



IT'S A LONG ROAD FROM

GREAT GRATIFUL

WHEN ALEXANDRE DAIGLE WAS PICKED NO. 1 IN 1993, HE COULDN'T HAVE KNOWN HOW LOUSY HIS NHL CAREER WOULD BE. FIFTEEN YEARS LATER, WITH ANOTHER DRAFT APPROACHING, HE'S A ONE-MAN ADVERTISEMENT FOR SECOND ACTS.

BY LINDSAY BERRA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BAERBEL SCHMIDT

It's the kind of car they give all the imports on Hockey Club Davos; a nondescript grey hatchback made distinct by the golden-horned elk of HCD painted on both doors. It slips and slides along the snow-covered road, wipers working hard to clear the windshield of persistent flakes, headlights cutting a bright swath in the nighttime blackness of the Swiss Alps. A dog darts across the road, then disappears as quickly as it came. In the passenger seat, Robin Leblanc curses under his breath in French. But in the driver's seat, Alexandre Daigle is calm. His grip on the wheel is loose. Relaxed. Because although the road may be treacherous, Daigle has never felt so in control.

On this December evening, Daigle is headed for the Walserhuus, a restaurant his new coaches took him to on his first night in Davos two years ago. Located in a rustic lodge with twinkly lights high above Davos, the place is famous for its fondue *chinoise*. Fifteen years ago, Daigle could have—maybe should have—been famous too.

At least that's what the Senators thought. After Ottawa finished its first season with a 10-7-4 record, they were guaranteed the top pick in the unusually rich 1993 draft class, which included Daigle, Chris Pronger and Paul Kariya. A No. 1 is a jump start for teams needing a boost out of the

basement, and the choice is usually a player whose skills and potential far outshine those of the rest of his class. (The 2008 draft will be held June 20-21 in Ottawa. See box on the facing page.) And while it's true that in the draft's 45-year history only five No. 1's—Guy Lafleur, Denis Potvin, Mario Lemieux, Mike Modano, Vincent Lecavalier—have led the

while, is draft eligible on his 18th birthday, when he is still a work in progress, a mere whisper of the man he will become. As a result, the NHL draft, like that in baseball, is an inexact science at best.

Still, the Sens were pretty damn sure they had it right when they made Daigle, the scoring machine from Montreal, their top pick. Scouts called him the

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team that chose them to a Cup, a championship is still the gold standard. A real chance of winning one justifies years of scouting reports, countless physical and psychological evaluations and endless interviews with coaches, teammates, parents, siblings and, of course, the players themselves. If franchises are to place all their eggs in one basket, they want to be sure the bottom won't fall out.

But can you ever be really certain? NBA and NFL teams can draft players at 19 and 20, respectively, but even one year of college grants time to mature physically and mentally. A hockey player, mean-

next Gretzky. The Senators expected him to be the future of their franchise, and Daigle expected nothing less of himself. But despite his skill, movie star looks and bilingual charm, he would never live up to his nickname, Alexandre the Great.

There is no shortage of theories why, and most point directly to unfair expectations. Maybe it was the burden of those astounding numbers Daigle posted in juniors (281 points in 137 games). Maybe it was the pressure that came from the widely held suspicion that Ottawa purposely dropped games in March and April of 1993 to guarantee a last-place finish and the No. 1 pick. Or maybe it was the weight of that \$12.5M contract, the largest starting salary in NHL history. Whatever the reason, Ottawa's media and fans wanted perfection, or at least a Calder Trophy, to justify the hype. No Calder nomination came, and 54 goals in 217 games over the next four seasons weren't enough.

In 1998, the Sens washed their hands of Daigle, who wore eight different sweaters over the next seven-plus seasons. Players drafted after him (Pronger, Kariya, Todd Bertuzzi) became stars while he became disenchanted—the sport he loved was now a job, his boyhood dream a chore. In the summer of 2006, with his NHL stock at an all-time low, Daigle crossed the pond to play in Switzerland. It was the best move he ever made.

VAILLANT ARENA, SMACK IN THE center of the ski village of Davos, is crafted of knotty pine and boasts the pitched, snow-covered roof of a ski lodge. It holds 7,000 people, if you count those willing to stand, and today the arena is packed. Fans in blue-and-yellow Davos jerseys, hats and scarves wave giant blue-and-yellow flags and pound blue-and-yellow drums. Amid the mayhem, Daigle is glaringly easy to spot.

