

## Interview with Bruce Prentice

**[AN]** This is a Canadian Baseball History Conference. We're lucky to have a number of people with us today who have been instrumental in confirming and preserving that history. Bruce Prentice is certainly one of them. He created Canada's first college baseball program at Seneca College, and later established the Ontario Sports Hall of Fame. But of most interest to us is that he also founded the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame.

Bruce, welcome. Before we get to the Hall of Fame aspect of things, I understand that you and your brother Bob were both pretty good ballplayers at one time. Can you attest to that?

**[BP]** Bobby had the talent. He was very good. He could hit a baseball over the screen at Greenwood Park at Bowmore Road School at 7 years old. He was one helluva ballplayer. He was the best in the family. We had a wonderful sporting family. All my brothers used to play sports of all kinds, but Bobby was the premier athlete in the family. He was the one that signed with the Indians, went away for 10 years, played with the Indians farm team, played with Rocky Colavito. He went to spring training with Bob Feller. And Joe Altobelli. He even played one year with Roger Maris.

**[AN]** There's a nice photograph of you in a Tigers uniform.

**[BP]** Well, yes. I had the good fortune of going down to work out with the Tigers down in old Briggs Stadium. I said old Briggs Stadium; that's how old I am. But going to batting practice, I'd be hitting against the big lefthander Hal Newhouser, Virgil Trucks, and a couple of other major league pitchers. I think I barely hit the ball out of the infield in batting practice.

**[AN]** They didn't cheat and throw curve balls, did they?

**[BP]** They threw spitballs at me. Anyway, it was a wonderful experience down at Briggs Stadium, and I wasn't good enough. But Muddy Ruel, who was then the Tigers Farm Director, contacted me afterwards. He wanted to sign me; back in those days they had what they called the D League. That's how old I am, they had a D League. He wanted to sign me to go down and ride the buses. My two

brothers, Dave and Bob, said “You don’t want to go down to D ball”. And they were right; I didn’t go to D ball. Anyway, that was my baseball career.

**[AN]** How did the concept of a Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame first occur to you? What planted the seed?

**[BP]** Well, I guess it was when brother Bob retired. He came back home, and was with the Blue Jays. He started putting together the first high school baseball program in Canada, believe it or not. And the Americans coming up here, baseball people, just could not believe that in Canada, anywhere, there was no high school baseball. They said “How do you guys learn to play baseball?” Well, as a matter of fact, when we were playing probably we were playing 20 games a year. We would practice maybe on Saturday and Sunday, but games, we actually had about 20. That’s all we could play. And that would take us into the playoffs, if we were lucky. Snow was starting to fall in September, so we’d play maybe 2, 3, 4 games.

So Bob had the idea to put together the high school baseball program. He did that in Scarborough. He got three schools to say OK, we’ll try a baseball league. The Blue Jays supplied bats and balls, and some bases, etc. and they started playing. We played one season; I was helping Bob put it together. I had this idea: if we had high school, why can’t we have college baseball? So I started at Seneca College. I put together the Seneca College baseball program. That was also the first one in Canada. We’d begin to play schools in upper New York state, because there was nobody else to play. So that’s what we did: we went and played Eisenhower College and teams across the border. And we went down south, as a matter of fact; we used to take our team down to Florida. So anyway, then we had to look at how to finance it. We needed money for uniforms. The school, yes, they did finance it, put uniforms together; they paid for that. And bats and balls from the Blue Jays. But as another source of financing I put together a baseball school in the summer time. In putting the baseball school together, I said to myself “Who am I going to get to instruct?” So I started looking, trying to find out who was around in Toronto to instruct the kids how to play baseball. I could do a little bit, of course, but we had to have some pros. So I got hold of Goody Rosen, Phil Marchildon, Ron Taylor, and said OK, come on out and teach the kids. And they did. So while I was doing that, I started thinking “Who else is around in baseball in Canada?” So I started doing some research and realized that at that

time there were over 150 Canadians that were [or had been] playing baseball, major league, and nobody knows anything about them. So I said to myself "What are you going to do about it?"

So I put together the Constitution, the Selection Criteria. My youngest son David said the chesterfield that I used (it was a loveseat), would have papers on it everywhere when he came home from school. I was learning about who I'm going to elect to this stupid Hall of Fame. So that's how it all got started, with the Seneca College baseball program. But there's another story to that, if I may. Thinking about this Hall of Fame, I thought "What's going to happen? Who's going to help me with it?" So I called Neil MacCarl, and said "Neil, I need some help with this. I want some advice about what to do." He said OK. So I had lunch with Neil, and told him what I had in mind, a baseball Hall of Fame. Well, after lunch he went back to his office and called brother Bobby at the Blue Jays office. When I got back home, Bob called me. He said "What the hell did you do with Neil MacCarl?" "What do you mean?" "He says you're crazy. He says you're nuts." "I explained to him about the baseball Hall of Fame." "He says you're nuts. There's nothing anywhere. Nobody cares. There's nothing in the attic. There's no souvenirs anywhere. There's no artifacts. He thinks you're crazy." So guess what? I dropped it.

