

ROAD TRIP!



Ten provinces.
Three weeks.
One highway.
And a whole lotta hockey.



BY: RONNIE SHUKER

THE TRANS-CANADA

Highway stretches from Newfoundland all the way to Vancouver Island. It is the world's longest national highway, and Canada does it up huge along the way. There's the world's biggest axe, coin, dinosaur, fiddle, golf bag, red paper clip and apple-shaped structure. There's also the largest Canada Goose and longest covered bridge, along with a menagerie of larger-than-life roadside attractions, including a beaver, moose, fish, squid, lobster, cow, bison, elephant, sandpiper, spider, mosquito and dragonfly.

Toward the west end of the line, however, is the most Canadian. In Duncan, B.C., atop the Cowichan Community Centre, hangs the world's largest hockey stick. After nearly 5,000 miles of driving, I finally reached it in early September. A few weeks earlier, I was in Newfoundland getting set for a coast-to-coast road trip along the TCH. The quest was a cross-Canada scavenger hunt for all things hockey. The catch was to do it during the dog days of the hockey calendar.

So with a bucket list of puck places to see, I let the hockey gods guide the way along Canada's main thoroughfare. St. John's was the starting point, Duncan the destination, a black Chevrolet Malibu my ride.

And it all started with a little history lesson.

About a mile from downtown St. John's sits Signal Hill, where the world's first transatlantic wireless signal was received in 1901. It's also where a hard-partying QMJHL player fell down a 300-foot cliff in 2016, but I hadn't come to marvel at how he miraculously survived. I was there to meet with historical weapons specialist Robin Martin, who doubles as the local hockey historian, particularly of the early 20th century, long before Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949. "Hockey was incredibly popu-

lar in Newfoundland," he said. "It was one of the few things we had in common with the Canadians. That's why it was really competitive when we played against each other."

During the First World War, Signal Hill was home to the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, which had a team based in the area and another over in Europe. Both regularly played exhibition matches against Canadian clubs, even during wartime, and they were always heated affairs, including an infamous game against the University of Edinburgh, which was stacked with Canadians studying abroad. "The game got quite animated," Martin said. "It got pretty rough, and there was damage done to the point that the Lord Mayor of Edinburgh banned outdoor hockey for a period of time."

Martin stepped away mid-tale and came back with two black-and-white team photos. The players looked proud to wear the caribou emblem on their chest, the same insignia that represents the regiment today. They were young, and most of them died that way. "Of these men here," Martin said, "if I'm not mistaken only three of them returned home."

The next morning I passed Jimmy Kimmel's favorite town, Dildo, on the way to Bonavista on Newfoundland's east coast. On the outskirts of town stood a pair billboards praising local sons Michael Ryder and Adam Pardy. Both are important to Newfoundland hockey history: Ryder, who won the Stanley Cup in 2011 with the Boston Bruins, retired in 2015 with the most NHL points by a Newfoundlander, while Pardy finished his career by bringing his home province its first pro championship last season with the ECHL's Newfoundland Growlers.

Through signs like these I would learn the names of many small towns as I made my way across Canada, including Murray Harbour, P.E.I. (Brad Richards), Hearst, Ont. (Claude



Giroux), Dryden, Ont. (Chris Pronger) and Foam Lake, Sask. (Bernie Federko). NHL players are often proxies for geography teachers. After all, if it weren't for Bobby Orr, few would know Parry Sound, Ont., and were it not for Gordie Howe, even fewer would've heard of Floral, Sask. Thanks to Ryder and Pardy, I could now place Bonavista on a map.

Later that day I made it to Port aux Basques, Nfld., just in

HOMETOWN PROUD

No need to guess which NHLers hail from towns such as Hearst, Ont., and Bonavista, Nfld. The welcome signs make it clear.

time for the overnight ferry to Nova Scotia, where the game was born.