Yes, those are red-and-orange flames on his helmet and jersey, and, yes, he wears yellow while his teammates wear blue. He is, figuratively, on fire. At least on the score sheet, which is why he wears the uniform reserved for the team's top scorer. The yellow jersey is a league custom many find absurd—"Bullshit," Davos coach Arno del Curto

calls it—but Daigle has been wearing it for much of the past two seasons. Watch, and he'll show why.

In the second period, the six-foot, 195-pound center catches a pass just beyond the red line and dekes around the defenseman backing into his own zone. As the blueliner spins to follow, Daigle turns on jets that once made NHL scouts salivate; it's

coming to the rink. He left Ottawa a persona non grata, more famous for an alleged score with Pamela Anderson than for any scoring he did on the ice.

Daigle bounced from team to team: Flyers, Lightning, Rangers, Penguins and Wild, along with AHL affiliates in Hartford, Wilkes-Barre and Manchester. After the 1999-2000 season, the first



Life is good: Daigle, who finished second in scoring in the Swiss League in 2006-07, finished 2007-08 on top of the world as a new dad.

obvious he hasn't lost a stride. He gains clear ice and snaps a shot just inside the left post. "I have great speed," Daigle says. "The bigger ice over here gives me three more strides to get a shot without somebody hanging all over me." Tonight, Davos beats Rapperswil, 6-1, and Daigle's goal keeps him ahead of teammate Reto Von Arx as the team's leading scorer. A season earlier, Daigle had 22 goals and 61 points in 44 games, and HC Davos won its third Swiss championship in five years. Following that season, Daigle signed a four-year contract extension that will keep him in Switzerland until 2011. That's more success than he ever had in the NHL.

"When you're young, you think the NHL is glamorous and fun," says Daigle, now 33. "But it's a tough job. You have to be made a special way to deal with it. Me, I'm not aggressive at all. Zero percent." In Juniors, talent had been enough, and Daigle was a fierce scorer for the Victoriaville Tigres of the Quebec League. "He'd just get the puck and fly by guys," says then-Sens scout Jim Nill. "But maybe he relied too much on his skill. When it comes time to get to that next level, you have to ask yourself how you're going to compete."

It should have been impressive that an 18-year-old boy could play a man's game and score 20 goals with no support on a team that won just 14 games his rookie season. But fans and media wanted a scapegoat, and Daigle was it. He wasn't the next Gretzky and they wouldn't let him forget it. An "Unofficial Alexandre Daigle Sucks" website appeared on the still-young Internet. Add the arduous 82-game schedule, nine-day road trips, late-night flights and early morning buses to negative press and the game became too intense for the lighthearted Daigle. For the first time he dreaded

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in which he spent serious time in the minors, he took a two-year NHL hiatus and started a production company of sorts in Hollywood and skated for a Beverly Hills beer-league team with former NHLer Marty McSorley. He returned to the NHL in 2002, citing a renewed passion for a game that would never love him back.

During the 2003-04 season, Daigle tied his career high of 51 points with the Wild, but the lockout killed the next season and the NHL's subsequent game-opening rule changes came too late. And while offense-first players like Atlanta's Ilya Kovalchuk and Columbus' Rick Nash learned to love backchecking in the postlockout NHL, that was a simple trick compared to the black magic needed to give Daigle a killer instinct. So his God-given talent was deemed expendable as GMs league-wide grew wary of signing a player who seemed unwilling to compete. Daigle was branded, his work ethic questioned, his time up. "I always thought I'd play 15 or 20 seasons in the NHL," he says. "But the time comes when you have to face reality."

The reality was that Daigle still wanted to play, and when del Curto heard he was considering Europe, the coach offered him a two-year deal and the comfort of knowing, for the first time since leaving Ottawa, where he'd be hanging his skates for two solid seasons. Daigle called Boston center

Joe Thornton, who spent the lockout playing in Davos. "He told me it was a fun team in a fun town with good skiing," Daigle says, "and that they'd won a couple of championships." For Daigle, "fun" was the operative word.

