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**Bobby Orr voted 31st  
greatest athlete of  
century**

## Orr brought more offense to defense

By Larry Schwartz

Special to ESPN.com

Only a handful of athletes have changed the way their sport is played. Bobby Orr is one of the select few.

Orr radically altered the style of hockey by introducing defensemen to the offensive side of the game. A defenseman who scored goals, rushed the puck up ice, set up teammates with pinpoint passes. What a revolutionary concept.

"He changed the sport by redefining the parameters of his position," wrote *Sports Illustrated's* E.M. Swift. "A defenseman, as interpreted by Orr, became both a defender and an aggressor, both a protector and a producer. Orr was more than an opportunist. He created opportunities."

Orr's style generated a new wave of offensive-minded defenseman, such as Denis Potvin and Paul Coffey, Ray Bourque and Brian Leetch. But as outstanding as they were, they couldn't compare with the Boston Bruins' legendary No. 4.

The 5-foot-11, 185-pound Orr excited fans with rink-length rushes. His shot was a low black dart, blistering and accurate. He quarterbacked the Bruins from the point. He also played with reckless abandon, sacrificing his body as he dived to block shots. He possessed a toughness in addition to grace, skill and speed.

Orr accomplished something that even players as magnificent as Gordie Howe and Rocket Richard couldn't -- become the first player to win three consecutive MVPs.

Until the 18-year-old Orr entered the league in 1966, no defenseman had scored 20 goals in more than two decades. Orr did it seven straight seasons (1968-69 until 1974-75), five times scoring more than 30 goals, and once 46. Twice he won the Art Ross Trophy for leading the league in scoring (that's twice more than any defenseman in the game's history).

No defenseman besides Orr has ever led the league in assists; he did it five times. Not only was the first defenseman to record 100 assists in a season, he was the first player to do so. At the end of Orr's Rookie of the Year season in 1967, Harry Howell won the Norris Trophy as the league's best defenseman. "I'm glad I won it now," he said, "because it's going to belong to that Orr from now on."



Bobby Orr is the only defenseman to lead the league in assists, and he did it five times.



It did -- for the next eight years. He probably would have continued to have piled up the trophies even longer were it not for his ravaged knees, which allowed him to play more than 60 games in just eight seasons. There were a half-dozen operations on his knees. In his final three-plus seasons, he could play a total of only 36 games.

"Nobody is a perfect hockey player," Montreal Canadiens center Jean Beliveau said. "The important thing is to correct your mistakes. Orr, he does that. He is always there. He blocks the shots. He can skate. He can shoot. Is there anything more?"

Well, you could lead your team to a couple of Stanley Cups, and Orr did that too. When the Bruins won it all in 1970, with Orr scoring the most famous goal in hockey history (naturally), it was the first time they skated with the Cup since 1941. Since Orr left the Bruins, they have yet to drink from another Cup.

He was born on March 20, 1948 in Parry Sound, Ontario, the third of five children. Upon leaving the delivery room his mother Avra was warned that the child might not live. But he quickly took a turn for the better, and was thriving by the next morning.

Robert Orr came from athletic stock. He was named after his grandfather, who before emigrating to Canada played professional soccer in Ireland. His father Doug was offered a hockey contract with a Bruins' farm club during World War II, but instead entered the Royal Canadian Navy.

Bobby began skating at four and the next year he was playing organized hockey. At 12, at 5-foot-2 and 110 pounds, he was considered a potential pro. During a tournament with the Parry Sound Bantam All-Stars, playing with older boys, the Bruins spotted him while they were scouting two other players. Orr played 58 minutes (the other two minutes were spent in the penalty box) and was the game's best performer.

Two years later, the Bruins signed him for \$2,800 with the agreement that he could live at home and commute to home games three hours away. At 14, the 127-pound defenseman was playing junior hockey in Oshawa with 19- and 20-year-olds. He made all-league second-team. By the time he was 16, he was pictured on the cover of *Macleans's*, the national magazine of Canada. It was clear that Orr was the most remarkable player to come along since Howe.

When he was 18, Orr took the unusual step of having a lawyer, Alan Eagleson, represent him, and he reportedly signed for \$50,000 for two years and a \$25,000 bonus, the biggest contract ever received by a rookie at that time.

Orr was assigned No. 27 in 1966, but he quickly changed to his legendary No. 4. "He was a star from the moment they played the national anthem in the opening game of his rookie year," Boston coach Harry Sinden said.

New England fans adored Orr, who scored 13 goals, was named Rookie of the Year and all-league second-team. However, not even Orr could stop Boston from extending its streak to eight consecutive seasons without qualifying for the playoffs.

Though a knee injury limited Orr to just 46 games in 1967-68, he was so impressive when he played that he made all-league first-team and, as Howell predicted, won his first Norris Trophy. Orr also led the Bruins to second place in the first year of expansion and the playoffs. He came into his own two years later, in 1969-70, becoming the only player to ever win all four major awards -- Hart (MVP), Art Ross (scoring), Norris and Conn Smythe (MVP of the playoffs) -- in the same season. His 87 assists set an NHL record and his 120 points were the most ever for a defenseman.

His dream season ended with Orr flying -- literally. After scoring the winning goal past goalie Glenn Hall in the last game of the Stanley Cup finals, a four-game sweep of the St. Louis Blues, Orr was hooked and sent airborne, where he was immortalized in the most famous picture in hockey history.

In 1970-71, he notched 102 assists and scored a career-high 139 points.

The next season, Orr won his second playoff MVP in leading the Bruins to their last Cup. After the Rangers had lost in the finals in six game to Boston, in which Orr scored seven goals, Rod Gilbert said, "Hockey is a team game, right? One man is not supposed to beat a whole team."

Orr scored 46 goals and won the scoring title with 135 points in 1974-75, but it was his last hurrah. His career was ended effectively at 27 and officially at 30 after three-plus injury-plagued seasons (10 games with Boston in 1975-76 and 26 games over two seasons and a month with Chicago after signing a \$3-million, five-year contract as a free agent).

In between knee operations, he won the "outstanding player" award for leading Team Canada to the championship in the 1976 Canada Cup.

When he tearfully retired on Nov. 8, 1978, he had scored 270 goals and 951 points in 657 games -- that's 1.4 points per game, a remarkable average for a defenseman.

Orr spends much of his time involved in charity work, playing golf, and running his sports agency.

As far as his place in history, let's give *Sports Illustrated's* Frank Deford the final word: "It's not necessary to get into who may be better, Orr, the defenseman, or Wayne Gretzky, the center, except to note that Orr did something that Gretzky had no opportunity to do, and that was change the very nature of the game."