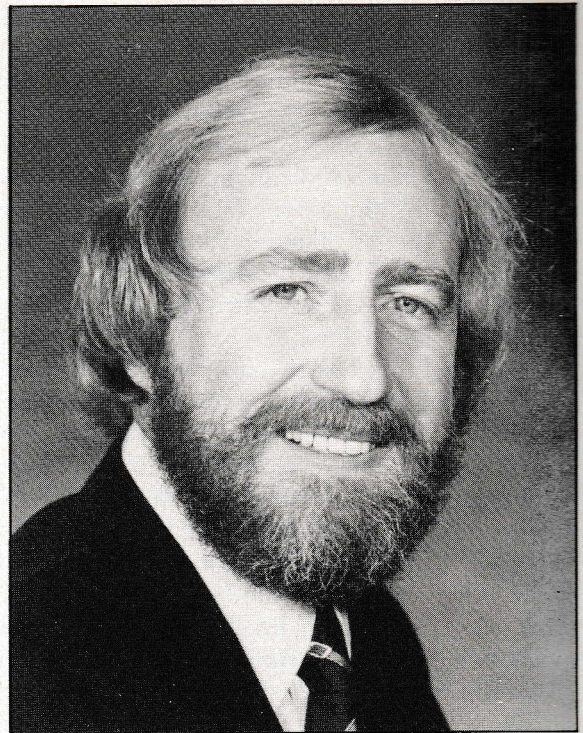


Peter Puck Picked a Heck of a Hockey Player

Now that Oilers owner Peter Pocklington has Wayne Gretzky under contract for 21 years, the Stanley Cup is next on the agenda.



By Marc Edge

Peter Pocklington greets you warmly in the plush 25th-floor executive offices of his land-development corporation in Edmonton. Outside it is 40 below and a blizzard rages in the National Hockey League's most northerly outpost.

"How *are* you," he says earnestly, squeezing your hand. His probing suede-blue eyes meet your gaze directly. He is, after all, anxious to come off well in print. To be seen as sincere. Pocklington is an admitted egomaniac, a man who first ventured into the sports business to gain attention. He figured, correctly, that by owning the Edmonton Oilers he would garner all the publicity he could handle. If anything, he underestimated.

"At first, it was an ego trip," he admits, not denying there are attractive tax benefits to be reaped from a money-losing sports franchise. "But when I got involved with it I found that if we got in the NHL and

filled our building, it would become a profitable business."

And no one loves profit more than Peter Pocklington.

A high-school dropout (he was too busy making money), Pocklington amassed a \$25-million fortune from used cars and real estate by his mid-30s. To do it, he had to move from his native Ontario to the wild west of Alberta, where businessmen kick back in the boardrooms in Stetsons and hand-tooled cowboy boots and deals are made at the backgammon board. Here he is a natural, a king among hustlers whose previous conviction for knocking down mileage readings on used cars is generally overlooked in the laissez-faire atmosphere of boomtown capitalism. Here they fondly call him Peter Puck.

Pocklington's plunge into sports ownership began one night about five years ago when he was dining with his wife in Edmonton's Steak Loft. Drawn to the sound of a nearby celebration, Pocklington found his friend, entrepreneur Nelson Skalbania, hosting a press party to mark his acquisition of the WHA's Edmonton Oilers.

This, thought Pocklington, is a fine way to attract attention. Never mind that he didn't know much about sports. He was hooked. How, he whispered to Skalbania, could he get a piece of the action? Buy in, he was told. So he did, signing up for half the Oilers—and a share of the limelight. Later, he would throw in two Rolls-Royces, a Krieghoff painting and one of Mrs. Pocklington's rings for the rest of the team.

The Oilers dropped a cool million in each of their seven years in the WHA, but Pocklington gloried in his newfound notoriety. He had jumped from the business section to the sports page, and everyone in Edmonton read that.

When he became particularly outspoken, he often made the front page. Then came the full-page features and magazine articles. They weren't always flattering, but they *were* entertaining.

This is a fellow who has wrecked five power boats, each characteristically dubbed *The Free Enterprise*, and now pilots a 900-horse-power wave-basher. Who is part owner with Paul Newman of a Can-Am racing car. Who has a tidy invest-

Contributing writer Marc Edge wrote about Dave Taylor in the January/February 1980 issue.

ment in rare paintings, and land holdings in Hawaii, Arizona, British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario. Who is embroiled in a legal battle with a Toronto psychic who, claiming he owes her for "business advice," has sued him for \$7 million (he insists she never gave him any solid tips, anyway). Who hands out copies of *The Incredible Bread Machine*, a conservative political tract that sings the praises of Pocklington's favorite philosophy, free enterprise. Who admitted—and later regretted doing so—a belief in astral projection, saying he regularly quit his body to go "flying at night."

