Islanders

ILLUSTRATED

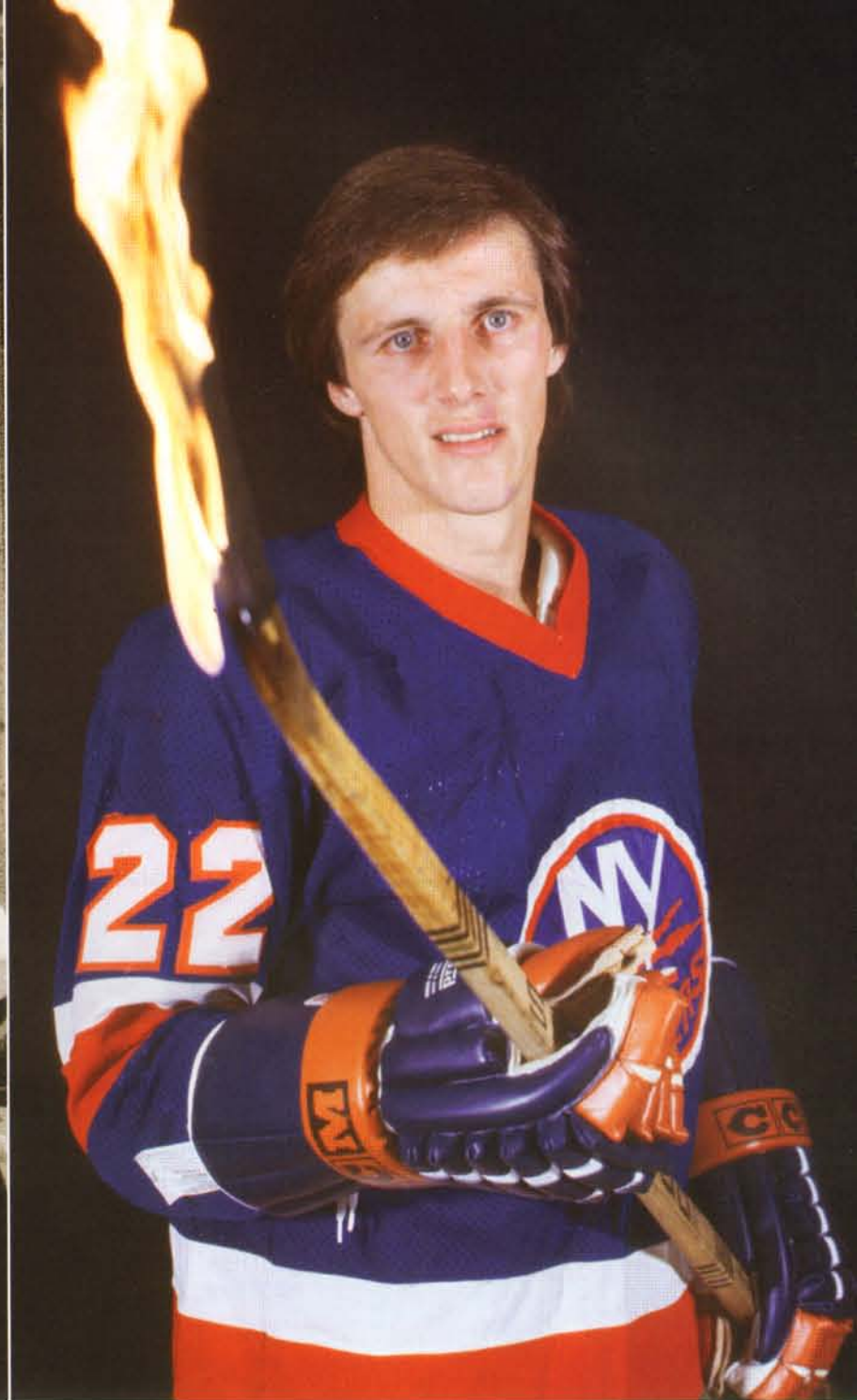