

# THE FLYERS SPOIL PHILADELPHIA'S IMAGE

BY JEFF GREENFIELD

**W**e blew it, chief. Forget it. Here I am, wandering around Philadelphia, gathering stuff for the semi-annual hatchet job on this town's sporting life, and for a while I was coming on like Secretariat at the far turn. I mean, we've got the Phillies, the Eagles, the 76ers (named, I think, after the number of games they lost last year), and I even found a bunch of records you don't have in those Gemstone files back in the office:

*Biggest cost overrun, football stadium:* Veterans Stadium, planned for \$25 million, built for \$42 million, with a stadium coordinator convicted of asking for a bribe.

*Most cash paid per score:* Derek Sanderson, who played eight games for the Philadelphia Blazers, scored three goals and shuffled back to Boston with a cool million, which comes out to \$333,333.33 per net-tickler. (The Blazers have since moved to Vancouver, where the bankruptcy laws aren't so tough.)

*Fastest conversion of arena from*

*While his ruffian teammates knock opponents into the boards, Bobby Clarke knocks the puck into the net.*

*closed to open air:* Spectrum, March, 1968. The roof had this unfortunate trick of collapsing in the middle of a game—but then, most Philly teams do the same thing.

Plus, I got some juicy data on the Eagles' latest flight into the side of a mountain: Their owner, Leonard Tose, decided to fight the television blackout by putting up 500 "lousy seats," hoping they wouldn't be sold, whereupon the ex-husband of Mr. Tose's present girl friend announced he'd buy them all up, just so the fans could watch this team on home TV and run them out of town.

And then, just as I am putting the capper on this traditional ha-ha-Philly-teams-put-their-pants-on-three-left-feet-at-a-time piece, I find myself at the Spectrum with a huge line outside.

I approached the throng of youths and asked them what they were doing. The Grateful Dead, maybe?

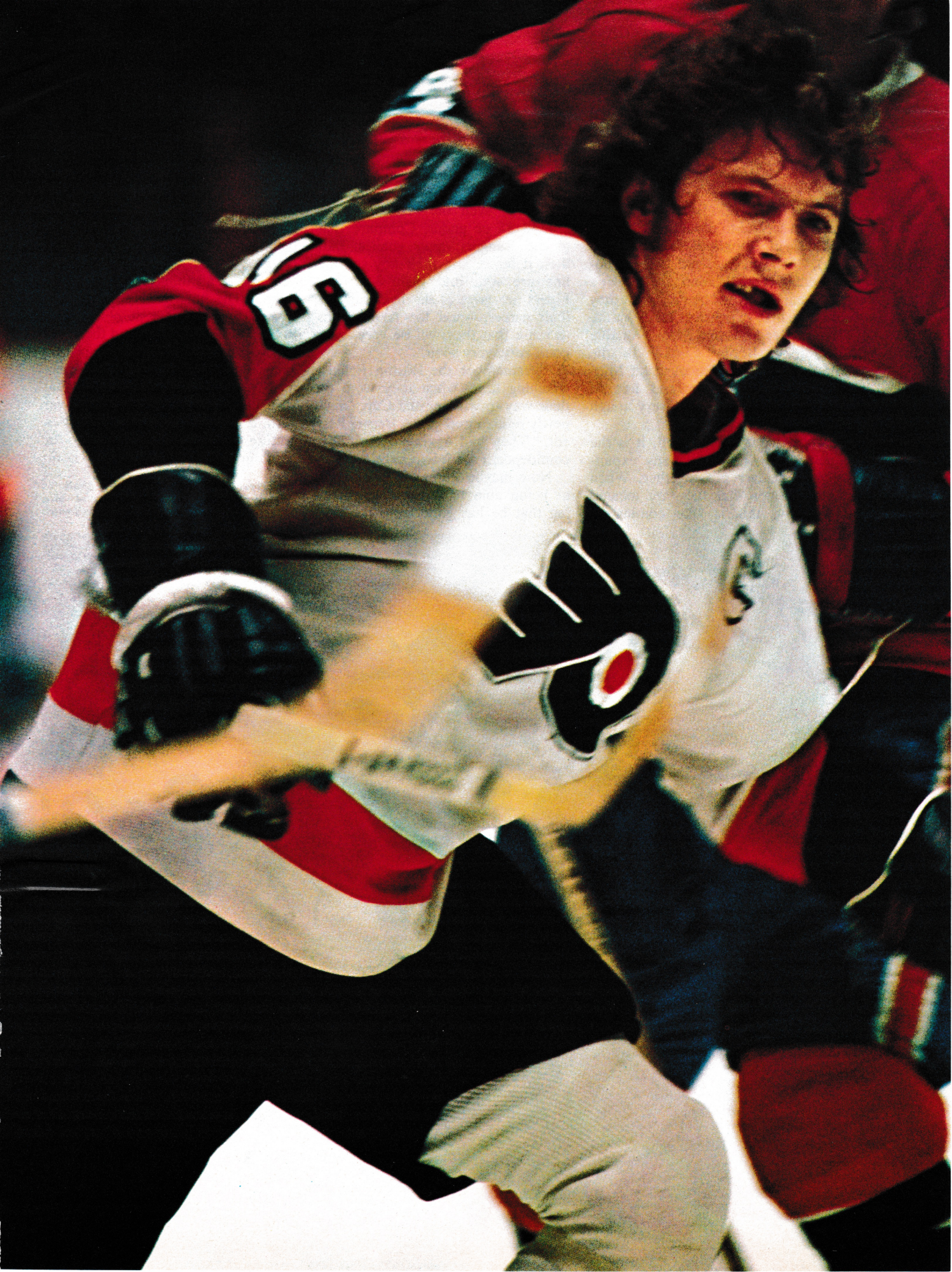
"You kiddin'?" The *Flyers*, buddy. Four of us are buying \$300 in tickets. I worked half the summer for the money."

