

FOREWORD

I LOVE the game of hockey! Like most kids growing up in small-town Canada (King City, Ontario), I began skating at the age of four—once you can walk, you can skate. I was drawn to the game because of the speed, competition, physicality, and unity within the team structure. But from as early as I can remember, we were hitting each other on the ice. When I watched *Hockey Night in Canada*, famous commentators Don Cherry and Ron MacLean highlighted and honoured big hits and fights the most. Don Cherry's *Rock 'Em Sock 'Em* videos were a constant Christmas gift, showcasing the best goals, saves, and bloopers but placing the biggest emphasis on the hitting and the fighting. Looking back on my career and life, I can now see that I was trained from a young age to play the game of hockey with the goal of taking away my opponent's will to play. You lean on your opponent through physical force, until they hesitate to go for the puck.

Because of Don Cherry and his videos, kids like me were sitting at home in front of the TV subconsciously absorbing a narrative that self-sacrifice for the good of the team is necessary for the group to succeed. That hate and rivalries are more important than scoring more goals than the other team. That fighting and physical contact are integral components of the sport of hockey.

My path to the National Hockey League (NHL) was not a conventional one. I didn't have any grandiose dreams of one day playing in the NHL. Rather, I was drawn to the game because it was an emotional release for me. Despite the sexual, physical, and verbal abuse I endured during my rookie season in the Ontario Hockey League, I was a thirty-goal scorer, and I had less than a handful of fights over three years. I was not an enforcer yet, but I played the

game hard, and I was always the lead, or close, in hits per game. After I was drafted by the Pittsburgh Penguins in 2003, I knew that if I was going to be playing my brand of hockey against grown men, I would have to learn how to defend myself. You see, in hockey, you cannot deliver a clean hit on an opponent without someone else challenging you to a fight. So, in 2005–06, when I was old enough to turn pro and play in the American Hockey League, I gained twenty pounds of muscle in the off-season and began my mission to be the most complete hockey player I could be. And that included fighting.

My first professional fight was against Kevin Colley, a known enforcer and tough customer. I knocked him out. When I got back into the room during intermission, I remember my captain, Alain Nasreddine, looked at me and said, “What the fuck was that?!” I had been to three training camps with Alain, and he knew me as a hockey player, not an enforcer. But my thinking was this: *If I can add enforcer to my resumé, that will get me to the NHL quicker and help me stay around longer.*

Little did I know I would eventually be pigeonholed into a role that would nearly kill me, and rob me of much of the joy of playing hockey at the professional level. I can now see how the subconscious messages I received as a child right through my teens about how to nobly play the game of hockey, combined with the abusive events of my rookie season, shaped me into the reckless, angry, and highly volatile hockey player who was willing to sacrifice himself for the good of the team. This mindset was both my best weapon and my biggest flaw.

Playing the enforcer role took its toll on me physically, mentally, and emotionally. I was nicknamed “Car Bomb” when I was in Philadelphia because of my unpredictable playing style. The fans loved it, but the anxiety I felt when looking at my opponent’s lineup during

morning skate, knowing that a fight was coming, was difficult to deal with. I had to ignore those thoughts and feelings because they didn't serve me in the enforcer role, but that constant level of stress, and the way I was coping with it, were not sustainable.

By twenty-five, I was in a rehab facility for my dependence on opiates after undergoing two major surgeries in fourteen days. In rehab, I was introduced to spirituality, and it saved my life. It also changed the way I played the game, because I had healed past traumas and gotten to know myself on a deeper level. I knew what my faults were, what my triggers were, and what I needed to do to live a happier and more fulfilling life. I was less angry and emotional, and that equilibrium transferred onto the ice. I was a better teammate and began to fight less. I was lucky enough to go to the Stanley Cup Finals four times with three different teams in my last five seasons. I attribute that success to living the right way and being more aware and conscious of myself and others.

But it wasn't all fun and games.

