

INTERVIEW WITH JEREMY ROENICK: **NHL 94'S BEST PLAYER!**

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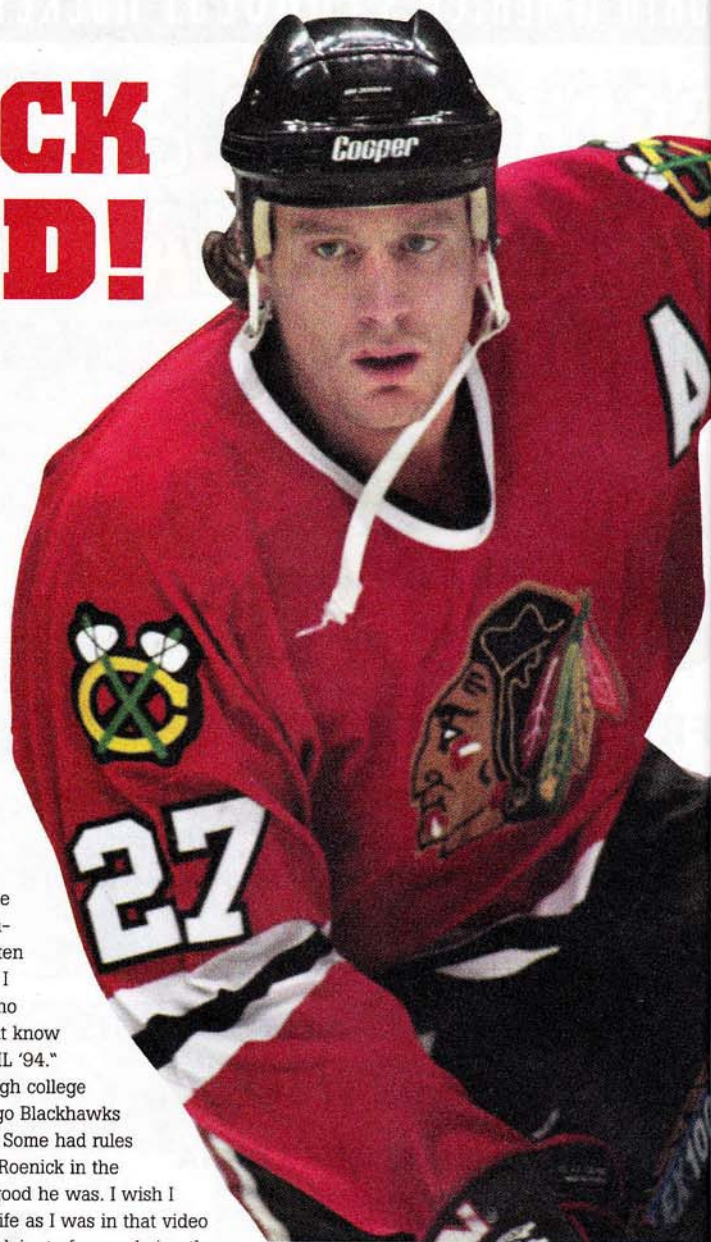
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IT'S ROENICK HE'S GOOD!

FORMER NHL SUPERSTAR JEREMY ROENICK TALKS ABOUT BEING A VIDEO GAME LEGEND

By Sal J. Barry | Contributing Editor



Jeremy Roenick electrified crowds during his 20 seasons in the NHL with his hard-nosed, high-scoring style of play. He reached the 50-goal plateau three times and was the third American-born player to score over 500 career goals. When he retired in 2009, Roenick had 513 goals and 703 assists in 1,363 games. A year later, he was inducted into the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame, and is currently a studio analyst for NHL games broadcast on NBC.

Yet, to a generation of hockey fans, Roenick is perhaps better known as being one of the best video game characters to grace a TV screen. "NHL '94," released in fall of 1993 and currently celebrating its 20th anniversary, is considered the best hockey video game from the classic gaming era.

In the game, which uses the names and attributes of real NHL players, Roenick is nearly unstoppable. His great speed and agility, along with one of the hardest and most accurate shots, make Roenick the biggest offensive threat in "NHL '94."

In the Genesis version of the game, a programming mistake — known as the "weight bug" — made lightweight players actually more difficult to knock down while also making them hit harder. This resulted in Roenick being a total wrecking ball in "NHL '94," with a better mix of offensive skills than Mario Lemieux or Wayne Gretzky.

