

November 1, 2013

## Howie Meeker not dimmed by age

By ROY MacGREGOR

*Former NHL star and TV analyst has opinions on everything in hockey, from fighting and shot blocking, to ice surface and sticks*

By day, he loves what he sees.

From his living room window, he can watch sunlight play over the Strait of Georgia. He can catch sight of a bald eagle soaring high over the shoreline, sometimes see the churn of salmon as they gather for the fall run up nearby French Creek.

By night, he can barely stand what he sees.

He tried to stop watching several years ago, and instantly his sleep improved, but of late he has found his eyes drawn back to the late night scores and highlights of NHL hockey, and he can only wince.

Howie Meeker turns 90 on Monday. He can still shout "Golly Gee Willikers" as well as he ever could in the 1970s and 1980s, when his enthusiasms and criticisms of the national game became a CBC fixture. Meeker was renowned for his beloved telestrator and, most of all, for a voice and expressions – "Hold it right there!" "Jiminy Cricket!" – that made him as famous then as Don Cherry is today.

Today, Howie Meeker is not as opinionated as he once was.

He is much more opinionated.

Flow: "They dump it out, they dump it in. Lots of times, there is absolutely no reason for them to be dumping it in."

Shot blocking: "It should be a penalty. If you leave your feet to go down to stop a shot, it should be a penalty. If you go down to block a pass, no problem, but to me it's obvious that it should be a two-minute penalty if you go down to block a shot on goal. This isn't entertainment. It just makes for dull hockey. It's crazy. The NHL needs goals and here they're doing everything possible to stop goals from going in. They've got to be out of their minds."

Fighting: "The game doesn't need it. I can't understand it. There's just no need at all. You don't need fighting. The playoffs are wonderful entertainment – and there's no fighting. Fighters are like the dinosaurs, they are history."

Goon players and staged fighting: "It degrades the team. It degrades hockey. I just turn it off."

Scrams and pushing after checks and scrambles: "I'd send them to the [penalty] box. 'Get your ass off the ice!'"

Size of ice surface: "They've got to be bigger, that's the problem. I tried to tell them. I sent [former NHL president Clarence Campbell] a letter advising the league to build rinks so the ice surface could be made larger if you ever need it. They wouldn't listen. Players today are so big, so strong. I was 5

[foot] 9. Half the players were 160 [to] 175 pounds. [1950s Toronto Maple Leafs forward] Harry Watson was a giant at 200 pounds."

Goaltender equipment: "You take a skinny guy 160, 170 pounds and you turn him into Superman. It's almost as if they double in size when they put that equipment on."

Sticks: "I'd cut every player's stick by three or four inches. They have them long for defence, but the result is no one ever has the full blade along the ice. Pucks go under the toe, under the heel."

On and on the thoughts pour out, including some sure-to-be controversial observations on minor hockey.

As far as the NHL goes, though, Meeker would instantly institute far-more severe penalties for intentional head shots – penalties so severe the issue would be rendered moot in a short time. He would not only love to see fewer teams in the current 30-franchise league, he believes there should be fewer players per team: Two talented lines capable of scoring, a third line able to check and contribute in a meaningful way, four defencemen, with a fifth as spare in case of injury or fatigue.

He talks for nearly two hours and does not himself tire, or wander. His health is good, but for a wonky leg that periodically quits on him – somewhat ironic for a man who preached: "Keep your feet moving!"

"Doctors had me wired up like I was going to the moon," he says of a recent series of tests to determine what was causing the problem.

Meeker gardens with his wife, Leah, in their long-time home in Parksville, along B.C.'s Sunshine Coast. He fishes for salmon. They do charity work for guide dogs. They spend time with their nearby grandchildren, both in minor hockey. And they travel, most recently to their old home in Newfoundland where, on Canada Day, they held an early 90th birthday celebration at the Capital Hotel in St. John's.

"They had 150 name tags ready," Meeker says, "and they ran out in less than hour."

Was there a name tag set aside for him? "Hell no!"

All Howie Meeker's life he has been associated with the winter game.

He was a junior star in Kitchener and Stratford, Ont. He joined the Maple Leafs in 1946, after three years in the army and time spent recovering from injury – and promptly won NHL rookie of the year honours. He tied an NHL rookie record the night he scored five goals against the Chicago Blackhawks.

