

PLASTIC SURGERY

BY JAN HUBBARD

Sports at its best brings out the kid in us, but in the case of Joe Ingraffia, having a childlike hobby has fed a passion and created profit.

While it might be tempting to examine Ingraffia's fascination with figurines and say

wide array of sports figures made by McFarlane Toys and while he enjoyed them, he felt something was missing.

"When McFarlane issued the first set of hockey figures back in 2000, they didn't have the license to use [team] logos," says

Ingraffia, a 49-year-old procurement manager for a Chicago research institute, "So the figures [wore] generic uniforms. Since I had done plastic/vinyl model kits and figure painting for a number of years, I took some of those skills, equipment and supplies, and added the logos to the figures. It also was right around the winter Olympics, so I decided to take a couple players and put them in their Olympic colors. I did a Mike Richter Team USA and a Steve Yzerman Team Canada."

Ingraffia worked on a few more figures and decided to post images of them online. The reaction was immediate and significant. "Right away, I got a request from a collector in Edmonton who wanted me

to turn a Paul Kariya figure into Mike Comrie." He began getting emails asking about the process, and the more figures he posted, the more the emails increased. Finally, he was so overwhelmed with inquiries—mostly about creating and applying the custom decals—that he created a web site (customsbyjomo.com) with instructions and customizing tips. The fact that it averages nearly one million hits per month tells you everything you need to know about the popularity of these aftermarket alterations.

Nowadays, his services are in high demand from collectors unable or unwilling to attempt the act of customization them-

He began getting e-mails about the process — the more figures he posted, the more e-mails he got.

selves. This is especially true with hockey figures, which he says pose a couple of unique challenges.

"The uniform striping on the sleeves and hem of the sweater can be very intricate," Ingraffia says. "But the biggest challenge is painting all the gear used by goalies. The goalie pads, glove and blocker are all made of rubber. The primer must be applied very lightly and it takes a while to dry on the rubber pieces before you can move on."

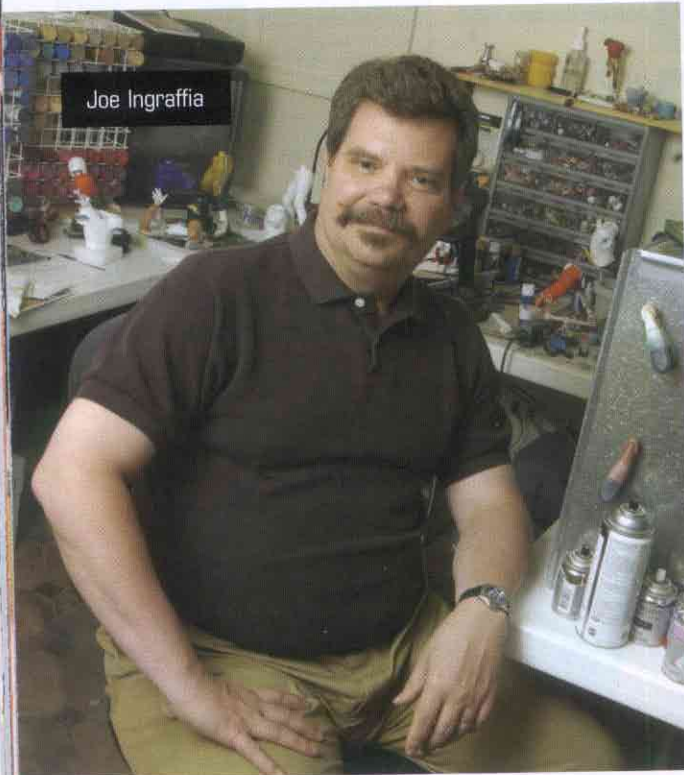
The actual hands-on process—four to five hours for skaters, seven to eight for a goalie—typically starts with someone requesting a figure of, say former Islanders great Mike Bossy. That person would then send Ingraffia a figure and ask him to turn it into his hero.

"I start by digging up a bunch of pictures of [Bossy]," Ingraffia says. "I make sure I get all the uniform markings right. I find the artwork to create the numbers, nameplate and logos. I probably spend a couple of hours getting that done.

"Then I take the original figure, clean it and take it apart. I prime it with all-white spray paint and then paint the uniform colors, including all the striping on the pants legs and [jersey]. Then I go through the process of adding decals. You can buy decal paper and print decals on a color printer, so that's what I do.

"I apply the decals then paint around them to cover the edges. Then I add several coats of sealer so the decals won't come off."

Nothing to it—at least if your brain operates in a way similar to a Swiss watchmaker. The average klutz is far better off



this is a man who never grew up, it should be noted that collectors are willing to pay decent money for his creations.

