

Good God, Olympic Gold!!

by Les McLaughlin

The RCAF Flyers celebrate their gold medal win over Switzerland on the outdoor rink at St Moritz in 1948. Rear row, (L to R) are: André LaPerrière, Hubert Brooks, Andy Gilpin, Ted Hibberd, A. Sydney Dawes, head of the COA, Pete Leichnetz, Irving Taylor, Wally Halder, George Mara, Murray Dowey, George McFaul, Frank Boucher, Sandy Watson, and George Dudley, head of the CAHA. Kneeling in front (L to R) are: Roy Forbes, Orville Gravelle, Reg Schroeter, Ab Renaud, Patsy Guzzo, Louis Lecompte and Frank Dunster.



The long faces at Air Force Headquarters in Ottawa told the story. Air Marshal Wilf Curtis, chief of the air staff, was not pleased. The dream of bringing glory to Canada was crumbling. And the reputation of the RCAF was sure to suffer a humiliating blow. The editorial in the *Ottawa Journal* on 16 Dec 1947 said it all: *"The folly of sending a hurriedly organized RCAF hockey team to the Olympic Games should have been obvious from the beginning. Unscrambling this muddle is of national interest far beyond the limits of organized sports circles."*

In their first exhibition game the night before, Canada's designated Olympic hockey team, the RCAF Flyers, were trounced 7-0 by the McGill Redmen, a hodgepodge collection of Montreal university students. More than 6,500 fans, officials from the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association (CAHA) and air force brass witnessed the debacle at the Ottawa Auditorium with shock and dismay.

It had been 16 years since Canada won gold in hockey at the Winter Olympics. Now, in the fall of 1947, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) implemented strict new rules on what constituted amateur status for Olympians. Canada was the only nation which opposed the decision. The

CAHA complained that even players in senior leagues across the land probably did not qualify under the tough new rules imposed by the IOC.

"To get a team that was strictly amateur," wrote the *Ottawa Evening Citizen*, *"you would probably have to dig into the juvenile or midget ranks. Strict amateurism went out away back."* The CAHA decided not to send a Canadian hockey team to the 1948 Olympics, partly because it disagreed with the "amateur" rule, and partly because it couldn't find a team good enough to qualify under the new rules.

S/L Sandy Watson was the senior medical officer at Air Force Headquarters (AFHQ). Apart from his medical duties, his single passion was hockey. "When I read the headline saying we – this great hockey nation – would not be sending a team, I was offended," says Dr Watson, "and thought maybe I could do something about it."

Though not a great player, Watson was a fine organizer. He was obviously a crafty promoter too. Using his promotional skills, he convinced the CAHA that the RCAF – some 16,000 members at the time – was not only skilled in the air, but also on the ice. After all, argued Dr Watson, the Ottawa RCAF Flyers had won the Allen Cup, emblematic of the Dominion Hockey Championship in 1942.

And under Watson's guidance, the RCAF had defeated some of the best teams in Europe during an exhibition series in 1946. The CAHA agreed but gave Watson just 48 hours to get RCAF approval.

"I met with A/M Curtis one day in early October. Then we went to see Brooke Claxton, the minister of national defence, recalls Watson. Within 36 hours I called the CAHA telling them the news."

The RCAF Flyers would represent Canada in St. Moritz, Switzerland, in 1948. Watson, now the team's manager, insisted this would be an "all air force show." The players would be drawn from bases across the country. They would be amateur and they would be good.

A/M Curtis, a hockey fan, said, "It would be a crime not to send a Canadian hockey team and we're proud to be the ones to carry the colours." The army, which had its fair share of hockey talent, was not invited.

"Canada's sweetheart, 18 year old Barbara Ann Scott, would do the country proud by winning the women's figure skating gold medal."

Defence Minister Claxton, also a hockey fan, was a constant advocate of "tri-service activities". However, on 20 Oct, after receiving many pointed requests to make the team an "all military show," Claxton said, "the original invitation was to the RCAF and that's the way it will stand." The decision delighted the air force. But it infuriated the army.

Meanwhile, trouble was brewing south of the border. The American Amateur Hockey Association (AAHA) was sending a team which the U.S. Olympic Committee, headed by Avery Brundage, said was not truly amateur. Nor was the AAHA a member of the U.S. Olympic body. The International Ice Hockey Federation, however, said it would accept the AAHA entry. This outraged Brundage, who predicted a big fight when the Olympic Games got under way. He was right.

