

Sara McClanahan follows in father Rob's footsteps while carving her own hockey path



By Heather Rule ([/author/heather-rule/](#)) Nov 27, 2017



She wanted to be just like dad.

When your dad is Rob McClanahan — part of the 1980 “Miracle on Ice,” who played hockey at the University of Minnesota and then in the NHL — that sounds like a great path to follow.

“Well, when I first started the college process, I wanted to do exactly what he did,” said Rob’s daughter, Sara, a senior at The Blake School in Minneapolis. “Go to the U of M, play hockey and go on to the Olympics, hopefully win a gold medal.”

The result of that goal was a lot of self-inflicted pressure on herself to do well, especially during her freshman year of high school when she says she’d beat herself up if she made a mistake. Once her parents and half-brothers encouraged her to expand her college search

beyond just the U of M, her game loosened up and hockey became more fun, Sara said.

About a year ago, after considering plenty of schools in the WCHA and out East, she committed to play hockey at Dartmouth College.

Rob is delighted to see his daughter excel as a hockey player and adds that the next chapter isn't about him. Everything is on Sara's terms.

"This is her life. This isn't my life," Rob said. "This is about Sara McClanahan, and it's the story that she's writing, so to speak."

Of course, the athletic apple still landed right next to the tree. Rob scored five goals (including the game-winner in the gold-medal game against Finland) and had three assists for the USA men's hockey team in the 1980 Olympics. He was a third-round draft pick of the Buffalo Sabres (49th overall) in the 1978 NHL Amateur Draft and tallied 101 points in 224 NHL games (1979-84) for the Sabres, Hartford Whalers and New York Rangers. He also played 52 games in the AHL.



Sara McClanahan is hoping to follow the Olympic dream of her father, 1980 Olympic hockey hero Rob McClanahan. (Credit: Margo LaPanta)

Meanwhile, Sara is a three-sport athlete, playing varsity since eighth-grade in soccer, hockey and lacrosse at Blake. She likes each sport, even though hockey is her favorite. It's the competitiveness of hockey that gets her. There's just something about it.

"Hockey, if you lose the puck, you can actually go full out and hit the person a little bit to get it back," Sara said. "Whereas in lacrosse, I mean, you can't touch them, pretty much. Soccer, you can't be as aggressive."

Despite Rob's hockey background, he and his wife let Sara gravitate toward hockey on her own. At 4 or 5 years old, she tried figure skating and hockey. She wasn't a fan, at first. She didn't want to get rid of the walker to guide her way on the ice.

"I hated getting on the ice," Sara said.

"The skates you had hurt, so you didn't like it," Rob said.

Sara was exposed to a variety of sports when she was a youngster, from water sports to tennis and skiing. Her mother was a Division-I ski racer, and yes, Sara is a pretty decent skier, too, Rob said.

"The one thing that ... my wife and I focused on was not hockey," Rob said. "It was getting her in all sports."

Playing with the boys, and dad behind the bench

Once Sara got into hockey, she started out playing with the boys' youth teams in Orono. Rob took a step back and didn't jump into coaching her team — at least not right away. He got involved with the coaches board and kept getting asked to coach. He turned them down until, he said, "finally, I succumbed," coaching Sara and her teammates through squirts and peewees.

Rob made sure a couple things were clear with him behind the bench: Sara was one of the players, not his daughter, and she was also just one of the guys — even though she was the lone girl on the team.

Oh, and Rob said he would be harder on Sara than anybody else. No favors. No special treatment.

"If I called her 'McClanahan' and I corrected her, she knew it was a message for the team," Rob said. "If I called her 'Sara,' then she knew she was in trouble."

"I don't remember that," Sara said.

For her, it was just hard to see her dad as her coach, and he was hard on her, she said. Sara remembers her dad skating *Herbies* — sprints from end line to blue line and back, to the red line and back, the far blue line and back and the other end line and back — with her and the team. Rob remembers a different version of what happened when he raced the kids at the end of practice.

"We never did a full Herbie," he said.

Sara disagreed: "That's false. We did one full Herbie."

Rob ended the back-and-forth with a laugh, insisting again it couldn't have been a full Herbie because he never could have done it.

Sara's Orono teammates are some of her closest friends. They still play pond hockey together, one of her favorite activities.

"And then they'll smoke me, and I'm like, 'When did this happen?'" Sara said.



Sara has seven goals so far this season for Blake, one behind the team leaders. (Photo courtesy Rob McClanahan)

Finding success at Blake

Sara attended Breck School in Golden Valley for K-5 before switching to Blake. Joining the varsity hockey team as an eighth-grader was her first experience playing girls' hockey, and she had to adjust to the faster pace playing with high school seniors.

She's played with a lot of outstanding players at Blake, from Karlie Lund to Carly Bullock and Sylvie Wallin, the list goes on. Sara, a forward, has scored her share of goals, too. One of the more memorable ones came in overtime of the Class 1A, Section 5 final against rival-Breck in her sophomore season to send her team to state.

