

# ONE

Hockey players live by a complex set of unwritten rules known as “The Code”: always fight in your own weight class, never sucker punch anyone, don't instigate a fight when a tired player is coming off the ice, and always stop throwing punches after a player falls to the ground. William Murphy didn't live by The Code.

William Murphy was one of the meanest enforcers who had ever played in the minor leagues. He routinely led the league in fighting majors and had ended the careers of numerous hockey players. He had the unique honor of holding the record for the longest suspension imposed on a defenceman – nearly an entire season – for the blindside boarding penalty he took on a Number One prospect. Although the criminal courts found him not guilty of the incident which left the young Winger paralyzed, a civil court had imposed a staggering civil judgment which would never be collected by the family.

Truth be told, Murphy wasn't an enforcer in the true sense of the word. Enforcers are specified role players whose purpose is to protect high-talent individuals and to be a deterrent to other teams taking liberties with your team. Murphy just wanted to inflict pain.

When he checked a player into the boards, Murphy didn't just try to remove the puck from the player. He designed his hits in an attempt to maximize pain. He came in low. He drove up hard. He left his feet. And he always finished his checks.

No one was quite sure where he came from. He seemed to burst into everyone's attention later than most Canadian players, who began playing peewee

pond hockey as soon as they could walk. Indeed, it was a rite of passage in remote Manitoba where hockey sticks were more common than Frisbees in San Diego.

One thing was for certain – his on-ice ferocity paled in comparison to the off-ice stories of his personal relationships. Often traded between teams as a result of his off-ice performance, Murphy was known as a hot-head with a short trigger fuse and no tolerance for bullshit. As a result, he had never received the level of fame that other enforcers in the league enjoyed. And that was fine with him.

As he pulled his car into the rink's parking lot, Murphy popped open the glove box and fumbled around for a bottle of prescription pills. He rattled the jar reflexively and noticed that, while running low, he would have enough to get through the next day or so. He then opened the jar and poured half a dozen into his meaty hand, tossed them into his mouth, and gobbled them down.

Today's game was gonna be a beaut. The last time he had played the Remparts he had taken liberties with their Top Line Center. The Remparts had picked up their own Enforcer, hoping to keep things in check. His name was Pierre LaSalle and he was bigger and younger than Murph. He knew there was going to be an issue.

Murphy walked into the locker room and pulled out his gear for the thousandth time. You really can't prepare yourself for the olfactory onslaught that is a hockey dressing room – old, wet sweaters that didn't have enough time to bake in the sun and simply wouldn't smell right no matter how many dryer sheets you stuffed into your bag.

As the team dressed, Murphy sat in a big corner alone. This was usually the spot that was reserved for the goalie since he had so much gear, but when Murphy was traded to this team he had plopped his gear down in this coveted spot on the first day and no one had the guts to suggest that he should clear out. He had sat there ever since.

As was custom, Murphy was the last one to leave the dressing room. The young kids wanted to get out early and warm up. They would stretch and practice shooting. They would do passing drills and work on contingency situations. Not Murphy. He would wait until everyone cleared out, gobble a couple more pills, and then hit the ice.

As he was dry-gulping a couple of pills, his coach walked in.

“Murphy, get your ass out there.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

“And listen, I don’t want any bullshit with La Salle, you understand.”

Murphy looked up confused. Why the hell not? There were times when a coach would actually tell a player not to fight – like when you had a one goal lead or you were in a playoff game. But this was not it. In fact, it was the opposite. Murphy had thrown down the gauntlet at the last meeting with the Remparts and LaSalle was specifically brought on to even the score. He knew that. He brought it on himself.

It was not like he was looking forward to it. Or that he wanted it. It was just a fact. That was what he did. And it was time to go to work.

Murphy walked through the tunnel and stepped onto the ice. As he did, both teams were doing shooting drills: rotating around the ice as fast as they could, passing, and shooting on their own goalie to warm them up. Both sides were careful to stay on their own side of the Red Line, the halfway mark of the hockey rink.

Murphy jumped on and started circling the rink, not in the same pattern as the rest of the players, but in his own outer orbit. He was going about 1/3 speed and staring directly at the guys on the other side of the Red Line. His eyes locked on LaSalle.

Murph came around on the next cycle and crossed over the Red Line in a lazy circle about 10 feet into Rempart territory. This was another violation of the unwritten Code and did not go unnoticed. As he passed through Rempart territory he glanced at LaSalle and shook his wrists in front of him – an invitation to fight. LaSalle stood up.

By the time Murphy had made it around the rink again, La Salle was standing 6 inches on his side of the Red Line. This was a provocative act to be sure. Most players would have skated by and dropped a shoulder or extended a stick into LaSalle, thus provoking a reaction.

