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Bruno Zarrillo, a former star with the River East Royal Knights, stands outside the Terry Sawchuk Memorial Arena.

## From playing with River East buddies to a storied career on European ice

JASON BELL

BRUNO Zarrillo had no inkling a two-year stint in the Manitoba Major Junior Hockey League would be the passageway to a long and successful professional career overseas.

"I don't think I ever thought about going anywhere in the game at that point, I played because I just loved hockey. I'm grateful for (the MMJHL)," Zarrillo said recently. "It was God's destiny for my life. It's crazy how door after door after door kept opening for me after that.

"I got into a good spot in Europe and was able to turn it into a career. Sixteen years, it's crazy."

One of the finest players in MMJHL history, Zarrillo, now 54, played his minor hockey in North Kildonan, racked up ridiculous scoring stats — 119 goals and 277 points — in just 77 games over two seasons (1986-88) with the River East Royal Knights and then took his offensive talents to Italy, Germany and Switzerland.

He played for Italy in three Olympic Games and 11 world championships, and won 10 league championships in Europe.

Zarrillo, who operates a hockey academy in Winnipeg, was inducted into the Manitoba Hockey Hall of Fame in 2009.

His love affair for the game began on the outdoor rinks at Gateway Recreation Centre, playing with his friends in the early 1970s and, after several years of competing at the highest levels of minor hockey, he was back with many of those same familiar faces with the Royal Knights under head coach Barry Bonni.

"I tried out for the Manitoba Junior (Hockey) League and had a good camp, I thought, but I didn't make the Kildonan North Stars. I was going to Red River College (in business administration), so I decided to just play with my buddies," Zarrillo said. "You know how hockey is. You start out together and pretty soon there's AA, AAA and you all start getting split. Then, all of a sudden, here we are at 18 or 19 and we're all back together again.

"That's what the MMJHL is for. It's for guys who want to continue to play at a decent level of hockey and go to school. That's what it's traditionally been known for and why it's been so successful. I really think the MMJHL is the most stable of all those leagues. It's continued to grow, they've added teams, new rinks. Kids can afford to play, they can play a competitive level and still work or go to school. It's a great product."

Zarrillo, a slightly built but shifty, heady centre, had old friends (and N.K. neighbours) Danny Preston and Gian Paolucci on his line during his



Zarrillo holds a photo of himself from his playing days.

first year with River East, and the trio guided the squad to the league championship. That year, he had 56 goals and 82 assists.

A year later, Zarrillo potted 63 goals and 76 assists as the Royal Knights successfully defended the crown.

"Some weekends I'd have 20 points, it was crazy. Not stealing points, those were honest points. It was the (Wayne) Gretzky era, everything was wide open and I had great linemates. We had a strong team, so points came easy," he said. "The best memories are of me and the guys I grew up with. I got to play with my younger brother (Carlo), who was a goalie."

Bonni said Zarrillo is, indeed, among the league's all-time premier players.

"He never had the hardest shot, wasn't the best skater, wasn't the biggest guy. But he had that intangible where he could read the ice. Back then I compared him to the way Gretzky saw the game, in the sense that he was this scrawny kid with tremendous vision," said Bonni. "What paid off for Bruno was that he went to Italy and played in their B league but stuck it out and then really made a name for himself over there."

After obtaining an Italian passport, Zarrillo played one season with lower-tier Latemar HC and then joined HC Bolzano, sizzling with 133 points in his inaugural season and 114 the next. He played seven years there and five with the Cologne Sharks in Germany's elite league — including one under former Winnipeg Jets 1.0 head coach Bob Murdoch — among his nearly 600 games played in Europe.

During the 1996 world championship, Zarrillo led Group A in scoring with eight points in five preliminary-round games, one ahead of legendary NHLer and former Jets 1.0 sniper Teemu (the Finnish Flash) Selanne.

He also played on a line with Jaromir Jagr for a short stretch in 1994-95 during the NHL lockout.

"Lots of good memories," said Zarrillo. "I've been fortunate."

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