

# TK-A-CZ-UK Spells Trouble

BY JEFF GREENFIELD

Walter Tkaczuk has never scored 30 goals in a season. He's never had a hat trick, never made the National Hockey League All-Star team. He isn't the fastest or flashiest skater in the NHL, on the Rangers, even on his own line. There are no anticipatory cheers when he starts up the ice the way an Orr, a Hull, a Cournoyer, or a Brad Park can set the fans screaming. Off the ice, with his quiet clothes, his horn-rimmed glasses, his modest life-style, and his open, friendly face, he might be mistaken for an insurance salesman or a law school student.

Why, then, is Walter Tkaczuk paid \$150,000 a year to play hockey for the New York Rangers? Why did his teammates select him last season as their most valuable player? Why do most observers tag Tkaczuk as the key man in the Rangers' seemingly endless quest for the Stanley Cup?

The numbers won't tell you very much: He was the Rangers' leading scorer in the 1969-70 and 1970-71 seasons, their leading scorer in last spring's Cup play with seven goals and nine points and a member of the most effective penalty-killing team in the NHL last season.

Those numbers don't add up to \$150,000, but when you close the record books and look at the ice, you find the real explanation for the worth of Walter Tkaczuk. Watch him knock down the strongest man in the league with his shoulder to set up a goal. Watch Tkaczuk and teammate Bill Fairbairn stifle a power play, sliding

the puck back and forth, eluding wingers in a Canadian version of keepaway. Watch Tkaczuk, a center, dive into the corners to pull the puck away from a defender, flinging it to the point or the slot to set up a goal. Watch this 25-year-old steady his team and deflate his rivals, and you realize you're watching a spectacularly un-spectacular hockey player.

"I would pick him as one of the premier centers in the league, the best hockey player the Rangers have without a doubt," comments Boston's Derek Sanderson, who watched the Rangers destroy the heavily-favored Bruins in five games in the opening round of 1973 Cup play. "If I was to pick a player to be injured, it'd be him. He's probably one of the strongest skaters in the business; he's very good with the puck, a good shot, a tremendous forechecker. He's got all the tools, all the moves."

"He has mobility for a big man," says linemate Steve Vickers, whom Tkaczuk helped make last season's NHL Rookie of the Year. "He's a great player. And like Esposito, his secret is his mobility. I tell you, there's no way I'd have gotten 30 goals without him."

Adds Ranger defenseman Brad Park, "He's so strong on his skates, you can't run a player like Tkaczuk out. He just bowls you over, boom! I played against him in juniors and he bowled *me* over a few times. I'd rather be playing with him."

The accolades from his fellow players have not made Tkaczuk a

superstar in New York City, where basketball in general and the Knicks in particular have first call on the hearts of sports fans and writers. Apart from the high-scoring Ratelle-Gilbert-Hadfield line and the goal-mouth heroics of Ed Giacomin, the skills of Ranger athletes are not celebrated *seriatim*, as are the attributes of every Knickerbocker from Walt Frazier to Danny Whelan, the trainer. New York sports fans are the wisest of basketball observers; they are as likely to cheer a smart defensive maneuver or good pass as a brilliant move to the basket. On the other hand, Ranger fans love not wisely, but too well, with a desperate, bitter-sweet longing that comes only to a suitor whose dreams die every spring for 33 years. What Walter Tkaczuk does is not writ large in the hearts of the average New York sports fan; indeed, he is still, after five full NHL seasons, as likely to be called "*Tay-chuck*" as "*Ka-chook*" (which happens to be how *he* pronounces his name). Yet Walter Tkaczuk, who wins and saves hockey games, deserves—if not proper pronunciation—at least proper recognition.

Tkaczuk's most recognizable attribute is his strength.

"He's an exceptionally strong individual," Boston's Doug Roberts said glumly after a Stanley Cup defeat last season. "He's solid on his feet; you just can't knock him off the puck."

"First of all, you're never gonna scare him," notes Derek Sanderson

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"Second of all, you're never gonna knock him down. So what's the sense hitting him? He hits more people when they're trying to hit him than when he starts it himself. Walter waits for you to take a run at him, and then he starts up quickly and hits first."

