

Aurora's Sikura signs with NHL's Blackhawks

By Jake Courtepatte

As one of the top skaters in American collegiate hockey, one of the big questions late in the NHL season was if centreman Dylan Sikura would sign with the Chicago Blackhawks.

Hawks fans prayers have been answered, as Sikura signed on Sunday with the team that drafted him in the sixth round of the 2014 NHL Entry Draft.

Sikura said he is "beyond grateful" to have realized his NHL dream.

"I can't even explain how much it means to me. I'm thankful to the Blackhawks for giving me the opportunity and want to be able to contribute right away."

"Right away" may be the exact right words: with the Blackhawks out of playoff contention, they will be looking to get some experience for their up-and-coming prospects.

Sikura is expected to make his much-anticipated NHL debut on Thursday night, when the Hawks host the Winnipeg Jets.

"It's good for the kids," said Chicago head coach Joel Quenneville in a media scrum on Monday. "They get some exposure and see the pace, the strength, and the decision-making that goes on here that helps them prepare going into the following year."

The 22-year old Aurora native spent most of three seasons with the OJHL's Aurora Tigers, before becoming a prominent piece up the middle for the NCAA's Northeastern University Huskies over the past four seasons.

Over four seasons at Northeastern, Sikura averaged more than a point per game, with 58 goals, 88 assists and 146 points in 137 games.

Sikura's college career ended Saturday when the Michigan Wolverines beat Northeastern 3-2 in the first round of the NCAA tournament.

He scored a powerplay goal in his last collegiate game.

Though the option to become a free agent after his senior season left many in the hockey media guessing, Sikura said it was "always his intention" to sign with the Blackhawks.

"I just wanted to keep this whole Chicago thing in the background until my college season ended."

Though terms have not been disclosed, Sikura is expected to hit the maximum cap on entry-level contracts, which is \$925,000 plus an allotment for performance bonuses.

The team has high hopes for the young Sikura, who joins his brother Tyler in the Blackhawks organization, signing a contract with the team earlier in the month.

"Dylan really improved over the last couple of years since his draft year," said Quenneville. "It seemed like he was quicker, faster, more poised with the puck."

The unexpected early exit from the NCAA tournament will allow Sikura to burn a year of his three year, entry-level contract, by playing in at least five of Chicago's remaining regular season games.