

# THE GREATEST FRANCHISES IN JUNIOR 'A' HISTORY

SIX NATIONS? ORANGEVILLE? WHITBY? WHAT ABOUT NEW WESTMINSTER? LET THE DEBATE BEGIN

**I**n sports, there are debates that can get even the most mild-mannered fan worked up: Gretzky-Orr? Bird-Magic? Great taste-less filling?

Take that one step further, trying to list the greatest franchises in the history of a particularly sport, and what you get are arguments that can last all night. With all this being said, I am going to create our own little debate and attempt to list the greatest teams in Canadian lacrosse history.

The following is hardly a definitive list, but simply one fans' opinion of the greatest franchises to grace our beloved sport. I've compiled two top 10 lists, one each for Junior 'A' and Senior 'A'. In this issue, I will tackle one half of the Junior 'A' list, with the rest of Junior 'A' appearing in the next issue. The Senior 'A' list will begin with the July issue of *Ontario Lacrosse* and conclude in our final edition, released in November.

To clarify, my greatest franchises criteria is based on what they have done over the entire history of the game. Essentially, which teams have had the most impact upon the game we all love.

## JUNIOR 'A'

**10 SIX NATIONS ARROWS**  
They only burst on the Jr. 'A' scene in 1990, but the team from Ohsweken, with the smallest population base of any junior club, has made a timeless impression: two Minto Cup wins and many near misses. The most memorable being the thrilling 1997 final against Whitby. Yet the Arrows' greatest legacy is the brand of offensive lacrosse they play, especially in the 1990s. Add to that the incredible traveling fan support they've always enjoyed, and you can truly state that Six Nations lacrosse is a celebration of the game.

**9 VICTORIA**  
The temptation is to call this team the Shamrocks, its name-sake when it won the Minto Cup in 1962. However, the team's

next championship came in 1976 as the McDonalds, or in lacrosse circles referred as the Great Kevin Alexander team. A decade of near misses as the Esquimalt Legion concluded with a 1988 title. Victoria is best remembered for its losses. First, the 1963 Shamrocks succumbing to the Green Gael dynasty, and then in 1985, when the Gait twins debuted for Whitby and beat them in that unforgettable game seven.



*Orangeville Northmen celebrate 2008 Minto Cup*

**8 ORANGEVILLE NORTHMEN**  
The team joined the league a year after Six Nations, but also made an immediate impact. Orangeville brought extraordinary fan support to Jr. 'A' lacrosse.

The large crowds the Northmen attract on Friday and Sunday nights have made Tony Rose Arena the Mecca of Ontario lacrosse. Along the way, these fans have been rewarded with four Minto Cups and competitive teams every season. Small town lacrosse at its best, even if the community is outgrowing its small town status.

**7 NEW WESTMINSTER SALMONBELLIES**  
The Salmonbellies have been around for years, yet they've had surprisingly little success. After holding the Minto Cup as senior champions from 1913 to 1935, New Westminster has only hoisted the championship cup three times at the junior level. They were unlucky to have their best teams in the 1960s when they ran into the Green Gael juggernaut. Since then, they've been unable to overcome the Burnaby powerhouse. The Salmonbellies have been around since the start of junior lacrosse and will be around as long as the game is played.

**6 WHITBY WARRIORS**  
Their initial run in Jr. 'A' had them lose in the 1960 finals. Next came two Jr. 'B' championships in 1970 and 1974. They returned to Jr. 'A' for good in 1975. Whitby's breakthrough came in 1980,

*Photo: Hired Gun Photography*

with four more Canadian championships since then. In 1984, the Warrior nickname was adopted, and in 1997, coach Jim Bishop won his last Minto with the club. Whitby's greatest accomplishment has been to build the largest minor league system of lacrosse players the game has ever seen. This has guaranteed competitive junior teams every year.

**5 BRAMPTON EXCELSIORS**  
Excelsior, the name of a Longfellow poem, was given to a Brampton high school team in 1870. Needless to say, the Excelsiors have been a force in the game from the very beginning. Its best Junior clubs in the field era led to Brampton's Mann Cup wins in 1930 and 1931. The first Minto triumph did not come until 1952. The 1957-1959 dynasty concluded Brampton's most successful decade. Brampton's greatest contribution since then was at the 1976 Minto, when it opposed the CLA rule, which allowed only the British Columbia champion to pick up players. Since 1977 no provincial champs have added players.

**4 ST.CATHARINES ATHLETICS**  
The history of the St.Catharines A's is a long one, with periods of total dominance and stretches of hopeless futility. Its Junior and Senior teams alike have gone through many rises and falls. At the Minto Cup, the Athletics represented Ontario from 1946-1949, winning twice. The best players from those teams moved to Peterborough to win four consecutive Mann Cups (1951-1954). Eventually, fortune fell so low for the A's that they dropped out of site from 1978-1981. Legendary coach Jim Brady brought them back in 1982, and in the following year, the club embarked upon a league record 22 straight winning seasons, including four Minto championships and countless near misses.

**3 BURNABY LAKERS**  
When it comes to success, this Vancouver suburb-based club has dominated B.C. lacrosse since 1961. That domination reached the point of surreal a few years ago when the Lakers won every league title from 1996 to 2007, including five Minto wins, though none in the East. Actually, the Cablevision teams from 1977-1979 might be Burnaby's greatest dynasty as they won three Canadian titles in three years. Prior to 1977 B.C. teams had won only three Minto Cups in the previous 15! The 1977 Cables went to Whitby, lost the first two games then ran off four straight wins. Ironically, in 1997, Burnaby returned to Whitby, won the first two games then lost four straight.

**2 OSHAWA GREEN GAELS**  
In contrast to the other top franchises the Gaels' history fits into a compact 21 years at the Junior 'A' level. Jim Bishop's fast-break style revolutionized the game. All Green Gael teams played that ultra offensive lacrosse. The best teams were the squads that won seven consecutive Minto Cups from 1963-1969. After that unbelievable stretch, there were no more titles, however, there were many entertaining teams and great players. How did a team of such legendary status cease to be? Well, Oshawa minor lacrosse virtually died out in the late 1970s. By attracting players from all over the country, the Gaels continued to compete and contend until 1983. Bob Hamley began his

Junior career on that last team. Six years later Jason Richards became the last former Gael in Jr.'A'. He was the OLA's top playmaker in 1989.

**1 PETERBOROUGH LAKERS**  
The first team to top the Green Gaels' seven Minto wins, Peterborough's total is now at 11 with its last one being the unlikely championship of 2006. For some, the total is 12, if one counts the Hastings win of 1961, a squad comprised of Peterborough players. The P.C.O's began Peterborough's run in 1972. The 1974 club produced a perfect season, 46-0, followed by the James Gang that added a trio of championships from 1981-1983. Then the Maulers capped the run with wins in 1986, 1987 and 1989. Ten Canadian championships in 18 years and 13 Ontario titles in 19 seasons, plus an appearance in all but one OLA final from 1971-1990. In contrast to today's champions, for all those years you could count the number of non-Peterborough minor lacrosse players on one hand. Equally remarkable, Lee Vitarelli, Peterborough's general manager, has run the club for more than 30 years now. ♦

*Paul Whiteside is a lifetime lacrosse fan whom, back in the 1990s, had the honour of conducting lacrosse research, pre-1961. That journey through time took him beyond the box lacrosse era, back to the start of the Ontario Lacrosse Association and the glory days of the National Lacrosse Union.*

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**- Kyle Georgalas, Cornell University Lacrosse**

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