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## The coach and the concussion that won't go away

Sixteen years after a hard hit ended his playing days, the after-effects have forced Craig Fisher out of coaching too.



CHRIS SO / TORONTO STAR

Craig Fisher had to give up a dream job of coaching the University of Ontario Institute of Technology men's hockey team due to a concussion injury he received 16 years ago when he was a player.

By: [Sean Fitz-Gerald](#) Sports Reporter, Published on Fri Dec 04 2015

Craig Fisher, the former hockey player forced to retire twice from the same injury, looked over to his wife, Diane, who has remained by his side for 20 years, including those nights when he needs help climbing the stairs just to get to bed.

“Can I ask you a question?” he said. “Did you know life was going to be different from then on?”

“I don't think I fully understood,” she said after a pause. “I don't know how you could.”

They were in their home, sitting at a handcrafted maple table in a room with a decorated Christmas tree glowing by the window, with a fireplace going in the adjoining room. He had been discussing his injury for almost two hours, and he said his right side had begun to tingle. Soon, the visitor would leave, and Diane would embrace her husband, and help him from the table.

Craig Fisher is 45 years old.

Twenty years ago, he was a goal-scoring dynamo, scoring 74 goals in one season with the Orlando Solar Bears, in the International Hockey League. His playing career screeched to an end when he suffered a concussion on Nov. 12, 1999, off a collision so violent it made him an urban legend among his peers.

He suffered. He slept for 20 hours a day, struggling even to walk to the car for a doctor's appointment. The light tormented him. Sharp and sudden noises left him disoriented. In time, some problems would ease, but many more remained and, ultimately, they exacted another cost — they forced him to retire from his self-described dream job, as a coach.

Fisher stepped down as head coach of the University of Ontario Institute of Technology's men's hockey team in October. The campus is only minutes from his home, in suburban Whitby, but his brain could not keep pace with the demands of the job. The school gave him a new job — a nine-to-five desk job — that he will enjoy for however long it lasts.

"At the end of the day, I'm looking for a tie," Fisher said. "I'm not even looking for a win with this concussion."

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Diane Fisher, a petite woman with a firm handshake, was in the stands the day Fisher was injured. She was sitting with Molly, the couple's then-infant daughter, as her husband had momentum going through the neutral zone on the power play.

He was a 29-year-old forward with the Rochester Americans, and he was off to a hot start to the season, with 15 goals in his first 16 games. The Philadelphia Flyers took him in the third round of the 1988 NHL entry draft, and he appeared in 12 NHL games, but most of his career had been spent in the minor leagues.

Rochester was playing the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins. Fisher was not looking when Tyler Wright, an opposing forward, drilled him with a shoulder check. No video could be found, but witnesses say that, as Fisher fell — likely already concussed — his chin collided with another opponent's knee. And then his head hit the ice. He was unconscious.

"It was a sick feeling," Diane said. "I don't like to think about it too much, because I just remember that his body was spinning on the ice, and he was clearly not conscious while it was happening."

Jason Holland, then a Rochester defenceman, was on the ice when it happened.

"It was like a car accident," he said, "a freak thing."

"You never see it," said fellow defenceman Mike Hurlbut. "And I've never seen it since."

"He wasn't in a very good state," said former Americans forward Domenic Pittis.

Fisher was taken to a local hospital. They cut his equipment off, but they later decided it was safe to discharge him that night. Diane Fisher said hospital staff did not even allow the family to pull the car

around. They left the hospital after midnight as a convoy, with Diane pushing her husband in a wheelchair, and with her husband pushing their daughter in her stroller, all the way across the lot.

Fisher effectively disappeared, a prisoner to his injury in his own home. Diane said even their daughter seemed to have an inkling about the severity of the injury: "I'd whisper to her and, for a child who's 15 months old, she'd whisper back."

Rochester had a good team that season, and would advance to the Calder Cup final. As the playoffs began that spring, four months after the injury, Fisher finally returned for a visit. Only part of him returned, though.

"It was like he was a 90-year-old man," Holland said. "It was like he could walk around in baby steps, like a 90-year-old man. He couldn't see too far ahead of him, had to look at the ground. I've never seen anything like it in my life."

Holland, who said the initial play was a clean hit, now works in real estate, with Re/Max, in Edmonton. More than a decade after the fact, the memory of the hit remains vivid.

"I played 16 years pro, and that's the worst I've ever experienced with a teammate," he said. "His quality of life was nothing. It's the equivalent of being . . . I don't even know what you could compare it to."

