



The Generosity Of Billet Families Around The Country Keep Junior Hockey Alive And Well

By John Tranchinan

USA Hockey Magazine - 01/07

No matter if they're playing in the USHL, the NAHL or countless other circuits across North America, Junior hockey players pursue their dreams by moving away from home, changing schools, and living with a local family who, initially at least, are strangers.

Billeting is a vital, and often overlooked, aspect of the Junior experience, and the success of a good match impacts the player, on and off the ice, long after his playing days are done.

The quality of a young man's situation at his new home often directly affects his performance on the ice.

"The kids have to enjoy themselves and be in a positive environment in order to give you everything you need hockey-wise," said Tony Curtale, head coach of the NAHL's three-time defending champion Texas Tornado.

"Ultimately, for that hockey player to achieve his goals and be as good as he could be, he needs to be happy in his surroundings."

Keith Ballard recalls his first experience with a billet family. As a youngster leaving home in Baudette, Minn., for the first time, Ballard joined the National Team Development Program. During his year in Ann Arbor, Mich., Ballard lived with a divorced woman and her two young daughters, ages 5 and 7.

While it took some getting used to, Ballard has fond memories of the experience.

"The family was good for me and made a real effort to make me feel comfortable," said Ballard, who now plays for the Phoenix Coyotes. "We had dinner together every night when I was there, which was a very good thing for everyone.

"After a while you get into a routine with hockey and school. The busy schedule is a good thing because you don't feel like you're burdening anyone."

The fact that the kids who play Juniors are leaving home for the first time amplifies the uncertainty that they feel as they try to adjust to living with a new family.

“It’s tough when you’re 16 years old and moving away from home,” said Matt Nickerson, who moved from Old Lyme, Conn., to play for the Tornado from 2001-03, and was a 2003 third-round draft choice of the Dallas Stars.

“But it was nice having a family that really took care of me. It was a lot more of a family atmosphere than I expected.”

Heading into the great unknown, most players don’t know what to expect and can only hope for the best.

“I really lucked out and had just an unbelievable family,” added 2005 Hobey Baker Award winner Marty Sertich, who relocated from his Minnesota home to Sioux Falls of the USHL for a year before attending Colorado College.

“It made it perfect for me, made me feel comfortable and made it just like I was living at home.”

If the kids have a tough time adapting to a new home, imagine the anxiety felt by their parents as they send their kids off to live elsewhere. Mary Ann DiGirolamo’s son Matt moved away for the first time to Texas (from Pennsylvania) to play for the Tornado last season.

“You put a lot of faith in the organization,” she said. “The Tornado is a very well-established and a very respected organization, and you really have to hope that they’re watching out for the children. Quite honestly, it’s a leap of faith.”

DiGirolamo worried about the usual ‘mom issues,’ such as how much Matt was eating, if he was doing his homework, etc. In the end, though, her fears were eased by Matt’s host family, consisting of Stephanie Hatten and her husband Eric, and their sons of 6 and 3 years old. Stephanie became Matt’s surrogate mother and developed a close friendship over the phone with Mary Ann.

“I probably talked to his mom at least once or twice a week, and sometimes even several times a day,” Stephanie acknowledged.

“She felt like, from him, she might not be getting the whole story, so she wanted to hear it from another mother’s point of view, how he’s doing, how he’s settling in. That was her baby, so I think that was very tough on her.”

“It’s funny, because now Matt has two moms,” DiGirolamo said. “And I think, in some respects, at 17 years old, it’s almost nice to have another adult to talk to that isn’t necessarily your parent but is still watching out for you. He’s very close to Stephanie. He calls her regularly. I don’t know what they talk about. I have a lot of faith in her judgment, and I really know that she’s watching out for his best interests.”

Ultimately, DiGirolamo pointed out, parents just have to trust that they raised their son well and hope for the best.

“You have to have faith in your child, that they have a cool head on their shoulders,” she sighed. “You pretty much hold your breath and hope you got everything into them they needed.”

For the Junior teams, there are a couple of over-arching principles they follow when selecting families for billeting, most of whom are referred by others in the program. For example, Curtale notes that he doesn’t allow single parents to take on that responsibility, and the host family must provide the player with his own room.

“We try to give them a real honest evaluation of what it’s going to be like to have one of these players,” Curtale said.

“Everyone could imagine bringing a teenage boy into your home is full of issues. We try to tell them about our program, and fortunately, a lot of them know that because most of them have been referred by somebody who knows it.”

The players become so enmeshed into the families it’s like adding another son to the mix.

“It’s like you take on another child,” said Stephanie Hatten. “They become part of you and your family, because for a lot of these boys, you are their support system and their cheering section. I feel like I was extremely fortunate. He was a great kid. He was very considerate, never broke curfew, and when he had friends over, they were very considerate.”

A boy that is dedicated enough to hockey that he would uproot his life for the challenge of playing at a high level is more likely to produce a smooth transition for all.

“I’m impressed with what hockey has done for these guys,” said John Moses of Frisco, Texas, whose family billeted Dylan Cooper of the Tornado last season. “The hockey program, because of what it puts them through, develops an admirable sense of maturity and balance. These guys are oftentimes demonstrating a sort of self-confidence that you might not expect from somebody that age.”

Stephanie Hatten was thankful for having Matt DiGirolamo around to influence her young sons.

“I can honestly say that I could not have asked for a better kid to be a role model for my two boys,” she said. “If they were to ever do something like Matt did, leaving home and being away from his family and friends and everything he knows, I would want my boys to be like him.”

While there is no perfect formula for success in terms of how each club determines which player goes with which family, there are some guidelines that drive the process.

“We interview the family to find out things about their interests,” said Tamera Curtale, Tony’s wife and the Tornado’s housing coordinator.

“It’s not that they have to pass a particular test, we just want to get a good feel for the families and then the players and then match them up as best as possible.”

The true mark of how successful the match is can be demonstrated by just how many players remain in contact with their host families after they leave town. The vast majority indicate that they have cemented lifelong friendships.

“It couldn’t have worked out any better,” Moses said of his experience hosting Cooper. “There was never any tension, even on minor points. He’s such a polite kid. He behaves the way you wish your kid would behave.”

“It was probably one of the best things that we’ve ever done as a family,” added Stephanie Hatten. “It was a wonderful experience, not only for me, but for my husband, for my two boys. We loved it.”

John Tranchina is a freelance writer in Dallas.