

4-16-1999

A Tribute to Wayne Gretsky

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Journalism Studies Commons](#), [Other History Commons](#), [Sports Management Commons](#), and the [Sports Studies Commons](#)
Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety>
University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Public History at STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in On Sport and Society by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "A Tribute to Wayne Gretsky" (1999). *On Sport and Society*. 273.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/273>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
April 16, 1999

Wayne Gretzky's retirement marks the end of the career of one of the greatest sports stars of the century and the greatest hockey player of all time. A list of his achievements is mind boggling: Nine Hart Trophies as regular season MVP all in the 1980s; Two Conn Smythe Trophies as MVP in the Stanley Cup Playoffs; Five times the winner of Lester Pearson Award given to the outstanding player as voted by the players; Four Time Lady Bing Trophy winner as most gentlemanly player. He is the owner of over sixty NHL career records including goals (894), assists (1962) and points (2856). He was the All-Star Game MVP four times including this season. The list goes on and on and on.

These numbers are impressive even to those who know little of hockey. But numbers only begin to tell the tale of this truly extraordinary athlete and person.

Gretzky's name will no doubt always be associated with the Edmonton Oilers who won four Stanley Cups while he was there. The year following his departure the Oilers won a fifth Stanley Cup and players and coaches alike paid tribute in the post-game interviews to Gretzky for having taught them how to win. Even in his absence he remained a presence in the Oilers' dynasty.

Moving to Los Angeles for the 1989-90 season Gretzky took that franchise and turned it around, helping to develop a large fan base for hockey in Southern California. The move to Los Angeles also raised the profile of hockey across the United States and ignited the hockey boom that has marked the decade of the Nineties. In 1993 Gretzky led the Kings to the Stanley Cup Finals where they came within a curve on the blade of a stick from winning.

After dominating the Eighties and early Nineties Gretzky moved on to St. Louis and then New York where with the Blues and the Rangers he continued to play at an amazingly high level. Until this injury plagued year he remained near the top of the NHL in offensive statistics. This year in his twenty-first year of professional hockey there were times when he looked like an ordinary player and for Wayne Gretzky that must have been a terrible feeling.

All along the way Gretzky entertained the hockey fans, gave them his best every time he stepped onto the ice, and continued to bring new fans to the game. This may have been his greatest

achievement, as was recognized in 1994 when he was given the Lester Patrick Award for outstanding service to hockey in the United States.

Every decade or so an athlete comes along who takes his or her sport to new and higher levels. The standards of excellence are raised. The artistry of play is elaborated. Things are done which have never been done before. Long-standing records are broken. The fans flock to see the new star become a hero. It's all remarkable and very exciting, worthy of great plaudits.

But only once in a lifetime does an athlete appear who totally redefines a sport. This is what Wayne Gretzky has done. This is why in fifty or a hundred years the name Gretzky will stand alone when the athletes of the second half of the 20th century are discussed. His name will carry the same instant and nearly universal recognition and reverence that today is given only to Babe Ruth.

Wayne Gretzky redefined the game of hockey during the decade of the Eighties, just as Ruth redefined baseball in the Twenties. And both men resurrected and reinvigorated games that were under a cloud. In the case of Ruth the Black Sox scandal had left a cloud over baseball. Ruth brought new excitement and interest with both the number and dimensions of his home runs. Talk of the Black Sox was soon forgotten, replaced by awe and wonder at the Ruthian Clout. The Babe revolutionized baseball, changing it from a game dominated by pitching and speed (Ruth himself having been a dominating pitcher), to a game dominated by the big hitters and the home run. Offense superseded defense with a vengeance.

In the case of Gretzky and hockey there was no cloud of scandal to blow away, but much of the sporting press and the public had grown weary of the goon hockey that seemed so prevalent in the Sixties and Seventies. There were as well, especially in the United States, complaints about the low scoring in hockey that adversely affected its appeal on television. Wayne Gretzky changed all of that, as hockey in the Eighties was transformed and its popularity soared.

Hockey and Gretzky are a perfect match. Hockey is a game of speed, skills and grace, a fact that should not be hidden behind the fighting and the muscle. Gretzky's athletic skills have been developed to levels of artistry, which are perfect for this game. His skating is marked by an economy of motion, with moves never before seen on the ice. His vision, especially his

peripheral vision, coupled with his hand-eye coordination, and a total understanding of the game, has taken his passing skills to levels never seen before. His artistry is unsurpassed, and he lifts the level of play of all those around him. He said that his success may have come from God-given talents, and then added that maybe it was his passion for the game that was the greatest of those gifts. As with so many of the greats, Gretzky would rise to the occasion, as he did when he tied and broke the scoring mark in a return trip to Edmonton, and as he seemed to be able to do whenever his team needed the crucial goal.

Over the years Gretzky's point totals soared and his salary soared with them. Those playing hockey quickly recognized that the greatest rewards were to be accrued by scoring, rather than by defense. The result was an increase in offensive production and a decline in defense. The game opened up. Skating, stick handling and passing became the focus; speed and finesse, the marks of this game. And the reason for these profound changes was the arrival to dominance of the Great One. In the last few years there has been a drift back to clutch and grab hockey, and it would be a fitting tribute to Wayne Gretzky if the league moved to reverse the trend.

Beyond all of the achievements, records, and awards, Wayne Gretzky remain still the seemingly simple and modest young man from Ontario, who plays hockey because he loves it, and who gives as much as he takes from the game. Despite all the money and his relocation to the media and star capitals of Los Angeles and New York, Wayne Gretzky has not been seduced by drugs and lawyers, the twin specters of modern sport.

For those who need to draw their heroes from sport, Wayne Gretzky remains a solid choice. For those who go to sport in search of artistry and excellence, no one offers more of both than Wayne Gretzky. He is truly an athlete for the ages.

Copyright 1999 by Richard C. Crepeau