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One for all, all for Eurolanche

Ten years. Ten years of fulfilled dreams. Ten years of unforgettable experiences. Ten years of beautiful memories. Not even in my wildest dreams did I expect Eurolanche to exist as long as to celebrate its 10th anniversary. And even if I did, I surely didn't expect that we would return to Denver nine times in total during that span; that NHL legend Jeremy Roenick would do a live interview with me for NBC Sports; or that Joe Sakic would respond to my request *'Could you, please, sign a poster and dedicate it to me, David?'* with *'I know who you are'*.

The media often use the term dream factory and it's safe to say that Eurolanche indeed became one. During its 10 years of existence, we organized nine Eurolanche Invasions with the participation of 37 unique participants (54 in total) from 8 European countries, who attended 56 Colorado Avalanche games, with four of them being away games. Furthermore, we held 9 member meetings, 9 meetings with both former and current Avalanche players, and interviewed more than 60 players and people connected with the organization from the Mile High City. We also appeared in all global, North American and European hockey media we possibly could. Everyone, who played a part in this hard, 10-year-long work, either regularly, partially, or even minimally, can be proud of themselves. Thanks to our fantastic work as a team, we made Eurolanche into a brand, which is unrivaled on the entire NHL market.

The book 10 years of the Eurolanche Fan Club tells complete and detailed story of the Eurolanche Fan Club. With these 200 pages, I wanted to elucidate the first weeks and months of the fan club's existence, its turning points, tough times and problems, as well as its greatest achievements not only to our members, but to both hockey fans and sports fans in general as well. This book is a previously unpublished account of Eurolanche's everyday functioning and a look behind its scenes, which often resembled a chaotic frontline, which we had to navigate through in order to achieve the state we're in after ten years.

One could compare the Eurolanche Fan Club to a small company, with its story being a good example of achieving the so-called American dream. It's a story of dedicated hockey fans, who made it from their small bedrooms Europe full of posters, PlayStations, ProHockey magazines

and hockey cards all the way to the Pepsi Center to fulfill their dream – to see the Colorado Avalanche play in person.

Since I've been present at 99-percent of the events organized by the fan club, as well as organizing most of them, I wrote this book as a first-person narrative. I describe all events as I remember them after all these years, including all the positive, as well as negative emotions, which helped shape the future of the fan club and all its projects.

Based on the game we love, I divided the book into five parts – *I. Period* (beginning at the moment I became a fan of the Avalanche all the way to EuroLanche's first trip to Denver), *II. Period* (detailing the period between the first and the ninth Invasion), *III. Period, Overtime and Shootout*. The latter two parts of the book contain 'bonus' chapters, which didn't find their way into the book's previous parts. Additional bonus material is part of special paragraphs titled *Commercial Break*, which are scattered throughout each parts of the book. At the end of the I. Period, as well as at the ends of each subchapters of the II. Period are short summaries titled *The season of the Colorado Avalanche*, which detail how the Avalanche fared during the 10-year existence of EuroLanche.

At first, I hesitated how much to write in the *I. Period* in order to prevent the book becoming an autobiography instead of a story about EuroLanche. I tried my best to remain brief, only highlighting the moments I considered to be the most interesting. I wanted to avoid overly describing the beginnings of my Avalanche fandom, opting to describe the life of an NHL fan at the turn of the millennium to readers from all over the world instead. I'm certain that most of you had a similar experience as I, which is why the first part of the book isn't my, but our story – a story of European fans of the world's best hockey league.

The book as whole is a big mosaic of stories of members of the EuroLanche Fan Club, who had the opportunity to fulfill their dreams throughout the past 10 years. I dedicate it to everyone, who has followed, is following, or will follow our motto from 2007 – One for all, all for the Avs as well as its alternative, after which I've named this prologue.

I hope that this story, our story, will continue for another decade.

David Puchovsky

Early fandom and my first Stanley Cup

Why did you become a fan of the Colorado Avalanche?

