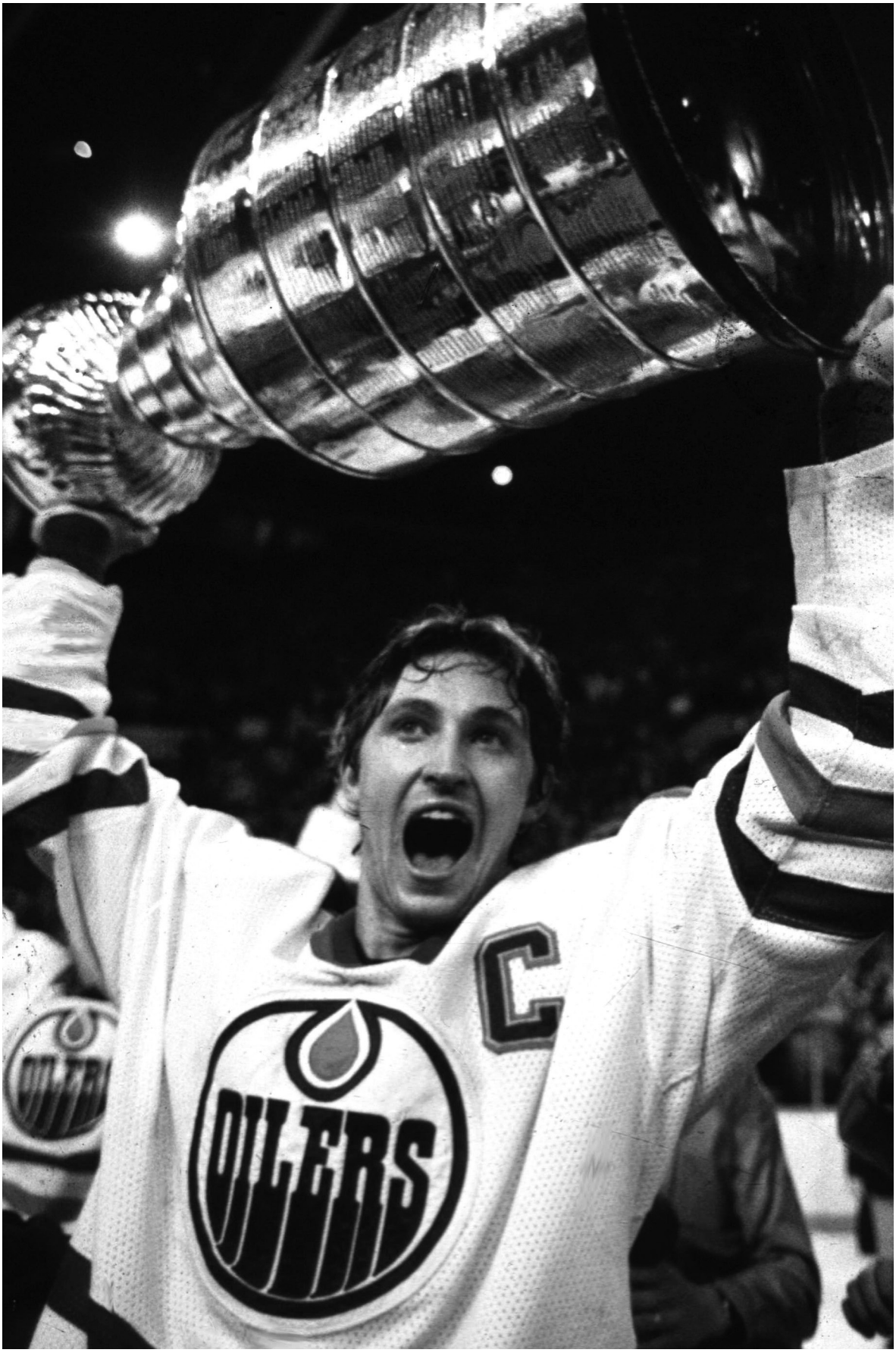


1 WAYNE GRETZKY

AS A TEENAGER playing against men, he was called 'The Kid.' But the nickname that stuck came from the mid-1970s film *The Great Gatsby*, based on F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel. He was 'The Great Gretzky,' and that has long since been shortened to The Great One.

Wayne Gretzky's otherworldly scoring exploits were indeed great and brought him international attention before he was even a teenager. How he handled all the attention – with modesty, grace and poise – was equally great, and what he contributed to the sport remains immeasurable.

It's doubtful anyone else has affected hockey in such a wide array of areas. Gretzky's influence has been felt everywhere. He changed hockey on the ice, off the ice and in places where it was barely visible.

