

NHL Hockey Hall of Famer Pat LaFontaine Shares His Story

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Pat LaFontaine: You know as athletes you think you're invincible and you have this macho image and my first concussion occurred in Madison Square Garden. It was in 1990 in the play-offs and there was about two minutes to go in the game. And I remember getting hit and going into the net and Chris Nilan was following me, I think he's a Boston player, BU guy wasn't he? And he was kind of leading me into James Patrick and it was kind of an instant play, but yet defense was coming at me and I was going to the net and I was at full speed and he was coming full speed and Chris Nilan was kind of steering me into it and bang! I hit his shoulder and the force of his shoulder that hit my head. I was out instantly and looking at the tape now the back of my head -- fortunately, I had my helmet on, I hit the ice also. And the only thing I can remember was that the trainer was trying to -- coming in and out of consciousness, I guess I was starting to swallow my tongue and I was going through a little bit of convulsions. It must have seemed like an eternity, but I remember getting wheeled off and the hostile fans at the Garden were yelling all kinds of things. That was my first real severe concussion which is a grade three and I was sitting in the medical room with the doctors and I was in and out -- two or three times and I remember saying at one point to the doctor, "I'm fine. I'm ready to go. Everything's fine Doc. Put me out there." And he said game's been over for five minutes. I said oh.

The next day I remember I came to again I said, "Could you -- could you call my wife." And fortunately, I remember the number and that night I remember being strapped to a headboard and going to the hospital and having all kinds of CAT scans and fortunately everything was okay. But I had the "the" worst headache and felt like somebody just taking all the energy out of me for about ten days. Just as Dr. Kelly had described, blurred vision and kind of glossy-eyed and no enthusiasm, but I thought well, this is a concussion, we're athletes, we'll overcome this. This is only gonna last for a week and fortunately it lasted about ten days and right back at it, playing hockey again and really I kind of put that behind me and never thought that would come back around.

It wasn't until about two years later where I received another one and it just so happened that was in the same building. And I remember it wasn't as severe because I wasn't unconscious, but I remember skating around the rink and looking at my trainer and everything was in slow motion. I remember, I got to get off the ice, something is not right. And at that point in time back then it was -- it was talked upon that, oh you just got your bell rang, get back in there, you know you're fine -- how many fingers?

You know there was a course of action that was more on the, obviously a lighter end of things. So I remember going into the locker room and the trainer came in and he said that, so who's playing -- who's their goaltender and what's the score?

And I said why their mask looked a lot alike and I said it's that got to be Richter and it's three to two. And I felt pretty confident that it was what it was. And then it up Vanbeesbrook and it was two to one we were losing. So of course I didn't play that game, but then I was feeling pretty good I played two nights later. And my third concussion and I'm kind of going through this rather quickly, my third concussion was against Quebec where a guy by the name Matt Sundin just happened to catch me blind-sided with his elbow. I remember sitting on the bench and I told my trainers something's not right and he just said just stay here and you know we're not gonna play it for this period, but just sit on the bench and that's when the period, we'll talk. And I remember looking and all of a sudden that period was over and I was in the locker room. I remember turning to one of my teammates and this was further on the period and then I said, what's the score? He said it's two to one. Two to one I said, we scored! We scored, that's great, who was it and he said you did. You scored and you got an assist and I said oh man I don't remember.

Then I went and play that game and fortunately, things started to come back to me and I was able to play the rest of the game, but the trainer knew that I wasn't all there. And as these things went on -- went on you just took it for granted. You got your bell rang. You know you're gonna bounce back, everything's gonna be fine. Well, as your injuries escalate and as you know now there is such a thing as a cumulative effect. But back then we just thought it was macho.

You got hit, you got hit, you got hit, you're gonna bounce back. You're an athlete. You're supposed to overcome these things. Well, it wasn't too long after where I had another concussion and I actually took a stick across the jaw where my jaw was broken and had to have my jaw wired and it felt like a firecracker went off in my mouth and I never -- never even considered that most likely you receive something then too.

I never counted all the dings where you've got hit so hard in the boards and you kind of just disoriented, but then things snapped back right in place and you're back playing, and you never consider those concussions either. Then I took a real severe one in Buffalo. It was 1996 and it was this 6-foot-six player, 235 pounds and I was cut across the middle like I've done for 15 years and the next thing I know I was cutting back and I -- the last half of a second I tried to lean back and that was it. I couldn't get out of the way, but the force of his shoulder had hit the only part of -- the weakest part of my body, which is my neck and head and that six-six, the strongest part of his body is hitting the weakest part of my body something's gotta give.

