

MARIO LEMIEUX

For the past eight years, Wayne Gretzky has dominated hockey as no other professional athlete has ever dominated a sport. But last season, after reigning as the N.H.L.'s scoring champion for seven straight seasons and M.V.P. for eight, the undisputed king of the rink lost both honors to Pittsburgh Penguins center Mario Lemieux.

It's no coincidence that Lemieux wears number 66, which is Gretzky's 99 turned upside down. Only 23 years old, Mario le Magnifique is turning the league upside down. One fourth of the way through this, his fifth N.H.L. season, Lemieux was on a pace to shatter the N.H.L.'s all-time single-season scoring record. Not surprisingly, the Penguins agreed to renegotiate his contract, which now approaches Gretzky's \$2,000,000-a-year salary.

In addition to his incredible skating and stick-handling skills, Lemieux has one asset that Gretzky wasn't blessed with—size. At 6'4", 210 pounds, Lemieux has strength and reach to match his speed and finesse. Picture Michael Jordan at seven feet tall. How good is Lemieux? So good that Calgary Flames coach Terry Crisp said, "I'd be willing to go to jail for six months to have him." And that would be a Canadian jail, eh.

Paul Engleman caught up with Lemieux at the City Club in Pittsburgh. "Steeltown is in the midst of an architectural renaissance," he reports. "But Mario has stolen center stage as the city's leading tourist attraction."

in french,
his surname
means "the
best." in
hockey, it
means the
same thing.
meet the man
who outgreets
gretzky

1.
PLAYBOY: What do hockey players talk about when there's a fight between two other players and they're all holding on to one another's jerseys?

LEMIEUX: A lot of guys out there are good friends. You try to grab one of your friends so you don't have to fight. A lot of players in the N.H.L. don't want to fight. If you have a really good friend who grew up in your neighborhood or something like that, you might

talk about where you're going after the game. Especially if you're ahead five to one.

2.

PLAYBOY: You've been tripped, hooked, high-sticked, slashed and speared. Which do you prefer?

LEMIEUX: None of them. But slashing is sometimes part of the game. You have to take a slash once in a while to go around a player or to make a play. Spearing is very dangerous. It could put you out for the rest of the season or for the rest of your career. That's the one I don't like.

3.

PLAYBOY: What's the difference between slashing and spearing?

LEMIEUX: Spearing is when you hit somebody with the end of your stick in, like, the stomach. Slashing is when you take a swing at somebody. For spearing, the difference is three more minutes in the penalty box.

4.

PLAYBOY: Opposing players are on record as marveling at your talents. Which players in the league are so exciting that they can bring you out of your seat?

LEMIEUX: Certainly Denis Savard. He's one of the best stick handlers in the league and he gives a good show, especially in Chicago when he gets the crowd going. He's the best entertainment around the league. And Gretzky is great to watch.

5.

PLAYBOY: You were only eighteen when you went into the N.H.L. four years ago. A lot of young players who grew up in small towns in Canada have trouble adjusting to life in big American cities. But you grew up in Montreal, so Pittsburgh was something of a step down, at least in size. What was your biggest adjustment?

LEMIEUX: Learning the language. When I came to Pittsburgh, I didn't speak any English. The first three or four months were pretty hard. It took probably two years before I was comfortable.

6.

PLAYBOY: We understand that one of the ways you learned English was by watching soap operas on TV. Strictly from an

educational point of view, which one would you recommend?

LEMIEUX: *One Life to Live*. [Laughs] I didn't know what was going on when I came to Pittsburgh, so I just flipped the channels and tried to find something interesting. On a soap opera, they talk real clear.

7.

PLAYBOY: Quite a few players and coaches have expressed their dissatisfaction with letting Soviets play in the N.H.L. What's your position on the subject?

LEMIEUX: It isn't fair to bring Russian players into our league. We have enough good hockey players in Canada and America. We don't need those people to come over here and take our jobs. They should keep the Russians where they are and keep playing matches like the Canada Cup to see who's best.

8.

PLAYBOY: Let's face it: You're playing a game in which guys are carrying around sticks. Some of them clearly have bad tempers. Are you ever afraid that one of them will end your career in an instant?

LEMIEUX: I never think about it. You can't go out there and worry about somebody's ending your career. For sure, it can happen. You know who these guys are and sometimes you have to be careful, but I never think about it.

9.

PLAYBOY: Every team you play against puts its best defensive center on the ice to cover you. Which players are the biggest pains in the ass?

