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Howell: A Hockey Legend

Ben Higgs, Paul Platt

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On February 22, 2009, in a ceremony at the New York Rangers' arena, Madison Square Garden, the number 3 jersey of long time Rangers player, Hall of Famer, and Hamilton resident, Harry Howell, was retired where his NHL career began. Howell is a retired professional hockey player, who boasts a career of 21 years in the NHL. He was a stalwart defenseman, weighing 203 lbs and standing 6' 1" (3). During his career, Howell was particularly known for the consistency of his polished defense, which was appreciated by his coaches, teammates, and especially his goaltenders (7). Joe Pelletier, a hockey journalist, says, "He was always able to steer oncoming attackers to the boards and away from scoring spots" (7). Howell was key to each team he played with and he was nicknamed "Harry the Horse" because, with his skilled game, he often carried his team (8). From a simple beginning in the city of Hamilton, Howell advanced to have a phenomenal hockey career, during which, he received awards and trophies, and set records, but, most of all, he played his favorite game. This is his story.

Harry Howell was born Henry Vernon Howell in Hamilton, Ontario on December 28, 1932 (6, 9). He began to play hockey as a child with his friends (9). At the time, few arenas were available, so the enthusiastic youngsters literally hit the streets to play road hockey (9). During the winter, however, Howell and his friends frequented backyard rinks whenever possible to play their favorite game on ice (9). By the time Howell was eight years old, public outdoor rinks were being made in Hamilton's local parks (9). This is where he and his friends practiced until they were able to play bantam hockey in the Hamilton Police Minor system, where Howell was first coached (8). When he began to play midget hockey, Howell's skill began to set him apart from the rest of the team (9). By age fourteen, his talent was noticed by the NHL, which placed him on the Reserve List (9). Then, at age sixteen, in 1949, Howell was signed as a free

agent by the New York Rangers and given a position on Guelph's junior hockey team, which belonged to the Rangers (1, 6). He began in the Junior 'B' division, but was quickly moved to Guelph's Junior 'A' team, the Biltmores, in 1950 (9). In the 1951-1952 season, Howell helped the Guelph Biltmores win the Memorial Cup, as the Junior 'A' champions of Canada (1).

In 1952, at age 19, Howell made his NHL debut, becoming a professional hockey player for the Rangers (9). Lacking defensemen, due to injuries on the team, Frank Boucher, the Rangers' General Manager (GM), recruited Howell to play in the road game against Toronto on Oct. 18, 1952, after which he would return to the Biltmores (6). However, Howell played so well that the Rangers decided to keep him on the team (8). On his first shot, in this first game with the Rangers, Howell scored his first goal in the NHL against Harry Lumley (8).

Howell played for the Rangers for 17 years, spanning the seasons from 1952-1969 (6). In the 1955-1956 season, at the age of 22, Howell was made captain, becoming the youngest captain in the Rangers' history and in the NHL at the time (8). However, a humble man, feeling that he was not playing well, Howell relinquished the captain's 'C' two years later (9). Yet, Howell continued to be a leader and role model. He was given the responsibility of breaking in the rookie defensemen as they joined the team (1). Consequently, however, Howell had to drown his own ambitions for greatness, since his talent was often hidden as he covered the mistakes of these young players (1). But Howell's often imperceptible talent served to demonstrate his skill. It is no surprise that, in 1954, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1967, and 1968, he was chosen to play in the NHL All-Star Games (6). In the 1966-1967 season, Howell was selected to play to the First All-Star team (6).

During his career with the Rangers, Howell received many awards for his skill. In the 1963-1964 season, he received the team MVP award (6). He also received the Players' Player

Award twice, in the 1964-1965 and 1966-1967 seasons (6). Howell was one of the most popular players in the Rangers' history and in three consecutive seasons, from 1964 to 1967, he won the Fan Club's Frank Boucher Trophy, which was awarded to a player chosen by the fans (6). Only three other Rangers have matched this achievement (6). Perhaps Howell's greatest achievement, though, was his winning of the Norris Trophy, in the 1966-1967 season, as the top defenseman in the NHL (3). Interestingly, on winning the trophy, Howell prophetically stated, "I'm glad I won it this year. I think some other guy is going to win it for the next decade" (8). He was referring to Bobby Orr, who won the trophy for the next eight consecutive seasons. A dedicated player, Howell missed only 40 out of 1,200 regular-season games with the Rangers, setting a record, which still stands today, for the most games played with New York: 1,160 (6).

