Chapter One

THE INNOVATORS

The slapshot and curved sticks were still decades away, but by 1930 injuries to goaltenders were nevertheless a growing concern... to goaltenders, if to no one else. Clint Benedict, an eventual Hall of Fame goalie and four-time Stanley Cup champion, had only himself to blame for this. The strapping, wily veteran had earned the nickname "Praying Bennie" in the early years of the 20th century by spending much of the game on his knees to stop pucks from getting past him, even though it was illegal in the NHL at that time for goalies to drop to the ice to make a save. Benedict would simply argue that he had fallen by accident, and he would usually avoid the two-minute penalty the infraction carried. Finally, in 1918, NHL president Frank Calder, driven to distraction at seeing his referees unable to distinguish between a real or fake Benedict tumble, eliminated the rule prohibiting goalies from dropping to the ice. Netminders were now free to spend as much time as they wanted lying down on the job, closer to the ever-present dangers lurking there.

Nicknamed "Praying Benny" for his habit of dropping to the ice to make a save, goalie Clint Benedict wore this crude leather and wire mask in a 1930 NHL game after a Howie Morenz shot broke his nose and cheekbone earlier that season.

The earliest hockey games featured netless goals and maskless tenders who played mainly upright between two pegs.

Between the time of its tentative first steps in the late 19th century and the birth of the National Hockey League in 1917, the game of hockey changed significantly. Equipment improved, players grew more skilled, and rules were changed to make the game faster and more dynamic. Positions, and the way they were played, changed too. Defensemen, for example, never strayed from their end of the rink during hockey's formative years. Meanwhile, the position of rover (a free-roaming skill player) was eliminated altogether by the early 1920s.

Goaltenders were not immune to change. Some goalies liked to wander more than others, skating out of their crease to clear away pucks. But for the most part, goalies stayed put in front of their net. One thing is for sure though: even after equipment developments such as protective leg

pads and catching gloves were added around the turn of the 20th century, goalies played the game standing up. In many leagues, the rules of the game actually prohibited them from dropping to the ice.

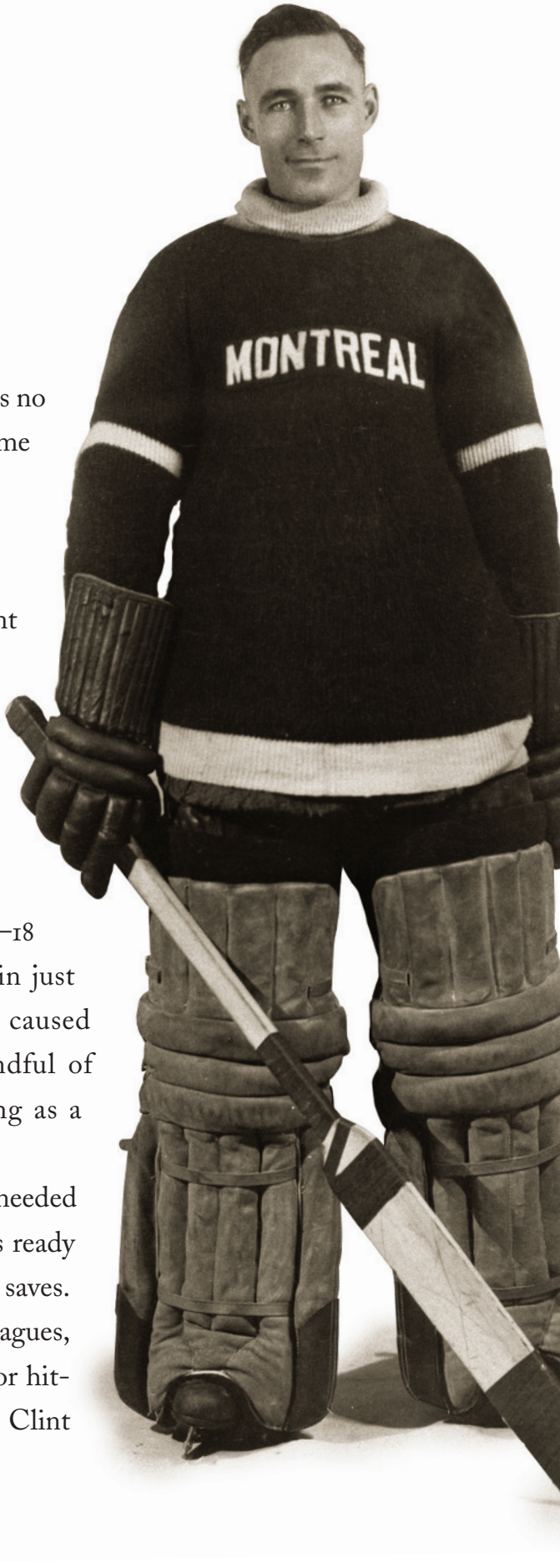
In those days, the puck rarely left the ice. Players' sticks were heavy and rigid, with thick, straight blades. Lifting the puck was uncommon, not an important part of the game—and difficult to achieve intentionally, too. For the most part, shots on goal were whipped along the ice, so there was no need for the goaltender to use anything but the blade of his stick to block a shot on goal. Yes, goalies were smart but also practical fellows back in the early days of hockey. They didn't drop down because they really didn't need to. And, after all, why should they go low and put themselves in the line of fire?

Since goalies' faces were not often in harm's way, there was no need to protect them. Or so logic dictated. Then along came Clint Benedict to change all that.

Praying Benny

A professional since joining the Ottawa Senators in 1912, Clint Benedict had already earned the nicknames "Praying Benny" and "Tumbling Clint" by the time the NHL was formed. By then, hockey had emerged as a way of making money, although not a particularly honorable one in the eyes of many. The new National Hockey League was full of promise for aspiring professionals. But with only four teams actually playing games in the inaugural 1917–18 season (one of whom, the Montreal Wanderers, played in just six games before a devastating fire at their home rink caused them to drop out), there were actually less than a handful of goaltending jobs to go around. There was no such thing as a backup goaltender back then.

Competition for goaltending jobs was fierce. So if risks needed to be taken to secure one of them, then Clint Benedict was ready to take them, diving and sprawling along the ice to make saves. The practice of dropping down was permitted in other pro leagues, but not in the NHL. Trouble was, the two-minute penalty for hitting the ice to make a save was based on intent, and by 1918 Clint Benedict had perfected the "accidental fall."



