

HOCKEY



Len Boogaard, father of late NHL player Derek Boogaard, sits in a spare bedroom at his home on Jan. 5, 2017. The Boogaard family has revived a wrongful death lawsuit against the NHL.

DAVE CHAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

A father's fight

The fall of Derek Boogaard is a cautionary tale about the dangers of fighting. Boogaard, at 28, died from an accidental drug overdose as he tried to cope with the pain that came from his years as a hockey enforcer. After witnessing the physical and cognitive toll hockey took on his son, Len Boogaard is waging a battle of his own: to eliminate fighting from the game. But in the five years since Derek's death, he still wonders if the NHL is listening.

Roy MacGregor reports from Greely, Ont.

No one noticed the retired Mountie sitting, shoulders parade-straight, among those gathered at Rideau Hall in early December, when Governor-General David Johnston held a one-day conference on concussion injury in sports.

He was never introduced, his name not mentioned – though the surname would have raised more than a few eyebrows. While others were invited, he had had to ask to be allowed to attend, squeezed in at the last minute.

As expert after expert spoke, he felt the urge to speak himself. After all, he is an expert in an area no one would ever wish to tread: the parent of a child lost to drugs, alcohol and, ultimately, death.

In the afternoon session, Dr. David Mulder, the highly respected team doctor for the Montreal Canadiens and a recognized pioneer in trauma treatment, was talking about steps the National Hockey League has taken to deal with head injuries: penalties for deliberate checks to the head, changes in protocol and treatment, independent spotters with the power to remove a potentially injured player from the bench.

Len Boogaard wanted to interrupt. He stirred and began to rise, only to feel the hand of his wife Jody, herself a Mountie, on his forearm. Jody's message was clear: Stay seated, stay quiet. She feared, probably justifiably, that any discussion might turn confrontational, would certainly be emotional.

The retired Mountie settled back in his chair, knowing Jody was right. All he had wanted to do was ask one very simple question.

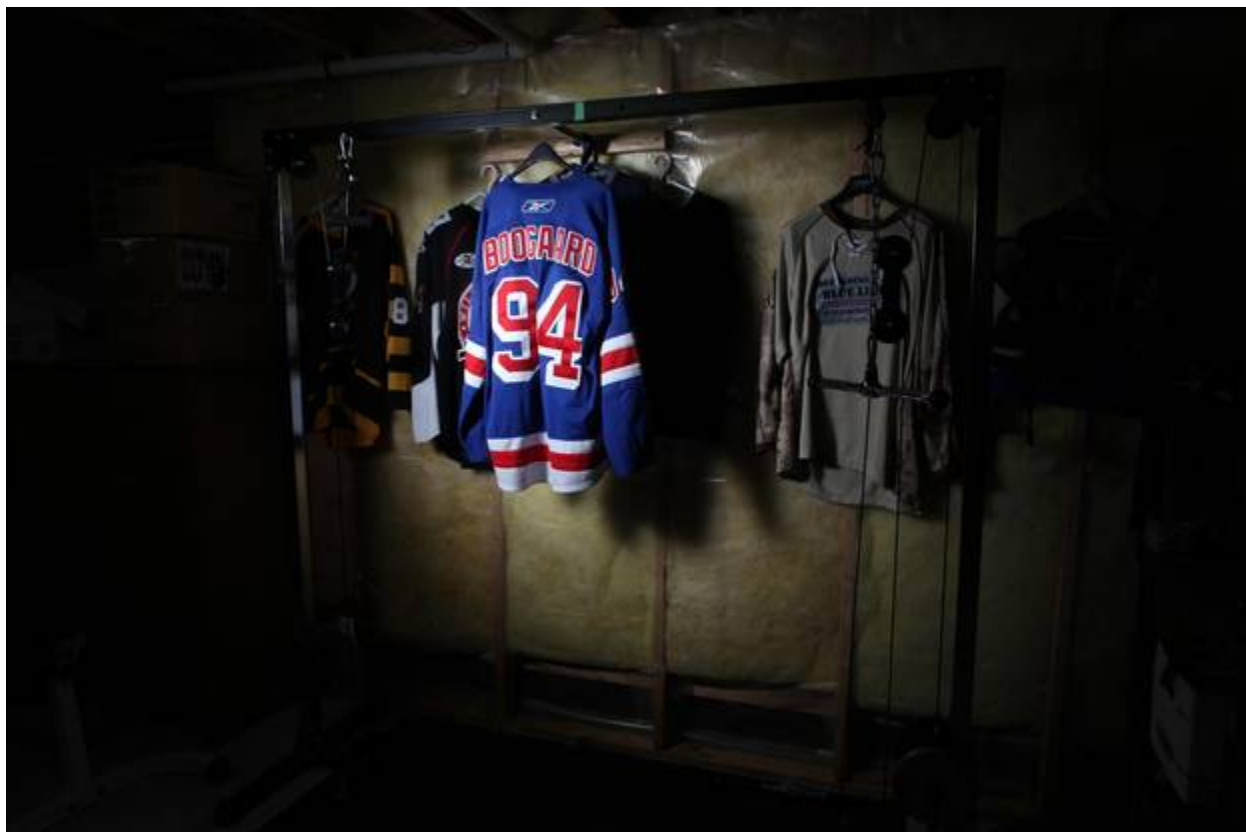
“What is the NHL going to do about fighting?”

