

## The Measure of Success: On Marcel Dionne

by E Martin Nolan

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An era does not shift lightly into the next. You cannot go from the helmetless abandon of Hockey's legendary era to the rising tide of Gretzky and Lemieux without loss. With that first great generation of NHLers went a certain mythical quality; many stories of that era are told more as tales out of lore than factual recollections. Gordie Howe's elbows were razor sharp and Maurice Richard was as fast as, well, a rocket. Today's players, by contrast, are utterly human and earthbound, rendered in high-def. The players of yore were seen in person and read about in papers, allowing their stories to expand in the imagination. But these men were two-skated like today's stars. How to connect them, then? Who can bridge The Rocket to Syd the Kid?

You would need a player with perfect placement between eras. He would contain the qualities of the past while having to adapt to and, in the process, create the future. He would embody the transition into the modern era.

That player is Marcel Dionne. In *Triple Crown: The Marcel Dionne Story*, Ted Mahovlich claims that Dionne was "the first great player of the modern era" and that "no player mirrored the making over of the sport better than Marcel Dionne." Dionne is fifth all time in points and fourth in goals. He almost single handedly secured hockey's place in LA. He was, for all intents and purposes, the first free agent. But he also brushed shoulders with who he calls "the real players that made the game." He roomed with Delvecchio, battled against Hull in Chicago, Orr in Boston. Touching that era was, Dionne says, "like a fantasy."

But before you get all rosy-eyed about it, know this: all that sentiment? "It doesn't matter." This is Dionne's mantra, and delivering it in his Quebec accent, he puts such a stress on the "a" of "matter" that the "er" seems to cower. Dionne is not one to cloud the past with undue nostalgia. Perhaps that's indicative of his place at the start of an era that saw players finally receive their due while losing a good amount of that old romance to the revealing spotlight of the modern game.

That clarity of vision is easily detected in the many interviews he's done since retiring. No matter how often he's asked certain questions, they never manage to impress him. For example, he was undersized. Did that matter? "No...there's more to it than that." Likewise, as a French Canadian, he would have loved to have played for the Canadiens. He told me, "they just know how to do it." But in the 1972 draft, his lifelong rival, Guy Lafleur, went to Montreal while Dionne was off to Detroit. Gordie Howe had just completed his final season with the Wings when Dionne arrived.

Dionne's four years with the Red Wings were marked by organizational ineptitude. That circumstance would mark all three teams that Dionne played for. Surely, that was a raw deal. But does he regret not having the chance to don the red and blue? "It never bothered me," he says. "I just wanted to play."

Dionne spent the bulk of his career carrying a team in the less-than-hockey-crazy city of Los Angeles. Did the lack of hockey interest in LA bother him? Simply, "No." He does admit that "some guys go there and they die there, they have to have that drive, wake up the next day and read their name in the paper. But there, when you left the rink: that was it." For Dionne, that wasn't an issue. Nor was the oft-cited philosophy that hockey is only natural in cold climates. "That's not true," he says, "it's about preparation," not environment. "I'd rather wake up and it'd be warm and sunny than twenty below. Twenty below only lasts for a while."

That combination of confidence and realism, of "what matters," goes to the core of Marcel Dionne. It suggests humbleness, coming as it does from a hall of famer, and it began very early in his life. The story begins in Drummondville, Quebec, where Dionne was born into an athletic and hardworking family. He was the oldest son and from an early age shouldered responsibilities beyond his years. He was helping run his parents store by the age of 12. He has particularly fond memories of working on his grandfather's farm one summer. "It never leaves you," he says when asked if that experience influenced his hockey career. "It's the work ethic...it's you, no one's helping you." The same goes for hockey, because players have to accept individual responsibility, just as he did on the farm all those years back: "there's times when you need all your teammates, but sometimes it's you." Of course, "it's you" more often if you're a superstar on a mediocre team. Because that was his fate, Dionne almost had to have a confidence merging cockiness.

It can be a fine line, however, between confidence and self-absorption and Dionne was often accused of the latter. Upon entering his store today, one could easily find evidence of this: there are numerous framed pictures of Dionne, Dionne Jerseys, and other Dionne memorabilia. But once you talk to him, you realize that this impression is far from the truth; Dionne's confidence in himself does not make him egotistical. In fact, his ability to keep his own greatness in perspective is perhaps the most impressive thing about him. He's comfortable enough with his prominent place in the game's history to sell his own merchandise—to market his own greatness—and *still* not come off as egotistical. In fact, his generosity towards his customers and fans actually creates the opposite effect, leaving you impressed by his unselfishness. He is obviously loyal to his family and friends. He expressed disbelief that I hadn't asked him to pick me up from the bus station for our interview. He made sure a family member who worked at the shop dropped me off after the interview, and on the ride he told me that Dionne had helped him out with the job when the auto factory in St. Catherine's was shut down.



