SPORTS

Seeing the Ice

Hockey champion A. J. Mleczko in the broadcast booth

A. J. MLECZKO ’97 (’99) could always see the ice. As a player, that was one thing she counted on, even more than the goals and assists she scored (although there were plenty of those, too). But her ability to read the ice—to anticipate the next pass, the next shot, the next breakaway or open look—that was why, after so many years of skating at center, serving as a playmaker and face-off specialist for the American women’s hockey team that won Olympic gold in 1998 and the Harvard team that won a national title the following year, Mleczko transitioned back to defense and felt like she’d come home. “I had the whole ice in front of me again,” she says. “You know, the more you play this game, the more you understand it. I wasn’t ever the fastest player, I didn’t have the hardest shot, my stick skills weren’t the best, but I saw the ice pretty well.”

She still does. For the past 13 years, Mleczko (muh-less-ko) has been a television analyst for women’s hockey, working every Winter Olympics since Torino (plus the Summer Games in Rio, where she joined the field-hockey broadcast crew). In February 2018, she was in PyeongChang, South Korea, giving color commentary—and trying to keep her cool—as Team USA beat Canada in the finals to win the first American gold medal in women’s hockey since Mleczko and her teammates had done it 20 years before (in the first year the Olympics included the women’s sport). In North America, that 2018 game stretched into the early morning hours, as the teams went to overtime, and then to a shootout. Nearly 18 million people tuned in. “I was shaking,” Mleczko recalls. “It’s very important to NBC that their broadcasters are not American cheerleaders. And so I had to stay unbiased and keep looking at everything analytically, keep the emotion out of my voice. But I’m watching this game, and, I mean, I was shaking.” A cell-phone video shot by a colleague sitting behind her caught Mleczko bursting from her chair at the instant the game was won, jumping in the air, fists raised, an utterly involuntary—but dutifully silent—expression of joy. Meanwhile, her broadcast partner Kenny Albert, motionless beside her, called the play.

After she returned home to Concord, Massachusetts, NBC asked her to work a Boston Bruins game, which turned into a weekly NHL assignment for the network. Then a few weeks later, Mleczko made news as the first woman to be an in-booth analyst during the Stanley Cup playoffs. “The learned skill,” she says, “is translating into...”
words what you see unfolding in front of you. I have confidence in my knowledge of the game, confidence in the way I see it, but the words I choose, that’s what I’m continually working on.” She’s had to learn to slow her naturally quick patter, she says, and to know when not to speak at all. When she began broadcasting, every second of dead air felt like something she had to fill. “But when there’s a moment that is rich in and of itself”—like the cheers and on-ice pileup when Team USA won in Korea—“then you don’t need someone like me telling you why it’s amazing.”

In women’s hockey, she says, where the audience is often split between true aficionados and total newcomers, choosing the words is a particular challenge. “You have to be able explain the game to people who have no idea what’s going on—like, why this penalty got called, or what’s the difference between body contact [which is allowed in women’s hockey] and body checking [which is not]—without condescending to the serious fans.” In the NHL, color commentary is a little different. Viewers typically know the game. Usually they’re fans of one or both teams. “So there’s not as much explaining what ‘icing’ is. It’s more just pure analysis.”

This season, Mleczko is one of several
Incorporators.

Scott Malkin serves on the magazine’s Board of Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellowships; *Jonathan Ledecky created this magazine’s Berta shrinking within walking distance of the family’s home. When Mleczko and her sister and brother each turned two, he strapped them into skates. For the girls, that meant figure skates: back then, she says no girls played hockey. Her sister, Priscilla ’95 (nicknamed “Wink,” later a Harvard hockey teammate and Crimson captain), became a very good figure skater; Mleczko decided to do something else. When she asked about hockey, her father outfitted her in gear from the rink’s lost and found—including a boys’ cup.

From then on, she practically lived at the rink. It was just across the street from school, and she skated most mornings before going to class. After school, she’d be back on the ice until some scheduled event—figure-skating practice, a team skate—shooed her off. Then she’d find her way to the pond next door. When she was old enough to have homework, she’d sit by the fireplace in the rink clubhouse and work until after dark. “There was a pay phone,” she says, “and we had a system where I would collect-call my parents when I wanted a ride home. They wouldn’t accept the call, but they knew it was time to pick me up.”