Tkaczuk's strength gets him the kind of goals that don't make purists purr. Rather than 50-foot slapshots or ballet-like feints and glides, his goals look like the consequences of street brawls. In the Boston-New York Stanley Cup series last season, Tkaczuk scored one goal by putting his left shoulder into Phil Esposito, muscling him aside, stepping around Wayne Cashman, and firing the puck over a sprawling Don Awrey.

In the decisive fifth game, Tkaczuk scored the backbreaking fourth goal by digging the puck out from behind the net, fighting off Sanderson and Dallas Smith, barreling his way in front, and pushing the puck into the net.

Against the Black Hawks in the semi-final Stanley Cup round—in which New York lost to underdog Chicago in five games—Tkaczuk scored a crucial, though ultimately futile, tying goal by simply crashing through two defensemen, and backhanding the puck into the net after being thrown off his feet.

Strength, however, means more than scoring goals. It means the ability to simply stand your position and hold off opponents, letting your teammates move down the ice—as Tkaczuk did to Bobby Orr in the fifth Cup game, letting Jim Neilson pick up the loose puck and feed Steve Vickers for a score.

"When there are two guys on Walter," says linemate and fellow penalty-killer Bill Fairbairn, "I don't worry about going out there to help out, because I know that Walter is just not about to give up the puck."

Tkaczuk sees his corner work as a function of his limitations instead of his abilities. "With, say, Espo, he's such a good goal scorer that he's more valuable staying out in the slot; they feed him. And with his scoring, why not have your wingers working for you? I'm not as good in front of the net, so I'll try and contribute for the whole line." (His contribution is tangible—both his wingers were 30-goal scorers last season, and each scored nine points in New York's ten Stanley Cup games.)

Walter Tkaczuk never seems to have had as high an opinion of himself as his talents deserved. Almost from the day he began playing junior hockey for the Kitchen-Rangers, migrating from his adopted hometown of South Porcupine, Ontario (to which he migrated from his original hometown of Emstedetten, Germany), hockey observers were predicting National Hockey League stardom for Tkaczuk. But even after scoring 93 points and being voted his league's Most Valuable Player in 1968, Tkaczuk doubted his future.

"I didn't think I was going to make a living at it," he recalled last spring after the Rangers were eliminated by Chicago in the semi-final round. "When I was a junior, I tried out two, three games at Omaha in the Central League, and jeez, I couldn't do a damn thing, not a damn thing. I kept thinking, 'I'm gonna be playing higher than this? No way.'"

Yet by the fall of 1968, Tkaczuk was sitting on the New York bench. By December of that year, with Emile Francis returning as New York coach, Tkaczuk had won a regular berth. From 1969 to 1971, he was the team's leading scorer. But it was not until the start of the 1971-72 season that Tkaczuk was given the chance to demonstrate his special gift: Penalty-killing.

"The power plays win games, and the penalty-killers save them for us," is a frequently spoken adage of Ranger general manager and former coach Francis. In an effort to save more games, Emile teamed Tkaczuk with Bill Fairbairn as the Rangers' prime penalty-killing unit.

"Francis told us he wanted young, strong guys who skated their shifts," Fairbairn remembers, "not guys coming out there cold." Tkaczuk's own memory of the event is typical. "I don't know what made him think of it," Walter said. "He must have sent us out by mistake, and we did well so he tried us again."

Whether inspiration or accident, the Tkaczuk-Fairbairn unit clicked. In 1971-72, they killed almost 85 percent of the opposition's power plays; last season, they killed off 34 power plays in a row and finished the year by snuffing 28 consecutive power plays. These are not simply numbers; championships are won and lost on a team's ability to score when they're a man up and hold off their opponents when they're a man down. In the 1972 New York-Boston finals, the Bruins scored game-winning goals in three of their four victories on power plays. In the 1973 playoffs, Boston went 1-for-16 on power plays and New York wiped them out; Chicago, on the other hand, went 4-for-15 and ruined the Rangers. Little wonder that Boston coach Bep Guidolin moaned, "The power play, the power play is the key, and Tkaczuk and Fairbairn killed it."

