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The Twin City Cyclones
aim to do what other
minor-league hockey
teams here have not:
stick around.

BY CHRIS GIGLEY

stops
here

The offices of the Twin City Cyclones are hidden behind the Lawrence Joel Veterans Memorial Coliseum Annex on Deacon Boulevard. Only a nondescript red awning and team logo on a lone steel door indicate this is the nerve center of Winston-Salem's latest minor-league hockey team.

But inside, five full-time front-office employees work the phones, sift through files, and organize schedules to ensure the city's eighth minor-league hockey team is permanent. In the second office on the left, Mark Richards, the team's head coach and general manager, maps out his to-do list for the next day's practice. Don Lewis, equipment manager and team sales representative, is in there, too, filling out emigration forms on Richards' laptop.

Richards wears a five o'clock shadow that is blossoming into a beard. Now is not the time for shaving. Instead, he is trying to squeeze in as much practice time with the team as possible before they head out on a six-week road trip. Complicating matters is the fact that the annex doesn't have any ice.

"We have to travel to Greensboro to practice every day," Richards says. "It's not a huge deal, but it takes us a good half-day to go over there, get dressed, and practice

for a hour and a half, then shower, get dressed, and get back on the bus again."

By the time the former Pee Dee Cyclones of Florence, S.C., signed a new lease with the LJVM, the facility had already booked the annex for much of October and November. So the team hosted its inaugural home opener October 25, a Thursday, played a second home game two days later, and didn't return until December 13.

"This is a tough league," says John Gurskis, the Cyclone's 32-year-old center and assistant team captain, who played for the Winston-Salem Parrots in 2002-2003. "With so many young kids on the roster, it's tough to go on the road and win."

The schedule weighs heavily on Richards' mind too. He knows a winning team will help him when he's handling his general manager responsibilities. Wins build excitement. Excitement draws more fans.

"Hockey has been here off and on for a long, long time, and everyone has different stories about why it was good at one time, why it went down, and what can make it better," says Richards wearily, as if he's heard every one. "But the bottom line is we need people to come in and buy tickets for us to be here. If that happens, we'll stay."



Mark Richards (middle), Twin City Cyclones head coach and general manager, practices with the team.



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Gypsies on Ice

Heaven knows Richards and his team would love to settle here — they've traveled enough already.

Jozef Kubaliak, the team's 28-year-old defender from Slovakia, has played in the Czech Republic, Sweden, and, last season, Long Beach, California. Goalie Nick Pannoni, a Montana native, is fresh out of college, but even he has played professionally in Seattle and a far-flung place in Canada called Moose Jaw.

Then there's Richards, a 38-year-old Philadelphia native and former goalie who was drafted by the Winnipeg Jets in the 1990 National Hockey League Supplemental Draft. He never made it to the NHL, but his 16-year career in the minors took him to plenty of places.

"I played in the American Hockey League, the East Coast Hockey League, the United League, which is now the International Hockey League," Richards says. "I played in the Central League. Let's just say that I've seen a lot of cities in the Eastern part of the country."

So has Gurskis, who says that's a big reason why he's still playing, even though his chances of reaching the NHL are virtually nil. The Boston native has been in the minors since 1998.

"I've played in Kansas, Indiana, Florida, and Georgia," Gurskis says. "Last year I played in Holland. It was a nice experience. We traveled around to Germany and Czechoslovakia. It was something I wanted to do before I hung 'em up."

Still, Gurskis says he's gotten just as much enjoyment out of his experiences in the United States. "Before I graduated from college, I'd never left New England," he says. "Who would've thought that I'd play in a place like Wichita, Kansas, for two years? Not me."

Gurskis also adds that he'd love to stay in Winston-Salem for more than a year or two. He has already reconnected with fans who knew him from his days with the Parrots, and he absolutely loves being able to play a round of golf in the winter. "I wouldn't even dream of doing that back home," he says, laughing.

Of course, Gurskis says everything hinges on patience — from the fans, the ownership, the league, and the players.

"There's a market here for hockey, but it just won't happen overnight," he says. "It's not going to happen in our first year. It's going to take three to four years."

Revolving Doors

Professional hockey's recent history in Winston-Salem is largely to blame for the community's cautious support.

"If you look back at the '70s, '80s, and even early '90s, this town had some good teams and they'd pack the house," Gurskis says. "It just takes time to reach that point. Other owners have come in and said, 'Here's the team, where's the support?' But it doesn't work like that."

