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Terrance Gordon ("Terry") Sawchuk

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SAWCHUK, TERRANCE GORDON (*b.* 28 Dec. 1929 in East Kildonan, Canada; *d.* 31 May 1970 in New York City), Hall of Fame hockey goaltender who set records for shutouts and victories and is considered to be the best ever.

Born and raised in East Kildonan (later part of Winnipeg), Terry was the third of four sons (and one adopted daughter) of Louis Sawchuk, a tinsmith who had emigrated as a boy from Austrian-controlled Ukraine, and his wife Anne (Maslak). Their second son died young from scarlet fever, and the oldest, an aspiring hockey goaltender whom Terry idolized and was inseparable from, died suddenly of a heart attack at age 17. At age 12, Terry injured his right elbow playing football, and, not wanting to be punished, hid the injury, preventing the dislocation from properly healing. Thus, the arm was left with limited mobility and several inches shorter than the left, and would bother him his entire career.

After inheriting his brother's goalie equipment, Sawchuk began playing in a local league and worked for a sheetmetal company installing vents over bakery ovens. His goaltending talent was so evident that at age 14 a local scout for the Detroit Red Wings had him work out with the team, who later signed him to an amateur contract and sent him to play for their junior team in Galt in 1946, where he also finished eleventh grade.

Glowing reports of Sawchuk's goaltending led the Red Wings to sign him to a professional contract in November 1947, and he quickly progressed through their developmental system, winning rookie-of-the-year honors in both the United

States and American Hockey Leagues. Sawchuk also capably filled in for seven games when Detroit's goalie, Harry Lumley, was injured in January 1950.

Although Lumley led the Red Wings to the 1949-50 Stanley Cup, Detroit traded him to the Chicago Black Hawks to make room for the much-heralded Sawchuk. Some were skeptical of Sawchuk's unusual style – whereas most goalies would bend only their knees, the chubby youngster, who had lightning-fast reflexes and played with reckless abandon, bent over from the waist (described as a “gorilla crouch”), so that his face was forward and closer to the ice. This enabled him to see the puck more clearly, especially while being screened by opponents, but put tremendous strain on his lower back and, since goalies were bare-faced, required tremendous courage.

Nicknamed “Ukey” or “The Uke” by his teammates, his first five years with the powerhouse Red Wings (when they won three Stanley Cups) were phenomenal, winning the Calder Trophy as top rookie (the first to win such honors in all three professional hockey leagues), three Vezina Trophies for fewest goals allowed (he missed out the other two years by one goal), was voted an All Star five times, had an astounding 56 shutouts, and his goals-against average (GAA) remained under 2.00. In the 1951-52 playoffs, the Red Wings swept both the Black Hawks and the Montreal Canadiens, with Sawchuk surrendering just five goals in eight games (for a minuscule 0.67 GAA), with four shutouts.

Sawchuk's personality seemed to change when Detroit general manager

Jack Adams ordered him to lose weight – he dropped over 40 pounds, becoming more sullen and withdrawn, and struggled for years to put weight back *on*. Also contributing to his moodiness and self-doubt was the pressure of playing day in and day out – there were no back-up goaltenders – despite repeated injuries. During his career, he would have three operations on his right elbow, an appendectomy, countless cuts and bruises, a broken instep, collapsed lung, ruptured discs in his back, and severed tendons in his hand. Years of crouching in the net caused Sawchuk to walk with a permanent stoop and resulted in lordosis (sway-back), which prevented him from sleeping more than two hours at a time. He would also receive approximately 400 stitches to his face before adopting a mask in 1962. He became increasingly surly with reporters and fans, and preferred doing crossword puzzles to giving interviews.

After a very brief courtship, Sawchuk married Patricia Ann Bowman Morey in August 1953. They would eventually have 7 children, and the family would suffer for many years from Terry's increasing alcoholism, philandering (a Toronto girlfriend became pregnant by him in 1967), and verbal/physical abuse. Pat Sawchuk had threatened to divorce him numerous times, and finally did so in 1969.

