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March 27, 1978 • Vol. 9 • No. 12

It's Either/orr for Bobby—the Black Hawks' \$3 Million Man Must Skate Again or Call It Quits

By Linda Witt



'Pieces of bone break off and float through the knee—you can hear them when I walk'

Come on, check ole Dad," the father calls out in teasing encouragement to his lookalike son. For a 3-year-old, Darren Orr wields his cut-off hockey stick with surprising authority. As ole Dad looks up with feigned interest at a passing airplane, THWOCK!—Darren reacts instantly, snapping a bright-orange puck into the net.

Laughter engulfs the snow-banked patio in Northbrook, Ill.—a sound of cheer and, at the same time, utmost poignancy. Darren's dad is Bobby Orr, often acclaimed the most gifted hockey player ever to take the ice. This month he turned 30 and should be approaching the peak of his playing career. Instead, his career may be over.

The past three National Hockey League seasons have been agony for Orr. He suited up only 10 times (in an 80-game regular schedule) for the Boston Bruins in 1975-76. Moving to the Chicago Black Hawks, he skated in only 20 games in 1976-77. This season Orr's playing time is zero. Yet he signed for twice the salary of any other hockey pro—a five-year, \$3 million contract.

The source of his troubles is a ravaged left knee that has been operated on six times, twice within two months in 1975. After the most recent surgery in April 1977, doctors benched him for a year. The surgeon performing that operation said the chances were one in 10 that Bobby would play again.

Despite those odds, Orr insists that "the knee feels good" as he settles back with wife Peggy in the family room of their ranch house. Darren is in the kitchen devouring Sesame Street and spaghetti, and 1-year-old Brent gurgles in a walker. "The knee is strong," Orr says. "It doesn't lock anymore. It doesn't buckle. But inside there's just bone on bone, no cartilage left, nothing to absorb shock. Little pieces of bone break off and float through the joint." His wife pales at the description and turns her face. "Sometimes you can hear them when I walk." He once told a reporter he thought he'd be arthritic by the time he was 45. If he plays now, some friends think he won't be walking then.

"Hockey's been good to me, I've no right to complain," he notes, gesturing at the roomful of trophies. "I've had a lot of time to think about how I feel. I'm getting better at handling the frustration. When I'm alone I talk tough to myself—Bob, let's get out of this thing. Okay? If the long rest doesn't make a difference, well..."

His voice cracks. Orr senses he is slipping into pathos. Abruptly he scoops up Brent and heads for the kitchen. "Hey," he barks in mock gruff-ness, "let's you and me go out and get in Mommy's garbage."

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In an era when those who have it are advised to flaunt it, Orr is a throwback. He is a modest superstar. To make him squirm, simply tell him how good he was on the ice. Selected nine times for the all-star team in 11 active seasons, Orr studs the "best," "first" and "most" lists in the NHL record book. His finest season came in 1969-70 when he led Boston to its first Stanley Cup in 29 years. He was named the league's most valuable player, its best defense-man, its top scorer and the outstanding performer in the play-offs. That December SPORTS ILLUSTRATED named him Sportsman of the Year.

"I played my position all wrong," Bobby says in his self-deprecating way. "A defenseman is supposed to move the puck up for others, but I've always liked to carry it too much. A lot of coaches would say that's just not the thing to do."

Perhaps they did before Orr came along. He revolutionized the game as a rushing defenseman who, when he wasn't crunching opponents in his own defensive zone, could also skate, feint and score with the slickest centers and wings. Until Orr, no NHL defenseman had ever been credited with more than 20 goals in a season. He topped that mark seven times, including a record 46-goal barrage in 1974-75.

"He had everything going for him," says Boston coach Don Cherry, who particularly recalls one game in 1975. "It still gives me chills to think about it. The Atlanta Flames were in Boston. Bob was killing a penalty [waiting until his team was at full strength again] by going around and around his net. Suddenly he took the puck down along the boards on the right side. The whole Atlanta team was waiting in the corner, but he went through and put the puck in. No one clapped for what seemed like 10 minutes. We were too stunned to react."

Orr skated back to the bench, his head lowered as if in shame. "He was embarrassed because he thought he had embarrassed the Flames," Cherry says. "I've been in hockey 25 years and I've never seen anyone who even comes close to him."

Parry Sound, Ont., the birthplace of Robert Gordon Orr, is a resort town (pop. 5,765) on Canada's Georgian Bay. Fishermen come there in search of walleyed pike. Growing up, young Orr spent summer vacations cutting up meat in his uncle's butcher shop or selling clothes at Adams' menswear. There was plenty of time left over for games—"a little baseball, some Ping-Pong, golf."

