

MINI-STORIES OF LESSER-KNOWN HOCKEY PERSONALITIES YOU REALLY SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

2020

FIBBER MCGEE, RW

Henry “Fibber” McGee was born in Toronto in 1900. A right-winger, he played amateur hockey in the area but made his way out west and managed to land a playing contract with the Victoria Aristocrats of the PCHL. The contract was given largely based on McGee’s stories of playing back east and scoring several hat tricks on the legendary Georges Vezina. McGee claimed to skate like the wind and possess a shot that goaltenders feared, and the Aristocrats were happy to sign him to the team. With no internet, the transmission of information from across the country was slow and there was no way to check McGee’s facts, or any reason to do so, at least initially. But as the PCHL season started it became apparent that McGee couldn’t put three past George Vezina’s grandfather, let alone the future hall-of-famer. He skated like a cold draft and goaltenders waited for his shot more with impatience than with fear. McGee was released by Christmas.

He took a train back east and was signed late in the season by the Toronto St Patrick’s, the predecessor of the Maple Leafs. The signing was based largely on McGee’s claim that the PCHL was planning to rename the leading scorer trophy in his honour, and that the premier of British Columbia had once jokingly said he should name him to a top cabinet post, because McGee was so good at putting the puck in the top cabinet where his grandmother stored the Saltines. These claims were quickly recognized as not possible once he played a couple of games. McGee couldn’t keep up with his linemates, couldn’t give or take a pass, and was once skating for all he was worth in one direction, not realizing the play was now going the opposite way, and skated straight into Babe Dye, the overtime hero from the previous year’s Stanley Cup. Babe was shaken up but was still able to grab McGee and pummel him with punches until officials pulled them apart and told Babe that he was hitting his own teammate to which Babe yelled “I know, now let go of me so I can punch him again!!”.

Management and coaches were at first patient with McGee who had said he was still hurting from an injury sustained while rescuing a young girl and her dog from a burning building back in Victoria, but as the weeks passed it was clear McGee just wasn’t very good. Old Hec Parker, the GM of the St Pats, decided to contact his former team. Once a few wireless messages passed between Ontario and British Columbia, McGee’s untruths were fully exposed, and the nickname “Fibber” McGee began. The Toronto Daily Star’s hockey reporter Elmer Ferguson was the man that originated the nickname “Fibber” and wrote a piece on his recent dubious life, and even invited readers to write the paper if they could fabricate bigger fibs than McGee, leading to the largest one week’s volume of mail in the newspaper’s history and a shortage of stamps in the city that lasted a month.

McGee managed to land brief contracts in lesser leagues with teams in Duluth, Sudbury, Edmonton, Portland (both Maine and Oregon), Spokane, Cleveland and half of the towns between Toronto and Windsor, but every time he had oversold his ability and either exaggerated or lied about his past successes. The one semi-truth he told was that he had once fought Babe Dye! His reputation and nickname became well known.

Fibber retired from hockey, became a municipal politician in Niagara Falls, going undefeated in 8 straight elections. He spent his last days at a seniors home in Parry Sound, impressing the ladies with stories of speeding up and down the right wing, wind in his hair, and putting 4 or 5 a night over Georges Vezina's shoulder.

Footnote: while you, dear reader, may wonder at the veracity of the above small biography of Fibber McGee, I leave you with this to ponder. Cecil "Babe" Dye was very much a real player for the Toronto St Patrick's. He led the team in goals and points in the 1923-24 season. And these were three of his teammates:

Lloyd "Shrimp" Andrews

Albert "Toots" Holway

Howard "Holes" Lockhart.

And "Holes" Lockhart was one of their goalies! Someone named "Holes" was between the pipes of an NHL team! Defended by "Toots", "Shrimp" and "Babe"!

Don't believe me? Look it up on hockeydb.com. Please, go, you really must look it up.

So, honestly, with that knowledge, why would you doubt the tale of Fibber McGee or any of the others to follow....

BEULAH RUGSMETTER, PLAYER AGENT

Back in the day, close to a century ago, players did not have agents. There was no JP Barry or Pat Brisson and their small army of lawyers, accountants and negotiators, not even an Alan Eagleson to be the go-between of the player who was hoping to make a little more money playing hockey, and management that was determined to keep costs down. There may have been no agents, but there *was* Beulah Rugsmetter.

Mrs Rugsmetter lived on a farm in central Saskatchewan. Her husband had died when her twin boys Karl and Hugo were young, and the boys grew up doing two things: helping their mother manage the farm and playing hockey on their pond. The boys were defence partners and were scouted by the expansion Chicago Blackhawks in 1926 and asked to play. The start-up team needed players and while there was nothing exciting about the game played by Karl and Hugo, it seemed like the ideal situation to get two players at once. The team thought they could have them cheap. This is where Mrs Beulah Rugsmetter had her say.

