

Calgary sports community shares Christmas MVPs *

Henry Burris et al. recall favourite yuletide memories

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So much of the contemporary holiday classic A Christmas Story rings so true with so many of us. Falling in the white stuff strapped into a yeti-sized snowsuit and struggling pointlessly to get up. Your dead-ringer-for-Darren-Mc-Gavin dad%\$#&*(ing as the furnace ruptures and belches smoke. The school bullies. Getting your tongue frozen-stuck on a lamppost, on a double-dog dare.

But most of all, what touches a chord in everyone at this time of year is Ralphie's longing for that Red Ryder carbine-action 200-shot range-model BB rifle with a compass in the stock. The dream present, the one that lingers in memory long after the tinsel has been put away, the leftover turkey gone into sandwiches and that wondrous sense of childhood belief compromised beyond repair.



CREDIT: Lorraine Hjalte, Calgary Herald
Luger Regan Lauscher's favourite Christmas present as a child was the talking doll Cricket. "She was a phenom," said Lauscher.

Sports being a kind of grown-up playland, a sample of the local fraternity graciously took time to share their own Red Ryder carbine BB rifle stories, old and new: - Henry Burris, quarterback/ Grey Cup MVP, Calgary Stampeders: "I'd have to say Techno-Bowl. A Sega game. THE first game to give you the real feel of NFL football. All the players, Walter Payton, Barry Sanders. All the teams. The Bears. The Dolphins. Milt Stegall's in that game! Shows how young Milt was. Or how old the game is. So, definitely, Techno-Bowl. That and Mike Tyson's Punch-Out. I was 10 or 11. My greatest Christmas." - Jonathan Asselin, show jumper: "A puppy dog. Definitely. I was eight years old. A St. Bernard we called Carlos." - Regan Lauscher, World Cup silver medallist, luge: "My favourite Christmas present as a child growing up was the talking doll Cricket. She was a phenom! You could buy cassette tapes that you put into the player in her back and she would talk along with the books. I was BIG into dolls and was ecstatic when I unwrapped her!" - Jarome Iginla, right wing/ captain, Calgary Flames: "A set of goalie pads. Brown. The old D&Rkind. I don't think they make 'em anymore. I was eight years old and still hadn't decided whether I wanted to play out or in goal. But I put 'em on and played on Christmas Day with my friends." - Les Gramantik, head coach, Canada High Performance Training Centre, athletics: "We were poor when I was growing up. There wasn't a lot of money for Santa to throw around. But I do remember one Christmas being in high school and somehow my mom--a single mother--bought me a turquoise V-neck sweater. To this day, I don't know where the hell she got the money. I had no idea. It was such a

surprise. But, let me tell you, I wore that sucker out. VERY avantgarde in Romania in the '60s. I wore that sweater all the way through university, for six or seven years, and to every party I went to. White shirt, grey or blue pants and my turquoise sweater. I was a dude! Those are the sort of moments, the kind of presents, that always stay with you."

- Jeff Christie, Olympian, luge: "The one that I remember most and got the most use out of was the Christmas that I was 12 or 13. I got the complete road-hockey goalie equipment-- pads, catcher, blocker, face mask (the kind that Freddy Kreuger wore), stick and net. I spent the next three years of junior high playing street hockey with friends every day after school. Even a broken arm didn't stop me, although the butt end of the stick eventually wore the palm of the cast out and I had to go get the cast replaced!"

- Stephen Ames, three-time winner on the PGA Tour: "Oh, that's easy. My first set of clubs. Titleists. Brand new driver, 3-wood, 5-wood, everything. I was 13 years old. My parents didn't see me for the rest of the day. I was gone. Christmas in Trinidad is a lot different than here, obviously. Here, we spend Christmas in the snow, skating or tobogganing; in Trinidad, we spent it at the beach. Or on the golf course."

- Chandra Crawford, Olympic gold medallist, cross-country skiing: "I got a one-piece alpine ski suit one year that I really loved. New down-hill skis that were twin-tipped. New CDs were almost always the thing I was most stoked on--Dance Mix '95 (which I still love), Alanis Morissette, Matchbox 20, U2."

- Blake Nill, U of C football coach: "We lived on a farm when I was young. I remember one Christmas out back my dad had bought the family a new snowmobile. I think every farm in the vicinity had one, except us. My brother and I thought that was amazing."

