

It's True - Charles Darwin Actually Played Bandy!

If you don't know who Charles Darwin was then perhaps you should stop reading this article right now.

But if you do know who he was, the brilliant and intuitive Englishman who was the first to propose that all life, every species that currently exists, evolved from an earlier, already existing species - since labelled the "Theory of Evolution", then you definitely should keep reading.

Born in Shrewsbury, England in 1809, Darwin was only 22 when he began an almost five year circumnavigation of the globe aboard the HMS Beagle, a voyage of discovery stopping in multiple locations, including the Galapagos Islands. It was on this voyage that Darwin first formulated his Theory of Evolution. He began writing his monumental book "On The Origin of Species" in 1839, which he finally published in 1859.

But, long before the "Evolution" lightbulb lit up in Darwin's brain he was just another student attending Shrewsbury, an Anglican boarding school in the English town of Shrewsbury, located 50 miles west of Birmingham and 75 miles south of Manchester. The city is almost completely encircled by the River Severn, the longest river in Great Britain. Darwin attended Shrewsbury School from 1818 to 1825. During those winters of 200 plus years ago the climate of England was much colder than today. As a result, the backwaters, sloughs and ponds of the River Severn turned to ice in the heart of winter. It was on this ice that the boys of Shrewsbury School would skate and play a game with sticks and a ball. One of these boys was Charles Darwin. We know this because Darwin's son Willy also attended Shrewsbury School and on March 1, 1853 Darwin sent the then 13 year old a letter:

My Dear Willy:

"...Have you got a pretty good pond to skate on?
I used to be very fond of playing hocky on the ice on skates"

But the "hocky" Darwin was referring to was not the ice hockey that we know. It was instead a game where two teams of skaters, each using short, curved sticks made of wood, attempted to strike a ball through the two borders of the opponents goal. The playing surface and the number of players was dictated by the area of skate able ice available, with the goals often hundreds of yards apart. Although Darwin referred to this sport as "hocky" in his letter to Willy, it was known by many other names including: shinty, shinny, hockey, hurling, dodders, rickets but from its very origins hundreds of years ago, and almost exclusively in the last 130 years, it is known as "Bandy." Yes, Charles Darwin actually played Bandy.

In fact, up until at least the 1870s even though games may have been referred to as hockey games, there was no sport that actually resembled modern ice hockey. Just as the sport of bandy evolved from sports that were played on land and not ice, the sport of ice hockey evolved from the sport of Bandy. Extensive research has been done to ascertain the origins of modern ice hockey. Much of this information is incorporated into the book "On The Origin Of Hockey". researched and written by

Carl Gidden, Patrick Houda and Jean-Patrice Martel. One of the main questions the authors were seeking to answer was whether modern ice hockey originated in Canada or whether it actually began in England. This is, of course, a matter of great national importance to Canada. The authors' research focused on the 19th century and included finding and reading newspaper articles, journals, books, memoirs, letters and other correspondence and even contemporary paintings and drawings. The conclusion they came to was that ice sports, played on skates, with a short curved wooden stick and most often a ball (and sometimes a cork or a bung) had been taking place for hundreds of years in England and that the initial ice sports played in Canada's also were with short sticks and a ball on an open ice surface. In other words, although the authors' did not specifically say so, Bandy was played in Canada long before ice hockey.

It was not until the 1870s and 1880s that the ice hockey that the world is familiar with today began its separation, its evolution, from the sport of Bandy, and this first occurred in England.

This presents us with an irony, or perhaps the better term of "synchrony". Charles Darwin, a bandy player, formulated the theory of evolution, that one species evolves from an already existing species. The sport of Bandy is what the sport of ice hockey has evolved from. It would appear that Darwin's theory does not just apply to biology, but also to human constructed systems, such as sports and athletics. Darwin was familiar with the fact that even though a new species may have evolved from an original species, this did not mean that the original species must or would disappear, become extinct. This is true with Bandy. It did not become extinct with the rise of ice hockey. Bandy not only continued to exist, it flourished in the Nordic countries of Sweden, Finland and Norway and as well as across the vast winter landscape of the Soviet Union. Since the early 1980s Bandy has exploded across the northern hemisphere, first in the U.S. and Canada, and then across most of Europe and into Mongolia, China and Japan. It has become the second most played winter sport in the world, both among men and women.

Yet, even though Bandy is the original winter team sport on skates, is the parent, the origin and the source of modern ice hockey, and is the second most popular winter team sport on earth, it has been shunned and excluded for the past 100 years by the International Olympic Committee, denied its legitimate place as a competitive sport in the Winter Olympic Games. Let's take Darwin's origin of species and extinction analogies a step further here. The IOC refusal to allow Bandy into the Winter Olympic Games for the last 100 years could be seen as akin to the meteorite that struck earth and extinguished the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. It could easily have been an extinction event for Bandy. But, not only did Bandy refuse to go away, defying this extinction event, it has continued to thrive and grow. One day, hopefully sooner than later, the IOC will see the light, and Bandy will take its rightful place in the Winter Olympic Games.

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