

# SPORTS & LEISURE

## Athletes going head-to-head with migraine specialist

By **EAMONN MAHER**  
Staff Writer

If you happen to see a star athlete walking down Main St. in Georgetown, there's a pretty good chance that person is here to visit Brendan Cleary.

The world-renowned acupuncturist sees migraine-suffering patients who travel hours for his treatments at the downtown-based Ontario Migraine Clinic.

As the subject of concussions garners everyday media attention and more information comes to light about the repercussions of head injuries, Cleary says that his acupuncture treatments are gaining popularity due to his success rate and the lack of side effects that come with them.

Pro and Olympic-level athletes are visiting because his methods usually allow them to keep training, with treatments "stacked" over a shorter period of time to facilitate the healing process.

The OMC is open from Tuesday to Thursday and on the other days, Cleary might hop into his own private jet to visit with a high-profile patient.

He estimates that of the 450 or so treatments administered by him per week, about five to 10 per cent are elite athletes and that rate is increasing.

Cleary has also recently had some informal dialogue the National Hockey League Players' Association about how to approach the issue of concussions.

The 42-year-old local native, who is married and resides at an Erin Township horse-farm, took time to speak with *The Independent & Free Press*, sometimes stepping out for a couple of minutes to check on patients in his office.

**IFP:** You're not able to say exactly who you've treated due to patient confidentiality, so how do you advertise to pro athletes about your services?

**BC:** You can imagine that with contracts on the line and a lot of money involved, they don't like people knowing too much about what's going on. Teams talk to each other, so if they have similar problems, trainers—even though they're competitors—try to help each other to get their athletes back on track and they're good about that. They hear about us pretty much through word of mouth.

**IFP:** Are athletes with concussion problems coming to you as a last resort?

**BC:** It's a buzz topic at the moment, al-

Migraine specialist Brendan Cleary (with friend) says his migraine treatments are gaining popularity with elite athletes. Photo by Eamonn Maher



though it's a very real situation. In the past, treatments like mine weren't the route that they would have taken. It would have been just more rest and sit in a dark room all day. There's nothing that Western medicine really offers other than a couple of medications for some of the symptoms, but to really expedite the process of improving healing, they don't have many tools in their arsenal for that. That's why people travel from all over to get these acupuncture treatments.

**IFP:** Do you find there are a lot of unknowns with concussions, that it's something that's constantly evolving with what we're learning about them?

**BC:** No, it's very simple for me. What I find is a snapshot of how each system of their health is functioning and based on that initial snapshot, it lets me know how to select acupuncture points. I've never treated two concussion patients the same. They can describe to me identical symptoms but if they have, say, high blood pressure or diabetes, it totally changes the starting point with which we need to start training. You see a reaction to the initial treatment and work from there, stimulating specific areas so I can really target what I'm looking for. So I know from day one what we're looking at.

**IFP:** When you're sticking pins into some of these big macho hockey or football players, you must get some interesting reactions?

**BC:** It's funny. They have no problem

with it. They just want to get better and it doesn't matter how. They trust what I'm telling them.

**IFP:** What's your athletic background?

**BC:** I used to run marathons. That's actually how I got into acupuncture. When I was training and competing, you were very limited in the meds you can take and my coach at the time took me to get acupuncture for some injuries I had when I was 13 or 14, so I understand what these athletes are going through. It's not just the concussion and the symptoms, which is something that often people don't understand. It's the suffering that has nothing to do with concussions. It's, 'Am I going to be playing next year? Will I be able to feed my family? Am I going to miss out on \$50 million?' You can imagine the stress that goes on because even when they're better and feeling well, they're still scared because they think, 'What if this comes back?' Or, 'I don't want to be out too long, but am I waiting long enough? Should I go out on the ice or the football field now?' It's an interesting problem. People with a bad back or who've torn an ACL don't think the same way.

**IFP:** Do you often see players returning to action before they should?

**BC:** In my experience, people have to be asymptomatic for three months and you never see that in pro sports. You ask an athlete how they feel and how long they've felt okay. A week and no symptoms? Did you train hard? Yeah, I did all of the workouts

and everything is good for seven days or not even a week, then it's back on the ice you go. That's not long enough. Players will rarely go long enough being symptom-free. If they do (wait), it's not that they can't get another concussion possibly, but they don't have the same type of recurrence than people who don't wait, in my opinion.

**IFP:** Then how are they able to get clearance from doctors to get back to the playing field?

**BC:** I have athletes who come here who are fully concussed and suffering from symptoms and yet they go to neurologists and pass the exams all the time because it's based an awful lot on the response of the athlete. They can fly through those tests. There are physical assessments that can be done, but those can be passed quite easily or they fall within a wide range of (normalcy). In pro football, if you're gone, you're done. There are no guaranteed contracts so there's that element to it too.

**IFP:** If you had the opportunity to give advice to the commissioner of a pro sports league about how they might cut down on concussions, what rule changes or suggestions would you make?

**BC:** I wouldn't pretend to know how those people should run their leagues. They say that 10 per cent of the hits in the NHL are dirty and 90 per cent not. I don't think there's any player who goes on the ice and doesn't think it's dangerous. (But) they're not signing up to be punched in the face. I think there's a big difference between dropping your gloves and fighting and skating down the ice with your head down for a second and taking an elbow on the chin. They're very different situations and they need to be taken care of. I think (new NHL Senior Vice President of Player Safety and Hockey Operations) Brendan Shanahan is making a huge impact on that with some of the suspensions we've seen. Talking to players who I treat, they say it does make a big difference. You look at (James Wisniewski of the Columbus Blue Jackets, who forfeited \$537,000 of his \$5.5-million-a-year salary for elbowing Minnesota's Cal Clutterbuck in the head during the pre-season, earning an eight-game regular-season suspension) and players take notice of that. You can still have clean, hard-hitting games like we see in the Olympics without the fighting, which you don't see in the playoffs. And you never see the fighters playing with the superstars on the same line.

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