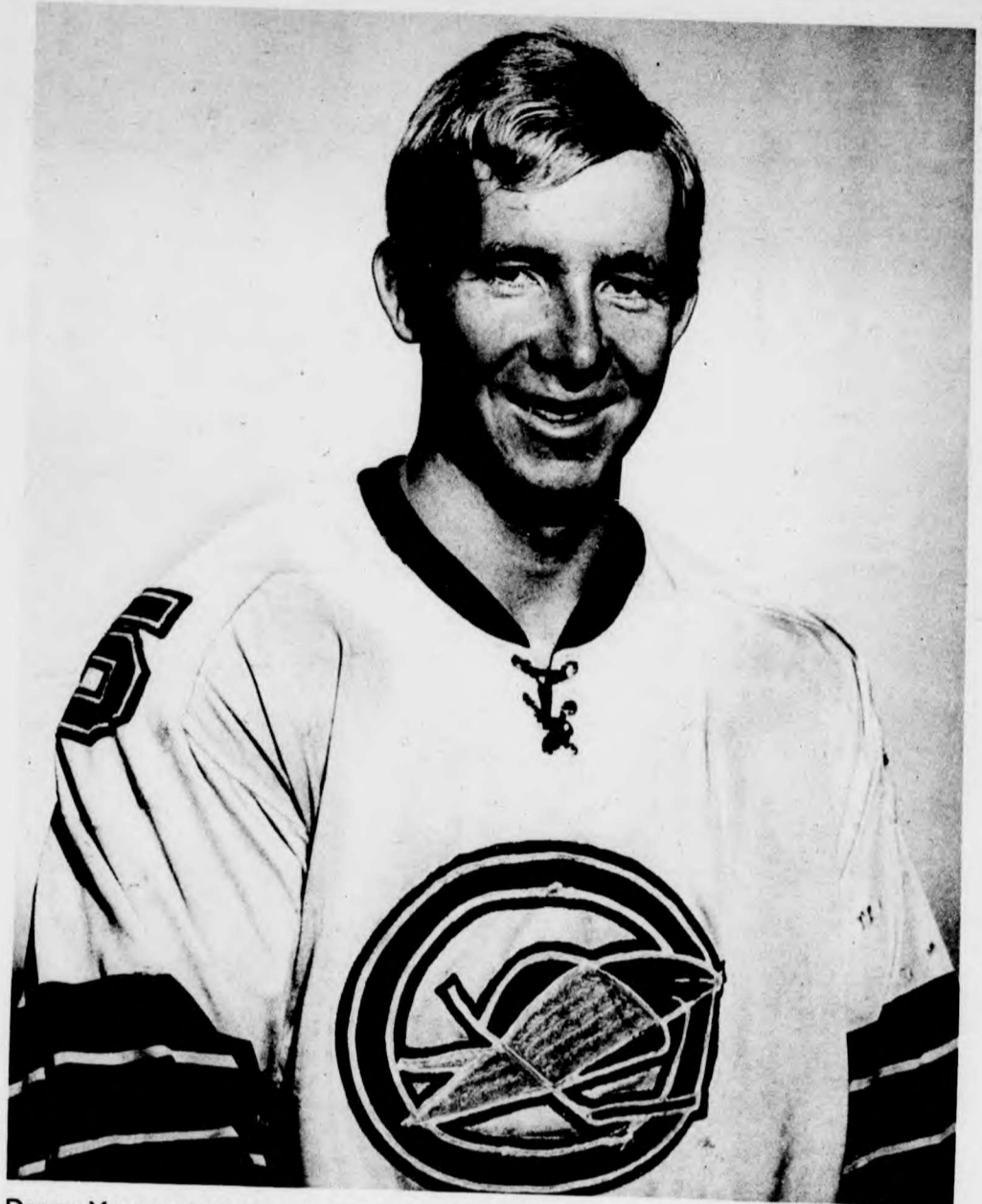


# What would you do if you had the chance to play in the NHL?

Yeoman Donny Young decided his degree came first



Donny Young was offered a job with the Oakland Seals, but he turned it down.

A lot of the guys are making very little, with big families to support. But they've got no education to fall back on, and they're doomed to play in the minors for the rest of their careers. I didn't want that, so I came back to York this year for my degree." And so Don Young, the smooth-skating veteran centre of the York Yeomen, rejected the Canadian Dream by turning down an offer to play professional hockey with the Oakland Seals' organization.

