



# ★ *Euro Trip* ★

## A Story of Pro Hockey Overseas

— by David Shoalts —

**F**orty-seven years ago, after his dreams of a hockey career crested with a tryout with the Dixie Beehives of the old Metro Junior B Hockey League, Sam Del Monte, who took up the game at the age of 12 after he and his parents immigrated to Toronto from Italy, made himself a promise.

“I felt I never really got a chance to play the game,” Sam said. “I grew up in Little Italy and I used to hack around on the street with a stick and a ball. I played a little bit—I won a THL championship when I was 16

years old—but I felt I never really got a chance to develop in the game. My father really didn’t like sports and I was the oldest of eight kids. So I made a decision. Because I never really had the chance, my sons would get every

opportunity. I followed through with that.”

Boy, did he ever. Sam went on to marry Barbara and the Del Montes had three sons—Dion, Daniel, and David. None of them ever made the NHL,

but all three played enough hockey in enough leagues and cities—from the Ontario Hockey League to the NCAA to the East Coast League to the American Hockey League to most of the leagues in Germany and Sam's native Italy—to leave the entire family with a lifetime of memories.

When he wasn't selling anything "from cars and heavy trucks to life insurance, milk machines and baby pictures," Sam spent his time coaching his three boys. He did it so well that all three were offered scholarships from NCAA universities with Dion, the oldest, going to Dartmouth College and David, the youngest, going to Princeton. Middle child Dan was courted by Bowling Green but chose to play in the Ontario Hockey League (OHL) instead, suiting up for the Peterborough Petes and Sarnia Sting.

There was no shortage of skill among the three brothers—they all led their respective teams in scoring the year before they went pro—but the NHL's obsession with size meant none of them were drafted. "At that time, size was so important," said Dan, whose junior career wound up in 1995, the same year Dion graduated from Dartmouth with an economics degree. "Look at someone like Martin St. Louis—he was never drafted. He had a great college career and still got passed over. Size obviously isn't the only consideration when looking at a prospect but you could be a very good small player and get overlooked."

But, if there was a place where size didn't matter as much, it was in Europe. The larger ice surface made skating ability and skill more valuable to teams than size alone.

Since Sam was born in Italy, Dion and Dan were able to get Italian passports and the door opened for the 1995-96 season to that country's Serie A, which, at that time, was one of the top leagues in Europe. Players like Jaromir Jagr and Tony Amonte spent time in Italy the previous season during an NHL lockout. Dion, who was 22 at the time, signed on with Val Gardena while 19-year-old Dan landed with Asiago.

While the hockey was good and the scenic views of the Italian Alps were unforgettable, there was no mistaking the Italian league for the NHL. The arenas were much smaller,



▲ Clockwise: Dan and Dave in victory, Dion and Dan in victory, Dion playing with the Nürnberg Ice Tigers, Dave playing in Bremerhaven.

running from 1,200 seats to about 7,000, and the facilities were equally rudimentary. Even though the Del Montes were raised in an Italian family, there was still a culture shock, as Dan discovered in Asiago.

"You're talking 3,000 people on top of a mountain," Dan said. "You're

culture. The pay was also better—the equivalent of \$250,000 for top players once you factored in a free apartment, car, and the team paying your income tax—but there was more pressure on foreign players. Each team was allowed a fixed number of imports and they had to perform or else they'd be replaced.

On the plus side, the game was easier on an athlete's body because the schedule called for 40 to 50 games a season compared to the 100 that could be played in North America.

"The fans are passionate," Dion said. "They're chanting and singing the whole game. It's like a soccer crowd. It's a fun environment to play in. Obviously when things aren't going well—if you aren't performing or the team isn't performing or if you're injured—there's a lot of pressure. You have to learn to deal with it. You're expected to be one of the leaders as an import."

Dion tried life in the English Super League the following year, and then sojourned in the North American minor leagues for the next two years. He headed back to Germany in 2000 when he had the chance to play with Dan in Freiburg, a city in southern Germany on the edge of the Black Forest not far from Switzerland.

***"It's a great place to play when things are going well."***

**—Dion Del Monte**

not given a car because they were afraid you'd take the car and leave. There were as many farm animals on road as cars. This was the pre-Internet days and it was five bucks a minute for a phone call home. It was tough for a 19-year-old. After that year, I knew I could play anywhere and be okay."

Both Dion and Dan left the following season to play in Germany, where the facilities were better, but they had to learn a new language and a new



▲ The Del Montes in their Bronko Hockey instructional gear.

Together, they would win a championship in 2003, earning the team a spot in the elite league the following season.

Three years later, Dan won another title with his younger brother David, who joined him in Bremerhaven, a German port city on the coast of the North Sea. It was David's second pro season after finishing his economics degree at Princeton University and playing in the East Coast Hockey League (ECHL).

