

# U of T/York rivalry at heart of college hockey

By Mel D. Broitman

*"If you've never seen a college hockey game or known the excitement of a good hard-nose, fast-skating match you should have been at the York-Toronto final... Varsity Arena held a loud, bursting enormously competitive crowd that would have taken the roof off if possible." (Roger Hudson/Peter Woods, Excalibur March 13, 1972)*

*"The hockey season is over for the Yeomen; but their spirit lives on. As Varsity Blues' captain Dave McDowall was receiving the Queen's Cup at centre ice, after taking the OUA final 6-2, the deafening chant of 'YEOMEN, YEOMEN' drowned out the presentation." (Phil Cranely, Excalibur March 13, 1972)*

Old dreams may die a hard death, but new dreams are always born. When York lost its first ever Ontario University Athletic Association (OUAA) hockey championship to the University of Toronto Varsity Blues back on March, 1972, it was a bitter defeat. But as *Excalibur* writer Phil Cranely so correctly pointed out fourteen years ago, "for the Yeomen, the spirit lives on."

The York and University of Toronto men's ice hockey rivalry is one of the greatest in the history of Canadian college sport. Games between the two schools have continually placed hockey on the highest plane of competition. The rivalry between the two clubs has become synonymous with excellence in athletics, ferocious intensity and a dramatic tension that has often times driven the supporters of the two teams into a frenzy.

The roots of York hockey have very humble beginnings. While the University of Toronto was building a dynasty that would claim seven national championships in an eight year period beginning in 1965, the Yeomen hockey tradition was slowly evolving in the great outdoors. York hockey first began as a club in an open-air rink at Glendon College. York's first hockey coach, Bill Purcell, had his team practice and play in freezing temperatures and on snowy evenings.

Although both schools enjoyed enormous success in the 1960's, they competed at distinctly different levels. The University of Toronto was a major force in the Ontario-Quebec Athletic Association (O-QAA) the forerunner to the OUAA and the finest athletic conference in the country. York on the other hand, joined the Ontario Inter-University Athletic Association (OIAA) in 1961, a league designed for competition among the newer and smaller Ontario universities.

Both Toronto and York were the class of their respective leagues. York however, never came close to achieving the notoriety of the legendary Varsity Blues. For the Yeomen it was always an uphill battle, with the Blues standing all alone at the top of the heap.

The two schools did nevertheless engage in exhibition games, with December 9, 1968 marking a historic occasion in the annals of Yeomen hockey. York defeated their cross-town rivals 3-2 at the then relatively 'new' Ice Palace. Right from the outset a friction between the two teams developed as the Blues would not allow the Yeomen to bask in their glory. Paul Carson, Sports Information Director for the University of Toronto, recalls those early confrontations. "York won a couple of exhibition games, partly because our people didn't take it too seriously. We would take it as training camp and play borderline people."

Regardless, a true sporting rivalry was evolving. Two years later and again in December, the Yeomen and Blues exploded their battle into the public eye. Maple Leaf Gardens played host to the first ever Hockey Canada Tournament, and the Yeomen and Blues treated over six thousand fans to one of the greatest Canadian college games ever played. In the tournament semi-final, York outlasted Toronto 2-0. A scoreless tie was broken with less than five minutes remaining in the third period, when York forward Murray Stroud poked a rebound home as he was falling to the ice. That goal established the York/U of T hockey rivalry for all time. "That game at the Gardens put York on the map," says Bill Purcell, who was then coach of the Yeomen.

Once again an air of bitterness permeated York's victory, as in the tourney York used players that were yet ineligible for regular league play.

It was not until 1971, when York and Toronto would finally play for keeps. A new league, the OUAA, was formed involving schools only from Ontario. York joined and immediately became the main challenger to the perennial national and provincial champions, the Varsity Blues.



**A FIGHT?** No, Murray Stroud (under the pile) was mobbed by his teammates after scoring the winning goal in York's 2-0 victory in the Hockey Canada tournament in January of 1971.

That first (OUAA) York team sported nine law students from Osgoode who were eligible because no 'transfer' rule existed. As a result, Murray Stroud, Steve Latinovich, Bill Holden and others, allowed York coach Bill Purcell to immediately ice one of the finest teams in Canada.

"At that time every regular season game was a sell-out," Carson says. "For the playoff games, the arena was full half an hour before the game started."

