



OLDEN GOLDIES

The 80+ International Series shows it's never too late to lace 'em up and battle your cross-border rivals

BY RONNIE SHUKER

ONLY IN TORONTO CAN you leave two-and-a-half hours early for a one-hour drive to the rink and still arrive 28 seconds after puck drop, but such is the city's notorious traffic. At least I haven't missed any fights. No 4-Nations-Face-Off-inspired fireworks have set off the final of this Canada-USA showdown in late October 2025, just a friendly international showcase between rival nations on Rink No. 1 of an

unassuming quad-pad in an industrial part of Burlington, Ont., surrounded by United Refrigeration and SmartStop Self-Storage outlets, with a nearby A&W, and a Hampton Inn & Suites, where some of the players have been staying for the tournament.

I find a seat in the stands with about a hundred or so fans, give or take – mostly wives, sons, daughters, grandkids and even great-grandkids. Many are waving mini national flags and wearing jerseys, shirts, sweaters, hoodies and caps. Some are sipping Starbucks. A handful are cheering on the players.

"There you go, Dad!"
"Let's go, red!"

"Go, go, go, go, go, Grandpa!"

Although it's the seventh installment of the 80+ International Series between Canada and the United States, this is the first time there have been four teams in the tournament: two from Canada (Team Canada 80+ and the Ottawa Elder Skatesmen) and two from the U.S. (USA Team 1 and USA Team 2). After a three-day round-robin, Team Canada 80+ earned the right to represent the Canadian side, while USA Team 1 is repping the Americans.

The Americans have come from all over the U.S.: Illinois, Colorado, Indiana, Michigan, New Jersey, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Alaska, Connecticut, Florida, California,

Massachusetts, Tennessee, New York, Washington, Rhode Island, Oklahoma and New Hampshire. For the Canadians, five players have come all the way from Saskatoon, including the game's lone former NHLer, Bill Orban, while the rest have come from towns across Ontario, including Collingwood, Huntsville, Niagara and Kincardine. One of them is the Canadians' ringer, Guy Levesque. He's all over the ice, first getting a goal off the rush to open the scoring, then assisting on Canada's second marker after a teammate corrals his thwarted wraparound attempt and buries the rebound.

The pace is slow, but whistles are infrequent, so the action is more or less nonstop. On the benches, none of the players on either team is jumping over the boards for line changes, lest any of them fractures a hip, so the gates are getting a workout. On the ice, full stops are few and wide turns are abundant.

HARDLY BITTER RIVALRY

Team Canada claimed gold after a 5-0 win over Team USA 1. They're now 4-3 all-time against the U.S.

The first period ends with Canada up 2-0. There is no intermission, and the teams don't switch ends, so the second period begins straightaway. Levesque gets a breakaway but can't convert. Then, when the action resumes after a "charge" chant from the crowd at a break in play, everyone's worst fear happens. A Canadian player tumbles awkwardly into the boards and lays on the ice in obvious pain. A hush comes over the crowd as the player fails to get up. Given that they're all 80 or more, just about every player here has some story to tell about a teammate or an opponent back home having a heart attack on the ice. Thankfully, the fallen player soon starts to move. It's a badly broken ankle, but he'll live.

At his insistence, the other players lift him off the ice through a nearby gate and place him in the walkway. There, people in the crowd come down to make him as comfortable as possible, placing pillows underneath his broken left foot to keep it elevated and piling blankets over him to keep him warm. It isn't until the players bang their sticks against the boards and on the ice that silence finally abates and the crowd cheers. The game continues while he waits for the paramedics to arrive.

Within a minute-and-a-half,



Canada doubles its lead with a pair of quick goals and then nearly adds another after Levesque runs into the American goalie while attempting to score again. The period ends with Canada up 4-0.

Before the start of the third, I imagine this setting is ripe for one of those fake-grandpa skits on YouTube in which a heavily costumed professional athlete schools a group of wannabes. Imagine Connor McDavid or Nikita Kucherov suiting up as an octoge-



narian, first feigning to skate like an ankle burner only to suddenly begin making spin-oramas, tape-to-tape passes, behind-the-back plays, breakouts up the middle and going bar-down with a wicked snipe, like the one Levesque makes from the slot for Canada's fifth goal of the game. By the time the announcer calls "last minute to play in the third period," Canada's 5-0 lead is insurmountable. They've now taken a 4-3 lead all-time against the U.S. and assumed bragging rights for another year.

With the players exhausted from three periods of hockey, the celebration on the ice is far more tempered than the one in the crowd. After the handshake line ends, the players line up on their respective bluelines. Levesque wins player-of-the-game honors, and then the players all receive their medals, first silver for the Americans and then gold for the Canadians, who take turns hoisting the trophy and then depart for the dressing room for post-game celebrations.

