

Life and hockey: Jim Neilson's story prompts a push for the Hall

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[Kevin Mitchell, Saskatoon StarPhoenix](#)

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Hockey gave Jim Neilson a prominent name and nose.

The latter flows across his face, left to right and back again. Hockey foes shaped those slopes over four decades at rinks from Prince Albert to Oakland.

"My nose," the ever-stoic Neilson says simply, "has been rearranged. I had it straightened one time, and second game back, it's back where it is now. It's my characteristic, I guess."

Before putting his most prominent features through the wringer, Neilson was a five-year-old child walking into his new home at a Prince Albert orphanage. He stayed there a dozen years, learned to play hockey, then skated onto Broadway at age 21, playing for the New York Rangers in a world far removed from his humble upbringing.

That 1962-63 NHL debut launched a career that didn't end until 1978-79, when he played one final season with the WHA's Edmonton Oilers and a rookie named Wayne Gretzky. In between: More than 1,000 NHL games, four all-star nods, two top-five placings in Norris Trophy balloting.

He was invited to Team Canada's training camp prior to the 1972 Summit Series, but pulled out because of a knee injury.

Neilson's three kids have launched a spirited attempt to get the unflappable defensive defenceman into the Hockey Hall of Fame — "maybe," former teammate Brad Park writes in a support letter, "it is time to honour those who put the defence of their team ahead of crossing the red line."

"When dad started out," says daughter Dana Neilson, "the goaltenders weren't wearing masks yet, and he finished his career with Wayne Gretzky as a teammate."

"Dad's story, because of where he came from and how far he went in his career — being on the all-star team with Bobby Orr — you hear these things and think his story is one that should be told. Should it be told in the Hall of Fame? We think so. But it should still be told, as far as we're concerned."

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Neilson's first home bordered a northern Saskatchewan lake, where his father Olaf Neilson — who moved from his native Denmark in the late 1920s — worked as a mink rancher.

His mother, Rosie Rediron, was a Cree from the Big River First Nation, and she left the family and returned to her reserve when the kids were very young. That left Olaf in a tough spot: Busy mink ranch, remote locales, and kids needing to be schooled.

He felt the best option was St. Patrick's Orphanage in Prince Albert, and that became home for Jim and two little sisters. The boy watched out for his siblings, while forming a new family unit in the orphanage.



Jim Neilson poses with sisters Jeanne and Mary Lou during their childhood days. (photo courtesy Neilson family)

“(Olaf) probably came once a year, and I hardly knew him eventually,” Neilson says now. “I guess that was your family there, you’re so used to them being around, whatever you’re cooking up, and you’re going to school with them. I was basically a true orphan, in a certain sense.”

Jim sat in a classroom, did chores, played copious amounts of hockey. He skated against kids from schools around the city, learning on the fly.

When he reached his mid-teens, he walked from the orphanage each day to St. Mary High School. Sister Ignatius, a nun at the orphanage and staunch fan of the Detroit Red Wings, slid him extra sandwiches because of his walk, and because of all the calories he burned while playing hockey.

Neilson appreciated that nice touch. He liked the orphanage, he says now, except he was often hungry.

“I can’t remember too many sour things about the orphanage,” he says. “In essence, that’s probably the only thing I knew. I got there at an early age, and we were all in the same boat. There was a few Native kids there, but it was basically any orientation or background ... your house might have burned down, so the kids had to go somewhere. Or maybe a family breakup. A lot of French kids there, some German ... everybody and his dog were there. It was a real mixture of people at the orphanage.

“And for anything that was negative about it ... I can’t really say. It would be so minimal. I was a busy guy at the orphanage. I was good at my work, and with the chores. I got extra duties. The orphanage was fine by me, except we were always hungry. It wasn’t like a government-sponsored deal — it was done mostly by Knights of Columbus, and donations, and things like that. But overall, we survived it, and went up the ladder pretty good from there. I had a good background.”

There was no TV at the orphanage, and Neilson never watched an NHL game in all the years he lived there. But he remembers sitting near the radio on Saturday nights, listening to Foster Hewitt call Hockey Night in Canada. He learned about Montreal and Toronto from those broadcasts. He didn’t know where those cities were, exactly, but he absorbed the exploits of players like Doug Harvey without ever seeing them play.

“I couldn’t emulate anybody,” he says, though he remembers a couple of his favourites — fellow Saskatchewanian Max Bentley, and goaltender Turk Broda.

“I was blessed with some ability, and I was always on the ice. We played a lot of shinny; you learned how to stick-handle, handle the puck, you were turning, skating. Nothing like hockey schools or anything like that; you just learned on your way up, and whatever you picked up, you took with you.”

