1 THE BEATINGS AND THE DAMAGE DONE
THE SORRY STATE OF TODAY'S NHL

The 1972 Summit Series that pitted Canada against the Soviet Union is one of the most seminal moments in the history of hockey. And in that series, one of the heroes for the Canadian team was a gap-toothed, maple-syrup-bleeding, 23-year-old whirling dervish named Bobby Clarke.

Clarke's biggest contribution to that Summit Series tournament—won, of course, by Canada in a come-from-behind, eight-game victory—did not take the form of a goal scored, a deft assist, or a soul-stirring locker-room intermission speech.

Instead, a large part of Clarke's legacy was forged forever in Game 6 of the Summit Series, when he swung his stick down on the ankle of Valeri Kharlamov and fractured the Soviet star forward's ankle, essentially leaving the Russian star a shell of himself for the rest of his career.

Clarke, meanwhile, went on to enjoy a 15-year career in the National Hockey League (NHL), win two Stanley Cups with

the infamously over-aggressive "Broad St. Bully" Philadelphia Flyers, and retire as a first-ballot Hockey-Hall-of-Famer. Indeed, Clarke embodied the win-at-all-costs mentality that had a stranglehold on elite-level North American hockey long before then—and that still carries sway in the NHL.

Today, even Bobby Clarke thinks things have gone too far and the costs are too high.

Now a 62-year-old executive with the Flyers, Clarke recognizes what most of us who've watched the hockey world recognize: the NHL—the sport's standard-bearer—is increasingly becoming a league in which the primary goal for its players has shifted from contesting a game to, in reality, surviving it.

As Clarke has noted on numerous occasions, the NHL is long beyond the point where players employ a body check to separate a member of the opposing team from the puck. Now, NHLers are instructed to use themselves as wrecking balls laying waste to the other side, regardless of the consequences for their opponents—or themselves and their own bodies.

"You used to hit to separate a guy from the puck," Clarke told me on the set of TSN's *Off The Record* program. "Nowadays, it seems like players hit to separate their opponent's head from his body."

Players have also been emboldened by state-of-the-art protection from Kevlar equipment that could stop a bazooka attack from point-blank range and, at the same time, be used to further decimate the bodies and brains of on-ice adversaries. Player equipment has become as much about protecting the athlete as it is about emboldening them into feeling bulletproof on the ice. As well, modern-day players are far different from their predecessors in that current NHLers use their hard-shell elbow and shoulder pads to obliterate an opponent.

In fact, if the league's worker-bee players don't "finish their checks"—hockey code for, "launch your body fully and completely into the rat bastard on the other side"—management usually replaces them with "high-energy players" (another hockey euphemism for "encouraged line-crossers") from the minor leagues who are willing to play with an extreme level of aggression in exchange for a healthier paycheck.

More than a quarter-century after Clarke stopped playing in 1984, and due to a variety of factors we'll examine throughout this book, for the sport's best players, the game of hockey is now more dangerous than ever before. Concussions are threatening to end the careers of some of the NHL's best players—including Sidney Crosby, the league's biggest marquee superstar—and a significant percentage of all NHLers are dealing with head injuries. While advances in medicine and science offer us better indications of the toll taken on athletes in high-impact sports, and while medical officials still speak out against the lack of sufficient player protection in hockey, the best hockey league in the world has simply not moved quickly enough.

The NHL's approach to player safety can correctly be called cavalier, but—make no mistake—the league isn't run by a loose-knit collection of wealthy sadists who are simply in it for the kicks that come with being part of a pseudo Fight Club.

No, theirs (and by theirs, I mean the NHL team owners who tell league president Gary Bettman what to do) is a highly calculated, profit-driven philosophy: a delicate balancing act in which the league must present the appearance it cares while, at the same time, promoting a hyper-aggressive style of play that leads directly to players suffering grievous injuries.

Why do Bettman and the owners try and have it both ways on the issue of violence? For the same reason each and every fast-food store drains small silos of salt in preparing their product: they simply don't believe it will sell without it. Similarly, although fighting and senseless aggressiveness are as unhealthy for hockey as a double Big Mac dipped in lard and formaldehyde is to the average human heart, the NHL operates under the assumption that fighting must be included with the actual on-ice product to make it more palatable for the masses.

In other words, the NHL has no faith in its core product. The NHL markets illegal acts—because don't forget, all fights are against the rules. Go to www.nhl.com during the regular season and you'll see enforcers and fisticuffs in the main news story rotation. Now try and think of another reputable sports league that would do such a thing. You'll be thinking a long, long time.

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This leads us to the product the NHL puts on the ice today. To be sure, every game played under the league's banner is as much a product as any dish soap or toothpaste; those who consume the product come to expect things in return for their money. Any NHL fan has expectations of seeing: (a) a game played and won (which wasn't always the case when the NHL allowed games to end in ties); and (b) enough entertainment and excitement to justify what have grown to become highly unjustifiable ticket prices. Beyond that, though, the product—in terms of the style of hockey that's presented—is entirely up to those who administrate the sport.

