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BEN HATSKIN, ROY SALOMON INDUCTED INTO JEWISH SPORTS HALL OF FAME

By Paul Lungen, Staff Reporter - December 6, 2018   3651   0

In the minds of hockey fans in Winnipeg, Ben Hatskin will always be associated with Bobby Hull, standing at the corner of Portage and Main and signing the former Chicago Blackhawks superstar to a multi-million dollar contract to join the nascent World Hockey Association (WHA).

The 1972 signing, which included a $1-million bonus that was unheard of at the time, launched the Winnipeg Jets and gave the WHA instant credibility. A direct path from that moment can be traced to the current Winnipeg Jets team, to the Edmonton Oilers winning five Stanley Cups, to NHL hockey in Quebec City and the Quebec Nordiques' monumental "battles of Quebec" with the Montreal Canadiens and to the Hartford Whalers, the fourth WHA team to merge with the NHL, which ended up moving to Carolina and winning the Stanley Cup in 2006.

Hatskin, who owned the Jets in their formative years, was recently named to the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame, along with Roy Salomon, a long-time Canadian Maccabiah Games organizer and a fixture on the Maccabi sports scene in Montreal.

Salomon, who's known as Canada's "Mr. Maccabi," is a recipient of the Hall of Fame's Lifetime Achievement Award, while Hatskin is being recognized for his significant role in developing professional hockey.

"I feel very honoured," said Salomon. "There are a lot of wonderful people in the Maccabi movement."

A former president of Maccabi Canada, Salomon's involvement with the organization dates back to 1969, when he participated in the Maccabiah Games as an athlete. Salomon played varsity basketball at Duke University.

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The Games were a life-altering event for him, he said.

"When I marched into Ramat Gan stadium in 1969, things changed for me. I had loved the idea of Israel, but I'd never been there before. When I came into the stadium, my thoughts were: we've been through pogroms, the Inquisition, the Holocaust and we're here together. Israel is strong and we're proud to be there."

Returning to Montreal, "I wanted to do as much as I could to have other Jewish athletes be part of the Games," Salomon continued.

He recruited several former athletes to join Maccabi Canada. Many would go on to hold senior positions in the organization.

Alex Brainis, the vice-president of Maccabi Canada, said "Roy is one of the founders and most instrumental personalities in the history and development of Maccabi Canada over many years."

In addition to his role domestically, he has held many senior positions with the Maccabi World Union and has been an outstanding "ambassador for the movement," Brainis added.

Roy Salomon, centre, poses for a picture with two IDF soldiers at the Western Wall.

In many ways, Hatskin's story is a familiar one: the child of Jewish immigrants who made good.

Born in 1918 to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents, Hatskin was always interested in sports and business.

A large man who was a good athlete, he earned a scholarship to Oklahoma University to play football. When he returned to Winnipeg, he played centre for the Blue Bombers and in, a six-year career, won two Grey Cups, in 1939 and 1941.

According to a 1973 profile in Winnipeg Jets Magazine, in 1957, Hatskin opened a stable with 15 horses, one of which won the 1959 Louisiana Derby in New Orleans.

After the Hatskins sold their family box business, Ben and his brother got into other ventures, including real estate, juke boxes, containers and investments.

In 1967, he entered the Western Canada Hockey League, the forerunner to today's Western Hockey League, as the owner of the Winnipeg Jets, which was a junior team at the time.

Roy Salomon, centre, watches as Bob Luxenberg of Maccabi Canada presents a track suit to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, left.

In the late 1960s, he was turned down by the NHL when he sought to acquire an expansion franchise, leading him and other businessmen to consider forming a rival league.

When he approached Hull, the greatest goal scorer of his generation and a free agent at the time, to come to Winnipeg, Hull said he would do so for $1 million, thinking that outlandish sum would put an end to the matter.

Hatskin convinced the other franchise owners to share in the signing bonus and in June 1972, Hull signed the enormous contract at a public ceremony in downtown Winnipeg.

Numerous NHL players followed Hull to the WHA, as did many top junior players, including Wayne Gretzky and Mark Messier.

In luring Hull away from the NHL, Hatskin challenged the NHL's contractual reserve clauses, which bound players to the teams, even after the contract expired. The WHA argued the contract violated anti-trust laws. A U.S. judge agreed and declined to enforce it, eventually leading to the current free-agent system.

Hatskin sold his interest in the Jets to a community ownership group in 1974. He remained involved with the league as its CEO until the WHA merged with the NHL in 1979.

He died in 1990.

Others to be inducted into the Hall of Fame include world champion figure skater Sasha Cohen, Major League Baseball player Kevin Youkilis, 1936 and 1937 world champion table tennis player Ruth Aarons, 1950s British auto racing champion Sheliah Van Damm and two-time world and Olympic rowing champion Nathan Cohen.