

# The history of the Vancouver Canucks, through a photographer's lens

Ralph Bower's photos are slated to be part of a new hockey show at the Polygon Gallery in North Vancouver

[John Mackie](#)

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Retired Vancouver Sun photographer Ralph Bower holds a vintage print of former Vancouver Canucks goalie George Gardner in action on Sept. 23, 1968. Bower photographed the Canucks from 1955 to 1997 for the Sun, and his photos will be part of an upcoming exhibition at the Polygon Gallery in North Vancouver. John Mackie/PNG John Mackie / PNG

A few years ago, The Vancouver Sun was about to throw out a box of negatives of the Vancouver Canucks back when they were in the Western Hockey League.

So photographer Ralph Bower saved them.

“They were going into the garbage can, so I just took the box home. Why put it in the garbage?” said Bower, 85. “But I never looked at it. About five or 10 years later I was going through my old negs and there was a whole box of them.”

The negs were important to Bower because he'd shot many of the pictures. He started working for the Sun in 1955, and photographed the Canucks until he retired on New Year's Eve, 1996/7.

Looking through a pile of prints recently, he could pick out players from decades back, from both the Canucks and visitors. Phil Maloney, Gump Worsley, Willie O'Ree — he's got action shots of them all.

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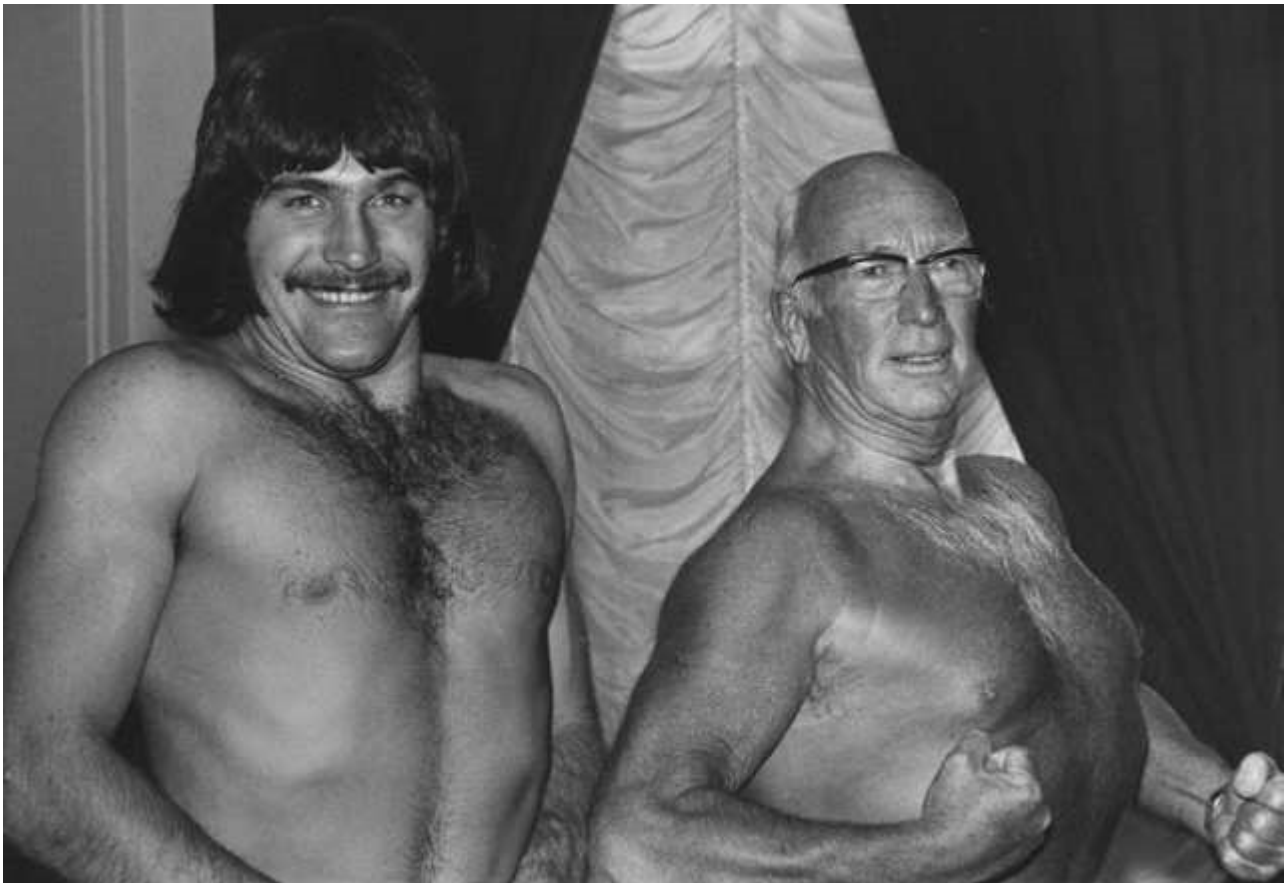
He shot with a Speed Graphic in the old days, a camera that was technically limited but produced awesome photos. Especially when the players weren't wearing helmets or masks.

