

# The Iceman Arriveth: Hockey is the Sport

**H**ockey is the gilded stepchild of American sports, earning profit without honor in its adopted country. While it is the neo-official religion of Canada, where children in Sunday school believe the Stanley Cup is the silver chalice, hockey is the last major sport in the United States to be under-analyzed, under-appreciated. Both its adherents and its detractors seem too captivated by hockey's color, speed, physical brutality, and frequent bursts of violence to consider whether this fastest sport in the world has a fair share of cerebral pleasures, rather than being simply a battle fought on a sparkling plain where ignorant armies slash by night.

The commercial pleasures and potential of hockey are beyond doubt. A National Broadcasting Company vice-president calls hockey "the fastest-growing sport in the United States." Discount his enthusiasm by the twelve million dollars his network has invested in National Hockey League telecasts, and his statement remains true. The growth of hockey in the last five years is measurable from the major leagues to the diversions of our children.

Seven years ago, the National Hockey League had six teams, four of them in the United States, all followed fanatically by a white working-class audience. This fall, with the addition of Kansas City and Washington, the N.H.L. will consist of eighteen teams (fifteen of them in the U.S.), playing in houses before corporate executives, suburban adolescents, and the tradesmen of yore. Unlike their counterparts in other sports, these new hockey teams have drawn remarkably big crowds, even in the cities where the teams don't win.

In the 1972-73 season, the New York Islanders established in their first year an all-time N.H.L. record

for failure: twelve wins, sixty losses, six ties. In that same season, the Islanders drew more than 12,000 per game. By contrast, the A.B.A. Nets a year later could not draw 10,000 per game, despite a first-place finish and the presence of basketball's most exciting player, Julius Erving. In Buffalo, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Minnesota, St. Louis, the story is the same: no sport sells out its games more frequently than N.H.L. hockey.

This enthusiasm has spread to the children of affluent America, whose collective economic power exceeds the gross national product of most United Nations member countries. This group provided much of the audience for the Mets in their early years of glorious failure. Today, they seem to have seized on hockey. More than 200,000 of our flowering manhood play organized hockey on some 9000 teams. And this is no casual commitment. It costs about \$150 to outfit a young hockey player, and enough outfits were put together last year to sell almost \$90,000,000 worth of hockey equipment. Nor is money the only parental cost. So overcrowded are ice rinks that teams of children practice around the clock, some gathering for five a.m. sessions. Ice rinks may be the growth industry of this decade: 133 of them have been built since 1970. The NBC official, who lives in Greenwich, Connecticut, says that "these kids don't want to grow up to be Mickey Mantle; they want to grow up to be Bobby Orr."

The young men of Greenwich have planted their fantasies in a solid financial basis. A decade ago, a major-league hockey player was lucky to earn \$10,000 a year. When the competing World Hockey Association began play in 1972, the market turned from a buyer's monopoly to a seller's paradise. A

talented young player with a good junior-hockey record now has the bargaining power of a service-station attendant with a direct pipeline to Kuwait. Denis Potvin, the nineteen-year-old who broke Bobby Orr's scoring record for defensemen in junior hockey, signed a three-year Islander contract for \$500,000.

And for established stars the possibilities are limitless. In 1971, Ranger All-Star Brad Park held out for the outrageous sum of \$30,000. The following year Park was paid \$150,000. Teammate Walter Tkaczuk's salary rose over that same summer from \$15,000 to \$150,000. The average N.H.L. salary is now about \$55,000, and even with a fragile peace between the N.H.L. and W.H.A., the demand for topflight players guarantees that huge contracts are a permanent part of big-time hockey.

All this suggests that hockey is leaving its historic past as a sacrament of the urban white working class, celebrated in South Boston, Chicago's Bridgeport, New York's Bay Ridge, but foreign to most Americans. But for all of the successes of the sport, hockey in America has yet to be taken seriously as a sport fully entitled to respectability. The late Jimmy Cannon, whose New York *Post* columns were as influential as any sports writing, suggested in a famous remark that hockey would be better if they played it in the mud.