At least, that's the controversial claim of Windsor, N.S. There, the Windsor Hockey Heritage Museum occupies five rooms in the Haliburton House, named after the author upon

BEFORE THE WAR

The Swastikas played out of Windsor, N.S., in the early 1900s, prior to the symbol being taken over by the Nazis.

whose fictional writings from the 1800s Windsor bases its claim. Other places have vied for hockey's virgin ground, and the museum goes to great lengths to debunk them all. But it has largely waged the fight online. The shrine itself is more about Nova Scotia hockey history. By far the most interesting exhibit was of Windsor's Swastikas teams from the early 1900s, long before the Nazis hijacked the ancient symbol. It easily drew the most attention from the handful of visitors milling about on a sweltering August afternoon.

The museum only opens during the off-season and has fallen on hard times in recent years. When I left, tourists were outside playing croquet in front of the Birthplace of Hockey.



"So you're with The Hockey News?" said Phil Brown. "Now I got something. I should bring it out right now. Just a sec."

On my way to New Brunswick, I'd pulled off the TCH and ventured into Truro, N.S., in search of coffee and gas. On a side road through town, I passed an easily missed sign that read simply, "Antiques, Sports, Vinyl Records." I played a hunch and turned around.

As I waited for Brown to return, I looked around the spacious shed behind his house. Alongside the vinyl and antiques was a huge haul of

hockey miscellany, everything from player pictures, team portraits, autographed action photos and championship posters to magazines, small statues, miniature Stanley Cups and even a wooden table-hockey game from the 1940s. In the memorabilia world, the collection wasn't a treasure trove, but it was all set up with obvious devotion.

Brown came back and plopped down a pile of The Hockey News from its days as a weekly newspaper in the 1970s. They were his latest acquisition in 10 years of scavenging since retiring. Most of his collection was of memorabilia from his beloved Canadiens, but the centerpiece was the 23 framed photos of Original Six stars plucked from the pages of the long defunct *Weekend* magazine. Brown cut them all out and placed each photo, along with many others, in a \$100 frame. He estimated he's sunk about \$5,000 into his collection just in frames alone. "It's crazy, I know," he said. "I have five goaltenders, one from each team, except Boston. I don't have a Boston goaltender. I'd like to have one. That'd sort of complete it."

SEARCHING FOR A 'B'

The only thing Brown feels is missing from his immense and impressive hockey collection: a framed photo of a Bruins goalie.



TOP: AVARD WOOLVER; BOTTOM: RONNIE SHUKER

RONNIE SHUKER



a hunt around the Bell Centre, then to the intersection of Stanley and Drummond, where the rink once stood and a parking garage now stands, and then to the National Car Rental office that operates the garage – which suggested I try a nearby tourist office, which sent me to the *Montreal Gazette*, which told me to try Parks Canada, which had no idea what I was talking about.

According to the *Gazette*, the plaques were put in storage and never installed. It was a lesson in how hard it is to mark origins, a theme that started in Windsor and would repeat itself across the country.

The town of Gananoque (pronounced *GAN-a-NOK-way*) has a saying that will make even the most inveterate punster groan: "There's the right way, the wrong way and the Gananoque." That day, the way to Gananoque, Ont., brought me first to Gatineau, Que., where the Ca-

nadian Museum of History had a Maurice Richard display, and then a two-hour drive south to see a travelling hockey exhibit at the 1000 Islands History Museum in Gananoque, best known for where the Bruins discovered Orr in 1961.

After his Hall of Fame career, Orr was immortalized in Toronto alongside the game's greats before him. All except the Hall of Fame's first 42 residents, who were inducted while the Hall was bound for Kingston, an hour's drive west of Gananoque. I was initially embarrassed I hadn't heard of the Original Hockey of Hall Fame, but once I got there I realized why so few fans know about it.

The first thing I heard upon entering was the voice of Kingston's finest narrating a short film: "Hey folks, it's Don Cherry here. I want to tell you about my hometown, Kingston, Ont., and how it came to be the greatest hockey town anywhere."

