2009-10 YALE HOCKEY GAME PROGRAM FEATURES

SETTING THE TONE

Ryan Donald

By Lizz Reeves ‘11

The most significant statistic that can be used to measure Ryan Donald’s impact on the Yale Hockey team is the won-lost mark. His personal offensive numbers are not impressive (3 goals, 13 assists), but that’s because a defensive blueliner won’t have the puck on his stick often in the offensive zone.

Donald, or “Donny,” as referred to by his teammates, is central to the Bulldogs’ success. “His physical presence in every game helps set the tone,” said Charles Brockett ’12 of his 6-foot-3, 220-pound captain. “He is willing to do whatever it takes to win.”

Ryan’s attitude to win by whatever means necessary made him a key part of a 2008-09 Yale defense that earned a No. 10 national ranking in scoring defense, helping the Bulldogs to a school-record 24 wins and a trip to the NCAA tournament.

When Donald was elected captain by his teammates last spring, Keith Allain ’80, Yale’s Malcolm G. Chace Head Coach of Hockey, had confidence in his defenseman to continue the success this winter. “He has all the qualities we are looking for in our leaders: selflessness, mental toughness, discipline and passion,” said the Bulldogs’ mentor.

His teammates also praise his leadership abilities. “When it comes to hockey, no one wants to succeed more than Donny,” said fellow defenseman Kenny Trentowski ‘11. “But outside the rink, he just likes to hang out with the guys and have a good time. It’s the perfect balance. In tough situations he is the one who can loosen up the mood, and in loose situations, he is able to get us back on track.”

On a team that relies on its high-pressure style to be successful, the St. Albert, Alb., native knows that a strong work ethic can win games. But Ryan does more than just work hard.

“Donny demands excellence from himself and the entire team on the ice, in the weight room, and away from the rink,” said Brockett.

The Yale captain certainly leads by example off the ice: In the weight room, where he lifts the most on the team; and in the classroom, where the political science major earned membership to the ECAC All-Academic Team in 2009.

Donald has helped turn the Yale Hockey Program into something the whole Yale community believes in. In just three years, the Bulldogs have transformed from a bottom-half conference team to the team that collected the Ivy League, ECAC regular season, and ECAC Tournament trophies last year. Not only is Yale in the top half of the ECAC, it is ranked among the top teams in the nation.

Much of this success can be attributed to the leadership of Donald and his teammates in the class of 2010, who brought confidence and a winning mentality to Ingalls Rink their freshman year.
Donald came to New Haven with a history of team and individual success. He was coming off a great campaign with the Camrose Kodiaks in 2005-06, in which Donald was named co-defensemen of the year on a team that was South Division regular season champions and the AJHL runner-up.

“I was used to winning, and I knew we could continue that here at Yale,” said Donald.

Ryan’s future on the ice looks bright. The defenseman gained valuable experience at NHL camp with the Vancouver Canucks last summer. The camp, which took place July 6-10 at GM Place and the University of British Columbia, allowed Donald to hone his skills with some of the best.

“It was a great experience to see what it takes to be successful at the next level,” said Donald, a member of the ECAC All-Tournament team in 2009. “It’s nice to be able to compare yourself to other players who are in the same position.”

When asked what his ultimate goal was for his last season with the Bulldogs, Donald did not hesitate to respond, “A national championship.”

Those are big aspirations for a “big” captain.

TRANSITION MAN

Sean Backman

by Steve Conn, Yale Sports Publicity Director

It’s not always easy for fans to know when Sean Backman is part of a Yale scoring play. Trying to distinguish the blur of No. 16 whizzing by can make you uncertain of what you just saw. The senior forward turns a change of possession into a shot as fast as anyone in college hockey, and his change of scenery from Nutmeg State prep phenom to collegiate standout was as smooth as his stride.

Backman, who has 62 goals, sixth best at Yale, is the school’s active career leader and one of the primary reasons the Bulldogs have become one of the best programs in the East.

“He epitomizes what we want from a Yale player,” said Keith Allain ’80, Yale’s Malcolm G. Chace Head Coach of Hockey. “He approaches every day with tremendous energy and enthusiasm, and he plays full-out every single shift.”

