



Travels with **Gordie**





Gordie (back row, third from the right) and teammates from the King George Athletic Club in March, 1942.

Local History Room - Saskatoon Public Library - LH 9373

This is a hockey story that starts not on a rink, as one might expect, but on a softball diamond. Later, it spends quite a bit of time in a farmer's field and then on a parking lot. Eventually it gets to a rink. But not until much later.

In 1990, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan was tapped to host the Challenge Cup, an international softball tournament and promotional event under the auspices of Softball Canada. Sports Hall-of-Famer Don Funk was hired to manage the event, which was to be held in Gordie Howe Park. The park was approaching its 25th anniversary the following year, and what better way to commemorate both the tournament and the anniversary than to have Mr. Hockey himself, Gordie Howe, come in to dedicate a life-sized bronze statue of himself at the facility that bore his name?¹

Bill Epp, a local sculptor, recommended an ex-student of his named Michael Martin for the job. A carpenter by trade and an artist by inclination, Martin was also a dedicated

hockey fan. He started immediately, going through books, photographs and old newspapers and immersing himself in the life of the Detroit Red Wings' famous No. 9. There were meetings to be had, including one at the Mayor's Office with Gordie Howe. By May the work of actually creating the statue was well underway.²

At this point, some of the details became murky. A 1993 newspaper article suggested that the tournament organizers had run into financial difficulties and that the sculpture "became an expense the Challenge Cup couldn't carry."³ Another article even said that when the tournament ran a deficit, Softball Canada refused to pay for the statue.⁴ Neither of these are completely true. Plans for the statue did hinge in part on fund-raising, which fell short, causing a deficit which the national organization did eventually cover. But there was never any formal contractual arrangement with Softball Canada or anyone else regarding the statue.⁵ What mostly happened was that when it turned out the Howes were unable to be part of the event, the statue idea was simply dropped.⁶

But that didn't end the story. Martin's work was already well advanced. He was excited by the project and confident he'd find a buyer for it. By mid-September he was ready to start casting, which was done at Bill Epp's foundry near Martensville. When it was complete, the statue consisted of a stack of bronze pieces—a head here, a gloved hand there, a couple of feet encased in skates—ready to be welded together.

And there it would sit for nearly two years.⁷

In 1991, The Partnership, an organization of Saskatoon downtown businesses, got involved. Gordie and Colleen Howe were in Saskatoon that August as part of a tour to promote the newly-formed Howe Foundation and to hold a hockey clinic. While here, they drove out to Epp's farm with Kent Smith-Windsor, Executive Director at The Partnership, to see the statue and talk to Martin.⁸ That fall, The Partnership agreed to purchase the statue for \$20,000, "contingent upon finding a suitable sponsor for the project." A potential sponsor had been lined up and they had high hopes the



DETROIT RED WINGS

GORDIE HOWE

Gordie Howe, ca. 1966.

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deal would be finalized within the month and the installation done by the summer of 1992, if not earlier.⁹

Instead, the sponsor pulled out and the deal fell through, but not before Gordie Howe dropped by to see the statue one more time, during a visit to Saskatoon for a celebrity hockey game in the winter of 1992.

It was during this visit that he suggested the head was “too fat”.

“That’s my brother Vic!” he told Martin, who dutifully melted it down and with the help of fellow artist Hans Holtkamp, re-cast it.¹⁰ This was not the first time Gordie had lost his head. While working on the original model, Martin had beheaded the hockey star on two separate occasions before he was satisfied with how it looked.¹¹

By the summer of 1992, it was clear there was no alternative sponsor and Martin notified The Partnership that he would have to seek a buyer elsewhere. By now, the statue had been assembled and was sitting alone and lonely in a field at Bill Epp’s farm.¹² On July 6, Martin wrote to the Mayor’s Office indicating that he would be seeking private funding for the statue with an eye to donating it to the City where it would go either to Gordie Howe Park or SaskPlace (now SaskTel Centre, Saskatoon’s 13,000-seat sports arena).¹³

But in 1991, Saskatoon’s City Council had established the Municipal Artwork Placement Jury, which was tasked both to develop criteria for adjudicating works of art offered to the City as well as to undertake those adjudications.¹⁴ In 1992, the Jury was asked to evaluate the Gordie Howe statue.

