

The MEAN of KEENAN

ON THE BOARD IN THE Vancouver Canucks' locker room is scrawled one short sentence: *All players ride*. It is New Year's Eve, and the Canucks are spending 45 minutes of it on the stationary bike, paying part of the penalty for losing 8-0 to the Philadelphia Flyers.

bad penalties. Do you agree?" "Jyrki, Mike says a bunch of you are playing to get traded. Do you think that's true?"

Numbly, the players mouth the phrases of professionalism and accountability that have been the foundation of their moral code since they could stand on skates. "When we played the way we did, I guess we shouldn't feel good."

lar by the ghosts of Keenan players past, taunting the Canucks for discounting their stories. The Flyers who called him "Adolf" and gave him the Sieg Heil salute behind his back. The Blackhawks player who said that if he'd had to play one more year under Keenan, "I would have ended up in a mental hospital by Christmas." The warnings

about his nasty streak.

But through these transparencies come other voices. Pavel Bure telling a reporter that Keenan is "just a great coach"; Alex Mogilny echoing Bure's words. Mark Messier say-

ing Keenan is the best coach he ever played for. Visiting Chicago blueliner Chris Chelios saying that the bottom line is Keenan is a good judge of character, and the guys who can't take it aren't tough enough on themselves, as far as he's concerned.

This is the hardest part: the inner civil

(The Canucks coach had a Huck Finn childhood and a C+ average. He says he has no great desire to be understood. Any questions?) by Pamela Swanigan

The easy part. It is harder to come back into the locker room and face what's left of the press, who lately have been asking questions the likes of which the players have never heard. "Trevor, Mike says you're playing at 50 percent. How do you feel about that?" "Gino, Mike has called you selfish for taking

"Well, Mike, you know, he's just trying to make us better, so..."

They trail off like that a lot, as if emotion has far outshot expressive ability. They are ethically fatigued, plagued by problems they can't solve by trying to push an opponent's nose through the back of his head. Plagued in particu-

Illustration by Alain Pilon

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war that keeps many of them lying awake at night, asking themselves

questions that would tax the sanity of Socrates. *Am I not a human being—though admittedly a professional athlete—and do I therefore not deserve to be treated with respect?* (But then, the other voice answers, *I am trying harder, afraid to face Keenan after failure.*) *Isn't any of this covered by the Geneva Convention?* (Get real: this is the NHL.) *What is it supposed to accomplish, anyway, all the public disparagement, questioning our commitment to our families, for crying in the mud!* (A winning team, probably without you on it.)

As winter drizzles its way toward spring and the Canucks fizzle their way toward another non-playoff season, the civil war of opinion spreads through the population at large. Of course, the Canucks' perennial place among the ranks of the predigested has long been the most-discussed mystery in Vancouver next to the workings of the four-way stop, and many inventive theories have blossomed over beer. Some observers, noting that in basketball "forward" means closest to the team's own goal and "back" means closest to the opponents', posit that the players have become confused by their proximity to the Grizzlies. Others, watching the offensive line backskate frantically toward its own net and the defencemen scatter around the ice like startled zooplankton, have come to believe that the Canucks are afraid of the fronts of their new jerseys. A growing number think that Mulder and Scully are somehow involved.

But with Keenan's arrival, the conversation has turned to the coach and turned contentious. A virtual Mason-Dixon line is drawn between those who think Keenan's ends justify his means and those who think meanness cannot be justified by any end: the former call the latter sentimentalists; the latter accuse the former of heartlessness. The Gelinias-McLean trade was good, the Keenanites say: a decent winger and a once-good goalie for a younger, faster winger and a still-good goalie. Then Linden went, too, and suddenly the heart of the old Canucks team was gone. Mike Keenan is exactly what's wrong with pro sports, complained the sentimental-

ists: 90 players he went through in St. Louis, in two-and-a-half seasons. Ninety! How could anyone even tell which team they were rooting for, much less care?

Hey, they didn't bring the guy here to collect SuperHost points, rebut the Keenanites. "Niceness" is exactly what's wrong with the Canucks. Niceness doesn't win games. Mike Keenan wins games.

Mike Keenan briefs fan favourite Scott Walker.



Mike Keenan teams go to the playoffs. Trade the whole team, if it means a chance for the Cup.

ALL THIS CONTENTION IS FITTING for someone who, by his own account, came out of the womb aggressive. He was born 48 years ago, in the small town of Whitby, Ont., and though his sister Marie remembers the young Mike as easygoing, Keenan him-

self says he was competitive from the start. "I had an innate competitiveness when I was seven years old. Six years old. Five years old," he says. "I played competitive hockey when I was six years old, and I didn't compete for anything other than that I liked competition. It wasn't just hockey: I competed in lacrosse and baseball and soccer, everything you can imagine."

