

Markus Naslund was surely Canucks' Swedest deal

1996 trade of Alek Stojanov to Penguins brought a future captain to Vancouver

By Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER A farm kid from southern Alberta, Mason Raymond, is the Vancouver Canucks' most European-style player. The team's most physical defenceman is a quiet Swede, Alex Edler, and one of its fiercest forecheckers is Denmark's Jannik Hansen. Their captain is Henrik Sedin.

If you want to know how this Canadian team became progressive enough to rise above the narrow stereotypes we once had for hockey players, March 20, 1996 would be a good date to start.

That was the day former Canuck general manager Pat Quinn, an old-school cigar chomper often unfairly mistaken for Tyrannosaurus Rex, traded Alek Stojanov for Markus Naslund.

Stojanov was an intimidating power-forward prospect from Hamilton Quinn's hometown. Naslund was a small, soft scorer from Ornskoldsvik, Sweden. He didn't even fight!

"You have to remember the era," Canucks scout Thomas Gradin, also a Swede, said. "Just imagine when Pat Quinn was running the show. Markus was a small, Swedish player. The smaller you were, at one time, the worse it was. All of a sudden there was going to be more Swedes. And you know, through the years, there was that question: Can you actually win with Swedes on your team? That has always been talked about."

Not much anymore. Not with Nicklas Lidstrom and Henrik Zetterberg and Tomas Holmstrom in Detroit. And the 2006 Olympic gold medal. Or even, three months after that 1996 deadline trade for Naslund, Peter Forsberg co-driving the Colorado Avalanche to the Stanley Cup.

Times have changed. The Canucks will retire Naslund's jersey on Saturday. He never made it beyond the second round of the playoffs, but he captained Vancouver for eight years and led them boldly into this century, in which the Canucks have missed the playoffs only twice and become one of the National Hockey League's strongest franchises.

Naslund finished his 12 years in Vancouver as the Canucks' all-time leading scorer.

"We have a picture that's created that you've got to be a rah-rah, big, tough guy to be a captain, and that's not true," Quinn said recently at his home in West Vancouver. "We know it was a mess when Mark Messier came in [at the end of the 1990s] and he had that sort of reputation.

"When Markus came here there were some vacuums [in the team] and he was a big enough guy to fill those vacuums. I don't know how much genius there was in [the trade], but it sure turned out good."

Beset by injuries, Stojanov was dropped by the Penguins only a year later. He was 24 and his NHL career was over. Stojanov finished with seven points, 862 behind Naslund.

It remains the single greatest trade in Canuck history, following by one decade the worst: Cam Neely and a first-round pick to the Boston Bruins for Barry Pederson.

“Pittsburgh saw a potential Neely in big Alex, and they were willing to give up this skill guy,” Quinn said. “You’re always concerned about doing another Neely deal and giving away a guy too soon, especially some of these big kids.”

One of the most remarkable aspects of Naslund’s time in Vancouver is that it lasted beyond the year-long reign of terror when Mike Keenan after Quinn was fired as GM and Tom Renney as coach essentially held both jobs and gutted most of the active roster.

Good thing Brian Burke had just been hired as general manager when Naslund, left out of the lineup by coach Keenan at the start of the 1998-99 season, asked to be moved.

Burke didn’t trade him, Naslund grew up a little, then flourished. He exploded for 36 goals that season, and a year later became the Canucks’ first European captain.

Anytime the team struggled, the superficial debate about Swedish captains restarted.

“Maybe the Swedish nature in him is not to come across as being a fiery person,” Naslund’s long-time linemate and friend, Brendan Morrison, said from Calgary. “I don’t know if some people read into that as Markus not caring, but that couldn’t have been farther from the truth.”

“He cared incredibly about the team performance and his own performance,” iconic ex-captain Trevor Linden, banished by Keenan in 1998 and repatriated by Burke in 2001, said of playing for Naslund. “His performance meant everything to him, and the team’s performance. He cared to the point that it probably took some of the fun out of things. Whether it be in the dressing room or with his family or in the community, he really cared.”

