

Former York captain's hockey season in Finland ends earlier than expected

In conversation with John Campbell

By LORNE MANLY

John Campbell's hockey season in Finland has come to an abrupt end just as it was shifting into high gear. The former York captain, who played a major role in leading the Yeomen to the national championship last year, suffered an injury that has shunted him to the sidelines for the rest of the year.

Campbell, who anchored the Yeomen defence for five years, was one of the two imports playing for Imatra, a team in the Finnish first division. He played 12 games before the injury was properly diagnosed as a fracture of the spinous process which is attached to the fifth lumbar of the vertebrae. Told by team doctors that he was not allowed to play anymore this year, Campbell flew home some weeks ago.

Playing professionally in Finland was not in Campbell's plans last spring. After graduating with his Honours Bachelor of Arts in Psychology with a minor in Physical Education, Campbell was relaxing at home, not looking too "intensely for a job." I got some job offers from some old insurance guys," Campbell said, "but I wasn't too interested in it."

Then in June he received a telephone call from a representative of the Imatra club to see if John was willing to play in the Finnish first division this year. "At first I wasn't sure," said Campbell, "because you get sick of it (hockey) sometimes and I was tired of it, especially after last year. But the more I thought about it, the more I got the itch to play again."

Helping Campbell reach the decision to play in Finland were the fringe benefits that come with being an import on a European hockey club. "They treat you great," exclaimed Campbell. "You get your salary, a car, an apartment and your food is paid for."

Also, Campbell would be playing a lot as he'd be seen as a leader of the team. "The team depends on you," Campbell said. "I was playing in the most important situations such as on the powerplay and killing penalties along with my regular shift."

Campbell is very disappointed in having to return home as the team, which got off to a poor start, had won five in a row to move up to fifth place (in a 12 team league) before Campbell was forced out of the lineup. Campbell himself was averaging a point a game and playing strong defence.

Campbell doesn't remember any particular hit that caused the injury but recalls it became sore following a game two weeks after he arrived in Finland. "First I thought it was sore muscles," Campbell said, "but it was still hurting after the treatment so then we thought it was tendinitis."

The team gave Campbell cortisone to reduce the swelling but nothing happened. They then tried another drug without success before X-raying. It was only after the X-ray was taken, nearly a month after Campbell hurt himself, that he discovered the seriousness of the injury and the cure. Campbell was told by the team doctor that the injury wouldn't heal properly if he played, effectively ending what had been up to that moment a productive year.

"The team was really happy with my play," Campbell related, "but the pain was just getting too much." The twisting and turning that comes with playing caused the muscles to pull on the bone, resulting in a lot of pain. In order that the spinous process can heal Campbell is not allowed to run or skate so that the muscles (which insert into the spinous process) don't tug on it.

While in Finland Campbell was pleasantly surprised with the quality of play exhibited in the first division. "There was excellent play in the league," Campbell exclaimed. "There are some very good players (including) about five or six Finnish national team players and some players from the American Hockey League. There's also an ex-NHL player, Jim Bedard, who played goal for Washington."

Campbell found the Europeans to be highly skilled but much less aggressive than North Americans. "Canadians check a lot better," explained Campbell. "They're more disciplined and physical. The Europeans don't worry too much about defensive play."

One major difference Campbell found was that the players in Europe don't take the game as seriously as North Americans do. "If they lose, it's taken pretty lightly. It's life and death over here (in North America)," Campbell attributes this fact to the lifestyle across the ocean. "They're not as aggressive," said Campbell. "They give up a bit easier than we do."



