

## The Masked Man from Penetanguishene

By Waxy Gregoire PSHOF

There has been a lot of press lately about the famous goaltending legend Jacques Plante and his donning of his first goalie mask fifty years ago on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1959, after receiving a cut to his face in a game against New York. To be sure, it was a momentous occasion in the annals of goaltending and hockey. It literally changed the face of the game and goaltenders world-wide owe their thanks to “Jake-the-snake” as Plante became known. But unbeknownst to local hockey fans, Penetanguishene had its own pioneer in the mask-making business.

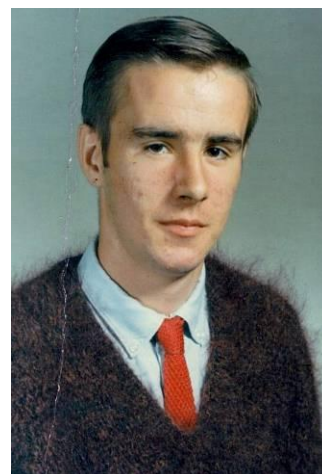


James “Jake” Dupuis started playing minor hockey, then called the Little NHL, in the fall of 1961 as a second year novice. He was nine years old. Goalie facial protection was something that hadn’t really been thought of in minor hockey. He remembered that first year only because: “I didn’t wear a mask, or a helmet. I was bareheaded. We all were, all of us young goalies. In fact, I don’t remember wearing much of anything!”

In his first year of Pee wee, helmets became mandatory for all players including goalies. He wore one but as he recalls, “they didn’t help your face much.” The next year he wore his first mask: a small plastic beige coloured thing with oval snake eyes. The mask was quite popular in minor hockey circles when they came out and young Jake was lucky enough to have bought his own. Still at this time, a young goalie ironically didn’t have to wear a mask if he wore a helmet.

“In my 2<sup>nd</sup> year of Bantam, when I was about 13, I was on the All-Star team,” Jake recalls. “I had begun to read about making molds and masks in Grade 8. Well, it turned out that year we had a manager on the team by the name of Andy Beaudoin who happened to be a foreman at Grew Boats in town, where they built fiberglass boats. I talked to him about my idea and he said he could help me make a mask for myself but first I had to make a mold of my face.”

“At home I had made cardboard masks with the eye holes cut out but we were now getting into the serious stuff – face molds. I made a mold of my face using cardboard and a coke box, then pouring in Plaster of Paris. The plaster had to be just the right texture, not too thin – not too thick. Then, with the mold of my face in hand, I went down to see Andy at Grew Boats on a Saturday morning.”



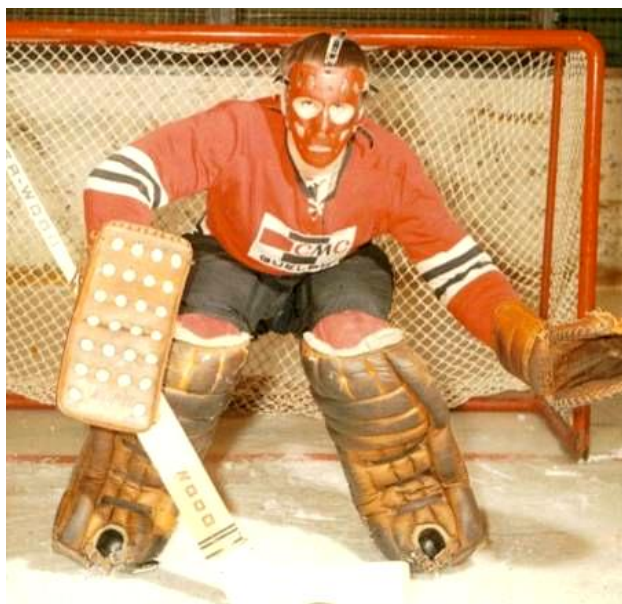
Covering young Jake's face mould with Vaseline, Beaudoin began applying many coats of matting and resin on top of it. This layering with some fibers in it had the desired effect of making the mask very light and thin. The mask also was the colour of the resin – light ghoulishly green.

After the mask was set and hard, holes were eventually cut out for straps, eyes, mouth as well as a few for ventilation. He put a bit of padding on some key spots but for the most part the mask fit snugly onto his face. Dupuis recalled that there weren't too many goalies in the area that had their own molded mask, certainly nobody in Penetanguishene!

