

Chapter 1

The 1960s:

Much Accomplished In A Short Time

The Woodstock Navy Vets success story as a Jr. C team began before they were even admitted into the OHA junior hockey ranks.

In the beginning, in 1964-65, it was a juvenile hockey team, sponsored by the Woodstock Navy Club. The juveniles went all the way to the Ontario Minor Hockey Association championship semi-finals in 1965-66 before losing to St. Catharines in overtime in the deciding game of a best-of-three series.

The team lost only five games in all of that season and had provided Woodstock with a taste of winning hockey that had not been present since the Woodstock Athletics senior teams had won big-time in the first two years of the 60s.

Since there is no level of play for hockey players who pass the legal age in juvenile, it seemed a shame to let this fine collection of hockey talent go their separate ways when it was felt they were on the verge of something very big.

Enter a human dynamo named Sam Keeping. A sports fan of the ultimate magnitude, he was also a "mover and shaker" as they say in today's parlance. An avid hockey fan, he attended many senior games at Woodstock's Perry Street Arena and had heard the cries following the 65-66 season. The fans in town wanted more from the Navy Vets. They wanted junior hockey.

Backed by the good wishes of the Navy Club and a hard-working core of executives and helpers, Keeping applied to get a Jr. B franchise for Woodstock. When that application was unsuccessful, they turned to the Jr. C level and were rewarded with a team in the Inter-County Jr. C Hockey League for the 1966-67 season. Other teams in that loop included the soon-to-be arch-rival Ingersoll Marlands, the Paris Mounties, the Dundas Merchants, the Simcoe Golden Blades, and the Brantford Chiefs.

On opening day, the Woodstock Navy Vets lined up to play Ingersoll on Sunday, October 23 in Ingersoll.

The line-up included goalies Art Fraser and Ken Kitching; defencemen Don Carter, Gary Pooley, Stan Murphy, Brian Shelton and Terry Rutherford; and forwards Gary Thorne, Scott Seagrist, Don Izzard Jr., Mike Fitzgerald, Fred Slater, Reg Eglisson, Jay Blackwood, Dan McMillan, Jim Wilder and Gene McLaren.

Greatest Game #1

The very first game that the Vets ever played in the Jr. C ranks was a portent of what was to come and therefore qualifies as one of their greatest.

I recall the game very well, since I was a goal judge for the game, played on a Sunday afternoon.

I recall the team coming onto the ice with great anticipation. Sam Keeping had kept his family on edge with his enthusiasm and nervous excitement. (I know, I was part of that family.)

The Vets hit the ice in their double-blue and-white uniforms. It was the culmination of many hours of work and preparation by the players and management as well.

The game went without a hitch. The Vets were "awesome" as the youth of today likes to put it. They rolled over Ingersoll by a score of 10-2 and an instant hero was created.

Fred Slater, a smooth-skating forward, exploded onto the Jr. C scene. He scored five goals and set up two others with such apparent ease that it seemed he didn't even break a sweat. It would be the high-water mark of his season, since he never again showed this kind of scoring knack. However, with his matinee idol good looks and ease of style, he was always a fan favorite. It was an auspicious debut in every sense.

The Navy Vets went on to record a very successful season as they finished second in the league standings in the regular season, ousted Ingersoll in the first round of the playoffs in five games and then topped the regular season champs from Dundas in the league finals in a seven-game showdown. In the final game, Scott Seagrist scored a pair of goals, defenceman Gary Pooley filled in as a forward due to a manpower shortage, and a bantam-aged Dave McLaren suited up and showed himself to be more than adequate as a blueliner.