I've been asked this question a lot throughout the years. Either from Eurofan members, or from European and North American media, which interviewed me several times. I've asked other fans of the team from Denver the same question. The answers are often the same and can be divided into several categories.

I've played NHL 98, I liked their logo and Peter Forsberg on the cover of the game.

I began to collect hockey cards and chose Colorado..

Sakic and Forsberg were phenomenal at the time, so I started to root for them.

I've been following the Quebec Nordiques, because the Štastný brothers used to play there.

Most of the time, it was mere coincidence. Only a handful of European fans rooted for Quebec, let alone follow their games and managed to stay fans of a single franchise up until now. First and foremost, technology in those days didn't allow Europeans to follow the NHL in such capacity as today. Additionally, the entire Eastern bloc, from the Czech Republic, the former German Democratic Republic, through Slovakia to Russia was cut off from the rest of the world. Physically, due to ruthless border controls, and due to the lack of information – it was forbidden to follow foreign news broadcasts. Only a fraction of up-to-date information and news came through to people from the Eastern bloc. From time to time, scores of Quebec Nordiques games were published in the local communist sports newspaper. Following the famous defection of the Štastný brothers, the team (and of course, they themselves) became taboo. This is why it's almost impossible to speak of any tradition or perseverance in the case of European Colorado Avalanche fans, which is more common among European football (soccer for North Americans) fans.

Coincidence also played an important part in my case. I didn't grow up in a sports family. Yes, I watch sports at home on our TV, but that was it. The times when my grandmother used to go figure skating with both her daughters were long gone by the time I was born in 1990. I wasn't really interested in sports until I was ten. Then, something happened, which changed my life forever.

I think it was around the time of summer of 2000, when my mother

first allowed me to go play by the apartment building my grandmother lived in on my own. I met a peer, an Afro-American boy. I'm not trying to be racist by highlighting the color of his skin. At the time, not a lot of dark-skinned people lived in Slovakia. Society was way wilder than it is today. I remember that when fans of the local football club (Artmedia Petržalka) were going from their homes to the stadium and back, he was forbidden to go outside, because his skin color would attract the unwanted attention of football hooligans and skinheads.

Not only did I befriend a black boy, which was rare in those times, but it was him, who first told me about the Colorado Avalanche, although I don't really remember the details. It's strange that I know that I experienced something, but feel the memories from my early childhood slowly fading from my memory simultaneously. I'm certain that it had to be during one of our street hockey games. I don't know how I had a hockey stick in my hand, nor why did I want one in the first place. It's likely that I viewed it simply as a part of playing sports outdoors. I sure didn't think about any teams back then. Fun fact: I was initially a left-handed shot, which is natural for a right-handed person. I likely broke my stick and my grandfather bought me a new one with Dominator (a reference to Dominik Hašek) written on it. The stick was for a right-handed shot, which is more practical for left-handed people. Despite this, I learned how to play with it and have played with these kind of sticks ever since. I still write with my right hand, but I can also write with my left one. Is it because of this event?

I remember my friend telling me about some Colorado team and some guys named Sekik, Fosbeg and Roj. I don't know how long it took me until I learned how to spell the names of these legends properly. And that is how I became fan of the Colorado Avalanche that day.

After I learned that some Colorado team existed, I started to look for more information. There weren't many options. I didn't even know the word internet back then. I didn't have a computer at home, only at my grandmother's and even that one didn't have an internet connection, nor did it have any games and was only used for her accounting stuff. I began to use the internet two years later, in 2002. Up until then, my search for information about the Colorado Avalanche and my fandom was limited to the only available source – the ProHockey magazine and the teletext of Slovak TV channels.

I got my first issue of ProHockey, which was is being published since 1999 until now in three languages (Swedish, Finnish and Czech, with the Czech incarnation of the magazine being also published in Slovakia), in October 1999. It was the season preview issue, which most likely led me to play street hockey. For many years, this magazine was the source of valuable information, which I wouldn't have found anywhere else without internet access – season schedules, current rosters, injury news and transactions, analyses... It's almost laughable that I was satisfied with a monthly dose of news, which often weren't even up-to-date, as they were published and printed a month ago. The times were different back then and I didn't even dream about the technology we have today.