She began by telling the team that only one boy would be available, as the other would have to stay to help on the farm (which was actually fine with the team as the abilities and appearance of Karl and Hugo were so similar that no one could tell them apart anyway), then suggesting that whichever son travelled to Chicago alone would be traumatized by the separation from their twin and finally let it be known that maybe both boys could go if the team were to pay a 'widowed mother on a farm' bonus. The asking price was almost as high as the couple of bona-fide players already signed by the team, but it was mid-summer and the team was getting desperate, so they agreed. Karl and Hugo Rugsmetter played for the Blackhawks in the inaugural season. They weren't flashy, but they did fine and were inseparable on and

off the ice (one unfortunate aspect of their inseparability was that if one brother changed or was called off on the fly, the other twin would go to the bench as well even if it was not at an advisable moment in the play). They didn't speak to teammates, only to themselves, and almost always in German. The team believed that their mother Beulah had a better command of English than they did. In the off-season they didn't stay in touch with teammates but instead returned to work the farm with their mother.

For the next three seasons Mrs Rugsmetter threatened to keep the boys on the farm through the winter unless the bonus was paid, and each year the team management capitulated, as it was easier to just bring the two big defensemen back. In those days, players did not know what other players were making on their contracts. If they had there might have been more than a little surprise that Karl and Hugo Rugsmetter were among the top earners for defencemen in the NHL, right up there with Eddie Shore and King Clancy!

After a few seasons the team improved and were ready to move on from the two big German farmboys. They needed just one to fill the last roster spot and asked for Hugo. Mrs Rugsmetter negotiated for all she was worth, but the Blackhawks made it a take or leave it offer and she eventually gave in. The one son stayed to work the farm while the other went to Chicago alone but played poorly without his twin. Upon his return from having gone home for Christmas he played better for a short time but the disinterest in his game returned and with the team on the verge of making the playoffs for the first time, they paid out the contract and sent the lad home in February, ending the NHL career of the Rugsmetters.

One interesting fact that was revealed a couple of decades later was that when Hugo returned home for Christmas that final season, it was his brother Karl that came back to the team and played until the team released him. No one had noticed.

Both had longer NHL careers than could have been expected, and both made more in their 3+ years in the NHL than some of their contemporaries made in a decade, all thanks to their mother, Mrs Beulah Rugsmetter, predecessor of the modern player agent.

TANNER MCREEDEY, RW

Sports is an exercise in statistics, there is someone somewhere calculating who won the most games played at night in a domed stadium wearing blue jerseys and captained by a left-handed Lithuanian in bare feet. Some statistics are more meaningful, like the top 10 goal scorers in the NHL in the 1970s. The top three are no surprise: Esposito, Lafleur, Dionne. But who had Rick Martin at number 4, or remembered to include Jean Pronovost and Garry Unger (#s 6 and 9!)?

Which brings us to Tanner McReedy, who never played an NHL game but managed to rank 4th in total assists in the 1970s in professional leagues outside of the NHL. How's that for a stat?!!

But the thing that his contemporaries remember about McReedy was that he could not make a pass to save his life, and seldom tried. There wasn't a net McReedy wasn't willing to shoot on, from any angle, in any situation. The thing was, McReedy liked to shoot, but he was very, very bad at scoring. He was the shooter that could turn corners into the goalie's crest, the shooter that could turn an open net into a left pad save. And his teammates knew it! They didn't even look for a pass; if he had the puck they

skated to the net at every opportunity, and as the statistics bear out, they were very good at turning his saved shots into rebound goals. 74 of them in 1974-75 alone, splitting his time between Albuquerque and Utica in the SouthWest and American leagues. He added another 59 the next year in Reno and 58 two years later in Boise/Portland/Calgary as his contract was sold and resold. But he never, ever hit double digits in goals. With such a disparity between goals and assists one might think he was a distributor extraordinaire like Jean Ratelle or Bernie Federko, maybe even the great one, number 99, but that was not the case. He just hit the goalie a lot. And teammates would put in the rebound. And he would be credited with an assist.

The leagues he played in didn't track shot attempts or shots on goal by individuals in those days but McReedy would certainly have topped the list every year.

Eliot Friedman of SportsNet recently spoke to NHL exec and former NHL goalie John Davidson, who was a teammate of McReedy's for a brief time in the minors in Hamilton. Friedman asked Davidson if he was any better at scoring in practice.

"Hell, no!" Davidson shouted. "We used to give him half the net just for fun, but he couldn't hit it. I remember one scrimmage I misplayed a dump-in and the puck bounced out in front to him but his shot hit me right in the forehead. The thing was, I was still standing behind the net!! He had shot it over the open net and hit me in the f-ing head!!" Davidson exclaimed, laughing.

