

SUNDAY SHOWCASE

REFLECTIONS ON THE ICE



Photographer gives Solar Bears fans candid look at players' lives

By STEPHEN RUIZ
Staff Writer

Of all the visuals that Bruce Bennett did not expect when he followed the Orlando Solar Bears for several days last month, a dog with a front-row seat surprised him most.

Bennett, director of hockey photography for Getty Images, was embedded with the ECHL team to chronicle the lives of minor-league hockey players. As forward Austin Block rushed to join the Solar Bears for a game against the Atlanta Gladiators on Feb. 12 at Amway Center, Bennett clicked away as Block quickly put on his uniform.

After Bennett left the locker room, he encountered Solar Bears managing partner Jason Siegel.

"I just shook my head and said, 'Boy, I never saw anything like that before,'" Bennett said. "Jason said simply, 'He brought his dog.' I was like, 'I am sorry. What did you say?'"

Runkle, a 5-year-old Boston terrier-pug mix named after a character in the former Showtime series "Californication," attended his first hockey game that night. He was introduced to a sport he never had seen.

The experience also was unique for the Solar Bears.

"It took a little getting used to, like walking in first thing in the morning and not even getting into the rink yet and he would be outside, taking pictures of us," defenseman Eric Baier said. "After a couple of days, everybody got used to it. It ended up being a lot of fun."

In his 41st year of shooting hockey, Bennett's sharp eye for the sport has been fine-tuned significantly since he was a teenage shutterbug and snuck into the photographers' area to shoot New York Islanders games at Nassau Coliseum and Rangers games at Madison Square Garden. He sent those pictures to "The Hockey News" and was offered \$4 per photo.

During his time with the Solar Bears from Feb. 10-13, Bennett shot about 12,000 pictures, of which he said about 450 were uploaded to the Getty Images site and 22 were picked for a photo essay on minor-league hockey for ESPN.com. It's all there — at practice, in meetings, in the locker room, preparing equipment, on the bus, pregame skates — a slice of life that fans don't receive for the price of admission.

Some pictures were converted to black-and-white to enhance the effect.

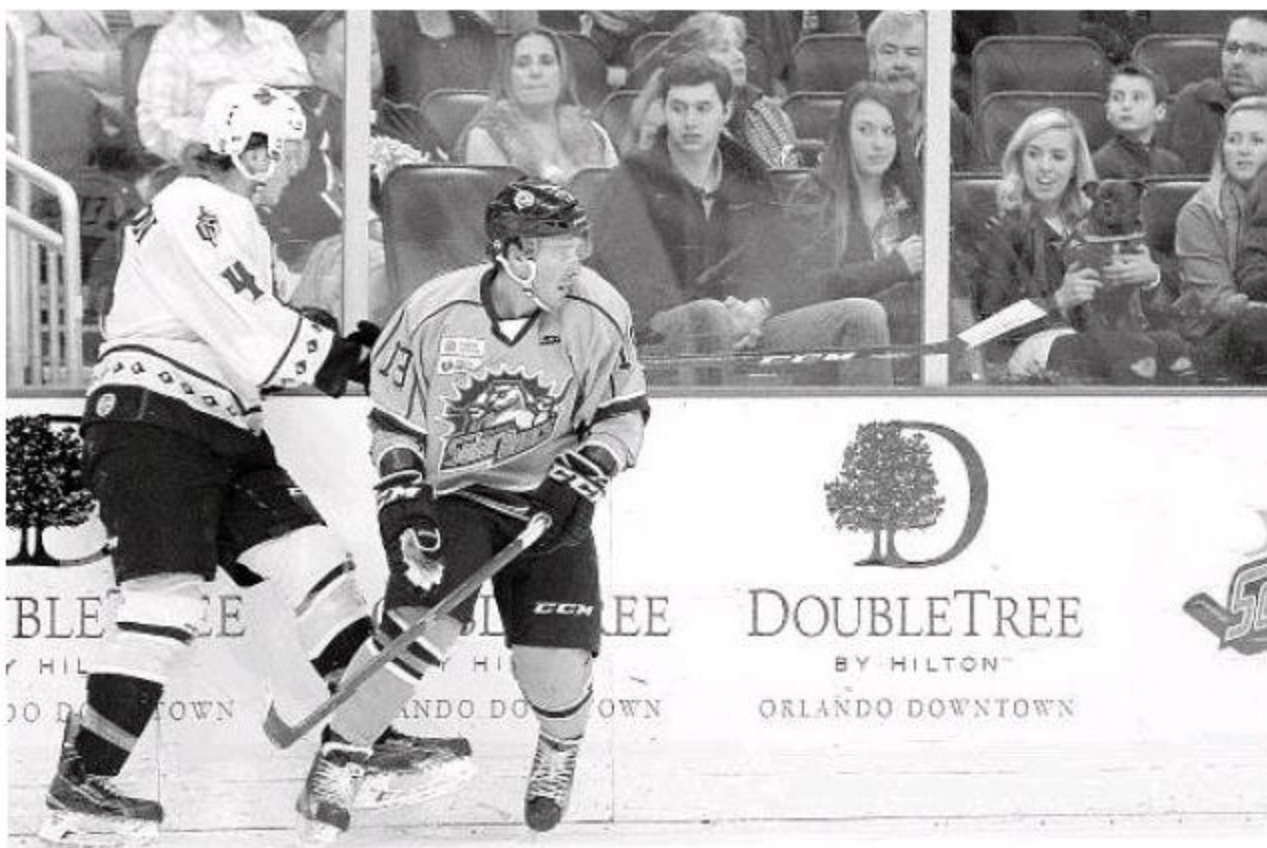
"He was never in the way," coach Anthony Noreen said. "There were meetings we had with four or five guys in a small room where he would find his way into a corner and be taking pictures. Until it was over, you would never even know he was there."

