



BY PAUL EDMONDS
Photos by Danny Truong

A QUANTUM LEAP

THE COLE BABYCH STORY

WHAT COLE BABYCH HAS ACCOMPLISHED THIS SEASON IS MORE THAN JUST A SPIKE IN DEVELOPMENT; THE 16-YEAR-OLD HAS TAKEN A QUANTUM LEAP IN HIS OFFENSIVE GROWTH. HIS SIZEABLE ON-ICE IMPROVEMENT OVER THE LAST YEAR IS IMPRESSIVE AND WILL LIKELY QUICKEN A DESIRED ASCENSION IN THE GAME.



Over the course of his minor hockey career, the two-way forward has always been considered a hard-worker, skilled at winning battles, playing smart and being fiercely competitive. But it's the extra layer of offence added to that package this season that has created a more well-rounded centreman for the U18 AAA Winnipeg Wild.

"I've never really been the goal scorer or the point getter on my team," said Babych. "That's never been part of my game, as much. But recently the hard work is starting to pay off and I've found some success, so it's been great. The coaches like the fact that I'll work hard in some of the areas that other players don't want to go."

As a rookie this season in the Manitoba U18 Hockey League (MU18HL), Babych finished second in regular season scoring on his team with 18 goals and 37 points

in 36 games, including a team-leading seven power play goals. The point-per-game offence is something he's never truly experienced before at the AAA level, especially after enjoying a successful developmental season with the U17 Wild last year where he netted eight goals and 21 points in 32 games as a minor-aged player.

"This year is so much more evident in how much stronger he is, how much more dominant he has become and how much more confidence he's playing with," Wild head coach Paul Krueger said. "We put him in every critical situation and he's flourished. He's a guy we count on in every situation."

"He's a hockey-smart kid. He understands the game. He's inquisitive. He wants to know; he wants to learn. And while he's not wearing a letter, he's a guy that his teammates look up to."





At nearly six-foot tall and 175 pounds, there are a few contributing factors to Babych's emergence this season. Admittedly, last year's campaign with the U17 club tops the list, as it led to an extremely beneficial season of progress.

"I got a lot more opportunity especially at the end of the year," Babych reflected. "It's a really good league to develop and to figure out who you are as a player. It was a great fit for me."

From there, Babych was inspired to get better. At the season's conclusion he immediately parlayed the U17 experience into extra motivation to ascend higher in the game. And while earning a roster spot on the Manitoba Junior Hockey League's

Selkirk Steelers was the lofty and blissful goal last fall, he realistically had his sights set on cracking the U18 Wild. That included a commitment to both on and off-ice training. Others took watch.

"We certainly noticed the change in his game with his conditioning," Krueger said. "He was stronger on the puck, winning more battles and was especially tougher to handle down low in both ends of the rink."

Babych's next-level physical preparation was put to the ultimate test earlier this season when he missed a month due to appendicitis. He spent two weeks in the hospital, lost 25 pounds and was weakened by the antibiotics for the entire month of December. Babych

also endured a bout of bronchitis that kept him sidelined this season as well, but he bounced right back from both – and swiftly.

"We put him right back in the lineup and he picked up where he left off," Krueger said. "There's no doubt because of all of the work he's done in the offseason it's allowed him to return quicker."

For a teenager that loves to play hockey, both health setbacks were difficult to absorb, especially the appendix issue. But Babych managed to move past it by keeping his focus and relying on the support of his team.

"It was hockey first," he said. "In my eyes I never really took a break. I was always watching hockey, so it was easy to get back into it."

Of course, Babych's family has played a significant role in his career to date and that includes his parents. His father, Wayne Babych, played over 500 games in the National Hockey League with St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Quebec and Hartford. The younger Babych says his last name is frequently recognized around local hockey rinks, particularly because his uncle, Dave Babych, played for the Winnipeg Jets for parts of six seasons (1980-86). And while he understands his lineage in hockey and the resource his father provides as his biggest supporter and mentor, he's set on carving out his own path.

"I don't feel there's any expectation or pressure to live up to," he says. "There's a different journey for everyone. I try to be my own person."

Up next on Babych's hockey list this season is to help his Wild advance to the 2024 TELUS Cup in Cape Breton, NS., April 22-28. The Wild are already guaranteed a spot in the 2024 TELUS Cup West Regional U18 Championship as the host team (April 4-7). The opportunity to win that and vie for a national championship is exciting.

"I'm extremely thrilled," he says. "It's something that we're always working toward as a team. It's going to take a lot of hard work, but we have the team to do it."

After that, he'll turn his attention again to trying to earn a spot next season on the Steelers. As a Grade 11 student at St. Paul's High School with a 90 percent average, Babych is hoping to secure an NCAA Division I opportunity to play hockey in the United States. Getting a start in the MJHL is his hopeful next step.

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- WILD HEAD COACH PAUL KRUEGER

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U18

AAA

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THE WINNIPEG WILD WILL HOST THE 2024 TELUS CUP WEST REGIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP FROM APRIL 4-7 AT HOCKEY FOR ALL CENTRE. THEY, ALONG WITH ONE OTHER TEAM FROM THE MANITOBA U18 AAA HOCKEY LEAGUE AND TWO OUT OF PROVINCE TEAMS, WILL VIE FOR ONE SPOT TO REPRESENT THE REGION AT THE TELUS CUP.