

Hojae Kwon Alone on the Pond

By Lew Sellers – July 7, 2009

I grew up in a farming community in southwest Washington where the seasonal rains pooled in the depressions of the valley pastures. These ponds were a haven for migrating ducks and geese during the fall and spring. But, on rare winter cold spells the ponds would freeze hard enough to provide a variety of convenient ice skating surfaces throughout the valley. My friends and I occasionally played hockey with makeshift hockey sticks and a snuff can for a puck, all taped up to hold in the sand; tree branches were fashioned to form a goal. A bonfire on the edge of the pond provided a warm haven from the cold hours on the ice. I wore skates that gripped the leather soles of my oxfords, not much for ankle support, but at least they were skates and not everyone had them. I don't recall ever sharpening those rusty old skates... I used a makeshift hockey stick mostly for balance.

The group skates and games on the frozen ponds of the Chehalis Valley during the winter of 1951 were fun and memorable. However, the most enjoyable of those times were the very rare moments when I was the only one on the pond. The joy of having the pond just for me was a delight beyond description. There was joy and exhilaration to skating as fast as I could like Richard Button across the open expanse of the ponds, the bitterness of the cold biting at my cheeks. Or, my 9-year-old imagination transformed me into Gordie Howe winning the Stanley Cup for the Red Wings.

Jump forward now from 1951 to July 1st, 2009. The setting is not the ponds of the Chehalis Valley but rather the frozen pond at the Kent Valley Ice Centre. It's not me on the ice... It's Kent Valley's 9-year-old Hojae Kwon. He has the ice all to himself during the 6:30pm Stick n' Puck. He skated in the Wednesday Power Skating clinic at 5:30pm and was the only one to hang around to skate for free in the Stick n' Puck session that followed the clinic. I watched from the upper concourse of the ice rink as Kwon enjoyed his solitary skate on the Kent Valley ice. He methodically lined up six pucks in front of the net, skated up to each one and fired it at the net. Some of his shots rebounded out of the net to one side. Kwon skated up to the first of several of those pucks and backhanded them toward the goal. Finally, with his third attempt the puck struck the back of the net for the score. The 9-year-old expressed his joy with a quick jump and the raising of his stick in celebration. His celebration was short-lived as he wheeled around to the next puck and backhanded it into the net. Again, he jumped and raised his stick in a victory celebration.

For almost an hour Hojae Kwon enjoyed the solitude of the vacant pond. He skated in circles, practiced his crossovers forward and backwards. He delighted himself with his improving backhand, shooting one puck then another, over and over. He could have been acting out Max Talbot scoring two goals in the Stanley Cup for the Pittsburgh Penguins, or imagining he was Henrik Zetterberg scoring one of his 11 Stanley Cup playoff goals for the Red Wings. In reality, it wasn't the Stanley Cup playoffs. It was a 9-year-old, his imagination and his magic hockey stick, all alone on the pond taking advantage of and enjoying every solitary minute.

Hojae; I can't begin to describe the joy you brought to this old man's heart as I watched you skate last Wednesday. You took me back to a dairy farm in the Chehalis Valley where I skated alone for hours one afternoon on a frozen pond. You took me to a time and a place where my imagination allowed me to be the world's fastest ice skater and its best hockey player; a place where I was alone in the bitter cold gliding across the icy pond with frozen fingers and soar ankles, smiling all the time as daylight faded to premature winter darkness and I had to leave the pond and head for home.

You made my day Hojae! It appeared that you enjoyed the rare solitary ice as much as I did. However, the full pleasure and joy you will ultimately realize from ice hockey and your skating is just beginning. There is much more joy to come; much, much more. Stick with it young man, your determination is strong and you're developing a vicious backhand shot...