

TANK McNAMARA

by Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds



Reagan is only Westerner known better than Gretzky

By MILTON RICHMAN
United Press International

NEW YORK — It shouldn't come as any great shock to anyone that the most recognizable "out-sider" among people inside the Soviet Union is Ronald Reagan.

Now who do you think is second? Would you believe it's Wayne Gretzky? That's the information I get. For the most part, my sources are recent emigres here from Moscow, Odessa and Riga. They tell me that hardly anyone in those places has ever heard of fellows like George Shultz, Malcolm Baldrige or Tip O'Neill, but practically everyone there has heard of Wayne Gretzky.

I'm not surprised. What makes you think the man in the street in the USSR is that much different than his counterpart in the USA? It's a lot easier to get more worked up over sports than international politics. More enjoyable also.

The Russians love hockey. They appreciate outstanding performers, too. So why wouldn't they get excited about someone like Gretzky even if he is from Branford, Ont., and plays for the Edmonton Oilers?

Barely 23, Gretzky already is acknowledged by many as the greatest hockey player of all time. I can't argue with that, and I think I saw some of the best ever when I watched such players as Eddie Shore, Maurice "Rocket" Richard, Jean Beliveau, Bill Cowley, Gordie Howe, Bobby Hull, Doug Harvey and Bobby Orr.

Until Gretzky came along, I thought Orr was the best player, or certainly the most accomplished one I had ever seen on the ice. But Orr says he wasn't anywhere near the player Gretzky is, and I don't think the former Boston Bruins' defenseman is merely saying that to be modest even though he's normally inclined that way.

To me, Gretzky is the most overwhelming force in team sports since Babe Ruth. I can't honestly think of anyone else who compares with him. It was only last Saturday that the Los Angeles Kings snapped his scoring string at 51 consecutive games.

Think of that for a second. Going all the way back to the start of the NHL season, back to October, the Oilers' sylph-like center gotten at least a goal or an assist in every game before he was out on Saturday. At that, his streak might still be alive had teammate Charlie Huddy missed putting the puck in an open net after being set up by Gretzky.

Gretzky is almost too good to be true. For the past four years, he has won the Hart Trophy as the league's most valuable player, and for the past three years, the Ross Trophy as the league's top scorer. With the runaway scoring lead he has right now, he's like a lock to win both trophies again this season.

He even played in last night's All-Star contest at the Meadowlands Arena in New Jersey despite a painful shoulder injury that aggravated at least three times during the game.

Gretzky keeps a low profile about his income, but taking account the \$1 million a year he earns with the Oilers and additional \$2.5 million he gets from outside endorsements annually, it's hard to think of anyone in sports who makes as much as he. No one deserves it more, either. Generally, seeing is believing, even after you see Gretzky do the things he does, it's hard to see you actually saw what you did. That's how electrifying he is.

It is not outlandish to equate Gretzky with Babe Ruth, since there already is a distinct parallel between them despite the fact two different sports are involved.

When Ruth first came up to the big leagues in 1914, he was a pitcher with the Boston Red Sox. He won 23 games one season and 24 the next. He showed he also could hit home runs. The Red Sox were owned by Harry Frazee, a theatrical producer, who became financially strapped that as reluctant as he was to do so, he was forced to sell Ruth to the Yankees in 1919 for \$125,000 and a \$350,000 mortgage on Fenway Park. One Boston taxi driver was infatuated over Frazee selling Ruth away, he hauled off and hit the Red Sox owner, knocking him ears over tea kettle.

Peter Pocklington has said he'd never trade or sell Gretzky long as he owned the Oilers. But what if he's forced to sell the club or what if his creditors demand to be paid? What then? Pocklington might have no other choice but to sell his prime asset. Babe Ruth was sold, wasn't he? And under very similar circumstances, too.

In such cities as Los Angeles, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Washington and East Rutherford, N.J., which do not ordinarily put out on a regular basis, Gretzky's arrival with the Oilers guarantees capacity house. With a team like the New Jersey Devils, that means a difference of somewhere between \$150,000 and \$160,000 whenever Gretzky comes to town.

Imagine what it would mean to him in terms of how much money he'd make if he ever came with one of the teams in New York? Don't think it could never happen. Nobody ever believed the Red Sox would ever sell Babe Ruth, either.

Next episode of SWC soaps

By BILL ROBINSON
Assistant sports editor

Two Southwest Conference basketball teams welcomed players back to the practice floor Tuesday as two others prepare for a third-place showdown scheduled for tonight.

In the latest episode of the Houston soap opera, 6-8 forward Braxton Clark returned to practice as did Arkansas' Kenny Hutchinson.

Clark left the No. 5 Cougars in December with Benny Anders, who rejoined the team last week. Both players left during a tournament in Hawaii, accusing Coach Guy Lewis of mistreating them.

Hutchinson, one of the most highly recruited high school products last year, attended his first practice with the No. 18 Razorbacks. He will have to sit out the remainder of the season to preserve his four years of eligibility. He had been ineligible because he failed a New York graduation test despite having high enough grades to be accepted by Arkansas.

As for the Razorbacks, the team gets the week off to recover from the dual setbacks to Rice and Villanova last weekend. Arkansas returns to action Saturday when it hosts the Bears.

As for the showdown, SWC and Texas Tech square off tonight for sole possession of the No. 3 spot in SWC standings. Both teams are 5-2 in conference action.

Elsewhere around the conference, Texas looks for only second SWC win in 21 years when it hosts TCU. Both teams are 1-6 this season.

In the other game tonight, last-place Baylor will host a strong Rice team. The Owls are and are coming off an upset victory over Arkansas Friday. Baylor has yet to win a conference game this season.

Thursday night, league-leading Houston will host Texas A&M in a televised contest. The Aggies finished the first half of the SWC action with a 4-4 record. The Cougars are 7-0, but haven't played Arkansas yet.

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Rockets defeat Kings

United Press International

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (UPI) — Rookie Ralph Sampson scored 33 points and grabbed 12 rebounds Tuesday night to give the Houston Rockets a 122-107 victory over the Kansas City Kings.

Sampson, who fell just two points shy of his career high, paced six Rockets in double figures as Houston won for the fifth time in its last six games. Robert Reid added 18, Caldwell Jones and Allen Leavell 16 apiece, Phil Ford 14 and Elvin Hayes 13 as the Rockets won on the road for only the fifth time in 21 tries.

Hayes and Leavell came off

the bench in the second quarter and combined for 17 points to help stake Houston at a 58-49 intermission lead. Kansas City led 38-37 midway through the period but Hayes scored seven and Leavell six to spark a 21-0 Rocket run.

Ford sank a 3-point basket over the first three minutes of the third period to open a 67-57 lead and trigger the rout — the worst home defeat of the season for the Kings.

Mike Woodson scored 19 points, LaSalle Thompson 11, Eddie Johnson 20 and Larry Drew 18 for Kansas City, which lost for the 13th time in its last 17 games.

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