

A Life Created Through Murder(Ball); The Jason Crone Story

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After over a decade of gruelling workouts, perseverance, and hope, it all culminates in every athletes dream come true. Short winded, but the adrenaline still fuelling through his veins, Jason Crone lowers his head and takes in the magnitude of the moment he is currently in. A gold medal win at the Parapan/Am Games, in front of a home Canadian crowd. The national anthem booms through the overhead speakers ringing out inside Hershey Centre in Mississauga, Ontario, shaking through the bones of both players and spectators alike.

For Jason Crone this is the crowning achievement of his career and it couldn't be a better bookend. It is hard to imagine that on the journey to victory, it had to start with a catastrophic loss.

In 2003 it was a weekend afternoon like every other for a then, 15-year old Jason Crone, and his family as they set off for Jasons hockey game at the old Owen Sound Coliseum. Coming off of a Provincial championship Crone had his sights set on repeating the accomplishment. Everything leading up to the game was as mundane as they come, but the result would be anything but.

Crone representing his local OMHA team, the Owen Sound NuComm Junior Attack were facing off against Riverside, a Windsor based team and as always Crone was ready to establish himself with fast, hard, and gritty play.

Halfway through the back and forth contest Jason spotted a loose puck in the centre zone of the ice. Crone as always raced off to recover the puck to make a play for his team. As soon as Jason came down towards the puck, a Riverside player also rushed in from the right side of the ice. Within 5 seconds, Jason Crone's life would change forever.

As the two fought down the ice for the puck, the Riverside player attempted to cross check Crone off the puck resulting in the two crashing into the side of the net, and plummeting into the end boards. While the Riverside player got up, Crone stayed down. The arena fell silent as everyone stared as Crone laid motionless on the ice. Crone would suffer a broken neck as a result of this play. "I couldn't move, I couldn't breathe, it was terrifying." said Crone as he relived the most traumatic experience of his life. "Having no control over whether you can breath or not, trying to get up but you literally can not get up."

Crone was rushed to London Hospital, but the damage had already been done. Crone could no longer feel his extremities from the centre of his chest down. As someone who's entire life revolved around sports, this would be the most crushing news he had ever received as he would be paraplegic for the rest of his life. "The ambulance was called right away, Owen Sound Fire & Paramedics were there within 10-15 minutes, and it's been 16 years since this happened but I remember when I heard them say he's broken his neck." Said Crone talking about what he could remember from the accident and what it was like while being stretchered off the ice.

“When you’re 15 you think you’re invincible” said Crone, recalling the injury. “You think nothings going to hurt me, nothing bad is going to happen to me, it’s not a bad way to be, you just don’t think that at 15 my life is about to be turned upside down.”

Luckily for Jason his parents and his brothers were all there to be by his sides during the accident, as they came out onto the ice and stayed by his side all the way until they reached the London Hospital which was a battle all on its own. After stabilizing in Owen Sound Hospital, Crone was intended to be helicoptered to the University Hospital in London but a snow storm had set in forcing the paramedics to drive Crone for 3 hours to get him to London in time to receive the medical care he desperately needed. Crone spent the next 3 weeks in critical care. Luckily for Crone, his small community came up huge for him and his family.

Not only did his team don the slogan “All the Way for Jay”, but they crushed opponents left and right until the team did exactly what their slogan entailed, winning the OMHA Championship in Crones honour. “I didn’t know a lot of stuff going on back home until after the fact, all I knew was the guys had my jersey hanging behind the bench” said Crone as he went over what he would hear while in the critical care unit. “I was so out of it for basically the first 10 days, I had massive surgery on my neck, follow up surgeries, and all the medications I was on, it took me a while to come around on it but once I was able to sit up in bed for the first time, that’s when my parents started

showing me the newspapers, it was awesome. Friends, family, people I didn't even know from back home rallying around me, its something you don't see in a big city."

