

The Providence Bruins brought American Hockey League action back to the Ocean State for the first time since 1976-77, when the Providence/Rhode Island Reds played their final season. The Bruins played their first game on October 6, 1992 in St. John's Newfoundland, a wild 8-7 loss to the Maple Leafs. Right wing Jim Vesey scored the first goal in franchise history at 4:06 of the first period. The shootout style of hockey would eventually prove to be a common thread throughout the season for this talented club.

After beginning the season 0-4-0 in four straight road games, the doors opened at the Providence Civic Center on October 16, 1992 for the home opener. A raucous, sold-out crowd of 11,909 watched as six different goal scorers, including Chris Winnes on a penalty shot, paced the hometown team to a 9-3 victory over the Hershey Bears. Defenseman Glen Featherstone potted the game-winner, while rookie goaltender Mike Bales made 45 saves for the win.

It was a thrilling season for the P-Bruins, as a league-high 371,162 fans watched the Black and Gold skate to the Northern Division title, with Head Coach and current Boston Bruins Vice President and General Manager Mike O'Connell leading the team to a 46-32-2 record. The team finished second in the league with 384 goals, to this day the second-highest single-season total in American Hockey League history. The high-scoring club was the quintessential "run-and-gun" team, with wild shootouts common in their games. In fact, while their total of 384 goals remains a team record, so too does their total of 348 goals against, which was the third-most in the league.

The talented Bruins featured eight players that scored 20 or more goals, paced by top scorer and AHL Second-Team All-Star left wing Tim Sweeney, who tallied 41 goals and 55 assists for 96 points in just 60 games. Sweeney finished eighth in league scoring, while also leading the team and tying for fifth in the league with 16 power play goals. His +43 rating also led the team and ranked sixth in the AHL.

While eight players reached the 20-goal mark, five of them made it 30, with a sixth scoring 29. Sweeney led the way, followed by Vesey (38), rookie centers Sergei Zholtok and Jozef Stumpel (31 each) and rookie right wing Glen Murray, who had 30. Right wing Peter Douris tallied 29 goals in just 50 games.

The rookie trio of Stumpel, Zholtok and Murray had remarkable seasons. Stumpel ranked second on the team and among AHL rookies with 31-61-92 totals in just 56 games. He also tied for 12<sup>th</sup> in the league overall in scoring. Stumpel's skills were in full display on October 30, when he torched the Capital District Islanders with three goals and four assists in a 9-3 rout. The seven points remains tied for the franchise single-game record.

Zholtok finished fifth on the team and tied for fifth among league rookies with 31-35-66 totals in just 64 games, and was tied for the team lead, and third in the league, with Vesey with seven game-winning goals. He was also third on the team with a +24 rating. The Latvian remains the franchise career scoring leader (through the 2003-04 season), with 83-103-186 totals in 196 games from 1992-95.

Murray, who would play just the one season in Providence before making the Boston Bruins and the NHL for good the following year, notched his 30-26-56 totals in only 48 games. The 20-year-old power forward registered two hat tricks, while also posting three four-point games. Murray, by the way, was tied for the league lead with a 25.2% shooting percentage. Vesey ranked fifth at 23.9%.

Murray (18<sup>th</sup> overall) and Stumpel (40<sup>th</sup> overall) were the Boston Bruins' first two picks in the 1991 NHL Entry Draft, while Zholtok was their second pick, 55<sup>th</sup> overall, in the 1992 NHL Entry Draft.

The Bruins also produced offense from their defensemen, led by captain Peter Laviolette, who had 13-42-55 totals in 74 games. Dominic Lavoie, known for his blazing shot, tallied 18-34-52 totals in 67 games. Veteran Stephane Richer had 8-29-37 totals in 53 games and was named the team's Best Defenseman. Darryl Olsen finished with 7-27-34 totals in 50 games.

Aside from scoring, the Bruins were also known for their toughness, with four players reaching triple-digits in penalty minutes. Left wing Bill Huard led the way with 302 PIM in 72 games, ranking him third in the league. He also contributed on the offensive side, scoring 17 goals. Fan favorite and defenseman Jamie Huscroft racked up 257 PIM in 69 games, while veteran left wing Darren Banks notched 199 PIM in only 43 games. Feisty defenseman Steve Jaques had 187 PIM in just 51 games. Rookie Russian blueliner Denis Chervyakov had 99 PIM in 48 games.

The Bruins had solid goaltending, as a trio of netminders found themselves frequently under siege, with their teammates frequently caught up ice after attacking the opposition. John Blue's acrobatics in the crease earned him frequent chants of, "Bluuuuuuue" from the Bruin faithful. He was 14-4-1 in 19 games with a 3.47 GAA, while ranking fifth in the AHL with a .898 save percentage. Rookie Mike Bales was tied for fourth in the league with 22 wins in 44 games. Mike Parson finished 13<sup>th</sup> among AHL netminders with a 3.80 GAA, while posting a 10-4-0 record in 16 games.

One memorable night occurred at the Providence Civic Center on January 10. With goaltender Blue recalled by the Boston Bruins, Providence needed an emergency backup for Mike Bales. Providence firefighter Rob Gribbin, who played a great deal locally, was recruited to join the P-Bruins on a tryout

contract. He had backed up for Bales in a 2-1 loss to St. John's on January 8, and was doing the same against Adirondack on the 10<sup>th</sup>. With the Bruins behind, 7-3 late in the game, O'Connell gave Gribbin a lifelong memory by putting him into action. With the fans cheering him on, Gribbin stopped both shots he faced in his eight minutes of play. O'Connell presented Gribbin with his #1 jersey during the team awards at the final regular season game on April 9.

The Bruins faced the Springfield Indians in the North Division Semifinals. Springfield won Games 1 and 2 in Providence, before the Bruins rebounded with Zholtok giving his team a 3-2 overtime win in Springfield in Game 3. The Black and Gold followed up with a 9-0 bombing of the Indians in Game 4. Despite the apparent turn in momentum, the Indians took Game 5, 4-2 in Providence, before wrapping up the series with a 4-3 win on home ice in Game 6.

The captain of the inaugural P-Bruins club would go on to leave a firmly embedded legacy on the franchise over the years. Laviolette, who would captain the 1994 U.S. Olympic Team the following year, went on to play 252 games with a "P" on his chest, the most of any player in team history until the 2003-04 season. Always one of the great on-ice leaders for the P-Bruins, he would later take that quality behind the bench in astonishing fashion.

1993-94

The Bruins again led the AHL in attendance, as 368,135 fans turned out to see their local hockey heroes. The team struggled throughout the season, missing the playoffs after posting a 28-39-13 record. Several players were back from the previous season, but some key cogs were gone. Glen Murray had graduated full-time to the Boston Bruins. Top scorer Tim Sweeney had been claimed by the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim in the NHL Expansion Draft, while Peter Douris signed with the club as a free agent. Captain Peter Laviolette joined the U.S. National Team and would serve as team captain in the Olympics.

In addition, Sergei Zholtok would play in only 54 games, and Jozef Stumpel in 17, as each would spend significant time with Boston. Likewise, talented second-year winger Grigori Panteleev would play in only 55 games, and captain and fan favorite Jamie Huscroft in 32. All received the chance to help out the parent club.

Center Jon Morris led the team with 22-44-66 totals in 67 games, with Zholtok close behind, notching 29-33-62 totals in only 54 games. Cranston, RI native Dave Capuano finished fourth on the team with 24-29-53 totals in 51 games. Rookie center Fred Knipscheer showed hustle, along with some skill, posting 26-13-39 totals in 62 games.

Aside from Capuano, two other Rhode Islanders saw action in front of their hometown family and friends. Tough right wing and Pawtucket native Howie Rosenblatt tallied 6-4-10 totals and 59 PIM in 19 games. Goaltender and Cranston native David Littman was 10-11-3 with a 3.59 GAA in 25 games.

Aside from Littman, Blue and Bales returned to man the nets for the Black and Gold. Blue was 7-11-4 with a 3.51 GAA in 24 games. Bales played the most of any goaltender, posting a 9-15-4 record and 4.44 GAA in 33 games.

