

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

Knuckle fit right in after moving west for hockey

BY PERRY BERGSON

Rick Knuckle, who played with the Brandon Wheat Kings in the 1970s, somehow lasted long enough in the game to become the toast of the hockey world in 1993.

Knuckle came out from Nova Scotia, following in the footsteps of his friend Tim Lockridge, who had lived in Portage la Prairie before the move east. Lockridge returned to play with the Manitoba Junior Hockey League's Terriers at age 15, making his Wheat Kings debut a year later after a move to the MJHL's Brandon Travellers.

With Glen Hanlon's graduation after the 1976-77 season, Brandon was holding an open audition for a new goalie so Knuckle came out west.

He was originally assigned to the Travellers, who served as Brandon's de facto farm club, but was quickly promoted and earned the top job, playing 49 games.

Nicknamed Schoonie by his teammates because of his Nova Scotia roots, he split playing time with Scott Olson in 1978-79 but gradually played more as the playoffs went on. He was on the ice for the first two games of the Memorial Cup but the league's first-team all-star goalie was replaced by Portland Winter Hawks pickup Bart Hunter for the final three games.

Still, Knuckle was taken in the sixth round, 116th overall, by the Buffalo Sabres in 1979.

Knuckle returned to Brandon for the 1979-80 season and then embarked on a professional odyssey that saw him play until the end of the 1996-97 season. He may be best remembered for making his National Hockey League debut on Feb. 18, 1993 with the Los Angeles Kings at age 33, and appearing in 14 regular season games.

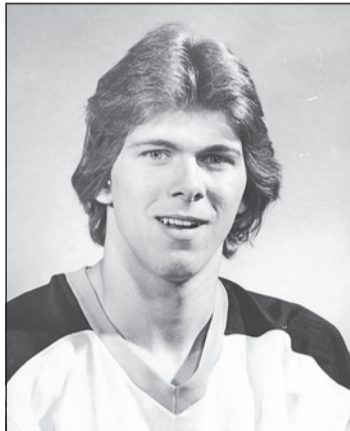
Knuckle did amateur scouting for the Nashville Predators for 13 years, before joining the Arizona Coyotes as their director of amateur scoring for three years.

He now lives in B.C.

TIM LOCKRIDGE: "Rick and me grew up together. Our dads were in the air force so I met Rick in Nova Scotia and he just kind of clung to me. I came out to Portage (to play for the Terriers) when I was 15 and Rick wanted it. I was the one who got him a tryout two years later in Brandon to get his foot in the door ... If anybody can hang in the minor leagues for 18 years, how much persistence is that, especially when you weren't really getting paid a whole bunch? He just loved to play hockey."

GREGG DRINNAN (Brandon Sun): "Rick Knuckle was not a typical goaltender — I would say Scott Olson was the more typical goaltender — but Rick certainly had his differences. He was really quiet, and I think he might have been a little better off if he had been more vocal, only because I think he was a little too hard on himself. It might sound strange when they only lose five games but I think when he gave up a bad goal he had trouble shaking it off sometimes. If there was one player more than any other who was bothered by criticism from Dunc, I think it might have been Rick. It's not like Dunc threw goalies under the bus, but if a goalie gave up a bad goal and everyone in the building saw it and the team saw it and knew it, Dunc wasn't going to try to protect the goaltender or lie about the goal. He would say 'Rick gave up a bad one and we can't have that.' I think it stuck with him a little more. It wasn't water off a duck's back."

STEPHEN PATRICK: "Schoonie was laid back and relaxed. He had quick reflexes, a real good guy. He was a lot of fun. I played with him in



Rick Knuckle

the minors in Rochester and I ran into him in Brandon when Nolan was playing and he was scouting. He was a real good goaltender."

MIKE PEROVICH: "Rick was quiet. He didn't say much."