As he rewrote the record book, Gretzky was also revolutionizing offensive hockey when he entered the NHL with Edmonton in 1979 following a stunning pro debut season in the WHA. He blended features of European hockey with the North American style to usher in an era in which opponents had to stop plays, not players.

He was "the first of our great scorers who essentially plays with the other four skaters," Ken Dryden told *Sport Magazine*'s David Levine in May 1984, the eve of the first of four Oilers Stanley Cups, when that U.S. monthly put Gretzky on the cover, proclaiming "Admit It, America – Wayne Gretzky is the Best Player in *Any* Sport" and publishing three articles' worth of evidence. "The Hulls, the Espositos, the Mahovlichs were the driving force of their units, and the others were support players to them, and in many ways put with them for that purpose," Dryden said. But Gretzky was different. His games resembled movies in which he starred in the lead role, his teammates became supporting actors and players on other teams were left as the extras you only notice in the credits. "Gretzky gives up the puck to someone in better position, to move in turn into a better position to get the puck back," Dryden continued. "It creates all sorts of interesting and ambitious schemes which all function as a distraction."

The scoring chances he produced came from unusual places – not just the wings or in front of the net, but behind the net as well. "He went to areas where there was nobody," said Scotty Bowman. "The puck would come to him, and now he's got time and space. He was also one of the first to hang up high. He didn't come back in his own end. He lurked on the off-wing side up high. Then he'd take the puck inside, curl and find those late guys."

As many have noted, Gretzky's genius was rooted in his ability to anticipate where the puck was going to go. He also possessed an incredible awareness of everyone else on the ice. "He was fearless for his size," added Bowman, who recalled thinking Gretzky was "almost frail" when he watched him as a junior. "But he kept chugging along."

Off the ice, that relatively small frame and those relatively delicate facial features –

unlike the stereotypical hulking, scarred image of a skater from the 1970s – may have been the keys to Gretzky's unprecedented popularity. He not only played differently, he looked different, like the boy next door – a boy who would regularly defy the odds and the critics on his road to glory.

Sport Magazine's John Capouya wrote a phrase in his 1984 Gretzky profile that was frequently quoted for years afterward – that Gretzky's influence "transcends hockey." We tend to examine that influence now in connection with his move to Los Angeles, which opened up new vistas for the game and enlarged the hockey map, but he first conquered his homeland. "Wayne had a tremendous impact in Canada, which might be taken for granted today," said Puck Agency president Jay Grossman, who has represented numerous NHL players for more than three decades.

In 1984, Capouya spoke with Canadian national radio personality Peter Gzowski, who had interviewed Gretzky on national radio 10 years earlier, when the phenom was just 13, and then written a book on The Great One's young and rising Oilers team. Gzowski called Gretzky "the greatest phenomenon this country has ever seen." Capouya reported that Gretzky's endorsements in 1984 (soft drinks, apparel, cereal, insurance and toys) earned "four to five times his hockey salary" and pointed out that even "his haircuts have national repercussions."

Four years later, when Gretzky married Janet Jones, Canadians treated the event like a royal wedding. Only a few weeks later, when he was traded to Los Angeles, they considered it a national disaster.

Not so the Kings, the NHL or Gretzky himself, though. With the game's biggest star in a city of stars, hockey became front-page news in a huge media market where it had been an afterthought, and echoed it nationwide. "People said, 'I need to be at Kings games,' " said the team's TV voice, Bob Miller. "The first week, they had to put extra people on the phones. They sold something like 5,000 season tickets in a week. We had never seen anything like that."

Celebrities flocked to watch Gretzky and the Kings, generating a new level of national attention for the sport in the U.S. "The locker room after games was like a Hollywood party," Miller recalled. "There were so many stars in there. It was crazy." Post-game team gatherings at the famous West Hollywood celebrity hangout Chasen's turned festive. "Milton Berle, John Candy, Neil Diamond, Mary Hart – so many stars would be there," Miller said. "And Wayne was in the middle of it all."

Gretzky raised hockey's profile to new heights in America. The Kings' box office success fuelled thinking among NHL owners about expanding to other non-traditional Sunbelt markets in the hopes of repeating it, a process that continues today. "Wayne doesn't like to take credit for that," Miller said. "But I think he did (set off that process)."

It's hard to imagine anyone else performing more high-profile promotional work for hockey in the U.S. than Gretzky, and it was a task he performed gladly, even during his stint as coach and part owner of the perpetually troubled Coyotes from 2005 to 2009. "He's always understood who he was and who he is," Grossman said. "He understood that from a young age, and he wore it very well. I don't think anybody's done it better. I don't think anyone was close."

