

Tiger Williams pulls no punches

Interview by Dean Bennett
photos by Bill St. John

On December 29 of last year the Detroit Red Wings invaded Northlands Coliseum to receive a 6-3 spanking from the Edmonton Oilers. After the game, sitting in a towel-strewn visitors' locker room Dave Williams cracked his second lite beer, removed an ice pack from a sore right elbow, and granted the Gateway this interview.

Gateway: What made you decide to write a book? What did you hope to accomplish by it?

Williams: What did I want to accomplish by it? Money. Nothing but money. That's what the world's all about. That's why you (this reporter) are going to university—to get a good job and make money. Also, I think that a lot of the hockey stories that have been written are a lot of B.S. stories with quotes like: "I went down the ice, and I went around this guy, and I scored it in the top corner and then I took my wife out to dinner, and then I went home and fed my new baby girl with a bottle..." I mean, that's a lot of crap. I wanted to write a book that put you right on the ice, right in the situation; what happens when you have to make a decision on the ice. I'm glad I went that way and the book's been very successful.

Gateway: One of the themes of your book is that an advantage, any advantage, is fair in a fight. If someone has an advantage they should be using it—even if it means resorting to "dirty tactics." This is your philosophy of hockey, but is it also a philosophy of life?

Williams: Oh yeah. Obviously you have to be taking advantage if you want to come out on top. The early bird gets the worm and the guy who puts in 16 hours a day is the one who comes out on top. I apply it to everything I do. In "real life", of course, there are ethics involved. You have to play by the rules of society, but that doesn't mean you still can't be a barracuda.

Williams: While you certainly acknowledge Wayne Gretzky's enormous athletic talent in your book, you also derided him by saying he is a "whiner." Don't you think this so-called whining could be his attempt to gain an advantage, and if so, would this not make your statement hypocritical?

Williams: Well that's true, but I don't think he needs the advantage. Players as great as he is should be setting an example for everyone concerned and that includes the public. You know, Canadians whine and cry about everything. If you're an S.O.B. you get everything in this



country, but if you're an honest guy who works every day you get nothing. I don't agree with that and that's what plagues our society today. And that's why somebody like Gretzky who can influence society has to show some leadership.

Gateway: In the book you also comment on Edmonton fans being "bush league." Care to elaborate?

Williams: Primarily, I think back to the end of last year's Stanley Cup. I've never been in any other building where the fans jumped all over the ice. They took the excitement of winning the Stanley Cup and skating around the ice with it away from the players. I mean, what's wrong with these people?

"American fans are a lot better than Canadians"

Gateway: During your early years with the Toronto Maple Leafs you made numerous references to the alcohol problems of some of the players. Is the problem of drug and alcohol abuse in the NHL increasing, declining, or remaining static?

Williams: I think alcohol abuse has been curbed a lot. One reason for this is that travel time has increased. When I began playing in Toronto the league only had 17 teams. Winnipeg wasn't there and neither was Edmonton or Calgary. We didn't have the long road trips that we do now. As far as the drug situation goes, I don't know. As I stated in my book, the guys know if I catch them with it I'll goon 'em. It's around, but how much of it is around I really don't know.

Gateway: Any thoughts on the current plight of the Maple Leafs? What effect do you think the losing is having on their coach and your friend Dan Maloney?

Williams: Well actually they're doing just what I want them to do because they're in our division. I never had that attitude towards them when I played in Vancouver because how they played never affected us. But now that they're in our division I hope they have a lousy year and I hope it continues until either myself or the Leafs leave the Norris (division). It's too bad for Danny. It's a tough job for him there. But I think he just doesn't have the players to do anything. Their best players—the players they count on—aren't worth a grain of salt.

Gateway: Comments on the self-destruction of the Vancouver Canucks this season?

Williams: Well they're not going to make the playoffs this year and that'll be the first time in four or five years that they've done that. I wish Vancouver was doing better than they are because then they would be beating teams in our division. Personally, I thought they'd have a respectable year, but they're not and that's too bad.

Gateway: How are things working out for you in Detroit? What is your role in coach Nick Polano's system?

Williams: I play a lot in short-handed situations. My role is basically a defensive one. Nothing fancy. Like they say, it's a dirty job but someone's gotta do it.

Gateway: Your book tends to glorify the underdog players—the checkers. Why?

Williams: Because fans and people in the media never give them any

credit. They're very important. In last year's Stanley Cup, Edmonton's best line was their "Plumbers"—(Kevin) McClelland, (Pat) Hughes, and (Dave) Hunter. Between the three of them they're lucky to get 20 goals a year, but it's an important part of hockey. Every team must have good blend to win.

"Toronto's best players aren't worth a grain of salt"

Edmonton never won until they improved their "plumbing" situation.

Gateway: What is the general reaction to players now entering the league? Is their attitude about the same as it was when you joined in the mid-seventies?

Williams: The League is more competitive now. Guys that don't come to play every night don't last very long any more. You go back six or seven years to the World Hockey Association and you'll find you had a pretty diluted NHL. But now, of course, we don't and this, coupled with the influx of European players, makes the league very competitive again.

Gateway: The current NHL playoff structure. Your comments and ideas for revision.

Williams: There's just too many teams that make the playoffs. There should be two teams and a wildcard from each division. I think it's unfair that a team like Hartford

could get 70-80 points this year and not make the playoffs, where possibly Minnesota or Detroit might have 50 or 60 points and be in. Maximum of 12 teams should be in; sixteen is just too many

Gateway: Which city has the best fans in terms of knowledge and player support?

Williams: Well, let's put it this way. The best fans in the league are in Chicago. They're the noisiest. American fans are a lot better fans than Canadians. A lot of players know that, but they don't say it because they're wimp-ass or don't want their city to think they're traitors. American fans are better than Canadians. They make more noise. I don't know if it's because they drink more booze or smoke a better grade, but they're certainly very boisterous and it makes for a better game for both teams.

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