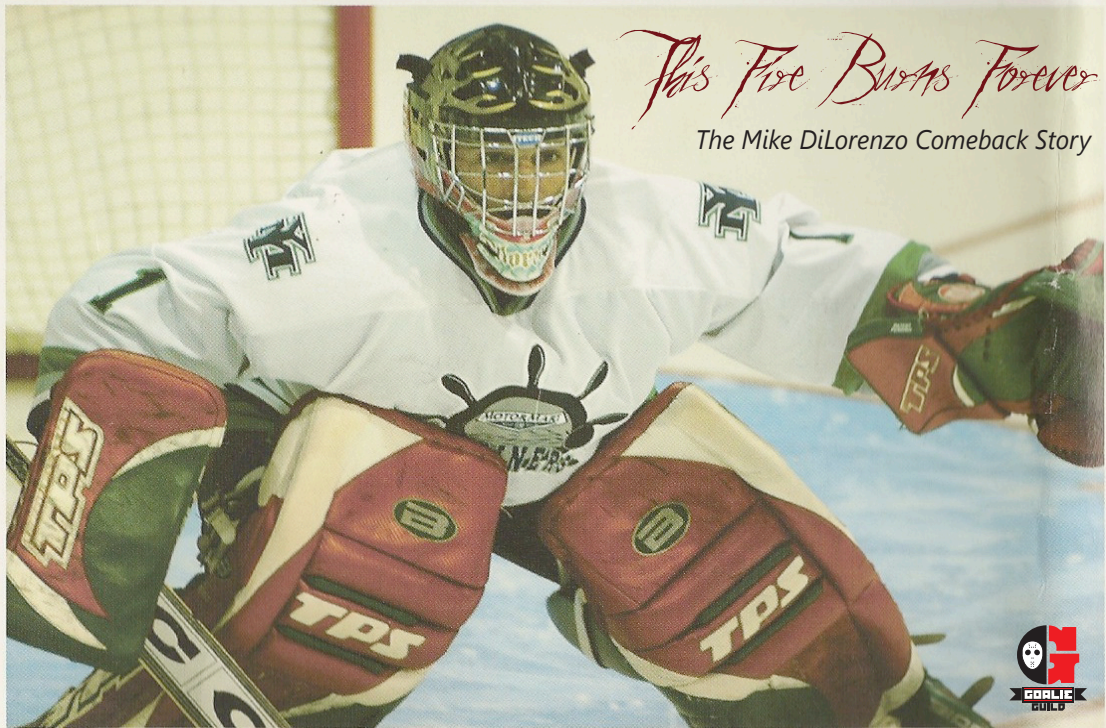


This Fire Burns Forever

The Mike DiLorenzo Comeback Story



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This Fire Burns Forever

THE MIKE DILORENZO COMEBACK STORY

Written by Justin Goldman, founder of The Goalie Guild, this **Bild Novelle** is dedicated as a personalized narrative for DiLorenzo's successful rise, his frustrating fall, and his triumphant return to the game he loves.

This four-part series was penned throughout August and September, 2011. Parts I, II and III were published on The Goalie Guild website, but Justin published Part IV in this inaugural **Bild Novelle**, which is available as a free download. All photos of Mike are copyright the DiLorenzo family and are not to be redistributed without express written consent from The Goalie Guild.

PART I: THE YOUNGER YEARS

PART II: THE JUNIOR YEARS

PART III: FROM PRO TO JOE SCHMOE

PART IV: THIS FIRE BURNS FOREVER



The Younger Years

One of the great mysteries of life is how time flows differently for us all.

For the life of a pro goaltender, time seems to flow a lot like water. One day it's like a bunch of crashing waves, complete with crazy swells, foamy highs and foreboding lows. The next day, time can flow like a cleansing rain, allowing a goalie to wash away the dirty memories of the past and start over with a fresh outlook, a new perspective on their career.

Take the simile one step further and you'll come to find that every moment and every experience that makes up a pro goaltender's career is swayed and shifted by one thing; the constantly changing tides of their attitude.

So when it comes to telling the current comeback story of a former pro goalie named Mike DiLorenzo, you'll find that his life has run the gamut of turbulent water-like states. For in today's game of pro hockey, smaller goalies attempting a comeback are much more likely to end up as shipwrecks instead of success stories.

Listed at 5-foot-10, many will say the CSS DiLorenzo is destined to rest at the bottom of the ocean. But those who have dedicated their lives to stopping pucks do so knowing they have to constantly prove themselves. And if you're willing to work tirelessly to prove your worth, life often finds a way to gift you with tools and mentors that guide you along the path towards your wildest dreams.

More importantly, this whole "underdog" dynamic is a major part of the DiLorenzo comeback. It clearly fuels his fire, so whether it's water, fire, or some other basic element of life, the truth is that these forces of nature inside his mind just cannot be stopped.

The inner fire that burns inside all of us is truly what separates one goaltender from the next. Although invisible to the naked eye, it is still a powerful force we can sense, feel and almost taste. It is the answer to why every goalie has a story to tell, and why every goalie loves to sweat. They

are true warriors, true fighters. They embrace the battle and they learn to manage the struggle, strife and pain.

DiLorenzo will not allow a lack of size to ruin his pro goaltending story. So he is fighting back in admirable fashion, and I am proud to be telling his story. With that being said, there's really nothing left to add when introducing you to this four-part series. For, after getting to know him on a very personal level, I can safely say it's only a matter of time before Mike DiLorenzo is a pro goaltender again.

THE STORY BEGINS

Even before he was born in Waterford, N.Y. back on June 9 of 1983, Mike DiLorenzo's parents were never into hockey. For the first seven years of his life, they didn't have season tickets to a hockey team, they didn't watch games on TV, and the only sport in the family was golf, which was played by his father, Michael Sr.

That all changed when Mike skated for the first time ever at a friend's birthday party. To his surprise, he was able to move around relatively well for an eight-year-old. Mike's experience was so enjoyable that, after the party, he swiftly proclaimed to his parents that he wanted to play hockey. They obliged willingly, and a few months later he was a member of the Clifton Park in-house mite program.

While talking about his first year on the ice, Mike's memories mainly involved skating as a forward. As it so often goes for hockey at this age, the kids are so young and impressionable that the coaches focused on teaching them the game's most essential fundamental – skating. So Mike's teammates rotated in goal, so as to make sure everyone on the team had a chance to stop the puck.

When Mike's turn finally arrived, he did so well and looked so natural playing, that his coach asked him to play again. And since Mike liked it so much the first time, he was given the open door policy to the crease, thus spending the majority of that season as a goalie.

THE BIG SAVE

For a young kid in Mike's situation, not only was being naturally introduced to ice skating a keystone to his future success, but having

the natural ability to skate well enough to enjoy the experience was also important. If Mike doesn't enjoy skating at that party, he probably never asks his parents to play hockey, and this story would have never been written.

What is written, however, is the legendary law that says goalies must be the best skaters on their team. The precise footwork and foot dexterity it takes to have the balance to move correctly in the crease is not easy to achieve, so skating skills are simply paramount.

For in today's offense-driven, free-flowing, fast-action game, natural skating talent can take a goalie an extremely long way, no matter how small they might be. In fact, you could even go so far as to say the smaller you are, the better skater you need to be, since covering space and "playing big" is so necessary to successful goaltending.

But learning how to be a better skater is just one step. The other is actually wearing the goalie pads and playing between the pipes with confidence. Many beginners are reluctant to play goal because it's uncomfortable, and are therefore

forced into the net. Because of this, many either hate the feel of the bulky pads, struggle to perform, or don't enjoy the purpose of the position. Many others learn to love playing the position over time, but it's just not as natural as with those who experience that instant attraction.

Loving the position right away, when compared to someone who takes to it over time, doesn't guarantee one will be turned out to be a better goalie than the other. But there's still something profound and synchronous about a young kid that can slip on pads for the first time and automatically make acrobatic glove saves or quick kick saves. There's no coaching necessary, it's just pure,



natural reactions.

After listening to Mike discuss his early years as a goaltender, it turns out he was clearly one of the naturals. So with that in mind, I wanted to know about the very first memory that he feels cemented his future as a goaltender. As it turns out, this memory was quite easy for Mike to discuss. It came during his very first season with Clifton Park.

"I remember it like it was yesterday," Mike reminisced. "It was the end of the season and I was in goal for the championships of the house league. It was late in the game, and I just remember going down to make a standard butterfly save. But then I was down on the ice and I remember seeing this kid, who was standing in front of the net, somehow get the puck with the net wide open. He shot it, but I just reached up my arm while I was lying down, and I made that save."