Equally essential was Gretzky's role in improving the economic landscape for his fel-

low players. As the game's first million-dollar-a-year player, Gretzky's trade to the Kings ensured he'd continue earning big bucks. His salary eventually hit $3 million annually with L.A. He'd more than doubled that by the time he ended his career with the New York Rangers.

A rising tide lifts all boats, and Grossman points to salary disclosure in the 1990s as the biggest factor in boosting player salaries. Yet even so, he acknowledged that Gretzky's trade to the Kings may well have been the trigger point in the growth of salaries. "Players started to think about the game more from a business standpoint than they ever had," he said. "You'd have to say there was a reverb effect of Wayne's trade to L.A. on the salaries of other guys in the league."

The bottom line of Gretzky's influence is something anyone can be a witness to. Just ask a casual fan or a non-fan to name the first hockey player that comes to mind and there's a good chance the answer will be Wayne Gretzky. And that's rather remarkable because, as of this writing, Gretzky retired 17 years ago.

– By Stu Hackel

2 GARY BETTMAN

ON DEC. 11, 1992, the NHL board of governors confirmed that Gary Bettman would replace interim president Gil Stein as head of the league under the new title of commissioner. In the nearly quarter-century since, Bettman has guided the game to a new era of billion-dollar broadcasting contracts and an on-ice product considerably different from the one he inherited. He has built up a legion of critics, but he's pushed ahead relentlessly and evolved into a bulldozer of a businessman, accepting that there would be collateral damage.

If you watch any of Bettman's press conferences, you'll recognize he doesn't readily agree with the premise of many journalists' questions. If your perspective doesn't jive with his, he won't concede you're right simply for the sake of pleasantries. That's not why the world's savviest sports lawyers are well compensated.

And Bettman is nothing if not savvy. You don't survive the likes of hawkish owners such as Jeremy Jacobs and the late Bill Wirtz for more than 20 years unless you (a) quickly figure out the lay of the land and (b) sculpt it to serve your vision. And that's precisely what Bettman did very early in his tenure, via changes to the NHL constitution that consolidated his power.

Since then, even Bettman's harshest critics would admit he's grown the game. He began with 24 teams. Now he governs 31, with the Vegas Golden Knights entering the NHL in 2017-18. He's increased the NHL's footprint in Europe, and he's been open-minded when it comes to cutting-edge technologies, entertainment options and changes to the game, such as the shootout and the crackdown on obstruction.

But do you want to know the real reason Bettman has been the big dog on the ice

block for as long as he has? It's quite simple. In the NHL's first full season under his watch, revenues were pegged at $732 million. That number is now closing in on $4 billion. And it only gets better. The league's mammoth Canadian TV rights holder deal (worth $5.2 billion through 2025-26) with Rogers Sportsnet could put as much as $15 million into each team's coffers every season. To a moneymaker's moneymaker like the Toronto Maple Leafs, that's chump change. But for teams that claim to live or die financially depending on whether they make the playoffs and win a round or two, that's a lifesaver.

And that's one of the hallmarks of the Bettman era. With a few exceptions – the Quebec Nordiques, the original Winnipeg Jets and the Atlanta Thrashers that became the Jets 2.0 – Bettman has managed to keep his house in order. He kept the Coyotes in Arizona when most people had written their obituary. He brought in a new ownership group for that franchise and a slew of others who were imperiled to various degrees (including the Florida Panthers, St. Louis Blues, Buffalo Sabres and Tampa Bay Lightning). He championed the Canadian assistance plan to help buoy some of the smaller-market northern clubs while the Canadian Dollar was bottoming out. He convinced his employers to help cover the costs of payrolls in New Jersey and Dallas until he found new owners. And he moved the Detroit Red Wings into the Eastern Conference and the Jets into the West.

You don't get everything you want as an owner in his NHL, but in every new collective bargaining agreement, he's got at least one goodie for you. In the most recent labor deal, if you were a small-market team owner, not only did Bettman arrange a 50/50 split of revenue (as he did for all teams), but he fur-

ther restricted the ability of big-market franchises to bury lucrative contracts in the minor leagues. If you were a big-market team owner, Bettman allowed you to use your largesse by disposing of two unproductive players per team via amnesty buyouts.

What has been productive for Bettman's NHL is the way it has employed advancements in technology to reach fans. Remember, the history of the league includes the career of late Hawks owner Wirtz, who infamously refused to allow his team's home games to be televised. But under Bettman's stewardship, the league appears on the vanguard of social media and has done stellar work promoting its brand on constantly changing platforms. "What we're going to continue to see is the evolution of a fan's ability to connect with the game in ways that previously had been unheard of," Bettman said. "And whether or not it's on TV by cable or satellite, whether it's streamed onto a TV set or a tablet or a computer screen, whether or not it's by mobility, whether or not it's entire games or clips of games or statistics or stories or wraparound programming, we are committed to giving our fans the most complete experience they have to connect them to the game."

