

**Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now 'Hockeyland' celebrates Minnesota's love for hockey**  
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CATHY WURZER: You know that Minnesota is certainly the state of hockey. Where else can you find a high school hockey tournament considered one of the state's premier sporting events? Well, this weekend, a new documentary film opens in theaters that celebrates the love many Minnesotans have for high school hockey.

*Hockeyland* focuses on two high school boys hockey teams in Northeastern Minnesota-- Eveleth Gilbert and Hermantown, which is near Duluth. The documentary opens in theaters this Friday and the Minnesota-born director Tommy Haines is on the line with us right now. Tommy, are you with us?

**TOMMY** Yeah. Hey, how are you doing?

**HAINES:**

**CATHY** Hey, I'm fine. Thank you so very much for being here. You are, I understand, Minnesota-born. That's what I introduced you as. Where are you from?

**WURZER:**

**TOMMY** Yeah. I grew up in a little town called Mountain Iron on the Iron Range back in the '80s.

**HAINES:**

**CATHY** And so you played hockey, I'm assuming?

**WURZER:**

**TOMMY** Oh yeah. Played outdoor hockey growing up there, a little rink called South Groves, outdoor rink, same rink that Matt Niskanen grew up playing on. So yeah, I think every little town in Minnesota has a kind of a famous hockey player that's come from that area. And so Mountain Iron's kind of claim to fame is Matt Niskanen. But yeah, I grew up playing there starting at 5 and played into my teenage years.

**HAINES:**

**CATHY** So it makes sense to me, then, that you chose to follow Eveleth Gilbert, which has since merged with Virginia forming this big consolidated district, and Hermantown. Now, you could have gone with another storied rivalry, Warroad-Roseau Or Blake versus Breck. Why did you choose the Golden Bears and the Hawks?

**WURZER:**

**TOMMY** Yeah, that's a tricky one. And we've been looking at this story for almost 10 years now. And so yeah, Warroad-Roseau, Hill Murray, and White Bear Lake, Edina, Minnetonka-- like, there's so many great rivalries in the state. But this is an area that, like I said, I was from.

**HAINES:**

I knew the Iron Range well. And I kind of like not just the grittiness up there, but also the beauty of the land. And so that was a big part of making this film. But we also heard that Eveleth was going to be merging with the rival school next door, Virginia.

And this is a very storied program in Minnesota dating back to John Mariucci and John Mansich. And so we knew this was kind of the last chance to actually film this Golden Bears team. So that's really what got this whole thing started.

**CATHY** Your film reminds me of a couple of other high school sports films--*Hoop Dreams* and *Hoosiers*, really, to be honest, only it's about hockey. Why do you think Minnesota loves high school hockey so much?

**WURZER:**

**TOMMY** Well, obviously, the climate, right? You were just talking about the climate and how things are getting a little warmer, but hopefully it stays cold for a little while longer. But I think that's a big part of it-- the 10,000 lakes that turn into rinks in the wintertime. I think that all feeds into that natural excitement for hockey.

**HAINES:**

But then we have so many great Olympians that come out of the state, so many great NHL players. So that all kind of feeds into this, then, cyclical thing that becomes high school hockey. And it's a pretty amazing culture. Obviously, you talked about the state high school hockey tournament too, and it happens at the XL. It's just an amazing experience seeing, like, 17, 18,000 people packed in there watching high school hockey.

**CATHY**  
**WURZER:** You know, and I tell my friends that who live in other parts of the country and they can't get their heads wrapped around that at all. How would you describe hockey culture to someone who doesn't understand, has no concept?

**TOMMY**  
**HAINES:** Yeah. Well, especially in Northern Minnesota, there's a little bit more grit. And these towns or small towns, especially in the Iron Range. These are mining towns that used to be very populated. And the mining jobs have become fewer and fewer just because the technology has gotten so much better.

And so these towns are shrinking. But there's still such a strong passion for the game up there. And everyone comes out to the games. The parents and locals volunteer at the rinks and concession stands. And it's an amazing thing to walk into the Hippodrome in Eveleth and just see it packed on a Thursday, Friday night. And everyone from the town's coming to support their local teenage kids.

**CATHY**  
**WURZER:** You did a nice job focusing on several kids in this movie. And when you bring cameras into someone's life, you have to have a strong level of trust with them. You know that. How did you build that trust to show the good and the not so good?

**TOMMY**  
**HAINES:** Right. Well, that's the number one thing. We make observational documentaries. So we like to build that trust over not only the course of two to three years-- and this happened to be, we had to do this in a matter of weeks-- and not only that, but yeah, it was teenage boys we were dealing with.

