

TIME OUT

BLADES OF FURY

Atlanta Thrashers star **Marian Hossa** talks about life on the ice and what he enjoys about his new hometown

BY AMY FLURRY PORTRAITS BY CHRIS STANFORD

From the stands, there's no real sense of the hulking physicality of the professional hockey players on the ice, bundled up under jerseys, padding and protective gear. But glimpsed from across the parking lot of the Buckhead Bread Company in a fashion T-shirt and Bermuda shorts, Thrashers star Marian Hossa cuts an imposing figure, one that has passing drivers on Piedmont Road rubbernecking.

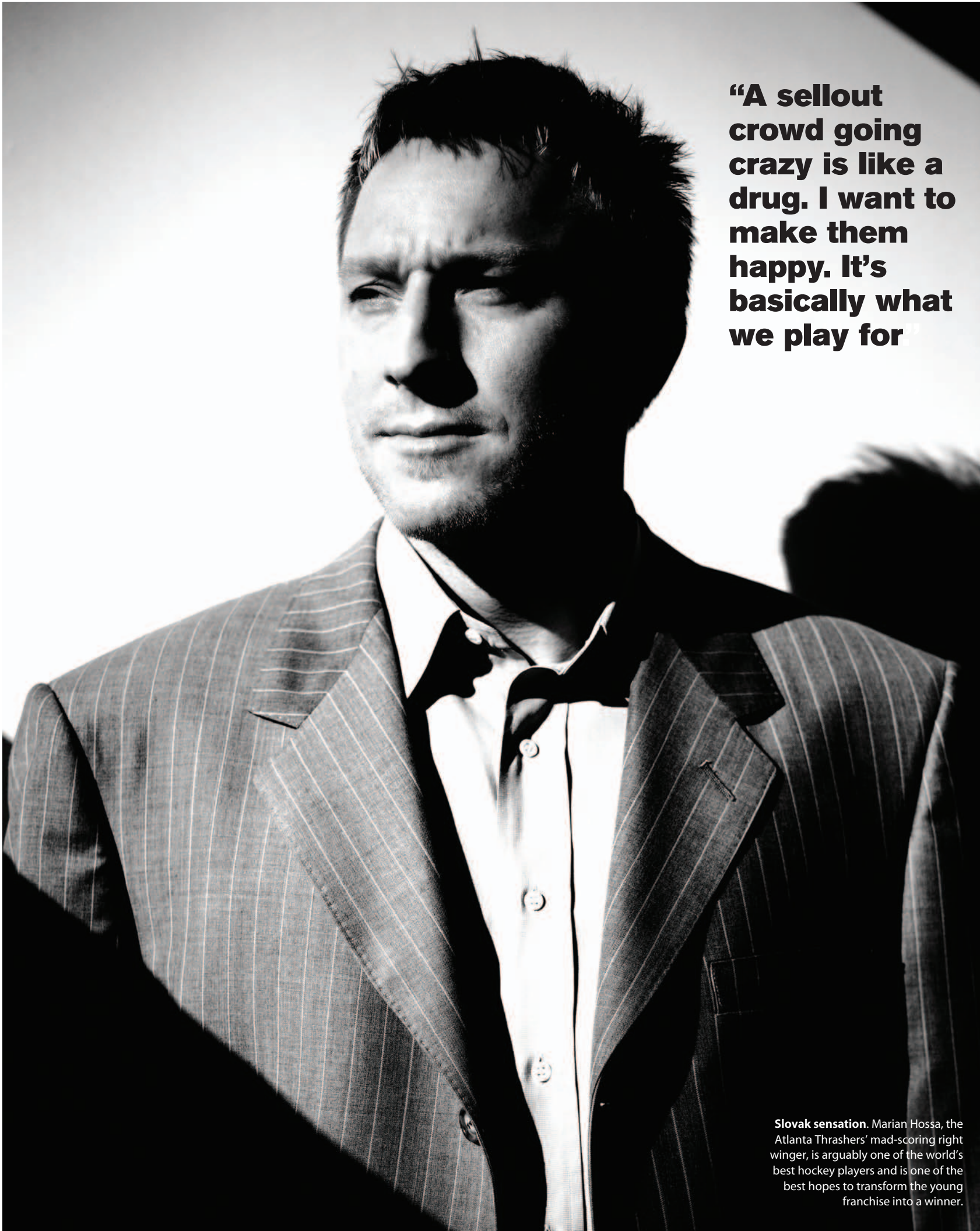
As we make our way to a table for breakfast, diners fix their gaze on the chiseled blonde. "Who is he?" their pursed lips and wrinkled foreheads suggest, rapt.

Hossa is the mad-scoring right winger for the Atlanta Thrashers, and arguably one of the best all-around hockey players in the world. The 28-year-old has been brought in to transform the Thrashers, a young team riddled with injuries and setbacks, into a winning franchise. Last year he racked up 100 points, with 43 goals and 57 assists—a great feat in any season—and led them to a Southeast Division Championship and their first playoff game. Although the thick accent might tip off the perceptive fan, the Slovakian superstar goes relatively unnoticed in town.

Today, however, he would give an arm to be recognized after the waiter announces breakfast service ended 20 minutes earlier. "No way," he gasps, jumping back in his chair before challenging: "Can't you..." And the waiter, sensing the fabled feistiness of celebrity, retreats to procure a pen and order pad.

"When I'm on break, I miss the food in Atlanta," says Hossa, who returned only days prior from the post-season summer months in Trenčín, Slovakia. He spent time with family, played golf in Munich, Germany, with his buddies (his handicap is 17) and ate his fair share of Mom's cooking—*wiener schnitzel* and *pierogies* among his favorites. "I sit on my ass for a month before I start training again," he says of the much-needed downtime that follows a brutal eight-month season.

