

# Hockey tough guy has new lease on life in Syracuse

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spent a night in jail for hitting a spectator on the hand with his tossed stick Jan. 26, 2001 in Dayton, Ohio. Playing for Peoria at the time, Sugden said he was only faking, but the stick flew from his hand.

He was upset with fans taunting him about his drug problem.

The ban was lifted last fall after an AHL hearing.

He talks about his past freely now. The junior hockey boozing, the game-day liquid lunches in the pros. The failed drug test in the minors.

Now he goes to AA meetings and spends time with his young family in Syracuse. He hasn't touched alcohol for 20 months, cocaine in more than four years.

But the stories remain like the tattoos: Reminders of a life almost wasted, as Brandon puts it.

Ironically, Mr. Sugden got drunk for the first time in Syracuse, as a 13-year-old with his Toronto minor hockey team.

He drank and fought heavily in the Ontario Hockey League during stops in London, Sudbury and Barrie.

Cocaine was used to celebrate making the old International Hockey League



**BRANDON SUGDEN:** Stouffville resident expects to be called up to NHL's Columbus Blue Jackets.

in 1998-99 and continued five times a week until he failed a drug test with Dayton the next season.

Month-long rehab got him clean, along with the realization he was killing himself and his career.

### SUPPORT FROM FANS

His story has appeared in papers and was a subject of a TV special in Syracuse. The response has been supportive.

"Many people wrote me letters, inviting me to talk to them at the rink," he said.

"They're recovering addicts and they can relate. It's nice. I still go out with the guys

after the game to the bar, it's a team building thing," he said. "Now, I'm the one not drinking. But it's so nice to wake up in the morning and not have a hangover."

"On every other team I played on, I overstayed my welcome by being the goof."

Mr. Sugden gets his kicks from Playstation games with son Anthony, 8, and going bowling. His favourite band remains Marilyn Manson.

Wife Crystal keeps one of the toughest players in the minor pros "on the straight and narrow."

"If I even think about doing something, I just have to look at her and realize I can't," he said.

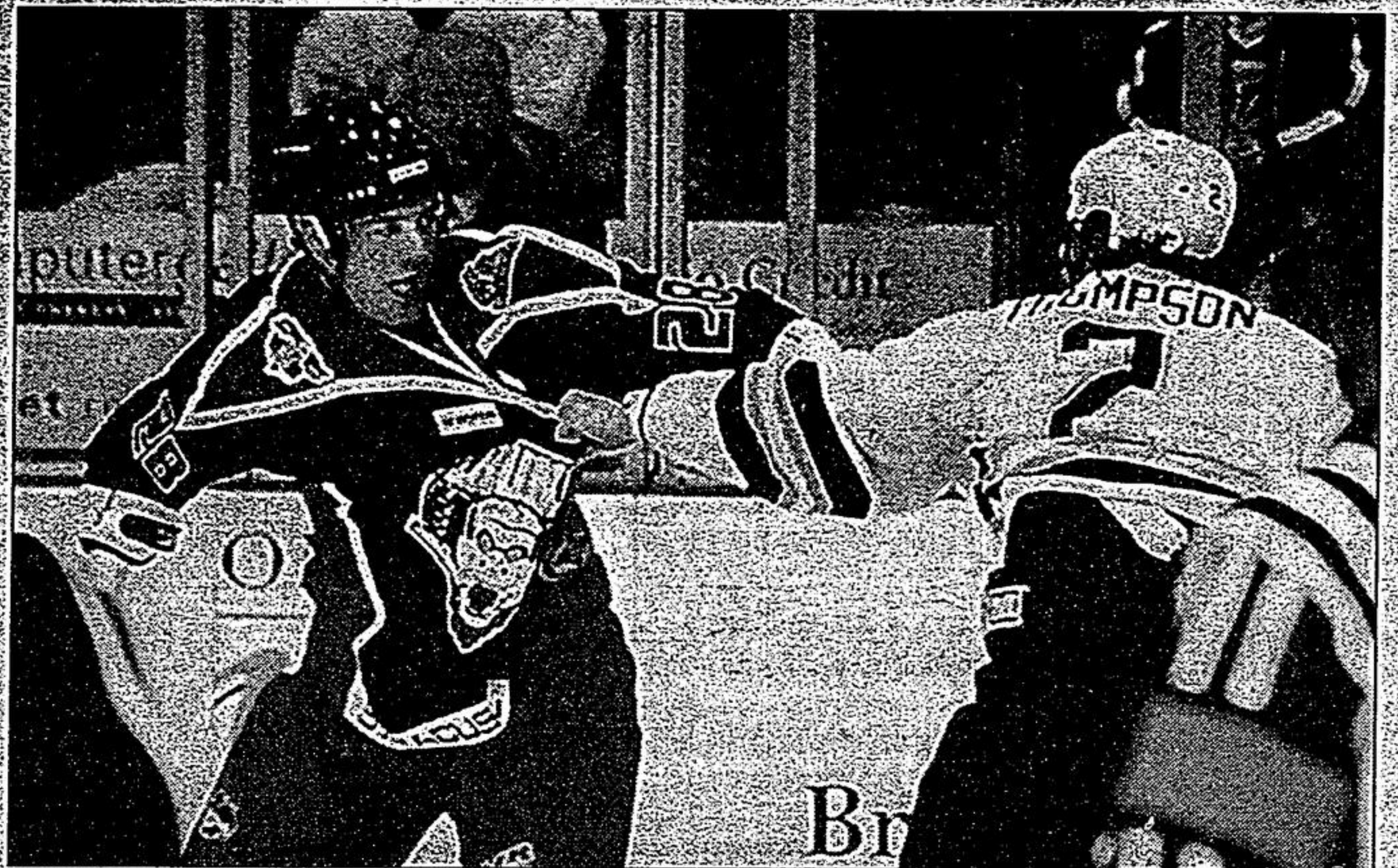
At the rink, he's king.