That was Quinn’s impression, too.

“He cared about his teammates,” Quinn said. “That’s what a great captain is.”

Morrison, whose Flames have Saturday night off in Calgary, is among Naslund’s many former teammates who will be at the retirement ceremony.

“I admire him as a player and as a person,” Morrison said. “I think he’s probably going to be a little bit embarrassed by all the attention. He was never a guy who craved the limelight. But this is going to be a special night.”

“I was overwhelmed when I was asked,” Naslund said. “You feel that you’re not worthy of it in some ways. It would be easier to accept if I’d been part of a Stanley Cup-winning team. [That disappointment] will always be there a little bit, but you’ve got to let go. We did our best. Coming to the rink and knowing you had a chance of winning every night, and you played with guys who were hungry and played an exciting brand of hockey that’s what I remember most fondly.”

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Canucks' top prospect Cody Hodgson out after taking stick to the face

By Ian Walker

VANCOUVER Manitoba Moose leading scorer Cody Hodgson will not play Friday against the Oklahoma City Barons after an errant stick to the face sent him to a clinic on Thursday.

The Vancouver Canucks' top prospect was competing in a battle drill with Lee Sweatt during a hard Manitoba Moose practice in Oklahoma City when the defenceman's stick rode up under the centre's visor. Hodgson continued to practise for a short time before being forced to leave the ice with a large red welt on his left cheek.

Moose physiotherapist Rob Milette accompanied the 20-year-old to the local clinic, where he was to undergo tests to see the extent of the injury. It is not believed to involve Hodgson's eye. Results won't be available until morning and there is no time frame for his return.

"We'll have to get him looked at and see what's happening," Moose head coach Claude Noel told the Winnipeg Free Press. "That will be determined by our medical people."

The incident occurred during a two-on-two drill about 45 minutes into today's practice. Hodgson came out of the corner with the puck along the goal line to the net when Sweatt, who was beaten on the play, reached around from behind to try and stop him. It was then when Sweatt's stick clipped Hodgson in the face.

Hodgson, the team's first-line centre, leads the AHL's Moose in scoring with 10 goals after missing nearly all of last season with various back injuries.

The Moose called up Francis Lemieux of the East Coast Hockey League's Florida Everblades to replace Hodgson in the lineup.

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Wake-Up Call with Cam Cole: No Duck luck

By Cam Cole

VANCOUVER Just playing Devil's Advocate here, and not suggesting the Vancouver Canucks should give the two points back, but ... Anaheim Ducks coach Randy Carlyle may be right.

The play probably should have been blown dead in the third period Wednesday night, the instant Ducks goalie Curtis McElhinney was struck in the mask by Christian Ehrhoff's point shot, and if it had been, Daniel Sedin's goal into the open net vacated by the bleeding McElhinney wouldn't have counted.

The Ducks might have held onto their 4-2 lead, and passed the Canucks in the standings.

Instead, the goal got Vancouver back within one, McElhinney was gashed over the eyebrow for several stitches and had to be replaced by Jonas Hiller, Ryan Kesler tied it in the final minute, and the Canucks won in the shootout -- and Carlyle was hot, getting into a little tete-a-tete with a Team 1040 reporter afterward that went something like this:

Reporter: "Was fatigue a factor in the third period?"

Carlyle: "To some degree it was. What's the call when a goalie gets hit in the mask with a slapshot?"

Reporter: "In international hockey, it's an automatic whistle."

Carlyle: "It is in this league."

Reporter: "Tough call, though, because it was a bang-bang play."

Carlyle: "If it happened to the Canucks, what would you be saying?"

Reporter: "That it was a bang-bang play."

Carlyle: "Ha. You'd be saying they should have blown the whistle."

Reporter: "What did the ref say?"

Carlyle: "He said it was too quick. I said, well you got four sets of eyes out there. The linesmen can make that call, too. That clearly is cut and dried."

