

## Strong4Lou

by: Doug Caliendo

That morning, I had woken up and driven to Notre Dame High School just as I did every other day for the past three and a half years. It was another Wednesday and nothing more. However, this one would take a bit of a turn shortly after I left the house.

My mother had stayed overnight in the hospital with my father, who was in hospice care being treated for what we knew was to be the end of his ten-year battle with colon cancer. Only about a week earlier he was admitted to hospice, and my family and I knew that his time ran short. During first period, my mother called me out of school. I got back in the car and drove over to the hospital in Branford to meet my mom and sister. At that time, she gave me the news. My father, Lou Caliendo, had passed away peacefully at 7:35 that morning after a long, courageous fight with cancer. The strongest man I knew, the man who introduced me to the game of which I have come to love after all these years.



Upon receiving the news, I was obviously very sad and emotional. Since his admittance to hospice, this day had seemed inevitable for the past week, so I was almost expecting it, you could say. However, nothing could possibly prepare me for the emotions to come along with this traumatic event. Yet, above the sadness, I was happy that my father was no longer in pain and in a better place. The three of us proceeded to go to the funeral home to discuss arrangements and then back home, where we were soon accompanied by the rest of our family.

The biggest question of the day was whether or not I would play that night's game against Northwest Catholic. I was reluctant at first and I thought that it would be better for me to take the night off. However, at around noon that day, my mother convinced me that I should lace 'em up that night. She told me it's what my dad would've wanted me to do. She was right. There was nothing Pops wanted me to do more than get out on the ice.

The day went by. I ate lunch and tried to sleep a little bit but my attempts were to no avail. I got back in the car and headed over to Bennett Rink for 2:30 to get ready for the game. The locker room and the rink were quiet. I was first greeted by my teammate, Cal Hoban. No words were exchanged, simply a hug. I feel as if it were better that way. No words were necessary to show the support that I had from my brothers in this time of hardship. And I know that my dad was just as much a father figure for the rest of ND Hockey as he was for me. This wasn't just my loss, but everyone's. This relationship among teammates is simply unmatched by any other than the Notre Dame brotherhood. My only job now was to try and get mentally prepared for my task ahead of me, which was to play to the best of my ability and make my teammates, school, and most importantly, my father, proud. Game time was 4:00 that day and it seemed to be the longest pre-game of

my life. We entered through the doors and warmed up just as we did every other game with our minds focused on getting another W.

After warm-ups concluded, we lined up on the red line as we do every other game and they began to announce Northwest Catholic's starting lineup. As the remainder of their team skated to the blue line, the announcer focused his attention on us. Just as every game, the student section, which was rather small considering it was a Wednesday afternoon, erupted in applause and screaming. Like usual, I was the first announced, after the goalie, for the starting lineup. "Defenseman, number 10, Doug Caliendo" rang from the speakers. I skated over to the goalie, tapped his pads, and continued out to the line. But unlike usual, after about five or ten seconds, the applause didn't stop. Everyone in the building was on their feet, clapping and screaming for me. The news of my father and my decision to play in the game had hit Twitter and it was rather well known. It was by far the largest ovation I had ever received for, well, anything. I had no idea what to do, so I stood there and somehow managed to maintain my composure. The other four starters were called and then the rest of the team skated out to the line with us. I was presented with a check from Northwest Catholic's captains on behalf of their school community.

As the game went on, it was hard to focus more on hockey than any external thoughts. Similar to any other game in which we were in this situation, I was extremely frustrated being down 2-0. I even had to leave the locker room during the second intermission to gather myself and my thoughts and stay in the game. The third period came along and we finally pulled it together. Two goals from Vin Paolillo tied it up with only minutes to spare. In fact, for his second goal, I was in the box for a rather BS penalty. But all that mattered was that we had tied the game.

Overtime is where the fun started. I was on the ice for the first shift, as expected, just trying to help my team win a hard-fought game. Less than a minute into OT, their goalie covered the puck and stopped the clock. At this point, I knew something had to happen. We won the faceoff and play began again. My teammate, Matt Muro, carried the puck into the corner but was defended heavily. He ended up losing the puck and it came right to me...

***I stepped into it and let a clap bomb rip. I saw it hit the net as clear as day. It was the absolute defining moment of my hockey career.***

I turned and skated towards center ice, and pointed my right hand to the sky. I knew that assist came from my dad. My legs were weak with emotion at this point and it took all of my strength to stay on my feet. I was greeted first by Matt Muro and the rest of my team shortly after. Once my back hit the boards, the tears came. It would've been impossible to hide that emotion. I couldn't have been happier to share that moment with the guys who I have become so close to through this tough journey. There will never be anything stronger than the bond of a hockey team. After the celebration ended, we shook hands and then made our way towards the Green Machine to pray as we do after every win and loss. This one, though, had a little extra meaning behind it. This was a goodbye, a see you later, and most importantly, a thank you.

Within minutes, word of my goal was already circulating Twitter. The best was yet to come, though. I had already received texts from my friends upon entering the locker room and all

my teammates were overwhelmed with emotion. My coach, Tim Belcher, explained to us how this was an absolute storybook ending and it couldn't have happened in a more appropriate fashion. Upon leaving the locker room, my mom and sister were crying tears of joy and expressed how proud of me my father would have been. A few hours after the game had ended, most of the team had come back to my house with me and the video of my goal had surfaced. Almost immediately, it broke the Internet. Local news outlets were covering it non-stop and people were desperately trying to relay it to national sports news stations. Come morning, I was being covered on ESPN's SportsCenter, NHL on NBC, Barstool Sports, and other stations throughout the United States and Canada. I couldn't have possibly dreamed of the immeasurable support that my family and I received from the hockey and sports communities.

