HOCKEY

An enforcer’s last fight

Rob Frid, a former major junior and minor-league enforcer, says a career built on fighting has left his life in pieces.

GEOFF ROBINS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Robert Frid fought hundreds of times over three years of junior hockey and eight seasons in the lower minor leagues. He has had at least 75 concussions and been knocked unconscious many times. Declared permanently disabled in his mid-30s, Frid, now 41, doesn’t think he has much time left

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LONDON, ONT. The Globe and Mail Last updated: Friday, Feb. 26, 2016 3:14PM EST

Robert Frid is in pain. He is sitting in a restaurant booth and is so uncomfortable he leans against his soft backpack, which is filled with medication he totes wherever he goes. After awhile, he stands up beside

the table and the staff watch warily, not sure what to make of this big man with missing teeth.

On bad days, like this one, his hands shake. His eyes are glassy, the result of a daily mix of Percocets, oxycodone, nabilone and medical marijuana he takes for pain control and nausea. Visiting this Jack Astor's in Hamilton, having a conversation, is one of the most strenuous things he will do all month.

Frid is a former enforcer. He fought hundreds of times over three years of junior hockey and eight seasons in the lower minor leagues. By his count, he has had at least 75 concussions, including multiple times where he was knocked unconscious. He's 41 but appears much older. Even on good days, he struggles with basic tasks like bending down to pick something up. His hands have been broken so many times that he labours to do up his shirt buttons; his nose is so battered he often can't breathe out of it.

But it's the damage to his brain that is most troubling. His long-term memory is poor. He has anxiety disorder and headaches and usually can't sleep through the night. One neurologist believes Frid shows early signs of Parkinson's disease. Another has diagnosed him with dystonia, a movement disorder that causes painful muscle contractions in his legs, feet and hands.

Frid is likely living with chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), the degenerative disease that is being found posthumously at an alarmingly high rate in the brains of many former football and hockey players. He never made the NHL, but is an example of the damage that can be done in hockey's minor circuits, where a higher level of violence is the norm.

Declared permanently disabled in his mid-30s, Frid believes he is now fighting for his life. He is certain that he has an advanced form of CTE – "Stage III or IV," he says – but wants to become an advocate for former players in his situation. He wants junior leagues to eliminate fighting, which he calls "legalized violence among minors." And he wants to warn parents about kids following his path. Most of all, he doesn't want anyone else to end up like him, abandoned by the game.

"I won't last another few years," he said.

Frid was never a star. He often played in house leagues growing up in Burlington, Ont. But he was big and athletic enough as a teenager to make Triple-A teams on the bottom of the roster. He was also fearless. After his mother died of cervical cancer when he was 16, Frid's big hits became more frequent – they were his catharsis. "You get angry when you lose somebody that close," he said.

Junior teams quickly noticed the redheaded kid built like a man – he was already 6-foot-2 and 200 pounds – who would do anything to score an ugly goal or lay a bodycheck.

The London Knights, one of the marquee teams in the Canadian Hockey League, selected him in the 10th round of the 1992 OHL draft. He went before some of his more talented teammates, who sat stunned in the crowd at Maple Leaf Gardens when his name was called. It was a rare bright moment for Frid and his stepfather, who had worked on his game together that year, through their grief.

Knights scout Bob Gerow told the media that Frid could be the next Louie DeBrusk, the team's recently departed enforcer who went straight to the NHL.

Frid had never fought before. Now he was a fighter.

Looking back, Frid says his memory of his junior hockey career has the most gaps. But he has called former teammates and asked questions – 20 years later, he wants to remember.

What he knows is he fought a lot in London. There were intrasquad games against teammates where he would be lined up against other big, tough kids also trying to be the next DeBrusk. Sometimes they would drop the gloves a half-dozen times in one afternoon.

"He would do anything it took to make the team," teammate Darryl Rivers recalled. "He wasn't a top-three-line player."

"Rob was a strong skater and a hard-working player," said then-Knights coach Gary Agnew, who declined to answer questions about Frid's role

or the injuries he suffered playing in London. “I don’t recall him ever being a problem.”

“I got the shit kicked out of me,” Frid said.

