

LEAVING ON THE JETS' PLANE

David Babych and Doug Wickenheiser were both caught in the draft, but did the Canadiens get left out in the cold?

BY MARC EDGE

The television cameraman motions to David Babych, the NHL's No. 2 draft pick last June, to move to the right. That way, he explains, Winnipeg Jets general manager John Ferguson, the man with a nose like a vulture's beak, can drape his beefy arm around Babych's shoulders and still get in the picture. *Closer, David, let's get a little closer.* Babych shuffles closer. *No, no, not so far. A little to the left.* Babych moves to the left. *A little forward, now.* Grinning like a kid posing for the high school year book, Babych moves still again. *Ah, perfect.*

The cameraman fusses with the light meter next, then the focus, then the battery pack. Minutes pass, and storm clouds begin to mass in Ferguson's eyes. The floor of the Montreal Forum, site of the 1980 entry draft, is mobbed and Ferguson wants to strut about a bit. The cameraman looks up. *Okay, now, the sweater, David, the sweater.* Babych dutifully holds up a No. 4 Jets jersey with BABYCH on the shoulders. *Beautiful. Now, hold it.* Ferguson is all smiles, his arm right there on the shoulders of his newest acquisition. The cameraman signals his readiness to an interviewer, who promptly sticks a microphone in Babych's face and begins asking questions. Babych has already heard them too many times this morning, but he obliges once more. Yes, he's delighted to be picked so high. No, he's not up-

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set that Montreal, which had traded with Colorado for the year's first pick, passed him by in favor of Doug Wickenheiser, a big, high-scoring center. Yes, it was unfortunate that St. Louis failed in its last-minute attempt to trade for Winnipeg's pick in order to grab Babych and reunite him with his brother, Wayne. And, yes, he was relieved that Edmonton's late-season surge had taken the club out of the running for first pick. Edmonton is Babych's hometown, but earlier last season he insisted he didn't want to play there. Too much pressure, he said, to which an Oiler executive tartly responded: "Does he think there's no pressure in the seventh game of the Stanley Cup?"

Babych played his minor hockey in Edmonton, later moving across the Saskatchewan River to Fort Saskatchewan to play Tier II junior. Meanwhile Wayne, with whom David had played on the family's backyard rink in 30-below cold, was three years older than his brother and left home to join the junior Edmonton Oil Kings of the Western Canada Junior League at 15. When competition from the WHA's Oilers became too stiff, the Oil Kings—and Wayne—moved to Portland and became the Winterhawks—and the first U.S.-based Canadian junior team.

David remained with Fort Saskatchewan until he was 16, staying an extra year principally to finish high school, then followed his brother to the States, a move he says he may not have made had

Wayne not pioneered the way. At six two, 205 pounds, he soon evoked comparisons to Denis Potvin. Although not the bone-crushing checker Potvin is, Babych is a pinpoint passer who doesn't ruffle easily and plays a strong defensive game. Potvin, it's said, wasted his last two years in junior and was ready to enter the NHL at 19. At the same age, Babych will get a chance to do what Potvin couldn't.

John Ferguson thinks he's got a Calder Trophy candidate on his hands. And even if the superlatives heaped on Babych only approximate the truth, his top pick will almost certainly make the starting lineup, an unlikely eventuality had Montreal decided to draft Babych. Instead, the Canadiens chose six-foot, 199-pound Doug Wickenheiser, who had 89 goals and 81 assists for the WCHL's Regina Pats before turning in a subpar performance in the Canadian junior championship series. It was a selection that baffled many. *Sport Magazine* chose Wickenheiser as hockey's up-and-coming superstar of the next decade, but that suggests either the magazine's prophets drink in the same bar as the Canadiens' scouts or that they are woefully ill-informed. "Dave Babych is *ten* times better than Doug Wickenheiser," says Hartford general manager Jack Kelley. "What Montreal has done really puzzles me."

