

Rangers Sunday Sidebar 1: Why A Rangers Photographer Should Become A Standup Comic.

By Stan Fischler

On any given night when the Rangers are playing in The World's Most Famous Arena -- if you look carefully -- you'll find a lithe, compact, silver-haired gent with a camera at eye level. He is looking for the next best hockey photo because he has already filmed thousands.

You may not know Bruce Bennett personally but -- trust me -- he happens to be The World's Most Famous Hockey Photographer -- also The Best.

Over the past half-century, Bennett's works have become legendary and just a few days ago he won further acclaim when he joined Dave Maloney, Billy Smith, Jiggs McDonald, Ken Morrow and Joe Micheletti as inductees into the New York State Hockey Hall of Fame.

What Bruce happens to be -- other than his camera artistry -- is a funny fellow; except how would you know unless your name is Bennett?

But at the NY State Hockey Hall of Fame event in Troy, N.Y. the humorous side of Bruce was there to see hear before the capacity crowd who loved every second of his monologue.

While other inductees limited their speeches to pride, honor, gratitude and other cheery homilies, Bennett did old-fashioned stand-up. Here was his opener:

"Thank you for inviting me to talk a few moments about my favorite subject: ME!"

About the audience: "I'm taken with how huge this crowd is; and I'm just talking about the Induction Class. The last time this many people were inducted was in World War Two." Then, a pause: "I think the entire town of Troy, New York is here as well tonight!"

About The Outpouring Of Love: "I've spent over five decades behind the lens, so I admit it feels a little strange to have the focus on me. And I want you to know that this is not a 'Retirement Party.'"

About Fellow Honoree Jiggs McDonald: "I started taking pictures in 1974. My friend here, Jiggs McDonald, remembers '74 because that was the first year he collected Social Security payments."

About Bruce's Years Of Work: "Over 51 years, I photographed 6,246 games." Then a pause: "But who's counting!"

About Bennett's Helpers: "Another record I hold is that I've made more Getty Images' interns cry than anyone else in the company's history."

About What He Learned From Wayne Gretzky: "Wayne said, 'Skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been.' I took that advice with a twist. 'Don't focus on where the puck is, be concerned about where it's going next -- for safety and taking great shots.'"

About His Injury: "At The Garden, I took a puck to the stomach and fell down in the photo box. Two linesmen came over to see if I was okay. Leon Stickle said, 'Try to fart. If you can fart, it means you're okay!' Meanwhile Ray Scapinello said, 'The girl in the front row wants to know if your date is still on for tonight!'"

About His Funny Rangers Shoe-Whacking Photo: "I took a picture of Boston defenseman Mike Milbury beating a Rangers fan over the head with Mike's own shoe."

About Gordie Howe: "I sat in front of him at the Spectrum in Philadelphia and he figured I had enough pictures of him. He (skated over) and tapped me on the head with his (hockey) stick and said, 'Hey, I'm trying to pay attention to the game.' I wish he had left me with a small scar to remember that moment."

About An ESPN Interviewer's Question: "He asked me how I wanted to be remembered. My first thought was that he had been speaking to my cardiologist!"

The Maven wishes he was Bruce Bennett's agent; I'd book him into Vegas tomorrow -- with, or without, camera!