

Block Party

Playing With Fire

All things considered, Theo Fleury's fortunate to be telling his own story.

Playing With Fire, a Harper Collins fall release co-authored by Kirstie McLellan Day, is quite possibly the best hockey auto-biography released since Phil Esposito's *Thunder and Lightning*, published exactly six years prior to Fleury's. In many ways, *Playing With Fire* is considerably more interesting. It's undeniably more significant and potentially career-defining. What sets the two books apart from others is honesty, a sense of self, and an un-abashed frankness in the story telling. For the money, you can't ask for a straight-forward, unapologetic look inside the troubled Fleury's career. His words are clear, his message direct.

Theo Fleury is no hero and this is no tale of the symbolic underdog made good. Frequently over the course of the 312-page read he comes across a martyr, in a few senses of the term. But his story is laid out for you as best as he recalls it and with a lot of help from his co-author. The on-ice stories fill the book in quite nicely. As with any self-tale, there are the occasional exaggerations and inaccuracies, but for the most part it's well written and without question a provocative read.

It's not a book for the faint of heart, and not for any pre-bantam player of your own. Locker-room type language is present on every other page. Just a few chapters in you get a graphic account of his nightmarish "relationship" with his junior hockey coach Graham James, who in 1997 was sentenced to 3 and ½ years in prison after being found guilty on 350 counts of alleged sexual abuse by former player Sheldon Kennedy and another unnamed teammate. James is now on the lamb attempting to renew his life, presumably under an assumed identity.

Fleury holds nothing back in his allegations towards James. From sharing a double bed with James on a pre-junior scouting trip and having James caress his buttocks while he lay terrified wondering if James was doing so unconsciously in his sleep. Fleury, 14 at the time of this first incident, would soon learn this was no mistake. James' advances would soon escalate, Fleury alleges. First to James demanding Fleury stay at James' house and apart from his billet family twice per week -- where James would force himself on Fleury -- to masturbating on the young hockey player's feet and performing oral sex on the boy. Fleury admits to being brought to orgasm by James, who claimed he was not some sick-perverted old man, rather he needed Fleury's semen for unfounded medical reasons.

In his recent book tour Fleury has told the media he plans on bringing new charges against James for his specific abuse (Fleury was abused prior to and while James coached him on the Moose Jaw Warriors while Kennedy was abused later in Swift Current) but those plans are on hold with Fleury citing it's a delicate situation, to which he must be certain he is of right mind to put himself on such under the magnifying glass the sex abuse trial of a Canadian national hockey hero would bring.

But while Fleury is apprehensive about putting himself on the stage in criminal and civil lawsuits, he is taking acting classes hoping to play the lead, himself, in a 20-city play based on his book. So while he may not be ready to hear his tragic life-altering scenes with Graham James re-hashed in a court room, he apparently has no issue re-enacting them himself in theatre.

While literally every poor decision and controversial moment in his career and life Fleury does trace back to the abuse from Graham James, he's also the son of an alcoholic father and pill-popping mom. He was sexually abused by James in 1983 and '84. He hops on the road to alcoholism two years later at 16, first getting drunk at Sheldon Kennedy's house the weekend of a hockey tournament. However, Theo didn't try and considered himself to be "naïve" to drugs until first turned pro in early 1988, at the age of 19.

Fleury notes the first time he experimented with marijuana was during the spring of 1988 while with Salt Lake in the International Hockey League. Fleury had just finished his fourth and final season with the Moose

Jaw Warriors, his junior team, and turned pro with the Salt Lake Golden Eagles, the farm club of the Calgary Flames.

While Fleury doesn't name the player who turned him on to the drug and gave him his first joint, the background and description he includes in the book (mid-20's at the time, talented forward and Manitoba native who resided in Moose Jaw) gives the source's identity away as Brent Sapergia. Coincidentally, Sapergia is the minor-league hockey coach who made national news last month when his bench-clearing stick-throwing tirade made the rounds on YouTube.

A month later Theo was introduced by those same teammates to cocaine. Fleury describes his first lines as euphoric feeling like nothing he'd ever experienced. "It gave me goose bumps, I was so happy." Suddenly the shy, awkward rookie was confident and brash.

That summer, seeing how big and muscular his teammates at the minor-pro level were, the 5-foot-6 pint sized winger went home intent on making Calgary straight out of fall camp, claiming to put on 25 pounds of muscle in just four months. The extra size cut down on his speed and flexibility and he was cut from the Flames and sent back to Salt Lake where he tore up the IHL both on and off the ice. This is where the self-proclaimed "bad-ass" is born.

Whether he hated the person he became in hindsight or not, one thing perfectly clear throughout the book is Fleury clearly admires some of his "bad-ass" party tales. It's almost to the point you'd wonder if he longed for those days once again. He doesn't come out and say as much, but the tone is there at times, ranging from flat-out braggadocios to an obvious self-pity. Even as he described his two-day coke-binge on the eve of his first and, as history would have it, only season as a Chicago Blackhawk, Theo communicates the hours spent inside Chicago housing projects snorting lines with big bad gangsters as if preserving his own personal David versus demon Goliath scenario.

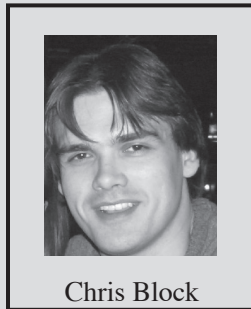
The feel-good send-off is that Fleury claims to have his life together, is healthier than ever and coupled with the strength shared by his wife, he's ready to help other young teenagers and adults come forward with their stories of sexual abuse. As anyone who's lived with or known an addict, in every case it remains to be seen.

Nothing against Fleury, but his post-book actions contradicts the presented mission. An aborted NHL comeback in September now looks like it was more of a publicity stunt to kick off the book tour than anything else. Theo concluded it was NHL or bust and once cut from Calgary's 23-man roster he said he knew his on-ice journey had ended. Lofty expectations and a harsh assessment for someone who'd been away from the league for six years, and all things considered, had an impressive camp.

Promises of bringing his sexual predator to trial have stalled by trepidations Fleury has about what revisiting the James' portion of his life would do to his own mental state. Mind you, these are same stories that struck him a book deal with Harper Collins and made this a best-seller in his home country. While the message he is sending in the book is of total healing, post-authoring he's now backing off such claims.

Sheldon Kennedy recently asked if Fleury's telling kids to come forward and do the right thing, why isn't the man doing so himself? Fair question. Time will tell.

In every act of Fleury's tale, it has always been the sport of hockey to which he's turned for escape and stabilization. If he's grasped the last life and dollar out of the sport that's given him life for his first forty years, let's hope he has a sound plan for the next forty.



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