The P-Bruins' Rookie of the Year was defenseman Jon Rohloff, who brought some offensive punch from the blueline. The 1988 Boston draft pick notched 12-23-35 totals in 55 games. He would go on to play three seasons in Boston.

Another defenseman proved to be the team's key player during the season. Veteran Ken Hammond led all team blueliners and finished third overall on the team with 12-45-57 totals and 100 PIM in 65 games. The Bruin players named him the team's Best Defenseman and Most Valuable Player.

The 1993-94 season also saw the arrival of one player who would go on to have a long-lasting impact on the franchise: defenseman Bill Armstrong.

The 6'5", 235-pound Armstrong, a fourth-year pro, made his impact in the physical department, leading the team with 200 PIM in 66 games. He would eventually go on to become a P-Bruins head coach and assistant coach, and was behind the bench for some of the most memorable moments in franchise history.

1994-95

Long-time Boston Bruin fan favorite Steve Kasper took over behind the bench as Mike O'Connell, the team's head coach for its first two seasons, became Harry Sinden's Assistant General Manager in Boston. Playing in the highly competitive Northern Division, the Bruins finished in third place with a 39-30-11 record. The team was rewarded once again at the gate, as it led the league in attendance for the third consecutive year. A total of 360,613 fans came to the Civic Center to watch their heroes play.

The high-scoring club, which tied for fourth in the AHL with 300 goals, was led by center Brett Harkins, who finished fifth in the league with 23-69-92 totals in 80 games. He also tied for the league lead with his 69 assists. Linemate Sandy Moger led the team with 32 goals and a +23 rating, while finishing fifth in the league with a 21.1% shooting percentage. Second-year center Fred Knipscheer followed up on his strong rookie season, finishing second on the team with 29-34-63 totals in 71 games.

Former Providence College defenseman Jeff Serowik, in his first year with the Bruins, had a season to remember. He won the Eddie Shore Award as the AHL's Outstanding Defenseman after tying the league single-season record for blueliners by scoring 28 goals. His 62 points overall ranked third on the team and remains tied (through the 2003-04 season) for the franchise mark of most points in a season by a defenseman. Serowik also led the AHL with 342 shots on goal, a figure that remains a franchise single-season record.

Defenseman Peter Laviolette, the team captain in 1992-93, returned to Providence after spending the previous year with the U.S. National and Olympic Teams. Laviolette and captain Guy Larose provided the team with a good leadership base, with Larose playing a hard-working, inspired style of hockey.

The team also had plenty in the way of toughness, with three players surpassing the 200 PIM mark. Center Daniel Lacroix had 15-11-26 totals and a team-high 266 PIM in only 40 games. He was recalled by Boston during the season and then claimed on waivers by the New York Rangers on April 10.

Defenseman Bill Armstrong had 244 PIM in 75 games, while left wing Alex Nikolic had 229 PIM in 57 games. Defenseman Denis Cheryakov racked up 130 PIM, while Moger had 105 and Serowik 102.

Goaltender Scott Bailey, playing in his first full season in the AHL, had a strong year, posting a 25-16-9 record in 52 games. His 25 wins tied him for fourth in the AHL, while 3.00 GAA ranked fifth, and his .900 save percentage tied him for fifth.

As the regular season was nearing its end, the P-Bruins pulled off an exciting transaction to help in their race for the Calder Cup. Left wing Tim Sweeney, who had 96 points with Providence in 1992-93, was acquired on loan from the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim. He had 2-2-4 totals in the last two regular season games, before going on a tear in the playoffs. Sweeney would post 8-17-25 totals in just 13 playoff games, leading the AHL in both playoff assists and points.

As the Bruins entered the Calder Cup Playoffs, they found themselves with the daunting task of trying to derail the defending champion Portland Pirates. The teams alternated wins through the first six games of the best-of-seven series, forcing a deciding Game 7 in Portland. The Bruins scored six third period goals, with Mikko Makela scoring what proved to be the series-winner, as the Bruins skated to a 6-3 victory.

The B's moved on to the Northern Division Finals to face the Albany River Rats, owners of the AHL's best regular season record. After falling behind 3-0 in the series, Bailey and the Black and Gold roared back to post back-to-back shutouts in Games 4 and 5 before falling in Game 6.

Despite playing two of the AHL's four rounds in the Calder Cup Playoffs, the Bruins had the league's top three postseason scorers. Sweeney led the league with 8-17-25 totals in 13 games. Harkins finished second with 8-14-22 totals in 13 games, while Grigori Panteleev was third with 8-11-19 totals in 13 games. Sergei Zholtok ranked 10th with 8-5-13 totals in 13 games.

Further excitement was garnered during the season, as the AHL selected Providence to be the site of its first All-Star Game in 35 years. Three Bruins, Knipscheer, Bailey and player/assistant coach Tim Tookey hit the ice in front of their hometown fans. The Canadian All-Stars skated to a 6-4 victory over the U.S. All-Stars in front of a sold-out crowd of 11,909.

1995-96

With Steve Kasper moving up to take over the coaching duties in Boston, future Phoenix Coyotes Head Coach Bobby Francis arrived in Providence. The son of Hockey Hall of Fame member Emile Francis, he had been the head coach of the AHL's Saint John Flames for the previous two seasons, and the Salt Lake Golden Eagles for the four years previous. He also had two years of experience as an assistant coach with the Eagles.

The Bruins finished the season at 30-36-10-4, as the AHL unveiled its new standings format. All teams received one point in the standings by making it to overtime during a game. Thus, an overtime loss was differentiated from a regulation loss. The Bruins made the playoffs in the Northern Division, reaching the postseason for the third time in four years. They also led the AHL in attendance for a fourth straight year, with 314,992 fans coming to games.

Goaltending was a strong key for the Black and Gold, as veteran Scott Bailey and rookie Rob Tallas split the bulk of the workload. Each played 37 games, with Bailey posting a 15-19-3 record and 3.26 GAA. Tallas, who was voted by his teammates as the club's Rookie of the Year, was 12-16-7 with a 3.29 GAA. Bailey ranked 13th in the AHL with a 3.26 GAA. Tallas ranked 15th with a 3.29 GAA and fifth with a .906 save percentage. He would also make his NHL debut with the Boston Bruins, suiting up for one game. Bailey also made his NHL debut with Boston, playing in 11 games.

Center Ryan Hughes led the team with 22-52-74 totals in 78 games, and also led the team with 10 power play goals. Right wing Martin Simard, who was named captain later in the season after captain Marc Potvin was recalled for the season to Boston, finished second on the team with 53 points in 78 games. His 26 goals led the team. Simard had played for Francis for five years in Salt Lake. Veteran center Mitch Lamoureux, a long-time AHL scoring ace, was acquired from the Hershey Bears on November 16. He went on to finish third on the team with 22-29-51 totals in 63 games.

Left wing Tim Sweeney, a key cog of the P-Bruins' high-flying 1992-93 team, returned to the organization after signing with Boston as a free agent over the summer. He notched 17-22-39 totals in 34 games, but was recalled by Boston and did not return to Providence for the playoffs.

Former Boston College standout Ted Crowley led the Bruins' defense with 12-30-42 totals in 72 games, ranking fifth overall on the team. Former Boston University standout Phil Von Stefenelli was behind him with 9-21-30 totals in just 42 games, as he spent the other half of the season with Boston. Peter Laviolette, Crowley's teammate on the 1994 U.S. Olympic Team, posted 9-17-26 totals in 72 games and was named the team's Best Defenseman. Skilled John Gruden, one of the league's best skaters, split the season between Providence and Boston, and tallied 5-19-24 totals in only 39 games with Providence.

The Boston Bruins engineered a trade on March 8 that would bring excitement to the Providence lineup. Right wing Steve Leach was traded to the St. Louis Blues for defenseman Steve Staios and left wing Kevin Sawyer. Staios would post 1-4-5 totals in seven games before being recalled by Boston. Sawyer quickly became a fan favorite, leading the club and finishing fifth in the AHL with 297 PIM in just 45 games. He had 29 PIM in just four games with Providence.

