

LOCAL HERO

Taylor Senecal's championship return to Essex High is about much more than hockey in Vermont

By Patrick Donnelly

KELLY MCMANUS SOUZA still remembers the first time she saw Taylor Senecal play.

McManus Souza, Berwick's head coach and director and 19-U coach at Assabet Valley, was at an event in Toronto with her oldest daughter.

"She was probably 10 or 11 years old," McManus Souza said. "I remember approaching her and her family and telling them, 'When you're ready to play girls hockey, make sure your first call is to Assabet.' ... I don't think I've ever done that with another player or family, approaching them in that capacity.

"I couldn't let that opportunity go, given how good she was at that age."

Soon enough, the Essex Junction, Vt., native was donning an Assabet sweater. Eventually, she made the same first impression as a freshman at Essex High.

"She was something special," Jerry Gernander said. "Even as a freshman there, she just skated so well, and she thought the game at a different level. It was pretty clear that she was pretty special."

Gernander's daughter played with Senecal in the 2021-22 season. Fast forward to late 2024 and Gernander was about to embark on his first season as head coach of Essex High. When he got a look at his roster, Senecal's name immediately jumped out.

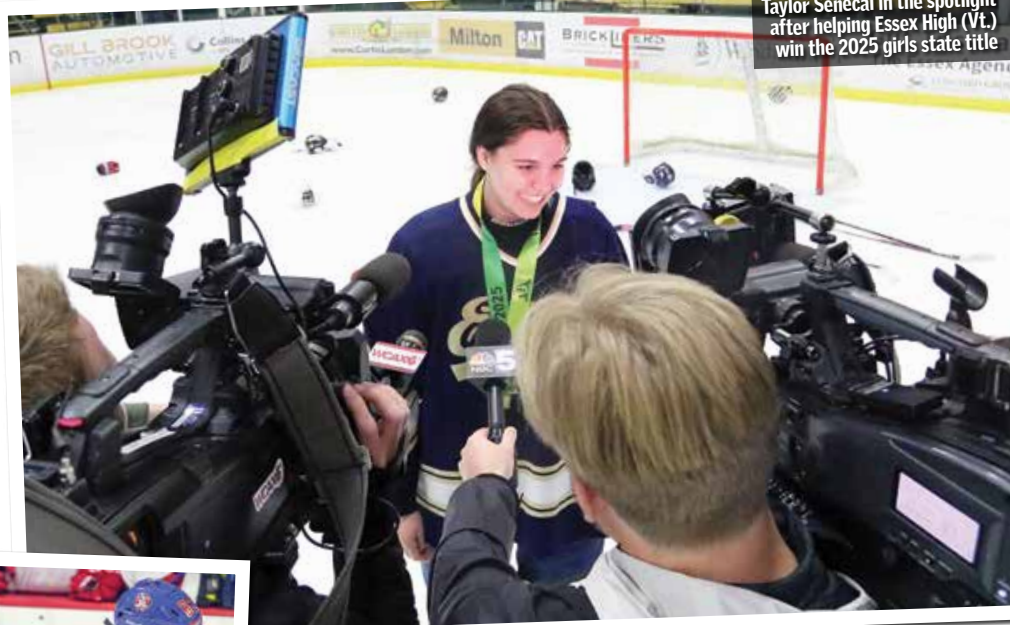
"When I signed up to coach, I didn't know she was going to be back," Gernander said. "So it was a pleasant surprise for me ... coming in off the street to coach, and being able to coach somebody like that was pretty nice."

To understand Gernander's surprise is to understand Senecal's winding journey.

Taylor Senecal (Essex Junction, Vt.) competed at USA Hockey Select camps and won gold at the U-18 Women's World Championships in January 2024.



Taylor Senecal in the spotlight after helping Essex High (Vt.) win the 2025 girls state title



After posting 53 points (29 goals) on defense as a freshman at Essex, Senecal moved on to NAHA for her sophomore year. As a junior, she played with the Little Caesars 19Us in Detroit, initially living with the team in Michigan and taking online classes. Senecal also competed at USA Hockey Select camps and won gold at the U-18 Women's World Championships in January 2024.

