Even if Wayne Gretzky never lives in Canada again, deep in his bones he is Canadian.

The Ordinary Superstar: Wayne Gretzky

by Ken Dryden

PROFILE

Notes

Ken Dryden was a goalie for the Montreal Canadiens hockey team. He is currently president of the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Gretzky holds or shares 61 NHL records. The following are his career records.

—Goals: 894
—Assists: 1963
—Points: 2857
—Assists per game: 1.32
—Goals by a centre: 894
—Assists by a centre: 1963
—Points by a centre: 2857
—Overtime assists: 15
—Goals, including playoffs: 949
—Assists, including playoffs: 2023
—Points, including playoffs: 3239
—Hat tricks: 50
—40-goal seasons: 12
—50-goal seasons: 9
—60-goal seasons: 5
—Consecutive 40-goal seasons: 12
—Consecutive 60-goal seasons: 4
—100-point seasons: 15
—Consecutive 100-point seasons: 13

I never played against Wayne Gretzky. He came into the National Hockey League from the World Hockey Association with the Edmonton Oilers the October after I had played my last game in Montreal. I have met him and spoken with him a few times, but I know him mostly the way most of you know him—from the thousands of impressions I have gotten of him from TV and newspapers during these last two decades.

I don’t know if he is the greatest player ever. He is certainly the best player of a time when hockey has been exposed to more people in more different places. He may also be hockey’s
most important player. He was, I think, the first Canadian forward to play a true team game. His predecessor superstars were always the focus of their team’s strategy. The challenge was to get the puck to Howe or Richard or Hull or Mahovlich or Lafleur. Gretzky reversed that. He knew he wasn’t big enough or strong enough, or even fast enough, to do what he wanted to do if others focused on him. Like a magician, he had to direct attention elsewhere, to his four teammates on the ice with him, to create the momentary distraction in order to move unnoticed into open ice where size and strength didn’t matter. Then, he had to get the puck back, and accompanied by four players moving up the ice with him, and opponents backpedalling in sudden panic, to give it up again. Gretzky made his opponents stop five players, not one, and he made his teammates full partners to the game. He made them skate up to his level, pass and finish up to his level, or be embarrassed. He made them all be better players, not just statistically better players from riding his coattails. Bobby Orr had done the same a few years earlier, but as a defenceman, and while Orr’s achievement may have been the more unexpected (imagine, a defenceman leading from behind), leading from in front is harder. Everything happens faster, there is less space and time to see the patterns and to make new ones, more reason to abandon the ideal and just do it yourself. The irony is that Gretzky, the greatest scorer of all time, by season with 92, and by career with 894, wasn’t first of all a scorer. He was the artist who created the work of art and then left it to the artisan to finish it off.

His greatest contribution, however, may have come in other ways. This was never more apparent than in the days leading up to his retirement announcement. Happily for him, by the time the attention hit, he seemed genuinely to have his mind made up. For in that kind of clamour, you cannot discover your own mind. He was emotional, and conflicted, as one would be, but he seemed relaxed, at peace, almost serene. As he had done so often on the ice, he had managed to put all his emotional/personal pieces together. Simply, he knew, it was time. “I’m done,” he had said to his wife, Janet, the previous Sunday. So in the furor of his near-week-long “death watch,” he could just talk, openly, freely, with nothing to hide except his final words, which, everyone knew, would come soon enough. In Ottawa, after his last game in Canada, and the next day in New York at his final press conference, there was no rushing off, and no reporters in a race to beat their deadlines. Like after a season is over and the Cup is won, with all the pressure off and with experiences to share, everyone seemed content to just hang around and talk. And Gretzky listened, too. “Go ahead,” he kept saying, encouraging the next questioner when it seemed to the media that they had already taken enough of his time. It’s okay. He seemed utterly content with himself. But he always has, and maybe that’s what is behind his biggest achievement. If you were to put Wayne Gretzky
in a room of ordinary people, he would not appear ordinary—his clothes, his hair, how he speaks about himself, his bearing, and attitude—they would all set him apart. But if you were to put him in a room of superstars, he would stick out even more dramatically. There, he seems normal. Comfortably normal.