What makes the Tkaczuk-Fairbairn team so devastating is their unwillingness to let the opposition touch the puck, much less put it in the net. Their notion is embarrassingly simple; instead of clearing the puck down the ice, they simply "rag" it back and forth, moving slowly within their defensive zone, while the clock ticks away. At times, their pace becomes downright laconic, slowing the fastest game in the world to a snail's pace, draining the morale of their opponents, who often look like straight

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men to one of Harpo Marx's antics. Up in Boston, Tkaczuk killed several seconds of a Boston power play by leisurely skating around and around the center-ice face-off circle looking like an ice-show hopeful; in New York, he helped keep the puck away from Boston for a minute and 52 seconds.

Walter's philosophy is elemental. "When you're killing penalties and you get the puck and there's nobody around you, why shoot it down the other end?" he asks. "Why give them the puck again? You're just giving them another chance to come down again and maybe score.

"So what we try to do is, if we get the puck, and there's no one around me, I look up to see where Fairbairn is. He always breaks to somewhere where there's nobody. We're not really interested in scoring goals; we just want to make sure *they* don't score. So we go back or frontwards. Let's say we're rushing up the ice; the defense backs up; we slow down. We just handle it as much as possible, because if you got the puck, they don't score."

Of course, the strategy doesn't always have a happy ending. Last season, Tkaczuk was involved in what may have been the most important goal of the Chicago-New York playoff. It came in the second game, after New York had won the first at Chicago. The Rangers had come back from a 3-0 first-period deficit to tie the score. Now New York was one man down, and Fairbairn and Tkaczuk were successfully stifling a penalty.

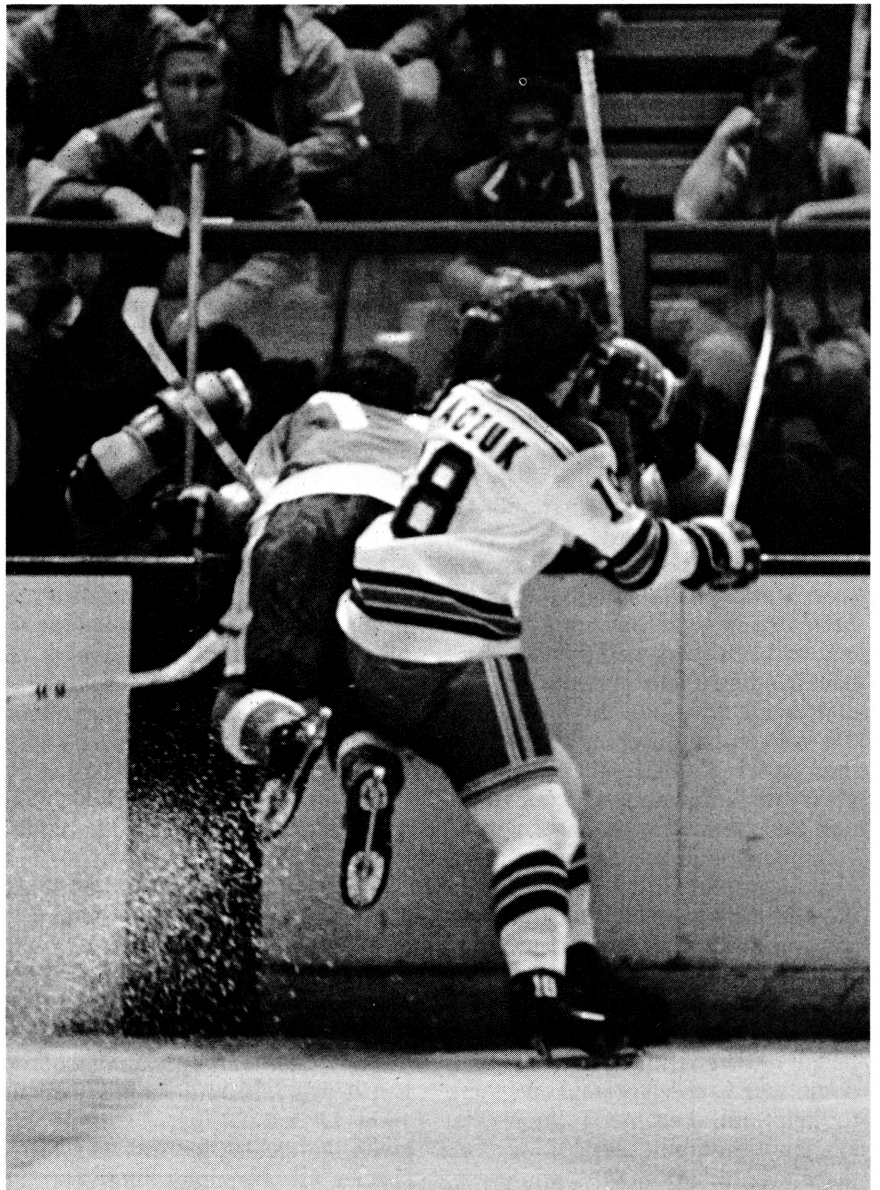
Fairbairn passed the puck over to Walter at the Chicago blue line, perhaps looking for a three-on-two break. Then, Tkaczuk remembers, "All of a sudden, [Bill] White took

