



# GABBY'S GUESTS

Often we only see Marian Gaborik lifting people out of their seats on his way to a breakaway goal. What you may not know is that he's also busy lifting the hearts of those in need in the State of Hockey.

BY ERIC WALSH

*Photographs by Bruce Kluckhohn*

**T**HREE SUMMERS AGO, MARIAN GABORIK OPENED AN ICE hockey rink in his hometown of Trencin, Slovakia. MG Arena was built for kids in Trencin because he felt the local youth needed another place to play the sport they loved. That's not all, Gaborik knows playing hockey is an expensive proposition, so he set up a foundation to aid Trencin children with purchasing their equipment. Now, it seems, the all-star forward has set his sights on elevating the spirits of youngsters who reside here in the State of Hockey.

During 36 of the Wild's contests at Xcel Energy Center during the 2007-08 season, guests of Gaborik watch NHL hockey action from the unique bird's eye view provided by the

Club Cambria Suite Level.

The only player left from the Wild's inaugural roster, Gaborik originally purchased Suite No. 58 for 11 games last season and donated the space to

the Minnesota Sports and Entertainment (MSE) Community Giving Fund for local charities to enjoy. Since then, he's expanded upon his gift to satisfy the entire 2007-08 home schedule.



In turn, several deserving charitable groups have joined the Team of 18,000 to cheer the Wild on. Talk about a golden opportunity.

"I am excited about this program," said Gaborik, who holds numerous Wild franchise records, including most games played, most goals and most assists. "I think it is a great opportunity to provide charities that don't normally have the chance to watch the Wild play the ability to enjoy a game in the comfort of an Xcel Energy Center suite."

Most of these groups have been working steadily with the MSE Community Giving department since the Wild made its debut on the ice back in 2000. Beneficiaries include organizations like the Ronald McDonald House, Children's Hospital and Clin-

ics of Minnesota, and HopeKids just to name a few. Of course, there are many more.

"We appreciate the generosity Marian has shown toward this program," said Amy Woog Patnode, Manager of MSE Community Giving. "It means a great deal to everyone involved. Often times, it's one of the few opportunities

these families have when they can forget about their illnesses or difficult situations and just have fun."

HopeKids, for example, is a support group for children diagnosed with cancer and other life-threatening illnesses. Executive Director, Josh Taylor coordinates events and activities that promote hope and empower young people's lives at the same time.

"Every month we have a calendar full of exciting events for the entire family to always look forward to and get excited about," Taylor said about HopeKids, which was MSE Charity of the Month for January 2008. "It gives the kids another reason to keep on fighting. There's always something around the corner to look forward to. It just makes their future a lot brighter."

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Because of his position, Taylor is able to witness first-hand what sort of impact it can really have.

“The chance to watch a Wild game from Gaborik’s suite is something that would never be available to our kids – it makes them feel so special,” he said. “Just to be in a suite like that and be looked after is such a big thing to them. To be the center of attention is really cool. The experience doesn’t end that night either, the memories are great for them as well. So often I hear from families that the kids talk about our events and being Gabby’s Guest for weeks and months afterwards.”

One of these kids was an eight-year-old boy battling cancer. He had just learned the day before attending

the game on Jan. 18, 2008 that he was in remission. The Wild was facing the defending Stanley Cup champion Anaheim Ducks that night. But it was Chase who was rejoicing in the victory of life. And, with the company of his mother and friends, Chase had a most terrific time doing it.

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“We want to say a huge THANK YOU to the Minnesota Wild organization for an awesome time,” his mom, Jenna said of the experience. “We have done quite a few fun things this year, but the Wild game as Gaborik’s Guests ranks right up near the top. What a great way to celebrate the end of a very difficult year.”

Athletes are inspirational. They are role models. The ones who give back do make a difference. Gaborik knows it. When he is on the ice, the audience finds him. Every shift. Every shot. Every goal. Somewhere, amongst the crowd, children are smiling, for they are the honorary guests of Marian Gaborik. •

