

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

Racers want Propp and Allison, but Wheat Kings say no!



Brandon Wheat Kings general manager Jack Brockest and the team's board of directors refused to sell the contracts of Brian Propp and Ray Allison to the World Hockey Association's Indianapolis Racers. Brockest is shown behind Brandon's bench during a game coach Dunc McCallum had to miss. (Brandon Sun file photo)

BY GREGG DRINNAN

This story originally appeared in the Nov. 8, 1978 edition of the Brandon Sun.

It was only last week that Nelson Skalbania, owner of the World Hockey Association's Indianapolis Racers, sold 17-year-old Wayne Gretzky and his reported \$1.75-million personal services contract to Edmonton Oilers and immediately was quoted as saying that he intended to recruit 10 more juniors this season.

Well, Skalbania's raiding party has touched down and it appears that its first stop was right here in Brandon.

As Jack Brockest, general manager of Brandon Wheat Kings, stated: "I can't think of a better place for him to start than right here where we have whom we believe to be the two best junior players in the country."

At a hastily called press conference Tuesday night at the Keystone Centre, Brockest revealed that "an approach has been made ... to buy up the contracts of Brian Propp and Ray Allison."

Propp and Allison, linemates with the Western Hockey League club, are both 19 years old, meaning they are eligible for the National Hockey League's 1979 junior draft. On top of that, the two outstanding forwards are currently making a shambles of the WHL scoring race, in which they stand one-two.

"The Wheat Kings have been offered \$80,000 to give up the rights to Propp and Allison," Brockest added. "But at an emergency board meeting it was unanimously agreed that we turn the offer down. We don't want any part of it."

The "it" Brockest refers to is the signing of underage junior hockey players by WHA teams. Birmingham Bulls, Cincinnati Stingers and Indianapolis combined last summer to ink nine underage players. The Bulls grabbed seven of those — Pat Biggin, Keith Crowder, Michel Goulet, Rick Vaive, Gaston Gingras, Craig

Hartsburg and Rob Ramage. Cincinnati took Mike Gartner and the Racers, of course, picked off Gretzky.

All nine players, though, were taken — without permission of the various clubs — from teams in the Ontario Major Junior A League and the Quebec Major Junior League; and Western League clubs were left unscathed. Subsequently, two team owners from the east have filed lawsuits in Ontario's Supreme Court against several of the players, Birmingham Bulls' owner John Bassett and player agent Alan Eagleson, claiming breach of contract.

Propp and Allison both signed WHL player contracts with the Wheat Kings before this season started and Brockest says, "As far as we're concerned, they're valid contracts. They signed with us as 19-year-olds."

"But, we're not holding this as a club over their heads."

Because under-age players from the west have been left alone, there has never been a precedent-setting court case held to establish the validity of the contracts. Brockest adds, though, that "I think we're quite prepared to do that (take legal action). But we'd hate to get two kids caught in the middle of litigation."

It's doubtful if things will ever go that far, so Wheat Kings have adopted a wait-and-see attitude.

"The initial reaction of the two players," commented Brockest, "is that they want to wait and go into the draft in the normal scheme of things. I mean, the WHA exists today, but there's no guarantee it will tomorrow."

Propp and defenceman Brad McCrimmon were approached by Birmingham last summer, but decided to stay and play out their junior eligibility and wait for the 1979 draft. Indianapolis, though, has not expressed an interest in McCrimmon, who definitely is one of the top 10 juniors in the country.

The approach to the Wheat Kings by Skalbania was made through player agent Bill McFarlane, who represents Propp and Allison.

"Neither player has been heavily involved up to this date," Brockest said. "And they are very definitely members of the Wheat Kings. The initial reaction from their agent (McFarlane) is that the offer made to them is not outstanding."

Brandon coach Dunc McCallum said his reaction to these latest developments was "the same as it was last summer" when Propp and McCrimmon were approached by the Bulls.

"They weren't offered a whole bunch to join," said McCallum. "And they've got more to lose in the long run by making a hasty decision. If the boys are going to finish their draft year here, I think possibly this is another feather in their hat, and may even help them get drafted a little higher. Any publicity they can get has to help."

"But," McCallum added, "it's about time the National League took a stand. If the NHL would declare that these juniors who sign with the WHA aren't eligible for the (NHL) draft next year it would stop it in a hurry. These kids all want to play in the NHL, and they'd scurry back to the junior teams in a hurry."

Brockest and Wheat Kings' president Bob Cornell didn't waste any time, or words, shooting down rumours which have been circulating as to whether or not the Brandon hockey club is for sale.

