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Bobby Orr: Another classy gentleman

February 23, 2009 11:22 AM | Posted by **Bob Cole** Comments Recommend 54

I will never forget the first time I met the great Bobby Orr - another number four, another classy gentleman.

It was back in the 1968 Stanley Cup final in Montreal. That spring the Canadiens were playing the St. Louis Blues and ultimately swept the series.

Anyway, CBC Radio had brought me to Montreal to do the fourth game, which was, of course, the last game in the series. Ted Darling was doing the play-by-play, Fred Sgambati was the host and I was brought in to do a few odds and ends. Basically, they wanted to see what I could do.

Bobby, who was rookie of the year the previous season, won his first of eight Norris Trophies in 1968. He was brought in to Montreal along with his Boston Bruins teammate Derek Sanderson, who was the rookie of the year.

I had never met either young man, but I managed to get a CBC camera and set up an interview with them at the old Mount Royal Hotel.

I did it for our local station back in St. John's and I was nervous as hell. We were all pretty much rookies, Derek and I for sure, and Bobby was one year ahead of us.

Well, I did the interview and it was terrible, but we still aired it back home. The best news is that it was the start of a great relationship with No. 4, Bobby Orr.

As I mentioned in my previous blog on that other great, classy No. 4, Jean Beliveau, I did my first NHL play-by-play in 1969. The following season I was working for CBC Sunday NHL radio and I was assigned to cover an afternoon game between the Philadelphia Flyers and the Bruins at the old Boston Garden.

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After the game, I went across the street from the Garden to a steak house. I was by myself, but I remember when I first walked into the restaurant there was a big round table that would seat eight or 10, with a reserved sign on it. A while goes by and I was enjoying my meal, thinking about the game, and I see a group walk in and sit at the table.

Wouldn't you know it, there was Bobby Orr at the table. I asked the waiter who he was with and he said Bobby's Dad, Doug, was there along with some other family and friends from Parry Sound, Ont.

Bobby, who had only met me the one time in Montreal - and it wasn't like I was on TV every week back then - saw me and from a distance gave me a nod and wave. I was pretty impressed that he would remember me.

Well, our paths would cross again and we'd wind up spending a lot of time together over the years. In 1980-81, Ralph Mellanby, who was the executive producer of *Hockey Night in Canada* at the time, and the guy who hired me, said we were going to hire Bobby as an analyst in the booth. Ralph said to me, "Bobby's never done it before obviously, but we want to give him to you to work together."

That was fine by me. Bobby and I got to be friends working together, but I could tell early on he was never really comfortable in the role. He was great, he knew the game and the players very well, but he never wanted to criticize the players and the coaches.

I remember we were in Edmonton to do a game that season and we went to the Oilers' practice. Bobby sat there watching those young Oilers and kept hitting me on the arm. "Look at that kid," he'd say. "Look at what he did with the puck. That kid has incredible hands. He really is going to be a great player."

Well, it was 99 of course. But he was so impressed, pointing out all the things the likes of Wayne Gretzky, Mark Messier and Glenn Anderson were doing on the ice. He just loved that and he knew they were destined to be a great team even though they were just getting started.

So we did the game the next night and we both had flights home at 6:30 Sunday morning, which meant we had to be up at 4 or thereabouts to pack and get to the airport. Well, we got back to the hotel and we sat down and started talking. We talked about hockey, broadcasting, life and finally Bobby said why don't we just stay up until we have to leave for the airport and keep talking hockey. That was fine by me.

What an opportunity for me. I'm not sure too many people have had the chance to spend a night with one of the greatest players ever and listen to him talk hockey. He was telling me about all the little things he used to do that made him so good and he was just amazed that no one picked up on them. He'd have these clever, set plays with the goalies to move the puck, stuff like that. Amazing, really.

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I could write a book about the stuff Bobby talked about that night. But imagine being in a room with Bobby Orr, telling you about his game, and he couldn't understand why it was so easy for him on the ice.

At 4:30 we packed our bags and it was off to the airport.

I will never forget the first time I met Bobby, then a few years later in the steakhouse, and then the chance to sit and talk hockey all night. Just talking with him, he was an ordinary guy like you and me; on the ice what an incredible superstar. The words great and Bobby Orr belong together.

Thanks for all the great memories Bobby and thanks for picking up the cheque that night in the steakhouse.

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