

A man and a woman are embracing in a warm, red-lit environment. The man is in profile, looking towards the woman, who is smiling broadly at the camera. They are both wearing red clothing. The woman has long, wavy brown hair. The background is a solid, vibrant red.

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Son of a Goalie

The next Hextall is poised to take the ice

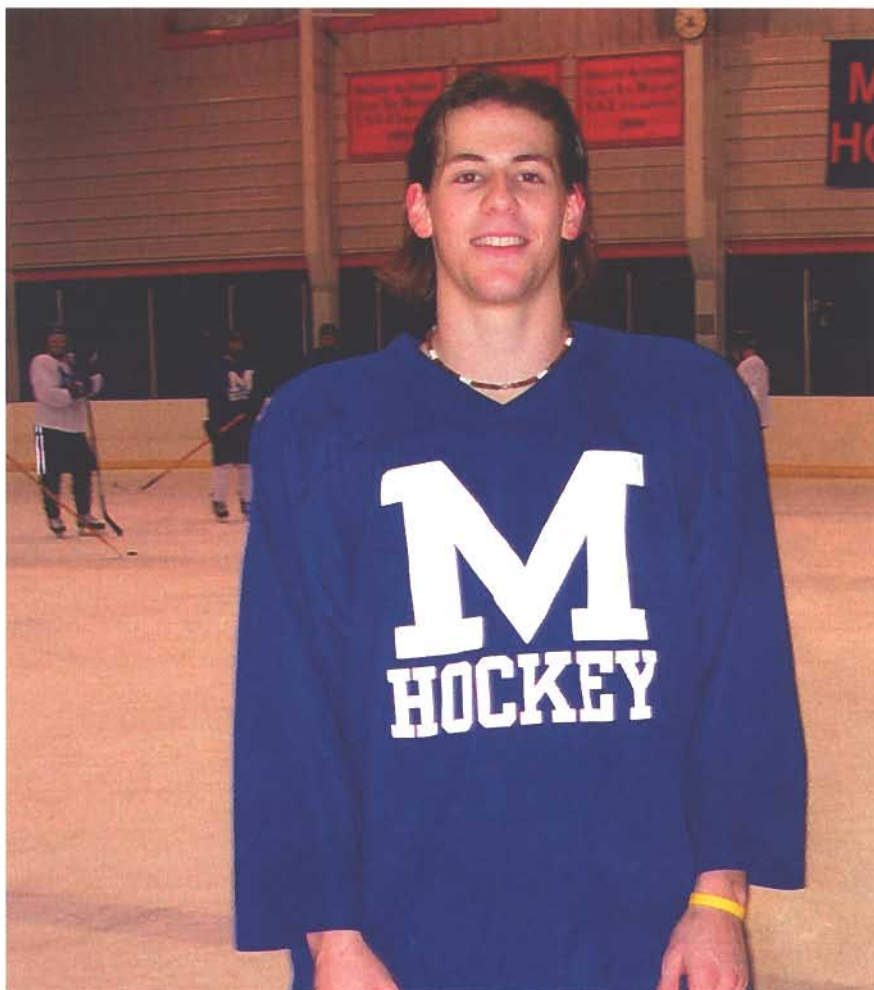
Most hockey fans know the Hextall name because of Philadelphia Flyers goalie Ron Hextall, the veteran goalie who hung up his skates in 1999 after a successful 13-year career. Fewer fans may realize that hockey has been a Hextall family tradition, and the newest member of the family to watch, Brett, may well become the fourth generation lacing up the family skates.

Before his dad became a Flyer, Brett's great-grandfather, Bryan Hextall Sr., played with the New York Rangers for 11 seasons, winning the scoring title in 1941-42. His grandfather played professionally for nine years then retired in 1976. Even Brett's uncle, Dennis, made the pros. Now, at only 16 years old, Brett hopes to follow in his family's footsteps and play professional hockey.

