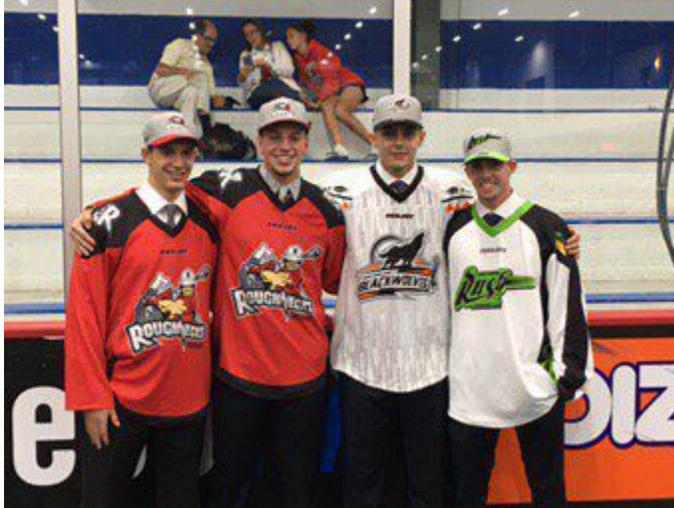


NLL Taps Into Barrie JR. A Talent Pool



DAVID MANN, Special to the Examiner
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When the Barrie Lakeshores went into rebuild mode halfway through their Junior 'A' lacrosse season, they knew the players they were giving up were talented.

The National Lacrosse League (NLL) draft confirmed it.

Former Lakeshores Nick Chaykowsky, Liam Patton and Steph Charbonneau all heard their names called at the Toronto Rock Athletic Centre earlier this week.

Chaykowsky was drafted 17th overall in the second round by the New England Black Wolves, followed by Patton in the third round (26th overall) to the Calgary Roughnecks and Charbonneau at 45th overall, also by the Roughnecks.

"I'm most excited about playing the best lacrosse in the world if I get the opportunity to crack a lineup," said Chaykowsky, who grew up in Bradford.

Chaykowsky improved his draft ranking significantly in the latter half of his Junior 'A' season.

"I feel like this summer I took more of a charge," said the Nipissing University student. "This year, what pushed me a little more is I was telling myself that 'you're the guy, go do it'. I think it was a little bit of more of this; confidence, go out with a bang."

Once traded to the New Westminster Salmon Bellies, the offensively gifted forward thrived. His 14 goals and 25 points were the best and second best totals respectively in the British Columbia playoffs.

Lakeshores general manager Mike Kloepfer described Chaykowsky as a power forward who can play transition and also bring “great character” to any lineup.

“He’s skilled, he’s big and he’s strong,” Kloepfer said. “I think it’s a big jump to go the National Lacrosse League, but I think he can find his way there.”

Chaykowsky’s experience includes Newmarket minor lacrosse, Nipissing field lacrosse, Oshawa Outlaws arena lacrosse, as well as the Lakeshores and the Salmon Bellies.

For Patton, his reaction on Monday’s draft night reflects that of many athletes.

“It was just super surreal,” said the defender. “Every time he was about to call out the next pick a few guys before me, I was just hoping it was mine.

“And then it was and walking up to the stage and wearing the hat they give you, it was kind of just like one big blur.”

Each of the former Lakeshores who were drafted play lacrosse considerably differently.

Patton’s versatility makes him an especially dangerous player.

“Liam is a big, strong, young guy, primarily a defensive guy,” Kloepfer said. “He’s good on faceoffs, but he’s just a big, strong defender who can play that role and shut down the offensive players on the other team.”

Patton will no longer be simply watching his favourite Roughnecks on TV, but playing with them at training camp.

“There’s the Carnegie brothers who have been on the team for a while. There’s Tyson Bell, who cracked the roster a couple years ago and I got to play junior against,” said Patton, who finished Junior ‘A’ with the Okotoks Raiders.

Being drafted by Calgary is extra sentimental for Patton beyond just the Roughnecks players he looks up to. Growing up with a father in the military, he lived in a few different cities before his family settled down in Barrie in his early teens.

But it was in Edmonton where Patton first played lacrosse at around nine years old.

“I thought that was really cool to finish my junior career kind of where I started playing lacrosse in Alberta, and then getting drafted to Calgary is a whole other surreal thing,” said Patton, a University of Guelph student. “It’s pretty crazy how full circle it feels.”

The final player with Barrie ties to get drafted was Steph Charbonneau, a left-handed defender.

Charbonneau’s journey to Calgary is anything but ordinary for most lacrosse players. He grew up in Quebec, where the sport is not nearly as popular as it is in pockets of Ontario.

“He came with us a few years back and we worked with him in the off-seasons,” Kloepfer said. “He just kept getting better and better and he just loves to play. He’s got that ‘it’ factor. He already works like a professional.”

Charbonneau closed his Junior 'A' career as a member of the Port Coquitlam Saints in B.C. He was the closest of any of the three players to winning a Minto Cup. The Saints lost in the Junior 'A' lacrosse final to Six Nations.

Experiences like that will propel him forward, as will his time with the Lakeshores.

"I owe so much to the team and to the organization; the teammates become my brothers," said Charbonneau, who lives in Barrie and attends Lakehead University in Orillia.

Playing in the NLL is primarily limited to weekends and most players have full-time jobs or, like the three former Lakeshores, are still in school. Each team flies their players out to practices and games.

Entry-level salaries start around \$10 000 US for NLL players.

"I mean, it may not be much, but you're getting paid to do what you love," Charbonneau said. "It's a step up from junior where you don't get paid at all."

NLL team training camp starts in late October, with the season beginning in early December.

Chaykowsky, Patton and Charbonneau will also all be entering the Senior 'A' lacrosse draft for summer league.

"You kind of take every opportunity you can to play lacrosse," Charbonneau said.