



THE ROYAL SUCCESSION

BY SCOTT TAYLOR

Photos by Dave Willson and Scott Taylor

AFTER 45 YEARS, BARRY BONNI HAS FINALLY SOLD HIS RIVER EAST ROYAL KNIGHTS. BUT HE DIDN'T REALLY SELL A HOCKEY TEAM. HE ENTRUSTED HIS LIFE'S WORK TO ONE OF HIS OWN.

Barry Bonni always knew this day would come. He just wasn't going to let it come with the wrong guy on the other end of the bargain. For 45 years, the River East Royal Knights have been Bonni's hockey team. He founded them. Coached them. Managed them. Owned them. Worried about them. Won championships with them. Paid the bills. Found the players. Bought the equipment. Sat through the league meetings and, more often than not, remembered why some obscure rule was written in the first place. The Royal Knights weren't simply something Barry Bonni owned. They were Barry Bonni.

So, when the 74-year-old finally decided it was time to sell the Manitoba Major Junior Hockey League franchise he founded in 1981, there was one requirement that mattered more than the purchase price: the new owner had to understand what he was buying. Enter Manny Minuk. He understands. Of course, he should. He's a true Royal Knight. "I wouldn't have sold it to just anybody," Bonni said. "For all the money in the world." And with that, one of the longest-running ownership eras in Manitoba junior hockey has come to an end - sort of. Bonni has sold the River East Royal Knights to Minuk, the club's 46-year-old head coach, former player and former championship Knight. But Barry isn't exactly disappearing.

Minuk has asked his old coach to remain as club president and mentor while the new owner learns the parts of junior hockey ownership that nobody sees from behind the bench. "It's his team now, but he asked me to stay on as president and mentor him," Bonni said. "So, I'm doing that." For Minuk, there was never any intention of buying the Royal Knights and immediately putting his own stamp on the franchise. In fact, almost the opposite is true. He bought the team because he wants the Royal Knights to remain the Royal Knights. "I promised him that I wanted the same thing he did," Minuk said. "I don't want to go rebrand and change everything and tear everything down. I don't necessarily think that's needed.

"I felt like the Bonni family should always be part of it in some capacity." That might be the most important reason the deal actually happened. Bonni started the Royal Knights in 1981 after the East Kildonan Knights folded. At the time, he couldn't imagine an area the size of River East without a junior hockey team, so he created one himself. He combined the Royals name from River East Minor Hockey with the Knights name from the former East Kildonan franchise and the River East Royal Knights were born. Then he simply never left. This is Bonni's 45th season with the Knights and, when combined with eight years coaching minor hockey, it's his 53rd consecutive year coaching, managing or operating hockey teams. Along the way, he built one of the MMJHL's signature franchises.

HAVING COFFEE WITH THE NEW OWNER OF THE ROYAL KNIGHTS, MANNY MINUK



LONGTIME OWNER AND ONETIME HEAD COACH BARRY BONNI BEHIND THE BENCH

He has coached more than 1,000 MMJHL games, won more than 700 of them, captured six league championships and was named Coach of the Year four times. His Royal Knights won four consecutive championships from 1986 through 1990, and Bonni was inducted into the Manitoba Hockey Hall of Fame in 2017. His final championship as head coach came in 2000-01.

One of his players was Manny Minuk, who produced 88 points in 80 games during two seasons with River East. In his first season, the Knights won the Jack McKenzie Trophy. In his second, they returned to the championship final.

Twenty-five years later, that former player now owns the team. There is something beautifully circular about it.

Minuk grew up in East St. Paul and played minor hockey with the Marauders, Kodiaks and Sharks before leaving for Edmonton to

attend college. He came close to making the hockey team at NAIT, but with school taking priority, he stepped away from competitive hockey.

When he returned home, he still had two years of MMJHL eligibility remaining. That brought him to Bonni and the Royal Knights.

After junior, Minuk played senior hockey briefly before his children arrived and coaching became his connection to the game. Eventually, hockey brought him back into Bonni's orbit. Last season, Bonni hired his former player as head coach of the Royal Knights - now he has sold him the franchise.

At the league meeting where the ownership change was announced, Bonni laid out Minuk's progression almost perfectly. Minuk had been a player in

the league - and a champion. Then he became the parent of a player. Then a coach. Now, an owner/coach.

Even Minuk hadn't considered his journey quite that way. The other MMJHL owners apparently approved. Minuk said the announcement was greeted with warm applause, but to be fair, he already has some respect around the league. After