Montreal Canadiens legend Howie Morenz scored 40 goals in the 1929–30 season. He also injured Maroons goalie Clint Benedict twice that year with shots to the face and neck.

"What you had to be was sneaky," Benedict told an interviewer just months before his death in 1976. "You'd make a move, fake losing your balance or footing, and put the officials on the spot—did I fall down, or did I intentionally go down?"

NHL referees couldn't tell the difference, but some hockey purists could, and derided the practice. On January 9, 1918, unable to stomach the blatant rule infringement any longer, NHL president Frank Calder simply dropped the rule itself.

"In the future they can fall on their knees or stand on their heads if they think they can stop the puck better in that way than by standing on their feet," Calder told newspaper reporters. (This is perhaps the origin of the expression "stood on his head," now commonly used to describe an outstanding goaltending performance.)

Now operating within the rules, Benedict began to perfect his technique. He finished last in goals against average (GAA) with a 5.12 mark in 1917–18, but was the leading NHL goalie in both GAA and shutouts for the next five seasons, topping the likes of Montreal Canadiens great Georges Vézina along the way. In 1923–24, he finished second,

Clint Benedict's perfecting of the "accidental fall" led to a 1918 rule change which finally allowed goaltenders to drop to the ice to make a save.

posting a 1.99 GAA to Vézina's 1.97. During those years, Benedict helped his Senators claim three Stanley Cup titles. He then moved to the Montreal Maroons in 1924–25, and delivered a Stanley Cup to his new team the following season.

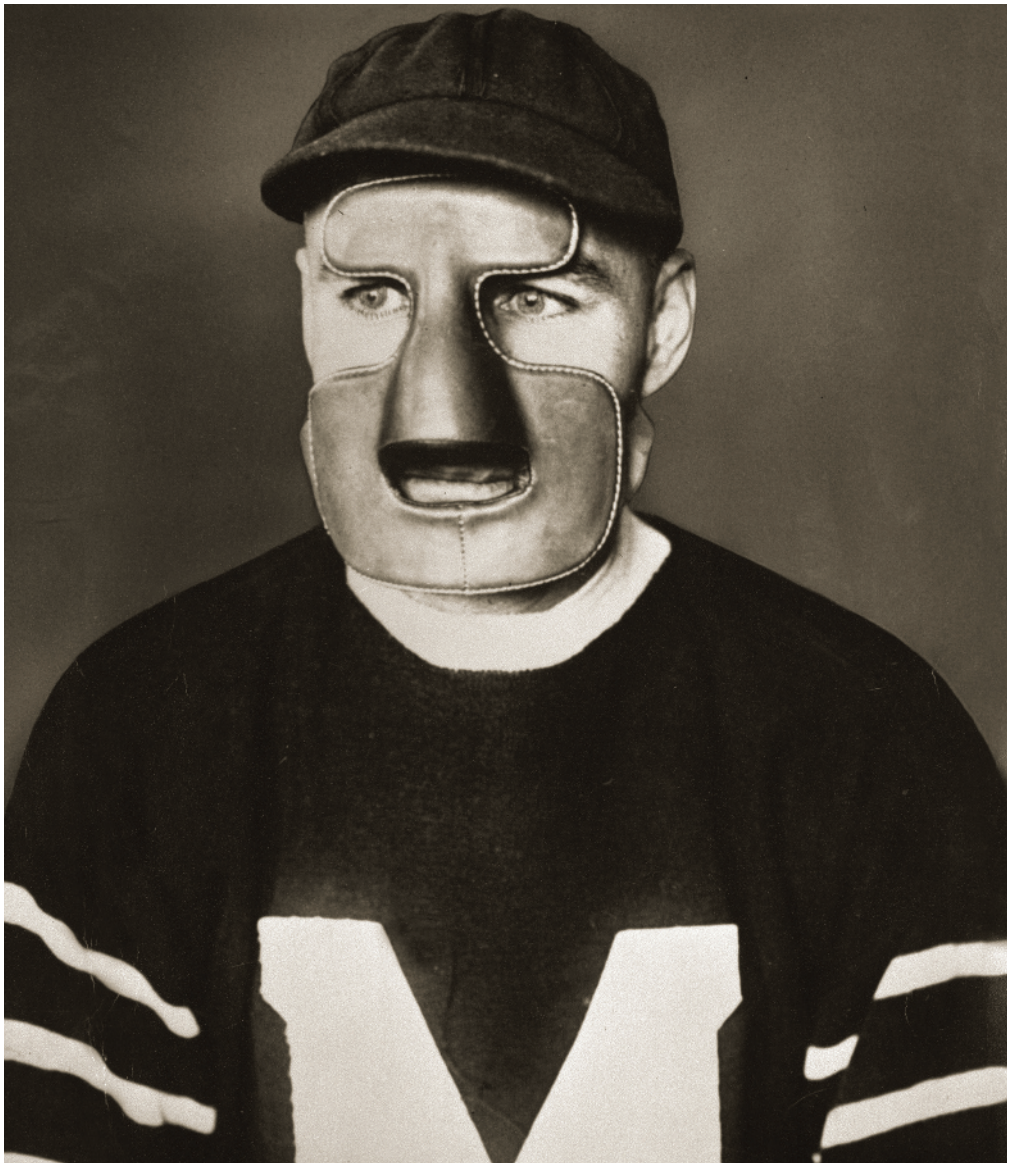
Dropping down to make a save served Benedict well, but it also led to injuries for him and those who followed him down to the ice surface. To beat the prone goalie, players were resorting more and more to—borrowing a phrase from pond hockey—"lifters." And this meant more pucks to the face of the still maskless marvels of the net.

The First Mask

Midway through the 1929–30 season, Benedict took a hard shot to the head while diving to make a save against Boston's Dit Clapper. A few days later, on January 7, 1930, he was struck in the face by a screened blast from Canadiens superstar Howie Morenz. Knocked unconscious by the shot, Benedict awoke in hospital, his nose badly broken and cheekbone shattered.

Benedict was out of the Maroons line-up for the next six weeks. When he finally returned to action for a February 22 game against the New York Americans at Madison Square Garden, he was wearing a strange-looking mask to protect his still-healing face. An article in the February 23, 1930 edition of the *New York Times* noted: "Benedict, the Maroons goalie, played his first game since his injuries over a month ago, wearing a huge mask to protect his injured nose."

