

FIFTY GOALS IN FIFTY GAMES

Bossy Matches Maurice Richard

July 24, 1981

“My phone rang at midnight one night,” Scotty Bowman told Dick Irvin for his book *The Habs: An Oral History of the Montreal Canadiens 1940 to 1980*. “It was Claude Ruel.”

Ruel was a jack-of-all-trades in the Canadiens’ front office who worked with Bowman as an assistant coach, while also serving as director of player development during the 1970s. “Scotty,” said Ruel, “I’ve just seen a junior player who lifted me out of my seat. First one since Guy Lafleur.” The player’s name was Michael Bossy. “We gotta get him!”

Mike Bossy was a kid from Montreal playing junior hockey in the suburbs with the Laval Nationale, but Bowman had never seen him play. He checked him out at Ruel’s request and liked Bossy right away. “Claude and I started to promote him to Sam [Pollock]. But our scouts didn’t like him. In those days Sherbrooke had a junior team that was full of goons. Games there had fights all the time. When we’d talk about Bossy, Ron Caron and the scouts would say, ‘Wait ’til you see him play in Sherbrooke.’ They questioned Bossy’s courage.”

According to his biography on the Hockey Hall of Fame website, Mike Bossy’s father gave him a plastic hockey stick when he was two years old “to see what would result.” At the age of five he scored 23 goals in a single game! He grew up to score a record 309 goals in his four-plus seasons in the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League, and yet the Montreal Canadiens weren’t alone in their assessment of him. Bossy hated the violence in junior hockey. In his autobiography *Boss: The Mike Bossy Story*, the chapter about his junior career is entitled “Survival.” Throughout his career, and afterward, Bossy spoke out against fighting and violence in hockey. His personal belief was: “Each time you knock me down, I will get back up and score more goals.” Yet because he took so much abuse from his opponents and rarely fought back, many scouts assumed Bossy lacked toughness. At the NHL Draft in 1977, 12 teams (including the New York Rangers and the Toronto Maple Leafs twice) passed

on Bossy before the New York Islanders selected him 15th overall. Many of the players picked ahead of him went on to become fine NHL players, but of the 185 players selected that year, only John Tonelli, whom the Islanders grabbed with their second-round choice, scored even half as many goals as the 573 Bossy netted in his career.

The New York Islanders had entered the NHL as an expansion team in 1972-73, and their woeful record of 12-60-6 in 78 games that season was the worst mark in NHL history. In those days a last-place finish guaranteed the first pick in the NHL Draft, so the Islanders landed number-one prospect Denis Potvin. After modest improvements in their second season, the team grabbed Clark Gillies and Bryan Trottier with their first two draft picks in 1974. By their third season of 1974-75, the Islanders had secured their first playoff spot. A year later they recorded 101 points and established themselves as an emerging powerhouse. Smart drafting remained an Islanders trademark, and the decision to select Mike Bossy continued the team's upward trend.

Bossy arrived at his first training camp in the fall of 1977 determined to show what he could do. Islanders coach Al Arbour placed him at right wing on a line with Trottier and Gillies, and the chemistry between the three was obvious. "We picked the guy we needed!" Arbour enthused. Bossy became the first rookie in NHL history to reach the 50-goal plateau, finishing the season with 53 goals to rank second in the NHL behind Guy Lafleur's 60. Trottier led the league with 77 assists, and his 123 points also placed him second to Lafleur, who had 132. As a team, the Islanders went 48-17-15 and won their first division title with 111 points, yet they suffered a quarter-final playoff defeat at the hands of the Toronto Maple Leafs.

A year later Bossy led the NHL with 69 goals while Trottier was first with 87 assists and 134 points. Denis Potvin won the Norris Trophy as the best defenceman for the third time in four years, and goalies Billy Smith and Glenn Resch formed a top tandem in the nets. This time the Islanders were number one in the NHL with 116 points (51-15-14), but once again they suffered a crushing playoff defeat, losing to the rival Rangers in the semifinals. In 1979-80, Bossy "slumped" to "only" 51 goals, which tied him for fifth in the NHL with a rookie named Wayne Gretzky, and the Islanders plunged to fifth overall with 91 points. Still, they went all the way to the Stanley Cup Finals and defeated the Philadelphia Flyers in six games when John Tonelli set up Bob Nystrom for the series-winning goal in overtime.

