

## REGGIE LEACH - GETTING TO THIS POINT

By Jim Amodeo

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Mike Wilson's special guest 'Inside the Room' earlier this month was former Philadelphia Flyers sniper, Reggie Leach.

A gifted goal scorer, Reggie's most productive NHL season was in 1975-76. On an offensive tear, he rifled home 61 goals and added 19 more in the playoffs. Despite losing to Montreal in the Stanley Cup Final, Reggie captured the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP. He is the only skater on a losing team to win this award. All the other winners have been goalies.

His appearance 'Inside the Room' came just days before the release of his book, *The Riverton Rifle*.



Speaking before a captivated audience, Reggie talked about how he became the man he is today. The role hockey played in life and the struggles he faced. How he turned his life around and is now a powerful force in the First Nations community.

"I grew-up in the little town of Riverton, Manitoba, which had a population of 650 people," Reggie said of his start in life. "There were only 2 or 3 native families in Riverton. I was a snotty little kid and my clothes were always dirty."

"I didn't start skating until I was 10," he noted of his late start on blades. "I put on my brothers skates. They were size 11 and I'd stuff them with papers so they wouldn't fall off. That is what I used for 4 years. Today, I only use a size 7 skate."

Like many kids, Reggie hit the pavement to first learn the game.

"I played a lot of road hockey. I played goal because I was short and fat and I couldn't run."

The major hockey team in town made a tremendous impact on young Reggie.

"When I was 12 or 13, the Riverton Lions senior team were my heroes. They were the best

players in town. I knew a little about the National Hockey League, but not that much. The Lions were the guys I respected and I wanted to be like them."

And it didn't him long to share the ice with his hockey heroes.

"At the age of 13, I was good enough to play with the senior team for a couple of years."

Scouted by the Detroit Red Wings, they arranged for Reggie to play Junior "B" in Saskatchewan.

"So, I go there and being a native kid, it was my first time away from home. I'd get up in the morning go to school and hockey practice. Then, I'd go back and sit in my basement. I did that until Christmas. That's how lonesome I was."

Unable to to adjust to his new surroundings, Reggie decided to take action.

"I went home for Christmas and stayed home. There was no way I was going back. All my friends were in Riverton and I rejoined the Lions."

His return home, as Reggie stated, "is where everything turned around for me."

Over time, with the help of one gentleman, Reggie realized his growth as a person and hockey player was dependant on one factor.

"I'm hanging around the senior team and having a couple of drinks with them all the time at the age of 14 or 15."

A former coach recognized the pitfalls of Reggie's ways and provided him with some positive direction.

"He took me to a restaurant for dinner. We talked about hockey and what I wanted to do in life. I hated school and told him I wanted to be a hockey player in the National Hockey League."

What happened next helped Reggie get on the path to success.

"He pointed to a guy on the street and said, 'that guy could have been a pro hockey player, but he drank too much.' I said, I'm not going to do that," Reggie told his mentor of his intention to curb his booze consumption.

"He told me I had to leave Riverton and he made some calls. At that time, Detroit owned junior teams in Weyburn and Flin Flon."

Reggie explained the criteria set by the Red Wings when it came to placing prospects in either Weyburn, Saskatchewan or Flin Flon, Manitoba.

"Anybody that didn't go to school went to Flin Flon and skated for the Bombers. We had to show-up every morning and sign in at The Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting Company, then

spend the next 4 hours trying to hide."

In Flin Flon, Reggie met Bobby Clarke, who became his lineman and the two of them later won a Stanley Cup with Philadelphia.

"I remember the first time we met. I was in the Whitney Forum shooting pucks against the boards. This was in August and there was no ice. He was watching me and came down and introduced himself. We were never apart for the next three years. We bought our clothes together and we sat together on the bus."

Reggie's NHL journey began in 1970, when the Boston Bruins selected him in the Draft.

He fondly recalled his first taste of NHL action, when he was inserted into the line-up for a exhibition contest against Gordie Howe and the Detroit Red Wings.

"He was one of my idols," Reggie noted of Mr. Hockey. "All I remember is Bobby Orr coming up to me and saying, 'Reg, keep your head up, Gordie is going to test you.' So, on one play I go around the net and sure enough, Howe elbowed me. I turned around and slashed him."

This reactionary response didn't go unnoticed by Number 9.

"He said to me, 'kid you're going to be okay.' He skated away and I knew I scared him," a comment Reggie made with a big smile.

"I was the highest paid door-opener for 2 years," he said with a chuckle. "I made the roster, but in most games I got one or two shifts."

By February 1972, Reggie's lack of ice time with the Bruins began to frustrate him.

"Getting out of Boston, I sort of forced the issue. I told them I'm not playing and I want to get traded so I can play."

Reggie got his wish when the Original Six Bruins dealt him to the expansion Oakland Seals. While he got plenty of play with Oakland, the team didn't have much success on the ice.

"The only good thing about Oakland was the fact our owner, Charlie Finley, also owned the Oakland A's. We got free tickets to the World Series."

His exit out of sunny California came in 1974.



"I got traded in May to Philadelphia and they were the Stanley Cup champions."

The shift east reunited Reggie with his junior pal, Bobby Clarke.

"Clarkie, Bill Barber and I were put together," Reggie noted of Fred Shero's new line combination.

On the topic of his coach in Philly, Reggie told a story which gave insight into the genius that is Fred Shero.

"The first year I was there we would practice the same break-out play every day for 20-minutes. But we would never use it in a game. We did that for 4 months straight. Then, all of a sudden in March he said, 'all right guys time we switched.' That is when we went for the second Cup and we had the new system going into the playoffs."

The most moving part of the evening came when Reggie talked about his drinking problem.

"I'm an alcoholic," Reggie told the hushed room. "My problems started around '78-'79. I didn't really realize it at the time. I use to quit for all the wrong reasons. I quit for family or the Flyers wanted me to quit."

The turning point in Reggie's battle with the brown bottle came in his post-hockey life.

"Finally, in 1985, I quit on my own for myself and nobody else. I haven't drank since and it has been 30 years this September."

This brings us to Reggie Leach getting to this point in his life.

"I do a lot of public speaking in First Nations communities. I talk about life choices and drugs and alcohol. I tell the kids to learn one thing a day and it will take you a long way."

His book - *The Riverton Rifle* - is now available and after listening to Reggie talk about his life and hockey career it is a must read. It is a wonderful blend of inspirational stories and chronicles his rise to become a star player in the National Hockey League.

"It is not a show-and-tell book," Reggie said of *The Riverton Rifle*. "It is what I learnt from my lifetime to become an elder."

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