‘If you want to make it, you got to fight’

Derek Boogaard died on May 13, 2011. He was 28 years old. The New York Times, investigating the early and shocking death of this young hockey player, estimated that he had been in more than 100 fights, some of which he lost, before he even made the NHL. He fought more than 60 times, losing precious few encounters, while a professional with the Minnesota Wild and New York Rangers.

Derek's parents both had Dutch heritage, Len born in the Netherlands, Joanne the first Canadian-born child in the Vrouwe family that had emigrated to Regina. Their first-born, Derek, was a giant virtually from birth. Two boys and a girl would follow, all destined to soar above six feet.

When Derek was 5, the parents signed him up for minor hockey in the small Saskatchewan town of Herbert, where Len had been posted by the RCMP. Derek was so much bigger than the other kids that they fell down just running into him. Parents complained; parents would always complain. They complained so much that at age 12 he quit the game and took up skateboarding.



Derek Boogaard's New York Rangers jersey on display in his father's basement gym in Greely, Ont. Boogaard played 277 games for the Rangers and the Minnesota Wild, accumulating 589 penalty minutes.

DAVE CHAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

He was huge and fairly athletic, 6 foot 4 and filling out at 15. Floyd Halcro, a friend of Len's, was coaching the bantam AA team in Melfort, Len's next RCMP posting, and convinced Derek to come back into the game. Big, shy, a "teddy bear" at home, according to his three younger siblings, Derek took on the role of "enforcer" as it meant ice time and acceptance by his Melfort

Mustangs teammates. They counted on him and he liked to be counted on, wanted to matter to his teammates.

Len Boogaard was enthusiastic about his son's return to the game. He often drove Derek and teammates to out-of-town games in a police car – “I had permission” – and would even drive Derek into Saskatoon for boxing lessons.

Len shudders today to recall those drives into the city. “You're a dad,” he says. “You're supposed to be looking after your kids. In hindsight it is always, ‘Well, maybe I should have done this, maybe I should have done that.’ When I was taking him to Saskatoon for boxing lessons at 15, it's like, ‘What was I thinking?’ ”

In one game that the on-ice officials lost control of, Derek waded into the opposition bench, the players scattering like rabbits. There just happened to be two scouts from the Regina Pats in the stands and they so liked what they saw they immediately put Derek Boogaard's name on the team's protected list. He was far from the best player on the ice, but he had something all junior teams wanted.

“He was told, ‘If you want to make it, you got to fight,’ ” says Len. ” ‘Wherever you go you got to fight, you got to fight.’ ”

At 17 he went off to Regina for the Pats' pre-season training camp and had a dozen scraps in the team's first four scrimmages. He had a new nickname – “Boogeyman” – which the fans loved. When he lost a fight in a game against the Kelowna Rockets, the Pats traded him to the Prince George Cougars, where he was far away, alone and miserable. His parents' marriage had broken up, he kept changing billets and he was flunking out in school. His season ended with a broken jaw, courtesy of another player's fist.

He returned to Prince George for a second season – his body rounding out to the 6-foot-7, 265 pounds he would take into the NHL – and, happy with his billets, he had a good year. A fan poll named him the toughest player in the conference. He scored twice, once in the playoffs. In hand-written notes about his life that his family found after his death, he had written, “It was the best feeling I had the last 2 years.”

But Derek Boogaard wouldn't be drafted for his goal-scoring. The Minnesota Wild took him 202nd overall in the 2001 entry draft.

