

The Literature on Hockey's Bad Boys

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The truth is (that is a great opening to an academic paper) the truth is that for as long as there has been “literature” we have been fascinated with “bad boy” stories. As far as the sports figure is concerned, this category ranges from hardcore criminality to just-on-the-edge agitation, from the cocaine-snorting, pistol-toting ruffian to the music-blasting, speeding-convertible delinquent. We might imagine a continuum operating here as a player may begin at one end and move towards the other—take John Kordic for example. His story has been chronicled by Mark Zwolinski. Fall into evil or turn your life around. Moreover, the fascination has a sexual component as those who are bold enough to act outside the conventional or lawful parameters are associated with strength and conviction. This aspect of “bad boy” behavior might also be called the Machiavellian shine; rewards accrue to those who dare to step over the line. The sports biography intersects with “true crime” literature and that of “Hollywood celebrity” (take bad girl Lindsay Lohan, for example). Literature means living vicariously, and when it comes to the “bad,” taking the vicarious route is obviously a “good” decision. Proof that the image is a capitalist/entertainment construction may be seen in the fact that as part of the 2011 “Hockey Day in America” NBC television aired a segment entitled “Bad Boys” about recreational hockey in Los Angeles starring Jerry Bruckheimer and a list of NHL and film personalities.¹ The obvious pop culture reference here is to the Bruckheimer feature films starring Will Smith and Martin Lawrence—foul language, violent behavior, and general disrespect for authority are the chief markers. Golf had John Daly, and

Basketball Denis Rodman, but hockey identifies with the “bad boy” in a more fundamental way.

In this presentation I will attempt to describe a polarization and evolution of sorts of popular literature (including some journalism) dealing with the “bad boy” phenomenon in hockey. I will certainly not try to reference all of it since the body of work we are talking about is immense. I will also restrict myself to non-fiction. For anyone interested in a scholarly analysis of Canadian Literature (that is fiction, drama and poetry) that deals with hockey violence, including some excellent introductory comments on masculinity, aggression and sport, I would refer you to Chapter Three of Jason Blake’s *Canadian Hockey Literature*.

I will try to outline historical trends in the popular literature about hockey’s “bad boys,” and then focus on some journalism of the past year. I will also speculate on the influence, if any, this literature has on attitudes towards violence in hockey and the current debate about the role of the enforcer.

First, we begin with Stan Fischler, perhaps the most prolific author of hockey books. I believe he has claimed to have authored over one hundred publications on the sport, and while I have not attempted to count them all, I have come across enough to think that his claim may well be true. Someday Andrew Podnieks may beat Fischler’s Gretzky-like record. Typically, Fischler’s books contain basic biographical information and little in the way of reflection or anything that could be described as cultural analysis.

His interest in the “bad boy” can easily be seen in those early works like *The Big Bad Bruins* (1969). This seemed to be a time when the sport celebrity as bad boy was

constructed around the “playboy” image. Football had Joe Namath and hockey had Derek Sanderson, whose autobiography, entitled *I’ve Got to be Me*, carries the author line “with Stan Fischler.” You can hear Geoff Hendry read intriguing passages (like Derek’s take on dating wealthy women) from this work on YouTube (the series is called “Passages”). The glamor part seems to have eroded later in the 1970s as the “Broad Street Bullies” from Philadelphia proved to be even meaner and tougher than the Bruins. Fischler published on the Flyers and their success and then eventually concentrated on the bad in “bad boy” when he released a biography of Dave Schultz in 1981, *The Hammer*.

