

A "hockey vagabond," 27-year-old Vic LeMire operates a summer goaltending school in Vancouver where he terrorizes net minders with his self-made puck-shooting machine. Oh, and he makes masks, too.

Shoot-Out in Vancouver

by Marc Edge

IT'S UNCOMFORTABLY HOT in Vancouver—hot even for summer. Everywhere people are trying to beat the heat, while in the east end of the city, smack in the heart of the Italian quarter and not too far from the Pacific National Exhibition grounds, the smell of burning rubber brings your nose to the Britannia Ice Arena.

Inside you find what is obviously a hockey school, not uncommon at ice rinks across Canada during the summer months. But before long you realize this is a hockey school unlike most others. The only skaters with pucks are the instructors, dressed in orange-and-black sweat suits. The students are garbed from head to toe in leather and plastic armor, for this is a hockey school just for goaltenders.

Here are goalies of all description: tall ones, short ones, thin ones, fat ones. They range in age from peewee (the youngest is five) to oldtimer, from junior hockey hopefuls to players who want a crack at college hockey. Some are in the bright *bleu, blanc et rouge* of the Stanley Cup champion Montreal Canadiens, others in the dark blue and green of the popular hometown Canucks. Many wear club colors emblazoned with crests of various community associations or winter clubs.

They come from as far south as California and as far north as the Yukon and Northwest Territories, near the Arctic Circle. And if you look carefully, you may see a female student or two.

For most, this hockey school is the best way to prepare for the upcoming season, to get skating legs back after a

summer off the blades and to sharpen skills for the barrage of slap shots, wrist shots, backhands and breakaways that will come their way from September to April.

They are all aspiring Ken Drydens or Rogie Vachons.

THE SMELL OF burning rubber comes from one end of the ice, where a diminutive, frizzy-haired instructor kneels inside the blue line and aims a square contraption at an increasingly frustrated young goalie. Pucks spin from the machine and hurtle past the goaltender and into the net.

"Kick that skate out," comes one exhortation, then: "Get that glove up," as a puck sails into the top corner of the net. Suddenly, Vic LeMire leaps up from behind his homemade device to correct the student's technique. Although not in pads, LeMire is obviously a goaltender. You can tell as he crouches to demonstrate the proper stance, or the best way to hold the stick or glove.

Back at the machine, it becomes a contest. "Ha, ha, gotcha," LeMire chortles as he beats a sharp net minder; he flashes a quick thumbs-up signal or shouts "awwright!" after a particularly good save.

LeMire is a 27-year-old hockey vagabond. Coaching goaltenders is his livelihood. Last summer's camp was his fourth, and drew more than 200 goaltenders (in four age groups) to six week-long sessions. During the winter, he is a coach with the local junior A Kerrisdale Couriers, and operates a thriving basement business making fiberglass goalie masks:

