

# Skating Through Tragedy: The Brotherhood of the Ducks

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*To the gentlemen that reminded me that the universal experience of joy through heartbreak is evident. To the men who have endured much more than anyone should in their college trajectory– but continue to speak, to be kind, and to show unwavering compassion in their each move.*

*To the coach who leads the boys by example and continues to teach these boys how to be men.*

*And to Henry Bradford, who I was lucky enough to know his triumphant soul.*

The term brotherhood on its own is such a cliché— as if the simple act of friendship between males somehow translates into unity. It may be a cliché for its societal overconsumption, especially in men’s athletic departments. But one piece remains undefinable: brotherhood can go much deeper. And for the University of Oregon hockey team, brotherhood always prevails.

“When I came to Oregon, I was playing hockey for myself,” said Jackson Henningsgard, co-president of the University of Oregon hockey team. The overall consensus of being a college athlete is sacrifice. It takes grit, it takes patience, and an overflowing amount of passion to embark on a dynamic road.

Growing up with his father coaching him in hockey, he felt an immense amount of pressure to perform the best he could. Henningsgard played to win, to be the best.

In 2022, Henningsgard picked up his suburban identity rooted in Amery, Wisconsin, and migrated to become a Duck. He left his junior hockey league a year earlier in hopes of becoming the person he always longed to be: a winner. But what Henningsgard didn't know was that his definition of a winner would change through hardship and failures endured on the road.

Henningsgard's first year of hockey at UO taught him many things— one being that loyalty in friendship is crucial. His teammates Roddy Peterson, Isaiah Strategos, and Liam Baird all took him under their wing.

Located on the outskirts of the UO campus rests a deep green home with obvious signs of living, tainted windows, an overgrown lawn, and hockey equipment contaminated by the stench of hard work. But this house was more than just its attributes, it's where Henningsgard began his college hockey career.

When they weren't at the rink practicing drills, in a training lift, or traveling for games, they were cooped up together. And although their lives were always busy, they made time to understand each other. The relationship that was built between them, strong and honest, helped them navigate the complicated roads ahead of them.

The hockey season started and a clear divide on the team was apparent. A lack of strong coaching led to a battle of egos on and off the ice.

The egos visible were for plenty of reasons but it was no secret that there was a gap in how people felt. Peterson suggested that there were many new players who may have expected more from the club hockey team than what was delivered. Some guys on the team held an apparent mindset of “I am the best,” which only worsened the egos.

“The other teammates played with an ego, but Peterson and Strategos never did,” said Henningsgard. Despite the divide in sportsmanship, every player still got along with one another– there was just a lack of unity.

The team always had fun when they could. The mesh of personalities created a lively atmosphere and the team made long-lasting memories. Dayton Clarke, a forward during the 2022 season, was one of the characters whose personality will always be remembered.

“Clarke was a riot. He made everyone around him laugh and always had a smile on his face,” said Peterson.

On Mother’s Day weekend, the players and their respective mothers celebrated at the Henningsgard house. The night was a stereotypical college night for the hockey team. They partied, laughed and enjoyed each other's company at season's end.

On May 13th, 2022, Dayton Clarke never made it home. He was hit by a delivery truck on his walk and died on the scene.

Henningsgard, Peterson, Strategos and Baird all found out about Clarke’s tragic passing through an email received by the coach the following morning. At that moment, the boys relied on each other more than ever.

After the passing of Clarke, an immediate shift in the dynamic of the team occurred. Egos were dropped and the only priority was supporting one another. Clarke’s family traveled to Eugene numerous times to collect his belongings and grieve with the players.

“I think how strong the team came together helped [Clarke’s mom] and her family a lot through it,” said Peterson. Many of the players also traveled to Victoria, B.C. for a service in honor of Dayton Clarke.

The next season approached and Clarke’s jersey hung on the bench. Some players left the school and the team because of the tragedy.

Faced with unprecedented challenges like shaping a team after the loss of a teammate, Jackson Hyman took over leadership and became the new coach.

Under the care of Coach Hyman an entire new bond was built. Whether it was the loss of Clarke or the attention that coach put on his players– the previous ego and stiff shoulders from teammates left for good.

Peterson and Stategos roomed together for their final year at UO, meanwhile Henningsgards, a sophomore, lived with six other men in a cornflower blue house, the “hockey house.” During this time, their inner circle expanded. Another goalie alongside Peterson, Henry Bradford, became a core member of the group.

