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## BENCHED

As a kid living in Winnipeg, Manitoba, wintertime meant hockey for me. I started playing when I was six or seven, and by the age of ten I had come to realize that I was no Dale Hawerchuk, as much as I longed to be.

My first few years playing were spent on defence, often times allowing the opposing forwards to get past me so that I could execute my patented Breakaway Slide Stopper. This usually amounted to crashing first into the opposing forward, then my own goalie, and finally with the three of us ending up in our team's net.

When I turned ten, I decided that I wanted to be a forward. I'd gotten a taste of scoring the previous season and liked it.

It was an enjoyable season on forward, and my team was good enough to make the playoffs. I thought that the primary difference between the regular season and playoffs was that we no longer had to play our games on the frigid outdoor rinks around the city, but then I was only ten.

Besides playing forward for the first time, and making the playoffs for the first time, that year had another first: My first male teacher. It was something I had truly

dreaded before the school year had begun, but a few months later every kid in that class including me thought that Mr. Hallstead might have been the coolest guy in the world. He was always happy, he taught us things from years ahead in our curriculum, and he rode a motorcycle to school when the weather permitted; arriving to a crowd of kids who now pestered their parents to take them to school early so they could be the first one there to wait for their beloved teacher. He had also gone to a few sporting events that his students were playing in, so naturally I took the opportunity to ask him to my first ever playoff game and he said yes.

The day of the big game arrived and I couldn't have been happier. My father was out of town on business, so my Mom took me to the game and sat with Mr. Hallstead a few rows behind our bench.

In the dressing room before the game we learned that our "other" coach would be filling in again. Our regular coach often traveled and when he was away he would have a tall, skinny kid of about twenty years old coached the team. He had one of those bodies that made you wonder how it was able to support his head. He had long frizzy and curly hair that he covered with a green mesh baseball cap bearing some obscure company's logo on a small white panel on the front.

He took coaching seriously, very seriously. On each of his other interim coaching games that season he had used the chalkboard to try to instruct us on what we should be doing. On the bench he was often yelling for this player or the other to do something or be somewhere. After the games were over he would expose us to *detailed* descriptions of his dates with "hot" lady friends, which I now believe were completely fictional. We all knew what to expect from him, and none of us minded that much.

For the playoff game he would control the forwards while one of the player's fathers watched the defence.

The start of the game was tense and our young coach was very agitated, barking out orders to the other kids, and switching different kids in and out of the lines to ostensibly produce some scoring chances. His voice was squeaky and unpleasant sounding, but was partially muted by the sound of the game in front of me. Skates digging into the ice, sticks slapping together, the dull thud of the puck knocking against the boards. Several times in that first period I readied myself to step on the ice, and each of those times the coach tapped me and said I was off the line in favour of one of the other players. I sat on the bench, upset and disappointed, but still eagerly awaiting my first shift. I had, after all, only missed a few shifts to start the game. It had never happened before, but I was certain I'd hit the ice soon enough.

I asked when I would play on one of the stoppages of play and the coach told me he'd let me know, his eyes never leaving the ice surface.

It wasn't much, but enough to give me hope. My emotions began to rock back and forth between excitement and growing despair as shifts ended and began, but I was still not called on to play.

I looked back behind the bench a few times that period, hoping that some sort of teacher emergency had called Mr. Hallstead away from the game even though it was a Saturday, but each time I saw he and my mother there looking concerned.

As the buzzer sounded to end the first period I felt well justified in asking the coach again when I would get to play.

His answer?

“You should probably go back to defence if you want to see the ice today. I don’t have a place for you on forward, and we need to score goals.”

He said it about how you might imagine it. One could argue that by ten years old a kid could understand that reasoning, but I couldn’t. I just didn’t feel I was any worse than the other kids out there and besides, I’d invited my teacher to watch! Surely that warranted some consideration. Not only that, but I’d played forward for almost the entire season. This was a house league, and it had always been an equal ice time league for all players. Just because it was the playoffs, how had all that changed?

The second period began and there I sat, still with the forwards who came and went from the ice. If anything like that had ever happened to me prior to that game I might have been able to warn my teacher, but it had taken me by surprise. Still, I had some hope that the coach wasn’t really serious about not playing me on forward so I sat it out, hoping for my chance.

After the third or fourth shift I tasted the salty liquid in my mouth. It took me a second to realize what it was. I had held back my emotions with such vigour that tears had been forced out in silence from the pressure. I watched the time on the scoreboard counting down. Each second that ticked off was a sharp and penetrating dagger, and late in that second period it had become unbearable.

Tears that had been quietly streaming down my face for much of that period were now accompanied by sobbing. My shoulders shuddered despite all my efforts to maintain a calm exterior, at least one that my Mom and teacher would see.

I cried, I sat amongst my teammates and openly cried. Kids on either side of me eventually noticed, nudging each other.

“Hey, look at Glen,” I heard someone say.

I tried, but I could no longer control it.

I looked back with those tears covering my face to see if perhaps, mercifully, Mr. Hallstead had left, but there he still sat eyebrows furrowed in a look that I didn't understand at the time. I had hoped my helmet and mask might shroud my tears, but I saw their recognition and pity before I began to turn back to face the ice. As I did so I noticed that the assistant coach standing near the defence also looking at me with concern.

I waited another shift then decided I had to do something. I rose from the bench and moved around to the back of it. The coach and most of the players on my team watched me, despite how engaged they had seemed with the game.

I walked down the length of the bench towards the assistant coach. I saw the heads of Mr. Hallstead and my Mom following my every skated step. It was a walk of shame, the first I had encountered outside of those dreams of being pantless in school. By the time I reached the assistant coach I was sobbing uncontrollably.

He had told me once, earlier in the season, that if I ever wanted to play defence he'd let me. At the time I had not said much, but had thought highly of myself and better suited to being a forward. I didn't feel that way anymore, in fact I feared his rejection.

I tapped him on the shoulder and when he saw me he leaned down close to my mask.

“Can – I – play – defence?” I asked.

He smiled and said, “Sure, you can be first on for the third period. Take a spot on the bench Glen.”

When the buzzer sounded to end the second period I felt so excited. I turned around to my Mom and teacher and nodded enthusiastically, but they still weren't sure what was happening. When the first shift was sent out for the third period my legs were as surprised as the rest of me to be on the ice. Before the draw I did a few little circles before drifting backwards into position. The puck dropped, and off I went. Skates digging into the ice, sticks slapping together, the dull thud of the puck knocking against the boards. The sounds were mine now too. Late, but still mine.

I don't remember if we won the game, or much else afterwards beyond smiling as proudly as I could at my Mom and Mr. Hallstead a few times during that third period.

After the game my teacher came to tell me he thought I had played great on defence while casting glances at the door of the dressing room. My Mom, red faced, came in then followed closely by the coach, and then my teacher was gone.

She got me out of my equipment, and both of us were silent until she suggested we go on a rare trip to McDonald's for lunch. The last things I remember of that day were tasting the salt on the French fries, feeling so much love from my mother, and wondering how I could explain it all to my teacher on Monday morning.