

From USA Hockey Magazine

Captain Courageous



Howard's Passion For Hockey Stronger Than Ever

By Bob Schaller

He had a powerful stride, and was very aggressive on the ice. But at age 15, Joe Howard lost his legs, and his dream of being an elite hockey player when he was hit by a train.

"I missed hockey more than walking, more than anything else," Howard said. "I never thought about playing again — I thought it wasn't possible."

As the years passed and he came to grips with the hand life had dealt him, the ice found Howard again.

And since his love of the game was never in the deep freeze, he once again embraced the sport he never would have chosen to walk away from.

"To find this sport again ... I didn't even think it was an option," Howard said while practicing with the U.S. National Sled Hockey Team. "Finding it is really something."

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In 1997, Howard started playing sled hockey. Just a scant eight years later, he is one of the world's best players. And the U.S. team he captains has ruled the world since winning Paralympic gold in 2002.

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Joe Howard

The fact that he has finally reached the pinnacle of his sport should come as no surprise. The spirit that lived in young Joe Howard could never be claimed by a train or anything else.

"If you aren't looking to take your game to that next level, what's the point in playing?" Howard asks rhetorically.

"If you don't want to reach and achieve your potential, you don't belong playing. That's even true for recreational leagues on up: Do your best, there's no other option."

The man who had hockey taken away from him as a boy is now helping bring it to a whole new generation of physically challenged athletes.

"It's really great to see all the local sled programs that have sprouted since the Paralympic success we had. And getting some television coverage really helped," said Howard, who finished second in Team USA scoring with 13 points. "People had maybe heard about the sport, but they didn't realize what it is: Full speed, full contact, the same game. The only difference is that we're sitting down."

JOE HOWARD

CENTER

Shoots: Right

Hometown: Kingston, Mass.

Height: 5-9

Weight: 175

Intl Experience: 8 years on U.S. National Team

But "sitting down" does nothing to lessen the intensity or action of the game. It's hockey, (very) pure and simple.

"It's funny, because when we do a local tournament and we have referees who haven't called a sled game," he said.

"They don't know what to do when we start hitting each other. They're like, 'That must be a penalty, right?' Wrong. We're hockey players. Hey, we aren't afraid of getting hurt. Think about it; we're sitting down because we've been seriously hurt. But we're still hockey players, so we hit."

A grin creases Howard's face as he talks about what it means to work with young sled teams.

"I'm no pioneer in this sport — it was around 10 years before I started playing," he said. "But when our season ends, I work with kids on teams that are under 16 [years old]. That's my biggest thrill. I'm there for that ice time because I see what they get out of it. I'll be driving home after their practices, and I'll just feel overwhelmed emotionally, because of what it means to me."

Ironically, Howard, now a prolific scorer, didn't score when he first started playing. Of course, his team didn't score much either, as they'd lose "regularly 11-0 or 13-0." There was something holding him back.

Howard was using a long sled to accommodate his prosthetic legs. But at a tournament in Sweden, he saw players on smaller sleds skating circles around him. So off came the legs.

Sixteen years after losing his real legs, this detachment was liberating. With his fire for the game burning brighter than ever, it was time for Joe Howard to light the lamp.

"I took a hammer to my sled and literally banged it in half," Howard said quietly. "The very next game, I scored my first goal."

Bob Schaller is a freelance writer in Colorado Springs, Colo.

