

THE PROS

by JOHN CAIRNS

Millions enjoy watching professional sport. Many also love arguing about it. The question people never tire of asking is "who is better than who?" What makes it interesting is that the answer is always changing.

In Canada we are now primarily concerning ourselves with hockey. The standings reveal the top teams, but the players we must judge for ourselves. Doing that is especially interesting now that the N.H.L. season is winding to a close. Just who are the league's current all-stars? Going from the net out, the top three at each position appears as follows.

In goal the big name remains Ken Dryden. The tall and talented Canadien is once again leading everyone in goals against average, and with the capable help of Bunny Larocque, he appears headed for a third straight Vezina Trophy. His top challenger is Flyer Bernie Parent whose 2.28 average isn't far behind. Number three is Tony Esposito, the man chiefly responsible for Chicago's return to first place. Much deserved honorable mentions go to Edwards of Buffalo, Palmateer of Toronto, and Vachon of Los Angeles.

On the blue line, the brightest star is Borje Salming. The Swede is scoring well and his defensive play is beyond question. A man even higher in the points race is Dennis Potvin, his counterpart with the Islanders. Although Dennis' defense is suspect, don't be surprised if he wins the Morris Trophy. Next is last year's trophy

winner, Larry Robinson of Montreal. "Big Bird" as he is sometimes called is still a stiff checker and a high scorer.

Tops at center is Mr. Maple Leaf, Daryl Sittler. When Toronto needs a goal either Sittler helps get it or it doesn't usually get scored. Luckily for the Leafs he's collecting his points more regularly than ever. A close second is Brian Trottier from the Islanders. Having come into his own now he was for much of the year leading the league in scoring. Third is a veteran playing perhaps his best hockey. It is Jacques Lemaire of the Canadiens. Fast skating and entertaining Gilbert Perreault of Buffalo merits honorable mention.

At left wing none beat Islander Clark Gillies. By having his best season ever he has helped New York overpower Philadelphia. Steve Shutt is number two. Though not scoring like he was last year, his statistics are still excellent. In third is Terry O'Reilly of Boston who unfortunately is also vastly underrated.

On the right side we have Guy Lafleur, hockey's greatest star who seems destined for yet another scoring championship. Second at the position contrastingly, is rookie Mike Bossy. In him the Islanders have someone who will no doubt be a scoring champion himself some day. Third spot goes to Buffalo star Danny Gare. Deserving honorable mention are Wilf Parendt

of Colorado and the over-rated Lanny McDonald of Toronto.

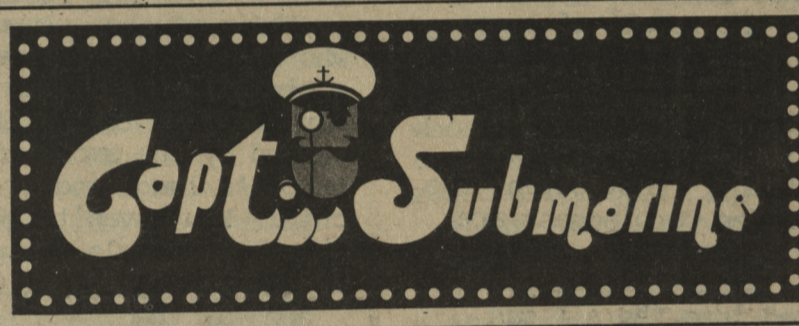
There you have them, the biggest stars. Just as a matter of interest though, here are two additional categories.

The league's most underrated player is Canadien goalie Bunny Larocque. Although second fiddle to Ken Dryden, he has proven more than capable. Next most unappreciated are respectively Terry O'Reilly of Boston and Don Edwards of Buffalo. We've mentioned them before.

On the other end of the scale are the overrated performers. The worst example is Chicago's Stan Mikita. No longer a N.H.L. star he should try the W.H.A. Also guilty are Reggie Leach of Philadelphia and Gilles Meloche of Cleveland. Leach has had only one superior season and Meloche is rarely great two games in a row.

Let's turn to coaches. for a moment. The leading figure there is Islander boss Al Arbour. He now has his team playing offense as well as it does defense, and they will be a definite Stanley Cup threat. Don Cherry is one big reason why the Bruins will also be in the running. Chicago's Bob Pulford is third best. He has made the Hawks again a first place team. Honorable mention here goes to Montreal's Scotty Bowman. His team does, after all, have a superb record.

Well, we've ranked just about everything in sight. The list will change, but as mentioned before, that is what makes it all so interesting.



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