The Bruins fell in the first round of the Calder Cup Playoffs to the Springfield Falcons, 3-1.

1996-97

The Bruins finished the year with a 35-40-2-3 record in their second year under Bob Francis. This was a team that added players as the season went along, and by the end of the year, looked it had the weapons for a good playoff run. This Bruins club terrorized opponents' power plays, as it finished third in the AHL with 15 shorthanded goals.

Veteran center Mitch Lamoureux led the club with 25-29-54 totals in 75 games, followed by defenseman John Gruden, who ranked sixth among all AHL blueliners with 18-27-45 totals in 78 games. Center Todd Elik had begun the season with Boston before being reassigned to Providence, and finished third on the team with 16-29-45 totals in just 37 games. The veteran of 448 NHL games injected skill and experience into the lineup. Brett Harkins, a 94-point scorer with Providence two years previous, had signed with Boston in the fall and spent most of the year with the big club. He was reassigned to Providence later in the season and finished fourth on the team with 9-31-40 totals in only 28 games.

Toughness was provided by left wing Kevin Sawyer "The Destroyer", who further endeared himself to the Providence fans by finishing third in the AHL with 367 PIM in 60 games. Second-year left wing Andre Roy tallied 17-11-28 totals in 50 games while finishing second on the team with 234 PIM.

An early season trade by Boston brought added skill to the Providence lineup. The Bruins traded their 1998 first-round draft pick to the Colorado Avalanche for defenseman Anders Myrvold and right wing Landon Wilson on November 22. Myrvold posted 6-18-24 totals and 123 PIM overall in 73 games and played in the AHL All-Star Classic. Wilson would play in only two regular season games with Providence, while playing in 40 with Boston. He would, however, tally 3-4-7 totals in 10 playoff games with the P-Bruins, and would in the future become one of the most important players in franchise history.

Scott Bailey and Rob Tallas once again handled the bulk of the goaltending duties, while Derek Herlofsky, a former Boston University standout, would go 6-1-0 with a 1.56 GAA in seven games late in the season. Herlofsky would become the first goaltender in franchise history to post regular season back-to-back shutouts, as he blanked Worcester and Fredericton on April 5 and 6, respectively.

Hopes were high for the Bruin faithful as the Calder Cup Playoffs approached, but things looked dismal when the Worcester IceCats took a 2-0 lead in the teams' best-of-five Southern Conference Quarterfinals series. But the Bruins roared back with a 4-2 win in Game 3 in Worcester, before Bruin blueliner Barry Richter knotted the series at 2-2 with his double-overtime goal in a 5-4 victory in Providence the next night. Richter, one of the league's top offensive defensemen, tied for third in the league in playoff game-winning goals with three, including two against Worcester. The deciding Game 5 was played in Worcester and Landon Wilson's goal proved to be the series-winner, as the Bruins took a 3-2 game and series win. The red-hot Springfield Falcons ended the Bruins' season for the second consecutive year, taking the Southern Conference Semifinals, 4-1.

1997-98

A season that began with much hope and optimism turned out to be the most difficult in franchise history. Tom McVie, a veteran NHL and AHL coach, took over the helm, as Bobby Francis became an assistant coach in Boston. Rod Langway, one of the best defensive defensemen in NHL history, and a future Hall of Fame member, was hired as McVie's assistant. After coming out of the gates with a 3-1-1 record, things took a turn for the worse. Providence finished the season at 19-49-5-7, missing the playoffs for just the second time in franchise history. Ironically, the Bruins, who finished last in the AHL with 211 goals scored, led the league with 19 shorthanded goals.

Despite the disappointments of the year, several players spent their rookie campaigns with the club, and were one year away from being part of one of the most majestic seasons in North American hockey history. Goaltender John Grahame set a team record by playing in 55 of the 80 games, and was between the pipes for 15 of the 19 wins. Right wing Cameron Mann finished third on the club with 21-26-47 totals, while Randy Robitaille showed flashes of tremendous playmaking ability, posting 15-29-44 totals in only 48 games. Centers Joel Prpic and Shawn Bates were shorthanded terrors, as Prpic tied for second in the AHL with five shorthanded goals and Bates ranked sixth with four. Finally, Aaron Downey established a physical presence on the ice rarely seen anywhere, leading the league with a team-record 407 PIM, while receiving the Providence Bruins Community Service Award.

Left wing Jean-Yves Roy led the team with 28-34-62 totals in 65 games and was named the team's Most Valuable Player. Second-year right wing Kirk Nielsen finished second on the team with 19-29-48 totals in 72 games. Veteran blueliner Barry Richter finished fourth on the club and seventh among AHL defensemen with 16-29-45 totals in 75 games, and was named the team's Best Defenseman.

1998-99

After the pain of the previous season, a new coaching staff was brought to Providence, as former P-Bruins defenseman and Franklin, Massachusetts native Peter Laviolette was hired to guide the team. He quickly tabbed former teammate and close friend Bill Armstrong as his Player/Assistant Coach. The team started out slowly at 4-5-0-1, but one special night in November proved to be the start of, as Aaron Downey loved to put it, "something special."

November 6, 1998 was "Turn Back the Clock Night." The Bruins and Hershey Bears wore old-time jerseys, with the B's wearing Providence Reds sweaters. A crowd of 11,596 watched a barn-burner with the Bruins/Reds capturing a wild 8-6 victory. That was the first of seven straight wins.

November 25, 1998 was another memorable night, this time in Syracuse. The Bruins set an AHL record by blowing the puck past the Crunch goaltenders 10 times in the first period. Right wing Cameron Mann, who scored the 10<sup>th</sup> goal, had his stick sent to the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto, as did center Randy Robitaille, who scored a team record five goals. He also assisted on two goals, while linemate Landon Wilson tallied three goals and four assists. Both players tied Jozef Stumpel's team record of seven points in one game. The Bruins, by the way, cruised to a 14-2 victory.

The season continued to roll on, as win after win piled up, and both the team and its fans sensed something magical developing. The Bruins lost three straight games from December 12<sup>th</sup> through December 18<sup>th</sup>. A team record 11-game winning streak and 16-game unbeaten streak (15-0-1) followed, and the Black and Gold would not drop back-to-back games again until the last two games of the regular season. They would finish up with a record of 56-16-4-4, easily winning the league's regular season championship, one win shy of tying the 1992-93 Binghamton Rangers' AHL record of 57.

While the team as a whole excelled, several players enjoyed memorable seasons as individuals. Robitaille became the first P-Bruin to crack the 100-point plateau, finishing second in AHL scoring with 28-74-102 totals, also becoming the first Bruin to be named the league's Most Valuable Player. Robitaille combined with wingers Landon Wilson and Eric Nickulas to form arguably the league's top line. Wilson and Nickulas each led the team in goals (31), power play goals (15) and game-winning goals (7). Wilson, who developed into a dominating power forward, notched his 31 goals in just 48 games.

Brandon Smith (16-46-62) and Terry Virtue (8-48-56) finished 1-2 in scoring among AHL defensemen, with Smith's point total tying Jeff Serowik's team mark, set in 1994-95. Robitaille, Smith and Wilson (31 goals in 48 games) were all named First-Team AHL All-Stars, while Virtue earned a spot on the Second Team.

Center Andre Savage finished second on the team and among league rookies with 27-42-69 totals in 63 games and was named to the AHL All-Rookie Team. Goaltender John Grahame led the league with 37 wins and set a new AHL record with a 19-game winning streak. Left wing Antti Laaksonen led the league with a +40 rating, with Smith (+36) and Virtue (+34) right behind. Downey led the AHL for the second consecutive season with 401 PIM. Finally, Laviolette was named the AHL's Coach of the Year.

