HERB BROOKS

THE INSIDE STORY OF A HOCKEY MASTERMIND

BY JOHN GILBERT

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This one's for Herbie, and for a friendship I'll always cherish. He did it his way, and he did it well. Nobody can ever replace his dedication, honesty, and mystique, and I hope this helps keep him alive and forever young in our hearts and minds.

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INTRODUCTION

There are a lot of reasons I had to write this book. Mainly, though, I owe it to Herbie.

Watching, studying, and writing about hockey have been, and continue to be, an exciting and gratifying career. Trying to stay close to professional, college, and high school teams has been both challenging and rewarding, whether in the formative years of the 1960s, or in the highly sophisticated twenty-first century. Without question, the game will never be the same as it was in the late 1960s and through the 1970s. Among other teams I've covered, the University of Minnesota hockey program has been near and dear to my heart since I was a journalism student at "the U" in the 1960s and John Mariucci was the coach. When I started at the *Minneapolis Tribune* in 1967, I covered the Gophers and Minnesota's fabulous high school hockey, as both skyrocketed to prominence through the 1970s. It was no coincidence that both Minnesota high school hockey and the University of Minnesota hockey blossomed in parallel. The University of Minnesota teams comprised homegrown players throughout that era, arguably the most important and exciting two decades in the sport's history in Minnesota.

Having written about all the top high school players and teams, it was easy to be close to the Gophers, who were like a select team of the best prospects the high schools could produce. There was no Junior "A" United States Hockey League in the United States at the time, and no USA Hockey development program. Minnesota high school players were devoted to their communities, and equally devoted to go to "the U," even as walk-ons, for the chance to take on the constant horde of skilled Canadian players imported by other prominent American colleges. True, there also were top players from small pockets in New England and Michigan, and for a while an all–New England Boston College team joined Minnesota in comprising 100 percent U.S. players. But a lack of national championships eventually drove BC to add a few Canadian imports. No other college could have even imagined being made up of 100 percent home-state players, a feat the Gophers pulled off for most of three decades.

Herb Brooks was still playing when I first got to know him, and the first time I ever saw him coach, he was a young assistant to Glen Sonmor at Minnesota. It was definitely a career highlight of my thirty years at the *Tribune* (and later the *Star Tribune*) to cover those Gopher teams for the seven years Brooks coached them, from 1972 through 1979. It meant apportioning my time, because I was also covering the

National Hockey League's Minnesota North Stars, the World Hockey Association's colorful Minnesota Fighting Saints, regional small colleges, the national and Olympic programs, and the high schools. It was pure pleasure to try to capture and portray the color and passion of Gopher and high school games, because in those days, none of the players dreamed of playing beyond high school or college. And because there was little thought of careers with huge professional contracts, they played the game they loved with 100 percent intensity, for only their pride and their teammates. I treated college and high school games with the same passion as the Stanley Cup Finals, because they deserved it.

When Mariucci died, it was a stunning blow to all of us who knew and loved him. I was credited with being first to refer to Mariucci as the "Godfather of Minnesota Hockey," although that hit a nerve with Louie Nanne, who played for Maroosh at Minnesota and apparently had referred to John as his "Godfather," a nod to their common Italian heritage. That was before my time, but regardless, my christening of John as the whole state's godfather was because his impact on hockey went beyond nationality—he was most accurately the "Godfather of U.S. Hockey." Mariucci was never against Canadian players coming to U.S. colleges. In fact, he recruited Canadians such as Nanne and Murray Williamson, both of whom became All-Americans at Minnesota, and others, "Just to show I don't discriminate," he would grin. But he did fight to get the National Collegiate Athletic Association to restrict "over-age" Canadian recruits, who would play high-test Canadian major junior hockey through age twenty, then, if they didn't get an NHL offer, come to the States for a college scholarship. Mariucci saw that as exploiting U.S. hockey rather than helping it.

While fighting that fight, Mariucci cultivated the fertile but lightly seeded Minnesota youth and high school hockey fields, nurturing and finally generating a genuine movement. It was the same sort of craze that had afflicted his native Eveleth and first spread throughout Northern Minnesota, eventually reaching the Twin Cities and its fast-growing suburbs. That was about when I came onto the scene, in the mid-1960s, just in time to chronicle the rise of the Gophers and the upsurge in high school hockey. There were a lot of big-time sportswriters who knew every facet of the NHL—and there still are. Fewer in the media pay attention to college hockey, and fewer still to the high schools. My determination, and pleasure, was to try to encompass all of them and watch as that unique Minnesota perspective ultimately became intertwined.