The point is not that the play happened too quickly for the whistle to be blown. The modern NHL casebook is full of goals disallowed even though the whistle didn't sound until after the puck entered the net -- the rationale being that it's not when the whistle actually was blown that matters, but when the referee meant to blow it.

So when is there a more obvious time to invoke that interpretation than when a goalie is kayoed by a slapshot to the head?

Just asking...

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Mo will be in the stands for Nazy's big night

By Ben Kuzma

You would think Brendan Morrison's number was being honoured Saturday, judging by his level of anticipation to witness Markus Naslund's No. 19 jersey being raised to the rafters in Rogers Arena.

"It's a very special night," said the centre of the famed West Coast Express line. "For me, to have the chance to be there and feel the emotion in the rink is something I'm going to remember for the rest of my life."

"I can tell my kids whenever we go to the rink again and his number is hanging up there that dad actually played with that guy. We had a lot of big years."

Big might be an understatement. The Vancouver Canucks trio was incredible and intimidating with an intoxicating blend of speed, power and finesse. The line combined for an eye-popping 119 goals and 272 points in the 2002-03 season and was arguably the game's greatest alignment during that campaign. And even though the WCE would eventually slow down, at its best it was a runaway train.

"It wasn't are we going to score tonight? It was, how many are we going to score tonight?," recalled Morrison. "I can tell you it's a really good feeling and I haven't had that for a while. When you're an offensive player and are in that groove, there's no better feeling. And we were so competitive."

"We took pride in being the best line and we went against top lines. It was a big challenge and one that we were excited about."

That's why Morrison took advantage of a narrow window in Calgary's schedule to jet here from California to attend the ceremony. Todd Bertuzzi can't do the same because the Detroit Red Wings play in New Jersey on Saturday. They know Naslund is deserving of being recognized because 756 points in 884 games as the franchise all-time scoring leader are as significant as his captaincy and the scrutiny he absorbed.

"Ultimately, it comes down to the team's playoff performance and it's probably why he doesn't get the credit he deserves," Morrison noted of failing to advance past the second round of the playoffs, especially when the Canucks blew a 3-1 series lead to Minnesota in 2003. "He took the brunt of it, which I think is unfair. He was appreciated and respected and was sincere. He really cared about the guys in the room."

"I spoke to Bert and he was really upset he couldn't be in Vancouver for the ceremony. He kind of lit up when we were talking about it, which was pretty cool to see."

For all the dates of distinction in Naslund's career here, Jan. 9, 2002 is among the most significant.

On that night in Joe Louis Arena, coach Marc Crawford played a hunch and placed Morrison between Naslund and Bertuzzi during a 5-4 overtime loss to Detroit. Andrew Cassels had been battling injuries and Crawford took Morrison off an alignment with Peter Schaefer and Matt Cooke. There was instant chemistry and after a week of tinkering, the Canucks knew they had something special in the WCE.

"They liked playing together, had a lot of fun and it was comical at times," recalled Crawford, now coach of the Dallas Stars. "Mo deserved a medal some days, but he was the kind of guy who could handle the impact of what was happening. They could really play a puck-possession game and it was a special line for a number of years."

Crawford had a special appreciation for Naslund because the winger drew crowds and kept the coach employed. Season-ticket holders were not amused when Crawford replaced the fired Mike Keenan midway through the torturous 1998-99 season. A 58-point season kept fans away, but Naslund managed 36 goals and 66 points on a terrible team that lost 18 of its last 28 games.

"People were angry and Markus was the one bright light we had," said Crawford. "At the end of that year, it was starting to change and getting respectability back to the franchise is a big part of his legacy. People identified with him because he was kind of a passionate guy especially for a Swede."

On a personal note, Crawford believed he lasted eight years as a Canucks head coach partly because the Naslund's ability to be a calming influence especially during his reign as captain.

"He quieted a lot of revolutions," admitted Crawford. "He probably understood me better than most. He put out fires that I would create."

