



THE Rest OF Your Life

DEVON O'NEIL

SURE, SKIING, CLIMBING AND BIKING MIGHT BE THE THINGS THAT DRAW YOU TO A MOUNTAIN TOWN, BUT PLAY IN A REC SPORTS LEAGUE AND YOU CAN FINALLY CALL THE PLACE HOME.

by DEVON O'NEIL

Looking back on my brief but transformative life in the mountains, there are many memories to consider when I try to pinpoint the to moment that truly held me here: The drive into town. The first powder run. The first rowdy night out. The first summit. However, while nature and adrenaline can draw you in, to stay in a mountain town you need to feel a sense of community. You must want to be part of that community. Or at least I did.

My sense of community took root not on a peak or a trail but on a flat grassy field surrounded by, of all things in the American West, a chain-link fence.

It was September 2003. I was 24 years old. One month prior, I had visited a physical therapy office at the Breckenridge Recreation Center. Rob, the therapist on duty, had watched me mope around the building for three months while I recovered from foot surgery. I sat on the table and we got to talking about our former lives as athletes. I told him I had played football and baseball in college. He mentioned a town flag-football league that was soon to start.

"What position did you play in school?" he asked. Receiver, I told him. "We might need an extra guy," he said. "You should come try out."

I laughed inside. Try out? For a rec sports team?

I went, of course—I missed the idea of being on a team too much not to at least see how bad a ski-town flag-football league could be. When I got to the field inside the fence, I met my would-be teammates. There was Rick, a wide-eyed, thick-necked plumber from Detroit, smoking a cigarette on the sideline. Next to him stood Mike, his best friend and colleague, who, I would learn, weighed 170 pounds but played like 230. There was Pino, the shifty chairlift mechanic; Chip, the Harley-riding web developer; Smoke, the snow-removal contractor; Timmy, the 5-foot-7 carpenter who blitzed like a badger; Dave, the relentless door-and-windows wholesaler; and Todd, the fiery defense attorney/tight end. Off to the side stood Iggy, a

21-year-old rabbit-quick tailback from Holyoke, Massachusetts. He and I soon learned we were the only ones trying out.

We ran some patterns, caught some passes, juke a time or two in traffic. Eventually we split up and played an informal scrimmage. Iggy and I held our own, so at the end of the audition, Rob and Chip—who were both 10 to 15 years older—informed us we were on the team. They said it nonchalantly, like there had never been a question, but it felt good nonetheless.

Our team was called Ullr's Donkey Punch. (Ullr's was the Main Street bar that sponsored us.) It wasn't until our first game that I learned we were the two-time defending champs. We won that game easily, and the next game, and the next. Our only loss during the regular season was to a team called Grand Timber, our archrival and the last squad to win the league before our reign began. We met them again in the championship game. It was tied 23-23 when I went up for a pass in the end zone and tore a ligament in my big toe when I landed. But I caught the ball. We held on to win.

I distinctly remember walking home from Ullr's that night in my shorts and cleats. I lived three blocks up the hill, it was 18 degrees out, and my toe was injured badly enough that I wouldn't be able to ski for two months. But I couldn't have cared less. Winning with the crew we had, in a tight game, then raging at Ullr's (the manager, Big Steve, served us lobster and New York strips) felt just as good as winning the conference championship my senior year in college. Which astounded me. I remember thinking that night that I could live in Breckenridge for the rest of my life.

The next summer, Rob and Todd invited me to join their Thursday-night men's softball team. This led to an opportunity with the premier team in the county, Summit Cable, on Wednesdays. Iggy played on that team, as did his brother Matty, who would join our football team

that fall (sans tryout). In general, the rosters of various sports overlapped. People moved to and from the county, standard turnover for a mountain community. But for the most part you saw the same faces each season, year in and year out.

I played on a basketball team for two winters as well, alongside Rick and Timmy. I hoisted bricks, but it was worth it just to watch my 6-foot-6 buddy Boffey, an ex-college center, tussle with a 50-something guy under the basket one night while chasing a meaningless rebound. That's the thing about rec sports. They make you feel young again. You can jostle and scrap, dive for a deep pass, throw someone out at the plate—and feel the rush course through your body like an electric charge.

