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HAT TRICK

New York Rangers' left-winger and gadfly, Sean Avery.



STYLED BY DEBORAH WATSON; SUIT, SHIRT, AND TIE BY BROOKS BROTHERS; POCKET

Sean Avery was born to play the bad guy. Which may be why the New York Rangers' diminutive forward (he's five ten—"in skates," he jokes) is having so much fun. Voted the most hated player in the N.H.L. by his opponents for vicious hits, fights, trash talk, and general pomposity, Avery has a penchant for saying what he's thinking—even when he's not. But in New York, the 27-year-old has won over teammates and fans alike by helping to re-ignite a somnolent franchise. Since his trade from the Los Angeles Kings, midway through last season, Avery has quickly developed the reputation of playing hard on and off the ice, leading him to both the penalty box and the gossip columns, where reports of his club-hopping and active love life have restored a touch of glamour to a sport sorely lacking any. Avery's high-profile carousing has also landed him in *People* magazine's 50 Most Beautiful People issue, a rarity for those with

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puck-mangled maws. This kind of behavior flies in New York only as long as your team wins, and won they have. The Rangers' playoff run last spring had fans and N.H.L. dignitaries alike whispering the old Ebbets Field adage: "Wait till next year." Halfway into this season, even with Avery nursing a wrist injury, the team stands within striking distance in the fiercely competitive Atlantic Division. This is good news for the N.H.L. In the wake of the labor dispute that canceled the 2004-5 season, having a winner in New York—the biggest sports market—is a crucial step toward getting hockey back on the national radar. As for Avery, a life after hockey is already emerging, including a Sirius radio show and numerous Hollywood ventures. However, the task at hand is returning Lord Stanley's cup to New York. "I think we're the best team in the league this season," says Avery with less than Gretzkyan modesty. "Let's see if I eat my words or not."

—JONATHAN KELLY