

Feature

Fresh face helms new team

by Neil Duxbury
Brunswickan Sports

The Mile High city has finally got another hockey team. After its Colorado Rockies left to become the New Jersey Devils, the sporting year in Denver was laid bare, comprising a fall of football and a winter of discontent from the NBA's Nuggets. In the past two years all that has changed. First the expansion baseball franchise (also the Rockies) and now the return of hockey, at the expense of Quebec City. The fans have come back too, with a 28 game sellout streak.

Second year head coach Marc Crawford led the way from Quebec to Denver and his skilled but inexperienced team followed. Now bolstered with a few playoff veterans, the Avalanche are looking to improve on last year's first round playoff exit.

Crawford played his minor hockey here in Fredericton with the then AHL affiliate of the Vancouver Canucks and Quebec Nordiques, the Fredericton Express. When his playing career with the Canucks was over Crawford turned his eye towards the coaching ranks. He began in Ontario, before moving back to the Atlantic region to coach the St John's Maple Leafs.

Crawford seems to have good, if a little rose tinted, memories of the area where he "spent most of the 80s."

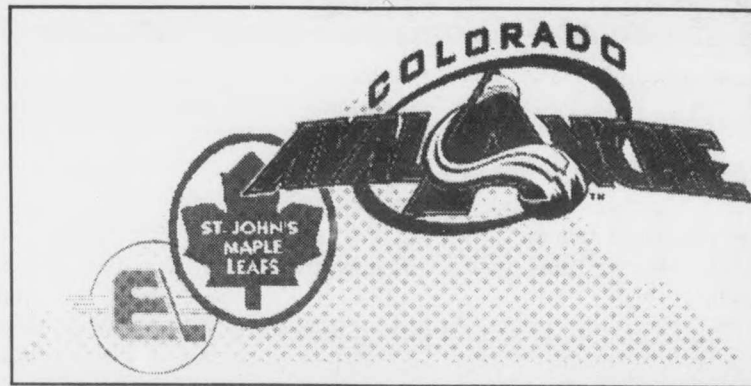
Coaching in the Maritimes has given him the chance to check out AUSA hockey, particularly the games involving Saint Thomas, where his brother Eric is a fourth year player.

"Obviously it's entertaining hockey. The AUSA does a great job of keeping a very competitive league and a great job of producing student athletes."

But when it comes to memories of Fredericton, there seems to be one that stands out.

"I'm sure that all of the guys that remember their time [in Fredericton] spent quite a few days...and quite a few dollars at the Cosmo."

In July of 94, after three years coaching on Newfoundland, Crawford was



hired by the Quebec Nordiques as their new head coach. In his rookie season, the strike shortened 94/95 campaign, Crawford led his team to the best record in the East - improving their winning percentage by .225. While the Nordiques inexperience showed in the playoffs (losing in the first round to the New York Rangers), Crawford's efforts were enough to earn him the Jack Adams trophy for NHL Coach of the year - the first rookie head coach to receive the award.

The change of leagues brought a different style of coaching for Crawford.

"In the AHL, all of your players are striving to get to the National Hockey League and you're one of the guys who really controls their fate so you have a bit of clout with them as a coach. At the National Hockey League level, you're more of a communicator, much more of a technically and tactically correct person, where in the AHL, it's almost in the situation where you want input from the players but you also want to make sure that they're doing the things that the organisation sees as important in their development as players."

And for the development of coaches? "Tremendous. You're playing against all of the top coaching prospects that you're probably going to see in the National Hockey League."

At the end of his first season, the Nordiques were sold to the COMSAT group, who relocated them to Denver and renamed them the Colorado Avalanche.

"It was tough [to leave], in that Quebec had a very solid hockey tradition. It was a city where hockey was number

one, and you had no problem motivating the fans and, motivating the players to play well. They had pressure not only from themselves and the organisation, but pressure from the media and the fans who were very educated and very loyal."

The problem was not the intensity of the support, but the size of the market.

"It was clearly a situation where the market was too small to support a National Hockey League team. It just wasn't feasible to keep a team competitive at the National Hockey League level. Especially in our situation, for us to have to run the way of the Expos and sell off your high priced talent because we couldn't afford them really isn't the way to run a pro franchise and I don't think the people of Quebec would have stood for that."

There have been many adjustments for the players, new city, new arena but the biggest, according to Crawford, is the travel. "You suffer a loss of practice time, a loss of time to develop players at the National Hockey League level and develop the good habits that you need to be successful."

The Avalanche have set a pace equivalent to the Nordiques last year. With a playoff berth guaranteed, now comes the task of proving that last year's exit was an anomaly.

"I think we have to look on the playoffs with enthusiasm. It's a time when we can really show that we're a great club. Our team has shown that three of the last four years that we're a very good club regular season and now the next step is to show in the big dance that we can do the two step."

Co-Ed Cheerleaders

...and decide in the air



A big hand for the Co-Ed Cheerleaders. Performing one of their many intricate and potentially dangerous moves (would you want to land on a hardwood floor from that height?)

Photo Warren Watson

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