Teenaged Neilson played junior hockey with the Prince Albert Mintos in 1959-60 and 1960-61, walking to games, hockey bag over his shoulder, because he often didn’t have coins for bus fare. He figures he must have watched his first televised games after leaving P.A., and breaking into the pro ranks with the Kitchener-Waterloo Beavers of the old Eastern Professional Hockey League in 1961. They named him EPHL rookie of the year.

In 1962, he bounced into New York, with a Rangers jersey, playing a full-time NHL role as a rookie — far from his unconventional home, but retaining that sense of calm he’s always carried.

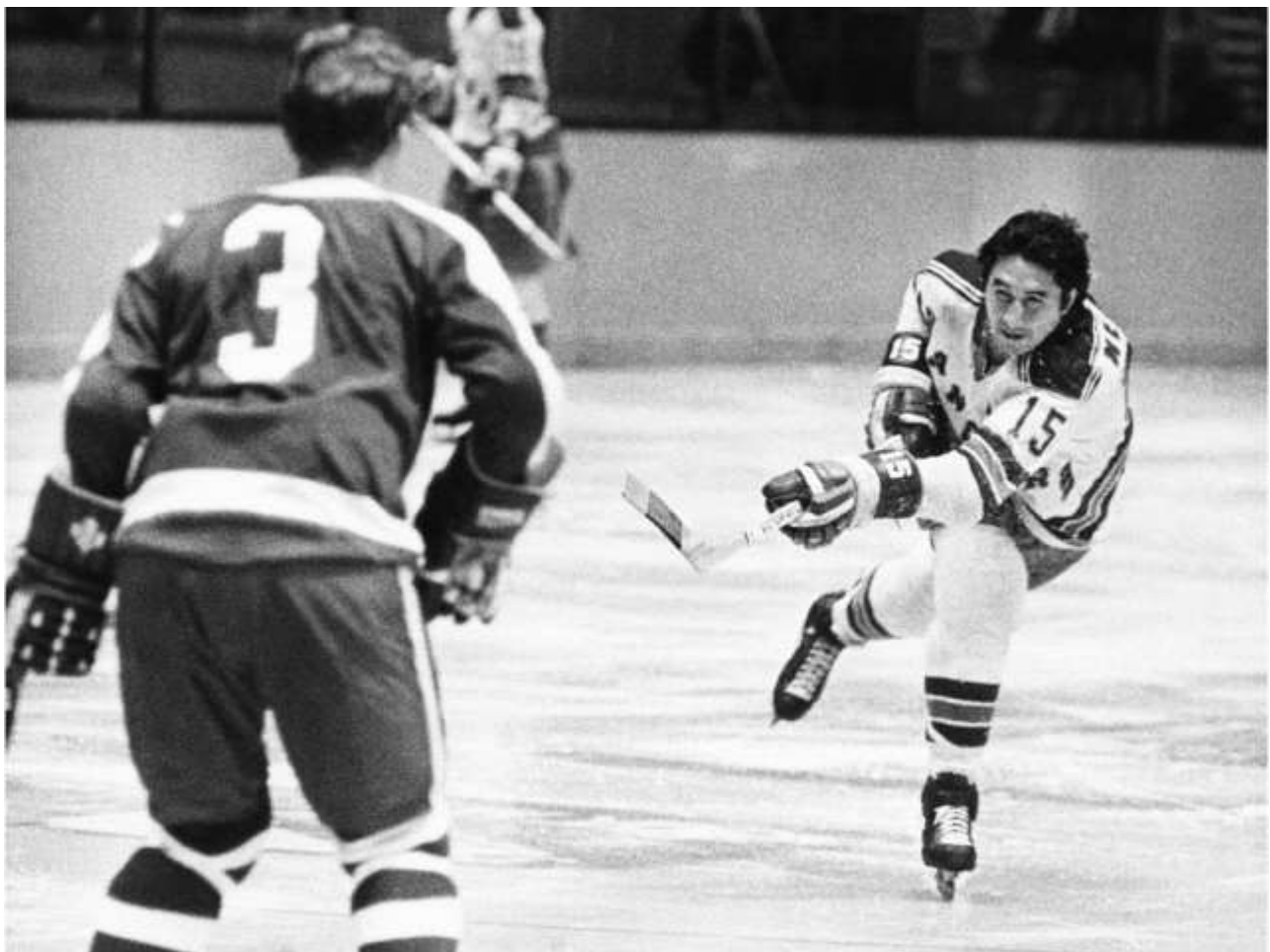
“All of a sudden, I was in New York. I never had a chance to think about it. It was just turn a page, and there I was,” he says.

