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Two Dreams, One Degree

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Two dreams, one degree

After a long night of body checks, slapshots and chasing a puck up and down the ice, Michael McCurtain '16 often retreated to his hotel room – to tackle accounting homework.

For two years, McCurtain juggled the life of a professional hockey player with the demands of earning an accounting degree through Linfield's Online and Continuing Education Program. The online program gave him the flexibility to continue his hockey career, while getting a college education and looking ahead to a career off the ice.

"Since I was a little boy, I've wanted to play hockey," said McCurtain, 29, of Eagle River, Alaska. "Linfield let me follow my dream while completing my degree."

McCurtain played the sport most of his life, first picking up a stick at age 7. After high school, he played junior hockey then enrolled (and played) at Marian University and the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, both NCAA Division III colleges, before beginning a professional career in 2012. There, he battled it out night after night on teams including the Watertown (N.Y.) Wolves and the Berkshire (Mass.) Battalion of the Federal Hockey League.

"Hockey can be a hard life," said McCurtain, who played forward and defense. "It's a physical sport and takes a significant toll on the body, but it can also be emotionally draining, with the need for constant performance to keep your job. I began thinking about finishing my degree."

During a visit to family in Oregon, he toured colleges and found an instant connection with Linfield.

"I loved the campus," he recalled. "But I was 27, and unsure about doing the campus life at that age. Plus, I was still playing hockey."

So he entered the online program, and continued playing hockey on the East coast. He lived in team housing with teammates from other parts of the United States and elsewhere, including Russia, Ukraine and Canada.

"We traveled together, ate together, practiced together, lived together," he said. "Just like a family, except with hockey players."

McCurtain fit his Linfield work around his hockey schedule, allotting three hours of homework after games or practices. He worked from hotel rooms and on the bus. During long bus rides with no Internet connection, he printed lecture notes before so he could do homework.

Michael McCurtain '16, wearing jersey number 22 for the Berkshire Battalion, balanced the demands of a professional hockey career with the demands of college through Linfield's Online and Continuing Education Program. Now he is considering a master's degree in accounting.

"Since I was a little boy, I've wanted to play hockey. Linfield let me follow my dream while completing my degree." – Michael McCurtain '16

McCurtain praised the open communication and close-knit feel of the Linfield program. He became friends with a number of students in his classes, along with his professors, communicating by phone, email and Skype.

"Of all the colleges I looked into, Linfield was the most up front," he said. "They looked through my old syllabuses and transcripts, accepted all my previous credits and really worked with me. That's one of the reasons I chose Linfield."

Ultimately, a hip injury derailed McCurtain's on-ice career, but that didn't stop him from walking across the stage to receive his degree during commencement in the Linfield Oak Grove.

"My mom and both grandmothers always wanted me to get my degree," he said. "It was a long journey. I came to Oregon for Commencement so they could watch me walk."

– Laura Davis

