



Yvon LeBlanc Honored at Veteran's Rink in Gardner

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Gardner High School jersey No. 4, which had been assigned to the late Yvon LeBlanc and which was officially retired 26 years ago this month, was finally given its proper place Monday night in a brief ceremony held before Gardner's game against Wachusett Regional at the Gardner Veteran's Rink.

LeBlanc, a talented Wildcat forward with a passion for hockey, graduated from high school in June of 1982. In November of that year, he was diagnosed with leukemia. After a 13-month battle, which included chemotherapy and radiation, he died at age 19 in December of 1983.

Two months later, in an emotional ceremony prior to a home game, the Wildcats honored LeBlanc's high school career by retiring his jersey.



(Above) Ronnie Cormier, left, and Ricky Oullet hold the case containing the retired Gardner High hockey jersey of their cousin, Yvon LeBlanc. (JAY GEARAN)

Time heals, but there's a flip side. It can make people forget, and things that should be done are left undone as the years pass by. LeBlanc's No. 4 was retired, but never displayed, unlike the other jerseys that hang on the Veteran's Rink wall honoring other special hockey players.

"Every time I would go to the rink, I would wonder why Yvon's shirt wasn't up on the wall," said John Cormier, his uncle.

That all changed on Monday, thanks to the efforts of LeBlanc's family and friends, and the cooperation of Gardner High coach Jim Vacarelo and Veteran's Rink officials.

Family friend Robert Cormier built the case and Vacarelo located a Wildcat No. 4, tucked deep inside a locker room closet. And on the Wildcats' final game of the season the time was right to honor Yvon LeBlanc. Again.

Sitting together watching the ceremony among many of LeBlanc's relatives were his aunts Andrea and Ella Cormier and Jeanita Ouellet and his cousins Dena Pelton and Ricky Ouellet,

Danny LeBlanc and Ronnie Cormier.

They were there in 1984, too, at the first jersey retirement ceremony, when LeBlanc's mother, Claudette, recalled, "He scored his first goals while he was on his ankles. At that time she remembered her only child's love for the game, beginning at age 7.

Claudette passed away in 1999. LeBlanc's father, Roger, 68, was back at the Veteran's Rink Monday night. He repeated what he said in 1984, "There would be nothing that would make Yvon happier than to know that this is happening."

When LeBlanc made the Gardner High hockey team, he just had to have No. 4, the same as his Boston Bruins' idol, Bobby Orr.

When LeBlanc was battling his illness, Orr called him on the phone and once visited him at St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester. They talked hockey for over an hour. A photo of Orr and LeBlanc together sits inside the case with the jersey.

LeBlanc's high school hockey coach, Maurice Fitzgerald, recalled, "Yvon was unusual in his sensitivity and consideration for others, including his teammates and coaches. He was a great kid."

LeBlanc's close friend Claude Leger joined a contingent of former teammates at center ice surrounding the retired jersey during the ceremony. "Some of my fondest memories of Yvon were not on the ice, but of our trips to Canada together and playing table hockey at his house when he was in between treatments at the hospital," he said

Also at center ice was former teammate Paul Cormier and another of LeBlanc's close friends, Pete Levasseur, who recalled one of LeBlanc's favorite sayings.

Smiling, Levasseur said, "Whenever we would mention going someplace, to a Bruins game or a concert or something, Yvon would always say, 'We were there.' That was always his spur of the moment line: 'We were there.' "

Exactly the three words that so many of Yvon LeBlanc's friends, family and teammates will think about now, whenever they look up at the Veteran's Rink wall, see jersey No. 4 and remember the long journey to its rightful spot.