

BACK in 1989, arguably the world's most famous hockey pictureman, Bruce Bennett, swapped his camera for a keyboard and wrote an item for IHNR's Wembley Special of that year. It was aimed at giving both an insight into how the job was done in the NHL while indicating it was not necessarily the glamorous occupation that many observers might think.

In North America, hockey is of course big enough to enable photographers, and many journalists, to make a living solely from the sport. Here in the UK that is impossible due to the limited media coverage and low degree of popularity the sport has nation wide. Picture editors on our nationals are not half so keen to bid for a shot of Tony Hand flashing the puck home – no matter how spectacularly – as they are any goal scored in soccer's Premier League for instance!

That means the band of travelling photographers who cover the British ice hockey scene are all freelancers. And they do it as a labour of love since making a profit is virtually unheard of.

At the start of this season I decided to make a trip across to New York to check out the differences in taking pictures at NHL games and those in our Heineken League. After countless transatlantic telephone calls and sending samples of my work, accreditation was set up for three games in six days at the beginning of last month.

A base in mid-town Manhattan, New York, gave good access to the home venues of both the New York Rangers and the New Jersey Devils. At both arenas the hospitality was quite superb with complimentary meal, team media guides and press notes available for all press. Here in Britain you are doing well if you get a free programme at a league game so enabling pictures to be captioned!

Photographers here experience a wide variety of conditions in terms of both accessibility and, more importantly, lighting. With virtually all games in the NHL being televised, the lights are extremely bright making it a dream to work in. The only problem with the Madison Square Garden home of the Rangers lies in the use of Tungsten lighting which means that ordinary daylight film without a flash unit gives a very warm cast to the pictures. For this reason I chose to use black and white for the two games I covered there. A similar type of lighting can be found at Fife or Telford.

The NHL home photographers, and those from the national agencies such as Reuters, take the prime positions leaving any visiting press being allocated the remainder. However these top guys normally only stay for a period or two, giving visitors the chance to move to better positions as the game progresses. As a result, with no positions available at ice level, I opted to use a long telephoto lens from around one hundred feet above ice level on the fifth floor of the arena during the first period of the New Jersey/Philadelphia game.

Another advantage of the NHL being televised is that when commercial breaks are inserted during stoppages of play, a photographer can reload his camera with new film. Incidentally, TV dictates when the game restarts and match officials go by a red light going out above the TV cameras.

Ice level space is extremely limited and positions are fixed during each period. For the Rangers home games against Pittsburgh and St Louis there were three holes in the plexi glass at each of the four corners through which to take pictures. At The Meadowlands venue for Devils games, a small box about five feet square, adjacent to the team benches, was used by press and TV alike. For all of these positions, seats had to be used at all times in order not to obstruct the paying public's view from behind. In addition, Meadowlands has three holes in the plexi glass on the Zamboni corner – but to use them meant standing on almost sheet ice!

In this country photographers can move around quite freely – normally of course when there is a stoppage in play – and generally stand for the entire length of the game. But what a bonus it would be if a British rink cut the occasional hole in the plexi glass – where it is installed – with provision for it to be covered when not in use.

One thing never changes though when at a game and that is the need to watch the puck and/or players at all times. During the Rangers/Penguins game a fierce slapshot came flying towards my position and, suffering from jetlag no doubt, I automatically ducked as if standing behind the netting at my own local rink in Romford. The puck hit the plexi about fifteen inches from the eight inch diameter hole I was using. It certainly made me sit up and concentrate harder – despite it nearing 3am London time!

For those readers who think that taking photos is just a good way of getting to see a game free – think again! The only action you get to see is that through the eyepiece of the camera in front of you. Reporters get the benefit of seeing the game while the photographers get their rewards hours later when they see if the game has been captured successfully on film.

My NHL experience was very rewarding, providing as it did, the opportunity to test my skills on equal terms with some of the sport's best photographers in the world. Considering the conditions that photographers have to endure in most British rinks – and the results they return from those forays – I have no doubt some could hold their own in the NHL.

BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY TO THE NHL

By Trevor Benbrook



RIGHT: CRUNCH TIME! New Jersey Devils' SCOTT STEVENS looks to have come off worst in this clash with Flyers' KEVIN DINEEN.

BELOW: NO WAY THROUGH!! Philadelphia Flyers' ERIC LINDROS is a big guy, but New Jersey pair, VALERI ZELEPUKIN and CLAUDE LEMIEUX (22) have very effectively barred his way forward here.