Frid’s first serious concussions came playing for the Knights. As a rookie, he was knocked unconscious when Windsor Spitfires defenceman Ed Jovanovski hammered him into the end boards on an icing play. It was about that time that he started to vomit prior to games and again during intermissions.

This was the mid-1990s, and information about head injuries was scarce. There were no concussion protocols in junior hockey, and players never sat out for weeks on end, waiting for symptoms to fade. Eric Lindros’s first major head injury wasn’t until 1998, and even then the Philadelphia Flyers star was derided by many for being soft when he struggled to return.

Frid was 18, living away from his family for the first time. He assumed nerves were making him lightheaded and nauseous, and he continued to fight almost every game. His head injuries were never a conversation with the Knights, or even at home with his billet, who was a nurse at the local hospital. She didn’t raise any concerns, even though she was putting his blood-stained pillow in the laundry every week.

“It was different back in the day,” Rivers said. “There wasn’t a lot of awareness.”

DeBrusk visited London and gave Frid tips on how to fight. He developed a style of grabbing opponents with his left hand and holding them as far away as he could, turning his head so that the back of it would take some of the punishment. He fought future NHL heavyweights like Eric Cairns and Eric Boulton and held his own. His second full season, Frid finished seventh in the Ontario Hockey League with 216 penalty minutes. His 16 goals and 16 assists brought interest from pro teams.

Frid was invited to the St. Louis Blues training camp the next fall. He fought again and again and suffered another concussion early on. The Blues cut him, and he threw up on the flight home. He ended up in the hospital with an irregular heartbeat and doctors monitoring his vital signs.

His grandfather intervened. “Fuck Rob, you’ve got to get out,” he said. “Get some education.”

Hired gun

Frid played the next two years at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, N.B. He majored in economics and enjoyed school.

But he was a poor fit in a hockey league without fighting. Pro teams kept calling, too. Feeling better, Frid started to believe he could live out the Canadian dream of playing for a living. In 1997, he signed in the East Coast Hockey League – two rungs below the NHL – with the Louisville Riverfrogs, a team in Kentucky where fans could sit in hot tubs and watch a frog-shaped blimp fly around the arena.

Like most minor leagues, the ECHL was filled with fights. Teams with colourful names like the Louisiana IceGators (who led the league with 40 penalty minutes a game that season) and Baton Rouge Kingfish sold the violence as part of the show, playing to a crowd unaccustomed to hockey.

Robert Frid said his love for his daughter Tegan keeps him going.

GEOFF ROBINS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

It didn't take long for Frid to get another concussion. One night early on against the Columbus Chill, he was shoved face-first over the boards. His two front teeth hit the other team's bench and scattered into pieces. Frid was knocked unconscious, and a trainer couldn't wake him despite using a half-dozen smelling salts.

The Riverfrogs rushed Frid to the hospital. He finally woke up when a doctor attempted to remove the remnants of his teeth with a pair of pliers. "I felt like my head was going to explode," Frid said.

He wasn't treated for a concussion. On the drive back to Kentucky, he made the team's bus driver pull over at a gas station so he could buy alcohol. He drank six beers in the back of the bus and passed out for the four-hour ride home.

Frid bounced from team to team and league to league as a hired gun. He had more than 200 penalty minutes in five consecutive seasons in the United, Central and West Coast leagues, giving and receiving beatings in small cities in Georgia, Alaska and Texas. Some teams even paid bonuses based on how many times players fought.

Some years, he made only $350 a week. The most he ever earned was $900 a week with the Anchorage Aces in 2000-01. But Frid enjoyed the other fringe benefits of being a pro hockey player. He was a minor celebrity in many towns, and fans would buy him beers at the bar.

“Rob Frid was a hero,” said Don McKee, who coached him for two years with the Odessa Jackalopes. “Any guy that played that role, the crowd loved them.”

But by 2003, Frid realized something was seriously wrong. During some fights, it felt as though he was being struck by lightning. “I didn’t have any feeling from my head down to my legs,” he said. “Then hits were like that. Then I started seeing more stars all the time, even on general contact. That’s when I knew.”

He was 29 when he retired from hockey.

