



## Chapter III: Northwestern Ontario Sports Hall of Fame Inductees of Finnish Heritage

*By Diane Imrie*

Since 1982 the Northwestern Ontario Sports Hall of Fame, located in Thunder Bay, Ontario, has been recognizing the outstanding accomplishments of athletes and builders through induction into the Hall of Fame.

In order for someone to be inducted into the Northwestern Ontario Sports Hall of Fame they must be nominated by a member of the public. The selection of Hall of Fame members is made by an independent Selection Committee comprised of individuals from across the region who gather each year and compare the accomplishments of the many people whose names have been submitted.

A number of Hall of Fame members are of Finnish heritage and are highlighted on the following pages. The determining factor for inclusion in this section was whether or not an individual themselves, or their parents or grandparents, were born in Finland. Although every effort was made to include as many Hall of Fame Inductees of Finnish descent as possible, the ability to determine heritage connections can often be a difficult.

The Inductee biographies contained in the following pages were written by Diane Imrie, the Executive Director of the Sports Hall of Fame. The images come from the archival collection of the Sports Hall of Fame, unless identified as being from another source.

There are also a number of athletes and builders who have been inducted into the Hall of Fame as members of teams, many of whom have Finnish roots. For the purposes of this publication only individual inductees are being highlighted in this section of the book, however, some of the team inductees are featured in the Photo Gallery. A full listing of all of the people who have been inducted into the Northwestern Ontario Sports Hall of Fame can be found at [www.nwosportshalloffame.com](http://www.nwosportshalloffame.com).

# Pentti Lund

## *Athlete Inductee (1984)*

Finnish Heritage: Born in Karijoki. Parents - Laina (Kujala) & Otto Lund (original name: Ronnlund)



This future NHLer grew up practicing on the outdoor rinks of Port Arthur with a strong dedication and passion for the game. Born in Finland, he arrived in Port Arthur in 1932 at the age of six. Playing bantam and midget hockey during his youth he quickly learned the game, creating a solid base for a successful career. Playing with the HMCS Griffin Junior Hockey team from 1943-45 he claimed the Thunder Bay Junior scoring title for two consecutive years before joining the Boston Olympics of the Eastern Amateur Hockey League. Winning the E AHL scoring title and being named to the E AHL First All-Star Team in 1947, he caught the eye of professional clubs.

Getting a feel for the National Hockey League he played in a few playoff games with the Boston Bruins from 1946-48 becoming one of the first Finnish-born players to make it to the NHL, and the first to score a goal. He continued his climb through the professional ranks while playing for the Hershey Bears of the American Hockey

League during the 1947-48 season and by the next year he was back in the NHL as a member of the New York Rangers from 1948-51. Claiming the Calder trophy as NHL's Rookie of the Year in 1949, he won the playoff scoring title a year later, in 1950.

A memorable moment in Pentti's career was when he used his smart game play and talent to stop Maurice "The Rocket" Richard from taking off with the puck through a skilled stick check that infuriated the talented Richard during the 1950 Stanley Cup playoffs.

Playing for the Boston Bruins from 1951-53, Pentti's promising hockey career was dealt a major setback when he took a stick to his eye in 1951 while playing against the Chicago Blackhawks. Unwilling to let his injury take him out of the game he spent some time in the AHL before returning to the Bruins to play out the end of the 1952-53 NHL season. Retiring from professional hockey in 1953, he left behind an NHL career total of 259 games with 44 goals, and 55 assists for a total of 99 points.



*Pentti receiving the Calder Trophy as the NHL's 1949 Rookie of the Year.*

Rounding out his hockey playing days with the Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds from 1954-55 he moved behind the bench where he spent some time coaching the Fort William Beavers Senior team and the Thunder Bay Oldtimers. Transferring his talents from the stick to the pen, he served as a sports editor with the *Times-News* for over 25 years. His contributions to the sport of hockey earned him entry into the Finnish Hockey Hall of Fame in 1992.



# Joe Wirkkunen

## Builder Inductee (2008)

Finnish Heritage: Parents - Sohvi (Partanen) born in Iisalmi & Kaarlo 'Charlie' August Wirkkunen born in Lappinlahti



Born in Port Arthur in 1928, Viljo 'Joe' Wirkkunen would go on to leave his mark on the international hockey scene and contribute to the development of hockey in his hometown. Developing a love of hockey while a young boy, his ability to pursue the game as a player was cut short when, at the age of 12, he contracted polio. Told he may never walk again, he took on the challenge to regain his strength and his determination paid off. Through extensive exercise and walking, he went on to win walkathons and remain active in sports such as baseball, curling and golf throughout much of his life.

Wanting to stay involved in hockey, he became a technician of the game, serving as a referee and coach in the Port Arthur minor hockey program during the 1940s. In the early 1950s Finland was searching for a Finnish speaking instructor with knowledge of the Canadian ice hockey system. Port Arthur resident Frank Sargent, who was a former President of the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association,

sought suggestions from the local hockey community, and Joe's name was recommended. Travelling to Finland in 1951 he gave lectures and ran hockey clinics and helped the National Team prepare for the 1952 Olympics in Oslo.

Returning to Finland as Head Coach of the National Team in 1959, he became the first non-Finnish born person appointed to that position. Taking teams to the 1960 and 1964 Olympics and 4 World Championships, he led Finland to the 1962 European Championship silver medal, the best showing by any Finnish hockey team up to that point.

In addition to his coaching duties, he also wrote three instructional books in Finnish for coaches and players. Finishing up his head coaching duties in 1966, he was often called upon to travel with the team to various competitions throughout the 1970s. Credited with laying the foundation upon which their nation built a strong hockey program, the Finnish government awarded Joe the Silver Medal for Merit in Sport in 1978. In 1985 he was amongst the first slate of individuals inducted into the Finnish Hockey Hall of Fame. This builder of sport, who passed away in 1986, also contributed his talents to the hockey programs of Thunder Bay, serving as the first coach of the Thunder Bay Twins and as a coach in the Port Arthur Minor Hockey league during the 1980s, marking over 40 years of involvement in the game of hockey.



*Joe coaching the Finnish team at the World Championships (third from right).*