

High school hockey players, coach survive bus-semi crash

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Members of Grafton/Port team escape accident with only minor injuries

Members of the Grafton/Port Washington hockey team haven't had any luck winning games this season, but after last Friday, they are certainly counting their blessings.

Ice Hawks head coach Dan Wade and two of his players sustained minor injuries when their team bus was broadsided by a jackknifed semitrailer in a harrowing crash on Highway 60 in Dodge County.

"We were extremely fortunate. It could have been really bad," said Wade, who received a concussion and bruises.

"I looked up and saw the truck barreling toward us at 55 mph. I knew we were going to be hit hard. It was unbelievable. We just tried to hang on."

Wade and 14 players from the co-op high school team were in a Riteway Bus Service coach bus headed west on Highway 60 to a game in Viroqua when the crash occurred.

According to the Wisconsin State Patrol, the bus was stopped at the intersection of highways 60 and 26 in the Town of Clyman at about 3:15 p.m. When the bus pulled out into the three-way intersection, it was struck by a northbound semitrailer whose driver tried to slow and swerve around the bus before the collision.

"He hit the brakes and skidded about 75 feet before the truck jackknifed," Wade said.

"Thank goodness that happened because it slowed the truck. If it hadn't jackknifed at the last second, things would have turned out very badly."

The wheels of the truck cab struck the undercarriage of the bus, jarring most of the team members from their seats. Although the front of the bus was lifted, it didn't overturn.

Wade said he went headfirst into a window.

"I was tossed around like a rag doll. I got up and asked if everyone was all right," he said.

Authorities said weather was not a factor in the crash, which occurred on dry pavement.

Most of the players were unhurt, though two complained of minor injuries and were transported by ambulance to a local hospital along with the bus driver. A Grafton freshman sustained whiplash, and a Port Washington senior had a knee injury, Wade said.

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All three were treated and released. The truck driver was not injured.

The state patrol, Dodge County deputies, firefighters and emergency medical crews responded to the scene quickly, according to Wade.

“They started arriving within 45 seconds. Most of us were banged up, but we were so happy that no one was more seriously hurt,” he said.

Emergency crews stayed on the scene with team members for about three hours, during which time players called their families to get rides back home.

“The kids actually took it pretty well. Some of them even asked if we were going to get a replacement bus and go to the game,” Wade said.

In addition to cancelling Friday’s game, the Ice Hawks called off a Saturday road game against Black River Falls. The accident was the latest mishap in what the first-year coach described as “a very rough season” for his team.

“We were planning to have a pretty good team this year, but we lost nine of our top 11 players to injuries and suspensions,” Wade said.

“We were real excited to get a lot of guys back this week, but then this happened.”

Forced to go with a young lineup throughout the season, the Ice Hawks headed to Friday’s game with an 0-17 season record.

Grafton High School Principal Ken McCormick said the team’s struggles on the ice pale next to its good fortune in avoiding more serious problems Friday.

“We were very lucky that only a few kids were injured, and that those injuries were minor,” McCormick said.

“It sounds like the driver of the truck did a great job to prevent a more serious accident. It could have been so much worse.”