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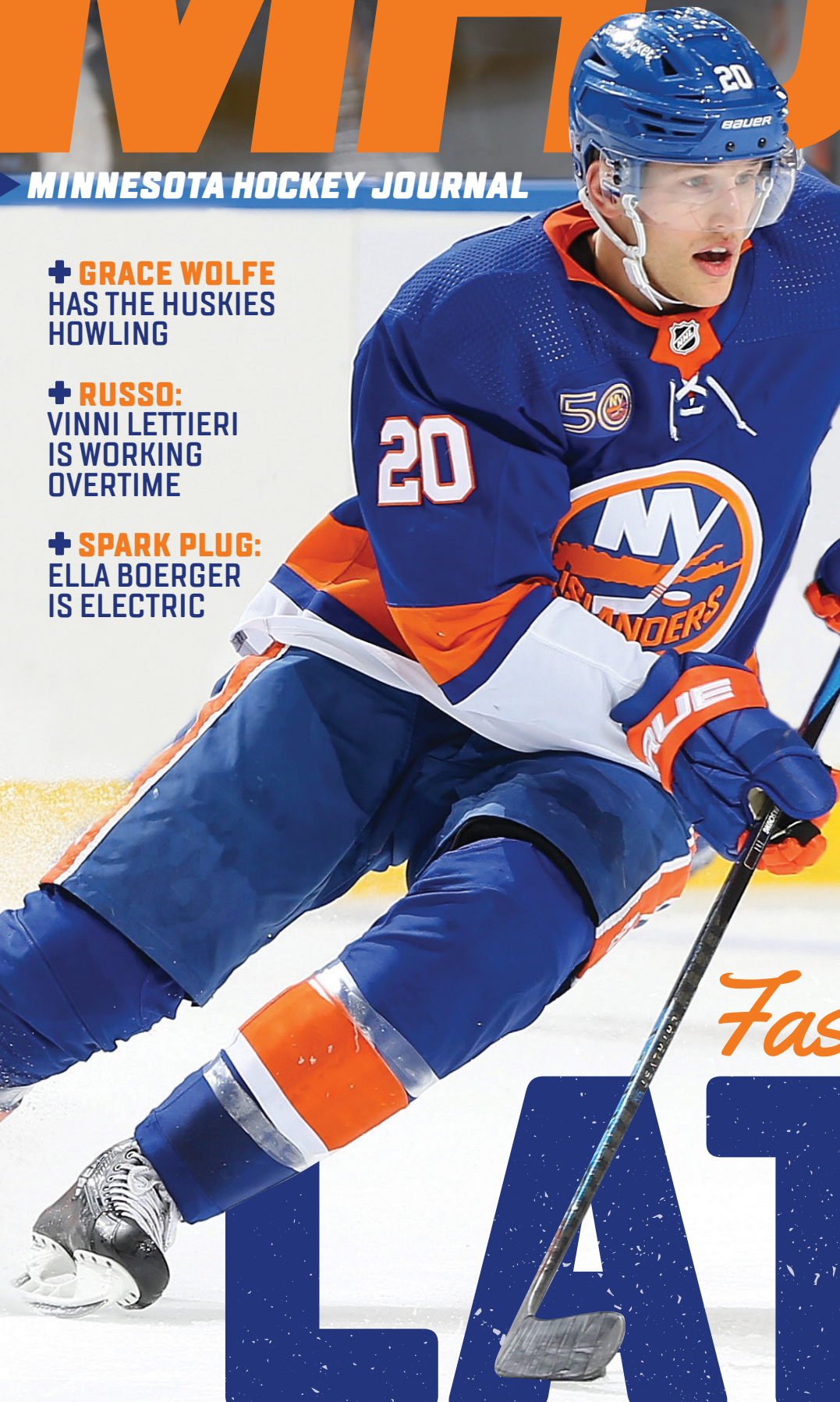
MINNESOTA HOCKEY JOURNAL

+ GRACE WOLFE
HAS THE HUSKIES
HOWLING

+ RUSSO:
VINNI LETTIERI
IS WORKING
OVERTIME

+ SPARK PLUG:
ELLA BOERGER
IS ELECTRIC

Hudson Fasching has carved his place into the New York Islanders roster.



**HUDSON
FASCHING'S
LONG ROAD
TO THE NHL**

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MINNESOTA HOCKEY JOURNAL

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FACEOFF

22

HUNGRY LIKE THE WOLFE

Owatonna's Grace Wolfe leads revamped Huskies program into a new era.



NOV./DEC.

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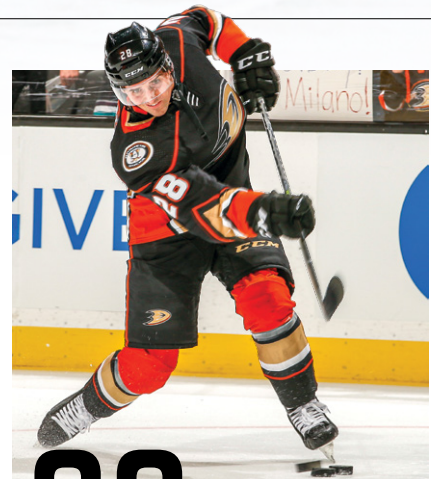
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Apple Valley's Hudson Fasching has found a home in Long Island.
Credit: Mike Stobe/NHL via Getty Images



Goals & Assists



► Lake City's Taylor Heise and the legendary Billie Jean King.

PHOTO BOOTH

Northern Lights

12 Minnesotans Selected in Inaugural PWHL Draft



Sidney Morin



Hannah Brandt

Of the 12 Minnesotans drafted, **12 different non-profit community-based associations were represented.**

→ Minnesotans filled the inaugural PWHL draft board on Sept. 18 in Toronto, with 12 State of Hockey natives selected throughout 15 rounds.

That included No. 1 overall pick Taylor Heise, a native of Lake City, who played high school hockey at Red Wing before winning the 2022 Patty Kazmaier Award during a sensational career at the University of Minnesota.

RD.	PICK	PLAYER	TEAM	HOMETOWN
1	1	Taylor Heise	Minnesota	Lake City
3	13	Grace Zumwinkle	Minnesota	Excelsior
4	20	Gabbie Hughes	Ottawa	Lino Lakes
4	24	Maggie Flaherty	Minnesota	Lakeville
5	27	Hannah Brandt	Boston	Vadnais Heights
8	43	Madison Bizal	Montreal	Elk River
8	46	Emily Brown	Boston	Blaine
9	49	Sidney Morin	Minnesota	Minnnetonka
10	57	Paetyn Levis	New York	Rogers
10	60	Sophia Kunin Shaver	Minnesota	Wayzata
13	73	Liz Schepers	Minnesota	Mound
15	85	Sydney Brodt	Minnesota	Mounds View

12

Minnesotans were selected, which makes up 13% of all players drafted and 41% of all Americans drafted.

7

Minnesotans were selected by PWHL Minnesota.

In 2022-23, Minnesota led all American states

13,390

registered Girls skaters and 5,196 of those being 8 & Under skaters, which makes up 20% of all American 8 & Under skaters.



▶ Former Lakeville North and UMD Bulldog defenseman Maggie Flaherty.



HOCKEY WORD FIND

Find and circle the 10 words in the group below. Words can be found horizontally, vertically, diagonally and backwards.

