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E:60

MAURICE CLARETT SPEAKS:
AN E:60 EXCLUSIVE.

TUESDAY 7PM/ET ESPN HD

PRESENTED BY LINCOLN

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New book might answer Orr vs. Gretzky debate

By John Buccigross
ESPN.com
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Chirping Q&A with the NHL's best

It remains hockey's greatest poem. Succinct, romantic, lyrical and timeless.

Number Four.
Bobby Orr.

If you ever wondered why some people believe Bobby Orr, and not Wayne Gretzky, is the greatest NHL player of all time, read the new book titled, "Searching for Bobby Orr." It's on stands now and the author is Stephen Brunt.

SHOT OF THE WEEK

What clearly separates Orr from Gretzky is his on-ice toughness. He fought, sometimes savagely, with a barroom Irish temper. If Gretzky was ABBA, Orr was The Clash. That's not necessarily an endorsement. It's just the way it is.

Every person who plays or even loves hockey is an emotional person. That is the common denominator of the hockey culture. Orr's emotion is much like that of another Boston legend, Larry Bird.

The cover sets the entire tone of the book. It is Orr, probably from his rookie season, holding his wooden Northland stick with gloves that almost go to his elbows. He is helmetless, freshly shorn, pimply, 18, the highest-paid player in the game. He is looking off into the unknown. Small-town boy in a big city. The leading man behind the greatest transformation the sport will ever see. It is incomprehensible that Robert Gordon Orr will turn 60 in 15 months.

I see an Orr movie coming, and I see Matt Damon playing Orr.

"Searching for Bobby Orr" is a textbook of NHL history that does what any good read should: raise more questions about the league's most poetic player.

The shot of the week is back! Every week, we will present an NHL photo and I'll provide a caption. [E-mail me your suggestions](#) (include your name and hometown/state) and the next week we will use the best ones and provide a new photo.

LAST WEEK:



Two minutes: Narcolepsy. (AP Photo)

Your submissions:

When an angry Phaneuf attacks, they always tell you to get into the fetal position and play dead.

-- Andrew Ross, Sault Ste Marie

"Brad, time to wake up!"

"C'mon mom, five more minutes!"

-- Dan, Smithtown, N.Y.

"Can't sleep, clowns will eat me. Can't sleep, clowns will eat me!"

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Question from John Buccigross: Why did you write the book?

Answer from Stephen Brunt: For a bunch of reasons. Obviously, it's a subjective, personal opinion, but I think Orr was the greatest player who ever lived, or at least the greatest of my lifetime. I didn't see [Maurice] Richard in the '50s or [Gordie] Howe then. To me, there are only two players in the discussion -- Orr and Gretzky.

They're the two great, original talents the sport has produced, where there's no true precedent and no one could really duplicate the way they played after they were gone. Writing about Orr was an opportunity to explore the whole idea of genius, in sports and in general. I was also very interested in the time during which Orr emerged. It was a pretty significant era for the NHL [leading up to the first great expansion], for pro sports in general, with the emergence of the first unions and player agents, and for Canada, which really began to come of age in the country's centennial year, 1967.

I wanted to write a book in which I could put Orr into that context. And to me, the heart of the story was the most important relationship in the history of hockey, and one of the most important in the history of professional sports -- Orr and Al Eagleson. There was a classical element to the story, with the betrayer figure and with Orr's "fatal" physical flaw, his bad knee. There's a play or a novel in there somewhere, though I'm not the guy to write it. Plus, the story hasn't really been told properly before. There hasn't been an Orr bio written for more than 30 years, and it's pretty clear that he's never going to do his own book.

[As the story goes ... Acting as both Orr's agent and executive director of the NHL Players' Association, Eagleson falsely told Orr that the Blackhawks had offered the star a more lucrative offer when his contract with the Bruins ran out in 1976. It was later revealed that it was the Bruins that offered the better deal, which included an 18-percent ownership take in the Bruins organization. Eagleson's reputation was permanently destroyed in the 1990s when he pleaded guilty to multiple counts of fraud and embezzlement.]

Q: Explain the title, "Searching For Bobby Orr."

