

# SPORTS

## Maple Grove • Osseo • Champlin • Dayton

### Four Crimson athletes selected in NHL Draft

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Maple Grove was well represented in the 2021 NHL Draft in July. Four Crimson hockey players were selected in the sixth and seventh rounds, two in each of the final two rounds.

Here are the four Maple Grove athletes selected in the NHL Draft:

- Kyle Kukkonen: Round 6, Pick 162 overall to the Anaheim Ducks
- Cal Thomas: Round 6, Pick 171 to the Arizona Coyotes
- Justin Janicke: Round 7, Pick 195 to the Seattle Kraken
- Connor Kelley: Round 7, Pick 204 to the Chicago Blackhawks

#### KYLE KUKKONEN

2021 Maple Grove graduate Kyle Kukkonen was playing an afternoon round of golf on July 24 with his brother and dad when he got a phone call saying he was drafted 162nd overall in the sixth round by the Anaheim Ducks. Kukkonen said he played a bad hole before

getting the phone call, which cheered him up. "It is a great honor," Kukkonen said. "It is a step in the journey and a good achievement to show the progress I've made."

Kukkonen is one of four former Maple Grove Crimson to be drafted in the final two rounds of the NHL Draft, something that gives Kukkonen pride. "It is a super good achievement for [Maple Grove hockey]," he said. "Younger kids can look up to us and know it's possible to achieve your dreams if you put hard work in."

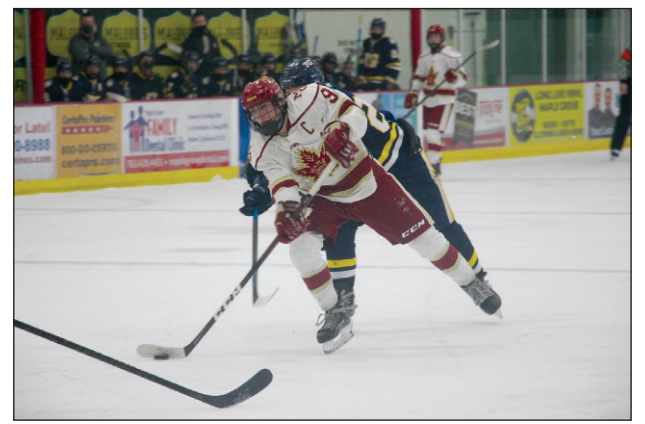
Last season, Kukkonen led the Crimson in goals (31), assists (43), and points (74), second-most in the state, en route to the state tournament semifinals. He also spent time with the NAHL's Minot Minotauros. Next year, Kukkonen will play junior hockey for the Madison Capitols and then plans to play collegiately at Michigan Tech University in Houghton, Michigan.

#### CAL THOMAS

Thomas graduated from Maple Grove last year and tallied 26 points in his se-



Cal Thomas fires a shot on net against Andover during the State AA quarterfinals at the Xcel Energy Center on March 31. Thomas, who is expected to play a season in the USHL before beginning his collegiate career at Vermont, totaled 26 points during his season. (File photos by Sam Johnson)



Kyle Kukkonen shoots on goal against Totino-Grace on March 20 at Maple Grove Community Center. Kukkonen led the Crimson in goals (31), assists (43), and points (74), second-most in the state, en route to the state tournament semifinals last season.

nior season.

The defenseman also played with the USHL's Sioux Falls Stampede and reportedly expected to play a season in the USHL before starting his college career at Vermont.

#### JUSTIN JANICKE

Janicke donned a Crimson uniform for one season as a freshman in 2018-2019 before playing in the USA Hockey's National Team Development Program.

The 18-year-old scored 12 goals and totaled 28 points in 43 contests for the U18 team this past season, and was drafted number one overall in the USHL draft by the Dubuque Fighting Saints in May.

Janicke is expected to play one more season in the USHL before playing collegiately at Notre



Maple Grove celebrates after beating Centennial 7-0 to capture the Section 5AA championship on March 25 at Maple Grove Community Center. Thomas (upper left-hand corner) and Kukkonen (holding trophy) were two of four Crimson hockey players drafted in the 2021 NHL Draft in July.

Dame.

#### CONNOR KELLEY

Kelley, a freshman defenseman at the Univer-

sity of Minnesota-Duluth, scored three goals and tallied two assists with 19 blocked shots last season.

The 19-year-old played

one season with Maple Grove in 2017-2018 prior to joining USA Hockey's National Team Development Program.



Grace McCallum and coach Sarah Jantzi answer questions from the crowd at McCallum's welcome back celebration at Twin City Twisters in Champlin on Aug. 10. "It was really cool knowing all the support we had back home...It meant the world to us, and it got us through that competition," McCallum said. (Photos by Sam Johnson)

### Grace McCallum comes back to large crowd

**MCCALLUM...**  
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Boys and girls of all ages asked her to sign posters, hats, and t-shirts, something McCallum did for everyone who stood in line to meet her. "I think it's pretty cool that kids think of me as their hero," McCallum said. "I don't think it's sunk in yet and I don't know when it will. I am honored that people look up to me."

#### 'MY HERO'

It wasn't just the kids that couldn't wait to meet their hero. City Council members wanted to join in on the celebration. Champlin Mayor Ryan Karasek first heard of McCallum in 2018, when the giant poster of her was put on the front of Twin City Twisters.

