

Aurora Sports Hall of Fame 2023 - Inductee Jim Thomson: Former NHLer and Aurora Tigers? owner is Connected to Community



Aurora Tigers' owner Jim Thomson is as personable as he is fashionable, so when we see him resplendent in a gold, patterned blazer while serving as the fun-loving Emcee of Sport Aurora's Breakfast of Champions ceremony at Stonehaven on Sunday morning, it speaks volumes about his stylish connectivity to the Town of Aurora and its sporting community.

Thomson?born in Edmonton?is gracious enough to take time from his busy schedule as proprietor of JT Prospects to discuss the recent rising fortunes of his Aurora Tigers Junior A Hockey Club, his NHL career, and, more immediately, his upcoming induction into the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame.

It's evident that his Tigers are a labor of love and the former NHLer's connection to the game is still a vivid one.

Thomson?who was selected 185th overall by the Washington Capitals in the 1984 NHL Draft?played for the Caps, as well as the Hartford Whalers, New Jersey Devils, Los Angeles Kings, Ottawa Senators, and the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim. Of the six teams he played for, he cherished his two tours of duty with the Kings the most.

?The LA Kings was my favorite team to play for. Growing up in Edmonton and playing with all the ex-Oilers made it a great place for me. McSorley. Kurri. Coffey. Most of all, I wanted to play with Gretzky.?

Thomson's connection to ?The Great One? is evident in the inflection in his voice when he discusses a personal anecdote in which the NHL's all-time points leader was instrumental in getting him traded back to the Kings after Thomson had been selected by Ottawa in the expansion draft.

?When I was traded back from Ottawa to LA, I was told by the General Manager that it was Wayne who made the trade. Gretz told the Kings' management that I was good in the dressing room and looked after my teammates.?

It's evident that that was Thomson's code of honor as a player and continues to be as an owner of a hockey team.

When asked about what attributes he brought to the rink every day as an NHLer, his remarks segue nicely with Gretzky's assessment of Thomson thirty years ago.

‘I was all-in. I was a teammate that looked after his teammates. I think I was a selfless player who put my teammates first and, as an NHL veteran who was in 124 pro fights, I often found myself in situations where I had to take care of the people around me and my protective instincts would kick in. My family values and traditions of protecting one another transitioned to the hockey rink very seamlessly.’

Thomson reflected on the highlights of his NHL career and he takes us on a linear tour of magic moments that would inspire any aspiring Canadian hockey player.

‘My first highlight was when I got called up by the Washington Capitals. Bryan Murray asked me if I was nervous and I thought I’d been called up to get into a few tussles that night, but I was told that my job in my first NHL game was to cover Mario Lemieux.’

Thomson breaks from his story and we discuss his role in neutralizing a Top 3 player in NHL history.

‘I admired Mario's early retirement because he was tired of being held and slashed and then I really admired his ability to come back into the game after battling cancer. If he doesn't miss those games due to illness and protest [Lemieux famously referred to the NHL as ‘a garage league’ at one point], maybe he's the Number One scorer in NHL history.’

Thomson's connection to the game and its stars is passionate and his memory of his first goal is vivid.

‘My first was against a great goalie, Ed Belfour, at the old Chicago Stadium. What a place to play. A great Original Six arena.’

When I surrender the fact, with some trepidation, that I am a life-long Chicago Black Hawks fan, Thomson discusses the Blackhawks with whom he had tussles in the 80s and 90s, including ‘Stu ‘The Grim Reaper’ Grimson, Mike Peluso, and Dave Manson.’ After delineating these tough-as-nails Blackhawks, Thomson turns the tables on the interviewer and asks, ‘Who's the greatest all-time Blackhawk?’

I mention my favorite Blackhawk was Tony Esposito, I loved Bobby Hull as a player but his off-ice antics tarnished his legend, but I choose Jonathan Toews for transforming a moribund franchise into a three-time champion. The personable Thomson pauses and politely disagrees: ‘Patrick Kane had that superstar quality about him and he had that big game reputation. He's the best Blackhawk although Toews was great, too.’

When I mention that Prime Time Kane might not have had those opportunities to shine without the scoring and checking of guys like Toews and Bolland, the affable Thomson agrees and is fully engaged in our banter about the value of these kinds of players who definitely looked after their teammates.

When asked about his favorite teammates during his six-team NHL odyssey, Thomson supplies the names of two players almost immediately.

‘Rob Murphy in Ottawa. We were roommates when we played with the Senators and you get to know your roommate really well as an NHL player. Also, Shaun Van Allen from my days with Anaheim. You find that these close friends have a different level of connection. Shaun and Rob were such good guys. Shaun was so well-liked and cared about the people around him. He was a super family guy, too, and great husband to Colleen.’

The interview moves naturally to discussion of more local themes and Thomson acknowledges the good feelings connected not only with his NHL days, but with being inducted into the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame.

?I was taken back and honored. What struck me first was being recognized for my volunteer work in the community and how much time the Tigers contribute to events in the community. All the hours and years I put in with my team and family. The NHL career is almost irrelevant compared to the importance of community service.?

Thomson's connection to Aurora is evident in both his words and deeds. His connection to the Tigers, in some ways, runs even deeper and he disclosed his level of satisfaction and periodic frustration related to being the owner and Governor of the Town's Junior A hockey franchise.

?I'm very satisfied. Nine years ago, we knew what we were getting into when we took over the team. It's a little disappointing that the residents in the Town of Aurora are not supporting the team as they once did. When we took over the team, we would routinely draw 350 fans, but there are nights when we have trouble pushing 100. It's tough when we have small crowds for our home games. However, the Town of Aurora has been wonderfully supportive, especially the Mayor and his Council. It also makes it worthwhile to see how many others who really care about the Tigers. It would be great if we had more players like [current Tiger defenseman] Jack Rispin who told his dad when he was younger that he was going to be a Tiger one day and now Jack is on the team.

?It's satisfying to see a local player play for our team who has come through the local Tigers system. It's great to see our players do well in the schools that they go to after Junior A hockey and to see them with their own families when they return to visit is very satisfying, too.?

Whether it is his connection to his graduated Tigers players, his former NHL teammates and opponents, or local events for which he volunteers his services, it's evident that Jim Thomson's roots run deep in the various stops he has made in his personal and professional life. His life in Aurora has also become a rich one, indeed, and the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame has recognized in a timely and laudable manner Jim Thomson's notable contributions to the sporting life of his adopted Town.

By Jim Stewart