

In Pursuit of Hockey Skills



Remembering Joe Wirkkunen

I grew up on the bottom end of Van Horne St. in the 1940s and lived across the lane from my pal Martti Wirkkunen. He was the youngest member of a family of 4 children (siblings - Sulo, Viljo, and Hilikka) all born in Port Arthur, Ontario. As their parents had emigrated from Finland, the language spoken in the Wirkkunen home was quite naturally Finn.

Joe (Viljo), almost a decade older, caught my attention from the very first day I laced up a pair of hand-me-downs. In fact my earliest memories of Joe were watching him do laps for hours on end at Crompton's rink down on the corner of Cumberland and Wolseley. We all marvelled at his stamina and endless perseverance and soon took up the practice ourselves, thinking it would improve our "hockey skills."

I recall being in Martti's barn sometime in the mid 1940s when we came upon a wall plastered with hockey cards. It was his brother's collection of pictures of the great NHL stars of the day. Like any aspiring athlete of his age Joe must have longed for the day when he would finally play for the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Joe was a very quiet individual who did not waste time on small talk. He had come down with polio as a child and his parents were advised that he would never walk again. If anyone told Joe it was certainly not evident to the rest of us for he was constantly in motion. He could often be seen heading for the railway tracks in the evening to jog to Current River and back. Almost nobody "worked out" back then so this behaviour did not go unnoticed. Imagine the surprise when the city held its first walkathon in the early fifties and Joe took first prize. He gained an early lead on the pack and never looked back.

Joe was also into baseball and younger guys like me used to take turns acting as his catcher. As much as we looked forward to the experience we were always quite relieved

to pass the glove to the next volunteer once our turn was up. He would invariably unleash a few blistering shots that would leave our catching hands smarting.

This may come as a revelation to some but Joe never actually played organized hockey. The bout with polio had left him with one leg slightly shorter than the other. Consequently he was not allowed to join a team for fear that his weak limb would give out under the strain. Even then the Canadian game had a reputation for being a little brutal. That said, Joe was no stranger to the spontaneous pick-up matches that regularly erupted on local ice-rinks.

As time went by he came to accept his sort, gravitating to both refereeing and coaching to remain involved in his lifelong passion. Meanwhile he had completed his studies and accepted employment with Ontario Hydro as a forester. His career path and lifestyle appeared set and his future promising.

Then in 1951 the Finns came to the realization that they needed to make significant changes to their game if they were to compete at the international level. In particular they felt they could benefit from the adoption of some elements of the Canadian game. But then where would they find someone who could help them achieve their goal? Necessarily that person would have to be able to communicate with ease in the Finnish language.

Precisely how events unfolded from there remains obscure but suffice it to say that the search inevitably led to the Canadian Lakehead and Joe Wirkkunen. His unique perspective and understanding of the game, together with his fluency in Finnish, convinced the Finns that they had found their man. Ironically, the battle he waged to overcome his early misfortune had opened up new and exciting possibilities for him.

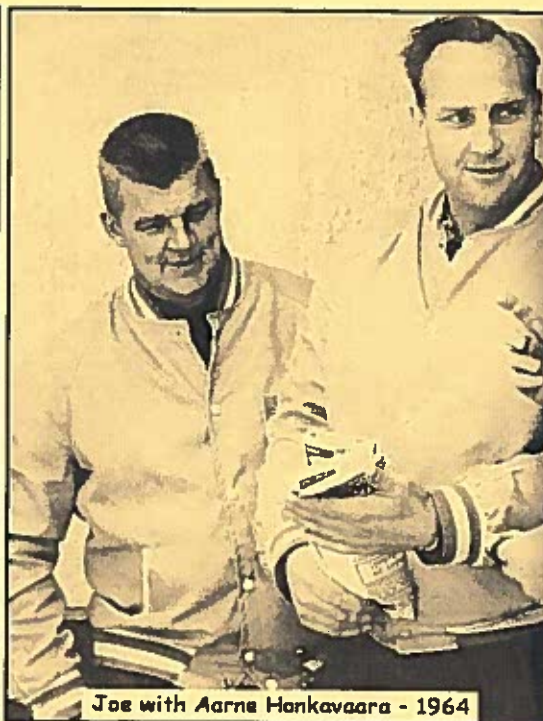
So Joe (then 23) packed his bags and off he went to spend the winter of 1951-52 in Finland working as an on-ice trainer. His job was to teach hockey techniques to the National Team as they prepared for the upcoming Olympic Games in Oslo, Norway.

