complacency. Considerable discussion centered around building a new stadium between Eagle River and Rhinelander or buying the old stadium. The old stadium, built in 1932, was badly in need of repairs. The stadium was now owned by a Chicago insurance company. The Eagle River Recreation Association replaced the Northwoods Recreation, Inc. This new organization led by Charles Speiss, Gib Sanborn, Mike Obrodovich, and Dr. Tom Doyle eventually convinced the Chicago owners to sell the stadium for \$25,000.

In 1964, the juvenile team entered a WIAA approved invitational high school tournament at Madison and defeated Madison Central and Madison West for the state crown. Fond du Lac and Madison East were other teams competing. This was the beginning of the state championship for high school teams.

By 1966, two Eagle River products Jim Petruzates and Tom Obrodovich were leading the University of Wisconsin hockey team. In February, 1966 Wisconsin defeated Minnesota 5-4 in overtime on Jim Petruzates' forty foot slap shot. This victory marked Wisconsin's entry into big-time collegiate hockey.

Hockey in Wisconsin following World War II was limited to a few communities and was curtailed by the slow improvement in adequate facilities. Eagle River was no exception. Headlines in the March 17, 1966 issue of the Vilas County News-Review reveals the situation in Eagle River and Wisconsin, in general, in the 1960's. "Hockey Tourney Cancelled by Thaw. Revenue Loss Crimps Plans." Since the ERRA only owed \$2600 of the original \$25,000 note, it was hoped that by again hosting the National Intermediate senior tournament the debt could be retired.

Actually, the tourney was postponed until the following December. In December warm weather forced the round robin tourney to single elimination.

These events illustrate the plight of Eagle River and Wisconsin hockey. With only one artificial rink, in Madison, hockey development was dependent upon long, cold winters.

Although Eagle River had an indoor stadium, extensive remodeling was needed. This project began during the summer of 1967. The roof was repaired, the building rewired, new lighting and modern plumbing added. A lobby with a new concession stand and spectator warming area with lockers in the base-

ment was built. The Eagle River Stadium, with the exception of the new lobby did not look much different than that of the thirties, but the building was now structurally equipped to serve the community. Still, the building lacked artificial ice which was becoming a necessity in hockey communities throughout the country.

In 1967-68 Eagle River won the state



Detroit, was purchased jointly by Eagle River and Calumet, Michigan for \$500. The difficult task was to transport the equipment.

With the arrival of artificial ice, high school hockey again returned to Eagle River. The season opener that year was a 1-1 tie against Madison East.

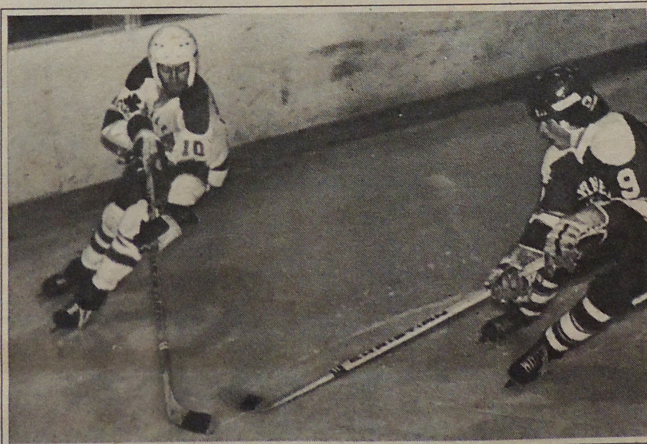
In 1972 Eagle River replaced its used compressors with two new Vilter compressors. This has allowed the ERRA to expand their program by adding a summer hockey and figure skating school.

The installation of artificial ice helped Eagle River keep pace with other Wisconsin communities that were building arenas and installing artificial ice. Hockey finally arrived in Wisconsin in the seventies and Eagle River, the bellwether of Wisconsin hockey from the thirties through the sixties, intended to stay up with the newcomers.