There's no knowing when that moment in our life as goalies – the one where time slows down and allows you to remember every little detail – is going to happen. But it always does, and it's usually not until many years later that we come to learn of that moment's true impact on our life.

"The net was wide open and I was down and out on my back," Mike added. "I just saw a puck going upstairs, and I just reached my arm up as hard as I could, and the next thing I know, the puck came down in front of me. I can see it happening right now, it's so crazy."

It just seems like such a sudden, random circumstance. For Mike, it was an otherwise meaningless desperation save by a nine-year-old kid in a house league in upstate New York. It doesn't really leave you thinking it will withstand the test of time in the general scope of human existence. Many pro goalies don't even really think about that moment on a steady basis, it's just something that's there.

But for a young DiLorenzo, a kid who instantly embraced being a goalie, that moment was monolithic. The position embraced him back.

"I don't know, but at that moment, I just knew I was going to be a goalie forever," Mike said. "I remember it so vividly that I can hear all the coaches and kids and parents like clapping or whatever. After I made the save, our team went down the ice and scored and ended up winning the game. So I just felt really good about what I was doing that game and knew from then on out I wanted to stop pucks."

For Mike, time slowed down during that save to the point where it resonated forever in his mind. It seeped into his subconscious and saturated his early hockey memories. Every finite detail of the set and

setting, including the puck's rotation and the color of the tape on the player's stick was tattooed to the inside of Mike's skull. It simply took over many other less-influential memories.

So with one natural glove hand reaction, Mike had made his first timely save, and it mystically transformed into a life-long goaltender. That moment has broken free from the chains of the normal flow of time, making it quite enigmatic, surreal and valuable. But what actually makes the moment so meaningful, and what caused DiLorenzo to remember such a short interval of time?

I feel it's because making that type of save injects massive amounts of confidence, both into the heart and the mind. At this age, a child's mind is extremely impressionable. Making saves, no matter how meaningless or routine, can lift a child's spirits to unforeseen heights and reveal raw potential, untapped passion and great promise.

When a young child makes a truly heroic, momentum-shifting save, it can easily have an everlasting impact on their life because of the sheer boost of confidence that child receives. It opens up their minds and allows them to imagine being someone or doing something great. It instills a person with passion and desire when it happens, but evokes and revives that passion when served as a memory.

"When I was thinking about making a comeback, those were the thoughts that I remember," Mike said. "Just thinking about it right now, I would wake up at night and remember that save. I would remember other stuff too, but I would always for some reason remember that save. It was the true stand-out point of me saying, 'Okay, I want to be a goalie.'"

Being a pro goaltender is a long, twisted path that's clearly less traveled. It is selected for some by fate, given as a gift to others by chance and unfortunately never completed by so many more. But the dream to reach that point of professionalism is embraced by everyone. And when times of desolation, frustration and emptiness descend on that path, the origins of the fight can become an important and nurturing memory to re-live.

That memory includes a moment that symbolizes everything Mike stands for as a goaltender and an athlete. It's proven by the fact that, even as a distant memory, it still remains as a vivid symbol that stokes the flames of his passion to be a pro goaltender once again.

MIKE'S FIRST COACH

The season after that special save, Mike played for the Clifton Park travel Mite-B team, but still rotated back and forth between playing goal and forward. At age 10, however, Mike decided he wanted to be a goalie for good. He tried to do this at the A-level by trying out as a goalie, but a very influential protagonist in DiLorenzo's story, a coach by the name of Ron Kuhl, forced everyone to try out as a skater.

To everyone's surprise, Mike was actually cut from the team. It was a tough break for sure. He was cut as a forward despite clearly being a good goalie, ultimately forcing Mike to make the switch to the Schenectady youth hockey program for his two years as a squirt.

Something didn't seem quite right, though. Kuhl, who was a well-regarded coach that ran all kinds of youth and high school hockey camps during the summer months, was someone Mike really wanted to play for. He had somewhat regretted the choice to leave all of his new friends to play with Schenectady, but the desire to be a goalie simply outweighed the need to play for Kuhl and with his friends.

During his two years at Schenectady, Mike exacted revenge on Clifton Park by beating them a number of times, proving to coach Kuhl he was a good little goalie. But after his second year, he decided to return to Clifton Park and re-join his friends and his favorite coach.

But this time, Kuhl didn't even think twice about it. He demanded that Mike play as the team's full-time goaltender.

"He finally came to his senses and let me play goal for his team, and that's exactly what I did," Mike said. "I ended up playing for coach Kuhl for the next three or four years, until I started playing high school. He was a great character, this coach. He ends up being the guy I talk about later down the road here, as he was one of my more influential coaches as a kid. He's actually the same guy I'm training with today. He's running the Athletic Republic I'm at right now, so he's definitely been there for a long time for me."

Are you starting to see how interesting time flows for this goaltender? Even at the tender ages of 10, he wanted nothing more than to be a goalie, but was not allowed to do so. He switched divisions because of it, played for his original team's arch-rivals, exacted revenge and proved his goalie skills, then returned to his original coach and team, this time finally as a full-fledged goaltender.

"Coach Ron was trying to put together a state championship team and he was trying to get his coaching career going," Mike said. "He was

a really serious and intense guy, and especially for the level we were playing at as kids, he was very demanding. I knew I wanted to play for him because I knew he was a good coach and had good teams.”

After making the switch back to Clifton Park for his second year of peewees and first year of bantams, Mike led his team to the State Finals. Even though they ended up losing, the experience was so positive that Mike stayed with Kuhl until he was in eighth grade.

Every time you tell the story of a young hockey player, you invariably discuss the impact of special guides along the way. From all of Mike’s stories that I heard, it was clear that he regarded coach Kuhl as having a Merlin-esque influence. He was the wise sage that demanded perfection, and instilled a strong work ethic in an extremely positive and influential way. But it was not nearly as positive as the influence of his parents.

THE SELFLESS SPIRITS

The only sport in Mike’s life before that very first skating experience was golf and a little bit of baseball. Michael DiLorenzo Sr. was a golf course superintendent for private country clubs for more than 25 years. It was his passion, his career and by far his favorite pastime, so it certainly absorbed



most of his time, along with numerous trips to golf courses around the country.

Yet it never overshadowed or took away from the support for his son’s hockey endeavors.

His mother Vicki, currently the vice president of the Albany College of Pharmacy, started out as an accountant and used to work for a stock investment company in Boston. When the company went south and things didn’t work out, the family was forced to move a couple of times in order to meet their financial needs. But despite the ebbs and flows of their financial woes, Mike’s parents never stopped putting him a position to have fun, enjoy his experience and get better.

“My parents were very, very supportive,” Mike stated. “I kind of took it for granted while I was playing, even all the way up through high school I never really appreciated it.”

If there’s one thing I know from experience, it’s that it can be difficult for a son to comprehend the sacrifices their mother makes. The daily acts like making lunches, driving to and from practices and doing laundry, they’re almost so routine that the selflessness and love behind those acts are not always recognized.

Because of this, most parents with young goaltenders share a similar trait with their children – they do it for the love, not for the glory.

Having to do these daily acts time and time again is just half the battle of being a parent. The other half is instilling the child with good morals, keeping them focused on school and making sure they stay out of trouble. So when a child gets older and becomes more successful, they’ll often look back at the sacrifices their parents made, but struggle to put into words how much it meant.

At the same time Vicki was taking her son to all of these hockey tournaments, practices and games, she was also taking night classes in order to get a degree from the College of St. Rose. After she accomplished this more than 13 years ago, she landed a job as an accountant, worked her way up the ladder and is now the vice president of a pharmacy college.

“My mom ended up being the one who took me everywhere,” Mike explained. “She signed me up to these teams and brought me up to Canada for these camps, and took me every weekend to tournaments. So I spent a lot of time with my mom and her sacrifices were incredible now that I think back about it. She gave up all of her time to take me on these

trips.”

On top of all of this, Vicki had to curtail Mike's ravenous rebel side. But as she helped Mike play goal, he actually returned the favor.

“I had a lot of fights with my parents. I don't know why, but I was always kind of like a rebel. I just never wanted to listen, which I guess is like most kids. But there was a lot of arguing and a lot of fights. I couldn't sit still and always wanted to be doing something,” Mike explained. “When they saw I got into competitive sports with hockey, they went with it because it was the only thing that kept me calm. I started to come around a little bit and got so involved that I didn't care about rebelling. And the whole time, regardless of the fighting, my parents went above and beyond.”

