

I have a dream

Brian Keelan - January 2021

Back in May of 2020 I wrote a story called “Remembering Whitey,” to honour Pat “Whitey” Stapleton who had just passed away (April 2020) at the age of 79. I had admired him ever since I was a teenager when he was simply the best hockey player in Sarnia and went on to become the first guy from Sarnia to ever play a full season in the NHL – no mean feat in those days when there were only six teams. He went on to play 10 seasons in the NHL as a solid defenseman on a talented Black Hawks team that had the likes of Bobby Hull, Stan Mikita and Glenn Hall. Then he spent five more seasons in the WHL before retiring to his farm in Strathroy which henceforth became known to all as, “Hockey heaven, Strathroy division.” During the years after he retired, he maintained and honoured his roots in Sarnia with frequent appearances at schools and banquets. He started a nationwide hockey program, sponsored by Pepsi and Canadian Tire, called Fundamentals in Action and instituted drills he believed would foster a love for the game among young players.

Since that first story back in April, I have received and been told lots of stories about what a modest man he was, what a great sense of humour he had, his leadership ability and things he did to help people for which he took no credit, he just did them because somebody asked him to, or he just felt they needed a bit of a leg up.

Several years ago, I was in St. Catherines, Ontario doing some research for a writing project dealing with the Welland Canal. After a few hours touring the Welland Canal Museum, I came across an area at the back of the museum called the St. Catherines Sports Hall of Fame. I went in for a quick look around to see who their most famous sports people were: Stan Mikita, Dennis Hull, Elmer Vasco, Rudy Pilous and Gary Cheevers were the names I recognized.

One of the rooms of the exhibit was tricked out like a hockey dressing room. Across the back wall of the dressing room was a huge mural; a black and white photo of a scene shot in the St. Catherines Teepee’s dressing room after a game in the late fifties. It showed three or four hockey players sitting on the bench after a game. Their shirts were off, and they were smiling as though they had won the game. Their sticks, skates and gloves would be considered “vintage” today. They were drinking cold cokes. One of the guys was Sarnia’s Duke Harris and the guy beside him was Whitey Stapleton.

I remember thinking to myself, “What a great idea for the Sarnia Arena.” We should have photo murals like that all over the place. They would highlight all the great hockey players from Sarnia and Lambton County that followed Whitey to great careers in professional hockey. They could be in all the dressing rooms, the hallways leading to them, on the walls in the lobby, the men’s room and any other place we can find that would tell the story of all the great hockey that has been played in that building – to educate and entertain the people who visit our arena and in doing so, let them know that, “This is our house.” That would be a great way to honour all the players who have made us so proud throughout the years.

I am sure you’ve seen the large full colour, photo murals they have these days that can be used to do this. We have people right here in Sarnia who can produce them.

My project started out to just have the arena named in honour of Whitey Stapleton but over time it has morphed into a “dream” I have for how to make that happen. Here is how I see that...

1: We need to begin by getting the official approval to do it. To do that I would need to go before City Council with a petition and make the case for doing this. It will be a little bit of a political issue, but four city counsellors have already signed the petition to do this at Change.org. The rest of them I figured might be influenced by a good turnout of citizens/voters who supported this effort by signing the petition to support this at Change.org/whitey stapleton. I would like to do that in person – versus a Zoom meeting – so I could show up with a group of supporters/voters to help me make my point which is why I haven’t done it yet.

2: Once approved by City Council, we could then develop a great plan that made everyone – or as many as possible – happy. I have a “connection” to a person who was involved with the design of the hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto, but I don’t want to go there until I

have the approvals required. I do not believe it is a good idea to get anyone else involved if I don't have the authority to act upon their suggestions.

3: Once we had a plan, we could then draw up a budget and then we could then start to raise the money to do it.

And now... for the dream

I know that if Whitey were still alive, he would be up to his neck in his efforts to promote and celebrate the 50th anniversary of the 1972 summit series victory. My dream is that we try to have this project approved, designed, funded and installed by September 2022. It would then be nice to have a grand opening of the newly re-named and designed arena on the 50th anniversary of Game 8. We would try to get as many members as possible of the team (29 of the 37 men are still alive) to attend the opening and I am quite sure we could get some pretty good publicity out of that effort. We could feature "the puck" that Whitey scooped up from behind the Russian net after Paul Henderson scored the game and series-winning goal.

