



[Home](#) » [Sports](#)

## Nash of Kamloops, hockey legend Jagr share Knights' tale

Local D-man helps Jagr push Czech team into top pro league

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Not every North American who leaves the continent in search of professional hockey work in Europe comes home with a great story. Brendon Nash has one.  
Photograph By HOKEJ.CZ PHOTO



Jaromir Jagr was all smiles last Friday after scoring four goals for the team he co-owns in a 4-2 victory that sealed the club's promotion to the Czech Republic's top professional hockey league. - Kladno Knights photo

Hockeydb.com isn't even tracking Brendon Nash's statistics this season.

The prolific puck website indicates the 32-year-old Kamloopsian's final three hockey stops were with Denmark's Rungsted Ishockey in 2017-2018, Austria's EC Graz in 2016-2017 and California's Bakersfield Condors in 2014-2015, a suitcase-toting and not-so-atypical end to a journeyman's career.

Meanwhile, younger brother Riley, a 29-year-old forward for the Columbus Blue Jackets, is at the centre of the hockey universe, heading to the second round of the NHL playoffs after dispatching one of the greatest regular-season teams in league history.

Riley had one goal in four games in the first-round sweep of the Tampa Bay Lightning, according to hockeydb.com.

So, there can't be an argument here — the younger Nash is the most noteworthy sibling of 2018-2019.

Or maybe there can be.

Jaromir Jagr works in mysterious ways.

Jagr abdicated his NHL position in 2017-2018, leaving the Calgary Flames to take the throne in his hometown, Kladno, Czech Republic, where he is part-owner of the city's pro team, second-tier Rytiri Kladno or, in English, the Kladno Knights.

His legend in the hockey-mad hub about 30 kilometres west of Prague is perhaps more mythical and folkloric than anywhere else on the planet, and it grew when he returned to push his club back into top-tier hockey.

The Knights were relegated to the Chance Liga, the second division, from the top-flight Czech Extraliga following the 2013-2014 campaign.

That was a big deal, comparable to a Premier League soccer team booted to the English Football League Championship — grown-men-and-women-in-anguish type stuff.

"Attendance was cut in half right way," Brendon said. "People didn't come for the first few years."

Brendon, who was part of a failed bid in 2015-2016 to lift Kladno back into the Extraliga, was enlisted again this season, signing a one-year deal and returning to the Czech Republic with wife, Keri, also from Kamloops.

"Given that Jagr was going to be here, there was a pretty good chance they were going to make a push," Brendon said during a FaceTime conversation with KTW on Monday.

"They came so close last year and, with him coming back to play, I thought it would be a good chance to actually move up and get to play with him."

Brendon, a 6-foot-3, 205-pound defenceman, finished sixth on the Knights in 2018-2019 regular-season scoring with 29 points, including seven goals, in 49 games. Find those stats online at eliteprospects.com or at rytirikladno.cz, with some Google translation work.

Jagr was, reportedly, recovering from nagging injuries throughout the early portion of the campaign and kept fresh for the post-season by appearing in only four regular-season contests, registering a goal and three assists.

The 47-year-old star was magically ready for the playoffs and drew a crowd everywhere he went.

"It's crazy what he has to deal with on a daily basis," Brendon said. "At pretty much every practice, there's been at least two or three people waiting for him to sign stuff."

"A lot of our road games were sold out. He's trying to warm up, there are always people around trying to take photos, get him to sign stuff. He signs everything. He always takes pictures."

Kladno played a pair of best-of-seven series to begin the playoffs, dispatching both opponents 4-1.

The club had help from another of the city's favourite sons, Tomas Plekanec, who retired from the NHL in November, left the Montreal Canadiens and began playing for both his hometown team, the Knights, in the Chance Liga and HC Kometa Brno in the Extraliga.

(Apparently you can do that in the Czech Republic).

In the first two playoff rounds, Plekanec led the Knights with 15 points, including four goals, in 10 games; Nash tallied three goals and five points in 10 games; and Jagr compiled five points, including two goals, in eight games.

Kladno advanced to the 12-game qualification round, a tournament featuring the top two teams from the Chance Liga and the bottom two squads from the Extraliga.

The two clubs that finish with the most points play in the Extraliga next season, while the bottom two join the Chance Liga.

Jaromir Jagr did Jaromir Jagr things when it mattered most, recording 10 goals and 13 points in 11 qualification-round games.

"He scored all four goals in a 4-2 win that clinched promotion," Brendon said of the victory over CEZ Motor Ceske Budejovice last Friday.

"It was the perfect storybook ending to his season here."

Travelling Kladno fans brought drums and team scarves to Ceske Budejovice and stayed long after the final whistle to salute the team.

The home barn was packed on Sunday for a game that doubled as a coronation, a celebration of the Knights and Jagr, a night on which the home team fell 2-1 to Pirates Chomutov, but the score didn't matter.



Kladno Knights fans packed their barn on Sunday to celebrate promotion during the team's final home game. - Kladno Knights photo

Colourful pageantry and repetitive chanting were fixtures throughout the game and party that followed.

Kladno, which finished the qualification round with a meaningless road game after KTW's press deadline on Tuesday, will return to the Extraliga in 2019-2020, but Brendon's future with the team is uncertain.

"The Europeans are a little slower with how they handle it [contract negotiations]," said Brendon, who had seven points in 11 qualification-round games heading into Tuesday's tilt. "They're never in a rush to get anything done.

"I feel like I've got a few more years left in me, a few more years of travelling before we settle down."

And what about Jagr?

"Maybe he'll hit 50 before he retires," Brendon said with a laugh. "I hear he's looking to play a couple more years. That's just speculation, I guess."

Brendon said North American players in Europe who have similar playing situations to him make somewhere in the range of 30,000 euros to 70,000 euros (\$45,000 to \$105,000 CDN) per season.

"Talking to other guys who have come over, you hear the horror stories of not getting paid, not getting equipment, not getting flights, but everything has been great," Brendon said.

"Everything has been covered. They negotiate a net salary and take care of all your taxes."

The Knights also provide a car and an apartment for the Kamloops couple, which has embraced trekking across Europe for the past four seasons, although Visa complications forced Keri to leave Europe two months ago.

"With Jagr owning the team, after being here last time, you know you can get anything you need to succeed," said Brendon, a Cornell University alumnus. "We were comfortable coming back here."

Brendon will arrive in the Tournament Capital this weekend to begin his annual off-season routine, which will include training with Greg Kozoris and watching his brother's NHL playoff run.

"No one expected them to sweep Tampa," Brendon said. "It's crazy. Now, after all those deals at the deadline, you never know what to expect."

A return to Kladno could mean reuniting with Jagr (and getting Brendon's name back on hockeydb.com for the 2019-2020 season, as the site keeps Extraliga stats), but the couple seems to be taking a Jagr-esque approach to the off-season decision.

"Now that I've done it for a few years, I've started to learn it's OK to be a little casual," Brendon said. "Eventually, it will get done.

"We go wherever is the best opportunity to live and play."

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