The Game of the Season: Manon Rhéaume’s Triumph In Hockey

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27 years ago, girls weren’t allowed to play hockey with boys at the youth level. Now, girls have more opportunities than ever in hockey, from youth all the way to the professional level. Manon Rhéaume was the first and only woman to play in the NHL. She played with the Tampa Bay Lightning in the 1992-93 pre-season, their first year as an official NHL team. In 1992, in Tampa, Florida, Manon Rhéaume set a new bar for woman in hockey when she became the first woman to play for the Tampa Bay Lightning in an NHL exhibition game. Her triumph in the NHL continues to be an inspiration for female athletes to this day. Manon Rhéaume’s journey in hockey has been made up of her hockey experiences before her time in the NHL and during the pre-season with the Tampa Bay Lightning, her impact and influence on female athletes, and her legacy in the hockey world.

Rhéaume had many hockey experiences before her time in the NHL and it was at the age of three when it all started. She began skating in the backyard rink her father, Pierre, had made when there was no youth hockey team or rink to organize one. She often practiced in goal while her father practiced with her two brothers, Martin and Pascal. Later, as a teen, she wanted to go to college and pursue a degree in journalism. But she also loves keeping pucks out of the net. Instead of hanging up her goalie skates and going to teachers college with an eye to becoming a teacher in her home province Quebec, Rhéaume became something else entirely. When her father became the local hockey coach for the Atom team, with no one wanting to take place of the goalie, she didn’t hesitate at the opportunity to ask her father if she could play. Luckily, he said yes. Rhéaume loved the competition, but with no system of hockey for girls growing up, she

had no choice but to try out for the boys team. When she graduated from Atom level to Pee Wee, parents weren’t too fond of the idea about having their son being bumped from the team for a girl. It was a real tragedy that parents weren’t able to support a girl playing hockey. “Some parents were jealous and thought their little boys would make it to the NHL, so they thought I didn’t deserve the chance to play,” she said.¹ Coaches soon started taking the parents’ side. Tragically, even the coaches weren’t able to support Rhéaume. Her father was told to stop bringing her to tryouts, but as a kid growing up in a hockey-mad family, all she wanted to do was play hockey. Rhéaume continued to play hockey, trying out for the Pee Wee AA team, but was cut. Both she and her father believed it was because she was a girl.² She was dropped down to the Pee Wee CC team instead and went on to become the first girl to play at the International Pee Wee Hockey Tournament in Quebec at age 11. Finally, this tournament was a triumph for Rhéaume in her hockey life.

In 1986, Manon played Bantam AA under coach Pierre Brind’Amour, a former Québec Nordiques player.⁵ “I played two years of Bantam AA, and after that year every single goaltender got invited to a Midget AAA camp except me. They told me they didn’t want a girl there.”⁶ In February 1989, the week she turned 17, she quit the sport, convinced that her career in hockey was over.⁷ A year later, Rhéaume was invited to a hockey camp for women where she joined a team in Sherbrooke. In 1991, she played for the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League. She was the first female to play in the Canadian Hockey League, a farm system that prepares

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juniors for the NHL.\textsuperscript{8} She never got any special treatment, except for a separate dressing facility. Rhéaume was also the first woman to play in any major junior hockey game. This brought her to two triumphs in the CHL for becoming the first woman to play in the league and the first to play in a game. She played for the Trois-Rivières Draveurs in the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League. In her first game, she went in mid-game of a tied game, and let three goals in on thirteen shots.\textsuperscript{9} Rhéaume was called onto the ice after their number one goaltender came off the ice with an injury. At the beginning of the third period, Rhéaume took a slapshot to her mask and which broke the cage, resulting in a cut to her eye. At the blow of the whistle, she took off her bloody helmet, forcing them to take her out of the game to receive stitches. “The blood started running,” says Manon. “But I continued to play. I didn’t want anyone to say I stopped because I’m a girl.”\textsuperscript{10} “Some say I was injured because I’m a girl, but it would have happened to anyone.” It is a tragedy that people would say such things after an injury. “My mask looked like it had been in a car accident.”\textsuperscript{11}