The enthusiastic Glen Sonmor had been Mariucci's assistant and protégé, and he appreciated Mariucci's influence so much that when he succeeded Mariucci in

1966, he took Maroosh's dream and ran with it. A native of Hamilton, Ontario, Sonmor's colorful attitude spread to his teams, and the Gophers captured the interest of statewide hockey fans. Sonmor lifted the Gophers to a Western Collegiate Hockey Association title and an NCAA tournament championship game.

Then Herbie took over in 1972 and lifted the Minnesota program to unprecedented heights. That was shortly after the University of Minnesota-Duluth had gone Division I, and long before St. Cloud State, Mankato State, or Bemidji State even entertained such thoughts. To Mariucci's dismay, UMD chose to go mostly with Canadian imports, following the lead of other WCHA teams, and if it left the Gophers free to pick the best Minnesota high schoolers, not many thought Minnesotans were good enough on their own. Turns out they were, and it became a tradition that Mariucci had started, Sonmor expanded, and Brooks perfected.

From the time Brooks took the helm, I normally saw him, or at least talked to him, nearly every day. We also stayed in contact through the off-seasons. We exchanged tidbits of information from around the hockey world, talked about the numerous cars I reviewed for an automotive column I also wrote, and discussed other topics. It became common for Herbie to stop by my home in suburban Shoreview, or for me to drive to his place a few miles north to show him a particularly interesting car I was road-testing. We established a mutual respect that was everlasting.

Herbie demanded a high work ethic from himself and his players, and he appreciated that I worked beyond reasonable effort to study hockey and convey hockey news that went beyond the superficial. It didn't take long to realize he was something special as a coach who would try anything to extract the best from his players and teams. Sometimes he would invent psychological ploys, much the way Neal Broten might invent a move to get around a defender. Herbie had special confidantes, such as strength and conditioning coach Jack Blatherwick, but he seemed to appreciate an outside voice. He confided to me his innermost theories and ideas about the game, and I welcomed every opportunity to listen to his ideas. Occasionally, I challenged him with ideological questions based on observations I had made from watching NHL teams, or teams from the Soviet Union or Sweden. Even if my questions were simple, they were honest and they became more valid as I grew comfortable filtering such information through Herbie's uniquely creative mind. Herbie later told me those brainstorming sessions served as a source of checks and balances for him, helped reinforce some of his ideas, and pushed him to try his more inventive concepts. While putting his own teams together, he followed existing traditional guidelines at first, but remained alert for new ingredients for his teams' preparations.

When it came to studying the game, Herbie was a grad student moving swiftly toward becoming a professor, and I was an eager freshman, impatient to learn and discuss new hockey techniques wherever I could find them. It was always enjoyable to talk hockey with characters among the elite NHL coaches of that time, such as Fred Shero, Scotty Bowman, and Don Cherry, but while they were among the best in coaching NHL hockey, they had no knowledge of or experience with European variations of the game. Herbie, meanwhile, had played against and learned from the Europeans, and we frequently discussed their puck-control style. He ultimately started to practice such things as circling and regrouping with his Gopher teams, using each step to reinforce his cautious belief that there was a future for a "hybrid style." This was his term for his own idea of combining the creativity of the European collective style with the rock-solid Canadian defensive discipline, reinforced with the eager willingness to overachieve that was the greatly underrated asset of U.S. players, particularly Minnesota-bred high school players. That last factor was possibly the most important ingredient, so why wouldn't Brooks recruit only Minnesota kids, then push them to cover the skill and discipline ends?

One day in the spring of 1979, as Herbie was completing his third NCAA championship season with his most talented University of Minnesota team, I realized something was a little different when he called and asked me to meet him for lunch at Stub and Herb's, specifying a mid-afternoon time to ensure the place would be virtually empty. He was not the "Herb" in Stub and Herb's, but it was his favorite campus-area "saloon," as he called it—a corner restaurant and beer joint near the university campus, on Washington Avenue. He knew I didn't drink, but having a beer was not his objective. The place was only two blocks from Williams Arena, the long, huge barn of a building that housed the Gopher basketball team at one end and, at the time, the hockey team at the other.

"See you there," I said.

We often got together spontaneously for a quick lunch, but I couldn't help thinking how unusual it was for us to meet formally for lunch by appointment. When I arrived, Herb was sitting at a table just around the corner to the left of the entrance of the otherwise empty place. We ordered a couple of sandwiches, then Herb opened his briefcase and pulled out a large legal pad.

