

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



Wes Coulson wasn't the biggest Wheat King but was considered a fearless, heart-and-soul contributor to the team. (Brandon Sun file photo)

Coulson offered heart-and-soul presence

BY PERRY BERGSON

Wes Coulson was the epitome of a heart-and-soul player for the 1978-79 Brandon Wheat Kings.

In an era of big defencemen, the five-foot-eight Oak River product earned what he got by blocking shots and playing hard. He, along with Brad McCrimmon, Tim Lockridge and Mike Perovich, was part of the team's core of 19-year-old defencenders.

He joined the Wheat Kings a year earlier, earning 39 points in his 18-year-old season in 1977-78.

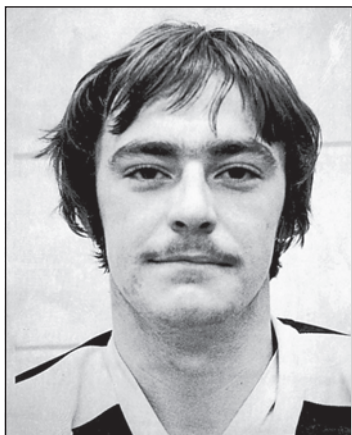
Nicknamed "Ches" or "Cheswick" by his teammates after they decided he bore a very slight resemblance to a character in the 1975 film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Coulson scored 13 goals and added 38 assists in 66 regular season games, and added 21 points in 19 playoff games.

Unfortunately, he hurt his shoulder in Game 3 of the league final, and essentially played the Memorial Cup with one arm, further weakening a Brandon blue-line that had already lost Perovich for the season.

Coulson played two seasons of pro hockey after graduating from Brandon, and then went home to drive a truck and farm until 1999.

When his wife Donna's career earned a job offer in Canmore, Alta., the pair moved there in 2014, and still live there. He now drives a truck for a local construction company.

DON GILLEN: "Wes was a great guy and a great team-



Wes Coulson

mate. He blocked shots and paid the price for the team. He loved playing in Brandon, loved being a Wheat King, loved his community, Oak River/Hamiot, he's just a good guy. A solid player who wouldn't be a superstar on any team but was solid enough to play on any team in any league. He was so reliable. You could count on him."

LAURIE BOSCHMAN: "Wes Coulson was a smallish right-handed point man but he was gritty."

BRANT KIESSIG: "I feel like (Wes) was a lot like me. 'How did I get here?' But just like me, it was 'I'm going to do it because I'm here and I'm going to make people believe that I should be here' and he did ... He knew his job and he did it 110 per cent. He was a heart-and-soul guy because when you see a guy like that giving her the way he was, there was no way you were going to take a night off. No way."

MIKE PEROVICH: "Cheswick had a big heart. Wes was a good player. He was good defensively and he had a little

offence too. He was blocking shots, he was a good one."

DAVE STEWART: "Wes was a little farm boy. We used to go up to his farm the odd time and go on the tractor ride because us city guys didn't know anything about farming. He was down to earth, a good guy and a good worker."

KELLY MCCRIMMON: "Wes would be the same then as he is now. He was a fantastic teammate, a great friend to everybody, black and white, meat and potatoes. That's how I've always known him. There were so many good players on that team, he was a really underrated player."

DAVE CHARTIER: "Wes was a smaller guy but he had some toughness. He was on his last year in my first year ... He played his role so well that he was a big guy for us."

BRUCE PENTON (Brandon Sun): "Wes was a smaller, feisty, hockey sense guy. Everyone on our team to me thought the game very well, and to me as a goalie, I want to see my defencemen make good decisions. Wes Coulson was our shot blocker, penalty killer. He had sneaky talent. He was our second unit power-play guy and could shoot the puck. He was a farm guy, and another guy who had good ethics and morals. Those things carry onto the ice."

BRUCE PENTON (Brandon Sun): "(Wes) was a little guy but he was tough as nails. I don't know if Dunc had them working out but they all seemed to have real upper-body strength. Wes wouldn't take any crap from anybody. He wasn't a big guy but he was strong as an ox and a good player. He had a lot of offen-

sive skills too."

STEPHEN PATRICK: "Wes was a tough little bugger ... He was a tough farm boy who could block shots and move the puck. He didn't need the puck — some guys seem to need it a little more — but he could move it quick and he was really strong."

TIM LOCKRIDGE: "Wes hasn't changed since he was 18 years old. He was a good old tough farm kid from Manitoba. He used to take a beating and get up and keep on going. I remember times when we were on the bus and everybody would say 'Someone check on Ches.' And then it was 'Oh, he'll be fine. He just had his bell rung tonight.' Wes is salt of the earth, he's just a nice guy."