I remember rotate -- I don't remember, but I'm watching on video that I rotated and lost my helmet. I was unconscious and it's when my forehead slapped on the ice and I was out for about ten seconds -- eight to ten seconds because we reviewed it later and the thing that's scary was I remember waking up in the locker room and looking at the clock. This happened about five minutes into the game. I remember looking at the clock in the lounge sitting in one of the couches. I was looking I said, wow, the periods don't -- you know, what was I -- what am I doing

with my equipment? You know we're playing the game I should be out there, why am I sitting here?

The trainer finally came in and explained because I didn't know what was happening to me. Meanwhile, I had consciously got up from the trainer after I was knocked out, skated on the bench I guess and I was on there and it was almost like you're there, but nothing was recording. And one of the trainer had -- one of the trainers had come, it's Keith Sharp and I was real close with because he'd heard some voices and he'd come in and he'd said, you okay? And I guess I told him I was fine, but at the time he said nobody was there, but I was speaking, I guess and so it's not to meant -- you know some guys might think it's funny because they tell you stories, but as time goes on it really scares you because at that point in time I turn to the doctor and he had said you're not going back. That's it. You're not gonna play.

I was scared to go back because for the first time it wasn't one of those things we had the desire to get back in there. This one was -- this felt different, but yet I didn't have any headaches and yet I -- I just felt like something changed, but I'd listen to the doctor and come to think of it later on it was a grade three concussion. I should have been sent to the hospital. I should have spent the night, but I remember as an athlete that, you know, you're gonna overcome these things. And so I'd ask the doctor, yeah, I'm fine. I can drive home. I'm sure that I've had this before. You know concussion is about for a week, ten days or something, I'm sure I'll bounce back. I just had one about a year earlier and I was out the same amount of time about ten days to two weeks. So the next course of action was I asked one of the players if he could follow me home and when I think about that how I ever did that and how the player -- you know we're at a level of professional sports where you know those things shouldn't be happening.

I wasn't at a place rationally or consciously to even make a decision like that and it's such state of that -- that fall was Mike Leoda, the player's association gave every trainer, coach and doctor strict rules it said if you're unconscious, it's a grade three and you should be sent for tests in the hospital. Well, I was literally a grade three because I was out. I was unconscious, but they deem me a grade two and so I didn't have to see the doctor until the next day. Fortunately, nothing tragic happened driving home and I -- but it was a little strange now I don't remember much about it.

And then I was out about a week and I went to see one of the doctors and the physicians and I said I think I'm okay because I remember these symptoms and they're not as bad. Something's different, but I don't have any real bad headaches and he says, well this is your fifth or six concussion now. I think we should be careful here, but if you're still feeling good and the symptoms aren't too bad then you could skate -- you know on Tuesday. I think it was about three or four days later. So I did that and I still didn't feel too bad. Something wasn't right, but I wasn't gonna admit that because I was captain of the team and I want to make sure I was there and supporting my teammates and taking on that responsibility to not showing any of that weakness of course because it's a macho thing and you feel that responsibility. The next thing I remember I played a week later against

Montreal. So I remember being so tired and I remember having to get myself so worked up and I couldn't sleep that afternoon. It's --geez, it didn't feel right on the ice and I'm sure I'm gonna snap out of it and everything's gonna be fine. You know what, the doctor said it's okay and it's -- I'll be fine.

So it was the -- two nights later we played another game. Same thing, I was having trouble sleeping and I was -- I guess I started saying some strange things and wasn't myself and one of the sports writers came up to me and says, boy you look real pale. Is everything okay? And I said oh yeah, everything fine. I'll be fine. You know I'm probably just a little tired with lots been going on and he says, alright. I said fine and so I went and played that night and I remember flying in to New York after the game, I said I have never been so tired in my life and all of the sudden I started feeling like something was being taken away. Something -- my enthusiasm, my drive, I wasn't sleeping, just didn't care about things.

