

GROWING UP GRANT

JOHN GRANT JR. TALKS ABOUT EMERGING FROM THE SHADOW OF A CANADIAN LACROSSE LEGEND

>> BY PERRY LEFKO PHOTOS: JACK DEMPSEY/COLORADO MAMMOTH

AS HE MOVES FORWARD IN THE TWILIGHT of his brilliant lacrosse career, John Grant Jr. can review it all with a sense of introspection, clarity and understanding. He has accomplished so much at all levels: Junior, Senior, College, Professional, National and International. He's been a member of five Peterborough Lakers, Mann Cup-winning teams. He's also been part of Canadian national teams that won World championships in box and field lacrosse. He's achieved individual and team success in the National Collegiate Athletic Association, National Lacrosse League and Major League Lacrosse. At age 40, Grant expects his pro career to conclude when his current deal with the NLL's Colorado Mammoth ends (he's in the second year of a four-year deal). But Grant still has the motivation to succeed and much of it has to do with being the son of John Grant Sr., a Canadian Lacrosse Hall of Famer who provided him with the tools to excel. Ontario Lacrosse Magazine interviewed "Junior" to ask him about his life, in particular being the son of a lacrosse legend, something he'd never been asked. Grant addressed that, his overall career, his future goals and why he has become like his father.

OLM: What was it like growing up being John Grant Jr., the son of a lacrosse superstar?

JGJ: Like any Jr., you grow up and rebel against it or use it and thrive. It opened a lot of doors for me, but I never, ever wanted to be known as just the son of a great lacrosse



player. I wanted to be known for my own abilities and my own success. I wanted to earn it. Now looking back, I believe I have. That's kudos to the way he raised me. I used it as a driving force. To be mentioned in the same breath as far as what my abilities are and his, that's good enough for me. I earned it on my own merits and having the name definitely helped. That's where I'm at now. I spent my whole life trying to outdo what he'd done and as you get older and wiser, you realize that's kind of youthful foolishness. Now I'm playing to honour the name of both of us. It's great that I have a father that's a Hall of Famer and hopefully one day I can become one as well. Right now it's all about playing the game I absolutely love that's given me so much and trying to honour the game more than anything else. Honouring my father is a byproduct of that. He obviously loves the



game as much as anyone I've ever known. At this point in my career, it's trying to get the most out of the years I have left and give back at the same time. That's how it is now. There's no competition anymore.

OLM: What do you mean?

JGJ: There was (competition) when I was younger. I was always trying to outdo him. That was a driving force for me. It wasn't anything other than that's just the way I grew up. He's a competitive guy and so am I. When I was old enough we had really good battles in the backyard or at the rink. I played against him just as hard, if not harder, than I played against any other opponent. That's just something that drove me and got me to where I am. I don't think I'd have the drive or the competitive edge that I have unless I gained that growing up. I was too young to be playing against a grownup, but it was trying to beat him and his teammates in backyard games. That's what gave me my edge.

OLM: Did anyone ever say you would never be as good as your father?

JGJ: I got that my whole life up until I started winning championships. That's how you're judged in our sport — championships, just like the other sports. I don't hear that as much anymore, but I still do occasionally. I'll leave that up to other people (to decide). That's not something I'm concerned with right now. I'm proud of my name and I'm doing everything to uphold it.

OLM: When you began playing competitively at the age of five, your father coached you. He coached you for about 10 years in all, so was it hard being the son of the coach?

JGJ: He was harder on me than any of the other kids on the team. He wanted me to earn everything I got.

OLM: Your dad is 6-foot-6, you are 6-foot-2. Were you always taller than kids your age?

JGJ: I grew up being the smallest guy on my team all the time and I battled with that as well. Around age 20, I had a pretty nice growth spurt, so everything I learned as a tiny, little spitball helped me when I got to be a pretty good size. I owe a lot of my success to both, but my driving force was to be better than my Dad.

OLM: You were drafted first overall by the Rochester Knighthawks in 1999, but you made it known you didn't want to play for the team, preferring to play for the Philadelphia

Wings. Why? Was it because your father played for the Wings in the mid-1970s?

JGJ: I had spent my whole life being a Philadelphia sports fan with all their franchises and it was because of the Wings and the ties to the city. When I attended the University of Delaware, and Philly was just half an hour down the road, I was able to rekindle some of my love for the Philadelphia sports franchises by going to a lot of those games. A lot of Delaware players hailed from Philly. I found the ones pretty quickly that had tickets. I tried my best to play in Philly in my rookie year. It just didn't work out. They called my bluff and knew I wouldn't sit out the season. It came down to the first exhibition game before the season started and I gave in, signed on the dotted line and played 10 years there. I ended up living there and doing quite well there. I had a pretty good life in Rochester, but as happens in the game of lacrosse and in any sport, you get older and expendable.

OLM: You began this season third overall in NLL history in goals (602), fifth in assists (914) and third in total points (1,275). John Tavares leads with 802 goals, 914 assists and 1,716 points, any chance you can match those records?

JGJ: I don't think anyone is going to go anywhere near Tavares' records. He's 46 now and has played something like 22 years. He's been one of the greatest players of all time. I don't think I have enough time in my career to continue to play and go near those numbers, but that's not why I'm playing. I'm still playing because I love championships and I want to help my team win rings. It's not about the personal stuff anymore. Sure, at the end of the day when you look back it would be great to have some individual records, but ultimately you're judged by championships. That's the way I grew up. My dad had Mann Cup rings and world titles and all that kind of stuff and he never, ever mentioned what his points were or how many goals he had or how many assists. It was about titles. I've only won one in the NLL, and it's unacceptable. I'll do everything I can to win another one before I retire.