"This," he said, "is my organizational plan for the Olympic team."

Brooks laid his legal pad on the table. Always a stickler for details, he had the page filled with all sorts of notes surrounding a large circle he had drawn in the middle. Brooks had coached the U.S. National Team in the 1979 World Championships, but

they didn't do well, finishing seventh as a thrown-together team of available players from the lowest echelon of the pros. It was, though, an invaluable learning experience for Brooks, who among other things learned he could go to battle with a young Boston University goaltender named Jim Craig.

Brooks explained that the circular chart was his flow chart, covering every imaginable position on the staff he would assemble for the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team. Spokes ran out from the center to names on the outer edges of the circle. He explained all the names he had put together, including Jack Blatherwick, his favorite physiological wizard, who studied and invented improved training techniques in the same manner Brooks concocted new breakout patterns and forechecks. Another spoke in the organizational wheel was Gary Smith, his Gopher trainer and a skilled medical man with a properly sarcastic sense of humor. Another was the colorful Doc Nagobads, a Latvian by birth who had served as team doctor for many U.S. teams, and who had become Herbie's long-time friend. Of course, Warren Strelow, Herbie's lifelong friend and neighbor in suburban Mahtomedi, would be asked along as goalie coach. Every detail was covered, from assistant coaches to specialists to equipment men.

I was both flattered and fascinated that he was showing me his secret plan, as he went around the circle, describing the roles he foresaw for each spoke. Being impressed with Herbie was not new to me, but being impressed to the point of being *silent* was definitely different. One of the reasons Herbie and I had developed an ever-closer bond was that we always knew we could count on each other for honest feedback. It might be supportive; it might be critical. It might stir up a huge argument between us, or it might lead to me heckling him about a game plan gone awry, or him heckling me for something in a story that might have been countered by a subsequent performance. Whatever, it invariably concluded with both of us laughing or imagining future scenarios that could be projected from there.

This time, I could only watch, until Herbie got around to the final spoke in his plan. "And this," he said, pointing toward the bottom of the page, "is you."

"What?" I asked.

"I want you to take a year's leave of absence from the *Tribune* and be the media contact guy for the Olympic team," Brooks said.

I was overwhelmed. I had never considered working in public relations—the "dark side" of journalism, if you're a reporter. I had spent a dozen years at the *Tribune*, where I was the only person with even the most remote interest in hockey on the sports staff of the largest publication, in the heart of the most intense hockey country in the United States. The sports editor who hired me, Larry Batson, was a brilliant

man, and domineering. He once told me, "I don't know much about hockey, but I know just enough to know that I don't like it." There was no appropriate response to that, which was true of a lot of comments Batson tossed out. His directness was appreciated more in retrospect, when compared to his string of successors.

Batson noticed that I was eager to cover hockey at every level, so he decided to take advantage of my energy. I was already covering college and high school hockey, and also doing backup work on the North Stars. When the World Hockey Association started, I added the Minnesota Fighting Saints to my domain. Batson decided the only way to contain me was to make me control myself. He made me the paper's Hockey Department, as he called it, commanding me to cover the entire hockey spectrum but giving me the freedom to choose whichever game I decided would be biggest or make the most compelling story. When there were conflicts, other staff writers covered games I submitted as worthwhile. I frequently chose Gopher games over pro games when they were on the same weekend nights, because I could cover the pros during the rest of the week. I felt guilty when more veteran reporters were ordered to cover games I suggested, but I was totally consumed with the opportunity to take on the greatest possible assignment. I could expand my passion for the game at all levels and still steal enough time to coach the in-house bantam hockey team my older son, Jack, played on.

Every male sports journalist in the United States grows up with sufficient knowledge of baseball, football, and basketball to write competently about them. But when it comes to hockey, most reporters seem to write superficially about it, rather than risk exposing their lack of knowledge. I've always loved and played baseball, and as a kid I played quite a bit of basketball and enjoyed watching football. I read every word on the sports page and soon became aware that game reports from baseball, football, and basketball in the morning newspaper told me all I needed to know about those games. But I never read any stories that came close to adequately telling me what had happened in any hockey game. The score, who scored how many goals, and which goalie made a lot of saves, with a few quotes sprinkled in—usually only from the home team—was the superficial, formulaic norm. So, when I decided I wanted to become a sportswriter, I set out to learn all I could about hockey so that I could write about it with some degree of competence if the occasion ever arose.

