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SAVING FACE

THE ART AND HISTORY OF THE GOALIE MASK

Revised Edition



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Gerry Cheevers' stitches mask was simple and clever in its design, and remains the most recognizable mask in the history of hockey.

Chapter Three

PAINT JOBS AND METAL BARS

By 1970, there were goalie masks of all types, made by several different mask makers and even mask companies such as Jacques Plante's FibroSport. What these different masks had in common was their color, or rather their lack of it. Although a few of the older masks were still the dark, natural hue of the fiberglass they were made from, most masks were painted white... just white.

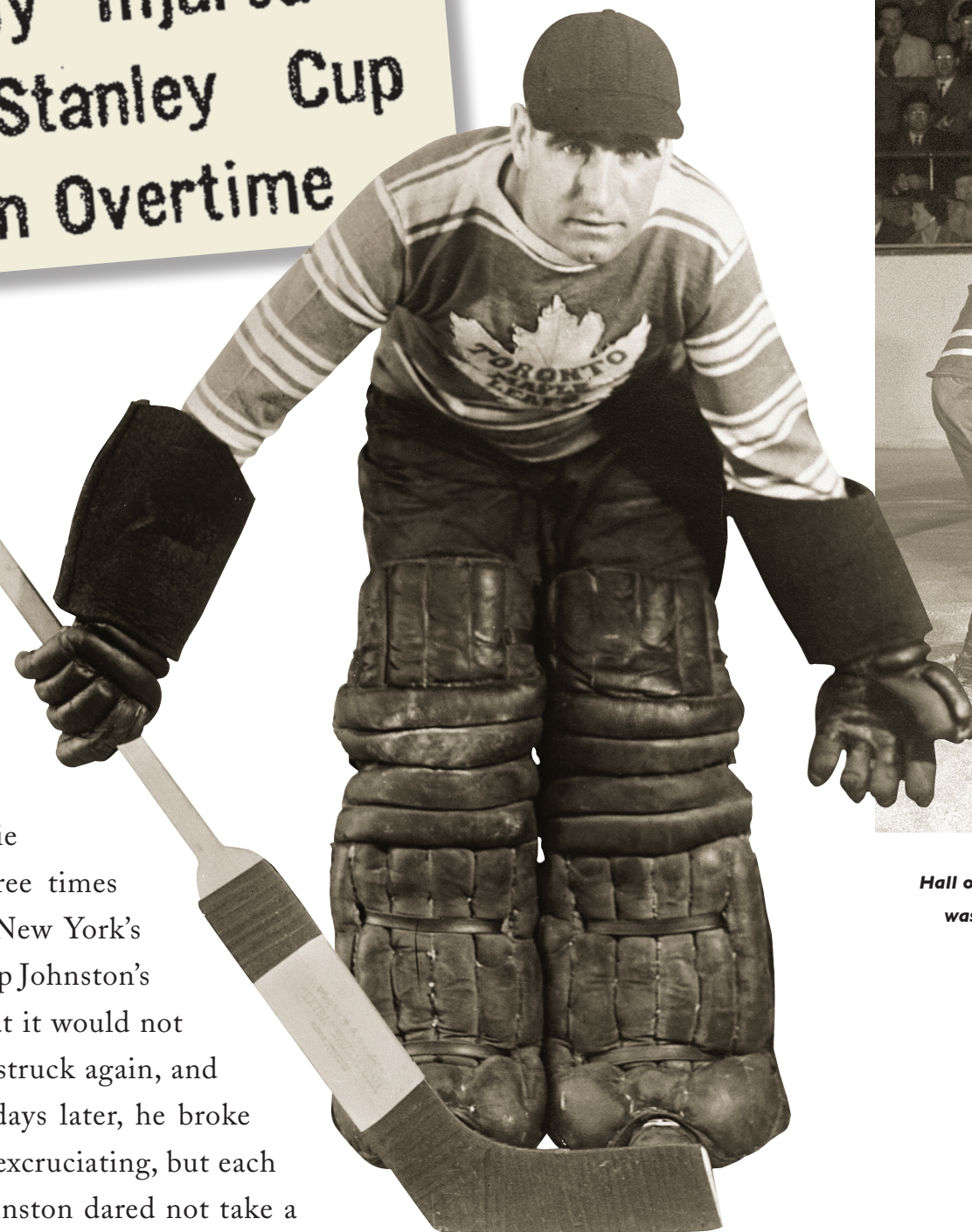
A goalie who hated white changed all that by drawing ugly little black marks all over a mask made by a man who loved white. With a few strokes of his black marker, Boston's Gerry Cheevers unknowingly started a seemingly irreversible trend, decorating or personalizing the goalie mask. Soon, there were different colored paints, then some simple graphics and, within a few years, goalie masks were completely transformed from plain pieces of protective equipment to colorful works of art.

