



"Per Ardua Ad Aurum" –

The Heroic Path of the RCAF Flyers from a Ridiculed Disgrace to Olympic Hockey Champions

The year was 1947 and athletes were training to participate in the first Olympic Games since the end of the Second World War (1939 – 1945). The winter and summer Olympic Games of 1948, held in Switzerland and England, would be the first to take place in 12 years.

Back then Canada was not much of a sports nation, usually winning less than a handful of medals at the winter games which were launched in 1924. The one exception to this was Canada's hockey team which had won four out of the first five gold medals that were handed out. (The very first Olympic ice hockey tournament had actually been part of the 1920 summer games.)

At the previous Olympic Games, Canada had always been represented by the winner of the Allan Cup. Similar to the Stanley Cup, which is presented each year to a professional hockey team, this trophy back then was handed to the Canadian amateur champions. While these teams did not have paid players, they still received some compensation. When in 1947 the International Ice Hockey Federation created new rules about the definition of an amateur, the Allan Cup champions were no longer eligible to represent Canada at the Olympics.

For a hockey nation like Canada, especially with its successes at the previous Olympic Games, this was quite the disappointment. While many accepted that Canada would not send a team, Squadron Leader Alexander "Sandy" Watson, a senior medical officer of the Royal Canadian Air Force, was so appalled that he decided to put a plan into action to get Canada a team.

Watson knew that there were good players in the Air Force because the Ottawa RCAF Flyers had won the Allan Cup in 1942. Watson himself was a good organizer who had led the Flyers to success in exhibition games in Europe in 1946. He was thus convinced that he could weld together a good team in time for the Olympics. Serving members of the air force met the amateur definition because they were paid for their day to day military work and not for participating in sports. After a few phone calls to the Minister of Defence Brooke Claxton, Air Marshal Wilf Curtis (Chief of the Air Staff of the RCAF) and the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association (CAHA), Watson was ready to line up players for tryouts.

Sergeant Frank Boucher, who came from a family of NHL players, was recruited to be the team's head coach while his father Georges, who had spent many seasons playing for the Ottawa Senators, was added to the selection committee. Corporal George McFaul became the trainer and the RCAF ensured that hockey hopefuls were transported to Ottawa for a series of tryouts during the fall of 1947.

They found enough good players in the air force but soon Watson and Boucher had to realize that good players do not automatically form a good team. On December 10th, the team's 17 player roster was announced and made ready for its first exhibition game against McGill University's team. The press had been skeptical about this motley team from the beginning, and the 7:0 loss to McGill seemed to justify their negative views. Two days later, the Flyers were on the ice again, this time the opposing team was an army team playing in the Ottawa City League. The army with its many good players had felt shafted when it was decided that the Olympic team would be an air force team rather than one composed from all three services. Once again the Flyers suffered a humiliating defeat, were called a weak team and some voices even suggested Canada should find another team to send to the Olympics.

Watson and Boucher had to devise a new strategy quickly as time was running out, with the games to start at the end of January. They asked the CAHA to look for some badly needed defence players that could be added to the team. While waiting, they recruited a handful of players from another Ottawa team who were just as quickly recruited into the air force, in fact Reg Schroeter and Frank Dunster were air force veterans who were now reenrolled. The results were immediately visible in Belleville where the Flyers played against the town's OHA team and came out on top winning 8:4. But the transformation was still not complete. With less than two weeks before the squad had to travel to Europe, the CAHA finally came through and supplied three more players, George Mara and Wally Halder from Toronto and AndréLaperrière, a student from the Université de Montréal. Still in need of another goalie they brought in Dick Ball who had stood in the net for the University of Toronto varsity team for the past two years.

Georges Boucher was able to use his connections to set up a practice match with his old team, the Ottawa Senators, for the evening of December 30th. The new goaltender had only come in that afternoon, but, although the Flyers lost 10:4, the team looked better than ever. Even the Ottawa Citizen, the town's newspaper, had to agree that this team "might make a showing in Switzerland that would not totally embarrass Canada".

As the team was getting ready to head to New York to take the Queen Elizabeth to travel to London, they encountered yet another setback as their new goalie was diagnosed with a lung infection and not cleared for travel. With 24 hours before their scheduled departure, Watson and Boucher needed a goaltender overnight. The two amateurs from Toronto suggested that Watson get in touch with Murray Dowey, a goaltender they had played with in their Toronto league.