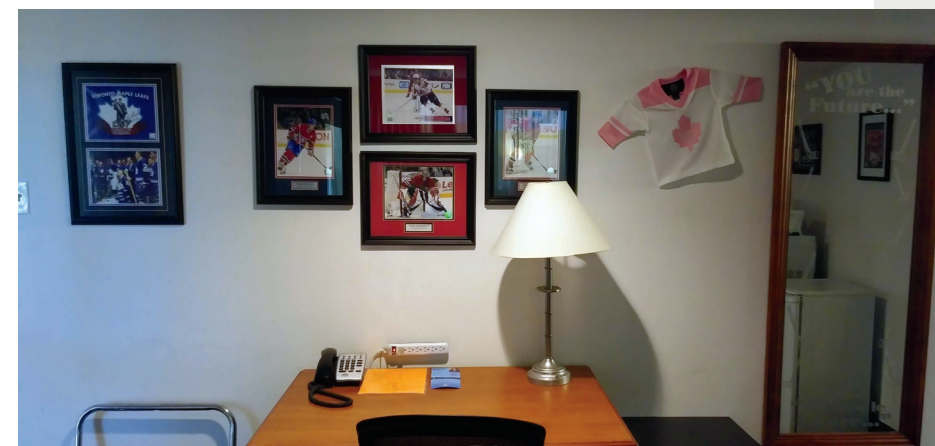
In 1943 the NHL awarded the Hockey Hall of Fame to Kingston but later changed its

mind and chose Toronto instead. Kingston carried on with construction of its Hall, which has since been shoved to the edge of town, where it occupies a room in the Invista Centre about the size of a large apartment. Now little more than an homage to local hockey history, it still had a few things worth seeing on what was a self-guided tour, including hockey's oldest-known jersey, puck and goalie mask, as well as Wayne Gretzky's rookie jersey with the WHA Edmonton Oilers.

As the looped clip neared its end, I got up to leave. In the hour I'd spent there, the only other person to come in was a custodian. When I left I heard Cherry declare, "As I said, Kingston, the greatest hockey city that ever was."

SUITE DREAMS

It's hard not to have visions of the game when it's plastered on every wall of your hotel room. So, top or bottom bunk?





Going from the original Hall to the current one would've been the natural next stop. But having lived in Toronto for the past 10 years I decided to blow right past the Big Smoke and head for the Hammer, where there was another original site to see.

Since leaving St. John's, I'd stayed true to drinking blue-collar brew from a Canadian coffee icon. On this day, however, my morning coffee had more significance. On the corner of Ottawa Street North and Dunsmure Road in Hamilton, Ont., was the site of the first Tim Hortons.

The store received a total makeover for its 50th anniversary, so it looked nothing like it did in 1964 when Horton was

with the Leafs. Still, the site has stayed true to its roots. Along with a statue of Horton outside the entrance, I was able to take a nostalgic stroll down "Memory Lane" on the second floor, where retired goods from six decades of Tim Hortons history filled several glass displays: old drinks, donuts and pastries, as well as mugs, paper cups, retro uniforms, baking instructions and cooking utensils, complete with an original counter.

As with all other places of origin I had visited, the original Tim Hortons is also in dispute. The counterclaim comes from

ORIGINAL RECIPE

The first Tim Hortons, located in Hamilton, still serves coffee and donuts but doubles as a museum for the iconic chain.



HOCKEY'S FIRST HALL

Few have heard of the Original HHOF in Kingston, and that's a big reason why it's sparsely attended despite owning a plethora of gems.

North Bay, Ont., where according to at least one report the first store opened in 1962.

It served burgers instead of donuts.