"You could see the expression on their face," he said. "Hockey in those days wasn't as fast — it's twice as fast today."

Bower is a bit of a pack rat — he kept prints and clippings of his photos when they ran in the paper. Which makes for a one-of-a-kind Canucks photo archive — the paper usually didn't keep game photos, particularly the larger 11-by-14 prints he favoured.

Rogers Hometown Hockey will be coming to North Vancouver on March 14 and 15. The "family-friendly hockey celebration" will be held at The Shipyards district at the foot of Lonsdale on the North Van waterfront.

The Polygon Gallery is also at the foot of Lonsdale, and decided to do a Canucks photo show in tandem with Hometown Hockey, starting March 7. They're going to be using old Sun and Province photos, and this week, curators Diane Evans and Justin Ramsey went through Bower's cache.



Vancouver Canucks draft choice Dennis Ververgaert poses shirtless with the team's tough guy owner Coley Hall, May 29, 1973. Ralph Bower/Vancouver Sun Ralph Bower / PNG

There are some incredible shots, such as goalie George Gardner spreading his arms like an eagle in flight, a dejected Dale Tallon on his knees in the Canucks goal after they've been scored on, and former Canucks owner Coley Hall posing shirtless with Dennis Ververgaert in 1973.

"Ververgaert was the first draft choice of the Canucks, and Coley Hall was the owner," Bower explains. "Coley said 'You guys aren't as tough as we used to be' and took his shirt off to match him at the press conference."

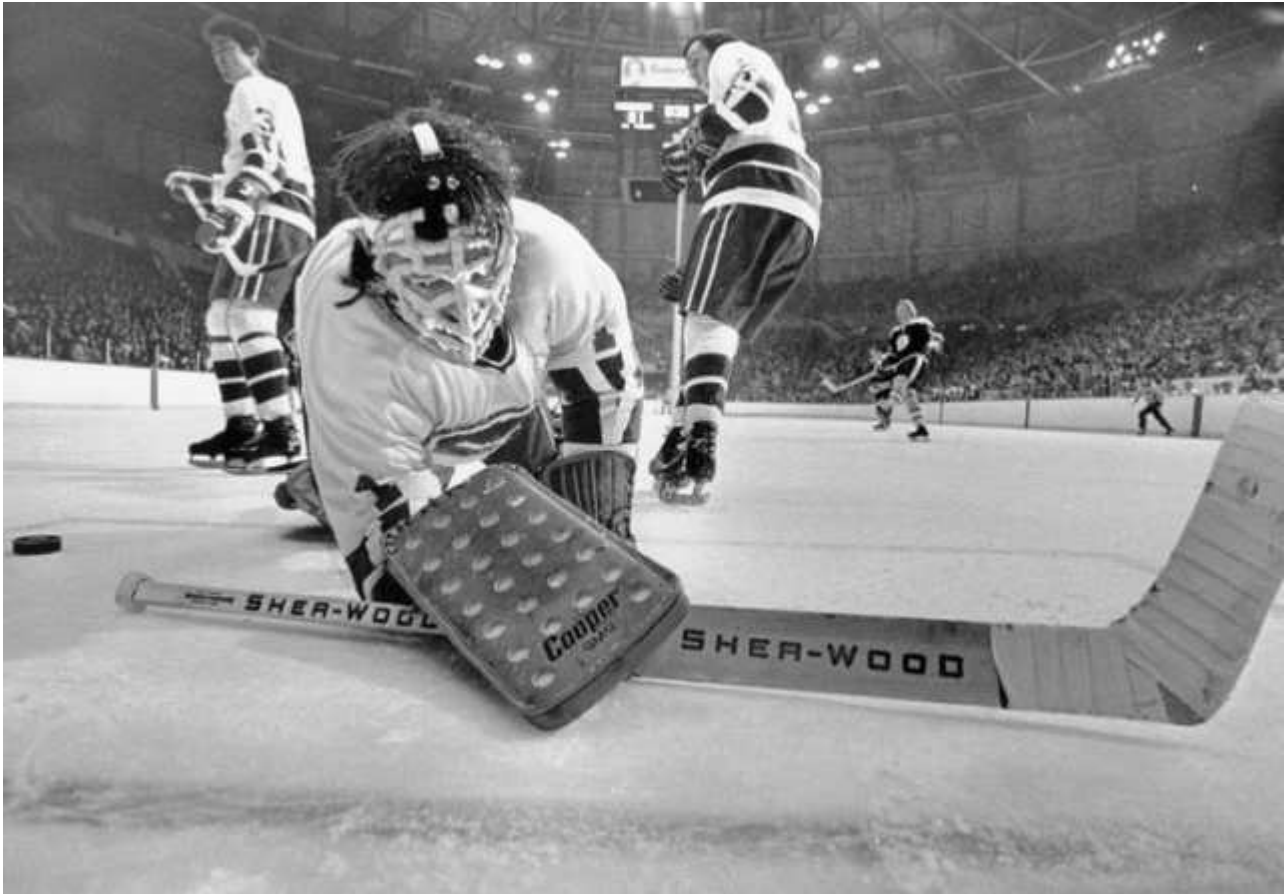
Coley would have been 67 at the time, Ververgaert was 20. But their physique was similar — and Hall was a renowned tough guy. When he was asked to testify on behalf of Canucks majority owner Tom Scallen after Scallen was charged with theft, Hall reportedly said "let him rot in jail."

