

Chapter 3

The Rise of Box Lacrosse

Led by owners of the National Hockey League's Montreal Canadiens, Joe Dattarinch and Leo Dandurand (ice hockey arena and club operators), introduced an indoor version of lacrosse to utilize their empty facilities during hockey's off-season. This new version of lacrosse became known as box lacrosse - "boxla" for short. Because it was played on the smaller cement floor of hockey rinks, teams used only seven men at a time instead of twelve men traditionally used in outdoor field lacrosse.

When the hockey men launched their enterprise in 1931, gate revenue was their foremost goal. Cast as the International Lacrosse League, the circuit included the Montreal Canadiens, Montreal Maroons, Toronto Maple Leafs, and the Cornwall Colts. Owners recruited former professionals who had played prior to the Great War, younger field lacrosse players who were willing to abandon their amateur status, and professional hockey players seeking summer pay.

The Maple Leafs finished in first place during the inaugural twenty-four game campaign, but the Canadiens won the three-game title series. That first season saw pro hockey players Lionel Conacher, Nels Stewart, "Hooley" Smith, and Dave Kerr suit up with the Montreal Maroons. Conacher easily won the scoring title.

Players from Oshawa's 1929 Mann Cup winning team were spread throughout the league. "Toots" White, Red Spencer and Pat Shannon with the Maple Leafs, Ted Reeve and Bob Stephenson with the Maroons, and Kelly Degray and Chuck Davidson with the Canadiens. The Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association had experimented with exhibition games at Sunnyside Park in Toronto during the 1931 season. Field lacrosse teams continued to compete for the Mann and Minto Cups.

The following year, 1932, the Toronto Tecumsehs replaced the Cornwall Colts. Halfway through the 30 game season, both Montreal teams pulled the plug when attendance declined.

A team made of players from the Atlantic City Americans, who had played in the Olympics in Los Angeles as a demonstration sport, entered the league as the Buffalo Bowmans. They joined the loop as a third team along with the two from Toronto. Researching through The Toronto Globe, it is noted that Toronto Maple Leafs and Buffalo Bowmans played in the league final. Toronto led the series two games to one, however, no further information has been made available to date as to the eventual winner of the league.

Before the Montreal Canadians dropped out of the league, there was an exhibition game played at Madison Square Gardens in New York on May 10, 1932 between the Montreal Canadians and the Toronto Maple Leafs. Actually, the United States went as far as forming a six-team league including the New York Giants, New York Yankees, Brooklin Dodgers, Toronto Maple Leafs, Boston Shamrocks, and Baltimore Rough Riders. It was called the American Box Lacrosse League (A.B.L.L). The A.B.L.L. set up a 50 game schedule that was played from June to September in venues such as Yankee Stadium and Fenway Park, attracting crowds of one to five thousand people.

Financial woes caused the Yankees and Maple Leafs to bail out of the league by the end of June and the league soon faded. The Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association (O.A.L.A.) continued with the Senior A groups. Group 1 was made up of six teams that included the Mimico Mounties, Orangeville Dufferins, National Sea Fleas, Hamilton Tigers, Brampton Excelsiors, and Toronto Marlboros. Group 2 consisted of four teams that included the Fergus Thistles, Mimico Canucks, Native Sons, and Niagara Falls Cataracts. The Mimico Mounties were the first box lacrosse team to win the Mann Cup.

Unknown to only a handful of people, there was also a Bush League played in the Durham Region, sanctioned by the O.A.L.A., called the Southern Ontario Box Lacrosse League. It was made up of five different teams from Port Perry, Brooklin, Bowmanville, Harmony, and Stonehaven (in Whitby).

Brooklin featured players such as Sailor Luke and the Vipond twins, Lewis and Luther. Harmony won the league with Ray Leroy, Glen Sather, Stan Cook and Roy Fleming (members of Oshawa's 1936 Senior A team) as well as Roy's two brothers, Alex and Fred.

The only year Oshawa had a Senior A team was in 1936. They lost all 28 of their league games and never made the playoffs. The star of that team was Chuck Barron, who actually outscored the legendary Bill Isaacs, finishing sixth in league scoring (he also played for the Montreal Maroons in 1932).

