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Mon., Dec. 26
 ALB@BNG 7:05
 LOW@PRO 7:05
 HER@WBS 7:05
 CHI@MIL 8:00
 SAN@HOU 8:05
 PEO@IOW 8:05

Tue., Dec. 27
 POR@ALB 7:00
 SAN@CLE 7:05
 PRO@SPR 7:05
 SYR@HAM 7:30
 BNG@TOR 7:30
 PEO@MIL 8:00

Wed., Dec. 28
 OMA@GRA 7:00
 ALB@HER 7:00
 BNG@SYR 7:00
 SPR@BRI 7:05
 PRO@LOW 7:05
 POR@MCH 7:05
 HFD@WBS 7:05
 PHI@NOR 7:15
 IOW@HOU 8:05

Mon, December 26, 2005

Crunch's Penner continues path to the top

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 By Ed Gonser

If your lifelong goal is to reach the NHL then you have to pay your dues. **Andrew Penner** is paying his dues, hoping he'll eventually get the payoff.

The Syracuse Crunch goalie has been lurking in the shadows of **Pascal Leclaire**, waiting to make the jump to the Crunch's number-one man between the pipes and his dream of landing a spot on an NHL roster.

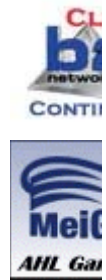
Born just outside of Toronto in East York, Ont., Penner is the oldest of **Terry** and **Cindy Penner's** three boys. He makes his home in Simcoe, a small town of about 16,000 people in southwestern Ontario, about 25 miles south of Brantford.

Penner is trying to add to the list of NHL talent Simcoe has produced, including current Columbus Blue Jackets goalie coach and 15-year NHL veteran **Rick Wamsley**, Minnesota Wild goalie **Dwayne Roloson** and former Los Angeles Kings and current Colorado Avalanche defenseman **Rob Blake**.



Photo: John E. Kasko

Andrew Penner has been climbing the Blue Jackets' depth chart for three years, and is 7-6-1 for Syracuse in 2005-06.



CA BAL

Thu., Dec. 29
 SAN@CLE 7:05
 ROC@HAM 7:30
 MIL@CHI 8:00
 TOR@MTB 8:30

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It was Penner's lot in life, his destiny, his way to the NHL to stand in front of the 72-inch-wide-by-48-inch-high net, as a goalie.

"My father played hockey and I was always around hockey when I was really young and I kind of just got it from him," Penner said. "He was a goalie and was drafted just to the OHL by the Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds. He was actually drafted 25 years before me. Because my father was a goalie I guess I was kind of always inspired to be a goalie."

Penner was signed as a free agent by Columbus Blue Jackets general manager **Doug MacLean** on Sept. 17, 2001, two years into his junior career.

"I was excited that I was given an opportunity by the Columbus organization, signing when I was 18 as a free agent," Penner said. "It's been tough not being the top prospect, but if it was easy it wouldn't be the most fun thing in the world and I've always had to do things the hard way."

Penner is used to the backup role, whether it's putting in the long hours at the rink or picking up a guitar and jamming with Dad in a family tribute concert to Kiss.

Penner played three seasons with the North Bay Centennials of the OHL as backup to current Vancouver Canucks goalie **Alex Auld** before being traded in 2002 to the Guelph Storm and then taking over the starting duties in 2003, leading the storm into the Memorial Cup playoffs.

After being signed by Columbus, Penner was tagged for the No. 1 slot with the ECHL's Dayton Bombers, where he only won 15 games out of 50 outings in 2003-04.

"I was obviously the lowest guy in the depth chart without being drafted and wasn't a real high prospect on Columbus's list," Penner chuckled. "I was about No. 8 in the depth chart behind everybody and I learned to work my hardest every single day."

Last season, Penner returned to Syracuse in a backup role for **Karl Goehring** after Leclair went down early in the year with a groin injury. Penner made the most of the opportunity and played well, going 8-12-1 in 23 games with a 2.70 goals-against average and a .917 save percentage.

