

# SWEET Sorrow

**Gordie Howe, one of his sport's fiercest warriors, can only watch and grieve as his wife—the smarts behind Mr. Hockey—slowly succumbs to a rare brain disorder**

BY ALLEN ABEL

**S**LIDING TOWARD a shadowed place where light and hope cannot reach her, a woman sits in a padded chair, and a small black dog licks her hand. There is a toddler's safety gate at the top of the basement stairs, and every door that leads outside is equipped with an alarm, not to keep intruders away from the home in Bloomington Hills, Mich., a leafy suburb of Detroit, but to keep the woman inside during the dislocated wanderings that are a consequence of her terrible, wasting affliction. The man of the house—one of the paramount athletes of the 20th century, an icon of humility and patience—is as stricken as his dying wife, and already feels her loss. "If missing someone is love," says Gordie Howe, "then that's what it is."

Colleen Joffa Howe has Pick's disease, a lesser-known form of dementia comparable with Alzheimer's in its inexorable destruction of the mind, yet specific in the portions of the brain it attacks. There is no cure. Colleen is 69, and had this misfortune not befallen her, early next year she would have been leading her Hall of Fame husband toward a cluster of milestones: her 70th birthday in February, his 75th in March, their golden anniversary in April.

Now that cavalcade of happiness will not occur. After years of private sorrow, the Howes—Gordie, sons Marty, 48, Mark, 47, and Murray, 42, and daughter Cathy Purnell, 43—have decided that the time has come to publicly close ranks with the millions of other families whose elders have faded into the same unreachable dimness. Extraordinary in their achievements, the great Red Wing and his family bear a common grief. "It's one of those things that always happens to someone else," says Marty. "Until it happens to you."

For at least the past year, Gordie was his wife's sole caregiver—preparing her meals and medication, shepherding her through her wanderings, waking in terror at the sound of those door alarms. (With the disease rapidly progressing, a nurse now helps him three days a week for four hours each day.) The little teacup poodle named Rocket, after Gordie's nemesis on the Montreal



#### HAPPIER TIMES

Colleen and Gordie on their wedding day in 1953; Gordie and sons Marty (center) and Mark with the upstart Aeros in 1973.

Canadiens, Maurice (Rocket) Richard, once was her joy and companion. But now, says Gordie, "it's just a dog."

"When Mom first quit eating," Cathy says of Colleen, who has lost close to 30 pounds over the last two months, "Dad would order a pizza. But then he wouldn't eat either, because he didn't want to be eating if she wasn't."

The chores have been onerous, the toll of sorrow obvious in the big man's eyes. But Gordie was taught as a small boy on a Saskatchewan farm not to weep for his woe, nor shun his duty. "For him," says Murray, a radiologist in Toledo, "it's like getting a Ph.D. in life."

Colleen Howe was one of the first women to demand and win a place at the money tables of major league sports. Twenty-nine years ago, as America's first female player agent, she negotiated the revolutionary package that brought Gordie out of his early retirement—he was only 45!—and teamed him on the ice with Marty and Mark in the World Hockey Association for the happiest seasons of Gordie's legendary career. She raised and nursed and chauffeured four athletic children and arranged her husband's every personal appearance, every grand tour, as well as hundreds of acts of public and secret charity, leaving the man his mates called Power free to rearrange the scoring records of the NHL and the facial bones of his opponents.

"She fought as diligently as any agent I've ever worked with, in sports or Hollywood," says Howard Baldwin, who was president of the New England Whalers when Colleen negotiated the move of Gordie, Marty and Mark to that team from the WHA's Houston Aeros in 1977. During those negotiations, Baldwin, now a film producer in California, flew to Michigan, where Colleen had purchased

not going anywhere unless he gets paid.' People said, 'That's horses---,' but she stood her ground because that's how he made his living."

A few weeks ago, the younger of Cathy's two daughters, 15-year-old Jade, was assigned to write an essay on a topic of her choosing for her honors English course in Helena, Mont. Jade's composition is titled *Gone*.

