



Teemu Selanne at his restaurant, Selanne Steak Tavern, in southern California.

Restaurant owner and busy father, Teemu is living the good life in southern California Selanne still serving up smiles

MIKE MCINTYRE

LAGUNA BEACH — He likes his coffee black. His steak “medium rare plus.” And he’s an extremely generous pour, especially when it comes to a Moscow mule. His left knee is giving him all sorts of trouble these days, he’s admittedly almost always running behind schedule and his biggest pride and joy are his four children, who keep he and his wife Sirpa hopping with their numerous athletic pursuits.

He is Teemu Selanne, the beloved Winnipeg Jets legend who, you’ll be happy to know, is still living the good life just a stone’s throw from the Pacific Ocean in this little piece of southern California paradise.

Despite being nearly eight years removed from the end of a Hall of Fame hockey career, the Finnish Flash remains a big deal around here. That was clear as we sat down earlier this week for a chat inside Selanne Steak Tav-

ern — a high-end eatery he owns that sits along the stunning Pacific Coast Highway.

As the doors opened at 5 p.m. on a warm Tuesday evening, plenty of star-struck diners were thrilled to see the main attraction sitting front and centre at one of the tables. The sociable Selanne, who at 51 seemingly hasn’t aged a day since the Jets selected him 10th overall in 1988, was clearly in his element as he worked the room with the same kind of ease he once controlled the offensive zone on the ice.

“Twenty-two years in the NHL, I always enjoyed going on the road to the best restaurants,” Selanne said of his passion for culinary pursuits.

“I always said it would be nice to have my own restaurant when I’m done. I’ve always loved this atmosphere, good food and things like that. One time, it was on Thanksgiving and we’d just finished playing golf: after the round we were having a beer in our

club and I don’t know how we started talking about the restaurant, but I said I always wanted to have a steakhouse. My buddy, Kevin, said ‘me too.’”

That conversation happened in 2005, when Selanne was back in the area for a second stint with the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim. But it wouldn’t be until 2013, when he began his final season in the NHL, for the dream to become a reality.

“It’s always fun when he’s in here. People just love him,” said Kevin Pratt, that golfing buddy of Selanne’s who eventually became his business partner. The pair first met in 2000 as neighbours in Coto de Caza, the nearby private community they both call home, and agreed to wait patiently until the right location became available.

“We think we’ve created something pretty special here. Teemu is just a fabulous individual, period,” said Pratt, who makes a sweeping motion at the busy scene in front of us. “Teemu, this

is what he does. He’s a hell of a guy.”

The tavern is truly a family affair. Selanne and Pratt’s wives were integral in giving the property — a historic cottage built in 1932 — a major facelift before opening the doors for customers.

“Everything was super dark,” said Selanne. “Very kind of like a French style. We opened up everything. You can see that there’s a lot of feminine touch. We didn’t want a heavy, old-school steakhouse. This is like a more modern, European style steakhouse. It really suits this area, and this house.”

Both his wife and their oldest son, Emil, now work at the restaurant.

“He’s just the nicest guy. The nicest guy,” Margarite Clark, who handles public relations for the company, said of Selanne.

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Former Winnipeg Jet Teemu Selanne takes a shot during a practice for the NHL's Heritage Classic Alumni game in Winnipeg in 2016.

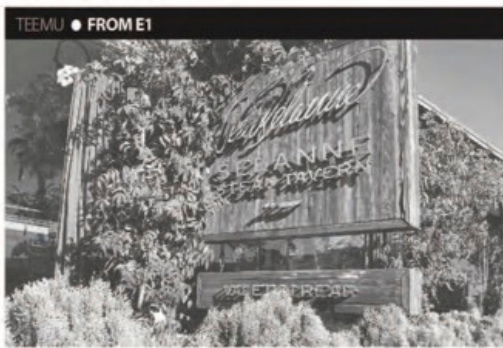
JOHN WOODS - THE CANADIAN PRESS FILES



Teemu Selanne talks with Free Press sports reporter Mike McIntyre at Selanne's restaurant.

