

# Express Promise Thrills

By MIKE POWER  
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Every season the Fredericton Express promise excitement, but this year, their sixth American Hockey League season in Fredericton, it appears they are going to deliver.

It's been a long time since the Express excited anyone, 1983 to be exact. That year Jacques Demers led a team of colourful veterans to its first Northern Division title, and then on into the Calder Cup semi-final round. Since then, although they did win one more division pennant, the team has been boring. Earl Jessiman took over from Demers and proved the theory that teams take on the personality of their coach. Jessiman, from Brandon University, quickly lost the respect of the players and support from the fans, things haven't been the same since.

Finally last year a new face came on the scene, that of Andre Savard. Savard a NHL veteran was the hand-picked replacement for Jessiman, and Quebec General Manager Maurice Filton assured all that he would bring the Express back to life. During his first season there were some growing pains as Savard the player struggled to become Savard the coach, and at the same time had to deal with a click of older players who liked to have things their own way. Now, as he begins his second year Savard has a team more suited to his tastes, and also is

showing that he is comfortable with his new career.

What makes the 1986-87 Express more to the coach's liking is the lineup of players, instead of the Alain Lemieux or Tony Curries, Fredericton is built around hard working veterans like Greg Malone, Mark Kirton, and Marc Crawford. Commenting on the team's newfound enthusiasm Savard said, "It starts with the veterans, the youngsters see guys who have been in the NHL, guys with careers, working in practice they pick it up, it's important for a team to have that winning attitude. It only takes one or two guys at the top to lead."

The other key to this year's Express and the main reason there is a promise of some real excitement at games, is the strong youth movement. Fourteen players are in either their first or second full professional season. Many of them are blue chip prospects in the Quebec and Vancouver chains, but with youth comes inexperience. The team's games so far have been wide open affairs with very little in the way of checking. "It's an area that needs a lot of work," commented Savard. "I'm surprised when I see some of these kids who played junior, they don't know how to check." Many observers feel that the weak link that will eventually bring the team down is the defensive corps. Only second year Expresser Daniel Poudrier can be called an experienced pro, a

fact which does not escape Savard "its (defense) a tough position to learn, and it takes a lot of time, and there are going to be mistakes, but you have got to play the players and hope that over time they get better game to game."

A positive side to the youth, and one that showed through recently when the Express kid-dy corps stormed back to beat Maine, is that the youngsters have no fear of reputations and are not intimidated by the professionals, "it's all new to me, you don't hear much about the American League playing Junior out West," says rookie Jim Agnew "we will just play everyone a couple of times and go from there." Agnew is typical of the new breed of Express, a rugged defenseman he has caught the eye of team followers by giving more than

receiving in a couple of scraps in the early going.

The cornerstone of any chance the Express has to succeed in 86-87 is goaltender Frank Caprice. Beaten out of the backup job in Vancouver, Caprice surprised everyone by showing up ready to work hard in Fredericton, in the past the likeable goalie has followed his demotions by periods of depression and poor game concentration. Caprice has been nothing short of brilliant so far, and has kept his youthful teammates in games allowing them to come back and win. It could be that the confidence shown by Coach Savard has helped the goalie's attitude, "We have a lot of confidence in Frank Caprice," says Savard "I'm sure that if he keeps working, and plays to his abilities he will get back to the

NHL and have a good career."

And so it will go for this season's Express, they will go as far as their young legs and aggressive forechecking will take them, "We have good forechecking, we don't have the big time player, so we must pressure their defense," commented forward Yves Heroux, a player who is working much harder this year and typifying the new Express enthusiasm. Unless the inexperience causes a complete collapse, and that is doubtful with old hands like Malone and Crawford on hand, the Express should be in the chase for playoff positions down to the wire. It may just be that on paper last year's Express was more talented, but I doubt any of the previous 5 versions of the Express will have provided the thrills this year's edition promises.



UNB's Cross Country team proudly displaying their AUSA Trophy. They will be attending their first trip to the CIAU's in three years.

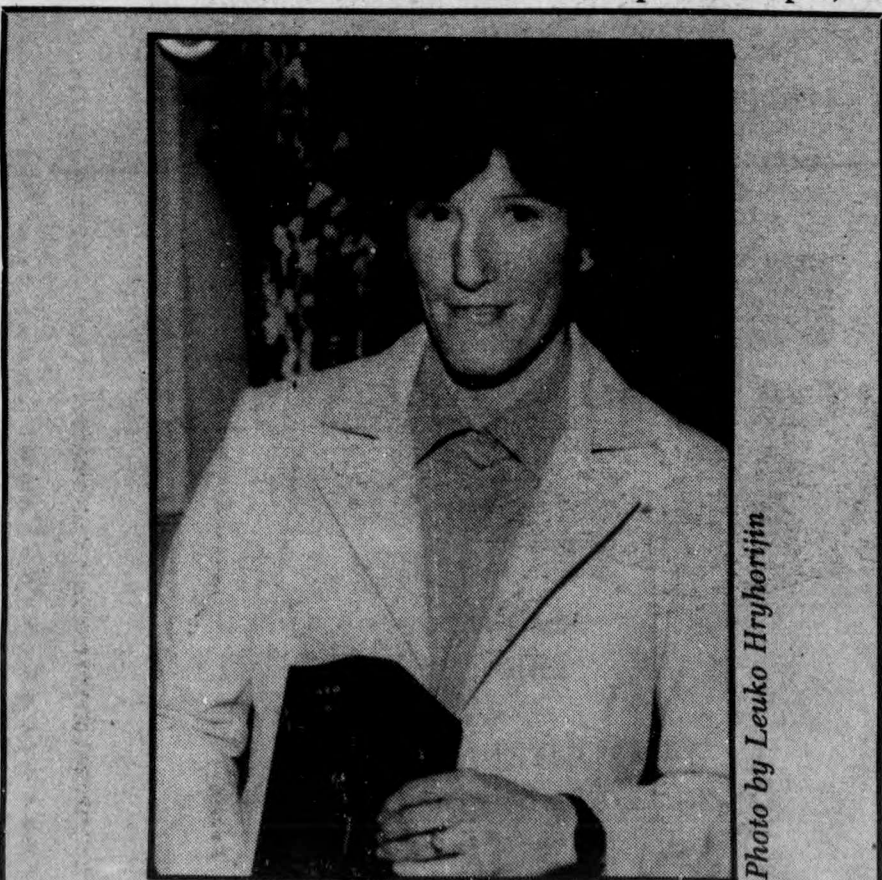


Photo by Leuko Hryhorijin

Joyce Slipp was nominated as coach of the year at a banquet in Toronto last weekend. Joyce is the National Regional Coach for the Martimes. She has also been the mastermind and the balancing force behind the successful UNB team.

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