

TRY TO BEAT THAT!: THE 1978-79 BRANDON WHEAT KINGS

Versatility was a big key in winning

BY PERRY BERGSON

The Brandon Wheat Kings were well coached in 1978-79, they were highly skilled and they had tremendous depth.

In Part 2 of a look at their intangibles — Part 1 ran in Wednesday's edition of the Sun — the players look deeper into what made them great.

VERSATILITY

WES COULSON: "If you want to play a good, clean hockey game, we can do that. If you want to go to a tight defensive game, we can do that. If you want to go goal for goal, we can do that. And if you want to drop the mitts and get at her, we have enough guys and you don't have enough on your squad. That was our mentality. We weren't really afraid of anybody."

GREGG DRINNAN (Brandon Sun): "The depth in terms of their physical play was unbelievable. It really was. That's not just fighting, most of them could fight, but just their ability to grind. If they got into a game and realized, for whatever reason, that we're going to have to struggle to score tonight, maybe we should try to win 3-2 instead of 6-2, they could grind with the best of them. It was just check, check, check right through the lineup. Their forwards, whichever 12 of the 13 they dressed, they could match up and rub you into the ground. Every single player was responsible defensively, because if you weren't, you didn't play. Certainly when the game was close. Dunc was always concerned about bad habits forming later in a game when it was out of hand. I think he liked to do more of his yelling in the lopsided games because of things like that."

RICK KNICKLE: "We had a lot of different qualities on that team and we had some good size."

LAURIE BOSCHMAN: "We had good goalies, we had a very solid defence and we could score goals, we could fight, we were a pretty well-rounded team."

GREGG DRINNAN: "Nowadays teams like to talk about their top six and their bottom six. The Wheat Kings that year — of course it was a different era — were a top three and a bottom nine. I don't think there's much doubt about that. But I bet most of the forwards, if not all of them, got a chance to play with some combination of the top three."

KELLY MCCRIMMON: "It was a really talented team and yet in saying that, there was a layer on that team of incredible players. After that, Dunc made sure the team was tough, Dunc made sure that the team had really good chemistry, was big and there were a lot of guys who were really effective two-way players. Brant Kiessig, Darren Gusdal, Donny Gillen, Steve Patrick, Dave McDonald, they were guys who were good hockey players."

BRIAN PROPP: "We were balanced pretty well, and these guys had their good games too. Dunc really made a difference by giving the young guys a chance to play a little bit more and they would score more and get more points. It wasn't a one-line team. We had three or four good lines who knew their roles. The younger guys really did a good job. I remember Kelly McCrimmon, he was a tough guy and he didn't score as much but he was a key element of our team. You had Brad as a leader and Kelly as a good leader. He was really smart. These guys could play really well too, and it gave us a chance."

GREGG DRINNAN: "In today's game, everyone on the team knows their role. You're the fourth-liner but you might get up to the third line. With that group of Wheat Kings, they all had their roles but they all could be slotted in somewhere else. They had penalty killers like Gusdal and Kelly McCrim-



Wes Coulson (3) said Brandon could play whatever kind of game their opponent wanted, and usually beat them at it. (Brandon Sun file photo)

mon, but other guys would kill penalties."

CAMARADERIE

BRIAN PROPP: "When I think about our team, we had so much fun. When we were on the bus, we were given a couple cases of beer coming back from a trip because the closest trip was three-and-a-half hours. It was nice to hand them out and have a couple of beers with the guys and just relax. Now it's a little different but at that time ... We wanted to win and we found a way to win."

RICK KNICKLE: "We really enjoyed it, and winning didn't hurt. We did a lot of stuff together as a

team and I believe that was a big factor in why we won so much. Talent, of course. But if you don't like each other and work hard for each other ..."

WES COULSON: "That was a special team. We all seemed to get along. Ya, there were little groups here and there because we had a little bit of an age discrepancy, but as a rule, when we got on the bus — and they talk about how it can be best to hit the road with a junior hockey team and get them away from the city they're in and all the distractions — and we would take off and go for five-day trip through Saskatchewan. There are only 20 of you guys and a coach and a manager and a trainer and bus



Mike Perovich (2) said the Wheat Kings always knew they could depend on each other, even if they weren't always the best friends. (Brandon Sun file photo)

driver so you learn to get along."

RICK KNICKLE: "Every guy had a nickname ... and we had guys like Donny Dietrich who made sure these nicknames stuck. We're 17- or 18-year-old kids so that's why these names would stick, but they stick after 30 or 40 years when we see each other."

RICK KNICKLE: "We had so many guys who were really genuine guys."

MIKE PEROVICH: "I played on teams where there were fights in practice and guys hated this guy or that guy. You're not all going to get along. But the secret to good teams is you don't take that between 8 and 10 o'clock. You leave that s— in the dressing room. You put that sweater on and you play for the patch on the front. You might hate a guy's guts sitting across the dressing room from you, but if someone gives him a stick in the back, you've got his back. That's what makes good teams, when everybody is on the same page and has each other's back between 8

and 10 o'clock. You're not going to get along with everybody. It's not kumbaya. And that team had that."