I said something is not right and we went on that western road trip and it just started spiraling downhill and then I started to have bouts where I've -- I've become very emotional. And things were just starting to slow down and get strange and I remember telling my coach to a point where I said you know someday I'll look forward to just doing a bookstore, selling books. And he said what do you mean by that, I don't understand. Well, this - this stuff is getting old and something is not right and I'm not sure about this and we had a home game and you kind of park that away and fortunately he is a coach that was not only concern about the player, but he's concern about the person. Well, we ended up going to back to Buffalo and I played against Philadelphia that night and here I was still haven't been sleeping and I've been trying to hold everything together because you're the captain and you wanna say everything's okay and just smile and my face was getting more pale and things were getting strange.

And so I -- I still tried to play that game and after that game everything slowed down. The speed of the puck, I couldn't take a pass. I remember like as though things were going in front of me and I remember hoping that game was getting over quick because I shouldn't be out here. And after the game was over I stood up and talked to my teammates as a captain basically in tears and said and I'm sorry guys I haven't been playing up to my capabilities because I let you guys down and I need to play better. I don't know what's wrong with me.

The guys thought that was you know admirable, but you know that something is not right. And I remember that night just totally emotionally just letting everything go and from that point on things got strange. I wasn't sleeping, things were worse and now I know that I was taxing the brain whose had multiple concussions that hasn't had a chance to heal.

I remember seeing the doctor the next morning scared, terrified, emotional and he said to me this is normal. He said you're the captain of the team. He said you just come off the World Cup championship with team USA. He said you're a father of three, your teams lost a few games, you haven't scored a couple of goals. He said put that in a soup bowl, mix it together, it's no wonder you feel the way you feel. And I looked at him and I was scared to death. I had tears I said, I'm telling

you Doc, something is not right because I have never been like this before. He said listen, he says go out I'm sure you get a couple of goals, your teams wins, everything is gonna be fine. And I looked at him with tears in my eyes, I said, I don't care about scoring goals. I had no desire. I got in that car and it was as though nobody understood.

My wife was wondering what's going on, my teammates were wondering, the doctor didn't even understand. And those probably were the longest two weeks because I got to the point where I got so withdrawn with -- the next day I happen to go see Teddy Nolan who saw me and said you know that comment you made in Colorado about owning a bookstore, I was still holding it together a little bit, he said what's going on, something's not, are you okay? And then again I broke down and he looked at me and said we gotta get you some help. We were leaving for Hartford that day. We were gonna go there, this was just before Hartford were moved down to Carolina and he says you're not going because I don't care what I have to tell the press, I don't care what. You can't play hockey in that state. You're the captain of the team, you're never seen, you're the one that used to carrying things on your shoulder, you can't even carry a conversation, something is not right.

So I went home still he wants to know what's happening to me. What's going on? I'm emotional and depressed. I'm not myself. I can't sleep and now the anxiety, I can't sleep I'm starting to get anxiety attacks.

I'm starting to get these headaches that are starting to come, but they didn't come initially and that was a concern because whenever I had a concussion I had a headache right off the bat.

Now I started getting these headaches and they got worst to the point where their migraine headaches where I'd be up, three, four hours they'd last and I'd be shut for the day. So everyone was wondering what was happening and meanwhile I was in bed I couldn't leave the house. I couldn't -- couldn't -- I didn't shower, you know. The most I did was make French toast for the kids on the toaster oven once and sending off to school and go right back upstairs. And it wasn't until about two weeks later where my agent Don Meehan finally didn't understand either what was happening to see that no, this wasn't the guy he knew either. It wasn't the guy I know. This is all strange. I didn't know what's happening.

He finally said that listen we've gotta get you some help. We're gonna send you out to the Mayo Clinic and the Savivors are gonna help out. We think -- you know we need to get you looked at. Well, fortunately, finally maybe somebody does understand and when I saw the doctors at the Mayo Clinic they said to me, listen we saw your head. We understand what's going on. You've suffered a grade three. You had multiple concussions. You hit your forehead on the ice and we feel that you might have a vascular damage there. We consider it a minor brain injury.

So what happens here, your right frontal lobe is responsible for your moods and your personality and what happens is many cases it's almost like a numbing

effect. And then you're pushing through an injury that hasn't even healed and sometimes it doesn't come up right away we've seen it happen in a lot of car accident. But because you lost your helmet and your -- forehead slapped on the ice and all your migraine headaches are right here tells us that that's most likely where you hit your head on the ice with your forehead. And this is all very normal for somebody who's had multiple concussions and just went through what you went through.

