

ELEVEN SECONDS ... AND COUNTING

After hockey accident leaves him paralyzed, Travis Roy rises to new challenge

BY BRIAN KOONZ
PHOTO RICHARD PETROSINO

LONG BEFORE THE FRIGHTENED WHISPERS AND THE NECK BRACE, Travis Roy remembers family dinners when he couldn't wait to clean his plate. It didn't matter what food was on it. In his mind—the hockey-filled head of a coach's son—it was the longest prelude ever.

"In the house I grew up in, just off the kitchen, there was a closet. And right above the door, someone had screwed one of those metal pencil sharpeners," Roy told about 200 students and others who'd come to hear him speak this fall at Quinnipiac during a talk sponsored by Pi Kappa Phi fraternity.

"My dad would always hang his whistle off the pencil sharpener. Underneath, there was a bag of hockey pucks," Roy said. "After dinner, Dad would head to the closet, grab his whistle and the pucks, and we were out the door."

The small rink where Roy skated better and faster than the other kids in Yarmouth, Maine—and just about everywhere else—was the perfect place to launch a boy's dream. By comparison, Walter Brown Arena at Boston University, where he found himself years later, was enormous, with national championship banners adorning the rafters.

On Oct. 20, 1995, the Terriers raised a red-and-white banner to mark their fourth national championship. Roy watched the pregame ceremony in awe with his teammates. He was one of four freshmen hoping to play in the season-opener against North Dakota.

"Two minutes into the game, we scored," Roy recalled. "The place went nuts. The bench went crazy. The pep band started playing, and then, there was a tap on the back of my shoulder that I had been waiting for my whole life."

When Roy jumped onto the ice and skated like a rocket in his BU uniform, everyone cheered, none louder than his father, Lee. Eleven seconds later, Roy flew headfirst into the boards and did not get up. He was face down on the ice he loved. Roy was the first to know he was paralyzed. He was 20 years old and would never walk again, let alone skate like the wind.

"There are times in our life when we choose our challenges, and other times when the challenges simply choose us," Roy said. "It is what we do in the face of those challenges that defines who we are, and more important, who we can and will become."



Lee Roy came out of the stands that night when his son didn't get up. He leaned into the circle of staff to give a pep talk, but he never saw the small puddle of melted ice made by his boy's panicked breath as he said, "C'mon, Trav. Get up. Be tough. There's a hockey game to win."

Roy couldn't turn his head to look into his father's eyes. "I told him my neck hurt and I thought I was in big trouble," Roy told the audience of mostly students, many of whom weren't even born when he got hurt. "And I was in big trouble." Roy knew his father was crumbling inside. This, he could surely feel.

The X-rays and tests confirmed the worst: Roy had fractured his fourth and fifth cervical vertebrae, leaving him a quadriplegic unable to care for himself. Nearly 23 years later, Roy travels the nation to share how he healed from the inside out.

"For the first 20 years of my life, I pretty much chose my challenges. Most of them took place inside the curved dashboards of an ice hockey rink," Roy said. Everything changed after the accident. For the first four months, he stared at the anonymous ceiling tiles of a Boston hospital and wondered, "Is this how the rest of my life is going to be?"

Roy posed the same question to the crowd. "Think about your goals, whether they are personal or professional, this semester or this year. How much do you want to make them happen? Take a chance that could change your life? Do you know what happens when you don't take a chance? Generally nothing."

Roy took a chance when he left Boston, the city where he lives today, for the Shepherd Center in Atlanta, a rehabilitation hospital for patients with spinal cord and traumatic brain injuries. There, he learned to scuba dive in the pool and to paint with his mouth. Most of all, Roy learned to live again.

Six months after his accident, Roy was back in Yarmouth. A few months later, he was studying communications at BU—he graduated in 2000—and working on his autobiography "11 Seconds." The book was published in 1998, the year after he started the Travis Roy Foundation, which has raised more than \$12 million for spinal cord research and grants to help those with spinal cord injuries pay for adaptive equipment.

The advocacy, the honesty, this is Roy's daily challenge, the one that he chose. Sometimes, he explained, pushing the joystick of a wheelchair forward is the first step, and just maybe, the most important one.

Seniors John Killah, philanthropy chairman of Pi Kappa Phi fraternity, center, and fraternity brother Jameson Graham, right, present Travis Roy with a Quinnipiac ice hockey jersey signed by the team.