Derek finished out his junior career with the Medicine Hat Tigers and the Wild signed him to a contract, sending him off to play for the Louisiana IceGators of the East Coast Hockey League. Lonely, he bought an English bulldog he named Trinity, who would outlive him by several years. Today, Trinity's ashes are in an urn in Len Boogaard's home in Greely, Ont., near Ottawa, and two more English bulldogs have taken her place. One is called Pebbles, the other Boogie.

From the ECHL, Derek moved up to the American Hockey League, playing two seasons with the Houston Aeros. He was so popular with fans that when they had a "bobblehead" night for him, it was the doll's fist that bobbed.

At the Wild's 2005 camp, head coach Jacques Lemaire saw how intimidating Derek could be on the ice and made room on the roster for the enforcer. Early in the 2006-07 season, in a game against the Anaheim Ducks, Derek would cement his reputation with a punch that so shattered the cheekbone of the Ducks' enforcer, Todd Fedoruk, that it had to be reconstructed from metal and mesh. The next season, Fedoruk would become a teammate, their stalls side-by-side, and they would become best friends.



Len Boogaard keeps mementoes from Derek's career on his wall. He says his son, while fierce on the ice, was a "teddy bear" at home.

DAVE CHAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Somewhat naively, Derek believed he had value as a player as well as a fighter. “He was pigeon-holed,” says Len. The NHL had brought in a new rule to get rid of staged fights at the end of a game. Coaches that sent out their enforcers in the final five minutes could be fined \$10,000 if a fight broke out. “Derek went to Jacques and said, ‘Look, I want to play in those five minutes,’ And Jacques said, ‘I’m not going to.’ So Derek gave him a cheque [for \$10,000] and said, ‘If you play me, and I get into a fight, that’s yours.’ When Jacques came to the funeral, Jacques still had that cheque in his pocket.”

The fighting was taking its toll on Derek. He had hurt a shoulder playing for the IceGators and painkillers had helped. He had back surgery during the 2008-09 season with the Wild and was prescribed Percocet, which he would sometimes gobble up to 10 pills at a time. He began taking OxyContin, deliberately chewing them to reduce the time-release aspect of the pills.

The pill dependency got so bad that he missed camp in 2009. The reason, never given at the time, was that his father had forced him to seek help for his drug dependency.

“I found out about it,” remembers Len. “I confronted him with it, sort of surreptitiously. He told me to leave it alone because it would ruin his career, that he could handle it himself, that he could look after himself. And he could deal with it. I said, ‘No, that’s not the way it’s going to work.’ So I made phone calls and within a day or two days he was in rehab in California.”

Len Boogaard understood his son’s reluctance to seek help: “It’s a job, and if you’re not willing to do that job there are 1,000 kids standing behind you willing to do that job.”

Derek had cause for concern. The Wild had another young player, John Scott, who was an inch taller than Derek, almost as heavy, and just as willing. “John Scott was there to take his job,” was Len’s view.

Scott certainly understood the job description. Writing recently in the Players’ Tribune, an athlete-run website, the now-retired Scott figured he had 43 fights during his NHL career and lost only one. He had almost as many children, four, as goals, five. He saw his role as much the same as a bar bouncer: “If you’re doing your job right, there is no fight.”



[Kelly: Unsealed e-mails show an NHL in the midst of an existential crisis](#) A trove of provocative 2011 e-mails between NHL officials could be what finally pushes the league to abandon its lawyerly approach to the issue of brain injuries.



[One last fight for a former hockey enforcer](#) Robert Frid fought hundreds of times over three years of junior hockey and eight seasons in the lower minor leagues. He's had at least 75 concussions and been knocked unconscious many times. Declared permanently disabled in his 30s, Frid, now 41, doesn't think he has much time left.

Scott, who was voted to last year's all-star team as a fan joke, wrote that he had a confession to make: "I don't care what people remember about me as a hockey player, but please remember this one thing: I didn't love to fight." It wasn't the actual fighting that was the problem, Scott wrote, but the nerves, the anticipation, the stress on your psyche.

"I wished I could have scored goals," Scott wrote. "I mean, scoring is a lot of fun. But that's not me. I'm not as good at that as the other guys. What I do have is a natural protective instinct. I was born with size, and I was good at punching guys in the face. I didn't love it, but I was good at it, and I was happy to do whatever it took to protect my teammates."

Derek Boogaard felt much the same. When he returned from rehab, however, he seemed different somehow. He would often fall asleep, forget things. But he kept fighting. He was happy protecting his teammates.