The first mask worn in an NHL game bore no resemblance to those that followed some 30 years later. Manufactured by a Boston sporting



The origin of the mask Clint Benedict wore in 1930 NHL action is unknown. Some say it was a football face guard, others say it was a boxer's sparring mask.

goods company, it has been described as both a football face guard and a boxer's sparring mask. Made of leather and supported by wire, it protected the forehead, mouth and especially the nose, but not the eyes. The large nosepiece obscured Benedict's vision, causing him to discard the mask soon after that first game, which ended in a 3–3 tie. It is unclear exactly how many times Benedict wore the mask. Different sources give different answers, varying from one to five games. Some say Benedict shelved it permanently after a 2–1 loss to the Chicago Blackhawks, a loss he blamed directly on the mask. Benedict's season ended for good a few weeks later after another Morenz shot hit him in the throat during a

Maroons-Canadiens contest on March 4. He had played only 14 games in that, his final NHL season.

Clint Benedict may have been the first NHLer to wear a mask in a game, but a number of amateur hockey goalies had donned face masks several years before him. There is evidence to show that the practice of wearing masks was fairly common the further you got from the high-stakes, macho world of pro hockey, where coaches would argue that wearing a mask would impede vision, or worse, indicate that the goalie wearing it lacked one of the key elements required to play the position: courage.

The baseball catcher's mask (see *Tool of Ingenuity: The Thayer Mask*, page 22) was invented by Harvard man Fred Thayer in 1877, and it is more than plausible that hockey goalies would have worn one soon after it became widely available in sporting goods stores. In fact, we know that goaltenders did just that a few decades later. The Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto has photographs of an anonymous North American goaltender in Switzerland wearing a catcher's-type mask sometime in the late 1920s, while another photograph shows Japan's goalie, Teiji Honma, wearing a more modern catcher's mask at the 1936 Winter Olympics at Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany.

Japanese goalie Teiji Honma wore a cage-type mask at the 1936 Olympics, while Roy Musgrove wore a half cage playing in England.

A mask similar to the one worn by Roy Musgrove while playing in the British National Hockey League.

Elizabeth Graham, second from right, goaltender on the Queen's University women's team, may have been the first goalie to wear a mask. She wore a fencing mask.

Ladies First?

There is also evidence that the first ever mask-wearing goaltender may have been a woman. In 1927, Elizabeth Graham, the principal puck-stopper on the Queen's University women's hockey team, "gave the fans a surprise when she stepped into the nets and then donned a fencing mask," according to a report in the *Montreal Daily Star*. One story has it that Graham's father made her wear the mask after she had sustained serious damage to her teeth while playing goal.

Despite Elizabeth Graham's choice of protection, the metal bars of the catcher's mask were soon favored over the fine mesh of the fencing mask. Indeed, the catcher's mask was often worn by goaltenders who needed to wear eyeglasses. As twisted as it may seem today, the logic of the time seemed to be that it was perfectly reasonable to play goalie

TOOL OF INGENUITY

The Thayer Mask

For years, the baseball catcher's equipment was collectively referred to as "the tools of ignorance," presumably because nobody of sound mind would crouch behind home plate, trying to catch a hard, speeding ball while someone standing in front of him tried to hit it with a piece of lumber. Foul tips are as old as the game itself. So, before the invention of the catcher's mask, you had to be about as crazy as a hockey goalie to play catcher in a baseball game.

Fred Thayer, the player-manager of the Harvard Baseball Club in the 1870s, was having a hard time finding anyone brave and/or crazy enough to play catcher on his team. His best prospect for the position, future major leaguer James Tyng, had caught a few games, but had become "gun shy" after getting hit with a few foul tips. Thayer, who had seen an opposing catcher wearing a fencing mask with eye holes cut in it the previous year, set to work developing a mask for catchers. He designed a mask with sturdier metal bars and wider spaces for better vision and commissioned a Cambridge, Massachusetts, tinsmith to make it. The finished product came complete with padded chin and forehead rests to cushion the blows from baseballs. James Tyng debuted the mask in the spring of 1877. *The Harvard Crimson* newspaper called it "a complete success," which "adds greatly to the confidence of the catcher, who need not feel that he is every moment in danger of a life-long injury. To the ingenious inventor of this mask we are largely indebted for the excellent playing of our new catcher, who promises to excel the fine playing of those who have previously held this position."

Others mocked the new piece of equipment and questioned the courage of the man who wore it, but the mask quickly caught on. Thayer patented his invention in 1878. Later that year, the A.G. Spalding and Brothers sporting goods company began selling both Thayer's Patent Harvard Baseball Mask, as well as a similar version of their own design, for $3.

without a mask and risk losing your eye, but that breaking your glasses was to be avoided at all costs. The bespectacled Roy Musgrove wore what has been described as a field lacrosse mask while playing in the British National Hockey League from 1936 to 1939 for the Wembley Lions—a team coached by none other than Clint Benedict. Similar to a cage, it was actually a half-mask that protected only the eyes. Years later, future Hockey Hall of Famer Tony Esposito would wear a catcher's mask while tending the nets on rinks near his home in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, to protect his face… and his glasses.

Tortured Heroes

While amateur goalies were starting to protect their faces, professional netminders continued to tempt fate by going maskless. And many paid a steep price for it, suffering both physically and mentally. While their opponents' increasingly hard shots were shattering facial bones, it was the fear of injury and the pressure to succeed that shattered goalies' nerves. The title of a 1967 book by Toronto sportswriter Jim Hunt says it all: *The Men in the Nets: Hockey's Tortured Heroes*.

Goaltending legend Glenn Hall would become physically ill, vomiting before every game, sometimes between periods, and after the game was over, too. Hall, whose nerves and disposition got worse with each passing season, came to hate his job, and threatened to quit many times over the course of his long career. "I sometimes ask myself 'what the hell I am doing out here,'" he said in 1967. "But it's the only way I can support my family. If I could do it some other way I wouldn't be playing goal."

The great Glenn Hall would sometimes question the logic of playing the rough-and-tumble position of goaltender.

