

O'Sullivan, P. & Joyce, G. (2015). Breaking Away: A Harrowing True Story of Resilience, Courage, and Triumph. Toronto: Harper Collins.

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Patrick O'Sullivan's book, "Breaking Away" is a narrative told from O'Sullivan's perspective. The book details his life from childhood to present day, discussing his father's physical and emotional abuse towards him throughout his hockey career. O'Sullivan begins with an insight into his father's life and career in hockey, transitioning seamlessly into how his father transferred his failed ambitions onto his son. O'Sullivan details how his father would always push him to life-threatening extremes. O'Sullivan's father would also get into confrontations with hockey coaches, management and organizations for his erratic behavior within the arena. Eventually, O'Sullivan manages to break away from his father, but the abuse he endured would follow him for the rest of his life. He details his struggles as an NHL player and his decision to quit his career in professional hockey to focus on his psychological treatment. O'Sullivan uses his personal story to bring attention to over-involved sports parents and the effects they have on their children, and sheds light on the hockey community's ingrained stance against offering mental health assistance to their players.

The book begins with a look at the past of O'Sullivan's father, John O'Sullivan. John's hockey career was defined by failure. At the end of his junior career, John had suffered setbacks that would have made most people quit the game. However, John "believed he had a future in the game even if there was abundant evidence that he didn't even have a present" (p. 22). John also had a reputation of being a temperamental player. After facing constant failure, John finally gave

it up. When his son Patrick showed an interest in hockey, John shifted his obsessive dream of joining the NHL onto his son. “He talked about how I was only going to get one chance to make good in the game. The fact was, he *had* a second chance. I was his do-over” (p. 57).

John would work every day to improve Patrick’s hockey skills. He also made sure his son understood the importance of being successful. “He hammered the message that every game was a matter of life or death . . . if I was anything less than the best, I was going to let him down, let the family down” (p. 44). Along with forcing Patrick to do hundreds of hours of hockey drills, John would physically and emotionally abuse him. “He’d blow up and call me ‘a little fag’ before I had any idea what it meant. When he’d rent the ice and get on the ice with me, he would slap the back of the helmet and daze me if he thought I wasn’t trying hard enough” (p. 50).

John also made a point of attending every one of his son’s games. He would spend the game screaming at Patrick loudly enough to disrupt the whole arena (p. 55). At home, the abuse continued. John would frequently wake Patrick in the middle of night and force him to work out. “If he didn’t think I was trying hard enough, he’d punch and kick me. A few times in the dead of winter, he would kick me out of the house and lock the door, leaving me standing in the snow in my PJs and bare feet” (p. 69). Patrick knew if he protested his father’s actions, he would only suffer more physical abuse. “The difference between other pros describing their boyhoods as ‘hockey 24/7’ and my experience is the difference between guys on the street saying they love their country and a Navy Seal putting it on the line” (p. 79). For Patrick, playing hockey became about surviving. When Patrick was sixteen years old, he had his final confrontation with his father. After a physical assault, Patrick called the police. John was charged with assault, and when he breached the conditions of his peace bond, he was sentenced to fifteen days in jail.

The day of Patrick’s NHL draft ended in frustration and disappointment. The story about

his relationship with his father had gone public, and he was being touted as a problem kid. There were wide-spread concerns “about drafting a kid with ‘baggage’ and ‘issues’” (p. 172). Patrick had started the day with hopes that everything would come together for him, but instead it fell apart (p. 173). His father’s actions had sullied his son’s reputation, and left Patrick with an internal anger that made it hard for him to focus on the game. Patrick believes that if he had been able to get past his anger, he may still be playing hockey today (p. 12).

In 2012, Patrick made the decision to walk away from his hockey career. He felt that he “had been dominated by the game for two decades. There were more important things [he] had to do” (p. 236). Patrick began to write about the abuse he had suffered, which was a cathartic experience for him. “It turned out I could write about things that I could never talk about” (p. 238). Patrick then looked into getting psychological help and was diagnosed with PTSD. As a husband and father, he fully realized the importance of getting help. “. . . as much as I was in this for my own emotional and psychological well-being, I was also doing it for [my wife] and for our sons” (p. 246).

The one question that stood in Patrick’s way of a full recovery was “how did nothing stop my father’s abuse from happening to me?” (p. 254). To answer this question, Patrick reached out to coaches from his childhood. Most of them had had suspicions that Patrick was being abused by his father but chose not to contact the authorities for a variety of reasons. Two coaches admitted that they felt as if they did not do enough to help him. In contrast, two others believed that his abuse was not their problem and that players were meant to look after themselves. They were “a prime example of the culture of the game that protected and enabled my father” (p. 260). Patrick notes that hockey organizations did not tend to offer their players assistance with mental health. “People presume that these organizations . . . would have a vested interest in their

players' psychological and emotional well-being" (p. 195). From his experience, the culture of hockey believed that "it was all about independence and self-reliance . . . it's all up to you" (p. 195). The events that Patrick O'Sullivan endured will affect him for the rest of his life. However, unlike all the coaches and other adults who did not attempt to help him, he knows that he will not hesitate to help a child in need. "I know that I'm going to see sports parents mistreating their children . . . and if I don't like what I see, I'll say something and do something about it" (p. 301).

O'Sullivan's main intention when writing this book was to promote awareness of abuse in sports communities. He hopes that over-involved parents might see their actions reflected in his story and realize that they are pushing their kids too hard (p. 12). He also hopes that after reading his book, people are encouraged to report abuse so that children are prevented from suffering any further harm (p. 13). Finally, this book was written for victims of abuse. The author wants them to know they are not alone and encourages them to seek help. "If this book spurs [victims of abuse] to seek professional help to heal the damage like I did, then putting it all down on the page will have been worthwhile" (p. 13).

O'Sullivan's intended readership is the general population. He targets people involved in organized youth sports, including parents, coaches, managers and children. An academic audience for this book may include anyone studying abusive family relationships, child-care professionals, and sports psychologists. This book would be improved if it were published with information about resources for victims of abuse. Phone numbers or websites appropriate to the country of publication would make it easier for readers to get help. O'Sullivan's book was a captivating and powerful narrative. His story provokes an emotional response that helps readers to understand his trauma. I would especially recommend this book to anyone involved in children's sports, or other sports organizations.