



BY LINDSAY BERRA

YOU WANT STRESS? STEP INTO ANY NHL GOAL CREASE. YOU WANT THE MOST STRESSFUL JOB IN SPORTS? FOR THAT YOU'LL HAVE TO LIVE BEHIND THE MASK OF MONTREAL GOALTENDER CAREY PRICE.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARAH A. FRIEDMAN

On a recent December morning, six floors above the snow-piled corner

of Chemin Queen Mary and Avenue Decelles, Olivier Bauer is discussing his upcoming graduate course, *La Religion du Canadien de Montréal* (The Religion of the Montreal Canadiens). It seems that the University of Montreal theology professor has rankled both the marketing department of Les Glorieux—French Canadians call their NHL club the Glorious Ones—and Montreal Cardinal Jean-Claude Turcotte. The Habs suits think the notion that their team is divine is a bit much; His Eminence says the course is disrespectful to religion. Bauer, though, strongly believes that Catholicism and hockey commingle in La Belle Ville in a special way. He cites the woman who climbed 283 steps to L'Oratoire Saint-Joseph on her knees to bring the team luck in the 2008 postseason and mentions legions of ailing Canadiens fans in the 1950s who claimed to be cured after touching the sweat-stained sweater of Rocket Richard. Now the faithful sing the praises of a new savior: a gifted young goaltender nicknamed Jesus because his last name almost rhymes with Christ.

So much for perspective.

But no matter. Carey Price may have the most high-pressured job in sports. (For other opinions, see the boxes throughout the story.) It's one thing to act as the last line of defense in a game in which goals are only a bit more common than broadcast deals; it's another task entirely to man this post in Montreal. The Canadiens—arguably one of the three or four most storied franchises in all of sports history—are inarguably positioned this season to drive a young goaltender batty. Not only is the club hosting the 57th NHL All-Star Game (Jan. 25) in this, its centennial season; but the skilled and speedy Habs also happen to have the third-best record in the Eastern Conference. Expectations for a Stanley Cup are even loftier than usual in town, and with 10 players, including scorers Alex Kovalev



The Habs' hot pick of 2005 has been on fire this season, giving up more than two goals only once in a key 14-game (9-1-4) span.

and Saku Koivu, eligible for free agency this summer, the time to get things done in Montreal is now.

Pressure. It pushes and distresses. It has heft and weight and can squeeze the brain. It wakes you in the night, calls to you in the street, growls when you do not pay it proper heed. Many are defeated by it. Some are enraged by it. Others, like Price, take stock of it and learn to coexist. And when it's withstood, of course, pressure creates diamonds.

Montreal knows something about things that glitter. The franchise has won 24 Cups, more than a few on the backs of goaltenders who performed beyond their years. In 1971, 23-year-old rookie Ken Dryden, who played just six games during the regular season, sparked in the playoffs and stole the Cup for a team that finished third in the division. Fifteen years later, 20-year-old Patrick Roy brought the team another improbable Cup, posting a remarkable 1.92 goals against in 20 playoff games. Last season, Price's Canadiens made a surprising late run to finish first in the East, and the 20-year-old was immediately compared to Dryden and Roy. So when Price saw his face superimposed onto the

body of Jesus on a fan's sign during the playoffs, it was a not-so-subtle reminder that Canadiens devotees expect miracles from goalies who don the *Bleu, Blanc et Rouge*.

As if the stresses of the job itself aren't enough. It's pretty easy, in fact, to make a case that no position in sports requires a greater combination of athleticism, intelligence, stamina and focus than NHL goaltender—and no NHL goaltender is under a brighter spotlight than whoever's guarding the net for Montreal.

