



Toronto Maple Leafs legend Johnny Bower was at Sunday's Brampton Beast game and signed autographs for hundreds of fans, including Jacob Mallion. Photo by Iain Colpitts

Leafs legend Johnny Bower welcomed by the Beast

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By Iain Colpitts
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One week after his 91st birthday, Johnny Bower is still happy to make public appearances, spending Sunday at the Powerade Centre to watch the Brampton Beast beat the Kalamazoo Wings 6-3 in ECHL action.

"I love coming out to things like this," said the longtime Mississauga resident and Toronto Maple Leafs legend, nicknamed "The China Wall" for his stopping power. "I enjoy it very much because if I sat around and watched television all the time, I'd probably be dead by now."

Along with Coach's Corner host Don Cherry, Bower was invited to the game as a guest of honour for the Beast's Remembrance Day pre-game ceremony.

Bower served four years in the Canadian Army during the Second World War, dying about his age to enlist as a 15-year-old in 1940. He was discharged in 1943 due to rheumatoid arthritis and returned home to Prince Albert, Saskatchewan to play junior hockey.

"There were two fellows from the Indian reserve in Prince Albert and they went to Dieppe because the holding unit that was there needed some new guys to fill it," Bower said.

"They didn't come back and I felt bad. They were good hockey players too, real good hockey players. I give them a lot of credit because they fought for their country."

Bower has attended Beast games around this time of year since 2013 for Remembrance Day festivities and the team is 3-0 with him in the building.

He played in goal during a time where

goalie equipment was much smaller than it is today. With the ongoing debate about re-instating smaller pads and other equipment at the NHL level, Bower sees the argument from both sides.

"If I had the equipment they have right now, maybe I might still be playing," he said with a laugh.

"It's hard for forwards to score goals because they cover half the net, but (goalies) have to have that protection now because they shoot it pretty hard. When I was playing, I could feel just about every shot, not just me, but Jacques Plante just about got killed until they developed the mask"

Even in his early 90s Bower still has a driver's licence and managed to play five rounds of golf this year and 11 last year.

With a coin, stamp, street and Walk of Fame star in his name, Bower is a Canadian icon and is always very generous with his time, still devoting a lot of his schedule to public appearances and autograph signings because he grew up in a poor family and said he has always looked for ways to give back.

Bower was a vital piece for the Maple Leafs in their last Stanley Cup victory in 1967 and although it may still take the team awhile to get to that stage again, Bower likes the direction the team is going in under the direction of coach Mike Babcock.

"He's a very demanding coach and if the guys listen to him, they'll win," he said. "He's strict to all of them and if you don't play the way he wants you to, you watch, later on you'll be sitting on the bench. That's the way (my coach) Punch (Ilnach) was too."