



Mike Peluso, left, a key member of the New Jersey Devils Crash Line with Randy McKay and Bobby Holík, fights with Tie Domi of the Winnipeg Jets in 1993. (Kevin Larkin/The Associated Press)

## **When the game is over, the enforcer's suffering has only just begun**

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When I started my career in the NHL with the Chicago Blackhawks, I was assigned the role of enforcer.

Every night, it was our job to protect our teammates from the opponent – no matter the cost to our own heads. Enforcers were rewarded with cheers and support from the fans, the general managers and our teammates in exchange for slugging it out game after game. We would wonder, sometimes, if we were hockey players or boxers.

The rewards did not last long. The altercations were brutal on our bodies, and I suffered at least 10 concussions from fighting. Probably many more. After some fights, I went to the wrong penalty box, only to be treated by doctors or trainers who asked me to name the President of the United States, provided a few aspirin, and sent me right back into the game.

Derek Boogaard, Rick Rypien and Wade Belak were also enforcers – and all died tragically under circumstances believed to be related to repetitive head trauma they endured during their careers. Their stories are heartbreaking, but unfortunately the difficulties they faced before their deaths have become all too common among retired NHL players.

In December, 1994, I suffered a major concussion thanks to a bare-knuckled fist to the head. I was knocked unconscious as my head slammed against the ice, and carried off the rink. In the locker room I took multiple showers, because I kept forgetting that I had already showered.

However, the team quickly cleared me to play despite signs of a serious concussion. A few weeks later, I experienced a grand mal seizure during a workout.

As I convulsed, my teammates restrained me from hurting myself any further, but the damage to my brain had already been done. Incredibly, it was a team orthopedic surgeon who treated me after my seizure. I sat out for just two weeks before the team doctors again pushed me back onto the ice. I was never seen by a neurologist.

This would be the first of many seizures, and that concussion was just one of many hits to the head. At no time in my NHL career did anyone – a doctor, trainer, coach or league representative – ever tell me that I could be at risk for seizures or other long-term neurological diseases and disorders such as dementia or Alzheimer's. I loved playing hockey, but wish someone had sat us all down to have an honest conversation about how our brains would feel years into the future.

I retired from the game in 1997 after a career-ending injury, but had no idea that my health issues were only beginning. I have suffered six more grand mal seizures and spent tens of thousands of dollars on neurologists, testing, medications and other medical bills since retiring. The doctors want to revoke my driver's licence, and no one wants to hire someone with a seizure disorder. Today the neurologists tell me that my seizures are, without question, a result of my professional hockey career.

I am just one of many former players dealing with serious health issues, but I joined the concussion lawsuit against the NHL because the entire retired player community needs help. Many suffer in silence from post-concussive symptoms such as daily headaches and anxiety, memory loss and depression. There isn't a short-term fix for our issues. We chose to play hockey, but lacked the knowledge to decide whether this was the life we wanted after our careers were over.

All we wanted to do was play, so we did whatever the league told us to do to stay in the game. We gave the NHL everything we had, and foolishly believed they had our best interests at heart. The league failed to take care of us when we gave our blood and sweat to the game. Now is the time for the NHL to step up and do the right thing by the players who need urgent help and care.

*Mike Peluso played 10 seasons in the NHL for the Chicago Blackhawks, Ottawa Senators, St. Louis Blues, Calgary Flames and New Jersey Devils, including the 1995 Stanley Cup team. He lives in St. Paul, Minn.*