While learning about Michael Sr. and Vicki DiLorenzo, one thing became quite clear. If their path has any type of influence or bearing on Mike's future, then his current comeback is destined to end successfully. More importantly, what I learned from Mike about his unselfish parents was the fact that the act of the comeback is in his blood, both on his father's and his mother's side.

That's just one of many reasons why Mike's current comeback is not the end of a story, but merely the next chapter.

The Junior Years

When teenagers decide to leave home and begin their junior hockey journey, many will feel like they've crossed a point of no return.

By giving up college eligibility, making this important life decision becomes a blind leap of faith into the unknown, a bold dive into the abyss. Talented players with little maturity as independent adults skate head-first into a new world. They don't know anyone, they're exposed to the elements of living in a foreign realm and they're not always sure how to handle certain situations that are bound to arise.

If there's one penultimate lesson a junior hockey player will learn right away, it would be that there are some things they can control, but so much more that they can't.

Mike's junior experience is a classic example of a kid who experienced the dizzying degrees of success and failure. There were many controlled, comfortable highs, but a couple of uncontrollable, treacherous lows, all of which led to plenty of frustrations for Mike, both on and off the ice during his junior years.

With his parents' support, Mike left his high school hockey team halfway through his freshman year (despite being on the varsity squad) and chose to play juniors with the Capital District Selects until his junior year of high school was over. So instead of continuing to take classes and staying his comfort zone, he took full advantage of the opportunity to play on a team that had close to a 70-game schedule.

After his third season with the Selects program, Mike still wasn't satisfied with the level of competition. Fortunately, he was able to earn an invite to try out with Chicago of the United States Hockey League. He went out there prior to his senior year of high school and had no problem making the team. Upon making the team, Mike had no problem taking the next step in his junior hockey career.

“I went out there for my senior year of high school and played in the USHL for that one season,” Mike explained. “It wasn't easy, but I graduated out of Chicago after leaving everything behind. I did pretty well and played a bunch of games, but it was a pretty high level and I didn't know anyone on the team, so it was a very different situation for me. But most importantly, I got to play with guys that were way better than me.”

In that one season playing Tier-I juniors in the United States, Mike was considered as the team's backup. He soaked up information on a daily basis, enjoyed the experience with his teammates and billet family and did well with his studies. His work ethic also went a long way in proving to the coaching staff that he was willing to do whatever it took to be the team's starter the following season.

He pushed all the right buttons. He took advantage of his opportunities. He controlled what he could control. He was in great shape and playing well. But when his chance came to earn that starting role in camp, things didn't go as planned and he was cut from the team.

“I played in the USHL my senior year, and then went back out there

for my post-graduate year with the intention of getting a scholarship to play in college. When I went out there, I was supposed to be the starter after paying my dues the previous year as the backup," Mike explained. "I didn't have a bad camp, but I didn't have a great camp, so they let me go. I wasn't quite sure what I was going to do for the upcoming season considering originally I was looking to go the college route."

Like a molten cast-iron knife slicing right through his flesh, Mike's path was cut in half. Expectations weren't reached and his confidence was severed and sliced apart. The decision to leave home to play juniors turned out to be the wrong one and now he was stuck.

Talk about highs and lows. A whole year dedicated to building up the skills and reputation needed to become a starter in the USHL, just to have all of that work and dedication get cut down in a couple of training camp sessions.

But Mike didn't despair and he continued to live without regrets.

"My goaltending coach at the time was a guy named Barry Madigan," Mike said. "I trained with him up in Ottawa and he worked with the Senators for some time. I also had a good friend named Martin St. Pierre, who now plays in the Blue Jackets organization. I grew up with him in the summers and his father was a scout with the QMJHL's Hull Olympiques at the time. Since I had good connections with him, he asked me if I was interested in playing Major-Juniors in the CHL. I had been asked before by Peterborough to try out, but at the time I told them not to waste a draft pick on me since I wanted to play in college."

Obviously, things had changed drastically in terms of preparing for an NCAA career. After what happened with his USHL stint, he was thirsty to prove his old coaching staff wrong, and he would do whatever it took to make that happen. He had worked hard all summer long, was in great shape, and was still cut from the team he had made a year before. Clearly upset about that turn of events, he not only felt like he deserved to be playing Tier-1, but he didn't really have any other choice since the summer was already over.

"So I decided to go to Hull's camp just to get the experience, and to get an idea of where I was at, and to see how capable I was," Mike explained. "I don't think anyone expected me to make the club, so I went for it. I ended up standing on my head and just played unbelievable at camp."

THE HULL TRYOUT EXPERIENCE

During the walk-on tryout with Hull, Mike faced guys like Ales Hemsky, Maxime Talbot and a few other pro players, so it was clearly the best talent he had ever seen before. The Quebec Major Junior Hockey League has some of the most skilled Canadian players in the world, so this extremely competitive camp was a true test of Mike's skills.

But as camp stretched into the second day, his quickness, agility and work ethic made a favorable impression on the coaching staff and general manager. Unfortunately, one of the things that made this camp so memorable was an obstacle he never saw coming.

"Believe it or not, it was two days before camp was over when I took my equipment outside to dry after one of the sessions," Mike said, quietly laughing. "I put it on top of my car and took a nap and when I woke up I



found that someone had stolen half of my gear off my car."

Bewildered at this atrocious act of larceny, Mike had to go into the GM's office and awkwardly explain exactly how his gear had been stolen, and how he would need some new gear to finish out camp. No matter how good you're doing in camp, that's not really the type of thing a goalie on a tryout wants to be discussing with the GM right in the middle of camp.

"That's when he basically said, 'Well we only have two days of camp left and we want to offer you a spot on the club,' so they offered me a bunch of gear, I finished off the camp, and then had to talk to my parents about what had happened. It was kind of a tough decision considering I had to give up my college eligibility."

Giving up college eligibility may have been a tough decision, but at the time, it was a total no-brainer. I mean, how many goalies in the history of junior hockey have been cut by a USHL team, then just three weeks later, walk on to a QMJHL team and make it? I can only think of one, and his name is Mike DiLorenzo.

"I was so stoked to have this chance, and it was a spur of the moment, quick decision," Mike reminisced. "And the fact that these guys were feeding me stuff about NHL Central Scouting, drafting and getting fed everything about the QMJHL, I just decided to make a run for it."

The decision wasn't so easy for his parents, however. As well-intentioned as they were, they really had no idea what went into this type of commitment, or what it would mean for their son's future on the ice and outside of hockey.

"The decision to let me go play in the QMJHL as a post-graduate was the craziest," Mike said. "They didn't have any hockey background, so I think they were kind of lost and had no idea how to handle me. They were kind of naïve about it, because I was so excited to give up my college eligibility. So I feel like I influenced their decision to let me do it. I don't think my dad ever wanted me to give that up, but my mom was so into me playing, and she saw I wanted it so badly, that they ultimately decided to let me do it."

While listening to Mike's story about the tryout with Hull, I quickly realized it was one of those rare moments where, similar to his very first big glove save as a kid in Schenectady, he was injected with a copious amount of confidence. It took his entire game to a totally new level and he had ultimately proven to himself and his former USHL coaching staff that he had what it took to get better.

"To be honest, when I went into that camp, I wasn't thinking too much," Mike said. "I just put it in my head that some things are out of my control, something I had a lot of trouble doing when I was younger. I just wanted to play and have fun with the game. I was getting to play against two top draft picks and some of the best players in the world, so I just took it as a great opportunity to test myself and to show off my skills and I had a lot of fun."

During that camp, Mike was just an American kid making big saves and gaining more confidence while fans were cheering for him. It was much like a revival of his first memories as a kid just stopping pucks, hearing the fans cheering him on, and getting better as a result. But that one residual memory, the one that sticks out more than any other, was totally different.

The moment Mike knew he made the team was during the goalie-specific evaluation skate, the same day his gear was stolen. Hemsky was on the ice as one of the shooters, and was up against Mike in a drill where Hemsky received passes from the goalie coach and took 10 quick shots from the hash marks. During this first go-round, Ales scored six or seven goals out of 10 on Mike. Afterwards, he was supposed to rotate out and let the next goalie in, but he spoke up and just told everyone out there that he wanted to go again.

"The goalie coach kind of looked at me funny, but I just kept saying I wanted to go again. Another shooter was going to step in to run the drill, but I said I wanted Ales to shoot again," Mike explained. "The next time around, I ended up stopping nine out of 10 and I think that was pretty much it. That caught the eye of the coaches, it boosted my confidence and it set me up to show off my character to the coaching staff during scrimmages. I knew if I could stop Ales, I could stop anyone, so I went on to have a great camp and made the team after my gear was stolen."