At this point, the publications tend to blur together. The first Fischler *Bad Boys* book seems to have come out in 1991 (I found a reference to it using a Google search which pulled it up on an Amazon page, but I haven’t been able to replicate the exact search). In any case, a new edition appeared in 1994 from Warwick with the subtitle *The Legends of Hockey’s Toughest, Meanest, Most-Feared Players*. Confusingly enough a *Bad Boys 2* had appeared the year before from McGraw-Hill, the original publisher. I haven’t had the pleasure of collating these volumes, so I’m guessing here, but I suspect these books recycle a lot of the same material. (I can provide you with documented examples of Fischler’s unscrupulous reuse of previously published information if you wish; obviously, to produce over a hundred works on a subject requires that you make the most of your raw material).² The 1993 book can easily be purchased from several secondhand internet providers, so this suggests that a kind of market saturation was achieved. On the other hand, it may simply reflect that fact that much popular literature is quickly consumed and discarded. And I would emphasize this last point. We are

constantly reinventing that which enthralls, be it vampires, *femme fatales*, or bad boys. In any case, Fischler's *Ultimate Bad Boys* (1998) seems to be his last foray into the area that then opened up for all kinds of interlopers.

There are many of these including *In the Bin: Reckless and Rude Stores . . .* (2001) by Lloyd Freeberg whose position as a penalty-box official gave him a close view of the action, and Kevin Allen's *Crunch: Big Hitters, Shot Blockers & Bone Crushers: A History of Fighting in the NHL's Fighting Tradition* (1999), another masterpiece from Triumph Books. (How Allen manages to include "shot blockers" in this category is as nonsensical as it is novel.) A few years later we find items like *Blood Feud* (2006) by Adrian Dater about the nasty battles involving the Colorado Avalanche and Detroit Red Wings.

There are a number of more thoughtful, analytic books that deal with hockey violence, so I should take note of some of these. Richard Gruneau and David Whitson, two of Canada's most respected academics when it comes to examining hockey, focused on the subjects of violence and masculinity in Chapter 8 of their seminal 1993 work *Hockey Night in Canada*. Other good analyses followed that avoided the "bad boy" romanticization like Lawrence Scanlan's *Grace Under Fire: The State of Our Sweet and Savage Game* (2002).

Still, while some academics and writers were writing against violence, the attraction of the popular "enforcer" biography was given new life in 2010 with *Tough Guy: My Life on the Edge* (2010), the story of Bob Probert with Kirstie McLellan Day.

Day was also the “ghost writer” of Theo Fleury’s story of sexual abuse *Playing with Fire* (2009).

On the surface, these are very different stories. Fleury’s is very much that of the victim, not the perpetrator, but the fact that Probert died suddenly at the age of 45 (his brain was donated for medical research to help understand the effects of concussions in athletes) suggests that he too was a victim of the culture—that the real “bad boys” may not be who you think they are.

Nevertheless, the coach as sexual predator has to be the worst of the bad boys, and one might even hope that there is a special hellfire reserved for them. We should also mention Sheldon Kennedy’s *Why I Didn’t Say Anything* (2006) as another example of the victim of sexual abuse coming forward. True courage gets identified with disclosure and becomes part of the healing process. For those who believe that literature serves a greater social purpose (an opinion that is by means accepted by all), these texts really stand tallest. Both Kennedy and Fleury were raped by their junior coach Graham James, whose “bad boy” status is beyond redemption. The subject also comes up in Larry O’Connor’s hockey novel, *The Penalty Box*.

If we want to expand our purview, we could consider other categories like the white collar criminal. The guys in suits who commit fraud and embezzle money are also “bad” boys. Ross Conway wrote *Game Misconduct* which is an exposé of the corrupt dealings of Alan Eagleson. Similar books have been written about Harold Ballard and Bruce McNall—corrupt owners.³ Flamboyant builders have sometimes attracted as much press attention as some star players, especially when characteristics such as

ruthlessness and unethical tactics—the usual Machiavellain stuff—is displayed. Another group perhaps to qualify as “bad boy” is a subset of ourselves, the critics and writers about the sport who profit from published research and journalism. One might even talk about an unwritten code of ethics that would include such things as attempting to verify various “stories” that circulate about a player. Going ahead with an unauthorized (that is “unauthorized” by the subject himself or herself) version is fine according to this code, as long as it is understood as such and as long as some attempt has been made to consider the story from the subject’s point of view. However, to profit on the basis of publishing rumors, without taking any effort to substantiate them is generally thought of as crossing the line. In one of the conference’s opening sessions we heard from Mike Danton that Steve Simmons never did contact him about the content of his book *The Lost Dream*, which according to Danton included some wild fabrications about his life. So a “bad boy” model emerges whereby the codes (official regulation/law and unofficial “best practices”) are challenged and perhaps violated. The “bad” obviously has to do with the sense of violation, but the charm has to do with a sense that the codes themselves need to change, to be broken or modified (read “made more fair or more human”).