Think about it: He is on the ice for 60 minutes. When play is at the opposite end of the rink, he must fight to keep his focus. When the action turns up ice, his senses shift into overdrive. A netminder's top priority is the puck; he must know where it is at all times. But he must also watch play and predict how it will unfold. He must know a puckcarrier's options better than the puckcarrier himself, see through traffic in his crease and line of sight, recognize shooters and know their tendencies—all so he can gamble with constantly shifting percentages. When the shot comes, he must handle

it, controlling the rebound so as not to give up another. He is his team's most crucial penalty killer and its last resort. Even if his timing, position-ing and reactions are perfect, he can still be beaten by a deflection or tip or 100-mph bullet that neither man nor machine could catch.

In Montreal, meanwhile, there is really only one true measure of success, in the net or elsewhere on the ice: hardware. GM Bob Gainey won five Cups there. Coaches Guy Carbonneau, Kirk Muller and Doug Jarvis have a total of seven. Black-and-white photos of the team's 44 Hall of Famers line the locker rooms at both the Bell Centre and the team's training facility, holding every skater accountable with hollow-eyed stares. It is worse for Price. The Vezina Trophy, given to the league's top netminder, was named for a Canadiens goalie and won 28 times by one. Where does the plaque listing all the winners hang? Opposite the locker of the reigning home goalie. "It's impossible not to notice," Price says. "I've gotten used to it, but every day, they're there."

Then there's the culture. The image on the back of a Canadian \$5 bill does not feature the Canadian Parliament Buildings or Le Chateau Frontenac; it features a hockey scene. And Montreal isn't merely Canada; it's French Canada, where roughly six mil-

HOT SEATS

Sure, Price is under the gun. But a bunch of other high-profile highfliers are in the crosshairs too—and the players and suits we checked with were happy to give them up. Anonymously, of course.

HOT SEATS MLB



YANKEES PITCHER CC SABATHIA

"He makes the most money," says one GM. "That's how it always works. That's why A-Rod gets so much heat. When you play in New York, and you make the most

money, you have to expect it. Plus, the Yankees didn't make the playoffs last year for the first time in a long time. They're also opening a new stadium. Fans are going to expect Sabathia to be the savior. That's a lot of stress. He's a big, strong guy, and he'll be great—but he's really up against it."

lion prideful Francophones seem to believe that the success of their club is tied to the preservation of their culture. "The Québécois have three things that belong to them," Bauer says. "The French language, the Catholic religion and Les Canadiens de

Montréal." Their language is threatened in their view by English-speaking Quebecers, their religion by the province's diversity. And unlike New York, where fans can shed tears for the Yankees and move on to the Giants, these true believers have but one team on which to focus their energies: Les Glorieux, Les Habitants, Le Tricolore.

That obsession is stoked by the French media. Eleven beat writers travel with the team (four follow the Rangers), along with dozens of reporters who fill airspace on radio and TV stations, including three all-hockey, all-the-time TV channels. An off-day optional skate has a bigger media crush than a Saturday night game in Detroit. "It's too much," says Quebec native and former Canadiens goalie José Théodore, who won the Hart and Vezina trophies in 2002, then became a tabloid punching bag before being traded to Colorado in 2006. "Even when there are two days with no game, there are 20 people there looking for a story. That's when they start to say stuff. I remember players getting booed, and wondering, Why is he getting booed, the game just started? And it was about an article in the paper. There are people who just like to create controversy."

In Montreal, every slide by the team or a player—even a mini one—is a controversy. "If you

have a bad game, man, do they let you know," says former goalie Rogie Vachon, who helped the team win three Cups in the 1960s and '70s. "Lose two in a row, there's total panic. Fire the coach. Move somebody. The pressure is terrible." For players, there is no reprieve. Those who relish privacy rarely go out, and they keep their ski caps pulled low when they need to fill the car's gas tank or restock the fridge. Others like the attention. Brian Hayward, Roy's backup from 1986 to 1990, recalls sitting next to Mick Jagger and Jerry Hall in a restaurant. "The chef came out for an autograph and walked right by them and came to me," Hayward remembers. "Mick and Jerry were looking at us like, Who the hell is he?"

