

'Kings on the road: Minor-league hockey players chase their dreams across the South

Experience is gained, hopes are tested

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They trickled off the bus and into a mild winter's day in northern Alabama, the opening face-off with Huntsville a little more than an hour away. Duffel bags were plucked from a trailer and hauled through a side door of the Von Braun Center. A right turn down a curved hallway led the players toward what they believed to be the visitors' locker room.

What they found instead was a misshapen space suggesting design flaw over dressing area. Two sets of double doors gave way to what was, essentially, a three-sided cupboard. With a collegiate game between Alabama-Huntsville and Lake Superior State to be played later that night, the Mississippi RiverKings, members of the Southern Professional Hockey League, were relegated to a room labeled "STORAGE."

"Make sure you put that in the article," defenseman Mike Grace told a reporter. "This is a (expletive) joke."

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Some five hours earlier, at 8 a.m., the RiverKings gathered at their home arena to begin a two-day road trip through Alabama and Georgia. With sleepy eyes and tired voices they shoved sticks, skates and pucks into the trailer, then climbed onto the dark red motor coach that doubles as their pseudo-fraternity house.

After the driver successfully combatted a leak in the hose that pumps water into the onboard bathroom, the RiverKings hit the road roughly 20 minutes late.

The vehicle itself bears a striking resemblance to the Knight Bus from J.K. Rowling's famed Harry Potter series. A strip of linoleum flooring stretches from front to back, guiding passengers through the small kitchenette and into the sleeping quarters, where bunks are arranged one on top of another as if in a submarine. At the back of the bus is a door to a private room with four additional bunks and a television, luxuries afforded to the more experienced players.

A bathroom is adjacent to the kitchen. The sign above the toilet reads: “Pee in toilet only!!! No paper towels!!! No toilet tissue!!! No poo!!!”

Derek Landmesser, the head coach, sits on a leather couch in the front of the bus, his left arm resting on a small dining table. Across the aisle are two bunks reserved for Landmesser and Rick “Rusty” Hanlon, the athletic trainer. A third bunk for equipment manager Brian Schmidt folds down from the ceiling above the table.

Landmesser, 39, was born in Thunder Bay, Ontario, and had a 15-year professional career across hockey’s minor leagues. His last nine seasons were spent with the RiverKings, and he still holds a handful of franchise records. The 2013-14 season is his third as Mississippi’s head coach.

As the bus chugs along, Landmesser discusses life in the SPHL with a reporter and photographer who were granted an all-access look at the RiverKings franchise. The league itself is three rungs below the National Hockey League and acts primarily as a breeding ground for young, inexperienced players with aspirations of reaching a higher level. In baseball terms, the RiverKings are the equivalent of Single A.

It forces Landmesser to operate on a diminutive scale: He scouts players without a scouting budget, takes risks based on word-of-mouth, signs players to three-game tryouts and endures the unregulated poaching by teams from above and abroad. The weekly salary cap of \$5,600 is divided among the 18-man roster. Money is not a motivating factor, but a love of the game is.

“It’s a long process finding players,” he said.

This year’s squad features 12 rookies after nine members of the 2012-13 team were promoted to higher levels, Landmesser says. Upward of 80 percent of the roster is Canadian, and one player is from the Czech Republic. Collectively, they yearn for stardom.

Landmesser, though, is not looking for a call-up. After more than a dozen years in Southaven, he and his family are settled. Leaving no longer crosses his mind with his three daughters entrenched in youth cheerleading programs and an organization that treats him “extremely well.”

It means that, unlike his players, Landmesser’s goal is to remain.

“I’m very content here,” he said. “I’m happy.”

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In the hallway outside the locker room in Huntsville, Brian Schmidt unpacks a Kenmore sewing machine and places it on a collapsible table. It has been nearly 20 years since he learned to stitch in an eighth-grade home economics class, a skill he assumed would never be called into use. But then he became an equipment manager for a slew of minor league hockey teams, and things suddenly changed.