While Grahame was with Providence for the whole season, partner Jim Carey paired with him to give the Bruins the league's top goaltending tandem for the first half of the year. Carey, a Boston-area native, had been the AHL's Rookie of the Year and Outstanding Goaltender in 1994-95. He followed that up with the Vezina Trophy as the NHL's Outstanding Goaltender with the Washington Capitals in 1995-96. Carey had been acquired by Boston from Washington along with Anson Carter and Jason Allison in exchange for Adam Oates, Rick Tocchet and Bill Ranford late in the 1996-97 season. He began 1998-99 with Providence, and was outstanding. Carey, along with Wilson, Robitaille and Savage, represented the P-Bruins at the AHL All-Star Classic. He was released from his contract on February 27 and signed with the St. Louis Blues, after going 17-8-3 with three shutouts and a 2.33 GAA in 30 games with Providence.

Seven different P-Bruins made their NHL debuts with the Boston Bruins during the season, including three who had traveled long roads to get there. Virtue, who had never been drafted, played his first NHL game on January 16, after playing 524 career minor league games, including 369 in the AHL. Smith, also never drafted, made his NHL debut on January 9, after playing in 302 career minor league games. Center Marquis Mathieu, an outstanding faceoff man and agitator extraordinaire, played his first NHL game on October 28, after playing 288 career minor league games. He too had never been drafted. Savage, an undrafted rookie out of Michigan Tech University, played his first NHL game on January 7. Laaksonen started the season with Boston, while rookie right wing Eric Nickulas, a Cape Cod native, played his first NHL game on January 7 at the FleetCenter. Finally, rookie left wing Jay Henderson made his NHL debut on October 28. Henderson had been selected by Boston with the final pick (246<sup>th</sup> overall) of the 1997 NHL Entry Draft, 245 picks after star Bruin Joe Thornton.

Mathieu, one of the AHL's most irritating opponents, centered a line that tortured many an opponent during the season. With Joel Prpic and Aaron Downey on his wings, the trio quickly became

known for their relentless forechecking and physical play. Mathieu racked up 166 PIM in 64 games, while Prpic had 163 PIM in 75 games. Downey led the AHL for the second consecutive season with 401 PIM.

Providence made a key acquisition early in the season, on October 27. Veteran defenseman Steve Bancroft, who had been in the Bruins' organization from 1990-92, was acquired on loan from the Calgary Flames. He had been the captain of their AHL affiliate, the Saint John Flames, and wouldn't you know it, the Bruins were in New Brunswick to play the Flames at the time of the deal. So Bancroft packed up his equipment and walked down the hall to the visitors' room, and was in the lineup for the Bruins on October 28 in Saint John. Bancroft became one of the Bruins' alternate captains, and ranked eighth in scoring among AHL blueliners with 8-38-46 totals in 70 games.

Another veteran who became a major key was defenseman Dennis Vaske. The veteran of 232 NHL games with the New York Islanders had signed with Boston as a free agent over the summer after spending the first eight years of his career with New York. His promising career had been cut short due to recurring problems from a series of concussions, but he would become a key leader for the P-Bruins. Vaske began the season with Boston, before being reassigned to Providence in late October. He played two games with Providence before being recalled to Boston. Vaske returned to Providence for good on November 10 and was named the team's captain. He recognized early on the talent on the team, and repeatedly told the players that this was a group that had a real chance at winning the Calder Cup.

Four more veterans were added to the lineup later in the season, and became key cogs of the juggernaut. The first was defenseman Bob Beers, a veteran of 258 career NHL games, including 77 with Boston. He had been a 1985 draft pick by the Bruins, and had played 51 games with Providence in the 1992-93 and 1996-97 seasons. He retired after the 1996-97 season, and became the radio color analyst for Boston Bruins games. Beers still had the itch to play, and signed with Providence on February 26, playing that night in a 5-2 win over Worcester. He played in all three games that weekend, including a very busy game schedule on February 27. Beers worked on radio for a Boston Bruins afternoon game that day, then got in his car and met the P-Bruins in Lowell to play that evening.

Right wing Peter Ferraro had been up with Boston since the start of the year, playing in 46 games before being reassigned to Providence on March 8. A long-time scoring star in the AHL, he quickly added to the P-Bruins' lethal attack, racking up 15-10-25 totals in just 16 games, including two hat tricks.

Defenseman Jason McBain, a veteran puck-moving blueliner, was acquired by Providence from the Las Vegas Thunder (IHL) in exchange for Chris Taylor and Yevgeny Shaldybin on March 23. McBain had ranked ninth in scoring among IHL defensemen, and further added to what many believed was the AHL's top defense corps.

Finally, right wing Steven King, a native of East Greenwich, RI, came out of retirement near the end of the season, on April 10. The former Brown University star had played in 67 career NHL games, and had signed with Boston during the summer. Lingering shoulder problems forced him to retire just before the start of training camp. After spending the year rehabbing the shoulder, he found it strong enough to return to action. King, a former 40-goal scorer in the AHL, scored a goal on his first shift in a 4-3 overtime win over Portland on April 10. His signing added a skilled veteran presence to a group of forwards already loaded with speed, skill and tenacity.

Entering the postseason with the pressure of being the frontrunner as the favorite to win the Calder Cup, the Bruins did just that, posting a 15-4 record, including a league-record 10-0 mark on home ice. The road to the Cup was long and hard, beginning with a 3-1 series victory over the hard-working Worcester IceCats. The second round, the New England Division Finals, was against the arch-rival Hartford Wolf Pack. Most observers predicted a long series, but the Bruins swept instead, though it was very close. One game went to double overtime, another to overtime, a third was decided by one goal, the other by two goals, one an empty-netter. Center John Spoltore had his coming out party in the series. The veteran center had led the ECHL in scoring, posting 36-73-109 totals in 69 games for the Louisiana IceGators, but had never before played in the AHL. All he did was score the game-winning goal in each of the first three games of the series, including the double-overtime and overtime games.

The series win moved the Bruins into the Eastern Conference Finals for the first time in franchise history. The Black and Gold took a 3-0 series lead, as they outscored the Fredericton Canadiens, 17-9 over that span. Fredericton won Games Four and Five on home ice, before both teams returned to Providence for Game 6 on May 29. The Bruins outshot the Baby Habs, 35-17 in a 6-1 rout, sending the team to the Calder Cup Finals for the first time.

The Calder Cup Finals brought an interesting matchup, placing the team with the AHL's best regular season record (Providence) against the team with the best record in the Western Conference (Rochester Americans). The Bruins led the league in scoring, and with 321 goals, were the only team to reach the 300-goal plateau. Rochester had set a new AHL record by allowing only 176 goals during the season. Rochester center Domenic Pittis led the league in scoring with 104 points, two points ahead of the Bruins' Robitaille. Grahame, the Bruins' goaltender, had led the league with 37 wins and had an AHL-

record 19-game winning/unbeaten streak. Rochester goaltender Martin Biron was named the AHL's Outstanding Goaltender. It seemed like a dream matchup.

The Bruins took Games 1 and 2 in Providence, 4-2 and 6-0, led by a Cameron Mann hat trick in Game 2. The series then shifted to Rochester, where the Bruins would look to put a stranglehold on the series in Game 3 on June 9. Game 3 had a bizarre start for the Bruins, with Bancroft walking into the trainer's room minutes before warm-ups and collapsing in a heap. He had severe back spasms, and had to be scratched from the lineup. The Bruins would play the game with five defensemen. That number would later be reduced to four, after Virtue caught his skate in a rut and suffered a serious knee injury in the closing seconds of the second period. The defense corps was now down to Vaske, Smith, McBain and rookie Johnathan Aitken.

Wouldn't you know it, Game 3 was destined to be a marathon, as it would go to triple overtime. The undermanned Bruins persevered, with King tipping home a shot from the point by Vaske 55 seconds into the third overtime. King, who had come out of retirement at the end of the season, now had goals and points (5-2-7) in four straight games. Providence was now one win away from the championship.

A desperate Rochester team took Game 4 on home ice, 4-2, giving the Bruins the chance to clinch on home ice in Game 5.

