

LA KINGS LEGEND BERNIE NICHOLLS: "I WAS NEVER EVER DIAGNOSED WITH CONCUSSIONS"

👤 Ryan Cowley 🕒 December 8, 2015



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It is an issue that has become increasingly prevalent over the past decade, making it increasing more difficult for even the most stubborn to ignore. For a sport as fast-paced and as hard-hitting as hockey, many of its athletes — both retired and active — have suffered alarming ramifications from their respective playing careers. One such case is that of **Los Angeles Kings** legend **Bernie Nicholls**.

This past July, Nicholls wrote an article for the **New York Daily News** explaining the brain damage he suffered over the course of his 17-year NHL career. Nicholls also explained why he is suing the **National Hockey League**, noting of his playing career that “although satisfying and enjoyable at the time, led to permanent brain damage and has irreparably damaged” his health.

Nicholls, however, pointed out how grateful he was for the career he had.

“Getting the call to play in the NHL was a pivotal moment in my life,” Nicholls noted in his article. “I am from a small town in Ontario, one of no more than 100 people. While we only have one garage, one store, one laundromat and one restaurant, we have a lot of hockey. And when I heard I was going to the Los Angeles Kings, it felt like I was going from the smallest place in the world to the biggest city. And although it was a culture shock at first, the move allowed me to play the sport at a higher level than I ever imagined.”

Unfortunately for the former 70-goal-scorer, the stringent realities of playing hockey at the highest level set in quickly as Nicholls “began to understand the rigors, the consequences of playing in the NHL.”

While he was blessed to “play alongside legends like Wayne Gretzky” and to play in cities like **Los Angeles**, **New York** and **Chicago**, Nicholls was “taking serious and severe hits to the head, many of which were concussions that teams and the league ignored and failed to document.”

Last month, I spoke to the Kings legend about the injuries he suffered during his playing career.



Bruce Bennett | B Bennett

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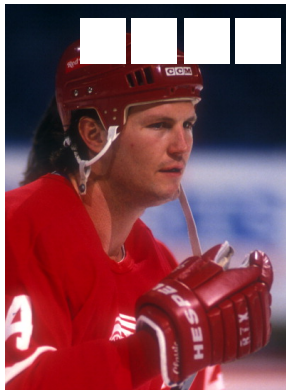
"I never really had any treatment during my career," Nicholls told me. "I was never ever diagnosed with concussions. Like, I tell people I got my jaw broken, and I'm pretty sure I got a concussion that day but nothing was diagnosed as a concussion. It was just a broken jaw."

Nicholls went on to admit that while he did receive treatments for concrete injuries like his aforementioned broken jaw or even a cut above the eye, the notion of having a concussion was virtually nonexistent.

"I took 25 stitches, I got hit with a stick in the head, above my eye," Nicholls continued. "I got stitches, so no one said anything about a concussion, so I never really— I didn't get diagnosed during any time in my career as concussions but I'm pretty sure I had them."

While he has been retired for 16 years, Nicholls continues to struggle with everyday symptoms stemmed from his playing career.

"Now, on a daily basis, I get dizzy, my memory loss is not good," Nicholls added. "So, what bothers me the most is that I'm dizzy all the time— well, not all the time but when I look up or if I put my head down without a pillow or something, I'll get dizzy."



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In 1982-83, Bernie Nicholls registered what would stand as a career-high of 124 penalty minutes. He would exceed the 100-penalty-minute twice more but was never known as a fighter in the NHL. His 475 goals and 1209 points in 1127 games helped Nicholls' notoriety as a point-producer supersede that of an enforcer. Still, Nicholls has suffered similar symptoms to that of NHL enforcers.

Following his sudden passing in 2010, **Bob Probert's** brain was donated to **Boston University** for examination.

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Probert, arguably the most notorious fighter to ever grace an NHL rink, had his brain studied by neurosurgeon **Robert Cantu** and his team at BU. The team also studied the brain of **Reggie Fleming**, an NHL enforcer from the 1960's, and discovered that both had died with **Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy**, which is defined by www.bu.edu as "a progressive degenerative disease of the brain found in athletes (and others) with a history of repetitive brain trauma, including symptomatic concussions as well as asymptomatic subconcussive hits to the head."

The concussion issue was then resurfaced in 2011 when, within the span of three-and-a-half months, enforcers **Derek Boogaard**, **Rick Rypien** and **Wade Belak** all died — the former from a mixture of painkillers and alcohol; the latter two from suicide.

While it was revealed that Rypien and Belak both suffered from depression, it was unclear if either case was brought on from the physical impact of fighting in the NHL. As for Derek Boogaard, his brain, like Probert's and Flemings', was examined by the aforementioned neurosurgery team at Boston University. It was discovered that Boogaard, also like Probert and Fleming, suffered from CTE, a close relative to Alzheimer's disease — and to think that the former **Minnesota Wild** big man was only 28 when he passed.



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Fortunately, Bernie Nicholls is not only still with us but remains active in the hockey — and sports — community. Always happy to participate in a charity game, Nicholls took part in a game that benefited the **Be The Match** foundation in El Segundo, Calif., just two weeks after our conversation. Even after being traded by the Kings 25 years ago, Nicholls remains a fan favourite in Los Angeles not only for his on-ice prowess during his playing days but for his positive attitude and infectious personality off it. Even better, Nicholls served as a coaching consultant for the club when they won their first Stanley Cup in 2012.

Nicholls is one of 60 former NHLers suing the league. The suit was filed by the former players in November 2013 following the news of 4,500 former NFL players, who had issued similar concussion-related complaints about the NFL, reaching a settlement with the league.



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For more information on the lawsuit, written by TSN Senior Correspondent Rick Westhead, [click here](#).

With all due respect to the other three major North American sports, hockey is, in many ways, the most beautiful of them all. The crisp, fluid motion of the skating, the elegance of two or three players gliding the puck from one stick blade to another, the gracefulness of the puck hitting the twine of the net followed by thousands of fans clad in their team's colours whether it's a jersey, T-shirt or enough paint to laden their entire bodies, it's like nothing else. But if those who play this beautiful game have to deal regular symptoms that would alter their short- and long-term health, it leaves a stain on the sport and worse, on the lives of each and every one of those players.

At the end of the day, this writer believes that the National Hockey League has what it takes to do the right thing. This is a case that does not have to — and does not need to — end in tragedy. The likes of Bob Probert and Derek Boogaard may not be with us anymore, but Bernie Nicholls and many more still are, and as long as they are, they can — and should — be helped to lead happier, healthier lives.

It is not time for the National Hockey League to cry but to sweat. For their former players who helped mold the league — and the game overall — to what it has become to the current players who help the league be the success it is today, the NHL owes it to everyone who steps onto the ice for every game they possibly can, to those who regularly put their health — and even their lives — at risk to suit up for this beautiful game they would have played for free because they love it that much. Unfortunately, if nothing is done, those priceless childhood memories playing hockey on the frozen pond, in the driveway or at the local arena will become increasingly more difficult to keep for many of these players. That alone should be enough to lend a helping hand.

That is but a small favour to ask of a league that has garnered more revenue and overall success than they know what to do with.