It was to be a critical moment in our story.

With the new adjudication policy soon to be adopted by City Council (which ended up taking until the end of March) the committee was forced to wait until its May 11, 1993, meeting to determine the statue’s fate. Sadly, after much deliberation it was decided that while Gordie’s personal appeal could not be denied, the statue did not, alas, live up to the City’s artistic standards.

The adjudication policy required that in order to be accepted for donation, “artwork must have artistic merit of enduring quality.” In a letter to the artist, the Jury said:

While the sculpture does show some evidence of skill in the modelling of the figure and handling of the medium, there is not sufficient expressive content in either the figure or the medium to warrant the Jury’s acceptance of the piece. Whereas the subject being portrayed does afford the sculpture initial appeal, the Jury’s responsibility is to differentiate between what would have some appeal based on subject matter alone, and what is artistically relevant.¹⁵

The minutes from the May 11 meeting offered a bit more detail:

In the assessment of the proposal ... the Jury members felt that the artwork did not display the action and energy of the sport or individual being depicted. The work was felt to be placid and gesturally weak.¹⁶

In short, Gordie lacked zing.

Later criticisms of this decision miss the point. The mandate of the jury was to make a decision based solely on artistic merit, by

people who were recognized authorities in this field. Regardless of how one feels about Gordie Howe, the Jury was simply doing what was required of it by City Council.

In any case, this decision shut the door on Gordie’s statue’s future as public art. Although it was City Council that got to decide where a piece of art would go, it was the Artwork Placement Jury that determined which pieces would be displayed.

The SaskPlace Board of Directors made a similar ruling earlier that year in response to a separate inquiry about putting the statue there. In a letter dated January 20, 1993, they said: “although your work appears noteworthy, the placement of any commemorative works of art is not being considered at Saskatchewan Place.”¹⁷

But there was still hope for the statue.

Earlier that year, long-time CTV sportscaster Lloyd Saunders had mentioned the statue in a broadcast. This was soon followed by an article in the *Saskatoon Star Phoenix* by sports columnist Ken Juba asking why Martin’s creation had been left to languish in a cold, snowy field.¹⁸ Still, nothing may have been done about it if it had not been for Peter Zakreski.

Zakreski was at that time the chair of a citizens’ group in Saskatoon called Spirit of Service. A senior vice-president with Federated Co-op in Saskatoon, he was no stranger to the concept of public service. He had served on City Council from 1974-1979 and been involved in nearly every big sporting and community event in Saskatoon since. In 1992, his group had been instrumental in getting the statue of former Governor General from Saskatoon, Ray Hnatyshyn, installed in Kiwanis Park.



Dedication of Gordie Howe Park on Gordie Howe Day, July 22, 1966.

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So it was not surprising that Zakreski would take up the cause of moving Gordie Howe's statue out of Bill Epp's field and onto a plinth in Saskatoon.

At that time, Gordie and Colleen were planning a two-year, 65-city tour to celebrate his upcoming 65th birthday. The plan was for the Howes to attend a hockey game and a fundraising event in each city. The money that was raised would be split between the Howe Foundation—which is dedicated to improving the lives of children—and a local charity. Hearing about this, Zakreski contacted the Howes and arranged for Saskatoon to be included on the tour, and then began fundraising to buy the statue and to find a suitable place for it.

The Artwork Placement Jury's decision meant that Gordie's statue could not be placed on public property. But Zakreski and his group found an ally in the owners of the Midtown Plaza, Saskatoon's big downtown shopping mall, who agreed to provide a site on their property across the street, on the south west corner of 20th Street and 1st Avenue.¹⁹

It cost \$17,000 to buy the statue and a further \$7,000 or so to landscape the site. The site design was done by a local architectural firm and included nine Schubert chokecherries (for Howe's jersey number), and red brick laid in a ring-hub-and-spoke pattern, mimicking the Detroit Red Wing logo.²⁰

Gordie Howe's birthday tour was a hit in the other cities it went to. But in Saskatoon, we outdid them all.²¹

Thousands came out to see Gordie Howe during his three-day stop here, on the weekend of September 25-27, 1993. First there was a breakfast at the Bessborough Hotel on Saturday morning, followed by autograph signing at the 8th Street Co-op where they cut up the first of three birthday



Sculptor Michael Martin with his statue of Gordie Howe in a field near Martensville, Feb. 17, 1993.

Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan
StarPhoenix Collection, 3961c-23a

cakes that day. After lunch, there was the ceremonial unveiling of the statue and then more cake and autographs inside at the Midtown Plaza, followed by another autograph session later that afternoon at the 8th Street McDonald's.

That night, the Howes caught the Saskatoon Blades hockey home opener against Prince Albert. To a standing ovation from the 7,491

people there, Gordie Howe, in a Blades uniform, was introduced as the newest member of the team. During breaks and after the game, the Howes handed out more birthday cake and autographs until finally leaving about 10:00 p.m.

Sunday was mostly family time except for a special lunch with four lucky raffle winners. On Monday, the Howes visited Gordie's

alma mater, King George School, where he was awarded his grade eight diploma—something he hadn't quite gotten around to getting in those busy days of 1944. In return, he presented the school's Legacy Fund with the \$18,000 raised during his visit. Later that day, he addressed a crowd of several hundred at a farewell luncheon at the Ramada Renaissance Hotel.

It was the longest time Gordie had spent in his home town since the early days of his professional hockey career, all those long years before.²²

So finally, Michael Martin's work of art had found a home. The site itself, perched on the edge of the Toys 'R' Us parking lot, was not optimal. But if it wasn't quite as high profile as SaskPlace or the riverbank, it was still better than out in a field near Martensville. The trees and other plantings helped shelter it from the parking lot, and with the building of the Scotia Centre Theatre across 1st Avenue and the continuing development of River Landing behind it, the site today is not so lonely or barren-looking as it once was. But in the winter of 2002 it was a dreary, windswept place, and an article written by yet another *Star Phoenix* columnist, Randy Burton, called for the statue to be moved somewhere a little more appropriate to the memory of this famous Saskatoon son.²³

Burton's column generated a storm of agreement. He recalls a stack of "literally hundreds of letters" on his desk from readers agreeing it should be moved, including one who wrote: "I cannot recall how many times I have driven by and seen incoherent idiots [i.e., drunks] relieving themselves on old Gordie's leg".²⁴

Burton's newspaper column kept the pressure up over the next few weeks, with the result that City Council agreed to take another look. There were two options. Either the Midtown Plaza (Cadillac Fairview, the company that owned the statue) could donate the statue to the City, or they could retain ownership, but apply to have it displayed in a public location.²⁵

Gordie and Colleen Howe at the statue unveiling during Homecoming Saskatoon, Sept. 25, 1993.

Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan StarPhoenix Collection, 4525c-24a

At the same time, a Holiday Park neighbourhood resident named Jackie Longhorst was gathering names on a petition asking for the statue to be moved to the entrance to Gordie Howe Park, at Avenue P South and Dudley Street. Among the 1,122 names were those of Howe family members and Gordie himself, who had come by the Longhorst residence to drop off some memorabilia.²⁶ Even local real estate developer Ken Achs got in on it, suggesting that the statue be moved to the old CPR station at Idylwyld Drive and Jamieson Street, and that Idylwyld Drive be re-named in Gordie Howe's honour.²⁷

In the end, City Council decided to leave it up to Midtown Plaza. In February of 2005, Midtown Plaza announced that following discussions with the Saskatoon Blades and the arena (Credit Union Centre, as it was by then known) the statue would finally be moving, with the mall retaining ownership.²⁸ After some further delay, the move occurred in the fall of 2006.²⁹

There are many places in Saskatoon where this statue would be appropriate; places that have an association with Gordie and his time here in the city where he grew up. A case could even be made for the original location on that parking lot across from the Midtown Plaza. But Gordie Howe's only request had been that the statue stand somewhere near "where hockey is played, so that young kids could gain inspiration from it." SaskTel Centre is that place.

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Colleen—Gordie's wife of more than a half-century, his greatest supporter and a veritable one-woman-public relations



department—passed away in 2009. Gordie followed her on June 10, 2016.

After his death, Gordie's body lay in state for 12 hours in Joe Louis Arena in Detroit, from 9:00 a.m.–9:00 p.m., in celebration of the famous No. 9. In Saskatoon, City Council voted to name the Circle Drive South Bridge in Gordie's honour, while the Saskatoon Blades held a "Thank You Mr. Hockey Day" tribute at SaskTel Centre on September 25.