That Christmas at a family gathering, we were sitting around, and my older brother Dave (he was always my biggest booster) said "What ever happened to that Hall of Fame idea of yours?" I said "Well, I talked to Neil MacCarl about it, and he said I was crazy, so..." He looked at me and said "Who the hell is Neil MacCarl? He's one man. One writer. The hell with him. Do you believe in the idea?" I said "I sure do." He said "Well good." After Christmas, after New Year, I picked up the phone again and called Fergie Olver. He said "Bruce, you're not crazy. Let's go. Let's go do it."

OK, so we gathered some people together, Randy Echlin, Dave Crichton. That's how it all got started. The first induction ceremony was down at SkyDome in 1983. That gives you the background on how it all got started.

**[AN]** Your time at Ontario Place in particular seems to have been very successful. That must have been a very exciting time. That must have been the heyday of your stint.

**[BP]** Yes, more or less. Ontario Place was wonderful. We had good sponsors. Labatt helped us out, and Coca-Cola; those were the two big sponsors. And we used to draw, believe it or not, during the summer, we drew 400,000 people. We had one of the pods in Ontario Place. We had it all decorated up, with the display downstairs and the Hall of Fame itself upstairs. As a matter of fact, I've got pictures of it. Any time you want to have a look, I've got an album here showing a lot to do with the Hall of Fame. But Ontario Place was great. Cooperstown at that time was drawing close to 300,000, but we outdrew them; we had 400,000. We had a great time up in the top. We had receptions up there.

**[AN]** How did you end up with Babe Ruth's car?

**[BP]** There was a fellow in the potato business. He lived up in Newmarket. He was a car dealer. He had a huge garage with all these different cars. He called me up and said "I've got a car here you might be interested in." I said OK fine. I went up to look at it, and sure enough it was Babe Ruth's 1941 Lincoln Zephyr convertible. What colour was it? I'm trying to remember. [Yellow.] He said "Do you want it?" I said "Certainly!" So he brought it down, and we had it downstairs in the display room. People would love it when they would come in and stand beside the car and have their pictures taken. Thank you to the potato farmer.

**[AN]** At that point, did you try to sell it as a Canadian artifact, representing the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame because of the Hanlan's Point connection, or did you tie it in some other way? Or was it just a donated artifact that had nothing to do with Canada?

**[BP]** Well, of course, everybody knows about Babe Ruth hitting that home run. That was the tie-in. We had a cutout of Babe Ruth standing beside the car. It all tied in in that sense, and people would love it. Knowing that it was Babe Ruth's car, knowing the history of Babe Ruth, and his having hit that home run. As a matter of fact, someone's going to win this [holding up the book *Who's Who in Canadian Sports*] if they can answer this question: What uniform number was he wearing? Don't answer now; think about it.

**[AN]** You were doing well at Ontario Place, and it was financially sound because you had a lot of foot traffic, a lot of visitors, good exposure. But then I understand you encountered two fairly serious setbacks in rapid succession, kind of a double whammy. (You don't have to name names.)

**[BP]** I know I don't. They had their executive running Ontario Place. They happened to hire this new lady to take over as Executive Director of Ontario Place. It became a disaster. What happened, what she was going to do was ask for money from everybody, all the other vendors, hot dog stands, everybody. They called me in with the Director of Labatt, a perfect gentleman and a wonderful man. We went in and sat down across the table from her, and she said "OK, we want more money. We want to double the rent of the Baseball Hall of Fame, and we want a piece of the action all the way down." Labatt just looked at her and said "I beg your pardon?" More or less. She said "We need more money. And we want it to come from you." The Labatt fellow said "Excuse me. Bruce, let's go." We just walked out, and he looked at me and said "Uh, uh. This lady's nuts."

The next person was a fellow named Dick Ramsden, Vice President of Marketing with Coca-Cola. With Dick Ramsden the same thing happened. We went in, we sat across from this lady, and she did the same thing: demanded more money from Coca-Cola, wanted a split of the money, etc. He got up and he said "Excuse me, ma'am, but you'll hear back from us." He walked out, and he said "Bruce, hang in, and we'll see what happens." What happened was, Dick Ramsden got hold of the Ministry to find out what was going on, and it turned out that Dick Ramsden started an investigation into this lady, and into the organization that she represented. It turned out that she embezzled from this organization X amount of dollars, and it turned out that she ended up spending seven months in jail. That's all. But through all of that, it turned out a complete disaster, and we couldn't move any farther than that because the sponsors all pulled back and said "Sorry, we can't help you."

