

'GOOD GOD, A GOLD!'



A TEAM FORMED so Canada would be represented at the 1948 Olympics, the RCAF Flyers skated off with the gold medal. Team is named on page 12.

In 1948, Dr. Watson's RCAF Flyers crashed into Olympic hockey history

BY RICHARD SUTHERLAND*

THEY'RE OLDER and greyer now, those fleet-footed skaters of yesteryear. For a few the final overtime whistle has sounded. But those who survive and who can make it are coming to Calgary—from all over this land they are coming—the flying Canadians who gave this country its most unlikely hockey triumph ever.

In February the organizers of the Calgary Winter Games salute the Cinderella team—the RCAF Flyers who barnstormed their way on a wing and a prayer into the finals of the hockey tournament at the 1948 Winter Olympics.

And struck gold. When nobody expected Canada to have a team there at all.

Dr. Sandy Watson is certainly going to be taking a few days off from his Ottawa practice for the 40th anniversary commemoration. Ophthalmologist Dr. Watson was manager, doctor and godfather of the team.

It was Dr. Watson's willingness to

go to the boards with the Canadian government and the Olympic organizers that got the RCAF Flyers off the ground and on to a victory roll.

It began when Dr. Watson opened the newspaper one morning in late summer 1947. The front page headline read: "CANADA WILL NOT BE REPRESENTED IN OLYMPIC HOCKEY AT ST. MORITZ IN 1948."

Dr. Watson read on and, in a quiet, understated Canadian way of course, began to get mad.

"I said, 'We can't get a hockey team? Nuts to that!'" Dr. Watson remembered in a telephone interview with The Medical Post.

There had been no Olympic Games during the war years of 1940 and 1944. The first postwar Winter Games were to be held in St. Moritz, Switzerland, in February 1948. In the late summer of 1947, the International Ice Hockey Federation issued an invitation to all affiliated countries to indicate their intentions to send a hockey team to the

Winter Games in St. Moritz in 1948.

Unfortunately the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association (CAHA) could not find a team of adequate calibre whose players could afford to take three months off work to play in the Olympics plus complete a lengthy exhibition tour of Europe.

Dr. Watson thought the CAHA was exaggerating the difficulties of playing the Europeans. Indeed he felt any good Senior A Canadian hockey team would have a good chance at a medal. How could he be so sure? That went back to his war experience.

DR. WATSON had enlisted in the RCAF Medical Service in London, England, in December 1944. Because he was unmarried and a latecomer to the services he was well down on the list of servicemen who were being shipped back to Canada on a point basis according to length of service, marital status etc.

Among the servicemen waiting to be shipped back there were a lot of hockey players, Dr. Watson recalled. He had been an enthusiastic (but ungifted) defenceman in various bush league teams in his native Port Dover, Ont.

So with time on his hands Dr. Watson turned himself into a hockey manager and assembled a team of RCAF men that played Canadian army teams in the Wembley Arena in London.

Back to Ottawa came Dr. Watson, still attached to the RCAF—he was the last Air Force Medical Officer to return. With him came the nucleus of the Flyers. While Dr. Watson and his team awaited final discharge they thought they might have a season playing in the Eastern Canada Senior League. Then came that dramatic newspaper headline. With time on his hands and hockey in his blood Dr. Watson went to work.

First he contacted the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association. Did



Dr. SANDY Watson presents the World Amateur Hockey Championship Trophy to Air Marshal Curtis, Chief of Staff, March 1948.

they want a team to to represent Canada? If so the RCAF just happened to have one. Dazzled by Dr. Watson's skilful PR puck handling CAHA president George Dudley gave his blessing to the Flyers.

That done Dr. Watson stormed over the blueline of the government and RCAF bureaucracies. Chief of the Air Staff, Air Marshal Curtis and Minister of National Defence, Brooke Claxton were to be two key behind-the-scenes players in the swiftly developing play.

In early October, with less than three months to go, messages were sent to all Sports Officers on RCAF stations inviting all hockey players with Junior A or higher levels of experience to travel to Ottawa to try out for the team.

Some 75 did so and were carefully graded by Dr. Watson, by former NHL great George "Buck" Boucher and his son Frank who had been named coach of the Olympic team. But still disaster loomed. In early December the Flyers were vanquished by a lopsided score in an exhibition game against the McGill University team. It was back to the drawing board for Dr. Watson.