D	K	T	O	M	M	I	E	S	E	B	N
W	K	B	E	G	A	T	O	G	S	U	S
I	H	S	O	G	V	K	H	O	E	L	R
L	P	I	T	A	E	Q	A	P	D	L	A
D	O	K	T	N	R	I	L	H	M	D	T
R	N	Y	S	E	I	Y	L	E	E	O	S
D	D	A	T	G	C	A	W	R	E	G	H
A	I	R	N	E	K	A	S	S	K	S	T
S	F	E	V	A	S	K	P	W	E	J	R
S	R	E	V	A	E	B	S	S	R	K	O
S	H	U	S	K	I	E	S	Q	E	E	N

TEAMS

- HUSKIES
- GOPHERS
- BULLDOGS
- BEAVERS
- MAVERICKS
- WHITECAPS
- WILD
- NORTHSTARS
- TOMMIES
- SAINTS



A DANGLER'S DICTIONARY

Beauty/ beautician

(noun)

def. // A one-of-a-kind player that is beloved by teammates



MINNESOTA MUSINGS

*“It’s an unreal feeling. Minnesota is my home. **Everyone I love is there and it’s the State of Hockey.** I’m just really honored that I’m able to play and continue to show little girls that anything is possible if you keep working hard.”*

– **Taylor Heise**, Lake City, 2022 Patty Kazmaier Award, 2023 PWHL No. 1 Overall Draft Pick



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MINNESOTA HOCKEY NEWS & NOTES



► SKI-U-MAH WITH JLG ARCHITECTS!

When the University of Minnesota made the call to shrink the rink...JLG took their goals and elevated the arena!

Last month, the Golden Gophers unveiled JLG's rink renovation at 3M Arena at Mariucci, offering new premium seating, standard size ice, and sustainable, operationally efficient refrigeration—a trifecta designed to champion the future of Golden Gopher Hockey. JLG collaborates with NHL, collegiate, and youth programs across the country to drive architecture that balances athletics, entertainment,



budget, operation, and revenue—winning architectural solutions that put your program in a league of its own.

JLG is home to the only practicing architect in the country to have earned the designation of Certified Ice Technician and Certified Ice Rink Manager through the U.S. Ice Rink Association.

Learn more about JLG Architects at JLGArchitects.com/Hockey.



► BRUSH UP ON LIFELONG DENTAL HEALTH

The key to lifelong dental health is to establish good habits as early as possible. Starting routine dental care early helps prevent cavities and create dental habits that will give your children their best smiles for all their little—and big—milestones. Children's teeth need regular dental cleanings and examinations, and most children should visit their dentist once every six months.



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► DICK'S HOUSE OF SPORT: YOUR WINTER HOCKEY DESTINATION IN MINNETONKA!

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Ice Rink Rentals: Elevate your hockey skills with private ice time, ideal for practice, drills, competitive games, and team bonding.

Birthday Parties: Host hockey-themed celebrations with skating, games, and more, creating memorable moments for your young hockey star.

FREE Open Skate: Enjoy the pure joy of gliding on ice with friends and family.

Winter Events: Don't miss our hockey-themed open skate sessions and the exciting "Skate with Santa" event.

Hockey Gear and Skate Sharpening: Explore our top-notch hockey equipment and expert skate sharpening services.

Join us in embracing winter magic at DICK'S House of Sport. Get all the details and updates at d.sg/HOSIceRink.

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MUST READ STORIES FROM THE EDITORS OF MINNESOTA HOCKEY JOURNAL

touch oint

MNS IN D-1

The MIN Machine

Minnesota leads the way in producing Division I men's hockey players—and it's not even close

→ With the 2023-24 hockey season well underway, it's time to take a closer look at where college hockey players come from. Minnesota continues to lead the country and all Canadian provinces in producing Division I men's hockey players.

Source: College Hockey Inc.



47
California



BRODY LAMB
HOMETOWN: BYRON
COLLEGE: MINNESOTA



JACK PEART
HOMETOWN: GRAND RAPIDS
COLLEGE: ST. CLOUD STATE



AARON PIONK
HOMETOWN: HERMANTOWN
COLLEGE: MINNESOTA DULUTH



KYLE LOOFT
HOMETOWN: MANKATO
COLLEGE: BEMIDJI STATE

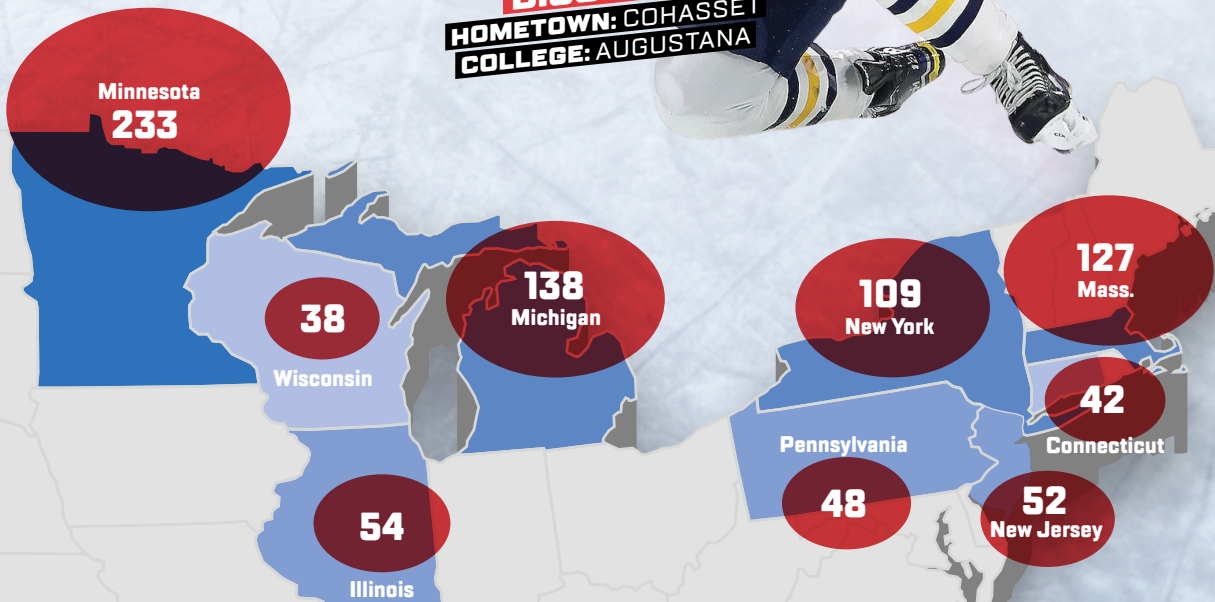


23/25

players for the Gopher hockey team are from Minnesota.



HUNTER BISCHOFF
HOMETOWN: COHASSET
COLLEGE: AUGUSTANA



KYLE KUKKONEN
HOMETOWN: MAPLE GROVE
COLLEGE: MICHIGAN TECH



BEN DEXHEIMER
HOMETOWN: EDINA
COLLEGE: WISCONSIN

THE TOP 10 STATES PRODUCING DIV. I HOCKEY PLAYERS:

- Minnesota – 233
- Michigan – 138
- Massachusetts – 127
- New York – 109
- Illinois – 54
- New Jersey – 52
- Pennsylvania – 48
- California – 47
- Connecticut – 42
- Wisconsin – 38

Championship Values

→ Building a Winning Culture with **Garrett Raboin**



GARRETT RABOIN HAS HAD A UNIQUE 18 MONTHS AS A HEAD HOCKEY COACH.

Hired by Augustana University in April 2022, the Detroit Lakes native spent most of that time building the country's newest men's college hockey team before the Vikings finally took the ice in the fall of 2023. For Raboin, the goal was to spend that time recruiting and getting the program started on the right track, a track to establishing a winning culture.

"The biggest thing for me is you have to have a vision for what that is and what works," said Raboin, the former St. Cloud State player and assistant coach, who later followed coach Bob Motzko from his alma mater to Minnesota. "Being around successful coaches, staff and players, you take elements from your journey and pinpoint what you want to see in your group—what, in your eyes, you want it to look like."

For Sioux Falls, S.D.-based Augustana, Raboin isn't just looking for the best on-ice talent.

"(Longtime college assistant) Mike Gibbons said to me when I started, 'How do you win championships? You have to recruit championship people. But don't just recruit on the ice. Some of the best people become the best leaders. They're successful students, they're successful in the community, they're successful after hockey. So much translates to real life.'"



▶ Detroit Lakes native Garrett Raboin leads Augustana hockey into the Division I era.

IT STARTS AT THE TOP


The head coach and leadership set the tone, Raboin said, noting that he saw that first-hand when he went with Motzko to the Gophers.

