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SAN JOSE, Calif. – The nickname formed several years back, bestowed upon Joe Pavelski without much intention of having it stick. It started when several friends, part of a foursome golf group that plays every Wednesday in Wisconsin during the off-season, noticed how Pavelski kept stringing together accomplishment after accomplishment, little of which related to his profession as an Olympian, NHL All-Star, and leading goal scorer for the San Jose Sharks.

In the morning, he would arrive at workouts bearing pictures of three muskellunge fish he had landed at dawn. In the afternoon, he would shoot scratch across 18 or 36 holes. In between, he might dazzle colleagues at the rink with an array of hand-eye coordination drills, somehow whacking a tennis ball with his stick, against the wall at waist level, while holding a full conversation. Then he might win 27 straight volleyball matches at a teammate's lake cabin, birthing a dynasty like he did a few summers ago.

“So we were like, ‘What *aren't* you good at?’” says Adam Burish, a former college teammate and one member of the foursome. “We call him *The Truth*. Everything he does is the truth.”

Before long, Pavelski had no choice but to embrace the moniker. “Every time we golf, we'd put on the scorecard and it'd be in group text messages,” says Canadiens defenseman Tom Gilbert. Today, Pavelski's golf balls and markers are emblazoned with the nickname, and his putter carries the etching, *TRUTH* 8—his jersey number with San Jose. “We're trying to find something he's not good at,” Gilbert says. “Maybe baseball. We haven't really tested the waters on that. Even if he's never played baseball, he'd probably be good at it. He's always the frontrunner. It's a gift, obviously. But he's a humble guy. It's not like he goes out there and throws it in everyone's face. He works hard.”

This is, friends say, the quiet brilliance of Pavelski, who tops the 2016 Stanley Cup playoffs with 13 goals, despite going scoreless over Games 1 and 2 in the Stanley Cup Final against Pittsburgh. He's a former seventh-round draft pick who trails only Alex Ovechkin in goals scored during the past three seasons, having developed into one of the NHL's most skilled puck-tippers. A 5' 11" forward whose reputation for subpar skating was always dwarfed by a standout hockey sense, thirst for new knowledge and tireless attention to detail. A 31-year-old steering the Sharks to their first Western Conference championship in his debut season as their captain. “This whole

thing sounds too good to be true,” says Pavelski’s junior coach, P.K. O’Handley. “It’s not by accident, it’s by hard, hard, hard work and information.”

And if Clippers forward Paul Pierce balks at the borrowing of his nickname by a fellow Californian? Well ...

“He’s more ‘The Truth’ than that guy,” Burish laughs. “He’s good at basketball, but is he a scratch golfer? Can he catch muskies? Was he the guy who was never supposed to play in college or the NHL?”



Photo: Dave Reginek/Getty Images

The drills don’t stop with the tennis balls whacked against the wall. At Wisconsin, Burish remembers Pavelski grabbing buckets of pucks and asking Burish to hurl them at his skates, like an infielder taking short hops, so he could work on the weird bounces that might arise during games. To hone his wrist strength, he would shoot 45-pound weight plates clean across the concrete floor, while teammates struggled to even nudge it a few feet. Former Badgers assistant coach Troy Ward recalls Pavelski ordering a J-shaped device fashioned out of dasher boards, which looped pucks back to him for one-timers without anyone else around. Long after practices in San Jose, Pavelski can be spotted asking defensemen to fire pucks at odd angles—high, low, wide, everywhere—so he doesn’t get rusty.

“A lot of times in games guys are just tied up, and he’s able to keep his stick not tied up,” defenseman Brent Burns says. “Then the hand-eye coordination to do it. A lot of guys swing and

miss, or don't hit it. That's a skill now. You've got to work on it. The ice sucks, usually, most of the nights in pretty much every building. There are a lot of bouncing pucks, a lot of pucks coming that guys work on knocking them down."

If the national audience didn't already know this about Pavelski, Game 5 of the Western Conference Finals served as a public-service announcement. Sixteen seconds into the final period, after having already cranked a Joe Thornton power play feed past Brian Elliott less than two minutes before intermission, Pavelski notched the eventual winning goal by knocking down Burns' wrist shot, which was sailing left of the net until Pavelski's toothy-white stick interrupted the flight pattern. Back in San Jose two nights later, Pavelski's fourth tally of the series, a wraparound off a rebound that skittered behind the goal line, helped San Jose eliminate the Blues.

"A lot of people throw around 'student of the game' or 'perfectionist,'" O'Handley says. "I would say Joe is both."

Indeed, to trace Pavelski's path to the NHL is to find a dutiful preparer who leaves no base uncovered. When he enlisted the help of skating coach Cathy Andrade, she was surprised when Pavelski stopped the lesson to ask for paper and pencil, so he could take notes.

