

Block Party

Watching The Sopes

Brent Sopol has seen, experienced and accomplished a lot over his 17 years of professional hockey. Now 37, the veteran of six NHL franchises reached the pinnacle in 2010 when he helped the Blackhawks win its first Stanley Cup in 49 years.

Since, Sopol has bounced around, though to many his career has dropped off the radar. After winning the Cup, Sopol was apart of the big trade that sent Dustin Byfuglien and Ben Eager to Atlanta in a deal that sent the Hawks Jeremy Morin and the rights to draft Kevin Hayes and Justin Holl. Sopol was traded later that season to Montreal for a playoff run. When no NHL team came calling with any good offers the following summer, Sopol set off to Russia and the KHL.

Standing outside the Chicago Wolves locker room after a tough overtime loss to Milwaukee last Friday night, Sopol reflected on the past four years.

"There's nothing that is pure stoke," Sopol said. "There's peaks and valleys in everything. Three years in Russia – there's many peaks and many valleys."

Sopol inked a one-year deal with the Chicago Wolves earlier this month. His goal is still to draw the attention of an NHL team and Chicago, he says, is the best place for him to do that.

"Why not? This home to me now. This is where my kids are. Obviously this is where I was at in the summertime... this is home for me."

Being closer to home was a huge part of Sopol's decision. Three years playing in Russia took its toll on him and his family. Sopol and his wife Kelly have since separated. She's rooted herself and opened up a new business in Chicago.

"It was tough to be away from my kids, as long as I did," he explained. "Going to a country I didn't know the language, the culture and the hockey and things like that. So it was a big transition. I got respect for those guys that come over [to North America] and Europeans that come over this way now."

Sopol played two seasons in Siberia. He was traded late in that second year to Ufa Salavat Yulayev, which plays in Bashkortostan, which lies in a mountainous region in the southwestern portion of Russia.

Hockey in Russia was a culture shock to Sopol in many ways. He says virtually nothing about the experience is the same as playing in the NHL.

"I think the only same thing is equipment, puck and a stick. Otherwise there's nothing the same," said Sopol. "It's a big ice. So you can't play anywhere near here. You can't hear. It's a completely different style of hockey."

"When you grow up in North America and play the bump-and-grind game, the in-your-face hockey like we do here, it's a big transition going over there where there's basically no hitting."

Fast-forwarding to now, Sopol is focused on helping the Wolves win and hopefully earning another NHL contract. He hasn't looked too far beyond that.

"I have short term goals. I've got long term goals. I just try to take it one day at a time. And look at things as the glass is half-full and see where it makes it and where I end up. It's all about working hard and let the chips fall where they may."

Still, Sopol is self-aware. As with many athletes, he knows there will come a time when he will no longer be able to compete like the player he wants to be. And when that time comes, he says he'll know it.

"When you get to my age and you've been playing the game as long as I have, it's been an amazing career, you always think of those things," Sopol says.

"You got those things in your mind. You have to take things day-by-day. You have short-term goals. And if you execute those short-term goals then you keep going. If not, then maybe you reevaluate and take things to a different way."

In the short-term, Sopol's concentration is on being a leader as well as

calling on his wealth of experience to help guide the young St. Louis Blues prospects achieve their dreams. He accepts his role on the Wolves quite willingly.

"It doesn't need to be communicated to me. I've been around a long time. It's to help these young guys out and help these d-men out. The little tricks of the trade. Just be a leader out there. Play and have fun, and show those kids how it's done."

After being apart of the Blackhawks championship in 2010, Sopol made some history by taking the Stanley Cup to Chicago's Gay Pride Parade. The Cup did not make a return appearance in 2013.

"I took the Cup that year to the Pride Parade in honor of Brendan Burke, and his passing at such a young age – the son of Brian Burke. It was a tough day, taking it for him."

Even with the push of efforts like the NHL-endorsed You Can Play project, Sopol believes it would still be difficult for a gay professional athlete to publically state his sexuality.

"Yeah. I'm sure. In any industry, an individual, I'm sure it's not easy. I can't say, because I'm not. It definitely can't be easy no matter what sport, business or whatever it is."

Sopol drew the ire of many Americans in October of 2012 when he took to the Twittersverse to express his apparent displeasure with the idea of President Barack Obama being re-elected for a second term.

"If you crazies elect Obama again I'm coming back to Chicago and living off the system," posted to his Twitter account while in Russia where he was playing for Novokuznetsk Metallurg in Siberia.

This predictably sprouted outrage on Twitter as seeing a professional athlete who has collected millions in career earnings joke about living off the government. I jestingly asked Sopol on Friday if he, indeed, has returned now to do just that.

"[Laughs] I come back here to always work."

Sopol said he was just trying to participate. He's an engaged and concerned citizen.

"I watch and we live in this country," he explained. "Every individual, I think, should be. I think everybody should be aware. You should have a grasp of kind of what's going on because it's important."

Sopol says he's School of Defense summer training school is something he plans to bring to Chicago this coming summer. Coaching is something he has in the back of his mind. But for now, his focus is still on playing the game.

"It's something I'll definitely look at," Sopol responded when asked if coaching was in his future. "It's something I have in my back pocket for the future. But, like I said, I'm just trying to take things one day at a time. I'll reevaluate as the season goes on, and the summer goes on, and see where things are at."

With his children and life now rooted in Chicago, it's possible this association with the Chicago Wolves organization could be an ongoing one – even after his playing days are through.

"This is my city and this is where I plan on being for a long time.

"Three years in Russia (and now) to be able to come back here and play in the city that I love is pretty special."



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