

Tribe Takes On Winter Hawks

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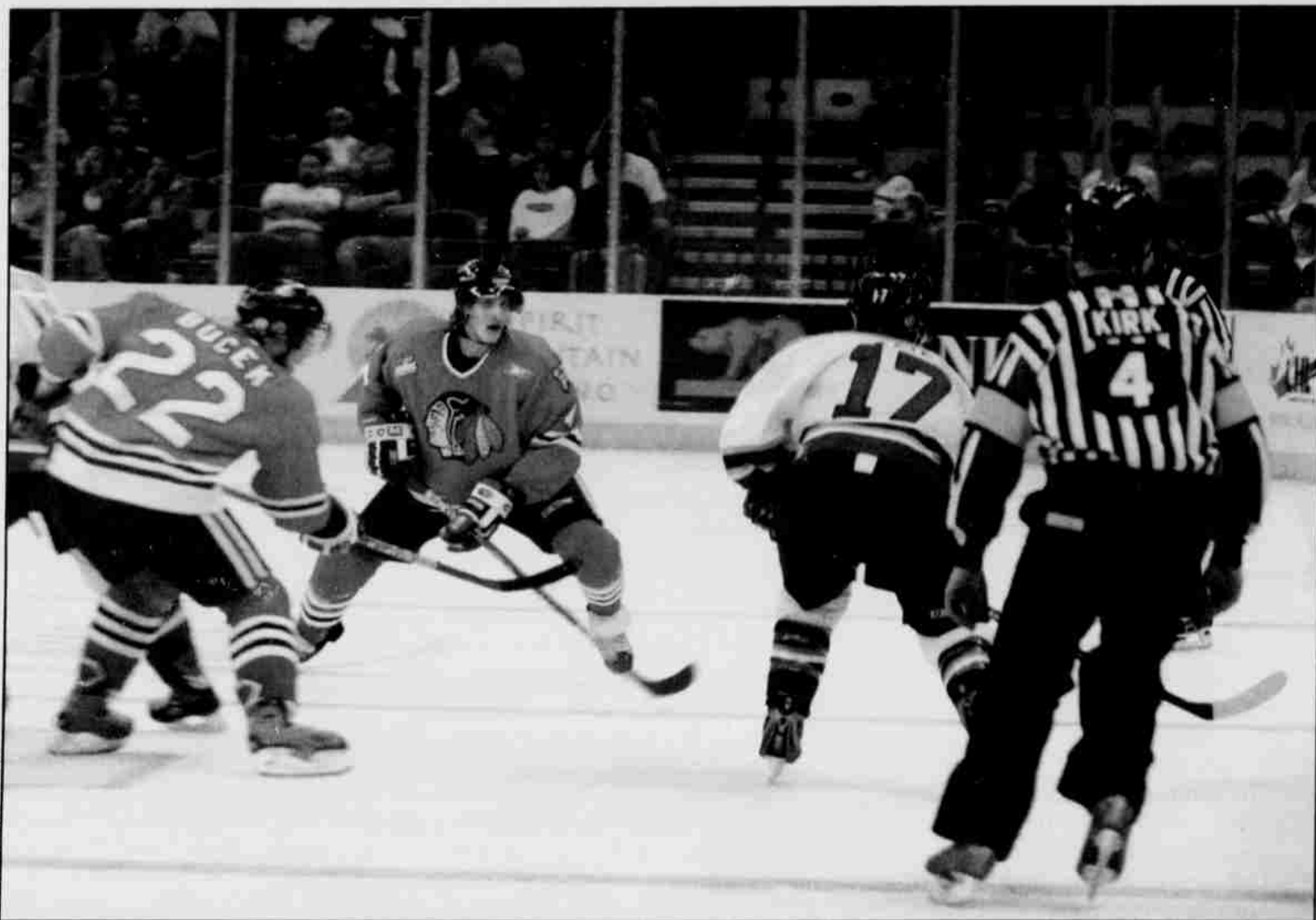
the team. But most of all, it teaches them professionalism and provides real world experience. And that is not always pleasant. Robin Big Snake is a case in point. Last month, he was the team's leading draw, a hard-hitting, in-your-face wing who mixed it up with the best of the league. Today, he is off the Portland roster and back home in Alberta, Canada. [See sidebar]

From the Tribe's point of view, the \$35,500 annual investment to become a major sponsor of the Winter Hawks is an investment in a team worth following, a team that many Tribal members already follow.

