HOCKEY'S IMMIGRANTS CAN OFTEN GET CAUGHT UP IN PAPER CHASE

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Body

The team bus lumbers toward the Canada-U.S. border while the coaches huddle in the front seats, trying to figure out how to avert the looming disaster.

The working ***papers*** of one of the hockey players on board are incomplete. Short of some divine - or diplomatic - intervention, the player, a Czech, likely will be detained by Canadian customs officials. Somebody suggests smuggling the player through the checkpoint in the luggage compartment. Nobody laughs.

Sound like a scene from the soon-to-be-released Disney flick, "D3: The Mighty Ducks," the second sequel to the original movie from which the Anaheim NHL entry derived its name?

Actually, it's a true tale involving Pavel Trnka, a defenseman in the Mighty Ducks' organization. His is one of myriad misadventures that come with the foreign territories from which professional hockey players rise.

Athletes without a U.S. passport or a green card seeking employment with a U.S.-based team are required to obtain work permits and nonimmigrant visas. In most cases it's only a minor inconvenience, a matter of gathering the proper ***papers***, after which players are able to fly across the U.S. border as if it were the blue line on a breakaway.

But throw a zealous customs official, a forgotten passport or a team transaction into the mix and the process ***can*** become the bureaucratic equivalent of the neutral zone trap. It ***can*** be especially trying for younger players such as Trnka who are unschooled in the procedure and nonconversant in the language of their interrogator.

Finnish forward Teemu Selanne was en route to his first NHL training camp in Winnipeg from his hometown of Helsinki in 1988 when he was detained in customs for more than an hour at the Toronto airport. The only official ***papers*** on his person was a passport, and the customs official wasn't buying the baby-faced 18-year-old's story that he was trying out for the Jets' hockey team.

Or maybe he just couldn't understand it.

"My English was not very good," Selanne said. "I was young. It was tough."

Selanne's animation grew in proportion to his anguish until finally, he was handed some ***papers*** to fill out and sent on his way. These days, the only delays Selanne encounters at the border are when a customs official asks for his autograph.

In the United States the process was streamlined with the passage in 1990 of the Immigration Act, which created a temporary work permit category - P-1 - for internationally recognized athletes and athletic teams wishing to compete in the United States while maintaining permanent residency elsewhere. A current passport and a copy of a professional contract are sufficient for a player on one of the 20 U.S.-based NHL teams to obtain a P-1 permit. It

must be accompanied by a visa, which is obtained by gaining the permission of the U.S. embassy in his country of residence to work in the United States.

When crossing the border, some foreign-born players also carry newspaper clippings as further proof of their standing.

The P-1 permits generally are good for the length of a player's contract, while the visas must be renewed every year.

In addition, athletes from the former Soviet Union who are on teams that travel to Canada must also secure a multiple-entry visa, renewable every six months.

There are seven players from the former Soviet Union participating in Ducks training camp. Kevin Gilmore, Disney Sports' vice president of business operations, and his administrative assistant, Tia Wood, spent the better part of one week gathering the players' paperwork in an effort to procure their entry visas.

Roughly a dozen Ducks players have green cards, freeing them from the rigmarole.

Trnka's troubles last fall stemmed from an administrative mixup. He asked that the Ducks send his P-1 paperwork to the Canadian embassy in Calgary, the closest such office to Edmonton, where the player was spending the summer. But Trnka, then 19, never made it to Calgary to pick ***up*** his ***papers***.

The oversight wasn't uncovered until Trnka, who played for the Ducks' top minor-league affiliate in Baltimore in 1995-96, traveled with the Bandits to Cornwall, Ontario, in October. On their way out of Canada, Bandits team officials led Trnka to his inquisition. After the situation was explained to him, a sympathetic customs official issued the player a visitor's visa and sent him - and the team - on its way after an hour's delay.

Until just recently, when a foreign-born athlete was traded from one team to another, his working ***papers*** were at once reduced to scrap ***paper***. The new team is required to start the ***paper*** process anew, but now there is a 30-day grace period. It went into effect too late to help defenseman Milos Holan, who was in his hometown of Bilovec in the Czech Republic when he was acquired by the Ducks from the Philadelphia Flyers in March 1995.

Holan, in a hurry to ***catch*** a flight from Los Angeles International Airport to Vancouver to join the Ducks, instead spent two hours in a closet-like room in the bowels of LAX, trying to explain how it was he could tell a customs official he was coming into the country to play for the Mighty Ducks when his working ***papers*** clearly stated he was employed by the Philadelphia Flyers.

"You're kind of at the mercy of the official at the border," said Debbie Blanchard, who handled all the foreign-born players' paperwork last season before leaving the Ducks to move to Chandler, Ariz. "That's why we'd always tell the player, 'Don't say you've been traded to the Mighty Ducks, say you're trying out with the team.'"

On the same day the Ducks acquired Holan, they also picked ***up*** defenseman David Karpa from the Quebec Nordiques (now the Colorado Avalanche). Karpa, a Canadian citizen, couldn't ***get*** into the United States without a 30-day visitor's visa. That is also what Karpa and the Ducks' other unsigned player, J.F. Jomphe of Canada, would require today to ***get*** into the country.

Karpa couldn't secure the visa without first ***getting*** an invitation on Ducks letterhead to join the team. So Blanchard, then the administrative assistant to general manager Jack Ferreira, scurried around at midnight ***getting*** a letter typed, signed and faxed to Karpa in Quebec.

Less than three weeks later, Karpa and teammate Stephan Lebeau were detained at the U.S.-Canadian border after a game in Vancouver because they had forgotten their passports. Blanchard had to collect the documents from the players' girlfriends, then ***catch*** a flight to Vancouver to deliver them. Imagine the Canadian customs official's surprise when Blanchard's answer to the obligatory question about how long she would be staying in the country was, "Five minutes. Ten minutes, max."

Even when a player's ***papers*** are in order, there is no guaranteeing smooth passage across the border. Last season Denny Lambert was stopped by a customs official in Toronto. As a native North American, Lambert is free to work in either the United States or Canada. The official took one look at Lambert's ***papers***, then proceeded to grill the 5-foot-11 forward about his Ojibway heritage. At one point, he said to him, "Prove to me you're an Indian."

The immigration official clearly was flexing his muscle. But Lambert, who regularly dropped his gloves on the ice, kept his cool until Gilmore came to his aid.

Trnka, now 20, doesn't anticipate having any run-ins with customs officials this season.

"Last year I didn't know anybody, the language was different. It was very confusing," Trnka explained. "This year it is much better."

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Company: MIGHTY DUCKS OF ANAHEIM (91%); ANAHEIM NHL (60%); MIGHTY DUCKS OF ANAHEIM (91%); ANAHEIM NHL (60%); ANAHEIM MIGHTY DUCKS (83%); ANAHEIM MIGHTY DUCKS (83%); NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE (57%); NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE (57%)

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