Bower started off taking Canucks photos at the Forum, at a time when the rink was surrounded by wire mesh, not Plexiglas. The lighting was dim, so you had to use a flash, which meant you had to be close to the action to get anything.

In order to get a photo without the wire, the photographers cut a little box in the wire near the net, which you could pull out when you wanted to take a photo.

"You opened a wire hole with a square window and put the camera through and shot with a flash, strobe," he said.

“I got hit once. Gordie Howe hit me, right in the arm. He shot the puck and it went right through the hole. He came right over, ‘Are you all right?’ I said ‘It’s not too bad.’ He said ‘Well it wasn’t one of my hard shots!’”



Vancouver Canucks goalie Dunc Wilson's mask is covered in snow after being sprayed by Johnny MacKenzie of the Boston Bruins during a game on Dec. 12, 1971. Boston's Fred Stanfield scored on the play. Ralph Bower/Vancouver Sun Ralph Bower / PNG

Bower has mounted several shows of his Sun pix since he retired. On Feb. 5 at 7 p.m. he'll be teaming up with North Shore News photographer Mike Wakefield for a talk on Shooting The North Shore at the West Vancouver Memorial Library.

One of Bower's best shots shows goalie Dunc Wilson sprawled on the ice, snow covering his mask.

“A player had sprayed ice all over his mask when he came in on him, and when you looked in he had a mask covered with snow,” said Bower.

“That made the picture. I didn't even know I had it, it's a dark room special.”

By that he means that he shot rapid-fire photos and then discovered the snow in one of the frames. He was able to capture it thanks to his invention, hooking a camera up inside the net.

He triggered it with a doorbell.

“You know how a doorbell makes a ring? Well that went to the camera (via a wire under the ice), it made the motor work. There was no infrared. You had to run it by juice, follow me?”

It took a bit of talking to let the Canucks use his net-cam.

“I had it arranged to go in the net with (coach) Harry Neale, but he said (goalie Richard Brodeur) was pretty reluctant about it,” he recounts.

“I said ‘it’s a major thing’. He said ‘Well, OK.’ But as soon as they finished the national anthem, (Brodeur) took his stick and plucked my camera out of the net.”