And the NHL's modern-day product essentially was formed after the 2004–05 lockout season, a disgrace of a labor war

propagated by Bettman under the guise of league-wide parity, that was, in reality, an exercise in cost control and boosting the value of franchises. One of the very few good things to come out of the lost season was the opportunity for the league to examine what its game had become. And what it had become was a dreary, low-scoring, predictable display of defense-first hockey that pleased only coaches and goalies.

So when the chance came to make changes to the game, a group of progressive-minded members of the NHL community (led by former Detroit Red Wings star and current NHL vice-president of hockey and business development Brendan Shanahan) jumped on it, redefining what hockey could be—a fast, physical feast for the eyes that stressed skill and speed rather than a game that had become known for inhibiting skill and promoting a plodding, ponderous pace.

Sure enough, that's precisely what hockey became again, to the delight of fans and media who had grown tired of what became known as the Dead Puck Era. But one of the biggest unintended consequences of the positive changes (essentially, a full-on crackdown on obstruction) was the increased speed of the players; it allowed the team with puck possession to move unimpeded through the neutral zone and crash down on the defending players once they collapsed inside their blue line.

All in all, the changes took an already-physical NHL game and made it into a season-long Thunderdome of sorts, where mere survival from night to night, week to week, and year to year is as much of a goal as the display of offensive or defensive talent.

Let's stop and reflect on that for a second. In the NHL, it isn't enough anymore to be fantastically skilled at playing

within the rules of the game; you also have to be adept at avoiding the league's designated decimators, the head-hunting players who exist solely to physically harm their opponents.

Contrast that conscious NHL management decision on player safety with those made by other professional sports leagues.

The National Football League (NFL)—by far the most successful of all pro leagues, with billions in revenue per season—has gone to great lengths to protect its quarterbacks (its most important players in both the competitive and marketing senses) by banning defensive players from potentially knocking QBs out of the lineup with cheap shots, late hits, hits to the head, and even hitting below the knees.

In rugby—one of the most violent, vicious sports anywhere on the planet—the sport's administrators tolerate none of the nonsense tolerated by the NHL. In 2005, a UK league player named Julian White was suspended for eight weeks for fighting—a suspension that included professional league games and extended to games representing his country—even though the three-member disciplinary panel accepted White's excuse that he was provoked and fought in self-defense.

Like the NFL, the National Basketball Association (NBA)—a more profitable business in the United States than the NHL—deals equally harshly with its players who overstep the boundaries of base-level sportsmanship and respect.

NBA commissioner David Stern has suspended superstar players such as Steve Nash not only for the regular season but also for the all-important and financially lucrative playoffs merely for leaving the bench during an on-court skirmish. Nash never threw a punch, never tried to bite another

player. He merely left the bench to assist a teammate who was embroiled in a skirmish, yet was suspended anyway because the league he works for does not tolerate puffed-up macho nonsense.

When matters have really gotten out of hand in Stern's league—as they did in Detroit between the Pistons and the visiting Indiana Pacers in November 2004, when players fought each other as well as fans in the stands—Ron Artest, the main culprit involved, was suspended for 86 games (73 regular season games and 13 playoff games) while another player was suspended for 30 games.

There has not been another NBA fight in the stands since that night in Michigan.

Incredibly, some hockey traditionalists will hear that comparison, recognize the terrible light in which it casts the NHL's tepid attempts at controlling player behavior, and claim hockey is inherently different from football, rugby, or basketball, that the combination of speed on skates and ensuing collisions necessitates the use of fights and other assault-like actions.

The sport's traditionalists will argue over and over that hockey players are the toughest pro athletes anywhere—and in the same breath they'll tell you why hockey players simply can't "suck it up" and turn the other cheek on cheap shots, the way other athletes in collision sports do.

The sad fact is, hockey players don't need a cheap shot to go off. There aren't many things that take place in the game anymore that don't involve at least a scrum of players, a glove in the face, or a full-on punch at the tail end of it. Every hard body check thrown—whether clean, borderline, or outright dirty, whether thrown at and absorbed by a star player

or a no-name call-up from the minor leagues—results in an escalation of aggressive tactics.

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Is there anyone in the NHL community who can stomach all the on-ice shenanigans without lashing out? Sure. And for more than a decade, the most prominent league employee, after Bettman, was his director of hockey operations, Colin Campbell. Campbell recently relinquished his role as the league's chief disciplinarian, but from 1998 until June 2011, he was the man responsible for determining who committed a hockey crime and who was innocent of any wrongdoing.

It has never been wise to place all or even the majority of blame on Campbell, a former player and head coach who goes to great lengths to be fair (at least by NHL standards). He took direction from Bettman and the owners and was told to interpret a rulebook that is thousands of shades of gray instead of the standard black and white.

Nonetheless, to say Campbell's idea of justice is inconsistent is to say the prices of concession foods at movie theatres are slightly inflated. Campbell's verdicts are like snowflakes—none of them are ever the same, and each one has as much chance of leaving a lasting impression on the suspended player as does a tiny speck of half-frozen rain.

By and large, NHL suspensions come in three varieties. The first is the standard one-, two-, or three-game ban normally given to a first-time offender whose victim suffers only minor injuries (the league always takes into account the effect and not the intent of any action).

