

Dec 1972

Derek Sanderson And First Prize: Five Years In Philadelphia

BY JEFF GREENFIELD

It was not quite 3 PM on a rainy, foggy September day in the back of a Boston bar called Daisy Buchanan's. The establishment's co-owner and the town's newest millionaire sipped his first sustenance of the day, an Oddball (a mixture of Pernod and orange juice), as he sat stretched out full length, back against the wall, feet balanced on a chair. If the 26-year-old with mod-length hair, moustache, knit shirt, jeans and sockless, laceless sneakers did not exactly look like a blue chip investment, his casualness and his grin suggested a young man who has the world more or less where he wants it for the moment.

"Ah yes," Derek Sanderson rasped, his voice taking on a credible version of W.C. Field's nasal, sucker-baiting whine. "Ah, yes. On the whole, I'd rather be in Philadelphia."

It is said that the Liberty Bell cracked when Derek signed a \$2.65 million WHA contract.

By force of happy circumstance, economics, self-promotion and skill, Sanderson had transformed the apocryphal epitaph for Fields into an understated summation of sheer triumph. For on August 4, the third-line center for the Stanley Cup champion Boston Bruins had jumped to the Philadelphia Blazers of the new World Hockey Association for about \$2.65 million for about five years—making him the highest paid athlete in the history of the whole world.



There are a great many clouds hanging over the Sanderson gold strike, as the National Hockey League and the World Hockey Association now square off in enough court fights to wipe out unemployment for several years' worth of law school classes. The Bruins are suing to stop Sanderson (and goalie Gerry Cheevers) from playing for the Blazers, or for anybody else except the Bruins. The Chicago Black Hawks want Bobby Hull's \$2.5 million agreement with the Winnipeg

Jets scratched. The NHL wants an injunction barring any of its players from signing with any WHA team for three years—by which time the owners devoutly pray the new league will turn into a frog, or perhaps a soccer association. The WHA, in turn, is suing the NHL for a sum approximating the Gross National Product of 13 East African nations, charging violation of (Continued on page 124)

I know I can knock over every one of those dudes," said Duane Bobick. The strapping 22-year-old heavyweight stood on the terrace outside the tenth floor quarters of the United States boxing team and stared down at Munich's Olympic Village. "There's no way I can lose," he said.

Wind tousled his wavy auburn hair and dimples grew with the smile on Bobick's handsome, unmarked face. "I'm gonna win the gold medal, then disappear for a little vacation," he said. "When I get back, I'll be ready to talk business."

The heavyweight boxing competition was still a week away, but every top manager in the fight game was ready to talk business with Duane David Bobick—immediately. In fact, the 6-3, 208-pound, U.S. Navy quartermaster may have been the most sought after amateur fighter in history.

He was certainly the most publicized prospect of all time. Bobick had already been on the cover of *True*, on a full color page in *Life*, twice featured in *Sports Illustrated*, and, the ultimate tribute, proclaimed an overwhelming favorite at Munich by *SPORT*.

Bobick had captured the gold medal at the 1971 Pan-American Games and had scored 60 consecutive victories in winning the All-Navy, National AAU, Interservice and National Golden Gloves cham-

pionships. His overall record was 92-9, and his victims included every good amateur heavyweight in the world.

"Bobick will do as great as Muhammad Ali in bringing in money for promoters," predicted 1968 Olympic coach Pappy Gault. "He's got a good jab, a good right, a good heart and a wonderful personality." And what's more, Duane Bobick is white. "That kid is the answer to a promoter's dream," said Ali's trainer, Angelo Dundee. Muhammad himself watched the trail of crumpled bodies Bobick left at the Olympic trials, then proclaimed, "There's the latest Great White Hope."

Olympic gold had propelled Floyd Patterson, Joe Frazier and Ali toward the world title and had made 1968 champ, George Foreman, an instant contender. No American heavyweight had lost an Olympic bout since 1960, and would-be managers had hounded Bobick so aggressively that his coach at the Norfolk (Virginia) Naval Station needed help from the Bureau of Naval Personnel in Washington to ward them off.

At Munich, before the competition, the only questions were which manager or corporation

Many a dream for a Great White Hope came crashing down when Cuba's Teofil Stevenson knocked out Duane Bobick.

would get Bobick's signature and how fast the young man from Bowls, Minnesota, would turn his enormous potential into a million dollars. That he would win the Olympic Gold medal was taken for granted by everyone—including Bobick.

"I respect the guys I'm fighting, but I know I'm better than they are," said Bobick, so straight-forward and unpretentious that his bubbling self-confidence was refreshing, not offensive. "I even think *they* know I'm gonna win."

