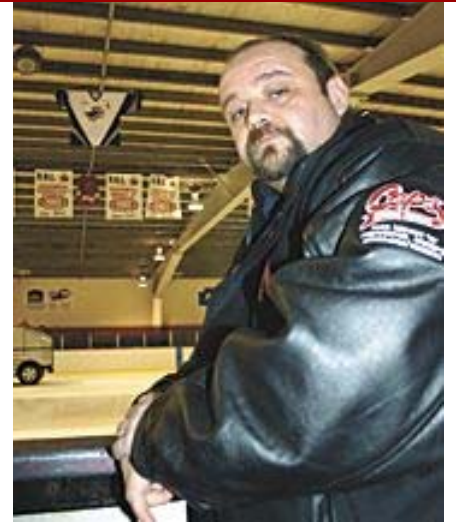


'There for the kids'

Rod Churchill continues coaching minor hockey after son's death

**"Rod Churchill:
"I'll still look out and
hope to see No. 7."**



Don Power/The Express

Seventh Heaven

Rod Churchill has continued coaching minor hockey, despite the death of his son Matthew

BY DON POWER

Express Sports Editor

Less than two weeks after the worst day of Rod Churchill's life, he was back doing what he loved, with the people he loved.

Churchill and his wife Desma had their lives turned upside down March 28 of this year. That night, their only child, 15-year-old Matthew, was killed while walking on Bauline Line, not far from his Portugal Cove home.

For the Churchill's, life as they knew it ended that day.

Time would heal the heart, they were told by family and friends. Things will get easier as the weeks and months progress.

What do they know, the Churchill's thought? Have any of them ever watched their lives explode? Have any of them ever lost a child?

Rod Churchill didn't have time to wait.

Life had to go on. Rod knew it. Desma knew it.

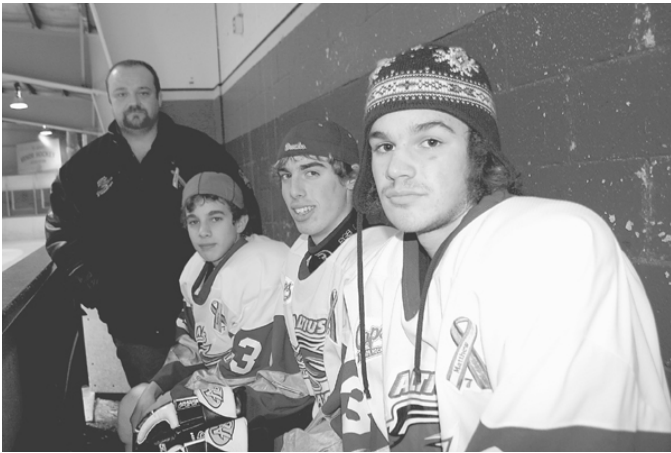
The only way for life to resume — even while they still grieved — was a return to a normal routine. For Rod Churchill, that meant minor hockey.

After all, he figured, he had begun volunteering with Matthew's organization, St. John's Minor, for all the right reasons. Those reasons — those kids — were still there, even if Matthew wasn't.

"I think that was the biggest thing that brought me back to hockey, to be there for the kids," Churchill said recently in an emotional interview.

"Desma said it was up to me, but she said it was something I shouldn't just give up. Even at the funeral home during Matthew's wake, there were people coming up — kids, coaches, people from other associations — and they all wanted me to come back."

So he did. Except Churchill's return occurred a lot earlier than most people expected.



Don Power/The Express

Rod Churchill coaches three of Matthew's best friends including (left to right) Greg Thorne, Jason Duggan and Andrew Carter

'LOVES THE KIDS'

Churchill's midget team, the Altius Predators, was about to begin the Tri-Com playoffs. Jack Casey, president of St. John's minor hockey, walked into Twin Rinks for the opening game and was dumfounded.

Other minor hockey parents were too. Most couldn't believe their eyes.

There in the dressing room preparing for the game was Rod Churchill.

"He came back to try to make the kids understand that life goes on," Casey said last week.

"Rod is back, and as hard as it is for Rod to be there with the kids — wearing the same jerseys as his young fella wore — he's doing it because he loves the kids."

Despite requests from hockey people that he return to the game, Churchill was uneasy when he entered the rink that early April day.

His fears were unfounded, but there were still awkward moments those first few days.

"The parents were a little bit leery," Churchill remembered.

Casey agreed.

"I'd be the first to admit to you, what do you say to the man?" Casey asked rhetorically. "You feel so guilty.

"In the funeral home, you know what to say, because you've got it straightened out. At church, you know what to say, because you've got that thing figured out. But when you're in the rink, at a minor hockey game, what do the adults say? Every one of the parents were saying, 'That could be me.'

