

Tonka grad Kruger heating up in Texas

BY Nick Clark · SUN NEWSPAPERS

Jimmy Kruger's been hot this December, and it has nothing to do with his play.

Though that might even be hotter.

Kruger, who just last winter helped guide Minnetonka into the Class AA championship game, has found a new hockey home in an unlikely place.

He had a pair of tryouts with clubs from the United States Hockey League, and eventually ended up in Alexandria of the North American Hockey League and in the midst of a goaltending rotation that might have left him conjuring up memories from years past.

He made one start for Alexandria, before the Blizzard traded him to the Texas Tornado, where what the dust finally settled in what was a whirlwind ride up until then.

"It was chaotic, but I ended up in a great spot," said Kruger. "The weather is beautiful, the organization is first class in every way imaginable, and they have a tremendous history of developing goaltenders."

For proof of that, Kruger only has to look at the National Hockey League, where last season, a pair of Tornado goaltending alums – Al Montoya and Ben Bishop – both saw time in net.

It hasn't been hard for Kruger to dream of such a future, but he admitted the more immediate concern is building off a start that would likely dwarf what either Montoya or Bishop put together.

Through his first 13 games in Texas, Kruger was off to a 12-1 start. He had a pair of shutouts, including a 2-0 blanking of Topeka in his Tornado debut, and has posted a goals against average under two (1.91) and a saves percentage of .925.

"It's funny how it worked out, because Alexandria drafted me, and I figured if I didn't make it in the USHL, that is where I would play," Kruger said. "Then just like that, I'm down here and playing as well as I ever had. It's tough to figure out why, but I'm loving it."

His performance early on earned Kruger the chance to take part in the NAHL's Top Prospect's Tournament in Walpole, Mass. Dec. 5-7, where he took more than just the NAHL best goals against average and saves percentage with him.

He's been scouted throughout the year, and said he's already heard from up to 10 different college hockey programs. But the eyes watching him play in suburban Boston are a little more notable.

"New Hampshire will be there, and that is where I really want to go," Kruger said.

While that aspiration may seem a little high for a goaltender not in the USHL, his current team did send both of those aforementioned goaltenders into the NHL, and each made stops at big-time Division I colleges prior to turning pro.

Montoya went to Michigan, and Bishop Maine. Kruger could very well be next.

“They have a history of producing some unbelievable goaltenders down there,” said Minnetonka head coach Brian Urick, himself a Notre Dame alum. “If he keeps playing like he has, he could very well get that type of chance.”

Urick issued that sentiment about a number of his players last year. Minnetonka had four players commit to Division I schools, including three of its defensemen.

With the attention those players commanded, Kruger often time went unnoticed. But Urick said it was actually Kruger that helped make his defenders look so good.

“He kind of flew under the radar,” Urick said. “Everybody talked about our defensemen, but we had two defensemen that were always up in the play, and we would give up some odd man rushes and scoring chances. Jimmy would bail those guys out a lot. Really, he didn’t get the attention he should have.”

Although it wasn’t like he wasn’t watched. Kruger finished his prep career with back-to-back nights inside the Xcel Energy Center he won’t soon forget. On both nights, nearly 19,000 people flocked into downtown St. Paul to see the Skippers first play Hill-Murray into a four-overtime marathon that Minnetonka eventually won 2-1.

Less than 24-hours later, the Skippers were back to face Classic Lake Conference nemesis Edina in the big school title game. The Hornets would win 4-2, but the defeat did little to take away from an experience Kruger said his new teammates in Texas cannot even fathom.

“We play in front of like 2,500 people at our home games, and the guys think it’s huge,” Kruger said. “I try to tell them about the state tournament, but their impression of high school hockey is a little different. They don’t really understand what it’s like in Minnesota.”

Kruger had a chance to skip it. He played in Hopkins, making the Royals varsity team as a ninth grader before transferring to Minnetonka as a sophomore.

He could have played another year and tried the junior route before finishing up high school, but there was business left to attend to with the Skippers.

“The reason I stayed was I wanted to win a state championship,” Kruger said. “That was it. I was with my buddies, and we all said ‘let’s do this.’ We all could have left, but we wanted to do something special. Unfortunately we didn’t get the title, but we did do something pretty special. There were some other routes that might have accelerated the hockey process, but it was totally worth it to stay there and have that experience.”

Now he just has to find a way to cool down. On the day before Kruger left for Boston and the NAHL Top Prospects Tournament, it was 65 and sunny. That same day, up to a foot of fresh snow covered the Twin Cities.

Urick said Kruger has been texting pictures of the weather back to Minnesota, rubbing it in, if you will.

“I can’t lie, it’s a little strange for it to be December and to hear about the weather back home and I’m wearing a short sleeve shirt,” Kruger said. “It doesn’t feel like hockey season, but it is. Not that I’m complaining.”