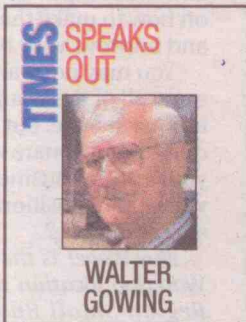


Gretzky's neighbour to drop puck

Second of a two-part series on Wayne Gretzky's kindergarten teacher, Cambridge's Marilyn Smith.

Walter Gretzky, one of the honorary chairmen, along with Bob Coine of Brantford, has been a supporter for many years of the Preston International Hockey Tournament that starts tomorrow in Cambridge and surrounding area rinks.

It is the 54th annual tournament when 2,000 young hockey players, ages 8-10 come to play.



WALTER GOWING

The senior Gretzky, father of the "Great One" Wayne Gretzky of hockey fame, was thrilled to learn that his former Brantford neighbours, Marilyn and Bob Smith, who now live in Cambridge, will be involved in the tournament.

Marilyn, at age 82, will drop the puck tomorrow at 12:30 p.m. at the Cambridge Centre ice rink to officially open the tournament.

Marilyn married Bob Smith in 1951 and taught school in St. Thomas for eight years before moving to Brantford in 1964 to teach. She was a kindergarten teacher for 40 years.

Bob Smith worked for a quarter of a century at Massey-Ferguson in Brantford, one of the world's largest tractor building companies at one time.

His last three working years were at Raymond Battler's Lift Trucks before retiring in 1991.

Looking for the ideal place to retire to, they selected a high-rise in Cambridge. They are active members of Avenue Road Baptist Church.

"Memories are precious," said Marilyn, as she recalled attending Phyllis Gretzky's funeral in December 2005.

"Each of the five Gretzky children that I taught in kindergarten lined up to give me a big hug."

That included Wayne, Kim, Keith, Glen and Brent.

The Preston International Hockey Tournament is very familiar to the Gretzkys.



CLOSE TIES: Bob and Marilyn Smith, former neighbours of the Gretzkys.

WALTER GOWING,
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Walter brought Wayne to the old Preston Arena for two of the tournaments when Wayne was eight and nine years old.

At those tournaments, the young Gretzky scored and assisted on so many goals that he set a tournament record that has never been broken.

"Hockey wasn't Wayne's only sporting activity," said Marilyn, "he was so good at baseball that he could have played professionally. I guess the hockey people are glad he chose hockey as a career."

Marilyn and Bob both agree that Wayne "was a natural" at skating and stick handling the puck around the rink. They watched him polish his finesses many times as he spent hundreds of hours on that backyard rink, often with his father watching and coaching him.

John McCash, chairman of the tournament, along with Waterloo Region chairman Ken Seiling and Cambridge Councilor Karl Kiefer will take part in the opening ceremonies.

Assisting at the faceoff will be Derek Pittman, vice-president of Zehrs Markets, Mike Melo, district supervisor and Derek Pudnick, Preston store manager.