Now all I'd known at this point in time about the Philadelphia Fly-

ers was what I had read in legal journals; I mean, this hockey club has made more court appearances than Owen Marshall. But just for the record, I checked it out, and, chief, we're in a lot of trouble. I mean, I can make fun of the Atoms, because nobody cares about soccer champions except 300 Rumanian émigrés and people who like to watch guys in bare legs kick a leather ball around. But when you are talking about the National Hockey League, you are talking major sports. And I am very much afraid the Flyers are an honest-to-Richard good team. Not great—not yet. But close.

Look at the record. Last season they finished second in the NHL Western Division, eight points behind the Black Hawks. They scored more goals than anybody in their division; they became the first team ever to have two 100-point centers (Bobby Clarke and Rick MacLeish); they produced 74 power-play goals or a score 29 percent of the time they were one or two up (the most power-play goals and the best percentage of any team); they had the rookie with the highest point







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total in the NHL (Bill Barber, who came in second to the Rangers' Steve Vickers in Rookie-of-the-Year voting); their 21-year-old rookie defenseman Tom Bladon broke Orr's first-year scoring mark; and they are the first expansion team in the league ever to have a Most Valuable Player, in Bobby Clarke. In the Stanley Cup, they knocked off Minnesota in six games and lost to Montreal in five, very, very tough games.

That is not bad. Indeed, it is the most impressive record any expansion team ever put together. When you consider that they are located in Philly, this is like coming in

second at Indy in a '65 Tornado. And you have to remember, too, that the Flyers are *young*. Only two of their top scorers were as old as 30 last year; Clarke was named captain at 23 (no NHL captain was ever that young); their key scorers, defensemen, even the "enforcer" are around 25 or under. Compare that to the Rangers; their goalies, half their defense, and their key scoring line are well into their 30s. The Flyers are guys at the beginning of their careers—and the team seems to sense that they will be very, very good very, very soon.

"I remember the Boston Bruins, watching them when they were on their way to winning the Cup," says newly re-acquired goalie Bernie Parent. "They had a kind of spirit or confidence. I see it here now."