"When Bob Motzko took over the program, he didn't come in with a firm hand and change everything," Raboin recalled. "He made it fun for his players to be around the rink and around each other and excited about the work."

Over time, that winning attitude became woven into the fabric of the program.

"As a program we went from a coached team to very much a player-led team," Raboin said. "Guys like Brock Faber, you could see how much he cared for the program and how much he cared for the state."

"As a recruiter, you're first drawn by what you see on the ice, but, from there, you try to find positive people who value others. Those are the kinds of people you want on your team."



“When everyone feels part of the team, the team will grow and ultimately be rewarded.”

► WE, NOT ME

While success at one level of hockey may lead to opportunities at the next, Raboin stresses that winning players are the ones who put the good of the team above individual goals. Winning teams have selfless players.

“The team is so much bigger than themselves,” he said. “The teams I’ve been part of, the players are so much there for the team and the program. The biggest thing in the world they want is to win a national championship for their university and their team. Turning pro is a byproduct; turning pro is secondary.”

► EVERYONE HAS VALUE

Raboin recalled his first season as an assistant coach at St. Cloud State when the Huskies made their first-ever Frozen Four and how the so-called “depth players” led them to that moment.

“These were the third- and fourth-line guys who didn’t know if they were going to be in the lineup the next game,” he said. “The positivity they had to compete hard to push their fellow teammates in practice everyday,

► To build a winning culture, every player on the team must feel welcomed and valued.

to make sure the scout power play looked identical to the team they’d be playing. We’re talking about everyone. The team isn’t just the guys playing on the weekend; the team is everyone in the program.

“When everyone feels part of the team, the team will grow and ultimately be rewarded.”

► COMMUNICATION, NOT CRITICISM

Related to that, it’s vital that coaches, leaders and top players communicate value to the entire roster. Players need to understand where and how they fit in on the roster—and why.

“Communication is so important today,” Raboin said. “It may be more important than ever. Players need con-



stant feedback. You can’t just be critical about why someone isn’t playing. You have to talk about the value of the person and the things that make them valuable.”

► STAY POSITIVE

Winning is a byproduct of the attitudes that a team and program have over time.

“I’ve always been drawn to people who are positive and kind,” he said. “As a recruiter, you’re first drawn by what you see on the ice, but, from there, you try to find positive people who value others. Those are the kinds of people you want on your team.”

Raboin watches how players act and carry themselves at different moments.

“How you compete in those moments lead you to the result. Winning is what happens at the end.” **MHJ**



STATE of
HOCKEY

Northfield

NICKNAME:

Raiders /
Royals

HOME ICE:

Northfield Ice Arena

PRESIDENT:

Ryan Sabyan

DISTRICT:



**2022-23
REGISTRATION
NUMBERS:**

265



COMMUNITY YOU CAN BANK ON

In September, folks in Northfield, Minn., celebrated the anniversary of the heroic defeat of the James-Younger Gang, a historical event that essentially put this town, located 40 miles south of downtown St. Paul, on the map. According to legend, when the infamous Jesse James and his group tried to rob the First National Bank of Northfield, local citizens armed themselves and successfully turned the gang away. James managed to escape, but not before experiencing firsthand the strength and resiliency of this town, that has grown to a population of more than 20,000 people today.

Like the smaller society that rallied to defeat Jesse James back in 1876, the same spirit of civic pride, fortitude and kinship has been demonstrated time and again by Northfield's current hockey community. It's a passionate group that has stuck together through thick and thin, offering its time, money and brain power to help the local organization grow and its 265 young skaters develop in a positive environment.

"We think the hockey community in Northfield is one that rallies around each other," said former Northfield Hockey Association (NHA) President Chris Kennelly. "Over the years we've had events to raise money to help members with cancer and other fundraisers for scholarships. And we've had some great volunteers. It always amazes me how someone will come to the board with a new idea and then just run with it to get it done. We've done a good job of recognizing that and supporting passionate people to go after their ideas to make the program better."



INSPIRED TO SUCCEED

Sometimes all it takes is a little success to invigorate a community and fuel a winning tradition. According to Kennelly, who served as president of NHA for the last five years, having both of its high school girls' and boys' teams make appearances in the Minnesota State High School Hockey Tournaments for the first time—2016 for the girls and 2017 for the boys—made a huge impact.

“We had been close so many times, so for both teams to make it over the hump and play at the X(cel Energy Center) was huge,” he said. “The young kids in the program saw the hard work pay off and it motivated them to push themselves to see if they could make a state tournament run. Success is contagious and it’s created an environment that people want to be a part of.”

That success on the state’s biggest hockey stage has contributed to the overall growth of the Northfield program. In fact, Kennelly says registrations for the upcoming 2023-24 season are the highest in NHA’s history.

Inspiring growth is one thing, sustaining it is another. The future development of players in Northfield has been and will be buoyed by a strong belief in the tenets of the USA Hockey American Development Model, including small area games.

“Mixing in competition with repetition is a great way to keep players interested and forget that they’re working on skills,” said Kennelly. “As we’ve continued to develop, we’ve partnered with Northfield Skating School to do additional skating programming, with St. Olaf College to run some preseason clinics, and with other partners to provide goalie and specialized training. Our summer program has also given kids an opportunity to get in additional training and keep the legs from getting rusty.”

FORMULA FOR GROWTH

Like the Malt-O-Meal ingredients mixed together at Northfield’s original Ames Mill, there’s a recipe for growth for the local hockey program as well. NHA has participated in Hockey Day in Northfield and USA Hockey’s Try Hockey for Free program and partnered with Community Action Center, a local non-profit, to provide scholarships for anyone interested in playing hockey. Information tents at local community events like the Jesse James Days Parade and CrazyDays have served as ways to boost player recruiting and retention. One of the most critical components has been the collaboration of groups within the Northfield hockey community.

“We’ve had some incredible non-parent and parent coaches who are truly dedicated to developing kids and growing the game,” said Kennelly. “Perry Kruse has volunteered his time coaching our

youngest level of skaters for over 30 years. We’ve also had coaches share practice plans and development tools from one season to the next to continue that continuity in development. Our coaches have also encouraged the Bantam age players to attend the Mite practices and help out. This has been a great success as those young players have access to the older players they look up to, and it’s furthered the community feel we’ve worked hard to develop.”

BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD

The excitement around the two high school state tournament runs and the trickle-down effect that has led to recent growth is just the beginning for NHA. The Cannon River Royals, a co-op with the Faribault Hockey Association, has been successful, and allowed girls to continue to play at appropriate levels (their U15Bs made a state tourney run of their own in 2023). With a new president—Ryan Sabyan—leading the way and a renewed effort to build a new rink, the future of Northfield hockey looks bright.

“I’m excited to take on the role as president of the NHA, as hockey isn’t just a sport that our kids enjoy playing, it is a lifestyle we live,” said Sabyan. “I’ve been on the board of this association for three years leading up to this year and enjoyed my time being a part of a growing association. The friendships you make while at the rink all winter long become lifetime friends. Seeing the kids’ faces when they show up to the rink excited about their hour on the ice is always great to see.”

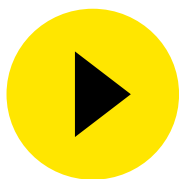
The hope in Northfield is that soon a refreshed place to play and host tournaments will align better with the vibrant hockey community and atmosphere that already exists. In recent years, NHA has partnered with neighboring arenas to meet the demand for ice time. Despite an unsuccessful referendum to build a new facility five years ago, the community has once again come together to try to make their dreams a reality. NHA continues to work with the city on a potential new arena, to be located next to an existing—and extremely popular—outdoor rink.

Time will tell if the new building will become a reality. But one thing is certain: the Northfield hockey community will rally together. Given its history, that’s one thing you can bank on. **MHJ**



Spark Plug

*The electric **Ella Boerger** jumpstarts young Tommies program to the next level*



Like St. Thomas' fledgling Division I women's hockey program, freshman forward Ella Boerger has come a long way, quickly.

The former Andover High School star, who won two state championships and was named Minnesota's Ms.

