

Another Spin of the Wheel (A Buffalo Sabres 'What If?')

by Borden D. Mills

What if the Vancouver Canucks won the #1 pick instead of the Sabres in 1970 with the now famous "Spin of the Wheel" preceding the 1970-71 amateur draft. The future could've been as follows...

I.

"One." *Clarence Campbell* announced to the hushed crowd at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. A group of well-tailored men stood up and, cheering loudly, pumped their fists into the air.

"The **Vancouver Canucks** have won the rights to the first overall pick in the 1970 amateur draft."

The **Buffalo Sabres'** group, headed by crusty ex-Maple Leaf coach *Punch Imlach* looked disappointed, yet determined that even the second overall pick could be turned into something positive for the newborn franchise.

The following day, the Sabres brass returned to the site of the unfortunate spin. The Canucks squad sat amongst the other N.H.L. franchises, talking excitedly amongst themselves in kid-in-a-candy-store tones. It was apparent from the beginning that their first pick would be *Gilbert Perreault*, the high scoring center from Victoriaville, Quebec. The Sabres, more subdued, concentrated on the forthcoming expansion draft, selecting *Tom Webster*, who would immediately be traded to Detroit for *Roger Crozier*, the veteran goalie, to give the Sabres the backstopping backbone in order to solidify a young, but talented club.

The amateur draft began as expected. Canucks G.M. *Bud Poile* went up to the microphone and proudly announced, "Vancouver claims Gil Perreault..."

The Sabres were up next. Imlach walked deliberately to the front of the room and cleared his throat. "The Buffalo Sabres claim *Darryl Sittler*..."

There was a murmur amongst the gathered. Toronto's table seemed the most interested in the unfolding events, with GM *Jim Gregory* nervously twisting at his tie. There was a rustling of some papers, and then *Milt Schmidt* of the **Boston Bruins** stepped forward. "The Bruins claim defenseman Dale Tallon..."

The Sabres shored up a primordial scoring line by drafting RW *Mike Murphy* in the second round and Drummondville LW *Yvon Lambert* in the third round. Imlach hoped that the three young talents would someday catapult the Sabres into the Stanley Cup promised land. Six years later, his hopes were to become reality.

II.

After the 1975 amateur draft, in which Buffalo selected goaltender *Bob Sauve* in the first round, the Buffalo Sabres felt that they had all the makings for a successful Stanley Cup run. The year before saw them finish with 93 points and a trip to the conference semifinals, ultimately losing to *Guy LaFleur's* upstart California squad in a rugged six game series. The returning Stanley Cup champions, the Vancouver Canucks, with their awesome "Hair Line" of Perreault, *Steve Shutt*, and *Lanny McDonald*, still looked like the team to beat, yet the surprise talk of the preseason was of Buffalo's young winger *Morris Titanic*, who piled up an incredible 17 goals in just 7 preseason contests. "Morrie looks good to go for fifty goals." said 45 year-old veteran defenseman *Tim Horton*, playing the final year of his career with the Sabres after winning the Cup with Vancouver just the year before.

The Sabres started the regular season strong, winning 20 of their first twenty-five contests. Centerman Darryl Sittler was the most impressive, racking up 20 goals and 35 points in his first 24 games. Even the defensive corps got into the act, with second year D-men *Lee Fogolin* and *Mark Howe* each scoring 10. Sabres starting goalie *Richard Brodeur* was seldom tested, facing an average of little over 22 shots per game. His six shutouts put him on pace to eclipse the modern day mark by the end of February.

The middle of the year saw both Richard Brodeur and Yvon Lambert laid up with ankle injuries, yet the inspired play of rookie Bob Sauve and Morris Titanic kept the Sabres sharp, as the team skated into 1976 with a spectacular 33-6-4 record. Titanic tore through the month of December with 15 goals in 17 contests, while Sauve shined with 10 wins. Dependable defenseman *Jim Schoenfeld* led the team with an incredible halfway mark of +40. The return of Sittler in late February had many folks in the upstate New York area thinking of the playoffs long before the season was officially over.

III.

Finishing first in the Adams division at 55-16-9 didn't excite 35 year-old Sabres coach *Roger Crozier* in the least.

"We are here to win the Stanley Cup. Nothing less will satisfy us."

Crozier was concentrating his thoughts on his touchy goaltending situation. Richard Brodeur's ankle had been re-injured against Minnesota on April the 3rd, and the future two-time Vezina winner had shown a noticeable dropoff in his lateral movement. Crozier himself was ready to come out of retirement to remedy the situation. Against the **California Golden Seals** in the conference semis, Crozier decided to go with rookie Bob Sauve, who won 15 games as Brodeur's back-up during the season.

The series went the distance, a full seven games before *Jacques Richard* potted a backhander past goalie *Gerry Desjardins* and into the Seals' net 16:32 into the second overtime. The Sabres' vaunted offense was all but stifled by *Larry Robinson* and the Seals' clever defensive schemes. *Don Luce* led the series in scoring with four goals and Darryl Sittler chimed in with six assists, but it was Bob Sauve who singlehandedly saved the Sabres' season, posting a sparkling 1.62 GAA and two shutouts. The Seal's "French Connection" of Guy LaFleur and *Rick Martin* scored only three goals the entire series, and were largely ineffective playmakers against the stifling Sabres' defense.