How about \$250 for a 12-inch action figure? Or \$100 for a six-inch figure?

Yes, in the world of high-end collectibles, it may not seem like much. But as a part-time enterprise, it provides disposable income while allowing Ingraffia to do something he loves.

In short, Ingraffia is a sports figure plastic surgeon. If an Alexandre Daigle action figure existed, he could change it into Todd Bertuzzi—something the Senators wish they could have done in 1993.

A few years ago, Ingraffia discovered the



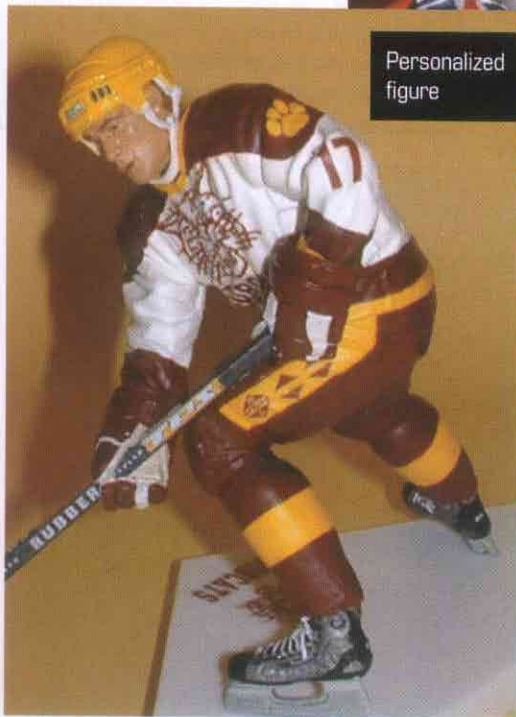
Steve Yzerman



Manny Legace



Mike Richter



Personalized figure





A pair of personalized figures

NINE STEPS TO CUSTOMIZING

1. Decide whom you want to make.
2. Determine which base figure will work the best — take into consideration size of player (height/weight), right or left handed shooter, etc.
3. Locate *many* good pictures of the look you are going for and just as many pictures of the player you are making. It doesn't hurt to also find shots of other players in the same uniform.
4. Clean the figure and soak it in very hot water. This softens the plastic and allows it to be easily disassembled.
5. Spray a very light coat of primer over all parts to be painted. Repeat until you have a nice coat.
6. Start painting the jersey/pants/legs/equipment. The key here is planning. Work from light to dark.
7. Put the figure back together. Trimming the ball/socket joint with an exacto blade will help the parts slip back together.
8. Apply decals. Wet the area with Micro-Set. Slide the decals in place. Brush the decals with Micro-Sol especially on areas that are irregular. Let the Sol soak in for about 30 seconds — then gently press the decal into the folds, use a soft brush, tissue, or make-up sponge.
9. Spray with Testors Flat/Dull on the jersey/pants, etc.

letting Ingrassia do the work and forking over a hundred bucks, which is the going rate for an expert customizer. Others do it for as little as \$50, but as with most things in life, you get what you pay for.

Ingrassia estimates several hundred people are actively involved in recasting McFarlane figures. Although there may be licensing issues involved with some designers, Ingrassia avoids the issue by not offering anything for sale. If someone sends him a figure and asks him to redo it, he charges for his services but does not offer the figures for re-sale.

"If you send me a pair of shoes and ask me to paint the Nike swoosh on it, I can do it," Ingrassia says. "But I wouldn't post them for sale and claim they are Nikes."

Ingrassia's work is unique because of the incredible detail. There is an entire section on his website about doing the eyes for the figures and it's almost haunting. You can click on the figure of retired football star Barry Sanders and it seems that he is looking right through you.

Ingrassia gets requests from all over the world. Many are for non-NHL players per-

forming anywhere from Europe to the juniors to roller hockey leagues. "I also receive many requests from fathers to make customs of their sons, or of fans looking for a player on one of their local teams," he says.

"The hardest of these was a request for a roller hockey player. It was a challenge with the different style pants they wear and figuring out how to represent the blades. The pants were remolded using Super Sculpey [an easily moldable polymer clay], and the blades were done by grinding down the metal skate blades into semi-circles, and adding a thin balsa wood runner."

In a field that's so precise, it should not be surprising that people have a fine eye for detail.

"I made one figure of Michael Jordan and someone pointed out that I had a jersey from one year and shoes from another," Ingrassia says. "He said that Jordan never wore that combination together. I get that sometimes because I look at so many photos. If it's worth fixing, I redo it."

With various body parts and heads scattered all over the place, Ingrassia's home workshop sometimes resembles a house of voodoo. But Ingrassia said when people see the finished product, they never accuse him of being freaky or geeky.

