



THIS PUNCH PULLS NO PUNCHES

by Marc Edge

Unpredictable, colorful and always amid turmoil. That's Punch McLean, one of the most feared and successful coaches in junior hockey.

Soon after this article was typeset, Punch McLean was suspended indefinitely following an attack by the New Westminster Bruins on the Portland Winter Hawks. The incident reportedly erupted after Portland's Don Stewart and Bruin John Ogrodnick came to blows with only seven seconds left in the game and New Westminster trailing 4-1. Led by Andrew Ristau, who was fined \$500 for his actions, the Bruins cleared the bench—the Winter Hawks did not—and assaulted the Portland players on the ice; one victim was so badly beaten he had to crawl off. By the time order was restored, referee Terry Gregson had handed out 191 minutes in penalties. Eight Bruins were suspended (three for “gang fighting”) for a total of 29 games, the club was fined \$1,000, and the Winter Hawks pressed charges against the Bruins. “We have to,” says Portland general manager Brian Shaw. “There are kids’ lives at stake. Someone could have been killed.”

Five days after the melee, Punch McLean, suspected of provoking the attack, offered a public apology. “I’ll do everything I can to stop this sort of thing in the future,” he said. “It’s the first time I’ve ever had to apologize for something like this. I didn’t send the players out on the ice, but I have to shoulder the blame. It happened so fast, there was nothing I could do.

“I was fined \$1,000 earlier this year for going out on the ice. I didn’t think I should do that again. I was at the far end of the bench; when I turned around, the fights had broken out. I don’t condone this sort of thing. It won’t happen again.”

As the city of New Westminster considered terminating its lease with the Bruins, McLean expressed bitterness. “The Winter Hawks all of a sudden have become holier than thou. I remember last year when guys named Playfair, Mulvey and Turnbull challenged our bench. You didn’t see me hollering to the league to ‘get those guys out of here because they’ll hurt my little angels.’”

Punch McLean is now considering retirement. “Maybe the game has gone by me. I’m an old horse who’s been at it 25 years. It’s tough to change your thinking. The game is changing—maybe I haven’t changed with it.”

ERNIE “PUNCH” MCLEAN was smiling devilishly that warm, sweaty September night in New Westminster, British Columbia, two seasons ago. His New Westminster Bruins had just pounded the outclassed Calgary Centennials for the second time in three nights, but the reviews, as they often are in the nearby Vancouver press, were not favorable. Too much violence was the familiar complaint, usually

from columnists and commentators who seldom, if ever, got their information firsthand. The Bruins, McLean was tired of hearing, should concentrate on hockey, not fist-cuffs.

But if ever a hockey team was a reflection of its coach’s personality, the Bruins displayed the two-fisted style of their sage, who has been known to take a poke at an uncooperative referee. Or sportswriter.

He had not yet met the latest heretic, a new writer covering the Bruins for the first time. But when the young man from the morning daily poked his head inside McLean’s Queen’s Park Arena dressing-room office, Punch knew it was a chance to practice his special brand of intimidation.

“Come on into the dressing room,” he said, putting his arm around the writer’s shoulders and leading him into the middle of a pack of boisterous, half-naked junior hockey players. On one side stood six-foot-three, 200-pound Barry Beck, who had the pectorals of a weight lifter and prowess as an amateur boxer. Across the way was pugilistic Harold Phillipoff, at six-foot and 220 pounds one of the most feared forwards in junior hockey.

“Boys,” McLean announced loudly to quiet the chatter around him, “I want you to meet the man who called us the McBride Boulevard Bullies.”

McLean suddenly removed his arm from around the writer. “Hot nuts!” went up the cry as the journalist got the unrehearsed New Westminster Bruins raspberry and left to pick his way sheepishly out of the locker room.

Punch the intimidator had struck again.

ERNEST JOHN VINCENT McLean’s 46-year-old birth certificate gives his birthplace as “Section 9, Township 2, Region 8, west of the Second Meridian.” The son of a coal miner, Punch McLean was born in a mine shaft in Estevan, Saskatchewan—which may explain his continual complaint about “getting the shaft.”

But if his beginnings were low, McLean now views the world from atop the junior hockey heap. As Western Canada Hockey League champions the last four seasons, his Bruins have logged four straight appearances in the Memorial Cup tournament, which decides Canada’s junior hockey champion. After two disappointing trips east, New Westminster has won the Cup the past two years. This May, McLean

would dearly love to make it three straight. In late March, the Bruins clinched a playoff berth with a third-place finish, 19 points ahead of the Seattle Breakers, last in the WCHL's Western Division.

Through two decades, McLean's teams have never once missed the Western Canada Hockey League playoffs. They never came closer to doing so, however, than in 1978. "Last year was a storybook," says McLean. "It was a rebuilding year. Portland [the West Division's first-place Winter Hawks] had some problems early in the playoffs when they lost some big gunners through injury. They just never recovered."

