

SPORTS

# Ward enjoying NHL experience

Josh Lewis  
Sports Editor

Joel Ward is loving it.

The former Panthers captain, who signed a contract with the NHL's Minnesota Wild in September, has been recalled twice by the team since December.

He was first called up from the Houston Aeros of the AHL Dec. 13. He played six games, scoring one point – an assist in his hometown of Toronto on Boxing Day. After being sent down Jan. 2, he was quickly recalled eight days later after injuries to Wild forwards Mark Parrish and Derek Boogaard.

Ward said the first call came as a surprise.

"I was pretty ecstatic," Ward said from Minnesota recently. "I was out Christmas shopping and got a call from my coach saying 'be prepared, you might get called up.' (The Wild) played out west that night and after the game they called and said I was going up. I was pretty shocked. It came out of nowhere. I packed my bags and went from there."

Ward, who played his first NHL game



in Vancouver Dec. 16, couldn't have picked a better way to make his debut.

"It was pretty cool. I got to start the game, on Hockey Night In Canada, standing out there for the national anthem. It was pretty nerve-wracking, but once the puck drops, you go out there and try to have some fun. It was an unbelievable experience."

Ward, 26, described his first NHL point as a fluke, but was happy to have gotten it at home.

"Boogaard made a hit, smoked a defenseman. I barely grazed the puck and it went back to Kurtis Foster at the point. He took a shot, it got through a few legs

and went in. It wasn't the greatest assist, but I'll take it.

He said getting his first point was pretty cool, but they didn't win the game.

"That would have made it even nicer, playing in front of a lot of friends and family. But it was good to get that game over with at the same time."

Ward is now back in Houston after being sent down Jan. 16, but said he'll never forget his first taste of the NHL.

"It was the greatest experience of my life. It will stay in my memory for the rest of my life."

Ward said being in the NHL is a sharp contrast to the life he lived a few years ago.

"Being on the chartered planes was pretty cool, and staying at nice hotels. And here I am thinking back to when I lived on Queen Street, walking to school every day," Ward chuckled. "I'm like a kid in the candy store."

Ward said the reality of playing in the world's top hockey league hit him when he found out he'd be rooming with defenseman Kim Johnsson.

"I told Johnsson I took him in my

playoff pool a couple of years ago, and now I'm sitting next to him," he laughed.

The Wild rookie hasn't been initiated yet by his new teammates, but he knows that may not last forever.

"I sleep with one eye open on the road," he said. "I've been trying to keep under the radar. Nothing's really happened, so I've been hanging in there, keeping my mouth shut."

Despite being returned to the Aeros, Ward now knows he can compete with the world's best.

"I think I've matured a lot more the second time up. The first experience was neat, but going back down and up gave me more confidence and helped my game."

Ward said becoming more comfortable with his play has allowed him to concentrate on the task at hand.

"Once you gain confidence at this level, you can get up here and do your thing. You eliminate mistakes as much as possible and build off of it. As long as the team's winning as well, that helps. Hopefully I can do my part and keep my job."



For a good deal call  
308-8744

## SIX PACK SPECIALS

**BURGER 101**

Hamburger +  
Fries + Pop =

\$6.00

**CHEESE 101**

Cheeseburger +  
Fries + Pop =

\$6.50

**MOZZA 101**

Mozzaburger +  
Fries + Pop =

\$6.75

**SHROOM 101**

Mushroom -  
Swissburger +  
Fries + Pop =

\$7.00

**WIENER 101**

Hot Dog + Fries  
+ Pop =

\$5.00

**CHICKEN 101**

Crispy Chicken  
+ Fries + Pop =

\$7.00

Counter Service or Take Out

**Super 5**

1/2 order  
Nachos \$5  
+ fries +  
small pop =

1/2 quesadilla  
+ fries + \$5  
small pop =

**FREE FOOD**

Clip and bring  
this coupon for  
1 FREE cookie  
with any purchase over \$5.00

Open daily  
10am - 7pm\*

\* Subject to change

East Side Mario's Express - Located in the CARI Complex between Arena A & B