The 5-foot-9, 175-pound Ezra Stiles College resident didn’t miss a beat after scoring 29 goals in 57 games with the USHL Green Bay Gamblers in 2005-06. Backman, who attended Avon Old Farms, easily adjusted to the speed of college hockey and notched 18 goals in 29 outings as a Yale freshman, one shy of the school’s rookie record. He went from hitting the net once every two games in the USHL to having a .602 goal per game average in ECAC Hockey and sharing conference rookie of the year honors.

He is not the first one in the family to play hockey in the Elm City. Sean’s father, Mike Backman, played five seasons for the American Hockey League’s New Haven Nighthawks while going back and forth from the parent club, the New York Rangers.

Expectations for the son of an NHL player are often unrealistic and difficult to live up to. However, Backman didn’t hear people talking at the rinks and wasn’t concerned what others expected of him.

Backman said, “I was naïve about those expectations, and maybe that was good. I wasn’t going to let that effect what I do.”

Mike Backman skated in the International Hockey League at 23, and his path to get there was very different than the one his son has taken. Mike, the Hockey Director at Stamford Twin Rinks and a salesman for Interstate Lumber in Byram, Conn., had other ideas for Sean.

“My dad knew the value of a good education,” said Sean, referring to Mike’s post-hockey life.
The winner of the Order of Old Farms (classroom, community, athletics) at Avon, Backman was rewarded on and off the ice for taking the “collegiate route” over becoming a young pro. He has been on an all-conference team all three years and was ECAC Tournament MVP after netting a hat trick in the 2009 championship game victory. He had a similar effect on his Avon team with two New England titles, including one with Backman as captain.

The Backmans live in Cos Cob, Conn., close enough to Ingalls Rink for Sean to have seen Jeff Hamilton ’01 and Chris Higgins ’05 a number of times. Sean had ample opportunity to imagine what it would be like to be a Bulldog.

“I always wanted to come to Yale, it was my dream… and the other schools knew that. Once I got the [test] scores I needed, it was a no-brainer for me,” said Backman, who has been ranked among the top Division I players in goals per game the last three seasons.

It’s not surprising that Backman, who is averaging seven shots on goal per game and has a season-high of 11 against Brown, leads the team in shots taken every season. In addition, he has increased his shot average per game by one each season since coming to Yale.

“My dad told me the guys with the most shots are always the ones with the most goals. When you put the puck on net, you never know what will happen,” said the senior Bulldog, who wants to be remembered as a productive player, part of the core of team leadership, an energy guy and someone who “stirred up” things on the ice to get teammates going. “A lot of my shots that went in should not have been goals.”

A shot on goal is never a bad play, but there are some shots that should not be attempted. And there are times when Yale’s veteran gun can be almost as dangerous to his teammates as he is to opponent goalies.

“He’s not afraid to bury his head and take a slap shot… and he’s not always looking to see who is in the way,” said senior captain Ryan Donald, who has been hit with friendly fire at practice a number of times but is still impressed with Backman’s skills. “He’s a shooter. He hides it [puck] well and can get off a hard shot from any pass.”

“Shooting the puck is a lost art in this sport, everyone wants to make cute plays,” said Yale assistant coach Kyle Wallack. “Sean will shoot from the bleachers.”

Backman, a semifinalist for the 2009 Walter Brown Award as the top American collegiate player in New England, also wants to be remembered as a guy who did everything he could to help his team win, and not just a conference title. “I want to be remembered as a senior leader on a team that won a national championship,” said the second oldest of Mike and Toni Backman’s four children (sister, Jaclyn, played field hockey at Merrimack, brother, Brett, plays hockey for Mid Fairfield).

He has a point in eight of nine games this season and his consistency may be his greatest value to the Elis. In fact, Backman only has two hat tricks but has 102 career points in 103 games.

“Sean was a building block for a new coaching staff as a freshman. He was someone you could build a culture on,” said Wallack. “He loves the game and competition, and he always wants to get better.”

If Backman, who had a high school summer internship with the Washington Capitals and then played in their development camp last summer, continues to improve his skills, he might get a third opportunity with the D.C. team.

