

VIEW From The Cheap Seats

By Mark Savoie

Wayne Gretzky signed a contract last week which made him the highest paid team athlete in North America, possibly the world. He's getting paid more than Michael Jordan, Nolan Ryan, Barry Bonds, Shaquille O'Neal, and Mario Lemieux. Only the stars of Italy's soccer league potentially earn more as a salary than Gretzky. Of course, Gretzky still lags behind Jordan and several others in gross earnings because of the huge endorsement contracts that some athletes are bringing in. And Gretzky is no slouch in that department either.

The contract that Gretzky signed with Bruce MacNall of the Los Angeles Kings calls for him to be paid \$30 000 000 for playing the next three seasons. For those of you who have trouble with word problems or flunked BA1203, that works out to \$10 000 000 per season. That's a lot of money for a player who has had serious injury problems over the last several years.

It is also a lot of money for a player who's not all that good. Gretzky is still an offensive threat of prominence. His skills in the offensive zone have deteriorated a great deal, but when you were as good as he was you can go downhill a long way and still be damn good. Such is Wayne Gretzky. Unfortunately for Wayne, his skills in the defensive zone remain abysmal. Even in the early 1980s, when he was the best player in hockey, he was not as good as people said and thought.

The object of hockey is to win. The way to achieve this object is to put the puck into the other team's net more times than they put the puck into your net. How this is done is immaterial. The first extreme is to go all out on offense, trying to score as many goals as possible and daring the other team to keep up. The second extreme is to attempt to shut down the other team's offense completely in search of a shutout, hoping that somehow in the process you'll score a goal sometime. Historically, the second extreme has had the most success, although the edge is not statistically significant.

Throughout Gretzky's career he has been a proponent of the first extreme. No player (except Gordie Howe's 32 seasons) has contributed to more goals for his team than Wayne Gretzky. It may also be said that no player has ever contributed to as many goals against his team than Wayne Gretzky. When Gretzky is on the ice, there is always an excellent chance that someone is going to score. In his younger days, it was usually his team. The opposition still scored goals by the bushel when Gretzky was on the ice, but Gretzky and his mates would score a bushel and a half in the interim.

It's different now. The odds are awful close to 50:50 as to which team will score with Gretzky on the ice. Last season Gretzky managed only a +6 on the plus/minus charts. This means that in even strength situations with Gretzky on the ice, Los Angeles scored just six more goals than the opposition. Admittedly, plus/minus is not the be all and end all of hockey stats, but it is superior to everything else at present. Plus six just doesn't cut it if you expect to deserve to be called a star player. (It's even worse if you look at his plus/minus relative to his team, as opposed to relative to the league).

In his prime Gretzky was so good offensively that his defensive liabilities were insignificant. He produced goals so frequently that the goals he allowed were irrelevant. At present Mario Lemieux is at the same stage of his career. Gretzky, on the other hand, has seen his goal production fall off to the point that he should no longer be considered one of the best players in the league. He is still among the very best offensive players in hockey; the problem is that this no longer makes up for the fact that he is among the very worst defensive players in hockey.

Gretzky apologists will point to Gretzky's performances in Los Angeles's last two games against Toronto in the semi-finals last season. They'll say that Gretzky's great efforts in these clutch games are more important than his performance throughout the season. The lie to this argument should be immediately obvious, but is usually ignored. Having a great game in a clutch situation does not automatically make you a great player. Paul DiPietro had a great name for the Montréal Canadiens in the clutch game six of their series with the Québec Nordiques. Despite this, few people are heralding DiPietro as a great player. It takes game in - game out seasonal excellence to make a great player. Gretzky was this once, but now he is just another player on the ice. Not even an especially good player.

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Next week (if nothing comes up) I'll explore the fallacy of my statement that "The object of hockey is to win".



