WILD ICE

Celebrating Canada's game in Canmore



JUNGMIN HAM RMO PHOTO

The fate of Alex Kaleta's 'hat trick' hat

A good hat can serve many needs: built to brave the elements, keeping cool in the shade, or just looking undeniably stylish.

For Alex Kaleta, a brimmed hat that came into his possession transcended pop culture and has become the stuff of legends. All because of a friendly little bet.

Clapping pucks for the New York Rangers and Chicago Black Hawks (two words back then), the Canmore born and raised hockey player had a nearly 20-year professional career from 1938-55, but Kaleta is most famously known for his playful involvement in popularizing the iconic "hat trick" term.

According to the NHL and Hockey Hall of Fame, while playing for the Black Hawks in 1946, Kaleta was in Toronto for a game and wanted to buy a new hat while in town.

Without sufficient funds to purchase the fancy fedora that caught his eye, the shop owner and Kaleta made a deal that if he scored three goals against the Maple Leafs that evening, he could return and have the hat for free. Like a Rocky Mountain avalanche, Kaleta hit fast and hit hard, scoring four times in the 6-5 loss to Toronto.

Sammy Taft, the owner of the hat shop, said the press ran with the story and he recalled hearing on the radio about "Alex Kaleta's hat trick."

While many would think Kaleta's brown-brimmed hat, a piece of sports history, would be behind glass in a sports museum, the reality is it won't ever get the chance for its close-up.

Linda Lamb, daughter of Milly (Kaleta) Lazzarotto, and niece of the NHL player, spoke highly of her beloved uncle, sharing stories from his youth to his professional career and, ultimately, what ever happened to the famous hat.

A star on the ice and in the family, there was much joy from everybody back home when Kaleta returned. Nieces and nephews would gather together and "Uncle Alec" gave incredible gifts from faraway places and regaled them with extraordinary stories from his travels.

"Oh my gosh, he was such a lovable man," said Lamb. "He was always full of stories – stories of not his achievements but humorous things. He was always performing. We used to wait for his stories, he used to act things out. We just loved him. He had a wonderful personality, very happy."

The jovial fella's chipper attitude would even agitate the opposing team's stormy fans, said Lamb.

"They would boo him and he would be up there, waving his hands and laughing. They could never irritate him," said Lamb. "That was just the way he was. He was a happy person."

Always with a story to tell, Kaleta was a humble man. He rarely, if ever, spoke about himself or his hockey career around the kids.

So much so that Lamb and her siblings weren't aware of Uncle Alec's claim-to-fame until they heard about it on television 50 years after the fact.

KALETA CONTINUED ON A22



Alex Kaleta wearing the "hat trick" hat.
PHOTO COURTESY OF LINDA LAMB

The Red Barn holds a special place for me and many hockey people in Canmore. The Red Barn was an outdoor rink next to the old daycare in Larch. For years, the ice was well maintained, and locals from the community would gather to play shinny during the winter. Multiple generations of people from the Bow Valley played together as friends at the Red Barn. If you ask a local about the Red Barn, they'll say it's where some of the best games in Canmore have been played and for me, it's the place where I've had the most fun playing hockey.

EVAN McFEETERS
PRAIRIE HOCKEY ACADEMY, U18 PREP HEAD COACH

KALETA CONTINUED FROM A21

When a player scores three goals, or a hat trick, they are showered with a barrage of caps flying onto the ice from the audience in the stands.

Growing up Canadian, this is household knowledge.

"The initial hat that my uncle got for the hat trick, he did give it to my uncle, Art, at one point, but we knew nothing of this hat trick until probably the mid-'90s," said Lamb. "But anyway, my uncle had no idea he had this hat that my Uncle Alec gave to him and he said he wore it until he wore it out. He said, 'Oh my gosh, I would have never done that' and he said he threw it out.

"He said, 'I had the hat from the hat trick and didn't know it.' He felt so bad when he heard the stories."

It's about as iconic as a phrase can get, but many of many in Kaleta's family were blissfully unaware.

Originating in England in the 1850s during a game of cricket, the hat trick phrase exploded in popularity in North America following that fateful day in Toronto. Despite its English roots in another sport, hat trick is chiselled in all things hockey (and if England doesn't like it, we can send Ryan Reeves over there).

A Canmore legend

One of seven children, Kaleta was born in the small mountain town west of Calgary in 1919.

At a very young age, the young mountain boy learned to skate in his backyard in an unusual way.



Alex Kaleta's New York Rangers jersey and Chicago Black Hawks emblem. PHOTO COURTESY OF LINDA LAMB

"From what I understand from my family and from my mum, he learned to skate with one skate and one boot," said Lamb. "She said, 'Who knows where the skate came from.'"

Lamb said her grandmother used to toss out the used dishwater during winter and that's how the little rink in their backyard was made.

"We used to laugh because mum said in those days you never used to strain your dishwasher or anything so there would be bits of vegetables and everything in the water and she would just throw it out there and that's what he learned to skate on," said Lamb.

For being such a small community, Canmore has been described as a "hockey hotspot."

Banff's Eddie Hunter, a mountain legend in his own right, recalls Kaleta being the "big Canmore hope at that time."

Born in 1926, Hunter was seven years younger than Kaleta but watched the future NHL player skate around on local ice.

"I don't remember playing against him, but I remember him being a good skater and a good hockey player," said Hunter.

Known for his speed, Kaleta was nicknamed Seabiscuit after the famed racehorse. On skates, Kaleta was called an "ice sprawler", meaning someone who takes up a lot of space when barrelling down the ice with the puck.

He played for the Canmore Briquettes before turning pro with the Black Hawks in 1941-42 before being called to war duty, and then returned to Chicago in the 1945-46 season.

During the three years he was out of the NHL due to the Second World War, Kaleta played in Calgary for the Currie Army. Lamb noted her grandmother's Polish food and casserole were a big hit with the boys in the dressing room during home games.

From 1948-51 he played in the Empire State for the New York Rangers.

Nearly six feet tall and weighing 170 pounds, the 1946 Chicago Stadium Review's description of Kaleta noted he was a "big boy" and "sturdy body checker."

Kaleta was married and had two children.

"He never told us much about his career other than his life was hockey," said Lamb. "He played it, he coached it, he directed it, it was in his blood that's for sure."

Kaleta passed away in 1987.

