

The Grandville Hockey Community Remembers Ryan Fischer

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It was going to be the biggest game of Ryan Fischer's life.

The senior forward and team co-captain had helped Grandville High School to its first-ever Michigan Division 1 state semifinal hockey appearance. The Bulldogs were slated to play in Plymouth against powerhouse Novi Detroit Catholic Central on March 7.

Fischer, who also starred in football and baseball, and was to attend the United States Military Academy to study aerospace engineering, wouldn't get to play in that game, or any other, however.

He never woke up that morning.

Fischer, 17, who had assisted on a Grandville overtime goal in an earlier state playoff victory, died in his sleep of an enlarged heart, according to a Kent County medical examiner. It was an unforeseen medical condition — and his unexpected passing stunned the small west Michigan community.

"I ran down there as the whole situation was unfolding," said Grandville coach Joel Breazeale, a neighbor of the Fischer family. "We were still in shock."

Word soon spread of what had transpired. Breazeale said that a major goal was to try to keep the situation contained and off of social media, to help protect Fischer's sister, who was away at college in Wisconsin, from inadvertently finding out.

Breazeale gathered his team soon after at his home to make the terrible announcement about their teammate, and the players also got to share their thoughts and shed their tears.

"We just spoke from the heart, and let the boys express their emotions," Breazeale said. "The day was one of complete shock, including our coaching staff."

No one would have questioned the Bulldogs if they had chosen not to go ahead with the state playoff game two hours away. Yet play they did, at the behest of Ryan Fischer's parents, Roni and Scott, who spoke to each and every player before they departed for the Detroit area on a sullen bus ride.

"They found the composure to think about the boys," Breazeale said of the Fischers. "It was a huge, huge day for our community."

The Bulldogs (16-11-3) came up short against Catholic Central by a 3-0 count at Compuware Arena, despite 34 saves from Grandville goaltender Myles Madden, the second star of the game. At the request of the Fischers, co-captain Max Houtman wore their son's No. 11 jersey to honor his long-time friend, "Fish." So did many of the dozens in the stands who were dressed in maroon and white and had made the trek from the Grand Rapids area.

"It was a huge honor for me to wear his number, and I hope I made Ryan proud," said an emotional Houtman to mlive.com afterwards.

"We did what we felt was the right thing to do," Breazeale said. "It was truly inspiring despite the tragedy ... It was the type of outpouring we've come to expect from the hockey community."

He added that it was Ryan's mother who had urged getting the hockey community involved — and not just from Grand Rapids or Michigan, but from all over, at all levels of the game.

"It was awe-inspiring," Breazeale said.

Catholic Central fans wore Grandville's colors in a show of solidarity. Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Jack Johnson, a Michigan native and former University of Michigan blueliner, even sent supportive tweets to the Bulldogs.

When the final buzzer sounded, Grandville's players didn't stand alone. They were joined in a huddle by Catholic Central players, who were also playing and praying for one of their own in senior Matt Sorisho, who had been paralyzed in another game just weeks earlier. The Shamrocks, who saluted the crowd post-game along with the Bulldogs, won the state title the next night over Brighton.

Fischer's funeral at St. Pius X Catholic Church on March 12 was standing room only in the faith-based Grandville community. The Ryan Fischer Legacy Scholarship, through Fifth Third Bank, has been established in his name and will honor a player in Grandville's conference who embodies Fischer's qualities of character, determination, integrity, academic achievement and community service.

A skating fundraiser was slated for May to benefit the scholarship in Fischer's name, as his hometown continued its healing process. An April fundraiser in his memory was also held at a local movie theater with the "Captain America" sequel, which proved to be a fitting choice.

"Everyone looked up to him. I mean, he was the Captain America of our school," said former teammate Logan Bellgraph, who donned Fischer's No. 11 for a runner-up finish in a 3-on-3 tournament at Ferris State University. "He was the greatest friend ever, and he was everyone's best friend."

Now he lives on in their memories.

"The impact he had as a great Christian young man, player and scholar will be everlasting," Breazeale said. "We're better because of what Ryan did for us."

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