



The game changer

Former hockey tough guy on a concussion crusade

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When Bob Lemieux dies, his body will be buried on his family's homestead in Dorchester, N.B., on the side of the hill overlooking a trout stream and the pasture where he roamed as a child – but his brain will go to Chicago.

Having suffered seven severe concussions in his life, including three during his very short NHL career in the 1960s with the Oakland Seals, the former hockey tough guy is donating his brain to research.

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In this image take from video shot on Wednesday, Jan. 25, 2012, Tony Dorsett, a retired Hall of Fame running back for the Dallas Cowboys, listens to a reporters question in his home in suburban Dallas. Dorsett, 57, is one of at least 300 former players suing the National Football League, claiming the NFL pressured them to play with concussions and other injuries and then failed to help them pay for health care in retirement to deal with those injuries. Martha Irvine/AP

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“It’s 3.5 pounds I’m not going to need anymore,” he says. “And if it helps somebody behind me that’s all that matters. Listen, I’m 68 years old. How much life have I got left? Why don’t I do something positive with it?”

With the life he does have left – and there’s no indication it’s about to end – Lemieux is also enrolled in live brain studies, including one in Toronto involving NHL alumni and is on the list for another at UCLA. He writes a blog as a way to educate about concussions, he speaks about his theories on how to make the game safer and how to shut up his former teammate, Don Cherry, from spouting on and on about the glory of fighting.

And he’s telling his story – a difficult tale to hear about depression, suicidal thoughts, alcohol abuse, and an addiction to food with which his 6-foot-2 frame ballooned to 358 pounds. He has since lost 120 pounds but blames much of his problems on his concussions.

His is a timely crusade as the game of hockey is under scrutiny provoked, in part, by its star player, Sidney Crosby and his struggle with concussions. The recent deaths of so-called hockey tough guys by suicide or abuse have amplified the debate.

“I feel for those guys who have ended their life,” says Lemieux, his voice choking with emotion.

In February he signed the donor-registration form directing his brain go for anatomical study to the Brain Injury Research Institute (BIRI) in Morgantown, W.Va., which is studying the long-term effects of repeated concussions and head trauma.

It was founded by Garrett Webster, whose father Mike played for the Pittsburgh Steelers and was inducted into the Football Hall of Fame. He was only 50 years old when he died in 2002, having suffered, too, from depression and dementia. It was discovered after his death that he had a degenerative brain disease, chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), becoming the first NFL player to be given this diagnosis.

Webster speaks to Lemieux regularly and is hoping his hockey connection will open some doors into that world. Brain research is competitive, Webster says. In fact, his institute has lost several athletes’ brains to other organizations, including that of another Hall of Fame football player, Junior Seau, who killed himself last year. He was 43 years old.

“So it’s helpful to have somebody who is going through the same thing my Dad went through but he’s still able to communicate and help us out with a lot of things and be an advocate for what we are doing,” Webster says.

Retired now, Lemieux spends most of the year in a home he bought several years ago on the Northumberland Strait with a view of Prince Edward Island on a clear day. Quiet and slow-paced, he calls it “paradise” and lives there with his ever-patient wife, Mariette, and Jack, their overweight, cranky nine-year-old Chihuahua. A few months are spent in Kalamazoo, Mich., where he coached hockey, and raised his family.

With his health deteriorating, managed by a cocktail of blood-pressure pills and anti-depressants, Lemieux decided about 18 months ago he needed to take charge. Reading about food addiction, he stumbled upon the fact that concussions and his drug of choice, food, could be somehow linked.

That set him upon his journey, which began with the Montreal Canadiens when at 13 he was spotted with a kid with potential. At 19 he was captain of the Junior Canadiens, the Habs’ major-junior team, coached by Scotty Bowman.

Bouncing from team to team – the Houston Apollos, the Muskegon Mohawks in Michigan and the Seattle Totems in the WHL – Lemieux was drafted in 1967 to the new NHL expansion team, the Oakland Seals.

Along with that big frame, however, came big feet – size 16. Lemieux was not a fast skater. Instead, he became a brawler. Helmets were pretty much non-existent. Only after his jaw was broken for the third time in a fight did he put one on – and he was ridiculed for it.

As for concussions – Lemieux suffered his first two playing football as an 11-year-old. The third came when he was 15, playing in the Canadiens system. He fell backward, banged his helmetless head on the ice, broke his jaw and was knocked out.

His fourth occurred when he was 18 in a game against the Blackhawks' farm team in St. Catharines, Ont. Dennis Hull's shoulder connected with his head. "I went out cold," he says. It was a clean hit.

Then came the fifth, sixth and seventh in the few weeks he was with the NHL. He will never forget that last one. Playing in Detroit against the Red Wings, 22-year-old Lemieux was skating with the puck from behind the net when he spotted Gordie Howe standing at the hash marks. Most players would have passed the puck.

"I gave him a deke. He took it. I put the puck through his legs ... it was absolutely the prettiest play you could imagine," Lemieux recalls. "I picked up the puck on the other side, took about one stride and realized what I had just done. I had just beaten Mr. Hockey."

Turning around to savour the moment and to make doubly sure that really was Gordie Howe proved to be his undoing. "The next thing I know I am waking up again," he says. And his NHL career was over.

Back then there was no protocol about how to deal with concussions but his coaches figured correctly that three concussions in three months were too many – and Lemieux went back to the minors, the WHL's Vancouver Canucks.

And he had changed.

"I was frustrated because I knew something was wrong," he says. Later as a coach, he was short-tempered and prone to outbursts. Referees took delight in throwing him out of games.

"At some point I lost it. I truly did. I lost it ... I was totally out of control as a coach. I was insane," he said. "I was up on the bench, I was doing stupid stuff."

Brian Levine, senior scientist at Toronto's Rotman Research Institute at Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care, is studying 20 former NHL players, from ages 30 to 80.

Although he won't speak specifically about Lemieux, he says his study is examining everything from brain health, the health and habits of his subjects, to possible links between concussions and depression and even addiction.

"That's why we are doing the study because these ideas are out there and they are very intriguing and there are certainly reasons to suspect that, yes, there is a connection but we don't understand the mechanisms of that ..." Levine said.

Bob Lemieux is hoping he can help with that understanding – and so his unique donation.

“This gift is irrevocable and may not be rescinded,” reads the donation form he has signed.
“BIRI may assign and transfer my brain to such other proper research facilities or brain bank facilities as it deems proper.”