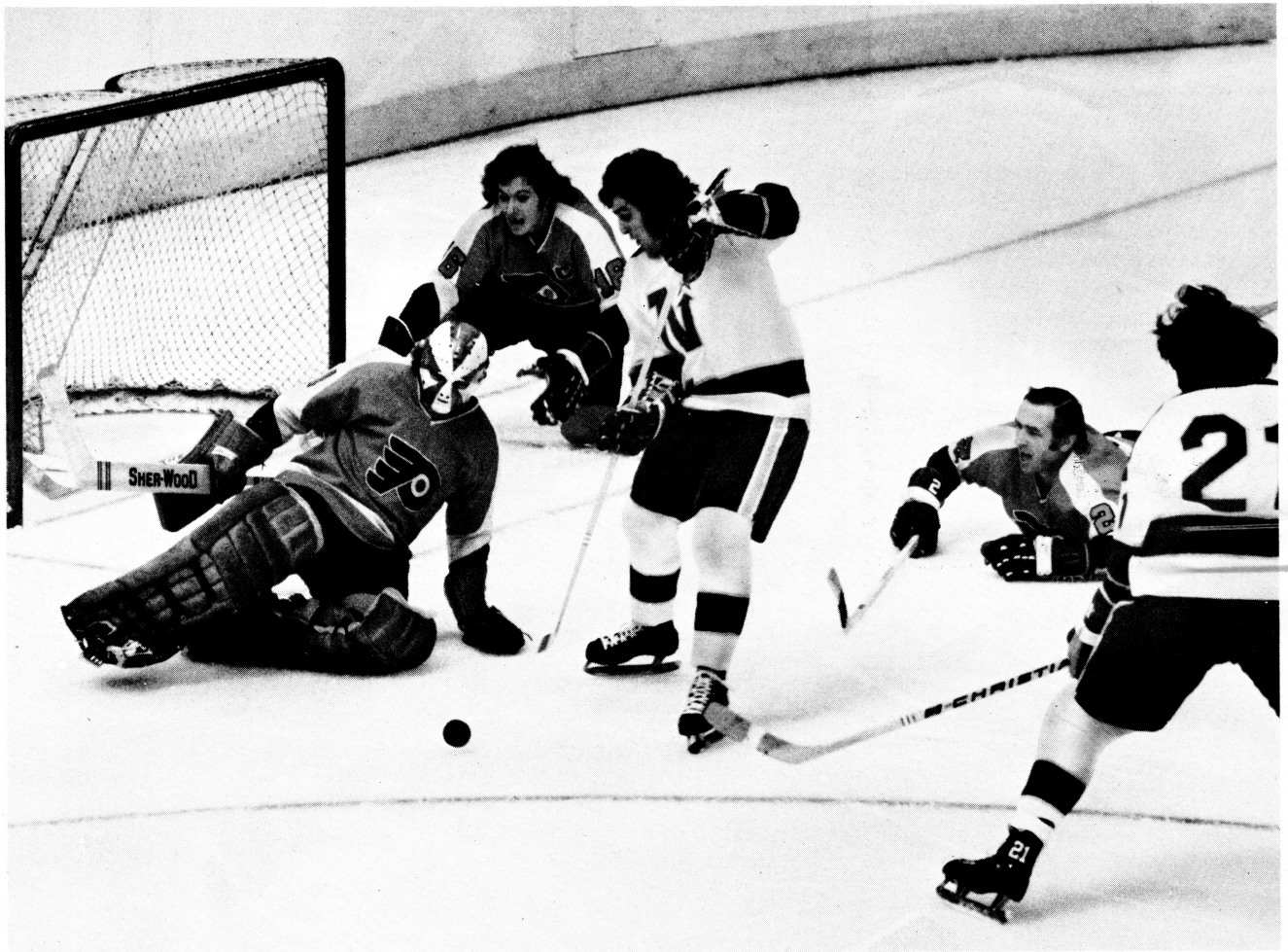
Now maybe Parent is just happy at being able to unpack, considering that he has gone from the Fly-

ers to Toronto to the Miami Screaming Eagles who became the Philadelphia Blazers back to Toronto and now back to Philadelphia. But watching the team at their training camp at the Penn Ice Rink in Philly this fall, you got the sense they all think that way.