Talk about highs and lows. With only half of his regular gear and the other half belonging to Hull, Mike finished the camp and completed one of the most remarkable feats imaginable for an American junior goalie.

FROM HULL TO HALIFAX

Mike's first taste of QMJHL regular season action was positive and successful, and it came way sooner than expected. The team originally had two goalies, but traded one of them away so Mike could play. Then the other goalie, Eric Lafrance, got injured, so Mike was quickly thrust into

the starting role.

"I think I played like 20 games out of 28 games in the first half, so I got to play a lot and I did well," Mike said. "I was talking to the Islanders and the Blackhawks and I was ranked by Central Scouting to go in like the third or fourth round [of the NHL Entry Draft]."

Towards the middle of the season, however, the team hit a slump and experienced a run of injuries, so the losses started piling up and the other goalie had a chance to play. Then, without any warning whatsoever, the



head coach got fired because he had some problems with the GM.

"They brought in a French coach and only two other guys besides me were English-speaking guys," Mike said. "The French coach didn't speak English at all, so I was pretty much put on the backburner and didn't even give me a chance to play in the second half of the season. I lost my draft status, and that's when it was tough on me mentally to stay focused and to stay motivated to work hard."

The struggles for Hull continued, as the team lost 10 games in a row, and throughout that entire stretch, Mike didn't get a chance to play one

game. When he finally did get his next start, he allowed just one goal on 45 shots and single-handedly got the team's first win of the second half. In the very next game, he sat on the bench.

"It was kind of a rollercoaster in the second half of the season in Hull, but it was great players and top draft picks, so I got a lot of experience and I made the best out of what I could in the second half. Then the Halifax Mooseheads offered me a trade at the end of the season. So I got an opportunity to go there and it was an unbelievable experience as well."

The last part of that sentence was made with such hesitation that I knew something was up. So I asked him. And what I learned was not something I think Mike planned on telling me.

"I started off well there, I didn't play bad," Mike hesitated. "But I had a bad billet experience, which kind of affected me a bit."

Uh oh. Is this where the damage was done?

THE HALIFAX BILLET HORROR SHOW

A lot of people don't understand what it is like to move away from home and get inserted into a random family. No matter how nice you may be, or how nice the family may be, not everyone clicks. People don't always have the same personalities and it can simply be an uncomfortable situation for many.

This was the case for Mike when he first arrived in Halifax. It quickly made the trade seem more like a prison sentence. What made things even more tense for Mike was the fact that the billet family was the parents of Halifax's assistant coach. So he was always on watch, always having to kind of temper and moderate his attitude, even when he was away from the rink.

"This older couple had been billeting kids for years and years. They were an older couple, and for whatever reason, we just didn't click," Mike said with a slight sense of guilt. "I would play acoustic guitar in my room quietly just to relax, and she would come in and say I couldn't play. It just seemed like she would have a problem with everything I did. She would complain to her son [the assistant coach] about things I was doing and would call him up just to complain some more. I never had a bad billet situation before, whether it was in Chicago or in Hull, so this was tough for me."

So Mike did what he thought was the right thing to do and went to talk to the GM at Halifax. Unfortunately, it just made things worse.

"I told him that this situation wasn't working for me here, and I'm not comfortable playing where I'm at and it's affecting my play. I asked him to get involved, and from that day on, I was treated differently by the assistant coach, who had a big influence on the head coach," Mike explained. "It kind of got ugly, things weren't going well and I wasn't playing as well as I should have."

With all of these distractions on his mind, Mike ended up getting cut from the team at Christmas time. Just from the tone in his voice, I knew this was a story he had probably wanted to get off his chest for some time.

"I'm the kind of guy that gets along with everyone and I'm an easy-going person, but we just didn't click. She would always get on my case and bug me. She would always make comments that irked me in the wrong way. I didn't enjoy going home to an unfriendly environment."

Feel good, look good, play good. That's how it usually goes for a young goaltender. But if you're emotionally drained due to certain situations off the ice, it's tough to flip your mind off and just focus on stopping pucks. There's no turning back, however. You just have to prod along and hope situations remedy themselves.

"Unfortunately it seeped into my gameplay because I just wasn't there mentally and I wasn't having fun at that point. My attitude was turning and I wasn't happy and unfortunately it got dragged into the locker room and the coach had a grudge with me and it got messy."

The slight tinge of guilt I sensed in Mike's voice quickly turned to remorse.

"I wasn't able to block out the issues with my billet family, and I let it get to me too much. I started to have issues with the coaches and they would start to give me a hard time about everything. They were on me constantly and it was affecting my confidence."

Once a young goaltender loses confidence and they're not playing well, next comes the decay of the most important thing of all - work ethic and character. This can be exacerbated when the goalie feels like he has nobody to turn to, nobody on his side, nobody that cares about his future or well-being.

"No matter what I did, I just wasn't going to make the assistant coach happy. He was pissed at me for leaving his family, and I just felt like no matter what I did, I wasn't going to make the situation right. Unfortunately that really played a toll on my mental game. I had it in the back of my mind all the time. I was thinking about it in the middle of games, in practices.

If I made a statement, I would get chirped about it and it came to a point where I blew up and lost my composure and I got into a major argument with the coaches and that eventually led to me being released from the club."

Ahh, I thought. There it is. A major argument with the coaching staff. Yeah, those are never good.

Thinking back to this conversation, I couldn't help but wonder what was going through Mike's mind as he told me what he had told very few others. Sure, everyone sees things differently and there are two sides to every story, but no matter what view you take, this may have been Mike's biggest and most costly mistake.

"It just goes to show that if you're in a situation where it's not the best, you need to learn how to keep your composure and be a mature athlete," Mike said. "At that time I was only 19 years old, I wasn't mature enough to handle that situation and it got the better of me. I was never able to get over that with the coaching staff."

It was easy to consider Mike's mindset in this situation. That slight tinge of guilt and remorse - it was something that Mike didn't shy away from reliving, but it was still something he'd been trying to forget since the day it happened.

"It cost me my career in the QMJHL," Mike said abruptly, snapping me out of a daze. "The bottom line is that they're the coaches and I'm the player. I didn't realize it then, but I'm not in a position where I should be talking back or making unacceptable remarks to the coaches. I learned a lesson from it and I almost didn't play hockey after it, to be honest."

As I listened to Mike struggle to finish explaining the Halifax horror show, in the back of my mind I was hoping that by having Mike willingly tell the reader this story, it would act as a sort of cathartic self-healing experience. Maybe he could close the book on what had happened. Maybe it would help him bring more closure to his past. Maybe it would help him complete his current comeback attempt.

I'll end Part 2 in the same fashion our phone conversation ended. It was with the bitter reality that no matter how much you might struggle to handle uncomfortable situations as a goaltender, you must find a way to display maturity and professionalism, even if you are totally right. Understanding this is a learning process, so many goalies often have to learn things the hard way to truly understand what it takes to manage certain emotions.

And if you happen to be one of those goalies that learn things the hard

way, like Mike has proven numerous times, you have to be able to push back that much harder.

From Pro to Joe Schmoe

"Once again I've lost my way. Going nowhere fast, I dread the return. Spend my days in this self-made cage where my soul can dwell, and my loneliness is thriven far too well. Too many years have passed, too much blood has been spilled. I realize it's my destiny, my will. All and none of the answers I've found...alone I stand on hollow ground." — The Haunted, 2000

Bouncing back, fighting back, coming back; it's all the same. You accept defeat, you lose confidence and you attempt an emotional revival as quickly as possible, all while knowing you could end up right back where you started.

Such is the story that Mike continued to tell, over and over and over again.

Even though the Halifax billet horror show stopped Mike's QMJHL career dead in its tracks, he still found a way to escape the team's clutches and kept trudging forward. This happened despite the fact that the Mooseheads refused to release his rights, thus stymying any chances of him being acquired by other QMJHL clubs.

"But I didn't quit," Mike said abruptly. "I talked to a guy named Paul Currie, who coached the Yarmouth Mariners at the time. He just told me to let it go and forget about it. He really helped me realize that I couldn't be doing those things at that age, or any age really."

Coach Currie, who was highly regarded for his quality coaching and friendship skills, would always come up to Halifax and look for guys

that didn't make it through the Mooseheads' camp, then invite them to Yarmouth's training camp. Sure enough, when Currie heard about the Halifax billet horror show, he got on the phone with Mike, created a friendship and talked him into playing for the Mariners.

