

COMMENTARY

Bisson comes through in clutch

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Dr. Leslie Bisson says it really didn't occur to him at the time. This was no time for reflection. It was time for action. All Bisson, the Sabres' lead team physician, knew was that the Panthers' Richard Zednik was skating frantically toward the visitors' bench at HSBC Arena, holding his fingers to his neck and leaving a grisly trail of blood behind.

It was only later Sunday night, talking with his wife, Karen, that Bisson contemplated the full irony of the situation. Bisson, you see, is also a member of the Bills' medical staff. He was the first doctor to arrive at Kevin Everett's side when Everett suffered his serious spinal injury at Ralph Wilson Stadium last Sept. 9.

Bisson, an orthopedic surgeon, saw Everett lying motionless on the ground. It was almost too much for him to bear. He felt his days as a team doctor might be done with. "Honestly, I thought about quitting after what happened to Kevin Everett," Bisson said Monday afternoon. "I came home and talked to my wife and said, 'I just saw the most miserable thing I've ever seen in my life. I don't know why I do this.'"

Bisson spent a few days thinking it over and came to a simple conclusion: The athletes weren't going to stop playing and putting their bodies at risk. Someone had to be there, prepared to respond if an athlete's worst fears came to pass. So it might as well be him. He couldn't have imagined that another freak accident would take place right in front of him, nearly five months to the day after Everett went down. But Bisson was ready. He was in his seat, five rows up near the Sabres' bench, when a skate came up and slashed Zednik's carotid artery halfway through the third period of Sunday night's game.

"It basically occurred in front of me," Bisson said. "But because the play was continuing in the other direction, I didn't notice what had happened immediately. I didn't know he was injured until he skated past our bench. I saw this guy with a horrified look on his face."

Bisson sprang from his seat and rushed through a gate that led to the benches. He reached the rear of the visitors' bench just as Zednik arrived with the Florida trainer. Bisson knew precisely what to do. He practices it every year in training camp. In another tiny coincidence, he had reviewed the procedure for vascular injuries at the recent NHL All-Star Game.

He pressed his fingers on Zednik's neck to stop the bleeding. Then Bisson helped the 32-year-old forward to the Buffalo medical room and placed him on a stretcher. Zednik was conscious the whole time. He complained a few times that Bisson was pressing too hard on his neck and hurting him. "I'm sorry," Bisson said. "I've got to push this hard."

Zednik was fortunate. His carotid artery was sliced nearly in half, but it was hanging by a thread, which made it easier for Bisson to hold it in place. Otherwise, Zednik might have bled to death.

Rip Simonick, the Sabres' veteran equipment manager, said Bisson was calm and reassuring. "Everything was under control," Simonick said. "Obviously, it was a life-or-death situation."

Simonick's mind flashed back 19 years, to the night Clint Malarchuk's neck was slashed at the Aud. Simonick held Malarchuk's hand that night. Malarchuk, who thought he was about to die, had Simonick call his mother so he could say he loved her.

As Bisson explained later, though, Zednik's injury was even more perilous, because it was the carotid artery. If not for the rapid response at the scene, he could very well have died. But Zednik was swiftly transported to Buffalo General, where doctors clamped his carotid artery and got him in stable condition within 15 minutes of the accident.

Late Monday afternoon, Bisson and three doctors from Buffalo General were able to report the happy news that Zednik had suffered no apparent long-term damage and would probably begin working out again in two months.

It was a bit surreal, sitting through another of these medical news conferences, so soon after Everett's injury. One such event is enough for any community. We have two professional sports teams. What are the odds that in each of those sports, the most horrific injury to occur in many years would take place in our town?

Well, it happened, and you had to feel a surge of pride to know that Buffalo's medical community had responded brilliantly in both cases. During Monday's media gathering, we were again told how nobly the doctors, nurses, trainers and emergency medical personnel had performed in a crisis with national repercussions.

The town was still reeling from last week's NFL news conference in Toronto, where Buffalo was insulted for its sluggish economy and shrinking population. OK, so we don't have a lot of big companies. But evidently, we have a lot of big-time medical people who can come through when it matters most, like athletes in the clutch.

Bisson said he didn't feel any particular sense of pride that he was involved in the Everett and Zednik successes. "Honestly, I think I'm doing what any first responder would do," he said. "I don't think there was anything special that I did. You just have to know to push on the carotid artery and get the bleeding to stop, and get him some place where he can have his definitive care." Zednik might have a different perspective. Bisson will always be a special man in his life. After all, he saved it.

Bisson visited Zednik in the hospital Monday. Zednik was understandably woozy after his ordeal. He didn't recognize the Sabres' team doctor at first. "I'm the guy who was with you in the ambulance," Bisson said. "I'm sorry I was pushing so hard on your neck."

"Thanks a lot," Zednik replied.

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