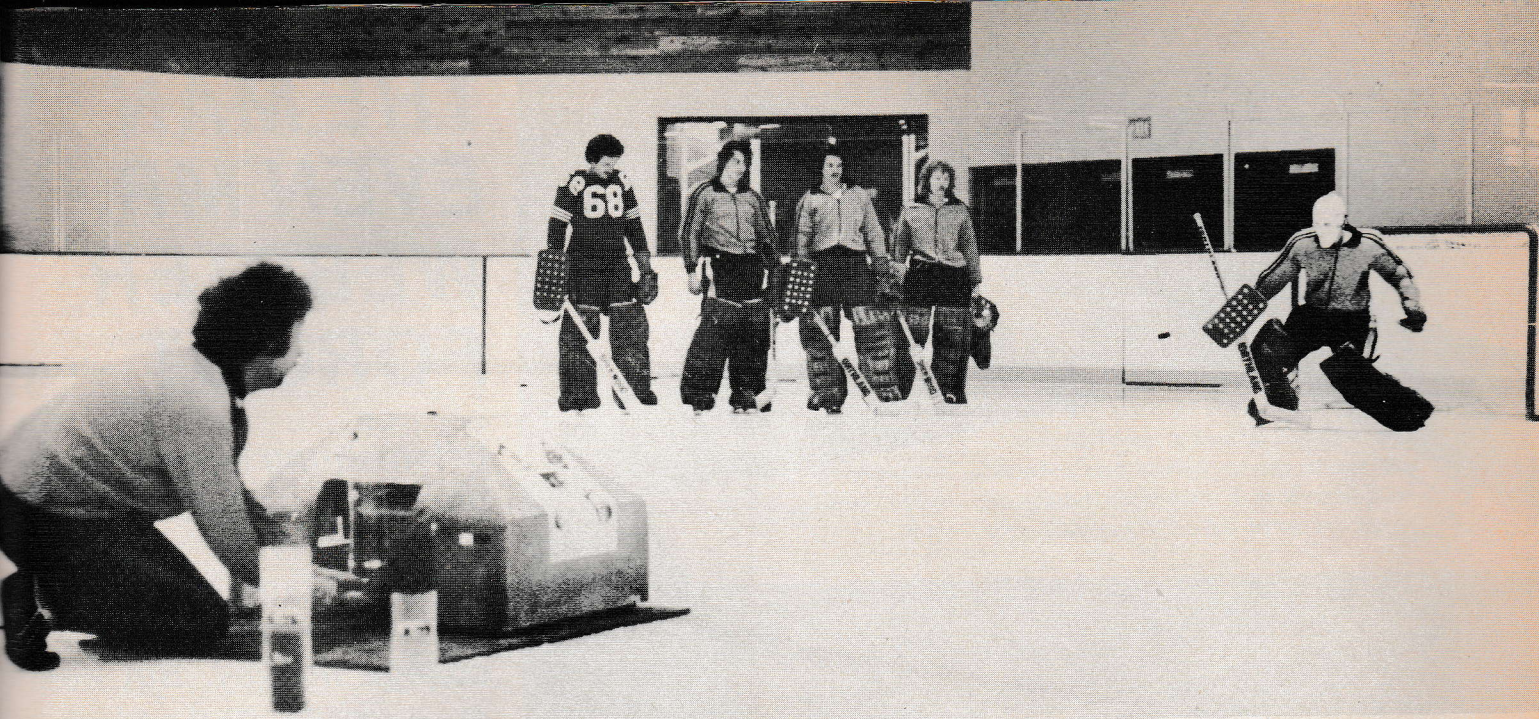
A native of Manitoba, LeMire played major junior hockey with the Brandon Wheat Kings of the Western Canada Hockey League, then college hockey at Ohio State University. Murray Armstrong, who assembled powerhouse teams at Denver University in the early '70s, persuaded LeMire to switch schools; but LeMire was caught in an N.C.A.A. purge of players who had been recruited from major junior hockey in Canada. So LeMire finished his stint on the hockey-go-round at Vancouver's University of British Columbia, where he picked up a degree in mechanical engineering. It was his engineering background that helped LeMire to develop his puck-shooting machine.

"It's just two half-horsepower motors driving small rubber tires at 1,725 r.p.m., all held together by an aluminum frame," explains LeMire. "That's the speed it always goes at, and if you want it to shoot faster, all you do is put more air in the tires. The machine can shoot pucks up to 85 m.p.h."

While the original machine was somewhat crude (it was mounted on the underside of a card table and fired one puck at a time), the latest model is cartridge-loaded to shoot a half-dozen pucks in succession. And it is as accurate as you can get without using a telescopic rangefinder. "The great thing about the machine is its tremendous accuracy," says LeMire. "You can teach the boy how to make a save without risk of hurting him. For the younger goaltenders we use sponge-rubber pucks. The object is to teach the boy to make the save, not to make him scared of the puck."