With some more coffee-flavored water in hand, I pulled up to Galt Arena in Cambridge, Ont., an hour later, where arena supervisor Dean Bevan greeted me with a wide smile and a hearty handshake. I wasn't the first person to ask to see the world's oldest continuously operating arena. Just last summer, a retired American tourist on a road trip from California swung through for a look. "We get a lot of that," Bevan said. "People will just show up and say, 'My grandpa used to play in here. I heard a lot about it. Mind if I walk around?'"

Built on an old bottle dump, Galt Arena has never ceased operations since opening in 1922, not even during the mas-

sive renovations in the 1990s after a narrow city council vote saved it from becoming a parking lot. Much of the old arena remains intact, including the red fir roof. The vapor barrier beneath it was removed, but the trapdoors that cooled the rink in the days before refrigeration systems still line the hallways below the stands where the dressing rooms used to be. "You'd have to duck to get in here because you'd hit your head," Bevan said. "The bleachers would come right down into the dressing rooms, and if you had a seat on the bleacher side you always had to remember not to stand straight up because you'd knock yourself out cold."

As Bevan showed me around, his crew was busy reinstalling the ice for the upcoming season. Above them hung a picture of the Queen on the east wall. The Queen used to watch the games from the west wall, but she was moved to make room for a massive mural commemorating Cambridge's 1983 Allan Cup. Next to the mural was a 10-foot painting of Cambridge's favorite son, Kirk Maltby, and beside him hung another of the town's favorite adopted son, Gordie Howe. Maltby, of course, won four Stanley Cups with De-



troit. Howe, meanwhile, spent only one season in Cambridge, with the Galt Jr. Red Wings, but his connection to the community runs deep, as detailed by a number of artifacts and articles in the lobby, and he returned several times after he retired.

Bevan and I went back to his office, where he pulled out his most prized souvenir: an original program from opening night on Jan. 20, 1922. I turned the pages carefully, then snapped a photo and got up to leave. I was about to begin the long, hard drive through Northern Ontario, and my first stop was three hours away. "I'm jealous you're going to one of my heroes' museum," Bevan said. "I haven't been there yet, but it's on my bucket list."

At the Bobby Orr Hall of Fame in Parry Sound, the call of the most famous goal in NHL history is pumped right into the washrooms. So as you're taking a No. 1, you can hear No. 4 score

the Cup-clinching goal in 1970, and then go see the image that captured it all.

Simply called 'The Goal,' the shrine's main exhibit features a sculpture of Orr soaring through the air after sweeping the St. Louis Blues. Sixteen times in NHL history, an overtime goal has ended the Stanley Cup final. Others have been more clutch – Pete Babando and Tony Leswick won the 1950 and '54 finals with Game 7 winners – but none is more iconic.

According to the Hockey Hall of Fame, that shot of Orr is one of the two most requested photos in NHL history. The other is of a blue-collar player born, buried and beloved in a mining town six hours north of Parry Sound where his story is still awaiting its final chapter nearly 70 years after his tragic death.

Most people know the story through these 33 words:

Bill Barilko disappeared that summer. He was on a fishing trip. The last goal he ever scored won the Leafs the Cup. They didn't win another till 1962, the year he was discovered.

"Every Canadian has heard Fifty Mission Cap from The Tragically Hip," said Kevin Vincent. "They can sing the song, but they don't know the story. The really don't know the story."

Vincent knows it well. Eight years ago, he took part in an expedition that brought the most

THIS ICE WON'T MELT

Galt Arena, the world's oldest continuously operating arena, has chugged along for a whopping 97 years.

significant artifact from one of Canada's most important stories back to Timmins, Ont.