So we had to meet with the parents, have dinners with them, and talk to them about what our intentions were-- that we weren't coming there to exploit these kids and try to catch them out partying and doing things that, often, 16, 17-year-old boys will do. But we also didn't want to make these kids into gladiators and superheroes.

We wanted a real life experience of what do they go through-- the pains, and the successes, and all that's in between that. And so we just talked to the parents about that. And they were amazing, both Hermantown and Eveleth Gilbert parents were so supportive from the film from pretty early on. But that trust was, like you said, that was key.

**CATHY**  
**WURZER:** And it's really not all about the game. Yes, obviously, it's about hockey. But there were some really lovely, poignant moments. One of the player's mothers had cancer, is that right?

**TOMMY**  
**HAINES:** Yeah. Yeah. And that, for me, as a filmmaker, is so hard to film, because you actually just become good friends with these people. And to watch Indie O'Dowd, whose mom is sick, and then he also has some chronic back issues, just deal with the struggles that they're dealing with up there, but then still remaining positive, and she still was working three jobs while supporting her family to play hockey-- it's pretty incredible.

And so that's something we wanted to highlight, just the amazing families that are part of this Minnesota hockey culture that we have. It's amazing.

**CATHY** You did a nice job. There are going to be people who listen to this and say, well, wait a minute now, Tommy. You  
**WURZER:** can't really talk about hockeyland without including girls high school hockey. Some of the best female hockey players in the country come from Minnesota. The Hermantown girls team made it to the state championship, for goodness sakes, but they're kind of left out.

**TOMMY** Yeah. I know. And maybe that's a sequel. Maybe making a girls high school hockey one is a sequel. I happen to  
**HAINES:** be a man, so it's a little trickier for me logistically wise to film girls hockey. But yeah, it's an up and coming sport and I think there's so much excitement surrounding it.

But it's something that I would love to help make. But this is more of a nostalgic thing for me. This is something that I grew up with. I knew boys hockey growing up, and I really wanted to revisit that and see the changes that had happened over 30 years and some of the things that stayed the same. So that was kind of the intention for me.

**CATHY** What specifically has changed dramatically over these years?

**WURZER:**

**TOMMY** Oh, well, I think the culture is still very, very similar. But you do see things like technology-- cell phones, and  
**HAINES:** ipads, and things like that have eked into hockey culture and teenage minds in general. So we did see some of that.

Also, there's just a little bit more analytics and training that goes on, more so than back in the '80s. There's junior programs and kids often just play year round. And so that that's changed.

Back in the '80s, it really was you play three or four sports a year, and when the seasons changed, you just changed sports. And so all that's changed. But I still think just the passion and the care for these boys and the community's care for these boys, that still remains the same. And it's an amazing thing to see when you're up there witnessing it.

**CATHY** And the dream is still to get to college then to the NHL, right?

**WURZER:**

**TOMMY** I think the dream still is that. And it's amazing in Minnesota, because most sports-- I grew up playing tennis in  
**HAINES:** Rosemount, so that wasn't the dream for tennis players or soccer players maybe in the state. But in hockey, that dream it's not an easy one, but it's at least somewhat of a realistic one for some of the top players.

So yeah, it's a serious thing. And a lot of kids maybe don't even dream about playing in the NHL, but do dream about playing in the high school hockey tournaments. And some of the kids are lucky enough to reach that. And yeah, it's amazing because you see the cyclical nature of it too beyond the influencing the younger generations of players coming through Hermantown and the same things happen in Eveleth and cities all over the state, then these kids want to be those high school players once they get to high school.

So I was lucky to be able to get a quick glimpse into these locker rooms for a year. And again, can't be thankful enough for these teams, families, and parents to let us into their lives.

**CATHY** Great to see it in theaters too. Congratulations on that.

**WURZER:**

**TOMMY HAINES:** Yeah. Well, this is our biggest release to date. We're in 63 theaters in Minnesota this Friday, and then 135 and growing nationally. So I think the bigger we have for people coming out in Minnesota, the bigger this thing is going to reach out across the country.

So really hoping that Minnesotans come out and support the film. And we'll be hopping across from Edina, Rosemount, Hermantown, back up to the Iron Range, and other places around the state-- ourselves, cast, and filmmakers will be just popping into theaters and saying hi to audiences. So it should be a lot of fun.

**CATHY WURZER:** Great. Well, best of luck to you. Good job. Thanks so much for joining us.

**TOMMY HAINES:** Yeah, hey, thanks for having me on. I appreciate it.

**CATHY WURZER:** Absolutely. Tommy Haines is the director of *Hockeyland*. This is a new documentary film that opens in theaters, as he mentioned, this Friday. It'll also be streaming on Amazon and Apple TV in October.