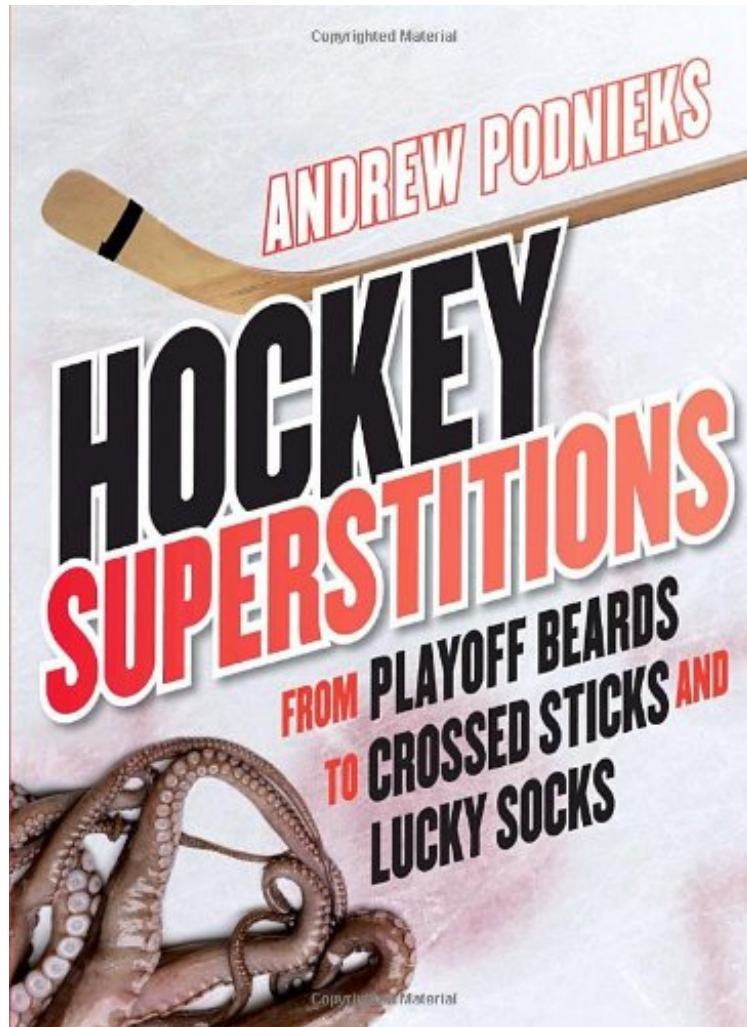


Hockey Superstitions: From Playoff Beards to Crossed Sticks and Lucky Socks

Andrew Podnieks

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One of North America's best-known hockey writers examines the strangest rituals and superstitions within the NHL. Why did Wayne Gretzky start every pre-game warm-up by shooting wide to the right of the net (a rather funny habit, given that he scored more goals than anyone in the game's history)? Why do many hockey players seem to believe performance is tied directly to facial hair? Why does Geoff Sanderson use a different length stick for every period? And why did Petr Klima break his stick after every goal he scored? *Hockey Superstitions*, by one of Canada's best-known hockey writers, Andrew Podnieks, explores the fascinating and fun world of hockey superstitions: their origins, their quirks, and the mythology around them. Along the way, it gives us an original look into the minds of the players and coaches behind them.

About the Author ANDREW PODNIEKS is the author of more than 55 books on hockey, most notably 2008's bestselling book on the 100th anniversary of the Montreal Canadiens, *Honoured Canadiens*. He is also the author of *Players: The Ultimate A-Z Guide of Everyone Who Has Ever Played in the NHL*; *The Complete Hockey Dictionary*; *World of Hockey: Celebrating a Century of the IIHF*; *A Day in the Life of the Maple Leafs*; *Canada's Olympic Hockey History, 1920-2010*; *A Canadian Saturday Night*; and *Portraits of the Game: Classic Photographs from the Turofsky Collection at the Hockey Hall of Fame*. In addition, he has covered three Olympics and nine World Championships for the IIHF and has written extensively with and for the Hockey Hall of Fame and Hockey Canada. He has also worked with Canada's Sports Hall of Fame to develop web and exhibition content. Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