The second is the more serious four-to-six-game penalty given to repeat offenders and/or players whose victims suffer a more serious injury. An example of a four-to-six game penalty can be found in the 2010 exploits of Pittsburgh Penguins agitator Matt Cooke. One of the NHL's most-hated players, Cooke earned the eternal hatred of Boston Bruins fans in 2009–10 when he blindsided Bruins center Marc Savard with an elbow to the head that was neither whistled as a penalty nor cited as sufficient cause for an immediate and lengthy suspension. Savard returned in the post-season that year, but was sidelined, perhaps permanently, in February 2011 after suffering another serious concussion that left him dealing with memory problems and other cognitive afflictions. Meanwhile, in the 2010–11 season, the 32-year-old Cooke continued his over-the-borderline play; in consecutive games in February 2011, he was involved in what appeared to be an intentional knee-on-knee hit on Washington Capitals superstar Alex Ovechkin, then checked Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Fedor Tyutin from behind and into the boards headfirst. Both Ovechkin and Tyutin escaped serious injury—but both could have had their careers end in an instant.

Cooke was not suspended for his hit on Ovechkin. On the Tyutin hit, he apparently crossed a line and was suspended. But get this: despite the fact that it was the third time Cooke had been suspended in his 12-year NHL career, and despite injuring Savard less than a year earlier, Cooke only received a four-game ban for the Tyutin hit.

A four-game suspension represents less than five percent of an 82-game regular season. Need anyone wonder why NHLers take revenge into their own hands? If players know the league

will tacitly endorse over-the-top behavior by not levying serious suspensions, isn't their only choice to go vigilante on the guy who "deserved it"?

More importantly, guess what happened after that supposedly strict suspension for Cooke?

Yes, a mere month after his hits on Ovechkin and Tyutin, Cooke came across center ice during a game against the New York Rangers and, as he approached defenseman Ryan McDonagh, jutted out his elbow directly and intentionally into McDonagh's head.

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That brings us to the third variety of NHL suspension: the very rare, double-digit ban handed out in egregious situations where the league cannot avoid serious scrutiny from non-hockey fans and the media.

Cooke's elbow on McDonagh came less than two weeks after the league's 30 GMs had met and, along with Bettman, put together a five-point plan to improve how the league addressed its treatment of the concussion issue. The five points included arena safety improvements, softer equipment, and tougher punishments for repeat offenders. Penguins owner and all-time hockey great Mario Lemieux suggested fines for teams who employ unnecessarily dangerous players—a move that showed leadership considering what he'd pay by having Cooke on the roster.

But here was Cooke, still making no effort to change his ways, still playing as if he had no fear the league would take away a significant portion of his salary, nor seemingly aware that he had devastated the career of Marc Savard, a former star

whose career appears to be over in part because of Cooke's elbow. Cooke had been a player without a conscience in a league without a conscience, at least in terms of the price paid by its key employees. Why would he worry?

Unfortunately for Lemieux, public sentiment on Cooke's behavior had reached its nadir. Critics were openly taunting Lemieux, snidely supposing he and the Penguins organization would—as so many organizations had done before—turn a blind eye to their own player's vicious streak. But showing himself worthy of his earlier words, Lemieux and the Penguins applauded when the NHL reacted to public anger and suspended Cooke for the final 10 games of the 2010–11 regular season and the first round of the playoffs.

Another egregious incident happened in February 2004, when then–Vancouver Canucks winger Todd Bertuzzi punched Colorado Avalanche forward Steve Moore, then landed on top of him—breaking Moore's neck and triggering a lawsuit that had yet to be resolved by the time this book went to press. It's an incident we'll examine in greater detail later in the book.

The public outcry was loud and angry, and the NHL suspended Bertuzzi for the remainder of the 2003–04 campaign, and what it termed "indefinitely." Even then, the league's supplementary discipline department failed to rebuke Bertuzzi as harshly as the situation demanded. Bertuzzi sat out the rest of Vancouver's regular-season games—20 in total—and did not play a single game of hockey in the 2004–05 season. The thing is, very few NHLers played hockey that year—and definitely not in the NHL; remember, that was the season NHL team owners locked out Bertuzzi and the members of the National Hockey League Players' Association (NHLPA).

Now, you can argue that Bertuzzi could've done what some NHLers did during the lockout and play in a professional European league for a seven-figure salary. You'd also be right in saying Bertuzzi's penalty was not insignificant. He has paid a bigger price than many realize or admit. But there is no doubt that many hockey fans and players were disgusted to see Bertuzzi returning to the NHL to begin the 2005–06 season and remain disgusted to see him continue to play through the 2010–11 campaign, while Moore never played another game after being injured.

Through this saga, you can understand why players feel the need to exact their own revenge on the ice. The NHL's administrators certainly aren't looking out for them.

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If you want to see where the NHL's priorities really lie in regard to player safety, you have to look at the recent suspension history of Sean Avery. Like Cooke of the Penguins, Avery's job on the ice is to be a pest—to get under his opponents' skin and sucker them into taking penalties. Avery is arguably the best hockey player in history at that job. As a matter of fact, he's too good at it—so good that he became one of the most loathed players (and not just among fans, but among his fellow NHLers) to play at hockey's best level. Avery does so by going where few players ever go: into his opponents' personal lives, ridiculing or otherwise infuriating them to the point they see red and retaliate physically.

