

HockeyBarn Features

OPEN ICE: Simon Gagne at the Head of the Pack in Concussion Awareness



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Photos for this feature courtesy of [Rich Schultz](#).

When it comes to dealing with concussions and other traumatic head injuries in hockey, 'toughing it out' can no longer be in the playbook. Just ask [Simon Gagne](#).

"As hockey players, we like to play with injury and we think that everything is going to be OK. But this isn't a shoulder or knee injury- it's your head. We need to take the time to get better before going back and playing," Gagne told *HockeyBarn*.

The Flyers left wing missed a total of 57 games last season as a result of suffering a concussion and then two severe hits to the head, all within a few month span.



After receiving the final devastating blow to the head from Jordan Staal in a February 10 loss to Pittsburgh, Gagne was advised by one of his doctors, post-concussion specialist Dr. Jim Kelly, to stay off the ice for the remainder of the season- including the playoffs.

And he listened.

Now that Gagne, 29, is back in a Flyers sweater and playing at the level that got him drafted in the first round in 1998 by Philadelphia, he is thankful for every day he gets to play the game he loves.

He is also actively spreading his wisdom about how not to join the early retirement club.

Gagne's story is in stark contrast to the hero worship previously bestowed on players who toughed it out after a head injury and perhaps returned too soon under the auspices of helping out their team.

With six goals and two assists in his last ten games, and 72 points in 75 games, the speedy [Philadelphia alternate](#) captain has kept his dangerously quick shot and is a major force in leading the Flyers charge into the postseason.

He finds it hard to fathom that last April he was stuck at home "frustrated" watching his teammates run to the 2008 Eastern Conference championship on television, instead of playing alongside them, as he suffered from the effects of post-concussion syndrome.

"Last year I didn't know what was going to happen, because one day I would feel a little bit better and then the next day I was having headaches again," said Gagne.

SWEET RELIEF

While heeding Dr. Kelly's advice of rest and relaxation by toiling many hours on the couch watching TV, Simon happened to catch a local news segment on Scott Greenberg MD of the [Magaziner Center for Wellness](#) in Cherry Hill, NJ. Greenberg was discussing his specialty:



prolotherapy.

A few days later, after consulting with Flyers athletic trainer Jim McCrossin, Simon was in Dr. Greenberg's office.

What is prolotherapy?

"A series of pinpointed shots that help heal nerve damage, spark the bodies immune system, regenerate damaged tissue and strengthen the joints. With prolotherapy, you get pinpoint therapy to the area that is damaged. You don't just get a blanket treatment. It is like getting surgery without getting cut open," according to the New Jersey-based doctor.

Dr. Greenberg, one of the leading prolotherapy specialists in the country, treated Gagne once a week in April and May with a series of 30-50 shots per session targeted to the joints in the neck, head and upper back. The shots combine two anesthetics with an inflammatory agent.

Gagne credits the treatments with allowing him to progress from chronic headaches to feeling OK to being cleared to play in time for 2008 training camp.

"After the first treatment, I saw the result right away. I think prolotherapy was a large factor in me being able to come back this year," said Gagne.

Training camp is one thing, but the career Flyer has now played almost an entire season complete with checks and hits, including some scary shots to the head that thankfully did not result in further injury. Still, he claims he feels better than ever.

His stat line certainly shows it. Gagne kicked off the season with a bang, getting off to the most productive scoring start of his career, with 30 points in his first 21 games, and he is currently second in scoring for the Flyers.

"There was a lot of frustration last year, but now it is all behind me and I am so happy that I am able to play the game I love, and at the same level," added Gagne.

Dr. Greenberg is careful to mention, however, that "Prolotherapy is not something to tinker around with. The injections are around nerves, the spinal cord, major blood vessels and things like that-it can be very dangerous. You need an expert."

Prolotherapy is safe for athletes of any age, according to Dr. Greenberg, and he has treated patients as young as 12. Even with the treatment, he seconds the sentiment that the single most important factor in recovering from traumatic head injury is staying off the ice until you are 100 percent clear of all symptoms.

TIME FOR CHANGE

Gagne has been actively spreading the message of his plight to other players, and adamant that change is needed in the NHL and should be coming soon.

"Hopefully this summer they will take a look at it and they will find something. You see guys getting hurt a lot right now, and you see guys getting elbows and shoulders to the head, which almost always results in a concussion. We need to find something to protect the players."

While he does not claim to have a perfect solution, Gagne offered some suggestions for ways to potentially decrease the number of head injuries.

"Right now you are allowed to make shoulder hits to the head, but you not allowed to make elbow hits to the head, so maybe, let's put both of them together- shoulder and elbow hits to the head will both be penalized. I think that is something that might be tough to call, however."

A similar proposal presented by the NHLPA at the NHL GM Meetings in March requesting that a minor penalty be



assessed for any intentional or unintentional hit to the head was rejected. However, Simon told us that many players are working towards the goal of helping to implement changes over the summer before the start of the 2009-2010 season.

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

Over the last few months, several startling studies on the effects of traumatic head injury in athletes have been released. They all appear to echo a similar warning to the message Simon Gagne has been sharing: it is imperative athletes stay off the ice for a sufficient amount of time after injury as the second (or third or fourth) concussion after not letting the first one properly heal can lead to more struggles now and 15 or 20 years down the line.

One particularly shocking study out of Boston University found that repetitive head trauma in contact sports can cause symptoms of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy(CTE), a degenerative brain disease, in an athlete as young as 18.

Researchers found early symptoms of CTE in the brain of a deceased 18-year old football player. The previous youngest brain to have shown symptoms of CTE was a 36 year-old former NFL player, so the doctors on the study warned that players and their families should take this finding as a powerful message about the implications of concussions in contact sports- even in youth leagues.

Dr. Robert Cantu, a clinical professor of neurosurgery at BU Medical Center and a co-director of the brain study institute, helps lead the on-going study on CTE and explained the shocking find and its implications on contact sports and brain health to *HockeyBarn*.

"The 18 year-old we studied had multiple concussions in football and multiple concussions in other sports, but we had no expectations that we would ever find early symptoms of CTE. It's very provocative- it gives us an idea of just how early this kind of thing can get started."

Patients exhibit symptoms similar to post-concussion syndrome, but the main three symptoms are **1. Dementia** or recent memory loss **2. Depression** and **3. Erratic emotional behavior** characterized by impulsivity or lack of impulse control.

The exact number of sufferers is not known as CTE can only be diagnosed after a person's death and subsequent study of their brain. No former professional hockey players brains have been formally studied by the institute, however, Dr. Cantu warns that he fully expects CTE to be found when they study the brains of former NHL players who have committed to donate their brains to research.

Former Flyer (in addition to former Red Wing, Whaler and Hurricane) Keith Primeau, who was also plagued with multiple concussions, just announced on Friday that he will donate his brain for research after his death to the Sports Legacy Institute.

We should have more answers about CTE and other brain disorders in the future, but the message now is clear. As Simon said,

"It doesn't matter if you take a week, three weeks or three months- make sure you take the proper time and that you're 100% before you go back and play."



Editor's Note: HockeyBarn appreciates the long-term effects that serious head injuries on ice can have, and is a proud supporter of the [Baycrest International Tournament](#). Follow HockeyBarn at the end of April as we document the over 50 NHL alumni that will participate in the charity tournament in Toronto to fund Alzheimer's research.