There are millions of casual baseball, football, and basketball fans, but there are no casual hockey fans—you are either intensely into it, or you avoid it. Hockey is complex enough to repel those who aren't interested in its intricacies. To begin with, the ability to skate rivals any skill required of baseball, football, or basketball players. Remember when basketball followers insisted that Michael Jordan was the greatest

athlete ever? Then he proved he wasn't by his inability to hit minor league curveballs. Hitting a baseball with a bat takes great skill, but try using a stick that has a 60-degree bend right where it seems it should be straight, to whack at a hard rubber object shaped like a tuna can, on a surface that is completely unnatural for both you and the object. Throw in the facts that your opponents are trying to knock you down and your teammates often move inconsistently with what the puck carrier seems to have in mind, and, out of hand, hockey is set apart from every other sport in difficulty, always spontaneous and improvisational, and never simple.

As hockey fans, we can be patient with those who don't understand hockey, or don't appreciate the athletic achievement of stickhandling around a defender to make a perfectly timed pass to a speeding teammate. But when it comes to writing about it, sportswriters should first be required to put on skates and try to play in any pickup game, just once, to appreciate its complexities.

Until the 1980 Winter Olympics loomed on the horizon, the *Minneapolis Tribune* had never shown more than passing interest in covering the Olympics. But the 1980 Games would be different. First, they would be held at Lake Placid. Second, along with the usual handful of Minnesota and Wisconsin skiers, skaters, and biathletes, the U.S. hockey team would be coached by St. Paul native Herb Brooks, who had just coached the University of Minnesota for seven years, winning its first three NCAA titles in the last six of those years. He would take a team of college and ex-college players of his own selection, including several Minnesotans, to fight the good fight against the evil hockey empire of the Soviet Union, the proud and often arrogant forces from Canada (who still consider hockey to be their own game), and the rising talents from Sweden, Finland, Czechoslovakia, West Germany, and the rest of the world. It was a David-and-Goliath thing, but these would be our own Davids against the rest of the world's Goliaths. The *Tribune* would send three reporters to cover the Games: Jon Roe to report on the main events in various sports, Joe Soucheray to do his trademark light and breezy early-career columns on whatever whims that moved him, and me specifically to cover the hockey team and the tournament.

Nobody, of course, could imagine that the 1980 Winter Olympics would end up with Brooks and his Team USA gang pulling off the Miracle on Ice. Everyone assumed that there would be a nice flow of homespun local-focus stories. Nobody guessed that what awaited them was an event that would galvanize the entire country and sporting world, and would be the springboard that made every reporter desperately eager to cover the next Olympics, certain that glory would be theirs as they chronicled the next gold medal. Overlooked in the rush was that a lot of those journalists started out

at the 1980 Winter Games like a lot of fans in their indifference to the hockey team's hopeless cause. The horde of U.S. journalists could have been covering the hockey games, but chose instead to write about Eric Heiden's speed-skating glory, the futility of falling ski jumpers, and the faltering U.S. fortunes in various other events. Hockey wasn't big enough to them, and the fans reflected the media, as the first few U.S. hockey games didn't draw more than half-capacity crowds to the 8,000-seat arena or its press box.

For most journalists, covering the 1980 Winter Olympics meant grumbling about long days, late nights, deadlines, enormous crowds, impossible travel, and potential hypothermia. But to me, covering hockey at the Winter Olympics was an endless feast of the best things about the game. Herbie and the Minnesota-based U.S. team would be the primary focus, but I was excited about opportunities to watch the magically gifted Soviet Union and to marvel at the skill and creativity of the Swedes, Finns, and Czechs. It would be a labor of love. Journalists at such events have a tradition of complaining after three days about being overworked. Nine months beforehand, I knew it would be two weeks that would pass too fast. If there had been more space in the paper, I could have filled it all, every day, feeding off an adrenaline high that outlasted the Games.

With all of that building anticipation, here I was, sitting with Herb Brooks at Stub and Herb's while he offered me the chance of a lifetime—to be on the inside during the selection, formation, season-long world exhibition tour, and the Winter Olympics themselves, writing releases and promoting story ideas on a diverse group of players.

"So," Brooks said, "what do you say?"

"It's a great opportunity, Herbie," I said. "But I can't do it."

"What?" he asked, startled. This, as it turned out, would be the first of only a very few things in Brooks' carefully crafted blueprint that didn't go exactly as he had planned. I read the surprise on his face. Herb and I had grown to be close friends and had a high-test professional relationship. Cynics accused me of being Brooks' biggest booster, but I also was his biggest critic. I might have praised him more than others, but only because I covered his teams more extensively. I also zinged him, privately and in print, whenever I thought it was necessary.

