

# Aztecs rock their way to victory

## With record number of wins, SDSU disproves nation

By Robert Patrick  
The East County Herald

It's been a long season, and San Diego State's hockey team has lived it to the fullest. From being practically ignored (you could call SDSU's athletic department early in the season and receive a rather dismal response. "Who? What?" the person on the other line would say, between intervals of silence and dead air, when asking about the school's hockey program), to being the undisputed darlings of local sports writers everywhere. All of this within a few productive months. A goal here, a slap shot there, and the Aztec's skated their way to a 23-1 regular season record - not to mention a bunch of interviews, news stories, and television opportunities.

Not bad for the San Diego squad.

"Right there, look," said San Diego State's goalie, Jacob Kalmonson, while pointing to the wall of his home, a home which he shares with some of his hockey teammates, including leading scorer Ben Nicoll.

"There's the one from *The Union Tribune*, they talked to me in that one." Kalmonson's hand pointed erectly, as if to

summon a firing squad. An impressively cut news story was tacked crookedly to the wall, 'Nice on Ice' it was titled.

Kalmonson smiled. The 5'9", 150, goalie, sunk into a blue armchair. Sighing, he looked about, surveying the damage of his home. Around him were empty cans, half-torn posters, and abandoned cups - all stacked high like the spoils of a great battle. They were all, of course, shortly accounted for by Kalmonson, "we had a party over the weekend," he said. All were accounted for, that is, except for a few strewn DVDs, which I learned were roommate and fellow teammate, Lance Peterson's.

"Peterson is the biggest surprise of the year for us," said Kalmonson, while reclining. "He's brought a lot of good to the team."

In fact, Peterson has scored 13 goals this year, and made 25 assists, all while adding to the chemistry of the nearly undefeated SDSU squad.

Before Kalmonson can further explain Peterson's impact on the Aztec's successful season, Ben Nicoll, SDSU's top goal scorer, walked in from the hall. His sandy blond locks dropped over his eyes, just for a moment, as he

made his way into the messy living room. Using his feet like metal detectors, to avoid any unwanted trash below him, Nicoll finally plopped down on a couch next to Kalmonson.

Overhearing our talk about teammate Peterson, Nicoll chirped in excitedly.

"Yeah, Peterson has been a great asset to our line this year," said Nicoll, while stretching. "He's still the only guy living here who doesn't pay rent, though."

Peterson, whom I find out is living in the home's garage, got there from a rather humorous reason.

"He lost an eating challenge," said Kalmonson, laughing. "I don't think he expected that."

And while the Aztec hockey players know each other well, and have insatiable senses of humor, they have also plugged in some incredibly serious stat lines. The Aztec's have outscored opponents 211 to 57 this year, with 26 of those goals coming from forward Ben Nicoll.

All of this success came just three years removed from generating a winning less season, in which coach David Hough first took the helm. Since then however, Hough and company have

led their team to a couple of congratulatory seasons. The Aztec's have generated so much publicity this year, in fact, that most media outlets have been asking them how they would stack up against the best hockey schools in the nation - Minnesota and Boston University, just to name a few. In actuality, some of the eastern based schools have even questioned the validity of SDSU's talent, especially most recently, with the west coast team's ongoing success. One Boston University player, namely Luke Popko, even suggested that San Diego State didn't have a hockey team earlier this year.

"I think those guys have a different attitude out there," said Kalmonson.

"A lot of them are overconfident, take things too seriously. I mean, we can be serious, too. But yeah, we can joke around a lot. West coast hockey players are a little more easy-going."

Kalmonson continued to express his exhaustion over the comparisons.

"We take it with a grain of salt, you know, being compared to those schools," he said.

"We know we're good and that's it."

There's truly a lot to be said about the character of these Southern California kids.

From shelling out their own money (they're a club team), to amassing a heroically large crowd, to building a plethora of sponsors, SDSU has grown from virtually nothing to everything this year. All with a little help from their friends.

"We have a lot of fans now," said Nicoll. "They really energize us when we play."

Out of the success, also came distractions for the team, however.

"When we lost our first and only game of the season, that was because of the media attention, I think," said Nicoll. "There was a lot of news cameras and still photographers working that game. Some of our guys weren't used to that exposure. It was really different for some of us."

A door is opened. A teammate, friend, roommate, comes in unannounced. He attracts the attention of Nicoll and Kalmonson briefly, then wanders by a bushel of hockey sticks. The sticks, evenly aligned near the entrance of the house, look as

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though they could double for a makeshift coat rack. Perhaps in an alternate dimension.

Kalmonson slouches back into his chair, immediately continuing with his train of thought.

"It's going to be a lot of work playing in the playoffs in a few weeks," said Kalmonson, while looking at Nicoll for validation. "We'll have our family coming with us on the road, so it will be good support. I wish a lot of our fans could come, but that's a lot to ask for."