Over his career, Avery had been accused of uttering racial slurs during a game and he'd had nasty run-ins with his own team's coaches and broadcaster. On the ice, he was notorious

for goading opposing players into dropping their gloves to fight him, only to "turtle" (cover his head with his hands and refuse to fight). But in December 2008, Avery committed a sin that—to the hockey world—was worse than anything already on his rap sheet.

At the time, Avery was a member of the Dallas Stars and was in front of a group of media cameras in Calgary prior to a game against the Calgary Flames. Out of nowhere, and seemingly only to amuse himself, Avery began referring to a former girlfriend—Canadian actress Elisha Cuthbert, by then the girlfriend of Flames defenseman Dion Phaneuf—and was less than kind. "I just want to comment on how it's become like a common thing in the NHL for guys to fall in love with my sloppy seconds," Avery said tastelessly as the cameras rolled.

For uttering those 26 words, Avery was suspended six games by the NHL, which also penalized him in an unprecedented manner by forcing him into anger management counseling. Bettman described Avery's comments as the latest in "a type of conduct that is repetitive, inappropriate and perhaps antisocial . . . What guided me in this case was we needed to be clear that this was not acceptable and not representative of what our players do . . . I wanted it to be clear to the fans that this is not something we tolerate, particularly fans with children, who may have to explain to them what this statement was."

Consider what Bettman does and doesn't consider antisocial behavior that could harm the delicate eyes and minds of children: checks from behind, slashing, knee-on-knee attacks, and other on-ice acts of lunacy qualify as normal behavior. Callous and rude *words*, on the other hand, are symptoms of unstable and dangerous mindsets that must be stopped at once.

Don't attempt to apply normal rules of logic here. The NHL operates in its own philosophical vacuum, always doing its best to belittle or disregard any intrusion from the outside (real) world.

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That said, don't kid yourself. When the NHL wants to move quickly to address a problem, it can move with whiplash-inducing speed. With the snap of Campbell's fingers, Avery was suspended for six games—ostensibly for doing nothing more than making a fool of himself in Calgary.

Another incident, in which Avery was also involved, further underscores what the league can accomplish and how quickly it can take action when it has the impetus and backbone to stamp out a particular problem. In April 2008, Avery's New York Rangers took on their archrivals, the New Jersey Devils, in New Jersey for a first-round playoff game. During that game, and in a display of relative ingenuity not seen before on an NHL rink, Avery parked himself in front of Devils goalie Martin Brodeur. Facing Brodeur, Avery began waving his stick—at eye level—in Brodeur's face. The following day, Campbell and the NHL sent out a news release announcing that the unsportsmanlike conduct penalty had been reinterpreted to include swinging a stick in a goaltender's face.

The league can call it a reinterpretation all it wants, but in essence, it made up the Sean Avery Rule—instantly—to address behavior it deemed unseemly.

In the summer of 2010, the NHL also moved quickly to eradicate what it perceived as a problem when star right-winger Ilya Kovalchuk attempted to sign a contract with the

New Jersey Devils. The initial contract Kovalchuk signed was worth $102 million and would have kept him with the organization for a staggering 17 years—what would have been a new NHL record for contract longevity. However, NHL officials rejected the contract the following day on the grounds that the deal "circumvented" salary cap regulations (in part, because of the total term of the contract; and in part, because the payout was heavily skewed and front-end loaded so that Kovalchuk would have been paid the league minimum at the end of the deal). More than six weeks later, and after an arbitrator's decision in the league's favor nullified the contract, the Devils and Kovalchuk submitted a restructured deal that came in at 15 years and $100 million. The league accepted the new contract and ostensibly rewrote the collective bargaining agreement on the fly and in its favor. More evidence the league can take action quickly when there's a will.

Easily the saddest example of how quickly the NHL can move when it wants to is the tragedy of a fan death in Columbus in March 2002. Thirteen-year-old Brittanie Cecil was at Nationwide Arena watching the Columbus Blue Jackets play the Calgary Flames, when a puck deflected over the glass and into the stands behind the net, striking her in the head. Though Cecil left the game under her own power and exhibiting no signs of massive trauma, her skull had been fractured by the puck; she died in an Ohio hospital two days later from complications from a torn vertebral artery.

In response to Cecil's death, the NHL implemented mandatory netting at both ends of all its arenas by the start of the following season. The league understood that not to move quickly to protect its paying customers would be to leave itself vulnerable to liability lawsuits and the negative public optics

of appearing not to have learned a lesson from an unspeakably awful accident.

So, when it is sufficiently motivated to do so, you see that there's never anything that stops the NHL from moving to halt or address a particular situation. The trouble is, when it comes to its most important employees—the players who show up night after night for 82 games during the regular season and then the playoffs—the league always finds a way to rationalize its much slower response to making the game as safe as possible.

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Take the case of Kurtis Foster, a defenseman who was playing for the Minnesota Wild in 2008. While being chased into his own end by San Jose Sharks forward Torrey Mitchell, Foster was knocked into the end boards and broke his left femur. What made things even worse was that there were complications in the operation to repair Foster's femur, such that he nearly died on the operating table and almost had his leg amputated.

