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NHL star and South Jersey native Johnny Gaudreau and brother killed after being struck by vehicle while riding bikes

Police say the brothers were struck by a vehicle in Oldman's Township on Thursday night. The driver was suspected of being under the influence of alcohol.

by Gustav Elvin and Rodrigo Torrejón
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Columbus Blue Jacket superstar Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, were struck and killed by a vehicle while riding their bicycles in Oldmans Township on Thursday evening. Johnny was 31 years old, and Matthew was 29. They were slated to celebrate their sister's wedding on Friday.

The brothers, who grew up in Salem County, were riding their bicycles north on County Route 551, when they were struck by a man driving a Jeep Grand Cherokee, New Jersey State Police said in a statement.

The driver of the Jeep, identified as Sean M. Higgins, 43, of Woodstown, N.J., was driving north on County Route 551, behind a sedan and SUV, authorities said. Higgins tried to pass the sedan and SUV, driving into the southbound lanes and passing the sedan.



John Duchneskie / Staff Artist

As Higgins tried to get back into the northbound lanes, the SUV in front of Higgins' Jeep moved to the middle of the road, splitting the north and south lanes to pass the two men riding bicycles north on the right side of the road. Higgins then tried to pass the SUV on the right and hit the two brothers from behind, killing them.

Higgins was suspected to be under the influence of alcohol at the time of the fatal crash, authorities said. When a New Jersey state trooper arrived at the scene of the crash, he spoke to Higgins, who told him he had hit two bicyclists with his Jeep, according to the probable cause affidavit for his arrest. Higgins also told the trooper that he drank five to six beers before the crash, the affidavit said. The trooper detected the "strong odor" of an alcoholic beverage on Higgins' breath as they interacted, the affidavit said.

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Higgins then failed a field sobriety test, according to the [affidavit](#). In a later interview with investigators, Higgins said he drank before and while he was driving, the affidavit said, and that his drinking alcohol contributed to his "impatience" and "reckless driving" that caused the crash.

He was charged with two counts of death by auto, among other charges, and is being detained at the Salem County Correctional Facility. Police continue to investigate the crash.

New Jersey governor Phil Murphy called the Gaudreau brothers "proud New Jersey natives" and offered his "heartfelt prayers" to the family.

Jim Gaudreau, the brothers' uncle, released the following statement on behalf of the family:

"Last night we lost two husbands, two fathers, two sons and brothers in law, two nephews, two cousins, two family members, two teammates, two friends, but truly two amazing human beings.

We want to let everyone know we are receiving your messages of love and support and we appreciate your continued thoughts and prayers. We ask for your continued respect and privacy during this very difficult period of grief. From all of our families and the bottom of our hearts (the Gaudreau, Morris, Korbitz, Venello, and Joyce families)."

Gaudreau, a seven-time NHL All-Star, has played the past two seasons with the Blue Jackets after playing parts of nine seasons with the Calgary Flames.

"The Columbus Blue Jackets are shocked and devastated by this unimaginable tragedy. Johnny was not only a great hockey player, but more significantly a loving husband, father, son, brother, and friend. We extend our heartfelt sympathies to his wife, Meredith, his children, Noa and Johnny, his parents, their family and friends on the sudden loss of Johnny and Matthew."

"Johnny played the game with great joy which was felt by everyone that saw him on the ice. He brought a genuine love for hockey with him everywhere he played from Boston College to the Calgary Flames to Team USA to the Blue Jackets. He thrilled fans in a way only Johnny Hockey could. The impact he had on our organization and our sport was profound, but pales in comparison to the indelible impression he made on everyone who knew him. Johnny embraced our community when he arrived two years ago, and Columbus welcomed him with open arms. We will miss him terribly and do everything that we can to support his family and each other through this tragedy.

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"At this time, we ask for prayers for the Gaudreau family and that their privacy be respected as they grieve."

The Gaudreau family has long been an unmistakable part of the fabric of the Philadelphia-area hockey scene. Johnny and Matthew's father, Guy, is the hockey director at Hollydell Arena in Sewell and has been a longtime coach in the area, including with the Flyers' AAA youth teams and Gloucester Catholic. The brothers grew up playing for the Little Flyers and Team Comcast, with Johnny later going on to star at Gloucester Catholic. Both brothers played collegiately at Boston College, with Johnny winning an NCAA title in 2012 and the Hobey Baker Award, NCAA hockey's equivalent to the Heisman Trophy, in 2014.

"The National Hockey League family is shocked and saddened by the tragic passing of Columbus Blue Jackets forward Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew," NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said via statement. "While Johnny's infectious spirit for the game and showstopping skills on the ice earned him the nickname 'Johnny Hockey,' he was more than just a dazzling hockey player; he was a doting father and beloved husband, son, brother, and teammate who endeared himself to every person fortunate enough to have crossed his path."

Several current and former Flyers were teammates or friends of the Gaudreau brothers. Winger Garnet Hathaway played with Johnny in Calgary from 2015-2019, ex-Flyers Kevin Hayes and Patrick Brown were teammates with both brothers at Boston College, and Tony DeAngelo knows the Gaudreau family well from growing up in South Jersey. Hayes told The Inquirer in 2019 that Johnny was "one of my best friends, not within hockey, just within my life."

"The Philadelphia Flyers are heartbroken to learn of the sudden and tragic passing of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau," the team said in a statement. "Johnny and Matthew were deeply rooted in the Philadelphia and New Jersey community, where they spent their entire childhood on the ice....