Fourteen minutes before face-off Schmidt is a tailor, chuckling and cursing to himself as he repairs the detached name on the back of goaltender John Griggs' jersey. Later he becomes a welder, using a blowtorch to melt the blade off one broken stick and attach it to another. The constant whir of his skate sharpener drones on in the background.

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The RiverKings return to the locker room after the first period on the wrong end of a 1-0 score. Huntsville's Brock Sawyer pounced on a juicy rebound five minutes into the game.

The quietness of the room is startling. Nary a word is spoken for 15 minutes as sticks are retaped, jerseys removed and personal reflection is savored.

Down the hall, Schmidt sharpens the skates of forward Matt Harrington, who relays tales of female conquests to pass the time.

Landmesser gathers his thoughts in a closet-sized room off the main hallway until there are five minutes left in intermission. When he addresses the team, it's in the same manner as every other speech throughout the weekend: with handwritten notes on a paper folded into thirds, and with at least one F-word in every sentence, and usually more. He praises his team's effort, assuring the players that goals will come.

But on this afternoon he is incorrect. Frustration bubbles over after a scoreless second period, and forward Todd Hosmer berates a referee over what he feels are unfair face-offs. He follows the official all the way to his dressing room, and a security guard steps between them as Hosmer unleashes a hailstorm of profanity.

The RiverKings go on to lose 1-0 before a crowd of 3,743. This one, the players feel, got away from them.

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At Landmesser's request, the bus pulls off at a Subway restaurant down the road from the arena. It is the team's restaurant of choice for the simple fact that it's both healthy and inexpensive. Some of the players eat as many as four footlong sandwiches in the span of two days.

Yet this particular Subway serves another purpose. It has a bathroom, and more specifically it has a bathroom without restrictions. A line of players handle their business now to preserve the fluids-only policy on the bus.

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The air is quiet after the loss. Conversations are sparse and sleep pervades as the bus keeps rolling along.

Leo Thomas snores softly in a second-level bunk on the left side of the hallway. He is 31, far and away the oldest player on the team, and his body needs every bit of rest it can get.

Thomas is the RiverKings' captain, chosen by Landmesser for his maturity and poise that are products of a professional career spanning more than a decade. They first met roughly 15 years ago when Landmesser played with Thomas' older brother, Kahlil. The younger Leo would venture onto the ice with the professionals, soaking in the game and the work ethic that comes with it.

The Thomas brothers are black, and from an early age Kahlil and his mother lectured young Leo about the racism he was likely to experience in an overwhelmingly white sport. Leo remembers a junior game in Flint, Mich., in which he scored two quick goals that frustrated the opposition. They sent a player onto the ice to shadow Leo's every move, the N-word flying out of his mouth unrelentingly.

Leo alerted the referee and promptly scored a third goal. When the opposing player came after him, Leo cross-checked him through the face mask.

"From the age of 7 to 16, it was pretty bad," Leo said.

But as his career progressed, society did too. The slurs slowly evaporated, and by the time Leo turned pro the N-word spats were long gone. He is now universally respected across the SPHL.

With a girlfriend and 2-year-old son back home in Fort Wayne, Ind., rationalizing each additional hockey season is increasingly difficult. His goal was to reach the NHL, but he understands that window of opportunity has closed. The single game he played in the American Hockey League — one step below the big show — during the 2007-08 season remains a cherished memory.

"It was amazing," Leo said. "The first period was kind of like, 'Oh my god. I'm up here.'"

For the past two years Leo has said he will play two more seasons before retiring. Yet for some reason he can't give the game up, and the chase for a fourth championship — he won three at Fort Wayne — continues.

And though he loves his girlfriend and son, they will be there when he retires. But hockey, Leo says, is different, which is why he keeps hanging on.

"Once it's gone, it's gone."

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What should be a four-hour trip from Huntsville, Ala., to Columbus, Ga., drags on into a fifth when the bus is pulled over for running a red light at 7:56 p.m. The driver pleads his case to the police officer as players snicker in the back of the bus.

“You guys are bad luck,” Landmesser says tongue-in-cheek to the reporter and photographer. “I’ve been doing this 17 years and I’ve never been pulled over.”

