

# ALMOST A THISTLE?

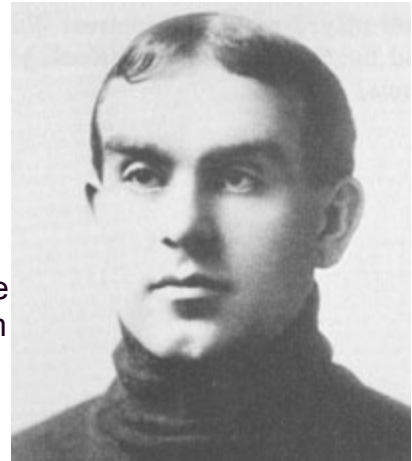
FREDERICK WELLINGTON TAYLOR

**CYCLONE**

(1884-1979)

"Where the hell did you come from?" inquired incredulous **Kenora Thistles'** rover **Si Griffis** to the stocky, prematurely balding young man a half foot shorter than he.

The young man looked up with his dark, piercing gaze, framed perfectly by a pair of arched eyebrows that gave him a confident, almost haughty countenance. "I'm from **Listowel...**" he replied. "Anything wrong with that?"



The long-legged Thistles rover shook his head and skated away. Griffis had seen the best, played against the best, and was even considered one of the best-- he and teammate **Tommy Phillips**. From the Maritime Provinces to the western port of **Vancouver, British Columbia** the amateur hockey world was abuzz with the amazing talented team from Kenora, Ontario, and suddenly those very Thistles were whispering amongst themselves about the impressive, never-before-seen talents of one **Frederick Wellington Taylor**, later known as **Cyclone**, the most electrifying hockey player of his generation.

Tommy Phillips, the Thistles' captain, though he may not have known at the time, had a fateful link to this scrappy player from the small Ontario town of Listowel. Taylor was the man fingered by **Ontario Hockey Association** (O.H.A.) exec **William A. Hewitt** to replace Phillips' recently vacated "star" role on the **Toronto Marlboros** hockey club roster. Phillips and talented net minder **Eddie Giroux** ditched the strictly amateur "Marlies" to come west and play for the Thistles, who were likely to be offering some form of payment for both their services. Taylor, a stubborn young iconoclast, had refused Hewitt's advances, preferring to stay put in his tiny home town, playing for the local junior team and working at a nearby piano factory, rather than go to the famed, big city club that had played for the **Stanley Cup** only ten months prior. Hewitt took the rebuff personally, and told Taylor he'd never play hockey in Ontario again, and for a year, the incredible talents of the **Listowel Pistol** lay dormant.

After a year of blacklisting a frustrated Taylor came west to try his hand with the

**Portage La Prairie Plains** hockey club playing out of the **Manitoba Hockey League** (M.H.L). Portage La Prairie had been, up to Taylor's acquisition, an also-ran; usually served up as fodder for their more talented league rivals from **Rat Portage** (later Kenora) **Ontario**, and **Brandon, Manitoba**. In this particular game versus the Thistles, however, the outcome was different. Taylor raced up and down the ice, matching Phillips, the premiere two-way player of the era, skate for skate, even managing to best him on a few nifty takeaways and scoring opportunities. Simply put, Tommy Phillips could not keep up. The old saying goes, 'If ya can't beat 'em join 'em', and rather than defecting to the moribund Plains, Griffis and Phillips had an idea. They decided to talk to Taylor over coffee, ham and eggs at a local late night cafe. They were to talk to him about joining their team. No doubt the toast wasn't the only thing being buttered up as the three sat around that small Portage La Prairie cafe table drinking coffee and talking business, hockey style. Griffis and Phillips knew they were good enough to run away with yet another league title and challenge for the Stanley Cup for the third time in four years. Taylor, it was mutually agreed, would put them over the top. Portage La Prairie was, by this time, out of the running, so a deal was struck where Taylor would be loaned to Kenora for the eventual Stanley Cup challenge match, or so Taylor recalled years later in **Eric Whitehead's** colorful 1977 biography.

Unfortunately, Kenora never got a chance to play that challenge match, either in the early spring of 1906, or against their hated rival, the **Ottawa "Silver Seven"**. In fact, the whole story seems a bit too good to be true.

The common legend, entrenched in the securest realms of hockey lore, tells an engaging tale where Taylor, by phone, dramatically accepts a professional position with **Houghton-Portage Lakes** of the Michigan-based **International (Professional) Hockey League** (I.H.L.) the day before he is bound to hop aboard a Thistle-infested boxcar bound for **Montreal, Quebec** to take on the **Montreal Wanderers** for the right to hoist Lord Stanley's Cup. At the time this whole scenario is supposed to take place, however (late January or early February of 1906), the Silver Seven, not the Wanderers were the reigning Stanley Cup Champs, and would be until Montreal, by virtue of holding off the Silver Seven in a two game/total goals playoff series in mid-March, captured both the **Eastern Canada Amateur Hockey Association** (E.C.A.H.A.) title and the championship chalice. Also, the Thistles would still have to wrap up their league title (and hold off a pesky **Winnipeg Winnipeg** club) in order to even be able to submit a challenge. So, what's the deal?

The remarkably crisp recollections of the Cyclone's 90 year-old mind respected, the most likely scenario has Griffis and Phillips asking Taylor to play for the Thistles for the remainder of the season as well as the Stanley Cup playoffs. A financial compensation might even have been bandied about, but not a sum substantial enough to eclipse the \$400 (plus expenses) offered by Houghton-Portage Lakes. Even if he had agreed, Taylor might not have been around to

play in Kenora's eventual Stanley Cup challenge match which, due to the lateness of the conclusion of both the E.C.A.H.A. and M.H.L. seasons, was held over until the following January. So, what about that memorable *train ride never taken*? Well, there could be several possibilities. Perhaps the Thistles were going to Montreal to play a couple of exhibition games versus the Wanderers, though that scenario is not documented and considering the duration and expense of the journey, probably not economically feasible. Another possibility is that the train ride could have been the **Canadian Pacific Railroad** (C.P.R.) ride back to Kenora. The Thistles were, after all, on the road. It wouldn't make sense for them to leave for Montreal from Portage La Prairie without first stopping home. Perhaps the train ride in question was simply one back to the twisty, frozen shores of the **Lake of the Woods**.

One thing is for certain. The mutual respect held by Taylor and both Griffis and Phillips was so lasting that a year and a half later Cyclone was persuaded to sign a contract with the Silver Seven, who had also signed Phillips, and in 1912, was game enough to sign on with the **Vancouver Millionaires**, based in part on Griffis' and Phillips' presences, although Phillips had decided to call it quits before the season actually commenced.

Taylor may or may not have embellished on certain aspects of his extraordinary history, but when one has such a history, where superhuman feats upon the ice were more often than not the norm, occasional flights of fancy can be forgiven, and even celebrated despite tendencies towards the physically impossible. Take for instance Taylor's nonagenarian reminiscence that if he had come to Portage La Prairie just a few weeks earlier, he might have been invited to play for the **Dawson City Nuggets**. The Nuggets were in the midst of their arduous 4,700 mile journey from the Yukon to Ottawa to face the Silver Seven in what was to become a legendary challenge match, and were picking up as much help as they could get their gold enriched hands on before their infamous date with destiny 1,400 miles to the east. Unfortunately, The Klondikers came traveling through the fair Manitoba city in early January of 1905, not January of 1906, and at that time, the blacklisted Cyclone was still stringing pianos back in little Listowel!