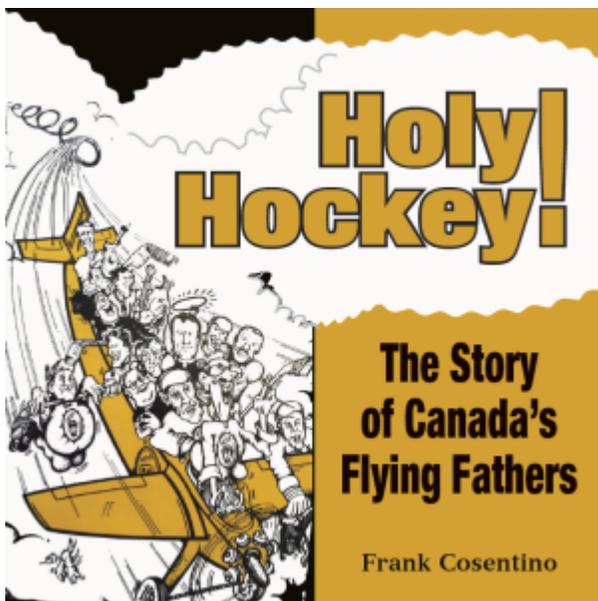


Next generation of Flying Fathers hits the ice with a mission

The Flying Fathers hockey team is close to a resurrection, and an Edmonton-area priest is a part of it.

For more than four decades, starting in 1963, the Flying Fathers were hockey's version of the Harlem Globetrotters basketball team. They entertained audiences with a combination of slapstick comedy, self-deprecating gags, pies in the face – and quality hockey – to raise more than \$4 million for charity.



Frank Cosentino's book "Holy Hockey: The Story of Canada's Flying Fathers" was published in 2018. Burnstown Publishing House

The late Rev. Les Costello, who had won a Stanley Cup with Toronto Maple Leafs in 1948 before entering the priesthood, co-founded the team with Rev. Brian McKee of Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.

The Flying Fathers toured throughout North America and Europe, racking up 900 wins and only six losses as they played for crowds in the thousands. The largest audience was 15,396 in Vancouver.

They were stars on the ice and their exploits were chronicled in newspapers, on TV and – most recently – in the Frank Cosentino book *Holy Hockey: The Story of Canada's Flying Fathers*, published last year. In their heyday, there was even a Hollywood movie offer, although that was turned down.

Age, health and other issues led to the team's final game in 2008. But now Rev. John Perdue, the vocations director for the Diocese of Peterborough, is spearheading a possible Flying Fathers comeback.

"At a certain point in Canada, everyone in the Catholic world knew of the Flying Fathers," he said. "It was sort of in the air ... The heart and soul of it is the joy of the priests and getting families to come out and have a beautiful night together."

"What do the faithful of God want? Are they interested? What does the Church need? We've had some talks about the value of this for a Church with a wounded image of the priesthood right now ... We're trying map out what can we be to contribute to the kingdom of God in Canada."

Some may call it coincidence, others providence. But a series of events led to a three-game Flying Fathers charity benefit tour in late February in the Ottawa area, playing against teams organized by the local communities.



Rev. Kris Schmidt

At centre ice was the only Western Canadian member of this new group, Rev. Kris Schmidt, pastor of Our Lady of the Angels Parish in Fort Saskatchewan, northeast of Edmonton.

The next-generation Flying Fathers have their own purpose: to combine Canada's love of hockey, the Church's evangelization, and a demystification of the priesthood at a time when it's under intense scrutiny.

"I love sport and I love my faith, and this brings the two together," Father

Kris said. "People need to see the humanity of the priesthood as well. It makes them understand faith differently and makes priests more approachable. Seeing a bunch of priests playing hockey and goofing off while doing it definitely achieves that goal. When I went to seminary, I knew that if I ever became a priest, that it was something I wanted to become involved with.

"This can become a bridge for that new evangelization that we always talk about that we're trying to do. Hockey is a big part of their life, and now this creates a bridge for them into their life of faith."

In Pembroke, Ont., proceeds from the game organized by Rev. Pat Blake, an original Flying Father, benefited two retirement homes. About 1,000 people watched as the priests challenged a team of local minor hockey coaches.

At a standing-room-only game in Fort Coulonge, Que., northwest of Ottawa, the Flying Fathers played against a team of high school students, raising funds for their school and the local St. Pierre Parish.

In Parry Sound, Ont., they played a Knights of Columbus squad, with proceeds going to a pregnancy crisis centre, a hospice and Habitat for Humanity.

