

BY SCOTT TAYLOR

Photos by Bruce Fedyck, James Carey Lauder, Lexi Minuk and the River East Royal Knights

THE LEGEND CARRIES ON

WITH A NEW COACH AT THE HELM, FOUNDER, PRESIDENT AND GM BARRY BONNI, AN HONOURED MEMBER OF THE MANITOBA HOCKEY HALL OF FAME, IS ABOUT TO OPEN HIS 44TH SEASON WITH THE RIVER EAST ROYAL KNIGHTS



There is nothing Barry Bonni can't tell you about the Manitoba Major Junior Hockey League.

After all, the soon-to-be-73-year-old patriarch of the River East Royal Knights, founded his hockey team 44 seasons ago, when he was just 28-years-old.

This is a man who has been GM or head coach or both since the 1981-82 MMJHL season. He's won 700 games and six league championships. But this year, he was faced with a difficult decision.

For seven years, Blake Bonni, Barry's son, had been the club's head coach. Three seasons ago, Blake was named the Manitoba Major Junior Hockey League's Coach of the Year, but to be

fair, and for whatever reason, the team had struggled the past two seasons.

Both Blake and Barry are very clear: "We both want what's best for the River East franchise."

However, despite a number of conversations, Blake and Barry decided that they had vastly different opinions about the direction of the team. Ultimately, the two concluded that the time had come for a new voice in the Royal Knights' room.

"Three years ago, Blake was Coach of the Year," Barry said. "But as hard as it is, when it's your own kid, It's something we had to do."

Now that a new season is right around the corner, both father and son appear to be good with the decision, Blake's

replacement will officially be a veteran coach who starred for Barry when the Royal Knights won the Jack McKenzie Trophy in 2001.

"Our new coach will be Manny Minuk Sr. He played for me on the 2001 championship team," said Barry. "His son, Manny Jr. played goal for us the past three seasons and now he's aged out of junior so that cuts out any conflict of interest. Manny Sr. was a forward who could fly (88 points in 80 games over two seasons with the Royal Knights from 2000-2002), and I think he'll make a great coach."

Interestingly, Barry Bonni, a legend in junior hockey in Manitoba and a man who was inducted into the Manitoba Hockey Hall of Fame in

2017, got to where he is today because of coaching.

"In 1970, I started coaching baseball at Bronx Park," he recalled. "Then in 1974, I started coaching hockey at Bronx Park. A couple years later, it got to be too much. I was coaching both baseball and hockey and even though they're in different seasons, it took up a lot of time and effort. I was also a much better hockey coach than I was a baseball coach, so I dropped baseball but continued to coach hockey at Bronx Park."

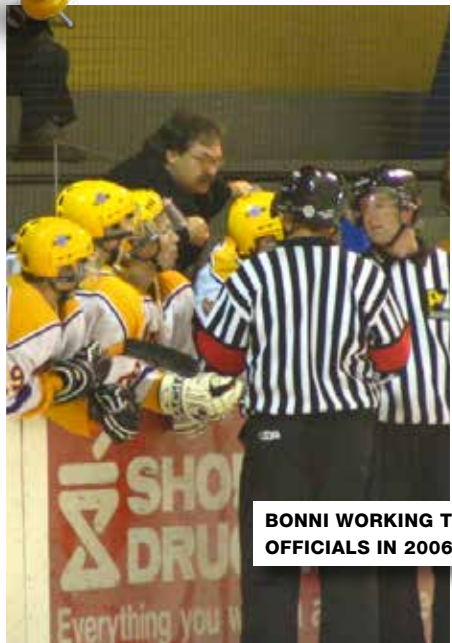
Bonni won three championships there and then moved to River East Minor Hockey and started coaching in the tier system. In three years at River East, he won a couple of championships, including

BARRY BONNI, FOUNDER, PRESIDENT AND GM OF THE MMJHL'S RIVER EAST ROYAL KNIGHTS.

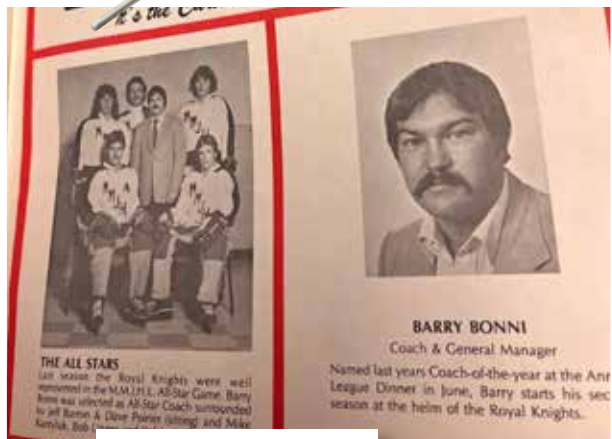
BONNI, TOP RIGHT, COACHING BRONX PARK IN 1974