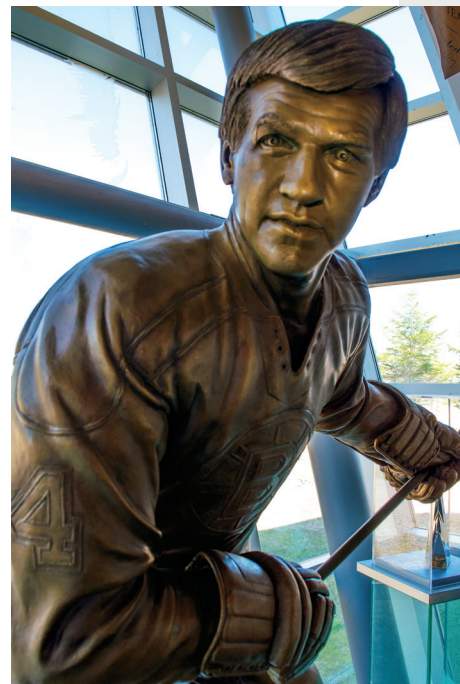
Barilko won four Stanley Cups with the Leafs, scoring the Cup-clinching overtime goal in his final one on April 21, 1951, immortalized in a photo by the Turofsky brothers. That summer, Barilko joined dentist Henry Hudson on his floatplane for a fishing trip near James Bay. They never made it back.

Authorities searched for months in what remains the largest search-and-rescue mission in Canadian aviation history. It wasn't until 11 years later that they were found. "This is our Buddy Holly story," Vincent said. "It is. And if Bill Barilko were an American, there would've been five or six movies made about his life already. There are none, absolutely none."

For over half a century the wreckage remained in the forbidding forest some 70 miles north of Timmins. Yet as development increased in the area, worries grew that the site would be scavenged. So in the fall of 2011, Vincent and 12 others set out to retrieve the wreckage. A helicopter dropped the group

off about a mile from the crash site. It took them two hours to hack and zigzag their way through the dense woods and knee-deep muskeg to reach the wreckage and then nearly four hours to net it all. It was then airlifted to a flatbed truck and taken to Timmins.

Before placing it in storage, the group performed a ritual. Using two cups from Tim Hortons they poured water onto the floats from Porcupine Lake, where Hudson and Barilko departed and were supposed to return. "We were half an hour into putting the wreckage in storage when one of the guys said, 'Oh my god, do you know



T OP: ORIGINAL HOCKEY HALL OF FAME; BOTTOM: RONNIE SHUKER

T OP: HARRY NEDERPELT; PROGRAM: RONNIE SHUKER; BOTTOM: BOBBY ORR HALL OF FAME



what we just did? Tim Horton replaced Bill Barilko on the Leafs' blueline!" Vincent recalled. "It was quite the moment when we discovered that."

Vincent hopes to find a permanent home for the wreckage, but until then it'll remain in storage. He has taken only a handful of people to see it, including Timmins native and former NHLer Steve Sullivan as well as broadcaster Elliotte Friedman. "When we open up the doors to that bin to people, it takes their breath away," Vincent said. "We might look back on this 25 years from now and go, 'Jesus Christ, why didn't we do something with all that?'"

For now, fans have to visit Timmins Memorial Cemetery to honor Barilko. Many do. According to a local tourist information center, the most requested places to see in Timmins are Maple Leaf Tavern, where singers Stompin' Tom Connors and Shania Twain got their starts, and Barilko's headstone. Among those who have made the pilgrimage is Oliver Solaro, who rode his motorcycle from Toronto in the dead of winter to pay his respects. Before departing, he placed a loonie at center ice of the former

Maple Leaf Gardens and then put it back in his pocket for the ride to Timmins.

When I found Barilko's gravesite, I saw the loonie lying heads-up at the base of the headstone, kept company by an NHL puck and another from the Leafs' centennial, as well as a Leafs pendant, a greenish marble and some flowers. As I stood there, staring at Barilko's headstone, I thought about how old his legend is and yet how young he was when he died. He was only 24 years old.

Born and bred in Thunder Bay, Ont., Colin Zulianello can't say for sure what it is that makes his city the most efficient NHL factory in Canada. But the former minor-league goalie and Thunder Bay's reigning goaltending guru had a few theories to table when I met him at his home in late August.

