

CLINTON, NEW YORK

The Biggest Little Hockey Town in the USA

BY JIM MANCUSO

A PHILADELPHIA SPORTSWRITER ONCE SAID: “Tonight Philadelphia (population 1,425,000) plays Clinton, New York (population 1,680). In this there must be a story.” Indeed, Clinton, New York earned the nickname “the biggest little hockey town in the USA” as a result of the big hockey accomplishments made by the small upstate New York village.

The origin of organized hockey in Clinton can be traced largely to one individual — Albert I. Prettyman. Considered to be the father of college hockey in the USA, Prettyman brought the game of hockey to Clinton when he arrived at Hamilton College as the school’s athletic director in 1917. Since then Clinton has made its mark in hockey on the minor professional, amateur, high school, youth and college ranks, winning championships on every level.

The Clinton Comets, originally known as the Clinton Hockey Club, were one of the most successful and storied teams in hockey history. The Clinton Hockey Club was established in 1927–28 and was composed entirely of local amateur players. Edward Stanley, the club’s founder, served as business manager of the team from 1927 to 1973 and was team coach from 1927 to 1947. Stanley, revered locally as “Mr. Hockey,” also played a vital role in the development and growth of amateur hockey in New York State and in the United States. He held several offices in the hockey world and took part in organizing several hockey leagues.

Clinton became a member of the Amateur Athletic Union in 1930–31, the organization’s first year of governing ice hockey in the United States. By the 1933–34 season the Clinton Hockey Club, still composed of local talent, was playing in the National AAU Tournament at Madison Square Garden against the Hershey Bears. Clinton took part in four other national AAU tournaments (1939–40, 1940–41, 1941–42 and 1946–47) and is tied with the famed St. Nicholas Hockey Club of New York City for the most appearances in the National AAU

Tournament with five. The Clinton team also won or shared in four Adirondack District AAU titles in the 1930s and 1940s. Members of the Clinton Hockey Club were invited to try out for the 1932, 1940 and 1948 Olympics and various World Championship tourna-



Pete Babando spent the final seven seasons of his career in Clinton.

ments. In 1940, Clinton was one of only two municipalities in the United States (along with New York City) to have two members (Prettyman and Stanley) serve on the United States Olympic Ice Hockey Committee.

Albert I. Prettyman, Hamilton College athletic director and hockey coach from 1917 to 1946, helped put Clinton on the hockey map. Prettyman was chairman of the ice hockey rules committee for the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) from 1926 to 1946, he served on the United States Olympic Ice Hockey Committee in 1932, 1936 and 1940, he helped lead the United States team to a bronze medal in the 1936 Olympics, he received the degree of Doctor of Hockey from the NCAA in March of 1949 and was the first person elected to the American Hockey Coaches Association's Hall of Fame in 1951.

The Clinton club suspended operations for three seasons during World War II (1942–43, 1943–44 and 1944–45) because of a lack of players. With the war over by the fall of 1945, Edward Stanley attempted to resurrect the club, but there was still a shortage of skaters in Clinton. Stanley's team combined forces with Hamilton College (which also had a deficiency of players) for the 1945–46 season and formed what became known as the "Town and Gown" team. The club would play under the name Clinton Hockey Club.

In 1947–48, the Clinton Hockey Club changed its affiliation from the AAU to the Amateur Hockey Association of the United States. Clinton would go on to win more AHAUS national tournaments than any other team in the history of the organization with three. The Clinton Hockey Club captured three consecutive AHAUS National Intermediate Open Tournament championships from 1950–51 to 1952–53. Clinton was also the New York State AHAUS champion in 1947–48, 1950–51 and 1951–52.