*She used to call, and we would talk on the phone for hours. I could barely get a word in so I mostly listened. . . .*

*I wonder what she thinks about now when I talk to her. Confusion is a constant with her. I wonder how long it will be before Gramma no longer recognizes me. The doctors' answers are no more clear than hers. I miss her, and she isn't even gone yet.*

ARNOLD PICK was a German neurologist in the late 19th century. The malady that he first detected in a patient who had lost the ability to speak is classified as a progressive dementia. Its widely varying symptoms can include aggressiveness, ob-

**NO MERCY** Howe was known for his hard checks as well as for his soft hands.



sessive walking routines, rudeness and a loss of inhibitions. Some patients survive 10 years; others less than two. That something was not right with Mrs. Hockey was clear as early as five years ago. "She used to be so sharp, with such a memory," Gordie says, "and suddenly those names and numbers weren't coming back."

## "He won't like me saying this," Mark says about Gordie, "but he was the most cruel player I ever saw."

a small ranch and was raising exotic livestock. "There she was, out in the middle of a field, feeding llamas," Baldwin recalls. "I got attacked by a goat as I walked out there. We went at it until two in the morning, but we got the deal done. At the press conference [to announce that the Howes were joining the Whalers], she gave me a toy goat."

Shrewd and visionary, Colleen even had Gordie's name trademarked, as well as their sobriquets: Mr. and Mrs. Hockey. For this relentless drive and ambition, she was ridiculed. "Back then, hockey wives were told, 'Stay at home and stay out of the way,'" says Mark. "Even when I got engaged 25 years ago, I remember telling my fiancée, 'My team comes first,' and that sort of stuff. It took us a few years before we realized that's pretty stupid."

"She got angry at the walls that were built up," Cathy recalls. "But she said, 'Well, I'll just pull 'em down!'"

"I used to hear people say, 'Your mom's butting into your dad's business,'" Mark says. "Well, after he retired, the NHL wanted him to go everywhere for nothing. Mom said, 'Gordie's

At first the slips of memory were humorous. "I remember a woman came over to sell my parents long-term insurance," says Cathy. "She asked Mom for her phone number, and Mom said, 'I have so many telephones, I can't remember them all.' She asked Mom for her address, and Mom said, 'This is where I live—right here.' And we all were in the other room, laughing."

"We noticed she was different, but we didn't know what to do about it," says Murray. "Imagine approaching a loved one and saying, 'We think you're losing your mind, and you need to get tested.'"

By then, about four years ago, Mrs. Hockey was getting the nine grandchildren's birthdays mixed up and sending graduation cards a year early. She was defensive about her lapses; it was overwork, she protested, the weariness of being a non-stop CEO. At Murray's insistence, there was testing, including a six-hour interview in the spring of 2000 with one of Ohio's leading experts on dementia. The news could not have been worse.

BETTMANN/CONRIS

"I sat down with Mom and Dad," Murray says. "I told them, 'This is a progressive disease—we don't know the exact time frame, but it will be a long, hard road.'"

Murray is not a neurologist and is not an expert on Pick's disease. In medical school, he says, it was dismissed in a single sentence: This is really rare; you'll never see it. The instructors were wrong. "She's my mom, the biggest influence on my life of *anyone*," Murray says. "To slowly lose that person is very, very hard."

MR. HOCKEY is introduced as the keynote speaker at the 19th annual dinner of the Transportation Club of Detroit. The fete is a gathering of railroad and trucking people at the sumptuous Dearborn Inn, near the Ford Motor Company headquarters. "They used to make us stay here during the playoffs," Gordie whispers as he walks into the hall. (Some coaches sequester players during the postseason to keep them focused.) "But I'd sneak out and go home anyway."