Until she turned 15 and headed to boarding school, and then to Harvard (where a “gut affinity” had led her, despite a women’s hockey program then still very much under construction), Mleczko was the only girl on every team she played with—or against. In fourth grade, the same year she took her last figure-skating lesson, she cut her hair short, so it couldn’t be seen below her helmet, and started calling herself A.J. instead of Jamie. But by the time she reached middle school and was playing for her father, she’d begun to enjoy her singular place on the team. Her father was tough; he gave her extra sprints, and no favoritism. “If we did dry-land training, he’d pick the biggest kid on the team to jump on my back.” During games, boys on opposing teams sometimes took a run at her. Usually—though not always—she was nimble enough to evade them. What made her madder were players who shied away when she had the puck. “If I’m out here, I’m expecting to be treated like anybody else.”

The same might be said of her broadcasting career. Last spring, when ESPN interviewed Mleczko about her news-making NHL postseason position, she said, “I wish that this wasn’t a big deal.” She was talking about the number of women she hoped to see in the booth soon, but also about something else: it shouldn’t really be such a shock to see a woman—a standout athlete herself, with a lifetime in the game—analyzing the NHL on TV.

Mleczko hadn’t worried about life after hockey, “because I didn’t know when my life after hockey would begin.” And in a sense, it hasn’t. Mleczko and her husband, Jason Griswold, have four children, two girls and two boys, ages seven to 15. When she’s not on the road with the Islanders or NBC, she coaches her kids’ youth teams. “I try not to give them a play-by-play from the bench,” she says of her players, “not to tell them what do” during competitions. “I let the coaches her kids’ youth teams. “I try not to give them a play-by-play from the bench,” she says of her players, “not to tell them what do” during competitions. “I let the

Mleczko was five years old when she decided she wanted to play hockey. “My dad thought it was the greatest thing ever.” He’d had her skating since she was a toddler. Tom Mleczko was the captain of a Nantucket charter boat during fishing season, but the rest of the year, he taught middle-school science in New Canaan, Connecticut, and coached hockey for 13- and 14-year-olds at the New Canaan Winter Club, an outdoor rink within walking distance of the family’s home. When Mleczko and her sister and brother each turned two, he strapped them into skates. For the girls, that meant figure skates: back then, she says no girls played hockey. Her sister, Priscilla ’95 (nicknamed “Wink,” later a Harvard hockey teammate and Crimson captain), became a very good figure skater; Mleczko decided to do something else. When she asked about hockey, her father outfitted her in gear from the rink’s lost and found—including a boys’ cup.

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And broadcasting came to her, as it does for many athletes. In 2006, an NBC Olympics producer called her to ask if she’d be interested in working on camera. She said sure: for the first time in a long time, her calendar was open. After Team USA’s 1998 gold medal in Nagano—for which she’d taken two years off from college, living on friends’ couches and keeping her gear in her car—she returned to campus and captained the Harvard women to an NCAA championship in 1999. She put up 114 points in 34 games that year, the most prolific scoring season in women’s college ice-hockey history, and earned the Patty Kazmaier Award, given annually to the top American female college player. In 2002 she returned to the Olympics, where Team USA took silver in a hard-fought final that still haunts her (it was that very game that she returned to the Olympics, where Team USA took silver in a hard-fought final that still haunts her (it was that very game that)

The SARS epidemic canceled the world championships in Beijing, and brought her playing career to an abrupt end. Mleczko hadn’t worried about life after hockey, “because I didn’t know when my life after hockey would begin.” And in a sense, it hasn’t. Mleczko and her husband, Jason Griswold, have four children, two girls and two boys, ages seven to 15. When she’s not on the road with the Islanders or NBC, she coaches her kids’ youth teams. “I try not to give them a play-by-play from the bench,” she says of her players, “not to tell them what do” during competitions. “I let the game teach them. It’s one of the best things I can give them as a coach.” She wants them to develop their own sense of when to pass, when to shoot, when to dump the puck—the chance to read the ice for themselves.

~LYDIALLYLE GIBSON