Crawford's favourite memory had nothing to do with a Naslund rush or goal. It was the thunderous ovation when he appeared on crutches in the regular-season finale in 2001 to accept his Molson Cup award. He had broke his leg March 16 in Buffalo and the Canucks won just two of their last 11 games and barely squeaked into the playoffs thanks to a Harold Druken overtime winner on April 5 against Los Angeles before being swept by Colorado.

"Even in injury, he was a big part of us getting into the playoffs that day," summed up Crawford.

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Moose sign centre Lemieux

By QMI Agency

The Manitoba Moose have signed centre Francis Lemieux to a professional tryout contract, the AHL club announced Thursday.

Lemieux, 26, scored 10 goals and 21 points in 25 games with the ECHL's Florida Everblades. The Sherbrooke, Que., native previously played five seasons in the AHL.

The Moose play at Oklahoma City Friday night and could be without forward Cody Hodgson, who took a stick in the face from D Lee Sweatt Thursday and is questionable.

Tod Leiweke helped shape the Canucks

MATTHEW SEKERES

Vancouver— From Friday's Globe and Mail

Tod Leiweke says attending Markus Naslund's party would be "self indulgent," so the chief executive officer of the Tampa Bay Lightning will not be at Rogers Arena when No. 19 is retired in a pregame ceremony Saturday.

The former Canucks executive, who has gone on to be one of North America's most respected sports businessmen, is too preoccupied with the rebuilding Lightning, even if he would "like nothing more than to walk into that building with Steve Yzerman."

And in a way, it's fitting.

While Leiweke and Naslund were critical to the NHL franchise's turnaround, the former is The One Who Got Away. He watched Naslund forge his excellent career from Seattle, often inviting the team captain to watch the NFL's Seahawks at Qwest Field.

"More than once, he sat in my seats," Leiweke said. "The Canucks were my hockey outlet during eight seasons with the Seahawks."

Since departing Orca Bay Sports and Entertainment, the former owner of the Canucks and NBA's Grizzlies, Leiweke has been a part of the Minnesota Wild's 409-game sellout, created the Seahawks' 12th-man tradition, and launched the wildly successful Seattle Sounders FC of [Major League Soccer](#).

It was enough of a résumé to command an equity stake in the Lightning from owner Jeff Vinik, whom he first met in Vancouver during February's Olympics. By July, the 50-year-old had resigned as head of Paul Allen's Vulcan Sports conglomerate, which includes the Seahawks, Sounders and NBA's [Portland Trail Blazers](#), to follow his hockey heart and join forces with Yzerman, Tampa's new general manager.

"That wasn't the first call, and I have actually gotten pretty good at saying 'no,'" Leiweke said.

The Canucks called twice in the past four years during executive searches. Leiweke would only agree to join an advisory committee in August, 2009, when general manager Mike Gillis was handed the president's title, and when Victor de Bonis was handed the business-operations reins.

But to this day, much of Canucks Sports and Entertainment's model is the remnant of Leiweke's tenure as Orca Bay executive vice-president from 1994-99. He bolted after being bypassed for the company's top job, amid a rocky ownership period, but within a few years, the Canucks would emerge as a strong business under new owners, the Aquilini family, who remain his close friends.

"They had a vision, not of what it could be, but of what it should be," Leiweke said.

On the ice, a wise trade from the Leiweke era would prove a catalyst. In 1999, the Canucks acquired Naslund from the Pittsburgh Penguins for forward Alek Stojanov. Naslund would go on to become Vancouver's career scoring leader, and the key member of the West Coast Express, hockey's most dominant line, which triggered the club's active streak of 321 consecutive sellouts.

"Markus was one of those transitional players, who took the Canucks from a time when they weren't selling out, to a point where you couldn't get a ticket," Leiweke said.

'Schneider will start playoffs': dc

Readers rant on backup goalie and starter Luongo at White Towel

The Province

In a column on our White Towel blog, The Province's Jason Botchford writes about how it's time that Canucks backup Cory Schneider gets a start.

