



Derek Boogaard  
Age 2

## A Boy Learns To Brawl

By JOHN BRANCH

**D**EREK BOOGAARD was scared. He did not know whom he would fight, just that he must.

Opportunity and obligation had collided, the way they can in hockey.

His father bought a program the night before. Boogaard scanned the roster, checking heights and weights. He later recalled that he barely slept.

A trainer in the dressing room offered scouting reports. As Boogaard taped his stick in the hallway of the rink in Regina, Saskatchewan, he was approached by one of the few players bigger than he was. Boogaard had never seen him before. He did not know his name.

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### **PUNCHED OUT**

THE LIFE AND DEATH  
OF A HOCKEY ENFORCER

PART 1

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“I’m going to kill you,” the player said.

The scrimmage began. A coach tapped Boogaard on the shoulder. Boogaard knew what it meant. He clambered over the waist-high wall and onto the ice.

He felt a tug on the back of his jersey. It was time.

The players flicked the padded gloves from their hands. They removed the helmets from their heads. They raised their fists and circled each other. They knew the choreography that precedes the violence.

Boogaard took a swing with his long right arm. His fist smacked the opponent’s face and broke his nose. Coaches and scouts laughed as



MARCUS YAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The plains outside Melfort, Saskatchewan, Derek Boogaard's home for several years of his boyhood and the place he was discovered by hockey scouts.

they congratulated Boogaard.

He was 16.

Boogaard was exhilarated, exhausted, relieved. Maybe the fear was extinguished, but it always came back, like the flame of a trick candle. One fight ended, another awaited. It was a cycle that commanded the rest of his life.

There is no athlete quite like the hockey enforcer, a man and a role viewed alternately as noble and barbaric, necessary and regrettable. Like so many Canadian boys, Boogaard wanted to reach the National Hockey League on the glory of goals. That dream ended early, as it usually does, and no one had to tell him.

But big-time hockey has a unique side entrance. Boogaard could fight his way there with his bare knuckles, his stick dropped, the game paused and the crowd on its feet. And he did, all the way until he became the Boogeyman, the N.H.L.'s most fearsome fighter, a caricature of a hockey goon rising nearly 7 feet in his skates.

Over six seasons in the N.H.L., Boogaard

accrued three goals and 589 minutes in penalties and a contract paying him \$1.6 million a year.

On May 13, his brothers found him dead of an accidental overdose in his Minneapolis apartment. Boogaard was 28. His ashes, taking up two boxes instead of the usual one, rest in a cabinet at his mother's house in Regina. His brain, however, was removed before the cremation so that it could be examined by scientists.

Boogaard rarely complained about the toll — the crumpled and broken hands, the aching back and the concussions that nobody cared to count. But those who believe Boogaard loved to fight have it wrong. He loved what it brought: a continuation of an unlikely hockey career. And he loved what it meant: vengeance against a lifetime of perceived doubters and the gratitude of teammates glad that he would do a job they could not imagine.

He did not acknowledge the damage to his brain, the changes in his personality, even

**'I didn't want him to fight. He knew that. He would always be:  
"Oh, Mom, it's O.K. It's my job now. It's what I'm doing."'**

JOANNE BOOGAARD, Derek's mother

the addictions that ultimately killed him in the prime of his career. If he did recognize the toll, he dismissed it as the mere cost of getting everything he ever wanted.

### **The Biggest Kid, but No Bully**

There were times, as a boy, that Derek Boogaard's skates broke, the rivets attaching the blades giving way under his heft. His awkward size and movement led to teases from teammates and taunts from fans. He heard the whispers of parents saying that this oversize boy — too big, too clumsy — had no rightful place on the team.

Boogaard never fully escaped such indignities. But there was one place where he could reliably get away.

Youth hockey in western Canada is a perpetual series of long drives across dark and icy landscapes. For Boogaard, that often meant riding shotgun in his father's police car.

It meant stopping after school for gas and a Slurpee as the winter dusk settled early on the prairie. It meant a postgame meal of rink burgers, the snack-stand staple that warmed the belly against the bitter cold. It meant a radio usual-

ly tuned to hockey — maybe the Toronto Maple Leafs, Derek's favorite team, or the hometown junior league team, the Melfort Mustangs. And it meant falling asleep in the dark of a winter's night, awakened by the warm light of the family garage.

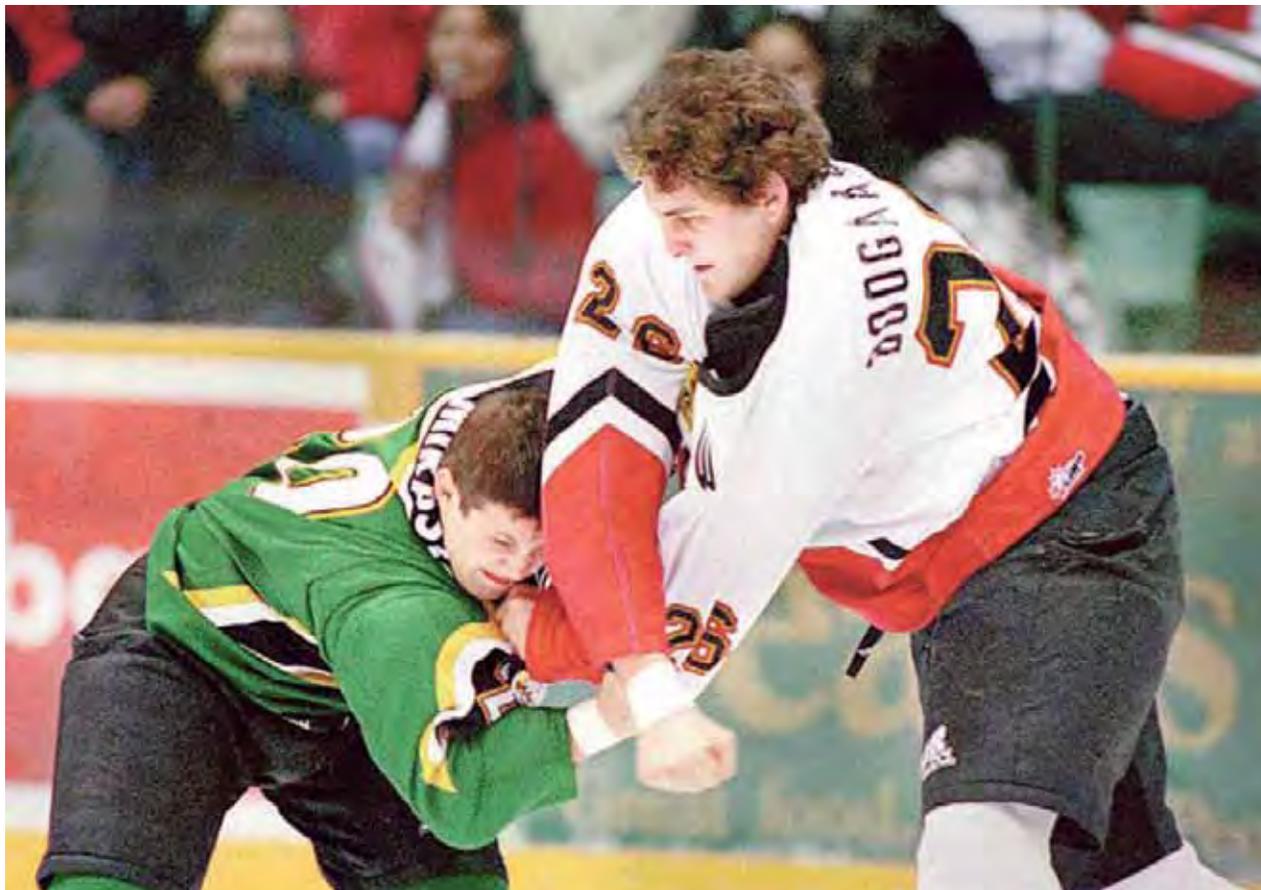
"I think the best part of playing hockey for ages 3 until 16 was the little road trips with dad," Boogaard handwrote a few years ago, part of 16 pages of notes found in his New York apartment after his death.

He remembered the blue and white jerseys of his first team. He remembered his grandfather tapping the glass to say hello. He remembered scoring his first goal — against his own goalie.

"I remember when I would sit in the bench I would always look for my mom or my dad in the stands," Boogaard wrote.

During the first shift of his first game, Boogaard skated all the way to one end, alone, away from the puck and the other children, looking for his family.

"And he finally saw us," his father, Len Boogaard, said. "He had a big smile on his face



BRENT BRAATEN/PRINCE GEORGE CITIZEN

Bigger than teammates and opponents, Boogaard forged a role with his fists in Prince George.

and he was waving at us.”

Derek Boogaard was born on June 23, 1982. He was the first of four children of Len and Joanne Boogaard, three boys then a girl, spaced evenly two years apart.

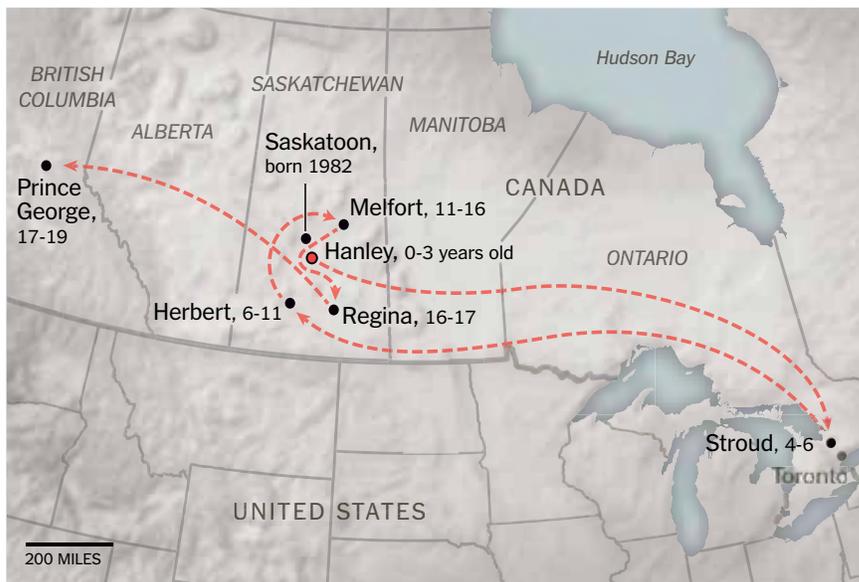
Len Boogaard, a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, mostly worked his beats in small towns on the Saskatchewan prairie. R.C.M.P. policy dictated a move every few years so that familiarity in one town did not breed comfort or corruption. It cast his family, like those of other officers who are part of the sprawling Canadian carousel of small-town law enforcement, into roles as perpetual outsiders.

The Boogaards lived in Hanley, Saskatchewan, population 500, when Derek was born. After a couple of years near Toronto, the family moved to Herbert, Saskatchewan, a town of fewer than 1,000 people, predominantly Mennonite. Whether Len Boogaard was issuing traffic tickets or investigating domestic disturbances, the grievances “would ultimately come back to the kids at some point,” he said.

No one was more affected than Derek, who spent a childhood trying to fit in. The biggest kid in class, shy and without many friends, Boogaard was often tagged as a troublemaker and dismissed as a distraction. A grade school teacher, the family said, routinely relegated Boogaard to a closet.

Boogaard had a restless, inquisitive mind, but struggled to follow directions. He labored through reading assignments. On an application for a hockey team in ninth grade, the Boogaards said that Derek had an average grade of 65 percent. They also noted that he was 6 feet 4 inches and 210 pounds.

He was hardly a bully. Paradoxically, he was picked on largely because he was so big. At age 11, after another family move, he was quickly challenged to a schoolyard fight by a boy named



At age 17, Boogaard had lived in a half-dozen Canadian towns.

Evan Folden, who considered himself king of the school jocks.

Boogaard won his first fight. He bloodied Folden’s nose.

He was continually targeted by older kids and challenged by classmates wanting to build a reputation. Even his younger brother Ryan and Ryan’s posse of friends ganged up on him, like Lilliputians on Gulliver.

The family feared for Boogaard’s safety because he often acted without considering the outcome. He once moved a friend’s new trampoline close to the garage, climbed to the roof and belly-flopped onto the canvas. The springs broke, the frame collapsed and Boogaard hit the ground with a thud, bruising his ribs.

