



A Long Journey to the NHL

Like so many young hockey players in Minnesota, Blake Wheeler dreamed of playing in the National Hockey League someday. In September of 2008 his dream came true as he earned a spot on the Boston Bruins. His was a dream shared by thousands each year but is realized by only a select few. Although to many observers it seemed that he was destined to play at the top levels, his road to the top was anything but smooth.

Blake's journey through youth hockey and to levels beyond illustrate the often times bumpy road to the top. It was along this journey that Blake learned to stay focused and overcome obstacles. He learned to keep moving ahead and not blame others when things did not go his way. Every success and failure was important steps and helped to prepare him as he pursued his dream.

In his early years of youth hockey in Wayzata, Blake moved from mites to squirts a year early. Blake was already bigger, faster and more skilled than his teammates who were one and two years older. As an eight year old he dominated his squirt team from day one and became the go to player for several years. When Blake moved to pee wees he was still considerably taller than his teammates and had learned some nifty stick handling moves that helped him score bushels of goals during his two years of pee wees. As pee wees his teams struggled to advance in post season play leaving Blake and his teammates frustrated. Even with several top level players on his teams their goals of making it to a state tournament remained elusive.

Moving from pee wees to bantams proved to be a difficult adjustment for Blake and his offensive production got off to a slow start. By mid December he had only scored a few goals and was struggling to find his way in bantams. The faster game and bigger players were challenging for him. He continued to grow taller but remained quite lean compared to other players who were maturing. He simply was still in growth mode and would remain so for several more years. By the time January rolled around Blake had made the necessary adjustments and he returned to his more comfortable role as leading offensive player for the team. At the conclusion of the season he was the team leader in goals and assists. As the pattern of frustration continued his first bantam season ended abruptly with an eight overtime loss to Eden Prairie in the Maroon Region finals and a 3-2 toss to Edina later in the same day. Although Blake and his teammates were once again denied the opportunity to move on to the state tournaments, the stage had been set for a dream season the next year.

The 2002-2003 Wayzata Bantam team began with a great deal of anticipation for the possibilities they might achieve. The boys wanted to erase the frustrations from their pee wee years and first year of bantams. Wheeler was destined to once again lead his team in offense but would they be able to overcome the breakdowns that had plagued them in previous years? It became clear early in the season that this team had a common purpose and a quiet, focused leader in Blake Wheeler. He led by example with hard work and the unwavering belief that he and his teammates would succeed. Wheeler's leadership and vision came to fruition as the team was undefeated in Minnesota during season play, won the AA Silver Stick title in Port Huron, Michigan, won the Minnesota A Bantam State title, and played three strong games at the Tier 1 Bantam National Championships against triple A teams the LA Junior Kings, Madison Capitals, and Philadelphia Junior Flyers. At seasons end Blake had accumulated 130 points in 60 games and lead the team in offense. Blake Wheeler and his boyhood friends had finally accomplished their goals of winning a state title.

As the championship bantam players moved into high school over the next two years seven of the players would eventually become division one athletes. Blake made a difficult decision that he needed a change from Wayzata High School and the next fall he began his two year stint at Breck School. At Breck he could continue his hockey development and also play football on a very strong high school team.

Former Breck hockey coach Wally Chapman saw the same patterns of adjustment and frustrations emerge for Blake. *"I remember seeing Blake for the first time at try-outs; he was very talented, had great hands and was a very hard worker. Blake's sophomore year was a year of transition. Getting used to High School hockey as well as his 6'4" frame took some time. As Christmas rolled along Blake started hitting his stride and became an impact player for us from that point forward. His sophomore year ended with a disappointing play off loss that left Blake and his teammates determined to come back stronger the following year. Blake had a dream for their junior year. He led the team to the 2004 Class A Championship and led the team in scoring. While attending to school work and hockey Blake was being scouted every night by Division 1 College coaches as well as many NHL teams. He was constantly being asked to meet with NHL General Managers and Scouts. Under all of the pressure to perform, Blake delivered every night and had the uncanny ability of playing his best in the big games. What impressed me most about Blake during this time was how he always put the team first and was very humble about the success he was having. I was saddened to see Blake leave Breck to go to the USHL, selfishly because we would have had an even better team in 2005 but also because I believe in High School hockey and the development possibilities on and off the ice that exist for each student/athlete. Blake left his mark at Breck as a respected student, great all around athlete and a friend to many."*

Blake participated in the USA Hockey Advanced/Select 15,16 and 17 programs in Minnesota. Although he played in the Minnesota 15 camp in St. Cloud, he was not able to make the National Camps at any of the three levels. These experiences helped Blake to overcome disappointments and work hard to get better. He still had his vision in sight.

In the summer of 2004 Blake was selected as the number 5 pick in the NHL draft by the Phoenix Coyotes. Blake was one step closer to his ultimate goal but it would take him down a couple roads that he likely had not anticipated. The pattern of opportunity offered and adjustment periods needed would continue to play out over the next few years.

After committing to the University of Minnesota following his junior year of high school, Blake was offered a chance to tryout for the USA World Junior team. In order to accelerate his development and have a chance to play on the USA team he was advised to leave Breck and spend his senior year at Green Bay in the USHL where he was named rookie of the year. The USHL experience was very helpful to his development but did not help him earn a roster spot on the USA team that year. A year later he finally did earn the opportunity to play on Team USA. Once again the transition to higher levels does not come easy.

Undaunted by disappointments Blake continues his dream of playing professional hockey in the NHL. As he entered college he concentrated on building strength in order to compete physically and to improve his skating. He spent time during the summers at Minnesota Hockey Camp in Nisswa, MN training off and on ice and working with the Gopher staff to continually improve.

According to Gopher Hockey coach Don Lucia; *“What impressed me most about Blake was his work ethic and patience. Nobody worked harder at practice or in games. He needed time in college hockey to grow into his body and adjust to playing as a power forward rather than a center. Blake was not in a hurry to move on to the next level knowing that when the time was right it would happen. He was an excellent student and outstanding player for the Golden Gophers. We wish him all the success he deserves playing in the NHL”*.

Blake spent three years as a Golden Gopher and each of those three years he showed remarkable improvement as a player. He had grown to 6’4” and added weight each year. He also excelled in the classroom recognizing the need for a solid academic background required to succeed in life after hockey.

In the summer of 2008 Blake Wheeler became a free agent and signed a contract with the Boston Bruins. He spent the summer working hard to insure he would be in top shape when arrived in training camp in September. Most observers would expect that he would spend a couple years playing in the American League as preparation for the big show.

When the Boston Bruins broke camp last week and announced their roster Blake had made the opening roster. His dream had come true; he was playing in the NHL. Now his challenge will be to acclimate himself to the NHL game and continue to develop himself to insure he stays at that level.

For all young players in Minnesota who dream of playing college or professional hockey Blake Wheeler is a great role model of persistence, hard work, patience, and dedication.

The road is not easy and can take many a wrong turn but for those who persist sometimes dreams do come true.

Hal Tearse

Coach in Chief, Minnesota Hockey.

Hal Tearse coached Blake Wheeler for one year in Pee Wees, two years in Bantams, and in the Upper Midwest Elite League. Wally Chapman Coached Blake for two years at Breck School and Don Lucia coached him for three years at the University of Minnesota.