Cannon's implication—that hockey is a sport without pattern or reason—is widely shared, particularly (a highly distorted survey suggests) by those members of the literati who view the New York Knickerbockers as a living embodiment of some esoteric philosophical principle ("In the pick and roll, you see, we have a Hegelian synthesis of strength—Willis Reed—and fi-

# of the Seventies

by Jeff Greenfield

*Ladies and gentlemen, follow the bouncing puck*

nesse—Walt Frazier”). Watching a sport as fast, as violent, as apparently helter-skelter as ice hockey, a refined or confused observer is likely to relegate the sport to the twilight zone of legitimacy, close to the jungles where dwell roller derby and professional wrestling.

Not that a cerebral judgment is likely to impede the growth of hockey. It has too many qualities that are in demand today. With football, it shares a sense of constant danger and violence, a sense enhanced by the furious speed of the game, and by the openness of the violence (in football the force of the hitting is muted by the movement of twenty-two men across ten yards of space). Like baseball, hockey provides a refuge for the daydreams of ordinary mortals: hockey players are often under six feet tall, and weigh less than two hundred pounds. One of the most exciting players in the league, Montreal's Yvan Cournoyer, is five feet seven inches tall; it is his speed that sets him apart, not genetic accident.

And hockey has something else: it is a white refuge. There is no black hockey player in either the National Hockey League or the World Hockey Association, and a black spectator at a hockey match is a rarity. While this may change within a decade—it must occur to some bright coach that a Jim Brown on skates and armed with a stick would make a formidable forward—the current segregated state of hockey provides the same unspoken assurances to Middle America as do restrictive covenants. Those who cling to such charming racial principles as “a black always chokes” will find it hard to sustain an argument in the face of Dick Allen, Bill Russell, Willis Reed, Paul Warfield, ad infinitum. Watching hockey, the spec-

tator need never think about “them.”

Whether hockey wins respect or merely enthusiastic followers may not matter much to hockey's establishment, without question the most parochial, suspicious, and unsophisticated of any major sport. The massive, badly planned expansion of 1967 clearly lowered the quality of N.H.L. play, but still brought millions of new fans to the game. Few of hockey's followers seem to mind much the thinking of men like Bobby Orr's manager, who censored a reference to the young star's drinking of a can of beer. (New York writers regularly noted Dave DeBusschere's post-game habit of six or eight beers, and no reports were received of towheaded youths storming the Knick dressing room crying, “Say it ain't so, Dave!”) Still, some of the derisive treatment hockey receives from sports' lettered tribe seems to be a product of the unique difficulties of appreciating the game—a fault within ourselves, not in the stars, or coaches, or the game itself.

**F**undamentally, hockey is an alien sport, imported from the frozen Canadian wasteland. Americans grow up with baseball, basketball, and football, games they more or less invented. As children, we stand in a rocky plot of grass and dream of DiMaggio or Musial or Williams or Mays. We play football in organized school teams, or with a 1965 Plymouth as the end zone. There is not a school yard in the nation without a hoop on a backboard; even the poorest child can grow up with visions of Oscar Robertson in his head. Ice hockey, on the other hand, was confined to the Northeast and upper Midwest until just a few years ago. (Significantly, Boston and its environs is one area in America

where hockey has always been unquestioned king: during the eight straight title years of the Boston Celtics, the N.B.A. champions went some seasons with an attendance average of around fifty percent, while the then last-place Bruins sold out every game.)

Moreover, hockey is played by imported mercenaries. Other sports draw their heroes from among us: from the Hill neighborhood of St. Louis came Yogi Berra and Joe Garagiola; from San Francisco's fishing families came the DiMaggio brothers. Pete Axthelm's *The City Game* suggests how thin the line is between those who went from playgrounds to professional stardom and those who fell back into a life of lost dreams.