Remarkably, Meeker won Stanley Cups his first three seasons, and a fourth before retiring from the game after only eight seasons. He briefly served as a Conservative member of Parliament while still playing and later became head coach and then general manager of the Maple Leafs. He ran hockey schools, put out instructional manuals and film, served as *Hockey Night in Canada's* pre-eminent analyst and continued playing recreational hockey well beyond becoming a senior citizen.

It was while he was in Parliament that he became concerned about the state of minor hockey in the country and what he believed was poor to non-existent coaching for kids who were basically teaching the game to themselves on outdoor rinks.

"I grew sick and tired of them bringing in foreign coaches in all other sports but in our own minor hockey there was no coaching," he says.

Three times, to three different governments, he proposed a sports council that could formulate and spread "a national minor-hockey philosophy." He imagined various universities could establish sports departments that could "teach the teachers to teach" in one- or two-year course. It could be funded, he argued, one-third by the federal government, one-third provincial, one-third municipal. But there was no interest.

"I may as well have been farting against thunder," he says.

Today, he bemoans the state of minor hockey and minor-hockey coaching. "Kids today can't skate," he says, "can't handle the puck, can't turn, can't think."

Canadian hockey organizations today, he believes, cater to the good players, the ones who will one day fill the junior ranks and perhaps reach the NHL – a percentage so small he believes the country is in a foolish chase.

Two of his grandchildren, 15-year-old Courtney and 12-year-old Jordan, are playing minor hockey and, over Thanksgiving weekend, nearly-90-year-old Howie Meeker took them out in the driveway so the young girl and boy could show their stuff. While he loves his grandchildren, he wasn't impressed for what the youngsters are getting for registration fees that cost the family more than \$1,000.

"They're not teaching them anything," he says. "There's no such thing as coaching. There's guys on the ice, but most have never played a game of hockey in their life."

He would stress skating and skills and puck handling. He would never allow 12-year-olds to play on a full ice surface. Half-ice at most, one-third the ice surface would be preferable. And working with coaches who have the proper training, not just a group of volunteer dads.

"We have to train people to teach skills," he says.

And a skilled hockey mind, he believes, is as important, and as teachable, as skilled skating or stickhandling. "They can skate and check," he says, "but they're not creative. Holy jumpin' but they are not creative."

He would cut down sharply on the number of games played and make practices the main emphasis – even if parents complained. "That's all the kids do," he says. "They play games. Practice is a waste of time."

He would put a fast end to costly travel and tournaments for minor-hockey players. He would discourage, completely, the current mania for expensive "hockey academies." As he graphically puts it: "It's crazy – you can't make chicken salad out of chicken [expletive]."

And he would put an end to the arbitrary divisions that decide minor-hockey levels by birth date: "It's got to be by size and skill."

Years ago, Meeker was among the first to argue in favour of taking checking out of minor hockey in favour of skill development. He once said there should be no checking until 14, but today, he has changed his mind on that: he would raise the no-checking rule to 16.

"You have to do that," he says, "so the little guy isn't afraid to handle the puck. Once they're 16, the junior teams can draft the players they want – and play any goddam rules they want."

Something happened to Howie Meeker when he became a senior citizen. He became convinced the game he loves is not for the elite but "for life." Letting youngsters play through the critical drop-out years, 14 to 16, would keep them in hockey "so that when they're 60 years old, they can still be playing the game."

Looking back, the 90-year-old believes he can pinpoint exactly when he truly fell in love with this game. Not when he was the teenage star in Stratford. Not when he was rookie of the year in the NHL. But when turned 65.

He was a senior citizen and he found a group of old-timer players around Parksville he could play with – make plays, try plays, be creative, get to know each other perfectly – and it made him think back more than four decades to when he was a young man with the Maple Leafs.

"I remember one game we were playing the Montreal Canadiens," he says, "and I was on the bench and I couldn't help but notice that half the Montreal players were smiling as they played. They were having fun!"

"I turned to my linemate, Vic Lynn, and said: 'Look at those crazy buggers. This is war! And they're having fun!'"

Forty years later, in a small rink in Parksville, B.C., with not a soul in the stands, Howie Meeker finally found that same fun.

"At age 65, my feet slowed down to match my brain," he says. "And in old-timers' hockey I found four more skilled old farts to play with."

"And you know what? I wouldn't exchange the years we played together anything I've experienced in hockey – Stanley Cups and all."

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