

ON THE MOUNTAIN

He's one Devil of a success story

A parish festival isn't where you'd expect to find a Devil and former River Rat. And yet, no one was alarmed that such a creature lurked outside St. Charles Borromeo Church on June 22.

Brian Gionta's demeanor has little to do with the nicknames of the professional hockey teams he's played for this past season. The Greece native, who now competes for the National Hockey League's New Jersey Devils, was actually quite angelic as fans approached him during a Saturday-afternoon autograph session.

Greeting nearly everyone with "How's it going" and "How are you," Gionta patiently signed bumper stickers, photos of himself and even the backs of children's T-shirts.

"I'm lucky I came today. Now I get to brag to all my friends," one boy commented.

Gionta said he enjoys the chance to mingle with young admirers. "You remember how it was when you were a little kid," he remarked.

Even though he made it all the way to the NHL at age 23, following a stellar career at Boston College, Gionta fails to fit the image of a brash young athlete.

"I don't do it for the recognition. I just do it because I love it, and to have fun. I work hard and never take it for granted. I don't throw it in anybody's face. There are a lot of people in the world who aren't as fortunate," said Gionta, a 1997 graduate of Aquinas Institute.

Gionta is a rising star with the Devils, playing home games before crowds of up to 19,000. But he said he's determined not to get swept up in all the adulation and media attention.

"You have to have the right people around you," he said.

One such person is his high-school sweetheart, Harvest Ingram, whom he will wed July 26 at St. Mary's Church in downtown Rochester. "Obviously, we fell in love a long time ago. She's a great girl and there aren't too many out there," he said.

Asked which is more nerve-racking — preparing for an NHL playoff game or for his wedding — he laughed and said, "The playoff game, for sure. I'm not nervous at all about the wedding."

Gionta grew up in Greece's Our Mother of Sorrows Parish. He played one year at Aquinas, followed by three years of travel hockey, before entering



Bruce Bennett photo, courtesy of the New Jersey Devils

Greece native and Aquinas Institute alumnus Brian Gionta plays professional hockey with the New Jersey Devils.

Boston College on scholarship.

There, he enjoyed arguably one of the finest collegiate careers in hockey history. He totaled 123 goals and 109 assists over four years, leading the country in scoring with 33 goals (he also had 21 assists) in his senior season of 2000-01. That's also the year his Eagles finally won the NCAA Division I title, after losing twice in the championship game and once in the semifinals during Gionta's previous three years.

Gionta earned a bachelor's degree in communications from Boston College in 2001. He had been a fourth-round draft pick of New Jersey in 1998, and thus began the 2001-02 season with the Devils' top farm team, the Albany River Rats of the American Hockey League. There, he totaled nine goals and 16 assists in 37 games. In late October he returned to his roots when the River Rats visited the AHL rival Rochester Americans, before a crowd that included many of Gionta's family members and friends.

"It was wild. I had dreamed as a kid about playing in the old War Memorial. That's as close as I've played to home in seven or eight years," Gionta said.

In mid-season Gionta made it to the big time, debuting with the parent club Devils. He totaled four goals and seven assists in 33 games, and also had a goal in each of New Jersey's first-round Stanley Cup playoff wins against Carolina. However, the Devils were eliminated from the best-of-seven series, four games to two.

Gionta stands just 5-foot-7 and

weighs 175 pounds, but at every level he has continued silencing doubters about his size. "It's something I've dealt with all the way around. You just have to keep going out trying to prove yourself," he said.

Pre-season begins in August as Gionta enters the final half of his two-year contract. Gionta said he's pleased to be affiliated with a successful franchise; the Devils won Stanley Cups in 1995 and 2000. Regardless of where his career takes him, he and his wife-to-be plan to make Rochester their off-season home: "Both our families are from here, and we'll definitely come back here."

Speaking of family, Gionta's brother Steve, a 2002 Aquinas graduate, will attend Boston College on a full scholarship this fall. And his parents, Sam and Penny, are frequent visitors to Gionta's home games at the Continental Airlines Arena in East Rutherford, N.J.

In addition, Gionta's older brother, Joe, coaches youth hockey at Lakeshore Hockey Arena. One of Joe Gionta's players, 13-year-old Josh Best, says Brian often stops in to check out the action. According to Josh's dad, Dave, the NHL-playing Gionta prefers being silent about his stardom.

"He keeps a low profile and stays to the side," said Dave Best, whose family belongs to Greece's Holy Name of Jesus Parish.

The Bests were among the autograph-seekers at the St. Charles festival. Can Josh see himself as an NHL player such as Gionta some day?

"I hope," he remarked.



Stacey Staubus/Photo intern

Gionta (left) signs an autograph for Greece Athens High School student Brenden Prince during the St. Charles Borromeo parish festival June 22.

STORY BY MIKE LATONA