

**Dick Ernst: Memories of a thrilling hockey program**

**By Dick Ernst**

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Cranston High School has a long history of great hockey. It was a charter member of the Interscholastic Hockey League when games were played on Polo Lake in Roger Williams Park. The team representing Cranston East High School, sadly, no longer exists; it was unable to find enough players to fill a squad. But I have cherished memories of this great team, the Thunderbolts, and my years with it.

As a sophomore and junior in the 1950s, I played with all-staters Don Hebert and Nellie Turnquist under Coach Paul “Jigger” Higgins. As captain and all-stater in 1956 on Coach Howie Crins’s first team, I played with teammates Al Soares, Frank Curran, Dick Grant, Barry Johnston, Ken Hogberg and Howie Hallberg. (Soares, an all-stater, played briefly for the Rhode Island Reds and later coached Brown.)

All those players went on to college. We played before 5,000 fans in the state playoffs, practiced on ponds throughout the state and rented the old Rhode Island Auditorium and the Shipyard Ice Bowl, as did all our squads, until 1971, when Cranston Veterans Memorial Ice Rink opened.

Cranston hockey thrived long before my time, in the mid-1920s and early ’30s, under Coach “Speed” Merritt. The Bolts captured the league title in 1927, and league and state titles in 1929, ’30, ’31 and ’32. The undefeated 1931 squad was the most dominant. All six starters made The Journal-Bulletin first team all-state squad: Red Gould, Howie Chisholm, Red Hough, Howie Sheffield, Rod McGarry and Tony Parrillo. These boys were undefeated, and unscored-on throughout the entire season!

The 1964 and 1966 Thunderbolts won state championships. Joe Cavanagh (said to be the greatest Rhode Island high school player) and linemates Dan DeMichele and Rich McLaughlin, along with defensemen Ted Bryand and Curt Bennett (named all-New England tourney), Bill Greene and goalie Greg Fiske powered Cranston East to the 1966 New England title, beating St. Dominic Academy of Lewiston, Maine, at Boston Garden. Hockey aficionados consider this the best Rhode Island team ever. Cavanagh was a three-time All-American at Harvard, while Bennett was All-American at Brown.

George “Mack” Horton, longtime assistant to Higgins and Crins, took over the team in 1967, while I became his assistant. John Bennett and David Cavanagh led our Bolts to the state championship, beating La Salle in a torrid, three-game final.

In 1969, East defeated defending champs Mt. St. Charles in an exciting state final, and then edged Waterville, Maine, 2-1 in overtime in the New England semi-finals, and Berlin, N.H., 3-2 in the finals -- again in OT -- at Snively Arena in New Hampshire. Our team literally skated hundreds of miles on lakes to achieve this victory. Cranston East had a strong squad, with all-staters Mike Theriault in goal, Harvey Bennett at defense and Otto Tingley at center. Dave Poole solidified the defense while Lloyd Sheehan and Doug Smith completed first line offense. Lloyd scored the winning goal against Waterville, and Doug put in the winner against Berlin.

Although Cranston East was defeated in the 1970 state finals by Mount St. Charles, the early 1970s produced the biggest rivalry in Rhode Island: East vs. Cranston West. Large crowds in 1975 forced the league to schedule these games at Thayer Arena in Warwick. East met West in the Division I quarter-finals, winning the series, two games to one, the only time these teams met in Division I playoffs. Throughout the 1980s, East topped West 21 times without losing.

That era also produced superstars. Jack Capuano, a 1982 and 1983 Bolt, is now head coach of the NHL’s New York Islanders. Curt, John, Harvey, Jim and Bill Bennett all played professionally. Three-year first team all-stater Jim Bucci starred, and brother Dave a year later. Steve Taylor was a 1980 all-state, Met A League top scorer and 1984 Providence College captain. The Harrington brothers -- David, Steve and Gerry -- all went on to play at Yale. Jim Bennett went to Brown. Other stars included Rich and Bob Cavanagh; Pat Kennedy; Pete Howard; Ray Mansolillo; Ken Silva; Mark Hebert; Vin Baldini; and goalies Paul Mellor and Garret Bodington.

I took over the coaching reins in 1974 for the next 29 years. My spectacular 1984 squad pulled off one of the great upsets in league history. Bishop Hendricken had finished first in the league, defeating the Mount, but East, which had finished fourth, defeated the Hawks in three exciting semifinal games. Gordie and Bob Ernst, along with Tom Hogan, were a dynamic first line in front of goalie Joel Kiers. Mike Gambardelli, Steve Baker, Bob Tramonti, Bill Butler and Gary Augusta were standouts on this squad.

Meeting Mount St. Charles in the finals, East lost two straight. However, the Bolts were the only public school to play in the finals every year over a span of 16 years. Gordie Ernst set a playoff scoring record with 19 points, including a game-one hat trick.

In 1985, brother Andy joined Bob and Gordie on the Bolts’ top line. Andy scored two goals as Gordie added the winner, beating the Mount, 5-4 -- Mount’s only loss of the season in which they were rated No. 1 in the United States. This was their only loss to a public school in a span of 20 years of league play.

The Ernst brothers made league history for family all-state hockey honors, with seven: Gordie, three times; Bob, two; and Andy, two. Andy was the leading scorer in New England hockey in 1987.

My 1994 and ’95 teams won back-to-back Met C championships with terrific players. The great captain and two-time MVP Tom Pereira, Terry Healey, Greg Brown and goalie Kevin Roberts bolstered those outstanding teams. The 2002 Bolts were 26-0 Met C champs, but I was then forced to retire because of a Department of Education ruling. Bob Jackson and former players for me, Bob Finelli and Paul “P.J.” Bessette, eventually took over the East Thunderbolts hockey team until its demise in 2013.

Dick Ernst, known as the dean of Rhode Island hockey coaches, has coached 52 high school teams -- 36 at Cranston East. He is currently the Lincoln-Cumberland girls hockey coach.