

Hitchen tries hand in German hockey league

BY MICHAEL HAYAKAWA
Staff Writer

Playing professional hockey isn't all about making big dollars, travelling on chartered jets, dining out at first-class restaurants and even endorsing products in magazine or TV advertisements.

For Justin Hitchen, it was all about moving to a new country, adapting to a different social environment, learning how to cook his own meals, wash the dishes and doing other domestic chores in a new residence miles away from his native Stouffville.

Making his professional hockey debut this season, the 21-year-old Hitchen is playing overseas for a team in Moosburg, Germany competing in the lower semi-professional ranks called EV Aich.

As a forward for the team and their lone Canadian player, Hitchen has made an immediate impact, leading the club in scoring.

Turning to play in Europe, Hitchen said it was an option he wanted to pursue since playing tier two junior A hockey spanning over four seasons with the Markham Waxers, North York Rangers and Durham Fury.

To date, Hitchen hasn't regretted that decision.

"I've always wanted to come to Europe to play the European style of hockey," he said from his Moosburg residence.



Moosburg is located outside of Munich. Justin Hitchen, a former Stouffville Spirit, made his pro hockey debut there this season. The 21-year-old is the team's scoring leader.

Hitchen said the opportunity to play in Germany wouldn't have been possible without the help of Stouffville resident John Barnett and Markham resident Mike Regan.

"John gave me some insight on his experiences in playing professional hockey in Germany and he pointed me in the right direction in making my dream of playing European hockey come true," Hitchen said.

But it was Regan, a current coach in the Markham Waxers minor organization, who got the wheels in motion in arranging for Hitchen to be with his current club.

"Mike flew here to Germany in the summer and made some inquiries with some teams on my behalf," Hitchen said.

"He was a huge help in beginning my hockey career in Europe." Since arriving in Germany, Hitchen said it was a tough adjust-

ment.

But his new teammates have been helpful in making his life away from the ice and Stouffville a lot easier and more enjoyable. Some have even provided him with some cooking recipes.

"They know how far away I am from home so they make many efforts in making me feel good about being here.

"Whether it's taking me out for dinner, showing me some sights, meeting some of their friends away from the rink, or inviting me to their houses for meals," he said.

As well, some of the local supporters have gone out of their way to offer assistance.

Especially since a good number of them speak English.

"I always have fans talking to me and asking me questions so that gives me a nice feeling, too. Everybody makes efforts to ensure I'm all taken care of," he said.

While in Germany, Hitchen said he's made contact with a couple of former Stouffville Spirit players, Mike Sullivan and Mike Forgie, who play in Deggendorf, about a 45-minute drive away from Moosburg.

"We've met up numerous times and have hung out," Hitchen said. "We also travelled to Austria and took in some of the sights there. What a beautiful country.

"Also the hockey stores over here

are quite different.

"Different styles of stores. Different products. Not like just Hockey back home or that type of store."

Part of his one-year deal includes a fully furnished apartment complete with cable TV, Playstation and cellphone and a per diem each month.

As for the hockey itself, Hitchen said the calibre is good. The game atmosphere, he added, is far different from what he was accustomed to during his tier two junior A days.

"The fans have drums and instruments ... instead of the announcer saying the last name when someone scores the goal the crowd chants the name."

Looking down the road, Hitchen hopes his stay with EV Aich will be a stepping stone to bigger things.

"I hope I'm able to move up to a higher league. Whether it's here in Germany, or maybe another country in Europe.

"I've been contacted by a few teams already in higher leagues.

"To travel and play hockey and make a bit of money on the side, what else could I ask for?"

"I'm not going to get to far ahead of myself.

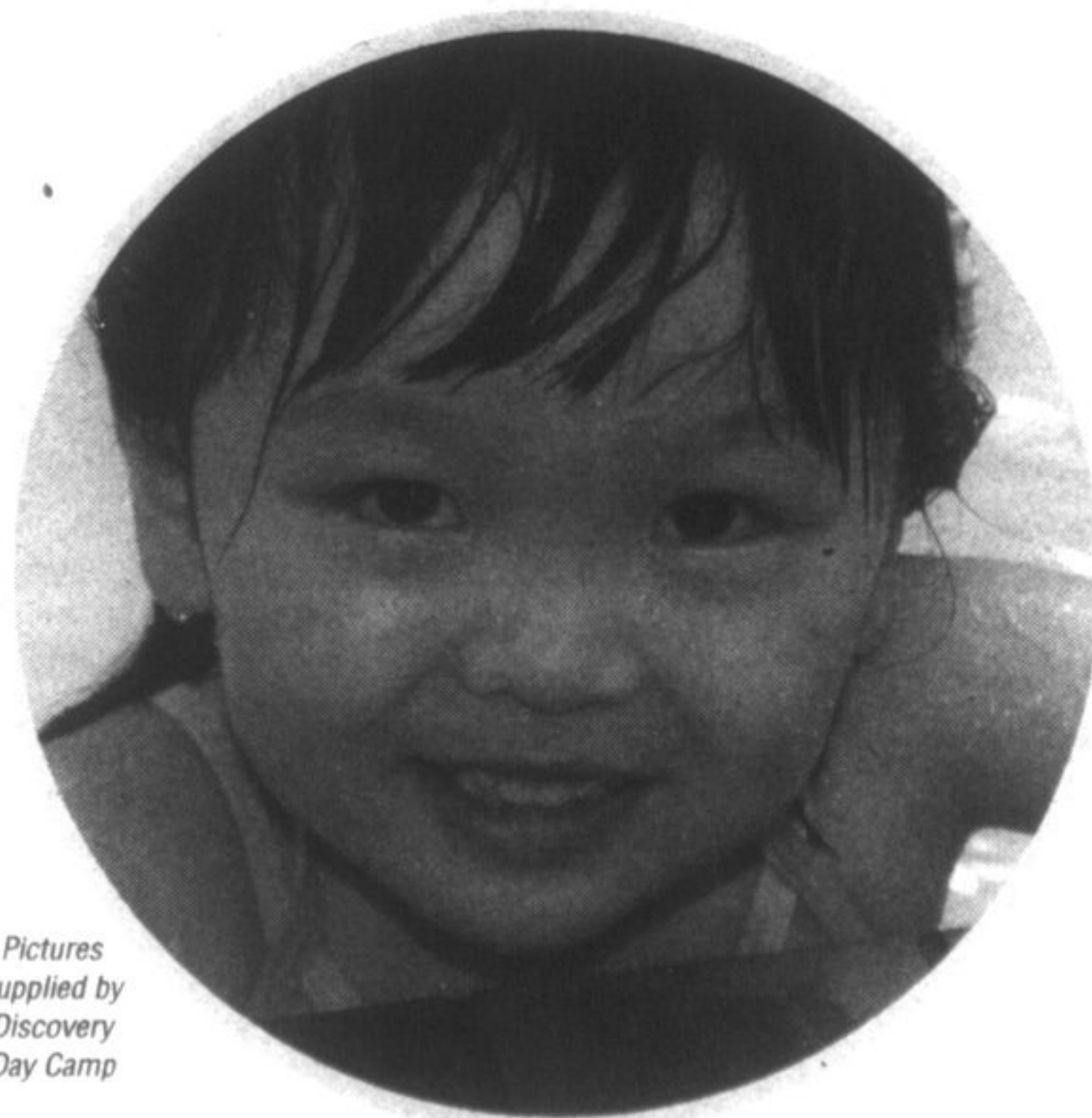
"I'm going to take it one game at a time and whatever happens next year will take care of itself," he said.

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