

## Get over it

It's been a long, long wait, but the NHL playoffs are finally here. The last time I was this excited about the NHL post-season was ... the last time the NHL had a post-season. It's been two long years.

Last May, on a trip to New York and Radford, Virginia, I bought the Tampa Bay Lightning Stanley Cup DVD. I was roaming around the Newark airport, found a Virgin store, and gave the lady my last dollar bills for it.

It's only a DVD, with highlights and interviews, but even that is quite a ride. And yes, I was a little misty-eyed by the end of it. But like a great playoff series, or season, it left me wanting for more.

And then I had to wait another year to get to the real thing.

I'm a playoff hockey junkie. There's nothing I won't read or study during the playoffs — regardless of the league. The Finnish and Swedish teams are already playing the finals, and I am consumed by everything that's been written and said during the games.

I can't even imagine what it's like to be a player and be in the middle of it all. For months, if things go your way. For two months, you'll have to be ready to give everything you've got, never give up, knowing that every lost faceoff or every missed pass or shot can come back to haunt you.

Every single playoff series creates its own heroes and villains, and legends and rivalries are born. Bonds are made.

And then, two months later, the group of slick young men that entered the postseason optimistic and energetic has turned into a platoon of battle-tested and wounded men with long beards who push themselves a little further, shift after shift, game after game, night after night, by sheer willpower.

For the Stanley Cup.

Everybody says that the Stanley Cup is the ultimate championship for a hockey player, and as the Euro writer that I am, I've wondered what makes the Finns and the Swedes think so, too. Is it something they just say because they know that it's the right answer, or do they truly feel it, deep down in their hearts?

And obviously, that just goes to show that I have never laced 'em up for a Game 7.

I have, however, seen the DVD.

## **Shanahan The Man**

As you've probably already seen, Rangers forward Brendan Shanahan was named the inaugural winner of the Mark Messier Leadership Award this week.

Brendan Shanahan truly is a leader. He stands out from the crowd. He's different. He's smart, he's a great athlete, he's rich, he's famous, he's got it all. When he gives interviews, he actually answers the questions he's asked. He looks the interviewer in the eye and delivers his thoughts in a careful manner. He's tall, he's dark and, yes, he's handsome.

He's got that ruggedly handsome look from the 1950s Hollywood.

Maybe when they're done with George Clooney after *Oceans 13*, they can throw in Shanahan in number 14. Nobody would miss Clooney.

»A lot of players here go above and beyond in the community, and I do think it's very important,« Shanahan said when he received the award. »I think about it every day when I'm walking my kids to school, just being a good citizen and being a good person in the community.«

Not your average hockey quote.

In 2001, Shanahan helped Detroit sign Brett Hull by giving money back and later agreed to a smaller contract to fit under the salary cap.

Not your average guy.

With his Gretzky-styled small shoulder pads, and a droopy skating posture, he sometimes looks like Goofy on ice. And no, I wouldn't say that to his face. After all, this is the only active NHL player with more than 500 career goals and more than 2,000 penalty minutes.

As we all remember, Shanahan invited — and paid their way — the who's who of the NHL to Toronto in December 2004 for a two-day summit about the game, trying to figure out how the game could be improved. Maybe he got tired of sitting at home while waiting for the lockout to end, but he probably just wanted to get involved. Carry his weight.

In fact, a month after the summit Shanahan was in Sweden

with the »World Stars« team of locked out NHLers, so I got to ask him about it. He looked me in the eye, and he delivered a carefully thought out answer about how the American presidential election had been an inspiration for the initiative. Or, even more, he was impressed by the volunteers in the John Kerry campaign he supported.

»I was really impressed by the way ordinary people got involved and handed out flyers and campaigned for their candidate, and I felt that I wanted to get involved,« he said.

And then he hit the shower.

The fact that Shanahan stood his ground and drove the current officiating development even though he wasn't the ultimate »skilled player« is a testament to his leadership qualities. He is a true class act.

It also turned out that Shanahan's vision was correct. Hockey did become more fun to watch, and to play.

Last May, Shanahan took on the role of paving the way for the next generation of Canadian players as he captained Team Canada in the World Championship in Latvia, Riga. He was the only one on the roster that was born in the 1960s, and five years older than the second-oldest player on the team, Glen Metropolit from the Swiss league.

