

Always ready to lend a hand

Dan Dawson has transformed from sniper to assist man during NLL career, but goals aren't the only things he's helped out with

By Herb Garbutt
OAKVILLE BEAVER STAFF

Behind almost every great goal scorer is a playmaker — the player who can thread the needle and make it easy for the sniper to do what he does best. It's a vital role but, with apologies to assist men everywhere, you don't acquire a nickname like Dangerous Dan by setting the table for others.

Which makes Dan Dawson's latest entry into the National Lacrosse League (NLL) record book somewhat of an oddity. Dawson broke the NLL single-season record for assists Saturday, setting up three goals for the Philadelphia Wings to give him 76 for the season.

Dawson has filled both roles brilliantly during his 11-year career. He was a triggerman after being drafted (68th overall) by Columbus in 2002. For three of his first four years in the league, he had as many or more goals than assists. He notched a career-best 48 goals in 16 games in 2005 with Arizona and 47 two years later.

Since then, he has led a nomadic lacrosse life. Three times in five years, Dawson's team has suspended operations or folded. Each time, the Oakville native was eagerly snapped up first overall in the league's dispersal draft by a team desperate to add some offensive punch to its lineup.

Opposing game plans became simple: stop Dangerous Dan Dawson. And it worked, sort of.

Two years after leaving Arizona — with a one-year stop in Portland in between — Dawson joined the

expansion Boston Blazers. He was limited to just nine goals in his first six games, but he racked up 26 assists. Then in a February game against Minnesota, Dawson set up 10 goals (and scored twice) in a 16-12 win.

"It was just one of those things," said Dawson, who earned the league's MVP award in 2009, his first season with the Blazers. "It was more of an in-game adjustment. Especially in Boston, they were double-teaming me and I couldn't get a shot away."

Dawson finished the year with a very respectable 30 goals, but it was his 74 assists that really stood out. It was an NLL record, which he shared with Josh Sanderson, who equaled his total that same season.

"Some of the passes he'd make were unbelievable," said Brenden Thenhaus, who scored 27 of his 38 career NLL goals in his one season with Dawson. "Everyone had seen the highlights of his one-handed, behind-the-back, through-the-legs goals and it was the same with his passes. You didn't know where the ball was coming from, you just had to be ready because you knew it was coming."

Dawson averaged 62 assists in his three seasons with Boston. And, more importantly than his role on the floor, Dawson thought he'd finally found a professional home. Then in August, the team suspended operations.

"Honestly, I didn't see it coming," Dawson said. "I loved the city. I'd built so many great relationships with my teammates. I thought we had a great start on the floor, but the business side of things, you can't

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HAPPY TO HELP: Dan Dawson, pictured in action for the Philadelphia Wings, recently set a National League Lacrosse single-season record for assists.

Bronze at sledge hockey worlds testing captain's mettle

By Herb Garbutt
OAKVILLE BEAVER STAFF

While it's becoming increasingly harder to win a world championship, Greg Westlake is not about to lower his standards.

The national sledge hockey team captain is not particularly excited about bringing home a bronze medal for the second straight time.

"People say congratulations on the bronze and I almost want to smack them in the head," said Westlake, who scored a dramatic game-winner with just nine seconds to play in the 2008 final, the last time Canada won gold.

Despite heavily outplaying the United States, the Canadian squad was edged 2-1 in the semifinals at this year's tournament. The Americans went on to take the gold, while Westlake scored in the first period and set up Brad Bowden's short-handed goal in the third as Canada took the bronze with a 2-0 victory over the Czech Republic.

It was the semifinal loss, Canada's only defeat in the tournament, that stung the most. Canada outshot the Americans

16-6, including 8-0 in the final period, but the Americans rode two early goals to victory. Down 2-0 in the first 15 minutes, Canada was forced to play catch up.

"We were just squeezing the stick too much," Westlake said. "When you go down early, you start trying too hard. In the end, we just didn't get the result we wanted. The right team doesn't always win, that's why you play the games."

Playing each and every game is more important than ever as other countries continue to close the gap on Canada and the United States, who have combined to win six of the last seven world and Paralympic titles since 2000.

Four years ago in Massachusetts, Canada opened the world championships with an 11-1 rout of Italy. Two weeks ago in Norway, Canada had to come from behind to beat the Italians 3-1. In 2008, Canada and the U.S. combined to outscore their opponents 50-16; this year that gap was cut to 27-9.

"We're never going to be guaranteed to win gold," Westlake said. "So the next time we do win, it's going to feel that much sweeter."

The fact Canada and the U.S. was the semifinal and not the final highlights the heightened competition. The matchup

occurred because the U.S. finished second in its pool, losing to the Czech Republic and needing a shootout to edge Estonia.

Korea, blanked 2-0 by Canada in pool play, won the silver medal. Norway, the 2004 world champs and traditionally the biggest threat to Canada and the U.S., didn't even make the semifinals, finishing fifth.

"The sport is growing in popularity. You're starting to see all your typical hockey countries get involved," the 25-year-old said. "Canada started putting money into sledge hockey before anyone else, carding athletes — this is my job and I take it seriously. Now you're seeing other countries, especially those who (host) the Olympics putting money into it. Korea, this is their full-time job. They eat, sleep and play sledge hockey."

Westlake welcomes the new contenders.

"I can't wait for five years from now, if I'm still playing, when Canada, the Czechs and Russia are playing for gold," he said.

Just don't expect him to accept anything less than gold when he pulls on the Canadian sweater.