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THE WORLD OF HOCKEY ACCORDING TO BOBBY ORR

By Lucas Aykroyd

When you survey hockey history, few players can rival Wayne Gretzky as the best of all time. But Bobby Orr is one of them, and while Gretzky has been preoccupied recently with coaching the Phoenix Coyotes and picking the Olympic team, as well as family matters, the legendary former Boston Bruins defenceman is here in Vancouver on business as a player agent.

"I'm here to see some of my agency's clients [including Canada's Steve Downie and Marc Staal and the USA's Jack Skille], and some of the best 18-, 19-, and in some cases 17-year-old players in the world," Orr told HockeyCanada.ca in a rinkside interview at the Pacific Coliseum. "These kids are the future of the NHL and it's nice to see them."

Which teams, in this Hall of Famer's mind, are among the tournament favourites?

"The US is pretty good, but in a short tournament like this, who knows? The Slovaks are pretty good. Canada, they're kind of the underdogs, but again, who knows? If you get a hot goalie, and their goalie's been playing very, very well, anything can happen in a short series like this. But the US certainly is a very strong team."

Recently, there's been a great deal of focus on officiating, both at the World Juniors and at the NHL level. Like many longtime hockey observers, Orr has mixed feelings about the obstruction crackdown, although he enjoys some of the rule changes that have opened up the game.

"I like the rules, but in my mind, there are too many games being decided by a very weak hooking penalty!" said Orr. "I like the rules, and I like the [removal of] the center line. I know we had to crack down on obstruction, and I think there are major obstruction penalties that should be called. But we're looking at power plays, power plays, power plays every game, lots of 5-on-3s. I like the game and I like what they've done, so I don't want to be real negative. I just think we've got to let the referees use their judgment. There are times now where players are dropping their arms and holding on to the stick and it's called hooking. To me, that's not a hook. It's players that aren't involved in the play and so forth. But overall, I think the rule changes have been wonderful."

Orr, in the wide-open NHL of the 1970's, would almost certainly have flourished with the removal of the red line. Even under the former rules, he scored 100-plus points six seasons in a row between 1970 and 1975. But Parry Sound's most famous son figures that with the state of coaching today, it's tougher to complete those long-bomb passes than it would have been in the 70's or 80's.

"It's surprising, but I think most of the breakaways have been from guys coming out of the penalty box. We do see that long pass sometimes, but teams are defending against it now. Guys are coaching at this level because they're good. So they figure things out pretty quickly."

The winner of eight Norris Trophies, three Hart Trophies, and two Conn Smythe Trophies, the 57-year-old Orr can only marvel at the combination of size, strength, speed and skill that today's junior players bring. Most players on this year's Team Canada are around six feet and 200 pounds, and would have dwarfed NHLers of decades past.

"I played at 185 pounds, and I was a good-sized player back then," said Orr. "Of course, every team had one big guy, like a Moose Vasko. But now, these players are all so big. Back then, the big guys weren't that mobile, not necessarily great skaters, and they couldn't catch you. Today, they're all big and they can catch you! It's amazing, the size of the kids. They're mobile and fantastic skaters."

Orr got his first exposure to international hockey when he was added, along with other OHL all-stars, to the Toronto Marlboros' roster for a December 14, 1965 exhibition game against the Russian national team.

"I have a photo with us with the Toronto Marlboros sweaters, and people can't figure out why I have a Marlboro sweater on!" Orr said with a laugh.

Due to circumstances, Orr didn't get many other chances to suit up against Russia, Canada's greatest rival in those days. He was nursing a knee injury when the 1972 Summit Series took place, and could only accompany the team to Moscow as an observer as the Canadians won three straight games to triumph on the strength of Paul Henderson's last-minute tally against Vladislav Tretiak.



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"If you go back, it was unbelievable for a team going over there. And in those days, the conditions were much different than they are today. Having to win three of four over [in Moscow] is one of the great things ever accomplished in sports. The conditions were so difficult, and for that team to do what they did was unbelievable."

Orr was part of Canada's entry in the 1976 Canada Cup, however, and was named tournament MVP, racking up nine points despite basically playing on one knee. He recently checked out the new DVD set from Video Service Corp./Music Video Distributors featuring six games from that competition.

"It was really my last hockey. It was a great memory for me. If you look at that defence, we had Lapointe, Savard, Robinson, Potvin, a pretty good defence! [laughs] And me, I was a throw-in! I think if you look at it, we were all mobile, we could all move the puck, we could all skate, and we were all tough enough."

Orr wouldn't be surprised if the 2006 Olympics in Turin, Italy provide the best international hockey ever.

"I think it's going to be wonderful. There'll be a lot of good teams over there. If you go back to the junior teams, even, if you look at the Slovakian team, most of the players are Canadian Hockey League players who play over here. They're not going to be intimidated by anything. They're experienced in Canadian hockey. The Olympics will be great. Canada? It'll have a pretty good team! Everyone's never going to be happy with the players selected. Everyone has their own opinion and that's the way it is. Wayne [Gretzky] has put together what he thinks is the best possible team to win. And hey, he's the man. He does a great job. They've worked hard at it. They haven't taken it lightly, and they'll be very, very good."