Some of the strategies used in Europe were foreign to Campbell as well. One example is the integral part the five man unit plays in both the practices and games. "They're very conscious of keeping units of five (three forwards and two defencemen) together," Campbell

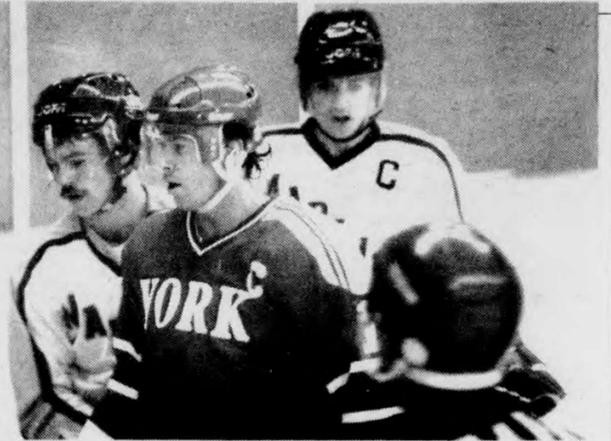
remarked, adding that Imatra usually went with three forward lines and six defencemen as opposed to the techniques the Yeomen employed.

York went with four lines at times last year and, on occasion, trimmed down to only three lines and four defencemen. The idea of units was so strong with Imatra that, according to Campbell, "the team played basketball at a spa on Mondays where we practiced in our fives."

Campbell, after arriving home, went to watch his old team play and was impressed with what he saw. "They look really good," he said. "(They) might even be better than last year. There's more depth for sure."

Even though Campbell remarked that it's hard to tell from just one game he could still see it was a "typical Chambers-coached team" playing disciplined, tight-checking hockey. This depth, which could be a major factor in York's success this year, can be summed up by Campbell's comment that "no one player will hurt you on the ice."

Campbell, who was captain of the team for four years, is very pleased to see the remarkable turnaround of the last two years and glad that he could be a part of last year's national champions. "It was a great way to end off university," Campbell related, "especially when we weren't that good before."



Photos by ROBERTA DIMAIO



NATIONAL CHAMPS: A jubilant John Campbell (above, centre) holds the CIAU championship University Cup following York's 3-2 victory over the University of Alberta Golden Bears last March at Varsity Arena. Below: Campbell displays the Queen's Cup after winning the OUAA championship against Western.

The teams were good the first two years of Campbell's tenure at York but the middle two were "tough and frustrating." To Campbell it seemed that the Administration didn't place a high priority on the hockey program. However, the arrival of Dave Chambers as coach (along with assistant coaches Graham Wise and Steve Knish) and the decision by the Administration to back the program 100% changed all that. The difference to Campbell was like "night and day."

Chambers brought in 19 new players, most of them having Major Junior A experience, to shake things up. Campbell agrees with this move saying "it was necessary. In this league you need the best player you can get and Chambers did that."

The team blossomed in the second half of the season and the playoffs en route to becoming the best team in the country. Many people were surprised with York's success but not Campbell. "I knew we had a good team but we couldn't put it together for various reasons at the beginning of the season."

"We had a lot of new guys not used to the league or playing with each other," Campbell said. "The guys weren't sure of their roles and we were struggling with goaltending. But the players became more used to the league and (Mark) Applewhite turned himself around in goal."

This marked improvement in the goaltending situation was a major reason behind the club's turnaround, according to Campbell. "He knew he had to do it after Bryson (Rob, another goaltender) got hurt; the load was on his shoulders and he did it. Steve Knish (the assistant coach in charge of the goaltenders) should get a lot of the credit for that."

Since Campbell returned home he has spent his time readjusting to Toronto. He wants to get a job not because of a need for money (he is still getting paid through March) but because he wants to keep busy. "I want to get into something, not too permanent," Campbell said. "I can't just go to York games this year."

John is not sure what he'll be doing next year. He first has to decide if he wants to return to Europe. "I'm not 100% sure if I want to go back to Imatra," he said. "There's only about 40,000 people in the town (which is four kilometres from the Russian border). There's not a lot to do there, unlike Toronto."

Campbell is mulling over the possibility of playing hockey again next year, most likely in a larger town than Imatra but he's planning on getting settled at home first before he makes the decision. Odds are however, that Campbell will be playing next year as he just can't seem to get rid of that "itch" to play.



YET ANOTHER TROPHY: Campbell was a second team all-star three times during his York career, and was the Yeomen team MVP in 1983-84.