



HOCKEYTOWN, SUMMER VERSION

KELOWNA AND THE WIDER OKANAGAN'S APPEAL HAS CAUGHT THE ATTENTION OF MANY FORMER CHLERS AND CURRENT NHL PLAYERS **BY DOYLE POTENTEAU**

If the recent migration of many current professional players is any indication, don't be surprised to see this year's participants in the Home Hardware CHL/NHL Top Prospects Game eventually settle in and around Kelowna.

With its hot, dry climate, cool lakes, golf courses and wineries, it's hard to beat the Okanagan as a summer destination.

Little wonder, then, that this semi-arid region of British Columbia has become a favourite off-season resting stop for NHL players.

Stretching from Osoyoos in the south, at the Canada-U.S. border, to Vernon in the north, the Okanagan is around 165 kilometres long and is home to approximately 350,000 people. The heart of the region, both physically and financially, is Kelowna, pop. 125,000, home to an estimated 75 NHLers, either current or past, who spend at least part of the year here.

"I go back [to Kelowna] because I spent Grade 11 and 12 there playing with the Rockets, and there are tons of my teammates and guys older than me who played for the Rockets who go back," said Toronto Maple Leafs Luke Schenn, who rented a place in Kelowna for six weeks last summer.

As the logos on their helmets show, Shea Weber, Josh Gorges and Tyler Myers have all moved on to vastly successful NHL careers but their ties to Kelowna remain strong.

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Courtesy of www.tourismkelowna.com

“Other guys around the league go back — Carey Price, Ryan Getzlaf, Dany Heatley. My personal opinion is that it is the nicest place in Canada, especially in the summertime. Big lake, you have the mountains, go mountain-biking, do all the outdoorsy stuff. Some of the best golf in Canada. You don’t have to drive anywhere to go to the lake. You can be in the city. You can work out with tons of different NHL players. With the skates in August, able to skate with that high calibre of player. It has many different draws, and it is a pretty cool place.

Schenn’s praise is echoed by players now retired as well:

“I’ve travelled all over North America and the world, and sometimes you don’t appreciate how beautiful it is here until you go elsewhere,” said Jeff Finley, a former defenceman who played 18 seasons of professional hockey, including 15 in the NHL with six teams (New York Islanders, Philadelphia Flyers, Winnipeg Jets, Phoenix Coyotes, New York Rangers and St. Louis Blues). “This is one of the most beautiful places in the world. It’s in Canada, the summers are hot and there’s no humidity, so why wouldn’t you want to spend your summers here?”

Plenty of professional players do. In fact, it’s becoming a who’s who list that would make one heck of an NHL team, starting with a quartet of former Kelowna Rockets in Duncan Keith, Shea Weber, Tyler Myers and Luke Schenn. Other former Rockets call this area home, too, such as Josh Gorges (Montreal), Blake Comeau (Calgary Flames), Brandon McMillan (Anaheim) plus Chuck Kobasew (Minnesota).

That some former Rockets choose to summer here is understandable, especially in the case of Keith (raised in Penticton), Gorges (Kelowna) and Weber (Sicamous, which is also the home of Toronto Maple Leafs defenceman Cody Franson). Others, though, had little or no connection to this region before relocating here. That includes players such as Andrew Ladd (Winnipeg), Brent Seabrook (Chicago), Ryan Getzlaf (Anaheim), Carey Price

(Montreal), Jordin Tootoo (Nashville), Scottie Upshall (Florida), Scott Hartnell (Philadelphia), Cam Barker (Edmonton) and Jarome Iginla (Calgary).

Raised in Vernon, Finley hung up his skates in 2006 after playing one season in Germany. In the summer of 2007, he joined the Rockets as an assistant coach before leaving in 2009 because of family commitments. Today, he’s a scout for the Detroit Red Wings and he still calls the Okanagan home.

“I moved to Kelowna when I was 20, so all of my pro career I’ve spent the summer in Kelowna,” said Finley. “Back then, there was maybe a handful of [NHLers] who lived here. Greg Adams was around, so was Len Barrie, but there wasn’t a lot. When we were training during the summer, we used to really struggle to get enough guys to have a decent skate. Now it’s quite different.

“The last summer that I played, there were too many guys and we had to go out and get a second ice time. And all of them legitimately deserved to be there — they were all either playing in the AHL, the NHL or in Europe. So it was great from a training perspective, but trying to get ice time took some juggling.”

