



99

**GRETZKY:**  
HIS GAME, HIS STORY

**AL STRACHAN**

Assisted by **WAYNE GRETZKY**

Foreword by **ROY MACGREGOR**

Also by Al Strachan

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(as told to Al Strachan)

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*Don Cherry's Hockey Stories Part 2*  
(as told to Al Strachan)

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Strachan, Al

99: Gretzky: his game, his story / Al Strachan;  
foreword by Roy MacGregor.

eBook ISBN: 978-0-7710-8325-9

1. Gretzky, Wayne, 1961-. 2. Hockey players – Canada – Biography.
3. Hockey coaches – Canada – Biography. I. Title.  
II. Title: Ninety-nine, his game, his story.

GV848.5.G78S77 2013 796.962092 C2013-900689-3

Library of Congress control number: 2013931565

Fenn/McClelland & Stewart,  
a division of Random House of Canada Limited  
A Penguin Random House Company  
One Toronto Street  
Toronto, Ontario  
M5C 2V6  
[www.randomhouse.ca](http://www.randomhouse.ca)

v3.1

*For the lovely Vivienne*

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## FOREWORD

*By Roy MacGregor*

“Come on! – you’ll have a great time!”

And I did. It was late fall, 1994. The National Hockey League owners had just locked out its players in what would, over the years, become a virtual ritual, but this was the very first and, without Twitter and endless talking-head panels, there wasn’t much for hockey journalists to do but wait it out and find something else to fill in the time.

Al Strachan suggested I join him and a handful of other hockey writers – Tony Gallagher of the *Vancouver Province*, Kevin McGran of Canadian Press (now with the *Toronto Star*) – who were going to follow Wayne Gretzky on a barnstorming “Grand Tour” of Europe. The “Ninety-Nine All Stars,” put together by Gretzky, his agent Mike Barnett and (I would not know until I read this book) Al Strachan, would play exhibition matches against club teams in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Germany. “Strach” was going for the Sun chain. I was then with the *Ottawa Citizen*, part of the then-powerful Southam empire. If hockey superstars like Gretzky, Brett Hull, Mark Messier, Paul Coffey, Steve Yzerman and Sergei Fedorov were going to be wearing jerseys rather than suits and playing real games rather than head games, then Southam certainly wouldn’t want the Sun to own it. They happily agreed that both Tony, another Southam employee, and I could go along.

Strach, whom I did not know very well then, was far more welcoming than I had expected. I knew his reputation for caustic remarks and quick dismissals but I had to learn for myself that the sarcasm and jibes come with such joyous wit that he is, in fact, a delight to be around. I knew he and Tony had long been friends but I had no real concept of how close he was with Gretzky, the organizer, funder and main attraction of the trip.

At first, this bothered me, as I’m sure it bothered others. Strachan, and Tony, as well, had an access that McGran and I simply could not match. Neither of us had covered Gretzky in his heyday, as both Tony and Al had. The worry proved completely unfounded, as Al made sure that each game was run roughly as real NHL games were, with a semi-formal scrum with Gretzky and other players at the end of each match. The rest of the time, we all travelled together as one delightful group, sightseeing during the days and playing exhibition games – several of them excellent – at night. The travelling band included various wives and girlfriends and several of the players took

along their fathers, including the incomparable Walter Gretzky. Sergei Fedorov, perhaps because his father wasn't available, brought along a stripper.

This was my first real encounter with Gretzky and the friendship that began on that trip eventually became a "partnership" after his retirement in 1999. The *National Post* had started up just the year before and, wanting to make a big splash in sports, arranged for Wayne to write a weekly column for them. He agreed but asked that I, having transferred to the *Post* from the *Citizen*, "assist" him with it. I then got to know the Wayne Gretzky that Al Strachan knew and admired – though I would never know him as well as Al.

