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## 31 Bobby Orr

E.M. Swift

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The great ones all bear a mark of originality, but **Bobby Orr's** mark on hockey, too brief in the etching, may have been the most distinctive of any player's in the past 40 years. He changed the sport by redefining the parameters of his position. A defenseman, as interpreted by **Orr**, became both a defender and an aggressor, both a protector and a producer. **Orr** was much more than an opportunist: He created opportunities. Like a quarterback who can run or a point guard who will drive to the basket, **Orr** directed the attack, sometimes from the rear, sometimes from the front line. And he played with such daily abandon that it was as if he knew, even as a teenager, that time was soon to run out on his career.

Was **Orr** the best ever? Not many who saw him play would dispute it. Certainly his nine years in the **NHL** before his left knee gave out were as electrifying a stretch as has ever been put together by a hockey player; during that period he changed the very nature of the game.

Before **Orr** broke into the league in 1966 as a much-heralded, crew-cutted 18-year-old from **Parry Sound, Ont.**, defensemen were pretty much expected to play defense. They seldom strayed out of position. They broke up rushes, minded the front of the net and helped clear the puck from the defensive zone. The offense was in the hands of the forwards. Every once in a while there would be a blue-liner—**Doug Harvey**, **Pierre Pilote**, **Red Kelly**—who could also quarterback the power play, chalking up 40 or 50 assists in a season. But with the curved stick and the slap shot in their infancy, precious few of those guys could shoot the puck with the velocity and accuracy to become a scoring threat. And none would be so brazenly foolish as to lead a rush from end to end. That was the domain of the great forwards: the **Bobby Hulls**, **Gordie Howes** and **Maurice Richards**, the players the fans came to see. Then came **Orr**.

At 5'11", 175 pounds, he was solid but not imposing. But, lord, he played the game with creative unconstraint. **Orr** was fast, blessed with instant acceleration, gaining top speed in three or four strides. Then he might glide, legs wide, until he broke with breathtaking quickness either left or right before passing or shooting, his shot blistering, low and accurate. Or he could put forth another quick spurt, splitting the defense—he was tough and fearless and loved to drive to the net. Or he might execute his trademark spinorama move in which he pivoted 360 degrees at mid-ice, like one of those figures in a board hockey game, then wheeled away from his pursuers, who trailed behind in various stages of undress. He didn't have to stickhandle; his quick feet did the stickhandling for him. His legs and head fakes kept his defenders off balance. **Orr** was simply the quickest, most mobile man on the ice.

It would have been insane to shackle such a player to the blue line, and the **Boston Bruins**, who had missed the playoffs seven years in a row before **Orr's** arrival—and for whom **Orr** would play the first 10 of his 12 **NHL** seasons—allowed their young genius free rein. He broke every positioning rule in the book. He controlled the game from his defensive slot as no one has before or since. And he seemed to always have the puck. While killing penalties, he sometimes played keepaway by himself for half a minute or more. He gobbled up every puck the opponents were so unwise as to dump in and chase. "Whenever you do that, you can just kiss the puck goodbye," **Chicago**

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Black Hawk coach **Billy Reay** once said. "That's another part of the game **Orr** has spoiled for everybody."

**Orr** thought nothing of rushing the puck end to end, trying to generate any kind of scoring chance. Temporarily out of position, he would use his speed to get back on defense. He was caught up-ice with some regularity, but far more often it was the opponents who found themselves outnumbered and outgunned. **Orr** had seasons of 33, 37 and 46 goals—unheard-of totals for a defenseman in that era. (The last defenseman before **Orr** to have scored 20 goals in a season was Flash Hollett of the **Detroit Red Wings**, in 1944-45.) **Orr** was not only the first defenseman but also the first player to total more than 100 assists in a season, and he twice led the league in scoring—still the only defenseman ever to have done so even once. "Hockey is a team game, right?" asked **New York Ranger** forward **Rod Gilbert** in 1970, after a six-game playoff series against the **Bruins** in which **Orr** scored seven goals. "One man is not supposed to beat a whole team."

But **Orr**, who took the **Bruins** to **Stanley Cup** titles in 1970 and 72, was a consummate team player, obsessed with being one of the guys, complete and well-rounded in the best traditions of an **NHL** defenseman. Throughout his career he blocked shots with the tenacity of a rookie. He bodychecked with ferocity. He fought the toughest of the tough, willingly dropping his gloves to do so. Off the ice he was modest and shunned publicity. His teammates worshiped him. Fans flocked to see him play.

It was too good to last, of course. He had played too hard on knees too fragile. Six operations on his left knee alone effectively ended **Orr's** career at the age of 27 and officially ended it at the age of 30 when **Orr** retired after three injury-plagued seasons, one with the **Bruins**, two with the Black Hawks. But by then his legacy had long been established. He had been voted the league's top defenseman eight years in a row, its MVP three times, its playoff MVP twice. And his influence on young hockey players worldwide is incalculable. Certainly every young defenseman in **North America** was drawn to this new brand of exciting, wide-open, aggressive hockey. Another dimension had been added to the game—a generation of offensive defensemen was born.

Few of them came close to playing as **Orr** had, but some who did—Brad Park, **Denis Potvin**, **Paul Coffey**, **Ray Bourque**, Brian Leetch—became the dominant players at their position. And all took their lead from number 4, **Robert Gordon Orr**.

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