

John Chapman's an enigma. He's got a macho voice and a heroic, manly reputation – he once dove into a cold lake to rescue a drowning woman and her two-month old baby. Yet, he effortlessly accesses and shares what's going on in his heart like only a man who's comfortable with his emotions could do.

“My wife, Jan, like Jimmy's late wife, Liz, died of breast cancer. Jim and I have that in common,” John told me from his Lethbridge, Alberta home. John being the first of the five to find - the ‘five’ being the men from Estevan, that Ernie McLean said I needed to talk to if I hoped to understand what it was like to be a teenage Jim Harrison. “And also, like Liz, Jan was a tiny woman. But Bobby Clarke told me, when we learned Jan had nine months to live, ‘You’ll be surprised how tough the tiny ones are, John.’ And Clarkie was right - Jan lasted twenty months.

“One thing I did to cope was I kept a daily journal documenting Jan's battle with the disease. There's a publisher looking at it but I'm not sure what will come of it. I didn't write it to sell it, but maybe it will be of help to someone else one day.”

And then, with a quick deke, John changed topics. Not at all to get away from a sensitive subject, but to take a different kind of trip down memory lane. “Shit, Jim and I were barely sixteen years old when we signed our C-forms. He was a hard-nosed kid with his hair slicked back into a ducktail, and I was the crew-cut I suppose.

“After a game, we'd be given a sandwich in a box, and if we were lucky, an extra-large, chocolate milk. Then we'd walk for miles in thirty-below weather, carrying our gear the whole way. We'd hang our equipment to dry and then walk all the way back to our boarding houses. It would be two o'clock in the morning before we were done. Yet, we loved it.

“You know, I've coached some of the game's big stars – Lanny MacDonald, Bob Nystrom, John Davidson, the Sutters...and I'll tell you, when you sit around having a couple of beers with those guys, they don't talk about their Stanley Cups or their pro

careers. You know what they talk about? They talk about two things: One, their days in Junior hockey - I think because it is such an important, influential time in a young boy's life. So they talk about their teammates from that era, and their billets - their landlord or landlady. They remember the people who helped them along the way.

“And secondly, they talk about their families. I'll tell you, Jimmy and I go back many years – we went our separate ways at twenty years of age but you never lose that connection - and if we sat down to talk, today, we'd talk about playing Junior hockey together. And we'd talk about...” John pauses, to compose himself, his voice cracking, “...we'd talk about our wives.”

I had to smile. It was just like Ernie said it would be - Dale Hoganson and Gregg Sheppard were both in the North Battleford phonebook. But Dale had something urgent to ask when I informed him his former coach had recommended I speak with him: “Did Ernie have anything to say about his near-death experience?”

Now, if someone had asked me that question a few weeks earlier, I'd have assumed they meant the time Ernie's plane went down in northern Saskatchewan. But Ernie had recently been back in the news – he'd gone missing again, this time in the BC bush. Not a highly recommended practice for anyone, but especially so for a man of Ernie's advanced age.

I told Dale I'd spoken with Ernie *before* he'd gone missing, but that I'd talked with John Chapman *since* he'd been found, and that John had seen an interview with Ernie's wife, Fran, on television. “John told me that when they'd found Ernie alive, they asked Fran what she was going to do when she next saw him. And she said, ‘first I'm going to hug him, and then I'm going to slap him.’” Dale huffed a short laugh through his nose before adding, “I don't doubt old Ernie has made it hard on Fran over the years.”

Relaxing at his home where it was barely October but had snowed four inches that day, Dale shared with me a brief description of his current life: “We’ve got some land, some quarter horses, and we do a little roping,” he said, using natural, rural vernacular. “I got hitched late in life, married a local girl, she’s a nurse. My daughter is in Red Deer, studying to be a nurse too, and she’s a hockey player. I manage my best friend’s Chrysler store - we’re cow people, eh?”

“Yep - North Battleford is a good place to get away from the plastic part of the world. Sometimes I look at those alumni guys playing sixty old-timer games a year in Ontario and think, maybe I should live there – maybe I could make some good money. But then I think again - sixty games a year for thirty years? How do you listen to the same old stories over and over for thirty years, in a plastic part of the world?”

“Do you miss the game, Dale?”

“Um... Well, I’ll tell you - there I was, I’d been playing for Quebec but I’d just retired, and my old team was playing in Edmonton so I went up to see the boys. I went in the dressing room and it’s great, seeing the old guys. Then, after the game, we go out together and we’re having a few laughs. And we’re talking about all kinds of things, when – I’d say, twenty minutes, a half hour later – they start talking about their last game and their next game. And of course, I’ve got nothing to say about that, so I start looking around, wondering what I’m doing there.

“But that’s the edge they play on. They just do that every day - all hockey, all the time. I’m sure I did the same thing. It’s like, they’re great guys and then suddenly... it’s gone. In the end, some guys can’t handle that, it’s so hard on them. But do *I* miss playing? Nope.”