Inside the banquet hall, as the crowd presses forward, it's bobbleheads and bedlam. Some 40 years ago, when he was earning \$30,000 a season as the most gifted and punishing forward in the NHL and the league's MVP, Gordie spent his summers traveling across Canada and signing autographs on behalf of Eaton's department stores. For this, he would earn an additional \$10,000, enough to buy Colleen and the kids a summer cottage near Grayling, Mich., which he rarely had time to enjoy. Back then, in Moncton or Victoria or Port Arthur, he would begin signing autographs in the stores before seven in the morning and not cease until the dark of night. A smile, a story, a memory for everyone.

An adulatory biographical film—conceived by

**ALL BUSINESS** Colleen proved to be a shrewd, hard-nosed negotiator for Gordie.



Colleen. "I guess she knew I'd say yes anyway."

Houston went on to win two league championships and then bit the Texas dust in 1978, leading to the Howes' signing with the Whalers. After that season the NHL absorbed four WHA teams, including the Whalers, and Gordie wound up playing on a line with Bobby Hull and Dave Keon—three old goats with 2,000 pro goals among them and a combined age of more than 130. But that was long ago, and now he begins to tell the audience about Colleen's illness, and the loneliness, and the pain. "I had a lot of knocks, and this is the biggest one I ever had," he says.

His voice wavers, but he goes on to describe for the gathering how shy he was the night he went to the Lucky Strike Lanes on Grand River Avenue in Detroit in the late winter of 1950. "The greatest thing that ever happened to me," says Gordie, "is that I went to watch a young lady bowl."

IT'S NO surprise that in Colleen's self-published autobiography, *and... HOWE!*, she included some of Gordie's love letters.

June 14, 1952

Hi dear,

Once again I have heard three sweet words from you which I should use more often and that is, "I miss you." They sound awful good coming to me from such a sweet young lady as you and again I say I should use them much more often. But the truth is I don't know much of sweet words so just give me time as I am a comer.

Love Gordie

By this time, the awkward Romeo had been in Detroit for six seasons, had played in five All-Star Games, had seen his name engraved on the Stanley Cup, had led the league in scoring twice, and had just been named MVP for the first of six times. He was a dark-haired, square-jawed, big-shouldered, dangerously handsome brute who could stickhandle through a mob of Maple Leafs and then delicately flip the puck into the

## Colleen was the first woman to demand and win a place at the big-money table of major league sports.

Mrs. Hockey as part of Gordie's 65th-birthday celebration in 1993—is shown to the crowd. Then he moves to the podium. "One pair of pants, one shirt, nine kids, a father on a tractor," Gordie tells his audience, encapsulating his prairie origins. "But rich in friendship."

He moves on to an anecdote about how Colleen—"a lady who has been my leader"—pulled off the brilliant triple play that brought Gordie and teenagers Marty and Mark to the WHA's Aeros in 1973. Gordie, who had retired from the Red Wings two years earlier, didn't see it coming. "She did a lot of things without my knowledge," he says about

net. But with Colleen, he was milking the aw-shucks thing for all it was worth, and it worked to perfection on a young woman who had never witnessed a hockey game.

Their backgrounds were disparate. His dad, Ab, drove that tractor on his farm outside Saskatoon. Her father, Howard Mulvaney, played the trombone in the Benny Goodman Orchestra. Gordie had always planned to marry early: "I thought it should be before 25," he says. "Why be old and have young kids?"

Colleen concurred. From the moment she agreed to marry Gordie, he would defer to her superior intelligence. "Girls have

SHELLEY KATZ

more time to think," says Mr. Hockey. "They're not whacking each other over the head."

It would be another decade before the Howes knew for sure how ruthlessly he was being robbed by Red Wings management, though Colleen had long suspected as much. A defenseman named Bob Baun, who was traded to Detroit in 1968, broke the NHL's code of silence and told Gordie over drinks one night that he was earning twice as much as Gordie was. "When Bobby told me how much he was making, I said, 'Oh, Jesus.' I believed him, but what could you say? Back then, *nobody* was making much money. Our money from one season was gone before the next."

He went home, and Colleen said, "I told you so." She and Gordie flew to Fort Lauderdale, to confront Bruce Norris, who owned the team. Gordie recalls Norris saying, "Oh! All right then—we'll sign you for two years at \$75,000!"

