

HOMETOWN HERO

HOW METRO DETROIT NATIVE DYLAN LARKIN BECAME THE RED WINGS' NEXT GREAT HOPE

BY JEFF WARANIAK // PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE REGINEK

At the Larkin family house, Kevin Larkin is tidying up before his wife gets home. In the garage, he stacks boxes full of hairbrushes, curling irons, and other products — part of his wholesale beauty supply business servicing metro Detroit salons.

"I was surprised with Dylan coming to the forefront with the Red Wings how many hairdressers are hockey fans," he says.

Inside the house, he clears the kitchen table of a bag of Red Wings swag and salon supply catalogs.

"I like to tell my customers that they were unofficial sponsors helping Dylan get through minor hockey," he jokes. "Dylan broke three sticks in one weekend, once. That's \$750!"

He lifts a black suit coat from the back of a kitchen chair. It's Dylan's. He'd left it in a hotel during a Red Wings road trip and instead of shipping it back to his own place, he had it sent here to his parents'.

"Kids, man!" Kevin says, and takes the coat to Dylan's room.

With comparisons to Steve Yzerman buzzing throughout the hockey world, it can be hard for Red Wings fans to remember that 20-year-old Dylan Larkin is still, in many ways, a kid. Even here in the Larkin house, his identity is in flux. On one wall, family photos show Dylan learning the game at local rinks. On another, there are photos of Dylan sitting with Red Wing greats like Ted Lindsay and Gordie Howe in the locker room at Joe Louis Arena.

And in Dylan's room, where Kevin stores Dylan's suit coat, bobbleheads and baseball hats rest among collectibles from the 2016 NHL All-Star Skills Competition where Dylan broke the record as the NHL's fastest skater.

"I remember watching when Mike Gartner set the record," Kevin says. "Twenty years later, to watch your son be the one to break it ... Unbelievable."

Even for Dad, Dylan's rapid rise to stardom with the Red Wings has been full of surprises. But between his esteemed work ethic, competitive nature, and maybe some convenient timing, Dylan Larkin's path from metro Detroit minor to homegrown pro makes a lot of sense — including the speed of it all.

THE SPORTING LIFE

A generation ago, the Larkin family sport wasn't hockey. Throughout the '70s and '80s, in their native Toronto, Kevin Larkin and his two younger brothers were climbing the ranks of the Canadian soccer scene. Eventually, all three came to the U.S. on soccer scholarships. First, Kevin, who played at the University of Southern Indiana in Evansville (where he met his wife, Denise); then Paul at Oakland University; then Jim, who went on to play goalkeeper for the Canada men's national team. When Dylan and his older brother came along, seeing Uncle Jimmy play was a family affair.

"If (Jimmy) was ever in this area playing, we'd go



Dylan's early stuff: This page, Dylan Larkin, age 7. Larkin, age 19, celebrating his first NHL goal.

Speed skater: Opposite page, Larkin during his rookie season.



BOTTOM TWO PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICK HAGEN



Man on campus: This page, Larkin during his 2014-15 season with the Michigan Wolverines. **All-American:** Opposite page, Larkin with the U-18 National Team Development Program.

to his games and he'd bring the boys into the dressing room and get them acclimated," Kevin says. "At a very young age, they got to see what it takes."

The early exposure to pro sports had a strong impression on all of the Larkin boys. Colin, Dylan's older brother, is a forward on the University of Massachusetts hockey team in Boston. Cousins Adam and Ryan play hockey at Yale and Miami of Ohio respectively, and although Dylan excelled at soccer like his dad and uncles, it was hockey that stuck.

"At one point (Dylan) did say he wanted to be a professional soccer player," Denise Larkin, Dylan's mom, says. "But he was young, he was probably only 10. When it came down to it, I think hockey just seemed cooler."

Whether it was the cool factor or not, Dylan embraced the sport whole-heartedly, playing travel hockey with the 1996 programs (his birth year) for the Lakeland Hawks, then Honeybaked, and later Belle Tire. Early on, there was an inkling that Dylan had talent and speed, but he flew slightly under the radar.

"Dylan was good," Denise says. "But I think if people would've said 'Have you heard of Dylan Larkin in the 90s?' Some people might have said, 'Yeah, he's pretty fast,' or 'He's pretty good.' But he was never the it guy."

For much of his minor career, that didn't change, but his passion for the game and willingness to take on older and better players encouraged improvement. His competitive streak also carried over into school, which he attended in Waterford.

"We found out early on, he's kind of a perfectionist," Denise says. "Those MEAP tests? Oh, he used to get worked up... He works very hard."

