

Back in the game

Tough guy Sean Avery is back on the ice with the New York Rangers after going through therapy to help him handle his demons. Right now he's calm and collected, but how long can it last?

My real name is Christopher but I'm far from being a saint. I'm still working on that.

Sean Avery



MARIE-JOELLE PARENT
QMI Agency

NEW YORK — One year ago, he was suspended for making disparaging marks about another player and his ex-girlfriend.

Today, he's back on the ice with the New York Rangers. Thanks to a dose of therapy, Sean Avery has learned to keep his demons in check, but has the NHL's monster child turned into an angel?

Here, the man who twice led the league in penalty minutes and was 2007's most hated player in the league sits in front of me. The same guy who once called an opponent an "arrogant little midget."

It's hard to see the man behind this reputation when you look at him. He obviously loves fashion. Only his build and the single scar at the corner of his mouth give away his day job. He seems calm and collected, almost Zen.

Next to Avery, a Ranger spokesperson keeps track of the discussion on his BlackBerry.

"Talking too much is never really a good thing," said Avery, 29, who hails from Pickering, Ont. "It's funny because two or three years ago, our GM said to me that the quietest guy in the room is always the most powerful. It never really sank in until I went through some stuff last year."

The "stuff" Avery refers to are the comments he made about his ex-girlfriends before a Calgary game in December, 2008. Avery referred to actress Elisha Cuthbert and model Rachel Hunter as "sloppy seconds" because they dated other NHLers after him. That remark got him suspended indefinitely from the league.

After a two-week stint in behavioural therapy, Avery started meditation. He also got a new tattoo. "You used to be alright, what happened," lyrics from a Radiohead song, now adorn his arm. But seriously, what happened?

"I think that any time you say something that's hurtful towards somebody you're always going to regret that,"

Avery said. "If I've said something that's done that, then I don't feel good about it. Regrets are tough words because you know you did it. You kind of have to deal with what you've done."

Following his suspension, the Dallas Stars — Avery's team at the time — didn't want anything to do with him. He was eventually sought out by the Rangers, for whom he played before going to Dallas.

Avery, for his part, seems to have found his niche in the Big Apple, a city as flamboyant as his personality.

"I just blend in with the city and its people," he said.

Avery, though a huge pest on the ice, is not your typical hockey player off the ice. He has a voracious passion for clothes, perhaps even more so than international soccer star David Beckham.

During the city's fashion week, Avery is front row for the fashion shows. He is friends with designers and loves reading about Coco Chanel. At one point, Avery wore black nail polish, even on the ice. He is collaborating on a men's clothing line and even did an internship at *Vogue*. A movie about Avery, tentatively titled *Puckface*, is believed to be in the works.

As for changing teams, Avery isn't ready for that to happen just yet. He also said he couldn't handle a Canadian city at the moment.

"We already tried the experiment of me playing somewhere else and I don't think that would work," he said. "Everything is just going good here so I don't want it to change."

Does he miss Canada?

"It's been a few years since I went back," he said. "I will always be Canadian. I think Canadians' attitude towards me is changing and mine toward them also. I think it's a lot better than what it was."

Avery said his only goal for this season is to win, but notes that it's not everything.

"Statistically, it's not important. I have a contract, I don't have to worry about that," he said.

But only time will tell if Avery can keep his temper in check for the entire season.

"This is the best I ever felt," Avery said. "No season's perfect, I'm going to have my ups and downs, but I'm handling situations a lot better now."

Avery said his relationship with John Tortorella is also better.

"Tort is a tough guy, we found a way to understand each other," Avery said. "I am excited by the challenges he gives me. We still haven't had our big blow out yet but I'm sure, like in every relationship, it will come."

Avery has also learned to moderate his lifestyle, an important thing to do in a city like New York. For instance, he said, Tuesdays are for groceries.

"You always have to grocery shop on Tuesdays in New York. That's when all the new stuff gets delivered," he said.

Needless to say, coming from the self-described "bad boy," it's a surprising piece of advice.

"When I first got here a few years ago it was just like go go go and I had enough energy to keep up," he said. "I certainly still go out, but I pick my spots and try to go to places where no one knows that I'm even there. That's the biggest secret."

It is no secret, however, that Avery can often be found with his teammates in his new restaurant and bar, Warren 77, in Tribeca.

"It's the anti sports bar," he said while looking at the locker room-inspired decor that he helped design. "Sports bars are tough places to go, too much testosterone and the food isn't that good. Here, families and hipsters can come."

Avery seems to be headed in the right direction to rehab his reputation.

When I ask him what the biggest misconception about him is, he offers a slight smile.

"That I'm a bad guy, probably," he said.

Are you?

"I don't think I'm that bad of a guy," Avery said. "My real name is Christopher but I'm far from being a saint. I'm still working on that."