

Scott Andrews

# Chasing a Dream

The Portland Pirates are the final step before hockey's ultimate goal. Four players talk about how this team shaped their destinies.

Since the Portland Pirates' first game in October, 1993, more than 500 men have donned the team's red, silver, black and white jerseys. A handful of these played only a few games and represent minor footnotes in the franchise record book, while a select number have more than 200 games

Once a Pirate always a Pirate (from top): Matt Lickby, Peter Romano, Kent Hull, and Olaf Kolzig.

beside their names.

The Pirates have produced many fan favorites. A few players moved up beyond the Pirates and the American Hockey League to become impact players at the highest level of all: the National Hockey League.

It's all part of Portland's rich, minor-league hockey history. The

Maine Mariners, the minor league affiliate of the Philadelphia Flyers, first skated in October, 1977. In their inaugural season, the Mariners won the 1978 Calder Cup, the trophy awarded to the AHL's championship team. They repeated that feat twice, in 1979 and 1984.

The Portland Pirates, the farm club of the NHL Washington Capitals, also won the cup in their first season, 1993-94, then battled their way back to the championship final two years later.

The 1977-78 Mariners helped save the acrimonious political wounds that had torn apart Cumberland County over the issue of constructing and financing the \$8 million Civic Center. "That was pretty much a defining moment; it pretty much erased all the contentiousness," remembers Steve Crane, the Civic Center's general

manager. "Hockey really unified the public in support of this facility."

Fast forward to the 1993-94 season. After years of decline, the Mariners had departed in 1992. In the summer of 1993, Tom Ebright, owner of the Baltimore Skipjacks, transferred his franchise and re-established it with a new name: The Portland Pirates.

By May, 1994, the Pirates were contending for the Calder Cup before standing-room-only crowds at the Civic Center. A ticker-tape parade down Congress Street followed the Pirates' triumph.

Although he's now a megastar goalie for the Washington Capitals, former Pirates' goalie Olaf Kolzig fondly remembers the tumultuous cheers and adulation of that 1994 season finale: "The fan support was unbelievable. It was just a great atmosphere to play hockey in. It's

"And then you have a great game and you start thinking, 'okay, when are they going to call me up?'"

still one of the great moments of my life."

In this 10th year of the Portland Pirates, *Port City Life* has selected four faces to represent the many different facets of the franchise's splendid history and future promise. As part of the celebration, the AHL Dodge All-Star Classic and Skills Competition will be held in Portland Feb. 2-3.

## Calder Cup playoff hero

Six-foot-three-inch Olaf Kolzig stood between the pipes for some of the biggest games in Portland Pirates history, including all 12 wins in the victorious 1994 Calder Cup playoff series.

Following his Portland days, Kolzig became the Washington Capitals' No. 1 goalie, winning the 2000 Vezina Trophy as the NHL's best.

Ten seasons earlier, Kolzig's perspective was far different. As the

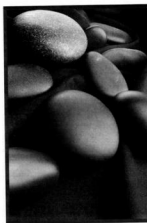
Capitals' No. 1 draft pick in 1989, the 19-year-old enjoyed his first whiff of NHL experience that fall. But after two early losses, the Caps sent him down; five long years passed before he returned.

Those were growing years, recalls Kolzig, who notes that the American Hockey League is a perfect place for talented players to develop their skills and grow mentally. "It's a great place to play; the competition's great and the pace of play is great," says Kolzig.

"There's a maturing process that takes place when you're in the minors," Kolzig adds. "There's a lot more pressure, I think, down in the minors. If you have a bad night, you automatically think the big team is taking notice and that you're not going to get a call-up."

"And then all of a sudden, you have a great game and you start thinking 'Okay, when are they going to call me up?' Sometimes you start

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playing mind games with yourself, your highs are too high and your lows are too low."

That 1993-1994 championship season in Portland was Kolzig's final year in the minors. "Portland is one of the best cities I've played in," he remembers. "The fans there were as big a part of our winning that year as the players were."

Portland and the American Hockey League remain fond memories for Kolzig — memories he shares with younger players who are still working up through the ranks.

"Those are the best years of your life," he says. "You make good friends and you become closer as a team. And when you do make the NHL, you really appreciate where you're at."

### A leader on and off the ice

No player has ever been more closely identified with the Portland Pirates than the man who wore jersey No. 10: Kent Hulst, the long-time team captain. Now retired as an active player, hockey is still his life, and greater Portland is his adopted home.

