

CHAPTER 7

Luther Vipond – Whitby Sports Hall of Fame Nomination - “Lacrosse Builder”

Luther Vipond (1914 – 1982), a life-long resident of Brooklin / Whitby, was a legendary figure in his community. Over a 5 decade period, he distinguished himself as an athlete, coach, manager, executive, sponsor, mentor and community builder. Everyone who met Luther would immediately recognize his passion for his community and sports, especially lacrosse and hockey.

As a lacrosse player, Luther began his career in the early 1930's playing for Brooklin in what was affectionately known as “the Bush League”. By 1934, Brooklin had joined the Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association (later the OLA) and Luther was one of the leading players on Brooklin's Senior B teams of the late '30's and early '40's. Luther was “the complete player”; he could score goals, gather up loose balls, check the best opponents and would back down from no player. As one of his team mates once said: “... we all got a bit bigger and tougher when Luther was on the floor”.

As with many of his contemporaries, Luther's lacrosse (and hockey) careers gave way to the more pressing matters of WW II. Luther was among the 14,000 Canadians who landed on Normandy's beaches, on D – Day, June 6, 1944. He spent much of the balance of the war fighting his way across France and Germany.

There was no lacrosse played in Brooklin during the years immediately following the War, so in 1946 Luther joined twin brother Lewis in playing for the Senior A Barrie Lakeshores. The following season Luther joined brothers Bill and Tim on the Oshawa Senior B team.

While playing for Oshawa in '47 and '48, Luther joined with other Brooklin sporting enthusiasts, who felt it was time that the community had its first indoor arena. Over the course of 1947-48, building materials from the former Ajax munitions factories were secured, and the new arena was built. Luther was among the volunteers who erected the building that was officially

dedicated as Whitby Township's war memorial on November 6, 1949. Luther's uncle, John Vipond, was its first manager (Luther assisted his uncle in the maintenance of the building).

The summer of 1949 saw the return of lacrosse to Brooklin as they joined the OLA Intermediate division. Luther, now a veteran player, continued to provide on and off floor leadership and by 1952, at the age of 38, helped lead Brooklin to its first ever OLA championship (Intermediate C). This was the first All – Ontario lacrosse championship won by a Durham Region team since the 1929 Oshawa General Motors club won the national Senior A championship and the Mann Cup (then awarded to the national Senior A field lacrosse champions).

In 1953 Luther retired as a player to assume the role of coach of the Brooklin Broncos lacrosse club and led them to the OLA Intermediate B finals. The following season Luther joined the lacrosse club's executive, beginning his long involvement with the "off floor" direction of Brooklin's lacrosse clubs. That season also saw Luther, at age 39; make a brief "comeback" to help out his short handed team. Brooklin went on to win its second OLA championship (Intermediate B) in 1954. Luther was also active during these years as a coach of Brooklin minor lacrosse and hockey teams, including an OMHA juvenile D championship hockey team in 1954. That year Luther also assumed the role of Brooklin (Whitby Township) arena manager, a position he would hold until his retirement in 1979.

The late 1950's were especially rewarding years for Brooklin lacrosse clubs, winning an OLA Intermediate C championship in 1957, Intermediate B in '58 and both the Intermediate A and Senior B championships in 1959. The 1950's were one of the "golden eras" of Brooklin lacrosse with 8 OLA finals appearances and 6 championships. These teams were led by local players and supporters, many of the older players like Luther had played at a higher level, Senior A or B, but when post War lacrosse returned to Brooklin in 1949 they returned to play Intermediate lacrosse for "the hometown", ensuring a strong and successful Brooklin lacrosse franchise for years to come.

The new decade began with Brooklin retaining the OLA Intermediate A crown with another very strong club. That winter Luther and other team executives began talking seriously about Brooklin making “the big move” to the OLA Senior A division. On May 24, 1961, Brooklin played its first ever OLA Senior A game, a 6 – 5 victory over Brampton, a team who would quickly become their arch rivals. The team was a mix of holdover veterans from past Intermediate teams, 7 former Whitby Red Wings from their 1960 Minto Cup finalists team (including stars Glen Lotton and Terry Davis) and a strong contingent of players (including all-star goalie Pat Baker) from Peterborough. The on floor team was directed by Luther’s twin, Lewis, brother Bill moved from coach of the 1960 championship team to Vice President. Former President of the Canadian Lacrosse Association and Canadian Lacrosse Hall of Fame member Gene Dopp lead the team’s overall direction as club President.

