



PROBUS Club of Central Edmonton Newsletter

November 2023

Editor: Ken Hoffman

Website: www.probus-central-edmonton.com

Email: probus.cent.ed@gmail.com

Nov 21 Patrick LaForge



Patrick LaForge spoke to us about his life and the Oilers. He covered a wide range of topics from moving to Edmonton to volunteer activities since retirement. Amongst topics covered were the evolving beer business, solving a beer crisis in Cuba, helping the management group keep Oilers in Edmonton, delivering the first Heritage Classic, and building Rogers Place.

He moved with his family from a farm to Edmonton in 1958 settling on the Jason Walters family farm where Kinsmen field house now sits. He attended NAIT becoming involved in student government and with fund raising. He

shared a story about starting a cabaret in the lunchroom at NAIT, this was shut down by the police for license violations such as too many people and free beer not on the license. He worked cutting grass for a company that was later bought by Cal Nichols, this began a long-term relationship. He started with Molson's brewery in 1979. He was a sales rep for a year. While at Molson's he was involved in:

- Molson's Indi
- Molson's ski race
- Started a company that to provide live entertainment for an audience that they then sold beer to. The first band was Bruce Springsteen in Toronto.

He told a story about how Molson's became owners of Montreal, Toronto, and Flames amongst other franchises. They focussed on how to building Canadian's interest in the NHL and improve team profitability. In doing so he spoke about the challenges of working with Harold Ballard. He worked with Molson's until 1996, by then he was president of Molson's International. He told a story about launching beer in Cuba. At the time Cubans received food stamps that allowed one beer a day for all Cubans over 12. Beer supplies ran out, so Eric Molson was contacted by Rafael Castro with a request for beer for Cuba. Patrick was then directed to get it done. Problem was that there was an embargo on trade with Cuba at the time. He arranged to have a container of beer shipped to Jamaica. The ship became a Jamaican freighter which went on to Cuba. He put twenty hockey sticks, tennis balls, and nests in the container. A road hockey game broke out on Ambassador driveway until his wife made it clear that they were too noisy for the kids to sleep. In 1996, he moved on to Alpine Canada as President and he was located in Calgary. At this time, they were reacting to the Graham James problem. Rule changes filled a lot of his time. One initiative was to have executives of sponsor companies meet with stars athletes. He was approached by CPR to move to them, to help CPR focus on improving relationship with citizens of Canada.

In 1998, Cal Nichols asked Pat to help the investors group in the acquisition of the Oilers. At the time Oilers were held by ATB who acquired them from Pocklington when ATB put him into bankruptcy. He was asked to look at the books and offer advice. He joined the Oilers as President in 2000. He told an anecdote about his mother not believing him. Kevin Lowe phoned him the evening of the

Cal Nichols saves Oilers for Edmonton - 1998



announcement to tell him that his mother was just there. She came in to ask if Patrick worked there, hearing that he did she returned home.

While with the hockey club he started the Oilers Foundation the money it received were put back into the community. The foundation has had a significant impact on the community through a number of initiatives, e.g., starting an inner-city school. He noted that of the big cities in English speaking Canada, Edmontonian hold giving back to the community as

more important than any other city. He told a story about how he encouraged the anthem singer to hold up the mike doing the singing of the national anthem, this became an iconic moment.

After a some more anecdotes he moved on to talk about the first outdoor games. This discussion started in 2004 with disappointment in the LA presentation of the all-star game. Oilers owners and execs decided that an outdoor game was needed. After, taking several steps to get buy in with little success, he spoke to Wayne Gretsky. From this point on the game took life and they got an alumni game with Canadian set up. After looking at several venues they settled on Commonwealth Stadium. Now it was just about selling tickets. They did a lotter from all remaining seats after taking care of season ticket holders. This was 34 to 35 thousand tickets. They got 720,000 applications for tickets. They filled the stadium. Other items mentioned included 2006 Stanley Cup run and starting a pro baseball team in Edmonton.



In 2007 Cal mention that they needed a new stadium. Thus began a new quest that ended in the building of Rogers Place, which opened in 2016. Patrick described the many features that were built in the area which contribute the lives of Edmontonian. Also, he shared the backstory about the events around the notorious 2011 trip to Seattle.

He then moved on to his volunteer activities after leaving the oilers, these were with several organizations including Norquest

College, Hope Haven, Salvation army, South Edmonton Rotary.

We benefited from an enjoyable and interesting presentation from a significant person in the growing Edmonton. He provided us with interesting look it the backroom activities on number of significant events. This was truly one of the better presentations we had.

Merry Christmas to all of you. Enjoy family and friends.