

FIVE MINUTE MAJOR: Gordie Howe was a symbol of NHL past

By Jake Courtepatte

As a twenty-something, I find it surprisingly difficult to write how I feel about Gordie Howe: not the Gordie Howe I know, grey-haired and waving from the seats with an old Red Wings jersey and a spotlight on him, but Mr. Hockey, Mr. Elbows, the toughest man in hockey.

But as a lifelong hockey fan, I still feel the need to do him justice. So I thought, why not ask my dad?

Here is the first seldom-told story he gave me, smiling.

When goaltender Gump Worsley broke into the NHL with the New York Rangers in 1952, Howe was just beginning the prime of his career. In a game between the Rangers and Howe's Detroit Red Wings, the 24-year-old Howe had a chance to tuck away a supposed empty-netter late in the game, with Worsley diving back towards the crease in the hope of making the save. The maskless Worsley (he was once quoted as saying "my face is my mask") never faced the shot.

When asked later why he kept the puck on his stick, instead of risking hitting Worsley square in the face, Howe simply said he would get plenty more chances on Worsley.

In March of 1962, Howe became the second player to ever score 500 NHL goals, after Maurice Richard, in a 3-2 Detroit victory over the New York Rangers and Gump Worsley.

In October of the following year, Howe tied the Rocket's regular season goals record of 544, against the Montreal Canadiens who now employed starting goalie Gump Worsley.

In November of 1965, Howe became the first NHL player to score 600 goals, against the Canadiens? I think by now you, the reader, know who was on the other end. Keep in mind, Worsley is a Hall of Fame goaltender.

Here's another Howe story, told by Hall of Famer Stan Mikita, which sheds light on a different side of Mr. Hockey.

In one of his first few years with the Chicago Blackhawks in the early 60s, the young Mikita gave Howe a cheap shot with his stick during a regular season game, cutting Gordie and sending him to the ice. After Howe left the ice for stitches, Mikita's teammate and ex-Wing Ted Lindsay said to watch out for Howe: he could be a little vindictive.

A number of games came and went between the Red Wings and Blackhawks without incident, and Mikita relaxed a little. He does not remember how, or when, he got hit.

Exiting the zone on a delayed offside call, Mikita was behind the play, and behind the referees' line of sight. Howe, circling back the same way, slipped off a glove, popped Mikita on the chin, and slipped it back on with officials none the wiser.

Mikita missed the rest of the period. When he returned on a faceoff, he skated over to Howe and said they were even. Howe simply smiled and said, "Don't know, Stanley, I'm not sure yet."

Mikita, the man who would score over 1,400 NHL points in a 21-year career, said he "died a thousand deaths" over the next three or four games against the Wings. Eventually, Howe called them even, but Mikita never gave him a cheap shot again.

Howe was part of a dwindling list of "tough guys" in the NHL that also had a scoring touch, and his was the greatest. He didn't fight much, but he carved out his reputation with his arms and his stick, both on the puck and on an opponent.

Fans across the country will decry the "new" NHL, and have been doing so since the 2004-05 lockout brought about the hard salary cap. Since that long, slow winter, fighting in the NHL has decreased dramatically, from 0.64 fights per game to 0.28. While the traditional on-ice ranks had the referees as the police chiefs and the Marty McSorleys, Dave Semenkos, and Tie Domis as the beat cops, the fate of the game has since been taken control of by the stripes.

Others, perhaps more rightly, will argue that the health of the players takes precedence over the enforcer's role in the game. The 76-year old Mikita now suffers from severe dementia, and head trauma played a major role in summer of 2011 deaths of enforcers Rick Rypien, Derek Boogaard, and Wade Belak.

Even still, seasoned fans of the game will remember fondly the 45-year-old Howe, playing alongside sons Mark and Marty in the World Hockey Association, elbows as sharp as ever. Howe commanded a respect amongst his peers, and gave it back when deserved.

And Wayne Gretzky, the Great One, was his biggest fan.

"Unfortunately we lost the greatest hockey player ever today, but more importantly the nicest man I have ever met," Gretzky said on Twitter upon Howe's passing. "Sending our thoughts and prayers to the Howe family and to the millions of hockey fans who like me loved Gordie Howe. RIP Mr. Hockey."

The greatest hockey player of all time had his bodyguards. His hero had his fists and his elbows.