



...AS IN COMPLICATED

WHOEVER SAID "LEADERS AREN'T BORN,
THEY'RE MADE" WAS OBVIOUSLY THINKING
OF NHL CAPTAINS. BUT WHAT EXACTLY GOES
INTO THE MANUFACTURING PROCESS?

BY LINDSAY BERRA

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, MEET YOUR 2009-2010 NHL CAPTAINS...

Daniel Alfredsson, Senators; Jason Arnott, Predators; Rob Blake, Sharks; Eric Brewer, Blues; Dustin Brown, Kings; Zdeno Chara, Bruins; Sidney Crosby, Penguins; Shane Doan, Coyotes; Chris Drury, Rangers; Adam Foote, Avalanche; Jarome Iginla, Flames; Mikko Koivu, Wild; Jamie Langenbrunner, Devils; Vincent Lecavalier, Lightning; Nicklas Lidstrom, Red Wings; Roberto Luongo, Canucks; Bryan McCabe, Panthers; Ethan Moreau, Oilers; Brenden Morrow, Stars; Rick Nash, Blue Jackets; Scott Niedermayer, Ducks; Alex Ovechkin, Capitals; Mike Richards, Flyers; Craig Rivet, Sabres; Eric Staal, Hurricanes; Jonathan Toews, Blackhawks; Doug Weight, Islanders

IT'S JUST A LETTER YOU MIGHT SAY. THIRD IN THE ALPHABET,

handy for words like C-A-T and C-A-S-H and C-A-C-O-P-H-O-N-Y. It's also a musical note and the Roman numeral for 100. But when it's capitalized and bolded, cut from durable, moisture-wicking fabric and stitched to the front of a hockey sweater, the letter C becomes something else altogether. And on Feb. 16, 2009, following a game on Long Island, it burned the left side of Sidney Crosby's chest like a firebrand.

The year before, in Crosby's first season as captain, the Penguins had reached the Stanley Cup finals. But with 24 games to play, the Pens stood 10th in the East, in danger of missing the playoffs. Twenty-four hours earlier, general manager Ray Shero had fired coach Michel Therrien and promoted Dan Bylsma from Wilkes-Barre/Scranton in the American League to stanch the bleeding. Crosby had never before felt the weight of the C so heavily on his sweater. Righting the ship and rallying the troops had been his responsibility, but he felt he had failed both team and coach. Adding insult to ignominy, Crosby had his shootout attempt blocked in that evening's game, sealing a loss to the lowly Islanders. Shero says this was the first and only time he's seen Crosby, in five years as a Penguin,

tique that doesn't linger around captains in other sports. Historically, the C has been bestowed upon the grizzled vet whose legitimacy draws from longevity and multiple playoff battles—seven current NHL captains are older than 35; 18 are over 30. Crosby certainly had earned the respect of his peers, most notably by handling the pressure of his wunderkind reputation with aplomb and by topping 100

THE DAY SIDNEY CROSBY BECAME CAPTAIN OF THE PENGUINS WAS THE DAY HE HAD THE WISDOM TO KNOW HE WASN'T READY TO LEAD THE TEAM.

lose his focus. "That was the hardest time I've had as captain," Crosby says. "We'd tried everything, and it didn't work. I felt like I'd let the coach down. I was mentally drained."

Crosby has the type of self-critical mind that plagues the overly gifted. Like the concert pianist who fixates on slight flubs of his fingers even as he bows to a standing ovation, Crosby obsesses over flaws. It was his drive to be the best that prompted the Penguins, in May 2007, to make him the youngest permanent captain in NHL history at 19 years 297 days. His appointment broke the seven-year-old mark of Tampa Bay's Vincent Lecavalier (by 27 days) and sparked a leaguewide debate about the role of an NHL captain. In hockey, the position has a mys-

points in each of his first two seasons in the NHL. But his appointment was a direct affront to one of hockey's grandest traditions.

NEARLY EVERY sport has captains, of course. All are leaders in some capacity, and most are granted the responsibility of dealing with officials on the field, court or ice. But the NHL is the only major pro league in which the captain is rule-bound to be identified by "the letter C, approximately three inches in height and in contrasting color, in a conspicuous position on the front of his sweater." It's the visibility of the letter that lends power to its bearer and has made it such an enduring symbol of leadership. The C is also inexorably linked to an-

other icon: the Stanley Cup. That's because the captain of an NHL team, not the owner or coach, is the first to raise the Cup overhead. "That's the biggest perk," says Joe Sakic, who captained the Avalanche to Cups in 1996 and 2001. "And it's part of the lore of the C." Those who wear it are obligated to live up to the leadership of those who have gone before: to Sakic's quiet intensity, to the professionalism of Steve Yzerman, to the fiery drive of Mark Messier and to the seven Stanley Cups raised among them.