However, most fans of the game would be more familiar with other popular media and their celebration of the traditional “bad boy.” I’m talking here of Don Cherry’s “Rock’em, Sock’em Series,” which started in 1989 and as of 2012 stands at 23 (this according to *Wikipedia*).⁴ One could see this popular culture, Fischler’s “bad boys of hockey” along with Cherry’s annual video compilations, as a celebration of the sport as rugged and manly. Here is the place to mention that there are several websites devoted to fighting in hockey—in fact, I suspect that the digital resources devoted to hockey’s

enforcers are disproportionately high compared to the total for hockey itself. According to John MacAloon, a cultural anthropologist who has specialized on the Olympic Games, these kinds of cultural works serve in a festive function that contains the game, the rituals around it, and all the celebratory activity on the part of fans.⁵ Even analytical works might be placed here, for the festive frame, again according to MacAloon, can include critical commentary—or commentary that essentially seeks to change the rituals and game that are inside its frame.

I have probably used too much time surveying the popular literature that seems to celebrate the hockey bad boy. With the deaths of three former hockey tough guys in the summer of 2011, this literature obviously changed. Rather than celebrate the bad boy, a number of writers felt obliged to defend the presence of fighting in hockey against a barrage of criticism. The debate continues. I should say that I am indebted here to the work of one of my students, Ethan Calof who did a research project on this subject. There is no time to compile anything like a complete list of participants; suffice to say that almost everybody from singer Michael Bublé to Canadian Governor General David Johnston have expressed opinions on the subject.⁶ As the highest public figure in the country, the Governor General might have some ground to weigh in on fighting in hockey, but who cares what Michael Bublé thinks of Don Cherry? One of the better works that argues for the elimination of fighting is Adam Proteau's *Fighting the Good Fight: Why On-Ice Violence Is Killing Hockey*. Calof summarizes part of Proteau's position as follows:

His main point is that, by allowing excessively violent acts and rule breaking, the NHL is saying that they have no faith in their core product, "a fast, physical feast for the eyes that stressed skills and speed." As Proteau says, the NHL is

admitting that they don't think they'd be able to sell without fighting. He goes on to call enforcers "Dancing Bear Acts" instead of hockey players, saying "they're giant men trained to perform unnatural acts for a crowd's enjoyment." (Calof)

And so the "bad boy" becomes that ruthless owner/manager who uses players as so much meat to make money.

The investigative journalism that caught many people's attention this past December was John Branch's three part special for the *New York Times* on the Derek Boogaard story.⁷ It chronicles the rise and fall of the enforcer who made it to the Minnesota Wild and then was traded to the New York Rangers: the fights, the drugs the pressure. I found the animation with part three, which was part of the online version of the story and which demonstrated the debilitating effects of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), particularly illuminating. Branch has followed the original story up with a number of others, the latest appeared last month and detailed the case that Len Boogaard was putting together about the negligence on the part of a number of parties in how his son was dealt with. If there is a successful legal action against team doctors, the two franchises involved and the league itself, I suspect that that will ultimately lead to the elimination of the "enforcer" in the sport. If Gary Bettman understands one thing, it is liability. Look how fast those nets went up in every arena throughout North America when it was established in court that lacking such measures could result in lawsuits. There are hundreds of reader comments posted to Branch's online stories about Derek Boogaard. One might speculate that this response is indicative of the influence of Branch's writing. While the idealist in me hopes that work like Branch's will help prevent further injuries, I must confess that I'm not an idealist—that I believe most

journalism speaks to that segment of an audience that is already in support of the position taken. In short, I believe that journalism tends to retrench or solidify existing opinions rather than shape or change them.

