

The Manager

By: Eric Welles

#7

Farmington Valley Generals ('11-'14)

My path to high school hockey 4th line fame was different than many others throughout the great state of Connecticut. I started playing hockey at age 3, like most others, but at the age of 7 I stopped, because, well, I sucked. I just wasn't any good. But that never stopped me from loving the game. I went to every single pro game that I could go to. Whether it was the Hartford Wolf Pack, the Boston Bruins, Rangers, whatever, if it was two teams on a sheet of ice, I loved to watch it. I played baseball consistently my whole life. It was great, I was decent, but still, hockey was my passion.

So when high school rolled around, I got that itch to lace them up again.

I had gone to Avon High School's Nutmeg Hockey Conference title game against Suffield when I was in 8th grade. They won in overtime and the building went crazy. It's still to this day the loudest I've ever seen a crowd for a high school sporting event. It lit my fire, even if I was god awful, I wanted to be apart of that team. I wanted to experience something like that.



Freshman year rolled around, and the state of Avon High School hockey was up in the air. The once great "Dirty Birds" were looking for a dance partner to start a co-op with. Well, Windsor came knocking and it started to lay the frame for

what you know today as the Farmington Valley Generals. I had no idea how to get involved though, or if I even wanted to play. Hell, I didn't even know if I could play. I had skated here and there but I hadn't truly played hockey in 7 years at that point.

Windsor-Avon-East Granby had a helluva first year, making it all the way to Yale

before getting eliminated in the semis. I was at that game, and again, the atmosphere, I had to be apart of it.

So I took a chance. I was nervous at first, but I approached our science teacher who doubled as a hockey coach, Scott Percival and asked if I could be a manager. He asked what I knew about hockey, and I said "A lot". He said that was great, and that next year I could get going and help out where needed.

Fast-forward a year and I started talking to my friends on the team about the prospect of me managing. I was really nervous that I would be thought of as weird. A guy managing a guy's team is pretty unheard of in high school sports, so I definitely prepared myself to be told that I was weird, and definitely thought it would never be accepted. My friends surprised me, however. They eased my mind and made me feel a lot better and actually good about the idea that I was managing.

Meeting the rest of the team that first week of practice, though, that was what I was really worried about. Not only that, but we had dropped East Granby and added Farmington, Avon's biggest rival, to the mix. That first week I think the other managers were more weirded out by having a guy manager than the boys were. I think they understood how much I really knew about the game, how much I loved it, and that someone could keep some solid stats for them.

I did everything I could to help out. I did the book, the play-by-play (a favorite of the boys), even threw in some insight that I could see from the stat book. I also always filled the bottles for every game and practice because none of the other managers could go in the room or really wanted to do it anyway.

After one of the games about halfway through the season, one of our assistant coaches, Andy, and I were cleaning up the locker room at Loomis. He looks at me and goes, "Why don't you play?"

"I suck, like really bad."

"So what?"

"I can barely skate."

"Next year, come out for the team. You're one of the boys. You have to wear that jersey. The feeling is incredible."

Andy, if you're reading this, thank you. I was ready to be a manager for 3 years, but you motivated me to try my hand at hockey. You changed my life, for sure.

Anyway, later that season, Percival came up to me and asked if I wanted to skate a little bit at practice, just on the side, no drills or anything, just to get my feet

underneath me again.

I was real hesitant. Okay, the boys accepted me as a manager, but there was no way they would be okay with me skating at practice.

I was wrong again. They were all cool with it, or at least I think so because nobody ever gave me any shit.

My career as a manager ended in a heart-breaking fashion when the boys fell in round one of states to Trinity Catholic with 6.1 seconds left. I didn't even announce the goal, because, well, fuck that.

That's when my career as a player began, or so I thought. I played football, also, and right before our last game of the fall I dislocated my kneecap. Great, back to managing, was my first thought.

Luckily, I healed quickly after some intense PT and got on the ice the night before the first scrimmage. Surely, I thought I'd be scratched, but frankly we didn't have enough guys to warrant me being a scratch. So I dressed, but didn't play. And so began many a night sitting on the bench for all 45 minutes.

In two seasons, I actually touched the ice in maybe 12 of the 45 games we had. I still could barely skate, but I could shoot the puck pretty hard if I didn't fall down doing it. I started 5 times, once because I correctly answered a trivia question. I spent more time serving bench minors my junior year than I did actually on the ice. I didn't complain once. I never scored; I was never on the ice for a goal. But, those last two years, I felt as much of a part of the team as our best players. The reason? The boys. They let a bender like me live the dream I had always been chasing for two years. Nobody ever yelled at me for fucking up a drill, nobody ever told me to quit, none of that. They brought me into the family when they probably had every right to not even acknowledge my existence. To the boys, thank you, I love you all and I always will.

The best moment of my career? My first shift. We were up by 5 with three minutes left, and Coach put me out there with Cutch, and Sandy. I can honestly say I hadn't seen those guys more excited in a 5-goal game in my career. The smile on their faces when I stumbled over the boards and skated out for the faceoff with them was awesome. I'll never forget it.

If you looked at my high school athletic career from a strictly performance based standpoint, I was a baseball player. Admittedly, it was and always will be my best sport. But to me, I'll always be a hockey player.