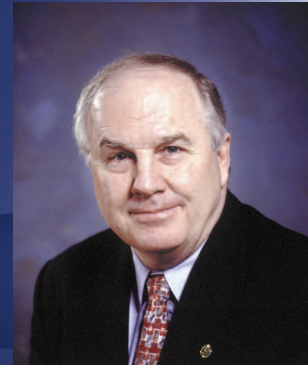
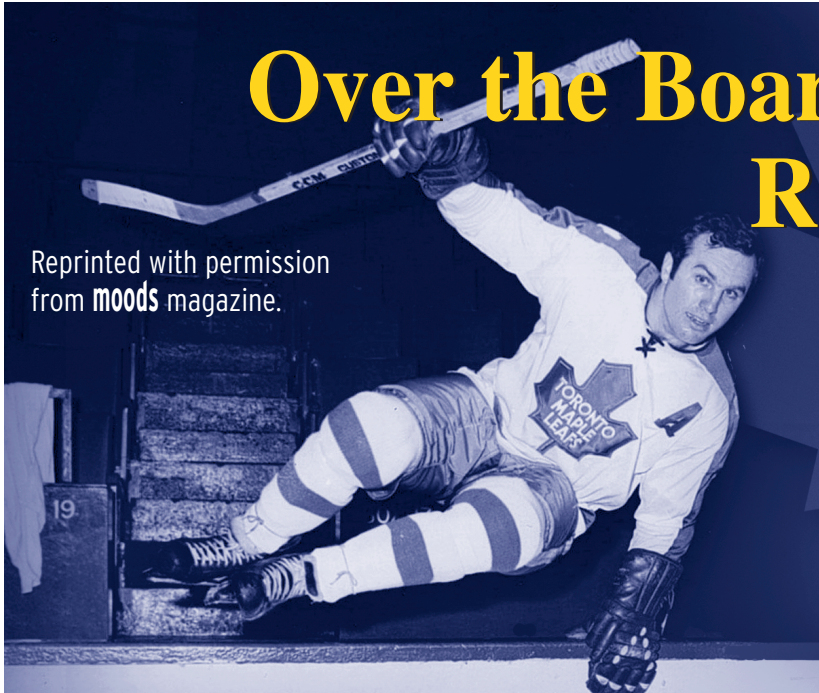


Over the Boards with Ron Ellis

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BY RON ELLIS

Recently, hockey fans were shocked to hear and read that two young professional hockey players were involved in a serious car crash. Dan Snyder lost his life and Dan Heatley's career is in jeopardy. This accident is an important reminder that pro athletes are not invincible.

There was a time when I thought I was invincible and a self-made man. I made all the sacrifices, trained the necessary hours and committed myself to the goal of becoming a professional hockey player. If I didn't make the big time it wouldn't be for a lack of effort and I truly felt I could handle any setback that came my way.

After leaving the game, I took these same principles into my post-hockey career and I was enjoying success until I came face to face with clinical depression. As with prior setbacks, I persevered to overcome depression myself. Because of my lack of knowledge and my pride, I failed miserably and in time was not able to function at work or be a responsible husband and father.

One evening, I agreed to attend a seminar with my wife to hopefully get some needed information

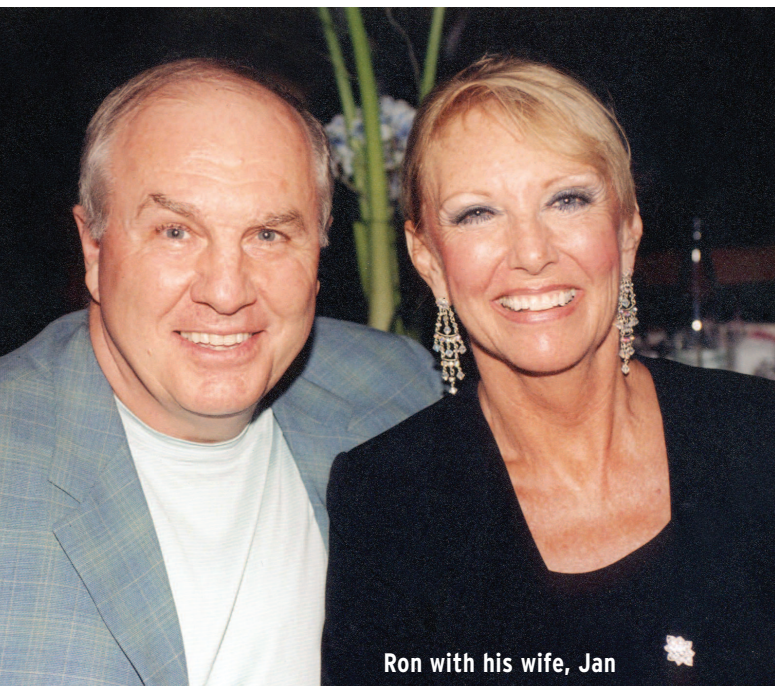
on depression. One member of the panel was Mike Wallace from the 60 Minutes TV show. He shared his long battle with depression and emphasized the importance of getting proper help. I decided that night that if Mike Wallace can put his pride on the back burner and get help so can Ron Ellis.