Hitting the road, SDSU will play Tennessee first.

"They have a good team," said Nicoll. "Northern

Colorado, I think? They have a good goalie. They are going to be tough, too. There is a lot of competition."

But these guys have seen it all before, and, from what Nicoll tells me, mostly from his own team.

"Whats the best goalie I've played against?" Nicoll questions himself, then answers just as quickly. "Jacob Kalmonson, of course. I mean, playing against him in practice, you really get to play against the best goalie everyday."

With Kalmonson's average hanging barely over the 2.00 mark, and making 413 saves on the season, Nicoll definitely has a point.

There hasn't been anyone

better this year.

So, what does the goalie do for celebrations after a big save?

"It's hard for a goalie to celebrate," said Kalmonson. "I leave that up to the skaters."

"The team has actually been working on a few," said Nicoll. "Man, I'll tell you, I hate to bring up Peterson again, but he had the worst one of the season."

Both Kalmonson and Nicoll laugh.

"I mean, he spun around in circles for like fifteen solid minutes. It was embarrassing."

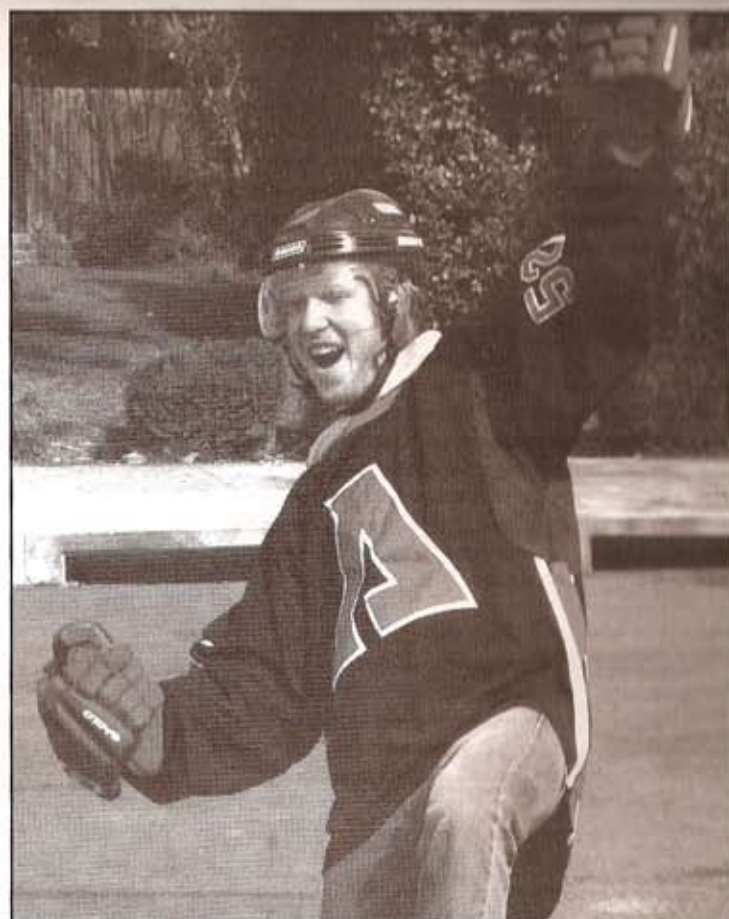
Launching up from the couch, Nicoll asks Kalmonson if it would be okay to break out a game of street hockey. Kalmonson complies. Before I know it, Kalmonson has dragged a rather humorous, and equally metaphorical, net out onto the blacktop.

The net is small. Really, really small. There is no feasible way someone could score on Kalmonson. This sounds eerily familiar.

Nicoll and Kalmonson laugh as they play a game of street hockey on, quite literally, a small scale.

After the joke dies down, they retire back to the living room for more serious hockey talk. Its all in a days work for the star players. Working hard, playing hard, partying hard - but most importantly - leaving nothing behind.

They would have it no other



Nicoll demonstrates a post-goal celebration after a mock-goal.



Kalmonson has made over 413 saves this season with the Aztecs.

way.

So, what's in the future for the two talented players, after the hockey year ends, that is? Kalmonson, a communications major, now in his senior year, hopes to create a career for himself. He also plans on playing more hockey, more specifically, enrolling in adult leagues in his spare time, while lobbying for the upkeep of the Sports Arena.

Nicoll, only in his

sophomore year, intends to battle it out on the ice for a few more success-bound seasons with the Aztecs.

"We have a lot of returning guys next year," said Nicoll. "I also think our team's success will help upcoming freshman classes to take a look at our hockey team. Instead of someone going to say, Long Beach, they will go here to play hockey instead. Things are only looking up."

Looking up, indeed.