Looking for something new to motivate him for the 1980-81 season, Bossy set his sights on a unique accomplishment. Since Maurice Richard had first reached the 50-goal plateau in 1944-45, there had been 23 other players (including some, like Bossy, who had done it more than once) to score 50 goals. However, in the 36 seasons since Richard had done it, no one had matched his feat of scoring 50 goals in 50 games. That was the target Bossy set for himself

— though outside of confiding in a few close friends and teammates, he didn't go public with his plan at first.

Bossy began the 1980–81 season on fire, scoring 25 goals in his first 23 games. On the night of November 27, 1980, the Islanders were in Montreal for their 24th game of the season. Bossy had an assist but was held scoreless in a 4–3 victory over the Canadiens. That same night Maurice Richard was in Lethbridge, Alberta, to referee an old-timers game. Richard spoke with local sportswriter Garry Allison, who wrote about their conversation in the *Lethbridge Herald* on December 2. The Rocket admitted that he didn't get to too many NHL games anymore and didn't even watch them much on TV. He didn't like the style of the modern game. "I don't like these slapshots from centre, where they race in for the puck," he said. "When you take the slapshot out of the game, you see more passing. You see guys carrying the puck into the other end. You see better hockey."

Although Phil Esposito had pushed the single-season record all the way up to 76 goals in a 78-game season in 1970–71, Richard didn't consider that mark to be any better than his own scoring accomplishments. "After they went to 12 teams," he said, "they should have started a new record book. But what are you going to do?" As for Bossy, Richard thought he had a chance to match his 50 goals in 50 games. He rated the Islanders' sniper as a similar player to himself: not a super hockey player, but a superb goal scorer. "There were a lot better hockey players than me," Richard admitted, "but they didn't work as well as I did around the net."

Meanwhile, Bossy continued to keep quiet. After scoring 33 goals through 33 games, he got just one in his next two games to slip slightly behind the goal-a-game pace he needed, but then he scored a hat trick in his next outing, a 9–0 win over Chicago on December 21, to give him 37 goals in 36 games. It was around then, when a journalist asked him if he was shooting for Esposito's scoring record, that Bossy went public with what had been driving him. "Rocket's record is what I'm aiming for," he said.

With the spotlight fully on him now, Bossy scored three goals over the next five games, giving him 40 in 41. Three nights later, against Toronto on January 6, 1981, Bossy was held without a goal yet set a team record with six assists, including five on goals by John Tonelli, in the Islanders' 6–3 win over the Maple Leafs. When he scored just once more in the next three games, giving him 41 in 45, Richard's record seemed to be slipping away, but then Bossy scored four times in a 6–3 win over Pittsburgh and suddenly was at 45 goals in 46 games.

In his next game, against the Washington Capitals four nights later on January 17, Bossy scored three more and was now ahead of the pace with 48 goals in 47 games. With 50 in 50 truly in sight, the Islanders offered to pay Richard's expenses if he wanted to join the growing "Bossy Watch." The Rocket said no but wished Bossy well and reminded people that he had told



quick shot
past goalie
before he
time to react.

the Hall of Fame

the Canadiens to draft Bossy back in 1977 after seeing the kid from his own Montreal North neighbourhood starring as a junior player.

Adding extra excitement to Bossy's chase of the Rocket's record was the fact that Charlie Simmer of the Los Angeles Kings was hot on his heels. Lined up at left wing on the Kings' Triple Crown Line with Marcel Dionne and Dave Taylor, Simmer had played 46 games through January 17 and had scored 44 goals. After being shut out in game 47, Simmer scored twice to reach 46 goals in 48 games.

Bossy played his 48th game at home against the Calgary Flames on January 20, 1981. The Islanders won 5-0, but Bossy was held goalless. "The Flames," wrote Larry Brooks in *Sports Illustrated* on February 2, "seemed more obsessed with keeping Bossy off the score sheet than winning the game." Eric Vail shadowed him all night and showed little interest in anything but pestering Bossy. "I hope I'm wrong," said Denis Potvin, "but it looked like stopping Mike was more important to them than a win."

Two nights later the Islanders were in Detroit, where the Red Wings assigned Paul Woods the job of checking Bossy. He managed to keep him from scoring, though it took a little help. Late in the game with the Islanders already up 2-0, Bossy and Clark Gillies broke away on a two-on-one, but defenceman John Barrett chose to completely ignore Gillies and focused all

his attention on keeping Bossy covered. "I think Barrett would have followed me to the bench if I'd gone there," Bossy said afterward. Later Bossy missed two long shots at an open net, prompting coach Al Arbour to crack, "I should have given Mike my glasses."