As I walk down to ice level to corral a few of the players as they come out of the dressing rooms, I see Peter Austin lying on the floor still waiting for the paramedics to arrive. At 83, Austin plays regularly in the nearby Burlington Oldtimers Hockey Club. He'll need surgery to repair his broken ankle, but he'll be back on the ice in four months. Someone comes by to give him his gold medal. He lifts his head to receive it around his neck, wraps his left arm around



EIGHTY TIMES FOUR

Team USA 2 and the Elder Skatersmen rounded out the first four-team 80+ International Series.

with me at a bench in the walkway. There are no players in their 90s on the teams, though there used to be, including Guinness World Record holder Mark Sertich, who continued playing right up until two weeks before he died in 2020 at 99.



PHOTO BY JOHN PROOF

66 WE'VE HAD GUYS THAT HAVE BEEN LINED UP TO PLAY AND END UP GETTING SICK OR DYING BEFORE THE TOURNAMENT — Bill Leithead

the trophy and throws up the ole No. 1 with his index finger as I snap a photo. A true hockey player. The win makes the pain a lot more bearable," he says.

After the paramedics finally arrive and Austin is wheeled out of the arena, Canadian captain Bill Leithead and American defenseman Emil Ludy, still fully dressed, sit down

At a comparatively younger 83, Leithead still plays twice a week, once with his old-timers team in the same Burlington league as Austin and the other with a plucky group of pickup players nearly 30 years his junior. This, despite a quadruple bypass following a heart attack more than 20 years ago. Had he listened to his cardiologist, he would never

have been inducted into the 80+ Hockey Hall of Fame in 2022, nor would he have won another gold medal with Team Canada. "No more hockey. It's the worst sport you can play," Leithead recalled his cardiologist saying to him.

All these years later, Leithead is still playing, and he's still savoring every moment the game offers him, because no one knows when the game of life is over. "We've had guys that have been lined up to play and end up getting sick or dying or something like that before the tournament," Leithead says. "Unfortunately, that's the thing. There's no guarantee you'll be back again next year."

At 86, Ludy, who lives near Bloomington, Ill., and has been playing hockey since in the late 1940s, is the second-oldest player on either team. Nicknamed "Emil the Cat," he received similar advice from a physician after suffering a pulmonary embolism from a blood clot in his leg while driving to the senior Olympics in Rochester, N.Y., in September 2011. "Looks like your hockey days are over," Ludy recalls him saying. "I said, 'Doc, you don't really understand hockey players.'"

Like Leithead, Ludy defied his doctor's orders and returned to the ice soon afterward.

He has since played in more than 1,000 games and more than 100 tournaments that have taken him all over the contiguous U.S., including Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, Iowa, Pennsylvania, California, Nevada, Arizona, New York, Minnesota, Florida, Maryland and Connecticut, winning several USA Hockey national championships in the over-50 division and, most recently, in the over-75 division. Although he doesn't play in adult leagues anymore, he still plays twice a week, including once a week on a team with two of his sons and grandsons. "There's no better thing to keep in shape than hockey," Ludy says. "You never see a smiling jogger. You never see a smiling weightlifter. You never see a smiling cyclist. We're smiling all the time just because we can do it."

As Leithead and Ludy leave to get changed, Orban comes out of the Canadian dressing room, still half-uniformed. "So you're from The Hockey News, eh?" he says. "The Hockey News was a big thing for us back then. When it was the newspaper, that was our bible. We waited for that to come out to see who was where and where was this guy and that guy and how they were doing and stuff. That was the gospel. It was always a standard joke — if a manager or a



coach didn't like you, it was just, 'Orban, I'll ship you so f---ing far away that The Hockey News won't even find you.'

Orban played 114 games over three NHL seasons in the late 1960s with the Chicago Black Hawks and Minnesota North Stars. But he spent most of his career riding the buses of North American minor leagues, winning the IHL's Turner Cup with the Fort Wayne Komets in 1965 as a rookie. "It's great to share stories like that because the guys like to hear things like that," Orban says. "I don't mind. I'm not big about it. I wasn't a big star. I just filled in when guys got hurt."

66 THE WIN MAKES THE PAIN A LOT MORE BEARABLE — Peter Austin

Ask any retired NHL player what they miss most about their playing days, and they won't say the money, the fame, the travel or the competition. They'll tell you the same thing: camaraderie. They miss the dressing room and all the banter and bonding that comes with it. "That's what it's all about," Orban says. "It's about the older guys that got a place to play that never really wanted to play. There's a real meaning to it. The guys want to work hard, and they want to be a part of it. They're excited. We're friends off the ice, but on the ice, we're going to win. Not to hurt anybody, but get up and go. The energy is focused on winning this game."