Young reached his decision this summer. After two weeks at the Seals' training camp, he was offered a professional contract with Oakland's Nashville farm team in the Eastern Hockey League. The offer was tempting; there isn't a boy in Canada who's ever pulled on a pair of skates who hasn't dreamed of one day playing in the National Hockey League.

To complicate matters, Don is already 21. According to Alan Eagleson, counsel for the NHL Player's Association, if you haven't made it by the time you're 24 your chances of getting to the NHL are very slim.

"Frank Selke, the Seals' general manager, told me I'd need three years in the minors before I'd have a chance of coming up to the big leagues," explained Young. "I thought it over, and asked several people for advice."

One of those people was Lou Angotti, the fiery centre of the Chicago Black Hawks. Angotti is one of the few players in the NHL with a BA. He attended Michigan Tech before turning pro. Angotti strongly urged Don to go back to York for his final year. Young took the advice.

"I knew going back could hurt my hockey development, even if I do try out again next year. But once you've got the degree, they can't take it away from you."

Canada is full of men not wise enough to follow Young's course of action. You see them in cold country arenas, coaching Junior C or Intermediate A or Senior B, the junior hotshots who reached with both hands for the brass ring, and fell short. And then one day they wake up, and they're 34-years-old, with a pink slip from a low minors club, and there's nothing to show and nowhere to go.

For every Bobby Orr, there's hundreds of promising young hockey players every year, only a handful of whom will ever make it. It is hard to reject a national dream, but Donny Young did it and made the wise move. Next summer he'll have his BA, and there are always other training camps.

That Young was invited to camp this year was surprising, considering that he never played junior hockey and sat out last season. In high school he had been a most sought-after player, but again school came first.

"I was invited to the Marlboros' camp twice, and Detroit was interested in me too. But I figured if I combined school and hockey they'd both suffer, and I considered school more important.

"After I graduated from grade 13 I went to the Peterborough Petes' training camp. I made the team, but that year they

changed the age rules. I would have had only one year of eligibility instead of two. So I decided to go to York."

Young admits that his decision to pass up Junior A hockey hurt his personal development badly, but now he has his high school degree and is within a few months of his BA.

At Oakland's camp, Don roomed with Tony Featherstone, the Seals' number one draft choice from the Kitchener Rangers. "I figure if I had played junior hockey I would have been as good as Tony now," says Young.

Donny had a good season with York two years ago as they finished second in the OIAA. Last year he decided to concentrate on his courses while building up his weight with three-a-week workouts at a Toronto gym.

However, Don kept up his hockey, playing pickup games around the city. He drew the attention of the ubiquitous NHL scouts even there, with both Oakland and the Philadelphia Flyers after him. The Seals placed him on their negotiation list. He signed two forms, and was on his way to Oakland's Oshawa training camp.

Don had no false hopes of breaking into the opening lineup and taking the NHL by storm, but he thought the camp would be a useful experience.

"They had 63 men in camp, including a dozen other centres. The year before there'd been only 36 players in the whole camp, so there was a lot of competition for jobs.

"There were only three or four other free agents in camp, guys who had played in the International League. Everyone else was from the farm system or had just been picked up in the amateur draft."

Unlike baseball or football, with their long training camp, hockey camps only last two weeks. Two weeks to grab the brass ring, with four men after every job.

"We had two shifts every day, an hour and a half in the morning and an hour and a quarter in the afternoon. Usually we'd scrimmage for about two hours of that time. Every couple of days we'd switch the lines around to give everyone an even chance. There were only four goalies in camp all experienced, Gary Smith, Charlie Hodge, Chris Worthy, and Marcel Paille, so that part was pretty even for us all."

Marcel Paille is 37-years-old. His career has been a merry-go-round trip between the American Hockey League and the New York Rangers' bench. His last NHL game was five seasons ago, but there's nothing else to go to, so he goes through the motions of trying to beat out men a decade younger and a precious second faster.

"It was tough getting back in the groove again. It took me about a week to find my place, but after that I held my own.

"The first day they had me on a line with two other rookies against a line of Norm Ferguson, Billy Hicke, and John Bren-

neman. They were three of the fastest skaters in the league. Our line was going around like chickens with their heads cut off trying to keep up with them."