On the ice, nine goaltenders go through their paces. Two are with LeMire and his automated slap shot; the rest work with other instructors. The day's lesson is something called "stacking the pads": goalies are taught the proper way to flop to the ice on a close-in shot. The trick to it all, as LeMire patiently explains for the umpteenth time, is to push sideways off the back leg and fold that pad under the other while sliding across to block the shot.

To practice the save, LeMire fires pucks from the blue line. The goaltender must first make the save, then sprawl to the side to stop a shooter with a second puck. At the other end the same technique is practiced without the machine, while at center ice a line of goalies flops from side to side, sometimes five or 10 times in a row. One, two, three, kick. On an-



At his Vancouver goalie school, Vic LeMire operates a machine that fires pucks up to 85 m.p.h.

other day it might be skate saves or stickhandling. A buzzer screeches and the goalies rotate, the players in the net switching places with the two at center ice.

AS HOCKEY ENTREPRENEURS go, LeMire is busy. "There hasn't been a day when I haven't had a mask on the go in the basement," he says proudly. A student of anything connected with goaltending, LeMire has devised a mask that offers complete protection and includes an extension to cover the throat.

To fit a mask, LeMire first takes a plaster of Paris mold of the player's face, then layers 15 coats of fiberglass over the mold to create a shell which is both light and strong. Then comes the time-consuming chore of drilling, cutting, filing and polishing. Finally, it is fitted to the goaltender's face to check sight lines; more drilling and filing follow before the mask is padded and fitted with a backplate and is ready to go.

LeMire has turned out an estimated 500 masks in the past four years, and swears by his model—which, he says, costs a fraction of what other "professional" masks cost. "Some masks are just two or three layers of fiberglass, and that's no protection at all. Look at Dan Bouchard in Atlanta. He got put in a hospital wearing a fiberglass mask he made himself, but it was only a few layers thick."


Many professional goaltenders, including Bouchard, are now using the

wire or "bird cage" mask, but LeMire defends the fiberglass variety. "If you look at the wire mask, it's basically flat. When the puck hits, the force has to go somewhere, and that can mean a broken jaw. For a boy younger than about 14, it would be silly to rush out and buy a fitted mask, because the face is still growing at that age and the caliber of shots isn't that great, yet. But the fitted mask is designed to deflect the puck rather than stop it, and the impact is taken by the stronger bones in the face and the forehead." LeMire objects to store-bought plastic or fiberglass masks because, he says, those can be more dangerous than no mask at all. "I've never had a goaltender hurt wearing one of my masks."

While his summer goaltender school has proved enormously successful, LeMire has started evening sessions for forwards and defensemen, using his perspective as a goaltender to teach hockey basics. He is also moving east, holding week-long clinics in Manitoba (in Crystal City and Portage La Prairie) in the fall, and in Evanston, Illinois, in the spring. "I went to a goalie school in Chicago last year and they had about 30 goalies of all ages on the ice at once," says LeMire. "They were just standing around and hardly got any coaching at all."

THE BUZZER SOUNDS long and loud, and LeMire lines his charges along the boards. "All right, to the other end and back five times," he shouts. "Last one has to go again." LeMire emphasizes skating and conditioning, and holds separate sessions with these basics in mind.

After 20 minutes of end-to-end skating (with a stop at each blue line to make 10 skate saves or similar maneuvers), players moan and a few lean over the boards as they suck in air.

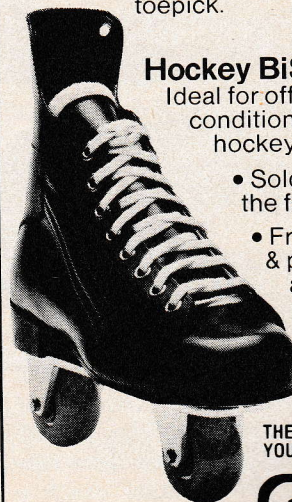
LeMire is a harsh taskmaster, but the players keep coming back. And for now, at least, they are *perspiring* Ken Drydens or Rogie Vachons. 

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