

# The Eagle Has Landed At Dalhousie

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—Alan Eagleson

BY LISA TIMPF

IF THE FACE OF THE SPEAKER AT THE LAW. Hour lecture last week was familiar to most, if not all of the audience, there was a good reason for it.

Alan Eagleson, sport lawyer and international ice hockey enthusiast, has become synonymous with professional hockey in Canada.

If nothing else, most people would remember his involvement in organizing the classic 1972 ice hockey confrontation between Canada and the USSR.

Eagleson, a dynamic, confident speaker with a youthful enthusiasm for his topic, did not disappoint those in the audience who had hoped to hear some interesting anecdotes.

One of the things he discussed was the 1972 series, how it came about and why it almost didn't happen.

The formation of Hockey Canada in 1968 was triggered by the need to structure situations where "our best could compete with everybody's else's best," said Eagleson.

Canadian representative ice hockey teams in the late 1960's, composed of amateur players, were being consistently embarrassed at the international level by teams they had easily been able to beat in the past. For Eagleson, it was time to seek a wedge to get Canada's professional players into the action.

The opening for that wedge came when Soviet coach Tarasov, after yet another win over Canada's amateurs, suggested that the Soviet Union could beat Canada's pro's any time.

Eagleson tried to communicate with the Soviets through the Swedish ambassador in the Soviet Union, to open negotiations and establish a situation where Canada's professionals could meet the CCCP on the ice. The Soviet reply was that they would only discuss the idea with NHL president Clarence Campbell.

Enter one of the flashes of inspiration that has enabled Eagleson to make the most of his opportunities.

"I sent a telex to the ambassador, and said to tell them that Campbell represented the capitalist owners, whereas I was the representative of the workers themselves," said Eagleson. "The next day they agreed to meet with me and negotiate."

The negotiations resulted in the 1972 Canada-Russia hockey series, an event in which almost every Canadian across the country became emotionally entangled.

There were a number of incidents, Eagleson recalled, that almost prevented the whole thing from coming off.

At the start was the formation of the World Hockey Association (WHA), really a North American rival to the NHL. Five NHL players who had been selected to Team Canada decided to join the new league.

The NHL owners were not pleased with this turn of events, and laid down an ultimatum: if players from the new competing league were allowed to participate in the series, the NHL would not respect the contracts of any players injured in the course of the Canada-Russia series.

"It was a matter of choosing between what was best for five or for 35," said Eagleson. "The WHA players stayed home."

Another incident arose when the Soviet team's hockey equipment was seized by a 24-year-old Laval University student with a grudge to bear.

Four years earlier, the same student had parked a rented car in Prague, Czechoslovakia only to have a Soviet tank run over it in August of 1968.

"He had been trying for four years to get his expenses of \$1500 reimbursed," said Eagleson. "I called External Affairs and asked

them, why didn't they just give the guy his \$1500 to get the equipment back?"

External Affairs was reluctant to do this because to do so would be to imply that the Soviet explanation that they had been "invited" into Czechoslovakia was incorrect.

Eagleson, who by this point was probably asking, "Why me? Why now of all times?" decided not to let the situation destroy the dreamed-of hockey series. He paid the student the \$1500, got the equipment back, and billed External Affairs a month later.

Eventually, despite the setbacks that almost prevented the series from happening, Canada won in the dramatic eighth game, and the way was paved for Canadian professional to compete with the world's best in similar events, and in competitions such as the Canada Cup tournament.

Besides his involvement in promoting Canadian professional players' role in international hockey, Eagleson has a number of claims to fame in the sporting world. He was one of the first, in 1962, to break into the field of law and professional athletics. Now, in 1985, there are at least 75 professionals involved in the field. But Eagleson remains among the most prominent.

Eagleson told the Weldon audience that much of his fame is a result of being in the right place at the right time. Perhaps — but one would have to add, with the right talent for making things happen.

Eagleson's involvement with the legal aspects of professional sport started when former lacrosse team-mate Bob Pulford, knowing Eagleson had gone to law school, started to ask him a few questions about his contract. Pulford was then playing professional hockey for the Toronto Maple Leafs, and some of the articles in his contract, according to Eagleson, "defied description."

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The first problem was that in 1963, and in fact until the formation in 1967 of the NHL Players' Association, players did not receive a copy of their contracts — a good way to avoid questions from coming up.