OLM: Who has/had the harder shot, you or your dad?

JGJ: At my best I was throwing it 105-106 miles per hour. I know that no one in his generation did that. He had the better backhand than me, but I was fortunate enough to learn from probably one of the best that's ever done that shot. I'd get to go home after games and practices and try to replicate it in the backyard. My dad would do that back in the day

SR. REMEMBERS PHILLY, THE WINGS AND... ELVIS?

Some memories last forever. For John Grant Sr., it's playing for the Philadelphia Wings in the mid-70s in the newly-formed National Lacrosse League (NLL) and having the chance to meet players from the Philadelphia Flyers, 76ers and Eagles, along with a rare opportunity to see Elvis Presley up close on the way to a concert.

The original NLL was founded in 1974 and lasted two seasons, consisting of six teams — Philadelphia, Maryland, Toronto, Syracuse, Rochester and Montreal — some of them playing in buildings that were the home to NHL teams in their cities. The schedule consisted of 40 games — between May and August — the first year and 48 in the final season. The play was fast and physical, and maybe the best lacrosse of the wooden-stick era.

The Wings played their home games at the Philadelphia Spectrum, beginning their 1974 season just after the Philadelphia Flyers won their first of back-to-back Stanley Cup championships. Grant recalls the team played its first game in the evening on the same day the Flyers won their first Cup in the afternoon.

"What a lifetime experience that was," John Sr. says. "It was amazing for a kid from Peterborough to live that kind of life. What better city to go to than during the years the Flyers won the Cup two years in a row? What an amazing city and what great fans. There was such a buzz. We were treated like professionals because it was a pro league and we flew to games and had our own beat reporter. We dressed in the Flyers' dressing room when they finished their season."

"When the Flyers were playing a night game, the referee and the linesmen and people from NBC played a pickup game of hockey in the afternoon and we got to play."

He recalls an amusing encounter with some football players from the Philadelphia Eagles, who were staying at the same hotel during their training camp.

"Here we are in the lobby throwing the ball around and these big 300-pound guys from the Eagles looking at us and say, 'You mean you can actually hit somebody with these sticks? You guys are crazy.'"

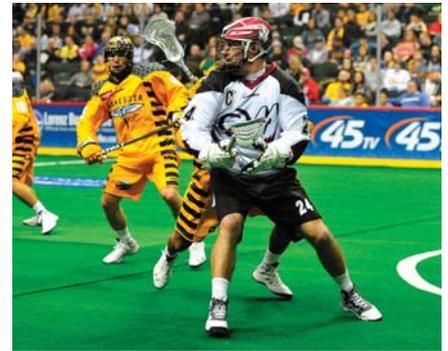
But by far his greatest memory is seeing Elvis, who was booked for shows at the Spectrum. He was occupying the top three floors of the hotel where the Wings stayed, and the hotel employees were all alerted of Elvis' presence for security purposes. One afternoon while Grant and two teammates were having lunch, the waitress serving them asked them if they wanted to see "The King". He would be exiting from the back freight elevator toward the loading dock where he would be whisked into a waiting limousine. The players were led through the kitchen to the area where Elvis was approaching.

About 100 or so Elvis fans gathered waiting at the loading dock.

"He had about four or five bodyguards around him and as soon as he got out on the loading dock the crowd ran at him," Grant recalls. "The bodyguards literally picked him up and put him in the limousine. They had to fight off these screaming people, and it was the craziest thing you'd ever want to see. We felt sorry for him because that whole week he'd get in the car and was driven to the Spectrum, got up on the stage, did his show and came back to the hotel."

The Wings finished first that season and Grant led his team with 78 goals, 105 assists and 183 points in 39 games. The Wings lost the championship final to the Rochester Griffins. In the following 1975 season, the league expanded to 48 games and Grant totaled 198 points with 64 goals and 134 assists, but the Wings failed to make the playoffs and the NLL folded.

When the NLL resurfaced in 1987 as the Eagle Pro Box Lacrosse League it featured the Wings, but a loss in the league semi-finals ended Grant's pro lacrosse career that year.



with a wooden stick from one net all the way to the other end of the rink. That's a shot I learned before I was even a teenager. You've got to give it to him for that. Fortunately for our generation we've got video and everything is documented. I know he did a lot of things that unfortunately weren't documented on film. He did some spectacular things that unfortunately weren't captured.

OLM: Who was the better athlete?

JGJ: Whether he likes to believe it or not, most people that know both of us will say neither one of us were very athletic. I was probably more athletic than him, but he had superior vision and was more of an assist guy. I've been more known for shooting and scoring. In my later years, I've been trying to become more of a feeder and a leader. He was definitely a better leader than I've been, and that's what I'm still trying to improve on and be a better captain.

OLM: Do you and your dad still talk lacrosse?

JGJ: Sometimes too much for me, but I think we're finally finding the balance now. When you're young you think you know everything, and now that I'm older I cherish those times and welcome the vast knowledge he has. We had a long lacrosse talk (just recently) on my way to coaching (kids) lacrosse. It's weird that it's come full circle. I bring kids' sticks home from that team to string their sticks and he's still doing that at his age. It's kind of funny. I'm getting into trouble from my wife for staying at practice an extra 45 minutes instead of being the guy racing home to get out of there as soon as possible. I said to her, 'Yeah, I guess I have fully become my old man.' To me it was a compliment but she was there waiting with dinner on the table. That's just the way it works out I guess. As far as leadership qualities, I still have a ways to go to compare myself to him. **OLM**