On the second day of practice Young got welcomed to the NHL. "It was the first shift after lunch, and I wasn't really warmed up yet. We were just nearing the end of the shift.

"I got a pass, crossed centre, and passed off to my left winger. I made the usual rookie mistake of standing there admiring my pass. Bert Marshall came from nowhere and flattened me.

"I didn't want to look like I was hurt with all the coaches watching, but I just couldn't get up. It was an unbelievable feeling. My legs wouldn't work, and I felt like I had a knife deep in my stomach. There were two Oakland sportswriters there acting as referees. They came over and told me to get up. I just lay there pointing at my throat.

"Finally the trainer came over. I had swallowed my tongue and he had to pull it out. It fell back down my throat again, but I wasn't badly hurt. Marshall rode me about the check for a couple of days, but coach Fred Glover told me nobody could be expected to play hockey right after a check like that."

Although they were all competing for a handful of jobs, there was no hostility among the players. "The NHL guys were great," remembers Donny. "There was always a lot of kibitzing going on, and they really gave it to me after I swallowed my tongue.

"Most of the guys knew their own level, and were pretty sure of where they'd end up. My roommate, Tony, knew he'd either make the big club or go to Providence in the AHL. He ended up opening the season with Oakland, but he's down in the AHL now."

Yet the hopes and dreams of a lifetime overcome reality, and no player will admit he isn't likely to make the NHL. From a nation of 20-million, and all the Americans who play hockey, only 240 can make the NHL. The chances of getting there are almost infinitesimal, but when you've bucked the odds down to 4-1 at a training camp, hope dies slowly.

For players like Wayne Muloin, with a brief three game stay with Detroit to show for a seven year career, a training camp represented the golden opportunity to achieve a boyhood dream.

"No one thought Muloin would make it, but then he started hitting everybody in sight. He put Carol Vadnais out for a week with one of his checks. He ended up by making the team. There's a lot of guys like Muloin, who know they probably won't make it, but they keep coming back every

year because they'd rather play hockey in the minors than get a job somewhere.

"The pressure was pretty bad on some of them. Charlie Hodge really missed his family. He would walk the streets for a couple of hours every night. He was just about ready to quit.

"There was always somebody after your job. Gerry Odrowski and Joe Szura figured they had the club made, but they got beat out and went back to the minors."

You hear a lot about the ones that made it, but no one seems to care about the ones who go down. Odrowski spent most of his career in the Western League; Szura spent eight years in the bushes before playing his first NHL game. They thought they had it made, but this business doesn't work that way. No matter how long it takes to get to the top, there's no guarantee you'll stay.

"After a while I was working with Yves Locas and Gene Ubriaco. I played better with them. One day I beat Garry Smith with a shot but hit the post; later on I set Ubriaco up for a couple of goals."

It took Gene Ubriaco 10 seasons to get to the NHL. He's since been traded to Chicago for Howie Menard, another journeyman. Yves Locas has played ten pro seasons, but although he once got 40 goals in the AHL, he has never seen the inside of an NHL arena.

"Mr. Selke told me at the end of the two weeks that he wanted to send me to Nashville. He told me to think it over carefully. I asked around about the EHL, and then decided to go back to school."

The Eastern Hockey League is a throwback to the glory days of minor league baseball. With 11 teams spread from Long Island to Jacksonville along the eastern seaboard, it's a league of one long and lonely busride from city to city which somehow all look the same. It's a league of broken dreams and unfulfilled promise. The rosters read like a memory of the last 15 years of the OHA, but the players are no longer the young heroes but tired old men playing out the string.

Every boy in Canada who's ever taken the ice has wanted to play in the NHL, and the pro training camps and the low minors are full of men chasing that dream they'll never catch. For Donny Young that dream is just as real as it is to every hockey player in Canada. But there are only places in that dream for a handful, and the rest must have something else.

For Donny Young there will be other training camps, and other shots at the NHL. But there will be something else if the brass ring is just too far past his grasp, so he is content to play for the Yeomen's strongest ever team as they seek the national title.

"I don't know what I'll do next year. I saw the Oakland players the last time they were here to play the Seals and they want me to come back next year. But right now all I want is my degree."

By NICK MARTIN