'When I came into the league, look how tough it was and how much holding and grabbing there was. Now if you can't skate you can't play. So overall speed, for sure. I don't think first and second line speed has changed. Now, it's the third and fourth line'

— Teemu Selanne on how the league has changed



Selanne Steak Tavern boasts a green and inviting exterior.

"My stepdad celebrated his 100th birthday here for brunch a couple years back and Teemu made sure to come in to say congratulations. That tells you what kind of guy he is." Selanne also lends the occasional hand in the kitchen and behind the bar, but admittedly he's being pulled in all sorts of directions these days. His other two boys — Eetu, 23, and Leevi, 21 — are both playing Division III hockey at Curry College just outside Boston. And 13-year-old daughter, Veera, is a rising young tennis prodigy in the community.

"Most of my time goes to her. I coach her pretty much every day," he said.

Selanne, who can swing a mean racquet himself, held serve for more than an hour on pretty much every topic under the sun. Here are the highlights of our wide-ranging hot-stove session over scrumptious scallops, skirt steak and wild mushrooms:

ON THE PATRIK LAINE TRADE SHOCKER:

SELANNE always kept an eye on how the Jets were doing, but admits his interest really picked up when they drafted Laine second overall in 2016. The games became must-see TV. But the blockbuster trade last January, which shipped Laine to Columbus for Pierre-Luc Dubois, was a tough pill to swallow.

"I was watching all the games, because I wanted to know how Patty was doing, how was his process. His skating, what kind of things were happening there. Great Finnish player comes to the same team I used to play for. It was like a double interest for me. But then, when he left, my interest in them went a little bit down. Just back to what it was before, following them, but not that close."

ON THE JETS HONOURING THE PAST, INCLUDING ERECTING A STATUE OF DALE HAWERCHUCK:

TO be clear, Selanne isn't down on the organization. He recognizes sports is a business, better than anyone. After all, he was traded by the Jets in 1996, during his fourth season. But his heart very much remains in Winnipeg and it's been warmed by some recent moves to recognize the L.O era in a bigger way.

"That's awesome. Winnipeg and Mark (Chipman), they're first-class people. I'm so happy to follow their action and see how much they care about community and what they are doing for the people in Winnipeg. I admire those guys."

ON DUSTIN BYFUGLIEN ABRUPTLY DECIDING TO RETIRE WITHOUT SO MUCH AS A GOODBYE IN WINNIPEG:

SELANNE, like pretty much everyone in Winnipeg, still wonders what the heck happened.

"That's an interesting story. Maybe there's something that we don't know."

ON HIS CURRENT FAVOURITE JET:

NO surprise that the Dashing Dane, Nikolaj Ehlers, has caught his eye.

"He's so fun to watch. He can fly out there."

ON WHO, OR WHAT, GRABS HIS ATTENTION IN THE NHL THESE DAYS:

HIS primary focus is on the rebuilding Anaheim club, of course. But a certain Canadian superstar is doing things Selanne never imagined were possible.

"Of course, McDavid. The thing is, like myself or Paul Kariya, we were really quick up the line. But I've never seen anybody who's like (McDavid). (Nathan) MacKinnon as well, but I think McDavid, he's almost like a turbo boost. It's insane. It's insane. The way he can see the game, he's the full package."

ON HOW THE SPORT HAS CHANGED SINCE HE LAST PLAYED:

SELANNE believes the biggest improvement has been to the quality of third and fourth lines, once reserved for slow-footed checkers and slugs.

"When I came into the league, look how tough it was and how much holding and grabbing there was. Now if you can't skate you can't play. So overall speed, for sure. I don't think first and second line speed has changed. Now, it's the third and fourth line.

"And, when I came in the league there were a lot of super big tough defencemen. They weren't great skaters but they were tough, smart players. Now, they're pretty much gone. If you

can't skate anymore you're going to be in huge trouble. Obviously the goalies are bigger. Even in my last year the goalies were huge."

Selanne is impressed by the fear-less commitment most players have to block shots, which are coming harder than ever thanks to composite stick technology. But he's also happy to see teams abandon the ultra-boring trap, which was perfected by the New Jersey Devils during his era.

"I think all teams now it's about scoring goals. Which is great. That's why it's so exciting."

