

Zach Attack

Style. Reputation. Character. Those are just three words that describe Zach Bogosian of the Atlanta Thrashers. The NHL blue liner and former third overall pick plays the most taxing position on the ice as defenseman. He's had the game's all-time greats – Orr, Bourque, Chelios, Stevens – in his ear, by his side and as friends since he first picked up a stick. The 20-year-old stalwart is now ready to reap the rewards.

Text Manouk Akopyan



It's the opening week of the NHL season and playoff beard wishes and Stanley Cup dreams have officially begun. Guns N' Roses guitarist Slash plays a reverberating rendition of the national anthem to a sellout crowd at Staples Center, cutting the ribbon to the 2010-2011 hockey season. It's the Los Angeles Kings against the Atlanta Thrashers in the home opener. It's a long-suffering franchise deprived of a Stanley Cup against one that wasn't even around when Wayne Gretzky last played an NHL game. And in Kobe Bryant's home, it's Armenian Pride Night. The object of tonight's affection and commemoration is Thrashers defenseman Zach Bogosian, known to be the first and only player of Armenian heritage to ever play in the National Hockey League. Bogosian finds himself in an odd predicament.

He's playing his personal and bi-annual "home away from home" game. If he blows a coverage, no one really cares. Fans are there specifically for him, win or lose, eyes glued as he skates within the confines of the 200-foot rink. But for the American-born Zach, wherever you put him, there is only one true home – and that's Massena, New York, a place where three generations of Bogosians have been reared over the last century, all in the same house his great-grandfather Stephan Bogosian first built and lived in. "It's crazy for me because, in Atlanta, fans come to see the team and in an away game in Los Angeles, they're specifically there to see me," says Bogosian of his honorary night. "Hockey is a special part of my life, and when you add to the fact that Armenians are always in full support of me, it makes it even more special for me. I love it."

With the Bogosians having been a mainstay in Massena since Stephan first moved there in 1910, Zach had no plans of breaking the family tradition. He recently built a house in Massena overlooking the St. Lawrence River, which is a one-minute boat ride to the Canadian bridge. Peacefully nestled away from lively Manhattan, it's a home the avid hunter and fisherman wouldn't have any other way. "You go from a town like Massena where everyone knows everyone and you spend six hours every day on a boat and other outdoor activities, to overnight, living in a 24th-floor condo in Atlanta. I wouldn't say I love city life, but I don't hate it; I've gotten used to it. I like a quiet place, that's for sure. That's one thing that is really different for me. There's not too many of us Armenians anymore in Massena, but we pretty much know everyone who is still there."

→ Zach Bogosian comes from an athletic family – his father and uncle both played college football. In 2008, the Atlanta Thrashers drafted him with the third overall pick in the NHL draft.



Scott Cunningham



One-Hundred Years of Bogosians

Zach is an American-born Armenian fully engaged in his roots. He had the opportunity of meeting the first generation of American Bogosians – great-grandfather Stephan, from Sivas, Turkey, who lived to be 100, and great-grandmother Zouart, from Bahcecik/Kocaeli, Turkey, who lived to be 96. He vividly recalled their stories. Stephan came to America in 1910 to work and make money for a couple of years so that he could then go back home to his wife and child. However, during the genocide, he lost them both – and the rest of his family – and was advised not to go back. Zach has shown his love for the culture through a forever-lasting and more permanent medium – tattoos. He has a rosary with an Armenian cross along with an Armenian flag on his back,

and recently, inked the "Our Father" prayer (*Hayr Mer*) in Armenian letters across his left chest. "I'm not sure if I'll get anymore tattoos, but if I do, they will certainly be Armenian. It's really special to me," he says. "My grandfather Haig is a diehard Armenian and is a spitting image of Stephan. Once he finds out someone is Armenian, he gets all spruced up. I feel the same way too. It's rare to be an Armenian and I definitely have a special place for them as well." Nowadays, his father like owns the Bogosian Carpet Co. on the same block Stephen started his dry cleaning business and his grandfather Haig runs a nursing home. "He thinks he's the mayor of Massena," Zach jokes. As for his mother Vicky? "My mom's not Armenian, but then, she pretty much is. Even her sisters have adapted."