Hockey stars? They come from Saskatoon and South Porcupine; Parry Sound and Sault Ste. Marie; Point Anne and Arthabaska. They come forward as provincials, high-school dropouts in a sports world where college, even if only by osmosis, has given other athletes a patina of sophistication. Many hockey players cannot even speak English. In such a world, the social concern of goalie Ken Dryden and the natural wit and glib tongue of Derek Sanderson are freakish. It is difficult to believe in the mental stimulation of a game whose principals are given to explanations like: “He's a super hockey player, aye?”

These barriers will soon fall. With five hundred high schools and 160 colleges now competing in hockey, and with more than thirty N.H.L. and W.H.A. clubs competing for talent, American campuses are already beginning to feed players into the major leagues; thirty-five N.H.L. players have attended college.

What will take longer—and what may never happen at all, if the guardians of hockey are content to let tele- (Continued on page 274)



## THE ICEMAN ARRIVETH

(Continued from page 161) vision rights and box-office receipts be the sole measure of success—is the growth in understanding of hockey as a game of skill and precision. While no game appears easier to understand than ice hockey, no game requires more time before the patterns of play begin to make sense.

Hockey is a game of unrelieved intensity. It is played on a frozen pit. Its players are totally without sanctuary. There is no time out, no surcease. So fast is the game that a forward line cannot skate for more than two minutes without exhausting itself; the fury continues while the lines are changed in the midst of the play. An intentional stoppage of play is always punished, either by a face-off deep in the territory of the offender, or by a delay-of-game penalty. New York Ranger Coach and General Manager Emile Francis puts it bluntly: "There's no place to go. When that puck is dropped, there's no way to take a pass and step out-of-bounds. There are boards, and they're pretty hard."

The rules of hockey are simple, purposeful, and geared to the continuation of movement and passing. As a precision game, hockey tries to deter easy offensive and defensive plays. A player cannot put himself in front of the opposing goal and wait for a pass to come to him, the way a Jabbar or Walton might basket-hang; instead, a team must carry or pass the puck into the attacking zone before the team itself is allowed to be in that territory. Otherwise the play is off side. (Similarly, a player can't wait just outside the blue line for a pass to come his way from the other end of the rink. *Any* pass across two lines is off side, unless the man taking the pass has been speedy enough to catch up with the puck from the same zone in which the pass was begun.)

The rule isn't complicated at all. But until a spectator watches enough games to absorb the rhythm of the game, he won't understand that the off-side rule structures the entire flow of the offensive game. The forward line must know each other's moves automatically; they must know when to stop before crossing the blue line if the puck carrier is likely to put a move on a defender before crossing the line. A centerman must be able to pass the puck in full flight so that it crosses the blue line an instant ahead of a winger. Once the puck is in the attacking zone, the defensemen move just inside the blue line at the "points." Their key job is to keep the puck from coming back across the line, because once that puck leaves the zone, the entire attacking team must retreat to center ice.

A second basic rule rewards an effective attack, just as the off-side rule protects the defense. A team pinned in its own zone must fight its way out. If it tries to fling the puck out of danger from its half of the ice, the puck will be brought right back into the heart of its zone.

This rule dictates, among other things, what makes a good two-way hockey player. As Emile Francis points out, a hockey player must react the moment the puck changes hands. If a team permits its opponent to cross the red line in full possession of the puck and unimpeded by checks, that team can throw the puck into the attacking zone legally, and that is where goals are scored. The standards that determine a hockey player's worth are also inextricably linked to the pattern of rules: can a forward back-check well enough to prevent a puck from reaching his zone? Can a defenseman outmuscle his opponent to keep the puck on side? It is as difficult to learn these subtleties as it is to learn what to watch for on a football field or basketball court. In fact, it is more difficult because the game of hockey is played at nearly inhuman speed.

