

MOUNT CLEMENS

Community comes together to support Dakota hockey player

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By Timothy Pontzer✉



From left, brothers Jack and Anthony Mastronardi pose on the ice for a picture together. (Photo courtesy of Al Mastronardi)

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Members of the Dakota hockey team line up prior to a Feb. 7 MAC Red contest with Romeo High. Each player sports a No. 15 patch on their jersey and stickers on their helmet, honoring their injured teammate. (Photo by Sarah Purlee)

MOUNT CLEMENS — Before every contest this season, the Macomb Dakota hockey team lines up for the National Anthem.

While the players stand in numerical order, there's a noticeable gap found where No. 15 should be, a space reserved for junior Anthony Mastronardi.

On Dec. 3, with exactly 1:38 remaining in Dakota's home opener, Mastronardi and an opposing defender were racing for the puck when their legs accidentally tangled, and Mastronardi collided with the boards headfirst, suffering a spinal cord injury.

“Absolutely nothing can prepare a parent for that,” said Al Mastronardi, Anthony’s father. “You go from watching your beloved 17-year-old son fly around the ice and truly loving life to having to work hard in therapy to gain his strength back.”

Since the accident, Anthony Mastronardi has spent every single day at the Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan, slowly gaining movement and endurance. His doctors say a long journey lies ahead, but cite his youth, health and determination as factors for a hopeful recovery.

“He will continue at RIM for the next 3-4 weeks, hoping to be able to go home soon to begin outpatient therapy,” Al Mastronardi said. “The doctors cannot give a definite diagnosis, as every spinal cord injury is different. The one thing we all know for sure is that Anthony will never stop battling.”

While he cannot join his teammates on the ice, Anthony Mastronardi’s No. 15 is seen on each Dakota jersey and helmet with patches and stickers that serve as a rallying cry for the Cougars.

“This whole season is for Anthony,” said Andrew Brooks, who is a fellow junior and team captain. “Every single game and practice, we play for him. We really want to deliver him a state championship ring.”

Brooks has helped organize groups of players to visit RIM and spend time with their teammate. Every game tape is delivered so Anthony Mastronardi can analyze the performance.

“Seeing how Anthony has handled this is nothing short of remarkable,” said Dakota coach Jim Andonoff. “You can see how determined he is to get better, and it is extremely inspiring. He told all of the guys, ‘I want you to win this for me,’ and they have responded, wanting to work hard for him.”

The team’s annual Christmas party was moved to Anthony Mastronardi’s hospital room where they surprised him with a unique present that showcased the compassion of the entire hockey community.

Anthony Mastronardi had requested a hockey poster for his room, so Andonoff made some calls. Four days after his injury, Dakota held its next game at Mount Clemens Ice Arena. More than 150 student-athletes from various high schools attended the contest, each wearing their jersey to pose at center ice for a picture, far exceeding the coach’s expectations.

“The support has been overwhelming,” Andonoff said. “Countless opposing coaches, players, parents and referees have asked about Anthony, genuinely wanting to know how he’s doing.”

Al Mastronardi agreed, citing well wishes from all levels. Detroit Red Wings defenseman Danny DeKeyser visited, bringing a signed jersey. Macomb L’Anse Creuse North grad and current Pittsburgh Penguins defenseman Steven Oleksy stopped by as well.

“It is truly moving seeing how everyone has come together for Anthony,” Al Mastronardi said. “DeKeyser was amazing, taking time out of his day to lift Anthony’s spirit. Oleksy spent over an hour with Anthony on Christmas Eve, just spending time with him. I cannot thank everyone enough.”

Anthony Mastronardi’s younger brother, Jack, serves as a freshman goalie on Dakota’s roster. He has backstopped every other contest for the Cougars, helping aid the club’s 12-8-1 record at press time, including a 3-2 mark in the Macomb Area Conference Red.

“Honestly, Jack is one of the strongest kids I’ve ever met,” Brooks said. “To see his brother go down like that and still be able to come out and keep playing the way he has, it has helped everyone get through this. He has never showed any weakness and is a true leader for us.”

“I dedicate each game for Anthony,” Jack Mastronardi added. “You have to enjoy the things you love no matter how small, because they can be taken from you so fast.”

While his teammates focus on finishing the campaign strong and delivering on their promise of a state title, Anthony Mastronardi is determined to join them soon.

“I’ve been asked to tell my story, but my story is not over. It has just begun,” Anthony Mastronardi said. “I am blessed to have loving family, friends, and the hockey community surrounding and supporting me during this difficult time. The road ahead is going to be rough for awhile, but I will get there. My goal is to walk back into that locker room to support my brother and the team.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Timothy Pontzer is a sports reporter who covers Oakland and Macomb counties for the Shelby-Utica News, Macomb Chronicle, Troy Times and Rochester Post. Pontzer has worked for C & G Newspapers since 2016 and is a proud graduate of Oakland University.
