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Mitch Albom on: Krupp v. Wings: 'I want my reputation back'

Dog-eat-dog legal battle rages on over \$12.3 million

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By **MITCH ALBOM**
Detroit Free Press

Aug. 30, 2001

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He is a hockey player who isn't playing hockey. He has a huge contract, but he hasn't been paid in years. He is owed – depending on whom you believe – either \$12.3 million or not a cent.

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He has been in legal limbo since 1999. His personal life has been ransacked by private investigators. He has been called a slacker, a liar and a joke of a man who would risk his NHL career for a pack of dogs.

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Uwe Krupp was suspended by the Red Wings for a remarkable 722 days – 20 times longer than Marty McSorley's original suspension for slashing open Donald Brashear's head. Yet even as you read this – despite a bitter, bared-tooth legal battle – Krupp is trying to get back on the Red Wings' roster.

"I want to earn my money," he says. "I've had a pretty good career. I won a Stanley Cup, played in an All-Star Game. But when people hear my name now, they say, 'Isn't he the dumb ass who ruined himself dogsledding?'"

"The Red Wings and I once agreed we would say nothing about our case to the press. But they quickly threw that out the window. They've exploited it with their story.

"I've held my word. I've been quiet.

"But now I want my reputation back."

He sits in a local coffee shop, 6-feet-6, broad frame, wide shoulders, a mop of brown hair parted in the middle. He looks like a strapping, healthy athlete, befitting his distinction as the first German to star in the NHL. His wife, Valerie, an attractive, athletic woman with dark, wavy hair, sits beside him. They sip coffee. What could be wrong?

Plenty. Krupp, 36, is a man caught between two worlds, the believed or the non-believed. To hear him tell it, he has given his heart and soul – and other body parts – to hockey, and only a debilitating back injury has kept him off the ice.

To hear the Red Wings tell it, he is a scam artist who wants money for nothing and his kicks for free.

Convention 2010

"The guy is a fraud," says one member of the Wings' staff.

"He clearly violated his contract," says a team attorney.

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"All I can tell you is this is a huge case," says Wings owner Mike Ilitch, biting his tongue so hard you can hear his face redden. "And when the whole story comes out, people will see the truth."

HOCKEY IN GERMANY

Well, let's begin with the truth that both sides can agree upon. Uwe Krupp is an unusual talent. Born in the busy section of Cologne, Germany, an industrial city on the Rhine River with only one ice rink, Krupp should have been a soccer player. He excelled at soccer. He was named for Uwe Seeler, a famous German soccer player. Besides, everyone in Germany plays soccer. Who plays hockey?

Uwe did. Uwe was different. His story is a sort of Forrest Gump-on-ice. He starts skating. He grows four inches in a single summer. He winds up on a national squad, gets spotted by a scout, and is chosen, unbeknownst to him, by the Buffalo Sabres with the 223rd pick of the 1983 NHL draft.

A few years later, after an exhibition game in Munich, he emerges from the showers to find Scotty Bowman waiting in the hallway.

"I had no idea who he was," Krupp says of the Hall of Fame coach. "I was a German kid. What did I know about the NHL? Someone said, 'Put on a towel! Get out here now! This is Scotty Bowman! You must come!' "

Bowman, then Buffalo's coach and general manager, asked through a translator if Krupp would come to America and play for the Sabres.

"Before I could answer, the guy translating was saying, 'Yes, yes, he'll come.' "

In Germany, Krupp knew a lot about his sport. Or at least he thought he did. But when he arrived in Buffalo later that year, the fall of 1986, his real hockey education began. During training camp, a player took a run at Krupp. Uwe, a defenseman, instinctively sidestepped, letting him pass. When he reached the bench, a teammate yelled, "Uwe, what the hell are you doing? Next time a guy does that, you slam him hard – or you'll never see the end of it."

Krupp did what he was told. He learned to fight. He learned the tough-it-out and keep-your-mouth-shut mentality of hockey. It wasn't his way, perhaps. But it was hardly the last time he would feel out of step with the surrounding culture.

"I remember listening to Michael Jackson music once in the locker room," he says. "I loved Michael Jackson. Everyone in Germany did.