Air force Sgt Frank Boucher, who had been a professional player, was chosen to coach the RCAF club. His father, George "Buck" Boucher, coach of the Ottawa Senators in the Quebec Senior League, was head of the team selection committee. A nation-wide search for players began on 17 Oct, a scant 3½ months before the Olympic Games. "I

knew the air force had good hockey players," says Boucher from his home in Kemptonville, Ont. "but as for a good team, well that was something else."

With painstaking precision, the two Bouchers and Watson scoured the land for the best players the RCAF had to offer. Olympic hopefuls were flown in from bases as far away as Whitehorse, Yukon. More than 75 airmen were given try-outs. The revolving door of would-be Olympians continued until 10 Dec 1947 when the final team of 17 players was announced. A sceptical press told Canadians not to expect too much from the RCAF Flyers, but no one expected a 7-0 pasting in their first exhibition game against a university team.

"At the end of the second period," recalls coach Boucher, "Governor General Viscount Alexander came into the dressing room and asked, 'What is the matter with MY team?' I said, 'Sir if I knew I'd fix it.'"



Reg Schroeter (left) and Ab Renaud hoist figure skater Barbara Ann Scott right after her gold medal win.

Olympic officials gamely tried to conceal their grave doubts about the team's ability, and urged Canadians to give them another chance. That chance came two days later on 16 Dec when the Flyers played their second exhibition game against an army team from the Ottawa Senior Hockey League. The army, still seething from their exclusion in the Olympic affair, defeated the Flyers 6-2. This was not the air force's finest hour. The brass knew it. The CAHA knew it. The public knew it. And the press knew it.

"Well we took our look at the RCAF Olympic team," wrote columnist Tommy Shields, "and regret to report that it was neither a pleasing nor an encouraging sight." But it was too late to turn back now. The CAHA decided to stick with the air force, but quickly added that the team would have to be bolstered, perhaps even by non-air force personnel. That wasn't good enough for the Ottawa Citizen which editorialized: "The decision to retain as Canada's Olympic entry a weak RCAF team which is tied for last place in the Ottawa Senior League will be greeted with dismay from across Canada."



The RCAF Flyers parade to opening ceremonies in St Moritz, Switzerland on 30 Jan 1948, led by S/L Sandy Watson.

On 19 Dec, five players were brought in from the New Edinburgh Burghs of the Ottawa Senior League. Two, Reg Schroeter and Frank Dunster were ex-air force; one, Ab Renaud, was ex-army and two others, Ted Hibberd and Pete Lechnitz were too young to join the forces during the war. The next day they passed their medicals and became instant airmen as AC1s. Former F/O Reg Schroeter, a small but crafty puck handler was tearing up the Ottawa Senior League on a line with Ab Renaud and Ted Hibberd. Schroeter remembers, "getting a call from a fellow named Sandy Watson, who said he and CAHA officials would be watching our next league game. If we did well, we might get the call to join the Flyers. I was thrilled. Our line scored five of the six goals that night. A few days later I was back in the air force."

Ab Renaud, who had spent the war in Europe in the army, was working as a junior civil servant in the Department of Agriculture. "I got a call to go down to see the deputy minister. Now I don't get a call to do that very often. He said the minister of national defence called asking if I'd be interested in joining the Olympic team. I'd served overseas in the army as a sergeant. Now I was in the air force as an LAC."

Amidst this turmoil, a story broke which brought no Christmas cheer to the beleaguered airmen and their backers. On Christmas Eve 1947, Al Pickard, president of the CAHA, admitted he had considered withdrawing the civilian bolstered Flyers from Olympic competition, but said that exhibition game commitments overseas had already been made and would have to be honoured. The *Ottawa Journal* warned: "At best Sgt Frank Boucher, coach of the RCAF Flyers, has been given an intermediate team which should not be asked to play any exhibition games against any senior team in Canada."

On 31 Dec, just 10 days before the team sailed from New York to England aboard the *Queen Elizabeth*, Sandy Watson asked the CAHA if they could send three additional players to join the Flyers. Forwards George Mara, and Wally Halder, and goalie Dick Ball, all from Toronto, were the best non-airmen the CAHA could find at short notice and still meet the "amateur" definition. It would be a defining moment in a Canada's Olympic hockey history.

