Laurier multi-sport star turned down CFL for career as a diplomat which spanned numerous countries, Prime Ministers, and even the United Nations

by Kevin Campbell

On a Spring day in the mid-60’s, destiny arrived in Paul Heinbecker’s mailbox, in the form of two letters.

One came from the Edmonton Eskimos, notifying the WLU defensive half-back, who had pulled triple duty as quarter-back and punter, that he had been drafted to the Canadian Football League.

The other envelope’s return address was Ottawa, offering a job in the Canadian Foreign Service.

A choice had to be made, and the star athlete, more than apt at track and field, hockey and basketball, too, checked his inner compass and found himself choosing Ottawa.

It was not a decision he had planned to make.

"After football practice one October night, it was too cold and too wet to walk to the bus stop. I saw a sign on the bulletin board saying the Foreign Service exams were to be held that night. I knew I was going to have to get a job if I didn’t make it into the CFL,” recalled the Laurier graduate, "so I wrote the exam."

“It was pure serendipity.”

As well, Heinbecker wasn’t exactly Canadian winter’s biggest fan.

"[Edmonton’s field] used to be called Clarke Stadium and every time you watched late fall Eskimo games on television, the snow would pile up on the field and on the sidelines,” said Heinbecker. “The foreign service sounded a little more romantic, like the foreign legion. At least it was going to be warmer.”

And the rest as they say is history.

Shortly after arriving in Ottawa, Heinbecker found himself given his first assignment overseas.

"They called me in and they asked me if I’d like to go to Ankara, and I said, “Sure, great. Then I went back to my office and I looked up where Ankara was in my atlas... I would have gone anywhere.”

The Turkish capital was the first stop in propelling the diplomat’s government career, but it also launched a much more intimate one.

It was in Ankara where at the age of 25 Heinbecker met his wife, Ayse Köymen. A couple of years later, he returned to Ottawa.
Turkey, a country growing in prominence in the world.

The Heinbecker’s next foreign assignment was to Stockholm where he learned the intricacies of Swedish neutrality, industrial policy, social policy, and more.

Next stop was France. In Paris, at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Heinbecker learned the vagaries and the vocabulary of international economics.

After polishing his French, Heinbecker returned to Canada in 1979, where he drafted speeches on foreign policy for Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and Foreign Minister Joe Clark.

Later, the Canadian diplomat was off to Washington, serving as the political section head of the Canadian embassy. There Heinbecker covered hot-button issues such as acid rain, arctic sovereignty, international security, arms control and the Middle East.

Between 1989 and 1992, Heinbecker served as Prime Minister Brian Mulroney’s chief foreign policy adviser, meeting world leaders including Boris Yeltsin and Nelson Mandela. He was named Canadian Ambassador to Germany in 1992, where he promoted investment in Canada and fought the “cod war” against European over fishing off our shores. Four years later, he was back in Ottawa advising Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy on international security, arms control and the Middle East.

The new millennium brought new frontiers for the by now accomplished diplomat when he was appointed Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations. “It’s one of the best jobs any Canadian can have, I guess,” said Heinbecker.

It was at the UN where Heinbecker promoted human security worldwide through Canada’s ‘Responsibility to Protect’ initiative. His single fondest memory and most satisfying moment in his career, helping to keep Canada out of the Iraq war.

“There was some perception in Ottawa that if America chose to invade Iraq [in 2003], that we would have to go too. I told Prime Minister Jean Chretien that the casus belli was fraudulent and that it would be a mistake to get involved,” said Heinbecker.

Canada didn’t get involved and the country avoided perhaps the single-most ill-advised war in modern history.

Heinbecker is still the last Canadian to sit on the UN Security Council, since the Harper government failed to win election in 2010.

Now, a Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation and the director of the Centre for Global Relations at Wilfrid Laurier, Paul Heinbecker can be found commenting and lecturing on Canadian foreign policy and helping Laurier master’s students in International Public Policy, exposing them to the “movers and shakers” in Ottawa. He tells them not to get discouraged when 9,900 applicants out of 10,000 don’t make it into Canada’s Foreign Service, because there are many more options now than when he was a kid.

“The chances of getting into the Foreign Service aren’t favourable, but there are lots of other international careers these days... no one should jump off a bridge because he or she didn’t pass the Foreign Service exam,” says Heinbecker.

Living in Ottawa now, he’s in the midst of writing his second solo-effort book, this one a book of anecdotes. Says Heinbecker, “It’s a book of interesting stories to tell... I think I’ve got a few.”

Heinbecker has two daughters, Yasemin and Céline. Both are Foreign Service officers.