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My Brilliant Hockey Career

By Mark Kearney

(My teammates' full names have been left out to save them further embarrassment).

I still remember it.

I'm skating toward the net, shifting my weight as I draw back my stick. My head is down, but as I peer through my badly-fitted helmet, I see an opening in the left side of the net. I shoot, falling to the ice as I follow through.

The goalie kicks out the shot. Wait, it's not over. A teammate skates by and swipes at the rebound, also falling. He shoots, he scores! But the glory is mine. I've just notched the fifth and final assist of my two-year-career as a Tyke hockey player. It didn't elevate me to Gretzky status. But on my team, I was a solid, perhaps gifted player. My five assists over two years placed me third among our team's scoring leaders.

It began the winter I was eight. Until then, no one my age in Pickering, Ont., my hometown, could play organized hockey. Back then, Pickering was too small a village to justify a Tyke team. But this was now -- most of us baby boomers were no longer babies, Pickering Village's population had inched

past 1,000, and we wanted more than just backyard rinks. All the big guys, including my brother, were playing organized hockey – now it was our turn.

There was a drawback besides my mother not wanting her youngest child involved in what she thought was too bone-crushing a sport. Pickering had no arena, and that meant we had to travel some 15 miles to Brooklin, north of Whitby, to practise and play our “home” games.

In our early practices, under the watchful eye of the coach, who happened to be my father, and the manager, Mr. Dingley, who lived down the street, we tried to skate while wearing pads and shoot a puck without falling (this was troublesome – “he shoots, he falls” was kind of an unwritten team motto). The previous year I had been my grade 2 skating champ; that gave me an advantage over some teammates, who despite being young Canadians, tended to have more ankle on the ice surface than blade.

The season started. Perhaps we got thrown into competition too soon. It's difficult to tell when you're eight. Perhaps we hadn't jelled as a team. Perhaps it was the fact that our uniforms, black and orange as I recall, were the product of the benevolent village funeral director, who, of course, didn't object to having his name and service displayed on our jerseys.

We lost our first game 27-0.

Looking back now, the game is a blur. We fell behind early (like 12 seconds after the opening faceoff). I'm not sure what was worse -- all those goals or that most of our team didn't even know the rules. We were lucky not to be called for delay of game as some of our players realized, after a long pause, that they'd lined up in the wrong end of the rink for a faceoff.

After the first period we were down about 14-0.

In the second, we came out with our heads still high (ahh, to be eight again!) and eager for revenge. My father, the coach, told us to shoot the puck into the opposing team's end and skate after it. This was a good strategy as we had not yet mastered the art of passing. We followed his advice and even managed a few shots on net. It was a good period; we held the opposition to six goals. It may have been after goal 18 flew into our net that I got tired of skating back to our goalie, slapping my stick on his thick pads, and saying "nice try." But my father, the coach, insisted.

A bad fluke game?

No. We lost the next one 21-0 (see above for details).

But the third match was in our arena. Pickering was going home to Brooklin. In practice we worked on all the things we'd done wrong in the first two games -- skating, shooting, goaltending, defence, offence.

Home matches were different. A home game not only meant more cheering fans, but a larger pool of cars to drive us to the arena. When you had someone like my friend Ricky on the team, those extra cars were needed. Ricky wasn't big, but he always wore some part of his equipment to the game. When you're crunched four or five to a back seat those shoulder pads really cut down on breathing space.

We were playing a team from Cannington, another small town even farther north of Whitby. And we did improve. Final score: Cannington 15, Pickering 0.

It wasn't the score that was so demoralizing. Heck, keeping the opponents under 20 goals was a major accomplishment. But it was at the 8-0 point when one of the Cannington players skated over to his bench and said "Coach, when can we start trying?"

I had no assists in these games, but that kept me tied for first place in scoring on our team. We suffered through another 27-0 game in Oshawa, and more lopsided games followed. But the average score was under 20, and we were improving. Certainly our team was starting to line up better for faceoffs.

I guess you always remember your first assist. Halfway through the season we played Sunderland. It was clear late in the first period that our past humiliations weren't going to be repeated; we were only down by three goals. In

the second, trailing by about 6-0, my linemate Mick got the puck inside the other team's blueline. He skated toward the net and the puck came loose to me on left wing. I got it to my other linemate John. He shot, fell, and -- it went in. We'd scored. We rubbed his helmet and started toward the bench. But we were told to stay out there, and amid some scattered applause, the puck was dropped.

Sunderland beat us by about 12-1, but I was on the scoreboard with one assist. Mick and John got a couple of other goals the rest of the year as we finished a perfect first season. No wins, about 20 losses, no ties. My record -- no goals, two assists, a couple of penalties. Wait'll next year, I thought.

We lost next season's opening game 18-0.

Some guys were even crying in the dressing room. Why it took them 21 losses to feel the pain, I don't know. But they recovered. And then --- well, I can't lie -- we lost every game that season, too. Thanks to the scoring exploits of Mick and John, I racked up another two assists by about halfway through the schedule.

But the best was yet to come-- a game against Brooklin.

Two home teams, a Friday night. I didn't feel anything different before the game, but we had played Brooklin before and had always kept them under 10 goals. The score was 3-0 in the second period when Mick skated in on the right side and fired a shot. GOAL!

A few minutes later Mick moved around a defenceman, and -- my god -- picked the corner. He raised his arms in triumph, we mobbed him, and the crowd overcame their disbelief and cheered loudly. We were within one. I could feel the rush of adrenaline. I skated harder, hustled to the puck, even threw a body check.

But it wasn't meant to be. We lost 4-2, and I had no assists. Nevertheless, we left the rink in glory, someone patting my shoulder pads and saying "nice game."

My father, the coach, congratulated us, and Mr. Dingley, the manager, treated us all to a can of pop. I peeled off my jersey (Number 14 -- same as my boyhood hero, Dave Keon of the Leafs), sipping a Seven-up, and joking with my fellow players, some whose names I've now forgotten. My fifth and final assist - - the one described at the beginning -- was still to come, but in my brilliant hockey career no moment was sweeter than that Friday night in Brooklin.