

## **ROGER THIRNBECK**

Roger Thirnbeck was a major driving force for field hockey in Calgary and Alberta for nearly forty years. He introduced countless teenage boys and a few girls to the sport he loved (many of who still play,) he played for and coached several Alberta teams, and was Alberta President for over a decade. He was innovative, stubborn, argumentative and notoriously politically incorrect. In short, he was passionate about field hockey.

Roger emigrated from England in the 1960's to lecture in geography at Mount Royal. He joined the Calgary league where he was a large presence in defence and he used his bulk to his advantage. An abiding memory was of him puffing his way upfield for penalty corners, taking the shot, hoping he'd miss if he didn't score, to give him time to get back to his defensive position before play restarted. Before long he was organising matches and tours, forming the Wanderers club in 1973. Unusually for a defender, he was an advocate of attacking hockey, preferring to win 5-4 than 1-0, and always up for an often mischievous post-match post-mortem with a beverage to hand, but always with a point to make. He gave out a fair bit of stick, but was good at taking it as well. Hockey with Roger was never dull, and could be fun both on and off the field.

In 1975 Roger was at the forefront of the 'Stampeders' tour to Great Britain. With the help of other notable organisers such as Joe Levesque Sr., he arranged deals and sponsorship, and secured an invitation to the Easter Festival in Guernsey. Afterwards there were games against Jersey and Blueharts (his old club) and also Bedford Eagles (1975 English club champions) and University College of Wales, Aberystwyth. The Stampeders were a strong team, never losing by more than a goal. All who went said it was a marvellous tour both on and off the field. A dozen or so years later Roger took an Alberta Junior Boys team on a successful tour of England, where they won the Scarborough Festival.

Roger was keen to get youngsters into the game, and, in addition to the Wanderers men's team, also ran the Colts team of youngsters. He also brought many innovations to the sport.

After the success of the Montreal Olympics, the first major tournament to be played on artificial turf, Roger was instrumental in securing McMahon Stadium for field hockey, beginning in 1977. The first match was played in driving sleet, ensuring it was a memorable occasion. He spent time looking for land to build a hockey-only facility, scouring city maps for suitable places as only a geographer could. He found some possible locations, but raising the money to buy the land was the inevitable stumbling block.

Indoor Hockey was first played in Calgary in the mid-80s. With the no-hits rule Roger soon realised a longer stick would allow for more powerful flicks, and although all sticks at that time were made 36 inches long, there was not (until 2015) any maximum length for a stick. Sticks still had to be wooden in the 1980s, and he had a huge block made of laminated wood, over 50 inches long. He sawed half-inch-wide strips from this block, which were fashioned into sticks, each tailored to an individual player's preferred length. Several players used these sticks for many years.

Lindsay Park Sports Centre (later Talisman, now Repsol) has been the venue for indoor hockey in Calgary since the 1985-6 season. The humid atmosphere created by the swimming pools caused the wooden boards to warp alarmingly; no set would last even a season. Roger had the idea of building boards with the necessary wooden facing, bolted to an aluminium box girder, so they could not warp. These boards were built for the 1990 Indoor National Championships, and are still in use today. He even stipulated ash rather than pine or fir when consulted about replacing the wooden facings in 2011. Our boards have been taken to Edmonton and Winnipeg for National Championships, and are the best, most durable boards ever built, anywhere.

Roger and Batch Thirnbeck recently celebrated their golden wedding anniversary along with Alan, Lara, Andrea & families and close friends Dac & Ellen Dang in Southwood Hospice. He had been battling cancer with all his usual vigour and stubbornness, outliving his doctors' most optimistic estimates by years.

A few days before he passed away from cancer Roger chatted with longtime hockey friend Ben Johnson about the fun they had back in the 1970s.

Roger Thirnbeck was a decent player, a natural organiser and always an innovator. Field hockey has lost a very special friend.

Tony Stewart and Ben Johnson