

# 400 stitches & counting

Brendan Shanahan, the New York Rangers' veteran left wing, is starting his 19th season. What keeps him suiting up?  
By Alec Wilkinson



**STICK SENSE**  
THIS PAGE: Shanahan fine-tunes a tape job in the Rangers locker room. Ermenegildo Zegna blazer, \$2,295; zegna.com. Calvin Klein shirt, \$275, and pants, \$375; calvinklein.com. Hugo Boss tie. OPPOSITE: Michael Bastian sweater, \$1,330; Bergdorf Goodman Men.

# B

rendan Shanahan, the star left wing for the New York Rangers, is 38 and substantially decorated—three Stanley Cups with the Detroit Red Wings and an Olympic gold medal, with Canada, in 2002—but he was 25 and playing for the St. Louis Blues when he told the team's media department that he had spent his summer playing saxophone at the Canadian Jazz Festival. He also said that he had run with the bulls in

Pamplona, visited his cottage in Ireland, and auditioned for the voice of Dino the dinosaur in the *Flintstones* movie, all of them fabrications he assumed they would dismiss. A few months later, however, he was taken aback when an interviewer for ESPN, on the afternoon before a game, asked him to reproduce the voice of Dino. "No, because I wasn't very good at it," Shanahan said uncomfortably. "That's why I didn't get the part."

The interviewer, Gary Thorne, pressed Shanahan about the cottage in Ireland and running with the bulls. Finally, he brought up the Canadian Jazz Festival. To Shanahan's dismay, he handed him a saxophone. "So, Shanny," he said, a trifle smugly, "we wanted to have the opportunity to hear you do it."

Shanahan, cornered, stood the saxophone on his thigh. He turned strangely calm, and he spoke without hesitating. "I would," he said earnestly, "except the coach says, 'No sax before a game.'" Such suave aplomb is only one reason I admire Shanahan.

Since he began in 1987 with the New Jersey Devils as the second player chosen in the amateur draft, Shanahan has played 18 seasons, a long time for a hockey player. He is six feet three inches tall and weighs 218 pounds. He looked like an altar boy when he was younger, but now he looks like an oil-field hand. His face is lean and narrow. It is also deeply scarred. He says that a hockey player gets about 20 scratches in a good year, 40 in a bad one, and that he has had about 400. The scar tissue sometimes protrudes through his skin, like ribs through the upholstery of an old sofa. He has brown hair with a few strands of gray, high cheekbones, and small, brown eyes. His right eye sometimes droops, and his right cheekbone is slightly recessed, from an injury.

During his fourth season, a teammate on the Devils took a slap shot while Shanahan was standing in front of the net. Traveling close to 100 mph, the puck struck a stick and changed direction. "I saw something black coming at me," Shanahan told me. "It knocked me on my back, and I thought, That was the puck. When I got up, my teeth didn't meet anymore in the same place. I felt like I was wearing someone else's face. I started skating to the exit, and you know it's bad when your teammates come up to you, and it looks like they're going to be sick." The puck broke Shanahan's jaw, his cheekbone, and his sinus cavity in six different places. The girls he knew growing up in Canada always used to tell him that he had a baby face, but now they said he had lost it.

That Shanahan, with his face shattered and bleeding, would find his way off the ice on his own, both exemplifies a Canadian tradition of sloughing off pain and typifies his resolve. Until last February, he had never allowed a trainer onto the ice to attend him. Playing against the Philadelphia Flyers, however, Shanahan was making a turn and looking behind him at the puck. The Flyers' Mike Knuble, who is roughly the same size as Shanahan, was watching the puck and skating forward. Neither saw the other. The referee later told Shanahan that the sound of their faces colliding was the worst sound he had ever heard in an arena.

Shanahan's wife, Catherine, was at home with their three children (boy and girl twins, age five, and a three-year-old girl), packing to take them to their house on Cape Cod for a week. She had the game on the television, but she was out of the room when the collision occurred. When she came back she saw the circle of players around someone injured on the ice. Scanning the circle, she realized her husband was not in it and that he must be the one on his back. He lay there unconscious for three and a half minutes—he looked dead, or maybe paralyzed—then was put on a stretcher and taken away. He spent the night in the hospital with a concussion. No one expected him to return that season, but, 32 days later, he did.

