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Orr's grit is still 'priceless'

By GARY LOEWEN

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Hockey is not for the meek, but Bobby Orr is concerned that the sport is sliding in that direction.

Some violence-abhorring Americans, commissioners and other pacifists seem determined to police the game to the extent that it becomes an ice ballet.

Orr would prefer that hockey be allowed to return to its roots.

"Hockey is a tough game, a physical game and (the NHL) just can't take that toughness out of it," Orr said in an interview.

"But I think it is happening.

"We have to let our players battle. Pucks, sticks, speed ... you're not going to get away from injuries."

Orr is familiar with injuries. He was forced from the game at age 31, having had knee surgeries almost annually through his nine-year NHL career.

He was one of the most brilliant offensive players the game has ever known, a defenceman with 915 points in 657 games, but he could handle himself physically, too.

"The way I played I handled the puck a lot and I got whacked a lot, but we're in a tough game."

His style of play and his battle wounds are highlighted in a new MasterCard commercial (www.inittowinit.ca).

During Orr's era -- he was rookie of the year in 1967 and won the Norris Trophy as top defenceman each of the next eight years -- a player could retaliate to a cheap shot with his fists.

But the instigator rule, instituted about 15 years ago, has put a damper on fighting and many believe that it has resulted in an increase in cheap hits.

"Before, the deterrent was a fear of getting beaten up if you stepped over the line," Orr said.

"Now, guys are running around torpedoing players. You need that fear (of getting pummelled in retaliation) for that type of player."

In that vein, Orr, 60, says the NHL needs to deal with hits from behind. But otherwise, "you have to let the guys compete."

Out of the game now for almost half his life, Orr says he feels great. He has had knee replacement surgery on both knees and they feel normal again.

But when he is on skates, he has to remind himself to be careful and not let his competitive side take over.

Orr, who works as a player agent, noted that while the league has introduced rule changes to improve the offence, "I'm not sure we've done that." He echoed the opinion of Brett Hull that with the centre line gone, the players don't have to use their skill. They just dump in the puck.

"I've been coaching from the press box for 25 years," Orr said with a laugh, "and I haven't made a mistake yet."

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