

Once a budding hockey prospect, Heuerman finds NFL future after dropping NHL goal

After dreaming of the NHL and sacrificing for the sport he loved, Jeff Heuerman found a future in the NFL.



At 13 years old, [Jeff Heuerman](#) was almost completely alone. He had left his family in Naples, Fla. to pursue professional hockey dreams and moved into his friend's grandparents' house in Manchester, Mich., a town of about 2,000 residents. That friend, Austin Watson, was the only person he knew in town and because Watson was a year older, Heuerman went to middle school and Watson went to high school.

By himself in a sleepy rural town, Heuerman boarded the school bus and lay down on the cold vinyl seat to fall asleep before school. That became more difficult in the bitterly cold Michigan winter mornings. Some window latches

were broken or stuck, but even with cold drafts creeping through the gaps, he had plenty of time to get in more rest. The 90-minute bus ride weaved through the frosty farmland, resting momentarily to pick up children from stops at the farms' edges.

He was a hockey prodigy with a promising future. Compuware, a youth hockey program with 15 national championships and 34 state championships to its name, had offered him a spot and Heuerman happily accepted. But to take the next step on a possible path to the NHL he would have to move even farther north.

Watson was preparing to make that northern jump to the Ontario Hockey League, and Heuerman knew that if he was going to continue toward professional hockey at the highest level, that would have to be his path, too, in a year's time.



It had been fun to live in a place and play hockey with other skilled players, but he didn't know if he wanted to move to Canada and keep going with a dream that would draw him further from his family. He missed his family, especially his brothers, who were growing up without their oldest sibling. He had also hurt his ankle in the middle of the season, which made him question the route even more.

So Heuerman called his father, discussed the options and the path came to its end. He would return home to Naples.

About a decade later, Heuerman can't help but feel somewhat out of place again. While other rookies on the roster work to make an impact on the active roster or the practice squad, the rookie tight end is still hard at work rehabbing after offseason surgery to repair a torn ACL.

Still, Heuerman is upbeat and though he wishes he could be out there with the rest of the teammates, he's happy knowing he found his way after leaving behind a path to professional hockey.

When he returned to Florida, Heuerman's hockey future had been on life support in Florida until he eventually resigned to move on from it to football. But when he started seeing his friends and former teammates -- including Watson -- getting drafted to the NHL and signing big contracts, he couldn't help but feel like he might have made a mistake.

"Should I have stuck with that?" Heuerman remembers wondering in high school. "Some of the guys I knew growing up playing around, these dudes are getting drafted at 18. Like this dude's making a million bucks at 18 and I'm sitting here living off my dad.

"Should I have just bit my tongue and gone to the OHL for a year?" he thought. *"Should I have taken that route?"*

In the muggy heat of Florida, ice hockey isn't often the first sport that comes to mind. Regardless, Heuerman immediately connected with it and he quickly became a skilled center.



That Heuerman was quick learner and a natural athlete was no surprise given his father's background.

Paul Heuerman flirted with a professional sports career after playing four years for the Michigan Wolverines basketball team. A 6-foot-9-inch forward, Heuerman moved into the starting lineup as a junior and became a team co-captain the following year. A second-team Academic All-American in June of 1981, he was drafted by the Phoenix Suns in the fifth round.

Unfortunately, Paul's basketball career didn't take off. He went to law school and settled down in Naples, a rapidly-growing city on the Gulf Coast.

Paul nurtured his son's love for hockey and Jeff rapidly improved at the sport, so much so that he caught the attention of two key figures, one of whom was Austin Watson, whose parents had recently moved to Florida.

"I had gone out for stick-and-puck and you could kind of tell who's a good player and who's not," Watson recalls. "I kind of gravitated a little bit towards him because he was [so good]. He was a good player and down in Florida there's some good players but it's not a huge hockey market, so that was nice for me to meet a kid at 12 or 13 years old playing at the same level as me in Florida and we kind of just hit it off from there."

The other person Heuerman stood out to was one of Detroit Compuware's coaches. He would eventually call to offer Heuerman a spot on the team. This, to be sure, was a big deal for a young hockey player.

"It's not like they had open tryouts," Heuerman says. " You have to be asked to be on the team, so when they asked, I was like *Holy crap! I'm coming from Florida and they want me to come play for them? I'm freaking doing it!*"

Such a step was massive for Heuerman's future in hockey. To make it to the professional level, you can't really stay in Florida. Generally speaking, a talented player carves their way into playing at a high youth level, declares for the OHL or goes to play at college, and from there they eventually, hopefully get drafted to the NHL. Heuerman was still a good distance from there, but one of the best youth hockey teams had identified him as someone they wanted on their front line.