Other players of distinction for that Oshawa team were Kelly Degray (voted into the Oshawa Sports Hall of Fame), Roy Fleming, Glen Salter, Stan Cook, Ray Leroy, and Eugene "Shine" Boivin (who perished on November 2, 1944 in Holland while fighting with the Canadian Forces) as well as Peterborough boys Mick Magee, Peter King, Ira Dundas, Emmett Creighton, and Red Creighton.

Included at this point is a 1998 interview between myself and Lewis Vipond. Vipond played, refereed, and coached during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. He talks about the old bush league in 1932. The interview was conducted after a Brooklin Redmen Major Lacrosse game against Akwesasne Thunder on July 11, 1998 in the Whitney Lounge at Iroquois Park, Whitby, Ontario.

Larry: *You are a member of one of the first lacrosse families in Brooklin for as far back as I can remember. Where did the family originate and when did they settle in Brooklin? Can you tell me a bit about the family?*

Lewis: *My great grandfather, my dad, and his father, and his father that would be the third one. They came from England and settled in Raglan, Ontario. I think it was in 1824. They settled and cleared the land in Raglan. We had a hundred acres just east of Raglan between the townline and the ninth concession. In 1881, my grandfather which was John Vipond bought the farm up where we lived in Brooklin. There is a subdivision there now on that 220 acres. That was the Vipond farm called Meadowcrest. My dad Myron farmed it from 1926 until he sold it in 1954. Nine children were in the family. Luther and Lewis (the twins) are the oldest. Then came Bill, Tim, Doug, Don, and three sisters. Mike's mom is the third sister, Marjorie. Luther and Lewis then Helen, then there was Bill, then there was Martha, Taffy Main's wife. Taffy Main used to play hockey in Whitby and was quite a ball player. And then Marjorie, Mike's mother, born in 1920. By 1954, Luther was home on the farm, after he came back from overseas.*

That was the only one of the family that was home then, we were all gone. He was a farmer and farmed that land. After his old man sold the farm, they built on the bottom 68 acres of the farm leaving 130 acres. Neil Grandy is working it now. Luther worked that farm from '54 to '82. Neil is Charlie's Dad. The next farm is ours. They are starting to build houses on the Grandy farm now.

Larry: *What is your earliest memory of lacrosse being played in Brooklin? They had pretty good intermediate teams in Brooklin in the '50s. Could you tell me a bit about those teams and the players who played on the teams in those years? Also, when and how the Luther Vipond Memorial Arena was built and the changes made to the arena in those years?*

Lewis: *1930. We had kind of a field lacrosse team in 1930 and 1931. No, I was not on the team. I was only 16 at the time. We played in the Bush League. That is when we first started to play lacrosse in Brooklin, 1930, 1932, 1933. It was a Bush League in '34. It was all Bush League then. In 1935, we entered the OLA Intermediate. That is when we started. I was playing then. Well, I played on all those Bush League teams. I played in my first year in 1932. It was field then. 1935 was box. Box came in '32 and we started to play box. We played in a Bush League. We had Harmony, Port Perry, Claremont, and Red Wing Orchards. Norm Irving of Red Wing Orchards had a box over there. And they had a Bush League. That was what it was. Then in 1936, '37, and '38, I played intermediate in Brooklin. In '39 I was in Sudbury and did not play. 1940 and '41 we played in Brooklin. I came back from Sudbury. I worked for Sam McLaughlin on the Windfield's Farm for 14 months. I drove the tractor. I was the tractor man. My brother Bill was the other guy. He drove the other tractor. Sam had a lot of land there; about 400 to 500 acres. There was no lacrosse in Brooklin from '41 to '49 because of the war. The arena was opened January 1, 1949. I think they started a team in 1949 if not mistaken, definitely in 1950. The arena was built in late '48 and opened in '49. At the time in '49, Bill was working at G.M. Luther was on the farm. G.M. had a parts department that had a pretty good hockey team. So we played the Markham Millionaires. They had just won the Intermediate championship in Ontario. On opening night, we beat them 3-2. That was in the month of January. I came down from Toronto to play hockey for Brooklin. Bill and Luther played on that team too.*