For Seabrook, relocating to Kelowna proved to be more out of necessity. Raised in the Vancouver suburb of Tsawwassen, Seabrook told the *Chicago Sun-Times* that he moved to get away from all the craziness that engulfed Vancouver during the Canucks’ run at the Stanley Cup last season, including their first-round victory over Chicago in seven games.

“I had to get out of there,” Seabrook said. “I moved up to Kelowna and took possession of our place right before the finals started. It was good for me to get out of the city. It was pretty

Scenes like this don’t attract just tourists – Kelowna’s appeal extends to professional athletes wanting to take advantage of the agreeable conditions during the off-season.

crazy there, lots of stuff going on. I had golf clubs [put] in front of my front door after we lost to Vancouver and things like that. So it was good to get out of the city.”

With Okanagan Lake stretching 135 kilometres in length, finding lakefront property isn't hard — especially with a former NHL defenceman, Todd Simpson, having transformed into a real estate agent. Simpson's website has five testimonials, four coming from hockey players, including Franson and Wade Redden.

Real estate agents, though, aren't the only ones financially benefitting from this migration to the Okanagan. Shops, restaurants, nightlife stops and the public are also reaping positive rewards.

With its abundance of golf courses, there's no shortage of player requests to attend local fund-raisers. For example, Kobasew annually lends his name and time to the Sandman Harvest Celebrity Golf Classic, as do plenty of his NHL compatriots. The charity tournament, which began in 1996 with Greg Adams, raises money for children in need. Further, Ladd, Weber, Dany Heatley and Comeau, along with golf professionals Dick Zokol, Dave Barr, Ian Leggatt and Ray Stewart, took part in the Big Shots charity tournament in early August at Black Mountain Golf Course, which raised money for the *Daily Courier's* annual Christmastime Be An Angel Foundation.

Said Ladd: “It's a great cause with 100% of the proceeds going toward helping needy families at what can be a tough time of the



Ryan Getzlaf (left) and Shea Weber are two of many NHL players who can often be found on the golf course during the summer months.

hockey players here, it's not out of the ordinary to see Jarome Iginla or Getzlaf or whoever,” said Lambert. “Everybody knows that they have summer places here, and, because of that, I think they're not bothered that much in comparison to other cities, where there aren't as many well-known people or hockey players.”

With so many NHLers extolling the virtues of the Okanagan, don't be surprised if even more wind up relocating here.

“Every summer, you hear of a couple more names that you had no idea were even in town, like Tootoo or Carey Price,” said Finley. “It's fantastic — the economy benefits and it's also good for hockey guys to be around one another in the summer so they can train with one another. I don't see how this doesn't continue to grow and become more and more of a hotbed.”

“When you look at cities and what Kelowna offers, and how beautiful it is here,” added Lambert, “I certainly think this is a trend that will continue.” ☺

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year.” Adding his name to the growing list of former professional players who moved to the Okanagan was Dan Lambert. A former Quebec Nordiques draft pick (sixth round, 106th overall in 1989), Lambert, 41, played professionally for 19 seasons, mostly in the minor leagues and Europe. In 2009, after retiring that season, he joined the Rockets' staff as an assistant coach and relocated to Kelowna.

One of the unseen benefits that Kelowna offers is the ability to blend in — something not afforded to NHLers in their team cities.

“Because there's so many

THE NEXT STEP?

Call it trickle-down economics.

With more and more NHL players moving into the Okanagan, don't be surprised if hockey's next great player hails from this region. And if not that, then certainly an eventual rise in professional players who hail from south-central B.C.

For when it comes to knowing what it takes to play hockey at the highest levels, the Okanagan has an overflowing bankful of knowledge. And it's only

a matter of time before that knowledge is passed on to today's youth, as more and more former NHLers join local minor hockey associations, such as Richard Matvichuk in Kelowna and Dean McAmmond in Vernon.

Then there's the untold benefits of seeing today's NHL stars live in person.

“Anytime you can take your kids down to the rink on an August morning and see 40 NHL players on the ice having a scrimmage, it's exciting,”

said Detroit Red Wings scout and former NHL blueliner Jeff Finley. “It just brings that much more excitement to the game and to the local kids.

“I hope it rubs off; it should. I know when you're around the rink, those guys are more than willing to sign autographs and come out to the local hockey schools and help out when they can. It can't help but be a positive thing.”

— *PotentEAU*