

## **Two Centuries, Twenty-Six Conventions, and Hundreds of Friends by Cal Kitson**

I wasn't quite sure what I was getting into when I attended my first National Hockey League Booster Clubs Convention in 1993. Even though a few other members of the Boston Bruins Fan Club would be going, I had never met them. So I walked into this alone, and it could have gone either way. I could have felt like an outsider and hated it, never to return. But happily the opposite happened - I felt welcomed and accepted immediately, had a great time meeting new people from all over the USA and Canada, and knew I'd be back the following August!

I've just returned from my 26th straight NHLBC Convention, and I treasure the many friends I've made over the years. The week in Philadelphia was wonderful but it got me thinking about how things have changed over the years. So here are some observations, through my eyes, comparing convention then and now.

I've always taken lots of pictures during convention week – the places we'd visit during pre-convention trips, the posed club group photos, and candid shots in the hospitality suites and on the dance floor. In the beginning, I would pack my camera and dozens of rolls of film! As I'd head out for a day of sightseeing, I'd grab 5 or 6 rolls to take with me, and hope I wouldn't run out! During the banquets, I'd snap, snap, snap...and have to change the roll of film! It felt like I was running back to the table every few minutes to grab a new roll from my camera bag. And I wouldn't know how the pictures came out until I got home and had the rolls developed. If a shot came out blurry or dark, I didn't have an opportunity to take it over and the moment was gone. So don't blink!

Never wanting to miss a good shot, I'd constantly be running around whenever I saw a club/group photo being organized, or during our costume-themed banquets when people got creative with their outfits. Had to capture every moment!

Often times I would mail out rolls of film to be developed during convention week, so that the printed photos would already be waiting for me when I returned home. There was an element of excitement with that — opening the package and seeing the photos for the first time, reliving the memories. I'd also be stuck with a pile of "bad" photos, where people's eyes were closed, or when I just missed the shot by a few seconds. Those ended up being thrown away—what a waste of money!

I'd usually order double prints, then mail out copies to the people who were featured in my photos. It took time to sort through hundreds of pictures, trying to be fair so that everyone got at least a few shots. Occasionally someone would send me copies of their pictures in return, but I usually never saw any photos but my own. Remember, this was years before Facebook and social media!

Several years ago I finally switched to a digital camera. What a change for the better! No more bulky film to buy and pack, or stopping to change rolls several times a day, and no expense for processing the film. I'd get to see the pictures as they were taken. I could upload the pictures directly to my computer and share them online with everyone at no expense through sites like Shutterfly or Snapfish. And I could easily delete the so-so pictures, keeping only the best shots.

Finally, I could print only those select photos that I wanted to put in a small album to show my non-convention friends back home (the highlights!).

Over the past few years though, even my little Canon Sure Shot seemed old fashioned! Capturing the moment with cell phones is the new norm. One of my favorite things about smart phone photos...everyone's taking them! I no longer need to spend my time running around trying to capture every group shot or event. I know other people are taking them, and they'll be up on Facebook within seconds!

There are other subtle ways convention has evolved over the years. The hospitality suites have always been a favorite place to gather during the week for an alcoholic beverage and some laughter and conversations. But now dice games and puzzles are the thing! You'll find our hockey peeps hunched over the table collaborating to complete a colorful puzzle! And is it just me, or does it seem like our group is drinking less beer and more water these days? Gotta stay hydrated!

Pub crawl is always one of the more well-attended pre-convention activities during the week. It's fun to visit several places over the course of the evening, have a cocktail or a beer, and maybe even take part in a trivia contest or belt out a tune during karaoke. While there are still a number of die-hards who keep pub crawl going into the wee hours of morning, somewhere along the line we added an "early bus" back to the hotel!

During the banquets on Friday and Saturday night, dancing to our favorite "convention" songs is always fun. Whether it's Paradise by the Dashboard Light, or line dances like the Electric Slide or Macarena, we still enjoy boogeying with the Peeps. We just take more rest breaks in between, and perhaps a pain reliever before bed! And when the DJ asks, "How low can you go?"...well, let's just say it's not as low as it used to be!

I participated in Saturday's Survivor Night my first few years, but these days a good night's sleep seems more important! I've even been known to sneak in a quick nap in the afternoon before heading out for pub crawl or the dinner cruise!

Another way convention has changed is how we communicate and interact during the week. Back in my early years attending the NHLBCC, I'd have to call the front desk and ask to be connected to my friends' rooms if I wanted to check on the day's plans. The staff couldn't tell me the room number for security reasons - my friends would have to tell me themselves. So I'd make a running list by the phone in my room with everyone's room number, so I could call directly to coordinate our plans. But now we all have cell phones! It's so much easier to just send out a quick group text message so that everyone knows when and where to meet for the next adventure!

Back then we'd would hang out in the lobby or hospitality suite, waiting to see what dinner plans people were making. Sooner or later, a group would form and what started as 3 or 4 people planning to get a bite might grow to 10, 15 or more heading out to a restaurant. Now you just post a message on Facebook, suggesting a time and place to eat, and bam—instant dinner companions!

That brings me to Facebook. I think FB has single-handedly changed the experience of convention for all of us. During convention week, we post our status updates continuously — we always know where everyone is, what they're doing, and who they're with. We see their

photos in real time. Our Peeps who couldn't attend "camp" that year get to experience convention right along with us, day by day, as if they were there.

Through Facebook, we can keep the Peep connections going even after we've left. Messages are posted saying "goodbye until next year," and letting everyone know if our flights have been delayed, and that we made it home safely. You can say how much you're missing everyone, and express your thanks for the hard-working host club. "Friending" the new people you've met at convention keeps our dysfunctional hockey family growing!

On the downside though, we now spend a lot of our time together during convention week looking down at our cell phones, checking in, posting photos, seeing what people are up to by their status updates, and scrolling through our newsfeed. We wait all year to be together at convention, but when we're sitting at the same table, everyone is glued to their phones and not always interacting with each other! With our limited time together, we need to work on that...living in the moment with the people we're with and not just reading about it on FB. (I'll admit that I've been guilty of doing this too!)

Best of all, though, Facebook keeps us all connected throughout the year. Before FB, you'd say goodbye at the end of convention week, saying "See you next August," and you meant it. Other than trips to visit special friends during the year or attending a game on the road, you really didn't see most hockey friends until the next convention. But now through FB, we share the big and small events of our lives for the other 51 weeks of the year. We feel the excitement build as the countdown to the next convention gears up. We firm up plans regarding our arrival days and what we want to do during the week we're together. FB has strengthened our bonds with each other even more...what a wonderful thing!

While it's sad to see convention week come to an end, we start looking forward to next year's convention almost immediately! By Sunday morning's final breakfast, many of us have already entered the dates of next year's convention into our countdown apps! Before we've even said our final goodbyes, we're saying things like "Only 51 weeks until we meet again!"

I was 29 at my first convention, and am now in my mid-50's. I've attended the NHLBCC in both the 20th and 21st centuries and in two countries. I've visited fourteen states and two Canadian provinces. I've lost many dear friends over the years, but I also make new friends with each passing convention. I give thanks every day that I discovered the NHLBCC in 1993. I wouldn't trade these memories or friendships for anything, and hope to be part of this crazy, wonderful hockey family for many years to come!

-Cal Kitson