It's rad to ski the steep-and-deep and rip down alpine singletrack, too, but it's not the same. I didn't grow up in the mountains, I grew up playing team sports. I think that's why competing for a common goal has always trumped solo contests for me.

This is not to say rec sports don't cross the line from time to time. After beating everyone in the league but Ullr's Donkey Punch for five years, Grand Timber got a little chippy (they practiced and had plays drawn up on cards; we drank beers during the game, winged it on offense, and never practiced). One night during the regular season, a fight broke out between one of their guys and one of ours. It escalated into a brawl, and one of our guys ended up with a broken eye socket. From then on the cops showed up whenever we played Grand Timber.

The Ullr's Donkey Punch legend grew as we won our sixth straight title. The newspaper covered our games a couple of times a season, and Big Steve mounted a trophy case between the pool tables at Ullr's. Our rallying cry was "K-Q-B!" in honor of a 6-foot-2, combat-boots-wearing lineman named Kelly Quinn Brennan—the heart and soul of the first Ullr's championship team. KQB died in a ski accident two months later, in January 2002.

Just as I took great satisfaction from winning,



BACK ON TOP: MOTHERLOAD TAVERN, THE 2014 CHAMPS.

the end of our reign inflicted more emotional pain than I ever imagined rec sports could produce. We were playing a semifinal in five inches of November snow. Shortly after the game started, Iggy tried to cut and felt his knee explode. As he lay writhing on the ground, screaming, we all knew his ski season was over. The other team kept it closer than expected, then, on the last play of the game, they scored to tie the score with no time left. On their conversion attempt (no kicks allowed), their cocky quarterback narrowly eluded my grasp and darted into the end zone for the win. It took me a week to get over the loss.

We came back to win the next year, but due to budget cuts, the town eliminated the league in 2009. I spent six weeks in Nepal that fall while a bunch of teammates drove over to play in Vail's league, but they said it wasn't the same. Too much chaos, not enough respect among teams.

In the absence of football, I got more into our softball team. The heart of our crew is a frizzy-haired shortstop who goes by the name of Sideshow, sleeps outside, and moonlights as a sports bookie. For the past five years, we have been known as the Northside Crooks, represented by the classic sponsor combo of a bar and a defense attorney. We don't win every game, but we win enough to keep the fire stoked, and one time we came back from 12 runs down in the final inning to beat the best team in the league. We scored our last eight runs with two outs. I left my car in town and took a taxi home that night.

By the time I reached my mid-30s, I had made peace with the town's decision to end my football career, and so had my aging body. But in 2013, in a surprise move, they brought the league back. It was six-on-six instead of the old seven-on-seven, but that didn't matter. Soon enough group texts were flying around and we had a team again.

Ullr's had gone out of business (then been revived by a new owner in a new location), and most of our players had moved away or retired. Only three of us remained from the dynasty of the early 2000s: Pino, Smoke, and me. Among our new players was a state wrestling champion named Jake and the prize of the free-agent pool, Joe, the one-time starting quarterback at Ohio State.

We steamrolled like the old days, outscoring our opponents something like 220-40 and finishing the regular season undefeated. Our run continued to the championship game, where a team we'd beaten earlier stunned us on a long touchdown pass with 23 seconds left. It was agony all over again. Worse, I tore my hamstring and couldn't ski until December.

This past fall, we recruited a few players and returned to right the wrong. After an inauspicious 1-2 start, we found our groove and more or less coasted to the title, winning 30-13 in the championship game. We hit the Motherloaded Tavern (our new sponsor) hard that night, noshing cheese fries and tater tots and high-fiving across the bar. At some point, we determined that our average age was 33, by far the oldest in the league, and that our team contained seven current or former bartenders.

Late that night, I saddled up next to Pino and Smoke and took stock. It was each of their eighth flag-football championships, counting the seven they won with Ullr's, and my sixth. But as great as it felt, it also rang hollow not to be celebrating with our original squad. So I sent Rob and Chip a photo of us and wrote, "Thinking of you both."

Chip, by now 48 years old, replied: "Congrats boys. I can still run a 6.3-second 40-yard dash if you need a deep threat."

—Devon O'Neil is a staff writer for ESPN.com and a frequent contributor to Skiing and Outside magazines. His work can be viewed at devoneil.com.

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