The incredible friendship between the game's greatest player and the game's most controversial commentator was something to behold. Gretzky is renowned for his diplomacy on all matters concerning hockey. He has always been careful to avoid controversy, endlessly polite and quick to offer the benefit of the doubt. Not so Strach. Al is one of those people with no built-in governor. He says whatever he is thinking, and usually in a low-but-penetrating voice that is impossible not to pick up. Most people built like that, though, are not very bright and could well use a governor. Not Al. He is one of the brightest brains in sports journalism – erudite, well-read, with an incredible grasp of history and events. His politics might make some cringe, but if they wish to debate him they had better know their file – because he will rip it to shreds.

Those who get to know his humorous side, however, soon come to treasure it. He can be hilarious. I sometimes think this is why Gretzky is so fond of him. Al not only knows his sports on a level that can keep up to the encyclopedic Gretzky, but Al is more than happy to say, aloud, things that Gretzky might only be thinking. He also makes Gretzky laugh. At himself, as well.

Today's journalists cannot possibly get to know athletes as they once could. When Al Strachan started out, hockey dressing rooms were quiet places where reporters could sit alone with a player and chat about everything from the game at hand to the world at large. Television cameras and radio microphones were rare. Today, it is impossible to speak alone with a professional athlete. The moment his mouth opens, small hand-held recorders and iPhones press in on him to vacuum up every word, many of the recorder holders not paying the slightest attention or, for that matter, even bothering to look at the player. Whatever he says, even the most utterly meaningless – "the first goal is important," "we have to play desperate hockey" – is instantly sent out on Twitter. It has made players retreat to clichés, avoid all talk that might be misconstrued. Idle chatter is a dead art.

It is because of this that this book is so telling. It is not just about feats and records – though they are there, as well – but about a very special relationship between a superstar athlete and a star reporter.

Wayne Gretzky and Al Strachan, both richly deserving of their rightful places in the Hockey Hall of Fame.

## PREFACE

Even though Wayne Gretzky began his National Hockey League career in 1979, it wasn't until the 1981 Canada Cup that I really got to know him. Our paths had crossed a couple of times in post-game scrums, but in circumstances of that nature, you don't get much of a chance to interact.

However, in an event like the Canada Cup, where the players have lots of free time and the same reporters are coming back day after day, relationships begin to form.

The reporter, naturally enough, will revisit the players with whom he feels he is developing a rapport. Similarly, the players will either increase or decrease their level of cooperation as they get to know the people with whom they are dealing.

A couple of factors led to my becoming friends with Wayne Gretzky. One was that both James Christie and I were covering the tournament for the *Globe and Mail*. We were both about the same height. We were both overweight and we both had moustaches. Jim's was a bit more luxuriant than mine, but whose wasn't? During a chat just after the training camp opened, Gretzky called me "Jim." I pointed out the error of his ways and we laughed about it. The next day, I teased him about it.

When you're Wayne Gretzky, most people, with the exception of most of your teammates, treat you like royalty. To have someone make fun of you, however lightly, opens a new door in the relationship. You can get angry and slam that door, or you can laugh and go marching through it. Gretzky opted for the latter.

Face to face, I have often made fun of him. He makes fun of himself. Once, after he was hit in the ear with a deflected slapshot and had to leave the game to get stitches, he grinned and said to me, "That's the first time in my life I ever blocked a shot."

But I never made fun of him in print. I have always considered him to be the greatest player in hockey history. I have heard all the arguments made on behalf of other candidates, and as I respect every one of those guys, I will not enter into a debate on the matter because such debates always end up in a recitation of shortcomings.

If other people want to see Gordie Howe or Mario Lemieux or Bobby Orr as the greatest ever, that's fine. A case can be made for every one of them.

But my own choice is Gretzky, and I've never made any secret of it. Because we had come to know each other, he made sure that he read my columns and he liked what he saw, not only in what I wrote about him but also in what I wrote about hockey.

Not long after the 1981 tournament, we were on a long charter flight together for some reason. He came and sat beside me for what I initially assumed was just a brief courtesy visit. But he stayed for the entire flight and it transpired that we agreed not only about hockey, but about many other things in life as well. A firm friendship was formed.

I was very fortunate in that the *Globe and Mail* sent me all over the continent covering hockey, and as a result, whenever I encountered Gretzky, I had lots of hockey gossip to pass along. He loved that because he had become a prisoner of his fame. If he went out, he would be mobbed, so he spent a lot of time talking on the phone to his friends in hockey. The primary currency in those conversations was inside information.