DAVE CHARTIER: "Ricky is a good guy. We would always be the last ones off the ice, he and I. Somebody would shoot pucks and I would deflect them. He had the old goalie mask and Rick was standing there and I deflected it and it went under his mask and hit him and cut him for probably 10 or 12 stitches. He said 'What the ... were you doing?' and I said 'I don't know what I was doing, I was just trying to get it up high.' He was a goer. He stayed after practice. He was one of the better goaltenders. He played well and everybody liked him. There were a lot of players who were leaders, and he was a silent leader."

RAY ALLISON: "Rick was a good goalie. Glen Hanlon was the first kid I played with in Brandon, and I don't know if they were in that calibre of goaltending, but Rick was a pretty good goalie, pretty fundamental. He had pretty good hands."

WES COULSON: "Rick was just a fun-loving guy. He just loved life. He was a good goaltender. We had two really good goaltenders as a matter of fact. He was a kid from Nova Scotia who worked hard and stopped the puck. He was a good teammate."

DAVE STEWART: "Schoonie was different. He had lots of talent but sometime his mind would wander. He was a good guy. Goaltenders are all a little different."

TIM LOCKRIDGE: "I felt for Rick. We picked up the guy from Portland, Bart Hunter, and used him in the Memorial Cup and I think that was a real slight on Rick. He took it in stride and went with it but deep down I think it bothered him a little bit."

DON GILLEN: "When Rick got the baton handed to him, he carried it and never dropped it. He played extremely well. He just stepped in and never missed a beat. He was reliable. He was kind ahead of his time with statistics and calculating. He had the game figured out and a lot of angles figured out before (analytics) were a thing. He went on to scout, and he knew what to look for. He was a student of the game."

LAURIE BOSCHMAN: "Rick was a stellar goalie for us during our run. He was just very solid. We had a pretty productive team and he did a great job back there in net."

GREGG DRINNAN: "He was a really good goaltender, and a good goalie for that era because he would give up four and know I better not give up five. He would batten down the hatches and they would end up winning."

WES COULSON: "He just went along with the flow and never seemed to get rattled. Goaltenders are a different breed anyways but he never seemed to get too upset. If he let in a couple of bad goals, it never seemed to bother him. That's the kind of makeup you have to have to be a goaltender."

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Rick Knuckle posted a 3.16 goals-against average in the 1978-79 season and was named the WHL's first-team all-star goalie. (Brandon Sun file photo)

Goalies faced lots of rubber in late 1970s

BY PERRY BERGSON

If you judge goaltenders from the 1970s and 1980s by their goals-against averages, you're probably missing some important information.

The 1978-79 Brandon Wheat Kings were a force in the Western Hockey League, but in 72 regular season games, they held their opponent to 29 or fewer shots just 18 times. Conversely, they allowed 40 or more shots 14 times.

"That era was just a lot of shots," goalie Rick Knuckle said. "I had a goals-against of 3.10 and led the country almost. Now it's 2.10 or 2.00. It's a one-goal difference but it's crazy the shots I would get. Thank God we had an offensive team because that's why I won more than I lost."

The wildest example came on Oct. 15, 1978, when the Victoria Cougars visited the Keystone Centre. Brandon won 7-3, but Knuckle faced 72 shots, with Victoria firing the puck at him 31 times in both the second and third periods.

"It was one of those nights,"

Knuckle said. "You don't get 70 in a peewee game."

The pair was solidified when Charlie Funk was cut in mid-September to reduce the number of goalies in camp down to two.

The two goalies nearly sawed the playing time down the middle, with Knuckle seeing action in 38 games, and Olson on the ice for 35. Both goalies played in a regular season just once, and that came because Olson was ejected in the game that ended Brandon's unbeaten streak when he sparked a brawl.

"The two of them were really good," Brian Propp said. "They were good friends. The thing about them was that they were consistent. We had a lot of chances to play better but we didn't really have to because we had a lead all the time. Knicker played well that whole year, and so did Scott. Scott was a little unorthodox but he figured out a way to stop the puck."

