

Focus

Nazem Kadri: Canada's new game face



He has a fairy-tale story that hockey wants to tell. A Muslim who is expected to become a star, his rise comes when the sport is intent on attracting ethnic communities

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Hockey magic strikes with 35 seconds left in the first period. Before that, this Ontario Hockey League game between the London Knights and the Plymouth Whalers is clunky and scoreless. Nazem Kadri's father, Sam, mutters with exasperation in his first-level box.

"Come on, Naz," he grimaces each time the Knights' star forward lets the puck get away.

Nazem's mother, Sue, watches quietly but no less intently, fielding bathroom requests from her youngest daughter, Rayanne, 5, and organizing plates of chicken fingers. Sister Yasmine, 20, the eldest of the five, is texting, glancing up once in a while at a play. "Boys," her mom sighs.



Peter Power / The Globe and Mail

Nazem Kadri at practice with the London Knights of the Ontario Hockey League.

For nearly 15 years – from the winter Nazem first donned a hockey jersey at age 4, and promptly helped lead his team to a championship victory, to the day this summer when the Toronto Maple Leafs called his name as a first-round draft pick – hockey has been the Kadris' full-time business.

Sam shines with pride as he recalls the day Nazem was born: As he raced into the hospital parking lot, he heard Tom Cochrane's *Big League* on the radio. "It just came right on: 'My kid is going to play in the big league,'" he says. "I swear to God."

Today, Sue still sends Nazem to games with spaghetti in Tupperware and frets about injuries and how soon he is likely to leave the basement of their home in the north end of London, Ont. Before his 19th-birthday party earlier this month, she found herself thinking, "This might be my last year putting balloons up."

The extended Kadri family – typically 60 aunts, uncles and cousins at each game – is scattered around the John Labatt Centre. Sam's own, elderly parents – his mother easily spotted in a white *hijab* among clumps of hockey jerseys – are across the ice, two rows up.

They don't speak much English – Sam's father refers to the penalty box as *habis*, Arabic for jail – but having arrived almost empty-handed 40 years ago from Lebanon, where they'd never heard of hockey, they understand the feat their grandson has achieved. They don't miss a game.

As the clock runs down on the period, No. 91, dancing on his skates, snatches the puck in a pass up the ice. Enough is enough, Nazem's body language says. He sweeps the puck gracefully around a Whalers defenceman, catches it again on the other side, skates in front of the net and flicks it in above the goalie's outstretched glove.

"Now that was pretty!" says Sam, when the cheering has died down. "That's what I'm talking about."

The next night, on *Coach's Corner*, a gushing Don Cherry will play a clip of this goal and criticize the Leafs for sending Nazem back to the OHL for experience despite a pre-season run in which he scored three goals and five assists.

Draft day

Sam and Sue Kadri on what it was like to watch their son get drafted

But it's more than fancy stick handling that makes him special: He has a fairy-tale story that hockey, more than ever, wants to tell. Nazem Kadri is not the first Muslim to be drafted into the National Hockey League – perhaps his most prominent predecessor was Montreal's Ramzi Abid, a left-winger who played several seasons before heading to Europe in 2007. But none has faced such expectations of stardom.

It comes at a time when both minor and professional hockey are intent on drawing ethnic communities into the game.

Maple Leafs general manager Brian Burke admitted on draft day that it would be good news if Nazem inspired more Muslim youth to take up the sport. "If that increases our player pool in a part of society that we're not touching right now, that's great," he said. It's often said that the great Canadian game has become a victim of complacency, watching while Canada aged, faces changed and soccer fields became more common than urban rinks.

"For a long time, the hockey tradition has been that if you open the door to the arena, the rink will fill with kids," observes Scott Oakman, executive director of the Greater Toronto Hockey League (GTHL). "That's simply not the case any more."

Hockey is still trying to build a following across ethnic groups, as basketball and soccer have done. Visible-minority teenagers play the sport at about half the rate of their white peers, according to 2005 Statistics Canada data. A study this summer found that only about one-third of Canadian teens regularly watched NHL games on TV in 2008, down 10 points since 1992.

"Hockey has been pigeonholed as an upper-middle-class, white sport to a large degree," says Glen McCurdie, a spokesman for Hockey Canada. "But it has a very important role to play in bringing newer Canadians into the country and welcoming them."

There are increasing numbers of high-profile players from immigrant families, among them Calgary Flames captain Jarome Iginla, whose dad arrived in Canada from Nigeria at 18. But they still account for a small percentage.

"I don't think our sport truly reflects Canadian society," says former NHL goalie Kevin Weekes, now a CBC hockey commentator, whose parents came from Barbados and eventually gave in to their son's pleas to play a game he first learned on the street.

"From my own experience, your parents immigrate here and they turn the television on, and they don't hear a name that sounds familiar, or a face that looks familiar. In that case, you are losing kids right off the bat."

