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Justin "J-Pants" Taylor

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For the **LOVE** of Hockey



Now 45, the Sun Valley Suns have put 'fun' back in the game

BY HAYDEN SEDER

Like any institution in Sun Valley—The Pioneer Saloon, The Mint, the Sun Valley Ski Education Foundation—the Valley's hockey team, the Sun Valley Suns, has a storied history, rumored lore, colorful characters and long life to come. Celebrating its 45th season this year, the Suns started as just a few guys wanting to play hockey for fun and continues to attract men both locally and the world over for that same reason: to put the "fun" back in hockey.

The Suns are a group of high-level players from Europe, North America, and some recruited right in Sun Valley. Members of the Black Diamond Hockey League (BDHL), the team competes for a championship trophy alongside other regional teams like Jackson Hole's The Moose and the Bozeman Stingers. The caliber of current players is high with teammates with experience in the American Hockey League (AHL), East Coast Hockey League (ECHL), European leagues, and NCAA schools, including Minnesota Duluth, Hamilton, Lake Forest, Bowdoin, Colby, St. Michaels, Southern Maine, Williams, and others.

THE HISTORY

Many men feature prominently in the history of the Suns but no more than George Gund III, the "father of Suns hockey" who built the Sun Valley ice rink and sup-

ported the team financially for 20 years.

Gund had a house here and owned the Minnesota North Stars at the time and wanted to bring hockey to Sun Valley. In 1973, he leased a parcel of land from Bill Janss and the Sun Valley Company for his new indoor skating rink. At the time, a group of former hockey players was regularly playing on the outdoor rink. Once construction on the indoor rink was completed in 1975, that group, comprising Alex Orb, Charlie Holt, Nick Orr, David Knott, Hermie Haavik, Doc Burgett, Kim Salmela, John Heinrich, John Weekes and Gund, became the founding of Suns hockey, laying a foundation for the next 45 years.

Also on the original lineup was John "Cub" Burke (also known as "Cubbie") who has been the head coach and general manager for the Suns for the last six years. Burke moved from Duluth, Minnesota, after hearing from his hometown friend Haavik about the Suns, starting an influx of players from Duluth and the East Coast. He played from 1975-1986 and then coached for nine years after that.

Thus begun a time period in the Suns history that has become legendary in the minds of Suns fans. At the time, the Suns had a rivalry with the Aspen hockey team (after that, Vail became the rival, and now it's Jackson Hole). Burke and others have said that the stories about these days "aren't

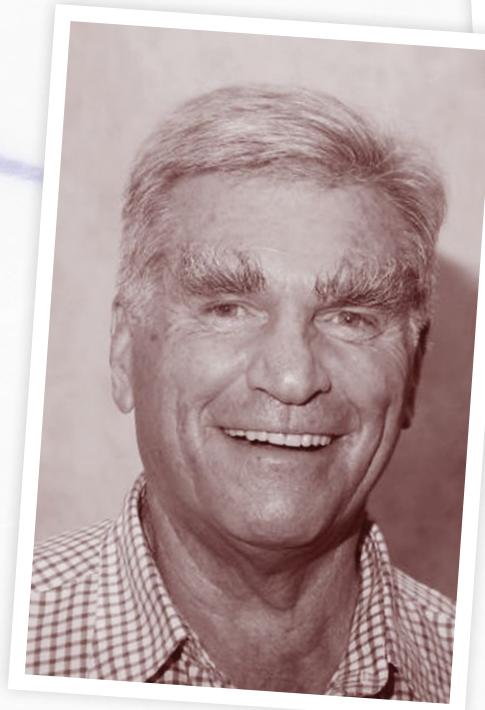
fit for print" and thus will probably go to their graves, but some fans have heard or saw for themselves fights on and off the ice and the throwing of various items like batteries and duck heads at players by fans.