Hockey, enjoyed a fast start to the 2023-24 season with four consecutive victories. The Tommies, in their third D-I

season in the WCHA, hope Boerger can infuse some high-end offense into their lineup.

MHJ // Why did you choose St. Thomas?

Ella Boerger // It just felt like it was home. Everyone is so respectful of each other and at the same time everyone pushes each other. When we lift in the weight room everybody cheers and it really creates a great culture.



“

The car ride home after winning the State Championship was crazy...I couldn't wait to get home and talk to my parents about it. We had a team sleepover that night, too. It was so much fun. I'll never forget that night.”

MHJ // Has anything about the college experience surprised you so far?

EB // The games are a lot faster and more physical. You're also definitely a lot busier. We have a lot on our plate with classes and balancing out homework. But it's a lot of fun. You have to do well with time management, so it's definitely a big change from high school.

MHJ // How did you get into hockey?

EB // My dad played in college and I have an older brother who played. I grew up in Sartell and we lived on a pond. That's when I really started to love the game. My brother and my brother's teammates and some neighbors and I would play.

**THE
BOERGER
FILE**

POSITION:

F

SHOOTS: Left

HEIGHT:

**5'
7"**

HOMETOWN:

Sartell

COLLEGE:



University of
St. Thomas

FUN FACT:

Ella was Andover High School's Athena Award Winner for playing hockey, golf and tennis

YOUTH HOCKEY:



Sartell Youth
Hockey

When it was a weekend, everyone would come over and we would be on the ice for hours. My dad bought some super nice boards and would always be working on the ice to make it better.

MHJ // What would you tell your younger self?

EB // I would tell my younger self to control your attitude and effort. Show up at the rink every day and have a good attitude and work your hardest. Just enjoy your time. You can only play hockey for so long.

MHJ // How special was it to win the State Tournament not once, but twice?

EB // It was an unreal experience. Such a great group of girls that were on those teams. The car ride home after winning the state championship was crazy. I was a freshman. Everybody was so happy and some people were crying in disbelief. I couldn't wait to get home and talk to my parents about it. We had a team sleepover that night, too. It was so much fun. I'll never forget that night.

MHJ // Tips for younger players?

EB // Definitely focus on shooting and stickhandling. The really good players all have a really good stick, so working on that on your own time will really help.

MHJ // Why does Minnesota continue to produce the most girls' hockey players?

EB // I feel like it's the sense of community and opportunity we have in hockey here. Youth hockey, the State Tournament, it brings so much attention to the game in Minnesota. And there have definitely been a lot of standout players, like Natalie Darwitz, Winny Brodt-Brown. It sets the bar high for girls in Minnesota.

MHJ // How can we grow the girls' and women's game even more?

EB // I think the older players coming back to their communities and being around the younger players really helps. At Andover, at least once a week a couple of us girls would skate with the 8Us or do shooting lessons with them. One or two nights we did a movie night in our locker room. **MHJ**



Fashionably

by JESSI PIERCE



HUDSON FASCHING'S LONG AND WINDING ROAD TO THE NHL

H

HUDSON FASCHING knew he was going to be a hockey player.

Well, maybe not instantly.

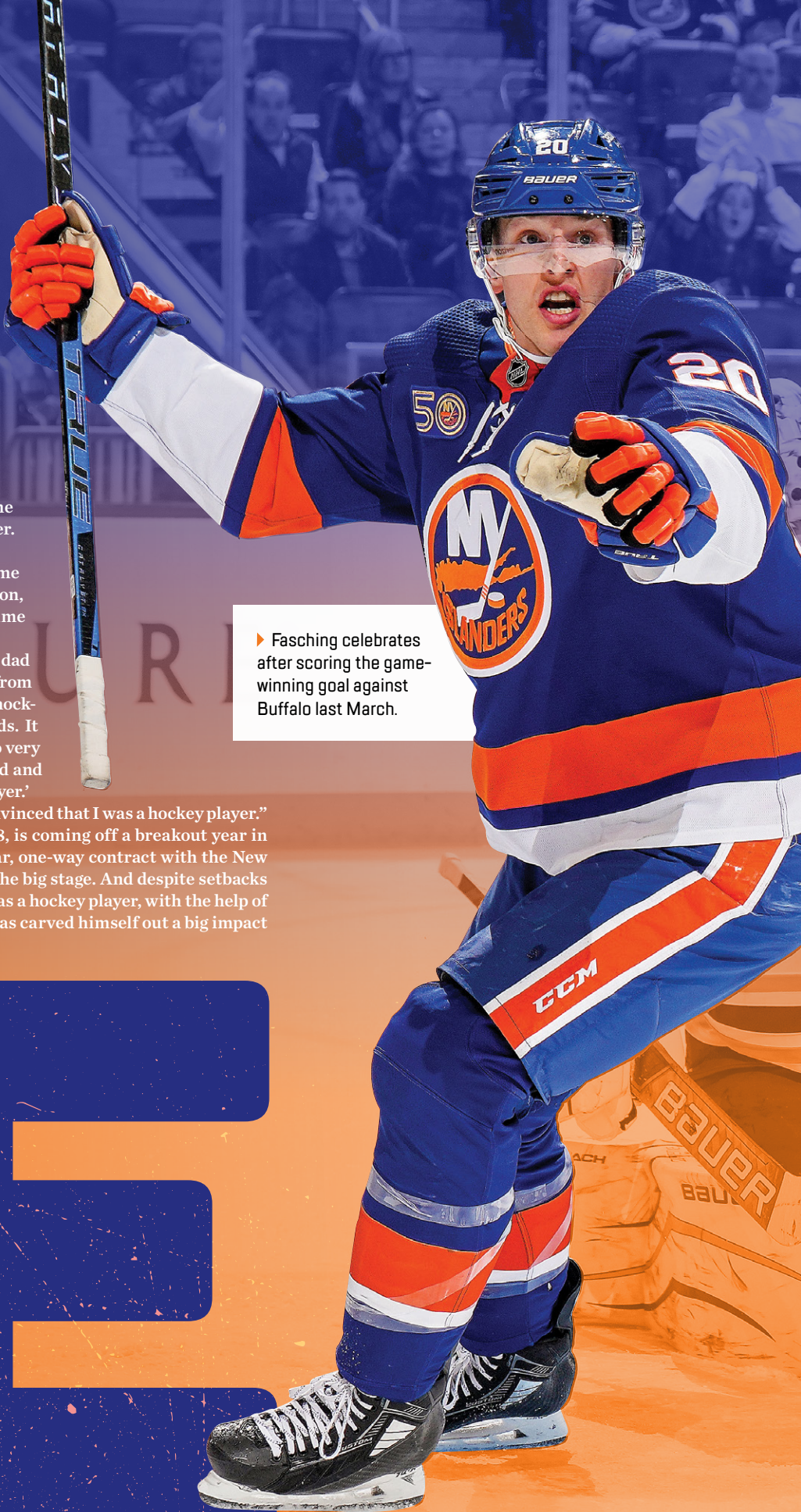
At the age of 4, his first time on the ice, his mom, Shannon, struggled as most first-time hockey moms do with the equipment.

“The first time I went out [on the ice], my dad was out of town for work and my mom is from Kentucky, so she had no idea how to put on my hockey equipment. I had all my stuff on backwards. It was a mess. So, the first couple skates didn’t go very well for me. My mom called my dad on the road and said, ‘I don’t think he’s going to be a hockey player.’

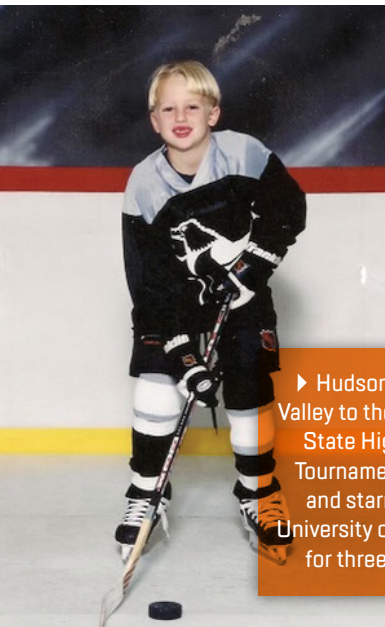
“But by the time I was 5 or 6, I was pretty convinced that I was a hockey player.”