"Did it bother him, that he couldn't score?" Friedman asked.

Davidson was more serious. "It did. He was a good guy. He got the nickname "Mitts" somewhere along the line and of course that was just a dig at how bad his hands were around the net. Give a dog a bad name and you may as well hang him. I felt sorry for him. He never stuck with a team for very long. Coaches liked that he hustled and checked and especially that he could hit the net but after a while the fact he never scored and never, ever passed got on their nerves and he would be waived or bought out and off he would go to another team to try his luck. I'm not sure how long he kept playing."

It was 1981-82 that we last have a record of Tanner McReedy playing a professional game, finishing with 3 games with Bridgeport of the East Coast League. No goals of course, but 5 assists. Evidently those 5 assists weren't enough to keep him under contract and his professional playing days ended. Let's hope that somewhere there is a beer league where McReedy is once more known as "Mitts" but that it's legit and he's filling the net.

DAVE "The Dart" SCOFIELD, G

Dave Scofield had the luxury of playing in net for some of the best defensive teams in history. Or maybe it was a curse, as even Dave himself admitted it made him lazy and prone to moments of distraction when he should have been focussed on the one thing on the ice a goalie need be concerned about: the puck.

Dave was born in Parry Sound, Ontario on March 31, 1948, a mere 11 days after Bobby Orr who became a close childhood friend. Wherever Orr played hockey, Dave followed as the goalie and many teams accepted Dave as the goalie Orr had to have, like a baseball pitcher having his own personal catcher. The reasoning was, if it made Orr play better, then it was worth it. Or was it? By all accounts Scofield

didn't feel the need to try and as a result his skill was always in question, especially at practice where coaches wondered whether his poor angles, weak glove hand, enormous five hole and generous rebounds made him appear several levels below the calibre of play. But Dave Scofield enjoyed a better GAA (goals against average) than any other goalie on the teams he played on for one simple reason. Orr played his butt off defensively when Dave was in net. And he demanded the same from his teammates, so even when Orr wasn't on the ice, Scofield was protected. His save percentage, if they tracked that stat back in the day, would surely have been among the worst in the league, but he gave up very few goals because teams got very few chances.

Unfortunately, Scofield would at times get bored with the lack of action. He has said he would count fans, carve words in the ice with his skate, try to belch the alphabet, and other things that kept his attention from the puck. Once a month an opposing team would accidentally score on him while trying to ice the puck from their own end. After one such occasion Scofield was on the verge of being cut so he blamed poor eye sight and bought frames, glasses with no lens, and he worked on paying better attention. The team bought the excuse. Scofield began smoking as a young teenager and found that having a dart in his hand helped with his focus. This resulted in several minor penalties in his early days for having a lit cigarette in his mouth in the middle of a game. It also resulted in his nickname, the dart. Ken Dryden was not the first goalie to rest his hands on the top of his stick during stoppages, it was Dave The Dart Scofield who put his hands there to hide the cigarette in his mouth from the view of the officials. When officials started to watch for the cigarette Scofield switched to the candy variety. It wasn't quite the same but helped his concentration.

When Orr joined the Oshawa Generals, Scofield was invited to join him at Orr's suggestion to the team. He was almost cut at the first practice, but Orr convinced the team to keep him for an exhibition game and it was the only game the Generals won in exhibition. It was also the only game shots against were under 10 (they were averaging more than 40) but management conceded that it was worth keeping Scofield if the team could win behind him. But as good as Orr was, he couldn't protect Scofield enough as the competition got stronger. He surrendered 7 goals on only 9 shots in the first period of the first regular season game he played. Three of the goals came from outside the blue line. Dave Scofield was no Ken Dryden. Unfortunately, he was also not even David Ayres. That was the end of his run with Orr and the Generals released him the next day.

Scofield is honest about his ability, or the lack thereof, when asked about it today. He returned to Parry Sound and after exhausting every attempt to catch on with teams from semi pro clubs to Friday night beer leagues, Scofield did what he says was the only decision possible to stay on the ice.

"I threw out the pads and started to play defence!" Was he any better? "No!! But at least I wasn't costing my team the game." But did he like it any better? "No, I didn't. It tough to do all that skating with a ciggy in your mouth."

VINNIE PIMM, F

The 1971 NHL entry draft is forever remembered as the draft in which Guy Lafleur was taken first, not by the California Golden Seals who should have selected first as a result of finishing last the year before, but by the Montreal Canadians who had traded their pick and Ernie Hicke for the first pick of the Seals.

It was one of the most lop-sided trades in NHL history. But with a late round selection that same year, the Golden Seals hoped they might have tipped the scales back in their favour with an unheralded sleeper pick.

