



Malone living the dream

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Wayne Gretzky never got to play for the Toronto Maple Leafs. Mario Lemieux never skated for the Montreal Canadiens. Jarome Iginla ended up on the enemy side of his childhood Alberta heroes. **By Pierre LeBrun -- THE CANADIAN PRESS**



Ryan Malone was a fan in the stands the last time Pittsburgh won the Stanley Cup.

PHILADELPHIA -- Wayne Gretzky never got to play for the Toronto Maple Leafs. Mario Lemieux never skated for the Montreal Canadiens. Jarome Iginla ended up on the enemy side of his childhood Alberta heroes.

Not every kid ends up playing for the very NHL team that adorned his bedroom walls in posters and pennants.

"I definitely feel privileged, lucky and honoured," Ryan Malone said Thursday after the pre-game skate at Wachovia Center.

The 28-year-old Pittsburgh native has played all four of his NHL seasons with his hometown Penguins. The last time the team reached the Stanley Cup final was 1992, the second of back-to-back championships, with a 12-year-old Malone cheering them on in the stands.

"I remember every time they were on a power play they would play the Jaws music," Malone said with a laugh. "My father and mother went to Chicago when they won the second Cup.

"We went through the whole thing. I also remember in '93 when they lost to the Islanders (in the second round) in overtime, everybody is sitting around in the stands going, 'What do we do now?' Because everybody was used to keep going for another month."

Penguins fans would have to get used to that feeling. They haven't been to the Cup final in a long time. If only that 13-year-old Malone in '93 had known the next time they'd be knocking on the door, he would be skating on the team.

"It's crazy to be in this situation right now," said Malone, whose Penguins led the Philadelphia Flyers

3-0 in the Eastern Conference final entering Thursday night's Game 4.

Malone's father Greg also played for the Penguins, which is why Ryan grew up in Pittsburgh. Greg Malone, a New Brunswick native, also played for Quebec and Hartford and is now a scout for the Phoenix Coyotes after many years as a Penguins scout.

So not only did Ryan Malone grow up a Penguins fan, he literally grew up hanging around the team.

"You definitely feel lucky," Malone said. "I would have happily played anywhere but it's an extra bonus to play for the team I grew up with. I'm privileged."

Just how long he'll be wearing that uniform remains to be seen. He's an unrestricted free agent July 1 and his career-best season, 27 goals and 51 points, would fetch him a handsome raise over the US\$1.45 million he made this season. Perhaps as much as \$4.5 million on the open market. That will likely be too much money for a Penguins team that is looking to get star centre Evgeni Malkin to sign a rich, new extension this summer, not to mention having to re-sign restricted free-agent goalie Marc-Andre Fleury.

It's clear what decision looms for Malone: take a big raise on the open market or stay home for a discount.

"I'm not thinking about that right now," said Malone. "We have a lot of guys who are unrestricted. We could have the whole team back or nobody back it looks like.

"But those are decisions that will be made when it's over and hopefully we're all happy."

Marian Hossa, Jarkko Ruutu, Georges Laraque, Brooks Orpik, Gary Roberts, Mark Eaton and Ty Conklin are among the other unrestricted free agents. Because Malone makes his off-season home in Minnesota, where he played NCAA hockey at St. Cloud State and more importantly met his wife, there are some who believe the Minnesota Wild will make him an offer.

It won't be an easy decision. For starters, there aren't many NHL teams that would give him the chance to play with a centre like Malkin. The two have clicked on a line with Petr Sykora this season. Malone carried 12 points (4-8) in 12 playoff games into Thursday's action. It's been a career year and not just offensively.

"Ryan, you know, he became a leader," said head coach Michel Therrien. "He learned through adversity the last three years. He means well. He's going to stick up for his teammates. He's an assistant captain on our club, and it's fun to see him get that responsibility, especially to a guy like him who grew up with the Penguins, because his dad was part of this organization for a long time.

"He's doing a fantastic job," continued Therrien. "He's got a huge role as we all know in our club.

He's playing on the power play, he's playing with Malkin on one of the top two lines, he's playing on the penalty killing, so he's got no choice but to have a good game. Because if he's having a bad game, it's going to be tough for us to win. He's one of those guys that's got big-time minutes."

Therrien dished out some tough love in Malone's direction over the last three seasons. He felt he had to.

"The first time I saw Ryan Malone, I saw his potential, but I don't think he realized it," said Therrien. "All the credit goes to him, because you know what, he's focusing a lot more than he was. He's playing a tough game. He's disciplined on and off the ice and he understands what it takes to be a true professional, and this is what I respect about Ryan right now.

"We went through some tough times together, but in the meantime, I enjoy the development that guy had over the last few years."

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