

Ex-enforcer battled to pay bills

THE CITY: Georges Laraque won't endorse a ban on fighting because he says it would be hypocritical of him now that he's retired

By IAN GILLESPIE, The London Free Press

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Georges Laraque, who fought his way through 13 NHL seasons, will speak Thursday at Violence Becomes Entertaining, a forum on the impact of media violence on children and adolescents in London. (QMI Agency file photo)

He admits it's dangerous and he didn't like doing it. But don't expect former NHL tough guy Georges Laraque to argue that hockey fighting should be banned.

"The reason I defend it is pretty simple: This is the job that put bread on the table for me," says Laraque. "Without that job, I wouldn't have been in the NHL. . . . So I feel it's hypocritical, now that I've retired (from hockey) to say, 'Oh, I made my money, let's take it out now.' "

Laraque admits his views may be unpopular when he airs them Thursday evening during the opening panel of a two-day London forum focussed on media violence. But the former on-ice tough guy -- who played 13 years in the NHL with the Edmonton Oilers, Phoenix Coyotes, Pittsburgh Penguins and Montreal Canadiens -- says he has no regrets about his pugilistic puck work.

"I'm not remorseful," he says during a phone interview from Montreal. "I did something I didn't like, which was fighting. But I love hockey, and I didn't just fight. If I was just a fighter, I wouldn't have played."

Although Laraque says he was never forced to fight ("Nobody puts a gun to your head."), the man named by Sports Illustrated as hockey's No. 1 enforcer in 2008 says he realized his skills weren't enough to fulfil his childhood dream.

"I was always a top scorer when I was a kid (growing up in Quebec)," he says. "But then at 16 or 17, with my size, I knew I needed to fight to make it to the NHL."

Peter Jaffe, the anti-violence crusader who helped organize the local conference, says he invited Laraque to join a panel of speakers (which includes Toronto neurosurgeon Charles Tator and former NHL referee Ron Wicks) because Laraque "has a lot of insights into the culture of hockey."

But I'm not sure conference participants like Jaffe, who says hockey fighting sends the wrong message to young people, will embrace Laraque's combative take on the topic.

"The people from the panel, they've never played the game," says Laraque, who scored 153 points and averaged 10 fights a season during his NHL career. "I don't care if some guy has a PhD or whatever -- they don't know anything (about hockey fighting) because they've never done it. They make me laugh."

In Laraque's opinion, banning fighting will make hockey more dangerous.

"Once you take fighting out, there'll be more elbows and more high sticks," he says. "Players won't care (about hurting an opponent) because they won't have to fight."

The bigger problem, he argues, is dangerous hits to the head. And he blames those on changes to the offside rule that eliminated the centre line and encourage longer passes and faster speeds.

But Laraque also suggests the game is inherently dangerous.

"If you suspend everybody that gives a blow to the head, there won't be anybody left to play," he says with a laugh. "Maybe one day they'll take out body-checking and everybody will play with a (helmet) cage and a big neck guard, and then it will be safe."

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IF YOU GO

What: When Violence Becomes Entertaining, a forum on the impact of violent media on children and adolescents

When: Thursday, 7-9 p.m.; Friday, 8 a.m.-4:15 p.m.

Where: Faculty of Education, Althouse College, 1137 Western Rd., UWO

Details: Presentations and workshops on various topics including video games and cyber bullying; for full agenda, visit www.mediaviolenceforum.ca

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