THE PLAYOFF BEARD The playoff beard is a sure and ubiquitous sign that Stanley Cup hockey has arrived. For a dozen games in the pre-season of September through the eighty-two gruelling games that comprise the regular season, the NHL's nearly one thousand players are clean-shaven, with a few sporting a beard year-round and only a handful even crafting a moustache. But when the calendar turns to the first day of the playoffs, all players on all sixteen playoff teams put away their razors, vowing not to shave again until they have won the Stanley Cup (or, more likely, have been eliminated). The playoff beard has come to mean several things. First, it is about the team, a way of bonding and showing each teammate that the players are "all for one and one for all" as they begin the quest for hockey's Holy Grail. Furthermore, it is about perseverance, about each player making a collective vow not to shave, not to care about personal appearance or tonsorial etiquette because looks don't matter, family doesn't matter, nothing matters except chasing the dream for the next two months of hockey. Because the beard is not a feature players enjoy the rest of the year, it is also a symbol for the suffering they are willing to endure to win. Wearing a beard, especially in the spring and summer months when the playoffs are scheduled, is as unpleasant in its own way as blocking a shot, losing a tooth, or sticking up for a teammate during a game. The beard is an outward commitment by the players to their fans that they are willing to do whatever it takes to win in the playoffs, willing to vouchsafe all personal cleanliness and focus only on bringing home the Cup. It acts as a constant reminder to each player of this promise, this dedication. Dave Lewis, a member of the New York Islanders from 1973 to 1980, believes that his team started the NHL tradition of the playoff beard in the mid-1970s. However, photographs of the team from those playoffs don't consistently corroborate his claim. It seems to have begun with the Islanders, to be sure, but not until 1980, when the team won the first of four straight Cups (1980–83). Lewis, unfortunately, was traded to Los Angeles late in the 1979–80 season and never won a championship with the team. The 1979–80 team that won the Cup for the first time featured two Swedes—Stefan Persson and Anders Kallur—the first Europeans to win the Stanley Cup (Bob Nystrom, also on the team, was born in Sweden but grew up in Canada). Another irrefutable fact is that Swedish tennis king Björn Borg began a Wimbledon tradition of growing a beard back in 1976. Each Wimbledon he started clean-shaven, vowing not to touch a razor again until the end of the tournament. He won five championships in a row, and each trophy presentation featured a bearded Borg accepting the prize (Andy Roddick tried to mimic this habit in 2008, but he failed to win the lawn championship). It is well within reason to think the Swedish players copied their national legend and brought the beard tradition to the NHL.

THE PLAYOFF BEARD GAINS MOMENTUM The successful run of four Stanley Cup wins in a row with bearded superstitions established the New York Islanders in the game's history, but that doesn't mean the legend spread from that day to this. Indeed, the team's success more or less ended the playoff beard for some time. The Edmonton Oilers took over from the Isles as the dominant team for the rest of the 1980s, and those players refused to copy a tradition possibly started by their rivals (many of their great players were probably also too young to grow truly Grizzly Adams-ish beards anyway). So, the Oilers won their Cups with clean-shaven faces and lightning speed and skill. Ironically, while the New York Rangers would never dare do anything similar to the Islanders—or vice versa—it seems that the beard returned with the New Jersey Devils in 1988, the first year that previously sad-sack team made the post-season. Their beards didn't grow long before they were eliminated, but in 1995, the team continued with the tradition, won the Cup, and never looked back. Momentum picked up as the century came to a close, and now, far from worrying about copying an enemy's habit, the superstition is that you can't win the Cup without adopting the team beard philosophy. Ergo, the evolution to today when players on all sixteen teams grow their beards and every spring one team does, indeed, win the Stanley Cup with full beards

(proving the superstition's worth!). **THE PLAYOFF BEARD REACHES THE OWNER'S BOX** The playoff beard has pretty much been a players-only tradition, but a new era began in 2008–09 when Pittsburgh Penguins owner Mario Lemieux adopted the superstition along with the team. This isn't surprising given that Lemieux was (a) a Hall of Fame player himself and (b) landlord to the team's captain, Sidney Crosby. No doubt at the start of the playoffs, over a bowl of cereal at breakfast, the captain challenged the owner to play along and toss the razor aside for the duration. And so it was that on the ice and in the dressing room after Pittsburgh's historic victory in June 2009, Lemieux raised the Cup high above his bearded face in triumph. It is highly doubtful that the older and more corporate owners will follow Mario's lead, but Penguins fans can be sure that Lemieux will continue with the tradition as long as it has strength (having Crosby and Evgeni Malkin on the team doesn't hurt, either).