Now disabled and living in pain, Frid is emotional when he contemplates his career. He anguishes over how he and his teammates had no idea the damage they were doing when they played through postconcussion symptoms. He wishes he knew to retire the way players like North Bay’s Zach Bratina did last fall, walking away at 19 because of too many hits to the head.

“It makes more sense when I look back now,” Frid said. “I should have never played again after that one hit [in Columbus]… But we didn’t know this could be a result. We expected broken teeth and bones and all that…. But neurological issues and shit like that? That’s what makes things difficult.”

“There’s a guilt factor I’ve felt,” McKee said. “What can I do for Rob? I could never key on what I could do for him.”

’In dire straits’

Had Frid been catastrophically injured – paralyzed or badly disabled – while playing, insurance through the teams would have provided care and disability payments for life. Today, he has neither, and his only income is $712 a month in Canadian Pension Plan disability.

Mel Owens, a former NFL linebacker turned lawyer who has become a crusader for benefits for retired football players, has taken up his case. After years of litigation, Frid received a $40,000 (U.S.) workers’ compensation settlement earlier this month for his one season in Alaska.

Frid played his major junior hockey with the London Knights of the OHL.

TIM MOORE/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

It's rare for retired hockey players to receive such payouts. While former NHL players are involved in a massive concussion lawsuit against that league, Frid wasn't allowed to join it as he never played a regular-season game there.

Attempting to get Frid's teams and leagues to compensate him for his injuries has been difficult. Many of the organizations no longer exist; some entered bankruptcy or changed names. The potential for legal liability also means few involved in Frid's career are willing to talk about his injuries. Multiple former coaches and team officials declined comment for this story.

“Liability was the biggest concern of the owners [in the minors],” McKee said. “They did not want to fall into a lawsuit situation. They ran scared in order to protect themselves financially… Finally the Central League dissolved itself.”

Owens argues Canadians should be outraged that their health-care system has to absorb the costs for these players’ injuries. The majority of them are products of the Canadian junior system and return home after their short, low-paying pro careers are over.

“Rob is really, really in dire straits,” Owens said. “He’s not going to get any better. That care alone is going to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. If not millions of dollars. He’s 41 years old. He’ll get worse and need more care. And he should be taken care of by the insurance company.”

Beyond care, Frid needs money to live. Prior to receiving his settlement, he was relying on food banks. He was months behind on rent and bills and weeks away from living in a homeless shelter. Some days, he had to choose between eating and medication – and went hungry.

He realizes he will end up destitute again once the money runs out. “It’s horrible,” Frid said.

Living with brain damage

After retiring, Frid moved back to London, married a former girlfriend and had a daughter, Tegan, now eight years old.

He took several jobs, including driving a long-haul truck. In 2008, he began driving a city bus, but his health continued to deteriorate. Two years in, he was throwing up in a pail between stops.

At that point, Frid entered the Canadian medical system. Doctors were bewildered by his long list of injuries. One believed he might be a hypochondriac; another accused him of conspiring to obtain pain medication.

But extensive testing revealed Frid had memory loss, anxiety disorder related to chronic pain and early degeneration in multiple parts of his body. He also had the testosterone levels of a 90-year-old man, which can be caused by trauma-induced imbalances in the brain.

When three NHL fighters – Derek Boogaard, Rick Rypien and Wade Belak – died in 2011, it created massive media attention on the issue of life after hockey for enforcers, and Frid fell into a spiral. He realized he was living with brain damage and began obsessively reading articles about CTE. He pledged to donate his brain when he died to Boston University, which is leading much of the current CTE research.

His wife grew concerned. Her husband was increasingly erratic and getting in accidents while driving the bus. He alternated between time

on short-term disability and being back on the job while heavily medicated. Eventually, he was hospitalized for 10 days due to a manic episode – something Frid and his doctors now believe was a reaction to his medication, possibly due to complications with his brain injury.

“I was telling the nurses every day, ‘Nobody is taking into account my former job,’” Frid said. “‘I was an enforcer.’”

He became suicidal. Over the next two years, he lost his job, his wife, his home and custody of his daughter. He fell out of contact with family and friends. He began to fade away.

