

here's why the
hockey goalie has

the toughest job in sports

by Dave Warner

WHAT'S THE TOUGHEST position to play in team sports?

Pitcher, catcher, third baseman?

Center in football?

Lacrosse player?

Anchor man on a relay team?

None of those, say hockey players, who regard theirs as the most rugged team sport of all. And for the toughest job in hockey they nominate the position of goaltender.

The goalie crouches in front of a four-by-six cage, looking very much like a clay pigeon in a shooting gallery.

His is a deceptive job. He does very little skating and no checking, and to the casual observer it may seem that being a goalie is a breeze.

But the goalie is an easy and frequent target for that 6-ounce, hard rubber puck, often traveling at speeds of 120 mph. Get it in the face, as many goalies have, and the result is lasting facial hash marks.

The goalie also is prone to injuries from opposing players who, while skating at full speed, crash into him in gang fashion.

The sole objective, of course, is to get that puck past him into the net.

Physical hazards are enough to make the goalie's job the toughest, but there are mental pressures, too.

Some of the best of these cage cops have had to walk away from the nervous fatigue which has been known to hit them in the middle of a championship series.

Bill Durnan, formerly of the Montreal Canadiens and rated just about the best goalie there ever was, is an example of one who had to call it quits during the Stanley Cup playoffs because his nerves were completely shot.

Two years ago, Terry Sawchuck, rated the best goalie in the National Hockey League at the time, mysteriously left the Boston Bruins, never to return. Again, shot nerves. And the list doesn't end there.

There's hardly a goalie in any of the pro leagues who won't admit to these nervous tensions. They know and accept them as part of the game. The emotional fatigue plagues them off the ice, too.

Emphasis on the power play in modern hockey has resulted in heavier scrambling in front of the goal. Shots are screened through massed players to confuse and add to the troubles of the goalie, who falls prey to the pressure no matter if he's tall or short, or plays in a crouch or straight up.

Less than 10 years ago, one player would be trying to break through and beat the goalie with a shot. Now everyone rushes the net. There are so many foes around the net, the goalie can't see. They fire the puck and storm the net. This is the power play—a real nightmare.

Where his teammates get frequent rests, the goalie stays in for the full 60 minutes—if he doesn't get injured.

Why is there so much pressure for the goalie and not his teammates? One goalie puts it this way:

"With many fans, each goal scored against you is a personal mistake. The other team scores and what happens? They turn on a red light. They stop play for everyone to see. The goaltender digs out the puck. Everyone in the stadium is looking at him; he's the goat.

"A forward can make a bad play—say he misses one of those clean shots from 10 feet out—but the game goes on and maybe he scores a minute later. Then he's a hero—and there's no pressure.

"A goaltender has no defense against luck. A shot hits the post and drops in. Or one of those long ones you can't see because somebody crossed your vision. Maybe somebody deflects one into the other side of the goal. And the bouncing puck that dribbles in for goals gives you fits.

"That cage looks pretty small, easy to defend. But picture it in your living room and it's pretty big. That's an awfully long six feet across.

"In baseball, when somebody makes an error and a run scores, the run goes into the books as unearned against the pitcher.

"Hockey teams make errors, too. But there's no such thing as an unearned goal for a goalie.

"A goal is scored against you. The little red light behind your cage flashes on. The fans scream for your blood. Sometimes, when the score is close late in the game and a goal is scored against you, you wish you could press a button that would drop you through a trap door in the ice."

Montreal's Jacques Plante keeps his eye on the puck as enemy tries a feint.



The hottest spot on ice is occupied by the goalkeepers of hockey.