Luther, along with 3 of his Senior A lacrosse club executive colleagues, publicly committed themselves to re-establishing minor lacrosse in Brooklin. As was reported in the Senior A team’s 1961 program, “... a minor Lacrosse League of four teams will operate in Brooklin Arena. ...some of the play-off games may be played before a senior game with one period during the rest period. This will give the lacrosse patrons an opportunity to see these boys in action. Each team will have a manager- coach to see that the boys have proper training. Those who have volunteered for the four positions are: Luther Vipond, Bill Vipond, Ken Greer and George Richardson. Brooklin is very fortunate in having such public spirited men in charge of the teams.”

During the early 1960’s Brooklin’s Senior A club laid the foundation for its operating model that is still evident nearly 50 years later. It would be a community owned and operated club that would strive to provide an opportunity for the best local players to play at a high level, while providing affordable “family friendly” entertainment for the region’s lacrosse fans. And, importantly the team would maintain a close link to the community through local sponsorship and the support of minor and junior lacrosse in Brooklin and Whitby. No member of the club’s executive better exemplified these principles than Luther Vipond.

The strong foundation created by Luther and his executive colleagues coupled with excellent player recruitment and development resulted in Brooklin's rapid ascent to the top of the OLA Senior A division. By 1964 the team, a combination of veterans and young recruits, beat a tough and talented Brampton Excelsior's team in a 7 game series to claim its first OLA Senior championship. "Luther's house", the Brooklin Arena, had never seen crowds like those during the '64 playoffs; the house was packed well beyond capacity and was 'rocking' like never before. By this time Luther had assumed the additional responsibility of treasurer, a key position on the club's executive. Brooklin was now billed as the "smallest community in Canada with a Senior A lacrosse team". Successfully managing the club's financial affairs was critical to the club's long term viability. Luther kept a close eye on the club's financial performance, as a small community organization, every dollar mattered.

Hosting Brooklin's first ever national championship was a major undertaking for the Brooklin club. The end result, although not in Brooklin's favor, was a lacrosse fan's delight. Brooklin took the western champion and highly favored Vancouver Carlings to the 7 game limit. The 6 games played at the old Whitby Arena (one game was played in Peterborough) were played before overflowing crowds, a series that older lacrosse fans still like to recount today.

The balance of the 1960's cemented Brooklin's reputation as a major force in Senior A lacrosse with Mann Cup appearances in 1965, 67, 68 and 69. Its first Mann Cup titled came in 1968 with a 4 game sweep of the western Canadian champion Nanaimo Luckies at the Oshawa Civic Auditorium. In 1969 the Redmen travelled to BC to play the western champion New Westminster Blues. The Redmen prevailed 4 games to 1, becoming the first eastern Canadian team to win the Mann Cup "on the road" in BC since the 1953 Peterborough Timbermen.

The 1960's represented a new pinnacle of success for Brooklin lacrosse, with 6 OLA championships, 5 national finals appearances and back to back Mann Cup championships. Brooklin had clearly found a place on the nation's lacrosse map. Over the decade Luther had given freely of his time,

effort, money and his considerable lacrosse wisdom to his beloved Brooklin lacrosse clubs. In return they gave him great pride and pleasure. During the 1960's Luther shared his love of the game with other Vipond family members. During much of the decade brother Bill joined Luther on the executive, brothers "Tip" (Doug), "Sully" (Don) and nephew Mike Gray were "on the floor", while brothers Tim and Lewis provided sponsorship support.

In contrast the 1970's were not kind to Brooklin lacrosse supporters. The Redmen made a fateful decision before the 1970 season to move their home games to the Oshawa Civic Auditorium in an effort to attract players returning from the defunct professional league and to add to their fan base. This move was not supported by many long time Brooklin lacrosse fans.

The void created by the Redmen's move to Oshawa was, at least in part, filled by the Whitby B & R Transporters. The Transporters entered the OLA junior B division in 1969, playing their home games at the Brooklin Arena. Luther joined other long time local lacrosse builders Lloyd Gibson and Gene Dopp on the B & R executive. This provided the new franchise with a high level of "lacrosse legitimacy" with players, supporters and the OLA. In their second season the Transporters captured the Castrol Cup, then awarded to the national Junior B champions, bringing Whitby its first ever national junior lacrosse championship.

The 1972 season was a watershed year for lacrosse in Brooklin. It was the last season that lacrosse was played in the glorious old barn in Brooklin. Over its 23 year history this great old rink had been home to 13 OLA and 3 national championship teams. Luther was a member of each of these teams as either a: player, coach, manager, executive or sponsor. In all but one instance (1952), he was also arena manager. To anyone who played or attended a lacrosse or hockey game at the old arena or who had the good fortune to have worked there for Luther as a 'rink rat', it was obvious how much Luther loved to be "part of action" and what a vital role he played in the development of the community's youth .

