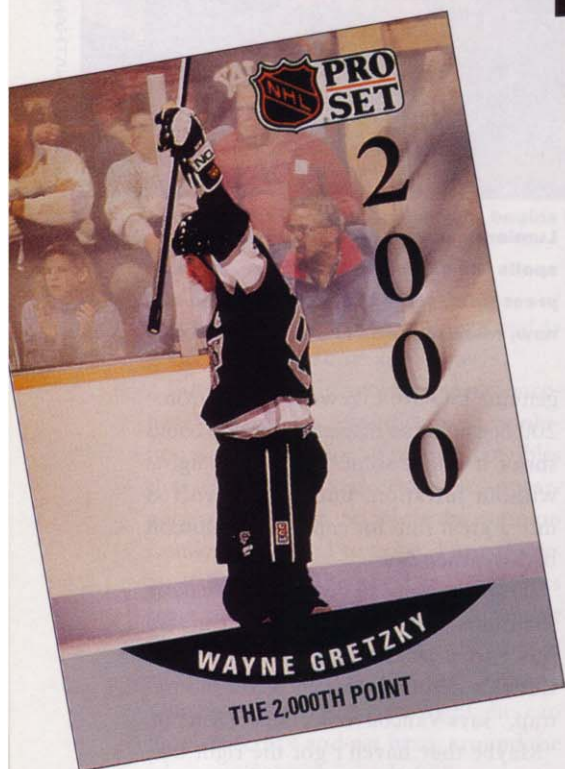


HE SCORES, THEY SHOOT



At every National Hockey League game, you'll find shooters poised to catch the action — for hockey cards

By Kathy Bevan



PAUL J. BERESWILL

Edmonton shooter Gerry Thomas learned the hard way that covering hockey games could be as dangerous as playing them. He was stationed at one of the choice photo positions in the Northlands Coliseum, shooting an Oilers home game through an eight-inch hole cut in the arena glass.

“It was just the perfect size for my lens and, as it turned out, the hockey puck,” recalls Thomas, who suffered a broken lens, a cut nose and some hurt pride.

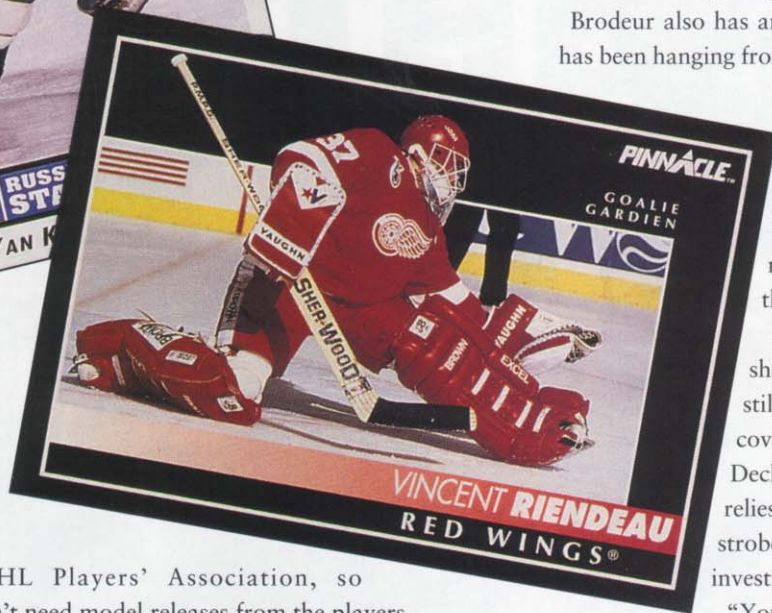
“But I was just a rookie back then — I’m faster now.”

Thomas is one of a handful of Canadian pros who take some of the uncredited shots that appear on professional and amateur hockey cards — a business that’s every bit as competitive as the game they’re covering.

There are six main hockey card companies — Fleer, Upper Deck, Leaf/Donruss, Score/Pinnacle, Topps/O-Pee-Chee and Parkhurst. All of them are licensed

GRAIG ABEL

Hockey card photos typically pay a modest \$100 each, so many shooters make their living as team photographers and sell cards as a sideline.



by the NHL Players' Association, so shooters don't need model releases from the players.

Hockey photographers can work on a flat fee or a one-time sale basis. One-time sales let the photographers keep the rights to their images, once they get them back from the cardmakers.

