

A Look Back on the Early Canucks

Go Canucks Go! Lesson 3

Appendix 1.0



1945 - 46 Vancouver Canucks Team Photograph

A Look Back on the Early Canucks

Go Canucks Go! Lesson 3

Appendix 1.0

The upcoming 2010-11 season marks the Vancouver Canucks' fortieth NHL campaign and promises to be a rather enjoyable, leisurely jaunt down memory lane.

No doubt many former fan favourites will be trotted out and bathed in applause from an adoring fanbase thirsty for every last drop of 'Nuck nostalgia. Already announced is the retirement of Markus Naslund's #19 jersey and the creation of the Ring of Honour whose first honouree is original Canucks captain Orland Kurtenbach, a 1997 BC Sports Hall of Fame inductee.

The 2010-11 season also marks another less celebrated, yet no less important milestone: the sixty-fifth anniversary of the formation of the Vancouver Canucks Hockey Club way back in August 1945.

As thousands of war-weary Canadian men and women returned home from the front and support lines of World War Two, many were starving for something good, to feel better about the world after the war. People wanted diversions, a return to some semblance of 'normal.' War rationing days now over, many had the money and time for leisure and entertainment pursuits halted for years.

Not surprisingly, one of the first to return was hockey. Vancouver had been without a true out-and-out fully professional team since the 1926 departure of the Patrick brothers' Vancouver Maroons (latter incarnation of the 1915 Stanley Cup champion Millionaires, Vancouver's lone claim to hockey's Holy Grail). Even the semi-pro Vancouver Lions hadn't touched the ice since 1941 when war intervened.

Coley Hall, shrewd Vancouver hotel owner and a former notable local athlete known for his ferocity and physicality on the ball diamond, quickly identified the gaping hole in the city's hockey heart and sought to remedy that with a new team in the newly reformed Pacific Coast Hockey League. Legend has it Hall actually won the right for the PCHL franchise in a poker game at a downtown Vancouver hotel. Partnering with Paul Thompson, former NHLer with the New York Rangers and Chicago Blackhawks and younger brother of Hockey Hall of Fame goaltender Tiny Thompson, Hall would serve as manager, while Thompson would coach. Hall would buy out Thompson's share the following year taking sole ownership. The team would play out of the drafty 5000-seat PNE Forum, still standing today at the corner of Hastings and Renfrew. All they needed was a name, something to appeal to the patriotism still pumping in the veins of Vancouverites.

According to long-time Vancouver Sun columnist and 2009 BC Sports Hall of Fame inductee Archie McDonald, it was while out for a summer stroll on a Vancouver street that Hall stumbled on the name that would come to symbolize hockey in this city for over six decades. No stranger to the shadier characters of the Vancouver sports milieu, Hall ran into his bookie, Arthur Rennison. Mentioning to Rennison that he was about to buy a hockey team, conversation shifted to the team's name. Rennison suggested "Canuck," as in the nickname often used for brave and plucky Canadian soldiers overseas.

A Look Back on the Early Canucks

Go Canucks Go! Lesson 3

Appendix 1.0

Hall immediately liked the name's potential to appeal to Canadian patriotism on multiple levels. The Canuck name would also be identified with a comic book character popular with Canadian soldiers: 'Johnny Canuck', a flight jacket and goggles-clad GI Joe-esque hero who singlehandedly defeated Adolf Hitler and the Nazis.

(Interesting sidenote: although universally understood in Canada, the 'Canuck' nickname would confuse more than a few casual American hockey fans over the years. According to legendary Canucks broadcaster and 2000 BC Sports Hall of Fame inductee Jim Robson, in Maine the term 'Canuck' is actually a derogatory name used for French Canadians who ventured south into the US and stole American jobs.)

Later the Canucks would adapt another Johnny Canuck incarnation—a lumberjack on skates—as their sweater logo in the early 1960s and recently brought back an updated version on the shoulders of their current third jerseys.

Speaking of jerseys, the original design and colours bear little resemblance to those of today. First off, the 1945 originals truly were sweaters, not the light, breathable, micro-fibre, sweat-wicking garments today's Canucks enjoy. Made from a heavy cotton wool, the fabric sopped up moisture and easily tripled or quadrupled in weight over the course of a game.