The new Brooklin Memorial Arena opened in 1973 with Luther back on the job as arena manager. But, times had changed as Luther told Jim Shaw, Sports Editor of **THIS WEEK** in an October, 17

1973 article. “It’s a different time these days”, claims Luther. “I guess it’s the generation gap. Heck, I remember we used to play a game and we used to talk about it in the dressing room after until the wee hours of the morning. I hardly recognize the people coming through the door today. I guess TV sports keep most of them at home.” Luther’s uncharacteristic pessimism was most certainly driven by what had happen that summer. The Redmen had returned to Brooklin after 3 years of playing out of the Civic Auditorium. But while the local fan base was excited by the team’s return to “its true home” the Redmen organization was in disarray both on and off the floor. Half way through the 1973 season the team suspended operations, lacking both the players and the financing to continue. This was truly the darkest time in Brooklin’s long love affair with lacrosse. No one in the Brooklin lacrosse family felt both the shame and the pain of this “failure” more than Luther.

Luther suggested to Jim Shaw that he might retire from his arena manager position in 1974. But something changed his mind and he decided to stay with it. This decision to “stick around” turned out to be an important factor in Brooklin’s return to Major / Senior A lacrosse. Over the Christmas / New Year’s period of 1975 -76 there was some “serious talk” among patrons at the Brooklin Legion as to what it would take to reestablish a senior lacrosse franchise in Brooklin. A young group of local players, primarily graduates of the Junior B & R teams were keen to continue playing lacrosse locally; they decided to approach a select group of former Redmen executives to seek their guidance and support. There were 3 “lacrosse old timers” that were seen as essential to any serious effort to regain an OLA franchise, they were Luther, his brother “Sully” (Don) and his nephew Mike Gray. All 3 agreed to get involved in a detailed review of what it would take to return to the OLA that summer. It was an ambitious objective. In a short 5 months the new season would begin. Quickly other local lacrosse enthusiasts were recruited; a formal executive was created, with Luther assuming his traditional role as club treasurer.

Luther was clearly supportive of this new generation of Brooklin lacrosse enthusiasts, but he also made it clear that his involvement came with some “conditions”; 1) all bad debt from the ’73 Redmen would have to be repaid or formally forgiven; 2) the new club must adopt prudent accounting and financial practices; 3) the team would recruit “local players”; 4) the team

would play its home games at the Brooklin Arena. The full executive quickly endorsed Luther's conditions and began the arduous task of rebuilding the Redmen franchise. Luther immediately addressed the debt issues with all former creditors, and because it was Luther Vipond asking, many suggested without being asked that any "old debt" would be forgiven and the new club would start afresh. With that task taken care of Luther then focused his attention on securing sponsors. He personally met with long time former sponsors, mainly local businesses owned and operate by individuals who had known Luther for years. The respect that Luther had earned in his community allowed him to seek and gain their financial support. This early endorsement by the community was an essential step in securing the club's future.

While the 1976 team failed to make the playoffs, it was a hit with local lacrosse fans and the team ended its season in sound financial shape. But, most importantly, "Brooklin lacrosse was back", and again like so many times over the previous 40+ years Luther Vipond played a key role.

On September 30, 1979 Luther retired from his position as Brooklin Arena Manager, bringing to an end a great run for a man who contributed much to all those who entered "his house". He continued to be active on the Redmen's executive and as a sponsor. But, most importantly he continued as the team's elder statesman and mentor, to players, coaches and executives.

On May 23, 1982, at age 67, Luther Vipond succumbed to injuries incurred during a farming accident. Both the sporting community and the community at large had lost a pillar of strength. He had given much to both and asked for little in return. His reward had been innumerable lifelong friendships, as Sports Editor Jim Shaw wrote of Luther in 1973:" He's got more sport stories to tell than a history magazine".

On Remembrance Day 1982, Whitby Mayor Bob Attersley and Luther's son Peter unveiled a new sign during a ceremony renaming the Brooklin Memorial Arena, the "Luther Vipond Memorial Arena". **The Oshawa Times** reported that: "While members of his family and community watched proudly, Brooklin Memorial Arena was renamed in honor of Luther Vipond, a man who gave much of his life and energy to the arena and children's sports."

Today's Brooklin Redmen lacrosse club also continue to honor and recognize Luther's tremendous contribution to their lacrosse legacy by annually awarding the "Luther Vipond Trophy" to the executive who best exemplifies the qualities and standards that Luther represented during his life long association with lacrosse.

Tony Gray

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