

Power plays

Nouns and pronouns suffer when coach Joe Pinto steps into Locker Room 3 and begins his pregame speech.

"We've been working on cycling the puck, so let's try to do that," he says, marking five X's on a miniature drawing-board ice rink.

"Now, who do you back-check to? The man closest to you, whether she has the puck or she doesn't have the puck. . . . You guys playing offense, remember we should have one girl down low. . . . Defensemen, the best way to control the game is for us to keep the puck out of our zone. You girls are pretty good at that."

Ten of the team's 12 players are present, an exceptional turnout for the Saturday afternoon after Halloween. It is, after all, 3 p.m. and prime time for children's birthday parties, grocery shopping, collecting the dry cleaning, returning videos, and every other conceivable weekend chore.

But the women on this team — who during the week work as lawyers, artists, secretaries, business executives, computer managers and everything in between — have become experts at carving out time for two nights of practice and one game a week from early September to mid-March. Baby-sitters, husbands and understanding friends are key.

As Pinto continues, the women pull on long woolen socks and at-



Cecilia Dee (right) playing wing against the University of Maryland.

Facing off with Philadelphia's ice queens.

By Tanya
Barrientos

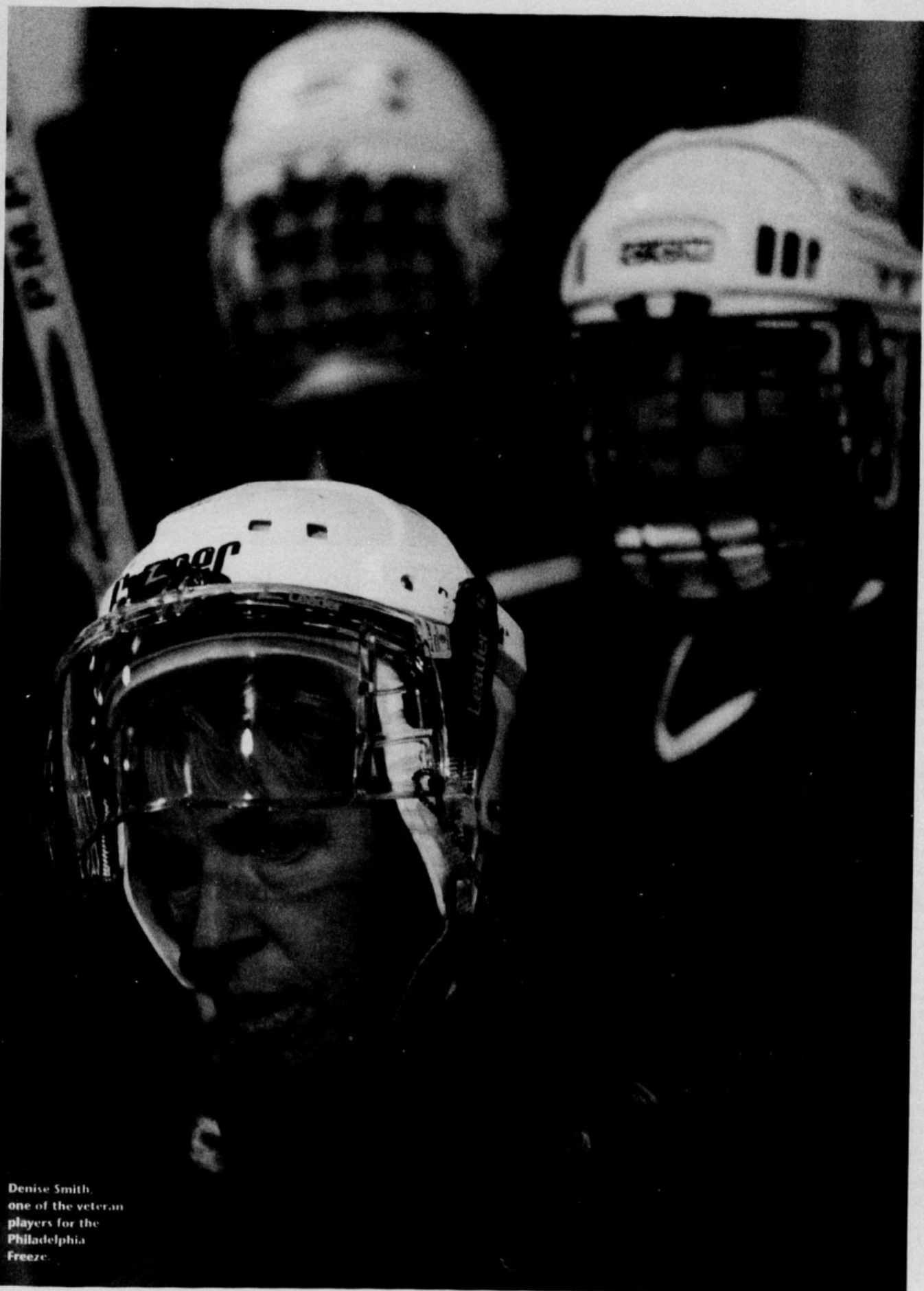
tach them to Velcro tabs that dangle from their spandex shorts. Some slip on their shoulder and shin pads. Some lace up their skates. By the time the coach winds down, reminding them to "always, always keep a man in front of the net" and "in this play, make sure the left wing stays low on the break-out," the B-team is ready to go — the Philadelphia Freeze vs. the Chesapeake Bay Lightning — fully padded and pumped for the first game of the 26th season of the Mid-Atlantic Women's Hockey League.

