

Akid I once knew

A true story of hockey, teammates and growing up BY STEVE MAICH

I WAS ABOUT 13 YEARS OLD WHEN I FOUND OUT WHY SPORTS MATTER. I LEARNED WHY FROM A KID I PLAYED HOCKEY WITH—A KID I DIDN'T EVEN LIKE MUCH.

This kid had a pretty common name. So common, in fact, that I couldn't find him to discuss this story. So let's call him Keith.

I played most of my youth hockey on teams with the same core group of guys from the neighbourhood, many of whom I am still in touch with. Because that core group played together for so long, we had an unusually strong select team, and an unusually tight-knit group of friends. The same guys who played road hockey together and slept over at each other's houses in elementary school were the ones driving our parents' cars to parties and talking about girlfriends as we neared our high school graduation.

Keith came and went from this group in the span of a single year. He moved to our subdivision in the late 1980s, when our friendships were already well-established. We lived in a middle-class enclave just north of Toronto—one of those inner suburbs that have become more affluent over the years as the trees have matured and the real-estate values climbed. But even then, everybody in our neighbourhood existed in a two-car, vacations-every-summer kind of comfort that we kids all took completely for granted.

From the very first select-team tryout that Keith attended, it was obvious that he was different. For one thing, he played in long Cooperall pants, and this was a few years after Cooperalls were no longer cool. They were also a bit too short for him, so you could see the bottom of his shin pads sticking out where they met his skates. His clothes were always clean, but they were old and just slightly out of fashion. Socially, he was awkward—always just a bit too loud, a bit too aggressive, a bit too quick to brag and never quite in on the joke.

My dad was our coach throughout those years, and when he told me that Keith had made the team, I shook my head. All my dad saw was that Keith was a good skater who could handle the puck—he'd need to pass more and not run around in our zone so much, but he'd be a good addition to the team. All I could see was the guy who told rambling, embellished stories and didn't fit in.

Then came the real kicker: Keith's mom did not have a car and so, my dad explained, we would need to drive him to and from each game and practice. I responded in a manner that all parents of teenagers will find familiar: I whined and then I sulked.

First of all, I wanted to know, who in the world doesn't have a car? And secondly, how did Keith become our responsibility?

Looking back on it, I am embarrassed at my utter cluelessness and lack of generosity. In my defence, I was 13 and still had a pretty deep conviction that the universe revolved around me and the world ought to bend to my desires. Also, rides to hockey were important to me. My dad worked a lot and volunteered a lot of his spare time to the local hockey and baseball leagues. Those car rides represented uninterrupted time to talk about sports, school, movies and more sports. Now there would be another passenger—an interloper with a lame sense of humour and too-small Cooperalls. If we were going to stop for a burger after the game, that meant Keith was coming, too. If I wanted to talk about movies, I'd have to listen to Keith recite his favourite scenes from *Police Academy*.

If this story were an after-school special, now would be the time that my old man would sit me down and say, "Hey partner, Keith is new in town. He needs us to help him out, and don't you worry: We'll still have plenty of time together, OK? Now, how about we head to Dairy Queen for a banana split?" But this is not an after-school special, and my dad did not say anything like that. He gave me a look that combined confusion and irritation. That look told me to suck it up and quit being so selfish. So I sulked.

Driving to those games, I learned more about Keith than I ever wanted to know.

For instance, I learned that he and his little sister had different dads. That his mom was on her own, and that she worked a lot. He talked a lot about his dad but never made it clear where he was. He just focused on the fact that he had a cool car, could fix anything, and took him to awesome stuff like monster-truck rallies at the Exhibition. He bragged. He exaggerated. He drove me nuts. I responded to his every overture with sullen grunts and shrugs.

Things weren't much better in the dressing room. Keith's arrival was always met with a silent, unanimous eye-roll. After a few weeks of trying to decipher our long list of inside jokes, Keith just got quiet. Every so often he'd try to engage somebody in conversation, but never to much effect. He settled into his role: decent player and team outcast. He was never really shunned, but he was never really welcomed either.

