



BRIAN SPENCER

Tragedy Turned Triumph

Brian Skates to Glory

By RAY DIDINGER

BRIAN SPENCER grew up at one end of a twin-handled saw, helping his father, Roy Edward Spencer, cut through the wilderness of Prince George, British Columbia. It was a boyhood of 15-hour work days that turned young hands into bloody blisters.

A boy grows up quickly in the timber country and he dreams of the day he will leave. His idols are the Gordie Howes and Jean Beliveaus. Every youth in British Columbia walks through the forest, hearing cheers in the Montreal Forum or Maple Leaf Gardens.

Roy Edward Spencer shared Brian's dream. He wanted to see his son drop the other end of that saw and have the thrills he never had.

"My father never played hockey because from the time he was a kid, he was always working," Brian said. "He spent every penny he had to buy me my equipment."

On weekends, Roy Edward Spencer and his son would walk to the nearest frozen lake and together they would shovel off the latest snow fall. When the ice was cleared, Brian would lace on his skates and his father would hold the stopwatch.

"He never wanted me to be second-best," Brian said. "The only thing he wanted was for me to make the NHL. He said the day I made it, his life would be a success."

Brian knew his father was dying slowly with an internal infection when Toronto drafted him in 1969. The Maple Leafs assigned him to Tulsa in the Central League and Spencer began fighting his way up.

Early in December, the Leafs were sagging and they called their brawling 21-year-old prospect up to the NHL.

"WHEN I HEARD, I called Dad right away," Brian said. "We both sort of broke down. He was so happy, he couldn't even speak."

The week he joined the Leafs, his wife had their first child, a girl named Andrea. Brian was the happiest man in Canada if you didn't count Roy Edward Spencer who kept bragging to everyone in Prince George.

A week later, all the joy ended in one brutal night. Brian told his father the Leafs' Dec. 12 game with Chicago would be televised back to their province.

"Dad was excited, this was his first chance to see me," Brian said.

But the local TV station picked up the Vancouver-California game instead and Roy Edward Spencer's emotions shattered. With a gun, he drove to the station, demanding they televise his son's game. Police arrived and shooting started. A moment later, Roy Edward Spencer, 59, was dead.

"They told me the next morning," Brian said, his voice cracking. "He loved me so much, he only wanted to see me before he died. He was a gentle man. I'll never be half the man he was."

"People have written me many letters of sympathy. It makes it easier but something like this can never be easy. Maybe it prevented him years of slow suffering in some hospital bed."

SO BRIAN returned to Prince George to see his father

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buried. He had plans to surprise his parents later that month by flying them to Toronto to see him play. Whenever the tough, young kid thought about that surprise, the tears would roll down his cheeks and he wouldn't care who saw them.

Spencer went back to Toronto to rejoin the Leafs who have been the NHL's best team since he arrived from Tulsa. With Spencer at left wing, the Leafs have gone 13-1-1 and his aggressiveness is one of the reasons.

"I play hockey the way Dad taught me," Spencer said. "He taught me never to back down. That's what our team needed. Now the teams we play know if they push us, we'll push harder."

The Flyers discovered how hard Spencer can push a few weeks ago in the Gardens when he kayoed Gary Dornhoefer with a blindside right hand.

"I thought he gave me a dirty check and I went after him," Spencer said. "I wasn't thinking straight. It was a sneak shot and I regretted it as soon as it happened. I'm no (John) Ferguson, I don't sneak punch."

The Flyers obeyed the hockey code when they retaliated near the end of the game. Dornhoefer, Bob Kelly, Doug Favell and Ed Van Impe ganged up on the 6-0, 185-pound rookie. The Leafs visit The Spectrum tomorrow night but Spencer doesn't anticipate trouble.

"THEY ALREADY paid me back," he said. "The fans might want my head but I think the players are satisfied with the beating they gave me. We go into this game even."

On Saturday night, Brian scored his first NHL hat trick against Pittsburgh. He saved the puck and now has it alongside his cherished boyhood pictures of his father and himself.

There was tragic irony in his success. The game was televised to Prince George and everyone saw young Brian score his three goals. Everyone except Roy Edward Spencer, the man who shoveled the snow off the lake so his son could learn to skate.

"I'm playing for him now," Brian said. "He'll never be dead in my mind. I still picture him smiling and happy. He was proud of me and he still is, I know. He never saw my games before but I believe he sees them all now."

In death, Brian Spencer has found his reason for living. It was his father's final gift.