

By CHUCK GORMLEY
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First came Bobby Ryan, a trailblazer from Cherry Hill who in 2005 became the first player from South Jersey taken in the first round of the NHL draft, second overall behind Pittsburgh Penguins sensation Sidney Crosby.

Then came Bobby Sanguinetti, a fleet-footed defenseman from Lumberton who last June was taken 21st overall by the New York Rangers.

Now comes T.J. Brennan, a 17-year-old defenseman from Moorestown who is chasing his dream as a rookie member of the St. John's Fog Devils of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League.

"Some kids are dead serious about playing in the NHL and T.J. is one of them," said Brad Dobbin, president of the Fog Devils. "He is kind of raw, but he has a tremendous upside. He absolutely is an NHL prospect."

In less than two years Brennan has gone from playing club hockey at the Igloo in Mount Laurel to playing in the same junior league that produced Mario Lemieux and Simon Gagne. Last month, the Central Scouting Bureau rated Brennan, whose slapshot has been clocked at 97 mph, as the Quebec League's top defensive prospect eligible for the NHL's 2007 draft.

"He definitely has an NHL shot," said Fog Devils coach Real Paiement. "And he has NHL talent. He's starting to play with an edge and if he improves on his positional play, he's got a good shot at it."

The fourth of Terry and Kim Brennan's five children, T.J. began playing street and roller hockey on a sport court in his Moorestown backyard, often imitating moves by Eric Lindros.

At the age of 10 he asked his parents if he could play ice hockey, which would require all of them to be up before 5 a.m. "If we were getting up at 5 a.m. we wanted to make sure it was something he wanted to do," Terry Brennan said, "because with five kids it certainly was something we didn't want to do." T.J. Brennan fell in love with the sport and after a year playing for former

Flyers goaltender John Vanbiesbrouck, who was coaching his son Ben at the Medford Ice Arena, Brennan played in-house hockey with the Mount Laurel Jaguars. Brennan was good enough to play up an age group throughout his three years in the Jaguars program but it was not until his team went to the district finals under coach John Donahue in 2005 that he was noticed by Little Flyers junior elite coach Wayne Sands. Terry Brennan said he would commit to driving his 16-year-old son back and forth to Aston, Pa., but only if T.J. played on the A team. T.J. made the team and got his first real break when he was spotted by Fog Devils scout Bob Johnson during a tournament in Montreal last June. Johnson stunned the Brennans by inviting T.J. to participate in a tryout camp in August. "Our first question was, 'Who are the Fog Devils?'" Kim Brennan said. "Our second was, 'Where's St. John's?'"

The answer, of course, is Newfoundland, a large island off the southeast coast of Canada. "If you're not looking for Newfoundland on a map," Terry Brennan said, "you don't know where it is."

Finding St. John's, the Brennans learned, is a lot easier than getting there. By car, it requires a 15-hour, 1,000-mile drive to Halifax, Nova Scotia; a five-hour ferry ride to Newfoundland; and a five-hour drive to St. John's. By air, it's a \$630 round-trip, direct flight out of Newark.

With that in mind, the Brennans spent the next month weighing their son's dream of playing the highest level of junior hockey against the risk of forgoing his senior year at Moorestown High School and losing NCAA Division I eligibility.

"Honestly, as parents we were thinking he would go to college and get an education," Kim Brennan said, noting the interest her son received from several college lacrosse and hockey coaches. "But we've always taught our kids to follow their dreams." Fog Devils president Brad Dobbin said he was inundated with questions from the Brennans, who wanted to know everything from where T.J. would attend high school to where, and with whom, he would live.

"Sometimes the NCAA will try to pollute the waters by saying kids can't get an education in Canada," Dobbin said. Dobbin pointed out that Quebec League players are eligible for college scholarships and can redeem them after their junior careers, and that his club had a reputation for providing only the best billet families. Brennan, who spent much of his summer working out with Ryan, asked Ryan's advice on which route he should take. Ryan, a teammate of Sanguinetti on the Owen Sound Attack of the Ontario League, advised him to follow in his footsteps. "He told me how great it was and how he didn't regret his decision," T.J.