During winter, though, there is little to do in Parry Sound except skate—and, Orr says, "you don't skate without a stick in your hand." Bobby's father, Douglas, who packs dynamite in a munitions plant, recalls that his son began playing when he was only 4. "We'd give him a stick and a puck and watch him go."

By the time he was 9 and playing in the Peewees, the Orrs knew they had a prodigy. He skated better than his peers—even better than his two older brothers—and he had caught the eye of hockey scouts. At 14, Bobby was signed by the Oshawa Generals, a junior club in the Bruins' organization. That meant going to a hockey boarding school far from home—where he received \$10 a week pocket money while boarding with an Oshawa family. Orr's close friends believe his leaving the nest at such an early age marked him for life, intensifying his natural reserve.

"Sure I was homesick, and the family I lived with was tougher on me than my own folks," Bobby shrugs. "It was the way you served your apprenticeship. If you were good, you knew you'd turn pro at 18." He never went home to Parry Sound much after that.

The Bruins, who had gone nowhere for decades, realized Orr could transform the club. He did not disappoint them. As Rookie of the Year he became a drawing card—and within three seasons the Bruins were selling out.

The fans' adoration only exacerbated his shyness. Orr rarely got through a restaurant meal without being interrupted by autograph seekers. "Bobby was never much for all the crap you get when you are famous," his father says bluntly. Yet Orr was too devoted to hockey—or too polite—to turn down requests. There are dozens of stories about his generosity, how he has worked with handicapped children. Orr never tells them.

Over the years he became more sophisticated, a natty dresser. (In fact, he owns a men's clothing store in Toronto.) He progressed from the basic jock crewcut to a stylish mop. What did not vary was his intensity in the rink. "He never coasted," says Chicago hockey writer Bob Verdi, a pal. "And because of that he got hurt. I remember once when his team was leading 7-2, he put his knee in front of a puck to stop it."

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PROMOTION

After his contract with the Bruins expired in 1976, Orr was put on the market by a slick attorney, Alan Eagleson, whose deals had already made Orr wealthy. Everyone knew Bobby was damaged goods, but many clubs were willing to gamble on his knee. The Black Hawks, desperate for a big-name attraction to halt sliding attendance, were the highest bidders.

Can Orr play again? "After so many operations," Black Hawk teammate Stan Mikita, a 20-year veteran, believes, "it'll be damn hard. But even on one leg he'd probably be better than 90 percent of the players in the league. For guys like us, hockey's been our life. There's a spirit in you that keeps you going despite the pain."

In January Orr took to the ice for the first time and began skating with the team at practice. After two months he says, "I'm still a little edgy, a little nervous." Appointed an assistant to head coach Bob Pulford, Orr has contributed significantly to the Black Hawks' surge to the top of their division. He teaches rink savvy, instills confidence and has been particularly successful turning rookie defenseman Doug Wilson into a hot player.

What is not generally known is that Orr has not accepted a nickel of his \$3 million salary. "Bobby says he went to Chicago as a superstar and won't take any money until he starts performing like one," explains attorney Eagleson. When questioned on the point, Orr grumbles, "I don't want to seem a martyr. I will be cashing a check soon."

The decision on his recovery awaits this summer. Then Orr will subject his knee to a week of brutal workouts. Meanwhile, Peggy Orr worries. "I always know when he's sad," she says. "He gets telephones," holing up in his study and calling friends. "On the whole, though, Bobby has handled all this pretty well. Maybe it helps that we live apart from hockey. We like to put on jeans, go down the road to a neighbor's for dinner and forget it."

In his bachelor days Orr squired more beauties than Joe Namath but with greater discretion. Yet his wife did not come out of this razzle-dazzle set. A speech therapist from Detroit, she met Bobby through friends. She knew nothing about hockey at the time, but he was good-looking and three and a half years later they were married. Orr's face remains lean and unscarred and, unlike other battle-weary hockey legends, he has all his teeth.

It would be relatively easy for Orr to capitalize on his fame and establish a new career in, say, sportscasting. But he is firm: "I don't want to get out of hockey, no matter what." Though he has what another player calls "an encyclopedia" of hockey knowledge, Orr does not see himself as a head coach. In fact, he has told the Black Hawks he will do anything for them but take that job. What then? Kids flock to him and, in truth, he is more at ease among them than with adults. Maybe, he muses, he will operate a hockey camp: "I watch how a kid skates, and if he really can skate and wants to play hockey, well, he can be taught."

"A lot of people paint Orr as sad and maudlin—the man-boy grabbing for the only thing he knows," says friend Verdi. "That's wrong. It's kind of beautiful the way he keeps driving himself. He doesn't need the money, he doesn't need the trophies." What he needs now, desperately, is the game.