



# A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH

By Sal J. Barry

**T**hroughout the history of hockey, they have been called fighters, policemen, tough guys, enforcers – and unflatteringly, goons. These are the monikers applied to the breed of hockey player that readily drop their gloves and engage in fistcuffs. Call them what you will, but no one can deny the everlasting popularity of enforcers in this game.

The fact that such players are popular – many times as well-liked among fans as a team's leading scorer – is not surprising. Sure, scoring goals is hard ... but so is sticking up for a teammate when it means going toe-to-toe with a behemoth like George Parros or Derek Boogaard. While many have argued that fighting is a detriment to the sport, many more have argued the exact opposite. Fans jump to their feet and cheer when a goal is scored; do they do any less when a fight breaks out?

It's a dirty job, but someone has to do it. Love it or leave it, fighting serves its purpose in hockey. While the role of the enforcer has diminished somewhat in the post-lockout "New NHL" era, it nonetheless remains a celebrated aspect of the game that is here to stay.

## THE BATTLE SO FAR ...

So, how did the role of "enforcer" come to be? It did not spring up overnight; rather, this unofficial position took time to develop, going as far back as hockey's earliest days. Physical play in the relatively close quarters of an ice rink – which were smaller a century ago – leads to inevitable contact or even collisions; "body-checking", as we'd later call it. One theory as to why this was allowed, as noted in Ken Dryden's book "The Game," was that many of the earliest hockey players were also rugby or lacrosse players who were already used to physical contact in sports. Such contact would cause tempers to flare, with fighting being the inevitable result.

In 1922 the NHL decided to assess each fighting player a five minute penalty, instead of ejecting them. Fighting was punished – but it was allowed to exist. Over time, the rules for fighting evolved, barring players from using

sticks or gloved hands; failure to do so resulting in stiffer penalties or expulsion from the game.

During the "Original Six" era, superstar players like Gordie Howe and Bobby Hull were much harder – if not impossible – to intimidate like many of today's best players. Both Howe and Hull, among many others, were more than willing to drop the gloves and go at it if need be. With only six teams in the league, competition for a roster spot was fierce. Therefore, teams did not need to carry a designated enforcer.

That changed in 1963, when the Montreal Canadiens added John Ferguson to their lineup. Ferguson is often considered hockey's first enforcer, as his job was to protect the Canadiens' skilled players like Jean Beliveau. While Ferguson would go onto tally 145 goals and 303 points in 500 NHL games, his main purpose was to protect his teammates from being intimidated or "roughed up" by aggressive players on other teams.

Expansion in the NHL would bring about a sea change in the roles of fighting and intimidation. As the NHL tripled in size in a span of eight years (1967-1974), so did the available roster spots. Further increasing the job market for hockey players was the emergence of the rival professional league, the World Hockey Association, which would lure many players away from the NHL.

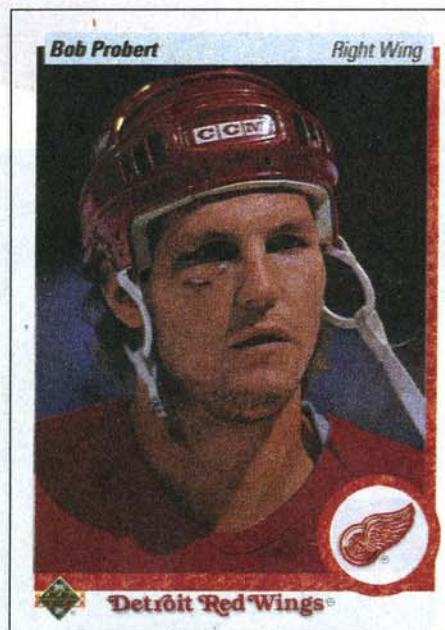
Exceptions had to be made when it came to skill, toughness, or both to fill out the greatly increased number of jobs available. Players who were skilled but not so tough, as well as players who were tough but not extraordinarily skilled, would soon find employ in the NHL. A team did not have to rely on outplaying their opponent to win; instead, they could just bully them enough to get them off their game. This was also noted in Dryden's book, which states

"intimidation was [used] to make a good player worse. And it worked." The Philadelphia Flyers – known as the "Broad Street Bullies" – were testament to this strategy, winning back-to-back Stanley Cup Championships in 1974 and 1975.

