

Hockey Before Helmets: The Bisons and Championship Hockey in Buffalo

By Clarence C. Picard

Nowadays, nearly 19,000 fans routinely fill the stands at HSBC Arena in Downtown Buffalo for Sabres games. Things didn't get that way overnight, though. For 37 years the Sabres have been the hottest ticket on ice, but before the NHL came to town, the Buffalo Bisons were one of the top franchises in the American Hockey League, winning five Calder Cups during their 30-year run from 1940 to 1970.

While the Bisons weren't playing at the highest level, with only six teams competing in the National Hockey League from 1942-67 the AHL's level of play was top-notch. The late-60s success of the Bisons certainly set the table for the Sabres' 1970 entrance into the NHL.

Buffalo Hockey Pre-Bisons

Buffalo's northerly location made hockey a natural choice for a winter sport. Like most organized sports in the English-speaking world – baseball, various football codes, boxing, etc. – hockey began to be formalized in the latter-half of the 19th century. Although the modern game was developed over centuries with similar games being played on land as far back as in ancient Egypt, the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association calls Kingston, Ont. the birthplace of hockey based on a game between Queen's University and the Royal Military College of Canada in 1886. With so many influences it's nearly impossible to say when the first game was actually played, but an indoor rink existed in Montreal in 1875.

During Prohibition in the United States, wealthy Americans in northern cities routinely crossed the Canadian border to enjoy the vices outlawed state-side. Fort Erie's Peace Bridge Arena was home to the Canadian-Professional

Hockey League's Buffalo Bisons who started playing in 1928. The Bisons played a 42-game slate, picking up 17 wins and seven ties behind Rolland Huard's 26 points in 18 games. By the '30-31 season, Buffalo paced the International Hockey League with a 30-13-5 record before falling in the finals to the Windsor Bulldogs.

In 1930-31 the Majors were formed with games to be played in Buffalo at the Broadway Auditorium – a 7,600-seat arena. Midway through the season, though, Auditorium management decided to turn the venue into a fulltime bowling center and the Majors were forced to share the Bisons' Fort Erie arena. With sagging attendance the team folded, and professional hockey in "Buffalo" until 1940 was confined to the Bisons playing across the Niagara River.

The Bisons lasted to the 1936-37 season – typically finishing in the top half of the league – but a merger with Niagara Falls, NY led to dwindling

fan support and the team ended play in December, 1936.

Memorial Auditorium

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) countered the Depression by pumping millions of dollars into various civic projects across the country. The WPA spent \$2.7 million to build Memorial Auditorium in Buffalo to replace the Broadway Auditorium. Construction began on November 30, 1939, and the opening ceremonies were less than a year later on October 14, 1940. Dedicated to the soldiers of the First World War, Memorial Auditorium became an icon of Downtown Buffalo until its closing in 1996. Originally accommodating 12,280 for hockey, the venue hosted events ranging from the Bisons – and eventually Sabres hockey – to the Ringling Brothers Circus, boxing, dog shows, wrestling and political events. The "Aud," as it is affectionately called, remains a prominent feature of Downtown Buffalo architecture.



Local youths play hockey on the frozen Delaware Park Lake. BUFFALO COURIER, ROTOGRAVURE PICTORIAL SECTION, JANUARY 7TH, 1923

Calder Cup



"Ye Gude Olde Days"

ARTHUR FARRELL, HOCKEY: CANADA'S ROYAL WINTER GAME, 1899

Memorial Auditorium has remained vacant since its closing in the mid-90s with political debate raging over plans to remodel or tear down the venerable arena. In March 2007 plans to use the Aud as a Bass Pro Shop were scrapped, and the building remains scheduled for demolition by the end of 2009 at a \$10 million cost. In December 2007 Buffalo sold the Auditorium to the Erie Canal

