



# Ten years after catastrophic hockey injury, what life is like now for Jack Jablonski

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Jack Jablonski's wheelchair was stuck and there was nothing he could do about it.

The windchill at the NHL's Winter Classic in Minneapolis on New Year's Day had plunged to minus-10 degrees. And the cold had done a number on the batteries that power Jablonski's wheelchair.

The fix, as it often has been for the past 10 years, was Jack's brother, Max. Ever since Jack went from a vibrant, healthy 16-year-old high school hockey player to a quadriplegic in a catastrophic instant, Max has provided countless assists. And he was there again at the Winter Classic, pushing Jack and his 400-pound wheelchair — 600 pounds in total — around Target Field all day long.

But "Jabs" has always seemed to look on the bright side since that fateful day, Dec. 30, 2011, and so he said: The view from Section 218 was simply sensational.

Despite being frigid cold, Jack was content to spend the evening with his mom, Leslie, dad, Mike, and, of course, his 23-year-old brother as they watched the Wild (<https://theathletic.com/team/wild/>) take on the St. Louis Blues on a baseball diamond transformed into a winter wonderland for the coldest outdoor hockey game in NHL history.

Jack dressed in layers like the 38,000 other hockey lovers. He wore a green and black 2016 Stadium Series winter jacket. A blanket covered his legs, and red and white Jablonski Foundation BEL13VE mittens protected his hands.

Late in the second period, Jack was greeted with a thunderous ovation when he was honored as MassMutual's Community Hero. Despite being ice cold, he flashed an ear-to-ear smile at the recognition. The company presented him with a \$1,000 donation to the Jack Jablonski Foundation (<https://www.bel13vefoundation.org/>) that in a little more than nine years has raised \$3 million to support spinal cord injury research.

What Jack was too reluctant to tell the NHL and MassMutual, who gave him tickets to sit in the outside elements rather than inside, is he's usually ice cold even on warm days.

Among the many things Jack lost 10 years ago was the ability to regulate his body temperature.

If it gets below 65 degrees, if the sun goes down, Jack is freezing.

So, in the summertime, when Jablonski visits the Twin Cities, he'll sit on the gorgeous patio atop his childhood home's attached garage sometimes from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

He'll stare at the gorgeous Minneapolis skyline and daydream of what his life could have been.

Would Jack, now 26, be married with children? Would he have played Division I hockey? Would he have made it to the NHL?

When his mind wanders to those dark places, he tries to remind himself of how far he's come.

"If you would've asked me in 10 years, where would you be, when I was lying in the hospital bed, I could not have pictured a better outcome than where I am today," he says. "But at the same time, obviously, it's a realization and another year of a memory of what could have been or where I would be if this didn't happen."



Jack Jablonski with his parents, Mike and Leslie, and brother Max (with photobombing former NHLer Jeremy Roenick) at a Jablonski Foundation gala in 2019. (Courtesy Mike Jablonski)

Adjacent to the kitchen in a hallway in the Jablonskis' beautiful century-old colonial home is a 1922 newspaper clipping from the Minneapolis Journal.

The headline reads, "It's a Perfect Day at Modern Electrical Home."

Built in 1919, the Jablonskis' home was initially a real estate showcase; Minneapolis' first home completely wired for electricity.

Leslie and Mike Jablonski bought the house in 1994. They're the third owners in 103 years, and now the first electrical home in Minneapolis is outfitted with an elevator and a ceiling lift in their oldest son's bedroom that gets him out of bed and transports him to the accessible bathroom's shower.

The 1922 article talks about the “soft glow of 16 shaded lights in the living room.”

But two days before Christmas — one week from the 10th anniversary of his injury — Jack sits in that same shadowy living room with the soft glow of a lamp and an open window illuminating his face.

He’s smiling. He’s optimistic. He lights up when he notes that he’s about to become the 17th patient to take part in an upper limb study in Los Angeles with the hope of trying to get some finger movement.

He says he doesn’t “remember the hit.”

In that game, Jack, a right-handed shot, was coming down the left-wing side on a two-on-two. He went wide around a defenseman and beat him. The second defenseman on the weak side cut him off at the net, so Jack quickly did a button hook to look for a trailer coming into the zone. One of the defensemen checked Jablonski in the shoulder, but at the same time, the backchecker hit him from behind and sent him headfirst into the boards.

