

?The Great Eight? is Number Four in My Books

By **Jim Stewart**

OPINION

There's a movement afoot to reassess Alex Ovechkin's ascendancy to professional hockey's greatest goal scorer.

At press time, The Great Eight trailed The Great One by only seven goals and there's been much hand-wringing across the country about Ovechkin surpassing a much-coveted hockey record.

In a timely manner, a group of WHA enthusiasts is positing a solution to our anxiety.

The WHA fan group is lobbying the NHL to accept statistics generated by the 1970s ?outlaw pro hockey league.? The NHL's positive response to this decades-long request would cast a shadow over Ovechkin's much-publicized pursuit of Gretzky's 894-goal mark which Number 99 accrued as a member of the Edmonton Oilers, Los Angeles Kings, St. Louis Blues, and New York Rangers.

In fact, if the NHL does the rational thing and incorporates the WHA's statistics into its record books, Ovechkin would be chasing not only Gretzky, but hockey icons Gordie Howe and Bobby Hull as well.

If and when the WHA goals scored by Howe, Gretzky, and Hull are added to their NHL totals, Ovechkin will be put where he belongs in the history of Major Professional Hockey: a solid fourth and off the podium.

The Divine Nine of Major Professional Hockey Goal Scorers?with the players' NHL and WHA goals combined?offers a more accurate view of who and what Ovechkin is chasing:

Gordie Howe?975 (801 in the NHL and 174 in the WHA)

Wayne Gretzky?940 (894 in the NHL and 46 in the WHA)

Bobby Hull?913 (610 in the NHL and 303 in the WHA)

Alex Ovechkin?887 (all in the NHL)

Jaromir Jagr?766 (all in the NHL)

Brett Hull?741 (all in the NHL)

Mike Gartner?735 (708 in the NHL and 27 in the WHA)

Marcel Dionne?731 (all in the NHL)

Phil Esposito?717 (all in the NHL)

Ovechkin belongs in the same statistical class as the eight icons above, but he is no Howe, Gretzky, nor Hull.

Howe, Gretzky, and Hull each dominated a decade or more of NHL and/or WHA play.

The ?Gordie Howe Hat Trick??a goal, an assist, and a fight?is legendary. Gretzky rewrote Howe's scoring records amassed over

parts of four decades and helped create a dynasty in Edmonton. Hull became professional hockey's first million-dollar player and gave the WHA instant credibility when he defected from the Chicago Blackhawks in 1972. He and Orr were Team Canada's best players in the Canada Cup in 1976.

Howe, Gretzky, and Hull were also multiple Major Professional Hockey champions with the Red Wings and Aeros, Oilers, and Blackhawks and Jets, respectively. Individually, they could electrify an arena in vastly different ways.

Howe, Gretzky, and Hull were Canadian hockey icons who suited up for Team Canada on multiple occasions.

By comparison, Ovechkin?with his one ring in Washington as well as his close association with the reviled Putin and the banished Russian national team?has been reduced to an X-marks-the-spot power play specialist and empty net savant who is embarrassingly long in the tooth in 2025 and hanging on to secure a record that many hockey statisticians believe is illusory.

When NHL and WHA goals are combined, Ovechkin trails all three of Hockey's Mount Rushmore members--Howe, Gretzky, and Hull-- by dozens of goals. The fourth member of Hockey's Mount Rushmore is, of course, Bobby Orr--not Ovechkin?but that's another story for another time.

In 2025, the case for the WHA's stats being amalgamated with NHL stats has never been clearer.

The NHL is currently comprised of 8 more teams (32) than the combination of 17 NHL teams and 7 WHA teams that were operating in the 1978-1979 season. The NHL expanded in 1979-80 by adding 4 of the 6 remaining WHA franchises: Edmonton, Winnipeg (to Arizona and now Utah), Quebec City (now Colorado), and New England (now Carolina). The argument that WHA stats were watered down was always specious and given how watered-down today's numbers are in a 32-team league that is 25% bigger than the NHL and WHA teams combined in 1978-79 suggests that the WHA players' goals and assists were legit.

In a related professional statistical development last year, Major League Baseball rewrote its record books when it acknowledged Negro League stats and amalgamated them to recognize the quality of play and players prior to Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in 1947.

It is timely to put Ovechkin's achievements in a more accurate context. There is no doubt that Ovechkin is a superstar athlete destined for the Hockey Hall of Fame and worthy of our attention?but he's #4 on The All-Time List of Major Professional Hockey goal scorers. He trails The Golden Jet by 26 goals in case anyone is asking and has a long way to go to catch The Great One and Mr. Hockey.