

## SPORTS

## DT

# Jack Jablonski coping and 'fighting life'

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Jack Jablonski's arrival at USC as a student was not normal. Nor was his first job, an internship in Downtown Los Angeles.

Most freshman arriving on college campus for the first time were not the subject of a major national sports story featuring a game they can no longer play.

"My first semester was extremely tough," Jablonski said. "I had always played in team sports growing up and had teammates with identical interests. My first semester at USC ... I didn't have that. It was a tough transition meeting friends, living life without the support system I had back home and learning to become as independent as possible on campus academically all while trying to get good grades at a top 15 university."

That was Jablonski, reflecting on his move from his native Minnesota to Southern California after an on-ice accident left him paralyzed from the chest down.

"When I suffered my spinal cord injury at the C5 and C6 vertebrae and severed my spinal cord completely, one of the things I lost was my ability to control my body temperature. Therefore, I am always super cold if it's anything below 60 to 65 degrees and sunny.

"I knew I needed to move to a warmer climate for college after two years of life in a chair enduring the winters of Minnesota. A friend of a friend made us aware of a scholarship that was based at USC called Swim with Mike that gives financial aid to disabled athletes. I flew out and met with them during my senior year of high school, applied and was luckily accepted. Without that scholarship I wouldn't have gone to USC or be here with the LA Kings."

Jablonski was 16 when he was playing high school hockey. He was checked from behind and went headfirst into the boards on Dec. 30, 2011.

The fact Jablonski now works in the NHL — he is a digital media specialist associate for the Kings at Crypto.com Arena, a full-time job he has held since 2020 — is not a surprise. He comes from an area synonymous with puck, and a unique drive establishing a charitable organization as a teenager to advance paralysis recovery.

Still, Jablonski aimed for normal college life despite being the subject of an ESPN documentary.

"My second semester I rushed and pledged/joined a fraternity called Tau Kappa Epsilon, and it was the best decision I made since going to USC, because I found a group of brothers, teammates, who had the same hobbies and interests as I did," he said.

"They supported me for who I was, didn't treat me any different than one with an able body, and were willing to drop everything on a dime if I needed help. It allowed me to come into my own and grow as a college student and human."

Studying at USC's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism helped enhance his skill set. An internship with the Kings after a tip from a fellow Minnesotan provided invaluable experience.

"I first got involved with the Kings through Kelly Cheeseman, the chief operating officer of the Kings. He and I both went to the same high school and played for the same high school hockey coach at Benilde-St. Margaret's in Minnesota. Our coach connected us when I got out here for college."

Jablonski primarily works now as a podcaster and analyst after getting what he wanted at "SC — that traditional college experience."

"It was everything," he said about being treated like everyone else.

"I left Minnesota in part to get a fresh start from all the attention and pressure I had back home. Being able to enjoy a traditional and social college life was in many ways a time where I could forget about my disability and just enjoy present."

Jablonski was recently back in the spotlight, honored for his advocacy work as the Community Hero of the Game during the NHL Winter Classic at Target Field in Minneapolis on New Year's Day.

In front of nearly 40,000 fans, he was recognized for improving the quality of life for those living with an SCI and for the Jack Jablonski Foundation raising more than \$3 million, while enduring the temperature of minus 5.7.

"My chair froze, it was so cold."

Eleven years ago, Jablonski was another high schooler.

The 10-year anniversary of the accident puts the past decade in perspective.

"Where do I begin? I would say, in a few words, that I am grateful, lucky and fortunate. But, also, it has been a nightmare. I have been secluded and dependent on



Jack Jablonski landed a job in social media for the LA Kings.

Photo courtesy of the LA Kings

others."

He stressed the importance of channeling energy into what he is most passionate about.

"My rehabilitation and my foundation are two things I'm very focused on away from the rink," he said.

"I work out and rehab three times a week for two hours per session where I walk on the treadmill with total assistance in my lower extremities. I stretch, do cardio and weights."

He said he also believes he will walk again. And a message for the doubters:

"Do your research. What we are learning about the spinal cord and in spinal cord injury research is expanding an exponential pace, especially in the last five years.

"As someone who is behind the scenes in the scientific world with my foundation, recovery is possible. Progress is being made to improve the lives of people living with paralysis. Will people with SCI's

be walking tomorrow? No. But I truly believe we will be in the future. No matter how long it takes, I'm in it for the long haul both as one who both raises money for the research it will take and the person living with paralysis that wants to benefit from the medical advancements to come.

"I'm extremely thankful for everything I've been able to overcome and all of the support in every which way that I've been given. I can't thank everyone enough. Looking back, in many ways it feels like yesterday that this happened. But also, it feels like it was so long ago because of everything that I've accomplished and experienced since the injury at 16 years old.

"I wouldn't be where I am today without the support from everyone throughout these last 10 years, especially early on. It helped motivate me and keep me in a positive mindset as I learned how to cope and fight life paralyzed in a wheelchair."