Of course, other sports have legendary leaders too. Remember Red Sox captain Carl Yastrzemski ripping his teammates for their 10–20 spring training record in 1975, then leading them to the World Series? And New York Giants captain Harry Carson walking out alone for the coin toss at the 1987 Super Bowl and lining up against six Denver Broncos? And Kobe Bryant, whose work ethic and drive (and 30.2 points per game) catapulted the Lakers to the 2008–09 NBA championship? But in today's NBA, the captaincy is more ceremonial than serious, and no captain is singled out with a C. In the NFL, the captain's most pressing duty is the coin toss. In soccer, players may covet the captain's armband, but how important can the role be when it's casually passed from one player to another upon a substitution? In baseball, the title is so irrelevant that only the Yankees (Derek Jeter), Red Sox (Jason Varitek) and White Sox (Paul Konerko) even have captains—and only Varitek wears the C on his uniform. Is it a scarlet letter or a badge of honor? Upon

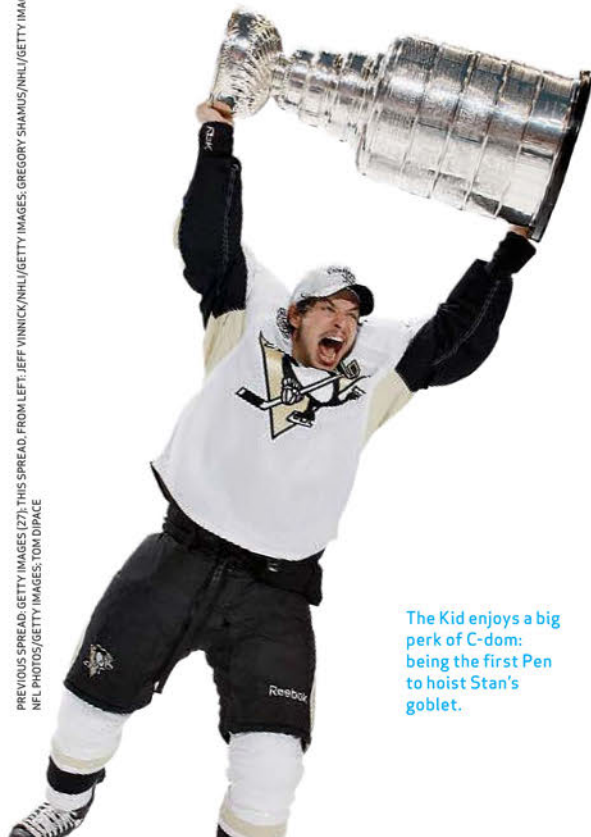


PREVIOUS SPREAD: GETTY IMAGES (27); THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: JEFF VINNICK/NHL/GETTY IMAGES; GREGORY SHAMUS/NHL/GETTY IMAGES; GIN ELLIS/NFL PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; TOM DIPACE

being named captain and presented his adorned jersey, in 2004, Varitek was so uncomfortable being singled out that he had the team sew an A (for assistant captain) on Doug Mirabelli's spring training uniform and AGM (for assistant general manager) on the jerseys of Curt Schilling and Kevin Millar. Those letters were quickly removed, while Varitek's stayed. "I was very honored, but I didn't know I was going to have to wear it," he says. Even today, Varitek's C may as well stand for Conspicuous.

Hockey, meanwhile, takes the wearing of the C seriously, and the letter could stand for Chemist. Twenty players hit the ice in every game, all keyed to the same game plan. Like football, hockey is combative. Like basketball, its pace never quits. And like baseball, the hockey season runs forever. The captain must make sense of all those hits, all that speed and all that time. "The culture of hockey, more than most sports, is about keeping the team together," says Devils captain Jamie Langenbrunner. "To be successful, you need everybody to pull together. By putting the C on somebody, you're appointing him to make that happen."

Wearing the C requires a broad set of skills. An NHL captain must be a motivator, inspiring each player to be his best even in the deepest of team or individual funks. He must be a level-headed arbitrator of disputes, an approachable and open link of communication between players, coaches and management, and a fair delegator of responsibility. He must know the benefits of levity, and know when to use his position as social coordinator to provide it.



The Kid enjoys a big perk of C-dom: being the first Pen to hoist Stan's goblet.

While many captains shirk those more trivial duties, the best embrace them. Crosby, who is the first to mock his lack of prowess with a cell phone, enlists the help of roommate Pascal Dupuis to text the team every time the captain wants to send a message or plan a meeting or dinner. Above all, a captain must play hard, play hurt and play right.

It's that last part, leading by example, that players most often cite as the key to captaincy. One game into the 2001–2002 season, Lightning coach John Tortorella took the C away from the 21-year-old Lecavalier, ultimately giving it to 39-year-old Dave Andreychuk the following season. Lecavalier was disappointed—until the Lightning won the 2004 Stanley Cup under Andreychuk's tutelage.