I have had many diagnosed concussions, my last two from fights and punches to the left side of my head, with no helmet on. The symptoms of my traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) included insomnia, loss of appetite, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, head pressure, headaches, impaired vision, light sensitivity, difficulty problem solving, and concentration and impulse control issues.

The final year of my hockey career was an absolute roller coaster. The 2014–15 season began in October; my son was born in November; my best friend, Steve Montador, passed away at the age of thirty-five in February; I received my seventh diagnosed concussion in March; we won the Stanley Cup in June; I decided to retire because of post-concussion syndrome in September; and my grandfather passed away in October. I fell into a deep depression, and I was an unreachable, lost soul for seven months.

When I retired, I was spiritually, mentally, and physically dead. Losing the hockey community, part of my identity, my purpose, and loved ones in such a short period of time, all while suffering the effects of repetitive head trauma, was overwhelming. The mental health complications associated with brain injuries took me to a hell that I want others to avoid, if at all possible. That is why I advocate so passionately for proper understanding, diagnosis, and care for TBIs. That is why I advocate for individuals to continue to seek out different types of treatment for post-concussion syndrome, because without hope and the possibility of a solution, the voices of suicidal ideation can become overpowering. That is what happened to me and what ultimately pushed me into treatment facilities all over the United States and Canada, into reading medical literature, and into spending more than six figures in the past three years in the search to improve my quality of life.

It is my belief that fighting has no place in today's game. Hockey does not need to be sold on hate and rivalries anymore. I believe that the younger generation wants to see skill and speed over violence and hate. The public is now more aware than ever of the risks that athletes are taking for their entertainment. I believe that the NHL and the NHL Players' Association (NHLPA) have to do more to protect their athletes as it relates to concussion protocol, proper diagnosis, and care for traumatic brain injuries. Once the NHL and NHLPA begin to educate the players about the risks of repetitive head trauma, they will not want to bare-knuckle box on ice any longer.

I am against fighting in hockey because of my personal experience. And I will continue to speak my truth about my daily mental health struggles in hopes of reaching as many people and communities as I can, and awakening people to the signs and symptoms of post-concussion syndrome in themselves and loved ones so that they can get help to move into proper diagnosis and care.

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I have been on a search for peace. An after reading this book, even though I have yet to meet James, Stephen, or Dale, I feel connected to them. I have experienced the same dark places that they have: hopelessness, a loss of self-identity, impulse control issues, substance abuse, and isolation. The fear of the unknown and what lies ahead is something else that we all seem to share. We are talking about scary issues here. Our brain health will dictate our quality of life moving forward. I hope these young men will find the peace that we are all so desperately seeking.

Books like this are important. They will help educate parents and kids about the risks of playing collision sports. It always comes back to players helping players. I want to thank James, Stephen, and Dale for having the courage to speak about the life-threatening ailments that athletes experience after repetitive head trauma. I hope our stories will save others from experiencing the same suffering and pain that we have. Thank you to Jeremy for putting these stories together. I hope this book serves as a cautionary tale and a vehicle that can drive change in the game of hockey.

Daniel Carcillo

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INTRODUCTION

GROWING UP, my most vivid hockey memory is one that was repeated over the course of countless very early weekday mornings. There I am, standing on skates, in full gear, only barely able to see over the boards. I'm staring out at the lingering fog hovering just above the ice. The rink is cold and quiet. The ice surface is perfectly smooth. It hasn't been touched since the Zamboni's last laps late the night before.

The hour is ungodly (3:57 a.m.) and although it will be only minutes until a parent lets us onto the ice, the moments pass slowly. It feels like an eternity. Every second is excruciating. The anticipation to hit the ice, to mark up that clean sheet with choppy, pint-sized strides, is overwhelming. I just can't wait.

