



Tyson Nash, right, and Jamie McLennan spent the year together in Japan.

TYSON TAKES ON ASIAN LEAGUE

NASH PASSES ON AHL AND RUSSIA FOR FAR EAST EXCURSION TO JAPAN

BY NEIL ACHARVA

WHEN TYSON NASH WAS

traded from the Phoenix Coyotes to the Toronto Maple Leafs in November of 2006, he went from the far reaches of the NHL world to one of the global centers of hockey. However, any notion he may have had that Phoenix was a far-removed outpost for the world's fastest game was turned on its ear last summer when he signed with a Japanese team, the Nippon Paper Cranes of the Asia League.

"I was ignorant to what went on over here," Nash said over the phone from his apartment in Kushiro, a town of 170,000 where his team is based. "I have been blown away by Tokyo. The city literally doesn't sleep, people are respectful and kind; it has been an eye-opener."

Across from his apartment is the team's home rink, which is adjacent to the team's practice facility. Although the walk is short, he is usually accompanied by Paper Cranes goaltender, Jamie McLennan, who lives one floor above Nash.

To sign McLennan, Nash simply bangs his fist on the ceiling, which shows how the close bond the two have developed – beginning with their years as St. Louis Blues teammates – is intact in their new home. The pair have taken to cyberspace to blog their experiences (McLennan blogged all season for thn.com) and often their descriptions of life in the 'Land of the Rising Sun' are intermingled with hilarious pot shots at each other.

With each passing day, Nash became more accustomed to his new surroundings; the cuisine

definitely pulled him in: "The food is amazing – Sobu Noodles is the Alberta Beef of Japan – but I leave every restaurant starving (because of the portions)."

In September, 2007, Nash had a choice between the AHL and Russia. But selecting between being a target for upstarts trying to make a name for themselves in the minors or 10-hour flights, six-hour time changes and the possibility of not getting paid regularly in Russia wasn't overly appealing.

When Nash heard of the opportunity in Japan, the decision just seemed to make sense.

"I work for a billion-dollar company, I'm actually a paid employee of Nippon Paper," he noted. "They pay my taxes and we are treated like absolute gold."

While Nash is an employee of the company, being one of two imports on the team exempts him from working for Nippon in the off-season, as many other players do.

Nash has been helped along by Yujiro Nakajimaya, assistant coach and team interpreter. Yujiro played professional hockey in Japan for 17 years before hanging up his skates last season.

"If I had known Tyson was playing for us this season, I would have stayed another year," he said.

Nash explains there is always excitement when an NHL player goes to Japan to play.

"They might have thought I was Rick Nash," he joked, poking fun at his relative lack of scoring touch.

The Asia League has seven teams: Four in Japan, two in Korea and one in China. Nash describes the

calibre of hockey as much better than many would expect.

"It is a lot like the AHL," he said. "You would be surprised how good players are. They are big and fast and very competitive."

Nash jokes about how his own team was a little taken a back by his rough-and-tumble style on the ice.

"Even my own teammates were wondering what I was doing," he said. "They were saying, 'This guy hits anything that moves.'"

The 3,000 fans who come out to watch their beloved Paper Cranes arrive adorned with flags and carry drums and cowbells, giving the games a festive atmosphere.

"We could probably fill a facility of 8,000," Nash said. "It's growing and five years down the road hockey in Japan will be a big deal."

The executives at Nippon Paper are very cognizant of their player/employee performance and expect a concerted effort, especially when playing the team owned by rival paper giant, Oji.

Nippon finished fourth overall in its 30-game season before winning a pair of playoff rounds and advancing to the league final. However, it was defeated by its enemy, Oji, in an all-paper championship.

Although he enjoyed his Japanese experiment in every respect, Nash would like another kick at the NHL can next fall.

"I want another chance," he said. "I have to be at my best. The guys on the team see how hard me and Jamie work and I think they are a little surprised by it. We only know one way to play and we do that by working our hardest."

No matter where his career goes from here, Nash will always be thankful he headed to the Far East.

"I'd never even been to Europe before coming here," he noted.

"My dad came up for the all-Japan tournament, my wife also visited; I was excited for them to see what I am experiencing." **ENR**



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