What's it like to be a captain? Harry Carson reveled in the honor and responsibility. Jason Varitek? Not so much.

"The way Dave did things, he inspired guys," says Lecavalier. "His whole career, he took the beatings in front of the net and was in there getting big goals. He gave his all for us. When you go through two months of playoffs, you need everybody going in the same direction. Dave said, We're going that way, and we followed."

When Crosby was given the C, no other captain in the league was younger than 27. But in the 34 months since Crosby's appointment, seven teams have bestowed the honor upon players 25 or younger. To a man, these fresh-faced C's are extraordinary talents: Alex Ovechkin of the Caps, the Blackhawks' Jonathan Toews, Blue Jacket sniper Rick Nash, Mike Richards of the Flyers, Dustin Brown of the Kings, the Hurricanes' Eric Staal and Thrasher-turned-Devil Ilya Kovalchuk. Their performances on the ice are worthy of emulation, their maturity off it is beyond their years. But lack of life experience prohibits each from being the type of nuanced leader expected of an older player.

"I don't think the young guys realize how much more there is," says Messier, the only NHL player to captain two different teams to Stanley Cup championships. He says, flatly, that he couldn't have been

a captain at 19, and that he only *might* have been ready when he was actually named C of the Oilers at 27. But his tactics are legendary. Messier passed out books, such as Pat Riley's *The Winner Within* and Phil Jackson's *Sacred Hoops*. In 1991, his first act as Rangers captain was to remove a cabinet stocked with tape, laces and the tools of stick repair from the center of the Rangers locker room because it prevented him from making eye contact with teammates. Messier strived to have a personal relationship with every player so criticism wouldn't be misconstrued, and so no other issues—from food allergies and phobias to issues with confidence or physical fitness—would affect on-ice performance and detract from Messier's ultimate goal: winning.

Five years after his retirement, Messier still speaks with cultish conviction about what it means to be a captain: "To be an effective leader, you must earn the trust of your men. They must believe you have their best interests at heart. Only then can you help them discover themselves as athletes and people and ultimately achieve their maximum potential." You can almost hear the NHL's twentysomething C's voicing a collective, "Huh?"

Simply, the C is about respect. Players respect those who wear it, and those who wear it respect the C. Steel City's inner circle uniformly agrees that the day Crosby became captain was the day he had the wisdom to know he wasn't ready to lead the team. Pittsburgh was captainless from January to February 2007 in the wake of Mario Lemieux's retirement. Shero had a heart-to-heart with his budding star. "I told Sid we wanted him to be captain," Shero recalls. Crosby considered the offer, then said no, because the timing wasn't right. The Penguins were poised to make the playoffs for the first time since 2001 and Crosby didn't want to cause a distraction. Always a pass-first player, Crosby worried he hadn't yet earned the letter. "I had respect for the older guys on our team and I wanted them to know

I wanted to earn the C as much as I could. The team wanted a captain, and I looked forward to the opportunity, but I had to prove to myself that I could handle it," Crosby says. "I won the scoring race and after that, I got a little more comfortable. The extra half-season gave me the time to prove myself."

That self-awareness is an indicator that a young player is fit to lead. Ovechkin's passion for the game is magnetic and his dynamic skill set made him the Capitals on-ice leader the moment he arrived in DC. Still, one glaring insecurity prevented him from wearing the C: "My English was not good enough," he says. The Caps resisted the urge to promote him immediately and instead waited four-and-a-half years to name their young superstar captain. But what works in Washington may not fly elsewhere. The league trend has become more reflexive: Draft a phenom, pay a ton of money, give him the C.

In January 2008, Ovechkin signed a 13-year, \$124 million extension with Washington, the first \$100 million deal in NHL history. Richards has a 12-year, \$69 million deal with the Flyers. Nash is signed for eight years and \$62.4 million. Toews and Crosby are both committed for five years, at \$31.5 million and \$43.5 million, respectively. "Teams are thinking, we're essentially giving these guys the keys to the store," says Flyer Chris Pronger. "So they need to be our leaders."

Some teams have better luck with the superstar-as-captain plan than others. After a tough January loss to the Capitals, Pronger sits in the glaringly empty visitors' dressing room at the Verizon Center, one battered foot submerged in a garbage can full of ice water and ice bags Saran-wrapped to his knees, fielding questions from Philadelphia writers. The rest of the Flyers, Richards included, are hiding in the showers and treatment rooms, dodging the press. At 35, Pronger is a 16-year vet, a Norris Trophy winner and a Stanley Cup champ. For all intents and purposes, he could be the Flyers' captain. Instead, he serves as a foil to Richards, throwing the young captain's flaws into sharper focus.

