

Case remembers all the times he's taken first steps on a fresh sheet of ice. His head hangs heavy as he looks down at the rubbered floor that takes him to the ice; he's preparing for another night of hard work, another night of cheering fans watching his every on-ice move. He's done it hundreds of times in his life, maybe even thousands. Nothing regarding hockey is new to him, but according to Case, as he gets older, each first step is more important than the last. Each first step counts more toward his future. He knows the weight that those first steps hold, the power they have that could change everything.

These steps are his future. Everything around him holds importance to what he is building for himself, and Case knows his work ethic allows him to reign in any present anxieties and channel them into something great. He knows that this is what leads him to walk up those stage stairs and pull the 2019 New Jersey Devils jersey over his head in the fourth round of the National Hockey League draft. These steps are what gets him to that point, and the wavy-haired brunet recognizes that often. "It's surreal... it's something that you work your whole life for, up to that point. Obviously making it to the NHL but getting drafted is sort of that first step in the process," Case says, adjusting the black cap on his head, "It goes quick, but in the moment, you feel pretty good about what you've done so far."

The NHL draft is what any young hockey player strives for. Growing up, Case was no different. When he was ten years old, his family moved from Albany, New York, to Buffalo, New York for hockey. But once he reached the age of 13, he picked up and left home for Toronto. Some may be concerned about leaving home that young, but for the now 20-year-old, the opportunity to go to Toronto reinforced the idea in his head that hockey was "it" for him. It's not the same for every athlete, but for aspiring professional hockey players, leaving home is something that is beneficial and crucial to their futures. To go far from home may create anxiety

but can also create a sense of independence and self-reliance, as well as promoting an idea that relationships are never cemented in just one place. It's usually something that people learn as they age, but Case was forced to educate himself on that sooner than most.

At 13, a young Case McCarthy was an outlier in Toronto. Although he was possibly the youngest skater there, he knew that he was there for preparatory reasons. "It was more for development," Case said, "having a more professional routine at a young age, to kind of understand and start learning that process, so that I'm not having to do that at 17 or 18 [while] getting ready for college."

Case McCarthy, now a junior studying within the Questrom School of Business, is reigning hockey defenseman of the week, as well as for the month of November. For the star athlete, leaving home was something that he found hard, but not solely because he was away from home, but because of everything he had to learn while he was gone. There were challenges for him, but one of the toughest was learning how to manage his relationships with people in his life. "The biggest challenge was, I guess, how to manage the relationships built outside of hockey," Case says, "and trying to communicate in the best way I could, what my life is like, in order to maintain those relationships and not just cut people off."

Relationships are difficult to maintain in general, but for elite athletes, it's a whole different ballpark: Case has two younger brothers that he had to leave behind, and according to him, leaving them impacted their relationship. "There was kind of a distance there for a little bit..." Case says, "and not until, I'd say quarantine, it took that long for us to get tight, and now we talk every day." Case is not the only hockey player to have left people behind, however. Luke Tuch, a sophomore forward on the Boston University men's ice hockey team, has a twin sister that he had to say goodbye to when he wanted to further his career. "I was pretty young when I

left... I went to Buffalo when I was 15,” Luke says, “but, leaving my twin sister [Leah] was tough... I think I matured a lot from that.”

For Tuch, his older brother Alex went through the hockey development scene as well, leaving their home when Luke was ten years old. However, Luke constantly talks about how his brother and him have a fantastic relationship. “He’s like a mentor to me, and I definitely look up to him,” Tuch says, “not only in hockey, but off the ice also. We do have a really good bond.” Especially now that his brother Alex Tuch is a professional hockey player, Luke has a lot of experience with long-distance relationships and how to keep them intact. “[With] him not being around for quite a few years, I wasn’t really able to see Alex much,” Luke says, “but, I think we got closer. I talk to him on the phone a lot.” Sometimes, in cases like Luke’s, distance makes the heart grow fonder. Other times, distance hurts, but new relationships can fill that void that leaving people behind can create.

New relationships are a large benefit of leaving home for athletic purposes. According to Case, he has a coach from his time in Toronto that had impacted his life deeply. “He kind of took me under his wing,” Case says, “I still text him, I still talk to him. I’m hoping I can get across the border and see him. That’s one relationship I think I’m going to keep strong. He helped me out a ton and he’s sort of a second father figure in that aspect.”

