First Practice

by Ralph Henry Barbour

It's remarkable how different things look in the morning! A chap may go to bed the night before in the seventh subway of despair and wake up in the morning feeling quite cheerful and contented. And this is especially true if the sun happens to be shining and a little frosty, nippy breeze is blowing in at the window and the faint odor of coffee and other delectable things floats in with the breeze. As Toby's room was over the kitchen, which occupied the basement of Whitson, he was quite frequently treated to a presentment of what was to happen in commons. This morning, sitting on the edge of his bed, and shivering a little as the playful zephyrs caressed his legs, he sniffed knowingly and decided that there was an unmistakably choppy bouquet to the fragrance arising from the kitchen windows. And he was pleased, because he was especially fond of lamb chops. Also, he was particularly hungry to-day, having eaten scantily of supper because—

That because brought back to memory his overnight's grievance. But this morning it seemed absurdly trifling. He had, he decided, made a silly [fool] of himself, and he wondered what on earth had got into him! He would find Arnold the very first thing and show him that he was sorry. Of course Arnold liked Frank Lamson. Why shouldn't he, since they had known each other several years? Besides, Frank, after all, wasn't such a bad chap probably—if you knew him well! Meanwhile there was a bath to be taken, and one had to do a lot of hustling to get a bath in before breakfast for the reason that the bathing facilities in Whitson were archaic and there were some twelve boys for each tub. This knowledge spurred Toby to action and he jumped up and closed the window with a bang, seized the gorgeous new crimson dressing-gown that his mother had given him for Christmas and, struggling hurriedly into it, dashed down the hall. For once promptness earned its reward. Only Stillwell and Framer were ahead of him and Toby was back in his room in five minutes, glowing and happy and hungry.

When, on his way downstairs, he knocked at the door of Number 12 and was invited to enter, he found only Homer Wilkins within. Homer was still very incompletely attired and very sleepy looking, and he informed Toby with a prodigious yawn, that Arn had gone on down. "He's a regular Little Brighteyes," he complained. "No worm would have half a chance with Arn. What's the weather like, Toby?"

"Great! You'd better hustle if you want any breakfast."

"I don't expect any," replied Homer sadly. "I haven't had a square meal in the morning since I've been here. Everything's sold out when I get down. They ought to have a lunch-wagon for fellows —"

But Toby didn't hear the rest. Arnold was busily adorning his plate of oatmeal with much cream and sugar when Toby reached the table. Only four others were on hand so far.

"Morning," greeted Toby as he sat down and pulled his napkin out of its numbered ring.

"Hello, Tucker!" "Morning, Toby!" "Greetings!" "Shove that sugar-bowl along this way, will you?"

Arnold, however, only looked up briefly and nodded. Toby's face fell. When one is ready to apologize and make up it is most disheartening to find that the other party isn't ready! Evidently Arnold was nursing resentment, and Toby knew that as a nurse for that sort of thing Arn was hard to beat. But he pretended that he observed nothing different in his friend's attitude and was quite chatty—for Toby. Will Curran, who had been severely lectured by his older brother for snobbishness, showed a desire to make amends and was unusually attentive to Toby. By the time the table had filled up, which was only when the leisurely Homer Wilkins had fallen wearily into the chair at Arnold's left, Arnold had forgotten to look hurt and proud and was holding an animated discussion with Gladwin on the subject of hockey skates. Glad, as he was generally called, was firm for the half-hockey style and Arnold pinned his faith on the full.

"A straight blade is all right for racing," declared Gladwin, "but it's too slow for hockey."

"Too slow!" exclaimed Arnold. "How do you mean, too slow? You get more surface to the ice and—"

"That's all right when you're skating, but when you want to turn quickly—"

"Oh, shucks! Look here, Glad, you take a skate that's got a round toe and how are you going to start quickly? You can't dig your toes in, can you?"

"No, but you don't have to. A fellow can start just as quick on the edge. A long, flat blade is—"

"Oh, poppycock! You never saw a racer start on the edge, I'll bet! Look at the Canadians. You don't deny that they know more hockey than we do, do you?"

"They did," responded Glad cautiously, "but we're catching up with 'em nowadays. Anyway—"

"Well, they know hockey, son, and they use a full-hockey skate every time! If that doesn't prove it—"

"I don't think the Canadians play any better game than we do these days," interrupted Glad. "And that doesn't prove anything, anyway. Canadians are more or less English, and you know mighty well that an Englishman uses the same skate to-day that his great-grandfather used, and couldn't be made to change. It—it's all a matter of custom with them!"

"Don't be a silly [dufus], please," begged Arnold. "Any fellow who has seen a Canadian hockey team knows that they use a full-hockey skate, and a full-hockey skate wasn't made until a few years ago, and so their grandfathers couldn't have used them! Why, you might just as well say that the best hockey skate is an old-fashioned 'rocker'!"

"There's a lot of difference," began Gladwin, but the audience told him to shut up and eat his breakfast, and Arnold was restored to his normal equanimity by the knowledge that he had won the debate. Consequently, when, a few minutes later, Toby met him in the corridor, Arnold had quite forgotten his grievance.

