

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

# Wheat Kings have endured some heartache

BY PERRY BERGSON

The passage of years has certainly brought more than its fair share of heartache for the 1978-79 Brandon Wheat Kings.

Coach Dunc McCallum died of brain cancer on March 31, 1983 at age 43, and general manager and eventual owner Jack Brockest passed away on Nov. 10, 2011

at age 84. Three of the 21 players are also gone. Defenceman Brad McCrimmon died in a plane crash on Sept. 7, 2011 near

Yaroslavl, Russia, forward Darren Gusdal passed on June 21, 2014 and Don Dietrich succumbed on Feb. 16, 2021.

Each of the three players

made their own impact. McCrimmon was the superstar defenceman, Gusdal was the well-liked penalty killer and energy player and Dietrich was the youngster who would blossom into a West-

ern Hockey League star a year after the magic season.

What follows is a brief look at their lives, and how their Brandon teammates remember them.

## Brad McCrimmon set tone for teammates

BY PERRY BERGSON

There simply aren't many people like Brad McCrimmon.

A product of Plenty, Sask., and older brother of Kelly, Brad was the leader of the 1978-79 Brandon Wheat Kings on and off the ice.

At age 15, McCrimmon joined the Saskatchewan Junior Hockey League's Prince Albert Raiders and in his second season in 1975-76, he was named the SJHL's top defenceman.

He moved to the Wheat Kings for the 1976-77 season and didn't skip a beat, managing 18 goals and 66 assists in 72 games. Those point totals rose to 97 and 98 in his last two seasons in the league.

He was named an all-star in the 1977-78 and 1978-79 seasons, and was the WHL's 1978 defenceman of the year.

Not surprisingly, McCrimmon was selected 15th overall in the first round in 1979 by the Boston Bruins.

McCrimmon had a sensational National Hockey League career, playing in more than 1,200 games for the Boston Bruins, Philadelphia Flyers, Calgary Flames, Detroit Red Wings, Hartford Whalers and Phoenix Coyotes between 1979 and 1997.

In 1989, he helped the Calgary Flames win their only Stanley Cup championship.

After retirement, he joined the New York Islanders as an assistant coach. After two seasons, he returned to the WHL to coach the Saskatoon Blades for the 1998-99 and 1999-2000 seasons.

McCrimmon subsequently went back to the NHL to coach with the Calgary Flames, Atlanta Thrashers and Detroit Red Wings.

On May 29, 2011, he was named head coach of the Kontinental Hockey League's Lokomotiv Yaroslavl. However, on Sept. 7, 2011, the unimaginable happened when the team plane crashed on take-off near Yaroslavl, Russia as the team was making its way to Minsk, Belarus to begin the 2011-12 season. Forty-four died, including McCrimmon.

As a Wheat King, he was the player who sometimes wore the whistle in practice when coach Dunc McCallum wanted to watch from above.

He was also the perfect teammate, a fact illustrated by something that happened to forward Brant Kiessig in his rookie season.

Kiessig's girlfriend, who was in high school in Thunder Bay, unexpectedly decided to join him in Brandon. Dealing with the situation was weighing heavily on him so he decided to talk to McCrimmon about it.

"Brad said 'Kies, don't worry about, when she gets here give me a call and we'll fix her up,'" Kiessig said. "My girlfriend came to Brandon and she moved in with his girlfriend, who was his first wife Karen. That's the type of guy Brad was. He said no problem and took care of it. He did me a solid."

**LAURIE BOSCHMAN:** "Brad could take a pass. You could fire a pass at him almost like a slapshot and he could handle it, and of course back in the day we only had the wood sticks. He played so much for us and was a solid defenceman for us both defensively and offensively. He was just a great all-around defenceman and obviously a leader in the dressing room."

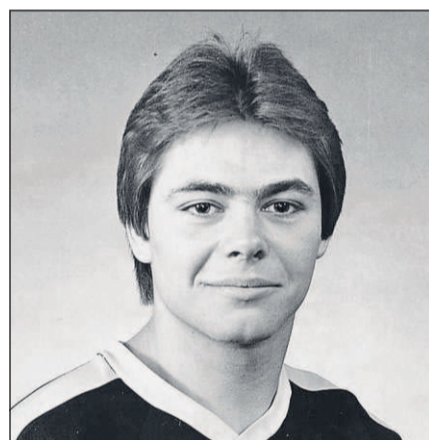
**BRIAN PROPP:** "(Brad) was really skilled. He had a good shot, was a good passer. He kind of flew under the radar because he was much better than he got credit for. He was really skilled, a good stickhandler, he did everything really well."