A hockey player rushing up ice travels at more than twenty-five miles an hour; a slap shot hurls a frozen rubber disc toward a goalie at one hundred miles an hour. Everything that happens in hockey—passing, stickhandling, checking, shooting—happens fast. Ironically, the very intensity that makes hockey a dramatic, visually hypnotic game makes an appreciation of the game enormously difficult. Nothing looks planned; everything seems to be happening at once. A give-and-go in basketball, or a flea-flicker pass in football, is understandable; we can watch it develop. In hockey the give-and-go is a staple of offensive strategy too, but because it happens in the midst of furious rushes up and down the ice, it is likely to be forgotten as the play continues.

"There's no set plays like in football, of course, because hockey's too fast for that," Emile Francis says, "but there's a pattern of play, and a system, and depending on where the puck is, there's a particular job you've got to be doing. And it has to come instinctively, so that there's an automatic reaction: the minute *this* happens, you do *that*."

This pace is the key reason that the cause of our mass obsessions is not yet suited to conveying the nature of hockey; I mean, of course, television. Even though hockey is an exact opposite of baseball—a game of icy savagery and bounded terrain as opposed to a summer game of scope and leisure—hockey shares with baseball the problem of being trivialized by television. Just as the screen shrinks baseball, robbing it of its warmth and spaciousness, television strips hockey of its spatial frame of reference. NBC's Scotty Connal says as much:

"One of the problems is that it's difficult to relate to the game if you've never seen it in person. I would hate to have to learn hockey without having seen it in person. If you're a guy in Wheeling, West Virginia, tuning in for the first time, it's very difficult."

This is less the fault of NBC's coverage, which valiantly tries to illustrate the flow of the game and the separate skills involved, than it is of hockey itself. When ten men move up and down

a two-hundred-foot-long surface in ten seconds, a camera cannot take in all of what is going on. By contrast, a medium shot of a basketball court can take in an entire half court—enough to watch every play moving through an offensive pattern.

"You know when you watch a game in person how important peripheral vision is," says Connal. "You can see the puck coming out over the blue line, and out of the corner of your eye you'll see Brad Park in a fight."

Connal's point was illustrated in last season's St. Patrick's Day game between the Rangers and the Bruins. With a little less than eight minutes gone, we saw Ranger left winger Steve Vickers take a pass from a teammate and rush up ice with only Bobby Orr between Vickers and the goal—a textbook one-on-one play. What the camera did *not* show was Ranger defenseman Brad Park racing up the right side of the ice, fruitlessly pursued by Phil Esposito. An instant after Park came into view, he took Vickers' pass and scored. The television audience was denied a sense of anticipation because it could not see the full nature of the scoring threat.

There are also clear advantages of televised hockey: the instant replays in slow motion are the surest way to see exactly how a scramble in front of the net produced a goal, and arenas in Long Island and Washington are planning to install huge closed-circuit screens for their fans. Isolated shots can also teach a largely untutored audience that there is method to hockey madness.

"Say Boston's on a power play," explains NBC's Connal. "If you isolate on Esposito, you can show that the man in the slot is not a garbage man—he's got to be big and strong to fight off the defense." NBC also introduced an intermission feature called *Peter Puck*, in which a Hanna-Barbera animated puck explains rules and terms of hockey. This noble gesture would be better facilitated by adopting the format of the National Football League's *Playbook* feature, in which game footage in super-slow motion illustrates what technical terms mean. As of last March the combination of viewer unfamiliarity and technical limits had combined to give the hockey ratings a third-place standing among Sunday sports telecasts.

This is going to change in the coming decade. The parents of children playing hockey and the students in high schools and colleges where the sport just beginning are a natural audience for hockey. This and hockey's appeal as an active and, for some, whites-only sport mean that the market for hockey has nowhere to go but up during the 1970's.

The *real* question is whether hockey will succeed simply because of its capacity for bloodshed or racial pride, or whether those who control the sport care enough about it to take on the job of communicating its less sensational, but ultimately more rewarding qualities. #