

Zamuner a mentor for Aussie hockey youth

■ By Adrian Barclay
SPECIAL TO THE BEAVER

When former Canadian Olympian and 13-season NHL veteran Rob Zamuner announced that he would be arriving in Australia to play with the Brisbane Blue Tongues, it created a lot of excitement in the southern continent's hockey community.

The Australian Ice Hockey League (AIHL) had a new star to help publicize the league, while the Blue Tongues gained local media attention and an attraction for the fans.

All that aside, Zamuner's arrival is also an opportunity for Australia's young players to learn from somebody who has experienced hockey at its highest level, and what it takes to perform and stay at that level for a long period of time.

"I think with the experience I've had watching other players, you learn how good players are successful and I think a lot of that is very subtle differences like working hard and discipline," the Oakville native said recently from his temporary home on Queensland's Gold Coast. "If I can show those qualities, maybe the young players from Australia can benefit from that."

Influence on young duo

His influence will likely be most beneficial to the two Australian junior representatives who are his teammates with the Blue Tongues, forward Davey Upton and goaltender Brenton Cooney. Both youngsters have spent time in Canada to develop their game, with Upton spending a season in midget AAA with the Lethbridge Hurricanes and Cooney currently a member of Edmonton's South Fort Chevy's.

In his limited time with the squad, Zamuner can already see the potential in the pair.

"Absolutely. Both are young players that hopefully will be instrumental in having young kids look up to them

and growing Australian hockey," Zamuner said. "Davey looks just like a pure athlete so for him to have an interest in hockey, I think, is very important for the sport. I can see already at a young age that there are certain intangibles that players have for any different sport, and he certainly has that for hockey"

Zamuner has long been involved with junior players, and states that coaching is something he will look to pursue when he returns to North America. He always made himself available for assisting junior development during his NHL career, and

undoubtedly was a strong influence on countless youngsters.

"Every summer I would do a lot of work with different hockey camps and working with young players," he said. "It's really quite enjoyable when you see young kids wanting to learn and get-

ting better over the course of a week or two of hockey camp."

Butch Cooney, president of Ice Hockey Queensland, knows the benefit that a player like Zamuner can have on junior development in the state.

"I think it gives them a goal to aspire to," said Cooney. "If I was a junior kid looking at someone who had been to those heights, it would give me something to hone my priorities on."

A hockey camp involving Zamuner is in the works, and should attract a lot of attention amongst the junior hockey community.

In the meantime, Zamuner's presence in Australia will likely encourage and inspire hockey players of all ages to work hard and earn a place on one of the AIHL teams as the league gathers increasing momentum and status.

"It's pretty awesome, even for our senior players to be playing with and against someone of his calibre," said Cooney. "For locally-based Queenslanders, it gives them all something to aspire to."

He's the veteran now that the junior players are looking up to, but Zamuner remembers a time when he



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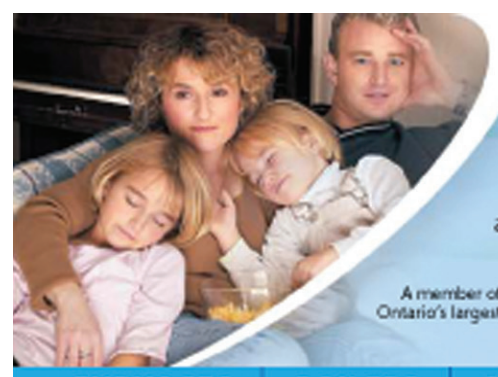
SOUTHERN STAR: Oakville native and former NHLer Rob Zamuner is currently playing hockey in Australia with the Brisbane Blue Tongues.

was the young athlete looking for inspiration. It was then that he recognized what he considers to be one of the keys to success: never stop learning.

"I know I broke in with New York (Rangers) in the early '90s, watching how Mark Messier conducts himself, how he works," he said. "In the '98 Olympics watching Steve Yzerman and Joe Sakic, those types of players, working hard and how they play... right down to your last NHL game you're still learning. When you stop learning and know everything that's when you're in trouble."

It is advice like this that Australian hockey officials hope will stick in the minds of their developing players, and also perhaps in the minds of new junior recruits that sign up to play hockey after watching a player like Zamuner in action. It is seen as another positive step in the advancement of the Australian game, and Zamuner himself believes the best is yet to come from Aussie hockey.

"What I see is that the players that play have a lot of passion for it and they play for the love of the game," he said. "I think that if the numbers continue to grow, the quality will rise with that."



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