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Former NHL enforcer Riley Cote in Toronto to promote cannabis as a 'tool to help all people'

Sean Fitz-Gerald 3 hours ago

Riley Cote was standing in a suburban Toronto restaurant with a microphone in his hand, spreading the gospel of medicinal cannabis. The retired NHL pugilist had become an evangelist, telling dozens of retired players about the benefits the substance could offer them, from easing their aches and pains to helping them sleep easier at night.

“It’s no joke,” he said. “All I want to do here today is share my story with you, my experience with you, and just offer this healing tool — at the very least, for you guys to go home and do your own research.”

He employed acronyms for various compounds with a casual fluency, and he suggested his devotion to the cause was a reason why the Philadelphia Flyers removed him as an assistant coach with their AHL franchise last year. It was for the best, he said, because it freed him to pursue his true calling.

“People are hurting,” Cote said. “And they’re looking for answers.”

As rain lashed the parking lot outside on Monday afternoon, a series of speakers invited to address the former NHLers at a luncheon suggested many of those answers lay with cannabis. Three cannabis-related companies were listed on the program, as was Athletes for Care, a not-for-profit that Cote helped to create.

Recreational cannabis will become legal in Canada on Oct. 17, but that does not guarantee professional sports leagues will soften rules governing its use. In an interview last week with The Associated Press, NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly said the league would continue to test for marijuana.

In June, a University of Regina football player was stripped of the Canadian rookie-of-the-year award after testing positive for cannabis. The CFL does not test for cannabis.

Players from many leagues, meanwhile, have advocated cannabis use to treat pain over medication that can lead to addiction.

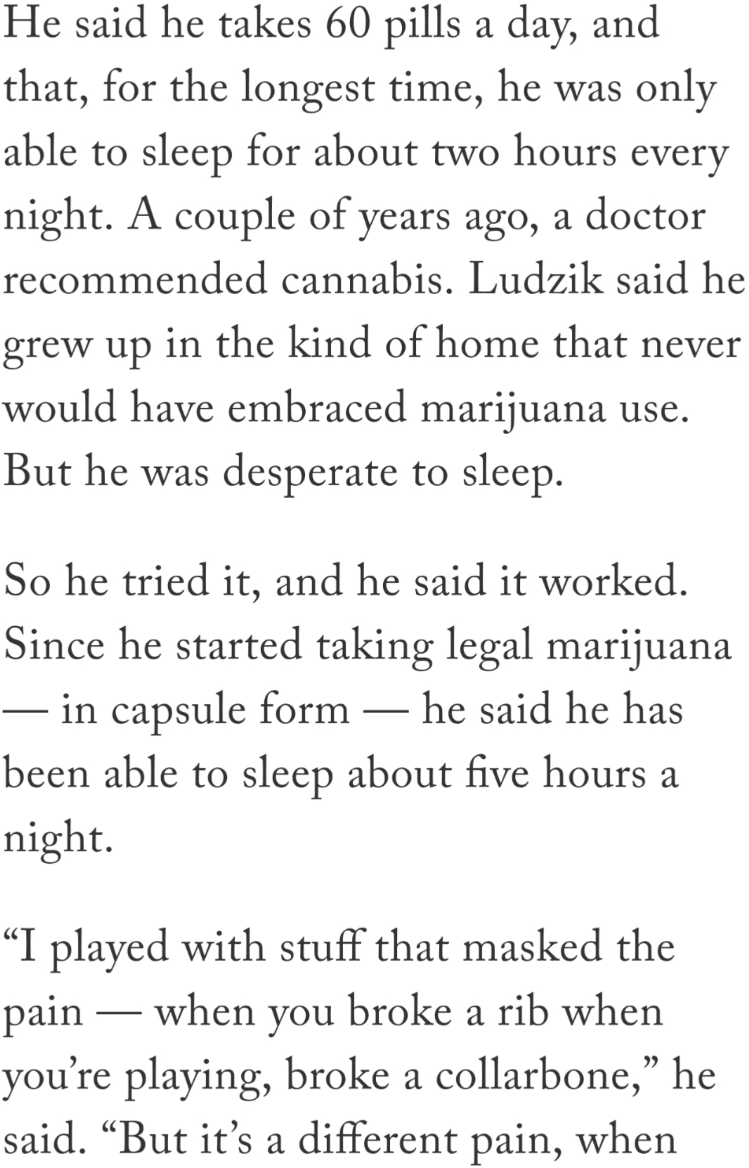
“We’re not just trying to tell people something new: We’re trying to tell them that something they have always believed is wrong,” said Dr. Barbara Mainville, a former emergency room physician who was invited to address the room on Monday. “To work against that, you have to go back to think about, ‘why did they believe it in the first place?’ And we believe that cannabis is bad because that’s what we hear, over and over and over, our entire lives.