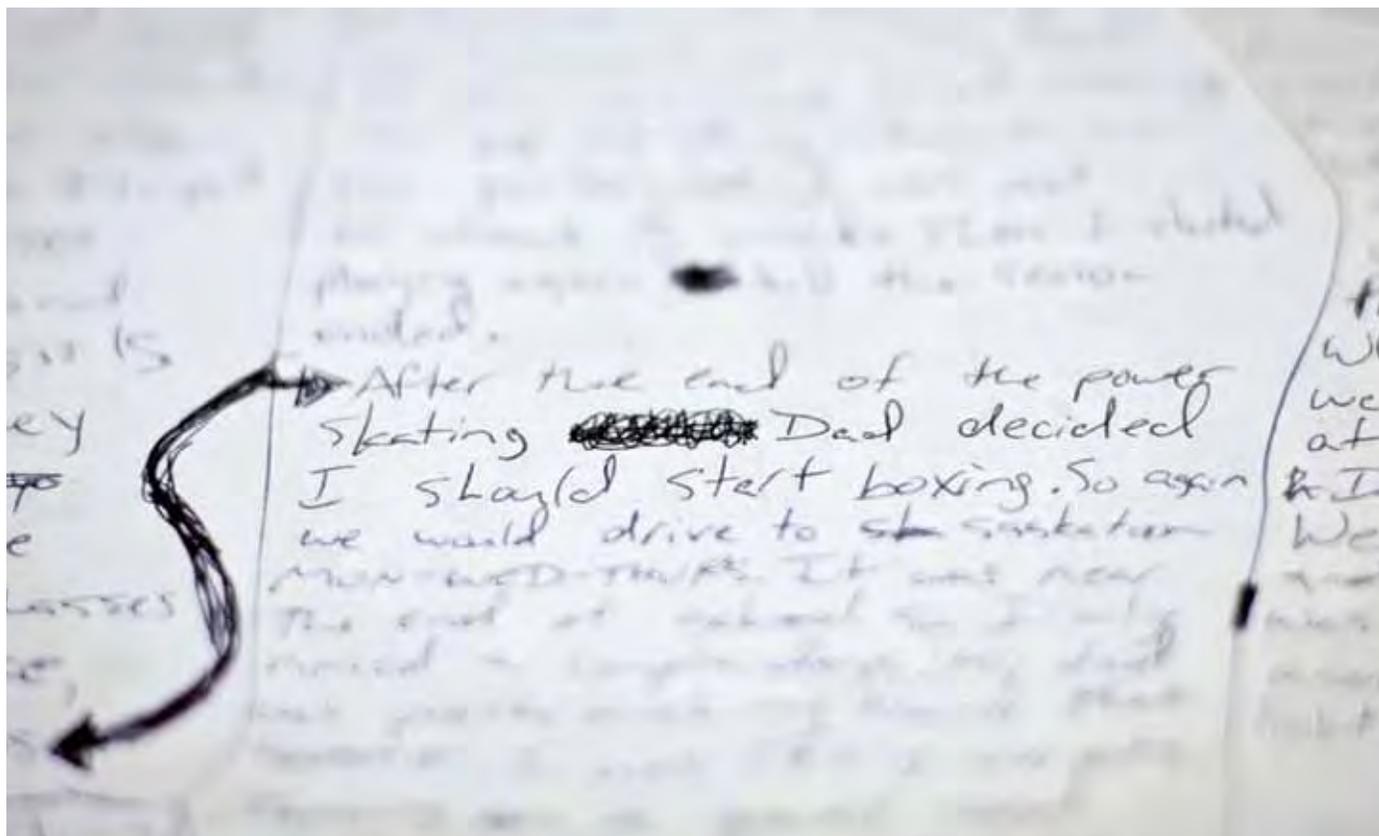
“There were some cognitive issues and behavioral issues that made it difficult, as well, trying to understand what he was doing sometimes,” Len Boogaard said. “He would do stuff and he wouldn’t appear to know the consequences of what he was doing — or why he was doing it, what sort of impact it would have on him or other people around him.”

The family was determined to provide positive reinforcement. Hockey was one way.

“It’s something that he really enjoyed to

**‘He didn’t have a Plan B. Plan A was to play hockey. There was no backup plan.’**

LEN BOOGAARD, Derek’s father



MARCUS YAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Derek Boogaard wrote 16 pages of notes that detailed his life growing up as an aspiring hockey player — full of fear, frustration and fondness.

do,” Joanne Boogaard said. “And because he struggled so much in school, we bent over backwards to give him every opportunity that you could for him to do what he liked to do.”

That is why, after a separation from Len Boogaard when Derek was 16, she took out a second mortgage on the house, to finance the sports her children played. It is why Len Boogaard repeatedly drove Derek 90 minutes each way to Saskatoon for skating lessons, then boxing lessons to teach him to be a better fighter on the ice.

Len Boogaard, a quiet man smoldering with a cop’s intensity, sometimes saw that his son needed a boost. So he would pull into an icy parking lot and spin the police car in a dizzying series of doughnuts. Or he would park at the edge of a pasture and moo at the cows through the loudspeaker. Or, with the back seat filled with boys, he would shout for them to look up before hitting the brakes, smashing the smiling faces into the clear partition and sending the boys into shrieks of laughter.

Derek Boogaard loved that part of hockey.

## A Memorable Night in Melfort

Melfort, Saskatchewan, has about 5,000 residents. It is surrounded by horizons of flat, windswept fields, covered in grain in the summer and snow in the winter, crosshatched every few miles by two-lane roads. It rests under the dome of an impossibly wide sky, pierced by the occasional water tower or silo.

The Boogaards and their four children arrived in 1993, when Derek turned 11, moving into a split-level house at 316 Churchill Drive. There were hockey games in the street, wrestling matches on the front lawn, video games in the basement and family dinners around a cramped kitchen table.

“It seemed so small because they were all so big,” said Folden, who became a teammate and friend of Boogaard’s after their schoolyard fight.

They were rough-and-tumble days, and even Krysten — the youngest, on her way to 6 feet 5 — was pulled into the scrums. “Cage raging” began in elementary school and continued in hockey dressing rooms as teenagers.

“It’s where you put your gloves and helmet



LEFT AND CENTER, BOOGAARD FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS; TOBIN FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH

Derek with his father, Len, a Mountie. The oldest of four siblings. Turning 19 the day before he was drafted by the Wild. His mother, Joanne, who keeps Derek's ashes at her home.



MARCUS YAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

**'He was a smart guy. He knew he wasn't going to be good enough to make it on skills alone, and he used his size to his advantage.'**

TODD RIPPLINGER, hockey scout

on and just go at it like a hockey fight and the loser is the one on the ground,” Boogaard wrote. “This is where you kinda learn how to punch.”

In eighth grade, Boogaard had an assignment: Describe what you want to do for a living. He wrote that he wanted to play in the N.H.L., envisioning himself among the class of gritty players with scoring punch, like his hero, Wendel Clark, who grew up in Saskatchewan and became captain of the Toronto Maple Leafs.

The teacher asked Boogaard for an alternate plan. Boogaard said he did not have one. Their ensuing debate landed Boogaard in detention.

“He didn’t have a Plan B,” Len Boogaard said. “Plan A was to play hockey. There was no backup plan.”

And what if hockey did not work out?

“I have no idea,” his father said. And neither did anyone else.

Boogaard’s size, if not his skill, provided roster spots on top-level youth teams. At 13, a team photograph showed Boogaard among the tall boys in the back row, with a round, cherub face. Two years later, it was as if Boogaard had been stretched by a rolling pin. He towered over his teammates. His knees ached from the growth spurt.

Floyd Halcro, a coach who helped talk Boogaard into playing after he had quit hockey at age 14, heard all the concerns, from parents of teammates and opponents alike.

“He would get penalties that were not, in any way, shape or form, his fault,” Halcro said. “I’m 5 foot 9, and a little guy my size would take a run at Derek and run into his elbow, and the refs would give him a penalty. He got so many penalties because he was 6 foot 3, 6 foot 4 at that age. And he was actually picked on by other teams, by other referees, other communities, simply because of his size. Derek would certainly stick up for the team, he would stick up for his teammates, but wasn’t mean at all.”

That is what made one particular episode so memorable. The old rink at the corner of Stovel Avenue and Manitoba Street, covered in pea-green aluminum siding, squats low next to Melfort’s curling club. Built in 1931, Main Arena has low-hanging fluorescent lights above the ice and orange-glow heaters above three rows of bleachers.

Exactly what happened that winter’s night

has been left to the rusty memories of the few dozen in attendance. This much is clear: Melfort was losing badly, and 15-year-old Derek Boogaard was suddenly inside the other team’s bench, swinging away at opposing players.

“It felt like I had a force feild on me,” Boogaard wrote. (His notes had occasional misspellings.)

Players scattered like spooked cats, fleeing over the wall or through the open gates.

“He had gone ballistic,” Len Boogaard said. “It was something I hadn’t seen before.”

Eventually subdued and sent to the dressing room, Boogaard re-emerged in his street clothes. He sidled up to his seething father, who was dressed in his police uniform.

“Dad just kinda asked me what the [expletive] are you doing?” Boogaard wrote. “So I stood by him for the rest of the game.”

Len Boogaard nodded toward the few unfamiliar faces in the bleachers. There were about 10 scouts from teams in the Western Hockey League, a junior league that is a primary gateway to the N.H.L. Among them were two men representing the Regina Pats — the chief scout, Todd Ripplinger, and the general manager, Brent Parker.

“All the Western League scouts’ jaws are down like this,” Parker said. His mouth fell open at the memory.

Ripplinger and Parker scribbled a note saying that the Regina Pats wanted to add Derek Boogaard to their roster. They stopped at the Hi-Lo Motor Inn on the edge of Melfort and used the fax machine to send the note to the W.H.L. office in Calgary. Then they drove three hours back to Regina.

“Me and Brent talked all the way home about how we’d never seen anything like that before in our lives,” Ripplinger said.

Ripplinger arranged to visit the Boogaard family a few days later. Boogaard sheepishly made just one request: Could the Pats provide some extra-large hockey shorts?

Derek Boogaard had outgrown his.

## Learning His Future: His Fists

The Western Hockey League has 22 teams flung across western Canada and the northwestern United States. The players, ages 16 to 20, have their expenses paid, receive a small stipend for spending money and can earn scholar-



MARCUS YAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Len Boogaard encouraged his son's hockey career, enrolling him in boxing lessons as a teenager to improve his fighting skills.

ships to Canadian colleges.

Most harbor hopes of playing professionally. On a typical roster of two dozen, a few will advance to the National Hockey League. And in today's N.H.L., about one of every five players once played in the Western Hockey League.

It is one of the three top junior leagues in Canada, the others based in Ontario and Quebec. In many regards, the W.H.L. is the toughest. Not only are franchises stretched 1,500 miles apart in some instances, making travel part of the teenage tribulation, but they also have produced some of hockey's most notorious enforcers — from Tony Twist and Stu Grimson to Colton Orr and Steve MacIntyre. Veteran executives recall games where the only way to stop the brawls was to shut off the arena lights.

The teams are not affiliated with N.H.L. teams, so player development is less a goal than profit. Fighting, an accepted and popular part of the game, is seen as a way to attract fans.

Efforts to ban fighting in the N.H.L. have long been stymied, in part by the popularity and tradition of it in the junior and minor leagues. Web sites are devoted to the spectacle, often

providing blow-by-blow descriptions, declaring winners and ranking the teenage fighters.

Boogaard stepped into this culture when he was 16. The unwritten rules were well established.

Both players must agree to the challenge. Gloves are off. Until a few years ago, helmets were removed as both a sign of toughness and consideration to the unprotected knuckles of the combatants. When the leagues made helmet removal illegal, players learned to delicately remove each other's helmets before the fight began — a concoction of courtesy and showmanship. Players knowingly drifted to the center of the rink. Some, like professional wrestlers, paused to pose or fix their hair.

The reaction of the scouts that winter's night in Melfort made it clear what to expect when Boogaard went to his first W.H.L. training camp in Regina in the fall. If Boogaard wanted to advance in hockey, he would need his fists.

"He knew," Ripplinger said. "He was a smart guy. He knew he wasn't going to be good enough to make it on skills alone, and he used his size to his advantage. I remember him at 16



MARCUS YAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Local rinks are primary gathering places throughout Canada, and boys often play hockey soon after learning to walk.

years old, pushing weights and boxing and stuff like that. He knew his job.”

Boogaard’s first fight was the one-punch nose-breaking knockdown of the reigning tough kid during Regina’s first team scrimmage. But Boogaard, seen as a fighter, not a player, played little during the preseason. Finally, he was told he would play one night in Moose Jaw, against the Pats’ primary rival.

The family drove four hours from Melfort. Ryan Boogaard, two years younger, researched W.H.L. fighters, a brotherly scouting service that continued through Boogaard’s career. He warned Boogaard of a player named Kevin Lapp, rated as the league’s No. 2 fighter. Lapp was nearly 20. Boogaard was 16.

Moments into Boogaard’s first shift, Lapp asked if he was ready. Boogaard said he was. He was not.

He heard the older players in the back of the bus making fun of him on the way home. The next day, Boogaard was reassigned to a lower-

division team in Regina.

Len Boogaard told his son he was proud of how far he had made it.

“When all the people in Melfort said that I wasn’t any good,” Derek Boogaard later wrote, “he said I shoved it up their [expletive] already.”

The next team also had little use for Boogaard. During a game at a tournament in Calgary, Boogaard watched teammates take turns on the ice while he sat, unused, on the bench. Frustrated at being forgotten — or viewed as something less than a hockey player — he finally turned to the coach.

“I’m good, I can play,” Boogaard cried. “I’m right here in front of you.”

He later lashed out at the coach in the hallway and quit. Joanne Boogaard came from Saskatchewan to retrieve him. She drove him eight hours home.

“For your son to cry halfway from Calgary to Regina, just to be beside himself with, ‘Why does this have to happen?’” Joanne Boogaard

**‘Prince George, it’s not a dirty town, a rough town, but it’s an honest town. And people didn’t mind seeing two guys who were willing to drop the gloves and go at it.’**

JIM SWANSON, former sports editor at The Prince George Citizen

said. "All he wants to do is play. All he wanted was to have his fair share, to show people."

Boogaard thought his hockey career was over. His parents were divorcing. Len Boogaard was reassigned to Regina, the provincial capital. Joanne Boogaard, a Regina native, moved from Melfort, too. Derek Boogaard was failing classes at his new high school. The family worried about the people he hung around.

Just 16, he and two friends got into a fight outside a bar. Boogaard later wrote that they beat up seven 30-year-olds. He came home at 2:30 a.m. with no shirt and his body splattered in blood. One eye was black by morning.

By the fall of 1999, the 17-year-old Boogaard had grown a few more inches, to 6-7. The Regina Pats wanted him back in training camp. Desperate to prove himself, he fought teammates 12 times in four scrimmages.

Called into the coach's office one day, he thought he would be cut from the team. Instead, he was told he would play that night against the Kelowna Rockets.

Kelowna featured a 6-7 enforcer named Mitch Fritz. Ryan Boogaard provided the scouting report. Fritz had an overhand punch that reminded the Boogaards of the villainous ape in the Donkey Kong video game.

Fritz won. Boogaard was traded. There is not much use for an enforcer who loses fights.

## **Struggling With Everything**

Prince George, British Columbia, where Boogaard had been dealt, was curious to meet its new teenage enforcer, but not quite prepared. Boogaard's jersey had to have extra bands of cloth sewn to the bottom and at the end of the sleeves.