Wayne and I became close friends. He would often phone just to chat, and likewise, I would phone him when I had learned something I thought might interest him. There were no cellphones in those days, but he always made sure that I had his most recent private numbers and knew what alias he would be using to register at a hotel.

If we were in the same town, we would invariably go out for dinner on the off-nights. On game nights, we would meet for a beer or two afterwards.

When he left Edmonton in 1988, we drifted apart somewhat. For one thing, he got married, and like everyone else in those circumstances, he altered his lifestyle. Janet is a wonderful lady, and we get along famously, but it stands to reason that when you're a married man with children, the relationships you had as a bachelor get altered.

Another factor in the change was that he was no longer based in Canada. Both the *Globe and Mail* and subsequently the *Toronto Sun*, which I joined in 1994, focused on Canadian teams more than American teams.

For the rest of his career, we maintained a close relationship and spent time together when our paths crossed, but nonetheless, it must be conceded that the calls were no longer as frequent.

Even so, whenever I needed to talk to him, he was available, and there were occasions when we saw each other on a daily basis for extended periods—the Scandinavian goodwill tour in 1994, for instance, and during a number of playoff series in which he was participating. Because my editors knew that Wayne and I were good friends, I was invariably assigned to the series in which he was playing.

To this day, we still talk regularly, and when it came time to finalize this book in 2013, we spoke at length about his career.

The book was intended to be much shorter than it is, but with so much material at hand, it was impossible to keep it at the prescribed length. There are still some leftovers that simply wouldn't fit, but I feel safe in saying that this book contains thousands of pieces of information about Wayne Gretzky

that you didn't know and an equal number of his quotes that you have never heard before.

There are even some that he says he had forgotten about.

## CHAPTER ONE

More than a decade after Wayne Gretzky's 1999 retirement as an active player, there is still a gaping hole in hockey.

The National Hockey League continues to feature skilled players, and there are even those—Sidney Crosby comes to mind—who may eventually do as much for the game as Gretzky did over the years.

But Gretzky, despite his most common nickname, was much more than great. He was magnificent. His feats are legendary. When he retired, he held no fewer than sixty-one NHL records, most of which stand today and some of which will stand for at least our lifetimes. Perhaps they will last forever, and hockey will move on to a “modern era” in which the Gretzky standard is set aside as unattainable.

Gretzky holds every offensive record worth holding. He won ten scoring titles. He won the Hart Trophy as the most valuable player in the league nine times and twice won the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP. He also won the Lady Byng Trophy five times, was a first-team all-star eight times and a second-team all-star seven times. He was on four Stanley Cup-winning teams.

He not only broke records, he shattered them, so much so that even *Sports Illustrated*, a magazine that for a number of years was notorious for its anti-hockey stance, had to concede he was the most dominant athlete ever—in any sport.

Today, and for the foreseeable future, the fifty-goal season is a rarity. Gretzky once scored fifty goals in the first thirty-nine games of the season.

Today, a 100-point season is the benchmark of excellence. Gretzky had a 215-point season and a 212-point season. Only four times has an NHL player cracked the 200-point barrier. It was Gretzky all four times.

But there is so much more to Wayne Gretzky than his hockey skills, superb though they were. Anyone who knows him always makes the same observation: no matter how great he might have been as a hockey player, he is every bit as great as a human being.

You could ask Jean Anderson, for instance. Just hours before Gretzky announced his retirement in New York—a hectic time in his life, to say the least—he called Jean's husband, the Brantford, Ontario, sports broadcaster Arnold Anderson.

Arnold Anderson was the first person to conduct a radio interview with

Gretzky, a ten-year-old hockey prodigy at the time. Gretzky called to wish him well as he battled cancer. “That says something about the man—on a day like today that he would call,” said Jean. “We were moved.”

On that same weekend, I was wandering around Madison Square Garden and a security guard volunteered the information that when he was at his previous post, he’d had access to the players and had mentioned to Gretzky that he would like a stick. He was transferred to a different post where players did not normally go, but Gretzky sought him out and gave him a stick.