"I'd love to be the PR man for your Olympic team," I told Brooks. "But I'd rather write about your team for the *Tribune*, and they've already told me I can go and cover the Olympics. Besides, if you screw up, who'll write about it, if I don't?"

"You bastard," he said, laughing. But he understood.

I knew I was forfeiting the chance to have the inside scoop on the U.S. team, but as it turned out, I was able to get the most comprehensive news on the team during the Games. Brooks exercised his stubbornness on the world stage, and his way of chastising the media was to announce that he would not attend his team's postgame press conferences. After making this announcement and storming out of the auditorium, he told me he would meet me privately in a small office near the dressing rooms back at the arena. Those sessions gave him a chance to vent and provided me with the incredible coup of exclusive interviews after every game.

After it was all over and the gold medal was in hand, back at the *Minneapolis Tribune*, the managing editor called me into his office and told me that Bantam Books had approached the paper. It had examined all the newspapers covering the hockey games and decided that the *Tribune*'s coverage was the most comprehensive. It wanted to reprint everything I had written in a paperback book, titled *Miracle on Ice*, which it could publish immediately. I was overwhelmed.

"That's great," I said.

"But we're not going to do it," he said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"We decided that if it's that good an idea, we'll do it ourselves."

That, too, would be fine with me. But somehow, the idea got pushed to the back burner, then taken completely off the stove—then forgotten. It never happened. Brooks told me about some fellows who were writing a book about the whole thing. "You're the only one who should write the book," he said. "You're the only reporter who was with this team from the time it was picked and throughout the whole season, and the only one who knows what really went on with this team."

I told him I would write the book, but I was going to wait. Books came out, movies and videos, too. Who can ever forget the first *Miracle on Ice* movie, where a rumpled Karl Malden pursed his lips and tried to convince us he was accurately depicting the smooth, slick Brooks? "Patti would rather have had Robert Redford play me, and then she would have played herself," Brooks said.

Several times, Brooks mentioned that he was waiting for me to write the book, in between coaching stops in Switzerland, New York, New Jersey, Minnesota, and then back to St. Cloud State University in Minnesota, when he took that program from Division III to Division I. He also coached the France team in the 1998 Olympics in Nagano, Japan, and returned to the NHL on an interim basis to coach the Pittsburgh Penguins for Craig Patrick, his old Olympic assistant, for part of a year. He agreed to coach the NHL pros representing the United States at the 2002 Winter Olympics in

Salt Lake City, where Canada played only one really good game in the tournament, but pulled the rug from under the United States in the gold-medal game to ruin Brooks' flawlessly choreographed undefeated masterpiece.

In the summer of 2003, I told Herb that, finally, I was going to write the book. I told him I had waited until he was through with coaching, so I could write a book that included the best stories and reminiscences from throughout his amazing coaching career. Certainly, the 1980 Olympic victory would be a big part of it, using the assembled facts, my published accounts, and tidbits pulled out of my yellowing notes, rather than impromptu recall. But Herbie was far more than a passionate coach who dropped out of the clouds for one magical Olympic year. After the 2002 Olympics, I had hopes he'd return to the NHL or to some college to work his unique coaching magic. But he insisted he wouldn't be doing any more coaching. It was time, I figured, to put it all together.

Tragically, Brooks was killed a couple of months later. On August 11, 2003, he apparently fell asleep at the wheel of his Toyota van, while driving home from a golf outing for a hockey fundraiser on the Iron Range. He died when the vehicle flipped over going off the freeway.

The news was crushing to our whole family. My wife, Joan, had treated Herb's aching back and shoulder with physical therapy, and he used to say she was the only person who could relieve his pain enough so that he could go golfing. My older son, Jack, was stick boy on Herb's first three Gopher teams, and years later Herb let my younger son, Jeff, into his Roseville hockey school a couple of years too young because Herb knew his feisty attitude would prevail. He knew all of us, we all knew him, and we all still feel the emptiness he left behind. I'm luckier than most, because every once in a while I can go back to my notes and relive so many of those treasured moments. That's why he was anxious for me to assemble all these notes into a book. He knew I could, and would, straighten out some of the discrepancies among the scattered reminiscences of him and his players.