Known locally for his off-season work with local prospects as well as NHL products Carter Hutton, Matt Murray and Mackenzie Blackwood, Zulianello spent the past four years as a developmental goalie coach with the Calgary Flames. As we

LEAFS LEGEND LOST

Anyone can pay respect to Barilko at his gravestone in Timmins. Only a select few have seen the wreckage from his plane up close.

sat in his backyard, Zulianello searched for a reason why Thunder Bay has produced the most NHL players per capita. He cited its blue-collar attitude, strong sense of family, humility and bounty of rinks, but it was the city's Stanley Cup success that stuck out most.

In the salary-cap era alone, the Cup has come to Thunder Bay eight times between Eric and Jordan Staal, Patrick Sharp, Murray and Robert Bortuzzo. Of the 95 NHL players the city has produced, 20 have won the Stanley Cup (30 times in total), and that's not including the seven Jack Adams won as coach and/or GM in Detroit or the three WHA Avco World Trophies that Joe Szura and John Schella brought home. "The Cup comes home all the time, which is awesome, because it puts you on the map," Zulianello said. "And when the Stanley Cup is

coming to your hometown fairly frequently, I think it enables kids to be like, 'This is a distinct possibility, and if I work for it, then it's an attainable goal.' Because belief is a powerful thing."

Stanley Cup winners aren't the only champs that Thunder Bay produces. A month after Bortuzzo had his day with the Stanley Cup, Todd Skirving's long-awaited day with the ECHL's Kelly Cup finally arrived. "He literally on Facebook did an open invitation," said Zulianello as he flipped through his cell-phone for Skirving's address. "Anyone who wants to see the Kelly Cup, come to his house, 110,000 people: 'Sandwiches and pop and munchies will be served until we run out.' This is our city. It's so Thunder Bay."

When I arrived at Skirving's house a little while later, it was easy to pick him out among the crowd in the backyard. The glow from winning a championship with the Growlers still hadn't left his face. "It just felt like one big family, from the team to the staff to the management to the city," Skirving said. "It was the best season of hockey and life so far."



TOP: KEVIN VINCENT; BOTTOM: RONNIE SHUKER

As we talked, a military jet flew low overhead. Skirving's smile widened as he looked up, pointed skyward and laughed. It wasn't the Stanley Cup, but this was still his day in the sun, and everything was going his way. "I got a flyover for the Kelly Cup!" he said. "I got to get a video of that really quick."

Minor-leaguers are always a blast to interview, but by far the most fun are alumni, especially those far removed from their glory days.

After surviving the slog through Northern Ontario, I arrived at Joe Daley's Sports & Framing in Winnipeg on a side street off the TCH. When I walked in, Daley was chatting with a customer at the far end of the store. He looked up, smiled and waved, as if I were an old friend stopping by for a visit.

When the customer left, I walked to the front and shook hands with Daley, who was grinning widely. He hadn't made a sale, but that didn't matter. "If you want to come in and spend half an hour chatting with me and leave and don't spend a nickel, I'm looking forward to the next time I see you," Daley said. "Like the fellow that left when you walked in. Just a great guy. I always tell people, 'You're a customer once, next time you're a friend.'"

For the next hour, Daley led me through the peaks and valleys of his pro goalie career and then the highs and lows of his memorabilia store. Between his two careers, he has lived

through three incarnations of the Winnipeg Jets.

Daley spent most of the 1960s bouncing around the minors before reaching The Show. After five seasons in the NHL, he jumped to the WHA where he won three championships with his hometown Jets, with the Golden Jet leading the way. "I look back now, and what Bobby (Hull) meant to the league, to this city, for hockey and everything, if we're not in the WHA, we're probably not talking about a Jets NHL team today," Daley said. "There's no way that the NHL is going to come to small-market Winnipeg and say, 'You guys deserve a franchise.'"