"But in Buffalo, some players came over and made faces. They said, 'What are you listening to, man? Don't you know that guy's the wrong color?' "

Krupp got used to such surprises. After all, this was not his country. What could he expect? It was a thrill to be in the league at all. His first NHL game was against the Montreal Canadiens at the Forum. He was selected one of the stars of the game.

"You just knew," Scotty Bowman said later, "that he was going to be a player."

Back then, there was no reason to suspect that Krupp would end up in a lawsuit against his team, that his reputation would be trashed, that he would disappear from the sport and see his life as some sort of John Grisham nightmare. Back then, he was just another rising star who, in 1988, during his second season in the league, accepted an invitation from friends to go to upstate New York during the All-Star break. There was a sled dog race, they said. He might like it.

He did. In fact, while he was there, he was invited to take part. Why not, Krupp figured. It

doesn't look hard.

He stood on the sled, the dogs pulled him through the snow – and he was hooked.

Who knew that affection would one day be the source of a \$12-million dispute?

A LOVE OF DOGS

"Here's the thing," Krupp says, pushing aside his coffee cup. "My mother, during World War II, was evacuated to a rural area in southern Germany. They sent families there to escape the bombing.

"When we were growing up, she would always talk about her years there in the country, how she loved the cows, the goats, the open space, being away from the city.

"We romanticized those stories. We were city kids. We lived in an apartment.

"That's why I took to dogsledding so much. It was part of that idea. I always dreamed of one day having lots of land and animals."

In time, he would have both. In Buffalo, where he spent parts of six seasons, he acquired seven dogs and began to train and race them. In Long Island, where he spent three seasons with the New York Islanders, he owned 10 dogs. In Quebec, where he spent the lockout season, he had 15.

In Colorado, where he spent three seasons and won a Stanley Cup, he lived on an 11-acre spread with 12 to 15 canines. He also acquired property in Montana, where he could truly spread out, keep lots of dogs, and finally have the life that enchanted him. He became quite a figure in the sled dog world – a hockey star who mushes! – and was profiled in numerous TV and print features, including some by the NHL.

Was he different? Yes. Did others think he was odd? Perhaps.

Did he mind? Not at all.

None of this was a secret.

Neither was Uwe Krupp's injury history.

INJURIES AND SURGERIES

If Krupp's body were a car, he long ago would have exhausted the warranty and the mechanic's patience. He arrived in the NHL, at age 21, still recovering from left ankle reconstruction in Germany. He tore his left anterior cruciate ligament in 1992. In 1993, he took a puck to the head and suffered a fractured sinus bone, which required surgery to reconstruct his forehead.

"They cut you from ear to ear," Krupp says, leaning over to show the effects, "then they fold your skull flesh forward and rebuild with titanium mesh."

He smiles. "I'm the bionic man."

His left knee totally blew out two years later (in the season opener against the Red Wings), and surgery kept him out from October to March of 1996. He rehabbed diligently and came back in time for the playoffs, helping Colorado win its first Stanley Cup. He even scored the Cup-clinching goal, in the third overtime of a 0-0 game against Florida.

That night, he skated with his Avalanche teammates, hoisting the trophy, drinking in the victory.

That night, no one would have doubted Krupp's desire to endure pain to play.

That night was his greatest hockey moment.

Then came the downhill part.

On March 26, 1997, Detroit played Colorado in what is now known as the "Darren McCarty/Claude Lemieux Turtle Dance" game. A free-for-all broke out, and everyone fought someone. Krupp found himself squared off against Detroit's Jamie Pushor, and during the fight, he got twisted in a strange way.

The next morning, Krupp says, he had no sensation in his left foot. He tried skating, but could barely stand. "I kept falling over," he says. "It was so strange."

The Avs tried everything. Eventually, Krupp was sent to Robert Watkins, the celebrated Los Angeles surgeon who has operated on the likes of Steve Yzerman and Wayne Gretzky. Watkins explained the problem. It wasn't Krupp's ankle.

It was his back.

Krupp had a herniation in his spine, between his L4 and L5 discs, which radiated the pain and numbness downward, thus causing the problems in Krupp's left foot. Watkins recommended surgery. He performed it in May of 1997.