As it happened, Shanahan lived last season in an apartment house next door to the one where I live. One day when

I was leaving my building, my doorman said, "You just missed Shanahan. There was a black car waiting, and he came out and got in." I asked how he had looked. My doorman thought for a moment. "Well, when he stepped off the curb," he said, "he looked like a man stepping into a rowboat."

For weeks after that, when Shanahan was interviewed on

television, the lines in his face seemed deeper, and he looked much older.

Shanahan came to the Rangers last season, as a free agent. He says that he likes living in New York because so many things happen that the days seem agreeably prolonged. Last year, he sometimes took the subway to the Garden for games. If people recognized him, they usually said no more than good luck. One night, coming home from a game, he stood next to two men on the platform wearing Rangers jerseys with number 14 and "Shanahan" stitched on the back, but they never noticed him.

What Shanahan added to the team were elements of skill, resolution, and toughness that they had lacked the year before, when they were swept in the first round of the 2006 playoffs by the New Jersey Devils. He is not the best player on the team—Jaromir Jagr, a right wing, and Henrik Lundqvist, the goalie, are—but he is among them; he tied for second on the team in goals, with 29.

In July, he again signed a one-year contract, for \$5.3 million. "I don't want a comfortable three- or four-year contract," he says. "I like playing for my pay and knowing that if I want to have a job next year, I better have a good season." He intends to play as long as he feels he can.

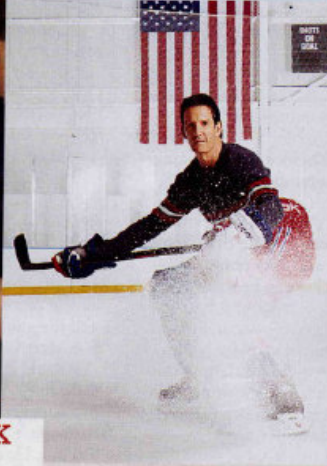
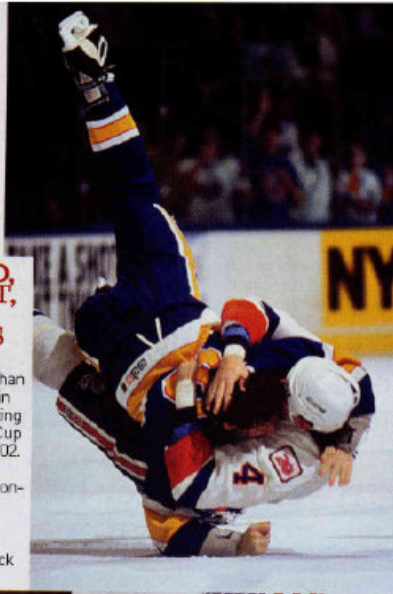
His longevity is partly a matter of training judiciously. "A few years ago, I started working with Mike Boyle at Boston University," he told me. "He got me more into using the weight of my body—sit-ups, pull-ups, push-ups, jump-

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**BLOOD, SWEAT, AND TEARS**

RIGHT AND FAR RIGHT: Shanahan making it up in '04 and hoisting the Stanley Cup in Detroit in '02. CENTER RIGHT: Felled by an on-ice collision. BELOW: The aftermath of an errant puck last season.



**WORK AND PLAY**

LOWER LEFT: Shanahan speaking on behalf of the NHL players' union during a 2004 labor dispute. RIGHT: In the crease against the Islanders' defense in 2007.



ing, one-legged squats, exercises designed for explosiveness more than strength. Hockey's an interesting sport in that it doesn't matter what you can lift in the weight room. We do everything we do on a little thin blade. Give me the biggest, baddest guy in the weight room: If he's not strong on his skates—if he doesn't know when to push and pull and when to lean—it doesn't matter what he can lift."

Shanahan has scored more goals (627 by the end of last season) than all but 11 men who have played the game, and more than all but two left wings—but he is neither fleet nor agile, and he never has been. He skates like a car whose wheels are out of alignment. He says that he has always felt like "an ugly skater," but that he gets where he is going faster than people think. He is also a brainy player. It is difficult for a hockey player to think while engaged in the game, because it unfolds so rapidly. Some of Shanahan's intelligence is native, and some is acquired. I asked him what experience provides. "If the puck is at A and you know it will eventually come to D, the young player will follow it from A to B to C to D," he said. "The experienced player will be waiting for it at D."

