



HOME ICE ADVANTAGE

by Joe Martelle

In a nation that raises our hockey heroes on the highest of pedestals, Leo Boivin doesn't seem to fit the mold. Despite having an arena and one of the biggest midget hockey tournaments in the province named in honour of him, the Prescott native remains the most humble of Hall of Famers.

I met with Leo on a cold and rainy July morning. He welcomed me into his home with a firm handshake. His grip and his physique make it easy to forget that the former NHL star is approaching his mid eighties. After a few moments at his kitchen table, it's clear that his mind is every bit as healthy as his body. As the dark clouds rolled over the St. Lawrence River just outside the window, I had a rare opportunity to converse with a true hockey legend.

Leo Boivin first skated on the St. Lawrence when he was just five years old. The youngest child of a family of seven, he has

always called Prescott his home. "My Dad was a captain down in the Saguenay River, near Chicoutimi, and they were short a (ferry) captain here. He came up here for a two week trial and it turned out to be a good trial. Two years later he went back to Chicoutimi to sell his house and moved, then we moved here."

It was his childhood home on King Street where he developed his love for the game. Boivin grew to be an impressive junior player and eventually graduated to the big league. He began his career with the Toronto Maple Leafs during the

1951-52 Season. Boivin was called up as a replacement for stellar defenseman Bill Barilko, who had mysteriously disappeared while on a fishing trip during the summer of 1951. Three years later he would be involved in a trade that found him wearing a Boston Bruins jersey. It was in Boston where Boivin blossomed as a player and gained a reputation as one of the hardest hitters in the game. He would eventually be named Team Captain and spent almost a dozen campaigns guarding the Beantown blue line before another trade moved him to Detroit for a two year stint. When the league expanded to twelve teams in 1967, Boivin's leadership and experience as one of the game's premier defenders became a much needed commodity in new venues. He would finish his nineteen year playing career with stops in Pittsburgh and Minnesota.

Leo's reputation as a stay-at-home defenseman went beyond the game. Regardless of where the sport called him as a player, as a coach, or as a pro scout, he always considered Prescott as home. In an era when professional athletes tend to follow the fruits of their labours to the warmer climates of the south or big city skylines, Leo Boivin has remained true to his roots. In a house constructed much by his own hands, he and his wife raised their three boys about a mile up the road from his own childhood home... with no regrets whatsoever. "I could have stayed in Boston. They wanted me to stay. They said 'We have lots of work for you... you can do whatever you want.' Well I said 'No Gentlemen, I'm going home.' I had the St. Lawrence River. My dad was here. My

sister was here. I came home every year. I could have stayed over there but I was born and raised here. I loved fishing and I loved everything here. Everything was right here."

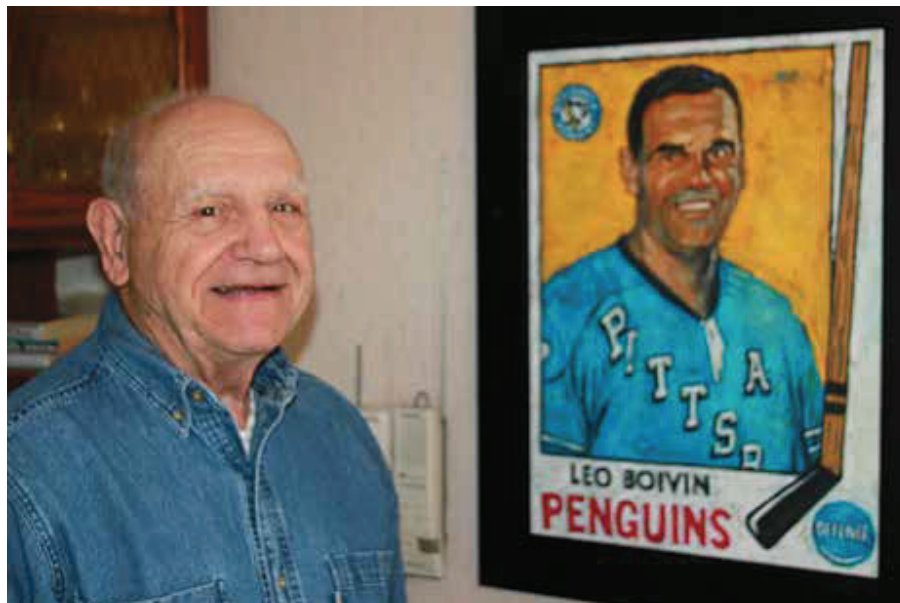
Boivin's loyalty has been acknowledged by the community. Shortly after he was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 1986, Prescott renamed the town's arena to pay homage to one of its favourite sons. "It's an honour they did that. I was really surprised when they named the rink after me. It was quite a year. I got inducted into the Hall of Fame and when I came home they had a big party for me at the rink. It was something...to be recognized, you know, by your home town."

Almost thirty years later the name Leo Boivin is still synonymous with hockey both in and outside Prescott and the South Grenville region. There are ceremonial puck droppings and community appearances on a regular basis. The Leo Boivin Showcase tournament, hosted by the town every spring, is one of the premier midget hockey events in Eastern Canada.

Leo is still a fan of the game, catching as many broadcasts as he can (and perhaps still tending to favour his Bruins). And the game is still a fan of Leo Boivin. Rarely does a week go by without a number of autograph requests finding their way into his mailbox. "I get lots. I get them from all over. I've got letters from Czechoslovakia, Sweden...I even got one from Tokyo. I get a lot from the States, from Ontario and Canada here. They send the cards and I sign them and send them back. These kids they read all the sports and they'll say, you know, 'My dad saw you play and I wish I could have seen you play' and stuff like that. It's nice that they have collections like that. We never had cards and stuff like that when I was a kid."

Many of the letters come without return postage but each request, be it a hockey card from Toronto or a puck from Pittsburgh, is carefully and graciously returned by a man who clearly understands the value that children put in their heroes.

I couldn't help but think that without a doubt Boston's loss is Prescott's gain. **LH**



Editors Note

There is no doubt that Leo Boivin inspires youth hockey in our area and while today's young hockey players and athletes did not see him play, his legacy and commitment to this area truly is an inspiration, and is why Prescott in the town's hearts will always be known as "Hockeyville!"