The Canadiens are noted for their scouting acumen, their ability to unearth diamonds in the rough,

TOP TEN FROM THE U.S. COLLEGES

Name	Amateur Club	Position	Drafting Club
1. Murray Eaves (44th overall)	University of Michigan	C	Winnipeg
2. Dan Meile (47th overall)	Providence College	RW	Washington
3. Mickey Volcan (50th overall)	University of North Dakota	D	Hartford
4. Steve Bozek (52nd overall)	North Michigan University	C	Los Angeles
5. Randy Velischek (53rd overall)	Providence College	D	Minnesota
6. Craig Ludwig (61st overall)	University of North Dakota	D	Montreal
7. Jay Miller (66th overall)	University of New Hampshire	LW	Quebec
8. Carey Wilson (67th overall)	Dartmouth College	LW	Chicago
9. Bob Brooke (75th overall)	Yale University	C	St. Louis
10. Kurt Kleinendorst (77th overall)	Providence College	C	Rangers

but this year they may have been dazzled by statistics and beaten at their own game. Babych is regarded as the best of a weak crop of juniors (see page 25 for top picks), so good the North Stars offered four starters for him. Wickenheiser, on the other hand, is suspect defensively, albeit something the Canadiens are adept at correcting. But, unlike Babych, he is believed to lack both desire and maturity, intangibles that all great players possess.

Montreal claims to go after the best available player but, says one agent, "that's a lot of bunk, because they sure didn't do that here." No, they didn't. Though Serge Savard is aging and Guy Lapointe is reportedly up for trade after feuding with Montreal coach Claude Ruel, the Canadiens' defense is still solid, including as it does two-time Norris Trophy-winner Larry Robinson and youngsters Rod Langway, Brian Engblom, Gaston Gingras and Bill Baker. But the loss of Jacques Lemaire before last season created a void at center and the Canadiens chose to fill it with Doug Wickenheiser.

Montreal is hoping to break tradition with its choice of Wickenheiser. Twice before in the last decade the Canadiens have plunked for a highly rated draft pick from the West, only to be burned. Ten years ago they made Flin Flon goalie Ray Martynuik—"a surefire superstar"—their top pick (fifth overall) and five years

later took Robin Sadler second (ninth overall). Neither ever played in the NHL.

So of this year's juniors Babych may be the man to watch, and John Ferguson is convinced he'll do much to improve the league's third-worst defense. Ferguson isn't alone in his enthusiasm. Consider:

- "He's the best in the country, the best defenseman to come into the league since Potvin, but he's better defensively than Potvin. He does it all—pass, skate, shoot. I've seen them all across Canada and there's no one even close."—George Woods, Vancouver Canucks head scout.

- "He's better at 18 than Beck was when he was 19. I think he has the ability to carry a franchise. He's smarter than the average player."—Charlie Hodge, Winnipeg Jets scout.

- "He's big, strong and poised. He moves the puck well and reminds me of Harry Howell in his skating."—Colorado Rockies scout Rudy Filion.

None of the praise is lost on Babych, who was determined to be picked at least as high as his brother, who went third in the 1978 draft. To this end, he turned down an offer to play for the 1980 Canadian Olympic Team, which sorely needed defensemen of his caliber. "The Canadian team didn't do very well," he says a bit self-servingly. "I could have dropped quite a bit in the draft because when you're playing against the

best in the world they can make you look bad."

Babych is obviously afraid of looking bad, and he has his weak points. One is proneness to injury, which may run in the family. Brother Wayne missed 49 games due to injury in three seasons with the Blues, and last year David sat out 29 games because of strained ankle ligaments and a dislocated shoulder. "Last year I was rated fourth in the country by the NHL's Central Scouting [office] even though I wasn't eligible for the draft," says the younger Babych, who was ranked behind Perry Turnbull, Rob Ramage and Wayne Gretzky. "I would have been disappointed if my injuries had kept me from finishing at least as high as fourth."

Injuries aren't the only negative.