DAVE STEWART: "It was a hockey team. It was never that everybody loved everybody. You go on the ice and do your job. That's just the way it is."

There was a serious incident in the 1970s with a hockey player that involved alcohol and a serious injury to a non-player — it didn't involve the Wheat Kings — so the team wasn't as wild as some people might expect of junior hockey players in the 1970s. In fact, they policed themselves.

RAY ALLISON: "We weren't allowed in a bar for I think two years. We had to get a case of beer or two cases of beer and go to somebody's house. We usually ended up at Kelly's, his wife's place and we would have a few beers. We would only hang around ourselves. Can you imagine? You're playing together, you go to a house party and it's just you, and then you get on the bus and it's just you. We just moved

around Brandon for a year and a half or two years all together because we couldn't go anywhere else. I don't think anybody did anything without the guys."

BRANT KIESSIG: "There was very little of that kind of thing with that team. That was probably one of the reasons we became a tight unit in that sense because we couldn't. The older guys kept a lid on that. We were only allowed to go basically to team-approved parties, and there weren't a lot of them. The odd time we had a party and it was almost like guys like Brad McCrimmon were the chaperones. They keep a pretty tight lid on that squad."

RICK KNICKLE: "The town really protected us and looked after us. We could feel that but we never abused it or took advantage of us. We never got in any trouble, and I think we looked after each other that way because we didn't want to ruin a good thing."

LEADERSHIP

STEPHEN PATRICK: "As great as the top line was, they dragged everybody up to play as well as they could. It was run really well that year and you had a great leadership group. You had four top guys and then you throw Freddy (Tim Lockridge) and Wes in there and Mike Perovich, that's a lot of leadership. As a young guy, you just can't let your guard down or have a day off or a practice off. Everything was top notch."

KELLY MCCRIMMON: "It was an older team and the leadership was very strong, beginning with the head coach, Dunc. He had tremendous respect and just a real natural leadership about him, with his presence and his command of the room. He was clearly THE leader of the team, and from there, there were some real good 19-year-old players ... The core of that team had been together and had some disappointments and yet it was the third great season the Wheat Kings had in a row. Those older players led the way."

GREGG DRINNAN: "Brad's leadership was beyond everything. He was the guy who if anyone was going to act up on that team, Brad would be the guy who pulled him aside. He wouldn't embarrass anybody but would just go over and say 'Hey, we don't do that here. That's not how we operate here. We want you to be a big part of the team, so let's clean it up and let's go.'"

STEPHEN PATRICK: "We had the right young guys and we had the right veterans. If you look at the new guys on the team, Kiessig, me, Abby, Elcombe, Chartier, us guys didn't have any history. You play a little taller and a little bigger than you are when you have that leadership group. That had a big impact on the team."

LUCK

STEPHEN PATRICK: "It was just a great group of guys who came together at the right time."

GREGG DRINNAN: "I think every single one of them, from Jack Brockest to (trainer) Smokey Stouffer to Dunc and every player, they were just in the right place at the right time. I'm a big believer in that in the sports world. Some players, it doesn't matter the sport in dealing with coaches, they're never fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time and something just clicks and everything picks up. They all had egos — you can't play at that level without an ego — but they understood the team concept. Every single one of them had a primary role and was quite content to play it. They loved each other and would go to war for each other, and every single one just happened to be in the right place in the right time."

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ON THE ICE

SEASON IN REVIEW

BRANDON 3, EDMONTON 1

Game 15, Nov. 3, 1978

Recap: Brandon managed its lowest offensive output since the third game of the exhibition season but Ray Allison's 20th goal of the season, which came early in the second period, stood as the winner. Brian Propp was serving as best man at his brother's wedding and missed the game. Both Propp and Allison now had 53 points. Larry Roberts was inserted into Propp's spot, but after he started to feel the effects of the flu, callup Lavern Popp (MJHL's Brandon Travellers) skated with Allison and Laurie Boschman, who added a late empty netter.

BWK goals: Brad McCrimmon, Allison, Boschman.

BWK goalie: Knickle.

Shots on net: 43-40 BWK.

Attendance: 2,945, in Brandon.

Record: 14-0-1.

Dunc McCallum: "We usually get off to a hell of a start and everything's offence after that."

BRANDON 8, REGINA 2

Game 16, Nov. 5, 1978

Recap: Brian Propp returned to the lineup with a five-point night and linemate Laurie Boschman added a pair of goals as the Wheat Kings built a 5-0 lead. Propp's goal-scoring streak reached 19 games over two seasons, a WHL record. Goalie Scott Olson picked up his first WHL assist on Boschman's first goal. Defenceman Mike Perovich had three assists.