After his first practice with the Prince George Cougars, Boogaard met with General Manager Daryl Lubiniecki.

"If you win a few fights in this town you could run for mayor," Lubiniecki said.

The local paper, *The Prince George Citizen*, ran a full-page photograph of Boogaard with a Boogeyman theme. The family name had always been pronounced "BOH-guard." With Derek, some were starting to say it as "BOO-guard." Boogaard was expected to step into the character, leading with his fists.

"It bothered me," Joanne Boogaard said. "I didn't want him to fight. He knew that. He would

always be: 'Oh, Mom, it's O.K. It's my job now. It's what I'm doing.'"

Prince George is a city of 80,000 about 500 miles north of Vancouver. It spills out of a valley amid a wrinkled landscape of mountains carpeted with evergreen forests. Bears and moose are common backyard visitors. For the Cougars, the nearest opponent is a six-hour drive. It is not uncommon for the team bus to roll into town at midday after a road trip.

"Prince George, it's not a dirty town, a rough town, but it's an honest town," said Jim Swanson, the local paper's former sports editor. "And people didn't mind seeing two guys who were willing to drop the gloves and go at it."

For Boogaard, instantly homesick, the season started poorly and got worse. He lost his first fight to Eric Godard, a future N.H.L. enforcer. Quickly tagged with a reputation for poor balance and wild swings, Boogaard lost most of the rest of his fights, too. Online voters gave him a 6-9-1 record.

His private struggles were just as profound. Junior hockey is considered a rite of passage for Canada's most promising young players. It is a wild, frightening, competitive and lonely voyage into the world of frenzied fan bases, full-time coaching staffs, cross-province bus travel and host families, known as billets.

Boogaard got tangled in all of it. He was awed by the ferocity of fans. ("That's the worst I have ever heard people yelling and screaming," he wrote of a game in Swift Current.) His spirits flagged under the callousness of coaches pressured to win. His inexperience meant that he spent overnight bus trips sitting near the front, not sleeping in the bunks in back reserved for veterans. And Boogaard bounced from one host family to another, unable to create a facsimile of his once-stable home life.

"It was a very long year for me," Boogaard wrote. "I struggled with everything it seemed."

Boogaard was hardly a model citizen. He quietly rejected authority figures — teachers, coaches, host families — who treated him with what he sensed was distrust. He disobeyed rules, particularly curfews, and rotated through several families. He never completed 10th grade.

"He was a boy in a man's body," said Dallas Thompson, then an assistant coach for Prince George. "Everything was in a hurry. He knew what he wanted to do: He wanted to play in the

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## **PUNCHED OUT** Part 1

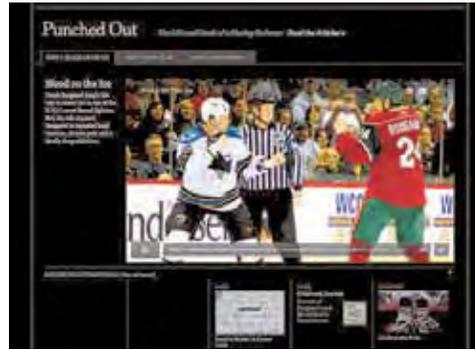
Over six months, The New York Times examined the life and death of the professional hockey player Derek Boogaard, who rose to fame as one of the sport's most feared fighters before dying at age 28 on May 13.

This article, the first of a three-part series, revisits Boogaard's childhood in the rugged youth and junior leagues of western Canada and his progression from physically awkward boy to renowned brawler on the ice.

### **On the Web** [nytimes.com/boogaard](http://nytimes.com/boogaard)

In addition to this article:

- **VIDEO** Boogaard realizes that to reach the N.H.L., he must embrace fighting.
- **PERSONAL REFLECTIONS** 16 pages of notes found in Boogaard's apartment after his death.
- **PHOTOGRAPHS** Images of Boogaard as a boy, and of places throughout Canada that shaped his future.
- **EXTENDED INTERVIEW** Mat Sommerfeld, a childhood rival of Boogaard's in the Western Hockey League, discusses the physical toll he endured as a fighter.



N.H.L. A lot of things, like school and growing up, got accelerated a bit, and I think it overwhelmed him at times.”

In March 2000, during a home game against Tri-City, Boogaard was hit in the face by an enforcer named Mike Lee. The two were ushered to the penalty box.

“I sat in the box for the five mins and I couldn't close my mouth,” Boogaard later wrote. “My teeth wouldn't line up.”

Boogaard went to the hospital, where his jaw was wired shut. The Cougars put him on a liquid diet and sent him home to Regina.

“He was missing a tooth,” Len Boogaard said. “He could fit a straw through there. Then he realized, too, in that space, he could shove food down as well. So he would cut up little pieces of steak and slide it through that hole. Instead of losing weight, he gained about 25, 30 pounds that summer, while his jaw was wired shut. It was incredible.”

The father laughed at the memory.

“He'd go to McDonald's and shove fries through that little hole there.”

### **The Phone Rings. It's the N.H.L.**

Boogaard ultimately found refuge at the home of Mike and Caren Tobin, owners of a

Prince George jewelry store and longtime hosts for the Cougars. Boogaard trailed a teammate to their house and never wanted to leave.

“Derek was shy — oh my God was he shy,” Mike Tobin said.

The house became Boogaard's sanctuary. He played video games in the basement and made himself comfortable in the kitchen. He brought other teenagers — not teammates, usually, but assorted misfits he befriended at school. He went to action movies with Mike and tagged along on family outings. He helped run the birthday party when the Tobins' twin daughters turned 5 and had a giant bounce house in the front yard.

Boogaard felt an instant kinship with Mike Tobin — an affable man who treated Boogaard less like a son than a little brother, who did not finish school but built a successful business, who drove nice cars and had a stately home on the edge of town.

“He hated, hated, hated school,” Tobin said of Boogaard. Imitating Boogaard's deep voice and sideways smirk, he added: “‘Look at Mike. He didn't finish school and he has a Porsche.’”

Boogaard, with a backlog of frustrations, wanted to quit during training camp in 2000. He was 18. He called his father to tell him. He told

his teammates he had a plane ticket home. Tobin ultimately persuaded him to stay.

And, suddenly, Boogaard started to win fights.

“His first year in the W.H.L., I think, it was mostly adjusting to his frame, not knowing how to use his reach,” Ryan Boogaard said. “I think he felt more comfortable with that frame in his second year in the W.H.L., and he did a lot better.”

He quickly avenged his broken-jaw loss to Mike Lee. He beat Mat Sommerfeld, a rival who had torn Boogaard’s name from the back of his uniform and held it over his head after an earlier conquest. One Web site put Boogaard’s record at 18-4-4 in fights that season. One poll named him the toughest player in the W.H.L.’s Western Conference.

When Boogaard took the ice, a buzz rippled through Prince George’s arena, which routinely had capacity crowds of 5,995. One side of the arena would shout “Boo!” and the other would shout “Gaard!”

He scored only once in 61 games for Prince George in 2000-1. He recorded 245 penalty minutes, ranking eighth in the W.H.L. He was, finally, an enforcer, appreciated by one team, feared by all others.

“Whenever he would score or get a point, they would cheer like it was the greatest thing,” Swanson, the former sports editor, said. “It just wasn’t something they expected. Whenever you heard the name Derek Boogaard announced, you expected it to be followed by, ‘Five-minute major for fighting.’”

Yet, improbably, Boogaard found himself on the ice during overtime of a playoff game.

“I was standing in front of the net and I turned around and the puck was just sitting there while the goalie thought he had the puck,” Boogaard wrote. “I backhanded it into the net and the game was over. It was an unbelievable

feeling. The guys came out of the bench and the place was going nuts. It was the best feeling I had the last 2 years.”

The television announcer called it “a miracle on ice.” It remains a highlight in Prince George hockey history.

“I don’t think I ever saw our rink, or Derek, that happy as the time he scored that goal,” said Thompson, the former assistant coach.

The 2001 N.H.L. draft began on June 23, Boogaard’s 19th birthday. Now of legal drinking age, he spent the night mostly at the Iron Horse Bar in Prince George with a couple of friends.

The next day, the phone rang at Joanne Boogaard’s house in Regina. It was Tommy Thompson, then the chief scout of the Minnesota Wild.

“I told her I was calling from the Minnesota Wild and that we had drafted Derek,” Thompson said. “She clearly was not expecting this call. She said he was already on a team, in Prince George. I said, ‘No, the N.H.L. draft.’ She said: ‘N.H.L.? You’ve got to be kidding.’”

Caren Tobin answered the ringing telephone in Prince George moments later. She ran upstairs to the bedroom where Boogaard was sleeping. She pounded on the door. Boogaard answered in grunts and asked her to take a message. She coaxed him out of bed and downstairs to the phone.

“In typical Derek style, he goes, ‘Uh-huh, uh-huh, O.K., yeah, O.K., thanks,’” Tobin recalled. With little emotion, he hung up and said he was drafted by the Wild in the seventh round, No. 202 over all. The Tobins screamed in excitement.

Boogaard said he was going back to bed. He had a headache.

A month later, he was in St. Paul, home of the Wild. An arena worker let him into the team dressing room. For the first time, he put on an N.H.L. uniform.

And it fit. ■



Derek Boogaard  
Age 27

# Blood On the Ice

By JOHN BRANCH

**I** DIDN'T SEE it coming at all. I was in a bad position and he hit me hard, hardest I've ever been hit. I instantly knew it was broken. I didn't lose consciousness, but I went straight on the ice. And I felt where it was, and my hand didn't rub my face normally. It was a little chunky and sharp in spots and there was a hole there about the size of a fist." — TODD FEDORUK, former N.H.L. enforcer

The fist belonged to Derek Boogaard. Whenever he opened his right hand, the fingers were bent and the knuckles were fat and bloody with scar tissue, as if rescued a moment too late from a meat grinder. That hand was, until the end, what the family worried about most with Boogaard. How would he write when he got old?

When Boogaard closed his right hand, though, it was a weapon, the most feared in the N.H.L. The thought of Boogaard's right fist kept

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## **PUNCHED OUT**

THE LIFE AND DEATH  
OF A HOCKEY ENFORCER

PART 2

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rival enforcers awake at night. It made them alter their strategy and doubt their fighting acumen. And, in the case of Todd Fedoruk, that fist shattered his face and dropped him to the ice, all while officials and teammates watched, an arena full of hockey fans cheered and Boogaard's Minnesota Wild teammates banged their sticks against the boards in appreciation.

No single punch announced the arrival of a heavyweight enforcer the way it did on Oct. 27,



PAUL BERESWILL/GETTY IMAGES

Derek Boogaard usually won his fights as an enforcer in the N.H.L., but he ultimately struggled with an addiction to prescription painkillers.

2006. Fedoruk, 6 feet 2 and 235 pounds, had built a career as a nuisance and willing combatant. Trying to avenge a hit that the 6-8 Boogaard had laid on an Anaheim Ducks teammate, Fedoruk chased Boogaard down the ice. He baited him with tugs on his jersey.

Seven seconds after their gloves dropped, the damage was done. Surgeons inserted metal plates and a swath of mesh to rebuild the right side of Fedoruk's face. His career was never the same.

Message sent. Players around the league took notice of the Boogeyman.

"I knew sooner or later he would get the better of me," said Georges Laraque, long considered the toughest man in hockey. "And I just — I like my face, and I just didn't want to have it broken."

Boogaard was 24, in his second N.H.L. season. He was already established as a fan favorite in Minnesota and a man to avoid everywhere else in the dangerous, colorful and sometimes unhinged world of hockey enforcers.

***"I never fought mad. Because it's a job, right? I never took it personally. Lot of times when guys fight, you just ask the other guy politely. Because the job is hard enough. Why make it harder by having to insult anyone? We know what the job is."***

— GEORGES LARAQUE,  
former N.H.L. enforcer

There has been fighting in hockey for about as long as there have been pucks. Early games, on frozen ponds and outdoor rinks, were often scrumlike affairs with little passing. Without strong rules, scores were settled with swinging sticks and flying fists.

The N.H.L., formed in 1917, considered a ban on fighting. It ultimately mandated that fighters be assessed a five-minute penalty. That interpretation of justice, now Rule 46.14, still stands. It has never been much of a deterrent.

The best way to protect top players from violent onslaughts, teams have long believed, is the threat of more violence, like having a mis-

sile in a silo. Teams employ on-ice bruisers, the equivalent of playground bodyguards. Hurt one of us, and we will send out someone bigger, tougher to exact revenge.

Teams did not hesitate to promote the prospect of a ruckus. Fighting was not just necessary, they believed, but also part of hockey's allure. Nearly half of N.H.L. games, 600 or more in a typical season, pause for a two-man brawl.

"I went to a fight the other night and a hockey game broke out," the comedian Rodney Dangerfield used to say. Everyone still gets the joke.

Imagine in football, if a linebacker hit a quarterback with what the quarterback's team believed was too much force. The equivalent to hockey's peculiar brand of justice would be if those teams each sent a player from the sideline — someone hardly valued for his skill as a player, perhaps rarely used — and had them interrupt the game to fight while teammates and officials stood back and watched.

In football, as in most sports, such conduct would end in ejections, fines and suspensions.

In hockey, it usually means five minutes in the penalty box and a spot in the postgame highlights.

Fighting is not tolerated in most hockey leagues around the world. It is not part of college hockey in the United States and Canada, nor international tournaments like the Olympics.

But it is a mainstay of North American professional leagues, stretching from the N.H.L. to small-town minor and junior leagues. Proponents believe the sport is so fast and so prone to contact that it needs players to police the shadowy areas between legal hits and dirty play.

With a mix of menace and muscle, enforcers settle grievances and slights between teams, be they real, imagined or concocted as an excuse for disorder. Sometimes fights are spontaneous combustions, a punch thrown to avenge a perceived cheap shot. Others are premeditated affairs, to settle simmering disputes — whether from last period or last season. Some are in-

tended to reverse the momentum of a lopsided game. Some are a restless player's way of proving himself to his team.

