

★ Mark **MESSIER** | 45 | center

If you ask Mark Messier what distinguished him as a player over his twenty-five-year NHL career, you'll get a true Captain's answer: "Winning championships." Messier won five of them—with and without the Great One—for his hometown Edmonton Oilers between 1984 and 1990. At which point, he packed it up and headed east. And as the stubble-headed, bug-eyed, messianic leader of the New York Rangers, Messier hoisted Lord Stanley's Cup a sixth time, in 1994, forever erasing the notion that he was just Gretzky's sidekick, Scottie Pippen on skates. On the ice, he lifted a snakebit franchise onto his back and carried it across the finish line. Off the ice, he charmed the living crap out of the five boroughs. And he made it all look easy, exuding the kind of charisma and gravitas usually expressed not by balding Canadian athletes but by statesmen. "I was comfortable with the move to New York," he says. "I had come off five Cups in seven years with the Oilers. I felt I could bring some of that to the city." Though Messier is the NHL's second all-time leading scorer, he's incapable of talking about individual achievements. Press him to describe his single greatest moment as a player and you can practically hear him wince. "There's a feeling from the '94 championship that still exists in the city today," he admits. "People still come up to me and say thank you." In New York, that's no small thing. —**HOWIE KAHN**

