

# Sports Illustrated

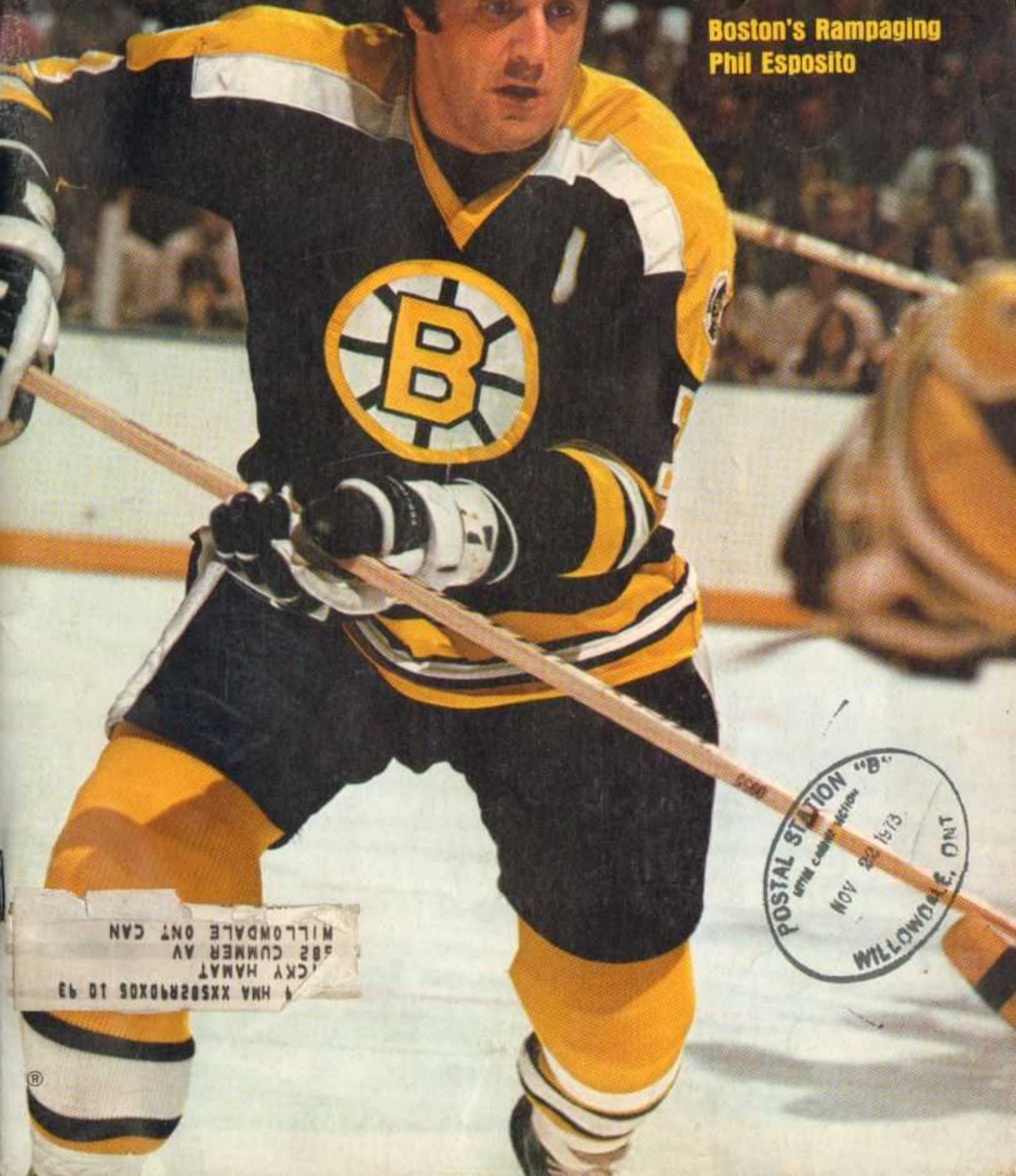
NOVEMBER 19, 1973

50 CENTS

HOCKEY

HEATS UP

Boston's Rampaging  
Phil Esposito



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# "Know what I'm doing?"