"I think we could all learn from Karl Goehring here in the past couple years and you know he's been a great backup and has gone onto being a No. 1," Crunch head coach **Gary Agnew** said. "The backup needs to be prepared to be the No. 1. If the No. 1 falters as Pascal did last year with an injury, then you need a guy that's able to step in there and get the job done."

"You do have to pay your dues with hard work and work on your game and wait for your opportunities," Wamsley said. "When your opportunities come, you have to perform. When playing at this level and trying to get to the next level those opportunities aren't as many as a player would like."

Wamsley has a pretty good resume. He shared the net during his NHL career with **Richard Sevigny** in Montreal, **Mike Liut** in St. Louis, **Mike Vernon** in Calgary and **Grant Fuhr** in Toronto.

"If your No. 2 guy can win half of the games he plays in, he's invaluable,"



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Wamsley said. "If your No. 2 guy can give you a win after sitting on the bench for 10 to 12 days, he's invaluable."

Penner's chances at the next level will depend on his progression in the AHL.

"Everyone starts out to be a No. 1, I don't think anyone starts out to be a No. 2, but sometimes that just happens," Wamsley continued. "It's a luxury for a coach knowing the No. 2 guy can play and can rest the No. 1 guy when the schedule gets a little heavy. The team then has confidence in the No. 2 guy and will perform at a higher level knowing that he'll make the stops when he needs to. It's important early in your tenure as a No. 2 to establish the fact that you can come in and do the job."

Penner also has been able to keep a perspective on his role as a player in his relationship with the fans, drawing from his youth growing up as a Toronto Maple Leafs and Blue Jays fan.

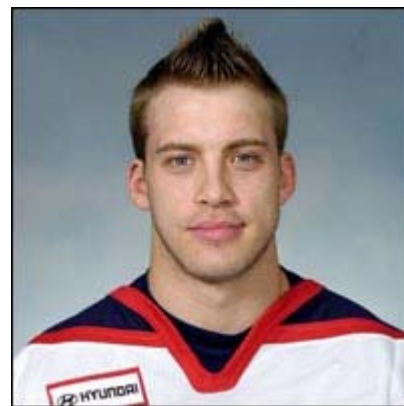
"When I was younger and watching the Leafs and got a player's autograph it was the biggest thing for me," Penner reminisced. "We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the fans. I'm a big believer in getting out into the community. You need to go out of your way to make the fans feel good. They're the ones paying to watch."

Agnew notices how hard Penner is preparing to move to the next level.

"He is a guy that fits the mold of a No. 2 goalie," Agnew said. "He is the first guy on (the ice) and the last guy off. He does all kinds of extra work. He keeps a positive attitude of starting at the bottom rung of the ladder in the (ECHL). He appreciates where he is when he moves up, and I think that as long as he keeps that appreciation and understands that, he will get a chance to play."

"I'm doing everything in my power to try to impress Columbus and show them that I am an asset to the organization," Penner said. "I just have to stay right there to compete at this level. If Leclair falters or he gets called to the NHL, the No. 1 spot would be my job for the taking."

Penner, in an effort to make himself more marketable, went to Long Beach, Calif., to train and work out with prominent trainer **Scot Prohaska** for about 10 weeks at a price tag of \$10,000.



Penner, who earned a one-game recall to Columbus in October, continues to strive to be an NHL goaltender.

"For anybody, that's a lot of money," Penner said. "I could've bought a house. It seems like a big deal going to California and stuff, but the best investment you can make is in yourself in pro sports. You have to do what you have to do to play in the NHL. It's all I've thought about my whole life. I'll do anything to achieve that goal."

Penner also knows how to network, training with his hometown mentor Dwayne Roloson.

"I've been working closely with Roloson the last two summers to gain the respect and confidence in my teammates and coaches," Penner explained. "That I can be the guy when it comes down the stretch. To show I can challenge for the No. 1 spot at the AHL level and continue my progress to the NHL."

Roloson, who played college hockey for UMass-Lowell, was a three-time AHL All-Star and winner of the Baz Bastien Award as the AHL's outstanding goalie in 2001. He is now an eight-year NHL veteran in his fourth year with Minnesota.