Mathieu, Prpic, Wilson and Ferraro all scored in the game, before Mann sealed things with an empty net goal in the final minute. The final score was 5-1, and the final series score was 4-1. Ferraro, who tied for the league playoff scoring lead with 9-12-21 totals in 19 games, was named the Most Valuable Player of the Calder Cup Playoffs.

June 13, 1999 was the night when the magical run reached its zenith, as 11,909 screaming fans celebrated with their heroes, as the Calder Cup was skated around Rhode Island ice for the first time since the Reds' last Cup win, in 1956. It was fitting that the Cup was captured at "The Bear Den," where the Black and Gold was all but unbeatable all year, posting a 43-7-0 combined regular season and playoff record.

Five Bruins finished among the top 15 in AHL playoff scoring. Ferraro tied for the league lead, with Nickulas (8-12-20 in 18 games) and Robitaille (6-14-20 in 19 games) tied for third. Mann (7-7-14 in 11 games) and Virtue (2-12-14 in 17 games) tied for 13th.

Grahame went 15-4 in the postseason, starting and playing in all 19 games. His 2.38 GAA ranked third in the league, while his .912 save percentage ranked fifth.

The 1998-99 Providence Bruins were a unique and special team. Not only did they lead the AHL with 321 goals, they ranked fifth in the league with 223 goals against, a new franchise record. They also led the league with 2,332 PIM, with eight players reaching triple-digits in penalty minutes. The P-Bruins also ranked second in the AHL on both the power play (21.4%) and penalty kill (85.3%).

Oh, and there was one last bit of history made. The 1998-99 Providence Bruins proudly hold the distinction of being 71-24-4 in the regular season and playoffs, the best combined record in AHL history.

## 1999-2000

Following up a season such as 1998-99 would be a daunting task for any club, but the 1999-2000 campaign became more difficult than anyone could have imagined. Despite that, the Bruins would eventually come to within an overtime goal of returning to the Calder Cup Finals.

Providence jumped out quickly, going 6-1-1-0 at the start of the season. After that, the injury bug bit both the Boston and Providence Bruins in unprecedented fashion. In fact, the P-Bruins began the year with five players missing at least eight of the first 10 games of the season. The injuries continued throughout the season, along with consistent call-ups to the equally injured Boston Bruins. In total, 18 players would suit up for both Bruin clubs. By the time the regular season was complete, the P-Bruins had set another AHL record, although it was one that was much different than any from the previous season. Head Coach Peter Laviolette was forced to dress 70 different players over the course of the season, the most by any team in league history. In fact, 42 different players dressed over the course of the regular season's final 10 games alone.

Throughout the course of the season, Laviolette was able to put the same lineup out on consecutive nights just eight times. The Bruins did not play with the same lineup in three consecutive games at all during the season.

Only one player, right wing Jeremy Brown, played in all 80 regular season games. Aside from Brown, just three players, defensemen Jeff Wells (74) and Johnathan Aitken (70), and center Joel Prpic (70), played in as many as 70 games.

Right wing Peter Ferraro, the 1999 Calder Cup Playoffs' Most Valuable Player, led the Bruins with 21-25-46 totals in 48 games, while second-year winger Jay Henderson had a breakout year, finishing

second with 18-27-45 totals in 60 games, along with 200 PIM. Ferraro had been slated to play in the AHL All-Star Classic, but was forced to miss it, due to injury.

Highly-touted rookie defenseman Nick Boynton showed flashes of why he had been the Boston Bruins' first round pick in the 1999 NHL Entry Draft. He brought size and skill to the blueline corps, but struggled for most of the season, making the adjustment to pro hockey while battling through injuries that limited him to 53 games. He also had to cope with being diagnosed with diabetes the day before he left home to attend training camp.

With all of the disruptions to the lineup, the Bruins were forced to bring players in from the ECHL and on loan from other organizations. Among the 70 players to suit up for Providence, one from the ECHL proved to be a critical force in the lineup. Center Eric Manlow tallied 17 goals and 16 assists for 33 points in 46 games, nearly a 30-goal pace over a full season. He would eventually lead the team with 6-8-14 totals in 14 playoff games.

Players loaned from other teams included center Chris Ferraro, Peter's twin, who tallied 9-9-18 totals in 21 games before being recalled by the New York Islanders. Defenseman Jassen Cullimore brought size and presence to the blueline early in the season before returning to the Tampa Bay Lightning. Highly-touted rookie center Jason Krog was acquired on loan from the Islanders on March 1, and notched 9-8-17 totals in 11 games with the Bruins, while finishing third overall on the team with 15-29-44 totals in 56 games. Veteran defenseman Aris Brimanis was acquired on loan from the Isles on March 14, and proved to be a solid addition to the backline.

Just like he had done the previous year, defenseman Bob Beers came out of retirement once again, signing with the P-Bruins on January 6. He played while still serving as the color analyst for the Boston Bruins radio broadcasts.

After finishing 33-38-6-3, the Bruins shifted to the Atlantic Division for the first two rounds of the Calder Cup Playoffs. They swept the Quebec Citadelles in three games and followed up with a four-game sweep of the Lowell Lock Monsters. On to the Eastern Conference Finals for the second year in a row, where they would face their arch-New England Division rivals, the Hartford Wolf Pack.

After sweeping Hartford in the 1999 Division Finals, many predicted a grueling series, one which would likely go the full seven games. That was exactly the case, as the Wolf Pack came back from a 3-1 series deficit to force the deciding Game 7 in Hartford. The winner would take on the Rochester Americans, who advanced to the Calder Cup Finals for the second year in a row.

The teams battled to a 2-2 deadlock, with overtime looming. At 7:32 of overtime, Hartford defenseman Terry Virtue, a key member of the Bruins' Calder Cup team 12 months previous, attempted a centering pass deep in the Providence end. The puck deflected off the backchecking Ferraro's skate and redirected past goaltender John Grahame, ending the Bruins' hopes of a Calder Cup repeat.

It was another excellent postseason run for the Black and Gold, with several players putting forth outstanding individual performances. Five Bruins finished among the league's top 20 in playoff scoring, led by Manlow, who tied for seventh with 6-8-14 totals in 14 games. Cameron Mann (11 games) and Andre Savage (14 games) were right behind him with 6-7-13 totals each. Ferraro finished with 5-7-12 totals in 13 games, while defenseman Brandon Smith had 1-11-12 totals in 14 games. Savage also tied for second in the league with three game-winning goals, while Mann ranked fourth with a +11 rating.

Grahame ranked third in the league with 10 wins, and sixth with a 2.50 GAA. He was outstanding for the second consecutive postseason, particularly in Game 4 against Hartford, a 3-2 double overtime win. Grahame set a new franchise playoff record with 63 saves in the game, an AHL postseason high. The 63 saves still stand as the most made in any Providence Bruins game, regular season or playoffs.

2000-01

After two highly successful seasons behind the Providence bench, Peter Laviolette moved on to Boston as an assistant coach. Not surprisingly, his assistant, Bill Armstrong, was named his successor on July 10, 2000. Armstrong named Easton, Massachusetts native and former Boston College goaltender Scott Gordon as his assistant. Under the tutelage of the new coaching staff, the P-Bruins roared out to a 16-4-1-2 record, the best start in franchise history. With a league-best 17-5-2-2 record by December 10<sup>th</sup>, the P-Bruins' coaching staff coached at the AHL All-Star Classic for the second consecutive year. The Bruins were outstanding throughout the year on special teams, ranking third in the AHL on both the power play (20.5%) and penalty kill (84.5%).

The second half of the season brought back memories of 1999-2000, as injuries in Boston and Providence ravaged the Bruins' lineup. Seven different goaltenders suited up during the season, and 43 different skaters donned the "P" overall.

Peter Ferraro led the team with 26-45-71 totals in 78 games, while Eric Manlow finished second with 16-51-67 totals in 60 games. After playing 373 career minor league games, Manlow made his NHL debut with the Boston Bruins on December 19<sup>th</sup>.

