

NHL99: Pavel Datsyuk, the 'Magic Man,' played like a thief and an artist



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Welcome to [NHL](#)99, The Athletic's countdown of [the best 100 players in modern NHL history](#). We're ranking 100 players but calling it 99 because we all know who's No. 1 — it's the 99 spots behind No. 99 we have to figure out. Every Monday through Saturday until February we'll unveil new members of the list.



John Modzelewski answered a call from an unknown number, which he normally doesn't do, and when he does he almost always regrets it. But this one was different. Modzelewski was walking through his neighborhood in Gilbert, Ariz., when four syllables from a cold-calling sportswriter — *Pa-vel Dat-syuk* — suddenly snapped him back to the luckiest day of his life.

“Nov. 8, 2001,” Modzelewski said, reciting the date from memory. “The day before my 23rd birthday. Holy cow, that was a long time ago.”

An art student at Arizona State at the time, Modzelewski played in a weekly pickup hockey league at the Coyotes' practice facility in Scottsdale. He arrived at the rink extra early that day to put on his goalie gear and watch the [Red Wings](#), his favorite team, wrap up their morning skate. Dominik Hasek had just left the ice when Modzelewski made his way rinkside. As associate coach Barry Smith skated past, Modzelewski summoned every ounce of courage in his 6-foot-7 frame, tapped on the glass and asked if the skaters needed a substitute goalie. Smith shook his head. A minute later, Modzelewski tried again. Smith relented.

“I still can't believe I talked my way into that,” Modzelewski said.

He remembers taking his place between the pipes as the star-studded Red Wings roster lined up along the blue line and ripped shots his way. But it was when players started to peel off, one by one, for breakaways that Modzelewski first noticed the wispy rookie with the magician's touch with the puck.

Pavel Datsyuk was only a month and a goal into his [NHL](#) career. He was almost anonymous, just a 23-year-old Russian kid making a case for more ice time alongside the 10 future Hockey Hall of Famers on one of the most talented teams in NHL history, yet in practices he'd shown flashes of the brilliant two-way center he'd become: A thief on one end of the ice, an artist on the other. Datsyuk comes in at No. 43 on our list of the greatest NHL players of the modern era.

In Datsyuk's decorated NHL career, Modzelewski may have been the first goalie not wearing a Red Wings jersey (it was, in his case, a blue Play It

Again Sports sweater) to know the hopelessness and humiliation of facing Datsyuk one on one. Marty Turco, Pekka Rinne and Antti Niemi would [come to understand it](#), too. Each time Datsyuk glided in alone on Modzelewski, he had a new trick to try. He didn't use the same move twice. He didn't miss.

"I think maybe I stopped one, and it was dumb luck," said Modzelewski, who still has a puck from that practice. Datsyuk's stickhandling was a blur. "It was masterful."

European scout Hakan Andersson flew to Moscow in the winter of 1997 looking for the Red Wings' next great Russian, not Datsyuk. Andersson was there to see defenseman Dmitri Kalinin but found himself distracted by the Dynamo Yekaterinburg center giving Kalinin fits. Datsyuk was old and undersized, a 19-year-old already passed over in two NHL Drafts and still playing hockey in his home city 1,000 miles from Moscow.

The hands that would one day make Datsyuk the "Magic Man" had been honed on the rink outside his family's flat in Yekaterinburg (formerly Sverdlovsk), where Datsyuk skated for hours with friends in freezing temperatures. Because they used only one puck, he learned to keep possession for as long as he could. Because he feared breaking his stick, he rarely shot. Because he had only figure skates at first, he was fleet and light on his feet.

When Vladimir Krikunov, a longtime Russian player and coach, met Datsyuk, he seemed nothing like a hockey player. He was quiet and shy. His gait [reminded Krikunov of](#) "a pelican on a walk." Then he saw Datsyuk on a soccer pitch in the summer, and an ice sheet later, and was stunned to see him moving so smoothly, playing with a beautiful blend of vision, creativity and patience.

"It was evident that he was an extremely talented player," [Krikunov said](#).

