

“I Love Slafkovský’s Emotion”

Gretzky’s Longtime Photographer on 50 Years Behind the Lens

A weekend conversation with renowned hockey photographer Bruce Bennett

Bruce Bennett may well be the most respected hockey photographer in the world. Over the course of his career he has photographed **more than 6,400 games**, including **over 5,000 in the NHL**. The 70-year-old American now serves as **head of hockey photography at Getty Images**, one of the most prestigious visual agencies in the world.

A native of New York, Bennett became widely known for documenting the career of **Wayne Gretzky**, capturing countless defining moments of the game’s greatest player. He has covered **more than 40 Stanley Cup Finals** and **seven Winter Olympic Games**. He is also **the only photographer inducted into the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame**.

From Milan

By Tomáš Prokop

If someone calls you the most famous hockey photographer in the world, how do you react?

“It’s very flattering. I just go to games like the players do—shift after shift, period after period. Before I knew it, I had six thousand games behind me.”

You began at the legendary Madison Square Garden during the 1973–74 season. What do you remember from those days?

“I was an eighteen-year-old kid shooting from the very top of the arena. At first I was only photographing the warmups.

I would send the photos to *The Hockey News*, which was the biggest hockey publication at the time. They paid me three or four dollars per picture—and that’s how my career as a hockey photographer began.”

Was hockey always your main focus?

“I tried photographing other sports, but as a sports photographer you really succeed only when you deeply understand the sport you’re shooting. I knew hockey well—I played it as a kid—so I stuck with the game I understood.”

You’re often described as Wayne Gretzky’s personal photographer.

“I like that description. Wayne’s career and mine overlapped from the beginning of his NHL days.

I traveled on some trips with him in North America and Europe. I took private photos when he joined the New York Rangers and photographed several of his youth hockey camps. We’ve always had a great relationship.”

Did that relationship ever turn into friendship?

“I try not to cross that line with athletes. I prefer to keep things professional. I’ve never had dinner with a professional athlete. Even when I visited someone’s home, it was strictly for a scheduled photo shoot.

You have to stay objective. You can’t develop emotional ties to a player or a team. Otherwise it affects your work.”

Still, did Gretzky trust you more than most photographers?

“He knew me well. Someone once joked that when I was younger I looked like Albert Einstein. I was also friendly with his agent. We had several sessions where I photographed his portraits.”

Are there particular photos of Gretzky—or anyone else—that mean the most to you?

“It’s hard to choose after taking so many pictures. But many of my favorites involve the **Stanley Cup**.

I love the images where Wayne is surrounded by the trophies he had just won—usually three to five of them. I was also there for some of the biggest milestones, like when he broke Phil Esposito’s goal record or when he scored his 892nd goal, which Alex Ovechkin has since surpassed, as well as many of his points records.”

Since we're speaking with a Slovak outlet, we have to ask about the Šťastný brothers.

“The Šťastný brothers were incredible. I once captured a beautiful photograph of all three of them together that was later published in Boston Garden.

I remember Peter the most, but I photographed Marián and Anton too. They were wonderful people. You don't often see three brothers playing at such an elite level—and even on the same line. And their story was remarkable.”

Were there players you especially enjoyed photographing?

“Superstars always fascinated me the most. With Connor McDavid, sometimes you just want to put the camera down and admire his game.

I felt the same way years ago watching Bobby Orr or Paul Coffey. It was amazing to watch defensemen who could control the entire game. Among more recent players, Patrick Kane was always great to photograph because of his style.”

McDavid's speed must make your job even harder.

“It's a challenge. Hockey photography is always demanding. But that's what motivates you—the speed of the game and the chance to capture that perfect moment.”

What has changed the most in your work over the years?

“The biggest change, of course, was the move to digital photography.

In the old days you had to take the film back to the lab, develop it, and only then could the photos be published. Now you look at the screen immediately and know whether you captured the shot. Back then we even focused manually.”

Did working with film make things more exciting?

“In some ways, yes. A few years ago I published a photo from a Stanley Cup Final that came from a sequence of twelve thousand frames. Someone pointed out how many rolls of film that would have been.”

You've been inducted into the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame. What did that mean to you?

"It was a huge surprise. Zach Parise, Joe Pavelski, and Scott Gomez were being honored at the same time.

I remember thinking: I just take pictures. Nobody checks me into the boards or commits penalties against me. But it's amazing to be the first photographer to receive that recognition."

The NHL has been your life, but you've also covered seven Olympic Games.

"Every Olympics was unique for me. When NHL players were involved, the level was incredible—passion, emotion, physical battles, goals.

But I also enjoyed the tournaments without NHL players. There were fewer photographers and I had more space to work."

NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman on Bruce Bennett

"They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Bruce's photographs are worth many thousands.

He knows exactly where to be and when to capture the right moment—the most important one. Whenever I'm at an event or a game, he's there. I see him everywhere. It's almost as if he always knows where he should be.

Bruce will leave behind an extraordinary legacy. When people look back at the history of our sport through his photographs, it's hard to imagine anyone documenting hockey over the decades the way he has."

Juraj Slafkovský is shining at his second Olympics. You photographed him as a 17-year-old in Beijing.

"That's right. He likes to express himself, he smiles—and photographers love that.

When he scores, he really celebrates and lets the emotion show. That's exactly what makes a great photograph."

Getty Images is often called the “Mecca” of sports photography. You lead the hockey team there—what does the agency mean to you?

“For thirty years I ran my own company with publications around the world. I’ve been with Getty Images for twenty-two years now.

Working there has allowed me to learn so much from colleagues who specialize in other sports.”

After fifty years of photographing hockey, what still drives you?

“I’m married, and whenever possible I try to get out of the house. My wife enjoys it—and so do I.

I’m not a golfer, but people say that one great shot can bring you back to the course. Hockey photography works the same way for me. One great moment keeps pushing you forward.”