At home, Hossa's workouts resemble the free-form play of his early years, with afternoon soccer games; he is wary of playing too much hockey. Every day he and his brother, Marcel, who plays for the New York Rangers, call Zdeno Chara, Marian Gáboriík and Pavol Demitra—all fellow NHL players—to coordinate bike rides or games at nearby athletic facilities. "We like to keep it fun," Hossa says, "but it's not like we are just kicking around a ball, smiling. We are always competing."



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Slovak sensation. Marian Hossa, the Atlanta Thrashers’ mad-scoring right winger, is arguably one of the world’s best hockey players and is one of the best hopes to transform the young franchise into a winner.

GROOMING BY EMILY SISTRUNK

MARIAN HOSSA

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Competitiveness was encouraged from an early age. When Hossa was around six or seven, his parents focused on their son’s natural athletic proclivity. “I got to choose between soccer school or hockey school,” he says. “I never regretted picking hockey.” At that time, Hossa’s father, Frantisek, coached one of the nation’s top club teams. “I might be sitting around at home after school when he would call and invite me to come skate with the team. He would always have extra little drills waiting for me to work on.”

Jeff Odgers, a retired hockey player and current Thrashers commentator, credits Hossa’s lightning-fast acceleration and good balance to his soccer background. “Knocking him off balance is next to impossible, and if he gets a step on a defender there’s no catching him,” Odgers says. “Lots of players hire personal trainers to give them this kind of extra edge, but he has it naturally.”

The family affair with the sport paid off for Marian and Marcel; both were first-round drafts into the NHL and represented the Slovak National Hockey Team in the 2006 Winter Olympics, coached by their father.

Following the league lockout that wiped out the 2004–2005 season, Hossa was traded from the Ottawa Senators to Atlanta along with Greg de Vries for Dany Heatley after Heatley crashed his speeding Ferrari 360 Modena into a wall. The passenger, teammate Dan Snyder, died as a result of his head injuries.

Hossa joined the team under these grim circumstances, and even though Atlanta’s interest in hockey is still developing, he has injected much-needed new energy into the team. When he talks about playing in Atlanta for the first time, he smiles at the most striking memory: “After each whistle, the announcer would explain to the spectators the particular penalty, even what something as basic as offside meant,” he says.

The waiter appears with breakfast, and Hossa perks up. His order alone—three eggs over easy, waffles topped with raspberries, toast and jam, a side of bacon, two glasses of orange juice and a coffee—would feed a small family. He makes no apologies for turning his attention away from the interview to his meal, breaking only to clear a plate.

Brushes with great professional athletes might disappoint if it weren’t for reminders of their sublime brilliance in their game. The level of commitment to the sport and to a contract leaves little time for developing interests, or a life, outside of that inner circle. Hossa repeatedly alludes to his limited downtime.

What is evident is that for Hossa, living in Atlanta has afforded a semblance of stability—a luxury in the highly competitive, transient world of professional

hockey. He shares a Buckhead apartment with long-time girlfriend Jana and admits to enjoying a sense of community. During his first week back from abroad they hit some of their favorite restaurants, including MF Sushi Bar and the Atlanta Fish Market. They also like to catch the occasional movie at Phipps Plaza and shop at Lenox Mall. “We have thought about enrolling Bono at a dog-training course at PetSmart,” he says of their one-year-old English bulldog. “In Canada I couldn’t go anywhere without being recognized,” he says. “I don’t miss that.” And last year, as further proof of his settling into his new home, Hossa quietly partnered with UPS to launch Hossa’s Heroes, a community program established to build on the experiences of local children from the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

On the ice, however, he doesn’t mind the spotlight, which he shares with teammates Ilya Kovalchuk and Slava Kozlov, making for an explosive triple threat. “A sellout crowd going crazy is like a drug,” he says, coming to life. “I want to make them happy. It’s basically what we play for.” Hossa shrugs when asked about the pressure of a repeat performance of last year’s franchise-record century mark in points, which boosted Thrashers’ ticket sales and yielded 11 sellout games. “That’s what I’m paid to do,” he says with matter-of-fact resolve.

Others will talk about Hossa’s prowess with much less modesty and far more awe. Fifteen-year veteran and teammate Bobby Holik calls him a rare player, useful in any situation. “If he broke his wrist and couldn’t shoot, Hossa would still be the best defensive player on the ice,” Holik says. Hossa is a four-time All-Star selection and is one of three Thrashers on the ballot for the 2008 NHL All-Star Game, which will be held at Phillips Arena here in Atlanta on January 27th.

With a healthy Kari Lehtonen back minding the net and a strong supporting cast, the Thrashers began the season holding all the right cards to angle for another franchise-best performance. But a four-game sweep by the New York Rangers, a groin injury that benched Hossa for three early games and the firing of head coach Bob Hartley in October after an 0-6-0 beginning are reminders of the high pressures and uncertainty of professional sports. Even after a playoff appearance, a rough season start can make a team—and its fans—doubt their talent.

At the Thrashers training facility in Duluth, there is tense anticipation in the frosty air. The pressure on Hossa to revive Atlanta is, undoubtedly, great. “He’s here to help his team win a lot of games,” Odgers says. “The only way for the team to take it to the next level, to really help Atlanta build hockey, is to win.” The city’s hockey hopes are riding on the blades of the Slovak sensation. And as of press time, there are strong signs of a promising narrative direction. ○

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PHOTOGRAPHED IN THE HEINEKEN LOUNGE AT PHILLIPS ARENA.

Breakaway. After spending the post-season summer months in his native Slovakia, the 28-year-old Hossa is glad to be back in the U.S. “When I’m on break, I miss the food in Atlanta.”