With some 250,000-400,000 fans attending Winter Hawks games in Portland every season, the team reaches a potentially vital group that in general is believed to be well-disposed toward the Tribe's gaming operations.

It will mean "a lot of exposure for the Tribe," said Vrooman. "We're going to have the Confederated Tribes logo on the ice. We're going to have big signs. On the nights that there is going to be a presence of people from the Reservation, we're going to do more promotions. We're talking about using the big screen used to show slow motion instant replays, and part of that will be putting some advertising up there and some messages and things about Tribal history — basically educating our fan base to what you're all about, and building awareness (of the Tribe) in the Portland market."

"I think that anytime you can go out and get somebody in the public eye like a sports team, it shows that you are investing in the community," said Reyn Leno, Vice Chair of the Tribal Council, "and we always said that we would



Face Off—The Winter Hawks Braydon Coburn (center) defends against the Lethbridge Hurricanes Michael Kaye during the October 10 game at Memorial Coliseum in Portland. The team hosted a reception after the game for Tribal members.

give back to the community. And it's fun for the membership with all the free tickets."

The Tribe joins Fred Meyer, Bank of the West, the Plumbing and Me-

chanical Contractors Association and UA Local 290 of the Plumbers Union in sponsoring the Winter Hawks. The Winter Hawks have won two Memorial Cups — 1983 and 1998

— the championship of all amateur hockey. "A lot of people think it's the hardest trophy in sports to win because there are so many teams that are going for it," said Vrooman.

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~Reyn Leno

Vice Chair of the Tribal Council

chanical Contractors Association and UA Local 290 of the Plumbers Union in sponsoring the Winter Hawks.

The Winter Hawks have won two Memorial Cups — 1983 and 1998

This year, the team sits right in the middle of its division, third place of five with a 4-4 record.

"We have a great chance to be great this year," said Vrooman.

The Tri Cities team beat Portland

in the playoffs last year and have most of their players back, so they should be very good, too. It should be a real competitive division," said Vrooman.

People that come to our games have a great time. Our fan base is fun. They're loud. They support

"The goal of the league is to get these guys to the National Hockey League. Give them their best chance. And one of the ways to do that is to have the teams very close, very competitive, have the



Photo by Toby McClary

Sam The Man—Tribal member Sam George (front, left) was among the 50 Grand Ronde Tribal members who were in attendance at the October 3 game with the Kamloops Blazers.



Photo by Peter Tinda

Logo Board—Winter Hawks Center Brandon Dubinsky squeezes past Hurricanes Defenseman Brent Seabrook right in front of the Tribal logo during the Sunday, October 10 game at Portland Memorial Coliseum. The Winterhawks lost 4 to 1.



Photo by Peter Tinda

Contact Sport—Winter Hawks Right Wing Sasha Golin (left) gets up close and personal with Kris Versteeg of the Lethbridge Hurricanes. The Portland Winter Hawks draw more than a quarter of a million fans to the Rose Garden and Memorial Coliseum every season.

the team. They wear jerseys. And it's a really neat thing and I think when the people come from the Reservation to see games, they're going to see a very fast, exciting game to watch. And they're going to see a lot of fun people have a great time.

"I think the marriage is real important to both," said Vrooman. "Our goal is to make everybody happy and try to do the best we can, executing the sponsorship to everybody's satisfaction, so that this could be the beginning of a long-term partnership." ■

The Travails of Winter Hawk's Robin Big Snake

Robin Big Snake, 20, was one of the Winter Hawks most popular players. With 21 "major" penalties for fighting and a team high 230 minutes in the penalty box in his first season (2003-04) with the Winter Hawks, Snake, as he is called, created the kind of excitement that makes hockey the game worth watching for thousands of fans.

Being half Cree (on mom's side) and half Blackfoot (on dad's side), he also was a great headliner for the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, a major sponsor for the team. An Indian athlete that Tribal members took a lot of pride in supporting, Snake also remarkably, was a soft-spoken, thoughtful and patient young man in an interview.

Snake was headed for the big leagues — and still may be — before his fall from grace earlier this month. In fact, he had just returned from what reportedly was a great tryout with the Hartford Wolf Pack, the American Hockey League affiliate of the National Hockey League's New York Rangers.

"Any other year," said Winter Hawks GM Ken Hodge, "they probably would have signed him to a contract, but with the NHL locked out, Hartford has 35 hockey players trying for 23 spots so Robin was in pretty tough (company). But, they liked what they saw. He showed them some things. Now, they will monitor his performance with us as a 20-year-old this season."

