

No one's doubting Thomas

Hockey vagabond from Michigan becomes unlikeliest winning goalie in All-Star Game.

John Niyo / The Detroit News

ATLANTA -- Tim Thomas had played in All-Star games before. But those games were in Finland, or Sweden.

This one was in North America.

And for a journeyman goaltender who didn't make his NHL debut until a couple years ago -- at the ripe, old age of 31 -- Sunday's opportunity to represent the Boston Bruins in the 56th NHL All-Star Game certainly was one to cherish.

"It's a feather in my cap," said Thomas, a 33-year-old Davison native who actually earned the victory in Sunday's 8-7 triumph for the Eastern Conference. "I talked to my brother the other day and he told me, 'You know, when you're 70 you can tell your grandkids you were in an All-Star game.'

"I hope I can remember it by then, because I am a goalie and I do get hit in the head. But me making it here is something I never really dreamed of, because it was hard enough just making it to the NHL."

That's no exaggeration. Thomas was a two-time All-American at the University of Vermont, but he wasn't selected until the ninth round -- by Quebec with the 217th pick -- of the 1994 NHL entry draft. After that, he embarked on a long journey through hockey's hinterlands, bouncing from Finland to Birmingham, Ala., to Houston to Hamilton, Ont., and back to Finland in his first two professional seasons alone.

Well-traveled

He played for the now-defunct Detroit Vipers in 1999-2000, then headed back to Europe to play in Sweden and Finland the next two seasons.

The Boston Bruins signed him to play in the minor leagues in 2002 -- he played four NHL games as an emergency call-up that season -- but the NHL lockout sent him back to Finland, where he earned league MVP honors playing for Jokerit Helsinki in 2004-05.

"There was that time period between age 25 and 30 when I thought I might never get the chance (in the NHL)," Thomas said.

"And then when I was in Finland, I kind of made peace with the fact that I wasn't going to get a chance. I was ready to finish out my career there."

His parents, who'd once sold their wedding rings to help fund Thomas' youth hockey career, convinced him to give it another try in North America, however, so he signed with Boston after the lockout. He earned the starter's job there last season, but he hardly had time to get comfortable in that role: The Bruins traded for veteran Manny Fernandez over the summer.

Fernandez has missed much of the season because of a knee injury, though, and Thomas again seized the opportunity as the Bruins' No. 1 goalie, compiling a 16-11-3 record with a 2.34 goals-against average and a league-leading .928 save percentage. And after New Jersey's Martin Brodeur withdrew from the All-Star Game last week, citing family reasons, Thomas got the call.

"We were playing in Montreal that night, and I wasn't supposed to start, thank goodness," laughed Thomas, who ended up playing two periods in relief of his backup, Alex Auld. "Because I wasn't mentally prepared to play after hearing the news."

He wasn't prepared for what he's heard since arriving in Atlanta, either.

"When people give me compliments, I always feel a little bit uncomfortable," said Thomas, who brought his wife, Melissa, and eldest daughter, 7-year-old Kiley, to Atlanta.

Belated respect

His parents -- they eventually got those wedding rings back, by the way -- couldn't make it because of his mother's continuing chemotherapy treatments for breast cancer.

"But so many people have told me, 'It's great to see you here,' said. "Guys I don't even know, like Chris Osgood, who I talked to (Friday night). It's a great feeling to get the respect of your peers."

There's a reason he's getting it, of course.

"Guys respect guys who didn't have it handed to them," Osgood explained. "And he's definitely one of those guys."

Ex-Wings goalie Manny Legace, now with the St. Louis Blues, is another one of those guys, having bounced around in the minors for several years before finally getting his shot in the NHL.

"We'd crossed paths before -- he was playing for Manitoba when I was with the Vipers," Thomas said. "But this was the first time I'd really ever met him. It's kind of cool to be at an All-Star game with a guy you were competing against 10 years ago, when nobody thought either one of you would ever make the NHL, you know?"

This weekend was a reunion of sorts, too, with his former college teammate, Tampa's Martin St. Louis.

"He's a competitor, in every thing he does," said St. Louis, who won the Hart Trophy as NHL MVP in 2004. "That's how I remember him in Vermont. And that's why he's the goalie he is today. He didn't have an easy road here. But he found a way, just through perseverance and competing."

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