’You’ve had too many’

Frid credits two doctors with saving his life. One is Tony Iezzi, a psychologist in London who specializes in patients living with brain injury and chronic pain. The other is Burlington-based concussion expert Paul Echlin, a former OHL team doctor who has become an outspoken critic of how hockey teams and leagues handle head injuries.

Frid permitted both to speak with The Globe and Mail for this story and provide documentation of his long road through the medical system. Iezzi compares Frid’s injuries to those he has seen in war veterans and car-crash victims.

Frid estimates he's had more than 70 concussions in his playing career.

GEOFF ROBINS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

"There is no treatment in the world that's going to put Rob back to where he was," Iezzi said. "We can change a hip. We can change a shoulder. But you can't change a brain."

"It's quite sad guys like him didn't get the medical attention, the diagnosis and treatment early," Echlin added. "They didn't have somebody sit down and say, 'You've had too many; you can't play anymore. Do something else because bad things are ahead.' He just had people saying, 'Get out there again.'"

Iezzi explained Frid's problems have snowballed because living with a brain injury eventually causes "a ripple effect." An inability to work creates financial issues which then creates relationship issues, he said.

"Two years ago, he looked way, way better," Iezzi said. "…But you take away and take away and take away. It doesn't matter if you're a hockey player or war vet, when you've got nothing left, it's not a good moment."

Frid knows he is not the only former hockey player suffering. He can detail the story of enforcers like Quinten Van Horlick, who died last October at 40 years old after a history of drug abuse and run-ins with the law. He knows of others like Derek Crawford and Marc Potvin, who both died young. Frid also connects with former players – including many he fought – on Facebook. Several have commended him for opening up about his health problems; some have confided that they, too, have issues.

Echlin doesn't believe the recent decline of fighting in junior hockey and the NHL goes far enough. Many minor leagues remain filled with fights and illegal hits; many coaches still pressure their charges to play through head injuries.

One league official who did agree to speak to The Globe was CHL president and OHL commissioner David Branch. He said he wasn't familiar with Frid in particular, but acknowledged the leagues sometimes get calls from former players seeking help. (No support

programs are currently available for alumni.) He said that because players can suffer concussions playing in minor hockey before they get to junior and in pro leagues after they leave, it is difficult to determine responsibility years after the fact.

“You hate to hear those things,” Branch said of Frid’s health problems. “My goodness. This is an area that’s of great concern at all levels of the game. I coach minor hockey, and I’ve had three players this season alone with concussions. Probably 10 years ago, there would be no recognition of what had occurred.”

Branch said junior hockey has dramatically improved how it handles concussions in the last decade, including baseline testing for all players and a rule banning hits to the head introduced in 2006. He also admits he is uncertain “if there’s any place for fighting in our game.”

“I think our league has been a leader in addressing head injuries,” Branch said. “We’ve really worked hard in this area.”

’Focus and determination’

When Frid was at one of his lowest points, with no money and his settlement in limbo earlier this year, the hockey world began to reach out.

In January, he received $300 in cash from a fan from his days in the minors. Kurt Walker, a former Toronto Maple Leafs fighter who has

become an advocate for retired players, passed along money for food. Other retired NHLers like Steve Ludzik, Clint Malarchuk and Sandy McCarthy reached out with words of support.

“I wanted him to know that there’s help out there,” Walker said.

Frid recently moved to Toronto and hopes to get more medical coverage from the various hospitals. He has a referral to a Parkinson’s specialist and wants a firmer diagnosis and treatment for his tremors. He also remains in a legal fight for disability payments from his time as a bus driver. And he is trying to regain partial custody of his daughter, whom he wants to bring in on the train and take to the zoo.

He still wakes up nauseous every day. He takes four or five hot baths daily to cope with the pain, and admits to turning to alcohol when he can’t afford his medication.

“He is such a mess, but there are moments in his life when he has a focus and a determination,” Iezzi said. “He’s very determined about taking care of his daughter. And very determined about this cause. He has something he wants to say. Not just for him. For everybody else in his situation.”

“I’m not ready for my brain to be examined postmortem yet,” Frid said. “I love Tegan too much.”