Clinton was one of the first villages in America to build a 2,000-seat indoor arena, which opened during the 1948–49 season and was christened the Clinton Arena. The ice surface size of the Clinton Arena (191.5 x 85 ft.) was actually larger than that of Madison Square Garden's (186 x 86 ft.). Another remarkable fact was that the tiny village of Clinton now had two indoor ice rinks (counting Hamilton College's Sage Rink — built in 1921), joining Buffalo as the only places in New York State to boast two such facilities at that time. The club, to commemorate the opening of the Clinton Arena, was renamed the Clinton Comets in a name-the-team contest. In 1949–50, the Clinton community achieved another major goal by adding artificial ice to the Clinton Arena. These two accomplishments made by the village of Clinton were recognized and praised by *The Hockey News* in a December 31, 1949 article entitled, "Clinton — 1,600 Souls Opens 2,000-Seat Arena."

Now with reliable indoor facilities, Clinton could maintain a longer schedule and attract better competition. In 1949–50, the Comets played over twice as many home



Benny Woit spent four years in Clinton during his lengthy pro career.

games as in seasons past and the majority of their schedule consisted of Canadian opponents for the first time. Clinton also began to play some big time amateur teams in 1950–51 including the New York Rovers (a New York Rangers farm team), the Ottawa Senators (the 1948–49 Allan Cup winners) and the Royal Canadian Air Force Flyers of Ottawa (who represented Canada at the 1948 Olympics).

To keep up with the stiffer competition the Comets started actively recruiting Canadian players prior to the 1950–51 campaign. During the first half of the 1950s Edwin and Erwin Duncan (twins), Gordie Jamieson, Bob Lunny and Marv Thomson were among the Canadian players enlisted by Clinton.

In 1951–52, Clinton helped form the New York-Ontario Hockey League with four teams from Ontario — Brockville, Cornwall, Gananoque and Inkerman. The NYOHL represented the first stable league that the Comets belonged to in terms of having a regular schedule and a significant number of games. Clinton won the NYOHL regular-season title in 1951–52 and 1952–53. In 1952–53, the majority of the Comets roster was made up of Canadian players for the first time. The NYOHL, which also added an expansion team in Smith Falls,



Pat Kelly was one of the greatest blueliners in EHL history.

Ontario, during the league's final campaign, folded after the 1953–54 season.

The village of Clinton displayed its dedication to hockey when the Clinton Arena burned to the ground on September 11, 1953. That afternoon, Edward Stanley met with other village leaders to organize the building of a new arena on the site of the original one. The Comets temporarily used Hamilton College's Sage Rink as their home ice. By mid-January 1954, with the help of the entire Clinton community, the new Clinton Arena was open for hockey — a remarkable achievement in such a brief time after the fire.

The Comets were members of two circuits in 1954–55. Clinton joined the Eastern Ontario Hockey League (EOHL) and then the revived Eastern Hockey League (EHL). The EHL was previously known as the Eastern Amateur Hockey League from 1933 to 1954. The Eastern League did not operate in 1953–54 because of a lack of teams. The following season, 1954–55, the Comets entry helped to resurrect the loop. Edward Stanley was good friends with longtime EHL president Thomas Lockhart and Lockhart asked Stanley to assist him in reorganizing

the EHL as well as enter his team in the league. Clinton was only able to play an abbreviated schedule in its inaugural EHL campaign since the club had already committed to a full season of games in the EOHL.

In 1954–55, Eddie Shamlock became the new coach of the Comets replacing native Clintonian Bob Williams who was behind the bench from 1947 to 1954. Clinton did not fare well in its only season in the EOHL with a 19-25-4. They finished in sixth place and missed the playoffs. In the EHL, Shamlock's team had to compete against clubs from big cities — Baltimore, New Haven, Washington and Worcester. The Comets, however, prevailed in EHL play and won the league's regular-season championship with a 15-7-0 (.682) record. The EHL regular-season title was based on winning percentage and not points since Clinton and Worcester played only a partial schedule. In the postseason, the Comets lost to the Baltimore Clippers three games to one in the semifinals.

