

21

by Brian Michael Barbeito

The coach told the player, number 21, to stand in front of the net in order to distract the opposing team's goaltender and to block the view, to 'screen' him as it were. 21 did so, and did it well. There were defensemen that gave him much trouble by hitting his legs and arms with sticks. These hits, far from light, often hurt through plastic and padding, because they had to send a clear message not to stand there. He got used to it. Sometimes a goalie would hack the back of legs. More often than not it was the sides of knees that got hit, knees that tried to hide under bandages and braces, knees that had worked hard in physiotherapy in order to function properly after years of problems. This was the price of being a tall third line centreman. 21 was not a goon, far from it. He skated like the wind, used his wingers well, and was often considered a finesse player. But at that level of play, there were destined stars and even a few future superstars around - people who had agents and scouts after them. To be competent meant next to nothing, and to be good or even very good meant little. One had to be extraordinary. Hack, hack, and hack against his legs went the sticks. One time, on a particularly difficult night, when 21 had been hit and punched and trash talked to, the net-minder struck him in the back with a stick while the referee was not looking. 21 turned round and in an instant smashed the goalie in the face with his right fist-glove and knocked him out. That was when the two, then five, and soon all of the ten players started to fight. That is when someone hopped the bench and in the next moment even more bodies were involved. Someone sucker-punched 21 in the back of the head and he went down hard. It was to be his fourth concussion in two years. When it was all over, he wondered what it had all been for. His team had lost, and he had another injury, and a head injury at that, to deal with. The next night would be a new game, and 21, ever a company man, would do it over again, taking one for the team, because someone, a long time ago, had bought the lie that it all meant something.

