

THE UNDENIABLE LINK



FROM WAYNE GRETZKY TO JOE NIEUWENDYK AND MORE RECENTLY DAVE BOLLAND TO JOHN TAVARES, IT IS AMAZING TO HEAR THE HUGE AND POSITIVE IMPACT PLAYING LACROSSE HAD ON NHL STARS FROM THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

// By Roger Lajoie

Here's a trivia question for all of you die-hard hockey fans: What do Wayne Gretzky, Steven Stamkos, Brendan Shanahan, Gary Roberts, Joe Nieuwendyk, Paul Kariya, Joe Sakic, Paul Coffey and Adam Oates, just to name a few NHL greats, have in common?

For a lacrosse fan, the question is a ridiculously easy one to answer. All of those hockey superstars – and many more actually – have all played and loved lacrosse.

"I always said that there were a lot of us that would have picked lacrosse over hockey if we could have made the same kind of living playing it," says Gary Roberts, 43, who retired this

past year after playing 22 seasons in the NHL. "The toughness and physical aspect of lacrosse has definitely had an influence on my playing ability in hockey."

In his younger days, Roberts was a terrific lacrosse player, as was his Whitby buddy Joe Nieuwendyk, whose brother Gil is considered a superstar in the sport. Joe, recently named the general manager of the Dallas Stars, wasn't that shabby himself as his impressive lacrosse résumé includes a MVP award from the Minto Cup when he was as 18 years old.

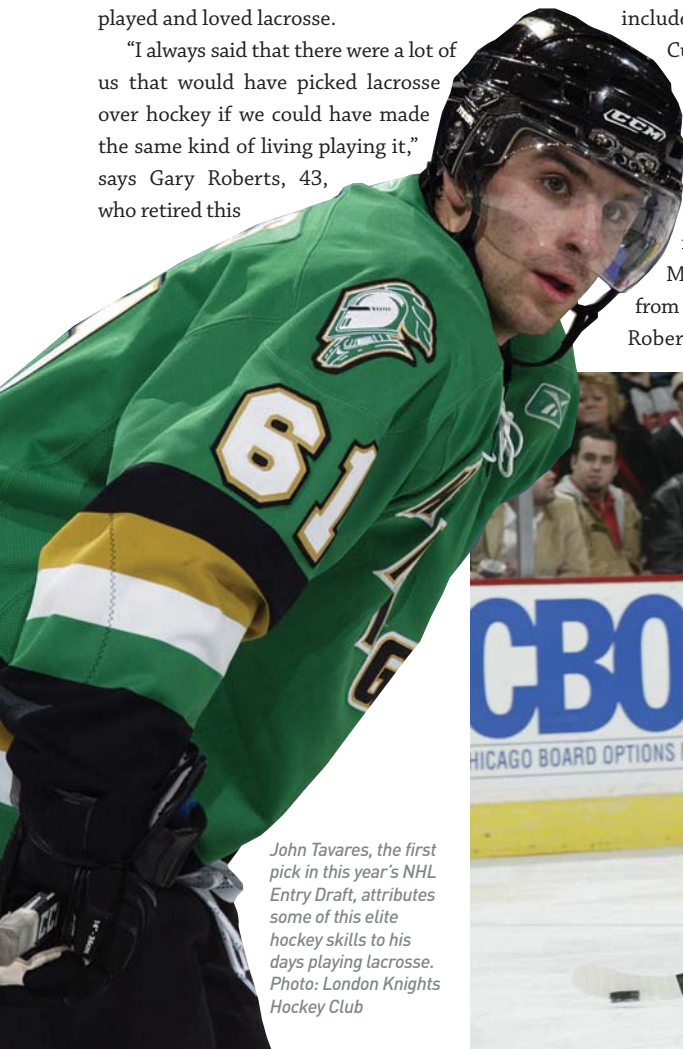
"Lacrosse was a great way to get ready for hockey, but it was much more than that to me as well," Nieuwendyk says. "The memories I have from minor lacrosse, growing up in Whitby, and from the Minto Cup and the lessons learned from that, are very special ones for me." Roberts and Nieuwendyk grew up and

played lacrosse together more than 25 years ago now. But hockey players playing lacrosse — or for that matter, lacrosse players playing hockey — was a common trend long before their time and is still today.

