

Part of the game



By Nate Smelle

HOCKEY SEASON MAY BE over for some, but not for local on-ice sensation, Tori Howran. While many of her friends are focused firmly on enjoying the summer before it's over, Howran has been working hard to make the line-up on both the Under-18 National Team and Team Ontario. Coming from a hockey family myself I understand the hard dedication required to become part of an elite squad such as the ones she is trying out for. Just to be offered a tryout says a lot about Howran's exceptional skill. To compete at this level hockey must be considered more than just a sport or a game...it is a lifestyle. Every waking moment and often many while asleep is spent thinking about hockey. On ice or not every decision is made with 'the Goal' in mind. Training for the next season never ceases, one's diet is adjusted to maximize performance and almost all free time is sacrificed for the sake of the sport.

Sounds horrible, right? Unless of course you love the game.

Growing up with free reign over the family sporting goods business?Niagara Cycle and Sports in St.Catharines?loving the game was my only option. Having access to all of the latest gear and training equipment was a huge advantage that helped push me forward as I stepped up from the House leagues to eventually play Junior Hockey for the Golden Horseshoe League Championship winning St.Catharines Junior B Falcons.

As exciting as winning this championship was, it was another moment on the ice that is responsible for defining me as a hockey player for life. Considering that part of this experience includes temporarily blacking out, I remember it vividly; almost as if in slow motion. Wearing the Grimsby Peachkings jersey as a left winger, I remember heading up ice with my teammates on a breakout from our own end when all of a sudden everything went dark. The victim of a brutal crosscheck to the face, I managed to find my feet before the play stopped. Assessing my state of being I could see that my sweater was covered in blood and that my cage had been torn in two. Skating to the bench in a daze, the trainer took me aside to tend to my wounds.

From the look on his face I could tell that I needed some serious work. With only a minute left on the clock before the end of the second period though, he proceeded with a quick fix to stop the bleeding until the intermission. 'Your modelling career is over,' he joked as he stuffed the gauze into the hole where one of my front teeth had been. 'Looks like he chipped one and I think the other is broken up inside the gums,' he continued with his diagnosis. Maybe it was the reporter in me or maybe it was the taste of blood on my tongue, but all I wanted to know was who was behind this vicious attack.

Getting the other guy's number from the trainer I headed back out onto the ice in the third high on adrenaline and numb with

painkillers with only one goal in mind...evening the score; not on the scoreboard, but with the hack of a dentist on the other team's blueline. Fuelled by a need for justice and a desire for revenge, I gave into the 'darkside' squaring off with my opponent as soon the puck dropped. Adding some of his plasma to my freshly painted jersey I skated off the ice victorious, proudly displaying my new smile to the crowd.

Having spent the previous 16 years listening to my Grandfather, my Dad and Uncles tell their hockey stories around the dinner table, I now had one of my own that could carry its weight. Looking back on this life-changing moment I can now see the extreme brutality of the encounter. Still, for some weird reason I look back on this experience fondly. For the record, I abhor violence in all of its forms...except if it happens on the ice...then it is part of the game.

As Tori Howran skates towards the future she too will inevitably tally up a number of her own hockey stories. Hopefully the tales she has to share with her loved ones around the dinner table are much more peaceful than mine. Believe me, hockey teeth are not as cool as they seem.