Moviegoers learned about Roenick in the 1996 film "Swingers," starring Vince Vaughn and Jon Favreau. In a memorable scene, the characters are playing "NHL '94" (although the cutaway shots of the game are actually from Electronic Arts' previous hockey game, "NHLPA '93"). When accused of playing unfairly, Vaughn's character replies "Y'know, it's not so much me as Roenick; he's good." This cemented Roenick's status as a pop culture icon and a video game legend.

Recently, Roenick talked with Beckett Hockey about his video game notoriety, games he played growing up, and what it's like to be a cover athlete.

SAL BARRY:

The video game "NHL '94" celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. I'm sure you remember that game.

JEREMY ROENICK:

I do. Very, very well. The "NHL '94" game is the one topic that is mentioned to me most often to me in my lifetime. I have more people who come up to me — that know me — because of "NHL '94." People that got through college playing as the Chicago Blackhawks and Jeremy Roenick. Some had rules that you couldn't be Roenick in the game because how good he was. I wish I was as good in real life as I was in that video game. But that's my claim to fame — being the best video game hockey guy in video game history.

SB: Did you play video games when you were growing up?

JR: Yeah, I had the Atari game system. I played a lot of video games. I spent a lot of time in hockey rinks as a kid. You find things to do. It was the start of the video game age, with "Star Wars," "Pac-Man," "Space Invaders," all that stuff. I was more of a [coin-operated game] player, but then I played Atari.

SB: What were your favorite video games when you were a kid?

JR: I was a "Donkey Kong," "Ms. Pac-Man" and "Asteroids" kind of guy. Those games, and "Frogger" and "Centipede." Those were the games I was brought up on, the classics. In my house now, I have a "Ms. Pac-Man/Galaga"

[coin-operated] video game machine.

SB: What were your thoughts back in the early 1990s when game companies started using real NHL players in their hockey video games?

JR: I thought it was really cool. I thought it was the right idea. It was a great idea. It helped us athletes. It helped our visibility and to become more recognizable.

SB: Did you ever play as yourself in any of the games you've been in?

JR: I have. My son Brett plays them a lot more than I do, though. So, he's played as me a lot more than I have. I've played the games, but I'm not really good at them. But it's really cool to see how the games started and how they progressed over the years to where they are now. Amazing what technology has been able to achieve.

“ All of a sudden a shock came over me when Vince Vaughn said my name. It was probably one of the coolest things that happened to me at that point in my career . ”

SB: Do you play any of the newer games against your son?

JR: Absolutely. Especially the one that came out a couple of years ago ("NHL '12"), with the "Be A Legend" game after I retired. EA (Electronic Arts) put ten legends in the game to play against current NHL guys, so I made sure I played that one because when you are deemed a legend in one of those games, that's pretty cool!

SB: How did you end up as one of the playable characters in the "Be a Legend" mode?

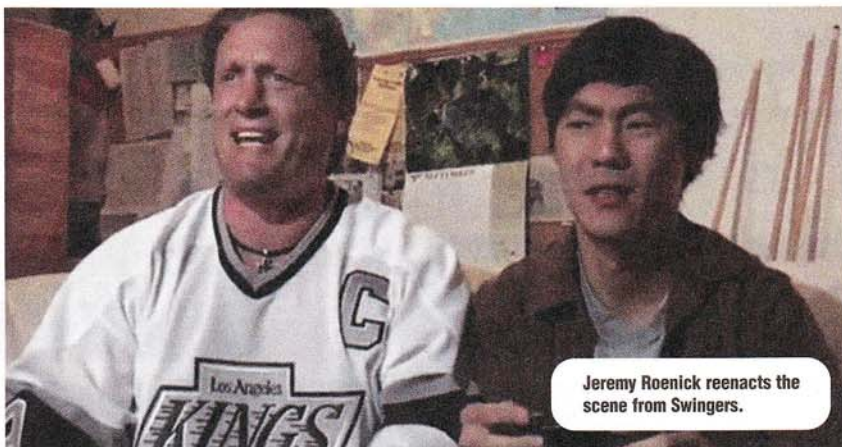
JR: I've always had a good relationship with EA Sports. I've helped them with their games, do some reenactments, wear the motion capture suits. And they asked me to be in other games, like the Tiger Woods golf game ("Tiger Woods PGA Golf Tour 13"). I'm one of the celebrity golf players in the game. When EA needs a go-to

Vaughn said my name. It was probably one of the coolest things that happened to me at that point in my career.

