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Bailey McKeon

bailey.mckeon@trincoll.edu

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How to Play Hockey: for Girls

Bailey McKeon

Grow your hair out. Because you have to tryout for a boys team, you need everyone to see your ponytail underneath your helmet. It's the only way they'll be able to tell you're a girl when you're on the ice.

"I wanted to take you on my team," the coach will say to you in a vicious Russian accent after he posts the list of kids who made the *Jets*, the team you so badly wanted to be on, "... but half of my boys would've quit if you were on it." Thank him for the opportunity, pick up your hockey bag, and get the hell out of the rink. Don't lie and say "I understand" or "It's okay" or any fake bullshit like that. Lose respect for him.

Tell your dad what the coach said once you're inside of the car, but before your dad starts driving. Do it any later and your dad might just accidentally crash the car out of surprise and anger. Do it any sooner and risk making a scene in the parking lot because, naturally, you'll start crying.

Cry partly because your dreams are crushed, partly because you're sensitive to the insult that no one wants you as a teammate, but mostly because of the unbeatable absurd sexism of it all. Tell yourself that if you were really good enough, the coach would've taken you. Yeah, he just was trying to come up with an excuse as to why he didn't take you to avoid having to look a fourteen-year-old girl in the eyes and say she wasn't good enough. Lose even more respect for him.

Tryout for your backup team that afternoon. "Reese Martin" it'll say on the twelfth line of the posted list this time. Say thank you to your new coach, pick your bag up, and get the hell out of the rink. You don't know anyone on this team.

*

In August, you'll be invited to a team pool party and cookout to kick off the season. Make sure you have a cute swimsuit. Conveniently, your brother comes with you to the party and he hangs out with your teammates. Everyone assumes he is on the team. Don't try to hangout with the boys. Hangout with the sisters. It's safer and much easier to let the boys be boys. None of them are going to talk to you anyways.

But the moms talk to you. They think you're one of the sisters. Do not go along with it. They will only be more confused later when it's you who shows up to the rink for practice. Save yourself from that now and

introduce yourself. Besides, there will already be a rumor going around that there's a girl on the team. But parents can be clueless when they have too many things to think about. Make it click in their mind. They'll say they recognize your name from the roster and flash a fake smile. They won't have much to say anymore. They'll politely excuse themselves and grab another cocktail.

*

When you go to the first practice, go to the women's locker room. Don't be surprised when it's a tiny broom closet and there are actual cleaning supplies stored there. Get used to it. You hear the boys talking in their locker room through the walls. Eavesdrop. You'll hear things like:

- "...the girl on our team..."
- "What's her name again?"
- "...Reese..."

After the third practice, it becomes clear that they'll speak in their locker room as if they do not think you are listening, and you come to realize it would be much better if you actually weren't listening. Bring headphones to practice.

During practice, try your hardest. Your teammates will respect you more if you're good and you prove you can keep up with them. But they'll hate you if you beat them every time. Don't challenge their masculinity this way. Girls lose. Lose sometimes to cushion their ego. But don't lose enough so that they think you suck. Lose the perfect number of times.

*

The goalie will try to be your friend. Drop your skepticism, goalies are always quirky like that. Besides, you should be thankful you even have a friend. Now you won't have to awkwardly stand alone when people pair up for off-ice workouts until you either

1. automatically get partnered with the kid who also doesn't have a partner or, worse,
2. have to be partners with the coach.

Be partners with the goalie.

"Brendan and Reese!" the other boys will chant after you've only been partners with the goalie for two weeks. It's the first time you've heard most of the boys even say your name. "Brendan likessssss youuuuuu" one of them, the instigator, will whisper to you as you stand amongst the weight racks in the gym while coach explains today's lift. Say nothing.

When your coach stops talking, don't look towards the goalie. He will look towards you, wanting to be your partner again. Somehow, the taunting doesn't seem to bother him. Maybe it's because he really *does* have a crush on you. Minimize your interaction with him. Be nice, like girls are, but not too nice. He'll think you like him when you don't. And by all means, do not be his partner again.

Instead, sum up the confidence to ask the instigator to be your partner. Throw him for a loop. He will respect you.

In one week, the instigator is sort of your friend. Which is great for you, because he's got a lot of friends that you can now be friends with too. Joke around with them but be skeptical. Keep your boundaries. Don't be too much, they'll think you're annoying. But be too little and you'll lose their interest. Be just enough.

*

After the first game of the season, the team and parents will go out to dinner to celebrate. Of course, there will be a parents table and a kids table, which is where all of your teammates will sit. Stall your mom so that you're one of the last people to arrive to the restaurant, that way almost all of the seats at the kids table are taken. Now you'll get the seat at the very end of the table nobody really wants. None of them want to sit next to the girl anyways. Stay out of the way. Let the boys be boys.

You'll be a big hit at the parents' table though. The moms will love you. Remember the ones from the preseason pool party? They will start to joke with you, when you're walking out of the rink after a long practice, saying that you "showed the boys how it's done." They're your biggest fans. It feels nice to be liked, until, as you walk over to your mom at the end of dinner, the goalie's mom says:

"Joey would be lucky to marry a girl like Reese."

