

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

# Kelly McCrimmon's path with club began in 1978

BY PERRY BERGSON

Nobody has cast a greater shadow over the Brandon Wheat Kings franchise than Kelly McCrimmon.

But in 1978-79, he wasn't the owner, general manager and head coach who took the team to new levels of sustained success. He was a rookie forward who just happened to be the younger brother of one of the best defencemen in team history.

By sheer force of will, Kelly McCrimmon carved out his own niche on the 1978-79 team as a hard-working, edgy forward who could contribute at both ends of the ice.

Unfortunately, he had some rotten luck. He earned an eight-game suspension on Dec. 14 for leaving the bench during a brawl, came back on Jan. 15, missed 13 games due to a cracked bone in his arm, suffered an ankle injury on March 2 and then reinjured his arm again during Game 2 of the league final and missed the rest of the season.

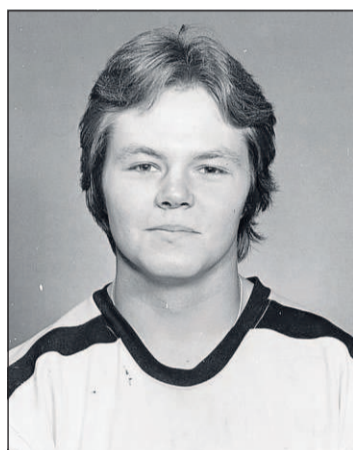
He returned the next year, and after graduating, headed to the University of Michigan for four years, and upon earning his degree, went home to the farm.

After coaching near Plenty, Sask., farm, he took a job with the Wheat Kings in 1988, and within a few years was a partial owner of the team, later buying the rest of the club from Bob Cornell.

After winning a Western Hockey League championship in 2016, McCrimmon joined the National Hockey League's Vegas Golden Knights as assistant general manager, and was later promoted to GM. He sold the



Kelly McCrimmon got off to a tremendous start to the 1978-79 season for the Brandon Wheat Kings but only played 40 regular season games due to injuries and a long suspension. (Brandon Sun file photo)



Kelly McCrimmon

team to Jared Jacobson last September.

**TIM LOCKRIDGE:** "The professor. The one thing I remember about Kelly was his detail for the game. His wheels were always turning. He was constantly analyzing everything so you knew he was going to go on somewhere and do very well for

himself, which obviously he has. He was Brad's little brother, and you could see some things that were the same in him but they were both very independent. Brad would help coach in practice and Kelly was the same way. He understood the game and he wanted to learn more and do more in the game."

**WES COULSON:** "Kelly was quite the character. Him and I shared a bunk on the bus so I got to know Kelly quite a bit. He was another one of those guys who was happy with life. He just had a hate on for Kenny Federko, just an absolute hate. It might be because he had a hate on for Saskatoon. He couldn't stand the Saskatoon Blades. He grew up around Saskatoon but he couldn't stand Ken Federko. I remember one night in Saskatoon and we're down in our end. We came out first and all of a sudden Kelly takes off and stands right by the door where

the Blades come out. Out comes Kenny Federko and he takes a swing at him (laughs). 'What are you doing?'"

**STEPHEN PATRICK:** "I remember this one time he ran a guy in warmup. It was Bernie Federko's younger brother. It was amazing."

**DAVE STEWART:** "Kelly is Kelly. He didn't have a ton of talent, that's for sure, not like his brother, but he had his place. He killed penalties and he would get in front of the net and cause s—. He was good at that, and you always need players like that. Did I think he would be where he is now? No, I thought he would head back to the farm."

**RICK KNICKLE:** "Kelly was another guy on our team — with Brad being the star defenceman and getting all the accolades — who was really important on our team. I believe if he wasn't hurt, we would have won the Memorial Cup."

**DON GILLEN:** "He understood the game very well. He understood the little things. He was a very smart hockey player. He had a couple of unfortunate injuries. The wrist, I believe, he broke a couple of times and that sets you back for a few months. And when you come back, is your shot the way it was? You always knew you could count on him. The other team always knew he was on the ice."

**WES COULSON:** "He didn't have the talent that a lot of the other guys had on the team but he worked hard and he would stand up for you. He didn't give a s— about nothing. If somebody was picking on somebody, he would give them a little tap, and if you wanted to go, fine. If you didn't want to go, he would give you another tap. He was quite the character."

**MIKE PEROVICH:** "Kelly was a good penalty killer. He worked hard."

**STEPHEN PATRICK:** "Kelly was great in the dressing room. I didn't see that he felt any kind of pressure because his brother was a great player. Kelly would always have guys around his locker because he had a great sense of humour. He was a real good penalty killer and he was a bugger to play against ... He was a great teammate."

