

Oakland Tribune Sports

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ED LEVITT Blood on The Ice

Which athletes are the most battered, bruised, bloodied and underpaid in big league sports?

Well, the National Hockey League, after meticulous research, has produced startling statistics to show that no player suffers quite like a hockey player.

The NHL figures that more than 500 teeth are lost, loosened or loused up during the season, which is good enough reason why hockey players would rather fight than smile.

In addition, the NHL reports that at least 4,300 stitches are being used each season to mend the hides of the league's 252 players.

"We've had more stitches than streaks," says Seal coach and general manager Fred Glover, himself a battle-scarred old NHL veteran.

The Seals also had more broken bones than the Raiders and 49ers put together the past season.

In just recent weeks, Carol Vadnais suffered a broken thumb; Joe Hardy a broken wrist; Earl Ingarfield a broken kneecap.

Then there's Bill Hicke. Poor Bill. He got his nose fractured in one game—and broken again in another.

Now he's skating around with a bird-cage for a mask. A third break and Bill Hicke says he might retire and take up an easier sport, like fighting Joe Frazier.

"We've had so many injuries," says Glover, "you'd think our guys were run down by a truck. Hell, Norm Ferguson had a shoulder separation; Bert Marshall a broken wrist; Tony Featherstone a concussion; Mike Laughton a damaged knee; Gary Croteau a sprained shoulder; Harry Howell a back injury; and Gary Jarrett got his forehead busted open by a flying stick. He's carrying a scar that looks like a zipper."

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Hockey keeps getting rougher. It is a sport that belongs to the aggressor.

"You can't back off from a fight or they'll chase you out of the league," says Carol Vadnais, who fights more often than a heavyweight contender.

"A National Hockey League player learns to play even if his face is sliced in half," says Harry Howell.

"I've seen more blood on the ice than in a hospital," says Fred Glover.

Larry Zeidel played hockey for 20 years. When he finally retired from the NHL, he told friends, "It wasn't too bad. I only had my skull fractured twice—and 600 stitches to keep me together."

While playing for the Edmonton Flyers of the Western League, Zeidel, according to a national magazine, "was involved in one battle so bloody and so intense it is still famous among hockey players, a group as blasé about blood as butchers."

"Jack Evans, lantern-jawed defenseman of the Saskatoon Quakers, provided the opposition. Zeidel doesn't remember how the fight started.

"Evans hit me with his stick. I don't know if it was an accident or not. But it didn't matter. I had to get back at him. So I hit him with my stick."

"The two of them went at it like medieval gladiators. First, they broke their sticks by banging them on each other's heads. Then they carved at each other with the jagged stumps.

"Covered with blood, they began to trade punches. Finally they wrestled each other to the ice, exhausted.

"As we were being led from the ice," Zeidel remembers, "I noticed I was bleeding more than Evans. So I grabbed a loose stick and hit him over the head with it.

"Funny, but I remember holding back just a little bit as I hit him. If I hadn't restrained myself, he'd be dead."

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Yet hockey players, according to the men who play the game, are no more vicious than any other group of athletes.

"It's just the nature of the sport," says Glover. "The competition is hot. You've got strong men banging into one another. They're wielding big sticks—and angry tempers. At times it can be explosive."

Glover would like his Oakland Seals to get meaner on the ice.

"You can't let the opposition intimidate you," he says. "You've got to play rough, daring, deliberate hockey."

"We're battling the Montreal Canadiens at the Oakland Arena tomorrow night. They've got the great Jean Beliveau. He scored two goals the other night."

Continued Page 27, Col. 1

"This man has been a superstar for almost 20 years. Do you think we can beat Beliveau and the Canadiens by playing like sissies? We've got to be mean, aggressive. That's how you win in the NHL."

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What about the blood baths and broken bones? Are the players now more concerned with savagery than style? Is this the way it must be to survive in the NHL?

"If you must bleed and suffer to win," says Fred Glover, "then we must do it. The players aren't sadistic. They don't want to kill anybody. Only two major league players have been critically injured in hockey since 1907."

Sure players get hurt. But it's not being done deliberately. I've got scars all over my body from the game. But I wouldn't change a thing about hockey. It's been a part of me for so long. It could never get too rough. Not for me.

And not for the genuine hockey buffs. They're hot for their sport.

Even the bloody ice can't cool them down.