

Growing Up in Kelvington

There's no loafing on the farm, so there's no loafing in a game." As a kid, I heard those words from my dad a lot. When you grow up on a family farm like I did, you learn early on that everyone is expected to pull their weight on the home front.

Home for us was a grain and cattle farm that covered about a thousand acres when I was born, although we later expanded it to nine thousand acres. Our farm was in Kelvington, a tiny community of nine hundred people roughly 250 kilometres east of Saskatoon. You can't get much more small-town or rural than Kelvington, Saskatchewan. We had everything that any small rural town needs: a grain elevator, bank, post office, credit union, department store, hospital, retirement home, town hall, and, like in every small town in Saskatchewan, a Chinese restaurant. The one we had in Kelvington was called Ning's Café. In terms of things to do, the selection

was a little more limited. We were big enough to have a motel and a hotel, although the motel was basically just a long strip of property just outside of town. The hotel was in town, and it had the one bar in Kelvington. There was also an auction market, a skating rink, a curling rink, and even a nine-hole golf course. The golf course was easy to find, as it was beside the water tower and the motel.

Golf in small-town Saskatchewan was different than what most people are used to. Our course had sand greens—oiled sand, to be exact. So, when you were on the green, you had to make a path in the sand just to putt your ball. I golfed on the course often as a kid, and my grandfather later brought the first golf cart to Kelvington. One of the most exciting moments I can remember was when Kelvington hosted the Saskatchewan sand greens golf championship. The tournament was held in different towns each year, and when Kelvington got its turn, believe me, it was a major deal and the whole community came out. That wasn't all that hard, of course. Because we were such a small town, everyone knew everyone in Kelvington; we all moved in the same circles. We only had one public school and one high school, so growing up, I knew every kid in the surrounding area.

My dad had been born in Kelvington in the middle of the Great Depression, and he spent his early life there. As a young man in the 1950s, he left town to play junior and minor pro hockey. He signed somewhere different every year, from Moose Jaw to Saskatoon to Philadelphia to Charlotte. Eventually, though, he headed back to Kelvington in his early twenties to work on the family farm. It was good timing, since my mom, who was from Springside, Saskatchewan—a town about 150 kilometres away that, if possible, was actually smaller than my hometown—had just moved to Kelvington to teach school. They met soon after Dad moved back, and it wasn't long before they were married and starting a family.

It isn't very hard to see where I got my work ethic. My parents, each in their own way, were the people most responsible for shaping

me into the man I am today. But while my dad taught me a lot of the skills I would need to get to the NHL, it was my mom who showed me every day how important it is to get along with everyone and anyone around you.

Mom made sure we had three square meals a day. I'm talking about a hot breakfast, lunch, and dinner, day in and day out. Steak and potatoes (with plenty of bread and butter) was my favourite meal. Of course, growing up on a cattle farm, I had to like that. But it helped that my mom was also a heck of a cook—I would have eaten anything she put in front of me. I would often look in the fridge and complain that there was nothing to eat. She could look in the fridge, and the next thing you knew, there'd be three different meals sitting on the table. She would be mixing and matching things, and everything would be delicious. She really could cook up a storm.

But on a farm, nobody does just one thing. On top of taking care of all of us day to day, my mom was also the one who would run into town for spare parts if something on one of the farm implements broke. That allowed Dad and the hired men to keep working away on one of the many jobs that inevitably needed their attention. There's no question that the hardest-working person on our farm was my mom. She was the head chef, parts runner, and jane-of-all-trades.

We hired men during the seeding and harvest seasons—the busiest periods of the year for us—to get the jobs done in time. One constant was Tim Johnson. He was like family to us growing up. Tim was with us every year, helping out on the farm—he even lived in a little bunkhouse on our property. Tim was only ten years older than me. He had dropped out of school and started working for my dad at sixteen, which made him the cool guy in town because he had some money. As a young kid, I really liked Tim because he fixed all the things that we broke before my dad got home!