"Paul not only offered me an opportunity to play a bunch of games and be the team's number-one goalie, but a chance to try and kind of make up for my mistakes a little bit," Mike said. "So I agreed."

Mike's one-year stint with Yarmouth — a strong team in the Maritime Junior-A Hockey League (MJHL) — turned out to be his saving grace on the ice. Backed by 28 wins and only 10 losses, Mike was voted as the league's MVP and played in the All-Star Game. From start to finish, he simply had a great year both on and off the ice. He had bounced back, forgot about everything that happened in Halifax and experienced tremendous success in the MJHL.

Not only did Mike dominate in the crease, but he matured as a person. As the team's clear-cut starter, he was also one of the most reliable players on the team. He acted as the assistant captain and took over the role of the team's Strength and Conditioning Coach, leading off-ice drills and workouts.

Finally, Mike was having fun playing hockey again, all while mentally maturing as an athlete and a goaltender both on and off the ice.

"Coach Currie gave me a good opportunity to go down there with a good group of guys," Mike reflected. "He got me my own apartment and just let me do my thing. He knew about my situation with the billets in Halifax and he improved my outlook on playing the game again. We had a real successful season down there and went to the league finals, so overall it was a great bounce-back for me."

It was that revival story that ultimately paved the way for him to achieve his dream of being a professional goaltender. Against the grain, against the odds, Mike's life never looked as good as it did right now.

MIKE FINALLY TURNS PRO

Although Mike turned many heads after his season in Yarmouth, the path he traveled during his rookie pro season was a sudden bludgeoning of reality.

"I started my pro career by trying out for the Roanoke Express of the

ECHL and I signed a contract with them in June," Mike said. "I was so excited for the opportunity that I had no problem getting myself prepared and ready to go. I felt blessed to be playing in the ECHL, but three or four weeks before the season started, I got a call from the head coach saying that the team had just folded."

With the shocking news, Mike was stuck heading up an ECHL river with no paddles. It was too late to earn tryouts for other teams, as most had already signed their goalies. So two weeks before camps got underway, he had no secure job to play anywhere. Fortunately, he finally earned a chance to latch on with the Greenville Grrrowl after a strong showing in their training camp.

But then they brought in a guy named Mike Brodeur from an AHL affiliate, so two weeks into the season, once again, Mike was pushed out of the lineup and left with no place to go. A few days later, Mike was picked up by the Fresno Falcons, where he would spend three weeks playing for the team until they also received a goalie from their AHL affiliate.

"Are you kidding me?!" I blurted out, cutting Mike off in mid-sentence.

I couldn't believe it. Just months after he had primed himself for a successful rookie season as a pro, three of those "uncontrollables" came out of nowhere (Roanoke, Greenville and Fresno) and completely destroy everything he was trying to accomplish.

This ridiculous pattern of proving his worth, getting signed and then released was eroding his confidence, raising his level of frustration and eliminating his ability to stay in one place. With so much movement, he simply never had a chance to establish himself anywhere. As an undrafted player that had fought so hard to get to this point, his first season as a pro clearly wasn't going the way he wanted.

"I started to get an idea of how contracts and the business side of things worked," Mike said softly. "Sometimes no matter how well you do, it never seems to have an effect on your ability to stick with a team. Guys get sent down, and that's just totally out of your control."

After all of this bouncing around, the San Angelo Saints of the Central Hockey League finally gave Mike the stability he so desperately sought. He spent the entire second half of the season with the Saints and played behind starter Scott Reid, who was one of the best goalies in the league. Mike's guarantee was fulfilled, but playing behind Reid limited his action to just six games.

"I didn't get to play as much as I wanted, but I had the opportunity to get

into the pro level and play in those six games," Mike said. "I had a shutout in one of the games, so the experience was good, and to get into a pro organization was really cool. It also allowed me to work on my game in the second half and prepare for my second season as a pro."

Unfortunately, San Angelo didn't offer Mike a new contract after the season ended, so he went to the Fort Wayne Comets and signed with them. But after another good showing in camp, they signed another goalie they had in mind and Mike was released after camp.

"What else is new?" I thought. I guess I should have also known that these unfair obstacles weren't going to erode Mike's will, but rather strengthen it.

"Finally, I ended up calling up Terry Ruskowski, the head coach of the Laredo Bucks, and just asked him about where I could possibly play because I knew I could excel in the Central League," Mike said. "Laredo was having major trouble with their goalies, they weren't stopping pucks, so I told him my situation and requested just one practice to kind of prove myself, but he was totally iffy about it."

Terry's demeanor over the phone wasn't the type of feedback Mike wanted to hear, but that wasn't going to stop him from trying to coax his way into the one-day tryout.

COAXING TERRY RUSKOWSKI

Mike's phone conversations with Terry instantly reminded me of Mike's tryout in Hull. Just like when he was on the ice with Ales Hemsky and his perseverance and stubbornness ultimately shone through, Mike just wanted this chance with Laredo really bad.

While backing up Reid in San Angelo, he saw first-hand during the first round of the playoffs what kind of organization Laredo was. He considered it one of the best places to play in the league, the facilities were amazing and from the bench, he saw how Terry coached and knew what they were all about. That's why he felt so strongly about being a good fit for the team.

"I called him up even though I knew I didn't have the credentials he was looking for," Mike said. "It was a gutsy move on my part."

At this point, after everything Mike had been through, there was nothing wrong with being gutsy if it led him to where he wanted to go.

"We had a long talk one day and he was totally on the fence. He thought about it, and then he called me back, and we talked for another day or



two," Mike said. "I was getting impatient though, time was ticking and they were losing games and their goalie's numbers were really bad. So I said now's the time. I felt like I had to do it."

So Mike went online, found a flight to Laredo for around \$600 and methodically clicked that final purchase button. It was booked. But would he really show up at a practice without warning?

"I called him back and made sure to tell him I wasn't trying to sound pushy, but that I bought myself a flight down there and all I want is an opportunity to skate in practice for one day. He said 'alright kid I'll see you tomorrow' and I could tell he kind of had a grin on his face. He liked it, you know?"

As I listened to Mike, I put myself in Terry's shoes and pondered how I would have handled it.

Here I have a couple of goalies that can't stop a beach ball, and some kid that won't leave me alone about getting a chance to skate in just one practice. I may not have been open to this kind of thing at first, but I need a goalie and I can't turn down someone who clearly wants it so bad. Why the hell not? I've got nothing to lose.

For those who aren't familiar with Ruskowski, he is regarded as a legend in Central Hockey League lore. A former draft pick of the Chicago Blackhawks (70th overall in 1974), Terry went on to play 630 games in the NHL with Chicago, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh and Minnesota. He scored 113 goals, racked up 313 assists and amassed 1,356 penalty minutes. He was a bruiser, but a well-rounded player that wore his emotions on his sleeves and worked extremely hard for his teammates. He was the ultimate player's player.

"From the research I did on Terry, I knew he was a gritty, blue-collar, hard-working guy, and that's how he made a career in the NHL," Mike explained. "So I think he liked my determination factor and I think he was just looking forward to seeing what I could do."

That's what I figured. You just don't pass up a goalie that wants to prove his worth so badly, especially when you need help between the pipes. So Mike was suddenly on his way to Laredo with one practice to make a case for another chance to play in the CHL. To no surprise, Mike owned it on the ice that day.

"I did great in practice and I remember Terry coming up to me after making three or four good saves in a row," Mike said. "He gave me a slap

on the pads with his stick and said 'atta boy' or something like that. So I knew right then it was a good situation."

In that practice, Mike was the first guy on the ice and the last guy off. He rode the stationary bike afterwards and waited with baited breath for some kind of call from the coach. Even though he got positive feedback from Terry on the ice, Mike knew full well he was still on the bubble.

It must have been difficult mentally. I mean, if that were me riding that bike, I would probably just be waiting to hear that Laredo had signed another goalie, or that someone else was heading over from some other league. With so many downfalls before, it's tough to not expect it to happen again.

But the captain of Laredo and former CHL MVP Brent Cullaton took a liking to Mike's work ethic and helped him clinch the spot he so desperately wanted.

"Brent saw my attitude and that I really wanted to be there, so he and a few other players went into Terry's office after practice and said I was working hard and that the team should keep me," Mike said with an audible smile on his face. "I got called into the office and Terry offered me a contract, and the deed was done. I only got to play four games in three weeks, but at that point, I knew even if things didn't work out here, I established that I could play in the league."

Mike ended up going 3-0-1 with Laredo, posting a .940 save percentage and a 2.20 goals-against average, earning seven out of eight points. He did everything he possibly could have done to stick with the team.

