

Rainbow warriors

For nearly 15 years, Vancouver's Cutting Edges hockey team has shown that gay men can play--and win--at one of the toughest sports around. And discrimination from their heterosexual rec league opponents is negligible.

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Growing up in London, Ont., Chris Bailey played pond hockey until his feet froze. His parents couldn't afford to have him play in an organized league so he borrowed hockey equipment from friends and played endless games of shinny. Like many kids across Canada, he developed a passion for the game and for goaltending. Then Bailey came out of the closet and his hockey career stalled.

"When I got older, hockey and being gay didn't work in my mind so I just stopped," says the 39-year-old as he takes off his goalie equipment after a game with his Cutting Edges B team at the Richmond Ice Centre.

"There are a lot of young guys on our team that came out and quit playing hockey for the same reason. They were never really called 'fag' in the shower or anything like that. They just thought that the two things were incompatible."

Six years ago, Bailey joined the Cutting Edges, a gay-friendly hockey team that has played in local recreational leagues since 1994. The team allowed him to unite two parts of his life he thought were at cross purposes. He is hardly alone. Throughout Canada, gay hockey leagues have formed to create a place for gay men to play the sport they love without worry they could be rejected by teammates. The Cutting Edges, however, is the only gay team in Canada that competes in a recreational league and regularly squares off against hockey teams with players who might not always welcome them as opponents.

The Cutting Edges play in more than just recreational leagues. The team has travelled around the world to compete in gay tournaments with its fair share of success. It won gold at a New York Tournament in 2004. At



CREDIT: Photo-Dan Toulgoet

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Goaltender Chris Bailey stops pucks for the Cutting Edges B team.

the 2006 OutGames in Montreal, both Cutting Edges A and B teams won gold medals in their divisions. Last year, the team won silver at the OutGames in Calgary.

The team formed when Vancouver Sun reporter Kevin Griffin helped assemble a team of local hockey players to compete at the 1994 Gay Games in New York. After returning home, Griffin and the team realized how much they enjoyed the game and joined the UBC Duffer's League. Since then, the team has expanded, at times having as many as four teams playing in different divisions. Due to renovations at the UBC ice rink this season, the team moved from the UBC Duffer's League to the Coast Hockey League based out of Richmond Ice Centre.



CREDIT: Photo-Jason Lang

Cutting Edges manager Terry Hutcheson says the team rarely encounters on-ice bigotry.

The Cutting Edges' roster has players with varying backgrounds and skill levels. Some younger players are at the peak of fitness while older players find their hockey skills have atrophied after years away from the game. Darrell Oakford started playing for the Cutting Edges after more than three decades away from the game. Growing up in Peace River, Alberta, Oakford played Junior A hockey against future NHL legends Bobby Clarke and Reggie Leach.

"It was different hockey," says the 58-year-old retiree. "It was prairie hockey, and we were out for blood. I was in 52 games and I was in 42 fights."

Oakford never disclosed his sexual orientation to his Junior A teammates. He stayed quiet not out of fear but because he felt it was no one's business. In his late teens, he moved to Vancouver and left prairie hockey behind. More than 30 years later, his friend James Oakes convinced Oakford to join him on the Cutting Edges B team. The first time he suited up for the team he could barely stand up on his skates, but four years later he looks forward to every game.

Among the younger players, 24-year-old Simon Litherland stands out, even in a locker room that doesn't fit the hockey mould. The shaggy-haired furniture designer takes pride in likely being the city's only gay vegetarian English hockey player. Litherland played roller hockey in the south of England after his father brought him a hockey stick from an overseas business trip. Due to a shortage of local hockey teams in his area, he was forced to play on adult teams while still a teenager and his skills improved rapidly. After moving to Vancouver, Litherland joined the Cutting Edges and has developed into the team's best skater.

"How embarrassing is it that our best player is from England?" jokes teammate Allan Bisson before the team heads out on the ice.