Vincent Arthur Pimm was drafted by the California Golden Seals despite spending the majority of his junior career injured. But lead scout Bucky Mearns liked what he saw the few times Vinnie Pimm was in the lineup and convinced Bill Torrey to take a chance on him in the 9th round. Pimm came to training camp and within the first 30 minutes on ice had pleasantly shocked the coaches with his speed, his shot and his ability to move the puck, much like that Lafleur fellow. But then he tripped stepping off the ice and an injured knee kept him out of the lineup for 2 months. This was, remember, just 30 minutes into the first on ice session of training camp. In his defence, the step at the benches of the old Cow Palace where the Golden Seals practiced was higher than anywhere else, but it was the first of many bizarre accidents that limited Pimm's playing time. Rather than an iron man, Pimm was a wonky crutch of a player.

When he got back in the lineup he was outstanding, but over the next three seasons he was also out again for as wide a variety of reasons anyone in hockey circles could remember. He took a puck in the eye while sitting on the bench. He injured his back slipping on soap in the shower. He missed two months with a bruised spleen when he impaled himself on his own stick when it caught in the edge of the Zamboni door as he was carrying the puck in the corner. He separated his shoulder celebrating a goal with Bill and Ernie Hicke. Goaltender Gary Smith directed a rebound toward the corner but it caught Pimm in the mouth for 29 stitches and 7 teeth. And Vincent Pimm is the last recorded case of smallpox in the state of California.

To demonstrate how easily Pimm could be hurt, consider his experience when he played the Toronto Maple Leafs who had introduced two Swedes (Borje Salming and Inge Hammerstrom) to their team. Leafs owner Harold Ballard was so frustrated at the lack of physical play from new Swede forward Inge Hammerstrom that he told the media that Hammerstrom could go into the corner with a dozen eggs in his pocket and come out with none of them broken. Yet Pimm was injured as a result of puck battles in the corner with Hammerstrom ... twice!

Pimm knew he was injury prone and he never met a shot he wanted to block. In fact, he did everything he could to get out of the way of the shots of opponents. "I saw him almost block a shot once," teammate Stan Gilbertson observed, "But I never saw a guy get hit with a puck more." So it was ironic that in a 1974 game against the Bruins he moved out of the way of a shot only to have it hit teammate Terry Murray whose skate, as he was falling, came up and hit Pimm in the groin. He lost 8 weeks and his right testicle.

He posed for a photographer from O-Pee-Chee but the flash resulted in his left pupil remaining constricted for days leaving him unable to so much as walk down a hall without an eye patch. To add insult to injury, O-Pee-Chee decided Pimm hadn't played enough games to warrant including him in the hockey card set.

The injuries were so common and Pimm so battered that many players in the league referred to him as Pimmyata and joked about who would injure him that game, whether they intended to or not.

The psychological damage was evident as well. Pimm refused to sign autographs, certain that some bizarre injury or rare disease was sure to befall him. He brought his own mug with him when the team went for beers after the game, and sat with his back to the wall ready to duck should the waitress drop a knife in his direction or a bus come through the front window.

After so many injuries, and the Golden Seals losing faith in him, Pimm retired part way through the 74-75 season having played 79 career games but having lost 209 to injury. He never played in a playoff game. He played in a season opener only once. His closest friend was the team therapist.

After hockey Vinnie Pimm delivered mail for Canada Post in Kenora Ontario, through some of the worst snow and ice in the country. He retired from Canada Post after 36 years, having never missed a day.

CECIL LEITHAUSER, organist

Harold Ballard, the controversial majority owner of the Toronto Maple Leafs from 1972 to his death in 1990, feuded with many people. He feuded and created rifts that lasted years with players such as Darryl Sittler and Dave Keon. He battled with government over such trivial matters as tax evasion (he did jail time) and with police over things such as the temporary disappearance of girlfriend Yolanda. He quarrelled with pretty much anyone he came in contact with. He fought with coaches and with the league. He refused to allow the Russians to play at Maple Leaf Gardens. Pal Hal, as he was nicknamed, was generally despised by the fans for not only his behaviour, but for the poor management of a team that lost much more than it won under his ownership.

Perhaps his biggest feud, and the one that lasted the longest, was with Maple Leaf Gardens organist Cecil Leithauser. Even before Ballard became the majority owner, and a constant in the owners box at all home games with King Clancy by his side, Leithauser was entertaining the crowd with music from his 96 key, 4 foot high, state of the art organ high in the rafters of Maple Leaf Gardens. Leithauser had a degree in music theory and performance from Teeder Conservatory, Kennedy College and had performed at countless venues in the 50s and 60s, as well as the requisite weddings and bar mitzvahs.