"Most of the time, people are just fascinated," he said. "I keep a couple of figures in my office at my regular job, and people are always coming in and looking."

Despite the demands for his services, Ingrassia doesn't view customization as a sideline.

"This is a hobby, because I enjoy making the figures, and it's a great way to clear my head from the grind of everyday life. I make figures for myself and friends, and use any money I make to support my own col-

lection."

David Lee, editor of Beckett Football, has learned some tricks from Ingrassia and has customized several McFarlane figures for his own collection of University of Texas memorabilia.

"The coolest thing about customizing the McFarlanes is that it allows collectors to get creative," Lee says. "It's sort of like designing your own sports cards. Some people, like Joe, are so into it that they will exchange body parts, sand down areas, buy numerous tools, etc. But with a little guidance and some creativity, anyone can do it."

No doubt the art of customizing is tremendously appealing to fanatical sports fans. And why not? In real life, plastic surgery is a booming business. It may only be sports figures, but if you have a chance to turn Tommy Salo into Roberto Luongo, you'd be a fool not to do it.

Jan Hubbard is a veteran sportswriter for the Dallas Morning News.

CUSTOM PACKAGING

It's one thing to alter a previously existing McFarlane figure into that of another player. But many serious collectors take the extra step to modify the packaging as well.

Essentially, the goal is to create a finished product that looks as though it were made by McFarlane himself. And as the figure customizing hobby grows, so too does the demand for authentic-looking inserts, the hobby's name for the paper detail inside the plastic package.

"I would say it's becoming very popular since it gives the look of being authentic," say Steph Malette, an Ottawa-based customizer. "Many collectors like to hang the customized figures along with the real ones. In my case, at least 90 percent of my customers want the custom packaging. I even know of some people that just sell [the packaging] to those that paint their own figures but don't have the skill to make authentic-looking inserts."

Although professional results can be difficult to detect from a real McFarlane, the process isn't all that difficult for anyone to attempt . . . at least, once you have a bit of know-how. The key is building templates to match the different insert tag sizes found on various McFarlane pieces.

"That's the first thing you'll need," Malette says. "Goalie inserts are much larger than regular players, and some players will

be different in size depending on the figure.

The biggest challenge can be finding high-resolution images for the art, Malette says.

"But once you have the various templates and photos that you feel work for the piece, you go from there. I use Corel Photo-Paint, Corel Draw and Adobe Illustrator to make the insert images, but I always tell people to use the software they're most familiar with. I also use a borderless printer, which allows me to print the insert using two sheets of 8.5 X 11-inch paper. Having the borderless feature is great since the backs of inserts are a standard 8.5 inches in width."

Using pre-existing templates already created, a custom package can take as little as an hour to complete, but in most cases the process takes about three hours. That includes the printing and cutting of the insert, and the re-packaging of the figure.

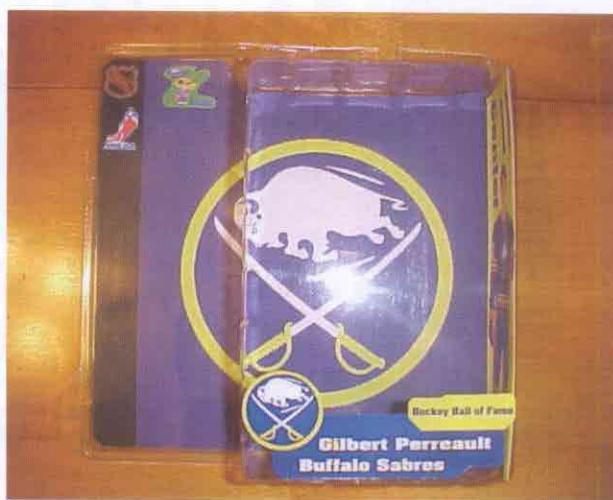
Malette's efforts have encouraged other

collectors to try their hand at customization, including E.J. Freeman, a collector who approaches things from a slightly different aesthetic.

"I saw what others were doing, but I wanted to make my own mark," Freeman says. "Some customizers go for the 'just like McFarlane' look. I wanted ours to be unique and stand out as our work. My partner, Mike Weissmiller, does the layout, and I act as the researcher and critical eye. I get a vision of how I want a package to look, I sketch it out for Mike and he makes it happen."

Freeman also has his own unique customizing angle.

"I always noticed how much everyone complained about the sticker-type bases McFarlane switched to on their hockey figures. People who open their figures for setup and display noticed that, over time, some of the base stickers yellowed, curled up on the edges or bubbled. They looked awful. I came up with a process that makes the bases look more like actual ice similar to the way McFarlane used to do their bases. Joe Ingrassia has posted a tutorial for



TODD MCFARLANE ON CUSTOMIZING

BECKETT HOCKEY: What do you think about the whole customizing thing, Todd? Are you flattered by it?