Since the Red Wings had a capable younger goaltender in the minor leagues (Glenn Hall), Adams dealt Sawchuk to the Boston Bruins in June 1955, devastating the self-critical goalie. During his second season with Boston, he was diagnosed

with mononucleosis, but returned to the team after only two weeks. Physically weak, playing poorly, and on the verge of a nervous breakdown, Sawchuk announced his retirement in early 1957 and was labeled a “quitter” by team executives and several newspapers. During his recuperation, however, Detroit soured on Hall’s performance, and Adams reacquired Sawchuk for seven more seasons. The Red Wings did not enjoy the same success as before, though, and when Detroit had *another* promising young goalie ready for promotion (Roger Crozier), Sawchuk was left unprotected in the intraleague waiver draft and was quickly claimed by the Toronto Maple Leafs. Sharing goaltending duties with 40-year-old Johnny Bower, the veteran duo won the 1964-65 Vezina Trophy and led Toronto to the 1966-67 Stanley Cup. Left unprotected in the June 1967 expansion draft, he played one season for the Los Angeles Kings before being traded back to Detroit. Sawchuk spent his final season with the New York Rangers, where he played sparingly but recorded the final shutout of his career.

After the 1969-70 season ended, Sawchuk and Rangers teammate Ron Stewart, both of whom had been drinking, argued over expenses for the house they rented together on Long Island. During the scuffle, Sawchuk suffered internal injuries when he fell on top of Stewart’s bent knee. After being admitted to Long Beach Memorial Hospital, his gall bladder was immediately removed and a second operation was subsequently performed on his damaged and bleeding liver.

Described in the press as “horseplay,” Sawchuk told police that he took full

responsibility for what happened. After being moved to New York Hospital in Manhattan, another operation was performed on his bleeding liver, but he never recovered and died shortly thereafter from a pulmonary embolism at age 40. He was buried in Mount Hope Cemetery in Pontiac, Michigan. A Nassau County grand jury exonerated Stewart and ruled Sawchuk's death accidental.

In 1971, Sawchuk was posthumously named the winner of the Lester Patrick Memorial Trophy for "outstanding service to hockey in the United States," and (with a waiver of the normal three-year waiting period) was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame. His number was retired by the Red Wings in 1994, and, even though he had become an American citizen in 1959, he was honored on a Canadian stamp in 2001. A seven-time All Star, Sawchuk's record of 447 regular-season wins stood for 30 years, before being surpassed in 2000 by Patrick Roy. Upon his death, Sawchuk also held the record for regular-season games played by a goaltender (971) and shutouts (103). The standard against which goaltenders are measured, Sawchuk was already publicly hailed as be the "best goalie ever" by a rival general manager in 1952, during only his second season. [There are two excellent biographies: *Shutout: The Legend of Terry Sawchuk*, by Brian Kendall (1996), and *Sawchuk: The Troubles and Triumphs of the World's Greatest Goalie*, by David Dupuis (1998), who had full cooperation from the family. Neither book contains extensive source notes, however.

Sawchuk's crouching style was featured in several early articles, including:

“‘Greatest Hockey Goalie Ever’: In Second Year Up, Young Terry Sawchuk and His Gorilla Crouch Keep Detroit Red Wings Far in Lead,” *Life*, volume 32 (18 Feb. 1952); and “How Sawchuk Stops ‘Em,” by Marshall Dann, *Detroit Free Press*, 16 Mar. 1952. Valuable early profiles are: “Hockey’s New Mr. Zero,” by Al Silverman in *Sport*, volume 13 (Apr. 1952); and “The Awful Ups and Downs of Terry Sawchuk,” by Trent Frayne in *Maclean’s*, volume 72 (19 Dec. 1959). A professional make-up artist highlighted all the scars and injuries to his face for a photograph accompanying the article, “The Goalie is the Goat: Hockey’s Reviled and Bludgeoned Fall-Guys,” in *Life*, volume 60 (4 Mar. 1966). The Red Wings of the early 1950s are covered in Stan Fischler’s *Motor City Muscle* (1996).

Obituaries appeared in the *Detroit Free Press*, *Detroit News*, *New York Times*, *New York Post*, *Long Island Press*, and *Newsday* (all 1 June 1970). There were numerous follow-up stories regarding Ron Stewart and the grand jury investigation. The only reporter to speak with Sawchuk during his hospitalization was Shirley Fischler (who snuck into his room and identified herself as a fan rather than as a writer), which she describes in “Last Interview,” *Hockey Illustrated*, vol. 10 (Nov. 1970). Noteworthy tributes to Sawchuk are by Joe Falls (“Terry Sawchuk ... Man of Contrasts”) in the *Detroit Free Press*, 1 June 1970; and John U. Bacon (“The Man Between the Posts”) in *Detroit at 300*, a special issue of *Michigan History Magazine*, vol. 84 (Nov./Dec. 2000).]

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