Brett fell in love with the sport as a toddler. "I think when you grow up in Canada, you grow up in a hockey environment," says dad Ron. "It's clearly number one in Canada. You just kind of grow up with skates on and that's the way it is. Brett would come to the rink with me at a young age, the way I did with my father."

Hockey was certainly in Brett's genes. Not only was his father a hockey all-star, but his mother, Diane, was a highly-successful, competitive amateur skater, winning more than a few Canadian National titles. It seemed that Brett was destined to find his way on the ice, but it wasn't all smooth skating.

"We were in Quebec and Brett was four years old," remembers Ron. "He'd been skating a little bit when he'd come over to the rink with me, but he wanted to play hockey so bad, which Diane and I thought was ridiculous. But he wanted to play, so we let him.



Family resemblance? We'll let you decide.

"It was early in the season," he says, "and Brett grabbed a puck and he started skating with it, but he was going the wrong way. Everybody's yelling at him, of course, in French, and Brett has no clue what they're saying. So, finally, I guess he saw some arms pointing down the other way, so he turned right around and went back."

Once back on track, Brett's hockey skills continued to move in the right direction. Not as comfortable in the goal as his dad, Brett's a forward.

He's learned from many coaches throughout his young life in addition to those sleeping down the hall.

"Obviously, my dad being a player is probably what got me started. I get asked a lot, do I play because of my dad. No. He doesn't force me to play or influence me to play – not intentionally. My mom also is a skater, so, it's definitely in the blood," he says with a laugh.

"Going into the locker rooms with my dad and being around all that stuff was definitely great," continues Brett. "It makes me see how good it is and what it's like to play at that level. They gave me the start. My dad talks to me if he watches a game, and says you can do this better or that better, but he's not one of those parents that says 'why didn't you do this or why didn't you do that.' He just gives me little tips and pointers and lets me do my thing on my own."

After attending grade school and middle school in Voorhees, Brett spent his freshman and sophomore years of high school at Bishop Eustace. Though he loved his hometown and the friends he had grown up with, his family made the difficult decision to send him to the Milton Academy, a prep school six miles south of Boston. Why? For hockey, of course.

To Milton Coach Paul Cannata,

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Brett has made the perfect choice. "There's a long history of hockey at Milton," he says, "going back to almost as long as hockey has been played in the Boston area, back to when they used to play their games on a pond, and all the way through the modern era."

While Brett's goal is to make it to the pros, he recognizes that he has a lot of work to do to make that dream happen. Being away from home isn't easy, either. Second among four children, he misses brother Jeffrey, 9, and sisters Rebecca, 12, and Kristin 18. He also misses hanging out on weekends with his Voorhees friends playing for the Manhunt squad. He's serious about doing whatever it takes yet realistic that he needs a back-up plan in case professional hockey doesn't work out.

"If hockey doesn't work out, I'll have a solid education," he says.

Whether or not Brett will need his back-up plan is the ultimate question. Those who have coached him think he's got the grit and determination, but the path to making the pros is a long and difficult road.

Steve Mountain, Brett's coach from the Philadelphia Junior Flyers, is one who thinks Brett can make it. "He's a terrific prospect. From a coach's perspective, he's very easy to coach, very intense, fun to be around, very protective of his teammates, very proud to play with the kids he's with, very gracious and accepting of what's going on around him."

Cannata agrees but is cautious about the pressure that is put on kids in sports. "I don't think it's fair to start talking about 15 or 16 year old kids and their professional or even collegiate potential," he says. "It puts an unfair burden on a young kid who's just developing. I think it's important to do well where you are and the future will take care of itself."

Whether or not Brett is successful in his pursuits, those who know him well believe he will make a name for himself whether he becomes a professional athlete or not. His hockey skills are merely one of his attributes.

"He's so comfortable in his own skin," says his mother, Diane. "I've always called him a man of honor. He's got a lot of integrity."

Brett would love to be play for his home team, the Flyers, but realistically admits that if he got to that point, if hockey ever comes back, at that, he'd play for anyone. It's possible that the Hextall family tradition will continue, with Brett taking center ice. ❖