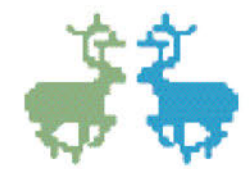




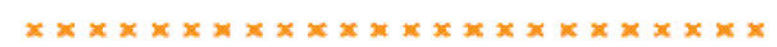
Eric, Jordan, Jared and Marc Staal in a rare moment of inactivity.



# FAMILY VALUES



LINDA AND HENRY STAAL  
RAISE TWO CHOICE CANADIAN  
PRODUCTS: SON AND SKATERS.  
MEET THE NEW FIRST  
FAMILY OF HOCKEY



BY LINDSAY BERRA



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHELBY LEE ADAMS





THE SUMMERTIME SUN DOESN'T DIP slow the western edge of Lake Superior until nearly 10 p.m., leaving all of Thunder Bay, Ontario, wash in an orange glow for at least another hour. In the morning, just after 6, the first rays of light will filter over the line of trees at the eastern end of Henry Staal's 550 acres, wedged between Highway 61 and the Kaministiquia River, 10 miles south of town. As a second-generation sod farmer, Henry is grateful for the extra daylight, even if it means he sleeps less than the sun. He has to accomplish all he can in just six months: sod season runs from May through October, leaving nothing but paperwork for the long, cold winter. And there's not much of that. Staal's farm, Sunshine Landscaping ("Growers of Kentucky Bluegrass" is painted on a wooden sign out front), has just 11 employees—seven not counting family.

On a steamy July day, Eric steps up on the running board of his silver Escalade, watching brother Jared, 15, load the harvester a field away. Up the road a bit, 18-year-old Marc is on the big mower, music pumping through headphones to drown out the noise. Jordan, 17, is off with Henry, installing a sod order in town. "I could run this place if I had to," Eric says, squinting into the 100° noonday sun. "But I'm glad I have something else. I'm glad I don't have to do this for the rest of my life."

Thousands of family farms are scattered across Canada, many stocked with strong, hardworking

5,597 NHL games, 3,209 points, 8,394 penalty minutes and six Stanley Cups. Grizzled coach Jacques Demers once said, flatly, "You win when you have a Sutter in your lineup." Today the Sutters have sons of their own (see page 102), and their Cups collection has yet to be duplicated. But only a fool would bet against the Staal boys doing just that.

Eric is already a star with the Hurricanes. Marc, a defenseman for the Ontario Hockey League's Sudbury Wolves, was drafted 12th overall by the Rangers in July. Jordan, a center and maybe the best prospect of them all, played for Canada's



**ASK ANYONE IN HOCKEY ABOUT JARED'S FUTURE, AND YOU'LL HEAR THE SAME CHORUS: "OF COURSE HE'S GOT TALENT. HE'S A STAAL."**



Boys' life: when the work's done and the sun's out, there's always time for stickhandling drills.



Under-18 team in the Junior World Cup this summer and is sure to be a high pick in the next NHL draft; he'll return to the OHL's Peterborough Petes this fall. Right wing Jared, too young to judge, is just as good for the Thunder Bay Kings as his brothers were at the same age. "They all have terrific instincts," says Petes GM Jeff Twohey, who picked Eric and Jordan in the first round of the OHL draft. "But the biggest thing you notice is the way they protect the puck. And it comes from playing on that outdoor rink."

Henry built the rink across the yard from the Staals' modest farmhouse, behind a line of evergreens that has grown too thick to see through. But 10 years ago, Linda Staal had a clear view of her sons through the sliding-glass doors off

the kitchen. The Staal boys never had time for warm-weather fun like trampolines and swimming pools. Theirs had to be a cold-weather pursuit, allowing them to pass time through months of below-zero cold between the end of one sod season and the beginning of another. So Henry borrowed a septic truck from a neighbor, steam-cleaned it and flooded the yard. He added boards and lights and nets. The boys would hit the rink after school and play two-on-two, Eric and Jared against Jordan and Marc, until Linda cut off the lights from the house to tell them it was time for bed. Sometimes they'd wait in the blackness, cold tugging at their cheeks, clenching and unclenching frozen toes inside their skates, until Linda caved and flipped

sons who leave the farm to test out Canada's junior hockey leagues. All the boys have the same dream, but most discover the bitter truth—God gave more talent to someone else—and return home to spend their lives growing barley or rolling hay or driving cattle. Here and there, one boy makes it, leaving a brother or three who will never get any closer to the NHL than dusting themselves off and settling in to watch the Flames or the Leafs on *Hockey Night in Canada*.

