

Living a dream: Marty Mjelleli fulfills lifelong goal with first pro hockey contract

By Bobby Hart

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Marty Mjelleli, shown playing in the Shattuck-St. Mary's alumni hockey game in June, recently committed to play for the Gwinnett Gladiators of the East Coast Hockey League. Mjelleli is a 2001 graduate of SSM and has always dreamed of playing pro hockey.

FARIBAULT — Before he could even fit into a pair of ice skates, Marty Mjelleli was a rink-rat.

About six months after he started walking, Marty's father, Martin, remembers searching for a pair small enough to fit his 3-year old boy. He found the next best thing.

"I got the smallest skates I could and I had to put like four pairs of socks on him," Martin said. "And he just took off. It was incredible."

More than two decades later, Mjelleli is ready to lace up a much larger pair of skates to achieve his dream of playing for a professional hockey team. Mjelleli, a 2001 graduate of Shattuck-St. Mary's, committed to the Gwinnett Gladiators of the East Coast Hockey League July 2, and just received his first professional hockey contract in the mail Thursday. However, he didn't have much time to look it over. He was busy out on the ice, helping out at the Goaltender Development Institute at the SSM Ice Arena.

"It's almost like nothing has changed," Mjelleli said between his duties Thursday night at SSM. "Hockey has been the one constant in my life."

Starting small

Mjelleli found his first ice time when he was 3 years old in Seattle, Wash., when his family housed members of the Seattle Thunderbirds, a Major Junior team in the Western Hockey League. After the games, the toddler

would hop on the ice, and anything resembling a normal bedtime was difficult for his parents to enforce.

“I just figured we’d get him on these skates and he wasn’t going to like it,” said Marty’s mother, Terry Lorenzen. “Well, I couldn’t get him off.”

Although Terry said the reality of her son playing professional hockey hasn’t yet sunk in, it isn’t much of a shock either.

“I don’t think it was that much of a surprise because everything is hockey to this kid,” she said. “My main goal was to get him an education, and I thought, well if you can do hockey along the way, why not?”

It’s fair to say Mjelleli’s obsession with hockey didn’t compromise his education. After flourishing in the rigorous academic program at SSM, he went on to be nationally recognized for his achievements as a student-athlete when he was named a member of the Lowe’s Senior CLASS All-American team as a senior forward on the St. Cloud State University hockey team in April.

Making it big

After graduating cum laude from SCSU in May, Mjelleli had a few different opportunities with Minor League pro hockey teams, but after talking with Gwinnett coach Jeff Pyle, he was sold on playing for the AA Atlanta Thrashers’ affiliate in an 11,355-seat arena as a Gladiator.

“It was a good fit,” Mjelleli said. “(Pyle) wanted a left-handed forward. They had six right-handers. I talked to him in the spring and it just seemed like the best fit.”

Mjelleli also fit the mold of what Pyle was looking for in a self-motivated player.

“Everything that I heard about him — he’s a great team guy, he will do anything that he has to do, he’ll play any position — just from that aspect, he was the kind of guy that I was looking for,” Pyle said. “I needed a low-end guy that was willing to come in, be a hard worker and do the necessary things to help get us where we need to get. Just his character, and I think the kid’s work ethic pretty much sold me.”

So instead of being the post-game show in Seattle, Mjelleli will get the opportunity to get paid for prime-time play at the Gwinnett Center, a \$68 million facility in Duluth, Ga. The ECHL is the third-longest tenured professional hockey league behind only the American Hockey League and the National Hockey League, and has had 355 former players go on to play in the NHL.

“He’s attaining his dream,” Martin said of his son. “My dream for him was to go to college and play hockey. His dream was to go a step further.”



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Now that he's attained his dream, Mjelleli said he wants to postpone waking up for as long as possible, moving up the ranks as far as his rink-rat ambitions will take him.

"It's something that's pretty special because not too many people can say that they're a professional hockey player in life," Mjelleli said. "I see a lot of my friends get desk jobs and stuff, and I'm sure one day I'll definitely be behind there with them, but for the time being, I'm still living out a dream."

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