Branch called his original series on Boogaard “The Life and Death of a Hockey Enforcer.” I’d like to just comment on the noun “enforcer.” In doing so, I will go back to Stan Fischler, whose biography of Dave Shultz, published just over twenty years ago, carries the subtitle *Confessions of a Hockey Enforcer*. For Fischler, the term “enforcer” was meant to have positive connotations. Enforcers are good guys who make sure that everybody is playing by the “code”; this basically amounts to “leaving the skilled players alone.” The bad boy as good guy, a protector. The image is idealized. It is also at the heart of those who maintain the counter position to people like John Branch.

In a recent online (*Wired*) interview the author of the screenplay for *Goon*, Jay Baruchel, goes on at length about how the enforcers kept the dirty play and cheap shots out of the game.⁸ It’s one of the commonest ideas when it comes to the debate over fighting in hockey. Enforcers are necessary to keep the real lunatics in control. The weakness of this argument is easily demonstrated. While it is nice to imagine a good-hearted enforcer like the one depicted in *Goon*, the reality isn’t so clear-cut. A standard body check is likely to be interpreted by a “goon” as “taking liberties with a team’s star player.” The enforcer does not serve as a protector so much as he intimidates the other team and tries to get the opposition to give the star player a lot more room and freedom than would normally be the case.

Another common myth about the “bad boy” is that of on-ice psychopath turned gentle giant off-ice; this was also part of the main character in the film *Goon*. One constantly hears about the on-the-ice tough guy being so nice, so gentle off the ice. The art of aggression--turn it on, turn it off. A simple guide to keeping one’s “work” separate from one’s “home life”; however, the problem is that the switches get mixed up. Suddenly, your fourth-line tough guy is caught crying in between periods and smacking his girlfriend in the parking lot. Popular culture is full of such contradictory figures: the mob hit man who is particularly fond of his tropical fish, who helps the elderly woman with her groceries at the door. So what? Such behavior does not justify murder, obviously. Gruneau/Whitson and Blake have commented at length on this myth and the “safety valve” theory.

I’ll just point to another aspect of the “enforcer” role—all those involved in law enforcement depend on delinquents to justify their jobs. In short, one of the hockey myths about the violence in the game has to do with demonizing and conversely idealizing sides. (Again, the argument is that we need enforcers to keep the lunatics in line.) The perennial conflict between good and evil—one of popular culture’s basic forms. Think of all those bad Nazis in books and films. Think of Milton’s Satan that so moved the Romantics. The story of hockey’s “bad boys” is in diverse ways just a small section of a much greater phenomenon having to do with the narratives with which we entertain ourselves.

I teach an undergraduate class on hockey literature which includes a unit on “bad boys.” For the popular non-fiction, I avoid Stan Fischler and opt instead for the first two chapters of Martin O’Malley’s *Gross Misconduct: The Life of Spinner Spencer*. I also

include a poem on John Kordic and Justin Bryant's short story, "Hakkenan's Move"; these latter two texts are dealt with by Jason Blake so I will just refer you to his book for an analysis. I will say a few things about the O'Malley book. Brian Spencer was drafted by the Leafs and played in the NHL in the 1970s; not strictly what we would today refer to as an enforcer he did have a reputation as an agitator and "bad boy." This image, however, is only part of what makes his story so compelling. The tragedy that hit the Spencer family, who lived in BC, began when Brian's father, Roy, learned that the local CBC affiliate would not be broadcasting the Leaf game as scheduled (Brian's NHL debut), but would carry the Canucks instead—a popular move one would think in BC. Roy Spencer, so incensed at the change, went to the local CBC office in Prince George with a gun to insist that the Leaf game be shown. Apparently, they did what he asked, so there was some satisfaction. Nevertheless, confronted by the RCMP upon leaving the station, Roy was eventually shot and died. Years later Brian "Spinner" Spencer finished his NHL career and retired to Florida, where he was charged with murder. Although he would be acquitted, he ended up getting shot and killed a few months later in a robbery that ensued after a cocaine purchase. O'Malley's biography was used as a basis for the 1993 CBC film of the same name, *Gross Misconduct*, directed by Atom Egoyan. I remember the film being on television but I cannot remember much about it. (I have just discovered that somebody has loaded it up on YouTube.) I've recounted the story only to provide you with an example of how the professional athlete as "bad boy" easily crosses over into the celebrity and crime categories. There is a section of O'Connor's novel *The Penalty Box* that fictionalizes a version of the Roy Spencer tragedy.

