

## Remembering Whitey

Pat “Whitey” Stapleton (Jul,4 1940 – April 8, 2020)

Great trivia question: What was Whitey Stapleton’s number when he played for the Boston Bruins?

I know. Most of you probably didn’t even know he played for the Bruins. But he was there for two years. He was also a Toronto Maple Leaf. For one day!

Whitey was three years older than me so, when I was playing peewee hockey, he was playing midget – two leagues ahead of me. The first time I ever saw him play I was in grade six. He was playing for St. Joseph’s school and I was at the Sarnia Arena watching St. Joe’s play my school; Our Lady of Mercy. It wasn’t an official minor-hockey league. It was organized by local parish priests; Father Farrell, Father Devine and Father Nolan as simply an opportunity to play more hockey. I didn’t even know his first name until I was in high school; he was just Whitey to all of us who watched him. I used to go early to my games or stay after them – along with a lot of other kids – just to watch him practice. He was the first hockey player I ever saw who you just knew was going to go all the way to the NHL.

During the two seasons Whitey played for the Junior “B” Legionnaires (56-57, 57-58) they won their first two titles. His team mates were local legends like George “Duke” Harris, Don “Mouse” McPhail, Paul “Butch” Crawley, Danny Foster, Ross Dark, Mike Muir, Jack Kerwin, Gerry Paiment and Danny Chivers. I remember all those guys from those days because as you grow older, you never forget the older guys who were nice to you when you were a kid. It bears proof of the adage: *People seldom remember what you say but they never forget how you made them feel.*

Even among all those great athletes, Whitey made the game of hockey look easy. At five feet eight inches he was solidly built and didn’t take any crap from anybody. He could give as good as he got but he wasn’t a dick about it. He just concentrated on playing his game which was all about getting the puck out of his end and onto the stick of a fast-moving, open forward. He is best (and often) described as, “a productive, playmaking, offensive defenseman.”

In the summertime – when he wasn’t playing baseball – Whitey worked for Silverwood’s Dairy as a milkman on a horse-drawn wagon. He did that right up through his Junior “A” days. His younger cousin, Mike Boyle, told me that Whitey used to take him along with him. Whitey would let Mike “drive” and he stayed in shape by running from the wagon to the house with the milk, back to the wagon with the empties, where he’d grab the milk for the next house and run ahead to that place while Mike “drove” the wagon to the next house. There Whitey would return the empties and pick up the milk for the next house. Mike said, “He was hardly ever in the wagon.”

### Getting to the NHL

In those days, Sarnia was the one of two Junior “B” teams that fed the Chicago Black Hawks. From the Legionnaires you progressed to Junior “A” and the St. Catharines Teepees, unless Chicago sold or traded the rights to you to one of the other NHL teams (there were only six in those days) and then you played in their system. But Whitey and Duke Harris stayed in the Chicago system and they won a Memorial Cup for the Teepees in 1960. Rudy Pilous was the coach of the Black Hawks and also the GM of the St. Catharines Teepees. But Whitey didn’t like Rudy very much. After Junior “A” Rudy sent him to Sault St. Marie in the old Eastern Pro Hockey League; a farm club for the Black Hawks. Chicago won the Stanley Cup that year so you can see why that lineup would have been tough to crack. In Sault Ste. Marie, his coach was Billy Reay. Whitey liked Billy and he did well there; 5 goals & 43 assists.

The next year, Whitey was not protected by the Rudy Pilous-coached Black Hawks and he was claimed in the interleague draft by the Boston Bruins – at that time, the worst team in the NHL. That year the Bruins won 15 games, finished last and Chicago lost the Stanley Cup to – can you believe this – the Toronto Maple Leafs. The next year (62-63) the Bruins only won 14 games and Whitey was sent to Kingston after 21 games. The playing/assistant coach there was a defenseman named Harry Sinden. He and Whitey clicked. One of the other defensemen was Dick Cherry. Guess who his brother is?

Dick Kowcinak – who came to Sarnia in 1949 after an illustrious career with the Trail Smoke Eaters – knew Billy Reay – the new coach in Chicago – and glowingly recommended Whitey to him as a

defenseman with good hockey sense and, “a deadly accurate passer.” He’d be a good fit for the new style of hockey they were playing featuring high-scoring, speedy forwards like Bobby Hull, Stan Mikita and Phil Esposito. Encouraged by this, Reay made a deal to bring Whitey back into the Chicago fold. But they had concerns about his size (5’8”, 180 lbs.) so, they sent him to Portland, Oregon where he played for two years with great success. He and his family loved living there. In the 1964-65 season, he scored 29 goals, had 57 assists, won the WHL’s outstanding defenseman award and led the team to the league championship. There they beat the Seattle Totems featuring Sarnia’s own Don Ward on defense.

In the fall of 1965, Billy Reay invited Whitey to the Black Hawks training camp; telling him he would play for the Hawks that year. But at the last minute, they told him he was going to St. Louis as a player/coach for the St. Louis Braves. Whitey was broken hearted and seriously considered hanging up his skates for good. But Ted Lindsay – by now retired from the NHL – was visiting his brother Otto – who lived in Sarnia. When Ted heard that Whitey was considering quitting hockey, he called him and convinced him to keep going; telling him, “You’re too good to give up now.”

The City of Sarnia and the County of Lambton along with a couple of generations of Sarnia/Lambton hockey players thank you for making that call Ted.

Whitey went back and played 14 games for St. Louis before he got “the call” from Billy Reay (Nov. 28, 1965) telling him that one of the Black Hawks defense men was hurt and to, “Get your ass to Chicago,” for a Sunday night game with the Canadiens. They lost 2-1 but Whitey played a hell of a game and assisted on the Chicago goal. He never went back to St. Louis and that year he made the NHL’s second All Star team. Four years later, Whitey was captain of the Chicago Black Hawks. In 1969 they added Bill White to the defense. He was a stay-at-home style defenseman and when coupled with Whitey’s offensive style of defense, they became one of the finest defensive tandems ever to play the game.