The fact that I fought this disease on my own for years eventually required that I be hospitalized. My message is early diagnosis and early treatment that will lead to a quick return to a normal life style. I needed the support of my family, my doctors and my employer to make my comeback.

Ron's Story

An excerpt from Ron's book, *Over the Boards with Ron Ellis*

Thirty-five years ago, in 1967, I had a dream come true. Just like most Canadian boys, I had dreamed of playing in the NHL. I also dreamed of winning a Stanley Cup, and the Toronto Maple Leafs won the Cup, beating the Montreal Canadiens. It's the last Cup the Leafs have won. The hockey gods smiled on me again in 1972 by allowing me to be picked for Team Canada. It was the first time Canadian professionals would get a chance to



Ron with his wife, Jan

play the Russians. Most of you likely know the story, but in game eight, with just 34 seconds remaining, Paul Henderson's goal determined the winner and Canada won. In 2000, the Canadian Press chose Team Canada '72 as its Team of the Century. We brought all the players and their families back to Toronto for the celebration. They unveiled a monument at the corner of Yonge and Front, in front of the Hockey Hall of Fame, to honour the players and the accomplishment.

But if that ceremony had happened five years earlier, I likely would have declined to attend. Yes, that's true. I wouldn't have been able to force myself to participate in one of the greatest experiences of my life. You see, I was in the midst of a ten-year battle with clinical depression. You thought the Canada-Russia series was tough? My depression was the greatest challenge of my life.

You ask, "How? How can a professional athlete, who has enjoyed some of the great successes in his sport—how can he be depressed?" Well, the answer is simple: it can happen to anyone. Three million Canadians suffer from depression. Three million! The 35- to 50-year-old male seems to be especially prone to

depression, especially those that fall into the "high contributors" group.

As a Toronto Maple Leaf, I suffered my share of injuries. One time, I hurt my knee and was out for six weeks. During that time, I was in a cast. Quickly, I learned how to drive my car while wearing the cast, and could still go to practices and interact with my teammates. Even though I had a physical injury, I still had a zest for life. Not so with mental illness; it can destroy people who are physically strong. It can also destroy their families.

In 1986, I opened a sporting goods store. Everything my wife and I owned was on the line. I was under unbelievable financial stress and was struggling to adapt to a new life after hockey. My daughter was battling an eating disorder and my mother was dying of cancer. It was a horrendous time. I found I couldn't concentrate. Simple duties became overwhelming. I became a file shuffler and was afraid to answer the phone. I withdrew from my friends and from most of my family. At my worst, while at work, I'd leave my office and sit in my car in the parking garage for hours. Just sit in my car!

I knew I was in big trouble, but other thoughts nagged me. "Real men don't get depressed. Just give it time—it'll go away." I had always been strong and very goal-oriented. I'd been a perfectionist. I was afraid that if I admitted I had a problem, people would think I was weak. I said to myself, "Ron, snap out of it. Pull up your socks," but at that point, I couldn't find my socks and didn't much care. In time, I refused to leave the house, and preferred just sitting in a dark room.

Pride and ignorance held me back. Pride, particularly for men, is a huge obstacle. It kept me from moving forward. I wasn't being a husband to Jan or a father to my kids. My wife couldn't hold the family together by herself.

