

Mick Kern and the search for Stan Gilbertson



By [Mick Kern](#)

January 7, 2016

This one may be a bit difficult to pull off, but I'd love to talk to Stan Gilbertson".

Such is the answer that was forthcoming from Jeff Marek, when I swiveled in my desk chair, and asked him who he'd like me to go after as he filled in for NHL Game Day host Steve Kouleas. We knew where Steve was; over in Davos, Switzerland, getting ready to do the play-by-play for the 2015 Spengler Cup.

I had no idea where Stanley Gilbertson was. But the mere mention of his name brought back a flood of memories.

In an age long before the Internet, and media guides, we had hockey cards. O-Pee-Chee in Canada, and Topps in the States. Those tiny cardboard missives into the heart of hockey contained all the advanced stats of the day. Goals, assists, and points. Games played, and penalty minutes. Height and weight. When the guy was born, where the guy was born, and all the teams he played for. Depending on the year, you were also privy to his favourite meal, and what hobbies he enjoyed, all underscored with a simple yet heartwarming cartoon illustrating these various activities.

With hockey flickering across our television screens on Saturday nights, unlike the wall-to-wall coverage we have grown accustomed to, often those cardboard capsules were the only exposure we had to players on some of the more obscure NHL teams.

How often did the likes of the California Golden Seals, Atlanta Flames, and Washington Capitals get on TV, unless they made the playoffs against either Toronto or Montreal? And that rarely happened. As kids, we followed the likes of Len Frig, Larry Romanchych, and Stan Gilbertson via hockey cards.

Born in 1944 in the State of Hockey, Gilbertson played his junior hockey with the Regina Pats, and also suited up with the AHL's Hershey Bears. He got his shot at the big leagues in time for the 1971-72 season, wearing the colourful uniform of the Golden Seals. And it was there that Stan made NHL history, without anyone even knowing it at the time.

On December 25th of that season, in a game against the Los Angeles Kings, Gilbertson put the puck into the empty net to seal a Seals' Christmas Day victory.

Yes, they played hockey back then on The Big Day. That year alone, there were 6 games on Christmas Day. The Penguins beat Montreal 4-2, the Rangers edged the North Stars 2-1, Boston beat up on the Flyers 5-1, the Sabres and Blues skated to a 4-4 tie, while the Maple Leafs were 5-3 winners against Detroit. In that game, Toronto forward Bill MacMillan had a hat trick.

And the visiting Seals beat the Los Angeles Kings 3-1; Stan Gilbertson with that empty netter with 18 seconds left in the game. He also recorded the final penalty on Christmas Day, sitting in the box and feeling shame for two minutes at the 5:06 mark of the 3rd period.

7,251 souls took in that Festive Forum Night. Gary Edwards getting the win over Gilles Meloche.

So when Mr. Marek asked if we could track down Stan Gilbertson, I didn't have to be convinced. But where to start?

The obvious contact was the NHL Alumni Association, based out of the Toronto area. Former NHL'er Mark Napier is the head of the Association, and they're good people to deal with. But this was December 23rd, and businesses everywhere were winding down for the holiday break.

Including, apparently, the NHL Alumni Association. Numerous phone calls went to die in voice mail hell. Which meant I had to get creative. And that always hurts.

Okay, Stan Gilbertson, an American player at a time when the league was predominately Canadian. Which meant I had to find someone from that era who had either played with Stan, or coached him.

One just can't call up the California Golden Seals. Which is a crying shame, but that's another matter. The Seals relocated to Cleveland in time for the 1976-77 season, spending two seasons as the Barons, before being merged into the Washington Capitals.

Okay, that last part didn't happen, but it almost did. The Barons (Seals) were instead merged into the struggling Minnesota North Stars, and a couple of years later, that shotgun wedding produced a team that stopped the powerhouse Montreal Canadiens in the 1980 playoffs, and a year later, that North Stars team made it all the way to the Stanley Cup Final. They lost in 5 games to the New York Islanders, but at least they got there.

There is a person that is the go-to guy about all things Golden Seals. Brad Kurtzberg. About ten years ago, he put together a true labour of love, researching and writing the book "Shorthanded: The Untold Story of the Seals – Hockey's Most Colorful Team". You can still find it on the Internet.

It's worth it; Kurtzberg tracks down all the former Seals and Golden Seals he could find, and in the tradition of the hockey books of Dick Irvin Jr., Kurtzberg recorded the former players as they shared war stories about their days with the funky franchise.

Which meant a direct message on Twitter to Brad would be the best place to start.

While waiting for a response, it occurred to me to actually put the name Stan Gilbertson into a search engine, and see if his address came up. That method is hit and mostly miss. Do I know which city the former Seal now lives in? No, but let's start with the state of Minnesota.

