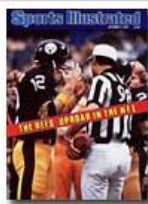


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## Oh, For The Orr Of Yore

In his latest comeback, Bobby Orr is again playing defense for the Chicago Black Hawks after taking a 20-month sabbatical to rest his surgery-ravaged left knee

Jerry Kirshenbaum

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Bobby Orr simply doesn't enjoy himself on the sidelines. He finds little good to say about the recent hiatus in his hockey career, a 20-month layoff caused by miseries associated with his ravaged left knee. Nor was he particularly pleased last week when a far lesser ailment—a pulled groin muscle—briefly interrupted his plan to test the knee in NHL exhibitions. As his Chicago Black Hawk teammates took to the ice Thursday morning for a workout in The Coliseum in Moncton, New Brunswick, Orr restlessly roamed the building in street clothes.

"Because of my bad knee and the long layoff, I know I've got quite a way to go," Orr said, ducking into an empty dressing room, where he let off steam by twisting a metal coat hanger. "But as long as there's any chance I can play, I've got to try. I feel it's too soon to retire. I want to be a hockey player."

Despite this resolve, it was by no means certain that Orr, at 30, could avoid the athletic scrap heap. Considered the best defenseman in NHL history, Orr is also the only defenseman ever to lead the league in scoring, which he did twice when he was with the Boston Bruins. The second occasion, the 1974-75 season, also turned out to be his last full season. Orr had already undergone three operations on his left knee, and after he was operated on twice more—and played just 10 games—in the 1975-76 season, the Bruins treated him as damaged goods in contract talks, prompting him to sign a five-year, \$3 million contract with Chicago. The gimpy Orr played just 20 games for the Hawks, last appearing on Jan. 27, 1977, when he skated less than three minutes in a 1-1 tie against the Canucks in Vancouver. Three months later Dr. John Palmer of Toronto removed bone chips and loose cartilage from the knee—operation No. 6—and put Orr's chances of playing hockey again at "one in 10."

The knee responsible for that gloomy prognosis is crisscrossed with so many scars that, in the absence of a map, Orr himself cannot tell which one is the result of which operation. With virtually no cartilage left to cushion the joint, Orr lacks strength when pushing off on skates, making it hard for him to pivot or to execute quick starts and stops. Even if he somehow defies Dr. Palmer's forbidding odds and succeeds in his comeback, Orr concedes that his days of dazzling end-to-end rushes are over. "I got caught up-ice enough when I had good knees," he says. "I sure better not try it now. But if my knee holds up, I still think I can make a contribution to the Hawks."

With that "if" hanging heavily in the air, Orr was in the starting lineup for the Black Hawks' preseason opener in Chicago Stadium against the Montreal Canadiens a fortnight ago. As he skated out to center ice, the 9,126 fans gave him an ovation. "I had the jitters," Orr says. "It was the way I felt when I went to training camp my rookie year."

Orr worked the power play and occasional odd shifts against Montreal—Chicago beat the Stanley Cup champions 7-5—and did the same in two subsequent defeats, 4-2 to the Canadiens in Ottawa and 4-3 to the Toronto Maple Leafs in Moncton. Playing cautiously, he appeared awkward at times, as though he were some tousle-haired imposter trying to ape the real Bobby Orr's familiar bowlegged stride. Yet there were also bona fide flashes of the Orr of yore. Although he didn't score in the three games, he was credited with two assists, one on a slick between-the-legs pass against Toronto that set up a goal by Cliff Koroll. He got off other crisp passes against the Leafs, worked the give-and-go and stirred the crowd with a head fake that left Toronto Center Don Ashby completely flummoxed.

Even more encouraging was the fact that the knee had stood up. Orr was still far from being in shape—witness the groin pull, which kept him out of Chicago's 3-2 victory over the Maple Leafs in Toronto Saturday night—but there was no soreness or swelling in the knee. To the well-wishers who flocked around whenever he got off the team bus or passed through a hotel lobby, Orr kept saying, "The knee's just fine. It's not bothering me."

In his latest comeback, Orr was hoping to break a pattern that had become distressingly Sisyphean: surgery, intensive rehabilitation to get quickly back into action, then more surgery. "The one thing I had never tried with the knee was a long rest," he says. "This time I've tried that."

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Indeed, after his last operation, Orr stayed on crutches for six weeks and didn't skate for a full year. Finally, last January, **Chicago Coach Bob Pulford** named Orr as his assistant, and Orr put on his blades to work with the Hawk defensemen. Meanwhile, he strengthened the knee by lifting weights, riding a bicycle and performing flexes and straightleg bends while watching TV. Jogging was a no-no, so he swam laborious laps in Pulford's backyard pool. Orr also helped Pulford in an administrative capacity by providing scouting reports on amateur and minor league prospects, and occasionally on future opponents.

The prevailing view among hockey people is that Orr's comeback will prove unavailing, that his bum knee will again—once and for all—betray him. This probably explains why Orr's is not among the names of 15 defensemen placed on the NHL All-Star ballots that will soon be distributed to fans.

It also explains why preseason rivals were solicitously giving him a wide berth on the ice. In one of the games against **Montreal**, Orr slid into the **Chicago** net and his left knee struck a goalpost. The knee was not affected but **Stan Mikita**, **Chicago's** veteran center, said, "You get scared when Bobby goes down like that. You wonder if this is it."

"Hockey's a fast, contact game," counters Orr. "If I can't take it, I shouldn't be playing." Orr also dismisses suggestions that by skating on the bad knee he risks crippling himself for life. "I've got an arthritic condition in the knee that's likely to bother me, but it's there. I appreciate the concern, but the damage has already been done."

Nobody wishes Orr more success in his comeback attempt than Pulford, who says that even under the best of circumstances, Orr would play far less than the 40 minutes he customarily logged in the old days. He also would sit out some games, and be called upon to move the puck to teammates rather than carry it himself.

"It's unrealistic to think Bobby can be the same player he once was," says Pulford. "But if the knee holds up, he's not going to be just another hockey player, either. You could see that in the exhibition games he's played. There's no way **Bobby Orr** will ever be ordinary."

Maybe Orr really did have to give it another try.

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