Unlike soccer, which requires only cleats and an open field, hockey is time-consuming and expensive. And it's harder to start playing at a later age and still catch up on skill levels.

In an effort to help, minor hockey – though cash-strapped itself – is offering more free workshops, and the GTHL passed a new resolution to let teams to opt out of games on religious holidays.

But if hockey has been getting short shrift in Canada's newer ethnic communities, it's not for lack of interest. In Muslim communities across the country, ball hockey – a more accessible alternative – has become a phenomenon, spawning serious tournaments where players are ranked and traded.

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And the CBC's broadcast of *Hockey Night in Canada* in Punjabi, now two years old, has drawn "a huge following," says Sukhpreet Singh, a customs officer in Surrey, B.C., who runs a 3,000-member Facebook group on the show. Young Sikh Canadians often watch the show with their grandparents, he says, and it has raised the profile of promising Sikh hockey players.

Many immigrant families understand the doors hockey can open for their children. Samren Sandhu, now a star forward for the University of Ottawa Gee-Gees, had an Indian-born father who worked hard to put him in hockey – first in the small town of Sparwood, B.C., and then in Calgary – knowing it was key to making friends.

Coming home from long shifts at the local mine, where he worked as a machinist, Bharpinder Sandhu spent hours practising with his young son in the basement and analyzing plays on a whiteboard. Now, hockey fever has struck family-wide – the game's always on at gatherings and many of Samren's cousins have signed up to play.

Such dynamics make Nazem Kadri any team's dream. Young, polite and grounded by a warm, devoted family, he represents the game's future in an increasingly diverse nation. In Arabic, Nazem means "leader": A lot of people count on him living up to his name. No matter where you come from, almost all hockey stories start with a father dreaming of his boy playing in the NHL. The eldest of seven children, Sam Kadri was four years old when he arrived in Canada with his parents, who had left war-torn Lebanon for better prospects in Ontario.

His dad worked two jobs as a janitor to pay the bills, and though Sam grew up playing street hockey and pickup games on frozen ponds and being mesmerized Saturday evenings by *Hockey Night in Canada*, he never asked his parents to sign him up.



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Sam and Sue Kadri and their daughters talk about their son Nazem in the kitchen of their London home.

"I couldn't see seven kids, and my father being the only one working, and trying to accommodate me playing hockey," Sam says, sitting at his kitchen table with his wife and daughters. But his own kids would be different.

"We had the stick before he started walking," Sue smiles.

"We had the skates before he came out," Sam says.

"I thought he was crazy sometimes," his wife admits.

"She didn't like him rollerblading on the hardwood floors," Sam says. "We toned it down on the slap shot."

By the time Nazem was 2, Sam was a successful businessmen with a used-car business and two things his father never had – the means and time to put his son in hockey. (His daughters, too, but they preferred watching their brother.)

Like dads across the country, he adopted a winter-morning ritual that would last years: Get up in the dark, grab a coffee, warm the car, lace Nazem's skates up in bed, throw his groggy boy over his shoulder and drive him to the rink.

"I could barely open my eyes," Nazem remembers.

With his dad watching faithfully, Nazem made the London Junior Knights Team at 6, and played at AAA level into his teenage years. His sisters were his personal cheerleaders – Rayanne went to her first game when she was one week old – and at out-of-town tournaments, they made friends and went shopping. ("It always cost me double," Sam sighs.)

They spared no expense on equipment and summer skills camps. At 15, Nazem was drafted by the Kitchener Rangers in the OHL, requiring him to move away to be billeted with a local couple. "When I dropped him off," his dad says, "it felt like my heart was being ripped out."

But it all led to the evening of June 26, when about 100 Kadri relatives and friends filled a section at the Bell Centre in Montreal. When the Leafs' turn came up, the local crowd booed Brian Burke. Then Nazem was called.

His father grabbed him first. "I love you, buddy," he whispered. And as Nazem walked down to the stage to pull the Leafs jersey over his head, his family began chanting. "All you started to hear in the silence of the whole Bell centre was 'Kadri! Kadri!'" Sam says. "It was overwhelming." Raising three children in the small farming town of Avenmore, Ont., a few kilometres outside Cornwall, Mostafa and Zahra Elgazzar understood immediately that the key to integrating their kids was to put them in hockey skates.

When Mostafa came from Egypt in 1972 (promptly falling on the ice outside Montreal's Dorval airport), his hockey knowledge was limited to a short clip in an information video shown at the embassy where he got his visa.

Once Zahra arrived a couple of years later, they were initiated by their first Canadian friend, who would explain the rules as they watched TV and make them ardent fans of the Canadiens and Guy Lafleur.

"I used to wonder, 'How do they do this?'" Zahra says. "The player is on a knife on ice. We were fascinated."

In Avenmore, they were the only Muslim family, referred to as "the immigrants." But with hockey that soon changed. Their boys, Khalid and Omar, became stars, earning the nicknames Terminator and the Egyptian Magician.