"I had never met Andrew until a few summers ago when his family moved to Simcoe," Roloson said. "When he was home during the summer (of 2003) my personal trainer (Prohaska) was in town working and training me because I had shoulder surgery. Andrew happened to be at the gym during one of our workouts and [they] started talking, next thing you know he started training with us."

Penner, by all accounts, is a hardworking athlete but also an opportunist. It's all in the timing, and Penner couldn't have had a better moment to give his career a shot in the arm.

"Andrew is really a hard worker as he has shown in our workouts the past two summers," Roloson said. "It was huge that he would pay out of his own pocket to work at getting to the next level. It (his trip to California) was pretty expensive on an AHL salary. It was a big commitment on his part to do that and I'm sure it will pay off in the end for him."

As much as an opportunity it was for Penner to work with a veteran NHL goalie, Roloson also has benefited from the association.

"It was an opportunity for me because when you can get two goalies together they help each other by talking about experiences and situational stuff on and off the ice," Roloson said. "We go over what works for each of us and pick each other's mind. If one of us needs advice on a problem we're having, we'll call each other to talk it out."

Penner also went the extra mile working with an eye coach, **Bill Harrison**, to improve his ability to see the puck while he was in sunny California.

"Harrison makes you work the 12 muscles in your eyes every day for about a half hour," Penner said. "It helps to make the puck seem like it's coming at you slower and when it does it's amazing how much clearer you can see it. Working with a coach like that helped me watch the puck coming at me at 90 miles per hour to make a save. It helped everything become more clear."

"I wish more of our players would be that studious on how they prepare for the year and how they get into shape," Wamsley said.

Penner also likes to get wild and crazy, taking chances some of us wouldn't. He took up surfing over the summer while training in California. He also is into heavy metal music and shopping at the mall.

"I'm a big adrenaline junkie," Penner said. "I like to be trying stuff all the time. I'm not a guy who'll just crash on the couch and watch TV all day. I'd rather be at the driving range or doing anything that keeps me moving."

Penner knows that he needs to put in all the extra work he can in order to have a breakout year.

"It's always nice to try new things. In California it was a change of scenery for me. It was nice to get the fresh seafood and the fresh air off the ocean, but my main goal was to train for hockey," Penner said.

Penner is modest but has a heart as big as a five-hole on a breakaway.

"Andrew helped me run a goalie school for the local kids in town when he first moved to Simcoe," Roloson recalled. "He volunteered even though he had just gotten to town. It was a big help because the school had 15 goalies sign up and I would have had to do it alone. I asked him to come over after he had just gotten off the red-eye and he was there in a heartbeat. The school also helped us teach each other at the same time. It was a lot of fun for me to work with him."

So why does the Crunch's safety net train so hard?

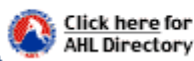
"There are guys who are naturally gifted that don't have to put in half the effort off the ice that I do to make it this far," Penner said. "I don't have the natural ability of a Pascal Leclaire, he's just tremendously quick. I've had to work double and need to keep up that work ethic to make it to the next level. That's why I like the Dwayne Roloson story so much, he was a backup and no one wanted to sign him. Then he wins goalie of the year in the AHL and now he's an NHL All-Star.

"It's the third year of my contract and third-year contract guys, it's always a big year. You have to get better every year and I've done that," the 6-foot-3, 212-pound goalie said. "I'd be quite insulted if they went out and got somebody else."

With Leclaire getting his chance to show his stuff in Columbus this year, Penner has done the same in Syracuse. He hit the Christmas break with a record of 7-6-1 in 15 appearances for the Crunch.

And on Oct. 25, Penner got the call he'd been waiting for, earning a recall to the Blue Jackets. He was in uniform for their game against Nashville the next night.

"I'm ready to handle anything that's given to me," Penner said. "I'd do this job for free if you didn't need money to live. If you do it for the money, it takes away from the fun of the game. My whole goal my entire life is to play in the NHL. It's just the knowing that you have achieved your lifelong goal. When the day comes that I'm the No. 1 guy, that day will be a quite satisfying day indeed."



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