We had three lines, about fifteen players. They had a team in '50 I know for sure. But I think they started in the summer of 1949. Mike might know. Mike was only 7 years old. I don't think he'd remember. Intermediate lacrosse was in '51, '52, '53, '54, and '55 I think. Brooklin won the intermediate championship in all those years. Pretty, every one of those years. They won them damn near every year. Then, I don't remember what happened in '56 and '57. In '59 and '60, Brooklin won the Senior B championship. Because I refereed. The last game I refereed was in Brooklin in 1959 in October. Some players who played in '51 and '55 were Donnie Craggs, his brother Rusty, Donald played and Doug played and Adrian Kim played some in them years in the '50s. Luther played in 1953 and Bill played to '53. I was playing in Toronto. If you see Donnie Craggs or some of those guys, they could confirm exactly between '51 and '55 but I know they won the championship in '53, '54, and '55. Bill coached those years. I don't remember, what in hell, I still think they played intermediate in '56, '57, and '58. Well one of those guys should know but I wasn't sure if I was refereeing then. They had a dirt floor until 1962. I think it was 1962 they put in the cement floor. They put in artificial ice in 1962. They named the arena when Luther died in '82. It used to be called the Brooklin Memorial arena. It was changed when Luther passed away on May 23, 1982. They used the lumber from the munitions plant in Ajax. That was where they got a lot of the lumber. Ajax filled the shells. It was a big plant in Ajax, thousands worked there. Everybody in Brooklin worked in Ajax during the war.

Larry: *Your career?*

Lewis: *I left Brooklin in '38. I went to Sudbury to play senior hockey. They had won the Allan Cup the year before. That was the highest hockey there was. I played with Vachon, Shields, Rosini (Rosini played for Boston), Nicholson, Nweboldt, Hoggrath. These were all senior hockey players.*

Larry: *But I never heard of them.*

Lewis: *That's because they're senior players in 1938. You Larry weren't even thought of. We played against Frood Mine. It was a Nickel Belt League. A lot played pro hockey. Rosini made the NHL, Bingo Kampman, Murph Chamberlain. Bingo and Murph played for Frood when they won the Allan Cup in '36. Murph Chamberlain played pro. Roy Hexamar was a hell of a good hockey player. He played minor pro hockey. There was a guy who played for Frood Mine. His name was Jim Dewey who could have played pro hockey any day right today. He was a great hockey player but he had a big job with Inco. This Dewey was a hell of a hockey player. Frankie Lavine and Frankie Graham were the Pony Express. They had played with Halifax in 1935 and won one Allan Cup and Frood won it in 1936. Frood won it in 1939. I played only one year in Sudbury. We had this Nickle Belt league, Copper Cliff, Frood Mine, just outside of Sudbury. Frood Mine is still going, also Creighton Mine. The mines all had teams including Sudbury. Four team league. Frood Mine won it (the league). Played in the Allan Cup and didn't win it. Won in 1936. Then a guy stole a guy's cheque and they cut the league out right there. That was in '38. Well, he got a guy's cheque and also he was supposed to be working and the big shot from Inco came in. He was sitting in a beer parlor. That was the end of the league. They had sort of senior league there. A lot of the players went to Kirkland Lake and played for the Kirkland Lake Blue Devils in 1940 when they won the Allan Cup.*

Larry: *You were saying they were playing for "food".*

Lewis: *No, Frood - F R O O D.*

Larry: *The guy that stole the cheque, they cut his leg off?*

Lewis: *No, No, they cut the league out. I went to Toronto in the fall of 1941. In '40 and '41, I came back home and played for Brooklin. In the fall of '41, I went to Toronto in September and 1942 played for the Etobicoke Indians, 1943 the Toronto Lakeshores, 1944 the Toronto Lakeshores and 1945, I went overseas and did not play any lacrosse. In '46, I played for Toronto Lakeshore again but played out of Barrie. In '47 and '48, I played for Weston. That's it. That's my whole career. I was 34 years old in September of that year.*

I played at 190 pounds that last year, but my best weight was 180, 5'9", shoot right. See, I could score five goals a game in this league now.

