MASKED EMOTIONS

When Rob Sutherland suddenly had to face the reality of losing a close sibling, his teammates did all they could to Shield him

BY KYLE PALANTZAS

IT SEEMED LIKE A NORMAL game day for Rob Sutherland. He ate a usual pre-game meal, geared up in his true-to-type shirt and tie, and boarded the South Muskoka Shield team bus.

He sat beside the same teammates in the dressing room as he strapped on his pads, bantered back and forth as usual and ran through his typical paces in warmup for a Greater Metro Junior A League game.

Rob played outstanding that night; making several last-minute saves to clinch a 3-2 victory.

Fresh off the win, the Connecticut native was his outgoing self for the five-hour bus ride back to the Ontario town of Gravenhurst – not knowing that back home, life as he knew it had changed forever.

That morning, Rob’s sister, Jane, fell awkwardly and hit her head.

Rob only missed one game while attending Jane’s service. The team wore the letter ‘J’ on their helmets in her memory.

Rob responded with the best hockey of his career.

“ ‘The way I saw it, Jane was watching me every game now,’ Rob said. ‘She wasn’t able to see me play a lot in Canada, but now she can watch every game. I dedicated the rest of my season to her.’

Rob taped a picture of his older sister to his stall, making sure she was with him every step of the way.

Remarkably, the 6-foot-1 goaltender put up a league-best .949 save percentage in the regular season and set a league record with a 1.70 goals-against average.

“I just told myself Jane wouldn’t want me to feel sorry and go into the pits,” the 20-year-old said. “So every practice, if I started getting tired or if I slacked off a little bit, I thought that Jane would have never quit or stopped.”

In a blink of an eye, hockey took on a whole new meaning. Putting on his goaltender mask and hitting the ice was Rob’s escape from what was actually happening.

Hockey allowed him to stream his emotions and keep his mind from wandering.

More than 600 miles away from her younger brother, she passed away at the age of 23.

Rob’s father, knowing his son was starting in goal that night, decided to wait until after the game to break it to him.

“It was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do,” said Jim Sutherland. “Rob and Jane were so close and he was so far away from home.”

On the close-knit Shield team, it didn’t take long before everyone, coaches and trainers included, got word and were at the Meagher family’s house, where Rob billeted.

“The team quickly became his family,” said captain and roommate Chad Meagher. “As soon as everyone found out one teammate was in pain, we were all right behind him.”

Shield members rallied around Rob in the following days, coming to the Meagher house with a constant supply of food and support; condolences for the lost sister they had never even met.

“I think it’s just unbelievable,” Rob said. “That’s the only way I can describe it.”

His teammates kept him busy as they bonded over pond hockey, team activities and anything else the teenagers could think of to keep their friend’s mind off his loss.

“The concept of team really hit home,” said coach Dallyn Telford. “I saw our team stand behind Rob when he needed teammates and friends and family more than he ever did in his life. You are taken back by how less important hockey games are and how important life actually is with friendship and teammates.”

Rob was actually new to the South Muskoka Shield, acquired in a trade a few months before the passing of his sister. But he became a part of the family right away.

“That was one of the biggest things for me,” he said, “realizing how big of a part of the team I was and realizing how big the team was for me in my life at that period of time.”

‘JANE WOULDN’T WANT ME TO FEEL SORRY AND GO INTO THE PITS’

“The sport of hockey became more than just a game,” he said. “I used Jane to motivate me and to help me get better both as a goaltender and a person.”

Rob led the Shield to an impressive 35-5-2 regular season, en route to a Russell Cup final appearance. They were beaten in Game 7 by the Deseronto Storm, the same team the Shield beat the day Jane passed away.

Rob and the Shield started this year a perfect 6-0, but the memory of a season and event he’ll never forget remains vibrant.

“There was no other way for me to regroup or recuperate from what happened but to play hockey,” Rob said. “To do what I know best and do it for my sister, because that’s what she would have wanted from me.”
BIG CATCH CONTEST

THE HOCKEY NEWS AND TRAVEL MANITOBA WANT TO SEND YOU AND A GUEST ON THE ULTIMATE CANADIAN FISHING ADVENTURE!

Grand Prize:
- Return economy airfare to Winnipeg
- One night accommodation in Winnipeg
- Return economy airfare to Treeline Lodge
- 4 nights accommodation at the Lodge
- All meals, drinks, fishing license, guide and boat included

2nd Prize: Autographed Alex Ovechkin pro hockey jersey

3rd Prize: The Hockey News prize pack

Log on to www.thn.com/bigcatch

BETWEEN OCTOBER 1ST AND NOVEMBER 30TH, 2010 TO FILL OUT THE ENTRY FORM FOR YOUR CHANCE TO WIN!

Contest starts October 1, 2010. Contest closes November 30, 2010. Contest open to residents of Canada (excluding Quebec) and the United States who have reached the age of majority in their province of residence, except employees of contest sponsors, their affiliates, members of their immediate families and persons with whom these employees are domiciled. One grand prize, one secondary prize and one third prize will be awarded. Approx. total value of prizes is $10,000 CAD. Chances of winning depend on number of entries received. No purchase necessary. For full rules, go to thehockeynews.com.