On a recent Tuesday night at Richmond Ice Centre, Cutting Edges B team faces a Division 11 team named Blades of Teal. The Edges score an early goal, but the Blades of Teal come back with odd man rushes to build a 2-1 lead. During the second period, the Edges slow the game down by clogging up the middle of the ice and clawing back to a 4-4 tie. With a minute left, the Blades of Teal score what proves to be the winning goal. With just 20 seconds left in the game, 230-pound Cutting Edges forward Allan Bisson--known affectionately by his teammates as "Big Gay Al"--lays a vicious hit on an opponent directly in front of the opposing team's bench. Tempers flare as Blades of Teal players get in Bisson's face, and his teammates rush to his defense before the referee intervenes.

After the game, the Blades of Teal are surprised to learn the team they played consisted almost entirely of gay men. Many react with a raised eyebrow to questions from a visitor, but they quickly shrug it off.

"Good thing we won," one player mutters.

"That must be why one of them was wearing a rainbow flag on their helmet," says another.

But what are they really upset about? Bisson's late hit.

According to Cutting Edges players, the reaction of the Blades of Teal is standard. For the most part, their sexual orientation has been met with acceptance or indifference by opposing teams, although some unpleasant incidents have occurred.

"In every division there are always one or two jerks," says Trevor MacNeil, who has been with the Cutting Edges since 1994. "Usually their teammates are apologizing to us for them. Even they think they are idiots. There are always yahoos. Even on our team we've had some people who are uncontrollable. Sometimes you get them on the other team and they'll be spewing epithets at us."

Team manager Terry Hutcheson recalls an instance when an opponent called a Cutting Edges player a 'fag' without knowing he was playing against a gay hockey team. When he found out, he apologized profusely.

"We really don't think it's much of an issue," says the 38-year-old Hutcheson, who works as a visual effects producer in the film and TV industry. "Especially if we win. It's hard to call us names if we're winning."

While Cutting Edges' gay players don't encounter much open hostility from opponents, they must deal with a hockey culture that values masculinity and associates homosexuality with weakness. While athletes in other sports have outed themselves once they retire, to date no current or former NHL player has come out of the closet. In hockey circles, even the smallest association with homosexuality can be met with derision. Last year, Florida Panthers forward Olli Jokinen told the Palm Beach Post that he and teammate Ville Peltonen shaved their moustaches after two unnamed Vancouver Canucks told them that they looked "gay" during a game at GM Place last season.

Athletes in other sports have faced criticism after coming out once their careers were over. Last year, former NBA centre John Amaechi wrote *Man in the Middle*, a book about his experiences being a closeted homosexual playing in the NBA. After the book's release, former NBA star Tim Hardaway told a Florida radio station: "I hate gay people, so I let it be known. I don't like gay people and I don't like to be around gay people. I am homophobic. I don't like it. It shouldn't be in the world or in the United States."

Bailey says he's rarely encountered that level of hostility, but recalls that after a game he played for his law firm's company team, he entered the visiting locker room to talk to an opposing goaltender and was met with an extremely icy reception. Since joining Cutting Edges, Bailey has occasionally played for hockey teams consisting of straight players and feels accepted by teammates.

The UBC Duffers League reported no major problems from Cutting Edges members or opposing teams when the team played in its league before moving to Richmond.

"Honestly, it was a non-issue," says Michael Rose, manager of the UBC Thunderbird Winter Sports Centre, which ran the league. "There were no pros or cons one way or the other. They just ran a handful of teams that were in our league. From the desk I sit at, they were just teams that were in our league and it didn't go any further than that."

Rose notes verbal abuse or sparring is not restricted, or connected, to gay teams on the ice. "I've played beer league hockey for years and I see that sort of thing happen regardless. From what I've seen or know, I've never had [homophobic slurs] brought to

my attention. I've had the odd racial issue, but no sexual orientation or gender issues come to mind. It's rare, but incidents do occur."