Fast forward to today and Fasching, now 28, is coming off a breakout year in the NHL. A season that earned him a two-year, one-way contract with the New York Islanders. But it wasn’t a linear path to the big stage. And despite setbacks and moments where he questioned his career as a hockey player, with the help of his family and self-determination, Fasching has carved himself out a big impact role ahead of this 2023-24 season.

► Fasching celebrates after scoring the game-winning goal against Buffalo last March.



THE



► Hudson led Apple Valley to the Minnesota State High School Tournament in 2010 and starred at the University of Minnesota for three seasons.



“This is something I’ve been working for a long time,” said Fasching, who was selected by the Los Angeles Kings in the fourth round (No. 118) in the 2013 NHL Entry Draft. “It’s a culmination of a lot of years of hard work, so it definitely feels good to have that pay off.”

FAMILY FIRST

From the outside, Hudson Fasching’s hockey upbringing in Apple Valley was like many others who call the State of Hockey

home. Outdoor rinks, weekend tournaments, playing with your best buds.

For Hudson however, hockey was much more than just being an elite player. It was about appreciating the physical gifts he had been given, and spending time with family while he did it.

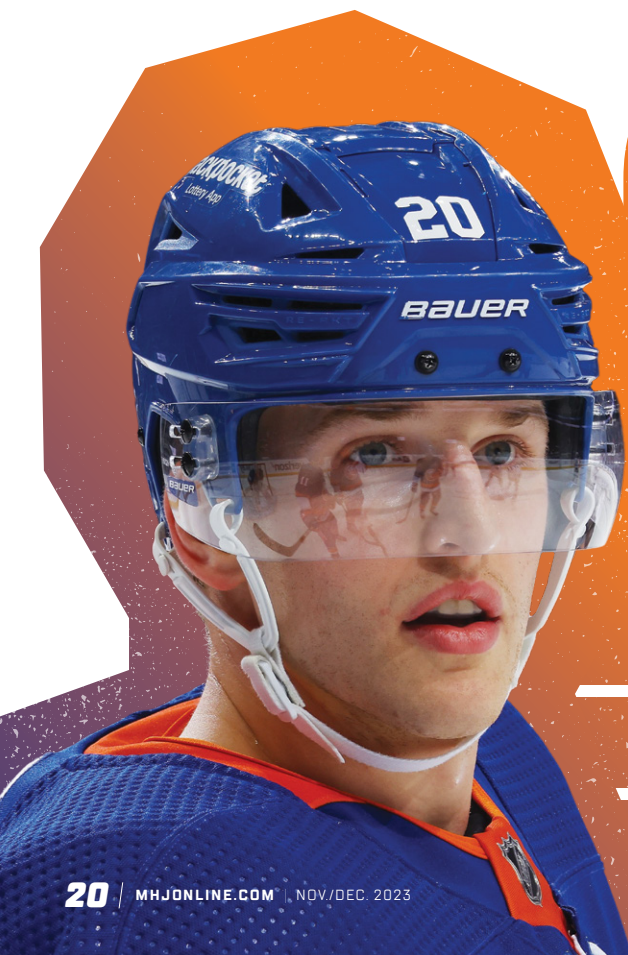
Hudson’s younger siblings, Mallory and Cooper, each suffer from a mitochondrial disorder that leaves them unable to walk or speak, requiring around-the-clock care.

“Growing up, with my brother and sister in wheelchairs and everything, we didn’t take a lot of family vacations,” said Fasching. “For the most part, all of our traveling was hockey or soccer tournaments for me. I never took that for granted.

“But it also gave us a lot of time spent together. There was the occasional trip to doctor’s appointments and hospitals for Coop and Mallory, but really, I just look at all the time we spent together as something that was very important.”

EARNING HIS WAY

After two seasons with the U.S. National Team Development Program, Fasching returned to Minnesota as a Golden Gopher. As a freshman, Fasching immediately found himself on the top line of a dominant Gopher squad. He posted 30 points (14 goals, 16 assists) in his first year, and followed it up with 26 points (12 goals, 14 assists) and 38



I WAS 21 WHEN I STARTED

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GAMES. LOOKING BACK,

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WAS JUST A LITTLE KID.

IT’S A TREMENDOUS JUMP.”



► Fasching celebrates with his boyhood idol and fellow Minnesota native Zach Parise.

points (20 goals, 18 assists) in his sophomore and junior seasons respectively.

He signed with the Buffalo Sabres, who acquired his rights from L.A., after his junior year in 2015-16, appearing in 7 games and registering 1 goal and 1 assist.

From that point on, Fasching's hockey career was one of ups and downs—literally.

"It's a difficult job to go from college to pro," said Fasching, who totaled 22 points in 87 NHL games from 2015 up until this season. "I was 21 when I started my first couple of NHL games. Looking back, it's crazy to think that I was just a little kid. It's a tremendous jump. You're on your own with a bunch of grown men. Guys who are a lot stronger and a lot more mentally mature. It's a difficult task for sure."

The next eight seasons, Fasching would spend time moving between the NHL and American Hockey League, along with movement amongst organizations. After two years in Buffalo, he was traded to the Arizona Coyotes, where he continued to bounce up and down from the minors.

In 2022-23, Fasching opted to test out free agency, signing a one-year, two-way contract with the Islanders. It led him to a breakout year, solidifying a spot in an NHL lineup for 49 games and amassing 10 goals and 9 assists in the process.

To go from being one of the best young players in his age group to an NHL player trying to find his footing was a good dose of adversity for Fasching.

"I didn't face maybe as much adversity as I needed," he explained. "I was, for the most part, always on the A teams. I was pretty



ISLAND LIFE

49

GAMES PLAYED

10

GOALS

9

ASSISTS

19

TOTAL POINTS

*2022-23 SEASON

big for my age growing up, so that gave me a little bit of a physical advantage as well. So to be facing that in my mid- to late-20s and working to get on that top team was different. It was about finding ways to be mentally tough, and how to react to those situations. It's an invaluable skill I've learned.

"I wasn't a first-round draft pick, or a highly sought-after free agent necessarily, but I certainly did think my time in the American League would be shorter than it was. But everything happens for a reason, and I'm just thrilled to be where I am today and keep moving forward."

Fasching's family has grown to include a wife and 1-year-old daughter, Nora, who like his parents and brother and sister actively cheer him on as he continues to become a mainstay with the Islanders. He even got a chance to play with his childhood hero, Zach Parise.

"He's a hard-working player," Parise told nhl.com. "He's been in the league for a little while, so to see him finally find a niche here and play well and thrive and succeed is great."

For Fasching, he's still just trying to be a hockey player.