Brennan said. "In the end, what I wanted was to go to the NHL. My dream has always been to go as far as I can go." So the Brennans packed their bags and flew to St. John's, where Brennan began his 10-day tryout on Aug. 16.

The Fog Devils had six spots to fill on their 22-man roster, three of them on defense. Brennan was one of 23 defensemen vying for three roster spots. "I told him we weren't just going for the experience," Terry Brennan said. "We're going to make the team." On his second day on the ice, Brennan was sticked in the face by a teammate and suffered a broken nose despite the protection of a shield. A few stitches and a few minutes later he was back on the ice.

"I thought, 'Let's get him out of here,'" Kim Brennan said. "We had no idea what hockey really was. In Canada they practically go from the womb to the ice."

On the eighth day of the tryout camp, Paiement, the Fog Devils coach, said he had seen enough and told the Brennans T.J. had made the team. Now, they said, came the most difficult part of their trip. Leaving.

In Canadian major junior hockey most teenage players live with billet families and are enrolled in Canadian high schools. The Fog Devils placed Brennan with Renee Spurrell and Trevor Budgell and enrolled him in Gonzaga High School, which has an enrollment of 400 students, about 800 fewer than Moorestown High School.

"As a mother you're concerned about where he'd be living," Kim Brennan said. "But they are a wonderful couple. They love him. They go to his games.

She's a phenomenal cook. As a mother that made me feel great."

Asked how well Spurrell cooks, T.J. Brennan said, "Oh, man, she's the best - well, second-best. I can't knock my mom."

Before they left St. John's Kim Brennan said the Fog Devils scout warned them their son might get homesick and suggested occasional visits. So every three weeks T.J. has received visits from at least one of his family members, coaches or friends.

"I've been real close to my family my whole life, so leaving them is huge," T.J. said.

The separation has been especially difficult for Brennan and his father, who went from having long conversations on car rides to and from hockey rinks, to shorter onversations over the phone.

"It was tough, really tough," Terry Brennan said. "Other people would tell Terry what he wanted to hear. He could always count on me to tell him the truth." "My dad has always been there for me," T.J. said. "He's not just my dad, he's my best friend. You could hear the tears on both ends of the phone. We don't like to show it, but we'd get pretty emotional."

As a senior at Gonzaga, Brennan takes four classes a day from 9 a.m. until noon, then practices with the Fog Devils at 2 p.m. The Quebec League's 70-game season runs from Sept. 15 through March 18 and Moorestown High School has agreed to let Brennan attend his senior prom and graduate with his class in June.

Brennan, who will be home this week to celebrate Christmas with his family, said it's hard to fathom how he could go from being a relative unknown in Moorestown to being recognized around his school and around St. John's as a hockey celebrity. "It was nerve racking going from 50 fans (in Mount Laurel) to 5,000, but the fans here are great," he said. "The younger kids look up to you. It's hard to get that in your head, that you're someone's idol. I've always looked up to NHL players and now these kids are looking up to me."

T.J. Brennan profile

Age: 17

Birthdate: April 3, 1989

Hometown: Moorestown

Family: Parents, Terry and Kim; sisters Cortney, 23, Katie, 22, Alexis, 19; brother, Shane, 15

Ht/Wt: 6-1, 202

Team: St. John's Fog Devils

League: Quebec Major Junior Hockey League

Position: Defense

Shoots: Left

Scouting report: Offensive defenseman who can play physical. Hard, accurate shot (97 mph).

Accomplishments: Named to South Jersey High School Ice Hockey League All-Freshman Team at Moorestown High School in 2003-04. Named SJHSIHL Breakout Player of the Year in 2004-05.

Favorite players growing up: Dan McGillis, Chris Pronger, Bryan McCabe