

ON ICE FULL STRENGTH IN CLASS

Tanner Fritz, the first in his family to earn a high school diploma, prepares for commencement and a path to the NHL.

By Adam King | Photos by Kevin Fitzsimons

It was apparent early on that Tanner Fritz had talent. Even at age 5, he skated better than the other kids.

Most novice hockey players just want to skate as hard and fast as they can once they touch the ice, but Tanner, now a senior starting forward and captain of the Ohio State men's hockey team, was more controlled.

His mind was mapping strategy as his blades carved a path through defenders. He understood placement and position. He had a deft pass and a scorer's mentality. He always had just a little bit more that set him apart.

By the time Tanner was 9, Irwin Fritz recognized the talent in his son and what it might mean for Tanner's future. It meant pushing him in an opposite direction from the career path of Irwin and his two stepsons, Draypr, 29, and Dustin, 30, whom Irwin also raised.

EDUCATION FIRST

In the many places the Fritzes lived in rural Canada, young men's futures often were tied to the oil fields. Irwin, who grew up on a grain farm and dropped out of high school for a job, has spent his entire

adult life working those fields or managing others who did.

"I wasn't focused at school, and I felt at the time I was basically spinning my wheels and wasting my time," Irwin said.

Draypr and Dustin also dropped out of high school to follow the lure of good money in oil.

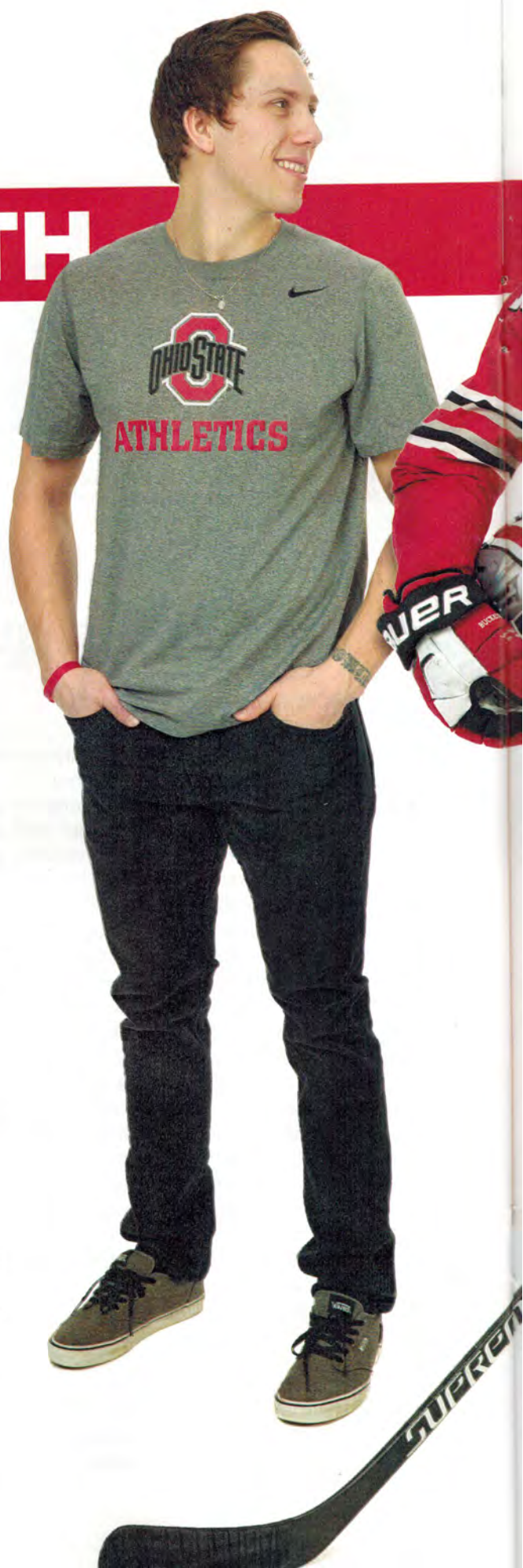
But the work was grueling. Being away from family two weeks at a time was the norm, and the elements were never kind: 10-hour shifts spent in the mud and rain during the summer and in wind chills of 55 below zero in the winter.

Irwin wanted better for Tanner.

"One of the things I missed was an education, and I wish I wouldn't have," Irwin said. "It would have helped me in my career and life. I wanted Tanner to have those advantages."

When it became clear Tanner had a future with hockey, Irwin made sure his son focused on schoolwork as well as stickwork.

"Growing up, I saw which way my life could go," Tanner said. "I saw what my brothers did, and that wasn't the life I wanted. Having my dad guide me through education





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— Ohio State hockey coach Steve Rohlik

was a really big deal for me."

It wasn't always easy, Tanner acknowledged. In Canada, there is no high school hockey. Tanner played in the Alberta Junior Hockey League, which was a significant time and travel commitment.

"I knew I wasn't going to be the best student in the class, but I didn't want to be the worst," Tanner said. "I just wanted to make sure that I maintained decent grades to give me the best opportunity to go to university."

In the spring of 2009, Tanner became the first in his immediate family to earn a high school diploma, graduating from Grande Prairie St. Joseph High School.

