

Sports personalities return to roots in Aurora's Hometown Hockey



By Jake Courtepatte

He may be known now as the face of Roger's Hometown Hockey, or the host of CBC's Hockey Night in Canada, or simply as the man to Don Cherry's left, but for 23 years, Ron MacLean donned the referee's stripes.

Splitting his time between the broadcaster's suit and the zebra uniform in junior, minor pro, and university leagues across Canada, it was in the late nineties when his on-ice work first brought him working with the Junior A Aurora Tigers.

"When I officiated the Tigers, my officiating would take part in Newmarket or Richmond Hill for whatever reason," said MacLean in a phone interview. "Maybe the Tigers played home games on Saturday nights, and I'm usually a little preoccupied Saturday nights."

MacLean, of course, refers to his position as the head honcho of the famed Hockey Night in Canada broadcast, a post he held from 1986-2014, and again since 2016 after a brief restructuring stint.

Off the ice, his connections to the Town of Aurora may have played an even more significant role in his rise to the top of the broadcasting world: it was Bill Yuill, namesake to the St. Andrew's College varsity hockey captain's trophy presented each year, who first gave MacLean his first big break.

"He was a Medicine Hat, Alberta guy that hired me to do radio in Red Deer," said MacLean, who entered the business in 1978.

"He's a huge benefactor of St. Andrew's College, he loved the College and would get me to come and speak at it."

St. Andrew's was given the star treatment by MacLean and the Hometown Hockey crew in a segment during last weekend's broadcast from the Aurora Community Centre, where thousands poured in between the two-day festival before climaxing with the national broadcast Sunday evening.

"This is a privilege playing a game against UCC," said varsity hockey coach David Manning in the piece, speaking to his team before a game against Upper Canada College in November. "We've been playing these guys for 120 years. That's special. There aren't many rivalries in sport that are 120 years long, let alone hockey."

One of the top preparatory programs in the country, MacLean said he was able to catch a game on the road a few seasons back.

"It's a terrific program," said MacLean. "I know a lot of the York-Simcoe guys play there, they get recruited heavily, so that's a nice pipeline they have going there."

That pipeline often diverts in one of two directions: either to the Saints program, or that of the Junior A Aurora Tigers, who were also featured on the Sunday night broadcast.

Co-Host of Hometown Hockey Tara Sloane recounted the history of the franchise, calling it one of the most "storied teams in Canada", highlighted by future NHLers like Dominic Moore, who signed autographs throughout the day.

Thinking back to his refereeing days, MacLean recalled coach Brad Selwood, an ex-NHLer with one year behind the Aurora bench. He called that season, in 1997-98, his "glory years" of refereeing.

"I've been there a lot," said MacLean. "I've loved it each and every time."

That season happened to be one of two Moore spent with the Tigers, where he notched 112 points in 102 games with Aurora.

"You grow up always wanting to play a game seven in the NHL, and playing those games in Aurora, you're cherishing the opportunity," said Moore.

Fellow ex-NHLer Chris Kelly, who played with the Tigers one season prior to Moore joining the squad, happened to be there for the first season back as the Tigers, after a brief stint as the Aurora Eagles.

‘The town was pretty ecstatic that they finally went back to the Tigers,’ said Kelly in the broadcast, who helped the Tigers to their first league championship since 1967. ‘To win the championship in the first year back as the Tigers, it was pretty special, not only to us but I know to the town.’

This year's incarnation of the Tigers are not only replicating that success on the ice, but off the ice as well in their philanthropy. MacLean said he ‘really appreciated’ Tigers owner Jim Thomson and the Tigers bringing in former Humboldt Broncos players for the weekend, who were able to join MacLean and the CBC crew Saturday morning for a segment for that evening's HNIC broadcast. ‘That's our way of giving them a chance for a starring role in our broadcast,’ said MacLean.

No stranger to the media spotlight, MacLean and Thomson go back to Thomson's days with the Los Angeles Kings, when Thomson played the role of bodyguard to Wayne Gretzky.

‘Don was giving it to Wayne Gretzky, after Gretzky was saying we had to maybe think about getting fighting out of hockey.

Because of ESPN, and the American audience, we may have to eliminate hockey.

‘Don was outraged, but he didn't quite know how to say it, because you can't pull on Superman's cape. So, he went on the TV, and said ‘well, Wayne's right, and here come the dancers now. Hockey is a silver ballet. There's Marty McSorley, and Jim Thomson, and Kelly Hradey in his blue chiffon.’

Tigers forward Cael Cavallin joined MacLean and Sloane in the booth to announce the three stars of the Edmonton Oilers and Calgary Flames contest, as did Aurora Panther Emma Irwin, whose intermediate squad had the two hosts drop the puck on their Sunday matinee game against Kingston.

Sunday night's broadcast also opened with a touching tribute to John Abel, the former Aurora deputy mayor who passed away suddenly on December 6.

‘He was a driving force in Aurora sport,’ said Maclean. ‘We just want to extend (to his family) our condolences by singling you out at the start of the telecast.’