



TORONTO HOCKEY PLAYER COVETED BY U.S. AND CANADA

By Paul Lungen, Staff Reporter - January 20, 2016 > 7998 > 0



Jake Walman playing for Toronto Jr. Canadiens TWITTER PHOTO

If you check Jake Walman's hockey profile on [Elite Prospects](#), you'll find his name flanked by the flags of Canada and the United States, each given equal prominence.

Born in Toronto, Walman is also an American citizen through his U.S.-born mother, giving him, like Brett Hull before him, the option of choosing which country to play for.

Of course, only a handful of the very best players ever have to make that kind of decision. Walman, a smooth-skating, high-scoring defenceman with [Providence College Friars of the NCAA](#), was put in that position last summer when the hockey programs from both countries expressed an interest in recruiting him to play at the World Junior Championship in Finland.

"It was a tough decision," Walman acknowledged on the phone from Providence.

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He ended up choosing the American team, but the IIHF, the sport's governing body, had other ideas. The IIHF ruled that Walman hadn't played two consecutive years in the United States and was thus ineligible to skate for the American team.

That unfortunate circumstance didn't end Walman's World Junior saga. The Canadian team, looking for a talented, puck-moving defenceman, happily turned to Walman to compete for a spot on the blue line.

"I was just excited to get the call from Canada," Walman said.

He might also have mentioned that the call was unexpected. Very few NCAA players have ever played for the Canadian junior team, which relies almost exclusively on skaters from one of the three Canadian major junior leagues.

But only days before he was set to join 10 other defencemen vying for seven roster spots at a pre-tournament selection camp, Walman suffered a shoulder injury. It wasn't season-ending bad, but it was enough to force the 19-year-old to miss the event.

Meanwhile Canada, which could have used him, finished sixth in the tournament while the United States earned a bronze medal.

If you examine Walman's hockey pedigree, it's no surprise he was courted by the hockey programs of two countries.

So far in 16 games with Providence, he's scored 12 goals and added nine assists for 21 points, tops among NCAA defencemen. With an average scoring rate of 1.31 points per game, he's 16th overall.

Last season, in his first year with the Friars, he scored one goal and added 15 assists, good enough to get him selected by the St. Louis Blues in the third round of the 2014 entry draft, 82nd overall.

A veteran of the Greater Toronto Hockey League (GTHL), Walman advanced through the ranks playing at various times with the Toronto Junior Canadiens, the North York Rangers and the Toronto Red Wings. As a kid, he played on the same team as Connor McDavid, considered a generational player, as well as other high NHL draft picks like Robby Fabbri, Michael Dal Colle, Brendan Lemieux and his buddy and fellow Jew, Joshua Ho-Sang, an Islanders first round pick.



Walman attended two of the Blues' summer orientation camps, but can't attend their rookie or regular camp without losing his NCAA eligibility.

And with a defence loaded with the likes of Alex Pietrangolo, Jay Bouwmeester and Kevin Shattenkirk, plus highly-touted youngster Colton Parayko, he knows cracking the Blues' lineup will prove a formidable task.

He's up for the challenge. Good as he is, he's constantly trying to improve his game. He considers himself a strong skater who sees the ice well. But to crack a pro lineup, he knows he'll have to get better in his own zone – "having a strong stick, working in the defensive zone before jumping to the offence," he said. And he's been working on his shot for the last year and a half.

"I used to say I like to emulate Erik Karlsson and Morgan Rielly. I might have to switch it up and play a more complete game," he said.

Scoring points has always been one of Walman's strengths. In 2013-14, his first season in the Ontario Junior Hockey League (OJHL), playing for Toronto Jr. Canadiens, he scored 33 points in 43 games. He was named the OJHL rookie of the year and was a co-recipient of the Canadian Junior Hockey League national Rookie of the Year Award.

In 2014, he represented Team Canada East at the 2014 World Junior A Challenge and then played for the OJHL's South-East Conference all-star team, which finished OJHL at the 2013 Central Canada Cup All-Star Challenge.

When he's asked to name the highlights of his hockey career, none of that comes up. But two other memories do. First was his participation in the 2013 Maccabiah Games in Israel, when he was part of a gold medal-winning junior team.

"That was probably one of the best experiences of my life," he said. "I didn't know much about Israel. I knew that's where my roots were. To play hockey there was a pretty special experience."

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Still, he continued, it was eclipsed by "a special moment" in Philadelphia, when St. Louis selected him in the entry draft, a moment that recognized all he had accomplished in hockey.

With his injury now behind him, Walman is back on the ice, focusing on becoming a better defenceman so he can advance to the next level. A sophomore, he has two years of NCAA eligibility remaining after this season, but he admits his ultimate goal, like the other high-end talents he played with in the GTHL, is to play in the NHL.

Talent and skill are important, he said, "but it's really the compete, the heart, the determination that get you to the next level."

Looking in the mirror, he sees a guy who "never backs down, is relentless, who never gives up," he said.

And at this point, it really doesn't matter which country's flag flies beside your name.

