



Photo credit:
Cara Lane

THE GREAT BLIZZ BRING IT ON!

BY STEVE NEARMAN • PHOTOS BY THE GREAT BLIZZARDS TEAM PHOTOGRAPHER BILL WEDGE

Last February, on an ordinary Saturday, Steve and I met to review photos of the epic Himalayan Trek he embarked upon and ended up writing about last spring. But as we meandered off topic, and as he shared updates on his son's remarkable team, it began to suddenly snow—out of nowhere. As big flakes fell from the sky, it only made sense to get outside right then and take his picture.

The truth is that I hate being cold.

This is like the ultimate downer when you are a kid growing up in Massachusetts.

So why on Earth would hanging out at hockey rinks every weekend become a major part of my life?

It certainly isn't because I am a terrible ice skater and even worse hockey player. Take my word here.

That started in my youth – if it was winter, I was booed off the ice and if it was summer, I was booed off the baseball fields. I actually thought “Boo” was my nickname when it came to team sports.

I've often pondered if being verbally abused as an unassuming and underwhelming young athlete doesn't drive a lot of my motivation to champion the underdog.

So fate would have it that I am raising an autistic boy/man who just had to take a liking to ice hockey back 13 years ago! I never imagined when my son Jonathan geared up for the first time in Northern Virginia in 2011 the journey he and I would take. I also could never imagine that he grew up a Washington Capitals fan and not a Boston Bruins fan like me. Fortunately through brainwashing, lots of it, I've turned him into a rabid Bruins fan.

And it's been some journey.

Because when we moved to Pinehills in 2017, there were no ice hockey teams for special needs people anywhere on the South Shore. In another twist of fate, one of Jonathan's former teammates' family moved to Scituate around the same time. His dad and I agreed there needed to be a special needs team on the South Shore like the one in Northern Virginia and when you put a mission-ready former Air Force fighter pilot like him on a project with a bull-headed, tenacious former sports writer like me, you are bound for success.

Or at the least, a crash-and-burn failure worth writing about.

It didn't hurt that most of our top-secret planning sessions were held in an undisclosed location at Buffalo Wild Wings in Hanover. The booth in the back. Note: he went hottest spicy, I went mild.

And thus became The Great Blizzards of Massachusetts Special Hockey.

People occasionally ask why the name. That's an easy one.

Two very important events in my life had one four-letter word in common – SNOW.

I was born during a raging blizzard in 1960 and I missed two weeks of my senior year of high school – no makeup days! – because of the famous Blizzard of 1978.

This team needed to be defined by a massive force, a life-changing event, a newsworthy happening, a lot of action and chaos and a whole bunch of flakes!

Thus, why not pay homage to all the Great Blizzards of our Commonwealth.

I thought it was a pretty cool name until one day, while contacting a potential funder, the woman on the other end of the line taking the message responded back – “you are with the Grape Lizards of Massachusetts?” I thought “Wow, what a great name, with a purple lizard as our mascot skating across the ice!”

With used donated gear, 10 players hit the ice in September 2019 at the Kingston Bog Ice Arena, which in my limited geographic knowledge of the area I believed to be centrally located on the South Shore. It wasn't just five months later, we hit a massive stonewall – COVID. Rinks shut down and when they reopened, the area youth programs were spreading the virus like wildfire. The towns around the rink were redder than Santa's jacket.

We stayed off the ice longer than most with many of our players immunocompromised. And when we returned, my wife the nurse was taking temperatures and doing contact tracing outside the rink before practice and making sure players masked up. Many in the youth hockey community snickered at us while others wished their program had done the same. It truly was like skating on thin ice.

But all the while, we kept getting the word out about special needs hockey on the South Shore. With a wildly successful inaugural Boston Bruins alumni fundraiser in February 2020, we had financial security for the first time to pay for ice time and some new equipment and storage and even some travel.

Eventually, we convinced the world-famous Riverview School on the Cape to bus half a dozen of their rookie players to Kingston each week. This led to creating a second location on the Cape, out of the Tony Kent Arena in South Dennis in 2023.

All told, we number 65 players ages 4 to 39 and their families on the roster with approximately 50 volunteer coaches, young and seasoned, some with very extensive special education experience. Plus a loyal team photographer Bill Wedge who has missed only a handful of practices and attended all of our tournaments since nearly Day One.

We have bonded as a team through travel to places like New Jersey, New York, Virginia, Rhode Island, St. Louis, Chicago, Ocean City, Maryland, Maine and Vermont. We have won many games and got crushed many times as well, including playing two teams from the Montreal suburbs back in November. It appeared to me that most of their squad's members were already on contract with the Canadiens.

We've showcased between periods of the Providence Bruins games and we hosted the generous Bruins Alumni six times already! We also continue to make podium at the annual Plymouth Fourth of July Parade!



Jonathan Nearman #22, or JNear as Dad calls him, scoring a goal with the Bruins alumni. Dad is in the foreground giving him the shout out.



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Steve welcomes new players to The Blizzards all the time, including one who travels down from the North Shore. Worth every minute, according to his father, who was brought to tears recently watching his son succeeding on the ice.