On the ice, the Pirates' record book begins to tell Hulst's story. He is the club's all-time leader in several key categories: total games played (473), playoff games (67), total goals (147), playoff goals (22), game-winning goals (19) and total points (360). Among his many awards and honors, Hulst was captain of the 2001 Canadian All-Stars and twice voted "Players' Player."

No goal had a bigger impact than Hulst's dramatic game-winner in a nail-biting double overtime match in the 1994 Calder Cup finals. "I was fortunate to be in the right place at the right time," Hulst remembers. "Mike Boback slid it out to me and I popped it in."

What's perhaps most surprising

about Hulst's record is what's not there: He's never played one game in the National Hockey League.

Now retired, Hulst currently coaches at North Yarmouth Academy, directs the Travis Roy Ice Arena and runs a summer youth hockey camp. He and wife Tammy have lived in Scarborough for nearly ten years. Nine-year-old son Colin plays with Casco Bay Youth Hockey and five-year-old daughter Alyssa is starting Break the Ice.

Canadian-born Hulst has made a positive impact on Maine. As an active player, he was a leader in getting his teammates involved in the community, especially in programs targeted at children.

"We're professional athletes, and we have that ability to draw people in to raise money for charities," says Hulst. "And a lot of guys take that personally and want to get out and raise money for kids who are less fortunate."

On October 27, Hulst returned to the Civic Center to receive a standing ovation as the 2002 inductee into the Portland Pirates Hall of Fame, a well-deserved honor bestowed by vote of deeply appreciative Maine hockey fans.

### High-scoring veteran

Veteran right wing Peter Ferraro is a natural sparkplug who energizes teammates and radiates enthusiasm. The feisty forward was the Pirates' leading scorer last year, finishing tied in goals (21), total points (58) and tops for first in assists (37).

Today's top-ranked status down in the minor leagues would have seemed improbable 10 winters ago when Ferraro, a freshman at the University of Maine, first burst upon the national hockey scene with twin brother Chris as pivotal members of the Black Bears' 1993 collegiate championship squad.

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Other early career highlights included the Olympics and a No. 1 draft pick of the New York Rangers.

But despite formidable talents and aggressive attitude, Ferraro never made much impact at the National Hockey League level, where four different clubs have limited his ice time and sometimes relegated him to fourth-line status.

Down one level, Ferraro's scoring prowess led the Providence Bruins to the 1999 Calder Cup. Released by the Bruins organization, he and brother Chris were professionally reunited when the Washington Capitals signed the pair and sent them to Portland a year ago.

"It has been a blessing for my brother and I to be professional hockey players," comments Ferraro. "Ever since we were six years old, our main goal has been to play in the National Hockey League. We've had a taste of it, a glimpse of it, and it's been great."

Ferraro retains the passion of youth, tempered by realism drawn from long experience. He's not about to quit as long as playing is fun and there's a realistic chance of another shot at the highest level. And that requires a total effort in Portland.

"We're 29 years old," says Ferraro. "But we're competitors, and we will never lose sight of our ultimate goal."

#### Maine native has high hopes

The first day six-year-old Matt Libby played in Biddeford Youth Hockey, he fell repeatedly and hated the game. But the youngster's skating skills and attitude improved the second time his parents took him to the Biddeford Ice Arena. By the time he entered Thornton Academy eight years later, Libby ranked among Maine's top high school hockey players.

About that time Libby started angling toward a professional career. After two seasons of semi-pro for two teams, he won a scholarship to Hockey East powerhouse Providence College, where he graduated with both athletic and academic honors. "I always took pride in my education, and that was one of my goals as well as competing a high level of hockey," he says.

Last year Libby played 70 games on professional tryout agreements for four minor league clubs. On the first day of Portland's 2002-2003 season, the 24-year-old inked his latest short-term contract. He also became the first Maine native to play for the Pirates since 1994.

"This ruggedly handsome, 6-foot-1-inch, 200-pound defenseman brought a determined work ethic and positive attitude that quickly won the respect of his teammates, and he started this season with good numbers."

His goal for 2002-2003 is modest and direct. "My plan is to work hard, learn as much as I can, get as much ice time as I can and to become a productive player," Libby explains. "My short term goal is to stick here in Portland and maybe get some guys in Washington to take an interest in me. If I play all year in Portland, I'll be tremendously happy with that."

Libby won't speculate on a National Hockey League career, but he's already thinking beyond his playing days. With an honors degree in business management, Libby admits that a lifetime career as a hockey executive might someday suit him just as well as a Pirates uniform.

But for today, Libby is thrilled to be living the dream of all aspiring young athletes when he modestly says: "My job is to play hockey."

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