So, depending on what day of the year it was, my mom was cooking three meals for anywhere from five to fifteen people. And

that doesn't even count the snacks we might be having at nine or ten o'clock in the evening when we had to work all night or the desserts that we got after most meals. You don't grow up on a farm without having good desserts, and they were my mom's specialty. The only bad dessert that she made was Christmas pudding; I hate Christmas pudding.

Growing up, I did the usual chores that any farm kid would do. On top of our grain farming, we also had a cow and calf operation. We had two hundred cows that we had to tend to every day. As kids, my brothers and I had to stand by the gates of the cow pen at feeding time and make sure none of them got out while my dad used the tractor to bring in bales of hay and feed for them. It would be minus-25 degrees Celsius outside, and we would be standing still, little kids guarding the entryway against the massive animals around us.

Come spring, our big job was tree planting. In Saskatchewan, you created your farmyards by planting trees to mark the border. My dad's philosophy was that by planting fresh trees every year, your yard would always be healthy. So, as the trees that my grandfather had planted fifty years earlier died off, we had to replace them with new saplings to keep the border from thinning out too much. We must have planted thousands of trees on our property over the years. We had two ways of getting the job done. Sometimes we would just dig a big hole and lay the tree in directly by hand. Other times we would put the trees into the ground using a potato planter. I or one of my brothers would sit on the back of the potato planter while the others towed it around with the tractor, and as the planter dug each hole, we'd drop the new tree into it. The days were long, but on a farm, even kids do whatever it takes to get the job done.

Harvest time was when things were busiest. On the farm, if it wasn't raining during the harvest, you would be working from 6 a.m. to 2 a.m. for two weeks in a row. The hired men would pray for rain just so they could have a break. The long hours weren't a choice, though. We had to work quickly to get the crops off the ground,

because we never knew how long our window of good weather would last. So, as long as the weather held, we would stay out in the fields. The only thing that would stop us was the dew. The combine didn't work well if there was any moisture in the field, so dew on the crops meant the combine wouldn't thrash well. And even if the dew settled in, it didn't give us much of a break—we'd just have to work harder and faster once the crops were dry again.

At seeding time, the schedule was a little different, but the days were just as long. My dad used to get up at four in the morning and start seeding until the hired men arrived at six. At that point, Dad would go have a nap, and then he'd be right back out there, working alongside the others. Everyone got the same amount of sleep in the end, but it meant that more work got done throughout the day.

My days weren't all that different from those of other farm families. My brothers and I were the extra help the family needed to get the jobs done. It wasn't pretty or easy, but there were some perks. We all had parts of the farm that we liked best, but everyone knew my favourite thing was to go for a drive. As a young kid, I looked up to the guys who would drive all the machinery around the farm, and seeing them control those powerful machines made me want to do the same.

I drove a vehicle for the first time when I was six years old. We had one of those old Datsun pickup trucks with a five-speed stick shift, and it was the first car in which I could reach the pedals with my toes. Before I was ten, I was already driving small farm equipment. Once my dad saw that I was comfortable with the smaller vehicles, he decided to promote me to the bigger machines. One day, just after I'd turned ten, Dad told me that instead of coming home after school, I was to pick up our four-speed Ford tractor, which was being repaired at the John Deere dealership in town. It seemed easy enough—the machine was just a little bigger than our lawn tractor, and I'd driven that plenty of times. The dealership was right near my school in town, so to my dad, it made more sense for me to stop off

there and bring the tractor home after school than it did for him to take time off work to head into town and pick it up.

I followed my dad's instructions, and after I got out of class, instead of catching the bus like I usually did, I walked to the dealership, grabbed the keys, and started driving the tractor home. My plan was to head through town and stop off at my grandma's house before continuing on home. I didn't realize that my route would take me right past the police station. As soon as I rolled by, one of the cops came flying out of the parking lot with the lights on. He made me pull over, and once he heard my story, he told me *he* would move the tractor. But when he got behind the wheel, the cop saw that there was more to the machine than he thought, and he realized he didn't have a clue how to drive it. My dad wasn't mad—it was his idea, after all. But he also refused to come pick me up. Work on the farm still came first. So I had to wait by the tractor with the cop until my mom came to collect me, the machine, and the ticket I'd been given for driving underage.