So is there anything in between the stooge-like parade of popular bad boys and the academic journalism on concussions? I would like to close this presentation by mentioning two other works. The first is a song, the second not yet written. The song is Warren Zevon's "Hit Somebody," a rousing ballad that appeals to the underdog in all of us; it isn't about being violent as much as it is leaving an impression—to mimic the Nike ad from a decade ago—"hit somebody" as have an impact, rise up from the small town Canadian prairie and assert yourself in the big time American city. Hit somebody as in don't be afraid to challenge authority. Hit somebody as in be somebody. That story. When Zevon performed the song on the David Letterman Show in 2002, Paul Shaver, the band-leader, who also happens to be a Canadian from Winnipeg, shouted the words, "hit somebody" in a way that attempted to lift the audience.⁹

Those who know the game and the behavior of North American fans will recognize that there are times when the players seem to be going through the motions, when the action is devoid of passion or lacking in a willingness to engage. Time to get a drink or go to the bathroom or just yawn and read the program—when *suddenly* somebody will make significant contact, cause a turnover and *suddenly*, as if a switch has been turned, both the players and the spectators will be intently focused on the play again. Ideally, it will not be the "dancing bears" or the "enforcers" or the "goons" (they are expected to perform their acts), but just a wonderful moment when the sport, on life-support for so much of the long, dull season, strikes our need and love for action. If we lose that, we lose the game. Ken Dryden makes an argument in an article that ran in *The Globe and Mail* in January 2012 (Dryden 1-5). Similarly, academic discourse also needs some shaking up for time to time.

So “Hit Somebody” as a call to think outside the box, if I may continue the analogy. I’m using it as a segue to my last reference, because I confess to feeling inspired by it. Maybe this is because Zevon passed away, maybe because the “bad boy” attraction has something much more primitive at its core. In March I asked journalist Stephen Brunt what his next hockey project was, and he answered that he was contemplating a book on fighting and hockey.¹⁰ He began by reminding me that he has written a few books on boxing and that he always had a love of that sport so the subject of fighting in hockey seems like a natural. Brunt wasn’t endorsing Don Cherry or anything like that, but he was honest enough to confess that as a sports fan he found fighting enthralling on a gut level and he wasn’t going to be hypocritical about it. Not a bad boy exactly, but maybe a bit in the anti-fighting camp. For the record, if you haven’t picked up on this already, I am against fighting in hockey or to be more exact in favor of a game ejection and suspension for anyone who does fight, and yet I, too, will admit that I have felt that adrenalin of bloodlust when two players suddenly drop the gloves and are about to go at it. Brunt didn’t know what shape the book would take, but I would have to guess judging from his work on Bobby Orr and Wayne Gretzky that it will be well worth reading, or in other words, that it will be a piece of journalism designed to “hit somebody.”

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ENDNOTES

¹ The segment is available on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPmz4CkvFSQ>. The Inner Circle reggae song "Bad Boys" was popularized by being used as the theme music for the FOX television series, COPS.

² Compare Beddoes, D., Stan Fischler, Ira Gitler *Hockey! The Story of the World's Fastest Sport 3rd Ed.* Toronto: Macmillan, 1973 with Don Cherry. *Grapes: A Vintage Age of Hockey*. Toronto: Prentice Hall, 1983.

³ William Houston *Ballard: The Most Controversial Canadian Sports Figure*. Toronto: Summerhill Press, 1984 and Stephen Brunt. *Gretzky's Tears: Hockey, Canada, and the Day Everything Changed*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.

⁴ See "Don Cherry's Rock'em Sock'em." *Wikipedia* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Cherry%27s_Rock%27Em_Sock%27em_Hockey

⁵ See John MacAloon. "Olympic Games and the Theory of Spectacle in Modern Societies." *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*. Ed. John MacAloon. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984. 241-280.

