

CATCHING UP WITH: JOHN HRUSTH

Note from the author, Bob Anderson: With the XHL scheduled to enjoy its 20th season this summer (hopefully), I thought it would be fun to look back at some past players and people who have helped shape the league and make it what it is today. Please keep checking back for more of these "Catching Up With" articles to learn more about the great stories and people who have made the league so great!

For those who played with or against John Hrusth, I'm sure most would agree that he was a guy who was way more serious on the court than he was off the court. A former 50-goal scorer in the XHL, Hrusth boasted more about the penalties he took than the goals he scored. But you may be surprised to know, he wasn't always the outgoing guy that we all knew and loved during his playing days in the XHL.



John Hrusth had a giant presence on and off the court during his 12 years of play in the XHL.

"My personality has definitely changed a lot over the years," Hrusth said. I feel like I have always had a witty side, but I did not show it. When I was in school, I usually kept quiet and did not talk to many people. Boy that has changed."

It sure did. There were few people who were as well-liked across the league than Hrusth. Former player Garrett Mohny dubbed him "shorty" even though he towered over league-mates with his 6-7" frame.

"Mondays and Wednesdays were hockey nights in Brockway with four games a night starting at 6:00 and lasting until 10:00," former teammate and league president Bob Anderson said. "I would usually show up 45 minutes to an hour before the games to sweep off the court and set up the sound system. I could almost always count on John to show soon after to help out. If he wasn't the last person to leave that night, he was one of the last. During those hours spent at the

court, people would seek John out to chat. His light-hearted spirit, smile, and stories were a hit with everyone. He has a way about him. You could call it a gift. He puts others at ease! It doesn't take long to open up to him and he to you."

Despite not knowing anybody from the league, Hrusth was a part of the XHL's inaugural season in 2001. After playing ice hockey in Jamestown, New York for some time, Hrusth moved back to this area and missed playing hockey. It just so happened, a new roller league was starting in Brockway: the Xtreme Hockey League.

He saw an ad in the newspaper and sent in an application. He was the only player to send in an application who did not already have a team. It just so happened; one team was looking for an extra player to fill their roster: the Colonials.

"I remember looking at that application," Anderson said. "I didn't know a whole lot about hockey then, but I remember seeing his height on the form and thinking, we need to pick this guy up. I talked it over with the Miller brothers who were on the team (Jim and Ed), and they both were a bit reluctant. They didn't know this guy and they questioned whether taking in a stranger would be best for the team. After all, we didn't know if he could skate. But in the end, we took the gamble and I'm so glad we did!"

Hrusth was hard to miss on the court. He dwarfed the competition. He could take long strides on the court but couldn't always get that frame stopped. That was no problem though, the fence in Brockway served the purpose. Though he rarely lugged the ball up and down the playing surface, he managed to put himself in good positions to score and his wrist shot got better and better as the years went on.

Hrusth played all 10 seasons in Brockway and spent two in Reynoldsville. During that time, he had a lot of great on-the-court moments and several disappointments, but one accomplishment stood out. In 2004, the Colonials hoisted their first cup. That was a difficult season for the red, white, and blue. They had to overcome a lot of adversity to win it all, and some of it was self-inflicted.

"We started out on a bad note with injuries," Hrusth said. "I think the first game I hit Paul Decker in the eye during warm ups. He was out several weeks. The same game Freddy [Terwilliger] fell and broke some ribs. Instead of folding, we ended

up coming together as a team, and ultimately won it all!"

During his 12 years in the league, Hrusth came to embody the jersey he wore and become a microcosm of the league. Hard work and dedication paid off. But as good as he became as a player, it couldn't match his genuine fun side off the court. There were many great memories that stood out.

"[I recall] a trip to Kennywood with Bob, Paul, and someone else that I can't remember. We stopped at Primanti's in Harmarville. Bob was having allergy issues and his eyes [were red] and looked like he was crying. We told the waitress that his long-term girlfriend had broken up with him via a text message. The best thing was Bob going along with it. I also have fond memories of going to Geauga Lake with the crew. I also loved when we all played ice hockey regularly in Indiana. Lots of great memories at Fire Mountain!"

Hrusth played every season for one team, something very few players in league history have done.

"What I enjoyed about being on the Colonials was the fact that we were a tight-knit group," Hrusth said. "We were grinders except for a young flashy guy named Bob Anderson. We all seemed to know our roles on the team. Just a good group of guys."

Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end. For Hrusth, the time to hang up the skates came not from a lack of passion, desire, or enjoyment, but from necessity.

"It was the second year in Reynoldsville. It was early March that I made that unfortunate decision. For those that don't know, I have had four or five herniated discs in my lower back. That is why I decided to retire. The last disc that went out hurt so bad that I consulted a surgeon. I did not have surgery, but that prompted my retirement."

While Hrusth has made a couple of appearances to play in Randy Carlson tournaments, he has pretty much retired the skates except for the annual appearance to referee at that same tournament. Though he doesn't follow the league as closely as he used to, one thing stands out about the league today compared to those early years.

"All the players have gotten a lot better," he said.

Those who want to catch up with Hrusth can find him with Adam McKinley as a manager at Sheetz in Brockway. You can be sure he'll put you at ease while sharing a story or two from the past. Just don't get too close, he may accidentally shoot you in the end while flipping a burger.