

STEWART, Mike (con't)

By Paul Svoboda

The Intelligencer

He breaks up fights.

He gets yelled at by guys in suits.

Crowds swear at him.

And he loves it.

No, Mike Stewart isn't a bar-room bouncer.

He's an Ontario Hockey League linesman.

And if he gets his way, the 29-year-old Belleville resident may some day be breaking up fights and getting yelled at in the NHL.

"We all have hopes and aspirations for the NHL," says Stewart. "You try to do a good job and keep your mouth shut."

Stewart's been calling the lines in the OHL's eastern cities for the past three seasons — often working with local OHL veteran official Al Detlor of Stirling — and he's seen his regular season workload increase steadily.

While he has yet to receive any OHL playoff assignments, where officials as well as players receive more exposure, he's hoping his size might attract big league attention.

With bigger, stronger and faster players coming into the NHL every season, the 6-foot-4, 250-pound Stewart has the kind of measurements that come in handy when one of your job requirements is periodically separating two rather irate — and large — combatants on skates.

"That's a big advantage for me," he agrees. "If anything works against me it's my age. If anything is going to happen, it's going to have to be in the next one to two years."

Stewart, a Peterborough native and Moira Secondary School graduate, started skating the lines five years ago after returning home from a football career at

In his first year, admittedly, Stewart was "very green" but he saw his assignment sheet grow from about 25 games in his rookie season to over 30 in the 1991-92 campaign.

This past season, Stewart logged action in about 40 games, including a pair of televised contests.

A highlight was being assigned by the NHL to do the lines in the Ottawa Senators-Toronto Maple Leafs all-rookie training camp exhibition game last fall at the Sports Centre.

"The whole idea is exposure," says Stewart. "We have a supervisory staff and we get evaluated about four or five times a year.

The feedback has always been positive."

Meanwhile, after three years in the Ontario loop, Stewart has his own list of likes and dislikes.

The Memorial Centre in Peterborough is his favorite rink, "because I was born and raised there."

His least favorite OHL barn?

"Kingston," he says. "It's very dark and they use a blue border on the rink boards and it's really easy to lose the puck."

Stewart the diplomat says he likes most of the referees in the OHL, but admits Paul Ravary of Whitby is a personal fave.

As for the guys in suits who yell at Stewart and other OHL

officials — the league's head coaches — Belleville Bulls bench boss Larry Mavety and Ottawa 67's veteran mentor Brian "Killer" Kilrea rate special mention.

"They both have their way of letting you know whether they think you were right or wrong," Stewart says. "It's part of the

But what about heckling players?

"There's always a guy on every team that sets the tempo with the linesmen, mostly to do with the face-offs," he explains. "There's always a character on every team."

Bulls overage centre Justin Morrison fits that category, says Stewart.

"In the days when Morrison played for Kingston, it was like three teams on the ice," quipped Stewart. "Because you had to watch everything he was doing."

Stewart hoped no one was watching when he suffered his most embarrassing moment in the OHL during a game in Ottawa. But, with the match televised live on TSN, it's not likely many watchers missed Stewart fall not once, but three times, during the contest.

"Guys rarely fall and when they do the fans yell and scream," he said, recalling the experience with a sheepish grin. "But when you fall two or three times, you start to doubt your ability to skate."

He later discovered the tumbles were due to a broken skate blade.

Okay, so getting yelled at by guys in suits doesn't bother him and neither do screaming spectators or the occasional fall. But what about breaking up fights?

"Basically, we look at the infraction," Stewart explains. "If it's feasible to break it up before it gets going, we'll try to. But if they've thrown seven or eight punches already we'll let them go and get it out of their system."

"We let it go until they tire or if there's a real aggressor. Then