Apples Don't Fall Far From Trees

The Bogosian family tree is filled with standout, naturally gifted, big-bodied athletes, and – coincidence or not – all captains of their respective teams. Zach's father, Ike, lettered in football as a starting strong safety at Syracuse University from 1979-81. As a senior, he was a co-captain. Ike's brother Steve was an All-American football captain at West Point (Army) from 1970-72. Zach's 24-year-old brother, Aaron, is currently a forward and captain at New York's St. Lawrence University. Standing at 6'3", 215 pounds, Zach's genetically blessed with a quarterback's body. Yet, growing up, there was one thing the Bogosian kids could not do: follow their father into the family football factory. "I always wanted to play football, but my dad never let because of the fear of serious injuries," Zach says. Bogosian's rise from playing town B hockey at 14, to four years later, a prodigy playing in the National Hockey League didn't happen by accident. Even though Zach played lacrosse just as well as hockey, Ike drove him two hours to Ottawa every weekend in the summer in order for his son to improve the game he loved most. In 2000, the 10-year-old spent a week in Canada soaking in hockey with Stanley Cup winning defenseman Scott Stevens and his family. He later learned how to skate through figure skating, which led to speed. Both turned into his two strongest assets today in the game's most taxing position. Ike's efforts in return made him the greatest influence on his son's life.

Tipping the scales at 6'3", 215 pounds, 20-year-old Zach is genetically blessed. "Every year, I feel a lot more confident in my game than I did the year before," he says.

"There is a time and place for fun, but my father always drilled it into my head to be a hard worker. A lot of guys think it's not very manly to figure skate, but it worked out for me," he smiles. "A mistake for a defenseman usually results in one thing: the puck ending up in the back of the net. There's a lot of pressure, but hard work takes care of that." The father and son duo went to Ottawa 67's games of the Ontario Hockey League, where just a few years later, he would leave the popcorn and soda in his seat, throw on his No. 4 sweater and make his way to the rink, playing for the Peterborough Petes.

Teenage Savant and the Legends of the Fall

As he's comfortably reclined in a leather chair at the Ritz Carlton Hotel, Zach laughs about how the last five years have zipped by faster than a blazing slap shot. After all, just a handful of years ago, he looked as intimidating as a librarian. "In high school, I had an awkward body: big hands, big feet, and a skinny body," he says. With the goal of playing Division-1 hockey, Bogosian moved away from

Massena to Massachusetts' Cushing Academy to hone his craft. During his freshman and sophomore years in the small town of Ashburnham, the 5-foot-4, 120-pound 14-year-old Zach grew into his genes and got really big, both literally and figuratively. It all came together during his last year at Cushing when he was mentored and tutored by Boston Bruins all-time great and Hall of Fame defenseman Ray Bourque. Bourque was on staff as a volunteer coach, where his son Ryan was Zach's teammate. Bogosian says that the most important thing Bourque taught him was to come into the zone late and to always remember that his offense would be there for him – advice he plays by until today. By 11th grade, Bogosian had realized he was a blue-chipped prospect destined for the NHL when he took his talents to the Ontario Hockey League, a Canadian major-junior hockey league. In the OHL, he moved from one NHL legend to another when he scored himself the great Bobby Orr as his agent. Irony, coincidence, neither or both, the No. 4 jersey Bogosian has worn since his youth was because of the legendary Bruins defenseman, now the president of The Orr Hockey Group. ▶

“Bobby Orr is the nicest person I’ve ever met,” says Zach’s father Ike. “With Zach, he’s not only his agent, but they have a special relationship as friends too. There are those who never get to even meet players like Stevens and Orr – let alone having the privilege of playing with them. All those guys have had a big impact and influence on him. Whatever they’ve said, he’s listened and done exactly as he’s been told.”