"Last year, we weren't sure we belonged on the ice with the Canadians," Bobby Clarke says. "This year, we're all thinking we can beat them." The fans think so, too. The Flyers drew 96 percent of capacity in the 1972-73 season, and their advance sale this year was over 11,000 even before training camp began.

Now I don't think, chief, that you should run out and plan a cover with a Stanley Cup topped by a picture of Mayor Frank Rizzo or anything like that. But there is no

**The Flyers gave up the most goals of any playoff-qualifier in 1972 and also led the entire NHL in penalty minutes.**



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question that the Flyers have scoring punch. Bobby Clarke centers a line with Bill Flett, who scored 43 goals (an all-time record for an NHL right winger with a full beard), and rookie Bill Barber, who had 30 goals and 64 points. Their second line is centered by Rick MacLeish—a cast-off from Boston who scored 50 goals and 100 points his second season in the league—and his linemates, Ross Lonsberry and Garry Dornhoefer, accounted for 51 more goals.

There are problems, however. First, the Flyers built up many of their points the way a half-decent club-fighter or an overambitious D.A. builds a record—finding the right opponent. Against the four NHL doormats—the Islanders, the Vancouver Canucks, the California

Brass Seals and Toronto—Philly chalked up a 13-4-3 mark for 29 points. Check them out against the big four of Canadiens, Black Hawks, Rangers and Bruins, and they were 4-12-4 for 12 points.

Second, the Flyers are weak on the road. You know the old hockey line of “win at home, tie on the road.” This is very helpful, since it advises a team never to lose. But it's still important to do well away from home, and last year Philly went 10-22-7 on the road, which suggests that not everybody is all that happy to get out of that town.

Third, the defense is not nearly as effective as the offense. Tom Bladon looks very strong and new defenseman Larry Goodenough may be what his name suggests, but there is not yet any Flyer who can do for them what Bobby Orr or Brad Park or Bill White or Jacques Laperriere or Guy Lapointe can do for their teams. In giving up 256 goals last season, Philadelphia was more porous than any other team which made the Cup playoffs.

“We have to get a mobile defense,” comments affable head coach Fred Shero, “and we have to put a top third line out there. Montreal has a third and fourth line that outplayed any third line we could put out on the ice last year. We've got to be better.”

It may not be totally fair to blame the defense, since 69 goals against the Flyers came when the team was shorthanded; that's the most shorthanded goals against any NHL team, but it's not that bad a record when you consider that the Flyers played shorthanded hockey 360 times in the '72-73 season—over 30 percent more than the next most penalized team. In fact, Philly set a record last year of 1756 penalty minutes—almost 600 minutes more than the second-ranked Bruins. That is almost 30 games worth of penalties.

Why? Well, some of the Flyers apparently grew up watching the Friday night fights. You remember a couple of years ago when the Flyers and the St. Louis Blues took



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their dispute into the stands and ultimately into the criminal courts? Well, last December 29 in Vancouver, things got to violent that seven Philadelphians were charged with breaking the law by "using obscene language and by fighting spectators with fists and by wielding hockey sticks against and in close proximity to spectators in the general seating area for spectators." Goalie Bob Taylor was actually given a suspended sentence of 30 days in jail and a \$500 fine. The sentence of 30 days was dropped in an appeals court.

Four Flyers racked up more than 200 minutes each in penalties, and rookie Dave Schultz, who it says is a left winger but is called the Designated Hitter (he is called many other things by opposing players) led the league with 259 minutes. This is impressive, although not up to his minor-league mark with the Richmond Robins of 392 minutes. But Schultz is young and has a long and happy life ahead of him, assuming he lives much longer. He is a pleasant-looking young man with a mild expression and a nonviolent mustache, and he speaks with a sense of regret about his image.

"I'm not that kind of guy off the ice," he says, which is fortunate since I am standing in close proximity to the player, as the lawmen say in Vancouver. "It bothers me that the fans don't like it unless I'm fighting. It was that way in Richmond, too. I can skate and shoot, too."

He does not see himself totally as the "enforcer," the winner of other men's battles.

