

A person is ice skating on a vast, frozen lake. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright starburst effect and casting a long shadow of the skater. In the background, there are large, rugged mountains under a clear blue sky with a few wispy clouds. The ice on the lake is dark and shows some tracks from other skaters.

SKATE YOUR HEART OUT

Some of Canada's most beloved athletes have found their edge on our wild ice. With these expert rink tips, a shovel, and your skates, you can too



ON FROZEN POND

HOW SKATING ON WILD ICE IS LIFE WITH NO LIMITS

BY ELLADJ BALDÉ

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ELLADJ BALDÉ KNOWS ICE. *One of Canada's top figure skaters spent much of his life performing high-flying jumps and heart-stopping backflips on ice surfaces tailor-made for his skills.*

But Baldé, who retired from competition in 2018, wanted to know what it felt like to skate on wild ice, the frosty layer that forms over many Canadian lakes during the coldest months. Last winter, he got his chance. Alberta-based photographer Paul Zizka invited Baldé out for a photo shoot on Lake Minnewanka, just outside Banff, one chilly December morning. As Baldé glided across the lake's icy crust, he discovered a new love for a different kind of skating. Since then, the photos and videos of his wild ice adventures have caught the attention of the world, garnering millions of views across social media and support for his messages of social justice. With so many eyes now on him, Baldé, who is of Russian and Guinean descent, co-founded the Figure Skating Diversity and Inclusion Alliance, a group working to foster a more welcoming environment for coaches and skaters who are Black, Indigenous, and people of colour. Cottage Life spoke with Baldé about what makes skating on wild ice so special.

I always imagined wild ice to be really bumpy and most of the time, it is. Once the ice gets thick, there's all these cracks and holes; it's a surface far from perfect. But my first sheet of wild ice was absolutely perfect. I've never felt smooth ice like that. The ice was a couple of inches thick and completely black. Every

edge that I held was carving a white line into the ice. I was able to almost paint an image with my skates. It was magic.

But the thing that stood out the most to me was the sound that wild ice makes. It's like there's a whole *Star Wars* battle going on under me—laser guns going *pee-ew, pee-ew, pee-ew*; other sounds going *boom* and *drmmmm*. It feels like you're skating on something that is real and alive and breathing.

I've now skated on Lake Minnewanka many times and experienced this lake in many different ways. The first time, when I went up with Paul and his team for a photo shoot, it wasn't completely frozen for winter yet. We had an area that was 30 feet by 30 feet wide, maybe, where the ice was thick enough for skating. They said "skate within this area," giving me a perimeter. I skated on that sheet of ice all day. Half an hour later, the part we were skating on had detached and started drifting away like an iceberg. It eventually disappeared.

But over the winter, the entire lake freezes. You have 25 kilometres one way and 25 kilometres the other. To me, that's mind blowing—to have that much space and to be able to do what you want and go where you want is incredible. It's moments like that when you just stop in disbelief.

When you skate indoors, the ice that you skate on is manmade and full of chemicals. It doesn't seem like real ice. Whereas when I step on a lake in the mountains, I can't help but think that this water froze through a process that Mother Nature does naturally.

The combination of doing what I love most, which is skating and performing, in a place that I feel most at home, which is nature—I feel like I've been missing out on that my whole life. In competitive figure skating, you don't have the freedom to really deep dive into what it means to be an artist; there are so many rules. But when I started skating outdoors and connecting to nature, my intention behind skating changed. I started to find fulfillment in ways that I never thought was possible.

When I started making videos on wild ice, I wanted to use skating as a vehicle to share a message that's deeply ingrained within me and that I hope to inspire the world to connect with. We all have something that's unique about us. And we all have gifts that we can share with the world. If I can inspire some people to share their gifts with the world, we would live in a better place.

That's my mission. When things blew up on social media, I was given the gift of a massive platform to continue to share my art. I feel like I'm able to be of service to humanity and our planet. I can help raise awareness on certain issues that I believe can be fixed. If people turned their awareness towards these things and took action, things could get better. And I want to use my platform and my art to inspire people to do that. >>

As told to Christina Frangou. This excerpt has been edited and condensed for clarity.

