

SPORTS

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Trade brings seasoned OHLer back home

Defenceman Shepley now living in town while closing out Major-Junior career with Brampton

By Jon Kuiperij
SPECIAL TO THE CHAMPION



DOUG BALL / COURTESY OF BRAMPTON BATTALION

BATTALION'S NEWEST TROOPER: Recently traded to Brampton, OHL veteran Zack Shepley guards his defensive zone during his recent debut against Niagara.

Zack is back, in more ways than one.

Twenty-year-old defenceman Zack Shepley — an Oakville native whose family relocated to Milton three years ago — returned to Ontario Hockey League (OHL) action earlier this month, playing in his first games of the season after undergoing off-season surgery to repair two herniated discs in his lower back.

The return to action coincides with a return to the area for Shepley, who was recently dealt to the Brampton Battalion after playing his first three seasons with the Plymouth Whalers — the last culminating with an OHL championship.

"It was good to play in a game again," said the six-foot-four-inch, 218-pound blueliner,

who arrived in Brampton a mere one hour before a December 7 tilt with the Niagara IceDogs but still suited up for the 3-0 win.

"It was nice to get the first one out of the way right away and not have to think about it for a few days. I didn't have to deal with the nervousness."

Shepley was referring to the adjustment of playing with a new team, but he easily could have been talking about his return from the back ailment.

He first started feeling pain in his lower back in the spring of 2005, but played through it last season before undergoing an MRI at Christmas.

The test discovered the two herniated discs, causing Shepley to sit out for six weeks before rejoining the Whalers for their run to the Memorial Cup.

He finally underwent surgery this past summer.

"I knew I had to take the time to heal it so I could have a

hockey career (past the OHL) as well as a normal life," Shepley said.

Playing with Brampton means Shepley — one of three Milton OHLers — can move back in with his parents. It also might mean a better shot at getting back to the Memorial Cup, since the Battalion are just two points out of first place in the Eastern Conference with a 20-11-1-2 record.

Their newest defenceman picked up an assist in Friday's 6-3 decision over the Kingston Frontenacs — who include fellow Miltonian Josh Brittain — and is a plus-2 in five games since his arrival.

Plymouth wasn't doing too badly itself, but a 19-9-2-2 record is only good enough for a fifth tie in the West — which features such top contenders as Kitchener, Windsor and Sault Ste. Marie.

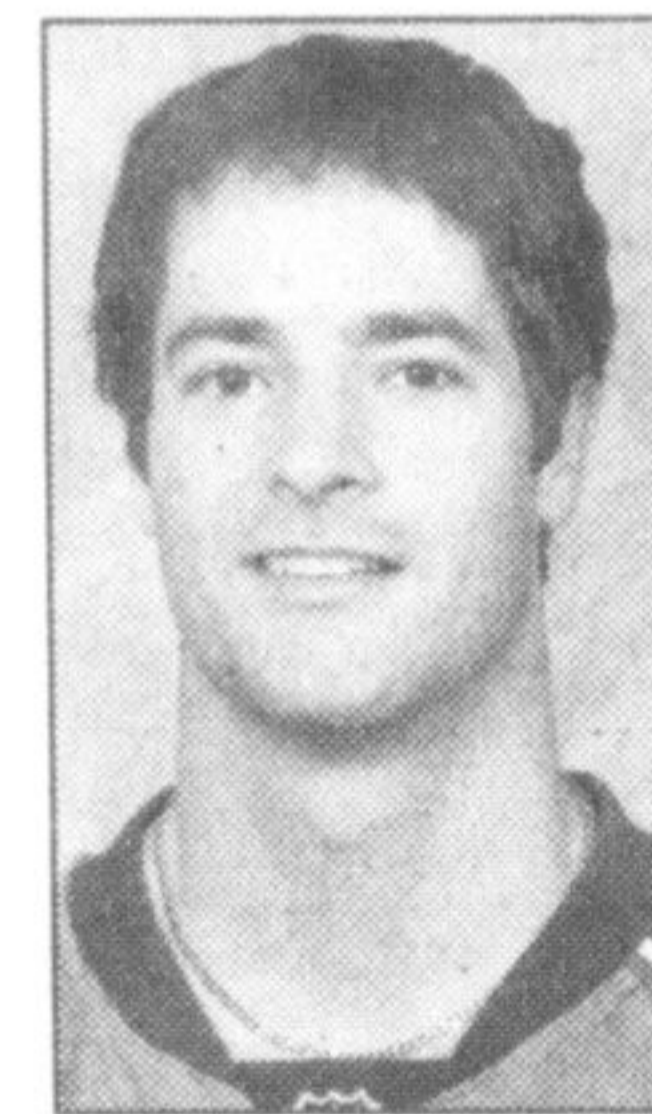
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Haydar sent back to Wolves

In a not-too-surprising move, Darren Haydar found himself headed back to the American Hockey League's Chicago Wolves Sunday afternoon.

The reassignment came just a few days after the Atlanta Thrashers placed him on waivers — which he cleared Wednesday — as part of an offensive shake-up that began with the recent acquisition of veteran Mark Recchi.

Prior to being recalled by Atlanta October 10, which began his longest NHL stint in five-and-a-half years, the 28-year-old right winger was named captain of the Wolves. This followed an incredible 2006-07 campaign in which he amassed 41 goals and 81 assists to run away



Darren Haydar

with the AHL's scoring race and claim MVP honours.

Even more impressive, he recorded a point in 39 straight games, tying the fourth-longest streak in North American professional hockey history.

Haydar closed out his latest NHL tenure with a goal and seven assists in 16 games.

His return to the Windy City is welcome news for the Wolves, who already sit atop the Western Conference at 19-7-1-0,

and with the recent arrival of both their reigning MVP and hot prospect Bryan Little are even more favoured to make another serious run at the Calder Cup.

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