Karasek, who lives close to the gym, drove by the facility each day and saw the poster: 2018 World Champion Grace McCallum. He asked fellow city council member Nate Truesdell, whose two daughters train at the gym, who McCallum was. "Who is this Grace McCallum?" Karasek asked Truesdell at a council meeting. "She seems like a big deal."

Now, everyone knows her name. "It is amazing we have such a talent training here in the Champlin community," Karasek

said. "We couldn't be more honored and proud about that."

At the celebration on Aug. 10, Karasek was asked to give a few words in front of McCallum and the crowd of several hundred people. He told the audience every year he grows dahlias and distributes them to people in the community who are doing good works.

This year, however, he grew a new dahlia he's never grown before, called "My Hero." With only one bloom of the plant, he presented it to McCallum, thanking her for inspiring so many in the community.

"I watch you when you are competing and I feel like I should probably take an ibuprofen just watching you...It is super impressive," Karasek said. "You represent everything that America is. Hard work, dedication, passion... that is what we all strive for. You are my hero. You are everybody here's hero and we are proud of you."

#### TOKYO TESTIMONIALS

Taking a break from the autographs and photos, McCallum and her coach Sarah Jantzi, who was the assistant coach for Team USA in Tokyo, did a question-and-answer session with the crowd. People got to know that McCallum

loves to crochet and knit, plans to major in kinesiology at the University of Utah, (she will leave this week to begin her collegiate gymnastics career on a full scholarship), and will never eat sushi again after trying it in Japan.

For free time, since they were not allowed to walk or jog outside, Jantzi admitted to bingeing Netflix in her hotel room during their multi-week stay in Tokyo, with her watch list featuring Ozark, Manifest, and Outer Banks. But above all, she reminded herself and McCallum to live in the moment. "Being out there and representing your country...you can't imagine the feeling until you actually are there doing it with the USA on your back," Jantzi said. "It's an amazing feeling."

Along with Tokyo testimonials, McCallum also fielded questions about her and Team USA's performance during the competition, including Simone Biles' shocking dropout during the team all-around. "We all felt pretty stressed and a little bit of pressure after she dropped out," McCallum said. "But we knew it was for her own safety. She is not a quitter. She is not one to just drop out and so we knew it was something serious and we supported her 100%."

McCallum was the first

teammate to compete after Biles dropped out, and she knew her performance would be a tone-setter for the rest of the all-around. "I knew my routine would probably set the mood for the rest of the meet," she said.

But even though she wasn't competing, Biles was still there to support her teammates. "She helped guide us through the meet. She was a great leader, and was always there for us, giving pep talks and advice," she said.

As a coach with the team, Jantzi knew that the rest of the team had what it took to keep performing at an elite level, even with their leader Biles. "These girls are so prepared to compete all-around in the Olympic games," she said. "Yes it was a little bit shocking at first, but as a coach, we knew any one of those kids could step into that position if they needed to because they were prepared."

Since no fans were allowed at the 2020 Games due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the environment of an empty gym at the biggest stage presented a new challenge for the athletes: how to find the energy to compete and rise to the occasion of the Olympic Games. For McCallum, her motivation came from those closest to her: her teammates. "It was super

important to have one another, especially not having a crowd this time," she said. "We were supportive and really relied and cheered each other on. It made the biggest difference."

With Tokyo now in the rearview mirror and college beginning shortly, McCallum was noncommittal on the prospects of competing in the 2024 Summer Games in Paris. "We'll see," she said.

#### FAMILY FEEL

Future plans aside, McCallum and her support team at Twin City Twisters were living in the here and now during the extravaganza. Steve Hafeman has known McCallum for over 10 years and coached her at a gym in Forest Lake before transitioning over to Twin City Twisters eight years ago. Five years ago, he became co-owner of the business with founder Mike Hunger and was amazed to see the community rally around McCallum during her celebration.

"It's overwhelming honestly, in a good way," Hafeman said. "It's great to see the community support. These little kids' eyes light up when they see somebody in person who made their dreams come true...It makes them believe it can happen to them too."

From a young girl to an Olympic silver medalist,

Hafeman has seen McCallum grow not only as a gymnast but as a young woman. "It's been quite the journey. It's overwhelming to see the support and smile on Grace's face," he said. "Her determination shines through when she performs. When push comes to shove, she's firm and courageous."

Twin City Twisters bought 400 cookies for the celebration, thinking it would be a good estimate for the three-hour extravaganza. They were out of cookies within two hours. Along with seeing McCallum, the gym rented out two food trucks, a bouncy house, and other Olympic-themed games, such as a javelin throw, with foam noodles going through life-sized foam Olympic rings, and a foam hurdle jump. As much as it felt like a hero's welcome home, it also doubled as a family reunion of sorts. Strangers and friends alike from all over the area came out to support one of their own. The amazing Grace McCallum.

"Our community and gym are like one big family," Jantzi said. "The amount of support Grace gets is amazing. I had no doubt everyone would come and support her. That is just what family does."



Grace McCallum signs autographs for fans at her welcome back celebration at Twin City Twisters in Champlin on Aug. 10. Twin City Twisters estimates that over 400 came out to support McCallum.