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NOTICE: This is an archived version of the following article: Sorokan, K. (2016). Life after the hits: You don't have to be a professional athlete to deal with the effects of repeated concussions. *The Scavenger*, 3. Retrieved from <https://macewanjournalism.com/2158-2/>

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Life after the hits

You don't have to be a professional athlete to deal with the effects of repeated concussions

By Keenan Sorokan



Mike Funk remembers waking up on the ice, convinced he was Eric Lindros.

THE MURMUR of the crowd builds until it reaches a roar. Then, the bright lights hit, painful and blinding. The player can't bear to open his eyes for more than few seconds. Skates zip by, the blades carving the ice with their distinctive *ssshhhh*. A coach kneels and shouts. Familiar words make no sense.

"What is your name? Where are you? What period is it?"

The player looks up and replies: "My name is Eric Lindros, and we're losing 7-2. I gotta get back out there."

He stops talking and starts to vomit.

His name is not Eric Lindros. It's Mike Funk. And that wasn't his first concussion. Nor would it be his last. He thinks he may have had 18, but this one was unlike anything before. It left him easily confused and with barely any balance. This was a bad one, and there was nothing he could do about it.

So began another state of utter helplessness.

"It's like a throbbing behind your eyes that will move to your forehead," he says. "When it gets to the front of your forehead, that's when you get the sensitivity to light and to movement, and everything like that. It just slowly works its way up there. You can feel it build up – 15 minutes or so. Every heartbeat, it goes another bit further. There's nothing you can do to stop it.

"I was a zombie."

Funk has a tough time describing his past of head injuries. Opening up isn't the obstacle; remembering is. He pauses several times as he tries to recall what happened that night he told coaches he was former Philadelphia Flyers centre Eric Lindros. Then, he looks up and says, "I don't remember my Grade 10 year at all."

It's something he hasn't said very often. He does remember years of coaches of who treated head injuries as if they were tests of endurance.

"I remember being told countless times, 'You just got your bell rung. Get back out there. Get back out there!'"

Stories like these are cause for worry for men like Dhiren Naidu, one of Canada's foremost sport-concussion experts. He's an associate professor in the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry at the University of Alberta, and the head physician for the Edmonton Oilers, the Edmonton Eskimos and the U of A Golden Bears football team.

He presented research at the fifth International Consensus Conference on Concussion in Sport in Berlin in October, a collaborative effort of some of the top sports bodies in

the world. FIFA, IIHF, IOC, World Rugby and the International Federation for Equestrian Sports all played roles in planning and running the event. Two-hundred of the top experts in the sports community came together to discuss and update everything known about concussions – looking into protocols for treatment, diagnosis and return to play.

The most widely used tool for evaluating athletes with head injuries is the SCAT III (Sport Concussion Assessment Tool), created at the 2004 conference in Prague. It is a medical test designed to evaluate the effects of a possible concussion on the injured athlete.

After the last conference, we can expect the development of SCAT IV.

Though Naidu is tight-lipped about the conference findings, he does say that research is being done in southern Alberta, looking at urine, saliva and blood analysis to detect concussions, rather than relying on how athletes say they feel.

This is a far cry from the way concussion used to be treated, when athletes were simply told to avoid any stimulation – which cuts them off from the outside world.

Funk remembers being sent home after getting a concussion, with instructions to sit in a dark room, turn the lights off and do nothing.

Plucking a player from the sport he loves and sinking him into a dark room with only his thoughts is a positively toxic process, Naidu says.

“That’s not the standard of care for concussion now. What we would tell people is to do relative rest and take away all the stimulating things that bother them, such as screen time and reading, but still do their day-to-day activities.”

THE PREVIOUS conferences have created new standards like relative rest that are globally practiced. The new “Berlin Guidelines” will detail similar findings, hopefully preventing more stories like Funk’s.

Born in Calgary, Funk moved to Brownsville, Texas, with his family at three, when his father began creating and selling RV accessories, which were inspired by Funk playing with Lego. He was groomed to be a salesman from an early age.