Ball was a fine young net-minder from the University of Toronto. He quickly took over the starting role in goal. With these three civilians and the five newcomers from Ottawa, the Flyers, "might make a showing in Switzerland which would not totally embarrass Canada," said the *Citizen*. Mara would become team captain. Halder would lead the scoring parade during the Olympics. But fate was not so kind to Dick Ball. The final medical check revealed Ball had a lung infection which would prevent him from travelling. Sandy Watson was frantic. George Mara told him that the best amateur goalkeeper in Toronto was Murray Dowey.

Dowey, who had been in the air force in 1945, recalls the phone call from Sandy Watson. "I was stunned and asked him 'why me?'" He told me the story and said if I needed help getting permission to leave my job with the Toronto Transit Commission, he'd get the defence minister involved. But my boss said OK."

Dowey arrived in Ottawa on 8 Jan, just in time to be sworn into the RCAF and join the team for the train trip to New York to catch the *Queen Elizabeth* the next day.

"We didn't see him play until our first exhibition game in London," recalls Schroeter, "he didn't look like a hockey player, but he had fast hands. Quick as lightning."

Dowey, who would become the team's number one goalie, arrived so late in fact that he wasn't around when the official team photo was taken. However, the pros at the RCAF photographic lab made sure he was in the team photo. They cleverly pasted a picture of Dowey's head onto the body of Dick Ball. It takes a very close look to discover the ruse.

Meanwhile, both Canada and the United States were being warned that "ize-ockee" had come a long way since the '30s when North American teams basically went over there to teach the Europeans the game. The lessons, it seemed, had been learned.

In spite of the concern being voiced across the land, the RCAF Flyers were given a rousing send-off from Ottawa's Union Station on 8 Jan 1948. Everyone except George Mara and Wally Halder were in RCAF uniform. Perhaps the happiest play-

er was F/O Hubert Brooks of Montreal. "Brooksie," as his teammates called him, was on his third mission from Canada to Europe. As a navigator with 419 (Moose) Sqn, Brooks was shot down over Hamburg in 1942 and spent the rest of the war escaping and evading. For his outstanding efforts he was awarded the Military Cross, just one of five RCAF airmen to receive the decoration.

Now in 1948, Brooks was going back to Europe, for the third time, not only to help Canada battle for world hockey supremacy, but to marry his fiancé Birthe Grontvend, who he had met in Europe just after the war when he served with the British Missing Research Unit, locating missing personnel.

The Flyers' exhibition series in Europe began on 16 Jan, one day after their ocean liner docked in Britain.

On 22 Jan, the Canadian Press, reporting from St Moritz, predicted the final result in ice hockey. Czechoslovakia first, Sweden second and Switzerland third. Canada, it said, would be an also-ran. Not to worry, said the news wire service: "*Canada's sweetheart, 18 year old Barbara Ann Scott, would do the country proud by winning the Women's figure skating gold medal.*" As much as they supported Barbara Ann, the military brass back in Ottawa was not thrilled with this assessment of their hockey team in Europe.

The Olympic Games opened on 30 Jan 1948. Canada's first game was against Sweden. After the match, the Canadian Press headline read: "*Spring Surprise at the Olympic Games.*" The Flyers defeated Sweden 3-1. As if to herald things to come, Canada's goals came from George Mara, Wally Halder and Reg Schroeter. Murray Dowey, who was barely on a first name basis with his new teammates, barely missed a shutout.

"It became apparent," says Dr Watson, "that we had a star goaltender. At that time no goalie ever caught the puck. They blocked shots with their body or their stick. Dowey was a baseball player. He just amazed the fans by catching the puck with his gloved hand. In pre-game warm ups, the fans would get up and cheer at this innovation."

While the winning headline was cause for some relief at AFHQ in Ottawa, another on the same day was not. "*Hockey cancelled...removed from the Olympic Games.*" The battle between the IOC and the AAHA had become a full scale war. When the Americans insisted on icing the team not considered amateur by the IOC, the drastic decision was taken.

The hockey tournament would continue, mainly because tickets for most of the games had



already been sold. However, the teams would not be playing for Olympic medals. But by now the players weren't interested in the intrigue of international politics.

The RCAF Flyers were quickly jelling into a good if not great team. In their next four games, some sort of on-ice magic began to occur. They beat a tough British team 3-0 as a swirling snow-storm blew over the open air rink in St. Moritz. "I

All of the 1948 Olympic hockey games were played on outdoor rinks which caused a host of weather-related problems.

RCAF Flyers Team Roster

Goalies

Cpl Ross King, Portage la Prairie, Man. (deceased)
LAC Murray Dowey, Toronto.

