



Ben Fanelli keeps his hand in hockey teaching students at Kitchener's Victus Academy but his true passion these days is 40 Conditioning Inc., his own fitness company in Waterloo.



Fanelli's fire burns bright

There's much more to this former Kitchener Ranger than the life-changing injury everyone but him remembers happening

BY JOHN ROE
PHOTOGRAPHY • ALISHA TOWNSEND

Two pictures tell the tragedy and triumph of Ben Fanelli's life like nothing else.

The first photo, as infamous as it is shocking, still hits you like a punch in the stomach. There's Fanelli, lying prostrate and motionless on the ice at the Kitchener Auditorium, looking like a cast-off rag doll. After an opponent viciously checked the Kitchener Rangers defenceman from behind, Fanelli's helmet flew off before his unprotected head struck the metal stanchion separating the glass. As the crowd watched helplessly and in horror, the 16-year-old collapsed unconscious, with a fractured skull. It was Oct. 30, 2009. When Fanelli later came to in hospital, the doctors told him he would never play sports again.

The second picture, though less familiar, shows an older Ben Fanelli as he is today, skated-up, smiling and on the ice teaching

students at Kitchener's Victus Academy how to play the game of hockey he loves so well.

He is tall, lean and muscular, the picture of health, the epitome of a young athlete in his prime. He can still stride across the ice and fire a puck into the net with an acrobatic ease, even if his dreams of a career in the pros are long gone. The doctors, it turned out, were wrong.

The flattening hit on Fanelli, which more than a million people have since watched on YouTube, was a life-changing, life-defining moment. But while it knocked Fanelli down, it did not stop him from getting up again, returning to junior hockey and going on to become a university student, teacher, advocate for people with head injuries, fitness instructor, entrepreneur and, quite likely, whatever else he wants to be. Just as the hottest fires forge the strongest steel, so Fanelli's devastating injury made him the confident, resilient 24-year-old adult he is today.

Few people who saw Fanelli just after that hit would have predicted such a fortunate

outcome, or that he would transition so smoothly from Picture No. 1 to Picture No. 2.

Fanelli remembers nothing of the incident that injured him. It was near the start of his rookie season. He recalls being on the bus for a game the night before in Brampton. His next memory is of waking up in hospital, talking to his mother and a doctor. He remembers the physical pain. And he'll never forget the fear he experienced at the uncertainty facing him. One of the doctor's predictions, in particular, left him "in shell shock," he says.

"My stomach was in my feet. They said I wouldn't play sports ever again and wouldn't go to school for at least two years and, if I did go back to school, I'd need a teaching assistant."

The prospect that his injury would leave him a different person with a different personality was "the scariest thing."

At first, a task as simple as drawing the hands on a picture of a blank clock was beyond him. And yet when he saw a piano,

he was able to play a simple tune. That was a turning point. He knew he could beat his injury. It would take time. It would demand grinding effort. But he could do it. After a week in hospital he was able to return to his Oakville home where he spent the next two months recuperating.

Fanelli will always be grateful to the Kitchener Rangers organization for standing beside him in those trying days. He returned to Kitchener and was back at the rink in January 2010.

"I wasn't on the ice or anything," he says. "I would just go to the rink and do what I could, fill bottles ... and then work on my stuff," including cognitive exercises.

Though the desire to play still burned in him, he missed the rest of that season and didn't play in the one after that. But he kept working harder and getting stronger. And so he was back for the 2011-12 season — and for three more after that. In his last year in the Ontario Hockey League, he was

named the Rangers' captain.

"If they weren't as supportive as they were," Fanelli says of the Rangers, "I definitely wouldn't have played hockey again. And there's a chance I wouldn't have healed the way I did. ... They welcomed me with open arms. It was incredible."

The game of hockey will always be part of Fanelli. As an eight-year-old growing up in Oakville, he was entranced by its speed and intensity. "I'm one that can't sit still for long," he admits. Later, like almost all of his Rangers teammates, he believed he had "a really good chance of entering" the National Hockey League.

But after the injury, Fanelli began moving in different, though connected, directions. In the second season he missed playing, he started Head Strong, Fanelli 4 Brain Injury Awareness, an organization that aimed to help athletes with brain injuries.

The initiative tells you a lot about Fanelli. He was still in his teens. He was still focused on his own recovery. He still faced

hard, unanswered questions about his own life. Yet he wanted to help others to gain something from what he had lost. His injury didn't make him feel sorry for himself. It made him curious. It motivated him.

In time, and with Fanelli's guidance as well as the support of others, Head Strong grew into "something bigger," the non-profit EMPWR Foundation. Its mission is to bring together the latest information on concussions and share it with athletes, parents, coaches and trainers. Along with a board of directors and a team of doctors, the foundation is supported by a who's who of sports stars — ambassadors such as Mark Scheifele, Gabriel Landeskog and Stuart Percy of the NHL, former Canadian Football League players Adriano Belli and Mike Bradwell, as well as Olympic gold medalist in slopestyle Dara Howell.

