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Hockey's Cutting-Edge Canvas – The Art of the Goalie Mask

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Thirty-six years ago, Ray Bishop scooped up one of the Hot Wheels racecars parked on his bedroom floor in Clarkston, Mich., and decided that it needed an update. Though its miniature wheels still spun, the worn-out die-cast toy required a fresh coat of paint and a splash of creativity.

Lacking a coloring set, Bishop fetched a bottle of nail polish from his mother’s drawer. Using his small yet dexterous 6-year-old hands, he unfastened the tiny brush from the bright red bottle and went to work.

As the years passed, Bishop’s color palette expanded, along with the size of his models. By age 15, he dropped the nail brush for an airbrush and got his hands on a new batch of colors, ranging from hot pink to lime green. With the guidance of his father, a recreational auto body painter, Bishop moved on to adult-size model cars, hot rods, motorbikes, electric guitars and even grand pianos.

But in the hockey-rich state of Michigan – home of the NHL juggernaut Detroit Red Wings, who lead American teams with 11 Stanley Cups – Bishop’s work within the thriving goalie mask art industry has been the main vehicle for his success.

After the older Bishop piqued his son’s creativity in airbrushing cars, the pair’s die-hard following of the Red Wings later inspired the younger Bishop to pick up and paint a goalie mask.

“I decided to marry a few loves together – conceptual design and artwork with auto body and the love of hockey," said Bishop, 42. "I still have the first mask that I did in 1996, the skull mask. I look at that mask and I kind of chuckle; it’s rudimentary, it’s basic. It’s not what I would consider to be good."

Since creating his personal prototype, which he now keeps perched in his office in the nearby suburban town of Grand Blanc, Bishop has both expanded his artistry and developed it into a full-time business.

"I really didn’t realize that I’d do what I’m doing now," he said.
In fact, the first painted mask emerged in 1968 under unpromising circumstances. During a Boston Bruins practice, Hall of Fame goalie Gerry Cheevers charged into the locker room in frustration after getting hit in the face with a shot. Cheevers, protesting the absence of a league rule requiring goalies to don face protection, instructed his trainer to portray 10 stitches where the puck struck his mask. Each slapper to the face thereafter yielded more and more stitches, until black lines covered the white fiberglass.

Cheevers’ mask, which now rests in the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto, accomplished much more than originally intended as an innovative work of art. "You’re creating an identity for a goalie that fans key into," Bishop said.

Since opening Bishop Custom Designs in 1996, the artist has learned that creativity is just one of the many things needed to keep up with both increasing
competition and the demands of hundreds of clients, ranging from the pee-wee and junior levels to the American Hockey League and the NHL.

Clients such as star NHL and U.S. Olympic goalie Ryan Miller – a hands-on customer and artist himself – display Bishop’s work on a national, even worldwide stage. But even with the 60 hours spent on Miller’s 2014 Sochi Olympic mask – a personal record – Bishop said the task is usually simpler when the goalie knows what he wants.

“It makes my job a little easier when I have a direction,” Bishop said. “When somebody calls me up and says, ‘I want red, white and blue,’ that could be Papa Smurf, or, you know, something else. The conception of the design can take days or a week or two, depending on how much input I’ve had from the goaltender.”

Miller’s 2010 Vancouver Olympics mask served as predecessor to the 2014 update worn in Sochi. The $1,500 recreation depicted a red-eyed American eagle over one side, and over the other, a Herculean Uncle Sam with the letters “USA” tattooed on his protruding bicep. In an ode to the setting, Miller instructed Bishop to portray the goalie, his wife and their dog as Russian nesting dolls on the maskpiece that covers the back of the head.
“No matter what we come up with, it has to be badass,” Bishop said.

As it turns out, that philosophy applies not just to Bishop’s Olympic masks for Miller, but to all his paint jobs. He added original – and equally conspicuous – eagle designs for Miller’s American teammate Jimmy Howard, as well as for U.S. Women’s goalie Brianne McLaughlin.