When he wasn't involved in one sport or another, he lived a life whose tenor, as he remembers it, was largely rural, despite the fact that Whitby was overhung by the smokestack oppression of the big GM plant in nearby Oshawa, where Keenan's father, Ted, as well as two uncles and his grand-

father, spent their working lives. "I had a great childhood," he says. "Where we lived backed right onto farm after farm after farm. I spent all my time in the fields and fishing in rivers. I was like Huck Finn."

But Huck Finn was more than the archetypal free spirit: he was also a boy driven to rebellion by his father's drinking and his aunt's compulsive personality. In this, too, Keenan was like Huck. Ted, a soft-hearted, music-loving man, drank a lot; Keenan's mother, Thelma, was a compulsive perfectionist. They fought continually, turning dinner into shouting matches as Mike, Marie and their sister Cathy tried to choke down their food. Though all the fighting made him feel sick, he, like most children, did choose a side: his mother's. Keenan's early rejection of his father's "soft" personality and adoption of his mother's rigidity is something to which both he and his mother have since attributed much of his obsessive approach to life.

When he graduated from high school (with a C+ average), his only thought was to leave Whitby behind as fast and as far as possible—to escape the family tension, he has told other journalists, though now he says it was largely adolescence and zeitgeist. "I would have travelled all over the world: I'd already purchased books, I'd already gone through lining up youth hos-

(Even coaching the U of T Blues his methods were an unholy combination of his mother's perfectionism and Scotty Bowman's emotional terrorism.)

tels and all that business," he says. "I looked forward to getting out of Whitby and out of Canada: why wouldn't I? It was the '60s."

As it turned out, he only went across the border to Canton, N.Y., but it was a start along a path that would take him farther than he had ever thought. Out of the blue, he was offered a hockey scholarship to St. Lawrence University, a prestigious private school where hockey was the only sport and players were gods. Keenan revelled in the big-time feel of the country he loved immediately and still calls "great"; he indulged in the high life, formed a band with some teammates even though he couldn't really sing. But most weekends

he still crossed the border to see the girl he had met just before leaving: Rita Haas, a grounded, steady, smart young woman, the daughter of a farmer and granddaughter of a Hungarian Jew who had died in Auschwitz. Keenan married her, and after taking a science degree from St. Lawrence he returned to his old environs, getting a master's degree in secondary education from the University of Toronto and then a job teaching phys-ed at Forest Hill Collegiate. Life looked as if it were headed for middle-class suburban normalcy.

But even then, Keenan was spending his nights coaching the Junior B Oshawa Legionnaires to back-to-back championships. Then coaching the OHL Peterborough Petes to the Memorial Cup finals. Then, when his idol Scotty Bowman noticed his prowess, coaching the farm team of Bowman's Buffalo Sabres, the Rochester Americans, to the AHL's Calder Cup. And then, angered by Bowman's failure to promote him, backtracking and coaching the University of Toronto to a .867 regular-season record and a 9-0 sweep of the CIAU championships.

Even then, his methods were an unholy combination of his mother's perfectionism and Bowman's emotional terrorism. He broke hockey sticks during practices; he made his team leave on a road trip two days early even though it meant they would miss Christmas at home; he skated players, without water, until they vomited. Even then players rebelled and complained, called him despotic, played their best for him, for a while. And even then there were people in NHL management willing to look at the success and disregard the failure. After Keenan wrote them a long, jargon-filled letter, the Philadelphia Flyers hired the 35-year-old as their head coach.

THIS IS WHERE KEENAN'S LIFE turns into Keenan-lore and his plurality goes public. There was the record of success—wild success. In his 11-and-a-half seasons, Keenan's teams earned the best record in hockey three times; six divisional titles; four appearances in the finals; one Stanley Cup championship. In 1985, Keenan won the Jack Adams award as coach of the year. He led his country's team to two Canada Cup wins. He holds fourth place on the list of all-time playoff victories.

But running parallel was the record of failure—terrible failures with players and management. In Philadelphia, he was fired

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after the players mutinied against such taking-of-Waco measures as turning the locker-room lights on and off, threatening to

hit players with hockey sticks and warning them of other repercussions if they didn't play hard. Four years later, the Chicago Blackhawks got rid of him for much the same reasons. In New York, Mark Messier had to stem a team uprising when Keenan benched star defenceman Brian Leetch for "lack of aggressiveness" after Leetch returned from an injury. (A broken leg, nothing serious.) A few weeks after harassing the Rangers to their first Cup in 54 years, Keenan self-imploded out of New York in a flurry of broken contracts, threatened lawsuits, commissioner's castigations, tampering fines, partial suspensions and general *Sturm und Drang*. In St. Louis, his Chemo Mike housecleaning methods and financial profligacy created such animosity that he had to install a special door in the arena to escape the media. He fled town in 1996 followed by another gag order, a barrage of epithets from Blues star Brett Hull and a losing record.