And for what? A run-of-the-mill icing play? It made little sense to many people who expected the NHL to finally address the dangerous icing chase and change the rules to a different system—such as a hybrid icing rule in which the league's linesmen have the discretion to whistle the play dead if a linesman believes the defending player will reach the puck before the player chasing him. (Under this scenario, if the linesman believes the attacking player has a chance to reach the puck first, then the race would be allowed to play out.) That wouldn't have eliminated the risk involved, but only minimized it. Yet

even that was too much for NHL officials. The season after Foster's injury, the league did not adopt the hybrid icing rule; instead it passed a rule that said:

> *Any contact between opposing players while pursuing the puck on an icing must be for the sole purpose of playing the puck and not for eliminating the opponent from playing the puck. Unnecessary or dangerous contact could result in penalties being assessed to the offending player.*

In other words, the NHL was prepared to discourage dangerous actions—but only to a certain degree. It was not ready to alter—even slightly—the structure of play to systematically reduce the danger of an icing play. It was prepared to live with more Kurtis Fosters as the cost of doing business.

No wonder Foster spoke out and openly lobbied for more player safety in a TSN interview in 2010. Some people may not comprehend how tough it is for a player to make his voice heard in an NHL community that demands near-total deference to authority; but Foster—who courageously rehabilitated his leg and returned to the league in 2009—spoke up because he didn't want one of his colleagues to suffer a fate similar to or worse than his.

Can you imagine any other game in which an athlete who has overcome a gruesome injury to compete again speaks out and says, "Hey folks, the governing body of my sport isn't doing enough to prevent someone from nearly dying like I did in competition," and that governing body blatantly ignores him and callously carries on?

Can you imagine a warehouse worker narrowly escaping being killed in an industrial accident triggered by a dangerous workplace, and the owner of the warehouse refusing to correct

the conditions? That story would make front-page newspaper headlines in any civilized city on the planet.

Within the NHL's city limits, that's par for the course. In the NHL, players are replaceable. The league has historically held the notion that fans pay to see the team, not individual players or their irreplaceable talents. Team owners and their minions believe what veteran agent Allan Walsh was told at the 2010 NHL All-Star Game in Raleigh, N.C., when the topic turned to concussed and sidelined superstar Sidney Crosby:

> *An NHL executive said to me, "Everybody's whining because [Crosby] is out, but nobody really cares about this issue. All we'll do is find another player to hype and everybody will forget about Sid." I wonder how much of that attitude permeates through NHL headquarters.*

Walsh isn't the only one left wondering. It is only natural to assume NHL team owners are acting primarily in their own best interests as the annals of the NHL are fraught with story after story of NHL owners who treat their players as property and not people—as racehorses to be ridden until their bodies break down.

Virtually every night of every season, players are permitted to cut each other down physically with little to no repercussion to dissuade them from doing the same thing, or worse, next time they're on the ice.

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It truly is hard to know where to begin cataloguing how common over-the-top antics are in the modern-day NHL. We've already covered the madness of Matt Cooke, the insouciance

of Sean Avery, the brutality of Todd Bertuzzi, and the callous indifference toward Kurtis Foster's agony and subsequent crusade. Certainly, the casual observer would wonder, there couldn't be other examples as bad or worse than those?

Surely enough, the observer would discover the horrible truth: that vicious acts of potentially enormous bodily harm are the stock-in-trade of an entire class of professional hockey player; that some of those players—some call them enforcers, but I call them Dancing Bears, as they're giant men trained to perform unnatural acts for a crowd's enjoyment—now train in mixed martial arts in the off-season instead of training as hockey players; and that occasional outbursts of stick-swinging, spearing, and using skates as weapons by the league's so-called "policemen" (usually those same Dancing Bears) are masked by the league with the euphemisms of "letting off steam," "keeping the other team in check," and "boys being boys."

Does the "rap sheet" built up by a 15-year NHL veteran named Chris Simon read like that of a boy being a boy? He used a racial epithet against an opponent, cross-checked a member of the opposing team in the throat, and kneed an opponent. And on each of these occasions, Simon was simply slapped on the wrist.

Not a word of that is an exaggeration, nor does it represent the worst of Simon's behavior. He marauded through the Canadian junior hockey system (racking up 439 penalty minutes in 144 Ontario Hockey League games) and, by the time he made it to the NHL in 1993, was an increasingly rare breed—a fearsome, six-foot-three goon who had real and valuable hockey skills; he scored a career-high 29 goals for Washington in 1999–2000 and finished with at least 10 goals in seven seasons.

But as we see with so many so-called policemen of the game, Simon began to unravel toward the end of his NHL days such that his increasingly animalistic acts essentially forced the league to wash its hands of him.

Over a nine-month span in 2007, Simon (at the time, a New York Islander) was suspended a total of 55 games for two separate, repugnant incidents. The first time, he was banned 25 games in March for swinging his stick directly and intentionally into the face of another player; the second time, he was suspended 30 games in December for purposefully stepping down with his skate on an opponent's leg.