Leithauser also had a reputation for not suffering fools gladly and he certainly considered his boss Harold Ballard to be in that category. He mocked the owner and the team with his musical selections that resounded throughout the building during stoppages in play. "Poor Little Fool", "Cold As Ice", "Miserable" and the little known Beatles tune "I'm A Loser" were favourites in Cecil's repertoire. If the Leafs scored he played "Even the Losers Get Lucky Sometimes" or "Once in a Blue Moon".

Ballard would glare up the rafters where Cecil Leithauser and his organ were situated, but the man was never fired or as far as anyone knew, reprimanded. It was rumoured that he was Yolanda's ex-husband and that he had some photographic dirt that she and boyfriend Ballard wanted to keep a lid on, but even Dave Hodge of Hockey Night in Canada, no friend of Ballard himself, investigated but could find nothing to substantiate the rumour.

Throughout Ballard's tenure as owner, no one tickled the organ keys but Leithauser. He never missed a game and he never missed an opportunity to send a dig at Ballard. The first game that Ballard was back to Maple Leaf Gardens after his jail term, the first break in the action was filled with the sounds of "Folsom Prison Blues" and when Ballard looked furious and started to stand up, only to have King Clancy

hold him back, the music quickly changed to "Coward of the County". Sports writers talked and wondered but no one ever found out where the feud began or what Cecil had on Ballard that kept his job safe and his person secure from bodily harm.

When Ballard died in 1990 there were some that expected to hear Leithauser finally reveal the secret kept those many years but two days later he left his job as organist and moved to a quiet life on one of the channel islands in British Columbia where he largely disappeared until his own death in 2015.

WILBER LUDDERCHUK, D

There aren't too many players who have ever suited up for an NHL team that can make the claim that they have scored more goals in their career on their own net than against the opposition. There aren't any that want to make the claim in the first place. In fact, there is only one who has done it. Poor Wilber Ludderchuk is the one and only player who has accomplished the unfortunate feat.

Ludderchuk grew up on a farm 150km north of Winnipeg and was a standout defenceman for the Portage Terriers and the Winnipeg Monarchs before being signed by the Detroit Red Wings for the 1934-35 season. He did not play the first handful of games but once inserted in the lineup by coach Jack Adams, Wilbur made his mark for all the wrong reasons. While defending on a 2on1, Ludderchuk deflected the attempted pass behind a fooled Normie Smith who had no chance once he pushed to his right to play an expected shot after the pass only to have Ludderchuk deflect it to his left into the open side of the net. Sweeney Schriner of the New York Americans was given credit for the goal, certainly helping him on his way to being named the NHL Rookie of the Year for 1934-35.

No one blamed Ludderchuk, he had made a play on a pass and it was just bad luck. But when it happened 2 games later, on a similar play after a pass from Frank Finnigan in his one and only season playing with the St Louis Eagles (who was trying to pass to Ralph "Scotty" Bowman ; not the same coach Scotty Bowman who is in the Hockey Hall of Fame, but a different one and who later in the season would be sold to Detroit and become a teammate), there was some concern. Teammate Bucko McDonald suggested that Wilbur should try deflecting passes somewhere other than into the back of the net. The rookie agreed and had little else to say, embarrassed at his second mistake. He did not play every game and hoped that when he got another opportunity, he might actually score one at the other end of the ice.

It was not to be. Ludderchuk played 31 of the 48 games the Red Wings had that season, and recorded three assists, though he did not register a goal. He did his best to defend, and by all accounts did so reasonably well, except on occasions when the opposition had an odd man rush and he was the last line of defence. Later in the season he was the last man back on a 3on1 and managed to have a pass from Howie Morenz go off his skate and into the net behind Smith. Several teammates stood up at the bench and began to ridicule Wilbur, but Red Wings' team captain Ebbie Goodfellow would have none of it and praised the rookie for at least being in the right position.

In Ludderchuk's final game of the season he was back for a first period 2on1 against Charlie Conacher and Busher Jackson. These men would finish first and fifth in the scoring race that season, so they certainly had the skill to score unaided, but alas poor Wilbur's quick stick deflected Conacher's pass up and over Normie Smith's shoulder.

Between periods the dressing room was quiet as the Red Wings were already behind by three goals. Normie Smith looked across the room to Ludderchuk.

"Hey kid," he said in a quiet voice.

"Yes sir?" Ludderchuk answered nervously.

"Next time you're back on a 2on1, just let them go. I like my chances better if I'm by myself."

"Yes sir." Ludderchuk agreed. But he only played a handful more shifts and there were no odd man rushes. The Red Wings did not sign him the following year and Ludderchuk went back to Manitoba where he eventually raised a family and owned a successful dairy operation until he passed away in 1987.