During that ceremony, at the request of the Howe family, Gordie and Colleen's ashes were interred in the base of the statue that bears his likeness and which sits at the front doors of the arena.

Finally, nearly three-quarters of a century later, Gordie Howe has come home to stay. ■



Gordie Howe's statue in its current location at SaskTel Centre, 2016.

NOTES:

- ¹ Telephone conversation with Glen Reeve, September 21, 2016.
- ² Pat Balderston, "This is 'Howe' it's done," *West Central Crossroads*, September 26, 1990. See also Ken Juba (SP, 22 Feb 1993). In a September 20, 2016, email, Martin confirmed that Howe had been at the April 23 meeting with Don Funk and Mayor Henry Dayday to discuss the softball proposal.
- ³ Ken Juba, "Is this 'Howe' to treat a statue?" *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, February 22, 1993.
- ⁴ Randy Burton, "Forgotten hero," *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, February 5, 2002.
- ⁵ Telephone conversations with Don Funk and Michael Martin, September 14, 2016.
- ⁶ Glenn Reeve, September 21, 2016. In a telephone conversation, Don Funk, said that arrangements with the Howes were never finalized and the idea just never went anywhere. According to Reeves, the event was conceived of not simply as a tournament but as something like a softball-themed festival, with Gordie Howe's dedication of his statue being one of the high points. If this is the case, then without Howe himself in attendance, there would have been no point in carrying on with the statue.
- ⁷ Balderston, September 26, 1990.
- ⁸ Theresa Kirkpatrick, "Gordie back in town". *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, August 31, 1991.
- ⁹ Letter, Winston Smith-Windsor to Michael Martin, October 16, 1991.
- ¹⁰ Telephone conversation with Michael Martin, September 20, 2016.
- ¹¹ Balderston, September 26, 1990.
- ¹² Letter, Michael Martin to Colleen Howe, July 6, 1992.
- ¹³ Letter, Martin to Dayday, July 7, 1992.
- ¹⁴ CoS Archives, file no. 215-13-1, letter, Trudi Barlow to Gary Young, October 15, 1992.
- ¹⁵ CoS Archives, letter, Trudi Barlow to Michael Martin, May 20, 1993.
- ¹⁶ CoS Archives, minutes, MAPJ, May 11, 1993.
- ¹⁷ Letter, Ken Wood to Michael Martin, January 20 1993.
- ¹⁸ Macskimming, Roy. *Gordie: A Hockey Legend.* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 1994) pp. 6-8.
- ¹⁹ The "Acknowledgement and Release of Exhibition Rights" signed by Zakreski and Martin on Nov. 16, 1995, includes the statement "The Cadillac Fairview Corporation Limited has accept the donation of the sculpture".
- ²⁰ Melanie Braaten, "Sculpture honours legend", *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, September 4, 1993. The article gives the figure of "\$6,000 to \$8,000" to place the statue.
- ²¹ Macskimming, p. 9.
- ²² Theresa Kirkpatrick, "Welcome Home, Mr. Hockey." *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, September 27, 1993. Also see Macskimming, pp. 9-12.
- ²³ Randy Burton, "Forgotten hero". *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, February 5, 2002.
- ²⁴ Telephone conversation with Randy Burton, September 16, 2016. Also see "Gordie needs more ice time", Randy Burton, *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, February 7, 2002.
- ²⁵ CoS Archives. City Council Minutes, February 11 and April 22, 2002. Also see Kim McNairn, "New home for Howe up to Mall Owners", *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, April 23, 2002.
- ²⁶ Telephone conversation with Jackie Longhorst, September 16, 2016.
- ²⁷ McNairn, April 23, 2002.
- ²⁸ Letter, Kathleen Girardeau, (Gen. Mgr., Midtown Plaza) to Visual Arts Placement Jury, February 21, 2005. A memo from the VAPJ to the city's Planning and Operations Committee dated February 22 notes that since the city would not become the owner, the process would require only approval of the site location, and not an adjudication of the piece itself. City Council approved the move at its next meeting, on March 7, 2005.
- ²⁹ CoS Archives letter to City Council from April, 2006, indicates it had not yet been moved. On August 21, the Blades apparently announced it "would be moving".

Cover image courtesy of Michael Martin

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