Still stuck at 48 goals in 49 games, Bossy tried to remain upbeat. "There's still one game left," he said. "If I don't break the Rocket's record, I'm not going to jump off the George Washington Bridge. The sun will still come up the next morning."

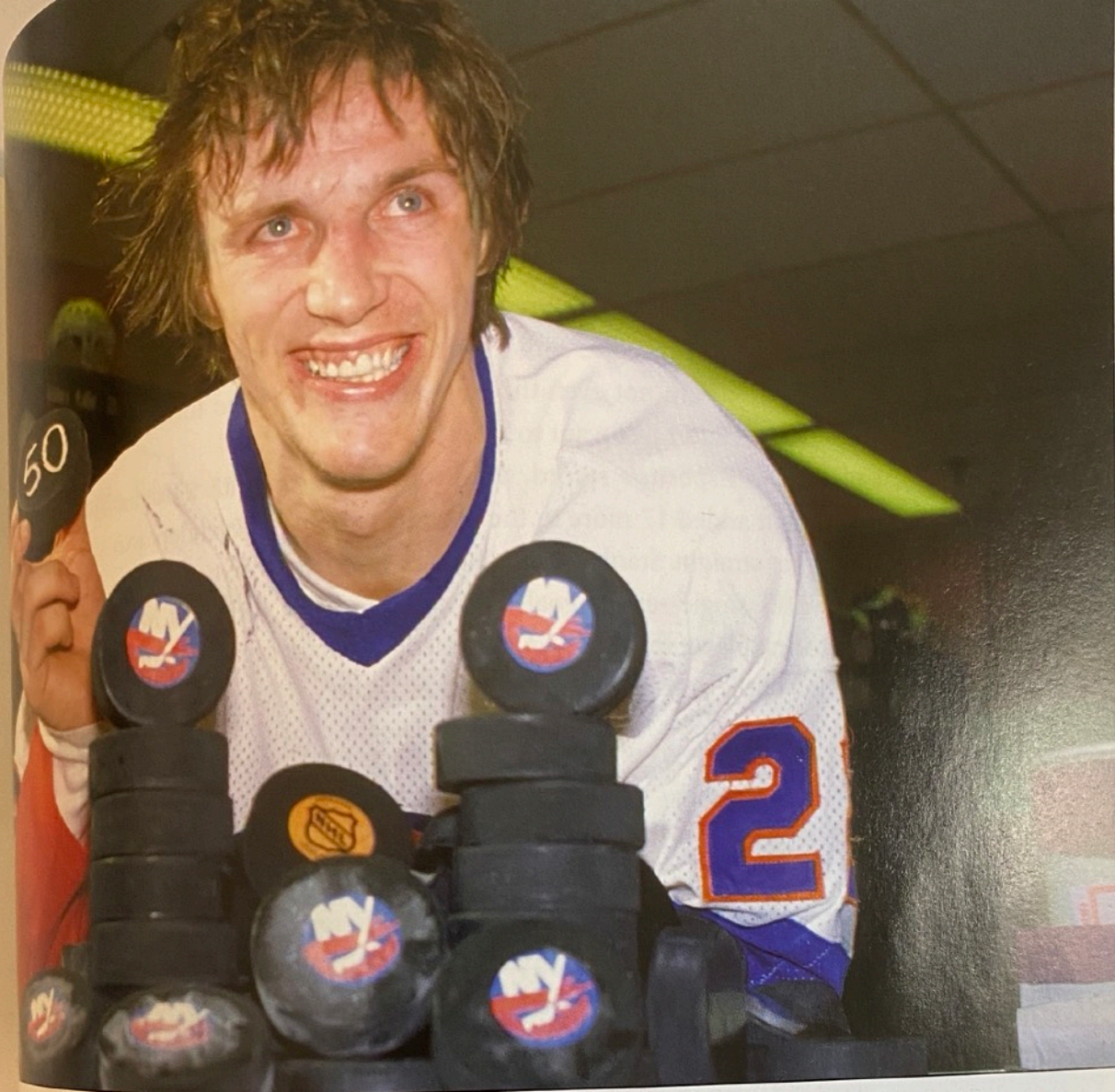
Game 50 was on Saturday night, January 24, 1981. The Islanders were at home to the Quebec Nordiques. By coincidence, the Los Angeles Kings played their 50th game that same day. Simmer had yet to move past 46 goals, but he and his teammates were playing an afternoon game in Boston. That meant he could still beat Bossy to the record with a big game. Simmer hadn't spoken much about the 50-in-50 milestone and was "amazed" that Bossy had put so much pressure on himself. "I'd love to do it," Simmer admitted, "but I'm not obsessed by it."