"It brought me a few tears in my eyes," Irwin said. "I was very proud."

A DUAL THREAT

When it came time to elect a captain for the 2014–15 season, Ohio State hockey players sent every one of their votes to Tanner.

It wasn't for his flash or his bravado. It wasn't because he was a vocal leader. It was a unanimous sign of respect for his abilities and

his determination — both on and off the ice.

When he arrived at Ohio State in the summer of 2011, after playing two more years of junior hockey, Tanner had an epiphany: Hockey would always be ingrained in him, but it might not always be there for him.

So he set about transforming his so-so academic habits. As a freshman, he earned a 3.0 GPA, qualifying him as an Ohio State Scholar-Athlete. He hadn't known the honor existed before receiving it, but being the competitor he is, he set his personal bar to achieve it every year — and he has. Going into this semester, he had a 3.4 cumulative GPA and has twice been named Academic All-Big Ten.

"If there's an example out there to follow, here he is," Coach Steve Rohlik said. "As a coach when you're trying to create a culture and have some accountability and talk about the responsibilities both on and off the ice, not only to yourself and this team but to your university, I think that's what Tanner Fritz stands for."

Hockey has the longest season of any college sport. So for Tanner, it's a point of pride that he has maintained high standards athletically

IN THE CLASS

"I'm not just doing it for myself, but for my family."

ACHIEVING HIS GOALS

2011-12

- Named Most Improved Player by a team vote after scoring 6 goals and 8 assists
- Designated Ohio State Scholar-Athlete for earning a 3.0 GPA or better



2012-13

- Finished second on team in points (37) and first in assists (26)
- Named Academic All-Big Ten selection and Ohio State Scholar-Athlete
- Voted second-team All-Central Collegiate Hockey Association
- Led the CCHA in scoring (32), the third Buckeye to do so and the first since 1998, and assists (23)

2013-14

- Earned his second Academic All-Big Ten and third Ohio State Scholar-Athlete recognition
- Helped lead his team to the Big Ten Tournament championship game, scoring points in the quarterfinal, semifinal and final games
- Invited to Chicago Blackhawks' summer development camp

2014-15

- Named captain by unanimous vote of his teammates
- Entered the season as the team's leading returning scorer and the Big Ten's leading scorer in average points per game
- Held 3.4 cumulative GPA going into his final semester



Rick Harrison

and academically. He is one of just 20 collegiate hockey candidates for the national Senior CLASS Award, which recognizes standouts in the community, classroom and competition as well as admirable character.

Tanner considers his accomplishments a tribute to the people who steered him down this path: his father; his mother, Shirley; and his cousin Daymen (Bencharski) Rycroft, a four-year letter winner with the Buckeyes from 2001 to 2004.

This spring, Tanner hopes his entire family will be in Ohio Stadium to see him accept his degree in sport industry. He wants to pursue an NHL career first, but he expects to use it one day to develop and run hockey programs in Grand Prairie, coach and do player scouting.

"Just being the first in my family to go to university is huge," Tanner said. "And I'm not just doing it for myself, but for my family. I know they'll be extremely proud of me, and I'll be able to write a new chapter in my life." ★



MT Actions Photography

Tanner (right) appreciates the support of his family: parents Irwin and Shirley and stepbrothers Draypr and Dustin.

TOP: Tanner works with faculty member Nicole Kraft on a media law project before class begins in Derby Hall.

ON THE ICE

“I’ve flown under the radar, and that’s the kind of guy I am.”



TOUGH SEASONS PART OF THE GAME

Tanner Fritz had never experienced such anguish. He always played on hockey teams with storybook comebacks.

Last season brought unmatched agony as Ohio State shocked its way into the Big Ten championship game by beating No. 1 seed Minnesota, only to fall to Wisconsin after leading with five minutes left. Tanner's hopes of making the NCAA Tournament were dashed.

“It’s like your heart has been ripped out,” Tanner said. “To be on the losing end was pretty crappy and a feeling I’ll never forget.”

This season, the team has been inconsistent, and there are no guarantees Tanner’s final year will be the breakthrough. But his

hockey mentality leaves no room for rollercoaster emotions, and his play has been equally even keel.

He entered the season as the team’s leading scorer with 83 points. Through mid-February, he was second with 15 points (six goals, nine assists).

Last summer, Tanner — who sees himself as a “200-foot player” because his skills translate well the length of the ice — caught the attention of the Chicago Blackhawks, who invited him to their development camp.

“Does he have a chance to reach his dream and put an NHL sweater on? I’ve got no reservation that he could make it there,” Ohio State coach Steve Rohlik said. “He

understands there will be some failures and tough times.

“But to me, you look at him, and it’s the same Tanner every day. You have to check for a heartbeat sometimes. But that’s what his makeup is, and that’s why he’s very successful.”

Tanner said he’s prepared for a long route to a professional career, slogging his way through the minor leagues, if that’s what it takes.

“I would like to start at the top (by being drafted). That would be ideal. But in reality, I’m going to have to work my way up,” he said. “I’ve flown under the radar, and that’s the kind of guy I am. And I’m OK with that. I know hard work does pay off.” ★