Then I had to ask, “Is this an okay time to talk, Dale?” because I’d suddenly heard a very busy life in the background, full of shrieks and laughter.

“Yeah, this is a great time. My wife and her brother are cleaning some geese the neighbour shot, and I ain’t going be cleaning no critters tonight. I don’t mind shooting them out of the air, but I want no frigging part of what they’re doing - I’d rather talk about Jim Harrison. Because when I think about my hockey career, one of the first guys I think of is Jim. We roomed together in Junior. I was two years younger than he was and I held him in reverence. You know, it’s not often your team’s top center is your toughest guy, too. And while I played with some great players on a Cup-winning team in Montreal, I’ve got to tell you: Jim was one of the top leaders I ever played with.”

“If there was ever a cat with nine lives, that cat would be Ernie McLean,” Gregg Sheppard said in a friendly, but very efficient, matter-of-fact way. “And you’re right, I did fight with Dave Keon; it was Keon’s only major penalty, ever. Funny thing is he was one of my favourite players growing up – him and Dick Duff.

“But another little-known story about Keon and me happened when we both finished our playing careers on the same night, against each other. He was back in the NHL with Hartford after playing in the WHA, and I was with Pittsburgh. It was the last game of the year and we were both playing our final shifts. So I skated over to him and I don’t know what he thought I was going to do – maybe he thought I wanted to fight him again – but I just grabbed his stick right out of his hands. I said, ‘You aren’t going to need this anymore,’ and I headed back to our bench. “I just wanted the stick that Dave Keon used on his last shift in his final game. I never stuck around long enough to see what his reaction was, but I still have that stick.

“As for my memories of Jim, I played two years on a line with him in Junior. Jim was my center and Fuzzy Erickson was my right wing, because I played the left side before turning pro. And that’s basically why I scored so many goals in Junior – because I played with Jim and Fuzzy.”

“You know,” Jim said, “Grant finished school in a time when most of us didn’t. Plus, he skipped grades along the way - smart guy, that Grant.”

Now, let’s face it, old-time hockey players are not often described as “smart” although much of this judgment is likely some form of ‘leveling’ done by insecure non-athletes. Because it’s been my experience that while many old-timers may not be book-smart, lots of them demonstrate a considerably high level of street smarts. But any way you look at it, I was intrigued by Jim’s description of Grant ‘Fuzzy’ Erickson ¹.

“Grant was an honour student and, wherever he played, he was the most popular player. He’s retired now, but he was in the antique business,” Jim said, in a tone that not only revealed a great deal of respect for his subject, but a lofty level of affection too.

But I was bewildered, because I had no recollection of Grant. Not that I expect to know every hockey name Jim pulls out of his past, but because Grant’s career statistics – 10 years of playing pro from Rhode Island to Iowa, including a short stint with the Bruins and the Minnesota North Stars, and four solid years in the WHA - are something I wouldn’t have thought I’d have missed in my hockey-crazed youth. But sure enough, I hadn’t heard of Grant.

“Once, I was with Edmonton and Grant was with Cleveland,” Jim said, excitedly. “And we were on a power-play and Grant took the puck off me. So I elbowed him, bust his nose up pretty good. Boy, he was pissed off at me. See, I’m the kind of guy who can be your buddy off the ice, but on the ice, I’m different. I used to fight with Pat Quinn all the time even though we were buddies and our wives were buddies... Anyway, Grant got over it, but he was ticked that night. He believes a friend shouldn’t do something like that to another friend. We were supposed to go for a bite to eat after the game but he walked right past and wouldn’t talk to me.”

¹ The nickname ‘Fuzzy’ came about as a result of Grant’s incapacity to grow abundant facial hair – a nickname that the majority of hockey people refer to Grant by, but never Jim who, noticeably, chooses to call his buddy, ‘Grant’.

Grant, a married father of two, spoke with me from his home, 45 km north of Victoria, BC. It was January and I was in Ontario, bracing for high winds and a low temperature of -23° Celsius, wondering if the pipe that carries water into the house was going to freeze again. But because Grant was too polite to boast about the weather at his home - the temperature at Cobble Hill reached 3° before breakfast time - he chose to note instead that he had, “experienced some cold days growing up in Pierceland, Saskatchewan.”

After a brief discussion about a book we had both read, Grant explained to me how he still followed hockey but believed it would be more fun to watch if it wasn't so, “coach-controlled and robotic.” Then he articulated his history with Jim: “I played with him on four different teams in four different leagues,” he said. Demonstrating a subtle sense of humour, Grant purveyed to me that, because he was two months older than Jim, one of his ongoing roles with those four hockey clubs was, “to show Jim the ropes.”

“We played Junior together in Estevan, and minor-pro in Oklahoma City where we roomed together. Then we both went up to Boston with the Bruins together, staying briefly in a hotel right over the Gardens, and later we met up in the WHA in Cleveland.” I could hear a considerable level of joy in Grant's voice - like Jim, Grant too was happy for their 45-year friendship.