Clinton competed for the EHL playoff championship in 1955–56, but lost to the New Haven Blades four games to one. New Comets coach Jack Timmins guided his team to a second place 33-28-3 finish that season. Timmins, who served as player/coach for the 1955–56 season, would pilot the team until early in the 1957–58 campaign when he resigned and was replaced by team captain Eddie Calhoun (who became the club's player/coach). Clinton had two lackluster seasons in 1956–57 (fifth place: 23-39-2) and 1957-1958 (last place: 15-47-2) and failed to qualify for the playoffs.

Wren Blair was hired as general manager of the Comets prior to the 1958–59 season to build up the club through his many contacts in hockey. Blair had just managed the Whitby Dunlops to a world championship victory over Russia in February of 1958. Bill Watson was hired as Clinton's player/coach in 1958–59. The Comets were a much better team under Blair and accomplished a "worst to first" season, winning both the EHL regular-season title (41-21-2) and playoff championship. Clinton defeated the Johnstown Jets four games to three in the playoff finals to win the Atlantic City Boardwalk Trophy.

In 1959–60, the EHL had a two-division format and Clinton won the North Division with a 35-27-2 record, but was eliminated in the semifinals against the Johnstown Jets five games to three. In 1960–61, Blair arranged for the Comets to be the number three farm club of the Boston Bruins. It was the first formal working agreement for Clinton who would be affiliated with Boston through the 1966–67 season. Bruins' NHL prospects assigned to the Comets over the years included Pierre Gagne, Jeannot Gilbert, Stan Gilbertson and Gord Turlick. Player/coach Irwin Gross replaced Bill Watson in 1960–61 and Clinton placed second in its division with a 30-32-2 record. The Comets had an early exit in the postseason losing in the quarterfinals against the Jersey Larks three games to one.

Two other significant events occurred in 1960–61 for Clinton — Edward Stanley became vice-president of the



Bill Bannerman, Jack Kane and Borden Smith made up the most prolific scoring line in EHL history.

Walker Cup from 1963–64 to 1972–73). In 1964–65, Woit led the Comets to their first 50-win and 100-point season with a 50-20-2 mark (102 points) and a third division title in four years. In the playoffs that season Clinton bowed to the Long Island Ducks in the semifinals four games to two.

The EHL was a league both for players trying to advance up the professional ladder and for players at the end of their careers who were not quite ready to retire and wanted the opportunity to skate for a

EHL prior to the start of the season (a position he would hold through 1972–73) and the Comets began playing some of their home games at the newly built Utica Memorial Auditorium in nearby Utica, New York. The Utica Memorial Auditorium provided twice the seating capacity of the Clinton Arena (4,000 to 2,000 seats), although a standing room crowd at the Clinton Arena could accommodate about 3,000 fans. In future seasons, the Comets gradually played more and more home games at Utica (mostly week night games as opposed to the traditional Saturday night game) as the cost of operating a hockey team got more expensive and the club needed more revenue to survive.

Benny Woit, a member of three Detroit Stanley Cup-winning teams, was player/coach of the Comets from 1961 to 1965. Woit had an immediate impact on the team as Clinton won the EHL regular-season title in 1961–62 with a 45-22-1 record. The Comets lost in the semifinals against the Greensboro Generals that year five games to one. Woit's team finished first in its division in 1962–63 (38-24-6) and second in its division in 1963–64 (37-28-7) and battled Greensboro for the EHL playoff crown during both seasons. In 1962–63, the Generals captured the postseason title over the Comets four games to two, while Clinton defeated Greensboro in the 1963–64 playoff finals four games to one. In 1963–64, the Comets captured the Walker Cup as playoff champions (the EHL playoff winners were awarded the Atlantic City Boardwalk Trophy from 1954–55 to 1962–63 and the

few more seasons. The Comets had a mixture of both classes of talent throughout their EHL years. Pete Babando, Hec Lalande, J.P. Lamirande, Orval Tessier and Benny Woit were among the Comets who were finishing up their playing career in the EHL, while Eddie Giacomini, Jeannot Gilbert, Stan Gilbertson, Bill Heindl, Dennis Patterson and Warren "Butch" Williams skated with Clinton before advancing to the higher minors and then the NHL.

