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Grandpa Orr remains No. 1

Legendary Bruins defenceman did everything at top speed and lifted hockey to a new level

BY RED FISHER, THE GAZETTE OCTOBER 2, 2010

He would walk into the room, wearing a shy, soft grin and golden spikes for hair. His neck was thick, his hands large and his chest would strain against his shirt.

Bobby Orr, 62 and a first-time grandfather, will be in the city next weekend to participate in the Chevrolet Safe & Fun Hockey Festival. And oh my, how quickly the years have gone by, if only because I can still see him at 18, in the mid-1960s, as one of the young men on their way to new peaks in sports' new Golden Age.

Joe Frazier was the best of the young heavyweights. Jim Ryun already was the greatest middle-distance runner of his time. Other sports had their own new, young faces, but none had greater promise or shone brighter than Orr.

He brought his shine to a struggling Boston Bruins organization in the 1966-67 season, and 12 seasons later -several of them unhappily shortened by knee injuries - had left his mark on the game as no player had before him.

He was, simply, the best player I have ever seen.

Why? All of the great stars before Orr and since did some things at top speed. Some skated at top speed. A few controlled the puck at top speed. Others passed it at top speed. Many shot the puck at top speed.

Orr was the only player who did everything at top speed.

In the process, he lifted the game to another level. He brought offence to defence ... new meaning and style to his position and, by extension, the game itself. He was, in every way, its golden boy.

One of hockey's tragedies - for all of us as well as for Orr -is that knee injuries drastically shortened his career. He played in only 657 games, and fans saw him at the top of his game for only eight seasons. How dominant was he? He was named the NHL's top defenceman in each of those seasons.

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Trophies? He won the Art Ross in 1969-70 with 120 points, the first of six consecutive seasons he would score more than 100 points. He won the Ross again in 1974-75 with 135 points.

He won the Hart Trophy three times and the Conn Smythe twice. He was the Calder Trophy winner and won the Lester Pearson Trophy.

How great was Orr, the defenceman, offensively? He was the NHL's plus-minus leader six times, the most in NHL history. Among them was an NHL-record plus-124.

Captain Gionta: It's about time -Red Line, Page D3

How much did Orr mean to the Bruins? He led them to the Stanley Cup in 1969-70 -a mere four years after he joined the team. The last time a Boston team had won the Cup was 29 years earlier. He led them to another two seasons later.

Wren Blair was handling Kingston, a team owned by the Bruins in the Eastern Professional Hockey League, the first time he saw 12-year-old Bobby play. Blair's team was meeting Sault Ste. Marie and all of the Boston people were there to watch for prospects. Blair suggested to Bruins general manager Lynn Patrick that they also watch a bantam game between Gananoque and Parry Sound because the Boston organization was interested in two youngsters on that team.

"We're at this game," Blair once told me, "and I'm watching the two kids. A funny thing happens. I see this little guy on the Parry Sound team out of the corner of my eye. It seems I'm going back to him all the time.

"I felt he had everything from the first moment I saw him.

"I knew Lynn felt the same way," Blair added. "He wasn't too big then, but the thing you had to remember about Orr was that he always played ahead of his time. He was a peewee when he played bantam. He was a midget when he played Junior A hockey. He was a junior when he joined the National Hockey League."

Shortly after Blair saw Orr, people started to wonder why he would take weird routes to cities where his Kingston team had to play. Somehow, it seemed, his team always was stopping in Parry Sound for the pregame meal. What Blair was doing, of course, was dropping in to see Orr and his family.

At the time, Bobby wasn't nearly old enough to play junior hockey, but in those days professional hockey people were not reluctant to go after prospects even if the youngster happened to be only 12. The Bruins were happy to subsidize Parry Sound's entire minor hockey program as long as Orr was available to them.

First of all, though, they had to get Orr's name on a form binding him to Boston. It took two years before Blair convinced Orr and his family that his future was with the Boston organization. It was only then that the Bruins sent him to their Oshawa junior team.

"I'll never forget the day I reported to Oshawa," Orr told me. "They had a roll call when we arrived for the first day of training camp. The players had to call out their names and the position they played. There were some big guys there and when my turn came, I called my name.