That was the same question asked on July 30, 2005, when the Canadiens selected Price from the

WHL's Tri-City Americans with the fifth overall pick, the team's highest in two decades. With Théodore established between the pipes, the public thought the pick would have been better spent on scoring up front. But Gainey had read the scouting reports that pegged Price as "very confident" with "excellent focus and concentration" and "a level demeanor," who made "key saves in pressure situations." Phrases, in other words, that suggested he might survive the heat in Montreal's crease.

With Price, who gets excited only about country music and sci-fi books, the team was lucky. He grew up in Anahim Lake, B.C., 2,500 miles from the fervor of Quebec. His mother, Lynda, is chief of the Ulkatcho First Nation, the first woman elected to the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs. Dad Jerry was a goaltender too, drafted 126th overall by



Price moved into the starter's crease last season after former No. 1 Cristobal Huet was sent to the Caps.

the Flyers in 1978. Carey didn't play organized hockey until he was nine, when Jerry, a licensed pilot, began flying him to the nearest rink, 200 miles away. When ice, snow and darkness made flying impossible—there was no lit runway in Anahim Lake—they made the six-hour round-trip by car, talking about life and the game. "Mental outlook is such an important part of being a goalie," says Price in the measured cadence inherited from his father. "My dad always told me to have a short memory, whether things are going good or bad. Play in the moment. If one goes in, forget about it and get ready for the next one."

Price backstopped Team Canada to a World Junior gold in January 2007 and was voted MVP of the tournament. Five months later, he was named Calder Cup Playoff MVP after leading the Hamilton Bulldogs to an AHL championship. By the time Price made his first start for Montreal last October, he'd already been anointed as the guy to lead the Canadiens to their first Stanley Cup since 1993.

Lucky him, given that his ascension came at a time when a goalie's job is harder than ever. Since the lockout, rule changes that eliminated clutching and grabbing have allowed skaters to gain more speed through the neutral zone, hiking the number of odd-man rushes and quality scoring chances. Despite that, of course, save percentages continue to improve—from .881 in 1988-89 to .909 this season—in part because pads are bigger, in part because of more strategic improvements.

Goaltenders, who now have their own position gurus and game DVDs to obsess over, no longer chase madly after the puck, kicking and sprawling; they simply anticipate where it's going, move into position and allow it to hit them. The goals scored by greats such as Guy Lafleur and Cam Neely on slap shots from the wing in decades past aren't scored today because goalies move out of the crease and block the view of the net. And nearly every goalie, including Price, has abandoned

+ HOT SEATS NASCAR



TONY EURY JR., CREW CHIEF FOR DALE EARNHARDT JR.

"This job is hard enough as it is, but Tony is the only crew chief on Pit Road who gets booed leaving the racetrack and ripped on talk radio," says another Cup Series chief. "That's the price of being the one calling the shots for the most popular driver in the sport. Hell, the only points race Dale won this year was at Michigan, and it was because of Tony's pit strategy—but Tony still caught crap because it wasn't a 'real' win. I just wonder, if he wasn't Dale's cousin, would he put up with all that stuff?"

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On a breakaway, Price's patience forces shooters to commit the first move—the only edge he needs.

+ HOT SEATS NBA



SUNS GM STEVE KERR

"Leadership is about making the tough decisions," says one Eastern Conference GM. "If the Suns are going to have more of a defensive mentality, then Kerr has to deal Steve Nash. That won't be popular in Phoenix. Also, it's hard to run a team as an absentee GM, and he still lives in San Diego."



CF NOTRE DAME COACH CHARLIE WEIS

"He's pretty much doomed," says a Big Ten defensive coordinator. "At Notre Dame, you have to be in the BCS

every year. It doesn't help that Weis came in with such a great résumé, had great talent when he arrived and got off to a great start. He's gone backward since then, and who's fault is that? Another 7-6 season and he's probably done."