Dionne is probably most famous as the leader of the Triple Crown Line. With good reason, Dionne gets just a bit wistful when asked about that line's reign. He describes it as "a perfect storm, the perfect guys, the perfect combination." Linemates Dave Taylor and Charles Simmer "could finish it, and I did too." While he had some good lines in juniors, in the NHL "finding the third guy was tough...you got to have guys that can finish, and that's what happened with the Triple Crown." Dionne laments the lack of such lines in today's game. Largely due to free agency, a line like that is "unheard of today, we played four, five years, you don't see that anymore." Dionne insists that it was largely because they played together for so long that the line succeeded. Any line has to navigate the tricky combination of randomness and order that is a hockey game, so it helps if they can work as one single unit. Dionne puts it this way: "you can't just improvise, you have to have—today they call it structure." That structure must be flexible, it must be able to adjust because "you never know if the puck is going to get there."

Dionne also had his share of disappointment, the most obvious being his lack of playoff success. While the teams Dionne played for—all of which were often, to use his words, "in chaos"—shoulder most of the blame for this, that does not alleviate the disappointment for a player as driven as Dionne. The one shining exception was when his Kings upset the mighty Oilers in a barnburner of a series in the 1982 playoffs. That series included a famous five-goal, third period comeback victory for the Kings at home. But that's about it for playoff success. He does not accept sympathy for this plight; indeed, he does the opposite and proclaims how lucky he was to even be in the NHL. "You never know how long you can play," he makes sure to point out. "It can end like that." He does imply some disappointment, though, as when he claims his extensive international play was "like a salvation for not making the playoffs."

Another thing that dogged Marcel Dionne was the repeated accusation of betrayal. The first came when Dionne was a rising star in the high-pressure world of Canadian junior hockey. After a stint in Montreal, he returned home to play for the Drummondville Rangers, quickly becoming the local hero. He still considers junior hockey to be "the best part of your life," even if you were a star in the NHL. He also admits that the pressure tends to "bite you in the ass." At just 16, Dionne had a tough time dealing with that pressure. He would come home from a game and "the house would be full of relatives" wanting to chime in on this or that. "It gets to be stupid," he says. It was about to get a lot stupider.

Years later, Dionne would famously force a trade—a move that paved the way for free agency—to get out of Detroit after trying for four years to help right a broken ship. But the precedent for that was set in his junior days, when Dionne decided to leave Quebec to play in Ontario. The pressure was stifling him, but Quebec would be slow to forget his betrayal. It all culminated in the 1971 Richardson Cup, when Dionne's St. Catherine's Black Hawks would face off against Lafluer's Quebec Ramparts. What stands out to Dionne about that series? He becomes dejected and he sums it up succinctly: "we never finished."

That was because politics and nationalism intervened. This was less than a year after the October Crisis that saw the separatist tensions in Quebec reach a stark climax. Dionne, who "never really thought too much about that stuff," would soon become an unwitting lightning

rod in the midst of a boiling storm. The series began in Quebec under a cloud and soon devolved into near mayhem. It was so bad that the parents of the St. Catherine's players would not allow their sons to return to Quebec late in the series because they feared for the players' safety. Concern for the parent's safety was also justified. When Quebec refused to play at a neutral site, they were awarded with the championship by default.

Referring to the treatment the St. Catherine's parents endured at that time, Dionne says "if you were to see this today, what happened then, these people would be in jail." He shakes his head, "there was a lot of violence." Dionne is still visibly disappointed by the whole fiasco, saying "it's baloney, all these issues we have in the world with religions...people are people, you let them do what they are supposed to do...as long as they don't break the rules." However, you get the sense that, for Dionne, the great tragedy of the series is that what "could have been a great series" was never finished. "You regret it your whole life," he says.

The desire to keep the game sealed off from external interference is another theme of Dionne's career. When he left Detroit, the fans there mimicked those in Quebec and poured all their frustration out on the player who had once been pegged as Mr. Hockey's successor. Thankfully, most of the violence that accompanied Dionne's return to Detroit was kept on the ice. Although, in a bizarre repetition of the Richardson Cup series, a bus had to pull right up to the door at Olympia after his final game there. That was to ensure the safety of Dionne and his teammates because an angry mob had collected outside to protest Dionne's departure.