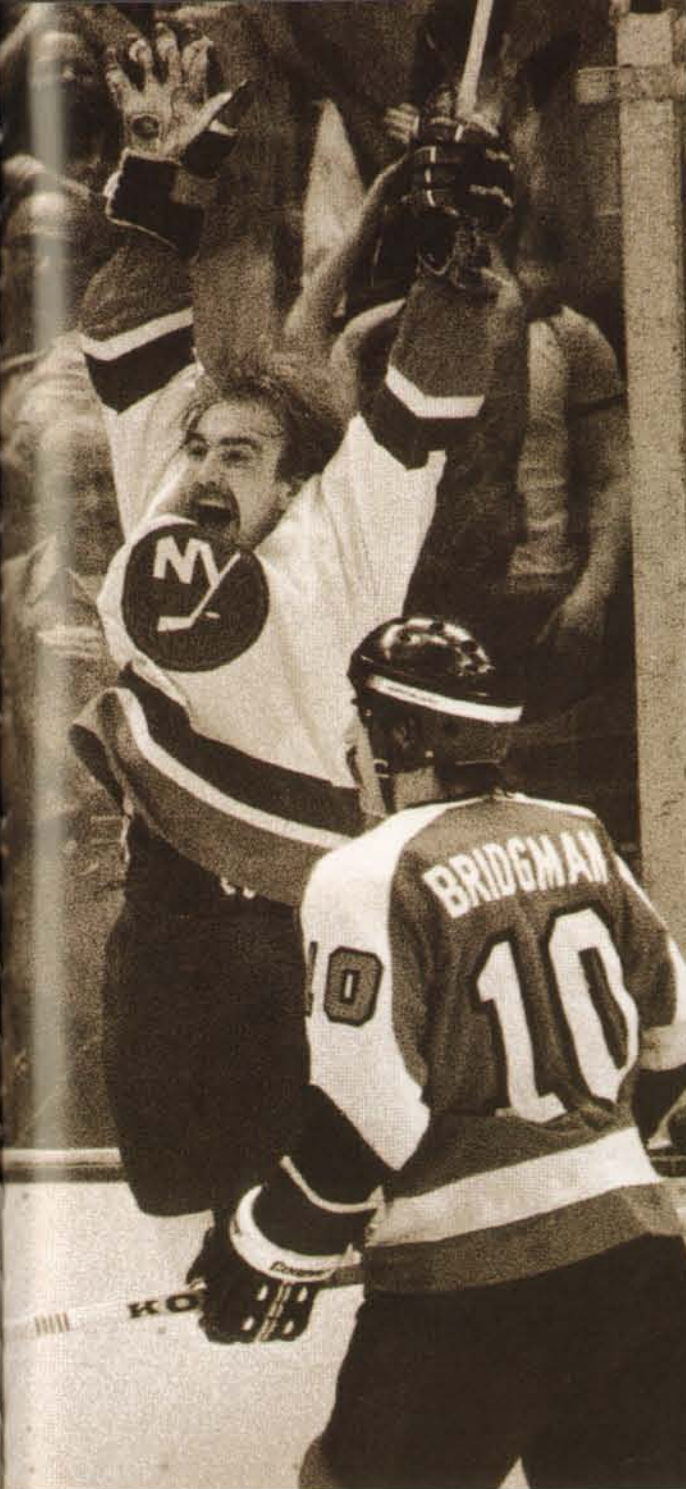