

SPORTING LEGENDS: WAYNE GRETZKY

SPORT: ICE HOCKEY

COMPETITIVE ERA: 1978 - 1999

Wayne Douglas Gretzky, OC (born January 26, 1961) is a former professional ice hockey player and current head coach and part owner of the Phoenix Coyotes. Born in Brantford, Ontario, Canada, he is known as *The Great One*, and considered by many to be the greatest player of all time.



Taught by his father Walter, Gretzky was seen as a classic prodigy. At age 6 he was skating with 10-year-olds. At 10 he scored 378 goals and 120 assists in 85 games, and the first story on him was published in the *Toronto Telegram*. At 14, playing against 20-year-olds, he left Brantford to further his career. He also signed with his first agent.

He played one year in the Ontario Hockey League, at the age of 16, with the Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds. There he began wearing the number 99 on his jersey. He had wanted 9 - for his hero Gordie Howe - but it was already being worn by another teammate. At Coach Muzz MacPherson's suggestion Gretzky settled on 99. The next year (1978-79) he signed with the Indianapolis Racers of the World Hockey Association (WHA) as an underaged player.

The NHL did not allow the signing of players under the age of 18 (nor does now), but the WHA had no rules regarding such signings. Nelson Skalbania, the owner of Indianapolis Racers, signed the 17 year old future superstar, Wayne Gretzky to, at that time, a whopping personal contract worth between \$1.125 and 1.75 million US over 4 to 7 years.

Skalbania, knowing that the WHA was fading, felt owning the young star was more valuable than owning a WHA team. But, needing cash, only eight games into the 1978-79 WHA season, Skalbania liquidated his greatest asset to his old friend and former partner Peter Pocklington, owner of the Edmonton Oilers.

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Gretzky's time with the Edmonton Oilers was filled with success.

On Gretzky's 18th birthday, the 26th of January, 1979, Pocklington signed him to a 21-year personal services contract, the longest in hockey history, worth \$4-5 million US. Gretzky would go on to capture the Lou Kaplan Trophy for rookie of the year, finish third in league scoring (110 points), and help the Oilers to first overall in the league. That would be Gretzky's only season in the WHA, as it folded following the Avco World Trophy finals.

After the World Hockey Association folded in 1979, four teams, including the Edmonton Oilers, joined the National Hockey League. The success enjoyed on the ice by Gretzky in the WHA carried over into the NHL despite critics expecting otherwise. The critics expected him to fail in the bigger, tougher, more talented NHL. But in only his first NHL season, 1979-80, Gretzky proved his critics wrong and was awarded the Hart Memorial Trophy as the League's Most Valuable Player.

In his second season, Gretzky won the Art Ross Trophy (the first of seven consecutive years) with a single-season record 164 points, and won his second straight Hart Trophy. He also broke both Bobby Orr's record for assists in a season and Phil Esposito's record for points in a season. In Gretzky's third season, 1981-82, Gretzky surpassed one of the game's most cherished records - 50 goals in 50 games - set by Maurice "Rocket" Richard during the 1944-45 NHL season and tied by Mike Bossy during the 1980-81 NHL season.

On December 30, 1981, in Edmonton's 39th game, Gretzky scored his 50th goal of the season (and fifth of the game) into an empty net in the final seconds of a 7-5 win against Philadelphia. On 24 February, 1982, Gretzky continued his record-breaking tear by breaking Esposito's record for most goals in a season (76), when he scored four goals to help beat the Buffalo Sabres, 6-3. He ended that 1981-1982 season with records of 92 goals, 120 assists, and 212 points in 80 games.

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Gretzky was a driving force for the New York Rangers, if only for a short period of time.

The following seasons would see Gretzky break his own assists record three more times (125, 135, and 163) and his point record one more time (215). He would also go onto break dozens of records and set standards that to this day still stand. By the time he finished playing in Edmonton, he held or shared 49 NHL records, which in itself was a record.

On August 9, 1988, in a move that drastically changed the dynamics of the NHL, Gretzky was traded with Marty McSorley and Mike Krushelnyski by the Oilers to the Los Angeles Kings for Jimmy Carson, Martin Gelas, \$15 million cash, and the Kings' first-round draft picks in 1989, 1991, and 1993. "The Trade," as it came to be known, upset Canadians to the extent that one lawmaker demanded the government block it, and Pocklington was burned in effigy.

Gretzky himself was considered a "traitor" by some Canadians for turning his back on his adopted hometown, his home province, and his home country; his motivation was widely rumoured to be to further his wife's acting career. After "The Trade", Gretzky's personal popularity sank across Canada, temporarily.

Gretzky's first season in Los Angeles saw a marked increase in attendance and fan interest in a city not previously known for following ice hockey. The Kings, who then played their home games at the Great Western Forum, boasted numerous sellouts on their way to reaching the 88-89 playoffs.

Despite being heavy underdogs against his old squad, Gretzky led the new-look Kings on and off the ice to a shocking upset of the defending Stanley Cup champion Edmonton Oilers, as Gretzky led his team back from a 3-1 deficit to win the series 4-3. Many credit Gretzky's arrival with putting Southern California on "the NHL map"; now California is home to three NHL franchises.

SPORTING LEGENDS: DAN MARINO



Gretzky with the ultimate trophy the Stanley Cup!

Gretzky's time with the Kings reached its peak when he led the team to its first Cup finals in 1993. After winning the first game of the series, however, the team lost the next four in a row to the Montreal Canadiens. The team began a long slide that continued despite numerous player and coaching moves and failed to even qualify for the playoffs again until 1998.

Long before that, running out of time and looking for a team with which he could win again, Gretzky had been traded from the Kings at his request. On the 27th of February, 1996 he joined the St. Louis Blues in a trade for Patrice Tardif, Roman Vopat, Craig Johnson, and draft picks.

While he scored 37 points in 31 games for the team (regular season and playoffs), and they got within one overtime game of the Conference finals, he never clicked with the team or with sniper Brett Hull on the ice as well as many had expected. On July 21 1996, he signed with the New York Rangers as a free agent, rejoining Mark Messier.

He ended his professional career with the Rangers, playing his final three seasons there and helping the team reach the conference finals in 1997. His last NHL game in Canada was on the 16th of April, 1999, and his final game was a 2-1 overtime loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins on the 18th of April. The national anthems in that game were adjusted to accommodate Gretzky's departure.

In 2003, Gretzky took to the ice one last time to help celebrate the Edmonton Oilers' 25th anniversary as an NHL team. The Heritage Classic was the first NHL game to be played outdoors, at Commonwealth Stadium in Edmonton. Preceding the NHL game was an exhibition game that reunited Gretzky and many of the old-guard Oilers against a superstar Montreal Canadiens team in front of 57,167 fans and millions more on TV.

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Scott Burton's Final Thought

Wayne Gretzky transcended his sport to become more than just a professional ice hockey player.

He was a national treasure, and to this day, Canadians everywhere idolise him, and his contribution to their national sporting pride.

There have been many great players in the NHL over the past decade, although very few have stood out as much as Gretzky did.

He was a natural winner, and the complete predator in front of goal.



99 was, and will always beõ Wayne Gretzky's number!