66 WE'RE FRIENDS OFF THE ICE, BUT ON THE ICE, WE'RE GOING TO WIN. NOT TO HURT ANYBODY, BUT GET UP AND GO

—Bill Orban

Orban's NHL days have long since passed. But all these years later, he's still playing and is even enjoying one of the greatest benefits he had as an NHL player: leaving his stinking equipment at the rink. Back home in Saskatoon, Orban is part of the Saskatoon 60+ Hockey League, an oldtimers organization with around 40 teams across four divisions and nearly 400 members. Games take place five days a week, Monday to Friday, with players ranging from 60 to 89. They play at Schroh Arena on the southern



edge of the city. In 2024, the club expanded the dressing rooms at the old barn to provide individual stalls for the players, where each member can leave their equipment after a hard morning or early-afternoon game.

At 81, this was Orban's first, but likely not his last, appearance in the 80+ Hockey Hall of Fame gaining more recognition, and with the U.S. version just getting off the ground, the cross-border rivalry will reignite in 2026 as players continue to play the game as they approach their expiry dates. While many of their peers are spending their golden years playing golf, tennis, pickleball or some other sport perhaps more befitting their age, these players have opted for a game better suited to those less than half their age. There are judges, lawyers, doctors, carpenters, insurance salesmen, you name it. All have long since retired from the rat race, but not from life on the ice.

"Those guys out there have knee replacements, they've got hip replacements, they've got cancer, they've got partial dementia, and it doesn't matter," Orban says. "If you want to come out and play hockey, there's a place for you."



KEEP 'EM GOING

The goal of the 80+ Hall Of Fame goes beyond just recognizing the contributions of octogenarians

BY IRN KENNEDY

TO PLAY AN NHL game beyond your 40th birthday is an accomplishment for even the most finely tuned athletes on the planet. In recent years, it's been a space reserved almost exclusively for future Hall of Famers such as Zdeno Chara, Jaromir Jagr and Teemu Selanne. But there's another Hall of Fame in existence, Canada's 80+ Hockey Hall of Fame, which honors octogenarians who have continued playing the game well into their golden years.

Founded in 2011, Canada's 80+ Hockey Hall of Fame has since enshrined more than 400 players and 40 builders who have made considerable contributions to the sport over their lifetimes.

Each year the organization hosts multiple induction ceremonies across Canada. "The idea behind it is both the recognition of the people still playing at the age of 80 but also in motivating others to stay in the game," said the Hall's president,

Herb Brennan. "It's amazing to me to see the energy these guys have and the excitement they have. It has had a profound effect to keep people playing, keep them moving and anxious to get to this point."

Brennan himself is one of those 80+ hockey players. Based in Ottawa, Brennan, 84, still plays with a team called the Elder Skaters. When Brennan was growing up in British Columbia's lower mainland, his community of Fort Langley did not have an indoor rink, and outdoor spaces rarely froze, so he didn't begin playing hockey until his family moved to New Westminster when he was 13. Since then, he's been making up for lost time and loves being on the ice and around his teammates. "I love the game... and I've managed to find leagues that keep getting older and giving me an opportunity to stay in the game," he said. "One of the things, of course, is the camaraderie that goes with it. I really do believe it's that common energy that people get. They love the game, they want to play it, and it's evolving in a way that allows us to continue to play."

Brennan is proud of the work the 80+ Hockey Hall of Fame has done, which, in 2025-26, will include the induction of the organization's first woman, 81-year-old Ginette Hatin. This season will also see the induction the organization's first NHL alumni, Saskatchewan product Bill Orban, who celebrated his 82nd birthday in February. Currently, the oldest active member of the Hall is 92-year-old Ray Wardle, who plays for the Octokids in Nepean, Ont.

Brennan wants the 80+ Hall of Fame to serve as a reminder to athletes that hockey doesn't need to end so early. And he hopes arenas and organizations across Canada see the opportunity to build upon their senior offerings, including for octogenarians.

At each induction ceremony, families are invited to see the inductees face off in an exhibition game, and inductees receive a personalized Hall of Fame jersey, their own hockey card and a medallion. But it's not simply about the accolades and ceremony. The ability of simply playing as an octogenarian, which members of the Hall joke is more difficult to reach than the NHL, is recognition of an active lifetime of health and participating in a game they love.

"We want to keep people in the game," Brennan said. "I see it in the faces of players who are in their 70s now saying, 'I want to keep playing. I want to stay in this game.' We like to keep people moving. Physical activity is important; just sitting around puts an end real quick to people, and this is one way for us to do it."

The Hockey News ALL ISSUES SINCE 1947
 THN.com/ARCHIVE