

HEROES & LEGENDS

HOPE AND HARD WORK HELP FILIP NOVAK MAKE HIS MARK

When 20-year old Filip Novak was a boy, his favorite hockey player was Boston Bruins' legend Bobby Orr.

“My country was still under communist rule then. Knowing about players like Bobby Orr was like a secret; we were only supposed to know our national players,” says the native of the Czech Republic.

Novak cut his teeth on a hockey puck, sparked by hidden images of underground heroes and the idea that hockey stretched past the borders of communist Eastern Europe. His father was a hockey pro, and the younger Novak started playing the game at five. He grew up in the locker room of his father's team and as his own devotion to the game grew, he attended a school for athletes to accommodate his game schedule.

As he got older, his homeland shed its communist ties. Suddenly, Novak had the freedom to learn more about the game as it was played in other countries. He could also choose where and how to play the game.

He could easily have gone on to a career with the Czech Republic's national team, like so many of his friends, but Novak's sights were set across the Atlantic, where Bobby Orr made his mark.

In 1999, at the age of 17, the tousled redhead with a few freckles and an easy smile left his family and his homeland for North America and a chance at the Big Time – a career with the NHL. He landed first in Canada with a spot as a Defenseman with the Regina (Saskatchewan) Pats, a junior team. He made his mark, earning Rookie of the Year honors for the 1999-2000 season and Top Defenseman for 2000-2001. After three seasons playing junior hockey with the Pats, Novak arrived in San Antonio in the summer of 2002 to play for the San Antonio Rampage.

Like most people new to Texas, Novak had some preconceived notions about the Lone Star State. “To me, Texas was cowboys and hot weather,” Novak says, laughing at both concept and reality. “I grew up watching dubbed re-runs of “Dallas” on Czech TV. I thought everybody in Texas wore big hats.”

Hats off

Novak is determined to adapt to the North American playing style and to hone his defensive game. “It's all about improvement,” he says, smiling but serious. “I would not be as good a defensive player if I had stayed in the Czech Republic.”

Novak touts what he calls his “hockey sense” as his greatest skill. Ironically, the Defenseman thinks he's most intuitive when he's playing offensively. “I'm in my comfort zone there and it's easy for me to slip

back into it. I find myself skating out of the defensive zone to make a good pass,” he says, with a mischievous grin.

Every move you make

Novak may be a little tough on himself. He thinks his defensive game is where he needs the most work; others think it’s his greatest asset.

Alternately, Novak is described by observers as, “a speedster...creative ...dangerous in the offensive zone,” the latter perhaps a reference to his tendency to jump territories. Without exactly acknowledging any of it, he smiles sheepishly at the idea of sports writers and miscellaneous game-watchers picking at the pieces of every move he makes. He’s careful and introspective, offering frank self-analysis in return. “I’m impulsive,” he says. “I take risks. Sometimes it doesn’t go well.” He worries that he should learn to play “more responsibly...make fewer mistakes.”

Maturing before the ever-watchful eyes of coaches and scouts, Novak’s frame is filling out from that of a lanky teenaged boy to the more substantial, confident posture of a young man. The boy who has been accustomed, since childhood, to somebody analyzing his every move on the ice is coming into his own with a sharp focus and specific objectives.

Home boy

Leaving home for the first time is a pivotal moment for anyone. Being 17 and moving thousands of miles to a new country is something else entirely. Home – family and friends – are important touch points for Novak. “Sure, I miss my family,” he says, of his parents and a 23-year old sister, a university student. Of his decision to come to North

diplomatically, as if to apologize for not favoring the medium. He warms at the thought of a home-cooked Czech meal. “If I went back today, the first thing I would eat would be *Uzený Sknedlíky a Zelím* — potato dumplings with sauerkraut and smoked ham.”

Maybe it was home cooking that fueled a special opportunity for Novak — his return home to represent the Czech Republic at the 2002 World Junior Championships. “It was awesome,” he says with a broad smile. “It was really special to be reunited with friends I’ve played hockey with since childhood.”

Live for the moment

Novak’s got the flexibility and adventuresome, go-anywhere-try-anything nature that typically accompanies youth. Which is good, since this stage of his career demands it. As much as he has his sights set on the NHL, today, the Rampage is his team and San Antonio is home. Obviously worlds different than both his brief home in Canada and his Czech homeland, he’s eager to explore San Antonio when his game and training schedules allow.

But sometimes, after hours of daily practice and workouts, he just wants to be a normal 20-year old guy, stretched out in front of the TV, playing video games.

STATS: Filip Novak

Position: Defenseman

Shoots: Left

Ht./Wt.: 6’1”, 185 lbs.

Born: 5/7/1982

Home: Budejovice, Czech Republic

Career Highlights

- ▶ Named to the 2002 WHL Eastern Conference First All-Star Team
- ▶ Represented the Czech Republic at the 2002 World Junior Championships
- ▶ Regina Pats Top Defenseman Award
- ▶ Regina Pats Rookie of the Year

America, alone, at 17, he says, with a smile that reflects some wisdom he seems to have learned along the way, “I didn’t worry about it, I thought it was a great adventure. When you’re young, you always think you’re ready to handle it.”

Novak keeps in contact, mostly by telephone, scrunching his nose a little at the idea of connecting via e-mail. “You can’t hear voices with e-mail,” he says,