Then, one night shortly after Christmas, around the mid-point of the season, we were playing an important league game at St. Michael's Arena—the beautiful historic rink on the campus of the boys' school in downtown Toronto. Keith, for once, would not need a ride to the game because his dad, whom we had never seen, was going to bring him. By then, I knew enough about Keith to realize that this was going to be a big game for him with his dad in the stands.

Our team had a rule that everyone needed to be in the dressing room 30 minutes before the game, but when the deadline arrived that night, Keith was nowhere to be found. My dad and the other coaches were fuming. With five minutes to go before game time, everyone was dressed and ready. I was in the hallway finishing my stretches when Keith came running down the corridor toward our room. My dad looked at him, put his hands on his hips and began, "Keith, where...?"

He didn't get any further before Keith dropped his bag and broke down in tears. A 13-year-old boy will do almost anything to avoid crying in public, but there he was: tears streaming down his cheeks, struggling to speak. "My dad didn't show...", was all he could choke out at first, and then suddenly the words flowed out of him in a gush. They were supposed to go for dinner before the game... he'd waited and waited... he finally realized he wasn't coming... he'd tried to call but there was no answer at our house... so he ran for the bus, and he had taken public transit with his hockey gear, all the way from the suburbs to downtown... bus to bus to subway to taxi. And when he didn't have enough to pay the fare, the cabbie kicked him out a couple of blocks from the rink. He ran the rest of the way. I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I'm sorry.

My dad looked stricken. "It's OK, Keith. It's all right. Just get dressed." Keith hurriedly threw on his equipment as my dad



THE AUTHOR (IN PADS) AND HIS FATHER A YEAR OR TWO BEFORE KEITH JOINED THE ROSTER



gave us all a very brief pep talk. Nobody looked at Keith's red, tear-streaked face.

I would like to tell you that Keith played the game of his life that night and scored the winning goal, but he didn't. He played terribly, as did the rest of us, and we lost. We rode all the way home in near-silence. Every so often my dad would break in with a bit of wisdom gleaned from that night's defeat. Keith and I just listened and looked out our windows. I thought mostly about every time I had resented his presence. I suddenly felt keenly aware of everything I had, and everything he didn't, and it made me burn inside.

It soon became clear that I was not the only one who felt that way. Over the next few weeks, without anyone ever having to say it, the boys on the team opened our circle ever so slightly to him, and Keith found a place to sit among us.

Near the end of that season, we won an Easter weekend tournament, beating West Hill in the final. They had been our biggest rivals all year, and the win felt like game seven of the Stanley Cup final to us. Afterwards, we had pizza and hot dogs in the dressing room. I have a snapshot memory of Keith in the room with a hot dog in one hand and a trophy in the other, laughing and hooting and acting the fool with the rest of us.

I don't remember ever saying goodbye. The season ended, and when the next season started, Keith was gone. His mom moved again that summer, and he went off to yet another school and hopefully another hockey team somewhere. But, for some reason, he still stands out in my memories of playing hockey as a kid.

Lately, as we put this issue together, I've been thinking a lot about sports and why they hold such a powerful place in our lives. Why do we play? As I've thought about that question, I have come back again and again to Keith. I keep thinking about how he travelled all that way, on his own, carrying his hockey gear, reeling from the disappointment of missing his dad, to play his part for a team that had only barely accepted him. How easy would it have been to just go back into his house, turn on the TV and curse his luck? And I think about that picture in my mind of him, clutching that trophy in his hand, basking in a shared victory with these boys who were just like him, and yet not like him at all.

Obviously, Keith needed our team. But more than that, he needed us to need him. And when he walked into that room, and we saw the tears on his face, it changed everybody in a small but important way. We saw a kid for whom hockey mattered on a whole different level, and we learned about compassion. The outcome of the game was utterly irrelevant.

Why do we play? For many reasons, of course. But maybe more than anything we play because, through these games, we catch glimpses of ourselves at our best. **SN**