Recently his grandson Andrew Deichert recounted occasions when his grandfather talked about his one season with the Red Wings. "There are so many people who would have loved to have played just one game in the NHL and he got to play a whole season, so he was very proud of that. He used to brag that he had scored four goals in the NHL. He wasn't shy about admitting that they were all on his own net."

"And don't forget that all four goals were credited to Hall of Famers. All four of them went on to go into the hall of fame. Opa used to say that he helped them get there. That's pretty cool."

JOHN SMITH, LW and JOHN SMITH, RW

Aside from the CFL, which drafted deceased individuals in back-to-back drafts of 1995 and 1996, one of the greatest draft day mix-ups involved John Smith and John Smith in 1969. It was the first year of the expanded draft which fans are familiar with today, made necessary by the growth of the NHL from 6 teams to 12. With Rejean Houle going first overall, and future hall-of-famer Bobby Clarke in the second round, by the fourth round many General Managers were less familiar with the names being recommended by scouts.

In Pittsburgh GM Jack Riley was making the selections but several scouts were in his ear about who to take next. One scout who had had his eye on western Canada, Bill Ezinicki (6th in PIMs in the NHL in the 1940s, right behind Maurice Richard), suggested John Smith, a winger from Medicine Hat. Jack Riley however, was born in Toronto. He thought every town west of Ontario sounded like "Saskatchewan". Riley made note of the name and when it came his turn in the 4th round he selected John Smith, a winger from Moose Jaw. It wasn't until the 6th round that Ezinicki realized that his man Smith was still available, and after conferring with Riley and deciding that Smith from Medicine Hat was still the next best player available, Riley selected John Smith.

To summarize: Pittsburgh selected John Smith. When they realized that John Smith was still available and that they had picked John Smith and not John Smith, they took John Smith because it was John Smith that they wanted, not John Smith. So they drafted John Smith and John Smith.

There have been many Smiths in the NHL, 74 to be precise. Some are less well known than others. Glen "Baldy" Smith played 2 games for the Chicago Blackhawks in 1950-51 and sadly little is known about him or where his nickname came from or how he felt about it. Or if he wore a helmet (or a toupée). Others made more of a name for themselves. Gary Smith was a goalie nicknamed "Suitcase" for being traded

frequently, and in the 70s he liked to carry the puck up ice like a defenceman. His brother Brian played for the LA Kings and became a beloved sportscaster in Ottawa. Billy Smith was a goalie who would carve his initials between your legs with his stick if you made the mistake of standing within reach of the crease. Bobby Smith was a star for the North Stars then the Canadians. Steve Smith had a solid career unfortunately remembered most for scoring on his own net in the playoffs, off of Grant Fuhr's skate, and thwarting what could have been an even bigger Edmonton Oilers dynasty. Sid Smith put together a hall-of-fame worthy career with the Leafs in the 40s and 50s. But there have been no John Smiths play an NHL game. Not a Johnny, not even a Jonathon. Of the 74, not a one. These John Smiths had the chance to be the one and only.

At camp that September coach Red Sullivan could not tell them apart. Names stitched onto the training camp jerseys both read Smith. Both lads were average height, average weight, had average speed and an average shot. The only difference was that one shot right and the other left. That was not enough for Sullivan, so he had their jersey stitching changed to Smith 4 and Smith 6, which marked the round of the draft in which they had been taken, in order to tell them apart. It really didn't matter as neither player was strong enough to crack what was then a weak Penguins lineup and neither played more than an exhibition game and neither was invited back to an NHL camp again. Both returned to Western Canada and played semi-professional hockey.

Their paths crossed once more in 1973 when they were both contacted to play a season in Flin Flon (again a mistake, as the team owner thought he had reached out to one John Smith but both showed up to play and wound up staying the entire season). Smith and Smith became friends and through their contact John 6 married John 4's sister Jane. They had one son and naturally they named him ... Tyler or Matthew or David, anything but John!

KRISTOFF BELAKIN, ASSISTANT EQUIPMENT MANAGER

Anyone who pays attention to the annual World Junior Championships and knows some of the history is familiar with the Punch-up in Piastany as it is known. A second period brawl between the teams from Canada and the Soviet Union, so bad that the lights were turned out, had serious consequences for those teams plus the team from Finland. Whose fault was it? Was it the teams, still embroiled in the Cold War? Was it the referee Hans Ronning from Norway who had little international experience? Was it the players on the ice? Was it Theoren Fleury, who after scoring a goal taunted the Soviet bench by pretending his stick was a machine gun and shooting it at them? Or was it Evgeny Davydov, the first player to come off the benches, rushing to defend his Russian teammates? So many possibilities.

No, the truth is it was Kristoff Belakin at fault, standing behind the Soviet bench as their assistant equipment manager.

