Eric Lindros Appreciation

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He was half-bull, half-boy, a velvet marauder with soft hands and chisels for elbows. He was cut from the same slab as other noted St. Michael's College graduates: Keon, Horton, Lindsay and Kelly. Because of his size and the size of his reputation, it was impossible for him to hide no matter where he played or with whom: as a 12 year-old Toronto Young Nat who floated several stories above the surface of the ice; as an Oshawa General who Godzilla'ed his way through opposing teams, leaving the tweed-capped scouts awestruck and dizzy with hope; as an Olympian who held the country's breath before coolly pushing the puck under a sprawled German goaltender; or as an Ontario Hockey League star who chased around his Russian equal, Pavel Buré, at the 1991 Saskatoon tournament.

Because Eric was so big and so good as a young man, his career possessed few surprises. The triumphs – the Hart Trophy, Olympic Gold Medal, and point-per-game average – were anticipated, but the drama of Mr. Lindros's career was often found in its disappointments: the litany of horrible concussions; the Flyers' doctors' treacherous misdiagnosis; the snubbing of *Les Nordiques* after being chosen by Quebec as the number one NHL draft pick; the goal-post to the right of Dominik Hasek stubbornly denying him shoot-out glory in Nagano; Pat Quinn's near-benching in Salt Lake; and the dreadful wrist injury that robbed him of skating for a full year with the Maple Leafs, the team he'd dreamed of playing for through the best and worst times in his career.

Captaining the Flyers proved to be both a blessing and a curse. During the '97 final versus Detroit, a 40-story office tower was sheathed with his orange and black 88; a few years later, GM Bob Clarke held him hostage, refusing to trade his afflicted and depressed star despite a flood of alluring trade offers. One afternoon in Toronto, Lindros received a phone call from the Leafs' board of directors telling him they'd uncorked the champagne in the boardroom and that Mr. Clarke had traded him to the team of his boyhood. Minutes later, they phoned back. Mr. Clarke wanted Tomas Kaberle, and the deal was nixed.

A lot of the hockey world wanted Mr. Lindros to suffer for not signing with Quebec – he held them at bay until his rights were traded to two teams, Philadelphia and New York; the Flyers winning his rights in court – and that's what he did. Because he played a tough, battering game and fought the league's most hellacious goons, he'd spend hours concussed and retching over dressing room toilets in a blind yellow fog with the sound of whitenoise and blood gushing in his ears. He watched his brother Brett's career end after repeated blows to the head and saw his parents' vilified by the local media and other hockey parents in numberless GTA rinks. But, in the end, this pain brought league-wide awareness, if not about how we treat people who are gifted beyond belief, but how hockey's cruelty can turn talent into mulch. With his career on the downswing, studies were conducted on the affects of concussions and head shots, reinforced padding in helmets, and other health issues. At his retirement event in London this past Thursday,

he shared the stage with Dr. Peter Fowler – a sports orthopedic surgeon who'd treated him throughout his career.

The farther Mr. Lindros slipped from his early status as the Greatest Player on the Planet, the more of a mensch he became. During the 2004-05 lockout, he went back to school, to U of T, where, as a professional athlete with millions of dollars in the bank, he squeezed his frame into a lecture hall chair with students half his age, studying business and philosophy. In between classes, he showed up on Monday mornings at Rosedale rink and played shinny, or at Ramsden Park, slapping around a puck with whomever was on the ice. Recently, he traded off-ice training and hopes of catching on with another team to work, instead, for the NHLPA, helping to order its business after a muddled and dirty regime so that players 50 years from now can reflect on their careers and laugh. Because Mr. Lindros is not a lock for induction into the Hall of Fame, he could have done wiser things than bump against ownership and NHL governors in an effort to ready the players' association for its next labour war.

In the twilight of his career, there was very little about wins and losses in hockey that mattered. After the wrist injury forced him to end his hockey life in Toronto, he greeted the media with tears in his eyes, saddened, terrified, and relieved that his career would hold no more promises or expectations. The circle had finally closed, and for that, the superstar appeared to be grateful.