When the league merged with the NHL in 1979, Daley retired as the WHA's all-time wins leader. He later bought his memorabilia store with his youngest son, Travis, and even though the Jets left in 1996, the Daley boys managed to keep

the store afloat until the team returned in 2011. By then Daley had been as inducted into the WHA Hall of Fame, and he recently completed the province's trifecta of shrines when he was named to the Manitoba Hockey Hall of Fame (2018) and the Manitoba Sports Hall of Fame (2019). "People come in here, and some of them think I'm a special guy," Daley said. "I'm just Joe. I got lucky enough to pursue my dream...I am what I am, just a retired hockey player."

The Trans-Canada Highway is national in name only. It's actually a haphazard network of provincial highways, so at any point the TCH could be Hwy. 1, 2, 7, 12, 16, 17, 20, 40, 69, 104, 105 or 185. Just for fun, it sometimes splits in two, like it does west of Winnipeg.

I carried on Hwy. 16 to Saskatoon and then detoured north

on Hwy. 35. As I drove through Tisdale, Sask., the big blue prairie sky began to billow gray. By the time I reached the intersection of Hwy. 35 and Hwy. 335, the rain had turned torrential.

I'd forgotten to bring an umbrella, so I turned off the ignition and waited for the rain to relent. A steady stream of cars and pickups came and went as people paid their respects to the 16 players and staff from the Humboldt Broncos who lost their lives here. The rain refused to let up, so I stepped out into the downpour and stood alone in front of the sprawling memorial. A large green 'HUMBOLDT STRONG' cross stood above the white crosses below,

NEVER FORGOTTEN

The Humboldt Broncos members who died in a 2018 team bus crash are honored in a roadside shrine.



TOP: TRAVIS DALEY; BOTTOM: RONNIE SHUKER



many draped with sodden jerseys. There were flowers, flowerpots, candles, teddy bears, an angel figurine and a white toy bus along with pop cans, beer cans, baseball caps, a cowboy hat and even a skid, all mixed in among the soaked NHL and Broncos paraphernalia. Heartfelt messages read "Humboldt Broncos, God's Team," "In Hockey & God We Trust," and "The strongest hearts have the most scars."

As I looked over the memorial, several more vehicles came and went. I didn't know what to do, so I stood there quietly in the pouring rain. Silence seemed like the only thing to say.

When news of the Broncos bus crash broke, the Travelodge in Saskatoon was one of several hotels to give assistance, offering free accommodations to families and loved ones.

Corey Waldner was among the staff members who wanted to help but were at a loss for words. All he could remember saying to his guests was, " 'Do you need a hug?' It was the least that we could do."

Waldner recounted that emotional time as he led me through one of the hotel's hockey-themed rooms. The entrance led to a custom-made Zamboni-like wall unit and time clock. Behind the queen-sized beds was a wall-to-wall mural of a *Mighty Ducks*-like team called the Mutts with a red goal light in the middle. A lamp made of

pucks rested on the bedside table between the beds while another made of sticks stood in a corner.

Waldner couldn't recall when the rooms were made but knows it was sometime between 2007 and 2010 while he was backpacking around the world. We talked travel as he led me back to the lobby, where he asked, "So where to next?" Before moving on to Alberta I had another birthplace to visit.

Gordie Howe is all over the Saskatoon area. There's the Gordie Howe Sports Complex, the Gordie Howe Kinsmen Arena and Gordon Howe Park, all of which sit in or around the Gordie Howe Management Area. To the south is the Gordie Howe Bridge, while to the north stands the Gordie Howe statue at SaskTel Centre.

South of the city, in the town of Floral, was the latest addition. On a dead-end gravel lane, since renamed Gordie Howe Road, was a memorial unveiled a few months earlier to mark where Mr. Hockey was born.

The parcel of land was purchased from a local farmer so that fans like me could make a

HOCKEY 24/7

Stay at the Saskatoon Travelodge and you can eat, breathe and literally sleep the game in a room adorned with gear and art.

pilgrimage in honor of Howe. When I got there, however, it looked like I'd been the only one to come by in some time. The fresh gravel around the monument was absent any tire tracks, and the only other on-lookers were a herd of cattle across the road.