Brandon Smith broke Laviolette's franchise record for scoring by a defenseman on March 3<sup>rd</sup> at Cincinnati and finished his Bruin career with 35-104-139 totals in 190 career games. His total of 104 assists still stood tied for the franchise career record through the 2003-04 season.

After having been named the team's Best Defenseman in each of the previous two seasons, Smith's hold on the award was finally broken. Second-year blueliner Nick Boynton followed up his difficult rookie season with an outstanding campaign, notching 6-27-33 totals and 105 PIM in 78 games, along with a team-high +16 rating.

In total, seven rookies spent most of the season with the Black and Gold. Czech defensemen Pavel Kolarik and Zdenek Kutlak, and Jonathan Girard, forwards Lee Goren, Mattias Karlin and Ivan Huml, and goaltender Andrew Raycroft all saw significant playing time. Huml, a 19-year-old Czech, played in a team-high 79 games. Goren notched 15 goals in 54 games, and played 21 games with the Boston Bruins.

The highly-skilled Girard was named the team's Rookie of the Year. The 1998 Boston draft pick possessed outstanding speed and skating ability, able to join or lead the rush and quickly get back into defensive position. Girard tallied 3-21-24 totals in 39 games.

The 20-year-old Raycroft was coming off a history-making junior career. He became the first goaltender in Ontario Hockey League history since Hall of Fame member Glenn Hall in 1950-51 to be named both the league's Most Valuable Player and Goaltender of the Year while playing for the Kingston Frontenacs in 1999-2000. He was Boston's fourth pick, 135<sup>th</sup> overall, in the 1998 NHL Entry Draft, but arrived in Providence as one of the team's top prospects. Raycroft was thrown into the fire from the start, beginning the season with Boston due to injuries to Boston netminders Byron Dafoe and John Grahame. He would come down to Providence in mid-November and win his first three decisions, before being recalled again by Boston toward the end of the month. Raycroft would not return to Providence again until mid-December, and struggled with his confidence. He would finish the season with an 8-14-4 record and a 3.37 GAA in 26 games.

Veteran Kay Whitmore, in his second season with the organization, would also play in 26 games, posting a 13-8-2 record and 2.67 GAA. He also recorded two shutouts and had a solid .917 save percentage. Whitmore's play helped the team maintain its position in the standings.

After missing all but 18 games due to a hip injury the year before, center Marquis Mathieu returned with a vengeance. A key member of the Calder Cup team two years earlier, Mathieu tallied 10-7-17 totals and 205 PIM in 57 games.

Left wing Peter Vandermeer, who played against the Bruins with Rochester in the 1999 Calder Cup Finals, was one of the team's big surprises. The tough Albertan posted 19-18-37 totals in 62 games, along with a team-high 240 PIM. He also led the club with 14 power play goals, tying him for fifth in the league.

Providence finished the regular season in third place in the New England Division with a 35-31-10-4 record and faced off with the Hartford Wolf Pack in the opening round of the Calder Cup Playoffs. John Grahame's goaltending heroics helped erase a 2-0 series deficit, as the Bruins went on to win the deciding Game 5 in Hartford, 2-1.

The Bruins met the Worcester IceCats, the owners of the AHL's best regular season record, in the second round. After winning the first two games in Worcester, the Bruins fell in the next three, and found themselves one game away from seeing their season end.

Faced with elimination, the Black and Gold took Game 6 in Providence, 1-0, forcing a deciding Game 7 in Worcester. The teams fought to a 2-2 tie through regulation, forcing sudden death overtime. Both teams had excellent scoring chances during the overtime, only to be thwarted by the goaltending heroics of Grahame and Worcester goaltender Dwayne Roloson, the league's Outstanding Goaltender during the regular season. Finally, Bruin winger Jeremy Brown found a loose puck in the Worcester crease and stuffed home the series-winner at 12:09 of overtime. The Bruins were headed to the Eastern Conference Finals for the third straight year.

Waiting for Providence was the Saint John Flames, the AHL's youngest, and in the eyes of many, fastest, team. The bruised and battered Bruins battled the well-rested Flames, but fell, 4-1 in the series, to the eventual Calder Cup champions.

Manlow led the team in playoff scoring for a second consecutive year, posting 6-7-13 totals in 17 games. Grahame finished third in the league with eight wins, and ranked among the league leaders with a 2.65 GAA. He started and played all 17 playoff games, marking the second time in three years that he went the distance in the postseason. Grahame finished his Providence career playing in 49 of 50 possible playoff games.

2001-02

The Providence Bruins entered their 10<sup>th</sup> season in Rhode Island with a decidedly new look. Across the boards, the Black and Gold was a much younger team than it had been in past years, led by 21-year-old goaltender Andrew Raycroft, 20-year-old forward Ivan Huml, 21-year-old defenseman Jonathan Girard and highly-touted 21-year-old rookie forward Andy Hilbert. The youth movement would prove difficult at times, as young players are prone to mistakes, but the upside, exuberance and energy, vastly overshadowed the difficulties.

The Black and Gold opened the season on October 5<sup>th</sup> against the Albany River Rats, and thrilled their fans by wearing special Stars and Stripes jerseys, with the familiar spoked "P" on the front, in honor of the victims of the tragedies of September 11, 2001. The jerseys were auctioned off for Disaster Relief charities.

Hilbert and Huml each scored in the home opener, while Raycroft stopped 21 shots, as the Bruins skated to a 4-2 victory.

The young stars, mixed with a core of seasoned veterans like Eric Manlow, Keith McCambridge, Chris Kelleher and Sean Haggerty, would help Providence stay in playoff contention throughout the season. As the season neared its end, Manlow would find himself within five assists of becoming the franchise career leader, as he piled up 100 helpers in 174 career games. McCambridge, the team captain, moved up to third on the franchise career list with 595 PIM in 166 games, and was the team's nominee for the Fred T. Hunt Award, given to the AHL player who exemplifies "sportsmanship, dedication and determination to hockey." McCambridge's leadership was best illustrated on December 14<sup>th</sup>, the day he was named team captain.

After breaking his hand that night while blocking a shot, McCambridge took his stick with him to the hospital, asking the doctors to mold his cast so he could grip his stick and play the next night. The doctors, seeing the damage, refused. The break was bad enough to keep the Bruins' leader out for the next 18 games.

The Black and Gold's young stars were a constant throughout the season. Hilbert led the team with 26-27-53 totals in 72 games. Named to the AHL All-Rookie Team, the former University of Michigan star was selected to play in the All-Star Game, and responded with two goals and an assist in the game. Hilbert also saw action in six NHL games with the Boston Bruins, scoring a goal in his NHL debut on December 20<sup>th</sup> at the FleetCenter.

Girard, the highly-talented defenseman, was also selected to participate in the All-Star Classic. He tallied two assists in the All-Star Game, but was the talk of the Skills Competition. Girard won both the Fastest Skater Competition (14.262 second lap) and the Hardest Shot Competition (99.0 miles per hour). It was no surprise that his teammates voted him the team's Best Defenseman.

Huml led the team with 28 goals and ranked third overall with 47 points in 76 games. Quite a jump for the native of Kladno, Czech Republic, who had 13-6-19 totals in 79 games as a rookie the previous season. Huml was also tied for second in the AHL with a franchise-record tying seven game-winning goals. He made his NHL debut with Boston on December 4<sup>th</sup>, earning an assist on the game-winning goal in a 3-2 victory at Atlanta.

Second-year winger Lee Goren had the Bruins' longest point streak of the season, seven games, posting 4-9-13 totals from March 1<sup>st</sup> through March 13<sup>th</sup>. The burly native of Winnipeg, Manitoba also provided a physical presence on the ice, as his 121 PIM indicate.

Perhaps the biggest story of the year was the development of Raycroft, playing in his second professional season. Raycroft had a difficult rookie season in 2000-01, but came back strong in 2001-02, setting single-season franchise records for games played (56), minutes played (3,317), saves (1,546) and shutouts (4). He ranked among the league's top-five in wins (25), saves and minutes played. Raycroft was voted by his teammates as the Bruins' Most Valuable Player, while also capturing the Three Stars Award and the first Hendricks Memorial Award, voted by the fans as their favorite player.

