

THE WESTERN CANADA HARDY CUP FINAL



"HIT MEN DRESSED IN WHITE"

By virtue of their loss to the Innisfail Eagles in the Provincial Sr. 'A' Championship, the Pontiacs were awarded the Intermediate 'A' title, allowing them to enter the Hardy Cup playoffs.

They then met and defeated the B.C. champion Victoria Athletics. That victory entitled them to meet the winner of the Saskatchewan-Manitoba series, the Winnipeg North End Flyers, in the Western Canada Hardy Cup final.

Winnipeg's North End is a tough neighborhood. A recent article in Equinox magazine called the North End "one of the best known, least understood neighborhoods in Canada, a place as infamous for its criminals as it is famous for its celebrities". In an article in the Winnipeg Free Press four days before the series started, reporter Reyn Davis wrote:

"North End Flyers consider themselves the products of their environment. 'We're a hitting club,' explained Ray Boyko, one of the Flyers' coaches. 'We were all brought up that way. Maybe it's the neighborhood.'"

The Pontiacs flew off for Winnipeg on April 18, 1981 for the biggest series in the Club's history. The winner of the best of five series would win the Edmonton Journal Trophy and move on to face the Eastern Canada champion in a contest for the 'Stanley Cup' of Intermediate hockey - the Hardy Cup!

The North End Flyers had defeated the Saskatchewan champion Lloydminster Border Kings to move on to the Western finals. According to the Winnipeg Free Press, Border King goalie Herm Hordal had offered the Flyers a little insight into the Pontiacs:

"There are a lot of ex-college players who don't like to get hit."

For the Winnipeg team this would no doubt have caused great joy, because they loved to hit, and if what was said were true, then the Flyers could win the series by intimidation. Other than that little bit of information, the Free Press article continued,

"The opponent (Bonnyville) is a deep, dark mystery. About all that's known about the Bonnyville, Alta., Pontiacs is that they would gladly buy their way around the Flyers if they could. 'They wanted to buy the series,' said (Flyers coach) Boyko. 'But we said no. The guys think they can win it.'"

Boyko's thinking was all wrong about Bonnyville wanting to "buy" the series. The fact of the matter was that Bonnyville management never spoke to the Flyers. An offer had been made to the C.A.H.A. to host the series in Bonnyville if the Winnipeg team could not afford it, but it is ridiculous to think that a series can be "bought".

The Flyers were led by key players Wayne Viz-

naugh, their top scorer, goalie Norm Tesluck, defenseman Kerry Lischlea, Larry (Bobo) Bolonchuk, a former defenseman with the New York Rangers, Barry Marcheschuk, a hard-nosed former pro, and centreman Bob Ouellette.

The North End Flyers' style of hockey was not the style the Pontiacs were used to. While the Pontiacs depended on talent and finesse, the Flyers played intimidation hockey. They were a fairly big Club, very rough, and very good. They carried their sticks high and used them frequently for other purposes than playing the puck. The series was very chippy, and encouraged by some lax refereeing, the Flyers gooned their way to a series win, 3 games to 1.

The first game was played on April 17, 1981. By the middle of the second period Winnipeg was ahead 3-0. Doug Ewanowich scored at 14:05 of the second, assisted by Bob Foley. Winnipeg scored twice in the third period to the Pontiac's one goal by Mickey Fagnan from Denis Fagnan and Garth Campbell. The game ended 5-2 Winnipeg.

Game two was won by Bonnyville 4-3 with all four goals coming in the second period: (1) Gino Levesques (Abby Hebert, Maurice Sylvestre); (2) Denis Fagnan (Pat Joly); (3) Mickey Fagnan (Maurice Sylvestre, Warner Crawford); and (4) Maurice Sylvestre (Gino Levesques, Garry Foley). Winnipeg had two goals in the second and one in the third.

Game three was a blowout. By now the physical abuse was starting to take its toll on the Pontiacs. Several players were still hurting from the Victoria series and their injuries were made worse by the constant barrage of hits handed out by the Flyers. The Winnipeg Free Press reported:

"Not occasionally, but constantly, the Flyers hit the Alberta visitors with unfettered glee. Hardly a chance to hit was overlooked. Checks were finished completely, often as many as 80 or 90 a game."