GREGG DRINNAN (Brandon Sun): "Wes Coulson was a favourite, only because I'm five-foot-six so I kind of had a soft spot for the shorter guys. He was five-nine, I would guess. He was a heart-and-soul guy who played hard every night, played any role on the back end. I'm certain if he got benched for a period, he wouldn't complain. He likely would ask himself after he cooled down why it happened and come to the realization that coach was right and smile and get on with his life. He was an unsung hero. You can't win without guys like that. You can have your ones and twos but you need the Wes Coulsons as support guys if you're going to have any success, and he was certainly a key to that team's success."

» pbergson@brandonsun.com

» Twitter: @PerryBergson

Winding playoff road is around corner

BY GREGG DRINNAN

This story originally appeared in the March 8, 1979 edition of the Brandon Sun.

Brandon Wheat Kings, with first place in the Western Hockey League's overall standings all but locked up, will begin the playoffs on the road.

With nine games remaining, the East Division pennant-winning Wheat Kings hold a 12-point bulge over Portland Winter Hawks, who have sewn up top spot in the Western Division. The Winter Hawks have eight games left to play in the regular schedule.

Regular season play winds up on Sunday, March 25 and the Wheat Kings, whose last scheduled game is Friday, March 23 when Regina Pats visit the Keystone Centre, are tentatively set to begin post-season play on Thursday, March 29.

The first round of the playoffs will be a double home-and-home round-robin affair, featuring the top three teams in each division. This is the same playoff format the WHL used for the first time a year ago. After the round-robin, the top two teams will play a best-of-seven to determine the division champion. Then, the league's three division champions will enter into another round-robin series with two teams advancing to a best-of-seven final to determine who will advance to the Memorial Cup playdowns.

All the Wheat Kings' playoff dates are tentative, and are assuming the Edmonton Oil Kings finish third in the East Division. Thus far, only two teams — Brandon and Saskatoon — are assured spots in the round-robin series. The other spot will go to either Edmonton or Regina. The Oil Kings, with six games remaining, lead the fourth-place Pats, who have eight games left, by three points.

Brandon then would return home to entertain Edmonton on Monday, April 2 and Tuesday, April 3, before heading for Saskatoon and a game on Friday, April 6. The Blades would then come to Brandon for games on Saturday, April 7 and Sunday, April 8.

It is expected that the Oil Kings will play their home games in Lloydminster, Sask., rather than in the Edmonton Gardens. But, should Regina catch Edmonton for that third and final playoff berth, minimal changes in Wheat Kings' dates would be necessary.

At the same time, Portland, Victoria Cougars and New Westminster Bruins will be engaging in the same type of series on the West Coast, while Billings Bighorns, Lethbridge Broncos and Calgary Wranglers

do the same in the Central Division.

Wheat Kings general manager Jack Brockest said Tuesday that this will, in all probability, be the last time the WHL uses the round-robin format to determine division semi-finalists. Nothing will be definite until the WHL holds its annual meeting later this year, but it appears that the day of the three-division league is about over. In all likelihood, the WHL will go back to two six-team divisions next season, with four teams from each qualifying for post-season play, and all series being best-of-seven affairs.

Brockest, who attended a league meeting on Monday in Calgary, said there was no mention of the realignment then, but that the plan "has been pretty well accepted ... if we stay the same geographically."

Brockest, meanwhile, showed some concern over the fact that the World Hockey Association is threatening an all-out war over underage players if there is no merger with the National Hockey League.

"We could get caught right in the middle if there is an all-out war," Brockest said, "If the World Hockey Association gets turned down again I guess they wouldn't have much to lose by signing juniors. And I suppose the National Hockey League would eventually have to start doing the same thing. And we would be right in the middle of it all."

Referring to stories that Birmingham Bulls owner John Bassett has signed more juniors to contracts, Brockest said that he believes all the players involved are from Eastern Canada. "I don't think there has been anything out west. There weren't even any rumours at Monday's meeting. And we (the Wheat Kings) haven't heard anything since Nelson Skalbania (owner of the now-defunct Indianapolis Racers) tried to get Brian Propp and Ray Allison."

JUST NOTES: Wheat Kings host Calgary Wranglers on Friday night, 8 p.m., at the Keystone Centre. Then, they travel to Regina for a game Sunday, with the Pats playing a return engagement at the Keystone on Monday night. If Wheat Kings win Friday and Sunday nights, they will tie a pair of WHL records: most wins in a 72-game season (54) and most points (116). That means Monday could be a record-breaking night ... Brandon forwards Dave McDonald and Kelly McCrimmon are doubtful starters for Friday night, but could return to the lineup early next week. McDonald has a pulled groin, and McCrimmon has pulled ankle ligaments.

Elcombe fit right in after leaving school to join club

It doesn't always happen with college players, but when the Brandon Wheat Kings added Kelly Elcombe during the 1978-79 season, they brought onboard an incredible amount of toughness.

The 18-year-old from Winnipeg left the University of Wisconsin to join the Wheat Kings, debuting on Dec. 3, 1978. He settled into a role on the third pairing with Don Dietrich, contributing three goals and 15 assists in 45 games.

