

Life after hockey leads Heskha to Serve and Protect

By Derek Holtom

Life has a funny way of working out the way it's supposed to. Shaun Heskha could definitely look at his life that way. A top-level junior hockey defenseman from the WHL, Heskha's path could have taken him in many different directions. Instead, the 40-year-old native of Melville Saskatchewan has sort of done it all – played professional hockey, got married and had children, won championships, became an all-star, made the NHL, and saw the world. And that was all before he was 37 years old.

For his second act, Heskha opted for a new challenge – becoming a Constable with the Winnipeg Police Service.

After retiring from professional hockey at the age of 37, Heskha had a decision to make – what to do with the rest of his career. For many professional players, staying in hockey is a natural decision. But while Heskha did appreciate many aspects of the hockey life, he was looking for a new challenge – one the WPS was able to provide.

“There's always this lull with pro hockey players when they're finally finished up, and your kind of like 'OK now what do I do?'," he said. "I tried a little bit of professional HVAC between careers, but I did that as I was applying for the police.

“I just talked to some of the guys I knew on the force, and it sounded like a very similar, team-like atmosphere," added Heskha. "The job is always changing, it's always, different, and that's kind of what I was looking for. It's kind of a similar role in hockey, but something different as well. I had the opportunity to coach or scout, but I really wanted to do something different.”

Heskha added being part of a team, being part of the community and helping people were all reasons joining the WPS made sense to him.

“I did think I was a little old to be applying, but the recruiters I spoke to really encouraged me to apply and give it your best shot," says Heskha. "So I gave it one chance and fortunately I got in.



“They were looking for responsible people who were going to be part of the community,” he added. “So far it’s been really great. It’s a new challenge – there’s a physical and mental demand.”

Heshka acknowledges that starting with the service later in life he’s a bit of an anomaly amongst newer recruits.

“Yah I’m the new green guy, but at the same time, I’m kind of an old guy,” he said. “Most people though are very respectful to me. A lot of the older guys on my shift are my friends now. It’s interesting because normally it’s a younger guy coming in, and they don’t have a lot of life experiences as I do.

“Everyone’s been really good to me, but you’re always going to get a few wisecracks as well,” he added with a laugh. “But you really need to rely on people you work with, and you really need to trust the people who work around you. We’ve really built up those relationships quickly.”

Heshka added he knows several people in the service who joined in their thirties, so starting a bit later isn’t exactly unprecedented.

“I think the service does appreciate some people with life experiences,” he said. “So for people on the outside looking in, it’s never too late. They want responsible people to go on calls and help people and do the right thing.”

And Heshka definitely has life experiences, having played hockey as far west as Victoria, as far east as Kazan, Russia, and plenty of stops in between. A right-shot defenseman, Heshka began his professional hockey career back in 2006 when he played three seasons with the Manitoba Moose, the former AHL franchise which kept the Winnipeg hockey market warm before the return of the Winnipeg Jets and the NHL.

“I was playing junior in Everett, and more saw myself going to school, but Vancouver called and they were going to offer me a contract, so I decided to take that,” says Heshka. “So they started me here in Winnipeg with their farm team.

“For me, getting to the pro level was a shock,” he added. “You go from playing 20-year-old boys to 40-year-old men, so it’s obviously a big shock.”

ON JOINING THE WPS

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Starting with the Moose meant playing in the early days of Winnipeg's brand-new downtown arena, which basically offered NHL-level amenities at the AHL level.

"We had a good team, and some really good players like Mike Keane and Lee Goren, and it was a first-class organization," noted Heshka. "If you look at the Jets organization (today), they still have the same mentality of family, and they still have guys like Zinger (Assistant General Manager Craig Heisinger) and Scott Arniel, and all the training staff is still there."

Perhaps more importantly, his start in Winnipeg introduced Heshka to his future wife Laura. Which also eventually led Heshka back to Winnipeg and into his career with the Winnipeg Police Service.