Wren Blair's first trade after coming to Clinton was not made until 1965, but it was one of the biggest blockbuster trades in EHL history. Prior to the start of the 1965–66 season, Blair made a stunning eight-player deal with the Jersey Devils. The transaction sent Norm Defelice, Hec Lalande, Orval Tessier, Benny Woit and a player to be named later to the Devils in exchange for Ed Babiuk, Borden Smith and Jersey's player/coach Pat Kelly. Tessier did not report to the Devils and retired, so Ted Szydlowski was sent instead. Lorne O'Donnell was the Comet player to be named later that was sent to Jersey prior to the following season to complete the trade. Many Clinton fans wondered why the deal was made since all four original players traded away had NHL experience. What Comet fans may not have realized at first was that the four Clinton players initially sent in the trade were aging veterans (especially Woit at age 37) and the players received from the Devils were very talented and had many quality playing years ahead. Blair was thinking in terms of the long-term success of the

Comet franchise.

Pat Kelly, a perennial EHL all-star at defense, was specifically acquired from Jersey to become Clinton's new player/coach. During his first two seasons at the Comet helm, in 1965-66 and 1966-67, Kelly guided his team to impressive regular-season records, but the club could not make it past the semifinal round of the playoffs. In 1965-66, Clinton went 41-28-3 and placed second in its division, but was stopped in the semifinals by the Long Island Ducks four games to one. Clinton won its fifth North Division title in 1966-67 with a 44-26-2 record. Ironically, the Jersey Devils knocked off the Comets in the semifinals four games to two and several of the players traded to the Devils by Clinton two seasons before had a hand in eliminating their former team.

Blair's new general manager position with the NHL expansion Minnesota North Stars led him to switch the Comets' affiliation from the Bruins to the North Stars before the start of the 1967-68 season. Clinton would be a Minnesota farm team through the 1971-72 campaign as a result of Blair operating the NHL franchise. The Comets, however, did not have any Minnesota personnel assigned to their roster during the first season of the new working agreement.

In 1967-68, the Comets had one of the greatest seasons in the history of minor league hockey. Clinton established an all-time minor league regular-season record for best winning percentage in a single-season at .861 (57-5-10) and won the EHL playoff championship by sweeping the Charlotte Checkers in four games. The Comets set a

number of EHL regular-season records during their historic season including most goals (436), most hat tricks (30), most players scoring over 100 points (6), most road games won (24) and longest unbeaten streak (21 games, 19-0-2).

North Stars farmhands shone in 1968-69 for a Comet repeat as Minnesota prospects Barry "Bucky" Buchanan, Don Herriman, Tom Mitchell, Jake Rathwell and Joe Robertson added punch to the Clinton line-up for another EHL regular-season title and playoff championship. Pat Kelly's club had a 44-18-10 record and defeated the Nashville Dixie Flyers in a seven-game finals thriller to win a second consecutive Walker Cup.

The Comets pulled off a Walker Cup hat trick in 1969-70 by once again leading the league during the regular season (50-16-8) and skating through the playoffs defeating the Greensboro Generals in the finals four games to two. Pat Kelly was named Minor League Coach of the Year for 1969-70 by *The Hockey News*.

Clinton had become only the sixth team in minor professional hockey history to win three or more consecutive playoff championships, joining the Oakland Sheiks of the California Hockey League (1928-29 to 1930-31), the Vancouver Lions of the Pacific Coast Hockey League (1928-29 to 1930-31), the Cincinnati Mohawks of the International Hockey League (1952-53 to 1956-57), the Johnstown Jets of the EHL (1959-60 to 1961-62) and the Springfield Indians of the American Hockey League (1959-60 to 1961-62).

