

Remembering Art Coulter: Captain of the 1940 Stanley Cup champion New York Rangers – By Ty Dilello

Few were better at playing tough on the blueline than Art Coulter. The second captain in the history of the New York Rangers, Coulter played the game the way it was supposed to be played in his age, combining toughness with skill in the heyday of the Original Six.

“He was a superb ice general,” said his Rangers coach and teammate Frank Boucher. “He lent strength to our smaller players, always on the spot if opposing players tried to intimidate them, responding beautifully to new responsibilities. He was a well set up fellow, quite tall, very muscular without an ounce of fat.”

“Art Coulter was our best player,” Rangers teammate Clint Smith recalled. “He was a leader, like what the Rangers later had in Mark Messier. He could really carry the puck, but he had to head-man the puck. That’s the way we played.”



Art Coulter was born in Winnipeg on May 31, 1909. The middle boy of three brothers, Art learned to play hockey at The Forks, located at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, an experience he later described as “300 kids and one puck”. He grew up in the North End around Church Avenue and went to St. John’s College for a few years and played a lot of hockey at the old tiny indoor St. John’s Rink. Art also played junior hockey in the Winnipeg and District League for the North End-based Pilgrims Athletic Club where he began to make a name for himself in local hockey circles.

It was with the Pilgrims team that Coulter won his first hockey title. His team won the Manitoba Juvenile Hockey Championships in 1926-27 when Art was 17.

During the regular season, the Pilgrims defeated Winnipeg teams such as Columbus Club, Brooklands, Vics, Argos and Stonewall to put them in the city final against the Elmwood Millionaires.

The Pilgrims defeated Elmwood in a two-game total goals series at the Olympic Rink in front of 1000 fans to capture the city crown. Coulter and his team then progressed to the provincials, where they swiftly conquered Portage la Prairie, Sperling and Morden to reach the provincial final.

The provincial final was a one-game winner-take-all affair at the Amphitheatre between the Pilgrims and Shoal Lake. In the end, it wasn't much of a fight as Coulter and company cruised to a 13-0 win to claim the provincial title. The Pilgrims boasted a 10-2-1 record in total that year, scoring 76 goals while only allowing 17. Coulter scored six goals that season and was his team's top defenceman.



Art's older brother David won many titles in amateur boxing and wrestling and was the runner-up in qualifying for the 1928 Summer Olympics in heavyweight boxing. David had moved to Pittsburgh and then convinced his father that more opportunities existed for the family's automotive and hardware business in the United States, so the entire Coulter family moved to Pittsburgh in 1927.

In the United States now, Art got back into hockey with the Philadelphia Arrows of the Can-Am League in 1929. He spent two and a half seasons in Philadelphia before the NHL's Chicago Black Hawks got wind of the talented defenceman and signed him on the spot. Right from the get-go, Coulter's physical play and ability to handle the puck at a high pace made him the perfect defence partner for the burly veteran Taffy Abel.

Art's younger brother, Tom, also played hockey back in Winnipeg growing up, winning the Senior School Series Hockey Championship with St. John's College in 1927. He was also a notable track athlete. Tom came back to Manitoba in 1932 where he won the 400-meter hurdles event at the Canadian Championships which qualified him for the 1932 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. Later, Tom wanted to attend the University of Chicago to pursue a master's degree in economics, but he didn't have the funds to pay for his tuition. Art suggested his brother play professional hockey to pay for his schooling. After a season in the minors, Art and Tom became not only teammates, but a defence pairing in Chicago. That is until Tom got injured as a result of a freak collision with the great Howie Morenz, who was playing for the Black Hawks at the time, that broke his fibula bone. That was pretty much the end of Tom's hockey career.

Led by the heroic Charlie "Chuck" Gardiner in goal, the Chicago Black Hawks defeated the Detroit Red Wings three-games-to-one to win the 1934 Stanley Cup. For Art, it was the first big success he had in the league and it gave him lots of confidence going forward. The next season (1934-35) he was named a Second Team All-Star at the end of the year. The 5'11" Art Coulter was quickly becoming one of the most sturdy and dependable defencemen in the National Hockey League.



Bill MacKenzie, Baldy Northcott and Art Coulter outside of Baldy Northcott's Sporting Goods in Winnipeg

It should be said that Art meant a great deal to the Chicago Black Hawks organization when they surprisingly dealt him to the New York Rangers on January 15, 1936 for Earl Seibert. Coulter later said the trade came in the aftermath of sassing the Black Hawks owner when he came to the locker room after a game to scold some of his teammates.

Coming to New York would prove to be a really good thing for Coulter. Early on he thrived under the influence of star forward Bill Cook, who had been the captain since the team came into the league in 1926. "If you stepped out of line, he put you back," Coulter would later recall.