This season, Sara and the Bears are off to an 8-0 start. They've won back-to-back Class 1A state titles but moved up to Class 2A this year. Sara has seven goals, just behind the team leaders' eight, and four assists this season.

As for Rob, he went from coach to "silent spectator" at his daughter's games. He sits in the corner, talks to very few people and observes. On game days, he sends Sara a text with "thoughts for the day" regarding the game. They're just five or six brief bullet points for things like faceoffs, speed and puck battles along the boards, Rob said.

They'll talk through the games afterward. Rob said he tries to be positive and doesn't say too much.

"That's not true, he says a lot," Sara said.

Rob amended: "I try to keep it simple."

Still, Sara said the talks are helpful.

There was one other piece of advice passed down from father to daughter: Trash talking.

Well, sort of.

"I used to encourage her, if you're beating them, just say, 'Hey, look at the scoreboard,'" Rob said.

The little birdie in her ear showed up before Blake hockey tryouts in eighth grade, and Sara said she was really into chirping. So she started chirping a girl during a scrimmage — and it didn't go over well with her coach, Shawn Reid. She recalls him screaming at her, telling her they couldn't have any of that behavior if she wanted to be on the team.

Rob remembers her coming to the car in tears, saying there was no chance she'd make the team after that.

"I was scared to death," Sara said. "It scared the crap out of me. I don't trash talk as much anymore."

Of course, Sara still made the team.

"Do you still chirp though?" Rob asked.

She smiled. “When it’s necessary.”

‘It’s sick’

Sara hasn’t just had success in hockey at Blake. Consider these stats her dad rattled off: Sara has played in 10 state tournaments, eight championship games and won four state titles (three in hockey, one in lacrosse). And she still has two more seasons to go this year.

He tries to tell her that’s not normal. Her brothers remind her, too.

“Don’t let it go to your head,” Sara recites.

She’s been lucky — a lot of kids never even make it to one state tournament, Rob said.

“It’s stupid how sick it is,” Rob said. “As your generation says, it’s sick.

“Because I mean, who goes to 10 state tournaments? Let alone play in eight state championship games? Nobody. It’s crazy.”

After all, Rob’s told her the story of his one and only state tournament appearance as co-captain of the Mounds View boys’ hockey team in 1976. The Mustangs took a 24-0 record into the state tournament at the St. Paul Civic Center. Unfortunately, they ran into a hot goaltender and promptly lost 4-3 to Richfield in the quarterfinals. They also lost to Bloomington Kennedy in the consolation final.

“That one hurts,” Rob said. “It still hurts.”

Rob finished the season with 40 goals and 66 points.



Rob and Sara look over a program from the 1976 Minnesota state boys hockey tournament, in which Rob's Mounds View team lost in the quarterfinals. (Credit: Margo LaPanta)

With a father who accomplished so much as a hockey player, there must be a lot of pressure on Sara to perform well on the ice, too. Right?

Well, yes. It's just that the pressure isn't from her parents — it's from her and her peers.

"Especially with hockey, with McClanahan as my last name," Sara said. "Even my friends who just come to my hockey games, I feel like there's such an expectation for me to be unreal."

Friends would tell her they'd buy tickets to see her when she plays in the Olympics one day. Sara had to ask them to stop saying things like that.

At the same time, she has full support from her parents. If she wanted to quit hockey, she could quit hockey, Sara said. Just like they were supportive when she wanted to quit soccer to play tennis this fall — and they were fine with her returning to soccer after she didn't make the tennis team.

Not having any pressure at home allows her to enjoy each sport, Sara said. She recognizes that support when she's around other players at the rink, too.

"Even during hockey games, I'll hear so many people ... 'Oh, my dad's going to kill me,'" Sara said. "And that's not something that I ever have to think about. That if I had a bad game I would get off the ice and be worrying about my parents screaming at me for not playing well."

Sara can't remember the last time she and her dad played hockey together. Rob, who will turn 60 Jan. 9, said he skates maybe once a year now.

"I'd rather be bad at something else," Rob said. "I love the game. It's a phenomenal game. I love skating, but I just can't. ... My mind wants to do it and my body can't."

And even though Sara wanted to be just like dad, she actually grew up playing hockey without really knowing what he accomplished in the sport. She doesn't even remember when she finally learned all the details. Neither does Rob.

"We never told you," Rob said.

"That's a good question."

Talk about no pressure.

Still, Sara hopes to skate in the Olympics and add that to her story.

"I'm going to keep working hard," Sara said. "If the opportunity presents itself, I'm going to take it. If it's not there, I'll be OK with that."

No matter what, it will be Sara's story.

(Top image of Sara and Rob McClanahan: Margo LaPanta)

What did you think of this story?

