



That winning season

Gathering for former player stirs memories of Blackhawks' Stanley Cup season

The same weekend as the inaugural Blackhawks Convention in Chicago, a slightly smaller version took place in Buffalo Grove, complete with video clips, autographs, and vintage memorabilia.

Even a former player and a member of the Blackhawks ownership team were on hand to celebrate. It took place at the Claremont Rehab and Living Center, a skilled nursing facility for about



Eileen O. Daday
Staff news

200 residents. Among them is Reggie Fleming, the so-called "Enforcer," who played with the Blackhawks for four seasons, including the 1961 Stanley Cup championship team.

Fleming has lived at the facility since suffering a stroke more than two years ago, which has affected his speech and mobility, though he retains vivid memories of his years as a Blackhawk, and of his 11 seasons with the National Hockey League.

The gathering took place as a tribute to Fleming, and as a hook to spark conversation between residents and the young hockey fans on hand.

As part of a special series called "Lifting the Human Spirit by Visiting the Sick," teens gathered together with some of the residents to mingle and reminisce about the Blackhawks' championship season, and one of its star players.

Rabbi James Gordon, pastoral director at the Claremont, formed the group as an intergenerational program, to uplift health care patients and foster compassion in young people.

He chose sports as a common interest between the two



One of those in attendance brought a Blackhawks program with Reggie Fleming on the cover to the Claremont Rehab and Living Center in Buffalo Grove.

groups, and already has brought in several celebrities, from Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White, a former Cubs pitcher, to NBC sportscaster Bruce Wolf.

The Blackhawks rally opened up with a video tribute to Fleming and his teammates, captured in "The Forgotten Champs," before breaking up to talk one-on-one.

"My favorite memory is scoring that tying goal," Fleming said during the tribute, referring to the goal that tied the sixth game of the final series between the Blackhawks and the Detroit Red Wings, enabling the Hawks to win the game, 6-1, and the championship in Detroit.

He went on to describe to his young visitor, Wheeling High School junior Michael Pierro of Arlington Heights, about how he had earned the role of the "enforcer."

Fleming described how his coach, Rudy Pilous, had told him to protect his star players, Bobby Hull and Stan Mikita.

"When one of your players is in trouble," Fleming recalls Pilous saying, "you just don't walk away."



Longtime Blackhawks fan Joel Grauer, right, of Buffalo Grove was able to get Reggie Fleming's autograph on a miniature hockey stick he got at his first Blackhawks game in 1970 at the age of 7.

Fans at the gathering noted, ironically, that a rematch between the Blackhawks and the Red Wings was just formalized, as the second Winter Classic, set to take place Jan. 1 at Wrigley Field.

On hand for the Claremont event was Sunny Wirtz, wife of the late Blackhawks executive vice president, Michael Wirtz, and aunt of Hawks chairman Rocky Wirtz. Besides Fleming, she was the only other person there, who had been at the game in Detroit to see the Hawks clinch the title.

"I drank from the Stanley Cup," she declared.

Joel Grauer of Buffalo Grove brought a replica wooden hockey stick for Fleming to autograph, while another visitor had brought an original Chicago Stadium program from the 1962-63 season that featured Fleming on the front, which they hoped



Sunny Wirtz, part of the Blackhawks ownership team, visits with residents like Carolyn Ripes at The Claremont Rehab and Living Center in Buffalo Grove.

Fleming would sign.

"It's my first stick, from when I went to my first Blackhawks game," Grauer said, before pointing to his father, a Claremont resident, who had taken him to the game.

Underlining the afternoon was optimism about this year's

team and their capabilities.

"We're going to have a good team this year, with all those young kids," Wirtz said.

Fleming seemed cautiously optimistic, reverting back to his days as the enforcer.

"We'll see," he said, "if they're strong enough."