

BEYOND THE BLUE

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"IT FEELS GOOD NOW TO BE
PART OF A GREAT ORGANIZATION
AND I'M LOOKING FORWARD TO
THE FUTURE!" - ROBERTS

Left image: Action from the 2015 OHL Cup in Toronto, ON March 17-23, 2015. Photo by Aaron Bell/OHL Images
Right Image: Kitchener Rangers General Manager Murray Hiebert, Second Round Pick: Elijah Roberts and Head Coach Troy Smith

PRIORITY SELECTION BRINGS NEW FACES TO THE AUD

There was no missing the smile on Hugh Craig's face on draft day. The Rangers' top scout in Eastern Ontario even cracked a joke when asked about Nicholas McHugh, the team's seventh round pick.

"Well, for starters, I've been talking about him since the second round!" he laughed when asked for a scouting report, adding that the young forward from the Ottawa Jr. 67's is a creative player with a high compete level. McHugh recorded 40 points in 29 regular season games in 2014-15, lining up alongside Rangers' first round

pick Greg Meireles (12th Overall). Meireles and McHugh were teamed up again on the Hockey Eastern Ontario roster for the 2015 OHL Gold Cup in Kitchener, confirming their success of last season.

"The chemistry those two kids had together this year was unbelievable to me," explained Craig. Rangers General Manager Murray Hiebert gave Meireles, the Junior 67's team captain, a rave review after the club made its first round selection, noting that his speed and physical play were exactly what Kitchener was looking for.

"He plays a complete 200-foot game," added Hiebert. "We went to see him in Prince George in the Canada Winter Games, where he won a gold medal, and one of his most memorable games, he was making a play in the offensive zone, and then right away he was saving a goal right in the blue paint in his own zone."

The two Ottawa-area skaters aren't the only ones headed to the OHL Gold Cup – in total, eight players picked by the Rangers were selected to play in the Kitchener-based tournament, including GTHL standouts



"I'M SO EXCITED TO BE DRAFTED TO A GREAT TEAM – I'M HAVING A GREAT TIME!" - GARREFFA

Left image: Action from the 2015 OHL Cup in Toronto, ON March 17-23, 2015. Photo by Aaron Bell/OHL Images

Elijah Roberts (second round, 31st overall) and Joseph Garreffa (third round, 44th overall) who will lace up together for Team Blue.

A defenceman with the OHL Cup-winning Toronto Marlboros, Roberts is an offensively gifted player who potted 10 goals and added 23 assists in his minor midget campaign. The Brampton, ON native arrived with his family in tow on draft day, pulling on his Rangers jersey in the team's dressing room before settling in to talk to the media.

"I was really nervous going in [to the draft], but it feels good now to be part of a great organization and I'm looking forward to the future!" the young rearguard said with a smile. "It was my first choice: I came down

for a game and the fans were amazing. It was something I want to be a part of."

Garreffa echoed that enthusiasm on his arrival to The Aud, beaming as he toured the facility with his clan. "I'm so excited to be drafted to a great team – I'm having a great time!", said the Toronto-based pivot, who was part of Meireles' gold medal winning team at the Canada Winter Games.

After the OHL Priority Selection, the work continues for all 14 players selected by the Rangers. Many attended the club's Spring Camp at Activa in April, with eyes towards a spot at the main training camp in the fall. And most have plans to continue improving their game through the summer months, including Garreffa.

"Just get stronger, is the main thing – the guys are so much bigger and stronger at the next level," revealed the smiling teen.

"And I also want to get quicker, because the game speed is faster."

FOR FULL DETAILS ON THE RANGERS' 2015 PRIORITY SELECTION, INCLUDING INTERVIEWS WITH TEAM SCOUTS AND PLAYERS, VISIT KITCHENERRANGERS.COM/PAGE/2015-DRAFT.

MERLI FINDS HIS CALLING IN KITCHENER

Brandon Merli has always loved The Aud. A lifelong fan of the Rangers, the Kitchener native was pursuing his own hockey dreams when the call came from the hometown team OHL Draft Day.

"I don't know if I ever thought about it – coming as a kid to the games, I always loved the game and loved seeing the Rangers players, the guys who came before me. And I definitely wanted to play at that level."

He played his entire junior career as a Blueshirt, appearing in 167 regular season games between 1996 and 2000. And while the team plodded through some rebuilding years ("we had some tough years then!", he laughs), he was always happy for the opportunity to play for his childhood team.

"I think my favourite memory of my time here was just being a hometown kid who could play in front of his parents every night. That was probably the coolest part."

After four years on East Avenue, his career took him to the East Coast Hockey League and stops in Birmingham and Atlantic City. But the minor league grind took its toll, and eventually the winger decided that his hockey career path wasn't headed in a

direction he liked. He returned to the Waterloo Region for school, and it wasn't long before he was back at The Aud.

He heard rumblings that the team was looking to expand its training staff, and so he seized the opportunity to sit down with then-assistant GM Steve Spott. Little did he know that that meeting would be the start of something big.