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| 1. TOP DOGS
P. Turgeon (NYI) <input type="checkbox"/>
K. Stevens (Pit) <input type="checkbox"/>
M. Recchi (Phi) <input type="checkbox"/>
P. LaFontaine (Buf) <input type="checkbox"/>
A. Oates (Bos) <input type="checkbox"/>
S. Yzerman (Det) <input type="checkbox"/> | 2. TEAM LEADERS
T. Selanne (Win) <input type="checkbox"/>
D. Gilmour (Tor) <input type="checkbox"/>
A. Mogilay (Buf) <input type="checkbox"/>
B. Hull (Stl) <input type="checkbox"/>
L. Robitaille (LA) <input type="checkbox"/>
E. Lindros (Phi) <input type="checkbox"/> | 3. SAFE PICKS
J. Roenick (Chi) <input type="checkbox"/>
M. Messier (NYR) <input type="checkbox"/>
M. Sundin (Que) <input type="checkbox"/>
P. Bure (Van) <input type="checkbox"/>
J. Sakic (Que) <input type="checkbox"/>
C. Janney (Stl) <input type="checkbox"/> | 4. CENTURIANS?
B. Shanahan (Stl) <input type="checkbox"/>
G. Roberts (Cal) <input type="checkbox"/>
S. Fedorov (Det) <input type="checkbox"/>
V. Damphousse (Mon) <input type="checkbox"/>
R. Tocchet (Pit) <input type="checkbox"/>
G. Sanderson (Har) <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. LUCKY DIP
T. Sandstrom (LA) <input type="checkbox"/>
V. Kamensky (Que) <input type="checkbox"/>
C. Neely (Bos) <input type="checkbox"/>
J. Cullen (Tor) <input type="checkbox"/>
G. Adams (Van) <input type="checkbox"/>
J. Mullen (Pit) <input type="checkbox"/> | 6. GEMS
J. Juneau (Bos) <input type="checkbox"/>
M. Modano (Dal) <input type="checkbox"/>
J. Jagr (Pit) <input type="checkbox"/>
T. Fleury (Cal) <input type="checkbox"/>
K. Müller (Mon) <input type="checkbox"/>
R. Brind'amour (Phi) <input type="checkbox"/> | 7. OFFENSIVE "D"
A. Macinnis (Cal) <input type="checkbox"/>
P. Coffey (Det) <input type="checkbox"/>
R. Bourque (Bos) <input type="checkbox"/>
L. Leetch (NYR) <input type="checkbox"/>
C. Chelios (Chi) <input type="checkbox"/>
P. Housley (Win) <input type="checkbox"/> | 8. LEADERS
D. Andreychuk (Tor) <input type="checkbox"/>
J. Nieuwendyk (Cal) <input type="checkbox"/>
T. Linden (Van) <input type="checkbox"/>
D. Hawerchuk (Buf) <input type="checkbox"/>
R. Francis (Pit) <input type="checkbox"/>
B. Bellows (Mon) <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. BLUE CHIPPERS
G. Suter (Cal) <input type="checkbox"/>
J. Brown (Stl) <input type="checkbox"/>
K. Hatcher (Was) <input type="checkbox"/>
L. Murphy (Pit) <input type="checkbox"/>
S. Duchesne (Que) <input type="checkbox"/>
R. Blake (LA) <input type="checkbox"/> | 10. POTPURRI
Q. Zharnov (Win) <input type="checkbox"/>
P. Nedved (Van) <input type="checkbox"/>
M. Pivonka (Was) <input type="checkbox"/>
D. Kvartalnov (Bos) <input type="checkbox"/>
N. Borschevsky (Tor) <input type="checkbox"/>
A. Semak (NJ) <input type="checkbox"/> | 11. CHERRY'S BOYS
K. Tkachuk (Win) <input type="checkbox"/>
S. Corson (Edm) <input type="checkbox"/>
S. Stevens (NJ) <input type="checkbox"/>
W. Clark (Tor) <input type="checkbox"/>
D. Hunter (Was) <input type="checkbox"/>
K. Dineen (Phi) <input type="checkbox"/> | 12. BOUNCING BACK
D. Savard (TB) <input type="checkbox"/>
G. Leeman (Mon) <input type="checkbox"/>
E. Tikkanen (NYR) <input type="checkbox"/>
J. MacLean (NJ) <input type="checkbox"/>
P. Klika (TB) <input type="checkbox"/>
B. Nicholls (NY) <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13. PLAYING TOUGH
M. McSorley (Pit) <input type="checkbox"/>
B. Probert (Det) <input type="checkbox"/>
D. Manson (Edm) <input type="checkbox"/>
S. Mellanby (Flo) <input type="checkbox"/>
R. Pearson (Tor) <input type="checkbox"/>
S. Momesso (Van) <input type="checkbox"/> | 14. EXPANSION BLUES
P. Falloon (SJ) <input type="checkbox"/>
A. Daigle (Ott) <input type="checkbox"/>
A. Semenov (ANA) <input type="checkbox"/>
R. Niedermayer (Flo) <input type="checkbox"/>
C. Kontos (TB) <input type="checkbox"/>
T. Yake (ANA) <input type="checkbox"/> | The entry fee is \$10.00. Cheques should be made payable to "NHL Pool Fund Raiser". If you wish to receive personalized monthly updates enclose an additional \$10.00.
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