



ABOVE: The well-protected author.

Coach Mom

Chaos on Ice

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY KRIS MILLGATE

What in the world am I doing? Am I crazy? Did you hear that smack? Am I hurt? Is this a midlife crisis? Such questions crash through my mind as I lie loose-limbed on my back looking at the metal-beamed ceiling above me through a metal-barred cage across my face.

The cage is the front of my hockey helmet. The ceiling is the cover over the ice rink in Idaho Falls. I'm back-bound because a new skater who doesn't know how to stop just took me out from behind. I dropped as quickly as an icicle unhinged from a roof's raingutter.

It's week one of hockey season for the Idaho Falls Youth Hockey Association. Dozens of chilly-faced children are at the city rink for their

first hockey lesson. They pile through the gate onto the ice like chips poured out of a bag. They sort themselves into a single layer and try to stand. They scramble for footing on finely-ground skate blades, find no steady stance, and pinwheel their limbs until they're laid out on the ice again.

"It's chaos on the ice. It's so easy to take a spill with those little guys out there," coach Bill Harrie tells me. "You have to watch your backside all the time."

His words ring true. I should be watching my backside better. Neglecting to notice the chaos coming at me has resulted in an unladylike clatter to the ground for all the parents in the bleachers to see. My ears buzz and my vision blurs. The edges of the metal beams above my head soften, so I close my eyes to clear the fuzz. I'm IFYHA's newest coach in the youngest division, and this is not my finest moment.

When I asked Mite Division director Jessica Baird if I could coach, she said, "I get excited when I see new coaches. I think programs like this one can't develop without parents going out on a limb. It

also helps the kids see that you're never too old to start something. Even when you fall down in front of the kids."

The hockey program, for kids aged three to eighteen, is affiliated nationally with USA Hockey and runs efficiently on the backs of local volunteers, parents, and grandparents from October through March. It started five decades ago with a hose in a field and is now a well-recognized program promoting the motto, "A kid on ice is a kid out of hot water." More than 350 kids skate every winter with the help of more than seventy coaches.

"I was raised with parents who jumped in and helped," Jessica told me while adjusting the straps on my helmet. "Our son was the kid who needed something to do at three, so we got turned on to hockey and I decided I would be a parent who jumped in and helped."

Her own parents also pitch in often. Jessica knows hockey, but I don't know hockey. I grew up on ski hills, not ice rinks, so when my boys wanted to try the sport, I spent the first year watching as a hockey mom. I expected fewer teeth, more tackle, but didn't see much of either. No one lost any teeth,

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and most tackles were unintentional collisions.

My boys always wanted to go to practice and they never wanted to miss tournaments, even if it was a long haul through a snowstorm to get there. Our family evolved with the interest of our kids, and stinky hockey bags started filling our basement, because all such smelly things are banished to the underbelly of our house. Now my smelly bag is down there, too.

After one year of watching, I went from hockey mom to Coach Mom. I enrolled in a coaching clinic in Sun Valley, where I was the only woman in pads, and I paid dearly in checks to the boards for my coaching certificate. I also paid a dear friend in boxes of candy to teach me how to hockey stop. Then I paid my kids with even more candy to teach me how to handle the puck on ponds around town. By opening weekend, I could



ABOVE: Arranging order from chaos.

skate forward, backward, stop and turn, sometimes even with a puck.

I need all of those skills on the ice, but during the first practice, I quickly realized hockey with kids under eight is more about herding than hockey. Now I spend hours crawling around on my knees, pep-talking the kids to get up again. I tie soggy skate laces, tighten loose elbow pads, and dump bottles of water into mouths stuffed with mouthguards.

It's while I'm watering my mouths that the impact comes from behind. I go down hard, and don't bounce up as neatly as the littles do. I know this, because I'm still staring at ceiling beams while the skater who used me to stop himself is up and flailing around, until something else stops him again. Worried coaches and curious kids, including one of my own, hover around me. I signal I'm okay with a nod of my helmeted head, but don't sit

up yet. I have a few internal questions to answer while I'm down here, feeling the cold seep into my spine.

What I'm doing is what I want. Learning to play hockey at forty is enjoyably crazy. That smack on the ice was my head in a helmet hitting hard water. It's a horrible sound, but I'm not hurt. And if this is a midlife crisis, I'll take it. Spending the winter on ice with kids is the best way I know to skate away from old age. ■