**LOCAL STAR**

**Mark Arcobello**

By Drew Kingsley, Yale Sports Publicity Intern

When seven-year-old Mark Arcobello first took the ice at Ingalls Rink as a member of the Southern Connecticut Youth Hockey Association, it was more likely that he was thinking
about a slice of post-game pizza than one day donning the blue and white for Yale. “I never considered playing here before being recruited,” said Arcobello, a senior forward and political science major in Ezra Stiles College. “It was always a dream of mine to attend a university like Yale, but it never really seemed like a possibility until I was recruited in high school.”

While Arcobello may not have envisioned Ingalls Rink as a part of his future, the Whale remained a fixture in the youth of the Milford, Conn. native. “Growing up I attended a fair amount of Yale games. Also, during my time at Fairfield Prep, I played at Ingalls for the Connecticut State Tournament in 2004 and 2005. Ingalls Rink has been a part of my hockey career my whole life and is one of the most meaningful rinks I’ve ever played in.”

Arcobello’s Fairfield Prep team won a pair of state titles at Ingalls, as he racked up 116 points in three years with the Jesuits. He finished his scholastic career with the Salisbury School, notching a team-best 47 points (26-21-47) in his senior season and claiming a Division I New England Prep School Championship.

Today, Arcobello has done his part in making Ingalls Rink a memorable place for fans, teammates and opposing players, though the latter might prefer to forget. Arcobello had 35 points last season as the Bulldogs put together the most successful season in program history, rising to national prominence with a 24-8-2 campaign that culminated with ECAC and Ivy League Championships and a slot in the 2009 NCAA East Regional at the Arena at Harbor Yard in Bridgeport, Conn. Arcobello, who also has a five-point game (2-3-5, 11/11/07 vs. Colgate) on his Ingalls Rink résumé, was named first team All-New England, All-ECAC Hockey and All-Ivy and earned Reebok East Division I All-America status, becoming the first Bulldog to claim the national honor since Chris Higgins ’05 in the 2002-03 season.

“Earning the All-America recognition last year is definitely something I am very proud of,” said Arcobello. “To be put on a list alongside some of the best players in the country is very flattering, however the success of our team and the other individuals that I play with deserve most of the credit. Without my linemates setting me up and finishing my passes, I wouldn’t have had such a successful year.”

Seven of Arcobello’s 17 goals last season were game-winners, the second-highest total in the nation, including the goal that pushed the Bulldogs past Cornell to claim the ECAC Regular Season Championship: yet another Ingalls Rink memory.

Among all of the accolades and team bests garnered by Arcobello last season, one statistic may seem out of place next to the forward’s 5-foot-9, 165-pound frame: a team-high 68 penalty minutes. “I’ve always tried to be somewhat aggressive during games,” said Arcobello, “though my size limits me from being a real tough guy like (senior captain) Ryan Donald.”

For all that Arcobello may lack in size, he makes up for it with speed and skill on the defensive end. It is a common sight at Ingalls Rink to see an opposing player starting a 3-on-2 break, only to soon realize the puck is on its way to the other end of the ice, courtesy of a Mark Arcobello steal or back-check.

Nearly 100 times in his Yale career, Arcobello’s trademark aggressive plays have led to Yale lighting the lamp, as he has tallied 39 goals and 55 assists during his four seasons wearing a Bulldogs’ sweater.

“We preach the importance of transition hockey,” said Keith Allain ’80, Yale’s Malcolm G. Chace Head Coach of Hockey. “Mark is one of our best players at creating a turnover and then making the right pass in transition.”

“Playing hard both ways is what wins hockey games,” added Arcobello.
Looking around Ingalls Rink today, the historic arena has changed quite a bit since Arcobello first stepped on its ice at the age of seven. But for Allain and his Bulldogs, the greatest change isn’t hanging on the walls or painted in the locker room; the greatest change to the Whale was brought about by Arcobello himself.

“Mark and his class have initiated a turnaround in our program,” said Allain. “Their talent and also their approach to the game have changed the culture of Yale hockey. They have set the new standard, and we will try to live up to their legacy for years to come.”

THE ICE QB  Tom Dignard

by Steve Conn, Yale Sports Publicity Director

Last January at Hamilton, N.Y., the Bulldogs pulled off one of the more improbable comebacks in the history of Yale Athletics. The Elis trailed Colgate 4-0 midway through the final frame before tallying five straight times and taking a 5-4 OT win.