The officer relents and issues a warning. The RiverKings arrive at Country Inns & Suites at 11:56 p.m.

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Music blares from the Columbus Cottonmouths’ locker room as the RiverKings enter the Civic Center the following afternoon. With a horn section blasting and a raspy voice in full shout, the unmistakable sound of DMX reverberates through the hallway.

Leo Thomas, whose iPod is bursting with DMX tunes, raps along to “Where the Hood At?” as he walks to the locker room. His competitive juices flow.

“How does that music not make you want to kill somebody?” he asks with a smile.

* * *

Tyler Sheldrake pours himself a cup of coffee two hours before face-off with Columbus. Wearing powder blue sandals, shorts and a long-sleeved T-shirt, he stirs his beverage slowly and sips at it through a mouth with the wrong number of teeth.

On the surface, Sheldrake is hockey personified. The Dunnville, Ontario, native stands 6-foot-1 and weighs 230 pounds. He sports a buzz cut, and his scraggly brown beard extends several inches below his chin. When he smiles, the absence of front teeth — he took a slap shot in the face at age 18 — makes you chuckle. And he sprints back to his car before the bus leaves Southaven to retrieve his paint can-sized tub of Stoker’s chewing tobacco.

“That would have been bad,” he said.

Sheldrake, 24, is the enforcer for the RiverKings. He assumes a bloody and bruising persona for the betterment of the team, fighting on command to protect his 17 brothers. In 39 games, Sheldrake, a forward, has amassed 169 penalty minutes to just a single goal.

He learned to skate when “my old man got me out on the pond” at age 4 or 5. When Sheldrake and his three younger siblings fell in love with the game, their father built them a rink on the land adjacent to the trucking company he owned. Earth was dug up, tarps were laid, the ground was flooded. It was hockey heaven.

As he matured, Sheldrake realized his talents were far from exemplary. He was more than competent, a big, strong body who knew the ins and outs of the game, but he lacked the elite skill set to take him to the next level. So he turned to fighting.

“If that’s the way I was going to keep playing hockey, that’s the way I was going to do it,” Sheldrake said.

With a vicious right hand and fearless spirit, Sheldrake played four years in the Central Hockey League — think AA baseball — before being sent down to the RiverKings. Like all enforcers, Sheldrake is revered by his teammates, and off the ice he is one of the most approachable players in the locker room. To this day, he says, he's never thrown a punch outside of a hockey game.

But Sunday is another day at the office, and the Cottonmouths have a player whom Sheldrake has already fought twice this season. It means he woke up this morning expecting to fight, a prospect that, to a reporter, is as unfamiliar as it is intriguing.

“I try not to think about it too much before the game,” Sheldrake says. “Don't want anything to throw you off.”

He winks and retreats to his locker. Anything to keep playing hockey.

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With 5:37 remaining in the second period, the goalless drought expires. Hosmer breaks through the Columbus defense on the power play and kicks the puck forward before slotting it home.

As if a lid on the net has vanished, the RiverKings' offense ignites. They score again 21 seconds later and tack on a third goal near the end of the period.

The three-goal lead is plenty of cushion, and the RiverKings cruise to a 4-2 win. What was a quiet locker room — and this time it is an actual locker room — turns rowdy as Luke Bryan blasts through the portable stereo.

Country music, left wing Matt Whitehead explains, is reserved for victories.

Yeah, that's my kind of night.

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The final checkpoint is a gas station 20 miles from the Columbus Civic Center in Salem, Ala., where players putter around a disappointing convenience store. They load up on beef jerky and chips and candy before turning their attention to the cooler. What's left of their per diem is pooled to buy their end-of-trip reward — beer.

Twelve- and 18-packs of Coors Light and Miller Lite are transported onto the bus, where a happy bunch of hockey players imbibes the whole way home. Even the staff — Landmesser, Schmidt, Hanlon and the broadcaster, David Schmoll — indulge in a few brews.

Games are played and stories are swapped as laughter echoes up and down the bus. Another weekend of hockey is in the books, still several hundred miles left to drive.



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