

Regehr makes speedy recovery to reach the NHL

By Donna Spencer --Canadian Press

TORONTO -- Robyn Regehr's NHL debut with the Calgary Flames has brought some closure to what has been both a horrifying and triumphant part of his life.

The 19-year-old defenceman, who broke both legs in a car accident that claimed two lives on July 4, made an accelerated recovery to begin playing again in just over three months.

After a two-week conditioning stint with Calgary's AHL team in Saint John, N.B., Regehr appeared in his first NHL game on Thursday and, according to coach Brian Sutter, played a mistake-free game in Calgary's 4-3 overtime win over the Ottawa Senators.

"I don't think anyone thought it was going to be this quick, even myself," Regehr said after practice Friday at Maple Leaf Gardens. The Flames meet the Leafs tonight (7 p.m. ET, CBC).

Regehr started walking without crutches about five weeks after his accident.

"I was blessed in being young still and I was in the best shape that I'd ever been in before the accident," said the six-foot-two, 206-pound blue-liner. "I came through the accident without any further injuries and I had a chance to rehabilitate and get back to where I am now."

Regehr, one of Canada's best defencemen at the world junior hockey championship last year, is considered a blue-chip prospect for the Flames, who acquired him from Colorado last February in the Theo Fleury trade.

The Avalanche drafted him in the first round in 1998.

The surgery that required two screws to be inserted into his legs, the wheelchair, the crutches and the long hours of physiotherapy heightened Regehr's joy at finally reaching his goal of playing in the NHL.

"It sure made me appreciate things a lot more," he said. "I'm fortunate to be here, let alone have a chance to play in the NHL."

"After the game on the plane into Toronto, that's where it kind of hit me that I'd just played my first NHL game. It was a pretty proud moment."

Regehr, his brother Dinho and two female friends were on their way home to Rosthern, Sask., after a day of water skiing on July 4. Regehr, who was driving, didn't even have time to hit the brakes when he swerved to avoid an oncoming vehicle in his lane.

The two men in the other vehicle, Paul Wolfe, 18, of Saskatoon and Eric Turenne, 20, of Warman, Sask., died. Regehr sees memorials to those two men every time he drives that highway.

"I couldn't have got through this alone," he said. "It was very difficult. Two people lost their lives in that. I got great support from my family and friends and people in the hockey world."

Now that he has resumed his playing career Regehr rarely thinks about the accident.

"The only thing that brings back memories is seeing the scars on my legs which will be there for a lifetime and it will always bring back flashbacks," he said. "It was a really tough time psychologically to get through it. This has made me a lot stronger person."

He wasn't afraid to drive after the accident, but admitted he replaced his totalled Chevy Nova with "a big truck."

"I have a different outlook on driving now," he said. "I'm pretty defensive and I'm aware of what everyone is doing on the road. I probably won't be comfortable in a small vehicle for a little bit of time."

The Flames signed Regehr in September to a deal worth \$975,000 US a year. As a teenage player, he will either stay with the Flames or be returned to his junior club, the Kamloops Blazers.

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