"Did you hear that line of piffle Glad pulled?" he demanded. "I'd like to see him make his quick starts on a pair of half-hockeys! I'll bet I could beat him every time!"

"Of course you could," agreed Toby. "Say, Arn, I—I'm sorry I was such a beast last night, you know."

"What? Oh! Say, what was the matter with you, you silly chump, anyway?"

"Nothing, really. I was sort of—sort of cranky, I guess."

"Must have been," agreed Arnold cheerfully. "Had the hump, I suppose. How is it by you to-day?"

"Oh, I'm feeling great to-day. Let's get out and tramp a little before first hour. Shall we?"

"All right. Wait till I get a cap. Guess we'll need sweaters, too."

"I'll have to run up and get mine and I'll fetch yours on the way down." Toby paused with the door half open. "Say, Arn, it's—it's all right, isn't it? About last night, I mean."

"Of course it is, you chump! Get a move on. We've only got about twenty minutes."

At three o'clock in the afternoon of that fifth day of January the stretch of low ground near the river and south of the running track became the scene of remarkable activity. Fully half the school turned out, although not all, I regret to say, with the intention of being helpful. Perhaps fifty per cent. of the gathering was there to watch the other fifty per cent. work and to get as much amusement as possible out of the spectacle. Mr. Bendix, the Physical Director, better known as "Muscles," was in charge of proceedings, assisted by Andy Ryan, the trainer. Corner pegs had already been set when the boys arrived and the task of digging holes for the uprights to hold the boards in place was under way. Captain Crowell, acting as lieutenant, doled out shovels and picks and soon the necessary excavations were completed. Fortunately, only the crust of the earth was frozen and once under that digging was easy. The joists were next lugged from their place of storage under the grand-stand and dropped into the holes and with one boy holding and two or three others shoveling, and Andy Ryan running around with a carpenter's level to see that the joists were set straight, that part of the work went swiftly and would have gone more swiftly if the onlookers, being in a particularly happy frame of mind, had not stood around and cheered every move enthusiastically.

Then a stream of fellows made for the back of the grand-stand again and returned bearing the planks, which, being in sections ready to attach to the uprights, required less labor than the pessimistic Creel had led Toby to anticipate. Each section was numbered and fell readily into place, after which a few long spikes completed the operation. Toby, armed with a hammer and a bag of spikes, was one of the carpenters. Every time he missed the head of the spike a shout of derision arose from the attentive audience, and, in consequence, Toby was very likely to promptly miss again! But there were plenty of others to aid and before long the three-foot-high barrier was in place, enclosing a parallelogram of faded and trampled turf one hundred and thirty-two feet long by sixty feet wide. Before the last spike had been driven home the boys were busy with picks and shovels and a foot-high bank of earth was being thrown up against the bottom of boards on the outside. By the time the last shovelful had been tossed in place twilight was on them and the spectators had departed. The thermometer showed the mercury at twenty-eight degrees, but falling, and it was decided to put in enough water to only saturate the ground. Two lines of hose were coupled to the nearer hydrants and the enclosure was thoroughly wet down. That ended the labor for the time and some forty-odd boys, abandoning shovels and picks, viewed the result of their labor with proud satisfaction and tramped somewhat wearily back to the

dormitories. To Toby, at least, who had worked hard and unceasingly from first to last, the lighted windows up the hill looked very good.

The thermometer was down to twenty in the morning and again the water was turned into the hydrants, the hose coupled and the frozen ground sprayed. This operation was repeated twice more during the day and when, in the late afternoon, Toby and Arnold walked down to the rink they found an inch of ice already formed. But it was not until the following afternoon that the rink was ready for use. The mercury was down to fourteen above zero at three o'clock and the final spraying at noon had supplied a surface as smooth and hard as glass. By a quarter past three four squads were at work, rushing and passing and, it must be acknowledged, sprawling over the ice. Later two teams were picked by Captain Crowell and the other fellows pulled their sweaters on again and lined the barrier and looked on. Most of the school was on hand, as well, and although there was no line-up that afternoon, they found plenty to divert them.

Toby, of course, spent most of the practice time outside the barrier, but he profited not a little by watching the more fortunate fellows. Going back, he confided to Arnold that he was sure he would never be able to get around on skates the way those chaps did. Arnold, whose right to a place on the first team was generally recognized, had been hard at it and was feeling very perked up and cheerful and derided Toby's doubts.

"You wait till you've had a few days of it," he said. "You'll get the hang of it all right. There's only one secret, Toby, and that is skate low. It helps you to keep your balance and makes it harder for the other fellow to body-check you. If you're standing straight on your skates the least shove will throw you over, but if you're skating low you can take a good hard check and keep your feet on the ice."

"I see that," said Toby. "But you fellows dodge and jump around and turn so quickly! Why, I'd break my silly neck if I tried it!"

"You'll learn. Anyway, if you go in for goal, you won't need to know so much about skating."

"How much does a pair of skates like yours cost?" asked Toby after a moment's silence.

"I paid five, but you can get a good pair for three and a half. Don't buy any till you find out whether you're going to play goal or not, though. If you play goal you'll be better off with a pair of heavy skates with short blades. You can move a heap quicker in them."