The decision was more or less a no-brainer for Heuerman: "All I wanted to do was play hockey and I just wanted to play on the best team I could."

Watson and his family solved the logistics of moving 1,300 miles when they offered him a room at his grandparents' house in Manchester, Michigan. Watson, also a Compuware player, already had eight brothers, and now with

Heuerman moving into the room across from his, it would feel like he had one more. They even drank their first beers together.

"He just wanted to play sports and hang out," Watson says. "We'd go fishing. [He was a] real nice, happy kid, always had a good attitude and always just wanted to be doing something active."

But with the two in different schools, Heuerman was alone as he entered a new school.

"It's character-building, I'll tell you what," he says. "I showed up to school and didn't know one single person. The only other people I knew were the guys on the hockey team and none of them went to that school. I would go to school, but then I would go home and go to practice. I would always be hanging out with all my buddies on the team. And on the weekends, it would always be the buddies on the team. So I really never met a whole lot of people at the school."

Heuerman enjoyed playing hockey at a higher level and living in a new place, but Watson's impending decision to move to Canada to play in the OHL weighed on his mind. He was unsure if he wanted to spend more years following the customary path to possibly go on to the NHL, like Watson would.

"I was *like Man*, I don't want to live in Michigan for another year and then move to Canada," Heuerman said. "That's the route I was headed on if I had followed it. That's kind of what you do. The top guys go play in the OHL for a year and then go to the draft. I didn't really want that."



Plus, he missed his brothers. If he took this route placed in front of him, he knew he wouldn't see them much at all. It was a lot for a 13-year-old to figure out.

"I was in eighth grade when I moved," he said. "They didn't know me. One was 7 and one was 11. So then I was going to move to Canada in a year? They weren't even going to grow up with me. [...] I'm 13 or 14 living here; I really don't know anything. I'm kind of figuring this all out at the same time and then it starts hitting me one day.

"I started to sit back, started talking with my dad. I'm like 'You know what, I don't know if this is for me. I think I want to go home.'"

Back in Naples, Heuerman tried to continue with hockey, but it just wasn't the same. He had put so much time and effort into hockey and coming back to Florida was like taking a step back. Disinterested and drained, he just didn't want to go on with it anymore.

Paul Heuerman was fine with his son moving on to something else, but not quitting altogether. Jeff would have to find a new sport or find a job, and he sure didn't want to get a job.

Originally, Heuerman didn't even want to try football. He had played in the

backyard from time to time, but he had no organized football experience. But a combination of a friend's suggestion and his hopes that it would impress girls convinced him to give it a shot.

Tight end became a natural fit after that. Heuerman was in the middle of a growth spurt that pushed his height to 6 feet 5 inches tall. He had great natural coordination, mobility and vision skills, which were further developed in his hockey days.



At that time, he didn't really see football as any kind of future career. He didn't even think he'd play college football. So while he saw friends getting drafted to NHL teams, Heuerman wondered if he could have done the same.

But once offers from colleges started to come in, those questions went away. Heuerman committed to play at Ohio State, and after four years initially marked by upheaval and scandal in Columbus, Heuerman and his teammates were national champions.

After months of frenzied draft preparation, Heuerman finally got to hear his name called as the Broncos selected him in the third round. Amid the celebration that night, he got a congratulatory text from Watson, just like the one he sent on the night of Watson's NHL Draft.

Football wasn't exactly the sport Heuerman had initially expected to turn professional in, he acknowledged. From a young age, he seemed to have a path to the NHL carved for his future but once he left it behind, Heuerman faced a new and more open reality where everything wasn't all planned out and he was able to find the sport that fit him.

As for Heuerman's questions about whether he could have or should have stuck with a direction that seemed destined for the NHL, Watson thinks he certainly could have followed in his footsteps.

"I'm sure he could have," Watson says. "It was unfortunate when he came and lived with us and had a little bit of a rough year I think with a couple of injuries and that kind of [thing]. It set his mind back a little bit and he kind of wanted to go back home and regroup but I think as you see, he goes back home and he gets drafted to the NFL years later. It's incredible. He's just an athlete and I think what he's done with football, I'm sure he could have done with hockey, but I think he chose the right route for himself."