Turning A Dream
Into A Reality

Hard Work, Sacrifice and Dedication Pays Off For United States’ Youngest Olympian

Every young hockey player, from the time they strapped on a pair of skates and felt the breeze as they whisked down the ice for the very first time, has dreamed about standing on the blue line during the flag raising ceremony at an Olympic Gold Medal game as they played their country’s national anthem. Very few have ever been able to realize that dream and have been able to feel the pride of representing their nation by winning that Gold Medal.

Brody Roybal, from Northlake, Illinois, will have that chance next March at the 2014 Winter Paralympic games in Sochi, Russia. As the youngest player ever to be selected to the United States Paralympic Sled team, and possibly the youngest ever chosen for any nation’s Paralympic sled team, Brody’s selection to the team did not come without a lot of hard work, sacrifice and dedication.

Brody was born without any legs . . . to make matters more difficult, he is unable to wear prostheses since he has no femur bones. This perfect abnormality hasn’t stopped Brody from pursuing his dream — in fact it has empowered him. At the age of five his first attempt at sports was wheelchair basketball — a sport he tried and didn’t like. He then tried horseback riding which also wasn’t something that captured Brody’s interest. Then, his parents Bob and Michele heard about sled hockey for kids with physical disabilities and they thought he should give it a try. That was all it took. He was directed by Patrick Byrne, a member of the 2002 United States gold medal sled team to go the Hornets Youth Sled team, a program available at no charge for any youngster with a physical disability who can propel himself or herself on a sled.

For the next eight and a half years Brody worked on his game and became one of the top players on the Hornets team. At the age of 13 years of age, JJ O’Connor, general manager of the Hornets and chair of the USA Disabled Hockey Program, knew it was time for Brody to move on to the next level. “It was hard to let go of a player of his caliber, but the staff knew the best thing for Brody and the Hornets was for him to play against better competition”. At the time there was some concern, especially from his mom, that Brody, at just 13 years of age, would be facing players as much as three times his age and weight. But that didn’t bother Brody in the least becoming one of the top players on his adult RIC Blackhawks team over the past two years.
At the age of thirteen Brody and a friend and fellow sled player, Declan Farmer from Tampa, Florida who is a year older than Brody, tried out and were both cut from the US Developmental Sled team (*a feeder team for the US National team*). Knowing that these two players were the future for the US program, O’Connor and Jim Smith, head coach of the Hornets sled team and chair of the USA Hockey Player Development Committee, secured funding from various sources and started the US Patriot team for young up and coming US sled players. They conducted camps and international competition during that year and according to O’Connor, “these young players needed that year to further refine their skills and without it they might not be where they are today in terms of development”. The following year, when Brody was 14 years old he did not make the National team and played for the US Development team. Declan was able to jump right onto the National team that year, bypassing the Development team.

Last February Brody made the decision in order for him to take his game to the next level he needed to become stronger. As a result, he and his family scraped together the funds to hire a personal trainer, Kevin Nawracaj. Kevin works at Leyden High School where Brody is enrolled as a sophomore. Brody began working out several days a week with Kevin. In addition, Brody converted his garage into a gym securing workout equipment from a variety of sources so he could workout everyday.

After a year with the Development team Brody decided to go to the United States Paralympic Sled National team tryouts that were conducted this past July in Buffalo, New York. He was then selected to be one of eighteen players of the United States National Sled team until December when the squad has to trim down to seventeen players to conform to Paralympic rules.

At the end of August, O’Connor and Smith met with Brody and his family and advised Brody the only way he was going to be one of the players selected to the final team that would compete in Sochi was to make a total commitment to the sport by working out everyday, both on and off the ice and giving up many of the things his high school friends would be enjoying.

Brody accepted the challenge and the regiment that began back in early September. Smith and O’Connor were able to secure ice time seven days a week every morning from 6:00 a.m. till 7:00 a.m. through the generous help of the folks at the Edge Ice Arena, a five minute trip from Brody’s home. Five days a week Brody wakes up at 5:00 a.m. and devours a light breakfast. He then heads off to the rink with a ride from his grandpa and meets Jim Smith, his Hornets coach. They both take the ice at 6:00 a.m. every morning and work on various drills to strengthen Brody’s non-dominant hand, speed, agility, shooting and passing techniques. He then gets dropped of at school by Smith who then drives to Brody’s house and drops off his equipment so it can dry out before the next mornings session before going to his office.
Brody then attends school until his 4th period where he has been excused from gym class and works out with his trainer Kevin 5 days a week. After completing his school around 3:00 p.m. Brody then goes home, catches a quick snack and heads to his garage for another workout, many times with his best friend Zack Urbaniak who plays able body hockey for the Leyden varsity hockey team.

After the workout Brody downs a quick dinner and then hits the books to finish his homework so he can be in bed by 9:00 p.m. in order to wake up at 5:00 a.m. the next morning and start the whole routine over again. In addition to his regular routine, Brody skates three evenings a week, twice with his RIC Blackhawks adult team and once as a student coach with his youth team, the Hornets. On the weekends, Brody and Smith skate in the morning from 6:00 a.m. -7:00 a.m. and then Brody hits his garage/gym for an afternoon workout.

“It has been a great pleasure to work with Brody every morning. He has an unbelievable work ethic and his hard work, sacrifice and dedication has hopefully resulted in him becoming a better hockey player” according to Smith. “We know all of the things Brody has had to give up in order for him to take his game to the next level. Hopefully with his tenacity he will be able to achieve his dream and wear the USA crest on the front of his sweater”.

This past weekend the United States Sled Hockey team participated in the World Sled Challenge along with Canada, Korea and Russia. The US squad took home the Silver Medal going 3-2 losing only to Canada in round robin play and the Gold medal game. Two days after the Gold Medal game, the staff of the US National team announced the roster for the 2014 Paralympic Sled team and Brody’s named was called.

Needless to say Brody was extremely excited about being chosen to represent his country, especially at such a young age. “I feel extremely honored at being chosen to play for the USA team and am very excited about representing my country. I am thankful for my family and for all of their support and to JJ for developing these sled programs for me to participate in. I am also thankful to Jim Smith who has gotten up each morning to come out and coach me and for putting up with all of the barbs I throw at him”.

The next step for Brody is to continue his seven day a week skating with Jim Smith and workout regime daily until he leaves for the Paralympic games in Sochi in late February. The hope is that with Brody’s continued hard work, sacrifice and dedication it will pay big dividends for Brody and his teammates at the 2014 Winter Paralympic Games.

We wish him the best of luck going for the GOLD in Sochi!

*Editor’s Note: Kevin McKee from RIC Blackhawks also made 2014 Sled Squad. Kevin, from Chicago, Illinois, will be featured in the next edition of the AHAI Newsletter.*