Cook retired from hockey at the age of forty partway through the 1936-37 season which left the captain slot open for the time being. It just so happened that at the time there was a rift going on between Rangers coach Lester Patrick and Art Coulter. "I asked Lester what was wrong between him and Art," teammate Frank Boucher recalled, "and he said he didn't seem to be able to get through to him. I suggested that Art, being a man of tall pride, should be made captain of the team. If Lester did this and took Art into his confidence, I was convinced the change would benefit Coulter psychologically."

Coach Lester Patrick agreed and the change seemed to do wonders for Art and the Rangers. With Coulter as captain, the Rangers won the Stanley Cup in 1940. Every Rangers player on that Cup winning team will tell you right away how amazing of a captain Art was. In fact, one tidbit stands out when I was researching his time as captain. Prior to a game against the Boston Bruins in the 1940 Stanley Cup semis, Art put a message in every player's dressing room stall: "Determination was the predominating factor in last year's Stanley Cup Champions. We have it too. Let's Go. Art Coulter."

In the 1940 Stanley Cup playoffs, the Rangers first defeated the top seeded Boston Bruins in six games, which put them in the Stanley Cup Final against the Toronto Maple Leafs. Tied two games apiece, New York won game five in double overtime and then followed it up with another overtime win in game six for their first Stanley Cup in seven years. It would also be the last Cup the Rangers would win until 1994. For Art, it was the pinnacle of his NHL career.



New York Rangers Captain Art Coulter being handed the 1940 Stanley Cup by NHL President Frank Calder

In Stan Fischler's 2015 book *New York Rangers: Greatest Moments and Players*, he tells a humorous story of Coulter during his Rangers heyday: "Tall and muscular and without a trace of fat, Coulter was teamed on defence with Lester Patrick's bruising son, Murray, also known as Muzz. Any forward who attempted to bisect that defence was guaranteed a surplus of black and blue marks.

"As tough as Coulter and Patrick were on the ice, they were sweethearts in civilized clothes. Both enjoyed the good life on Broadway, and Art in particular had a reputation as a free spender. During the Great Depression, the Rangers players were to travel in groups of four in taxis. One of them was named 'cab captain' and in charge of the fares. Coulter was one of those captains.

"One day, after the Rangers had completed a road trip, Patrick invited all his cab captains into his office so that he could review the various receipts that the players were required to obtain from the taxi drivers. Patrick was unmoved as he noted receipts ranging from six to eight dollars, but he did a double take when Coulter handed him a chit that totalled \$12.75.

"'Art,' Patrick inquired, 'Why is your bill so much large than the others?' 'Well, Lester,' Coulter replied, 'You've told us that we're in the big leagues now, so I tip like a big leaguer.' Patrick didn't bat an eyelash. 'That's very commendable, Art,' he shot back. 'But I don't know if the Rangers can afford big tippers like you.'

Art chuckled, 'Okay, Lester, you have nothing to worry about. I resign my cab captaincy.'"

Everything seemed to be going really well in New York for Coulter and the Rangers, but eventually all good things have to come to an end. With the breakout of World War II, Coulter joined the Coast Guard after the 1941-42 NHL season ended. Little did Art know that would be the end of his career in the National Hockey League. He played two seasons for the Coast Guard Cutters of the Eastern Amateur Hockey League (EAHL) and was nearly a point-per-game player in his time there. Those days with the Cutters would be the last form of competitive hockey that Art would play.

Coulter's last recorded hockey game was in 1944, but he formally retired after World War II ended. He finished with 112 points in 465 career NHL games. Over his eleven seasons in the National Hockey League he won two Stanley Cups and was named a Second Team All-Star on four occasions.

After he retired from hockey, Art owned and operated the Coulter White's hardware store in Coral Gables, Florida for a number of years as well as working in his family's importing business in Miami. It took awhile but Coulter was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 1974, thirty years after he retired from the game. In his later years, Art settled in Georgia and later Birmingham, Alabama, far away from the sport of hockey that he excelled at for many years. Art passed away in Mobile, Alabama on October 14, 2000 at the age of 91.

When Art was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1974, his Rangers teammate Muzz Patrick had this to say at the induction ceremony: "He was a real smart player. He hardly ever made a bad play or a mistake. And he had leadership abilities that made him a good captain. The rest of the guys respected him and looked up to him."

Always very opinionated throughout his life, Coulter found no one to praise among the hockey players of the newer NHL in the 1990's, saying they "just shoot the puck and chase it around like headless chickens." Later, when his old Ranger jersey had crumbled, he tossed it away and never asked the club

to replace it. He also found nothing good to say about the 1994 Stanley Cup-winning New York Rangers, instead giving praise to the Rangers of his time.

“All of ‘em are in the Hall of Fame,” Art said sternly. “They had brains, stick-handling and passing. They played the game like it should be played. Our old team that won the Stanley Cup could skate backwards blindfolded and whoop the Rangers they’ve got today.”

Here's to Art Coulter. A Winnipegger that captained the New York Rangers to the 1940 Stanley Cup.



Art Coulter & Muzz Patrick