- Kyle Shewfelt, 2004 Olympic gold medallist, floor exercise, gymnastics: "Without doubt, 1991, when my brother and I received a trampoline. My parents had put springs in a box and wrapped it up. I tore off the paper, opened the box and was kind of confused. Like: 'What am I going to do with springs?' And they told me to think about what went with springs. A trampoline! And I ran about 40 laps around the house."

-MatthewLombardi , centre, Calgary Flames: "I'd have to say a Sega Genesis. I was 11, I guess. My grandma bought the machine, my mom bought the games. I remember getting an NHL '93 game under the tree, with Mario (Lemeiux) on the front of the box. That was so cool."

-ZinaKocher , World Cup bronze medallist, Olympian, biathlon: "My first pair of downhill skis. I was four. I wanted to ski sooo much! We had been living in St. Anton, Austria, until I was three, when my brother was born. All I wanted to do was ski. I can't remember too much except that the desire to have skis and to be able to ski like my parents was extremely high."

- Ari Taub, Olympic wrestler: "My wife gave me a coffee mug with pictures of the family around the glass shell. And she also makes up calendars with photos for every month of the year. I can't think of better gifts to receive."

- Rob Lazeo, centre, Calgary Stampeders: "I was four or five years into my career in Saskatchewan, and my wife Mindi got my rookie jersey framed for me at Christmas time. I guess she had some help from Norm Fong, our equipment manager at the time. But it meant a lot to me. I thought that jersey was long gone."

- Craig Conroy, centre, Calgary Flames: "A Dallas Cowboys bike! I loved the

Dallas Cowboys when I was a kid. I came down Christmas morning and there it was, beside the tree, with a big bow on it. It left me speechless, if you can believe that. Cowboys logo on the seat. It was nice. I didn't care if there was anything else addressed to me after that. It was cold and snowing in Potsy (Potsdam, N. Y.) and I couldn't ride the bike for months, but I didn't care. What a present!"

- Sara Renner, Olympic silver medallist, cross-country skiing: "I can't remember who gave me my favourite slippers, but I still enjoy them. What made these slippers fantastic was that they had really slippery leather soles. It was really fun to zoom around our floors. I had no directional control whatsoever."

- Burke Dales, punter, Calgary Stampeders: "I'd have to say a Cross-man high-powered, single-shot pellet gun with a scope. I would've been 11, 12 or 13. We lived in the bush, 15 or 20 minutes out of town, and I was an outdoorsy kid. This gun had the power of a .22 rifle. A real kick. I hunted rabbits and squirrels with it, until I was 17 or 18."

-JohnKucera , two-time World Cup medallist, Canadian national alpine ski team: "A PC, six or seven years ago. Actually, it was a family gift, but I wound up stealing it. It can get pretty boring when you're travelling all the time, from race to race, far from my family, so I just, uh, borrowed it. For a few months. It sure kept me going during the down times. A little piece of home away from home."

- Henry Bekkering, U of C basketball: "Nintendo. Just what every eight-year-old dreamed of at that time. I'm proud to be a part of the video-game movement. The first wave. You got two games included. Super Mario Brothers, the classic, of course; and Duck Hunt, where you used a gun to shoot ducks flying across the screen."

- Robyn Regehr, defence, Calgary Flames: "Growing up, a GT Snow Racer sleigh. I really wanted one. I remember searching under the tree in vain that morning. Well, my oma had hung a little sleigh on the Christmas tree, and right behind it, stuck in the back, was the Snow Racer. I was thrilled. As an adult, I'd say a crib game that comes in the shape of a Pilsner bottle. My wife gave it to me. A guy right here in town makes them. You take the bottle apart and, voila!, there it is. My wife and I both love to play crib and that was unique."

- Beckie Scott, Olympic gold and silver medallist, IOC Athlete Committee member: "My favourite Christmas present as a young kid was a Barbie house that was handmade by my grandpa. He made it quite big and it had wallpaper, carpet, little lamps . . . even a little deck for Barbie to lounge and tan on. I was a Barbie fanatic, so it pretty much made my year. I adored my grandpa and it was really special to have something he'd taken so much time and effort to create that I absolutely loved."

- Erica Morningstar, Olympic swimmer: "I would say that it was a trip to Florida and Disney World. My parents surprised myself and my two brothers in 2003 with the trip."

- Kyle Bortis, LW/C, Calgary Hitmen: "I'd have to say a CD player, when I was eight. I had a hunch it was going to be there under the tree, so I was fist-pumping even before I got to the tree. My parents shot video of me pumping my fist and going crazy when I unwrapped it. So I'll always remember that CD player."