The 1998 NHL Draft came less than two weeks after the Red Wings won the Stanley Cup for a second consecutive season. Datsyuk knew the names on that roster, having followed the Russian Five closely

throughout the 1990s, and knew, despite dreaming of one day being in the NHL, his didn't belong among them.

Datsyuk was unaware that Andersson was urging Red Wings general manager Ken Holland to draft him. Andersson had seen Datsyuk play twice. He tried a third time, but a canceled flight left him and another NHL scout stranded. Since Andersson believed he'd been the only NHL scout to see Datsyuk in a game, Holland pressed his luck and waited. The third round ticked by, then the fourth, then the fifth. Late in the sixth round, at pick No. 171, Holland pounced.

In Yekaterinburg, a friend told Datsyuk he'd just been drafted by Detroit.

"Nice joke," Datsyuk replied.

He didn't believe it until he read the newspaper the next morning.

There's a story a Red Wings scout once told Dan Milstein, Datsyuk's close friend and agent, about Datsyuk's earliest days with Detroit. At Datsyuk's first rookie camp in Traverse City, Mich., down a goal in the last minute of a scrimmage, assistant coach Dave Lewis was behind the bench barking orders as music blared. The scout was beside Lewis ready to relay the instructions in Russian. The whistle blew. Players dispersed. Datsyuk turned to the scout and, instead of asking for a translation, asked, "What was the song that was playing?"

"That, in a nutshell, is Pavel," Milstein said.

Despite his limited grasp of English, Datsyuk's humor was as much his signature as his hands. As a rookie in the 2001-02 season, he leaned on Sergei Fedorov, Maxim Kuznetsov and Igor Larionov to translate and help him navigate a new country. Kuznetsov told the Detroit Free Press that Datsyuk would phone him from a sidewalk in downtown Detroit, spell the street names (because he couldn't pronounce them) and say, "Should I be here? Where do I turn?" At the grocery store, he bought what he recognized. Eggs were eggs. Pizza was pizza.

Early in the season, Datsyuk centered the “3-D Line” between Boyd Devereaux and Mathieu Dandenault. Devereaux had a habit of constantly calling for the puck. Datsyuk told him to cut it out; he’d find him. He always did.

Datsyuk was a highlight waiting to happen. Even his misses were breathtaking. He was unafraid of contact but elusive enough to elude it. Nicklas Lidstrom told reporters one day that he’d tell Datsyuk before drills in practice, “Don’t embarrass me too much.” Two months into Datsyuk’s NHL career, head coach Scotty Bowman already was calling him the most exciting player on the team.

Bowman moved Brett Hull to Datsyuk’s right wing, opposite Devereaux, and formed the famous line Hull nicknamed “Two Kids and a Goat.” Teammates joked the only reason that line worked was because Datsyuk didn’t know enough English to be bothered by all of Hull’s yapping. [Holland put it](#) more judiciously: “Boyd brought the legs, Pavel was the brains and Brett was the finisher.”

“The communication early was mostly done through facial expressions,” Hull said. “He could tell when we’d come to the bench and I’d be frustrated. He’d say, ‘Brett mad?’ I’d tell him, ‘Damn rights I am, but not at you.’ I could never get mad at the kid. He was so good in every facet of the game.”

The only issue Hull ran into was that, at times, Datsyuk would beat three defenders in the corner, then circle back and try to beat them again. Hull would be sitting alone in the slot, pleading for the puck. “He didn’t realize that we could score every shift,” Hull said, laughing. “He was sometimes more into embarrassing guys.”

Datsyuk scored 11 goals in his rookie season and three more in the Red Wings’ 2002 Stanley Cup run. A few days before it was through, before he carried the Cup around the Joe Louis Arena ice, a Free Press reporter stood in front of Datsyuk’s stall in the Red Wings dressing room, with Kuznetsov there to translate, and asked Datsyuk what he believed his future would hold.

“He wants to win Stanley Cup this year and then another 10 times,” Kuznetsov said.

Datsyuk laughed at himself and added something else.

“He said OK, he doesn’t know about 10,” Kuznetsov said. “But 15 for sure.”

