



The World's Oldest Living Pro Hockey Player – By Ty Dilello

Wilf Beaulieu never played in the big leagues, but he shares a unique connection with the NHL – they both had a memorable rookie year in 1918. When he was born in Winnipeg on Sept. 25, 1918, the NHL was coming off its first season of 1917/18. At 101, Beaulieu is the world's oldest living former pro hockey player.

Today, Beaulieu lives in a retirement home in Winnipeg, watches hockey religiously and is active in social activities with residents. He even shares stories about his playing days in the 1940s. A team photo of the 1940/41 Pacific Coast League's Portland Buckaroos hangs proudly in his condo and is a daily reminder of his pro hockey career nearly 80 years ago.

Growing up in the St. Boniface neighborhood of Winnipeg, Beaulieu played baseball in the summer and hockey in the winter on the outdoor rink at Provencher School where he attended. Playing mates and friends included future NHLers Eddie and Mud Bruneteau, the latter remembered for ending the longest game in NHL history, scoring in the sixth overtime during the 1936 playoffs.

Even at 101, Beaulieu recalls going to the Amphitheatre in Winnipeg as a kid to watch teams like the Montreal Maroons, New York Americans, New York Rangers and Toronto Maple Leafs train in the 1920s and '30s. "I remember Lester Patrick coaching the players and what he would say to them," Beaulieu said. "And that would be in my head when I played on outdoor rinks. I imagined I was playing in the NHL. Bulls— carries a long way sometimes."

Beaulieu got his shot at playing pro late in 1940/41. Friends Marcel Dheere and Jim McFadden had signed with Portland at the start of the season. The Buckaroos also wanted Beaulieu, a center, but before the club could get ahold of him, he had left Winnipeg for a mining job in Larder Lake, Ont. Late in the season, the Buckaroos were desperate for manpower and McFadden tracked down Beaulieu by phone at the mine. The 22-year-old travelled first-class via train to the West Coast where he joined the Buckaroos for the remainder of the season, scoring one goal in nine games.

The 1940/41 Buckaroos were a motley crew of former and future NHL players. Coach Bobby Rowe was a hockey pioneer who had a solid pro career from 1901 to 1926. Players Vic Ripley, Louis Holmes, Eddie Ouellette, Red Conn and Ron Martin were former NHLers of the 1920s and '30s. McFadden won the Calder Trophy in 1948. "I had the skating," Beaulieu said. "I could skate and carry the puck, but when you got in the corners it was rough going and I was a smaller guy. They had me killing penalties. After a couple games, our coach Bobby Rowe came and gave me a pay increase to about \$100 a week."



While in Portland, Beaulieu met a future baseball legend who became a lifelong friend. “There was a guy around my age who practiced with us,” Beaulieu said. “His name was Johnny Pesky and that year he was drafted by the Boston Red Sox. He went on to become one of the top shortstops in the game. Johnny treated me like a king. I had gloves and baseballs autographed by the whole team like you wouldn’t believe.”

The Second World War hurt Beaulieu’s chances at making the NHL as he served in the Canadian army and spent a few years in England. He played for army teams against the likes of Hall of Famers Sid Abel and Turk Broda. After the war, Beaulieu played semi-pro for a few seasons in the Maritime leagues before returning to Manitoba where he worked as an immigration officer. He lost his wife of 67 years when Marguerite died in 2018 at 89. Together they had seven children, along with 13 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren.

Very active throughout his life, Beaulieu was throwing a baseball at 87 and riding a bicycle at 92. He attributes his longevity with being a lifelong jogger and always staying in shape. Still witty and possessing an amazing memory approaching his 102nd birthday, Beaulieu cheers on his hometown Jets and hopes to still be around when they win their first Stanley Cup.