

# You'll be dearly missed, Peter



Peter Zezel passed away Tuesday from following complications from a long-time blood disorder. (Kellie Landis /Allsport)

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**By Monika Moravan**

Most hockey fans recognize the name Peter Zezel as a high-scoring rookie centre for the Philadelphia Flyers, who then shifted to a checking role under Pat Burns during the Leafs resurgence in the early 1990s.

As a teenage girl in the '80s I had a crush on him, as did most female hockey fans back then. The dark mane of hair, movie-star smile and eyes darker than sin made him worth watching off and on the ice, but make no mistake I knew the stats from the back of his hockey cards as well as the smile on the front.

On Jan. 16, 1991 Zezel's childhood dream came true; he became a Toronto Maple Leaf. It was an adjustment coming from teams that had been Stanley Cup contenders to a team that considered making it into the playoffs ahead of their goal.

Teamed up with wingers Mark Osborne and Bill Berg, he was a crucial part of the Leafs deep playoffs runs in 1993 and 1994 - as he said, "one non-call away from the final."

It was nice to be able to watch Zezel play at Maple Leaf Gardens when I managed to get tickets.

His trade to Dallas in 1994 was a surprise, but four seasons was a fairly long run with the Leafs. Zezel moved on and so did I, getting my education. The center entered the journeyman phase of his career, bouncing around from team to team, eventually landing in Vancouver.

It was there he learned of his niece's terminal illness - not the highpoint of a life or a career. With the Canucks out of the playoffs, Zezel asked that if the team traded him, it would be to or near Toronto so that he could spend time with his family. He was traded to Anaheim - farther from his niece in Toronto than any other NHL team - and the deal was annulled.

Zezel returned home and spent his niece's final two months with family. His career meant nothing at that point. The story gripped me because I was on maternity leave with my newborn son, remembering what it was like when he was in the intensive care unit.

That's when the schoolgirl crush turned into genuine admiration.

A few years later, my little baby had grown into a seven-year-old hockey player who needed help with a few skating techniques, minor things like stopping, turning, keeping ankles straight. I searched around for a camp, making several phone calls including one to Peter Zezel Hockey and Sports Camps

Imagine my surprise when Peter himself returned the call. Sometimes I think if he knew how many

questions I'd ask over the years, he would have never gotten back to me. But he did, patiently answering whatever I asked.

My son enjoyed his camp experience, be it the 90-minute ice-only Christmas and March Break sessions, or the all day summer version, with other activities such as swimming and soccer. All the campers were tired, but they learned, improved and had fun doing it.

During my son's first March Break session, I was in school, which meant driving from Mississauga to Markham, back to Mississauga to drop my son off, then heading into downtown Toronto for school.

I told Peter we wanted to come back for summer camp, but I couldn't handle the back and forth driving. He asked where I lived, then said he was a short drive away and to drop the boy off at his place in the morning, then pick him up on my way home from school.

That's what I ended up doing in the summer and when I offered to pay for gas he laughed and refused, saying, "I don't take money from school girls!"

I'll always be grateful for that kindness and especially for his Mum looking after my son until I picked him up, sometimes later than planned.

"It's no problem, dear," she'd say. "He's in good hands."

He certainly was – never wanting to leave the swimming pool or the pool table. Peter Zezel made my kid a pool shark. Thanks, Zez. The time at Zezel's house spoiled my son.

We once went on a mother-son trip to Wayne Gretzky's restaurant. While I was going gaga over the memorabilia, my son said: "No big deal. This is like Pete's place – just more Gretzky stuff."

I'll always remember Peter making sure the kids had fun, and the parents, too. It made me laugh to see him taking coffee orders from parents at the rink, trying to keep track of double-doubles, hot chocolates and sugar vs. sweetener. His solution was to bring in black coffee and a bag full of creamers and sweeteners. Talk about hands on involvement – the boss was often the coffee courier.

Zezel always seemed to have a coffee handy, so it surprised me that he didn't know about the 10-cup coffee carton from Tim Hortons. The first time I brought it into the coaches' room at hockey camp, he had a puzzled look on his face, "Mon, what the heck is that?"

When I told him he shook his head, smiled and said, "How did you know about that when I live at the rink?"

"You're brawn, I'm brains," was my reply.

He let out a hearty laugh, "You're too much, Mon."

You'll be dearly missed, Peter.