

Nolan making a difference

ROY MacGREGOR

From Saturday's Globe and Mail
December 7, 2007 at 10:08 PM EST

Islanders coach Ted Nolan has fought racism, poverty and the NHL's old-boys' network. But he's back in the NHL now, and the New York Islanders are better for it.

The Globe and Mail

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — Maybe he was just going through menopause.

At least, that's how Sandra Nolan tried to laugh it away when her husband began complaining these past few weeks of hot flashes and headaches and suddenly finding himself soaked in clammy sweat. It could not, surely, have to do with stress. Compared to what Ted Nolan had been through in the 49 years that led up to this inexplicable condition, his current job as head coach of the New York Islanders was a glide on thick, smooth ice.

He had fought through poverty, the 10th of 12 children growing up on the Garden River reserve near Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., in a small house with no electricity and no running water. So obsessed was he with hockey that he would build fires around the well to free up the frozen pump, then carry pail after pail of water to his little rink back of the house.

When he and younger brother Steve first joined up to play organized hockey in a nearby community, they had to play on different lines so they could share the only stick, helmet and pair of gloves the Nolan kids owned.

He battled racism, heading off to Kenora, Ont., for junior hockey and a daily regimen of fighting, both at school and on the hockey rink.

Nolan was skilled, but it was toughness that gave him 78 games in the National Hockey League before he turned to the yo-yo life of professional coaching. Up against racism as a child, he found he was up against it still as a man. At his most recent previous job, as coach of the Moncton Wildcats of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League, he had to deal with war whoops and tomahawk chops and pretend arrows in certain rinks. Luckily, he says with a weary smile, he knows no French so never really understood what he was being called.

He was only 14 when his father, Stan, died of heart failure. A decade later, his mother, Rose, was killed by a drunk driver. He lost a sister to liver disease, uncles to alcoholism.

So where was the stress here on Long Island? Here he was in Gatsby country, the world where Scott Fitzgerald once pointed out the obvious — "The very rich are different from you and me" — and he was doing well both in the bank and on the ice. The Islanders, dismissed little more than a year ago as a Three Stooges comedy on ice, were now surprisingly respectable.

They had made the playoffs last year and were off to a fine start this season. And they were doing it with so many Canadian aboriginals — Nolan an Ojibwa from Garden River, assistant coach John Chabot an Algonquin from Quebec's Kitigan Zibi, player Chris Simon an Ojibwa from Wawa, Ont., and even director of player development Bryan Trottier, a Métis from Val Marie, Sask. — that there were regular jokes among them about taking back Manhattan whenever the Islanders went up against the nearby New York Rangers.

Nolan's greatest delight this season was in bringing in his long-time friend Chabot to help with the coaching. Chabot, too, had come from rural poverty — his first skates were so large he had to wear six socks — but had grown up off reserve, as his father, eager to give his eight children a better opportunity, joined the armed forces.

While Nolan had been hit with racism at every turn, Chabot had been only vaguely aware of a difference when he was young. "I couldn't play with some of the other kids," he recalled. "Their parents wouldn't allow it."

Chabot had been a supremely talented young player who had limited success in the NHL, played in Europe and gained a reputation as a "teacher" as a junior coach in Quebec.

Things were going so well for Nolan on Long Island, in fact, that cold sweats and hot flashes seemed an impossibility in a man renowned for his ability to remain calm under fire.

And then, a few days ago, it was all explained. A toxic mould had invaded a new luxury complex in nearby Westbury. About 400 apartments were affected, including the one being rented by Ted and Sandra Nolan.

When the coach arrived for practice, he had just been handed an eviction notice, and he was smiling.

"I've just become a homeless person," he said.

It would not be the first time Ted Nolan has been tossed out in the cold, or, in the case of the NHL, the wilderness.

Ten years ago, Nolan seemed at the peak of a soaring coaching career. He had retired as a player and gone to coach the Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds of the OHL, where he first met, and changed the life of, Chris Simon. After winning junior hockey's Memorial Cup, Nolan became an assistant coach with the NHL's Hartford Whalers, soon moving to head coach with the Buffalo Sabres.

He took a team of low expectations and turned them into a playoff contender. He was chosen as the NHL coach of the year for 1996 and received the Jack Adams Award.

The last time Nolan saw his award, it was in a cardboard box that he threw down the basement steps. He has never looked at it since.

Whatever happened in Buffalo, it still eats at Nolan. He had great success there, but it was said he warred with fickle goaltender Dominik Hasek. It was said he backstabbed general manager John Muckler, who was fired not long before Nolan was offered a gratuitous one-year contract and, insulted, decided to walk. It was said he was even showing up drunk for practice.

What was the point of denial, even if he doesn't touch alcohol? There are no gloves to drop when you fight a stereotype.

For a decade, Nolan was essentially "blackballed" from the NHL, regularly dismissed as "a GM killer."

"I tried everything, you know," he said.

He sent résumés out that were not acknowledged. He called, but calls were not returned. His name would come up whenever a coach was fired, but calls never followed. It reached a point where he thought he should ask the media just to let his name disappear.

