

SPORTS

Former Panther captain signs NHL contract

Josh Lewis
Sports Editor

Former UPEI Panthers captain Joel Ward has signed a contract with the NHL's Minnesota Wild.

Ward, who played with the Panthers from 2001 to 2005, was rewarded by Wild management in late September after a terrific showing in training camp. He played last season with the team's AHL affiliate in Houston and will start this season there as well, but made a lasting impression on coach Jacques Lemaire.

"They liked what I brought to the table. I made a name for myself in the organization as a player who keeps grinding in the corners and gets to the puck and causes turnovers," said Ward from Houston recently.

"My final meeting with Jacques and (Wild GM) Doug Risebrough was really good. Jacques said he wished I could stick around, but with the numbers and business part of it, unfortunately I wasn't able to. It's hard to beat out guys on one-way contracts."

Ward, 26, said that signing the contract was his goal entering the summer and he hopes to see NHL action this season.

"It makes you feel wanted," he said of the deal. "It's tough for them to say when they might call me up, but they indicated that I should keep working hard and anything is possible, whether it's an injury or a slump."

Ward, who led the CIS in scoring in 2004-05, said adjusting to his role

as a grinder with the Aeros hasn't been difficult.

"I've always been a grinder in the corner. I made some plays in university. If I got a shot on net, I'd take the chance and hopefully bury it. But I've never considered myself a goal scorer. Here I know my role, a checking line role. I did it in junior. I just need to keep working at it and if I get a chance to put one in, that's great as well. I just try to cause turnovers and work at both ends of the ice. I focus on taking care of my own end first."

The 2005 CIS all-Canadian said the pro game is a world apart from the university level.

"In the NHL guys are right on top of you. They're a lot quicker, faster, stronger. At the AHL level, you have to know what you're going to do with the puck before you get it. In university you can get away with a little bit. The NHL guys keep their bodies in great shape and the talent is unbelievable. You gotta keep moving, keep on your toes. The university game is great as well, but obviously you don't get the talent level of pro hockey."

Ward has attended training camps with the Detroit Red Wings and Florida Panthers in the past, only to be cut loose, but said he's never thought about quitting the game.

"You get disappointed when you're released, since you came this far only to be cut. But I've never really thought about quitting. I just kept going and

going. You keep battling and you never know. If you keep working hard something positive's gotta come out of it. I know I can play, and hopefully I'll get a shot at one point. I've made it this far and I'm pretty fortunate for that."

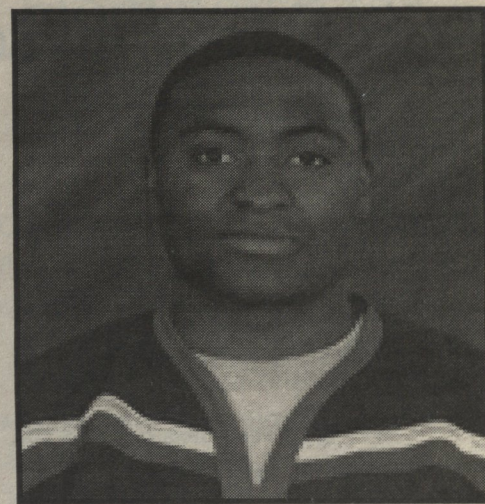
If Ward ends up in Minnesota, he doesn't expect to have any problems with Lemaire's defense-first coaching philosophy.

"I think it'll work pretty good. I tend to look at myself as a defensive forward. If you keep the puck in their end, it limits them from getting in your end. I can bring some energy to the team and hard work and a positive attitude. I'm just looking forward to the opportunity."

Ward said his closest friend on the Aeros is roommate Shawn Belle, a defenseman acquired from Dallas at last year's trade deadline. Belle was drafted 30th overall by the St. Louis Blues in the 2003 NHL entry draft and played for Team Canada in the 2004 and 2005 world juniors.

Ward finished fifteenth in team scoring last season with eight goals and 14 assists in 66 games. He's optimistic about the Aeros' chances this season.

"We have a good team in Houston. There's a good balance of young guys and veterans, and good goaltending. We're similar to the team last year, when we finished second in our division and made it to the second



Joel Ward

round of the playoffs. We have a little more grind. It's going to be interesting."

He also sees the parent squad in Minnesota having a good season after the traditionally frugal club splurged on the free agent market this summer.

"Minnesota has a great team. They brought in some great guys this summer in (centre) Pavol Demitra, and Keith Carney and Kim Johnsson on the back end. They have great goaltending in Manny Fernandez, with Josh Harding or Niklas Backstrom behind him. Demitra complements Marian Gaborik really well. In hockey pools I'll take those two."

Ward was also impressed by the city of St. Paul and its fans during training camp.

"Minnesota is a great place to play. The fans just love hockey. In an exhibition game I played in, there were 18,000 plus. For exhibition, I thought that was incredible. It's a great situation in that organization. They have the potential to do some real damage this year."

Hockey Panthers beat Eagles in home opener

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Sports Editor

Jason Kowalski scored the game-winner and Paul Drew made 41 saves as the UPEI Panthers defeated the Moncton Blue Eagles 2-0 in Friday's home opener. Ryan Kitchen added his first AUS goal early in the third period to seal the victory.

Drew was outstanding in goal for UPEI, which won its first game of the young season. He made several key saves to earn the shutout, including a sensational glove save to rob Karl Fournier of a sure goal late in the third

period. Another crucial stop came late in the second when, with Moncton pressing, Drew slid across the crease to make a snow-angel save on Eagles winger Jean-Francois Cyr.

The Eagles outshot the Panthers 41-19, with both teams missing the net on several chances.

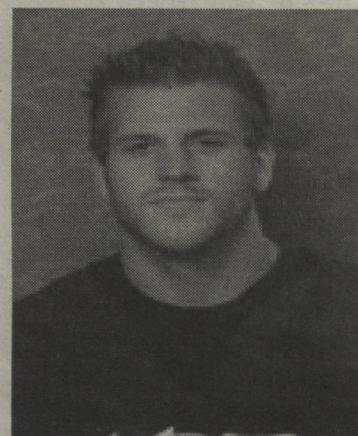
Kowalski opened the scoring three minutes into the game after jamming a rebound in the crease between the pads of goaltender Kevin Lachance. Chase Gavin and Rick Steadman drew assists.

Kitchen provided some insurance for the Panthers just 19 seconds into the final frame on an odd-

man rush. Stephen Cooke and Adam Chapman assisted on the goal.

Both teams had goals called back late in the second period. Moncton appeared to have tied the game after the puck had deflected high above the ice and landed in the Panther net, but it was determined that it had been knocked down with a high stick.

The Panthers then had a goal disallowed in the final minute of the middle period on a delayed offside call. Moncton centre Jean-Francois Laplante was ejected from the game at the end of the second period after a vicious hit from behind on winger Jeff



Jason Kowalski

MacDermid deep in the Panther zone. The Panthers host the St. F.X. X-Men and Dalhousie Tigers this weekend at MacLauchlan Arena. Game time is 7:30 pm.