I told that story to Gretzky’s former coach and general manager, Glen Sather. He was not surprised and said that one of his fondest memories of Gretzky, still a teenager, was that he had insisted that Joey Moss, who has Down syndrome, be hired as a clubhouse attendant in Edmonton. “Here was something he could do to help a young guy,” Sather said. “He turned Joey’s whole life around. That was seventeen or eighteen years ago. That kid still is around and he even signs autographs. I have millions of memories of Wayne, and they aren’t so much what he did on the ice as what he did off the ice.”

Long after he had been traded away from the Oilers, Gretzky continued to buy a season ticket to Oilers games for Moss, who otherwise would have had to stay in the dressing room and watch the game on television—if it was televised. (In 2012, Joey Moss was awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal.)

When Gretzky was traded to the Los Angeles Kings in 1988, the opening game was seventy tickets short of being a sellout. Gretzky bought the seventy tickets and donated them to an orphanage. That information came from team owner Bruce McNall. Gretzky never mentioned it.

During the late stages of his playing career, Gretzky lived in a gated community just north of Los Angeles. One day when I arrived for a pre-arranged meeting, the guard at the massive electronic gate was unfailingly polite but firm. He explained that he would be glad to admit me as soon as he had called Gretzky and obtained clearance. He said he hoped I understood, but it was his job to make sure that only welcome visitors are allowed in, and he intended to do his job.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he said, “I can’t let you in until Mr. Gretzky calls. I might do it for some people, but Mr. Gretzky is the nicest person in this entire community and I wouldn’t want to do anything to upset him.”

Throughout his career, Gretzky gave away approximately seven hundred sticks a year, which he paid for himself. He signed approximately two hundred autographs a day. His large dining-room table is usually covered with all kinds of memorabilia that fans, his personal assistant, his father, Walter, charities and so on have sent for him to sign. Every time he goes past the table, he’ll sign ten or so, then continue on to wherever he was going.

“I don’t know what my dad does with all of them,” he told me once. “I think he must stand down on the street corner, asking if anybody wants one.” When we were chatting in 2013, I reminded him of that and he laughed.

“Nothing has changed,” he said. “I just sent him a box of about a thousand

that I signed over a two-week period and I stuck in a note saying, 'Happy Father's Day.'

"He'll call and he'll say, 'I don't have any pictures,' and I'll say, 'I just sent you five hundred or a thousand. What do you mean, you don't have any?'"

" 'Well, they go fast,' he says."

Even though Gretzky no longer plays, his father still loves hockey and Wayne makes sure he can see games in person.

"I get him two season tickets to the Leafs," Gretzky said, "and I think he goes to 90 per cent of the games. He goes down to the restaurant before the games and he says hello to everybody and then he goes to the game. He loves it. It keeps him young. It's actually really good for him. He's an interested NHL fan. He doesn't really root for one team or another, but he still likes to see the players."

In an era when sports stars are known for their arrogance and their disdain for their fans, not to mention their criminal lifestyles in too many cases, Gretzky always exceeded every expectation—in a positive sense. For years, even though he was recognized as the greatest hockey player in the world, he did interviews in every city on the NHL circuit. Naturally enough, he was always the one the local TV rights-holder wanted to talk to between periods. He would stand patiently in front of microphones and cameras, answering questions and promoting hockey, often in areas where the game badly needed promoting. He never skipped a morning skate, even on those rare occasions when he didn't go on the ice, because he knew that no matter what might be happening in hockey that day, the media would be looking for his perspective.

He spent his entire professional career—two decades as an active player—in the harshest of spotlights, and there was never once a justified hint of impropriety on his part. There were no suspensions, no court cases, not even a temper tantrum. The so-called "scandal" regarding his involvement in a betting ring that came after his playing career had concluded was a 100-per-cent fabrication, 90 per cent of it created by the media, the other 10 per cent by NHL commissioner Gary Bettman.