But there is generally order to the chaos, unwritten rules of engagement, commonly called "the code."

It covers everything from how a fight originates (both players must agree, and they usually do because of a fraternal bond of responsibility) to how it ends (with a modest glide to the penalty box).

No sticks. Hands must be bare. Face-protecting visors are not worn by most enforcers to indicate that their face is open for business.

The fight ends when a player falls or the action slows to a stall, like popcorn after all but the last kernels are popped. Officials slide between the men and steer them away. Teammates cheer their own, regardless of the outcome.

When his cheek was crushed by Boogaard in 2006, Fedoruk's first thought was to "save face" and skate off the ice. He did.

"Their bench was cheering like you do when your teammate gets a guy," Fedoruk said. "I remember skating by their bench.

"Their faces kind of lost expression because I think they seen — you could see it. You could see the damage that was done because the cheekbone, it wasn't there anymore."

***"Derek would take two or three punches to land one good one. He wasn't a defensive fighter. I remember he said: 'I hate guys that hide. When I fight, I'm going to throw, and I'm going to throw hard. I don't have an off switch.' Anytime a fight didn't go his way — a draw or maybe he thought he lost — that would eat at him."***

— JOHN SCOTT,  
N.H.L. enforcer

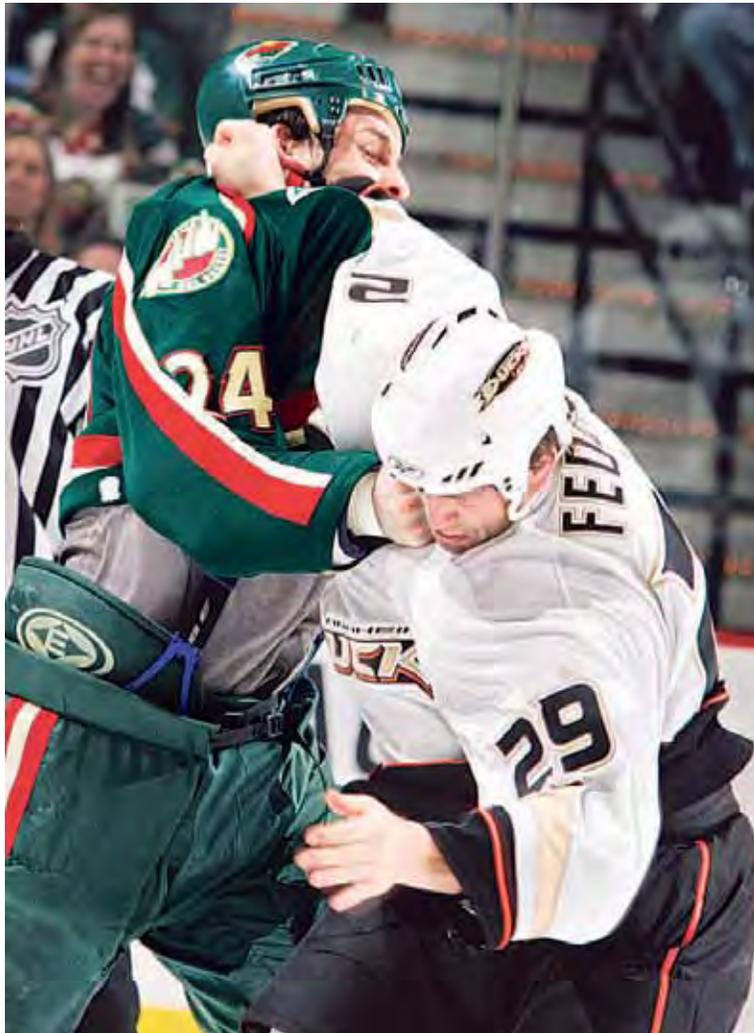
D. J. King has watched the video dozens of times. He still pauses the fight on the part where the Minnesota Wild's Derek Boogaard, a second after getting his nose broken, slugged King on

**'Having another player in the bench that is willing to come over and willing to punch you is a good deterrent for other violence on the ice — as crazy as that sounds.'**



MARCUS YAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Todd Fedoruk, another enforcer, had a cheekbone crushed by Boogaard in October 2006, below. Fedoruk later became a teammate whom Boogaard relied on for help.



ANDY KING/BRUCE KLUCKHOHN PHOTO

**‘There’s no better feeling when the boys get a rise from you showing up, putting yourself out there. I’m getting chills right now just from talking about it.’**

TODD FEDORUK, former N.H.L. enforcer

the head and sent his helmet flying.

King has tried to count the number of revolutions his helmet made before it hit the ice behind him. He thinks it was 12.

“The punch flung it about five feet in the air, I think,” King said, with a tinge of awe.

It was March 14, 2010. The game between the Wild and the St. Louis Blues was minutes old. King and Boogaard, both from rural Saskatchewan, knew each other from the Western Hockey League, when they were teenagers and their ambitions were similarly reliant on their fists.

They barked in the casual language of enforcers: You wanna go? Let’s go. Each man dropped his stick from his right hand. They shook their gloves, worn loose for such occasions, to the ice. They pushed up their sleeves. It was just another fight — yet memorable and telling.

King drifted to center ice, caught up by the spectacle. Boogaard stopped halfway there, leaving the men comically far apart. Boogaard stood firm, a matador awaiting the bull. King, 6-3 and 230 pounds, drifted toward him, as if pulled by Boogaard’s gravity.

“The referee just looked at them and said, ‘O.K., boys, let’s get it going here,’” one television announcer said.

“This is a super-heavyweight bout,” his broadcast partner said, his voice rising with ex-

citement.

Boogaard liked to grab opponents by the collar with his left hand and lock his arm. From that distance, opponents could not reach Boogaard’s face with a swing. But he could shake them off balance or torture them with jabs of a left fist full of jersey until he found a chance to uncoil his cocked right arm.

“I want to get in tight,” King said, analyzing video of the fight. “I want to come and switch up, throw some lefts right away and then go back and throw rights. All I want to do is be tight and throw as much as possible.”

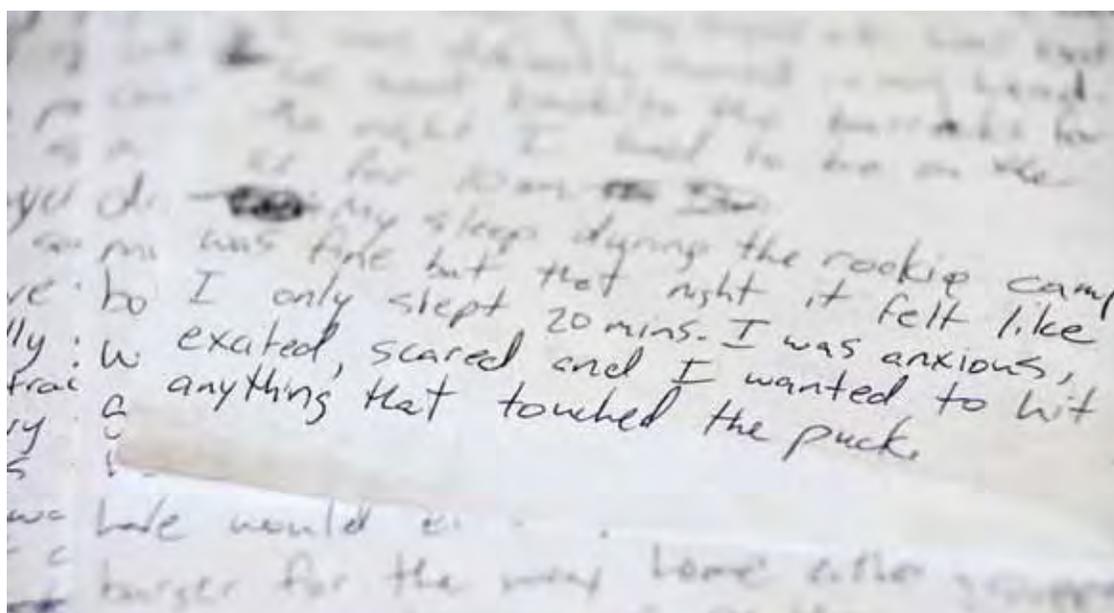
Boogaard stood in place, turning slowly. King orbited. He batted at air, gauging distance and reach. Finally, King stabbed with his left hand and, head down, swung at the bigger man with his right.

Boogaard blocked it. He grabbed King with a left arm bent at the elbow. King delivered two left-hand punches to Boogaard’s face “just to get him thinking,” King said.

The announcer’s voice rose to a shout.

“Boogaard fighting back!” he said, as Boogaard, half a foot taller, thundered a couple of right hands on top of King’s head. The helmet absorbed most of the beating. King felt it only after the adrenaline faded.

“It’s the hardest bone in the body and it’s not going to daze you as much as getting hit, especially, like, in the temple area or the chin

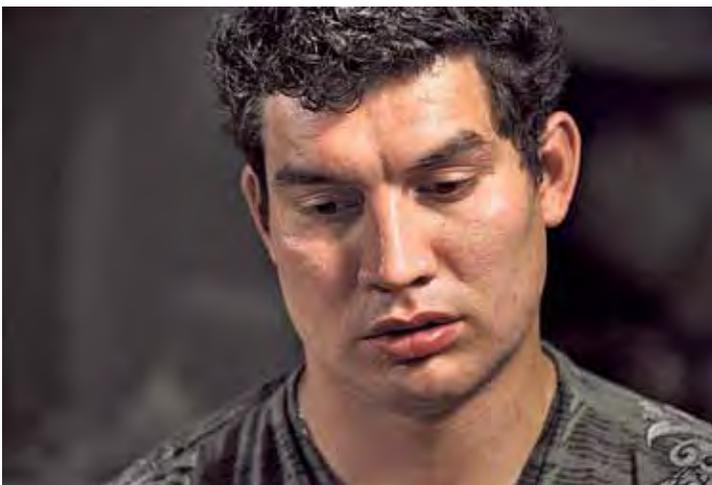


MARCUS YAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

In his notes about growing up in the rinks of western Canada, Derek Boogaard detailed the emotions that fighting stirred as he built his reputation.



JIM MONE/ASSOCIATED PRESS



MARCUS YAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Boogaard sent D. J. King's helmet flying in a March 2010 fight, above, but not before King broke his nose. King, left, says one cost of the bare-knuckle fighting is scar tissue on the hands that "comes off in chunks."

area,” King said.

King blindly threw three right hands that punched the air. A fourth bashed Boogaard in the nose and broke it.

More than anything, Boogaard hated getting hit on the nose. It had been surgically repaired less than a year before.

“Oh! And King stuns Boogaard,” the announcer shouted. And just as he said it, Boogaard threw a right hand that struck King on the forehead. King’s white helmet flew from his head.

The crowd roared.

The players had been swinging at each other for only eight seconds. Boogaard hit King on top of his bare head. King tagged Boogaard in the face again. A “Tale of the Tape” graphic, showing heights and weights of the fighters, popped onto the screen of the television broadcast.

King steered Boogaard toward the boards. Boogaard took a few more swings, but King was content to cling tight. Finally, as they came to rest behind the goal, officials slipped between them. Boogaard’s nose was bleeding, and blood was smeared across his forehead.

The fight lasted about a minute.

“That was a dandy!” the announcer said, and his partner laughed.

Replays were shown. Rink workers repaired the gouges in the ice and used shavings to cover the blood.

King went to the penalty box and wrapped an icy towel around his bloodied hands.

“The scar tissue in the hands builds up so much that when you get hit it just comes off in chunks now,” King said.

Boogaard headed to the locker room. He missed the next five games.

***“When a team scores, the fans of the team that scored will get on their feet. But when there’s a fight, everyone gets on their feet.”***

— GEORGES LARAQUE

Among the hundreds of Boogaard hockey clips catalogued across the Internet, almost all



MARCUS YAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

One of his minor league teams, the Houston Aeros, had a Boogaard bobblehead. The fists bobbed, too.

of them fights, one is a favorite of family and friends. It is from the final minutes of a Wild playoff game against the visiting Anaheim Ducks on April 17, 2007.

The teams stirred a dislike for each other during a series of hits and taunts. Bickering continued through a timeout. The Wild led, and Boogaard stood and jeered — or chirped, in hockey parlance — from the bench. The Ducks chirped back.

Tension built. The crowd chanted Boogaard’s name. Finally, Coach Jacques Lemaire gave the signal. Boogaard slid onto the ice and skated casual arcs near the benches. He looked at the Ducks, smirked and shrugged.

“If the roof wasn’t screwed down, it would have flew off,” said Joanne Boogaard, Derek’s mother.

Never had Boogaard felt such love. And it was not because he had smashed someone’s face. It was because he could have.

“He didn’t have to fight, he didn’t have to get hurt, he didn’t have to hurt anybody,” Joanne Boogaard said. “That was the best. He could just go out there and skate around.”

Boogaard had size and determination, but not much else, when the Wild chose him in the seventh round of the 2001 N.H.L. draft. He trained with a Russian figure skater. He contin-

**‘He would fight and his knuckles would be pushed back into the wrist. And then he’d have to have it manipulated and have his knuckles put back in place.’**



CARLOS GONZALEZ/THE STAR TRIBUNE

Derek Boogaard, right, and his brother Aaron held a camp in 2007 to teach players ages 12 to 18 how to fight and avoid injuries.

ued lessons to bolster his boxing. He was sent for seasoning in the minor leagues, where Wild officials told the coaches to mold Boogaard into an N.H.L. enforcer.

His minor league coaches did not have such vivid imaginations.

“We didn’t give him a chance, and we were the guys trying to help him,” said Matt Shaw, who coached Boogaard in the minor leagues and the N.H.L. “Give him credit. This guy willed his way to the N.H.L.”

At his first camp after being drafted, Boogaard aimed his body at an opponent, who ducked at the last moment. Boogaard hit the glass and shattered it. His body tumbled out of the rink.

