

# SAGA ON THE HIGH SEAS

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## PIRATES' FAITHFULS REMAIN STEADFAST, AS THE FRANCHISE NAVIGATES ROCKY WATERS.

From row one in Section T, Andrew Hart has the best seat in the house. He hears pucks ricochet off metal goalposts, watches crisp passes sail across the ice and feels the force of bodies slamming against the glass. At the Cumberland County Civic Center, in Portland, Maine, Section T contains dedicated fans drawn together by a shared passion. They love hockey.

Wearing team regalia, namely autographed jerseys, they wave black skull-and-bones flags. They ring cowbells and bang against the boards with their feet. They think of the players for this American Hockey League franchise as friends and call their fan base family.

"We come here together; we go on road trips together; we hang out together. Like a dysfunctional family," explains Andrew, the crew's leader. He has a buzz cut, soft, blue eyes and, at this particular home game, wears a pink-trimmed Pirates' jersey, indicative of breast cancer awareness, over his husky frame. By day, he works in security at Unum. By night, he's fist-bumping fans and holding up his red Pirates' scarf for the entire crowd to see. As head coach Kevin Dineen returns to the ice following intermission, Andrew leads the crowd in a cheer: "We're all a part of Kevin's army / We're all out to win the league / And we'll really shake 'em up / When we win the Calder Cup / 'Cause Portland's the greatest hockey team!"

## LOOKING FOR LOOT

It's a cheer fans feared wouldn't be heard within the stands next season. The Pirates' lease with the civic center was set to expire April 30, creating anxiety among Section T devotees. While Managing Owner/ CEO Brian Petrovek negotiated for contract changes, he also scouted lucrative offers from behind enemy lines, considering relocation to Albany, New York, whose River Rats were sold to North Carolina. Petrovek used the offer as leverage to express his desire for a long-term lease and renovations to Portland's aged civic center, telling Albany's *Times Union*, "You've got to have amenities... you have to have those revenue streams that help fill out the model."

Pirates' fans argued in favor of salvaging the rink. Season-ticket-holder Sheila Dobrowolski explained, "It's an older building but it's a building full of hockey history. Brian Burke, who is General Manager of team USA in the Olympics, played his one professional season in this building. For it to go by the wayside because [nobody] wants to give an inch is really pathetic."

## ALL HANDS ON DECK

Outside the civic center on February 23, Andrew rallied his gang of buccaneers. In cold, misty air they carried signs pleading: "Save Our Pirates."



*"It's a matter of civic pride," Andrew says. The Pirates mean "as much to the city as, say, the Bruins mean to Boston."*

Andrew grew up in Minnesota where, "you're basically born on skates." He played hockey a little himself but "was never very good at it." Like many minor league hockey fans, he's formed a community at the arena. Cynthia Reed-Workinan, a grandmother with short, silver hair, sits two seats over from Andrew in Section T. Cynthia explains, "When I wanted a ticket and they sold me one for this area, they thought I'd probably never come back, but I just loved the amount of energy that was expended down here. So I'm still here three years later."

As smells of beer and soft baked pretzels waft from the concession stands and linger

among the crowd, rock music blares across the arena in-between plays and following goals. For Marcus Payne, that means letting loose. Affectionately dubbed "The Dancing Usher" and "Mayor of Section T," he dresses in the required security uniform: a long-sleeved, navy blue shirt, tan khakis and red baseball cap. A spiraled headset tucks behind his ear. "I've been encouraged by management over the years to dance a little bit less than I do," Marcus

explains. "I just feel the music and I can't really not dance." He scratches his scruffy beard and laughs. "For the most part, people seem to enjoy it."

As far as Marcus is concerned, "Portland has always been a hockey town." Before the Pirates moved to Portland in 1993, the Maine Mariners skated this ice, capturing



*It's one big family in Section T.*

the Calder Cup Championship three times in the late seventies, early eighties. Chris Kirby, who has been coming to games for years, explains, "To have the Pirates carrying on the tradition is fantastic. To lose that would be devastating."

When he first heard of the potential relocation, Andrew organized an online network of fan support, creating a Facebook group for discussions about the franchise's future. He says the team "deserves to be supported. It's not the players' fault what's going on... it's management that needs to be shown the anger."

## STEERING TOWARDS A HORIZON

While rumors floated around the league, Portland played the negotiating game well into March, keeping fans on edge. February's all-time franchise record of 11-straight wins gave way to a slump. Andrew traveled to Connecticut and New York only to witness three straight losses. Then, a badly sprained

ankle benched standout goalie Jhonas Enroth. The team's frustrations on the ice paralleled the fans' frustrations in the stands.

Finally, Saint Patrick's Day brought luck to the community: Petrovek signed a two-year lease extension.

Head coach Kevin Dineen welcomed the news. Dineen moved his family to Maine five years ago to join the organization. He comments, "I think the way you really rate a place where [you've lived] is the quality of people you've met...we've found really sincere people." Of all the cities he's lived in, "Portland, you know, may have moved to the top of the list."

Andrew explains that it is "a big relief" to hear the good news of the lease extension and "months of speculation have all ended." Had the Pirates' contract not been renewed, it would have meant "disappointment" and "there would have been a lot of good history lost in the city...it would have been a shame."



He hopes Portland will make improvements to the overall atmosphere of the games. For example, New Hampshire's Manchester Monarchs put on a light show, have ample give-aways and focus more on fan interactions. Beyond promotional and ambient upgrades, Andrew wants more people in the community to understand "what it is to come out, be a fan, support a team."

## IT'S A PIRATE'S LIFE

There aren't many things that remain constant with hockey. In a game of shocking wins and heartbreaking losses, adrenaline runs high. Players shift franchises throughout the season. Teams move to different cities. But among these roller coaster emotions, one thing remains unwavering: the fans experience it all, together.



*Cynthia explains, "I've got three sons. They won't come to a hockey game. They say they went to a fight and a hockey game broke out."*

Coach Dineen explains, "When people get very passionate about something, I think there's an emotional attachment...and when you get involved with a team, it's between people."

After a recent victory, the crowd dissipates but Section T devotees linger in the stands. Andrew grabs his iPod, placing one headphone to his ear. He hands the other to Cynthia. Wearing a backwards Pirates' ball cap, Andrew softly sings, "You'll Never Walk Alone," famously associated with Liverpool's soccer team in England: "When you walk through a storm / Hold your head up high / And don't be afraid of the dark..."

A Zamboni resurfaces the ice for tomorrow's practice. Employees clean the stands of trash. The lights dim.

As the season winds down, players will pack skates away for the summer months. Fans will hang their jerseys in closets, place cowbells on shelves and neatly fold the skull-and-bones flags. Various seasonal plans means they won't see as much of each other until the first puck drops next fall when, thankfully, the clamor of a community in Section T will resume.

The grandmother sways to the music, joining her comrade in song: "Walk on / with hope in your heart / And you'll never walk alone / You'll never walk alone." ♦

*Cover photo by Sarah Craig; page 2 photo of Andrew by Emma Deans; page 3 group hug photo by Craig; Cynthia photo by Deans.*