There were other big changes for the goalie mask in the 1970s. The so-called birdcage mask (or cage-helmet combo as it is also known) became the mask of choice for goaltenders of all ages, especially after a couple of high-profile eye injuries suffered by goalies wearing molded masks. Thanks to the ingenuity of a veteran goalie, and arguably the greatest mask maker that hockey has ever known, the best qualities of both types of masks were soon combined to create the safest mask yet.

Chabot Seriously Injured in Left Eye in Stanley Cup Game Won in Overtime

eye with a hard shot, and only came to while he was being stitched up in the Rangers' dressing room. When Rangers coach Alfie Pike asked if he could continue, the still woozy Worsley replied "sure" and headed back out onto the ice, despite the fact that he could only see out of his right eye.

A few years later, Boston Bruins goalie Eddie Johnston had his nose broken three times in one week. The first time, a doctor in New York's Madison Square Garden stuck his fingers up Johnston's nose and tweaked it back into place so that it would not impede his vision. The next night he was struck again, and needed 12 stitches to close a gash. Two days later, he broke his nose again in Montreal. The pain was excruciating, but each time he headed back out onto the ice. Johnston dared not take a night off, because he knew, as every NHL goalie at the time did, that the minor leagues were full of young goalies waiting for their chance to play in the NHL... and take his job in the process. Johnston ended up breaking his nose seven times during his 17-year NHL career, much of which he played with a mask.



The Leafs' Lorne Chabot liked to be clean-shaven so he could stitch better.



Hall of Famer Johnny Bower wasn't shy to put his nose in the action.

Eye injuries were the worst of all suffered by goalies, the most serious of them ending careers on the spot, not to mention causing permanent loss of sight. One of the most infamous eye injuries was suffered by Terry Sawchuk in 1947, his rookie season in pro hockey. While Sawchuk was playing with Omaha of the United States Hockey League, his great career was almost over before it began when a stick sliced through his right eyeball during a goalmouth scramble. The first prognosis was permanent, irreparable damage, and plans were made to remove the eye the following day. But as luck would have it, a surgeon passing through town asked to have another look. Legend, and Sawchuk's autobiography, says that the young goaltender's eyeball was removed, repaired with three stitches, and then returned to his eye socket. It was his 18th birthday.



NOVEMBER 1, 1959: Enter the Mask

A Canadian Heritage Minute television spot was made to commemorate it, and a children's book in which it features prominently (*The Goalie Mask* by Mike Leonetti) has become a bestseller. And in 2007, 48 years after it happened, *The Hockey News* magazine ranked Jacques Plante's debut of the molded fiberglass goalie mask at Madison Square Garden on November 1, 1959, fourth in a special edition chronicling "Sixty Moments That Changed The Game."

The story has been told and re-told countless times. And, like any good legend, it has grown to mythical proportions over the years. Early in the first period of a game between the New York Rangers and the defending Stanley Cup Champion Montreal Canadiens, a backhand shot delivered by Rangers star Andy Bathgate caught Montreal goalie Jacques Plante in the face, opening a savage cut along his nose. It has always been accepted that Bathgate hit Plante by accident. However, many years later, Andy Bathgate himself told Hockey Hall of Fame broadcaster Dick Irvin Jr. that he actually hit Plante on purpose, flicking the puck high, without too much on it, because he was angry with Plante over a previous altercation they'd had.

