

A quick internet search for “Eau Claire high school hockey” turns up a page dedicated to the three schools in the city with programs. Scroll down a bit and you’ll find a headline in all caps proudly proclaiming: “JAKE DOWELL- EAU CLAIRE’S OWN.”

Dowell played for two years at Eau Claire Memorial High School before leaving for the U.S. National Team Development Program. Following two years with the U-18 team in Ann Arbor, Mich., Dowell came to Wisconsin where he compiled 90 points and won an NCAA championship in four seasons with the Badgers.

Dowell, who was drafted by Chicago in 2004, played four years with the Blackhawks following his career at Wisconsin and now finds himself with the Dallas Stars.

And somewhere in there, something pretty special happened—Dowell became a hockey idol.

Since Dowell left Eau Claire, the city has produced four hockey players at the Division I level—including current Badger skaters sophomore Jefferson Dahl and freshman Jake McCabe, both former Memorial players.

Both agree Dowell served as an inspiration for them and other young skaters in Eau Claire.

“I think it’s really taken off the last couple years starting with Jake Dowell when he went to the national program,” Dahl said.



Jefferson Dahl

“He was kind of the guy everyone looked up to in Eau Claire as the hockey idol who made it to the NHL,” McCabe agreed.

And McCabe had another top skater to look up to—his brother Andrew.

Andrew McCabe broke into college hockey playing his freshman season for Nebraska Omaha. Today, Andrew skates closer to home, playing for the Eau Claire Blugolds at the Division III level.

“I look up to my brother,” McCabe said. “He’s obviously a big role model in my life. He and my dad have taught me so much about hockey and he’s just a great guy. And I can always look up to him, and always go to him for advice.”

Jake also has a good friend of his brother’s to go too for advice—Derrick LaPoint, an Eau Claire North graduate who skated four years with North Dakota. LaPoint is the brother of current UW equipment manager Nate LaPoint, who himself played college hockey at Northland College in Ashland, Wis.

And despite any rivalry between the Badgers and UND, McCabe says LaPoint is always there for him too.

“He and my brother were great friends growing up,” McCabe said. “So Derrick’s there for advice also. He’s a guy that went through it all. He’s a guy that I can go talk to whenever I want.”

Jake McCabe spent just one year skating for Memorial before he left for Ann Arbor and the U.S. National team Development Program—just like the skater he looked up to, Jake Dowell. McCabe said although it was tough to leave the high school experience behind, he wouldn’t have done it any other way.

“In the end, I definitely made the right choice and I wouldn’t be here today if I didn’t.”

For Dahl though, skating for the Old Abes at Memorial proved to be a perfect fit. In four years at Memorial, Dahl collected 96 goals and 115 assists. At 211 points in 98 games played, Dahl averaged over two points per game in his career.

In fact in his senior year, Dahl collected 76 points in 26 games—nearly three points per game. Those impressive numbers led the Old Abes to a WIAA state championship in 2008—the first for the city—and earned Dahl the title of Mr. Hockey Wisconsin.



Jake McCabe

“I couldn’t really describe the feeling,” Dahl said of winning a championship. “It was just an unbelievable feeling.”

Both Dahl and McCabe say they see the hockey culture growing in Eau Claire.

“It’s definitely growing in Eau Claire and the area around Eau Claire, and I think it starts at the youth level and all the ages up,” Dahl said. “Eau Claire coaches get it and work more on developing players and I think that’s really helped.”

Although the city of Eau Claire has a few over 65,000, McCabe says the community atmosphere is not lost, especially in the hockey community.

“Everyone says how small of a hockey world it is, and Eau Claire’s no different,” McCabe said. “I mean everyone knows everyone when you get out onto the rink.”

Wisconsin head coach Mike Eaves says he’s also seeing an increase in the talent coming out of Eau Claire.

“It speaks to the fact that they must have some nice coaching,” Eaves said. “It’s a combination of things—good athletes are getting good coaching and having an opportunity to play.”

For Dahl and McCabe, guys who grew up idolizing skaters like Jake Dowell, they are now in turn the idols for young skaters back home.

“The talent is starting to grow more,” Dahl said. “It’s starting to get exciting around Eau Claire.”

—By Mark Bennett

Eau Claire Success Begets Success