

FROM DAY SCHOOL TO THE NHL

By [Paul Lungen, Staff Reporter](#) - October 3, 2017 [»](#) [12631](#) [»](#) [0](#)



Zach Hyman scores the first goal of his career on March 7, 2016 in a game against the Buffalo Sabres. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

When Zach Hyman was a Grade 12 student at the Anne and Max Tanenbaum Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto, he had a pretty busy schedule.

In the winter of 2010, when he was already a standout forward with the Hamilton Red Wings of the Ontario Junior Hockey League (OJHL), his skills got him noticed by the people putting together the Canada East Under-19 team that was going to Penticton, B.C., to compete in the World Junior A Challenge.

Trouble was, Hyman had a big assignment due in his American politics course and he didn't want to avoid writing the paper. He asked his teacher, Jory Vernon, whether he could prepare an alternate assignment that he would hand in after the tournament.

Vernon, who today is the principal of Ner Israel Yeshiva of Toronto, wasn't too keen on that proposition, as it meant preparing an entirely new assignment.

He thought about it for a minute, then made Hyman an offer: he'd prepare a unique assignment for him, but only if Hyman promised he'd get him tickets for his first game in the National Hockey League. "Deal," said Hyman, and the two shook on it.

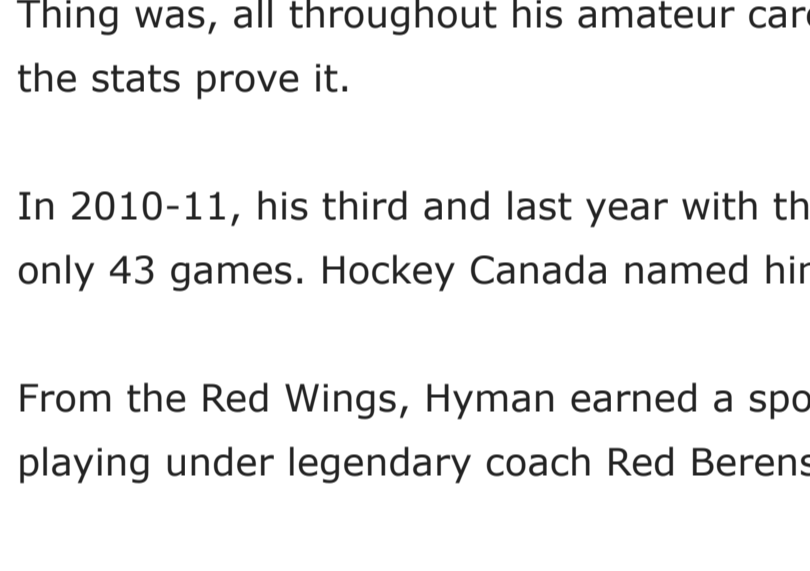
A few months later, in the summer of 2010, the Florida Panthers selected Hyman in the fifth round of the NHL entry draft.

Over the years, Vernon and Hyman stayed in touch. Hyman's hockey career eventually brought him back to his home town.

Playing with the Toronto Marlies, the Toronto Maple Leafs' AHL farm team, he was called up to the big leagues on Feb. 29, 2016, to play against the Tampa Bay Lightning at the Air Canada Centre in Toronto.

A little while before the game, Vernon received a text. Hyman had news: "I haven't forgotten our deal. I've got two tickets to the Leafs game for you."

Vernon picked up the tickets and attended Hyman's NHL debut. He wasn't the only one – the concession stands were full of people he recognized who had made a special trip to see Hyman play in his first NHL game.



Zach Hyman

Upholding his end of the bargain six years after their arrangement was made, is just the kind of guy Hyman is, Vernon said. Not only was he an exceptional student, said Vernon, "he has a great attitude – on everything. He's the complete package. He's a great guy, a good looking guy. He's got everything going for him and he could have been a complete jerk. But he's the opposite: he's happy to meet people, he's very supportive and a proud Jew."