"When you are that good, you're being pulled in so many different directions," McManus Souza said. "In Vermont, it's tough for kids in that area that don't have access to all the opportunities you have in Massachusetts, in terms of depth of programs and all that.

"She comes from a very close family. Going away from home wasn't something she really wanted to do."

Things became complicated after Senecal committed to Colgate. Committing to play Division 1 hockey was one thing, but she still needed to meet the university's academic standards. After talking to her family and her coaches,

Senecal decided to return home to Vermont to attend school in person at Essex. Most weekends were spent flying out to play in tournaments with Little Caesars.

"Everyone understood I needed to be home and doing the schooling piece, while still being part of the team, just not out there as much," Senecal said. "So, that was difficult."

But all the travel and bouncing around were a challenge as she balanced hockey and schoolwork. A midseason coaching change brought in a new staff that wasn't entirely in lockstep with Senecal's arrangement.

"If I could have lived out there, it would have been great," Senecal said. "The opportunity and the program was amazing, but it was challenging to keep my school on pace. ... All my teachers in Vermont understood the position I was in, and they always gave me the support I needed.

"The traveling was definitely tiresome,



but that comes with the sport at a higher level. So, I feel like it was good preparation for college next year because we're going to be on the road a lot."

The new staff wanted Senecal to be in Michigan full time if she was going to return to Little Caesars this past season. She had a decision to make. There was no bad blood with Little Caesars, but there was a better fit. Senecal returned to

Assabet for split-season club hockey and Essex during the high school season.

"I was a little bit unsure about playing (at Essex)," Senecal said. "Ultimately, I talked with (McManus Souza), and we thought it would be a really good opportunity for me to still be on the ice every day, stay in game shape and be competitive, just getting the reps I wouldn't get not living in Mass., and obviously on a split-season team when all those girls go to prep school."

It was an exciting opportunity for Senecal, who also had the full support of the staff at Colgate, to represent her hometown and give back to her community.

"I was a huge advocate of her playing high school," McManus Souza said. "I just felt like that if she could have fun doing it, and she was excited about doing it, which she was, then there was no reason for her to not be a part of that."

After winning the Massachusetts 19-U state title with Assabet in the fall, Senecal

returned to the ice in Essex for the high school season. Although she's never had any trouble fitting in on the ice, Senecal initially was out of her element.

"Honestly, it was a big change," she said. "At the beginning of the season, I was sort of like the outsider almost because I'd never really known the Essex girls that much, playing AAA. I knew a couple girls on the team, and that was kind of it. It felt like, 'Oh, it's Taylor, like the USA kid or whatever.'"

"Spending more time with everyone, they got to warm up to me, and that was a big part of us all coming together."

Her impact was immediate, even with the Hornets' 2-3-0 mark before the new year.

"I didn't know her on a personal level at all, so that was kind of nice for me to find out that she's such a good kid and a team-first kid, and that's how the season went for us," Gernander said. "You knew that she knew the game well enough, and she was going to make the right play. She was going to take the puck when she needed to. If we needed a goal, you didn't have to go down and prompt her. She knew the situation."

The wins came as Essex won eight of its 13 remaining regular-season games.

"The later we got into the season, we were all getting really close to family," Senecal said. "We all just sort of clicked and were on the same page."

February break offered a crucial chance to bond. With some of her teammates off to vacations, Senecal and a smattering of others were home practicing.

"Throughout that whole week of training, we kind of all came together and

Continued on Page 30

■ YOUTH HOCKEY

Bourget said, players improve differently at different ages.

"The way I looked at it was, you're not going to teach honors physics to a fourth-grader, right? But you're also not going to teach basic multiplication and fractions to a 10th-grader," Bourget said. "When they went to the blanket policy before, that's kind of what they did."