At 20, Boogaard was assigned to the Louisiana IceGators of the East Coast Hockey League. Within a year, he battered his way to the Houston Aeros of the American Hockey League, one rung below the N.H.L.

Hard work endeared him to coaches. In the summer heat of Houston, Boogaard tirelessly ran up hills near the practice rink. He stayed late after practice, awaiting further instruction. Alone, he skated, shot and practiced the basics, hoping coaches would trust him enough to put

him in the game.

Most important, Boogaard won fights. The Aeros replayed bouts on the video board and called it “Boogeyman Cam.” They had a Boogaard bobblehead promotion, and the fists bobbed, too.

Boogaard skated well for a big man, but he turned like a locomotive. When he aimed his body at players and missed, the rattling boards echoed an intimidating message. One coach told the Aeros staff that Boogaard was their most valuable player, because his team was frightened by his mere presence.

“That’s when it hit me,” Shaw said. “I went: ‘Good God. This guy’s going to play.’”

Still raw, Boogaard went to the Wild’s training camp in 2005. He beat up an enforcer from Buffalo, then one from Chicago in preseason games. Lemaire, the Wild coach, saw the impact Boogaard had on other teams. He never played in the minors again.

In his first regular-season fight, on Oct. 16, 2005, against Anaheim, he pounded Kip Brennan before dropping him with a big right hand. Boogaard won again, then again. With each fallen opponent, the rookie’s popularity grew.

Such adoration is not unusual. The enforcer,

sometimes mocked as a goon or euphemized as a tough guy, may be hockey's favorite archetype. Enforcers are seen as working-class superheroes — understated types with an alter ego willing to do the sport's most dangerous work to protect others. And they are underdogs, men who otherwise might have no business in the game.

Boogaard went nearly five years between N.H.L. goals and scored three times in 277 games. He spent 1,411 minutes on the ice and 589 minutes in the penalty box.

But he was quick to do an interview or sign on for charity work. He was huge and imposing, yet laughed easily and always knelt to talk to children. His personality was an understated counterweight to his outsize reputation as a fighter. His No. 24 became a top-selling replica jersey.

"It was the fierceness of his brand and the gentleness of his character," explained Tom Lynn, a former Wild executive.

Lynn was among those who noticed lifestyle changes as years passed. Boogaard signed his first contract with the Wild in 2003 and spent most of the \$50,000 bonus on a GMC Denali. He liked the status it signaled in the players' parking lot.

"Before he got to the N.H.L., Derek would walk around with his two teeth out, because he was missing those two front teeth," said Janella D'Amore, Boogaard's girlfriend through several years in the minor leagues and his first season with the Wild. "His hair would be a mess, he would wear the same T-shirt. He didn't care. He was just happy. Then he got to the N.H.L., and it was about having to wear the designer clothes and having the perfect haircut and the perfect designer glasses. I think he felt he had to fit the part."

Len Boogaard accompanied his son on a three-game trip to the West Coast in November 2006. Hungry after a movie in San Jose, Calif., Len recommended a fast-food place across the street. Derek wanted room service.

"So I got a pita for six bucks, and a Coke, and went back to the hotel room," Len Boogaard said. "Room service finally showed up, and he had a steak, very small, some veggies on the side and a Coke. And it was 95 bucks. I said, 'What?' And that's when he put up his hand and said: 'Don't worry about it, Dad. It's the lifestyle.'"

In juniors, Boogaard usually received about \$50 a week for spending money. In his final year in the minors, he made \$45,000.

Now his salary was \$525,000. It was a long way from the dark drives across the icy prairie of western Canada, fueled by rink burgers and the sound of the radio.

"Anytime I would question what he was doing, the hand would come up, waving," Len Boogaard said. " 'Don't worry about it, Dad. It's the lifestyle.' "

***"My back wakes me up. I get on the floor every morning. My left hand has been smashed and broken so many times I'm missing a knuckle. From the concussions, my memory — I have a lapse with my memory at times. It's just little things, and important things. If you look at the fights I've had since I was 16, I've had about 300. These aren't boxing gloves. These are fists. There has to be an impact."***

— BRANTT MYHRES,  
former N.H.L. enforcer

The worry was always about the hands. Like those of most enforcers, Derek Boogaard's giant hands were mangled — especially the right one. But that was the most obvious cost of his work. The rest of the damage, physical and mental, he liked to hide.

His sore right shoulder had ached since he broke his collarbone at 13. His nose, crushed too many times to count, was bent, like that of a cartoon character who smells something delicious in that direction. In the minor leagues, his back was so perpetually sore that he once could not stand up after lacing his skates.

"Being the guy he was, he couldn't show that pain and stuff like that, so he was kind of sucking it up a lot," said Todd Fedoruk, who was signed by the Wild about a year after absorbing the face-crushing blow from Boogaard in 2006.

The men became friends, not divided by their bout but tied together by their roles. They roomed together on road trips in 2007-8. It was only there that Boogaard asked for help: Todd, can you put a couple of pillows under my feet?

"I was kind of a nurse for him in the room, because around the rink he wanted to play," Fedoruk said.

A couple of years ago, a friend in the Wild locker room watched as a trainer sat



ANDY DEVLIN/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES

Boogaard played 1,411 minutes in six N.H.L. seasons and spent 589 minutes in the penalty box.

on Boogaard's chest, tugging and twisting Boogaard's nose after a fight.

In the fall of 2009, a doctor asked Boogaard to name every word he could think of that began with the letter R. He could not come up with any.

Last winter, a friend said, a neurologist asked Boogaard to estimate how many times his mind went dark and he needed a moment to regain his bearings after being hit on the head, probable signs of a concussion. Four? Five? Boogaard laughed. Try hundreds, he said.

Any boy's dream of the N.H.L. intersects with the reality of skill, usually in the teens. For a few, fading hope depends on a willingness and ability to give and absorb beatings.

"If you're playing pond hockey, 6 or 7 years old, and somebody said, 'Hey Brantt, the only way you're going to make it to the N.H.L. is fighting your way there,' you think I would have done it?" the former N.H.L. enforcer Brantt Myhres said. "No way. I would have done some-

thing else."

There is pain, of course. But fear, too.

"Imagine you go pick a guy that's 6-4, 220 pounds, and say, 'Why don't we meet here on the street in two days, and we'll slug it out and see how it goes?'" Myhres said. "I guarantee you'll be a mess."

Add the pressure of thousands of fans in the arena and countless more watching on television and judging on the Internet, of teammates and coaches, roster spots and contracts, and of knowing that any fight could be the end of a career.

More than most players, enforcers gaze ahead on the schedule. They know that the game in Calgary will entail a rematch of a fight lost last time. That game against Edmonton will need an answer for the cheap shot laid on a star player.

"I've had times where, going into a game, I know I'm going to get into a fight," the Chicago

**'He's such a big guy. The doctor told him it took about twice as much medicine to knock him out as for most people. He'd go through 30 pills in a couple of days. He'd need 8 to 10 at a time to feel O.K.'** — AARON BOOGAARD, Derek's brother

Blackhawks enforcer John Scott said. “Just the thought of getting into a fight, I just lay there, awake. ‘O.K., what am I going to do?’ I’m nervous. I’ve got butterflies in my stomach. I’ll probably get one hour of sleep. It’s exciting, nerve-racking and terrifying all at the same time.”

There is no incentive to display weakness. Most enforcers do not acknowledge concussions, at least until they retire. Teams, worried that opponents will focus on sore body parts, usually disguise concussions on injury reports as something else. In Boogaard’s case, it was often “shoulder” or “back,” two chronic ailments, even when his helmet did not fit because of the knots on his head.

“I hid my concussions,” said Ryan VandenBussche, 38, a former enforcer who estimates he had at least a dozen concussions, none of them diagnosed. “I masked them with other injuries. I’m not a huge guy, by no means, but I fought all the big guys. And I certainly didn’t want to be known as being concussion prone, especially early in my career, because general managers are pretty smart and your life span in the N.H.L. wouldn’t be very long.”

Myhres said he had concussions diagnosed twice but estimated he had more than 10 in his career. Now 37, he feels his memory slipping.

Mat Sommerfeld toppled Boogaard the first time they fought in the Western Hockey League. He was only 6-2 and 200 pounds, but was drafted by the Florida Panthers to be an enforcer.

Concussions ended his career. In his first rookie camp, his face was so swollen after a fight that he had to sleep sitting up for a few days. There were times he took the ice still woozy from a blow, only to be leveled again.

Now married with young children, working the family farm in Saskatchewan, Sommerfeld has had bouts of depression serious enough to

## On the Web

[nytimes.com/boogaard](http://nytimes.com/boogaard)

In addition to this article:

- VIDEO Boogaard gives and receives countless punishing blows in his reign as the N.H.L.’s top enforcer, resulting in mangled hands, broken bones, concussions and addiction to painkillers.
- ANATOMY OF A FIGHT D. J. King, a brawling rival of Boogaard’s, breaks down their fight in 2010, which left Boogaard with a broken nose and a bloody face — and left the announcers and fans euphoric.



- EXTENDED INTERVIEWS Todd Fedoruk, a rival-turned-friend of Boogaard’s, discusses his addiction to prescription drugs; Matt Shaw, who coached Boogaard in the minor leagues and the N.H.L., talks about the grooming of an enforcer; and Tom Lynn, a former team official with the Minnesota Wild, explains Boogaard’s popularity as a player.

Boogaard said. “And then he’d have to have it manipulated and have his knuckles put back in place. His hands were a mess. My concern was always, O.K., he’s going to suffer with this later on in life, in terms of arthritis. It was his hands that I was more worried about.”

**“Obviously, I’ve used painkillers, with injuries and stuff. Get your shoulder rebuilt, get your knee scoped. It’s hard to go out that next night and fight that world-class guy with broken knuckles. I’ve gotten into the drugs. Not going to lie. I’m sure people think, ‘Oh, he’s making \$1.5 million, how bad can it be?’ But they’ve never been in his shoes.”**

— MITCH FRITZ,  
former N.H.L. enforcer

warrant professional help.

“I don’t know if it’s worth it,” he said. “It wasn’t for me.”

On Jan. 9, 2007, in Calgary, Boogaard fought Eric Godard, a longtime rival called up from the minor leagues specifically as a counterweight to Boogaard. Godard landed a series of punches to the left side of Boogaard’s head. Boogaard twice fell to one knee. Dazed, he skated to the wrong penalty box.

He was placed on injured reserve with a head injury. He returned in time to fight Godard again 17 days later. The men knocked each other’s helmet off and traded punches to the face.

Boogaard likely had dozens of concussions before his death in May. No one knows.

But the hands? All it took was one look. Even the medical examiner who performed Boogaard’s autopsy noted the scars.

“He would fight and his knuckles would be pushed back into the wrist,” Len

It was the middle of the 2007-8 season, and Boogaard knew that Fedoruk was in the midst

of a decade-long battle with alcohol and drugs. Boogaard was taking prescribed pain medicine for his aching back.

“He’s like, ‘Man, these things work really good,’” Fedoruk recalled.

Boogaard and Fedoruk met as boys at camp for the Regina Pats in 1998. Almost a decade later, Fedoruk, three years older, was a teammate, mentor and confidant. And Boogaard wanted to know about painkillers.

“Him knowing my history, I think he knew he could trust me,” Fedoruk said. “He could open up to me and maybe try and find out some things about that. He was asking questions like, ‘You’re taking because you like it?’ Stuff like that.”

Fedoruk said his advice was simple: Be careful.

Two years later, Boogaard was in substance-abuse rehabilitation. Fedoruk would follow, for the second time in his career.

That kind of arc gnaws at Tom Lynn. He spent eight seasons as a Wild executive and is now a player agent.

“I started to notice, as I got to know the players in these roles, that some of them came in in a much more gentle way — some of them came in as different people than they were later on,” Lynn said. “After fighting for a while, they seemed to have susceptibility to personality issues such as depression or anxiety and addictions.”

As a teenager, Boogaard was a bingeing beer drinker, but it never seemed unusual in the culture of Canadian junior hockey.

In the minor leagues, he began taking Ambien, a prescription sleeping pill. It has long been doled out in training rooms to players struggling to cope with chronic aches and the demands of the schedule.

“I’ve been on teams where it’s pretty out in the open, and guys will say: ‘I have Ambien. Need an Ambien?’” said Mitch Fritz, a teenage

rival of Boogaard’s who has played mostly in the minor leagues.

On April 14, 2009, Boogaard had nose surgery. Seven days later, he had surgery on his right shoulder. He was prescribed Percocet, a combination of acetaminophen and oxycodone.

“He’s such a big guy,” Boogaard’s brother Aaron said. “The doctor told him it took about twice as much medicine to knock him out as for most people. He’d go through 30 pills in a couple of days. He’d need 8 to 10 at a time to feel O.K.”

John Scott, a 6-8 teammate of Boogaard’s now playing for Chicago, was prescribed oxycodone after nose and knee operations.

“It just dulls you right out,” he said. “Totally numbs everything. You don’t feel anything. You’re in no pain, but you’re not yourself. There’s no senses. Nothing. My wife was like: ‘This is creeping me out, man. You’ve got to stop taking those.’ And so I stopped.”

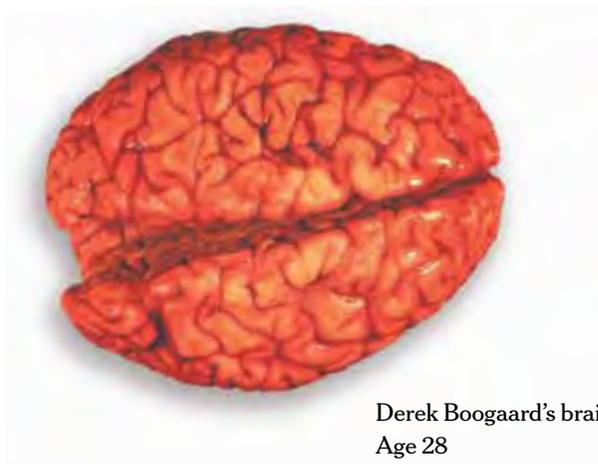
Boogaard did not. One September afternoon during the Wild’s preseason, disoriented while driving around Minneapolis, Boogaard was rescued by a police officer he knew. Boogaard slept on the officer’s couch.