In today's NHL, players are drafted and signed for their skills, but many teams also put a premium on the elusive term, "character." By all accounts, Hyman has it in spades.

His coaches rave about his work ethic and his willingness to learn and improve as a player. His teammates, current and former, talk about how reliable he is and how he's the type of player who makes the extra effort to dig out a puck, finish a check and do the hard, dirty work that allows finesse players to thrive.

Right from the start, it appeared as though he found himself in Maple Leafs head coach Mike Babcock's good books.

After his first game against the Lightning, Babcock said, "Hyman is a relentless worker who can still make plays."

After a subsequent game versus the Washington Capitals, the coach said, "If you're not going to compete, it doesn't matter how much skill you have, you're not going to play in the National Hockey League very long. There's a message in there for some of us. I thought Hyman and (Nikita Soshnikov) were real good."

Hyman, who attended United Synagogue Day School (USDS) and TanenbaumCHAT before moving on to the University of Michigan, is one of only a small group of Jews who have skated in the NHL, and he's part of an even smaller number who have played for the Maple Leafs. Hyman joins Jewish Maple Leafs Alex Levinsky, who played in the 1930s, as well as Mathieu Schneider, Mike Brown, Trevor Smith and Brendan Leipsic.

His Jewish heritage is important to him. "Values were instilled in me by my mom and dad. I went to USDS and CHAT and being Jewish is a big part of my life, along with a sense of community," he said.

In his two years of playing professional hockey, Hyman has distinguished himself for his board battles, his work ethic and his team play. Though he skated last season on a line with stars Auston Matthews and William Nylander, some fans criticized Babcock for how he was choosing his lineups, arguing that Hyman shouldn't be partnered with players who have that level of finesse and skill.

Thing was, all throughout his amateur career, Hyman, 25, was considered an offensive threat – and the stats prove it.

In 2010-11, his third and last year with the Red Wings, Hyman racked up 42 goals and 60 assists in only 43 games. Hockey Canada named him the Canadian Junior Hockey League player of the year.

From the Red Wings, Hyman earned a spot on the roster of the University of Michigan Wolverines, playing under legendary coach Red Berenson.

Berenson, who is now retired, recalled Hyman's arrival as a freshman.

"He came to Michigan with high expectations," Berenson said.

Already a published author – Hyman had, by then, written his first of two children's books with sports themes – "Michigan was a great fit for him academically and for hockey," Berenson said.

"He was hard working, clean cut, responsible, dedicated, but it didn't come easily to him. It took him two years to figure it out" and start being productive, but "we liked him from day one," said Berenson.

His confidence and enthusiasm really developed later in his college career. "It really came for him in his senior year," Berenson said.

Skating on a line with Dylan Larkin, who currently plays for the Detroit Red Wings, Hyman found success. In his senior year, Hyman scored 22 goals and added 32 assists in 37 games.

Hyman was named first-team all-American and was a finalist for the Hobey Baker Award, which is given to the nation's top college player.

For Berenson, Hyman's success doesn't come as much of a surprise. "Coach Babcock can see a lot of the intangibles in Zach Hyman, whether he scores or not," he said.

Hyman brings "second effort, back checking, getting pucks out (of the defensive zone), killing penalties.

"He's one of the most hit players in the league, but most times, he wins the battles to get the puck," Berenson said.

Berenson believes Hyman has a bright future in Toronto.

"Zach comes from an above average family, in terms of privileges and opportunities," he said. "But along with that, he's a very humble person. He's a very hard-working, blue-collar player. You'd never believe he came from a privileged background."

Alex Voihsanski has known Hyman since his days as a premiere youth hockey player in Toronto. Voihsanski, a hockey business executive who also runs JCC Chai Sports, was introduced to him through Hyman's father, Stuart Hyman. At the time, the two of them were involved in promoting hockey in Israel and Voihsanski knew that Stuart Hyman was a major player in the youth hockey world, as he operated 90 teams in the Greater Toronto Hockey League.