"Brandon is easily the most popular Crunch player," said Dave McCormick, who has operated an unofficial Crunch website for four seasons.

"Fans of all ages love him and flock to see him when he represents the team at public appearances. Sugden stands out as the player who goes to the most appearances and draws the most attention."

And he can play.

"The Crunch are a completely different team with Sugden in the lineup," McCormick said. "When he is



Syracuse Crunch enforcer Brandon Sugden, left, fights Rocky Thompson of the Toronto Roadrunners this season. The same teams play tonight in Toronto.

playing, no one pushes the Crunch around. His presence demands respect from the opposition. On several occasions, a fight or punishing check from Sugden has immediately swung the game in the team's favour."

Mr. Sugden's father, Travis, owns a label-making business in Toronto and lives on a golf course near Stouffville. In previous business lives

he was a pro wrestler, Cowboy Tray Travis, and a boxer who sparred with Muhammad Ali. He also trained boxers for the ring, including Brandon from age 9.

Travis gathered documentation for the appeal of the ban, including a testimonial from Stouffville Spirit general manager Ken Burrows.

"He became an unofficial member of our team; the players loved him," Mr. Burrows said.

Brandon rode the buses with the junior team, practised with them, spoke to the teenaged players about the dangers of drugs and alcohol and gave them tips on hockey fisticuffs.

"I miss that, I felt like I was back in junior," he said. "Some players may have been thinking of straying off the path and I gave them a kick in the ass."

Mr. Sugden now kicks tail with the big boys when they're willing to tangle.

"17-0," he says of his fight record this year. "No one's beaten me — yet."

He's celebrated fights by blowing smoke off imaginary handguns, earning him another nickname. Six

Shooter.

Against the notoriously tough Philadelphia Phantoms Dec. 19, Mr. Sugden couldn't find a dance partner.

"No one wanted to go," he said after trying to goad Phantom tough guys Peter Vandermeer, ex-NHLer Craig Berube and PJ Stock.

Against Cleveland Jan. 4, he had the Gordie Howe hat trick, a goal, an assist and a fight — and I took out the goalie."

