



WARRIOR FOR LIFE

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F. Kennedy in the Second World War, left behind a wife and a one-year-old son. After dealing with so much loss, Steve and his wife are understandably protective of middle son Ben, who now has a son of his own. “We keep him in a bubble,” Steve said. “We wrap him up as much as we can.”

Steve Hardy will drop the puck again this year when the Nate Hardy Memorial Game between the Boston Bruins alumni team and the Warrior For Life Fund All-Stars takes place Dec. 2 at Warrior Arena – the Bruins’ practice facility. One of the unfortunate realities of life post-9/11 is that these kinds of games, and in fact the Warrior For Life Fund itself, are necessary and vital. Because there are thousands of Gold Star Families without fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. And the ones who survived both the Global War on Terrorism and the Iraq War are hurting. Some of their wounds are constant visual reminders, while others are endured in silence and isolation. Even though the Iraq War ended in 2011 and the War on Terror effectively ended when the U.S. pulled its troops out of Afghanistan in 2021, the death toll continues rising. In fact, the number of suicides among those who served in those wars is dramatically higher than the number of those killed in action. Many of those who carry on do so with debilitating brain injuries, serious cognitive issues and PTSD.

“There is a warrior ethos that exists out there,” said Ryan Croley, the founder and president of the Warrior For Life Fund and himself a veteran of six tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan as a captain with the Navy SEALs. “Suicide for a warrior is an option, and people don’t want to talk about that. They often feel that when you’re no longer valuable to your society or to your tribe, historically that has been part of the warrior ethos. Twenty-two veterans a day kill themselves. That’s a real big number. How much of it is guys who are at the end of their lives living their ethos, and how much of it is a guy who is 40 or 50 who has isolated himself, is using drugs and alcohol, not able to sleep and unable to maintain a job and then kills himself because of those factors?”



DECLAN FARMER

“WHEN I STEP ONTO THE ICE, I DIDN’T HAVE TO THINK ABOUT ANYTHING ELSE... ALL THE WORRIES I HAD WERE GONE” — RYAN CROLEY

found hockey to be therapeutic for him and noticed an improvement in his cognitive ability. He figured if it could work for him, it could also help others. So when he returned to his home in Virginia Beach, Va., which has the highest concentration of active service and retired military members in the world, he started the Virginia Beach Hockey Club, which ultimately morphed into Warrior For Life. Croley calls it “peer-to-peer” recovery, but he also said it helps with neuroplasticity, which is the process of the brain rewiring itself after a traumatic injury.

“Hockey is the ideal sport for someone who has a traumatic brain injury, especially if you’re learning it from zero, because your brain is firing the whole time,” Croley said. “But the cognitive stuff aside, it just cleared my mind. When I step onto the ice, I didn’t have to think about