In his story for *Sports Illustrated*, Larry Brooks wrote that Bossy awoke early that Saturday morning to make breakfast for his 16-month-old daughter. He then went back to bed and slept until it was time get up and watch the Kings-Bruins game on television. Bossy watched Boston build up a 3-0 lead in the early stages of the second period before Marcel Dionne beat goalie Jim Craig to put the Kings on the scoreboard midway through the frame. Simmer finally scored number 47 at 17:40 of the second period, then evened the game at 3-3 with his 48th goal just 1:23 into the third. "I really didn't think he'd get four goals when I tuned in," Bossy said, "but then I began to wonder ..."

Simmer made it to 49, but his third goal of the game was into an empty net with just one second remaining, so there was no chance to get another. "I'm disappointed I came so close and didn't make it," Simmer admitted, "but getting 50 in 50 games had never been uppermost in my mind. If Mike can do it, more power to him."

Through two periods on Saturday night, Bossy was all but invisible. Although Al Arbour was sending him out on extra shifts and his teammates kept looking to set him up, Bossy didn't manage even a single shot on goal during the first 40 minutes. "It felt like my hands were taped together," he told reporters. "I wondered if I'd ever score a goal again." He also admitted that because he was the one who had built this up, it would be embarrassing if he didn't get to 50. "But then I realized that the biggest thing was not to give anyone the satisfaction of saying I didn't try."

Bossy began to look more like his usual self as the third period progressed. The shots were coming, at least, but he was still unable to put the puck past Nordiques goalie Ron Grahame. Finally, with just over three minutes remaining, Bryan Trottier passed the puck from behind the Quebec net along the boards to defenceman Stefan Persson, who snapped a quick



pass to Bossy near the side of the net. Bossy cut in front and whipped a backhand shot past Grahame for his 49th. The goal put the Islanders ahead 5-4 with only 3:10 left to play. If the score held up, Bossy might have a chance to pot his 50th into an empty net. But Grahame was still guarding the goal when Bossy hit the ice again with 1:50 to go.

The Islanders had the pressure on, but it looked as if Quebec defenceman Dave Pichette was going to be able to fire the puck out of the zone. Instead, John Tonelli got his stick on the puck and deflected it to Bryan Trottier. Bossy was all alone near the faceoff dot to the left of Grahame and hollered for a pass. Trottier whipped the puck across the ice. Bossy controlled it for only an instant before firing a wrist shot through the goalie's legs. The red light flashed at 18:30 of the third period, and a capacity crowd of 15,008 at the Nassau County Coliseum erupted while Bossy jumped and the scoreboard flashed "50 50 Bossy 50 Fifty" over and over. A few seconds later Bossy had a chance to score his 51st goal but chose to set up Trottier instead for the final tally in a 7-4 victory. "I owed him that one," Bossy said.

Back in the dressing room after the game, Bossy received a telephone call from Maurice Richard. The Rocket also sent him a telegram. It read in part: "Congratulations from an old recordman to a young recordman. I always knew

TWENTY GREATEST HOCKEY GOALS

one day my record would be surpassed or tied [and] I had always hoped that it would be done by the player from Ahuntsic ... I have admired from the start. We are proud of you here in Quebec."

For his part, Bossy said he felt "as if a thousand pounds were lifted off my shoulders," and when talk turned to Phil Esposito's record of 76 goals, Bossy admitted that "right now, I'm not even thinking about it. I've been through a lot in the last few weeks and I just want to relax."

Bossy fell short of Esposito's record, finishing the season with a league-leading 68 goals, then added 17 more in the playoffs to help the Islanders win their second of four straight Stanley Cup titles. A year later Wayne Gretzky obliterated the NHL's single-season goal-scoring record. Yet the night Mike Bossy became the first player to equal Maurice Richard's mark of 50 goals in 50 games remains one of the great moments in hockey history.