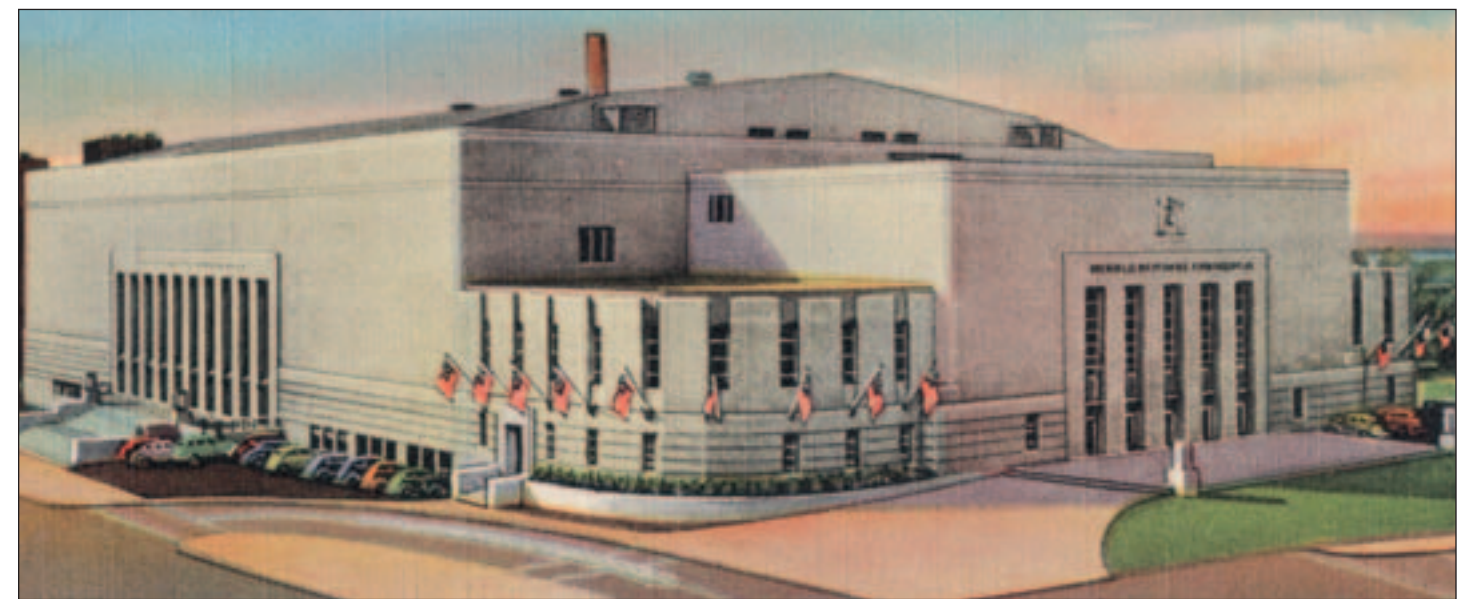
Harbor Development Corporation for \$1.00 to move along the process of preparing it for demolition.

Golden Years

In 1940, along with the completion of the Aud, a series of events led to pro hockey's rebirth in Buffalo. The International-American Hockey League awarded Buffalo a franchise on December 4, 1939. After the '39-40 season, the Syracuse

Stars folded, eliminating the club's top rival and sending several players to the most recent incarnation of the Bisons.

Success starts at the top and the leaders of the newly formed Bisons knew Buffalo and knew hockey. Louis M. Jacobs and Edgar Danahy headed Buffalo's push for a pro franchise. Jacobs co-owned Jacobs Brothers Concessions



A postcard of Memorial Auditorium in its glory days.

SUE ECK COLLECTION



Broadway Auditorium

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– Bisons GM Lou Giffels joined the Marine Corps as a captain. In Springfield, Mass., the government requisitioned the Eastern States Coliseum for surplus supplies, leaving the defending Eastern Division champion Indians without a home.

Springfield's misfortune was a monumental gain for Western New York hockey fans. The Indians merged with the low-budget Bisons, not only infusing Buffalo with better players and more money but also bringing legend Eddie Shore to town.

Eddie Shore was one of the sport's first stars winning four Hart Trophies (Most Valuable Player) with the NHL's Boston Bruins. "The Edmonton Express," as Shore was called, was known for his physical, violent play but the defenseman could also put the puck in the net. He is widely regarded as the best defenseman in league history after fellow Bruin legend Bobby Orr.

