

The price, the puck and the payoff: How Scott Langkow navigated his way through a life in international hockey

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How Scott Langkow navigated his way through a life in international hockey

By Courtney King



A player poster of Langkow, when he was goaltender for Krefeld Pinguine in Germany.

IT IS Saturday night and the bleachers are filled from wall to wall with dedicated small-town hockey fans. The smell of deep-fried concession food drifts through the air, and the white walls of the dome-like structure are dusted with a thin layer of dirt. It's the last period of the game. A quick look at the scoreboard shows that the hometown crowd doesn't have much to cheer about. Within the span of a few minutes, the visitors score three more goals to top up their already painful lead.



Now a coach, Langkow watches his Junior B team, Vegreville Rangers, from the bench. (Anita Kuffert)

Across the ice from the disappointed fans, Scott Langkow stands among the home team's coaching staff. He drops his head and leans against the wall, accepting a loss of 14-5 for his Junior B hockey team, Vegreville Rangers.

Langkow's journey as a player began in that arena, where, at 41, he coaches Junior B and Initiation (a minor hockey level that develops the skills of beginning players). With an 18-year professional career behind him, he knows what it's like to live a hockey life – and how much the game has changed.

Hockey has become an extremely expensive sport that demands a huge time commitment. As the price rises, parents and players are asking, Is it worth it?

This is something he knows a bit about.

Although he never became the huge NHL star many Canadian children dream of becoming, Langkow says he has no regrets.

He started in minor hockey when he was four or five, just because it was what everyone was doing in his hometown of Vegreville, Alta, and his professional career began as a goaltender for the Portland Winter Hawks of the WHL in 1991. Two years later, the Winnipeg Jets drafted him in the second round. He was picked 31st overall.

However, Langkow's spot in the NHL was never secure. He says it was a constant struggle of being called up, sent down and traded. His last NHL gig was a half-season with the now-defunct Atlanta Thrashers in 1999 and 2000.

When he was released, he had played just 20 games in the NHL. After that, he struggled to find a job in hockey.

"I had actually given up on hockey and worked that summer," he recalls of the time.

After a brief stint working with his brother-in-law, who ran a welding company in Fort McMurray, Langkow got back on the ice, after he got a tip from a hockey friend about an open goalie position for Ässät in Pori, Finland.

He was 26 with a wife and daughter, and his future in North American hockey was looking bleak.

"Once you go to Europe, you have to accept the fact that your chances in the NHL are pretty much done and you're just trying to make a living," he says. "I just had to be responsible. If you're not playing in the NHL, there is better money there, a better lifestyle – not quite as many games."

Langkow's wife, Anya, lived the hockey life with him. She had a passion for the arts that she had begun developing as a girl, and had cultivated her craft by taking musical theatre in college. That was shoved aside when she married a hockey player.

"His dream was sort of immediate," she says. "It's not something you can put off. I had to make a decision on whether I was going to follow my dream or follow him."

T HE LANGKOWS have three children, and two are old enough to remember their father's 11-year European career, where Langkow played in five different countries for six different teams. Anya says the constant moving made it difficult for the kids to adjust.

“As much as they enjoyed where we were at the time. The coming and going was always hard, leaving family and friends, and changing schools.”

The family had to move as often as twice a year, missing such important events as family members’ funerals and the births of some of their closest friends’ children. Anya also remembers having a difficult time with the languages, and worrying about simple things like how to use the bank and where to shop.

“There’s a lot of challenging aspects that go into it, too, that people didn’t see,” she says. “They just think, ‘Oh, you get to be a hockey player. Must be nice.’ ”

Langkow’s hockey career wasn’t like that of many NHL players. He was able to sustain a long professional career, but he never earned the millions the top players get.

“It was hard work to make a living,” Anya recalls.

When asked about the most difficult part of his hockey career, the Langkows give the same answer: the end. Anya describes that period as emotionally draining for both of them.

Langkow had been playing on a German team for five years and had led the league in wins during his final year. The couple had settled with Krefeld Pinguine and had made good friends and contacts. Anya says they felt secure – until things quickly went south. She sums up the experience as “disheartening.”

“We thought it would be in our hands to decide if we were done or not.”

The team didn’t want to pay Langkow the money he thought he deserved and, with a new baby and a long career behind him, he decided it was time to quit.

Even though his hockey career hadn’t been what most young players dream of – he points out that he never won any championships – he still says he values the experience and wouldn’t change it.

Anya says that it hurt to watch the joy go out of the game over the years.