The most up-to-date source of information during my early days as an Avalanche fan was the teletext. Does the generation born after 2000 even know what it is? I still remember the teletext sites of the Slovak Markíza TV channel even though I haven't opened them for a long, long time. 261 for the recent scores, 262 for the standings and 263 for the stats. From my conversations with other fans, I know that the vast majority of them remembers them just as well as I do.

Teletext was a phenomenon. I'll never forget how nervous I was, when I woke up before school, turned on the TV, immediately switched to the teletext, typed in the numbers 261 and waited until the site loaded. The sites didn't load right away as they do nowadays. It all took extremely long, everything had its time. It was even worse when a lot of games were played in one day, because the entire 261 site had more subsites, which automatically changed in certain intervals. Even if you finally got the 261 sites, it was possible that you were on the third subsite, while the score of the Avalanche game was on the second one. Then you had to wait for what felt like an eternity until you finally saw how your favorite team fared in their last game. That's why I was nervous during each game day, or more specifically each morning before I went to school.

It felt like the Stone Age. Again, I have to confess that I can't really recall the first score of an Avalanche I looked up on the teletext. I think it was a game against the Washington Capitals and the game was played in Washington in front of less than 14,000 fans. According to archived data, it was October 17, 2000 and Colorado won 4-3 (they were up 2-0, then they were down 2-3, with the goals being scored by Tanguay, Hejduk,

Sakic and Forsberg). I didn't even know the Avalanche had one of the best teams in the NHL. I didn't know who was on their roster. I started slowly, but steadily. I began to write down all the scores with all goal scorers without the names of the players who recorded assists on them into a small, simple notebook. Once again, I have to stress that the internet was still a big unknown for me and there was no other way how to look up older scores. That's why I had to write them down each morning in order to avoid them being lost once the teletext was being prepared for the following game day. Sadly, this notebook, my proof of the start of my Avalanche fandom, became lost. I tried to find it a couple of times, but unsuccessfully. I still have a reward – a Joe Sakic jersey – written out for whoever finds it. It's invaluable to me. Will you help me find it?

The 2000-01 season was also my first year of grammar school in Bratislava. Debates with peers about sports made my fandom even greater. We talked trash, argued whose team is better and compared scores of our favorite teams and players. That's likely why I remained loyal to Colorado, even though I still didn't see any of their games. Not even a highlight video. At that time, I made my last futile attempt to play ice hockey. I took some coins (we still had Slovak crowns at the time) and went to the nearest phone booth (yes, they still existed back then). I looked up the phone number of HC Slovan Bratislava, the biggest hockey club from my town, in the phone book and called them to ask if they're recruiting new 10-year-old players. I don't know what answer I got, nor with whom I spoke, but I remember that my mother wasn't very keen on the idea, because she couldn't have covered the costs. The dream of a professional hockey player, who would one day make it on the cover of ProHockey, was gone in an instant.

I continued to write down the scores during the following months. I learned how to properly spell the names of the league's biggest stars. I made licenses with their names. Despite limited options, I slowly started to get a good, but not great overview of the NHL. And then it happened. The Colorado Avalanche made it to the 2001 Stanley Cup Finals.

It was nerve-racking to wait every morning until the teletext page loaded. It felt like I was watching a play-off Game 7. Colorado dominated, yet sometimes unnecessary complicated its way to the Holy Grail of hockey. And then we got to Game 7. Truth be told, not everyone was in the same situation as I, as the first sports pay-per-view sports channels

began broadcasting several NHL games, including the Finals (the Czech Television began to broadcast the first NHL games in my region in the mid-90's, which also included the 1996 Finals series between the Avs and the Florida Panthers). But we didn't have any pay-per-view channels back then. It was way too expensive and we didn't have the money for that. That's why Game 7 was just like any other game for me.

„*Colorado won*,“ announced my father to me at about 6 a.m.