Shore owned the Indians and took over for Giffels as Bisons GM when the clubs merged. Shore hired his former teammate Art Chapman to take the role of player-coach. The new-look Bisons enjoyed incredible success under Shore's guidance. Gordie Bell led the way in goal, helping the team pace the league with a 2.55 goals against average for a 56-game schedule. Right wing Bill Summerhill shattered the team record with 68 points (41 goals, 27 assists) with left winger Lloyd "Dede" Klein also topping the previous mark of 58 with 22 goals and 42 assists.

In their first trip to the playoffs, the Bisons took on the regular season champion Hershey Bears. The Bears had dominated the regular season going 35-13-8 (78 points) compared to the second place Bisons' 28-21-7 (63 points) record. Hershey scored 240 goals while giving up only 166. Buffalo fans of course know regular season accolades mean little in the playoffs (see: Buffalo Sabres 2006-07 and Buffalo Bills 1990-93). Buffalo smacked Hershey 10-0 to open the series – including the franchise's first hat trick by Maury Rimstad and Bell's 10th shutout of the year. The Bisons beat Hershey in the series 4-2 and advanced to the finals against Indianapolis. The Capitals had an

("A Salesman's Walk Downtown," *Western New York Heritage*, Summer 2006) and Danahy was president of the Bisons in the '30s. He would continue that role with the new franchise, landing Louis Giffels as Auditorium general manager and Cecil "Tiny" Thompson as coach. Thompson gained his fame during a 12-year career as a star goalie in the NHL for Detroit and Boston. He won four Vezina Trophies as the league's top net minder, retiring with a lifetime goals against average of 2.08.

Thompson led a group of mediocre, blue-collar players to mid-table finishes in his two seasons as coach (19-27-10 in year one, 25-25-6 in year two). The Bisons weren't yet good enough to make the playoffs, but Thompson was able to prepare the franchise for the successes that were to come.

Professional sports were thrown into disarray across the country with the onset of World War II. Athletes, coaches and front office men across the United States and Canada entered the armed services

Antiquers Alley



It is not an American flag by Jasper Johns or a piece of Pop Art by Andy Warhol, but it has the graphic appeal of both contemporary artists. It is an antique embossed tin advertising sign for Campbell's Soups. Called "The Holy Grail of all advertising signs, rarely seen and seldom ever appearing on the auction block," in James D. Julia's November 2007 Toy, Doll, and Advertising Auction, lot 296, sold for \$18,400 including buyers premium. The sign measures 39¼" wide by 27¼" high.

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Cleveland Barons goalie Harvey Teno slides to stop Bison Murdo McKay in game 4 of the Calder Cup finals in front of a record crowd at Cleveland Arena on April 9, 1946. The Barons won the game, but Buffalo took home the Cup. HERMAN SEID PHOTO

explosive offense (3.77 goals per game) but it wasn't enough to slow Shore's machine. Buffalo swept the series 3-0 to claim their first Calder Cup win.

The following season Hershey led the Eastern Division with 68 points but Buffalo kept it close this time and finished with 63. Buffalo had returned only a handful of players from the previous season's championship club but Chapman's team – led by Fred Hunt's 80 points – were again in position to win the Calder Cup. The Bisons topped Indianapolis 4-1 to again advance to the finals, this time facing the favored Cleveland Barons who paced the league with 33 wins and 73 points. The ever-confident Shore showed little concern, boasting "Cleveland would not win a single game from us." True to his claim, Buffalo won 4-2, 12-2, 8-1 and a come-from-behind 6-4 clincher. The 12-2 game two loss was the worst playoff defeat in Barons history, a franchise that won eight regular season titles and nine Calder Cups.

The team of Chapman and Shore ably led the Bisons to another successful campaign in '44-45 but the revenge-

mindful Barons beat Buffalo 4-2 in the playoffs' opening round.

As the war ended and pro sports returned to normal, Shore left Buffalo for greener pastures where he could have a bigger say in franchise decision making. Chapman was promoted to General Manager and former Bisons defenseman Frank Beisler took the coaching reigns. The first year coach led the team to a division title and their third Calder Cup in four years, again beating Cleveland in the Calder Cup finals 4-3.

The Bisons again made the Calder Cup finals in 1948 – meeting up with Cleveland for the third time in five years – but were swept in four games. Missing the playoffs in 1949, the Bisons won the East in '49-50 and remained a top team in the league throughout the '50s but could never replicate their war years' success. Finals trips in '54-55 and '58-59 both ended in 4-2 losses to Pittsburgh and Hershey respectively and the team also missed the playoffs three times in the decade.

