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NEWS

Mouth guard

By Emily Nunn and Tribune staff reporter
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After a long day of oral, maxillofacial and dental implant surgery, and before a recent Blackhawks game, in which the home team got creamed by the Dallas Stars, Dr. Eric Pulver made his way through the team entrance.

He strolled past a couple of Zamboni machines, stopped to shake hands and chat with defensive player Adrian Aucoin (arm in a sling after surgery for a dislocated shoulder), popped into the locker room to pick up a walkie-talkie ("They'll beep me if they need me"), ordered a foot-long hot dog and a Diet Coke for his 11-year-old son, Dylan, and then grabbed their regular seats, from which he keeps an eye on the ice for signs that his services are needed.

One obvious sign, to put it delicately, is hemoglobin. A few minutes into the first period, when some shoving and pugilistic posturing took place, Pulver perked up and focused on the ice, like a bird dog who has spotted a pheasant.

"When they get like this," he said, over hoots from members of the crowd hoping for a brawl, "I always look to see if there's blood. . . . A stick might go up, or you might get a broken nose or a punch in the jaw, loose teeth. Then I may have to go down and do some work."

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But a full-blown fistfight never came to fruition. And there would be no blood on the ice on this night, either.

In fact, Pulver probably sees more blood in his office than he does down on the ice each year.

Since 1996, when he signed as the team's official oral surgeon (he rotates with three dentists through 41 home games), he has stitched up plenty of lacerations and tended to numerous broken teeth, etc., but he has been called down to the ice on his official walkie-talkie only about 15 times.

"I go down all the time, but I don't always go down to do work. I go to make sure there aren't any problems," he said. "It's amazing that facial trauma doesn't happen more often. It's amazing that I'm not down there more often. But I'm not."

And that's the way he likes it.

"I used to come for a good fight, some good hockey," said Pulver, who grew up playing the game in Toronto and later learned just how much hockey can hurt a guy when he broke his leg playing for his dental school hockey team, at the University of Toronto. ("It was pretty bad. We were playing the medical school team," he said. "A guy hit me in the head and I went into the boards. I spent four days in the hospital, three weeks in bed, and I was in a wheelchair for a couple of months, finishing dental school. It was a spiral fracture with a delayed union.")

Soft-spoken guys

But today, "I know the guys ... even the toughest players on the ice are the nicest, most soft-spoken guys in the world. And I'm hoping they don't get hurt."

They do anyway, of course, which is why an internist, an ophthalmologist, three orthopedic surgeons, an X-ray technician and a couple of ambulances are also at the ready for each game -- and Pulver is always on call even when it's not his game night.

While he claims his end of the job is not one horror tale after another, sometimes just one is enough.

For instance, as he was putting ketchup on Dylan's foot-long hot dog, he told about an incident a few years ago, when a Carolina Hurricanes player "somehow came off the ice without his two front teeth."

(Dylan, who plays hockey for the peewee league team Johnny's Jets and has his own dental concerns, removed his retainer from his mouth and placed it in the palm of his father's outstretched hand, so he could eat. "On a good night this is the only dental work I that have to do," said Pulver, laughing as he wrapped the bite-plate in a napkin and put it in the breast pocket of his suit.)

"Anyway, this guy came off the ice without his two front teeth -- he didn't know where they were. ... I went down to take a look, and yeah, they're not there.

"Some of the guys went out on the ice to look for them. Two minutes later, they found one and brought it back. The other one got pushed up to the floor of his nose ... way up high. We went into a treatment room. I numbed him up and found it. We pulled it down. I ended up taking him to my office and splinting his teeth together. I saw him about a year later, expecting the hockey smile, but those front teeth were still there."

The days of the hockey smile -- when players like Bobby Hull were pictured with jack-o-lantern grins -- appear to be over. But Pulver says advances in protective equipment aren't the reason. Most players opt to go cageless and visorless once they make it to the NHL, and with only a mouth guard between them and the puck, or stick, or skate blade, getting a tooth knocked out is practically a rite of passage.

"But if somebody is going to lose their teeth, it's the best time ever," he said. "One of the things that has changed is that we can put dental implants in."

Which may not sound like fun. But according to Pulver, who is an expert at implant surgery, "It's not any more painful than getting a puck or a stick in the mouth. ... A lot of the guys have teeth that they can take out for a game or put them in permanently for the summer. The technology has changed. They're permanent, but you can also make attachments so they can come out or you can wear them all the time."

Eyes on the ice

At 15:08 in the second period, the Blackhawks' No. 37, Curtis Brown, hit the ice pretty hard and lay there briefly, face down, like a starfish.

"What I like to do is see where he's going right now," Pulver said, when Brown finally stood up and skated off the ice. "He's going into the locker room."

Which implies an injury. Pulver held up his walkie-talkie, and listened intently. "I don't want to miss it if they're calling me," he said, laughing. "They don't call me that often."

And they didn't call on this night, either. Luckily, it doesn't hurt his feelings. "There are plenty of guys who have lost teeth or broken them in half and we'll numb them up and they'll go out and play. ... The majority of them are going back out," he said.

But a request for his specific oral and maxillofacial services -- "a fractured jaw, or a fractured bone around the eye, the zygoma, the cheekbone" -- would usually mean someone was headed not back into the game but to the

hospital. And who wants that?

"I think it happened once," he said, referring to a fractured jaw, "but I was out of town."

Pulver did get called on his office pager, just a few minutes later. "It was a call for advice about a 7-year-old boy who had knocked out a tooth," he said, after responding. "On a doorknob."

But before the night was over, the Blackhawks would need him too. Driving home from the United Center, Pulver said, "I forgot to tell you. When I went down to the locker room [after the game], a couple of the guys said, 'Here he is, here he is!'

"They got the injured player over and said, 'Look, look at this.' And I said, 'You have a chipped tooth. Did you get hit? I didn't see it. Are you numb up here? Did you get hit with a stick? Did you fall? Was it a puck?'

"And he said, 'No, doc. I fell off the couch last night.'"

The obvious question -- who was the player? -- arose. But Pulver is not just dedicated. He's also loyal. "You don't need to know who it was," he said.

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