

# A Yankee With Ice in His Blood

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By [BEN SHPIGEL](#)

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TAMPA, Fla. — According to [Yankees](#) outfielder Jamie Hoffmann, no proper tour of his hometown, New Ulm, Minn., would be complete without a visit to the [August Schell Brewing Company](#). The next stop, he is not so sure about. Maybe an outing to the [Minnesota Music Hall of Fame](#) or, if processed cheese is your thing, a drive past the Kraft Foods plant.

“There’s [not much else in New Ulm](#),” Hoffmann said.

So the good folks in that town of about 13,000, about 90 miles southwest of Minneapolis, have become adept at creating their own fun. It has forged a reputation as a baseball hotbed in a hockey-crazed state, [producing six major leaguers](#) but no N.H.L. players, though Hoffmann could have been the first.

Bypassing a hockey scholarship at Colorado College for an education in rookie ball, Hoffmann spent parts of six seasons in the [Los Angeles Dodgers](#) organization before finally making his debut last May. Around the Yankees’ spring training clubhouse, the success of the United States men’s hockey team in the Olympics has emerged as a popular topic of conversation. Hoffmann is interested, too. He played against some of those players in juniors.

“If I had chosen hockey, then I would really enjoy watching baseball. I really get to enjoy it now that I don’t have to play it,” said Hoffmann, who as a [Rule 5 draft](#) selection must spend the season on the Yankees’ 25-man roster or be offered back to the Dodgers for \$25,000 before he can play in the minors. He will compete with Marcus Thames.

Among major leaguers, choosing baseball over hockey is not a rare phenomenon. [Corey Koskie played juniors in Manitoba](#), [Kirk McCaskill shone as an all-American center](#) at Vermont, and [Tom Glavine](#) was a high draft pick of the [Los Angeles Kings](#). The difference is, Hoffmann never thought he would have a choice.

“It wasn’t that I wasn’t interested in baseball,” Hoffmann said. “It was that I didn’t think baseball had an interest in me.”

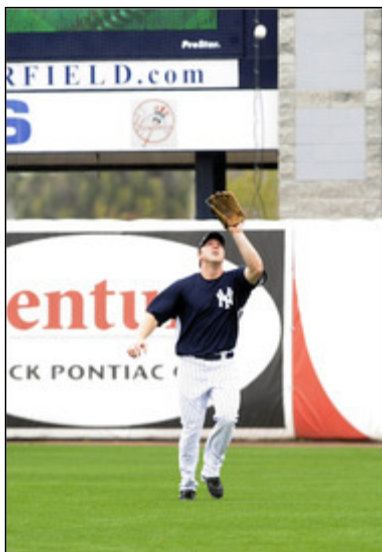
For a while, it didn’t. Hoffmann, Minnesota’s Class 3A player of the year in 2002, went undrafted in baseball. So after graduating from high school, he latched on with Des Moines of the United States Hockey League, considered the top junior league in the country. He competed against future N.H.L. players (and members of the United States Olympic hockey team) like David Backes and Joe Pavelski, [amassing 39 points \(14 goals, 25 assists\) and 120 penalty minutes](#), and impressed the [Carolina Hurricanes](#). They chose him in the [eighth round of the 2003 draft](#) — ahead of Montreal goalie Jaroslav Halak and [Chicago Blackhawks](#) defenseman Dustin Byfuglien.

He had size, skating ability, was physical, had real good character — all the things that we like,” said Scott Owens, the head hockey coach at Colorado College. “The only thing we weren’t sure of was how much he’d score, but we thought he was a real good projection. I think he had a good chance at playing in the N.H.L.”

Hoffmann intended to play a few seasons for Colorado College before signing with the Hurricanes, and he was so close to enrolling that his suitcases were packed, his Oldsmobile Intrigue fueled up for the 15-hour drive to Colorado Springs. First, he had to finish playing in an American Legion baseball tournament. Jeff Schugel, at the time a special assistant with the Dodgers, was in town attending a reunion of his own Legion team. He watched Hoffmann and offered him a contract. Hoffmann had about 36 hours to decide. He took 24.

“I decided this was the route to go and hopefully keep my teeth a little longer,” Hoffman said. “I still have my teeth.”

One year in rookie ball, three more in Class A and another at Class AA preceded his promotion last May. He slugged a home run in his first start and earned a few more starts in the outfield. His old hockey coach noticed.



“I’d always track him in the summertime, but somehow I missed him going from A ball to the Dodgers,” Owens said. “The next thing I knew, he was playing pretty regularly. I was like, How’d that happen?” When relayed Owens’s words on Saturday, Hoffmann laughed and said, “I’ve wondered the same thing.”

Hoffmann, 25, still roots for Colorado College. When the team is in Minneapolis to play Minnesota, he attends games wearing his C. C. sweatshirt.

“I get booed like crazy because I’m like the only one not rooting for the Gophers,” Hoffmann said. “And I’m like: ‘What? They didn’t want me.’ ”

So far, Hoffmann has fared better than New Ulm’s first two major leaguers — pitchers [Doc Hamman](#) and [Fred Bruckbauer](#) each lasted one game and did not retire a batter — but not its most celebrated product, the [All-Star catcher Terry Steinbach](#).

hopes to see Hoffmann there.

**Barton Silverman/The New York Times**

Jamie Hoffmann, a 2003 N.H.L. draft pick, hails from New Ulm, Minn., the hometown of another noteworthy high school hockey star: the former catcher Terry Steinbach.

“That’s what I’d love to happen,” Steinbach said. “I’d love for people to say that Jamie Hoffmann was the best thing to ever come out of New Ulm.”

Steinbach, who attended high school with Hoffmann’s father, Rich, said that he followed