Then came the locker room "issue"

following Snake's return from the tryouts that got him bounced from the roster. The team will not talk about it except to say that "we were unable to get Robin to channel his competitiveness and talent, which are two of his biggest assets, in the right direction," according to Win-

Canada. "I'm there for my teammates," he said, and "I play the way I want to be played with."

"My game itself eggs people to try and fight me, too," he said. "Like I lay big hits. And when you lay a big hit, you're bound to get asked



Photo by Peter Tinda

Super Star—Robin Big Snake signs an autograph for a Winterhawks fan at a meet and greet session at the Tribal Governance center, on Thursday, September 16. Big Snake, who is half Cree and half Blackfoot, grew up playing hockey.

ter Hawks Coach Mike Williamson, who made the decision to take Snake off the roster.

"I play in-your-face kind of hockey," said Snake, who grew up on the Blackfoot Reserve in Siksiika, Alberta, a community of 6,000, the second largest Land Nation in

to fight." "It's just how I play hockey," he said.

He's a fighter, but he also has a record of scoring regularly from his left wing position. Throughout his amateur career, beginning when he was 16, he has gone through a

Festerling Came Out Scoring

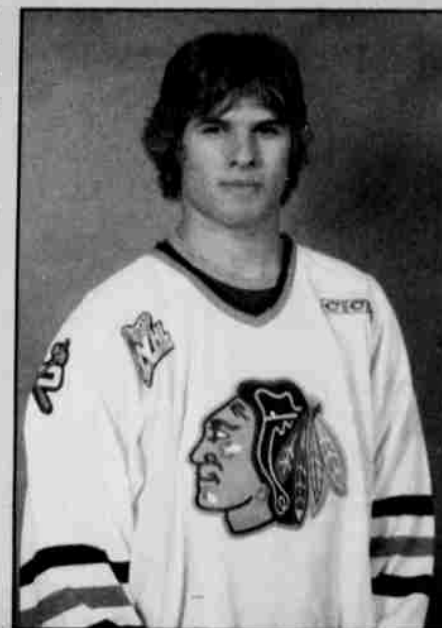
Winter Hawks' Center Garrett Festerling, #20, started the season this year as team high scorer with two goals in each of the first two games.

The team was nonetheless 1-1 with a 5-3 win in the first game against the Kamloops Blazers and a 6-4 loss against the Vancouver Giants in the second game. Today, the Winter Hawks sit in third place in the U.S. Division with a 4-4 record.

The Quesnel, British Columbia teenager was called up to the Winter Hawks at the end of 2003 from the tier two Junior A hockey team, the Vernon Vipers, of the British Columbia Junior Hockey League.

He was sixth on his team in scoring at the time of the call-up but all of the players above him were 19- and 20-year-olds. Festerling was 16 at the time.

The 5'9" Festerling has a 6'1" twin brother, Brett, who is a defenseman for the Tri-City Americans. They played on the same team in Quesnel all the way through minor league hockey, and won the British Columbia Midget AA Provincial Championship in Smithers, B.C. when the two were 15-year-olds. Their dad, Briar, played forward in the World Hockey League for the Saskatoon Blades and Regina Pats from 1974-77.



Garrett Festerling

Photo by Peter Tinda

number of periods where he scored more than a goal a game.

As the first from his Tribe to reach this level of hockey play, Snake seemed to recognize that he was a role model for everyone from kids in general to Tribal kids to his little brothers, who "like to wear my hockey stuff."

He talked about his success as a fulfillment of his dreams. "When I was younger, I used to sit around in my hockey equipment at home watching TV."

He described Tribal support for his efforts this way: "At first, they were a little, like, they wanted to see where it was going and where it was taking me, and that I had the drive to make it. Once I did get listed to Western Hockey League and started my career, they were more and more supportive. Now, they back me one hundred percent. If I need anything or I need help with anything, they're there."

"I just played hard and things worked out," he said.

"It feels good when I know that I'm doing my job, and can give the fans the entertainment that hockey is."

Before the incident, Snake said that his ambitions were to stay in hockey in any capacity he could find. As one of the great promises for tomorrow, Robin Big Snake has hit a snag.

More than most fans, Grand Ronde Tribal members will be watching for a comeback, looking forward to a promise fulfilled. ■