

Stephen Peat, Former N.H.L. Enforcer, Struggles to Care for Himself

Walter Peat worries about his son, who has symptoms — memory loss and headaches — often associated with C.T.E., a brain disease linked to head trauma.

By JOHN BRANCH JUNE 1, 2016

LANGLEY, British Columbia — The place smelled of rebuilding — cut lumber and sawdust, the electrical scent of power tools. The former N.H.L. enforcer Stephen Peat, 36, stood with his father, Walter, inside a maze of studded walls that formed the shell of their new house. It was being built to replace the home that Stephen burned down last year.

It was here in the back of the garage, Stephen said, where he left the blowtorch unattended. It was up there, in the bedroom above, Walter said, where he was startled awake and escaped down the stairs.

Within minutes, the two-story house on a suburban corner, bought years ago with money Stephen made mostly for beating up opponents in the N.H.L., was engulfed in flames that lit the black sky and pulled neighbors from their homes. Days later, Stephen Peat was arrested and charged with arson.

“Part of me was like, I want to sit and burn with this house,” Stephen Peat said. “Because I knew the consequences of doing something like that, and embarrassing myself like that. It wasn’t my first tragedy in life, you know?”

He excused himself. His head hurt, and he wanted Tylenol and a Coke from his truck. These days, sugar was as much an antidote as acetaminophen.

“That’s how he is,” Walter said, his son out of earshot. “He can’t focus. He’ll be cooking something, will answer the phone and walk away. I’m like, ‘Stephen, you left the stove on.’ ”

A couple of days earlier, Stephen missed a turn and got lost on his way to the recreation center where he goes nearly every day. A week before, Walter heard muffled cries for help and found Stephen pinned underneath his pickup truck. Stephen was fixing something but had not set the jack properly.

Walter Peat, 64, the head saw filer at a sawmill here in the suburbs of Vancouver, worries every day about the son he barely recognizes. He worries mostly that Stephen will be another N.H.L. enforcer dead before turning 50. The list, just since 2010, includes Bob Probert, Derek Boogaard, Rick Rypien, Wade Belak, Steve Montador and Todd Ewen.

The Peats cannot be sure, but they presume that Stephen’s problems are rooted in concussions. Perhaps, like several of the dead enforcers and roughly 100 former N.F.L. players, one day he will be found to have chronic traumatic encephalopathy, the degenerative brain disease caused by repeated blows to the head.

For now, it cannot be accurately diagnosed until death, but Peat and his father worry that he has it. The symptoms often associated with C.T.E. — memory loss, depression, impulsiveness, addiction, headaches — are part of Stephen Peat’s daily life.

Walter Peat, a widower, overseeing the rebuilding of a house his son set on fire, views himself as the last line of defense for his erratic son’s uncertain future.

He recently reached out to Len Boogaard, Derek’s father, who has spent time since his son’s death in 2011

investigating his final years. Boogaard, 28 and under contract with the Rangers, was found dead of an accidental overdose of oxycodone and alcohol.

“What I’m going through is what he did before his son passed away,” Walter Peat said.

Stephen Peat last played in the N.H.L. in 2005-6. He has spent most of the years since unable to hold a steady job and fighting off legal trouble — a couple of times from bar and street fights, and currently from accusations of theft, possession of stolen property and resisting or obstructing a peace officer. Peat says his only involvement in the latest episode was as a driver who unwittingly gave someone else a getaway ride.

The headaches, Peat said, began in earnest a year or two after his playing career ended. They often begin shortly after he awakens in the morning, and sometimes force him to stay in dark, quiet rooms, occasionally for days on end. Doctors and CT scans have been unable to diagnose the problem.

“I can’t sleep on my right side,” Peat said. “If I do, it feels like someone who weighs 200 pounds is standing on my face, right here.”

He put his meaty hand to his left cheek and temple. Does he think the headaches are related to concussions or the fighting he did in hockey?

“I don’t know,” he said. “The reason, I assume it is, is the blows to the head.”

He turned his shoulder forward in a boxing stance, his left fist in front of his chin and his right fist cocked behind his ear. It was the position he took for dozens of on-ice fights, beginning as a teenager in the Western Hockey League.

“I’m a right-handed fighter, right?” he said. “And all the blows were to the left side of my head. That’s where all my pain is. So that’s my uneducated guess. What other blows have I taken?”

Over lunch and a couple of beers, Peat did not look and sound like someone to fear. His cheerful voice is an octave higher than expected and his sentences run without punctuation. He made jokes and smiled. He was in a good stretch.

