



WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA SPORTS MUSEUM

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The Mighty Penguins

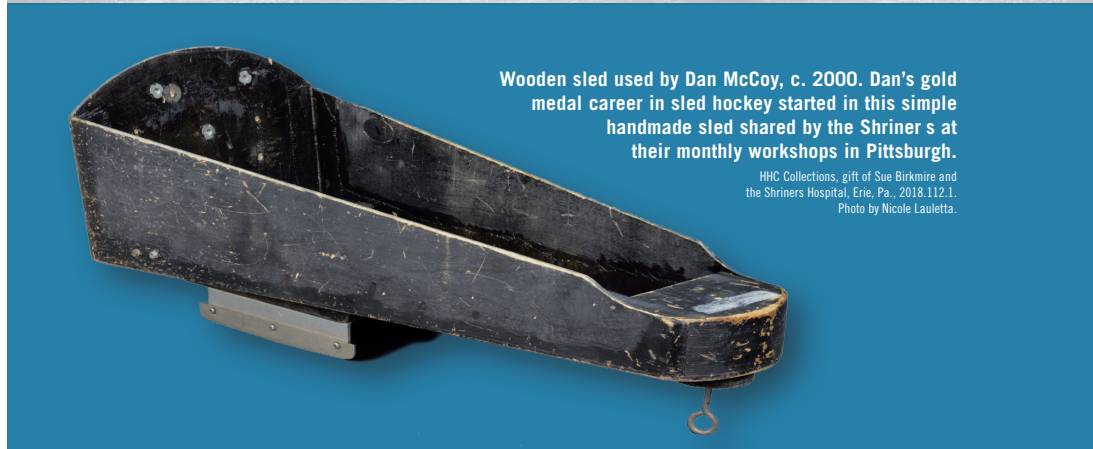
The desire by Sue Birkmire to positively impact the life of one child has had an incredible effect on the lives of hundreds of kids. After a divorce, Sue, a nurse at Shriners Hospital in Erie, Pa., offered housing to a woman from the West Indies and her daughter Lisa. The mother provided after school care for Sue's two sons and Sue took her daughter to Shriners for her physical therapy. One day, as Sue watched Lisa playing basketball in the driveway with the other kids from the neighborhood, she realized that Lisa, and the children at Shriners, would benefit from a basketball team. In addition to being an athletic outlet, the team would provide fellowship and social growth opportunities for the kids.

Sue worked with one of the physical therapists and got a basketball court built and the equipment for the kids to play.



Alex Brown on ice, Mighty Penguins sled hockey team, 2015.

Courtesy of the Mighty Penguins.



Wooden sled used by Dan McCoy, c. 2000. Dan's gold medal career in sled hockey started in this simple handmade sled shared by the Shriners at their monthly workshops in Pittsburgh.

HHC Collections, gift of Sue Birkmire and the Shriners Hospital, Erie, Pa., 2018.112.1.
Photo by Nicole Lauetta.

That Shriners' team, the Erie Jammers, still exists today. It became the gateway to Sue's involvement in developing a hockey league. Sue's kids loved hockey and had competed since they were young. Though familiar with the game, Sue found herself surprised when a young patient from Canada told her that hockey ranked as one of his favorite activities. Sue asked where he played and heard from his mother about the sport of sled hockey, at the time well-established in Canada.

In sled hockey, the players sit in sleds

and use two short hockey sticks with blades on one end and picks that dig into the ice and propel the player on the other end. Sue recognized that this could become another team sport played by the patients of Shriners Hospital. After researching the game, locating equipment, recruiting players, and convincing USA Hockey to provide insurance, she put a Shriners sled hockey team on the ice in Erie in 1996. Sue and members of the Shriners also began traveling to Pittsburgh to run clinics and teach the game to children there. The

Members of the Penguins join the Mighty Penguins on ice, c. 2015.

Courtesy of the Mighty Penguins.



Syria Shriners provided support and the Blade Runners Complex, now Alpha Ice in Harmar, became the site for early outreach clinics. Sue traveled to Pittsburgh every month in the beginning, and by 1998 a core group of families regularly brought their kids to play sled hockey.

At the same time, Sue reached out to other cities in the tri-state area and beyond to start more teams. Eventually she birthed seven: Erie and Pittsburgh, then Cleveland; Bradford, Pa.; Jamestown, N.Y.; Columbus; and finally Grand Rapids, Mich. From these core teams, and a couple of others that formed in Buffalo, N.Y., and Wisconsin, came an opportunity for physically disabled youth to compete in ice hockey.

Pittsburgh's team, the Mighty Penguins, celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. The parents of players on the first teams worked with the Shriners and community members to build the team and sustain it through two decades. Some of the first players to attend those clinics run by Sue Birkmire have had incredible success in their hockey careers. Just four years after joining the team and learning the game, Josh Wirt won a gold medal with team USA at the 2002 Winter Paralympics in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Inspired by Josh Wirt's example in 2002, Dan McCoy, who started with the team at age five in 1998, has also succeeded at the highest level of the sport. While watching the Salt Lake City games, McCoy announced, "I want to win a gold medal in the Olympics." From that time forward, McCoy, who has spina bifida, dedicated himself to making the U.S. National Team. Selected at age 14 to the U.S. Development Sled Hockey Team, just two years later, Dan was named to the U.S. National Team. He has constantly had to balance his health with the arduous training required to play on international ice. With three World Championship medals (two gold



The Penguins #14 Chris Kunitz and the Mighty Penguins #14 Dan McCoy show off their gold medals from Sochi, c. 2015.

Courtesy of the Mighty Penguins.



The Penguins former goalie, Marc Andre Fleury, skates with players from the Mighty Penguins, c. 2015.

Courtesy of the Mighty Penguins.

and one silver) McCoy has competed in rinks around the world. In 2014, he represented the United States in Sochi where the U.S. defeated the home team, Russia, 1-0, winning the gold medal. McCoy also notched two assists in five games during the Paralympics.

Retired from the national team now, McCoy continues to captain the senior team for the Mighty Penguins and to mentor and train young athletes in the program. His story of perseverance and dedication

in many ways parallels that of the Mighty Penguins organization which started as one woman's vision and now serves more than 50 athletes playing on four teams. Both speak to the difference that sport can make in people's lives. ✨

This newly collected material from Dan McCoy and the Mighty Penguins will be featured in the expanded Hockey exhibit due to open January 26, 2019.