Their daughter, Sarah, soon traded figure skates for hockey, and became a talented pint-sized goalie – at 5 feet and barely 100 pounds, her gear weighed more than she did.

While Mostafa worked as a janitor at night and went to school during the day, Zahra churned out sandwiches for practices, worked in the rink cafeteria and prayed in a high corner of the stands when the team was losing – at the urging of the other parents.

But it wasn't always easy. The boys often found themselves the subject of racial slurs on the ice and off-colour jokes in locker rooms, Khalid recalls. "If we arrived late, they'd say, 'Hey, Omar, did your flying camel not start?' But sometimes it went too far."

In Grade 10, Khalid quit a team after a player insulted his mother in the locker room. It was resolved quickly – after all, Khalid was the team's top scorer.

"In the end, it was a net gain," says Khalid, now a married Ottawa lawyer, expecting his first son and still playing hockey. "We got to know each other better. He learned quite a bit and so did I. He was just a kid who hadn't really been exposed to other cultures."

But Canada's obsession with hockey, Omar suggests, also makes people possessive about it. "It's sacred to them. It's as if they protect it," he says, with Khalid nodding in agreement.

However, he adds, "Nazem Kadri is a household name now in the hockey world. I think that's broken down a barrier. Now it's becoming normal for a Muslim to play hockey and to play it well."

"I joke to my teammates, 'Look at Kadri. It's over – we're coming.'"

In the meantime, some hockey parents have taken their own initiatives. Paul Song, a real-estate agent whose family settled in Canada from Korea when he was 10 and who used to lug his hockey gear on the bus to get to games because his parents were busy working, helped start a Saturday-night hockey program in northern Toronto for Korean youth. This year, 70 kids are lacing up.

"Once the kids get on the ice, they force their parents to bring them," says Mr. Song, whose children now play competitively.

Marion Christensen, a devoted hockey mom in northeast Calgary, which has a large ethnic community, took a similar step after "sitting in cold arenas for eight years wanting to see more diversity in hockey." This past summer, with another mom, she organized a free five-day workshop for immigrant children – with complimentary transportation and gear.

"I guess I had this idea that if you get immigrant kids playing hockey, they are going to feel a part of Canadian culture. They are going to feel included because of what they bring to the team and not necessarily looked at because of the colour of their skin and their accent."

In the end, 24 boys and girls 8 to 15 years old signed up, most of them with parents from Sudan – including Khadiga Elmahdi, who says she would not have known how to get her three boys into hockey without it. She knew when she came here seven years ago how important the sport was to Canada's culture. She has found it hard to meet people, but hockey seems like a social entry point for herself as well as for her three sons.

She is waiting for confirmation of their registration in an organized program, with Ms. Christensen's help. Soon she will be juggling practices between her business studies. "Now I will be a hockey mom."

PAYING PENALTIES

Toward the end of the third period, Nazem Kadri draws a careless penalty, slashing the top of a Plymouth player's stick. He skates angrily over to the penalty box to sit out the rest of the game.

His father fumes, "He knows better than that," he says fiercely. "He'll be hearing about that later."

Sue shakes her head, and whispers: "He's really just a big teddy bear."

Nazem is generous with his praise for his parents, and the roles that they played in his success. "For them to bring hockey into my life, when it wasn't their lifestyle so much, was definitely a special thing."

His father understands that his son's career is now a business – he recently earned \$4,500 signing his name on 300 hockey cards – and when Nazem went to the bank to deposit his hefty check from the Leafs, Sam made sure that only a few thousand dollars went into Nazem's personal account.

Sue, meanwhile, has been coaxing her son to take a course at university this winter "just to keep his options open." Yet when he collided with a helmet last year and broke his jaw, she was the one who blended up shepherd's pie and pasta so Nazem could suck it through a straw and not lose weight. And when a Windsor fan shouted from the rafters, "Get that terrorist off the ice!" it was Sue who was the angriest.

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"That hurt a lot. I mean, he's Canadian, born and raised. I thought, how dare you say that to my kid? *Any* kid?"

They practise their faith with a Western flexibility. During Ramadan, the Knights set aside a room for the family to pray, but typically they say their prayers at home after the game. Unlike many of her female relatives, Sue does not wear the *hijab* – "I am not there yet," she says. And while Nazem describes himself as a practising Muslim, he can't fast during hockey season.

On Friday night, one of her daughters points to a young brunette in a yellow jacket sitting across the rink – Nazem's girlfriend, she tells her mom. Sue shrugs: "He hasn't brought anyone home yet. I assume that will happen when it's important."

The cheering builds as the buzzer goes off. The Knights have won 2-1, and the fans have watched their star score a fabulous goal. Nazem skates out of the penalty box, almost sheepishly, not looking up at his dad.

"He'll probably try to come home later, so I'm sleeping," laughs Sam. "It's always easier the next day."

Sue, packing up the girls, just smiles.

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