

When Jordin Tootoo played his first game for the Nashville Predators, he made history by becoming the first person of Inuit descent to play in the National Hockey League (NHL).

Skating Across Cultural Gap

by Kevin Allen



RANKIN INLET, Nunavut—It is mid-July, and Jordin Tootoo is doing what a top NHL prospect should be doing. He is training. But there are no weight machines or stationary bikes.

Tootoo, 20, is on the Canadian tundra, just below the Arctic Circle—“on the land,” as he would put it. Hudson Bay is at his back. Pockets of snow are visible over his right shoulder. He is using nature’s Stairmaster—a 100-foot¹ hill lacking a single yard² of even terrain. To work his legs, he climbs the rocky incline with a series of powerful standing jumps—18 leaps and he’s on top. To work on his upper body, he transports his 102-pound³ cousin Kelli Hickes on his back. To work his forearms, he switches to two full 5-gallon⁴ jugs.

“Forget protein shakes,” he says, ripping off a piece of sun-dried arctic char, a fish, to enjoy after his workout. “How much protein do you think is in this?”

This isn’t a standard workout for an NHL player, but there is nothing standard about Jordin Tootoo.

5 Even in a league as culturally diverse as the NHL, whose rosters read like United Nations roll calls, Tootoo’s story is unique. He hails from the Canadian territory of Nunavut, where youngsters learn to hunt caribou, whale and seal long before they master slap shots. He had played only two seasons of

organized hockey before joining the Brandon (Manitoba) Wheat Kings junior team at 16.

All his close friends turn out to watch his games. The Inuit are accustomed to saving \$1300 just to fly to Winnipeg to go shopping; they won’t balk at paying a few extra dollars to make the 2000-mile⁵ trip to see aboriginal history, an Inuit playing in the NHL.

Drafted 98th overall in the 2001 draft, Tootoo has generated more attention than a first-round draft pick, and not just because of his cultural background. He scored 35 goals last season. When he skates up ice, he’s like a lightning flash across an open sky.

“He’s been the most popular player on every team he plays on,” Nashville GM David Poile says. “Fans were chanting his name when he played for Canada” at the world junior championships in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

He is short and light by NHL standards—but the Predators expect him to be a punishing body checker. His Inuit name is Kudluk, which translates as “thunder.” “He’s a torpedo on the ice,” Poile says.

10 Other talented players have come from Nunavut; none has reached Tootoo’s level of accomplishment.

“Think about it,” longtime family friend Jim Ramsey says. “You are asking them to give up four or five things they value most,

¹100-foot: about 30 metres

²single yard: just under a metre

³102-pound: 46 kilos

⁴5-gallon: 19 litres

⁵2000-mile: 3200 kilometres

including family, culture, the people and the land. You are setting them up for failure.”

Inuit have lived in this area for about 5000 years and moving away never has been easy, especially now when cultural pride may be at its highest. After two decades of activism, Nunavut was created from land in the Northwest Territories and became a new Canadian territory April 1, 1999. According to the Nunavut Tourism Commission, the area covers more than 2.1 million square miles⁶. Roughly, it’s about five times the size of Texas, and yet its population is about 28 000. Rankin Inlet is one of Nunavut’s largest settlements with 2000 inhabitants.

According to Tootoo’s friend Jackson Lindell, when Tootoo represented Canada at the world junior hockey tournaments, many in Rankin Inlet held parties “like it was the Super Bowl.”⁷

“If you walked around Rankin Inlet, you wouldn’t have seen anyone because they were all watching the games on TV,” Rankin Inlet’s mayor, Quasa Kusugak, says.

- 15 Jordin Tootoo embodies the merging of Inuit culture with a modern perspective. He has a scar on his hand from a harpoon accident he had while seal hunting four years ago. He also has his own Web site—teamtootoo.com—to market his hats and jerseys once he hits the NHL.

To appreciate Tootoo’s cultural heritage and lifestyle, consider his grandmother, Jenny Tootoo, was born in an igloo. His uncle Johnny Hickey, is a successful businessman, yet raises sled dogs. The Tootoo family has found harmony between cultural values and modern lifestyle. In the morning, Jordin’s mother, Rose pulls 2-foot-long⁸ arctic char, cleaning them and hanging them to dry in

the sun. In the afternoon, she surfs the Internet to see whether the Predators have signed any new players.

In Inuit tradition, family is among the highest priorities. Jordin is young, but he has the cultural understanding of an older man. And he appreciates and honors Inuit tradition.

“Jordin is the dream son,” Mayor Kusugak of Marble Island says. “He was like that before he became a superstar. If Jordin saw you with an extra bag of groceries, he would carry it for you.”

This is a close-knit community. Nobody knocks before entering. Even when a friend from another community arrives with three boys, she walks right into the Tootoo home. Jordin greets each boy warmly, and their dad tells them to go upstairs to look at Jordin’s awards and jerseys, which have been placed in one room like a museum. “I want to open doors for other aboriginal kids,” Tootoo says. “I try to make time for everyone.”

- 20 Everyone makes time for him. After he signed his first NHL contract this spring in Nunavut’s capital of Iqaluit, about 500 Rankin Inlet residents were at the airport when he returned.