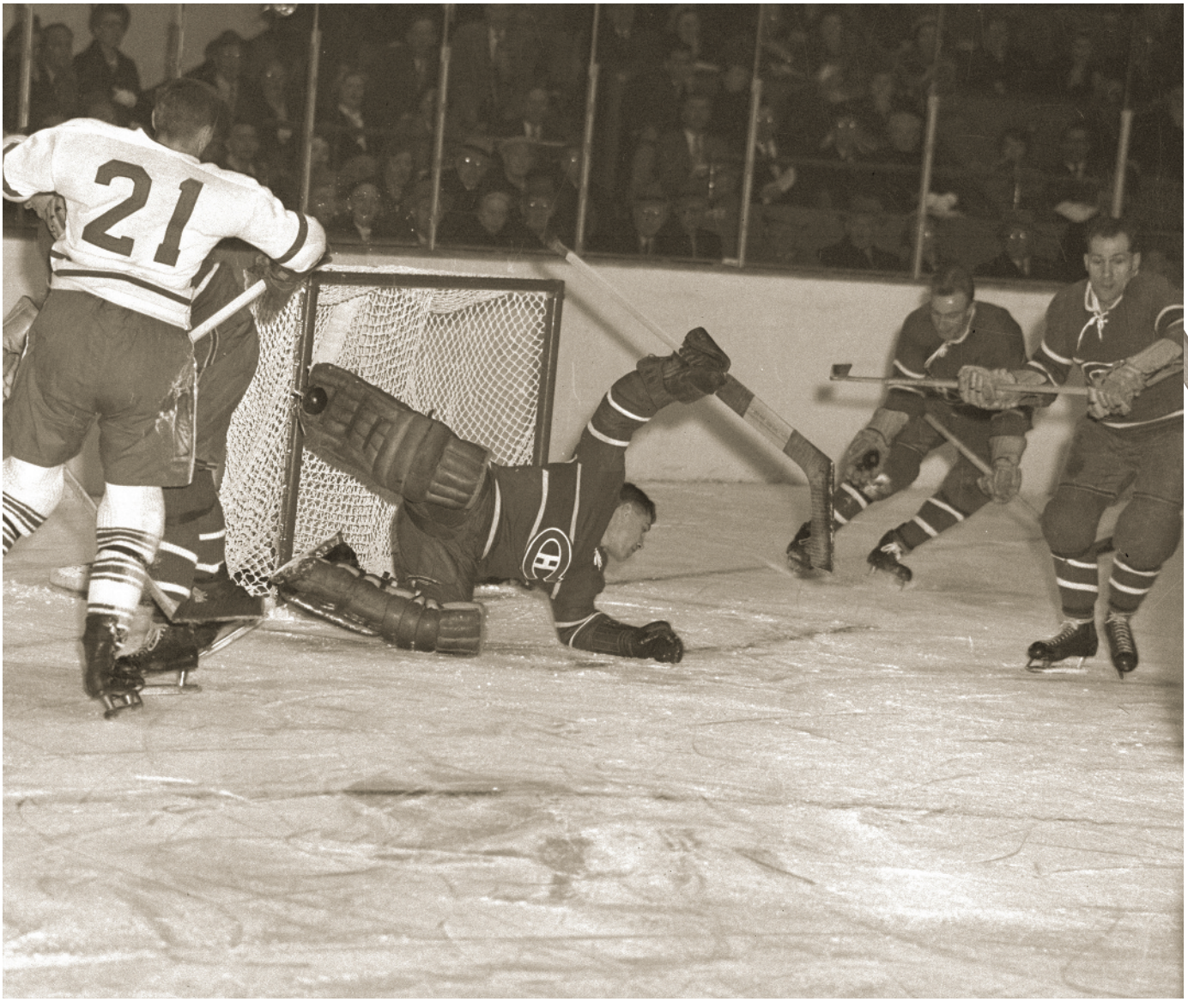
Once the season was over, Hall was known to retreat to his farm and scream in an empty field until he felt better. During his days with the St. Louis Blues, Hall would leave the team hanging until just before training camp before committing to another season. Hall also famously used the excuse of having to paint his barn to explain his late arrival in St. Louis one year. When Blues coach Scotty Bowman surprised Hall by dropping in at the farm, he found his goalie drinking a bottle of beer on his front porch... but no barn in sight.

Hall was not alone in letting the job make him physically ill. Jacques Plante was also frequently sick to his stomach, and also suffered from asthma—although his detractors, which included his own coaches, would dismiss his ills as hypochondria. Others, such as Toronto Maple Leafs keeper Frank "Ulcers" McCool, developed stomach problems.

Terry Sawchuk was often caught in the dangerous mix of skates, sticks and pucks. Famed trainer Lefty Wilson is shown giving emergency care.

Many goalies before and after him could have shared his unfortunate nickname. Roger Crozier, the Detroit Red Wings goalie through much of the 1960s, was said to have ulcers when he was 17, even before he played in the NHL.

Many goalies, such as Terry Sawchuk, turned to alcohol to steady themselves. Others, such as McCool, Montreal's Wilf Cude, Bill Durnan and Gerry McNeil (Jacques Plante's predecessor in the Canadiens goal), burned out before their time, unable to withstand the stress any longer. Terry Sawchuk walked out on the Boston Bruins midway through the 1956–57 season, only to return the following year for Detroit. A few goalies, such as the seemingly doomed Sawchuk and Chicago Blackhawks star Charlie Gardiner, died shockingly young. Most, however, played on through the fear and the pain, since

