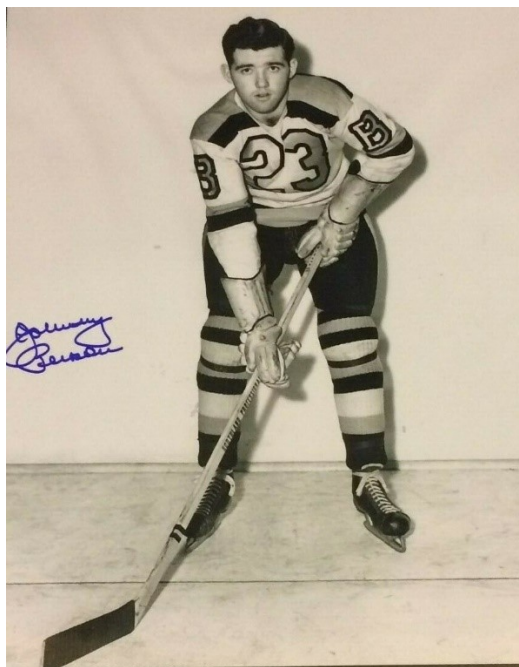


## REMEMBERING JOHNNY PEIRSON – BY TY DILELLO

*WINNIPEG-BORN JOHNNY PEIRSON PASSED AWAY AT THE AGE OF 95 ON APRIL 16, 2021. AT THE TIME OF HIS PASSING, HE WAS THE SECOND OLDEST-LIVING FORMER NHL PLAYER. THIS IS THE CHAPTER I HAD WRITTEN ABOUT HIM IN MY 2020 BOOK "MANITOBA HOCKEY: AN ORAL HISTORY."*



For four NHL seasons, from 1948-49 through 1951-52, only Ted Lindsay, Sid Abel and Gordie Howe scored more goals than Johnny Peirson's 88 he had in that time period. Over that stretch Peirson scored more goals than such better-known forwards as Ted Kennedy, Max Bentley, Bill Mosienko and Milt Schmidt.

"Peirson is one of those players with a knack of putting the puck into the net. He probably scores more goals more different ways than any player in the league," once recalled Lynn Patrick, former coach of the Boston Bruins.

"He may not have the power of Richard or Howe," recalled Patrick, "but he can carry the puck from end-to-end. He may not get as many tip-ins as Hergesheimer, but he gets them. He may not have a Geoffrion shot, but he has several good shots. He's a strong, graceful skater, an alert player, and he has that indefinable knack of putting the puck into the net. That's how Peirson scores the goals he does."

Peirson went on to have a remarkable eleven-year career in the National Hockey League as a strong scoring right-winger and would later work as a colour commentator for the Boston Bruins for a number of years.

Today, Johnny Peirson is one of the oldest living former NHL players. I've had the opportunity to talk with him on the phone a couple of times and I've always loved our conversations. He was vital in giving

me his insight on playing with Frank Brimsek when I wrote “Mr. Zero – The Frank Brimsek Story” back in 2015, so I thought I would call him up again when writing this book since he was originally a Winnipegger.

Johnny Peirson was born in Winnipeg on July 21<sup>st</sup>, 1925 so that makes him 95 years old today. When asked about being born in the prairies, the thing he remembered most about Winnipeg was that, “In the wintertime, you better be properly dressed.” Amen to that, Johnny.

“My father worked for the Hudson’s Bay Company in those days. I skated on the Assiniboine River and there were toboggan runs out there, but they also had some rinks and my mom was responsible for taking a bunch of kids out there on a regular basis. And then we skated on the river. That’s about all I can remember from my time in Winnipeg.”

Peirson and his family left Winnipeg in 1933 when he was eight years old. “After Winnipeg, we lived in a town that was completely surrounded by the city of Montreal called Westmount. In my day it was considered the English part of Quebec as English people started to migrate to Westmount and they had the NHL’s Montreal Maroons that were considered the English team in Montreal. In my day Montreal was twenty percent English and eighty percent French, but it was the twenty percent that ran the city pretty much in those days. I don’t think that’s the case today.”

Peirson went to Montreal Westmount Academy (Westmount High School today) and played for their hockey team. He later went to McGill University in Montreal as schooling was his number one priority over hockey.

During World War II, Johnny served in the Canadian Army, and it was an army acquaintance that first started him on his road to the NHL. One day after his discharge he met Don Penniston, who was coaching the Bruins farm team in Hershey. Penniston invited his army pal to Hershey where he impressed the Bruins scouting staff with his scoring prowess.

Peirson took up the offer because he figured a few extra dollars from playing pro hockey would help pay for his schooling. He was in for a surprise soon after he agreed to play with Hershey as a gambling scandal had erupted at the NHL level, displacing a number of players and opening the door for Johnny Peirson to join the Bruins full time.

“I gave it an opportunity for a year or two,” he recollected. “The money that was there was not very substantial, but I could save some money and if I didn’t get too far, I could always quit and go back to school.”

The 5’11”, 170-pound right-winger quickly evolved into a useful player for the Bruins offense who could backcheck, strive for team-oriented goals and harvest his share of points.

“The Bruins were in a transition period when I showed up,” recalled Peirson. “When I was there, rookies were seen and not heard. We spent time watching bags at train stations and other stuff like that. It was rare to have two or three rookies on a team at the start of the season. We had four, so you sort of behaved yourself.”

Peirson became a part of the Bruins team that featured the famous Kraut line of Milt Schmidt, Woody Dumart and Bobby Bauer. He also got to play with future Hall of Fame goalie Frank Brimsek of Eveleth, Minnesota.

“Brimmy had a great glove hand,” said Peirson. “He always gave the opposing forward the wide side on his glove hand. He made some saves that were incredible based on where he was situated. But then again, goaltending was so much different than what it is today. The slapshot was not even thought of back then, it was all wrist shots.”