Instead, Gretzky's magnificent career is studded with honours, awards and adulation—Hart Trophies, Art Ross Trophies, Lady Byng Trophies, Conn Smythe Trophies and Stanley Cups, followed by the inevitable Hall of Fame induction. He is the only player in NHL history to be so esteemed that the league retired his number. No NHL player will ever again wear the famous 99.

In 1998, when he was thirty-seven and feeling his age a bit, he turned down an opportunity to play in the world championship, the annual tournament in which Canada competes using players whose NHL teams are out of the playoffs. But until then, on every single occasion for nineteen years, Gretzky answered every call to play for his country. He never was too busy to play for Canada in Canada Cups or the World Cup or the Olympics. He never was too tired to make the transatlantic trip to play in earlier editions of the world championships. He never developed mysterious back or groin ailments that

prevented him from participating in all-star games.

In 1994, the first of the three hockey seasons curtailed by a Bettman-imposed lockout, he organized a European barnstorming tour that caused mob scenes wherever it went in Scandinavia and Germany, raising the NHL's profile accordingly.

He even had a hand in the Stanley Cup triumphs of the Dallas Stars, Carolina Hurricanes, Anaheim Mighty Ducks and Tampa Bay Lightning. Were it not for Gretzky, it is almost certain that the NHL would not be established throughout the American Sunbelt.

Even the Los Angeles Kings, Stanley Cup winners in 2012, might not exist. Before Gretzky arrived in L.A. in 1988 and made the Kings the darlings of the southern California sporting scene, the team had filed for bankruptcy. There was considerable speculation that the Kings would either fold or move.

But Los Angeles is the glitter capital of the world, and when Gretzky arrived on the scene and was embraced by all the beautiful people, he brought hockey the California acceptance it had long coveted. In turn, the Los Angeles media machine trumpeted the Kings' success, thereby making NHL expansion into other locales in the southern United States a viable proposition. In a more direct example of Gretzky's impact, Michael Eisner, the head of the Walt Disney Company, spurred by his son's adulation of the Kings and Gretzky, had Walt Disney Studios make the movie *The Mighty Ducks*. Then Eisner bought an expansion franchise for Anaheim and named the team after the film.

About the only criticism of Gretzky to surface regularly is that he is too revered by the media. It's a strange criticism. Why is it wrong to consistently praise someone who rightly, and equally consistently, deserves it? It is easy to be negative, but if the critics were able to come up with one single serious flaw exhibited by Gretzky in his life, then their arguments might be taken seriously.

Where has he gone wrong? He was not only an outstanding hockey player, he is also an outstanding Canadian. He was instrumental in getting the 2010 Olympics for Vancouver, partly because wherever he has gone, he has represented his country with grace, dignity and eloquence. If spreading the truth about a great man is somehow unacceptable, then there is something tragically wrong with the media business. If there has ever been a superstar who is as thoughtful, personable and humble, he has not come to the attention of people who cover sports today.

Someday, far down the road, there may be another player who can match Wayne Gretzky's achievements. But there almost certainly will never be another player who can match his achievements and do it with his class.

## CHAPTER TWO

In North American sports, the great players sooner or later find their way to New York. Hollywood makes the movies, but New York makes the news. So it was only fitting that Wayne Gretzky would end his career with the Rangers.

He had done Hollywood with the Los Angeles Kings and, in the process, changed the face of the National Hockey League.

Now he would do New York.

It was to be a three-year stint, the winding down of a glorious career, and even though this period wasn't as productive as earlier stretches, it was perhaps the most eventful. He was embraced by the notoriously fickle New York fans; he was reunited with his buddy Mark Messier; he suffered an injury that appeared to be serious enough to put a premature end to his career; and finally, despite the pleas of family and friends, he decided that it was time to retire.

When he arrived in New York in 1996, he was thirty-five, and indisputably no longer what he had been in his best days. He was still a dominant player and among the league's top point-getters, but when you've been head and shoulders above everyone else in the world, merely being one of the best is cause for introspection.

He was still the league's reigning statesman, the ultimate authority on all things related to hockey. He was the one who was sought out for an opinion whenever a contentious issue surfaced—which it often did in the NHL. It was his presence in Los Angeles that had convinced entrepreneurs of the merits of hockey and had, as a result, spawned NHL franchises throughout the American Sunbelt.