"I've always felt I could contribute to an NHL team," said Fasching. "Being in the minors, I knew that I would work my way up to where I am today. To be able to do that on a regularly basis is all I was looking for. It feels great to be there." **MHJ**

Jessi Pierce is a freelance writer covering the NHL and hockey in Minnesota. She hosts the hockey-centric Bardown Beauties Podcast and can be followed on Twitter @jessi_pierce.

by HEATHER RULE

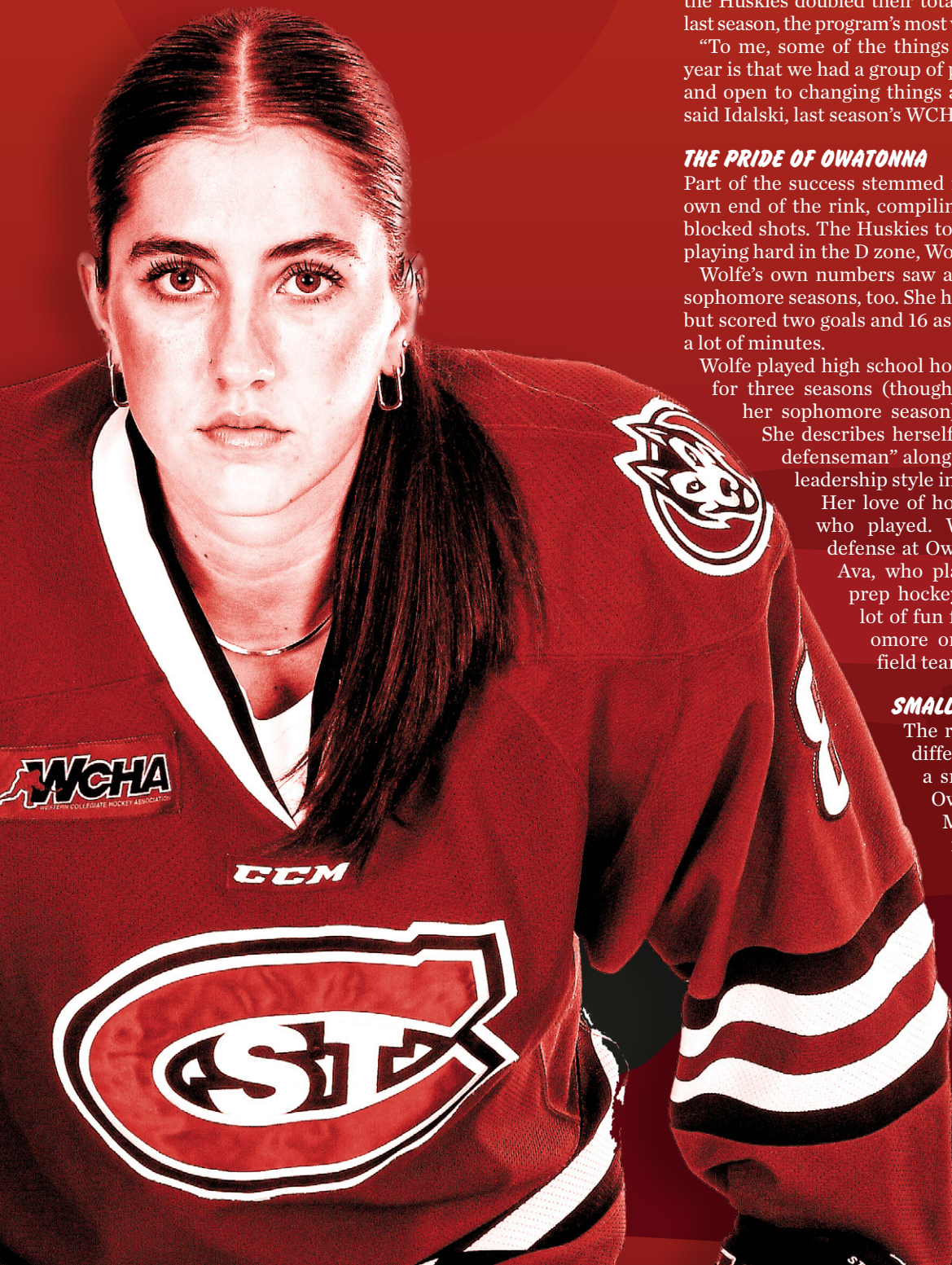
HUNGRY LIKE THE WOLFE

Owatonna's **Grace Wolfe** leads revamped Huskies into a new era

“

As long as you put in the work, you're going to get good things out of it.”

— Grace Wolfe



The St. Cloud State women's hockey team underwent a culture change last season under its new coach Brian Idalski.

“We just really wanted to up our compete level, our commitment, our leadership and obviously our performance,” said defenseman Grace Wolfe. “But we've always wanted to make ourselves a team where we're very gritty and passionate.”

While the transition could be difficult at times, Wolfe said, the cool part was seeing how quickly the Huskies turned things around. Winners of just nine games two seasons ago, the Huskies doubled their total for an 18-18-1 overall record last season, the program's most wins in a season since 2007-08.

“To me, some of the things that made us successful last year is that we had a group of players that were very hungry and open to changing things and doing things differently,” said Idalski, last season's WCHA Coach of the Year.

THE PRIDE OF OWATONNA

Part of the success stemmed from solid play in the team's own end of the rink, compiling a new program record 576 blocked shots. The Huskies took pride in their defense and playing hard in the D zone, Wolfe said.

Wolfe's own numbers saw a jump from her freshman to sophomore seasons, too. She had three assists as a freshman but scored two goals and 16 assists last season as she logged a lot of minutes.

Wolfe played high school hockey for Owatonna, a captain for three seasons (though a knee injury kept her out her sophomore season) before graduating in 2021.

She describes herself as being a “pretty defensive defenseman” along with her “attention to detail” leadership style in the locker room.

Her love of hockey stemmed from her dad who played. Wolfe also enjoyed playing defense at Owatonna in front of her sister, Ava, who played goalie. Siblings playing prep hockey together was special and a lot of fun for Wolfe. Ava is now a sophomore on the St. Thomas track and field team.

SMALL CITY TO THE BIG STAGE

The recruiting process was a little different for Wolfe coming from a smaller city and program like Owatonna. But she's proof that Minnesota's community-based model works. If a player is good enough, coaches will find them, no matter where they played youth hockey.

Wolfe is very happy with landing at St. Cloud State and being a rare Division I women's hockey commit out of Owatonna.

She knows it's helpful for younger Owatonna players to see her development path, too.

HUNGRY LIKE THE WOLFE



► Wolfe was a three-time captain for Owatonna High School's hockey and soccer teams.



“

I think Grace is now really seeing and realizing how good of a player she can be and how far she can go. Grace has been terrific. I'm a fan.”

—Brian Idalski, Head Coach

“As long as you put in the work, you're going to get good things out of it,” Wolfe said.

Idalski didn't know too much about Wolfe when he took the coaching job, but he referred to her as a “super-pleasant surprise,” outgoing, encouraging, improved a lot last year and has grown into her leadership role. She's an assistant captain this season after being in the leadership group for two years.

“I think Grace is now really seeing and realizing how good of a player she can be and how far she can go,” Idalski said. “Grace has been terrific. I'm a fan.”

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF HUSKIES WOMEN'S HOCKEY

This season also marks 25 years of St. Cloud State women's hockey. Commemorating that many years of hockey is “just crazy” to Wolfe.

“I think it just brings women's hockey into a new light,” Wolfe said. “How long we've been doing it and how important it is for the development of young women and young girls as well.”

Wolfe would like to see the Huskies once again beat their win total, citing 25 wins as a good benchmark, and also has high hopes to be recognized more nationally with higher rankings. She and her teammates have also talked about how they want to approach opponents like Minnesota, Wisconsin and Ohio State. While sweeping those series would be great, they'd like to at least achieve a series split.

Idalski sees the blueprint being the same as last year. They should expect things like playing in the Final Faceoff and competing for championships.

“We need to defend very well. We need to be opportunistic at the offensive end, and I think that our special teams need to be super good,” Idalski said. “I've said from the moment I arrived that you have to expect things before you can do them.”



**THE
WOLFE
FILE**

POSITION:

D

SHOOTS: Right

HEIGHT:

5'9"

HOMETOWN:



Owatonna

COLLEGE:



St. Cloud State

FUN FACT:

Grace played soccer, track and earned multiple Equestrian Riding State Championships

YOUTH HOCKEY:



Owatonna Youth Hockey Association



► Grace and her horse Lexi have won multiple Equestrian Riding State Championships.

HORSING AROUND

While Wolfe and her teammates no doubt hope a hockey trophy is in their future, Wolfe is already a champion in another passion: Equestrian riding.

Wolfe was part of 4-H growing up and has had her horse, Lexi, since she was 9 years old. She showed her horse at the Minnesota State 4-H Horse Show. She won blue ribbons with 4-H through Steele County to show at the State 4-H, where she won multiple times.

"I just take it as a hobby and something I will probably do for the rest of my life," Wolfe said.

