

Fun While it Lasted

Jock Callander is a retired Canadian professional hockey player and one of the most prolific scorers in the history of minor league hockey. He also spent parts of five seasons in the National Hockey League, primarily with the Pittsburgh Penguins. His name is inscribed on the Stanley Cup as a member of the Penguins 1992 championship team.

Callander spent all or parts of fifteen seasons with the Muskegon/Cleveland Lumberjacks of the International Hockey League. Between 1984 and 2000, Callander watched as the IHL evolved from a rickety bus loop concentrated in fading industrial towns of the Midwest to a bi-coastal league that briefly played in NBA arenas before collapsing under the weight of its own ambitions.

Throughout his career, Callander maintained a remarkable friendship and on-ice partnership with his fellow Saskatchewan native Dave Michayluk. The duo came up together on the Regina Pats juniors team in the late 1970's. Both prolific scorers in juniors, Michayluk was drafted into the NHL while Callander was passed over. Reunited in Muskegon, Michigan four seasons later, they went onto to play eleven seasons together with the Lumberjacks, helping to establish the club as the IHL's dynasty of the late 1980's.

In the spring of 1992, the injury-riddled Pittsburgh Penguins promoted Callander, Michayluk and Muskegon teammate Mike Needham to play in the Stanley Cup playoffs. No member of the so-called "Muskegon Line" had played a single game in the NHL that season. Michayluk had not played in the NHL for nine years. But each man scored a goal in the playoffs as they lived out life-long dreams and helped the Penguins win the 1992 Stanley Cup.

In the year 2000, Callander retired from ice hockey at the age of 39. He finished his career as the all-time leading scorer in the 55-year history of the International Hockey League. Today Callander works in the front office of the American Hockey League's Lake Erie Monsters in Cleveland.

Jock Callander spoke to Fun While It Lasted about his days with the Muskegon Lumberjacks on November 6th, 2011.

Interview begins after the jump.

FWiL:

After being such a prolific scorer in juniors, were you surprised to be passed over in the NHL amateur draft?

Callander:

I was rated in the early second round by central scouting and was expecting to get drafted. My draft year was the start of the underage draft so only five nineteen-year-olds went in that draft. Everyone was going with younger players. I had teams call as soon as the draft was over to either sign a contract or to go to their training camp.

FWiL:

What originally brought you to Muskegon in 1984? You played for Lumberjacks owner Larry Gordon's Central League club in Billings, Montana the year before. Was there a personal connection there?

Callander:

I did play for Larry the year before in Billings. Lorne Davis, a scout for the Edmonton Oilers, talked to <Lumberjacks coach> Rick Ley. Rick talked to Larry about me and then they brought me in.

FWiL:

When you began playing in the IHL in 1984, it was a regional bus league in the frozen Midwest. By the time you retired, the IHL was a commercial air travel league that stretched from Orlando to Long Beach, California. Can you talk about how the league - and the game - changed once that boom happened in the early 1990's?

Callander:

Everything got better in the league as the years went by. The players got better, the cities got better, we were paid more, and we traveled in better buses, and stayed in better hotels.

FWiL:

It's remarkable the way you seemed joined at the hip with Dave Michayluk, your juniors teammate at the Regina Pats. You guys played the better part of fifteen years on the same lines in juniors and the minors and even have your names on the Stanley Cup together. Can you talk a little about that relationship and what you meant to each others' hockey careers?

Callander:

Dave, first of all, is a fantastic person and his friendship meant the most to me.

We still keep in contact until this day. "Boris" is back on his farm in Saskatchewan. I get to see him in the summer when I head back to see my family. He was such a great player and natural scorer. I got a lot of assists because of his scoring ability. We had so much confidence playing together and knowing where the other one was going to be. We constantly talked about what we should try, what defenseman we should work against, while we were on the bench, in the dressing room, or on the bus or at lunch. We loved the game. I know for sure my career would not have been anywhere near as successful without him as a line mate.

FWiL:

The story of the Pittsburgh Penguins fourth line - the "Muskegon Line" - in the 1992 Stanley Cup playoffs is pretty incredible. What do you recall about the experience about winning the Cup with your Lumberjacks teammates and playing for Scotty Bowman?

Callander:

The Stanley Cup was a dream come true. I wasn't even sure if I was going to play another NHL game. When I got the call I had not played <in the NHL> for over a year. We all got called up in the playoffs when the Lumberjacks were getting ready to start the <IHL> finals. The next six weeks were unbelievable it was a whirlwind of excitement and a roller coaster of emotions. I really felt bad for our teammates in Muskegon because I believe we would have won another Turner Cup. Our team was playing at a very high level at the time we all got called up. But at the same time I was living out a dream that I had since childhood and it was something I will never forget.

FWiL:

Do you have one or two favorite memories or stories that you can share about playing in L.C. Walker Arena during the Muskegon days?

Callander:

The L.C. Walker was home and we loved playing in that rink. I know the visiting teams didn't. They had the cold small dressing room and our fans were great. The ice was very good compared to a lot of the arenas. We had a lot of fun and it was some of the best times of my life living in Muskegon.