York's first loss in the 1972 OUAA final began a series of frustrations at the hands of the Blues. In 1973 the new York coach, Dave Chambers, enjoyed great success except for the playoffs. From 1973 to 1977, York finished the regular season in first place twice, along with a pair of seconds and a third place finish. The Yeomen reached three OUAA finals only to lose every time by a single goal. Twice York were the victims of the University of Toronto Varsity Blues.

The culmination of Dave Chambers' five years at the helm of the Yeomen came in 1976-77. The Yeomen ran away with the league only to once again have to overcome one final hurdle—the Varsity Blues. "In those days the OUAA final was sudden-death and always

played in their (U of T) rink," Chambers recalls. "In 1976-77 we were first by about eight points last time in their building." York lost 3-2.

The 1976-77 final is known as 'The 3-2 Game' to all those who witnessed it. "Most people say that 'the 3-2 game' is one of the best hockey games they ever saw in their lives," Chamber says. "It was just a classic and the most memorable because it was sudden-death for the OUAA championship." It was especially frustrating for Chambers and his Yeomen because they were a far superior team. "The '3-2 year' York definitely had the better team on paper," Carson said. "Blues' coach Tom Watt always regarded that championship as one of his major coaching victories."

Of course Varsity Arena has never been a favourite place for York teams. According to York's first coach Bill Purcell, "U of T (Varsity Arena) was always a tough place to play in. They always found a referee to lean towards them. I can honestly say that, because I coached there. It was a very intimidating arena."

The '3-2 game' marked the end of Dave Chambers' first tenure as York's coach. It was not until he returned eight years later that the

Yeomen enjoyed any real success and met the Blues again in the playoffs.

In the meantime, seven years and five coaches left York's hockey program at an all time low. The Yeomen actually missed the playoffs entirely on two occasions and never beat the Blues in a regular season encounter. The rivalry appeared to be dying; it still takes two to tango.

In 1984, not only did Dave Chambers return to York, but Tom Watt resurfaced as head coach of the Varsity Blues. The Blues were defending national champions and the rivalry was ready to be born again.

If there were any questions about Dave Chambers' house-cleaning at York (19 new Yeomen), the critics were silenced on November 21, 1984. The Yeomen blasted Toronto 7-2 right in Varsity arena to capture the Sesqui Cup, emblematic of college hockey supremacy in Toronto.

Right from the beginning it was fate that Chambers and Watt would meet again in the playoffs. Memories of the three game semi-final series in 1984 will always be cherished by York hockey fans. The Yeomen finally shed their traditional burden and for the first time beat the Blues in a playoff game. York opened the series with a solid 5-3 win again at Varsity Arena. Game Two provided the counter-punch for nearly twenty years of frustration. York swept the Blues in two straight with an incredibly dramatic 4-3 victory in sudden-death overtime. Adam Parson's goal at 2:37 of the first extra period christened a new era in York/U of T athletics.

The Yeomen eventually rode the momentum from their conquest of the Blues right through to the national championship game. Fittingly, it was in Varsity Arena, where York would down Alberta 3-2 and claim their first ever national championship.

Last year the Yeomen and Blues met again in the OUAA semi-finals. The series marked the return of college hockey to the limelight in Toronto. With all three games decided by one goal, and two in overtime, the playoff encounter captured the imagination of hockey enthusiasts at both schools.

As has been the history between the two teams, the telling blow came at Varsity Arena. In front of a near capacity crowd, the Yeomen prevailed 2-1 in another classic match-up. "Last year was very much a Toronto/York series in reverse. It was exactly opposite to the series of the 1970's," Carson says. More importantly as Chambers says, "We are back to where the rivalry was expected to be. It is one of the great ones in all of college sport."

The calibre of Canadian college hockey has improved tremendously in the last few years. There is a trend among good young hockey players to seriously consider the University student/athlete experience. Even the pros are dipping into the Canadian college talent pool.

Riding the upswing are the Yeomen and the Varsity Blues. Their rivalry lies at the heart of Canadian college hockey.



**NATIONAL CHAMPIONS:** The York Yeomen win the University Cup downing the Alberta Golden Bears, 3-2, to claim their first ever national championship. The Yeomen beat the U of T Blues in the best of 3 OUAA semi-finals where each game was decided by one goal.