Despite complications involving his spinal fluid, Krupp worked out all summer and was ready by the Colorado season opener. He played in 78 of the 82 regular-season games, his second-best total ever, and for Germany at the Nagano Olympics.

Again, at that point, no one questioned his desire to rehab and come back. Things were looking up. He appeared to be healed.

And – a bonus! – he was a free agent.

AN OFFER FROM DETROIT

Now, again, all of this – the injuries and the dogs – was public knowledge in the summer of 1998, when Krupp hit the open market. If he was considered damaged goods, it didn't stop five teams from trying to sign him, including the Red Wings. They made him a big offer: four years, \$16.4 million.

"It was such an ego stroke," Krupp admits. "Here I am, being German, with a chance to play for one of the Original Six teams. And they had just won two Stanley Cups, and of all the free agents out there, they wanted me.

"Plus, I knew Scotty Bowman. And they offered me a no-trade clause, which was huge. Since I'd had a bad back, I asked if they flew commercial and they said, 'No, we have a private jet.' That was another plus."

Krupp signed on. He and Valerie bought a home, this time in South Lyon, on a converted horse property with 11 acres and plenty of room for their dogs. He and the Detroit Red Wings were beginning a happy marriage.

"We've dramatically improved our hockey club," Wings general manager Ken Holland said the day he signed Krupp. "We like the way he plays – his size, his range. This guy was No. 1 on our list.

"And he's no-maintenance. He's safe."

Funny. That's about the last thing Holland would say today.

22 GAMES LATER

The happy marriage began to crumble quickly. In the Wings' home opener, Krupp went down to block a shot by St. Louis' Chris Pronger. "A dumb move," he says now. "I was trying to show how much I'd give for the team."

The puck hit him hard near the right knee, in the open area between the pads. Krupp flopped over on the ice. When he looked at it in the locker room, it was dark and swollen "like a tennis ball," he says.

The team doctors, Krupp says, told him it was a bruise. Although it would prove to be a torn tendon, Krupp returned to the lineup a few games later.

He suffered a hamstring injury.

Again, he hurried back. One of the things he had learned in the NHL was that hamstrings "are not considered serious injuries," he says.

But this time, when he took to the ice, something was wrong. He lacked stability. He lacked balance. He got pushed around.

Thinking it was his equipment, he experimented with different skates. He stayed on the ice after games, sometimes for hours, trying to isolate the problem.

Meanwhile, his performance plummeted. He was hardly the player the Wings expected. He didn't seem tough. He wasn't hitting hard. Some began to grumble that he lacked heart.

"You could see that he wasn't into playing here," says one staff member, who asked to remain anonymous.

Krupp denies that vehemently. "I always earned my money. I always played up to the level of my contract. With Detroit, I had even more reason to do well."

He couldn't, he says, because his body wouldn't let him. One day he found himself practicing against associate coach Barry Smith's 16-year-old son, Ryan, "and I couldn't contain him," Krupp says. "The kid was 16, and I couldn't stay on balance."

He knew something was seriously wrong, something that wasn't being diagnosed. Just before Christmas of 1998, having played just 22 games as a Red Wing, Krupp felt something give during a pregame warm-up. He went into the corner and tried to turn, and his left foot flopped over on its side.

"I couldn't bring it back up," he says. "I couldn't make it move. It was numb.

"And that's when a light went off in my head – this is just like 1997. It's not my foot. It's my back."

AN ATTEMPT TO RETIRE

At this point in the story, we should pause to mark the date, because when Krupp hobbled off the ice and headed for the trainer's room at Joe Louis Arena that night, it was pretty much the last time he was part of the Red Wings.

That was Dec. 22, 1998.

No one could have predicted what would happen next. It is a lesson in mistrust and miscalculation – and the beginning of perhaps the worst legal relationship the Red Wings have ever had with a player.

Here is Krupp's version: He went to doctor after doctor, rehab after rehab, tests and more tests. He took needles in his spine. He took EMGs in his leg. He tried skating, even went to a few practices, but all of it ultimately led back to the same conclusion: The problems in his left foot continued, and they came from his back. He had a debilitating injury. It was

hockey-related. And surgery no longer was an option.

