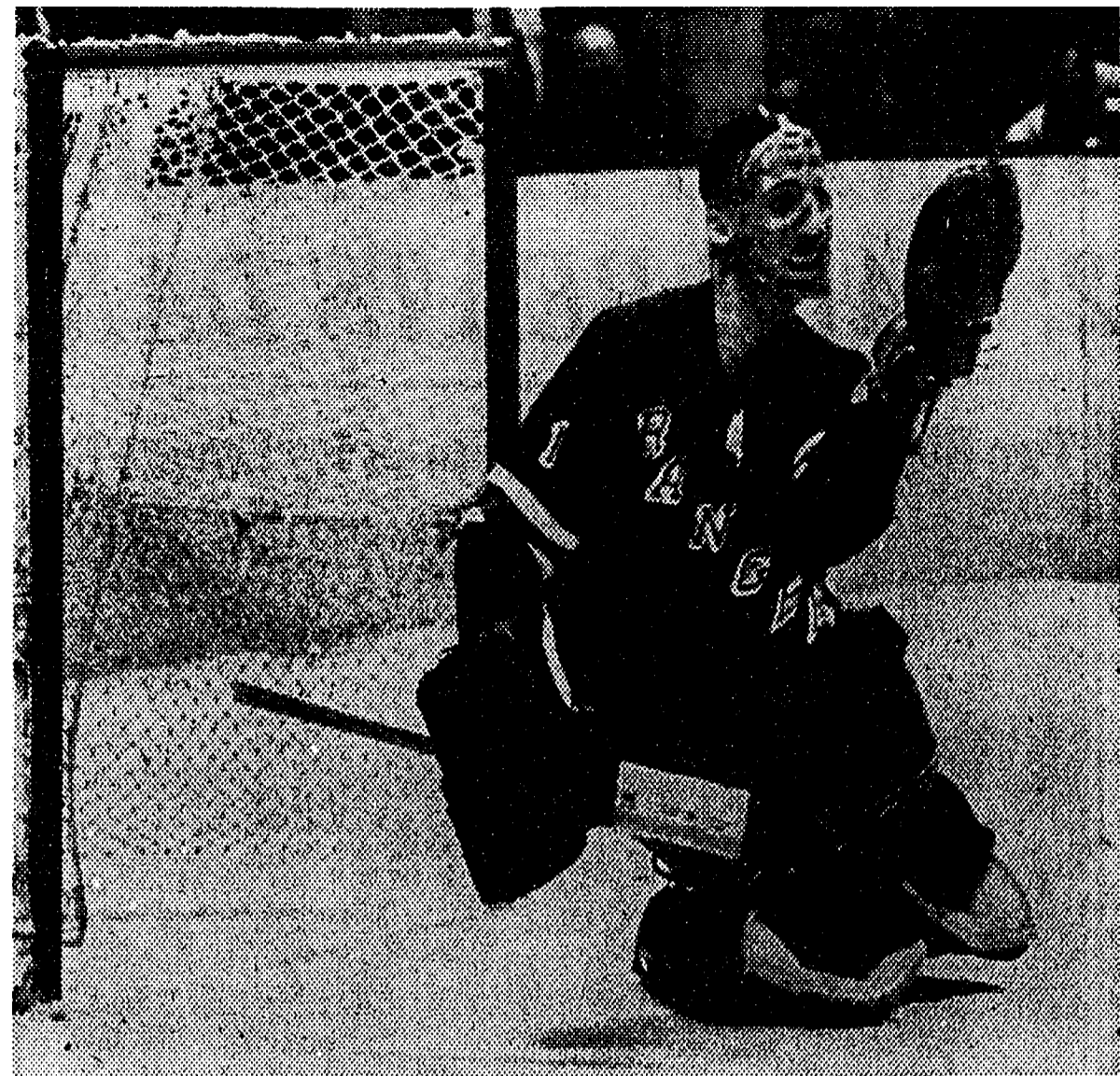


# Behind Plante's Mask: 'Man Alone'



The New York Times

Jacques Plante in action in Ranger net during a recent game at Madison Square Garden

## New Ranger Goalie Defies the Enemy to Get Shot by Him

By ROBERT LIPSYTE

Jake the Snake loves his work. Three nights a week he crouches in front of a hockey goal, loose and agile on skinny steel blades, peering down the ice through the eye-slits of a plastic mask. He seems to say, "I am Jacques Plante, the greatest goalie in the business, and I dare you to get one past me."

