

# Chapter 1

## **THE END TO END BEAUTY**

*Hockey captures the essence of Canadian experience in the New World. In a land so inescapably and inhospitably cold, hockey is the chance of life, and an affirmation that despite the deathly chill of winter we are alive.*

*~Stephen Leacock*

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*The city limits of my hometown gradually faded away as my tear soaked eyes lost focus of the place I still call home. Somehow, somewhere, I knew there had to be another place, another city that my father's '79 Caravelle was pointed towards, that I could some day call my home away from home....*

*SITTING IN THE BACK SEAT, STARRING BACK AT MY home town as it grew fainter from my view as the miles of road got chewed up by the car; tears of the unknown were rolling down my cheeks.*

*I did not ever think I would get to this point in my life. Being invited to play for a team and live six hours away from home at the age of fifteen was not even on my radar when I scored my first ever goal.*

*It may not go down in any one's memory like mine, but I remember that it was a fancy end to end rush where I hung the goalies jock in the rafters and celebrated like I had just won the Stanley Cup! In all reality though, it was a fluke goal. I tripped near center ice and made a wild swing at the puck, watching it roll towards the net and scoring that first ever goal, only because the keeper misplayed the crazy thing. That was the only goal that year. A five year old superstar!! 30 games and 1 geno.*

*That's when I new I was in love with hockey. I now knew why so many people for so many years before me were passionate about a game that was played on frozen water with a hardened piece of rubber. There was a spirit to the game that began to take up residence in my life. From that glorious goal scoring moment, I knew I would eat, sleep and breath hockey.*

*Okay, so did every other five year old kid in town, but I was going to enjoy the ride while I could!*

There are 587,500 registered hockey players in Canada, and each of them have parents who likely have similar stories. When you consider how many are registered right now, and that a few million have played and have left the game since this year... that adds up to a lot of hockey players.

A lot of early morning practices, late night games, bumps, bruises and destroyed egos. Age groups for hockey start out for kids aged five and under. Many start out with the naive concept they are all going to play this game in the NHL one day. However, most kids know by the time they are 15 or sooner whether they have a sniff of making anything of a career from the game.

Most people just play the game or get involved in it because of the passion that is within it. Some start late in life, which in hockey, would mean starting in

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your teens. They make up for not starting earlier as a child by playing later and longer in life.

They keep playing well beyond their prime, dragging themselves out of bed on Sunday mornings at 6:00 to play in the over 40 beer leagues. They build and share memories with their friends and linemates from their teenage years, not trying to make it to the pros, but to simply fill that void for hockey at least once a week. It is a part of their being.

They are so in love with the game, they want to stay involved. Maybe they can't afford the season tickets of a pro team, maybe there isn't even one within a close enough distance for them to make it practical to travel. So their passion shifts from the pros, to that of junior hockey: the place where the pros are created and forged into our heroes of tomorrow.

Junior hockey is all about the local die hard fans who enjoy paying their \$10 or \$15 for a ticket so they can go and let off some steam! Yelling at the ref a few times, and making some off handed comment to a home town player is what they seemed destined to do. For some, their relationship with junior hockey goes deeper than that. For some, they see junior hockey as a great economical boom for their bubbling city, crucial to the growth of tourism. While for others it runs even deeper. They join the booster clubs. They attend the hot stove leagues hosted in some obscure part of the arena after every game. They help sell 50/50 tickets for education funds; they hop on the fan bus to go into the enemy arena and egg on their fans as often as possible. They are driven by a passion for hockey.

Then there are some who are really off the charts in terms of commitment to a team. They actually throw their whole lives into the scheme of the ebb and flow of junior hockey. They are the ones who truly make junior hockey possible and the future of hockey brighter indeed. Of course I am talking about the billets. The ones who open their homes and lives to be invaded every fall, and have their hockey family put on hold every spring. They are the ones who over the years have had to adjust as much as the players. They have had to juggle more schedules than the team's general manager, and provide more arm chair counseling than Dr. Phil.

I have had the opportunity in my life to see this crazy game from so many different sides, and it has afforded me a rich view. I want to share that view with you through the optics of my life. I want to share with you my first hand experiences from the inside and sidelines of the game.

It is an amazing concept, this whole billet thing. It happens across the landscape of hockey, and for me it began with falling in love with the game. My story is likely similar to yours, and millions of others out there who love it so very much. In fact it started out for me when my parents introduced the game to me, and provided me every opportunity they could for me to see how wonderful it really is.

