

# Hometown Hockey: “Hockey Gave Me More Than I Could Ever Give Back”

*By John Rushin*

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When I was six, and my oldest brother accepted a scholarship to Providence College, I assumed everybody played hockey on a full ride for a future Hall-of-Fame coach, Lou Lamoriello, after declining offers from other future Hall-of-Fame coaches, like Herb Brooks and Badger Bob Johnson. I had no idea my brother Jim was exceptional. I only knew that he was my hero and I wanted to be just like him. And that meant playing sports.

When the leaves fell, I played football. When it snowed, I played hockey. When the birds returned to Bloomington, Minn., I played baseball. If anyone asked my favorite sport, I only had to look out the window to answer. Naturally, Jim received scholarship offers in multiple sports out of high school, and I discovered that *trying* to be like Jim was easy. Fun even. But *being* like Jim was much harder.

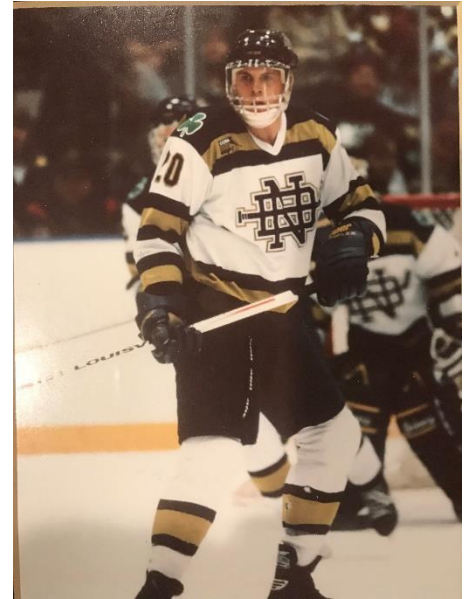
He was bigger and stronger than his classmates. He held the bench-press record at Lincoln High School (and still does, for all eternity, since the school has long been shuttered). Meanwhile, I resembled a baby giraffe, tall and skinny and uncertain on my oversized feet.

Skating wasn't my specialty. I was cut from Squirts. The coaches couldn't believe I was Jim's brother. A year later, I made Squirt Bs, then Peewee Bs, then Peewee Bs again. When the Minnesota Amateur Hockey Association moved the birthday cutoff from January to September, I made my first A team, as a third-year Peewee. But Bantams saw me again relegated to the B team, and I decided to hang up my skates. Hockey stardom, I was beginning to realize, was not in the cards.

So I called the basketball coach at Bloomington Kennedy High School, where I would be a freshman the following year, and told him that a 6'3" kid whose only experience was shooting hoops in the driveway would be trying out for his team in November. And I received an encouraging phone call in reply: not from the varsity basketball coach, mind you. From the varsity *hockey* coach. Jerry Peterson told me to play the sport I loved, that it didn't matter if I got cut from more teams than I made, or that I didn't skate in summer or fall, because I was playing those other sports that I also quite liked. He said skating would get easier when—if—I stopped growing. He said my size would be a great asset someday. When football ended, I tried out for Bantams again, and this time I made the A team.

We won the Minnesota state championship.

As a high school upperclassman, my body began to change. My classmates still called me the Wet Noodle, but I now more closely resembled Jim. College football and baseball coaches visited the same family room where recruiters visited him, and I too sent them away with polite no-thank-yous. I chose to attend Notre Dame to play hockey, the sport I had quit three years earlier, because my mom told me to choose the “best school” that offered me a scholarship. She had told Jim the same thing.



One afternoon in the summer between high school and college, I came home from an American Legion baseball game, pressed play on the answering machine—this was the '90s, after all—and heard a message from Neil Smith, the general manager of the New York Rangers. The Rangers had selected me with the 147<sup>th</sup> pick in the National Hockey League's amateur draft. Five years earlier, I had resolved to quit the sport.

I played four years at Notre Dame but never made it to the NHL. And yet, hockey has taken me everywhere else. Thanks to hockey, I traveled to Europe for the first time, to play in Switzerland, and to Alaska—twice—and to countless historic temples of the game, including the Great Western Forum in L.A., where Wayne Gretzky played for the Kings, and Joe Louis Arena in Detroit, where Mr. Hockey himself, Gordie Howe, would one day lie in state.

None of these experiences combined can approach the friendships made and relationships built on the ice, in the locker room, on buses and at airport gates. Hockey gave me more than I could ever give back to it. Hockey taught me not to quit, that things aren't always what they seem, that kids develop at different times. And that doing what you love to do is its own reward, regardless of what any coach tells you at the end of tryouts.