Tootoo misses Rankin Inlet when he is away playing, but he has survived homesickness by “just not thinking about it.” When he is “down south” in Manitoba, his mother sends him beluga whale, arctic char, seal and caribou. He struggled to adjust his diet while away from home but finally has settled on frequent meals of steak.

He was better prepared to leave than other Inuit players because his parents—although they could barely afford it—paid for him to

⁶2.1 million square miles: 3.37 million square kilometres

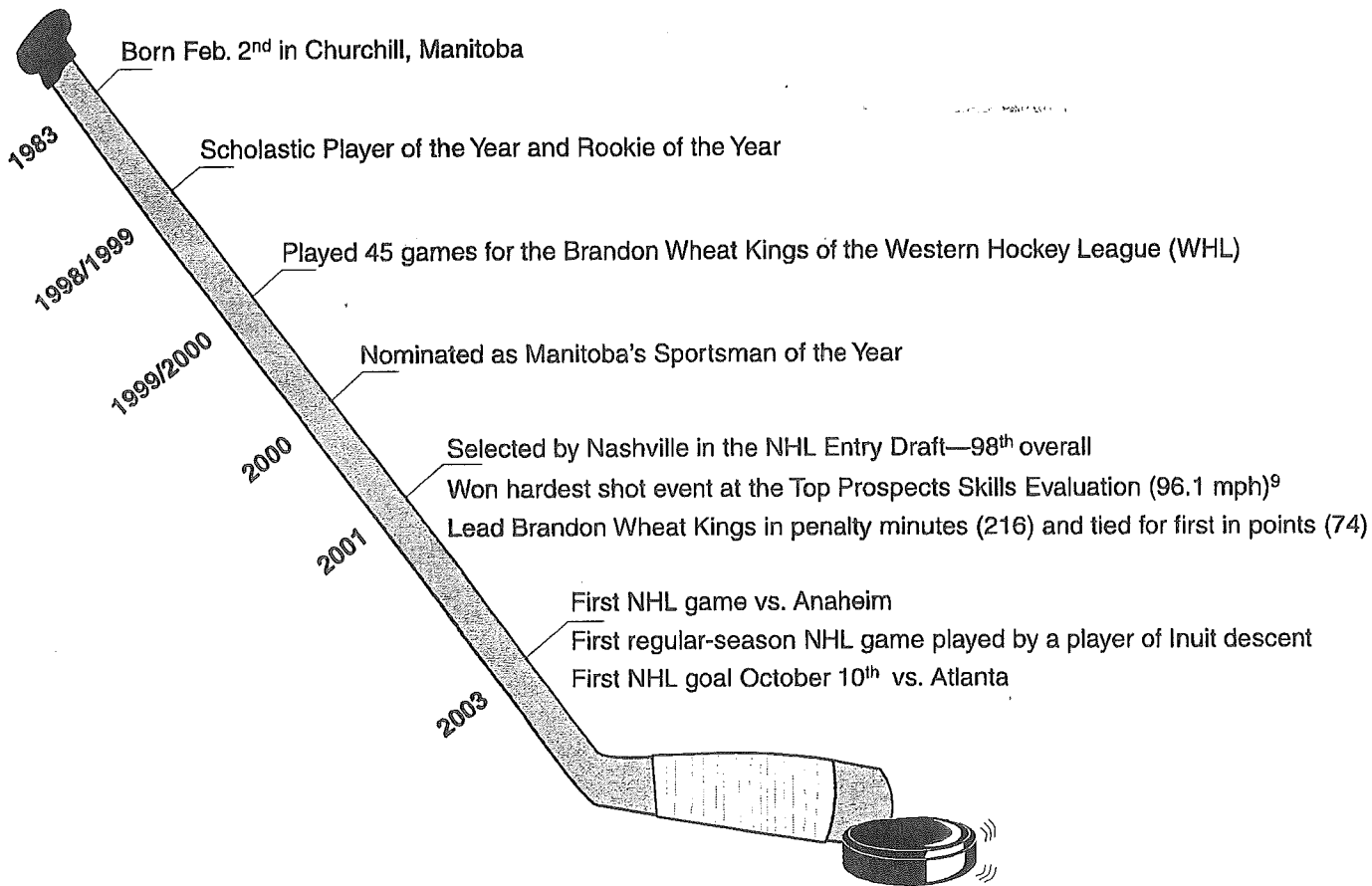
⁷Super Bowl: National Football League’s championship game

⁸2-foot-long: 60 centimetres

go to hockey schools in Winnipeg, Alberta and British Columbia. His father had played senior hockey in Manitoba and understood the value of training and learning to live in another culture. When a junior team from Edmonton finally spotted Tootoo in an aboriginal tournament and asked him to come there to play for them at 14, his father knew he should go and begin facing the mental challenge of being so far from home. The physical part already had been taken care of.

Tootoo developed as a leader in Rankin Inlet. "He was a good motivational speaker," remembers Charlie Karetak, who used to play with him. "Everything he said we tried to do." His cultural pride was showing then, as it does now.

His goal is to win the Stanley Cup and bring it to Rankin Inlet. He wants to bring it to the inuksuk, a towering stone monument at Rankin Inlet's highest point. "Then," he says, "I want to take it out on the land."



⁹96.1 mph: 155 kilometres per hour