After each scorched-earth departure (as one salient journalist put it), Keenan vowed to change his ways. As far back as 1987, the *Globe and Mail* ran an interview in which Keenan talked about learning to show his softer side; such claims to self-reformation run through his career like retirement ran through Sugar Ray Leonard's. The confessionalist trend reached its height in 1993, when Rita decided to stay in Chicago with their only child, Gayla, instead of following Keenan to his new post with the Rangers. His obsession with hockey had destroyed his personal life. A well-intentioned husband, Keenan had little time to spare for Rita, who endured 15 relocations and six miscarriages largely on her own. Between spending his winters coaching NHL teams and his summers coaching Canada Cup teams or watching junior hockey to keep up with the talent, Keenan didn't even see much of Gayla, to whom he was (and is) devoted; his friends, who call him a friendly, fun-loving man, often felt neglected, as did his parents and sisters, with whom he rarely spoke.

"The most important thing to me in my life, I've lost," he said to an *L.A. Times* reporter when Rita left him; he told *Sports Illustrated's* Gary Smith and Pat Jordan of *The Sporting News* that after the divorce he couldn't stop crying.

VOLKSWAGEN'S March 1998 One-Day Adventure: LA CONNOR, WASHINGTON

One of the best things about life in the Pacific Northwest is how soon spring comes. Sure, it rains too much, but that moisture brings out the daffodils and tulips as early as March. One of the finest places to enjoy the brilliant reds, whites and yellows in abundance is at La Connor in Washington state's beautiful Skagit Valley.

From Vancouver, take Highway 99 south to the U.S. border, where the road is renamed the I-5. Continue south past Bellingham, then turn west onto Highway 11. Follow it as it swings south, becomes Chuckanut Drive and weaves through 18 kilometres of first-rate mountain and coastal scenery. Turn right at Bow Hill Road and head towards the tiny village of Edison—on weekends you should see signs for artists' studios you can visit. Past Edison, turn south onto Bay View-Edison Road, which takes you on a winding, picturesque coastside drive. On a clear day you'll have Mount Baker as a backdrop to the north. The road turns into La Connor-Whitney Road; continue south and soon you reach La Connor. If you and Mother Nature are in sync, you'll see 600 hectares of flowers in bloom.

La Connor is a very quaint old port town with lots of buildings dating back to the 1880s. Don't think you'll be the first to discover it, but the earlier in March you come the better your chances of having it largely to yourself. Things really pick up the end of March and the start of April, especially April 3 to 19 when the Skagit Valley Tulip Festival draws thousands to the region. If you decide to stay overnight, La Connor has plenty of charming Victorian-era B & Bs. For more information on the tulip festival, call the La Connor Chamber of Commerce at (360) 466-4778.



Drivers wanted.

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ethic almost matched his own. The Blues had given him the GM position for which he had hungered since losing the one in Chicago, as well as the coaching job. But at the end of 1996 he found himself an untouchable—not the NHL brand, as in too good to be traded, but the original Calcutta version. Given his record and the league's premium on success, most thought the excommunication would be short-lived. "Next spring," *Sports Illustrated* predicted confidently, "after the annual quota of firings around the NHL, some owner will pursue Keenan, warts and all."

They didn't. Ten positions came open; 10 teams skipped over Keenan. By the time Orca Bay hired him on November 13, Keenan had been out of work for almost a year, and he was once again vowing that he had changed his ways.

So although everyone knew Keenan's reputation for blowing in as Saviour and blowing out as Satan, this time he was supposed to be a kinder, gentler devil; a sad and remorseful devil.

And for the first while, it looked like he might be. During the Canucks' first losing streak Keenan showed no signs of Iron Mike mode—mostly signalled by a look of slightly constipated intentness, like that of a man trying to figure out how to wiggle his ears. True, in their first home practice after a road trip in which they lost every game, he worked them until they

But after the St. Louis debacle, Keenan discovered something almost as bad: unemployment. Things had been looking up: Keenan had started seeing a tall, athletic former nurse named Nola McLennan, whose temper and work

knelt gasping and retching at centre ice, like blue-diapered supplicants to the god of lactic acid. But the mood was congenial, with the players smiling and Keenan looking affable and cracking jokes. (When one panting player asked a teammate during scrimmage, "What's the score? Six-five?", Keenan corrected, "Six-three," and then quipped, "That'd be six-five American.")