I know. What a dream huh? But stick with me here. So far, I have 1867 signatures on the petition. My original goal was to try for 2305 signatures because that is the number of seats in the arena. A quick math check says that I still need 438 signatures on the petition. I am sure COVID-19 has slowed that effort down since I can't just walk into a pub and hand out petition slips.

There was a bit of a snag last month when Dan McCaffery wrote in his First Monday column that he was aware of me introducing the idea of having the Sarnia Arena re-named in honour of Whitey Stapleton and went on to say, "So far no action has been taken." Then he added that although Whitey should definitely be considered for such an honour, he didn't think that honour should automatically go to Whitey. He suggested that there should be a contest and names like Dino Ciccarelli, Pat Verbeek, Wayne Merrick and Phil Esposito were suggested.

All I can say is, "I wish you had called me Dan."

But you didn't. So now I must try to make my case for the fact that it shouldn't be anybody else but Whitey. To start off, I have it on good authority that Dino Ciccarelli agrees with me that the honour should go to Whitey. So does Phil Esposito – and his brother Tony. So does Dick Hunter – father of Dave, Mark and Dale Hunter. Mark Hunter also agrees. So does Tony McKegney. These guys all played in the NHL and they think that Whitey richly deserves to have the Sarnia Arena renamed in his honour.

Why?

They agree that the case for Whitey being given the honour is based on two unique and major factors.

1: He was the first one. The NHL was 60 years old before anybody from Sarnia ever made it there long enough to play a full season. Sarnia had a few guys who'd been there for what they call, "a cup of coffee," but nobody ever played a full season. Whitey played 10 seasons and was named an All Star three times. He was the first defence man ever to score 50 points in one season – a 70 game season to boot. In those days there were 150 "jobs" as players in the NHL and Whitey was the first guy from Sarnia and the Sarnia Minor Athletic Association to claim one.

He made all those guys who came after him believe that they could play there too. He made many more believe that teamwork and hard work would get you where you wanted to go

2: 1972. There were 37 Canadian men on that "Team of The Century," and Whitey was one of them. As I wrote in my original story, Whitey was on the ice in game 8 – the most important hockey game ever played – when Paul Henderson scored what most Canadians will agree is the greatest, most important goal ever scored. Even more significant – to me – was that for the final 34 seconds after the winning goal was scored, coach Harry Sinden went with Whitey and Bill when he had three Hall of Fame defencemen sitting on the bench. There is no doubt that the heroics of Team Canada in that series changed the course of the game of hockey here in Canada. Imagine what would have happened to our game if we had lost that game.

This should not be a popularity contest that involves only people who are alive today and would tend to vote for people who are currently – or recently – in the news. It is an effort to go back to the beginning of our hockey history – which most of the people who are alive today are not aware of – and find a way to inform the people who live in Lambton County along with the people who will visit us about what happened in that building.

There were guys who came before Whitey who inspired him and guys who came after Whitey who were inspired by him. For these reasons, I believe Whitey is the centre of it all and the Sarnia Arena should be named in his honour. But... but the inside of the building will be tribute to all who played there.

That's not just my opinion either and so far, I've got 1867 signatures to back me up.

If you would like to get your name on that petition, please go to [Change.org](https://www.change.org). Once there go to the search panel and type in: Stapleton, or Whitey or Sarnia arena. I was hoping we could do this in February or March because then it wouldn't have to be done in a Zoom meeting but that doesn't look it's going to happen, but I need to do this by March at the latest in order to give the project a reasonable chance of meeting the timeline.

A little sports trivia:

1: Of the top 100 greatest players ever to play in the NHL, Phil Esposito is the only one who ever played for a team from Sarnia. He played for the Legionnaires in their 1961 championship season.

2: I just bought my grandson a magazine for Christmas that featured the top 100 defencemen of all time in the NHL. Whitey Stapleton is #72. The only guy from Sarnia who is on the list.

3: Whitey was the first pro coach for a teenaged Wayne Gretzky and Mark Messier with the Indianapolis Racers in 1978-79 before the team suspended operations in December. Peter Pocklington bought Gretzky's contract from Nelson Skalbania and the rest is history.

4: Whitey's son Mike, played 697 games in the NHL and is now an Anaheim Ducks scout.

Happy New Year and stay safe.