However this was far from over as far as the Owen Sound community was concerned. The town fundraised over \$30,000 for Crone and his family after throwing together an Owen Sound Police VS NHL Oldtimers charity hockey game with the proceeds going towards helping Crone and his family in their tough times. This would be the spark to the ignition of a beautiful one of a kind event.

After this event the groundwork was set for what would become an annual tradition in the small town called "The Crone Cup". The Crone Cup was a charity hockey game between the towns rival high schools The West Hill Raiders, and the Owen Sound Collegiate and Vocational Institute Falcons. The girls hockey teams would play their regular season matchup inside the Harry Lumley Bayshore Arena and the entire town would gather to watch and support Crone. The proceeds of the cup originally went towards Crone and his family to help cover all of the new expenses in his life but once Crone had recovered the proceeds went towards various charities including underprivileged children in the Owen Sound area, and to children battling cancer and their families.

Unable to attend the first years event as he was still hospitalized in London, the 2nd annual Crone Cup meant the world to Crone. After his OSCVI Falcons fittingly won in a 2-0 route of the Raiders, the crowd erupted as Crone came out onto the ice to present

the team with the Crone Cup. It was clear that it may have only been one game but it meant a far greater deal than just a statistic in a column. “I’ve never seen so many people in that arena before” said Crone thinking back to the first Crone Cup event he was able to attend. “Seeing all the people crammed in there was crazy. It definitely was a big thing that helped me see that I wasn’t alone, and seeing that support I will never ever forget that”. The game meant so much to Crone that even after he had finished high school he would do whatever it took to be in attendance for the game, including flying from Vancouver, BC just to get to the game and fly back out the next night.

This tradition would carry on for over a decade until the rival high schools once pitted against each other would then merge to become one school after depleting enrolment numbers made two high schools in the small area non-feasible thus ending the tradition that was the Crone Cup. Without the tremendous amount of support and motivation Crone received from the event, he may never have found his calling.

Three years after Crones accident, after numerous hours of training and physiotherapy, as well as an adjustment period to integrate himself into his new reality, Crone began his career as a wheelchair rugby player.

After Crone was discharged from the London hospital and began his rehabilitation process the local London wheelchair rugby team came to visit Crone and talk to him about his progress. “I was 15 and some of these guys were in their 30s and 40s but I had an instant connection with them” said Crone talking about his first interactions with

the sport of wheelchair rugby and the immediate joy the sport brought him. “ I remember when Dave (Wilsie) who at that point was the captain of the Canadian team, dropped in and he brought me a video of the 2002 World Championships in Sweden which Canada won, and I watched that tape over and over and over again until I wore it out. Thats when I said to myself shit, this is what I want to do and where I want to be.”

Fittingly referred to as “Murderball” because of its brutal physical style of play, Jason fell for a new sport he could call his own. Crone still had a knack for physicality and regained his athleticism that had once made him a successful junior hockey player and transferred it into his new field of play. “When I broke my neck a lot of doors got slammed shut in my face, but at the same time it opened not only a whole new set of doors but a whole new world for me to take advantage of with endless opportunities for me.” Crone said proudly as he explained where his passion for his newly found sport had brought him. “Wheelchair rugby was my saving grace in dealing with everything that had happened.”

Crone eventually strung up a deal with his parents that Crone would be able to begin playing wheelchair rugby competitively once he graduated high school. Once Crone graduated he went to Fanshawe College in London, less for the school however, but because Crone was dying at the chance to play for the London wheelchair rugby team. “After the first three months I remember thinking holy shit I am useless I am terrible, what am I doing” Crone recalled on thinking after his career in the sport had begun. “Once I dedicated myself, about six months into playing, we were playing in a

tournament in Barrie, and the Canadian coach at that time was there. He saw me and he said, you have some serious potential. A couple weeks later we were in a tournament in Windsor and he was there again, this time he invited me to the Team Canada training camp in Vancouver.”