Blue Chips: Pilote & Plante

As professional hockey evolved into a modern business, minor league clubs

began to align themselves with NHL franchises. The change was good and bad – minor league clubs would be assured some good young prospects but they also ran the risk of losing their stars mid-season to the parent club. Buffalo aligned with the powerhouse Montreal Canadiens from 1947-1954.

While the on-ice product wasn't always the best, Western New York fans were fortunate enough to see the careers of two future Hall of Famers blossom at the Aud. Pierre Pilote and Jacques Plante only graced Buffalo ice together for the 1952-53 and '53-54 seasons but both went on to shine in the NHL. Pilote and Plante guided the Bisons to a first-place finish in their second season together as the team won the most games (39-24-7), scored the most goals (283) and gave up the fewest (217). The powerful Barons again stopped the Bisons in the playoffs, 3 games to none.

Pilote was a local boy, growing up across the Niagara River in Fort Erie and playing juniors in St. Catharines. Pilote appeared in two games in 1951 before anchoring the team's blue line from '52



to '56. Pilote would go on to win three Norris Trophies consecutively ('63-65) while captaining the Chicago Blackhawks. The tough Pilote once played in 376 consecutive NHL games. He was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 1975.

Plante's Buffalo time was even briefer, appearing in only 88 games in '52-53 and '53-54. His flashy play, however, kept the Bisons in business after their great 1940s and before their success yet to come. Jake the Snake was remarkable for several reasons: he was the first goalie to regularly wear a mask and he revolutionized his position's play by routinely playing the puck out of the crease and directing traffic for the other players. Bisons GM Fred Hunt called Plante the biggest attraction since legendary Terry Sawchuck. Plante was too good to stay in the minor leagues and was called up to the Canadiens for the 1954-55 season. He led *Les Habs* to five consecutive Stanley Cup titles from '55-56 to '59-60, won nine Vezina Trophies as the league's top goalie and the 1962 Hart Trophy (MVP). Plante joined Pilote in the Hall of Fame in 1978.

Pastors, Pepsi and the Successful '60s

In January 1955 Lou Jacobs was forced to sell the Bisons when he needed money for his concession business. The Chicago Blackhawks bought the franchise with the stipulation that a Buffalo owner would get first crack at buying the club if Chicago wanted to sell.

In February '55, Ruben, Sam and Al Pastor purchased Buffalo's Pepsi-Cola plant. Looking for new ways to market themselves, the Pastor Brothers eyed professional hockey as the perfect tool. With rumors of a Bisons move to Syracuse swirling, Chicago stayed true to their promise to Jacobs and sold the club to the Pastors for a reported \$125,000 on July 17, 1956.

The Pastors' mark on Buffalo hockey remains today. Reuben helped established and promote youth hockey in the area, and the Pepsi Hockey Invitational has been a local fixture for more than 30 years (this writer still remembers making the trip from Cleveland to play in the tournament more than 10 years ago). Today, many fans don't realize that the Buffalo Hockey shirts with the Pepsi bottle cap sold at HSBC Arena are relics of the Bisons – if they know the club existed to begin with.

The ownership change didn't lead to immediate success with the team miss-

ing the playoffs in the Pastors' first two years, finishing next-to-last and last successively.

In 1958-59, desperate to improve the team, Reuben Pastor renewed the club's affiliation with Chicago and aligned with the New York Rangers – a relationship that would pay off both immediately and down the road.

New York provided Buffalo with starting goalie Marcel Paille – who appeared in every game – and the previous season's AHL Rookie of the Year Bill Sweeney. Sweeney paced the team with 75 points (31 goals, 44 assists) as the Bisons finished atop of the table with a 38-28-4 record. First-year Coach Bobby Kirk and the Bisons went on to beat rival Rochester in the playoffs' first round before falling 4-2 to Hershey in the finals. Nevertheless, Ruby Pastor was named Executive of the Year for turning the club around with *The Hockey News* proclaiming his moves as good as any in the previous 25 years.