Richards, with his edgy two-way game, had been

MODEL C-TIZENS

TAKE IT FROM THESE OFF-ICE CAPTAINS: YOU DON'T NEED SKATES TO LEAD A TEAM.



RICK FRYAN,
CAPTAIN, GOODTIME III CRUISE
SHIP, CLEVELAND

When did you know you had what it takes to be a captain?

Well, nepotism helps. My father and grandfather were captains, so it was expected of me. But I still had to learn the skills to be a good one.

What does being a captain mean to you?

It means you can order any type of breakfast you want and someone will make it for you.

What's the best way to lead?
"The customer is always right."



RICARDO WRIGHT
BELL CAPTAIN, DETROIT
MARRIOTT

Do you feel you were named captain at the right time?

I was chosen because no one else at the hotel wanted this job. It paid only a quarter more an hour than regular bellhops, and there was more to do.

What makes a good captain?

I like to use the power of suggestion. After all these years, I can look at somebody and get them to do something, and they don't even know they're doing it. It's beautiful.



CHIP LONG
CAPTAIN, AMERICAN AIRLINES,
CHICAGO

When did you know you had what it takes to be a captain?

I'm the oldest of eight kids, so responsibility has always been a part of my life. It's in my DNA.

Got any captain-y advice?

All those old clichés—the buck stops here, it's on my back, etc? Well, they're all true.

What makes a good captain?

I'm involved in the worlds of everyone on my team. If I could run out of the cockpit and serve coffee, I would.



J BIRD / CAPTAIN GEECH
CAPTAIN GEECH AND THE SHRIMP
SHACK SHOOTERS,
JACKSONVILLE, ILL.

What makes a good captain?

Keep the rest of the band out of marriage proposals and away from too many shots.

What does being a captain mean to you?

I'm the guy who makes sure everyone gets on the bus.

What's the best way to lead?

My philosophy: Whatever I do, do the complete opposite.

Ever doubt your ability?
Every single day.

in Philadelphia than there would be in another city." Richards boycotted the media for nearly a month earlier this season because he objected to articles written after Flyers GM Paul Holmgren complained about the players' affinity for Philly nightlife. Richards told the *Hockey News* that writers "make things up" and "throw [the team] under the bus." When Richards finally emerged from the treatment room following the loss to the Caps, the Philadelphia beat writers confronted him about his harsh words. The heated altercation ended with Richards loudly tossing expletives at one local writer. Ladies and gentleman, this is your captain speaking.

Despite their spot atop of the Central Division, the Blackhawks also have been the subject of recent jokes. Toews, known as Captain Serious, has far too

all in this together. We're all responsible for it. We're going to answer back with the way we perform and the way we play." Last season, Toews led the Hawks with 34 goals and the team reached its first Western Conference final since 1995. This year, they're poised for a Cup run. But long before Toews and the Hawks proved themselves on the scoreboard, Toews proved himself on paper. He took a 350-question, multiple-choice test that helps coaches assess the aptitude of players, and the results validated the decision to make Toews captain at 20. "It said he wouldn't allow himself to fail, and he wouldn't allow others to fail, either," says former Chicago GM Dale Tallon. "Jonathan has an aura about him."

Auras or not, what cements a captain's legacy is his record on the ice. Crosby may have been mentally absent in Bylsma's first game as coach of the Penguins, but he was wholly present as the Pens went 18-3-3 in their remaining 24 games to finish fourth in the East. They faced the Red Wings for the Stanley Cup in a rematch of the 2008 finals, and this time they won. Crosby was a captain and a Cup champ, all before his 22nd birthday. "Winning will always be the challenge," Crosby says. "The bigger challenge is being consistent and winning every year." Now the Penguins have a chance to repeat, and Crosby has a chance to extend his young legacy. Some other young captains, meanwhile, have a chance to begin writing their own. ☹

THE 20-YEAR-OLD TOEWS TOOK A 350-QUESTION TEST TO ASSESS HIS APTITUDE. THE RESULTS SAID HE WOULDN'T ALLOW HIMSELF TO FAIL, SO THE BLACKHAWKS HANDED HIM THE C.

in the Flyers' captaincy plans since he was drafted. On the ice, he's been compared to legendary Flyers captain Bobby Clarke; off the ice, he gripes like Clarke never would. "The biggest challenge is dealing with the media," Richards says. "Dealing with the pressure and answering all the questions when things aren't going well. There's a lot more pressure

often had to perform another role of the captain: damage control. Most recently, in January, Toews had to address a series of embarrassing photos that appeared on the Internet in which three shirtless Hawks—including 36-year-old vet John Madden, 15 years Toews' senior—were shown cavorting with women in a Vancouver limousine. Said Toews: "We're

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