After only playing the sport for a little over a year, Crone found himself on the Canadian National Wheel Chair Rugby team and competed in the 2008 Beijing Paralympics. In his first Paralympic Games in Beijing, Crone and Team Canada would finish with a 2-1 record in the round robin placing them second in their group. In the medal bracket round Crone squad would come up just short in a spirit crushing loss to Australia with a 41-40 loss.

One point could have changed the entire Games for Jason but it was not all for nothing as Crone would claim his first Paralympic medal in the form of a bronze after defeating Great Britain 47-41.

4 years later with some much needed experience on his belt Crone was ready to take home the gold.

Canada would once again finish second in their group with their only loss coming at the hands of the Aussies, who had beaten them the last Paralympics, this time by a wider margin; 64-52.

Canada and Crone would go up against the defending gold medal champions in the United States in their semi-final matchup. With a stunning upset, Canada and Crone defeated the USA by the narrowest of margins in a 50-49 victory which set the stage for Canada VS Australia in the gold medal final. Australia had had Canadas number in the past and unfortunately for Crone, this trend would continue as the Australian national team would take home the gold medal leaving Crone with his first silver Paralympic medal.

Still hungry and determined as ever, Crone realized his timeframe as an athlete was beginning to dwindle. Crone at the time of the London Games was 25 and looking to achieve more personally outside of athletics, making the 2015 Parapan/Am Games his last shot at winning gold.

Crone had actually left the National team prior to 2015, announcing he would take a break from competition after the 2012 London Games but was back within no time and ready to fire on all cylinders.

Going into the event Crone knew this would be his last chance, making this a do or die initiative. After winning four out of five games in the round robin with their only loss coming at the hands of the USA in a heartbreaking 60-59 loss Crone was set to accomplish what he had long set out for.

In the semi-final game Crone and the rest of the Canadian national team faced off against Brazil whom they defeated easily 65-32 in their opening matchup of the games. This game showed much of the same as Crone and Team Canada would dominate Brazil resulting in a mirror image of their previous matchup with another 65-32 victory. This then set the stage for the battle of the North American wheelchair rugby powerhouses, Canada vs. The United States.

“We were always an underdog against the U.S. team” said Crone in regards to the strong USA squad they were facing off against. “They thought they had that game won”.

In a back and forth matchup the winner of this game could have gone to the team with the ball in their hands last but in this contest Crone would not be denied. Canada would win the gold at home in a nail biting 57-54 win.

Crone had finally done it, he had met and exceeded his expectations and had crushed the narrative so determined to keep him down. Jason had become an all-time success story. Crone humbled by the moment, took in his surroundings, and spent a moment in his Nirvana. “Winning the Pan/Am Games, I’ll never forget that” said Crone fondly.

Crone and Team Canada would move on to win the Wheelchair Rugby World Championship in London, England, marking the end of Crone’s athletic career.

Three years had passed since Crone had put his athletic career behind him when he was contacted by Bayshore news. Crone had been announced as one of the 2018 Owen Sound Sports Hall of Fame inductees. A race of emotions fluttered within Crone. Recognition from the town that stuck by his side from the beginning of his journey all the way to its end had now given him the final and most important gift, a legacy never to be forgotten. “It still hasn’t really sunk in” said Crone, still in disbelief of the achievement. “It doesn’t feel real until I am down at the Bay Shore and I see myself down there. I really don’t even know how to describe it to be honest.”

Crone was inducted in a star studded class for the small town which included Olympic Skier Larisa Yurkiw and the 2011OHL Championship winning Owen Sound Attack team.

“I got to where I am today by just persevering through it and not letting shit get in my way. If someone tells me sorry you can’t do that or you won’t be able to do that when it comes to being confined to a wheelchair I would find a way to do it just so I could be like oh really I can’t do it? well look at me now”.

Three of the most influential and important sports stories to ever emerge from the small town but it was clear that Crone not only held a place of respect athletically but he held a spot in each and every Owen Sound residents heart, as they could proudly look at the kid they helped mold into the champion who appeared proudly in-front of them.