

Roamin' with Iginla

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VERNON, B.C. – Walking towards the first tee at Predator Ridge's spiffy new Ridge Course, Jarome Iginla is stopped at the snack shack by an older gentleman compelled to dispense advice to the Flames captain.

"Excuse me Jarome, I'm a 25-year Flames season ticket holder, and I beg you — please, leave," started the man. "Do yourself a favour and spend the last five or six years of your career somewhere you'll have a chance to win. Don't believe that garbage (GM Darryl) Sutter is selling about this team being close to contention."

Shaking his head while beaming from ear to ear Iginla took the counsel in stride and begged to differ.

"Thanks, but no," started Iginla, ever the ambassador, "we're going to be fine."

Asked later in the day if he was inundated with similar sentiments throughout his summers 600 km away from the 'Dome, Iginla shrugged.

"He wasn't that optimistic, but I am," laughed Iginla in the midst of a brilliantly sunny day on his home course.

"He wasn't trying to be rude — he was actually trying to be nice — but that was his analysis of our team. I get both sides of it — actually three sides. There are people who think we can turn it around and are excited that I'm back, people who are fans and think I'd be better off elsewhere and people who want me out just because they want me gone.

"I don't take it too personally. We missed the playoffs and people are into it.

I understand that."

Had hockey not worked out for Iginla, the 33-year-old Edmonton native figures he likely would have followed in his father's footsteps by becoming a lawyer.

"Big Matlock fan," he laughs.

"I watched it a lot with my grandparents. I always like debating, and my buddies will tell you I like to argue."

That much is evident on the first tee box, when Iginla and his former Flames teammate Chuck Kobasew start negotiations on their high-stakes, bi-weekly match.

Kobasew is a 1.6 handicap and he wants to round it up to a 2. Iginla is a five and insists on four shots as part of a season series that sits at 6-1-1 in Kobasew's favour.

"I won the last one," said the ever-competitive Iginla of his one-win streak.

"He's a better golfer, so

I have to chirp him to get him off his game."

Long off the tee and generous with his gimmees, Iginla hits the practice range regularly with hopes of one day getting his handicap down to scratch. On this day, he isn't close but shows no frustration in the process while going on to win his match with Kobasew with birdies on two of the last three holes, including a drive on the 322-yard 16th hole that finishes just over the back of the green.

Despite being a seven-hour drive from Calgary, heads turn in the clubhouse when he hits the patio for a post-round beer. Having recently completed construction of his summer home on Okanagan Lake between Kelowna and Vernon, Iginla is indeed a familiar face at the course.

Setting up Sidney Crosby's golden goal at the Vancouver Olympics didn't help his chances of being able to retreat to his summer home anonymously.

"There are a lot of Calgarians here, but, to be honest, it's Canada," said Iginla when asked if he is stopped regularly in B.C.

"There's not much difference between Calgary and Vancouver — it's part of playing here. It's a good part. It's fun. People give you their opinion, which is part of being a fan. You read in the paper how upset people get — I'd be the same way and I will be when I'm done."

Unsure what he wants to do after hockey — which he has long said should take him to his 40th birthday — Iginla won't rule out the possibility of staying involved with the game.

But at this point, he plans on letting his three children — Jade (5) and sons Tig (3) and Joe (2 next month) — dictate his future.

"It depends what our kids are doing, because I really want to be with them, supporting them and don't want to be too busy afterwards," said Iginla, who hopes they'll all continue to take to various sports.

"We're very blessed to have a unique lifestyle that gives you lots of time with your family all summer."

Drawn to Kelowna as a teen playing in nearby Kamloops, Iginla choose to spend his summers here years ago, ultimately deciding with wife Kara — his high school sweetheart — to build just two doors down from Iginla's father. The weather, his familiarity with the area and the fact its far from the microscope he's under in Calgary all contributed to the decision to summer in Lake Country, where dozens of other NHLers live in the nearby community of more than 150,000.

"At first, I worried I'd run into guys at the grocery store all the time, but it's not like that," smiled Iginla, who sees plenty of former teammates like Mike Commodore, Todd Simpson (a local realtor) and Andrew Ference, who lives next door to Kobasew.

"Chuck does most of the organizing and tries to get the guys together once a week to play together," added Iginla, who also tees it up with former Hitmen star Ryan Getzlaf.

"There are lots of golf games and skating in August with the guys. The weather is great for training, road biking. It just allows you to get away and regroup and recharge."

While he has a boat and a place on the water, he doesn't consider himself or Kara "outdoor people." So, the family generally spends time around their pool, on their sport court, at the park or playing "store" or "kitchen" when Iginla isn't training four mornings a week.

"I read that athletes are playing longer and being successful longer and some of the things that drop off are because guys find other things to do — they maybe don't train as much or they spend more time with kids," said Iginla, a notorious gym freak.

"Kara still gives me time every morning because I want to be a high producer in my 30s. I don't feel much different than when I was younger."

Plenty has been made of who he plays with on the ice of late, but off it, his playing revolves around Jade and the two boys.

Well, when they'll let him.

"She's really big into crafts and I'm not a huge crafter, but I try," he smiled.

"Drawing, colouring, popsicle sticks, craft kits... she doesn't even want my help most of the time because I'm messy and not as good."

Soccer and skating are also popular with Iginla's kids, prompting him to haul out the frozen hose like thousands other Canadian dads to build an ice rink in his southwest Calgary backyard last winter.

"It was my first year," said Iginla, who vows to give his kids every opportunity to make friends and enjoy the competition sport can provide them.

"I flooded the sport court. Had some rough ice for awhile but got some tips. They only went out four or five times - the weather had to be perfect."

On this day it is, which has Iginla enjoying every minute of his charmed existence.

Especially when a tap-in birdie clinches just his second win over Kobasew.

"It's 6-2-1," says Iginla of their record.

"Now we've got ourselves a summer."

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