

Bill Rea ? Remembering Bower

The recent holiday season brought some sad news, with word of the passing to the great Johnny Bower.

But the sadness had to be muted by the knowledge that this was a man who had a very long life and accomplished so much, getting his real start on his professional hockey career when he was in his late 30s, becoming among the very best goalies who has ever played the game. He was twice awarded the Vezina Trophy for being the best goalie in the National Hockey League. He got to drink from the Stanley Cup four times. There have been many great players who never got to do that at all.

And he also was behind the production of a hit record, Honky the Christmas Goose. It was while reading one of his obituaries that I learned this record actually challenged one of the Beatles' hits. I shouldn't have been surprised.

Bower was revered by many people who would never have seen him play.

I was covering a function in town some years ago. It included a silent auction, and one of the items up for grabs was a Maple Leaf jersey, and the number of the back was ?1.?

I noticed it, and wondered if that would have been one of Bower's jerseys.

I was talking to a man the following day who had been at this event with his son, and the young fellow was evidently impressed to see such a representation of such an icon. The man I was talking to is a couple of years older than me, so I was pretty sure his son never saw Bower play (Bower retired before I was in my teens). I asked if his son really appreciated what Bower represented, and I think he was surprised at my question.

?Of course he does,? was the reply I received.

I met Bower a couple of times, actually getting to chat with him for a couple of minutes one occasion. It was during the days when I was editing newspapers in Toronto, spending most of my time in East York, and he made an appearance at the arena in Leaside. He was actually seated at a picnic table just outside the arena, and there was a small crowd of young hockey players (most of them boys) who were thrilled to be that close to a legend. They were accompanied by parents (most of them dads) who were also thrilled to be that close to a legend. I was pushing 40 at the time, and I observed I was probably the only one in the group who had actually seen him play.

I didn't ask for his autograph, although I should have, for a reason I will get to in a couple of paragraphs.

The man was renowned for never turning kids away. Indeed, I remember one Saturday night many years ago while he was still playing (I guess it was the first Saturday of November), when I was watching the Leafs' game. Rather than the usual drivel we got during the intermission, Hockey Night in Canada showed us scenes of the Bowers' front stoop Halloween night. There's no denying the guy did know how to attract crowds, and that included trick or treaters.

Fast forward a couple of decades, to my first incarnation with this publication.

One of the local car dealerships arranged to have Toronto Blue Jays catcher Pat Borders come up to sign autographs for a couple of hours. This was before the Jays won the World Series, but anticipation was high, and Borders proved himself to be a pretty good PR man.

There were plenty of young fans lined up to get his autograph and spend a few minutes talking with the hero.

But there was one little fellow (he was four, if memory serves) who was not in line. He was standing off to one side, slowly inching his way toward Borders. I guessed he was too shy to actually get his autograph, but he wanted to get close to the main attraction.

Borders, of course, was aware of what was going on, and during a bit of a lull in the autograph line, he abruptly stuck his hand out to the kid. The little fellow shook, and then promptly took off. But that hand shake was the picture I got, which I made sure was printed in the paper that week.

I forget his name, but I knew that kid very well. Because I was that little kid some 25 years before.

One of my sports idols was going to make an appearance at a supermarket. My mother loaded my brother and myself, along with a couple of other kids, into the car, and off we went to meet the guy who was helping to keep the Leafs in contention for the Stanley Cup. All the kids eagerly lined up, but the little boy who was myself got cold feet, and hid inside the store while Johnny Bower signed autographs in the parking lot. I got a good view of him, but had not the courage to approach him.

That little fellow who was a fan of Pat Borders did better than I. He at least got a hand shake out of the deal.

And I will confess in this spot that getting his picture into the paper was something of a self-serving act on my part. While I did help this kid avoid feeling guilty for what might have been, I got the feeling that I had helped correct a mistake I had made many years before. The mother of the boy phoned me to thank me later that week, and I told her how I missed getting Johnny Bower's autograph years before.

It's too bad Bower never heard that story. From what I read following the days after his death, I think he would have enjoyed it.