"Some people have been claiming the team could be purchased as an expedient way of getting to these two players," said Brockest. "But, there's no way. The Wheat Kings are simply not for sale."

Cornell was in full agreement: "I don't think the club will ever be for sale. The existing owners and 'B' shareholders have worked very hard to get the Wheat Kings to where they are today."

Oilers, Flames make big splashes

BY GEMMA KARSTENS-SMITH

When Zach Hyman visited Edmonton with his wife about a week ago, he quickly realized that signing with the Oilers as a free agent would be a "no brainer."

The couple liked the city and could see their seven-month-old son, Theo, growing up there. Hyman loved the rink — and the opportunity to play with superstars like Connor McDavid.

"I wanted to go to the place that wanted me the most and that had the best chance to win and had the best chance for me to develop as a hockey player. And Edmonton checked those boxes," Hyman said Wednesday after inking a seven-year, US\$38.5 million with the Oilers.

Edmonton made some big moves as the NHL's free-agent market opened Wednesday, signing Hyman, defenceman Cody Ceci and forward Derek Ryan. The club also re-signed blue liner Tyson Barrie to a three-year deal and traded up-and-coming d-man Ethan Bear to the Carolina Hurricanes for left-winger Warren Foegele.

"Obviously we've got an incredible core that's really coming into their prime years. So I felt a responsibility, an obligation as the manager to try to build a little bit deeper supporting cast as we head into the season," said Oilers GM Ken Holland.

While the league's last free-agency period in October saw a number of short-term contracts and smaller numbers, managers across the NHL seemed to open their wallets once again on Wednesday to dole out cash and term for the most-coveted talents.

Business was brisk, too, said Ottawa Senators general manager Pierre Dorion.

"You better jump the gun pretty early. You better have all your ducks in a row because players were going off very fast," he said with a smile, noting the even head coach D.J. Smith got on the phone to try and connect with some players.

It was a busy day in Calgary, too, but the Flames were prepared, said general manager Brad Treliving.

"You do your homework on the player you're going to be investing in," he said.

Calgary's preparation appears to have paid off, with the Flames landing forward Blake Coleman on a six-year deal with an average annual value of \$4.9 million.

"We pursued him hard. And in order to get that player, you've got to make a commitment," Treliving said of the contract. "And that's not unlike any player in the market."

Coleman heads to Calgary after helping the Tampa Bay Lightning win back-to-back Stanley Cups.

The 29-year-old from Plano, Texas, tallied 31 points (14 goals, 17 assists) in the regular season last year and added 11 more



Zach Hyman, shown celebrating a goal with the Toronto Maple Leafs during the 2019-20 season, signed with the Edmonton Oilers on Wednesday. (The Canadian Press)

(three goals, eight assists) in 23 playoff appearances.

"Blake was a highly sought-after player," Treliving said. "He plays in the trenches. I think his skill is very understated."

While Coleman's destination wasn't revealed until Wednesday afternoon, Hyman's new home seemed to be a long time coming.

His move to Edmonton follows weeks of speculation and reports that the Oilers were attempting to orchestrate a "sign-and-trade" deal with the Toronto Maple Leafs that would allow for an eight-year contract.

The 29-year-old winger said he had "a bunch" of conversations with other teams, but liked what Edmonton has to offer best.

Hyman put up 33 points (15 goals, 18 assists) in 43 games for his hometown Maple Leafs last season and said he's looking forward to seeing what he can add to the Oilers lineup.

"Obviously Connor McDavid, he's a special player, he's a generational-type player," Hyman said, noting that he'd played alongside other special players in Toronto, including Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner and William Nylander.

"For me, it's about bringing my work ethic every day and trying to be consistent and trying to create as much space as I can for the guys that I play with. With Connor, obviously he's a guy that takes advantage of space, his speed is off the charts. And if I can create space for him, I think everyone in the world knows what he's capable of doing."

Playing in Edmonton was a lot of fun last year, Barrie said, even if the campaign didn't end the way the team had planned.

"It was fun to come to the rink every day and get on the ice and get better and work with these guys," said the 30-year-old defenceman who signed a

three-year, \$13.5 million deal on Wednesday. "And when you're winning games and having personal success, it goes a long way. It was just a lot of fun in a short year. And I can't imagine what it'll be like with fans."

After finishing the pandemic-condensed regular season second in the all-Canadian North Division, the Oilers were swept from the first round of the playoffs by the Winnipeg Jets.

"Obviously it's a little disappointing how we ended the year last year," Barrie said. "But I think we can only go up from there."

Defencemen were a hot commodity on the free-agent market Wednesday.