Gretzky's idol had always been Gordie Howe, the man known as Mr. Hockey. But Howe had earned that title in an earlier era. Now, as the twentieth century neared its end, Wayne Gretzky had become Mr. Hockey to fans all over the world. He had set record after record, not merely edging past the previous mark but leaving it in the dust. He was a child prodigy who, unlike many such youngsters, had lived up to his billing as an adult. In fact, he had not only fulfilled all early expectations of him, he had surpassed them.

Yet in 1996–97 incredible though it may seem, he started to lose confidence in his ability. Halfway through his first season with the Rangers, after having been laid low for a while with a particularly virulent strain of flu, he said, "I

don't think there's an athlete in the world that plays at the top of their game who has not had a problem with their confidence level at some point. When I came here, I was nervous. If you hear it enough and see it enough, that people don't think you can play, subconsciously, you may start to believe it."

The funk didn't last long. A few chats with Messier restored his confidence, and his switch back to a wooden stick—a Hespeler—helped him regain his touch. Also, travel with the Rangers, whose divisional rivals were all nearby, was such a breeze that he was usually well rested.

For most of his days with the Oilers, Gretzky had flown on commercial flights. To avoid being pestered, he would sit in the window seat in the last row and either sleep or pretend to do so. The Kings had their own plane, but because of their location in southwestern California, the players often felt that the only way to rack up more air miles was to be an astronaut.

Once he settled in, Gretzky enjoyed New York. He lived in an apartment at Madison Avenue and 63rd Street, within easy reach of the best that Manhattan has to offer—the fine restaurants, the theatres, the museums and all the other attractions.

The proprietor of a friendly nearby delicatessen reserved a booth for Gretzky, and most mornings he'd drop in for breakfast in relative anonymity. The booth was hidden from street view, and usually he was able to eat without being disturbed. Occasionally, a fan would engage him in a chat—which he didn't mind—but he was never mobbed.

"New Yorkers are great," he said as we were having our deli breakfast not long after he had joined the Rangers. "Out on the street, they'll recognize me and they'll usually shout or say something, but then they just go on their way. There are lots of celebrities in New York, so they don't get too excited."

Even so, the New York experience was never quite what Gretzky had hoped it would be. After the first year, Messier left for a windfall contract in Vancouver. The Canucks' management tried to atone for the mistakes they'd made a year earlier when they failed to sign Gretzky by offering Messier a fantastic deal. It was so good that he collected his final payment—which was based on an appreciation in the team's value—in 2012.

Without Messier or a comparable replacement, the Rangers missed the playoffs the next year, which didn't please Gretzky in the least. But it was in the third year that his hockey world started to crumble. The Rangers were playing some of the best hockey of his tenure, but for a full month, he was on the sidelines with a serious back injury.

It was the second major back injury of his career. The other had been caused when Gary Suter ran him into the boards during a Canada Cup game, and he was out of action for half of the 1992–93 season.

The latest back injury was unrelated. "The one in L.A. was a T6 [vertebra]," Gretzky explained. "This is a C5. This is more upper back, lower neck. It's a different part of the back."

This one was also different in that it wasn't the result of one specific check. It was the result of repeated abuse. Throughout Gretzky's career, a goal scorer

often received a cross-check in the back when he raised his arms in celebration. This was so much the norm that when one of Gretzky's teammates, Craig Simpson, asked for a penalty to be assessed, the referee said, "What are you complaining about? You scored, didn't you?"

Gretzky's back had been bothering him for a long time, but in typical hockey fashion, he had done his best to play through the pain. Finally, in late February 1999, he could do so no longer and had to come out of the lineup.

"Yeah, that's why I'm mad at myself," he said after watching from the sidelines for three weeks. "I didn't get it checked. I had it all year and I didn't know it. I would have missed games then, and not now."

The Rangers had climbed back into the playoff hunt while Gretzky was out of action, and naturally enough, he would have loved to have been a part of it.

"Depressing?" he said, repeating a question I had put to him. "It's the worst—especially now our team is playing so well.