“He used to give me a box of levellers, a case of beer, a business card and say, ‘Go give it to that man over there.’ ”

The family moved back to Alberta when Funk was 12, the year he slipped on a patch of ice and got his first concussion.

He was labelled “The American” by classmates and teammates, which created an identity crisis, especially in hockey. Local politics and shallow pockets can prevent a young talent from succeeding in minor hockey. Funk harnessed the mean spirit required to stand out from the crowd, with a borrowed line from his father: “The coach won’t pick you because you’re talented. He’ll pick you if you’re an asshole.”

From that moment, Funk was an aggravator, and that put a target on his back.

Nowadays, Funk is a bullish 25-year-old salesman with a stocky frame and a calm manner. But he speaks about hockey like a man from a much earlier era.

“Gave him a little bit extra elbow grease in the corner.”



Funk thinks he’s had around 18 concussions. His head injuries helped keep him out of the big leagues.

“Shot one off his pillows (goalie pads).”

His hands do most of the explaining, as if words can't do the topic justice. He waxes nostalgic about hockey. Listening to him, you'd think that it was back in the 1970s that he had missed his shot at the pros, not 2007.

That was the year Funk was invited to the WHL Portland Winterhawks' training camp. He had missed the entire previous season because of concussions and hadn't got any attention in the WHL Bantam Draft because of it. So he went to camp with a lot to prove, and with shoulder pads that were far too big.

Only 12 days in, Funk took a hit during an exhibition game in Moose Jaw, Sask., which derailed his ambitions. With his arm rigid after making a pass, he was smashed into the boards. His arm collided directly with the boards the way a pole-vaulter jabs a pole into position before lift-off. Because of the oversized padding, his arm was exposed and took the full brunt of the blow. He broke his collarbone in two places and three of the four muscles in his rotator cuff were torn.

FUNK WAS shipped from Moose Jaw to Saskatoon, to Edmonton's Glen Sather Sports Medicine Clinic, where doctors examined him and offered two solutions. He could undergo a tricky operation using metal plates and screws that doctors were vehemently against, but would keep Funk playing hockey. Or he could have a plastic suture repair that would return 85 per cent of the mobility to his arm and provide fewer issues decades later. It also would end Funk's hockey career – at the age of 16.

Both Funk's parents were on vacation in Phoenix and left the decision to their son. Funk was at odds with himself on how to proceed.

“I stayed up the whole night crying,” he recalls. “When they came in to prep for surgery, the doctors asked me what my decision was. I told them to go with the plastic sutures.”

Within 12 hours of being admitted, Funk was in surgery. Six and a half hours later, he was out, with impressive scars to prove it.

Almost immediately, Funk's life began to unravel. His girlfriend left him as he was lying on the hospital bed, and his friends became distant. He says he felt as if was back to being The American.

He was back on the outside looking in.

"I remember it," he says. "It happened on the Monday. Tuesday, everyone was gone."

After two years without competitive hockey, Funk was having trouble moving on, especially after high school.

He describes the next year and a half as the lowest period of his life. He couldn't cope with the loss of his sport, his girlfriend and his friends, and he turned to alcohol and drugs.

He describes the substance abuse as a way of "keeping myself away from my thoughts."

"Just to fuzz the edges enough, so that I didn't have to deal with reality. And the reality was that I was 19 years old, and I was nothing."

A morning glass of milk was soon replaced with a glass of Sambuca liqueur. Experimental drug use became habitual drug use. Finally, Funk traded his '95 GMC Sierra for a weekend fix of ketamine, half the value of the vehicle. He says he's certain that just one more week down that path would have killed him.

The only reason he can tell his story, he says, is that an old classmate saved him.