The Montreal Canadiens landed Stanley Cup-winner David Savard, inking the 30-year-old to a four-year contract with an average annual value of \$3.5 million.

"For me, (signing with Montreal) was an easy decision because it was a great fit for my family and a great fit on my ice, on the team," said the native of St-Hyacinthe, Que.

Savard finished last season in Tampa Bay after the Columbus Blue Jackets dealt him to the Lightning at the trade deadline in April.

The six-foot-two, 233-pound blue-liner had six points (one goal, five assists) in 54 regular-season appearances and added another five helpers in 20 playoff appearances.

The Senators also added a defenceman to the roster, signing 31-year-old Michael Del Zotto to a two-year contract with an average annual value of \$2 million.

Del Zotto, who hails from Stouffville, Ont., had 13 points (four goals, nine assists) for the Columbus Blue Jackets last season.

The Vancouver Canucks added former Jets defenceman Tucker Poolman on a four-year deal with an average annual val-

ue of \$2.5 million, and re-signed veteran blue-liner Travis Hamonic to a two-year, \$6-million contract.

The Jets chose to add to their back end earlier in the week, bringing in defenceman Nate Schmidt from the Canucks and Brendan Dillon from the Washington Capitals for picks in next year's draft.

The Maple Leafs brought in a new goalie Wednesday, signing Petr Mrazek to a three-year deal with an average annual value of \$3.8 million.

Joining the Leafs was "an easy choice," Mrazek said, noting the team has a number of skilled players and a passionate fan base.

The 29-year-old will work alongside goalie Jack Campbell, and said he's looking forward to developing the partnership.

"I don't know Jack personally but I've heard a lot of great things about him from my previous teammates. I can't wait to be a partner with him," he said.

Mrazek played 12 regular-season games for the Carolina Hurricanes last season and registered a 6-2-3 record with a .923 save percentage and 2.06 goals-against average.

The six-foot-one, 192-pound netminder from the Czech Republic has played 275 NHL games with the Detroit Red Wings, Philadelphia Flyers and Carolina.

In something of a corresponding move, Toronto's former No. 1 Frederik Andersen signed a two-year, \$9-million deal with the 'Canes on Wednesday.

The 31-year-old Danish netminder struggled with a nagging lower-body injury last year, and finished with a 13-8-3 record to go along with career-worst numbers, an 895 save percentage and 2.96 GAA. The performance gave Campbell the chance to steal the top job.

» The Canadian Press

SIGNINGS AROUND THE NHL

ANAHEIM DUCKS

• Ryan Getzlaf — one-year, \$4.5-million deal.
• Brogan Rafferty — one-year, \$750K deal.

BOSTON BRUINS

• Nick Foligno — two-year, \$3.8-million deal.
• Derek Forbort — three-year, \$9-million deal.
• Erik Haula — two-year, \$4.75-million deal.
• Tomas Nosek — two-year, \$3.5-million deal.
• Troy Grosenick — one year, \$750,000 deal.
• Linus Ullmark — four-year, \$20-million deal.

BUFFALO SABRES

• Vinnie Hinostroza — one-year, \$1.05-million deal.
• Mark Pysyk — one-year, \$900,000 deal.
• Jimmy Schuldt — one-year, \$750,000 deal.

CALGARY FLAMES

• Blake Coleman — six-year, \$29.4-million deal.
• Trevor Lewis — one-year, \$800,000 deal.
• Kevin Gravel — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Nick DeSimone — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Adam Werner — one-year, \$750,000 deal.

CAROLINA HURRICANES

• Frederik Andersen — two-year, \$9-million deal.
• Tony DeAngelo — one-year, \$1-million deal.
• Antti Raanta — two-year, \$4-million deal.
• Josh Leivo — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Ian Cole — one-year, \$2.9-million deal.
• Jordan Martinook — three-year, \$5.4-million deal.

CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS

• Juihar Khaira — two-year, \$1.95-million deal.
• Jake McCabe — four-year, \$16-million deal.

COLORADO AVALANCHE

• Roland McKeown — one-year, \$750,000 deal.

COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS

• Eric Robinson — two-year, \$3.2-million deal.
• Boone Jenner — four-year, \$15-million deal.
• Sean Kuraly — four-year, \$10-million deal.

DALLAS STARS

• Ryan Suter — four-year, \$14.6-million deal.
• Braden Holtby — one-year, \$2-million deal.
• Luke Glendening — two-year, \$3-million deal.

DETROIT RED WINGS

• Sam Gagner — one-year, \$850,000 deal.
• Pius Suter — two-year, \$6.25-million deal.

