

Editorial ▶ Traumatic Brain Injury and Vision Therapy: A Personal Perspective

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Every young hockey player dreams about playing in the National Hockey League (NHL). He recreates great moments in his backyard rink and while playing street hockey. He acts as the hero as well as the play-by-play announcer as he wins the Stanley Cup made out of old pots, over and over again. Off the ice, he trains hard, shoots pucks, and does everything in his power to become an all-around threat during the 5am games all winter long. His goal is to make the best out of his God-given talent and leave nothing out on the ice.

Today, players are bigger, stronger, and faster than they have ever been, pushing the pace on the ice and creating a more exciting, more physical game that the fans love to watch.

Along with bigger, stronger players come bigger, fiercer collisions. Along with the collisions come injuries. Unfortunately, those very collisions we work so hard to create are the very things that end careers prematurely, including mine.

I was always an overachiever; I was smaller and slower than everyone else. I had to work twice as hard to get half the results. In high school, I started slow and eventually caught on to become a pretty good high school player. I graduated and went on to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, where again, there was a pretty substantial learning curve. I worked at it and became an All-American and earned a contract with the Atlanta Thrashers of the NHL. This is where my size and lack of quickness became a liability on the ice. I was a good player, but everyone gets hit hard in their career. Most players get hit hard every game. As my career progressed, I was taking hit after hit. This wasn't



an issue until my head collided with a very big man's shoulder and then hit the glass. This was my first taste of what a concussion felt like. I was in the game but not in the game. I continued to play because I didn't know any better, and I thought I had just gotten "my bell rung" and would snap out of it. About a month later, I did finally snap out of it and began to train again for the next season. I sustained about four concussions like this one. Almost three weeks to the day after each, I was back on the ice and felt fine again. It seemed like I was healing well and had no lasting issues after the three or so weeks were up.

That all changed on January 3, 2008. I got put in a difficult situation where I had to take a hit to make a play, and that's what I did. I took a big hit. I actually played one more shift after that, and then the period ended. I had played in Boston many times before. I knew I was in trouble because when I left the bench to head back to the locker room, I didn't recognize anything. I felt like I was in that facility for the first time. Scary!!

After resting for 3, 4, and then 5 weeks, I was still having symptoms. Headaches, equilibrium issues, irritability, and confusion were all there

for a long time. Finally, in May of 2008, I started to feel a bit better. I was able to walk for distance and get my heart rate over 110 beats per minute for the first time in 5 months. I thought I was on the way to recovery. I kept increasing my workload gradually until one day in June, I felt lousy again. I started getting dizzy with any movement; even watching movement got me dizzy. Things I took for granted, like walking or pushing kids on the swing set, were now impossible without symptoms. I was extremely frustrated. We had visited every doctor imaginable, and all said the same thing: just rest and wait for the lights to turn back on. So that's what I did. We headed back to Massachusetts for the summer, and I tried to rest and relax as much as possible with 2 new babies.

I had a great summer and was symptom-free for 2 months. I was excited to start getting back to playing again in the fall, so I started to train slowly and to ramp up the intensity to see how I would respond. At first, I was elated that I was able to start getting in shape again, but before long, I was starting to have symptoms again. I kept telling the training staff that it felt like there was a lot of pressure behind my eyes. I felt like my eyes were straining and getting fatigued. We had seen every conventional eye doctor known to man, and they had all said that I was OK. They said I had a tiny amount of astigmatism but not significant enough for a prescription.

Three more months went by with no answers and more nausea. To say I was frustrated was an enormous understatement. It had been 11 months when my trainer, Greg Smith, asked if I wanted to follow a lead to North Carolina. I said of course, what do I have to lose? Greg had heard that a player with similar issues had seen a doctor for something called vision therapy in Raleigh. The next week, we were in Dr. Susan Durham's office getting what I thought was probably another two-hour exam where the doctor thought they could help but it didn't materialize into anything. At the end of the exam, Dr. Sue gave me a pair of glasses to see if they would relieve some of the symptoms. When I put those

glasses on, my world instantly turned to HD. Fuzzy gray lines and the words I was reading turned to crisp black words. All the pressure behind my eyes totally vanished instantly. I found myself getting excited that she had found something. She told me that the glasses were to help my eyes rest but that I had a lot of work to do before I could play again. She told me all about vision therapy and how I could work through these issues and make my eyes stronger to help my recovery. I obviously could not drive from DC to North Carolina twice a week for therapy, so she handed me off to Dr. Paul Harris. I spent the next 3-4 months working with Dr. Harris at his office outside Baltimore. We saw drastic improvements. I was working at home doing my therapy exercises, as well as slowly ramping up in the weight room and doing ice work. I was never so happy to be able to get on a treadmill and put my skates on again. We continued to work together to get me to the place where we were both comfortable with me getting back on the ice. At first, I wore the glasses all the time and contacts while I was skating. By the time I played my first game in April of 2009, I was only wearing the glasses when I felt tired, and I had no contacts in the games. I jumped back into game situations with some apprehension but soon found myself playing in two playoff series against the New York Rangers and the Pittsburgh Penguins. I am thankful that great doctors and vision therapy were able to expedite the healing process and allow me to successfully continue living out my dreams.

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