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A Different Kind Of Star Athlete

In a year of scandal, a reminder of why we root

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CHICAGO -- You've probably never heard of Tim Breslin. He played forward for the Chicago Wolves, a minor-league hockey team. A year ago, he was diagnosed with a rare cancer. In eleven weeks, at the age of 37, he was dead.

What happened next is a lesson in what sports is supposed to be about. Despite what the media show us, it really isn't about millionaire athletes lambasting teammates on ESPN. It isn't about people with God-given talent taking banned substances for an edge, or how many strippers can fit on a charter boat. It isn't even about winning the Super Bowl or signing a \$100 million contract.



Tim Breslin

For every Terrell Owens, there are millions of women and men who play not for riches or glory but for the sheer joy of competing. Tim Breslin was one. He loved being on a team, with his guys, on the ice. He would've loved to play in the National Hockey League, too, but when he fell short, he kept playing anyway and made a living at it.

A community grew up around him -- guys who played with him as kids, guys who played with him later, guys who knew guys who played with him, along with wives and girlfriends and coaches and Zamboni drivers, an ever-widening circle of people who love a peculiar game. Some knew Mr. Breslin; some didn't. When he died, this extended hockey family rushed to the aid of his immediate family. It was more inspiring than anything you'll ever see on "SportsCenter."

Tim Breslin first laced on skates growing up in Chicago's western suburbs. His ironworker father, Jim Breslin, built a backyard rink where Tim skated with his older brothers, Mike and Jimmy. At a frozen pond nearby, his brothers would send Tim out to test the ice thickness; once, he broke through to his knees and had to slog home in slush-covered skates.

Mr. Breslin played for Lake Superior State University when it won the NCAA title in 1988. Three years later, he signed with the NHL's Los Angeles Kings. He liked to tell about skating with the great Wayne Gretzky in training camp. But he didn't stick.

He played eight years in the minors, the last five in his hometown, where he married Jami Rutili. He could have sulked about not making the big league. Instead he thrilled at playing in front of family and friends. "I'm a Chicago guy," he liked to say. After the Wolves won their league title in 1998, he gave his championship ring to his dad.

He was strong on skates and deft with his hands, but his head and his heart made him a player. Battling in front of the net, "Bres" celebrated plenty of goals flat on his back. Bobby Nardella, who played with Mr. Breslin as a boy and on the Wolves, called him the "big piece of glue" that held teams together.

In 371 games with the Wolves, Mr. Breslin scored 41 goals and 90 assists. He was never league MVP. But in 1997 he was named his league's Man of the Year for attending charity events and speaking to children at libraries about education. Tall and lean, with thick eyebrows and bright blue eyes, he might have looked to the kids like a giant leprechaun.

After retiring from pro hockey in 1999, he helped manage an Irish pub. He and Jami had Shane, now 6; Paige, 3; and Chase, 2. Mr. Breslin golfed, fished, coached kid hockey and played with the Chicago Blackhawk Alumni Association. He had a wonderful life.

He'd been complaining of stomach pains for days when his wife took him to the hospital on Thanksgiving last year. Doctors found cancer of the appendix. He underwent surgery and was scheduled for chemotherapy. A few days before his first treatment, Mr. Breslin showed up at Johnny's IceHouse, where the Blackhawk alums were playing their weekly pickup game. They thought he'd watch and then head to the rink bar, the Stanley Club, for a soda. But Mr. Breslin played. Then he ordered a Bud Light.

He died Feb. 9. His casket left the memorial service through an archway of hockey sticks held aloft by former teammates. For Mr. Nardella, his old friend was too young, his death too sudden, his kids too small to merely have a funeral. "We had to do something more," he says.

Along with Cliff Koroll, a former Blackhawk player and president of the alumni club, Mr. Nardella started planning a benefit game between ex-Wolves and Hawks that would benefit Mr. Breslin's children. It wasn't the best time to plug hockey. Many fans were soured by the cancellation of the NHL season. The Wolves and Hawks were more accustomed to competing for fans than cooperating. But there was something about Mr. Breslin -- and the sport he loved -- that made it easy.

Hockey players are an unusual breed. They slam each other into walls, then line up and shake hands. They play until they are fat and old and their equipment smells so bad that they have to stow it in the garage. Whether they are in Moscow or Minneapolis, Stockholm or Saskatoon, they know that if they can find a rink, they can find a friend.



Former Chicago Wolves and Blackhawks with the Breslins at the Breslin Cup.

To fill Allstate Arena seats for the Breslin Cup, the organizers needed marquee players. NHL Hall of Famer Denis Savard, a former Hawk fan favorite who'd met Mr. Breslin once, canceled an appearance in Toronto to play. Chicagoan and former NHL star Tony Granato drove overnight from Boston to help out. Chicago native Chris Chelios of the Detroit Red Wings came, as did NHLers Doug Weight and Jim Dowd, college teammates of Mr. Breslin. For their trouble the players received no pay, no flights, no limousines -- just a few standing ovations.

The village of Rosemont, Ill., donated use of the arena and parking. A law firm chipped in \$10,000 of work; a partner, who didn't know Mr. Breslin, plays hockey. The Wolves' rivals, the Milwaukee Admirals, paid \$1,000 for an ad on the rink boards. Bobby Hull and other past Hawk stars who didn't know Mr. Breslin autographed jerseys for auction. "I don't think anybody said no," Mr. Koroll says.

On a Friday in June, more than 10,000 people paid \$20 apiece to cheer Mr. Breslin's father and son Shane dropping the opening faceoff. The event raised well over \$250,000.

In recent days, a college basketball star was suspended for breaking a teammate's jaw with a punch, a pro for refusing to enter a game in its final seconds. But here's some news you may have missed: The Chicago Wolves hung a banner remembering a man who represented those of us who play to be part of something larger than ourselves. "Tim Breslin," it reads, "1967-2005."