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The league forced the Bisons to break ties with the Rangers after the '61-62 but success stayed in Buffalo. The majority of the roster returned from the 1962 Calder Cup finalist and second-year Coach Billy Reay was very confident in his troops. Buffalo steamrolled over the competition in the regular season with a 41-25-7 record and 89 points, 20 more than the Western Division runner-up Cleveland Barons. Crafty center Art Stratton set up the Bisons attack with 70 assists and 20 goals. Denis DeJordy won the league's MVP and top goalie awards while giving up only 2.79 goals per game. The Herd topped Hershey in a thrilling seven-game series that included a fifth game where Buffalo tied it up with one second left in regulation before Doug Robinson scored the winner in overtime. In front of 11,536 fans the Bisons clinched their fourth Calder Cup and first in 17 long years.

The next season Reay moved up to the NHL to coach the Blackhawks, and the Bisons never finished higher than second in the Western Division over the next five seasons, including three divisional last place finishes.

With Chicago focusing their minor league efforts on the St. Louis Braves of

the Central Professional Hockey League (CPHL) for the '65-66 season, the Bisons were quickly losing their stars. Stratton, DeJordy and several other key ingredients of the '63 Calder Cup champs were shipped to St. Louis and replaced by veterans who were passed their prime and youngsters too inexperienced to contribute. A last place finish and the death of Blackhawks owner James Norris, Jr. finally pushed things over the edge and the Pastors severed ties with Chicago. The next year was even worse as it featured a 22-game winless streak and only 14 wins.

As he had done before the '58-59 season, R. Pastor knew he had to shake things up or fan support would continue to drop – average attendance was only 1,700 during the worst season in Herd history. Several NHL clubs looked to buy the independent Bisons but Rueben looked to a familiar ally to save the franchise. The Rangers brought success with them in their previous stint affiliated with Buffalo and their General Manager Emile Francis guaranteed the Pastors he would help turn the struggling club around.

Fred Shero – with nine years of experience behind the bench – quickly earned

the respect of the players. Shero had already won five championships as a coach and spent 15 years playing professionally. Former NHL star Camille Henry and up-and-comers like Guy

(continued on page 54)



Head coach Fred Shero led Buffalo to a 113-63-42 record in three seasons. Shero won championships before, during and after (Philadelphia Flyers, 1975) his time in Buffalo. WNY HERITAGE



Not much good happened to the Bisons in the mid-60s. Cleveland Baron legend Fred Glover netted his 500th goal against Ed Chadwick and the Bisons on February 11, 1966. DICK DUGAN COLLECTION

