

By Ronnie Adler

# Overcoming Barriers...On Ice

**Ice hockey is a game of finesse. It might be one of the most challenging sports for those with hearing loss as it is played in an environment where echoes in the arena make it difficult to communicate. Reverberations from blades cutting into the ice, hockey pucks slamming into the boards, and coaches yelling are all ingredients for making hearing a challenge.**

**Imagine having a hearing loss and still trying to hear your teammates or coaches while skating. Being constantly in motion and quick on your feet prevents you from lipreading and limits hearing your teammates when they call out a play or are looking for a pass from you.**

**For Caroline and Clark Davis, trying to adjust to playing hockey with a hearing loss was a frustrating experience. Even so, they persevered, and have not let those frustrations—or their hearing loss—disrupt their love for the game.**

**Ronnie Adler, director of the HLAA Walk4Hearing, sat down with Caroline and Clark to talk about how they took on the challenge of playing ice hockey with a hearing loss.**

**Ronnie: Tell me a little about yourselves.**

**Caroline:** I am a student-athlete who plays on the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) women's ice hockey club team. I am currently a junior and studying biomedical and exercise sciences with an immersion in psychology.

**Clark:** I am a senior at Conestoga High School in Berwyn, Pennsylvania. I play on the Conestoga boy's varsity ice hockey team, and I also enjoy playing soccer, tennis and rugby.

**Ronnie: What inspired you two to play ice hockey?**

**Caroline:** My younger brothers started playing hockey when we used to live in Ontario. I had been taking skating lessons, and when I was in seventh grade my mom suggested that since my younger brothers were playing, maybe I could give it a shot too. I ended up loving it!

**Clark:** What inspired me was the rush I get when I'm skating. I enjoyed watching the sport and how players moved on skates with the puck.

**Ronnie: What is the biggest challenge you both face playing ice hockey with hearing loss?**

**Caroline:** I remember struggling to understand my coach when he would go over the drills so I had to rely on watching my teammates to grasp what we were supposed to be doing. And often, during a game situation, I would not know when my coaches were calling for a line change. They would call out my name, but this was often unsuccessful. Then they realized that waving their hands to get my attention was the best way to communicate.

**Clark:** I often had to rely on short glances over to the coach right before face-off. They would point to where I should be instead of trying to yell across the ice.

**Malcolm Roeder (Clark's teammate):** At the beginning of the season there were some communication challenges. However, as a team we have learned to overcome those barriers on the ice with Clark. In the end, we realized that Clark's hearing loss does not change how effective he is at playing the game.

**Mike Graves (Clark's coach):** I would say that 99 percent of the time coaching Clark is just like coaching any of the other players. It only seems to be a challenge when Clark is far away and we are trying to yell instructions from the bench. Despite this, I feel that Clark has adapted very well and has excellent intuition, which probably mitigates the fact that he has hearing loss.

**Ronnie: What advice would you give another kid with hearing loss when it comes to playing a sport, especially ice hockey?**

**Caroline:** I would advise that communication is definitely crucial. Though it could appear embarrassing, letting

your coach and teammates know about your hearing loss upfront will be a significant help. You can discuss with them the best way to appropriately and efficiently communicate with you without any misunderstanding, whether it's the coach drawing or writing things on a whiteboard or teammates tapping you on the shoulder to let you know you're needed in the game.

**Clark:** At the beginning of each season, there's bound to be new coaches and teammates, most unfamiliar with hearing loss and the challenges of playing the game with it. Caroline and I always hold a team meeting to educate them and help them understand what our hearing loss means and what they can do to help us play our best. Typically it means more individualized instruction and communication from coaches and teammates.

**Ronnie:** If you could play for any team, which one would it be?

**Clark:** I would want to play on the RIT men's ice hockey team. Both the men's and women's team play at the NCAA Division I level so it is very hard to make the team. All other sports at RIT are played at the NCAA Division III or club level. I would love to attend RIT not only for their hockey program but for their academics as well. I would like to study genetics or engineering. Should I go into engineering, I'd like to find a way to design a better hearing aid.

**Ronnie:** What is one takeaway you learned playing hockey that you've applied to life?

**Caroline:** Teamwork is very important in ice hockey. While one person could take the puck and score for the team, they won't be the only one carrying the team to the championship. It's important for the whole team to work together to have a great game. I find it a useful thing to know in life; it's good to know how to efficiently work with others.

**Ronnie:** What do you like to do when you're not on the ice?

**Caroline:** I am involved in the No Voice Zone Club at RIT, a program where hearing students learn sign language and information about deaf culture from students at RIT's National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID). Also, during



Above: Caroline (white jersey);  
left: Clark in action



Below: Hockey is a family affair for the Davises—(l to r) Stuart, Caroline and Clark. Stuart is Clark's twin.



summer and winter breaks I often mentor in my hometown Youth Mentoring Program.

**Clark:** I recently spoke at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia's Family Day for Children with Hearing Loss. It was great to field questions from parents and share my hearing loss experiences with families. Also, I enjoy volunteering. I often work with children, and I am frequently still on the ice as I like to volunteer at skating events for underprivileged children. **HLM**

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