While Bennett is accustomed to tracking players on the ice — he has photographed 35 Stanley Cup Finals games and 27 NHL All-Star Games — he mainly has focused on the highest level of hockey. The minor leagues were largely a foreign concept. He had shot one ECHL game before he joined the Solar Bears for their matchup against the Florida Everblades at Germain Arena in Estero on Feb. 10.

Bennett photographed three Solar Bears games, including two against the Gladiators at Amway Center. All three were victories, part of Orlando's season-high, five-game winning streak.

Orlando will complete a three-game series against the Adirondack Thunder at 6 tonight.

"Comparing these guys to the



Orlando Solar Bears forward Austin Block (19) plays while his dog, Runkle, sitting on the lap of Briana Zinsmeyer, watches from the front row.



Rob Madore of the Solar Bears work out at the RDV Sportsplex. Photographer Bruce Bennett got all-access to the team.



Orlando Solar Bears players Eric Faille, Johnny McInnis and T.J. Foster, from left, prep for practice in the locker room at Amway Center.

players I shoot in the NHL, the players share the same sense of humor, which goes right along with my sense of humor, a little bit off," said Bennett, 61. "The players have the same drive to succeed."

"Some of the players are just lengthening their hockey careers and enjoying the experience of being professional athletes. Others are more motivated to show off their skill set, hopefully to be moved to the American Hockey League or the NHL."

The project first was discussed two years ago, but the schedules did

not align until last month Siegel, who had known Bennett from his time with the New Jersey Devils, gave him full access.

From the first picture to the last, Bennett attempted to become as hidden as fees on bank accounts.

"It's not something they are used to, having a camera in their face at all times," Bennett said. "As the days went on, you would still get the occasional player who was posing. I need a little bit more time to blend into the background and for them to forget that I was there."

Said Siegel: "To me, it is in the

eyes. Whether it was intense moments, happy moments, on the ice, off the ice, he did a great job showing not just behind the scenes, but giving insight into the life of an athlete who aspires to play in the National Hockey League."

Block has those dreams — and Runkle to keep him company: Block got him when he played for the University of New Hampshire, and they have been everywhere together, including to Europe twice. ("His dog passport has been stamped many times.")

Runkle never had seen his owner play until last month, when the Solar Bears acquired Block from the ECHL's Manchester Monarchs. With his luggage, equipment and Runkle in tow, Block arrived in Orlando at about the time the Solar Bears' game with the Gladiators started.

They rushed to the arena, and Block handed Runkle to a security guard. The pooch watched the game from the lap of Briana Zinsmeyer, the girlfriend of former teammate Max Nicastro. Runkle was a well-behaved spectator down in front.

"It was a first experience for me, and I think Runkle enjoyed it, too," Block said. "I don't know if it is the mental Bluetooth that he and I had from the long day of traveling. He was just sitting there and watching some hockey."

Bennett was happy with the week in pictures, as well as a particularly dogged pursuit.

"I wanted fans to better identify with the challenges that these players go through on a daily basis, the physical challenge and the mental challenge of being physically fit and sharp every game," Bennett said. "Each game is a challenge to show players in action, not only to show jubilation but dejection and show off the passion that the players have for participating in the sport."

On that score, Bennett's shot struck all net.

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PICTURE PERFECT

The Orlando Solar Bears won all three games during the time that photographer Bruce Bennett followed the ECHL team to chronicle minor-league hockey players' lives. A closer look:

Wednesday, Feb. 10

■ **Score:** Solar Bears 4, Florida Everblades 1

■ **Where:** Germain Arena, Estero

■ **Quick hit:** During a break in Toronto Marlies' schedule, G Garret Sparks returned to Orlando for one-game cameo and saved 25 shots.

Friday, Feb. 12

■ **Score:** Solar Bears 2, Atlanta Gladiators 1 (shootout)

■ **Where:** Amway Center

■ **Quick hit:** G Ryan Massa shut out Gladiators for last 52 minutes of regulation, plus overtime and shootout.

Saturday, Feb. 13

■ **Score:** Solar Bears 4, Gladiators 2

■ **Where:** Amway Center

■ **Quick hit:** Brenden Miller scored decisive goal during Orlando's three-goal third period.

Stephen Ruiz



Photographer Bruce Bennett captured player Matt Rupert as he looked out of the bus during a Solar Bears road trip.

Photos

Go to OrlandoSentinel.com/sports to see Bruce Bennett's photo gallery from his time with the Solar Bears.