“There were times – when you’re a professional athlete, you want to win – if he was on a team that wasn’t doing well, it takes the joy out of it,” she says. “And it becomes a job. And it’s not as fun to go to work day after day after day and practise. But, then, you get out on the ice and you play well. And that’s just where he was meant to be.”

Langkow says he vividly remembers his first NHL game. He was suddenly called up from the AHL by the Winnipeg Jets and thrown into a game that was already in progress when he got there. It all happened so quickly that he says he’s not even sure if his family saw it. But it stands as a powerful memory.

One thing Langkow says he treasures is the fact that at least two of his children were old enough to see him play. He has passed on his passion to his eldest son, a talented goalie like his father, who has just moved up to a AA team in Fort Saskatchewan, Alta.

Langkow now lives in with his family in Vegreville once again, and works for Canadian Natural Resources as a gas-field operator.

As a parent, he says he has pondered whether to encourage his son to continue to play the sport that consumed most of his life. He knows the challenges and the rewards but says the sport has changed tremendously.



When his his sons, Beckett (left) and Calder, were young, Langkow was at most practices. Now, Beckett is a goaltender in Fort Saskatchewan. (Anya Langkow)

The time commitment and expense have weighed heavily in Langkow's mind, as they do for many other hockey parents.

EVEN WHEN he started out, Langkow says, cost was an obstacle, but he had a lot of support. But, now, the exponential increase in cost has put pressure on kids to perform well, and the psychological effects on the players are more significant because all levels of hockey are taken more seriously.

"When I started, it wasn't uncommon for guys to go and have beers after a game," he says. This isn't often seen in higher levels these days.

The pressures on young players may have increased, but that doesn't mean the hardest working players are rewarded for their effort. While coaching Initiation players and witnessing his son's play, Langkow says he doesn't see the work ethic he had.

"A lot of kids are where they are because their parents could afford to get them there."

He points out that some young players get left behind because they can't afford to play all summer or participate in power skating.

"Everything is shinier and nicer and newer."

Anya adds: "And it's competitive. What type of equipment are you wearing? And are you wearing second-hand equipment?"

The Langkows say it is important for parents and young players to keep in mind that junior hockey doesn't directly lead to NHL glory.

"Most parents see their child through rose-coloured glasses," Anya says. "And they think that it's a means to an end, and you're going through all the steps. And it's going to end a certain way."

Anya points out that just 18 months separate her husband and his younger brother, Daymond. Brought up in the same home with the same opportunities, the brothers

played different positions and had much different careers. Both brothers were professional athletes for many years, but Daymond, a centre, played most of his career in the NHL.

Selling the Dream: How hockey parents and their kids are paying the price for our national obsession, features a study by the authors, Ken Campbell and Jim Parcells, on Ontario minor hockey players. It shows that players from Canada's most populous province had roughly a 0.1 per cent chance of playing a game in the NHL. The study gathered data from 1965, 1975 and 1985, and the results showed very little disparity. "Regardless of the era or the contribution from other parts of the world," the authors write, "the chances of a boy from any jurisdiction in Canada making the NHL are infinitesimal."

Although Langkow did not have a particularly smooth career, he was one of the lucky few who made it to the NHL, and he says the good times outweighed the bad. He has never left the game entirely. His children play, and he coaches a team of Junior B players with no big career expectations.

Yet, the way hockey has changed, Langkow glumly says, he has noticed a drop in the number of people like his players, who are in the game for love. In the past, he says, 40 to 50 players might have shown up at a training camp. This year, it was a struggle just to put together a Junior B team.



Langkow had been playing for the Pinguine for five years, when life went south. (Christoph Jurgens)

The head coach of the Vegreville Junior B Rangers, James Couch, says that, even with the new model of hockey and fewer players to draw from, Langkow still brings his best insights and advice to the bench.

“Scott is a very effective coach. He brings a perspective to the game of being very in tune with the players and what they need and think.”

It has been 3¹/₂ years since Langkow retired but Anya says it feels like a lifetime since he played professionally. While both Langkows agree that hockey parents and players should proceed with caution while navigating their way through the sport, neither would discourage anyone from playing.

“It’s nice to look back now,” Anya says. “Because you do think from a positive stance and remember all the good times, and all the amazing people that we met, and the places we lived – things that we were able to see – and gloss over all the trying times. I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

“I miss it.”

Langkow says there is one thing that made it all worthwhile.

“Since I was done, I don’t really miss the game. But I miss being in the dressing room, hanging out with the guys. No matter what level you are, I think it’s important just to be part of something.”