But alas, fate stuck another dagger in Mike's back. He got bumped again when Dov Grumet-Morris was sent down from the San Antonio Rampage.

"It was like a rollercoaster and I just kept going up and down," Mike said in an exhausted tone. "Thankfully I got picked up by the Memphis RiverKings and I went there for the remainder of the season and played a bunch of games. They were already out of the playoffs when I got there, but it was an opportunity for me to keep building a name for myself, so it was definitely a good opportunity."

Again, pondering things in my mind while Mike was talking, I wondered about the purpose of an opportunity if you end up right back where you started. I was starting to get knots in my stomach. It was a palpable, unsettling feeling. And it wasn't even close to over.

LIFE AFTER LAREDO

In Memphis, Mike continued to play extremely well. He was voted as the CHL's Player of the Week and played 26 games, which was another chance for him to get great exposure and prove he could play in the league. But when the season ended, the unsettling darkness of not knowing where to go or where he would end up had taken over.

But that's where his former teammate and captain in Laredo stepped in and shed some light on the path.

"Cullaton went to go play in the old United League for Elmira with Scott Wray and a bunch of other good guys," Mike said. "Fortunately he asked me if I wanted to go play there, and I knew the guys and loved Brent's work ethic and what kind of leader he was, so it was a no-brainer."

Mike got a call in July from the team's GM and signed a one-year deal. So he went out there and lived with Brent for three months and had a great camp, but once again Mike's window of opportunity was slammed shut by another goalie that was sent down from the AHL. This time, it was a guy named Kris Tebbs, who was sent down from Binghamton.

"We ended up battling it out," Mike said exhaustingly. "They didn't get rid of anyone, so a month into the season, it was a three-goalie rotation. The head coach had Tebbs as a player before, so I ended up getting released...and that was where things started to go downhill."

This was the final straw that broke the camel's back. The head coach knew Tebbs as a former player, and that was the decision for Mike being released, and that was that.

"I had enough. Here I was, playing great, working my butt off," Mike said. "I was by far the best goalie condition-wise in camp. Even in the workouts and preseason testing, I was in the top five of all the players, so I was ready to go. So that's where things went downhill for me. I started to wonder what the hell I was doing here and that's where I started to plummet."

There's no way I could blame him at all. I probably would have given up a long time ago. I mean, Mike went to Laredo and played great, but got cut. Before that he went to Greenville, played great, but got cut. Before that he signed with Roanoke, but then the team folded.

"I was really upset with the decision they made in Elmira and at that point I just unfortunately broke down and felt totally hopeless..."

FROM PRO TO JOE SCHMOE

The fallout really started in Elmira. Mike knew they had a good team there and he knew a bunch of guys and was supported by Cullaton. He had a great camp and was really liked in the locker room and got along with everyone. He was comfortable with his team and was confident it would be a big season since he was one of the hardest workers.

"I told myself this was the year I was going to break out. I played about 35 games in the CHL, I was surrounded by guys that knew me and I just knew it was going to be a good year," Mike said. "I didn't do anything wrong. I played well and it was just one of those things."

Like Mike said to me a few days earlier, a big part of being a goalie is knowing how to control what you can control, but learning to deal with things that are uncontrollable. But even some things are too unbearable to let go.

"After I was released, I screwed around and took three or four weeks off without even skating or anything, and I was just at home with my buddy, doing contract work," Mike said. "I got a call from Odessa to go down there and play, but I wasn't in shape, my confidence wasn't there and I just didn't really get back into it. They got their goalie back from injury a few weeks later and I was released again before the playoffs. I kind of decided that I'm done with the game at that point."

It was tough for me to find the right words to ask any more questions, so I felt it was only right to let Mike keep talking. I could tell this was a cathartic conversation for him.

"I came home and had no idea what to do. Am I going to try to find a club to play with? I was just doing contract work for my buddy and I wasn't going to the gym, I wasn't doing the necessary things to keep myself in game condition. I was drinking on a nightly basis, I was down on myself. I was just being a Joe Schmo and not an athlete."

I'm not sure why, but all I could ask Mike was how much drinking he was actually doing. Was it just lazy Sunday drinking, buzzed drinking, sloshed drinking, or complete obliteration?

"I wasn't getting wasted by any means," Mike said. "But instead of going to the gym and working out, I'd go home and sit on the couch and drink a few beers. You do that three or four times a week, you're going in the complete opposite direction."

Even I know from my own personal goaltending experience that every day you're not working towards the goal, you go to sleep at night knowing you're actually two steps further away from achieving it. Especially at his size, that's something Mike had been dealing with for years.

"Where everything ended for me is where I could have made it better. So it's kind of ironic, because I was primed to succeed in Elmira. I was so confident and felt so good and thought it was going to be a breakout year. When they finally said they were going to cut me, it was just the end of it all. I just didn't get it. I was preparing and doing all the right things, so at that point I just gave up on the game."

"Yeah, buddy," I said. "Time to get off this crazy train, it's even making me nauseous at this point."

What a poor human fate for a man that clearly worked hard enough to deserve so much more. It was a professional career that was filled with guts, but very little glory.

This Fire Burns Forever

After so many ups and downs, Mike was mentally exhausted. When his final stint in Odessa ended unceremoniously, he had seen enough. He tossed the goalie pads in his closet, quit the game of hockey, and move on with his life. The stress just wasn't worth it, and it was time to relax by enjoying life once again.

"When I left Odessa, I had two of my best friends living out in Hawaii. At that point, I was just really frustrated with the game, and I just wanted to get as far away from hockey as possible," Mike said. "I didn't want to have anything to do with it, and I just wanted to go somewhere where I wouldn't think about it. So I went out to Hawaii in April for the summer, and ended up living there for three years."

It was love at first sight, and almost overnight, Mike swapped skates for flip-flops. He embraced the "Pura Vida" lifestyle and fell in love with the

ocean, the scenery, and the sport of surfing.

"It was one of those things where I could go out on the water and not even think about anything," Mike reminisced. "But surfing was probably the most mentally challenging sports I've ever tried. I thought I could just go out there and jump into it, but I literally almost died a few times, so I quickly learned to respect the ocean. It opened my mind and gave me some clarity on some things in my life."

Clarity, and the fact that he was no longer under constant pressure to perform at his best, must have been quite an enjoyable experience. But as I've come to learn, Mike can't live without a challenge. Even if there's a tunnel, he'll still climb the mountain.

"I would see these massive 25-foot waves that people said I could never ride, so I just started focusing on surfing every day," Mike said. "I put in the same effort into surfing that I did with hockey, so within a year and a half, I was actually riding those massive waves. Then I quickly learned that there were things I was doing in surfing that I wasn't doing with hockey. I realized a lot of mistakes I had made commitment-wise. I just wasn't doing everything I could have done."

For a guy that laid it all on the line before he quit, I was surprised to hear his work ethic had reached another level. "Really," I asked.

"Yeah, a lot actually," he replied with a laugh, "Especially when it came to my mental focus and controlling my emotions. When you get out on the water and you're looking at 25-foot waves, it is life threatening. You have no control out there, so you have to become one with the ocean. If you get sucked under, your body is mangled by really strong forces. When that happens, you can't panic, so I learned to strengthen my mind and just relax my body. It really built my strength mentally, and I learned how to stay strong in times of panic. That was kind of the biggest part of my downfall in hockey; I was not able to focus or be mentally strong when I needed to be."

PURA VIDA, PURE LOVE

While Mike was dominating the waves in Hawaii, he also happened to meet the love of his life. Ashlei Limbaga, who was originally from Los Angeles, had crossed paths with Mike during her college years, and the two instantly sparked a strong connection. During the year and a half that they dated, they would talk about his hockey endeavors all the time. As

things progressed, their relationship peaked during a three-week trip to Italy and Greece. It was at that time that Mike decided to get engaged.

"A couple of days after we got engaged, we were in Rome outside of the Coliseum sitting at a little restaurant. We started talking about hockey, and she brought up the fact that I should try it again. It was a tough moment for me, because I always thought about coming back, but I just didn't know if I could mentally do it again."

But as it so often goes in life, we are inspired, guided, and influenced by our surroundings. For Mike, it was his new fiancé that truly opened the door for him to begin his comeback.

"She knew what I was capable of as a person and she always bugged me to go back and try again, but I always brushed it off," Mike explained. "To be honest, she's pretty much the backbone of this entire thing. By her pushing me and telling me I should go back, I saw how much she believed in me. She was my motivation. It's nice to have someone I was in love with actually want to help me pursue something that I had given up."