With a bit of a paunch on his 6-foot-3-inch, 220-pound frame, he wore jeans, a white T-shirt, white Nikes and a black Los Angeles Dodgers hat with a flat brim. A few days of stubble almost overgrew a soul patch under his lip, like weeds overtaking a garden.

Over two days at several restaurants, he was regularly surrounded by televisions showing hockey — it is Canada, after all, and it was the N.H.L. playoffs — yet Peat never paid attention. The number of fights in the N.H.L. has dropped in half since Peat’s last full season in 2003-4, to 344 fights this past regular season, according to hockeyfights.com. Peat’s was a prized, popular, punch-throwing role being nudged, slowly, out of the game.

“Hockey’s been the greatest thing in my life, but it’s also been the worst thing in my life,” Peat said. “It was great while I was playing, but what has it done lately? My peers of enforcers have become statistics and the N.H.L. is in denial. They’re denying that the job I did even existed, even though I sacrificed my quality of life, my well-being and my future greatly by being there for my teammates in the present.

“I don’t think the coaches or anyone was thinking of me 10 years down the road when they were pushing me out there to fight, you know what I mean?”

Walter Peat described Stephen as a straight-A student as a child and a high-scoring defenseman for the local youth teams. Walter’s big regret was letting 15-year-old Stephen go to the rough-and-tumble Western Hockey League when he was drafted third over all in the 1995 W.H.L. bantam draft. Instead of college, Peat’s education ended before he finished high school. Peat entered the W.H.L. as a high-scoring defenseman and exited as a first wing.

Drafted into the N.H.L. in 1998, 32nd over all by Anaheim, Peat eventually spent several seasons protecting star players for the Washington Capitals like Jaromir Jagr, Peter Bondra, Adam Oates and, briefly, Alex Ovechkin.

He fought dozens of times against the likes of Donald Brashear, Todd Fedoruk and Jody Shelley. His 2002 fight against Boston's P.J. Stock is still recalled as that season's best.

The canceled N.H.L. season of 2004-5 interrupted Peat's career, and injuries — to his pelvis, to his neck, a broken hand — knocked him out of the league a year later. Peat found odd jobs, including one as a bouncer. Headaches became a constant companion, he said.

Peat said that he was prescribed Percocet routinely by team doctors in the N.H.L., and spent years after he left the game "self-medicating" with prescription painkillers that he got from doctors or bought off the street. He admitted to cocaine use, too, and still consumes alcohol. He believes that his primary problem is not addiction, but pain.

After the deaths of Boogaard, Belak and Rypien, followed closely by the death of his mother to liver failure after years of cancer, Peat said he contacted the N.H.L. Players' Association.

"You start to feel like everyone I touch is dying," Peat said. "My mom died, the guys I played hockey with are dying. And then I start looking in the mirror, being like: 'What did I do last night? Is something wrong with me? Are my headaches leading to something worse? Am I getting better? Am I getting worse?'"

That call led Peat into rehabilitation through the league's substance abuse and behavioral health program overseen jointly by the N.H.L. and the players' union. The N.H.L.'s Players' Emergency Assistance Fund, meant as temporary relief for struggling former players, provided a few monthly payments, Peat said.

He returned to rehabilitation in 2015 after he was charged with arson.

"Why are you sending me to rehab again?" he said of his reaction last year. "I was just trying to find an answer to my pain."

His father cut in.

"They need to figure out the root cause of his pain, not just try to get him off of the pills," Walter said.

Stephen Peat said he viewed prescription pills as a last resort. ("I know I can go grab five Percocets and sit around all day," he said. "That's just lazy. I know there are better ways.") He finds temporary relief in saunas and hot tubs, massages and acupuncture, but he struggles to regularly afford them. He has studied natural remedies and diets. When he feels the headaches surging, he reaches for a Coke. He keeps Oh Henry! candy bars in the refrigerator.

("I actually hate to admit but have had to take pills again," he wrote in a follow-up to the in-person interviews, saying headaches had been "awful" since. "Just extra strength Tylenol and Advil 400s. But it still scares me. Cause that's how it starts again.")

While some former enforcers who have died in recent years took their own lives, Peat said he would not, at least not intentionally.

"I don't think I'm the kind of person who could pull that trigger," he said. "But I'm the type of person who could drive a car 200 miles per hour and lose control and end it that way. I get reckless with my life. I think that points to the fact that I fought for my teammates, and I was reckless with my own body. I had to self-sacrifice for my teammates, right?"