“The second I hit the ice, I was completely conscious,” he remembers. “From the neck down, couldn’t feel anything, couldn’t move anything. Couldn’t move my head. There was nothing. Just excruciating pain in my neck, and nothing below — no movement. I have no memory of the hit, no memory of the boards. Just remember the second I hit the ground, you hear the whistle blow and the arena go quiet.

“I still hear that whistle.”

After arriving by ambulance at a local hospital, Jack got into a full-blown argument with the doctors and nurses who were about to cut his equipment off. He didn’t want his No. 13 Benilde-St. Margaret’s jersey destroyed, his breezers, skates and shoulder pads ruined.

“In my head, I thought it was two weeks and I’ll be back,” Jack says.

Jack fractured his C5 and C6 vertebrae and severed his spinal cord at the C5 level.

The initial prognosis was that the left side of his body was likely not going to move again and he’d be lucky if he could bend his right arm.

But within the first week, he began moving his arm, bending it and hitting his brother.

Max yelled, “What the heck?” Then Max yelled back, “Wait, no, keep doing that,” because he couldn’t believe his brother was able to hit him.

There’s a Dave Matthews song called, “Dancing Nancies,” that asks if you ever wonder if things would be different if you took a left turn instead of a right.

*Could I have been a parking lot attendant?*

*Could I have been a millionaire in Bel Air?*

*Could I have been lost somewhere in Paris?*

*Could I have been your little brother?*

*Could I have been anyone other than me?*

Jack tries not to think about what-ifs: What if Benilde didn’t make it to the championship of that holiday tournament? What if he had woken up sick that day? What if he wasn’t called upon to play that exact shift? What if he got the puck in a different spot or passed it off or wasn’t checked at that exact moment in that exact way by that exact player?

Jack doesn’t blame the teenager who checked him. The incident adversely affected the other boy, too, he says. He visited Jack in the hospital, tried to keep in touch via text and, according to Jack, quit hockey after that year.

“There was no intention to do what he did,” Jack says. “It’s a fast game. It’s a physical sport. We never think it’s going to be us, but it happens. And, unfortunately, I drew the short stick. I mean, obviously I’m living this, but I couldn’t imagine being on the other side of it, either, knowing the impact that you’ve had on someone else.”

Three months before Jack’s injury, the Jablonskis completed a renovation of their home.

After the injury, they overhauled the house again to make it accessible for Jack. He was in the hospital from Dec. 30 to April 18, and from April to October, the family moved into an apartment in Edina until the work on their home could be completed.

The garage was renovated to handle a handicap vehicle. The hallways and door frames were widened. Doors were put in. Doors were taken out. The elevator was installed so Jack could get from his entry point in a basement filled with jerseys and other hockey memorabilia to his bedroom on the third floor.

So far, Max is the only person to get stuck in that elevator.

“Thank God it was me and not him,” Max says. “I just remember feeling like an absolute idiot.”

“It was because you were being lazy,” Jack says, laughing.

“No, no, no. I had just come home from college tours and had three suitcases, so I figured I’d take the elevator rather than drag everything up the stairs,” Max says.

Hang around Max and Jack for two minutes and it’s clear they’re close.

Jack still looks at Max as that skin-and-bones 13-year-old he was the year he was injured.

“A nerd,” Jack says, laughing, as Max collapses on Jack’s bed and stares at the walls streamed with hockey jerseys.

But Max had to grow up fast.

TV cameras came to his games after Jack’s accident, and that continued throughout his high school career.

At first, Leslie didn’t want Max to keep playing hockey. She couldn’t stomach it and still gets anxious walking into St. Louis Park Rec Center.

“But Max was insistent he wanted to honor Jack,” Leslie says. “When your son says, ‘I want to play for my brother,’ how do you say, ‘No, you’re done?’”

“It was never a thought to quit the sport,” says Max, who played through his senior year, became the Red Knights’ captain and considered playing past high school. “It was a one-in-a-million accident and very unlucky, so I was never like, ‘This is going to be dangerous for me.’ Plus, my dad liked going to my games. It gave us some normalcy during a very hard time.”

