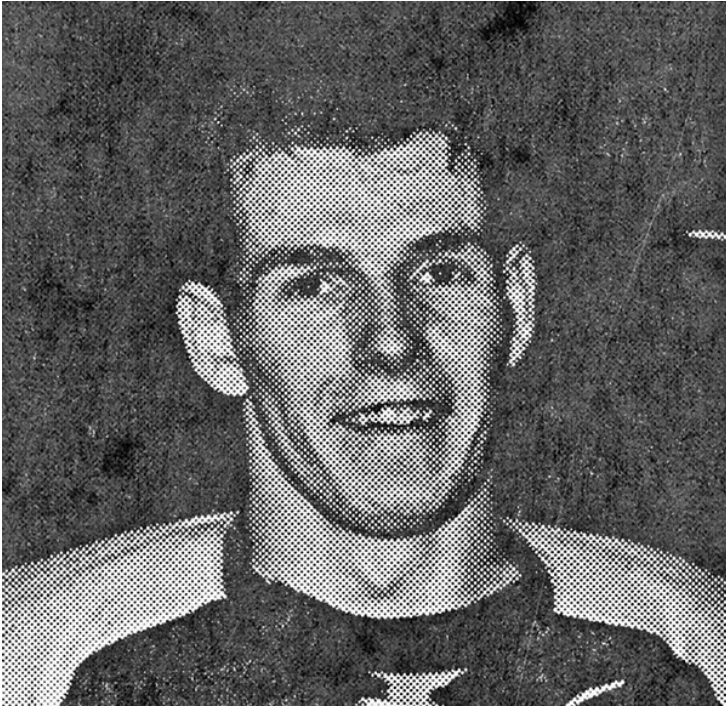


Aurora Sports Hall of Fame 2023 - Inductee Charles Leeming: Hockey and Baseball Legend a Lively Source of Local Sports History



Charles Leeming has seen oodles of changes in his hometown of Aurora in 73 years of residency, but one thing that has remained constant is his sense of humor.

When asked to describe the feeling he experienced when the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame called to confirm his 2023 induction, Leeming quipped in self-deprecation: "If you live in this Town long enough, they either bury you or they put you in the Hall of Fame."

The engaging raconteur even diminished the initial conversation he had with his wife when she reminded him, "Chuck, a woman from the Town called and said they want to put you in the Hall of Fame." Leeming's self-deprecatory reply: "What category?"

Leeming's modesty belies his impact on the early history of hockey in Aurora.

An original Aurora Tiger, Leeming recounted "scoring 40 goals in 35 games with the Junior B Tigers and playing on a great line with Ray Pugh and Gordon Burbidge. Ray led the league in points, Gord led the league in assists, and I led the league in goals." He added with a dash of ironic understatement that, "I could put the puck in the net."

The spry, sharp, and inspirational 80-year-old delineated an outstanding run he had with a series of Aurora teams throughout the 50s and 60s, which sounded like an engaging audiobook on local hockey history: "In 1955, our Bantam team—the Royal Lions—won the North York League championship. I always played up?it was a way to get better playing with and against older kids. Sometimes I'd have to play up two divisions because we had so few players in Aurora when the population was only 3,300. We won the Ontario championship in St. Mary's in 1956-57?it was the first time in ten years an Aurora hockey team won a title. In 1957-58, we were named the Unwanted Ugly Ducklings of Aurora because we couldn't find a sponsor after being nicknamed the Studebaker Larks by a local car dealership that sponsored us the year before. In 1959-60, we had a great season with the Junior B Aurora Bears. Dave Dryden was our goalie and Roger Neilson was our coach."

Although Leeming noted his connection to NHLers like Dryden and Neilson, his voice became animated with parental pride and joy when he discussed his favorite moment as a hockey player.

In 2017, my son Bob's team was short of players prior to an exhibition series in Europe so I was invited to play for the Canadian team and we played five games in five different countries together. I wound up being the second top scorer at the age of 74 playing against guys who were my son's age of 54. Any father should do this. Bob wore my old number 14 so, with my number taken, I chose 41. Bob and I played defense together?number 14 and 41 on the blue line. We had some injuries in Europe so they moved me to left wing and that's where I scored most of my goals as a 74-year-old. Playing hockey with my son in Europe was the highlight.?

As if this anecdote wasn't the hockey version of the magical moment shared by Ray and John Kinsella on a diamond in Iowa, Leeming acknowledged his own 'Field of Dreams' background in baseball as a multi-sport Auroran: 'I played ball in Aurora and Richmond Hill during my summers. When I came to Town, everybody played hockey in the winter and baseball in the summer. Aurora Glenville Dairy was our sponsor and we won the Ontario Men's Intermediate B championship. Frank Dynes down in Richmond Hill has all our championship trophies at his jewelry store. We won 2 of 3 Canadian championships in 1971, 1972, and 1973. The championship game we lost likely will not be repeated. We won our way into the championship and played 15 innings on a Sunday afternoon and into the evening tied at 0-0 and the game had to be postponed to another weekend. The next weekend, we resumed the championship game and played another 15 innings?and lost 1-0. A 30-inning national championship game that we lost due to a basepath error. That was tough.?

Leeming remembers with great sentimentality 'how much fun it was to play ball with great guys and winning Ontario and Canadian championships.?

'It was the same kind of relationship I enjoyed with my hockey teams, too, especially when the wives got along so well, too.?

The legendary two-sport athlete remembered when the Aurora Bears franchise moved to Schomberg, but he stayed in Aurora in 1961-62 to play for the newly-established Aurora Tigers.

'I was 19 years old, married, and had 2 kids. Cousins Dairy Bar and Jerry Wilson's Hardware sponsored us and provided babysitters so my wife could attend the games.?

Leeming's big 40-goal season with the Tigers caught the eye of pro hockey scouts and he was invited to 'play for the ECHL's Nashville Dixie Flyers who were willing to pay me \$140/week. I was 24-years-old and was ready to meet them in Rhode Island to join the team. When I asked them for a bit more money per week to support my wife and family, I got a telegram that told me not to report. It was just as well. I needed to be home with my wife and kids and that's the way it was back then with a six-team NHL?so few hockey jobs and the ECHL and AHL were the ways into the NHL, but they could say no because there were so many players to choose from.?

The reflective octogenarian does not seem to regret his near-miss with a pro hockey career in the pre-1967 era of the NHL and its farm teams system. At 35, Leeming started 'playing hockey in the Aurora Old Timers Hockey League and played for the next 45 years.?

One recurring theme that emerges in our hour-long phone call is Leeming's connections to people, places, and teams. Leeming's connection to the current Aurora Tigers remains strong and his assessment of Tigers' Governor Jim Thomson?a fellow 2023 Hall of Fame inductee?is a positive one.

'Jimmy Thomson seems to be a very decent guy and is running the club very well. We appreciated getting the Tigers Alumni jackets from him and participating in the Opening Ceremonies in September. The Tigers are a nice little team and any team is capable of winning a Canadian championship. I hope they do.?

Leeming attended a recent Tigers game against the high-flying Collingwood Blues and was a wee bit critical of the home team's

effort: ?I thought they skated really well against Collingwood, but they took too many penalties and it cost them.?

It's clear that Charles Leeming is connected to the here-and-now of Aurora hockey just as he is an invaluable link to the Town's hockey history-- having excelled as an outstanding and original Aurora Tiger who has donned both local hockey and baseball uniforms with equal pride and success since the 1950s.

By Jim Stewart