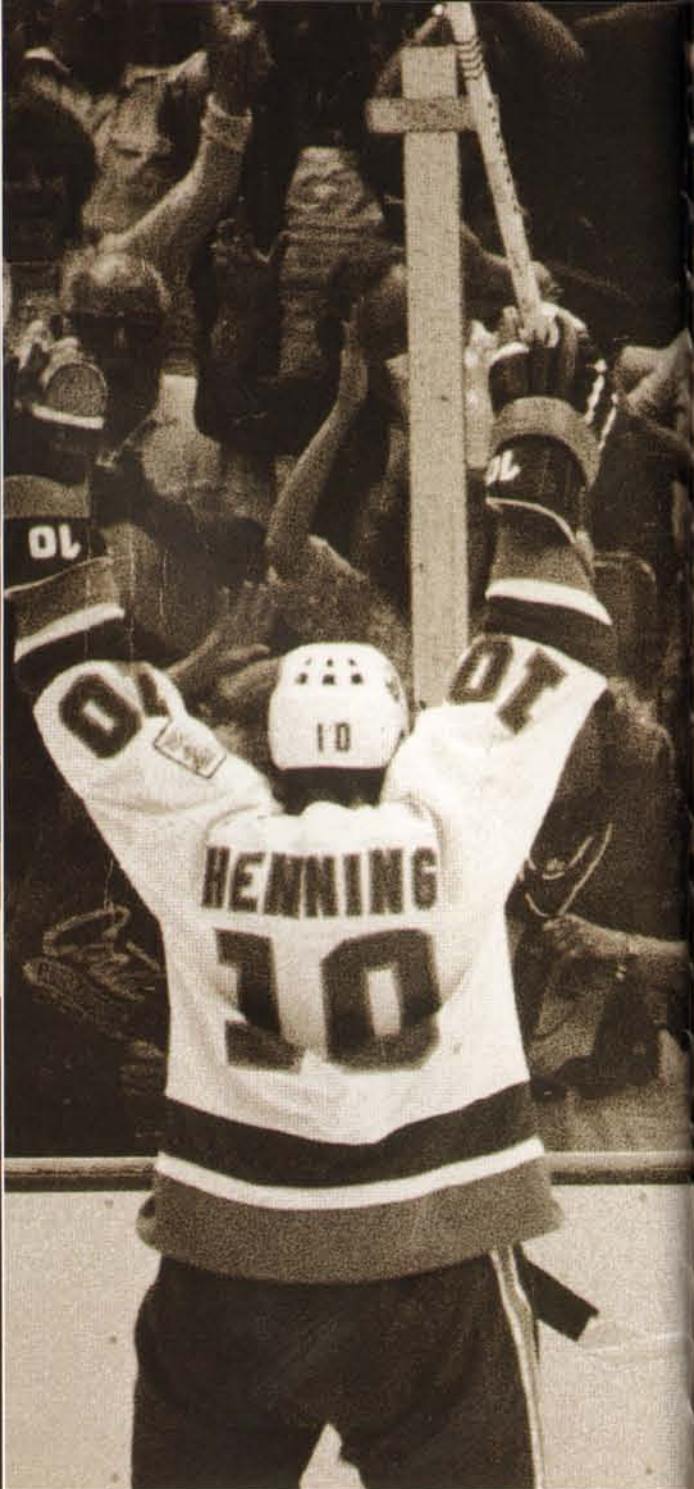