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## Next week

COLLEGE BASKETBALL jumps into a new season, bringing with it the also-ran's eternal hope: maybe this is the year. Not likely. Bill Walton and UCLA still top the Top 20. But if there is an upset, writes Curry Kirkpatrick, it should come from the rough Atlantic Coast Conference, in particular from North Carolina State and its marvelous David Thompson, who are riding a streak of their own. There are scouting reports on the best of the rest, including potent little Assumption College, and, in color, Walton in action and a portfolio of snakepits where even UCLA would shudder. Plus all regular features and the usual full range of other sports.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARL IWASAKI

## HIGH-JUMPING TO A CONCLUSION

*He shot his Sky-Cycle into the air and it fell to earth there—down in the Snake River instead of on the other side of the canyon. Well, so much for test runs; next time daredevil Evel Knievel will be aboard* **by DAN LEVIN**

CONTINUED

It all happened so fast. There was Evel Knievel, a messianic glare in his eyes, standing atop the mound of earth near the rim of a yawning canyon. Around him the landscape was almost lunar in its bleakness. Knievel was alternately waving and screaming. "Get the cameras ready!" And then, "Ten, nine, eight. . . ." At the end of his countdown the gleaming wheeled missile he calls a Sky-Cycle—13 feet of metal painted red, white and blue—blasted upward and out toward the far canyon wall. Then it began falling, spinning and twirling, a captive of the wind, a tumbling speck against the green ribbon of river 500 feet below. And finally there was a silent splash, followed seconds later by its echo up the canyon walls.

Not far away, alone in a field, Evel Knievel's mother stood weeping. And nearby his 4-year-old nephew Dustin, bewildered, looked down at the river, repeating, "My Uncle Bobby's there, my Uncle Bobby's down there."

"No he isn't," someone said, pointing to where Uncle Bobby stood smiling. For strangely enough, Robert Evel Knievel was exultant. "It was a fantastic success," he said. "The launching track worked just right." But for what was billed as the dress rehearsal of a manned canyon crossing, the wet conclusion seemed inescapably ominous. Had this been the real thing, perhaps the world's greatest living testimonial to hoopla and the skills of orthopedic surgery would now be no more.

Alongside the field three miles from the center of Twin Falls, Idaho the sign looms high and wide. It displays a drawing of a man on a motorcycle, both entwined in the coils of a mammoth snake, its jaws wide, fangs menacing, about to strike at the cyclist's head. On the crash helmet is the name Evel, and below the drawing are the words SNAKE RIVER CANYON JUMP SITE. But it seems there must be some mistake. The country is almost featureless in all directions. A lumpy dirt road winds past a farmhouse and a chicken coop, then through a rocky pasture where cattle are grazing. A mile down the road is a row of cottonwood trees and, nearby, what might be an ancient pyramid with a flat top and a wide path up its front. Along the center of the path runs a slotted metal track.

From the pyramid base there is little

to be seen but trees and cows, but 250 feet up its side, from the top, the outlook is something else. Evel Knievel says, "The first time I took my wife up on the launching ramp she broke down and cried." From the top it looks like the end of the world.

Two hundred feet beyond the launching ramp everything ends. Absolutely everything. For the next quarter mile beyond, nothing moves but hawks and eagles and the magpies that nest in the canyon walls. Only dimly out there is the other side, where the Sky-Cycle is supposed to land after its flight.

Next July Knievel plans to jump the canyon on his cycle. He is bored now with years of bounding over fountains and across rows of cars and trucks. He has done all that. It is time for the ultimate challenge, he feels, and canyon jumping is an unborn art form. Besides, the much-shattered Knievel feels he has about used up all his bones. "I will take on the biggest competitor of them all—death," he says. "It will be the greatest sports event of all time."

A tendency to such hyperbole is part of Evel Knievel's special charm. He sees a projected paid audience of, say, 100,000 spread out along the canyon walls. He also sees a 90-minute special of live motocross racing, followed by the filmed highlights of his career on closed-circuit theater TV outlets across the land—all climaxed with the canyon jump in live color as the grand finale. Knievel says, "We're gonna sell a million closed-circuit tickets at \$15 each."

In Twin Falls Knievel's conversation was punctuated with key words: beer, hot dogs, candy, T shirts, posters, paperback autobiography, programs, ads, closed-circuit rights. . . . "I got to adding up what all this amounts to," he says, "and I figured \$25 million, of which I get more than half."

