

## Catching Up With: Sean Mahaffey

Teddy Roosevelt championed the phrase: “speak softly and carry a big stick.” Former XHL player Sean Mahaffey did half of that very well.



If you played in the XHL for the first eight years, there was no doubt you remember him. Called “Muff” by his friends, everybody knew when he arrived at the court. You couldn’t help but hear the booming voice echoing through the airwaves and the giant laugh that usually came soon after.

Mahaffey was an original member of the XHL. He spent those early years on one of the league’s most special teams, a young and raw, yet super talented squad that went from newbies to champions in just three seasons.

“If you remember, we started the first year as the Bombers and weren’t very good,” Mahaffey said. “We figured out the league and playing together as who did what best and went from there. We had Brandon Reiter and Kenny Jeffery in their primes. That is the short answer of how we got so good so fast.”

The early years of the XHL look a lot different than they do now. Of course the players, and the league by extension, were learning their way. But it was also a festive, almost high school like atmosphere at the Taylor Memorial Park in Brockway.

“It was an absolute blast playing with that group, and playing in the league at that time,” Mahaffey continued. “We were able to park vehicles right up to the fence and have fans in the back of pickup trucks. Just crazy fun times!”

No team brought more of that atmosphere than the Bombers. As they finished up their time in high school, they brought their friends to games. After all, they learned about the league sitting in class when someone brought it up. There were more fans at their games than any the league has seen since.

“That was a fun time for all of us,” former league president and Mahaffey’s competitor Bob Anderson said. “We were all learning the game together. But that team and those players had an infectious personality. There was a draw about them that everybody was attracted to. It didn’t hurt that they were all super nice guys.”

The Bombers took their lumps, but they were fast learners. A name change to the Contenders seemed to be the spark they needed and a position change accompanied for Mahaffey.

Ryan Drayer played goalie most of the first season for the squad. Mahaffey may have played a game or two in net, but switched to full time duties in the second season. It was then that he patented his own “paddle down” style. And though he never finished seasons with the best save percentage, he was always among the league winners in the category that matters most: wins.

“I went full-time [goalie] the second year wearing some tiny leg pads and completely unaware of how to even begin to play the position,” Mahaffey said. “I wasn’t afraid to own my crease, which ended up with a lot of guys crashing into me or the net. I mean, let’s be honest, the talent level wasn’t as good as it is now, and we had a lot of guys still learning how to play, so I took advantage of that. I wasn’t the best goalie, but my job was to keep our team in games anyway I could. It probably wasn’t going to be with my glove, so might as well use that big stick we get.”

With Reiter and Jeffrey leading the way, the Contenders “earned” a playoff date with perhaps the most stacked team in XHL history: the Punishers. That team, aptly named, sliced through competition all season, beating teams by 30 or more goals. Remember, there was no mercy rule then. Despite this, the Contenders

managed to give them a series, relatively speaking, and in doing so, gained some valuable experience.

They used that to their advantage the next season when they made it to the finals to take on the Rogue, a team that every champion had to go through in those early years. The Contenders were still the underdogs, but they weren't phased in the least. They took game one and sealed it in game two with one of the most iconic goals in XHL history.

"Drayer scoring the championship winning goal on the break away will always be my favorite moment," Mahaffey said. "I had a unique perspective from the net watching that. We really thought about halfway through that game we would be going to game three, but we crawled back."

After a Colonials' championship in 2004, the Contenders felt they were missing one key piece to make their way back to the finals. They needed a veteran; a do-it-all defensive presence. And so entered Rob Stanley. That acquisition got them back to the dance, a second date with the Cup, and a story that remained a secret to everyone outside their circle for nearly a decade later.

"I think we were the first team that go to take the Cup with us [after the season]," Mahaffey said. "We had it at the bar, took it apart, drank from it, and signed the inside. Somehow we trusted Bert [Rob Stanley] to take it home that night and it ends up getting broken. A mad scramble was made to get replacement parts for it."

The Contenders franchise eventually folded and Mahaffey played for other teams along the way including the Phantoms and Griffins. And though they weren't as successful as his former team, he continued to be one of the league's most vocal and lively personalities.

Sadly, Mahaffey's playing career came to an end, much like John Hrusth's. A week before the 2010 season, he broke his leg which necessitated reconstructive surgery. Afterwards, a new job opportunity in Texas as an environmental and safety manager came knocking and he couldn't pass it up.

Despite not playing anymore, Mahaffey and his wife Toree are loving life in Texas. The two met in high school and have been together ever since. They have three children together.

“Our family loves living in Texas,” Toree Mahaffey said. “Some of us like the heat more than others. We are located right between Austin and San Antonio. We have rivers to float, waterparks to go to, amusement parks, etc. We have a small town feel but city life opportunities.”



While they have put down roots and made new friends along the way, the Mahaffeys have fond memories of those early years in Brockway.

“Sean loved the XHL [and] we loved coming to watch the games,” Toree continued. “There was so much action, drama, suspense, and thrill that came with every game. Being on a team with some of his best friends from elementary school...they pushed each other to be better than the game before. But most of all, they were having fun and doing what they loved.”

Sean still gets updates on the XHL, not just from keeping tabs on the Facebook page and the website, but from his stepdad, Jim Dennison.

“It was great to hear Bert stepped back on the court here recently, and it is nice to read familiar names,” Mahaffey said.

“I can tell from a distance, and from the few times I stopped in when I was back in town that the talent level has drastically increased, and I am sure my paddle down technique wouldn’t be as successful anymore.”

Mahaffey’s style may not be compatible with today’s XHL, but his zest for the game, and for life, certainly would. Oh, and he still speaks loudly. Just ask his wife.