

Haydar signs with Thrashers

Winger optimistic deal gives him better shot at making NHL

By Steve LeBlanc
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

It just so happens the first three digits in the phone number of Darren Haydar's new team — the Atlanta Thrashers — are the same as those of his parents here in town.

The 878 connection could be considered a good omen for the 26-year-old Miltonian, who after four years in the American Hockey League is still hopeful of getting the chance to trade in his minor league status for that of an NHLer.

Never really given that opportunity with the Nashville Predators — who didn't seem to have the productive right winger on their radar at all the last two years — Haydar agreed to a two-year deal with the Thrashers Monday night.

The deal was made public Tuesday afternoon, just three days after he became an unrestricted free agent.

The first year of the contract is a two-way deal and calls for Haydar to make the league minimum \$450,000 if he cracks the Atlanta lineup or \$95,000 if he's assigned to the AHL Chicago Wolves. Year two is a straight one-way deal with the Thrashers, meaning he stays up with the parent club or gets traded.

Now past the four-year barrier in his pro hockey career, Haydar will have to clear waivers if he's sent down to the Wolves this fall.

"There were some other offers, but nobody stepped up the way they (Thrashers) did," said the 5'9", 170 lbs. forward — fresh off a league-leading 35-point playoff run and a trip to the Calder Cup finals with the Predators' AHL Milwaukee Admirals. "I feel good about the deal and think I'll have more of a chance (to make the NHL) with Atlanta."

Added Thrashers' executive vice president and general manager Don Waddell, "Darren brings a lot of skill, and with the way the game is called now you can't have too much of that. Size is becoming less of a factor, and with that I think this is a good fit for both us and Darren."

An AHL Rookie of the Year in 2002/03, Haydar doesn't think his inability to catch on with Nashville has much to do with any lingering stigma he may have picked up from his 2002 NHL debut — when he suffered a concussion from a thunderous third-period check from Blackhawks defenceman Steve Poapst.

He played just one more game about a month later and since then hadn't been mentioned anywhere in the Predators' top prospects rankings.

"I think it had more to do with the fact that with Paul Kariya and Steve Sullivan in the lineup, they (Predators)

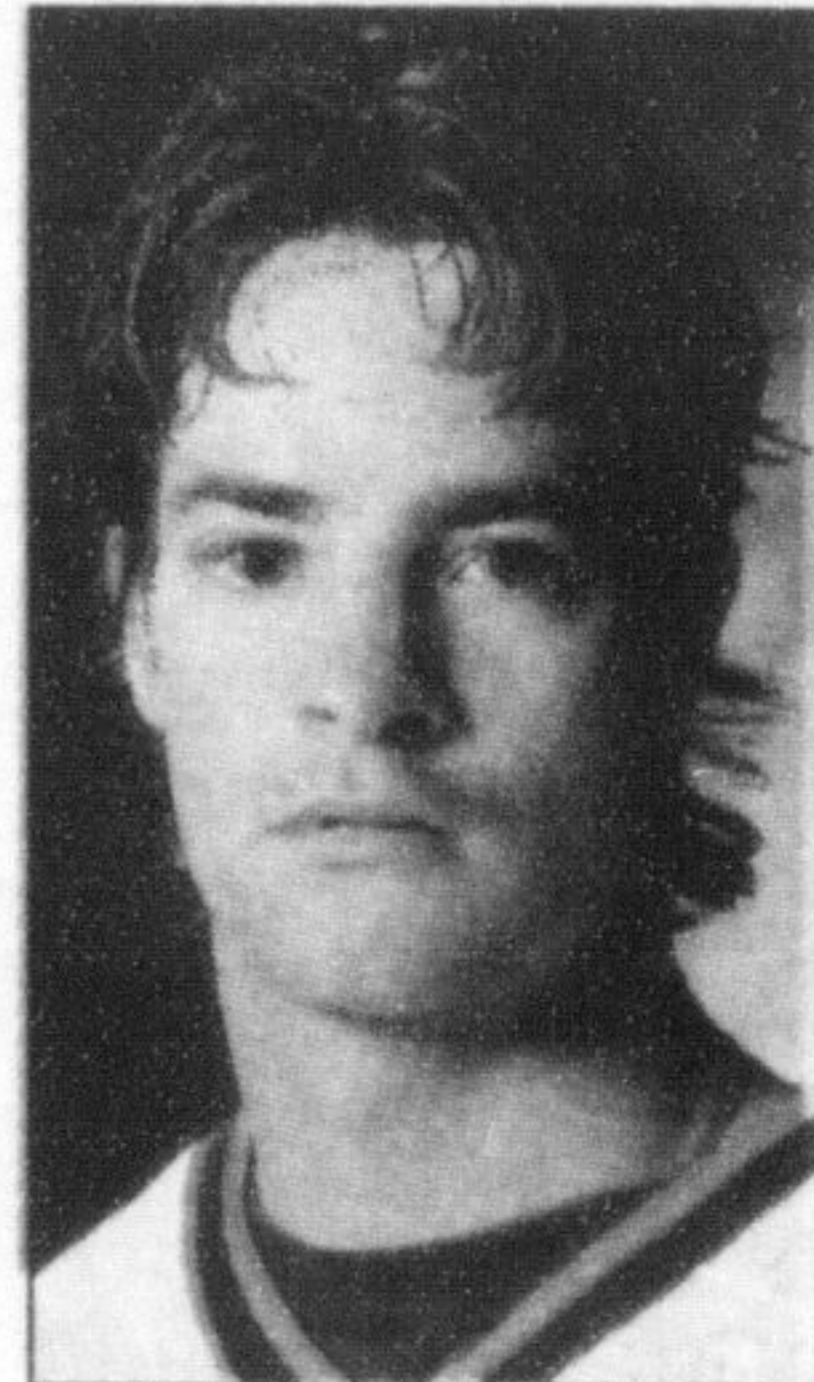
couldn't justify having another guy who's 5'9"," said the diminutive winger, who led the Admirals to the Calder Cup title in 2004 with a league-leading 26 points.

Haydar may be on the small side, but he's certainly played big in high-stakes situations at every level he's competed at. After leading his hometown Jr. A Merchants to an All-Ontario championship and the New Hampshire Wildcats to two trips to the Frozen Four, Milton's NHL hopeful strung together four 20-plus goal, 50-plus point seasons with Milwaukee — with a career-high 92-points (35G, 57A) campaign this past season that was good enough for fifth among AHL scorers.

This was followed by an explosive post season, which included 17 powerplay points and three shorthanded goals.

"I think that (production) boosted my stock," he said. "With the new NHL, special teams play is becoming more and more important."

Also signing with Atlanta Tuesday was Haydar's former New Hampshire teammate, Jason Krog — who spent last year playing in Europe after marginally-successful stints with the New York Islanders and Anaheim Mighty Ducks.



Darren Haydar

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