If Knievel is to spend any of that money, the performance of his Sky-Cycle will have to improve considerably. The Sky-Cycle that crashed was Model X-1, and it had been around for two years. Three years earlier Knievel had been denied permission to jump the Grand Canyon. His new site is on private land leased from the family of farmer Tim Qualls. And while five years did seem a long wait for last week's result, Knievel's claim of success was not unexpected. The goal of the testing was modest: to see if the Sky-Cycle would move smoothly up its steel

launching track, and that it had done. There also was some concern that once launched it would break apart, and it had not.

The takeoff track, and the dirt ramp upon which it rested, were slanted skyward at a 22° angle for the test. But the track will now be tilted to 56°, "almost straight up and down," as Knievel puts it, for his canyon jump. This will give him a higher trajectory, rather like that of a V-2 rocket across the English Channel—and more time for his parachute to open in case he has to bail out.

Knievel never expected old X-1 and its estimated 1,300 pounds of thrust to reach the other side. Getting all the way across the canyon is a job for one of two new X-2s, capable, he says, of 5,000 pounds of thrust. The X-2 will exceed 200 mph before reaching the end of the 108-foot runway, which means that Knievel will be squeezed by a force of some four Gs at top acceleration. The steepest, fastest drop on any roller coaster would not be more than two Gs, he says. "If it comes to an abrupt halt at that speed, it will jerk my insides right out my mouth."

The old X-1 had hardly hit the water when Knievel said, "I may go all the way to those power lines," pointing to some barely visible poles at least a mile beyond the canyon's far rim.

If Knievel makes the jump—and survives—much credit will be due his head project engineer, rocket expert Robert C. Truax. Knievel says of Truax, "I was told by Jim Lovell that he was the best rocket man in the world." Not a bad reference. "Well," says Truax, "I practically founded NASA." He says he told Knievel, "If you make it I want a \$10,000 bonus. And if you don't I get nothing, but you get a headstone." Knievel raised the figure to \$25,000. He would be wise to raise it every day until the jump.

A reasonable person who stands at the edge of Snake River Canyon must conclude that there is no way for Knievel to survive what he has planned. He does have a drag chute that he will release behind the cycle when it starts to descend—and a shock absorber in the nose—but even at that, Truax says the chances for a safe landing would be slim. Knievel may have more raw courage than any man alive, and he knows motorcycles, but the Sky-Cycle no more resembles a motorcycle than a Saturn rocket does a DC-10. The Sky-Cycle does have wheels,

*continued*

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## HIGH JUMP *continued*

but that is where the similarity ends. It is fired from its ramp like a rocket. There are no controls—no steering, no accelerator, just handlebars to hold on to—and Knievel will be at the mercy of a steam-powered flying object. *Steam?* Robert Truax says, "Most of the ships in the U.S. Navy are powered by steam. It is the most reliable form of power because there is no ignition."

But that was all that Truax would say about steam, or about anything without Knievel's permission. And Knievel, when asked about the model X-2 Sky-Cycle, said, "It's classified information. When I bring it here it'll be under armed guard, just like a missile being hauled across the U.S."

Knievel seems convinced that the world is waiting on his every move. The night before the test jump he said he "called 200 publishers across the country" to tell them about it. "I didn't want to hurt their feelings," he said, "but now it's too late for them to come. I've got too much wrapped up in this thing to have it ruined by the wrong kind of publicity." And he spoke of a "tremendous fight" he'd had with the networks. "No TV people allowed," he kept saying. "If I see a TV camera I'll throw the guy right off the edge of the canyon."

A month before the Sky-Cycle test, while jumping over 13 cars and trucks at the Wisconsin International Raceway, Knievel bruised his back and kidneys and broke his left hand. The throttle on his motorcycle had come off in midair; nothing like that had ever happened to him before, he said, and at Twin Falls there were moments when he held his head in hands that looked like those of an oldtime baseball catcher. "Yes," Linda Knievel said, "sometimes he does have pain."

The Sky-Cycle was at the bottom of the Snake River now, and Evel Knievel said, "When I go up on that ramp and look back at my wife and Kelly and Robbie and Tracy, my kids, my mother and dad and grandparents, and when I think of my Ferraris, my Caddies, my airplanes, my \$200,000 home, my businesses, and then I look out at that canyon and realize I have to go across it and maybe lose it all, well. . . . But I've gotta jump that canyon because I gave my word. And just before I hit that canyon wall I'll spit at that son of a gun. That's the way I want to go." **END**



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