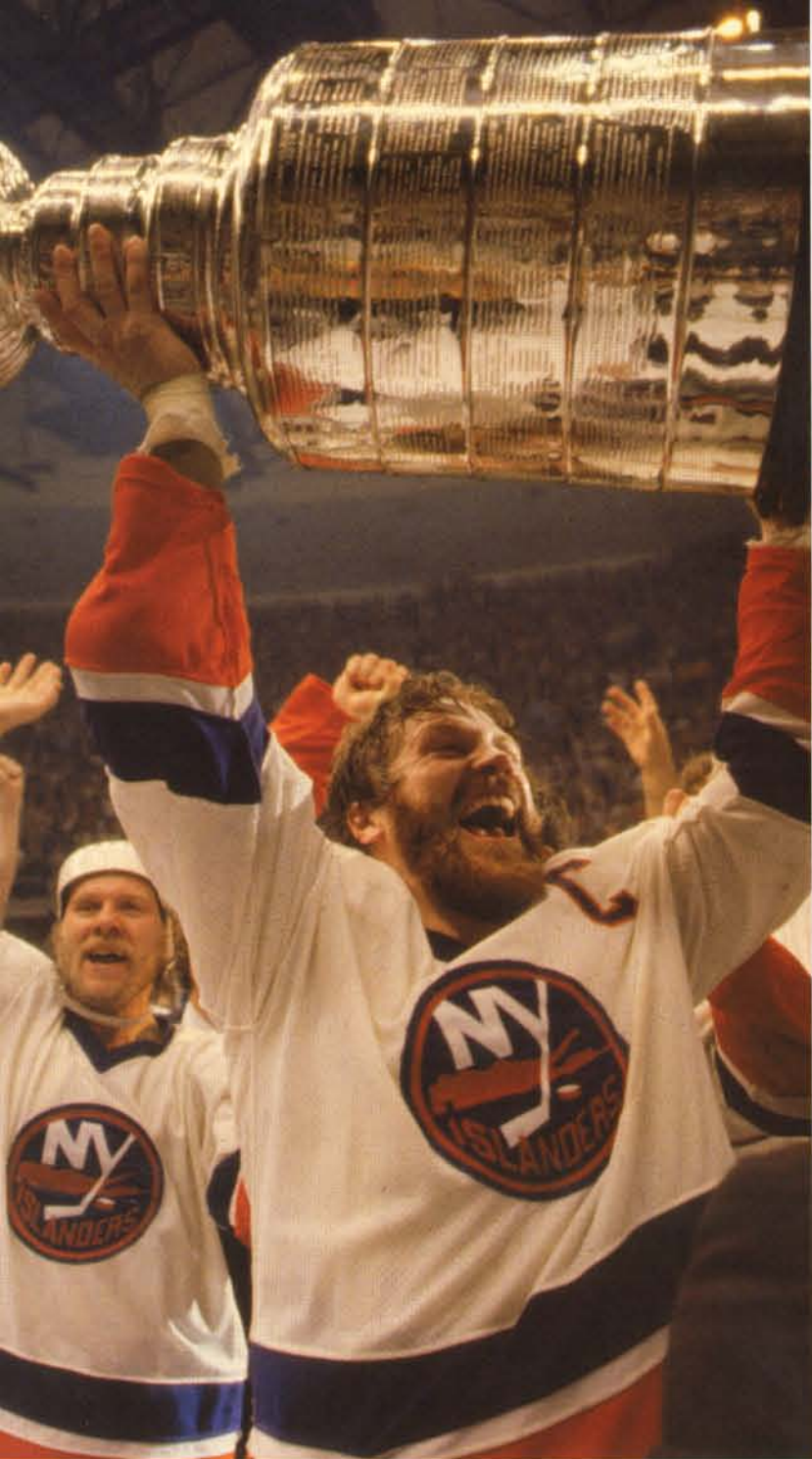December, 2008 • $5.00