The willingness to work didn't come independently. Between Kevin's business and Denise's job as a probation officer in Waterford Township, the Larkins instilled in their sons the values of hard work and humility, which is saying something. Some hockey parents are notorious for being pushy and entitled. Not so with the Larkins — perhaps a combination of Kevin's Canadian heritage and Denise's southern hospitality, having grown up in South Carolina.

Dylan himself says he attributes much of his success to his parents. In the Red Wings locker room, shedding his gear after a long afternoon practice, the 20-year-old says he's often heeded his folks' advice.

"Even when things aren't going well, they've always said you have to work hard to get yourself out of that," Dylan says. "There are always people that are ahead of you in life, who have what you want, but you have to work hard and want it just as much as them."

MEET D-BOSS

Growing up, Dylan still left room for fun. In fact, thanks to the tireless memory of the Internet, there's proof: the "D-Boss" video featuring a ruddy-cheeked 13-year-old Dylan and his friend and Belle Tire teammate Evan Gizinski.

"One day he was over, we were just hanging out, and I think we got bored so we started to watch some YouTube videos of kids shooting pucks," Gizinski says. "There were some videos of kids doing that so we kind of made it to make fun of them, maybe," he says, laughing.

The video captures the two boys — Dylan, who introduces himself as "D-Boss" and Evan, "EG slayer" — showcasing their shooting skills in the Gizinski's basement, AKA "The Dungeon."

The boys published the video as a joke for their Belle Tire teammates. It resurfaced midway through the 2015-16 NHL season.

"I think we're both pretty thankful that it was clean, and we didn't do anything stupid," Gizinski says. "We hadn't watched it at all for years, so when I rewatched it, it was just like 'Oh, man, we were hilarious.'"

Hockey fans found it hilarious, too, and although Dylan found it cringe-worthy at first, he's since embraced the D-Boss nickname; the rest of the Larkins have, too.

"I tease him. I tell him he's a marketing genius," Kevin says.

If nothing else, the video endeared Dylan to an already burgeoning Detroit fan base, providing a glimpse into the young Red Wing's off-ice personality. Until then, the then-19-year-old had been guarded and quietly professional.

"He's always kind of been a quiet kid," says Dylan's former Belle Tire coach, Joe Smaza. "Quiet, but goofy."

Smaza coached Dylan and Evan as part of the Belle Tire 96s for five years. During that time, Dylan emerged as a consistent top-line goal scorer and was named team captain. According to Smaza, Dylan evolved into a quiet leader who led by example, which wasn't easy considering the talent that surrounded him.

"With that '96 birth year group, we had 10 kids from that one program get drafted in the NHL," Smaza says. Aside from Dylan, the team included future Columbus Blue Jacket Zach Werenski and Winnipeg Jet Kyle Connor, who finished as the runner-up for the 2016 Hobey Baker Award, the NCAA's award for the top men's ice hockey player.

Playing with and against top talent in Detroit wasn't the only factor that boosted Dylan's play. As





Just tap it in: This page, above, Larkin scores a goal during a 2015-16 preseason game against the Pittsburgh Penguins.
Loyal following: Opposite page, Larkin's fan base has grown rapidly among fellow Detroiters.

his career advanced, the Larkins took full advantage of the teams and resources available close to home.

"When you think about it, Dylan never had to leave the state of Michigan for any of his hockey," Smaza says. "He played AAA hockey here in Detroit, then he went to the National Development Program (then in Ann Arbor), then college hockey at the University of Michigan. It's crazy."

At the professional level, Dylan would, of course, remain in Detroit, but before making the NHL leap, he still had some growing to do in Ann Arbor.

A STUDENT OF THE GAME

When Dylan arrived at the University of Michigan as a freshman for the 2014-15 season, he'd already spent two years with Team USA and the National Team Development Program — an organization that grooms promising 17- and 18-year-old players for the U.S. National Teams. He'd impressed scouts with his speed and offensive skills, but his bright future still had some blemishes.

"We watched him develop for two or three years recruiting him, but his development was hampered by injuries," says University of Michigan head coach Red Berenson. "He never seemed to have a complete, injury-free season, so I don't think we saw his best."

Arriving at Michigan healthy, Dylan showed what his best could be. Under Berenson's eye, he worked to improve his defensive play on and off the ice, embracing video sessions and studying Michigan's defensive zone system. He also tuned in to the pros.

"He watched the Red Wings to a fault when he was here," Berenson says. "He knew exactly how he would want to play when he got there. He's not just a natural talented player; he's a student of the game."

Dylan showed progress in his first few college games, but at the 2015 IIHF World Junior Championship, halfway through the NCAA season, something clicked. Playing for Team USA, NHL scouts saw how he stacked up against fellow future NHLers Jack Eichel, Connor McDavid, and Max Domi. Dylan also saw where he stood for himself.