Wilmer Skoog, a junior forward on the Boston University men’s ice hockey team, is an international student from Tyresö, Sweden. For him, he hasn’t lived at home since he was 15 years old. “[I] moved to an apartment and [I] lived alone for three years,” Skoog says, before discussing when he officially left Sweden, “I finished up high school at home... so when I was 18, I moved to the US.” Being so young, he had to learn how to adapt to a new environment, as well as jumping over a language barrier, and finding new friends, on top of how to take care of

himself. “The first two months were pretty tough, I think that was the hardest part, being quick and responding... I had to translate it in my own head before saying anything,” Wilmer says, “I had to learn new ways to connect with people... even though I was a little uncomfortable to talk to new people in the beginning.”

Boston University has brought these young men together, and their experiences regarding leaving home at such an early age have given them a commonality. Leaving home is not an unusual experience for teenage boys who dream of playing in the NHL. Gene Warner, a reporter for Buffalo News, commented on this phenomenon in his article talking about the pros and cons of starting a hockey career early. His statement reflected the difficult sentiment, as he observed that, “Leaving home early for junior hockey can present obstacles for any kid: missing home, being in a tough living situation, adjusting to a new school, trying to adapt to the top-level competition on the ice.”

The Boston University boys faced these challenges, just as many before them and many will after them. They all made that decision, and it brought them here to play. Case says that his hockey-focused mindset is the reason he made that choice. Case said, “This might sound bad, but everything for me revolves around hockey, so my balance is that it’s hockey first on my priority list.” This led to a sense of independence that can only come from experiences like leaving home so early. He was not entirely on his own, but his dedication to hockey forced him to grow up fast and learn to be comfortable being independent without having his parents around.

The family that they found outside of their relatives is special in more ways than one. It gave them relationships to rely on when they felt the most alone, it gave them a safe space away from home, and it helped build them into the men that they are today. Found family is something that isn’t always easy to find, but when it is found, they are there for life. After leaving their

immediate families, they had to turn to the new people around them for comfort and support, and Wilmer Skoog recounts on the family he made within his billet home and teammates.

“The second year [I lived in the US], I moved into a house where I lived with a family where they were super nice. I talk to them on the phone frequently,” Wilmer says, “Then I came here and [I’m] living alone with teammates. I’ve never lived with my teammates before, but it’s a lot of fun and I feel like all of us are getting to know each other better and connecting in new ways that wouldn’t be possible if we all lived on our own.”

When asked if they regretted leaving home, the resounding answer was no. These boys love their game, and they made a choice to dedicate themselves to it. “You make a decision early on if this is what you want to do. There’s a lot of sacrifice from a lot of other people,” Case says, “So, for me, it’s worth it.” He understands the sacrifices he has made, the ones that his family has made, and he knows that he will take those sacrifices with him for as long as he lives. He allows these sacrifices to positively impact his life. “Looking back on it, in retrospect, it’s part of building me and who I am today,” Case says, “It was the perfect storm for me to grow as a person and as a player... to mature on my own, be a little more independent instead of relying on my mom to do my laundry or cook me food. It was a good process, there’s nothing I regret about it.”

While leaving home is such a scary experience, Case made it clear that it was worthwhile. His experiences have made the benefits of life away from parents clear to everyone around him. He is a collegiate athlete, with the ability to take care of himself as an independent adult. He was able to do many things on his own at 13 that other 20-year-olds can’t say they did until their freshman year of college. He was able to take his time in Toronto and turn it into a lifetime of flourishing, into a future career. While there may have been some drawbacks within

his time away from home, he feels that it was important in his first step to his future professional career and life as an independent individual. He remembers the anxiety and the nerves that flowed through him the first time he was away from home, but he taught himself to power through. “I learned to kind of slow down and really take things in,” Case says, “Enjoy my life, enjoy any opportunity I can.”

Case wants to keep the passion that he has had with hockey for so long, mentioning that despite the continuous stress, pressure, and exhaustion from being away from home for so long, he still loves the sport. “But really just doing what I’m passionate about and working to put myself in a spot where I don’t have to worry financially,” Case says, “Where my family doesn’t have to worry financially, while still loving what I’m doing.”

The arena is cold, with bright lights shining down and covering a young Case McCarthy’s body. He feels the intimidation down to his bones, but he’s strong, strong enough to get through the game. He can feel the fear of being somewhere new coursing through his veins, but he pushes that to the side, right beside his usual game day jitters. He’s there for a reason, and he knows that there is nothing more important for him than that moment in time. He just has to take those first steps.

Works Cited

Case McCarthy, Junior, Boston University Men's Ice Hockey team

@casemccarthy_ on Instagram

Luke Tuch, Sophomore, Boston University Men's Ice Hockey team

@luketuch37 on Instagram

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@skoogw on Instagram

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