"It's easy to start Roberto Luongo," writes Botchford. "What's hard is making a change. What's hard is realizing each of the past three years have ended the same way and you continue to do the same things.

"What's hard is starting Schneider more, and telling your big-contract goalie he needs to play less. But Luongo is willing to do it.

"Is Alain Vigneault?"

Reaction among Province readers and Canucks fans has been swift and varied. We haven't seen this many comments on a White Towel post since Botchford wondered why Keith Ballard couldn't even make the lineup against the Maple Leafs, back on Nov. 9.

Here's some of what you had to say on the Schneider situation -- and you can read Botchford's full piece at thewhitetowel.ca:

SweetMonkeyAction: "The Canucks have played the fewest games in the league so far, ergo our schedule has been such that we have not needed to rest Luongo. Furthermore, that means our schedule is about to get much tougher. That is when you play Schneider. Not when the team has three games in eight days (and 10 in the last 27), with lots of rest. Stop making a controversy where there is none. If Schneider doesn't play around four times between now and the end of January, then you have a story."

Northfan: "Lou is a mid-level goalie, he ain't great. He has great games, but for every great save he makes he lets in a stinker. Ten million this season and he has stolen one game. He was outplayed again last night by the Ducks' backup."

Jimjang: "A starting goalie in the NHL shouldn't need to 'play himself into form' over the first half of the season. That's ludicrous. A frontline goalie who is a handicap to his team at least as often as he is an asset is no frontline goalie at all. All goalies are human and will have bad games and good games; the problem with Luongo is how consistently he has bad games."

Adrian G: "Luongo is not top 20 in any stat. For a Stanley Cup favourite with a great system and team D, this is probably a sign that he is tired. We all know that Lui is not a top five or 10 goalie anymore but maybe if he plays a little less, he will stay mentally sharp. All that we need is for Lui to be even average to pretty good for this team to win it. So far, he has been well below average and if anyone argues this fact, they really need to take off their blinders."

B: "'If you do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got.' Ronnie Coleman, eight-time Mr. Olympia."

Working Girl 6: "As Dr. Phil says, 'A good prediction of future outcome is from past behaviour.'"

Tina Poole: "Here's my theory: Vigneault is afraid to play Schneider longterm because he doesn't trust his ability to win on a regular basis."

Nikki: "I agree Luongo's not as consistent as we've seen him in the past. But let's relax for a little while, at least. He's working on his game, and working with a new coach making changes to his style. That's not going to happen immediately. Are we still in the mix right now? Are we winning more games than we're losing? Uhhhh, yeah. So give it a break, people."

dc: "Schneider will start for the Canucks in the first game of the playoffs ... just watch."

544548 Vancouver Canucks

Naslund left a long-lasting legacy still felt by Canucks

By Ben Kuzma

The symbolism is not lost on Henrik and Daniel Sedin.

They know raising Markus Naslund's retired No. 19 jersey banner on Saturday at Rogers Arena is a testament to how the legendary left winger raised franchise expectations, raised his game to be recognized as NHL MVP by his peers, and raised two baby-faced prospects to be as good off the ice as they are on it.

Look no further than the Sedins to see the lasting legacy left by a driven competitor and consummate captain. The identical Swedish twins are accountable, amiable and able to dictate tempo in a game while also being charitable in the community. And they owe it all to Naslund, a hometown hero who made their tough transition from Ornskoldsvik to the NHL easier to endure 10 years ago.

"Where do you start?" asks Henrik, the reigning Hart and Art Ross trophies winner. "For us, it was just having him here when we came over. You walk into the dressing room and there's a different language and you're on the other side of the world. The pressure

is a lot bigger over here from fans and the media. And then you see a guy sitting next to you and he's from the same neighbourhood back home.

"You see the way he carries himself and interacts with the players and media. He showed us that it's possible."

Not that it was easy.

