

20 Questions with Hockey Director Evan Nielsen

Tom Gullen (TG): Do you remember your first steps on the ice?

Evan: While I don't recall my absolute first steps on the ice, I do remember my early days of playing house league and loving to skate (but falling down a lot), feeling the cold air on my face in the rink, those distinctive rink smells, and of course the fun times with teammates.

TG: Describe the path you took as a young hockey player?

Evan: I started off on figure skates in a community learn to skate program. Very quickly, after I saw the older kids with their hockey gear and sticks, I wanted to try that. I moved on to house league in Evanston and then played travel hockey in Wilmette and Northbrook before two years playing AAA for the Chicago Young Americans. I played for Evanston Township High School for 9th and 10th grade before going to prep school in CT for 11th and 12th grade. From there it was off to Notre Dame.



TG: Who were some coaches and people that had the biggest influence on you?

Evan: I feel very fortunate that I had some great coaches growing up; many of whom I stayed in touch with over the years. Tony Baumann was one of my first coaches at Evanston and instilled an early love for the game in me. Rafe Aybar and Steve Holter at Wilmette were two coaches that always made the game fun and helped me continue to hone my game. My prep school coach, Mike Maher, was an important mentor for me in my first time away from home and Dave Poulin at Notre Dame taught me a lot about leadership and hard work on and off the ice.

TG: You left home as a 16-year-old to attend prep school (Taft). What was that process both athletically and personally?

Evan: My two years at prep school were hugely transformative for me. Living away from my parents forced me to take real ownership of my academic and athletic careers. Taft was a supportive place, but also one where I was pushed in the classroom and on the playing fields and the rink. It wasn't always easy, but the experience taught me how to balance my schoolwork, athletic responsibilities, and social life. I felt well prepared for college after my time there.

TG: Describe the recruiting process that you went through?

Evan: It was a different era for sure with most of the contact from colleges coming in the form of letters and phone calls, which I was doing a lot of it while away from home at prep school. My prep coach was a big help through the process and things really got going in the summer before my senior year. I went on a couple unofficial visits in the summer and then four official visits in the fall. All the schools and coaches were great. I honestly think I could've been happy at any of them.

TG: And how and why did you eventually choose Notre Dame?

Evan: I was always looking for the best combination of academics and athletics. I felt very comfortable with the coaching staff at ND and it was exciting for me to be back in the Midwest after two years in New England. I remember getting off the plane in South Bend for my visit and seeing the corn fields and it felt like home!

TG: So you are named captain of the team as a junior, but you were only 20 years old, the age at which most college players begin their career; you are three and four years younger than many of the players on the team. How did you adjust to the leadership role you were in? What attributes helped you in being a captain?

Evan: Each year captains are voted on in the spring by the returning players after the season ends and as off-season training gets going. So, I was still a 19-year-old sophomore when I was first picked to be captain. There were certainly older players returning and some of the incoming first year students the next fall would be as well, but I don't remember age ever being an issue. I had a good group of classmates and other leaders on the team that supported me and helped with leadership duties. The biggest transition as a captain was feeling a greater overall responsibility for everything related to the team, not just my own play. I had to learn to lean on others and ask for help and not try to do everything by myself. I think that was an important lesson and one that helped in my two years as a captain.

TG: What were your favorite places to play in college?

Evan: Miami of Ohio always had a good crowd (and wasn't too long of a bus ride). Yost Arena at the University of Michigan was another that had a loud student section. Going into my senior season Yost was the only rink I hadn't won in and I remember finally getting it done that year and it was a lot of fun.

TG: OK, let's shift gears. What attracted you to the position of being the WHC Hockey Director?

Evan: As someone who grew up in this area, I always admired the skill and depth of the teams WHC fielded. Over the years I had a chance to play with and against some really good players that got their start at Winnetka. Being back in the area this spring and home during the COVID outbreak I really wanted to get back involved with youth hockey on the north shore. When I had a chance to talk with people at WHC about the opportunity there my excitement for the hockey director position continued to grow. The organization has some dedicated people behind it who value the same things I believe to be crucial in youth hockey, community, player development, and fun.