*Dad was forced to freeze his tail off outside in 'nose-hair-breaking' freezing temperatures all winter long, making sure our backyard*

## **TRAGEDY AND TRIUMPH**

*Frank and Colleen Mcbean*

*The Mcbean family is a typical mix of what small town Saskatchewan has to offer to the world of hockey. There is a deep sense of volunteerism on the prairies and Frank with his law practice to back him up, was up to his eye balls in alligators, trying to get a junior hockey club started.*

*They already had a junior hockey team in Swift Current, but they wanted to hit the big leagues. The town of Swift Current is like the little engine that could. Being voted as one of the top ten cities in Canada by Mcleans Magazine, this church filled southern Saskatchewan community was looking for bigger and better when it set its eyes on the Western Hockey League (WHL), that player producing factory that churns out professional hockey players year after year.*

*Sure enough, with a host of volunteers, and a solid business plan in place, the Broncos were born.*

*It would be that spirit of 'the little engine that could', which would propel this city onto the world sports stage on several occasions. The city would ride this hockey train to glory and down to the pits of hell several times over the years, and the Mcbeans appear to be the ones who keep the positive, generous spirit steered towards success. In fact, it was an act of positive positioning that*

*got them into this thing to begin with.*

*In 1984 Frank and Colleen got a phone call every parent fears when their kids are out and about with friends: a call from the police force to pass along some bad news. In the Mcbeans' case, it was to learn that their two adopted children had been killed in a motor vehicle accident. Instantly their hearts were torn away and they were forced to deal with the reality that their family had been cut in half.*

*They needed to grieve, and yet their other two children needed healing and a home to grow up in. They began to seek a more positive home environment.*

*The Mcbeans needed a positive spark in their home, something to bring life and hope back in, and allow their remaining children a chance at success in life, knowing that a positive environment would face them each day and not the regrets of yesterday. A friend suggested that Colleen check into becoming a billet home for the Broncos. Being completely aghast at the idea initially, it soon wore well with her that this could be what they actually needed. Today, the Mcbeans have over 40 additional kids to call their own. 15 years of opening their home has created a lot of memories for the family. They have seen the highest that this level of hockey can offer, while offering their experiences*

*during one of the worst tragedies the game has ever faced.*

*Two years after taking in their first billet boys, their quiet street in the northern part of the city was filled with grief once again. Most of the players huddled into the house to talk, sleep, share stories and share their dreams. Four of their team mates would never get to experience those dreams. That fateful night goes down as one of the saddest in junior hockey history. #8 Trent Kresse, #22 Chris Mantyka, #11 Brent Ruff, and #9 Scott Krueger, four members of the Bronco hockey team, were killed in a team bus accident as they headed into Regina for a game with their rivals, the Pats.*

*The Mcbeans were an instant magnet. The players knew of their previous family tragedy and maybe their words of wisdom could act as a refuge in what was a season-long period of unanswered questions. Colleen recalls “many of them just huddled up right here on the floor, staring off into an unknown future, while Frank and I simply listened. We listened to their passions, their dreams, and encouraged them to do what the guys would have wanted them to do: finish the season, be positive and reach for their goal.”*

*Two years later that goal was obtained. The Broncos went on to win the Memorial Cup in 1989, the hardest fought-for Cup in Canadian junior hockey, with guys like Sheldon Kennedy,*



*Dan Lambert, Kimbi Daniels and Bob Wilkie; with a “Four Broncos” memorial patch sewn onto their jerseys, they hoisted the Cup in Saskatoon, likely with a glimpse of the Mcbean family room floor from that tragic night two years previous, and the voice of Colleen ringing out, “be positive boys, reach for your goal,” etched into those center ice celebration memories.*

*Valleys and mountain tops. That is so much of what we always see first on the front page of the papers, and the evening broadcast news. What about the rest of the events in one’s life?*

*Colleen recalls the night Kimbi Daniels was out well past curfew and Geoff Sanderson decided to pull a prank to trap him in his own game of sneaking in and out under the radar. Oh ya, “super billet” or no “super billet”, it happens to them all. Eventually if you stay in the business of creating a second home for young hockey stars, you end up with a collection of these kind of memories too. Geoff and Jason loaded up a jar of pennies, propped them on the top of the main door that was left ajar, and waited with great anticipation in the basement for Kimbi to come sneaking in and be greeted with a huge crash, bang, boom. Sitting in the basement waiting, waiting and....CRASH BANG BOOM, the trap had worked, they had caught the pesky little forward in the act of..... “wait a minute, that’s not Kimbi, SORRY COLLEEN!”*

