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SECTION: STATE AND REGIONAL NEWS

HEADLINE: After Death, a Lesson in Sportsmanship: Tourney commemorates goalie, 10, who served as 'role model'

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Apr. 4--Children who play sports often become a reflection of their parents. Hypercompetitive, for instance. Or whiney. Or hotheaded.

Then there are children who develop their own distinct personalities on the fields of play. Where exactly these characteristics come from, no one is certain. Braxton Rel was one of those kids. A little guy with a big name, Braxton played goalie for the Grizzlies, a New Mexico Ice Squirrt-division team made up of 9- and 10-year-olds. Like many young goalies, Braxton had been drawn to the position because of the big glove, the wide-bladed stick, the stand-alone honor. He played hard when he was on ice, stopping pucks with deftness. "Good quickness," remembers his coach, Chris Jarvis. But to bright-eyed, always smiling Braxton, ice hockey was just a game. He had taken up the game at age 6, because his older brother Preston played. His father was not a hockey player. Steve Rel, who had never been on ice, went skating once with Braxton. "Never again," he told his wife, Lorna. As a competent player, Braxton stood out for another reason. He never complained about his play or anyone else's. If he saw a teammate crying after a loss, he came over and said, "Hey, just think how lucky it is we're playing hockey."

"An amazing kid," remembers Vince Gilbert, who has long been active in Albuquerque youth hockey.

On Dec. 13, Braxton underwent a tonsillectomy, just like millions of kids. Day surgery, nothing special. Go in, go home, have ice cream.

Braxton went to sleep in his own bed that night. But he never woke up.

He died before dawn, apparently of complications from the procedure.

A fifth-grader at John Baker Elementary School, he was 10.

Hard as it was, the Grizzlies continued their season without Braxton. "The kids really missed him," Jarvis says. "His attitude especially."

The Grizzlies traveled to games in Durango and Flagstaff this past winter. They thought about their goaltender. They tried their best to reckon with the idea that Braxton was gone and that there was nothing they could do about it. Mostly they failed.

This gave Braxton's father an idea. Steve Rel got the local hockey community to help put on the first Braxton Rel Memorial Hockey Tournament.

Six teams from the Southwest competed, all 9- and 10-year-olds.

The tournament, it was decided, would not be one of these ultracompetitive affairs aimed at saluting high scorers and perfect records. The emphasis would be on sportsmanship. If anyone knew about being a good sport, it was Braxton Rel. Though Braxton was focused on the ice, when a puck went by him that he might have stopped, he would look over at the crowd and, well, smile.

"He knew such things happen, and he knew to move on," his coach says.

To be sure, Braxton wanted to win. But everyone says he wanted much more to have a good time. If the Grizzlies lost, Braxton forgot it immediately.

The tournament was held last weekend, at Outpost Ice Arena, Braxton's home rink. On Sunday, the Steamers from Durango won the event. Braxton's Grizzlies came in fourth. When the tournament director prepared to give the Steamers their trophy, a diamondshaped piece of crystal, 18 inches tall, something happened. A Durango player named Kele Steffler, another 10-year-old, skated across the ice and instead of taking the hardware, asked for the microphone.

"We want Braxton's team to have the trophy," 10-year-old Kele said without prompting, cue cards or coaxing. "This should be for Braxton."

The moment represented, say people who were there, sportsmanship at its best. Not an action handed down from a parent, but one done intuitively.

Kele Steffler knew Braxton Rel. "He was a role model," the Durango boy says.

The trophy now sits on the mantel of Steve and Lorna Rel's home in the Northeast Heights. Their son's hockey jersey hangs in the lobby of Outpost Ice Arena.

Somehow, hockey games will go on without Braxton Rel. But few know how.