But 23 years ago, a 1,400-acre farm outside of Viking, Alberta, produced six brothers who carried the discipline and grit of the prairie through six NHL careers. Among them, the Sutter brothers—Brian, Darryl, Duane, Brent, Rich and Ron—have

the kitchen. The Staal boys never had time for warm-weather fun like trampolines and swimming pools. Theirs had to be a cold-weather pursuit, allowing them to pass time through months of below-zero cold between the end of one sod season and the beginning of another. So Henry borrowed a septic truck from a neighbor, steam-cleaned it and flooded the yard. He added boards and lights and nets. The boys would hit the rink after school and play two-on-two, Eric and Jared against Jordan and Marc, until Linda cut off the lights from the house to tell them it was time for bed. Sometimes they'd wait in the blackness, cold tugging at their cheeks, clenching and unclenching frozen toes inside their skates, until Linda caved and flipped

the switch back on. Victorious, they'd let out a whoop and go right back to their game while Linda rolled her eyes.

To know they are brothers, all you need to do is look at them. All are towheaded—a cross between Prince Valiant and Dennis the Menace—and all are over 6'3" save for Jared, who at 15 is already scraping 6'1". All are soft-spoken and polite: Eric,

mostly business, with a determined set to his jaw and a parental tone in his voice; Marc, stoic and thoughtful; Jordan, quick to smile and show off his muscles; Jared, shy but with a sharp sense of humor born of being picked on by big brothers. But there is nothing reserved about their games.

Eric's offensive skills made him the No. 2 pick in the 2003 NHL entry draft. But in the tradition of

franchise centers, his finisher's touch doesn't come at the expense of defensive soundness; he is a play-maker on both ends of the ice. Marc is a defensive defenseman with the skating ability, puck-moving skills and vision of an offensive one. But it's his reliability in his own end that has scouts salivating. He plays nearly 40 minutes a night for Sudbury, against the opposing team's top lines. Jordan, the biggest brother at 6'4", 210 pounds, uses his size to create mayhem in front of the net. He's become a bear to contain; he scored five playoff goals for the Petes as a rookie last year. Jared, not ready for typecasting, is also a scoring threat and a physical presence. Ask anyone in hockey about his future, and you'll hear the same chorus: "Of course he's got talent. He's a Staal."



SOMETIMES, ON FREEZING JANUARY NIGHTS, Henry Staal will wake up at 4 a.m. and coax one of the farm's off-duty pickups out of the driveway. It's a 14-hour drive up to Sudbury, so he'll make it in

the car's 7 p.m. start. To catch Jordan, he'd have to leave earlier; Peterborough is an 18-hour haul. Jared is easiest to follow; half his games are played within the city limits, but even the bantam Kings travel as far west as Brandon, Manitoba, an



DOM BENTON/CP PHOTO (LEFT)

11-hour trip. During the 2003-04 NHL season, when Eric made the transition from junior hockey to the NHL without a single game in the minors, he was just a click away. "I bought that," Henry says, pointing to the 57-inch flat-screen on the living room wall. "No way was I going to watch Eric play in the NHL on our old set." But this past season, Eric spent the NHL lockout with the Lowell (Mass.)

Lock Monsters of the AHL. Even if Henry had wanted to make the drive to see Eric in person, it would have taken more than a day. Instead, he and Linda sat on a couch in the small den off the kitchen, listening to games—sometimes four a night—over the Internet on an old PC. "It's really hard to get into the flow of a hockey game over the radio," Linda says. "It's even harder when you

Sometimes Dad cuts Eric a little slack on chores. Sometimes he doesn't.

have to keep switching back and forth. But we have to listen to a little bit of everybody's, because they check in with us."

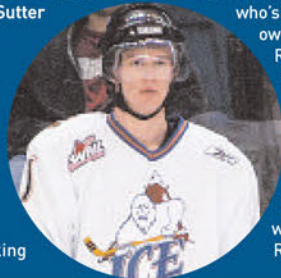
It's true. All four boys call home as soon as their equipment is hung in their lockers or stowed under the bus. And just by the tone of the "Hello," Henry and Linda can tell how each son played. It's a well-earned skill; they've had a lot of practice relating to their kids by phone. The Staals have given three of their sons to the OHL, all at age 15. It's a common practice in Canada, though it's no simple choice to let another family raise your son. There are happy stories of these extended families, but there are horror stories, too. Linda interviewed each set of billet parents extensively before allowing them to care for her sons. Once satisfied, she offered advice

## CARRYING THE TORCH

When the Flames' pick in the sixth round of the 2005 NHL draft rolled around, GM/coach Darryl Sutter asked his brain trust whom they liked. Chief scout Mike Sands cleared his throat and deadpanned, "What about that Sutter kid?"

Sands wasn't sucking up to his boss. (Not completely, anyway.) Yes, Brett Sutter is the son of Calgary's top dog, a former NHL star. But the 18-year-old center is a six-foot, 180-pound slickster whose pedigree also includes five uncles who made it to the show. Sands knew that Calgary could do a lot worse with the 179th pick than taking another Sutter off the farm.

The GM agreed, and after picking



his son, he was reminded that Chicago had selected him with the 179th pick of the 1978 draft. "That is weird," Darryl said. "There must be some fate there."