Until the WHA came along in 1972, there was not much Colleen could do about her husband's pay, and the family lived modestly. Eventually, Mrs. Hockey

Marty, who is an assistant coach for the Chicago Wolves of the American Hockey League. "When we went to training camp the first year in Houston, I was scared for him. After practice, he turned not just red [from exhaustion] but different shades of purple. After 10 days, though, he was dominating everybody."

Last spring, as the Wings moved toward their 10th Stanley Cup, Mark spent some time with his mother in her last days of mental clarity. He saw his father's sadness sagging into hopelessness. "On the ice we always called him Gordie," Mark says, "but when he was hurt, we called him Dad."

**DEVOTED** For much of the past year Gordie has been Colleen's sole caregiver.



WHEN YOU claim your bags at the gleaming new Northwest Airlines terminal at Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport, big Number 9 looks down on you from a mural of sporting heroes. At the Joe Louis Arena a photograph on a pillar outside Section 111 shows him in his early 20s, taut and sharp, a Superman lick of hair across his brow. And a tribute to youth hock-

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nudged the Red Wings to raise Mr. Hockey's salary toward \$100,000.

"Part of my dad's greatness is that he never made big money," Murray says. "I'm *glad* that I didn't grow up with a silver spoon. It's a blessing that we grew up as a middle-class family."

OBSCURED IN the onrush of encomiums for Gordie in response to the news of his wife's illness is the harsher side that he showed on the ice. "He won't like me saying this, but he was the most cruel hockey player I ever saw," says Mark, who played 22 years in the WHA and NHL. "Vicious. Absolutely nasty. He was highly skilled. He was bigger [six-feet, 205 pounds] than most of the other players of that era, and he had a meanness to him. If somebody wanted to go that way, he would go as far as that player wanted. I saw some of the stuff he did when nobody was looking.

"Hurting people—maybe that's what makes a great athlete, the willingness to do *anything* to win," Mark continues. "If he did some of the stuff now that he did then, he'd be suspended all the time. In Houston a guy hurt Marty in practice. I don't know how many teeth Gordie knocked out of that guy's mouth, but it was quite a few—and this was our teammate!

"I remember when we played together, I'd go into the boards and the man who was covering me would hit me and I'd take the check. Then, a second later, I'd feel this *boom!* It was Dad hitting the guy who hit me! I told him, 'I know you're trying to protect me, but Dad, I can take *his* hit, just not *yours*.' "

"Once he put the skates on, he was a different person," agrees

ey posted nearby reads: THIS IS THE FOUNDATION THAT GETS MOMS AND DADS OUT OF BED ON DARK, COLD WINTER MORNINGS SO THEIR SONS OR DAUGHTERS CAN SKATE. AND THE DREAM IS ALWAYS THE SAME: MAYBE MY KID WILL BE THE NEXT GORDIE HOWE. . . .

To his grandchildren, he is simply PeePaw. "I think he's learned a lot about himself the last two years," Cathy says. "He had more strength and more intelligence than anyone gave him credit for. Can he live without her? I hope so.

"Every one of us said, 'Dad, move in with us.' And he said, 'No. This is my home.' "

"I think at times he's scared," says Murray, "wondering what's going to happen when she's gone. He'll have to redefine his life, but he's not one to show fear. Pity is the last thing he wants. He'll want to be seen as another kind of role model—an ideal spouse in time of need and an ideal widower who wants to go on and not give up. I asked him what he would like to do when she's gone, and he said he wants to keep going out and touch as many lives as possible."

In Montana, with the first snow of winter on the ground, Cathy has one last story to share, a tale from when Jade was very young. She told Gordie once, "PeePaw, I'm going to marry a man like you when I grow up."

"Then Jade went in the other room," Cathy says, "and I told my father, 'She doesn't realize—there *are* no more like you.' "□

Allen Abel's fourth book, *Flatbush Odyssey: A Journey Through the Heart of Brooklyn*, was republished in March.

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