

Selanne's toothless days numbered

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Also coming in for kisser repairs was defenseman Ruslan Salei, for whom Pulver made a bridge to take the place of his missing front teeth. Salei's stick rests in the corner of Pulver's office.

Pulver performed root canal on [Paul Kariya] until 3 a.m. For Pulver, who treats present and former Angels and worked with the Rams when they were in Los Angeles, that night steeled his belief that hockey players were strong enough to get through life without Novocain.

Full Text (963 words)

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ORANGE The handsome mug of the Mighty Ducks is still missing his front teeth.

"Dad, you look like a first-grader," said Leevi, 6, the youngest son of Ducks right wing **Teemu Selanne**.

The Finn grins. A breeze shoots through the space mouth-tain created by American defenseman Derian Hatcher's high stick in the 2006 Winter Olympics, and Selanne's life without his most visible teeth seems to be fine.

He admits to a "bad habit" of sticking his tongue through the gap and the slight inconvenience of taking twice as long to polish off a Granny Smith apple.

"Yeah, I need to go in to the dentist ... sometime," he said. "But I've been playing golf. And some friends were in from Finland.

"You know, it's really not as bad as it looks. I've kind of gotten used to it."

Guess everyone -- even the mighty ones -- hates going to the dentist.

Meanwhile Jeffrey Pulver, the team's oral surgeon, waits patiently in his East Chapman Avenue office, white lab coat on and a white leather operating room chair open as much as 7-Eleven for Selanne.

"Getting him in here is like trying to make an appointment with the President," joked Pulver, 54, flashing an X-ray and pictures of the March repair he did on Selanne on his computer.

When Selanne returned to Orange County after the Olympics, Pulver extracted tooth fragments left behind after the injury, secured the exposed nerves, performed some bone grafts and sutured the holes in Selanne's gum line.

"I offered him a chance to go under but he's such a tough guy, he just took the local anesthetic," Pulver said, marveling at his patient's pain threshold.

In a one-hour surgery that resembled an archeological dig, Pulver recovered a dozen small, jagged parts of Selanne's front incisors and lined them up on a surgical towel. The display looked like something that should be under glass at the National Museum of Natural History.

"The girls (surgical assistants Harriet, Risa and nurse Karen) mentioned putting them on eBay, but then I didn't think we'd cover the \$10,000 we'd be fined by OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration)," said Pulver.

"So they went in the trash. These guys are past putting teeth under their pillow."

Before the next hockey season, Pulver plans to make a removal bridge so Selanne can have his familiar smile back.

Because there is a possibility Selanne could suffer the same injury again, Pulver will have to wait until Selanne retires to put in dental implants -- artificial teeth permanently screwed into bone.

These pearly whites Selanne left on the ice in Italy were the first he has lost in his 14-year NHL career. He has been lucky.

Given how physical he is and that he doesn't wear the NHL-recommended mouthguard, Selanne should be doing Super PoliGrip commercials by now.

But he's not. He's in Finland front-toothless now, while Pulver works on another season custom making mouthguards using plaster models taken of every Ducks player's mouth since 1993.

Selanne's most recent upper-mouth model is a 13-tooth yellow and chalky sculpture, kept in a baby blue plastic box and bearing a Tooth Fairy-adorned label of "If found please return to Teemu."

"Getting your nose broken hurts more than losing your teeth," said Ducks right wing Joffrey Lupul, who had just returned from seeing team dentist Rick Morimoto to repair a back tooth knocked out during practice.

Lupul, 22, grew up playing hockey with mouthguards, helmets, visors and the protection that allows these players to look more Gentleman's Quarterly than Gordie Howe.

"I actually have better looking teeth now -- with all the new ones and the crowns I've needed to get fixed because of hockey -- than I had before I started playing," said Lupul. "They look nice now."

Also coming in for kisser repairs was defenseman Ruslan Salei, for whom Pulver made a bridge to take the place of his missing front teeth. Salei's stick rests in the corner of Pulver's office.

There are bloody photos of Kings defenseman Mattias Norstrom, another Pulver patient. Last season, Norstrom got hit in the mouth with a puck so hard his bottom teeth got knocked out and the remnants pierced his lip.

"People were out looking for the teeth, but the Zamboni sucked them up," Pulver said. "I ended up working on him until 1 o'clock in the morning. He was out playing three nights later."

Pretty incredible, right?

"Wait!" Pulver said, remembering a most savage sight. "Paul Kariya."

Pulver's eyes widen. His heart quickens. He begins the description of the former Duck's

surgery just as a kid would a ghost story at a slumber party.

"It was regular-season game. Second period. Kariya got hit. There was a 2-inch laceration on his upper lip. All six front teeth broke off," Pulver said.

The dentist recalled talking to Kariya in the second intermission to offer treatment, pain killers, gauze.

"See me after the game," Kariya told Pulver, refusing to miss the third period.

Pulver performed root canal on Kariya until 3 a.m. For Pulver, who treats present and former Angels and worked with the Rams when they were in Los Angeles, that night steeled his belief that hockey players were strong enough to get through life without Novocain.

"But most of them still love their teeth," Pulver said.

As for Selanne, he's comfortable for now with a smile that's a throwback to the days of toothless grins on Stanley Cup champions and wool-sweater sporting future Hall of Famers.

But this Mighty Duck doesn't need to go without -- teeth, that is -- to prove he belongs among hockey's legends.

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[Illustration]

Caption: REPAIR PLANS: Dr. Jeffrey Pulver, left, holds a cast of the upper teeth of Ducks star **Teemu Selanne**, above.