

SPORTS

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

FRIDAY, JUNE 5, 1998

At 53, McNeil is back in major lacrosse

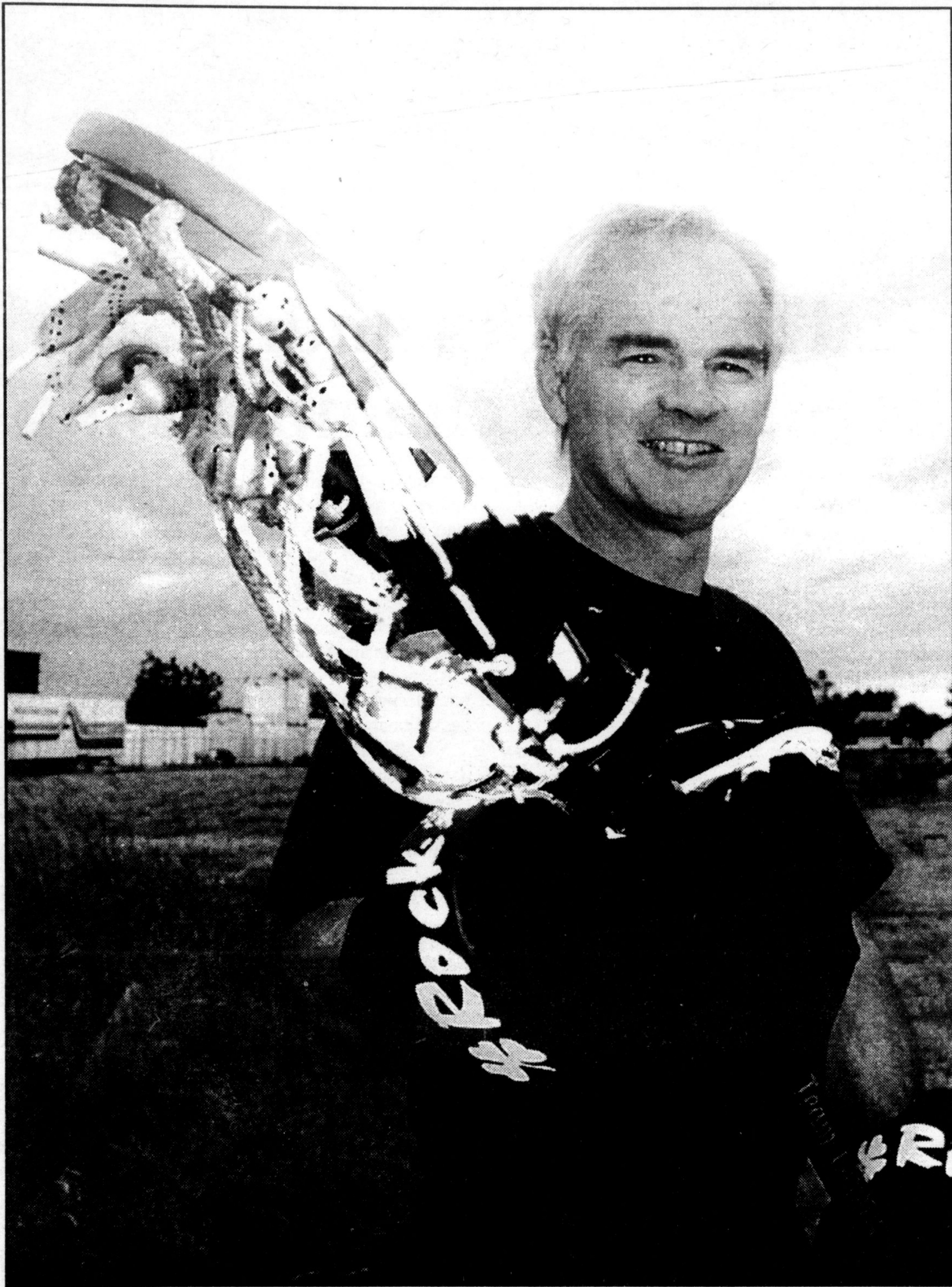


Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Ron McNeil has returned to Ontario Major Lacrosse action this season. At 53, he's the oldest player in the league by more than a decade.

By **STEVE LeBLANC**

The Champion

Ron McNeil is willing to put a lot on the line to perfect his sports equipment, even his aging body.

Not that he's out of shape — far from it — but the proprietor of Rock Lacrosse will be the first to admit he's no longer nearly impervious to pain.

"My recovery rate is not what it use to be and it's going to take a few weeks to get my legs back," said McNeil.

His comments came last Friday morning, just a few hours removed from a somewhat secretive return to Ontario major lacrosse.

The former real estate agent certainly wasn't embarrassed about his decision, but didn't tell anyone outside his immediate family either.

That included his brothers — all fellow lacrosse enthusiasts.

Quipped McNeil, "They would have said I was nuts."

Nuts or not, the 53-year-old Milton native is the newest member of the Peterborough Lakers and the oldest player in the league by more than 10 years.

He sees this summer's comeback, made possible by Lakers' director Peter Trory, serving two purposes — first to help him find ways of improving his locally made lacrosse equipment and second to get him into better shape.

"I had to quit smoking for this, after the first practice I was huffing and puffing," he recalled. "I've been doing a lot of running as well. I should be up to speed by mid-season."

McNeil likely won't pack the same offensive punch as he once did, but with three Mann Cups under his belt and a reputation as one of Canada's most dominant players he'll certainly be a presence to opponents and an inspiration to his fellow Lakers.

Thursday night he was used sporadically on the third line and helped Peterborough post a 17-11 season opening victory against Ohsweken.

In addition to not seeing a regular shift, McNeil didn't score any goals — perhaps even more of a rarity for one of the most proficient scorers in the 1960s and '70s.

"It seemed like every time he shot, he scored," recalled wife Sandy.

The pinnacle of his success came in the late 1960s when he set the national single-

season scoring record — amassing a remarkable 114 goals in 20 games with a team from Etobicoke.

The record has yet to be eclipsed.

He also holds the record for most goals in a career with just more than one thousand.

These accomplishments, plus countless more, made McNeil a highly popular inductee to the Canadian Lacrosse Hall of Fame in 1992.

The ceremony was held in Westminster, British Columbia, not far from Victoria, where he once played.

"That was one of the best moments of my career," he said of the induction.

McNeil can thank lacrosse for not only providing him the spotlight but offering him someone special with which to share it.

It was through the sport that he met Sandy, who admits she was wonder struck even before their first encounter.

"There was a feature story about Ron and his brothers in the Port Credit newspaper. I remember carrying the clipping around to games and thinking I've got to meet this guy," said Sandy.

She got her chance a couple of years later, in 1964, when the honour of being Miss Port Credit presented the opportunity to do the opening faceoff drop for the club's home opener.

Her favourite player just happened to be the captain that year as well.

"He asked me out almost immediately," Sandy explained.

The couple's son Jamie has now taken up the game and as a result has afforded his old man a new venture — manufacturing lacrosse equipment.

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