Dowey worked for the Toronto Transit Commission at the time but Watson, using the name of the Minister of Defence to stress the urgency, had no trouble to get Dowey's boss to grant the young man leave to join the Flyers. When Dowey arrived in Ottawa the following day, he had missed the final practice. He had just enough time to get enrolled in the RCAF, to get his uniform and have his picture taken before the team had to get on the train to New York. Outside of Mara and Halmar, no one had ever seen Dowey in action. Would this gamble pay off?

The six day voyage to England gave the Flyers a chance to get to know each other, since almost half the team had only been added since that horrible loss against McGill in mid-December. Boucher as the coach made sure that the team kept physically active by sending them on laps around the ship's deck. The players also had to endure some taunts from the US rival team which happened to be on the same ship, and unlike the Canadians, got to travel in first class.

Upon arrival, the team soon readied to play some exhibition games on route to St. Moritz, the Swiss host town of the Winter Olympics. The six exhibition games the team had been able to line up were vital not just for badly needed practice but also to raise funds to pay for the Flyers' Olympic adventure. They left Britain, where teams were often stacked with Canadian players, with a tie and a win, before losing to Racing Paris, another team studded with senior Canadian hockey players due to the financial support of Charles Ritz, owner of the famous Ritz hotel.

In Switzerland, the Flyers played two games against the Swiss National Team and registered one win and one loss, before soundly defeating the Davos Hockey Club 10:3. The press in Europe was much more impressed with the Flyers than the Canadian sports writers who had told Canadians that a gold medal was assured thanks to figure skater Barbara Ann Scott as the hockey team was clearly not a contender for anything. While they were correct in predicting Scott's medal, they completely misjudged the Flyers.

On 28 January the team boarded the train to St. Moritz only to find out upon arrival that nobody from the Canadian Olympic Committee had booked a hotel for them. With another problem solved on the fly, the team was able to practice for a couple of hours on the following day. The previous games had helped the Flyers adjust to the larger, international sized hockey ring all Europeans teams routinely played on. They also had to alter their play to be less physical than what they were used to from the North-American leagues, and they needed to adjust to the high altitude of the Olympic town. They also had to get used to the rinks in St. Moritz being outside, which meant different ice conditions in different temperatures or even snow piling up in the rink.

The Flyers were scheduled to play their first game against Sweden in the afternoon of the opening day. Initially, Sandy Watson had great concerns about his teaming participating in the long opening ceremony in the morning, just prior to the game. It was a matter of pride though, and the team marched along the other eleven Canadian competitors. The event seemed not to have impacted the team much at all, and the 3:1 victory over the Swedes gave the Flyers the confidence that they were a solid team after all.

The hockey tournament was set up in a round robin format, where all teams played against each other. The team with the most points would be the Olympic Champion. In case of a tie, the team who had the best goal average (goals scored divided by goals allowed), if it was still a tie, the team with the most goals would be the winner. Boucher thus drilled into his team that they needed to score as many goals as possible while keeping the puck out of their net.

During the exhibition games played in Europe, the team had already seen the goaltender abilities of Murray Dowey who had quickly become the Flyers' number one goalie. Over the next six games, he would only allow four goals while he had three shut outs. The Flyers in front of him on the ice had no problems scoring, walking off with a 3:0 over the United Kingdom, a 15:0 over Poland, a 21:1 over Italy, a 13:3 over the USA and a 12:0 over Austria. Only during their sixth game, the one against the tournament favourites from Czechoslovakia, were the Flyers unable to score. To their relief, Dowey was once again able to block all shots, and the game ended with a 0:0 tie.

The gold medal decision would come down to two games on the final day, as three teams still had a chance to win, the Czechs, the Swiss and the Flyers. When the Czechs beat the USA earlier in the day, the Flyers had to beat the home team, who were no longer in a position to win the gold medal. It was a hard fought game with the spectators cheering almost exclusively for the Swiss team. Despite having snowballs hurled at them, the Flyers persevered and won the game 3:0. While being tied with the Czechs for points, they had a much better goal average, and became the unsuspected Olympic Champions. Since there were no World Championships in the year the Olympic were held, the Flyers simultaneously also became the 1948 World Champions. What a crowning success for a team that had endured a lot of ridicule and adversity.

The gold medal around their necks, however, did not pay for all the expenses the team had incurred to get to Switzerland. With their market value having gone up quickly though, they played over 30 games as part of a European tour. The Flyers' two best scorers, Mara and Halder, the only civilians on the team, had returned to Canada in mid-February for work reasons. Murray Dowey followed them in early March, but the rest of the team still won almost all of their games. On the last day of March, the RCAF Flyers once again boarded a ship, this time the Queen Mary, to sail home via New York. On 7 April they travelled back to Ottawa where they received a hero's welcome. What a three months it had been.