As with other birthplaces and original sites, Howe's wasn't without controversy. When I left to get back to the TCH, I saw a woman picking flowers at the side of the road while her husband smoked in their car. The couple lived in the area and had the adorable habit of finishing each other's sentences. They said I was the first tourist they'd seen visit the monument in weeks. "And it's not even the right spot," they said. "The farmer who owns the land where Howe was actually

born wouldn't sell the piece of property, so they chose that spot instead. The house is farther south, closer to the marijuana facility over there."

Depending on which landmark is used as reference, Red Deer, Alta., sits just about or exactly in between Edmonton and Calgary. That made it the perfect place to house the Alberta Hockey Hall of Fame. For Blair Cipywnyk, that also made Red Deer, with a population topping 100,000, the ideal city to conduct a study on NHL fandom.

When I caught up with Cipywnyk, he'd returned home to Alberta after finishing his program in sport management at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont. For his master's thesis, *A Study on NHL Fandom in Red Deer, Alberta*, Cipywnyk interviewed lifelong Red Deer residents who were fans of either the Oilers or Flames to determine what made them choose one team over the other. Similar research has been done



LIKE A ROCK

Howe was as chiselled as any player, so his memorial looks the part. But does it really rest in his birthplace? Debatable.



on Sabres and Leafs fans in Fort Erie, N.Y., and on Red Wings and Leafs fans in Windsor, Ont., but both involve an international border, and neither city sits exactly halfway between two NHL teams. "That's what makes this so unique," Cipywnyk said. "There's not really another situation with a city that's equidistant...In terms of an actual city that doesn't have a local (NHL) team but is equidistant between two major teams, that's unique."

With Red Deer being more of an oil-and-gas town, Cipywnyk figured to find more fans of blue-collar Edmonton than comparatively white-collar Calgary. Instead he found that fans reflected Red Deer's distance to the two NHL cities – split down the middle – making it the perfect truce in the Battle of Alberta.

Time was ticking down on

my road trip as I left for British Columbia, but there was still one final stop to make before dropping off the car and catching a flight home.

Duncan may be the hometown of the Courtnall brothers, Geoff and Russ, each of whom eclipsed 1,000 games and 700 points in their NHL careers, but the Big Stick, as it's known in the community, remains the town's biggest star.

At 205 feet long and weighing more than 60,000 pounds, it officially owns the Guinness World Record for the world's largest hockey stick. The puck has always played Robin to the Batman stick, but both were refurbished in 2009, and they received another upgrade recently when they had their lights replaced. The old ones only shone white, and arena manager Terri Askham had been getting requests to change the color for special occasions, including one from Tourism Ireland, which wanted the stick lit green for St. Patrick's Day. "We hadn't been able to do anything like that," Askham said. "But it really hit home for us during the Humboldt Broncos tragedy, when there were vigils across the country and we couldn't change the colors...We really started to realize how much it meant to the community."

I stood in the parking lot, staring up at the Big Stick, and reflected on the past three weeks. The trip had been but a drop in the bucket list of potential puck places to see in Canada, but the hockey gods had been with me. No accidents, no engine problems, no flat tires, no wildlife to dodge – just watered-down coffee to endure and emergency bathroom breaks to make all along the TCH.

Then as I got into my car I thought of a quote from Ken Dryden's *The Game*: "Life on the road comes at a price. The energy it gives, the freedom you feel, it takes away, and more...A rhythm like any other rhythm, it is one you get used to; except this one is always changing and you never do." For a few short weeks, I'd hitched a ride on hockey's highway and found a rhythm with the game I'd never felt before. And even though I hadn't seen a single game, I'd seen the game all the more clearly for it. **H**

LIONIZED LUMBER

The town of Duncan, B.C., owns the Guinness record for the world's largest hockey stick.