In fact, hockey wasn't much of an option, either.

Dr. Chris Shaffrey, one of the surgeons who saw Krupp at the Wings' request, said this last week: "I told Uwe I wouldn't do another back operation on him like the one he'd had before. He could be a candidate for a (spinal) fusion, but that would be the end of his hockey career."

And Watkins, who did Krupp's original back surgery, sent the Wings a letter May 7, 1999, saying Krupp "has two levels of disc herniation degeneration in his back. ... It is my opinion that the best thing for his overall health and future prevention of symptoms is for him to retire."

Retire? Clearly, this was not what the Wings wanted to hear. For one thing, they signed Krupp to shore up their defense.

Besides, he still had three years left on his contract.

And they were guaranteed.

This explains the tense mood that hovered over a meeting at Joe Louis Arena in June of 1999. It was attended by Krupp, who hadn't played since before Christmas; Roland Thompson, his agent; Holland, the Wings' GM; and John Wharton, the team's trainer. It was supposed to be a where-do-we-go-from-here thing.

It did not go well. Holland, interviewed last week, acknowledges the meeting but says he has no comment on the details, citing the arbitration hearings that are still going on.

Krupp is less silent.

"Here's what happened," he says. "We're in the office, and Kenny's got the letter from Watkins saying I need to retire. And Kenny starts yelling, 'What is this s--? What is this s--? You think on the basis of a two-sentence letter you're gonna get out of here? You think we're gonna pay you your contract?'"

"My agent says, 'Kenny, what do you mean? His contract is guaranteed. You have to pay it.'"

"Kenny says, 'We'll send you to one doctor after another until we find someone who'll operate.' He is really upset. My agent goes, 'Kenny, what's the big deal? It's a disability thing. It's insured.'"

"And Kenny goes, 'There's no insurance.'"

"And my agent goes, 'WHAT?' "

There was no insurance. Apparently, the Wings can choose which contracts they want to insure – it is tied to a total dollar amount – and for whatever reason, the Wings' management would not elaborate, despite Krupp's long medical history, the team did not think it prudent to cover his deal.

This was – and is – crucial to Krupp's whole case. It meant the Red Wings, not some insurance company, were stuck with the \$12.3 million they still owed him.

Unless they could find a loophole.

"That's the whole thing right there," says Bob Riley, a lawyer representing Krupp in the arbitration hearings. "The lack of insurance is the story."

"What do you do when you owe a player \$12 million and he's not going to play? This whole case is being run on emotion. It is all about a team with an injured player who they never

got comfortable with. He came in with a lot of hoopla. They probably didn't do their due diligence with him. They probably should have had insurance on him.

"But when he got hurt, they were stuck. They had to do something."

THE SUSPENSION

The following month, Uwe and Valerie were at their home in Montana, hidden off a dirt road, six miles from the nearest town. A white Taurus pulled into their front yard, and a man who identified himself as Turtle Johnson got out. He said he was there representing the Red Wings.

"He tells me to sign this letter that authorizes some (lawyer) named Noel Gage to examine my medical records, my driving records, any sheriff's reports, any insurance claims," Krupp recalls. "It says they need this information to design a rehab program.

"This doesn't sound right to me. First of all, the letter isn't even on Red Wings stationery. And I never heard of Noel Gage. Besides, why does anyone need all that to create a rehab program?

"So I called the players association. And they said, 'Are you crazy? Don't sign anything like that.' "

He didn't. Instead, a few weeks later, Krupp, with Riley's help, signed a more standard medical release form. He sent it to the Wings. But the Wings already had sent Krupp another letter.

This one said he was suspended – for failing to turn over medical records.

And since he was suspended, he wouldn't be paid.

ANOTHER SUSPENSION

Now if this were a normal story – at least a normal grievance story – it would end there, with the player filing a grievance, an arbitrator getting involved, and the two sides fighting over the meaning of medical records and suspensions.

But this is not a normal story. Because Krupp is not exactly your average guy.

While he was rehabilitating, seeing doctors, getting treatments and not playing, on weekends Uwe Krupp went ... dogsledding.

