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'May I Kiss You, Bobby?'

By JUDITH FREEDMAN,
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At age 22 most of us are either still wondering how to make our marks in the world or have already abandoned our dreams of success. At age 22 Bobby Orr is at the top.

Orr is probably the best player in the National Hockey League today. During four seasons with the Bruins he has won most of the major awards and set new scoring records. Last year during the playoffs, Orr was voted the Most Valuable Player.

But this is only part of the story of Orr's success. Equally important and amazing is the way that Boston has adopted the young Canadian. Wherever Orr goes he attracts a following of hysterical high school girls, little kids, and admiring old people. Whether he ever bargained for it or not, fans, press agents, and autographs are now a way of life for Bobby Orr.

Bobby Orr was at the Coop Tuesday afternoon to autograph copies of his book, *Orr on Ice*.

If Bobby Orr had been a middle-class American boy he would probably be a senior in college this year. Instead, he is bringing out a book about himself to satisfy the public's curiosity. Orr is modest about the contrast.

He quickly insists that college students shouldn't "belittle" themselves. Orr sees the student life as preparing one to do many things. By contrast, he says of his hockey, "That's all I do."

Over and over again, in answer to questions about his life and his future Orr simply says, "I enjoy playing hockey." He refuses to philosophize or make predictions about himself and speaks of fulfillment only in terms of another winning season.

The crowd that has come to see Bobby Orr at the Coop includes a lot of high school girls, both of the heavy eye shadow and the clean-cut varieties; older women weighted down by shopping bags; excited little boys, themselves hockey players—all held back by proud Cambridge cops.

The book jacket of *Orr on Ice* says that it is a book about Orr's style of hockey. Setting your own style by age 22 can be a cool thing: the Beatles did it, so did Bernadette Devlin.

Whole Life

But one gets the sense that in Orr's case style has become a limiting thing, Hockey is very definitely his whole life, and real change seems non-existent. Everything is aimed at winning more games, scoring more points, perfecting the style. And the public reinforces these drives.

A teenage girl in a blue coat becomes the first of many that afternoon to ask, "May I kiss you, Bobby?" "Yes," he answers sheepishly.

Orr recalls when he was a little boy dreaming of becoming a hockey star. Now as he signs his autograph one wonders if in that dream he ever recognized that being a hockey star includes a lot more than just playing hockey. Orr shrugs and says, "That's part of your job—to make kids happy."

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Bobby Orr is making kids of all ages happy. The American public asks its sports stars for more than athletic ability: ghost-written books, snappy clothes, press agents, and shrieking girls are all part of the game.

Later, a young woman brings her little boy to see Orr. The kid, smiling and blonde, has braces on both legs and sits in a wheelchair. Orr spots him and jumps down from the platform. As they talk, a press agent hands Orr a copy of his book, which he autographs and gives to the kid. All this time the mother has been searching for her Coop card, which she at last finds and offers as payment for the book. She looks uncomfortable, rather than grateful, when Orr tells her the book is a gift.

The Babe Ruth of Hockey

Orr is sometimes called the Babe Ruth of hockey. Now, the story comes to mind of Ruth hitting a homer specially for a sick little boy. It's a commonly told story, for the public loves to create myths about its sports heroes. Somehow these stories get tied up with the Biblical healing myths, and people seem to unconsciously expect something magical from their heroes.

Only by now the myth seems empty. Orr is genuinely interested in the kid, but they both avoid any mention of his crippled legs. The boy is consciously smiling for the photographers, and the mother seems uncomfortable.

The traditional plot line is there, but the story is empty. Everyone in the room knows that Bobby Orr can't cure the kid, but in the backs of their minds there still exists the belief that maybe this time he can.

By the end of the session three girls have finally worked themselves up to crying. A blonde in a long purple coat appears and, watching Orr, smiles demurely. A press agent takes her to the car in preparation for the departure. The crowd swells, the noise increases, and Orr hurries through the last autographs.

Throughout, Orr has seemed modest and shy-Sure, he plays the public's game, but one wonders if he doesn't sometimes think it silly. Orr, now living his dream, knows what it's like better than anyone. In his own simple way he says, "People put an athlete on a pedestal, where they shouldn't."

The press agents push Orr through to the car. He sits next to the girl in the purple coat as the car pulls away from the Coop, followed by little kids screaming, "Hey, Bobby."

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