I like to have it pop," he said. "If things are too serious, it’s hard to be creative.”

From his childhood bedroom to his current headquarters, comic books and animated superheroes have inspired Bishop’s elaborate use of color. Batman and Captain America action figures and logos adorn his office walls, down the hall from a large warehouse where dozens of custom colors stack shelves several feet away from his corner workspace, which stocks his more common hues.
But like an artist with a palette, Bishop seldom sticks to the basics.

“I very rarely use a color that’s straight from the bottle,” said Bishop, wearing a black baseball cap with the words “Auto-Air Colors,” his custom paint provider, stitched in red. “Creativity has a lot to do with color choice. I want each [mask] to have a life of its own. You’re trying to outdo yourself from one to the next; you’re almost letting people down if you’re not.”

Two years after completing his first professional goalie mask in 1996 for Jeff Reese, who played for the now-defunct Detroit Vipers of the International Hockey League, Bishop began to connect with the NHL players, such as former Red Wing Manny Legace and Dallas Stars netminder Roman Turek.

Bishop met Miller, his most popular current client along with Jimmy Howard, through Gary Warwick, owner of Warwick Mask Company, a 47-year-old custom goalie mask crafting business an hour away in Port Huron, which lies on the border with Canada.

Miller, 34, has been loyal to both Bishop and Warwick since his years between the pipes at Michigan State. In the past year, he has kept each of them busy: at the NHL trade deadline in March, one month after the Olympics, Miller was traded from his long-time team, the Buffalo Sabres, to St. Louis. He then signed a multi-year deal with Vancouver in the offseason.

Bishop said that Miller, a talented drawer, relishes the artistic process more than most.

“I teased him once,” Bishop said. “Maybe if this whole goalie thing doesn’t work out....”

Since the late ’90s, Bishop’s prices have risen to the $500 to $2,000 range, but for the amount of detail most goalies desire, a single design usually falls between $1,000 and $1,600. Bishop still airbrushes cars, motorcycles and
musical instruments, but goalie masks make up the majority of his workload, and thus his income.

Each of Bishop’s NHL-level clients requests at least two masks per year, as well as an occasional special order, often with the help of the team’s equipment manager.

“It’s important to keep a good relationship with the equipment manager because he’ll try to send guys to you,” Bishop said.

NHL clubs ordinarily pay for the goalie’s first two masks, but if he wants more, as retired Hall of Famer Ed Belfour did, he must reach into his own pocket.

Belfour commissioned Bishop for his 2002 Canadian Olympic mask, and ordered as many as six masks a year when the goalie played for the Dallas Stars and Toronto Maple Leafs between the late 1990s and 2006. Eddie “the Eagle” earned his nickname from the idiosyncratic, sharp-beaked bird that spanned each of his helmets.

Before reaching Bishop, Belfour used another artist, Todd Miska, at the suggestion of Warwick, the goalie's mask molder. Miska has designed masks part-time in Minnesota in addition to working as a set designer, but his painting schedule often becomes hectic.

"I've always done a handful of NHL guys because it's a lot of work," said Miska, 46, who added that he produces an average of 65 masks per year for both professionals and amateurs. "College [orders] will be heavy from June to July. With the pros, [we] talk about a design over the summer, but it's spread out."

Both Miska and Bishop have reinterpreted the now-iconic eagle originally created by pioneering painter Greg Harrison.

“Harrison,” Bishop said, “is credited for taking the old-school mask and making it hybrid.”
In 1974, Harrison, a former college netminder, painted for Red Wings goalie Jim Rutherford a red pair of wings over the mask’s eye openings, which set the precedent for Bishop to apply his own depiction of the home team’s logo decades later.

Like Detroit goaltending greats Chris Osgood and Dominik Hasek before him, Jimmy Howard has for years had his masks painted at Bishop Designs.

Bishop has reconfigured the intricate Red Wings logo, a red and white car tire with two wings, and has upgraded Harrison’s model with more complex features.

