

Bright Lights To Inner City

Once a Broadway speedster, now a Harlem youth worker, Pat Hickey has stayed true to a mission he started 20-plus years ago

BY ALAN BASS

When Pat Hickey was first drafted by the New York Rangers in 1973, he had a choice to make like many other upcoming stars at the time: Take your chances attempting to make an NHL squad at the risk of being sent to the minors, or pocket the easy bucks in the WHA. Hickey chose the latter, mainly due to the fact his employers, the Toronto Toros, were bringing in Frank Mahovlich that year. "I thought, 'If I spent each morning playing with Frank Mahovlich, I'll be a better player,'" Hickey said. "I was fortunate to have some tutors like him."

Once Hickey decided to make the foray into the NHL, Rangers GM Emile Francis gladly signed him to a deal in 1975. After he drove a U-Haul into Long Beach to settle down, he sauntered over the arena in hopes of making a splash on his first day in camp. When he arrived, Rangers great Rod Gilbert was standing at the door waiting for him. "Mr. Hickey, welcome!" he said. "They tell me you're fast."

"That's what they tell me, too," Hickey replied, "But I just like to play."

"Well how would you like to race me down the ice, from one end down to the other for 100 bucks?"

Hickey quickly accepted, so as not to cause trouble. When they got onto the ice, Hickey blew Gilbert away, beating him profoundly down the ice. But when Hickey reached for the \$100 bill that the referee was holding, he quickly pulled it away and gave it to Gilbert, who simply said, "That's for the privilege of racing me down the ice."

The eventual roommates became very close friends, with Gilbert being a mentor to Hickey in helping him learn the ropes of the NHL and New York.

After his career ended in 1985 with 404 points in 644 games, Hickey helped found a nonprofit organization, Ice

Hockey in Harlem, which introduces inner-city children to hockey to help teach them about academics through the sport.

After the first year of successful programming, one of their sponsors held a luncheon honoring Hickey and his co-founders. During a bathroom break, an executive entered the washroom and began chatting with Hickey. Just before he left, he said, "Hickey, it's guys like you that I just can't stand." When Hickey



responded with a puzzled look, the man continued, "There's all kinds of guys like you. They come in here to Harlem, pick these kids up and put them on Cloud Nine and then just desert them and they come crashing down to Earth again."

The man walked out, leaving Hickey alone with his thoughts. "I walked back into the lunchroom, got up there and I said, 'As long as I'm alive, I'm going to make sure that this program lives on forever,'" said Hickey, now 59. "And it was thanks to that executive who enlightened me. We're now going into our 25th year."

"My message in life was and always has been, 'All you need in life to succeed is a will to try.'"

In addition to his work with IHH, Hickey serves on the board of the Rangers alumni and works at the Royal Bank of Canada. And although his NHL days are long gone, the former fleet-of-footer has ideas on how to improve today's game, especially when it comes to speed and skating. "The one lesson my dad always taught me was, 'Never turn your back to the puck or to the man. When you go into the boards to the puck, make sure you're accelerating around the bend, like a racecar that goes around the bend at Indianapolis.'"

"Today's game is speed and skating, and you don't go into the boards and stop. When you're driving a car, you break before the curve and you actually accelerate through the curve. Those little techniques could save a lot of injuries and a lot of concussions, while keeping the game the fastest in the world." **THN**

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