

For Brandon Kozun, right winger for the Calgary Hitmen, age is merely a number. His experience, composure, and resolve make you think he is much older than his seventeen years.

Born in Los Angeles, California, Brandon began skating at the ripe old age of two and a half. "I think I was about three years old when I started to play. I played some hockey there until I was about ten – I might have been nine, and then I moved to Calgary," says Brandon. Given the age restrictions for a novice player, Brandon may even have been eight, but he continues, "I started out in Blackfoot. I played there second year novice until first year atom," says Brandon. "The next couple years I moved to Midnapore, and I played there up until bantam."

As a player in Calgary's minor hockey system, Brandon was fortunate to have had the opportunity to play in a number of iterations of Calgary's Minor Hockey Week. "First year atom we went to the finals, but lost." While in Midnapore, he says, "I think we made it to the finals twice, but we never won." Even though the results were less than exemplary, he was very glad to have played. "It's fun. It's competitive. It's a fun tournament to go through, and as a young kid it's always something you look forward to," says Brandon.

Growing as a player, there was one individual in particular that occupied a central role in Brandon's development, Rick Alexander. "He was my coach for summer hockey for a long time. He was kind of like my mentor," intones Brandon. "He helped me a lot in developing my skills. I owe a lot to him for where I am today."

The admiration seems to go both ways. "One thing about him is he's very tenacious," says Alexander, the hockey director for National Sports Development. "If you challenge him, if you tell him he can't do that, or you expect him to do that or demand him to do it, he'll work hard until he does it. He won't back down, and that's one of those things that I think will work in his favour as he moves along the hockey road. As a lot of kids say, 'I can't do that,' Brandon will never say that. He will never do that. As a matter of fact if you make him mad he'll play twice as good. If you give him a challenge, he really goes at it."

Never one to become complacent, Brandon felt a move to the prestigious Shattuck-St. Mary's school in Faribault Minnesota for the 2005-06 season would help him to continue his development as a player, and a young adult. "Shattuck is a prep school that I went to when I was 15. I decided to go there because I knew it was high level hockey, and it would be a chance for me to mature a lot." He continues, "[Shattuck] really helped me a lot. It was good hockey, and I had a good coach. I developed a lot up there," says the young winger. Brandon's 38 points while at Shattuck placed him third on team scoring. His coach at the time was Rod Collins, a gritty former defenseman who has been around the game for more than fifty years, and has seen his share of talented players. "Brandon was a highly skilled player in Shattuck-St. Mary's program. He has very good offensive skills, and developed as complete player in the U16 program," said Collins. No small compliment from a coach who has worked with Vincent Lecavalier and Sidney Crosby, to name a few. As for Brandon's future, Collins says, "on more than one occasion we discussed the option of major junior versus junior A and the college route. Given his size I felt the college route was in his best interest." Brandon wasn't sure though. "I was an American kid. I didn't know which route I wanted to go. I was small - only 5'4". I didn't get drafted," says Brandon. But he would soon become noticed. "I went to the Hitmen camp and the right after that I got listed. That's how everything happened."

After Shattuck, Brandon played half the season for the junior A Calgary Royals of the AJHL and the other half with the Hitmen. On the Royals he was the youngest player on a team whose average age was eighteen and a half. The sixteen year old Brandon posted 42 points in 39 games – again good for third overall in team scoring. All of this while playing in 14 fewer games than the player in second place and 19 fewer than the player who sat first overall in team scoring.

As a matter of fact, the implication is that Calgary minor hockey has helped to produce quite a player; considering his age, and his top ten placing in Hitmen's scoring, the team is already seeing it. "I think if they use him in the right time and place, they'll have a real super junior hockey player

on their hands," says Alexander. "He's very impressive . . . he's the future of hockey and the way it's going. Brandon and guys like Ryan Duncan [the 5'6" winner of the Hobey Baker], the smaller, quicker, faster guys, they took them out of the game for a while. They took out the Ralph Backstroms, the Davey Keons, and the Henri Richards and they put those guys back in. That's what makes the game so exciting," says Alexander. "They're looking for skills in the higher leagues now, and he's a kid who has skill and will continue to develop that skill."

Just remember, if you make him mad he'll play twice as good.

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