My intention is not to write a biography, but rather to capture the best nuggets and stories that describe what made Herb Brooks the best hockey coach ever. One of the best goes back to when Brooks coached the New York Rangers. Many observers claim that he failed in that venture, even though he won a hundred games faster than any other coach in Ranger history. Most interesting, though, is that he turned a gang of mostly plodding, Canadian-stereotype, up-and-down players into a weaving, puck-controlling, quick-skating team that was a flat-out revolution in NHL hockey. It became a team that only a Wayne Gretzky could love for its creativity. The Rangers

were the only NHL team that could throw a legitimate scare into the mighty New York Islanders, the Stanley Cup power of that time. I saw Herbie's Rangers early, and I saw them after he got the whole team convinced his concept would work. Witnessing the change in style, I wrote that he had transformed a herd of plow horses into Kentucky Derby thoroughbreds.

One of the key reasons for his success with the Rangers was Mark Pavelich—one of the true heroes of the 1980 Olympic team, and one who has remained unsung in every post-Olympic story and film. Pavelich joined Brooks and became the Rangers' master playmaker, the rink rat who blended perfectly with the flamboyance of Ron Duguay and the primitive presence of Nick Fotiu. It was as though Pav executed what was going on in Herbie's imagination. When Brooks left, or was dismissed from the Rangers, it was because he didn't like the politics of former stars who still influenced the club's hierarchy. Ted Sator was hired as the new coach. Sator was the exact opposite of Brooks and demanded that his players forget about the regrouping, circling stuff and change back to an up-and-down, dump-and-chase, traditional Canadian style. That is not a knock against Sator, who later, ironically, coached in Finland. At the time, he was just one among many coaches and general managers who believed the traditional style was the only style. Indeed, it may always remain the lifeblood of Canadian and NHL hockey, even while players from more innovative European systems prove their superiority on NHL and world stages.

Pavelich abruptly quit playing shortly after Sator took over. He left a six-figure salary in Manhattan and came home to Minnesota, to fish and live in the woods on the North Shore of Lake Superior. It was hard for many to understand why a highly skilled player would quit before he even approached his peak NHL potential. But Pav was an idealist. He played the game he loved in a way he could love. In a private interview at his home, Pavelich told me he left because the style Sator imposed was simply not fun. Pav always gave his utmost to the game, and it was always immensely fun to him. When it stopped being fun, he came home, with no regrets.

After the interview, I wrote a story about the whole situation in the *Minneapolis Tribune* and included the line: "Asking Mark Pavelich to play dump-and-chase hockey is like asking Picasso to paint your fence."

Brooks hadn't seen the story, so I told him about it, and he got a laugh out of the analogy. "That's a great line," Brooks said. "It's so good, I'm going to steal it. I'm telling you right now, I'm stealing it."

I laughed along with him.

Years later, and several months after Herbie died, a good friend of mine, Jess Myers, arranged to write a feature on Herb Brooks for the 2004 NCAA hockey tournament

program. I knew Jess had never known Herbie or covered his teams, so I asked how he had gathered material for the feature. He said he had interviewed different people about Brooks, and that he got some good stuff from Herb's son, Danny.

"You'll love one story Danny told me about Herb," said Jess. "He said when Herb took over the Penguins for the second half of the [1999–2000] season, he said, 'Having a team with that much talent play the way they are is like having Picasso paint your fence.'"

Touché, Herbie.

Chapter 1

ONE OF A KIND

Herb Brooks was intelligent, intuitive, and stubborn—a powerful blend when it came to creating game plans and adjusting to game circumstances. The combination was never a problem when the intelligent and intuitive sides predominated, even though they defied conventional North American hockey thought.

Herbie was proud of his stubbornness. Always unwilling to compromise his principles, on many occasions he made stands that may have hindered his career advancement. This included his split from the New York Rangers and later from the New Jersey Devils, and his frequent battles with USA Hockey, particularly when it was known as the Amateur Hockey Association of the United States (AHAUS). He also ran into a few rough spots in his early years when his stubbornness prevailed over his intelligence and intuition, but he turned that part of his personality into a positive weapon as well. In fact, his stubborn determination was the catalyst for making the other two more cerebral qualities most effective.

Herb Brooks coached University of Minnesota hockey teams for seven seasons, from 1972 until 1979. His prime objective was to be loyal to the tradition he learned as a fan and player under John Mariucci. There couldn't have been a stronger foundation, and Brooks built upon it while raising the Gophers to the top competitive level in collegiate hockey. After only one year, his confidence bloomed and he raised the team's success, which brought even more confidence. Many coaches with good ideas never enjoy an upward spiral of success, but Herbie's beliefs led directly to the inexorable momentum of success and allowed him to live out the courage of his convictions.

