



BEHIND THE MASK

On June 1, 2006, the signing of Niklas Backstrom barely made the sports page in the Twin Cities. More than a year later, the Helsinki, Finland native has made his presence felt in the National Hockey League.

BY REBECCA FINLAY

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ERVES OF STEEL Backstrom knows pressure. He had plenty of it playing back home and against the Ducks in last year's

Crouched down, he watches. A bead of sweat rolls the length of his cheek as he shifts slightly in anticipation. Focused, he hears no outside noise. There is nothing but him and the puck. Behind the mask, each split-second decision becomes the difference between winning and losing. It all comes down to him. And he wouldn't have it any other way.

In his presence, one immediately notices that Minnesota Wild goaltender Niklas Backstrom has a natural calming effect. Perhaps it's his careful English accentuated by a thick Finnish accent, or his modest yet steadfast confidence in his ability and his team. At 29 years old, his unwavering demeanor is the driving force behind the Wild's success. And a

main reason he shared the William M. Jennings trophy in his first NHL season with Manny Fernandez, allowing a league-low 191 goals against.

Like his grandfather and father before him, the Helsinki, Finland native was drawn to the pipes. The oldest of three children, he grew up in a hockey family. "I started playing hockey at age 6, and they didn't have goalies in

the skating school I was in. But even then, I was always in the crease laying down and trying to save pucks," Backstrom remembers with a laugh, "Even when we used to play outside on the pond, I was always in the net."

And it was in the net that Backstrom stretched, slid and saved his way to the National level, representing his home country of Finland on both junior and Olympic stages. For over a decade, Backstrom worked on improving his game, and as he matured, there were times when he wondered if he'd ever be noticed by NHL scouts.

"You have dreams," Backstrom said. "When I was with the Junior Na-

BACK STOP Backstrom took the NHL by storm last year winning the MBNA Roger Crozier Saving Grace Award and a share of the William M. Jennings Trophy.



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adjust to life overseas.

Having only visited the United States a couple of times on vacation, Backstrom had never been to Minnesota prior to joining the Wild.

"It's a lot like back home [in Finland]," Backstrom said, "Great nature, four seasons and nice people here. It was an easy change for me. I'm used to the cold winters and snow."

Of course, Backstrom had plenty of time to adjust. For the first month of the NHL season, Backstrom barely saw time in the crease. With Manny Fernandez firmly in place as the No. 1 goaltender, Backstrom's time in goal was sparse. In fact, Backstrom became the first goaltender in the NHL's

modern era to win his first two games in relief. Doing so on October 7, 2006 against Nashville and November 2, 2006 versus Vancouver.

Once Manny Fernandez went down with a knee injury late in the season, the Wild handed over the duties to Backstrom and was more than equal to the task.

And now hockey-loving households all over the state have embraced Backstrom as a Wild favorite. With cold winters, snow and a new NHL season on the horizon, he remains poised as he enters his second year in the league and first as the team's No. 1 goaltender.

"Goalies grow up with pressure,

only one can play at a time," Backstrom says with a smile. "The only pressure I feel is the pressure I put on myself. I want to win. I want to play well and that's the pressure I put on me. I play hockey because I love it and it's the game I want to play and this is the place I want to be. I don't want to think too much about what other people think. You have to be selfish and think you're doing it for you and your team. If I've done everything as



EVEN-KEEL Backstrom shows very little emotion out on the ice. His goal is to block out everything and everyone and concentrate on stopping the puck.

well as I can — like practice and prepare — then there's nothing else I can do. If I prepare well then I shouldn't feel any pressure."

Preparing both mentally and physically for upcoming games is a staple of life for players in the NHL. Though pre-game traditions are often seen as somewhat unusual, or snickered at as superstition, Backstrom has learned what works best to get his mind in the game.

"I don't know if I would call them superstitions, it's more like a routine I do before the game to get myself ready," Backstrom said. "It's something I've learned through the years to get my mind and body ready for the

Beginner's Luck?

Backstrom wasn't young enough to qualify as a rookie by the NHL's standards but check out how he stacked up against current NHLers in their first years in net:

GOALTENDER	GAA	FIRST YEAR
Niklas Backstrom	1.97	2006-07
Andrew Raycroft	2.05	2003-04
Evgeni Nabokov	2.19	2000-01
Henrik Lundqvist	2.24	2005-06
Martin Brodeur	2.40	1993-94
Martin Biron	2.42	1999-00
Roberto Luongo	2.44	2000-01
Jean-Sebastien Aubin	2.58	1999-00
Ryan Miller	2.60	2005-06
Chris Osgood	2.86	1993-94

games. It's not like if I miss something that I'm afraid it's going to be bad [luck], it's more like a routine I know I need to do to be ready for the games. Encounter Backstrom prior to a game and you may find him preparing. Jogging slowly through the cavernous lower halls of Xcel Energy Center, he appears to be in his own world. When asked about his jog, he laughs and attempts to explain.

"Of course before the game I like to go outside the locker room for a jog," Backstrom said. "I like to get some sweat and go through some mental stuff to help with my instincts for the game."

The routine and jog appear to work. Last season he averaged 1.97 goals against in 41 games with a save per-

centage of .929. His ability to remain focused on the ice is what puts fear into the league's best sharp-shooters.

"I know when I'm focused, I'm not seeing or hearing anything else. The puck is the only thing I can see. I try to put everything else outside. You try to aim for where the only thing is you and the puck, and that's the only thing you care about."

As his family back in Finland keeps careful watch of his NHL career through Internet stories and broadcasts, Backstrom relies on their support even though the time difference makes it difficult for them to catch many of his games.

"I get some great help from my family," Backstrom said. "They know how the game goes and I'm in touch

with them every day. Not so much technical help but about the life of a goaltender. They know how it is."

Half-way around the world from the country he calls home, Backstrom has found a new home with 18,000 supportive family members at Xcel Energy Center. His NHL dream has become a reality and now he's focusing on his future with the Wild.

"I always try to think like the team and think for us as a team," Backstrom said with calm assurance. "The first goal is to get a playoff spot. It's a long way away, but we have to play really well. Every time you go out you want to play the best hockey and that's what I'm aiming for — to be the best goalie I'll ever be." ★



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