The Comets faced several challenges over the next



The Clinton Comets of 1967-68 were (standing, left to right), Pat Kelly, Don Davidson, Border Smith, Pat Draper, Ian Anderson, Howie Dietrich, Dave Armstrong, Len Speck, (seated, left to right) Bill Hindel, Rod Zaine, Ed Babiuk, Jack Kane and Pete Prevost.

two seasons (1970–71 and 1971–72), with an aging roster, many veteran players retiring and several key North Star assignees moving up to higher minor leagues. The Comets held their own in 1970–71 with a 31-32-11 record (fourth place), but lost a quarterfinal round playoff series for the first time in 10 seasons, falling to the New Haven Blades four games to one. In 1971–72, Clinton again finished near the .500-mark with a 30-32-13 record (third place). In the postseason, the Comets were eliminated in the quarterfinals by the Johnstown Jets four games to one.

Some of the longtime Comet players who are considered to be EHL all-time greats include Ian Anderson, Dave Armstrong, Bill Bannerman, Don Davidson, Norm Defelice, Tim Hook, Jack Kane, Pat Kelly, Borden Smith and Len Speck. Bannerman (RW), Kane (C) and Smith (LW) formed one of the greatest lines in EHL history. The trio skated together for seven seasons from 1965 to 1972.

Before the 1972–73 season Wren Blair decided to end the North Star/Comet affiliation, opting to feed his players to the new Saginaw Gears of the International Hockey League instead, thus relinquishing his role as Clinton's general manager. With Blair gone, Pat Kelly assumed the dual position of GM/coach, but retired as a player. Kelly established a working agreement between the Comets and the Ottawa Nationals of the newly formed World Hockey Association. Frank Blum, Jack Gibson and Ron Riley were among the players assigned to Clinton by the Nationals. Blair's departure marked the end of an era in Comet hockey as the club experienced its worst season ever (18-51-7) and missed the playoffs for the first time since 1957–58 which was the year before Blair's arrival in Clinton.

The 1972–73 campaign was the last for the Clinton Comets. They were sold by Edward Stanley and the Clinton Rink Association in April of 1973 to a group of eight businessmen from the greater Utica area. Clinton could no longer keep pace with the quick rise in player salaries brought on by major league hockey expansion which had already taken its toll on several minor league teams. The new owners changed the franchise name to the Mohawk Valley Comets in the hope of increasing the team's marketability to the central New York region. Once the Comets were no longer owned by Edward Stanley and the Clinton Rink Association, and "Clinton" was dropped from the team name, both Clintonians and out-of-town Comet fans alike considered the club to be a different entity.

Less than one month after the sale and renaming of the Comets the EHL dissolved into two new leagues for the 1973–74 season — the North American Hockey League (NAHL) and the Southern Hockey League (SHL). In 1973–74, the Comets still split their home games between Clinton and Utica, but from the 1974–75 season until the team folded in 1976–77 the Comets scheduled all of their home games in Utica.

The Clinton Comets were arguably the greatest team in the history of the Eastern Hockey League (1933 to 1973). The Comets share the record of five EHL playoff championships with the Johnstown Jets, they earned the most EHL regular-season championships with six, had the most appearances in the EHL finals with seven and, after the league split into two divisions to start the 1959–60 season, won the most division titles with eight North Division crowns. Clinton made the playoffs in 16 of its 19 EHL seasons and was the only team that was continuously in the league from 1954–55, when the circuit was revived after a one-year hiatus, to the loop's demise in 1972–73.

Although the Clinton Comets have been gone for over 30 years, they have established their mark in minor professional and amateur hockey history. With several minor pro, national amateur, state and district amateur championships to the team's credit while being based in a village with a population of about 2,000 people, Clinton, New York, rightfully earned the title of "the biggest little hockey town in the USA."

Jim Mancuso has written and co-written several books on minor league hockey including, *The Clinton Comets: An EHL Dynasty* and *The Clinton Comets: From The Chenango Canal To National Champions*.