Employing the principle colours of royal blue with red and white trim the team would wear until joining the NHL in 1970 when the familiar blue-green-white combination was adopted, a simple white "V" stood out proudly on the chest. Each thick felt V was hand stitched into place by the mother of team mascot and stick-boy, Marvin Storrow, today one of Canada's most respected lawyers based out of Vancouver.

None of the inaugural Canuck sweaters are thought to exist today. Hardly surprising considering tales of Hall instructing long-time trainer Eddie Shamlock to immediately gather all sweaters as players left the ice at the conclusion of each season's final game to be reused and repaired until badly tattered and tossed. The last remaining 1945-46 sweater was thought to have belonged to Vancouver's Ernie Dougherty, a nineteen-year-old rookie in 1945 who filled in occasionally for injuries. Now one of the oldest living members of the Canucks alumni at a spry eighty-five, Dougherty wore his frayed sweater for years while gardening and painting around the house until it literally fell apart at the seams.

Using archival photos and the recollections of remaining living players Dougherty, Andy Clovechok in Kamloops, and Alex Pringle in Coquitlam to get colour and style details just right, the BC Sports Hall of Fame succeeded in resurrecting this lost artifact. Commissioning local vintage sweater manufacturer Vintage Leagues to recreate a 1945-46 Canucks sweater in all its' royal blue and crimson glory, the replica was featured in the Hall's Go Canucks Go Gallery in early 2010.

A Look Back on the Early Canucks

Go Canucks Go! Lesson 3

Appendix 1.0

As the opening game of the Vancouver Canucks' inaugural season approached in late October 1945, all owner-manager Coley Hall and coach Paul Thompson needed were players. Twelve of them to be exact. Two forward lines, four defencemen, one goalie, one spare player. The back-up goaltender wasn't even dressed for games in those days.

Hall was only half-joking years later when he claimed the twelve-man roster limit was set because any higher and he'd have to buy a third car to drive the players to games up and down the West Coast. That's right, drive. In a pinch, they might indulge and hop a train. No private jets in those days.

Hall, a notorious tightwad, ferried his players in two beat-up limousines—and the players themselves took turns at the wheel. When the team was at home, Hall often rented the limos out, which sometimes led to some interesting transportation problems. One night on the way to a game in Seattle one broke down and didn't make it to the rink until halfway through the second period. When the stranded half of the team showed up, they found five players and forty-year-old Coach Thompson—wearing a jersey and skates about three sizes too big—holding a 2-1 lead. They held on and won too.

It was a much different time sixty-five years ago. It was also much different hockey. While the front pages of Vancouver newspapers reported the latest developments of the Nuremberg Trials, the sports pages detailed Thompson's search for twelve good men. It began a mere ten days before the Canucks' opening game. Within a couple days, he had whittled the forty-seven hopefuls vying for a spot to twenty. Training camp then consisted of twice daily sessions ground out the final week before opening night.

The group of players who made the cut were a mish-mash of veteran pros and rising youngsters. Nearly all had served during the war. Bruising defenceman Chuck Millman was the only local to make the squad, fresh off a tour of duty as a physical training instructor in the army. A bit of trivia: Millman also played for Vancouver's first professional football team, the Vancouver Grizzlies, during their lone 1941 season.

Team captain Dick Gray, another defenceman, flew bombers in the Himalayas during the war. Right-winger Alex Pringle had also been a bomber pilot. Wingers Mel Neilsen served as a firefighter overseas, while Ab McDougall was in the navy. Goaltender Ed McAneeley, the smallest in the league at 145lbs, had been in the army, so too centerman Bill Carse, likely the best-known player on the team. A decade earlier Carse had played for the Vancouver Lions before moving on to the New York Rangers and Chicago Blackhawks.

'Handy' Andy Clovechok, Bernie Bathgate (older brother of Hockey Hall of Famer Andy Bathgate), and Elmer Kreller rounded out the remaining forwards; Lyall Swaney and Jock Smith the other defense pairing. Local junior players Ernie Dougherty, a forward, and Roy Worrall, a goaltender, practiced with the team and were brought up as fill-ins when required.

A Look Back on the Early Canucks

Go Canucks Go! Lesson 3

Appendix 1.0

////////////////////////////////////

In the Canucks first NHL season in 1970-71, the lowest paid player made \$16,000—more than the entire combined payroll of the 1945-46 team. “We all got sixty dollars a week,” remembers Clovechok, “and when we were on the road the meal money was \$3 a day. Don’t laugh. That was pretty good money in those days.”

