

Tucker Poolman texted his father, Mark, late Monday afternoon to tell him the news: He was going to make his NHL debut with the Winnipeg Jets in a couple of hours.

Winnipeg Jets defenseman Tucker Poolman (3) controls the puck during the third period Sept. 27 at Bell MTS Place in Winnipeg. Terrence Lee-USA TODAY Sports
Tucker Poolman texted his father, Mark, late Monday afternoon to tell him the news: He was going to make his NHL debut with the Winnipeg Jets in a couple of hours.

Mark responded: "Work hard, have fun."

It was the only thing to say.

"It's the same thing I said to him every day since peewees and squirts," Mark said. "Why would I change now?"

Poolman became the first hockey player from East Grand Forks to play in the NHL on Monday night when he suited up for the Jets in Edmonton against the Oilers.

Mark wasn't able to make it to Edmonton, because Tucker got the call last minute, filling in for the injured Dustin Byfuglien of Roseau, Minn.

Instead, Mark quickly ordered the NHL's Central Ice package and invited some family members over to watch and he started reminiscing.

"That's the big thing," Mark said. "Just thinking back."

It's been quite a story for the Poolmans.

At age 18, Tucker graduated from East Grand Forks Senior High with zero college scholarship offers. No United States Hockey League teams were interested, either.

Tucker drove from city to city trying out for North American Hockey League teams, and he was continually released.

"He has persevered more than any player I've ever seen, playing or coaching," said former Senior High coach Tyler Palmiscno, who recalled Tucker being a 5-foot-4, 130-pound forward as a sophomore. "I know when those teams were releasing him, it was hard for junior hockey teams, because they saw the potential, but coaches and organizations need to win now. A lot of times, they don't get players the opportunity to show their potential. It took one coach with the right mindset."

Tucker and Mark drove to Chicago to try out for the Wichita Falls Wildcats, an NAHL team in Texas. On the drive, they agreed that if Tucker didn't earn a spot on the Wildcats, he would just enroll at UND as a student.

Tucker had already applied to UND and received his acceptance letter.

But the Wildcats put Tucker on the roster, starting a rapid six-year ascent that would lead to the NHL.

In 2011-12, he was with Wichita Falls. The next year, he was drafted by Omaha, went to the USHL and earned a scholarship to UND. The following year, he was a captain in Omaha and was drafted by the Winnipeg Jets in the fifth round.

In 2014-15, he started at UND. As a sophomore he won an NCAA national championship and as a junior, he was a first-team All-American.

Now, he's an NHLer.

"It goes back to the fact that he believed in himself," said UND coach Brad Berry, who frequently used Tucker during the run to the 2016 NCAA national title. "He has a strong family background as

far as teaching that if you work your hardest, things will take care of themselves. He was a guy who stayed with the process. In this day in age, a lot of people and players would say, 'Well, I'm going to try something else.' He stayed with it."

Before sitting down to watch the game, Mark said that he would inevitably be nervous, but hoping that Tucker doesn't feel the same.

"I'm just excited for him and hope things go well," Mark said. "Hopefully, he's not as nervous as he was for his first (UND) game against Manitoba. He couldn't feel his legs that first game when he got out there."

In East Grand Forks, Poolman had a big fan club following Monday's game.

"It just goes to show you, all you need is one coach to buy into you and you can take it from there," Palmiscno said. "Tucker's always been so mentally smart and tough. It took his body longer to mature than a lot of people, but he was strong enough to stay with it until his body matured."