**DAVE CHARTIER:** "Kelly and I played together on the penalty kill. He was a buzzer. What he lacked in talent, he was unbelievable in heart. He was a good player. He was like a bulldog. He would never give up, worked hard all the time. Look at what he has now. That's his work ethic, and he had it back then too. A lot of it came from home obviously but he worked his tale off.

He was so smart."

**DON GILLEN:** "When we went down to Billings, they had a booster club down there and it was quite active in a new organization. They used to put signs up for the opposing team and I still remember "#18 is McCriminal." (laughs)

**RAYALLISON:** "Kelly was pretty funny too. There were about three or four of those guys they were like peas in a pod, Donny Gillen and Kelly and Donny Dietrich and (Mike) Perovich. They would get going and it was pretty funny. The locker room was a pretty fun room at times, and we always had a good time."

**GREGG DRINNAN (Brandon Sun):** "Kelly was a hard worker, and his penalty killing was unbelievable. His anticipation of where the puck was going was second to none. I know it's a cliché, but people talk now about a good stick and he had a really good stick, knocking down pucks and getting into lanes. One of the things people forget about is the injuries, the arm he broke twice and issues with calcification in the healing process. They would have been a better team if he was healthy through the whole season because I would suggest he was the best defensive player on the team. He was also really hard to play against. Chartier was a pest and he didn't mind who knew it or how out in the open it was that he was doing this goofiness. Kelly was the same way but he was a lot slyer. Kelly knew where the referee was all the time and Kelly didn't care who you were or how big you were. He would do anything to win."

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# Playing in his own shadow Wheat Kings finish up record season

BY GREGG DRINNAN

This story originally appeared in the Nov. 15, 1978 edition of the Brandon Sun.

Who is the Brandon Wheat Kings' fifth-leading scorer?

On top, and in fact leading the Western Hockey League, is Brian Propp. Following him, in order, are Ray Allison, Laurie Boschman, Brad McCrimmon and Kelly McCrimmon.

Kelly McCrimmon? That's right. Prior to tonight's game with the visiting Lethbridge Broncos, the younger of the McCrimmon brothers had 12 goals and 14 assists, for 26 points, in the club's 19 games.

Admittedly, those figures are nothing fantastic in this era of high-scoring junior hockey. But, when you listen to Wheat Kings' coach Dunc McCallum you realize just how fine a season the 18-year-old rookie rightwinger is having.

"A year ago at training camp (1977), Kelly might have had a hard time making the Travellers," McCallum said, referring to Brandon's entry in the Manitoba Junior League.

Wheat Kings' general manager Jack Brockest agreed. "The difference between Kelly in training camp last year and this year was like night and day."

McCrimmon came to Wheat Kings' 1977 training camp after finishing the prior season with the Centennial Cup winning Prince Albert Raiders of the Saskatchewan Junior League. He realized he wasn't all that impressive, so he returned to the Terry Simpson-coached Raiders with his mind set on improving.

"I worked hard last year," offered McCrimmon, who carries 150 pounds on his five-foot-nine frame. "I broke my foot early in the season and improved most from January on. I lifted weights over the summer and put on 10 pounds. In fact, I've gained 15 pounds since I was at camp two years ago."

Raiders gained the finals



Years before becoming head coach, general manager and owner of the Brandon Wheat Kings, Kelly McCrimmon was a hard-working 18-year-old forward who had the bad luck of breaking his arm twice during the 1978-79 campaign. (Brandon Sun file photo)

of the Centennial Cup again last season and McCrimmon played a big part in the team getting that far. He scored 23 goals over the season, and that included 13 in the playoffs, and it was his post-season play that got him invited back to Wheat Kings' camp.

"We did some checking around on him during the summer," added McCallum, "and people recommended him on his playoff play."

But, don't let the scoring statistics fool you. McCrimmon is not a sniper. He does his best work in the corners, and his 56 minutes in penalties prove he doesn't shy away from the heavy going.

"He's a leader and he wants to win," says McCallum. "He's prepared to sacrifice to get the job done. I'd like to have 19 guys like him."

McCrimmon, meanwhile, has only praise for the two men who have handled his junior career — Simpson and McCallum.

"Simpson was not as aggressive a coach as Dunc is," McCrimmon explained, "but he appreciates people who work hard. I really respect him, as a coach and as a man. But, I really like Dunc."

McCrimmon enjoys playing for McCallum so much that he says the main reason he came to Brandon was for "Dunc's

coaching."

