

The best shot in the game

Regardless of the standings, the Rangers always look good thanks to Bruce Bennett

By Chuck O'Donnell
Bergen Record

Eric Lindros has a wickedly hard slap shot. Petr Nedved's wrist shot is lethal. Mark Messier owns a great one-legged wrister, and he likes to go to his backhand on breakaways. But at Madison Square Garden, no one shoots like Bruce Bennett.

As the Rangers' team photographer, he can be found around the Garden most game nights, draped in cameras and film and lenses, searching for the right angle or the right moment, snapping off photos that will be published in magazines and newspapers and media guides -- even on gum cards -- across the world.

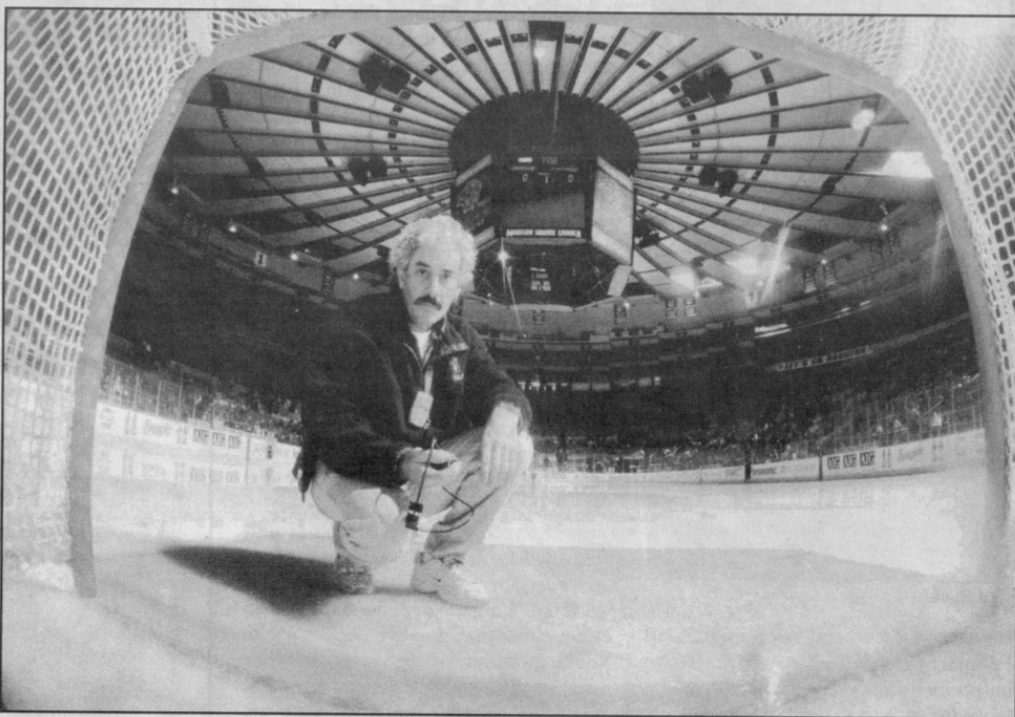
"At a typical game, we may shoot about 350 photos," said Bennett, who is also the official photographer for the Flyers, Devils and Islanders. "We're not necessarily looking for great shots. Mostly what we sell are the kind of things for trading cards and pinups in magazines. There is a good market for the hard action, but most of our sales will be individual players with the puck or without the puck (in the frame).

"I just edited (photos from) Islanders at New Jersey. I wanted to see what my percentage in focus is and see what I got from the game. There were a lot of usable photos. I wouldn't call any of them great. Out of 350 photos, there's maybe 20 that we would scan and put on the computer, maybe five of players in the air or in the middle of hitting someone. Maybe 10 of guys hitting or decent action poses.

But most of what we're looking for is nailing individuals. That's the biggest part of it, to make sure you have everyone shot."

In the past 28 years, Bennett has lost count of how many of his shots have been published. It's probably in the tens of thousands. Most years, he attends about 140 games a year. In all, he estimates that he has shot 3,000 to 3,500 games over his career.