**[AN]** So the sponsorship money was lost as a result of that. But you also lost some of your own money from another issue, another problem.

**[BP]** We had a Treasurer. Wonderful person. We used to put on big dinners downtown in Toronto, at the same time we were in Ontario Place. We put together big dinners. Maybe some of you remember. For example, we had Willie, Mickey and the Duke. Huge, huge dinner. Brian Mulroney was there as our guest speaker. Whitey Ford was there. It was marvelous. We had two head tables, it was so big. We had 1800 people. We made an awful lot of money from that one

particular dinner, and this money was going to be the salvation of the Hall of Fame.

This devious Treasurer of ours was dipping into the funds. On the Board of Directors was one fellow who happened to be the President of a financial company. I'd asked him "Would you mind looking into all of these Treasurer's Reports?" We had a Board meeting every month. It came time to find out what was happening with all of the money. I'm at home looking at the financial statements, and I'm not a financial wizard. But I could tell something was going on. So I went down to Ontario Place at 2 o'clock in the morning, walked into the Treasurer's office, and on his chair was his briefcase. I went to open up the briefcase, and I knew that if I'm caught, and there's nothing there, and he walks in, I'm going to be in trouble. I said "The hell with it." I opened up the briefcase, and sure enough there were cheques sitting there with my signature on them. He was embezzling.

I got hold of Ron Foster, one of the greatest guys you ever want to meet, working for the City and on the Board. I said "Ron, get down here." He said "What's the matter?" I said "Get down here." So Ron walked in and I said "Here. Look. There's something going on." It turned out, I called the Treasurer down. He came in and finally admitted that he did embezzle money, and at that time it was up to \$75,000. He had taken that away from us; it was what we needed. We didn't have any money. Later we tried to get the money back. We ended up getting \$6,700 back, I think. He had triple-mortgaged his house, for reasons I don't want to get into.

**[AN]** And I understand Mayor Lampport had a novel suggestion for dealing with him.

**[BP]** At the Board meeting, Lampport was banging on the table: "Let's arrest him! Let's charge him!" Saner heads prevailed. "Uh, uh. We can't. The moment that we do that, the Hall of Fame is in trouble. Nobody's going to do anything with the Hall of Fame any more, anywhere. We can't do that, Mr. Lampport, sir." And we didn't. Well, we went about in a round way, paid a lawyer and everything else. We got back \$6,700.

**[AN]** Lampport wanted to take this guy down to Cherry Beach and bob him up and down in the water. Now, at some point during your tenure as President you found

it necessary to resign your position as a Blue Jays scout. What was that all about? Because all this time you were still scouting for the Jays, right?

**[BP]** Yeah, brother Bobby was the Director of Scouting. He had people on his staff. Pat Gillick and I were good friends, so I was put on the staff. So I was a scout. I used to do some scouting around upstate New York, Quebec, where Ray Slack was the scout. Anyway, so what happened, at that time Claude Brochu had taken over the Montreal Expos. He called me and said "Bruce, we need some representation from the Expos". I said "Yes, we try to." He said "No, no. We need more. It looks like it's a Blue Jays Hall of Fame." I said "Maybe to you." He said "No, no. We need more representation." I said "Well, you'd better come down."

So he flew down, we had lunch, and I said "Well, what do you want?" He said "I need representation from Montreal. I need somebody on the Board. I need somebody to come and sit on the Board of Directors to help run this Hall of Fame." I said "OK, who are you going to name?" He said "I'll do it." I said "You're going to come down and sit on the Board?" He said "Yes, but I want something from you." I said "What?" He said "There's too much Blue Jay. You're a Blue Jay scout." To make a long story short, one of the biggest regrets of my life was I resigned as a scout for the Blue Jays to keep the Hall of Fame independent. And it sure did end up that way: brother Bobby wouldn't talk to me for almost two years. Pat Gillick sent me a nice letter (well, Bob did too) thanking me for the time. That's what happened with that one: I had to resign. I didn't *have* to resign; I did it because I thought it was right, to keep the Hall independent.

**[AN]** Bruce has lots more stories. He's offered to stick around for a while to chat, so anybody who's interested in chatting, I'm sure Bruce will be happy to talk to you, and show you lots of pictures. Anybody have an answer to his quiz?

**[Michael Lyons from the audience]** No number. They didn't have numbers then.

**[BP]** Yes, sir.

Andrew North  
November 2018