

Caledon native Brett Murray didn't expect AHL to cancel its season

Written By ROBERT BELARDI

Cancelling a sports league is a rarity. From amateur all the way to professional, it's not something any organization ever wants to do.

In some cases, it's the most plausible solution. The 1919 Stanley Cup finals between the Montreal Canadiens and the Seattle Metropolitans is the perfect example. After game five, the fight for the cup was cancelled due to the Spanish Flu. Most of the Canadiens' players and coach, George Kennedy, fell ill.

When the NBA, MLB and NHL suspended their seasons back in March, it was no surprise. Other pro leagues across the globe have done the same, as they continue to seek viable solutions to resume play safely.

The German Bundesliga has resumed play with no fans in the stadiums and coaches must keep their distance between one another.

But for other leagues it was paramount for those organizations to cancel the league outright. At least, they felt it was the right decision.

The International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) has cancelled the world junior hockey championships this year. The National League in Switzerland, the Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) and the Austrian Hockey League (EBEL) have done the same.

The league holding plenty of the NHL's farm teams; the American Hockey League (AHL) announced on May 11th their season will also be cancelled.

President and Chief Executive Officer David Andrews, in his final year in the position, made the call.

The league standings will remain the same; without a Calder Cup champion.

The decision came as a surprise to all players, including Caledon native and Rochester Americans winger Brett Murray. He tells the Citizen this is the first time since he learned to lace the skates all those years ago that he's had stop playing hockey before April. While the global situation has been grim for a while now, he didn't expect things to come to this.

"I never expected it to happen. When it did happen it was new, it was a new experience. It was weird for sure, we're in playing city in mid-March. It's when you're about to kick-off playoffs," Murray explained, from his new home in Collingwood, Ontario.

It's his first pro-season since being drafted by the Buffalo Sabres, 99th overall in the 2016 draft.

The 6'4, left-hander, has been at full throttle all year long, amassing nine goals and 15 assists in 55 games.

It's been quite the adjustment, but for Murray it's just another obstacle. He's been living in a hockey family all his life. To be playing the sport at a professional level is all he ever wanted.

His father played junior in Bolton. He has instilled the passion and excitement in the sport between Murray and his two sisters.

Although growing up watching the Leafs, Murray idolized one of the greats to ever play the game; five-time Stanley Cup champion (twice as a player and three times as an owner) Mario Lemieux.

When Lemieux left the game in 2006, Murray watched his successor, along with others, very closely.

"I always loved watching Sidney Crosby. You can't not love watching him play. Jeff Carter is a similar player. I like to style my game after Jamie Benn. Those are the guys I looked up to."

Murray, began his playing career with the Schomberg Red Wings and then moved to the Caledon Hawks.

When his bantam year rolled around, Murray found a place in the Toronto Nationals AAA roster. But, a sudden switch the next year to the Brampton 45's Minor Midget AAA side, to join Caledon native and forward for Clarkson University Jack Jacome, was a pivotal decision.

"I thought for progression in my hockey career, it was the best move at the time. It turned out it probably was the best move," Murray said.

Turns out Murray wasn't wrong, because the Oshawa Generals selected Murray 236th overall in the minor midget draft that year.

Although it was heavily rewarding, the opportunity to play with the Generals didn't arrive.

Murray moved on to The Hill Academy, a prep school specific to the NCAA route. With The Hill Academy U16 prep, Murray recorded 40 goals and 47 assists.

He was invited to try out for the Carleton Place Canadians the year after in the CCHL. He joined the team and made it all the way to the RBC Cup.

But that year was bigger than just a successful season. That year was when his name ended up on the central scouting list.

"That was the big moment. When that list first came out and my name was on it, it was a real eye-opener for sure. It was really cool. I think that was the time, I thought, if I really put my head down and work at this eventually, I can possibly have a career," he exclaimed.

And it turns out the opportunity presented itself. The Buffalo Sabres selected Murray in the draft.

From there, Murray travelled down south of the border. He played half a season with the Youngstown Phantoms in the USHL before beginning his life at school at Penn State.

Following two seasons struggling with the university's hockey team, Murray went back to the Phantoms.

He says, consistency was his problem, calling it one of the major challenges he faced throughout these three years. In his first full year with the Phantoms, Murray racked up 76 points. Not bad finding your feet again, enough to earn a pro contract as the cherry on top.

With the Americans, Murray says the AHL is a league of maturity. He is no longer competing against younger players. There are athletes of all ages and everybody is fighting for a spot.

"You got to come in day in and day out because someone is gunning for your spot. They're going to be trying no matter what. I think that was a big adjustment."

The nerves have settled from his first game. The limelight isn't so bright anymore. It's all about playing hockey and enjoying it professionally. Murray says that even his return to Toronto, in front of his family against the Marlies, was memorable. Playing in the city he idolized from a young age, was a moment he'll never forget, although the Americans suffered a 5-2 defeat.

As of July 1st, his contract will be expired. He is forever thankful to be a part of the Buffalo Sabres farm team. He says, owner Terry Pegula and his family have treated him with the utmost respect.

He wants to be a part of the Sabres. He is a fan of how the organization has built their squad, with the likes of Jack Eichel and Rasmus Dahlin leading the way.

If he can become a Sabre permanently in the NHL, he will do whatever it takes to bring that city a championship. Right now, Murray must wait until the free agency market opens up and he'll see what happens.