What did bring everything back to the forefront came a year later when Max was playing a game in Hibbing, Minn., and was slew-footed. He sustained a compound fracture to his tibia and fibula.

He was in a wheelchair for a month, then on crutches for six months.

“Eighth grade at Benilde, me and Jack were the only two in wheelchairs,” Max says, laughing. “And then my dad had his second hip surgery, so in a span of three weeks, all three of us were using the elevator.”

“And then I broke my wrist playing broomball,” Leslie says.

“Yeah, we couldn’t go in public because people had to be wondering, ‘What’s going on in that house?’” Max jokes.

Jack attended University of Southern California and majored in communications with a minor in sports media.

Max chose USC, too, in large part so he could help his brother.

Both joined the Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity.

Max would ultimately become president of the frat, graduate with a degree in international relations (global business) and now works for a company in Los Angeles.

“I’m sure Jack both hated and appreciated that I was there, but it was obviously very hard for him to see me do stuff that he wasn’t able to,” Max says. “It was a tough dynamic, especially me going to the same college as him, because he’s just looking at me like, ‘This is what I could have had at this school.’

“But I’m still very proud of just how individual his life has been and where he’s not dependent on me and not dependent on my family for everything. He does a lot ... so much stuff on his own, through his career and through just taking care of himself that people never expected.”



Jack Jablonski was honored by the Twins in 2012, visiting with Justin Morneau along with his mom, Leslie, and his brother Max. (Hannah Foslien / Getty Images)

In California, Jack lives with a caretaker who takes him to and from therapy and drops him off and picks him up from work.

He runs the L.A. Kings (<https://theathletic.com/team/kings/>)' website and contributes all sorts of written, visual and audio content for the team, like the weekly "Tradin' Jabs," where he interviews Kings prospects or players and the occasional hockey personality.

He aspires to one day get into hockey ops so he can be part of a team's decision-making process.

When he visits Minnesota, someone comes every morning to help him out of bed, shower him and change him. His parents and brother drive him places, and he has plenty of friends to go out and do stuff with.

“But yeah, someone’s always helping transport or feed me or make sure I’m OK,” Jack says. “You know, I can’t be left alone for 12 hours.”

Flying is an ordeal. He’s first on and last off airplanes and needs to be transported to his seat. His wheelchair goes in the belly of the plane and often comes out battered. He always has to have a companion, in large part because when the plane lands and the pilot hits the brakes, he says, “I’ll go chest between my legs and fly straight down if I don’t have somebody next to me holding me up.”

And if the person in the window seat needs to use the restroom during the flight, “it’s a nightmare.”

Sleeping can also be tough. He sleeps with a heated neck wrap because he gets so cold, and if he can’t sleep, there’s no tossing and turning. He just has to stare at the ceiling, alone with his thoughts.

“Everything ... has to be preplanned,” he says. “You can be spontaneous, but you have to be ahead of schedule. When I go to the Kings’ games, I have someone come with me. I have to facilitate who that’s going to be. When I go to work, I have to preplan how much I drink (and) when I drink so that when I need to empty my bag, I can empty it at the right time when I have the proper people there. I can’t just go to a friend’s house without preplanning everything. It’s very hard and tiring.”

With spinal cord injuries, the first 18 months are when you’re going to see the most improvement.

After 10 years, Jack’s arms are mostly functional, especially his biceps movement.

“Triceps, not so much, but I can find a way around it,” Jack says.

His back muscles work, and he’s able to activate the major muscle groups in his lower body, which is uplifting to him because it shows that “things are still connected below the level that they said they were.”

But his hands don't work.

“That’s the issue,” Jack says. “That’s the first thing I would ask for if I could have anything back.”

Yet he’s able to text as fast as anyone.

Before the injury, he was left-handed. But because he has wrist movement on the right side, he uses his right thumb to type on his phone.

Amazingly, this is how he wrote 20-page research papers in college, and how he writes his articles now for the Kings.