By the time I hit thirteen, I was consistently driving the bigger machines like the tractors, combines, and swathers. It didn't matter whether the engine had five horsepower or five hundred, I loved driving it. It's easier to experiment like that as a kid in a rural community. The population density in Kelvington is next to nothing. So when I was behind the wheel of a car, a five-hundred-horsepower tractor with double wheels in the front and the back, a grain truck, or anything else, I had nothing but space around me.

My parents never stopped me from driving. In fact, they encouraged it, because if I could drive, it meant I could work. We had that Ford tractor, along with a Datsun pickup and a smaller Toyota, and often, my mom might send me out to deliver meals to the crews in the field. She would finish the cooking and set it out, and when I got home from school, I'd hop in one of the little pickup trucks and take the food out to the guys. Especially at harvesttime, every minute was precious. We were all working from dawn until well after sunset,

so we couldn't afford to have everyone walk back and forth from the fields to get their meals. Also, our farm was well spread out. It crossed lots of roads and was scattered around the town. It got to the point where parts of our land were up to twenty-four kilometres away from our house—you actually had to drive through town to get from one side of our property to the other. I'd leave school in the centre of town and walk home, then turn around and take the food to the crew, cruising along the numbered streets past the school, the post office, and the grain elevator with KELVINGTON stamped on the side. Everyone pitched in; we all knew that we had a role to play if we were going to get the job done.



I was the second of three sons in our family. My dad, Les, and my mom, Alma, had my older brother, Donn, in 1962. I was born in 1966, and then my younger brother, Kerry, came along in 1968.

You would think that three brothers growing up together on a farm would mean there were a lot of fights. But Donn, Kerry, and I never scrapped all that much. I never fought that much in school, either. I tried to never fight, because if my dad ever found out about me scrapping, my punishment at home would be way worse than anywhere else. My mom wasn't any more lenient. She had quit her job as a schoolteacher after I was born, but she still knew the other teachers and had plenty of that teacherly discipline to direct at us. If I did anything bad at school, she would have found out about it real quick. In a small town, you really can't get away with anything; if you do something bad in the morning, everybody knows about it by lunchtime. So I tried to stay out of trouble.

That being said, Donn, Kerry, and I still took up a lot of air. When I was growing up, everything happened outdoors. Our house wasn't big enough to play in, so we would get kicked out of the house a lot. And once we were outside, Mom wasn't letting us back in until

it was time to eat. I can't blame her—it was a small farm home, too small for three boys to be running around in. Also, we weren't the only animals around. We always had family dogs—straight farm dogs that lived outside and were never allowed in the house, but when you added them to our mix, I'm amazed our mom didn't kick us off the property, let alone out of the house.

We had a basement, but it wasn't much more than a cold storage room and the furnace. If we were playing in there, we might as well have been outside. We preferred to be outdoors, anyway. Donn had his own room, but Kerry and I shared a bedroom, so for the two of us especially, being outside meant that there was more room for each of us.

We were also lucky that our closest neighbours were also our cousins. Neil, Darryl, and Rory were my cousins, and they were the same ages as me and my brothers. Of course, when I say they were our closest neighbours, they still lived half a kilometre down the road. Still, having them relatively close by was perfect for a sports-crazed kid like me. Whether we were playing three-on-three hockey, baseball, soccer, football, or any other team sport, the six of us could organize games right there without needing anyone else. To this day, I hate hearing the words “We have nothing to do.” To an outsider, it might have seemed that Kelvington didn't offer much. But to the six of us, it was our entire world, and we couldn't have been happier.

