



Carla Victor/Mountain View Gazette

SCOUTING OUT THE BEST – Innisfail resident Dennis McIvor knows hockey. He is retired from a 20-year-career as a professional hockey scout for the NHL. The walls of McIvor's home office are lined with hockey memorabilia including a signed photograph from Scott Nichol who was scouted by McIvor to play with the Buffalo Sabres.

Searching for the next Gretzky

Innisfail man spent career as scout for the NHL

BY JENNIFER WILSON
MVG Staff

Dennis McIvor knows hockey.

The Innisfail resident spent more than 20 years as a professional hockey scout for various NHL teams.

At 69, McIvor has been involved in hockey almost all his life. Growing up in Manitoba he played the game as a kid, but confesses he wasn't very good.

"I was OK," he said with a laugh. "Junior hockey was a lot different than it is now."

While many young boys dream of playing in the NHL, McIvor found his way to the big league in a different way. He was scouting for junior teams in 1980 when a series of events and past connections lead him to his future career.

At the time, Troy Murray, an up-and-coming player with the St. Albert Saints, was drafted by the Chicago Blackhawks. Scotty Bowman, who was then coach of the Buffalo Sabres, was upset his team had missed out on this player.

It was no surprise though, McIvor said, as there were few scouts at the time who would go to an Alberta Junior Hockey League game. After that, he said "all the coaches started paying attention to tier two players."

"The worst thing you can do is miss a player."

Bowman started looking for a scout and came across McIvor's name from a mutual friend, Jim Roberts, who played for Montreal.

"And the rest, they say, was history," said McIvor.

After scouting for Buffalo, McIvor went on to work for a year with the San Jose Sharks, a year with the Ottawa Senators, and then finished his career with the Tampa Bay Lightning in 2003.

A big part of his job was travelling. When he was a scout for Buffalo, his coverage area stretched from Winnipeg to Victoria.

"You're away from home more than you want to be," he said.

McIvor would travel around the west, attending various hockey games and looking at players. He scouted universities and colleges, Western Hockey League games and any tier two teams.

"I'd just watch, just like you do when you go to a game," he said.

The thing to look for was players who stood out from the rest, he said. But once in a while there was someone you just knew was going to be a contender.



photo courtesy of Dennis McIvor

DRAFT – Dennis McIvor, right, is photographed with Tampa Bay Lightning owners and coach at the 2002 entry draft.

"There's the odd one you think: there's something there," McIvor said.

As part of the scouting process, he'd also interview players before signing them. He once sat down with former Edmonton Oiler Ryan Smyth when he played in the minors for Moose Jaw.

One of the most memorable players McIvor signed

"I was watching history being made."

Innisfail's DENNIS McIVOR on working with Scotty Bowman, the winningest coach in NHL history

was one of the first guys he brought to Buffalo. Ron Fischer, a German player, was playing hockey for the University of Calgary in 1980 when the team went to the CIAU finals. Along with McIvor, Fischer was being scouted by George Kingston, a scout for the Calgary Flames.

McIvor told the young player he'd sign him right away, but Fischer hesitated. McIvor gave him until Sunday to make a decision and when no word came

from Kingston, Fischer was signed as a free agent. He went to training camp in the fall and made the team.

He had a good career with Buffalo, McIvor said. Over the years Fischer went back and forth between the AHL's Rochester Americans and Buffalo, before finding his place in the German league in Europe. He would represent West Germany in two Olympics and two World Championships.

McIvor said it was "highly unusual" for a player to get signed like that. Most people, he said, usually work their way through the WHL.

"A drafted player will have a better chance than a guy who's a walk on," he said. "It's easier for high profile guys."

Years later, Fischer was interviewed on CBC for Hockey Night in Canada and the announcer mentioned how going from university hockey to the NHL was a big jump. Fischer replied "Yeah. I have one guy to thank for that: Dennis McIvor."

McIvor said he felt really proud when he heard that. "You feel like you're a parent to these kids," he said.

But McIvor said his favourite memory of his entire NHL career was working with Scotty Bowman for five years.

"I was watching history being made," he said.

Bowman is the winningest coach in league history, with 1,244 wins in the regular season, 223 wins in the Stanley Cup Playoffs and nine Stanley Cups. McIvor believes this record will never be broken.

"He could anticipate line changes of the other coaches two lines ahead," McIvor said of Bowman, whom he's still friends with. "He's committed thoroughly to the game."

And hockey has certainly changed over the years, McIvor said. The game is faster, the players are bigger and the equipment is better.

"Hockey's a possession game," he said. "It bugs me when they throw the puck away."

But since his retirement, McIvor said he seldom goes to the rink anymore. He'll go watch his grandson play hockey but has other interests now, he said, such as volunteering at the hospital and spending more time with his wife Lois.

McIvor said he always enjoyed his job, but he's glad to see scouts make some gains in the hockey world, although it's nowhere near where the players are.

"Players put fans in the building," he said. "But this is the guy that puts players in the building."