

# Weekend WARRIORS



*Brodie Merrill sometimes travels 12 hours to get to his home games in Portland.*

FROM MISSED FLIGHTS TO MISSING EQUIPMENT TO BROKEN DOWN BUSES, THE LIFE OF A NATIONAL LACROSSE LEAGUE PLAYER INCLUDES A GRUELING TRAVEL SCHEDULE, NOT TO MENTION THE NEED TO BALANCE BOTH FAMILY AND WORK COMMITMENTS BACK HOME

// By Paul Grossinger

**A** few weeks ago, Brodie Merrill was sitting in the Air Canada Lounge at Vancouver International Airport watching “his” Montreal Canadiens play on television when he suddenly realized he forgotten something. No, it wasn’t his luggage, nor was it his passport. It was his flight.

“You really need to stay on top of things,” says the fourth-year member of the Portland LumberJax. “My traveling buddy [and fellow team mate], Pat Jones, is an organized guy and he usually baby sits me on the road.”

Merrill’s traveling miscue is not all that uncommon for today’s crop of National Lacrosse League (NLL) players for he is just one of many players that venture to the airport on a Thursday or Friday, suit up for a game on Saturday night, and then board another flight back home first thing Sunday morning.

Currently, many of the NLL’s 12 teams are stockpiled with players currently living in Ontario. For the ones that play on any of the six East Division teams, travel is still part of their weekly schedule, but it is nothing compared to their fellow brethren who play on a West Division club. Their life during the season is not only spent preparing for games, similar to their



Bob McMahon, a stay-at-home dad, admits it is tough to coach without mid-week practices.

East Division counterparts, but also dealing with grueling traveling schedules that have them in airports, airplanes, rental cars and taxis for sometimes up to 12 hours at a time.

"It is a traveling man's league," proclaims Josh Sanderson, who lives in Orangeville, but plays for the Calgary Roughnecks. "I think I have it easier than some of the guys and I have a lot of respect for a lot of the guys in the league, whether they are flying or driving. It is not easy."

Take Merrill as an example. During the 16-week NLL schedule, he racks up more air miles than some traveling salespeople. Venturing on a weekly basis from his home in the Greater Toronto Area to Portland or to road games in such cities as San Jose, Minnesota, Calgary, Edmonton or Colorado, he spends every weekend going through the same travel routine. And with no direct flights from Toronto to Portland, Merrill's 12-hour door-to-door journey for home games sometimes takes its toll. Actually, for Merrill, away games are easier for him because many of these destinations have direct flights from Toronto.

"I'd be lying to you if I say it didn't," says Merrill, referring to the negative impact all the travel may have on his performance. "It is a challenge. You really need to focus on eating well, having good nutrition habits during the week, getting enough sleep, taking care of your body on the off days and preparing yourself for the travel on the weekend."

"Over the years," he adds, "you get used to it and you become a better traveler. You work it into your routine. The biggest challenge for me is the three-hour time change between Toronto and Portland. You fly in Friday night for a Saturday night game at 7:30 p.m., and it is really 10:30 p.m. Toronto time."

And like most, if not all, NLL players and coaches, Merrill holds down a full-time job during the week. He is the head lacrosse director at The Hill Academy, a private school his family founded in Kleinburg, Ont.

"It is the nature of the league," says the 6'4" 27-year old. "Most players need to maintain a full time job away from lacrosse. I'm fortunate to play in the league and play for Portland, so it's something you try not to complain about. You can't take this opportunity for granted."

For some players like the Minnesota Swarm's Ryan Cousins, the weekly grind is a good fit with his lifestyle. As a personal trainer, he understands the need to eat healthy and work out between games, and is fully dedicated to ensuring he is game-ready whenever the referee blows his whistle. Actually, he says it is tougher to eat right and maintain a healthy

lifestyle when he joins up with his team mates on weekends.

"By going through airports and grabbing quick meals, I think I eat healthier when I'm at home," says Cousins, who has also won four Mann Cups in his career. "The fitness factor is huge in the NLL and some guys are learning the lesson too late. I hope some guys catch on because they are going to be left behind if they don't buy into what NLL teams expect from them. Players are getting faster and stronger, and it is up to the player to do that kind of stuff."

Cousins is in its eighth NLL season, and unlike Merrill, only has a six hour door-to-door travel day when making his way from Toronto to Minnesota. But like Merrill, he too has experienced the perils of travel. Last year, Cousins made the NLL All-Star Game, played in Edmonton, Alta. The night before, he had a game in Minnesota, so he flew out late to ensure he arrived on time. He made the game, but his equipment never did. As such, he played the game wearing other people's equipment.

"There is a saying in the NLL: Hurry Up and Wait. If you are not used to that or if you can't do it, then you won't last."