In the past decade the senior team has won the state title three times, the

Left: Falcons' Eddie Carter tying up an opponent.

Bottom: Denny Carter carrying the puck past a Mosinee forechecker.



senior title and hosted the National Intermediate tourney for the third time. Eagle River placed second to St. Paul but the tournament was again cut short because of poor ice. On March 14, 1968 the first meeting to discuss installation of artificial ice was held.

The artificial ice was eventually installed for the 1969-70 season. A used refrigeration system from an outdoor rink in

high school has represented its region every year but one in the state tournament winning four consecutive consolation titles, and the youth hockey teams have won numerous state titles.

While the ERRA has continued to make improvements to the arena, constant maintenance and new projects keep the many volunteers of the ERRA quite busy. New rink boards and adding

more dressing rooms seem to be the next agenda items. The association would also like to build a separate addition to house the Wisconsin Hockey Hall of Fame.

To finance the ice arena and the hockey program over the years, the Eagle River Recreation Association has undertaken a number of fund-raising projects. The biggest is the Eagle River Youth Days Auction held in the Stadium each July. This auction, conceived by WERL radio station owner George Palo nineteen years ago, is reported to be the largest of its kind in the country. Another very attractive fund-raiser is the sale of advertising signs that are on display on the walls of the domed arena. These colorful signs add to the unique architecture of the arena and create a friendly atmosphere for the skater and the spectator.

The community support for the ERRA is quite apparent. Game programs for each hockey team are filled with patrons support for the program. The program, in turn, helps support the community heavily dependent upon the tourist economy.

In 1974, the ERRA added a summer hockey school. The primary reason was to offer an inexpensive summer program for the local hockey player. Although the school had a rocky start, this past summer the school was filled for the first time. Hockey players and figure skaters from throughout the country have participated in the program.

In April, Eagle River hosted the National Intermediate tournament with teams from New York, Colorado, Michigan, Illinois, Minnesota, and Wisconsin participating. According to tournament director Joe Boxrucker, "it was the best hockey played in Eagle River." Rosters of teams like Superior, St. Paul, and Lansing, Michigan were filled with former college players. The ERRA lost money on the tourney mainly because the ice had to be held for an additional three weeks. But for the town's motels, restaurants, and retail stores it was a successful week. It appears that Eagle River would probably consider hosting a tournament of this nature every 4-5 years.

The contributions of Eagle River to Wisconsin and hockey, in general, particularly at the senior level are quite apparent. At every level of Wisconsin hockey—youth, high school, senior, and college the small town in northern Wisconsin has been at the forefront. Although larger communities such as Madison, Green Bay, and Superior have developed excellent hockey programs, the contributions of Eagle River in keeping hockey alive in Wisconsin over the years earns the community the title "Hockey Capital of Wisconsin." □

See Update on Following Page

Eagle River Update

Craig Ludwig played high school hockey for Northland Pines High School from 1975–1979. He played three seasons for the University of North Dakota, where the team won two NCAA national championships. He was drafted and signed by the Montreal Canadiens. He played eight seasons for the Canadiens and was a regular defenseman for the 1986 Stanley cup champions. After a one-year stint with the New York Islanders, Ludwig completed his career with the Minnesota North Stars and the Dallas Stars. He helped the Stars win their first Stanley Cup in his final season in 1999.

In his 17-year career, he had an impressive +79 plus/minus statistic. He played in 1256 NHL games, which is a record for Wisconsin-born players. His teams reached the NHL playoffs in 14 seasons. He was one of the NHL's top shot-blocking defensemen. He was the first Wisconsin-born player to reach the NHL in the modern era.

While Craig Ludwig was the most famous hockey alumnus of Northland Pines High School, the team itself had a remarkable string of success during the 1980s. Led by coaches Orrin Mangseth and Tom Obrodovich, the Eagles won state titles in 1984, 1986 and 1989. This was the first school to claim a WIAA state title that did not hail from Superior or Madison.