Despite a fishbowl existence in a hockey-mad market during a dozen seasons where his leadership, lean years and quiet demeanour often sparked great debates, Naslund accumulated 756 points (346-410) in 884 games after being acquired for Alek Stojanov in a March 20, 1996 trade with Pittsburgh. The catalyst for the famed West Coast Express line set a single-season franchise standard for goals (48), assists (56) and points (104) by a left winger in 2002-03, the same season Naslund was named the Lester B. Pearson Award winner as outstanding player by the NHL Players' Association.

"He took a franchise from nothing to being a contender," says Daniel, who matched Naslund's assist total with 56 helpers last season. "When we lost games or played bad, he was the most upset. That didn't really come out to fans or the media. He never showed it, but he did in this room.

"We always looked up to how he played, but off the ice was the No. 1 thing. It was how he treated people and also his competitive nature. There is pressure to win, but in our first years we realized as a Canuck that you have to be good in the community, good in front of the fans and the media.

"If it wasn't for him, I think a lot of players on this team would be a lot different. We try to do the same with the younger players."

Even though Naslund would watch countryman and former Modo teammate Peter Forsberg capture the Hart and Art Ross in 2003, it paled in comparison to never advancing past the second round of the playoffs especially during his eight-year reign as captain. Aside from silver medals at world hockey championships, Naslund never captured Olympic gold with Sweden or sipped from the Stanley Cup with the Penguins or Canucks. He didn't play for his country when it won Olympic gold in 2006 and world titles in 1998 and 2006.

All this still bugs him today.

That's why Saturday will mean so much to Naslund and his family, friends and former teammates.

Joining Stan Smyl and Trevor Linden as the only Canucks to have their numbers hanging in the rafters will be emotional for Naslund. In the broad scope, it's easy to forget he endured a broken leg and a broken spirit when he asked former coach Mike Keenan for a trade at the outset of the 1997-98 season. But Naslund soldiered on, even in the face of adversity, before his free-agent departure to the New York Rangers in 2008.

"That's the thing," says Henrik. "Just because he's a Swedish guy and not a Jarome Iginla type of player, look at his numbers. He carried this franchise. Vancouver was fortunate to not only have him, but Trevor, too. Half the guys in here played with both of

them and they set a standard for the rest of us that's tough to follow. But it's a great one."

The fact that Naslund's retirement ceremony will be broadcast by Hockey Night in Canada says a lot. So does joining countrymen Thomas Steen and Borje Salming, who have been honoured by Winnipeg and Toronto respectively. Steen had his number retired in 1994 and Salming was honoured in 2006.

"That's going to make up for a lot of things he missed out on," says Henrik. "Growing up in Sweden, you don't realize how big this is. But playing here now for 10 years, this is the biggest thing you can have except for winning the Stanley Cup. I know Markus is really excited about it. I'm sure he's going to shed some tears."

Naslund's last game as a Canuck was not memorable, a 7-1 home-ice drubbing by Calgary on April 5, 2008, in which his linemates were Brad Isbister and Ryan Shannon. But he always accepted the fact that management tried to improve the team and has now accepted the fact that, at age 37, retirement from the NHL and the Swedish Elite League looks good on him.

So will that No. 19 in the rafters.

"It's going to be an amazing night," says Daniel. "It's so well-deserved."

Details:

Markus Naslund's jersey retirement ceremony will begin promptly at 6:10 p.m. Saturday at Rogers Arena. The doors open at 5 p.m. The ceremony will also be broadcast live at cbcspports.ca and on TEAM 1040, then shown, taped, on CBC prior to the Canucks-Lightning game.

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Something vaguely unsatisfying about the Naslund years despite greatness: Willes

By Ed Willes

When you take a cold, dispassionate look at Markus Naslund's career, it's easy to identify the things he wasn't for the Vancouver Canucks.

He wasn't our Yzerman or Sakic; that extraordinary player who could alter his team's destiny and lift them to the Stanley Cup. He wasn't even our Jagr or Thornton; a scoring machine who could make you forget he wasn't part of that special breed.

He was close in both categories. But he wasn't quite that guy and when you factor in the failings of the good Canucks' teams from '02 to '04, coupled with Naslund's precipitous post-lockout decline, there is something incomplete and vaguely unsatisfying about his legacy here.

