

One of the tests for a hockey player with NHL ambitions

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY BY GARY MOORE



ROAD WARRIORS

is life on the bus. Here is our diary of one road trip.

THE BUS THAT IS TO BE MY MOBILE HOME FOR THE NEXT FIVE DAYS IS PARKED CROOKEDLY BESIDE KELOWNA'S MEMORIAL ARENA.

I'm joining the Rockets for a gruelling three-games-in-three-nights swing through the Prairies where they will clash with the Swift Current Broncos, the Medicine Hat Tigers and the

Lethbridge Hurricanes.

I'm the first there, except for bus driver Remo, who is chatting on a cellular phone. But it isn't long before the peace is disturbed by the gradual arrival of the players, most carrying pillows, sleeping bags and enough junk food to last through a civil war. They weave past me as they prepare themselves for the trip.



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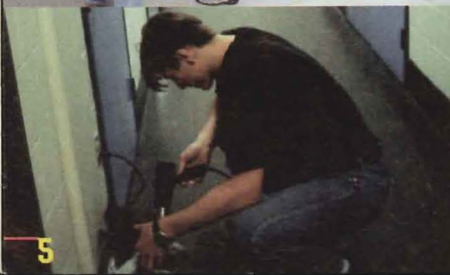
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IMAGES

- 1. The Rockets spend a quiet moment before their battle with Swift Current.
 - 2. As the team practices in Medicine Hat CKOV announcer Rick Ball looks on from the broadcast booth.
 - 3. Rookie Vern Fiddler gets some much appreciated support on tour from sister Bobby Joe, mom Patricia, dad Bob and family and friends.
 - 4. The team exits the bus upon arrival for its first practice in Medicine Hat after a 12-hour drive from Kelowna.
 - 5. Defenceman Karel Betik, who hails from Ostrava of the Czech Republic, tries to dry his skates with a hairdryer.
- Previous page: Nolan Yonkman (right) eyes the photographer as teammate Bruce Harrison grabs a snooze on the bus.



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Just after 7:00 p.m. the bus rolls onto Hwy 97 heading east. As a guest of the Rockets I am given a pair of seats to myself on the journey to the Prairies. The older players sit in the back, the rookies in the front and although the two groups keep mostly to themselves, there is a strong brotherlike bond between them. The vets are always lending money to the rookies and each has an I.O.U. sheet.

I try to get as comfortable as I can in my seat as we pass Armstrong then Revelstoke, letting hours of senseless violence from the mini-T.V. screens stimulate my mind as the kilometres disappear.

Sleeping on a bus is almost impossible for most people, but the players seem to have a sys-

- 6. The Rockets gather for practice in the Medicine Hat arena after breakfast the morning of the first day of their Prairie swing.
- 7. Coach Peter Anholt has words with the referee over a call in game three held in Lethbridge.
- 8. Left Winger Todd Fedoruk charges down the stairs of the arena in Swift Current.

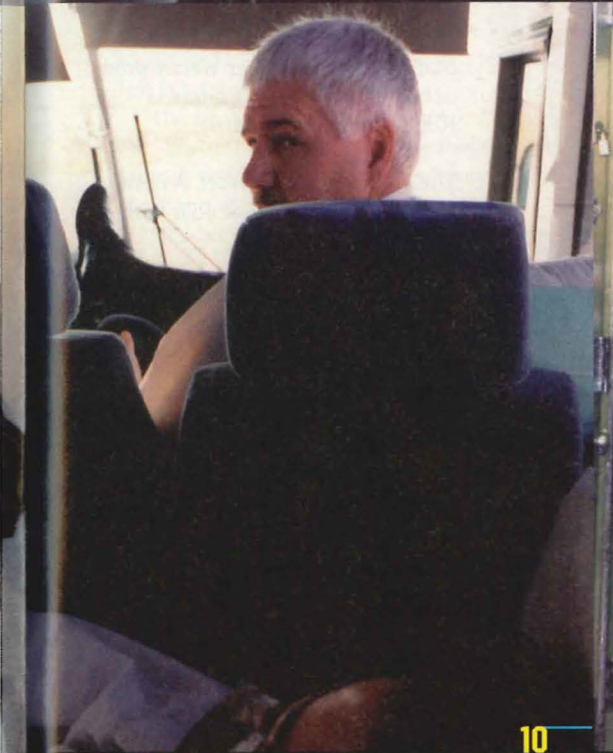
tem down. Sleeping bags are strewn everywhere, making a trip to the toilet a bizarre obstacle course and a nightmare for the bladder.

Almost 12 hours later the bus rolls into

“IT'S LONESOME FOR US AND IT'S HARD BECAUSE HE'S OUR YOUNGEST AND WE ARE A VERY CLOSE FAMILY—



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9. While waiting for their shift, Rockets players watch the action in game one in Swift Current.
 10. General Manager Bruce Hamilton relaxes on the bus while trainer Stu Oviatt tries to catch a little shut eye with his tie.
 11. Goalies Chris Noble (wearing mask) and Jordan Watt pause before the game in Medicine Hat.

Medicine Hat, Alberta. We take up residence in a local hotel, our homebase for the next three days. Despite the rowdy stereotype associated with team road trips, the rules that govern the way the

Rockets players behave are strict. There's a curfew, no alcohol and drugs or girls in the rooms are allowed. Disobedience could mean a fine or game suspension, perhaps both. Some players may question this authority, but most comply with little protest.

"If they are serious about hockey they should easily be able to quit partying during the season," says Assistant Coach Ryan Stewart.