Frustrated with the lack of decision making power they had, and with manipulative management, players had attempted to form a hockey players' union in 1957. Their efforts resulted in four of the ringleaders being traded to the Chicago Black Hawks — a form of punishment, as Chicago was a struggling team.

"The attitude then was that if you didn't like it, you could forget it," said Eagleson. "The system was totally management-oriented then. There was no right to arbitration. You could do

as you were told, or you could quit."

Eagleson's involvement with Pulford's contract got him thinking. Clearly there was something wrong with the state of affairs in professional hockey.

Opportunity came knocking for Eagleson to gain further experience in negotiating contracts for hockey players when Doug Orr asked Eagleson to represent his son in negotiating his first professional hockey contract. What made this case different from all the other similar requests from fathers was that this son was Bobby Orr, destined to become one of the best renowned defensemen in NHL history.

While the most experienced professional hockey players were making close to \$40,000 per year at the most, Eagleson negotiated an \$85,000 contract for two years with the Boston Bruins.

The result of gaining such a lucrative contract for a mere rookie, even one of Orr's stature, was that an enormous amount of interest was generated in the lawyer who had negotiated the deal.

Business opportunities came looking for Eagleson — within three days of Orr's signing, Carl Brewer of the Toronto Maple Leafs turned to Eagleson to get him out of a professional hockey contract, so that he could play amateur hockey for Canada. Despite initial resistance from the NHL owners, Brewer was released from his professional contract, and interest in Eagleson went up one more notch.

"I was amazed by the number of press conferences," said Eagleson. Serving as a member of provincial parliament in Ontario in addition to his growing law practice, Eagleson successfully juggled his responsibilities.

Accepting challenges seems to have been a trademark in his career and Eagleson was ready to take on yet another one.

This time it was Bill White, then playing for the Springfield Indians of the American Hockey League. The Indians had gone on strike to protest the antics and philosophy of Eddie Shore, the team's coach, manager and owner who demonstrated some bizarre behavior in his approach to his hockey team.

"For example, there were the 'Black Aces' — eight players who weren't on the line-up but were waiting to get their chance," Eagleson recalled. "Shore had them running the Zamboni, selling tickets and making popcorn." If they didn't like it, they could leave — there was no shortage of hockey players waiting in the wings in those pre-expansion days.

"Eddie also didn't believe in paying players bonuses for extra performance," said Eagleson. "He picked up one guy from another team whose contract called for a bonus when he scored 20 goals. After he scored his 19th goal, Eddie sat him on the bench for the rest of the season."

"We ended up with a series of affidavits," said Eagleson. "If the players had been animals, we could have taken their case to the Humane Society — it was that bad."

The case was instead taken to the president of the American Hockey League, Jack Butterfield, who happened to be Eddie Shore's nephew.

Butterfield wasn't eager to do anything about the situation, and NHL president Clarence Campbell said his hands were tied even though almost all of the players in the AHL were owned by NHL teams.

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Eagleson went to the NHL players seeking their support, and came up with a strategy. If Eddie Shore did not "retire" by the Jan 15 deadline, there would be a one-day strike of all NHL and AHL players on Jan 16.

Shore did quit on Jan 15 and Eagleson's involvement in the affair led to the formation of the NHL Players' Association.

"The first thing we negotiated for was the player's right to have a copy of their contract," said Eagleson.

Eagleson shared with the audience what he felt to be some of the keys to his success.

One was the necessity of reading the "fine print."

"I take every clause of the standard player's contract and blow it up to one paragraph per page," said Eagleson. "Then I read it through with the player and make sure he understands it. Too many lawyers don't read the fine print."

Another key to success in the field of law, according to Eagleson, is preparation. "Don't kid yourself," he said. "Things seem to come really easy to some people and they don't seem to have to put out a lot of effort. But if you work hard and come in prepared, you'll impress the judge."

A third key is the necessity of taking notes. "When I'm talking on the telephone to a client, I write everything down on a piece of paper," he said. "No matter how good your memory is, it's better if you have things written down."

Further keys to Eagleson's success came though while he was recounting his various ventures in the world of sport. A pleasure accepting challenges and an ability to see humour in the situation while resolving the problem came through clearly between the lines.

Eagleson noted that the best reward a speaker can receive is the attentiveness of the audience. He was well rewarded by the Weldon listeners, whose attention was firmly riveted by his entertaining anecdotes and enthusiasm for his work.