Shanahan was there to lead the team, and to pass on the torch to Sidney Crosby and others.

»I am sure they learned how much all the other countries want to beat Canada. A part of it is respect, and a part of it is that there is a swagger to Hockey Canada, and they're annoyed that even in losing we carry the swagger. For Canada, it's all or nothing,« Shanahan said.

»It was fun coming to the rink every day with these guys. For me it was a great honor to be a part of it. The heart on this team was so great and I am really honored that I got the chance to meet these guys at this point in my career, and get to know them before I am buying tickets to watch them.«

Sure. But for now, we'll gladly stand in line to buy tickets to see Brendan Shanahan.

Shanahan. Sha-na-han. Man, even the name's cool.

## **We come from Europe, we come in peace**

So, half of the family was away, and of the other half, one of us was fast asleep. Here I was, sitting in the dark in the kitchen, my laptop in front of me, the tv on, showing a »documentary« on Bryan Adams, the Canadian rocker.

I've been a Bryan Adams fan since 1985 when Terry, a Canadian exchange student who lived with us for eight months, left the tape of Reckless to me when he took off on a European vacation. And while Terry, who, by the way, was from Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan — Eddie Shore's birthplace — was away, I also borrowed his Oilers sweater. That he didn't know. But I never touched his Cooperalls, I swear.

I probably might have, but it was June. Even the Stanley Cup Final was over. The Oilers had won the Cup, Wayne Gretzky had shattered the playoff points record with 47 points in 18 games, and Jari Kurri tied the record for goals [19] in a playoff season. Not that I had seen any of the games anywhere. I was mowing lawns and listening to »Run to You.«

The Oilers had five European players on their roster, but Raimo Summanen didn't see any action in the playoffs. The Flyers, who lost the Final, had three.

Twenty-one years later, I am sitting in Sweden, in the dark, waiting for the radio broadcasts to begin. Live from New York, its NHL action, it's the Florida Panthers vs. the New York Rangers at Madison Square Garden. It's 2 a.m.

I love radio. When I was a kid I would write pages and pages of radio play-by-play in my little book. The best hockey broadcaster in the 1970s and 1980s was a radio guy, Raimo »Höyry« Häyrynen [whose nickname means »steam« in Finnish], so even when we watched hockey on tv, we'd turn down the sound and listen to »Höyry's« play-by-play.

Well, this isn't 1985 any more. I may still wear an Oilers sweater if I feel like it [not Terry's, though], and I do have all of Bryan Adams' albums, but so much has changed. The radio is on the Web, I can choose any game, and by whichever team's broadcast team, not to mention that soon there will be streaming video of NHL games.

But what struck me the most were the names in the play-by-play's: »Neelander,« »Yagr,« »Lundkvist,« and »Hossa.«

I just checked the leading scorers. In the Top Ten, there are seven European players, two Canadians and one American. In the Top 20, there are 11 Europeans. Granted, it's early in the season, and only four points separate Marian Hossa from Brian Rolston, number 16 on the list.

But still. It may be tough to be an Englishman in New York, but for all the other Euro-players, Manhattan's pretty good these days. As is the whole league.

And now, just as there are more European captains than ever before, just as the European players have become accepted, and household names even, the International Ice Hockey Federation wants to pull the brakes. The IIHF released a study this week about the career paths of the European players in North America. In the study, they draw the conclusion that many European players would be better off by waiting a little longer before leaving for the North American rinks, and that »too many Europeans who are not of NHL caliber are signed by NHL clubs.«

[That's European. In American, that means, »Do you really have to sign everybody? We've got nothing left!«]

»The findings of the study support our concern that too many players who are not NHL-ready leave the European leagues and never reach their potential,« says IIHF President René Fasel on their Web site. »This is detrimental both to the NHL and to the top European leagues. It is now the duty of the global hockey community to address this issue for the benefit of all leagues as well as international hockey.«

That, too, is code. That's the European, polite way of saying: »Show me the money.«

And while more and more hockey players are leaving Europe for North America, it's easy to forget that Europe's not such a bad place to live. Even Bryan Adams lives in London these days.