In the summer of 2010, Derek became an unrestricted free agent and signed a four-year, \$6.5-million (U.S.) deal with the Rangers. At 28, he was rich. He was in New York. And he was back in trouble.

He would play only 22 games for the Rangers. His fights did not go well. In a home game, with fans chanting his name, he was bested by Edmonton's Steve MacIntyre and suffered a broken nose. With the nose still not healed, he played a game later that month in Ottawa where the Senators' enforcer, Matt Carkner, stunned him with a punch to the still-fragile nose. He never played again.

"He was told, 'If you want to make it, you got to fight. Wherever you go you got to fight, you got to fight.'"

LEN BOOGAARD

He was suffering concussion symptoms, and they were horrible. The rink made him nauseous. When he felt well enough to skate again, the team said he could skate before their practices or after. He became convinced, rightly or not, that the coaching staff was ostracizing him. He became a recluse in his New York apartment, going out mainly to purchase more painkillers in whatever method he had to. When his father came to visit, he broke down multiple times, the huge hockey enforcer sobbing in his father's arms.

One of his Ranger teammates, Sean Avery, well known for his eccentricities, got Derek interested in Buddhism. He even got Derek to do something he hadn't done since school: read a book on it. Derek began collecting small Buddhas and placing them about his apartment. A cement Buddha is today in the backyard of his father's home near Ottawa.

Len Boogaard believes his son found some peace in reading about Buddhism. The first noble truth, after all, is about suffering – physical and psychological pain – the second about what leads to such suffering, the third that suffering can be overcome and happiness found if one only follows the path found in the fourth truth.

Derek was certainly seeking happiness. He found it not on the ice but in working with a group called Defending the Blue Line (now known as United Heroes League), which gets military kids involved in sports by providing equipment and tickets. After his son's death, Len Boogaard received a letter from a member of the U.S. Air Force saying Derek had "made a monumental impression on our military families." Another letter came from a local food bank, telling the family how Derek would often show up with groceries and help out.

Unfortunately, Derek's condition was worsening. He became obsessive. Len found that his son's February phone bill was more than 200 pages long and included nearly 14,000 text messages. Many of those messages were to a counsellor he had befriended in rehab. The Rangers sent him back to rehab in California but he did not stay long, leaving to attend a family event despite the program director's advice.

He flew back to Minneapolis, where he kept an apartment.

After an evening out with friends and family, he returned to the apartment and next day was found lifeless.

When Len Boogaard went to the funeral home to collect his son's ashes, he was shocked to discover they were contained in two urns, one being too small to contain all the remains.

"The funeral director told me they had never seen that before," says Len.

'The first thing to do is get rid of fighting'

Len Boogaard is a trained cop and went to work. He found that Derek had exchanged several texts the night before he died with another counsellor.

Derek obviously knew he was in distress. In checking with area pharmacies, Len was able to determine that, in his son's final season with the Wild, Derek had obtained 25 prescriptions for oxycodone and hydrocodone. The prescriptions came from 10 different doctors and added up to more than 600 pills. He had no idea how many painkillers his son had found on the illicit market.

The coroner concluded that Derek Boogaard had died of an accidental overdose of a lethal mixture of prescription painkillers and alcohol.

Before Derek's body was cremated, Boston University had contacted the family. Dr. Ann McKee, a professor of neurology, wished to examine Derek's brain to see if he had suffered from chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) and the Boogaards readily agreed. When McKee finished her examination, she told them that Derek had CTE in his brain to a level she had never found in someone so young. She told them that, had Derek lived, he would have had dementia by middle age.

When the New York Times approached the family about doing a story on Derek's rise and fall, the family agreed. Len turned over all his investigations and Derek's own handwritten notes on his life to reporter John Branch. Branch, a Pulitzer Prize-winner for other work, produced a riveting three-part series and video entitled "Punched Out: The Life and Death of a Hockey Enforcer." In 2014, Branch published the book *Boy on Ice: The Life and Death of Derek Boogaard*, which examines the enforcer's life and tragic death in detail.

Len Boogaard has not been able to read the book, though he holds enormous respect for John Branch.

"I can deal with talking about Derek and his addiction and the doctors and all that stuff," he says, "but when I have to read about his upbringing and all that he went through, ... I can't. It's the same with my wife and the others. They can't read it, either."

The Times investigation, a concussion summit convened by President Barack Obama in 2014 and various lawsuits by former athletes against professional football and hockey have convinced the Boogaard family that change is more likely to come in the United States before Canada.



