

Never Too Late by: Joel Johnson

Finally! After growing up watching hockey and forever wanting to play myself, I finally convinced my parents to let me participate in the greatest sport on Earth. The only problem was... it was already my freshman year of high school. Sure, some sports contain an abundance of successful athletes who start late in life such as football or track, but hockey was not one of those sports. Most of the guys I'd be playing with have been playing since they were six years old and were a hell of a lot better than I was. The extent of my hockey training consisted of strapping on rollerblades and shooting a street hockey ball in my unfinished basement.

ECHO Stars Bantam B Team is where I started. I remember wondering how a traditional hockey practice even ran. "What do I do when I step on the ice?" "What kind of drills do we do?" "Will my teammates like me?" At that point of my career I could hardly recall the order of which I strapped on my pads and now I had to go out and perform with the rest of these strangers. **I was the outlier.**



By the end of that season I scored only 3 goals in 50+ games. Some of my teammates went on to play varsity hockey for their respective teams, some quit hockey entirely, and one of my teammates moved to Canada.

Sophomore year. I tried out for the E.O. Smith/Tolland high school hockey program. I knew damn well I could not keep up with some of these guys but joining my high school team was the next big step that needed to be made. "Oh

god, here we go.” Or “I have to go with him?” I imagined my teammates mumbling under their breaths unaware of my humiliation. **I was the drill-killer.**

Nonetheless, I shrugged it off. Moving on, this was the year that we went to the state championship against Newtown. Although I strictly played JV and never dressed for varsity, I was ecstatic about the playoffs. I remember painting my face and jumping up on the boards at Trinity College while security yelled at my obnoxious behavior. Even though I felt as if I was on the team, others viewed me as just another fan. It was March 22, 2014 when a freshman on Newtown scored his first varsity goal, an overtime winner, to take the ring off of our fingers. But it was a double-edged sword. It motivated me to get better and I knew it was possible. *This freshman just scored his first goal ever and it was the biggest goal in his school's history. What could I do?*

Then one of the best examples of leadership I've ever experienced happened. One of our senior captains whose hockey career had just ended sent me this:



My junior year rolled around. I scored 7 goals in fall league but most of our games were not even close. I wasn't sure where I stood at the beginning of the Varsity season. Would I play on one of the main three lines or not? All I knew is that my teammates were pissed off and hungrier than ever since last year's game. I wanted to help them succeed in any way possible.

It was only the first scrimmage. I was carrying the puck up the side of the neutral zone about to dump it in when I got thrown off my feet. I was blindsided from my right and thrown into the boards to my left. Concussion. The doctor telling me I can't play for a few weeks felt like a punch to the gut. *This just really isn't for me. This isn't my sport. I was never meant to play with these guys.* My friends and teammates knew I was pissed off and dismal about the situation.

You are probably thinking, *you weren't even in the regular rotation, you hardly even played, why did you care so much?* The thing is, **I loved everything about hockey.** I loved my teammates. I loved driving the 15 minute route to UCONN everyday. I loved listening to the stupid stories we told each other in the locker room. I loved the pasta parties. I loved that first step onto a fresh sheet of ice every practice. I loved hard work and improving each and every day.

I returned soon enough and was put on the 4th line. At this point I recognized my role. I WAS NOT going to score that overtime winner in the championship, I WAS NOT going to lead the team stat in assists or +/- or hits. But I worked my ass off to get better every opportunity that I could. One of my teammates acknowledged my effort. Interestingly enough, that same player saw little ice time the year before. This year he was a leading goal scorer. He sent me this after we lost to Newtown:

3/23/14, 12:06



I want a championship next year

3/23/14, 12:07



My goals are
1. Win A Ring
2. Win Conference
3. Wear a C on my shirt

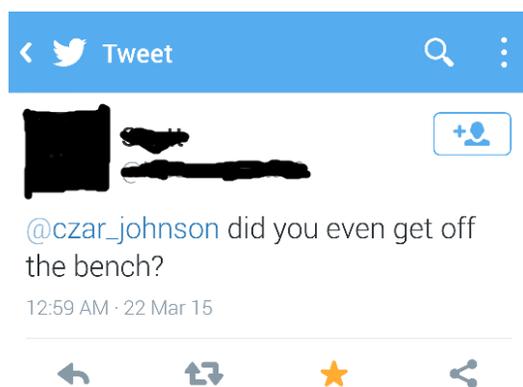
3/23/14, 12:18

So I separated my shoulder in February of my junior year and never scored a single varsity goal that season. But I tried to contribute as much as I could. I would pump them up before big games. I gave them tips in the weight room (something I was actually good at). Our starting goalie even called me his “good lark charm.”

We went on to win the state championship that year. One of the best players ever to come through our program scored four goals in that game alone. **The only time I was on the ice that game was for warmups.**



Just hours after the game, a high school hockey player tweeted at me:



The first thing I did was laugh. No. Really. I was still in a state of Euphoria and I couldn't help but find this hilarious. This guy wasn't even from the team we just played. What was he mad about? Nevertheless, what really mattered is that this forced me to take the offseason more seriously.

Now that my junior year season was over and it was time for the seniors to move on, I was ready to step up. Although I played baseball in the spring, I focused on getting improving at hockey. I went to the gym almost every day.

I started listening to motivational speeches and ended my workouts completely drenched. And no, I'm not talking about some cliché BS from a Hollywood movie. I mean I LITERALLY listened to 17 minutes of Eric Thomas' "Secrets to Success" speech on EVERY car ride to the gym. I started attending as many stick times and open hockey sessions as I could. I even went to a public skate by myself once so that I could strictly work on my skating (Yep. I'm that jackass at the public skates we all know).

My freshman year I was 5'6" and 135 pounds. By the end of the summer I was 5'7" and 165 pounds. We moved from Division 3 to Division 2 and it was going to be a lot harder. I had to be prepared.

I wanted to be soaked in sweat at the end of every practice and game. In fact, that was my baseline. I believed the more tired and wet I was, the more beneficial the practice was. I have this weird ritual of listening to motivational speeches before every game. Sometimes, I get way too hyped and start throwing stuff or hitting other players in the locker room. But I cannot remember the last time a coach yelled at me for being too lazy or not working hard enough and I take pride in that. I try to set the example for the younger players who are fighting for their ice time just as I did. It took me all the way until senior year for me to get into the regular three line rotation but I earned it.

When we had competitive practices the losing team would usually skate as a punishment. Every time this happened, the winning team would voluntarily

join and skate suicides with them. At the end of every practice, when most of our teammates were getting off the ice, the rest of us would line up on the line and race each other across the length of the rink and back. I learned these powerful lessons from my own teammates and I wanted to pass it on.

This year, my senior year, I only have one varsity goal. As of February 8th, we're 6-4-1. I've dedicated myself to being a grinder because I know that I don't have all the talent in the world, but I will never let someone outwork me. **I won't score 20 goals or dangle every defender, but I'm going to be the first forechecker or backchecker every single time.** Today, there are some sophomores and even freshman on my team that are better than me but there's others who are in the position I was three years ago.

Whether you're scoring four goals in a championship game or watching your team on the bench the two most important things are to value yourself enough to give 120% or don't do it at all and to help your team in whatever way possible to achieve a common goal.

We were underdogs in 2014. We moved up to DII and now we're underdogs again.

Who knows where we'll be at the end of the season.

Joel Johnson

Bucks #8