AMERICAN HOCKEY LEAGUE ALL-STARS

1968-1969



RALPH KELLER, Hershey
Defense
Second Team
RON INGRAM, Buffalo



GILLES VILLEMURE, Buffalo
Goalkeeper
Second Team
ERNIE WAKELEY, Cleveland



BOB BLACKBURN, Buffalo
Defense
Second Team
JIM MORRISON, Baltimore



GUY TROTTIER, Buffalo
Right Wing
Second Team
WAYNE HICKS, Baltimore



GIL GILBERT, Hershey
Center
Second Team
DENNIS HEXTALL, Buffalo



MICHEL HARVEY, Hershey
Left Wing
Second Team
JEAN COSSETTE, Baltimore

AWARD WINNERS '68-'69

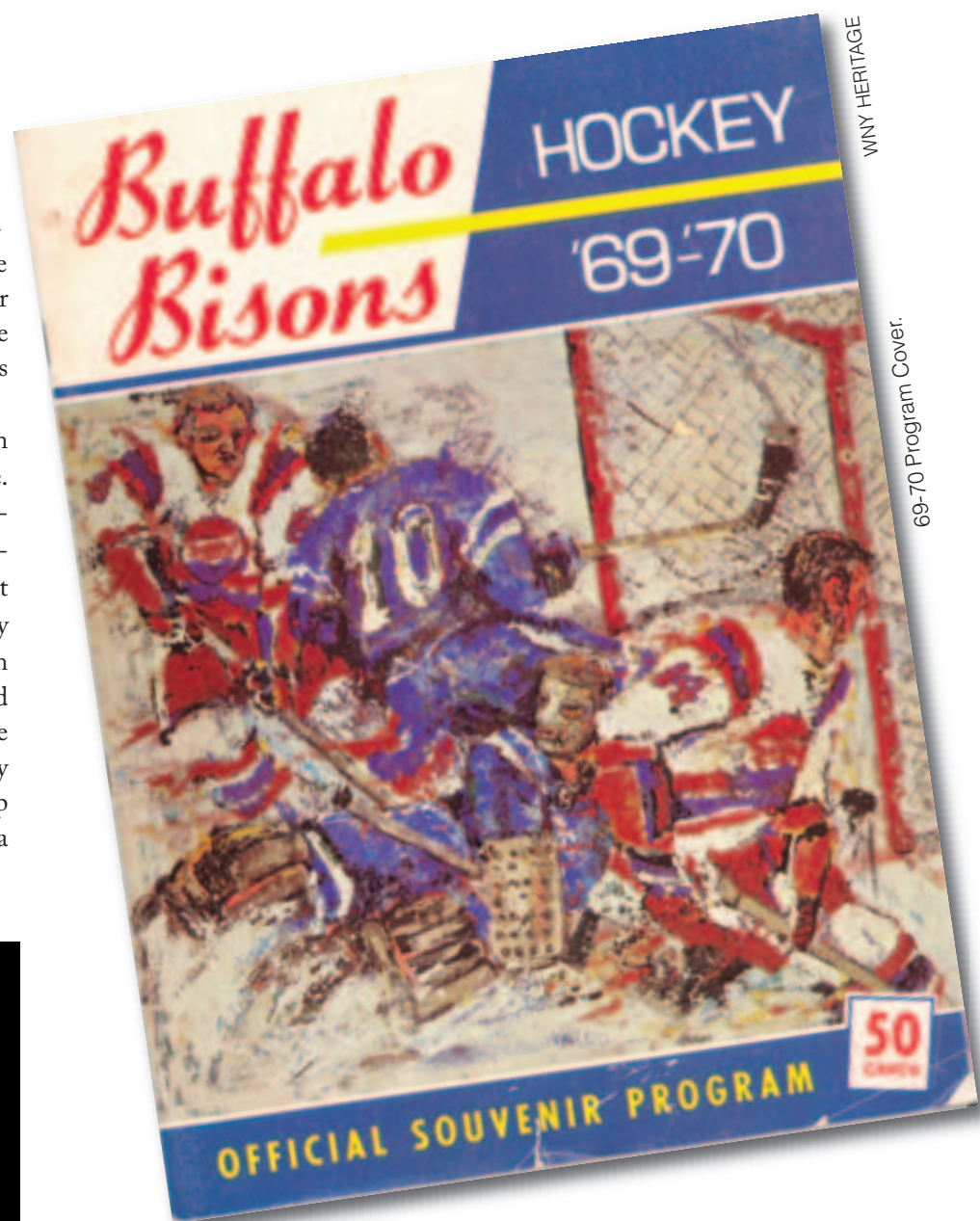
MOST VALUABLE PLAYER – Les Cunningham Plaque – **GILLES VILLEMURE**, Buffalo
OUTSTANDING DEFENSEMAN – Eddie Shore Plaque – **BOB BLACKBURN**, Buffalo
OUTSTANDING ROOKIE – Dudley "Red" Garrett Trophy – **RON WARD**, Rochester

Western New York players received several accolades after the 1968-69 season. Rochester American Ron Ward won the Rookie of the Year while five Bisons were selected first- or second-team All-Stars. WNY HERITAGE

(continued from page 52)

Trottier filled the Rangers-stocked roster. Only seven holdovers came back from the previous year. Things started well but injuries and call-ups derailed the season. Nevertheless, Buffalo finished above .500 (32-28-12) – only nine points behind league leading Rochester – and made a brief playoff appearance before falling to Quebec 3-2. Things were going in the right direction.

In 1968, with Shero's system firmly in place, the Bisons were ready to explode. The Rangers sent Buffalo star net minder Gilles Villemure and stud defenseman Bob Blackburn, and the Bisons got off to a quick 12-0-4 start. With Guy Trottier filling up the stat sheet, the team blew away the competition and finished the regular season at 41-18-15, nine points ahead of East-leading Hershey and 15 points ahead of West runner-up Cleveland. The fans – thrilled to have a winner again – flocked to the Aud.



