



# BABY BLUE

BY ANGIE BROMELAND  
PHOTOS BY CHRIS LEE

## HOW BLOOMINGTON'S GOLDEN CHILD IS MAKING IT IN THE BIG TIME

**S**ure, he's got the build of an athlete. He's 6-foot 4-inches, around 219 pounds and doesn't appear to be spending his days wasting away in front of the television. That said, he still looks more like a college kid than last year's No. 1 NHL draft pick. Preppy clothes, popped collars, new kicks, shaggy hair and baseball cap; sometimes it's hard to believe this 19-year-old has already achieved the kind of fame most people only wonder about. Erik Johnson is an NHL dream child.

A lifelong Bloomington resident, Johnson took up our city's favorite sport when he was 4 years old. "I just loved being at the rink," he says. "The presence that the ice has is really something different than other sports." The little boy took to the blades, and fell head over heels for hockey.



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Johnson attended private schools while growing up, but found direction in the Jefferson hockey system where he played defense with a tight-knit team of players and coaches into high school. “I had a lot of great coaching there,” he says. “But Bernie McBain is probably the guy who developed my skills as a player the most.” McBain and Denny Connelly are the two coaches largely attributed with the success of players such as Johnson and also Kyle Okposo, who plays for the New York Islanders, and Peter Mueller, who was drafted by Phoenix.

His senior year of high school at The Academy of Holy Angels, Johnson played at the national level in which he scored an admirable 16 goals. Then, the most amazing thing of all happened: he was drafted No. 1. “Growing up, you envision yourself being the No. 1 pick, and when it happened it was just unbelievable. Surreal,” Johnson says. The St. Louis Blues were the lucky recipients of Johnson’s skills, but in what was a decision that surprised many, the team and Johnson mutually opted to have him play his first year with the Minnesota Gophers, where he had already signed a letter of intent.

With all said and done, Johnson maintains that the decision was the right one: “I gained a lot of valuable information about the pro game, and really matured as a player and person.” Ending the season with a 31-10-3 record, Johnson recalls his time with the Gophers fondly, admitting he’ll

miss the intensity of games that drew tens of thousands of students and locals. “It was such a fun place to play hockey, and the atmosphere was unbelievable.”

But this season, Johnson is wholly and completely a Blue. In August he made the long drive to St. Louis where he is making a name for himself. The new kid in town, Johnson found a home with the family of Al MacInnis—a 23-season hockey professional, and now the Blues’ vice president of hockey operations. “He is just an unbelievable person,” Johnson says of one of his personal hockey idols. With a solid living situation, he is finding it relatively easy to feel comfortable in his new city. “St. Louis is a lot like the Twin Cities, so it made the transition easier,” he says, citing the city’s strong identity with sports as the icing on the cake. And though he’s been there only for a matter of months, Johnson’s already learning the other side to fame: recognition. “It happens way more often than I thought it would,” he says. “I still feel uncomfortable when it happens, because I’m just an average guy and don’t feel different than anyone else, but I’m getting used to it.” And it’s a good thing he is.

In October Johnson scored his first NHL goal in a game against the Los Angeles Kings—his most thrilling hockey moment to date—and a goal that won the game for the Blues. “You always dream of scoring [that] goal, and when I [did], it was so surreal,” Johnson says. “It was unbelievable

## Off the Ice with ERIC JOHNSON

If we could send you one thing from Bloomington, what would you want it to be? My mom’s pasta salad.

What music are you currently listening to? I’m in a huge Nickelback phase right now. I actually got to meet them this fall. Great guys. But I like all music.

Do you have a girlfriend? Yes.

What are you driving? A navy blue Range Rover.

What was the first thing you bought when you were signed? A cell phone.

What’s a typical pre-game meal like for you? Sometimes I grab a bite with the guys, usually pasta or a sandwich.

What TV shows are you watching? I’m a die-hard Grey’s Anatomy fan. Die-hard.

What’s your all-time favorite movie? That’s tough, but Hitch is hilarious.

What’s your favorite board/card game? Board game: Apples to Apples; card game: Texas Hold’em.

What’s your goal for this season? Win the Stanley Cup.

PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED BY THE JOHNSON FAMILY



having Dougie Weight and Paul Kariya assist on it, and then having Tkachuk go and grab my puck for me; it’s something I will remember forever.” These same men are the ones helping their baby Blue through his first professional season. “The best advice I got was from Doug Weight,” Johnson says of his transition to the pros. “He told me I don’t have to show how good I am every game, and I don’t have to do anything extra special; they all know how good I can be. So, that was very helpful for me—having guys like that behind you supporting you.”

The horizon is bright for our Bloomington boy, and expectations are high for a man who was drafted directly out of high school. Johnson’s family has already traveled to St. Louis a few times since his move,

bringing him the necessities and smoothing the transition. From time to time, Johnson finds himself back at home for games against the Wild, but also for visits. On these trips, he does his best to indulge in two of his favorite things: his mom’s cooking and spending time with his friends.

What’s surprising about Johnson, though, is that he sees his position in the NHL as something completely attainable, as long as players are willing to work hard. “I can’t tell you how many friends I have had that had such visible talent as hockey players, but they had no work ethic and no drive to be the best,” Johnson says. “Work to be the best, because if you don’t, why work at all?” **B**

### STICKS AND GRIT >

Johnson’s formative years as Bloomington rink rat, (from left to right): Celebrating their National Team championship in April 2006; Johnson as part of a Select Minnesota team; Hitting the ice in 1998; Johnson (center) facing off.

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