Burke describes the scene back then as truly fun. "Once we started playing games and the arena was formed, around 1,400 people would come to the games. It was such an event in town. It's really unique, we're the second oldest senior elite team in the country."

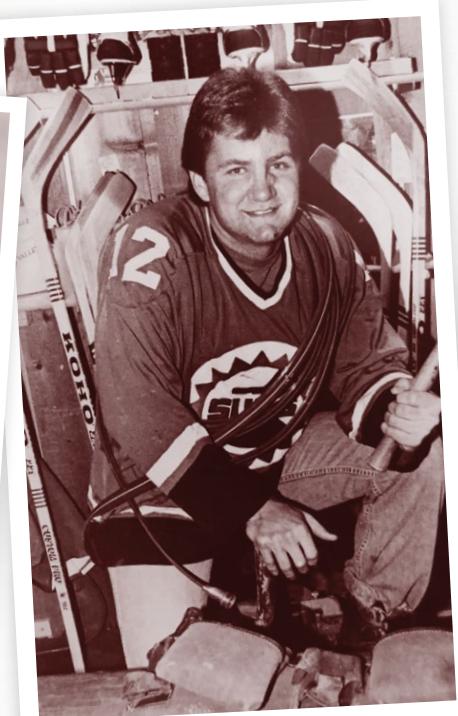
Steve Morcone, both a former player and coach for the Suns, has been involved in the team since he joined in 1983. A friend told him how much fun it was to play for the team and having just finished school, Morcone left Washington, D.C., to play in Sun Valley for two years. "Like everyone else when they're 23, I worked on the mountain, skied every day, and, in the summers, I painted and landscaped."

One of the youngest players on the team at the time, Morcone recalls fondly a trip to Japan with the team for over two weeks when the team toured the country and played on national TV. "We were treated like rock stars everywhere we went and had first-class accommodations everywhere. We had guys on the trip that had never even been on an airplane."

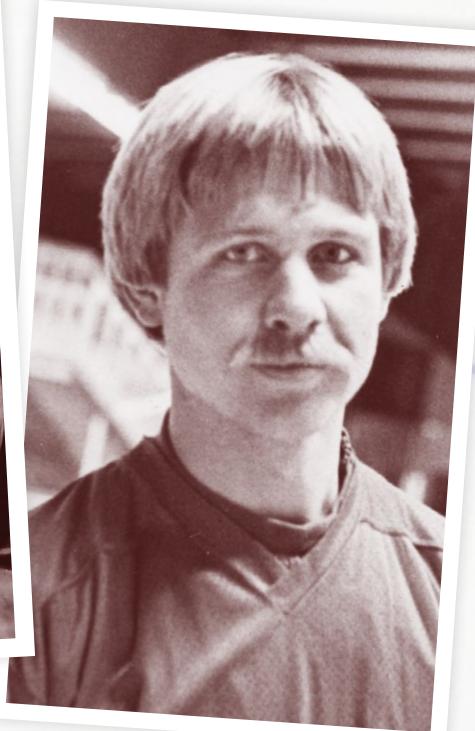
Morcone left Sun Valley in 1985 to go back to Washington, D.C., and start a food



The late George Gund in 1980, the
"father of Suns Hockey"



Former player and coach,
Steve Morcone in 1983



Coach John "Cub" Burke
in 1977

GUND, MORCONE AND BURKE: COURTESY SUN VALLEY SUNS



GROUP PHOTO: SARA OLSON

import business. He visited the area on vacations and remained a supporter of the Suns. After retiring, Morcone moved permanently to Sun Valley during a time when game attendance was down and the Suns as a whole were faltering a bit. At the time, there was no coach, and Morcone stepped in for two seasons until John Burke started coaching in 2013, a fit that seemed natural.

"John is amazing; he's got a certain passion for the Suns, and he's good at it," Morcone explained. "He devotes a tremendous amount of time and effort to get the team organized by managing practices and schedules, getting hotel rooms, recruiting."

