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SLED CLASSIC TROPHY NAMESAKE O'CONNOR HUMBLY ACCEPTS HONOR

By Heather Rule, 12/12/17, 10:45AM MST

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Despite reservations about being deserving enough, sport's 'Stanley Cup' bears his name

J.J. O'Connor was uncomfortable with it. He's not one to gloat about anything. He flat out — humbly and graciously — said no. He didn't want his name associated with a new trophy for the USA Hockey Sled Classic.

There had to be somebody more deserving, according to O'Connor. Somebody else. Some other name.

"I don't feel I'm worthy of such an honor to have a trophy like that named after me," O'Connor said, despite his career as one of the builders of disabled hockey. "I would just never feel as though I've done enough ... to have something like that."

It was a back-and-forth tug-of-war before the National Hockey League's steering committee settled on this: The O'Connor Courage Trophy.

O'Connor eventually agreed, though reluctantly. As he still works toward getting over the fact that his name is on it, he said he is also proud and is glad the players have something unique to strive toward achieving.

The new trophy — meant to be the Stanley Cup of sled hockey — was awarded to the Tier I champion Chicago Blackhawks in the USA Hockey Sled Classic at the end of the tournament Nov. 16-19 in Plymouth, Minnesota. It was the trophy's debut at the eighth annual event, which started with four teams in 2010 and was up to a record 28 teams over five tiers this year, represented by a record 20 NHL clubs.

The process for the trophy's creation started a few months ago. Paul LaCaruba, senior manager, social responsibility with the NHL, was part of the group to put the concept together. The NHL and the Hockey is for Everyone program LaCaruba is involved with wanted to find ways to better recognize the tremendous athletes in the Sled Classic, he said.

They brainstormed what could be done to celebrate those playing and also create awareness for the tournament and the sport, according to LaCaruba. The trophy idea was born.

"It did start, in a sense, with the [Stanley] Cup," LaCaruba said. "Thinking about how players, when they're kids, dream of winning some of these awards and how powerful that could be for someone who has a disability."

They considered something similar to other hockey trophies, plus they wanted to make sure the weight was just right to allow players to lift the trophy and propel themselves around the ice in celebration. LaCaruba didn't want to overstate the importance of the trophy but added that it's a symbol and celebrates disabled hockey.

"But I think that the amount of effort and design and thought that went into the design, and financially, the commitment suggests our heightened level of awareness of the sport and our commitment to seeing it grow year over year," LaCaruba said.

The last thing the committee decided was the trophy's name. The committee's decision to name it after O'Connor was unanimous — except for the man himself. They went back to the drawing board when O'Connor declined the first time, but a deadline crunch as the tournament neared caused the committee to beg him to reconsider, LaCaruba said.

The compromise was to add the word "courage," a word that LaCaruba felt was more than appropriate for people who play sled hockey.

"Courage being obviously something that speaks to anybody who's been disabled, who's faced such a challenge in their life," LaCaruba said, "and is willing to try to overcome it."

The majority of other NHL trophies are named after players or people associated with the game as well, so they wanted to continue that tradition, LaCaruba said.

Just because O'Connor wasn't all-in with the naming process — LaCaruba joked that O'Connor suggested "some pretty terrible names" to get the spotlight away from him — doesn't mean he has issues with the trophy itself. He loves it.

"I think it means probably as much to them as a Stanley Cup might. Maybe more," O'Connor said. "Because this is a trophy that was designed specifically with the sled players in mind."

The 28-pound trophy designed by Society Awards was displayed in the lobby of Plymouth Ice Center for the tournament weekend. Players saw the trophy for the first time, some taking pictures when they saw their name. The names of players on former Sled Classic championship teams were added, just like on the Stanley Cup. It has a wood base with a silver, upright sled and silver sled sticks on top, truly a one-of-a-kind trophy.

"For the players, I think to have somebody, an organization like the NHL, respect them enough to produce something like that really is just a huge honor," O'Connor said.

Now the chair of the Disabled Hockey Section for USA Hockey, O'Connor broke his neck playing hockey at age 16, and after graduating college he found USA Hockey was looking for someone to lead the disabled hockey efforts of the organization. Sled hockey, a Paralympic sport, is one of the six disciplines within the disabled hockey umbrella. O'Connor was elected to the position and started a youth sled hockey team in his native Chicagoland, since there wasn't one. He worked to promote hockey for anyone with a disability.

Having a trophy is just another step toward the success and growth within sled hockey, according to O'Connor. It's the icing and the cherry on top, he said. The hope is to have the trophy kept at the Hockey Hall of Fame and possibly travel to events when appropriate. They'll also consider the potential for other awards at the other tiers in future years at the tournament, according to LaCaruba.

O'Connor recalls playing hockey when he was a kid, dreaming of playing in the NHL and playing in a Game 7 to get his name on the Stanley Cup in the Hockey Hall of Fame. His name will be in the Hall now, just in a different form.

"I think it's a testament, just because you're in a wheelchair or just because you have ... adversity to overcome, you can still end up on a trophy in the Hall of Fame," O'Connor said. "And it doesn't have to be playing a sport. It could be by just doing what you love to help others."

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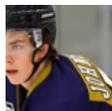
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