it off me. They turned right around and had a three-on-one break. And they scored." He shakes his head. "I'll remember that one for a long time." The Black Hawks ultimately won the game, 5-4.

For Tkaczuk, those bad moments come infrequently enough and the good moments often enough to have won him (thanks in large measure to the competition

of the World Hockey Association), a raise of approximately 1000 percent over his 1971-72 wages. Yet apart from a Lincoln Continental, he allows himself few overt signs of affluence. During the season, he lives with his stunning wife Valerie and their year-old daughter Sarah in a \$27,000 home in Long Beach; the off-season is spent by Walter mainly relaxing and reflecting on his good fortune.

"Right now, it's tough," he says. "I don't feel like going to play hockey every game. I go to bed before every game for two, three hours, and when I get up, I say,



**Tkaczuk's strength is his strength. He muscles defenders up against the boards and brawls his way to the net to score.**



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'Ooh, I don't wanna go play tonight.' But in later years, by your getting up those times, you get to stay in bed. It's gonna pay off along the line. But during the season, I'll say hundreds of times, 'Why the hell did I ever become a hockey player?'"

Part of the answer is that hockey was Walter Tkaczuk's ticket out of a life in the mines, where his father still works. "He never made more than \$8000, \$9000 in a year," Tkaczuk notes.

But a more basic answer to the question that Walter Tkaczuk asks on those late afternoons in winter lies in the mystique of a grail that has been denied the New York Rangers for generations: The Stanley Cup.

In a sense, Tkaczuk and the Rangers have traveled a common

path these last five years. As Tkaczuk has become a strong, effective hockey player, the Rangers have shed their role as NHL doormat, and become a consistent contender for supremacy, along with Boston, Montreal and Chicago. The Rangers are the only team to have made the playoffs each of the last five years.

And yet, just as Tkaczuk has yet to tap his full potential and achieve recognition as a stellar player, so the Rangers have still not achieved the conquest of the Stanley Cup. Only one member of the present team (Giacomin) was alive when New York last won the Cup in 1940; and each year the frustration grows stronger, particularly when 1973 was so clearly marked as New York's year.

Tkaczuk talked during the off-

season about his hopes and the sense of incredulity that the Rangers felt when Chicago eliminated New York in five games. "I really felt we had the club that could do it," he said. "Even after we lost, I felt we had such a good club that I just couldn't believe we did lose. Why? I would say there's got to be something missing somewhere. I can't see anything that we're missing, but. . . ."

Tkaczuk's thoughts turned to next year. "Before I leave hockey," he said, "the one goal I have is to say I was part of the Stanley Cup. There's not too many people with their names on there. I want to be able to sit back when I'm older and say, 'They're playing for that Stanley Cup, and my name's on it.'"

My own suspicion is that within two years, the New York Rangers will be skating around an arena holding the Stanley Cup aloft; and that Walter Tkaczuk himself will be the key to slaying the demons that have plagued the Rangers for so many years. ■

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