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Accusations of betrayal would continue. When he left for LA, he didn't only land in a better playing environment, he also received a hefty new salary. Predictably, this gave way to an idea that Marcel Dionne was only out to reward Marcel Dionne. That was simply not the case. Dionne had seen Howe rudely barred from skating with the Red Wings in practice during his first year of retirement—Dionne's rookie year—and Dionne took note of how poorly Howe and others were treated. "He never made any money" Dionne says of Howe, "he was devastated." Before Dionne, players "thought the game would take care of them, but it didn't." He understood that, unless players stuck up for themselves, unless they had that bit of cockiness that Dionne possesses, nothing would change. "You play for the love of the game," he says, "but don't be stupid. You got to make sure there's something in your pocket." Dionne did that, netting the largest salary to date when he signed with the Kings. Perhaps that was the real start of the new era. "The real players who made the game" will never lose their place in history, and maybe no other generation will ever achieve their status as legends. But at least the new era would be rid of the bitterness of under-compensation.

But Dionne's deal caught him major flack. "We were all underpaid," Dionne maintains, and other players "never thought they could make that kind of money." As a result, Dionne was vilified by other players—until, that is, everyone else began to catch up. He's disappointed that instead of seeing his success as an opportunity to improve their own situation, many players turned against him. "I was hurt by that" he says. Besides himself, he credits Bobby Hull and

Wayne Gretzky for helping players to receive their due. With players like them, “guys had something to shoot for.” However, like politics, money ceases to be an issue for Dionne once it ceases to effect what happens between the boards. “There’s a lot of money involved today,” he admits, “it starts [to factor in] at 15, 16 years old.” Still, “I don’t care how much guys make, for me it’s just a game...I don’t care, can he perform? Can he make me, as a fan, excited? That’s all that matters.”

There’s that phrase again, that refusal, that devotion to “what matters.” That attitude makes Dionne, shall we say, negatively inclined toward the press. “They need to shut up” he says about the media’s thirst for drama, adding, “they need to grow up.” But this approach does not make Dionne a grouchy old skeptic; there’s a flip side to his “doesn’t matter” mantra as well: while it filters out the unneeded noise that comes with fame and success, it also preserves that which is truly worthwhile. It is what allows Dionne to maintain an almost childlike wonder. During our conversation, he said “it’s amazing,” “it’s crazy,” or “it’s incredible” more often than he dismissed this or that with a “it doesn’t matter.” Dionne believes in the dictum, “everything in its proper place.” And hockey’s proper place is between the boards.

Our conversation ended with the question “how do you measure success?” Dionne paused to consider; it was not the pause of someone looking for an answer, but of someone who knew the answer so well that he couldn’t stand not to nail it. “Some say it’s cups,” he began deliberately. “To me, you got to look at it all, you have to have everything on your side. It’s not about you, it’s about everyone. You lose, does that make you a loser? No...it’s a team sport, you need support. Now tennis, golf, that’s different, that’s an individual thing.” How do you measure it then? “Did you go as far as you could? That’s success.”

For Dionne, it is as if we all have our own personal rink within the bounds of which our success is measured. It is not the external signs of success that matter, as our stats-crazed modern sports journalism and talking head apparatus would insist between its advertisements. Instead, it is the harder to prove and more important internal measures of accomplishment that matter. Dionne is arguing for quality over quantity, personal contentment over personal gain, the soul over the stat sheet. When he says, “I never looked at the NHL as my salvation,” he is dismissing both his lack of a cup and his impressive stat sheet, because neither *really* matters. He’s not blinking when he says, “it’s about what you accomplish in life, that’s what matters.” And who could be a better judge of that than yourself? He makes sure to drive this point home, saying, “you remember this: I never worked for anyone.” But a boss does more than keep his employees in line, he also evaluates them. In that sense Dionne has always had a boss: himself.

This is how Marcel Dionne—offensive monster, worthy rival of Lafluer, the prototype of the modern player—ended his career: after fading out of the New York Rangers’ lineup he played a number of games in the minors, which he says wasn’t a hit to his pride at all but “was a lot of fun...I just passed it, set guys up.” Then he retired, quietly. “I didn’t need a red carpet,” he says, “I was home already when people found out I was done.” Press conference? Of course not, that wouldn’t have mattered.