With that first stay in Finland Joe most certainly made a lasting impression on his hosts for he was invited back in 1959-60 (at age 31), this time as Head Coach of the National Team. As if that were not challenge enough, they gave him a further mandate, the implementation of the "Finnish hockey development system." This program featured training by age ranges and was patterned on what existed in Northwestern Ontario at the time. It came to be known as the "Suomi-poika," or Finn boy hockey network.

Joe returned for another 5 years running as head coach, missing only the 1960-61 season. During his tenure the team travelled to the Olympic Games in Squaw Valley and Innsbruck, as well as the World Championships in Colorado Springs, Stockholm, Tampere, and Ljubljana (Yugoslavia).

Over that same period he wrote the most amazing little book of drills and techniques, placing much importance on the use of hand-sketched illustrations to convey the message. It was published in 1963 under the title, "Jääkiekkotaito" (hockey skills). This very portable hardcover publication must have been the only reference manual of its kind available to budding young Finnish hockey players of the period. Now long out of print, it is considered a collector's piece in a country that is absolutely crazy about the game of ice-hockey. Also significant is the fact that it was published exclusively in

Finnish whereas today's authors of hockey reference books generally opt for English in order to target the global market.



Following those years spent in Finland Joe Wirkkunen again became active in hockey locally. In particular he had a very successful run with the Twins during a period when they twice won the Allan cup. But his local legacy is public knowledge and there is no need to address it further here. In contrast, the full extent of his accomplishments in Finland has remained a mystery to residents of Thunder Bay. This may be attributed partially to the fact that Joe was a very modest person who rarely talked of his personal achievements.

Tragically his life was cut short when, at age 58, he perished in a home fire (July 1986).

I had the good fortune to spend 8 months in Finland in 2003 on a work assignment completely unrelated to hockey. While there I seized upon the opportunity to learn something about Joe's own stay in the country. Much to my delight and amazement I soon discovered that his contributions to the Finnish game are far from forgotten.

In January of that year I travelled to Turku where I was the guest of Mr Juhani (Juuso) Wahlsten (then 65), a prominent figure in both Finnish and international hockey circles, and a veritable goodwill ambassador. Juuso was coached by Joe when in his teens and was very much taken with his kind nature. He stated categorically that "Joe was and is the man behind the Finnish hockey development system." Before parting company he turned over his spare copy of "Jääkiekkotaito" so that I could deliver it to Joe's brother, Martti back in Thunder Bay. I explained that Martti had only heard about the legendary hockey guide his brother had written and that he would be overjoyed to finally obtain a copy.

One bleak morning in February our secretary, Minna rushed into the office with some exciting news. It seems she had just heard two sportscasters discussing the finer points of the game and Joe Wirkkunen's name had come up.

Aside: Remember that we are talking about an event that took place some 30 plus years after Joe's return to the Lakehead.

In March I ventured to Tampere to visit the Hockey Hall of Fame where Joe Wirkkunen was inducted in 1985. On our arrival they happened to be running a video that featured Joe being interviewed on the ice by the local press (circa 1962?). There he was, exactly as I remembered him and sporting his characteristic brushcut! The picture and sound were so clear I had the impression it had just been filmed.

Later that same month I met with Mr Aarne Honkavaara (then 80), Finland's "Mr Hockey," at his home in Tampere. We talked at length about Joe's importance to the game of ice-hockey in Finland. He was quick to suggest that the key to Joe's remarkable success was his "tireless and unrelenting dedication to all aspects of the sport. No detail was left to chance." He and Joe jointly coached the National Team during those 6 memorable seasons when Finnish hockey was undergoing a major transformation.

Possibly the greatest testament to Joe Wirkkunen's legacy in Finland lies in the following statement by Juuso Wahlsten:

"Strange as it may seem, the Ontario Men's Hockey Association approached the Finns in 2001 expressing an interest in adopting their system. Little did they realize that the architect of present-day Finnish hockey was none other than Joe Wirkkunen, a native son from their very own province."

Albert Nuttall
Montreal, Oct 2007

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