

Cape Cod Rehabilitation

Orthopedic and

Sports Physical Therapy

Director, Joseph P. Carroll, PT MS SCS



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Rehabilitation for the Professional Athlete

How Two NHL Players Recovered From Shoulder Surgery

By Joseph P. Carroll, PT, MS, SCS

This fall, National Hockey League players will resume their competitive playing schedule after missing the entire season last year as a result of the owners' lockout. While the fans and players alike would rather have seen action, the lockout provided an opportunity for injured players to address their physical issues and rehabilitate if necessary for the following season. This past summer, Cape Cod Rehabilitation had the opportunity to work with two NHL players who took advantage of the work stoppage to undergo surgery for shoulder injuries.

In an amazing set of similarities, both players grew up knowing each other, played Junior and Collegiate hockey together, at one point played on the same NHL team together, had shoulder surgery at essentially the same time, underwent rehab together, and both their first names are Eric! By distinction, Eric Boguniecki is a fourth year player with the St. Louis Blues, and Eric Nickulas is a ninth year pro who recently signed with the Boston Bruins. Both players came to Cape Cod

Rehabilitation for physical therapy following their surgeries.

From past experience, the treatment approach for professional athletes is different from our regular patients. As expected, professional athletes maintain a higher level of strength and conditioning, therefore they expect a higher level of "physical" with their physical therapy.



Eric Boguniecki of the St Louis Blues.

The high motivation level and intensity professional athletes bring to their therapy sessions would help inspire some of our less athletic patients. Whether on land or in the pool, the first priority for both players with each therapy visit was to progress and get better with each session. According to Eric Boguniecki, "I didn't want to be treated as a normal patient. When I discussed my needs with the physical therapist, I explained that I needed to be pushed in order to be ready for the upcoming season. That was the number one issue for me." His physical therapist, Kevin Corrigan,

understands the level of performance that professional athletes need to maintain in order to be competitive. He commented, "In order to effectively treat the professional athlete, it is vital to safely find the top end of their performance and endurance and keep them there during rehabilitation."

***"It's not a summer vacation.
We start our days early and
work all day."***

This was a critical factor for his rehabilitation given the extent of his injuries. Two years ago during training camp, Eric Boguniecki sustained a hit which subluxed his shoulder. He continued to play in pain and didn't really uncover the extent of his injury until his surgeon recently went in to take a look. "My surgeon told me my shoulder was a mess," Eric said. The procedure that was supposed to take one hour ended up taking three. It turned out he had substantial anterior and posterior labral tears, and tears in his infraspinatus and teres minor tendons. His surgeon warned him that he had a long summer of physical therapy ahead.

At more or less the same time, Eric Nickulas underwent surgery on his shoulder to adjust and correct a procedure he had back in 1994, and also repair a new tear in his labrum. When he realized his friend needed physical therapy as well, he recognized an opportunity to rehab together over the summer. When asked if working with his ex-teammate would be a positive experience, Eric Nickulas commented, "Oh definitely. When he told me that he was going to have his surgery I told him that it would be great to work together and push each other. Everyone has a bad day now



Eric Nickulas (L) and Eric Boguniecki at Cape Cod Rehabilitation's Osterville office.

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and then and it's nice to have a buddy or friend beside you to ride you and push you through to make you do your work. If you had 3 or 4 bad days by yourself then you are that much behind in your program. He's helped me, and I think I've done the same for him."

For both players, the process of working through rehab together became a serious task. The professional athlete element to their rehabilitation was clearly evident, and with good reason. Eric Nickulas summed it up best

by stating, "Our business is cut throat. There are new guys coming along every year trying to take your job. We are not down here for two hours a day just for fun. We start our days early and work all day between rehab, working out and skating. It's our life, it's how we put bread on our table." That obvious determination was evident not only in the daily physical therapy workouts, but in the rapid progress the players made with their shoulder injuries. Working aggressively with the physical therapist, the

players endured the sometimes painful process of restoring strength and range of motion to the shoulder, a process that requires the



Cape Cod Rehabilitation Therapists T.C. Cleary and Kevin Corrigan attend to the professional hockey players rehabilitation needs.

"It's been a lot of hard work but it's been a lot of fun. I came in here every day to see a smiling face and it really helped."

physical therapist to stretch the arm into the areas of limited range. Especially in post surgical situations, this stretching process,

which may be uncomfortable at times, is necessary in order to restore the full range of motion. Following sessions with the physical therapists, both players would routinely perform free and stationary weight

exercises to rebuild strength. A typical day for the hockey players over the summer started with physical therapy, immediately followed by a few hours of total body conditioning. The players would finish up just in time to travel to

the practice rink for a few hours of ice time. In addition, I worked with both players twice a week in the pool for aquatic therapy sessions. These aquatic sessions incorporated freedom of movement exercises designed to increase their shoulder mobility. Eric Nickulas summed it up best by saying “It’s not a summer vacation. We start our days early and work all day.”

The dedicated sessions they put themselves through paid off. In fact, Eric Boguniecki relayed good news after a recent follow-up visit with his doctor. “Considering what shape I was in after my surgery, my doctor was amazed at the progress I had made. I see the light at the end of the tunnel. I might not start playing until the beginning of November, but out of an 80 game season I might only miss ten games so that’s not too bad.” As for Eric Nickulas, he noted that his range of motion has increased significantly and he is pleased that his strength has increased considerably as well.

For as much hard work as the two professional athletes went through, their rapid and successful rehabilitation was not without a few laughs, an aspect which can certainly make

hard physical work more enjoyable. Both players were seen at Cape Cod Rehabilitation’s Osterville office where they developed a close working relationship with our staff. In addition to pushing themselves hard they also looked to their therapists to push them hard as well. According to Erick Boguniecki, “After a year off, it was just like being in the locker room where you can goof around and have fun, but at the same time, your working hard and our therapist made sure of that.” TC Cleary, a Board Certified Physical Therapist who worked closely with Eric Nickulas had no problem dealing with their antics by saying, “We tried to make it a fun environment where they could pull their locker room antics while at the same time work hard toward their goals.” Eric Nickulas reiterated the same sentiment by concluding, “Our therapists have put up with our moaning and groaning through thick and thin. It’s been a lot of hard work but it’s been a lot of fun. I came in here every day to see a smiling face and it really helped.”

Joe Carroll is a physical therapist and owner of Cape Cod Rehabilitation. He is certified as a master instructor in the Burdenko method and can be reached at jcarroll@cape.com.

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