Still, rural Saskatchewan isn't known for a whole heck of a lot. The scenery is beautiful, the people are kind, and the farming is nonstop. But one thing it *can* claim is cold weather. As a kid, I never gave the cold much thought or found it to be that bad. It was just a fact of life. I remember playing a hockey game when I was eight years old in Invermay, Saskatchewan. We were at an indoor rink, but even with a roof and four walls around us, it was minus-40 degrees on the ice. It was just too cold for us to sit on the bench between shifts. So the coaches and refs came up with a system where every player who wasn't on the ice went to the dressing room to keep

warm. Every two minutes, the ref would blow his whistle, and both teams would change their lines. It worked for everyone . . . except the goalies. Those poor guys were on the ice the entire time.

As a young kid, I'd often play hockey wearing an unusual set of equipment. In the winter, it would get so cold that we couldn't wear regular hockey gloves. There wasn't enough insulation on them, so our hands would be frozen in no time. Instead, we wore regular winter mittens. On top of that, I would often wear a toque under my helmet, and I never went out without long underwear under my equipment. Sometimes even that wasn't enough, though, and I'd have to wear my regular pants and underwear under my equipment as well. It was as though I was dressed to go out and play in the snow, except I had all my hockey gear on, too. It was the only way we could play. And I always wanted to play.

My brothers and I spent a lot of time shooting the puck around in our yard. We didn't have an outdoor rink, but we had a goal at the end of our driveway, by the sidewalk, and that thing saw a lot of action. We placed three four-by-eight sheets of plywood behind the net to stop the puck if we missed. It was either that or we would be fishing pucks out of the snowbanks all night long. When it was too cold to stay outside, I would practise my shot inside the house. I would get down on my knees in the kitchen and use a ruler to shoot a marble against the bottom of the kitchen cabinets. Our kitchen had one of those old linoleum floors, so the marble really took off when I fired it. Those cabinets took a bit of a beating. And in the summers, we would even bring the net to our cottage so that we could keep playing all year round.

I shot so many pucks into that net over the years. I wouldn't ever call it practice, because I was having fun the whole time. As a kid, training and conditioning weren't a part of my life. Growing up on a farm, you don't need to go to a gym to get strong. Every chore on the farm was an exercise. We never saw it that way, of course. It was just the usual day-to-day stuff for us. But between the demanding

work I did on the farm and all those evenings that I spent alone on the driveway, wristing puck after puck into the net, I was constantly training in one way or another.

I tried my hand at things other than sports. I played the saxophone in grades four through eight. I wasn't too bad, but slightly above average at best. When I was in grade eight, I was already missing a lot of school because I was travelling so much to play hockey. It got to the point that my music teacher told me I could keep taking lessons, but I couldn't play in the band if I was going to keep taking hockey trips at the same time. He said I had to make a choice. It was the easiest choice of my life. I said, "See you later, band."

My dad loved to see me out in the yard, shooting the puck, and he made sure I had sticks and pucks to play with. He used to buy sticks by the half dozen for me and my brothers. He would bring them home, and then he'd pull out a torch to heat up the blades and straighten them. He didn't believe in a curved stick, so when I learned how to play, it was with a stick that was as dead straight as Gretzky's. I wouldn't start using a curved blade until I got to junior.

There's a technique to a great shot, but it's also an art. I didn't have technology helping me—wooden sticks really didn't bend. For every shot I took on that driveway, with the light fading around me, I had to practise positioning my feet, controlling my hands, and shifting my weight. Everything had to be perfect if I was going to be able to shoot the puck hard.

My dad had all sorts of odd rules and directions for me when I was playing hockey. In my early years, I played defence, but my dad told me I wasn't allowed to ever slap the puck from the point. No slap shots, only wrist shots. I never found out why my dad insisted on that. Whenever I asked him why, he'd just say, "You're not going to slap the puck." Maybe it came from his time in the junior and pro ranks. It was like he had an idea of what real hockey should be like, and he wanted to make sure it was the way I played.