"That's where the real work lies — getting your stuff back within a year," says Toronto photographer Dan Hamilton, who shoots for *Hockey News* and a number of cardmakers.

To avoid the wait, Denis Brodeur, team photographer for the Montreal Canadiens, dedicates the first period of a game to hockey card shots; the other two periods he shoots for the Canadiens and for himself.

While some old hockey cards attract big bucks from serious collectors — *Beckett's Price Guide*, the collectors' gospel, lists Gordie Howe's 1951-52 rookie card at \$2,000 U.S. — today's hockey shooters are hard-pressed to make a living from cards alone.

"If a freelancer really pushed all the markets, he could maybe make around \$45,000 or so — \$30,000 if he hustled all year for just one card company," estimates Gerry Thomas. He's team photographer for the Edmonton Oilers and also shoots cards for Upper Deck.

"If you're lucky, you can make \$100 a card and if you sold 300 images, it would add up," agrees Montreal photographer Denis Brodeur. "But you can't make a living from this kind of

photography."

Brodeur should know. He's been shooting hockey for over 30 years. A book of his hockey photos, with French text, was recently published in Quebec.

Brodeur played amateur hockey with the likes of Habs great Jean Beliveau, but eventually traded in his hockey stick for a Hasselblad.

"The Americans find it very amusing to see me taking shots through the glass with my old 2-1/4," laughs Brodeur. "But it's my shot of Patrick Roy that's been blown up onto a billboard and is still really sharp. They can't do that with their SLRs."

Brodeur also has an old-fashioned lighting system, which has been hanging from the rafters in the Montreal Forum for the past 20 years.

"I still use the old Ascor lights, the ones *Sports Illustrated* had before the new strobes came along," says Brodeur. "They're very heavy, but I can freeze a needle falling from the roof with them, they're so bright."

Edmonton's Gerry Thomas has been shooting hockey cards since 1989 but he still calls this work "the gravy on top." To cover his commitments to the Oilers, Upper Deck and his other freelance work, Thomas relies upon at least four camera bodies, eight strobes, and three lenses. It's a considerable investment.

"Your strobes can set you back \$30,000 and your camera and lenses can add another \$9,000," says Thomas. "Before you take your first shot, you could easily be looking at \$40,000 in equipment."

Most hockey shooters rely on Nikon F4s, but some have been switching over to Canon's EOS cameras. Thomas uses one of each.

The pros' bread-and-butter lenses are the pricey 300mm and 400mm f/2.8s, which they generally shoot at 1/250 second. But they also use other lenses for specific angles and shots.

"I go wide in the corners with a 20-35mm, and use my 80-200mm zoom around the goal," says Paul Bereswill, who freelances for *Sports Illustrated*. "If I'm shooting from ice level at the blue line, I'll use my 300mm but I'll go to a 400mm to 600mm if I'm shooting from above."

Transparency film is a must for card photography, and the pros typically say they prefer Fuji.

"Fujichrome 100 is a great film," says Bruce Bennett, whose New York studio uses around 30 photographers to supply card companies across the continent. "Art directors like the results, and it's available at a good price."

Hockey shooters can easily run through 7 to 10 rolls of film a game — 3 or 4 more if they've set up posed shots for the card backs — and still not get the main shots they've been hired for

in the first place.

"Once I was contracted to do three specific players, but they got into a fight five minutes into the first period and were thrown out of the game," recalls Denis Brodeur. "If that team only comes to the Forum a couple of times a year, it's tough."

Then there's the problem of lighting the rink. The pro arenas can be lit fairly well with strobes, despite restrictions on how many can be used and where they can be placed. Amateur rinks are another matter entirely.

