

*In the world of
professional sports,
you don't necessarily
have to be a hero
to be a star.*

Man,

You're a Great Player!

Occasionally I run into sports figures at cocktail parties, on the street, or on their way to the bank.

"Nice game the other night," I said to an old hockey-player pal.

"Think so?" he replied.

"You've come a long way since I knew you as a junior."

"How's that?"

"Well, you high-stick better for one thing—and I think the way you clutch sweaters is really superb. You may be the best in the league."

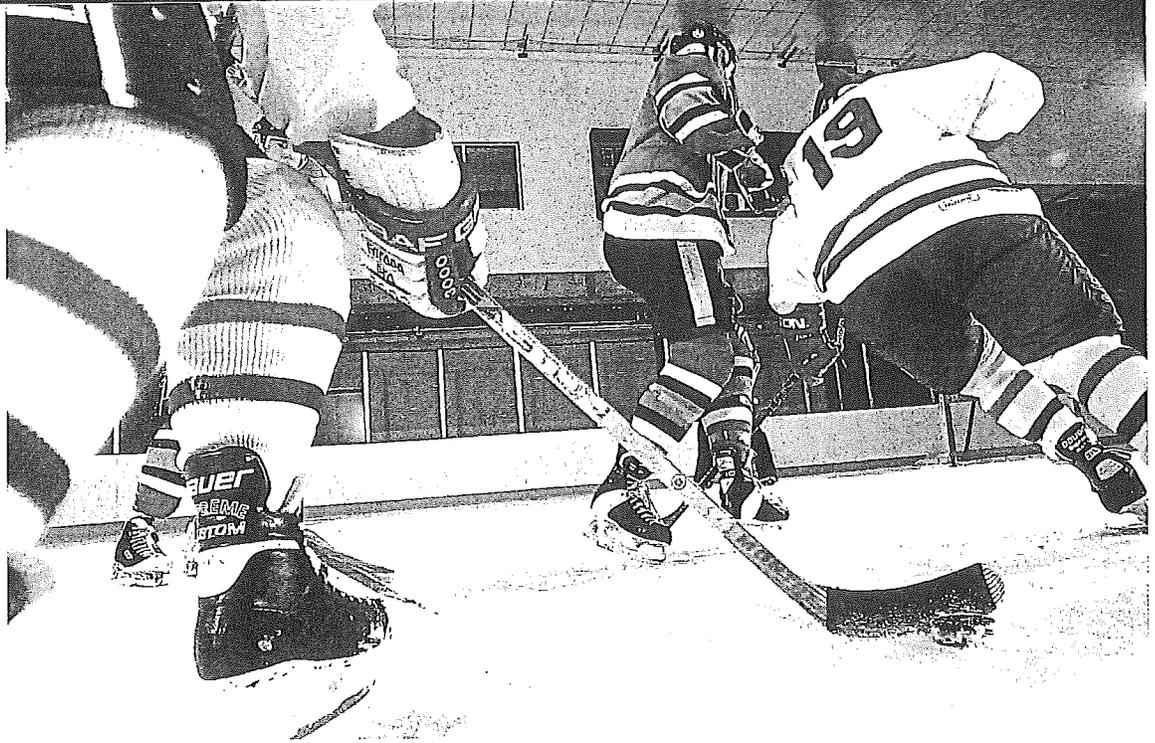
He blushed modestly. "For a time," I confessed, "I never thought you'd get the hang of it."

"It wasn't easy," he confided. "It took practice and encouragement. You know something like spearing doesn't come naturally. It has to be developed."

"I'm not inclined to flattery but, in my book, you've got it made. You're a dirty player."

"Stop kidding."

"No, no," I insisted. "I'm not trying to butter you up. I mean it. When you broke in, there were flashes of dirty play—but you weren't consistent."



That's the difference between a dirty player and merely a colourful one."

"I wish my father were alive to hear you say that," he said quietly. "He would have been proud."

"Well, it's true. There isn't a player in the league who knows as many obscene gestures."

"I admit I have been given a few increases in pay in recent years. Management seems to be treating me with new respect."

"You're selling tickets," I said. "You're a gate attraction now—not some bum who only can skate and shoot and the rest of it. Your profanity is beautiful."

"C'mon."

"No, I'm serious. I don't think anyone in the league can incite a riot the way you can."

"I've had a lot of help along the way. You can't make it alone," he stated generously.

"No one does," I said.

"Take that play where I skate up to the referee and stand nose-to-nose with my face turning red. It was my old junior coach who taught me that. He was the one who used to toss all the sticks on the ice and throw his hat into the stands and pound his fist on the boards."

"You were lucky to get that sort of training. A lot of players never learn the fundamentals."

"I think there are a few boys in the league who can spit better than me."

"Farther, perhaps, but not more accurately," I corrected.

"Well, thanks anyway. I've always considered it one of my weaknesses."

"That last brawl of yours was perfectly executed. Your sweater was torn off, you taunted the crowd, you smashed your stick across the goalposts. Really a picture Donnybrook."

"The papers gave me a break. The coverage was outstanding."

"Do you ever look back to the days when you couldn't cut a forehead or puff a lip or insult an official?"

"Everyone gets nostalgic," he confessed. "It's a good thing I got away from home by the time I was fifteen. I might never have been any more than a ham-and-egger, you know, a twenty-goal man who drifts through life unnoticed."

"What was the turning point?"

"I had heard prominent sports experts say that nice guys finish last, and that you have to beat them in the alley if you hope to beat them in the rink. But it didn't sink in."

"Nobody learns overnight."

"I wasted a few years learning to play my wing and to check without using the butt of the stick. But I noticed I was being passed by. I skated summers to keep in shape, exercised, kept curfew."

"Don't tell me. They said you were dull."

"Worse than that. They said I was clean. It's tough to live down that sort of reputation."

I nodded.

"Anyway, during a game in the sticks, I was skating off the ice—we had won five-one and I had scored three goals. The home crowd was pretty listless and there was some booing. Then it happened."

"What?"

"My big break. My mother was in the stands and she shouted to me. I turned to wave at her with my hockey stick and I accidentally caught the referee across the face. He bled a lot—took ten stitches later."

"Is that all?"

"Well, someone pushed me and I lost my balance and fell on the poor man. A real brawl started. Luckily, I got credit for the whole thing—went to jail overnight, got a suspension. And, talk about fate! A big league scout was in the arena. He offered me a contract right away."

"It's quite a success story," I said.

"You've got to get the breaks," he replied, humbly. ♦