Don't blush. Don't show your embarrassment. It doesn't mean anything bad...right? The woman just thinks you're a nice girl. Put forth a smile, a cute giggle, and a "Thank you, Mrs. Rothenberg." Hope that the goalie did not hear her and get any ideas. You don't need any parents playing "matchmaker." Unfortunately, you quickly find out that he did hear her as he emerges from behind a group of dads, making his way over to his mom too. Smile at him and immediately look down, you're blushing from embarrassment. Avoid him for at least the next two weeks.

As the season progresses, boys on the teams you play against will begin to target you, now that they know there's a girl on the *Dallas NorthStars*. Cut your hair.

Johnny on the *San Antonio Penguins* nonetheless decides to cheap shot you. "Fucking bitch!" he yells as he launches himself at you. Luckily, he falls along with you. What an idiot. As your body hits the ice, whip your arm around and sock him in the cage. Do it without saying anything. As he lays on the ice, stunned about what just happened, get up. Quicker. Your line-mate Kevin hugs you and yells "Reese is badass!" Smile a little but not too much and skate to your bench. Your coach looks like a fish out of water, the only unpleasant face among the smiles and cheers of your teammates going wild with joy because their girl teammate punched a boy.

"Never fucking do that again," your coach lectures you. "If someone cheap shots you, the boys will handle it. Is that clear?"

*

"Come to 304," one of them will say to you when you're heading back to the hotel after the game. Lucky you. Don't be skeptical of the invites you get anymore. You'll be a part of the team now. When you get back to the hotel, go up to your own room, drop off your stuff, shower, and tell your dad you'll be back to your room by 11. He'll be tipsy with the other parents in the lobby until at least 1 A.M. anyways. Take the elevator down to the third floor. Hang out with your teammates outside of the rink for the first time.

When they make the sort of jokes that fifteen-year-old boys tend to make, pretend you aren't there. Be prepared to hear things like:

- "Brenden, your sister is so hot I'd fuck her in the room next to you."
- "Yeah well at least my dick doesn't curve!"
- "Your dick smells like rotten cheese bro, you ever heard of soap?"

Don't laugh or smile to go along with it. This will only make them uncomfortable too. And refrain from shouting "Ew gross!" because that'll just bring the attention to you. Try your best to be invisible in these moments.

Sometimes, they'll make it hard for you to be invisible. They'll directly ask you, "Hey Reese, who's your friend with the big tits that came to our game last weekend?" In these situations, do one, or multiple, of the following:

- Don't give them the answer they want. Although you should never please them with the answer, be pleasing.
- Pretend you don't know what they're talking about. Play dumb. Girls can be dumb.

- Tell them that they're being demeaning. Never *actually* be mad though. Say it nicely. Say "Derek, that's demeaning," with a smile.

*

As your teammates become more comfortable, so does your coach. He's got a one-liner for every guy on the team, and now he's got one for you too. Stay quiet when he frequently spits off one-liners such as:

- "Danny, you're 6'3" and a wimp. Why don't you hit someone already?"
- "Connor, lay off of the fucking cupcakes. You're slow as shit."
- "My grandma's got better hands than you, A.J., and one of 'em was amputated."

And don't even flinch when he finally says, "Reese, you skate like a girl."

The first time he says it, you'll be stunned. Sure, his comments for everyone suck, quite frankly. But this is just what boy's coaches are like. Tell yourself you're being sensitive. You're being a girl. This is a good thing. You're one of the guys. Have a thicker skin.

*

Even though you aren't allowed to punch kids anymore, still put forth a "badass" persona. It worked for you, they liked it. Be likeable. When number 25 on the *Raiders* slashes your goalie's glove, tell him to back the fuck off. Stand straight up in front of your goalie, look the slasher in the eyes, and, while giving him a little push, say "Back the fuck off," just like that. Which reminds me, this whole time you've been saying "fuck" right? Not too much of course, you are a lady. But enough so that the guys know you're cool, right? Good.

Once he skates away, applaud yourself inside. Then turn around to your goalie and make sure he's alright. "Please never do that again," he says to you.

"Do what?"

"Tell somebody to 'back the fuck off.' It was the most unintimidating thing I've ever heard." He looks up at you and smiles. "You sounded like a dipshit," he laughs.

You take a lot of shit for doing that because, of course, the goalie told the whole team about it after the game. Laugh. They will start to make fun of you like you're one of them even though you absolutely failed at trying to be tough. Smile.

*

In the second half of the season, you'll take a brutal hit. This time is worse than most. Here's what you should do:

- Get up.
- Make it to the bench on your own.
- Don't be weak.
- Don't be sensitive.
- Don't be like a girl.

In the blur of sounds and sights you sense, your coach asks if you're alright. You slump on the edge of the bench and mumble something inaudible. Your now-pissed-off coach sends your also-pissed-off teammates to "take care of things" while you sit there defenseless. You feel nauseous, but you also feel like part of the team.