Villemure was the star with six shutouts and a 2.41 goals against average. He won the Les Cunningham award as MVP – the club's fifth winner – and the Harry Holmes Trophy as top goaltender. The awards didn't stop there, though, as Blackburn was named top defenseman and Villemure, Blackburn and Trottier were first-team All-Stars. Defenseman Ron Ingram and center Dennis Hextall were second-team. Trottier led the league in goals with 45. A fifth Calder Cup wasn't to be, though, as the Hershey Bears knocked the Bisons out of the playoffs 4-2 in the first round.

Behind the scenes, Seymour Knox was working to bring the NHL to Buffalo after a failed bid just a few years prior. The rabid support of the Bisons convinced the NHL to grant Buffalo a franchise and the '69-70 season would be the Bisons last. Rangers' GM Francis was committed to bringing Buffalo one last championship before they went *big time* and he moved nearly three-dozen players in and out of the Bison roster to keep the team running like an engine. A 16-game unbeaten streak midseason propelled Buffalo to another first place finish (40-17-15), 23 points ahead of second place Hershey. Villemure repeated as MVP and top goalie and Shero won top

coach accolades. Trottier netted 55 goals to again lead the league.

Late season injuries looked like they would again stop Buffalo short of its championship aspirations but the Rangers again came through. Several players from the CPHL champion Omaha Knights were called up to push the Bisons through the second round and into the Calder Cup finals – their ninth finals appearance.

Aided by young call-ups like current-Sabres commentator Mike Robitaille, the

Bisons jumped all over Springfield. The Bisons swept the Indians in Massachusetts and came back to Western New York ready to cap an illustrious history.

Robitaille described the city as “hot and heavy” for the Bisons in their final days. The Aud was full and the papers thoroughly covered the minor league club, unlike today where the Bison baseball team struggles to even make the bottom half of the sport section's first page. Buffalo was gaga over the Bisons and the feeling was reciprocated.

Buffalo is full of “good, honest people,” according to Robitaille, making the players feel at home. The proximity to Canada put the players at ease and the blue-collar atmosphere was perfect for the minor league players eager to prove themselves to the NHL.

The Bisons dominated game three with a 5-2 win and again smoked the Indians 6-2 to clinch the series. As Reuben Pastor shed tears of joy, the Bisons and their long-time fans wildly celebrated. An era had come to an end,



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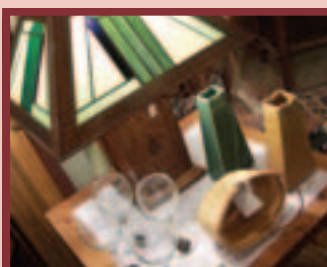
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BUFFALO HOCKEY CLUB—1969-1970

FRONT: Frank Christie, Trainer, Guy Trottier, Gerry Ouellette, Al Johnstone, Gilles Villemure, Dennis Kassian, Bill Plager, Fred Shero, Coach. CENTER: Billy Knibbs, Orland Kurtenbach, Ron Attwell, Bob Jones, Larry Brown, Sheldon Kannegiesser. BACK: Wayne Maki, Bob Ash, Don Blackburn, Wayne Rivers, Terry Crisp, Randy Legge.

The 1969-70 Calder Cup Champion Buffalo Bisons.

WNY HERITAGE

but the storybook ending left Buffalo hockey fans with a soft spot in their heart for the Aud's longest tenant.

Bisons Influence on Sabres' Success


Mike Robitaille has a unique perspective on Buffalo hockey having played with the

Bisons and Sabres and currently analyzing the Sabres during their intermission report and on the radio.

A man known for his colorful analogies — *"He's so tough he eats Brillo pads"* for example — Robitaille minced no words when describing the importance of the

Bisons to the Sabres future popularity and success.

"[Knox and] Sabres ownership wasn't going hat-in-hand to the [league]," according to the 10-year NHL defenseman. The Bisons had fans ready to buy tickets and take the sport to the next level locally.

Even if fans today barely recollect the AHL powerhouse that once played in Downtown Buffalo — or don't even know why a Pepsi cap is on the vintage jerseys in the Sabres' team shop — the five-time Calder Cup champions were the backbone that made Buffalo a Hockey Town today. 



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