Then, it was almost as if God said, "Ellis, if you're not going to get help, I'm going to shut you down." And

he did. It was almost like a computer that crashes, but I couldn't reboot Ron Ellis.

I quickly realized the importance of a general practitioner. My family doctor identified the problem immediately and walked Jan and I through the steps towards recovery.

There are four areas of importance in recovery from depression.

Number one is family—in my case, my wife Jan. She stood by me during some very dark times, and I'm proud to tell you, we celebrated our thirty-sixth anniversary [on May 28, 2002]. The divorce rate among professional athletes is much higher than the general population, and when you couple that with a partner struggling through depression, you get a sense at how blessed I am to have my amazing wife Jan in my life.

Number two is having a good family doctor. I was fortunate. I've had the same family doctor for twenty-five years. He did extra study on depression, and I was so thankful. He even went so far as to have a weekly meeting with Jan to help her and to give her the strength to get through my depression.

Number three is a good hospital facility, if one is needed. I resisted for too long, and finally needed to be hospitalized. I went to a hospital called Homewood, and after settling in I took courses in stress management, anger management and self esteem.

Finally, number four is the role of the employer. Do they have insurance that covers hospitalization for mental illness? When I joined the staff at the Hockey Hall of Fame, I didn't read the small print in the company insurance guide. Fortunately for me, the Hall had the proper insurance in place and that made it relatively easy to get the required help even to the point of having short-term disability available.

I have to tell you, when it was time to approach my employer, I was full of anxiety. I did not want to have that meeting. But a meeting was called with my boss—

David Taylor, the president of the Hockey Hall of Fame—Jan and me, Dr. Perez and a representative from the insurance company. By the end of the meeting, my employer made me feel safe to take short-term disability. If they had not, I know I would have soldiered on [without treatment] even if it meant ultimately losing my family and my job.

The insurance company developed a back-to-work program in conjunction with Dr. Perez and me. It was extremely important to develop a back-to-work plan, so that the employee can gradually take on more responsibility over time. I made the mistake during a previous reoccurrence by trying to return to work before I was ready. I wanted everyone to think, "I'm back and productive."

There are a lot of parallels between a hockey team and a business. Both require good teamwork. Both need stars and the diggers who will plug away doing whatever is asked of them. Both need valued employees. Both need their players to get back into the lineup when sidelined so they can contribute once again.



Ron dancing with his daughter, Kitty, at her wedding

It took me a long time to realize that depression is an illness, not a weakness. I also understood that the longer the depression is left untreated, the longer the recovery time. Now that I understand depression better, I realize that there were players on my team playing with depression. There are a number of players competing in the NHL right now trying to compete while coping with depression.

This is my final statement. After what the Hockey Hall of Fame has done for me, they have one very loyal employee. I'd go through a wall for them. I've been offered other jobs through the years, some with more perks than I currently have, but each time, I said, "No way." I have a real loyalty to the Hockey Hall of Fame for all they've done for my family and me.

When Mats Sundin went down with an injury two years ago during the playoffs, the Toronto Maple Leaf management did not react by saying to Mats "if you do not play tonight you will lose your job". On the contrary, they mobilized their staff of doctors to do everything possible to get Mats back into the lineup.

This same response should take place in the corporate world as well when a top performer is sidelined with depression. However, this is not the case and nothing will change until depression is accepted as an illness and not a weakness. If an employee is working in an environment where he or she feels safe to ask for help, that person can return to work in a short period of time once again performing at a high level. ■

Ask Ron Ellis

Visit our web site at www.moodsmag.com to ask Ron Ellis a question about depression in the work place and look for your answer in **future issues** or on our web site.



Ron golfing with his son, R.J.

Ron Ellis enjoyed a (15) year career with the Toronto Maple Leafs playing in over (1000) league games and was a member of the last Stanley Cup team in 1967. He represented the Toronto Maple Leafs along with team-mate Paul Henderson in the historic Summit Series with the Soviet Union.

Presently, Ron holds a management position at the Hockey Hall of Fame as Director, Public Affairs and Assistant to the President.

Ron and his wife, Jan, have made a commitment to do whatever possible to alleviate the stigma of mental illness particularly in the workplace by sharing their personal journey.