

A Conversation With the Busher

SITTING in the dressing room where the local heroes sit on game nights, and across the hall from where the visiting heroes sit, there sat Busher Jackson, who was a hero once himself. He's not long out of the hospital this last time and his face is very thin. When he was pulling on his skates those nights back there, he could do anything, they said. No one could skate with him. He would come off left wing and lug the puck in on goal like a kid who has just reached his own front walk and is anxious to make it home.

"What do you do in the daytimes, Busher?" he was asked. This was yesterday noon.

"Come down here, when I can," he said. He flexed his big hands. There are deep hollows between the thumbs and the palms of his hands, and he held up his right one. "I can't hold a pen with this one," he said. "Can't write. I've gotta get a job though. I hope I can get working soon. As soon as I'm in shape, anyway—maybe two weeks or a month."

(Stanley Cup? Busher helped win one, 28 years ago. He and Joe Primeau and Charlie Conacher were the Kid Line, then, and there were no greater sports heroes in that spring of 1932. Busher was 21.)

THE PARTIAL LOSS of use of his right hand came from a broken neck. Fell down the stairs at his sister's home 18 months ago.

"At noon, too," he said, and smiled. "Wouldn't have hurt myself if it had been in the middle of the night."



Busher Jackson

"I've had a great year and a half," he mused, sitting on the bench in the dressing room. The broken neck was followed by jaundice. He thought he'd recovered from that. Two months ago he was taken to hospital. The jaundice was back, and pneumonia, and a few other things. "I was in Toronto General," he said, "five and a half weeks. Once I was taking 22 pills a day for different things. They were awfully good to me there." He draws no unemployment insurance and has no other assured income. Lives on Quebec Avenue, near High Park. Dresses neatly—shined brown loafers, well-pressed slacks, sports jacket, white shirt and neat tie, beige gabardine topcoat, grey hat with a distinctively broad brim. He is 49, and is separated from his second wife.

Tim Daly, the old trainer, was shuffling by.

"There's my old buddy," Busher said, grinning up at him.

"You're looking better, Bush," Tim said. And: "You were still the greatest left wing who ever played, I say." And (mournfully): "But what I say don't count no more."

"You're all right, old buddy," Busher said.

(Scoring championship? Busher won his in the NHL when he was only 21—a big, raw kid, nearly three weeks younger than Bobby Hull when Hull won his, last month. No television then, and not so much radio, but just about everyone in Canada knew the name of Busher Jackson.)

A MAN CAME IN: Scotty Alexander, a trainer now for Hershey Bears. Called to Busher and went out. Tommy Naylor, the skate and stick man, was sweeping out the room. Jerked his head after the departing Alexander, and then at Busher. "Never used to see those two guys apart," he said. Busher laughed. "We never were apart much, for 10 years or so," he said. "Back then."

"We used to call Scotty, Busher's batman," Naylor said. He used to shine Busher's skate boots, you know? That's how we got started shellacking the toes of boots around here. Scotty came rushing in one night all upset because he hadn't shined Busher's boots, and I said, 'I'll shine 'em for you.' Put some shellac on the toes. When Busher picked 'em up he said, 'Hey, that's the best shine Scotty ever got on these things.'

"Loused up a car of yours once, too, didn't he?" Naylor asked.

Busher laughed. He doesn't drive a car, now. "One!" he said. "Which one? How many?" And laughed again, because those had been the days.

(All-stars? There are quite a few among the Canadians right now. But none was an all-star at 21. Busher was. The other all-stars then were pretty good hands, too—Charlie Gardiner, Ching Johnson, Eddie Shore, Bill Cook, Howie Morenz. Busher was a first-team all-star four times, a second-team all-star once.)

WAS BUSER on a diet, now?

"Yeah. Salt-free. Of course, I can't take a drink, either. Right now I feel better than I have for years. Sleep well." Looked at me straight out of that thin and deceptively ascetic countenance. "My family's been awfully good to me," he said. "They helped a lot."

Although no one will admit it officially, Conn Smythe, Maple Leaf Gardens, the National Hockey League, and his old linemates Primeau and Conacher have helped, too, from time to time. And Busher has had jobs, some pretty good ones.

Was there anything he'd do differently if he had it to do again?

"Only thing I really regret is that I didn't get a business of my own going, when I was going good," he said.

Was it true that when one is young and on top, there never seems to be any hurry to do those things that become vital later, to get businesses started, futures assured?

He didn't answer, except indirectly.

"I'll be back on top, some day!" he said. "And you can count on that!"

And I hope, and anyone who knows him hopes, that he is right—because especially in the heat of a Stanley Cup final it is not a bad idea to remember that here is Busher Jackson, who was a hero once himself.