'AS A KID, YOU GREW UP PLAYING HOCKEY. IF IT'S YOUR JOB, IT'S THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD'

"I heard that this kid was a special player, with talent, work ethic and drive," Voihsanski recalled. "He was a proud Jewish kid who excelled in school, went to Jewish schools all the way through. I started to take notice and follow his career path."

Voihsanski, who would go on to work for Stuart Hyman as general manager of International Scouting Services, recalled that Zach Hyman "was always a good player, but more important, he was a very polite, articulate, well spoken young man who you knew would get to greater things."

"His work ethic and ability to absorb what's given to him and the opportunity of taking it to the next level and be a team guy is off the charts," Voihsanski said.

Voihsanski credits Berenson with helping Hyman develop the defensive side of his game.

In 2013, Voihsanski recruited Hyman and his brother, Spencer Hyman, to play on the Canadian hockey team at the Maccabiah Games in Israel.

The team's head coach, Guy Carbonneau, who played in the NHL for 18 years, mostly with Montreal, put Hyman on a line with Daniel Erlich and Andrew Calof. It became Canada's top line and the Canadians dominated, easily winning the gold medal.

"We had chemistry," Erlich recalled. "I'm more of a playmaker and he makes room for guys out there. We had a lot of points together."

The trip to Israel, which lasted about two weeks, created long-lasting friendships among the players, Erlich said. He's kept in touch with Hyman, who he finds to be "probably the most kind-hearted person I've met. He does charity, giving back to the community."

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"Kids look up to him and parents know he's respectful, a top role model. Even the fact he writes children's books makes him a great role model," Erlich added.

Connor Brown has known Hyman for many years, at first as a rival player, and now as a teammate on the Maple Leafs.

Brown recalled playing against Hyman in their junior years, when Hyman was a Hamilton Red Wing and he played for the St. Michael's Buzzers.

Connor Brown

"He had a bit of a reputation, especially in the OJHL. He put up a ton of numbers there," Brown said.

This past summer, the two, along with other Leafs, trained together at the Mastercard Centre in Toronto.

"He sets the bar ... in the gym," Brown said. "Every day, he's there with a good attitude and trying to get better."

For his part, Hyman credits Berenson for turning him into the player he is today.

Although he grew up playing hockey, starting at age four or five in the Forest Hill House League, he was a little one-dimensional when he got to Michigan.

Under Berenson's direction, he became a more well-rounded player.

But there was more to the college experience than merely honing hockey skills. At 19, Hyman saw Berenson as a role model and a mentor.

Berenson worked out all the time and kept himself in shape. "He carries himself in a professional manner, not just in hockey, but in life. He wanted players to become Michigan Men," who project dignity, class and a strong work ethic, said Hyman. What's more, "he's doing what he loved, to the fullest."

When it comes to hockey, Hyman is doing the same. As a youth, he devoted much of his free time to it. When other kids went to summer camp, he stayed home to enjoy the summer ice time.

"I love being on the ice, skating all the time," he said.

Following the end of the Leafs season, he took two weeks off before getting back into his training.

For Hyman, it is barely he gets as work. "As a kid, you grew up playing hockey. If it's your job, it's the best job in the world," he said.

Making the experience even sweeter is the fact that he's living his dream of playing for his hometown team.

Hyman recalls that first game against the Lightning well:

"I put on the Maple Leafs jersey and I thought, 'this is surreal.' I remember telling myself, 'this is a dream come true.'"

Last year, he played in all 82 games, registering 28 points and sporting strong puck possession numbers. In July, he signed a four-year, \$9-million contract extension with the Leafs.

On a team of young, dynamic, offensively minded scorers, Hyman remains a valued defensive specialist, a two-way player in whom the coach can have confidence in every situation – to win board battles, kill penalties, tie up opponents and, when the chances emerge, put the puck in the net, too.

He's just the kind of player his teachers and teammates remember.



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