



## Sabres' Brennan focusing on defense

By John McGourty - NHL.com Staff Writer

It's been an interesting summer for T.J. Brennan, the Buffalo Sabres' defensive prospect from Moorestown, N.J. First, he received a sponsored trip to train in Austria. Then, he gave a fine performance at the Sabres' late June development camp.

"I spent the early summer in Austria, training in Salzburg," Brennan said. "Red Bull sent me over. They have a hockey club and they just wanted me to come over and train and see how I liked it. I gave it a shot and really liked it. It did me a lot of good and I'm in great shape now.

"Then I went to Buffalo for the development camp. I met up again with the guys I know from last year's development camp. I'm back home now in New Jersey and training here for the rest of the summer."

Brennan, 19, will return to Buffalo for training camp in September. Realistically, though, he will return to his junior team which is re-locating to Verdun, Quebec this season. Brennan will be getting a new billet family -- or host family -- and he'll have to greatly improve his French comprehension and speaking in order to be the team leader that he's expected to be.

He will also be working to improve his game in his own end. Brennan is already known to be an excellent offensive defenseman.

"He's an offensive defenseman who flew onto the charts this year," said Sabres' pro scout Jon Christiano. "T.J. has a big shot. His real need is to grow into a better defender by raising his defensive awareness, and thinking like a defensive defenseman in those situations. He just needs more experience. There's another factor: Some of these juniors play half the game so they're jogging out there, economizing their energy so they can play those many minutes.

"He has to become like a lot of kids going from juniors to the professional game. He thinks offense, but you have to be capable defensively. Hopefully, his skating agility and his defensive awareness will improve. He needs to work on his pivoting, his turning to skate backwards, his first couple of steps. Anyone can skate a straight line. Today's game is about wiggling around, making tight turns, skating in a phone booth. You have to be able to maneuver, get a little space and throw a puck on net."



### BUFFALO SABRES 2007-08 SEASON STATS

Category	Rank (Conference)
2007-08 Points	90 (10TH eAst/18TH NHL)
Change from 2006-07	-23
Home Points	46 (10th eAst/23RD NHL)
Away Points	44 (8th eAst/12 NHL)

There's a distinct possibility that Brennan, in time, could become the Sabres' top offensive defenseman and the quarterback of their first power-play unit. There will be several contenders for the job that Brian Campbell held until his trade to San Jose in February.

"I would take it as a compliment if they are grooming me to be the power-play quarterback of the future, but I'm not sure what they have in mind for me just yet," Brennan said. "I do have a lot of confidence that they will develop me in the right way. I will hold up my end and I'm confident they will, too. I know they are dedicated to making me the best I can be, and I'll do my half.

"That contract that Brian Campbell signed with Chicago showed how great he is and how much he was wanted. To be mentioned in the same category is great, but I have a lot to work on. Hopefully, one day I'll be there. I would love to fulfill the Sabres' plans for me."

While most people think Montreal is one of the world's great cities and Newfoundland is a remote rock in the North Atlantic, Brennan found a lot to like in his first two junior seasons with the St. John's Fog Devils.

"It's going to be a shame, having to move to Montreal and not having the same family," Brennan said. "I went out to Newfoundland and had a great billet family that supported me so much. I will always be grateful to Trevo Budgell and Renee Spurrell for what they did for me. They just had a son in November, Jake. I got really close to them. We will keep in touch, and they are coming to New Jersey for a few weeks this summer."

Brennan was your average New Jersey junior-high school athlete who blossomed in both hockey and lacrosse early in high school. He had some lacrosse scholarship offers, but wanted to play hockey in the NHL. One of his Philadelphia-area coaches worked the phones for Brennan until he found an opportunity to play for St. John's.

The Brennan family talked about the isolation of the Newfoundland city and the long period away from friends and family. In the end, Brennan chose the adventure.

"St. John's, that was unbelievable," Brennan said. "I was just turning 17, and it gave me a different route instead of college. Going to Canada -- especially St. John's -- that was really out there, but that was what I wanted to do. I will do whatever it takes to make it to the National Hockey League and play for the Buffalo Sabres.

"The guys on the team were great. We had a lot of local players, so we got to learn a lot about Newfoundland. It was so great in St. John's. The people were unbelievable. I did really well there, away from hockey. I finished my senior year in high school in my first season there. After the season, I was able to come back to Moorestown and graduate with my class. That worked out really well. I took university courses last season, a couple of business and economics classes."

The Sabres have only two options with Brennan under the agreement with Canadian Major Juniors. He can stick with the Sabres out of training camp and remain all season, or they can return him to his junior team, in which case he could play up to nine games for the NHL team before returning for the remainder of the junior-team season.

If Brennan is assigned to Verdun, and that looks likely, he could be signed to a professional contract at season's end and play in the American Hockey League or the NHL.

"I'm guessing I'm going to be playing another season of Canadian Major Junior," Brennan said. "Under the rules my only options are to play in Buffalo or Verdun. I'm going to give it my best shot to make the Sabres. More realistically, I'll play one more year of juniors. My ultimate goal is to make it to the NHL, so I want to play where it will do me the most good. If I don't make the Sabres this year, nothing is going to stop me from training really hard and being dedicated to improving my game and my team. If I fall short in September, I'll know what I have to work on and I will get better."

Brennan is solidly built with great athletic ability, and that has helped him overcome the twin handicaps of getting a late start and playing in an area not known until recently for producing good hockey players.

"I didn't start playing until I was 10 or 11 years old," Brennan said. "I had some friends who were playing and I started with the Jaguars, first in Voorhees and then in Evesham. I was born in Willingboro and grew up in Moorestown, went to the Moorestown schools.

"I played five or six years for the Jaguars and my freshman and sophomore seasons for Moorestown High School. I then played my junior year in high school for the Little Flyers and coach Wayne Sands in Aston, Pa. They wouldn't let me play high school, so I just focused on the Little Flyers.

"Playing hockey has really become popular in New Jersey," Brennan said. "It's great to see. I love to see the kid in the middle schools who are coming after us. I just want to see the sport grow here, and I wish there were even more people getting into it.

"It's good to see people at the higher levels in hockey taking us more seriously. We're starting to recognize the scouts. They have been coming to see players like Bobby Ryan and Bobby Sanguinetti and me. They were first-round draft picks and I was the first player in the second round in 2007.

"I think it says a lot of good things about our style of play and the improving level of play. I can tell them that there's a few more guys around here that they need to recognize."