



BRUNO'S BACK

There are plenty of new faces for Wild fans to check out as the 2008-09 season begins, and a familiar one as well, as Andrew Brunette returns to the State of Hockey

BY REBECCA FINLAY

Photographs by Bruce Kluckhohn

BEST KNOWN FOR HIS GAME 7, OVERTIME-WINNING SHOT seen 'round the State of Hockey back in 2003, Andrew Brunette and a makeshift team comprised of scrappy unknowns defeated a hockey Goliath known as the Colorado Avalanche. His shot at the Pepsi Center from a nifty pass from Sergei Zholtok sailed by Hall of Fame Goaltender Patrick Roy – sending the Avs to the golf course, Roy to retirement and the Wild to the Western Conference Semifinals.

The Team of 18,000 celebrated on that late April night, jumping from their chairs and cheering on a team that defied the odds and warmed our hearts by melting the Avalanche. For in that moment, it wasn't about the Cup,

it was about passion. The Wild wanted it more and battled back from a three-games-to-one game deficit to prove it.

Brunette's goal and arm-raising celebration became legendary as friends, fans and co-workers retold the

story with disbelief around watercoolers and dinner tables from the Iron Range to the Iowa border.

"Everyone [on the team] was a part of that run," Brunette, now 35, recalls with a smile. "It was a fun deal to be



a part of — being the underdogs and being down three games in a couple of series like that. But being with that group is what made it the most fun.”

Let go as a free agent during the work stoppage and acquired by the very team he helped eliminate, Brunette joined the Avs, a decision Wild General Manager Doug Risebrough later referred to as a mistake.

“I was disappointed to leave,” said Brunette. “I was excited about the team coming into the next year, and leaving left a sour taste in my mouth. But you get over those things, and every time I came to this city, I kind of missed it — the playoffs, the atmosphere, the fans and the team. It’s going to be a good team for a long time and as time wore on, you’d come here and want to

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be back.”

As Andrew Brunette strolled out of the locker room for our interview following an afternoon practice, he couldn’t look more at home in Minnesota.

Although he’s spent the past three seasons honing his skills in Colorado, one look at his well-worn Minnesota

Twins baseball cap says he’s back where he belongs.

“I got my old locker stall and it was a little bit different to come back, but, at the same time, it was an easier transition knowing some of the guys and the training staff and coaching staff. It was easier to step into this locker room than any other locker room in the league.”

Even teammate James Sheppard, who was just 14-years-old and still dreaming of playing in the NHL when Brunette last played with the Wild, offered to give his number 15 back upon his return.

“He [Sheppard] was pretty good, he decided he was going to switch to number 51 and let me have my number [15]. You know, we haven’t really dis-

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cussed what the payback is going to be yet," Brunette said with a laugh, "but he's pretty generous to do that."

Being back in the Wild uniform is a treat for Brunette, and he's even found time to flex his acting muscles, starring in a Minnesota Wild commercial that spoofs getting his old jersey number back, which will be aired during local Wild games and is posted on WildTV at wild.com.

"That [the commercial shoot] was embarrassing," Brunette said with a chuckle. "But nobody talked me into it, they asked me about it and I thought it was kind of funny. It was fun, and I had fun doing it...we had a lot of laughs."

Glancing around the locker room at the many new and some familiar faces, Brunette realizes that he'll now be looked at as a leader and role model on the team.

"I was joking that I kind of got old quick here, having left and then come back," Brunette said. "But I'm just go-

"I feel like both a returning veteran and a new guy. But honestly, it feels like I never really left."

ing to be myself and do the things I've always done."

And what he's always done is provide a solid performance on the ice. From 2001-04 with the Wild, Brunette tallied 164 points (54 goals, 110 assists) in 245 games. Ranking third on the team's all-time assist list, he is fifth in points and seventh in goals.

With Colorado in 2007-08, the 6-foot-1, 212-pound native of Sudbury, Ont., totaled 59 points (19 goals, 40 assists) in 82 games. He's also the NHL's active leader in consecutive games played with 453.



The Wild and the Team of 18,000 has welcomed him back, and Brunette has responded with a strong preseason performance both in the Xcel Energy Center and on the road.

"I think the fans welcome everybody here, not just an individual" Brunette said. "To play in front of them is a treat. When you come back and play an exhibition game and everyone stands up, it just reminds you how great these fans are."

Although many of the names have changed above the lockers, the strong work ethic, pride and passion of the team and coaching staff remains.

"Jacques is Jacques. He coached me for three years, and if I didn't enjoy him, I wouldn't have come back. He's an intelligent hockey man," said Brunette. "As for the new teammates, even though I haven't played with some of them before, it feels like I've played with them for a long time – and obviously with Gaby [Marian Gaborik], Schultz [Nick Schultz], Butchy [Pierre-Marc Bouchard] and [Stephane] Veilleux, some of them were a part of that '03 run, so it was kind of like nothing's changed."

In a taste of nostalgia, the Wild is starting the 2008-09 season with another scrappy group that may not be all that familiar to the Team of 18,000 just yet. With Brunette back in the lineup, those who remember the magic of 2003 can't help but feel the same flag-waving excitement in the air.

"I feel like both a returning veteran and a new guy," said Brunette with a smile, "but honestly, it feels like I never really left." •