

## At forward with Dave Gagner

By Alex Carswell



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Things could have been different for Dave Gagner. Taken as an underage junior, 12th overall, by the New York Rangers in the 1983 draft, Gagner contributed 12 points in 38 games as a rookie in 1984/85. Then, after notching 10 points in 32 games the next year, he broke his ankle. In 1986/87, the Rangers gave him a cursory look. He played 10 games, scoring five points, before being sent down to New Haven of the American Hockey League for the third season in a row. The Rangers had given up on him.

Yes, things could have been different for Gagner. If the Rangers hadn't sent him to Minnesota in October 1987 in exchange for Jari Gronstrand and Paul Boutillier, he could well have been a New York hero. He could have reeled off six straight 30-goal seasons—twice hitting the 40-goal mark—and turned in clutch playoff performances, like the 27 points he racked up in 1991.

But instead of reaching those heights in the Big Apple and being the toast of Broadway, he reached them in Minnesota and then Dallas, where he merely became the apple of many a GM's eye. Which is why it was no surprise when Cliff Fletcher, looking to steel up his Toronto Maple Leafs for a playoff run, plucked Gagner in exchange for Benoit Hogue and Randy Wood. The only surprise was that, despite the team's struggles at the time, Dallas—like the Rangers—let him go.

Gagner, listed at 5'10" and 180 pounds, is often lumped into the pejorative category "small forward." His game, however, is anything but small. In fact, it's huge.

"You can't think of yourself as small when you are small. You have to play a bigger game. You have to be strong on the ice, so you have to be in good shape all the time," says Gagner. "There are a lot of guys my size out there. I know there are a lot of guys bigger, too, but you have to play with a lot of intensity. I never think of myself as 5'10" or 5'9", or whatever I am. I think of myself as just as big as anybody else out there, and I just try and play as strong as any other player."

That mind-over-matter philosophy translates into an aggressive playing style which makes him, shall we say, not well liked by many an opponent. But loved by his teammates.

### He's clutch

The derisive tag George Steinbrenner once hung on Dave Winfield, "Mr. May," is one that actually applies to Dave Gagner. For while baseball players have to produce in October to earn laurels as clutch performers, hockey players have to do it in the spring—and Gagner always has. He has 46 points in 51 career playoff games, numbers Fletcher was certainly cognizant of when he made the deal for the 31-year-old Ontario native.

What does Gagner do to elevate his game in the playoffs?

"I think I probably bear down consciously because I want to be thought of in that light (as a clutch player). I think it's very important for people to feel that way about me, I guess, and I really try to play my best at that time.

"It's not like you don't play your best all the time, it's just that at (playoff) time you focus a bit more and you're more intense because it's a more pressure-packed situation.

"You just have to raise your emotion level a little bit more, and that's probably the key."

But as he says, Gagner doesn't forsake the regular season for the playoffs. His remarkable string of six 30-plus goal seasons was broken only by last year's Lockout, and he remains one of only five active players to accomplish that feat, joining Mike Gartner, Luc Robitaille, Brett Hull and Pierre Turgeon. That's pretty heady company, by any standards.

"I just want to be thought of as a consistent guy; somebody you can depend on, that you know what you're going to get out of. Not spectacular, by any means, but dependable.

"And that's one thing I think any player can be. You don't have to be that skilled. There are a lot of dependable players in the league because of their attitude and the way they approach their game—and probably the way they approach everything in life. That's one thing I was taught growing up: be dependable and be conscientious."

### **Tough, too**

And along with his dependable scoring touch, the guy is tough as nails. After notching 35 goals in 1988/89, he broke his kneecap, then rebounded with 40 markers the next season. He underwent arthroscopic surgery in December 1991, and missed just one game on his way to a 35-goal season. So despite the long list of injuries he's suffered, Gagner remains something of an ironman.

"I've always stayed in good shape over my career, and tried to build my body up so I can withstand things a little bit.

"The only way you can produce at this level is to be in every game. To put up good numbers you have to play a lot. You can't be the type of guy who plays 50, 60 games a year and expect to be a valuable asset to your team.

"There are a lot of players in this league who are successful because of their endurance and because they're in the lineup every night trying to help their team win."

Which is what Gagner does, whether the strategy of the night has him in the lineup at center or left wing, both of which he has played regularly throughout his career. And in either case, his approach remains as consistent as his production.

"I try not to make it too complicated. I just go out and play my position. I think center's probably a little bit harder because you have to skate (more) and you have a lot more responsibility; a lot more ice to cover. And you get a little bit more tired playing center—at least I do.

"Playing the wing you just have to be positionally solid and strong along the boards. You get hit more, but I enjoy playing the wing. It really doesn't matter to me. As long as I get to play a regular shift, I'll play anywhere."

Which is exactly the kind of attitude that has made Gagner such an important member of the Stars franchise, and now the Leafs, for a dozen NHL seasons.

But Gagner, like most hockey players, attributes his longevity primarily to one thing.

"I enjoy the game," he says, "and that's probably the reason I've been here so long. And why I'll probably stick around for a while."

**—Alex Carswell**