That's right. Dogsledding. The guy who was always a bit different from the other players kept true to his pattern. He and his wife, who had become a top-notch sled dog racer herself, competed together in five races in northern Michigan and Colorado.

Uwe didn't win any of them. He ran older, slower dogs. He never averaged faster than 14 m.p.h. And the races, which were six miles long, lasted fewer than 25 minutes a day.

But the first one was Jan. 2, 1999 – less than two weeks after his last game for the Red Wings. And the others were during the next few months, when Krupp and his doctors said he was too hurt to play.

Which, naturally, made the Wings curious – and angry.

It also gave them a new angle.

Now to hear Krupp tell it, blaming his career-threatening injury on dogsledding is like blaming a plane crash on bad food.

"It never even occurred to me that I could harm myself with dogsledding," he says. "All I

am doing is standing on the back of a sled."

Krupp insists there was never any kind of accident. He never fell off a sled. Never tripped, slipped or twisted his back.

This is confirmed by several people, including Dale Wolfe, 54, a race marshal for the Great Lakes Sled Dog Racing Association. He oversaw several of the races in question.

"Nothing ever happened to Uwe," Wolfe says. "People have the wrong idea about our sport. It's not physically dangerous.

"Take me, for example. I'm a Vietnam vet. I'm 20 percent disabled. I have a bullet in my hip. And I race the same six dog races that Uwe does.

"The president of our association is a woman in her 60s. She has two artificial knees. And she races."

Krupp insists the problem is that people don't understand sled dog racing. They think every race is the Iditarod, 11 days long through frozen wilderness.

Krupp, who admits in retrospect that it wasn't the smartest thing to do, says he went only those few times, and only on the weekends, because his rehab center in Troy wasn't open and he didn't want to sit around while his wife was away.

"Look, I have been racing since 1988, and not once, not once, have I ever felt even the slightest twinge of anything," he says.

He shakes his head, with the expression of an exasperated man trying to explain that the passport photo really is of him: "I did not hurt myself dogsledding."

Nonetheless, this was all news to the Red Wings. And when they discovered it, they lifted the previous suspension – and put on a new one.

Uwe Krupp was suspended for violating his contract, by dogsledding.

And he would not be paid.

THE BATTLE CONTINUES

Robert Carr is general counsel for the Red Wings. He is supervising the team's considerable legal retaliation against Krupp, which includes outside help from a high-priced New York firm. In many ways, you can't blame the Red Wings. This is a \$12.3-million disagreement. If they win, what they spend on lawyers might pale in comparison to what they save.

Besides, the Wings think they – and not Krupp – are the injured party. Although most of the front office contacted for this story, including Mike Ilitch, Denise Ilitch, Holland and members of the team medical staff, refused to speak much on the record, citing the continuing arbitration, Carr agreed to address a number of questions.

"In a nutshell," he says, "Uwe Krupp never played hockey again for us after Dec. 22, 1998. During the next several months, when we believed he was getting himself healthy and in fact being told by doctors that he should rest, he was dogsledding, professionally ...

"He can't play hockey? The question is why can't he play hockey? Is it because of the injury – or activities he took part in that were in clear violation of his contract?"

Carr notes that the standard player/club agreement prohibits players taking part in outside sports such as boxing, baseball, lacrosse or football.

Is dogsledding listed, he is asked.

"Not specifically," Carr says. "But then, neither is bungee jumping."

Krupp rolls his eyes at that comparison. He points out that he was doing the StairMaster and the stationary bike several days after the Dec. 22 injury – before any of the questionable sled dog races – and no one complained about that.

Riley, Krupp's attorney, says: "Dogsledding is not a mortal sin. Come on. In retrospect, I don't think Uwe should have done it. He exercised poor judgment. OK. So maybe you fine him. But to try and get out of his whole contract – this is just a case of the once-prosperous hockey team now being more budget-oriented."

But Carr and the Wings say Krupp did physical harm to himself by dogsledding. They don't think they should pay three years of NHL salary to a guy who said he was so hurt he couldn't play or even drive to rehab sometimes – yet somehow found the ability to fly to remote places and compete in a dangerous physical activity.

"These were sprint races," Carr says. "Krupp could most definitely be injured. And we believe he was."