Pinto knows he can count on the veterans — defensemen Jeanne Verrall, who's been playing for 25 years; Kit Wallace, who has been at it for eight; and center Lisa Cervo, who trained with men's teams before joining the Freeze in '96. Newcomers like 34-year-old Donna Helgenberg need a bit of breaking in. Pinto has already noticed that Helgenberg's background in competitive figure skating will be a boon to the team. But this is her first game, and he can see that her stick work needs polishing, as does her knowledge of the rules.

Inside the giant Flyers Skate Zone in Voorhees, men and boys are everywhere. Men are coaching,

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Denise Smith,
one of the veteran
players for the
Philadelphia
Freeze.

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cheering, refereeing and scoring games played by little boys and lanky-limbed young men. They are in the lobby, in the hallways, at the snack bar, and buzzing through the video arcade.

The Freeze's A-team and B-team games are the only women's contests on the schedule. When the door to the locker room next to the Freeze's swings open, the clamor and chaos of a team of 10-year-olds spill into the corridor. The only other female the Freeze passes on its way to the ice is a young mother holding a chocolate birthday cake.

It's no longer news that women have broken into just about every sport once considered strictly for men. A handful of professional women athletes have achieved a sports celebrity that has made them stars, the darlings of Madison Avenue. This summer, the Olympic women's softball team reached almost legendary status with its amazing comeback battle for the gold. Yet something about hockey has kept women at bay.

Even though the American women's Olympic hockey team made every female ice warrior proud in 1998 when it took the gold medal, and the victory accounted for a noticeable jump in female participation, the numbers are still small.

According to USA Hockey Inc., the sport's national governing body, no state recognized girls' ice hockey as an official high school sport until 1994, when Minnesota took the lead. The organization reports that only 27,000 girls and women are registered as hockey players across the nation, and half of those play on boys' or men's teams.

As the Freeze piles onto the team bench, assistant coach Ed Walsh (who dates defense player Marnie Levengood) warns the women to watch out for No. 14 on the opposing team. "She's a speedster," he cautions.

Play begins with an explosion of action on and off the ice. The women on the bench bang their sticks against the boards while the players on the ice whack and scuttle. The rules of women's hockey forbid body checking, but it's clear the teams have adopted an extremely liberal interpretation of "incidental contact," which is allowed. Grunting and growling mixes with the sound of skates scraping and sticks smacking. Suddenly a couple of players rush up to the bench, tumble over the boards, and take a seat as two others jump to their feet, leap back over the boards and zoom onto the ice. Within two minutes, the Freeze has scored its first goal. Pinto cheers and the players pound their sticks even harder.

"Good job, Cee!" Pinto screams. "Good eye, Pitch!"

When play resumes, rookie Helgenberg gets thrown into the penalty box for hooking. She sits and pants, waiting for Pinto to dress her down.



Amy Bradley, who joined the Freeze this year, is a goalie.

Instead he walks over to her and chuckles. "Umm, Donna," he gibes. "In hockey, you aren't allowed to do that."

At 46, Jeanne Verrall is not the oldest member of the B-team, but she was there when it all started.

"It was that 1974-75 season, when the Flyers were really big and hockey was in full bloom around here," Verrall says. "I was friends with five sisters, the Blair sisters, who were on my softball team, and they said they were going to start a hockey team."

The sisters — Marianne, Liz, Terry, Eileen and Annette — had two brothers who agreed to coach, and they asked Verrall to join their squad.

"I didn't even know how to skate," Verrall recalls. "But I went out and learned everything — skating, the whole game, thanks to them."

