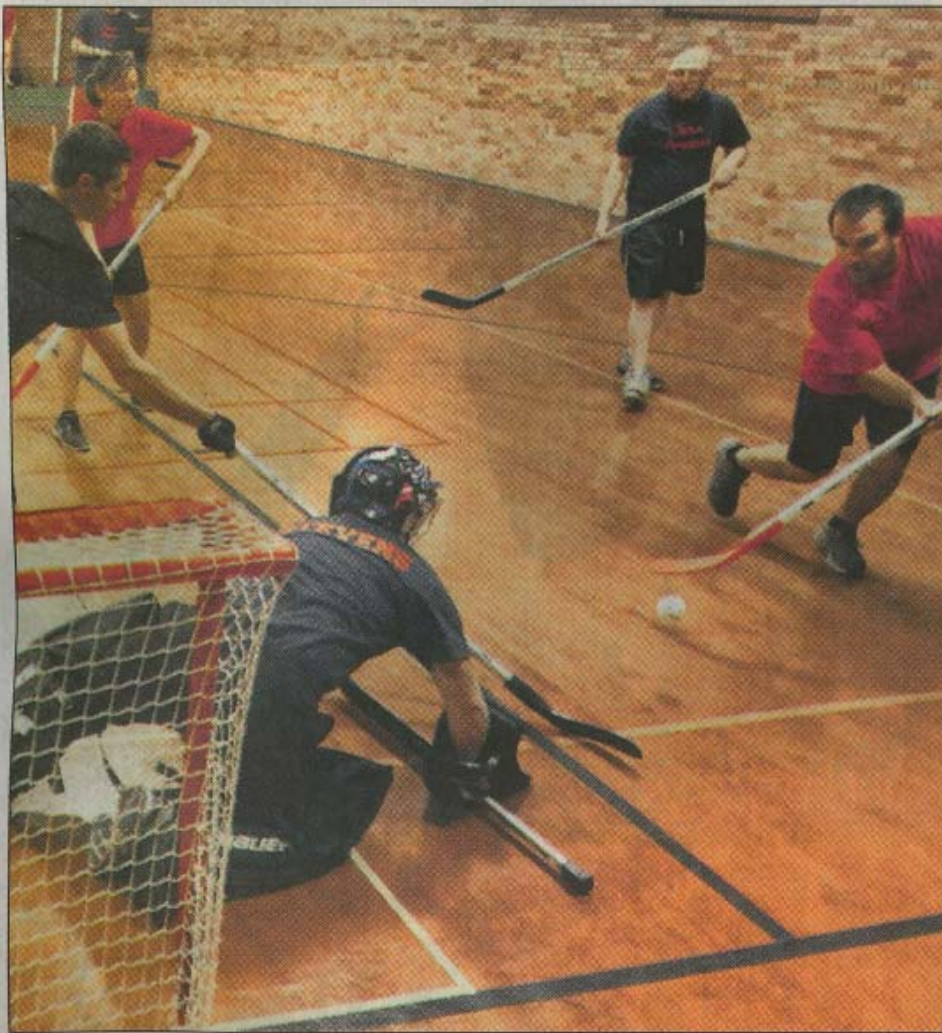


Outdoors

Hunting ■ Fishing ■ Hiking

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STEFAN HARD / STAFF PHOTO

The Bulldogs' Jeff Alberghini of Middlesex attempts to score on Team Amerika goalie Phil Stevens of Barre during a Vermont Floor Hockey game last Sunday at the Montpelier Recreation Center on Barre Street.

Hockey without ice is picking up steam

There is not a patch of ice to be found. The only equipment needed would be shoes, a light-weight (usually plastic) stick, a ball or puck and protective gear for the goalie. There is at each end of the marked playing area a goal with a 54-inch wide, sidelines, a goal line, a center circle and a crease. Penalties include slashing, icing, tripping, hooking, interference, checking from behind, or other stick penalties, and remind you of the rules of ice hockey. In fact, in a state in which kids grow up playing on neighborhood ponds and indoor arenas, and where adults continue to duke it out on the ice into their retirement years, this all sounds familiar. Except there is no ice. There are no skates and no heavy winter attire. Spectators do not shiver on cold bleachers with ice underfoot and there is no romanticized fire to warm the hands.

There is, however, plenty of action. The players, usually a goalie and four to six others who face off, pass, gain possession, shoot and defend, are more than fast, they are quick. They work as a team. They have fun, but are not silly. They are competitive, but not deadly. It is a friendly match, but

not too friendly. Each team wants to win. Who doesn't?

The game is floor hockey and as an organized sport it has been growing since the 1950s. Vermont Floor Hockey, Inc., is an established group of teams playing in three areas: Burlington, Barre-Montpelier and St. Albans. It is a club complete with officers, bylaws and dues. It continues to grow. (see www.vermontfloorhockey.com)

Who knows? "I'd like to see a Rutland league, or Rochester and Hancock, form and join the winter fun," said Jon Marshall, regional vice president.

Marshall, 37, grew up in Middlesex. "All I did as a kid was play sports," he said. At U-32 high school he switched from soccer to cross-country and went on to be part of the 1994 state championship team. Now a snowmobiler and avid hiker, Marshall values the Vermont outdoors.

However, Marshall does not skate. He saw an ad for floor hockey, thought it might be fun, and, as they say, the rest is history.



Linda FREEMAN
Active Vermont

See Steam, Page C16

Steam

Continued from Page C15

"They've been playing in Burlington since 2002," Marshall said. The club expanded in 2012 and continues to do so. "A lot of people come back. We've grown every year since we've started."

There are two seasons, fall, going on now, and winter, which begins in January. (The Burlington league of-

fers a summer league.) If you were to walk into the Montpelier Rec Center on a Sunday afternoon between 3 and 6 p.m., this is what you'd see: players in T-shirts, some wearing glasses and shin guards, chasing a ball and trying to score on the goalie of the opposite team. The two 25-minute halves are fast-moving and high-scoring as players compete weekly to ultimately participate in the inter-league play-offs and, hopefully, become

champions of the overall club.

Floor hockey is co-ed, approximately 50 percent men and 50 percent women, ages 18 and up. It is hard-hitting and competitive without being brutal or malevolent. For now, players from other teams step up to referee and call fouls as needed to follow the rules that are clearly stated on the web site and primarily safety-based.

What is a typical player profile? There are no pre-

requisite skills needed. General fitness, quickness, agility, and a competitive spirit are an advantage. There are currently no training sessions, no preseason conditioning and no tryouts. You come, you join and you play. You learn as you go. "You see a lot of Bruins and Canadiens shirts and hats," Marshall said. Many are enthusiastic ice hockey fans but for one reason or another do not play the game.

"Many are looking for ex-

ercise, something to do in the winter," Marshall said. "Some can't skate but can still play." The player population is diverse.

A small membership fee of \$3 and then a season fee of \$55 (members) delivers. The club provides equipment, including goalie's gear, sets up the schedule and provides the league structure. Captains and co-captains help with communication.

Marshall is quick to en-

courage newcomers and fuel interest in the sport he represents. As a young, athletic product of the Vermont outdoors, he understands the need to participate in something else. "In Vermont winters, if you do not ski, snowmobile or ice fish, Floor Hockey gives you a chance to get out, meet a lot of people and play," he said.

"The bottom line is, it's just a fun time and makes for a good sweat."