

SIZING UP THE SITUATION

“
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”

When It Comes To Debunking The Big Goalie Myth, Smaller Netminders Swat Away Arguments Like Shots On Goal

BY JIM LEITNER

MADDIE ROONEY doesn’t quite understand why the hockey world makes such a big deal about the size of its goaltenders. If you can stop a puck, you can stop a puck. And Rooney has proven time and again she can stop a puck.

Who could forget her performance in the gold medal shootout against Canada at the 2018 Olympics in PyeongChang? Or the silver medal she won this winter in Beijing?

“It’s always fun to prove the stereotype wrong,” said Rooney, a 5-foot-5 native of Andover, Minn., who previously starred at the University of Minnesota-Duluth. “[Team USA goalie partner] Nicole Hensley and I look at all these huge NHL goalies and we always kind of joke around and say ‘You don’t have to be that tall to keep the puck out of the net. Look at us.’ We take a lot of pride in it.”

Still, size has become an issue with talent evaluators, some of whom won’t even scout goaltenders who measure less than 6-foot-4. That mindset has trickled down to the lower levels as well.

MADDIE ROONEY



"It's fun to share our knowledge and our stories with younger goalies who may not think they're big enough or quick enough to have success, just because of their size," Rooney said. "A lot of goalies in this day and age have proven themselves. They might not have the most height, but they can make up for it in other ways."

Steve Thompson, the American Development Model manager of goaltending for USA Hockey, believes the bigger-is-better mentality began in the 1990s, when goalies began wearing bigger equipment and naturally took up more net. Logically, that train of thought applied to the size of the bodies underneath all of that large gear.

"What makes the position challenging and what makes some goaltenders great is oftentimes between their ears," Thompson said. "It's their ability to read the play, their ability to read the release, their ability to know where the puck is

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— JEFF LERG

going before it gets there and put themselves in a position to get hit with it.

"Size is not required to be a quick thinker, especially in a smaller goaltender. I think we're doing our potential goaltending pool a disservice by focusing only on those who naturally take up more net. There are a lot of people who aren't 6-foot-4,

and if we limit our pool to just those who are, we're going to miss out on a lot of great athletes and smart athletes who can get the job done just as effectively."

Dustin Wolf, a 6-foot-0, 170-pound goaltender from Gilroy, Calif., has won at every level. He starred for the Western Hockey League's Everett Silvertips, helped USA Hockey win a World Junior Championship in 2021 and is in his first full season with the Stockton Heat, the AHL affiliate of the Calgary Flames.

"It's the old cliché that, if you can stop pucks, it doesn't matter how big you are," Wolf said. "But there are a lot of teams that are set in their belief that, if you aren't 6-3 or 6-4, you won't even get a look, which is pretty unfortunate."

"On a daily basis, I don't think about my size at all. You just go out there, you're excited to do your job and stop pucks and give your team a chance to win every night. It's the outside sources that bring up the idea that you have to be big to play, and it's very prevalent in the hockey world. If you're a smaller goaltender, you might not get as much leeway as the guy who's 6-3 or 6-4."

And you do have a little more ground to make up.

Rooney didn't reach her current height until high school and competed against Minnesota boys' teams, so she had to integrate an aggressive mindset into her game at an early age. She developed stronger edge work and quicker feet to put herself in position to stop shots.

"I'm always at the top of the crease, trying to take away as much space as I can so they don't have as much net to shoot at," Rooney said. "But, also a big focus of my game growing up, due to not having that height, was my lateral quickness and overall agility in making up for that lost space I might not have."

Casey DeSmith, a 6-foot-0, 181-pound native of Rochester, N.H., in his fourth season with the Pittsburgh Penguins, doesn't discriminate when it comes to watching other goaltenders around the NHL. He can benefit from studying colleagues of various sizes.

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“You can watch any goalie in the league and glean something from their game, whether it’s from a mental standpoint or a technical movement,” DeSmith said. “It doesn’t matter what their size is. We all play slightly different games, but every goalie in the NHL is really good at something.

“As a smaller goalie, you have to rely on your angles and your positioning, and you have to be a little quicker than the guy who’s 4 or 5 inches bigger than you. And, of course, it doesn’t matter what size you are, you have to have really good rebound control. Whether you’re 6-0 or 6-5, it’s up to each goalie to find out what works for them.”

Jeff Lerg, a 5-foot-6 native of Livonia, Mich., won 76 games while posting a 2.38 goals-against average and .921 save percentage for Michigan State University from 2005 to 2009. He played 10 years of minor pro hockey in the United States and abroad before returning to his former youth hockey program, Detroit Honeybaked, to serve as its director of goaltending and hockey operations manager.

He identifies goaltenders for eight boys teams and four girls teams.

“I look for people who get the job done, regardless of size,” Lerg said. “Obviously, there are various styles a goaltender can play, but I’m looking for someone who controls the game well more than anything else. Skating is a big part of it, but also rebound control is a big factor.



**DUSTIN
WOLF**

Despite his size, **Dustin Wolf** has been successful at every level of the game due to his intelligence and his athletic ability.

“There’s more to the position than just taking up space on the initial shot. There’s pre-shot movement and how you adjust and maybe re-adjust before a shot is taken. Bigger guys might take up more space, but controlling pucks, battling through traffic and having a high amount of will power to will your team to victory are all elements I look for and things that don’t just automatically come.”

Lerg naturally roots for the undersized goaltenders and takes pride in watching them outduel the larger-sized opponents at the opposite end of the ice.

“I’d love to see us get back to the days when Chris Osgood and Manny Legace were winning Stanley Cups for the Red Wings as goalies under 6-foot,” he said. “That’s what I grew up with, and that’s what motivated me to be a goalie.

“Size is just one tool in the tool box. At the end of the day, it’s all about winning games, and it shouldn’t matter how big you are.” ☆

Jim Leitner is the sports editor of the Dubuque (Iowa) Telegraph Herald.