### DRAFTED BY LEAFS

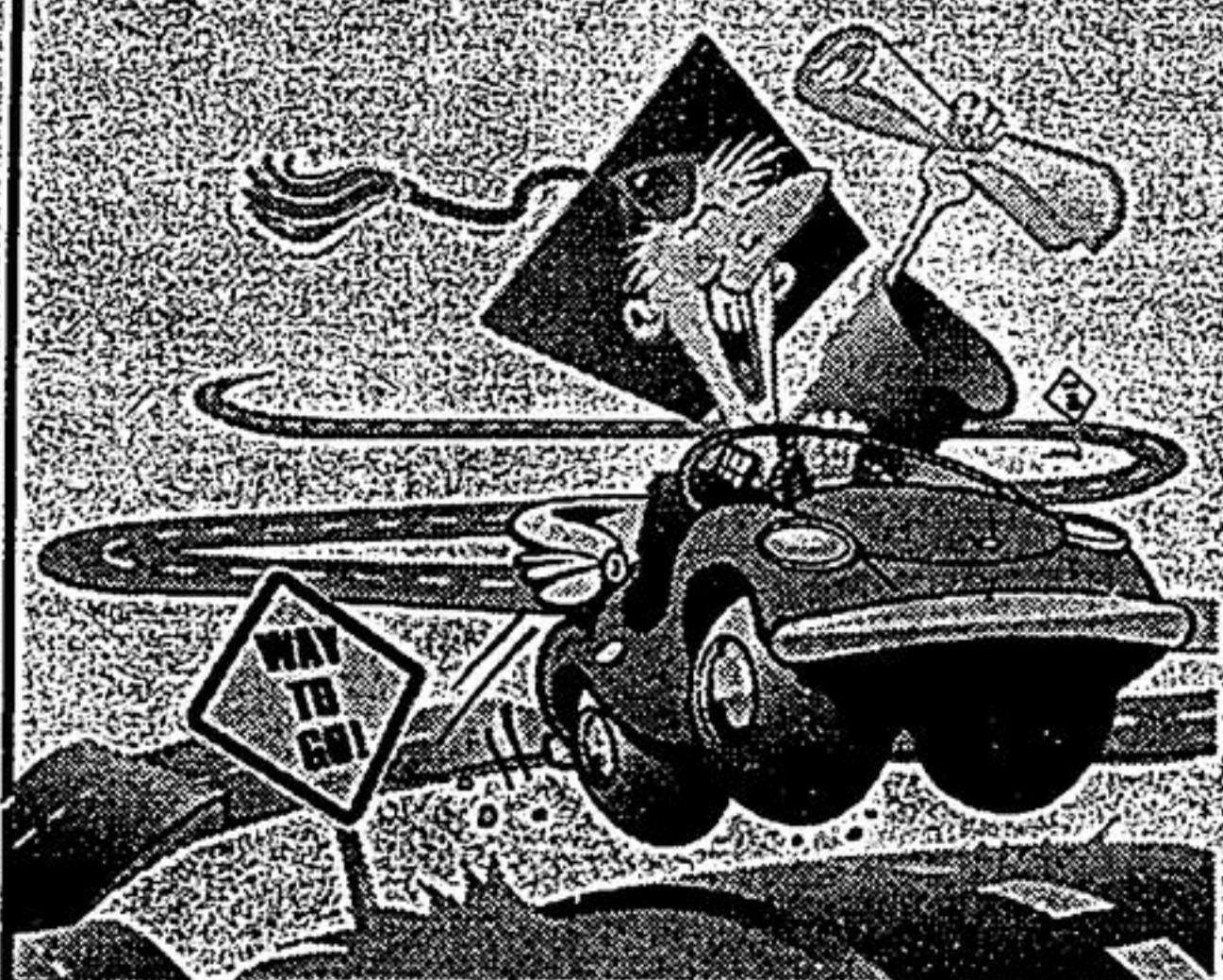
The Toronto Maple Leafs drafted him 111th overall in 1996. Two years later, the St. Louis Blues signed him as a free agent.