THE FANS AND THE RINKS

The Sun Valley Ice Rink was home to the Suns for many years (and still functions as their practice rink) but with the completion of the Champion Ice House in Hailey five years ago, the Suns games have all headed south. While the crowds are still good—the Suns have a very dedicated fan base—the move to Hailey has essentially made it easier

for the south Valley people to attend games who might not have before and harder for the north Valley people who once attended Sun Valley games.

But no matter the game, whether the Suns play a local competitor or film director and coach Bobby Farrelly's East Coast Gutter Snipes, the fans always come out.

"If it wasn't for the fans, there would be no Suns, no 45 years," said Burke.

Getting young fans interested in hockey is a priority for Burke and the Suns, which is why the coach lets children under the age of 10 in for free. "That's when they develop the passion for hockey and they join the youth hockey program and go on to get college scholarships," Burke explained. "It's important. I could charge kids and make a little more money, but it brings the whole family to the rink."

One loyal Suns fan is Bellevue Mayor Ned Burns who began attending games the winter of 2000-2001 when he moved here. "It was wild at that time down in the rowdy corner, but not as wild as the old days when

GAME 1,000

In February of 2019, The Suns played their 1,000th game and past players were honored.

Standing back row,

left to right:

John Weekes

Harry Weekes

Dave Hutchinson

John Heinrich

Steve Morcone

Hermie Haavik

Alex Orb

Ivars Muzis

Steve Bohner

Billy Cook

Scott Winkler

Pete Whitehead

Kurt Wenzell

John Stevens

Mark Broz

John Miller

Dale Johnson

Tim Jeneson

Blake Jenson

Kneeling front row,

right to left:

Zak Greenawalt + son

Charles Friedman + son

Terry Heneghan

James Moskos

Brad Dredge

Vilnis Nikolaisons

Ryan Thomson + son

Charlie Holt

Dave Stone

Chris Benson

Bobby Noyse



Neils "Bobcat" McMahon



DJ Robinson

SARA OLSON

players were leaving the ice to fight fans in the stands, which I heard happened in the 70s and 80s." [Burke said this is not true]. "We were more in the throwing-duck-heads-out-on-the-ice-during-Jackson-games era," Burns added.

Inspired by the Suns, Burns, at the age of 30, started playing hockey himself and paying attention to the playing of the game. "What keeps me going back is the nuance of the game: the little hand motions or deft footwork or tight pass. There are so many minuscule moments in a game that matter so much and to have watched 20 years of those little moments is honestly special!"

ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

Long overdue, the Sun Valley Suns Alumni Association (SVSAA) was formed last year to keep the over 600 former players living all over the world involved and up-to-date on all that is Suns hockey. Even more importantly, it helps to support the Suns financially and keep them around another 45 years.

Former players Dave Hutchinson, John Miller, John Burke, and Steve Morcone started the SVSAA. An advisory board of eight other men highly involved with the Suns was also created. This new arm of the Suns helps fund the team's needs on a year-

to-year basis as it relates to ice time, travel, visiting team support, and other necessary expenses. Ticket sales and other revenues from games help but don't begin to cover all the necessary costs to run a team of players who play for free.

"All of this support is to ensure the team is here forever and to honor the dedication of many others to the organization and the volunteer coaching over the years," said Hutchinson, who played for 15 years between 1978-1993.

Members of the SVSAA pay annual dues at different levels varying from \$100 to \$5,000 annually. Members have a designated "lounge" at games and participate in annual events, including alumni skates with the team, an annual golf tournament, and more to come.

GIVING BACK

Before the Alumni Association was started, a group of supporters and former players started the Suns Foundation, Inc. as a conduit for donation money to the nonprofit groups that collect tickets and sell merchandise at Suns games, a concept launched by Glenn Hunter when he coached the team. The foundation has expanded to donate to many groups, mostly in Blaine County. Over time, the donations have amounted to hun-

dreds of thousands of dollars, and there are annual donors to the foundation.