Tom Dignard ’10, a blueliner who sometimes seems like a quarterback on the ice, helped engineer one of the greatest wins of a magical championship season in New Haven. He scored two times and handed out one assist that night to keep a young win streak alive.

Twenty-four hours earlier at raucous Lynah Rink, Dignard, who had a goal, played one of his best games to help end Cornell’s 10-game unbeaten streak and give the Blue its first win at Ithaca since 1999.

These are two examples of his impact on the Yale program, but the Reading, Mass., native has made his presence felt since scoring a goal and handing out an assist in his second collegiate contest, a win at No. 8 New Hampshire in 2006. It has developed into 13 goals and 49 points in 86 career games, but his effect on the Blue is far beyond the numbers. Even an economics major like Dignard can see that.

“He has been important to the resurgence of the hockey program, and he has many of the qualities that are important to us,” said Keith Allain ’80, Yale’s Malcolm G. Chace Head Coach. “He is very skilled, has a high hockey IQ, can log lots of ice time and can play in all situations. But, most what’s most important, he is ultra-competitive.”

Dignard, known as “Digs” among his teammates, was in a vulnerable position near center ice at Ingalls Rink a week after the win at Cornell when a Quinnipiac player rammed into him and sent the Bulldog to the hospital for a week with a lacerated spleen that ended his season and jeopardized his future on the ice.

“I was amazed how many people came to visit me in the hospital. I knew my teammates were good friends, but that’s when you really know how special they are,” said Dignard, who
attended practices and games when he was healthy enough to be back on campus and has since made a full recovery.

Yale was in the middle of an eight-game win streak and suddenly was facing a stretch run without its play-making, tempo-controlling blueliner. Dignard, who had five goals and 17 points, was among the top scoring defensemen in the country. He went on to earn second-team All-ECAC Hockey honors despite playing in just 22 games.

“Digs goes on the ice every day with a purpose… to get better. He makes the players around him better as well. When No. 15 is in the lineup, we are a better team,” said classmate Sean Backman. “When we lost Digs last year, other guys knew they were going to have to step up to fill that big hole. Other guys did step up and we were able to win the ECAC championship for him.”

One thing that wasn’t missing from the lineup with Dignard out was a big voice.

“Digs tends to be soft spoken but leads by example very well. When he went down last year it was a huge blow, but it gave us something to rally around,” said Yale captain Ryan Donald. “Knowing that we had a teammate who would give anything to be back on the ice brought the importance of every shift into perspective. I think that everyone stopped taking things for granted and pushed themselves a bit harder every day.”

Backman, who has been the recipient of many quality Dignard passes and has been a good friend for four years, must do most of the talking himself.

“I don’t think he has said more than 17 words to me in that time,” said Backman.

“I’m not a talking guy,” said Dignard, who has yet to skate in a game this season because of a leg injury. “I like to lead by example. I would like to be known as a solid defenseman who steps up at the right time.”

Dignard has had a chance to observe Yale hockey operations from both sides with the injury time. His explanation for the continued progression of the program has two primary elements.

“Every day at practice everyone is fighting for their spot and pushing each other. Everything is left on the ice,” said Dignard, who relishes that scenario. “We also have become closer as a team because we all eat dinner together on campus now.”

Play-making blueliners tend to feed their teammates well, but Dignard can take that skill to a different level. The former Phillips Andover Academy Cum Laude and honor roll student-athlete, who has been an academic All-ECAC selection each year, loves to cook. He prefers not to use recipes (onions are off limits), and says people get mad at him for not using them. Dignard, who is back in Branford College after being able to cook off campus last year, didn’t put down the idea of becoming a “skating chef.”
Right now, all his teammates want from Dignard, who won the John Poinier Award for Yale’s top defensive player his sophomore year, is a steady diet of rubber -- in the form of pucks heading for their sticks or the net.

That could be the Bulldogs’ recipe for success in 2009-10.

YALE HOCKEY’S Class of 2010

by Steve Conn, Yale Sports Publicity Director

How do you measure the impact of a class of athletes on one team? Would victories (67), post-season wins (7), Ivy League titles (3), ECAC regular-season championships (1), conference tournament titles (1) and NCAA Tournament appearances (1) be enough?