During his two years with the Peterborough Petes, he quickly developed into a big and gifted defenseman and distinguished himself as an offensive and defensive standout with a complete game. Most nights, the highly touted 16 year old thrived at shutting down opposing prospects that were three and four years his senior and at NHL camps just a few weeks prior. He developed into a smooth skater with a blistering right-handed shot and a high hockey IQ en route to being named alternate captain, playing in 127 games, and recording 94 points (18 goals, 76 assists). “In sports, it’s like a pyramid,” says Ike. “When you start up, there are a lot of kids, and as you go up, everyone starts flying off. It’s a testament to Zach to where he has come with all the hard work and dedication.”

On June 20, 2008, Zach made the top of the pyramid – at 18 years old.



Kevin C. Cox/Getty Images

NHL Prime Time

For Zach Bogosian, Armenian Pride Night could’ve been a ritual done 41 times a year, essentially saving the Kings from rolling out the red carpet for a visiting player. The first occurrence was during Bogosian’s rookie season, when he racked up three assists in a 7-6 barn-burning shootout victory. In the 2008 draft, slotted with the second overall pick, the Kings had the opportunity to draft Bogosian as the franchise defenseman they were looking for. In the class, there were two viable, highly rated juniors: Bogosian and the Canadian-groomed Drew Doughty. When commissioner Gary Bettman stepped to the podium, the Kings called Doughty’s name, and the rest is now history. Looking at the back of their hockey cards, the differential in statistics doesn’t illustrate their respective values to each of their teams.

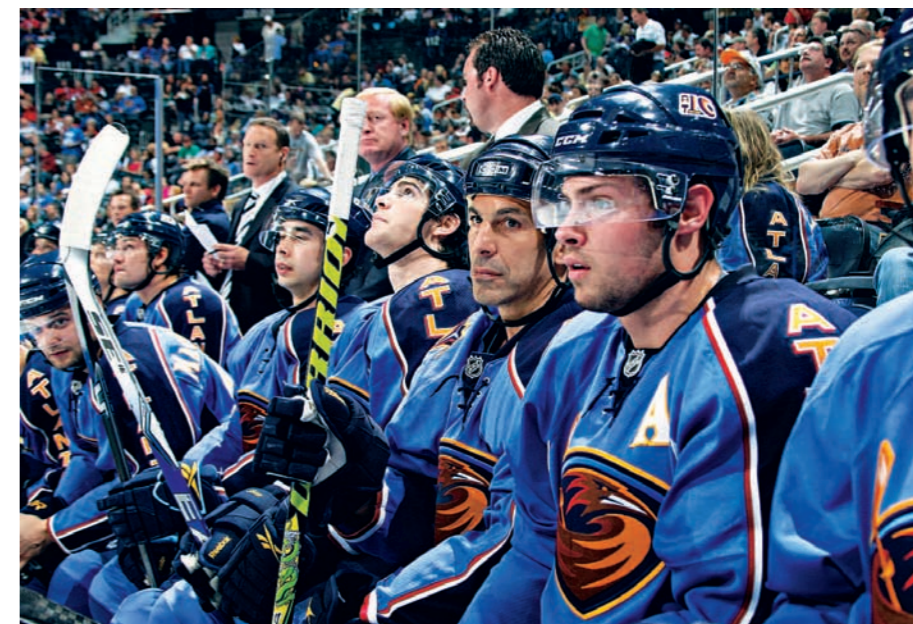
Scott Cunningham



→ Zach had the chance of a lifetime when he played with mentor Chris Chelios (centered) in 2010.

