

Rex Tucker: Sports Talk

Hockey's People: Rex Tucker

By P. Adam Wells, Sports Talk

This issue of Hockey's People, like those before it, has been a pleasure to research and write.

Rex Tucker, director of Tucker Hockey Enterprises, just turned 43 the other day.

On the ice he moves like a 30 year old. He possesses blazing speed and demonstrates excellent skating technique.

Rex didn't always skate this well on artificial ice.

That's because he learned to skate on the natural harbour ice of Little Bay Island, on the north east coast of Newfoundland.

At age 7, he laced on his first pair of hand-me-down skates, complete with four or five extra pairs of socks so they would fit better.

A couple of months later, his father replaced the size fours with a second hand pair of snug-fitting size two Bauers, and Rex was off to the races.

During December and January, when the harbour ice grew to be a foot thick, the occasional winter rain would visit for a few hours until the temperature plummeted again and the storm blew through.

What was left in the wake of the rain and the temperature drop was the "rink of dreams"; pure glare ice for a couple of thousand feet in any direction to skate on, play shinny on, practice shooting on (better be accurate because rounding up the pucks was a big job and a good skate under those circumstances).

Rex said he was an A student, but other than studying and doing homework (and religiously watching Hockey Night in Canada), he spent every bit of his free time out on the harbour.... skating, shooting, and playing shinny when weather conditions allowed.

And when the harbour ice wasn't cooperating, Rex says there were often frozen fresh water ponds on the island to play on, too. He loved to skate so much that long after all the others had gone in from the cold he would stay out, knowing that the tradeoff would be the excruciatingly painful, and often tearful one-half hour spent thawing out toes, fingers and ears by the woodstove.

As the crow flies, Little Bay Island is only about a mile off the Newfoundland Coast, but it's a 45 minute ride by ferry. For all intents and purposes this ruled out community hockey for the fishing village's 400 residents. Undeterred, not having an artificial rink or hockey coach, Rex continued to play shinny hockey and skate long hours every winter until he was 17.

"Orr and Stanfield on the point, Esposito wins the draw, puck goes back to Orr on the point, Orr over to Stanfield, Stanfield back to Orr, Orr to Bucyk in the corner, Bucyk back to Orr, Orr with the shot...He scooores!" So vividly, does Rex recall the words of Bob Wilson, radio announcer of the WBZ Bruin Hockey Network, that as he repeats them you find yourself being transported to another time, when an avid young hockey fan tuned into the radio broadcasts because they brought the Bruin and Ranger games play-by-play sailing north across the cold Atlantic with crystal clarity to eager ears starved for hockey action and news.

Conversely, Rex can also recall the frustration over his inability, from time to time, to see the Hockey Night In Canada images being broadcast by CBC television every Saturday night due to bad weather conditions affecting the outdoor antenna. He recalls, like many of us, getting as close to the TV as possible to make sense of the very snowy objects moving about on the screen, while listening to the audio which was generally good no matter what the TV reception was like.

“I always wanted to play in the NHL, and was often kidded about my determination to do so by friends and town folks”, says Rex. As he recalls, “I knew many of the NHL player’s stats. I kept abreast of the scoring race and team stats by religiously maintaining and updating my own stat sheets as the information became available to me on the radio.”

So after ten years and thousands of hours of dedication to learning the sport of hockey on the local natural ice , Rex went off to Memorial University of Newfoundland in St John’s determined to make their men’s varsity hockey team. He was in for a rude awakening.

The thousands of hours that Rex had devoted to learning his craft on natural ice came back to haunt him. He discovered that he would have to learn to skate all over again on the softer, artificial ice. All of his natural grace and skating skill had seemed to desert him and he found himself floundering against players he felt he could take apart out on the harbour. It was a rude awakening and a bitter disappointment.

So Rex contented himself with playing intramural hockey and pursued his degree in business, four years later he graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce Degree. And off to Toronto he went.

But his love for hockey continued to haunt him. “When I was eleven years old, the Canada-Russia Hockey Summit Series riveted me and stirred my passion for the game. Then, I didn’t know how it worked, I just knew I wanted to be part of Team Canada.”

Tom Renney, VP of Player Development and Assistant Coach of the New York Rangers knows about Rex’s passion for the game, and had this to say when I spoke to him over the phone recently.

“Rex has an incredible passion and dedication for hockey, and his primary thrust is to help people who want to learn the game, no matter how old they are. And he goes about it quietly and without fanfare.”

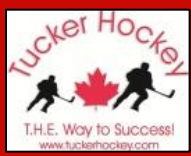
In Toronto, Rex landed a job with TransCanada Pipe Lines, doing budgeting, forecasting and performing financial planning for the next seven years. He fed his passion for the game by playing rec hockey and sharing Leafs season tickets. Said Rex, “Though my dream of making the NHL was shattered, I longed to be more deeply involved with hockey. I resolved to somehow combine my business education with hockey.”

