

# Soul on Slush: Ranger Dream Melts Away

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BY JEFF GREENFIELD

Rod Gilbert stood outside the room where his two friends were showering and dressing, waiting for the reporters, the players, the hangers-on to clear out. He and his two friends had worked in the building for a total of 38 years among them; but none of them had ever set foot in the visiting team dressing room before. Now two of them were inside; Gilbert wanted to go in, to say hello, but he wanted to do it by himself, without a crowd watching every gesture, listening to every word.

Finally, the others had left, and he went inside the room. He was wearing a yellow turtleneck, cream-colored slacks, a light brown leather jacket. One of his friends was inside, stripped to his underwear. The other was naked.

"Hey, there you are," said Rod Gilbert.

"They could have used you out there tonight," said Jean Ratelle.

"How's it going, Rod?" said Brad Park.

Gilbert looked at Ratelle for a second. "The yellow and black," he said, referring to his friends' new uniforms. He waited for them to dress and they went off together, to talk and to relax.

Earlier, someone had asked Gilbert how he had felt watching Park, a teammate of eight years, and Ratelle, a teammate for almost 20 years, skating for another team. It was the kind of question that generally met with a shrug or a mumble.

"Fuck the feelings," Gilbert said quietly. "I don't have any feelings. They touched my feelings too much already. Some of the people around here don't have any feeling, so why should I?"

The words disproved themselves. It wasn't just that the Rangers had lost again, losing with a whimper, 6-4, folding up and rolling over in the last two periods. It wasn't just that the Rangers were in last place in their division, with the worst defense in their conference. It was instead that he was watching the disintegration of a dream that has eluded him for 15 years, and Ranger fans for 35 years. And the presence of his two teammates in the enemy dressing room was the final demonstration that very likely the dream was not going to come true—not for Gilbert, not for the Rangers—for a long time to come.

*'On Thanksgiving Eve, with Brad Park in a Boston uniform, dispirit seemed to hang over Madison Square Garden.'*



Brad Park (back to camera) returns to New York in a different, uh, uniform.

Photo: Fred W. McDarrah

until the start of the 1960s, the New York Rangers were the whipping boys of the league, more often than not one of the two of six teams eliminated from the Stanley Cup playoffs before they even began. Then in 1960 Rod Gilbert and Jean Ratelle, two 20-year-old wonders, came to the Rangers from the Three Rivers team of the Eastern Professional Hockey League. The flashy right-winger and the brilliant-skating center with the face like Belmondo's and the feet like Jean Beliveau's had played together from boyhood. Together they marked the first flicker of potential for the Rangers since prewar days.

Then in 1964 Emile Francis, former NHL goalie, became general manager of the Rangers, and more and more bright young players came up: Brad Park, Walter Tkaczuk, Steve Vickers. The Rangers began making the playoffs year after year, and Garden fans began taking on the impulses of old Brooklyn Dodger fans. Next year, this year, soon, we would see the captain slowly, triumphantly circling the ice, with the silver Stanley Cup held aloft. And every year something went wrong with the dream.

In 1971, the Rangers beat the Toronto Maple Leafs in the opening playoff round, then won a sensational three-overtime game

stroyed the Bruins in five games—and lost to the underdog Blackhaws in five. In 1974, they took the Philadelphia Flyers to the last minute of the seventh game—and lost.

Then, last season, tragedy turned to farce. In a three-game opening playoff round against the two-year-old New York Islanders, who had set an all-time NHL losing record in their first year of existence, the Rangers lost the third and deciding game 11 seconds into the sudden-death period. And this season, under pressure from a new management team, general manager Francis began systematically disassembling the heart of his team. Vic Hadfield, left-winger on the Ratelle-Gilbert line that had set team scoring records in 1971-72, had already gone. Both veteran goalies, Gilles Villemure and Ed Giacomin, were traded. When Giacomin came back in a Detroit uniform, fans held up the start of the game for five minutes with their "Ed-die, Ed-die" chant and openly rooted for the Red Wings against their own team. Derek Sanderson, one-time *bete noire* of Ranger fans when he was with Boston, and more recently a crowd-pleasing New Yorker, was shipped to St. Louis. And finally, shockingly, Park and Ratelle were traded to Boston for scoring champion Phil Esposito and defenseman

Boston. Park, in shock from the move—he had a wife and two children living in Long Island, and his youngest son, a cerebral palsy victim, requires constant treatment—joined Bobby Orr to give Boston the most powerful power play in hockey. Ratelle seemed to regain some of his old stickhandling and skating skills that had faded in recent years. Gilbert, bitter at the trading of his friend and teammate of 20 years, openly predicted his own departure. And the Rangers continued to lose.

On Thanksgiving Eve, dispirit seemed to hang over the Garden. When the Rangers fell apart in the second period, giving up pucks, missing checks, permitting Boston to attack their goal at will, the fans moaned and hooted, but more out of rote than genuine anger. They had seen all this before. In past years, Bruin-Ranger games were matters of electric intensity, with crowds drowning out the National Anthem and hurling rubber chickens on the ice when a particularly hated Bruin enemy took the ice. Now there was a sense of surrender; many seats were empty, and by the middle of the third period fans began leaving in droves.

And when it was all over, reporters jammed the visiting dressing room to ask a numb Brad Park how he felt ("Hell," he said, looking around the visitors' quarters, "I've never been in this room in eight years."). He clearly fits in with Boston, despite his publicly expressed dislike, dating back several years, of the Bruins and their fans, and his offensive power, combined with Bobby Orr's, gives Boston the best pair of offensive-minded defensemen hockey has ever seen. But he still is not over the shock of being summoned to his coach's hotel room at 7:30 in the morning to be told that he was no longer captain of the Rangers.

Meanwhile, in their Golden Anniversary year, the Rangers are a firm part of the sports drama that has moved into New York City for a long run. While the Nets and Islanders flourish in suburban splendor, every one of the six New York City major league teams is somewhere between mediocrity and collapse. New York has not been without a major contender in professional sports since the rise of the New York Yankees 55 years ago. And at this time in our

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The last time the Rangers won the National Hockey League championship Wendell Willkie was fighting Robert Taft for the Republican Presidential nomination. From the onset of World War II

against the Chicago Black Hawks to send the semifinals into the seventh game—and lost. In 1972, they beat the Montreal Canadiens and wiped out Chicago in four straight—and lost to the Boston Bruins in six. In 1973, they de-

feated the New York Islanders captain Phil Esposito and defenseman Carol Vadnais.

Esposito promptly proved his susceptibility to the Ranger curse by injuring his leg and missing five games—as many in three weeks as he had missed in eight years with

misfortunes, winning is a sensibility we could use a lot more of. The only current solace for Ranger fans is that we have had a lot more practice at the art of being disappointed than anyone else in town.