But awkward with any suggestion that he is “smart,” Grant, with a nervous laugh, executed a perfect deflection, sharing an opinion on Jim instead, “Heck of a hockey player, even through his injuries. His back was hurting as long ago as Junior; I used to have to tie his skates for him some days, and he wouldn't say anything about how much he was hurting. He'd just go out and play. That's the kind of perseverance he demonstrated his entire career. He was a great player when he was hurting, and something really special when he was healthy. Imagine what he could have done if he'd been healthy his whole career.

“In those days, especially in Junior, it was different than it is today. When someone talks about a ‘trainer’, I picture the equipment manager in our era, trying to do both those jobs,

and more. I'm not blaming them - it's just the way it was. But they didn't have the knowledge they do now. None of us did.

“So injuries weren't treated very well - sometimes they weren't treated at all. And doctors didn't know then what they do now, either.” Grant spoke from the perspective of having been on the receiving end of five knee operations, two elbow surgeries, the setting and resetting of several broken bones, and numerous other ailments. “And when you had a knee operation in those days, they didn't just go in with a scope - there was no scope. They cut you wide open. Today, some athletes are playing golf two weeks after they're operated on. In our day, you'd have to wear a big plaster cast for quite a while.

“And off-ice exercise and diet was different. We didn't take care of ourselves the way they do, today. Ten years, or so, ago, I went back to Cleveland for a reunion and they had a new arena. The team owner gave us a tour of it and I noticed there was a fridge full of beer in the dressing room, of all places. He said the players seldom touched the beer in that fridge. Times are different. There's so much more money involved in the game today, and players are so conscious of their careers, they might take one or two beer now and then. Not like in the old days. I mean, when Jim and I played, we wouldn't have just taken all the beer... we'd have taken the whole fridge.”

I caught up with Ross Lonsberry at his California workplace. With a style of communication that exuded both confidence and humility - two Stanley Cups and two bouts with cancer can balance a man - Ross, a successful insurance professional based in Los Angeles, after hinting he didn't have much time to talk, gave me an hour and fifteen minutes out of his busy day.

“How's Jimmy doing?” Ross asked a half dozen times. “I mean, how's he really doing? Would it be presumptuous of me to ask for his phone number?²” he probed, not wanting

² Upon learning Jim is on Facebook, Ross laughed, “If Jim's on Facebook, it's because his new wife got him there, because he's not smart enough to do it himself... Make sure you tell him I said that, will you, David?”

to appear to be prying but, having lost track of Jim over the years, genuinely wanting to know how his old buddy was getting along. “Jim and I might not have been in contact much lately, but we were once quite close,” Ross said with a hint of sadness.

And then he opened right up: How Junior coaches Munroe and McLean had a rule that their stars weren't allowed to fight in the playoffs, and how such choices would haunt these players throughout their careers – “I remember Bobby Clarke, when I played with him on those Philadelphia teams, saying something about how Harrison, in Junior, would turtle whenever Estevan would meet Flin Flon in the playoffs; so I would have to defend Harry by telling Clarkie that Jim was just following coaches' orders – how Jimmy was actually as big a clutch guy as I ever played with. I mean, shit, those playoff series against Clarkie's Bombers were holy wars, and there were years when I was the top player, so Scotty would tell *me* not to fight – I actually don't agree with that rule; it sets your best players up for an undeserved reputation that travels with them their entire lives. I remember once, in Fort William or somewhere, I just couldn't take it anymore - even the little guys were hitting me - so I dropped my gloves and started pounding on this one guy. But Scotty didn't like me doing that so he sent Jim over the boards to settle things, and I remember Jim cart-wheeling right over me to get at this guy who *I* wanted to fight.

“And Fuzzy? Where's Fuzzy living these days? And where did you find Chappy – in Philadelphia? And that's good you talked to Gregg and Dale, because Gregg and Jim and Fuzzy were a great forward line once upon a time, and I was with the Kings when we drafted Dale... But I remember the whole bunch of us, in Estevan, looking at each other the first time Jim appeared on the scene. We all stood around shaking our heads, wondering who this thug was - he was just so rough-edged in those days, he was the classic guy from the wrong side of the tracks. And he got hurt a short time after showing up at camp, so here is this guy with a big chip on his shoulder, doing the team's laundry and travelling with the club, but not playing. We had no idea how good he was, or how good he'd become, but we were pretty sure he would be up for playing it tough when he got healthy.

“I have to laugh when I think about it now - even when we all went up to minor pro together in Oklahoma City, there was this craziness that seemed to follow Jim around. Like when he had an eye injury that was so bad we thought he might lose sight in that eye, yet there he is with his face all bandaged up, insisting on racing some guy driving a GTO, in Galveston, Texas. So here you have this fearless hockey player who’s pretending he’s a cowboy, until his Corvette starts fishtailing at 130 mph, at which point he goes white as a ghost for what seemed like a week. Run that by him next time you’re talking to him,” Ross gently instructed me, “Because that’s the kind of story you don’t want to let a good friend forget.”