In the fall of 2009, a few months after Datsyuk’s third trip to the Stanley Cup Final, Trevor Thompson, the on-air reporter for Fox Sports Detroit (now Bally Sports Network), asked him to play a game of keep-away. Datsyuk said sure. He rarely gave extended interviews — he liked to tell reporters to ask again in five years and see if his English was better by then — but he couldn’t resist a challenge. So, with cameras rolling after practice one day, they began.



https://youtu.be/EX_gEraVw3M

"I get to start with puck," Thompson said at the top, "so at least I get to touch it."

Datsyuk immediately picked his pocket. And that's when Thompson discovered that maybe the only time one feels more hopeless and humiliated than trying to stop Datsyuk on a breakaway, is trying to separate him from a puck.

"He took it," Thompson said, "and I never got it back."

For 50 seconds, Datsyuk deked and dangled, evading Thompson with ease. It made for one of the most memorable clips of a career rife with highlight-reel moments. Truth be told, Datsyuk had faced stiffer competition. He had legendary post-practice games of keep-away with Hall of Fame teammates, from Chris Chelios ("It always ended with Chelly slashing Pavel's stick in half," Hull recalled) to Marián Hossa. Thompson had played hockey since he was 4, but he couldn't keep up. He chased, shoved and laughed until he was gassed.

"That is the most fun I've ever had on ice," Thompson said. "People still bring it up every week. I laugh whenever they talk about how he made me look crazy. I say, 'Have you ever watched what he did against the [Blues](#) and [Predators](#) Ds in the corner? He'd have them running into each other. He'd have them going the wrong way when he's coming around the back of the net.'

"The things he could do on the ice are second to none. If he was between you and where you wanted the puck to go, it wasn't going to get there. He would knock it down. He'd come up and swipe it from behind you."

Throughout his 14 seasons in Detroit, Datsyuk was never known as the NHL's greatest scorer, but he was indisputably one of its most skilled and creative playmakers. His resume included four Lady Byng trophies, three Selke trophies and two Stanley Cup titles. In a [2012 player poll](#), Datsyuk was voted the league's smartest player; the cleanest player; the most difficult to stop; the most difficult to play against; and the hardest to take the puck from.

“It seems like you’re never really playing against him,” defenseman Hal Gill [told Sports Illustrated](#), “you’re playing against his shadow.”

In Detroit, Datsyuk never had the spotlight and never wanted it.

“In a game he just did his thing, his magic,” Hossa said. “And after the game, he just disappeared.”

Away from the arena, Datsyuk was happiest crawling on the floor with his kids. Milstein said one reason the two of them got along so well, other than the fact their daughters were born two weeks apart in 2002, was that they never talked about hockey. Datsyuk read constantly, loved action movies and decompressed with tennis. His favorite dinner spot was Bacco Ristorante, an Italian eatery in Southfield, Mich., directly next door to his tennis club. Datsyuk would park at the tennis club and walk over to the restaurant — to get in some extra steps, he’d always tell Milstein, but also to save a few bucks on valet parking.

Following the 2004-05 lockout, Datsyuk averaged better than a point per game across the next 10 NHL seasons before age and injuries started slowing him. In March 2015, he was 36 and in the first year of a three-year, \$22.5 million contract when he blocked a puck and felt his right ankle buckle. Datsyuk missed eight games but returned, in pain, for the playoffs. He went home to Yekaterinburg for the offseason and tried to rest, but after a fishing trip in the first week of July, he phoned Milstein and said, “Something is not right.”

The Red Wings flew Datsyuk to Charlotte, N.C., to meet with orthopedic surgeon Dr. Robert Anderson. The night before that appointment, as Datsyuk and Milstein were at dinner, Holland texted to tell them he was planning to draft a Russian, Yevgeni Svechnikov, in the first round the following day. “Haven’t you had enough of them?” Milstein joked. He remembers Holland writing back: “Russians have kept me in business since 1997!”

Since MRIs had shown no structural damage to the ankle, Dr. Anderson suggested a minor procedure to clean up the area — 45 minutes tops. The surgery took almost five hours. Datsyuk had two ruptured tendons.