Two years after he rejoined the Rangers, it was time for Brandon to expand. He took over the small but functional gym in the basement of The Aud, and opened Redline Conditioning. And over the past six years, they've grown in leaps and bounds, moving into a new, bigger facility off Queen Street in Kitchener and welcoming teams and pros for off-ice training. They even hosted a visit from the Stanley Cup last year, as long-time client Tanner Pearson stopped by to say thanks.

"It's nice to get to the point where the kids that you worked with when they were 13 or 14 are starting to realize their dreams at the pro level," says Brandon. "To be able to have some hand in their development is very gratifying."

Coming home to the Rangers dressing room has been overwhelmingly positive for Merli, even as Redline Conditioning continues to grow. In addition to

hockey players, they welcome teams from different sports and recently became the official training partner of Kitchener Minor Baseball. But you'll still find him at The Aud most days, keeping a watchful eye over the players as he pushes them to get better.

"It's nice to draw back on experiences that I had in the room and on the team, and understand some of the feelings that the boys have and to be able to relate to them. I know that there are times when they're down or things are tough and I can guide them through an experience that tested me that I was able to get through."

It's been more than a decade since the hometown kid laced up for his final game with the Rangers. And though he hasn't strayed far, Brandon has built an impressive business doing what he loves, and shares that passion with the next generation of Rangers.

"I think it's amazing. For me, it was a great honour to play here and it's probably the fondest four years of hockey memories that I have. So I'm very passionate and loyal with the Rangers organization. I'm blessed to come here every day and do what I do with the great people that this team has. For me, it's special and it's something I'll always have fond memories of."



LASHOFF'S PASSION EXTENDS BEYOND THE RINK

You could hear the excitement in defenceman Matt Lashoff's voice over the phone from Bridgeport, Connecticut. Fresh off the ice from practice with the American Hockey League's Sound Tigers, he was happy to be back on American soil after three seasons overseas.

"I still think that I have a lot of good hockey left in me, and I wanted to take a few more swings at the NHL, which is obviously still the end goal," beamed the long-time Rangers rearguard, who moved to Bridgeport from Siberia, where he was playing with Novokuznetsk Metallurg (KHL).

The move to Europe was not one he planned; after his 2011-12 season was shortened by a serious knee injury, he was looking forward to returning to the pros. But the 2012-13 NHL lockout put a damper on that plan, and like many of his cohorts, Lashoff and his young family were forced to consider the alternatives.

"We've had a lot of experiences over in Europe – it wasn't really a route that I thought I was going to take, but sometimes life has its own plan," laughs the modest 28-year-old, who started his overseas career in Switzerland, before moving on to the Swedish Elite League. His final stop was in Russia, a spot he always envisioned checking out eventually.

"My family has ties back to

Russia, so it was always an experience that I had considered and kept in the back of my mind as a potential bucket list item. I didn't know it would be this early in my career, but I really relished the opportunity to go there and experience the culture."

His positive perspective was influenced largely by his time with the Rangers. Lashoff credits former Head Coach and General Manager Peter DeBoer with preparing him for the grind of professional hockey, and the respect he has for his former bench boss is still evident a decade later.

"The way that Pete treated us – he preached mental toughness, he made sure he got in our ear when we needed it, and he was tough but fair. It shapes the way you think about the game. In my career, moving overseas and stuff, you have to deal with ups and downs galore, but I could always go back to those lessons."

His career has taken him far and wide, but Matt is filled with warm memories and glowing praise for Kitchener and his three seasons with the Rangers. His voice still picks up with excitement when he talks about his time at The Aud.

"Professionalism was an important lesson I learned – those guys preach to play the game a certain way and preach a certain approach as far as routines, consistency and especially work ethic. To this day, I believe that it's the right way to play. My time with the Rangers was absolutely amazing

and I wouldn't change it for anything. I would never have made a different decision," remembers Lashoff.

His return to North America re-energized Matt, who moved from Bridgeport to Portland in a late season trade. But beyond his family, and the game, there's one more passion that drives him. In 2011, the New York state native released his first album, *Living on Heart*. Music is another outlet for the well-spoken blueliner, a heartbeat he's always had.

"I feel very lucky. A lot of it is a byproduct of meeting really great people who have been so supportive of me doing both. Rock stars want to be athletes and athletes want to be rock stars, and I'm fortunate that for the time being, I'm able to do a little bit of both," he says with a modest chuckle.

He has new music coming out this summer, including a song with Canadian duo USS. And he's excited to be back in North America, where he can collaborate with other writers. Hockey is still his first love ('it's in my blood', he exclaims), but he's got room in his heart for both and a plan to keep going as long as he can.

"I've been doing this for a long time – I've been playing the guitar and playing hockey forever, it seems – and I feel like you just have to chase what you love. Whatever that is, you have to do it. It's been a pretty good ride doing both, so I'm hoping to keep it going!"