He was already under heavy pressure. In addition to carrying out his medical duties he was involved in administrative and organizational roles preparing the team for its voyage to Switzerland. Since Air Force funds were not available Dr. Watson also had to persuade various companies to provide uniforms, skates, sweaters, sticks etc. free of charge.

Working late into the evening, frequently sleeping in his office, his calls to Frank Selke Sr. manager of the Montreal Canadiens, Frank Boucher, manager of the New York Rangers and to Cecil Duncan, president of the Ottawa and District Hockey Association produced results. Over the next two weeks new players arrived, others were dropped, winning exhibition games were played and the final team roster determined.

The ultimate power play utilized by Dr. Watson in co-operation with the Ministry of Defence was to make instant short-term servicemen out of promising civilian players. "We got four or five that way!

"We just put the thing together overnight almost," said Dr. Watson. "Our guys had played together as a team for something less than three weeks before we left. The goaltender I never even met until we reached Europe."

What happened was that the regular goalie went down with a case of lung congestion 48 hours before the team was due to leave. Dr. Watson called Maple Leaf Gardens for advice. They put him on to a player they considered the best amateur goalkeeper in Toronto—Murray Dowe.

"I called him one night about eleven or twelve and said 'How would you like to come to the Olympics?'" said Dr. Watson. "He worked for the TTC (Toronto Transit Commission) and he said 'They'll never let me go.'

"So I called his boss that same night and he said OK. So the kid was brought up to Ottawa at six the next morning and we put him in the air force, in uniform and everything else, and he left that same afternoon for Europe."

Goaltender Dowe had five shutouts in the eight Olympic hockey games and was one of the real stars of the team.

But that was in the future. As the team got ready to leave, Canada was definitely not impressed.

"Everyone said we'd never win," Dr. Watson recalled. The headline in the *Ottawa Citizen* the day they left summed up the opinion of the sporting press: "THE FLYERS, LIKE THE ARABS, ARE FOLDING THEIR TENTS AND SILENTLY STEALING AWAY."

This bad press preceded the team to England where, on arrival, Dr. Watson was told that the post-Olympic tour had been cut back. However, after a win against two Canadian teams playing in an English League, those cuts were quickly rescinded.

Despite a 5-3 loss to "the most powerful Canadian club in Europe"—the Racing Club of Paris—a few nights later in Paris, Olympic hopes rose in Canada where the House of Commons had just approved legislation making "O Canada" our national anthem!

Arriving in Zurich the next day, Dr. (see *The Swiss*—page 12)

The Swiss joyfully, unknowingly played the wrong anthem

(from page 11)

Watson was surprised to receive a call from the head of the Swiss Ice Hockey Federation asking him to meet him at the radio studio. There the Swiss proudly announced that, aware that Canada had only yesterday adopted a new national anthem, he had telephoned the Canadian Embassy in Berne and asked for the music for the new national anthem.

Although they didn't have such music at hand, a secretary said she knew the music and would sing it over the phone. As she did, a member of the Symphony Orchestra of Switzerland transcribed her song into musical notes. That morning the music had been orchestrated, recorded and was played for Dr. Watson. Unfortunately it was "The Maple Leaf Forever." Obviously that secretary at the embas-

sy hadn't known of the new National Anthem "O Canada."

In view of the joy that the Swiss demonstrated in such a performance, the Canadians didn't have the heart to tell them—wrong anthem. Hence wherever the team played in Switzerland, and particularly when the Canadian flag was raised after we won the Olympic championship, it was not our new national anthem which was played but "The Maple Leaf Forever."

It is a vanished world now, the Olympic hockey scene of the late 1940s. The Russians did not contribute a team. They were on the sidelines watching, recalled Dr. Watson, wondering if they should take the plunge and enter next time. Canada had to play Czechoslovakia, Italy, Poland, Switzerland and Sweden as well as the defending gold medal team which had

won in 1936—England!

Compared to the Canadian game the Olympic style of hockey was devoid of body contact. The Flyers took four times as many penalties as any other team in the competition. Some of the rules were curious.

"For example you couldn't shoot the puck if you were lying on the ice," Dr. Watson said. "One of our forwards, George Mara was tripped playing Italy and as he fell on the ice he shot the puck into the net. The goal was disallowed and we were given a penalty."