“So what we have to do is have people hear a different message.”

Making converts of veterans, she said, is one of the ways to earn broader acceptance.

“They see that Joe, who used to play for the Leafs, he was in such a bad place and, ‘my goodness, he’s like a whole new person now,’” she said. “As they see more and more and more of those types of successes, that will start to break down the barriers.”

Steve Ludzik never played for the Maple Leafs, but he did spend more than 420 regular season games in an NHL uniform, mostly with the Chicago Blackhawks. He is 57 now, and he has been living with Parkinson’s.



He said he takes 60 pills a day, and that, for the longest time, he was only able to sleep for about two hours every night. A couple of years ago, a doctor recommended cannabis. Ludzik said he grew up in the kind of home that never would have embraced marijuana use. But he was desperate to sleep.

So he tried it, and he said it worked. Since he started taking legal marijuana — in capsule form — he said he has been able to sleep about five hours a night.

“I played with stuff that masked the pain — when you broke a rib when you’re playing, broke a collarbone,” he said. “But it’s a different pain, when you live with Parkinson’s. I just can’t be phony about it. I believe that it helps, with my Parkinson’s.”

What would it take for the sports leagues to embrace medical cannabis?

“I think it takes common sense, to be honest with you,” he said. “It’s a stigma, I guess. And that, more than anything else, is what you have to fight through.”

Mike Mihelic had to fight just to survive a four-hour flight home. He spent a decade as an offensive lineman in the CFL, with stops in Winnipeg, Hamilton and Toronto. If they played on a Friday night, they would usually fly home the following morning. They flew commercial, and they flew in coach.

Mihelic was 6-foot-5 and almost 320 pounds. And on the morning after a game, his back would ache, his legs would cramp, and he would be dehydrated. In short, he was miserable.

He used marijuana.

“I won’t say what teams, but there’s someone who would dispense whatever you needed, as far as muscle relaxers, anti-inflam, painkillers, that sort of thing,” he said. “Some guys used them, some didn’t.”

Mihelic, who now owns Cannascribe, a company that helps connect patients with cannabis, said using marijuana seemed better than facing the risks posed by the alternative.

“It’s associated with addiction, too, because a lot of them are opiates,” he said. “Would you rather smoke cannabis or take a synthetic heroin? That’s the way I always looked at it.”

Mihelic was sitting by the window in the restaurant, behind the tables of retired NHL players.

“You’ve got to come in through the alumni, to make that trickle effect, so it sifts down and they see it,” he said.

"Now, playing stoned? Or using cannabis while you're playing? I've never really seen it. There has only been a couple of players that I'd know who would smoke back in the day, before they'd play. I could never, because it just mentally relaxes me too much — and playing offensive line, I want to be as aggressive as hell."

In May, the CFL Alumni Association announced it would work with a cannabis company to study how the product could treat chronic pain. Leo Ezerins, the executive director of the association, found a seat near the back of the restaurant. He had a pen and a notebook with him at the table.

“What is clear is that some of our guys are in pain, and they’re looking for options to reduce the pain,” he said. “And with marijuana being used for medical purposes, we’re exploring that through a study.”

He said they had not established a deadline for when the findings of the study would be delivered.

“To say the sport community’s not been on top of it, I mean, who has?” Ezerins said. “We’re breaking new ground, new territory. There’s a lot to be learned.”

Back up at the front, Cote said he began using cannabis as a teenager. He said it helped with his anxiety when he was in the NHL, confronted with the task of fighting many of the toughest men on skates. Part of his mission was to increase awareness, he said, including telling people cannabis products now came in patches and lotions and capsules and even suppositories.

Cote was devout: “This is nothing more than a tool to help all people.”

(*Photo: Bill Wippert, NHLI via Getty Images*)

What did you think of this story?

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1 Comment

Josh E. 3 hours ago

Great Article Sean, I think we will soon see a change in culture in the sports world

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