Belakin bore a grudge toward the Canadians that no one has ever known about before this. Kristoff Belakin's mother was born Wendy Clark to a middle-class family in Ottawa, went to university, was hired by the Canadian government department of Foreign Affairs, worked in the consulate in Moscow and there fell in love with local cab driver Igor Belakin. Wendy became pregnant with a child and rather impetuously defected so they could all be together. A son was born, whom Wendy named Christopher,

but as the new address was now the Soviet Union, he was known as Kristoff. He tried to immigrate back to Canada but they were not permitted to go. Kristoff was told it was because Canada did not want them, and he grew up hating his mother's country.

He hoped to become a hockey player, dreaming of making the national team and spearing and slashing and cross-checking Canadians at some future tournament, but members of the best teams were made officers in the army and Kristoff was not eligible due to his mother's foreign birth. More reason to hate.

So, Kristoff hung around the teams, accepting whatever tasks were given to him. By the time the 1987 World Championships took place the Soviet Union was struggling economically, and the team had little resources for a large support staff. Kristoff was accepted as the assistant physical therapist simply because he could pay for his own way to Piastany.

Belakin's job was primarily to keep the water bottles full and carrying the spare sticks, but he also had to assist if extra help was needed for an injured player. He did as he was told and kept a low profile. Here please allow me a tangent, a sidenote of a personal nature. While in the former Czechoslovakia, which is where Piastany lies, Kristoff Belakin made his way some 80km away to Bratislava to spend the afternoon on an off day for the team. He wandered the old town, watched a movie, and had enough change left over to buy a trdelnick, or chimney cake as it is also known. But more importantly, on his travels, he bumped into a 16-year-old lad desperately trying to make his way to one of the two rinks in Bratislava where he hoped to be taught how to play hockey. The young man asked for directions but Kristoff could not help, they did not speak the same language, and the young man would continue on to the wrong rink and miss out on the lessons, thus not playing hockey for many years. This young man would immigrate to Canada some years later, raise three kids with his wife, coach some hockey, and play with a pickup group every Friday night, knowing the joy of lighting the lamp often enough to keep him coming back for more. That young man, our friend Duro Oravsky, also suggested the Punch-up in Piastany event as a topic for a min-bio, and I am grateful to him for that.

Now back to the story of Kristoff Belakin: Unfortunately for the Russians, as the schedule progressed and even as the defending gold medal champions from the 1986 tournament, their record going into the final game with Canada of 2-3-1 meant that they could not medal. Canada however was 4-1-1 and could still win the gold by overtaking Finland at 5-1-1 with a victory of 5 goals or more. The stage was set.

Prior to the game Kristoff suggested to a few Soviet players that the Canadians were insulting them in the press. Calling them names. Promising to hurt them. This was the beginning of his work.

To say the game was chippy is an understatement. Slashes were liberally delivered and elbows followed. Little was penalized. Players came back to their benches bruised and sore. Kristoff began to ratchet up the anger. He would lean close to a player on the bench under the pretext of providing water and would ask, to the effect, "what's wrong with you, are you going to let them get away with that?". Players were getting angrier. Belakin intensified his suggestions.

Canada was ahead 4-2 with 6 minutes left in the second period and a fight broke out between Sergei Shesterikov and Everett Senipass. Others joined in. Mike Keane took down Valeri Zelepukin and appeared to injure him. Theo Fleury took a two-hander on the leg and started a fight in return. Then Valeri Konstantinov head-butted Greg Hawgood and broke his nose. Brendan Shanahan said later that it was "the greatest head-butt I've ever seen".

As all hell was breaking loose the players on the bench sat firm. They knew what was at stake. No one would dare leave the bench unless tapped by the coach.

Roughly halfway between where Soviet coach Vladamir Vasiliev and Kristoff Biakin were standing sat Evgeny Davydov, a goal-scoring forward who at the moment was one very enraged Russian hockey player. Then suddenly Davydov felt the tap on his back and he didn't wait to look behind him to confirm who it was that had done it. Vasiliev had been looking the other way and didn't realize it was Belakin. Davydov was over the boards and moments later his own teammates plus the Canadians from their bench spilled onto the ice, found a partner and discovered that punching the other guy in the face is universally understood. The players tussled all over the ice, and just as one brawl ebbed another got worse. More than twenty brawls were happening simultaneously, and it was merciless and intense. When the fighting continued unabated for 20 minutes the officials left the ice and ordered the lights be turned off. The players could hardly continue in the dark, not really sure who they were trying to pummel, and the punch-up came to an end.

However, when things first went dark, an excited voice on the Soviet bench could be heard scream out "This is great!!!". Kristoff had remembered some English.

The head equipment manager said "bylo to, chto vy (was that you?)"