Her performance at the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League with the Trois-Rivières Draveurs was caught on tape and sent to Phil Esposito, founder of the Tampa Bay Lightning. When he received the video, he had no idea that Rhéaume was a woman and was gossmacked when he found out. She first met Esposito while helping out with interviews for RDS at the NHL draft in Montreal. In the fall of 1992, Rhéaume was invited to the training camp of the expansion NHL team, the Tampa Bay Lightning.\textsuperscript{12} This triumph lead her straight to the big leagues. She


was given the opportunity by Esposito to go to Tampa as publicity for his new team, though she was not invited for just publicity, but also for her talent. “She has God-given talent,” he said. “Defense, for instance, she couldn’t do that. No woman could against the men.” Rhéaume knew this and still welcomed the opportunity. “After so many people [before] said no to me because I’m a girl, if this time someone says yes to me because I’m a girl, I’m going to take that opportunity,” she says. “I have to stop the puck that’s my job. I have a chance to try. So I want to try.” There was so much pressure on Rhéaume that it took her a few weeks before she said yes to Esposito’s offer. She became the first woman to ever be invited to an NHL training camp and the first woman to try out for an NHL team. Before going to the training camp, she played for Canada’s women's hockey team, who won gold at the world championships in 1992. Rhéaume only gave up two goals in three games, which was a triumph proving her talent. After that, she showed up for the first two Tampa Bay Lightning training camps with the same chest protector her father had modified for her when she was playing Pee Wee hockey. Once Esposito noticed the gear, he bought her a new set, but she wouldn’t wear the new gear he bought her, thinking that she wouldn’t be able to move quickly enough to block shots. But she found her body bruised from the NHL-level shots, and in the end, she simply attached extra padding to her old gear. There was a mini-tournament within the camp, and she recalled stopping all 14 shots in her first appearance. Rhéaume had the third best goals-against average of any Lightning
goalie during that camp. Both triumphs really showed people her capability. Then on September 23, 1992, she changed the face of hockey forever.

During the 1992-93 pre-season, Manon Rhéaume became the first woman to play in an NHL pre-season game with the Tampa Bay Lightning against the St. Louis Blues. This was the most outstanding triumph she had throughout her entire hockey career. “I had a big bouquet of flowers from a Quebec radio station and a card saying ‘you can do this, we’re all behind you.’” She only played for the first period during the exhibition game, but during her performance she made seven saves on nine shot attempts. Rhéaume was later taken off the ice with a tied score of 2-2. Phil Esposito has been pretty open in past interviews that a big part of Rhéaume’s start was to drum up interest in his new expansion team. However, it became clear that Rhéaume had more than enough talent to go beyond being a publicity stunt.

Even after her time in the NHL, Manon Rhéaume has made a huge impact and influence on female athletes. After her game with the Lightning, she signed a three-year contract offering to play with the Atlanta Knights, the Lightning’s top minor-league farm team, in their minor-league organization. The contract ensured that she would not be exploited, but instead developed as as hockey player. “I was a little guy trying to make it in hockey,” said Ubriaco, head coach of the Knights. “So I’m not going to eliminate her just because she’s not like everybody else.” Later during her news conference about her game with the Tampa Bay Lightning, interviewers and magazines became more interested in her and her body, rather than her performance. Someone even asked about her nails, instead of what she put out onto the ice.

Rhéaume was also offered $50,000 for an interview and naked photoshoot with Playboy, but she quickly declined. This became a major tragedy being that they did not even care about her performance in hockey, which was the only reason they had an interview with her.