"It hit me about once a month, for about a six- or seven-day cycle," he said. "My neck and the right side of my body were really sore. I just thought it was one of those things. You know when you get a good night's sleep but maybe sleep on it wrong and get a stiff neck? That's what I thought I had. We played in Edmonton on a Sunday (February 21), and I got up Sunday morning and I couldn't move the right side of my body. I almost didn't play in Edmonton, but I said, 'Jeez, I've got to play here.' So we just heated it all day Sunday and Monday [before that night's game in Calgary], but both games, I had to play with one arm because I couldn't move the right side of my body."

Two days later, in New York the problem was worse than ever. Gretzky approached coach John Muckler and said, "John, I can't even hold my stick. I had better get this checked."

The team doctors put him on a three-stage plan. "I was on an oral anti-inflammatory for two weeks," he said. "That was the first step. That was the plan all along. The team went away, and I couldn't do anything anyway, so I went to Florida."

But when he came back in mid-March, tests showed that there had been no improvement. At that point, the medical staff gave him a steroid injection. Despite the general bad name that steroids have in the sporting world, in this case they were administered by a team physician and certainly weren't intended to be performance-enhancing, but rather, performance-enabling. They were meant to get Gretzky back in the lineup.

"It's a steroid that they hope will eat away at the inflammation," said Gretzky after the first injection. "Now I have to wait until next Tuesday, and if I still have the same kind of symptoms, I get another shot. I guess you can do these shots three times over three weeks."

Despite being in constant pain, he hadn't lost his sense of humour. "If it doesn't take after three weeks," he said, "then I guess we're on to Plan C—and I don't know what Plan C is.

"Hopefully, these shots will work. The doctor says he has had worse cases

that the shots have worked on, and he has had easier cases where it hasn't taken, so we don't know."

As it happened, two steroid injections did the job and Gretzky came back, but not before he had missed a month of action and twelve games.

To Gretzky, it was clear that his career was coming to an end. First, there was no guarantee that the pain would not return. Second, the person he most trusted to evaluate his playing skills—his father, Walter—wasn't saying much. He knew that his son was harbouring thoughts of retirement, and he wasn't ready to push him in that direction. Wayne, however, was acutely aware that, although the great hockey mind was still there, his body could no longer be counted on to do what it was told.

As the schedule wound down and the Rangers' playoff hopes slipped further and further away, there was increased speculation that this season would be Gretzky's last, even though he was still the Rangers' leading scorer. And whenever he had a chance to play with top-flight talent, his own skills became even more visible. At the All-Star Game two months earlier, he had been named the most valuable player.

With five days left in the season, the speculation ended. Larry Brooks and I—in the *New York Post* and *Toronto Sun* respectively—announced that Gretzky would retire after the final game, a Sunday afternoon affair in New York.

Gretzky himself stopped just short of confirming the news because he had promised the Rangers that the official announcement would be made in New York, and the team was on the road. But he did not deny the published stories.

On the Thursday night, the Rangers played in Ottawa, Gretzky's last road game and his last game in Canada. Earlier in the day, we had exchanged a few words, and as so many others had done, I told him I'd be sad to see him go.

"Don't you try to talk me out of it, too," he said with a smile. "I spent two days fighting off Janet and Barney." (Janet is his wife and Barney was his agent, Mike Barnett.)

He said the decision was not based on any animosity toward the Rangers, who had offered him the opportunity to be traded to any team in the league if he preferred to continue his career elsewhere. The wear and tear, however, had become too great. He admitted he was still bothered by the injured C5 vertebra in his neck and was planning to have at least one more steroid injection in the summer because he still had trouble turning his head.

Even so, the Ottawa fans clearly wanted him to reconsider.

"Just one more year, Wayne," read a banner hung on the wall outside the Rangers' hotel.

The Corel Centre staff working the visitors' dressing room had used white tape to affix a simple message to the front of their shirts: "NO."

The rabid pro-Senators crowd recognized that they were witnessing a momentous event and applauded the announcement of Gretzky's name in the starting lineup. They applauded again when he won the opening faceoff,