

TILTON CLUB HOCKEY

//////////////// { THE LITTLE TEAM THAT COULD } //////////////////



IT'S A SUNNY SEPTEMBER DAY AT TILTON SCHOOL, WEEKS AWAY FROM THE OFFICIAL START OF HOCKEY SEASON. COACH JEFF BOUCHER WALKS INTO THE CHILLY HOCKEY RINK AND PLOPS TWO LARGE DUFFLE BAGS ON THE FLOOR JUST OUTSIDE THE LOCKER ROOMS. "YELLOW OR BLACK?" HE ASKS, OPENING UP THE TWO BAGS, REVEALING TWO SETS OF JERSEYS. WE SETTLE ON BLACK, AS STUDENTS BEGAN STREAMING IN AROUND US, EACH EAGERLY GRABBING THEIR TILTON JERSEY AND DISAPPEARING INTO THE LOCKER ROOMS TO PUT ON THEIR GEAR. EXCITEMENT IS IN THE AIR. THE SAME KIND OF EXCITEMENT THAT SPINS AROUND THIS GROUP OF HOCKEY PLAYERS ANYTIME THEY GET READY TO DO WHAT THEY LOVE.

But this is not a normal practice day or game day. We're actually setting up for a photoshoot, for this magazine article; the ice inside the boards, still brand-new fresh for a season that has yet to start.

And this is not your normal hockey team at Tilton School. The players who gathered that afternoon, and the rest of the rag-tag crew that makes up the Tilton Club Hockey team during the winter season, range from athlete to novice to "How-Do-You-Stand-Up-On-This-Ice?!" Some play soccer, tennis, or softball. Others don't play a sport at all. Some grew up watching hockey but never played. Others had never seen a sheet of ice until they came to Tilton School.

But they all have one thing in common—the love of the game and the desire and passion to try something totally new and completely out of their comfort zone.

The club hockey team was started, almost by accident, by Jeff Boucher P'11, '14 of the Tilton facilities team in winter 2011/2012. He happened to be in the rink one afternoon when a few kids were goofing around on the ice. He

could tell they weren't on a team. Then-hockey coach Patrick Norton saw Boucher watching the boys and he asked "You want to coach them, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do," was Boucher's simple response.

Norton introduced the boys to Boucher, they decided to form a club team, and within two weeks they were up to 12 players. By the time the season ended, Tilton Club Hockey had 16 players—15 boys and one girl. They played a single game that season—against Proctor Academy—losing 9-4, but the numbers on the scoreboard held no significance to the Tilton players, Boucher remembers. What mattered was that they had played, and they had done their best. (Getting four goals into the net didn't hurt, either).

"The kids were so happy at the end of that game. They threw their gloves and sticks at the end, they were just so happy," Boucher said.

The Proctor coach, confused by their excitement, asked Boucher "Do your kids know they lost?"

Boucher proudly adds to this story that the team's lone female player, Ariane Siegel '12, scored Tilton's first goal that afternoon; and the first goal in Tilton club hockey history.

The second year the team continued to grow. Boucher's youngest son, Scott '14, helped coach with his dad, offering expert assistance to the novice players. They arranged games with Cardigan Mountain School and Plymouth High School and started practicing after Thanksgiving break. It was during this second season that Jeff gained some help when Carl Blais, Tilton facilities employee, joined as a coach, a position he held through the 2014-2015 season. Today Boucher has two assistant coaches—Rachel Saliba P'17, '19, '19, director of institutional stewardship, and Ben Morse P'21, husband of Amy Morse, music director. The team also has help from a few varsity players who come lend their support and technical advice during practices and games.

At the start of the second season, the popularity of the little-club-team-that-could had reached dizzying heights. When Tilton faced its first opponent, the Plymouth High School junior varsity team, the MacMorran

Field House was packed with excited Tilton School fans. It was wall-to-wall support, Boucher remembers.

“It was insane how many people were there,” he said. “It was by far the most exciting game ever. We lost, but that’s OK. Our goal is to learn the game and have fun.”

The team practices once or twice a week and plays on average four games each season, usually against Cardigan Mountain School, a junior boarding school in Canaan, N.H. They end each season with the traditional Black and Gold intersquad game, which draws a rink-filling crowd of excited, supportive Tilton fans. Other Tilton faculty members play the role of referee (Dean of Residential Life and Leadership Jackie O’Rourke laced up to help in January 2017), and Head of School Peter Saliba P’17, ’19, ’19 takes his favorite spot as Zamboni driver for the night.

Less than a quarter of the team have their own hockey equipment. Boucher helped supply the rest, accepting hand-me-down equipment from varsity players and his own family members whose children have outgrown their gear. How many players he can accept on the team depends on how much equipment he has, if players can’t provide their own.

One year a club parent bought new hockey socks for all 30 players after seeing the mismatched pairs the players were currently wearing. Their Tilton jerseys are hand-me-downs from the varsity teams. Rachel Saliba also buys a few pieces of needed equipment for the players when she can.

But none of this seems to faze the kids or Boucher. It’s not about having the best or newest gear. It’s not about being the best as a team. It’s not even about winning or losing.

“We’re there for the experience and to have fun with it,” said Boucher, who volunteers his time to coach and run the team. “The amount of fun I see the kids having is worth it,” he said. “If they’re laughing, I’m laughing, too.”

And for this group of students with a wide range of athletic experience, the laughter flows freely. Boucher is quick to point out that he provides some of the humor, which in turn are teachable moments.