As the NHL would merge with the WHA, and then expand again in the 1990s, one or more enforcer became commonplace on each team. Behind every superstar like Wayne Gretzky or Steve Yzerman, there was a tough guy like Marty McSorley or Bob Probert, looking out for the safety of their star players while doing their best to intimidate the opposition. And one would definitely think twice about running Gretzky into the boards if it meant McSorley would come knocking at your door, or worse, your face.



John Ferguson





## FIGHTING "NOT IN THE CARDS"

While fighting has long been an integral part of hockey, it has very seldom been an aspect depicted on hockey cards. Throughout the years, we have seen cards that show player scoring or celebrating goals and goaltenders making saves. But where are the cards of enforcers doing what they do best? Let's see a card of Georges Laraque pummeling some unlucky schlep who targeted one of his star players, or a card of Boogaard and Parros squaring off – and autographed by both of them. Unfortunately, that will most likely never happen. The NHL and NHL Players Association have historically been loath to allow cards depicting what is considered (by them) to be hockey's black eye.

Nonetheless, enforcers still managed to get some recognition in the hockey card market. In the 1970s and 1980s, Topps and O-Pee-Chee would include a subset of "Leaders" cards in their hockey sets – a card for the previous season's leading goal scorers, a card for the leading assist-getters, a card for the top netminders ... and a card highlighting the penalty-minute leaders. One can easily surmise how the players shown earned so many penalties.

In the mid-1990s, Classic – who focused mainly on minor league prospects – released a ten-card insert set entitled "Enforcers," showcasing ten tough men from the minor leagues, such as Donald Brashear, Daniel Lacroix and Corey Schwab – a goalie who was known to get into a tussle or two. The Professional Hockey Players' Association (PHPA), the union for minor-league hockey players, did not have the same hang-ups about fighting on hockey cards as does the NHL Players' Association.

During the 2002-03 season, Fleer issued a set called Throwbacks. While the set did include a lot of tough, yet talented players like Bobby

Clarke and Terry O'Reilly, the majority of the cards were of enforcer-types like Todd Ewen, Dave Semenko, Shane Churla and Tony Twist, to name a few. If there was ever a set for "goon collectors," it was this one. While the actual set itself sells for around \$20 to \$40, it's the autographed inserts that really grabbed collectors by the sweater, with signed cards of McSorley (\$50), Twist (\$60) and Bob Probert (\$100-\$250) being among the most sought-after.

Several years later, Upper Deck would also recognize the popularity of such players in two of their 2006-07 releases. UD Power Play would include an insert set called "Last Man Standing", touting ten pugilists from the prior season. On

the flip side, their Parkhurst release would feature a 23-card short-printed subset entitled "Parkhurst Enforcers." Tough guys from the 1950s to the 1990s would be showcased, ranging from Lou Fontinato to Tiger Williams to Stu Grimson.

Although the cards of enforcers are considerably tame compared to their on-ice actions, they nonetheless remain a popular niche in the hobby.

## THE FIGHT AHEAD

Since the 2004-05 lockout, fighting in hockey has decreased, as has the importance of the enforcer. The "New NHL," as it has unofficially

## FIVE FOR FIGHTING

While fighting is almost never shown on hockey cards, there have been a few exceptions. Here are five notable ones.



### Phil Roberto

1973-74 Topps #151 and 1973-74 O-Pee-Chee #3

This 1970s hockey card depicts the rugged Roberto squaring off against the New York Islanders goalie "Battlin'" Billy Smith, as two linesmen attempt to break them up. While the red-bordered OPC version of the card looks "angrier," the green-bordered Topps card states on the back that "Phil is a tough man in the corners, and even tougher in a fight."



### Neil Wilkinson

1990-91 Upper Deck #547

Wilkinson's rookie card looks innocent enough until you flip it over. The photograph on the back shows the North Stars defenseman duking it out with a Blackhawks adversary.



### Dan Marouelli

1990-91 Pro Set #692

No one ever said that being a referee was easy. On Marouelli's card, we are shown every ref's least favorite part of his job – breaking up a fight!



### Howie Rosenblatt

1992-93 Classic Pro Prospects #44

Minor-league card sets weren't shy about showing fights on trading cards. Nicknamed "The Legend," career minor-league player Howie Rosenblatt throws down with an opponent.