Dupuis wore the mask for his second year of Bantam, his two years in Midget and some junior 'C' Hurons action thrown in. Did it save some stitches in the beginning? "Oh sure, I got hit a few times, but it didn't cover the top of my head. I remember one practice I got cut on the top of my head and had to go to Penetang General Hospital for stitches. I'm sitting in Emergency when suddenly, our other goalie Terry Dubeau comes in for stitches related to his chin. He was still only wearing a helmet at the time but If he'd have been wearing a mask, and I a helmet, we both would have finished the practice!"

After a great 1968-69 season that saw Dupuis backstop his Midget team to the All-Ontario finals, he was invited to numerous junior camps, but he chose to sign with the Hamilton Jr. 'A' Red Wings. Before heading to camp Jake and Beaudoin made another mask similar to the first one but thicker and was painted red. He would use this mask in Hamilton for the 1969-70 season. While in Hamilton, Jake would become acquainted with the team's trainer, Freddie Dunbar, an equipment specialist and innovator who would one day invent the famous Cooperalls. Dunbar had many ideas, one of which was to convince Red Wing's coach Eddie Bush to give players Dextrose pills before the start of a third period as this was supposed to give players a boost of energy; the first use of steroids was a mere sugar pill!

During the next season 1970-71 Jake used the same red mask in Guelph where he toiled in net for the Tier II Jr. 'A' CMC's. At this point in time, Freddie Dunbar was now in the employment of the University of Guelph as Head of Athletics. Jake was soon in touch with his old friend as he had another mask in mind but wanted Dunbar's input.



“Fred helped me design that third mask that had more strength around the mouth area and extended higher around the head and ears. It covered the front half of my face and head. We also painted the mask white but black under the eyes to help with any glare.” It didn’t hurt that in this off season Dupuis finds himself working at Grew Boats for the summer and of course his friend Andy was there to help him again.

Jake would use this white mask in his second year at Guelph (1972) as they captured the Tier II Junior ‘A’ Canadian Championship and again during his first year playing for the University of Waterloo Warriors. After the 1972-73 season at Waterloo, mask making was heavily on his mind so he went to see his pal Mr. Dunbar.



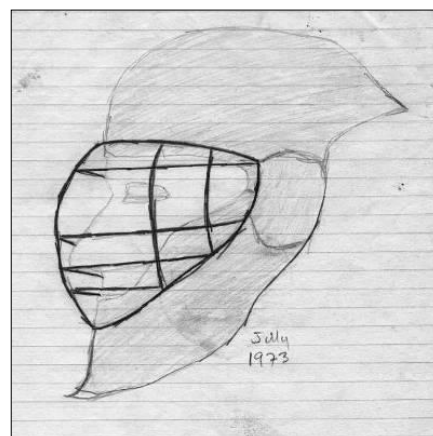
“By this time the smaller facial Jacques Plante masks were the rage. I told Freddie that I wanted a mask that would come up higher over the top of the head, back further than the Plante mask, to offer more protection, like a helmet. He helped me with the design, the mold and we used plastercane to build up key areas. Then, I was back to see Andy at Grew Boats. It also helped that my dad owned a body shop to fix cars where he had all the tools, sanders, drills, files, etc. and he could paint.”

The fourth mask was painted a base glossy metallic black by his father Celestin Dupuis at Cel’s Body & Fender Shop. Jake added the white and gold design striping that made it unique. It was sharp and turned heads around the league. The coloured mask was used during his next three years at Waterloo where he won another Canadian Championship.

In the fall of 1973, Jake’s mask-making innovation took another turn. His younger brother David, playing for the Penetanguishene Midget All-Stars and also a goalie, approached him with an idea to make a molded mask-cage so that he could have the comfort and snugness of a molded mask. David provided a drawing displaying the cage element which would allow him to wear his glasses.

“There was nothing like it around,” he recalls these many years later. “I had to think it through. I thought it was doable though it was a challenge to try and figure out how to attach the cage to the mask and still keep everything strong.”

First, his brother needed a mold. David went to his art teacher Hugh Niblock and asked if he would make a mold of his face, he agreed. Once that was done, Jake bought a Cooper cage and cut the outer edges so that the bars could be bent, shaped to fit and attach onto the mask.



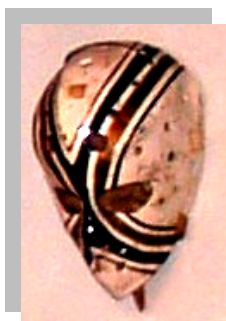
“Andy really helped me with this one. We had to really work to get the screening to fit onto the mold and then the mask. We did the first few layers and then laid the wire in and worked the next fiberglass layers around. It took some doing but it worked!”