Mike Murphy, Buffalo's only fifty goal scorer during the regular season, had been goal-less in his last fifteen games; contests in which the Sabres were a paltry 6-7-2, and knew that he and his linemates had to step it up against Montreal's perennial all-star *Ken Dryden* if there was any chance for the Sabres to move into the Stanley Cup Finals.

"We met in the first round two years ago and Kenny blanked us. We even put up goose eggs against his back-up brother, Dave."

The Sabres quickly put any questions concerning their late season slump and lackluster first round play to rest by sweeping the Canadiens out the door in just four games. The Sabres D, led by million dollar man Mark Howe and Jim Schoenfeld, scored all of the team's goals in the decisive 3-1 game four as the outside perimeter game worked wonders against Dryden's legendary talent and poise. "We really handed it to them." remarked Sabres' checkman *Mike Robitaille*, "We completely shut down *Marcel Dionne*, and got inside Dryden's head. We won all the battles. It was a superb effort. Now we go against Vancouver and Mr. Perreault. I can't wait to get a lick on that guy!"

IV.

The **Vancouver Canucks** were flying high after a 4 game sweep of the **Philadelphia Flyers**, in which the line of Perreault, McDonald, and Shutt piled up an impressive 10 goals and 12 assists. The Vancouver club had set the Canadian west coast on fire the whole season, posting a league best 58-12-10 record, and going on to eight straight victories in the playoffs before meeting up with second best Buffalo. Clearly, the series matched the two best teams in the NHL. There would be no cinderella champion this year. Both teams were the class of the league. Second-year Canucks sniper *Danny Gare* summed it up succinctly: "Six years ago our two clubs were pitted against the other through fate and the random spin of a numbered wheel. Now, here we are again, the two best teams in the league, playing for the most prestigious trophy in the western hemisphere. It should be a great series."

Game one, in Vancouver, went to the Sabres 6-3. Darryl Sittler found his scoring touch and scored a hat trick against Canucks' goalie and 1975 Vezina trophy winner *Dan Bouchard*, who was largely ineffective. Richard Brodeur responded to the sight of a few diehard Sabres fans waving "Savior Sauve" signs at the Pacific Coliseum, shaking off the rust to make 25 saves, including 12 in a third period

which saw the Sabres score four of their six goals. The Sabres' scrappy Mike Robitaille was sidelined for the remainder of the series with a fractured ankle after missing a check on Vancouver's shifty Gilbert Perreault and instead hitting the boards at an awkward angle. The Canucks also lost *Jerry Korab*, one of their top defencemen, with a separated shoulder thanks to a sinister *Tracy Pratt* crosscheck.

Games two and three saw the Canucks turn their play around. Perreault scored two goals and added two assists in a 4-1 game two romp, and two more goals in a 5-4 game three overtime nail biter at the Aud. Lanny McDonald pitched in with a goal and an assist in each game, while goalie Dan Bouchard found his composure and kept the Sabres' attack from gaining any momentum until late in game three. Sittler again led the Sabres offense with a goal and an assist in game two, and two goals in the third period of game three, yet the Sabres could not stop diminutive Vancouver sniper Danny Gare, who slapped a zinger past a frozen Bob Sauve to win game three just 35 seconds into overtime.

The Sabres knew that if they lost game four, the series would be totally out of hand, and worked hard on their defense of the "Hair Line" during practice, yet it was the offense of a forgotten member of the team that ended up being the saving grace for the squad. After scoring 21 goals before the 1975-76 All-Star break, Morris Titanic had managed just three afterwards. In fact, Titanic had been a healthy scratch for 7 of the last 14 playoff games, managing only a goal and three points in the games that he played. Game four was to be his spotlight. Titanic scored a career-high five points, including a second period hat-trick that put the Sabres up for good in a 7-4 offensive slugfest. Mark Howe chipped in a goal and three assists, and Dan Bouchard was chased from the net early in the third period in favor of upstart *Mario Lessard* as the Sabres sent the series back to Vancouver tied at two. Lanny McDonald scored two first period goals for the Canucks, who failed to capitalize on twenty-three third period shots against stalwart goalie Richard Brodeur.

Game five turned out to be a defensive struggle. The game was scoreless heading into the final period. Bob Sauve and young backup Mario Lessard put on a spectacular show, each making twenty-one saves through two. On the power play, *Don Lever* made it 1-0 early in the third with a nice wristshot down low past a sprawled Sauve, who was being screened by hulking defenseman *Jocelyn Guevremont*. Buffalo quickly answered back with a tic-tac-toe pass play that set up Mike Murphy in the slot to tie it at one. As the end of the period wound down, it appeared as though the game would go into overtime, but an errant clearing pass by Vancouver rookie defenceman *Harold Snepsts* was intercepted by Sittler, who quickly put it past a surprised Lessard. The Sabres made it 3-1 twenty seconds later with a *Paul McIntosh* empty netter, and were within one win of the Holy Grail of professional hockey.