But Murphy was not like other players.

He skated toward him in an uninterested way. They would have their opportunity later. Hell, the refs were not even on the ice yet. However, just as he was passing, Murphy took the butt end of his stick and jammed it squarely in LaSalle's gut.

LaSalle grunted and started to bend over, but he would never make it. Before he had the chance, Murphy was on him. He had dropped his gloves and caught him right on the chin when he wasn't looking. LaSalle immediately crumpled.

Murphy jumped on him and started reigning blows on his head. He got in three or four good unprotected shots before he was dog-piled by every member of the Remparts.

Murphy's teammates jumped in. No matter how much they hated him, he was still their guy. And an enormous line brawl broke out. With no referees on the ice and a massive 20-on-20 brawl, there was no one to stop it.

Some of the young kids grabbed one of the other French-Canadian pussies and just held them so that they could not be accused of being weak. Others fought until both tired out and then then fell to the ground and simply held onto each other.

Not Murphy.

In violation of virtually every aspect of the unwritten Code, Murphy continued to struggle with La Salle. As the players began to start to peel people off of the scrum pile, Murphy stopped struggling and reached down for LaSalle's hand. He grabbed his left wrist with one hand, wrapped his other hand around LaSalle's thumb, and pushed backwards until he heard the bone snap. It was a compound fracture and pieces of the broken bone had pierced LaSalle's skin and were sticking out.

LaSalle groaned but did not scream – he was too tough for that.

And, just as soon as it had started, the fight was over.

As the players and newly arrived refs started to unpile the players, they noticed the red patch of frozen blood on the bottom on the pile. LaSalle, the consummate warrior, had simply skated off, cradling his thumb with his other hand. Murph, for his part, knew it would be just a matter of time before the cameras determined that he had instigated the fisticuffs and simply skated back into the room as the refs attempted to chip out the frozen blood and re-fill the hole with cold water.

Back inside the locker room, the reaction was swift. Murphy's coach was on him in an instant.

"What the hell was that?"

"Unfinished business."

"I told you not to start anything with LaSalle."

"I didn't."

"Like hell you didn't."

"Whatever."

Murphy wasn't being disrespectful. He just really didn't care.

"You think you are untouchable, but you are not."

"You need me more than I need you. I am the only thing that brings people in for these games. We are 30 points out of the playoffs. We suck. People know we suck. They come out to see me."

"Not anymore."

“What are you saying?”

“I’m done, Murphy. Clear out your shit.”

“You really want that? Would you rather have me breaking thumbs for you or sign with someone else and come back and break O’Hurley’s thumb?”

O’Hurley was the Number Two pick in the draft. He was headed to the NHL as soon as he was seasoned. Everyone knew that. But with a broken thumb – especially on his shooting hand – his career would be over before it ever got started.

“No one will take you.” But the coach knew that there was always someone who needed a guy like Murphy. They might not *want* him, but they always *needed* him.

“We’ll see.”

Murphy left his gear wear it was and started putting on his street clothes – a T-shirt and jeans, not the suit and tie like everyone else wore when they showed up. It seems like being an enforcer had a few fringe benefits.

Murph dressed and cleared the locker room before the rest of the team had returned from the first period. As he was talking to his car, he thought about the irony. In less than 20 minutes, he had been involved in the largest minor pre-game scrum ever, broken the thumb of one of the league’s leading enforcers, been fired, and cleared out his gear.

He plopped into the seat of his car and opened his glove box. Down to a dozen pills. Not enough. He would need to call Alan. This wouldn’t get him through the weekend.

He drove straight away to a liquor store and hopped out of the car. He walked directly to the guy at the front counter and stared completely through him at the liquor wall behind him.

“Give me a fifth of Vodka.”

“What kind?”

“Soli. No wait, give me that one with the Number 3 on it.”

“That’s not a Number 3. That’s some commie letter.”

“All I know is it says 100 proof. Give me that one.”

Murph hobbled back to his car, plopped into the seat, and uncracked the seal. He upended the bottle swallowing about 1/3 of it and noticed how his hands still smelled like the inside of his hockey gloves. He re-capped the bottle and exhaled sharply.

Just then, his cellphone rang.

“Yeah.” Murph took another swig, uninterested. The caller spoke, saying a single word, and suddenly Murphy sat up ram rod straight. “What did you say?”

The car was silent except for the hum of the neon lights from the liquor store. Murphy listened intently and pondered the call. After a moment he said, “Understood. I’m on my way.”

He pressed the “End” button, rolled down his window, and tossed what was left of the bottle of Russian Vodka out of his window.