And when that parent comes out, and the gate opens, with its creaking hinges and always-sticky latch, I'm on the loose. The freezing-cold air on my face. The cacophony of steel cutting ice. The echo of wooden sticks on rubber pucks and the near-deafening bass of puck on hollow wooden boards. The whistles. The drills. Bright orange cones zigzagging across the playing surface like on a runway. Our white, smoky breath rhythmically leaving our bodies as our lungs heave for air. We skate, and skate, and skate some more, as the fog lifts to the rafters and the sun rises outside the rink.

It was bliss. It was freedom. It was religion.

Hockey is an easy game to love, and love it is what I've always done.

But there's a dark side of the sport that hides in plain sight. And like a savvy defenseman backpedalling on a dump-and-chase, it interferes with my love for the game.

It's the fighting.

Bare-knuckle boxing on ice has long been accepted and promoted, not only as a necessity in the game but as a promotional draw. “By golly, not only do these men fly across the ice at inhuman speeds, shooting a rubber bullet more than a hundred miles per hour, they also take breaks in the action to pulverize each other’s faces!” I can almost hear legendary *Hockey Night in Canada* play-by-play man Bob Cole making the call.

Hockey’s history and its current culture are steeped in fighting lore. Go up to pretty much any player or fan and ask them to explain a Gordie Howe hat trick. They’ll be quick to tell you: it’s a goal, an assist, and a fight in the same game. The inference has always been that a Gordie Howe hat trick is just as good (if not better) than the traditional, and objectively more valuable, three-goal version that brings hats floating down from the crowd like flowers on stage for a virtuoso performance.

And although I’m no fan of fighting now, there was a time when I fully endorsed the scraps. I lived for *Coach’s Corner* and *Rock ’Em Sock ’Em* videos. I adored the fighters and chanted “Giiiiinnnooo” as number 29, Gino Odjick, patrolled the ice for the Vancouver Canucks at the Pacific Coliseum in the 1990s, ready to punish anyone who dared take a run at superstar Pavel Bure, the beloved Russian Rocket. I even remember publishing a blog as a writer for the mid-2000s hockey reality TV show *Making the Cut* in which I parroted the argument spouted so often by players-turned-analysts: the hockey on the show would be better if the producers and scouts would allow the players to fight for the protection of the stars. And this was no light argument. It was stated as imperative, just as I had heard throughout my childhood from so many intermission panels on *Hockey Night in Canada* and TSN. They *had* to fight, for nothing less than the very safety of the players on the ice. (I believe this kind of argument is known as doublespeak. Like bombing for peace.)

But those pro-fighting feelings changed for me one night at a junior hockey game. The Vancouver Giants of the Western Hockey League (WHL) were set for a Friday night tilt (literally and figuratively) in front of a rowdy hometown crowd at the Pacific Coliseum. Some friends and I had a few beers at our shared East Vancouver house and made our way to the arena. Our buzz was on, the workweek was in the rear-view mirror, and the weekend vibes were good. We settled into our seats about ten rows up and just to the right of centre ice, double-fisting Molsons, talking and laughing loudly, hitting in full stride a quintessentially Canadian night out at the good old hockey game.

All that to say, I wasn't exactly ready for what would become a world view-bending epiphany that fine evening.

Just as the referee released the puck for the opening faceoff, two players dropped the gloves. It was instantaneous. I could've sworn the gloves beat the puck to the ice. Before the game had even begun, there was a fight.

The first thing I noticed was the fans' reflexive bloodlust. The crowd sprang to its feet as one. There was no contemplation and most definitely not a second thought in the building. The reaction was straight from the guts. The Friday night fans were already primed, but this put them right over the top. Ten thousand voices reverberated through the stadium.

The next thing I noticed was the players' faces. Square jaws, for sure, but unmistakably, these were a couple of baby faces. Just kids. We, the crowd, were thousands of fully grown adults (with plenty of kids mixed in) cheering, even demanding, that two children beat the shit out of each other with bare fists on ice.

Haymakers were thrown and received, and after about thirty seconds (which felt more like five minutes), the linesmen stepped