

The State News

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Published: October 2, 2013

It's Miller Time

Ten players, six decades, two Hobey Baker Awards, one National Championship and countless memories.

No family has been so intertwined with a sport at MSU as the Miller family has with Spartan hockey.

"It's a strong legacy that started back in the '50s," Kevin Miller said. "My uncle came in the '50s, and then my cousin and my dad and we just kept following. We all grew up here and watched all the hockey games and wanted to be Michigan State Spartans. That was a big goal of ours and that's why we worked so hard."

Elwood "Butch" Miller blazed the trail to East Lansing from Canada in 1955, and his brother Lyle followed in 1964. Butch's son, Dean, laced up his skates in 1978. Lyle's trio of sons, Kelly, Kevin and Kip, played at MSU starting in 1982, 1985 and 1987, respectively.

Miller cousins Taylor and Curtis Gemmell joined the chain in 1996. Ryan Miller was the first of Dean's sons to put on the green and white in 1999, while Ryan's brother Drew came along in 2003.

"My dad started taking us to games very early in our life," he said. "He was able to get us in the locker rooms, and that really ignited the passion to play at Michigan State some day. The best years of my life were here at MSU."

Win one for the Gipper

Winning is everything for the Millers.

Kevin is the only one of the group to win a National Championship, in 1987, and Kip and Ryan remain the only two Spartans to win the Hobey Baker Award, given to the top college hockey player.

"For me, it was something that I didn't expect," Kip said of his award in 1990. "It wasn't what it is now. It's a big deal and it's growing in popularity. (Back then), it wasn't something you talked about a lot, somebody just won it every year."

Kip finished the 1989-90 season with 48 goals and 53 assists in 45 games.

Still, as much as winning is important to the family, all of them said the losses can hurt the most.

Kelly vividly remembers his last game as a Spartan, a game against Providence in which the Spartans fell 6-5 in the NCAA Quarterfinals.

“We couldn’t have out shot and out played a team more than we did, but they figured out a way to beat us,” he said. “The feeling that I had after that game was probably the worst feeling I’ve had in my hockey career.”

Ryan finished his Spartan career as the all-time leader in goals against average (1.54), save percentage (.941) and the NCAA leader in shutouts with 26, but still has yet to win a major hockey championship.

“Early in my career in Buffalo ... we got close to the Stanley Cup final,” Ryan said. “Same thing with team USA, we captured that attitude, we had the right kind of swagger and we got really close. I’d love to close the deal here and capture that attitude just one more time.”

Silver and Green

When Ryan was the starting netminder for the USA Olympic Team at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada, all of his family, and the world, were mesmerized.

The Americans forced overtime in the gold medal game, but the Canadians prevailed when Sidney Crosby slipped a puck through Ryan’s five hole.

Kip and Kevin both made the trek to Canada to watch their cousin compete, while Kelly watched it from The Mitten.

“It was amazing,” Kip said. “I couldn’t stay home, I had to go. That game was so good. It sucked, but you were like ‘what a game.’ It was settled by the best (players) against one of the best goalies.”

While Ryan settled for silver, Kelly returned to East Lansing and put on his Spartan green again — this time from behind the bench.

After working as an assistant coach for the New York Islanders in the NHL, he now is entering his third year as an assistant coach with the Spartans.

Head coach Tom Anastos played with both Kelly and Kevin during his time at MSU from 1981-84, and said Kelly’s 15-year NHL career is an asset he can use to teach young players.

“He was one of the rare players who played 15 years in the NHL,” Anastos said. “Not too many guys have played 2,000 games in the NHL. (The coaches) know what it takes to get there, but he’s the only one who knows what it takes to stay there.”

Even when he was still playing at MSU, Kelly knew he wanted to one day stand behind the bench at Munn Ice Arena.

“I had such a great experience playing for Coach (Ron) Mason that I knew this was what I wanted to do if I ever get the chance,” he said. “It’s a lot of fun coming to work every day, and it doesn’t seem like work.”

Friend or foe?

In the early stages of Ryan’s career, and one of the last chapters of Kip’s, the two met in a minor league game in Rochester, N.Y. Kip scored on his cousin.

“I could hear him all night running his mouth,” Ryan said. “We went (out) after the game and had barbecue and some beers and a laugh about it. I’m just glad we won.”

With seven members of the Miller family tree at MSU and in the NHL since 1980, games against and with family members were bound to happen.

But it all started in the basement of the Miller household when Kelly, Kevin and Kip were young.

“Our best battles growing up were playing basement hockey,” Kelly said. “We’d go down there and play for hours on end. That room took a real beating and at times we beat on each other, but we really loved playing the game of hockey.”

Kevin played with both his brothers in his time at MSU, and was teammates with Kelly for less than a season in the NHL with the Washington Capitals. Near the end of his career, he played with Team USA and Ryan in Finland.

Starting this year, the divisions of the NHL have been realigned, meaning Drew and the Detroit Red Wings will take on Ryan and the Sabres more often.

The brothers will face off tonight in the first game of the regular season for both teams, and Ryan can remember the last time they played, and he got pulled from the game after Drew got an assist.

“He’s turned into a heck of a player, and he’s got the ability to score,” Ryan said. “(Drew) runs his mouth and tries to knock me around a little bit. I’m the older brother, I’m always quiet. You just sit there and roll your eyes.”

From Capitals to Red Wings, and Sabres to Team USA, the members of the Miller family have worn many different jerseys, but all them have only one in common.

“Growing up, being a Miller meant being a Spartan from the get-go,” Kip said “Any Miller that wanted to play hockey was going to go here. I’m a Spartan fan first and always was. I got to go to MSU and live the dream.

“This is home.”