INTERVIEW WITH RON ELLIS

Celebrated hockey legend **Ron Ellis** combined skill and sporting play throughout his 15 year NHL career. Playing his entire professional career for the Toronto Maple Leafs, Ellis has become one of the most respected individuals to ever wear the 'blue and white'. Ellis totaled 350 regular season and playoff goals and was a key member of the Leafs' 1966-1967 Stanley Cup winning squad. Ellis distinguished himself on the international stage with Team Canada at the 1972 Summit Series where he participated in all eight games. After scoring 32 goals for the Leafs in the 1974-75 season, Ellis retired to pursue other interests. After a brief return to professional hockey, Ellis returned to retirement and in 1986, began fighting his battle with depression. His dedication to mental health care and awareness has led him to work closely with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, drawing attention to the stigma associated with depression. Ellis went public with his story as the co-writer of his biography, *Over the Boards: The Ron Ellis Story*. Currently, he is the director of public affairs for the Hockey Hall of Fame, and the Founder of the Ron Ellis Team Canada Foundation, a charity that supports various organizations. Ellis has dedicated himself to eliminating the stigma of depression in the workplace, and speaks about his experiences with humour and empathy.

ON THE TEAM SELECTION, ON TEAM CANADA, ON THE RUSSIANS

In early 1972, there was talk in the press of a pending hockey series between Team Russia and Team Canada, a team which would be made up of Canadian professional hockey players. At the time as a member of the Toronto Maple Leafs, I was playing on a productive line with Paul Henderson and Honoured Member Norm Ullman. I asked myself, is there a slight chance I could be invited to the training camp? Soon, the call came in from the team management inviting me to camp. I was informed that there would be 35 players in camp; however, each player would play in at least one game for Canada. That would have been good enough for me. As it turned out, Paul and I had the honour of representing Canada in all eight games.

The Soviets were dominating International Hockey during the 60's in the World Championships and Winter Olympics. The Allan Cup winners representing senior hockey in Canada were not able to successfully defend previous gold medal performances against the Soviet side that was quickly becoming a world hockey power. Canadian hockey fans accepted this scenario because Canada was not able to send its professional players to the International tournaments. The organization of the 1972 'Summit Series' changed the hockey landscape. Canadian fans felt that we would show them who was the real hockey power in the world.

ON HIS BEST MEMORIES OF THE SERIES, ON THE ICE

The memory of the opening ceremonies in game one in Montreal stands out. Paul and I were assigned a new line centre by the name of Bobby Clarke, an upcoming super star with the Philadelphia Flyers. Early in the training camp, we decided to give it our best shot and hopefully be selected to be part of the team in game one. So there we were, standing on the blue line with our teammates during the team introductions. The excitement in the arena was electrifying with anticipation for this long awaited contest. The cheers for Canadian players as each one of them was introduced on the ice were deafening. As it turned out, the dream of playing in game one became my worst nightmare in two and half hours as the final score was Canada (3) and Russia (7).

Another unforgettable moment for me occurred in Game 6 in Moscow. We had to win this game and also the remaining two games to defeat the Soviets. With little time left in the game we were leading 3-2 when I was assessed a two minute penalty that I felt was a questionable call. Seriously, I knew full well how important it was not to take a penalty when you have a one goal lead late in the game. I was now sitting in the penalty box knowing that if the Russians scored and the game ended with a tie, the final two games would be meaningless. Esposito, Mahovlich, White and Stapleton were able to kill the penalty and saved my butt.

ON HIS BEST MEMORIES OF THE SERIES, OFF THE ICE

One story comes to mind when thinking of an off ice experience during the series. We had flown to Sweden for a few days before continuing on to Moscow for the final four games. The Swedish stopover was designed to give our team an opportunity to get used to the large international ice surface by playing two games with the Swedish National Team. The time spent in Sweden was critical to the final outcome of the series as this is where we became a true team instead of a group of All-Stars. Egos and animosities where left outside the locker room and there was by then a real

sense of team chemistry. During a team dinner the night before flying into Moscow, we were informed of a problem by our team management. During the negotiations for the 'Summit Series' it was agreed that our wives would be able to join us in Moscow. This was one of the perks offered by team management to any player who had agreed to report to training camp. The problem was that the Russians were now saying that due to overbooking, there were no hotel rooms available and our wives would have to stay at a different hotel. Immediately, the team, led by Phil Esposito, took a vote and unanimously agreed that if the hotel arrangements were not rectified, our team would fly home the next day and not go to Moscow at all. To be fair, I really didn't want to be the one telling my wife she had to stay in a different hotel. The situation was rectified, of course because the Soviets did not want us to go home given that they felt quite confident they were about to win the series. This was an example of how the team was bonding.

ON THE INFLUENCE OF THE SERIES ON HOCKEY

With passing years, the Russian team which in '72' was depicted as the enemy is now viewed with great respect. The Russian players lead by Tretiak, Yakishev and Kharlomov were skilled at their craft and truly represented their country with commitment and dedication. They proved to the world that they could compete successfully with the Canadian professional hockey players. The Canadian players learned that they did not have all the answers when it came to hockey training and development and that it was time to review the accepted traditions. The Soviets learned that you should never count the Canadians out. The Russian players have stated that they could not believe the look in the eyes of the Canadian players during the final game of the series. It's called passion for the game. Today, the Soviets have learned how to add passion to their already high skill set.

ON WHAT HE TAKES PERSONALLY FROM THE EXPERIENCE

The experience of being a member of Team Canada '72' impacted my confidence level positively as a professional hockey player. Being recognized as a member of the best group of players in Canada made me realize that all my hard work and commitment were being rewarded. In addition, I am proud to be part of a hockey series that became a watershed moment in terms of improving the game in general. I believe we opened the door to Europeans playing in the National hockey league, to our professionals participating in World Championships and Olympics, and the development of international competition for our women's and junior teams.

ON WHAT HE THINKS CANADIANS SHOULD REMEMBER FROM THE EXPERIENCE

The memory of the victory of Team Canada '72' in the Summit Series is alive and well with Canadians. It is remembered because of a miraculous comeback, the need for three victories in the final games in Moscow. These victories were all achieved by a one goal margin. This is the stuff we see in movies. The generation of Canadians who watched the series have passed this great narrative to their children and grandchildren.

The 'Summit Series' became much more than eight hockey games. As the series progressed, certain political aspects rose to the surface. We were playing the 'Big Bad Bear' and we were taking the role of the good guys. In my mind, this series is important to our history as it exemplifies the 'Canadian Spirit'. When I am asked to speak on the topic of the '72' series, I often use a quote by one of the Russian coaches. "We matched the Canadians in skill, we matched the Canadians in fitness, but we could not match their hearts." Enough said!