



FOREVER BOUND TO THE GAME

Losing a leg never stopped Brownridge from falling in love with hockey. He couldn't play, so he became the game's pre-eminent artist

BY RONNIE SHUKER

BILL BROWNRIDGE LEANS ON HIS CRUTCHES AS HE SOFTLY describes his painting of pond hockey on the Prairies. He's dressed in a zippered blue sweater over a red turtleneck with dark blue jeans, one side rolled up to his amputated right leg, and a hiking shoe on his left foot.

In the Thick of It looks like a mad scramble in any game of shinny. Where others see chaos, however, Brownridge sees "patterns," an artistry of innocence that pervades his paintings, which are on display in September at Mayberry Fine Art in Toronto (or heartofhockey.com). "I love the incredible patterns where you get two or three guys crashing together and stretching for the puck," he says, "especially around the goal."

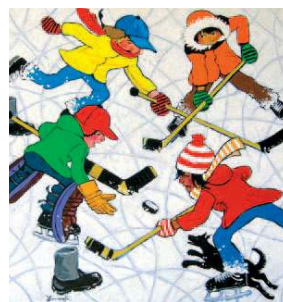
The net is special for Brownridge, 80, because goalie is the only position he could play as a kid. He was born with spina bifida, a birth defect of the spinal column that can cause clubbed feet, and could wear a shoe only on his left foot, much less skates on both. Doctors tried to reposition his right using a cast, but put it on too tight. It caused blood poisoning and left Brownridge with a crippled right foot. His leg was amputated below his knee when he was 15. He was never able to wear skates, but that didn't stop him from winning a championship in the only official game of his life.

In 1953, five years after losing his foot, Brownridge suited up for the Vawn Cougars, his hometown Jr. C club in Saskatchewan. Their goalie was injured right before the league final against rival Meota, but Brownridge was friends with

the players from his pond hockey days as a kid, so the Cougars had a ringer. "They'd all grown up with me playing goal on foot," he says. "The coach talked to the head of the league and said, 'We're in a jam here. Can we have this kid play goal without skates?'"

On an artificial limb, in full goalie gear, wearing moccasins inside rubber covers, Brownridge back-stopped Vawn to a 3-2 win.

Sixty years later, that game and the shinny he played on prairie slews are what fuel his artwork – and four children's books, including *The Moccasin Goalie* – which has been showcased at the Hall of Fame and in galleries across



ORGANIZED CHAOS

Brownridge sees artistry in the scramble for the puck in his painting *In the Thick of It*.

HE MADE IT COUNT

Bill Brownridge won his only game, tending goal without skates for the Vawn Cougars.

Canada. After 30 years as a graphic designer in advertising, he retired in 1995 to paint full time and has since carved out his niche as Canada's hockey artist.

Brownridge lived in Calgary most of his career, where he raised his five children, and it has been a large part of his artistic life. He graduated from the Alberta College of Art in 1957 and received a commission to render serigraphs for the 1988 Winter Olympics hosted by the city.

And he has ties to the Flames, too. They had him design their new jerseys in 1993 and his paintings hang in their offices. Ex-Flames Al MacInnis, Theo Fleury, Tim Hunter, Robyn Regehr and Gary Roberts own his paintings.

Because he had to sit so much when he was young, Brownridge took up art and looked at it as a way to escape his immobility. He became fascinated by movement, primarily by watching big brother Bob, a former minor-leaguer with the New York Rovers.

It's that spirit of motion that suffuses Brownridge's paintings, every one of which is about hockey. He brings to life the game at its purest, overwhelming the senses with bright colors, "fat" paint on acrylic canvases, and the silent sounds of kids clashing sticks and cracking pucks as their skates slice the ice. Many of his paintings, like *In the Thick of It*, are drawn from a bird's-eye view and combine Prairie landscapes with all-out action. "It's all arms and legs and sticks, all the body positions, all flowing," Brownridge says. "I get inspiration remembering games I've seen."

And the only one he played. . .