When rare incidents did occur, players in the UBC Duffers League were given a gross misconduct penalty. The league also investigated more serious incidents of verbal abuse and handed out suspensions. The Coast Hockey League, the team's new home, hands out gross misconduct penalties as well as a two-game suspension and a \$40 fine for any player that excessively abuses other players.

Sometimes Bailey wonders if the amount of homophobia in the locker room is overstated, and he wonders why he quit hockey after realizing he was gay. "It never occurred to me to play on a straight team," he says of his days before joining the Cutting Edges. "I never thought I'd feel welcome... I think it was almost entirely in my head. It was self-imposed. That's the really tragic part about it."

The hesitation Bailey felt as a youth may be a reason many gay hockey players across North America have formed leagues of their own. The Toronto Gay Hockey Association runs a nine-team league composed mostly of gay players and hosts gay hockey tournaments funded by large corporate sponsors. Similar leagues exist in cities such as Montreal, New York, and Los Angeles.

Hutcheson believes that Vancouver does not yet have enough players to start its own gay hockey league, and if it did, ice time would be difficult to find in a city where rinks are booked to capacity.

The Cutting Edges are open to the idea of a gay league if there was sufficient demand, but enjoy playing in regular recreational leagues. "I think that it has its benefits," says Hutcheson. "For the teams that do know that we're gay and see that we're playing like everyone else, maybe we're showing them something. It's almost like those other gay leagues, not to discount what they do, but maybe they're segregating themselves rather than just saying, 'Hey we're going out and playing and we're gay. So what. We're going to kick your ass.'"

While the Cutting Edges has proudly shown gay men can play winning hockey, it deliberately includes players of all backgrounds and skill levels.

"We'll take anybody," says Hutcheson. "That's why we're here, because a lot of us wouldn't be comfortable being ourselves on a straight team. It's just really supportive and inclusive. We have people that are clearly very skilled hockey players and some of us that are just muckers. Everybody is willing to help out and try and teach people."

That inclusive attitude appeals to heterosexual men who prefer playing for the Cutting Edges rather than other rec league teams that often take themselves too seriously.

"There are all those weekend warriors out there who act like there are [NHL] scouts out there watching," says Dan Degraaf, 27, who's one of the Cutting Edges' few straight players. "Here it's pretty positive. If we win or lose, we know it's just for fun and to get some exercise. Everyone realizes it's a game and if they lose they don't take it to heart."

The lanky, soft-spoken Degraaf admits he was a bit shy at first, but has been welcomed by the gay members of the team, and occasionally socializes with teammates at local gay bars and nightclubs.

The team also socializes at several fundraisers it holds throughout the year. The team's biggest event is Score, a skating party and dance scheduled for the West End Community Centre March 15. Over the years, the team has raised \$15,000 to help construct a locker room at the Dr. Peter Centre, which offers care for people living with HIV/AIDS. The charity events also give teammates an opportunity to socialize away from the ice and reach out to the gay community at large.

While playing for Cutting Edges can be a huge part of a player's social life, players rarely get romantically involved with each other. Except for Bailey, who met Glenn Smith, his partner of six years, on the team, Cutting Edges players view the locker room as the last place they'd look for a mate.

"I was talking to a friend the other day and he said, "Wow, that dressing room must be hot," says Hutcheson. "I said, 'You wouldn't think that if you came in here and looked at some of these guys and you smelled this equipment.' There's nothing sexual about this dressing room at all."

The real appeal of the Cutting Edges locker room is no different than that of any other team: the sense of camaraderie found playing competitive sports. That feeling of kinship keeps players coming back to Cutting Edges years past their prime. Oakford says he plans to keep playing "until I drop."

His commitment inspires players like Bailey, who keeps himself in shape and hopes to keep making up for lost time. "How long can I last?" he asks. "As long as I don't get injured, I don't foresee myself stopping. I think the reason being is that I lost 20 years. Now I'm trying to get that back."

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