Doughty told *Yerevan* magazine, “At a young age, he’s already one of the best defensemen for Atlanta. Some say that I’ve started slow, too. He doesn’t have anything to worry about. People and fans see a slow start with points and they don’t realize that sometimes, the bounces don’t go your way. With his talent, there’s no doubt in my mind that he’s going to be on the next United States Olympic team.” The blue-collared Bogosian echoed much of the same with his workman-like outlook and approach.

“I don’t care for personal statistics. If I score 20 goals a season, good for me, but if I don’t, I won’t lose sleep on it. It doesn’t matter if I put up 20 points a season or 70, I still play want to play an all-around game and good defense. As a defenseman, all I worry about is keeping pucks out of the net and helping my team win deep into the playoffs and a Stanley Cup. And hopefully, I can be a guy my team can lean on to help lead the way.” After Bogosian signed a three-year, \$2.6 million contract – set to expire after this season – he made the Thrashers roster out of training camp and quickly become a leader on the Atlanta blue line. He had veteran Mathieu Schneider, 21 years his senior, as his defensive partner and closest friend on the team. Last year the greats kept filing in and Bogosian became a kid in the candy store when his favorite player growing up, and the legend he most modeled his game after – Chris Chelios – laced his skates for one last run with the Thrashers. At 49, the Greek-American Chelios retired last year after 26 seasons as a defenseman, in between, accomplishing a litany of feats that place him among the NHL’s all-time greats. “When I was with Atlanta, I was with him every day, and even got to meet Ike,” Chelios told *Yerevan* magazine. “Zach bent over backwards for me by picking me up, taking me for dinner and made me feel very welcomed. And I knew why I was there – to help try to settle him down. Had he played in the era I played in and been the go to guy as I was, he’d put up really big numbers, too. Times are different though and the games changed a lot. It was a really nice experience to work with a kid with a great attitude who loved to play hockey.”



Scott Cunningham

“When I get mad, I have a switch in my head and I just snap a little bit. It’s good to have a mean streak, to stand up and protect yourself. I play with no fear, yet play clean.”

In addition to occasionally dropping the hammer and lighting the lamp, Bogosian’s library of fights and flying fisticuffs is steadily growing, too. He is certainly not afraid to get physical. “I don’t really like to fight too much. I love doing it when it happens, but I never go into a game with thoughts of fighting someone. When you look for a fight, that’s when you get your ass kicked.” Zach admits to beatings while growing up from brother Aaron as the source to his mean streak now. “They used to battle pretty good and as a father, I knew when to let them go and when to step in to make sure they wouldn’t beat each other to death,” says Ike. “I’ve always been goofy off the ice,” adds Zach. “On it though, it’s very different. I see it as ‘if I’m not going to hit them, they’re going to hit me. So I might as well just hit them.’ In locker rooms, I want to be known as a great defenseman who finishes checks and plays hard. But in no way do I run around like an idiot trying to hurt someone.” Zach has dealt with his fair share of physical pain as well, including already missing a couple weeks earlier this season due to a shoulder injury.

Eight games into his career, a broken leg sidelined him for two months. Last year, he dealt with a season-long wrist injury that reduced him to being an “ice robot,” he says. But the physical specimen has overcome it all, as he continues to play premium minutes against top lines. “I’m not one to make excuses, but it didn’t feel right when I had the puck. Looking back on last year, I should’ve taken a few games off to really recover and get healthy. But it wasn’t in my nature. I wanted to do the team well. It was hard, but also a learning process. Every year, I feel a lot more confident in my game than I did the year before.” Adds Chelios: “Playing with Zach last year, he’s got the mentality that he’s faster than the puck and thinks he can cover two or three guys by himself in the zone, and that’s just because he’s young. I see him as a fearless kid with a lot of skill, size and potential. He’s obviously got all the tools to be a great defenseman. With coaching and a little bit of structure, he’ll simplify his game and be a much more effective player. It’s just a matter of time.” At the sage age of 20, time is most definitely on his side to fix the kinks. ■