

the
Evolving
Business *of*
Making
and **Painting**
GOALLIE
MASKS



Custom-made models not just for NHLers

By Kevin Woodley

Randy Hall is like many recreational goaltenders in Ontario. The 43-year-old salesman plays mostly in adult leagues, with the odd senior league and pickup game thrown in for good measure.

The mask he wears, however, is anything but that of your average beer leaguer. In fact, Hall's paint job puts a few NHL lids to shame.

The skeleton of Hall's mask – a stylish tribute to his favorite band, Rush – is a mid-level Ricochet model from Sportmask and the heart is courtesy of a highly detailed paint job by artist Steve Nash of Eyecandyair. The mask runs around \$500, says Hall, while the paint job can be upwards of \$1,000. Hall should know. It's the second one Nash has painted for him – in just the past four years.

"My previous one was a collage of personal things and I wanted to do something to bump it up a level, so I came up with the Rush mask," said Hall, a fan of the band since he was 14.



It's not cheap to look the part. Custom-made masks can run you around \$1,500.

“I had my first one for about two years and now I’ve had this one for about two years as well, so now I’m contemplating another idea to throw at Steve for my next mask.”

Don’t think the new art will take shape on the same canvas – portrait masks are rarely painted over. So even though Hall’s mask has plenty of puck-stopping life left, it will soon take its place in his credenza alongside its predecessor, which featured a portrait of Johnny Bower, the Toucan from the Guinness beer ads and, on the back plate, a nice painting of a pub from the Irish town where his wife was born.

That means Hall will need another new mask for his new paint. For those keeping score at home, that’s about \$4,500 in less than six years. But it’s not as uncommon as some people might think.

“We’re booking for February in late August, so there’s definitely been a huge increase of people coming for custom mask painting. And it’s from all different age groups,” said Stephanie Pasquariello, who has run the business end of Ontario-based Eyecandyair for her painter-husband Steve Nash over the past 10 years. “Our youngest customer is probably nine years old, right up to guys in their sixties.”

Figuring out why so many are so willing to spend big bucks on stylish lids is easy. Many NHL goaltenders will tell you they started playing the position because of cool equipment and even cooler masks. Benefits include a more pleasant kind of crease crashing – it’s nice to have opposing players skating up to ask what’s on your head rather than trying to take it off – but for goalies such as Hall, who started playing 35 years ago, it’s also about finally having choices.

“There wasn’t any option back then. You had the old Cooper SK 2000 and the player’s cage,” said Hall of the setup still used by Stanley Cup winner Chris Osgood. “And now you can go to someone like Steve and just say, ‘here’s my idea,

run with it,' and the difference in the details from then to now is night and day, it's unbelievable."

The product range has never been broader, or more easily available.

"A kid can come home from school now, plop down in front of the computer for two hours, and look at 15 different retail stores and different painters and mask makers from all across the world," said Joe Messina, co-owner of Michigan-based Masked Marvel Goalie Helmets.

Figuring out why weekend warriors spend so much on masks is one thing, but sorting through the modern mask industry and how more than a dozen companies currently making more than 50 models fit into it is tougher.

Masks range from a couple hundred dollars to more than \$1,000, with weight and material – from injected plastic to hand-laid layers of fiberglass, carbon fiber and Kevlar – the biggest factor in price. Even the foam inside varies greatly, affecting price, fit and feel.

The biggest companies, such as Itech and Eddy Masks, offer a wide range of options: everything from cheaper plastic-injected youth and senior models, to more expensive Kevlar-layered pro versions available at retail, to the totally customized, one-off masks built from the mold of a goalie's face. Others like Masked Marvel and the Warwick Mask Company target higher-end goalies in need of hard-shot protection.

The good news is the wide range of products makes it easier to find one to properly fit any head, the most important factor in a mask.

"It's all about the fit, and it is crucial that people understand we don't change sizes with the foam, we change it with the shell," said Eddy Schulz, who started Eddy Masks in 1989 and now offers nine models, some with as many as five size ranges. "If it doesn't fit right and you put more padding in it and turn your head and get hit by a hard shot, you're going to get your ear blown out, and that's a fact."

So despite the improving selection, not every mask is safe for every level of play, even if there's an official certification sticker (CSA in Canada, HECC the United States and CE in Europe) on the back plate.

The irony is that while these certifications are necessary for use in most minor hockey organizations, most custom and pro models aren't certified. In many cases it's because of the non-certifiable "cat eye" cage preferred by most pros despite eye openings that a stick blade can squeeze through under a perfect storm of angles and conditions (like the errant Sidney Crosby blade that got inside Rick DiPietro's cage last season). But it can also be because once a company obtains certification for a specific helmet they aren't supposed to alter it in any way – not even by building up the foam to better fit a specific face. So custom helmets molded to individual faces require individual certifications.

In other words, many of the \$1,000 NHL masks stopping 100-mile-per-hour slapshots aren't permitted in minor hockey. But there's



'With the war in Iraq material costs have quadrupled.'



Getting a proper fit is always the No. 1 priority with a mask.

nothing to stop youth-league players from using a lower-level certified mask purchased at the local sporting goods store for a couple hundred dollars.

"My masks were just tested by the NHL and they tested at 105 miles an hour," said Gary Warwick, who has been in the industry for 40 years. "There's not a professional player out there who would walk into a store and buy a less-expensive, less-protective mask product off the shelf."

That's not to say plastic masks don't have their place – they go through the same certification, facing 85 mile-per-hour shots and stringent drop tests – but the difference between them and a Kevlar reinforced model isn't just about puck impact. Cheaper plastic masks usually flex more between the ears, which can get dangerous as crease contact increases.

"Heaven forbid you get into a goal-mouth collision and someone falls on you," Messina said. "They're so flexible it's like squashing a grape."

For those without the advertising reach or budget of a big company like Itech, certification is an important part of the long-term marketing model because it allows them into the youth and college markets, where brand loyalty is built. But certification, which can cost up to \$10,000, and marketing are only two of many dilemmas for modern mask makers.

Liability insurance costs Eddy Masks \$50,000 a year, though proof of insurance is no longer required for certification, and NHL licensing fees will soon surpass that. The mask companies also face rising shipping and

material costs, all while trying to build a wider variety of safer masks at competitive prices.

"With this war (in Iraq) our material costs have quadrupled because we use really high-end, military-use-only material," Messina said.

Setting yourself apart from so many others is another challenge.

In addition to working with "factory certified" painters to streamline custom-paint work, some companies such as Eddy, Sportmask and Olie have taken to offering a growing list of pre-designed paint options both off the rack at retail or through special orders, cutting both the time and cost of obtaining a unique look. Even at entry-level prices, Itech combined with Swedish-based DaveArt (the mask-painting leader) to offer paint and decals with all kinds of creatures, characters and stylish designs, including a Marvel Comics superhero line.

Having cage options can also be important since different-shaped faces have different sightlines, and Warwick and Masked Marvel also try to set themselves apart by offering Titanium cages.

But above all else, said Messina, customer service is key to standing out and building a strong reputation, especially in an industry where word of mouth, whether in the dressing room or on Internet discussion groups, means everything.

"Always go the extra mile because you might not get a second chance with that person," Messina added. "If you don't, they might go somewhere else the next day, if not in the next hour." **PHOTO**