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# THE GOALTENDER'S MASK:

## NOT ALWAYS A NECESSARY PART OF THE GAME

**T**he goaltenders mask goes back a ways in hockey – into the 1920s to be exact when Montreal's Clint Benedict toyed with one briefly – but it wasn't until the 1960's that this form of protection began to proliferate.

Jacques Plante of course was the first modern goaltender to attempt to introduce the mask. His debut with a mask came the day after Halloween in 1959, when Plante had been hit in the face with a backhand shot from New York Ranger Andy Bathgate.

After spending 20 minutes getting stitched up, Plante said he'd return to the game if he could wear his mask. Much to the disdain of his coach, Toe Blake, who had earlier prohibited his goaltender from wearing the mask, Plante said either he gets to wear the mask or goaltending duties would be turned over to a 40-something, weekend amateur named Joe Schaefer.

Blake relented and Plante emerged from the dressing room, his sweater blood-soaked, to finish the and win the game 3-1– and make hockey history.

The mask, like the helmet, took time to become commonplace in the game of hockey, even here in Spokane.

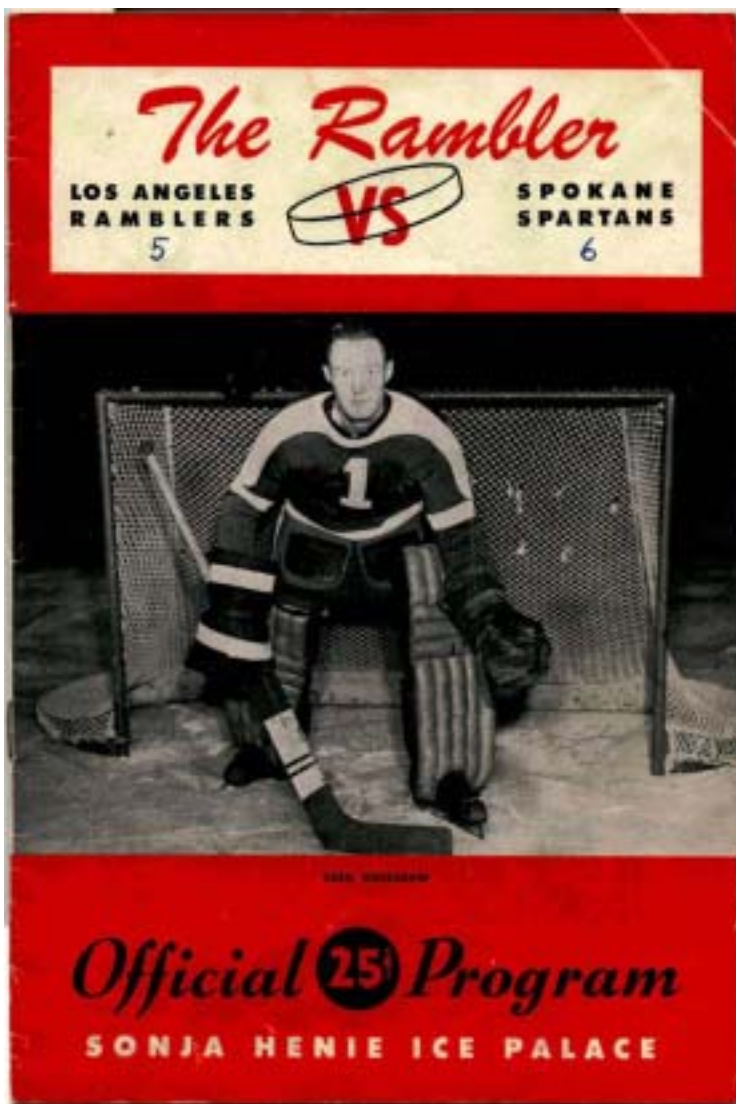
Playing in a day well before the advent of the mask Vern Kneeshaw said he didn't really need one. "I played before slap shots. We had more control over the puck then."

Players used more wrist shots, according to Kneeshaw. "In the 1940's, the accuracy of the shot was greater. You could play without a mask," added Kneeshaw, who still plays in goal for oldtimer hockey in Spokane, and wears a mask.