Has he ever seen a dogsled race, Carr is asked.

"No," he says, "but we have people who have."

Simmering beneath the Red Wings' legal attack is a general sense of betrayal, that a player who is supposed to be getting better shouldn't be taking chances on a whim. Off the record, Wings personnel suggest that a tougher player would be back on the ice. That a real hockey guy wouldn't be hiding behind this vague back thing.

"From the moment he got here, Uwe headed for the bench at the first sign of contact," one source says. "He never looked like he came to play."

One might ask: Couldn't they come to some compromise? Maybe split the difference on the contract? According to several sources, an attempt was made at such a compromise a few months back. But it fell apart, and the Wings dug in their heels. Now they say, in a statement: "The Wings believe that if and when the facts of this case become public, it will be very evident the team conducted itself appropriately in all regards."

"Uwe Krupp is playing fast and loose here," Bob Batterman, another Wings attorney, said last summer.

But to save \$12.3 million, the Wings would have to prove it.

THE LEGAL LIMBO

This is where the story takes its final weird turn. Krupp filed a grievance after the Wings suspended him – and the slow-moving arbitration hearings are now, believe it or not, closing in on the two-year mark without a resolution.

Krupp has continued unpaid, laying out his own money for medical and rehab bills which, he says, already have exceeded \$50,000. He was not allowed to skate, work out or use his equipment at Joe Louis Arena for most of his suspension.

To save money, the Krupps sold their home in Michigan.

To make matters worse, Uwe and Valerie began hearing strange things. First a friend shared a letter that he had received around Christmas of 1999. It was from a man named John Hall, out of Butte, Mont., who identified himself as a writer for a national sports magazine. He was seeking information about pro athletes who competed in dogsled racing.

Then came an e-mail earlier this year, from the same John Hall, sent to many people in the sled dog community. He again claimed he was doing research for an article. Some of the mushers were excited, thinking it was Sports Illustrated.

The e-mail read, in part:

"I am obtaining facts for an article to be published by a national sports magazine concerning the ongoing disagreement between Uwe Krupp and the Detroit Red Wings. ... I am attempting to find out what you think. Such as, can you dog-sled with a severe back problem? Krupp claims dogsledding has no effect on his back. I am surprised after watching a race. This has to take a toll on your body. ...

"The hockey team believes if you are able to race, you are able to play hockey. What do you think? Have you ever seen Krupp race? Is dogsledding hard on a person's back? Let me know. All information will be held in strict confidence."

It's a weird-enough request from a legitimate journalist. But no one can find a John Hall in Butte with a national sports magazine. But there is a John Hall in Butte with Absolute Investigations, a private-investigation firm. Did the Wings hire this man to lie in order to dig up dirt on Krupp?

When Carr was asked about this, he hesitated and said, "Not to my knowledge." Then he said: "Look, if the question is, did we engage in private investigators, the answer is yes. I'm not ashamed of that."

That wasn't the end of it. Two months ago, Krupp got a frantic call from his former wife, Beate Krupp, who lives in Germany. She sounded scared. She wanted to know if Uwe was in trouble, if their children – who split time between them – were in danger.

"What are you talking about?" Krupp said.

"This letter."

"What letter?"

She faxed him a letter from a William Anderson, with Private Investigations out of Troy. The letter said, in part:

"Dear Ms. Krupp;

"I have been retained by Olympia Entertainment Incorporated to locate and interview witnesses ... concerning an active arbitration case – Krupp v. Detroit Red Wings. ...

"The information that I have obtained concerning your location will not be disclosed to anyone else at this time. ...

"Are you familiar with Uwe Krupp's family? If so, would you elaborate on the following:

"Their social status

"Their wealth – when and how it was attained

"Uwe Krupp's wealth – when and how it was attained. ..."

The letter went on to ask about dogsledding, if she knew how much money Uwe made from it, and any injury information she could provide.

It ended by asking whether she would be willing to testify – against her ex-husband – in the arbitration case.

"She couldn't believe it and I couldn't believe it," Krupp says. "She felt like she was being threatened. She was scared. She said, 'Uwe, what's going on?'