Bettman's habit of bitter labor disruptions has interfered with this connection far too regularly. It doesn't matter who has been running the NHLPA – Bob Goodenow in 2004-05 or Donald Fehr in 2012-13 – the tactics of Bettman and legal firm Proskauer Rose Goetz & Mendelsohn have been clear: owners begin negotiations with a lowball process, test the union's mettle by freezing them out and eventually settle. But Bettman is unrepentant of the route he's chosen. Considering the way fans rushed back to embrace the product immediately after the past two lockouts, it's understandable that he should be emboldened by the process. "It's terrible and unfortunate when you can't make a deal without a labor disruption, but it's more important that you have the right economic system," Bettman said. "What we achieved was basically the same revenue-sharing formula between the players and the clubs that had then been put recently in place by both football and basketball. It was something we felt was important. We had hoped we didn't have to go through a work stoppage, but sometimes those things are unavoidable. But the worst of it is obviously the impact it has on the fans and the people who work in the business."

The consensus among hockey people is clear: Bettman is never going to be the most charismatic man in the room, unless it's a one-person room. He's never going to be the most popular man in the room, especially if that room is filled with fans and NHL player agents. But whichever room he's in, Bettman is going to be one of the smarter people, if not the smartest. He's going to be himself, focus on his goals and show not the slightest concern as to what everyone else thinks.

Here's an example. The on-ice Stanley Cup presentation ceremony in which Bettman awards the trophy to the captain of the winning team has become increasingly awkward as fans lustily boo the commissioner. It has been suggested that Bettman step aside and allow a more popular figure to perform the honors. He disagrees. "The fact is, as far as I know, it's always been presented by the president or the commissioner," Bettman said. "That's how it's typically done in other sports. It's a nice tradition. It shows the

winning team, the game and the Stanley Cup the appropriate level of respect."

On some level, you have to respect the singularity of purpose one must be consumed by to rationalize that reception and shut out the noise. And if there's something most admirable about the commissioner after 20-plus years, maybe that's it. He knows his job, he knows what his bosses want from him and he has delivered.

Bettman isn't here to paint his face and sit in the stands or hang with players at charity golf tournaments. He's a successful businessman and a human shield for the owners. He came to terms with this long ago.

Maybe the rest of us should, too.

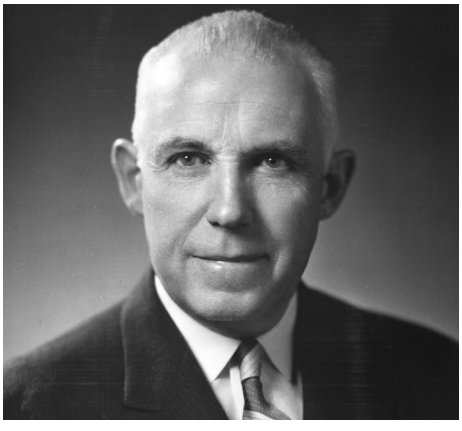
– By Adam Proteau

3 CLARENCE CAMPBELL

IT'S HARD TO cheer for the league commissioner or, in Clarence Campbell's case, the league president. The job is more about business and balancing the books (and the egos of owners) than appealing to fans. And with the passing of time and changing of attitudes, certain behaviors are called into question. Even if it was the right decision on his part to banish Maurice Richard for the end of the 1954-55 season and all of the playoffs for punching a linesman, it's difficult to say whether it was brave, foolish or just plain arrogant of Campbell to show up at the Montreal Forum for the Canadiens' next home game – a move that sparked the infamous Richard Riot.

Campbell grew up in Saskatchewan. He earned a law degree at the University of Alberta and continued his education as a Rhodes Scholar at the University of Oxford. Returning to Edmonton to practise law, Campbell also worked as a referee. From 1936 to 1939, he handled NHL games. During the Second World War, Campbell rose from a private to a lieutenant colonel and later helped prosecute Nazi war criminals.

In 1946, the league offered Campbell the job of assistant to president Red Dutton.



When Dutton resigned soon afterward, Campbell became president on Sept. 4, 1946. He oversaw the extension of the NHL season from 50 to 60 and then 70 games, as well as the creation of the All-Star Game in 1947 to aid player pensions. Campbell guided the NHL through an expansion process, doubling the league's six teams to 12 for the 1967-68 season and tripling them to 18 by 1974-75. He retired in 1977 after a 31-year career, the longest tenure of any North American pro sports leader.

– By Eric Zweig