**S**hanahan spent last summer on Cape Cod, then came back to New York to skate with his teammates before training camp opened in early September at the Rangers' practice rink in Tarrytown, about 20 miles north of the city. I drove up there one day and watched some drills and then a scrimmage and was reminded of how dangerous hockey can be when I saw Shanahan, standing in front of the goalie, flinch as a shot passed near his head. I watched Shanahan exclusively for a while—the way he would tilt sharply this way and that, his returns up ice to defend, sometimes lagging when he saw the chance for the puck to be recovered by his team. He seemed the embodiment of guile.

I had brought with me a copy of the *Hockey Scouting Report* for the 1990-91 season, because the photograph of Shanahan as a 22-year-old is so different from the way he appears today that I wanted to show it to him and see what he said. After he came off the ice and had taken a shower, we sat at a table in the cafeteria the Rangers share with the Knicks. A few other players began wandering in, moving the lazy way athletes often do, as if reluctant to make an unnecessary gesture.

Eventually Sean Avery, a seven-year veteran, arrived, wearing a white T-shirt and white baggy shorts. Avery and Shanahan played together on the Red Wings before Avery was traded to the Los Angeles Kings. Shanahan made a case to have him brought to the Rangers last season. Avery is an abrasive, passionate, and headlong player, and he seems to embolden the Rangers. In a *Hockey News* poll taken last season among players, he was also identified as the NHL's most hated player. He so remorselessly irritates other players that they often forget to play the way their coaches told them to and just try to punish Avery whenever they can, leaving their coaches' tactics in shreds.

**"I don't want a three- or four-year contract," he says. "I like knowing that if I want to have a job next year, I better have a good season."**

Shanahan opened the *Scouting Report* and showed it to Avery. "Look at this kid," Shanahan said. "You would have been terrified of him." He read from his assessment. "Don't let Shanahan's physical play fool you. There's a pretty good finesse player underneath that steamroller exterior. He's not a great skater and may never be by NHL standards in terms of speed or beauty..."

Avery shook his head dismissively.

"But he has a strong stride and good sturdiness and balance," Shanahan continued.

When Shanahan read "His balance and strength serve him well in the traffic areas, and he can hurt people when he drives through his checks," Avery said, "I'm bored."

"And he's a good scrapper," Shanahan continued. Avery rolled his eyes. Looking at me and gesturing at

Shanahan, he said, "Get him to talk about how he loves roses and wine."

Shanahan put the book down and said, "Let's get out of here."

"And his favorite designer right now is Alexander McQueen," Avery said. Shanahan's eyes seemed to widen. "Nobody wants to hear about your slap shot," Avery said. "They want the real you."

"I do have a thing for gardening," Shanahan said bashfully.

"And his favorite movie is *Running with Scissors*," Avery said.

"It is not," Shanahan said, somewhat indignantly.

Avery left. I followed Shanahan down a hallway hung with photographs taken 60 years ago, and we stopped to look at one depicting four players in street clothes. The men had the gaunt and determined faces of miners. "Look at how tough those guys were," Shanahan said.

He said it so respectfully that I was reminded of something that Cameron Hope, an assistant general manager of the Rangers, had told me about him. "Every great player has to have an ego, but you don't get that when you talk to this guy. He doesn't demand followers; he doesn't demand that people get in line. He doesn't impose himself, because he's confident enough to know that sooner or later people are going to seek his opinion."

We walked through a door and arrived at the rink. "The other day, Sean and I were the only ones out on the ice," Shanahan said. "I had been thinking over the summer about his game and what he needed to do to get better. I skated over to him and I said, 'Sean, I have an idea of what you could do with your shot to score more goals.' And he said, 'No, I know what I need to do. I don't need any help.' And I thought, 'You have a 600-goal scorer thinking about you, and you're not willing to listen to what he has to say? A few minutes later he came over to me and said, 'What were you thinking?'"

"What did you tell him?" I asked.

"I said, 'It's all right, you know what to do, you don't need my help.'"

"Are you ever going to tell him?" I asked.

"I'm going to wait and see if he comes back to me one more time," Shanahan said. □



**STRATEGIC PLANNING**

Shanahan talks strategy post-practice with defenseman Dan Girardi. Richard James coat, \$2,195; richardjames.co.uk YSL sweater, \$495, and tie, \$165; ysl.com. Alexander McQueen pants, \$600; alexandermcqueen.com. Charvet shirt, \$425; Saks Fifth Avenue. Lambertson Truex shoes. Fashion Editor: Justin Arroyo.