



THE EVOLUTION OF P.K. SUBBAN

The P.K. brand is a carefully cultivated image that runs a lot deeper than the name on the back and the logo on the front of the jersey. It's more about philosophy than pucks. That persona wasn't forever in Montreal, but it'll start up again in Nashville

BY RONNIE SHUKER



There's a heat warning in effect for Toronto on this sultry Saturday afternoon in mid-June, the kind that forces pedestrians to seek respite on the side of the street where shade is cast. In a studio of a nondescript warehouse block in the city's nondescript east end, however, the heat isn't bothering P.K. Subban, who just changed into a velvet burgundy jacket for his next shot. He's mugging for the camera in support of a new line of suits he helped sketch for RW&Co., and despite only intermittent air conditioning, there isn't a bead of sweat in sight on him.

Still, something's amiss. It's the vibe that's throwing him off, not the heat. He's not feeling the music, so he shouts across the room to his brother Malcolm and asks him to change the tune and pump up the volume. As an Amy Winehouse doppelganger fixes Subban's suit, the intro to Drake's "Started from the Bottom" begins. The brothers exchange smiles and let out a subtle "Yyyeeaaaahhh" in approval. When the beat kicks in, Subban starts dancing, nodding his head in sync with the rhythm. As his groove returns, the camera starts firing away.

It's rare to see Subban miss a beat. He is so comfortable in front of a camera, so candid in interviews, that you get the sense his evolution from chubby kid in a forgotten part of Toronto into chiselled NHL superstar was bred right into his DNA. His backstory, well documented, is the stuff of childhood dreams: A young kid, the son of immigrants, starts with little in an uninspiring urban neighborhood. His father, who works two jobs to keep his five children fed and give them every opportunity to succeed, takes his eldest son skating every winter night, often into the wee hours of the morning. He builds a rink in the family's backyard, and the boy's hard work combines with his physical gifts and natural talent. He rises through the ranks of youth hockey, then to major junior and on to pro. After one year in the AHL, he reaches the top of the hockey world – the NHL. And from there, he evolves into one of the game's most electric players and by far its biggest personality. It's now been seven years since Subban turned pro and six since he took the NHL by storm during the 2010 playoffs, if you can believe it. He sure can't. "I have no idea where seven years went," Subban says. "It's going to be my eighth year next year. I still feel like I'm 21, but everyone's like, 'No, P.K., you're 27.' You know? And next year, I'll be 28. It's crazy. It's nuts."

Until recently, all those years had come in the Montreal Canadiens organization. But in the middle of June, less than two weeks before being traded, Subban doesn't want to talk about the team, or hockey for that matter. Whether he knows it or not, his eighth year of pro hockey won't be in Montreal. He certainly doesn't know it will be in Nashville, who trades their captain, Shea Weber, to acquire Subban 11 days later, on June 29. Given the eight-year, \$72-million deal Subban signed with the Canadiens two summers ago, he probably expected to remain a Hab for life, like some of the lifelong Canadiens he looked up to, including the late Jean Beliveau. Instead, he's more like Patrick Roy – a controversial superstar, beloved by the fans, who was shipped out of Montreal in his prime of his career after a rift with the coach.



After six-plus years as a Canadien, the evolution of P.K. Subban is about to enter its next phase. Right smack in his playing prime, he finds himself having to adapt to a new environment in Nashville, which is about as close to Montreal in hockey culture as country music is to hip hop. Whereas Subban's playlist includes Drake and Eminem, the Predators often showcase Vince Gill on stage during intermissions of home games. In their 107-year history, the Canadiens have won 24 Stanley Cups, which is more than the number of years (19) the Predators have been in existence. There are about as many reporters covering the Canadiens as there are players on the team, while the Predators have just one beat reporter listed in the NHL media directory. Hockey is everything in Montreal, and no other player was more scrutinized there than Subban over the past six years. Not that the heat ever seemed to bother him. In his first TV interview after the trade, Subban said, "I know I'm not perfect. But at the end of the day, you have to be willing to take the heat."

The spotlight will be significantly less bright in Nashville, where hockey is still somewhat niche, despite a growing fan base. Yet that should suit Subban just fine, too. Unlike many of his peers in the NHL, hockey isn't the be-all and end-all. And playing in a non-traditional market will free him to indulge in his non-hockey interests. "I feel sad for someone who has (just) one thing that defines them as a person," Subban says. "I don't think that's really healthy...Somebody who says, 'Oh, hockey is my life, it's everything,' it's like, OK, well, when it's over, then what do you do, you know?"

Subban has long known he's more than just a hockey player. In his early twenties, he was already telling the world he's a guy who plays hockey, not a hockey player. It's a subtle distinction, but it's significant. Subban is far more philosophical about his career than most players. Many eat, sleep, think, dream, breathe and bathe hockey and only hockey – all day, every day – and don't come to the realization they still have half their life,



I DON'T THINK
THERE'S
ANYBODY LIKE
ME. I ALWAYS
FEEL THAT I'M
VERY DISTINCT
IN WHO I AM

PREVIOUS: PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS NICHOLLS FOR RW&CO. COURTESY OF THE NASHVILLE PREDATORS

FOR ANYONE TO DESCRIBE ME WHO I NEVER MET, I LAUGH AT THAT. I THINK IT'S HILARIOUS

or more, to live after it's over. It's usually only when they get married, have kids or near the end of their career that they give thought to what they might do and who they might be after they are finished with hockey – or, as is more often the case, hockey is finished with them. They certainly don't think about it when they're single, childless, famous, fabulously rich and still just 27.

