Scotty Bowman: The Greatest Hockey Coach Ever

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Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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It might have been just one more of the endless stream of National Hockey League games that attract little attention before January. It was a 3-2 final with Federov scoring the winner with 28 seconds left on the clock. This one, however, was special as it marked a milestone for one of the greatest professional coaches of any sport in any time. Scotty Bowman, currently the coach of the Detroit Red Wings, was behind the bench in his 2,000th NHL game on Friday night as Detroit beat Vancouver.

The previous record was 1,607 set by Al Arbour of the New York Islanders, a record passed by Bowman five years ago. Only five other coaches have been behind the bench for more than 1,000 games. Bowman has coached in 1,156 wins, while Arbour is second with 781. These comparative numbers led one writer to compare Bowman's coaching achievements with the scoring achievements of Wayne Gretzky.

Bowman began his coaching career with the St. Louis Blues in the expansion division of the NHL in 1967-8 and promptly led his team to three straight Stanley Cup Finals. In 1971 he moved to Montreal where over eight seasons his teams won six divisional titles and five Stanley Cups. From there he went to Buffalo where a Cup failed to materialize over seven seasons.

Leaving the bench Bowman became a CBC hockey commentator in 1987 and was out of coaching for three seasons. In 1990 he went to Pittsburgh as director of player personnel, and the following year he took over for the ailing Bob Johnson as Penguins coach. In 1992 he directed the Penguins to a Stanley Cup, Bowman's sixth, and the following year he was hired by Detroit. In eight years with the Red Wings Bowman has added two more Stanley Cups to his collection, and in the process has become only the second coach in the history of the four major professional sports to win championships with three different franchises. His eight Stanley Cups ties him with his mentor the legendary Toe Blake for the most by an NHL coach.

In many cases records based on longevity are only a reflection of longevity. In some however they testify to quality over time. In that regard the names of Ripkin and Gehrig come to mind.

In the case of coaches, especially in this day and age of the pampered millionaire player, longevity has a special meaning. In
professional sport it is said that it is now the age of the player, and that coaches survive only as long as the players are happy with them. Bowman may be the exception that proves the rule, and he is clearly the exception. Few professional coaches have lasted anywhere near the time that Bowman has, and he has not lasted because he won popularity and personality contests with his players.

Bowman's longevity in part is a tribute to his understanding of the changing nature of the players as people, but also to his understanding of the talent and abilities of each of his teams. It is a tribute to his understanding of the game of hockey and the ability to install a system that produces winning teams.

Bowman knows that he must sell his players on his system and he says the player motivations have remained the same. "There are more places for players to play. There are less restrictions on their contractual obligations. . . but that is a bit of an advantage, because, down deep, players want to win." In other words, the more things change, the more they are the same.

Bowman's longevity in coaching can also be attributed to his ability to adjust his style. In Montreal he was known as a "psychotic house-mother" keeping the players and their egos in line. In Pittsburgh he adjusted to life with a superstar. In Detroit he took the Europeans and North American players and melded them into a well-balanced and extremely talented bunch. Bowman was one of the first to take advantage of the new European talent pool and make it work, no doubt to the dismay of both Don Cherry and his dog.

At age 67 and in good health Bowman now sees himself behind the bench for perhaps as many as five more seasons. Whenever he does step down he will leave behind a legacy surpassing anyone in hockey, and equaling or surpassing anyone in the history of professional sport. One might expect that he would step right from the coaching ranks into the nearest Hall of Fame, but then he has already done that, entering the NHL Hall of Fame in 1991.

Sport's Illustrated once called him the greatest professional coach of all time. There are few who would quarrel with that assessment be they fans, players or other coaches.

It is time that Bowman's name be spoken with the likes of Lombardi and Auerbach, Mack and McCarthy. He is in rarefied air in the coaching stratosphere.
On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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