PREVIOUS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: PAUL ZIZKA. ELLADJ BALDÉ PORTRAIT: DAN DEALY



"IT FEELS LIKE YOU'RE SKATING ON SOMETHING THAT'S ALIVE AND BREATHING"

We asked 8 of Canada's most outstanding athletes on ice why skating outside is so special:



SARAH NURSE

Ice hockey, 2018 Olympic silver medalist

"I skated for the first time on an outdoor rink; it's where my love for skating began. Outdoor rinks are special here in Canada. No matter how old I am, skating outside reminds me of the magic of the first time I laced up the skates."



PIPER GILLES

Figure skating, member of the 2018 Olympic team

"I love the feeling of the wind. There's this movement when you're skating, but when you're on an outdoor rink there's even more. It's so wild and natural. One of my most magical memories was skating on Lake Louise. We were doing this beautiful artistic program and we blended into the mountains that were already art. I'll never forget that feeling."



ISABELLE WEIDEMANN

Speed skating, member of the 2018 Olympic team

"Our first few practices outside were a shock for the team. It's hard to train productively when it's -20°C and windy. Still, it was an absolute blast. And the elements made us stronger skaters. I bought a heated battery-powered vest last year. I think it weighed 4 kg, but I was never cold! It was amazing. I tell everyone to buy one."



BY HAYLEY WICKENHEISER

Five-time Olympic medalist in ice hockey

The backyard rink was my church and my first love. I lived out there. Every time my blades touched the ice, it was like I was being handed a blank canvas. I wasn't just skating. I was creating. I was dreaming. No one was criticizing me or yelling at me. I felt free and safe because that's where I belonged. I loved the feel of my blades cutting into the rock-hard ice. I loved the crispness of the air. I loved that I could see my breath. I didn't feel the cold, no matter the windchill factor.

Being on that ice wasn't work to me. Practising my stickhandling or skating wasn't work. It was fun. It was pure joy. The skills I gained came from a place of joy. Even as a kid, I loved to rise and grind. I loved the process of learning, improving, growing stronger.

In 2013, when I was struggling through injury and living through a lot of upheaval at Team Canada, I dialled up Lesley Redden, a former national team goaltender. There is no one in this world who loves to play hockey as much as Lester, who plays six days a week, year-round. Her joy and love for the game is as pure as any I have ever seen. I got her to meet me at a frozen pond in northwest Calgary. For a few days, that was the only hockey I played—shinny on that pond. I spent hours and hours there each day, breathing in the cold, crisp air, skating until my lungs burned and my hoodie was soaked in sweat. I needed to remind myself why I had committed so much of my life and self to this game. It wasn't for the championships or the medals or the awards. It wasn't to see how far I could take my game or how much I could accomplish. From the moment I took my first tentative strides on the ice, I fell in love with the game. I played because I loved it. I needed to find my way back there.

I firmly believe that shinny is Canada's secret weapon, the reason the country produces so many of the world's best hockey players. Pond hockey lets kids develop naturally, playing the game with joy and verve.

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THIS PAGE: ISABELLE WEIDEMANN PORTRAIT, ROAM CREATIVE/SPEEDSKATING CANADA. OPPOSITE: MACKENZIE HIGGS; SARAH NURSE PORTRAIT, DUANE COLE; PIPER GILLES PORTRAIT, SKATE CANADA/PATINAGE CANADA

SMOOTH OPERATIONS

7 WAYS TO MAKE THE VERY BEST RINK ON THE LAKE

BY CONOR MIHELL

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HAVE YOU EVER CLEARED a patch of lake ice at the cottage for a weekend skate? Most likely, you put in a whole lot of shovelling for the brief joy of skating or shinny—only to have your rink obliterated by the next snowfall. That was the pattern Helen Batten noticed last winter at her place on Clear Lake, in the Kawarthas, Ont. “We watched several of our neighbours get out there all gung-ho,” she recalls, “and one by one they all gave up.”

Helen and her husband, Douglas, meanwhile, stuck with the regime of clearing snow, flooding the skating surface, and clearing more snow. Their first attempt at a rink included a rectangle and a surrounding oval, with a candlelit neighbourhood skate on Family Day. Keeping a smooth surface for the duration of the season means dealing with storms, rain, deep freezes, and thaws, says Helen. Her takeaway was simple. “Stick with it and be prepared to put in the work.” Here are seven tips and shortcuts from the Battens and other pros to make and maintain a perfect sheet of outdoor ice. >>



THIS PAGE: ILLUSTRATION: KYLE METCALF; KEEGAN MESSING PORTRAIT, SKATE CANADA/PATIMAGE CANADA. OPPOSITE: PHOTO: DORENE HOOKEY



KEEGAN MESSING

Figure Skating, member of 2018 Olympic team

“You can forget the joy of the glide inside when you are training. It’s so easy to forget why you started skating in the first place. As soon as you go outside into Mother Nature, the world opens up and you have the blissful quietness of being outside mixed with the joyful edge found under your feet.”