"It's in his fiber to be in that quest, to be the best," Andrade says. Before Mike Eaves left Wisconsin this year, the former Badgers coach would sometimes field calls from Pavelski, asking for books on leadership and sports psychology to read. Even today, Pavelski receives statistical information sent from Ron Johnson, a biomechanist and skills coach who tracks scoring trends in the NHL, and a few years ago helped Pavelski find a new curve for his stick. "I'll send him literature on where the goals are, what to look for, different areas of the ice," Johnson says. "It's like Texas Hold 'Em. You just want to know the statistics. If he can't score off the initial play, he wants to make sure he's generating a secondary scoring chance."

Deployed mostly with Joe Thornton and Tomas Hertl this season, Pavelski notched his third straight year with at least 37 goals and 70 points, and didn't miss a game for the fifth consecutive season. The trio dominated possession against Pittsburgh at Consol Energy Center, but Pavelski managed just three shots on goal in the two defeats. He endured a mini-slump in the last round, too, going scoreless in Games 1-3 against St. Louis before busting out down the stretch. Those who know Pavelski best expect something similar on the sport's biggest stage.

"Every day after practice he's always doing things, whether it's off the ice or on the ice," says Brenden Dillon, among the Sharks defensemen who is often enlisted to help Pavelski at the team facility. "People give him credit for tipping goals, but that stuff didn't happen by accident. He's not the biggest guy. He's not the fastest guy. He doesn't have a 100-mile-an-hour slap shot, but he continues to work at his game, little things that are going to make him successful."



Photo: Gregory Shamus/Getty Images

On March 25, 2005, the Badgers' season ended against the University of Michigan in the NCAA Midwest Regional semifinal. The 4–1 defeat bred an angry locker room in Grand Rapids, Mich., filled with F-bombs and slammed gear. A few team leaders addressed the group, including Burish, who would become captain the next season. Then Pavelski, who had finished the season with a team-high 45 points, rose. A 20-year-old freshman at the time, he was the youngest to talk. "It was the first time he really spoke up," recalls Andrew Joudrey, then a sophomore. "He had it in him, but that was the first time it was in front of the whole team in a big moment. You could see how much he cared."

Really, it was only a matter of time before the Sharks named Pavelski the 11th captain in team history, which happened last October, and any awkwardness that one might've predicted—Pavelski's alternate captains, Thornton and Patrick Marleau, had each been stripped of the "C"—was non-existent among the roster. "We're not like, 'Oh, he's the captain, he's got to say something,'" Burns says. "More people talk about it outside the rink. We're not like, 'Oh god, we need our captain to speak now, and if he doesn't he's not a good captain.' If somebody says something, you listen."

According to Burns, there are certain outsized characters in San Jose—see: himself, Thornton, or even the way Roman Polak shrieks like a tennis player while playing table tennis—that mesh well with the more stoic skaters, like Couture, Marleau and Pavelski. But Pavelski has plenty of goofiness in the tank, too. Last summer, Pavelski terrorized training partners in Wisconsin with a rubber rattlesnake that he kept hiding in the shower. With the USHL's Waterloo Black Hawks, O'Handley remembers the time Pavelski swiped his clothes from the coaches' locker room after

practice, and during their Clark Cup run in 2004, Pavelski started a team-wide trend of wearing cowboy hats and boots to the rink, along with their suits and ties.

“He draws people to him, in the right way,” O’Handley says. “I’m not surprised in any way shape or form that he’s a captain of a NHL, and I say that with all due respect to every captain. His personality is just that way. His competitiveness, his commitment, his work, his preparation. He’s got a very unassuming way to unify a team.”

More than most, O’Handley has seen the scope of Pavelski’s personality. Six years ago, when O’Handley’s stepson died, Pavelski was the first to call O’Handley’s wife. And when the family established scholarships for youth hockey and baseball players, Pavelski was the first to send boxes of gear to raise money.

“For me, you’d like to clone that guy as your leader every year,” O’Handley said earlier this week. He was calling from the Black Hawks’ rink, where a painting commissioned for the Clark Cup hangs on the wall in the locker room. Aside from the jewel-encrusted ring, the biggest image in the frame is Pavelski, a “C” stitched onto the chest of his jersey. “A Season To Remember,” reads the caption at the bottom, and these days folks around Waterloo hold onto the hope that Pavelski will make more memories. When O’Handley recently visited his dealership to get work done on his car, the mechanic asked him, referring to the Sharks, “Are we going to get it done?”

If anyone can, O’Handley believes, it’ll be Pavelski.

That’s the truth.