Late one night soon after, at home with his fiancée, Erin Russell, Boogaard said he took four Ambien. She knew it was something more.

“I was scared,” Russell said. “I had never seen him that drugged up — falling all over the place and running into walls.”

A few phone calls and a day later, Boogaard was on a plane to California, headed to a substance-abuse program in Malibu.

“He just left,” Scott said. “He never told anybody he was leaving. I remember talking to him and everything was fine and then all of a sudden he was just gone. They told us he was getting surgery, or it was a concussion or something. They made up some excuse and they never told us what happened. But we all kind of figured it out. It’s not that hard to see.” ■



Derek Boogaard's brain  
Age 28

## A Brain 'Going Bad'

By JOHN BRANCH

**T**HROUGH THE NIGHT and into the next day, as the scrolls across the bottom of television screens spread the news of Derek Boogaard's death last May, the calls of condolences came, one after another.

Among them was a call from a stranger, first to Joanne Boogaard in Regina, Saskatchewan, then to Len Boogaard in Ottawa. It was a researcher asking for the brain of their son.

An examination of the brain could unlock answers to Boogaard's life and death. It could save other lives. But there was not much time to make a decision. Boogaard, the N.H.L.'s fiercest fighter, dead of a drug and alcohol overdose at 28, was going to be cremated.

There was little discussion.

The brain was carved out of his skull by a

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### **PUNCHED OUT**

THE LIFE AND DEATH  
OF A HOCKEY ENFORCER

PART 3

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coroner in Minneapolis. It was placed in a plastic bucket and inside a series of plastic bags, then put in a cooler filled with a slurry of icy water. It was driven to the airport and placed in the cargo hold of a plane to Boston.

When it arrived at a laboratory at the Bedford V.A. Medical Center in Bedford, Mass., the brain was vibrantly pink and weighed 1,580 grams, or about 3 1/2 pounds. On a stainless-steel table in the basement morgue, Dr. Ann McKee cleaved it in half, front to back, with a large knife. Much of one half was sliced into sheets about the width of sandwich bread.

The pieces of Boogaard's brain were labeled as SLI-76. They were placed into large, deli-style refrigerators with glass doors, next to dozens of other brains.

The Boogaard family waited for results.



MARK TAYLOR/THE CANADIAN PRESS, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

Less than six years after Derek Boogaard's first game in the N.H.L., his family gathered for his funeral in Regina, Saskatchewan. His parents held jerseys from his teams, the Wild and the Rangers.

One month. Two. Three. Two other N.H.L. enforcers died, reportedly suicides, stoking a debate about the toll of their role in hockey.

Four months. Five. The news came in a conference call to the family in October.

Boogaard had chronic traumatic encephalopathy, commonly known as C.T.E., a close relative of Alzheimer's disease. It is believed to be caused by repeated blows to the head. It can be diagnosed only posthumously, but scientists say it shows itself in symptoms like memory loss, impulsiveness, mood swings, even addiction.

More than 20 dead former N.F.L. players and many boxers have had C.T.E. diagnosed. It generally hollowed out the final years of their lives into something unrecognizable to loved ones.

And now, the fourth hockey player, of four examined, was found to have had it, too.

But this was different. The others were not

in their 20s, not in the prime of their careers.

The scientists on the far end of the conference call told the Boogaard family that they were shocked to see so much damage in someone so young. It appeared to be spreading through his brain. Had Derek Boogaard lived, they said, his condition likely would have worsened into middle-age dementia.

And that was when Len Boogaard's own mind went numb.

## Rehab, Pills and a New Team

The Minnesota Wild prepared for the start of the 2009-10 season. Derek Boogaard watched from a distance.

The team said that Boogaard, the pre-eminent enforcer in the N.H.L. and a hugely popular Wild player, was sitting out a few weeks because of a concussion. Instead, he was at the Canyon treatment center in Malibu, Calif., being treated for addiction to prescription drugs.

**'His demeanor, his personality, it just left him. He didn't have a personality anymore. He just was kind of — a blank face.'**

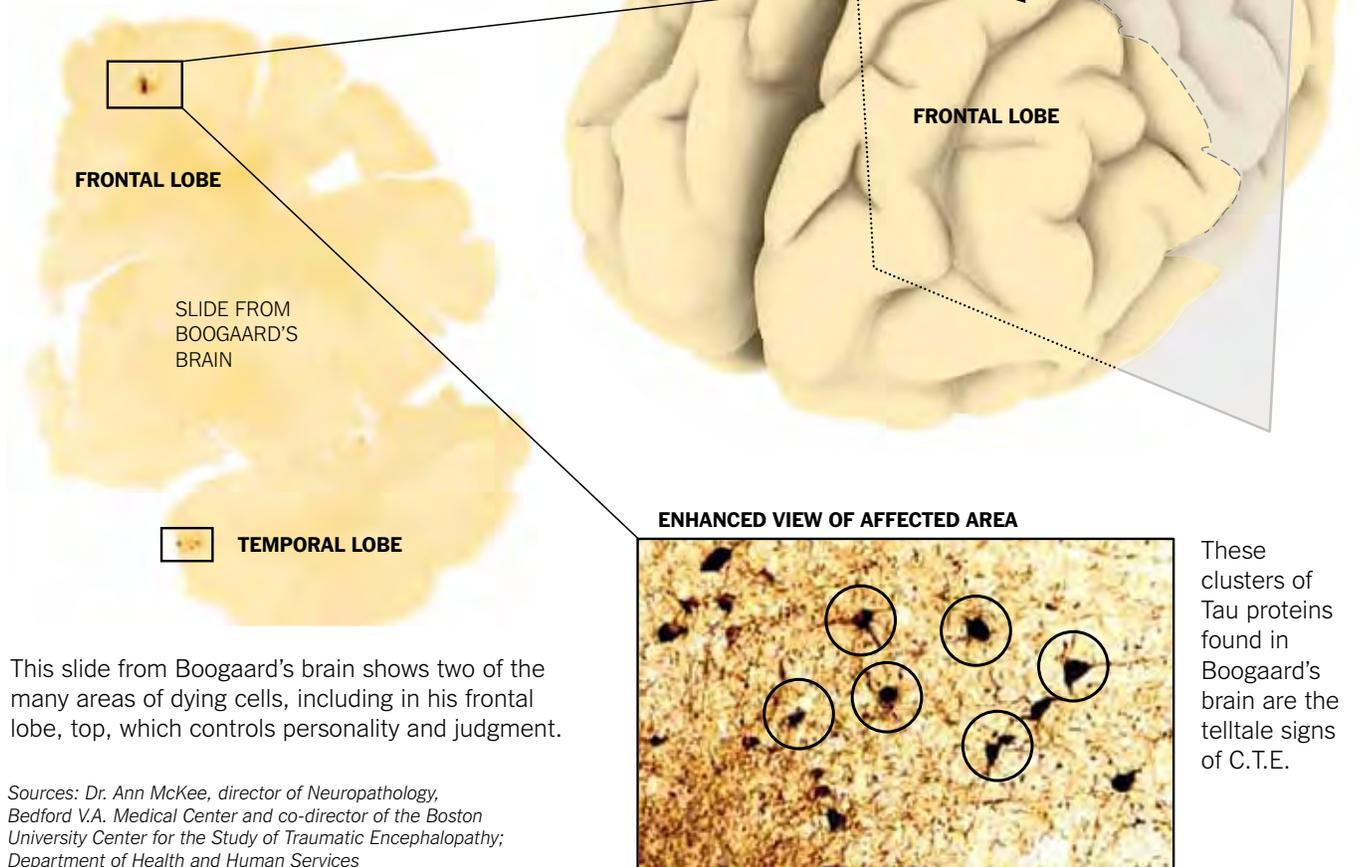
JOHN SCOTT, N.H.L. enforcer

# The Signs and Science of C.T.E.

Dr. Ann McKee, a neuropathologist, received Derek Boogaard's brain within days of his death and began testing it for chronic traumatic encephalopathy, more commonly known as C.T.E. McKee found the disease in many parts of his brain. Below is a look at one of the areas she found.

## Inside Boogaard's Brain

C.T.E. can occur in different parts of the brain and can therefore result in a variety of symptoms, including dementia and changes in mood and behavior.



This slide from Boogaard's brain shows two of the many areas of dying cells, including in his frontal lobe, top, which controls personality and judgment.

Sources: Dr. Ann McKee, director of Neuropathology, Bedford V.A. Medical Center and co-director of the Boston University Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy; Department of Health and Human Services

JOE WARD AND GRAHAM ROBERTS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Boogaard was embarrassed and worried that news of his addiction would shatter his reputation. He was also concerned that someone would take his role. From rehabilitation, he tracked the preseason fights of teammates and texted friends to gauge how badly he was missed.

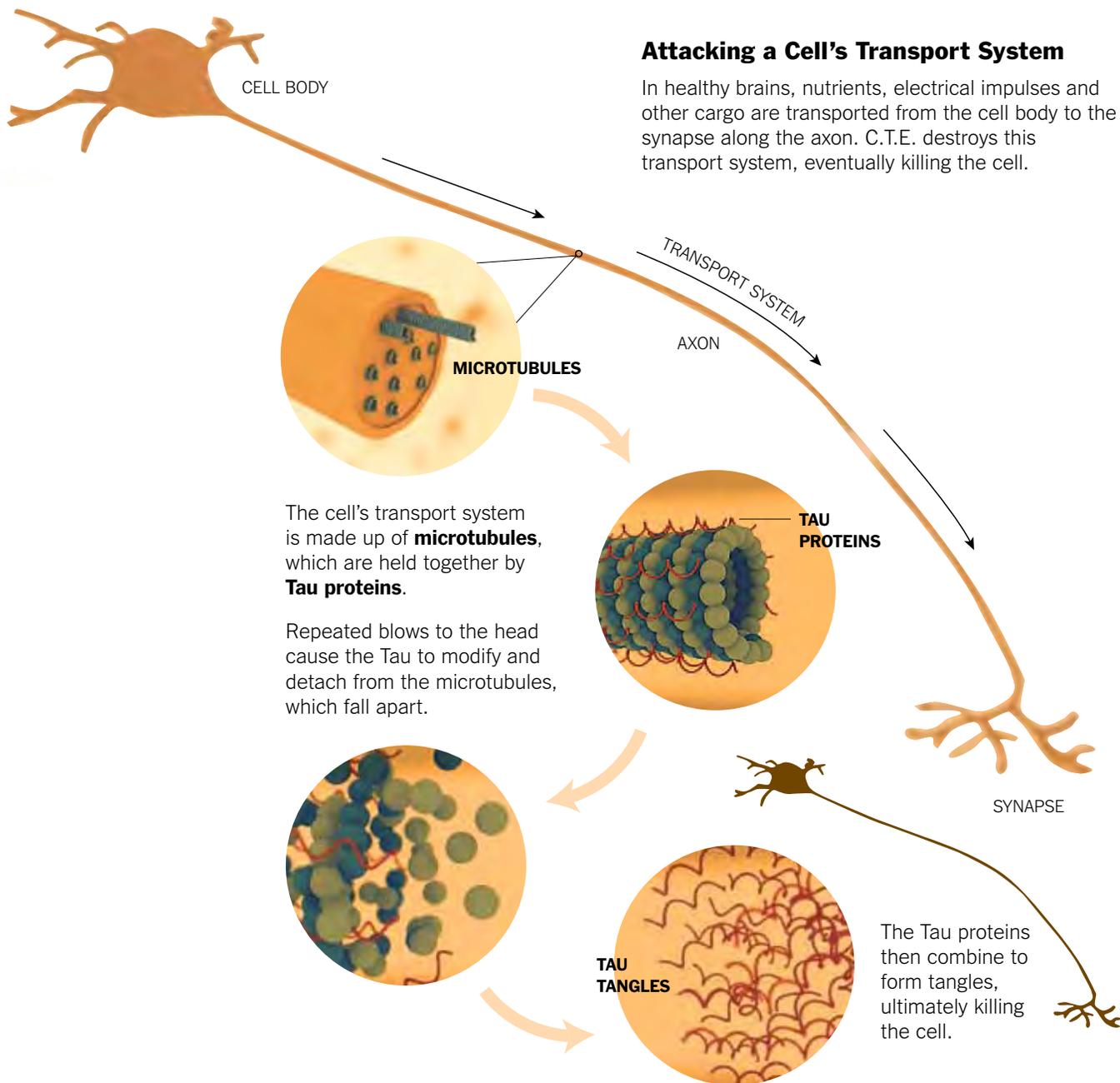
He rejoined the team after missing the first five regular-season games and had his first fight on Oct. 21, at home against the Colorado Avalanche's David Koci. Boogaard started with a left-hand jab to Koci's chin, then grabbed Koci's jersey and knocked him down with two right-hand punches.

Boogaard skated, expressionless, to the penalty box.

From the outside, everything seemed normal. It was not.

"His demeanor, his personality, it just left him," John Scott, a Wild teammate, said. "He didn't have a personality anymore. He just was kind of — a blank face."

Boogaard fell asleep while playing cards on the team plane, a teammate said. He passed out in corners of the team's dressing room. He was uncharacteristically late for meetings and workouts. Wild trainers and doctors warned Boogaard's teammates not to give him their



JOE WARD AND GRAHAM ROBERTS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

prescription pills.

Most N.H.L. teams have about 10 affiliated doctors — specialists and dentists with practices of their own. Boogaard had learned that there was no system to track who was prescribing what.