He may or may not be referring to the Parrots, a team in the defunct Atlantic Coast Hockey League. The Parrots moved to town midway through the 2002-2003 season after a Zamboni — an ice resurfacer — broke down during the first intermission of a game at the Bayfront Center in St. Petersburg, Florida. The team promptly bolted for the Piedmont and offered no refunds to their jilted fans in Florida.

That, in a nutshell, is the nagging legacy of independent minor-league hockey. Teams tend to be temporary. A year after the Parrots folded, the Winston-Salem Thunderbirds came to town for one season. Finally, the 2004-2005 Polar Twins arrived and folded with equal speed.

Richards is well aware of that legacy, and he knows how powerful the past can be. Fans in Florence supported its East Coast Hockey League club, the Pee Dee Pride, from 1997 to 2005. Home games at the 7,426-seat Florence Civic Center were usually hot tickets. But ownership moved the franchise to Myrtle Beach in 2005, and fans were still smarting when the Cyclones came to town later that year.

"We tried to make it work there, but we just didn't get the people in the seats like we needed to pay the bills," Richards says. "No matter what we did, we just couldn't get people back excited about hockey."

Winston-Salem is two years removed from its last team. Richards moved in hoping that old wounds from the Polar Twins' departure had healed. So far, he says, they have. Fans and corporate sponsors have bought into Richards' confidence in Cyclones hockey.



The Twin City Cyclones hit the ice at their new home, the Lawrence Joel Veterans Memorial Coliseum. The 2007-2008 season runs through the end of March, and home games include a series of promotional events. Single-game tickets range from \$10.50 to \$15 for adults, and \$6.50 for children ages 3 through 12.

“Whether you’re a hockey fan or not, we’d like to say, ‘Come on out for a cheap night of entertainment, and if you don’t like it, so be it,’” says Richards. “But most people who come through our doors the first time want to come back because it’s a good sport to watch live.”

Real Role Models

Whether the Cyclones win, the team is easy to root for. Anyone who has ever sacrificed to pursue a dream can relate to them.

Players certainly aren’t in it for the money. The team provides furnished apartments and covers utilities, but otherwise the athletes are left to fend for themselves on modest salaries. They aren’t playing for the glory, either. They play in front of a couple thousand fans a night in places like Knoxville and Fayetteville.

For the younger players, it’s all part of paying their dues to reach the East Coast Hockey League, professional

hockey’s double-A level, and, ultimately, the NHL. But for Gurskis and Sirois, it’s all about the hockey.

“I’ve loved hockey since I was 3 years old,” says Sirois, who has climbed as high as the American Hockey League, the triple-A level. “It’s what I’ve always wanted to do. Even if it’s not the NHL, I’m earning a paycheck to do what I love. That’s rare. I’ll keep coming back until my body can’t take it anymore.”

The same goes for Gurskis, who is relishing every moment with the team.

“Once I’m done playing, I’m going to miss the camaraderie,” he says. “I’ll have a Thursday night skate with my buddies back home, but that will be my one night a week to get that camaraderie. Here, I get it every day just shooting the breeze with the guys in the locker room. Bus trips, yeah, you’re on the bus for six hours. But you’re playing cards and everyone is just having a good time.”

Richards can relate. When he finally retired in 2003, he couldn’t stay away and quickly took an assistant coaching job with the team he had played for, the Memphis Riverkings. That December, the head coach was fired and Richards took over. He hasn’t looked back since.

Even now, with all the chaos of a first season in a new city swirling around him, Richards says he wouldn’t rather be anywhere else but his small, windowless office behind the LJVM annex, mapping out lineups and practice schedules. He is incredulous when asked if he ever gets tired of his livelihood.

“Hockey is all I’ve ever done,” he says. “It’s something I definitely love doing. Why would I want to do anything else?” **WS**

HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW

The Twin City Cyclones have a modest goal to shoot for to become Winston-Salem’s longest-tenured hockey team.

- Winston-Salem Polar Twins — 1973-1977
- Carolina/Winston-Salem Thunderbirds — 1982-1992
- Winston-Salem Mammoths — 1995-1996
- Winston-Salem Icehawks — 1997-1999
- Winston-Salem Parrots — 2002-2003
- Winston-Salem T-Birds — 2003-2004
- Winston-Salem Polar Twins — 2004-2005