Bennett laughs when he thinks how this all started by accident. Being a major league photographer wasn't his dream as a little boy. In fact, as a boy, he picked up hockey long before he picked up a camera. He went to see the Islanders play the Rangers at the Garden one night. He happened to bring his cheap camera with him. It was, as he says, "the first time I ever picked up a camera." Although he didn't know a lens from a rut in the ice, he sat in the nose



From the balcony to the crease: Bennett has seen it all, from every conceivable angle

bleeds and snapped off a few shots during warmups.

"I said, 'Well, let me shoot a couple of pictures and see what they look like,'" Bennett said. "I don't know how it struck me to send them to *The Hockey News*. It was just a case of being in the right place at the right time. The photographer they were using at Ranger games the year before had gone on to become a writer at *The Hockey News* at the Islander games. The Islanders had started the year before that. So, they had an opening for someone to supply them with photos. So, it was right place, right time. My stuff was horrible, the pictures were horrible, but they didn't have to pay me much and they were happy to be getting the material in."

The Hockey News was paying him the paltry sum of \$3 per photo, but Bennett couldn't be happier. He loved what he was doing, and he was working hard at becoming a better photographer. He realized early on that a player's face -- whether it was etched in pain, glowing with happiness or painted with any other emotion or condition -- was what brought the photos alive.

"Most important thing for me has been the face," Bennett said. "The eyes, the face. That's why it's great for a change to shoot pictures from upstairs. At a lot of arenas, you can shoot from halfway up. It's good for action stuff. For me, I always liked to be at rinkside so that you can get a good look at the player.

Usually the face will tell you how intense a player is. It will tell you if he's into the game, if he's not into the game. So for me, it's always been the face and the look that draws me into the photo."

Said Mel Evans, a photographer for the *Bergen Record* and a longtime colleague of Bennett: "Bruce has been doing this a long time. He knows the whole drill. He goes through a lot to get a good photo, setting up the lighting and everything. His shots always have a nice action to them."

Through hard work, Bennett has gone from novice to company. Bruce Bennett Studios, with its headquarters in Farmingdale, N.Y., is believed to be the world's largest source of hockey photographs. Bennett and his 14 employees

shoot more than 400 games a year. In all, they have shot 4,800 or so NHL games, 22 Stanley Cup-clinching games, 18 All-Star Games and 400 Olympic and international games. BBS has more than 2 million images on file, many of which can be purchased at rinkside.com.

Getting those shots isn't easy. First, he's got to bring the right equipment. He brings two camera bodies -- Canon is his preferred brand -- equipped with motors and long lenses. He also brings a flash "in case there's anything behind the scenes that needs to be shot." He also brings a digital camera so the Rangers can get something up on their Web site on game nights.

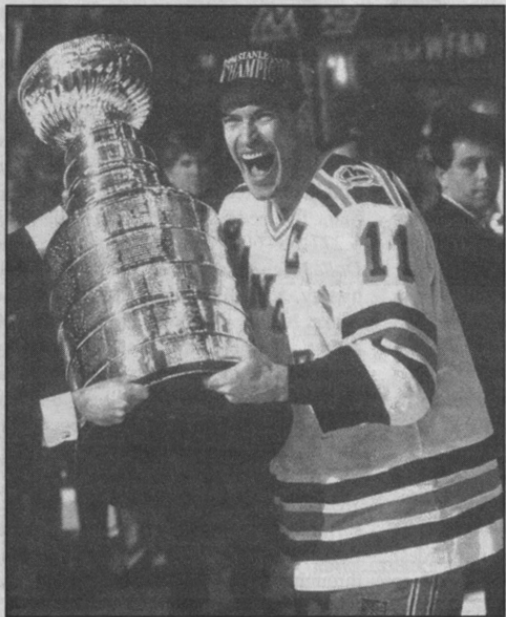
Once he's iceside, Bennett says he uses three things to get the shots: instinct, anticipation and knowledge of the sport.

"Hockey moves a little faster than most other sports and also not in a pattern conducive to stay with it until you know what you're doing," he said. "For us, we really have to rely on your experience to anticipate the play properly, know where the next play is going to be, to know how to avoid getting hit. (You have to have) one eye on the camera. If you lose sense of where you are, you can easily get hit with a stick or puck or the glass can come back and hit you.

