

What a cracker last Sunday's match against Nottingham was and it seemed that the Lions proved the old adage that a team who won't be beaten can't be beaten. Each and every one of our lads really excelled. Coach Richard Doran must have been really satisfied with their performances but you can be sure that he will be pushing them even harder because we've got our toughest season ahead of us.

The goalies of both teams did marvellous jobs but Vesa must have broken Panthers' hearts with those superb saves he constantly made, surely there is no better custodian in Britain, nor is there likely to be in the foreseeable future.

Coming away from the Den last Sunday my mind turned to the many goalminders I have known and seen perform over the past half-century and I consider Vesa likely to be equal to most of them. Thinking back I recalled the great Jimmy Foster who performed so well in the net when Great Britain won the Olympics in 1936. Subsequently Jimmy joined the Harringay Greyhounds when the Arena opened for hockey the same year. He was kicking them out for the "Hounds" for three seasons, the last being 1938-39 when Greyhounds topped the league. In those days the major teams were composed of just about 100% Canadian players and very good ones too. Many returned to Canada and the U.S.A to continue their careers in the NHL. Andy Goldie of Harringay Racers was another star goalie, as was Roy Musgrove of Wembley Lions. Roy generally wore a cloth cap and spectacles over which he attached a small wire mesh. It was Racers captain Wally Monson who delighted in snatching Roy's glasses, when the ref's back was turned, (there was only one game official on the ice in those days) and skating off with them, so leaving the near-sighted goal-minder very vulnerable.

Soon after those happy days World War Two commenced but a further season 1939-40 was completed before the German bombs started to drop. Some of the first of these dropped in the near vicinity of Streatham one Sunday morning when I was practising with our "Terrier" junior team and that was it for the rest of the war. No more London hockey.

Due to many Canadian troops being based in Britain a radio programme went out each Sunday at 6pm and the same broadcast covered Canada. It always began "This is Foster Hewitt bringing you all the highlights of last night's National Hockey League game from Maple Leaf Gardens, Toronto.." and then the commentary would begin. In the 1940s "Leafs" were tops. Such greats as centreman Syd Apps and his right winger Gordie Drillon, a prolific scorer and Pete "Dipsy Doodle" Langelle, Kenny Reardon, Wally Stanowski a super defenceman and the greatest goalie of them all, Turk Broda. Turk was a very portly man, fat even, a casual seeming performer who made the prevention of pucks entering the net look too easy. By coincidence I had the greatest good fortune to actually see this for myself. Later I will describe this in an amusing anecdote.

Many Canadian soldiers were based in Sussex, thousands of them in fact and nearly all keen hockey fans, many of them were good players too. Fortunately the Brighton Ice Stadium was still operating and so it was that the Canadian Army got their hockey recreation. Hockey kit was in short supply but this was remedied by the Canadian YMCA who arranged a boat load of equipment to be sent over. Most of it was well worn but it served the purpose. Squads of soldiers were marched into the rink each day to play, and on Sundays mid-day matches were played. This is where I managed to restart, playing for hastily picked up teams with such names as Wembley Dukes and Earls Court All Stars etc.

At that time there was a young local English boy who was proving to be a very competent goalminder, I shall not mention his name, blushes will be spared, who would gaze down upon these Canadians from the rinkside in a rather lofty manner. One day he was standing behind a goal giving a fat Canadian netman some good coaching advice such as "cover the near post", "hook your skate around the post", and "watch the centreman" etc. To each and every word of wisdom directed to him this Canuck who was wearing the most clapped-out set of pads, faded and torn jersey imagineable, would turn and politely thank him. "I think I'm getting the idea now" he said after stopping a few shots. "Yes" said our local lad who stood smoking a cigar and wearing all the mandatory hockey players' off-ice sartorialities, including the drape suit and snap-brim hat. "They might pick you for the game next Sunday." "Oh I do hope so" said the goalie. Meanwhile a bunch of the boys had joined me and we stood behind our "knowledgeable" young friend. How we kept our suppressed laughter silent I don't know because the man who'd been receiving all these pearls of hockey wisdom was none other than the great Turk Broda, now a soldier.

Later when we chided our mate his response was "How was I to know who he was, he didn't look much." By now very embarrassed the youngster fled and was not seen again until Broda was passed away. After the war ended the fat man returned to Toronto for several more seasons before retirement.

Yes indeed hockey goalminders are special people, they have to take everything thrown at them with no opportunity to take an offensive role, their only real satisfaction is to make a shut-out I suppose.