One just has to look at the success of David Bolland of the Chicago Blackhawks for proof of today's connection between lacrosse and hockey. The 23-year-old Bolland just completed his first full season in the NHL, in which he tallied 47 points in 81 games, and sported an impressive +19 plus-minus rating. The Mimico native also got his first taste of the Stanley Cup playoffs, which ended in the Western Conference semi-finals with a loss to the mighty Detroit Red Wings.

Although he is toiling in the Windy City now, the former London Knights standout says lacrosse was a love for him while growing up in Mimico.

"When my dad emigrated to Canada from Scotland, he basically didn't know anything about hockey," Bolland recently told Sun Media. "But my uncle and my brother were big into it and I started playing and loved it. Lacrosse was a big thing for us growing up and it's a sport that really helped me develop as a hockey player."



John Tavares, the first pick in this year's NHL Entry Draft, attributes some of this elite hockey skills to his days playing lacrosse. Photo: London Knights Hockey Club



The Chicago Blackhawks' Dave Bolland fondly recalls his days playing lacrosse in Mimico. Photo: Chicago Blackhawks



When he first came to the Oshawa Generals as a budding 14-year-old superstar, John Tavares wanted to keep playing Junior 'A' lacrosse in Mississauga. However, he only played one season of Junior "A" Lacrosse for there was much at stake as the number one pick in the 2009 NHL Entry Draft.

"It's lacrosse that helped teach me to spin off checks, take shots and protect the puck under pressure," says the all-time leading goal-scorer in Ontario Hockey League history. "My stick skills, the way to read the play quickly comes from lacrosse. The hand-eye coordination is just one of the little things that helps you in hockey."

In fact, when Tavares scored a "lacrosse-like" goal at the world junior hockey championships in Ottawa last Christmas, he once again gave credit to his lacrosse roots for his amazing ability to control a puck with his stick.

"Some of that comes from playing lacrosse and

working after practice fooling around," he asserts. "Sometimes those things come into play and help you out."

Tavares certainly had a great mentor in his life when it comes to lacrosse. His uncle John Tavares is of course one of the legendary players in the sport's history. A two-time National Lacrosse League MVP, Tavares is the league's all-time leader with 671 goals, 749 assists and 1,420 points in 17 years with the Buffalo Bandits. In 2009, even at the age of 40, he led the league with 51 goals and was fifth with 94 points.

checks or lean into guys, use your body to create room, you do a lot more of that in lacrosse because it's such a possession game," he adds. "You learn to make room for yourself, like in hockey. I learned a lot of those things, working the puck down low in front of the net to make room for myself, get shots off or make plays and create scoring chances [from lacrosse.] Obviously hand-eye coordination is a big one as well. And it's a physical sport so you learn how to play that physical style."

Tavares admits he misses lacrosse, a sport he loved as a youngster, and played until he was 16 years old.

"Lacrosse was a great thing for me because it let me get away from hockey for the summer as a kid," he says. "My mom never really believed in summer hockey. I needed a break and I always looked forward to the lacrosse season. And when hockey season came around I was really looking forward to that. It was good both ways to help myself in both sports."



The elder Tavares was a great role model for the younger Tavares. From his uncle he has learned the importance of being a good teammate and leader, but the budding hockey superstar says he learnt a great deal watching his uncle play lacrosse — and playing lacrosse himself as a youngster — that have paid dividends for him as a hockey player.

"The biggest [thing] is moving in traffic, shooting in traffic, making plays while guys are on you," Tavares told nhl.com. "When you're able to do that, you're able to draw guys toward you, make those plays in traffic, I think it creates a lot of chances offensively.

"Also rolling off checks — when you roll off

"I loved lacrosse, too, it's a great passion of mine," he adds. "It was tough to give it up, but you know it has to be done when the commitment gets this high at this level of hockey. I was a pretty good lacrosse player. I wish I could play both."

He's not the only hockey player who feels that way. In fact, perhaps the greatest hockey player of them all — Wayne Gretzky — told *Sports Illustrated* the same thing many years ago.

"I couldn't wait for hockey season to end so I could pick up a lacrosse stick again," Gretzky said.

And when it comes to describing hockey players, love for lacrosse, that pretty much says it all. ♦

Roger Lajoie is a freelance writer in Toronto, Ont.