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Pro coaches Tigers

by Gordie Sutherland

Former Dalhousie hockey star Scot Birnie realized the dangers of a career in professional hockey when he was just 21 years old and at that point he traded in a childhood dream for a University education.

In 1983 at the age of 18 Birnie was drafted 133rd overall by the Chicago Blackhawks, just one pick after goaltender Vladislov Tretiak who starred for the Soviet National team in the 1972 Super Series.

In total Birnie played two seasons of pro in the International Hockey League (IHL). He played his first pro game in 1985 when he played in Toledo's last 12 games of the season. The 19 year-old Birnie collected nine points in his short 12 game stint. But it was in the two years to follow that he began to realize that professional hockey was not the game that he pictured as a youth growing up in Prescott, Ontario.

"When you get an injury you are really brought down to reality and the reality of the thing is that you are a piece of meat and hockey is a business," said Birnie. "You don't realize that until you get in pro hockey."

Birnie realized that the threat of injury makes hockey an insecure profession. He says that his collar bone injury that he suffered in major junior and a shoulder injury suffered later in 1986-87 continuously hindered his chances of being signed to an NHL contract. "It was like a chain-reaction," he said, "Bang, you get injuries and they are never going to sign you unless you prove for a year or two in a row that you have no problem." The experience left Birnie wondering what would happen to a player who sustained an injury during a short-term NHL contract. He realized that unless you are a star an injury could spell the end of an NHL career.

In the 1985-86 and 1986-87 seasons Birnie had two consecutive tryout camps with the Hartford Whalers. The 1985-86 season was Birnie's best as a pro. He collected an impressive 60 points while skating for Toledo. The following season Birnie played for the Fort Wayne Comets.

During his stints with Toledo and Fort Wayne, Birnie became painfully aware of the business side of hockey. He realized that IHL team owners preferred to have the NHL teams pay their players' wages.

"I've always gone on the policy that the best players play," he said. "When you get involved in the contract stuff because one guy is under NHL contract and the other guy isn't so he plays just out of financial reasons to me your not playing hockey anymore and its not a game."

By January of 1987 Birnie was prepared to turn away from his childhood dream of playing in the NHL. "Pro hockey is so dehumanizing that I wasn't all that happy," he said. "I didn't realize how happy it could be until you have nothing else going for you. I did have my high school and 75 average or whatever but I mean that is all you have on your mind is to become a hockey player. That is

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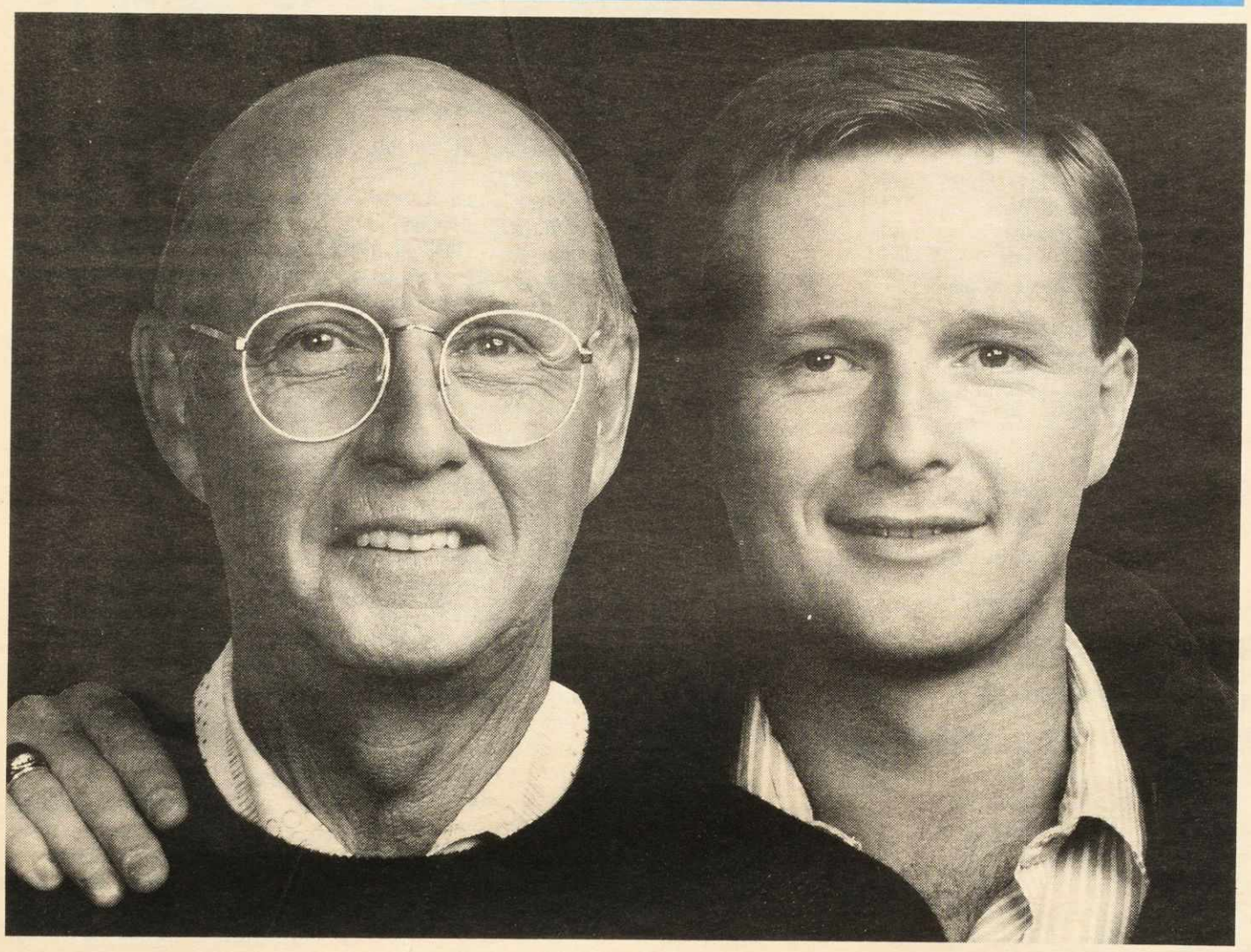

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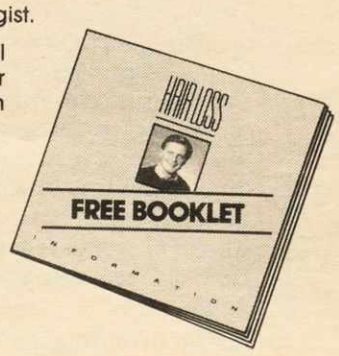

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