WE HAVE BONDED
AS A TEAM
THROUGH TRAVEL
TO PLACES LIKE
NEW JERSEY, NEW
YORK, VIRGINIA,
RHODE ISLAND, ST.
LOUIS, CHICAGO,
OCEAN CITY,
MARYLAND, MAINE
AND VERMONT.

But possibly our biggest contribution to the sport so far has been to revive the annual tournament for Special Hockey International. Shut down by COVID after the 2019 event in Toronto, the tournament was on life support with no hosts in site. The Great Blizz offered to bring back the tournament and hosted 33 teams from the United States, Canada and United Kingdom at Lovell Arena in Rockland last year. And we are hosting here again this year April 24-26!

The Blizz has expanded its reach off-ice as well. We created a weekly radio show "Breaking the Ice - Let's Talk Inclusion" on WATD-95.9FM on Tuesdays at 6:15 p.m., hosted by our talented, experienced radio celeb and two-player parent Holly Flanagan and me. Holly is a natural on live radio while I prefer to script rather than wing it. It's a winning combination in the studio. We believe the show's content has enhanced the special needs population by highlighting important issues, resources, events and people.



The Great Blizzards had a visit from the Hingham girls hockey team -- an exciting skate for all.

I am always appreciative when people in the radio industry give me unsolicited helpful advice - slow down your delivery, take a deep breath and exhale, and most importantly "don't quit your day job."

We always try to do new and different things each year. Travel to new cities, new tournaments. Organize new events. In that vein, we are proposing a Polar Moose Plunge on the Cape mid-February - remember, I hate being cold! - and we are a charity beneficiary this year for the Second Summer Cycle ride on September 14 in South Yarmouth. Team biking bonding. This is a major step up from our first car wash fundraiser in 2019!

Shhhhh...can you keep a secret? This year, we will be unveiling our new mascot: Whiteout!

I'd be lying if I said that life at the helm of The Great Blizz has been all rainbows and sunshine. Anybody who has been quite successful knows there always will be a few internal and external

forces trying to bring you down, and The Great Blizz certainly is no exception.

But the lesson here is that as the Obamas say, when they go low, we go high. And you shake off distraction and negativity and the personal attacks and the lies and you stick to the mission. EVERY TIME somebody has tried to derail us, we just keep getting stronger, growing the program by player numbers, gaining more local, regional and national supporters like Keurig, Dr. Pepper, National Grid, Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation for Autism, the Boston Bruins Foundation and the Boston Bruins Alumni, Rockland Federal Credit Union, Rockland Bank, Jersey Mike's, Riverview School and BRABO and much more.

It's a testament to the will of our team's Board of Directors and its many parents, guardians, coaches and other volunteers who work tirelessly to make The Great Blizzards the strongest blizzard ever to hit Massachusetts. Bring it on!

I would be remiss if I didn't tell a Pinehills story in a Pinehills publication to a Pinehills audience before I wrap up this article and focus on important matters like bandaging up wounds to my hands from my feisty Tuxedo cat while I was typing this – I mean, loading up my SUV with pounds of gear for our two practices over the weekend at the Bog and Tony Kent arena.

The last time I conned Katriena, the Stroll publisher, into running a piece about the Blizz a couple of years ago in exchange for season's tickets to the Bruins games – which she would have to pay for – I was overjoyed to find out that exactly one person read the story.

Fortunately for The Blizz, he was one IMPORTANT Pinehills resident.

As fate would nail me between the eyes once again, that reader was Doug Shepherd, NHL agent and all-around nice guy who reached out to me for a meeting after reading about the team. We sat down at another one of my

undisclosed locations – Mamma Mia's – and he asked me the question every desperate non-profit program founder and executive director wants to hear. "Steve, what would you like to order?"

Not THAT question.

"Is there anything that your team needs right now?" he asked, as my mind went spinning out of control. My first thought – sure, how about a corporate jet and a pilot for those away games? Then the rational side of my brain took over and thought, "You'll never get the jet and pilot but ask him to build a special needs indoor hockey rink for the team so you don't have to wake up at an ungodly hour for 7 a.m. hockey practice." Then reality sunk in.

The team really needed high-quality Great Blizz branded hockey bags and Doug made it happen through a foundation of one of his NHL players. Then our Godfather moved away to Northern Virginia of all places!

But he never forgot us. In fact, he just set us up with a company which creates 50-50 online raffles and we concluded our first short one with a drawing on December 23.

We split the \$1500 jackpot with the winner and started our second raffle – a Valentine's Day Sweetheart of a Jackpot right after New Year's Day, accessed through our Facebook site.

The funds from our first raffle will help pay for some of the expenses for 14 players and four coaches to go to Ocean City at the end of January to play in a 3-on-3 tournament in a high-rise historic resort hotel right on the Atlantic Ocean. The mini-rink is in the lobby of the hotel.

And do you know the best part for me? The lobby is toasty warm.

Steve Nearman is Executive Director of The Great Blizzards of Massachusetts Special Hockey and a Pinehills resident.

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