"And how much would they be?"

"Oh, three and a half, I guess. What's the matter with wearing the ones you have?"

"Could I? They're sort of old-fashioned. I only paid a dollar and a half for them, and I've had them about three years."

"Let's see them," said Arnold. They paused in the light from a lower window in Merle and Arnold looked them over. Finally he grunted and passed them back. "I guess they wouldn't do, Toby. They'd break in two if some one gave them a good swipe with a stick or skated into them. What you want to do is to get a pair of skating shoes and screw your skates right onto them. Those full clamp skates are always tearing your heel off."

"How much would shoes cost?" asked Toby.

"Five dollars. More if you want to pay it. But they'll stand by you for two or three years."

"Yes, but Crowell said we'd all have to have hockey gloves, and they're frightfully expensive. And I might have to buy a pair of pads if I got to playing goal. I guess hockey's a pretty expensive game, Arn."

"Pshaw, pads don't cost much; only about four dollars, I think. Fifteen dollars will buy everything you'll need."

"Gee, that's cheap, isn't it?" muttered Toby disconsolately. "I guess I'll wait and see if there's any show of making a team before I buy much."

Arnold laughed as they crossed the colonnade and turned toward the entrance to Whitson. "You were always a cautious chap, Toby!"

"I have to be," replied the other simply.

"I suppose you do. Look here!" Arnold stopped in the act of pushing open the door. "I've got a pretty good pair of skates upstairs. They've got button heels, but I guess they'd be all right for you. If you want them you're welcome. Come on up and I'll dig them out."

They proved all right as to size, but, unfortunately, the heel-plates had been lost. Homer Wilkins, who came in while they were bewailing this fact, suggested that they could get new plates by sending to the maker, and they cheered up again. Toby bore the skates away with him to his room and, arrived there, studied that note-book again. Quite a few fellows had paid their accounts by now and so many of the entries had been scored out, but there was still nearly six dollars owing him. Most of the accounts were small, ranging from fifteen cents to thirty, but a few were larger and Frank Lamson's was the biggest. Frank had promised to pay after vacation, but he hadn't and Toby considered the advisability of reminding him of his promise. But Toby decided finally that he would rather lose the money than dun Frank for it any more. What he would do, though, was to spend an hour after supper trying to collect some of the other amounts due him. Having reached that decision, he started his gas stove, heated his iron and pressed two pairs of trousers and a coat and waistcoat before supper.

Afterwards, he made the rounds of the dormitories before study hour and returned richer by two dollars and eighty cents. That amount, together with four dollars and twenty-two cents which he had by him, he deposited in a little cardboard box and hid under an extra pair of pajamas in a bureau drawer, after printing on the lid in ink: "Hockey Fund."

Seven dollars would, he believed, buy a pair of pads and a pair of gloves, and now that Arnold had donated a perfectly corking pair of skates, he wouldn't have to purchase shoes. He could put the heel-plates, when he got them, on the shoes he was wearing and use them for all purposes. He had a feeling that in expending seven dollars for hockey paraphernalia he was being downright extravagant, but he had earned the money and, he told himself defiantly, he had a right to be reckless with it for once. He didn't entirely silence an accusing conscience, but he reduced it to whispers!

Toby had already become an enthusiastic hockey fan without as yet having taken part in a game! His efforts to make good as a football player had not been very successful, and he made up his

mind that this time he would conquer. He had an ecstatic vision of one Toby Tucker, a blue-and-white stockinette cap on his head, wearing a white sweater with the crossed hockey sticks and the mystic letters Y. H. T. on it, his legs encased in white leather pads such as Henry, the first team goal-tend, had worn that afternoon, armed with a wide-bladed stick, crouching in front of the net while the cheers of Yardley and Broadwood thundered across the rink. The vision stopped there because, for the life of him, he couldn't imagine what the heroic Toby Tucker would do if some brutal member of the enemy team tried to put the puck past him! But it was a fine and heart-warming picture, and Toby wanted terribly to see it realized, and it didn't seem to him at such moments that it would be right to let a small matter of seven dollars interfere with that realization. Besides, there was still the barest, tiniest chance of that scholarship! When Toby was feeling cheerful he recognized that chance. At other times he told himself that it didn't exist. To-night, being optimistic, he allowed that perhaps, after all, he might win one of the smaller ones. If he did he would never regret the sinful waste of that seven dollars. Fifty dollars would make a lot of difference in his financial condition. However, he would not, he reflected, get his hopes too high. It was much better not to expect anything. Then if he did win a Haynes Scholarship—

Gee, he was getting all excited about it! That wouldn't do, because it was very, very likely that he wouldn't succeed. He pulled his books to him and settled himself, with a sigh, for an hour of study. Anyway, he thought, as he opened his algebra, he would know to-morrow, for to-morrow was the eighth and it was on the eighth, according to the school catalogue, that the awards were announced. Of course, since there were only six scholarships for the fourth class and about one hundred students— Toby sighed again, shook his head and plunged into algebra.

Source:

Barbour, Ralph Henry. "First Practice." *Guarding his Goal*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1914. 90 – 106. Electronic.