After leading the league in scoring that first year, Clovechok was given a raise to \$100. Dougherty was paid \$35 a week—if he saw the ice. He recalls McDougall occasionally faking an injury so the young rookie could get some ice time. McDougall, the wily veteran, had good reason to give up some playing time. If Dougherty got paid, he would have enough to pay for a round of beer for the boys afterwards at the Waldorf.

The pay was good, not great. A few of the luckier players owned their own car. Most took the streetcar to practices and games. All worked second jobs even during the season. Clovechok lived in a house with several players beside a local brewery. He worked there during the day, which had its perks. “We got our beer for nothing,” he laughs today.

On the same day a black ballplayer signed a professional baseball contract for the first time—October 23, 1945—the very first Vancouver Canucks hockey game took place in Vancouver. For the record, the ballplayer was one Jackie Robinson, who signed with the Montreal Royals, and it was the Canucks defeating the Portland Eagles 5-4 in front of a sold-out crowd of 5100 at the PNE Forum.

Ab McDougall scored the Canucks’ first-ever goal assisted by Chuck Millman, putting a dent into Portland’s 3-0 first period lead. The Canucks fought back to tie the game 3-3 by the end of the second, before Millman scored the game-winner for the club’s first-ever win. Professional hockey was back in Vancouver. Here to stay.

And while you might be able to draw a direct line from this ragtag team of returning servicemen to the current team operating under a \$60 million salary cap and playing out of a packed 18,000-seat arena named after a cell phone provider, obviously certain elements of the game then seem almost foreign today.

For instance: Tickets for the first Canucks game went on sale exactly four days prior to opening night. Prices ranged from seventy-five cents along the blue line (bench seating with a wooden backing) to thirty cents for standing room. The only place in town tickets could be purchased was from the Percival Hicks Ticket Bureau in the St. Regis Hotel at Seymour and Dunsmuir. Percy Hicks was a crony of Canucks owner Hall, who owned not only the Regis, but also the York, Devonshire, and Ritz Hotels in town as well.

Hall had a habit of employing his buddies in the hockey operation, not always for the better. The team doctor was Doc Brewster, another Hall crony. The two of them could often be found drinking rye and ginger ale up in a room near the top of the Forum that had a window overlooking the ice to watch the game. It was

A Look Back on the Early Canucks

Go Canucks Go! Lesson 3

Appendix 1.0

said in half seriousness by the players that if you were going to get cut for stitches, best do it in the first period because the way Hall and the Doc would drink, his surgical skills weren't so steady by the third.

If you wanted a cigarette for a quick smoke at a Canucks game in 1945, you didn't need to head for an exit during intermission. Packs were sold at every concession. It's been said that by the second period the haze clinging to the Forum rafters took on the consistency of mashed potatoes. In fact, the room Hall and Brewster used to drink in also doubled as a walk-in safe storing the bulk crates of cigarette cartons bought just to satisfy demand.

Still standing at the corner of Hastings and Renfrew, walking into the Forum today feels like being transported back to another era. You can almost envision the four feet of chain link fencing above the endboards. There was no glass on the sideboards whatsoever and fans could lean right over to get a closer look at the action before pulling back when the play came too close. The penalty box sat between the benches, which inevitably led to some scuffles.

Legendary Canucks broadcaster Jim Robson would eventually call hundreds of games from the Forum's announcing booth until the Canucks moved down the street to the newly constructed Pacific Coliseum in 1968. The chilly booth is still there too.

"By the third period, my feet were often like frozen bricks," he recalls. "It wasn't the most comfortable place to call a game. You had to stand and the entrance was out on the Forum roof. You had to go through a plywood tunnel just to get in."

A few modern improvements have been made over the years, most recently when the Forum served as a volunteer center during the 2010 Olympic Winter Games, but some things don't change.

The 1945-46 season might have been the first opportunity of Robson's storied broadcasting career to witness a professional hockey game in this city. As a young boy living in Maple Ridge, he recalls going to stay with an aunt in Vancouver, who took him to two games that season, one versus the San Diego Skyhawks, the other against the Tacoma Rockets. Within ten years, that same young boy was sitting a little higher up in the building and being paid to call radio play-by-play for CKWX. He would remain the "Voice of Hockey" in Vancouver for over forty years.