"They bring you down there to play hockey and go to school," Elcombe told the Sun's Gregg Drinnan in November 1979. "But going to school is No. 1 with them. Maybe I had the wrong idea when I went down there because hockey has always been No. 1 with me. Then, when things weren't going well, I had to make the decision."

Elcombe proved to be a tough-as-nails defender who earned 145 penalty minutes during the 1978-79 season. Those totals mirrored what he did in the Manitoba Junior Hockey League with the St. James Canadians when he earned 181 penalty minutes in 49 games in 1976-77 and 121 in 51 games in 1977-78.

Elcombe went on to play the 1979-80 season with the Wheat Kings — piling up 221 penalty minutes, which was only fourth best on that rugged club — and spent five seasons playing pro hockey before retiring after the 1985-

86 season. He now lives in B.C. and serves as the director of sales for a company that provides surgical instruments.

RICK KNICKLE: "Kelly was a tough nut. When him and Brant Kiessig stood side by side, you would look at those shoulders like brick, with no ounce of fat on them. Kelly was another guy who had that little snarl about him on the ice. He was nice guy off the ice but on the ice, tough."

LAURIE BOSCHMAN: "Kelly was a tough player. He had a motorcycle and was from Winnipeg, and he and Stephen were good buddies. He was very well built as well. He was a big, strong guy."

STEPHEN PATRICK: "Kelly was tough. He had a couple of real good fights with (Regina Pats captain) Dirk Graham his first year, and probably got a little more offensive after that ... Kelly would always give Donny (Gillen) a hard time about his car, so after a game when it was -30, they lived near each other so Donny was going to drop him off. Donny said 'I just have to go in my house for a second' but takes his keys with him and locks the door, so Kelly had to walk home ... Kelly was talented, he could shoot the puck and played with an edge. Everyone had something to offer the team."

TIM LOCKRIDGE: "Kelly was a little spark plug. He was built like a brick s—house and he wouldn't back down from anybody. When he came in, he

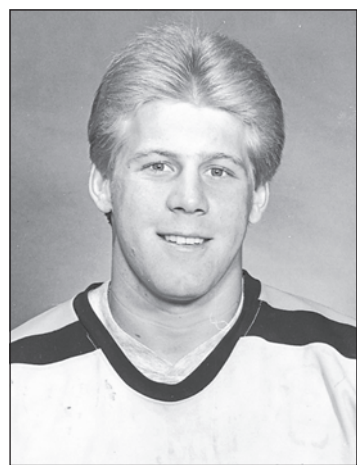


Kelly Elcombe offered a physical edge on the blue-line after joining the club in December. (Brandon Sun file photo)

was another guy who came in and he could play anywhere and I think he did. I don't know why he didn't get utilized a little more. He did get his minutes I'm sure. He was just an easygoing guy."

MIKE PEROVICH: "I played with (Kelly) in Colorado for a bit. He was funny."

GREGG DRINNAN: "Kelly Elcombe was a college player and it was like when he got to the Wheat Kings, they took the reins off. It was like as a college player he hadn't played very physical and then all of a sudden he got into the Western Hockey League and he could bang people and he



Kelly Elcombe

could scrap and run at people and be a pain, especially in the defensive zone. He was a high-energy guy and a guy who fit in really well once he got there and got comfortable and came to realize he could play at that level ... I would say playing-style wise, he was a bit smaller Tim Lockridge."

WES COULSON: "Kelly was a real hard-nosed St. James kid. He was a role player on our defence as well but he had some skill. He wasn't a big guy — everybody was taller than me it seemed — but he played a tough game, and I think that's why Dunc liked him. He played a real in-your-face, grind-her-out style of hockey. He didn't have the offensive skill of Mike Perovich or Brad or even Donny Dietrich, but he was tough and he didn't care. He was another one of those guys where if you wanted to go, it was let's go."

DAVE CHARTIER: "I was getting mixed up and I could hear (Kelly) from the background yelling 'Charts, throw them. Start throwing them.' So I started throwing them and beat the s— out of some guy from Saskatoon. I nailed him a few good times. Kelly was that type of guy. He made you feel stronger than you were. Having him around was unbelievable because he was strong and solid. He was a good player."

DAVE STEWART: "Kelly did drop the gloves. We needed a little toughness. Kelly didn't have a ton of talent like Perovich or Brad but he was one of those guys. We needed toughness on the blue-line and he really fit in well with that."

DON GILLEN: "He was very solid. I won't say he surprised guys but you woke up pretty quick if you were an opponent playing against him."

KELLY MCCRIMMON: "Kelly was a really good fighter, a right-shot defenceman, a really good guy. He really added to our team dynamic. He was really well liked. He was a great addition."

DAVE McDONALD: "Kelly came from (the University of) Wisconsin. We grew up together. He was another tough boy too. Everybody was hard working and wanted to prove themselves and wanted to go to play in the NHL or someplace. He was right behind Tim. Kelly could throw with the best of them too. It didn't hurt at all having him around."