The Gophers had always attracted a loyal following, although not as large as basketball in the 1960s, but the size of the crowds grew and grew until the Brooks teams started to win championships. Then the loyal fans outnumbered the 7,500 seats in the old Williams Arena, filling it to overflowing under the high, arched ceiling. The old Williams Arena is still in place, of course. A huge building resembling an aircraft hangar, it is still a fantastic location for the raised basketball floor surrounded by 15,000 seats and covering about two-thirds of the structure. At the west end, the remaining part of the structure is an oddly shaped facility where the hockey rink was once housed. The hockey end of Williams Arena was renamed Mariucci Arena in

1985. Later, when the university built a spectacular new hockey facility just across the street, the name Mariucci Arena went across the street, too. Brooks was correct in his assessment that "the new arena is beautiful, but it will never have the character of the old one." Character no, sightlines yes. The outdated hockey portion of the older facility was converted into a cozier venue for women's volleyball and basketball, and men's wrestling and gymnastics. But back in the final days with Herbie at the helm, crowds routinely topped 7,900, taxing the limits of the old barn, and the fire marshal.

In those days, Brooks had to conquer not only a league filled with powerful teams, but also a North American hockey mentality that is still a barrier in the twenty-first century. Hockey was Canada's game (and it still is, if you're Canadian). There was a time when Canada was the only country that played hockey at such a level, and because of that, the game established, and then nurtured, some deeply inbred traditions. Among them is the hard and fast rule to play "position" hockey. That means looking out from the goal, the left wing goes up and down the left boards, the right wing goes up and down the right boards, the center can wander some but pretty much stays between the wingers, and the defensemen stay back behind those three forwards. This positional style is not unlike soccer, where each position plays to support others; defenders advance the ball to midfielders, who, in turn, advance it to forwards. The Canadian game has always been played hard and passionately from Nova Scotia to Vancouver Island, and young teenagers leave home at sixteen for larger cities with better junior (under-twenty) developmental teams.

From 1942 to 1967, when the NHL had only six teams—in Montreal, Toronto, New York, Boston, Detroit, and Chicago—it was a tight clique of predominately Canadian players, Canadian coaches, and Canadian managers. If a U.S. player made a team, it was a novelty. In the 1930s and 1940s, among others there were John Mariucci and skilled goaltenders such as Frank Brimsek, Sam LoPresti, and Mike Karakas. All four came from tiny Eveleth, Minnesota, which is clearly the birthplace of U.S. hockey and is the rightful location of the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame. Later, in the 1960s, the only U.S. player in the entire NHL for several years was Tommy Williams from Duluth, Minnesota.

Despite the fact that American cities paid the bills, NHL teams were Canadian-run and didn't give American players much of a chance to infiltrate "Canada's sport." American players and coaches simply followed along, playing the Canadian style at the youth, high school, college, and semipro levels.

It wasn't until the Soviet Union, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, and Finland started playing the game at a serious level that some startling alterations to the traditional

style occurred. Soviet coach Anatoli Tarasov was the first to declare that the Soviet Union would develop its own style rather than copying the Canadians, because to copy Canada meant always to be second best. (Tarasov had some fascinating concepts, and any hockey fan who can find his book, *Road to Olympus*, will have a keepsake that is certain to make them rethink their theories of the game.) It was the Soviets who led the way in playing the game as a collective five-some, interchanging positions and crisscrossing wherever they chose, anywhere on the rink, rather than staying in predetermined lanes. The Soviets also broke new ground in physical training and the mental discipline of being tough enough to take a cheap shot and not throw down the gloves or retaliate in any way. Those traits were so foreign, so to speak, to North American hockey that NHL officials led the charge in ridiculing the Soviets, mistaking their unwillingness to fight as cowardice. To a lesser extent, the same was true of other European players, who were creative, brilliantly trained, and so totally disciplined that NHLers commonly referred to them as "Chicken Swedes."

About the same time when Europeans were developing their specific styles, Herb Brooks was finishing his playing career by skating on numerous U.S. National and Olympic teams. The story of how he was cut from the eventual gold-winning 1960 U.S. team is legendary, but he went on to play for the 1964 and 1968 Olympic teams and all the U.S. National Teams in that stretch. In those days, Canada generally sent the best of its many prolific senior teams, while the United States used mostly college players. The Europeans were not professionals, although they stretched the boundaries. Swedish players, for example, might hold day jobs, but they got jobs in cities where they also could play on teams in top amateur leagues. The Soviets focused on their Red Army team, although the Soviet Wings, representing the Soviet Air Force, and Spartak Moscow, also were significant powers in the Soviet Union's elite league. Players on those teams were, indeed, beneficiaries of the communist collective society. They might have served in the army or air force, but their only military duty was to their hockey team. They received financial support to play hockey, which made them pros to North Americans, even though they didn't command NHL-type salaries and still stood as amateurs to the International Olympic Committee.

