

SPORTS FEATURE

Philadelphia coach a product of Ontario hockey ranks

By MEL BROITMAN

Philadelphia Flyers' Mike Keenan is one of the NHL's most successful coaches. In this interview with Excalibur reporter Mel Broitman, Keenan talks about his experiences with Canadian University hockey—past, present and future.

EXCAL: What is the extent of your experience with Canadian university hockey?

KEENAN: I was coach at the University of Toronto for one year (1984) plus my playing experience as an undergraduate at the U of T. I graduated in 1973, and played for Tom Watt up till that time.

EXCAL: When you went back to the University of Toronto as head coach, did you find that the calibre of Canadian university hockey had improved?

KEENAN: I couldn't really make that evaluation. As a player you're really not in a position to evaluate your peers in terms of their abilities in the same sense you can as a coach. I can't really answer that question fairly.

EXCAL: How much of a step was it for you going to the NHL as a head coach from Canadian college hockey? Does the NHL regard Canadian hockey coaches with high esteem, as far as looking for experienced people?

KEENAN: Well I'm sure that was part if it (Canadian college experience)

but the other background that I had in terms of coaching: minor-professional, Junior A, Senior A, high school, Junior B and so on, also had a major part in the selection process that the Philadelphia Flyers depend upon.

EXCAL: From your experience with the Flyers, how highly do you and your organization regard Canadian college players as potential professionals?

KEENAN: Well, I've had the personal contact with them and we've seen some good players come out of the Canadian college hockey ranks. Unfortunately the philosophical approach by the athletic directors in Canada isn't quite the same as it is in the United States, and as a result the games (Canadian) aren't probably as good in terms of development of future professional players. I'm sure that their priorities aren't quite the

same as the major American colleges.

EXCAL: Do you think those priorities should change, or do you think the Canadian game should stay the way it is?

KEENAN: I'd like to see more emphasis to further the development of athletic excellence and I'd like to see the game change in terms of the approach of the athletic directors. It could make for a much more exciting and viable entertainment package for the student body. I think that there is room for both athletics and academics in the Canadian colleges, and the approach I think could be improved upon based on my experiences in both the United States and Canada. I have a high respect for the academic individuals in the Canadian college scene. We've had some tremendous student-athletes at the University of Toronto; doctors, lawyers, you name it—every major department in the University has been represented and represented proudly by inter-collegiate athletic hockey players. But there just seems to be a lack of emphasis in the overall student approach to the athletic teams at the schools.

EXCAL: Do you think that we should model ourselves a little bit more after the Americans, and perhaps pump money into incentives for athletes, such as scholarships?

KEENAN: No I'm not suggesting that. I just think that there needs to be better competitive values established by having better teams play amongst themselves, and not having teams or schools that are involved in high athletic performance have to play teams that aren't interested in it. Let them separate themselves and be more competitive amongst themselves. The athletes would enjoy it more. The student bodies would enjoy it more, and interest would rise. I think the overall development of the student-athlete and his position on campus would become more

favourable and better understood by everyone.

EXCAL: Is it just coincidence that players like Mike Ridley (U. of Manitoba—Washington), Rob Whistle (Laurier—New York Rangers) and Charlie Bourgeois (Moncton—St. Louis) have broken into the NHL. Is it just a one-time thing or do you expect it to happen more often that Canadian college players will make the step to the National Hockey League?

KEENAN: I don't know if I'd expect it to happen more often, but it's going to happen from time to time, just as the product of chance and choice. There are some good players in Canadian colleges that have decided to advance and pursue professional careers. There are also many good players that haven't advanced because they have selected academic alternatives, and I'm not suggesting for a second that the academic institutions are there to provide professional opportunities for young men. But I think that they have a responsibility in providing competitive performances in athletic opportunities that will enhance the lifestyle and richness of an individual's experience. If that results in an individual becoming a highly successful professional athlete, then so be it.

EXCAL: How crucial was your one year experience going back to the University of Toronto as a coach, to where you stand today as a successful National Hockey League head coach?

KEENAN: It's hard to say. It was part and parcel of my development and I enjoyed it a great deal. However I cannot give you a measure on how much more important it was than minor-professional or Junior A experience. I think they're all accumulative and I think it was a very important experience for me. I had an opportunity to deal with top level athletes and it was an experience that helped to develop my mental abilities and teaching skills.



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