Then Bobick's smile faded. His long denim-clad legs dangling over the terrace ledge, he thought for a moment in silence. "I kid around a lot," Duane said finally, his tone now serious. "But I realize how fortunate I am. My whole life is like a fairy tale."

The fairy tale ended nine days later, with Bobick on his knees, his face pressed against the canvas, blood trickling from his nose, and his head so battered he would have no recollection of being knocked out by a rangy Cuban named Teofil Stevenson.

In a sense, the downfall of Duane Bobick symbolized what happened to the United States Olympic team in Munich. Only the performances of Mark Spitz—who was ending (Continued on page 96)

The Bigger They Are...

BY DAVID WOLF

sents more than 200 athletes in contract negotiations.

"With Derek," Woolf says in his plush office on the 45th floor of Boston's Prudential building, "you're talking about a man who has the potential for being one of the finest hockey players of all time. At Boston, Derek was playing on a third line, behind an Esposito and an Orr, and he could never really be the center of attraction. Not that he necessarily wants that attention on the ice, but I like to feel he's entitled to it.

"You want to know how good I think he is? If you ran a decathlon in hockey, and you took ten different things that hockey players are supposed to do—faceoffs, forechecking, penalty-killing, shooting and so on—Derek would win or be right up there. He does more things well than anybody except maybe Bobby Orr, and I'm not too sure about that."

What makes Derek Sanderson a unique athlete is that, unlike other "charismatic" sports heroes, his skills are more subtle than obvious. For any football fan, it is impossible not to notice a Joe Namath because he is the focus of the game, just as you can't forget to watch a Wilt Chamberlain stuffing a basket, or a Dick Allen hitting a home run, or a Phil Esposito scoring 60 or 70 goals in a season.

But what Sanderson does on the ice is to excel at the undramatic talents that win hockey games. He is regarded as perhaps the best faceoff man in hockey. He is a deft, ruthless penalty-killer, forechecking to break up power-play rushes, and at times starting a judicious brawl or two to break an opposing team's momentum.

Sports columnist Larry Merchant doubts Derek's claim to superstardom but says, "One of the things that's fascinated me is his ability to make short-handed goals. There's a native shrewdness about him. He's swooping around with his eyes wide open, waiting for someone to make a mistake."

Whether Sanderson as a hockey player is good, very good or great, no one really disputes the fact that it is Derek's image that made him worth more than \$2½ million to a team that had never played a game in a league that had never played a game in a city whose sports fans love not wisely and often not at all.

"Personality is the No. 1 reason for that deal," Sanderson says. "Although

actually, the paramount reason was Pie McKenzie [Boston's 35-year-old forward who is the new player-coach of the Blazers]. Pie said, 'Hey, Turkey, get your ass over here, I'm not going all by myself.' He said, 'You get to be captain and pick your own left wing. But you don't get your own right winger, 'cause that's me.'"

"Derek has a charisma that is simply unbelievable," attorney Woolf notes, telling with relish (and a grain of salt?) about his first meeting with Sanderson.

"After his first season with Boston," Woolf says, "Derek came into my office, and I'd barely heard of him, and he said, 'Bob, my name is Derek Sanderson, I'm gonna be a superstar and I'm gonna make a million dollars, so I figure I'll need an attorney.' Ken Harrelson happened to be in my office, so I buzzed him and said, 'Hawk, I think your hockey counterpart just walked in.' They became good friends."

For hockey, the Sanderson deal helped to begin a new bidding war, in which athletes making \$15,000 a year were asking—and getting—contracts for ten times that much. For Sanderson, the new prominence was a logical progression: From the three-year-old in Niagara Falls, Ontario, skating on a backyard rink built by his father, to five years in the brutal junior hockey world ("I got paid six bucks a week for five years—count that up with the 2½ million," Sanderson says), to the good life in Boston and now to new vistas in Philadelphia.

"Philly is a town that has always had losers," Sanderson says. "But it's a great sports town. It really wants a winner. They're sick of losing year after year. They know the Flyers will never make the playoffs. When was the last time a Philly team won anything? [Answer: The NBA 76ers with Wilt Chamberlain in 1967.] Everybody's always knocked the Philadelphia sports fan, but look at the way

they respond to Steve Carlton. It's incredible. They pack the park when he's pitching. I tell you, if we do well, we'll take the town—or the town will take us."

How good is the WHA going to be, and the Blazers in particular?

"Well, it's a challenge," Derek says, and then grimaces at the cliché. "I figure by Christmas we'll be able to beat the NHL expansion teams. I don't mean Minnesota, 'cause that's not an expansion team anymore. But the others, plus Detroit, we can beat. But not Chicago, or Montreal, or New York."