I did what he told me, though, and it didn't hurt me. Even though

I only took wrist shots in games, I was still scoring all the time. At one point, our team was winning by so much that our coach put a new rule in place: after a player scored three goals, he wasn't allowed to rush the puck past the offensive blue line. So if I was going to score, I had to shoot at the goalie from the far side of the blue line; I couldn't even skate into the other team's zone. While it made things a little harder, I still managed to find a way to score. That rule came into place when I was in that six-year-old league, and even back then, I could wrist the puck from the blue line and get it over the goalie's head. At six years old, none of the goalies were as tall as the net yet, so I was scoring on them bar down from outside the blue line.

When I was at another team's rink, I had parents chirping me all the time because of how I played. It never bothered me, though, because I was playing to win. My dad never said anything in response to the other parents—partly because he wasn't the kind of guy to react to noise like that, but also because he wasn't usually around to watch me play. My dad didn't regularly start watching me play hockey until I was playing junior in Saskatoon. He tried his best when I was younger, but the fact was that he was just too busy working. There was always something to do—harvesting crops, tending to cattle, or ploughing and seeding the land. He probably watched me and my brothers play baseball in the summer more than hockey in the winter, because our baseball games were on Sundays, his one day off. It also helped that my dad just loved baseball. He would come out, watch the ball tournaments from his lawn chair, and not have to worry about the farm for a few hours.

Mom ended up watching me more because she did most of the driving. Sometimes, after dropping me off, Mom would come into the rink to watch me play or practise. But other times, she would be in the car, taking a nap just so she could stay awake on the drive back to Kelvington.

My dad had a big influence on me when it came to the philosophy of hockey and my work ethic in general. His attitude was

straightforward: if you played, you had to play hard. He would ask me, “If you’re going to make the effort to get close to the net, why just shoot it? Make sure you shoot to score when you get there.” My dad’s view of hockey was similar to his view of work in general. If you’re going to do something, do it right. And take pride in what you do. Good things don’t just fall in your lap; you have to work for them, intensely and consistently, and if you’re going to put the time in, you need to make the payoff worth the effort. On the farm, that meant long days and nights working to secure the best harvest, which would mean a better life for your family. And on the ice, it meant that if I ever got a chance to shoot the puck, I shot to score.



Everything in a small town in the winter revolves around the skating rink and the curling rink. If you needed to find someone, you went to the skating rink first and asked around. If they weren’t there, you went to the curling rink. Usually, all the kids would be at the skating rink while the parents would be at the curling rink; parents usually hung out at the curling rink because it had a liquor licence, so they could get a beer there.

Although it was a small town, Kelvington had a good local hockey rink. It was my second home in a lot of ways. Although he’d quit his hockey career long before I was born, my dad had never left hockey behind. He ran a lot of the hockey programs in Kelvington—there was one for every age group. And Dad ran the rink in Kelvington before I was born—Barry Melrose’s father, Jim, ran it when I was growing up. Years later, my dad was part of the group of men who got together to organize the new town arena. I remember driving the tractor inside the construction site, helping to level the ground for the new rink.

The town arena was home to one atom team, one peewee team, one bantam team, and one midget team. Once those four teams had

practised, the ice was basically free for anyone who wanted to use it. It was a dream come true—nearly unlimited ice time only a few minutes from home. I made the most of it. Once I started skating, it was hard to get me to stop. I practised skills that my dad or coach had taught me, but I also took time to just play around. I would do anything to get more ice time, and sometimes I'd even end up in the arena all by myself. The guys who ran the rink were great. If there was a team about to go on after the rink had been flooded, I wasn't allowed to mess up the new ice with my skates. But they would let me go out with my boots on and stick in hand. Even like that, I could spend hours out there.

For me and my brothers, playing hockey beat watching it. The only games we watched were the big *Hockey Night in Canada* matchups on Saturday nights at 6 p.m. I was perfectly happy about watching so little hockey. I didn't have hockey idols growing up the way my younger brother, Kerry, did, and I never dreamed of playing in the NHL. As a young kid in rural Saskatchewan, the NHL just seemed too far away. I was happy just to keep playing on my local rink whenever I had the chance.

