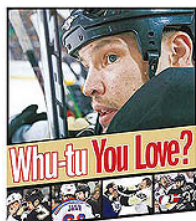


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## Jarkko Ruutu: A pest worth loving

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 By Robert Dvorchak, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



If he's on your team, you can't help but love Jarkko Ruutu and his infectious energy (not to mention his rhythmic last name). But if he's on the other side, he's a dirty, no-good, villainous pest. There is no middle ground.

Mark Beall and Kurtis Slagle, who have been friends since they attended grade school together in the Harrisburg area, did some pre-game shopping for a specific item at Pens Station before attending a recent playoff game at Mellon Arena.

Jerseys bearing the names and numbers of such stars as Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and Marc-Andre Fleury are available in sports stores everywhere, but they were interested in something from someone who opponents love to hate -- Jarkko Ruutu, cult figure.

"You have to come to Pittsburgh to get a Ruutu," said Beall, 25, holding a freshly bought T-shirt adorned with Ruutu's name and No. 37. "Why him? He's got all kinds of energy and personality."

Slagle, who became a Penguins fan while attending the University of Pittsburgh, wanted to purchase the player's authentic NHL jersey, but it was sold out.

"He's a big hitter. It's part of playing the sport. He fits in with Pittsburgh," said Slagle, a Marine who is shipping out for a combat tour in Afghanistan.

Inside Mellon Arena that night, Ruutu put on a show of his handiwork after three unanswered goals by the Rangers silenced the audience. In one remarkable shift, Ruutu gestured with his stick blade to get the attention of defenseman Michal Rozsival in the faceoff circle, and shortly thereafter, he re-energized his team with a goal that caromed in off Rozsival's skate.

In what has become a signature ritual, the crowd chimed in with public-address announcer John Barbaro when he called the name that resonates around the old dome like some phantom of the opera.

"Not all hockey names flow that easily. His name lends itself to embellishment. Lately, I feel like I'm saying it a lot," Barbaro said.

At other times, the chant erupts without prompting.

"The fans caught on. They love him," Barbaro said. "Even when he makes a hit, there's a spontaneous chant of Rooooo-toooooo."

How a pest, agitator, pot-stirring role player with a notorious reputation captures the fancy of hometown fans is just one of many subplots in the playoffs, but as the saying goes, the Cup changes everything.

Opponents disdain him the way they loathe mosquito bites or jock itch -- irritants that must be dealt with and get worse when scratched. In the blogosphere, anonymous postings rant about his villainy even as Web surfers are drawn to his hits and fights on YouTube, including his run at Jaromir Jagr in the 2006 Olympics.

There's no middle ground with Ruutu, whose facial scars are a road map of his style. If he's wearing the home sweater, he's cheered. For those on the other side, he's a dirty fiend and cheap-shot artist. Call it selective outrage.

In a recent Sports Illustrated poll of NHL players, Ruutu tied for third in the rankings of dirtiest players, although Philadelphia's Daniel Briere would put him at the top of that list. Ruutu placed behind the Rangers' Sean Avery and Anaheim's Chris Pronger, and even with Chris Simon, who was suspended for 30 games this season for using his skate like a meat cleaver on Ruutu's leg.

His reputation hardly upsets him, though. If he gets under someone's skin with antics, gestures, insults or heavy checks, he succeeds because the hatred he generates results in wasted energy in those looking for retribution.

"I like it," he said with a grin. "People can call me what they want. I probably get penalties called on me more often because of my reputation. But players on the other team have to keep their head up and be aware when I'm in the game. I've never drawn a line on what I can and can't do. I'll do whatever it takes to win."

Whatever it takes? Not only was that the slogan of Chuck Noll's dynasty, the NHL Hall of Fame has more than one honoree who had a similar mind-set in, say, leveling two-handers across an opponent's ankle in the name of winning. And for all the talent of the Mario Lemieux era, the Penguins didn't win a Stanley Cup until they acquired Ulf Samuelsson, perhaps the most-hated man in Boston for a knee-on-knee hit to Cam Neeley.

Savagery is as much a part of hockey as highlight-reel goals and spectacular saves, although it's supposed to be regulated by the referees. Ruutu is not the only player who plays on that edge.

Yet for a third- or fourth-line player whose penalty minutes (138) far exceed his regular season output (6 goals, 10 assists), Ruutu has been key in some of the most pivotal points of the season. Coincidence? His fans think not.

When the team was struggling in November, Ruutu's shootout goal beat the Ottawa Senators, who twice blew a two-goal lead. It was the kind of win that turns a season around.

In January, Ruutu slugged it out with Toronto tough guy Darcy Tucker, landing an unanswered series of punches.

In March, just days after he lost his stick and soccer-kicked the puck to lead a rush against the Rangers, he had his lip and mouth gashed open after scoring a goal against the Lightning. A stitching needle was required to close the wound, sort of like Ruutu voodoo. "I want to win hockey games. I don't care what I look like," he said at the time.

In the first round of the playoffs, Ruutu scored the winning goal that completed a sweep of the Senators.

And Ruutu jump-started his team against the Rangers.

But followers of the Penguins aren't the first to climb aboard the Ruutu train. In his six years in Vancouver, he inspired a song composed by long-time fan Heavy Eric Holmquist, a professional lumberjack, Canadian log-rolling champion and Elvis Presley impersonator.

"He's a live wire out there. He's a bit of a side show when he's on the ice, but he knows how to play the game. He knows when to cut out the funny stuff. He just puts his hard hat on and grinds away," Holmquist said.

The song is downloadable at [www.heavyeric.com](http://www.heavyeric.com), although a donation to a charity is requested. The opening line is Ruutu, Ruutu, rocks 'em like U2. One verse goes like this:

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*Jarkko Ruutu's a feisty Finn.*

*He's always getting under someone's skin.*

*He's not scared to throw open ice hits.*

*And he's not afraid to drop his mitts.*

•

One fan felt such a void when Ruutu came to Pittsburgh via free agency that he posted the three-word lament "I miss Ruutu" on a Canucks' message board.

Asked what triggered the sentiment, Russel Barden said: "Whenever the Canucks were playing poorly, Ruutu would go out and either make a huge hit or take the puck and drive straight to the net as hard as he could, no matter what might happen to him personally. He was always one player who could get the average fan into the game. He is a favorite on the team he plays on because he is one of the best in the league as a 'pest.' Teams hate playing against him."

Penguins fans can relate.

At a recent home game, Erica Sharer of Fombell was on her way to watch the action on the outdoor TV. She was decked out in black and gold beads and Penguins knee socks, and from her Penguins tote bag, she had a Penguins glove with the No. 1 finger extended. Completing the ensemble was her authentic Ruutu jersey.

"He's been my favorite player," she said. "I like his whole attitude. He's not just good at getting under people's skin. He's scored some big goals. What's not to like?"

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Images of Jarkko Ruutu were taken by the Post-Gazette's Peter Diana, Getty Images and The Associated Press.

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