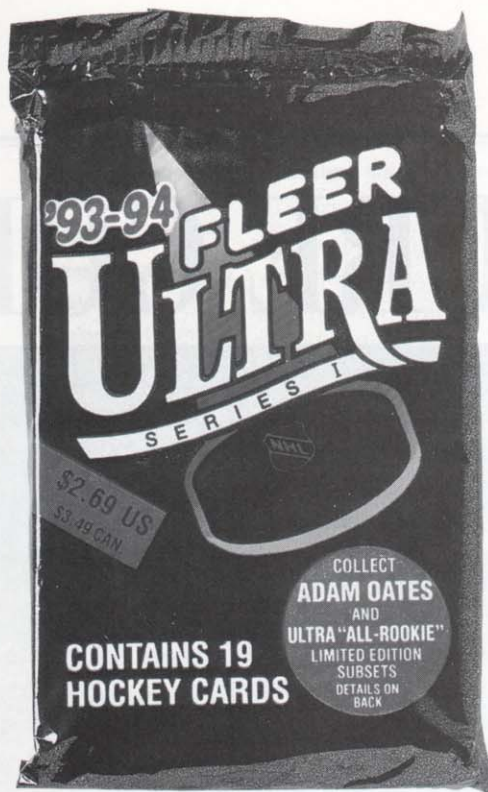
"The Victoria arena is a barn, with lighting that's so patchy it's even hard to strobe properly," says Todd Korol, who follows the junior hockey league schedule across western Canada. "Saskatoon, on the other hand, is really lit well. Even the *Sports Illustrated* guys like setting up in Saskatoon."

Sports Illustrated photo teams usually get carte blanche when they come to a game. Arenas that normally allow limited lighting along only one side of the rink let *SI* technicians hard-wire right around the building. And the number of shooters allowed per game becomes much more flexible when *SI* comes to town.

Sports Illustrated introduced strobe lights to hockey several years ago, after their initial success with basketball. Before that, hockey shooters were relying on available light — or "available dark" as one pro puts it — and shooting ISO 400 to 1600 film.

Strobe power depends on two factors: how long the flash lasts and how bright it is. Hockey shooters choose a flash duration between 1/500 second — which gives some ghosting during fast action — to 1/2000 second, which stops even slapshots cold. The brightness of their strobes, measured in watt-seconds, ranges from 1,200 — which is quite unobtrusive — to 3,200 — which is noticeable even during the briefest bursts. *Sports Illustrated* strobes are typically set at 2,400 watt-seconds.

Strobe setups vary, but the one used by Graig Abel, who shoots at Maple Leaf Gardens, is typical. He suspends his strobes 150 feet above the ice, on top of the press box. The TV lights are the big sets; photographers' strobes are the smaller ones. Abel keeps one set near the goal line, one at the blue line and one at center ice. Abel and other Gardens shooters each have a hard wire (a long extension cord) that runs down the wall and through the seats to the penalty box. Abel either hooks up directly to the hard wire or attaches a receiver to it



and triggers it by remote control from his camera position about 10 feet away.

"The Gardens is an old building with a lot of metal and cellular phones everywhere, so using the remote control from further than 10 feet away is risky," says Abel.

The advent of strobe lighting has been both a blessing and a curse for hockey photography. Thanks to the strobes, hockey shooters are able to use slow films, yet still shoot at settings like 1/250 second at f/5.6. Strobes have made it possible to capture much crisper images during the action, but they have also frozen strobeless shooters out of the hockey card business.

"Virtually all the card companies now want only strobe photography, and even if you have your own strobes, there's a limited amount of that kind of lighting that can go into any one building," says Bruce Bennett.

Bennett prefers using four to six 2,400-watt-second Speedotron strobes, hard-wired or controlled by a remote. Recycling time is minimal — two to five seconds.

Bennett's studio shoots so much hockey material around his native New York state that he's got Speedotron strobes permanently hooked up in the arenas of three local teams: the New York Islanders, the New York Rangers and the Philadelphia Flyers. When he's on the road, he relies on White Lightning strobes.

The powerful strobe lighting hasn't made many friends for photographers among TV crews. Strobe bursts are short-lived but extremely intense — enough to literally white out several frames on TV and ruin a replay.

That happened during playoff action a couple of years ago in Buffalo, when the Montreal Canadiens scored a goal no one in the TV audience was able to see.

"It was one of those flukes — all the photographers shot off their strobes at once and the puck disappeared as it crossed the goal line," recalls the Maple Leafs' Graig Abel, who also does work for Score/Pinnacle.

Photographers' strobes have also occasionally irritated hockey players. A couple of years ago, as Toronto inched toward the playoffs, team goalie Grant Fuhr complained about all the flashes going off during a pre-game warmup. Moments later, all the shooters had to shut off their lights and leave them off for the entire game.

It's impossible for unaffiliated photographers to set up their lights in an NHL rink, but amateur rinks are more open to up-and-comers. Even here, though, credentials — such as from a