TODD MCFARLANE: I think it's cool and interesting that our fans are using our figures as a base for their own creativity.

BH: Do you pay attention to any trends as far as what types of players are being customized? Does that affect or influence any decisions on possible lines, such as the Hall of Fame/Legends lines?

TM: Honestly, not really. Between myself and my employees, we've got a good cross-sample of the biggest sports geeks around, so we're pretty comfortable with the decisions we make regarding player selection.

BH: Some people are customizing these figures and then selling them on the secondary market. Do you police the sale of these figures, or do you not feel that it's a problem?

TM: I let my licensing and legal folks deal with that. In general, I have no problem unless someone is trying to pass a custom off as some sort of official McFarlane action figure.



this process on his website (www.customsbyjomo.com) under the "How To" section."

Compared to the outlay for the actual figures, custom packaging is a bargain. "The fee I charge just covers my costs," Malette says. "I currently charge \$15 for the custom packaging."

Of course, that pricing proves these customizers aren't in it to get rich.

"This is a hobby for me, but the demand is overwhelming," Malette says. "I could do it on a full-time basis if I wanted to. I was laid off from my job last summer, and did customs full-time for two months until I was able to find a new job."

Freeman also views it as a hobby, but does credit his custom work with getting him out of a financial jam or two. "It's a good source of extra money if you're in a bind," he says. "You have to be careful though. My wife has gotten onto me, saying that the time I invest in each custom was at the point where my profit was not worth my time. I can get a little obsessive about details when I customize especially where hockey is concerned."

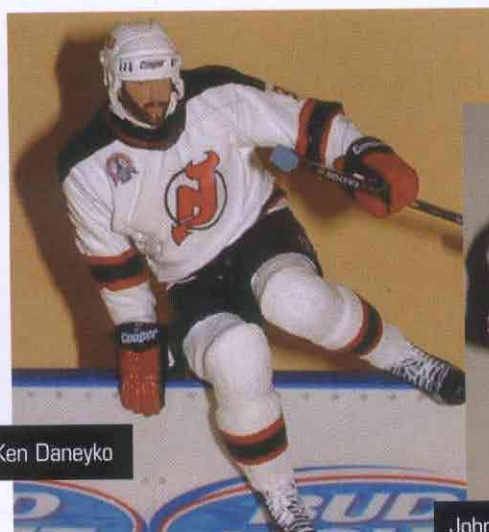
To see more of Steph's work, visit his website at www.sbc31.com. E.J.'s samples can be seen at <http://www.PictureTrail.com/gid4218475>.

— Al Muir

SHOPPING LIST

WHAT YOU'LL NEED TO CUSTOMIZE YOUR FIGURES:

- A few good brushes. A good cleaner (like a white wall tire cleaner)
- Krylon or Testors Spray Primer (White, Black, or Gray)
- Acrylic paints.
- Masking Tape.
- Decal Paper Exacto knives, sandpaper, scissors and assorted tools.



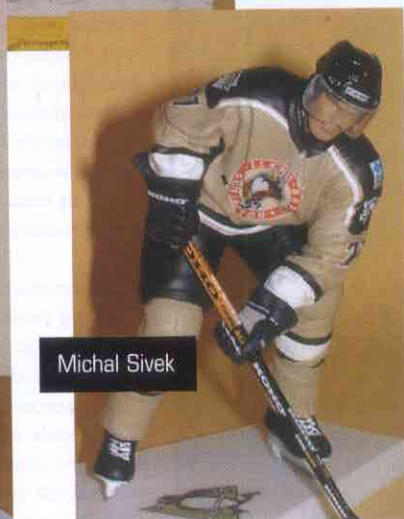
Ken Daneyko



John LeClair



Tony Amonte



Michal Sivek



Kris Beech

In Demand

When it comes to customizing McFarlane figures, the most common requests aren't for superstars, but players a little lower on the popularity food chain, at least according to one high profile customizer.

Joe Ingraffia says there's always demand for star players in uniforms other than those mass produced by McFarlane, but there's more interest in regional stars unlikely to earn a piece on their own.

"One of the most commonly requested was always Tony Amonte, probably because he was in the first series without the logos and he's changed teams a few teams over his career. I've done him as a Blackhawk, a Ranger and a Coyote.

"But most of the demand is from fans who have a favorite player who doesn't have mass appeal. There's also big demand for players who win the Stanley Cup. For example, I've done pieces of guys like Ken Daneyko or Manny Legace. But I also get a lot of requests for minor leaguers like Michal Sivek and Kris Beech."

Essentially, he suggest, people want most what's not out there.