What a difference a few years and a fresh country can make. Hockey in the Swiss League is better than the American Hockey League but not quite as good as the Russian Super or Swedish Elite Leagues. But for Daigle, it's everything the NHL is not. HC Davos plays a 50-game schedule, usually just two games a week. Teams travel by bus, and even after away games Daigle sleeps in his own bed. Between Christmas and New Year's, league play stops and Davos hosts the Spengler Cup, essentially a wintertime block party with hockey games in the afternoon. Media coverage is in German, and even though Daigle and his wife, Genevieve, are taking classes to learn the language, he couldn't read the papers if he wanted to. And he doesn't.

Daigle has made a life here in the Alps. He and Genevieve—along with dogs Gucci, a mini Doberman, and Zoe, a Yorkshire Terrier—share an apartment with a balcony that looks over the vil-

lage. On Daigle's days off it's a short hop to Zurich and Milan to shop and stock up on Italian reds. Meanwhile, Davos' status as an international destination—the World Economic Forum is held there every year—means the Daigles don't want too much for cosmopolitan Montreal. So it's hardly surprising that as the snow piles up outside, Daigle looks more than content to settle in behind a massive platter of raw beef and venison and a pot of boiling bouillon in the Walserhuus with Leblanc, a fellow Quebecois. "When I retire I'm going to be 225 pounds," says the once and former hockey savior.

But it's as tough to imagine Daigle getting fat as it is to view him as a draft-day cautionary tale. The talent the Sens saw is still there, only now it's in the service of Alexandre Daigle. Instead of slogging through the NHL's soul-sapping winter grind he can anticipate the fast-approaching Swiss League play-offs and birth of his first child. [Ed's note: Daigle scored 11 points in two rounds before Davos was knocked out; daughter Sienna was born in March.] Instead of wondering who he'll disappoint tomorrow, he can know who he's thrilling today.

And it doesn't matter that the thrills are 3,500 miles away from the NHL.

Which NHL draft year was the best ever? E-mail us at post@espnthemag.com

Three for the Show

On June 20, the draft returns to Ottawa, the scene of Alexandre Daigle's NHL debut. And while this may not be as rich a draft year as 1993, treasures lurk if you know where to look, starting with these three North American skaters.

BY GARE JOYCE

STEVEN STAMKOS | C | SARNIA STING (OHL)

Okay, he isn't Sidney Crosby or Alexander Ovechkin. But the Bolts, who have the top pick, will settle for this hybrid of Steve Yzerman and Joe Sakic, the rare junior star who makes plays at both ends of the ice. "Stamkos gets as many points for hockey sense as he does for physical ability," says one Western Conference scout. Teammates, coaches and scouts also praise his off-ice poise and attitude.



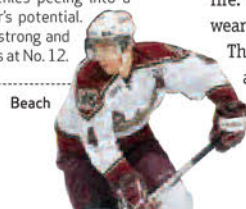
Stamkos

ZACH BOGOSIAN | D | PETERBOROUGH PETES (OHL)

Bogolian is the likely second pick, which means he'll be compared—again—to former MVP, Norris winner and 1993 No. 2 Chris Pronger, also a former Petes star. Says Peterborough GM Jeff Twohey, "Zach's a leader, a player who'll be a captain of an NHL team." Yes, another Pronger link: Bogolian describes himself as "hypercompetitive. I want to be in against the opponent's best line and I hate to lose." Now who does that sound like?

KYLE BEACH | C | EVERETT SILVERTIPS (WHL)

Near the end of one of his combine interviews, Beach was asked if he could stay. He apologized, saying, "St. Louis wants to check my head." The Blues weren't the only ones. He was interviewed by 27 teams and all questioned his maturity. (For the record, Beach denies peeing into a teammate's water bottle.) Still, no team questions the 6'3", 205-pounder's potential. "He's the only prototype power forward in this draft," says one scout. Big, strong and maybe unstable. Yeah, that'll work, especially if he's still around for the Ducks at No. 12.



Beach



Bogolian

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: FRANK DENNIS (3)/EVERETT SILVERTIPS; COURTESY SARNIA STING; CLAUSS ANDERSEN/GETTY IMAGES

MANU FRIEDRICH/VEO IMAGES (RIGHT)