

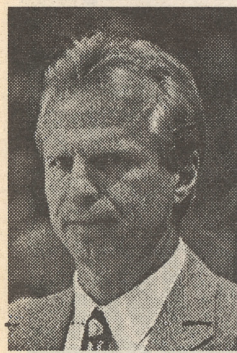
# Ftorek's Way

October 1995

Calder Cup Champion Albany River Rats return with their gritty, hard-nosed play

BY RANDY HOWARD

It was downright eerie, actually, walking down an aisle of the barren Knick Arena. A Transylvanian-like fog, laden with a burnt metallic smell, hovered over the rink. The slightest sound bounced off a sea of empty seats. On the ice, a voice rose above the smoke screen and caromed off the plexi-glass to an open space: *Unless you wanna play goalie, stay the hell out of the blue area.*



Or something like that. Barring pads, and taking size into consideration, Robbie Ftorek looks like any other player on the ice. He laces up his skates for practice. He wears gloves and wields a stick. He even takes shots on goal. His competitive playing days may be numbered, but the River Rats' coach still possesses a live-for-the-present attitude.

"I've been giving this a lot of thought lately," Ftorek says. "Some people don't have the right idea what's going on. You're taught by the ones you love the most."

He definitely has passion. Maybe it's an inborn thing.

For the sake of patronage, his father was an accomplished softball pitcher in Needham, Mass. His little league coach, Ray Hopkins, had a penchant for winning. At age five, Ftorek was introduced to figure skating by Maribell Vincent Brown, an Olympic coach who died, along with the U.S. Ski Team, in a 1960 plane crash.

"She was the reason I was able to play hockey," he says. "I was small and she taught me how to skate properly right away. She taught me how to use the edges."

A devout Bruins' fan, Ftorek's father was a season ticket-holder who'd bring his wide-eyed son to many games. Seated in front of the Ftorek's were Olympic legends Billy and Bobby Clary. An invitation to hear the play by play from the best spectators around segued into a meeting with Flemming McKell, young Ftorek's hero.

"He took me into the dressing room, and gave me his game stick. I'll never forget it," Ftorek says. "He sawed off



Last season, the River Rats allowed fewer goals than any other team in AHL history

Photo by Sue Cummings

another stick and taped the top off. Then (he) gave me a pat on the butt and said, 'Good luck.'"

Luck he had, and maybe even a hand from the universal monkey. Call it what you want, but Ftorek has been nothing short of a hat trick to this game. It defies logic that a 137-pound puckster could take a Detroit training camp by storm and eventually make the grade. Especially when bruisers DelVecchio and Howe are waiting to maim somebody. There's the silver medal from the '72 Olympics. There's an illustrious career, MVP awards and an election to the United States Hockey Hall of Fame.

And his favorite sport in high school was soccer.

Monday was a holiday. No game for the Rats. But Ftorek drove to Worcester to scout out the Icecats.

Already, he's put last year's Calder Cup Championship behind him.

There were great moments to remember, no doubt about it. That was the team that set an AHL record for the fewest amount of goals ever allowed in an 80-

game season. That was the year that rookie Steve Sullivan led the team in scoring. That was the team that has sent some nine players to the Devils, the parent team in New Jersey. Robbie Ftorek was voted AHL Coach of the Year.

All those successes culminated opening night against the Hershey Bears when

dication of how an October team will be performing over a seven month stretch, Ftorek keeps a watchful eye on his team.

"We've got a long way to go. We haven't played as well as we are capable of. I'm not really excited about it, but it's early yet."

Practice, hard work and letting the

**"It's really a pretty simple game. When we don't have the puck, everybody has to play defense until we get it back."**

the Knick was festooned with decorations, the cup spiraled down from the ceiling and the banner was hoisted up to the rafters.

Ftorek says he was moved by the spectacle.

"Robbie has done an outstanding job for us," says General Manager John Weisbrod. "He took a team last year that underwent a lot of changes and managed to keep them on an even keel—a winning keel."

Although a mere 1-1 record is no in-

puck do the work may be the staples of the River Rats' success this year. After the Rats downed the Bears opening night, Ftorek commended a fist full of soft-handed players.

Size is always a factor. Smaller players will have to "initiate and finish checks," as well as "play with aggressiveness and courage," Ftorek says. Perhaps he's just a little biased when he says the smaller players can be intelligent and use their leverage to get by.

And then there's the defense. In the

NHL and the WHA, Ftorek was one of the most prolific offensive players in professional hockey. He's quick to point out though, that every player has his defensive responsibilities.

"It's really a pretty simple game. When we don't have the puck, everybody has to play defense until we get it back."

Simplicity and passion. Luck and courage.

These could be the fundamental ingredients for another successful season. And if Ftorek's players are buying what he has to sell, if just a few of these quali-

ties rub off, that could very well be the case.

"He's unique in that he has an appeal to everybody," Weisbrod says. "Some coaches aren't approachable, some are player's coaches. Robbie's best trait is that he accomplishes both. He manages to ride that line."

It's mid-October and the fog has broken over the ice. The silence at the Knick has been replaced by cheering fans, whistles, slamming boards and other jubilant sounds. Robbie Ftorek stands behind his team in a snazzy suit—probably an Armani—and taps a player on the top of the head. *Good job*, he says. ♦



Center Pascal Rheaume returns for another season with the Rats

Photo by Liz Lajouesse