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NATURE *OR* NURTURE



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BULGING NETS, RED LIGHTS, the roar of the crowd, the celebrations. What's not to love about scoring goals?

Here's one thing: It's really hard to do.

The reason we love celebrating goals so much is because in the grand scheme of a game or an individual's season, they're hard to come by. But there are a special few who make it look like scoring comes easy. Those players are often referred to as "natural goal scorers."

That commonly-used term leads to the age-old question, are goal scorers born or are they made?

It's kind of a big question and the answers vary depending on who you ask. But there are enough things seen at the highest level of the game that make you wonder if there's something to the notion that goal scorers were simply born with the gift.

Why is it that Alex Ovechkin has scored at an alarmingly higher rate than his peers? How did New York Islanders legend Mike Bossy score at such an absurd rate even when goals were more prevalent in the NHL? How could Auston Matthews walk into the NHL and drop four goals in his first game? How is it that of the thousands of players who made it to the NHL only 44 reached the 500-goal mark? (Including five Americans. *See Page 33*). Even at other levels, what makes certain players more prolific scorers than their peers?

These questions are difficult to answer with 100 percent certainty, so why not go to a direct source, one of the special players who most would probably consider a natural-born talent?

Bryan Trottier is one of those select 44 players who scored more than 500 goals during his NHL career, finishing with 524 over an 18-year run with the Islanders and Pittsburgh Penguins.

As part of that distinguished career, Trottier also happened to play with Bossy, Pat LaFontaine, Mario Lemieux and Jaromir Jagr, and also coached Joe Sakic, putting him alongside some of the most prolific scorers the game has ever seen, in addition to being one of them himself.

So, were Trottier and his peers born with a natural ability to score goals?

"You're born with some of it," the Hockey Hall of Famer said. "But then you hone it through years of youth hockey, coaching, experimentation, stealing little bits and pieces here and there. There's no one recipe."

Trottier maintains that the best players are ones who are willing to do what is necessary to constantly improve to remain the best. He did it. And he also had a front-row seat to watching Bossy and Lemieux, the two players who rank first and second in NHL history in goals-per-game, do it, too. And the good news for those who maybe didn't get the goal-scoring gene is that Trottier believes anyone can pick up the skills necessary to score more goals.

"There's just a whole bunch of little things that any person—beginners to the most highly skilled—can do. There's something you can work on to improve yourself," Trottier explained.

"That's going to the Bossys and Lemieuxs because they prided themselves on making sure they did all the things that are necessary to keep themselves at the highest level they possibly can."



It's The Age-Old
Question: Are
Goal Scorers
Born Or Made?

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By Chris Peters

“Time is your friend. The more time you spend working at it—you improve and your confidence goes up.” — Bryan Trottier, Hall of Famer

In recent years, scoring has become even more difficult. Goalies are better, defenses are tighter, but the best still find ways to score.

To get a handle on what today’s top scorers are doing, *USA Hockey Magazine* polled five scouts who work with NHL or Junior teams to get their take. Watching as many players as they do, surely they would have an answer to our big question, right?

While each scout answered a little differently, the commonalities in the answers were very similar to Trottier’s opinion. There may be some traits elite scorers are born with, but without the immense repetition and work they put into honing their skills, they wouldn’t score like they do.

There are plenty of videos available of Ovechkin refining his one-timer, Sidney Crosby working on his edges to get inside-positioning, Matthews working on how to come off the wall and shoot, or Joe Pavelski spending time practicing his famous net-front deflections. They never stop working on skills geared towards scoring.

So, the best scorers may have a head start with some of their natural gifts, but as Trottier says, there are a lot of ways for anyone to get better. Nothing beats time spent practicing and honing one’s skills.

“Any time you can spend working on your shot, working on your release, your power, your accuracy, any kind of time you can spend on priding yourself on execution, quickness, all those things help you in a game,” he said.

“Time is your friend. The more time you spend working at it—you may not be a Bossy or Brett Hull—but what happens is, you improve and your confidence goes up.”

And when it comes to scoring goals, whether in Trottier’s era or in today’s game, confidence is the one trait that never goes out of style. ☆

Chris Peters is the author of the popular hockey blog The United States of Hockey.

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TIPS FOR MORE GOALS

→ MOST GOAL SCORERS don’t net their goals on a breakaway. And they don’t walk in uncontested and beat the goalie clean. They score by getting the puck and shooting it quickly and accurately. It comes with practice, not only to work on your shot but also on putting yourself in a position to score.



Tip #1

Keep your body low, with your knees bent. That way you’ll be ready to receive a pass and shoot in one fluid motion. If you’re standing straight up, you’re not ready for either. Another reason it’s important to stay low is you’ll be in a better position to get the shot off while absorbing a check.

Tip #2

Angle your feet toward the net so you can get the shot off quickly. Watch any of the good goal scorers, guys like Brett Hull, and they are already in a position to shoot the puck before they receive the pass. They’re not waiting to get the puck and reposition their bodies to shoot.