Russ Gillow played without a mask for two years in the pros. "I was forced to use one in Oklahoma City." Ray Kinsewich, Gillow's coach in Salt Lake City said "you play with a mask or you don't play."

Gillow palyed with a Jacques Plante style mask. "The early masks were terrible. They soaked up the sweat. You could wring out the sweat after the game."

"I was quicker without a mask. It made me a better goaltender," said Gillow who still resides and works in Spokane



**Vern Kneeshaw, shown here on the cover of the 1946-47 Los Angeles Ramblers program, played without a mask and said he didn't really need one. "I played before slap shots. We had more control over the puck then."**



Seth Martin built custom-fit goaltender masks in the 1960's.



"My first year (64-65) Carl Chawacka of Nelson missed the puck and his stick shattered my nose. It was broken in two places but we won the game." said Dave Cox.

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Dave Cox, who teamed with Gillow on Spokane's 1972 Allan Cup winning team, played without a mask for the early part of his career and remained maskless even into the days of the booming slap shots off wickedly curved blades that tended to produce knuckle-ball tendencies.

"One time against Nelson a shot was coming right at my head," Cox said. "At the last second I turned and got hit in the side of my head. It took 30 stitches and I got cold-cocked."

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Cox got his first mask – a Seth Martin fiberglass model worn by many netminders in the 60s and 70s – but even so, "the puck hurt just as much," Cox said.

When he went to Europe as a member of the British Columbia Totems All-Star team, Cox had a chance to buy a wire cage make like (Vladislav) Tretiak. "I regret not buying it," Cox said.

Playing against Spokane, Ron Huston was known for his hard slap shot and played against many goaltenders who didn't wear a mask. "I used to whiz the first shot past Davey Cox's ear," Huston said. "Then I'd bring it down."

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## MIKE SENSKE:

### "THEY WERE AIMING AT MY MASK!"

Goaltender Mike Senske was one of the first grads of the local Spokane Americans Youth Hockey Association to get a look-see with the Spokane

Jets senior team in the mid-1960's.

Senske, now the owner of Painted Hills Golf Course in the Spokane Valley recently recalled a couple of memorable incidents in his days as a practice goalie in the 1960's for the Spokane Jets.

Having just taken delivery on his first goaltender mask, Senske went to practice one day. Getting used to the mask was an art all in itself.

Traditionally, the Jets would take about 80 percent of their warm-up shots at Dave Cox and the rest at Senske. "One day all of a sudden they were taking 80 percent of the shots at me," Senske said. It didn't take him long to figure out "that they were aiming at my mask."

With his face protected by the fiberglass mask, Senske turned his attention towards protecting his throat. To do so, Senske would bow his head slightly, tucking his chin into his chest. By protecting his face and throat, Senske provided shooters a new target, however.

"Gordie Turlik comes down on me and lets go with a slap shot and it hits me in the top of the head. Knocks me out" – only for a second – but I was out!" Senske said.

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**Young Mike Senske has since turned from playing goalie to owning a golf course. Perhaps it was some of his experiences dodging pucks that moved him out of the nets and onto the greens. (Photo courtesy Mike Senske)**

Playing in a time when teams generally suited just one goalie, Senske attended all Jets games, dressed in civvies, but could be ready in a matter of 20 minutes or so to fill in should the regular goalie get hurt.

He missed the once chance for his 15 minutes of fame.

“It was the winter of 1964-65 and I was in Walla Walla one night visiting my fiancé. Dave Cox gets a puck in the mouth and over the public address system came the call: “Is Mike Senske in the audience?”” “I missed one game in three years, and this was it,” Senske said.

The goaltender’s mask continued to prove unkind to Senske while playing pond hockey on the south hill’s Cannon Hill Park.

“I lost my only tooth after I got my mask,” said Senske, describing how he took a puck in the chops in a pick-up game.

“My mom said “bring your tooth home,” which Senske did. Replacing lost teeth was something relatively new in the denstistry business, but the operation was a success.

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