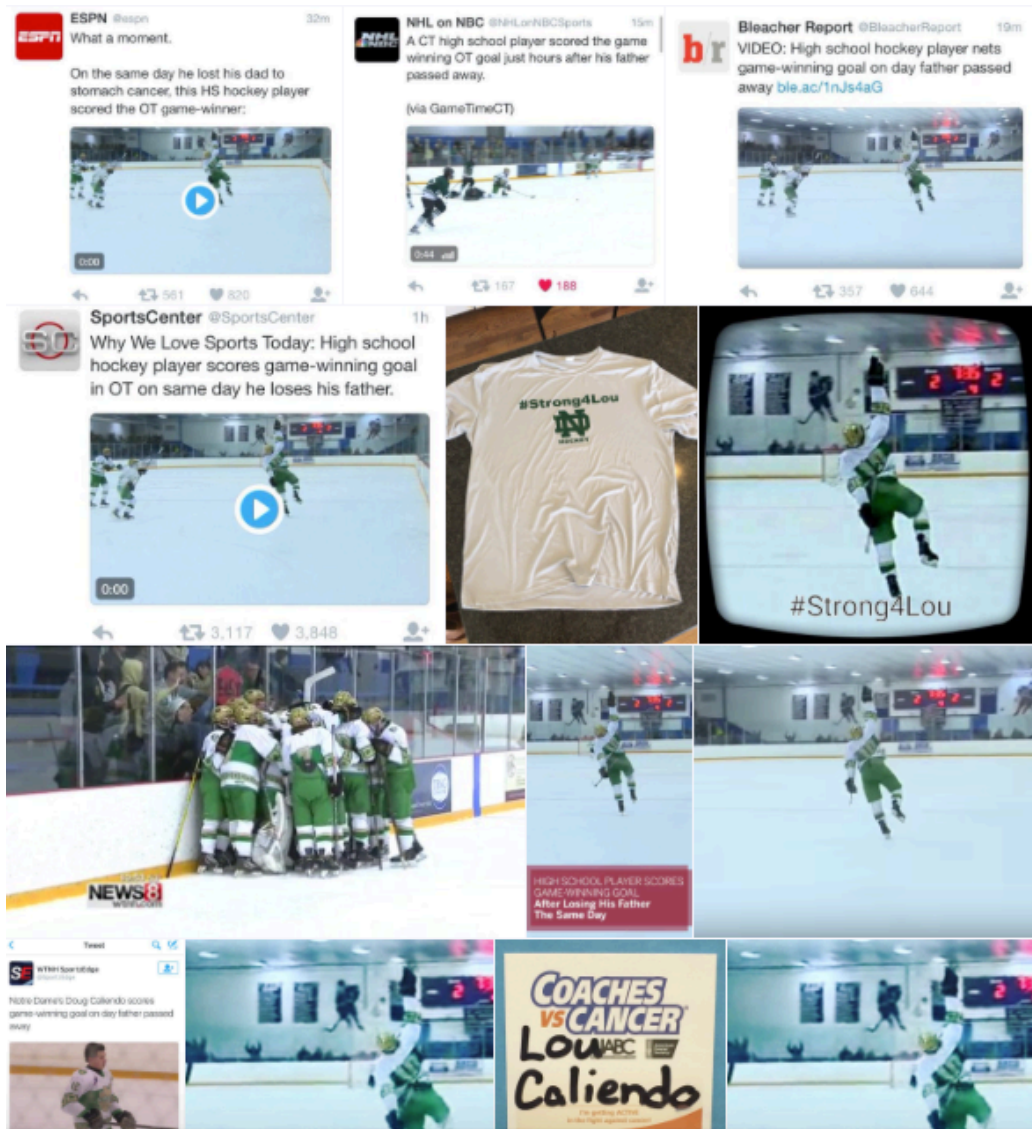
In the end, however, one thing stood above the rest. If you look at the photo of me pointing to my father in the sky, you will notice the scoreboard in the background. The score still reads ND: 2 and NWC: 2, but the time left to play in overtime was 7:35. That morning, my father had passed away at 7:35 a.m. This can only make me think of the words by my teammate Cal Hoban in a WTNH post-game interview, "[It] kinda makes me think there must be something upstairs pulling the strings." If I ever doubted my faith, I doubt no longer.



I simply cannot thank enough the people of the CT high school hockey community, all those who supported my family through donations to the Strong4Lou Fund, those who have reached out to me in support and condolences, and everyone who has been there for my family and me through this tough time in our lives. While it does not erase all the pain that comes along with the loss of my father, it sends an unmatched amount of help. To all of you, Lou is smiling down on you.

That goal, and every goal, was for you, dad. Thank you for lacing up my skates 13 years ago at Louis Astorino Arena and telling me to get out there. Thank you for being my biggest fan and supporter. Thank you for everything.

We are all #Strong4Lou.



A simple Twitter photo search of #Strong4Lou shows some of the amazing support Doug and his family received. Only a hockey community could handle this delicate situation with so much grace, class and overwhelming support.