From anyone else, that outlook would give off the air of an athlete with a half-hearted love for the game and a half-assed dedication to it. Yet no one, not even his detractors (and there are many), doubts Subban's passion or his commitment to his craft. Before arriving at the studio by 9 a.m., Subban got to the gym for one of his two-a-day workouts. And midway through the six-hour shoot, he shows no signs of fatigue. He's a boundless ball of energy who simply needs multiple outlets to release it, and in front of the camera is one of his most natural environments to do that in.

For all the camera time and public appearances, however, there are sides of himself Subban doesn't divulge. When pressed for details of his workout, he doesn't relent. Despite saying he can't wait for the season to get started, he doesn't want to talk about training for it. He says he doesn't want people to know that side of him. Perhaps a sweaty Subban conflicts with the perfectly polished brand he has worked so hard to create. Regardless, he seems fine if the public perception of him is enthusiastic goal celebrations, flashy suits, contagious smiles and contentious quotes. If people don't know what goes on behind the scenes, well, then, so much the better. Subban is one of those players everyone seems to have an opinion of, good or bad, and he has no problem with that. "For anybody to describe me who I've never met, I mean, I laugh at that. I think it's hilarious," Subban said. "When people are like, 'This is P.K.' I'm like, 'I've never met that guy before in my

life, and he seems to have a firm opinion on who I am.' You know, they could never put me on a talk show with those people, because they'd be made a fool."

Not that Subban hasn't stoked those opinions with some occasional tomfoolery. During the 2010 playoffs, Don Cherry was the first to call out Subban for his over-the-top goal celebrations and on-ice chirping, calling his antics disrespectful to the game. Soon afterward, a fellow player weighed in on Subban, when Mike Richards, then of Philadelphia, made a similar charge, intimating retribution would be coming Subban's way if the 21-year-old rookie kept disrespecting his peers.

Controversy followed Subban on his own team, too. Over his six years in Montreal, he got into altercations at practice with teammates Tomas Plekanec, David Desharnais and Max Pacioretty, and rumors of tension in the dressing room between Subban and the rest of the team were often in the air. Whether they were true, truish or completely fabricated, fans in Montreal didn't seem to care. They almost unanimously adored him. When the trade went down, fans went berserk, irate the organization had dealt its most beloved player. For whatever reason, those calling the shots in Habs management never embraced their superstar like the fans did, his personality deemed too individual to fit with hockey's traditional ideal of the collective.

However people choose to describe him, Subban owns himself unconditionally. He says he has matured since his perceived cockiness rubbed hockey's culture barons the wrong way, though admits he still has more to do. Still, he remains as brash as he was when hockey's self-anointed sentinels of tradition started calling him out for a lack of respect. And he's unapologetic about wearing many hats, not just a helmet. He's a hockey player, yes, but he's also a brand, a businessman, an artist and a philanthropist. "I don't think there's anybody like me," Subban says. "I always feel that I'm very distinct in who I am. I'm very comfortable with who I am, but I do things differently than maybe most 27-year-olds."

That distinctiveness includes knowing what he likes, and Subban likes everything to be just right. For him, it's all about the finer points of the finest things. He gets his haircut every two or three days (that's right, *days*, not weeks), and he talks about his suits like a marine would his rifle. His suits have to fit perfectly or he won't wear them, no matter how stylish and well designed. His pocket square has to be half an inch above the pocket line, no more, and never in a triangle. His tie has to be a double Windsor, nothing else. His pants have to be long enough so his socks don't show when he's standing up yet short enough so they ride up just the right height to reveal a carefully selected pair running up over his ankles. The socks, you should know, are always patterned, never plain. Whatever he's wearing, though, what you see is only half of what you get with Subban. "If you have a good man and a s---ty suit, that doesn't work. If you have a s---ty man and a good suit, that still doesn't work," he says. "I believe you need both. You can't have one without the other."



Behind the scenes at the photo shoot, Subban is as playful and accommodating as he is in front of the camera, even though he's in his fourth hour of shooting, and there's still another shot to do. In between, he opens up an hour to the media. Unlike most of his peers, Subban doesn't see interviews as a necessary evil – the price a player has to pay for getting paid millions. It's an opportunity for him to create his own narrative, a chance to direct his own show and not let someone else write the public script for his life. At one point, he sternly shushes his entourage in the studio for being too loud during a TV

interview. For all his humor, affability and playfulness, he exudes Jonathan Toews-like seriousness when it comes to the business of being P.K. Subban. "When people think of a brand, they can see it as self-centered, but it's not really about that," Subban says. "I should be able to have a say on what I want people to talk about when it comes to me. In order to do that, you've got to take control of it, because media and people will build their own perceptions of you."

Since Subban arrived in the NHL with his hair on fire in 2010, his evolution has been swift. He won the Norris Trophy as the NHL's best defenseman barely a month after turning 24, the second-youngest player to do so in nearly 30 years. And he's well on his way to becoming a millionaire so many times over that he could afford to donate some of those cool millions to the Montreal Children's Hospital last year. Subban has made it, and now he has it made. He knows hockey won't last forever, so he's taking advantage of his sports celebrity by parlaying it into other worlds he can live in when his playing career is over.

The next phase of his evolution begins this fall in Tennessee. Whatever that turns out to be, we know this much: the heat won't bother him. Like every NHL player, he wants to win a Stanley Cup. No surprise there. But unlike the others, it's not Stanley Cup or bust for Subban. "When I first came into the NHL, my mindset was different then than it is now after six years," Subban said. "You learn, you understand the game, you understand your business, you understand that you can't play hockey for the rest of your life. As much as I hope I have a lot of years ahead of me, it doesn't last forever, so you have to realize that and realize what you want out of it. For me, the No. 1 thing is I want a Stanley Cup. But there are other things in life. There are other things in my career that I want to accomplish as well. That's not the only thing." **H**