"I think the work we're going to do will be very impactful. ... I hope one day it's worldwide," Fanelli says.

"It's funny how I do so much of my own

research on neurology and the brain and neuroplasticity and stuff. I'll never be a doctor. But through the foundation I'm working on, I'm really inspired to help other people heal."

There were professional opportunities for Fanelli when he graduated from the OHL. He chose a different path.

"I had an absolutely unbelievable five years with the Kitchener Rangers organization," he explains. "I counted those blessings and thought, you know what? I'm healed, I was able to play again. Maybe it's time to do other things."

But his injury, his determination and his recovery "helped create the new goals and dreams and aspirations that I have now," he explains.

By Christmas, Fanelli plans to have finished a communications degree at Wilfrid Laurier University. He started at the university in his first year back with the Rangers. While he values his post-secondary school experience, he's not in-

terested in pursuing more academic goals. He aims to "work in social ventures, and finding different ways to help people and be involved in communities and organizations."

This past year, Fanelli began working at Victus Academy, a Grades 7 to 12 private school that specializes in teaching hockey skills to more than 50 male and female students. Fanelli is on the ice with the students two or three days a week, coaching, advising and giving advanced lessons in the game.

Always on the lookout for something new, he's started his own fitness company called 40 Conditioning Inc. The program, which he currently offers at the Waterloo Recreation Centre, gets its name from the time it takes — 40 minutes. Fanelli developed it after watching people working out in gyms and concluding many of them could accomplish more in less time with a more efficient routine.

As a seasoned athlete who has spent years

going through all different kinds of training regimes, he distilled what he had learned into an original program.

Each session consists of 10 minutes of mobility and stretching exercises, a 25-minute circuit and five minutes of mindful relaxation.

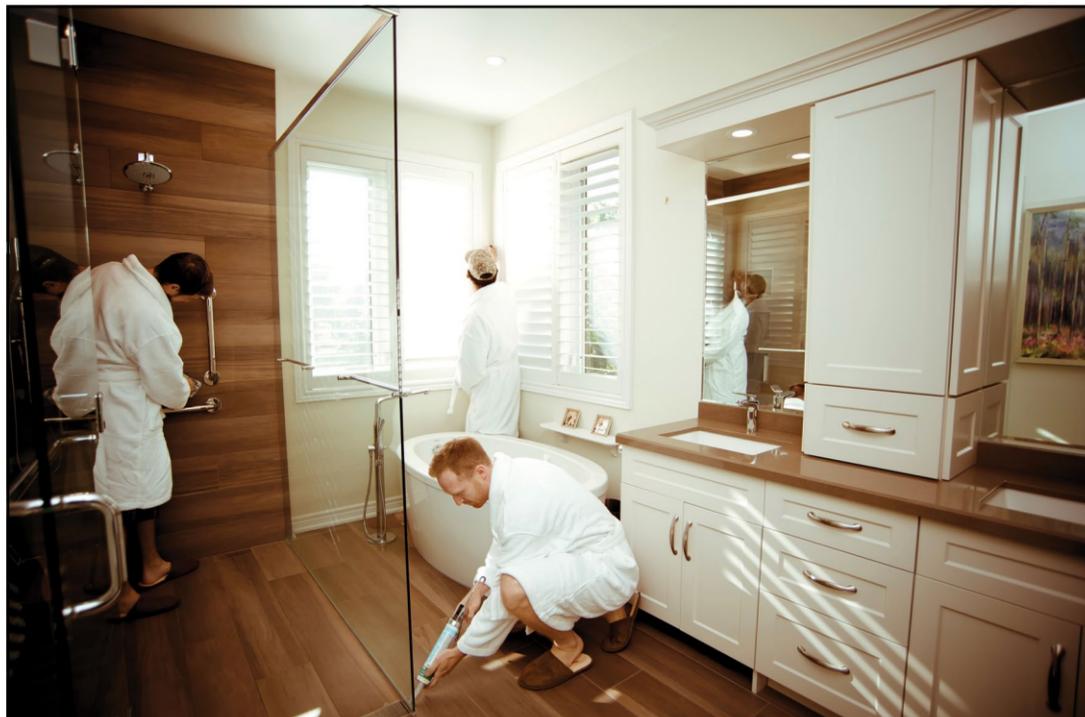
"The idea behind 40 is to make fitness attainable to everyone," he says. "The cool thing is ... people of all fitness levels can do it."

Running his own business, showing people how to get and stay in shape, these are what Fanelli is most passionate about today.

"Hockey was everything," he says reflectively, though as he does you know his eyes are focused on the future.

"The experience (with the injury) helped me realize there are other things. And now I have such a fire burning inside me. If I can help people and put food on my table ... that's my goal now."

Just imagine what the photo of Ben Fanelli, age 30, will look like. 



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