Even cowboys don't believe in spooks, and people began to wonder about Peter Puck. But out West there's a certain tolerance of eccentricity, a respect for pioneers who dare to be different.

By now, Peter Puck was a full-fledged sports nut. He had branched into soccer, snapping up Oakland's North American Soccer League franchise and moving it north to become the Edmonton Drillers. He recently acquired a Triple-A baseball team in the Pacific Coast League. As sole owner of the Oilers, he used his Midaslike business instincts to make money. First he had to fill Edmonton's Northlands Coliseum. Crowds averaged between 10,000 and 11,000 for a WHA brand of hockey Pocklington was convinced Edmontonians would never fully embrace. Without a star, he could never raise ticket prices enough to turn a profit.

For years, Edmontonians had cheered the Toronto Maple Leafs or the Montreal Canadiens from afar. When nearby Vancouver won a franchise, Albertans fumed. Edmonton coveted the NHL and Pocklington knew it. A WHA team could be no more than a stopgap, a stepping stone to the big time.

To stem the losses, Pocklington went hunting for the star that would spin the turnstiles. He found him when Nelson Skalbania, up to his neck in red ink, auctioned off his Indianapolis Racer assets to Pocklington in return for forgiving a

business debt. One of those assets was 17-year-old Wayne Gretzky.

With Gretzky as the trump card, Pocklington became a major force behind the merger. In the end, the price was high. And Pocklington was far from pleased. "We were raped," he has said. Not at the gate. The opening game pulled 15,248 fans. By season's end, the Oilers were in the black. A season-ticket waiting list several thousand names long permits Pocklington to charge among the highest ticket prices in the league.

"If I had it to do over again I might hold out a little longer," he says. "Once I got involved in the NHL, and saw the financial viability of some of the clubs, I realized we were in better shape than they were. But it obviously wasn't too much, or we wouldn't have paid the price."

Besides paying more than \$6 million to enter the NHL, the WHA teams are forbidden to collect television revenue for their first five years in the league—a revenue loss to the Oilers of some \$7.5 million according to Pocklington. Moreover, Edmonton was permitted to protect only two skaters and a goalie from the team that won the final WHA championship.

Despite losing the heart of its defense, Edmonton finished 16th among 21 teams, earning the last playoff position and the honor of being eliminated by Philadelphia in the opening round. Edmonton had lost defenseman Paul Shmyr (North Stars), Dave Langevin (Islanders), John Hughes (Canucks) and Joe Micheletti (Blues) and was allowed in return to select such unwanted rearguards as Lee Fogolin, Pat Price and Colin Campbell.

But expect Pocklington's team to improve quickly because he will apply to it the same principles he uses in business. And expect him to irritate traditionalists in the NHL establishment because Peter Puck's methods don't always jibe with league practices. "Unfortunately we have a draft system rather than a free-enterprise system, which I like," says Pocklington. "I prefer the farm

system. If I hire better scouts to go and hire better young talent and train them properly—to me, that makes more sense than the draft system."

Hiring the right people is basic to the Pocklington technique. He surrounds himself with topnotch talent, pays them accordingly and—perhaps most important—lets them know he cares. The Oilers management group is among the highest paid in the league, and Pocklington constantly rewards excellence with steak dinners, cases of champagne and, when Edmonton won the last WHA championship, an Hawaiian vacation for each player.

During Oiler home games Pocklington can often be found conferring with Glen Sather—or whoever is coaching at the time—behind the players' bench. Some say Sather is Pocklington's only hockey weakness. A fringe player who averaged less than 9 goals a season in the NHL, Sather has parlayed hustle and loyalty—qualities Pocklington holds dear—into a high-level job. So impressed was Pocklington with Sather, that he handed him complete control of the Oilers—perhaps blindly. Sather promoted himself to general manager and named Bryan Watson, his close friend, as head coach. Sather later admitted the appointment was a poor move: Watson was axed after only 18 games.

Pocklington also has a soft spot for Wayne Gretzky, whose high price tag he defends in purely business terms. "Being an entrepreneur rather than a manager, I see things in different perspectives," he says. "I build dreams. Bobby Hull and Gordie Howe played roughly 20 years. The good ones continue to get better. When you find a talent such as Wayne Gretzky, I'd just as soon have him forever. It's something the fans can identify with for the next 20 years. They've fallen in love with him—he's part of virtually everyone's hopes and dreams for a Stanley Cup in Edmonton; and he'll be one of the major forces bringing it here, I predict, in the next five years."