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...and the meek shall inherit Qatar

"In a three-year span he was shipped to 12 minor league teams. In 1974 he was on five teams by Thanksgiving. By the time I met Korney he had learned how to live out of a suitcase and make conversation with strangers. He was 23."

In this interesting column from [The Sporting News](#), 30 December 1996, Steve Marantz writes about ex-Lion Mike Korney. (© 1996 Sporting News Publishing Co., 2004 Gale Group)

Long-distance information, help me make a call. The phone rings halfway around the world, in Qatar, a tiny island in the Persian Gulf. The voice answering on the other end, clear and strong, spans more than distance.

"This is Mike," the voice says.

"You won't remember me," I hear myself say, "it's been 20 years."

"Eh?" The voice is clearly Canadian.

Sportswriters are supposed to be dispassionate observers, but I'm afraid we often fail the test of neutrality. A human response - to wish the best for athletes we like - overcomes journalistic intentions. Beat reporters are most susceptible to emotion because they are with a team day after day. It starts as an arranged marriage and then it becomes something more. For 20 years, at the holidays, I have wondered about **Mike Korney**, a hockey player who registered a blip on the big screen of success but left a huge impression on me. In 1976-77 Korney played for the **Kansas City Blues**, a minor league team I covered for the city's morning and afternoon dailies, *The Times* and *Star*. The players were sent by the **St. Louis Blues** and **Detroit Red Wings** to occupy Kemper Arena after the departure of the Scouts, a failed 2-year-old NHL franchise. The Scouts were my first major league beat, and when they left for Denver I felt as a newlywed might feel coming home the day after a honeymoon to find a spouse packed up and gone. Like any Triple-A club, the Blues were composed of a few NHL has-beens and several never-wares. A few rookies won quick promotions to St. Louis, and a couple of veterans arrived at their last stop. The Blues won the Central Hockey League championship, but I can't remember a specific game. They were a dominant club featuring an explosive offense, until St. Louis plucked rookies Bernie Federko Brian Sutter and Rick Bourbonnais. The team switched gears to defense, led by its player/coach, Barclay Plager, former NHL veterans Gilles Marotte and Joe Zanussi, and Korney.

Korney was one of the biggest men in hockey, at 6-4, 230 pounds, with broad shoulders, sparse mustache and shaggy blond mane. He stick handled and shot skillfully enough to skate on the wing though he was better at defense. But when the Red Wings drafted him all they could see were his thick fists. In the 1970s the NHL was overrun with dangerous goons such as Steve Durbano, Tiger Williams, John Wensink and Dave Schultz. Intimidators of a higher caliber, Larry Robinson, Clark Gillies and Terry O'Reilly, had to be slowed. Problems arose when Korney proved to be as gentle as he was big. He simply did not have the makeup to be an enforcer. Not that Korney backed down from fights, he just wouldn't pick them. Goons of the 1970s had sociopathic tendencies; Korney talked without slavering. He tried to convince the Red Wings he could help with his skates and stick, but they wouldn't listen. As a big man, Korney was trapped by a stereotype. Detroit's stiff-necked general manager, Alex Delvecchio, decided to teach Korney a lesson. In a three-year span he was shipped to 12 minor league teams. In 1974 he was on five teams by Thanksgiving. By the time I met Korney he had learned how to live out of a suitcase and make conversation with strangers. He was 23.

A couple of weeks before Christmas 1976, Korney looked sadly into a glass of beer. The schedule would not permit him to go home to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, for Christmas.

"I haven't been home for Christmas in five years," he said. "Hockey is a stupid game."

He spoke quietly of a miserable experience in Detroit, of being pressured by management and teammates to deck an opponent, and of being booed by 18,000 fans. For a long moment he retreated into himself tilted his glass, fingered his mustache. He scarcely breathed. Then he went on. Life was fine in Kansas City. He was grateful to Plager for letting him contribute as a player instead of as a goon. He had become friendly with a couple of teammates, one of whom, Brian Ogilvie, had invited him for Christmas. Korney brightened. "I'm spending Christmas with Ogie," he said. "He's got the whole works. A wife and kid, eh?" Gentleness is compelling in a big man. If the message of Christmas is love, family and hearth, then surely Korney was its gentle messenger.

Each year I have wondered about Korney, his rootlessness and loneliness. His pro career ended with Syracuse of the American Hockey League in 1980, after a short stint with the Rangers. He played for a seniors team in British Columbia and then dropped out of sight. Somehow I knew he wasn't working 9-to-5. This year curiosity got the better of me. I called his father, Peter, in Saskatoon, and he confirmed my suspicion. Korney is a helicopter pilot, flying workers and equipment to offshore oil rigs in the Persian Gulf. He went to Qatar in 1992 after piloting fire fighting choppers in Canada. Not long ago he changed his last name to Korey which is closer to the spelling of his grandfather, a Ukrainian immigrant.

"Your father said you've survived three crashes. He said you were lucky to get out of one alive."

"Two," Korey says. "One was just a roll-over--a skid broke. Another one the machine got snagged in powder snow in Alberta. It rolled over in the snow. Nothing major."

We make small talk about a few of the ex-Blues and where they've scattered. Doug Palazzari runs youth programs for USA Hockey, Don Martineau raises dogs in Nebraska. We lament Plager's death to brain cancer in 1987 Korey reveres Plager for giving him back his self-respect and confidence. "Barclay got the best of us," Korey recalls. "He didn't yell at me. I didn't like to be yelled at and put down, and he realized that. He was careful not to embarrass me in front of the team." Hockey is not a part of his life. Engineers and oil workers skate in nearby Dubayy and Abu Dhabi, but Qatar has no ice. Korey says he practices in-line skating on helicopter ramps, to the amusement of local Arabs.

I ask Korey about his hockey career. "What if you had gooned it up?"

He recalls a conversation with Nick Fotiu, a noted Rangers goon of the 1970s and '80s. "Nick said to me, 'I wish I had played more like you.' I had a lot of respect from opponents for the way I played. Looking back, it's satisfying knowing players respected me. I had a temper and was a protector, but I wouldn't take

advantage of weaker players. Anybody can be an idiot. "Maybe it was a test. People tried to change me into something I'm not. I just held my ground."

Small talk peters out. Finally, Korey asks why I am calling.

"I wondered what you were doing for Christmas."

He understands.

"I'm single," he says. "Before I came here I was married."

"Sorry."

"It's all right," he says. "I'm spending Christmas with friends. It's a good bunch of people. Lots of kids will be running around."

"Do you have kids?" I ask.

"I love kids, but I never had any of my own," Korey says. "It's nice to share Christmas with them. Christmas is for kids".

His voice, 20 years later, still gently yearning.

"We'll never grow up," Korey says. "We're all kids at heart, eh?"