What really gave the Europeans fits though was the Canadian attitude to injuries.

“I WAS AN experienced hockey physician by that time. If a fellow got cut on the face I would use a sterile kit. I'd just open the kit and put the sutures in at the bench without an anesthetic because of course it was still numb from the injury. And I didn't put any kind of dressing on. So our players just went straight out and took their place again on the ice.

"The Europeans thought I was some kind of butcher. There were photographs and stories in the papers," chuckled Dr. Watson (the first ever team manager to act as team doctor!).

Canada went on to win the first game against Sweden 3 to 1, and won

the rest of the games except for a tie (0-0) against Czechoslovakia. Although that country had a similar won-lost record, Canada was awarded the Olympic Gold Medal and World Amateur Championship based on a better goal average.

After the Olympics the victorious Canadians undertook a European tour which gave Dr. Watson a few heart stopping experiences.

"We only tied with Czechoslovakia in the Olympics but we played their national team in six or seven games and we beat them every time. One of their best players was Jarislav Drobný who went on to become a big Wimbledon tennis star. In fact we were in Czechoslovakia when the communists took over in February 1948.

"The communists marched in and all the hockey officials we had been used to simply disappeared. We were always afraid that if there was going to be a focal point of national resistance one of our games might be it. Because we had 18 or 19,000 people at these games with another 25,000 listening on loudspeakers outside the stadium."

But there was only one really close call.

"When we were leaving Czechoslovakia they let the team out but kept me back for 14 hours for interrogation," recalled Dr. Watson. "I never found out why, but the Czech hockey federa-



Dr. Sandy Watson today

tion had given me a lovely whisky decanter. It had a map of Scotland engraved on it that they seemed to find particularly fascinating."

The Russians must have known they were risking an international incident by holding on to one of Canada's hockey heroes.

"The minister of defence sent me a telegram every day of the tour from Ottawa. 'Keep up the good work!'—stuff like that," said Dr. Watson.

On April 7, 1948 after a tour that had taken in England, Czechoslovakia, France, Holland, Scotland, Sweden and Switzerland, the weary Flyers returned to a heartwarming welcome of bands, parades and an official holiday in Ottawa. They had played 42 games, winning 31, tying 6 and losing 5 before some 250,000 spectators and covering some 15,000 miles. They brought with them the coveted Olympic title, 17 Olympic gold medals and the World's Amateur Hockey Cup.

OUR OLYMPIC LINEUP

THE RCAF FLYERS, 1948 Olympic champions, in the photo on page 11 are: (Back Row, Left to Right) André Laperrière, Hubert Brooks, Andy Gilpin, Ted Hibberd, behind Hibberd is A. Sydney Dawes (official), Pete Lechnitz, Irving Taylor, Wally Halder, George Mara, Murray Dowey, George McFaul, Frank

Boucher (coach), Dr. Sandy Watson (manager), George Dudley (general manager C.A.H.A.); (Front Row, Left to Right) Roy Forbes, Orval Gravelle, Reg Schroeter (author of this article), Ab Renaud, Pat Guzzo, Louis Le Compte and Frank Dunster. Missing from the photo was goalkeeper Ross King.

The
Superior

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A GRATEFUL nation had its congratulations to the Flyers read into Hansard. Dr. Watson is the proud possessor of a telegram of congratulations from Prime Minister MacKenzie King. A young diplomat called Mike Pearson told him "what you did was the greatest diplomatic feat of any group from Canada in my experience."

Dr. Watson reflected: "The whole country went bonkers. The experts all forgot that they'd been saying we couldn't do it."

Their moment of glory, though enjoyable, was short-lived.

"We disbanded almost as soon as we got back—that was it," Dr. Watson said. "I ran a team in the Eastern Canada Senior League after that for two years. Then I went and studied eye surgery at Harvard for four years and never did get back into hockey."

Dr. Watson said the Flyers were never in the same league in terms of hockey skills as today's superstars. But international competition was truly amateur in those days. What counts for Dr. Watson is that when everybody said it couldn't be done the Flyers went ahead and did it.

"I truly believe it was one of the greatest stories in Canadian sport—ever," he said.

The basis for Richard Sutherland's article was an original manuscript by ex RCAF Flyer Reg Schroeter. Further assistance was provided in telephone interviews by former team manager Dr. Alexander (Sandy) Watson.