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ON THE ICE

Brandon 8, Edmonton 2 Game 47, Feb. 2, 1979

Recap: Edmonton's Bruce Jacobsen was tasked with shadowing Brian Propp. Advantage: Brian Propp. The Wheat Kings star scored three goals and added a pair of assists as the Wheat Kings romped to the win. In an odd touch after the game, Wheat Kings defenceman Brad McCrimmon praised referee Murray Harding, who had recently had been officiating in the Central Hockey League, but moved back to Manitoba for a job with the World Hockey Association's Winnipeg Jets. Edmonton scoring leader Ray Neufeld watched the game from the stands with an ankle injury.

BWK goals: Propp (3), Allison (2), Perovich, McDonald, Roberts.

BWK goalie: Olson.

Shots on net: 67-29 BWK.

Attendance: 2,088, in Brandon.

Record: 39-2-6.

Dunc McCallum: "I tried to juggle the lines early but then I thought that farther down the road — in the playoffs — Propp will likely have a checker on him all the time. And he got five points tonight with a checker on him. I don't think anyone can check him. He can operate from everywhere."

Brandon 11, Edmonton 2 Game 48, Feb. 4, 1979

Recap: In Edmonton's eighth and final visit to the Wheat City, Brandon charged out to a 4-0 first-period lead and after Edmonton scored twice, exploded for seven more goals. With Dunc McCallum in Houston on business, general manager Jack Brockest took over behind the bench and won for the second time this season. Kelly Elcombe's goal, which came when the Wheat Kings were shorthanded, was his first in the WHL. He was tripped as he broke in, and slid into the net with the puck under him. In the league scoring race, Brian Propp led with 69 goals, 72 assists and 141 points, followed by Ray Allison (40-66—106) and Laurie Boschman (42-56—98).

BWK goals: McDonald (2), Lockridge, Patrick, Stewart, Elcombe, Kempthorne, Perovich, Allison, Brad McCrimmon, Dietrich.

BWK goalie: Knuckle.

Shots on net: 70-30 BWK.

Attendance: 1,712, in Brandon.

Record: 40-2-6.

Jack Brockest: "I thought we played terrible in the second period. But the second was the type of period that would put you to sleep. But, I gave them a bit of a pep talk after the second and told them they had to outscore Edmonton 4-0 in the third. I knew we had to win by more than 8-2."

Brandon 7 Regina 5 Game 49, Feb. 7, 1979

Recap: The Pats took a 2-0 lead in the first 15:28, but Brad Kempthorne scored before the period ended to make it 2-1. After 40 minutes, Regina was up 4-2 and looking for its first win over Brandon. But Brian Propp's hat trick in the third period, plus singles from Steve Patrick and Ray Allison, pushed Brandon's unbeaten streak to 11 games and earned it the Eastern Division pennant. Propp's game-winner was his 11th of the season, one off the league record, and his 10 hat tricks were three off Bill Derlago's WHL standard. In addition, Laurie Boschman's three

assists pushed him to 102 points on the season. He had 99 the previous season as a rookie. The team now headed out on a 17-day, nine-game road trip against Central and Western Division opponents.

BWK goals: Propp (3), Kempthorne, Stewart, Patrick, Allison.

BWK goalie: Olson.

Shots on net: 59-39 BWK.

Attendance: 1,798, in Brandon.

Record: 41-2-6.

Dunc McCallum: "That third period was something we haven't had in six weeks. There was emotion out there ... and that's what this game is all about ... controlled emotion."

Brandon 4, Billings 4 Game 50, Feb. 10, 1979

Recap: Trailing 3-1 after 40 minutes, and 4-2 five minutes into the final frame, Brian Propp and Brad Kempthorne scored three minutes apart to salvage a tie. Kempthorne's goal was his 20th of the season. Former Wheat King Dan Earley had one of the goals for Billings.

BWK goals: Boschman, Kiessig, Propp, Kempthorne.

BWK goalie: Knuckle.

Shots on net: 48-29 BWK.

Attendance: 4,152, in Billings.

Record: 41-2-7.