In addition to the Suns Foundation, the players give back to the community in a myriad of ways, from going to the schools and reading to students, to scooping horse poop during the Wagon Days parade, to manning an aid station at the Boulder Mountain Tour. Players also teach elementary school children to skate at the Park Penguins after-school hockey program.

"The thing that makes the Suns such an institution is their availability in the community," Burns said. "The organization does so much. All those guys are role models to the young hockey players in the Valley."

Suns player Spencer Brendel grew up watching the Suns and knows the importance of giving back to his community. "Playing with the Suns is a lot of fun; you get to play in front of your parents and grandparents and people who have supported you for the last 25 years," Brendel said. "To give back some of that time is cool."

THE TEAM NOW

Brendel, like many other players on the team, came to the Suns after several years of playing semi-pro hockey. Before all that though, he was just a kid growing up in Sun Valley, watching the Suns and joining the



Sean "Doc" O'Grady

Eric "D-Day" Demment

youth program as a Mini Mite. After graduating from Wood River in 2007, he played for two years in Sweden and then was recruited to the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis where he stayed for four years before coming back to the Valley in 2013. Brendel is known locally for his company Play Hard Give Back (PHGB), which makes handcrafted trail mixes. Sales of the trail mixes benefit PHGB, ambassador athletes, and the chosen charities of those athletes.

As to why the Suns organization has remained such a long-running institution, Brendel offered: "Idaho has a certain soft spot for hockey; this community has latched on to it for some reason. It's cool to follow in the footsteps of all the guys who came before us and follow in the tradition."

Coach Burke says this season is looking good, especially with the addition of local Joey Sides, fresh from the pro scene playing for the Kansas City Mavericks. Many of the players on the current roster have played Division I, Division III, or pro hockey, a fact that has no doubt contributed to the Suns winning three of the last four Black Diamond Hockey League (BDHL) championships.

Another local who joined the Suns after playing Division III hockey is Justin Taylor, aka "J Pants," who played for Lake Forest College and then the Arizona Sundogs with

Sides in the Central Hockey League before coming back to Sun Valley in 2013.

Taylor was basically "born on skates" and grew up watching Suns games with his father, who coached hockey at Yale before Taylor was born. The environment of playing with the Suns versus when he played pro is no comparison with the amount of fun, camaraderie, and general hooliganery that the team enjoys. "It's a super-unique hockey environment," Taylor said. "The whole men's league, crowd-drawing, mountain-town aspect of it, it makes hockey fun again."

Taylor and the other players have kept the rowdy spirit of the Suns alive, forgoing scuffles on the ice for pranks on road trips like "leaners"—a trash can full of water, leaned against someone's hotel door that falls after the prankster ding-dong-ditches. The year Taylor joined the Suns was the first in eight years that the team was even allowed back at the Snow King Resort in Jackson Hole due to a story involving property damage (although no further details were shared).

"The teammates, the camaraderie, the road trips—it all contributes to the purity of it all," Taylor said.

The fun of the team and the beauty of the mountain town keep players coming

back year after year and recruiting guys from around the world as well.

"These guys are playing for the love of the game," Burke explained. "It's always been so fun; that's just the way we're going to be forever. We're not going to take ourselves too seriously."

Morcone added, "If you can have this kind of fun playing the sport you grew up playing and living in a community like this with the support of the community as well, that's what really keeps it going." ☀

CATCH THE FUN

NOV. 29, 2019 — MARCH 14, 2020

The Sun Valley Suns will host games at the Sun Valley Ice Rink and the Campion Ice House. The games, with teams from Jackson, Park City, Bozeman, Missoula, and Vail, are generally at 7 p.m. and will be full of action for the whole family. Tickets are \$10 for adults, \$5 for kids 10-18. Kids under 10 can attend free of charge. For a full schedule and more information, visit sunvalleysunshockey.com