But two days later came the sea-change: the dressing-down of Linden ("Sit down you, fucking idiot. What have you ever done?" *Global Sports Page's* Barry Macdonald quoted him as yelling at the former Canucks captain.) Then the first trade. And on the last day of 1997, the scrawled words: *All players ride.*

Keenan has no interest in explaining his actions. Newly re-employed and newly remarried (to Nola in December), he seems to have regained whatever confidence he had lost. On a professional level, he says—and seems to believe—"If there's been anything that's been consistent and strong in my tenure in the National Hockey League, it's my relationship with the players." On a personal level, though he strongly dislikes the media's general portrayal of him as being a few sandwiches short of a picnic (most notably in Gary Smith's definitive 1995 profile for *Sports Illustrated*, which Keenan reviles as "horrible" and "bizarre"), he says that he has no great desire to be understood. "I'm too busy trying to do my job to worry about those things. I don't have time to have people following me around trying to figure me out."

Which won't stop people from trying. Some will accept his behavior as a function of dysfunction, an inevitable product of rageaholism. Those who eschew such recov- (CONTINUED ON 97)

Quick, name Canada's third Prime Minister. We couldn't either. So Rogers and Excite Labs at Simon Fraser University joined forces to create the "Lives and Times of the Prime Ministers" CD ROM. It's a multi-media exploration of everything from the Fathers of Confederation to the ongoing debate over national unity. It also explains how John A. Macdonald became both our first and third Prime Minister. And lest we forget how our leaders fit into the cultural context, the CD includes commentary from historians and media personalities, satire from the "Air Farce" and profiles of famous Canadians like Terry Fox and Marshall McLuhan. So pick up a copy of the "Lives and Times of the Prime Ministers"

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(CONTINUED FROM 58) cry-speak would say that his background is no excuse for his actions, however sorely he may need one.

It is true, of course, that some people inflict grief on others without suffering ill effects themselves: John McEnroe, for instance, observed recently that he, unlike most pro tennis players, had never developed a stomach ulcer. ("I always think of you more as a carrier," NBC commentator Mary Carillo returned dryly.) And if it seems a bit strange for anyone to court the conclusion, Keenan seems to prefer it to the idea of having his aura petted. "Rage," he repeats with incredulous contempt, as if the word has never been used in connection with him before. "If that's how the people here would interpret my behaviour, I don't know anything about Vancouver."

Vancouver, however, will undoubtedly get to know about Mike Keenan—and a lot of it the hard way, if he follows his tendency to trade fan favourites. According to one veteran NHL beat reporter, who prefers not to be identified, he will. "Mike is a control guy," he understates from his office in the U.S. "He doesn't like players who develop independent popularity, outside of what he creates for them. Those are the guys he trades."

Even among the hard-liners, none of this is likely to inspire spontaneous renderings of the Hallelujah Chorus, and the outside media have a bleak prognosis for the morale of Vancouver's hockey scene in the near future. Gary Smith observes mildly from his home in South Carolina that "he's the wrong kind of coach to have for a place that has an attachment to players." His *SI* colleague Michael Farber is no more sanguine. "The only thing certain about Mike Keenan's return," he wrote in the December 15 issue, "is that it will end badly."

The NHL beat reporter is more specific. "He will have moderate success, maybe even make a run at the Cup," he says. "Then the whole thing will collapse, because his system is chaos. The fans don't know what they've got themselves into. The owners don't know what they've got themselves into. You guys are in for a ride."

This much we had already figured out. They should skywrite it above the North Shore mountains: *All Vancouverites ride*. For some, a rocky but rewarding ride toward a chance at the Cup. For others, the long dark stationary-bike ride of the soul, part of the penalty for thinking there could be nothing worse than a losing team. The easy part. ●

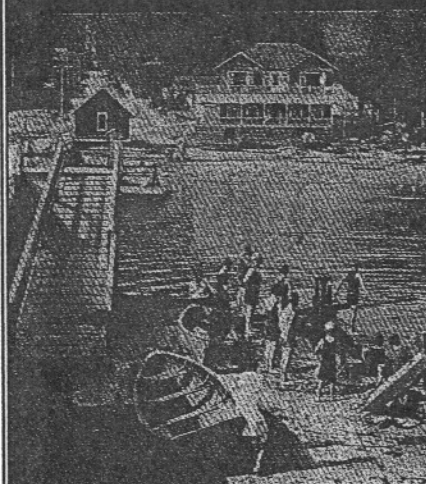
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