Fate may repeat itself. Brandon Sutter, 16, Brent's son, is a big (6'2", 180), tough winger who's generating serious buzz. Brent, owner, GM and coach of the Red Deer Rebels, drafted his son sixth overall in last year's Western Hockey League draft. Back in 1980, Brent was selected by the Isles with the 17th pick. That's where some scouts think Brandon could fall in the 2007 draft. Says Sands: "It's a long way off, but we'd have to take a look at him." Right, boss? -GARE JOYCE

about her boys' favorite foods and worst habits to their new caregivers, and she makes sure to see them when she and Henry travel to a game. Jared, who turned 15 in August and will be next and last to leave, was home alone with his parents last winter; at dinner he'd often kid his mom for habitually cooking three pounds of spaghetti: "Hey, Ma, who's coming to eat?" Ask what Linda will feel like when her last son is out of the house and she admits, "It will be very quiet. I don't relish the idea, but it will happen."

The boys pay a price for their pursuit too. The far-flung brothers don't talk to or e-mail each other much these days. "But they always want to know how the others did," Linda says. So they get updates from their parents, each sibling asking for details on the others' games.

None of the brothers is especially focused on his own performance; all of them remain farm humble, an almost too-good-to-be-true trait that leads

2002-03, his last season before the NHL draft, he scored a career-best 98 points in 66 games, grew to 6'3" and tipped the scales at 189 pounds.

When Marc entered the OHL draft that same year, he was also as thin as a blade of bluegrass. But Eric's legacy—and the weight he'd gained—helped Marc rise to second overall pick; Peterborough took Jordan third overall the following year. Now the scouts are looking to Jared, who is bigger than any of his brothers were at the same age. They keep in mind that no Staal ever really blossomed on the ice—or filled out his body—until after turning 15, and the thought spins the wheels in their heads. The boys think about it too, about making sure there's no third-generation sod farmer in the Staal family. "Every one of us is different, but we all want

was held in a ballroom at the Ottawa Westin (1,800 seats) instead of the Corel Centre (19,153 seats). Only Henry and Linda were allowed inside the hotel with Marc, who sweated along with his water glass as he slid out of the top 10. Finally, the Rangers—set to draft 16th but shocked Marc was available—traded up to No. 12 to get him.

Two down, two to go.

But at least until hockey season starts, the Staal family remains intact. Linda has six mouths to feed (upping her grocery bill from \$60 a week to \$300) and Henry has four strong bodies to use around the farm, despite the fact that Eric helps out only under duress. Ask Henry and he'll tell you that the second Eric was drafted he looked his father in the eye, shook his hand and said, "I quit." With Marc



The care and feeding of growing hockey players is a full-time job.



**THE SECOND ERIC WAS DRAFTED HE LOOKED HIS FATHER IN THE EYE, SHOOK HIS HAND AND SAID, "I QUIT."**



the Canadian media to cite them as an example of how to raise athletes. Henry dismisses the praise, saying he and Linda did nothing more than let their kids play. Loathe to become an overbearing hockey dad, he hasn't coached the boys since they were pee-wees. "When you have four sons on four different teams," Henry says, "you can't get hung up on one. You have to be there for the other three, so you kind of have to just be laid-back."

Laid-back works. When the Petes drafted Eric in 2000, other teams scoffed at his scrawny, 5'11", 145-pound physique. Even Henry thought he might not be ready for the OHL. But Eric was confident, and that first season he had 49 points in 63 games. The next year he upped his total to 62, and in

to do what Eric has done," Marc says. "We're all striving for the same things."

So when the NHL and the players association finally brokered a deal on July 13, the Staal clan gathered around the TV to get the details. Everyone except Eric. His contract goes for another year, so he was heading to Carolina regardless. But Marc was projected to be a top-five pick in the 2005 NHL draft before it was canceled. So the Staal boys cocked their heads toward the screen and waited. When the phone rang, Henry listened and smiled before hanging up and announcing the draft would be on July 30 in Ottawa. Jordan slapped Marc on the back. "We're all going to Ottawa after all, eh?"

Not so fast. Because of the short notice, the draft

chosen too, there's no doubt Jordan and Jared's summer just got busier.

But they are still boys. When the chores are done and the day has cooled, they duck through the evergreens to shoot pucks off a wood platform on the rink's sandy floor, now overgrown with weeds. The black-marked boards are chipped and sagging, the nets ragged. Last winter, for the first time since Eric was 5, Henry didn't pour a sheet of ice. With only Jared at home, and him skating in town most days, Henry didn't see the point. But the rink served its purpose. It got the Staals through 15 brutal winters, honing the hockey skills of four shy, skinny boys and giving them confidence to leave home and chase another life. It's a safe bet that inside five years they'll all be dotted across the NHL. And during the winter, when the sun sets early and life slows, farm boys across Canada will flip on a game for a little inspiration.

And maybe, just maybe, a coach will say, flatly: you win when you have a Staal in your lineup. ●