RIGHT: A bloodied Jacques Plante donned a fiberglass mask after being cut by an Andy Bathgate backhand on November 1, 1959. Bathgate later confessed to hitting Plante on purpose because he was angry after absorbing a hip check from the Montreal netminder earlier in the game.

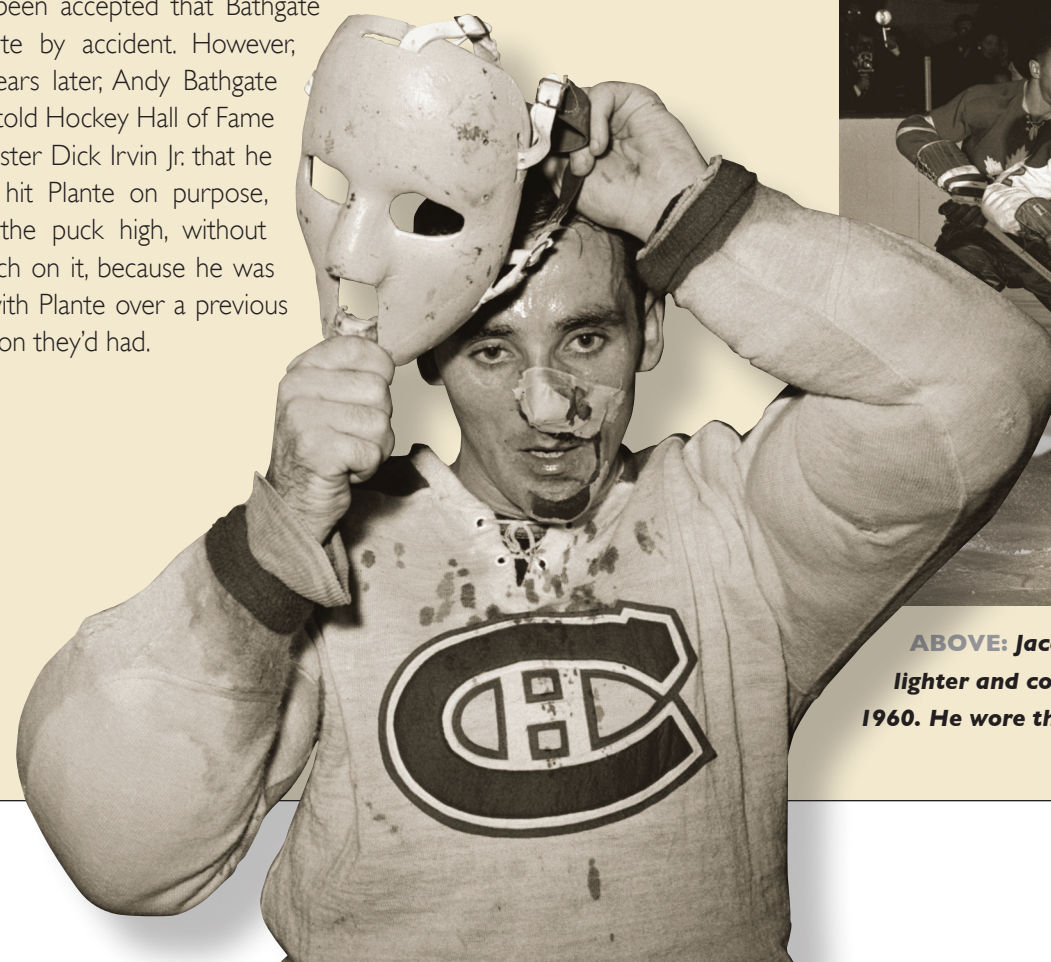
Nevertheless, we know that Plante fell to the ice and was guided toward the Garden clinic, where Rangers team doctor Kazuo Yanagisawa ("Dr. Kamikaze" to the many players he stitched up) closed the ugly gash with seven stitches. Almost as ugly was the exchange between Plante and Canadiens coach Toe Blake after the Montreal goalie insisted that he would only return to action if he could wear the fiberglass mask he'd been wearing in practices. Blake finally relented, and Plante made his way to the Canadiens dressing room to fetch the mask.