BWK goals: Propp (2), Boschman, (2), Dietrich, Poddubny, Kelly McCrimmon, Brad McCrimmon.

BWK goalie: Olson.

Shots on net: 34-33 BWK.

Attendance: 1,460, in Regina.

Record: 15-0-1.

Dunc McCallum: "Propp's been doing things like that all season. He's got to be one of the leaders on this team."

BRANDON 6, CALGARY 2

Game 17, Nov. 9, 1978

Recap: Brian Propp's goal-scoring streak finally ended, but he had three assists in the victory. However, Ray Allison broke Bryan Trottier's WHL record with an assist for the 18th consecutive game, a mark that stretched back to the 1977-78 season.

The Wranglers had three Finnish imports in the lineup — Kari Heikkila, Pertti Lehtila and Juha Makinen. Meanwhile, rookie forward Dave McDonald made his WHL debut for Brandon and fought on his first shift.

BWK goals: Allison (2), Boschman (2), Gillen, Kelly McCrimmon.

BWK goalie: Olson.

Shots on net: 63-28 BWK.

Attendance: 2,934, in Brandon.

Record: 16-0-1.

Dunc McCallum: (on Allison's record) "Now that's something to talk about. Nobody gives him enough credit."

BRANDON 8, REGINA 4

Game 18, Nov. 11, 1978

Recap: Dave McDonald and Steve Patrick scored their first WHL goals. McDonald's goal came in his second game, while Patrick's came in his debut. Patrick returned to Winnipeg after the game — he was playing with the MJHL's St. James Canadians — and the Wheat Kings were waiting to hear if he would join the WHL club for good. Brian Propp went a second game in a row without a goal after he had one called back. He did have a pair of assists.

BWK goals: Boschman (2), Kelly McCrimmon, McDonald, Allison, Kiessig, Patrick, Gusdal.

BWK goalie: Olson.

Shots on net: 56-47 BWK.

Attendance: 3,266, in Brandon.

Record: 17-0-1.

BRANDON 7, SASKATOON 7

Game 19, Nov. 12, 1978

Recap: With the Wheat Kings killing a major penalty in the final two minutes of the third period, the Blades rallied from a 7-4 deficit with three power-play goals in 28 seconds to tie Brandon for the second time this season. It was Scott Olson's fourth consecutive start as Rick Knickle recovered from a hand injury. Mike Perovich's fourth goal of the season matched his output from the 1977-78 campaign. Saskatoon moved past the Edmonton Oil Kings into second place, but still trailed Brandon by 16 points.

BWK goals: Boschman (2), Stewart, McDonald, Perovich, Propp, Coulson.

BWK goalie: Olson.

Shots on net: 48-30 BWK.

Attendance: 2,887, in Saskatoon.

Record: 17-0-2.

Dunc McCallum: "It lasted eight min-

utes too long. We did things as badly for eight minutes as we did them good for the first 50. We played super hockey for the first 50 minutes. Saskatoon got good goal-tending or it would have been worse."

BRANDON 11, LETHBRIDGE 2

Game 20, Nov. 15, 1978

Recap: Wes Coulson's power-play goal early in the first period got the train moving as the Wheat Kings rolled over the second-place club in the Central Division. The game was played up as a battle of Brandon's high-scoring top line and Lethbridge's Duane Sutter, Earl Ingarfield and Doug Morrison, but the Wheat Kings trio outpointed them 11-3, with a 4-2 edge in goals.

BWK goals: Propp (3), Coulson (2), Brad McCrimmon (2), Perovich, Kelly McCrimmon, Boschman, Poddubny.

BWK goalie: Knickle.

Shots on net: 66-32 BWK.

Attendance: 3,222, in Brandon.

Record: 18-0-2.

Wes Coulson: "Once we got rolling we seemed to do all right. But the Broncos are a big club and once their big guys get going they'll be a lot better."

BRANDON 10, SASKATOON 3

Game 21, Nov. 19, 1978

Recap: Brian Propp had two goals and four assists, Ray Allison had four goals and three assists and Laurie Boschman had three goals and three assists as Brandon's top line combined for an incredible 19 points. The Wheat Kings actually were tied 1-1 after the first period and outshot 15-6 as they handed the Blades five power plays in the opening frame. At one stage in the game, Brandon was down to just two healthy defencemen — Tim Lockridge and Brad McCrimmon — after John McPhee was given a game misconduct and Mike Perovich and Wes Coulson joined Don Dietrich with injuries.

BWK goals: Allison (4), Boschman (3), Propp (2), Stewart.

BWK goalie: Knickle.

Shots on net: 36-33 BWK.

Attendance: 2,793, in Saskatoon.

Record: 19-0-2.

Dunc McCallum: "We ran into a terrible amount of penalties in the first period and our penalty killers really did a job. (Brant) Kiessig and (Darren) Gusdal did most of it, and I think their work may have turned the game around."