Using vector graphics software, Bishop sketches his designs on his office computer, which hooks up to a vinyl printer that cuts out the various shapes. He then takes the sheets to the warehouse, where he begins the tedious work of carefully laying the tape over the mask and then cutting any excess material with a scalpel.

Howard’s No. 35, for instance, is the first piece of adhesive to stick to the chin and the last to come off, so that the numbers aren’t covered after everything else is painted.

“With the tape, I have to do everything in reverse,” he said. “It’s the little things – the detail in the font – that adds another element, a little somethin’ somethin’.

It’s a labor of love.”

Compared to his extensive work with the scalpel – with which he has kept nicks to a minimum – the airbrushing is painfree. Despite the Wings’ detailed logo, Bishop has proven that he has mastered the image.
In early October, Bishop received an unexpected call from Vaughn, Howard’s mask manufacturing company. The artist never received an initial order for a pink specialty mask that Howard would wear during Detroit’s Breast Cancer Awareness Night on Oct. 11. Bishop was displeased with the broken communication, but didn’t waste a moment and completed the project in time for Hockey Fights Cancer Night on Oct. 23 instead.

The mask, which Bishop finished in a day-and-a-half and which Howard wore for only one game, yielded $16,000 at auction for Karmanos Cancer Institute, twice the amount a similar design raised last season. Of that, $1,125 went to Bishop – a reduced price for the cause, despite the rush – while another $1,280 went to the NHL’s 8-percent online fee.

“The artist deserves the title of artist,” said Rick Keith, the winning bidder. Keith’s niece is a breast cancer survivor and his 25-year-old son, Zack, a goalie, received the mask as a surprise gift. Howard presented the autographed mask following a team practice at Joe Louis Arena on Nov. 26. “I was shaking so bad [during the auction]. I had to win this.”

Goalies have had a long-standing reputation for eccentric, even enigmatic behavior. New York Rangers goalie Gilles Gratton, nicknamed “Gratoony the Looney,” is but one example; his flamboyant, yet frightening tiger mask opened the hockey world’s eyes in 1976. Though the off-ice personality has plenty to do with it, the goaltender’s focus during the game is unparalleled; the willingness to block pucks with one’s head and body is extraordinary, even befuddling.

“My calling is to deal with crazy goaltenders,” Bishop said.

Glenn “Chico” Resch, a retired NHL netminder and former color commentator for the New Jersey Devils, described goalies as being “different.”
“Goalies aren’t as quirky as they used to be,” said Resch, who in the fall of 1974 donned one of the first hand-painted masks as a New York Islander. The famous orange and blue illustration of Long Island that covered his forehead was created by high-school student Linda Spinella, the girlfriend of the team’s clubhouse boy. It now sits in the Hall behind glass nearby Cheevers’ stitches in Toronto.

Resch said he believes the omnipresence of airbrushed masks has erased their uniqueness.

“In the ’60s, if someone got a new car, it was a big deal,” he said. “But now, if a friend gets a new car, it’s more common. Back then you would discuss the mask; it was a topic of conversation. It was part of an era of transition that was capturing the original part of what hockey was all about.”
Resch added that the mask is no longer what draws his eye since there are other distractions in net.

“Now there are colors everywhere, even the jersey,” he said. “I had brown pads; my gloves weren’t painted colors. It’s the contrast that stood out. Now there’s so much, that I don’t think people look at [the goalies] and notice the mask.”

But Rangers goalie Cam Talbot disagrees. Talbot joined the club last season as a backup to star Swedish 2006 gold medalist Henrik Lundqvist. The Broadway duo commissions the same artist, David Gunnarsson, who owns the Sweden-based DAVEART.

“Goalies are the only ones who can have that identity on the ice and get to be creative with their equipment,” said Talbot, who recently received his fifth Ghostbusters-themed mask, which is also slated for auction after more of the film’s cast members sign it. “I get so many comments and compliments – everyone thinks it’s awesome.”