The team, which had nine players, competed against four other fledgling women's squads at the former Boulevard Skating Rink in the Northeast (now a roller-skating arena). They called themselves the Boulevard Hookers. And they were terrible.

"We hardly ever scored," remembers Verrall with a smile. "If we could keep the scores against us in the single digits, we were really happy."

In the middle of the Hookers' fourth season, the team was forced to move to the open-air Old York Road Skating Club and take whatever ice time was available. Practice started at 11 p.m.

"In January it was brutal," Verrall says. "Your feet would get so cold they'd hurt, and your hands and arms would go numb."

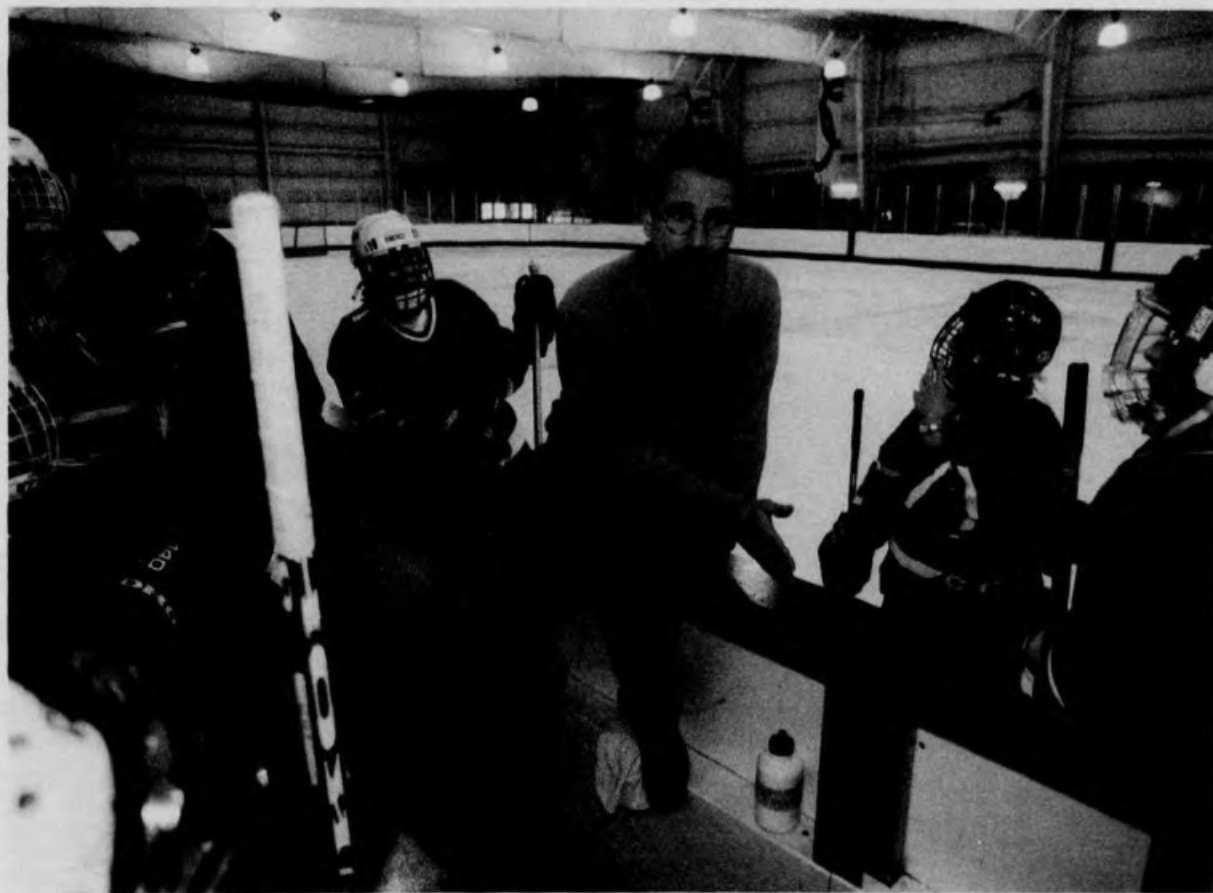
The team changed its name to the Old York Roadrunners, and as the years passed a smattering of other female teams popped up along the East Coast.



Patty Buck plays defense.

By 1983 the Mid-Atlantic league had six teams, and while the Roadrunners could boast of being among the most seasoned, they couldn't call themselves winners. Not even close.