In 1969, Howell's back was giving out in rebellion to the years of abuse on the rink, which required that Howell receive spinal fusion surgery (8). Emile Francis, the Rangers GM, planned to give Howell a management role after his recovery, since the administration did not feel he should play hockey again (9). Howell refused to stop playing hockey, so he was traded to the Oakland Seals, at age 36, for the 1969-1970 season (5). Then, in February of 1971, he was traded to the Los Angeles Kings, where he remained until 1973, when he left the NHL to play in the World Hockey Association (WHA) (9). Howell joined the New York Golden Blades, which later became the San Diego Mariners, where he was quickly recruited as a player-coach (5, 9). In the 1975-1976 season, Howell was signed as a free agent by the Calgary Cowboys, where he concluded his career as a hockey player (9).

Over the span of his career, Howell played a total of 1,411 regular season NHL hockey games, scoring 94 goals and 324 assists for a total of 418 points (5). While in the WHA, Howell played 170 regular season games, acquiring 43 points, through 7 goals and 36 assists (9). He

holds the record for the sixth most NHL games played by a defenseman (3). Rightfully, he was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 1979 (6). After his retirement from pro hockey in 1976, Howell became assistant GM of the Cleveland Barons (6, 8). Two months later, Howell was awarded the role of GM (4). The team moved to Minnesota, becoming the North Stars in 1978, and Howell coached them during their 1978-1979 season (4). Afterwards, he became the team's head scout (4). A couple of years later, he became a scout for the Edmonton Oilers, with whom he won his first Stanley Cup, in 1990 (3, 8). It was not until 2004 that Howell fully retired.

As a player, Howell was tough, skilled, and consistent. He had no fear and he had an immense tolerance for pain (8). Although the players wore almost no equipment, compared to today's standards, Howell would block shots, sometimes almost as many as the goalie (8). Also, a "master of the poke check," Howell's defensive expertise made him a difficult opponent and many players attested that Howell was the defenseman they "most hate to play against" (1, 7). Another aspect of his skill was his adaptability. The rangers often lacked sufficient numbers of right-handed defensemen, so Howell, a lefty, would often fill in and play the right defense position (2). Additionally, Howell made few mistakes. One of the Rangers' GMs, Emile Francis, attested to this, saying, "Hockey is a game of mistakes, and Harry doesn't make many of them" (2). One of Howell's greatest attributes, though, was his consistency. One of the Rangers' coaches, Red Sullivan, said, "Harry never misses any games and he almost always plays well" (1). Emile Francis confirmed this: "The...quality of his game seldom varies. Some defensemen, they look like all-stars one night, or maybe for three games in a row, and then they tail off. But Harry, he's like the Rock of Gibraltar" (2).

In conclusion, born out of a love for the game from an early age, Harry Howell's hockey

skill led him through a career of 24 years as a professional player. During this time, Howell's proficiency was reflected in the numerous awards he received and later led him to be inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame. After retiring in 1976, Howell joined the hockey management, filling the roles of coach, GM, and scout. Today, Howell is actually retired. He lives in Hamilton once again, where he continues to fulfill his role as a star, Scott Radley says, in his humble way: "Every autograph request that shows up in the mail is returned, signed. Everybody who approaches him gets a smile and a kind word. Everybody" (8). In the words of his close friend and fellow teammate, Andy Bathgate, "He's never changed" (8). Between his skill and humble character, as one of Howell's coaches, Doug Harvey, once said, "They don't come much better than Harry" (1).

Note: The bibliography at the end of this paper offers several excellent sources through which to learn more about Harry Howell.

The following is an interview of Harry Howell, conducted by Ben Higgs and Paul Platt on Wednesday, March 25, 2009.

Why did you get into hockey?

