

Pro hockey title worth the wait for Spirit grad

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Justin MacDonald couldn't recall playing on a championship team during his youth hockey days.

But the 22-year-old former Stouffville Spirit Jr. A and Markham Waxers midget and bantam forward won't soon forget this past season.

The Newmarket native was part of a Pensacola Ice Flyers team that skated off with its first-ever Southern Professional Hockey League's President's Cup championship, capped off with a 2-0 win over the Huntsville Havoc in the third and deciding game of their final series in Pensacola, Fla. April 14.

While winning the title was a great way to end the season it was the last thing on MacDonald's mind when he began the 2012-13 season in the Federal Hockey League as a member of Watertown, N.Y.'s 1000 Island Privateers.

Citing the organization wasn't the most efficient, MacDonald asked his agent for a move.

The wish was granted just after the National Hockey League ended its lockout in January as he had an

opportunity to play in Pensacola.

"The Southern Professional Hockey League is a far better league and when I had a chance to play in New York or on a beach, I definitely wanted to play on the beach," MacDonald said. "I was glad to get out of Watertown."

But even when landing in Pensacola, MacDonald acknowledged there was a bit of uncertainty on his part since the conclusion of the NHL lockout saw a domino effect with players moving from one league to another.

"It was a stressful time for sure," he said. "I'd heard word of me going elsewhere. But fortunately it didn't pan out and at the end, I couldn't complain because I won a championship."

In joining the Ice Flyers, where he was the second-youngest player on their roster, MacDonald sensed good things were in store for him.

"You could tell right away the team clicked. I'd never been on a team where they connected so well, where we all got along. There was no diversity in our dressing room. There was definitely good team chemistry and that's huge. If



JUSTIN MACDONALD: Forward with Spirit two years ago hoists cup with Pensacola Ice Flyers.

things don't click off the ice they won't click on it," he said.

Amassing nine goals and five assists in 28 regular season games and one assist in seven postseason tilts, MacDonald was quick to give credit to the Ice Flyers' coaching staff along with team owner and former Philadelphia Flyers' forward Tim Kerr in creating a cohesive unit.

At the same time though, MacDonald said he learned quite a bit from the older players on the squad.

He began his professional career last season when he split time with the Fayetteville FireAntz and Mississippi River Kings of the SPHL.

With the Spirit, the latter half of the 2010-11 campaign when they reached the Ontario Junior Hockey League semifinals before losing to the Wellington Dukes, MacDonald had an outstanding postseason when he compiled six goals and four assists in 12 playoff games.

"It definitely started when I played with the Waxers," he said. "But coming to Stouffville from Pickering in 2010-11 was a great time. The organization was great and they had great fan support."

"When you have fans like that come out to see you play you want to play better. We had a great team and coach in Craig Donovan that year. It was a team where everyone put in the same amount of effort."

"Wellington just brought their best game to beat us and went on to the RBC Cup," he said.

MacDonald acknowledged he

does not know what the future holds for him at the moment.

But as he has been part of a championship club, he hopes it might warrant some attention from an NHL club in terms of extending an invitation to him to attend a free agent camp.

Not to mention he's still relatively young.