The Bruins' 1977 Memorial Cup team had been weakened by graduation, and only nine players returned from the previous year's champions. On defense, the Bruins had lost regulars Barry Beck (Colorado Rockies), Brad Maxwell (Minnesota North Stars), and Miles Zaharko (Chicago Black Hawks).

To qualify for 1978 postseason play, the Bruins had to make a mad dash out of last place during the final third of the season. They edged the Seattle Breakers by a point. But they did it without McLean behind the bench. He was sitting out a 25-game suspension: He had reportedly punched a referee who had made the mistake of cruising too near the Bruins' bench after a particularly questionable call. (For weeks, McLean refused to discuss the affair. "Only my hairdresser and I know for sure," he told one reporter. "They haven't found anyone who saw it. And they've got to prove it.")

McLean never strayed too far from the Bruins, however, and often relayed key bits of strategy from the press box to assistant Doug Sauter, who from the age of 15 had been a player, then coach, with McLean.

McLean returned for the playoffs, and the inspired and scrappy

New Westminster goalie Carey Walker drinks from the Memorial Cup with help from Mark Lofthouse, now with the Washington Capitals.

Bruins beat the Billings (Montana) Bighorns for the right to represent the WCHL against the champions of the Ontario Hockey Association and the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League. New Westminster defeated the OHA's Peterborough Petes in the finals and the Memorial Cup was theirs.

League rebuke is nothing new to McLean, and it seldom slows him down. Sitting out a five-game suspension one night (he threw a garbage pail on the ice to protest an official's call), McLean watched from the stands as a linesman yanked one of his players out of a fight by his hair. McLean confronted the official after the game, grabbed him by the throat and dared him to pull *his* hair.

McLean has been known to pull a little hair himself. He once screamed to a linesman that a play was two feet offside. "So what?" was the perfunctory reply. Incensed, McLean leaned over and grabbed what he thought was the official's hair. But all he got was a handful of toupee. The flustered linesman ended up putting the hairpiece on backward. And McLean eventually got a \$300 bill.

The Bruin coach was suspended once for six games after an altercation with a Regina sportswriter. "He called one of my players a goon," explained McLean. That smacks of mock outrage. Many ju-

nior hockey observers claim McLean is mighty partial to goons, that past Bruin teams have been noted for roughhouse tactics and that McLean's own explosive nature hardly sets a good example. What's more, the Bruins are parent club to the Abbotsford Flyers of the British Columbia Junior League. McLean is commissioner of that league. Which, say critics, is clearly undesirable, if not a conflict of interest.

Like their parent club, Abbotsford has earned a reputation as a physical (some say, violent) team. Last season, three Abbotsford players reportedly jumped Bellingham Blazer Glenn Anderson, igniting a 20-minute brawl. Anderson's eye was swollen shut and six players were sent off before the game even started. Bellingham coach Don Berry was enraged. "This has happened in this league probably a half-dozen times, and nothing has ever been done about it. This was a planned attack. Everybody in town knew it was going to happen. There's not much point in calling the president of the league, because McLean controls Abbotsford and he won't do anything."

And how did Punch McLean react? "There are two sides to every story," he said. "The Blazers bring all these things upon themselves. They say it's goon hockey. I say it's exciting hockey."





Despite this, McLean is revered by his players for his fairness and coaching ability, and young professionals from Atlanta to Los Angeles sing his praises. Bruins doctor David Lough calls McLean "one of the most fun-loving, unselfish people you could hope to meet." McLean's abrasive nature is calculated—and it is the key to his coaching success.

GAME DAYS AT Queen's Park Arena were special for Alexei "Yosha" Saunders last season. In the afternoon, Alexei, then five years old, would receive personal instruction in basic hockey skills from Ernie McLean. "Ernie would have Yosha skate from one end of the ice to the other, just doing 'T starts,'" remembers Alexei's father, Ross, a professor of Russian language at Simon Fraser University in neighboring Burnaby.

McLean frequently deals with European junior and touring teams and attended Russian-language classes taught by Ross Saunders. ("Ernie wanted to be able to converse with Russian coaches, and in two years of instruction he has become fairly competent in the language. I didn't just teach him to

swear in Russian.") When McLean learned his professor had a toddler interested in hockey, he offered to help him. "He has fantastic patience with kids," says Saunders. "And he is a very, very good basic skating coach."

As a six-year-old, Alexei Saunders was the star of his team, scoring over 50 goals during a short schedule. Who knows, he may be another future Bruin.

PUNCH MCLEAN IS prone to accidents. In an Estevan construction mishap he broke his arm in nine places. He has broken every finger and both thumbs, and once was hit by a puck while standing behind the players' bench—he lost two teeth and suffered a broken jaw.