ON GETTING NHL PLAYERS BACK TO THE OLYMPICS:

SELANNE'S four Olympic medals (one silver, three bronze over an incredible six appearances) hang in the restaurant, and they — along with his Stanley Cup from 2006-07 with the Ducks — are his crowning achievement. He's happy today's biggest stars will get the opportunity to shine bright as well.

"So happy. I was covering them on the Discovery channel (in 2018) they were showing the Olympic games for hockey in Finland. It was not the same. It's not the same unless you see the best players in the tournament. It's so unique when the best play against best in the world. Not only for the players, but for the game. It's a unique thing.

"For the game and the fans, I think it's absolutely huge. I'm super excited about that. I think I will do again the commenting for Discovery. Last time the studio was in Denmark. I think it's going to be in Denmark again, and I'll be there for the couple weeks."

ON TAKING PRIDE IN HELPING TO PUT HOCKEY ON THE CALIFORNIA MAP:

TWO names are front and centre in terms of building southern California up to now be a place that routinely pumps out pro players — Selanne and Wayne Gretzky in Los Angeles.

"I think it's neat to be part of that whole progress. Obviously when we won the Stanley Cup, how big news that was. At the time there were only a few rinks here. Now, if you want to start playing hockey as a young boy or girl, you have so many opportunities.

"The Ducks, three years ago, built probably the most beautiful practice facility I've ever seen, with four sheets. The facility, I'm almost jealous that we didn't have that. Now, that opens up for the kids great opportunities. When my boys started playing here they'd have a couple one-hour practices a week, sometimes they'd have to share with another team. If you compare with what I had in Finland, or the kids have in Canada, they have opportunities to skate outdoors or there's so many rinks they can skate every day."

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The Finnish Flash is given an ovation by Ducks fans after the future Hall of Famer announced the 2013-14 season would be his last in the NHL.

ON ELECTING TO SETTLE HERE ONCE HE HUNG UP THE BLADES:

Turns out, this wasn't the original plan. A full-time return to Finland had initially been in the cards, but this area and all its splendour eventually changed their collective minds.

"There's no place like here. You can surf in the morning. You can play tennis right after. You can play golf. And then you drive two hours and you can go ski. All in one day. I'm happiest when I can be active."

"So now, it's two or three months in the summertime in Finland, where the summers are great. In winter, we might go there for Christmas or other occasions. We're going next week for my wife's sister who is turning 60. On the way back we'll stop in Boston and see the boys."

ON POTENTIALLY GETTING BACK INVOLVED IN THE NHL IN AN OFFICIAL CAPACITY:

NEVER say never. It's more a matter of timing. Right now, Selanne is happy being a busy family man, who still does some work with the Ducks in a charitable, ambassador-type role.

"So far I've been waiting and if I get any itching to get back in some way, I've decided I've got to be all in. It would be a new career. You look at coaches, they spend more time at the rink than players. I don't know if I'm ready for that."

"But I think about what could be my role. But I don't want to start anything when I'm just 50 per cent involved. It's funny, my oldest son is a huge hockey fan and Ducks fan. We watch a lot of hockey games together. He always asks, like why don't you do something more? And I tell him it's a big commitment. I think until my daughter goes to college, I don't think I'm going to want to do that. I already missed a lot of time with the boys."

ON THE FINNISH HOCKEY EXPLOSION, INCLUDING A PIPELINE OF TOP NHL PLAYERS:

SELANNE is too modest to take credit, but the man affectionately known as the "grandfather of Finnish hockey" has definitely played a role.

"It's awesome. The work that they do in Finland is phenomenal. Obviously it's the biggest sport. We also get the best athletes. Here, the best athletes, they have too many options. In Finland, the culture for hockey is like in Canada, it's so big. We automatically get all the best athletes to at some point play hockey. So that helps."

"And then the programs we have, a lot of ex-players who stayed in the game and coach. It's priceless. If I were to go back to Finland, I would



Selanne takes a victory lap after winning bronze with Finland in the 2014 Winter Olympics.

for sure get involved in hockey. You have to spend your time somewhere smart, and I think the hockey would be a very natural thing for me to do. The work they do for hockey there, there's a lot of passion. The right people are involved. It's cool."