⁶ Bubl  defended Don Cherry's comments about a group of former enforcers being "pukes" because they expressed anti-fighting positions, and the Governor General argued for the abolishment of fighting. See Joshua Ostroff, "Michael Bubl  Punches Back Against Critics of Hockey Violence," *AOL Music*, 19 Oct. 2011, 28 Mar. 2012 <<http://blog.music.aol.ca/2011/10/19/michael-buble-hockey-violence/>>; and Roy MacGregor, "Fighting and 'goonery' not something to celebrate in Canada's game: Governor-General," *The Globe and Mail*, 2 Mar. 2012, 28 Mar. 2012

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/fighting-and-goonery-not-something-to-celebrate-in-canadas-game-governor-general/article2357576/>

⁷ See John Branch, "Punched Out: The Life and Death of a Hockey Enforcer. Part One: Learning to Brawl," *New York Times (Late City Edition)* December 3 2011, , sec. SP: 1, ., John Branch, "Punched Out: The Life and Death of a Hockey Enforcer. Part Two: Blood on the Ice," *New York Times (Late City Edition)* December 5 2011, , sec. D: 1, ., John Branch, "Punched Out: The Life and Death of a Hockey Enforcer. Part Three: A Brain "Going Bad"," *New York Times (Late City Edition)* December 6 2011, sec. B: 13.

⁸ See Curtis Silver, "Goon Screenwriter, Jay Baruchel Talks Hockey Violence and Bringing Back the Enforcer," *Wired* 26 June 2012. <http://www.wired.com/geekdad/2012/06/goon-jay-baruchel/>.

⁹ See from The David Letterman Show, YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufEtQcisrgg>. "The Hockey Song." *The David Letterman Show*. 2002.

¹⁰ Brunt contributed a profile for Mike Tyson in the *SportsNet* magazine feature, "The 28 Greatest Bad Guys in Sports and Why We Love Them." The hockey profiles were Bobby Clarke, Chris Pronger, and Bob Probert. See Stephen Brunt and et al, "The 28 Best-Loved Villains in the World of Sport," *Sportsnet* Dec. 12 2011: 28-51.

The Culture Trip profiles 11 literary figures whose notorious private lives have become as famous as the brilliant works of fiction they have produced. From Oscar Wilde to Jack Kerouac, Truman Capote to Bret Easton Ellis, Culture Trip profiles 11 bad boys of literature whose personal affairs have become almost as famous as their professional works.

Arthur Rimbaud. Born in Ardennes, France in 1854, Arthur Rimbaud's childhood and adolescent years little foreshadowed the rebellious young man he would become. A devout Catholic and highly studious boy who excelled in almost every academic discipline, Rimbaud began writing poetry before he had even left primary school, though his creativity truly flourished during his teenage years.

By Amber Topping. The top 20 Byronic Heroes in Literature from Heathcliff, Mr. Rochester and more. See who is number one. He was "mad, bad and dangerous to know," yet his appeal was undeniable. The popularity of this character type continued to grow becoming immortalized and even more deeply romanticized with characters like Mr. Rochester of Jane Eyre or Heathcliff of Wuthering Heights. The popularity of this dark, romantic figure hasn't died since. So to celebrate the absolute awesomeness of the Byronic Hero, this week we've collected fitting quotes to showcase various aspects of the Byronic personality in literature. This may be the final chapter in my little "Top 20 Byronic Series" but don't be surprised if you Jack was the "bad" hockey player who hid behind his walls and Rosie was the shy, awkward girl who went to all of his games. They sho... There was one minute left on the clock and I could see the desperation on the boys faces. Each was breathing heavy with their eyes focused on either the puck or the other players. It was all or nothing now. If they wanted to win, they had to score. I watched as the coach yelled a mixture of things at the boys on the ice receiving a small nod of the head as comprehension of what to do. The crowd cheered in encouragement and I silently hoped they could pull off a play like this. It was hardly ever done before and not many coaches have initiated this play unless they were desperate enough.