One class in the history of Yale hockey can claim those accomplishments, and there are still four games and playoffs left this season. The Class of 2010 sits atop 115 years of the school’s sport, and not just because their entire listing is contained by the first four letters of the alphabet. Mark Arcobello, Sean Backman, Billy Blase, Tom Dignard and Ryan Donald have led the resurgence during the most exciting days of the game in New Haven.

The current class boasts prolific scoring, shutdown defense, excellent net work, versatility, energy, high hockey IQs and academic success. What more could you want in a group of recruits coming to the Elm City in the summer of 2006. Three of the five were in NHL free agent camps last summer; all five could be playing professionally next winter.

You could argue that the individual accolades of this group compare to the honors the team has garnered during the Keith Allain Era. Arcobello was an All-American last year, Backman has been part of the All-ECAC team all three seasons, Blase was a semi-finalist for the Walter Brown Award a few campaigns back, Dignard has been All-ECAC and a finalist for conference student of the year and Donald, the captain, has made the conference all-tournament team and all-academic squad.

“Our class has seen the Yale hockey program change both physically and in attitude. From the losing days of our freshman year to where we are now speaks volumes of how the program has changed from a mediocre team to one of the best in the country,” said Arcobello, who scored the tying goal at Cornell last Saturday and had the miraculous, late equalizer in the 2009 ECAC
seminfinals against St. Lawrence. “I am proud to grow with and be part of such a great group of classmates and teammates.”

This group was recruited before Allain took over in 2006, and has also seen its historic home venue transformed into something appropriate for a national contender.

“Playing for Yale has been one of the best experiences of my life. As a class we have grown together and been through a lot,” said Backman, who scored the game-winner in OT at Cornell last week and has 74 career goals, fourth best at Yale. “One practice freshman year, coach [Allain] called us over and told us that we were the future of Yale hockey and we had a lot of responsibility on our shoulders. From that day on, our class has taken that to heart. We try to set an example for the rest of the team so that we give ourselves the chance to be the best that we can.”

The 2005-06 Bulldogs under Tim Taylor won 10 games, doubling the success of the previous campaign. The Class of 2010, which had 11 and 16-win seasons before hitting 24 last winter, improved its record in each of the first three seasons under its new mentor.

“It has been great to see the change that has happened, going from a team that accepted losing to one that has championship expectations,” said Donald. “To be part of that transition has been awesome, and hopefully it only continues to grow in the years to come. Seeing the contrast from freshman year through now has given me and my classmates an appreciation for what it takes to have a winning program, and how focused everyone needs to be.”

Some freshmen are impact players the minute they step on the ice with their new teams while others need the early playing time to try and reach that status. These five players have accumulated a combined 498 career games, 140 goals, 317 points and 19 wins between the pipes.

“I think we owe a lot of our personal and team success to coach Allain for giving us the opportunity to play and have significant roles right when we got here our freshman year,” said Dignard, who ranks third among Division I blueliners in points per game this season. “We all went through our growing pains, but coach stuck with us and we definitely became better players because of it.”

Group chemistry and bonding can be significant variables in team success. Yale’s senior class has filtered its leadership through the others, something that could pay dividends down the line.

“Each guy fits into his own role, both on and off the ice,” said Dignard. “You could compare me to Ryan Donald. We are both defensemen but have very different styles of play that complement each other. Or you could compare Mark [Arcobello], who is more of a set-up two-way player, to Sean [Backman], who is a pure goal scorer as well as an energy guy. I think by having and understanding these different roles, we have become closer as teammates and friends because we know that each person's role is important and we need to count on everyone to succeed.”

Blase, who has not seen regular action all four years but has certainly made statements, may be the best example of Yale’s good chemistry. Despite playing behind Alec Richards ’09 the last
half of 2008-09 and then waiting until Feb. 6 for his first start this year, the California native has been positive and supportive. Blase (.910 career save pct.), who is the only one among four Eli goalies on the roster to have a collegiate shutout, was rewarded with a chance to boost the Bulldogs on a big league weekend and did just that with four straight wins, including a 2-1 decision with 19 saves at Cornell.

“This senior class has been instrumental in the turnaround of the Yale Hockey Program. They come to the rink every day to practice with a competitive nature that not only raises their level of play but that of their teammates,” said Allain. “They approach every new challenge with a passion and sense of enthusiasm that will make them successful the rest of their lives.”

It’s still too early to measure the class of 2010.