Game six saw Gilbert Perreault take control, and the Vancouver Canucks rebounded 4-3 in Buffalo to force a decisive seventh game back at Pacific Coliseum. Perreault scored two goals and assisted on the two others. One of the goals was a spectacular breakaway, in which Perreault deked Richard Brodeur to the ice, skated around of the back of the net, then chipped it in off of the back of the fallen goalie's legpad. Sabres fans got a brief glimpse of what could have been had they been the first to draft back in 1970, and were extremely concerned with the clutch performance of the incredible french canadian going into game seven. "We came out flat as a flophouse bed, then Bert quickly made it 2-0, then there

was no looking back." commented Canucks' playoff assist leader Danny Gare. "Now we gotta go back home and wrap this thing up."

Game seven came down to the matchup of two unlikely heroes, Bob Sauve and Danny Gare. Gare had scored only 24 goals in his first 100 games with the Canucks, yet led the team in playoff scoring going into game seven with 12 assists and 20 total points. Sabres' coach Roger Crozier was originally going to start Richard Brodeur, yet at the last minute, because of some stiffness in Brodeur's troublesome ankle, decided to go with Sauve. It was a decision that would prove to be the right one. For the first thirty minutes, Sauve stifled the Canucks, making save after save as the Sabres jumped out to 1-0 second period lead thanks to a tip-in by ancient NHL veteran Tim Horton. The Canucks tied it up with just 7 seconds remaining in the period with a brilliant one-timer by Gare off of a thread-the-needle pass by Perreault. Gare took command early in the third, taking a *Bobby LaLonde* pass and launching a quick wrister over Sauve's left shoulder to stake the Canucks to a 2-1 lead.

During the third, the Canucks staved off wave after wave of Sabres attacks, playing a largely defensive style of play that would eventually cost them the game and their second Stanley Cup. With 5:05 left to go, Canucks coach *Phil Maloney* sent out his checking line against Buffalo's first line. It was to be a terrible mistake. Yvon Lambert, mostly quiet during the Cup run, made a nifty move past Vancouver's young enforcer *Dave Williams* and deposited a floater between the legs of Dan Bouchard to tie it at 2.

The last minutes of the game saw some of the most inspired and impassioned play in the history of the NHL. Both team's first lines, a conglomerate of five future hall of famers, went at each other's goal in a flurry of activity that saw 19 total shots by both teams in little over four minutes. Sauve and Bouchard rose to the occasion, making save after save. There were 46 seconds left in the period when Gilbert Perreault fed a perfect crossrink pass to Danny Gare, who quickly sped towards the vacant left faceoff circle and fired the puck. At first, Sauve was to later say, he did not see the shot. He lifted his stick in a futile gesture to deflect the puck, which he thought was going to go in over his left shoulder, just as it did back in the second period. Instead, the puck struck the flat shaft of the stick just below his glovehand, and ricocheted back toward center ice. Darryl Sittler, late to his own zone to defend, was located just outside of the Sabres' blue line and became the fortunate recipient of the miraculous bounce. Sittler fed a streaking Yvon Lambert, who in turn fed it back to Sittler just inside the Canucks blueline. Sittler unleashed a quick slapper that knuckled toward the net and between the legs of Dan Bouchard, sliding gently into the back of the goal. The siren blared, and the house was silent.

The final thirty seconds saw a six on five, yet there was no shot on the Sabres' goal. Vancouver could barely get it out of their own zone, thanks to some deft defensive poke checks by *Larry Carriere*, Jim Schoenfeld and Mark Howe. The time elapsed, the horn sounded, and the Buffalo Sabres were Stanley Cup champions.

V.

Since the winning Stanley Cup run of 1976, the Sabres have failed to make it back to the big dance, year after year, coach after coach, first round draft and playoff disaster after disaster. The Sabres have qualified for the playoffs just eight times since 1980, yet visions of the past remain as distant, glorious beacons. Even the Bills' NFL championships of 1990, '91 and '92 do little to eclipse the aura of the Sabres' NHL achievement. The names and engravings on the Stanley Cup shall stand long after the players have moved on and passed away, long after the NHL itself has come and gone.

"It must have been incredible." remarked long-time Sabres goalie *Jacques Cloutier*, watching, awestruck as Bob Sauve's #28 was slowly lifted into the rafters of Sittler Arena in downtown Buffalo during a 1997 ceremony.

"Wow, what a team!" beams Sabres' fitness coach *Brian "Spinner" Spencer*, in between team practice drills at the old Aud.

The present day dawns upon a new year of Sabres hockey. A fifty-one year old man skates off the shining ice at Sittler Arena, sits down and begins to unlace his skates. "That team was one of the most cohesive units I have ever played against," reminisces Sabres' first-year head coach Gil Perreault, loosening a stubborn knot with a wistful gaze in his eyes. "To tempt fate and be a part of a special team like that. Isn't that what hockey is all about?"

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