



PHOTO/JENNIFER MASON

Stouffville's Will Acton signs autographs following the Edmonton Oilers' game-day skate at the Air Canada Centre Saturday. Acton scored his first NHL goal Monday in Washington.

Acton beats odds to reach NHL

BY JIM MASON
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Will Acton didn't need help getting around the Air Canada Centre Saturday.

His dad, Keith Acton, was an assistant coach with the Toronto Maple Leafs for 10 seasons.

And with the Actons living in Stouffville, Will saw his share of NHL games in the Toronto rink.

Will skated against the Leafs on the ACC ice as a member of the Edmonton Oilers Saturday.

Keith, who became the Oilers associate coach after Will signed with the organization last summer, was on the bench.

The story goes beyond the father-son connection.

Will Acton beat the odds.

He took another step Saturday - the Oilers told him to "find a place to live". In other words, he won't be back in the AHL any time soon.

Will scored his first goal in the NHL Monday in Washington, but sounded like he would have rather had a win for the 1-5-1 Oilers, who play on Long Island tonight.

UNDRAFTED AT ALL LEVELS

How many other NHL players never played a game of triple A minor hockey?

Never drafted either, first passed by all teams in the Ontario Hockey League. Ditto a couple of years later in the NHL draft.

This isn't the Taylor Hall or Ryan-Nugent Hopkins story.

Born in Minnesota, Will played the game as a youth in Philadelphia and New York, where his dad also coached, and then at the A level with the Stouffville Clippers.

He was a wisp of kid when he played Jr. C in Uxbridge and then blossomed in Jr. A with the Stouffville Spirit.

He played four seasons on scholarship at Lake Superior State and earned a tryout with

the Leafs' American Hockey League affiliate, the Toronto Marlies.

Two years later, the 26-year-old followed his coach, Dallas Eakins, from the Marlies to the Oilers.

"It's like I keep saying about Will, he just won't go away," Eakins said Saturday. "Will still has a long road, but we're all very proud of what he has accomplished so far in his career."

RETURN TO EDMONTON

He was less than a year old when he last lived in Edmonton, when his dad won the Stanley Cup with the 1988 Oilers and he was small enough to fit inside the cup for a family photograph.

Will huddled with his agent, Leaf legend Darcy Tucker, and signed autographs for a small contingent of Stouffville fans outside the Oilers dressing room following Saturday's game-day skate.

"It's pretty surreal, I don't think it's quite hit me just yet," he said. "There were times you wondered if you were ever going to make it."

"But I just kept at it and kept trying to get to the next level and just make the next team. I've taken that approach and it's led me here."

And the father figure?

"It's pretty cool, I'm pretty fortunate that way," he said. "I don't think there's anyone who knows me or knows my game better than he does. It's pretty nice have that asset on the bench or between games to make adjustments."

"On the other hand, it's kind of nice just to come to the rink and see your dad. Not a lot of people get to do that."

On the Oilers' only trip to Toronto this season, there were multiple ticket requests to meet.

"My phone bill has probably blown up a little, but it's a good problem to have," he said of the support of family and friends.

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