So, is he worthy of the game's ultimate honour?

It's a question which has been asked a lot this week and if you're looking for an answer here, we can't provide it. But it's also beside the point.

Naslund might come up short when measured against the game's true immortals but, in the most complete sense of the term, he's been the greatest Canuck of all time.

On that basis, his number should be retired and his career should be celebrated here because his impact on this franchise is virtually immeasurable.

Think about it for a minute.

Naslund, of course, is best remembered for his salad days with the Westcoast Express when, with Todd Bertuzzi and Brendan Morrison, he helped form the NHL's best line.

But, in tracing Naslund's career arc, we'd like to take you back to his first years with the Canucks when this team was in complete disarray,. And it's then Naslund's legacy comes into sharper focus.

Back in the late '90s the Canucks were in worse shape than the Irish economy. The Mark Messier signing was an abject disaster. The organization had drafted terribly for years. They'd also gone through a series of regime changes which culminated with the bizarre marriage of Mike Keenan and Brian Burke to start the '98-'99 season.

The Canucks would finish dead last in the West that year but a couple of things happened which changed the franchise. For starters, Burke gassed Keenan and brought in Marc Crawford to coach the team. He also drafted the Sedin twins that summer. But, by far, the biggest development was the emergence of Naslund as a frontliner.

To that point, the former prized prospect had been a bust with first, the Pittsburgh Penguins, then the Canucks.

Keenan, in fact, made him a healthy scratch a couple of times and Burke shopped him around the league. In the end, the trade he didn't make was almost as good as the deal which brought Naslund here in the first place.

Bless you Alex Stojanov, wherever you are.

Naslund would score 36 in '98-'99, then break through with a 41-goal campaign two years later. The next season he was united with Bertuzzi and Morrison and, just like that, the Canucks were ushered into a golden era.

At least it was golden by Canucks' standards.

Again, you have to remember where they were before that line exploded to appreciate Naslund's impact. The Canucks averaged 15,803 fans per game in '98-'99 and 14,642 the next season. There was also legitimate concern about the team's future here.

Then, in a couple of season, everything changed. With Naslund as the centrepiece, the Canucks played a thrilling, attacking style which, in the middle of the dead -puck era, made them as entertaining as any team in the league. There wasn't a better place than GM Place to watch an NHL game in those days and there wasn't a better line than Naslund's.

The Canucks also started a string of sellouts in November 2002 which now sits at 320 and the value of the franchise has skyrocketed. Naslund played the lead role in that transformation.

OK, they couldn't deliver that one playoff run and it's still unclear why Naslund devolved from superstar to second-liner after the lockout. But that's another story for another time.

Our story concerns what Naslund gave to the franchise in his best years and it was a wondrous gift to this city. In the context of the Canucks' history, he was our star; a sublimely skilled player on the ice, a gentleman and a role model off it.

When you add it all up, those are pretty good things to be. Remember that and everything Naslund represents when you look up into the rafters Saturday night.

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Naslund did it all in his heyday

By Ben Kuzma

Pick your poison. Give Markus Naslund time and space and he would release a strong and accurate wrist shot on the fly. Crowd him and he would somehow feather a pass to a streaking linemate without breaking stride.

At his peak, the former Vancouver Canucks captain was the game's best left winger, a three-time first-team allstar and Lester B. Pearson Award winner in 2003.

The franchise all-time scoring leader compiled 756 points in 884 games and receiving the ultimate honour in having his No. 19 jersey retired and raised to the Rogers Arena rafters on Saturday is a sobering reminder of how good Naslund was and how hard he was to play and coach against.

After all, he had 48 goals and 104 points in the 2002-03 season.

"The best way I could describe it was instant impact," recalled former Columbus, Dallas and Philadelphia coach Ken Hitchcock. "I felt when he was on the ice that if you made a mistake, he made you pay a big price. When you're on the bench against him, you could almost feel a goal coming. When he was hanging on to the puck and he had it for more than 10 seconds in the offensive zone you knew something really bad was going to happen for your team."