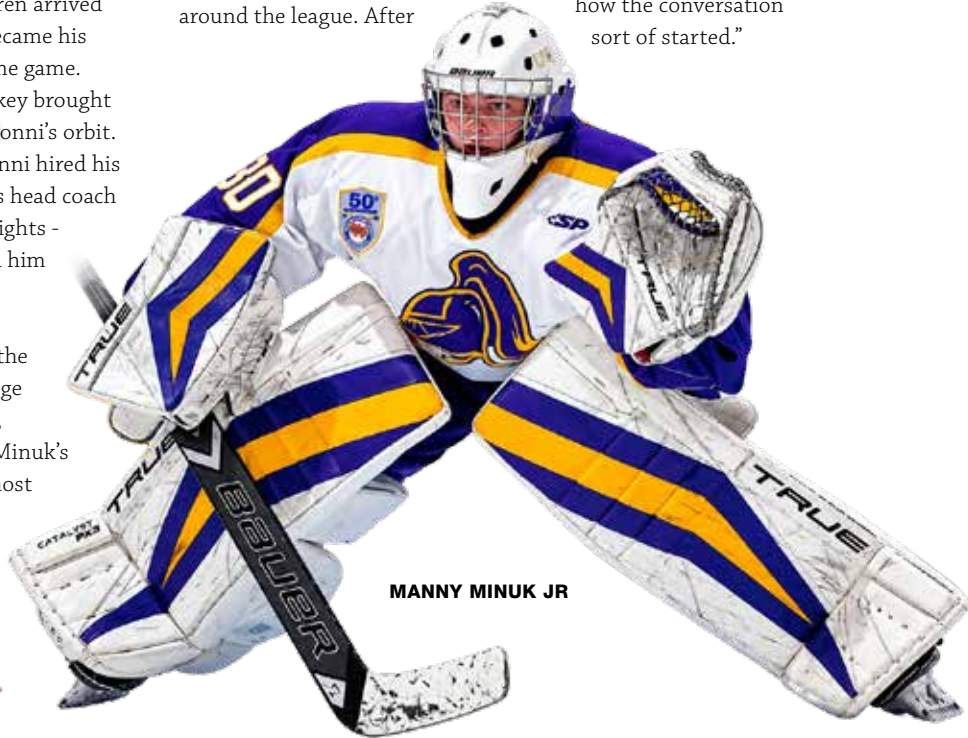
all, those same people had voted him MMJHL Coach of the Year last season.

For Bonni, however, this wasn't about winning a popularity contest. It was about survival. "The last thing I would want is in two or three years the team folds," he said. "If I wasn't confident that he'd make a go of it, I would not make this deal. I would just continue running the team until the right person came along."

Minuk became the right person almost organically. He noticed Bonni was doing virtually everything himself and simply asked if he needed some help.

Bonni's response? Maybe he'd sell the team.

"I don't know if I convinced him," Minuk said. "I think he realized or he felt that he was running out of time. He was doing everything on his own... I just kind of asked him one day if he needed a little more help with this stuff. And he just said, 'Well, maybe I'd sell the team.' And that's just how the conversation sort of started."



MANNY MINUK JR



ANTHONY JACOB

LAYNE RICHARDSON

Bonni had received expressions of interest over the years, but nothing he considered serious enough to pursue. Money was never going to be the determining factor. Legacy was.

Now Minuk intends to protect that legacy while building on it. He will remain head coach, with his son Manny Minuk Jr. and former Royal Knights captains Anthony Jacob and newcomer Layne Richardson on the coaching staff. Richardson, last season's MMJHL Hardest Working Player, gives the organization another young hockey mind with ties to the club.

Off the ice, Minuk is assembling a larger support group. His wife Lexi is helping with accounting, admissions and game-day operations. Kevin Greig will work on sponsorship. Greig's wife, Cara, is expected to operate a canteen once space can be arranged at Terry Sawchuk Arena. And former Knight Branden Douglas is helping to create an alumni association.

The objective is simple: make playing for the Royal Knights better and make attending a Royal Knights game more enjoyable.

"We're going to grow this thing based on having some sponsorship," Minuk said. "And just try to make the whole experience for the players a little bit better and for the fans... That's kind of our whole deal - to try to create a better game-day experience for fans and get fans back in the building."

Minuk brings something else to the ownership chair: business experience.

He runs a denture clinic and has already lived through a generational transition in business with his own father. That experience has shaped the way he views Bonni's continued presence.

"I'm never going to ask him to leave," Minuk said. "To me, it's still like his team,

obviously. I went through the same thing with my dad at the denture clinic. I understand what legacy means to these guys."

That might explain this entire transaction better than anything else. Minuk isn't buying something from Barry Bonni. He's carrying something forward for him.

Bonni, meanwhile, is already enjoying watching his successor rebuild some of the organizational infrastructure that naturally disappeared as the years passed.

Many of the volunteers and contacts who once helped Bonni have retired, moved on or died. Bonni himself has been retired from his professional life for eight years, making sponsorship and business contacts increasingly difficult to maintain. Now Minuk has the energy and connections to start rebuilding.

Bonni sees him doing some of the same things he did 30 years ago. And that makes stepping away a little easier. Although, not completely away. There are still league meetings. There is still paperwork. There is still the Hockey Canada registry to learn. There are still 45 years worth of knowledge that Minuk can't possibly absorb overnight - so Barry will be there. For now.

"Next year, he's on his own," Bonni joked. "I hope he remembers what I'm teaching him because I'm going to look outside and if it's snowing out, I'm going to say, 'Oh good, I'm going to stay home.' "After 53 years, I've done my time and I think I deserve the break."

He certainly does. 45 years ago, Barry Bonni climbed onto what he once called his "white horse" because he couldn't accept the idea that River East would no longer have a junior hockey team. So, he created one.

Then he spent more than half his life making certain it survived. Now, finally, Barry Bonni has passed the reins. But he made damn sure the next guy riding that horse was already a Royal Knight.

THE ASSISTANT COACHES IN THEIR PLAYING DAYS