Remember, this is someone the hockey establishment wants you to believe makes the game safer. The NHL argues that Simon's ability to throttle an opponent polices other players into playing responsibly. But clearly, "policemen" such as Simon wind up breaking the league's laws as often as any other type of player.

The relative heavy-handedness of the suspensions must have struck like thunderbolts to Simon's psyche. After all, prior to 2007 the longest Simon had been suspended was three games for the racial slur; he was suspended for only one game for the cross-check across the throat; and two games for the kneeing incident.

Before 2007, Simon was suspended on six occasions yet only sat out a total of 10 games. And so the pattern we saw with Bertuzzi emerges again: the NHL and hockey's culture failed to send a no-nonsense message to an overly aggressive player early in his career. When that aggression bubbled over, the game's establishment instantly reclassified him as a pariah.

Simon attempted to blame the stick-swinging incident on what he called a concussion suffered at the hands of Rangers

goon Ryan Hollweg, the player at whom Simon swung his stick. Then, the day after he stepped down with his skate on the leg of Penguins agitator Jarkko Ruutu, Simon agreed to take a voluntary leave from the Islanders saying he needed time away from the game.

The league was happy to oblige Simon and handed him the second-longest suspension in history, behind only Marty McSorley's one-year ban in 1999–2000 for his assault on Donald Brashear. Simon came back for one more game with the Islanders and was then traded to Minnesota Wild, where he played the final 10 games of his NHL career. Following that, Simon signed to play in the Russia-based Kontinental Hockey League; in more than 40 games in his first year, he racked up 263 penalties. Apparently, if he'd learned any lessons from his eight previous suspensions, it was that there are only so many times you can run amok in the NHL before you have to take your Dancing Bear act elsewhere.

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In the enforcer community, little has changed since Simon last played an NHL game—both in terms of player attitudes and supplementary discipline. That's illustrated perfectly by examining the trials, tribulations, and psychotic episodes of goon Trevor Gillies, who also happened to be wearing an Islanders jersey when he snapped on the ice twice in 2011.

If you didn't know any better, the story of Gillies would sound inspirational. Here was a career minor-leaguer enjoying his first extended stretch of NHL games at the advanced age of 32. All Gillies' bus rides in the ECHL and American League

since turning pro in 1999 were finally paying off with a major-league salary of $500,000.

However, scratch the surface of that story and you'll quickly sniff out the rotten forces responsible for Gillies' ascent to the Islanders roster.

In his first professional season, Gillies amassed 240 penalty minutes (PIMs) in 61 games. In his sophomore year, he "improved" that number—to 303 PIMs in 63 games. The year after that, he had 341 PIMs in 69 games. Unlike Simon, Gillies has no discernible talents other than his ability to maim while keeping his balance on a pair of skates. Since 1999, Gillies has scored eight goals (never more than two in a single season at any level) and 40 points in 619 games as a pro. He does have 2,739 PIMs in those 619 games, though.

Gillies never deserved to wear an NHL jersey at all. He was playing regularly as an Islander in 2010–11 mainly because of the fighting fetish of GM Garth Snow—who enjoyed throwing down his gloves and fighting on a number of occasions as an NHL goalie—and because of a slew of injuries to Isles players possessing actual NHL talent. Indeed, the Isles already had Zenon Konopka—a tough guy who racked up 265 PIMs for the Tampa Bay Lightning in 2009–10—to "stick up" for teammates.

But Gillies was out there anyway, averaging 5.2 shifts and a whopping 2:52 of ice time per game when he wasn't a healthy scratch from the lineup, barely appearing on the official score sheet unless he was drilling his fists into the head of a fellow member of the NHLPA. Even in that small window of playing time, Gillies turned out to be much like Simon and most of the enforcer types in the game: incapable of demonstrating self-discipline while demanding it from players on the other team.

On February 12, 2011, the Islanders were hosting the Pittsburgh Penguins. The game was being contested nine days after the two teams last played in a fight-filled affair highlighted—or, depending on your perspective, "low-lighted"—by a goalie fight that saw Penguins netminder Brent Johnson floor Isles counterpart Rick DiPietro with a single punch that broke several bones in DiPietro's face and sidelined him for weeks.

So much for those arguing that nobody gets injured in a fight. Throughout this book, you'll see many examples proving otherwise.

Naturally, Campbell and the NHL hadn't disciplined anyone involved in the DiPietro/Johnson fight. If they would have done so, they might have calmed the anger of those on both sides who were seeking retribution; but because they did not, when the two teams clashed again nine days later, Gillies became what the North American game's culture had trained him to become: a merciless, manic, heat-seeking missile bent on revenge.

In hockey's twisted "code," Gillies got that revenge—though not by trading punches with Johnson (who had to defend himself against Micheal Haley, yet another goon-type Isles player, in one of many disgraceful moments in the game). Instead, Gillies elbowed Penguins left-winger (and non-goon) Eric Tangradi in the face, punching him several times while Tangradi was down on the ice and taunting him from one of the exit areas to the ice surface.

Gillies wasn't alone in his abject stupidity during that February 11th debacle of a game; in total, 65 penalties were assigned (including 15 fighting majors and 20 misconducts) and 10 players were ejected. But, other than the automatic

10-game suspension Penguins winger Eric Godard received for leaving the bench and joining the fracas, Gillies received the harshest suspension—nine games.

