

THE KING OF SHINNY:

QUENTIN EVERETT BRICKLEY

by Will Bennett, Gamma Phi / Wesleyan '07

The Kingdom

Often, in crowded rinks, I have heard of a game, a game where the greats come together to play. Whispers claim that the best players, current and past, gather to compete, from 11:00 pm till 1:00 am every Thursday night. They never use the same rink. It's a private affair: They exclude the Hal Gil's, never permitting the goons. Pure talent. No hitting. Hockey in its virgin state. Even a player like Sergei Samsonov, the NHL rookie of the year and crafty star forward for the Bruins, can look mediocre on any given Thursday night. Division One, Professional, and unknown talent-anyone can show up, but if you don't belong, you only get one shift. These late night games are a restricted world. Talent is the only way in. This is Quentin Brickley's kingdom. In the uncelebrated world of shinny hockey, Quentin Brickley is one of the very best. A star in a world where there is no fame, only legend. Shinny hockey is everything to Brickley. He loves the speed of the game, the finesse, the pure skill, and he is addicted to how the sun kisses route 128 on his way home. How he curls into his bed, already warm from Sue; his hand skates through her hair, and he replays his best move till sleep calls.

Finding Quentin

"Quentin said to me, 'you know if I can't play in the show 'cause of my heart, I'll be the best damn shinny hockey player anywhere.' And that is what he has done," declares Billy Dunn a rink rat who hangs out in the Total Sports Repair pro shop, in Lawrence Massachusetts. Anyone who knows anything about hockey comes to Total Sports Repair and talks hockey. They use a coded language filled with terms like "the show," "full boat," "-1," "sleds," "mitts," and "HOfer." I have driven to Lawrence to find Quentin Brickley, the elusive legend. The man who could tool on Brian Leech, who could have been a hall-of-famer. The man who never made it. If anyone can find him it's these guys. The shop is brightly lit from overhead fluorescent strips which waver and buzz; lights which suck out color so that the place seems to be in black and white, as if from an older time. The shop is another world, and that is what the game of shinny is. The pure game. Before the NHL, before leagues, there was shinny hockey, the sport from northern Canada. In the first half of the nineteenth century there were men who skated on ponds, sharpened bones strapped to shoes and sanded wood for sticks. The players had a habit of hitting each other's shins, which some claim led to the name shinny. This is the same game my grandfather played as a boy on the ponds outside of Quebec City, where frozen horse dung was used as a puck, and newspaper was tied around the boys' shins for protection. Shinny has never really changed. It is a game without time division, without coaches to decide who plays. Shinny is about skating, stick-handling, and scoring. No scholarships. No Olympics. No salaries. Just hockey.

Surrounded by Fed-ex packages which might contain Ray Bourque's gloves, Joe Sakic or Mario Lemieux's skates, the men at Total Sports Repair gossip about the shinny games. Billy Dunn, whose folds of fat ripple his shirt, grins revealing only two teeth and sprays spit when he talks because of it, tells me that Quentin Brickley lives with his mother in Melrose. "He used to make hockey sticks in the basement. He stays up real late watching old Bruins games and sanding down sticks. Maybe he thinks of who he could have been, and where he should be. But the next day his routine just starts over. He goes rink to rink, and guys follow him.

I mean you've seen it yourself. They come in with their bags over their shoulder. Lawyers, doctors, bankers, painter, Roto-rooter guys. You name it, they take their break from work to come and skate against the Brick. If they steal the puck away from him, the drive was all worth it. He is our Gretzky," informs Dunn, his r's flattened into ah's by his Boston accent.

Dunn sits in one of several different colored plastic chairs, perhaps stolen from a bingo parlor, that are jumbled around a fold out table. Cards, poker chips, red plastic cups, an ashtray, rolls of hockey tape, the Bauer catalog, and a Playboy hide the white surface of the table. A man who is sharpening skates behind Dunn is simply known as 'The Father,' but not for any religious reasons. The Father's worn, tobacco stained hands guide the blade of the skates through the spinning machinery. White sparks dance off the sharpening wheel, and the old man appears to be singing a soundless song. The metal of the blade screeches as the edge is created. The shop smells of turpentine, burnt rubber, rust, and beer, and when The Father smiles he displays teeth the color of un-popped corn kernels. Above him, hanging on racks of hockey sticks protruding from the wall, are game worn jerseys from the greats. A personal note from Gretzky on an all-star jersey reads "Thanks to All the guys at TSR. You're the best. Now don't fuck up my skates. #99 Wayne Gretzky." The Father's experience permits his eyes to drift from his work, and to glance around the room. "Brickley, huh? A waste. The kid had, well heck I guess he still has it all, I mean he could still play in the Garden right now if he had anything in his pants. Park. Brad Park told me once that you... 'bottom line you have to compete.' Brickley has more talent than anyone I've seen strap on a pair of skates since Park. Missing the one thing you can't teach. A shame. It's a true shame." When the Father talks he produces a loud smacking sound as his lips return to each other. His fading blue eyes retreat as he nods up and down. His word is final.

"I need to find Quentin." Heads shake; no-one has a phone number.

