

Remembering Ron Ellis: Leafs Legend and Team Canada '72 Unsung Hero

By Jim Stewart

COMMENT

I was saddened by the passing of Leafs' legend Ron Ellis at the age of 79 on May 11. I met Ron Ellis on the beach at Sand Lake in July 1973 on a family vacation. Ron was taking a break from running his summer hockey camp. He was larger than life to me, but so welcoming to all 'us kids' that mobbed him. He was kind and patient as he signed autographs.

Despite being a big scorer in Junior and in the NHL, Ron Ellis embraced a key defensive role in Team Canada's stirring Cold War victory over the hated Soviets in Summit Series '72. Ellis tallied 3 assists and ' with the gritty Bobby Clarke ' checked the Communists into submission. Team Canada Coach Harry Sinden believed Ellis's steady checking in all eight games was a key to winning the Summit Series.

It was this kind of selfless, team-first play on that famous Canadian squad which created my admiration for the talented Ellis. He scored 46 goals to lead the Junior A Toronto Marlboros to a Memorial Cup sixty years ago in 1964. Ellis joined the Leafs right out of Junior A Hockey and finished second to Roger Crozier as Rookie of the Year in 1965.

He averaged 23 goals a season for the Leafs and, as Dan Robson wrote on Saturday, 'Ron Ellis learned to skate with legends' as a comparably young player contributing meaningfully to a team filled with Stanley Cup champions.

Two years later, the youthful Ellis scored 22 goals for the veteran-laden Leafs and added a Stanley Cup to his trophy case in Canada's Centennial Year ' prior to the '67-68 Expansion Draft that transformed The Original Six rosters significantly.

However, Ellis remained on Toronto's roster during the diaspora as legendary Leafs like Bobby Baun, Allan Stanley, and Terry Sawchuk were selected by the brand-new Oakland Seals, Philadelphia Flyers, and LA Kings, respectively.

In all, Ellis was a Leafs 'lifer' who played over 1,000 games for Toronto for parts of three decades; he ranks fifth on the franchise's all-time scoring list, and was a four-time All-Star. I was fortunate to be a sports card collector during his fifteen-season career and the cards displayed span his professional life as a Leaf.

Rest in peace, Ron Ellis ' a Lindsay-born Leafs legend who wore the Maple Leaf proudly for his country in 1972 and was, remarkably, the favorite player of my beloved Aunt Margaret: an ardent Montreal Canadiens' fan. I admired Ellis, too-- as a lifelong Blackhawks fan. That's how special Ron Ellis was to us and millions of Canadians.