Another drawback to Babych, say scouts, is his relatively low penalty-minute total—he averaged 67 minutes a season during his two years (during their junior seasons Potvin averaged 180 and Beck 218). Babych rarely instigates fights but will respond when provoked, and in the physically punishing world of Canadian junior hockey players quickly learned to steer clear of him. He claims to have been in only two or three fights in his life. His first came while he was playing in an exhibition game with the Portland Winterhawks. He was 15. A dispute arose behind the op-

PICK OF THE LITTER

Of the 210 players chosen in the 1980 entry draft held last June at the Montreal Forum, 144 were from the Canadian junior leagues, 43 from U.S. colleges, 13 from Europe and eight from high schools. The Canadian Olympic and U.S. National Junior teams accounted for a player each. The draft yielded a bumper crop of defensemen, 72 in all, but there were fewer goalies than there are teams. Of 16 (the highest: Minnesota pick Dan Beaupre, 37th overall), Montreal took three and Colorado, Edmonton and Hartford two each. Detroit, Washington, St. Louis, Calgary, the Rangers, Philadelphia and Quebec obviously felt sound in goal: They didn't draft any.

Below are the top 20 players drafted. Those with asterisks are players HOCKEY predicts will play in the NHL this season.

Name	Amateur Club	Position	Drafting Club
1. Douglas Wickenheiser*	Regina Pats	C	Montreal
2. David Babych*	Portland Winterhawks	D	Winnipeg
3. Denis Savard*	Montreal Juniors	C	Chicago
4. Larry Murphy*	Peterborough Petes	D	Los Angeles
5. Darren Veitch*	Regina Pats	D	Washington
6. Paul Coffey*	Kitchener Rangers	D	Edmonton
7. Rick Lanz	Oshawa Generals	D	Vancouver
8. Fred Arthur	Cornwall Royals	D	Hartford
9. Mike Bullard	Brantford Alexanders	C	Pittsburgh
10. Jimmy Fox*	Ottawa 67's	RW	Los Angeles
11. Mike Blaisdell*	Regina Pats	RW	Toronto
12. Rick Wilson	Kingston Canadians	D	St. Louis
13. Denis Cyr*	Montreal Juniors	RW	Calgary
14. Jim Malone	Toronto Marlboros	C	N.Y. Rangers
15. Jerome Dupont	Toronto Marlboros	D	Chicago
16. Brad Palmer	Victoria Cougars	LW	Minnesota
17. Brent Sutter	Red Deer Rustlers	C	N.Y. Islanders
18. Barry Pederson	Victoria Cougars	C	Boston
19. Paul Gagne	Windsor Spitfires	LW	Colorado
20. Steve Patrick	Brandon Wheat Kings	RW	Buffalo

ponent's net and a rival player collared David. "I was just about to go out on the ice and help him, when I realized he didn't need help," recalls his brother, who was then with Portland. "He really took care of himself. He could have played for us then."

Despite Babych's vow that the NHL is the place to play, his sense of personal worth prompted him to threaten early last season that if the NHL failed to pay him decently—something in the neighborhood of \$1 million over five years—he would flee to Switzerland for a pot of tax-free dollars. At the height of

end, he settled for a four-year \$600,000 contract, perhaps the largest of any graduating junior and enough to improve on the battered Toyota he bought with wages earned one summer moving furniture.

The amateur draft, or entry draft as it's now called, is a high-stakes roulette game in which only a handful of gambling teams end up winners. Past draft lists are littered with the names of junior whiz kids who arrive at training camp skating like a Chihuahua and shooting by compass and flashlight. Among the 695 players chosen in

including Greg Joly (Washington, No. 1, 1974), Cam Connor (Montreal, No. 5, 1974), Barry Dean (Kansas City, No. 2, 1975), Greg Vaydik (Chicago, No. 7, 1975), Fred Williams (Detroit, No. 4, 1976), Jeff Bandura (Vancouver, No. 22, 1977), Danny Geoffrion (Montreal, No. 8, 1978). If David Babych can duplicate the success of another No. 2 pick, Barry Beck, John Ferguson's determination to hold onto his first-round pick may prove to be the shrewdest move he's made since he quit playing.

And the Montreal Canadiens may end up with nothing more