It was Raycroft's 27-save, 3-0 shutout against the Eastern Conference-leading Bridgeport Sound Tigers in Connecticut on April 3<sup>rd</sup> that officially clinched a playoff berth for Providence for the eighth time in the 10-year history of the franchise. The shutout was the Bruins' sixth of the year, tying a franchise record. Raycroft's partner, Jeff Maund, a member of the 2000-01 AHL All-Rookie Team with the Norfolk Admirals, backstopped the other two.

The Black and Gold fell in their Qualifying Round Series, 2-0, to the St. John's Maple Leafs. Despite the loss, the Bruins enjoyed a winning season and saw the development and maturation of several young players. Those players functioned in critical roles and served notice that they would become forces to be reckoned with in the future.

2002-03

The Providence Bruins began the season with a host of new players, as well as a new head coach in Mike Sullivan. Sullivan, a native of Marshfield, Massachusetts, had just retired from a 12-year playing career, including the last 11 years in the NHL. Assistant coach Scott Gordon remained with the team for his third year with the Black and Gold. Despite playing with seven rookies in the lineup on many nights, the Bruins went on to capture their third division title, remaining in first place in the North Division from December 28 through the end of the season.

The young Bruins finished the season with a 44-20-11-5 record, registering 104 points, the second time in franchise history that a Bruin team hit the 100-point plateau. The Black and Gold was one of just four teams in the AHL to post 100 points, and with 268 goals, was the league's third-highest scoring team. Four players were among the league's top 20 in scoring, and the Bruins were the only team in the league with three 30-goal scorers, as well as six 20-goal scorers.

Diminutive 5'8", 180-pound second-year center Keith Aucoin was the biggest surprise of the season, leading the team and tying for eighth in the league with 25-49-74 totals in 78 games. Fifth-year center Matt Herr enjoyed his finest season, tying for 12<sup>th</sup> in the AHL with career-high 34-38-72 totals in 77 games. He was named a starter for PlanetUSA in the AHL All-Star Classic, and was named an AHL First-Team All-Star.

Herr's linemate Lee Goren also had his best season, ranking 17<sup>th</sup> in league scoring with 32-37-69 totals in 65 games. The third-year right wing was also voted by his teammates as the Bruins' Most Valuable Player. Second-year left wing Andy Hilbert ranked 16<sup>th</sup> in AHL scoring with 35-35-70 totals in 64 games, and tied for third in league goal scoring. He also played in his second consecutive AHL All-Star Classic, joining Herr on the PlanetUSA team.

Rookie left wing Martin Samuelsson tallied 24 goals and was voted the team's Rookie of the Year, while second-year right wing Pat Leahy notched 20 goals in his first full AHL season.

Goaltending was also a major key for the team, as third-year netminder Andrew Raycroft posted his second consecutive 20-win season, with a 23-10-3 record. Raycroft tied for fifth in the league in wins, and finished the season ranking second in franchise history in wins (56) and shutouts (6).

Partner Tim Thomas had a strong year, as well, registering an 18-12-5 record. He was unbeaten in 12 straight starts from December 6 through January 24, posting a 10-0-2 record with a 1.88 GAA and .934 save percentage. The 28-year-old Thomas also made his NHL debut with the Boston Bruins on October 19, in a 4-3 win at Edmonton.

Bruin captain and defenseman Rich Brennan was slated to join Hilbert and Herr on the PlanetUSA All-Star Team, but could not play, due to a foot injury sustained while on recall to Boston. Brennan, who had been named a starter, would have set a new AHL record, by being selected to play in his seventh AHL All-Star Classic. Brennan, who had led all AHL defensemen with 3-29-32 totals in 41 games at the time of his recall on January 14, was out for the remainder of the season. He suffered the injury on January 28, after playing seven games with Boston.

The P-Bruins re-established their dominance on home ice, setting a new franchise record by going unbeaten in 19 games at home. They were 16-0-3-0 from December 6 through February 23 at the Dunkin' Donuts Center. The Bruins were 18-11-7-4 at home for the season.

The one major shakeup of the season occurred on March 19, when Sullivan was summoned to the Boston Bruins to become an assistant coach on the staff of General Manager and Interim Head Coach Mike

O'Connell. O'Connell, the first coach in Providence Bruins history, had replaced Robbie Ftorek behind the Bruins' bench. Gordon was named as Sullivan's replacement in Providence.

Despite moving up to Boston, Sullivan insisted on coaching the P-Bruins one last time that night in Worcester, a game that ended in a 2-2 tie. Providence went 3-3-2-1 for the remainder of the season.

The P-Bruins opened up their Eastern Conference Quarterfinals series against the Manitoba Moose in Providence on April 16, a 2-1 loss in double overtime. Prior to Game 2 on April 18, Sullivan returned to Providence on the heels of Boston's elimination from the Stanley Cup Playoffs. Along with him came Goren, who had been up with Boston since March 31. Despite their return, the Moose took a 1-0 decision in Game 2, with the series heading back to Winnipeg, with the Bruins looking to stave off elimination in the best-of-five series.

Defenseman Zdenek Kutlak scored the only goal of the contest in Game 3 on April 20, as Raycroft stopped all 41 shots he faced for his first career playoff shutout. The Bruins outshot the Moose, 31-27 in Game 4 on April 22, and were led by left wing Ivan Huml, who scored two goals. Despite that, Manitoba prevailed, 3-2, and captured the series, 3-1.

Despite the sudden and disappointing end to the Bruins' outstanding season, the young Bruins team had good reason to be happy with the year overall. Several players reached new heights in their careers, and several young players appeared to establish themselves as legitimate NHL prospects.

2003-04

With Mike Sullivan being named the head coach of the Boston Bruins on June 23, Scott Gordon was officially named the Providence Bruins' head coach on July 25. Nearly one month later, on August 22, long-time P-Bruins nemesis Rob Murray was named as his assistant coach, just after retiring from his 16-year playing career. While a number of players returned from the previous year's team, this club became known more for its outstanding defensive play than its scoring.

When the season was over, the P-Bruins had given up the sixth-fewest goals in the league, 170, shattering the previous franchise record of 223 (1998-99 and 2001-02). The Bruins were one of six teams to break the AHL single-season record for fewest goals against in one season (176; Rochester, 1998-99). The Black and Gold also set another franchise single-season mark by posting 11 shutouts.

Leading the way in the shutout parade was goaltender Tim Thomas, who set a new single-season franchise mark with nine shutouts. His ninth shutout also made him the franchise career leader with 10 in 78 games. Thomas had an outstanding regular season, with a 20-16-6 record. He finished third in the AHL with a 1.84 GAA and second with a .941 save percentage. His shutout total tied him for third in the league.

On three different occasions, Thomas recorded back-to-back shutouts. He also had a nine-game stretch from December 30 through February 6 in which he allowed two or fewer goals in each of his starts. Not surprisingly, the Bruin players voted him as the club's Most Valuable Player.

Thomas, at 29, also played a mentoring role to highly-regarded rookie goaltender Hannu Toivonen. The 19-year-old native of Kalvola, Finland had been the Boston Bruins' first pick, 29<sup>th</sup> overall, in the 2002 NHL Entry Draft, and showed early on to be a very promising prospect. Toivonen was 15-16-4 in 36 games, with a 2.30 GAA and .921 save percentage. He also recorded two shutouts. Toivonen left the team in December to return to Finland, where he backstopped his country to an unexpected Bronze Medal in the World Junior Championships. Toivonen was named the team's Rookie of the Year by his Bruin teammates at the end of the season.

One key acquisition occurred early in the season, on October 29. Center P.J. Stock was loaned to the Philadelphia Phantoms in exchange for center Andre Savage, bringing a member of the Bruins' 1999 Calder Cup championship team back home. Savage was energized by his return to the Ocean State, and immediately brought his offensive spark to the team. He went on to notch 16-30-46 totals in 63 games. By the time the season was over, Savage had pulled to within 11 points of the franchise career scoring lead. He ended the season with 71-104-175 totals in 191 games, 11 points behind original P-Bruin Sergei Zholtok. His goal total tied him for third in franchise history, while his assist total tied him with former Bruin defenseman Brandon Smith for the franchise record. Savage also scored the 3,000<sup>th</sup> goal in team history in a 2-1 victory at Manchester on December 6.