"One of the joys of it was like the radiant face of the kid who took a pie in the face in Fort Coulonge," Father Perdue recalled. "He was all smiles. He wanted his program signed. He'll go and tell his buddies at the high school about the Flying Fathers."



Rev. John Perdue

The original Flying Fathers were well known in the Peterborough area where Perdue grew up. His grandfather was the sports editor of a local newspaper, so

he'd heard a lot about them but had never seen them play.

While at St. Augustine's Seminary in Scarborough, Ont., Perdue and other seminarians would play hockey every Friday at a local arena.

"We would joke that maybe someday we'll play for the Flying Fathers."

A series of personal connections led Perdue to Rev. John McPherson, a parish priest in Kentville, N.S.. who had played for the Flying Fathers and co-managed the team with retired Ontario Provincial Police officer Frank Quinn in its final 12 seasons.

While in seminary, Perdue had called McPherson twice to ask about the Flying Fathers. "He never returned my calls! I kind of joke about it because we're playing together now."

After he was ordained, he gave up asking until one of the ushers at Peterborough's Cathedral of St. Peter-in-Chains – Frank Quinn himself – raised the subject. He ended up going to Quinn's place for dinner.

"I sat for about three hours listening to stories about Father Costello and the Flying Fathers and their antics and how they grew, their popularity, and the possibility of a movie about them with (director) Francis Ford Coppola, just all of the exploits of the Flying Fathers, the meeting with the Pope at the Vatican. Frank knows all the stories."

Back when Perdue was still at St. Augustine's, seminarians had organized a hockey tournament with young men in the area. It grew to eight teams, including the seminarians, and was dubbed the "Father Costello Classic" in honour of the Flying Father original.

In 2017, organizers said they wanted to play against a team of priests.

"I'm sitting there going 'Oh boy, Is this moment?' " Perdue recalled. He told them, "I think I can pull together a team of hockey playing priests, but we can't do that and not invoke the legacy of the Flying Fathers."

In the middle of that organizing meeting, Perdue called Quinn, who came immediately.

"It had this feeling ... of a Wild West scene. He kind of kicks the door down and bursts into the room and he's got the hat on and the jacket on and all the swag. He just starts telling stories, because that's what Frank does."

The original Flying Fathers agreed to lend their name to this new group. New jerseys were made and they bought a trophy. In January 2018, the winner of the Frank Costello Classic played against a team of priests in Ennismore, northwest of Peterborough. It was a sellout.

The consensus among the priest players was 'We really enjoyed that and it could

be a positive news story for the priests and the Church in Canada,'" Perdue said. "So we began pulling together a tour."

Unbeknownst to Father Kris, the organizer of the tour had seen him play in a Hockey Helps the Homeless charity hockey tournament in Edmonton last spring with an alumnus of the Flying Fathers. They had also seen his vocation video produced by the Archdiocese of Edmonton, which opens with Father Kris on the ice.

The Flying Fathers team would pay for him to fly out to Ontario to join in the tour. When Father Kris asked Archbishop Richard Smith for his permission, the answer was a gentle no.

"The archbishop told me 'Well, you're a first-year pastor. Maybe you're better off to wait a year before you do that.' So that's the answer I gave them," Father Kris said.

"When Father John McPherson found out, he said 'Let me make some calls.'"

Father McPherson, a native Nova Scotian like Archbishop Smith, pulled out the home province card.

"The next time I saw the archbishop in October, he said 'Listen, you have some influential friends. If you want to go, you have my blessing!'"

By all accounts, the February tour was a hit.

"It's a hockey game like you haven't seen before," Perdue laughs. "It's a mixture of good quality hockey but we also mix in gags or antics. The odd time a referee or an opponent will get a pie in the face or he might get a tick from behind by Smitty the clown. There are gags and bits worked into quality hockey to make it humorous and enjoyable."

"It's more about entertainment than playing a real hockey game," Father Kris added. "Cream pies are probably our favourite shtick. It's just different ways to get the other team involved and to entertain the crowd and an opportunity to cheat so that we always win.

"The Flying Fathers don't get penalties, because the refs are in our back pocket!"

Aside from the comedy, organizers say the quality of hockey has to be good. The team's founder, Father Costello, played for the Leafs when they were winning. The Leafs haven't won a Stanley Cup since 1967.

"I would say we're as likely to win a Cup as the Leafs are!" Perdue joked. "I'd

put us at about a good high school hockey team, but our farm team is looking promising.”

The “trial run” in February was well received, he said.

“I think there’s enough momentum that we would begin now to consider where would our next tour be and when would it be.”

What the future holds is uncertain, Perdue said.

“I know that God is guiding it, but I’m not sure yet where it would be guided to.”