

Alberta Doctors' Digest

A professional hockey player's perspective

When I went through my CaRMS interviews, I was often asked about my previous experience and how that would help me in residency. I would give the typical “teamwork makes the dream work” and “gotta get the pucks deep” and “more bodies to the net” answer. But, in reality, what being a professional hockey player for ~10 years has really gifted me is perspective. And so I’m going to share a bit of the perspective that hockey has given me and how it’s shaped me in my residency.

Workplace challenges and high expectations are not unique to residency training

Over the course of my professional hockey career, I lived in nine cities. You may say, “wow that’s exciting.” I say, “No, it’s not.”

Some of my moves were for demotions, promotions, trades or fresh beginnings. In most of those moves, I had zero say; I was simply packaged and shipped like a cheap steak. Yes, some summers I had the option of which team I might want to sign with. But 90 percent of the time, it was simply a call from the general manager saying, “Brett, pack a bag; we are sending you to (insert one of nine previous cities mentioned), not sure when/if you’ll be back. Your plane leaves in two hours.”

“Being a doctor and a professional athlete are two jobs that require an immense level of commitment. It’s unavoidable that birthdays, anniversaries and celebrations will be missed.”

- Dr. Brett Ponich



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Sometimes you'd be watching sports highlights, and you'd see your name scrolling on the bottom beside the word "traded," and you'd think, "Huh, would have been nice if someone told me."

On one of these occasions, I only had 45 minutes to pack and be at the airport to play with a completely different team that same day. I packed two t-shirts, my suit and laptop thinking I'd be back in a few days. I spent the next two months in a hotel eating restaurant food for each meal. I wore the same pair of pants for a week and then used the dressing room washing machines to do laundry. By the time I was back, my entire fridge was rotten to the point I could smell it when I opened the front door. I learned to stop shopping at Costco pretty quickly (which is a big deal if you know how big of a Costco guy I am).

There is no doubt that residency is a grind. Working 24- to 36-hour shifts while still needing to find time for research and studying is a lot. Continuously going above and beyond what is expected can be exhausting. But when the clinical, research, teaching and studying workload overwhelm me, I find comfort in knowing that when I get to go home (eventually), I get to see my wife and sleep in my own bed. No one has tapped me on the shoulder and told me to get out of town ... yet.

Work is still going to feel like work sometimes, even when you're passionate about it

I've been fortunate to do (in my opinion) two of the best jobs in the world. But even on the days that I was literally playing a game for a living, there were a lot of mornings I didn't feel like getting out of bed and lacing the skates up. Even though I had an immense passion for playing, it still felt like work to the point where I'd fantasize about getting injured – not seriously injured – just enough to get a weekend off without feeling weak. There was a time when I was worried that I might be losing my passion for the game, but then those days would come and go. Now looking back, I can't imagine a more amazing way to have lived my mid-twenties.

Residency has been much of the same, with the ups and downs that come inherently with this job. It's easy to think, "I've devoted decades of my life and for this?!" But during the downs, it really helps me to take a step back, zoom out and take a bird's eye view of this job. We get to do the most amazing things and meet some of the best people. Recognizing that you can truly love your job while simultaneously hating it on some days is a real relief to me. Keeping that perspective really helps me grind through those days that I'm not loving things because I know that they will pass.

Work will always be there, but family and friends might not be

Being a doctor and a professional athlete are two jobs that require an immense level of commitment. It's unavoidable that birthdays, anniversaries and celebrations will be missed.

I left home at 15 and moved to the USA to play hockey. From August to May, I had no weekends off and no weeks of vacation. In the summer, there was always more training and new coaches to work with. I missed countless family events and big moments. I had only met my sister's boyfriend (now husband) once before they were married. When I decided to retire from hockey at age 25 and move back to Alberta, I was finally able to

be present and part of the family again, and I couldn't believe how important it actually was to me.

When hockey was gone and done, family was still there. My family and friends really are the most important things in my life. I feel blessed to realize this while they are still with me, and if I could go back in time, I would give a little less to hockey and a little more to them.

There will always be more things to study, more patients to see, more research to do, more committees to be a part of and more titles to accumulate. There are times that we need to accept giving a bit less to work in order to spend more on those we care about the most. I firmly believe that you will be a better physician if your home life is in order. This experience has really allowed me to be firm in setting boundaries in my life. I've always said that if residency starts costing me my marriage or family, I'll find something else. I lived the retired life for four months after hockey, and I'd happily do that again.

All this said, I have the best job in the world. I am blessed beyond belief to have a (second) career that leaves me so fulfilled. Recently, I had the fortune of performing a solo and unassisted otoplasty on a 14-year-old female who had been bullied extensively in school for her ears. When I removed her dressing in follow-up, she immediately burst into tears and exclaimed, "I love them so much!"

The feeling of being able to deliver that for her was the exact feeling I used to get stepping onto the ice, under the bright lights, in front of 15,000+ screaming fans. I couldn't wait to do it again.