

College hockey: A memorable journey to the NCAA title for Yale's Ruffolo

By KEVIN JOHNSON

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Three days had expired since the Yale University hockey team stunned the college hockey world, and yet it was the Bulldogs who remained stunned.

"I still don't think it has hit us yet. I think everyone is numb and humbled by it," Yale sophomore forward Trent Ruffolo said during a phone interview last week.

Yale's remarkable journey to the NCAA Championship culminated with a 4-0 win against in-state Connecticut rival Quinnipiac University in the title game on April 13 in front of 18,184 in Pittsburgh as well as a national audience on ESPN. Right in the middle of it all was Ruffolo, a South Floridian who hoisted the championship plaque amid a sea of his teammates from far better-known hockey areas such as Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Alberta and Quebec.

Ruffolo's path to the NCAA title might never have been paved if not for the two seasons he spent crisscrossing Alligator Alley.

As a young teenager in Coral Springs, Ruffolo played two years of bantam hockey in the Florida Everblades AAA program at Germain Arena in Estero. All those weekend trips that Ruffolo made across the Everglades on Interstate 75 for practices and games proved to be worth the effort.

"It was very time consuming, but it definitely paid off in the long run. We had a great team and a great coach," recalled Ruffolo, whose teammates included three current Division I players: Greg Gozzo (Harvard), Eric Drapluk (Lake Superior State) and Boston Bruins draft choice Brian Ferlin (Cornell).

During Ruffolo's days with the AAA Everblades, the players were too young to drive, so a carpool system was arranged with his teammates from Broward County, such as Drapluk, Mike D'Amico and Brock McGinn. Players piled into one car for the 100-mile trip to Estero. Mothers and fathers alternated driving duties.

"It made it a little easier on our parents," Ruffolo said.

Those two seasons in Estero under coach Brett Strot proved to be valuable for Ruffolo. From his earliest days — when he came home from a Florida Panthers game at about age five and told his parents that he wanted to play hockey — Ruffolo had never given college hockey much thought until he played for Strot.

“Brett Strot was the first one to really open my eyes about college hockey. He sat down with a lot of us and talked about our goals and where we need to be if we want to play college hockey,” said Ruffolo, who is the first Floridian to play for Yale.

“Being in a non-traditional hockey market, a lot of kids don’t understand what it takes to be a college hockey player, especially a Division I player,” said Strot, who played for the University of Minnesota in the late 1980s and went on to play in several minor leagues, including the ECHL.

Strot ran testing programs for his Everblade AAA bantams, comparing their speed and skill to that of college players.

“It was to show them where they’re at and where they need to be,” he said.

Ruffolo was among those who made the most progress.

“Trent absorbed everything,” Strot remembered. “He wasn’t the biggest or fastest kid, but by the end of the year, he was probably our most effective player. He took hold of everything we talked about. He progressed tremendously and was able to carry it on.”

Indeed he did.

Following his stint with the Everblades AAA bantams and the Golden Wolves in Broward, Ruffolo, who also played youth hockey for the Junior Panthers, generated successful seasons with the New Hampshire Junior Monarchs in the Eastern Junior Hockey League. After his first season in New England, he returned to Coral Springs in time to graduate with his class at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

Ruffolo made the most out of his two years with New Hampshire. He earned the EJHL’s Most Valuable Player award in 2011 and helped the team win two league titles.

The fact Ruffolo has been part of three championship teams in the past four years comes as no surprise to Strot.

“One thing about Trent is that he has unbelievable character,” Strot said. “When he was with us at 13 or 14, he really developed into a top team player. He was very unselfish. He’s the type of player who would help lead the team to victory one way or another.”

Ruffolo didn’t get on the score sheet in the NCAA championship game, but the 6-foot, 180 pound left wing and his linemates Carson Cooper and Matt Killian contributed in other aspects, namely helping

to shut down Quinnipiac's top forwards. As the higher seed, Quinnipiac had the last change for lines. When Ruffolo's line was on the ice, so too were Quinnipiac's biggest weapons.

"Our coach said they'd put their top line against us. He said he had no problem with that. I thought we did a great job defensively," Ruffolo said.

Even when Ruffolo's line did something that appeared to be a negative — such as going offside with 15 seconds left in the second period — it turned out to be a positive. The offside call resulted in a faceoff at center ice. Yale changed lines, won the faceoff and quickly moved the puck into Quinnipiac's end, where Clinton Bourbonais scored with three seconds left to give the Bulldogs a 1-0 lead and momentum heading into the final 20 minutes.

"The first goal was big, especially at the time, with three seconds left. Going into the third period with the lead was huge for us," Ruffolo said.

Yale tacked on three more goals to conclude an amazing postseason run. Fifteenth seeds in a 16-team field aren't supposed to do what Yale did, but the Bulldogs, who allowed just five goals in the tournament, somehow knocked off Minnesota, North Dakota, Massachusetts-Lowell and Quinnipiac to win their first national title.

"In the locker room (after the championship game), it wasn't rowdy. Everyone sat down and took a deep breath and tried to realize what we accomplished," Ruffolo said.

Yale became the first team from the ECAC to win the national title since Harvard in 1989. Ironically, Strot played for Minnesota in that championship game in 1989. His Golden Gophers fell to Harvard in overtime.

"When you reflect back, it's tough," said Strot, who now coaches a junior team in Tampa Bay. "So close, and the game was in St. Paul. Harvard had a good team. It was a great game. People talk about it as one of the top national championship games."

Ruffolo finished this season with 13 points in 34 games. He missed a few games due to a separated shoulder. His biggest night offensively came on Jan. 18 when he had two goals and one assist in a 4-0 win against rival Harvard.

"Definitely one of my better games," said Ruffolo, who is leaning toward political science as a major.

When the Yale players returned to class after winning the title, hockey was the buzz on the New Haven campus that has produced five U.S. presidents, more than a dozen Supreme Court justices, countless corporate, literary and Hollywood giants, and now a national championship hockey team.

"A few professors gave a shout out to the hockey team. It was kind of neat," Ruffolo said.