EDMONTON OILERS

• Derek Ryan — two-year, \$2.5-million deal.
• Zach Hyman — seven-year, \$38.5-million deal.
• Tyson Barrie — three-year, \$13.5-million deal.
• Cody Ceci — four-year, \$13-million deal.

FLORIDA PANTHERS

• Maxim Mamim — one-year, \$975,000 deal.

LOS ANGELES KINGS

• Phillip Danault — six-year, \$33.5-million deal.
• Alex Edler — one-year, \$3.5-million deal.
• Andreas Athanasiou — one-year, \$2.7-million deal.

MINNESOTA WILD

• Alex Goligoski — one-year, \$5-million deal.
• Frederic Gaudreau — two-year, \$2.4-million deal.
• Joe Hicketts — two-year, \$1.5-million deal.
• Jon Lizotte — one-year, \$750,000 deal.

MONTREAL CANADIENS

• David Savard — four-year, \$14-million deal.
• Mike Hoffman to three-year, \$13.5-million deal.
• Louie Belpedio — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Chris Wideman — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Cedric Paquette — one-year, \$950,000 deal.
• Jean-Sébastien Dea — one-year, \$750,000 deal.

NASHVILLE PREDATORS

• Mikael Granlund — four-year, \$20-million deal.
• David Rittich — one-year, \$1.25-million deal.
• Anthony Richard — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Matt Luff — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Zachary L'Heureux — three-year, \$2.775-million deal.

• Michael McCarron — two-year, \$1.5-million deal.

NEW JERSEY DEVILS

• Jonathan Bernier — two-year, \$8.25-million deal.
• Chase DeLeo — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Dougie Hamilton — seven-year, \$63-million deal.

NEW YORK RANGERS

• Patrik Nemeth — three-year, \$7.5-million deal.
• Jarrod Tinordi — two-year, \$1.8-million deal.
• Greg McKegg — one-year, \$750,000 deal.

OTTAWA SENATORS

• Michael Del Zotto — two-year, \$4-million deal.
• Andrew Gogozino — one-year, \$750,000 deal.

PHILADELPHIA FLYERS

• Nate Thompson — one-year, \$800,000 deal.
• Adam Clendening — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Nick Seeler — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Ryan Fitzgerald — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Gerald Mayhew — one-year, \$800,000 deal.

PHOENIX COYOTES

• Carter Hutton — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Dmitrij Jaskin — one-year, \$3.2-million deal.
• Jordan Oesterle — two-year, \$2.7-million deal.

PITTSBURGH PENGUINS

• Evan Rodrigues — one-year, \$1-million deal.
• Brock McGinn — four-year, \$11-million deal.
• Dominik Simon — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Taylor Fedun — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Filip Lindberg — two-year, \$1.85 deal.

SAN JOSE SHARKS

• Andrew Cogliano — one-year, \$1-million deal.
• James Reimer — two-year, \$4.5-million deal.
• Lane Pederson — two-year, \$1.5-million deal.
• Nick Bonino — two-year, \$4.1-million deal.
• Nick Merkley — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Jacob Megna — one-year, \$750,000 deal.

SEATTLE KRAKEN

• Alexander Wennberg — three-year, \$13.5-million deal.
• Philipp Grubauer — six-year, \$35.4-million deal.
• Jaden Schwartz — five-year, \$27.5-million deal.

TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING

• Remi Elie — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Charles Hudon — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Brian Elliott — one-year, \$900,000 deal.
• Brayden Point to an eight-year, \$76-million deal.
• Zach Bogosian — three-year, \$2.55 deal.
• Pierre-Edouard Bellemare — two-year, \$2-million deal.

TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS

• Petr Mrazek — three-year, \$11.4-million deal.
• Michael Bunting — two-year, \$1.9-million deal.
• David Kampf — two-year, \$3-million deal.
• Michael Amadio — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Kurtis Gabriel — one-year, \$750,000 deal.

VANCOUVER CANUCKS

• Brandon Sutter — one-year, \$1.125-million deal.
• Luke Schenn — two-year, \$1.7-million deal.
• Kyle Burroughs — two-year, \$1.5-million deal.
• Nic Petan — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Travis Hamonic — two-year, \$6-million deal.
• Phil Di Giuseppe — one-year, \$750,000 deal.
• Tucker Poolman — four-year, \$10-million deal.
• Danila Klimovich — three-year, \$2.775-million deal.
• Brady Keeper — two-year, \$1.525-million deal.
• Jaroslav Halak — one-year, \$1.5-million deal.

VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS

• Alec Martinez — three-year, \$15.74-million deal.
• Laurent Brossoit — two-year, \$4.65-million deal.
• Sven Baertschi — one-year, \$750,000 deal.