

# Devil's Desire YOUR TICKET FROM ALBANY TO EAST RUTHERFORD

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By Randy Howard

Go south, young man. Go to East Rutherford, New Jersey and tell us what life is like at the top. It won't be easy. You'll be playing behind the most tenacious goalie in the league, Martin Brodeur. There will be days when you want to get into the action so badly, you'll feel like flying down the ice and cracking the opponents goalie in the head. Again, be patient.

Life in the NHL. Fame, money and all the accouterments. Not a bad way to earn a buck, playing professional sports.

"I can't say enough about it," says Corey Schwab, former River Rats goalie. "It's a tremendous feeling to be in the NHL, even though we aren't winning right now. It's a lot of fun. It's everything I expected."

And it was everything he dreamed about during his two-year tenure with the Rats.

A product of the organization, Schwab was drafted in 1990, and spent four years in the minors, two in Utica. His fight to the top was a great learning experience, developing his pro style under the tutelage of Coach Robbie Ftorek. He says without it he wouldn't be in the NHL.

Unfortunately, the price for reward doesn't necessarily come at the end of the rainbow. Schwab has only had four starts since joining the team on Nov. 15. He has an 0-3 record, which includes losses to Tampa Bay, Florida and Chicago, but boasts a 2.24 goals-against average.

"It's been frustrating," the Saskatchewan native says of his lack of playing time.

Recently, Schwab had a one-night stand with the Rats and the Knickerbocker Arena, where he was on conditioning loan. He had to prepare for the western swing that New Jersey would be taking in the second half. Even the backup goalie has to be at the top of his game.

"Mario Lemieux is one of the most difficult to stop on the breakaway," Schwab says hesitantly, with deference to players around the league. "On the highlights he makes goalies look silly."

Schwab doesn't like to dwell on the abilities of his opponents. Coming from a New Jersey player this year, that might be the prudent approach.

The Devils, at 21-22, edged the Caps last night with a defense that was as tight as the lips on a Whitewater confidante. The offense, to their credit, tallied three

goals. While January in Albany has been unseasonably rainy, the scoring drought continues in East Rutherford.

Meanwhile the River Rats are cruising at 30-9-3, owning the best record in the AHL. But Robbie Ftorek is not a numbers guy. He doesn't care about stats or whose garnering hat tricks. As an aficionado of hockey with a key post, he knows all about what's transpiring within the franchise. The Devils are second to last in the Atlantic Division because they can't score enough, and General Manager Lou Lamoriello could pick up the phone any day now.

"It's very simple," Ftorek says of his relations with Lamoriello. "He tells me what to do and I do it, whether we bring a guy up or bring a guy down."

All it takes is a simple call for a Rat to become a Devil.

When the call is made, Ftorek, revered as the father-figure of the squad (and a pragmatist in the upper echelons of the blink-and-you-missed-it world of pro hockey), invites the player into his office for his standardized version of congratulations. "I've got good news and bad news," he'll intimate to his pupil. "The bad news is I'm losing a player. The good news is it you."

When a player is transacted in the New Jersey organization, a trickling effect usually follows. Players that have been brought up must prove they're worthy to challenge the bona fide hockey players of the world. Those still with the River Rats better hustle to impress Ftorek over the new vacancy.

"We look at it as a very positive thing," says Ftorek. "We've done what we're supposed to do and that's get a player to the NHL."

The philosophy of the New Jersey Devils organization remains consistent at each level. River Rats General Manager, and former NHL player John Weisbrod, puts it succinctly: "We gauge our success by how many guys we put in the NHL rather than how many Calder Cups we win."

Kind of staggering given Weisbrod's chief responsibility is to make sure the seats are filled.

To Albany, a city that has watched several slipshod teams make runs for the box offices only to fall flat on their faces, this may be a sad irony. The players come here to succeed. When they succeed, they're history.

If fans feel jilted after their favorite player moves on to New Jersey, perhaps they should take the advice of Ftorek, a former player himself who sums up the scenario: "Good players have an oppor-



Photo by Heather L. Rohan

## Coach Robbie Ftorek plays a major role in the Devils' organization.

tunity to move on, the fans need to appreciate the kids when they're here. It like when you get stitches. It not gonna be better tomorrow, but it will eventually be okay."

While Ftorek is apt to coin the phrase "time heals all wounds," Scott Pellerin, now in his third year with the New Jersey organization, has spent his fair share of time in the AHL. He remembers quite a bit about his first year in the organization. Fresh out of the University of Maine, the River Rats left wing played in 45 games for the Devils in the 1992-1993 season, contributing 10 goals and 11 assists.

In his third start of the season the Devils took on Mario Lemieux and the Pittsburgh Penguins. Herb Brooks, then the coach for the Devils, asked Pellerin

to shadow Lemieux, follow his every move and prevent him from scoring. Admittedly green and somewhat nervous, Pellerin survived the night having accomplished what Brooks asked. Lemieux went back to the hotel as a mortal and nary a goal to brag about.

"It was a tight-checking defensive game," says Pellerin, adding that the fans and Lemieux himself understood the situation that night.

Since that first season, Pellerin's playing time in the NHL was cut to only one game last year and five this year.

"It's been discouraging, I won't disagree with you there," the 26 year old says. On this night, Pellerin was watching the Devils play on television. "But you can't get disappointed, or lose your motivation and desire. You've got to keep working hard in practice."