

## U.S. Hockey Hall Of Fame Induction Puts Bruce Bennett's Legendary Career Into Sharper Focus



Like the high-level athletes he has spent a lifetime photographing, preparation is the key to Bruce Bennett's longevity and legendary success.

"Two or three hours before a game, I arrive and set up, and then I stand alone in the cold, empty arena. There's no music, there's no crowd, there are no players and no distractions. I breathe deeply and take in the smell of the rink," the Brooklyn native said in chronicling his nightly routine at NHL arenas across the United States and Canada.

"I don't mean to make this craft seem overly cerebral, because it is not, but the preparation is well thought out and is part of the process to be successful."

For more than 50 years the game's most prolific photographer has captured the speed and intensity, the beauty and ferocity of the game's greatest players and its biggest moments. And now, with his induction into the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame, he has taken his place alongside some of the very players he's photographed over the years.

Bennett joined NHL stars Scott Gomez, Zach Parise and Joe Pavelski, along with two-time U.S. Women's Olympian Tara Mounsey as part of the Class of 2025 that was honored during a ceremony on Dec. 10 in St. Paul, Minn.

"I didn't play, officiate, run or build a team in any way. As for my inclusion here, I keep thinking that one of these is not like the others," said Bennett in employing his typical brand of self-effacing humor.

"I simply did this [moving his finger up and down to signify the clicking of a camera's shutter release button] two and a half million times."

More than simply that, Bennett chronicled many of the game's greatest moments, from the New York Rangers' Stanley Cup victory in 1994 to Alex Ovechkin eclipsing Wayne Gretzky's goal scoring mark last season at the UBS Arena in Elmont.

By his own estimates, Bennett has amassed a collection of photographs that totals more than 2.5 million images. He has become a fixture during Stanley Cup celebrations as he shuffles along the ice capturing each player's childhood dream of hoisting the greatest trophy in team sports. He has also worked the past six Olympic hockey tournaments and is preparing for yet another marathon mission to photograph the upcoming Winter Games in Milan, Italy, which will feature NHL players for the first time in 12 years.

Bennett drew his passion for photography from his father, who first started taking pictures when he was stationed in Europe during World War II. After returning home he continued to chronicle family gatherings and displayed them in scrap books.

But it was his mother and grandfather who took the 8-year-old to his first hockey game at Madison Square Garden. It only took a few minutes until he was hooked.

"I was taken by the beauty of the rink and the acrobatics of players on skates, making moves that I could not conceive of," Bennett recalled. "And of course, there was the speed and ferocity of the play that captured my attention."

Years later he found himself back inside the Garden, sitting in the famous blue seats focusing his father's camera on the players during warmups. He boldly sent some of his images to The Hockey News, which paid him the princely sum of \$3 an image and offered him a future press pass that would place him closer to the action.

Seeing his work in print only further steeled his resolve to pursue his passion. With his foot now in the door and his father's blessing, Bennett left behind his accounting degree and embarked on what would become a Hall of Fame career.

Over the years his images have graced the cover of magazines, the sports pages of local and national newspapers and most recently on various websites and blogs. NHL teams took notice and several of the local teams, including the Islanders, Rangers, Flyers and Devils hired him as their official team photographer. From his homebase on Long Island, he could easily travel to shoot games up and down the eastern seaboard, shooting games from Hartford to Boston to Washington, D.C.

He started his own hockey photography business, Bruce Bennett Studios, before Getty Images purchased his considerable archive of images and hired him as their director of hockey photography, a role he continues to hold today.

As the medium where his work is featured has changed, so too has the technology. Long gone are the days of waiting for the film to be developed to see if he captured the action at the right moment. With today's digital technology he knows instantaneously and can transmit it to his clients before the puck drops again.

“During the early days of film, you didn't know if you missed the shot until three days later when you would get the film processed,” he said. “Now, every time somebody scores, we put it out there right away. There's that pressure of feeding the beast immediately.”

Learning that he was to become the first photographer to enter the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame, Bennett casually took the news in stride. He has always been more comfortable behind the camera than in front of it. Still, he knows his role in helping to capture the game's most magical moments and preserve them for eternity.

“One image can say what a thousand words cannot. And in this game, split second decisions are made by both players and photographers, and instinct, experience and anticipation are always the largest part of that equation. When the stars align, the shutter clicks at 20 frames per second and when I am locked in, I know that I can capture something eternal, a single little moment of hockey history frozen forever,” he said.

“This is what I have chased every night, the exact frame when the story becomes legend. For me, the goal has always been to catch what the eye misses and maybe, just maybe, reveal something in a photograph that even the players did not know was there.

“I have had the privilege of bearing witness to this great game and the honor of preserving it, because when you love the game and you love the craft, every frame is a tribute.”

And on the night when he was the focus of the tribute, the 70-year-old Bennett was asked how much longer he plans on spending his nights sitting rink side in an NHL arena with his eye pressed against his camera's viewfinder looking to capture the next iconic image.

“Physically, it’s a little rough. You can see I’m starting to get that old dog look in the eyes,” he joked. “But you know what? I still love it, so it’s hard to picture walking away. It’s still a great feeling going to the rink.”

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