

~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

Snoopy hosts hi-octane hockey seniors

By B. B. Kaye



Charles MacNulty of Moraga (far right) happily waits on the bench with his team, the Wanderers. Photo B.B. Kaye

Moraga local Charles MacNulty said, "I'm the youngest on my team, at 70. Someone here is around 84," as he prepared in the locker room with his hockey team, the Wanderers, for their match with the Portland Old Buds July 20. While they chatted and checked their gear, the Spokane Oldtimers versus New York Apple Core could be heard battling it out on the ice.

These tough players from all over the world converged at the Redwood Empire Ice Arena in Santa Rosa for the 42nd annual Snoopy's Senior World Hockey Tournament. Peanuts creator Charles M. Schulz, who featured ice hockey as a recurring theme in his comics, opened the arena in 1969. He introduced the senior

tournament in 1975, and it became a major event, hosting competition between over 60 visiting teams in one week every summer.

Teams are divided by age group, from 40 to 75, but there are many players in their 80s and at least one in his 90s. Older players can play in younger categories, but younger players may not play in older groups.

"This is my 18th year playing the Snoopy Tournament," said 82-year-old Wanderer teammate Rick Lohnes. "This (the Wanderers) is a makeup team for this year. Regular members couldn't make it, so Blake Johnson, the tournament director, connected us all."

Martin Thompson, 79, traveled from Vancouver, BC, Canada. "I've been playing for 77 years,

and cycles with Team In Training, an organization that raises funds through marathons for research to battle leukemia and lymphoma, and he does volunteer hospice care. "It's a good way to give back. It's one of the most rewarding things I've ever done, because people are so reflective of their lives. They've shared so many stories with me."

Inside the arena, air was cold and crisp. The frosty scrape and slice of blades on ice, and hockey sticks impelling a rock-hard puck across the cold white surface, filled the cavernous space with equally white noise. Players dipped and turned, sparring, bursting across the ice in attack and defense, effort punctuated with grunts and terse barks of command and encouragement, sweat glistening under the lights.

Seventy teams competed in 105 games in this year's jam-packed 10-day tournament. The tight schedule had games start as early as 5:30 a.m., with last games of the day beginning as late as 11:30 p.m.

As Spokane and New York exited the rink, the Wanderers and Old Buds lined their benches, eager and alert, ready for their hour under the lights. After a warm up, the referee signaled to start, and the teams faced off. The play that commenced fulfilled no expectation of ginger caution or eggshell frailty. These were warriors, fierce, fleet, boys again with red faces and shining eyes, exulting in sheer physical bliss. They charged and spun, banking deeply at speed, vaulting the puck airborne with aggressive

strokes, attacking, intercepting and blocking without regard for possible injury. A few face-planted, sliding prone across the ice, and rose again to throw themselves into the melee undeterred. When called, replacements on the bench launched themselves fervidly over the low rink side wall, not to waste one precious instant of this once-a-year treat by filing through the available door.

The match ended with a score of 13-2, Portland Old Buds badly besting the Wanderers. Happy nonetheless and glowing with exuberance, players headed back to their locker rooms to change for the next best part of this event: a barbecue in the parking lot with old and new friends.

As players and family socialized in the sun outside, 92 year-old Mark Sertich, member of Charles "Sparky" Schulz's original team the Santa Rosa Diamond Iceers, hauled his equipment case behind him, heading toward the arena entrance. He was there to play with team Continental 75's and his son, Mark Sertich Jr.

Stately and erect, sporting a perfectly formed Salvador Dali moustache, he stopped to chat. "I've missed the tournament only two times. Over the years, it's been more important to be here and see the guys and know they're okay – more important than the game itself."

He bid goodbye, and headed into the arena. He had twisted his knee the day before. It was swollen, but he came to play nonetheless.

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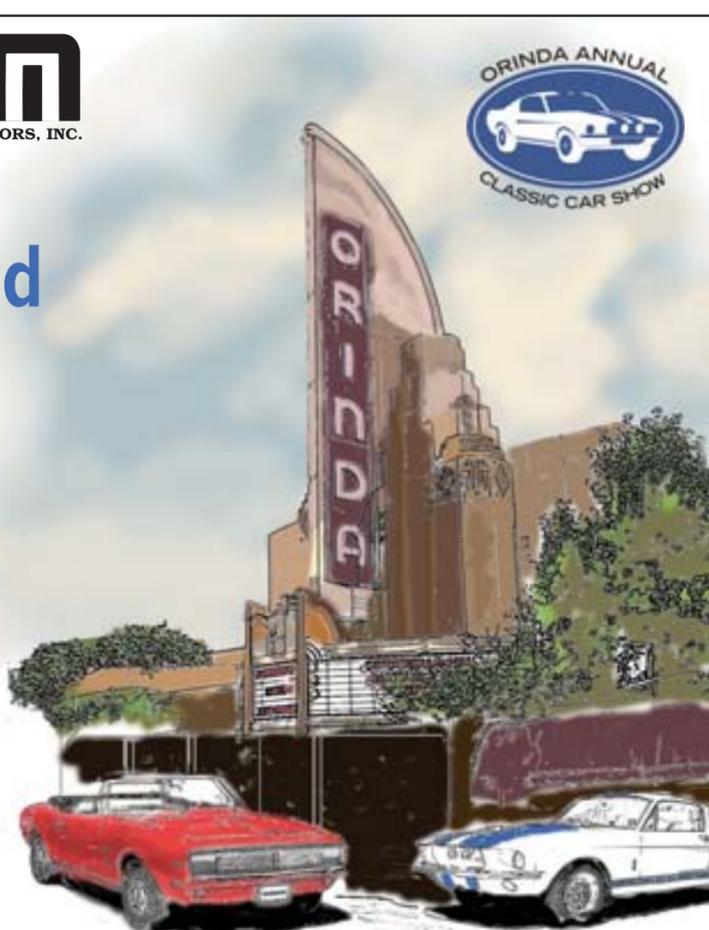
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