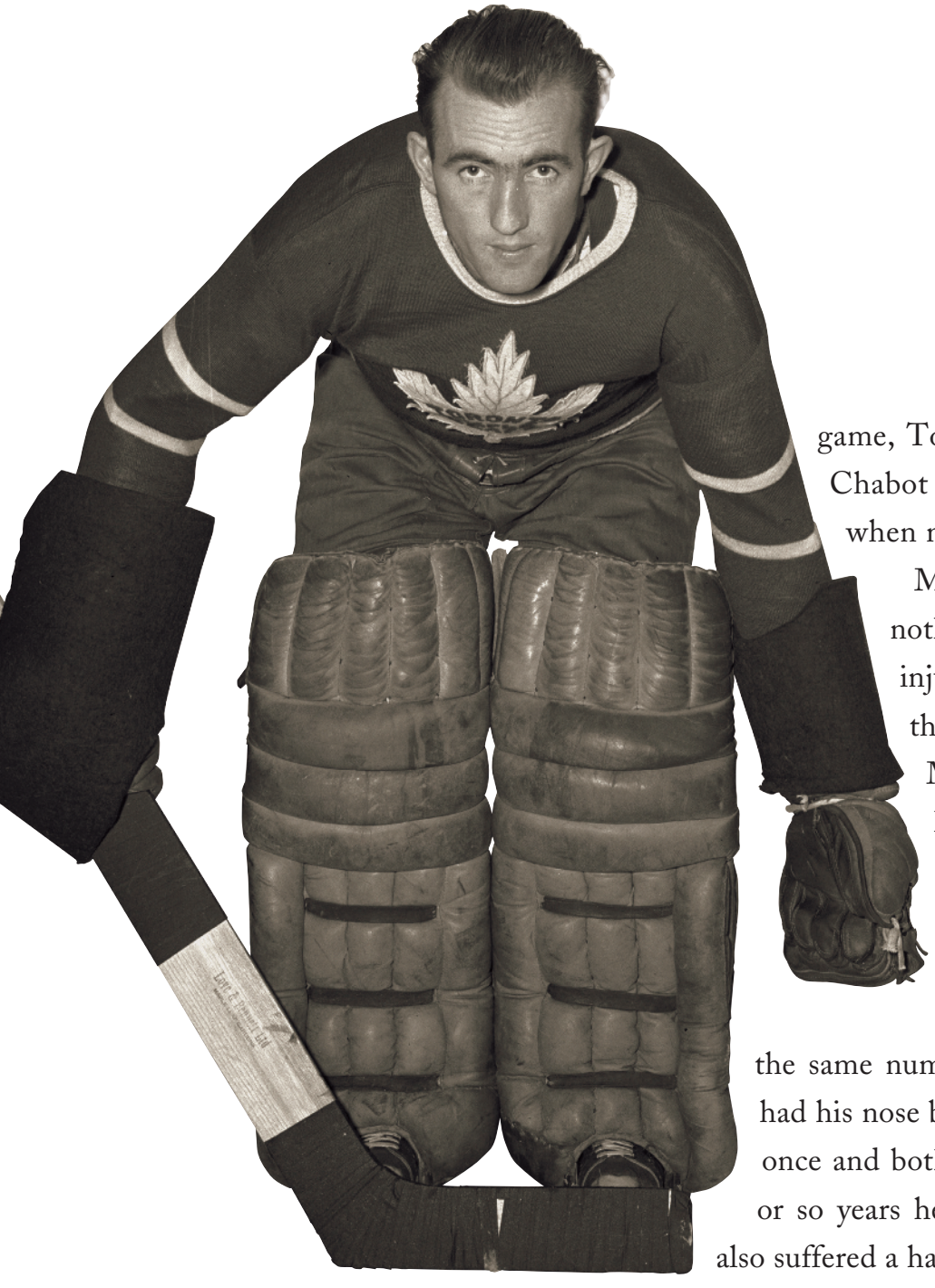


Gerry McNeil preceded Jacques Plante in goal for the Canadiens in a career derailed by the stresses of the position.

there were only six decent goaltending jobs in the world at that time and, despite the dangers, plenty of competition for the spots.

Sticks and Pucks May Break My Bones

Many pre-mask goaltenders used dark humor to cope with the very real prospect of getting gravely injured. Most told stories about losing their "chiclets" (teeth) or the number of stitches (which they glibly called "zippers") they'd received in their face. Scars and broken facial bones were worn like a grim badge of honor by the members of the goaltending brotherhood. Asked why he always shaved the day of a



Frank "Ulcers" McCool carried a nickname that belied his surname.

game, Toronto Maple Leafs great Lorne Chabot replied, "Because I stitch better when my skin is smooth."

Most people today would find nothing remotely funny about the injuries these goalies suffered and the pain they suffered through. Most pre-mask goalies received hundreds of stitches in their face and head. Broken jaws and cheekbones were common, too. Johnny Bower claims to have received more than 200 stitches, the same number as Jacques Plante, who also had his nose broken four times, his jaw broken once and both cheekbones fractured in the 10 or so years he played without a mask. Plante also suffered a hairline fracture of his skull.

Not only did maskless goalies suffer horrific injuries, they actually continued to play with their injuries. With no backup goalies waiting on the end of the bench to fill in, injured goalies were hauled into dressing rooms or crude arena infirmaries to undergo emergency repairs, usually without anesthetic.

During the 1960–61 season, Lorne "Gump" Worsley of the New York Rangers was knocked unconscious after getting hit in the left

eye with a hard shot, and only came to while he was being stitched up in the Rangers' dressing room. When Rangers coach Alfie Pike asked if he could continue, the still woozy Worsley replied "sure" and headed back out onto the ice, despite the fact that he could only see out of his right eye.

A few years later, Boston Bruins goalie Eddie Johnston had his nose broken three times in one week. The first time, a doctor in New York's Madison Square Garden stuck his fingers up Johnston's nose and tweaked it back into place so that it would not impede his vision. The next night he was struck again, and needed 12 stitches to close a gash. Two days later, he broke his nose again in Montreal. The pain was excruciating, but each time he headed back out onto the ice. Johnston dared not take a night off, because he knew, as every NHL goalie at the time did, that the minor leagues were full of young goalies waiting for their chance to play in the NHL... and take his job in the process. Johnston ended up breaking his nose seven times during his 17-year NHL career, much of which he played with a mask.

The Leafs' Lorne Chabot liked to be clean-shaven so he could stitch better.

Hall of Famer Johnny Bower wasn't shy to put his nose in the action.

Eye injuries were the worst of all suffered by goalies, the most serious of them ending careers on the spot, not to mention causing permanent loss of sight. One of the most infamous eye injuries was suffered by Terry Sawchuk in 1947, his rookie season in pro hockey. While Sawchuk was playing with Omaha of the United States Hockey League, his great career was almost over before it began when a stick sliced through his right eyeball during a goalmouth scramble. The first prognosis was permanent, irreparable damage, and plans were made to remove the eye the following day. But as luck would have it, a surgeon passing through town asked to have another look. Legend, and Sawchuk's autobiography, says that the young goaltender's eyeball was removed, repaired with three stitches, and then returned to his eye socket. It was his 18th birthday.

Enhanced for effect, this photo from a magazine article nevertheless shows the battle scars suffered by Terry Sawchuk during a violent career between the pipes.

The eye injury was but the first in a long line of serious injuries for Sawchuk, who, according to some sources, received as many as 600 stitches in his face as well as two broken noses, punctured lungs, a broken instep and ruptured discs in his back as a result of playing goal. In 1966, a prominent magazine featured a photo of Sawchuk, with the stitches on his face enhanced to be more prominent. The result looked something like an early sci-fi villain: half-human, half-alien and brutally unhappy. Often called the greatest goaltender of all time, Sawchuk died in 1970 at the age of 40, a physical and mental wreck.