What might be best for players at 10-U or 12-U, might not be best for older players at 150 or 16-U and up. By the time a player reaches those older levels, that hockey sense and emphasis on possession already might be established.

"I look at it as overall development, and the brain and body develop differently at different age groups," Bourget said. "To have the same rules govern 10-U, 12-U, 14-U, 16-U, 18-U and all the way up, never changing a rule, that doesn't leave any growth potential. You're basically taking that whole group under the same expectations, but mentally, they're not there yet. Mentally, physically, they're completely different.

"That, for me, was bizarre with the rule-making, but I thought the intent was great because it breeds creativity and gives kids a different way of looking at the game. ... It's going to breed better quality hockey players by the time they're older."

Finding better ways to develop young hockey players is, above all else, the goal. The new rules will last until 2029. By then, there undoubtedly will be more rule changes (and more debate) with an eye toward setting players on the best possible path to success.

"That's ultimately what we're trying to do as a country," Guerriero said. "We have the most youth hockey players in the world, and if you think about the numbers alone and our resources, we should be at a completely different level than everybody else. So, what is it? You see some of these players in Europe and those countries, and their hockey IQ and awareness of the game is elite.

"We're elite here, too, but there's so much room for potential." ■

■ HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS: SENECAL

► continued from Page 26

became best friends," Senecal said. "It was like, 'Wow, this whole team ... we're family.' Like win or lose, we were going to be a family. We knew we had each other's backs, and we went into games with nothing to lose."

That mindset carried into the playoffs with Essex seeded No. 4 at 10-8-0 overall. The Hornets made quick work of No. 5 Rice Memorial with a 5-1 win in the quarterfinals. Their run continued with a 2-1 upset over No. 1 Burlington/Colchester in the semis. "We all just knew," Senecal said. "After we won that semis game, we were like, 'We're winning. There's no choice but to win.'"

Win they did. Essex upset No. 2 Belkows Free Academy-St. Alban's, 5-1, in the championship. Senecal scored twice and added two assists.

"That was actually insane because I've never won a state championship in Vermont, and to think of it like my senior year, the last youth year of hockey, and I won one is so funny to me but also truly special," Senecal said. "We had an insane turnout of people. I think the whole school was there, and everyone was screaming and yelling. There were kids from the youth Essex teams all on the glass, too.

"Just seeing everyone's face light up, I felt like I was truly part of a special group within my community."

Even after 41 points (33 goals, including five in the playoffs) and a state championship, Senecal's greatest impact might have been in the community, giving the next generation of Vermont skaters another role model to aspire to, not unlike Senecal's inspiration growing up.

"I was signing stuff after games for little tiny toddlers," Senecal said. "It was just a great experience. Honestly, just giving those kids someone to look up to, I feel like it's really special. Growing up, I looked up to Amanda Pelkey. So, to think that I'm like those younger kids' Amanda Pelkey is insane."

Pelkey (Montpelier, Vt.), currently a forward with the Boston Fleet of the PWHL, played at NAHA and captained the University of Vermont before embarking on her professional career.

Senecal hopes to leave the Essex program in good hands. She's close with her younger teammates. They still skate and work out together. Even beyond current Hornets players, there's

a foundation being laid for continued growth.

"We want to grow the game, and we want more girls to play the game," Gernander said. "So seeing someone have success, you certainly hope there's ramifications from that. She's also really active with coaching. She's out there, and kids get to be on the ice with her, which is pretty cool. Certainly, the hope is that it inspires other girls to take up the stick and give it a shot.

Hockey might have been a driving force behind Senecal's return to Essex, but it became about more than just her play on the ice.

"She's just a kid you want to be around," McManus Souza said. "So many of those kids look up to her. I was at (New England) District tryouts with my younger daughter, and every player from Vermont asked if we knew Taylor Senecal. She's emerged as a local hero in some aspects this year.

"Hockey aside, those are the memories she's going to have for the rest of her life." ■



Paul Lamontagne

Taylor Senecal scored twice in the state championship game.