Defence

LAC Roy Forbes, Vancouver.
FSgt Louie Lecompte, Ottawa (deceased)
F/O Frank Dunster, Ottawa (deceased)
André LaPerrière, Montreal

Forwards

F/O Reg Schroeter, Ottawa
Cpl Patsy Guzzo, Ottawa (deceased)
Cpl Irving Taylor, Ottawa (deceased)
AC1 Orville Gravelle, Aylmer, Que (deceased)
George Mara, naval reserve, Toronto (deceased)
Wally Halder, naval reserve, Toronto (deceased)
Sgt Andy Gilpin, Montreal
AC1 Pete Leichnitz, Ottawa
AC1 Ted Hibberd, Ottawa
LAC Ab Renaud, Ottawa
F/O Hubert Brooks, Montreal, (deceased)

Coach

Sgt Frank Boucher, Ottawa

Manager

S/L Sandy Watson, Ottawa

Trainer

Cpl George McFaul, Ottawa

was really worried about the British team," said Boucher. "The snow was heavy and you'd lose the puck along the boards. I thought if they ever got a goal against us, it would be hard to come back."

Again, the goal scorers were Mara, Halder and Schroeter. In their next three games the RCAF Flyers plastered the weak Polish team 15-0. They beat the United States 12-3 and clobbered the Italians 21-1. Their sixth game was against Czechoslovakia, a team which, along with the Swiss, was still considered the best at the games. By now Canada, the Czechs and the Swiss all had a 5-0 record.

Meanwhile, the Swiss officials were planning for every eventuality. They heard that the Canadian Parliament was debating whether or not to make *O Canada* the country's official national anthem. When Watson arrived in Zurich just a few days before the Olympics began; "I got a phone call from a fellow with the Swiss International Ice Hockey Federation. He asked me to come to a radio studio where a big surprise would await."

It was a surprise alright. A Swiss official told him they were aware of the new anthem and, at such short notice, had phoned the Canadian Embassy in Berne asking for the music. The embassy didn't have the music, but a secretary would sing it over the phone. As she did, the conductor of the Symphony Orchestra of Switzerland transcribed her singing into sheet music. That morning, before Watson arrived at the studio, the orchestra recorded the Canadian anthem. The song the secretary sang over the phone was *The Maple Leaf Forever*. She hadn't heard of the new anthem either.

"The Swiss were so proud of what they had done. I didn't have the heart to tell them this wasn't our new anthem" says Watson, with a chuckle. "So I decided to let it stand and that the *Maple Leaf Forever* would be our national anthem." Perhaps it didn't matter anyway since hardly anyone thought they'd need to play the Canadian anthem at the end of the hockey tournament.

The crucial game against the Czechs was played on 6 Feb. It was a classic match. Czech coach, Mike Buchna, a Canadian, called it "real playoff hockey." Murray Dowey recorded his third shutout of the games. But the Flyers couldn't beat the Czech goalie either. Final score – a tie at 0.

"What I remember most of all," said Reg Schroeter, "is back checking, back checking, back checking. I had a good chance late in the game and said to myself, 'Oh God, why didn't that go in?'"

The Canadians were elated not only at the result of this game, but by a decision taken the previous night. The thorny question which had dogged the games was settled at a meeting of the IOC. Hockey would be re-instated as an official Olympic sport at the 1948 games.

Canada would now have to win its final two games – one against Austria and one against Switzerland, and then count on the Czechs to beat the Swiss in order to win the gold. In their match against Austria, Dowey recorded his fourth shutout in seven games. Final score 12-0. The next day, Czechoslovakia handed Switzerland its first loss of the tournament. The Czechs remained tied with Canada for first place. But Canada could win the gold on the basis of goals for and against, if they defeated Switzerland in their final game.

Meanwhile, Canada didn't only have S/L Sandy Watson as a manager, they had Dr Sandy Watson as their medical officer. Dr Watson recalls having his medical kit at the player's bench. If a player was hit with a stick or a puck, Watson would sew in sterilized sutures as soon as the player came off the ice. No need to go to the infirmary like the Europeans.

"This helped us a lot," says Watson, "because we were only allowed to dress 11 players. If a player had to go to the hospital, we couldn't replace him."

Watson recalls that the European press thought he was a butcher for sewing up players with no anaesthetic. "Simply," says Dr Watson, "if a player had a cut, it was numb anyway. I would just stitch him up and coach Boucher would send him back in."