And of course they try, bursting through Plante's New York Ranger teammates, a swirl of colors and flung ice roaring down toward the goal, thousands screaming as the stick cracks against a frozen rubber disk that becomes smaller and harder as it hurtles, 100 miles an hour, at Jacques Plante's throat.

Slap. Time stands still and thousands catch their breaths as Plante's big glove flicks out and kills the puck in its leather folds. Plante sinks to his knees, drawing out the last bit of emotional suspense. Then, as the breaths explode in a mighty whoosh, he disdainfully flips the puck away and watches the mad scramble start again.

"You must be born a goal tender, a man alone," says the 34-year-old Plante. "Even the rule book says you are not a hockey player, that a team is made up of 17 hockey players and a goal tender. You are a man who can prevent defeat, but you cannot win a game."

"The eyes are upon you, you are the target of the game. When a goal is scored, play stops and people talk. They say how you missed the puck, how you made a mistake. They do not talk of all the mistakes that were made before the opposing player took his shot. They say it is your mistake alone."

### Born to the Task

Plante, who joined the Rangers this year after nine successful seasons with the Montreal Canadiens, looks like a man born to accept such responsibility. His face is strong and angular with deep hollows beneath the scarred cheekbones and quick mobility around the eyes and mouth.

During a game, the face, which bears the marks of several hundred stitches, is covered with a 10-ounce, padded plastic mask. He introduced the mask



United Press International

Jake the Snake displays mask he uses to protect him from 100-mile-an-hour shots.

to the National Hockey League four years ago because, he admits freely, he was tired of seeing his blood on the ice.

"During the game itself there is little time to be afraid. Once you are afraid in a game you are through," he said in a clipped accent with traces of his French mother tongue.

"But I was not sleeping at night, replaying each game in my head, the pucks I stopped and the ones that missed my head by an inch, thinking about more stitches and going back to the hospital—and wasn't four times enough for one nose to be broken?"

He began wearing a mask in practice sessions in 1959, while he was with the Canadiens. On Nov. 1, in New York, Andy Bathgate, now a Ranger teammate, backhanded a shot into the left side of Plante's nose. Jake the Snake went down like a tree in the night.

### Puts On the Mask

Twenty minutes and seven stitches later (hockey games are held up when a team's only goalie needs emergency repairs) Plante skated out with a ghoul-ish, Plexiglass mask.

The controversy has waxed ever since. Originally, the Montreal coach said Plante might wear the mask until his nose healed. But Plante, impervious to catcalls from the safe seats, refused to take it off. And the Canadiens won their next 11 games.

"I am the best goalie in the league," Plante has said, "And

## He Says He Is Best and the Statistics Lend Support

with the mask I am even better. I can laugh at getting hit in the face. I can use my face to stop pucks."

Barefaced or masked, Plante has statistical support for his contention. Since he broke into the N.H.L. as a regular in 1954, he has won six Vezina Trophies, a record, the last two with a covered face. The trophy annually goes to the goalie who was least scored upon.

Just as the mask is becoming standard equipment for younger goalies throughout Canada, Plante's other innovation—wandering—is widely copied. He moves around, plays the angles instead of the net, skates out to make saves and pass the puck, and shouts instructions to the defencemen.

### Breathing a Problem

For all his activity, agility and grandstanding, Plante's biggest problem is breathing. Plante was raised in Shawinigan Falls, Que., and severe asthma kept him from competitive athletics until he was in his teens. The son of a machinist, Jacques was the oldest of a large family. He diapered, sewed and cleaned for the brood.

Until he was 14 he slept sitting up, coughing all night, falling asleep at dawn when he was too tired to cough any longer. At 14, the asthma disappeared and Jacques began playing hockey. He became winded too quickly to skate very long, so he played at goal.

The asthma still bothers him. Last week, he flew to Montreal to receive emergency treatments for it. But he never uses it as an excuse. He just admits he's a little bit crazy to continue playing (even with the mask he still gets sliced up now and then) with a wife and two boys in Montreal, a newspaper column, an off-season job with a brewery and such peaceful interests as oil painting and knitting.

"I worked very hard to get to the top, and now that I'm here I want to enjoy it, to taste it," he says.

"And there are the nights I go home and I tell my wife I don't know how they could score, I filled the net tonight, I blocked it all and every time they shot I scooped up the puck and laughed 'Aha, look what I found' and it is nights like that keep me going, nights like that I know I love what I do."