Derek Boogaard, squaring off against fellow heavyweight Jody Shelley in 2010, fought 60 times in his NHL career, and participated in up to 100 fights in junior hockey.
MATT SLOCUM/AP

“There seems to be more coverage of it down in the States,” says Len Boogaard. “Americans seem to be more interested in resolving this and doing something about the situation.”

“It’s a sacred cow here in Canada. You can’t say anything derogatory or negative about hockey.”

Scientists say that the developing brain is most vulnerable and Len Boogaard wonders how, then, junior hockey can justify fighting on any level. “Why would you have a 16-year-old fighting a 20-year-old?” he asks. “It doesn’t make any sense to me.”

His son was groomed as a fighter and willingly took on the role, but Len says the “Boogeyman” was not his son. “It was a persona,” he says. “When he went onto the ice this was his persona. This was what he had to do. It was his job. Take him out of that environment and he was a completely different kid.”

“When he came home from Prince George, here’s this kid, 6-foot-7, 265 pounds, and he was a fighter in the Western Hockey League and now he’s rolling around on the floor with the puppy. And then you realize that he’s only a kid.”

The father remains intensely proud of his son for fighting through all the adversity standing between him and his dream of playing in the National Hockey League.

“The bullshit he went through playing for those teams in Herbert and Melfort and when he was in junior,” Len says. “Just the amount of effort and desire and willpower that he had. He wanted to play in the NHL and ultimately he did.”

But the father does not fool himself. Derek was a good, at times fine, athlete – he won events in swimming, played football – but he was not a gifted hockey star.

If there were no fighting allowed, Len knows, “Derek wouldn’t have been playing in the NHL.”

Len Boogaard says he has lost the desire to watch the NHL: “I watched the World Cup and that was hockey. None of this bullshit, fights, scrums in front of the net all the time. It was just up and down hockey.”

What deeply bothers the father is that he knows he himself was an enabler, even if unwittingly. He took his son to Saskatoon for boxing lessons. He was there, as so many Canadian parents are, as the child rode his dream as far as it would take him.

“My son was an enforcer,” says Len. “He was there simply to fight. He wasn’t a goal-scorer, just bare-knuckle boxing on ice. So the first thing to do is get rid of fighting.”

When Ken Dryden, the former NHL player turned author and politician, spoke at the Governor-General’s conference last month, he told the gathering that on an issue such as concussion, where so much has been learned, “25 or 50 years from now, people will look back at us and say, ‘How could they have been so stupid?’ ”

That’s how Len Boogaard feels. “I didn’t know anything about concussions,” he says. “The thing that kept cropping up in my mind was his hands. His hands were just mangled. His knuckles were pushed back.

He was losing dexterity in them. I worried about what he was going to do because they were just essentially claws, his hands. And that's the only thing that I worried about – his hands. I didn't have any idea of the concussion issue.”

That all began to change with the 2010 death of Bob Probert, another NHL fighter who had struggled with alcohol and drugs. The former player with the Detroit Red Wings and Chicago Blackhawks died at 45 when he suffered a heart attack while boating with his four young children and in-laws. A subsequent examination of his brain at Boston University found evidence of CTE.

Probert's death came just as Derek Boogaard was signing what would be his final contract, joining the New York Rangers in what would prove to be his final season of hockey. An autobiography on Probert's career and struggles, *Tough Guy: My Life on the Edge*, was released posthumously and Len purchased a copy.

“I started looking at Derek and reflecting,” says Len. “A lot of the same things in the last couple of years. The short-term memory loss, the impulsiveness, the addiction issues etc., all those things associated with concussion and CTE – Derek had them.”

The decision to send Derek's brain to Boston University had been easy to make. The family merely wished verification of what they already knew. The family also brought a wrongful-death lawsuit against the NHL which was initially tossed out of court but has since been revised and revived.

What Len Boogaard wants above all else is a complete ban on fighting in hockey. Had he stood up at Rideau Hall that December day and asked what the NHL was going to do about fighting, he would have had a very simple suggestion.

If, as the league itself has said, fighting causes about 10 per cent of the concussions suffered in a season, why not reduce those concussion injuries by 10 per cent immediately by putting an end to fighting?

“How do you square the circle where they want to get rid of headshots but they allow fighting in the league?” he says.

“What am I missing?”

MORE FROM THE GLOBE



[Addressing concussions in hockey requires big, bold changes](#) The question isn't about treating people after they're hurt; it's about how to prevent them getting hurt in the first place.