And, of course, negating Naslund was only solving one-third of a bigger problem. Defending the famed West Coast Express line was like wrestling with a multi-headed monster. Todd Bertuzzi was the game's dominant power forward during the line's heyday and Brendan Morrison was smart enough to find his wingers and do the backchecking. And as much as Naslund would tell you his linemates make things click, it was the slick Swede who stirred the offensive drink.

"He was so crafty, skated so well and was so smooth," said Canucks defenceman Keith Ballard, who got his WCE baptism in 2005-06, as an NHL rookie in Phoenix. "He could beat you so many different ways. He had a good shot and could skate, but always had his head up and found the open guy."

"If you took a bit of a risk and tried to step up on him to make a play, he would just put the puck by you. And he was so good on the power play on the half wall coming up and rolling up high. I was nervous being out there against those [WCE] guys, they were really something."

Canucks defenceman Dan Hamhuis was quickly becoming a mainstay in Nashville when the WCE was rolling. The best compliment paid to Naslund was the manner in which Predators coach Barry Trotz tried to keep a player still learning the ropes from being schooled by the master.

"The years I played against him, I was a young player and the coach tried to keep me away from him," said Hamhuis. "Markus could score from anywhere and was very dynamic. He was fun to watch but a real challenge to play against."

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Naslund one of the true good guys of hockey

By Ben Kuzma

As a consummate captain, Markus Naslund made his teammates better players and better people.

Ryan Kesler has become a leader with the Vancouver Canucks because he has matured on and off the ice. And he owes a debt of gratitude to Naslund because long before Kesler would blossom into a roster mainstay, people wanted to run him out of town.

When Kesler signed an offer sheet from Philadelphia in September 2006 a one-year deal for \$1.9 million US that the Canucks matched there was a clamour to trade the centre as soon as the term expired.

Naslund and Brendan Morrison took an impressionable Kesler aside at training camp that fall and schooled him on the business side of the sport and offered unyielding support. Especially Naslund.

"Things he did away from the rink made a lasting impression," recalled Kesler. "He was very humble and you learn a lot from a guy like that. We became close the last couple of years he was here and he was a key to my development on and off the ice.

"I was pretty upset and I didn't know if I did the right thing with it [offer sheet]. I was questioning it. We went for dinner that night and it kind of got my mind off it. It really meant a lot to me."

That's why it doesn't surprise Kesler that Naslund's No. 19 jersey will be officially retired and raised to the Rogers Arena rafters on Saturday. He's the franchise scoring leader and brought the team back to respectability.

"He was one of the best leaders I've ever had," added Kesler. "He had a lot of passion for the game and when we didn't win, he didn't mask it and took a lot of pride in his game. He took it hard. That's the kind of great leader he was he expected a lot from himself."

Alex Burrows found that out during a 6-3 Canucks victory on Nov. 19, 2008 at Madison Square Garden

On a weird night when Naslund looked uneasy in playing against his former club, it was Burrows who scored twice and found out there was a lot of fight left in the new Rangers winger. As he was falling to the ice after checking Naslund in the opening period, Burrows got a little shot to the head after getting under Naslund's skin.

"He's just always a little rat," joked Naslund at the time. "He's whining. But he played well and he looks like he's taken another step. He looks more confident with the puck."

Burrows chuckled earlier this week when reminded of that incident.

"It's kind of funny," he said. "I forgot about that. I knew I was down and he gave me a little extra shove but it was like that every night. He wanted his team to be successful."

Sami Salo believes a lot of that success had to do with the way Naslund carried himself as captain. He could have afforded to have an ego and be distant, but he was a regular guy who formed close bonds with his teammates.

"He never showed it like he was a huge celebrity he's just a great guy and real easy going," said the Canucks defenceman. "He always had time for everybody. He helped my family get into a new city and school and well connected in the community. There was never a doubt that his number shouldn't be up there."

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