The Louch Mask

NHL goalies first started experimenting with goalie masks in the mid-1950s, albeit only during practices. That Montreal's Jacques Plante was one of the first to don a mask was no surprise to hockey

Hockey legend and mask pioneer Jacques Plante was no stranger to the trainer's table.

followers. Plante, a pioneer in terms of goaltending technique, was also known for having a mind of his own, a trait that often saw him at odds with those who coached him.

Plante debuted with Montreal in 1952–53, playing in three games, then played 17 more in 1953–54 in relief of the increasingly fragile Gerry McNeil. By 1954–55, he was Montreal's full-time goalie, and almost immediately began toying with the idea of wearing a face mask. He may have tried a plastic one sent to him by a Granby, Quebec, man as early as 1954, and old photos show him with a variety of other kinds of masks, including a catcher's-type cage and a lacrosse-type half mask.

That same year, a St. Marys, Ontario, inventor named Delbert Louch created the precursor to today's visor, a clear plastic, full-face shield he marketed as the "shatterproof face protector for all sports."

Jacques Plante modified his Delbert Louch shield for better vision, comfort and protection.

Louch sent one of his masks to each of the NHL's six starting goaltenders. Gump Worsley of the New York Rangers, who history has shown never met a mask he didn't hate, complained that the new shield was too warm, and that the glare it reflected from the arena lights, combined with its tendency to fog up, obscured his vision. Terry Sawchuk and Detroit Red Wings general manager Jack Adams at first endorsed the Louch mask, which was soon adopted by youth hockey associations across Canada and the United States. Photos exist of Sawchuk wearing one in a Red Wings practice, but it appears that he soon set it aside. Toronto goalie Johnny Bower did the same, but not before posing for a photograph with it on.

Toronto's Johnny Bower sported a clear plastic Louch mask for this photo, but never for a game.

Jacques Plante had the same complaints about the Louch mask that Worsley and the others had. But instead of giving up on it, Plante modified the mask, cutting a large eye opening and contouring its sides to improve visibility. Even though Plante used the mask in practice for several years, Delbert Louch's shield never made it into an NHL game.

Resistance

The Louch mask was far from perfect. But Plante and others may have used it in games anyway—had certain attitudes of the day not prevented them from doing so. Even by the late 1950s, a netminder wanting to wear a mask would have had to fight his way through a minefield of resistance. The attitudes of their coaches, teammates and fans now seem archaic, but they were a matter of fact for professional goalies in the 1930s, '40s and '50s.

The last people who wanted to see masked goaltenders in pro hockey games were coaches and general managers, who, at that time, were also responsible for ticket sales. Backed by a litany of excuses and arguments, most of which ring hollow today, they refused to let their goaltenders wear masks in games. Their attacks ranged from criticisms of the mask designs ("You can't see a puck at your feet"; "They're too heavy"; "They're too hot") to amateur psychology ("Goalies need fear to be on edge, it keeps them alert"; "Without a mask, a goalie will be too complacent") to attacks on pride and manhood ("A real man wouldn't hide his face from his opponents"). And then there was the financial argument: "The goaltenders in our organization will never wear a mask," said New York Rangers

general manager Muzz Patrick. Why? "Because women who like hockey want to see the players' faces."

The Fiberglass Revolution

In 1958, Montrealer Bill Burchmore was 35 years old and the sales manager for a company called Fibreglass Canada Ltd. The long-time youth hockey coach and Montreal Canadiens fan was in the stands at the Montreal Forum when Jacques Plante was struck in the forehead during a playoff game against the Boston Bruins. The game was delayed for 45 minutes while doctors stitched up the gash in Plante's head. At work the next day, Burchmore found himself staring at a mannequin's head, recalling the events of the previous evening. The mannequin was made of fiberglass.

Fiberglass, which is essentially glass-reinforced plastic, was invented during the Second World War. It was first used widely in boat building in the 1950s. Easily molded, and very hard after setting, it soon had numerous commercial uses. Burchmore was convinced that he could design a fiberglass mask, molded to fit the contours of a goaltender's face like a second skin. The mask would be light but strong, and molding it to fit the face would help ensure it didn't hinder the goalie's vision.

For more than a year, Burchmore experimented, eventually coming up with the process to make such a mask. Finally, shortly after the Canadiens won their fourth consecutive Stanley Cup in the spring of 1959, he wrote Jacques Plante a letter explaining his idea for a mask.

BILL BURCHMORE: Mr. Fiberglass

If a single individual can be credited with having invented the goalie mask, then that person would be Montrealer Bill Burchmore. Others before him made protective face masks for goalies. But those masks all had flaws that stopped NHL goalies from using them outside of practices. It is the fiberglass mask, and Burchmore's way of manufacturing it, that finally broke through and began to be used in NHL games. It remained the mask of choice for most goaltenders for a quarter century.

The right fit: Bill Burchmore's fiberglass mask was both welcomed and widely used by a generation of goalies.

Having witnessed Montreal Canadiens goaltender Jacques Plante crumple to the ice after taking a puck to the face in a 1958 playoff game, and inspired by a fiberglass mannequin at his place of work, Fibreglass Canada Ltd., Burchmore, a 35-year-old sales manager, was convinced that fiberglass was the right material for the task at hand. Easily molded when soft, it became extremely hard when it dried.

Burchmore started experimenting with various mask-making methods, at one point practicing the art of face mold making on a young colleague named Al McKinney. Claustrophobic, McKinney nevertheless agreed to have his eyes covered, straws inserted in his nose, and plaster of Paris slathered over his face.

Burchmore soon perfected his method, which involved covering the face molds with layers of fiberglass sheets soaked in polyester resin, and letting them harden. The mask he made for Plante, the one the Canadiens goalie was wearing the night he made hockey history in 1959 (see page 38) weighed 14 ounces and was 3/16th of an inch thick.

Plante had been wearing Bill Burchmore's mask for only three months when Burchmore came up with another innovation. By January of 1960, he had designed a mask using fiberglass yarn instead of sheets. And Plante was once again a willing "guinea pig" for the new design, called a "bar" or "pretzel" mask because it resembled a twisted pretzel. The new mask, which weighed only 10.3 ounces, was a dark caramel tone, the color of the polyester resin used. Some said it looked like giant worms crawling on Plante's face. However unsightly, the pretzel mask did allow for better ventilation, which at the time was the biggest complaint amongst the goaltenders who were experimenting with masks. Burchmore continued to make pretzel masks throughout the 1960s. His customers included NHL goalies like Cesare Maniago and Charlie Hodge, and countless junior, senior league and minor pro goalies. Burchmore made two pretzel masks for Plante. The legendary goaltender wore his second pretzel mask, which was somewhat larger than the first one, when he came out of retirement to join the St. Louis Blues in 1968.

