



The Giant Grizzlies were considered the best hockey team in town when this photo was taken during the 1955-56 season. Frank Horvat (assistant captain, centre) was the star. Pat Baisillie, top left, is still in Yellowknife.

The best Grizzly

Frank Horvat didn't come North to mine; he came to play hockey

Northern News Services

A hockey pro who could out-manuever any player on the ice. A powerhouse whose slap shot is rumoured to have exploded a puck on the goal post. A top scorer so feared by the opposing team, they would sabotage his car to keep him from getting to a game. It sounds like something straight out of NHL lore, but this was the legend of Frank Horvat, the star player on Giant Mine's hockey team, the Grizzlies.

For 25 years, the Giant hockey team was the best in the local rec league. "Rec league," perhaps, is a misnomer. It was more than just a fun old game. Hockey was Yellowknife's chief source of entertainment. It was a vicious rivalry for all players and fans.

They called it the Yellowknife District Hockey Association, or the Seniors League. Con Mine had a team called the Cougars; Negus had one in the very early days called the Hogans, and town business sponsored the Molson Indians team. By far, Giant and Town were the competing forces, and they were pretty well at loggerheads. "You might think it was fun, but it was war," says Horvat, with a stern tone befitting a local legend.

Frank Horvat first came to Yellowknife in 1952.

"The situation in the outside world was pretty bad as far as employment and so forth, and I had a friend of

MINERS'

Ryan Silke is a local historian who is working on a book on mining history in the Northwest Territories.



mine that played hockey up there.

"Giant Mine hired me on a hockey contract, and I got a job in the assay office," Horvat recalls.

His hockey contract was a verbal agreement with the company that demanded absolute dedication to the team by the prospective employee.

So important were sport leagues to the mines, they recruited workers based on their hockey and fastball talents.

"As soon as you got there, they give you your uniform, and you join the team," says Horvat.

Instant champion

Incidentally, the Grizzlies won the cup that year. Their coach, Bob Johnson, had made a bet with barber Joe Cairns that his team would win. But, as the players soon found out, "He put our proceeds in the playoffs - which would be portioned between the players. He put that on the block," meaning that their bonus money was on the betting floor.

"Well, I guess we got fired up, eh?" says Horvat.

They wiped the rink with the opposing team: Johnson won his bet, and the players got their bonuses.

Most newcomers were put to work underground as general labourers, but it was not to Horvat's liking.

"It convinced me it was not what I wanted to do the rest of my life," says Horvat.

He transferred to the assay lab, where rock samples from the mine were processed to analyze their gold content. It was a complicated chemical procedure, but something that Horvat loved to do. This was his job until 1967, when he left Yellowknife.

Hockey dominated his free time for all those years. Horvat, a giant of a man, became the top rated player in the league several years in a row. He claims to still hold a local points record: In a 26 game season, he had 76 goals and 32 assists. He could stick-handle a puck with ease, and could whip a shot so powerful that goalies feared for their lives. Of course, this was back in the day when hockey gear was scanty and helmets were unheard of.

The mining companies were very generous in their support of recreation in Yellowknife, building rec halls and curling rinks, funding sports for all ages and sexes, and contributing to the maintenance of the Gerry Murphy Arena. Almost everybody I chat with looks back to those years and reflect on the exciting hockey games. Frank Horvat was at the centre of the action.

"The hockey was a main attraction," says Horvat.

"It was something that people went to and enjoyed and supported their teams. It was a good thing."

Gradually, a few years after Horvat left town, the mine-sponsored hockey leagues phased out. Yellowknife-based community organizers took over the role of recreation. New business sponsored new teams - Kentucky Fried Chicken and Super-A Groceries had teams briefly. The Giant Grizzlies were last to win the "Senior League" trophy in 1975.

Horvat was far from Yellowknife by then. Now retired and living in Calgary, he still holds great memories of his Giant hockey career, and cherishes his mounted Grizzlies jersey and team photographs.

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Announcement



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