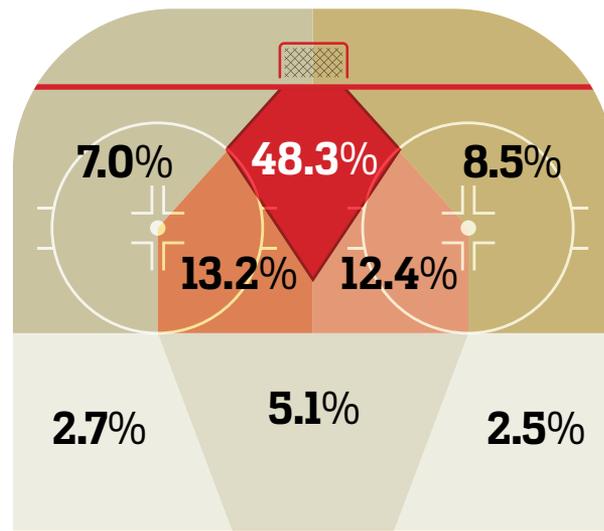
Tip #3

Turn your head so you can see the passer and the net without turning your head. Peripheral vision is just as important as a hard and accurate shot. Know where you are on the ice in relation to the net, in addition to knowing where the pass is coming from and where the defenders are.



Red Zone

48.3% of all goals scored in the NHL this season have come from the inner slot (red zone); 73.9% from the slot (home plate area).



SOURCE: Christopher Boucher via sportlogiq.com

By Ryan Williamson

DOWN AND DIRTY

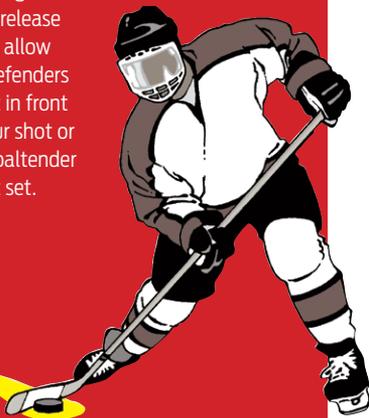
Scoring Dirty-Area Goals Isn't For The Faint Of Heart



with Scott Gomez

Tip #4

Work on catching the pass and shifting your body weight as you shoot in one motion. Don't waste time catching the pass, lining it up on your stick, picking your target and shooting. A quick release won't allow the defenders to get in front of your shot or the goaltender to get set.



Tip #5

You should practice one-timers and shooting from various angles and positions. The higher up you go in the game, the faster things happen. You have to adapt and be ready to get the puck and fire it on goal. It's the difference between scoring and being stopped. ☆

Anchorage, Alaska native Scott Gomez retired in 2016 after 16 seasons in the NHL.



→ With the score tied in its quarterfinal matchup with Switzerland at the 2017 IIHF World Junior Championship, the U.S. needed someone to step up. Fortunately, forward Jordan Greenway was up to the task.

With the U.S. on the power play, the Canton, N.Y. native set up shop in front of the Swiss net, wreaking havoc as a U.S. defenseman unloaded a shot from the point.

The Swiss goaltender managed to make the initial save, but Greenway fought off a check to buy enough time and space to slip the puck in the net and keep Team USA's gold-medal hopes alive.

Goals like Greenway's are considered dirty-area or gritty goals. These goals might not make a highlight reel, but they are crucial elements of a team's success. They are scored from areas of the ice that are not for the faint of heart. They come about thanks to equal parts positioning and persistence, craftiness and courage.

Greenway is following a long line of players who have made their living planted in front of the net and looked for the smallest opening to score.

One of those players will be Greenway's future teammate with the Minnesota Wild, forward Zach Parise. The two-time Olympian can credit many of his 300-plus goals to his willingness to play in the dirty areas.

"Deflecting the puck is a big skill," Parise said. "It's about anticipating the play well and knowing when to get there. Guys have made a living doing that."

Phil Esposito built a Hall of Fame career on setting up shop in the slot, collecting what his detractors often referred



"At the end of the day, they don't ask you how you scored, they ask how many you scored."

—Brett Sterling, Chicago Wolves

to as "garbage goals." In 1971, Esposito set the NHL record by scoring 76 goals, many of which came on deflections, rebounds and redirects. He was such a master at scoring garbage goals that a common saying in Boston was "Jesus saves, but Esposito scores on the rebound."

Another player who has mastered this skill is Brett Sterling. The Los Angeles native scored 108 goals in his four years at Colorado College and led the American Hockey League in scoring as a rookie. Sterling estimates that at least 75 percent of his goals came from being directly in front of the net.

"There was a running joke with my teammates that if you added up all my goals from my rookie season [in the AHL], the total distance would've been about 20 feet," said Sterling,

who is back with the Chicago Wolves after spending the past four seasons in Europe.

When it comes to instructing young players, Sterling said the most important thing is to get to the net.

"The more chaos you can create in front of the net, the more likely something can happen in your favor," he said.

As a player that stands in front of the net and battles for loose pucks, you can accumulate some bumps and bruises. But both Parise and Sterling agree that it's all worth it when they see the puck in the back of the net.