For three years running (1978-81), they failed to win a single game. And for the next five years, they limped along with slowly improving records, remind-



Coach Joe Pinto setting strategy between periods. The Freeze went on to shut out Maryland.

ing themselves that they were doing this for fun. Loads and loads of theoretical fun.

Then in the late 1980s, something happened. The team began to attract women who had played organized hockey before, women like Kit Wallace, who had been on Yale University's first women's team during her senior year in 1974, and Lisa Cervo, who had played on a men's roller-hockey team for three years.

"Suddenly we were getting *athletes*," says Verrall. If they hadn't played hockey, many had participated in other team sports, such as basketball or rugby, which was what 34-year-old Cecilia Dee played before she saw a pal on the ice and decided she'd rather skate than scrum. She has now been with the team for seven years and is club president.

The Freeze ended up with enough good people to form an A-team, a B-team and a C-team, with players whose ages range from 19 to 48. Last year the A-team went to the regional playoffs, and this year it hopes to go even further.

This is Kit Wallace's first year on the B-team (she had played on the A since joining the Freeze in 1992). She says the step down is a testament both to the team's new talent and to her age — 47. This will be her ninth season, and she says she still loves every minute of it, even if nowadays she swallows a couple of Advils before each game and a couple more after.

Before joining the Freeze, Wallace was convinced that her hockey days were behind her.

Raised in a family crazy about ice sports, she knew

she could always bat a puck around with her father and two brothers. But with marriage and motherhood, she thought team play was out of the question.

"I hadn't played hockey for years when my brother saw a sign for tryouts for the Freeze and told me I should go." Her daughter, Erica, was 3, her son, Michael, was 7, "and I had really devoted myself to my kids," Wallace says, adding that she wasn't sure she wanted to get involved in sports again.

"But I hadn't established much of a personal life outside of being a mom, and I thought I should at least give it a try."

She showed up for tryouts wearing 15-year-old skates and a beat-up bike helmet.

"After that one night, I was hooked," Wallace remembers. "The practices were at 8:30 at night, and I would put Erica to bed and she'd be crying, 'Don't leave me, Mommy! Don't leave,' and I'd tear myself away, sometimes, honestly, in tears, telling myself that I deserved this time for myself."

Hockey became so important to Wallace that even when she got divorced, she and her ex worked out a joint custody agreement that accommodated her ice time.

"We would trade weekend custody depending on my away-game schedules, and we made sure I had Monday nights free for practice."

Now Erica is a few weeks from turning 12 and says she's her mother's biggest fan.

"I love watching her play because there aren't too many other moms who do this," she says. "When I was little, my friends would come over and Mom would

play hockey with us in the basement. They thought she was awesome because their parents would never do that."

Still, Erica isn't sure about playing hockey herself. She is taking figure-skating lessons.

Wallace hopes her daughter will eventually change her mind.

"I've always said I wanted to play long enough to play with Erica," she says with a sigh. "This is the only time in my life that I feel I push myself physically beyond normal capacity. It's an incredible feeling, and I'd like her to know that."

"I'll probably just keep figure skating," Erica replies.

By the middle of the third period, the players are sweat-soaked and fatigued. One takes long pulls from an asthma inhaler every time she hits the bench. But their spirits are soaring because they're minutes away from a shutout victory.

There are fewer than 15 fans in the stands: Wallace's daughter and a school friend, a few of the other players' family

members, and women from the Freeze's A-team who played an earlier game. Only three people are rooting for the other team.

"OK, girls," assistant coach Walsh says as the final minutes tick away, "let's keep those zeros up there!"

With six minutes left in the game, the Freeze finds itself vulnerable. Two players are sitting in the penalty box, and No. 14 from the other team is determined to score.

"Come on! De-fense!" the women on the bench scream, pounding their sticks in frustration.

"Keep them trapped in their zone!" Pinto yells.

On the ice, Wallace and Verrall play dogged defense and rookie Helgenberg's speed proves wicked enough to keep No. 14 from the net.

With 32 seconds left, the Freeze scores, bumping the final score to 6-0. As the buzzer sounds, the women on the bench spill onto the ice to hug their teammates.

Pinto watches from behind the boards.

"Not a bad start," he says.

After the game, Wallace changes clothes and walks out to her minivan. She makes sure Erica and her friend are wearing seat belts before she pulls out of the lot.

"Oh, no," she gasps as she glances at the dashboard clock. It is 5:10 p.m. "Let's go, girls," she says, putting the van in gear. "Sorry, but no stopping. I have a parent potluck thing that I have to be at by 6:30." □

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