"Try Saugus, Will" recommends Dunn. "You might find him there."

"Saugus?" asks Cliff, an accountant who seems to live at the shop, seems to live for the game. "That hole? Nah. Come here Saturday night. We got ice at eleven. The Brick usually turns up."

Locker Room

For Cliff's Saturday game I show up with my bag and a notebook. I can tell from the buzz that I am in luck; 'the king of shinny' is here to play. Someone has warned Quentin that I am writing about him. "Me? What the fuck? I never did anything." But, he's okay with it, and agrees to talk later.

Observing Brickley get dressed for hockey reminds me of a homeless man I once saw setting out his scrounged meal with the formality of a banquet. Sitting in the corner, Brickley's muscles are outlined in his too small white t-shirt; the sleeves only extending two inches from his shoulder. His frayed blue jeans are speckled with dried paint, and there is a small hole in the seat. The smell of gasoline floats from his blackened hands as he rests his sticks next to his bag. The sticks are wooden, with tape spiraling down from the knob to the blade. The shaft looks like a barber shop display sign, the same tape job he has done since he was five and a member of the Melrose Minny Mites. His pants lie on top of his squirt team black Cooper bag; as he has gotten older and his equipment larger, he has never felt the need to get a bigger bag. Tossing the pants to the ground, he reaches into his bag, pulls out his helmet, and slicks his hair back as he straps it on. "It's bizarre. Ain't it bizarre how he puts his helmet on like that... before all his other equipment," says Billy Dunn as he laces up his own skates. Brickley's helmet is white, with no foam insert and offers little protection. The same one Gretzky started to wear in the late 80's when he was too valuable for anyone in the league to touch. His blue eyes have an unusual hint of silver, and a faint white scar extends from his left

eye to his nostril. A wound from goaltending in the streets of Melrose. Around his waist is a Tackla hockey belt which he unfastens to remove his jeans. He doesn't wear underwear. Standing up, he strides to the opposite end of the room, his penis swaying with each step. Brickley begins to talk to Ryan Shannon, penis swaying and all. Naked except for the helmet. Shannon is a local kid with shaggy black hair: In spite of his lack in size, BC has offered him a full boat. As Shannon's almond eyes shift uncomfortably away from Brickley's man-hood, Brickley grabs a stick and offers him some tips. Shannon listens intently. "You've got soft hands. I like that, but think about this. When no-one is on you, drop your hand low and fly. Then, you cross the blue. Square up. Plant your feet. Then you dangle. I mean we know you can fly, but don't be like all the American hockey players who just go out wide with their head cut off. Look what I can do once I plant my feet." Brickley demonstrates holding Shannon's all too small stick in his over-sized greasy hands. Brickley faces each wall quickly, his bare feet slapping the cool rubber mat. "See all the options you have?" Shannon nods and practices.

Brickley returns to his vintage hockey bag and commences putting on the rest of his equipment.

The Interview

"There are things that I've never seen possible on the ice. Moves I've never imagined. He can make you look like it's the first time you are strapping on your sleds. Like you are a little girl. The puck is velcroed on his stick. Really, I mean it's not like how every other US kid stickhandles. Smooth." With "smooth" Billy Dunn rubs his satin hockey pants and grins through the bars of his facemask. He leans back on the bench and spits, a glob hangs swinging like a pendulum from the bar of his helmet. Brickley darts up the ice toe-dragging around Ryan Whitney, a 6'5 defenseman projected to go first round in this summer's draft and sign a multi-million dollar contract. Whitney is left with his stick extended. There is a term in hockey for this: Raped. As Brickley skates around him, he calls back to Whitney offering advice, "Don't watch the puck or even Joe Schmo can look like 'the great one.'" Whitney, with his giraffe like frame, chases after him, cutting daddy long leg strides all the way. Brickley scores, and the puck is dropped again. Now Brickley, instead of shooting on the breakaway he has just created, circles around. He passes Shannon, Whitney, and two third liners from the Bruins and scores again.

After his second goal, Brickley hops the boards and crashes down on the bench next to me. He is not tired. At 5'11 his frame would be perfect for a 185 pound wrestler. "Will, now you got to know something... I never got to go to the show. I mean I always wanted to and all my life people always told me I'd go there. Kids in school would say 'why you shittin' over a C? All you have to do is sign your name at the bottom of a contract.' I love skating against these kids like Shannon and Whitney. The fucking studs. What I was. I mean, fuck. Their health is better than mine; I got dealt the raw deal. Still, I want them to succeed. Hell, now you know what people say about me? 'That guy loves the fuckin' game, but he's gotta move on.' This is all I know. This is all I want. I don't need more. I don't work. If I do, it can't interfere with this. I skate. That's what I am good at and the only thing I've ever been good at. This and Sue are the only things I love." He pauses; grabbing a water bottle he grips down hard spraying water across his forehead. As the beads slide down he catches them in his mouth, swishing and holding them till he spits them over the boards and onto the ice. Drips cling to his scruff. "Willy, It's simple. I just play."

