

Chick Zamick

Canadian who played for Nottingham Panthers in the postwar heyday of English ice hockey

A Canadian who came to Britain after the Second World War, Victor "Chick" Zamick was one of a large number of his countrymen who sustained the fortunes of professional ice hockey in this country for a period of about 15 years after 1945. A Winnipeg man, he played for Nottingham Panthers, a team whose membership consisted very largely of players from his native city.

The British Ice Hockey Association had been founded in 1913, giving the sport, which was very much an import from North America, a governing body in the UK. A gold medal in the 1936 Winter Olympics, won by a British team of decidedly Canadian origin, fuelled interest in the game and from the mid-1930s professional teams were regularly featured in rinks in and around London. In such fabled venues as the Empire Pool, Wembley, Brighton Sports Stadium, the London Empress Hall, Haringay Arena and Streatam Ice Rink, teams drawing their strength from Canadian players made the game a headline affair in prewar England.

While the young Canadians who dominated the rosters were not skilled enough to earn a living in North American pro leagues, they were far better than anything Europe had to offer. Hockey might not get them to the National Hockey League but it was a way to skate away from the family farm or local nickel mine.

The English National League began as a seven-team loop, expanded to 11 in its second year of operation. The Second World War put the league, as it were, on ice, but the sport continued as Canadian servicemen, many of them NHL stars, arrived on these shores with their hockey kit in hand. Glad to get out of the drab service uniforms worn on duty, they donned hockey colours and played public games to boost morale.

A return to civilian life brought back the English pro loop as a seven-team operation in the autumn of 1946. There were five London-based squads, with others in Brighton and Nottingham. Wembley was home to the Monarchs and Lions, while Haringey hosted the Greyhounds and Racers. Streatam rounded out the London contingent.

Renamed the British National League in 1954, it would prove to be a stable, well-balanced affair that filled rinks regularly and presented skilled entertaining ice hockey to its patrons until winding up operations in 1960, ending what many long time fans consider to have been the Golden Age of British ice hockey.

Winnipeg was a cradle of players for the Nottingham Panthers. Their coach, Alec "Sandy" Archer, a member of the 1936 Olympic winners, was a Manitoba native who recruited heavily from his home town. Ten of the 12 men on the team's inaugural roster were from Winnipeg. The Panthers finished in last place in their inaugural season, winning only seven of the 36 games on their schedule.

Among the young reinforcements who came over to reverse this trend was Victor Zamick.

Victor "Chick" Zamick was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, in 1926. One of a dozen children born to Ukrainian parents, he grew up in the North End of the city, home to a largely Eastern European immigrant population not always made welcome by Winnipeggers of longer standing.

One place the young Zamick did fit in was on the ice. He earned a tryout with the American Hockey League's Cleveland Barons, a step below the NHL, but elected to play junior level hockey with the Saint Catherine's Teepees, a feeder club for the big league Chicago Blackhawks.

Before signing on to play overseas he had served in the Canadian Army, finding time to play for a military hockey team that made regular headlines in the Winnipeg Free Press. He arrived in Nottingham dressed in a borrowed suit

with £15 to his name. His nickname, "Chick", picked up in the streets of Winnipeg, had its origins in a fondness for the Chicklets brand of chewing gum.

Most Canadians played a few seasons and returned home, but Zamick made his life in Nottingham, becoming a respected member of the community as well as one of the great names of British ice hockey.

With another Winnipeg man, Les Strongman, on his left wing, Zamick at centre scored 65 goals and amassed 124 points, establishing himself as a potent offensive force.

He potted 80 the next season and scored 87 times in 1949-50. Only once did he fail to record 100 points, in 1951-52, when a broken arm hampered his performance. In all he amassed over 1,400 points in league play — the first professional anywhere to pile up a thousand.

"He was one helluva hockey player," said Gordie Callaghan (Streatham, 1950-53). "He could have made any team in the NHL as far as I'm concerned." His career led to comparisons with Detroit Red Wing legend, Gordie Howe, but former line mate Strongman now compares Zamick to a more recent ice icon. "Chick was strictly a smart player, more like Wayne Gretzky than Gordie Howe. He wasn't the type of player who picked up the puck in his own end and went through the whole team. His extent of play was more or less from our blue line into their end. He wasn't a backchecker at all but nobody complained about that with all the goal scoring he did."

"He wasn't a big guy but very brainy," said Stan DeQuoy (Earl's Court Rangers, Wembley Lions, 1948-52). "He worked in spurts and darts. He was always in the right place at the right time."

Playing a clean, gentlemanly brand of hockey based on skill rather than skulduggery, he was perfectly suited to a game free of the brawling that was accepted and often encouraged in North America.

In 1951 the Panthers captured their first league championship, with Zamick leading the scoring race, almost from the outset. Election to the British Hockey Hall of Fame followed, as did selection — over the footballer Tommy Lawton, no less — as Nottingham's Sportsman of the Year.

After eight years with the club, the perennial All-Star was named player-coach to start the 1955-56 season. After bringing that season's BNL championship to Nottingham, Zamick spent three years in Switzerland and guided Servette, an underdog Geneva B-level team, to the Swiss Cup in 1959.

The Panthers had folded while he was away so Zamick played briefly with other squads before hanging up his skates to concentrate on business concerns. These included Chick's Dry Cleaner, a hairdressing concern, an Italian takeaway restaurant and the Plains Squash Club.

When the Nottingham Ice Palace, which had opened in 1938, hosted its final hockey game in the spring of 2000, Zamick was among the guests. In 2005 a plaque in his honour was unveiled at the Nottingham Ice Centre, home of the English Elite Hockey League's present day Panthers.

Zamick is survived by his wife, Vera, and their four children.

Victor "Chick" Zamick, ice hockey player, was born on August 16, 1926. He died on October 8, 2007, aged 81