In one three-month stretch of the 2008-9 season with the Wild, Boogaard received at least 11 prescriptions for painkillers from eight doctors — including at least one doctor for a different team, according to records gathered by his father, Len Boogaard. Combined, the prescriptions were for 370 tablets of painkillers containing hydrocodone, typically sold under

brand names like Vicodin.

Derek Boogaard increasingly wanted more pills. He became adept at getting them.

In downtown Minneapolis, Boogaard's favorite hangout was Sneaky Pete's, a sports bar that becomes a raucous club on weekend nights. Stripper poles are erected on the dance floor, and a throbbing beat escapes beyond the velvet rope out front. Boogaard was a regular.

Young men fueled with alcohol begged Boogaard to punch them, so they could say they survived a shot from the Boogeyman. People bought him drinks. They took pictures of him and with him. They chanted his name. When the

attention got overbearing, Boogaard escaped behind the bar, where his bobblehead likeness sat on a shelf.

“He was like Norm in ‘Cheers,’” said Stewart Hafiz, whose family owns the bar.

And Boogaard often bought painkillers, thousands of dollars’ worth at a time, from someone he knew there, according to Boogaard’s brother Aaron.

He gobbled the pills by the handful — eight or more OxyContin at a time, multiple people said, at a cost of around \$60 each — chewing them to hasten their time-release effect. The line between needing drugs for pain and wanting them for celebration blurred.

“I didn’t trust him to have that amount on him,” said Aaron Boogaard, who lived with Derek in summer off-seasons. “He knew it, too, so he would give them to me to hold, and I would hide them around the place, and he’d come to me when his back was hurt — or whatever was hurting him.”

“What was I going to do?” he added.

Wild coaches saw the decline for a couple of seasons. Boogaard’s admirable work ethic had faded, and no one could pinpoint why.

“I just said to him one day: ‘What’s up? What’s up with you? Where is the guy I know?’” said Matt Shaw, who coached Boogaard as an assistant with the minor league Houston Aeros and, later, with the Wild. “Because he was not himself. And he didn’t have an answer. He didn’t want to look me in the eye.”

Boogaard had been drafted by the Wild in 2001, a seventh-round pick given little chance of making the N.H.L. The Wild shepherded him through three seasons in the minor leagues and molded him into the most fearsome player in hockey. They saw how his gentle humility blossomed into fearless swagger. They felt how the game changed when he strode onto the ice.

But by the 2009-10 season, Boogaard was 27, and his body carried a lot of mileage. He missed the start of the season while in rehabilitation, and his contract was to expire at season’s end. He played 57 games, and had no goals and nine fights.

The Wild quietly dangled him as trade bait, then made a half-hearted attempt to re-sign him for about \$1 million a year.

There were plenty of other suitors. The New York Rangers and the Edmonton Oilers each offered four-year contracts paying more than \$1.5 million a season.

Boogaard’s family wanted Edmonton. It was familiar and close to home in western Canada.

He chose New York. He signed a four-year, \$6.5 million contract — a rather ordinary salary among his new Rangers teammates, but striking among the fraternity of enforcers who play only a few minutes a game.

“It’s one of the great cities to be at and you’re always on center stage when you’re out there, so I’m excited,” Boogaard told The Star Tribune of Minneapolis the night he signed.

The Rangers knew about Boogaard’s substance-abuse problem and time in rehabilitation, family members said. The team surely knew of his concussions and myriad other injuries.

But any concern the Rangers had was outweighed by their eagerness for his brand of toughness and intimidation. They needed an enforcer, and they wanted the best.

### **Manic, Sullen and Lonely**

Boogaard had played 21 games for the Rangers when he took the ice in Ottawa on Dec. 9, 2010. After leveling an opponent with a legal check, Boogaard was chased by Matt Carkner, a 30-year-old enforcer who had spent most of his career patrolling the minor leagues.

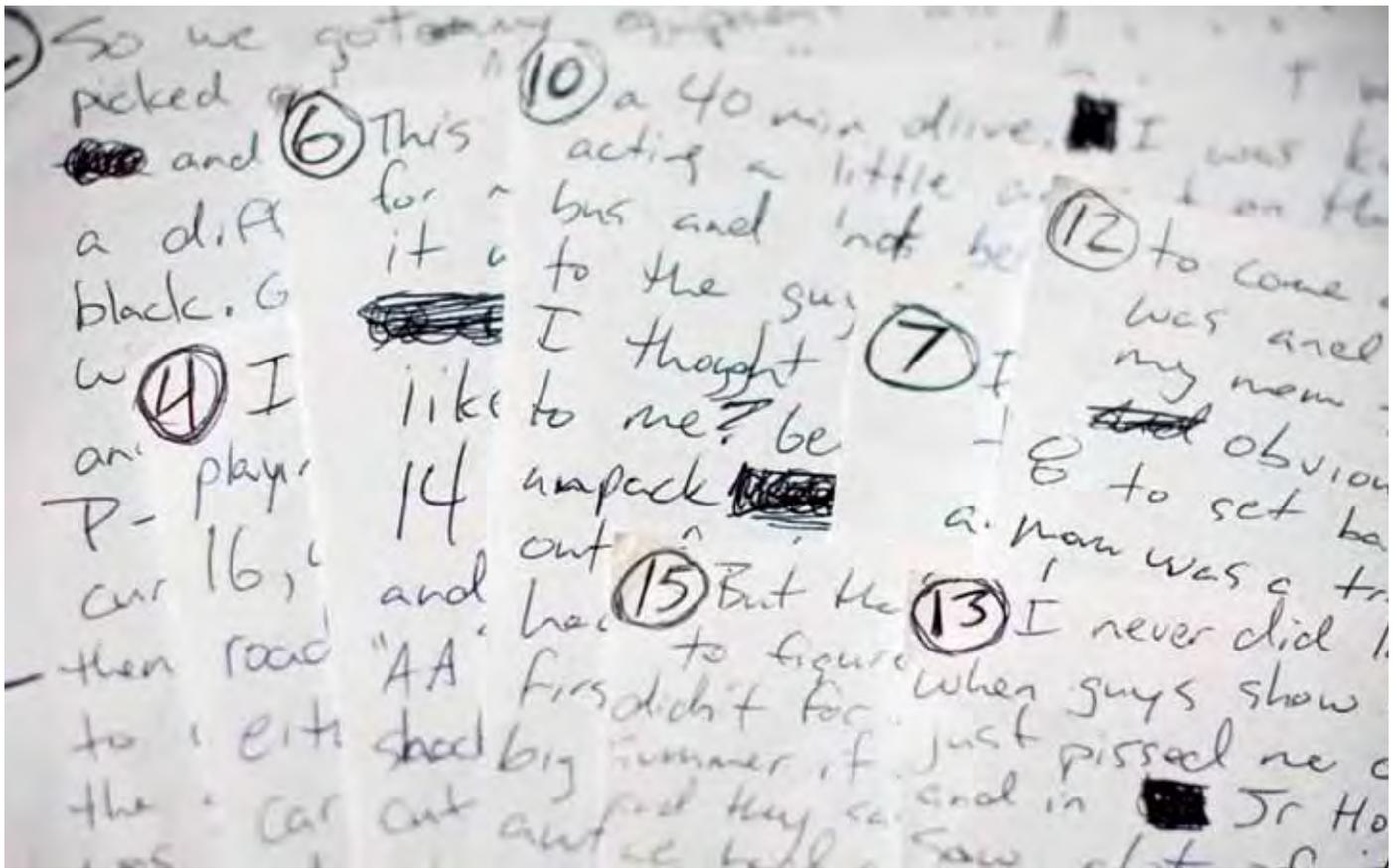
The two bickered as they glided across center ice. They barely stopped before Carkner cracked Boogaard’s face with a right hand.

Boogaard usually responded to such shots with an angry flurry. This time, he turned his head away and held on to Carkner. He did not throw another punch.

All fall, Boogaard’s family and friends had noticed an indifference in his fighting. Boogaard was listed at 260 pounds, but weighed nearly 300 when he joined the Rangers. Team officials expressed concern about his effectiveness on

**‘He was white. And I touched his arm and I knew right away because rigor mortis had already set in.’**

RYAN BOOGAARD, Derek’s brother



MARCUS YAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Derek Boogaard's 16 pages of handwritten notes captured his feelings about his journey from youth hockey in western Canada to the N.H.L.

the ice, even his safety in a fight, his agent said.

But much of that was disguised by Boogaard's sound beating of Philadelphia's Jody Shelley on Nov. 4 and a rare goal, the first since his rookie season, against Washington on Nov. 9.

Days later, the Madison Square Garden crowd chanted Boogaard's name as he pounded Edmonton's Steve MacIntyre. During a rematch minutes later, few noticed a MacIntyre jab that broke Boogaard's nose and most likely gave him a concussion. Boogaard missed one game and played the next.

Then came Carkner. He lifted Boogaard and slammed him down. Boogaard landed on his right shoulder. The back of his head struck the ice. He rose slowly and went to the locker room.

"I noticed he kind of stopped fighting and I took him down and landed on top," Carkner told reporters. "Obviously, if you land a punch on a guy like that it feels good. It feels good to take down a big man like that."

The Rangers said Boogaard was out indefinitely with a shoulder injury. Ten days later,

they revealed he was having headaches.

When Len Boogaard arrived in New York from Ottawa in January, he barely recognized his son. Several times over several days, the toughest man in hockey bawled in his arms.

"I had to hold him," Len Boogaard said of Derek. "It was like when he was younger, when he was a little kid growing up. He just sobbed away uncontrollably."

For weeks, Boogaard mostly shuttered himself inside his \$7,000-a-month apartment on the 33rd floor of the Sheffield, on 57th Street near Columbus Circle in Manhattan. The view of Central Park was obscured by the blinds Boogaard kept closed.

The Rangers told him to avoid the rink because the commute, the movement, even watching hockey could bring nausea. The team delivered a healthy meal to his door every afternoon, but Boogaard usually threw it away. His kitchen counter overflowed with fast-food packages.

The fog of Boogaard's postconcussion syndrome slid into a hazy shade of loneliness. Early in the season, a stream of friends had gone to



WAYNE CUDDINGTON/OTTAWA CITIZEN/POSTMEDIA NEWS

Boogaard was thrown to the ice by Matt Carkner, a veteran minor league intimidator, on Dec. 9, 2010. He never played again.

New York to see him play and take in the sights.

But with Boogaard out of the lineup, the number of visitors waned. Boogaard grew desperate for company. His January cellphone bill needed 167 pages to detail calls and text messages, some to people who had not heard from him in years. February's bill consumed 222 pages. It listed 13,724 text messages.

Those who went to New York noticed his memory lapses were growing worse. Boogaard joked about them, saying he had been hit on the head too many times. But they also came to worry about his darkening personality and impulsive behavior. His characteristic sweetness and easy manner, his endearing eagerness to please, had evaporated.

Friends said Boogaard was at turns manic and sullen. He went days without showering. He made grand and scattered plans. He talked about buying land in British Columbia and building one big house for himself and cabins for family members. He spent thousands on night-vision goggles, hundreds on walkie-talkies, and

\$150 on candy at a Duane Reade drugstore.

Len Boogaard, knowing that his son had been enrolled in a substance-abuse program since September 2009, was surprised to see so many prescription bottles in the bathroom with the names of Rangers doctors. He was also surprised to hear from his son that he had been given four days' notice for his next drug test.

Len Boogaard played a DVD of family photos and home movies. He reminded his son of everything he went through to reach New York — the family moves, the bullying, the naysayers of youth hockey, the struggles through juniors and the minor leagues.

Boogaard cried, and his father held him.

Few knew that Derek, usually on Sunday evenings, carried thousands of dollars in cash and drove his Audi to Huntington, Long Island. He met a man in a parking lot there and bought Ziploc bags full of painkillers, according to Boogaard's best friend in New York, Devin Wilson.

Boogaard sorted the pills into pastel-col-

ored plastic Easter eggs, which he stashed around his apartment, a one-man game of hide and seek. He carried one in a pocket whenever he left, the contents adjusted for how long he expected to be gone.

“You could tell he didn’t trust himself,” said Wilson, a teammate when they were teenagers who stayed with Boogaard many weekends last spring.

By March, Boogaard resumed light workouts with the Rangers, whose doctors continued to supply him with prescription drugs. Mark Messier, the team’s Stanley Cup hero in 1994 and now a team executive, tried to motivate him with a pep talk.

A day or two later, a noodle-legged Boogaard fell during on-ice workouts. The Rangers recognized the symptoms.

It was early April, the last week of the regular season, and Boogaard was on his way back to drug rehabilitation in California.

Friends thought he was vacationing. He called and texted from his cellphone and ate in nice restaurants. After a couple of weeks, granted a recess from rehabilitation, he flew to New York and drove his car to Minneapolis. He dropped off more pills at his apartment and returned to rehabilitation in Los Angeles.

Boogaard rented a Porsche for \$5,000 and spent \$1,200 on one dinner that week, part of \$32,000 he put on his Visa card over two weeks. Aaron Boogaard, four years younger, joined him in Los Angeles and stayed at a nearby hotel. The brothers exercised and boxed at a gym. They went to the beach every day.

“There’d be meetings going on and things like that, and he wouldn’t really be doing anything,” Aaron Boogaard said. “I’d try to say: ‘Dude, shouldn’t you be doing that stuff? I think everybody else here is doing it. Why don’t you?’ ”

Boogaard was under the guidance of the Substance Abuse and Behavioral Health Program, financed jointly by the N.H.L. and its players union. They would not make the co-directors — David Lewis, a psychiatrist, and Brian Shaw,

a clinical psychologist and professor at the University of Toronto — available for comment.

Cassidy Cousens, the founder and program administrator of the Authentic Recovery Center in Los Angeles, where Boogaard was assigned, would not discuss his case. Cousens said that patients generally go through a detoxification program and are subjected to random drug tests several times a week. Some are allowed to leave the grounds with an approved escort — a staff member for the first few weeks, a friend or a family member after.

“It might look odd to someone outside,” Cousens said. “But integrity is not lacking on the ground.”