"Ona? (me?)"

"Da. Trichat dees ees grett. (Yes. Yelling 'dees ees grett'.)"

"Nyet (no)," Belakin replied. "Necotoria Kanadskiye (some Canadian)"

Can we confirm it was Belakin who tapped Davydov to go? Yes, I can, every word is true! While many of the members on the team such as Mogilny, Federov, Malakhov, went on to become well known, Kristoff Belakin was never heard from again. No, I don't mean he had nothing to say on the matter. I mean, he was never, ever heard from again.

Konets. (The End).

KARL-PETR MAGNERSSON, photographer

Everyone would like a claim to fame. Bill Mosienko had an otherwise average career with the Chicago Black Hawks but way back in 1952 he managed to score 3 goals in 21 seconds against Rangers and just like that: claim to fame.

On a smaller scale, and at the periphery of the big professional sports, are the photographers who take the pics of the players for the sports cards, a billion-dollar industry. Upper Deck gave collectors a chance to vote on which of three photos would be used for the 2015-16 Upper Deck Young Guns hockey card, considered in collecting circles to be the true card of a hockey player. But do you know who the photographer was of the winning selection? I'm sure McDavid himself doesn't know. Every photographer in the business knows it was Mitchell Wayland, and with the card being the most desirable card of the past decade, selling for north of a grand at card conventions and on eBay, it is Mitchell Wayland's claim to fame.

Enter Karl-Petr Magnersson, photographer without a claim to fame, and the emerging controversy concerning the release of the 2024 Upper Deck series², which at the time of writing this article (March 6 2024), was literally just hours ago. The hockey card set in this series contains the Young Guns version of Connor Bedard, the most anticipated rookie since the other Connor made his debut almost 10 years ago.

Roughly a month ago Magnersson learned that he had the shot of Bedard that was going to be used. He was taking photos at Bedard's second career game, in Boston versus the Bruins, low on the glass to the side of the Bruins net. He was in the perfect position to catch Bedard's elated face following a wrap-around goal on Linus Ullmark. Bedard is smiling broadly, a little shock perhaps in his eyes, and Magnersson captured it perfectly with the jersey logo centred and no one else in the frame. It was the shot! Upper Deck chose it over hundreds, maybe thousands of other options. It meant money to Karl-Petr, but also a status that he would own forever.

Upper Deck set the photo within the card design, added the stats and comments and notes, prepared the plates, had the whole set digitally packaged and ready to be sent to the printers when an intern in quality control spotted a problem. Parsley. If you look closely at Connor Bedard's smile you can see parsley in his teeth. Linemate Nick Foligno confirmed his habit of a bite of a parsley-laced donair sandwich often minutes before tying his skates. Could you see it with the naked eye? Debatable. But a young intern in QC had noticed it and the powers that be could not let the card go to print knowing the parsley was spoiling the perfect pearly whites of the newest boy wonder and biggest draw for selling Upper Deck hockey cards.

Some may wonder why a sports card company would have a quality control division, one capable of spotting parsley in a photo subject's grin, but it all stems from the 1989 Fleer baseball release of Bill Ripken standing in a familiar pose (for baseball cards) holding his bat resting on his shoulder. Not until the cards were widely released across North America did it become clear that Ripken was holding a bat that had the words "fuck face" written on the bottom of the handle, clearly visible and easy to read with a good look up close. Fleer never said how many were released (maybe a hundred thousand) before they corrected it in new print runs with the offending words scratched out, first in white scratches and later in black. The card was a hot commodity and for a short time Bill was more well known than his brother Cal Jr (future hall of famer and the man who broke Lou Gehrig's consecutive games played record).

The question about the Ripken obscenity card was, who knew it was there? Did Ripken? The photographer who took and submitted it (conspiracy theorists say yes due to the words being right side up to read, they could just as easily been turned sideways or upside down)? Did the card company who selected that rather dull depiction of a ballplayer from so many other photo alternatives they had to choose from? One thing is certain: quality control was lacking. This was not a claim to fame any had sought.

But back to the recent parsley crisis at Upper Deck. With less than a day to spare before the print run was to be sent out, a new photo was needed. A handful of runner-up photos were reconsidered, and one submitted by Carl "Click" Howie was picked. Suddenly he was now in the position of his claim to fame. Howie, at the home game in question, had been drinking hard with a handful of pretentious corporate execs in section 103 and if he was honest, doesn't remember even taking the shot that now graces the card already selling for \$1100 and upon eBay.

In an odd twist of fate, Howie's wife had left him a decade earlier and was now married to Karl-Petr Magnersson! This story would be more incredible if it read like "Click's" revenge but that's just not the case. There were intervening years and neither man had given a second thought about the other before the great Connor Bedard rookie card photo snafu.