Brooks, playing on those generally undermanned U.S. teams (they finished fifth with a 2-5 record in 1964, and sixth at 2-4-1 in 1968), soaked up the impressive but unconventional emerging styles and systems of the top European clubs. These bits of information resided, like the seeds of a prize-winning flowering plant, in the nether reaches of Herbie's fertile mind. He was smooth and slick as a player, but he admired all facets of the game. We can only guess when the germination process began, wherein

he began pondering what would happen if you linked the best attributes of the varying European styles with the hardcore Canadian tradition, but it was clearly before 1972.

That year, Team Canada—a collection of NHL All-Stars—played the Soviets in an eight-game Summit Series. NHL observers, players, coaches, general managers, and owners were convinced to the point of arrogance that the NHL superstars would annihilate the red-clad players with unpronounceable names. Herb and I agreed that the Soviets would give the NHL stars more than they could cope with, and possibly shock the hockey world. And they did, even though Team Canada won in a dramatic comeback in the final two games to take the series 4-3-1.

Brooks paid close attention. He was heading into his first season as head coach of the Gophers. The traditional, stratified Canadian approach was still evident throughout college hockey in the United States. It wasn't just that the wide-open European game was a variation in style, such as a single-wing or T formation in football. At that time, the odd play of the Europeans was considered simply wrong.

When the Soviet Union proved the Canada-dominated NHL style had serious shortcomings, it inspired Brooks and advanced his beliefs. Still, Brooks moved cautiously at the University of Minnesota, gradually evolving toward more daring and adventurous ideas in practices long before he would turn his later Gopher teams loose, somewhat in desperation, in particularly tough games near the end of his college tenure.

Many critics insist that the sport's ruination lies in over-coaching young players with confusing and complex systems. It once reached the point where the very word "system" took on evil connotations. In Brooks' mind, his system simplified the game for his players. He didn't teach elaborate crisscrosses to be executed at the top of the left faceoff circle, much like a post-pattern in football or a pick in basketball. Instead, he refined his ideas to feature tough and disciplined North American defensive play, while setting his players free to be their most creative on offense.

Always the mind-game specialist, Brooks reached the point of making deals with his players: "You play the way I want you to play when we don't have the puck, and you can do whatever you want when we do have the puck." If the player got casual and slipped up on defensive coverage, his freedom was restricted until he covered all responsibilities. If he stuck with Brooks' defensive rules, the player was free to go out and make something happen, trusting his own skills to get it done. Brooks wanted to see players succeed by using their imagination and skills, rather than by fitting into a restrictive system that might negate such improvisation.

Throughout Herb's coaching career, cynics were plentiful. Some who knew him well claim he was mainly a master motivator. That includes those who think the game

is too chaotic to be patterned by coaching, as well as those who worship at the altar of Canadian hockey and figure any success Brooks had was only because he motivated his players, even though they seemed to play "wrong."

Sometimes, even some of his own players seemed to rethink Brooks. Shortly after the 1980 Olympics, Steve Christoff, a quick and intuitive forward who had played three years for Brooks at Minnesota and on the 1980 team, confided that Brooks got a lot of credit for creative offensive ideas, "but really, he didn't coach us to do that much," Christoff said. "We were pretty much free to do whatever we wanted."

In 1973–74, Brooks' second year at Minnesota, the Gophers won their first NCAA title. Radio and television showed up to cover the team's games regularly, and newspapers grudgingly allotted more of their precious space for hockey stories and photos. Minnesota athletic director Paul Giel, who had to be talked into hiring Brooks in the first place by his old friend and football teammate Ken Yackel, marveled at Brooks' mercurial but unwavering dedication to success. As athletic director, Giel was a lot like Brooks was as a coach. He gave Brooks the necessary guidelines, then let him do his own thing. When Brooks pulled off a plan, perhaps challenging his boundaries, Giel would turn away, shaking his head and smiling, "Herbie, Herbie, Herbie . . ."

In the end, though, who can argue with Herbie's ability to set his team's goals idealistically—and sometimes unrealistically—high, and then drive his players to attain them? Who can say that he wasn't right when he stubbornly pushed to do things his way? Who can say that his powerful employers/adversaries weren't the ones who were wrong when their conservative traditions prevented them from appreciating his revolutionary ideas?

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