"When he excelled there, he came back with a little extra boost of confidence," Berenson says. "That just propelled (his) second half of the season, and that's where he played his absolute best."

By the end of the season, Dylan had amassed 15 goals, helping him earn a nod as the Big Ten Freshman of the Year. The standout season, along with his performance at the World Junior Championship, impressed the Red Wings who, that spring, offered their young 2014 draft pick a spot at training camp.

At age 19, doubts about Dylan's ability to play in the NHL remained among Red Wings management. But with a new coach in Jeff Blashill, an aging Red Wings roster, and a shiny new arena looming in Midtown, change was in the air.

"Detroit rarely would take a player that young and put him in their lineup," Berenson says. "But in Dylan's case, whether it was the injury to (Pavel) Datsyuk or timing, or whatever it was, he made that team, and good for him. But I wasn't sure that it was a sure bet."

Dylan wasn't 100 percent sure either. The decision to chase the NHL dream and forgo his career as a student-athlete took time.

"We kind of went through his fears," Denise says. "I kept saying, 'The easiest thing would be for you to stay in Ann Arbor. Everything's set up for you. You know all the freshman guys. You're close.' He took all that in and came back to us and said, 'After long consideration, I'm ready. I want more hockey.' He just kept saying 'I want more hockey.'"

FITTING IN

Ask Dylan if he made the right decision to go directly to the NHL as a teenager, and he'll say he wasn't sure until opening night of the 2015-16 season.

Every member of the Larkin family was there at Joe Louis Arena. On Denise's side, they drove up from Evansville, Ind. On Kevin's side, they came from Toronto. In total, 30 family members watched Dylan make his hometown NHL debut.

The Larkins assumed their son had some first game jitters, but in the second period, Dylan proved otherwise, scoring his first NHL goal.

"At first we were like, 'He's probably nervous, he's probably tight out there,'" Denise says. "And then that happened, and you're thinking 'Well, I guess he feels better now!'"

For Dylan, netting that first goal also helped dispel any lingering self-doubt.

"You watch on TV growing up, and you think that these players are superman and everything," Dylan says. "But after opening night, I felt like I could be a good player in this league and help this team."

For the majority of his rookie season, Dylan turned heads in the hockey world, and despite a late-season lull, he finished with a team-leading 23 goals, earning him another accolade as the 2015-16 Red Wings' Rookie of the Year. Dylan's on-ice production

made NHL headlines, but in the locker room, it was his tenacity and integrity that earned the respect of his fellow Wings.

"A lot of times, he's one of the first forwards on the ice, and usually one of the last ones off," says Red Wings goalie Jimmy Howard. "He's constantly working on his game, and I think that doesn't get talked about a lot with him."

"He keeps going and going and going," says forward Darren Helm. "He works hard on the ice. He hasn't really had any growing pains, it doesn't look like it ... We're almost looking for him to produce almost every night. He's done a great job with that."

Dylan admits that during his rookie year, lacing up across from players he'd idolized while playing youth hockey took adjusting, but, from the very beginning, he also knew where he stood.

"I'm not gonna lie, the first time I was in the locker room, looking across at Z (Henrik Zetterberg) and Pav(el) (Datsyuk), it was pretty cool," Dylan says. "But you can't let it get to you, honestly. You just have to be yourself. You can't take a back seat because then you start second-guessing yourself and why you're here. And I think that's why I've been able to be successful."

Now, after nearly a season-and-a-half in the NHL, the Red Wings look for Dylan to grow his role as a points-producing forward. And in the stands, as Joe Louis Arena celebrates its final season, fans have their eyes on him, too.

"He brings excitement every single night, being young," Howard says. "And being from Detroit, he's an instant hometown hero."

TYPICAL PARENTS

Back at the Larkin house, Kevin is in the basement, providing a tour of the Dylan Larkin timeline. A hockey net from Lakeland Ice Arena that Dylan uses for target practice is parked against one wall. Along another, Dylan and Colin's childhood jerseys hang from the basement rafters.

Both parents can picture the boys in every jersey. They've always attended their games, and they still attend Dylan's at Joe Louis, as per his request.

"I found out that he did want us at the games, that he actually looked for us before the games ... it just made him feel comfortable," Denise says. "I know that's going to change, but it's nice right now."

At the All-Star Game last year, the attendance policy was no different. They were there at the rink when Dylan skated back to the bench, having set the new speed skating record. He looked so comfortable, they thought, playing alongside the best players in the world, but they did have one reservation.

"People asked me later, 'Were you nervous when Dylan didn't have a helmet on?'" Denise says. "I really wasn't, but ..."

"But if he's lucky enough to do it again this year, I'm going to suggest that he does wear a helmet," Kevin says.

For now, at least to his parents, Dylan Larkin is still a kid, after all. ■

