

## THE ATHLETIC

# From the Basement Hockey League to Iowa Wild, Sam Anas has something to prove



DES MOINES, Iowa — If it weren't for the audacity of adults telling 16-year-old kids that they were “too small” or “not good enough,” there wouldn't be players grinding it out on the ice with a chip on their shoulder, trying to prove the naysayers wrong.

Sam Anas would have never left Maryland to average a point per game at one of the top Division-I hockey programs in Quinnipiac, nor would he become one of the more dynamic wingers in the Minnesota Wild system.

When you walk into Iowa coach Derek Lalonde's office at Wells Fargo Arena, there's a board festooned with red magnets, each inscribed with names of players and arranged for potential lines.

The board itself is commonplace. What isn't are the names of undrafted players that are making regular top six starts at forward and top four starts at defense for Minnesota's development team.

“I think it's a reality,” Lalonde explained. “We're a team that's in a 'win now' mentality as far as Minnesota. We've given up a lot of draft picks. We still may do it again going forward this year.”

With that in mind, Lalonde was asked about the success of Minnesota's scouts sifting through the murkiness of the undrafted free-agent pool.

Attention turned to the board.

Justin Kloos, Brennan Menell, Hunter Warner, Zack Mitchell and Anas; all guys that were passed up by 30, now 31, NHL teams the first time around, only to get a call a few years later.

Following a 4-2 loss to the San Antonio Rampage last Friday, there was little to smile about. However, in post-game interviews, Anas walked in with his ever present smile after netting a bittersweet first goal of the season after missing the first six due to injury.

Before you lambaste him for not being a “competitor,” it bears keeping in mind that the kid known as “Sammy” approaches hockey a bit differently than most. With an uncommon path to getting to the professional ranks, he hasn't given much credence to what his detractors have said anyways.

With Minnesota carrying the daunting moniker of the “State of Hockey,” you're right in thinking “crab cakes” over “hockey hotbed” when it comes to Potomac, Md. After all, in signing his entry-level contract in April 2016, Anas became the first player to get his start in the DC Metro ranks to watch the ink dry on an NHL deal.



Sam Anas has one goal and three assists in six games so far this season for the Iowa Wild. (Credit: Shane Abbitt/Iowa Wild)

He may have been born in Maryland, but the hockey heritage in the Anas family still runs deep.

“I started playing in the kitchen with my dad when I was two,” he recalled. “He played in Canada growing up, so he kinda got me started young.”

Anas' dad, Peter, was a varsity goalie at Western Ontario University and has [10 games to his name](#) for the Lucan-Ilderton Jets in the now-defunct Continental A Senior Hockey

League. He's also an assistant coach at the Landon School for Boys, a program that has won five state titles since 2010.

But between lacing them up in Senior A and grabbing a clipboard for the Bears, there was the BHL, a league where Sam feels he began to hone the skills that have made him the dynamic winger he is today.

“We spent quite a lot of time in the basement, as we called it ‘the Basement Hockey League,’” Anas said, grinning. “I definitely logged many hours down there, some split with both of us being a shooter and a goalie. We had a lot of fun. ... I think that definitely helped with some hand-eye and skills like that.”

Since his time in the BHL, there have been a lot of adjustments to be made for the winger listed at 5-foot-8, 160 pounds. Especially with so many coaches and pundits having something to say about his size.

He was cut from his AAA bantam squads, cut from his varsity club at Landon as a freshman. He admits that he “didn't blossom right away.” However, after a combined 82 points (38 goals, 44 assists) in 44 games between two metro leagues, he earned a scholarship to Quinnipiac.

With a Division-I scholarship, he joined the more mainstream route of heading to the USHL, where he was selected 22nd overall in the 2011 draft by the Youngstown Phantoms.

“My first year in the USHL was a bit of an adjustment,” Anas recollected. “(It was) a little bit of a struggle, and I think knowing that I already had that commitment helped ease the stress off of me.”

The next season, he persevered, tallying 63 points (37 goals, 26 assists) in 64 games; one goal behind former Gopher Taylor Cammarata for the league lead. Anas and the Phantoms also went on to beat Lalonde and the Green Bay Gamblers in the first round of the Clark Cup playoffs that season.

His arrival in Hamden, Conn., might have been the first instance where he didn't have to spend too much time adjusting to a new level of play. He won the NCAA's Tim Taylor award as a point-per-game producer with 43 in 40 games for the

Bobcats; an award for Division-I rookie of the year with names like Jack Eichel, Kyle Connor and, most recently, Clayton Keller attached to it.

Anas and Quinnipiac went all the way to the NCAA title game in 2016. (Credit: Kim Klement/USA TODAY Sports)

It was that level of success in such an elite conference like the ECAC where he realized that playing professional hockey was shifting away from a dream and becoming more of a reality.

"I've always been confident in my skills, but (have) never known how they'd translate at the next level," Anas said. "I think once it gets going, I've felt good. ... After my freshman year I did well and had an idea that it might happen. But being a small guy, it's never just gonna be given to you and you'll have to earn it and prove some people wrong and just keep working hard."

That hard work led to development camp invites with the Washington Capitals, the Montreal Canadiens and the New York Islanders, but no contract offers.

"Yeah, I've made some rounds," he said, laughing.

In three years at Quinnipiac, Anas was the Bobcats' leading scorer each season on a squad that won two conference titles, made three NCAA tournament berths and one Frozen Four appearance in 2016, where they fell to North Dakota in the title game, 5-1; a season where he was named an ACHA All-American.

But college hockey isn't the pros, and once again he had to make an adjustment from playing against college kids to seasoned vets and other prospects in the AHL.

"I kind of struggled last year at the beginning," Anas recalled. "(Iowa) had a bunch of forwards, so I was in and out of the lineup until about Thanksgiving. Then I feel like I earned a good spot and was playing a lot more."

The self-prognosis was also reiterated by Lalonde.

"There (were) times where he was in over his head," the coach said. "This league was too much for him early on. There were times where (he) was a guaranteed minus-2, ... (but) I think he's worked very hard to compete, and figure out the pace."

Anas' resilience from being cut in his bantam days still continues, even as a second-year pro. When asked to step up his game, he's done that and then some at each level, something that isn't lost on Lalonde.

"I think, now, he's on the path of where we want him to be as a player," Lalonde said. "(Anas is a) dynamic offensive player. Great stick. Hockey IQ through the roof. Offensive IQ through the roof. Right now guys want to play with him. I still think there's a ton of growth left in (his game), and that's a credit to how hard he's worked."

And hard work in the summer is something Anas hangs his hat on.

When the ice has melted and the gear gets packed up, [he works out](#) at Pinnacle Performance out of the Capitals' old practice facility in Odenton, Md. In talking with Anas, it's easy to see how their philosophy of "Mind, Body, Skill, and Tactics" come through in his preparation.

That first emphasis on the mind being something that Anas works to enhance both on and off the ice. When asked what he does for fun outside of Wells Fargo Arena, you can catch him hitting the books.

"Being from a Greek background, I've started learning Greek," he said of his non-hockey activities. "It's a slow process, but I try and do a little bit every few days, and hopefully make my parents happy one day when I can keep up with conversation with them at the dinner table."

It may be too soon to tell, but for every critic in a player's formative years comes an opportunity to find a player like Sam Anas.

Without them, we wouldn't have guys like Dennis Maruk scoring 878 points in 888 NHL games, Pat Verbeek would've never been "the little ball of hate" and Marcel Dionne wouldn't be in the Hall of Fame.