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If Craig Fisher misplaces his keys, he said he will never have that "a-ha moment," where something in his memory sparks and reunites them. For the same reason, he parks his car in the same spot whenever possible. He takes the simplest route to work every morning.

At a restaurant, he will often order the first item he sees on the menu, because he knows that, by the time he gets to the fifth item on the page, he will have forgotten all about the first item. Everything has to be written down, everything has to be organized.

"I don't have a brain injury," he said. "I have brain damage."

And yet, for most of the outside world, it would be impossible to tell.

With his short-cropped dark hair and warm, expressive eyes, Fisher carries a conversation with ease. His eyes are bright, and he is animated and well-spoken. His movement is easy and fluid, to the outside.

"It's a double life," Diane said.

"One hundred per cent, double life," Craig agreed.

Activities come at a cost, and coaching became the most expensive. It took years for him to feel close to normal, and Fisher moved into coaching. He worked as an assistant with UOIT before becoming the head coach.

All the while, he did his best to keep the truth of his injury hidden. After a game, Fisher would slump home, exhausted by the mental toll. Sometimes, he would have to crawl on all fours up the stairs. Sometimes, Diane would have to guide him. Sometimes, Molly, his now 17-year-old daughter, would have to help.

“There’s nobody who would ever think that playing hockey would ever leave you with kind of permanent brain damage,” he said. “For me, I had been living a huge lie. It was my biggest kind of fear that I would be found out.”

He compared it to the nightmare someone might have of being on stage and forgetting all of their lines. Sometimes, on the bench, he would lose the play during a game. He needed help juggling the lines, matching the opposing coach’s strategy.

Fisher compensated by working harder. He prepared relentlessly, keeping detailed notes, and compensating for his problems adjusting on the fly. To the outside, it seemed almost fine.

“You could just go and talk to him, and he would remember things from our first couple of years together,” said Luke Van Moerkerke, a fifth-year forward at UOIT. “But then, you could have a quick conversation with him, and you would agree on something, and if it wasn’t recorded or something, he would lose track of it.”

“It would be a drill that we kind of did all the time, and he would go to explain it and lose his train of thought,” said Jeff Braithwaite, a third-year defenceman. “But everybody kind of knew that he struggled with memory and stuff like that. We would just try and help him whenever we could.”

Fisher suffered at least three concussions as a player. He had one with the Philadelphia Flyers, and he had another with the Solar Bears, before the catastrophic incident with the Americans. Earlier in his coaching career, he took a puck off his right temple.

There was no single trigger that led to his decision this fall, though, when he walked into his manager’s office to step down as head coach. At UOIT, Fisher believed he had found his dream job, coaching focused young athletes at a campus close to home.

Being on the ice, though, “felt like lifting 1,000 pounds,” and his symptoms seemed to be getting worse.

“Craig’s someone who’s a hugely social person,” Diane said. “He loves conversation. We all love hanging out together, and he just wasn’t part of it anymore.”

In October, he asked for a meeting with Scott Barker, manager of intercollegiate athletics at the school. The regular season was approaching.

“To be honest with you, I was under the impression we were just going to talk hockey,” Barker said. “I had no idea. He had done a marvelous job.”

Rather than send Fisher away, Barker created a new job in the department. Fisher is now hockey coordinator at UOIT, in which he serves as a kind of general manager for both the men’s and women’s teams — arranging travel, securing new equipment and assisting with academic support for players.

It is a happy ending in one sense, a win for the school and the old coach, but it is also still a loss. And that, Fisher suggested, is the kind of draw he has learned to accept because of his brain injury. A win will never be clear cut.

He has spoken out about his condition with hopes of easing the taboo around it. He said a number of retired players have approached him, in quiet moments, and listed off many of their own lingering concussion symptoms. He serves as their concussion confidant.

There are limits to what he can tell them, though, because he does not know how his own story will end. Sixteen years after the major injury, he and Diane try not to dwell on what he might be like 16 years from now.

“Be honest,” Craig said, when the question was asked.

“I can’t think about the future,” Diane said, fighting tears. “I can’t think about next year.”

In those moments when he is lost in a fog, lost in his own mind, Fisher said he tends to be relaxed.

“It is a comfort to think that, if that is in my future . . . that maybe I’ll just go into that happy place and that will be it,” he said. “But it’s a terrible thing for my wife and daughter to think about.”