MARIE-PHILIP POULIN

Ice Hockey, three-time Olympic medalist

“Growing up, my brother and I would spend countless hours out on the rink with our friends. Our mom had to drag us in to have dinner, and we would go right back out after. Playing hockey on lakes or rivers at a cottage is magical. I always feel so free. That love for the game makes me proud to be a partner of the Hockey Canada Foundation Assist Fund, which gives kids who love the game the opportunity to play.”



1

QUALITY CONTROL

Check the ice thickness by drilling or chopping test holes in several locations with an auger or axe (you want at least 20 cm to support a group of skaters). More important than thickness, says Danny Peled, the owner of Boreal River Rescue, a company offering ice safety courses across Canada, is the quality of the ice. White ice is 50 per cent weaker than black or clear ice, as is unsupported ice (occurring when water levels decrease after freeze-up). “Don’t rely on your friends on another lake, past history, or general conditions across a whole area,” says Peled.

2

CLEAR EARLY AND OFTEN

Begin clearing snow for a rink as soon as the ice is safe. Snow is an excellent insulator; removing it will allow the ice to thicken faster, building up a surface that lasts longer and is more resistant to shifting weather, says John Teljeur, the owner and event manager of the Canadian National Pond Hockey Championships in Haliburton, Ont. A few big snowfalls taught Helen and Douglas Batten the benefit of a snowblower—and the importance of removing snow from their rink quickly so slush doesn’t have time to accumulate. Mid-week snow is the bane of weekend cottagers. “You have to be out there regularly,” Helen says.

3

MAKE IT BIG

Reid McLachlan’s rink on the Gatineau River in Chelsea, Que., starts off “Olympic-sized” in January before shrinking to more modest dimensions as the winter progresses. That’s partly due to Reid’s and his partner, Becky Mason’s, enthusiasm for shinny. But it’s a practical strategy too: bare ice becomes convex over time as snow accumulates around the edges and weighs down the perimeter. Water pools in these low areas during flooding and they eventually become less suitable for skating, so the rink inevitably shrinks. Both Reid and Teljeur create “moats” or “ice dams” of cleared ice around their hockey rinks to try to keep water from leaking across the surface of the rink and to preserve the playing area.



4

HOW TO FLOOD

Flooding restores the skating surface after heavy use. There are many ways to achieve mirror-smooth ice and all involve “rinsing” the surface in a thin layer of water. The Battens use a submersible pump placed in a hole in the ice and a 1.5” PVC hose (Helen says anything smaller will drain poorly and become frozen after use); meanwhile, Reid slowly spills garbage can-sized barrels of river water onto his rink while skaters use wide-bladed push shovels to spread the “wet edge” towards the perimeter. Avoid flooding before a snowfall or during strong winds. Teljeur has concluded that -8°C is the ideal temperature for flooding. At this temperature, the water “melts in a bit and adheres better to the ice below it,” he says.

5

BEAT THE RAIN AND SLUSH

As long as your rink is clear of snow, patience is the best antidote to thaw conditions. “Let it sit,” says Teljeur. “Things will take care of themselves when cold temperatures return. You may have some rough ice, but that’s better than plodding through slush and creating a mess of foot marks.”

6

FIXING CRACKS

Pressure cracks, which inevitably form as ice shifts and settles during the winter, often are an indication that the ice is strong—but they can pose a tripping hazard for skaters. Nevil Knupp has been making rinks at his cottage on Crystal Lake, Ont., north of Fenelon Falls, for 25 years. He relies on a shovel and a slurry of snow and water to fill cracks in his 30-by-90-m outdoor rink. “It’s just like patching a hole in a wall,” he says.