But my parents could see that my skills were developing at a rapid rate, and they worked so hard to create opportunities for me. I was lucky, too, because my older brother, Donn, had paved the way for me. Donn was a tough defensive defenceman, and he had a lot of talent. He played Midget AAA for one year at Notre Dame. From there, he went on to play Tier II Junior A for the Yorkton Terriers, and then major junior for the Saskatoon Blades, until he broke his leg playing as an overager. I had watched the older guys in Kelvington develop around me and go on to play in other towns, but I never had any direct connection to them or their careers. Donn was the closest person to me who had left home to play hockey, and he planted the first seeds in my mind that I could have a hockey career.

It wasn't long before I was following in Donn's footsteps. When

I was eleven, I attended my first formal hockey camp. It was the Dennis Polonich Hockey School, and it was run by Dennis, who was playing for the Detroit Red Wings, along with a couple of future NHL stars, Brian Propp and Bernie Federko. I was on the ice with Polonich, Federko, Propp, and Barry Melrose, all of them awesome players who knew how to have fun with the game and teach skills to the kids. It was the first time I'd ever been introduced to anyone who actually played in the NHL, and I was amazed at their skill level. But more important, I learned how the game of hockey is about fun as much as it is a job. That's what I'd always felt, and I was amazed to hear that even the pros felt that way.

It wasn't long after that camp that I hit the next stage of my hockey career, and it was one that would test not only me, but my whole family. The Yorkton Bantam AAA team was holding tryouts. I was thirteen, and I needed better competition than what Kelvington could provide, so my parents and I decided I was ready to try to break into the higher ranks.

My older brother, Donn, was playing with the Yorkton Terriers at the time, and my dad asked me if I wanted to play rep hockey in Yorkton, too. I was ready for the challenge, but before he would let me try out, my dad wanted to make it clear he wasn't forcing me in any way, and that taking the next step was my choice. He had also decided he needed to be sure I was committed and actually wanted to play in Yorkton. So he laid it on the line for me. He said, "If you want to play in Yorkton, you phone the coach and ask for a tryout. I'm not doing it for you. If you want to go, I'll get you there. But I'm not *telling* you to go play there."

He was true to his word—my dad refused to phone the coach and set up the tryout for me. It was his way of finding out whether I really wanted to go or just had a passing interest. He wanted me to prove to him that I loved hockey, not that I merely liked it. It was a lesson that would stick with me. I realized that I would have to make choices for the right reasons, and I needed to stick with them and

see them through. The message was clear: whether it's a body check, a wrist shot, a job, or a competition, you follow through.

I followed through on my end and called the Yorkton coach to ask for a tryout. A few weeks later, we made the two-hour drive south, and when we arrived, we found that there were eighty other kids there for the tryouts. I was considered an “out-of-towner,” and it must have shown—I had never seen anything like it. Back in Kelvington, there were typically only twelve kids who “tried out” for the team, and naturally, we all made it. This would be the first time I would have to beat someone out to make a team.

When we got to the rink, there were two teams—one full of thirteen-year-olds and another of fourteen-year-olds. In small towns like Kelvington, the thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds still played together. But that year in Yorkton, they had enough kids trying out to fill two teams. Even though I was only thirteen, I tried out for the bantam team. I had no clue whether I was going to make it or not, but I think my dad knew. It was a test—the first of many—and I rose to the challenge. And my dad was right. Even though I was a year younger than most of the guys on the bantam team, I made the cut.

It was great hockey in Yorkton, and the competition at the AAA level was intense. But playing with older kids was nothing new to me. And it helped that the people on the team were so good to me. I made some great friends in Yorkton, and two of my cousins were teammates while I was there. One of them, David, was with me during my first year with the team, and then his brother, Dean, joined me the second year. David and Dean were cousins on my mom's side of the family, from Springside, Saskatchewan, and I didn't get to see them as much as my Kelvington relatives, so it was nice being able to play on the team and spend time with them.

