

SPORTS & LEISURE

Cotton named Hockey Heritage winner

By **EAMONN MAHER**
Staff Writer

Well-known in Georgetown as a towering, tough, stay-at-home defenceman for the Intermediate 'A' Raiders in the 1970s, and later as a coach at the youth level, one of Neil Cotton's most satisfying hockey moments happened off the ice.

The recipient of the 2012 Georgetown Hockey Heritage Council Award played on four provincial championship Raider teams during his eight-year intermediate career, which was in jeopardy of ending prematurely following the 1975-76 season after most of the executive members decided to walk away from the club.

"We had a meeting at Dave Kentner's dairy bar, where we were told that there wasn't going to be a team next year," Cotton recalled.

"I thought, I'm not ready to stop playing, so I got up and said I'll run it. At that point I think I became the one and only player/president in history, other than Mario Lemieux (who bought the Pittsburgh Penguins out of bankruptcy in 1999 in an effort to recoup his salary from the NHL club). I'm not in the same category as Mario though. He's got one more move than me."

Rescued from folding, Cotton's first tasks as the new Raider boss were to ask Bob Hooper to become the team's general manager and put an executive in place that would allow Cotton "to just come to the arena and play the game."

Cotton decreed that each of the players received \$10 for a win and \$8 for a loss (mileage expenses excluded) so that everyone was paid the same. Adding to an already strong nucleus, the Raiders not only skated to another Ontario title, but advanced to the Eastern Canadian Championships in Campbellton, N.B., one step away from winning the Hardy Cup.

The host Tigers, however, were loaded with experienced pros and quickly dispatched Georgetown, eventually going on to capture the national championship trophy.

"Campbellton had a tough team and they had some crazy guys," said Cotton, now 65.

"One of our players had his leg broken for no reason other than to take him out. We had to go back to work when we got back home and it just wasn't worth it to get into that stuff. It took an edge off your game. We got that far and that in itself was something to be proud of."

Cotton retired from competitive hockey in 1978, having earned Player of the Year and the Jack Harrison Award for his outstanding contributions to Raiders' hockey.

Prophetic in an interview with long-time *Independent & Free Press* sports



The 2012 Hockey Heritage winner Neil Cotton.

Photo by Ted Brown

writer Dennis Gibbons after losing to Campbellton, Cotton predicted that the big-spending teams would soon put that level of hockey out of existence.

"If they put together a team the way Campbellton did it, it would be the end of intermediate hockey in Georgetown," Cotton said in 1977.

"This town couldn't afford to run a team with a \$70,000 budget and have nothing left when it was over. Anyway, Georgetown bought the Hardy Cup in '82 and that was the end of intermediate hockey. You can say I'm a soothsayer, but it's on the record."

Cotton grew up in Toronto and played Jr. B in front of future Hall of Fame goalie Ken Dryden for the Etobicoke Indians, who made it to the 1965 Sutherland Cup Ontario championship before bowing out to the Kitchener Greenshirts.

He went on to study and play varsity hockey for the University of Waterloo Warriors and upon graduating, responded to an advertisement for a job teaching general science at Georgetown District High School and was hired.

He was playing in the OHA Senior 'A' loop with the Oakville Oaks at the time and had to take a year off from GDHS to take his formal teacher training. After being released by Oakville in January of 1971, Cotton was approached by Georgetown Intermediate 'A' Raiders' GM Wilf Brownlow about joining the team for the rest of the year and it didn't take long before he became captain and fan favourite.

Some students in his Grade 10 class nicknamed him Rocky for his role as on-ice policeman and 'Go Rocky Go' signs were hung on the end wall of Memorial Arena. One Monday morning, Cotton was left to explain to his students why his nose was heavily bandaged (nostril cut with errant stick) and after breaking his right hand in a fight, had to write left-handed on the chalkboard for a couple of weeks.

"I think it kind of kept the kids in their place because they didn't know what I was going to do next," he bellowed.

"It seemed like it was especially fun for the spectators because we played in Memorial Arena and you're talking about guys who were basically semi-pro in terms

of skating and hockey ability, running into each other in that little rink. It was like bumper cars out there—rough and tumble—so the people who came out Friday nights just loved it. In those days they had wire screens around the boards—not glass like today—and there were always scraps."

Cotton began coaching minor hockey in the late 1970s at the midget, peewee and tyke levels while also serving as the head on-ice instructor at the North Halton Sports Camp for several summers.

He was also head of the Town of Halton Hills's power skating program for three years before taking on the head coaching duties for the GDHS Rebels in 1985.

Cotton also coached baseball, soccer, squash, football, volleyball, rugby and golf at and away from high school. Retiring as GDHS's science department head in 2000, he remained with the Rebels to witness their first-ever Halton Tier I boys' hockey championship in 2001-02, defeating first-place L.B. Pearson 4-3 in the final.

Still, his reputation as the hard-nosed Raider followed him long after his competitive career was over.

"That was the funny part about coaching high school," he said.

"I wanted the guys to play disciplined hockey and stay out of the penalty box. When the other team's in there, we'll score, I told them. But I had a couple of kids whose dads were on the Raiders when I played and they said, 'Excuse me, Mr. Cotton, but you're asking us *not* to do what you used to do.'

"And I told them they were absolutely right. Except, there was an expectation by the coach for me to do what I did. That's just the way hockey was. I expected my players not to fight, just play hard and fast hockey and stay out of the box. *When they're in, we'll win.* Of course, it helped get the message across that I'm a bit of an imposing figure. But when we won the Halton championship, basically the other team self-destructed with penalties."

Well-known locally over the past three decades as a musician in a number of bands, Cotton was also co-chair of the Homecoming 2007 Committee, initially intended to be a celebration of GDHS's 120th anniversary, but was expanded to include many other community groups that were marking special occasions.

Married to Wendy for 43 years, Cotton has two children, Sean and Kelly, along with three grandchildren.

"I've had a great life in town, between teaching, coaching and raising a family, and I still love to play hockey and music."

The Hockey Heritage Awards Dinner will be held Monday, March 5 at the Acton Legion. Tickets are \$65 each and can be purchased by calling 905-877-6710.