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BOBBY ORR: BEFORE HE WAS 4

By JAMES DUTHIE THU, NOV 27 2008 COMMENTS(0) THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE DUTHIE

I told my nine year-old son I was going to interview Bobby Orr on Wednesday. His response, word-for-word:

"You mean that guy on the car commercials?"

(Heavy sigh.)

It's true. An entire generation of hockey fans is growing up knowing little or nothing about one of the two greatest players in the history of the game (it's Orr and Gretzky for me, and the list ends there).

I wish they'd make it a mandatory course in Canadian Elementary School. "Your Thursday timetable, son: Math, Science, English, French, Orr."

My boy even wears Bobby's number on his hockey team. The team colours are black and gold, so when 4 was available, I made him take it (he wanted 19...he has a Spezza thing). No number looks better in black and gold than 4, I explained to him. I figure he'll appreciate it someday. Or eternally resent me for stealing his individuality. Could go either way.

I hope a lot of fathers bring their sons to Oshawa tonight (Thursday), when they raise Orr's number to the rafters. That would be the number 2, by the way. Orr's more famous and poetic number ("Number 4 Bobby Orr!") didn't go on his back until he arrived in Boston.

"I never cared (about the number)," Orr says casually. "Just give me a sweater, that's all I ever said."

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He arrived in Oshawa as a naïve 14 year-old. He was all of 5'5 and 125 pounds, playing against 19 and 20 year-olds who looked like giants next to him. Everything was new.

"I remember our trainer asking me what lie I wanted on my stick," Orr says with a chuckle. "I didn't know what a lie was. I just wanted a stick. Of course, before long I was complaining about my sticks. I learned fast."

Ya think? In three OHA seasons with Oshawa, he scored 101 goals and added 158 assists. He also patented those end-to-end rushes that would redefine his position and change the game of hockey forever. In fact, Oshawa is really the place Orr's "Rushin' Revolution" was born.

So why has it taken the Generals so long to retire their legend's sweater?

It's Orr's fault. He'll tell you that. He hates these things, can't stand the spotlight and the adoration. They asked him for years before he finally gave in.

And yet today, he seems genuinely pumped. He literally glows as he talks about how kids from the nearby Bobby Orr Elementary School will be singing the national anthem.

We chat for almost an hour—most of it after the cameras stop rolling. Bobby Orr loves to sit and talk hockey. He shares his feelings on how different it is for young players today (getting offered huge cheques from stick companies at 16), about today's NHL (he doesn't like a lot of the rule changes), about the Senators (he thinks they're in trouble).

He is a treat to listen to. You can't help but wish we could hear from him more regularly. But we won't. After Thursday night, I bet you won't see Bobby Orr for a while.

Except in the car commercials.

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