Anxiety is another frequent visitor. Peat prefers to drive his GMC pickup everywhere, rather than sharing a ride, because he wants the freedom to leave at any time. Waiting for his father to meet him at a restaurant, he called him several times within an hour to check on his progress, even though the meeting time had not passed. ("Hey, Buddy? Where are you?" he asked, calling his father either Buddy or Wally.)

He admitted to sometimes waking up in tears. He often thinks that nearby parked cars are occupied by people watching him.

“I’ve been studying concussions, and some of the symptoms are things like anxiety and recklessness,” Peat said. “I’m like, ‘Wait — I have all these symptoms.’ I just wonder if I could get rid of the headaches, if all those other things will go away.”

On a warm spring afternoon, the sun made long shadows on the construction site. Workers had left for the day. Walter and Stephen walked the plywood floors, discussing everything from plumbing to window placements. Somehow, the burning down of the family house had brought the father and son closer together.

The two said that Walter was upstairs in bed after 10 p.m. on March 17, 2015. Stephen was in the garage, which was unusually packed with furniture and boxes because the Peats had cleared a spare downstairs room to rent. Stephen said that he had pulled stereo equipment from his truck, parked on the street, to fix on the workbench.

Unable to find a soldering gun, he used a blowtorch, he said, and set it down as he walked back outside, unaware that it was still lit. It burned a hole in a nearby mattress, Stephen said, and when he tried to pat it out with a blanket, flames erupted. They quickly filled the garage and engulfed much of the house.

Standing in the reconstructed garage together recently, Walter and Stephen had contradicting memories of what happened next. It was as if they had never talked it through.

Walter recalled waking up to an explosion (perhaps the gas tank of an A.T.V. destroyed in the garage) and seeing a glow out the window; Stephen said that he ran upstairs and alerted his father of the fire. Walter remembered finding the family dog, a Jack Russell terrier named Dawson, under the bed, then carrying him downstairs, but said he never saw Stephen; Stephen said that the two talked in the driveway, with Walter screaming at him.

“What did you do now, Stephen?” Stephen recalled his father shouting.

They both dismissed early news reports that said the two were heard by neighbors arguing earlier in the day. (The Peats said that Stephen was out of town all day and arrived home that night after Walter was in bed.) Stephen disputed the account of a witness who said he saw Stephen intentionally setting the fire. Walter sided with his son.

Stephen left the scene on foot — stopping to direct a fire engine unsuccessfully navigating the knot of suburban streets, he said — and went to a friend’s house. When he turned himself in a couple of days later, he was placed in custody and charged with two counts of arson. Walter and Stephen were placed under a no-contact order, and did not communicate for weeks. Stephen Peat went off to rehabilitation for 10 weeks.

The house was uninhabitable. The tenant, gone at the time of the fire, lost his belongings, including a truck in the driveway, and later sued Stephen Peat in civil court. He was awarded 17,455 Canadian dollars, or \$13,343, but Peat said he does not have the money to pay. The tenant did not respond to a message seeking comment.

News that a former N.H.L. player set fire to his father’s house spread quickly. In February, to avoid the publicity of a trial, Stephen Peat said he pleaded guilty to one count of “arson in relation to inhabited property,” and a lesser count of arson by negligence. He was sentenced to a year’s probation.

The Peats have bounced between the homes of friends and family, waiting for the house to be rebuilt. Stephen would like to work at a Harley-Davidson store, where he can put his encyclopedic knowledge of motorcycles to good use. He recently began working a landscaping job.

But it is hard to build relationships when you are known widely as the N.H.L. guy who burned down his father’s house, he said. His best friend, it seems, is the dog, Dawson.

“Dawson’s the one thing that actually pulls him out of it, because he demands that you walk him,” Walter Peat said. “He’s a little angel, that guy.”

Stephen said, “He calms me when my heart’s really going.”

Walter Peat is frustrated that many of those close to Stephen have dismissed him as nothing but a troublemaker. But he is mostly frustrated at the N.H.L., and hockey at large, for what he sees as putting his son in a discard pile.

The Peats are closely tracking the class-action lawsuit against the N.H.L. brought by players saying that the league concealed information about the dangers of concussions.

“Right now it seems like a battle we are losing, but I will spend the rest of my life standing up for my son, as I believe he is a good young man, who needs help,” Walter Peat wrote in an email. “Very sad that he has to resort to painkillers, alcohol and whatever means he can find to deal with his pain.”

More than anything, he misses “that twinkle and smile,” Walter Peat said in another message. “He looks fine, but who can say what is going on in a brain-damaged head?”