For the two years that I played bantam rep hockey in Yorkton, I also played on Kelvington's bantam and midget teams. I played on three teams for two years, and on top of that, I also practised with

the senior team in Kelvington. That was a lot of ice time, but it was an important stage in my development as a hockey player.

Sometimes, though, playing for so many teams would catch up with me. One night, I had to play games in Yorkton and Kelvington on the same evening. Yorkton's thirteen-year-old rep team was in Kelvington, playing in a tournament during the local winter carnival, and the Kelvington team wanted me to play for them. Barry Marianchuk, the coach of the Yorkton thirteen-year-olds, agreed that his team would wait for me to get back from Yorkton so that I could play with Kelvington, so as soon as I was done playing with the fourteen-year-olds in Yorkton, I raced out of the arena and hit the road. The Kelvington game was supposed to start at 8:30 p.m., but I didn't get there until about a quarter to nine. Nobody seemed to mind the delay—when the game started, the rink was still packed and the crowd was buzzing. The game was worth the trip, too. We beat the Yorkton team, 7–3, and I was lucky enough to score five goals. I don't think that poor goalie knew what hit him that night. As much as I liked scoring the goals, though, I liked winning the game even more. Especially because it meant so much for my hometown.

Playing at the AAA level in Yorkton could be tough at times. The real challenge was just getting to the rink in time for practices and games. Kelvington was 150 kilometres from Yorkton, and we drove the two hours back and forth for every single practice and game. That was no small feat. And because communities in Saskatchewan are so spread out and the population density is so low, we had to drive long distances for road games against other AAA teams. We might have a Friday night game all the way out in Swift Current, which meant a five-hour drive to the game and a five-hour drive home after. It took a lot of dedication to play hockey at that level in rural Saskatchewan.

My mom did most of the driving. I had to leave school at 2 p.m. just to be able to get to Yorkton in time for a practice at five o'clock. We would get home at 2 a.m., and then I'd pass out until I had to

catch the school bus at seven thirty the next morning. But I wanted to play at that higher level, so I was willing to do whatever it took—I didn't think of it as a chore. My mom was the one making the big sacrifice. The time investment was one thing, but my mom gave up so much more than that to help me. She had my brothers to think about, and the farm constantly on her mind. And driving in Saskatchewan in the winter is far from stress-free. We never left the house without a survival kit packed in the trunk of the car: candles, a blanket, snow boots, a snowsuit, and a lighter. Because if our car ever broke down in the middle of the highway on a winter night somewhere between home and Prince Albert or Moose Jaw, there was a real chance we wouldn't make it if we were unprepared. That's life in the winter in Saskatchewan.

Considering how much effort it took from my parents just to get me to games, I kept my dad's lessons in mind and made my effort count when I got there. Our games were a full sixty minutes—no family wanted to drive halfway across the province for a twenty-five- or thirty-minute game. In my first year with the Yorkton Terriers, I started to figure out new strategies to make myself most effective in a game. I played my first year of bantam hockey with no face mask. After that first year, though, the rules dictated that we had to wear a half shield that covered the top half of our face. But that half shield wasn't the kind of Plexiglas visor you see today; it was a wire cage. It looked a lot like a lacrosse mask. It was designed to protect your eyes, but I discovered that you could still fit the blade of your stick between the spaces on the cage.

So, when we went from helmet only to face masks, I came up with a new tactic. If a guy was coming at me on a one-on-one, I would punch him in the face. Not hard enough to knock him down or hurt him; just hard enough to throw him off or rattle him and let me take the puck. All athletes will bend the rules to whatever works in order to win. It has nothing to do with what's fair and what's not fair—you're just playing to win.

Because the teams playing each other were so far apart, there were very few people in the stands for most of my games with Yorkton. The parents of the guys on the home team might come out, but the only ones there for the visiting team would be whoever drove in the car pool or rode in the bus. That was normal to me—having played most of my hockey in Kelvington, I never expected to see massive crowds at a game. In just over a year, though, that would change drastically.