The final game against Switzerland was played before a huge and highly partisan Swiss crowd. The outdoor ice was slushy, press reports claimed the European referees favoured the Swiss and the fans in St Moritz threw snowballs at the Canadian players. By all accounts, it was a rowdy affair. Goalie Murray Dowey didn't seem to mind. Final score Canada 3 - Switzerland 0. Dowey had his fifth shutout in eight games. But the only thing on the minds of the Flyers in Europe and the fans back home was "Good God, Olympic Gold!"

"It was a tremendous feeling of relief for all of us," says Reg Schroeter, "because we weren't expected to win. The press was so bad when we left, all I could think of was 'Thank God, we won!'"

With the strains of *The Maple Leaf Forever* echoing through the hills of St Moritz, Capt George Mara led his gold medal team of RCAF Flyers to the podium. "When they raised the Canadian Flag, it fills you. You know, you can feel it and you become quite emotional," recalls Ab Renaud. "I still am."

"*Per Ardua Ad Astra*," says coach Boucher, "through adversity to the stars. There was nothing else we could do but win it."

The unexpected, indeed perhaps the unexplainable had happened. The reason for this fairy book ending for one of Canada's most unlikely team of hockey heroes may never be known. No matter, Canadians were quick to show their gratitude. Telegrams poured in from groups and individuals across the land. Perhaps the most telling was from a senior

"When they raised the Canadian Flag, it fills you. You know, you can feel it and you become quite emotional," recalls Ab Renaud. "I still am."

RCAF Flyers team manager S/L Sandy Watson presents the World Amateur Hockey Cup to Air Marshal Wilf Curtis, chief of the air staff. Looking on is Governor-General Viscount Alexander.

A large homecoming parade awaited the triumphant RCAF Flyers upon their return to Ottawa.



diplomat in the Department of External Affairs. "What you did was the greatest diplomatic feat of any group from Canada in my experience." It was signed Mike Pearson.

On 10 Feb, in St Moritz, F/O Hubert Brooks married Birthe Grontvend. The newly minted team of hockey heroes, dressed in RCAF uniform, with Olympic gold medals around their necks, formed the guard of honour. Canada's figure skating gold medallist, Barbara Ann Scott was the bridesmaid.

This unlikely collection of military and ex-military men had become the darlings of the European sporting community. Their planned tour of European cities to play a series of exhibition games was a roaring success. "We were treated like conquering heroes by the fans," says Ab Renaud. "The largest crowds we ever had back home might be a few thousand. In Paris, against the Paris Racing Club, the best team in Europe, 19,000 people showed up. But it was a gruelling tour."

When the exhibition tour ended, the RCAF Flyers had played in front of 250,000 fans. Their final record overseas was 31 wins, five losses and six ties. A large and enthusiastic crowd gave the Flyers a heroes' welcome as they paraded through downtown Ottawa on 6 Apr 1948. "Unmitigated pride, you just felt proud of the whole bunch of guys," recalls Reg Schroeter.

The team was disbanded on 10 Apr, after playing a benefit game in Ottawa against a team of NHL All-Stars which included Phil Watson, Frankie Eddols and Sid Smith.

The last Canadian Olympic gold medal in hockey was won in 1952 by the Edmonton Mercurys. ☺

(Ed note: Freelance journalist Les McLaughlin is a former broadcaster with the CBC Northern Service. He lives in Nepean, near Ottawa.)

Post scripts:

- Final Olympic Record: RCAF Flyers – 7 wins, 0 losses, 1 tie
- Goals for - 69
Goals against - 5
- Murray Dowey's goals against average 0.62 (Olympic record)
- Leading scorer Wally Halder 21 goals, eight assists - 29 points
- The RCAF Flyers exhibition tour of Europe featured 42 games. They finished with a record of 31 wins, 5 losses and 6 ties. An estimated 250,000 fans watched the games
- Dr Sandy Watson became one of Canada's most outstanding eye surgeons and was awarded the Order of Canada in 1988

BATTLING NATURE – ICE STORM '98 • AIR GUNNER'S DIARY

Airforce

MAGAZINE OF THE AIR FORCE ASSOCIATION OF CANADA
Vol 22 No 1 Spring/Printemps 1998

REVUE DE L'ASSOCIATION DE LA FORCE AÉRIENNE DU CANADA
\$5.00 CDN/\$4.00 U.S.



RCAF WINS OLYMPIC GOLD

Canada: \$5.00 U.S.: \$4.00
Retailer: Display until 15 July
8 1
7 25274 80714 1
www.airforce.ca