

CYCLONE HOCKEY

Feature Article

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Lebler Living the Dream

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For years, Mike Lebler has been pursuing a seemingly impossible dream. Now, after all those years, and after four years playing for Cyclone Hockey, it's within his grasp. The dream is becoming a reality; and like most anything worth achieving, it hasn't come easy.

It could have been easy for Lebler to lose faith that he'd realize his dream when, after more than proving himself as a standout offensive force in the Kootenay International Junior Hockey League (KIJHL), he did not make the full-time roster of any teams in the British Columbia Hockey League (BCHL), the top destination for players from Western Canada looking to play NCAA DI hockey. Lebler did play a few games over a couple seasons for his hometown BCHL club, the Penticton Vees, but they were only short cups of coffee when regulars were out with injuries.

Similarly, it could have been easy for Lebler to dismiss his dream as impossible when he didn't get any significant looks from NCAA DI schools. A dream the magnitude of Lebler's almost certainly required playing NCAA DI hockey.

Likewise, it could have been easy for Lebler to become discouraged and give up entirely when the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, the NCAA DIII school he was set to play for after exhausting his junior hockey eligibility, fired the coach that had recruited him, leaving him in limbo on where he'd play next. The door wasn't closed at Stevens Point, but it wasn't as open as it would have been had the coach that had been talking to him his entire 20-year-old year still been there.

But, then, another door opened—wide open.

Shortly after his final season of junior hockey with the Nelson Leafs, one in which he was

amongst the KIJHL's scoring leaders and in which played in his third consecutive KIJHL All-Star Game, he received an e-mail. The sender was one Eric Tofte, the director of recruiting for Cyclone Hockey, Iowa State's team in the American Collegiate Hockey Association. In the e-mail, Tofte indicated that Cyclone Hockey was interested in him (Lebler) after another player the team had been recruiting had recommended him and passed on his contact information.

After talking with Tofte on a

"Coming from a fairly small town in Canada, you don't really have anything like this, with the facilities they have here," said Lebler of Iowa State in an interview after his senior year.

"Coming to a Division I type of school is great, because you get the big university feel, the big university experience, and you get the good education here," said Lebler of the leading factors of his decision to attend Iowa State. "The teams that are Division III teams, they're smaller schools and maybe don't have as good of an education as you would get here."

The choice of studying at Iowa State, with its offering of over 100 majors and a number of highly respected and highly ranked academic programs, certainly offered Lebler a broad selection of quality academic opportunities, but it also gave Lebler the chance to still potentially realize his dream, even if the decision might have initially appeared to be a crushing blow to some.

Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of young Canadian hockey players grow up dreaming of playing pro hockey, and Lebler was no different in that regard. Where he was and is different is that he's not only Canadian, he's also Austrian. Lebler's grandparents immigrated to Canada in their early twenties and Lebler himself was born in the Austrian city of Klagenfurt while his father was working there.

Well, perhaps "working" isn't the most accurate description.

More specifically, Lebler's father, Edward, played 12 seasons of professional hockey in Austria, from the 1981-82 season through the 1992-93 season, and during that time did no less than etch his name into the Austrian Hockey League's record book. Edward Lebler scored 492 goals and 429 assists in 464 Austrian Hockey League games, was twice named the league's "Player of the Year," and earned the nickname of "Playoff Eddy" for his exploits in the post-season and for helping Klagenfurt win

near weekly basis thereafter, Lebler decided he'd humor Cyclone Hockey and kill two birds with one stone and visit Iowa State while he was already scheduled to visit Stevens Point. Lebler left Penticton fully expecting to still end up at Stevens Point, but when he visited Iowa State, he knew it was the right place for him to achieve his goals.





three league championships in the 1980s and for winning a fourth championship with Villach in 1992.

Edward not only played in Austria, he played for Austria. Thanks to his own Austrian heritage, the Vanderhoof, British Columbia, native was eligible to play for the Austrian national team and did so numerous times during the course of his career, including at the 1984 and 1988 Winter Olympics. Today, Edward stands fourth in all-time scoring for the Austrian national team on the strength of his 69 goals and 51 assists in 111 games when donning the Austrian jersey.

As the son of an Austrian hockey legend, Mike Lebler dreamed of returning to his early childhood homeland and following in his father's footsteps by playing pro hockey in Austria. To some, Mike's choice to play ACHA hockey for Iowa State over NCAA DIII hockey might have signaled the end of his dream to skate in the Austrian Hockey League. Mike's father, however, wasn't one of them after looking into it.

"I didn't know much about the American Collegiate Hockey League at first," admitted Edward Lebler in a phone interview. "Then, I did some research on it and what I figured out is it's probably the same caliber as [NCAA] Division III, so I thought that'd be a great place for Michael to go."

The elder Lebler, who earned a pharmacology degree from the University of Wisconsin and played college hockey for the Badgers (which included skating for a national championship winning team in 1981), also liked what he saw academically at Iowa State.

