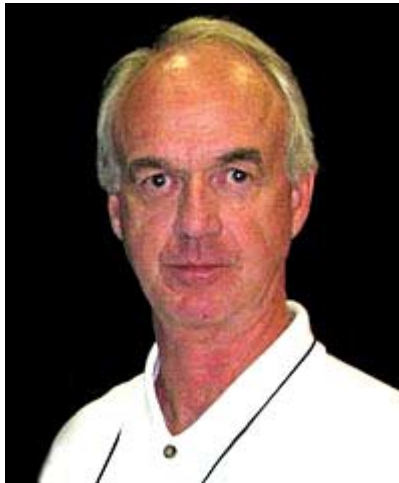


Gord Tumilson, Goalie Whisperer

Winnipeg, Manitoba

By Scott Taylor



Gord Tumilson

His first National Hockey League tryout was with the Los Angeles Kings in 1971. A year later, he was the No. 3 goalie for the World Hockey Association's Winnipeg Jets.

For a kid who started his hockey career at the old Northwood Community Centre and played Junior A for the Kildonan North Stars, even being the No. 3 goaltender with the WHA Jets was a dream come true.

"I'd tried out for the Kings and when I didn't stick, I went and played with the St. Boniface Mohawks for a year," Tumilson recalled. "Then I got calls from both the Buffalo Sabres and the Winnipeg Jets. Bill Gibb was the local scout for Buffalo and they were going to give me a look, but at the time, the Jets had nobody. Joe Daley and Ernie

Wakely hadn't even been mentioned yet, let alone signed, so when Bill Robinson called me from the Jets, I jumped at the chance.

"I went up against a pretty good goalie named Wayne Dahl, from Yorkton, and another guy I don't even remember, but I won the job. I guess I was cheaper."

Tumilson stayed for three years as the No. 3 goalie (read: practice goalie) for the Jets. He played in only three games, during the 1972-73 season, and finished with an 0-2-0 record with a goals against average of 5.66 and a save percentage of .846. Then, as he says, "I went off and got married and had a real life."

Like most people, he's done a lot of things during his life, but today he's a successful marketing consultant and sales executive by day and then, at night, he has become "The Goalie Whisperer."

Now, in his 60th year, Tumilson has taken the skills he learned as a member of the Jets – and a guy who played with two great goalies, Daley and Wakely, every day – and turned those lessons into a part-time job, a job he approaches with the same passion he did when he played.

It's been said, by many sports experts, that star players don't make good coaches and they might be right. Wayne Gretzky was a terrible NHL coach in Phoenix, baseball Hall of Famer Ted Williams lost 90 more games than he won as a manager with Washington and Texas and the great Magic Johnson went 5-11 in 16 games as coach of the L.A. Lakers in 1994.

But players who reached a high level and yet didn't get to play much at that level have, quite often, become great coaches. It's been said they spent much of their time learning the game. Coaching stars such as Jim Leyland, Pat Burns, Scotty Bowman, the late Chuck Daly, were never great players, but they were all tremendous coaches.

"Arnold Palmer believed that golf was 90-per cent in your head and just 10 per cent physical ability or skill," Tumilson said. "You absolutely have to have the 10 per cent. If you have no skill, you're not going anywhere. But a lot of people have the skill. You have plenty of junior goaltenders. There are probably 100 goalies in the NHL, if you count it at three goalies per team. Skill is a given.

"But those guys, playing at the top level of the game, are also close to the 90 per cent mark when it comes to the mental part of playing goal. Getting goalies to the 90 per cent level is what I do."

There are plenty of goaltending schools available to young goalies – good ones, too. But as Tumilson says, "While the assembly-line goalie coaches turn out really good technical goalies, it's that 90 per cent that these coaches don't bother with enough."

Tumilson says he spends most of his time trying to get his goaltenders to the highest possible level of that 90 per cent category.

"Every goalie I've coached over the past two years is still playing at the highest level at which they can play," Tumilson said. "Every kid who comes to me with his heart in it, who really wants to live the dream, is still living the dream."

The young goalies who come to Tumilson have two advantages: (1) the experience gained from the level he reached and (2) an older coach who deals with kids in a quiet, almost dispassionate manner. He's as much a friend as he is a coach.



Gord Tumilson, goalie for the Winnipeg Jets.

"I went a long way as a goalie without very much talent," he said. "But I spent most of my time playing with the Jets just trying to figure it out. Everything I did and every success I had was learned. It wasn't because I was a natural or because I was just good at it. As a result, I know what to tell a kid. I can give him all the answers in a progressive way."

One of Tumilson's star pupils is Eastman Triple A Midget star, Austin Lotz. Lotz, 15, is considered the best teenaged goaltending prospect in the province and was ranked as the No. 2 goalie available in the 2010 Western Hockey League bantam draft by the Everett Silver Tips.

The Everett Herald wrote: "The Everett Silver Tips didn't target goaltending in the draft, but the team believes it got a steal in seventh rounder Austin Lotz. Lotz, who was the 21st goaltender taken, was ranked by the Tips as the second-best goalie available. Lotz, who comes from rural Manitoba, may have slipped under the radar."

Lotz's success makes Tumilson proud. In fact, The Goalie Whisperer still works with Lotz on a weekly basis. Lotz is a result of Tumilson's coaching theory: "STPHF."

"It's an acronym for 'Stop the Puck, Have Fun,'" Tumilson explained. "It's great that these kids are getting better and better because they're conquering the mental part of the game, but it also has to be fun for them. I loved playing goal. I was excited every time I stepped on the ice. That's part of what I try to impart on these kids. I give these kids all the answers in a positive and progressive way."

"I'm not trying to knock the technical guys. They're tremendous coaches. But it's rare when a coach will spend the amount of time I spend with a youngster talking about the

other 90 per cent of the game. Every kid I've coached has moved on to the next level. I'm quite proud of that."

What makes Gord Tumilson different from many of the high-end technical coaches out there is the fact that everything Tumilson teaches was discovered through his own trial and error, through his own testing and, in a lesser way, from his own training. Tumilson didn't become a professional goalie coach until he was in his 50s. As a result, he's spent his life creating a program that would produce results.

So if you have a grandchild or even a teenager who just so happens to be a goalie and wants to reach the next level, Gord Tumilson might be the answer.

"We teach a kid everything he needs to know in the first two practices," Tumilson said. "Then we spend the rest of the year putting the mental and emotional side of the game together. Stop the Puck, Have Fun. It's a philosophy that I know works. I see it working every day."