Later, in her first game with the Knights, she triumphed as the first woman to play in a regular season men’s professional hockey game. She played for 5:49, allowing one goal on five shots.22 A year after playing with the Tampa Bay Lightning, she played another pre-season game with them against the Boston Bruins. This became another triumph as she got to play in the big leagues once again. The next season after playing with the Knights, Rhéaume played in the East Coast Hockey League with the Knoxville Cherokees, then traded to the Nashville Knights. In 1994, Rhéaume again played for Canada’s women's team at the world championships in Lake Placid. In the 1994-95 season, she also played in the International Hockey League with the Vegas Thunder and the Tallassee Sharks. During the summer of 1995, she played roller hockey with the New Jersey Rockin’ Rollers, Roller International League.23 A triumph being that she was the only woman goalie in the league. The next year, she played in pro roller hockey for the Ottawa Loggers and the Sacramento River Rats. In the 1996-97 season, Rhéaume played in the West Coast Hockey League for the Reno Renogades. She tried out for the 1997 Canadian national women's team, but was cut before the world championships. In 1998, she played for Team Canada at the Olympics in Nagano, but earned the silver medal after losing to Team America. Still, it was a triumph for her to play in the Olympics, considering that it was the first year in which the Olympics featured women's hockey. Rhéaume tried out again for the team in 2000, but did not make the cut and then retired from international hockey and her career as a

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goalie. After retiring as a goalie, Rhéaume continued to play recreational hockey as a forward. She played in a women's professional league, the Montreal Wingstars, of the National Women's Hockey league. She then coached an all girls’ team, the Mission Bettys, which brought her back to her roots at the International Pee Wee Hockey Tournament. From 2003-05, she was director of girls’ hockey at Powerade Iceport, an ice sports facility in Cudahy, Wisconsin. Rhéaume played for the Minnesota Whitecaps of the Western Women's Hockey League in 2008. On October 10, 2008, she played goalie for the Port Huron Icehawks of the International Hockey League, during an exhibition game against the Flint Generals. (See Appendix A).

Also in 2008, and in her greatest triumph, she started the Manon Rhéaume Foundation to help girls realize their dreams and providing scholarships to girls under 19 to help them pursue their athletic dreams. Girls who are awarded with a scholarship have expressed a desire to pursue their dreams in athletics to further or enable their respective athletic careers. Later on April 3, 2009, she made a brief appearance in goal with the Flint Generals against the Muskegon Lumberjacks in the International Hockey League. To extend the legacy of her hero, Manon Rhéaume, Dani Rylan established the National Women's Hockey League in 2015. Rhéaume is now coaching the Detroit Little Caesars team of girls under the age of 12 and working with the Detroit Red Wings youth hockey. There are now more opportunities at the college level and several women's hockey leagues in operation. Because of Rhéaume, girls throughout the United States can now play hockey at a higher level. Due to her impact on hockey, there is currently a movement to get Manon Rhéaume in the NHL Hall of Fame.

Manon Rhéaume has made an amazing legacy for herself in the hockey world. Her most important triumph is being the first woman to play in the NHL. Before playing with the Tampa Bay Lightning, Rhéaume has made a legacy of being the first woman for many things in hockey. From playing in the International Pee Wee Hockey Tournament, to playing in the Canadian Hockey League, to playing in any major junior hockey game, to being invited to an NHL training camp, and finally trying out for an NHL team. Even after playing with the Tampa Bay Lightning, Rhéaume has earned the legacy of being the first woman to play in a regular season men’s professional hockey game. When asking people which woman had the greatest impact on women’s hockey, Andria Hunter, two-time gold medalist at the Worlds, Brian McFarlane, author to over 75 books, and Andrew Podnieks, author to over 20 hockey book, said Manon Rhéaume.

In 1992, in Tampa, Florida, Manon Rhéaume set a new bar for woman in hockey when she became the first woman to play for the Tampa Bay Lightning in an NHL exhibition game. Her triumph in the NHL continues to be an inspiration for female athletes to this day. Manon Rhéaume has had many accomplishments in her life and has been the first for many of them. From her hockey experiences before her time in the NHL and during the pre-season with the Tampa Bay Lightning, her impact and influence on female athletes, and her legacy in the hockey world. Manon Rhéaume has proved that women have equal chances with men when it comes to sports and has changed a long history of a male-dominated sport.
These are Manon Rhéaume’s goalie stats from all of the minor league hockey teams she played for.
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