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Bobby Stakes An Orr Claim For Everybody

He is only 20, but sensational Boston Bruin defenseman Bobby Orr, backed by an astute Ontario attorney, has turned the hidebound National Hockey League inside out. Even old stars are making a decent living wage

Mark Mulvoy

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When the **Boston Bruins** finally denied a fortnight ago that their wunderkind defenseman **Bobby Orr** had signed a three-year contract for \$400,000, they spoke exactly one week and approximately \$1 million too late. The true figure was more in the neighborhood of \$200,000 but the Bruins, a notoriously frugal organization, were so flattered by their suddenly acquired big-spender image that they stood mutely as the false \$400,000 figure circulated through the hockey provinces. Players from **Al Arbour** to **Larry Zeidel** read the report and immediately reassessed their own salary demands. "I beat them all to it," said **Phil Esposito**, one of Orr's **Boston** teammates. "I knew what Bobby was going to get all the time, so I went in before him and told them to give me my figure or else. They gave it to me."

Even though **Bobby Orr** is getting only about half of what had been rumored, the fact that he is getting that much is a coup both for him and for a **Toronto** lawyer named **Alan Eagleson**, who is the **Mark McCormack** (and the **Marvin Miller**) of hockey. Until **Orr** turned professional with the Bruins two years ago, hockey salaries were, with very few exceptions, almost at welfare levels. After all, as **Henri Richard** of the **Montreal Canadiens** said the other day, "Most of us players don't have too much education because we had to quit school to play hockey. When we went into the office to sign our contracts the club had lawyers and accountants everywhere—and we had only ourselves. We were never prepared for any of these business deals."

This situation began to change in the summer of 1966 when **Orr** agreed to permit **Eagleson** to negotiate his first contract with the Bruins. Management customarily offered its best amateurs a bonus—usually something like two shiny suits and an oversized trenchcoat—to sign a minimum-salary contract. Thus it was with certain astonishment that the penurious **Boston** organization, which never before had negotiated with a lawyer-agent, found its original contract terms being calmly rejected by **Eagleson**. What made matters worse was that **Boston** was in a bind of its own making. The Bruins had not made the playoffs in eight years, and while sellout crowds of 13,909 continued to fill **Boston Garden**, management already had promised the faithful that relief was on the way. Its chosen instrument was an 18-year-old named **Bobby Orr** who would singlehandedly skate the Bruins into the **Stanley Cup** playoffs. Consequently, the Bruins were forced to alter their position at the bargaining table and they signed **Orr** to a two-year contract for some \$75,000.

When reports of this agreement infiltrated the **NHL** a number of other players got in touch with **Eagleson**, and soon the antiquated structure of financial relations between management and labor began to crack. **Eagleson** pushed the demolition by helping to organize a **Players' Association**.

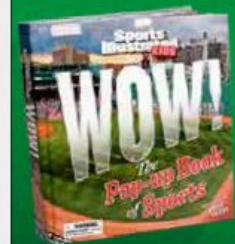
Ten years earlier a group of veterans, including **Ted Lindsay** of the **Detroit Red Wings** and **Ted Sloan** of the **Toronto Maple Leafs**, had attempted to start an association of their own, but when the owners heard of it they banished the insurrectionists to the **Chicago Black Hawks**. That meant no playoff money, since the Hawks were always in last place during the 1950s.

In the year just past the new **Players' Association**, with **Norm Ullman** as president and **Eagleson** as executive director and legal counsel, has won several major concessions from management. The minimum salary limit now is \$10,000—up from \$7,500; and the median salary is almost \$18,000—up about \$3,500 from two years ago. The players also receive more meal money on the road, and they are paid for playing in exhibition games. There is a major medical plan—new to hockey—and the players are now trying to modernize their pension plan.

"We got our idea from the Teamsters," said **Eagleson**. "We just realized the only way we could show strength was to join together."