NFL COWBOYS QB TONY ROMO

"He has the toughest job," says one AFC player. "The Cowboys are America's Team, and they appeared on

Hard Knocks, and pro football is a big deal in Texas. Plus, guys preceding him—Roger Staubach and Troy Aikman—cemented their legacy in Dallas. I wouldn't know anything about dating a music star, but I do know one thing: It's all about winning."

the stand-up style in favor of the more efficient butterfly, dropping to the ice with their oversize pads in a V to cover the lower portion of the goal. At 6'3" and 219 pounds, Price takes up a lot of space in the net. As a kid he honed his athleticism in soccer, hoops and rodeo, so despite his size, he can still make the YouTube save on the rare cases when called for. But when coaches and former goalies talk about Price, they speak most often about the efficiency of his technique and the effortlessness of the movements he uses to block the puck. He's a

TO FATHOM THE PASSION BEHIND HABS HOCKEY, JUST ENROLL IN PROFESSOR BAUER'S GRAD COURSE, "THE RELIGION OF THE MONTREAL CANADIENS."

quiet guy, and his game is quieter still.

But it's hard to stay calm and play in a town that regards a Stanley Cup as practically a civic right. Failure to deliver on the ultimate prize can leave scars—and bitter memories. (Former Habs goalies Dryden, Roy, Cristobal Huet, Jocelyn Thibault and Jeff Hackett refused to discuss their Montreal careers for this story.) That's why Price's quietness and composure may be his best assets. "He's always calm back there, and it spills over to the whole team," says teammate Mike Komisarek. "No matter how crazy things get, he doesn't show much." That's key, according to Dryden, who wrote about

his time in Montreal in his 1983 book *The Game*. "You're trying to deliver a message to your team that things are okay back here. This end of the ice is pretty well cared for."

Of course, it helps that Price doesn't speak or read French (although he is teaching himself), leaving the majority of the press in Montreal, good or bad, beyond his grasp. In last season's playoff trial by fire, Price gave up just five goals in his first four outings against Boston, putting his team one win from advancing. But when the Bruins scored five goals in both Games 5 and 6, public opinion overwhelmingly favored moving backup Jaroslav Halak into the starting spot. Price, however, rebounded in Game 7, and the Canadiens moved to the second round against the Flyers, who dispatched them in five games.

The memory of their early exit still stings. "It was the toughest loss of my career so far," Price says. "I really just hate to lose." No one cared that the Habs' power play, which had been the NHL's best in the regular season, was one of the postseason's worst. The goalie is always easiest to blame, and that is Jesus Price's cross to bear.

He wouldn't have it any other way. "Carey wants to be the difference," his dad says. "He wants to be the No. 1 guy on the biggest stage there is." He'll have to be. The Canadiens' power play is still a shadow (27th) of last season's scoring machine—they had hoped to sign free agent pivot Mats Sundin, who instead landed in Vancouver—and the Bruins come-from-nowhere success has put the East's postseason home ice advantage up for grabs. Only Price's dominance (16-4-5, 2.30 GAA, .921 SP, through Jan. 9) has helped keep his team's centennial dream alive. So the people of Montreal are in love again, and they showed it by voting early and often online for the NHL's

All Star lineup. Price and three teammates will start for the East.

But love can fade. Montreal's fans and media, all famously fickle, have forgotten that they were a little too quick with the anointing oil last season—and the boiling oil when things went south. It'll take another run in the playoffs to see which kind is on hold for Price these days.

Price has a lot to learn, particularly about speaking French. To see (and hear) for yourself, check out the video of our cover shoot on ESPNTHEMAG.COM.

Zinio:

Not everyone can cope with the pressures of playing goal in Montreal, and even these three Hall of Famers have had eccentricities that helped them cope. Jacques Plante (seven Stanley Cups, six Vezina Trophies) knitted his own undershirts. Roy (two Cups, two Conn Smythes, three Vezinas) chatted regularly with his goalposts. Gump Worsely (four Cups) drank (rye, as he once corrected a coach who accused the portly netminder of having a beer belly).