"It's nice to be playing with Brad," said McCrimmon, adding that he and his brother, who work a farm near Plenty, Sask., together in the off-season, are playing alongside each other for the first time in five years. "We were always close as kids and he told me if I worked hard here Dunc would keep me. But, even if I hadn't been on Brandon's list, this is the team I'd have wanted to play for ... and more for Dunc's coaching than just to be with Brad."

Brad, who is 18 months older than Kelly, is likely the WHL's top defenceman and quite probably will be one of the National League's top draft selections when the 1979 draft rolls around. But, Kelly says being known as "Brad's brother" doesn't bother him.

"It's been like that for quite a while," Kelly commented, "so it doesn't matter. I got used to playing in his shadow and it doesn't bother me."

Tonight, when Broncos and Wheat Kings faceoff at 8 o'clock at the Keystone Centre, Kelly will be lined up with veteran centre Dave Stewart and newcomer Dave McDonald. McCallum put this unit together before last Sunday's 7-7 draw in Saskatoon with the Blades and has been pleased with the results. McCrimmon, too, couldn't be happier.

"McDonald has good size and he's aggressive," McCrimmon said. "And he's like me in that he likes playing in the corners. Stewart is a good centreman. He's very smart and good with the puck. Things have worked out well."

McCrimmon, though, realizes he's nowhere near a perfect hockey player. "I have to improve my skating and I would like to put on another 10 pounds," he says.

If he does that, says McCallum "and continues to improve" who knows what the future will hold for Kelly McCrimmon. Maybe even playing in the NHL, alongside brother Brad.

BY PERRY BERGSON

Most seasons are measured simply in wins, losses and ties. The great ones are measured by the record book.

All these years later, the 1978-79 Brandon Wheat Kings (58-5-9) still hold the Western Hockey League mark for most points with 125, and an incredible 49-game unbeaten streak that ran from Feb. 11, 1978 to Dec. 13, 1978.

The closest anyone has come to the points record was in 2008-09 when the Calgary Hitmen went 59-9-3-1 for 122 points, but it's worth noting the league had overtimes and shootouts by then.

In 2004, the Ontario Hockey League's London Knights started the season with a 31-game unbeaten streak, topping Brandon's 29-game mark by two. The Wheat Kings still hold the WHL mark for longest streak to start a season and longest streak overall.

Brandon's record of just five losses is five better than the 1976-77 Wheat Kings and the 1978-79 Portland Winterhawks.

Brandon's two losses at home is tied for second behind the 1973-74 New Westminster Bruins, who were unbeaten. The Wheat Kings' 17-game unbeaten streak on the road was broken in 1999-2000 by the Hitmen, who went 18 games without a loss. They still hold the mark for fewest road losses with just three.

The team's 491 goals is in third all time behind the 1986-87 Kamloops Blazers (496) and 1982-83 Wintners Hawks (495).

The 85 shots they put on net against the Regina Pats on March 12, 1979 in a 14-4 win remains a league high.

Brian Propp set the record for goals (94) and points (194) for a left winger that season — he already had the assists record the year before with 112 — and his 194 points is third in WHL history.

Also, Propp tied Bill Derlago's record of 13 hat tricks in a season, which was eclipsed in

the 1983-84 when Ray Ferraro scored 15. Propp's 16 game-winning goals remains the record.

The two goals Brandon scored six seconds apart on April 24, 1979 in a 13-3 win over the Lethbridge Broncos remains the two quickest markers in WHL playoff history.

Remarkably, in a season they played 104 times, just three teams beat them more than once, the Portland Winterhawks (four times), Saskatoon Blades (three) and Peterborough Petes (twice in overtime). They lost once to the Edmonton Oil Kings, Billings Bighorns, Trois-Rivières Draveurs and Moscow Selects.

Oddly, the team wasn't a huge hit in Brandon. It seems almost unthinkable now but the 1978-79 team didn't do especially well at the box office until late in the season.

**BRUCE PENTON (Brandon Sun):** "They were so good that it hurt the crowds. They were so dominant and so assured of victory at home that I think a lot of people just stayed away. It was such a foregone conclusion that the excitement level was not there, other than if Portland came to town or something like that."

**GREGG DRINNAN (Brandon Sun):** "The one thing people might forget about that season is they didn't draw that well. I don't know if they averaged 2,500. Maybe some late season attendance brought the crowds up but part of that was they were too successful. They went 16-0 against Regina, so you had Regina coming into your building eight times and they weren't going to sell any tickets. They just weren't very good."

**BRUCE PENTON:** "It was shameful I thought at the time but they were just so good that people stayed away. There is no reason there shouldn't have been 4,500, 5,000 people there every game."

» Tomorrow's Sun: The playoffs begin.

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