A: For writers, he has been elusive. He fiercely guarded his privacy, even during his playing days. Where someone like Gretzky is an open book in terms of his family and background, Orr has always closed those doors. Even for guys who played with him and shared the Bruins' locker room, he was a bit of an enigma. So, there's a quest involved. I don't claim to have answered all of the questions, to have "found" him completely. That's why I like the open-ended aspect of the title.

Q: What did you learn about Bobby Orr from writing the book?

A: A tremendous amount about his family, his upbringing, his time in junior hockey and with the Bruins. I also watched hours and hours of Orr on tape, which was a great experience. Anyone who watched hockey back then has a memory of how he played. But it's another thing entirely to go back and see those games and understand just how dominant he was.

-- Jim Tinnick

"Note to self: The cannonball only works when the pond is NOT frozen."

-- Jeff Allison

Brad Richardson tossed political correctness aside this Halloween when he decided to be Eric Lindros.

-- Russell Siminoff, Parsippany, N.J.

"Guys, check it out, my impression of Claude Lemieux vs. Darren McCarty in '97."

-- Ryan Hicks, Troy, Mich.

"I wonder if Buccigross will spoon with me."

-- Adam Felenstein, Los Angeles

THIS WEEK:



NHL Linesman Jay Sharrers giving birth to fraternal twins. (AP Photo)



Q: How much did Bobby Orr cooperate?

A: My idea was always to write an independent, and in some ways, impressionistic biography. I've been down the "as told to" path with a professional athlete before, and didn't get much out of the experience. Ideally, I would have liked to have written my own book, with access to Orr. But after we met, it was pretty obvious that wasn't going to happen, now or ever. When I made it clear that I was going to write the book in any case, Bobby laid out some ground rules, which I accepted and honored -- I agreed not to approach any members of his immediate family.

Q: What was the biggest challenge during the project?

A: I guess trying to find people who were part of his life 40 and 50 years ago, to try and unlock some of those doors, and to get a feel for what each of those places must have been like at the time -- Parry Sound, Ontario, where he grew up, Oshawa, where he played junior hockey, and Boston in the 1960s. I also wanted to try and get to the origins of the Orr-Eagleson relationship in a fresh way. That required steering away from a lot of what we later came to know, the caricature of Eagleson as a cartoon bad guy, and trying to imagine how he must have appeared then. The main narrative of the book ends with the 1976 Canada Cup, which was the last significant hockey Orr played. He was named the most valuable player in the tournament. I wanted that part of the story to end with him still on top. Then, there's an epilogue that goes into his life after hockey, the Orr-Eagleson split, etc.

Q: Approximately how many books have you sold and what has been the reaction?

A: The book was No. 1 on The Globe and Mail's bestseller list last week, which is the best reflection of sales in Canada. There are 50,000 copies in print here, which is a pretty significant number in this country. Without tooting my own horn, I'd say the reviews and reaction have been exceptionally positive.

Q: Have you heard from Orr?

A: Not so far.

Q: What hockey book needs to be written?

A: I still think there might be more to be done on Gretzky, warts and all, though, of course, there have been bios written. I'd love to read a real hockey Ball Four. [Phil Esposito's] book was close, but I thought that, in the end, he pulled a lot of his punches. The '80s [Edmonton Oilers](#) are ripe for that kind of treatment. And I think the world could use more lyrical writing about the game that's so common around baseball. Ken Dryden's "The Game" is the closest thing to it.

Q: Anything you would like to add about you, the project, Orr, or anything hockey?

A: I think that the whole idea of Orr really strikes a chord for anyone of my generation. I'm 47. Of course, you always think that the greatest times, and the greatest players, were when you were young. But hockey fans especially like to think back to that era, before the world and the sport became so much more complicated. There's something comforting in the nostalgia. But I also think that it's possible to accept our heroes as human beings, flawed like the rest of us, not the one-dimensional image from the front of a hockey card. That's what I was shooting for here, a great hockey player made of flesh and blood, a unique talent who became a star at a very significant moment in the sport's history, and who was one half of a very human drama with Eagleson that on some level we can all understand.



AP Photo

Few players have been able to skate coast-to-coast like Bobby Orr.

