

Some Memories From A Maidstone Hornet

It was the end of summer, 1966, when teams belonging to the Essex County Juvenile Hockey League began ramping up for the '66-'67 season. As a young teenager, I'd been going to the league's Friday night games for quite some time to watch the county's six teams play their back-to-back games, the teams consisting of Essex, Kingsville, Harrow, Cottam, Anderdon, and Maidstone. The previous season had been especially exciting as I watched the crowds build in the Essex Arena towards the end of the regular season, and then pack the place to capacity for the playoffs. What made it even more exciting for this fourteen-year-old boy from Oldcastle was the fact that the Maidstone Hornets were right in the thick of things, working their way through the semi-finals and then into the finals from which they ultimately emerged as league champions. How thrilling it was to be part of the exuberant crowd, cheering for the champs at the end of the game, and how envious to be witnessing the teenage boys from Maidstone, just a little older than myself, jump over the boards and onto the ice to celebrate their victory – soon to be followed by many of their fans.

This was the popularity of juvenile hockey before the development of more 'Junior' level teams, teams such as the Junior A Windsor Spitfires that were considered to be potential stepping stones to the NHL. For many, the Essex Arena had been the place to be on a winter's Friday night, juvenile hockey was the hockey to watch, and the juvenile teams were those that young teenage boys aspired to play for. And, thus, in September of 1966, I wasn't about to miss the Essex Free Press announcement regarding tryouts for the Maidstone Hornets.

By then, I had celebrated my fifteenth birthday and was entering my second year of midget minor hockey. One wasn't allowed to play midget minor hockey beyond the first three games if he also made the roster for one of the juvenile teams. A gentleman who was a well-known figure around the arena at that time due to his connections to both minor and juvenile hockey approached me one day with some advice. He knew I was trying out for the Hornets. "Stay in midget hockey for another year, Tommy," he advised. "Take some more time to develop your skills." A trace of a smile then crossed his lips. "And let's hope that you grow a little, as well." Yes, I was young and quite small for my age. Amongst the juveniles, I could expect to be the smallest or, at least, one of the smallest players. But *first things first*, I told myself. I'd try out for the Hornets and go from there. If I didn't make the cut, I'd play my final year of midget and try again the following year.

I tried to keep my hopes from getting too high. From the time the notice appeared in the paper, however, I intensified my weight training routine to increase my strength, and started regular runs

around the neighbourhood to improve my endurance. The tryouts proceeded, and after each one, more and more hopefuls were cut. The players seemed so big and the pace seemed so fast; it was an entirely different experience from playing in the midgets. I remember how my nerves were on edge going into the final practice, after which the remaining cuts would be made. Typically, when players got cut, they were taken aside, discretely, as they left the ice, provided with kind words and well-wishes from the coaches. So, of course, I was worried about leaving the ice. *Maybe if I hustled and walked quickly to the dressing room, they wouldn't be able to nab me.* I did make it to the dressing room, but still couldn't be sure. *What if the coaches had been distracted at the exact moment they had planned to call me over to have our little talk?* After a few long moments, the coaches (Jim and Lonnie), the trainer (George), and the general manager (Arnold) entered the room and closed the door behind them, to congratulate the players inside the room – the '66/'67 version of the Maidstone Hornets! I was going to get my green and white jersey and it was going to have the number '5' on the back of it. Well, not for one minute did I consider staying with midget hockey for another year. I was ecstatic. As for worrying about my size, well I'd just have to skate fast and learn to side-step crushing body checks, wouldn't I?

I can't imagine not being part of the '66/'67 Hornets. Although I played four years for this team (always loving it) and was later honoured to be named its captain, the first year was the most magical. Of course there was the thrill of making this team in the first place, an exceptionally talented group that went undefeated over the course of the season and then remained undefeated over the course of the playoffs. There was the thrill of playing with a gifted teammate who would have certainly made the NHL had he not met with a tragic accident. There was the pep talk from one of the coaches just prior to one of the final games: "Listen up," he began, and then he reminded us of the phenomenal season we were experiencing. "Of course, you're well aware of the undefeated season that's on the line" he said. "But, what you're not aware of is all the individual awards coming our way." He went on to tell us that the league had just completed its voting for that season's outstanding player awards and that the Maidstone players had won all of them (or, at least, the vast majority of them). Well, if the team had needed any additional inspiration, then his announcement put us 'over the top'. We went on to win handily.

Then came the provincial play-downs. These were always such fun: the traveling; the experience of playing in different arenas; the jeering and booing from other home-town fans; the cheering from our own fans who turned out in impressive numbers to follow us (our parents, our friends, our neighbours); eating together on the road, the coaches driving us in their cars, blaring their radios, drumming their steering wheels, and driving with windows open, making sure to stay fully awake

as they drove us home safely; and most of all, the overall camaraderie with team mates and coaching staff. I will always, always, remember these guys with the fondest of memories.

