**Old sweater leads to a journey through UAF hockey history**

By Theresa Bakker

It all started with a memento, an old hockey sweater that Russell Knapp had kept for decades. He just couldn’t throw it away.

Now, thanks to the passion of the dedicated UAF alumnus, a set of eight historic club hockey sweaters will be displayed at the Carlson Center, the home arena of the Alaska Nanooks men’s ice hockey team.

When Knapp graduated from what was then the University of Alaska in 1969 with a wildlife management degree, his best memories would be of playing hockey with the campus club team.

“My first year at the university, they had tryouts at the outside rink over by the Patty," he said. "There weren’t a lot of people trying out. Basketball was the big sport on campus at the time.”

Even though the team wasn’t competing at the collegiate level, they travelled quite a bit, as far away as Whitehorse. They also traveled to Anchorage during the Fur Rendezvous to play local teams.

After graduating from the University of Alaska in 1969, Knapp didn't throw his hockey sweater away. He kept it for years, even though he had lost touch with the university.

After Knapp received an invitation to a hockey reunion in 2005, he returned to Fairbanks from his home in Nassau, New York. He has returned every year since and become active in a variety of groups supporting the UAF hockey program. On a recent trip, he brought along his hockey sweater and showed it to Kate Ripley, who was then director of the UAF Alumni Association.

“She asked me if I would commit to getting it framed, and I agreed,” Knapp said. “Then I started thinking about the history of the hockey program. I found photos from those early years that showed people skating under the Cushman Street Bridge, but as far as a definitive sweater that represented the school, there was nothing.”

He talked to everyone, even sharing his photos with the Face-Off Club, a Fairbanks based group that provides new team equipment and jerseys for UAF each season, along with scholarships and other support.

“No one knew anything about what those original sweaters looked like,” Knapp said. “They even put it on Facebook, but I didn’t get any leads.”

Knapp couldn’t stop thinking about the players who represented UAF before he got there. What happened before 1968? He knew his team wore the same sweater that had been in use since 1952. But what about the years between 1925 and 1952? He wanted to fill in the gaps.

There was one clue — Gordon Picotte's No. 11 hockey sweater from 1936 on display at the Carlson Center, where the Alaska Nanooks currently play their home games. It had been donated by Bob Hufman, whose father, L.L. Hufman, promoted the team and had pictures from the era.

Knapp, who had a career in construction, decided to reproduce all the sweaters worn by the players in those photos using the clues he managed to assemble.

He begged a neighbor, Pat Mensing, to help after having no luck finding a professional tailor or seamstress.

“She wasn’t buying it, but I put on the pressure," he said. "She and her husband had things they needed to do around the house — new tile, new cabinets, you name it. I said, 'If you do this for me, I will help with all your house projects.'”

In September, Knapp donated all six of the replicas to UAF, along with the sweater he wore as a club hockey player. Knapp also repaired and reframed Hufman's original 1936 sweater.

Erik Largen, head coach for the Alaska Nanooks men’s ice hockey program, said the hockey sweater project is a celebration of the rich tradition of Nanooks hockey, which began in 1925 and has seen an impressive transformation into a Division I hockey program.

“This helps us celebrate all of the past players, coaches, administration and supporters of the program who have helped grow the program with all of their hard work,” Largen said. “It is a celebration of all of the alumni at all parts of their history. Every team has meant so much to the Fairbanks and UAF community.”

Thanks to Knapp’s gift, the sweaters will be displayed as long as possible at the venue where the hockey team plays. Knapp is already on the hunt for additional sweaters to add to the collection.

"It seemed like everyone agreed that it would be good to show the beginnings of the program and how it started, at least as far back as we could trace it to 1932," Knapp said. "I’m still hoping to find out what the players wore before that.”

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Cutlines:

*Photo courtesy of Russell Knapp*
UAF alumnus Russell Knapp, class of 1969, poses with his club hockey sweater, which he donated to the university. He also recreated six additional sweaters from archived photos dating back to 1935.

*Photo courtesy of Russ Knapp*
This photo shows the 1936 University of Alaska ice hockey team in gear and its managers in parkas. The team was the first to travel to the Lower 48 to compete. The sweater worn by No. 11, Gordon Picotte (top, fourth from left), has long been displayed at the Carlson Center.

*Photo by Kristin Baysinger*
Framed reproductions of historic hockey sweaters line the wall at the Carlson Center, where six reproduced and two original sweaters will be displayed.

*1968 Denali yearbook*
University of Alaska club hockey players, including Russ Knapp, far right, play on an outdoor rink on campus in 1968.