"I was looking at some of the pictures from that year we won the title," said David, who is now a teacher at Garth Webb Secondary School in Oakville, Ontario. "Looking back at it makes you smile. I look at that one of me and Dan holding the cup together and it's a great feeling. It's a bond you'll share with your brothers forever."

Dion spent seven more seasons in Germany and retired in 2008, settling down and marrying his wife Tiffany in 2011. Dan, who met his wife Melanie in Germany, played until 2010, winning a total of five championships over the course of his pro career. David decided to make his hockey

career a bit shorter, retiring in 2005 at 25 to marry his wife and fellow Princeton alum Lynn, and get started on his teaching career.

They may all have bounced around the hockey world but none of the three Del Monte brothers would trade the experience for anything.

"We got to see the world and those are experiences you can't put a price tag on," Dan said. "We played in strong leagues on teams that are managed and coached by people with extensive hockey backgrounds from all over the hockey world, including some of the best Germans to ever play the game. We played in large arenas in front of big crowds and competed with and against ex-NHL players and players with national team experience. However, we also played in leagues where it is less professional and the facilities

are very basic. Where it's like, 'Listen, there's a guy named Dieter who owns the schnitzel shop and he's your GM.' He's not a hockey guy but he's making hockey decisions. There are some things that are very frustrating."

A hockey career in Europe isn't for everyone, the brothers say. It's not easy to get jobs in the best leagues

in Europe—it's very competitive, especially for imports. And for many of the players who do sign to play there, it's not easy to adjust to a new culture and new language.

"There are a lot of guys who play pro in North America for years, then go over there and just can't handle it," Dan said. "We learned as young adults and pros to function well in Europe. We learned to speak German, for example. If you can adapt and learn, it can be a great experience."

Now that the three are retired from playing, they're helping develop the next generation of players. Dan is a scout for the NHLPA and, together with Sam, coaches his son's AAA team in the Greater Toronto Hockey League (GTHL). Dion works as a professional skating and skills coach. Together with David, the four Del Montes run Bronko Hockey, a successful hockey school in Mississauga which runs on-ice camps and clinics and produces the patented on-ice resistance-training aid that bears the company's name, the Bronko Belt.

"It's been a fun journey that we've been able to take part in," Sam said, looking back. "Their mother and I visited the boys in many of the different places they lived. We got to watch them play and share in their experiences. The best part, though, is that we're not done. We've got grandkids now and they're learning to love the game—so the journey continues."

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***—Dan Del Monte***

# Brotherly Love

TEN MORE FAMILIES WITH MULTIPLE MEMBERS WHO PLAY (OR PLAYED) PRO HOCKEY



## The Staals

The Staal brothers, Jared, Jordan, Eric, and Marc, are each signed to NHL contracts. Jared, Jordan, and Eric all suit up for the Carolina Hurricanes, while Marc plays for the New York Rangers.



## The Sutters

During the 1980s, six Sutter brothers—Brian, Darryl, Duane, Brent, Rich, and Ron—played in the NHL. Since then, four of them have gone on to coaching and managing jobs.



## The Kessels

Despite watching their father set records in NCAA football, get drafted to the NFL, and play in the CFL, the Kessel kids all turned to hockey. Phil is the Toronto Maple Leafs perennial top scorer, Amanda is the 2013 NCAA female hockey player of the year, and Blake is an American Hockey League journeyman. The Kessels have a cousin, David Moss, who plays for the Phoenix Coyotes, too.



## The Howes

Gordie Howe came out of retirement for the chance to play with his sons Mark and Marty, and the trio suited up for The Hartford Whalers in the 1979-1980 season.



## The Espositos

Phil Esposito broke several records for scoring goals, while his younger brother, Tony, broke records for stopping them.



## The Sedins

The Vancouver Canucks' famous identical twin tandem Henrik and Daniel Sedin have played their entire careers together, and they currently sit 1-2 in Canucks franchise scoring record.



## The Richards

One Richard, Maurice, has an NHL trophy named after him after he became the first NHL player to score 50 goals in a season and 500 in a career, and the other, Henri, scored over 1,000 points over his career.



## The Subbans

PK Subban broke into the NHL with the Montreal Canadiens in 2010, and has since won a Norris Trophy as the league's top defenceman. His two brothers have both been drafted to the NHL as well—Malcolm, a goaltender, was selected by the Boston Bruins in 2012, and Jordan, a defenceman, was taken by the Vancouver Canucks in 2013. While only PK has solidified himself in the league, Subban is a name you'll be hearing for many years to come.



## The Koivus

Brothers Saku and Mikko have each captained different NHL franchises—Saku was the longest serving captain in Montreal Canadiens history, and Mikko is currently the captain of the Minnesota Wild.



## The Bures

While he only played 702 career NHL games, Pavel Bure totaled 779 points. His brother, Valeri, spent 10 seasons in the NHL, amassing 400 points.

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