

DYNAMIC DUO

Stephane Veilleux and Pierre-Marc Bouchard couldn't be more different when it comes to how they play the game. Of course, that's about the only thing these two best friends don't have in common.

BY REBECCA FINLAY

Photographs by Bruce Kluckhohn

ONE FLOATS LIKE A BUTTERFLY, THE OTHER STINGS LIKE A BEE. Champion heavyweight boxer Muhammad Ali knew the key to athletic excellence, and on any given game day, these two would make him proud. One glides down the ice, with slick stickhandling that often leaves the league's finest defensemen and goaltenders in a deeked-out stupor. The other is a hard-hitting maverick on skates, driving the net, killing penalties and is one of the top checkers in the game. Sit down with Quebec, Canada, natives Pierre-Marc Bouchard and Stephane Veilleux, and their friendship is immediately apparent. Ask one a question, and the other may jump in to answer on his behalf – usually sparking laughter and a nod in agreement.

Across the State of Hockey, Wild fans have come to depend on Bouchard, 23, and Veilleux, 26, for steady play and consistent performance. Night after night, they take the ice ready and willing to face any challenge that crosses their path.

In a job that requires its employees to spend a great deal of time away from family and loved ones, it always helps to have a friend by your side. "Steph is my best buddy on the team," Bouchard admits with a smile, "We are not roommates [on the road]

though, but it's a good thing, you know? We only see the best of each other this way."

As they joke, it is easy to see that these two enjoy spending time together. Veilleux who grew up in St. Georges de Beauce, Quebec, and Bouchard,

FRENCH CONNECTION Since both Wild forwards hail from Quebec, they share a similar upbringing.



from Sherbrooke, Quebec, have more in common than their geographic upbringing and witty banter accentuated by a French-Canadian accent. Though their on-ice styles may clash, similar backgrounds helped form their friendship. “My dad was a coach, and outside of our house in St. Georges he built a rink and he taught me how to skate and how to dribble the puck,” Veilleux recalls.

Bouchard adds, “My dad played in Junior hockey until he got hurt and stopped playing. Then he coached midget hockey. My younger brother, Francois, is 19, and is playing in Junior [hockey] right now.” Before he could finish, Veilleux jumps in, “He got drafted.”

Bouchard’s brother, drafted by the Washington Capitals in 2006, was also the influence behind his now-fa-

mous “spin-o-rama” shootout move last season that stunned the Xcel Energy Center crowd, not to mention Blackhawks goalie Nikolai Khabibulin.

“The story about that move is actually it’s my younger brother,” Bouchard admits with modesty, “The summer before I did that [the spin-o-rama] he came to me and said, ‘Brother, I have a move for you,’ and I said, ‘OK, go ahead,’ so he goes on the goalie and does it. I thought it was pretty good. So I kept practicing it, and I came to Training Camp and did it just for fun when we were doing shootouts with the guys. Then during that game Jacques gave me the OK to do it, so I just went and did it—and it worked! I was pretty happy about it...but I’ll have to work on something else now.”

Bouchard has been giving us a taste of his abilities so far, leading the team in points as of late November. Veilleux has also found his touch, with three goals and one assist. On this particular day, Veilleux is sporting a black eye and a bruised face—remains from a freak accident during a practice that left him with a broken cheekbone.

It’s always fun to score when you don’t score 20 or 30 goals a year,” Veilleux said. “It’s always exciting to get one every once in a while. I’ve been getting into a little bad luck with injuries the past two years, with my nose [last season] and then my cheekbone this year. It’s tough, but I’m always involved in the traffic and the corners. There’s a reason why it happens.”

Veilleux and Bouchard have re-

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mained strong, despite a string of more serious injuries that have sidelined several of their teammates. "It's not easy when you're missing some players with injuries," Bouchard said. "But we just try to do more things and work harder. We know what we can do, but we just try to do it better than usual."

It is their pride in each other's talents and abilities paired with their humbling modesty that makes this dynamic duo unique. Although the two display distinctively different styles on the ice, off the ice they share many interests, including idolizing Wayne Gretzky, highly competitive PlayStation Portable (PSP) duels on the team plane, and a passion for ping-pong.

"In high school, I'd skip lunch and run as fast as I could because we only had five [ping-pong] tables in the school," Veilleux recalls with a laugh,

"Then I'd go back to my first class in the afternoon all sweaty after an hour of playing ping-pong."

Today, their ping-pong games have become a locker room league of their own. At times, Veilleux even sports an all-white tennis-style outfit for the match-up. "He puts it on and thinks he's [tennis pro] Andy Roddick," said Bouchard with a smirk. Are they competitive against each other? "Oh yeah," Veilleux said. "Maybe too much sometimes," Bouchard confirms.

It is their competitive nature that has helped them achieve success in the NHL. As Bouchard enters his fifth full season, and Veilleux his third, they both continue to be awe-struck by their accomplishments.

"I'm sure it's the same for Steph," Bouchard said, "it's like you dream about it to play in the NHL and then sometimes you go through warmups and you start looking at the other

lineups, and you're playing guys like [Joe] Sakic, [Chris] Chelios, [Steve] Yzerman, [Sergei] Fedorov, [Mario] Lemieux, all the great players you were watching on TV and now you have a chance to play against them in the same league, it's pretty impressive."

As a new year approaches, they took a moment to share their resolutions.

"Personally, I would like to keep going the same way that I'm playing right now and I would like to score between 10 and 15 goals," said Veilleux, "If it happens, that would be awesome. And it would be nice to go really far in the Playoffs and to compete for the Stanley Cup. That would be unbelievable."

"I would like to keep improving year after year and every season," said Bouchard. "And for the team, it's the same as Steph's, to get into the Playoffs and have a chance to win the Cup."

Although they would like to spend the holidays with family, they realize that a demanding schedule this year makes that a challenge.

"I would like to go back home to see my parents," said Veilleux, "but it would be difficult." "Yeah, the holidays are tough," Bouchard admits, then adds with a laugh,

"Looks like I might be spending Christmas with my good friend Steph."

And with a smile, Veilleux nods in agreement. •

WASTE MANAGEMENT AD