"We've been together ever since – and it's the reason I'm still here in Winnipeg," says Heshka. "My wife is from here, I'm from small-town Saskatchewan. I got acclimated to Winnipeg, really got used to it, and now it's home."

Professional sports are, at its core, a business – teams want to win and they also want to make money. And so it was that Heshka was traded after three years in Winnipeg. Hey, even Wayne Gretzky was traded – twice. But as this story shows, what could be considered a door closing actually opened the door for Heshka to make it to the pinnacle of professional hockey.

"In my third year I got traded at the draft to Phoenix, which was a shock to me as I thought I'd be with Winnipeg/Vancouver longer," said Heshka. "But in the end, it was good as I got to play in Phoenix. Then I was on a bus in San Antonio and my coach called me up to the front, which usually means bad things



"But he told me I was getting called up to Phoenix (who were originally the 1.0 version of the Winnipeg Jets, and who are now known as the Utah Mammoth)," he added.

"My first game was in Anaheim – it was like a shock, playing against guys like (Ryan) Getzlaf, (Teemu) Selanne, and (Corey) Perry. I don't think I took a breath my first game. I just tried not to make a mistake while making sure to look around and enjoy the moment. It was honestly a surreal experience."

Heshka says he enjoyed every day he was in the NHL.

“I know it was just for a cup of coffee, but I spent three weeks there, and it was awesome – it was a once in a lifetime opportunity,” he said. “It just proves how hard it is to not only get there, but stay there. For those who play for years, they are special players.”

(For trivia buffs, the first of Heshka’s two NHL assists came on Nov. 12, 2009 when he assisted on a goal by Paul Bissonnette in a 4-2 loss to the Montreal Canadiens.)

North America couldn’t contain Heshka, and eventually he took his talents east, across the ocean to Europe. It was here that Heshka enjoyed many highlights – championship rings, all-star nominations, and most important, the birth of one of his children.

“I started in Austria, winning a championship with Red Bull, and then I won two championships in Finland, and it was great,” he said. “I love Finland – it’s very similar to Canada. The people are just awesome. I think I played seven or eight years in Finland, and one of my children was born there, so I can’t say enough good things about it.

“Playing in Russia was great as well, I played two years there, and you realize just how big Russia is – I would have 10-hour flights and eight-hour time changes,” he said. “It was a wild ride, and you really get to experience the culture there. I believe the (KHL) is the second-best league in the world. So getting to play there, and be in the all-star game, was a really good experience.”

Heshka says playing more in the NHL would have been great, but having the chance to play around Europe had its own advantages.

“Living in so many places, making a living, playing hockey and having a family which is No. 1, that’s okay too,” he said.



All things come to an end, and so it was with Heshka who hung up the skates and moved the family back to Winnipeg and eventually a rewarding career with the WPS. At 40 years old Heshka is still in the early days of his career, but in many ways, he’s already seasoned, already a team player, and looking forward to soaking up as much

knowledge as he can. In a lot of ways, becoming a WPS member was a natural choice after playing professional hockey.

“So, I’m working my five years in GP (general patrol), and right now I’m trying to be the most well-rounded guy I can be,” he said. “I’m very fortunate that my shift mates are really good, and very detailed in what they do, and they’re very willing to help me out.

“I am trying to learn as much as I can every day, and kind of try to see a path of where I want to go after, but that’s going to be a little bit in the future,” he added. “I’d like to try a little bit of everything and maybe see where my specialty lies. The great thing about the WPS is there are so many avenues you can pursue, whether it’s recruiting or TAC, there’s tons of different paths you can take.”

Of course no transplanted Saskatchewan native can long avoid the classic rivalry that is the Saskatchewan Roughriders and the Winnipeg Blue Bombers. The two standard bearers of the CFL have split the Heshka household, though the tide is slowly but surely turning green.

“I’m definitely a Rider fan,” he said. “I’ve converted two of my sons – I have two sons and one daughter.

“But the rest of my family are full on Bomber fans – like season ticket fans. So, it’s an interesting rivalry in our house.”