The Gilbertson name is rather popular up there in the Northern U.S. I pared down the results to a few names in both Minneapolis and Duluth, and made a few phone calls.

Maybe the Gilbertson clan was holding an early Christmas get together, because not one person answered their phone.

Well, that didn't work, and still no message back from Brad.

So, maybe this chase, this wild Seal hunt, was at a dead end.

Who would have a data base of American born NHL players? Why not try the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame?

Located in Eveleth, Minnesota, the Hall is smack dab in the middle of Stan Gilbertson territory. They gotta know where to find the guy.

Should mention this here. When we sit around and spitball ideas, often names from the past come up. The first question is always, should we get the guy? The more important second question is, is the dude still alive? That can be a bit of a hindrance in getting guests to appear if they've shuffled off this mortal coil.

From what we could tell, Mr. Gilbertson was still amongst us. His hockey career ended prematurely during the summer of 1977, when a car accident led to Stan losing part of one leg.

A call to the Hall in Eveleth was actually answered, the first bit of luck I enjoyed in this hunt. The woman at the other end of the line patiently listened as I explained my Search for the Holy Grail, and she simply said "you need to speak with Doug Palazzari".

Did she say Doug Palazzari? The former St. Louis Blue? I would have been happy just to talk with him, yet another player from the glory days of the 1970's. Palazzari got into 108 NHL games, scoring 18 goals, and adding 20 assists. The diminutive (5 foot 5) native of Eveleth worked for USA Hockey for a while, before settling in as the Executive Director of the United States Hockey Hall of Fame Museum in his hometown.

Doug got on the phone, and for the first time in my two decades plus career in this business, I embarrassingly became the stuttering fan boy.

“Doug Palazzari? Of-of the-the Blues? I had your hockey card”.

Doug chuckled and said, yes, that’s me. He could have hung up, but then again, how often does someone go on excitedly about Doug Palazzari?

I explained my Search for Stan Gilbertson, and Doug said “of course I remember him, I played with him in St. Louis”. We were beginning to get somewhere.

Turns out the U.S. Hall did not have an extensive database for every former American-born NHL player, but Doug thought he might have Stan’s contact information somewhere. I pictured him moving piles of books, and draft reports, around on his desk as he searched for that elusive piece of paper.

No luck, but he did have a phone number for Roger Gilbertson. A former referee (including a stint in the NHL in the late 70’s), Doug thought he might be related to Stan. And I had discovered when checking the internet, there are a lot of Gilbertson’s in Minnesota.

After thanking Mr. Palazzari, and asking if we could get him on the show one day, I followed the trail of bread crumbs and dialed Roger Gilbertson’s number.

He answered the phone immediately, and during my sales pitch, Roger interrupted me.

“Mick Kern? From NHL Network Radio? I listen to you guys all the time”.

Okay, this boded well for The Search.

Roger had the answers I needed. No, he wasn’t related to Stan, but he knew his brother Gary, who’s a firefighter in the Duluth area. He could get in touch with him, and then text me back with the contact information.

Five minutes later, I had that precious information. This caused much celebration in the NHL Network Radio on-air control room.

Stan Gilbertson was now living in Lodi, California. But what if, after all this, Stan was the sort that shunned the spotlight. It happens.

In a week where we had legends such as Wayne Gretzky, Mike Modano, and Emile “The Cat” Francis on the show, this was a bigger get to me. We had to land this guy.

A call to his cell went immediately to voice mail. I didn’t want to get lost in Voice Mail Hell again, so I instead elected to send an email. I made my case, and sat back, waiting for the final verdict.

During that time, Modano was on the air with us. On the second studio phone line, the light lit up. Someone was calling in. It turned out to be Stan.

We had found the Holy Grail.

I made my pitch for the umpteenth time that day, but by now I was well versed in the speech, and this time it really mattered.

Stan said no problem. 10 am Pacific on Thursday. Christmas Eve. The perfect gift. My old O-Pee-Chee hockey cards had come to life.

The next day Stan joined Jeff Marek and Matthew Barnaby on the air, and they talked hockey, and the Golden Seals, and goaltender Gilles Meloche, for 15 wonderful minutes.

It was one of those moments where if someone would have told me when I was 11 that I would be doing this for a living, talking on the phone to the likes of Doug Palazzari, and Stan Gilbertson (and Wayne Gretzky and Emile Francis), I would have said “where do I sign up”?

Now, does Doug Grant still live in Corner Brook?

<http://www.siriusxm.ca/mick-kern-and-the-search-for-stan-gilbertson/>