7

TOP TOOLS

Metal-edged tools are best for levelling the ice. Reid’s arsenal of shovels involves a variety of sizes, all with a metal edge. The Battens, meanwhile, discovered that the flat backside of a broad aluminum landscaping rake was ideal for removing the thin skiff of snow turned up by skaters. >>

THIS PAGE: ILLUSTRATIONS, KYLE METCALF. OPPOSITE: PHOTO, PHYLLIS LANGLEY



“YOU CAN’T LOVE THE GAME UNLESS YOU’VE SHOVELLED THE ICE.”

—
DAVE KING,
FOUR-TIME COACH OF CANADA’S
OLYMPIC MEN’S ICE HOCKEY TEAM

INTO THE BEYOND

IT WASN'T THE STANLEY CUP FINALS.
IT WAS SOMETHING EVEN BETTER

BY ROY MACGREGOR

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WE DIDN'T CARE IF it looked silly and sounded awful—there was only the dog there to stand witness.

My son Gord and I stood at attention in the middle of the bay in the only time of year you can actually walk on water—in this case, skate—and we belted out the national anthem. We hit a few sour notes, blew a verse or two, but ended with a roaring cheer for the start of what may well have been the greatest game of hockey either of us ever played.

A winter stay at the cottage had become a ritual, earlier on during March Break, then during Reading Week after the kids had moved on to higher education. There would, however, be no time for “reading.” Without a plowed road, getting there required snowshoes and sleds and a path that truly is (and I can prove it) uphill in both directions. Then there is the digging out of the entrance, the constant fires to bring the temperature up to that of outside and beyond, the unpacking, the ice augering for water...and, of course, the requisite playing.

We always made a rink, but, that year, the rink was already made for us. It was as if a Zamboni had made the rounds as we slept. The days leading up to this break had seen an early thaw, followed by a deep freeze the evening we arrived. Pure smooth ice—the French call it *verglas*—gleaming from a night of wind polish, now covered the entire lake.

In the case of the Great Camp Lake Freeze, there were only two of us “kids” and the dog. No matter, we were outside to play on the ice, and play we did. We used branches to set up a rink that stretched the width of the bay. We held contests to see who could fire a puck farthest down the ice—“my shot is still going!”—and we got down on our hands and knees near the far shoal to see if we might see fish through ice as clear as a pane of glass. Many cottagers never see their cottage in winter. A shame, really, as the cottage has a different sort of magic.

The greatest difference is the silence. There are no roaring motors, no chainsaws, no leaf blowers, no loons. There is no music blaring apart from one ridiculously bad, and mercifully short, rendition of “O Canada.” There is just the most astonishing silence you will ever hear—or not hear.

That is, not until you begin skating. There is a sound to skating on an outdoor lake that's not heard in enclosed arenas.

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P.K. SUBBAN

Ice Hockey, 2014 Olympic gold medalist

“The best thing about playing outside is the cold. I always associate cold weather with skating outside. Skating in extreme Canadian cold winters made me appreciate skating inside even more.”



TYSON LANGELAAR

Speed Skating, member of Canada's National Team

“My favourite memory of skating outdoors has to be the first day the national team and I skated on Gap Lake, Alta., last season. The weather was warm—not a cloud in sight. The ice was smooth. It was surreal. The surrounding mountains really light up with the right sunlight, which we had that day.”



GREG WESTLAKE

Para Ice Hockey, three-time Paralympic medalist

“There is something so Canadian about playing hockey outside. One of my favourite sounds is when your blades carve into the ice. Having access to outdoor rinks allowed me to always be playing. This is one of the reasons I partnered with the Hockey Canada Foundation Assist Fund, to help kids discovering the game, or who love it, access the sport.”

THIS PAGE: P.K. SUBBAN PORTRAIT, COURTESY P.K. SUBBAN. OPPOSITE: PHOTO, RACHELLE MACK; TYSON LANGELAAR PORTRAIT, ROAM CREATIVE/SPEED SKATE CANADA

It is the sound of carving, ice chips periodically spraying up from a strong flick of an ankle or a sharp turn. To a skater's ears, it is the sweetest of music.

We eventually threw down our hockey sticks—we had no puck, after all, my shot still heading toward the far shore—and only skated. Skated. Skated. And later, once we had the fire blazing again, we threw on our coats and stepped out onto the

shovelled deck. Here, high above the shore, we could see exactly where we had skated, the long lines and curls down the lake like cursive. The narrative of our finest day ever on blades readable for as far as we could see, for as long as the ice would last. 🐾

Roy MacGregor was once called the Wayne Gretzky of hockey writing. He was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 2012.