Neilson remembers pulling in \$7,200 that first season, with \$1,000 left in his pocket when he returned to Saskatchewan. He doesn’t recall his first NHL game, but one night at Boston Garden, he scored Goal No. 1 while temporarily playing forward.

He grins at the memory — the last marker, with 1:45 to play, in a 7-1 thrashing of Boston — and notes self-effacingly: “I put the clincher in the back of the goal.”

And from there, Jim Neilson built a career.

Twelve seasons with the Rangers, two with the California Seals, two with the Cleveland Barons, and one final campaign with the WHA’s Oilers, where he watched Wayne Gretzky — “this skinny little kid” — walk into the dressing room for the first time after coming over from Indianapolis.



Long-time NHL defenceman Jim Neilson. His family is gathering support aimed at getting him inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame. (photo courtesy New York Rangers)

Unlike most of his hockey contemporaries, Neilson is visibly Aboriginal — “I don’t look too Danish to anybody,” he quips, referring to the other side of his heritage — and during his playing days, he’d often tour Saskatchewan reserves at the invitation of the provincial government, sharing his story with kids there.

Neilson’s continued to work in the Indigenous community after retirement, including time spent with the Native Economic Development Program.

He was called “Chief” around the league and in the broader public, and sometimes attracted insensitive headlines like this one, topping a story on how he just might be the ice general the Rangers need: “Big Chief Aims To Light Up Smoke Signals.”

Milton Tootoosis, a counsellor with the Poundmaker Cree Nation, wrote an impassioned recommendation for Neilson’s proposed Hall of Fame induction, including a story about seeing the player’s image on a cereal box.

“As a poor Cree kid on the Indian reserve who loved hockey at a young age,” Tootoosis writes, “I could relate to him instantly. I recall thinking to myself as I ate my cereal one cold Saskatchewan winter morning ‘wow, an Indian hockey player on a cereal box and I wonder how he did it?’ ”

Neilson, for his part, says he learned his values at the orphanage. He was known across the league as a man who played the game hard and tough, but with integrity; a gentleman.

“Try to do a good job, do it to your best, and be a good teammate. That started at the orphanage,” he says.

“Just the values of being a good person,” he adds. “The nuns tried to instil that in you. You went to church every day, and those things become part of you. You learn some practical things about yourself.”



Jim Neilson of the New York Rangers signs autographs during his playing days. (photo courtesy New York Rangers)

Neilson now lives in Winnipeg. Last year, his kids — daughters Darcy and Dana and son David — read a Hockey News feature: The top 50 players for each franchise. Neilson was No. 30 on the Rangers list, with the vast majority of those ahead of him already in the Hall of Fame.

That got them thinking.

“The conversation’s there. It’s always been there. We’re just doing it now,” says David, who was himself a talented hockey player — four seasons with the WHL’s Prince Albert Raiders, two more with the University of Saskatchewan Huskies, and nearly a decade in the minor pro leagues.

The siblings put a big package together: Life and career details, clippings, stats, and recommendations from people inside and outside the hockey world.

“Jim defines ‘defenseman’ as well as anyone who has ever played our game,” writes former Rangers teammate Rod Gilbert.



Jim Neilson's family is making a case for inducting him into the Hockey Hall of Fame. Liam Richards / Saskatoon StarPhoenix

Neilson played 1,023 NHL games all-told, compiling 69 goals, 299 assists, 368 points and 904 penalty minutes. He played with the Rangers in the 1971-72 Stanley Cup final, losing to the Bruins, and he says his one hockey regret is that "it would have been nice to hoist that rascal."

Neilson's not one for fuss and bother; he's a quiet fellow, understated. So he was initially surprised to hear what his kids were up to with the Hall of Fame package, which needs to catch the eye of a selection-committee member before it goes further.

There's plenty of forwards in there with 500 goals, he says; players with many, many all-star nominations and Stanley Cup titles.

Neilson himself was a four-time all-star and a long-time role model for Indigenous kids. He was rock-steady on defence, note his children, a goalie's best friend, a dressing-room leader, and chipped in a point every three games on average. Gilbert — a member of the Rangers' famed GAG (goal-a-game) line — says Neilson's smooth passing from the defensive zone was a "huge help" to the unit's success.

“I kind of thought about it after,” Neilson says. “These kids are hockey fans, knowledgeable, the whole ball of wax. I said ‘sure, fine.’ And I got to thinking — I mentioned 500 goals, and all the criteria, but I know Dick Duff’s in there. I can’t say he doesn’t belong there, but he’s (won) some Stanley Cups. And I have to have the right leverage with somebody. And that story of mine ... somebody might look at that and say ‘it’s worthwhile looking into, and checking it out further.’ ”

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