

WOOKIEEE ROOKIE

MOVIES

After his college basketball career ended, Joonas Suotamo used his height to land another job: playing Chewbacca.

BY DANTE A. CIAMPAGLIA



Not so long ago, in a country kind of far away...?

Joonas Suotamo is living a dream he never thought possible. After spending the last few years as a substitute teacher and insurance salesman in his native Finland, the 29-year-old 6' 10" former college basketball player is now part of the *Star Wars* universe — in a big way.

Officially, Suotamo is credited as “Chewbacca Double” in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. In reality, though, he shared Chewie duty with 71-year-old

Peter Mayhew, the original Chewbacca, kicking First Order butt alongside Han Solo and helping Rey and Finn begin their adventures with the Resistance. “From the start to the very end of shooting, it was a thrill ride,” Suotamo says. “I have to thank basketball for getting me this role.”

TEMPTED BY THE COURT SIDE

Growing up in Espoo, Finland, Suotamo watched the *Star Wars*

HOOP DREAM
Heavily recruited by colleges from all over the country, Suotamo was limited to just 34 games with the Nittany Lions by injuries.

movies (over and over and over again) on worn out VHS tapes. The series ignited his imagination and sparked his creativity. *Star Wars* helped Suotamo develop a love of filmmaking and storytelling, even as he blossomed as an athlete.

“Basketball gave me everything when I was 14, 15,” Suotamo says. “I was really into it. I had hopes of getting to the NBA. I tried to do all those things.”

Suotamo’s skills on the court earned him a place on the Finnish junior national team. His play was good enough to attract attention from a host of Division I programs in the United States.

Penn State won the Suotamo Sweepstakes, but it wasn’t a happy time for him in Happy Valley. After redshirting his freshman year, in 2005, Suotamo was plagued by injuries. He appeared in only 34 games and scored 22 points at PSU before hanging up his jersey. “I never could give it my 100%,” he says. “It was just that kind of thing where eventually I knew I needed to focus on my aspirations elsewhere.”

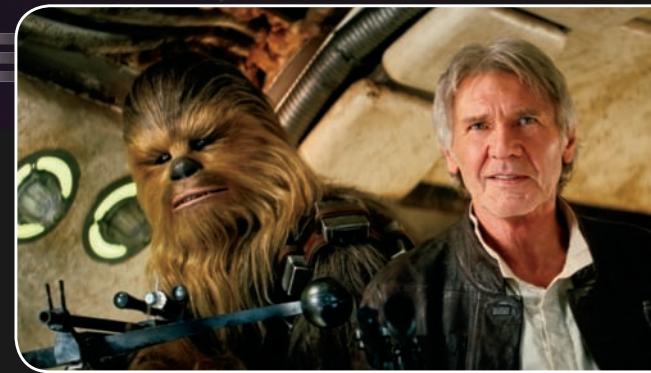
A NEW HOPE

Suotamo graduated a year early, in 2008, with a film degree. He returned to Finland, sold home and health insurance, filled in as a gym teacher at his old high school, and played basketball for a pro team in Espoo as well as the national team. That led him to *Star Wars*.

Through his national team coach, Henrik Dettmann, Suotamo connected with a casting agent looking for a tall man to fill a role in an unnamed movie. He submitted photos and a test video where he had to act like a caveman. Five months later, he got the call: He would be in the new *Star Wars* movie. “We celebrated by playing *LEGO Star Wars* on the PlayStation 3,” Suotamo

FUR SURE!

Lucasfilm won’t say which scenes Suotamo appears in. So that may or may not be him with Han Solo (top). We can confirm, though, that is him (bottom right) with Mayhew on the set.



remembers. “Although the game didn’t give me many hints, movement-wise.”

To really get Chewie, Suotamo drew on his knowledge of the original trilogy, and he worked with Mayhew on different Wookiee mannerisms. The best advice he received? “It might have been something to do with Chewbacca’s proud chest. Always proud,” Suotamo says with a laugh. But what helped most was basketball. “I’ve learned how to control my body more than I would if I had never played sports,” says Suotamo, who practiced his movements while watching himself in the mirror.

He was also helped by the mental training that comes with playing sports. As a huge *Star Wars* fan, Suotamo could easily have gone full fanboy during rehearsals and on set. But his experience on the court wouldn’t allow it. “It’s that thing I credit to basketball,” he says. “If you’re on the free throw line or if you’re meeting your idol, no matter what situation you’re in, it’s always best to stay as relaxed as possible and just kind of be yourself.”

Naturally, though, he was a bit nervous to meet Mayhew the first time. But the original Chewie welcomed him with open arms, helped him realize his full Wookiee potential, and made him feel at home throughout the process of making a *Star Wars* movie.

Once shooting began, Suotamo took the initiative to make his castmates comfortable with him as a second Chewbacca. “The first time



I was on set in the suit, I wanted to surprise everyone,” he says. So he broke out that unmistakable Wookiee roar. “I wanted to make a big entrance — I think people were impressed. I try to nail the pitch, and then I just roll my tongue. That’s the two-second lesson to Chewbacca noises.”

Now that *The Force Awakens* is out, Suotamo has a new task: making sure die-hard fans accept a different person (occasionally) behind the Chewbacca mask. And so far, most people have embraced him as a member of the *Star Wars* family.

“I’m stoked that it seems to resonate with the fans,” he says. “I’m so happy that people are taking this as well as they are. I treasure the responsibility because I’m one of those fans.”

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