Hockey is another part of Wolfe's life that she doesn't see ending with her St. Cloud State playing career. Idalski believes Wolfe has started to realize just how far she could take her playing career, like playing for the U.S. national team, for instance.

"But also, with the new PWHL, that opens up a whole new realm of hockey for young women like myself," Wolfe said. **MHP**



by Michael Russo

DOUBLE SHIFTING



Vinni Lettieri is working overtime for the family business and a spot in the Wild's lineup



Like most Minnesotans, Vinni Lettieri has been going to the State Fair since he was a small boy.

He'd go to the Midway to hop on the rides and try to win prizes. He'd go down the Giant Slide, head to the

Miracle of Birth Center to check out the calves, piglets and lambs, rush over to FAN Central to meet his favorite athletes from all the pro sports in town and eat whatever he could on a stick.

Since becoming a pro athlete, the former Minnetonka High School and University of Minnesota standout hasn't lost his love for the fair. In fact, every summer, from late August through Labor Day, Lettieri looks forward to it so much he attends the fair on an almost daily basis.

Of course, part of that is because he has to be the only professional athlete in Minnesota history who actually has a job at the fair.

For 35 years, his parents, Tino and Michelle, have had a stand at the fair. Tino, who was born in Italy, is the former goalkeeper for the Minnesota Kicks and Strikers. Michelle is the daughter of Lou Nanne, the former North Stars GM, coach and defenseman.

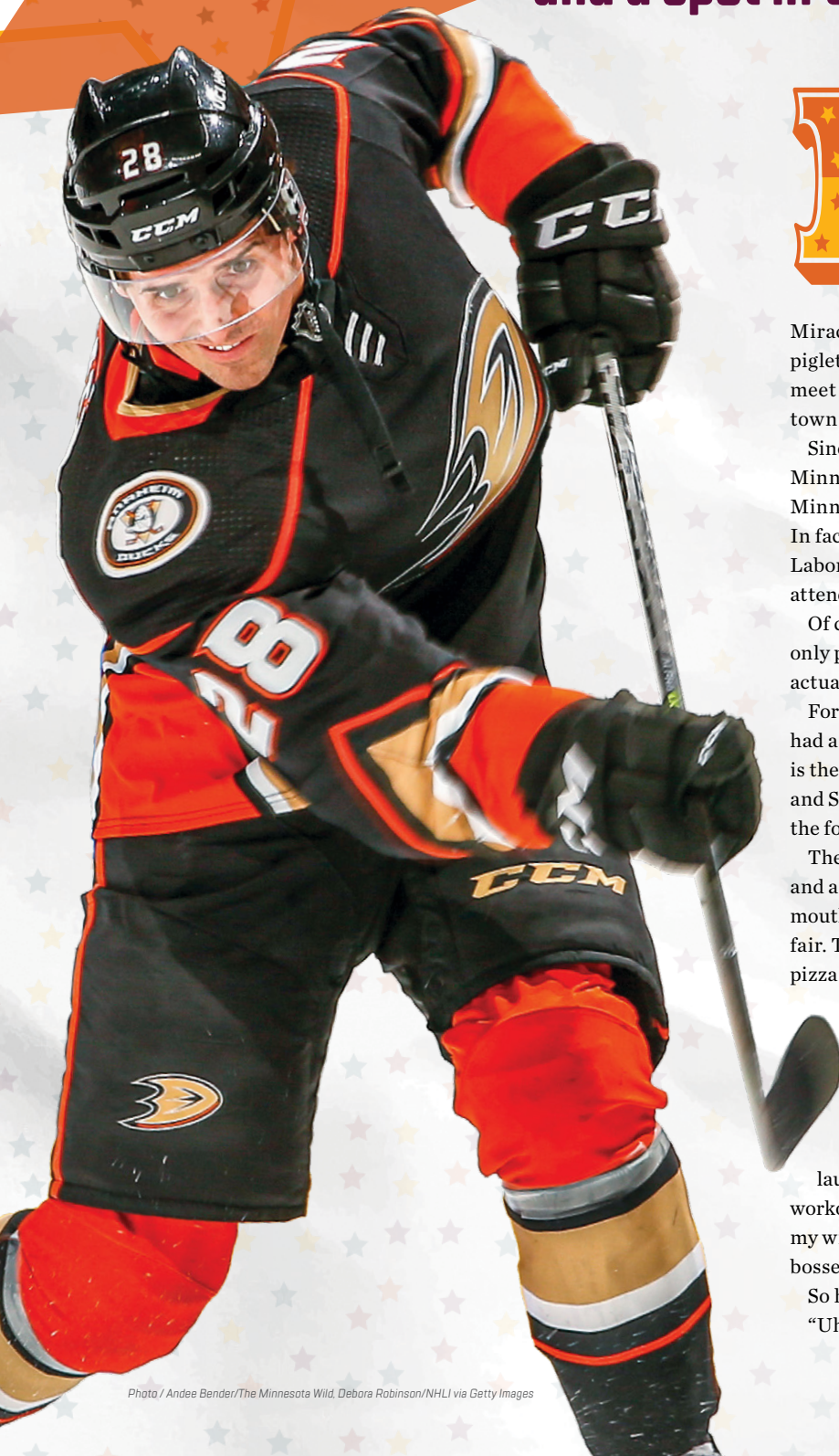
They own Tino's Pizza-on-a-Stick at the Fair, and as you may guess, they've got some of the most mouth-watering treats you can ever ask for at the fair. The pizza on a stick is scrumptious and the pizza dough balls will leave you wanting more.

For as long as he can remember, Lettieri has worked shifts at the family's stand with his sister, Bianca, and cousins like Louie and Tyler Nanne, two of Grandpa Lou's other grandchildren.

"Everyone gets a shift," Lettieri said, laughing. "Sometimes it's harder for me just with workouts and stuff getting ready for the season, but my wife (Cassandra) and I and Tyler love getting bossed around by Tino."

So he doesn't treat you like an NHLer?

"Uhhhh, no. Not at all," Lettieri said.



HOPING TO STICK

This past offseason, Lettieri, 28, signed a two-year, two-way contract with the Wild. That means he gets two different salaries, one when he'll play in Iowa of the American Hockey League and one when he plays in Minnesota with his hometown NHL club.

There is no doubt Lettieri is good enough, fast enough and skilled enough to play with the Wild. Unfortunately, pro sports is a business and if you're a Wild fan, you probably know by now that the Wild are super tight when it comes to salary cap space because they bought out the contracts of Zach Parise and Ryan Suter a few years back. That means the Wild spend \$14.7 mil-

lion less than most every other team in the league.

That also means that, despite the fact Lettieri had an outstanding training camp in September and tied for the team-lead in pre-season scoring and accompanied the team for a bonding trip to Duluth because the team anticipates he'll play an important role this season, Lettieri is initially starting his Wild career in the minors in Des Moines.

Not shockingly, as frustrating as this must be for him, Lettieri is being mature and will go to the AHL, perform, work hard and bide his time until he gets his opportunity three hours north.

"It will be all good," said Lettieri. "Just have to be patient."

▶ PROVEN POINT PRODUCER

Lettieri's AHL stats over eight seasons

116
GOALS

229
POINTS

267
GAMES

Lettieri is used to this. This is a guy who entered this season with 116 goals and 229 points in 267 AHL games over eight seasons in the Rangers', Ducks' and Bruins' organizations. He's always been one of the most dynamic AHL players, yet he's largely been an up and down NHLer with only 83 games of NHL experience.

He's just one of those bubble players who unfortunately only gets brief stints in the NHL and sometimes isn't put in the role he'd best be suited for.

In other words, throw Lettieri into a top-six role and on the power play, and he'll likely produce points. But sometimes he's called up and put in fourth-line positions and only gets a handful of minutes a game.

It's hard to gain any traction that way.

FAMILY MAN

Luckily, he has a great support system with his parents, cousins

"For any Minnesota kid, it's a dream come true."

Michelle Lettieri,
Vinni's Mother





and, of course, grandparents, especially Nanne, who believes wholeheartedly in his super fast, skilled grandson.