One of the relationships that Henningsgard treasured was his friendship with Bradford, no tension, constant support of one another.

“Bradford was one of those guys who I could go to for anything and he would always listen. We never fought and we always had fun together,” said Henningsgard.

Whether they were in off season and smoking a pack of Marlboro reds on the porch of that cornflower blue house, or drinking a Budweiser in the campus bar, or doing absolutely nothing at all– Henningsgard and Bradford were always together.

Bradford lived alone and preferred it that way. But as their friendship blossomed and roommates graduated– the thought of Henningsgard and Bradford being roommates came into the picture. Henningsgard finally felt like Bradford would drop his single-living preference and live with him.

“I couldn’t wait to live with him. I knew he would be a great roommate and it would just be fun,” said Henningsgard.

When Coach Hyman first met the team, he had them over at his apartment and asked each member individually what their goals were for the season.

“Almost all of the players responded saying that they want to score this many points, this many goals, or that they want more playing time,” said Coach Hyman. He realized that what the team needed most wasn’t about finding value through winning or losing– but finding brotherhood.

The team that year was not anything exceptional, but what was worth noticing was how close the team got with each other. They built friendships with every team member and emphasized brotherhood as a whole. They were always there for each other and led with care.

At the end of the year, Stategos and Peterson both graduated and moved away. Peterson mentioned that leaving the team was extremely hard but he tried to savor every moment he could with them.

“It was the closest group of friends I’ve ever had and probably will ever have,” said Peterson.

The team for Peterson was much more than just a sport– it was his family. They shared laughs while dealing with heartbreak and enjoyed all the complicated bits of life together.

The 2024 hockey season started with Henningsgard as co-president, and Bradford as the lead goalie. The team was hopeful, the team dynamic strong.

Each season, the veterans of the team put together a “rookie” night for the new players. The event has some sort of mischievous activity and scavenger hunt that the rookies perform followed by a party to bond together as a team.

Bradford was in charge of mapping together the scavenger hunt because he loved that stuff and had a witty mind. When it was time to begin, and the team called Bradford, he was nowhere to be found. An abundance of missed phone calls and his vacancy made the team worry.

A few members of the team, Henningsgard included, went over to Bradford’s apartment. When they tried the front door, it was locked and uneasily quiet. Because the boys were worried, they called for the door to be unlocked so they could check in on Bradford.

After accessing the door, the boys found a sight that they will never forget. Bradford had passed away from an unexpected cardiac arrest.

“I remember exactly what I was wearing, I remember the cold apartment, and I remember the exact feeling– it’s something I’ll never be able to forget,” said Henningsgard.

And just like that, the previous heartbreak of losing Clarke repeated, but this time it hit closer to home for Henningsgard.

When Coach Hyman heard his phone ring that night, he thought the boys were calling because they had gotten in trouble. But what Hyman didn’t expect was hearing Henningsgard’s broken muffles over the phone struggling to repeat that they had found Bradford dead. About 10 minutes later, Hyman showed up at the hockey house.

“It was just a shock. It was unexpected– I mean we hung out with Bradford that Friday morning and everything was fine,” said Coach Hyman.

The porch that the team always laughed on was now covered in tears. Nobody knew what to say and what to do, but in that moment, silence was the only thing they needed.

Silence followed the boys for a few days. The one thing that Henningsgard needed was his familiar shoulders to cry on. While that was all he could think about, Peterson and Strategos were on a flight back to Eugene and returned to campus to mourn the life of their teammate with everyone else.

After time of grieving with the team, Bradfords family asked some of the players to help clean out Bradford's apartment. This was difficult for everyone, but especially hard for the players who initially found Bradford dead. But the boys were there for one another with a shoulder to cry on.

"I don't think it ever truly set in for me until I left Bradfords empty apartment and drove away in his truck," said Peterson. Another player on the team, Jionni Esposito, bought Bradfords truck from his parents. Bradford was Esposito's "big brother" on the team.

Community efforts appeared and everyone aided the team with true support. Bradford was loved deeply— as a player, as a family member, and as a radiant human.

The hockey season kept going, but the boys played every game in tribute to the members they had lost. Every game, Clarke and Bradford's jerseys hang on the players bench. In honor, the boys hosted a memorial game for Henry Bradford on November 1st— what would've been his 23rd birthday. The team continues to come together for each member struggling with grief and plays as a united front. There are still many long weekends of the season, but Henningsgard is hopeful.

Henningsgard used to play hockey for himself and to win, but now he plays for his team, and for Clarke and Bradford.