Larry: *Yeah, but you didn't back then. I saw your stats.*

Lewis: *The first game in Weston we played Brampton, 40 minutes overtime and I scored the first three goals of the game.*

Larry: *Got the first three and didn't get any more after that.*

Lewis: *Is that not enough? I am a defenseman, not a forward. I had a hell of a good underhand shot. I could really skim the ball right along the floor, and I knew where it was going too. There is nobody that can shoot an underhand shot today. There isn't a kid that can shoot an underhand shot. Johnny (Fusco) can shoot a bit of one. Jim McNulty had one of the best underhand shots that I ever seen. One of the best, he was good. There were a lot of guys who could shoot, underhand shots but you had to practice and practice it.*

Larry: *Did you actually play against McNulty because he played way up in the '60s.*

Luther: *McNulty played in '51, '52, and '53 when I was refereeing.*

Larry: *The time you got the three goals in one game for Weston, was that '47 or '48?*

Lewis: *'48, last year. Hell, I scored three goals against Ray Mortimer one night in Mimico in '47. I can remember those three goals.*

Larry: *How many hat tricks have you had in your life?*

Lewis: *I had two. I had lots of hat tricks playing intermediate. So I remember those two. I can always remember that. Shot the ball one time just over centre and beat Mortimer. Mortimer was an engineer in the railroad. Played hockey when I came back to Toronto. Played in the T.H.L. Major. There were lots of pro hockey players in that league boy. It ceased in 1947. Played from '41 to '45.*

Played a little bit in '45 when I was in the army on the weekends. I played with the Army team. I played with Tip Tops and I played with the Red Indians on the weekends. That didn't finish my hockey career either. In '48 I played for Q and L. We had a team in Toronto Sr. B. We played the Ontario championship and we were beaten by Sarnia in the final games 4-2 and I think it was 6-3. Two out of three. That was Sr. B Ontario final. 1949 was the last year I played real good hockey. I was 35 then.

Larry: *You never played in the Mann Cup, did you? You never played on a decent team, did you?*

Lewis: *Yeah, I played for the '43 championships of Ontario but Mimico and Brampton beat us. In '43, I played in the Provincial finals, just like the Major finals here. That was Sr. A. That was top notch lacrosse. I was playing for Lakeshore. I started refereeing in 1949. I refereed to 1958. I refereed six Mann Cup games in '52, '54, '56. I refereed at least 800 games. I refereed 92 in one year. In 1954, I think it was, I got paid \$12 a game and 15¢ a mile and \$15 for the finals. We weren't big paid men in those days. I refereed Jr. and sure, I did the Minto Cup in 1955 and in 1953. I went to Winnipeg to referee the finals in the Minto Cup with Winnipeg playing Vancouver in 1955, and then we came back to Long Branch and played the Minto Cup here. It went five games and Long Branch won. I think that was most of my career. I did coach a little bit. I coached in '59 in Long Branch, the Senior team. After '59 they became Port Credit. They're Senior A. Yeah just like the Majors now. In 1961, I was the coach of the Redmen. I coached the Mimico Juniors in 1964 and I beat Bishop when he had that good team. We beat them 8-5 in Mimico. Quit as the first coach of Brooklin for business reasons. I did not last the season. I was manager of the parts department. I was living in Etobicoke I never coached junior until 1964. That was the last year I coached and then I retired. Graham Gair, Ross Othan, Johnny Dale, Davey O'Brien. Bishop's team won that year but I beat them one game. That was something. You might have that right in that scrap book. That was my coaching career. Now I am retired. I'm the main spectator for the Brooklin Redmen. Where the hell is my second beer, there? Merv, is that my second beer over there?*

Larry: *What was your career highlight as a player and as a ref and the one thing that stands out in your memory the most as a player and as a ref?*