That's one of the occupational hazards of being a hockey photographer, Bennett says. You have to be careful not to get too close to the action. And you have to be careful because the action always seems to have a way of finding you.

"Moreso in the older days, when I first started, the photo positions at Madison Square Garden were the best. You were in the penalty box area, but it was an area 40 feet across that had no glass," Bennett said. "You were so totally exposed, you would get (hit) with everything. You'd get (hit) with sticks, you'd get (hit) with pucks, you'd get players hitting into the boards. I would actually wake up in the middle of the night twitching. I would end up with nightmares.

"I got hit once and ended up with cracked ribs. A guy on Minnesota, I can never remember if it was Brad or Bryan Maxwell. Whichever one it was, he was behind the net, and



looked to clear the puck while killing a penalty and cleared it right into my ribs. So you used to get injured a lot more in the old days. But now those kinds of photo positions are hard to come by. They are still the best when they are available, like in New Jersey, they're wide open there. You still have a good shot at getting a good shot and getting hurt at the same time.

So you wear a helmet to the games these days like a lot of the other photographers?

"No, I'm no sissy," Bennett said. "I follow the Ron Duguay rule. I was in the league before a lot of these guys and I just never got comfortable wearing the helmet."

Through the years, Bennett has seen them all, from Duguay to Dvorak. He's taken many shots that, for one reason or another, have stayed with him.

When he was just starting out, Bennett caught Denis Potvin getting a hip into Canadiens star Guy Lafleur and flipping him over.

A photo he took during a game in the 1990s was memorable because Bennett had a split second to capture it. The Rangers were playing the Canucks and a fan threw a puck out of the stands and into the net.

"That was one of those weird things," Bennett said. "You know you see it and you take the picture. You just don't know if it's going to be in focus."

But of all the games he has shot at the Garden, perhaps the most memorable was when the Rangers won the Stanley Cup in 1994.

Bruce Bennett's Top 10 Hockey Moments

1. Ed Giacomin returns to MSG as a Detroit Red Wing
2. Lanny McDonald wins Stanley Cup
3. Bobby Nystrom scores in OT for Stanley Cup win in 1980
4. Wayne Gretzky scores his 77th in Buffalo in 1980 to break Espo's record.
5. Canada with Lemieux and Gretzky win 1987 Canada Cup in Hamilton, Ontario.
6. Gretzky and his '99ers' barnstorm through Europe in 1994.
7. USA World Cup hockey win over Canada.
8. All-Star Game in Chicago after Operation Desert Storm.
9. Gretzky retirement game at Madison Square Garden.
10. Forsberg scores vs. Corey Hirsch to capture 1994 Olympics in Norway.

"Just as (Messier) was presented with the Cup and cradled it in his arms, it was just the laugh and the pure enthusiasm and ecstasy of having accomplished that goal," Bennett said. "It wasn't that he was raising it over his head as some people do, he was

just cradling it in such a way that his face was just glowing. That was a great shot I remember."

In fact, Bennett says he has especially enjoyed working with the Rangers.

"The Ranger organization is one of the best I've worked for, the way they've treated me and my photographers," said Bennett. "The best part about the Rangers is that they give us the opportunity to be creative. They've made it clear early on that anything we wanted to do that we thought would make a good photo, they would be open to. So we've put cameras in the net, hung cameras from the scoreboard, walk around until we find different angles to try to give them something creative and something different that we normally couldn't get with someone else."

"The only direct contact we have with the players is when we do headshot sessions or if we have a one-on-one shoot for Hockey News or ESPN. My own feeling on that is that you have to maintain that air of being a professional. That also means keeping your distance from players. So if a player does club a guy like a baby seal and I have the photo, I wouldn't hesitate to use it.

Occasionally, a few of the players, for example, Mike Richter. I've photographed him so many times over the years both one on one and for headshot sessions, we've come to know each other a little bit. Hockey players are a different breed from the other athletes. For the most part they are the most nice, warm, down-to-earth people that you can easily get along with them. They invariably have a great sense of humor and they're just fun to be around."