There remains the question of whether a longhaired hockey player with a penchant for the good life can find happiness in a city whose reputation suggests that a big evening is to wander down to a hardware store and watch them turn the dials on a Trash-Masher.

"Yeah, I know," says Sanderson. "Lots of people told me it was a bum-rap town. I knew a guy working there for a thousand bucks a week who quit to take a 300 dollar job here in Boston. But it doesn't bother me."

In fact, the sheer vacuum for colorful sports heroes in Philadelphia was a plus—not a minus—in Bob Woolf's opinion.

"Philadelphia, in my thinking, is starving for a hero," he says. "If you come down there and give them a legitimate hero, the opportunities available for that fellow will be phenomenal. And Derek is just the kind of person who would shake up a whole city like Philadelphia."

Woolf pulls out a rolling file and opens it.

"Look at that stuff," he says, almost in amazement. The file is filled with Derek Sanderson deals: Bars, TV commercials, TV shows, personal appearances, investments, Derek Sanderson athletic equipment including shoelaces and jocks.

"If things go well in Philadelphia," says Woolf, "the world is his apple." There are already plans for bars, a TV talk show similar to the one he had in Boston, and personal appearances to drum up interest both in the WHA and in Derek.

As for Sanderson, the new wealth and status seem to be making little difference.

"Do I dress like a millionaire?" he asks, pointing to his shirt, jeans and sneakers. "Of course," he adds with an irrepressible grin, "I just got a

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What kind of politics? Left? Populist?

"I think a liberal part of Conservative politics. I don't go along with the NDP [Canada's left-labor party] 'cause that's too much power in the labor unions. They're great in their place, but too much power and they can cripple and inflate the economy. Those Teamsters, they could wipe out a place like New York City.

"I myself am a great backer of people like Curley in Boston and Daley in Chicago. They're intelligent. They did the job. They've always done a lot for the little guy."

How about Frank Rizzo, the Mayor of Derek's new home town, the tough law-and-order ex-police commissioner?

Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud, \$26,000, little bar in the back. I had it shipped from London. I got an air-conditioned Datsun I drive, and that's fine, but now when I go on a date, I'll have the chauffeur and the Rolls." He nods with satisfaction. "I can also be driven around between cities, so I don't have to fly." After a particularly bad flight a few years back, Derek became paranoid about airplanes. And though he actually dislikes liquor, Derek often gets polluted before a flight, so that he can be poured on the plane, uncomprehending and damn near unconscious.

For a self-made millionaire and celebrity at 26, the future is wide-open. Some of his confidants see Derek as a show-biz natural, a rock or movie star (though his first cameo in films was yanked by attorney Woolf when it turned out to be part of an X-rated movie). Sanderson himself is leaning toward politics, going so far as to make a short speech to a crowd at one of his Boston bars, saying, "We gotta break up AT&T. Break up ITT. Break up Standard Oil. Spread some of that power around."

Was this part of an act, part of what several people have called "Derek's urge to put the whole world on"?

"No, I'm very into politics," he claims. "I'm gonna be taking a course at Wharton School in political science in the fall. I've always been interested in Canadian politics; in fact, I intend to go into politics in Canada. But I'm a guy without an education, and street smarts aren't enough. You've got to learn the ropes. I figure I've got five or six more years of hockey. Then I'll be a little over 30."

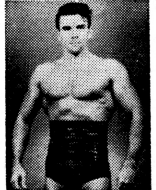
Derek lit up. "Fearless Frank? Listen, Rizzo and Daley are my two favorites. Everyone says, 'Oh, how can you back those two bastards?' Frank Rizzo is a tough Italian cop who knows politics. Talk back to a cop in Philly, and you knock fearless Frank, and he'll punch you in the mouth. In the long run, they give you the best they can. Not everything, 'cause they don't want people going soft. You can't take this power to the people too far."

It is intriguing, the prospect of a Derek Sanderson in Canadian politics. Like Frank Rizzo, Sanderson is a man who does not coat what he says in the shellac of political polish. He has the potential to grip people and get them to listen to him.

Besides, Derek Sanderson has two other things going for him. The first is his reputation: It is not very likely that a member of Canada's Parliament would care to argue *too* strenuously with a man who might vault a railing to use quicker methods of persuasion. The second is his name: It derives from an Old German word meaning "ruler of the people."

However serious Derek is about politics, those possibilities will have to wait.

As things stand now, Sanderson's five years in Philadelphia are not the second prize of the old joke, but first prize in a multi-million dollar game that Sanderson has played with consummate skill. Whether he is worth \$2.65 million as a hockey player or not, Derek has earned it as a personality, one who might quote the words of a great New York politician named Tom Plunkett: "I seen my opportunities and I took 'em."



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