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Character depth shows through



by Jim Judd

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While the Junior A hockey scene across Canada will conclude Saturday afternoon with the playing of the Centennial Cup, locally the Vernon Lakers officially ended their 1987-88 season with their annual wind-up banquet and awards celebration last weekend.

The club has come a long way in the past five years and Saturday's gala occassion at the Village Green Inn was a good indication of just how far the club's annual banquet scene has advanced as well. Naturally the bulk of the groundwork for the windup celebration was owing to the work done by the team's booster club. However, having a guy like Mel Lis running the operation doesn't hurt any either.

In fact, if the club continues to grow and prosper in the next two seasons, in the fashion that it has done in the past two under Lis' input, the Lakers will not only host the Centennial Cup in 1990 but could very likely have their names etched on the coveted Junior A trophy by that time or even sooner.

But, the success of the most recent banquet wasn't all due to the money laid down and the behind the scenes work by the booster club. This time around the players played a significant role in the evening's entertainment.

Personally, I've covered junior hockey across Western Canada for more than a decade now. In all those seasons, with so many different clubs, it was rare to find a group of players extroverted enough to manage anything more than a few muffled words mumbled into the microphone when asked to speak on behalf of his teammates.

These days, teams operate in a different manner, especially when it comes to road trips. Generally the players file onto the bus, take their designated seats, don a pair of ultra lightweight headphones and jetison themselves into some musical ozone. It's all pretty impersonal and some clubs have even made restrictions as to how much time players can spend with their headphones on and their brains tuned out.

It wasn't always that way, mind you. There was a time when the players themselves provided their own entertainment on the long bus trips. And it wasn't just a few hands of cribbage or some game of poker for a few bucks on the side.

No, there was a time when a lot of genuine talent was fostered among the various teams — guys played guitars, a few of the more vocally prominent would provide the lyrics and just about everyone would sing along. Maybe the hockey wasn't a whole lot better then but you have to think that it kept a lot of teams closer together on the road. It also allowed the players to develop some additional talents to their prowess on the ice.

In fact, guitar sing-alongs were so popular on hockey buses at one time that they used to joke around about having to waste a players' card in order to get a decent guitar player. Hell, nobody had heard of dolby sound in those days and cassettes weren't even invented yet.

This year's edition of the Vernon Lakers probably comes as close as any to the old style of entertainment value. The lucky patrons who showed up at the banquet last weekend howled with delight at the jaunty, nonsensical entertainment value of Vernon captain Mike Paller and his crew of cohorts.

Paller, who picked up a trophy as one of the most underrated players on the ice this season, could have taken home a similar award in my books for being the most underrated entertainer in junior hockey.

Paller plays a guitar, likes to sing and even takes a crack at a little songwriting from time to time. With his leadership, the group of players, which included the soft-spoken Chad Biafore, rookie Mike Barkley, jolly Ian Alger, the irrepressible Mark Greyeyes, and Keith Chase, bid a farewell to the team by way of song and skit. It was unpolished, of course, a little on the silly side — as it was intended, but downright hillarious and well executed with nary so much as a red face among the bunch.

Chase is another guy who could sop a team award for most underrated entertainer. Often typecast because of his hard-fisted tactics on the ice for the past four years, few hockey fans will ever get to see the versatility of the big guy. He has a repertoire of impersonations as long as one's arm, can disguise his voice in a most remarkable manner at times, and can hold a tune with the best of them when it comes to singing. To top it all off he plays a guitar and accompanied Paller in providing musical accompaniment for the stage show they performed.

You really have to see a pair of hands like Chase has, scarred like a roadmap of China from years of fistfights, gripping a guitar neck with supple ease. Huge fingers covering delicate strings provided sweet chords of music.

To say the least, the effort put forth by the group, narrated all the while by the smooth-talking Paller, highlighted the night and brought a tunderous ovation when it concluded.

The depth of personality exhibited by the group that night epitomized the type of character the team showed this season and particularly in the playoffs.

Hopefully the club will be fortunate enough to recruit talented hockey players with a similar vein of character running through them for next season.

Sadly, however, Paller and all of his cohorts who provided the entertainment that banquet night won't be around next season.