

Puck head leading puck heads

By Ryan Williamson, Eden Prairie High School

Indiana has basketball. Texas has football. Minnesota has hockey. Fans from the Iron Range all the way down to Rochester cheer on their high school hockey teams all the way to the Xcel Energy Center for the state tournament. Players, too, have a dream to follow in the footsteps of their Minnesota North Star predecessors such as Neal Broten, Herb Brooks and Curt Giles. While the “greats” are well known, there is one former player many have never heard of, one that has achieved his and thousands of others’ dreams. In 2009, Todd Richards became head coach of the Minnesota Wild.

Minnesota hockey fans jumped at the opportunity to score an expansion NHL franchise and were just as pleased to take back the title as “the state of hockey.” Jacques Lemaire was hired as the first ever Wild head coach in June of 2000, while some were excited about his prior success and so-called “great hockey mind” others were skeptical of his low scoring style and non-Minnesota ties. While the Wild won a division title and made an appearance in the Western Conference Finals, fans still were unconvinced of Lemaire’s inability to adapt to the Minnesota hockey environment.

After a disappointing season in 2009, Lemaire stepped down from the head coaching position on April 11 and “the state of hockey” finally had a chance to follow a leader that was one of its own. On June 16 of that same year, Armstrong alum and former four year player for the Minnesota Golden Gophers, Todd Richards, became the Wild’s second ever head coach. This change built a lot of excitement for the state of hockey to get behind one of its own at the head of their beloved team.

After his professional hockey career ended in 2002, Richards was a member of two different coaching staffs in minor league hockey, including a head coach job for the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins, the Pittsburgh Penguins minor league affiliate. It was here Richards learned the fast, high scoring style of hockey he currently champions with the Minnesota Wild players. “This is the style I like to play and I felt successful as a player,” said Richards. Last season, he was an assistant coach for the San Jose Sharks, where the high-scoring and fast-paced style was already in place when he arrived.

This style of play has provided for a higher scoring games overall which subsequently has brought fans to the edge of their seats. “On the ice, this has been a great overall change,” said *Star Tribune* Wild beat reporter Mike Russo.

Richards began to make the change to the high-scoring style by drafting a Minnesota-born player, Eden Prairie High School alum, Nick Leddy, in the first round of the 2009 NHL Draft. “Nick Leddy was the best player at that time and that is why we picked him, being a Minnesotan was a circumstance,” said Richards.

While the Wild has started a theme of bringing in homegrown players, this is not a deciding factor for potential recruits. “We are not going to go out of our way to find Minnesota players, they need to have the skill set to play for us,” said Richards.

All the while, even though Richards has assumed the role as the figurehead of the team of 18,000, he still feels like an ordinary guy, he said, “The experience is strange in a good way. I feel like a normal guy who puts his pants on one at a time.”

While the fans may expect success from the Wild, Richards simply expects the positive results to come eventually, “Our focus is on getting better, not the end result, but the process of getting better will bring a good end result.”

Richards will lead a team effort, with the help of the team of 18,000, to build on their success. As Herb Brooks said, “The name on the front of the jersey is a helluva lot more important than the one on the back.”