Plante was reluctant at first. He knew what his coach, Hector "Toe" Blake, thought about masks and anyone who wanted to wear one. Perhaps the idea of having a plaster face mold made wasn't exactly appealing either. But sometime in the summer of 1959, Plante, accompanied by Canadiens team doctor Ian Milne and trainer Bill Head, made his way to the Montreal General Hospital to have a mold made. Plante had to wear a woman's nylon stocking over his head and cover his face with Vaseline. Straws were inserted in his nose to allow him to breathe while his face was slathered with plaster of Paris.

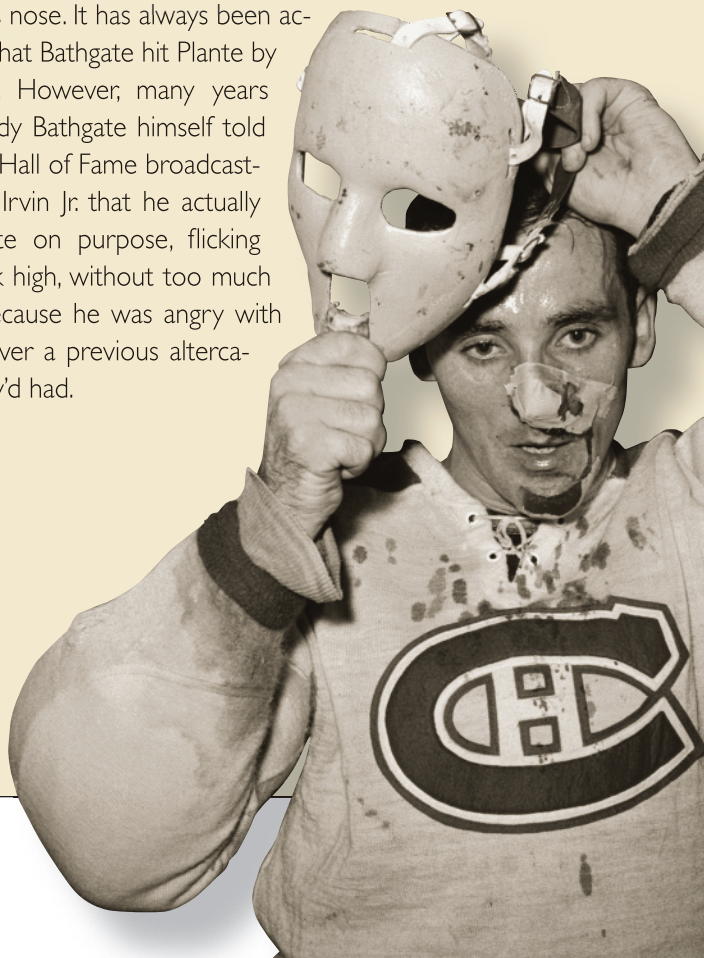
Plante's face mold was then sent to Burchmore, who quickly got to work layering sheets of fiberglass cloth saturated with polyester resin. The result was a 14-ounce, 1/8th-inch-thick mask able to withstand tremendous impact. For comfort and padding, Burchmore glued thin strips of rubber to the inside of the mask at the forehead, cheekbones and chin. Adjustable leather straps attached to the sides secured it to the head. In an attempt to disguise its presence, Burchmore painted the mask in a so-called flesh tone.

Plante tried the mask out in the training camp that soon followed and immediately fell in love with it for the protection it provided him. He swore that he could see perfectly well with it on. Toe Blake and others in the Canadiens front office were not so sure. Blake told Plante that he could wear the mask in practice but that doing so in a game would be a bad idea. He argued that if things went badly and Plante let in a few soft goals, people would blame the mask. Over the long run, Blake reasoned, wearing a mask could compromise Plante's chances of winning a record

NOVEMBER 1, 1959: Enter the Mask

A Canadian Heritage Minute television spot was made to commemorate it, and a children's book in which it features prominently (*The Goalie Mask* by Mike Leonetti) has become a bestseller. And in 2007, 48 years after it happened, *The Hockey News* magazine ranked Jacques Plante's debut of the molded fiberglass goalie mask at Madison Square Garden on November 1, 1959, fourth in a special edition chronicling "Sixty Moments That Changed The Game."

The story has been told and re-told countless times. And, like any good legend, it has grown to mythical proportions over the years. Early in the first period of a game between the New York Rangers and the defending Stanley Cup Champion Montreal Canadiens, a backhand shot delivered by Rangers star Andy Bathgate caught Montreal goalie Jacques Plante in the face, opening a savage cut along his nose. It has always been accepted that Bathgate hit Plante by accident. However, many years later, Andy Bathgate himself told Hockey Hall of Fame broadcaster Dick Irvin Jr. that he actually hit Plante on purpose, flicking the puck high, without too much on it, because he was angry with Plante over a previous altercation they'd had.



RIGHT: A *bloodied Jacques Plante donned a fiberglass mask after being cut by an Andy Bathgate backhand on November 1, 1959. Bathgate later confessed to hitting Plante on purpose because he was angry after absorbing a hip check from the Montreal netminder earlier in the game.*