ON THE TEAM-FIRST MENTALITY OF FINNISH PLAYERS:

IT'S an admirable trait, one Selanne said is instilled at a young age.

"Absolutely. It has always been our strength, whether it's the Olympics or World Championship. We know it's only two weeks and we don't have a problem if we have four first lines. As opposed to when everybody has to play 25 minutes and top power-play time. We always accept the roles."

"Sometimes you don't like it, but players take a lot of pride. If you play three minutes, give your best three minutes. I think Finns are easygoing and accepting. Sometimes too much in the NHL. Sometimes they don't fight for what I think they should get, what they deserve. But if you ask around the league about the reputation of Finns, they're hard-working, good guys."

ON BARELY HITTING THE ICE ANYMORE:

UNFORTUNATELY, there's not a whole lot of flash left in his on-ice arsenal.

"My left knee's pretty bad and doesn't like skating. I run a hockey school one week in Finland every summer, and then I have a scoring academy for one week for the 16-year-old junior national team forwards. And then I go on the ice with my kids sometimes here and there, but skating on my own, no. I would love to, but my knee, I can barely walk the next day."

"When I was 19, I broke both bones. It healed, but year after year it started wearing bone against bone. Now it doesn't go straight. So I just play tennis and golf."

ON GETTING TO PLAY IN THE CELEBRITY EVENT AT THE RYDER CUP:

HE'S still on a bit of a cloud after his experience in Wisconsin.

"Unbelievable. Ryder Cup has always been on my bucket list. I got a chance



Teemu Selanne is enjoying all the recreational opportunities southern California has to offer. But he still hangs out at the rink sometimes.

to play at Whistling Straits the day before. We had inside the ropes passes. It was just unbelievable. Obviously USA were unbeatable there, and the fans were super excited and everything."

"Being there, with that kind of atmosphere, it's almost like soccer or hockey. It was unbelievable. Even the guys like Patrick Cantlay, the guys that have been super focused and quiet and no emotions at all, even they're fired up and pumped. It's a huge thing."

ON THE STATE OF HIS OWN GOLF GAME:

INTERESTINGLY, Selanne said he had to re-adjust his expectations and learn not to be such a perfectionist if he wanted to continue enjoying what is supposed to be a leisurely pastime.

"It's pretty good. At one point I was a one handicap. My goal was to be scratch. It started getting to the point where I didn't enjoy the rounds where I shot 75 or 76. Then I said you know what, I don't want to be one of those guys. Now when I play and shoot 75 or 76, I'm happy."

Selanne recalls how the first time he ever picked up a golf club was in 1988, a fresh-faced rookie at Jets training camp invited to Niakwa County Club for a charity event.

"I didn't know what I was doing, but all the players were playing. They gave me a bag. I remember I asked 'So is it one or two clubs?' And they're like, no, you take the whole bag. I didn't know they were all for different distances. I always remember, though, how it was way harder than I thought."

"I didn't really pick up the game until I got traded here. Then my team would ask sometimes after practice, let's go play. And I realized I loved this game. Even then, I'd play maybe 10 times a year. Then when I was like

early 30s, it really hit me. I used to play a lot, and then when I retired I would play five, six times a week. I was also practising. It was good to stay busy with that extra time I had."

ON CANADIAN TENNIS:

SELANNE is a big fan of several current players, including Bianca Andreescu, Leylah Annie Fernandez, Denis Shapovalov and Milos Raonic, who have all enjoyed considerable success. In fact, his eyes light up at the mere mention of them.

"Oh my god, it's unbelievable. Canadians are a powerhouse right now. There's lots of great players."

ON THE IMPACT COVID HAD ON THEIR LIVES:

ALL six Selanne family members got COVID at one point last fall and winter, prior to vaccines becoming available, but fortunately managed to only have minor symptoms. But they did feel a major impact on the restaurant, which was shuttered for two lengthy stretches due to pandemic protocols. Now, they're back up and running with a staff of nearly 70 employees.

"I'm very proud of our staff and our kitchen. They take a lot of pride in doing things right. We try to run it like a hockey team. Even though it's my restaurant, in 20-plus years I've been to all the best restaurants in North America and all over the world. I can honestly put this place against anybody."

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— Teemu Selanne on living in Anaheim