I don't believe that subjecting Gillies to suspension totaling little more than 10 per cent of an 82-game regular season was enough. But for argument's sake, let's say he received a fair suspension, served his time, and deserved a second chance. Want to guess what he did in his first game back after that suspension (when the Isles took on the Minnesota Wild on March 2)?

If you guessed that he played two shifts without incident, but during his third shift, he reacted to seeing a teammate being hit from behind and into the boards by blindsiding another opponent with a targeted elbow and fist to the head, you'd be absolutely right. Gillies played a total of 1:51 against the Wild that night, and when Minnesota agitator Cal Clutterbuck knocked Isles center Justin DiBenedetto into the side boards, Gillies immediately exploded into Clutterbuck with the intent of doing maximum damage to the Wild winger's upper body.

Clutterbuck wasn't seriously injured on the play, but with the NHL's new rule banning blindside headshots regardless of a victim's condition, and with Gillies' newfound notoriety coming out of the Penguins brawl, it would have been easy, understandable, and admirable for the league to suspend him for the Islanders' remaining 17 regular season games and attempt to put other reckless players on notice.

Instead, the NHL suspended Gillies for 10 games—one more than he got for the serious transgression he committed less than a week-and-a-half earlier. And in the future, if he does something as reprehensible as either of his prior incidents, one

can only assume, based on the league's last ruling, that he'll be suspended for 11 games next time.

• • •

But it's not only the goons who are responsible for the on-ice incidents that stain the game or deprive it of its precious talents (i.e., the skills and personalities of the players). Sometimes it's the most well-liked players who are in the spotlight for the wrong reasons.

That was true on March 8, 2011, when towering Boston Bruins defenseman Zdeno Chara shoved Montreal Canadiens left-winger Max Pacioretty into an iron stanchion in Montreal's Bell Centre arena. Because the play happened on a puck chase, with both players pushing at full speed, when Chara pushed Pacioretty as he went to move by him and down the ice, Pacioretty's head went directly into the stanchion and, after coming to a halt, he wasn't moving.

The crowd and both benches were hushed instantly, all fearing they might have just witnessed a death on the ice. Luckily, Pacioretty "only" suffered a severe concussion and a fractured vertebra in his neck.

As with every instance of NHL violence, the aggressor (in this case, Chara) said he meant no intentional harm to the victim. And on some level, he should be believed; at six-foot-nine and 225 pounds, Chara is one of the biggest players in league history and could severely injure virtually anyone if he so chose—or even if he didn't mean to, as he repeated often after the Pacioretty incident.

Canadiens fans were angry and genuinely incensed—sure, primarily because this was one of their beloved Habs players

who was hurt, but there was a legitimate second aspect to their rage: they were upset with the direction in which the sport was headed and wanted the NHL to address their concerns.

Naturally, the NHL did no such thing. The league announced Chara would face neither a fine nor a suspension and called the incident a "hockey play." To be fair, on virtually every shift and in every game there are similar chases like the one that hurt Pacioretty. But in the past, the league has said a player's injury can be a factor in supplemental discipline—and yet it obviously didn't make a difference here.

And that view, in itself, made even more people angry. Incredibly, Air Canada—a longtime advertiser with the league and a charter airline for a number of NHL teams—sent the NHL an angry letter signed by the airline's director of marketing and communications, Denis Vandal, which read:

> *As a strong supporter and sponsor of NHL Hockey in Canada and several U.S. cities, Air Canada is very concerned with the state of hockey today. While we support countless sports, arts and community events, we are having difficulty rationalizing our sponsorship of hockey unless the NHL takes responsibility to protect both the players and the integrity of the game. From a corporate social responsibility standpoint, it is becoming increasingly difficult to associate our brand with sports events which could lead to serious and irresponsible accidents; action must be taken by the NHL before we are encountered with a fatality.*
>
> *Unless the NHL takes immediate action with serious suspensions to the players in question to curtail these life threatening injuries, Air Canada will withdraw its sponsorship of hockey.*

When is the last time you heard any business partner of a professional league openly question the league's safety standards? Yet that's the corner the NHL's carnival of violence had pushed Air Canada into.

Canadiens owner Geoff Molson also spoke out after Chara escaped punishment, writing the league his own strongly worded letter and alerting the NHL to his serious concerns for the sport's future.

> *The news of the NHL decision [on not punishing Chara] was a hard blow for both the players and fans of the Montreal Canadiens. It was one which shook the faith that we, as a community, have in this sport that we hold in such high regard.*
>
> *The Montreal Canadiens organization does not agree with the decision taken yesterday by the National Hockey League . . . [o]ur organization believes that the players' safety in hockey has become a major concern, and that this situation has reached a point of urgency. At risk are some of the greatest professional athletes in the world, our fan base and the health of our sport at all levels. Players' safety in hockey must become the ultimate priority and the situation must be addressed immediately. As a proud father of three hockey players, I want to help create a healthy and safe experience for them, and I certainly never want any family to go through what the Pacioretty's* [sic] *are experiencing at this moment.*
>
> *We understand and appreciate hockey being a physical sport, but we do not accept any violent behavior that will put the players' health and safety at risk. On this specific issue, I am asking for the support of the 29 other NHL owners, to*

address urgently this safety issue. And I am willing to play a leadership role in coordinating this group effort.

