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## Spotlight: Late-bloomer Levin on track to become Israel's first NHL player

Living in Canada, Levin is following the most unlikely of dreams as he pursues a professional ice hockey career.

By SAMMY HUDES FEBRUARY 21, 2016 04:22

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(photo credit: TERRY WILSON/OHL IMAGES)

It's something the 16-yearold Israeli embraces.

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TORONTO - David Levin knows he is different.

His journey of more than four years and 9,000 kilometers from his home in

His father had the television fixed on a game in the National Hockey League, the 30-team league that boasts the best players in the sport from across the

world, so I told him that's my dream now," Levin recalled.

enough, but even more so when you consider that Levin hadn't even played organized ice hockey until three years earlier.

••• Levin was born into an athletic family. Following a career in professional

soccer, which included a stint with Maccabi Tel Aviv, Levin's father, Pavel, a

Latvia-native, opened a youth sports club in Israel. His son played a variety

Fast-forward seven years to April 2015, when Levin was selected first overall

The OHL is one of Canada's three top development leagues for junior

in the Ontario Hockey League draft by the Sudbury Wolves.

After seeing the NHL on television, Levin tried ice-skating a handful of times at the Canada Center in Metulla, then the only full-sized ice rink in the country. But it didn't work, Levin says, and his dream quickly faded.

"I knew it was my dream and I want to be the same as him," Levin said. By the age of 12, Levin convinced his parents to let him go live in Canada

Sidney Crosby, currently considered the best hockey player in the world.

"I didn't even believe that he was going to do something because it's hard," said Alla.

The first time he went skating on the ice, Levin crashed into the sideboards of the rink because he didn't know how to stop.

"Guys here, they're on skates when they were three years old and working

everyday on the ice. I didn't have it, so when I came here, my first couple of

days were really hard for me," said Levin.

team in the highest youth hockey division.

"We don't even know how far he can go. It's exciting."

speak English," he said. "It was really hard for me, but I went to school and I was reading books."

When Levin wasn't in class, he was either on the ice or in the gym. His

persistence paid off, and earned him a spot on the Don Mills Flyers, a local

coach David Matsos. "I think he's surprised a lot of people including myself and he's been a

That Levin had such limited experience in organized hockey when drafted

"I love it. It's too cold, though. Sudbury is especially too cold," he quipped.

••• Levin said he has adapted well to Canadian culture, although the

toughest part has been the climate. Sudbury, located approximately 400

kilometers north of Toronto, averages temperatures of -13 Celsius and -11

The intense effort Levin has exerted to adapt to the ice hockey game has paid off. Three years after he didn't even know how to stop, his skating looks effortless. He is noticeable on the ice not because he looks out of place, but

Levin's unique ascent has attracted attention among hockey commentators in Canada and the United States.

"He's skilled as can be," said Matsos. "He's smart as can be and sharp as a

wrinkle. Like most Israelis, he is supposed to be conscripted to the IDF when he turns 18.

all but kill his NHL dream, but avoiding army service would mean he

"I have no words. I don't know. It's hard to get it in," he said. "I can't believe

Levin's agent, Darren Ferris, said he is exploring multiple options to defer Levin's service.

However, in the past this route has been used to exempt athletes from military service for a limited number of years.

"He has a chance to play in the NHL," said Ferris. "The toughest thing is to get everyone in Israel to realize, because I know hockey's not a big thing

Levin says it would mean the world to him to be the first Israeli-born NHL

player. "I'm dreaming about this everyday. I want to show Israel that you can come from nothing to all the way up here," he noted. "I want everyone to know I'm a kid from Israel and I want to be different."

Levin says his biggest motivators are his parents, who have supported him every step of the way. While many of his friends back in Netanya may not have understood the dream he was chasing when he left Israel, he says they now cheer him on from afar.

"The word 'Israel,' that's the biggest thing for me, that's what motivates me," explained Levin. "I just want to show everyone who I am. I'm a kid from

Living in Canada, Levin is following the most unlikely of dreams as he pursues a professional ice hockey career.

Netanya already seems miraculous, but Levin knows it's not just about him anymore. When he's on the ice, he's skating for Israel. Levin was eight years old when he first caught a glimpse of North American

world. "I asked him what he's watching. He told me that's the best league in the

ice hockey.

players between the ages of 16 and 20. At 18, players are draft-eligible for the NHL. Last year, 14 percent of NHL-drafted players came from the OHL. To be picked by the Wolves ahead of every local kid his age is impressive

of sports at the club, but roller hockey became his passion. That all changed a few years later when Levin first saw a YouTube clip of

with his aunt and uncle and train to be a professional hockey player. The move was surprising to his aunt Alla Tovberg and uncle Yafim, who live in the Toronto area.

"Too many people are playing hockey in Canada and few kids are getting even where David is now." At 13, Levin enrolled at an independent private high school geared toward high-performance student-athletes.

If that wasn't discouraging enough, Levin's bigger fear was adapting culturally. "I was more scared of my language, because I didn't really know how to

first overall by the Wolves speaks volumes of his raw talent, said Sudbury wonderful kid to coach, a wonderful teammate. I'm excited to see how far this kid can really take it," said Matsos.

Celsius in January and February, respectively. A two-assist performance by Levin on February 15 brought his point total to 24 through 35 games this year, including seven goals. He has backed up his high draft spot, averaging more points (goals and assists) per game than any of his peers also selected last April.

because he uses his speed and stick to manufacture scoring chances. Matsos doesn't pause when asked if Levin has NHL potential.

The answer is a quick "yes."

knife." Some have said that his story has the makings of a Hollywood movie. The suggestion evokes an overwhelmed laugh from Levin.

what I did."

couldn't visit home.

••• As promising as the career is that may await Levin, it comes with a This would take place in September 2017, just nine months before he is eligible for the NHL draft. Three years away from hockey at that age would

One of those options is a deferral for "elite athlete" status, granted to very few Israeli athletes.

A successful NHL career could span upwards of 15-20 years. there. He's the first kid to be drafted. It would be a shame that a kid would lose the chance to become a professional hockey player."

Levin insists he wears Israel on his sleeve with each shift he takes in the OHL.

Israel, I'm not a Canadian. I want to show them. I want to put Israeli hockey on the map."