His younger brother wore Jake’s fifth mask, the “David” mask for the 1974-75 Midget season. Sadly he outgrew it and after one season would never wear it again. Jake smiles when he thinks back to that mask.



“We should have patented “David’s mask”! We’d be rich! It was innovative and safe. It protected all the weak points of a mask and gives a goalie the benefit of snugness to his face. It was way ahead of its time!”

And so the next “official” inventor of the “David” mask-cage type was mask maker Greg Harrison and NHL goalie Dave Dryden in 1977. David’s mask actually beat them by five years but only the two Dupuis brothers realize it and today it’s what all goalies wear!



In 1974 when Jake was scouted by and attended the training camp of the NHL Washington Capitals, his mask was picked up by one of the other goalies, who was amazed at the way the mask was designed to go over the head.

During the mid 1970s, Jake used his mask making interest as part of his education. Waterloo was a great technical design school with a strong research and technology department. They tested athletes for intensity, stress, and various training and endurance methods. It was also during this era that sport equipment design was a going concern.

“When I was at Waterloo, I took an Equipment Design course. It was easy for me to focus on mask design! Not only was I interested, but I wanted to test designs and they had all the technical equipment to test masks with various levels of force, at certain isolated areas, etc. We discovered that most masks, like the Plante mask, were very weak in the cheekbone, the exception was the Joffa or Tretiak birdcage type mask. I tried a Joffa mask in some practices but even if I wanted to wear it in a game I couldn’t, it wasn’t certified by the CAHA – yet it was okay for me to use as a homemade prototype! Figure that one out!”



Using all the scientific data at his disposal, Dupuis then designed his best prototype (right). With the help of his Grew Boats friend, they made a mold for this new mask different than what was done for the others, making the mask from a female mold, similar to how the boats are built. The fiberglass was laid from the inside out – not layered on top of a face mould and perhaps it would be stronger.



There were other features to the mask such as a uniquely designed lower down chin that protected the throat, enforced ridges on the cheeks protecting the cheekbones, eyes and mouth, expanded and better protecting head padding that acted like a helmet. Testing showed it absorbed stresses from pucks beautifully. Had Jake finally succeeded in making the ultimate mask?

“Not quite,” Jake laughs today. “When I wore it to a few practices, it looked great but it was heavy and I quickly developed strain in my neck muscles. With further testing we realized that the mask’s center of gravity in relation to the head was way off and put a lot of strain on the neck muscles. It was great protection but you couldn’t wear it!”

Jake graduated from Waterloo in 1976 and attended Teacher’s College at the University of Windsor and the old white mask got a new gold repaint to match the Lancer’s colours. Jake retired from hockey after the 1976-77 season, and sadly retired from mask making.

Today, Jake’s masks and equipment are in a permanent goalie exhibit in the Penetanguishene Sports Hall of Fame. Inducted in the Athlete’s category in its inaugural year of 1987, the colourful goaltender has no regrets. He reckons he received about 20 stitches on his face during his career. No doubt the number would have been dramatically higher without his many masks. And there were never any guarantees.



“In my first year in Guelph, I took a slap shot in practice to the face, within hours my face was ballooning and my eyes were swollen shut. That was about the worst facial injury I’ve ever had and I had the mask!”

Another more recent memory makes him laugh.

“I went back a few years ago to play in a Waterloo Alumni game. The other goalies getting dressed were from the 1980s. They looked at my old mask and were fascinated by it but also couldn’t believe I would play with it they thought I was crazy! During the game, I took a deflection to the face and this defenceman came rushing back to me like he thought I was going to be dead. He couldn’t believe I was alright.”

Thinking back about his time in the mask construction and experimentation business, Jake figures he made about ten of them in all, all at Grew Boats, all with the help of fiberglass specialist and friend Andy Beaudoin. He enjoyed making and wearing them. They were his source of pride. But he’s ever mindful of the people in his life that helped him along the way.

“I owe Andy a lot! He was a great guy. I was lucky to have that Grew Boat connection in my hometown otherwise I don’t know what I would have done. Freddie Dunbar was really helpful along with my Dad and his car body painting facilities.

“I also thank Jacques Plante, for inventing the mask that saved so many goaltender’s lives, standing up to Montreal coach Toe Blake who didn’t want him to wear the mask on that November day some fifty years ago. His business senses to market the masks and get it out to the general public improved many goaltenders lives!”

**David & Jake Dupuis  
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