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"Position? I said defence -and everybody laughed. I guess it was kinda funny. There I was with all those big guys and me in the middle of them -14 years old and weighing 125 pounds and claiming I'm a defenceman."

Blair wasn't concerned about Orr's size, and nobody should have been. He was never a boy. He was making the same moves at 14 that he made in his first year in the NHL. In his first year in junior hockey, he was named to the second all-star team. He scored 30 goals as a defenceman at age 15 and the following year set a league record for defencemen with 34 goals. He scored 37 in his last junior year.

Emile Francis was a coach and general manager with several NHL teams. He saw a lot of Orr during his years in junior hockey.

"The kids would give him the puck and then they'd stand around and watch," he remembered. "In the pros, I figured they'd throw the puck to him and then set themselves up for a return pass. I'd look at my scoresheet after each game against Boston, and there's Orr with six, seven, eight shots. One game, he's got 12 shots. Hell, he's a defenceman. He's not supposed to get that many shots.

"I figured that since he's a defenceman, maybe he should spend more time defending," Francis added. "But then I'd try to think how many times we'd caught him for a goal, and I couldn't find it happening too often. I would see veterans panic in a tough spot and most of the time you couldn't blame them. Orr? He'd stand there as if he owned the place. He was some meal ticket."

Orr arrived in hockey at a time when the best rookies always were tested physically. More so then than now.

"Don't back up," Orr was told. "There'll be players who resent you. When that happens, throw off your gloves and go at them. Let them know right away where you stand. There are damn few players who really want to fight. If you show them you're ready to fight, they'll get the message in a hurry. Get it over with, then let your hockey ability take over."

The best fighters of Orr's time were Ted Harris, a defenceman with the Canadiens, and Orland Kurtenbach, a centreman with the Rangers. Harris and Kurtenbach were classic fighters, standup guys who knew how to dish it out.

One night, during the 1966-67 season, the Bruins and the Canadiens were involved in a bench-clearing brawl. In these free-for-alls, nobody went looking for another player. You fought whoever happened to be there.

"Wanna go?" Orr asked Harris, who had his back to the boards.

"I guess so," Harris said.

Orr's gloves were off and raining punches on Harris even before the Canadiens player had finished talking. In seconds, Harris was on the ice in a sitting position, staring up at Orr. There was even a hint of a smile on his face.

"Did he really knock down Harris?" Kurtenbach asked me a few days later.

"Twice."

"The kid's got good balance," Kurtenbach laughed. "He's hard to knock off his pins."

Goaltender Eddie Johnson was with the Bruins when Orr joined the team in 1966. At the time, hockey's highest salary was something in the area of \$38,000. A small fortune, really.

"He'll be hockey's first \$100,000 player," Johnston told me late in Orr's rookie season.

At season's end, I asked a member of the Bruins' front office: "What would happen if Orr came to your people after his current contract runs out and asked for \$100,000 a season?"

"We finished in last place this season, yet our attendance was up by 41,000 fans," he replied. "To what would you attribute the increase of 41,000?"

A young Orr was uncommonly shy. After a game, he would almost always hide in a small room adjacent to the dressing room that served as a "clinic" for injured players. It was off-limits to the media.

On this night in 1972, the Bruins were celebrating their Stanley Cup victory in six games over the Rangers following a 3-0 win at Madison Square Garden. Orr poked his head out of the "clinic."

"Come in here, I've got something for you," he said.

"Why don't you come out here and join in the fun?" I said.

"Naw. I like it better in here," said Orr, who had been announced as the Conn Smythe Trophy winner -as he had been after the Bruins had won the Cup two years earlier.

He handed me an autographed photograph.

"Thanks for everything," he said. "And oh, I guess I should tell you I'm having surgery on my knee tomorrow."

"Surgery?"

"It's been bothering me the last six weeks or so," Orr said quietly.

"It didn't seem to bother you during the playoffs, Bobby."

"Aw, not much," he shrugged. "It's nothing serious."

We're talking about multiple surgeries on both knees before he retired at 30 following the 1978-79 season ... about a special player who had knee replacements only in recent years.

Bobby Orr. No. 4.

He remains my No. 1 to this day.

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