Streit on Time

Long wait for NHL's call pays off for Swiss star

CAPTURING THE MOMENT

For more than 30 years, Bruce Bennett has been chronicling the NHL with his iconic images

By Brett Topel

Forgive photographer Bruce Bennett if he is not overly sentimental—it's just not his style. If you ask him, he is just a guy who comes to the rink each day and takes pictures of guys playing hockey. But in reality, he knows better.

Although he does not readily admit it, he knows that he is not simply taking photos—but capturing history. You see, Bennett is one of the most respected hockey photographers of all-time, and has created countless iconic images that have thrilled Islanders fans—and sports fans in general—for decades.

Bennett got started in the business in 1973 by sneaking into a photo box with his cousin when he was 18-years-old. He snapped some photos of an Islanders–Penguins game and called it a night. A few days later, he went to a Rangers game at Madison Square Garden and took some photos from the stands. He contacted *The Hockey News*—the most respected hockey publication—and sold them the photos. That turned into a free-lance gig that paid him $3 per photo.

Bennett proceeded to spend the rest of the 1970s as a freelance photographer, shooting the Islanders, Rangers, Philadelphia Flyers and other teams. However, the fact that Bennett lived on Long Island made him a natural fit to photograph the Islanders. And as the 1970s turned into the 1980s, there was plenty of Islanders action to shoot.

Still, despite shooting most of the memorable photos from the Islanders Stanley Cup years, Bennett insists that he has always tried to stay focused on the job at hand, and not over-think the importance of the event. He was well-aware of the historical nature of the games that he was photographing, he just didn't think about it.

"It's about the moments, but I don't really think about the moment as I am shooting," said Bennett. "The main rea-son is, you never really know when the big moment can come. I might take a photo of a great save in the third period of a game, and that might end up being a save people talk about for generations, so you never know."

Bennett's photos of the late 1970s and early 1980s tell the story of the Islanders franchise as it rose from a very good team to a legendary team.

"Those were great years and I loved every minute of it," said Bennett. "I have always really tried to not get too close to the players and to keep my objectivity. I have always approached this job as a journalist and I think you really have to do it that way to be successful."

Some of the photos from the Islanders' Dynasty are still very important to Bennett, who keeps a select-few of his photos on the wall of his office. One, is a poster he shot of Denis Potvin raising the Islanders first Stanley Cup with Butch Goring by his side. Another is a portrait he took of Islanders star Mike Bossy with his stick on fire. No photo re-touching—actual fire.

"We did that in the bowels of the Nassau Coliseum, and I remember we almost burned the building down that day," joked Bennett.

Bossy remembers that photo-shoot very clearly as well.

"Let's just say we both needed pa-tience and a sense of urgency when we shot that photo," said Bossy, who went on to laud Bennett for his body of work. "Every picture I look at today from the glory years brings back extraordinary memories and most of them are signed Bruce Bennett. He was, and continues to be, a premier photographer in the NHL."

Perhaps the most iconic of all of the Islanders photos that Bennett has shot was taken seconds after Bob Nystrom scored the game-winning, Stanley Cup-clinching goal against the Philadelphia Flyers in 1980. One of the things that makes the

Nystrom photo so memorable is the fact that it was shot in black and white.

"That was how it was back then, there was really no reason to shoot color," said Bennett. "Color photos were used for magazine covers, but everyone else ran them in black and white, so we used black and white film."

One of the photos that Bennett remembers very fondly is actually a non-Islanders shot from 1982. It is a photo he took of Wayne Gretzky scoring the goal to break Phil Esposito's scoring record.

"I was on assignment from *Time* magazine," Bennett remembered. "It's certainly not the best hockey photo that has been ever taken, it was just simply the puck going across the line. But it was the moment. For me, it is about the moment. That is probably the one photo that captures the moment best."

After establishing his own company—Bruce Bennett Studios—in the early 1980s, Bennett and his staff became heavily involved in the hockey card industry, shooting the photos for just about every company that produced hockey cards. Bruce Bennett Studios and the hockey card manufacturers was a perfect partnership, mostly because Bennett believed it was critical to shoot photos of every single player.

"It was a natural fit," said Bennett, who became the official team photographer of the Islanders in 1982. "My philosophy has always been that there is a fan for every player, so it is very important to have photos of everyone, even if they play only a few games."

After 22 years of running the successful BBS, Bennett sold his company to the ever-growing photo giant Getty Images in 2004. However, part of the deal was that Bennett himself got to continue to shoot. And that he has, every night working tirelessly to capture "the moment."

And although Bennett has taken literally millions of photos throughout his 35 years in the business, it was only recently that the importance of his work hit home.

It was a realization that he had during All-Star Weekend in Atlanta last season, as he was watching fans stop to view a selection of his photos that were on display.