"It's one of the great mysteries," he said. "I still don't know what happened.

"But I'm a strong, strong believer that things happen for a reason, and when I look back on it and look at everything that came out of it, I now think that it was the best thing that could have happened."

It took him a long time, however, to come around to this way of thinking. He spent the first two years in what he calls "a real dark period" of anger and blame.

"I lost my drive," he said. "I always believed if you worked hard, you would be rewarded, but ..." His voice trailed off.

"For a long period of time ... I quit."

Two people were there to change Ted Nolan's life, one in his home and one in a movie. At home was Sandra, the pretty teenager he'd first seen walking across the parking lot outside the Sault Ste. Marie rink, the mother of Brandon and Jordan, who are today both promising young players.

"She was always, always there," he said.

The other was the Will Smith film Ali. Nolan was smitten with the boxer's stubborn determination not to change who he was, regardless of the pressures put on him. He left the movie steeled to remain exactly the person he had been before the nightmare of Buffalo descended. And if the consequence was no more hockey, so be it.

"There's an Ojibway word that means now," he said. "I learned to really appreciate every day. There's an old song that says yesterday is history, tomorrow's a mystery, today is the present, that's why they call it a gift."

Finally rising from that dark period, Nolan began devoting more and more time to his heritage. He got

involved with hockey tournaments for native youth and operated a hockey school that included sessions on nutrition and spiritualism as well as skating and stickhandling. He began working with the Assembly of First Nations on various projects, including the Make Poverty History campaign.

Hockey, he said, gives native youth "an outlet. It makes you forget about your personal problems for a couple of hours."

"We want to try and make a difference," said Chabot, who has joined Nolan in various projects designed to build self-esteem among young Canadian aboriginals. "Hockey gives us a segue into their lives."

Nolan also poured his energies into a project he started years ago in the hopes of honouring the memory of his mother.

"It took me 10 years before I could even talk about her death," he said, still clearly fragile from the memory.

Rose Nolan had raised the dozen children on her own after the death of her husband, who was 39. She had turned Ted into a fancy dancer and a traditional drummer, taking him off to powwows in summer and getting him to hockey in winter. She was the one who kept him going in the game when he thought he could fight the racism no longer. The day he fled his first professional camp in Detroit, she turned her back on him when he came through the door, and she refused to speak until he went back, which he did, though he admits he cried himself to sleep for weeks.

It began with a golf tournament — a sport he didn't even know how to play — and is now the Ted Nolan Foundation, which hands out bursaries. For the past dozen years, an average of five young native women a year have gone on to postsecondary education through the Rose Nolan Memorial Scholarship fund.

"If I can make a difference," he said, "I will."

Nolan had turned so completely to native issues — even toying with the idea of entering politics — that the call back to coaching caught him off guard. It was Moncton on the line, requesting a meeting he wasn't at all sure about. Sandra encouraged him to go, and seven minutes after he sat down, he was on the telephone telling her to start packing.

"It had nothing to do with getting here to Long Island," he said.

Success in Moncton, however, combined with disaster in Long Island — bad trades, fired coaches and changed general managers — led to eccentric Islanders owner Charles Wang deciding to hire his own coach. Wang went to former Islanders all-star Pat LaFontaine for advice, and LaFontaine, who also had a Buffalo connection, immediately recommended Nolan.

Nolan believes he would never have been hired if there had been a GM in place.

Wang then hired and dropped a new GM before promoting backup goaltender Garth Snow to the job. When Snow surprised the league by signing goaltender Rick DiPietro to an unheard-of 15-year, \$67.5-million (all currency U.S.) deal, the rest of the NHL howled with laughter.

Fifteen months later, the Islanders are the ones smiling. It was Nolan who suggested the Islanders honour legendary coach Al Arbour by bringing Arbour back to coach his 1,500th game, and Nolan who insisted on moving himself into Arbour's old windowless office. The team made the playoffs last season and is challenging again this season, hoping to regain a swagger not seen on Long Island since the Arbour years.

Chris Simon says the essential difference has been Nolan. "If there's one word that describes Ted," Simon said, "it's leadership."

Simon likely knows better than anyone. The relationship between the two goes back to Sault Ste. Marie, when Nolan was coaching. He persuaded the teenager to quit drinking before he ruined his life and any chance of a hockey career.

"He was 247 pounds and had all kinds of off-ice problems," Nolan remembered.

"He pretty much told me his opinion of the life line that I was going along," said Simon, who added he has never touched alcohol since and has played nearly 800 NHL games.

"With Ted," Simon said, "it was never only about hockey."

It is a familiar refrain among the players. Mike Comrie, who arrived this fall as a free agent, says he had always heard "what a great players' coach he is. Well, it's true. The first thing he thinks about is the player."

"You get so you almost don't want to let him down. He wants you to have a life off the ice. He brings everything back to a life lesson."

"Hockey's only two hours a day," Nolan said. "There's a big life out there."