"I mean, they found my ex-wife in Germany over this."

The Red Wings, through Carr, do not deny involvement with William Anderson. And Anderson, when contacted by phone, responded to the question "Were you hired by Olympia Entertainment?" by hanging up.

"Sometimes, in any litigation, you have to engage the services of private investigators," Carr says. "Come on. This happens in lots of lawsuits. You do due diligence. You do what you can to find information.

"But if someone is suggesting we're doing anything underhanded, they're wrong."

Perhaps. But the Detroit Red Wings are a high-profile hockey team that prides itself on how well it treats its players. Is the front office really unconcerned that, in trying to bolster its case against Krupp, it hires people who lie or poke into private lives halfway across the world?

Although Mike Ilitch politely declined to go into detail about the case – "not while it's still going on" – he was given the chance to respond to charges of the private investigators.

"That's nickel-and-dime stuff," he said.

READY FOR TRAINING CAMP

OK. One last weird turn. As you read this, Krupp might be on his way to a Troy ice rink. Through the many months of his arbitration, he has continued to work out and rehab and is having some success. Despite a report last year from another Red Wings-hired therapist who said Krupp still was not capable of playing hockey or even practicing – he has been working out at the Training Room at the Troy Sports Center with Dr. Jeff Pierce and therapist John Czarnecki, in hopes of making it to Red Wings training camp, which opens Sept. 12 in Traverse City.

Krupp, who said his suspension had been lifted after 722 days (which is largely symbolic since he is not eligible for a paycheck until the regular season begins Oct. 4 at San Jose), has no idea if he will last one day in camp.

He also has no idea how the Wings will receive him. After all, he is essentially suing them for millions of dollars, and they are essentially calling him a fraud.

And, Krupp admits, by speaking his mind this way – against the wishes of his agent and lawyer – he risks further deteriorating his relationship with Wings management. But, he says, "I want my side of the story told. The Wings have been spreading this dogsledding thing. I want to explain things myself."

Oddly enough, in the strange world of professional sports, both sides seem willing to live in two arenas simultaneously – the courtroom and the ice.

"We're in the business of trying to win games," Holland says. "The most important thing is chemistry between him and players.

"As for any animosity between him and the front office – well, let's just say that wouldn't be the first time that's happened in the NHL."

Krupp, in the final season of the original four-year contract, is willing to plow ahead as well.

"Is it weird?" he says. He sighs. "You know what? I am numb from all this. I am tired of hearing my name dragged through mud. I am tired of people saying he isn't really injured. He's a faker. He ruined his career for a bunch of dogs.

"For me, this is a chance to eliminate any doubt in my mind. They gave me this contract, right? I signed on the dotted line. I want to earn my money. I always have. I'm not gonna

give up. I'm not gonna sit at home and say, 'They owe me, they owe me.' Let's face it: I played 22 games for them. They paid me for a year. I want to earn the rest of my money. And if I can't do it, it's not because I didn't try."

Krupp will not back down from his claims. He was hurt playing hockey, he says, not dogsledding. He is owed his money. He is paying a price perhaps for not fitting in, for being different, for not being "one of the boys" or seeming to lack the heart of a Steve Yzerman, whose tolerance for pain can border on the insane.

"But I can honestly say I have done everything I can do short of experimental spinal surgery to come back," Krupp says. "I've followed doctors' orders. I've done the rehab."

And if his comeback fails, he is asked, do the Wings still owe him the entire contract?

"Yes."

Every dollar?

"Yes. It's guaranteed."

So is a fight. Krupp might be willing to forgive the accusations, and the Red Wings might be willing to forgive his bad judgment. But neither side is going to part easily with \$12.3 million.

And in the end – after the lawyers, arbitrators, dogs, doctors, X rays, faxes, private investigators and whispers – that is what this is all about.

"I've seen these kinds of cases before," says Shaffrey, the surgeon. "They're dog-eat-dog – if you pardon the expression. I'm sure the Red Wings are gonna find some expert from Lapland that says sled dogs are the worst thing in the world for your back. And if I were Uwe I'd find someone who says the opposite."

Then again, finding opposites has never been the problem in this strange and twisted case. Finding something both sides agree on is another story.

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