**GREGG DRINNAN (Brandon Sun):** "His 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:** "Brad was a great leader. Abby and I took Boschman's car to Winnipeg one night and had to be back the next morning for practice. Bosch forgot to tell us



Brad McCrimmon wore an A, along with Tim Lockridge and Ray Allison, and was renowned for his leadership qualities and his ability to play a lot of minutes in any game. (Brandon Sun file photo)



Brad McCrimmon

that the car didn't work that well, and to boot, we run out of gas somewhere about 20 miles out. We had to walk through the snow and borrow gas from someone. We get back to practice 10 minutes late and Dunc walks through the dressing room and sees us putting our gear on and everyone is out on the ice. He doesn't say anything but we get bag skated after practice and I think we threw up. Brad, on his own, did all the skating with us, and I remember him doing it backwards. He didn't have to because we were the ones who (messed) up, but he did the skating drills with us. He did not get tired. It was impossible. We had it coming to us because we weren't supposed to go home and we went home and we were late for practice. But Brad, being the captain, was also teaching us a lesson."

**KELLY McCRIMMON:** "Brad was a real natural leader. He was a really strong, powerful man. He had a heavy build. I watched him play my whole life, and he was just a really intelligent defenceman who was hard nosed. He played 18 years in the National Hockey League afterwards. He was really, really respected by his teammates. He led by example, was an incredibly hard worker in practice."

**RICK KNICKLE:** "I saw him a couple of weeks before he went over to Russia and he hadn't changed a bit since we played together in junior. He always loved being around the guys and being on a team and being with teammates. You ask anyone about Brad, and his biggest asset was treating everybody with respect, but he could come down hard on you if you did something that wasn't kosher. He would call you on it, and you respected that about him."

**KELLY ELCOMBE:** "Brad was the superstar. He was such a good guy, another farm boy. He was so strong, incredibly strong for never lifting a weight. Being from the city you trained and had gone to gyms and that, I don't know if he had ever seen a gym but he was the strongest guy I've ever seen. He was very tough and very dirty. I don't know if people know that, but holy cow, he rarely fought but he made his room in other ways. He was a great leader — I know his nickname when he got to

the NHL was Sarge, we didn't call him that in junior — but that's the perfect description. It tells you all you need to know. He was tough to hell, had his game face on and was ready for action. He was a great leader. It was amazing to watch a guy like that day in and day out."

**KELLY McCRIMMON:** "Brad and Dunc had a great relationship, so Dunc always took the pulse of the team through Brad. Dunc would be away for practice, which happened on more than one occasion, and Brad would run practice until Dunc got there. You say that today and it sounds crazy (laughs), but that's how we did it. Brad would start practice and then Dunc would come out."

**BRUCE PENTON (Brandon Sun):** "(Brad) was a very, very quality individual. His dad Bryon would show up for games quite frequently at the Keystone Centre and you could tell he came from good stock. Byron was a no-nonsense type of guy, a farm guy who believed in hard work, and passed that on to Brad and Kelly. They both were similar. Whatever you see in Kelly, Brad was a lot similar. He had a no-nonsense approach to life and business but he would stop and smell the roses every now and then."

**TIM LOCKRIDGE:** "Brad knew how good he was and where he was going right off the get-go. You knew that about Brad when he was 17, the first day I met him. He was going to play in the NHL, and there was no doubt about it. When he was 17, he was awfully young and there were a lot of good older defencemen in the league, but when he was 18 and 19, there was nobody better than him."

**GREGG DRINNAN:** "Brad was just an all-around good guy."

**RICK KNICKLE:** "He had a calming effect when he came on the ice. It was 'OK, I can relax a little bit' because he would never give the puck away and so strong at that age. He was sneaky dirty, physical and tough but dirty as they come and I liked it. I saw it all in front of me."

**BRUCE PENTON:** "(Brad) could be a mean son of a bitch on the ice too. He would give out a lot of hacks in front of the net. He was pretty tough. He was probably five-11, 185, but he was shortish and stocky and solid as a rock. You couldn't knock him over. He was one of the best passers I've ever seen in my life. He could hit somebody in flight from a zone and a half away."

**GREGG DRINNAN:** "His passing ability was second to none. I don't know if I've seen a defenceman since then who could pass the puck like that. He wasn't the fastest guy on skates, he wasn't the quickest guy, but his intelligence, his hockey IQ, was off the charts. Without an assistant coach in those days, as hard as it is to believe, he was basically the assistant coach. He shouldered a huge load that whole season."

They didn't carry any extra defencemen, so when somebody went down — and there were times they ended up with four — they would actually be one plus three because Brad would be playing a whole lot of extra minutes. There had to be games that season when he played 45 minutes ... There was a reason his nickname was The Beast."

**KELLY McCRIMMON:** "The amount he played was unprecedented then or now."

**WES COULSON:** "The stamina he had was incredible."

**KELLY ELCOMBE:** "(Brad) was off the charts as far as respect went."

**RICK KNICKLE:** "Brad really organized a lot of stuff for us, and that was why we were a good team because he made sure guys showed up. He would phone you up and 'Why aren't you here? Everybody is here, come on, you're coming.' You had to have a good reason."

**RAY ALLISON:** "Brad just wouldn't let you go by him. He was a good skater and could turn real well but he just wouldn't let you go by him. He would find a way to get a piece of you, find a way to poke you, he hated to be beaten."