After the game, your coach asks one of your teammates to go with you into the women's locker room and help you get your gear off. Of course, he'll ask the goalie. The goalie will stand up, kindly, ready to help you. It's hard for you to even walk. You manage to lie and tell him that it's okay, that you can do it on your own. You don't need his help. You don't want him to come into your locker room. And you'd rather faint than have him help you take your gear off. Mosey across the hall to your separate locker room, plop down on the bench, look into your empty hockey bag in the lifeless room around you, and cry.

*

Your concussion will heal in a month and you'll be back on the ice just in time to prepare for playoffs. After a particularly tough practice, your dad will be waiting outside of the rink to pick you up in his 2007 Honda Accord and, after tossing your equipment and sticks in the trunk, you plop into the passenger seat and cry.

The practice won't be tough physically. Well, it'll be hard, but nothing out of the ordinary. No, that practice will be mentally exhausting. You'll have gone along with your coach's chosen "motivation" for you all season long. You'll have convinced yourself you shouldn't be skating *like a girl*. You'll come to think that anything done *like a girl* is weak or wrong. You'll hate the word *girl* and you'll hate that it describes you.

But in this practice, you finally have enough. As you skate down the ice with your coach yelling behind you, "How many times do I have to tell you to quit skating like a girl, Reese!" you begin to wonder how the fuck you're supposed to skate. You *are* a girl. And you keep up with the boys. Heck, in some games,

you even outskate them. You realize that you made his team as a girl. You become infuriated, but you manage to keep it together for the rest of practice, holding yet another thing in.

You spill it all to your dad in the car though. You go on and on for the entire twenty-minute drive home, hysterically announcing “How am I supposed to skate?! I AM a girl!” and declaring “He’s such a fucking sexist!”

You leave your dad not a second to say anything besides “Reese, it’s oka—” before you cut him off with “He won’t even let me punch someone!” You tell your dad everything, and maybe you shouldn’t have, but you will.

At practice the next day, you see your dad having words with your coach as you walk onto the ice and begin to skate the warm-up laps. You know your dad is going to do this. In fact, you tried to talk him out of it the night before, still in your mad hysteria begging him “Don’t dad! Don’t! It’ll ruin everything. He’ll hate me.”

“It’s not right, Reese,” he’ll say. “I won’t allow it. Look how he’s got you all worked up. We let you handle most things on your own, but this behavior is absolutely unacceptable. He needs to be held accountable by an adult.”

Watch the talk through the glass surrounding the ice to anticipate your coach’s arrival. He’ll likely be pissed at you for involving your dad. To your surprise, he won’t say anything to you all practice.

Days pass, and everything seems normal. Well, except that your coach no longer criticizes you for playing “like a girl.” Apparently, he apologized to your dad. He never apologized to you.

Your team will win the championship that year. And you’ll be in the pack above the crease of your net, hugging your teammates and shouting with joy, celebrating the big win. And you’ll look back on the pictures of that day and see yourself in the middle of the pack, surrounded by your teammates, easily picked out because of the small ponytail coming out from under your helmet.

Follow your teammates into their locker room after the game, each of you clutching your own gold trophy. Listen to your coach’s postgame speech and then it’ll be time for you to go back to your own locker room, the women’s room, to get undressed, leaving the boys to celebrate with one another in their

team locker room. As you turn around to follow your coach out, the goalie, who's sitting next to the door, reaches out and says "Reese!"

Turn around, into his embrace. Hug him back. Instinctively, you smile. You're thankful for the gesture and you realize you're thankful for his friendship. As you release from his embrace and turn back around to leave, another teammate, who's sitting next to the goalie, calls your name. Hug him too.

"Don't forget about me!" another one yells.

As you begin to hug each of your teammates, a single tear will stream down your face and meet your smiling lips. You don't have to hide it this time. They feel it too.

*

After the game, Danny's mom will host a celebration at her house. All of the families go, right from the rink, and linger around until 1 or 2 in the morning. The parents will pop champagne and drink wine and congratulate the kids as we run by, from the basketball hoop in the driveway to the pool in the backyard.

Once it's late enough, Danny will steal a few bottles of his parents' champagne, and maybe a couple of beers, and take bring them to the firepit where the team has gathered. You'll all pass the bottles of champagne around the circle for everyone to share in celebration of the season and the championship game.

After taking a swig, pass the bottle to the right, to the goalie. While everyone else in the circle is throwing jokes around and erupting with laughter, he turns to you and, as you hand him the champagne, he'll look up at you and say,

"So, girl's hockey, huh?"

"Yup, all the way up in New Jersey," you respond.

"That's insane. You're gonna have a blast."

"I really hope so."

"And you're gonna be going to a boarding school?"

"Yeah, they've got a team I can play on. They've got more girls hockey up there than they do around here." You'll realize, as you say this, that it's now quiet. Break your gaze with the goalie and look to the rest of the circle. All of the boys are looking to you.

“You’re gonna be playing with girls?”

“I can’t believe you’re leaving us, Reese.”

“How are we gonna win the championship without you throwing punches next year?”

“We’ll miss you.”

It’s okay, you can miss them too.

Bibliography