He starts with the Notes app on his iPhone, eventually transferring the content to his computer via Bluetooth. Then, he pulls up the articles on his computer and uses the back of his pinky to type and use the mouse to format, edit and publish to the Kings’ website (<https://www.nhl.com/kings>).

“That’s just how life is now,” Jack says. “When you reflect on it, it’s really hard to fathom how far I’ve come, especially with what the doctors expected. Obviously, there’s a long road to go, but I’m in it for the long haul.”



Max has stayed close to Jack's side in the 10 years since his injury. (Courtesy Mike Jablonski)

Right after the injury, Jack lost 30 pounds and weighed 125. Through exhausting, extensive and continuous therapy the past 10 years, he has worked hard to stay in good physical condition.

It's important, he says, to be ready for the next medical breakthrough. But he also wants to be physically capable of participating in any new medical trials.

He wants to be an independent person. To go places on his own. To live alone and not be surrounded by somebody who has to take care of him 24/7.

He wants to be at the forefront in the pursuit of a cure for paralysis because he plans to one day walk — and skate — again.

“A lot of people, when they see me and they haven’t seen me for a while, they’re like, ‘Wow, you look a lot stronger. You’re moving so much better,’” Jack says. “And to me, that’s great because when you live it, you don’t really realize some of the progress you are making.”

There are two big studies the Jack Jablonski Foundation helps fund. One is a lower-limb study at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., that’s working on epidural stimulation for paraplegics to help get their legs working again. The other is for upper-body stimulation and upper-body functions at UCLA through Reggie Edgerton, “who’s kind of the godfather of spinal cord injury research,” Jack says.

That’s what Jack starts this month.

In the meantime, Jack will continue his “awesome job” with the Kings, which includes updating and editing the home page or the single-game ticket page and also contributing features on prospects for their Insider website (<https://lakingsinsider.com/>).

His favorite part of the job? Getting the inside scoop on big news.

“I live, breathe and die this sport,” he says. “Early on, after the injury, in the hospital, the game I fell in love with at a young age was taken away from me. I was obsessed with it ... from just watching youth hockey to watching high school hockey to the world juniors to college. My dad had season tickets to the Gopher games growing up, and obviously the Wild. I just fell in love with it. And when I got injured, obviously it sucked, because you want to have an impact on the game on the ice. And that was taken away.

“But I couldn’t see myself without hockey in my life.”

He has talked to Kings general manager Rob Blake and other league executives, scouts and coaches about things he can do to one day have an impact at the NHL level.

“I try to talk to as many people that know the game ... what’s the thought process of bringing up this guy instead of that guy or why did we play this guy on the fourth line opposed to the third line, and why did we trade this guy, or what did we see in this prospect, and stuff like that,” Jack says. “I understand that I’m behind the eight ball of not growing up in a locker room after the age of 16 and being a part of the daily strategizing or talking about the players or learning from coaches or teammates.

“So, you’ve got to do the next best thing.”

Jack has a phenomenal support system: a mom who offers emotional support, a dad who gives him positive support and a younger brother who is always there.

“I don’t even have the words to say how proud I am — how proud we are — of both of them,” Leslie says.

Jack received a lot of attention and an outpouring of sympathy at the beginning. But with time, that naturally fades. People move on with their lives, forget or, to be frank, get tired and sometimes cynical of the countless Jack Jablonski stories they’ve read or seen.

Jack knows and understands that, although it can be tough.

But he tries to stay in the public eye so his foundation can make the world a better place for people in his situation.

“He got a lot taken away from him that day,” Max says. But didn’t wallow and Max says he’s “so proud of him” for going to a great school, getting a great job and raising so much money for spinal cord injury research. “I wish he had a fully functioning life and fully functioning body, but I’ve been super proud of him.”

Through it all, Jack remains optimistic he’ll “be able to get on skates” one day.

“Is it going to be today? No. Is it tomorrow? Next year? No,” he says. “But it’s down the road because the rate of which we’re learning and seeing progress is the best it’s ever been.

“I can tell you this: I’m not giving up. Never, ever.”

*(Graphic: John Bradford / The Athletic. Photos: Bruce Kluckhohn, Hannah Foslien / Getty Images; Evan Frost / NHLI via Getty Images)*

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