



Several Special Olympics athletes and Badger Hockey fans join John Mitchell on the ice



Badger Hockey Player Shares Success with Very Special Athletes

04.29.2010 — College hockey fans across the state watched with frenzied excitement as left winger John Mitchell netted two goals against St. Cloud State on March 27, 2010, securing the Wisconsin Badgers 5-3 win and their spot at the NCAA Frozen Four playoffs. But few sports fans witnessed the bright smile that appeared on Special Olympics athlete, Raimond Holschuh's face when Mitchell appeared to support his basketball team the next day.

The 23-year-old left his ice skates at home Sunday evening, laced up his sneakers, and headed over to Blessed Sacrament Gym to shoot hoops with the West Madison Special Olympics basketball team. As the 6' 5" hockey player strode into the gym, he towered over an entourage of athletes who eagerly greeted him with high fives and hugs. After relaying the highlights of the game with them, he threw on a green basketball jersey and helped the athletes warm up for their long-awaited scrimmage against the Dane County Deputy Sheriffs.

Mitchell, a Rehabilitation Psychology major from Neenah, Wisconsin, began interning at Special Olympics Wisconsin in the fall of 2009. For the past four months, Mitchell has helped Agency Manager, Lydena Goossens coach two Special Olympics basketball teams—the "Hot Shots" and "Green Phoenix"—each week.

"Many of our athletes love Badger athletics and to have an athlete from one of the sports teams' volunteering with us is great!" exclaimed Goossens. "Whether it's to say hello or to talk about a recent game, the athletes enjoy the interaction. John is excited to tell the athletes about his experiences on the ice, and this has helped him create personal relationships with [them]."

"It's been great [having him volunteer]...we both play hockey," said Holschuh, who has played hockey for the past ten years. "He taught me how to dangle the puck to maneuver around people. John's my role model."

According to Mitchell, he gets something very valuable in return for his coaching—a reminder on the value of sportsmanship. "I'm teaching them nothing except for the skills that they will use in their sport. They are the ones teaching me," Mitchell responded humbly. "They make me realize that hockey is just a sport and should always be enjoyed. When you get to a certain level in athletics, it becomes a business. Some individuals forget it's just a game that's meant to be fun."

Mitchell, a natural-born athlete who picked up his first hockey stick in elementary school, can relate to the athletes' youthful passion for sports. But, what resonates most with him is the athletes' desire to rise above the expectations of others.

"[Hockey] became my passion the first time I scored a goal. I have been addicted ever since," he said, his eyes full of compassion. "People telling me that...I wasn't good enough to play at the college level fueled my drive to get here."

Between juggling practices, games, volunteering, and school, Mitchell has a jam-packed schedule. But, the athletes' sense of camaraderie motivated him to squeeze in volunteer time, even after his internship ended.

"The enthusiasm these athletes bring to practice every week puts a smile on my face, no matter how bad of a day I'm having," he said.

Mitchell was in high spirits after scoring a goal just over a minute into the Frozen Four game on Thursday night against RIT. But the winning streak came to an end during the final championship game when they lost 5-0 to Boston College. After playing hockey for the University of Wisconsin, Mitchell will trade his Badger's hockey stick for a diploma when he graduates in May, but according to him, it doesn't end there.

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"My dream was to play hockey for the Wisconsin Badgers, so I gave that a shot," said Mitchell. "Now that I've made it this far, professional hockey has become my new dream job."

Wherever his talent takes him, Mitchell says helping athletes like Holschuh realize their dreams and discover their untapped potential will remain an integral part of his life.

"I do it because I enjoy giving my time back," he said. "A lot of people put their time in for me to get where I've gotten to, so the least I can do is give some of my time back for them."

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News Facts

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Special Olympics Wisconsin

(http://www.specialolympswisconsin.org/)

UW Badgers Hockey

(http://www.uwbadgers.com/sports/m-hockey/wis-m-hockey-body-main.html)

Wisconsin Sports Network

(http://www.wissports.net/sports/hockey/blog/?f=89&id=1149337)

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