

From the NHL to Germany, Aurora's Karl Stewart has taken the road less travelled

By Jeff Doner

Turning pro in any sport is not an easy task and Auroran and former Cardinal Carter Catholic High School student Karl Stewart took the road less travelled.

Stewart has carved out a nice pro hockey career for himself over the past 12 years.

Stewart left Cardinal Carter when he was in Grade 11 to play with the Plymouth Whalers in the Ontario Hockey League. He was young, talented and ready to take the next step.

He went undrafted in the 2001 NHL Entry Draft, but was quickly signed as a free agent by the Atlanta Thrashers and made his pro debut with the Chicago Wolves of the American Hockey League.

Stewart said it was tough not being drafted, but he was always confident that something would work out.

'I had conversations with Atlanta's head scout and he said to me that if they didn't select me in the draft, they were going to invite me to their rookie camp,' he said. 'At that time it was guys like [Ilya] Kovalchuk, [Dany] Heatley and Kari Lehtonen that I was competing with.

'I was holding my own against these guys and that kind of gave me the confidence to believe in myself and then, from the rookie camp, I got invited to the main camp and got into a couple exhibition games. I was only 18 at the time and playing NHL exhibition games, playing with first round picks, and doing really well.'

The Thrashers obviously liked what they saw and immediately signed him to a contract right out of training camp, giving him the added security of a contract while playing in Plymouth.

Over the course of the next few seasons, Stewart played 13 games for the Thrashers in the NHL by the age of 20.

'It's a surreal experience,' he said of his first NHL game. 'When you put on an NHL jersey in a regular season game, it's completely different than an exhibition game because you know it's for real.

'I remember being in warm-up and there was a kid on the other side of the glass just waving and wanting a puck and I thought, 'man that was me six or seven years ago and here I am on the side of the glass now and I've lived my dream.'

But his time with Atlanta was soon cut short when he was packaged with a second round pick and traded to the Anaheim Ducks for Vitaly Vishnevski in 2006.

Before even getting the chance to lace up for the Ducks, the Pittsburgh Penguins claimed him off waivers. After just three games with the Pens, he was once again plucked off waivers by the Chicago Blackhawks.

However, it was a move that ended up being great for Stewart's hockey career, where he said coaches Trent Yawney and eventually NHL great Denis Savard helped him flourish.

'Savard was an amazing player's coach and he helped me along and gave me an opportunity to play. He put me out on the power play and on the penalty kill and I made good with my opportunity,' he said.

'To watch a guy like Denis Savard handle the puck and skate in practice and then give you tips, you're going to listen because he's a

Hockey Hall of Famer and an amazing hockey player. He had a big influence in my career for sure.?

That season, Stewart stuck around with the Blackhawks for a 37 game stint during which he scored his first two NHL goals ? Another big stepping stone for his career.

?We were in Phoenix and I just tipped the puck in against Curtis Joseph and here I am a Toronto Maple Leafs fan growing up and cheering for CuJo and I just scored on him,? he reminisced. ?That was another kind of vindication moment for me where I felt I could do this and I belonged.?

Despite his growth in Chicago, he was again moved in a trade, this time to the Tampa Bay Lightning to finish out the season.

He then signed with the Florida Panthers in 2008 and played a full season with their affiliate, the Rochester Americans.

Following that season, Stewart moved on to Germany to play with the Straubing Tigers in the Deutsche Eishockey Liga, where he has played the last five seasons.

?I really enjoy the hockey there because it's a winning-first mentality,? he said. ?I spent some time in the NHL and the American League and when you're a fringe guy and you're up and down, winning isn't the main thing or the main goal. It's development first.?

For much of the year he and his family live in Germany, but Aurora is still home. His parents still live here and he, his wife and newborn son come home to the place where he learned how to play hockey every summer.

Now 31, he is signed on to play next season with Straubing, but beyond that he said he just takes it one season at a time.

However, he did admit that coming back to North America to work in hockey is something that has always been a goal.

Coaching or helping develop other young professional hockey players may be something he is looking at for the future. After all, he knows a thing or two about how to make a living by playing the sport he loves.

?I had always believed in myself and always wanted to be a hockey player, so there was really no other option,? he said. ?If you believe in yourself you're going to make it happen.?

Cardinal Carter hosts its 25th anniversary reunion on Saturday, June 14. For more information, visit cch.ycdsb.ca/Reunion25.