

SPORTS

From Capitals goalie to Wild coach: Bob Mason still NHL netminding

BY TY DILELLO
For The Journal

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ty Dilello, who writes for the International Ice Hockey Federation and is based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, provided The Journal with the following feature story that has been edited for publication about International Falls native Bob Mason, who is presently a goaltending coach for the Minnesota Wild.

Though International Falls native Bob Mason wasn't a starter in the NHL for very long, he was the Washington Capitals' goalie in their most exciting game in franchise history, as well as one of the greatest hockey games of all time.

These days, Mason is still very much involved in hockey, as the goaltending coach for the Minnesota Wild.

Mason said he began playing hockey as a youngster like most kids living in Minnesota.

"I grew up in Northern Minnesota and you started skating as early as you could because you wanted to be a hockey player growing up there," he said. "You emulated what your friends and peers were doing who were older than you and wanted to continually follow in their footsteps."

Mason said he first played defense and forward in organized youth hockey before having an opportunity to play in net one night when the goalie didn't show up.

"I was fortunate enough to have a twin brother who also played and we'd shoot the tennis ball down in the basement and I was always the goalie," he said. "So the kid was sick that night and I went in goal, had a good game, and stuck with it."

Mason said he had a "copycat style" playing in goal back then.

"There was very little goaltending coaching back then, so you had to copycat people that played ahead of you or on TV and tried to emulate what they were doing, so that's what I did," he said. "One of the guys in front of me, Kevin Constantine, was a couple years ahead of me in high school and I kind of tracked him."

"In the small town of International Falls, we had three good goalies who played in front of me that went on to play Division I college hockey, and I used to watch them all play constantly and imitated them all."

While goaltending through the early 1980s, Mason said he had "a sort of hybrid style, but more stand-up."

"Back in those days, there was so much individual (styling) in goaltending, that we all had our style," he said. "These days, kids are all getting taught at a younger age and developing a style at a younger age, while when I was growing up, we just did it based on copycat (style) and tweaked our own style and everyone had a different element to their game."

Mason said he first thought he could make the NHL when he played his first year of junior hockey with the Green Bay Bobcats of the USHL at age 19.

"Coming out of high school I didn't have a lot of options," he said. "The first year I went, I played about 55-60 games compared to the 20 I played in high school, and I got noticed, was on the NHL draft lists, and we had pro scouts coming to watch our games because of me so that was probably the first time I realized that maybe this can happen."

Mason developed his goaltending skills over the years and became a member of the Washington Capitals organization, as well as Team USA's squad at the 1984 Sarajevo Olympics.

"The 84 Olympics was definitely a proving point for me as a goaltender, just making team after having a couple good years with Minnesota-Duluth and getting noticed during my sophomore year, and that correlated into the Olympic Trials the next summer, where I had a really good tryout, making the team," he said. "I was noticed a bit before that, but the Olympic camp was a big step for me. Being named on the team was a huge part of my process of becoming a pro hockey player, no doubt."

Mason said he had a tough time the first couple of years breaking into the NHL because the Caps had Pat Riggin and Al Jensen in goal at the time.

"Then I was coming in that year off the Olympic Team in February of 84, so it was a tough time to squeeze in there, and I have to develop my game a little bit in the American League since there was no room for me," he said.

The next season had some more ups and downs for Mason.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

International Falls native Bob Mason, shown in goal during his NHL playing days more than 20 years ago with the Washington Capitals, last month wrapped up his 12th season as a goaltending coach for the Minnesota Wild.

"I remember being named rookie of the month with Mario Lemieux in 1984-85, and the same day I was awarded that, I was sent to the minor leagues," he said. "It was December of 84, and I went 8-0-1 that month, didn't lose a game and Lemieux had a bunch of points, so we were both named rookie of the month to share the award, and that same day I was sent to Binghamton, so it was kind of a shocker."

The 1986-87 campaign turned out to be Mason's best season in the NHL, despite it not starting out the greatest.

"That year I went in and had a great camp," he said. "I got called into (Capitals general manager) David Poile's office because I was going to get sent down to Binghamton, and I remember talking to half the team and they said I was the best goalie at training camp, but I guess it was a one-way, two-way contract issue."

"I remember going down to Binghamton and two games in, Caps goalie coach Warren Strelow came to watch me and that year the Caps got off to a rough start, and boom, I got called up, staying with Washington the rest of the season."

In 1986-87, Mason went 20-18-5 in 45 games with the Capitals in his long-

awaited breakout season, and it was in the playoffs that year that the "Easter Epic" occurred.