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This summer, when the time came for **Orr** and **Eagleson** to negotiate a new contract with the Bruins, both were ready. **Orr**, of course, had the credentials. In his first season he was voted Rookie of the Year and made the league's second All-Star team during the last half of the season. The Bruins, though, did not make the playoffs. They simply had a bad team. Last year **Orr** was benched—because of injuries—for 28 games. He had three knee operations in the last year. He broke his nose several times, fractured his collarbone and separated his shoulder. Still, he was voted the Norris Trophy as the best defenseman and was selected to the first All-Star team. And this time the Bruins—after nine years—made the **Stanley Cup** playoffs.

"Bobby proved in just two years that he is now the greatest player in the Bruins' history," said **Eagleson**. "The negotiations were long but fairly easy. The Bruins knew what Bobby was worth, and they were quite reasonable." After three days at the bargaining table **Orr** and **Eagleson** agreed to terms with **Boston**. The \$200,000 that **Orr** is to get will be spread out over the next three years.

While **Boston** Owner **W. W. Adams** (some critics claim the **W. W.** stands for **Why Win?**) basked in his new reputation as a kind of free-spending **Tom Yawkey** on ice, hockey players everywhere paused to reappraise their own contracts.

Said **Gordie Howe** when he read the first erroneous reports about a \$400,000 contract, "I don't think he's actually getting all that kind of money. Still, the bad thing about those figures is that the wives all get talking and pretty soon you're back in there with the general manager talking about rewrites. Don't kid yourself: a lot of guys will have clippings of **Orr's** contract when they talk to the boss this year. I'm going to mention it. I'm in the second year of a two-year contract now, but I think my contract is renegotiable. We play more games and the prices are going up. I still go in there by myself. I'm too far along to have a guy like **Eagleson** negotiating for me. But if he had been around when I was 20, I'd have made a lot more money in my career."

Ed Westfall, a Bruin utility man, said, "I think I'm half as good as **Bobby Orr**. Maybe I can get half as much money." **Wayne Maki**, an obscure **Chicago** forward who was working with **Orr** this summer at a hockey clinic in **Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario**, said, "I hope Bobby gets one million a year. Every ten thousand more he gets means another thousand or two for the rest of us. It's going to cost the owners money."

Confronted with talk like this, the Bruins reluctantly began to set matters in a more proper perspective. But the trouble had already begun. Said **Henri Richard**, "I don't care if the story was wrong. It should help us all. I don't see why we don't get paid as much as the baseball and football players anyway. I'm almost through, but I wish I'd had somebody like **Eagleson** to talk for me when I broke into the league."

Meanwhile, **Orr** is unperturbed by the commotion he has caused. He skated two weeks ago for the first time since his most recent knee operation and managed to laugh when **Esposito**, his **Boston** teammate, called him Money Bags. "I never said what I signed for, and I don't think it's right for anybody to write what they think I signed for," he said, resting against the sideboards of the rink he was playing in. "I don't know or even want to know how much writers make; I don't know why they should know what I make."

"I just know that I wasn't making any money at all two years ago—oh, I was clearing about \$10 a week after paying my expenses while playing amateur hockey in **Oshawa**—and now **Alan Eagleson** has made me a lot of money."

"They all wrote about endorsements and life insurance and education. They said all those things were in my contract. Well, they weren't. Sure, I'd like to finish high school, and I'll probably do it this year in **Boston**. But all I ever really want to do is play hockey. I don't care about anything else."

Now that **Orr** has signed his contract, there are reports from **Chicago** that **Bobby Hull** and **Stan Mikita** each will try to pry \$100,000 from the **Black Hawks** this year. **Howe** will ask for more money, too. It is certain that there will be a number of holdouts in **Toronto**, where **Punch Imlach** clutches at purse strings. And in **Montreal**, where the management has always told its players that playoff bonus money was a form of pay raise, there are rumblings about high salary demands and possible holdouts.

Recently an **NHL** official walked over to **Eagleson** at a league meeting and asked, "You're **Alan Eagleson**, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm **Alan Eagleson**," the lawyer answered.

"Well, you're not very well liked, you know," the official said.

"And who told you that?" **Eagleson** asked.

"Oh, a couple of the owners," the man said.

"Hmmm. I tell you what," **Eagleson** said. "You just let me know when the players don't like me, O.K.?"

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