

# The Last Word

By BRUCE BENNETT



## DON'T SHOOT ME... I'M ONLY THE PHOTOGRAPHER!

I was sure the fans were screaming for blood. After all, this was New York's Madison Square and the game was hockey. One of the Minnesota North Stars had just taken a bank shot off the back of my head as I sat ever so inattentively in the photographers position adjacent to the visitors penalty box.

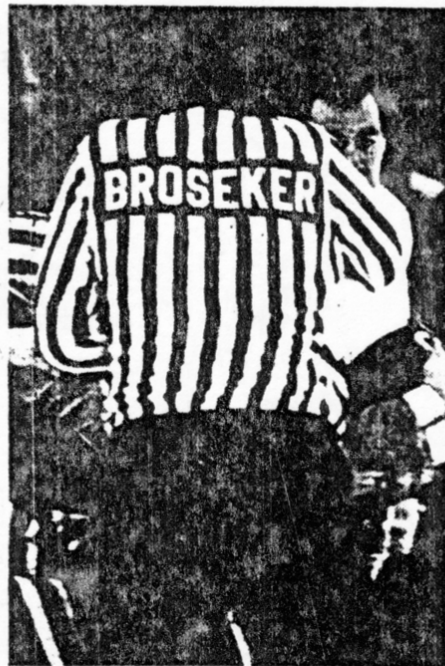
I lifted the camera to my face and fought back the tears as best I could. The New York fans sat patiently poised waiting for blood to appear with the same violent passion they would derive from watching the Rangers' Nich Fotiu take on Buffalo's Dave Schultz. However, the vulcanized rubber disc (frozen to give it the correct amount of bounce) had rebounded just right, so that only a small trickle of blood streamed down the back of my scalp.

On another more recent occasion I had the unmitigated gall to hold up the game for several minutes when an errant Boston Bruins' shot struck me in the middle of the back, knocking me to the floor. Moaning with pain, I noticed the players and officials gathering at the boards above me. One sympathetic linesman told me that the girl in the front row wanted to know if "our date is still on for tonight."

Operating on the assumption that the penalty box area is not the safest place to snap photos, I set up shop behind the glass during the playoffs at the Nassau Coliseum several years back. What could happen to me there? Don't tell me that the puck could find its way through that tiny cutout hole in

the glass that was just big enough to fit a camera lens. Of course not! But when the Islanders' Denis Potvin checked a Buffalo Sabre into the glass, the entire piece fell out of place and sliced across the knees of another photographer, Chuck Solomon. Was no place sacred?

But the fear of flying sticks and pucks is not the only obstacle photographers have to put up with. The game officials, commonly referred to as "zebras", constantly move back and forth in front of the cameramen obstructing our view. Freelance photographer Joe DiMaggio has suggested that the NHL put some money into the development of transparent referees. Other photographers have advocated the use of midgets to do



All too often, this is the view a hockey photographer captures through his lens — a "zebra's" back.

the officiating, but as of yet, we have little hope that the league will approve that plan.

Another problem we all face is trying to identify the players in our photos. The numbers on the sleeves of the new Vancouver uniforms are so low that they are often covered by the gloves. And the recent Russian series was a real nightmare. Not only were the sleeve numbers hard to read, but everyone knows that all Russians look alike.

I really don't want to leave everyone with the impression that hockey photography is just one big hassle. Where else would I be now without the numerous colds I've caught from standing next to the ice; where would I be without the invigorating feeling that comes over me as the players skate by, and the strong acrid scent of linament fills my lungs. Of course, I'll also fondly remember the push of fellow photographers elbows up against mine, and I'll remember when the fans attempted to throw things on the ice, but hit the photographers instead; or that gripping sensation that would come over me as I'd focus on the action with a 300mm lens, only to spot a larger-than-life puck coming my way.

Finally, when I retire, I'll look back on the not-so-formal education I received so very close to the action. After all, I'm the only guy on my block who knows all the curse words in French! □

*When he's not nursing his bruises or getting stitched up, Bruce Bennett is a contributing photographer for both The Hockey News and Hockey Pictorial.*