Lewis: *Highlight of refereeing would be the Mann Cups, that's all. There's nothing other than that. As a player, the hat tricks and playing in the provincial championship in 1943. See in 1940 and '41, Brooklin played Senior B you know. Owen Sound beat us both years. We lost to Owen Sound. In 1936, I was playing hockey for Whitby and we went to the provincial intermediate championship and got beat by Durham that year. I could go on. I started playing O.H.A. Junior in 1933. I did play a lot of hockey. That was my first game. The most interesting in lacrosse was in 1985 when Brooklin won the Mann Cup in New Westminster. The score was 5-4. The goaltender knocked in the fifth goal. The goalie was Quinlan. I was out there every year '85, '87, '89. I was out there in '65 too. I was with my brothers. I think the best lacrosse team of all time was the 1990 Brooklin Redmen. Was one of the best lacrosse teams in a long time. They had both Gaits, Marachek, Kent Douglas' kid. That was a good lacrosse team. I told a lot people that.*

Larry: *Who were the top three players who you have ever seen play the game?*

Lewis: *It's hard. Bill Isaacs, Kenny Dixon. He's only 72 years old. There's Ike Hildebrand. There's all kinds of them. If I took the time and figured it out, I could give you a better list. I did play with Reggie Hamilton, Reese Thompson, and Annis Stukus. They all played with us. We had a big team there, boy in 1943. Played against Bill Isaacs. Dixon played against me on Mimico, Archie Dixon, Jack Williams. Donnie McPhail was one of the toughest guys I ever played lacrosse against. He could really fight. Oh s**t, I think he would take Scotty McMichael. He was a tough boy and he was a damn good lacrosse player, too. Tough as nails. I can remember Luther and him having a fight in Barrie and I tell you it was a fight. It wasn't just a little punching out. Luther played with me in 1946. I was a more finesse player than Luther. Luther was tough as nails. Could he fight. I bet you a quarter he could knock some of these guys out in about one minute. I've seen him knock two or three guys colder than a cucumber.*

Larry: *You guys are twins. Did you ever have any fights against each other?*

Lewis: *We got along pretty good. I'd get a black eye for sure. He was a tough cookie. Bill was three years younger. He was no fighter. He couldn't fight his way out of a paper bag. He was tough, though. He was 210 pounds, not too tall, 5'8" and really built. We were all solid. Take young Doug, he's solid. Doug was a good athlete. If he could only skate as well as I could skate. I was a good skater. I had a lot of speed. Doug could handle the puck and throw a pass as accurate as anybody I've seen. He played for Brooklin in '64 and '65 when they won. Doug was a good athlete. The Gait boys, I think they're wonderful lacrosse players. I would say that there were a lot better stickhandlers and goal scorers right after the war, before the war and in the '50s. A lot of good lacrosse players, you know they could really play. I think they're doing a little better this year. I see the checking is very much better this year than it was last year. Whether it is the coaching or not, they are better checkers. You see Pete was a hell of good defenseman in lacrosse, you couldn't beat him. He could really whoosh. He was strong, big. You see Pete played at about 180 pounds. He's not tall but he is big. (Lewis's nephew, Peter, was a former captain of the Oshawa Green Gaels and coach of the Brooklin Redmen). And all the teams are playing defensively. All the teams the last years have been chicken s**t as far as defense goes. But they're hitting harder now. You see a few guys went down. I used to really clamp down when some s.o.b. would run in to me and knock me flat and the ball was going over. You know where he went? To the penalty box because I hated that. Call interference, it's hard to call interference, very hard, very hard. When you get in the 15 foot circle, you just can't call it. You got to allow the defense guy to have a little leeway. I don't understand the referees today. I saw plays out here where two guys were checking, they were both fighting for the ball, and they blew the bloody whistle and give it to one guy. How in the hell can you do that when there are only two guys involved? If the third guy is involved it's interference, you see.*

Larry: *Did you have any favorite players?*

Lewis: *Well, I had the Gairs. Norman Gair. He's dead now. I tell you another guy, Gordon Gair. He's still alive who is a hell of a lacrosse player. There's Jack and Toad Gair. I don't know what the hell his first name was. We always called him Toad. Norman went to the Olympics in 1932 with the Canadian Olympic team for lacrosse.*

Norman was good but his brother, Gord, was a great lacrosse player. Won the senior championship. He could shoot with both hands. Gord was better than Jack. Toad was a good steady lacrosse player, wasn't a star like Gord. Graham Gair was the son of Gord Gair.