“This is where he wants to be,” Nanne said of Minnesota. “He’s had 83 games in the league now, which is good. Hopefully he gets a chance here. He’s so effective on the power play shooting off the pass in the minors, but he hasn’t really had that opportunity yet in the NHL. But every place in the minors, he fills the net. So I always hope that somebody thinks, ‘Maybe we should try this.’”

“I don’t get involved, I don’t say anything. But inside I just see things that I wish that would come to fruition in the NHL. He believes in himself, which is terrific. I’ve told him, ‘You can’t talk

yourself into the league, you got to earn your job.’ I really like the strength of his conviction and the belief in his ability.”

Lettieri has such support, even his father understood in high school when Vinni quit playing soccer and following in his footsteps so he could concentrate on hockey. It was 2011, and at first Tino was hurt. When Nanne suggested to his grandson that he could try multiple sports, he decided to placekick on the Skippers’ football team.

He practiced 15 minutes a day, then left to go play hockey. He missed one extra point all football season.

“He went with his passion. He chose his route, and here he is,” Tino said.

► Vinni Lettieri (right) and his cousin Tyler Nanne (left) work a shift at Tino’s Pizza-on-a-Stick during this summer’s State Fair. Nanne starred at Edina before captaining the Golden Gophers and embarking on a pro career.

DREAM COME TRUE

Lettieri works hard in the gym and on the ice in the offseason, getting to skate with Minnesota’s long list of NHL stars in workout sessions and, of course, in the Da Beauty League, where he lights the lamp for fun at Braemar once or twice a week in the summer.

He missed some days this offseason because of his wedding and honeymoon, but he was still near the top of the scoring stats at the end and won the John Scott Cup, scoring a big goal in the championship.

The competitive juices get flowing because he’ll often get texts from NHLers like Brock Nelson and Jake Guentzel telling him they scored three, four, five goals in their Da Beauty League games.



“It’s like, ‘OK, now I’ve got to bring it tonight and get more than them,’” Lettieri said, kidding.

Lettieri had no fear signing with Minnesota and dealing with the pressure that sometimes comes with a Minnesotan signing in his home state. Part of it is he’s been a pro for eight years since leaving the Gophers and part of it is because he dealt with the extra eyes on him playing at the university.

“I think it’s kind of engrained in me,” he said. “I’ve already played at home. It was big for me to have everyone, my friends and family here. Playing for the Wild doesn’t seem too much different. I’m blessed to be in this situation where my family can see me play pro at home.”

Lettieri grew up going to almost every single Wild game as a fan and has played against the Wild at the NHL level with

the Rangers. When he signed with Minnesota back in July, it was a huge thing for his family. He was down in Texas at former teammate Kevin Hayes’ bachelor party, but at the Nannes’ summer home on Balsam Lake, Lettieri’s dad surprised the family and many of Lettieri’s little cousins by serving homemade cupcakes with the Wild logo placed on top in frosting.

“We’re all absolutely ecstatic,” Lettieri’s mom, Michelle, said. “We gave Bianca a heads-up first. She kept saying, ‘No way, no way.’ She was literally jumping up and down like a jumping beam. She’s probably his biggest cheerleader besides his wife and all of us. It is just going to be great that he can be either here in our backyard or in Iowa. We’re thrilled for him, absolutely thrilled.

“For any Minnesota kid, it’s a dream come true.” **MHL**

“I’ve told him, ‘You can’t talk yourself into the league, you got to earn your job.’

I really like the strength of his conviction and the belief in his ability.”

—Lou Nanne, Vinni’s Grandfather

Michael Russo writes for *The Athletic*. This is his 19th season covering the Wild and 29th covering the National Hockey League. He hosts the *Straight From The Source* podcast, contributes weekly on *The Athletic Hockey Show* and co-hosts *Worst Seats in the House* on the *Talk North Podcast Network*. Each podcast can be heard wherever you get your podcasts. Russo can be heard weekly on *KFAN (100.3-FM)* and seen throughout the hockey season on *Bally Sports North* and the *NHL Network*. Follow Russo on Twitter (now X) and Instagram at *@RussoHockey*. To subscribe to *The Athletic* at a discount, go to *theathletic.com/straightfromthesource*.



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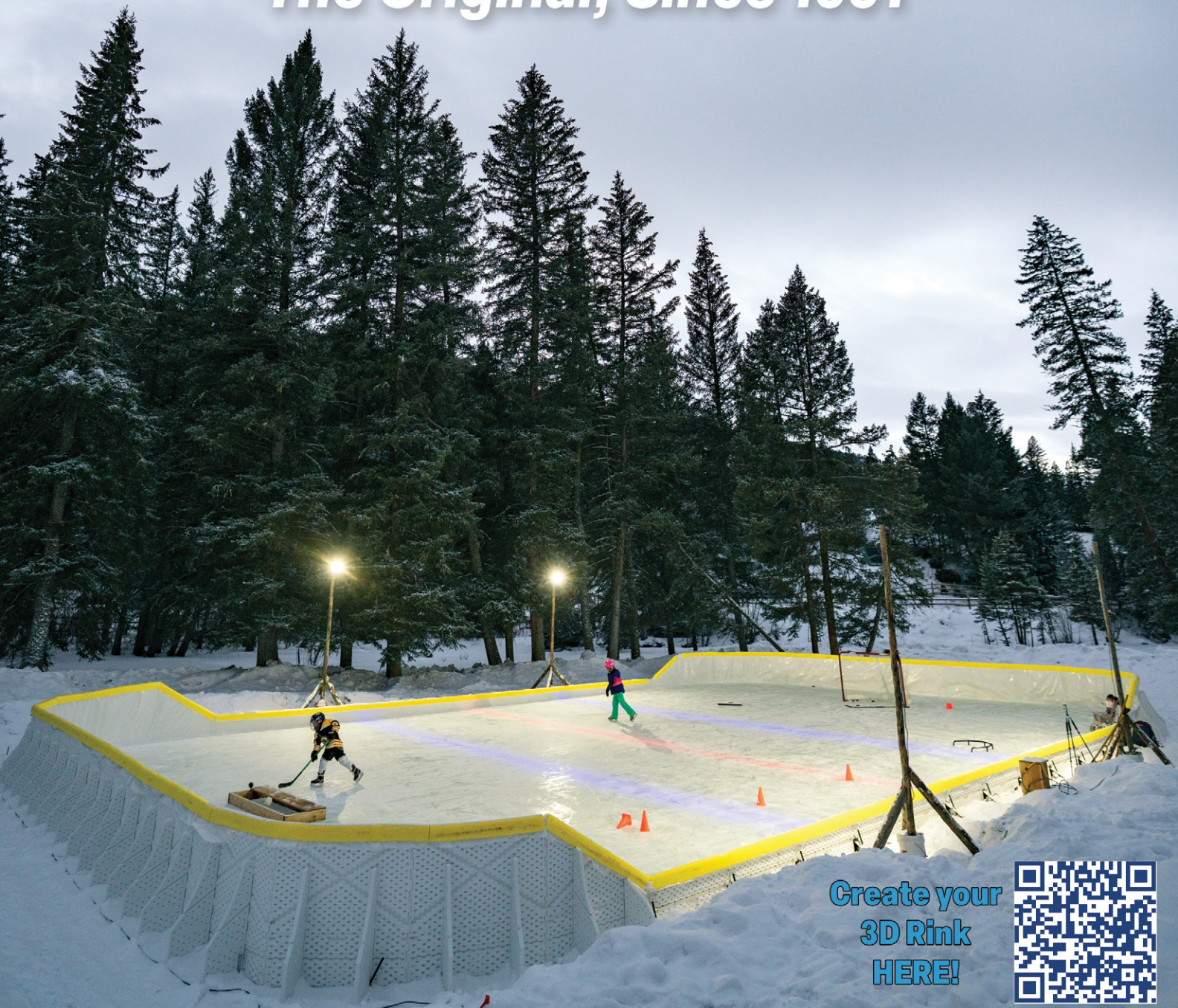
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