"As I walked past the exhibition and saw the way people were reacting, it really hit me," said Bennett. "These photos mean an awful lot to a lot of people. That makes what I do very rewarding." ∎
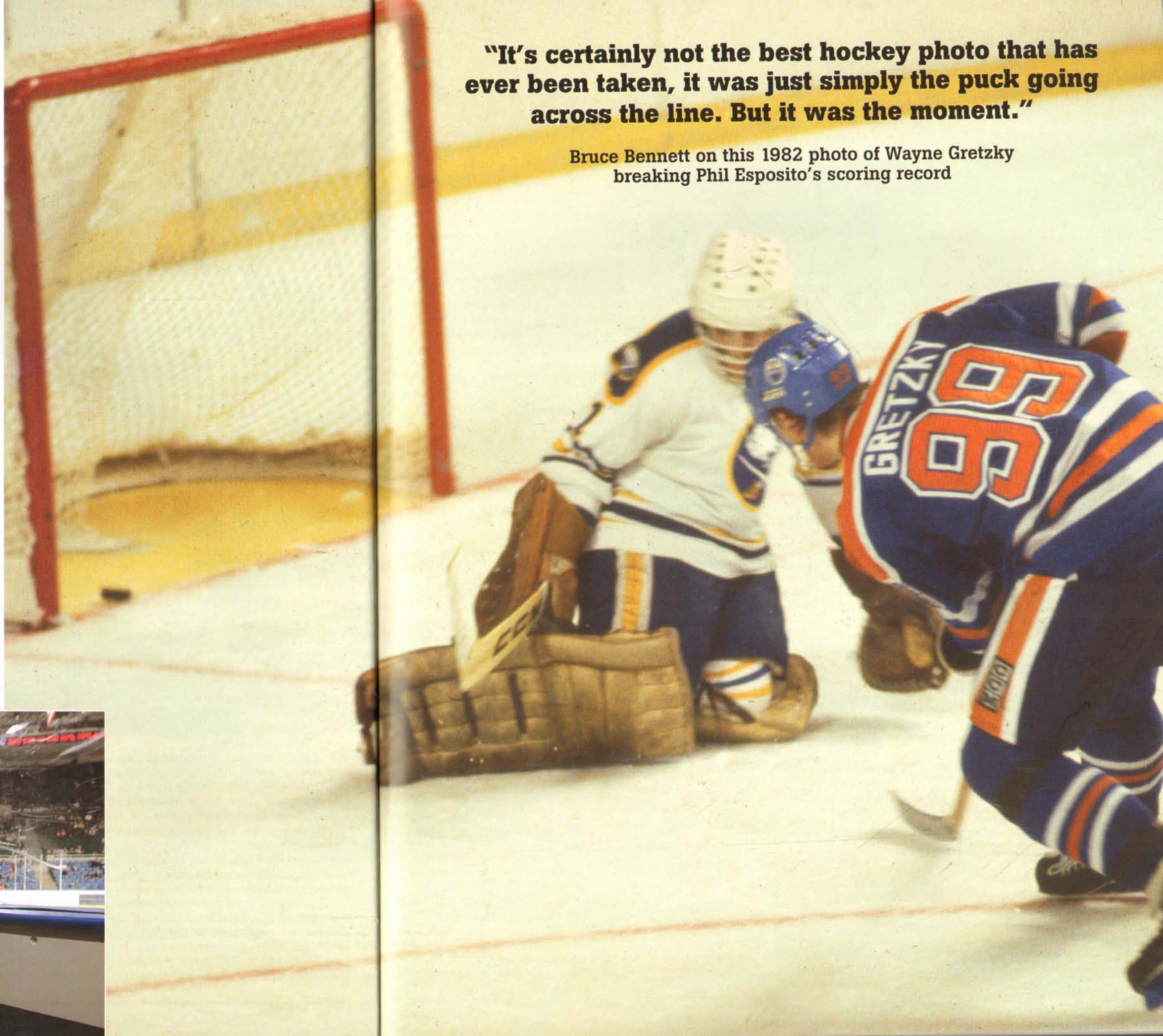
"It's certainly not the best hockey photo that has ever been taken, it was just simply the puck going across the line. But it was the moment."

Bruce Bennett on this 1982 photo of Wayne Gretzky breaking Phil Esposito's scoring record