"I had to, after a couple of days, say, 'I'm going to treat you like I've always treated you. I don't know what to do otherwise.' "

Casey's words soothed Churchill's trepidation. But it was the players who made him feel at home. It was the players who welcomed their coach with open arms and the innocence of youth.

"The parents treated me with kid gloves," Churchill noted. "The kids didn't. And that made getting behind the bench a little easier.

"The kids, I found, gave me the most strength. It was the kids I was worried about, because very few kids know how to deal with death. It's not an easy thing.

"They'd all come around. 'How are you today, coach? 'What are we going to do today?' 'Who's on our first line?' The same sort of questions they would say to me at any given weekend."

Three of those players were Matthew's best friends, including Greg Thorne, who was with Matthew the night he was killed. Churchill finds coaching these boys very therapeutic.

"I think just by being there, it helps Greg, Jason Duggan and Andrew Carter. Especially Greg. He's had a very traumatic event."

'THE RIGHT REASONS'

Jack Casey met Rod Churchill four years ago when he first joined the St. John's minor board during a June meeting. The very next morning, Casey received e-mails from the hard-working committee member suggesting changes to make bantam hockey better for the kids.

"Rod was always like that," he said.

Since then, the two have become fast friends, and tireless minor hockey volunteers. Casey calls Churchill "one of the good things about minor

hockey." He's one of the people who got involved when his son did, and he never forgets that minor hockey is about the kids.

"Rod got into coaching minor hockey and on the executive for the right reasons," Casey said. "It was never about putting his kid first."

"Matthew never made all-star teams, but Rod was still involved with them."

Churchill's involvement with minor hockey has changed this year. He no longer spends all Saturday and Sunday in the rink. He goes home earlier now to spend time with Desma.

"I can spend all day at the rink just watching minor hockey," Churchill said. "Minor hockey to me is just as exciting as sitting down and watching NHL play."

"This year, given the circumstances that myself and my wife now find ourselves in, I'm usually at the rink a couple of hours Saturday and Sunday. I can't spend any more than that because she's the one home by herself."

"Whenever I can get there, I'll be at the rink."

Churchill is also the association's midget coordinator, as well as the director of midget, bantam and juvenile hockey.

But it's coaching where he gets the most satisfaction.

"I'm a hands on type of fellow," he said.

"I still enjoy going to the rink, seeing the coaches, talking to the players. Obviously, with Matt not being there, it makes it different, it makes it a little bit harder."

Casey figures it's coaching where Churchill makes the biggest difference in the kids' lives, too.

"Right from when you saw him at the funeral home, he was putting the kids first," Casey stated. "All through hockey playoffs, and back in the rink again this fall, he's doing it for the kids."

"I'm not sure how much longer he'll stay at it. Perhaps when this group of kids is through. I've never really talked to him about it. He's continuing to be a father figure for them, a mentor."

"He's always put the kids first. Rod's got a heart of gold."



Rod Churchill

Matthew Churchill would have helped his dad Rod celebrate his birthday today

'FAST, BUT NOT FAST ENOUGH'

It's been nine months since Matthew Churchill died.

The school bus still drives by each day, although without stopping. Echoes of laughter come from near the computer Matthew played on. His guitar leans quietly up against a bedroom wall.

Matthew wasn't there for his Grade 9 graduation or the beginning of high school. He missed Mother's Day, Father's Day and the start of hockey season. Soon, he'll miss Christmas.

Rod Churchill's friends were wrong: time doesn't heal the heart. You just learn to live with the hurt and the sorrow. You learn to adapt, and move forward with life.

"When you look back at it... it's gone so fast," Churchill said, misty-eyed, "but I know each day, you can't wait to go to sleep. It doesn't go fast enough."

Churchill considers himself lucky to have hockey. And while entering the rink is never easy — "you're at the rink watching these kids play

hockey, wondering what could have been" — it does act as a salve on the wounds.

Matthew's No. 7 jersey hangs from the rafters in Twin Rinks No. 1. Churchill watched it raised in a private ceremony. He eyes it every weekend. Coaching, he says, allows him to take his mind off his troubles.

"It does to a certain extent, because it keeps my mind preoccupied with making sure everything is running smoothly, making sure I don't have my lines screwed up.

"But I'll still look out," he said, voice cracking with emotion, "and hope to see No. 7."

(Following Matthew's death, Robert Weston Parsons was charged with failing to stop at the scene of a motor vehicle accident where someone has been injured, and failing to provide information and assistance to the injured individual. The trial goes to court in the new year.)

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