News



Columbus Blue Jackets left wing Johnny Gaudreau (13) celebrates his goal scored against the against the Anaheim Ducks during the first period at Honda Center in Anaheim, Calif., Feb 21, 2024. Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, were killed the evening of Aug. 30, 2024, when they were struck by Sean M. Higgins of Woodstown, N.J., a suspected drunk driver, while bicycling in Oldmans Township, close to their hometown in Salem County, New Jersey State Police said. (OSV News/Gary A. Vasquez-USA TODAY Sports via Reuters)

John Knebels

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Oldmans Township, New Jersey — September 4, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

No words.

As family, friends, teammates, coaches, media, acquaintances and even strangers struggled mightily to make sense of the devastating tragedy Aug. 29 that took the lives of National Hockey League star Johnny Gaudreau, 31, and his brother, Matthew, 29, no expression adequately conveyed the sense of loss that tore apart the fabric of a popular, much-loved family with deep Catholic roots.

According to New Jersey State Police, the two brothers were bike riding on a rural road around 8 p.m. near their childhood neighborhood in Salem County, New Jersey, when a Jeep Grand Cherokee driven by an intoxicated driver identified as Sean Higgins hit them from behind. After both brothers succumbed to their injuries, Higgins was charged with two counts of death by auto. The investigation is ongoing.

Stalwart student athletes of Gloucester Catholic High School in New Jersey's Camden Diocese, each brother left behind a legacy cited by relatives and friends as kind, considerate, humble, faith-oriented, driven and grateful.

Adding more unspeakable grief, the brothers had been scheduled to be groomsmen at the wedding of their sister Katie the following afternoon. Instead, the Gaudreau family tried to comprehend the nightmare of losing Johnny, a married father of a 23-month-old daughter, Noa, and a 6-month old son, Johnny; and Matthew, whose wife of three years, Madeline, is due to give birth to their first child this December.

Somehow finding strength, Johnny's wife, Meredith, communicated a heartbreaking yet palpably poignant message on the social media platform Instagram.

"Thank you for the best years of my life," she said. "Despite losing you, I am still the luckiest girl in the world to have been yours . . . You are my forever and I can't wait to be with you again. I love you so much, forever and ever."

She labeled Johnny "the absolute best dad in the world. So caring and loving ... the best partner to go through parenthood with. John never missed a single appointment. Was the best at putting the baby to sleep."

Johnny and Matthew both played collegiate hockey at Boston College, a Jesuit Catholic university. After his sophomore year, Johnny eschewed a chance to turn professional because he wanted to play with Matthew, who was about to be a BC freshman.

Advertisement

In an official statement, Boston College's athletics department and its men's hockey program called the brothers "shining stars on and off the ice for the Eagles" before outlining a host of achievements on the ice, highlighted by Johnny's vital contributions on Boston College's 2012 national championship squad, and his being named NCAA Player of the Year in 2014.

"I am devastated and heartbroken over the news of the death of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau," said former Boston College head coach Jerry York. "They were not only great hockey players, but two outstanding young men. They represented their families and Boston College with the utmost class."

Current coach Greg Brown echoed those sentiments.

"No words can express our sadness right now," said Brown. "Johnny and Matty Gaudreau were first-class members of the Boston College community and left indelible legacies on our program. We will remember the smiles and joy that they brought to everyone in their lives. We are heartbroken for the Gaudreau family. We will miss them terribly."

Although Matthew competed professionally and later became involved in coaching at his high school alma mater for the past two years, he never played in the NHL. Johnny, however, played 11 seasons in the NHL — nine with the Calgary Flames and, desiring to be closer to home, the past two with the Columbus Blue Jackets.

An enormously rich NHL resume included being named to the all-star team on seven occasions. In addition to scoring a goal on his first-ever NHL shot at the end of the 2013-14 season and being named a finalist for NHL rookie of the year in 2014-15,

Gaudreau took home the prestigious Lady Byng Memorial Trophy in 2016-17. The award is presented to a player "adjudged to have exhibited the best type of sportsmanship and gentlemanly conduct combined with a high standard of playing ability."

Mary Boyle, former superintendent of Catholic schools for the Camden Diocese from 2004 to 2019, described the Gaudreau clan as "devoted Catholic people." One of the brothers' deceased grandfathers, John "Guy" Gaudreau, spent significant time volunteering at St. Edward Parish in Derby Line, Vermont. Their mother, Jane, and sister Kristen Venello were employed by St. John of God Community Services, a nonprofit special needs organization.

Besides their mother and sisters, the brothers are survived by their father, Guy, a hockey star in his own right during college. He was inducted into the Vermont Sports Hall of Fame in 2000.

"I had just seen the family at the end of July," said Boyle, referring to the eighth annual Johnny Gaudreau golf fundraiser that benefits Gloucester Catholic High School. "It's unbelievable. They're great people. The tragedy of two boys in one family dying just doing something as innocent as riding their bikes ... and it being the night before their sister's wedding just makes it that much more tragic."

The Blue Jackets and the Flames each planned candlelit vigils to remember the brothers on Sept. 4 in Columbus and Calgary, respectively.

Funeral arrangements have yet to be decided.