

# The Hard Road: An Interview with Theo Fleury

by Shauna Sweeney

I burst through my bedroom door- “3:55, 3:55,” I repeat to myself. There are only five more minutes until he is supposed to call. My nerves are getting the best of me now. All day it was running through my head; what am I going to say? What is he going to be like? Will he like me? I have all my questions prepared, but how will I ease my nerves?

The phone rings.

I answer nervously, “Hello...”

The gentle voice of *this* man saying my name leaves me stunned. The fact that he knows my name is enough to leave me speechless. I’m not talking about a boyfriend, or the old man down the street, I’m talking about someone who most people know: former NHL star, Theo Fleury.

Freezing at the sound of his voice, Theo Fleury asks “What are you so nervous about? Let’s see if we can get you an A on this thing”. After catching my breath, Fleury is more than happy to share his life and his experiences with me. Looking back at his life, he says, “I don’t have regrets”, and “I want to tell my story so I can help people”. After opening up, and writing his book, Playing with Fire, Fleury says, “I wanted people to know. I felt it was time. I was ready to do it”.

Fleury's passion for hockey began at a young age after a friend had asked him if he wanted to play while they were walking home from kindergarten. Going home with that thought in mind, his mother crafted hockey equipment from items around the house, so that he could play. "I had catalogue shin pads, and skates that were too big for me," and it has been the focus of his life ever since. Fleury looks back on playing hockey with no regrets: "I knew I wanted to do it, everything I have is because of hockey".

Under 5'6 and 140 pounds, Fleury is known as one of the smallest NHL players to play the game. Aware of his size, and the size of his competition, he knew it was going to be an uphill battle. Fleury also considers himself to be one of the "pioneers" who changed the way people see the game. "A big guy knows he can play, but a little guy has to *prove* he can play".

Accomplishing more than most hockey players can only dream of, Fleury won a Stanley Cup while playing with the Calgary Flames, and a gold medal with Team Canada in the Olympics, but the most memorable moment in his career was the 1988 World Juniors in Moscow. Wearing the "C" on his jersey with pride, Fleury led his team to the gold medal. "That's just as high as a Stanley Cup or a gold medal in the Olympics."

Living with injuries that were becoming more difficult to heal, and missing his kids grow up, Fleury said goodbye to his teammates, and his fans, and made the very difficult decision to retire. Fleury reminisces, "I miss the feeling you get walking through the tunnel before a game". Even though he played for many teams, Fleury says

“Calgary is my home. The Flames was my favourite team to play for”. Although hockey presented some challenges for Fleury, they paled in comparison to the bigger challenge he kept to himself for twenty five years.

Not many people know that Fleury is not only a spectacular hockey player but he is also a bestselling author. Fleury faced many struggles as both a child and young hockey player, being a victim of sexual and substance abuse. Realizing that what he went through was more weighty than he had assumed, he wrote a book to help people, and to make them aware that he too has faced these obstacles, and pulled through. “I had to get it off my chest”. Not holding back, Fleury tells all in his novel Playing with Fire. He was ready for people to know the whole story, everything from his childhood, the abuse and right through to making his comeback. Writing the book “was a great experience. I felt it was time”.

When he was just thirteen years old, he went on a trip to watch basketball in the United States with some boys and his potential coach Graham James. When James suggested that they sleep in the same bed, Fleury never really thought much of it. This was just the beginning to Fleury’s nightmare. James and Fleury’s friendship grew; James became closer to him, and began to sexually assault Fleury. Trying to make sure nothing would happen when they were together, Fleury would lay awake sleeplessly wrapped in a blanket. Fleury says in his book, “I would take it back today if I could, because it cost me my soul”. (Playing With Fire, 22)

The longer Fleury kept the abuse to himself, the more drugs and alcohol became his escape. At the age of sixteen, Fleury took his first sip of alcohol; in his book he says

“it was like –*snap!* –medicine”.(27) This is how he started to deal with all that had happened. The drugs came later on in 1988 while at a party. In his book he says it was “a hundred times better”.(54) These were stepping stones toward moments in Fleury’s life when he questioned whether or not he wanted to continue living.

Fleury now works as a motivational speaker. “I like helping people and it’s a great way to see our beautiful country”. Telling his story, he meets new people, and he hopes he helps them to become better people.

People look up to Fleury because of everything that he battled through to get where he is today. By telling his story to people across the country, and in his book, people respect him. Fleury also gives back a lot to the public; it might be as simple as a phone call to big fan in a small community, or as meaningful as playing hockey for charity. He also says if you want to accomplish your goals “work hard, but have fun while doing it”.

## Works Cited

Fleury, Theo. Personal interview. 25 Feb. 2011

Fleury, Theo. Playing With Fire. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2009.