Kelsey Funk first met her husband at Hillcrest Junior High School, the school that backs onto the modest Elmwood bungalow they now share. Mike was a popular jock and



Funk met his wife at Hillcrest Junior High School in 2004. Their house now backs onto the schoolyard.

came across as conceited. His personality grated on Kelsey at first. Things changed on a hazy night six years later, when Mike got a Facebook message from Kelsey asking to meet for coffee.

He was so high, he didn't even remember the slightest detail of their first date – but he does remember how good it felt. It was enough to change his dangerous substance habits.

“She’s the reason I stopped,” he says. “I’m not going to be able to maintain this and that at the same time, so which one is it going to be: the drugs or her?”

The couple grew close and started to learn about each other’s past.



WHEN KELSEY got curious about Mike’s previous sports injuries, she wasn’t expecting an exhaustive list, but Mike pointed to each part of his body that had been stitched, put in a cast or bandaged.

The injuries hit home for her later that year at Garrison Arena for non-contact ball hockey. The army base’s small playing surface (roughly two-thirds the size of a regular playing surface) allows for a quicker and closer game – a virtue and a vice for Mike’s aggressive playing style.

Kelsey was in the stands that evening to cheer Mike, as she was on every other night. However, that night, she saw an opposing player head-butt Mike as he ran back to the bench between whistles.

When Kelsey was driving him home, Mike told her to go to the hospital instead.

“The more time passed, the less he was starting to remember,” she says. “Eventually, he knew who I was, but he didn’t know how he knew me. He then knew I was important, but he didn’t know my name.”

Funk’s younger sister even showed up to see him during his five-hour stay at the hospital. They talked for several minutes, yet he forgot about her visit moments after she left.

“He was just like a goldfish,” Kelsey says. “He kept resetting.”

Funk couldn’t eat or sleep after the concussion. It was in this traumatized recovery period that Kelsey realized the true toll concussions had taken on him. These weren’t just farfetched stories of a man with exotic battle scars. This was a serious problem that she knew she would be dealing with for decades to come.

“I’m more worried about the future,” she says. “Like Alzheimer’s. Any kind of disorder he can get affecting his memory or affecting his brain. When he starts to get older and deteriorate.”

Kelsey has set the bar at age 40. That’s when Funk is under house orders to fully investigate his head injuries and begin early testing for things like dementia.

He admits the concussions have had adverse affects on his day-to-day life. Imagine feeling a bit of nausea and wondering if you hit your head too hard, or going for a jog and thinking you might have pushed yourself too far, when a headache emerges. Funk says he wonders about these things constantly.

“I don’t feel 25,” he says. “I don’t. I feel like I’m 45.

“I feel like I’m playing a character of myself. Like I’m hiding. I feel like I’m at 90 per cent speed of what everybody else is.”

This was evident through all our conversations. I had to constantly keep Funk on track or clarify gaps and inconsistencies in his stories. This brings up a troubling gap in concussion knowledge and research. There are no clear indicators on how or why these things happen to a man like Funk and not to a professional player who has taken multiple hits.

Naidu points to the specifics of the sports community research. Funk and the countless others like him are essentially falling through the cracks. These are people who suffer concussions without getting the care and rest it takes to recover from one.

“A sport concussion doesn’t mean you have to go and do a job the next morning,” Naidu says. “Most of our athletes don’t necessarily have to do that.

“A beer leaguer ... gets a concussion and has to return to work as an accountant. Or a teenager like Mike, who was going back to high school and living the typical busy life of an active teen.”

Mike Funk has had his life inexplicably altered from repeated head injuries. His identity has been taken from him.

A man who lived for hockey had nowhere to turn when the game suddenly disappeared and took away the life that comes with it.

Funk can’t erase the concussions, but they have erased a large part of him. It has been three years since his last one – the longest time between concussions since he got his first one. Perseverance is his mantra. He says loves his wife, his job and his home. Despite the scars of his past, he says he’s happy where he ended up.

Concussions didn’t define him. They created him.



Even though he's had a rocky past, Funk is constantly moving forward.

Photos by Keenan Sorokan