

Al Leader

While Frank and Lester Patrick first brought hockey out west in 1911 and helped create a foundation for the sport in the area, it was another man who took the game to the next level in the region, giving it stability and financial success. That man was George Alfred “Al” Leader.

Born in Manitoba in 1903, Leader played some junior hockey before leaving the prairies to escape economic depression and look for new opportunities. He ended up in Seattle early in 1925 and was surprised to find that the Arena in the city was no more. When the new Civic Arena opened in 1928 Leader resumed his involvement with hockey, playing in the amateur City League. By 1932 he was an officer in the league, serving as secretary-treasurer, and he also acted as an off-ice official and timekeeper for the professional Pacific Coast Hockey League in the middle part of the decade.

In 1941 he was involved in the founding of the Northwest League, a new amateur league that filled the hole left when the PCHL folded. A number of former pros joined the new circuit, and during World War II it became a “defense league” with teams associated with various war industries. In 1944 it was renamed the Pacific Coast Hockey League and included teams along the entire west coast and as far south as San Diego.

The PCHL went professional in 1948, and Leader was named president. He served in that role for the next 21 years, leading the league (which became the WHL in 1952) through both the good times and the bad. He was a tireless worker in his Seattle office, monitoring games, handing out fines, and finding new owners for teams that were struggling financially. If he couldn’t find backers for a team, he put up his own money while continuing to look for investors. At one time or another he was a part-owner of clubs in Seattle, San Diego and New Westminster.

Leader also played a big role in establishing the Seattle Totems as a powerhouse in the WHL. His nephew was a slick-skating center in the Detroit Red Wings system, and the young player wasn’t happy with the prospects of returning to the AHL for another season. Uncle Al made some calls and arranged for him to be reassigned to the

then Seattle Bombers, owned by Leader's friend Frank Dotten. That player was none other than Guyle Fielder, who went on to win six league MVP awards with Seattle while rewriting the WHL record books and leading the club to three championships.

Leader retired from his post as president of the WHL in 1969, but he remained with the league as its president emeritus and was involved in the efforts to make it a major league circuit that would compete directly with the NHL. Unfortunately that dream never materialized, and as NHL expansion swallowed up former WHL strongholds the league weakened in the 1970s. It folded in the fall of 1974, and Leader was there to help close up the operation. It was a sad ending to the league he had worked so hard to build and maintain.

In recognition of his contributions to the game, Leader was elected into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 1969. His nomination to hockey's hallowed shrine shows how highly regarded he was in hockey circles:

Throughout his regime he has presided with dignity and good judgment; he has represented it with courage and candor and in all his relations with the hockey world, both inside and outside his league, his actions have been characterized by the highest standard of integrity.

Jeff Obermeyer is a 13-year season ticket holder with the Thunderbirds. His new book, "Hockey in Seattle", chronicles the history of hockey in Seattle from 1915 to the present day. It is available at the souvenir stands or through his website at <http://www.seattlehockey.net>.