

Eulogy to AJ.

On the morning I got the devastating news, I walked into my office and picked up the team photo of the Willowdale Blackhawks, and I looked at all the young faces, and then my eyes fixated on AJ, and I took some comfort in the fact that I was standing right beside him in the photo, and my assistant coach Jack was standing right beside me. This is as close as we can get to AJ now - a photo on an office wall - and all week long I kept looking at him, thinking about him and his family, and like a lot of us this week, crying, and with so many great memories.

I didn't know AJ all that long: I coached him for two seasons with the Willowdale Blackhawks, but over those years, almost three years if you include tryout time, I watched a fine boy begin to grow into a fine young man, with many of the qualities I so admire.

AJ was funny - and not necessarily in a high school silly kind of way. His humour was more advanced than that. He loved the back and forth - the give and take - the repartee of a dressing room, the one-liners that fly around a sporting team. Hockey teams can be a lot like family. You love each other one minute. You're fighting with each other the next. And if you're heading in the right direction, you're pulling together when it matters most.

AJ was one of our glue guys. He was never the biggest, the strongest, or the fastest, just one of the best. We never had to worry about him, except maybe if his parents could get him to the game on time, or to the right arena. Teenagers can be erratic, impulsive, hockey players are no different. But I don't remember having this conversation with our coaches - I don't remember ever saying: What are we going to do about AJ? Because we never had to be concerned about him that way. He was solid - of mind, of body, and comfortable.

I would look at him sometimes, with his hoodie on, sometimes with buds in his ears, but always with some kind of smile. He had this big infectious smile that lit up our dressing room. He loved his hockey and he seemed to love his time in the dressing room just as much.

When I think of AJ, I think of words like modest, humble, intelligent, humorous: Often he was more interested in you than he was in himself. And he was inquisitive. He asked good questions. He wanted to know how we did things and why we did things - And as his former coach, Mark Stevenson told me: He was always working to figure out how the world worked — not for selfish reasons, never that — but so he could make it better for everyone else.

Hockey teams aren't always close knit. Some kids people are friends. Some aren't. Some hang together. Some don't. There are always pockets within any dressing room. But AJ was one of those guys who didn't have any one group or any one place in the room. He was friends with everybody. He talked to everybody. He made everybody laugh. He made everyone welcome. He didn't seem to care who you were or how popular you were - you were part of his team and he accepted you for that.

I read on one of his former teammates facebook page, a fitting description written by one of his teammates. They also played just two years together. It read : U were one of the nicest kids I have ever played hockey with. The two years we played together were amazing and went by so fast. Gonna miss you bud. You were a great kid. RIP AJ."

Another teammate wrote: You were a great teammate but a better friend."

AJ had that kind impact on people. You met him and instantly you liked him. and you couldn't forget him. I've coached 24 teams and probably more than 300 players over the years and AJ was on the very short list of those you'd never forget. He was the rare kid who made eye contact when he spoke with adults, who asked good questions, who wanted to know more about you than tell you about himself, who cared about playing hockey, but cared more about the world.

But I knew him mostly from his minor hockey, although we would occasionally debate the relative merits of the New England Patriots. And if we weren't talking football off the ice, we we'd be chirping him about that winter hat he wore, with the big flaps coming down the sides: That's a picture in my mind I'll never forget: AJ and that hat. And he loved that big floppy hat and the attention it would occasionally bring, loved the tete-a-tete that happens between coaches and hockey players, the harmless banter that never stops.

He had a special relationship with my brother in law, Alan Robertson, who who wasn't a hockey guy but ran our defensive bench when AJ played for us. And he would try and imitate Alan's thick Scottish accent and Alan would try and give one back to him. On the bench, Alan would say he was skating too slow to get off the ice and he would shoot something back about Alan being told old to be able to get the bench open in time for him to get off. The words were of admiration, not derision. And a friendship developed between a man in his late 60s and a 15-year-old hockey player.

In Florida, just a month ago, Alan turned to me and said: "You know what we have to do his summer. We've got to play golf with AJ."

Maybe this summer, a lot of us can gather, and do just that in his name for a good cause.

But from a personal side, when I think of AJ and our time together, I think of our week night practices that used to end around 10:30. You tell a teenager that practice is over and most of them sprint to the dressing room at top speed.

Never AJ.

He wouldn't leave the ice. He would gather some pucks, head to the blueline, and start taking slapshots. His own hockey weapon he developed partway through our first season together. Most nights, I'd stay on the ice with him and feed him passes. And then I'd get off, and take the pucks, and leave a few of him. Carole would be sitting in the stands, usually with a book, waiting for AJ. And the only way he'd leave the ice was if the Zamboni driver or his mom said it was time to go home.

He always wanted one more minute, one more slapshot, more time. And today, under these tragic circumstances, I think we all feel the same. All of us wish we had more time with him.

With permission from Steve Simmons.

April 5th 2013