It's one thing to be a star on the ice and to be known in your own city, but when you're put into an actual movie that becomes pop culture, it's a really cool thing. People pass by me, ask how I'm doing and say "Y'know, it's not so much me as Roenick; he's good." People constantly bring up the "Swingers" quotes. You know, "make Gretzky's head bleed," all that stuff. I became friends with Vaughn. He's a big fan of mine, and mentioned me in the movie because he respected me and the way I played, and was paying homage to my Blackhawks days. I thought that was really cool.

SB: So, you first saw "Swingers" in theaters?

JR: No. I was watching it at my house on DVD. We rewound [to that scene] like 100 times.



Jeremy Roenick reenacts the scene from Swingers.

Photo: Fox Sports

hockey guy, they always seem to come to me.

SB: So, when you play against your son, who wins?

JR: Oh, he does. He's a video game connoisseur, so he's very good at what he does. He works up on me pretty good, even when I play as myself.

Year after year, he'll ask me if I'm going to be in the next NHL game. I tell him that sooner or later, I'm going to probably be omitted from the games because I retired, but I still find a way back into them. I guess in "NHL '14" there's going to be an anniversary mode.

SB: Are you going to be a playable character in "NHL '14"?

JR: Yes. And I think it's really cool that you can go back and play the '94 version. That's what will sell "NHL '14," because of the history that people really remember how the game started. It's just like me — if I see a "Pac-Man" game, I'm going to play it. This ("NHL '14") will be a big seller.

SB: When did you first find out that you were "name dropped" in the movie "Swingers", in the scene where they're playing the hockey video game?

JR: I was actually just by happenstance, watching the movie and saw it. [Until then,] I didn't know I was mentioned in it, and then all of a sudden a shock came over me, when Vince

SB: Fifteen years later, you reenacted that scene from "Swingers" for a FoxSports.com web video. Whose idea was that?

JR: It was actually FOX Sports' [idea], for a show where they did sports-related skits. I was coming in to FOX Studios, so they planned a little skit where I would reenact the whole scene. Like I said, so many people bring that movie up, bring that game up, it such a pop culture movie. I thought it was the greatest thing.

SB: Several video game magazines and websites have ranked the greatest athletes in sports video games —

JR: Like Bo Jackson.

SB: Bo Jackson from "Tecmo Bowl," Mike Tyson from "Punch Out!" and Jeremy Roenick from "NHL '94" are considered three of the best video game characters ever. That's some pretty good company to be in.

JR: It was pretty cool. Like I said, it's my claim to fame nowadays. You know, you get to hang onto some things over the years, and that's one thing I hang onto.

SB: You were also the athlete pictured on the cover of the video game "NHL 2K3", and the 2004 follow-up, "ESPN NHL Hockey." What does

it feel like to be on a video game cover?

JR: It's a tremendous honor, because it hits so many different demographics of people. Some hockey fans, some not. Different age groups. To have your face plastered on video games sold all over the world, it's one of the biggest honors you can get in all of gaming. Even as an athlete, they depict you as a player that is worthy of the recognizability of the way the game is played. You know, the older I get, the more recognizable hockey players are today. So, I think that helps with everything too. I mean, my television work [as a commentator for NBC] doesn't hurt, but still, it helps [me] make a connection with fans and people all over the world.

SB: Did any of your Flyers teammates tease you when you were on the cover of either game?

JR: They tried to, but I looked too good, so they couldn't say anything.

SB: Last question: suppose that there is a three-way battle for the puck between Jeremy Roenick from "NHL '94," Super Mario and Sonic the Hedgehog. What happens?

JR: Super Mario would kick all our [butts].

Sal J. Barry is the webmaster of the hockey card website PuckJunk.com. He also writes for The Hockey News, Chicago Side Sports and The Hockey Noob (ChicagoNow.com/Hockey-Noob). He still plays NHL '94 on his old Super Nintendo, too. Contact him at sjb@puckjunk.com

