

Unrivaled championship tribute

Plymouth South assist honors Stoneham's Luti

By KAT HASENAUER CORNETTA

After sophomore defenseman James Luti died following a battle with anxiety on the eve of Stoneham's hockey season, his teammates set up a tribute in his Stoneham Arena locker room stall.

Following every game they won, that game puck went into his locker. Every game they tied, Spartans coach Paul Sacco would cut a puck in half and the team would put the half puck in Luti's locker.

"After each win, those kids were waiting for that puck," Sacco said. "I'd throw it to one of the guys, and everyone would want to touch it before it went up in his stall."

It wasn't just in Luti's locker. It was at his grave as well, which members of the team visited before every game.

"(The pucks) would have written on them, 'Fan of the Game' and things like that," said James' mother, Maria Luti. "I saw them, but I didn't know they were leaving them, until one day when I was at the grave. I was cleaning up, and I turned around, and there they were, walking up and driving up."

Maria Luti got to every game that she could, and built a rapport with her son's teammates.

"They text me and say, 'How's it going, Mrs. Luti? Do you need a visit?'" she said. "They come over and sit at my kitchen table. They play basketball here. If there is a half day at school, they are over here eating pizza."

'I know that every little bit helps. It doesn't cure it, but it does help. It was just a small gesture from our team to that family.'

— PLYMOUTH SOUTH COACH MIKE MCCOSH
On giving state title game puck to Stoneham

"I don't think they realized the battle he had with anxiety. At the end, all he could do was play hockey."

As the season went on, the pucks in Luti's stall began to pile up, and the boys assembled them in a pyramid. First 10 wins, qualifying them for the postseason. Then 11 wins, 12 wins...

By win 18, the victory against Boston Latin that sent them to the Division 2 state title game at the Garden, the pyramid was nearly complete.

"There was room at the top for one more puck," Sacco said.

So Stoneham took the ice Sunday against Plymouth South looking for not only a state title, but also the puck for the top of Luti's pyramid.

Plymouth South coach Mike McCosh didn't know about the pyramid in Luti's locker. He had just met Sacco for the first time during last week's MIAA championship breakfast leading up to the game. He learned about Luti's passing as his staff started game planning for Stoneham. As McCosh entered the Garden before Sunday's game, he made two decisions of his own.

First, Plymouth South

would retire No. 11, the digit Luti wore on his Stoneham jersey, for that game. The Spartans had Luti's 11 jersey displayed on their bench all season, and McCosh didn't feel right having one of his players wearing that number on the ice against them.

Secondly, McCosh decided that if Plymouth South won, he would give the game puck to Stoneham.

"We wanted to do something for that family, and for the team and for the school," McCosh said. "But especially that family."

McCosh's motivation was personal.



HONORING A TEAMMATE: A pyramid of game pucks as well as a photo of James Luti sits in the locker of the Stoneham sophomore hockey player who died before the start of the season; captains Jake Burrige (below, left) and Cam Sacco visit Luti's locker yesterday; at right, Luti's jersey hangs behind the Stoneham bench at the Garden during Sunday's Division 2 state championship game vs. Plymouth South.



'The moral fiber of these boys is strong. That they could pull themselves together and do what they did. ... They wanted it for me, my family and for James.'

— MARIA LUTI, mother of James Luti
On support from Stoneham boys hockey team

"I lost my brother 32 years ago when he was 18 years old to a drunk driver," he said. "I know that every little bit helps. It doesn't cure it, but it does help. It was just a small gesture from our team to that family."

Stoneham took a 3-2 lead into the third period of the title game. But Plymouth South netted the tying goal 27 seconds in. Then Alex Hayward notched the game winner in overtime to boost the Panthers to their first title.

It was a long-awaited title for McCosh, who has led Plymouth South for 22 years. But in the postgame locker room, McCosh didn't give the typical victory speech to his celebrating players.

"I told them exactly what I was going to do," McCosh said. "I said, 'I'm going to go to the locker room, and if they'll let me in, I'm going to give their captains the game puck.' They were 100 percent on board."

McCosh took the puck, poked his head into the Stoneham locker room, and asked for Sacco.

"I stepped out and we just talked," Sacco said. "He told me that he has been through a lot of that himself with

his brother. He had lost two other players in his 22 years coaching as well. He said, 'I feel your pain and what you're doing for them is important.' Then he said he wanted to give our captains the game puck."

"I was obviously speechless at that point."

Sacco escorted McCosh into the room, where the Panthers coach presented the game puck and told a little bit of his story, explaining why the team's continued support of the Luti family was so crucial.

The Spartans thanked McCosh and accepted the puck. They still were stunned by and disappointed about the loss, but they also were taken aback by the thoughtfulness of Plymouth South, especially when McCosh and his team could have been celebrating.

"I think they just were sitting there and taking it all in, the whole season," Sacco said. "We advanced through the first game, the second game, the third game ... and by that point, we could have played that game out in the parking lot. They just wanted to play that game for James."

It may not have been the way Stoneham wanted to get the game puck, but they still had the finishing piece of James' pyramid. And to a team that could have given up the season in grief back in December, paying tribute was just as important as winning.

"It was painful for them to lose on Sunday, but they endured a far greater loss in November and rallied," Maria Luti said. "The moral fiber of these boys is strong. That they could pull themselves together and do what they did. ... They wanted it for me, my family and for James."

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