After taking in much of the 1987 Canada Cup in Hamilton, Rex once again felt a rebirth and realized that his love for country and hockey were closer to his heart than all else and determined to move out of oil and gas industry and into the hockey business.

Ironically, after leaving TCPL he moved to the heart of oil country i.e. Calgary...the best hockey city in the world... to realize his hockey dreams in 1990.

After dedicating countless hours including researching and writing several business proposals in a concerted effort to become part of Hockey Canada, Rex found that his B. Comm degree and his ideas didn’t cut enough ice with the folks there. They wanted a stronger hockey background in their employee candidates.

For the next four years Rex immersed himself in the game of hockey. He blew a wad of money and hit every power skating school and pro-development camp going. He improved so much... he pursued a tryout with Tom Renney’s Canadian National Team in 1995 - as a 34 year old. He didn’t fulfill his goal, but Garth Marlarchuk, Western Regional Scout for the Toronto Maple



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Leafs , organizer of an elite hockey conditioning camp in Calgary for Pros, Semi Pro and Major Junior players made the comment: “That he didn’t look out of place out there’.

Over the next five years Rex coached Midget and Junior B hockey, added Coach of the Year honours in the Calgary Junior Hockey League, and NCCP Advanced Level I Coaching Certification to his resume, conducted coach clinics for Hockey Alberta, as well as taught power skating at a camp in the Czech Republic for five Summers among other achievements.

During this time, Rex kept the bills paid by doing sales work. And after ten years in the hockey trenches, Rex now knew he had other hockey options. He had a business degree, nearly 20 years of business experience and he now had a strong hockey background. Thus, Tucker Hockey Enterprises was born.

Rex’s long held dream of combining his business education with his love of hockey and country was now a reality. Rex had finally realized his ambition.

In 2000, with a business plan in hand, Rex set out to build Tucker Hockey Enterprises. His mandate? “Basically I’m teaching skating and hockey skills to anyone who loves the game and wants to improve, whether they are five or sixty-five. My most senior student to – date is 62!.” He has been so far successful. Last season, Rex was on the ice over 500 times instructing hockey programs for adults, youth , and providing 1 on 1 coaching, etc.”

Rex, on minor hockey: “ A hundred years from now, it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or what kind of car I drove... but the world me be a better place because I was important in the life of a child.”

Rex , on adult hockey: “ Would you believe I discovered the fountain of youth, to my surprise it was frozen and had a net on either end.”

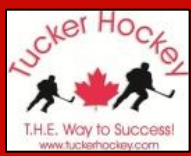
Rex on professional hockey: “Hockey is now all big business, driven by the almighty dollar, power and greed on both sides i.e. owners and players.

It’s almost like there’s going to have to be a correction in the market down the road or we will lose many existing franchises including the Flames. For instance, is Bobby Holik worth nine million dollars a season? When the Rangers come to town do you go to see Bobby Holik?

The owners aren’t abiding by or working within the parameters of the CBA. But it takes two to tango. The players and owners are like Michael Douglas and Kathleen Turner in the ‘War of the Roses’. They are tearing down the house....destroying the best game on the planet through greed and obstinacy - losing sight of the love and betterment of the game.

At one of my minor hockey power skating camps recently, I asked the group why skating was the most important skill in hockey. An eight year old replied, “Because, if I’m a better skater I’ll make more money!!” Greed is killing the game!”. I recently read Bruce Dowbiggin’s book, Money Players.. it’s very informative... an excellent read...the book quotes Rich Winter, player agent. Rich said, “ Gary Bettman keeps saying he wants to create an idiot – proof collective bargaining agreement this time out. Why doesn’t he just get rid of the idiots instead?” Many people, who are not as forthright with their thoughts as Mr. Winter, truly believe the wrong people are running professional hockey....our game!

Rex on the controversial subject of player evaluations at the community level: The biggest problem is that we don’t have control over our own game. For instance, there should be a universal evaluation system, sanctioned by Hockey Canada, and implemented across the nation.”



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Hockey fans, we all come to the game in different ways. But Rex Tucker, it is plain to see, certainly took the “road less traveled” on his journey to full-time hockey man.

I, for one, am glad he made that journey on the road less traveled. Rex Tucker is truly one of Hockey’s People. Good luck Tuck!! In closing, I’ll give the final words to Wally Kozak, Head Scout, Women’s Teams-Hockey Canada. “Rex Tucker is a dedicated coach and teacher of hockey. He has dedicated his life to the game and like all good hockey people is always learning and sharing his knowledge to help others and make the game better.”

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