“I was always a hockey fan and I really liked playing. I played bantam, midget and juvenile hockey in Hamilton. I was really interested in a hockey career from bantam on, which was when I was 12-14 years old. Back then, my uncle had season tickets for Maple Leaf Gardens. So, I was allowed to go and watch one game a month. I got really interested when I saw the NHLers play. Rocket Richard was my favourite player, He did a lot of good things. As it turned out, I ended up playing eight years against him later. He was my hero when I was a kid. But, I was hooked, once I started going to Leaf games. That’s when I decided I wanted to be an NHLer. No guarantees that I was going to be one, but that’s what I wanted to be.”

What are your major career highlights?

“The first one would be winning the Memorial Cup with the Guelph Biltmores, in the 1951-1952 season, and then having seven players from that team eventually play in the NHL. We were the best team in Canada.”

“My second major highlight was when I still had a year to go in junior hockey. I started the season in Guelph. But, I got a call from New York. The Rangers were on the road, starting their season, because Madison Square Garden brought in the rodeo as hockey season began, so the Rangers always had to start the season with road games. Anybody who’s had any experience will figure out that, when you start the season in everyone else’s home arena, you don’t do very well because they’re all pumped up for it. The Rangers had had three injuries in defense, and they ran out of defensemen. Frank Boucher was the GM and he said, ‘We’d like you to come

down and play a game in Toronto against the Leafs.' I was 19 years old, it was really something! So, I said, 'Sure, I'd love to come.' He said to me, 'You probably won't play very much. You'll be the fifth defenseman.' The fifth defenseman hardly ever plays. But, I played the second shift of the game partnered with Leo Reise, a veteran, and we played regular shifts for the rest of the game. Then, in the second period, the puck came along the boards to me, on my backhand. So, I just flipped it toward the net. I could see that the goalie was looking for the puck to come between his legs, but it flew right over his shoulder into the net. So, I got my first goal, in my first shot, in my first game. against Harry Lumley. That was quite a thrill! After that, they said I should come to New York and practice with the team, and then I could return to Guelph the next week. But, I never went back to Guelph. I signed an NHL contract and that was the end of junior hockey. I played with the Rangers for the next seventeen years."

Do you have any memorable stories involving your hockey career?

"One of the worst things that happened to us, and funniest also, was when we had a tremendous snowstorm in New York. All of the Rangers lived in Long Island. We got up in the morning and nothing was moving. There was a huge snowstorm along the entire East coast. The GM called us and said, 'You guys getting out okay?' We told him we couldn't go anywhere. He said, 'Call the fire department; call the police.' I knew they wouldn't come and get us. They didn't care about hockey players. Finally, the GM got some people to come in, get us, and take us to the subway, which would take us to Grand Central Station. We got on the train at Grand Central and normally it's a 4 hour trip to Boston, but we didn't get there until 8pm. The Bruins weren't even at the arena yet, because they were blocked off as well. We had 10 players that night: 1 goalie, 6 forwards and 3 defensemen. Now, they had a law in Massachusetts that everything had to be shut down by 11:45 on Saturday nights, The game had to be finished

before then, because the lights in the arena were going to be shut off. So, the referee called me over and said, 'Here's what we're going to do, we're going to play straight hockey. There'll be no off-sides, no penalties, and only 15 minutes between periods to clean the ice. That's it.' It was the cleanest game you ever saw. The linesmen turned their heads and the referee didn't see any penalties. We beat them 2-1. I scored one of the goals. It was so funny! No one even cared about the game, just about what we had all been through to get there. The game lasted an hour and thirty minutes and we were out of there by 11:45."

What is your most memorable place to play hockey?

"I would have to say the old Madison Square Garden. I played there for 15 years. Then, we moved to the new Madison Square Garden for my last two seasons. It's funny calling it new, because it's the oldest building in the league."

Who were the major supporters of your hockey career?

"My parents put up with hockey. They were determined that I was going to be a lawyer, because there hadn't been a lawyer in the family. Once I started junior hockey, though, I think they figured out that hockey would be my destiny. They went to all my games."

How did Hamilton help your hockey career?

"The city had the Hamilton Police Minor, which I played in. Bernie Arbour was a policeman and he became a good friend of me and my parents. There was a trophy from the Hamilton Police Minor Athletic Association for the player who was most proficient at baseball and hockey. I was the first winner. I was 15 years old."

What were some barriers that you had to overcome to be successful in the NHL?