Through the course of this entire journey of documenting Mike's path, I knew there was one moment, or one person, that would bring him back into the world he was meant to be in. Her name was Ashlei Limbaga. And so we spoke.

"I guess we were outside of our comfort zone," Ashlei said about the moment in Rome. "We were in such a magical place, and we weren't in our routine, so it was good to see him outside of that. I think it was the atmosphere of Italy that really led to this moment."

Although I have only been in love once before, I know that's what falling in love is all about. You find someone special that you connect with, and you find ways to open up to the other person that you never normally would with anyone else. Those are extremely important moments in a guy's life. To fall in love is to openly express emotions with a woman that you would never express with anyone else.

"I've always seen how important hockey was to him. I played volleyball in college and I would do anything to play one more game. So I know about that competitive side, and how you yearn to just do it again," Ashlei said. "I saw that in him when we were sitting at that restaurant in Rome. Now that we were engaged, we were just talking about our future and what we wanted to do."

While the two of them were talking about their future as a married

couple, she couldn't help but bring up hockey again.

"Even though we were in public, it was a very emotional conversation. He was breaking down at the table and crying, and seeing his emotions was making me break down as well. And that's when I said, 'you have to do this. Because if not now, then never again.'"

"Do you think you can do this?" she said to Mike.

"I know I can. I know what I did wrong the first time," he replied.

"Then...let's do this."

MIKE JOINS ATHLETIC REPUBLIC

When the newly-engaged couple returned from their vacation in mid-June, Mike sold his car, his motorcycle, his furniture, just about everything, really. It all happened so fast, but they were back in the States on June 25. Less than a week later, on July 1, he started training again in Clifton Park at a popular training center called Athletic Republic.

"When I got back to Clifton Park and decided to join the Athletic Republic, it was the first time I put on skates since moving to Hawaii. I hadn't skated once, Justin, in three years," he exclaimed. "I was just that fed up with the game. It took a toll on me and it took me that long to put the gear on again."

The very first time Mike entered the facility, he was greeted by Jack Bartosek, the founder of JB Exceleration, a company that owns and operates the local Athletic Republic franchise.

Talk about perfect timing. Mike, who literally had a few months to prepare for a comeback, would need all of the help he could get. Not only had he been off the ice for three years, but his body was clearly not in "goalie" shape. But that wouldn't stop him from trying, and that wouldn't stop Bartosek from giving Mike all of the tools he would need to make the comeback happen.

"It was real exciting for me, because it was my first time working with someone that had left the pro game for a period of time and wanted back in," Jack said. "Mike was ready to commit everything he had to getting back into the game. So for me, I was interested because I really wanted to help Mike get there. We've done a lot to help other athletes, but I wanted to help Mike because of his story."

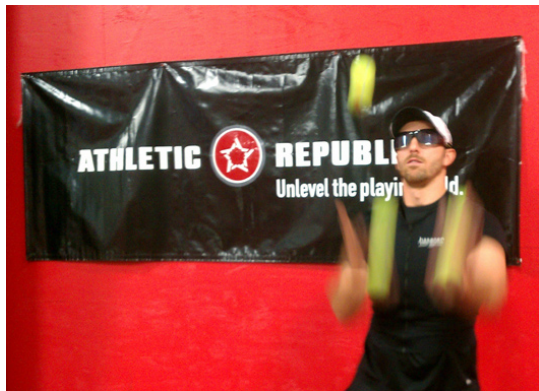
"I know exactly what you mean," I said to Jack.

"Yeah," he replied. "Mike was genuinely focused on making a comeback,

so I pulled out all the stops, and we talked about the technology that's available here, some of which the current pros don't even know about."

After he toured the facility, Mike agreed to train there at an intense level on a daily basis, and it clearly paid off. On the fitness side of things, the Athletic Republic has a strong reputation for mastering the ability to improve a hockey player's strength and agility. But Jack and his staff added two brand new training tools that are specific to goaltenders – components that most people don't even know exist.

The first tool is called the Nike Vapor Strobe Vision Training Eyewear. These glasses are worn by athletes that rely on vision as a critical component to their success. Used in practice to stimulate a sensory perception with the brain, goalies go through simple eye-hand coordination drills while the glasses take away their vision. The strobe reduces their opportunity and ability to see the target by flicking on and off. This limits the amount of time that they can see the object, thus forcing them to focus



harder on the object.

"The science inside the glasses has a technology with eight levels or settings," Jack explained. "So it can take away your vision for a very short period of time, like a fast strobe, or it can take away your vision for longer periods, like a flicker. Either way, you really have to focus on the object. It's on a scaled setting, so you build your protocols, and then advance your training from Level 1 up to Level 8."

So Jack and the Athletic Republic implemented the Nike Vapor Strobe glasses into Mike's training right away. He didn't just use them during his daily off-ice training, but for warmups on the ice as well. Mike put together a series of his own protocols that not only trained his eyes to make them communicate with the brain, but drills that helped him track the pucks with more precision as well.

"The other training product that we introduced to Mike is something that very few pro athletes know about," Jack said. "It has only been in the USA for two years. It's made to stimulate neuromuscular development, but without hurting the athlete or slowing them down."

Jack was introduced to this product when he met a man named Parke Hasanen, who is the developer of the Power-Wear product. Hasanen came in from Finland to visit with Jack and showcase the product. He was excited to grow his business using Jack's Athletic Republic as a place to give athletes a chance to use the gear.

"He asked me if I would be interested, and I was, and it fit perfectly with what we were doing with Mike."

Power-Wear is a line of weighted gear that athletes are wearing to reach a new level of fitness and strength and injury prevention.

"It's a pair of weighted shorts, a vest, or a full-body jumpsuit that a goalie will wear on and off the ice," Jack explained. "So when you add between four and eight pounds to your workout, your neuromuscular system is preparing to have that load. So you work harder, you strengthen muscles like the hips and groin and the lower extremities and when you're not wearing that during a game, you're much lighter and faster and it makes your equipment almost invisible."

With respect to goalies, agility is probably one of the most important factors for their success. They have to be able to drop into the butterfly and recover, then handle the traffic in front of them, contact as well. There are a few NHL goaltenders that are wearing the full body suits. So that's the side that's really exciting, because you feel lighter and quicker on the

ice.

So behind these two tools, how did Mike's training go in just a few short months?

"Mike followed the workout program that we developed for him, one that was made to strengthen his body first," Jack explained. "We talked about agility a lot, so Mike and some of the other guys really put together a whole series of workouts that was mainly based around flexibility."

Near the end of the summer, Mike actually took off the Power-Wear gear, as he didn't want anything getting in the way of his muscle memory. Again, the strategic training multiplied his potential on a daily basis. What would normally take a goalie a week to accomplish in terms of getting back into "pro goalie" shape, he was accomplishing in one or two days. It was really like he gained six months of training in six weeks.

"I wish we took before and after pictures, because he's really changed his body a lot," Jack said. "He has lower body fat, and he's ripped for a guy his age. You just see the look in his eyes and you see he really wanted it, so he really developed over the summer. Everyone here at Athletic Republic is real proud to be a part of Mike's training and we wish him the best in trying to reach his goals."

MIKE'S AGENT PAVES THE PATH

With Mike's training going better than expected, the last piece of the comeback puzzle was the support he received from Joe Hodge, his agent from Hockey Talent Management.

"Mike actually was referred to us by Terry Ruskowski and he reached out to us via e-mail," Joe said. "I was the one manning the e-mail box at the time, so we had a conversation after I received that e-mail. Mike kind of told me his story, and then I went to my partners. Based on Mike's prior experience in junior hockey, plus his limited experience in pro, and his very, very convincing and emotional life story, we decided to take a chance on him."

A chance. That's all Mike wanted. That's all Mike needed. But why did Joe and his crew actually take that chance? It was his pure work ethic. That's one thing that trumps size, skill or raw talent. The harder you work, the more "puck luck" and lucky bounces you'll get, both in life and on the ice.

"If you're just dealing with the person, obviously you want to help him.

But when you look at the player, and the fact that the minor league hockey industry keeps shrinking, you have to be wise with your decisions," Joe explained. "The jobs are limited when it comes to goalies, and they are becoming more limited every year. But Mike was very convincing. His sincerity, drive and work ethic to achieve more than he had before, made it easy to make the decision."

As I have learned, no matter who Mike talks to, they are all captivated by his story. That's the reason you're reading this right now, and that's the reason why you've made it this far.