- Jon Montgomery, second overall 2007-08 World Cup circuit, skeleton: "One

year, I got He-Man figures and a piece of yellow braided rope. I don't think I looked twice at the He-Man toys, but that piece of rope saw a ton of action. I played with that thing forever. Tying everything up and together and swinging from anything I could tie it to. Oh, the memories I have with that piece of rope! Strange, perhaps, but true."

- Kelly Hrudey, Hockey Night in Canada: "You receive so many great presents over the years, but maybe my first Christmas memory is the most special. A Dinky Toy. As a stocking stuffer. I'd like to say it was a red fire engine. I still remember the feeling, the joy, the excitement, when I pulled that toy out of my stocking."

- Tracey Kelusky, Calgary Roughnecks, lacrosse: "I used to love those cars you'd race using a trigger, the ones that would go down the track and around the loop. I don't know whether they were Hot Wheels or not. Lite Brite was another favourite. But I think this year's going to top them all. We're heading back to Peterborough with our six-month old son to see the grandparents. I can't wait to see their reaction!"

- Peter Maher, 960 The Fan, Voice of the Flames: "I'd have to say a Toronto Maple Leafs sweater. I was 10 or 11 and living in Campbellton (N. B.). My favourite player was Frank Mahovlich, the Big M. To own a Leafs sweater was a big deal in those days."

- John Morris, curling skip: "When I first moved out to Calgary in 2003, I was fresh out of university and was competing almost full time as an amateur athlete. It was going to be difficult to make it home for the holidays that year, as we had struggled early in the season and I was lacking the finances to travel to my home town of Ottawa. I was quite disappointed that I would be spending my first Christmas ever away from family and friends. Early in December, after another tough defeat during a tournament in Lloydminster, I arrived home to a wonderful surprise in the mail. My family had all pitched in to book me a flight home for the holidays as my Christmas gift. I was overjoyed and it was truly a memorable holiday that year."

- Lascelles Brown, Olympic silver medallist, bobsled: "My favourite Christmas present when I was growing up was a bike. I wanted a bike forever, and when I was 13, I finally got one. Another great Christmas present was a water gun. This came in very useful with Jamaica being so hot."

- Cory Sarich, defence, Calgary Flames: "I'd have to say the Christmas my dad made us regulation-sized nets. I was either four or five. Back on the farm. We were the only kids for miles that had real nets that wouldn't tip over. He welded them. Put the mesh in them. Painted them. The nets are still there, back home. I wouldn't stand behind them these days if somebody took a shot. The mesh is a little suspect. But that red paint is still holding up. You fix the mesh and those nets would be as good as new. Just goes to show that quality lasts."

-Sleds. Games. Dolls. Goalie pads. Trips. Indelible memories. Lasting joy. We'll leave the final word on unforgettable yuletide presents, though, to Olympic skeleton bronze medallist Mellisa Hollingsworth, the pride of Eckville:

"Christmas to me means so much more than just presents. I'll never forget the year I received the greatest gift in the world . . . the opportunity to spend Christmas with my dad.

"My parents divorced when I was a very young child--only five years old. Living with my mom when they first parted ways, I was able to visit my dad every other weekend and also on occasional holidays. My dad was a rodeo

cowboy and had little time to work in the oilfields so he could ride broncs. He didn't own anything, so Christmas was never about presents. The only gift I ever wanted was to see him.

"I'll never forget the year my dad took on a huge responsibility. With little money, he bought a mobile home and moved it onto my granddad's land, and that allowed me the opportunity to live with him in it. I'll never forget our first Christmas together sitting on an old 1970s orange rocking chair, and he asked me what I wanted for Christmas. Having just turned nine years old, and supposed to be worrying about toys and playing with friends, I was worried about family finances. I knew we barely had enough money for groceries, let alone presents, but I was nine and had a glimmer of hope that Santa would be able to deliver, so I decided to ask for what I really wanted-- a motorized Barbie car!

"For the first time in my life, I saw my dad cry when he told me he couldn't afford it.

"I felt awful for asking, and I told him I didn't need anything--I was just so happy to be spending my first Christmas with him.

"I did get a curling iron that year, which meant so much more than a Barbie car. But the reality is my favourite gift ever as a young girl was the first year I got to spend Christmas with my dad.

"Spending Christmas with the people I love is the best gift I could ever ask for."

And a joyous holiday season to you and yours, too.

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