But nothing was more harrowing than what is simply referred to as "the accident." McLean was on family construction business in 1970, piloting his small-engine plane over a bleak north Saskatchewan wilderness. A blizzard struck. McLean lost control, and the plane went down.

His left jaw was torn from his face and his left eye hung from its socket. It took McLean 27 hours to crawl to civilization. Seven major

Current Bruin star John Ogrodnick tries to muscle past Ottawa 67's defenseman Ed Hospodar as Pat Riggan makes the save.

operations during a span of two years followed to remove 57 wood splinters from his head. The left eye is glass and the jaw mostly wire.

"I think the accident sort of opened his eyes," says Sauter, now coach of the WCHL Calgary Wranglers and at 25 the youngest junior hockey coach in Canada. "When he was in construction, he was into a lot of other things and working late. But now hockey is his business."

In partnership with Bruins general manager Bill Shinske, McLean bought the Estevan Bruins he had been coaching for 10 years and moved the team to the West Coast. Since then, the Bruins have been the most successful junior hockey organization in Canada. In addition to the four straight league championships and back-to-back Memorial Cups, McLean coached Canada's third-place entry at the World Junior Hockey Championship in 1977 and in 1978 coached the Bruins to a fifth-place finish in the 1978 championship series.

Moreover, he has turned out such National Hockey League pros as Ron Greschner (Rangers), Bob Hess (St. Louis), Lorne Henning (Islanders), Clayton Pachal (Boston), Steve Clippingdale (Los Angeles), Mark Lofthouse (Washington), Stan Smyl (Vancouver)—as well as Phillipoff (Chicago), Beck, Maxwell and Zaharko.

"You've got to intimidate the opposition," says McLean. "I don't think it's intimidation if you're just bigger and stronger and say 'if you get in my road, I'm going to run right over you.' Intimidation is trying to psych the other guy out.

"It happens all the time in baseball, where a guy gets up to bat, and he's ready to hit and all of a sudden he calls time. He's gotten the pitcher to lose concentration. That's intimidation—trying to out-fox the other guy."

Several years ago, McLean was engaged in the front lines of a bitter war with the pro leagues over compensation for juniors drafted by NHL and WHA teams. McLean offered his top juniors, Beck and Maxwell, to the highest bidder.

"Here's a good example," says McLean, warming to the subject. "A franchise in the National Hockey League is worth \$6 million. Now, they're telling me Barry Beck is the Colorado franchise. So they gave our organization \$20,000. Certainly, when the fight was on, I was saying, lookit . . . whoever is going to pay the most money . . . It was a play to get everybody talking. That's intimidation."

McLean went so far as to enact legal action against the Los Angeles Kings to obtain compensation for winger Steve Clippingdale. "The worst part is you don't take the club to court; you have to take the boy to court. And nobody wants to take the boy to court. I think if the other clubs had let me go to court and prove that our contracts are legal and binding, we wouldn't have the headaches we now have with the WHA."

Although the NHL finally agreed to pay approximately \$20,000 for each draftee signed, McLean is still angered that the Swedish Hockey

Federation gets twice that amount.


McLean himself has been recruited by the pros—he turned down an offer to coach the St. Louis Blues, but made a well-publicized pitch for the Vancouver Canucks coaching job last summer. He was overlooked in favor of former New England Whaler coach Harry Neale.

"I don't want to leave here," he says. "I love it here; it's the best part of the world. I don't want to go to any of the major cities, where you live 40 miles from your work and you're traveling all the time back and forth. I enjoy it here. I enjoy the juniors.

"If anything, I would certainly take a chance with the Vancouver Canucks, but that's down the tube as far as I can see. I don't think it would take me very long to get any organization, be it the Vancouver Canucks or any team, on top of the heap. I believe in the type of talent I would put there. It wouldn't take very long."

THE BARNLIKE QUEEN'S Park Arena hasn't changed much over the years. Bruin fans still celebrate each hometown goal with a fervor that makes visiting teams queasy and the Bruins practically invincible in their own rink.

There are no Barry Becks or Brad Maxwells. No, the newest heroes are Boris Fistric and high scoring John Ogrodnick. They are just as hefty and skate just as fast as their predecessors. Tonight it's the Lethbridge Broncos who fall victim to the New Westminster onslaught.

Punch McLean is behind the bench, directing traffic and berating officials. The Bruins have the game wrapped up in the second period. Afterward, as cars crowd onto the Patullo Bridge spanning the Fraser River, several bumper stickers catch the eye. "Super hockey—Bruins style," one reads. "I've got Cup fever," another proclaims. A third borrows a familiar phrase—"McBride Boulevard Bullies." 

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