On Thursday, May 12, about a month into his rehabilitation, Boogaard was granted a second extended recess. He left with Aaron to attend the graduation of their sister, Krysten, from the University of Kansas. The plan was to meet up with their other brother, Ryan, in Minneapolis for a few days first.

That morning, Derek Boogaard sent a message from the airport in Los Angeles to Wilson in New York. There was a picture of a drink in his hand.

“Bloody Mary No. 6,” Boogaard wrote. “And we haven’t even left the ground yet.”

### **‘His Chest Wasn’t Moving’**

The night of May 12 began with a painkiller, a 30-milligram Percocet that Aaron Boogaard later told the police he handed his brother at their two-bedroom apartment in Minneapolis. Derek, hours out of rehabilitation, was bent on a party.

He wore dark jeans, a blue-and-white checkered shirt and Pumas. He had dinner with friends at a steak-and-sushi place, where he drank Jack Daniel’s and Cokes. The group shuffled among Sneaky Pete’s and three other downtown Minneapolis bars. At some point, or several points, Derek fueled the buzz with more prescription painkillers.

Once home in his second-floor apartment on North First Street, he spent time in the bath-

**‘If you polled our fans, probably more would say they think it’s part of the game and should be retained.’**

GARY BETTMAN, N.H.L. commissioner, on fighting

room. He went to his bedroom at the end of the hall.

Friends left. It was after 3 a.m. Aaron made pancakes in the kitchen. Derek called him back to the bedroom four or five times. Sitting at the end of the bed, he babbled and said the bed was spinning.

“He was miserable,” Aaron said.

Eventually, the calls from the bedroom stopped.

Asleep at last, Aaron thought. He left to spend what remained of the night at a girlfriend’s place. He returned at about 3 p.m. to shower and change. He poked his head into Derek’s room. Still in bed. He shouted that he was leaving for the airport to get their brother Ryan and left again.

Nearly three hours later, Ryan and Aaron arrived and stepped into the back bedroom, expecting to find their older brother sleeping off a hangover. It was about 6 p.m. on Friday, May 13.

“I looked and it didn’t look right,” Ryan said.

“Like, his chest wasn’t moving.”

Derek Boogaard’s brothers stared at the giant body sprawled on the bed. On the dresser were framed photographs of their grandparents. There were pictures of former pets, including a bulldog named Trinity.

At the foot of the bed was a brown stain, where Derek had thrown up on the beige carpet.

“He was white,” Ryan said. Like his father, he is a police officer, a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in rural Saskatchewan. “And I touched his arm and I knew right away because rigor mortis had already set in.”

Aaron began jumping up and down, screaming. Ryan told him to call 911, then took a couple of steps into the hallway and collapsed.

Lying on the floor, he called his father’s house in Ottawa. Len Boogaard’s wife, Jody, answered and heard nothing but unintelligible wails. She thought it was a prank call and nearly hung up. Finally, she made sense of the words contained in the screams.



MARCUS YAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Wild brought in Boogaard’s family when it honored him with a tribute before a game last month. A video showed his three N.H.L. goals and not a single punch.

**‘They are trading money for brain cells.’**

CHRIS NOWINSKI, a co-director for the Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy at Boston University

Len was in the backyard. He grabbed the phone.

“I knew this was going to happen,” he cried.

The Hennepin County medical examiner ruled it an accidental overdose of alcohol and oxycodone, the active ingredient in painkillers like OxyContin and Percocet.

“The coroner said with that mixture, he probably died as soon as he closed his eyes,” Aaron said.

## Researchers’ ‘Wow’ Moment

It did not take long for Dr. Ann McKee to see the telltale brown spots near the outer surface of Boogaard’s brain — the road signs of C.T.E. She did not know much about Boogaard other than that he was a 28-year-old hockey player. And the damage was obvious.

“That surprised me,” she said.

A neuropathologist, McKee is one of four co-directors of Boston University’s Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy and the director of the center’s brain bank. She has examined nearly 80 brains of former athletes, mainly retired football players and boxers who spent their careers absorbing blows to the head. The center’s peer-reviewed findings of C.T.E. have been widely accepted by experts in the field. The National Football League, initially dismissive, has since donated money to help underwrite the research.

The group may now have its most sobering case: a young, high-profile athlete, dead in mid-career, with a surprisingly advanced degree of brain damage.

“To see this amount? That’s a ‘wow’ moment,” McKee said as she pointed to magnified images of Boogaard’s brain tissue. “This is all going bad.”

The degenerative disease was more advanced in Boogaard than it was in Bob Probert, a dominant enforcer of his generation, who played 16 N.H.L. seasons, struggled with alcohol and drug addictions and died of heart failure at age 45 in 2010.

In the past two years, C.T.E. was also diagnosed in the brains of two other former N.H.L. players: Reggie Fleming, 73, and Rick Martin, 59.

The condition of Boogaard’s brain, however, suggests the possibility that other current N.H.L. players have the disease, even if the

symptoms have not surfaced.

The N.H.L. is not convinced that there is a link between hockey and C.T.E.

“There isn’t a lot of data, and the experts who we talked to, who consult with us, think that it’s way premature to be drawing any conclusions at this point,” N.H.L. Commissioner Gary Bettman said. “Because we’re not sure that any, based on the data we have available, is valid.”

The researchers at Boston University say that C.T.E. is a nascent field of study, but that there is little debate that the disease is caused by repeated blows to the head. They said that the N.H.L. was not taking the research seriously.

“We don’t know why one person gets it more severely than another person, why one person has a course that is more quick than another person,” said Dr. Robert A. Stern, a neuropsychologist and a co-director for the Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy. “But what we are pretty sure of is, once the disease starts, it continues to progress.”

Linking C.T.E. to Boogaard’s rapid descent in his final years is complicated by his drug addiction.

“He had problems with abuse the last couple years of his life, and that coincided with some of the cognitive and behavioral and mood changes,” Stern said. “What’s the chicken? What’s the egg?”

For years, the N.H.L. has tiptoed between the allure of its fast-paced, hard-hitting action and the need to protect star players. Its best player, Sidney Crosby, returned to the Pittsburgh Penguins last month after sitting out since January following two hits to the head, four days apart. Several star players in recent years have been forced to retire early because of postconcussion symptoms.

The N.H.L. formed a concussion-prevention program in 1997. In 2010, it banned blindside hits to the head. In March, the league altered its treatment protocol, requiring teams to examine all suspected concussions in a “quiet” room, away from the bench.

But the league has shown little interest in ending on-ice fighting. The message is decidedly mixed: outlaw an elbow to the head during play, but allow two combatants to stop the game and try to knock each other out with bare-knuckle punches to the head.



MARCUS YAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Aaron Boogaard in the apartment he and Derek shared and in which Derek died.  
Aaron gave his brother a painkiller before he went out that night.

“If you polled our fans, probably more would say they think it’s a part of the game and should be retained,” Bettman said. He noted that fights were down slightly this season.

“The issue is, do we increase the penalty?” Bettman added, referring to the five-minute punishment typically handed to both fighters. “Because it is penalized now. And there doesn’t seem to be an overwhelming appetite or desire to go in that direction at this point in time.”

Chris Nowinski, a former Harvard football player and professional wrestler who is another co-director of the Boston University center, is the one who usually makes the initial call to a grieving family to request the brain. He does not want to put an end to hockey. He wants leagues to take every possible precaution to ensure that athletes are both better protected and better informed.

In October, Nowinski attended a Bruins game in Boston. There was a fight, and he watched quietly as thousands of people stood and cheered while the players fought.

“They are trading money for brain cells,” he said.

## A Father Hunts for Answers

Len Boogaard, a cop and father, tries to make sense of it all. On leave from his desk job in Ottawa — a back injury years ago forced him off the streets — he patches together the remains of Derek’s world.

Like a detective, he dials contacts in Derek’s phone to ask who knows what. He explores hundreds of pages of phone records to reconstruct Derek’s relationships, his moods, his sleep patterns. He follows paper trails, trying to link the history of his son’s prescriptions to vague diagnoses in team medical reports.

Since the day of the funeral in May, Len Boogaard said, he has not heard from the Rangers.

The team refused to answer a detailed list of questions regarding their medical treatment of Boogaard during the season and his time in rehabilitation.

It also refused requests to speak to General Manager Glen Sather and the team physician, Dr. Andrew Feldman, among others, about Boogaard. Instead, it e-mailed a four-sentence

statement from Sather that read, in part, “We worked very closely with Derek on and off the ice to provide him with the very best possible care.”

Boogaard’s death took on added weight when, in August, two other N.H.L. enforcers were found dead. Rick Rypien, 27, reportedly committed suicide after years of depression. Wade Belak, 35 and recently retired, reportedly hanged himself 16 days later. (The family has said it was an accident.)

Each bit of news, packed with a wallop, provided a backdrop for further debate about the role of fighting and the toll on enforcers. So did the start of the N.H.L. season in October, as teams began the ritual of glossy video tributes and moments of silence. The eccentric former coach and current television commentator Don Cherry chastised former enforcers who second-guess their past roles as “pukes,” “turncoats” and “hypocrites,” and the debate flared.

Arguments enveloped Canada, in particular, where culture and tradition have collided with tragedy. No one quite knows what to make of it.

In Minnesota two Sundays ago, the Wild honored Boogaard with a pregame tribute. The

team sold Boogaard jerseys, T-shirts and autographed memorabilia that it had stored from two seasons ago. Fans crowded the team store. Some proceeds went to Boogaard’s favorite charity.

Boogaard’s parents and siblings were escorted onto the ice and presented with flowers, a painting of Derek and a framed game-worn jersey of his. The arena was darkened. A 4-minute-45-second tribute was shown on the video boards.

The Wild had drafted Boogaard in 2001, groomed him to fight and paid him several million dollars over five seasons to be the N.H.L.’s top enforcer. He punched his way to local adoration and league-wide fear and respect.

The tribute showed Boogaard running over opponents, smiling with fans and talking to children. It showed each of the three N.H.L. goals he scored.

It did not show a single punch.

The Wild would not answer questions about the video. They also refused to address specific questions about Boogaard’s medical care, concussions, addiction and rehabilitation, or the availability of drugs through team doctors. Requests to speak with General Manager Chuck

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## **PUNCHED OUT** Part 3

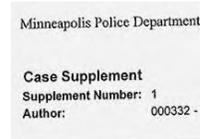
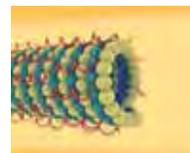
Over six months, The New York Times examined the life and death of the professional hockey player Derek Boogaard, who rose to fame as one of the sport’s most feared fighters before dying at age 28 on May 13.

This article, the third of a three-part series, chronicles Boogaard’s descent, on and off the ice, and the posthumous determination by researchers that he had a degenerative brain condition believed to be caused by repeated blows to the head.

### **On the Web** [nytimes.com/boogaard](http://nytimes.com/boogaard)

In addition to this article:

- **VIDEO** Battling injuries and abusing prescription drugs, Boogaard is a shell of the player who won fans’ adoration in Minnesota. His final chapter is written by a neuropathologist who sliced open his brain in her laboratory.
- **EXTENDED INTERVIEWS** Gary Bettman, commissioner of the N.H.L., discusses Boogaard’s death, the role of fighting in hockey, the use of prescription drugs among players and the league’s substance-abuse program; and Jeremy Clark, Boogaard’s close friend and trainer, talks about Boogaard’s life off the ice.
- **MOTION GRAPHIC** A look inside Boogaard’s brain and the disease that might have contributed to his decline.
- **DOCUMENTS** The police report from Boogaard’s death at his apartment, and his brother’s statement to the police.
- **PHOTOGRAPHS** The Boogaard family.



Fletcher and the medical director, Dr. Sheldon Burns, were refused.

For those who knew Derek Boogaard, there are questions that may never be resolved and regret that may never be relieved.

In July, Aaron Boogaard was charged with a felony for distributing a controlled substance — in this case, one pill to his brother the night of his death. The charge was dropped in October. He also told the police that he flushed pills down the toilet after placing the 911 call. He pleaded guilty to tampering with the scene of a death and received probation and 80 hours of community service.

He is trying to revive his own hockey career, and with his name has come the expectation to fight. Last season, in 53 games with the Laredo (Tex.) Bucks of the Central Hockey League, Aaron Boogaard had two goals and 172 penalty minutes. He fought 20 times.

Now 25, he plays for the C.H.L.'s Rio Grande Valley Killer Bees in Hidalgo, Tex. He wears No. 82, marking the year Derek was born. Aaron fought six times in a recent 10-game stretch. At the Wild tribute, he had a bruise under one eye and said he had knocked out an opponent with one punch the night before.

His mother has asked him to quit hockey. But he has no Plan B, either.

“I mean, honestly, what else am I going to do?” Aaron said.

Between trips to Minneapolis to tend to Aaron and his legal issues, Joanne Boogaard

distracted herself by gutting and rebuilding her kitchen in Regina. A corner of the refurbished family room is a sort of shrine to Derek. A thigh-high cabinet holds mementos, like photographs and jerseys. Two boxes hold his ashes.

As much as anything, Derek Boogaard always feared being alone.

“We weren’t going to bury him somewhere and just leave him by himself,” Joanne Boogaard said.

Len Boogaard tries to make his own peace. Several times during the summer, he drove back and forth between Ottawa and Minneapolis, about 20 hours each way. For company, he took two bulldogs — Trinity, one that Derek and a girlfriend bought in Louisiana, and a puppy Len Boogaard named Boogey. They stayed in the apartment where Derek died. The lease expired in October.

It was that month that the wait finally ended for the results from Boston. A conference call connected the scientists to Boogaard’s parents and siblings.

The Boogaards learned of the surprising severity of the brain damage. And they heard about the prospects of middle-age dementia.

It was then that Len Boogaard stopped listening. Something occurred to him that he did not expect.

For months, he could not bear the thought of his son’s death. Suddenly, he was forced to imagine the life his son might have been left to live. ■