"Lonsberry and MacLeish—they're pretty good fighters. And Bobby [Clarke] can take care of

himself. I don't want to be known as the guy who does their dirty work. But," he adds with quiet emphasis, "there's no way somebody's going to go after one of our players and get away with it."

Schultz does recognize, though, that it is not always good strategy to leave the Flyers one man down.

"I don't worry about the majors if I take somebody off with me," he says, "but it's the cheap two-minute jobs I'm going to have to do something about—because it just hurts the team too much."

One member of the Flyers who is not overwrought at the spectre of aggressive behavior is their coach, Fred Shero.



No team wanted to take a chance on diabetic Clarke, but he has left a sweet taste in Flyer fans' mouths.

"We want to put hitting back into hockey," he says frankly. "Body-checking has become lacking in the game. There's just not as much hitting as there should be. In my day (late 1940s with the Rangers) a 'hit' was counted when you knocked somebody down. Now it's any body contact. I think one of the problems is the kids don't play football anymore. The coaches don't let them. We used to play football, and we got used to hitting."

Is it money that makes the players reluctant to throw their weight around?

"No," Shero says. "It's—look,

take a guy like Flett. He's one of the biggest players on our team. Now last year he scored more than 40 goals. A guy like that might start thinking, 'I don't have to hit anymore. You don't see Frank Mahavovich running around hitting guys.' But now, Bobby Clarke, who's one of our smallest players, does more hitting than the whole team."

Which brings me to my biggest problem in our put-the-knock-on-Philly bit. This kid Clarke. I mean, it's not just that he's 24 years old and has already copped the Masterson trophy in 1971-72 and the MVP award last year. Nor that he was second in scoring last year only to Esposito with 104 points. Nor that he's a pleasant fellow with shaggy blond hair, standing about five-foot-ten and weighing 185 pounds. (Most of his front teeth are missing, but what the heck.) Nor that he hasn't let an \$85,000-to-\$100,000-a-year contract go to his head.

But how are you going to write a putdown about a guy who at age 20 is playing for the Flin Flon Bombers (scoring 52 goals and 87 assists his last year) but seems unwanted by any team because he is a diabetic, and then is drafted second by the Flyers, and immediately demonstrates that he is a first-rate All-Star player?

And I certainly can't get nasty about his play in the Team Canada-U.S.S.R. series since he centered the highest-scoring line in the series, with Paul Henderson and Ron Ellis, and caused the Soviet coach to say, "He's completely unselfish, he makes every move count for the team. I think he is the best player on Team Canada."

In some ways, Clarke's story is a familiar one: Born in Flin Flon up in the province of Manitoba ("a cold, snowy mountain town, all rock and bush," he says), played hockey "as far back as I can remember," quit school for hockey at the age of 16.

"My father wanted me to stay in



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school—it's an awful risk you're taking when you quit school," Clarke reflects.

Then came the sudden jump in 1969 from the Bombers to the Philadelphia Flyers of the National Hockey League.

"I'd only seen two NHL games in my life before I came up," he says. "At first, it was like a circus, being in the Garden or the Forum."

After a fine rookie season with 15 goals and 31 assists, he scored progressively better each year. Last season Clarke was picked as second team All-Star center, trailing only Phil Esposito.

It's hard to get Clarke to speak about himself, but he will talk about the worst moment of his career: At the end of the 1971-72 season, the Flyers played Buffalo needing a tie for fourth place or a win for third place. Instead, with four seconds to go, Buffalo scored the winning goal, knocking Philadelphia out of the playoffs.

"It's such a frustrating feeling because there's nothing you can do about it," Clarke says. "It's like you want to run the film backward."

He likes his team, and he likes their aggressiveness, despite the penalties, because "the other team's just not going to run into me or other players. You win a lot more games than you lose that way."

I know this isn't great copy, chief, but if you could watch Clarke combine shooting, skating, finesse and tough hitting, you'd understand why we are in such trouble. I mean, this whole damn team could spoil our best shot at easy stories since the "could-Mantle-carry-Mays'-glove?" stuff.

Oh, well, maybe the roof will fall in again at the Spectrum. If not, we've got to find another city to pick on. Would you trust me in San Diego? ■

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