"Looking at the academics of the school and what was offered there was actually better than a Division III school, so I was quite excited for him," said Edward of the advantages Iowa State offered his son. "A lot of times Division III schools are smaller schools and, academically, they don't have as many programs and you're limited in what you want to go in to."

Edward was also impressed with the caliber of hockey Iowa State offered when he got to see it, and he had strong context on which to draw his opinion, given his third son, Brian, was playing NCAA D1 college hockey for the University of Michigan while Mike played for Cyclone Hockey.

"When I watched Iowa State and the teams they played against, there are some very good players in that league, and there are some very good players at Iowa State."

His second eldest son was one of them.

As former Cyclone Hockey Associate Head Coach Brian Wierson noted in a mid-July interview, Lebler quickly established himself as an impact player for the Cyclones.

"He was a pretty offensive-minded player and, from the get go, proved he was a go-to guy, even as a freshman."

Indeed. Lebler finished fourth in Cyclone team scoring that freshman season (2007-08) with 27 goals and 26 assists in 42 games and was tops amongst all freshmen on the team, and he remained one of the team's top forwards the following three seasons. He again finished fourth in team scoring his sophomore season by tallying 23 goals and 29 assists in 46 contests. In 2009-10, he was the recipient of Cyclone Hockey's Charlie Turner Award as the team's leading scorer, after lighting the lamp 20 times and adding 40 helpers in 46 games, and was named to the ACHA Men's Division 1 All-Tournament Second Team after scoring 2 goals and 3 assists in 4 games and leading Iowa State to the finals of the 2009 ACHA Men's Division 1 National Tournament, a game which they narrowly lost 2-0 to Lindenwood University.

In his senior year, Lebler again earned the Charlie Turner Award on the strength of 23 goals and 26 assists in 42 games and was also the recipient of Cyclone Hockey's Alexander Murdoch Award as the team's most valuable player, the Rod French Award as the outstanding forward, and the Ed Moore Award as the most sportsmanlike player.

After all was said and done, Lebler finished his Cyclone Hockey career with 93 goals and 121 assists for 214 points in 176 games, which put him in elite company in Cyclone Hockey history as one of the few to score over 200 points.

Lebler joined similarly elite company on May 24, 2011 when the Linz Black Hawks of the Erste Bank Ice Hockey League announced it had signed him to a two-year contract. Only a select few ACHA players go on to play professional hockey each season, and even fewer break into the pro ranks at a level as high as Lebler will do in 2011-12. The Erste Bank Ice Hockey League is an Austrian-based league that is comprised of that country's top six clubs, as well as the top two clubs from Slovenia, the top club from Hungary, and the top club from Croatia. The league features numerous players who have played in the NHL, played in the minors under NHL contracts, and/



Top: Posed photo of Edward Lebler in a Team Austria jersey taken at his first training camp with the Austria national team in Kapfenburg in 1982. (Photo courtesy of the Lebler family)

Above: Posed photo of Mike Lebler in an Iowa State jersey taken after a team skate during his senior year (note the alternate captain's "A"). Is there a resemblance here?

or were drafted by NHL teams. The Erste Bank League is also the league of choice for players that play for the Austrian senior national team, as 24 of the 25 players who played for Austria at the 2011 World Senior Championships played in the Erste Bank League.

Heading into his rookie season in the Erste Bank League, it is likely that Lebler will begin his pro career playing a role vastly different than what he's played at Iowa State. He was a top-six forward all four years at Iowa State and he was named *the* top forward his senior season. As Cyclone Hockey General Manager and Head Coach Al Murdoch said of Lebler, "When the chips were down, he's the guy I wanted on the ice."

Historically, Lebler's been accustomed to playing in offensive roles, both in juniors and at Iowa State, but with Linz he projects to battle for a spot on the Black Wings' fourth line, at least to start the season. It's a role, however, that he isn't entirely unprepared for. The Cyclone Hockey coaching staff worked with Lebler to help him become an effective two-way player during his time at Iowa State.

"We wanted to let him round out his game and become stronger defensively [in his senior season], which he did," said Wierson of Lebler. "To take it to the next level, you've got to be a well-rounded player, and I think by the time he left he certainly was."

If Lebler indeed does play a fourth-line role for the Black Wings, he'll be called upon to play a responsible game defensively, generate offensive zone face-offs for higher lines, and then chip in offensively when the opportunity arises. To Lebler's credit, he possesses the work ethic necessary for a young player to succeed starting out on a lower line at a higher level.

"He's a coach's dream," said Murdoch of Lebler. "If we skated board to board for an hour and a half, he'd be right there skating as hard as he could every time."

It was that work ethic that made Lebler a leader and model Cyclone Hockey player both on and off the ice.

"He wasn't a 'rah rah' guy, but he was a leader by example in practice and games with his can-do attitude and his coachability," said Wierson.