In the first round of the playoffs, Washington took on the New York Islanders and Mason was initially slotted into the backup role for Pete Peeters. After Game 2 though, Mason was the goalie who got the nod for his side, winning Game 3 and 4 and replacing Peeters in Game 5. The Caps lost Game 6, which set up the most amazing Game 7 in Stanley Cup playoff history.

Game 7 took place at the Capital Centre in Landover, Md., on April 18, 1987. It is named the "Easter Epic" because the game didn't end until 2 a.m. on Easter Sunday, 6 1/2 hours after the opening faceoff.

The Capitals had dominated play throughout and led 2-1 with 5 minutes left in regulation, before Isles legend Bryan Trottier scored the tying goal to send the game to overtime. On that tying goal, Mason's skate actually broke.

"Trottier came down the right side, and had the puck on his backhand, so I pushed from right to my left and my right rivet in my old Lange goalie skates snapped and when it snapped, my ankle buckled," Mason said. "He threw a backhand my way and being a stand-up goalie, I was

still on my feet, and I think it trickled through my legs and into the net, so that was upsetting since there was only 5 minutes left in the game.

"I got up and something was wrong with my skate and I had no idea what it was, so the equipment manager, Doug Shearer, came out and saw the rivet sheared off and I had no support. He couldn't do anything, and we couldn't switch goalies at that stage of the game, so I played the last five minutes of the game with one good skate, and I had to make a couple of very nervous saves in the dying minutes to take it to overtime."

During the intermission, Mason said Shearer went in with a nut and a bolt and fixed the skate.

"It was a weird situation that nobody really knew about," Mason said. "If my skate didn't break, maybe we would have won in regulation and the game might not have gone to overtime in the first place."

In overtime, Mason and Islanders goaltender Kelly Hrudey stole the show, making huge saves left and right. In the end, Mason finished with 54 saves and his counterpart, Hrudey, had 73.

"I lost 13 pounds that game," Mason said. "But the adrenaline was jacked and you were trying to be the difference-maker. You almost wanted the puck coming your way so you could stop it."

The game had to end eventually, and at the 8:47 mark of the fourth overtime, Pat LaFontaine of the Islanders drilled a shot from the blue line that hit a stick in front and clanked off the post and into the net past Mason, ending the marathon, and the series.

The Easter Epic is still very notable to this day because it is the longest Game 7 in Stanley Cup history.

"Billy Smith was still with the Isles at that time, but was the backup (goalie) for that game and he was famous for never shaking hands with the other team after a series," Mason said. "And I'm looking down at the ice in the lineup to shake hands and suddenly he's right in front of me. He grabs my hand, shakes it and says, 'That's the best-goaltended game I've ever seen in my life.'"

After the Easter Epic, Mason was picked up by the Chicago Blackhawks prior to the 1987-88 season.

That year he played 41 games with Chicago, splitting ice time with Darren Pang.

He was then traded in the offseason to the Quebec Nordiques, where he saw action in 22 games. From there, he was traded back to the Washington Capitals, getting in 16 games with the club, before being signed as a free agent as the Vancouver Canucks, where he played his final six NHL games.

Mason would continue playing in the minor leagues until the conclusion of the 1994-95 season, where he announced his retirement. He accumulated a 55-65-16 record in 145 NHL games over the course of eight seasons.

Mason now lives in Bloomington and last month wrapped up his 12th season as the goaltending coach for the Wild. Prior to that, he was the goaltending coach for the Atlanta Thrashers during the first two years of the franchise's existence.

"I wanted to stay in hockey after I retired, so I kind of explored scouting a bit," Mason said. "But I had a great relationship with Warren Strelow who ran a bunch of camps in Minneapolis in the summer time, and since he was goalie coach in Washington, I started doing goalie camps with him and that's how I started getting into teaching kids and it kind of developed."

"After I retired I jumped at the chance to be a volunteer goalie coach at the University of Minnesota, so I stayed in the game that way and sort of learned about coaching more than just goalie schools. I learned about game preparation and what the coach is going through because before as a player you were never in that little cocoon the coaches are in, and it really opened my eyes to what the coaches do. From what a coach prepares for and what a player prepares for; totally different."

Though Mason may not have been the NHL's most well-known goalie, he and Hrudey put on one of the most memorable displays of goaltending ever seen in that Easter Epic game.

"The most defining moment in my career was the Easter Epic," Mason said. "I see Kelly (Hrudey) once in a while in Canada, and we always talk about it. It was just one of those classic games."

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