LEMIEUX: That's tough. Ron Sutter is very good. Troy Murray is very good, also. Guy Carboneau of Montreal is probably the best of them all.

10.

PLAYBOY: Your team was clearly in the best division in hockey last season. For example, the Penguins and the Rangers had better records than six other teams that made the play-offs, but they were excluded. Is it finally time to realign hockey's much-maligned play-off system?

LEMIEUX: The current system isn't fair to the fans and certainly not to the players. There should be a way to change it. But I'd want to (concluded on page 165)

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keep the divisional rivalries, and that's why the owners don't want to change it. The way the N.F.L. does it—with the wild cards—is the best system.

11.

PLAYBOY: While drug use is something of a problem in other sports, hockey players seem to restrict their substance abuse to alcohol. Why do you think that is?

LEMIEUX: We couldn't play hockey if we took drugs. The game's too fast. We couldn't survive with drugs. Alcohol is a little bit different. There are guys in the N.H.L. who like to go out after a game and drink five, six, seven, eight beers. It's a way to unwind, and it makes you go to bed a little earlier. That's the main reason.

12.

PLAYBOY: Which national anthem do you like better—*O Canada* or *The Star-Spangled Banner*?

LEMIEUX: Canada's has a nice melody to it, and it's got a good rhythm, too. Because I grew up in Canada, I tend to lean toward the Canadian side.

13.

PLAYBOY: A lot of hockey players think Winnipeg is the worst N.H.L. city to travel to. Last year, for example, when it was rumored that Czech defector Petr Klima might be traded to Winnipeg, he said he'd rather go back to Czechoslovakia. Which city do you think is the worst?

LEMIEUX: Winnipeg [laughs].

14.

PLAYBOY: Why hasn't hockey achieved greater popularity in the United States?

LEMIEUX: Because of the lack of TV coverage. There aren't any teams in the South and only one in the West Coast market. So we don't get the big coverage that basketball, football and baseball do. But a lot of people simply don't know enough about the game. Now that Gretzky's playing for L.A., he'll be able to attract more attention and people will see what a good game hockey is.

15.

PLAYBOY: Some people think hockey hasn't achieved the popularity of other sports here because of fighting. Should the league prohibit it?

LEMIEUX: Fighting isn't part of the game. We proved that in the Canada Cup. You had the best hockey in the world, and there was no fighting. Just clean, fast hockey. That's the way the game should be played.

Probably, the answer is to bring down the roster from eighteen to seventeen skaters. You'd get those "enforcer" guys out of the leagues. You'd get better hockey, better hockey players.

16.

PLAYBOY: For years, Wayne Gretzky has been considered the best player in hockey today and probably the best of all time. Now you're being called his successor. Will we soon be calling you the best of all time?

LEMIEUX: I don't think so. It's pretty hard to imagine that anyone could even come close to what Gretzky has accomplished. He holds something like forty-five records. It's probably going to take me five more years to do what he did. So I'd have to play fifteen years to accomplish what he would be able to do in ten.

17.

PLAYBOY: When they first see you play, some people are surprised at how effortless you make it look. How do you account for that?

LEMIEUX: I skate with a long stride, and that's why I sometimes look slow. But I can skate with all the good skaters in the league. And I don't like to skate for nothing. I look first, and anticipate, and try to be at the right spot at the right moment. That's why a lot of people say that I don't look as though I work hard. But I work my mind. That's a lot better than skating all over the place.

18.

PLAYBOY: Are there players in the N.H.L. who deliberately try to injure others?

LEMIEUX: Nobody goes out there with the intention of hurting somebody or ending another player's career. It would be really stupid for somebody to do that. We're all trying to make a living. But in the course of a game, tempers flare. It's an emotional game. Some of the guys do go crazy at times. They may lose control and do something stupid. But they certainly regret it afterward.

19.

PLAYBOY: We understand that the house you recently built has a wine cellar. What would you recommend for sitting at home and watching a hockey game?

LEMIEUX: Coors. [Laughs] I like California wine. That's what I drink most of the time. Some Bordeaux are also very good, but I usually go with a California cabernet.

20.

PLAYBOY: It's the seventh game of the Stanley Cup finals. Your team is down by one goal. With only a few seconds left, you score to tie the game after a spectacular end-to-end rush. But the referee disallows the goal because he lost sight of the puck. What do you say to him?

LEMIEUX: It wouldn't be pretty, let me tell you. I don't think you'd want to publish the words in this interview. I wouldn't be inviting him out for a beer after the game. That's for sure.



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