

THREE BOBCATS SIGN NHL CONTRACTS

Shortridge to San Jose,
Rafferty to Vancouver,
Fortunato to Nashville

BY BRIAN KOONZ

FOR NEARLY 48 HOURS, the pendulum of emotions swung widely for Quinnipiac hockey standouts Andrew Shortridge, Brogan Rafferty and Brandon Fortunato.

After the Bobcats fell to Minnesota Duluth, 3-1, in the NCAA Midwest Regional Final in March, their locker room grew thick with disappointment. The season was over with a No. 7 national ranking, a shared ECAC regular-season title and a record of 26-10-2.

"It takes a little longer to take that jersey off for the last time, especially for the senior class," said Shortridge, a junior who won this year's Ken Dryden Award as the top goaltender in the ECAC with an 11-4-2 league record, a 1.47 goals-against average and a .938 save percentage.

Right about that time—even a little earlier, actually—his cell phone began to buzz with text messages.

"My family adviser had been keeping in touch with all the [NHL] teams that were interested in me," Shortridge said. "I remember looking at my phone, and I saw a couple of texts from him. There were some teams with significant interest in me."

Perhaps no team was more interested in Shortridge than the San Jose Sharks and their American Hockey League affiliate, the San Jose Barracuda. Shortridge signed a one-year, entry-level deal and made his AHL debut on April 13.

Just like that, the pendulum swung squarely to the side of euphoria, two days after the season ended in a strange locker room in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

The text messages were pretty much the same on Rafferty's phone. And Fortunato's phone.

"You're so emotionally invested in wanting to win a national championship in college," said Rafferty, who ended the season with four goals and 20 assists for 24 points. "When that doesn't happen, it's obviously heartbreaking."



Photo San Jose Barracuda



Photo Vancouver Canucks



Photo Rob Rasmussen / Quinnipiac Athletics

1. Former men's ice hockey goalkeeper **Andrew Shortridge** signed a one-year, entry-level contract with the NHL's San Jose Sharks after Quinnipiac ended its season. He is shown guarding the goal for the San Jose Barracuda, the AHL affiliate of the Sharks.

2. **Brogan Rafferty** made his NHL debut for the Vancouver Canucks on April 4 against the Nashville Predators, after signing a one-year, entry-level contract with the team. The former Quinnipiac defenseman earned his bachelor's degree in finance this spring.

3. Despite breaking his fibula late in the season, **Brandon Fortunato** impressed the NHL's Nashville Predators enough to offer him a two-year, entry-level contract. The former Quinnipiac defenseman earned his bachelor's degree in entrepreneurship and small business management in May.

Like Shortridge, Rafferty was a junior. The gritty, right-handed defenseman had a decision to make: Come back to Quinnipiac for another year of college hockey or leave school for a shot at the NHL.

"I got on the bus after we lost, and my agent was texting me, and everyone was asking me what I was going to do," said Rafferty, who earned his bachelor of science in finance this spring, after taking extra credits in summer school. "And then, you wake up Monday morning and you get the missed call from your agent and you're like, 'OK, here we go.'"

Rafferty signed a one-year, entry-level contract with the Vancouver Canucks and made his NHL debut, including the time-honored solo lap around the rink, four days after Quinnipiac's season-ending setback. He played just over 12 minutes in a 3-2 road loss to the Nashville Predators on April 4.

"When you step on the ice for the first time, all the pressure and anxiety you're feeling before the game goes away," Rafferty said. "My family was in the building and saw me skate, so that was a special moment for them as well as me."

Rafferty became the third former Bobcat to play his first NHL game in 2018-19, joining Devon Toews '17 of the New York Islanders and Connor Clifton '17 of the Boston Bruins. Clifton became the first QU alumnus to score in the Stanley Cup Final in May when he put the Bruins on the board in a 4-2 victory over the St. Louis Blues in Game 1.

Senior defenseman Chase Priskie, a top-10 finalist for the Hobie Baker Award as the nation's top college hockey player, is expected to sign an NHL contract later this summer, after graduating from the School of Business in May with his MBA. Priskie told the Washington Capitals, who own his rights until Aug. 15, that he doesn't plan to sign with them.

Fortunato, meanwhile, was a fifth-year senior with no college eligibility remaining. The skilled, sharpshooting defenseman was playing the best hockey of his career when he broke his fibula in February during practice.

Fortunato finished the 2018-19 season with five goals and 23 assists for 28 points, good enough for second on the team in assists despite missing the last 12 games of the season.

"It was definitely a little nerve-wracking at first. I didn't know I was going to be out this long," said Fortunato, who graduated with his bachelor of science in entrepreneurship and small business management in May. "I'm grateful for the games that I did play. I never wanted the season to end the way it did, of course. But I'm very fortunate the games I did play were good enough for teams to be interested in me."

Fortunato signed a two-year, entry-level contract with Nashville. Like his Quinnipiac teammates, the chance to play in the NHL—after all those years skating across frozen ponds and empty rinks—was a ticket to a dream.

"Honestly, it's a really hard decision to make, and you have to make it quickly," said Shortridge, a mechanical engineering major who hopes to finish his degree down the road. "Quinnipiac has given me so much over the last three years, but these opportunities don't come around all that often. You don't know if they're going to come again, so you have to take advantage of them when you can."

AS GOOD AS GOLD

Melissa Samoskevich '19 didn't waste any time proving she belonged on the U.S. Women's National Team in April at the IIHF Women's World Championship in Espoo, Finland.

Samoskevich scored a goal against Finland in the first game and another against Russia en route to the gold medal for Team USA. The performance marked the fifth straight world championship for the U.S. women's hockey team.

Samoskevich and the Americans won in convincing fashion, outscoring the opposition, 41-5, in seven games, including 10-0 and 8-0 victories over Russia.

"It's still kind of shocking to me. I've looked up to those girls for so long," said Samoskevich, who graduated in May with a bachelor of arts in history. "To finally take the journey with them and celebrate, it was awesome. I still haven't grasped it completely."

After leading Quinnipiac with 13 goals this season, Samoskevich was named to the U.S. Women's National Team roster in March for the IIHF world championship tournament. She also played for Team USA last November at the Four Nations Cup in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

"I give a lot of props to the girls. It's not easy letting in a rookie the way they did, but they all made me feel at home," Samoskevich said. "I've won gold medals with the Under-18 team, but it's way different when you do it with the national team. I don't know if I'll ever have words for it because it's such an honor."

Samoskevich, who grew up in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, made a point of bringing her gold medal to campus. "I wanted to show my professors, my teammates, my coaches—so many people have played a huge role in this," she said. "I'm very grateful to everybody. They're part of the journey, too."

For Samoskevich, the journey took flight in a backyard rink before she attended Shattuck-St. Mary's School in Minnesota for high school hockey, and then, Quinnipiac for ECAC hockey.

"It's so awesome playing here because there's such a strong support system and the facilities are great, obviously," she said. "Not everyone can say they've had the Frozen Four at their school. I know a couple of the Wisconsin girls from national team stuff.

They came in and they were like, 'Wow, we're impressed.'"

With professional hockey and the 2022 Winter Olympics in her sights, Samoskevich plans to focus full-time on her athletic career. Someday, she hopes to teach elementary school, or maybe, history at a prep school so she can coach hockey, too.

"I still have one more year of school [to earn a master of arts in teaching] before I can get certified," Samoskevich said. "But right now, there's still so much I want to do with hockey."

— Brian Koonz