"You have a senior leader like that who, start to finish, is your leading scorer and the other players on the team know he's your go-to guy, and here he is just coming to work all the time,"

added Wierson. "Then, off the ice, you take his academics for instance, just a hard-working guy doing well in the classroom, always putting his nose in the books on road trips, and just doing what it took to be a student-athlete and was very representative of the kind of student-athlete that Coach Murdoch recruits to Iowa State."

In addition to his work ethic, Lebler's naturally quiet demeanor should also serve him well in gaining the acceptance of his veteran teammates, many of whom have played numerous games in the American Hockey League (the second-highest league in North America, behind only the NHL) or have played numerous games in Erste Bank League and other top European leagues.

"With his upbringing and the humble personality that he has, he'll be a respected teammate and he'll just do what it takes to be in the line-up and help the team like he did here at Iowa State," said Wierson.

In some regards, Lebler goes to Austria as a bit of an unknown quantity, as the Black Wings haven't seen him play and are relying heavily on the word of his agents, Patrick Piloni and Tommy Cijan (who was a teammate of his father's and who is also one of the top players in Austrian League history and who lies second in all-time scoring for Team Austria). Because of how things played out 30 years ago for his father, Lebler's

status as an unknown is one he embraces.

"He (Edward) went over there and he said nobody knew who he was and he had a fresh slate and just played how he wanted to and changed the game completely and became a big-time scorer," said Lebler of his father's start in Austria. "So, you never know how it happens, especially with the big ice and the different style of game."

"You never know, it could fit right into my type of play and work out well for me."

If things do work out well for Lebler and he proves himself worthy of consistent ice time in Austria's top league and then builds on that in subsequent seasons, it's possible Lebler could achieve his other goal of playing for the Austrian national team, as his father did in the 80s and early 90s. Lebler knows the goal of playing for the Austrian national team, even in smaller tournaments held during the season (to say nothing of one day playing in the Olympic Games and/or the World Senior Championships), is one that appears quite lofty, but it's been one of the reasons he's worked so hard in every off-ice training session, every practice, and every game the past four seasons with Cyclone Hockey. After all, as the Donald Zimmerman quote goes, "A task without a vision is drudgery."

Should Lebler go on to don the Austrian national



Mike Lebler diligently backchecking University of Oklahoma defenseman Troy Puente.



Above: Lebler building speed out of his own zone on the power play breakout.
 Below: Lebler on a shootout attempt against Lindenwood during his sophomore season.

team jersey one day, it would be an exciting and rewarding experience, not only for Mike, but for his parents, and in particular for his father. When Edward played his first international games for Team Austria after the 1981-82 season, he saw that first tournament merely as an opportunity to play some additional high-level hockey rather than as a source of great personal and national pride. Over the years, however, as he and his

wife (Mary) started their lives together in Austria, developed lifelong friendships in Austria, and had children in Austria, Edward's attachment to Austria increased and he took more and more pride in wearing the Austrian jersey. Now, with those 12 formative years of early adulthood in Austria that he credits in helping make him the person he is today and looking back on all of those experiences, seeing a son experience the same would be very special for Edward.

"Because I played there, because we lived there so long, because they were born there, I would be very proud to see that happen," said Edward of the specter of Mike and/or Brian playing for Team Austria.

Like Mike, Brian also signed with the Linz Black Wings in May for the 2011-12 season, so the two brothers will be playing on the same team for the first time since Mike played a couple playoff games for the Penticton Vees in the 2006 BCHL playoffs, and both could become eligible to represent Austria if they play pro hockey in Austria for three or more seasons.

Mike readily admits that he "definitely wasn't ready to go over there (to Austria) right out of juniors" and that Cyclone Hockey has played a big part in allowing him to reach his hockey objectives and sign a pro contract with a team in Austria's top league.

"It helped me mature a little bit and develop my game a little more and fine tune it," said Lebler of Cyclone Hockey. "I was able to play hockey and continue working and practicing for my ultimate goal of going over there (to Austria), so it definitely gave me an opportunity to play at a high level and to continue playing."

For Lebler, the opportunity to continue playing could have come at an NCAA DIII school, but it likely wouldn't have allowed him the construction engineering degree he graduated with at Iowa State (and as an ACHA Academic All-American his junior and senior years—the two years ACHA players are eligible for such recognition). Having a quality degree from the highly respected Iowa State University College of Engineering gives Lebler a little piece of mind in case things don't turn out with pro hockey, or even if they do and he goes on to play a 12-year pro career in Austria like his father, as his father was able to successfully transition to life after hockey with the pharmacology degree he graduated with from the University of Wisconsin.

In the meantime, though, as Lebler settles into his fully furnished, team-provided apartment and starts training camp with the Linz Black Wings, all other contingencies are an afterthought. Right now, he's living the dream.