Within the ownership community, Molson already had a philosophical partner in Penguins owner Mario Lemieux, who was unafraid to speak out, even at the risk of being subjected to Bettman's wrath. (Bettman has survived as NHL commissioner since 1993 in part because he has established a certain iron-fisted approach with owners who stray out of line. He has not been above having the league sue a team—as it did with the New York Rangers over website strategy—and his opinion matters greatly to the NHL's most powerful governors/owners.)

Molson and Lemieux gained another notable member of their outraged owners group in the Ottawa Senators' Eugene Melnyk, who—after the Pacioretty incident—went on a Toronto sports radio station to voice his disgust.

"I've been the lone wolf on this for years," said Melnyk. "These goons trying to decimate elite players . . . [it] happened to us with [Senators star Jason] Spezza . . . now [it] happened to *the* elite player in [Sidney] Crosby . . . it's going to continue unless radical stuff happens." Melnyk envisions an easy solution to the madness: "You hit a guy in the head . . . you're gone," he told The Fan 590. "You don't play hockey anymore . . . [that's the] only way to do it."

Melnyk also was very clear in expressing his feelings about fans who loudly moan whenever the topic of fighting is broached.

"[I] don't care about what anybody says about 'we need some violence,'" Melnyk said. "[G]o to wrestling . . . go to cage fighting . . . don't do it in a hockey game with elite players."

The strong rhetoric used by Air Canada and the three NHL team owners—with Lemieux, as you'll see in a couple paragraphs from now, as angry as anyone—was an undeniable indication that the united front the NHL claims to have among its owners and business partners is anything but. The direction of the league is as debatable inside NHL boardrooms as it in the public sphere.

Although relics such as Boston Bruins owner Jeremy Jacobs and Philadelphia Flyers owner Ed Snider still hold much power in NHL boardrooms, Melnyk, Lemieux, and Molson are the wave of future NHL owners. They appreciate players as emotional as well as business investments and are unwilling to let social codes from a bygone era rob them of those investments. They know that consumers of their product give their hearts and wallets over to NHLers and can be lost as fans/consumers if those players are forced out of the game by injuries that could have been prevented.

• • •

Less than a day after the suspensions for the Pittsburgh/Islanders February 11th gong show of a game were announced, an incensed Mario Lemieux issued an extraordinary statement tearing into the NHL and its feeble disciplinary process.

"What happened Friday night on Long Island wasn't hockey," Lemieux said that Sunday. "It was a travesty. It was painful to watch the game I love turn into a sideshow like that."

(Some heavily criticized Lemieux for employing Matt Cooke on his roster. That is valid to a degree, but bear in mind that: (a) Cooke has other skills, having scored 10 or more

goals in nine seasons; and (b) some think it is better to have a dangerous player on your side than looking across at you as a member of the opposition. In any case, Lemieux has warned Cooke that his actions will no longer be tolerated by the organization and the player appears to be down to his last shot with the Penguins.)

As we've seen in this chapter, the NHL game has been governed for decades by a clear and intentional philosophy, one that has made it culturally permissible to let players cannibalize each other's talents and earning abilities as professionals.

In some aspects, the NHL is miles ahead of where it once was in terms of player safety. But overall, it isn't close to where it should be. That's why the list of players sacrificed to the hockey gods by the growing plague of head injuries has grown in number every year. That's why Sidney Crosby's career was threatened when he hadn't yet turned 24 years old. That's why—except for in the most extreme of circumstances—you can commit any act of aggression on an NHL rink and expect to be suspended for no more than five percent of your season.

That's why Mario Lemieux, who played with a grace and determination like few others, can now talk with the same fear and disgust as the ankle-breaking Bobby Clarke did in wondering why players no longer bodycheck simply to separate an opponent from the puck.

It's why Lemieux and Clarke can speak with the same unease as former player and GM Mike Milbury. A longtime advocate of fighting—and a man who, during his playing career, once jumped into the stands of the Boston Garden to fight a fan with a shoe—Milbury spoke out in March 2011, questioning the need for designated fighters and ridiculing the

age-old, pro-fighting argument that fisticuffs help the players themselves police the game.

You don't have to play the game in a particular way to know something's amiss.

And, that's why the game needs to change at hockey's highest levels. A different approach is necessary both to protect the elite and irreplaceable talent, and to curb recklessness in the amateur leagues, where normal kids and beer leaguers have to live with the aftermath of irresponsible acts. Fittingly, then, Lemieux reserved his strongest sentiments for the league:

> *The NHL had a chance to send a clear and strong message that those kinds of actions are unacceptable and embarrassing to the sport. It failed. We, as a league, must do a better job of protecting the integrity of the game and the safety of our players. We must make it clear that those kinds of actions will not be tolerated and will be met with meaningful disciplinary action.*
>
> *If the events relating to Friday night reflect the state of the league, I need to rethink whether I want to be a part of it.*

At a time when hockey's bloodlust hovers as a threat to its professional and amateur ranks, who can blame him?