### Daniel Lacroix

1994-95 Classic Enforcers of Hockey #E2

A few seasons later, Classic Games would up the ante, offering a 10-card "Enforcers of Hockey" insert set in their 1994-95 release. The set focuses on ten of the toughest minor-leaguers, including Lacroix, who would eventually go on to play in the NHL.





Todd Ewen  
San Jose Sharks

speed and scoring in the game. Hence, many teams are reluctant to keep around a one-dimensional player who is many times considered a defensive liability. This is apparent when you

examine players like Laraque (four teams in four years) and David Koci (three teams in two years), who – despite being skilled fighters – have changed uniforms numerous times in recent years.

Furthering the plight of the enforcer is that NHL teams now adhere to a salary cap. Not only are many teams unwilling to make room on their roster, they are unwilling to make room on the payroll for a player whose main purpose is to fight.

But the final nail in the coffin may very well be Rule 47.22 in the NHL Rulebook, which states that any player who instigates a fight in the last five minutes of the game – or any time in overtime – will be subject to a minor penalty, a major penalty, a game misconduct, and an automatic one game suspension. Plus, the offending player's coach is fined \$10,000. This move was also adopted post-lockout as a means to curtail

O-PEE-CHEE  
1977-78

**NHL PENALTY MIN LEADERS**

1 DAVE SCHULTZ  
PENGUINS

2 DAVE WILLIAMS  
MAPLE LEAFS

3 DENNIS POLONICH  
RED WINGS

fighting at the end of a lopsided game, when the losing team's coach would put out his toughest players to stir things up and "send a message" to the other team.

As a result of these decisions, fighting has declined during the first two post-lockout seasons in the NHL. However, the fighting is slowly on the rise, almost achieving pre-lockout levels last season. Only time will tell if this is the end of the enforcer ... but you can be sure that they won't go down without a fight.

## GOON SQUAD

If they played on your team, you loved them. And if they played for the opponents, you loved to hate them. Here's a sampling of hockey's most notorious tough guys, past and present.



### Tiger Williams

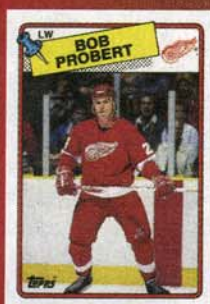
You don't get a nickname like "Tiger" for being nice. Dave "Tiger" Williams is the all-time penalty minute leader in the NHL, having "earned" 3,966 PIMs over 14 seasons.

### Dave "The Hammer" Schultz

"The Hammer" was part of the Flyers during their fight-laden days as the "Broad Street Bullies." He holds the record for most penalty minutes in one season, when he racked up 472 PIMs during the 1974-75 campaign.



DAVE SCHULTZ - L.WING



### Bob Probert

Probert stepping onto the ice was akin to Darth Vader entering the scene in a Star Wars movie – you knew something bad was going to happen. He was considered the heavyweight champ of hockey enforcers during the late 1980s to mid 1990s.

### Marty McSorley

Often called "Gretzky's Bodyguard," McSorley was traded, with Gretzky, from Edmonton to L.A. in 1988, and spent most of his career sticking up for "The Great One."

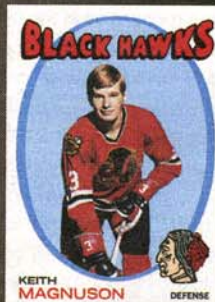


### Dennis Bonvie

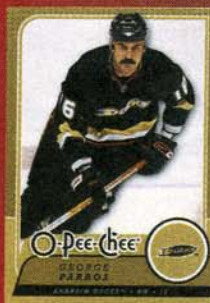
In a 15-year career spent with 14 different pro teams (six NHL teams and eight AHL teams), Bonvie holds the record for most career penalty-minutes in the AHL with 4,481, and most career penalty-minutes in a professional career with 4,792.

### Keith Magnuson

A popular player among teammates and fans, Magnuson always looked out for his teammates during his ten-year career. He served as team captain of the Blackhawks for three seasons, and his number 3 was retired this past November.



KEITH MAGNUSON DEFENSE



### George Parros

The Ducks' long-haired, mustached tough guy is also a smart guy. Parros was an economics major at Princeton University, played four seasons on their hockey team and was even team captain during his senior year.

### Derek Boogaard

Nicknamed "The Boogiemán," the Minnesota Wild enforcer sparked controversy when he and his brother opened up the "Derek and Aaron Boogaard Fighting Camp," a hockey program that teaches teen-aged hockey players how to fight.