Talbot has largely let Gunnarsson do his thing.

“I’m not the most creative guy myself, so I just said, ‘Go with what you feel,’” Talbot said. “He can’t get away from the idea at all. He loves it.”

Like Bishop, Gunnarsson continues to draw inspiration from what he enjoyed during his childhood.

“I’m a big fan of all kinds of superhero stuff, like DC and Marvel,” said Gunnarsson, who added that since starting with NHL goalies in 2001, he has acquired roughly half of the league’s clientele. “I’m also a big fan of pop art, such as Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol.”

Lundqvist goes back and forth with Gunnarsson on his design – sparkling red, white and blue zig zags with the Rangers’ alternate Statue of Liberty logo on the sides – but leaves it relatively plain.
“I keep it pretty clean,” Lundqvist said. "There’s not too much stuff going on – maybe that does say something about [my personality]," he laughed.

While most big-name goalies find an artist they like and stick with him, Todd Miska said he doesn’t consider the client-finding process a contest.

“I’ve never looked at it as competition because I have my own thing,” said Miska, who started painting in 1990. “I have my own style.”

Bishop’s struggle is primarily economic, though not from a lack of commissions. His schedule is packed from the summer months before the start of the hockey season until around mid-January. And when the NHL trade deadline arrives every March, some of his clients need a completely reworked design for their new team.

“I’m not digging ditches,” Bishop said, “but I try to come up with new ideas while meeting deadlines, and am expected to make miracles happen. It puts a lot of stress on you.”

Bishop caps his fee at around $2,000, as do his competitors. But the teams hold the leverage.

“Do I think it’s worth more? Absolutely,” he said. “The club will nickel-and-dime you; they’re only willing to pay so much. As an artist, sometimes you feel taken for granted. This isn’t factory work; this is art.”
With a wife and four kids aged 5 to 14 – the youngsters now being the bona fide hockey fans in the Bishop family – the artist often works six days a week to complete his orders. But when a call from an NHLer or an equipment manager reaches his office, Bishop must reprioritize.

“We don’t try to turn anything away,” said Matt Carter, Bishop’s business partner since January 2013. “[But] there are hours of prep work prior to Ray ever touching it.”

Carter, in addition to coaching Bishop’s two sons in baseball, has “loosened the reins” on the artist by managing invoices and corresponding with clients.

“It’s very difficult for artists to justify the time they need,” he said. “Something better does not necessarily make you [more] money.”
Bishop has noticed that some emerging painters have begun to corner the cheaper side of the market. In his view, that approach compromises artistic integrity.

“There are other people who are willing to do it for cheap or for free just to get their name on a mask,” Bishop said. “It’s not going to be good, [and] that’s going to be what they’re remembered for.”

Bishop’s vinyl wrap prototype sits nearby his corner workspace.

In mid-November, Bishop Designs launched a loaner program, through which goalies can register to have a backup mask ready to be shipped. Another project still in the works is a vinyl wrap prototype that is both designed and printed on the computer. The decals would cover the entire mask, and could be used full-time for kids and part-time for goalies who have just been traded.

Though the idea, which includes designs for all 30 NHL clubs, is still in its preliminary stages, Carter already has high hopes.

“We can take Miller’s Olympic mask and a make a wrap out of that,” he said. “It has to be designed functionally to work best; [it’s] not so much artistic as utility.”
But to Bishop, the art is what pops; that’s what his slogan, “Bish-it-up!”
denotes.

“Anybody can slap a logo on a helmet,” he said. “It’s gotta have me in it.

“I’m my own worst critic. I put a piece of me into every single one of those
masks. If I get a bad review or somebody says something negative, I take it to
heart. It’s almost like leaving a legacy. Not only is it the goaltender’s legacy – it’s
mine.”

Once Bishop ships his finished product, it belongs to the goalie, the charity
bidder, or even the Hockey Hall of Fame. On each mask he prints his surname,
the year and a cross, ensuring his own identity lives with each work of art.