

# Johnstone returns home



Playing professional hockey isn't all wine, women, and money as seen in the eyes of thousands of minor players across Canada. Just ask Eddie Johnstone.

Johnstone returned home to Vernon this week after his second season in hockey's professional ranks. As in his first year, not everything went well for Eddie during the 1975-76 season.

Two years ago Johnstone made the mistake of signing with the ill-fated Michigan Stags, of the World Hockey Association, when he graduated from junior A. Stags became Baltimore Blades, and Eddie found himself in the Southern Hockey League for most of the season.

At least in the Southern League he got paid sometimes. Most of the Blades' players would have made more money collecting unemployment insurance.

Last September he went to New York Rangers' training camp and had an excellent camp. So good he got a crack with the Rangers.

In 10 games with New York, he had two goals and two assists. But, then his luck started going bad again.

## COACHING CHANGE

John Ferguson replaced Emile Francis as coach of the Rangers, and after Emile left, Johnstone never got on the ice again.

Eddie said, "We were leaving on a road trip and Fergie said he was going to have a look at everyone because he had some important decisions to make. I never even got to dress for a game.

"Then when we got back to New York, he told me I was being sent down to Providence (Rangers' farm team in the American Hockey League)."

Despite the bad publicity Francis got last winter, Eddie says he was a great guy and good coach.

Johnstone said, "They made a big mistake getting rid of Francis. There was so many changes, no one knew what was going on and it was hard for the players to keep their mind on hockey."

With Providence, he racked up 54 points in 55 games on a line with Boyd Anderson and Greg Holst. Unfortunately, the club was knocked out in three straight games in the AHL semi-finals.

However, Eddie did have a few thrills during the 1975-76 season.

He enjoyed playing for Rangers, on national television, against the Soviet Red Army team. He said, "They're just like a machine, they've played so long together."

## BIGGEST THRILL

It was kind of exciting for the speedy right winger to play alongside Phil Esposito for a few games, but he says, "There is no doubt my biggest thrill was my first NHL goal. I'll never forget it.

"I was breaking down right wing and Pete Stemkowski packed the puck down the left side into the corner. I broke around Toronto's Stan Weir, took a pass from Stemkowski in front, and put it upstairs."

What is in store for Johnstone next winter. "I've still got two years left on my contract with New York and I'd like to go to their camp and get a chance.

"Fergie thinks I'm too small for the NHL, but I have to find out for myself if I can play in that league."

It seems rather ironic that a player who was touted for his guts, determination, and hustle in the corners, in junior hockey, is considered too small for the NHL. But, you can bet Eddie won't give up without a fight.

# The SPORTS

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