I looked at him, half asleep, from the top of my bunk bed and asked him almost doubting the news with my tone: „*They've won the Stanley Cup?*“.

„*Yes*,“ was his answer.

I was certainly happy, but surely not as happy as I would've been several years later, or today, after I've lived through so much more. I immediately went to make sure it was true and looked it up on the teletext. The green, blinking letters formed a clear message – that Colorado was the new Stanley Cup Champion. I didn't know about the emotive Cup handoff from Sakic to Ray Bourque for some time.

And that's how my first season with the Colorado Avalanche came to an end. After a while, I got my hands on an issue of ProHockey with Sakic and Bourque on the cover. I still have it today and it has immense value to me. The issue came with a poster – a photo of the Stanley Cup Champions on one side and a shot of Ray Bourque on the other. I wouldn't have done it today, but back then, I cut out the cover so I could have the small poster of Sakic on the inside and with that, damaged the entire issue and made it practically worthless. I got my hands on the undamaged original issue in early 2017, when I bought 10 of them directly from the archives of ProHockey's editorial staff. It was like a miracle when Editor-in-chief Petr Novotný found them in near-perfect condition for me. It felt like 2001 all over again.

Although success came really early, and I didn't even get to enjoy it as much as I would've liked, but its most likely one of the main reasons why I remained loyal to this club during the following years and seasons.

First trip to Denver and the hotline (2008/09)

If I had to describe the difference between the organization of the first Eurolanche Invasion and the following ones with one word, I'd choose chaos. Indeed, our first trip to Denver really resembled (un)organized chaos at times, which, to be honest, was sometimes almost necessary. Necessary in order for a newly-created project to become the best organized annual trip of European fans to the US to see NHL hockey.

Peter Budaj's promise of getting us match tickets was a really nice gesture, but didn't solve 99 percent of the remaining necessities. The year was 2008, nothing like ESTA (a visa-free travel to the US, which were granted to any non-terrorist really) existed back then. Not only Slovaks, but also Czech and almost every other nationals had to go to an in-person interview at the US embassy in their respective state before traveling there. We – I and two Martins (one from Slovakia and one from the Czech Republic) – were no exception.

I remember that day really well. I met with the Slovak Martin in Bratislava, where we already arranged our interviews at the US embassy. We both wore suits to make the best impression possible. In reality, we had no clue what would happen and what we should expect. We were worried that we wouldn't make it through the interview. Either do to our mediocre English, our because the Americans would be worried that we wanted to illegally immigrate to the US. I was prepared for any possible question from the immigration officer. To support my answers with any evidence, I brought an endless amount of papers with me, ranging from my bank account balance, information about the Fan Club, to the invitation letter from Jody, to whom we'll get later.

Following a thorough security check at the entrance, where they took our cellphones, we made it to the spacy waiting hall of the US embassy. Aside from a number of fellow tourists, one person in particular caught our attention. It was Ľubomír Višňovský, a former Slovak defenseman who used to play for the Los Angeles Kings, Edmonton Oilers, Anaheim Ducks and the New York Islanders. Not even professional hockey players were exempt from visa duty and had to get them in person. Ľubo player for Edmonton at the time and although he played in Canada, he still needed US visa. Based on his stats from that season, he apparently passed his interview without problems.

The wait at the embassy was excruciating. I was more nervous than before any exam in school. One bad answer, one bad decision and my dream of seeing the Colorado Avalanche would be over. It was all up to the decision of the officer. We viewed the US as an impregnable fortress and being granted visa was quite an honor. Everything was on the line. The future of EuroLanche depended on one decision.

Much to my surprise, the interview was conducted in broken Slovak of the American officer behind the glass. She asked me basic questions about travelling, I showed her all my documents, said a word or two about EuroLanche and it was done. I was relieved. I felt like I just passed an extremely hard college exam. In this very moment, I could finally say that I would get to see the Avalanche play in person for the first time in a couple of weeks. 2008 was a year of fulfilled dreams for me – graduating high school, getting into college, going to see KISS and Bon Jovi, two of my favorite bands, getting my driver's license and attending two NHL games in Prague as a journalist. Now, nothing stood in the way of fulfilling yet another big dream.