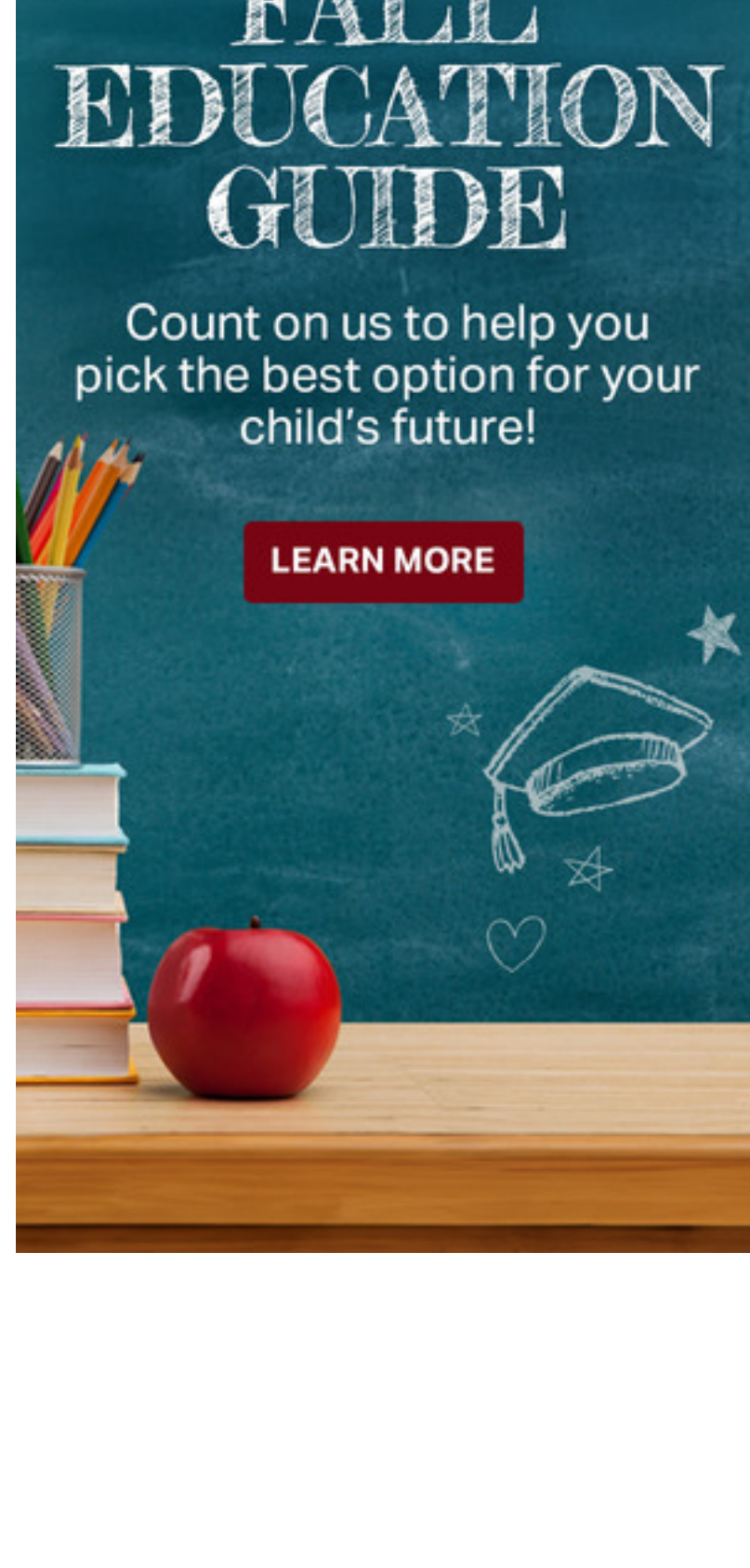
"Johnny and Matthew were, and always will be, beloved and cherished members of the Flyers community and entire hockey world."

During his NHL career, the undersized Gaudreau (5-foot-9, 163 pounds) established himself as one of the NHL's top passers, four times playing over 50 assists in a season. In 763 career NHL games, Gaudreau tallied 210 goals and 743 points, including a career-best 115 points in 2021-22. He finished top five in MVP voting twice, in the top 10 in scoring three times, and was the recipient of the 2016-17 Lady Byng Trophy, given to the "player adjudged to have exhibited the best type of sportsmanship and gentlemanly conduct combined with a high standard of playing ability." Gaudreau also won a World Junior gold and World Championship bronze while representing Team USA.

Matthew also parlayed a brilliant career at Boston College into professional hockey. He played parts of five seasons as a pro, spending time in the AHL, ECHL, and in the lower leagues in Sweden. Matthew spent the 2019-20 season with the Reading Royals, the Flyers' ECHL affiliate, racking up 40 points in 38 games. He had spent the past few seasons coaching at Gloucester Catholic.

"The Gloucester Catholic Family is devastated by the sudden and unspokeable losses of beloved alumni Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau. We extend our heartfelt sympathies and prayers.... Johnny and Matt truly loved Gloucester Catholic, and the entire Gaudreau family have always been loyal and dedicated supporters of Gloucester Catholic. Along with their incredible talents on the ice, they will be remembered even more by our GC Family as loving sons, brothers, fathers, husbands, friends, and role models."

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