In 1968-69 Bobby Hull scored 58 goals and Whitey had 50 assists. In 1970-71, Bobby Hull scored 44 goals and Whitey had 44 assists. When clearing the puck from his own end, Whitey had an uncanny ability to put the puck on Hull’s stick just before he crossed the other team’s blueline – at full stride. It was one of the most beautiful things I ever saw... in hockey.

In those days they didn’t wear helmets or face shields so you had to have some hard bark on you to play at that level. Phil Russell who came to the Black Hawks as an NHL rookie in 1972-1973 laughs as he recalls getting some good advice from Whitey. Knowing that Phil would have to do some scrapping in his rookie year to prove that he belonged there, Whitey told him, “Look, you’re probably going to play 15 years in the NHL (he did) so there are two things you need to do. One: always shave before a game and two: cover your face in Vaseline. You tend to pick up a lot of nicks and cuts in this league. The Vaseline stops the bleeding and when you get in a fight, the fist slides right off your clean-shaven face.”

### **What he meant to the people of Sarnia/Lambton**

Whitey was the first guy from Sarnia ever to play a full season in the NHL. The fact that Sarnia had one of our own guys playing at an elite level in the NHL led the way for and inspired the greatest generation of hockey players ever to come from Sarnia/Lambton. Guys like: Tony and Ian McKegney, Mark, Dave and Dale Hunter, Dino Ciccarelli, Wayne Merrick, Billy Lohead, Shawn Burr, Bob Neely, Paul Ysebaert, Mike Hobin, Pat Verbeek, Kerry and Rick Fraser, Robbie Moore, Jerry Butler, Jamie Hislop, Bob Gould, John Van Boxmeer, Don Burgess, Pete Mara and Mike Crombeen were all inspired by Whitey’s persistence and determination to make it to “the Show.” He made them believe that it could happen.

Fittingly, Whitey was the first guy ever inducted into the Sarnia/Lambton Sports Hall of Fame. It is an opinion shared by many – myself included – that Whitey is not in the NHL hall of fame because he stuck up for himself and went to the WHA when they offered him more money and the small-minded, vindictive “people” who own and operate the NHL – most of whom never even played the game – want to punish him for doing so.

### **Then came the Russians**

The eight game Soviet/NHL Summit Series in 1972 was my most unforgettable “Canadian” experience and my all-time favourite hockey experience. For the previous nine years, the Soviet “amateur” army

hockey team had won the world hockey championship – a title Canada had won 19 times before that. But since we were not allowed to use any players that had ever played pro hockey, we were now at a distinct disadvantage since the ever-expanding NHL was providing a lot more jobs for our amateurs. In those days, Russia didn't have professional hockey so all their good hockey players were "drafted" into the Russian army and they beat the amateur/pro rap by claiming their players didn't get paid to play hockey, they got paid to be in the army. I think that's where the term "Communist bullshit" originated.

Canadians were frustrated by the fact that our national amateur teams were getting beat by Russia's professional "shamateur" teams so, when the NHL finally arranged to have an "exhibition" series using NHL players, it was the chance for us (Canada) to set the record straight on who the boss was when it came to playing hockey. At least that's what it was supposed to be. Nobody was expecting what happened next and it ultimately produced the most memorable hockey game ever played.

**Game 8** took place in Russia and everybody knows what happened there. We won and that's a whole other very beautiful and inspiring story. But what really impressed me the most – as I sat (alone) in my apartment watching that game – was the last minute. Canada had three future hall-of-famers on defense; Guy Lapointe, Serge Savard and Brad Park. They also had Bill White and Whitey Stapleton. In the last minute of such a game who do you think coach Harry Sinden put on the ice?

Now keep in mind that Harry had played with Whitey in Kingston – which I mentioned earlier. I think it speaks volumes that in probably the most famous minute of Canadian hockey ever played, Sinden had the most faith in Bill White (+7 for the series) and Whitey Stapleton (+6 for the series). They were on the ice with Henderson, Esposito and Cournoyer when the winning goal was scored and they were on the ice for the last 34 (and the longest 34) seconds of my life – as they stopped the Russians from tying it up which would have allowed them to claim the "title" based on the goals for and against record. Every "real" Canadian who was alive at that moment remembers where they were and how they felt when that happened.

For those who weren't born yet, it felt good... really good. That whole team was inducted into the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame.

Years later, I told Whitey – out at John's Restaurant over breakfast – how I had agonized over that series and how glad I was that we had won – not that "they had won" but rather, "we had won." I thanked him for his service and told him how proud we all were to have him represent the city of Sarnia with such distinction. He told me that while all this was going on back here, they had no sense of it. They were just over there alone in enemy territory playing for their personal pride as NHL hockey players and Canadians. They had no idea how much it really meant to us all back here until they got back home. He also confirmed for me – with a sly grin and a twinkle in his eye – that he did have the puck. What puck you ask? You're kidding me... right?

I think my generation – and probably a lot more who come after me – would be pleased to see the City of Sarnia re-name the Sarnia Arena in honour of Whitey Stapleton. It would be our way of remembering him and thanking him for the inspiration he provided to the hockey players who followed and to keep the memory of what has happened in that building alive for the hockey players yet to come; and most especially for the way he represented the City of Sarnia in 1972.

#### **Trivia Answer +**

Whitey was # 4 for the Bruins. I'm sure you know who the next # 4 was.

Actually, it was Bob McCord (63-64, 64-65). Then it was Albert Langlois (65-66). Then it was????

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