"I had to get used to NHL play. I think it was getting used to the speed, size, and skill of the players in the NHL. I was asked to go to Cincinnati, the farm team of the Rangers, to play in

a minor league game. They said, 'We'll pay you \$50 for the game,' so I said, 'I'm there.' Even there, I was able to see such a difference between the juniors and the American Hockey League. Players were smarter and able to adapt quicker. Then, later, in the NHL, they had me doing a lot of different things. I had to adapt to the skill of the players around me."

What was it like playing hockey during World War II?

"I was playing bantam hockey when WWII ended, so I was quite young. We really didn't think much about the war. They turned off all the lights in Hamilton from 1940-1944, but I never saw a German bomber ever in Hamilton. We collected all kinds of stuff for the war effort. It was tough. You had coupons which allowed you to buy a certain amount of meat, milk, and sugar, and stuff. My grandfather had a farm, which helped us out a lot, but it was tough for people in the city who didn't have the resources we did."

Do you think hockey was a release for people at that time?

"I think so. There wasn't any television, so everybody listened to the radio. The only bad thing was that the games started at 8:30, and the radio broadcast didn't start until 9:00, after the evening show was done. By then, all the kids my age were asleep. Now, hockey takes precedence over everything else. My mother would come in and make sure my brother and I were still awake, or else she would turn off the radio. I think it was a release for everybody, because people loved their hockey. But, you never saw the players, except for the odd one in the paper. Even so, hockey gave people something to cheer about."

What did you do after you finished playing hockey?

"I played in the World Hockey Association, after 21 years in the NHL, for three years. That was enough of that. Some guys got paid, others didn't. I was fortunate. I got paid. Afterwards, I retired from playing. I was home for two weeks when I got a call from Billy

McCreary, who was a member of the Biltmore team when we won the Memorial Cup. He was the GM for Cleveland, the NHL team from Oakland. And he asked me to be assistant GM. I said, 'What time do you want me there?' So, as his assistant, I'd set up training camp, watch the guys play, and get their tickets for them, that kind of stuff. Three months later, I became the GM of Cleveland for the next three years. Later, we merged with Minnesota, which was going broke. Our owners took over Minnesota and we moved up there, because there were more fans there. Putting the two teams together, we went to the Stanley Cup finals against the Islanders in two seasons. That was quite a thrill too! Later, I became a pro scout for the Oilers. In fact, I was the first pro scout. Everyone else had scouts, but they were doing two jobs. Barry Fraser was chief scout for the Oilers and he suggested to the GM, 'We should have a pro scout and I have just the guy for you.' I accepted the job because I liked the organization. The Oilers had a tremendous GM. Glen Sather and Barry Fraser was the best chief scout. We won the Stanley Cup against the Islanders in 1990, which was a big thing for me! We had a heck of a party that night."

Since retiring from hockey, in 2004, what are you doing to keep busy?

"The reason I quit when I did was because of the lockout. I figured, after 54 years, it was time to quit. But, my wife loved it. I've been on seven cruises so far. I just go, she does all the planning. I now watch the Hamilton Bulldogs games and I am an Ambassador for them."

When you received the Norris Trophy, you said you were glad you won it then, because Bobby Orr would win it for the next decade. What was your experience with Bobby Orr?

"I played against him his first season. He was special. The Rangers were training in Kitchener and the Bruins, in Orr's rookie year, were training in London. My brother-in-law was playing for Boston. He phoned me and asked, 'Are you going to play in the exhibition game tonight?' I said, 'Ya.' He said, 'Wait till you see this kid. He plays a funny game. When he gets

the puck, he keeps it, at age 18.' I said, 'Ok, I've got to see this guy.' We won that game. But every time Orr got the puck, he outclassed everybody. There wasn't anybody even close to him. I've always said, if I was starting a team, he would be the first guy I would get and I would build the team around him."

What was it like to be inducted into the Heroes of Hamilton?

"It was a real thrill, especially when they put my banner up! It was an honour to have that happen! I think everyone whose name is up there is really pleased."

What impact do you want to have on Hamilton and what do you think your impact has been?

"I don't know if there's any impact at all. One thing that happened to me last November was that I was inducted into the Gallery of Distinction in Hamilton. That was a wonderful honour for me. There were five others inducted with me. I am invited to many banquets and golf tournaments and I am very impressed that, after expenses, the money is always donated to the needy charity."

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