Despite this, a popular craze among hockey players in the Western Hockey League is chewing tobacco, which is banned. Strict consequences imposed on those caught using chew don't seem to worry many of the WHL players who have taken a liking to the product. The Rockets are no exception. Kelowna's first challenge on this

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I M A G E S

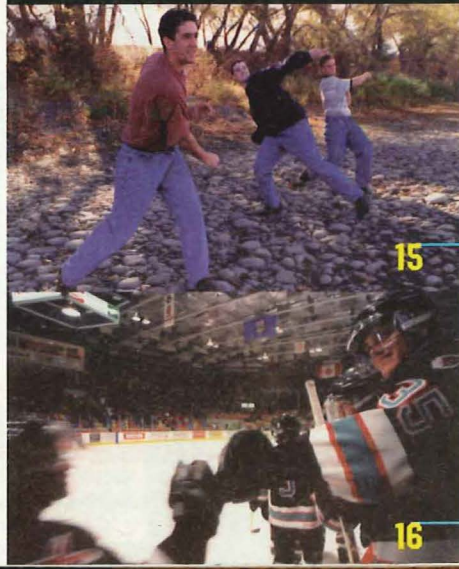
12. (l to r) Rookies Bruce Harrison, Vern Fiddler, Rory McDade, Jordan Watt and Nolan Yonkman pass the time on the bus playing cards.

13. Defenceman Nolan Yonkman signs an autograph for a fan while teammate Bruce Harrison looks on.

14. All decked out in their best, the Rockets walk to practice in Medicine Hat.

15. (l to r) Chad Wilchynski, Kris Mallette and Justin Jack stretch their arms and legs by tossing stones into the Saskatchewan River.

16. Right Winger Justin Jack gets tagged to go on the ice by another teammate during the game against Medicine Hat.



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(cont'd from page 25)

Prairie tour are the Swift Current Broncos, a team with 8 wins, 1 loss. The Rockets are on a three-game winless streak.

On Friday evening, following a two-hour trip east, the players sit in the visitors' dressing room minutes before the game, struggling quietly with their anxieties. Outside the door, the arena is filling quickly and you can hear the murmur of the crowd and the music. The puck drops just after 7:30 p.m.

Stupid penalties seal the Rockets fate in the first period. General Manager Bruce Hamilton asks me to give the players room as they file into the dressing room after suffering a humiliating 6-2 loss. Frustration is etched on their faces. Goalie Jordan Watt breaks his stick in the hallway. Hamilton looks pissed off and is mumbling something to himself. The bus ride back to Medicine Hat is long and deathly quiet.

The next day back in the hotel, 17-year-old Bruce Harrison, a tall redhead from Merritt, delves into the pros and cons of the sport and all the road trips.

"It's all in the experience, going from town to town, seeing new places. Going places with the guys, you become pretty good friends."

The 6-foot, 180-pound Harrison played with the Rockets last season as well, traveling as far as Brandon, Manitoba, and Portland, Oregon. He endures countless hours on the road and stoically faces the highs and lows of junior hockey. One would expect that from an aspiring NHLer, but Harrison has no illusions of making it to the pros.

"I don't really see hockey as my future. It's what I'm doing right now, but if it all ended tomorrow and they cut me when I got back from this trip I wouldn't think of it as a great loss."

In the off season, he plays in the punk band "Rectal Thermometer."

The only Kelowna native player on the team is the leading goal scorer. But Jason Deleurme doesn't have high hopes of playing pro hockey.

"I hate to say it but my chances are very slim. Look at my stature, I'm only 5' 7" and there's only one other player in the NHL that stands that tall. I'm still going to give it my best shot."

Grade 11 K.L.O secondary student Vernon Fiddler is a baby-faced rookie who can skate circles around his opponents. He



CLOCKWISE (from top left): Defenceman Gavin McLeod contemplates his game before the match with Swift Current; Coach Peter Anholt; Team Captain Jason Deleurme is interviewed by local media following the win against Medicine Hat; Defenceman Chad Wilchynski mulls over the row of sticks prior to game three against Lethbridge.

credits street hockey as the birth of his love for the sport and the Edmonton teen, who was on skates at age five, hopes for the day he's drafted. He's encouraged along the way by his enthusiastic family.

"You can count the games we've missed on one hand," says mom Patricia Fiddler.

She and husband Bob are proud of their son and say he's well-taken care of by the team, but having him away from home is sometimes very difficult.

"It's lonesome for us and it's hard because he's our youngest and we are a very close family. But it's also been exciting to know he is in the WHL. We get a call from him every day." Bob Fiddler says.

"We're playing in the Smartie box," Kevin Marsh says to no one in particular before game two Saturday. I don't realize

what he's talking about until I see the inside of the empty Medicine Hat arena. Every seat is painted bright red, blue, yellow, orange — the colors of Smarties.

By the end of the first period the Rockets are down 2-0 and defenceman Jeff Church has broken something in his hand and has been taken to hospital. It doesn't look good for the team. But the second period brings new promise in the shape of three goals. Hamilton stands at the back, in the shadows, and watches expressionless.

Coach Peter Anholt yells to the players from behind the bench, his face turning red. The Rockets hold on to a one-goal lead until Medicine Hat responds to the thunderous glee of the locals. It's tied 3-3.

(cont'd on page 44)

“SOMETIMES YOU GO TO A GAME AND IT'S EASY TO FORGET THAT THEY'RE MOSTLY TEENAGERS . . .”