**STEPHEN PATRICK:** "He would stay out after practice with us. I remember him teaching me how to do a saucer pass."

**DAVE CHARTIER:** "He had lots of confidence. He was a helluva hockey player and played for lots of years. He fought, and was a tough kid."

**WES COULSON:** "He was a great guy. He was the heart and soul of our defence, as much as Ray and Brian and Bosch made the offence run. Brad was a great skater, he could pass the puck, he was tough in the corners, tough in front of the net. That was built into his National Hockey League career too. He had some good offensive numbers at the junior level but when he got to the pro level it was more like he was the defensive guy and his nickname was Sarge. He demanded that we be better than we were when we were playing poorly. What can you say about the guy? The last game at the Memorial Cup in Montreal, he plays the whole game."

**DAVE STEWART:** "Brad was always a good guy. He and I used to go to the community centre and he would talk to the kids. He liked to get involved. As far as his talent, I never played with a guy who had more talent. The thing is with Brad, he never really worked hard at it and never had to. I don't think he worked a lot in the off-season. It was just natural talent. He had no problem passing the puck to me right on the tape all the time. He was a natural hockey player."

**DON GILLEN:** "Brad was very reliable. He was born to be a player. At 10 or 12 years old, if you were going to pick a guy in the community who was going to play hockey, he was the guy. He was virtually always hockey. He was strong, had a good work ethic, physically I would say matured early. He was with Prince Albert before, a really good strong team. He was a very good player who found himself on very good teams and contributed to why they were good."

**DAVE McDONALD:** "(Brad) could skater faster backwards than I could forwards. He was a good guy. He was small town, from Plenty, Sask., a home-grown farm boy. He worked hard and was so talented. It was unbelievable how he passed the puck. He could put a saucer pass on your tape at the far blue-line very time and he wouldn't miss. It was right there. He was a great, great leader. You just had to watch how he worked and how he passed the puck and how he shot."

**WES COULSON:** "He was just a good guy to be around."

**KELLY McCRIMMON:** "It was really special for me playing with my brother. That just made it so memorable at the time, and as time has gone on with what happened, it's even moreso. Even though it's that many years ago, I remember it like yesterday. I cherish every minute of it."

» pbergson@brandonsun.com  
» Twitter:@PerryBergson



Brad McCrimmon salutes the crowd at the MasterCard Memorial Cup semifinal game at Westman Place on May 21, 2010. (Brandon Sun file photo)

## Brad McCrimmon thrilled to be back

BY JAMES SHEWAGA

This story originally appeared in the May 22, 2010 edition of the Brandon Sun.

It has been three decades since Brad McCrimmon last played for the Brandon Wheat Kings, but the greatest defenceman in club history will never forget the place where it began.

The 52-year-old former member of Brandon's brilliant 1979 WHL championship squad and Memorial Cup finalists returned to the Wheat City this week for the MasterCard Memorial Cup and was the latest former Wheat King great to receive a standing ovation on Friday night as the club honours its former stars.

"I wear my Wheat King alumnus status pretty strong and I bump into guys throughout the league, whether I played with them or against them or even the young guys now and I always make sure I mention I'm a Wheat King alumni guy," said McCrimmon, now an assistant coach with the NHL's Detroit Red Wings. "But coming home to this rink, I had great years here, great teammates and a lot of great memories. So for sure coming back I always have little flashbacks."

In one of those stones that takes on legendary status, McCrimmon played almost the entire game in the 1979 Memorial Cup final, a game in which the injury-riddled Wheat Kings dropped a 2-1 heartbreaker in overtime to the Peterborough Petes. Thirty-one years have passed, but the pride in being a member of that team and the bitter disappointment of coming so close to winning the Cup remains fresh in his mind.

"It was really a crushing moment, but when you look back at it ... we were beat up," said McCrimmon, who had 24 goals, 98 points and 139 penalty minutes in 66 games in his final season in the WHL, adding nine goals and 28 points in 22 playoff games. "We played our hardest and we fell short, but I think in saying that we could never be ashamed of how we played. I felt we gave it everything we had."

McCrimmon went on to be drafted 15th overall by the Boston Bruins that summer and began an 18-year NHL career in which he played in a whopping 1,222 games, scored 81 goals and piled up 403 points and 1,416 penalty minutes, winning the Stanley Cup with Calgary in 1989. Since retiring in 1997, McCrimmon has spent 12 seasons coaching, both as a head coach with the WHL's Saskatoon Blades and as an assistant in the NHL, the past two years with Detroit.

As for his former team, McCrimmon couldn't be prouder of how younger brother Kelly has helped turn the franchise around over the last 21 years and is impressed with the new-look Westman Place.

"The (luxury) boxes are outstanding, the score clock, the whole atmosphere, it's amazing how it can change a rink so dramatically, but it has," he said. "People from other parts of the country who came to the Memorial Cup are going to be immensely impressed with the facility, the building, the exhibits, the hospitality ... I think that people will walk away from this experience being totally impressed."