*For being the adoptive mother that she is, Colleen had got up in the middle of the night to shut the door that those forgetful players never closed when they got in for the night! Obviously to her surprise and the delayed laughter that roared out, it was a memory of a lifetime for her to be standing there in the midst of the mess, and enjoying a late night laugh with her boys.*

*Frank and Colleen have made a huge impact in junior hockey. Not only have they invested in countless lives of players by opening their home through tragedy, but they have invested countless hours into the educational process of their boys and that of the team. Colleen was recently honored with the WHL 2006 Distinguished Service award.*

*“Colleen has provided ideas, advice, and leadership in the field of education as it relates to school and Major Junior Hockey. She has contributed significantly to the fundamental principles and philosophy of the WHL Education Program, which has become the premier system in North America,” stated Jim Donlevy, WHL Director, Education Services. They truly have represented hockey parents well. “Life must go on,” Frank reminds us, and that is what the Mcbeans have created.... Life! Life in the midst of anguish, hope in the face of destruction, and a home for those away from home.*

*rink was in mint shape, providing opportunities for me and the neighborhood kids to play hockey almost 24/7. Sure we got interrupted for things such as school, food, and a heater to warm the toes, but for most of the remaining waking moments of our young lives, we played hockey. Hockey in the backyard rink, hockey at the indoor community rink, hockey on the street, hockey at the park rink, hockey in the basement using tennis balls and ball gloves in the hallways. The only real stop to us playing hockey was to sit down in front of the tube on Saturday nights to watch this crazy sport!!*

*You know the tune too! We would be in the heat of the battle downstairs, smashing the puck at each other and the hallways. We were playing ball hockey, wearing holes in our jeans, playing for the Stanley Cup in game seven, in double overtime! We're about to take our shot, when that tune sounds. It comes from nowhere, and pierces the air like nothing else in Canada ever could: the theme song for Hockey Night in Canada! We race upstairs to grab a front row seat to see who was playing. Even if it was the dreaded Wings or Habs playing, we would watch. Our eyes glued to the TV hoping to see our favorite players, maybe even a glimpse of the mighty Bruins. Oh ya, the Bruins baby!*

*Did I mention the junior team in our town*

*was also named the Bruins? I never did get to the old Boston Gardens, but boy oh boy, the ol' Civic Center in Estevan still has that magical touch, that smell in the air that only a classic hockey building has. It was with the Bruins that I began to get a taste of what real hockey was all about. No, not the Big Bad Bruins from Boston; I am talking about the real deal: The Bruins who lived, and walked and breathed the same air as I did. The same local Bruins who we would claim in our daily street hockey games!*

*“I’m Crest”, “I’m Godfrey”, “No, I am” “OK, I’ll be Sakundiak” “You be Davis”, and the banter would go until every kid on our team was a member of the local junior Bruins. Just to rub in some salt, you would hear a kid pipe up, “ You guys get to be the Wings; you’re terrible!” Naming the opposition that day in street hockey, after the hated junior team up the road in the next town was the worst insult.*

Our love for Junior hockey in Canada can be measured in scenes like this around the countryside. Just change the name of the rink and insert your team name. The story is yours. It is fascinating to gaze across our country’s landscape and see how many lives have been touched by the game of hockey. How many memories have been created, and emotions stirred. All because of a black disc sliding at the end

of a wooden blade!! Some heard the game through Foster Hewitt and fell in love with it. Others got introduced to it by Howie Meeker, while others more recently have the voice of Harry Neal and Bob Cole forever carved into their minds, with a direct link to their love for hockey. Don Cherry. Well well well. You either love the man or loathe him, but its hard to argue his passion for the game. He draws such a large viewing audience and such great respect, because he wears his love for the game right out their on one of his fancy suite cuffs each week between the first and second periods. Ya, we all know when he comes on. You could be with a group of friends and family enjoying a great meal together on a Saturday night and after looking at your watch, you inquire, "I wonder if the first period is over?" Not because you want to know the score of the game, but because you don't want to miss the bombastic Don. Right away the TV is turned up, and everyone else in the room is turned down. Silence is demanded while Ron and Don tell it the way it is. They speak our minds for us. They talk with the same passion we may feel muzzeled to show. They have a platform across the country to speak from, and they want us all to be more in love with hockey when they are finished their show.

Its all about the passion for the game. Passion for the game that allows complete strangers to open their homes to complete strangers and instantly welcome them into their lives as immediate family.

Your passion for hockey and mine is why we need to have a Home Away From Home.