You would not -- I broke down. I could not believe that finally, 14 years of playing hockey and finally somebody understood what I was going through. And they said to me and the doctor and Dr. Kelly who help me later on because this -- I could go went on and on with the story, but he said just fortunately just be thankful that you didn't get hit again when you're playing during that period of time when they let you go back. I said, what do you mean? He said well, you already had multiple concussions. You're already coming up with bruise injury to your brain. There's a good chance if you took another hit to the head you could have some permanent problems for the rest of your life. And that's scary -- scared me to death and I'm thinking here we are it's 1996, doctors, highest level of professional sports, captain of the team and I was put at that risk.

Knowing what we know and knowing that here's a grade three unconscious, go to the hospital, don't play for a minimum of two, three weeks if you had more than five concussions and I realized that I wasn't at a rational place to make any of those decisions. And if you come across a player most likely that's had a concussion or has had one in a short period of time, he's not at a place either to make those decisions.

And so what ended up happening was I went through a series of months where you're almost like a punched drunk type of state. I remember talking with people and they said, boy, I haven't talked to you in a month and you're a different person and six weeks later I finally was able to leave and see the guys, although I was still very scared and very emotional, withdrawn and depressed. I remember seeing the guys for the first time and having trouble walking into a rink. And here I'd live my whole life since I was seven years old in a hockey rink and now I'm having trouble walking into a rink.

So, it took me six months before I was back to my old self. And I remember calling the doctor one night in Mayo Clinic and saying now Doc this is all physiological, right? I mean, if I didn't hit my head I wouldn't be going through the emotional and the depression and the headaches and then oh yeah I'm a doctor it's because you hit your head you're going through these things. I said Doc because you're not just being nice because I feel like I'm losing my mind. He said no, it's physiological and of course I went to bed that night, woke up because I woke up every night for two months straight at two o'clock in the morning with a headache and then had trouble all day long.

And that was like you know what I think the doctor is just being nice. I think really something is happening to me. And then I would become paranoid to the point where I have to pick up the phone at eight o'clock in the morning calling the

doctor and say Doc tell me again now this is physiological because I hit my head. But when you're going through that at the time, you don't know, you only know what you're feeling, you only know what's your experiencing. You don't even know it's almost like taking that enthusiastic person and taking him and set him off to the side. The person who's used to be a father of three, he was used to captain of the team, he used to scoring goals and used to do all those things now he can't do any of those things. Let alone get out and drive a car and leave the house.

So literally just set that person aside and deal with what's happening to you now and it's a scary dark road. It's a scary tunnel because you don't remember. You don't know if that's ever can come back because you're stuck in what's happening to you now. It's almost like dropping a computer on the ground and plug it in and expecting everything to go back to the way it was and all the -- the programs, the fit and normal and everything to kind of connect and this doesn't work that way and I'm sure Dr. Kelly has explain that.

So, the things that happened to you and it happened and everybody who says they have concussions, well I was just like that. I've had a concussion. But when there's a cumulative effect and when you've used up your reserve and that battery that supplies the healing process for your brain, it started to become depleted, you understand that post concussion starts to set in and you've crossed that line. So your ego tells you, well yeah I've had a concussion, but I can tell you from experience post concussion is a whole different thing.

You could take every injury, knee reconstructions, broken jaws, you know, surgeries, you know all kinds of different things and take the five concussions put together, this thing compared of what you go through in post concussion syndrome. So, my biggest concern is somebody who's experienced it and has to retire later on because at that point in time I sought out the best help in Dr. Kelly and I felt great for seven months and realized and said listen I don't feel like I'm finished playing hockey, but I have a -- I'm a father, I'm family -- you know I have three children, a beautiful wife and I said I -- there's no way I'm gonna put that at risk.

I said I need to know and I need to find out if I have a chance to go back and play after feeling great for seven months. And once again, I ran into all kinds of road blocks and I ran into doctors that were starting to become psychologists who wouldn't -- wouldn't even, you know what was my daughter, you know I'm not so sure I'd be playing. I don't wanna know I wanna know from your medical opinion what you think.