BARRY BONNI BEHIND THE BENCH BACK IN 2017



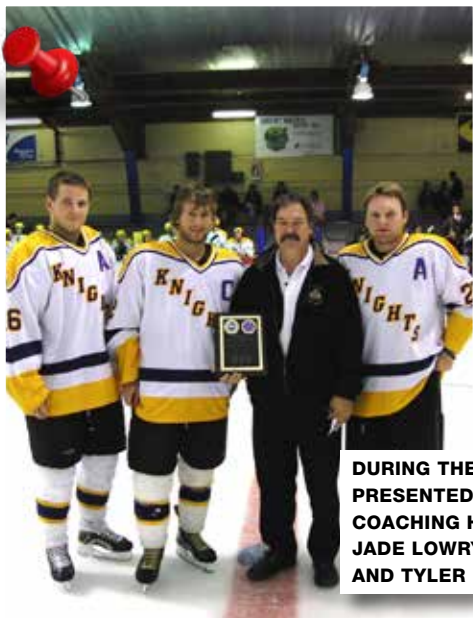
BONNI WORKING THE OFFICIALS IN 2006



THE ROYAL KNIGHTS PROGRAM FROM 1982-83



BONNI AND HIS KNIGHTS IN 2006



DURING THE 2008-09 SEASON, BONNI WAS PRESENTED WITH A SPECIAL AWARD FOR COACHING HIS 1,000TH GAME. FROM LEFT JADE LOWRY, MATT ROMANYCHYN, BONNI AND TYLER HILL.

the River East Marauders Tier 2 Juvenile team.

“In 1980, I was coaching the Marauders juvenile team and also helping the East Kildonan Knights of the MMJHL run their training camps in September,” he explained. “Then, at the end of the 1980-81 season, the Knights folded, and I looked at that and thought, ‘That’s awful, an area like River East and we’re not going to have a junior hockey team?’ And so, I ended up getting on my white horse, started a new team and I chose the name Royal Knights. I took the name Royals from River East Minor Hockey. Then I took the name Knights in respect of the East Kildonan Knights that had operated for eight years. So, I started the Royal Knights in 1981 and haven’t stopped.”

In 1981, he coached the brand-new Royal Knights to the MMJHL championship and was named Coach of the Year. Between 1986 and 1990 he led the Royal Knights to four consecutive MMJHL championships. He won his sixth title with the Knights in 2000-01 and won his fourth Coach of the Year award that same season.

He has won more than 700 of the 1000-plus games he’s coached in the MMJHL

“I’m now the senior guy in our league,” Bonni said. “Every team calls me at one point or another for advice, including Kerry Lines, our president. I appreciate that they have that respect for me that they still want to call me.

“Sometimes Kerry or somebody will say something in a meeting and then I’ll be called on to clarify stuff. Because I’ve been around so long, I was there when

a lot of the league by-laws were written. And with a lot of the rules in any league, you can read the rule and misinterpret it. But I know what it was meant to be.”

Bonni has been around so long, he’s seen three teams leave the league (the Midland Flyers, the Seven Oaks Raiders and Transcona Railers) and welcomed four new teams into the league (the Transcona Railer-Express, the Stonewall Jets, the Pembina Valley Twisters and the Raiders Junior Hockey Club).

He also spent a couple of years in the mid-1990s operating a Senior club on top of the Royal Knights.

“Yeah, for two years, 1993-94 and 1994-95, I ran the River East Rogues Sr. A team in the Winnipeg Senior A Hockey League, which got started a few years before the old CASH League folded,” he recalled. “We only operated for two seasons, but I won the championship in the first season and lost in the finals to Charleswood in the second season. Then, one of the teams bailed and a new team came in.

“And we were going to start the league with four teams, but that new team was on very shaky ground financially, and we didn’t think they’d last past Christmas. So, I said, ‘Boys, I’m not going with a three-team league. I’m out,’ and the league folded. It was fun. I will say that it was fun. But it just got to the point that, financially and competitively, something had to give. Honestly, I would have kept it going if we’d had four strong teams.”

So, as we begin the MMJHL’s 2025-26 season, Barry Bonni will have Manny



NEW HEAD COACH MANNY MINUK SR.

Minuk Sr. behind the bench with his new assistants, Anthony Jacob and Manny Minuk Jr., both former Royal Knights players themselves. The 44th year of the River East Royal Knights will look brand, spanking new.

And the new head coach is excited about the upcoming season. “Having Manny Jr. gives me a goalie coach right away and getting Anthony, Manny Jr.’s best friend, means we have two guys who know the organization and are super smart,” Minuk Sr. said. “They’re great dressing-room guys, they are both into the stats and the systems and they’re good communicators. So, I think they’re really built to be coaches.

“Barry and I always had a good relationship over the years and I’m just super honoured that he called and asked me to coach his team. With Manny Jr. and Anthony, we just want to be a part of the growth of this team and help Barry out,

and I feel very fortunate to be given the opportunity.”

Meanwhile, as Barry gets set to start his fourth campaign as the owner and president of the Royal Knights, he will admit, the jobs he undertakes are getting tougher.

“It’s been a fun ride,” Bonni said. “But it’s getting to a point where I’d like to not have the responsibility. When we started this team, we were paying \$20 an hour for ice. Now we’re paying, I think it’s \$265 an hour. It’s become a rich man’s sport, and I hate that.

“But I’ll admit, I count my pennies. We try to do everything we can for our players, but I watch our budget. After 44 years, the last thing I need is for this team to fold. I’ve done everything there is to do in hockey, but more than anything else, I want this team to go on forever and I want it to maintain the name Royal Knights.”