“The first year I was with the Bruins I played more with Milt Schmidt and Woody Dumart on their Kraut line as Bobby Bauer had retired. So I played a little bit with them but I found it difficult with the style of play. They were tic-tac-toe kind of people and I had trouble fitting in, so they deleted me from the line after a while.”

“I then played with a couple of other young guys like myself. I played right wing, Paul Ronty at center, and Ken Smith played left wing. Smith had already been in the league for a couple of years so he was a veteran to balance it out while Ronty and myself were rookies.”



Gordie Howe and Johnny Peirson at the 1951 NHL All Star Game

In the early 1950's, Peirson later played on a line with Fleming Mackell and Ed Sandford. The line was instrumental in the Bruins upset of the powerhouse Detroit Red Wings in the 1953 playoffs. Boston eventually fell to the Montreal Canadiens in the Stanley Cup finals in five games. For Peirson, that would

be the closest he would ever come to the holy grail.

“John was the right wing on my line,” recalled Bruins teammate Ed Sandford. “He was an astute hockey player; a smart right-handed shot and a good skater who played his position well. I’d call him a thinking man’s hockey player-always watching what the other guy was doing to offset him. I liked playing with Peirson because I knew pretty well what he was going to do when we were on the ice. The line I played on with Johnny Peirson and Fleming Mackell got hot in the playoffs and we defended very well against the likes of Gordie Howe and Ted Lindsay.”

Johnny thrived in Boston and was one of the team’s more reliable forwards during the 1950’s. He scored 326 points in 545 games over eleven NHL seasons, all with the Boston Bruins, retiring at the conclusion of the 1957-58 season. And he reached the 20-goal plateau on four separate occasions which was a very solid achievement in those days. Johnny also played in both the 1950 and 1951 NHL All Star Games.



Johnny Peirson, Fleming Mackell, Sugar Jim Henry, Leo Labine

Despite all of his career accolades, the always humble Peirson told me that he was just an “above average player, but not great.”

“I would say I was above average because I was a better-balanced player, a forward that knew how to

back check. The only thing I wish I had done was to work more diligently on my upper body strength because I would've been a better player. I lost a lot of battles and wasn't able to do what I would like to have done from the point of view of strength. But I had some defensive skills as well as being able to find the net sometimes."

After his career was over, Peirson elected to stay in the game by getting into broadcasting. He started in 1969 as a colour commentator for the Bruins alongside Hall of Fame play-by-play announcer Fred Cusick.

Johnny spent more than twenty years working as a broadcaster before deciding to retire. Now living in Wayland, Mass., Johnny still follows hockey and especially his Boston Bruins, and catches up with the team from time to time.

"To give a difference of the game when I played to today," recalls Peirson, "the first few practices of the year there were no pucks. Now if you look at it today, the way they play the game is amazing. The skating is just unbelievable and the pace is remarkable, a little faster than when we played that's for sure."

"In my era, defensemen didn't rush like they do today. They went by the blueline and that would be amazing most of the time. They tended to stay at home and play defensively until Bobby Orr came in and changed the pace. That's when defensemen really started thinking about offense."

"I don't go to games anymore. Getting into Boston Garden is pretty tough for me at my age. I used to go fairly regularly but not anymore so I watch it on tv, and although I do enjoy it, some of the broadcasters drive me up the wall! Thankfully, although I do have my limitations, my health still seems to be alright. When you get to that stratosphere, each day is a remarkable thing."

Through it all, Peirson never forgot about his birthplace and his eight years in Winnipeg.

"I talk a lot about Winnipeg to this day. I know it's changed since I left in 1933 but it's a great city and it always has been. These days I live in Massachusetts in a small-town west of Boston called Wayland. Being out there I don't get to see too many Winnipeg Jets games on television so I don't really get to know the players, but watching them during their playoff run in 2018 was great and I was cheering for them."

When we wrapped up our call Johnny told me to stay happy because that's very important in life. "At this age I can pontificate," he said. "Here today and gone tomorrow."



Johnny Peirson alone with Terry Sawchuk

			REGULAR SEASON							PLAYOFFS				
Season	Club	League	GP	G	A	TP	PIM	+/-	GP	G	A	TP	PIM	
1943-44	Montreal Jr. Canadiens	QJHL	15	1	2	3	4		3	2	0	2	8	
1944-45														
1945-46	McGill Redmen	MCHL	6	13	5	18								
1946-47	Boston Bruins	NHL	5	0	0	0	0							
1946-47	Boston Olympics	EAHL	10	5	10	15	24							
1946-47	Hershey Bears	AHL	26	11	11	22	32		11	3	2	5	10	
1947-48	Boston Bruins	NHL	15	4	2	6	0		5	3	2	5	0	
1947-48	Hershey Bears	AHL	36	14	26	40	39							
1948-49	Boston Bruins	NHL	59	22	21	43	45		5	3	1	4	4	
1949-50	Boston Bruins	NHL	57	27	25	52	49							
1950-51	Boston Bruins	NHL	70	19	19	38	43		2	1	1	2	2	
1951-52	Boston Bruins	NHL	68	20	30	50	30		7	0	2	2	4	
1952-53	Boston Bruins	NHL	49	14	15	29	32		11	3	6	9	2	
1953-54	Boston Bruins	NHL	68	21	19	40	55		4	0	0	0	2	
1954-55														
1955-56	Boston Bruins	NHL	33	11	14	25	10							
1956-57	Boston Bruins	NHL	68	13	26	39	41		10	0	3	3	12	
1957-58	Boston Bruins	NHL	53	2	2	4	10		5	0	1	1	0	
NHL Totals			545	153	173	326	315		49	10	16	26	26	