When he skated back onto the ice at the start of play some 45 minutes after being hit, a hush fell over the Garden faithful as they witnessed what appeared to be Plante's exposed skull. To sportswriters of little imagination, Plante "looked like something right out of a Hollywood horror show." And to at least one critic, more cultured than the rest, he "looked like a character in a Japanese Noh play." "Plante looks like a man who has died

from the neck up," wrote one wag. "Does Plante realize that he startles elderly ladies and frightens children?" questioned another.

By the time the final buzzer sounded on this historic night, the Rangers had put only one puck behind hockey's newly masked marvel. The Canadiens, meanwhile, deposited three behind one of the greatest mask resisters of them all, Rangers goalie Gump Worsley. Plante left the Garden that night with an understanding with Blake. He could continue to wear the mask until his injury healed. Later on they agreed that Plante could keep wearing the mask as long as the team was winning. And win they did.

For years, Plante's achievement was taken to be more important than Clint Benedict's brief experiment with a mask because it was said that he never again played without one. But that too is more fiction than fact. The truth is, Plante would indeed make one more maskless foray onto NHL ice.



ABOVE: Jacques Plante used his original "flesh-colored" mask for less than half a season, switching to the lighter and cooler "pretzel" mask he designed with his mask-making collaborator Bill Burchmore in early 1960. He wore the mask until his first retirement in 1965, and again when he returned to the NHL in 1968.



MASK MAKER PROFILE

JIM HOMUTH: Mask Perfectionist

Like many mask makers, Jim Homuth was a goaltender who started making his own masks out of necessity. In 1969, the Ottawa firefighter decided to create his own facial protection after suffering a few lacerations in games. He tried a few different masks but felt the fit and vision were inadequate. After watching Jacques Plante collapse to the ice after taking a Fred Stanfield slapshot off the forehead in the Stanley Cup playoffs, Homuth felt that he could make a safer mask. Homuth was a perfectionist who went about making his masks in a scientific way; experimenting and testing, often having shooters fire pucks at his own head. He studied the tensile strength of fiberglass and experimented until he arrived at what he felt was the perfect mask. Homuth used a special mixture of resins and fiberglass, reinforcing, spending countless hours studying their properties, and testing, until he arrived at what he felt was the best formula and design. Once this was determined, he never deviated, making all his masks exactly the same way. Homuth, along with Plante, was instrumental in advancing the design of the mask by adding forehead ridges and a pointed, angled nose area that ran down to the chin, ensuring there were no flat spots and that a puck would glance off the goalie's head upon impact.

Homuth made his first NHL mask for Gary Smith in 1972, and, through word of mouth, several other



Veteran Phil Myre wore a Jim Homuth-made mask as a member of the Atlanta Flames.

pro and junior goalies were soon asking him to make masks for them. His clients included Ken Dryden, Joe Daley, Michel Plasse, Gilles Gratton, Phil Myre, Dan Bouchard, Billy Smith and Gerry Desjardins. Although his masks were well regarded and in demand, Homuth took his time making them, producing only 10 to 15 per year and only in spring and summer. He made about 75 masks in total for pro, junior and college goalies.

Ken Dryden's first mask was a modified pretzel made by Bill Burchmore around 1964. Dryden wore the mask until he had a new one made by Jim Homuth in 1976.

Dryden wore the mask until 1973. He missed the 1973–74 season due to a contract dispute, and returned the following year with a mask made by Jim Homuth, an Ottawa firefighter and another ex-goaltender who started making masks out of necessity (see *Mask Perfectionist*, above). Together with Ernie Higgins and Jacques Plante's FibroSport, he would help supply masks for many NHL goalies throughout the 1970s.

By 1972, only a few maskless diehards remained. That year, North American hockey fans got their first look at something followers of international hockey had known about for many years—a mask that didn't fit