After the skate, everyone returns to the locker room. A white towel is wrapped around Brickley's neck. The silver cross dances on his chest as Quentin recites the names of his six siblings in one fast breath: John, George, Mathew, Andrew, Leila, and Rena. All but two play hockey, and the two who don't are girls. In Melrose thirty-five years ago, girls didn't play. Quentin Brickley's brother, Andy Brickley, is a commentator for the Bruins on UPN and NESN. He played in the NHL for fourteen years. On the NESN website there is a questionnaire where Andy is asked, "if you could spend a day with anyone who would it

be?”

Andy's answer is Jesus. I ask Quentin the same question.

“Gretzky, play shinny against him. Him, Yagr, Lemieux, Federov, and Bure. Get them all on ice. Measure myself against them.”

Despite Andy's long professional career the legend is that Quentin has more talent than his brother. Quentin rubs his chin and looks at me shrugging. “Depends on what the criteria are. He would agree with me, as far as, like, skills and ability, that I'm better. Naturally better talent. As far as being a complete hockey player being able to play at the NHL level, it's more of a question mark. I'm faster and trickier. But there's more that goes into it. He has certain qualities that he might have the leg up on. Bigger, stronger than me. Smart player. Wasn't quick like me...so he had to compensate with his brain. His game and my game is like comparing oranges and apples. When we play shinny I'm better. For sure.” He pauses. “But Shinny is a better game anyway. If you are good at shinny, you are a better athlete. A better player. I watch pro games, and there is way too much grabbing. The refs never call anything. It would be a much better game, if the greats had more room.”

Quentin is thirty-six years old, and he started skating at two. By four, he was on a travel team. Melrose youth hockey had never seen the likes of this kid, who had eight goal games. He went on to play at the University of New Hampshire. “We had some lean years when I was there,” he admits, but then he smiles and adds, “I had a four goal game against Northeastern.” Northeastern was ranked 3rd nationally at the time.

I ask him about the show.

“I went to the training camp with the Bruins in 88', but ended up playing with the Johnstown Chiefs, their EJHL affiliate. Next year I was supposed to go to training camp with the Devils. Didn't happen. So I played for the Knoxville Cherokees. I didn't want to go down there. I mean, after playing Hockey East, the level wasn't much better. The league had this rep of being a league like Slapshot. Too many meatheads. Lots of fights. I tore it up though. Averaged more than two goals a game. Hell my goal was to play in the NHL. Nothing happened. So I packed it up and headed home. That's when I bumped into Millbury, the Bruins GM, at that shitty hockey rink. Hockeytown. You know it right? He told me to call Rick Bonus who was the head coach at the Maine Mariners. The Bruins farm team. So, I called him. And Bonus said come on up. I went up, and Bonus basically gave me a one day tryout and said to me ‘I'm really surprised at how good you are. We've had guys here from EJHL that were called up that weren't AHL caliber players. By far you're the best guy we've had up here, and you can definitely play here. But we don't have room for you.’ Four days later he called me again, and asked if I could come up tomorrow for an afternoon game. Played in that game, stayed on with team for rest of year. Basically the 20th guy on roster. But I got some serious points.”

There is more I want to know, whether the Father was right or whether it is something else which kept Brickley from the show. So, I breathe deeply and ask. “Quentin, is it true what they say about the heart condition? ‘Cause everywhere I go people are always saying you should be in the show, and the only reason you aren't is cause of your heart.”

“Yes. It's True. Part of it anyway. My heart rate would speed up when I played hockey. Into overdrive, and it would scare me. Freak me out. The doctor's never saw a heart go that fast. Never. So in 94' they re-rooted it or something and now it has been fine ever since. But that was in 94' and I was 28. Too late in my career. I mean when I was trying to make it I could only skate like 75% 'cause I didn't want it to freak on me. I still tore it up at 75%.” His lips curl up as he shakes his head. “But that wasn't the only reason I didn't make it. Hell I mean, I know if you put Gretzky, Jagr, Lemieux, Forsberg, and Bure on a sheet of shinny I'd win. I

would. I know it. But I didn't realize who I was as a player till 26. This is before my heart condition. You want some advice Will?" Brickley snaps my shin with his towel preventing me from writing, forcing me to listen and to look at him. "Identify your strengths and weaknesses as a player and understand who you are as a hockey player. Your identity. Your identity is determined by your strengths and weaknesses. When you know your identity you will maximize strengths and minimize weaknesses. Don't go out on ice and try to be something you're not. If you're a skill player don't try and hit. Be who you are. And who you are should be consistent with your strengths and weaknesses."

I ask one last question; I ask Quentin to describe his perfect day.

"Get up moderately late at ten. Eat breakfast and read the sports. Pack hockey bag, go play shinny, and I mean high level shinny. I want to play against really good guys. Come back in the afternoon and unpack my bag. Have afternoon meal at like 4, and then play hockey in a real serious game that means something. After that, when the game is over, I'd like to grab my girlfriend, Sue, and go out to get something to eat. Pizza."

Quentin Brickley never made it to the show, never collected the big check. But on the ice, at hockey's purest, in the game of shinny, Quentin is king. I think for now anyway, Quentin Brickley's life is filled with perfect days.