Billings 6, Brandon 5 Game 51, Feb. 11, 1979

Recap: The Bighorns scored twice in the final seven minutes — including the winner on the power play with 1:55 remaining — to hand the Wheat Kings their third loss of the regular season. With the four points Brian Propp picked up on the weekend he led the league in goals (74), assists (74) and points (148). Five of Billings' six goals came with the man advantage. Brandon was scheduled to host Billings in their fourth and final meeting of the season Feb. 27. The Wheat Kings would continue their road trip in Portland on Feb. 14.

BWK goals: Brad McCrimmon (2), Propp, Kiessig, Stewart.

BWK goalie: Knuckle.

Shots on net: 42-40 BWK

Attendance: 3,114, in Billings.

Record: 41-3-7.

Brandon 7, Portland 4 Game 52, Feb. 14, 1979

Recap: In the second battle of the two league heavyweights, Ray Allison scored 25 seconds into the game and Don Gillen added a goal two minutes later as the visitors got exactly the start they wanted. Brandon led 3-1 after the first period and 5-3 after 40 minutes. Portland forward Perry Turnbull's hat trick boosted his season goal total to 58. Brant Kiessig's two goals gave him 18 on the season, with linemates Don Gillen (goal and an assist) and Brad Kempthorne (two assists) also enjoying multipoint nights.

BWK goals: Allison (2), Kiessig (2), Gillen, Propp, McDonald.

BWK goalie: Knuckle.

Shots on net: 54-38 Port.

Attendance: 8,241, in Portland.

Record: 42-3-7.

Dunc McCallum: "We got a good effort from everyone but the difference was the line of Kiessig, Gillen and Kempthorne. They definitely were the difference in the game. And our penalty killing was as good tonight as it was bad in Billings."

Brandon 5, New Westminster 5 Game 53, Feb. 15, 1979

Recap: Brian Propp had a hat trick but his goal 8:54 into the third period was one to remember as it propelled him into the top spot for career points in Western Hockey League history, with 471, moving him one past Ron Chipperfield. On the historic play, Propp's shot beat New West goalie Richard Martens high to the stick side, and his 12th winner of the season tied the league record. Brandon led 2-0 after the first, it was tied 2-2 after 40 minutes and Larry Melynyk tied it 5-5 for the Bruins (26-24-5) midway through the third period. Coach Dunc McCallum called it the team's worst game of the road trip. Brandon and New West had an all-time record of 13-13-6 against each other.

BWK goals: Propp (3), Brad McCrimmon, Allison.

BWK goalie: Knuckle.

Shots on net: 30-25 BWK.

Attendance: 7,063, in Vancouver.

Record: 42-3-8.

Dunc McCallum: "Brian has always got points. He likely could have stayed with us as a 16-year-old. But he didn't — it was more his decision than ours — and maybe, in the long run, it was for the better."

Brandon 3, Victoria 2 Game 54, Feb. 17, 1979

Recap: Larry Roberts scored the winning goal and added an assist. Brandon led 2-0 and 3-1, with the Cougars rallying to within a goal in the third period. Brandon goalie Scott Olson was terrific, stopping 37 shots. Victoria (24-22-10) had entered the contest on a seven-game unbeaten streak.

BWK goals: Propp, Patrick, Roberts.

BWK goalie: Olson.

Shots on net: 39-24 Vic.

Attendance: 4,651, in Victoria.

Record: 43-3-8.

Brandon 4, Seattle 3 Game 55, Feb. 18, 1979

Recap: Brandon took a 3-0 lead seven minutes into the opening frame, Seattle tied it in the third period, but Brian Propp won it 16:35 into the final frame with his 80th goal of the season. Brandon played without Kelly McCrimmon, Dave McDonald and Tim Lockridge, plus Wes Coulson was knocked out of the game in the third period when he was cross-checked into the boards and taken off the ice on a stretcher. X-rays proved negative and he joined the team on the bus to Calgary.

BWK goals: Boschman (2), Allison, Propp.

BWK goalie: Olson.

Shots on net: 46-30 BWK.

Attendance: 2,100, in Seattle.

Record: 44-3-8.

Dunc McCallum: "We had discussed trying to get ahead and then blow them out of the water but their goaltender (Ken Hodge) played extremely well."