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UNH Course Skates Through Hockey History

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DURHAM, N.H. – At the University of New Hampshire, where hockey dominates the athletic scene, the sport is not just a game or a Friday night spectator tradition. It's the subject of academic inquiry for 20 students each semester who take "The Coolest Game? Hockey and History," a research and writing-intensive course taught by professor of kinesiology and hockey historian Stephen Hardy.

And while the course explores the history and sociology of the game, its real aim is to help students understand and practice critical elements of scholarship like research, original thought, and scholarly writing.

"It's not all about hockey history. It's about *doing* history," says Hardy. The subject matter explores hockey's early years, issues of race and gender, technological influences, and even the culture of fighting, all while immersing students in the practice of scholarly research. Hardy mandates that student papers mine a range of sources, from academic journals on microfilm to oral histories and even YouTube videos of hockey brawls.

Scholars taking "The Coolest Game" also access UNH's Charles Holt Archives of American Hockey, a treasure-trove of original documents for which Hardy is the faculty advisor. "Most of the students who take this course can't believe they're actually using primary documents like NCAA minutes," says Hardy, who calls the archives "arguably the most substantial, professionally processed and maintained collection anywhere" outside the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto.

A stern taskmaster when it comes to scholarship and history, Hardy nonetheless infuses his course with a passion for the game of hockey. Students are divided into four research teams he's named the orange, blue, green and black lines, after the color designation of player groups typically used in hockey practice. In a recent class, as each line prepared to critique the others' papers, Hardy told the students to "put on their fighting braces," referring to Canadian braces – suspenders in American English – that were developed to button to their jerseys to prevent their opponents from pulling their jerseys over their heads in a fight.

"You can tell that Professor Hardy loves the subject," says sophomore journalism major Dineen Boyle. "It's a legitimate class, but it's a lot of fun."

Just half of the students in the course call themselves hard-core hockey fans; the rest enrolled for a range of reasons but are gaining an appreciation for the sport and its history. "I always knew my aunt played at Cornell, but she never talked about it," says English major Emmie Katz, who interviewed her aunt as a source for a group paper on the development of women's hockey. "It was cool to learn about my own family that way."

The course, offered in both fall and spring semesters, is one of UNH's Inquiry courses: small, experientially focused classes that examine a single topic from multiple perspectives. Inquiry courses aim to prepare students for active scholarship by encouraging them to reflect on their learning processes, to develop their own strategies to address questions, problems or subject matter in their coursework, and to effectively convey and present the results of their inquiry.

According to the students, hockey is an effective, if unconventional, lens through which to explore academic inquiry.

"This class is really good for learning to write research papers," says sophomore Abigail Doherty, a nursing major. "It will help us with our other classes and our theses."

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,200 graduate students.