We had some tense moments during our provincial run to the finals. For example, there was the deciding game we played against New Hamburg. The game had developed into a rather chippy affair that was threatening to get out of hand. The penalties were piling up, and let's just say that the Maidstone Hornets were not winning the hearts of the New Hamburg fans. After one of their players scored a late goal (too late to make a difference in the game), one of our more 'expressive' players offered his congratulations in a manner that was deemed offensive by the goal scorer. Unfortunately, the referee agreed with the opposing player and called a penalty on our player. Okay, so it was a little more than a two-minute penalty: the referee gave him a misconduct and tossed him out of the game for his infraction. To leave the ice surface in the New Hamburg arena at that time, one had to exit through a set of doors at one end of the rink, directly behind one of the nets. Although our penalized player skated peacefully and, no doubt, penitently (ahem) towards the doors to depart as requested, a mob of New Hamburg fans had gathered there to meet him, shouting out various threats and obscenities. I remember my teammate doing a u-turn at the doors and skating directly back to our bench. As wide-eyed as I'd ever seen him, he called to our coaching staff: "I'm not going out there to those killer sharks!" The coaches turned from the bench and towards the Maidstone fans to ask if some of the fathers, older brothers, and larger friends might want to go to the end of the rink to provide a safety corridor for our player. My dad was amongst those who volunteered their services. A little later, after the game, as our team and fans left the arena in a huddle formation, we noticed police cars in the parking lot. As the Maidstone cars left the lot, the police followed and stuck with us for several miles down the road, I guess until they thought we were at a safe distance from the sign that welcomed visitors to the friendly town of New Hamburg.

The season's finale occurred in our home arena in Essex, the second game in a two-game total goals series against Bolton, a town northwest of Toronto. We had lost the first game by a score of 8 – 6 in their arena. I do hope that this arena has been restored as a museum, somewhere. It was the smallest, most rickety arena, I've ever played in, barn-wood construction and supported by cables to keep it upright. Inside, there were no stands for fans to sit in, just a 'catwalk' for fans to stand along, high around the perimeter. There was a dirt floor behind the players' bench. At the ends of the rink behind the nets, the boards were slanted and reached much higher than the standard height (even including the glass panels that sit atop most boards). The Bolton team knew their rink well and took full advantage of it, achieving a two-goal lead, as both teams headed back to Essex. Let me make it clear,

however, that this Bolton team was a very good team and they were deserving of the championship. To play us to a 4-4 tie in the final game, in our home arena, they had to have been good team. I do feel compelled to mention that our star player, the one who was destined for the NHL, broke a skate blade in the closing minutes of the game and was devastated over the loss of opportunity to help his team get the goals that were needed. Nonetheless, we were in the closing minutes, we did need two goals just to tie the series, and Bolton was probably too good to allow two goals against, with time running out.

As I look back to the '66/'67 Maidstone Hornets now, I realize that the outcome of that championship game is a mere footnote to how that season ended. What stands out in my mind is the experience of it all: the sheer enjoyment of the sport (the speed of it, the passing, the shooting, the tic-tac-toe plays, the dodging of body checks, the stripping opponents of the puck), the mounting magic and excitement as we rolled on throughout the year, the buzz from our classmates at the schools we attended, the rollicking crowds at the arena, the support and encouragement we got from our neighbours, friends, and family, and specifically the farmers at the Oldcastle Variety Store sipping on their coffees and eating their pie, asking me about "last night's game" – and then showing up for some of the games. I never experienced the Essex Arena like I did for that final game against Bolton. The place was jammed, well beyond its stated capacity, every seat taken, the walkways behind the upper railings filled, making it difficult to pass through, two and three people deep, every other crook and cranny occupied, wherever one could find a square foot to sit, stand, or hang from. It was an Essex County Juvenile Hockey League Friday night crowd at its max, and then much more, at the height of its heyday. And I was blessed. I got to skate out onto the ice, into the middle of it all as a Maidstone Hornet.

Now, fifty-five years later, I look back and still regard this season and my experience with the Maidstone Hornets not only as a top highlight of my teenage years, but also as one of the highlights of my life. And with respect to the gentleman (and, indeed, he was a gentleman) who suggested I remain one additional year to play midget hockey I have harboured no smug satisfaction about rejecting his advice (although I might mention that I never did grow very much). On the contrary, I feel grateful that he approached me to become part of this story: a wonderful story that I was never going to miss – not for one minute.

Tom Managhan, #5

A one-time captain of the Maidstone Hornets.