After being granted visa for 10 years for 3000 Slovak crowns (which today equals about 100 euro; currently, ESTA for two years is granted for a fee of 14 dollars), Martin and I went to an internet café. There we contacted the Czech Martin, who was as successful as we were at the embassy in Prague. We bought plane tickets for the very first EuroLanche Invasion from the very same public PC shortly afterwards. Suddenly, everything went fast. We chose the cheapest tariff. Compared to the plane tickets from future Invasions, these were hands-down the most expensive ones and cost more than 700 euro. This is where I would like to thank my family, which gave me most of the finances for my first Invasion and without the support of which I couldn't have gone overseas, because I couldn't cover the costs by myself at the time.

We were promised accommodation by Jody, who lived in Littleton, a suburb near Denver. I knew Jody from the official Avalanche message board on their website. We chatted about hockey, she sent me a lot of souvenirs and when it was time for our first trip to Colorado, she didn't hesitate to invite both Martins and I to her home. She saved us a lot of trouble.

But I don't want to get too ahead of myself. Despite getting our visas, we still had three months of waiting ahead of us. It felt like eternity. We

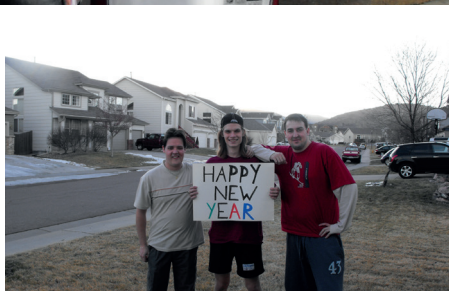
didn't think all too much about our schedule, or about the organization of the trip. After all, it was going to be our first time and we wanted to see everything! During those months of waiting, I thought about the day of our departure literally every day. I just couldn't wait. Invasion I was slowly finding its way into my dreams. On my way to school, at school, and on the way home from school I couldn't think about anything else. I still didn't want to believe it. I couldn't believe that my life was writing the story of a fan, who made it from his childhood bedroom all the way to the locker room of the Colorado Avalanche. I didn't even know about it back then. There were a lot of surprises waiting for us.

On the first day of Christmas in 2008, the three of us, who had an endless journey across the ocean ahead of themselves, met at my place in Bratislava. Both Martins and I only slept briefly. We couldn't wait for the trip to begin. At the same time, we couldn't even dream of the things that were waiting for us during the next 17 days.

We arrived at the airport in Vienna early in the morning in order to catch the morning flight to Frankfurt. In Vienna, I wrote down the following sentence into the official Invasion I notebook: "We learned interesting news that we'll have to get our luggage in Houston, where we only have an hour to board our next flight. It will be a really close call." Truth is that when I was buying the tickets in Slovakia, I asked the saleswoman if an hour would be enough to change flights, to which she kept replying yes. Although I ultimately trusted her advice, I still had my doubts.

The first Eurolanche Invasion flight meant the discovery of something entirely new for me. Although I flew more than 30 times already, all those flights were holiday charters. That morning in Vienna, I first experienced the defrosting procedure necessary for the safe departure of our plane. In Frankfurt, I was astounded by the size of the local airport, which is the most frequented airport in Europe. We had to move between two terminals via train. Up until then, I didn't know that something like that even existed. Changing flights took an entire hour. We never stopped moving during that hour.

We continued our journey from Frankfurt to Houston. We boarded the biggest plane in the world, the Boeing 747-400, which was quite the experience for us. Martin from the Slovak town of Martin flew for the very first time and he did really well. He wasn't the first, nor the



Above: The first group photo in front of the Pepsi Center.

Below: We first met Ian Laperriere. He's a great guy and we kept in touch even after he left Colorado. During Invasion I, we celebrated New Year's Eve while it was still warm outside. I also presented the ideas of Eurolanche to Avalanche and KSE representatives.