TG: How have you spent your first few weeks on the job?

Evan: Broadly I've tried to meet and talk to as many people associated with the WHC as possible to better understand the landscape and how we can best prepare for the upcoming season. We've been working to finalize our full coaching slate for the fall, making plans for an enhanced skill development program and coaching team, and planning for try-outs and preseason. All of this has overlapped with the WHC summer clinics, so it has been fun to get on the ice with some of the kids and other coaches. Finally, everything is taking place in the midst of a pandemic, so the first weeks have included lots of discussions around best practices in rinks and for hockey generally in light of all that going on right now.

TG: As we head into the season, what would you say are your three things you hope to achieve in Year 1?

Evan: I want everyone at WHC to feel like they have a hockey director that is approachable and accessible. As the season gets going, please stop and say hello. I'm very much looking forward to meeting everyone this year.

I want our kids and our coaches to feel supported in their development on and off the ice.

I would like players and their families to understand WHC's development philosophy and our plan for delivering on that.

Can I sneak in a #4? I hope our kids, their families, and the coaches have a lot of fun this season!

TG: Talk a little about skill development; you will be on the ice lots with both travel and house players. You have assembled a great team of skills coaches. What are your expectations for the coaches and the players?

Evan: I am really excited about the team we've put together on the coaching side. We want to have a clear plan for skill development and give coaches the tools to teach most effectively. Coaches will be encouraged to communicate effectively and be creative in their approach to teaching. Players should bring an enthusiasm to learn and push themselves; be ready to work hard and have fun.

TG: Suffice to say, this hockey season will be unlike any other that we have ever lived through; what message do you have for the kids and parents?

Evan: We are certainly in uncharted waters. I've been reminding myself to take it day by day, appreciate every opportunity at the rink, and to be there to support others. That approach has helped me, and I'd encourage others to try it as well.

TG: What are your impressions of the WHC as you went through the interview process?

Evan: This is a community that cares deeply about their hockey club. From the board level, coaches and staff, and families and players; there is an enthusiasm for the game of hockey at WHC that is inspiring. As I went through the interview process and got to talk with more and more people associated with the WHC, I was excited about the community-based player development focus at WHC. The philosophies outlined in the WHC's recent strategic plan are very much in line with my own and I am excited to now work to bring those plans to fruition.

TG: How do you plan to help our House League Coaches and players?

Evan: The House League at WHC is a crucial development step in our program. I want the players and coaches to feel supported by their hockey director and I want to assist in helping those participants to have a great experience playing hockey and to further their development.

TG: You spoke lots about “kids having fun” throughout your interviews; what steps will you take to ensure that takes

Evan: Fun can come in different forms. I think it starts with remembering that we play this game because it is fun. It's fun to be a part of something bigger than yourself. It's fun to compete. It's fun to make new friends and to build confidence. It's fun to work hard and be rewarded for your efforts. I'm a firm believer in setting a positive tone and that enthusiasm breeds an atmosphere of fun. I want to cultivate an atmosphere on each of the WHC teams and within the organization that values the joy of hockey, of learning a craft, and being part of a team.

TG: What are your thoughts on league participation: is it the league that makes the player, or is it coaching and playing at the correct level that makes the player?

Evan: The league won't make the player. A player who is encouraged, supported, and motivated who is playing at a level which presents challenges but isn't overwhelming will progress in their development. There is no one league or path in hockey that is the one-size-fits-all answer. Run your race and focus on the process for yourself or your child and good things will happen.

TG: What do you enjoy doing when away from the rink?

Evan: When not at the rink you might find me at home working on a crossword puzzle or zipping up and down Sheridan Road on my bike. I'm an avid reader, so bring on the book recommendations and I always like a swim in Lake Michigan.

TG: OK...you have your pick of any three musicians or bands for your own private concert; who do you pick?

Evan: This is a really tough one. I'm going to go all in with this and say: John Prine, Otis Redding, and Aretha Franklin.

TG: Cubs or Sox?

Evan: Cubs for sure, but the Sox have an exciting line-up this year and I cheer for all the Chicago teams.