"If you're willing to sacrifice, you're going to get rewarded," Sterling said. "At the end of the day, they don't ask you how you scored, they ask how many you scored." ☆

READY, AIM, FIRE

When It Comes To Finding The Back Of The Net, The Great Ones Shoot First And Ask Questions Later | By Chris Peters

ONE CAN POSSESS all of the physical tools necessary to fill nets, but the best scorers in the game have developed a diverse mindset for how to score. For most, however, it starts with one very basic principle.

“You gotta shoot,” said Minnesota Wild forward and two-time Olympian Zach Parise, who netted his 300th career NHL goal earlier this season. “You look at the guys who lead the league in goals, the majority of the time they’re the shot leaders, too. That’s one of the most important things.”

It seems simplistic, but it is true.

Washington Capitals captain Alex Ovechkin has been the most prolific scorer of the last decade. Over his career, he has averaged nearly five shots per game—the most of any NHL player since individual shots began being tabulated. Parise ranks 18th all-time in that category, averaging 3.43 shots per game, according to hockey-reference.com. He is the highest-scoring American since entering the league.

Everyone agrees, you have to shoot to score, but with the way goalies have improved over the years, most are going to stop almost all of the shots he or she sees coming. So there has to be more in a scorer’s tool bag if he or she is going to put up bigger numbers.

Peter Russo, head coach of the boy’s hockey team at BB&N School in Cambridge, Mass., and an individual skills coach who works with players of all ages, has been helping players add more instruments to their scoring tool boxes.

“There are a lot of ways to shoot a puck, so you have to pick the shot that makes the most sense in that area,” Russo said.

Russo explained how important it is for a player to develop a “basketful of release points,” which allows them to better shoot in stride, shoot off the pass or find any number of ways to get pucks off their sticks quickly. Knowing



Players like Zach Parise know that you have to pay the price if you’re going to score in today’s NHL.

when to use a specific release point is all part of that scoring mentality that one develops over time.

However, Russo maintains that mobility and understanding how to use it can be a scorer’s best weapon, even more than his or her shot.

“You look at Sidney Crosby, Auston Matthews, Patrik Laine, Vladimir Tarasenko, one thing they all have in common is they can move in a lot of different ways,” he said. “[Players] who can move laterally can navigate into the interior and get to the soft spots at the right time.”

Finding those soft spots is all part of developing a scoring mentality. As a player becomes aware of the patterns of the game, it allows for more open shots, rebounds and opportunities for catch-and-shoot scenarios, which is becoming a common weapon for some of the NHL’s top goal scorers.

In a recent polling of five NHL and junior hockey scouts, every one of them said they identify top scorers as the ones who know where to be to score the goals, whether it be at the net-front or by finding open ice to make plays. Having those instincts are what translates to higher levels of hockey, even more than a heavy or accurate shot.

One thing that has always been important when it comes to scoring is the willingness to go to the hard areas. Want to score more? Get to the net.

It doesn’t have to look pretty to count and the NHL’s goal scoring leaders aren’t getting their numbers by staying on the perimeter. (See graphic, Page 30).

“The majority of goals are scored from five feet around the crease,” said Parise, who does a lot of his damage from close range.

“You have to be willing to get there and anticipate the play. The way shot blocking is and how good goalies are, it’s tough to beat them clean. So it’s all the rebounds, the loose stuff around the crease and knowing how and when to get there.” ☆

“You gotta shoot. You look at the guys who lead the league in goals, the majority of the time they’re the shot leaders, too.”

— Zach Parise,
two-time Olympian

AMERICAN SNIPERS

Top American Goal Scorers Of All Time
(Goal numbers in parentheses)



NHL

1. Brett Hull (741)
2. Mike Modano (561)
3. Keith Tkachuk (538)
4. Jeremy Roenick (513)
5. Joe Mullen (502)



Men's College Hockey

1. Chuck Delich
Air Force (156)
2. George Clark
Army (153)
3. John Mayasich
Minnesota (144)
4. Danny Felsner
Michigan (139)
5. Tom Ross
Michigan State (138)



Women's College Hockey

1. Hilary Knight
Wisconsin (143)
2. Kendall Coyne
Northeastern (141)
3. Alex Carpenter
Boston College (133)
4. Jocelyne Lamoureux
Minn./North Dakota (125)
5. Brianna Decker
Wisconsin (115)
5. Hannah Brandt
Minnesota (115)
5. Haley Skarupa
Boston College (115)



Men's Olympics (1956-Present)

1. John Mayasich (14)
2. Roger Christian (11)
3. Bill Cleary (11)
4. Paul Johnson (11)
5. Brian Rolston (10)



World Juniors

1. Jeremy Roenick (12)
2. Brian Gionta (11)
3. Chris Kreider (10)
3. Peter Ferraro (10)
3. Brian Rolston (10)
3. John LeClair (10)
3. Mike Modano (10)
3. Steve Leach (10)



Women's Olympics

1. Natalie Darwitz (14)
2. Katie King (14)
3. Jenny Potter (11)
4. Cammi Granato (10)



National Team Development Program

1. Phil Kessel (104)
2. Patrick Kane (84)
3. Jeremy Morin (81)
4. Auston Matthews (79)
5. Andy Hilbert (73)

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