For most players, who travel from Ontario to play for teams other than Toronto, Buffalo and Rochester, most of their time away is spent practicing,

**July 16, 2009**  
**Tyandaga Golf Course**  
**1265 Tyandaga Park Drive**  
**Burlington, ON, L7P 1N1**  
**Start Time: 11:30 AM**

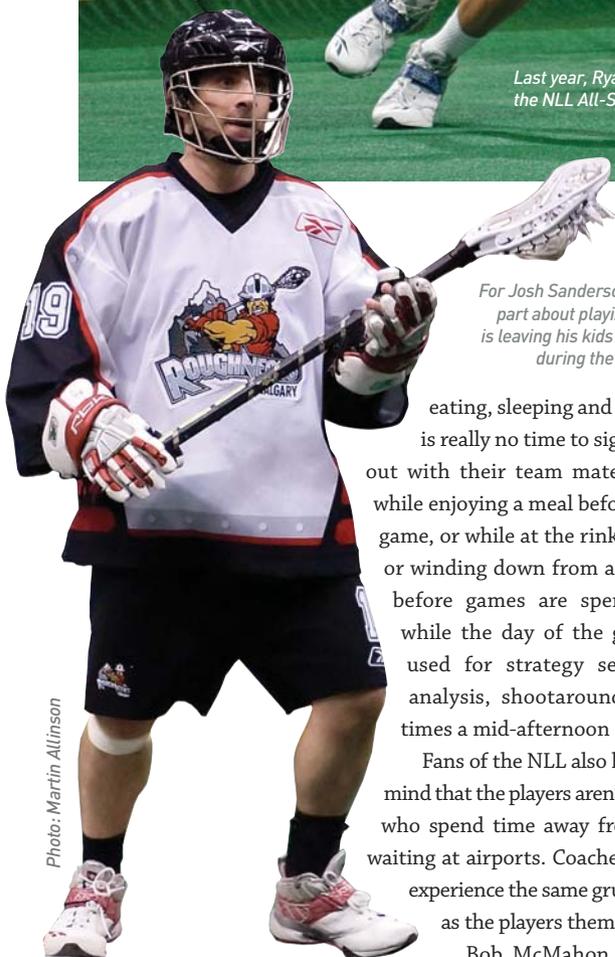
<b>Individual</b>	<b>Foursome</b>	<b>Non-Golfer</b>
<b>\$120</b>	<b>\$450</b>	<b>\$40</b>

**For Information and Registration Contact:**  
**Chris Driscoll**  
**416-426-7069**  
**chris@ontariolacrosse.com**  
**Registration deadline is July 2, 2009**



Last year, Ryan Cousins (left) had to play in the NLL All-Star Game with other players' equipment because his never arrived at the arena.

Photo: Minnesota Swarm



For Josh Sanderson, the toughest part about playing in the NLL is leaving his kids every weekend during the season.

Photo: Martin Allinson

eating, sleeping and playing. There is really no time to sight see or hang out with their team mates unless it is while enjoying a meal before or after the game, or while at the rink preparing for or winding down from a game. Nights before games are spent practicing, while the day of the game is often used for strategy sessions, video analysis, shootarounds and sometimes a mid-afternoon nap.

Fans of the NLL also have to keep in mind that the players aren't the only ones who spend time away from home and waiting at airports. Coaches and referees experience the same grueling schedule as the players themselves.

Bob McMahon, who coaches the Colorado Mammoth, lives in Orangeville and has been living the life of a NLL coach for 12 years now. With previous coaching stints in Arizona, Detroit and Albany, McMahon is no stranger to leaving his family on a Friday and returning once the weekend is over. He is also extremely familiar with trying to assemble a cohesive, quality team without the luxury of practice time and daily interaction with his players.

"You have to use your hours on the floor wisely," he says, referring to the challenges NLL coaches face. "You can't practice in the middle of the week like the East Division teams, so you get together on the weekend, and you go hard that night. It is the nature of the beast for the western teams. It is a business trip. You are in and out."

To prepare his team, McMahon holds a two-hour practice at 10 p.m. on the Friday night before games, as well as provides each player with scouting reports and video clips to review the day of the game.

And just as McMahon recounts, not all good travel stories happen in the air. He recalls, while coaching in Albany, the team bus breaking down six out of eight road games along the Queen Elizabeth Way. "One time we pulled into the arena 15 minutes before the game. That was a year from hell in terms of travel."

Then there is Ed Comeau, currently the coach of the New York Titans. Living in Hamilton and a sales representative for Otis Elevators, Comeau has coached in the league for 10 years, with time spent in both Toronto and Rochester. He believes he is fortunate that his travels only take him to New York and primarily other East Coast cities, as opposed to some of his counterparts that fly across the country to coach.

"It is difficult when you have a family," he adds. "Everyone in the league would agree that family is a big part of this. If you don't have a supporting family, it is very difficult to continue to be involved."

Sanderson, who owns Sanderson Source for Sports, a lacrosse specialty store in Orangeville, concurs.

"The toughest part is family. Obviously, leaving your kids is the toughest. With the store, I have good employees so I know the store will be taken care of."

By the way, Merrill caught a later flight in Vancouver and was bumped up to first class. I guess life in the NLL isn't all that bad! ♦

Paul Grossinger is the editor of Ontario Lacrosse magazine.