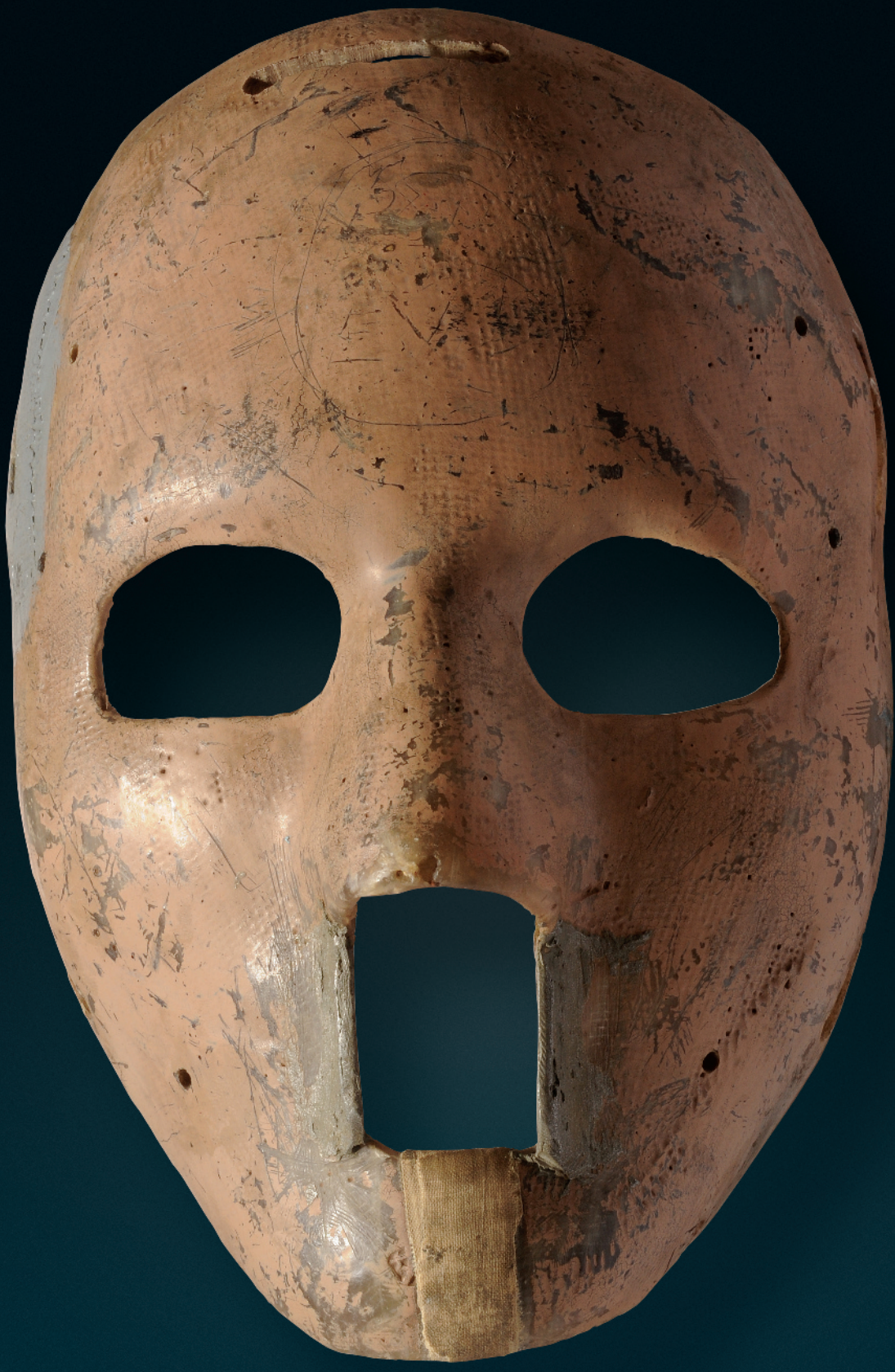
Nevertheless, we know that Plante fell to the ice and was guided toward the Garden clinic, where Rangers team doctor Kazuo Yanagisawa ("Dr. Kamikaze" to the many players he stitched up) closed the ugly gash with seven stitches. Almost as ugly was the exchange between Plante and Canadiens coach Toe Blake after the Montreal goalie insisted that he would only return to action if he could wear the fiberglass mask he'd been wearing in practices. Blake finally relented, and Plante made his way to the Canadiens dressing room to fetch the mask.

When he skated back onto the ice at the start of play some 45 minutes after being hit, a hush fell over the Garden faithful as they witnessed what appeared to be Plante's exposed skull. To sportswriters of little imagination, Plante "looked like something right out of a Hollywood horror show." And to at least one critic, more cultured than the rest, he "looked like a character in a Japanese Noh play." "Plante looks like a man who has died from the neck up," wrote one wag. "Does Plante realize that he startles elderly ladies and frightens children?" questioned another.

By the time the final buzzer sounded on this historic night, the Rangers had put only one puck behind hockey's newly masked marvel. The Canadiens, meanwhile, deposited three behind one of the greatest mask resisters of them all, Rangers goalie Gump Worsley. Plante left the Garden that night with an understanding with Blake. He could continue to wear the mask until his injury healed. Later on they agreed that Plante could keep wearing the mask as long as the team was winning. And win they did.

For years, Plante's achievement was taken to be more important than Clint Benedict's brief experiment with a mask because it was said that he never again played without one. But that too is more fiction than fact. The truth is, Plante would indeed make one more maskless foray onto NHL ice.

ABOVE: ***Jacques Plante used his original "flesh-colored" mask for less than half a season, switching to the lighter and cooler "pretzel" mask he designed with his mask-making collaborator Bill Burchmore in early 1960. He wore the mask until his first retirement in 1965, and again when he returned to the NHL in 1968.***



fifth-straight Vezina Trophy for being the NHL's top goaltender, not to mention the Canadiens' bid for a fifth-straight Stanley Cup. Plante reluctantly agreed to begin the 1959–60 season bare-faced once more.

Another Broadway Debut

The four-time defending Stanley Cup champion Canadiens got off to a fine start in the fall of 1959. The team was on an eight-game winning streak when it rolled into New York's Madison Square Garden on November 1 to take on the Rangers, who were led by star Andy Bathgate, the NHL's third-leading scorer the previous season. Three minutes into the game, posted about 10 feet from the Canadiens' net, Bathgate launched a backhand shot, the most difficult shot for goaltenders to anticipate. The rising shot struck Plante in the face, knocking him to the ice. Plante was cut, and Canadiens team trainers rushed him into the clinic in the Garden for repairs.

While a doctor was adding seven more stitches to Plante's already impressive facial collection, Montreal coach Toe Blake nervously paced the halls, even inquiring about the quality of the amateur backup goalies in the Garden crowd that night. Unimpressed, he called on Plante, who told him he would only return to the net if he could wear his mask. Plante was adamant, and Blake was in no position to argue with him. Forty-five minutes after getting hit, Plante skated back onto the Garden ice before a hushed crowd, wearing his ghostly-looking mask. Bathgate's backhander truly was a shot heard 'round the hockey world. Nobody knew it yet, but that shot, and the chain of events it set in motion, would change goaltending forever.

Jacques Plante's Bill Burchmore created mask is "The Mask" to many. It is arguably the single most important existing hockey artifact.