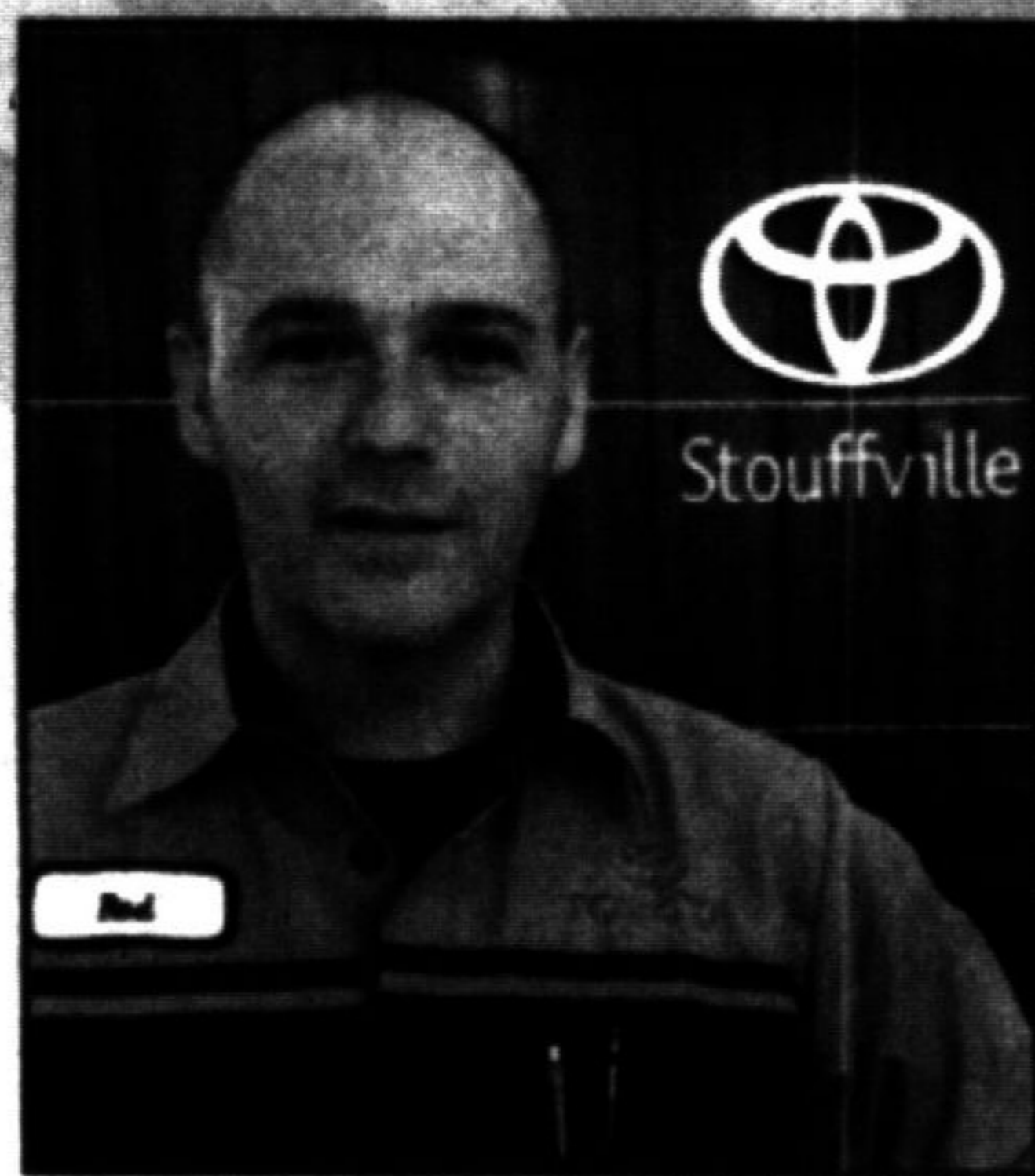
One thing MacDonald won't be denied, though, will be a coveted championship ring.

"Being on the Ice Flyers was a great experience. I wouldn't change it for the world," he said.

NOTES: Dan McWhinney couldn't play goal for Huntsville during the playoffs because of an appendectomy. He backstopped the Spirit to its first berth in the OJHL final in 2006. Now 27, he's played seven years of pro for six teams. He was playoff MVP and top goalie, playing for New Jersey, in the Federal league a year ago... the Spirit hosts its annual rookie camp May 3 and 4 at the Stouffville Arena. More at stouffvillespirit.pointstreaksites.com

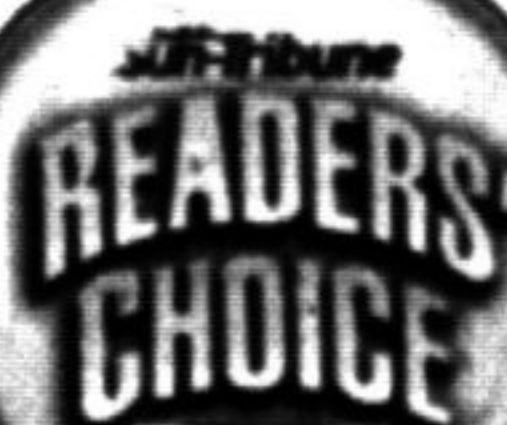
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