“I play hockey and I’m a goalie, so I don’t skate out that often,” Boucher explained. “So when I’m out doing a drill or something and I fall, they think that’s just hilarious. I laugh about it all the time. And I tell them ‘You’re going to see me fall down quite a lot. Don’t worry. You get up, you keep going, you have fun.’”

Cheyenne Johnson ’19, a two-year club hockey player, agrees. Before coming to Tilton as a freshman, Cheyenne had only been on skates a couple times in her life. At the urging of her friends, she joined the team her sophomore year.

“I can skate kinda well now, but I was not the only [beginner],” she said. “When I got out on the ice, I could barely stand up, but so couldn’t a couple other people. We all improved throughout the season.”

James Wills ’19 played hockey as a child in Georgia but had not seriously played in years. When he came to Tilton last year, his brother Brandon ’17, encouraged him to join the team. Like Cheyenne, James enjoys the fun and laughter, but what he appreciates the most is the diversity and acceptance on the team.

“It is nice to see the variety of skill levels. No one really feels alienated, which is great. To me club hockey is the most diverse thing about the school,” said Wills. “You have athletic kids, smart kids, it doesn’t matter how popular you are or anything; if you never played hockey before and you wanted to learn. So it is everyone. And if you ever mess up, no one laughs at you. They laugh with you because they know they will be doing the same thing two minutes later.”

The fact that the team hails from all ages, abilities and backgrounds, and that everyone is accepted is something Boucher is also proud of. Saliba credits this culture to Boucher himself.

“Jeff is just so happy. It’s really fun to be around him. He’s just so positive and he loves the game so much and he loves the kids so much,” said Rachel Saliba. “Club hockey is meant to be a time when the kids are just laughing and being silly, where there are no egos. Egos are checked at the door.”

The 2017-2018 season is club hockey’s seventh season. Over the years, Boucher has steadfastly and proudly captained his group of players, taking them as they come and helping them flourish; helping them achieve the impossible.

“Hockey is probably one of the hardest sports out there to play,” said Boucher. “You try to stand up on ice, which is slippery, on two really thin blades of steel. You try to control a hard rubber puck with a stick that’s pretty long. You’re being bumped around. So it’s not an easy sport at all.”

And on Boucher’s club hockey team, *effort*, not just *results*, are happily rewarded. At the end of each game, Boucher celebrates one player of the night by awarding him or her with a Hershey bar. The accomplishment doesn’t have to be huge. The coveted chocolate bar could go to a student who played the hardest, made a good pass, improved since last practice, scored a goal, or just didn’t fall down. Boucher is just as much a cheerleader as he is the coach.

“Down the road, when you’re doing something that’s really difficult, just think about how hard you had to work at this to become good at it,” Boucher reminds his players. “Down the road you just do the same thing. You just apply [what you learned] to what you’re doing and you’ll get good at it. You’ll be able to do anything. It will just take time. Like club hockey.” **T**

about the author

Angie Cairns was the Director of Communications from August 2016 through January 2018. Prior to Tilton she lived overseas where she was the head of marketing and communications at Tashkent International School in Uzbekistan. In late January 2018 she moved to her home state of Minnesota to be closer to her children.



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Tilton Student Samuel Alicéa '18 Speaks at January 21 Women's Event in Concord

TILTON, NH – In front of an estimated crowd of more than 5,000 people on the steps of the New Hampshire State House this weekend, Tilton School student Samuel Alicéa '18 from Boscawen, shared his story of courage and perseverance and the women who inspired him to take a stand.

Samuel was on stage with his grandmother, N.H. State Representative Caroletta Alicéa, and mother, Stephanie Alicéa, during the opening ceremony at the New Hampshire Women's Day of Action and Unity on Saturday, January 21. The event was held in conjunction with the Women's March on Washington and dozens of similar protests across the country and the world.

Samuel was invited to speak about his experience last fall when he chose to take a knee during the National Anthem before the Homecoming football game at his former high school, and the negative backlash he received. His protest was in response to the recent killings across the country of black men, women and children by police officers.

"I often felt that I do not do enough to create that social change that I look for in our society; the changes that I seek in our country," Samuel told the crowd on Saturday. "I decided the best way to protest was peacefully," he said. "I felt that the most peaceful thing to do was to take a knee, so that's what I did.

"But I'm here today to say that we the people can no longer stay silent about the constant and glaring injustices in this society. And we the people will not in any way whatsoever allow anyone, trying to fill our lives with negative and destructive thoughts, control our choices."

With his mother and grandmother standing behind him, Samuel continued:

“I was brought into this world and grown up ever since with my grandmother and my mother. These two strong strong-willed women have taught me many life lessons, the most important of which is to respect women. To all women, I admire your perseverance and your tenacity in the face of adversity. I look out into this crowd and I know you’re all proud of who you are, as well. And that’s why you chose to come here today, to stand together, united,” he said.

Samuel joined Tilton School in November 2016 and is a junior. To watch his speech from January 21, visit the Tilton School YouTube channel, Tilton School 1845, at <https://youtu.be/wTwnkEaghRg>.

Tilton School is an independent, coeducational, college preparatory school serving 260 students in grades 9 - 12 and postgraduate from 18 states and 17 countries. For more information, visit tiltonschool.org or contact Angie Cairns, director of communications at 603-286-1741 or acairns@tiltonschool.org

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Photo:

Samuel Alicéa on the steps of the New Hampshire State House during the New Hampshire Women’s Day of Action and Unity, Saturday, January 21, 2017. His grandmother, N.H. State Representative Caroletta Alicéa, and mother, Stephanie Alicéa, stand behind him.