

Brianne Jenner leads No. 2 Cornell into NCAA tournament

by Herb Garbutt
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You can tell from the tone of her voice that Hayleigh Cudmore isn't kidding.

As she and her Cornell teammates drive toward the NCAA championship, the sophomore defenceman shouldn't feel this way about her opponents. But she can't help it, because she knows exactly what it's like to try to stop Brianne Jenner.

"I actually feel kind of sorry for them," says Cudmore, Jenner's roommate and fellow Oakville resident. "I played against her in the (Provincial Women's Hockey League) and now I experience it every day in practice. It seems no matter where Bri is, she gets the puck and at times she seems unstoppable. You see girls doing everything they're supposed to and she's still getting the puck to the net. She's elevated her game to the point that even the best defencemen in the league are having trouble stopping her."

It's tough to call this a breakthrough year for Jenner. After all, she had at least 20 goals and 50 points and was a nominee for the Patty Kazmaier Award as the NCAA's top player in each of her first two seasons at Cornell.

But this year, with the graduation of Olympic gold medallist Rebecca Johnston, Jenner became the key player in the Big Red's offence and responded with 34 goals and 67 points in 31 games — just one of two players in NCAA Division I women's hockey to average more than two points game this season.

"She's a player who, quite frankly, can beat you any way she wants," said Cornell coach Doug Derrrough. "She's big and has the size, her skating is great, her vision, she sees the ice very well — almost too well because she'll pass and we'd like her to shoot more because she's got a great shot. She's got quick hands.

There's not an area she's weak in."

Jenner's season earned her both the Ivy League and East Coast Athletic Conference player of the year awards, but she is quick to deflect the attention away from herself.

"The awards are really more a reflection of the team," she says.

Cornell is a very talented team. It heads into the national championship tournament as the No. 2 seed, behind only the undefeated Minnesota Golden Gophers. But Jenner's play has left her teammates in awe.

"Our team has had some amazing talent. I was lucky to play with Rebecca Johnston my first year, but I've never seen a player take a team on its back like this. It's been really amazing to watch," said Cudmore, herself enjoying a strong season with 24 points.

And even though teams are aware of her every time she steps on the ice, Jenner has still managed to play at a level over the past two weeks that borders on ridiculous.

Of Cornell's 14 goals in four ECAC playoff games, Jenner

Big Red's Machine



Oakville's Brianne Jenner has posted 67 points in 31 games this season for the Cornell Big Red, the second-ranked team in NCAA Division I women's hockey.

| photo courtesy Cornell Athletics

scored six of them and assisted on six others, with half of her points coming in the final two minutes of the Big Red's four victories. To recap:

- Mar. 1: Having already erased a two-goal deficit in the third, Cornell fell behind 4-3 with 2:35 left against Colgate. Jenner picked up her fourth point of the game by setting up Monika Leck with 47 seconds to play in the third, then completed her hat trick, scoring the winner 39 seconds into overtime.

- Mar. 2: With Cornell down 2-0, Jenner set up two third-period goals, including the tying goal with 53 seconds remaining. She then scored the winner with one second left on the clock to complete a sweep of the Colgate series.

"Brianne just wouldn't let us lose," Cudmore said.

- Mar. 9: Jenner set up Taylor Woods' winning goal with 1:38 to play and then added an empty netter for her third point of the game in a 4-2 semifinal win over St. Lawrence.

- Mar. 10: Jenner opened the scoring, leaving the heroics in the ECAC title game to teammate Jessica Campbell, who scored with 1:40 left to give Cornell a 2-1 win over Harvard.

"All the top players have something, that little bit extra," Derrrough says, referencing Michael Jordan. "She's a real competitor. She wants the puck when the game is on the line. She wants to be that difference maker."

Competitive nature

Unlike Jordan, you might not get the death stare from Jenner should you be fortunate to beat her at, well, anything.

"She's competitive, but within herself," says Brenda Jenner, her mom.

"She just pushes herself to be the best at whatever she does," adds her dad, Dave.

Jenner played soccer and basketball growing up, but it was clear hockey was always No. 1 with her. She was skating at age two and wasted no time making her intentions clear.

"She went right from getting around the ice without falling, to

"Give me a stick," says her dad.

Derrrough scouted Jenner for four years and knew she was a special player. But once he got her commitment to join the Big Red, he had to wait. Jenner delayed her enrollment at Cornell by a year when she was centralized with the national team prior to the Vancouver Olympics. The youngest player in the Canadian camp, she was one of the final cuts.

Jenner says — and Derrrough agrees — she has become a more well-rounded player since then, improving her strength and defensive play (she led Cornell with a plus-40 mark and topped all forwards in blocked shots).

Now with the Olympics less than a year away and the world championships approaching, Jenner said she can't help but think about playing for Canada again — she won gold with the national team at last year's worlds. But for the next week, those thoughts will take a backseat.

"(The Olympics have) been my childhood dream for as long as I can remember. For guys, it's the NHL; for us, that's our NHL," Jenner said. "It's always in the back of your mind and hopefully I'll be able to do it, but right now I'm focused on Saturday."

Cornell will play Mercyhurst in the opening round of the tournament. The Big Red has made the Frozen Four in each of Jenner's first two seasons.

Both Jenner and Derrrough concede that while there is little separating teams two through eight, Minnesota (38-0-0) has distanced itself from the pack.

"That's the beauty of the NCAA, though," Derrrough said. "It's not a best-of-seven series. It's one game."

And in a one-game showdown, there are few players Cornell would rather have leading it into battle than Jenner.

"Down the stretch, she's been beyond clutch," Cudmore says. "We know we can't go into games thinking Brianne will carry us, but when you have one of the best players, it does instill confidence in us. That's so important to a team making a championship run. She's our catalyst."

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