

SHARP SHOOTER

Legendary hockey photographer Bruce Bennett's work celebrated in new book



HOCKEY'S GREATEST PHOTOS

THE BRUCE BENNETT COLLECTION | FOREWORDS BY WAYNE GRETZKY & MARTIN BRODEUR



BY STEPHEN LAROCHE | BECKETT HOCKEY EDITOR

For over 40 years, hockey fans have appreciated the photography of Bruce Bennett as they have seen his work in the pages of countless magazines such *Beckett Hockey*, and, of course, trading cards. A veteran of over 5,000 NHL games, he has been around for some incredible moments in the game's history and his best work has been celebrated in a new book called *Hockey's Greatest Photos*.

Bennett was visiting Toronto during the Fall 2015 Sportcard & Memorabilia Expo and *Beckett Hockey* was able to catch up with him to talk about the book, his career, and the impact trading cards had on his business over the years. The photography book has been a strong seller and the veteran shooter explained how the project came about.

"I joined Getty Images about 11 years ago and shortly before that, I started looking at different publishers and trying to figure out how I would even try to pull together a project, considering that there were 2,000,000 images in the archive," he said. "I started shopping around and within the past year or two, *The Hockey News* and I got together on it and said

the time is probably right to piece together a project."

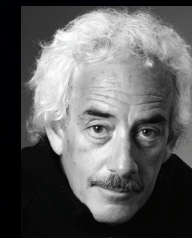
With so many images, Bennett noted that there was some challenge to selecting the best.

"When you start with 2,000,000 of anything and you try to pare it down to 250 is pretty difficult. In fact, a lot of those images are still in analog form, meaning slide, negative, and

print. Realistically, I went through about 300,000 of those images, but most of the images we used were culled from those that had already been scanned into digital format or were shot on digital."

Some of the earliest shots Bennett was noticed for came in the mid-1970s as the New York Islanders were rising to contention. Typically, he now shoots their games out of the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, but he chronicled the club's glory years where they won four straight Stanley Cup titles. He explained how he got his start in the business, but does not recall when his first game took place.

"No. I've got it listed in the books. Before I started my career, I shot two games. One was from the balcony of Madison Square Garden. I can't remember who the Rangers were playing, but then also one game between Pittsburgh and the Islanders at Nassau Coliseum. It was on the basis



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of those photos that I shot at those two games where *The Hockey News* got me a press pass to start shooting professionally."

Bennett can regularly be spotted during NHL events such as the post-game celebration when the Stanley Cup is handed out. Over time, he accumulated a large collection of press passes and many of them can be seen in the opening spread of the book.

"I guess I'm a hoarder. I never really thought about it. I just started throwing them into the box from day one and that box became three, four boxes. During the last NHL lockout, I went through all those boxes because I had some spare time and organized them into pretty much year by year and decade by decade and did a little self-published book that was about 40 large pages. That book got such a good reaction from friends and colleagues that I thought it would be a great way to open up my book."

Bennett also has had a long relationship with trading card companies as his work, or that from photographers that were employed by him, appeared on countless cards.

"Back when it was just Topps, we would supply them with images of players they were short on. My company back then, Bruce Bennett Studios, what I impressed on all our photographers, whether they were full-timers or freelancers, was the importance of getting an image of every player. They used to say there was a fan for every player and that also meant there was a buyer for images of every single player. Where we excelled was having those images that the card companies were desperate for because a guy may have only played one, two, or three games and he would be the guys who would be needed for that

material. So, a little bit for Topps, but when the trading card boom started with those first companies, that was a boom not only for trading card sales, but for my company as we immediately went from three or four employees up to 10 to handle the need for those images."

But was Bennett himself a hockey collector?

"Only if they gave them to me for free. Sometimes they would and sometimes they wouldn't. Growing up, I was a baseball card collector and that kind of fell by the wayside. At one point, my mother thought I was spending too much time collecting cards, so she threw them all out. I still talk to her, now that I think about it, but she also threw out the old comic books from the '20s and '30s. That I could probably never forgive because I probably could have bought a house from that stuff! I really wasn't much of a collector. Some of the guys that worked for me were big into going through the images if a card company sent us boxes of cards. They would go through the cards and separate each photographer that shot them and give you a stack of cards."

Such close proximity to the greatest players in the game gave him the chance to obtain some interesting collectibles, but he did not take advantage of the situation.

"I always kept my distance from the players. I thought it was more professional. Rarely got autographs from guys. Many of the things that players gave me were just gifted without me seeking to do barter deals for sticks and things. I have quite a few from Wayne Gretzky from knowing him for many years and being involved in his fantasy camp and traveling on the road with him. A couple of jerseys, but not really much at all."

BENNETT'S BEST

Looking at some of the best shots in *Hockey's Greatest Photos*

[1] Just a simple snapshot, this image was taken in the waning days of the World Hockey Association, and is by far one of my most popular images. Wayne Gretzky's reputation preceded him, so I made a special trip to Springfield where the Oilers were visiting the New England Whalers. When I shot this photo, he was looking at the hordes of media coming into the room, and I was lucky enough to have him right in front of me. It provides throwback to a simpler time in hockey's history during Wayne's youth, when players used equipment that is now no longer considered safe to wear in league play. *Springfield Civic Center, Springfield, Mass. April 1979*

[2] The start of my career almost turned disastrous when I couldn't get out on the ice to cover the Stanley Cup presentation in 1979, when Montreal defeated the New York Rangers. While standing on a chair in the first row of the stands, I captured this image which has gone on to become an iconic visual representation of winning the Stanley Cup. *The Forum, Montreal. May 21, 1979*

[3] This photo shoot, commissioned by *The Hockey News*, was shot in a small studio in the bowels of the arena. I'd practiced the primitive fire technique at home, which basically involved stapling cotton onto the edge of a hockey stick and dipping it in kerosene. Mike Bossy was really good about it. The flame didn't come anywhere near him, and I got off six to eight shots until the fire went out - although we also set off the arena's fire alarm. *Nassau Coliseum, Uniondale, New York. October 1980*

[4] Much of my current hockey coverage involves shooting with strobe units that are placed in the rafters and synced with my cameras. The strobes' power to freeze the image while keeping the color intensity vibrant and also minimizing noise or granularity, is a distinct advantage over available light imagery. A lighting tweak achieved by turning a few strobes off, delivered a popular image featuring the players along with their long shadows. *Nassau Coliseum, Uniondale, New York. December 8, 2011*

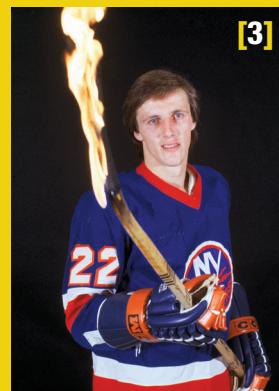
[5] I didn't realize I had anything all that special here until ESPN.com tweeted it out with a tagline that said "Photo of the year? Getty's @Bruce_Bennett may have it." This image, with the flying ice chips and the reflections in the glass, helped illustrate the advantages of digital photography. Travis Hamonic of the New York Islanders and Nick Bjugstad of the Florida Panthers provided the entertainment in this image which was used as two-page spreads in *Sports Illustrated*, *ESPN Magazine* and *Sportsnet Magazine* all within a two week span. *Nassau Coliseum, Uniondale, New York. April 1, 2014*



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