"He was so passionate about the game, he really just wanted to play," Joe stated. "When you talk to a person that's so passionate about the game, you can't help but want to do everything you can to help him reach his dreams. So I think those are the things I've learned the most about Mike. He's a fantastic young man, a great communicator and nothing gets the guy down."

The motivation was infused by his fiancé. The passion to return to the game was revived by internal strength. The strength he needed to play at a high level was given by his trainers at Athletic Republic. And now, in the final leg of the comeback journey, the opportunity to join an ECHL team was laid out before him by his friend and agent.

"Mike and I were on the phone one afternoon, and he was simply looking for extra ice time. I knew that Elmira had a free-agent camp every year, which was close to home, and a place where he would see good shooters," Joe explained. "So I told him to fill out an application and we'll give them a call and let them know you really want to come."

Something that had come up during one of their regular conversations quickly turned into the perfect storm. The timing was right, so it really wasn't any stroke of genius on Joe's part, it was just something that came up naturally, and worked out. Mike went to that free-agent camp totally prepared, both mentally and physically.

He played well enough to earn a tryout in their main camp.

MIKE SEALS HIS DESTINY

"Hey Mike, if that trip to Italy didn't happen, would you have had the guts to come back?" I asked after his initial tryout with Elmira.

"I don't know man," he said with a sigh. "I always thought about it in Hawaii, and I always said I would do it. I had accepted the fact I wasn't

playing anymore, but I was taking on a path with someone else's life. Ashley was the most important thing to me at that time. So no...I don't think so...I don't think I would have."

Talk about a bombshell. Knowing Mike as well as I did by this point, that wasn't an easy thing to say.

"That trip was really us coming together and really opening up and talking about things to each other. So that set off the fact that this was something I wanted and needed to do," Mike said. "The fact she was so supportive was really what made the decision right. I was engaged, so it wasn't just my decision, it was hers too. If it wasn't for that moment in Rome, none of this would have happened."

"Do you ever think about how our lives, especially yours, include things that happen for a reason?" I asked him. "Are you a believer in destiny? Like, you almost dying in Hawaii, and then going through the ups and downs as a pro, and then meeting your fiancé? Do you feel like heading into training camp, that these were all necessary steps you had to take?"

"Oh, absolutely Justin. The bottom line is, if I never went out there, I would have never learned things or matured as an individual. I was always blaming someone else, or pinning it on bad luck. I think the whole experience, even though it took me three years to figure out, was necessary, because I never would have met my fiancé. Sometimes it takes people time to admit their own faults and how to correct them and I think going out to Hawaii had everything to do with it."

Reflections of this manner are essential for the soul, for they can help manifest who and what we strive to become.

"Now that I'm 28 and heading into camp, I'm not nervous and I'm 100-percent focused," Mike said with audible confidence. "I have no distractions. I've become faithful, and I go to church every Sunday. I've been out of the game for three years, but I'm in the best shape of my life. I'm mentally strong and I know what I'm capable of doing. I've been training with NHL players all summer, so I know I can still play at that level. I used to have a hard time focusing because I had so many distractions, but now I have one goal, and all I need to do is work as hard as I can for two or three hours and stop the puck. I just have a whole different mentality."

As I listened to Mike speak, I realized he had come to learn some things I think most goalies don't understand. The foundation of being a good goaltender isn't your technique, or working your edges, or being in perfect

position. The true foundation of being a successful goalie is the mental strength you gain by knowing you are capable of doing amazing things, regardless of any obstacles around you.

You need to be able to see outside of yourself, and you have to realize there's a much bigger picture, and that the key to stopping the puck is being clear-minded and prepared. You need to have balance in your life. You need to have a certain level of spirituality and faith in yourself, faith in others, and support from others as well.

Mike is 28 years old now, and he's more attuned to himself as a person than ever before.

CONCLUSION: THIS FIRE BURNS FOREVER

Whether it's three or it's five or 50 years, everyone has a different path to take to reach their destiny. Everyone has to take a certain amount of time to go through the maze of life to get to that point of realization where the path is clear and true.

This story, from beginning to end, is what it took for Mike to mature and perform at his best. Today, Mike is where he needs to be. His life is complete. It is well-rounded. I've talked to his agent, his trainer and his fiancé, and they all say the same thing. They all say how bad he wants it.

When Mike first reached out to me, I had no idea it would be so emotional and so motivational. The final conversation we had before this piece was published, which was just a few days before Elmira's camp, was pretty influential.

"It's nice to get it all off my chest and have a fresh start," he told me. "I'm 28, but to me, this is like a brand new beginning. It feels good to have everything I need. I always felt like I was missing part of the equation. But now I feel like everything is right here, and I have everything I need to succeed."

I told him I appreciated his time, and appreciated him reaching out to me. I also remember saying to him, "Most people don't realize how important it is to have the emotional support."

Although I am not above this, I feel like many people are superficial. They're way too focused on the things they have in their life, not the fact that it is their faith and spirituality that makes those things special. I grew up with a ton of faith in my life, through an upbringing where having a



passion for something honorable is needed to truly be successful as an individual.

Because Mike was able to develop that faith, whether it was through surfing or through Ashlei or through the experience of seeing another part of the world, I am so confident he will be successful in his hockey future. Nature is a powerful force, and Mike has learned to develop an appreciation and an understanding of the forces in life that we can't control.

Go back to Part 2 and 3 of this story. What's the one underlying theme between all of the sub-plots? Mike's inability to deal with the forces that he couldn't control. But today, while Mike participates in another pro training camp, he knows.

He knows what he can control. He knows what he can't control. He has clarity. He has mental toughness. He has faith. Without any of those things, no matter how fast a goalie might be, no matter how big they are, they'll never truly grasp the potential they have within their heart and soul.

A lot of writers might be compelled to take these conversations and fluff them up with a lot of pretty words and phrases, mainly in order to force readers to feel emotions they wouldn't normally feel if they had heard them naturally. I won't do that. I simply don't need to.

You know what aspects of your own life you need to work on in order to be a more faithful and well-rounded person. I know that's the case for me; I've learned a lot about my own life, just from learning about Mike's.

So take this story for what it is. There's nothing else to add anymore, other than the fact that we all go through a maze in life, and regardless of whether or not we know which path to take, we all come out the other side a stronger and smarter person.

In today's society of computers, Facebook and Twitter, accessing information as fast as possible has overshadowed a lot of the more important aspects of life. It is so easy to overlook what we can't quite see with our eyes, or touch with our hands. But try to remember that the invisible forces influencing our decisions and our lives are way more powerful than anything tangible. If we pay close enough attention, those mental powers can guide us down a path of success we never imagined taking.

The Mike DiLorenzo Comeback Story isn't about a comeback. It isn't about ups and downs, or rollercoasters and crazy moments of boldness,

dejection, luck and pride. This story is about the love for a game, the love for another and the love for working hard.

To work is to exert energy. To exert energy is to live and exist. To exist is to share in the mystical and magical cosmic consciousness of the ever-expanding universe. And since the universe is constantly expanding, there's no limit to what we can do...if we simply believe.

Mike is the true essence of someone who works hard, expands his horizons, and simply believes in himself. That is why his fire burns forever, and why he's a pro goaltender once again.

Author's Note: *Despite a real strong training camp, Mike didn't make the Elmira Jackals. But this was not due to a lack of performance. Elmira has affiliations with both the Anaheim Ducks and the Ottawa Senators, so a bunch of their prospects (Timo Pielmeier, Marco Cousineau and Brian Stewart) were reassigned before the season began.*

Even though Mike didn't make the team, as you would expect, he didn't give up, he didn't quit. Instead, he elected to take a starting role in the new Federal Hockey League. This league is in its fledgling state, but it does have strong affiliations with the SPHL (Southern Pro Hockey League) and the ECHL as well.

So when the season started in mid-October, Mike was the clear-cut starter for the Vermont Wild. He is determined to work his way back into the ECHL, and then go from there. The ECHL tryout with Elmira may not have gone as well as planned, but Mike is playing at the pro level.

When I first started this project, I had no idea it would have such a meaningful impact on my life. Not only did I learn valuable lessons about work ethic and the ups and downs of the pro goaltender, but I made a close friend. The phone call I had with Mike at the end of Part IV was one of the most emotional conversations I've had with someone I have never met before.

I also never would have expected this to turn out to be a love story. But it did, and I think that makes this "project" one of the most memorable things I have ever done. For that reason, I could never charge someone to read this. I could never try to publish it as anything more than a free digital book. This is someone's life, and I am honored and lucky to have been able to tell it for whoever takes the time to read it. Until my next digital book, keep your stick on the ice, and never give up on your dreams!