“Nobody had any idea,” Milstein said. Datsyuk didn’t want anyone feeling sorry for him. As soon as the anesthesia wore off, he was asking for his phone. He wanted to text Svechnikov, to congratulate him and to welcome him to Detroit.

Pavel Datsyuk gets fist bumps after scoring a shootout goal in 2011. (Bruce Kluckhohn / NHLI via Getty Images)



Datsyuk’s Red Wings career ended before that last contract did.

During the 2015-16 season, he scored his 300th goal and became just the fifth Russian to surpass the 900-point plateau. He helped Detroit stretch its playoff appearance streak to 25 seasons. But, he felt, it was time to go home. Datsyuk had lost his mother, Galina, when he was 16, and his father, Valery, a few years later. He wanted to play out the rest of his career in Russia, near his family.

“I’m not thinking about my ankle,” Datsyuk told Detroit reporters when he announced his decision June 18, 2016. “I’m thinking about my heart.”

Datsyuk played three seasons in Saint Petersburg, winning the Gagarin Cup in his first year back in the KHL, and then fulfilled a promise to his

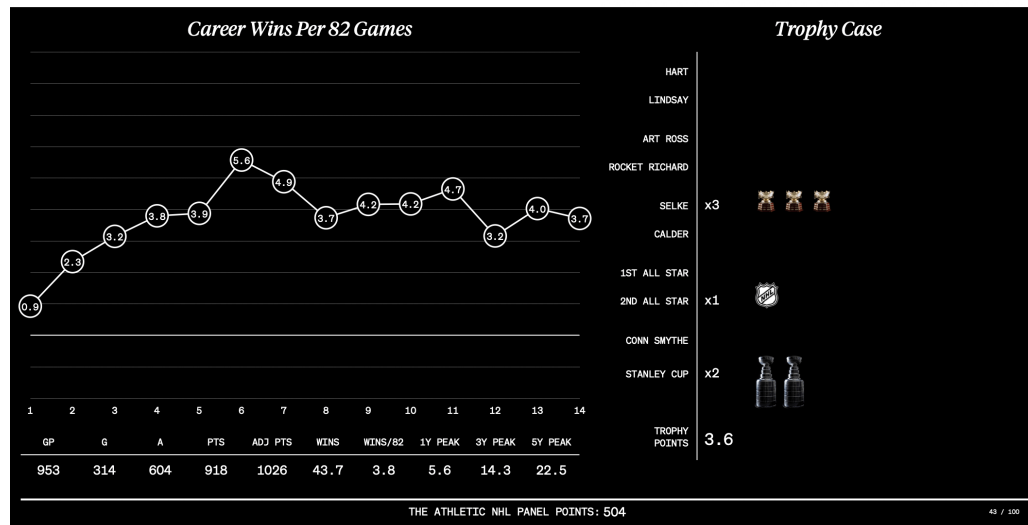
home city by playing the last two years of his career in Yekaterinburg. Datsyuk hung up his skates earlier this year and transitioned to a player development role with Avtomobilist Yekaterinburg. He didn't want a big title. He wanted to be out of the spotlight, working with young players as they chased their NHL dreams.

Aboard "Red Bird III," the plane shared by the Red Wings and Detroit Tigers, there's a sticker depicting the Holy Trinity stuck on the wall beside one seat. Datsyuk, a Russian Orthodox Christian, placed it there as a prayer for safety during flight. Until the plane is replaced, the sticker remains. Whenever he sees a new Red Wings player in that seat, Thompson, the TV reporter, will point out the sticker to them and say, "The great Pavel Datsyuk used to sit in that seat."

(Top photo: Len Redkoles / Getty Images)

Pavel Datsyuk

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Not everyone has appreciated Pavel properly. I know many people who refuse to recognize the brilliance of those Detroit teams just because of all the Europeans on them. I may never give Ovechkin any affection, but that is not because he is a Russian, but rather because—beyond being rather one-dimensional with a "dirty" streak—he is the epitome of a jerk, with a particularly obnoxious Russian twist. Pavel has always epitomized "class" and everything good that Ovechkin is not. TJB