I talked with my wife, went thorough, explain to me everything that happened, everything that happens and injuries, explain to me the risk and ramifications. Explain to me that you know fortunately that each concussion I have was usually spread out over a year period of time and thank God I didn't get hit in succession because the second impact because of the exponential factor which if you get hit a second time in the short period of time it compounds it maybe five or ten times of damage. And after going through that and finally seeing the light there too I was able to make a decision.

Six months ago there is no way -- I never thought I'd ever be able to play hockey again. Never thought my wildest dreams that going through what I went through, that was it for me. I wasn't even going to the hockey rink. And then all of a sudden everything came back, the enthusiasm, the drive, the excitement, the passion. And I told myself, you know if I can go back and play or something telling me I'm not done yet, plus I didn't wanna have to live with this one hit that not only maybe change my whole hockey career, but maybe got me in life too. And I said I have to listen to what's telling me, but then not only do you have listen to the passion I have to find the best experts out there who have researched this and are able to tell me what's in my best interest. And if I can go back and play and what the risk really are from as much data and expertise and experiments that they've had.

And fortunately I was able to do that. I was able to go back and make a decision and exactly what Dr. Kelly said to me would happen happened to me about three quarters of the way through last season and I took a fluky hit running into my own teammate. It was very innocent and I received then, I guess you could call it a minor concussion, but when you've had five or six no concussion is minor and realized that it took me about six months from a minor concussion. The symptoms weren't as severe, the symptoms weren't as drawn out, I'd never had a real migraine headache. But symptoms of the milder sort lingered for the long time which he has said most likely could happen, but no, I know I don't see any long term cognitive problems, I don't see any long term risk to your health. I said Doc, I said that's my most concern. So my responsibility now is I've played 14 years I don't have to go back.

But thank God I did go back because I needed to do what I had to do as far as finish things and prove to myself that I could go back and overcome this and play which is a benefit too because in some cases you can't go back and play and then in some cases I realized now that even if I take the minor -- a minor hit or a minor concussion that it might take me even longer to come back. If I took a major concussion, I may not come back to a hundred percent. There are no guarantees in life, but I said Doc I know now what's at stake.

And I've talked to players like Paul Coreia and the thing that scares me is that we're talking about players that when I have my first concussion I was 25. Now we're talking about players that have had them in high school, in juniors. By time they hit the NHL, they've already had three, maybe four. Guys are bigger, the faster, the stronger, it's gonna happen. I don't know if anyone saw ESPN the other night when a teammate, a former teammate of mine Jeff Hookaboo. I don't know if anyone saw that in ESPN, it just -- it makes me sick to my stomach when I see a guy come from behind and punch a six foot five guy in the back of the head when he's not looking and knock him out and his head hits the ice. And that's what happened in our game in time.

They're trying to clean it up, they're making an effort, they're saying that, you know there's no respect, but yet when you talk about the NHL it's easy to blame the player and just there's no respect, but then there's an environment that's created that allows it. Everybody is responsible, nobody is to blame. And so in

your situation whether it be football or hockey, the players will come across at some point. My agent was a big help to me. He knew that something wasn't right and the way we're headed and Dr. Kelly probably could second that is that the only reason why it hasn't just blown out, came out and said this is got to change us because nothing's tragic happened.

Our society waits for something tragic or crisis to happen before it changes and unfortunately it doesn't see the change coming there or the crisis that's gonna happen. And I just hope that players that come in the game nowadays don't have to make the decision because they've had so many hits and brains to -- you know bruises to the brain that they have to retire.

You know I have a -- you know, I have a young son and two daughters now and you know I played that. I went through that macho part and that was part of the game. I didn't mind -- I didn't mind the physical game, but I'll tell you looking back now if those intentional hits were not allowed and anything above the neck wasn't allowed I'd still be playing today. I could probably play three or five more years and have fun.

Just to share a story with you that it's very real, it's very scary, it could happen and I think of Steve Young often because he's had multiple concussions, but he hasn't gone through post concussion and I hope he never has to experience that. He's kind of like watching his career. I think his gone along the edge, and fortunately he hasn't had that one hit that's put him over and then he all of a sudden he wakes up one day and things are strange. And I hope he never experiences that, but you don't know just like I was in his shoes, I would have kept playing too, but you don't know until you've been there and you've experienced it. It's very hard to say it, to tell an athlete that because the power of being out there on the ice is so much stronger and the macho part of it that the education and the awareness that we don't know can happen.