Reporter Davis noted of the Flyers:

"They take fiendish delight in hitting, punctuating their checks with aggravating scowls and tugs and swats."

The final score was 9-2 Winnipeg, with Bonnyville's two goals coming from Mitch Sylvestre assisted by Doug Ewanowich and Mickey Fagnan. Game four was held April 20.

"Faced with elimination, the Pontiacs' survival instincts were aroused and they started aggressively if not abrasively." (Free Press)

The Pontiacs scored first at 0:49 seconds of the first period (Ewanowich from G. Foley), and again less than two minutes later (Levesque from Hebert), to take a quick lead. Before the period ended Winnipeg had scored twice and Bonnyville



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once more (Ewanowich from Levesque and Duterre), to lead 3-2. Winnipeg then responded with three goals in the second period and three more in the third to win the game 8-3.

"And so it was that the North End Flyers hit men dressed in white who leave their opponents black and blue, became the first Winnipeg team to win the Western Canadian Intermediate Hockey Championship. Joyously they paraded around Keewatin Arena, waving the Edmonton Journal Trophy, the symbol of their deed...The Western Challengers, Bonnyville Alberta Pontiacs, found themselves in a demolition derby. Sore and sad, they left the ice beaten by an 8-3 score that brought a merciful end to the best of five series after four games." (Free Press)

Both coaches offered their analysis of the series. North End Co-Coach Boyko offered the following:

"We wore them down. All the bumping and grinding took its toll. But I have to admit they surprised us coming out hitting like they did." (Free Press)

Pontiac Coach Rene Beaudin, himself a former North Ender, said:

"We had so many guys hurting. They wanted to win badly." (Free Press)

The Flyers were amused by one of the Bonnyville players calling them animals.

"Ever see an animal wearing a three-piece suit?"

asked Flyers leftwinger Pat Werestick, tugging the knot on his tie tight as he left the Arena. (Free Press)

The Pontiacs had lost their shot at the biggest prize in intermediate hockey, but were relieved the series was over. Monday morning six Bonnyville players were at the office of the Winnipeg Jets team doctor for an assortment of ailments.

When the team returned to Bonnyville complaining about the Winnipeg "thugs", their grumblings may have sounded like sour grapes. But an article that appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press, Monday, April 27, 1981 seemed to bear out the Pontiacs' expressions of disgust. The Flyers went on to meet the Charlottetown, P.E.I. Islanders, who had defeated Timmins, Ontario to take the Eastern Canadian Championship. Charlottetown defeated the Flyers in three games straight to take the Hardy Cup, but made their impressions of the Flyers quite clear to Free Press sports writer Reyn Davis.

Charlottetown goalie Yves Belanger, in speaking of the North End Flyers, noted: *"They deserved to lose, they played like monkeys. They had hate in their hearts."*

Charlottetown Coach Angus Carroll said: *"I'm glad the series ended when it did. I don't like their style of play. I was losing men every game."* There were four Islander players hurt in the series - two on crutches, one in hospital with a concussion and another with an eye injury. Carroll continued: *"I'm glad for hockey they lost."*

One of the owners of the Charlottetown Islanders was not quite so diplomatic: *"Who's running this outfit here?"* Glen Patterson asked. *"We didn't come this far to butcher people. We came here to play hockey."* Patterson said he would be glad to see the last of Manitoba. *"That Ontario border will look awfully good."*

The Flyers had very poor attendance at their games against Bonnyville and Charlottetown. By being hosts for both series the Flyers had to pay the visiting team's expenses. The Bonnyville series had left them financially strapped and the Charlottetown series broke them. They were bailed out by the Manitoba Amateur Hockey Association to the tune of \$10,000 so that they could complete the final series.

They survived though, and two years later won the Hardy Cup.

So ended one of the most important chapters in the Pontiacs' story. They had missed their shot at the title, but provided Bonnyville with one of its proudest moments in the history of local sports! ■