[jmackie@postmedia.com](mailto:jmackie@postmedia.com)



Vancouver Sun photographer Ralph Bower photographs his last official assignment before retiring after 42 years of service. The assignment was the New Years Eve Canucks Hockey Game, Dec. 31, 1996. Nick Didlick/Vancouver Sun Nick Didlick / PNG



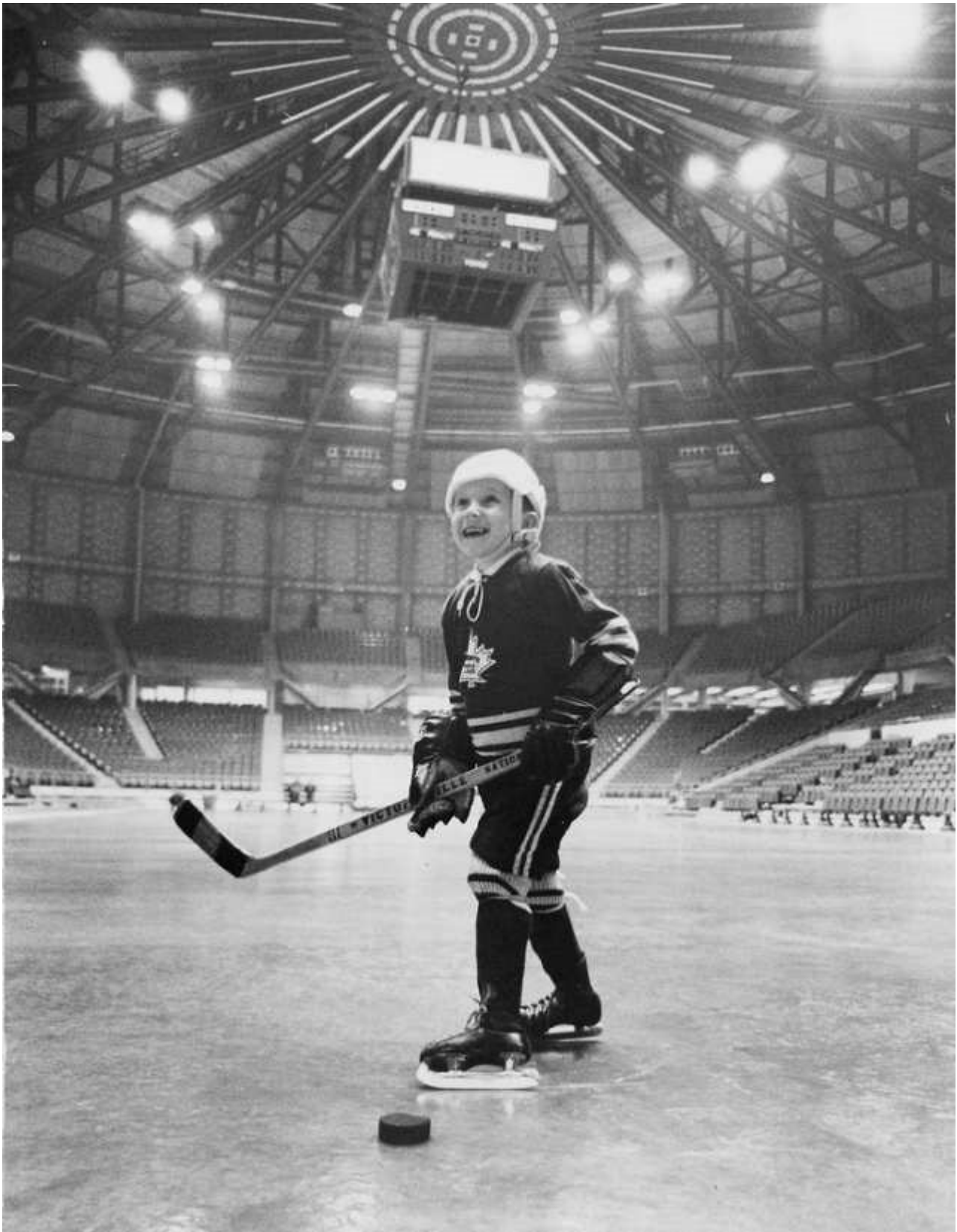
Ralph Bower's most famous Canucks photo may be a topless Pavel Bure getting a trim test from Dr. E. C. Rhodes at Canucks camp in Kamloops on Sept. 5, 1994. Ralph Bower/Vancouver Sun PNG



Former Vancouver Sun photographer Ralph Bower going through old prints of Vancouver Canucks games he photographed, Jan. 21, 2020. John Mackie / PNG



Ralph Bower photo of WHL Canucks legend Phil Maloney (left) in action against the New York Rangers at the Forum in the 1960s. John Mackie / PNG



Jan. 3, 1968. Six-year-old Doug Bower is the first person to skate on the new ice at the Pacific Coliseum, after his dad, a Vancouver Sun photographer, set it up. Ralph Bower/Vancouver Sun  
Ralph Bower / PNG