He is normal-sized. Every time he looks in the mirror, he knows he is not indestructible, and he has known that all his life. He also possesses a rare perspective on the game and his place in it that can only come from being a lifelong fan. He knows the names and records of all the great players. He has followed them, been inspired by their legends. Just watch him with Gordie Howe. Gretzky has caught up with and passed all of Howe's scoring records, and yet in his mind he knows he isn’t Howe and he never will be. To his eight-year-old starry-eyed self, Howe was 10 feet tall, stronger than an ox, and able to skate and shoot faster than the wind. To the 20- or 38-year-old Gretzky, no matter what anyone else says, he can’t match up. So Gordie Howe is the greatest of them all, and Wayne Gretzky is happily saddled with a humility he cannot deny. It is a humility that comes when one has a sense of history. Gretzky knows that time didn’t begin and end with him. It comes from being a working-class kid for whom good things can never be assumed. He speaks about himself as if he is as mystified at the success he has had as everyone else.

The endless hours he spent as a young boy in his backyard rink have somehow more to do with his father, Walter, who built the rink and found time for him; the passion that kept him

there he sees as a “gift” that came from somewhere else. He is not today’s ubiquitous self-made man who worships his creator. Such self-image comes when one views one’s immediate world as a burden and an obstacle to overcome. Gretzky doesn’t see his world this way. He didn’t grow up resenting the limits of small-town, working-class life, vowing to create a different future for himself. He likes what he is. He seems actually to like his father and mother, to like Brantford and Canada, and hockey. So when he went to L.A. and New York, he loved L.A. and New York the way any normal kid would, but without feeling the need to hate Brantford, without needing to give up Canada.

It is not supposed to be that way. We want each of us to carve out our own paths. To be responsible for our own destiny, to be beholden to no one. When most people go from the small time to the big time, they reject utterly their former existence. They make fun of the person they once were. Not Gretzky.

He is “the ordinary superstar.” Former Heisman Trophy winner and Montreal Alouette football player Johnny Rodgers hung that same phrase on himself, but wanting to elevate himself, he put the emphasis on “superstar.” With Gretzky, it is on “ordinary.”

Wayne Gretzky did not go out at the top as a player. Michael Jordan did, so did Mario Lemieux and Jim Brown. No athlete who retires at age 38 can expect to. But the power and appeal of sport is far more than just in its wins and losses. Sport holds the attention of people with its compelling, unscripted, character-revealing dramas. I have at other times
described hockey as Canada’s national theatre. On its frozen stage, life lessons get played out, and millions watch and learn. And as in the theatre, what counts is not just what happens, but how it happens. Great athletes, though they may not know it, get paid not just for what they do, but for how they do it. For how he played on that stage, Gretzky, the superstar as person, clearly stepped down at the top of his game.

It is often said that Canadians love to lionize their stars and love even more to tear them down. There is some perverse sense of the democratic in Canadians that makes us chop off any head that rises above the others. I don’t think so, or at least not any more so than Australians or Mexicans or Belgians or anyone else for whom centre stage lies in some other country. The standards of greatness in our world are established in New York or Paris or London or Hollywood. So people in smaller places wait for their stars to take to those stages, and then wait for the judgment of others. And to really make it, those home-grown stars often have to be so single-mindedly non-Canadian or a-Canadian that if they do succeed, we Canadians beat them up for not waving the flag when they get there.

To get to the top in hockey, you have to live a Canadian life, one of ice and snow, struggle and physical pain, even if you grow up in Kazakhstan or Sweden. And to stay at the top, you cannot stray very far from that life. Even if Wayne Gretzky never lives in Canada again, deep in his bones he is Canadian. With him, Canadians feel a bond. You could see it in the affection expressed toward him in those final days, and in the ease of conversation he had with the Canadian people. Canadians had watched him grow up. He is the first superstar to be recorded in the making.

We could see for ourselves the mythic normalcy of his childhood. His size, strength, and skating stride all could have been us. He had no advantages—family money, influential friends—that made his experience so different from our own as to set him apart.

Even his hard work, his passion on the rink, looked to us like hard play, like the normal, natural passion we feel for this game.

He is the champion we all could have been. Hardworking, hard playing, skilled, knowing what he is and what he isn’t, what he can and cannot do, respectful, and largely content, he is the face that Canadians would most like to present to the world.

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**You take it from here ...**

**Responding**

1. **Recognize Accomplishments** According to the author, what were Gretzky’s main accomplishments? What were the keys to his greatness in hockey? Discuss with others in a small group.