

Benej responsible for endless hockey

JUMP on the Thruway, get off at Saratoga, head for the hamlet of Greenwich and there you'll find The Land Where Hockey Never Ends.

If you look hard enough you'll also find Rick Benej who — apart from being one of the nicest guys in the world — happens to be the man responsible for perpetuating endless hockey.

Interestingly, he does it with his hands.

For the past 26 years, Benej has been crafting a game which has so passionately caught the media's fancy that he has been profiled in no less a publication as *The New Yorker Magazine*, not to mention *Esquire*, *The Wall Street Journal* and the *Schectady Gazette*, just to name a few good reads.

And all because his game, Table Hockey.com, is so close to the real thing that sometimes you can't tell the difference between Madison Square Garden ice and the shiny (31 inch by 48 inch surface of Benej's game.

OVER THE past couple of decades, this Brooklyn native has produced no less than 2,500 games at his arboreal digs and currently makes about 100 a year.

"If you play it as a kid and really like it, you want to play an adult model," he says. "It's a game that an adult wouldn't be embarrassed to play. It's addictive and I'd rather be addicted to this.

Mind you, this is not an

Stan Fischler



easy thing to make one's living on; which explains why each set — which features a goalie, two defensemen and three forwards on each side — goes for a cool \$495. In the bad old days, by the way, the cost was as high as \$895.

AS STUDIOUS about improving his game as Tom Renney is behind the Blueshirts' bench, Benej over the years has refined Table Hockey.com from its relatively primitive state when the first set was made public in 1982.

"The most important thing is making asymmetrical defensemen, creating a neat balance between the left and right side," Rick explains. "All the other games are right side dominant. It looks great."

Part of the popularity lies in the fact that the game lends itself to tournaments as easily as the NHL segues into the Stanley Cup playoffs. And I speak firsthand..

WAY BACK in the late 1960s, my wife, Shirley, and I threw a house party and realized that half of our guest were music buffs and

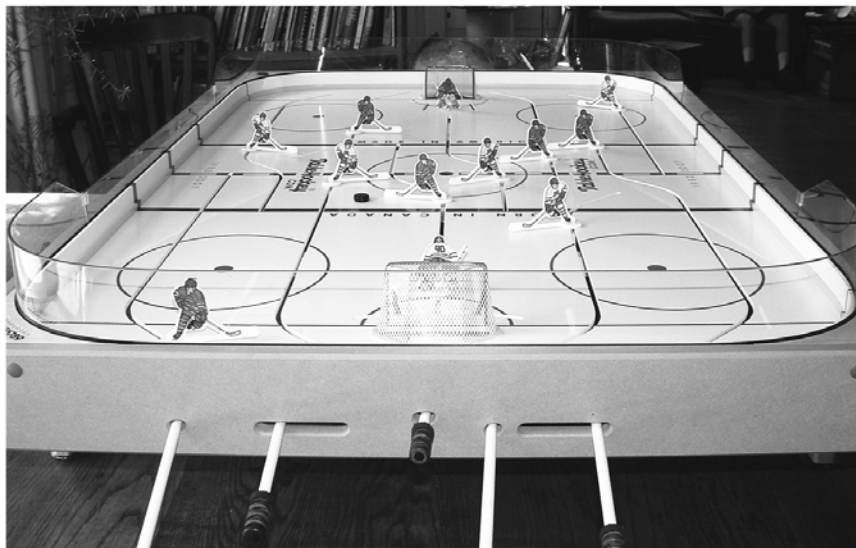


photo by Sara Kelly

Rick Benej's Table Hockey.com game replicates the real thing without needing the actual ice.

the other half loved hockey. We bought one of the mass produced table hockey games of the time and figure the hockey folks would keep busy with that.

As it happened, **EVERYBODY** — broadcasters Marv Albert and Sal Messina; even ex-Yankee Jim

Bouton, et. al. — wanted to pull the rods and shoot the puck.

After the second annual tournament, we couldn't fit all the table hockey nuts into our apartment, so we moved it to Manhattan's George Washington Hotel and then to the Hotel Pennsylvania right across from Madison Square Garden.

PLAYERS JETTED in

from all points in Canada, the U.S. Midwest and, of course, New England and the city.

It finally became so maddening — the games would break under the intense pressure of the competitors — that we finally decided to shelve the tourney altogether, a good 10 years before Benej's original model appeared. (By the way you can catch video of our 1971 tourney on Youtube.)

That same tourney madness still prevails only now there are playoffs in places from Moose Jaw to Montreal, but the best part is when a bunch of hockey nuts get together and just whack the puck around for the fun of it.

"Watching him play," wrote Michael Santa Rita in the *Schectady Gazette*, "is like watching a virtuoso violinist do his finger work. Both hands are used and moving each rod to a different rod to switch players around can be confusing at first. But Benej makes it seem effortless.

"Every groove is alive and the board is a jumble of energy as players whisk back and forth."

BENEJ STILL follows the NHL with the same passion he had growing up in New York. He's a Rangers fan and sometimes sounds as eloquent as the articulate Renney when describing what hockey is all about.

"The essential nature of hockey," Rick explains, "is to create enough time and space to make plays."

Actually, when you think about — and see his workshop — Benej's essential nature is to create enough time and space to make Table Hockey.com.

IF ANY of you are as nutty about this wonderful adult game as me, you can easily reach Rick on the Internet at TableHockey.com. And buy a set.

Then, you'll see up front why the hockey season can never end!

Author-columnist-commentator Stan "The Maven" Fischler resides in Boiceville and New York City. His column appears each week in the Sunday Freeman.

"I practice a lot," says Rick. "When my pals come up from the city, we play."

A FRUSTRATING aspect of the earlier Table Hockey.com was the fact that some sharpies took advantage of dead spaces in the board. The new, improved model eliminates such nonsense. The puck can be reached everywhere and the goalie — just like Marty Brodeur — can play the puck from several angles around the net.

The beauty part is that Rick still plays the game regularly and while it would be unfair to crown him world champion, he does do a pretty good imitation of Mister Deft.