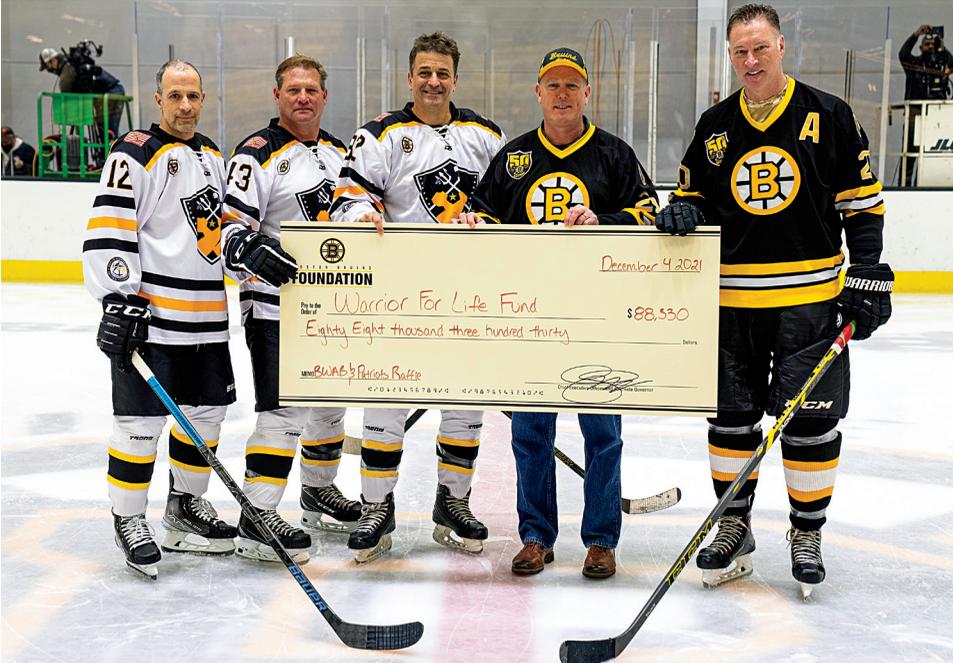


RYAN CROLEY

Croley speaks from personal experience on this. He found himself hugely out of sorts when he returned from his last tour of duty in 2006. He had been diagnosed with 11 traumatic brain injuries over time. And like some of those broken warriors, he had lost his tribe, so he found another one. Despite the fact he had no experience with the game, Croley taught himself to play hockey, “to keep me out of the bar,” when he was at the Naval War College in Rhode Island. Croley

anything else. For the one hour I was out there, all the worries I had were gone. It was wonderful. There are too many things going on with your brain for you to think of anything else.”

Croley now skates as the captain of the Warrior For Life Fund All-Stars, a group of active-duty and retired Navy SEALs who run programs in Virginia Beach five days a week. There is another all-star team at the Naval Amphibious Base in Coronado, Calif. In fact, the Western team de-



A BOND BEYOND

The Warrior For Life Fund players and the Bruins alumni have formed lasting relationships.

that I have are not going to go do a crossword puzzle,” Croley said. “But you put them in the Sense Arena and they’re making decisions just like they would have in a kill house.”

The former Bruins players and the military guys form fast and lasting relationships because of what they have in common. Both are fit, gritty and competitive. And because warfare is so different now than it was in the World Wars or Vietnam or Korea, deployment is almost diametrically opposed to what it once was. It used to be that hundreds of thousands of troops would be on the

feated a group of Bruins alumni and members of the Virginia Beach team handily in a game over the summer. And these guys can play. For the Nate Hardy game last year, the Bruins stacked a team with alumni “rookies” Zdeno Chara and Adam McQuaid for their 6-4 victory. “And why did we stack the team?” asked former Bruin Frank Simonetti, president of the team’s alumni association. “They beat us the year before. They’re that good. They’re smart, they’re fast, and they’re in much better shape than we are. Youth and speed, at some point, beats age and skill.”

With the Bruins firmly on board, along with Operation Hat Trick, an organization that funds programs for veterans through the sale of caps, the Warrior For Life movement has taken on a life of its own. There are now programs for both able-bodied and adaptive hockey in Minnesota, Pittsburgh, Chicago, North Carolina and Colorado. In fact, a new Human Performance Center is currently being constructed in Virginia Beach. It will feature a 15-by-40 synthetic rink where veterans can learn the game and measure their cognitive abilities using Sense Arena, a virtual-reality training tool for hockey. “You can play crossword puzzles to overcome concussion, but these guys

“TWENTY-TWO VETERANS A DAY KILL THEMSELVES. THAT’S A REAL BIG NUMBER” — RYAN CROLEY, FOUNDER OF THE WARRIOR FOR LIFE FUND



The Warrior For Life Fund runs programs in several U.S. locales.

ground to make up for a lack of intelligence and surveillance. Now, there are fewer people on the ground, but they are the best in their field, so they’re being deployed dozens of times, which is bound to have a profound effect on them. “If you can imagine going into a house and doing close-quarter battle,” Croley said, “hockey is a very similar thing.”

When the Bruins alumni faced the Warrior For Life Fund All-Stars last year, more than 1,100 people packed into the 700-seat Warrior Arena for the event. This year’s event will be just as popular. Croley said he’s hearing that recently retired future Hall of Famer Patrice Bergeron will suit up for the Bruins, which will make his team’s challenge that much more daunting. But most of all, it will raise money for a cause that is literally saving lives. And hockey is at the center of it. “It has kept me alive, absolutely,” Croley said. “And I probably have stories of 10 or more guys who have come to me and said, ‘This program saved my life.’” **H**

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