Three months into his new hockey life, Mr. Sugden has been told he'll be called up to Columbus late this season, more likely to spar than score. In 33 games this year, he has four points and 159 minutes in penalties.

"I'll get my feet wet for a few games," he said, promising to keep his hands clean at the same time.

"If someone told me this would happen a year ago, I would have told them they were lying."

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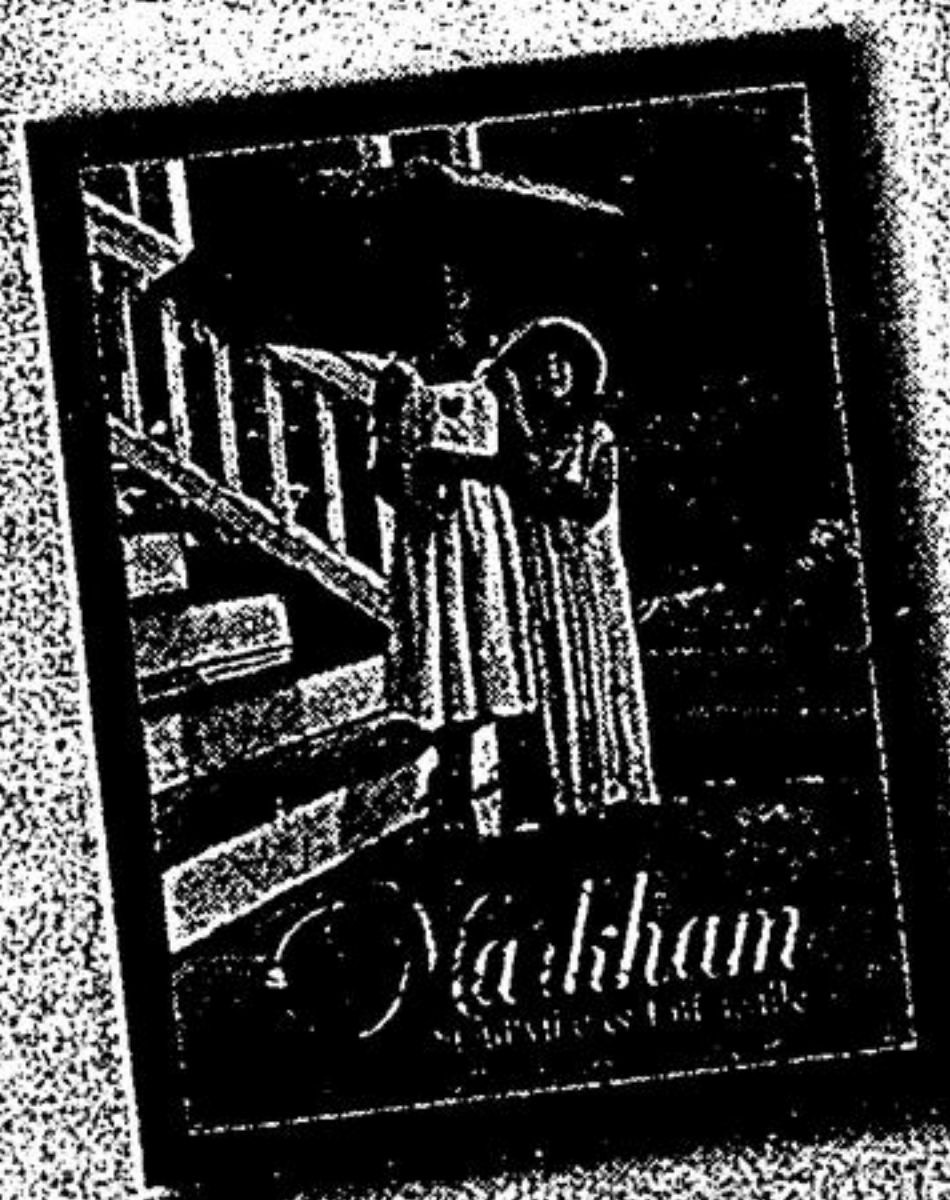
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