Another record was set by fourth-year defenseman Zdenek Kutlak. On April 7, he played his 253<sup>rd</sup> game as a Bruin, moving past former Bruin defenseman and head coach Peter Laviolette for the all-time team mark. Kutlak finished up with 257 games as a Bruin.

Second-year defenseman Kevin Dallman led all Bruin blueliners with 6-23-29 totals in 65 games, and established himself as a two-way, puck-moving defenseman, as well as a physical presence. Despite his 5'11", 190-pound frame, Dallman delivered some of the Bruins' biggest hits of the season. The Bruin players named him as the team's Best Defenseman.

Dallman was one of three defenseman who led the team to three straight overtime road wins late in the season. He scored in overtime at Lowell on February 26 in a 4-3 win. Towering rookie Milan Jurcina turned the trick two nights later in a 3-2 win at Bridgeport, before captain Rich Brennan did it again on February 29 in a 3-2 win at Manchester.

Brennan, who was hampered for much of the year due to a groin injury sustained in training camp, finished the season strongly. The seven-time AHL All-Star had 12-15-27 totals in 56 games. He tied for sixth among AHL defensemen in goals, was fourth in power play goals (8) and tied for second with four game-winning goals.

Right wing Carl Corazzini had a breakout season, posting career-highs in goals (16), assists (9) and points (25) in 62 games. He also tied for the league lead with four shorthanded goals. Corazzini, a former Boston University star and native of Framingham, Massachusetts, realized his dream when he made his NHL debut with the Boston Bruins on January 15. He scored his first two NHL goals on the road against the New York Rangers on January 20.

Two Bruin forwards brought a high-energy, aggressive style of play to the team that endeared them to the Bruins' faithful. Dorchester, Massachusetts native Brendan Walsh and rookie Colton Orr both established a physical presence not seen in Providence in many seasons. Walsh led the team and finished seventh in the AHL with 281 PIM in 52 games. He also established new career-highs in goals (10), assists (7) and points (17). Orr finished second on the team and among AHL rookies with 257 PIM in 64 games. Walsh and Orr were voted by the fans as the co-recipients of the Hendricks Memorial Fan Appreciation Award.

One of the biggest additions to the lineup happened on March 9, the day of the NHL's trading deadline. Center Brad Boyes was acquired by the Boston Bruins from the San Jose Sharks in exchange for former P-Bruin defenseman Jeff Jillson, and assigned to Providence. The highly-skilled Boyes demonstrated exceptional vision and deft playmaking ability. He finished sixth in AHL scoring with 31-41-72 totals in 78 games. Boyes was named an AHL Second-Team All-Star.

The Bruins finished the season in fourth place in the Atlantic Division with their 36-29-11-4 record (87 points). The Black and Gold played the Portland Pirates in a best-of-three Qualifying Round Series at the Dunkin' Donuts Center beginning on April 15. The Pirates swept the series by scores of 7-1 and 6-2, ending the Bruins' hopes of making a run at the coveted Calder Cup.

2004-05

Scott Gordon and Rob Murray returned for their second season as the Bruins' coaching staff and had a solid regular season, while excelling in the playoffs. With the NHL Lockout lasting the entire season, the Providence Bruins team looked very similar to that of the previous year with 14 players returning to the lineup. The only difference was this season's team had one more year of experience under their belt and was ready to make a run deep into the playoffs.

Providence finished the season with a 40-30-3-7 regular season record, good enough for 90 points and a fourth place finish in the Atlantic Division. On January 14, the Bruins played their 1,000<sup>th</sup> game in Providence, only the 14<sup>th</sup> team in AHL history to accomplish that feat. The Bruins went on to pull off two upsets in the first two rounds of the playoffs before falling in the Eastern Conference Finals.

Andy Hilbert was one player that Providence may not have seen if the NHL saw ice time. In his fourth season with the Bruins, he led the team in scoring with 79 points (37g, 42a) and finished the year leading the Bruins all-time in points (210), goals (101) and assists (109). His 79 points was good enough for seventh in the league in scoring, while he led the league in shots with 341.

Returning for his second season with the Bruins was center Brad Boyes, who was the second leading scorer on the Bruins with 75 points (33g, 42a). He was the only player in Providence to lace up the skates for all 80 games and set a franchise high in power play goals for a season with 20.

Among the returnees for the Bruins included defenseman Kevin Dallman, who for the second straight season led the Bruins d-men in scoring and was named by his teammates the Bruins Best Defenseman.

The two high-energy and aggressive Bruin forwards, Dorchester, Massachusetts native Brendan Walsh and Colton Orr returned for their second year, continuing to bring a physical presence on the ice. Walsh led the team and finished tied for 13<sup>th</sup> in the AHL with 284 PIM in 45 games. Orr finished second on the team with 279 PIM in 61 games.

Milan Jurcina, Pat Leahy and Providence College graduate Jay Leach each returned as solid defensemen for the Bruins. All three of them finished plus, while Jurcina finished second amongst Bruin defensemen in scoring with 23 points (6g, 17a).

Martin Samuelsson was the one other big name player back with the Bruins. He was making his third go around.

In net, after a solid rookie season, Hannu Toivonen showed why he was a first round pick of the Boston Bruins posting a 29-18-3 regular season record with a 2.05 GAA, good enough for seventh best in the league. The young netminder also finished fifth in the league in save percentage at 93.2% and set a franchise record with 238:45 consecutive shutout minutes from 1/30-2/12. In that span he had three straight shutouts.

The Bruins also had four key acquisitions in the off-season including two familiar names in Jay Henderson and Keith Aucoin. Henderson was a member of the 1999 Calder Cup winning Bruins and since then went onto win two more Calder Cups with the Houston Aeros and Milwaukee Admirals. Henderson played in 72 games for Providence and found a spot in the record books with the most games played in a Providence Bruins uniform (278) and second most career penalty minutes for the Bruins (891). Aucoin returned to Providence after a one-year hiatus to finish third on the team in scoring with 66 points (21g, 45a).

The other two key acquisitions were left wing Dan LaCouture and defenseman Brent Thompson. LaCouture joined the Bruins after spending the past six seasons in the NHL and added 27 points (12g, 15a) including a hat trick to the high-powered Bruins attack. Thompson became a co-captain and a leader on defense playing in all but one game and putting up 256 PIM. For the 15-year veteran it would be his final season before retiring at the end of the year.

Finally, with the NHL locked out Providence was assigned Patrice Bergeron, who at only 19 years of age had more than enough talent to compete in the AHL and finished fourth on the Bruins in scoring with 61 points (21g, 40a) in 68 games.

With all of this talent, the Bruins came to life in the playoffs, making a run for the team's second Calder Cup. In the first round Providence faced the Atlantic Division regular season champion Manchester Monarchs. The Bruins split the opening two games in Manchester winning 5-1 in game one before losing 4-2 in game two. With the series returning to Providence for two games the teams spilt again, Providence winning game three 6-3 and dropping a close one in game four 3-2. The Bruins went on to win game five in Manchester and then game six on home ice to advance to the second round against Lowell.

The Lock Monsters proved to be a little bit less of a challenge than the Monarchs as the Bruins prevailed in five games winning the series 4 to 1. The Bruins won game one by a lone goal 5-4 and took game four in overtime on an Aucoin game winner to push the Bruins over the top.

Providence had only one team standing between them and their second trip to the Calder Cup Finals, the Philadelphia Phantoms. During the series the Bruins struggled on the road and dropped three games at the Wachovia Center, which was too much for Providence to overcome. Overall, the Bruins had a very successful season making their deepest run into the playoffs since the 2000-01 season, while developing a good crop of NHL prospects.