

a look at the life & work of
albuquerqueans who deserve a toast

PERSONALITY



MARK Lemelin

A national ice hockey referee—in the desert?

For this native Albuquerquean,

it makes perfect sense.

He's had a stick swung at him, water bottles thrown his way, a player threatening to shoot a hockey puck at him, and he's been called every name in the book. After meeting such a laid-back guy, you have to wonder what it is Mark Lemelin does to provoke this sort of treatment.

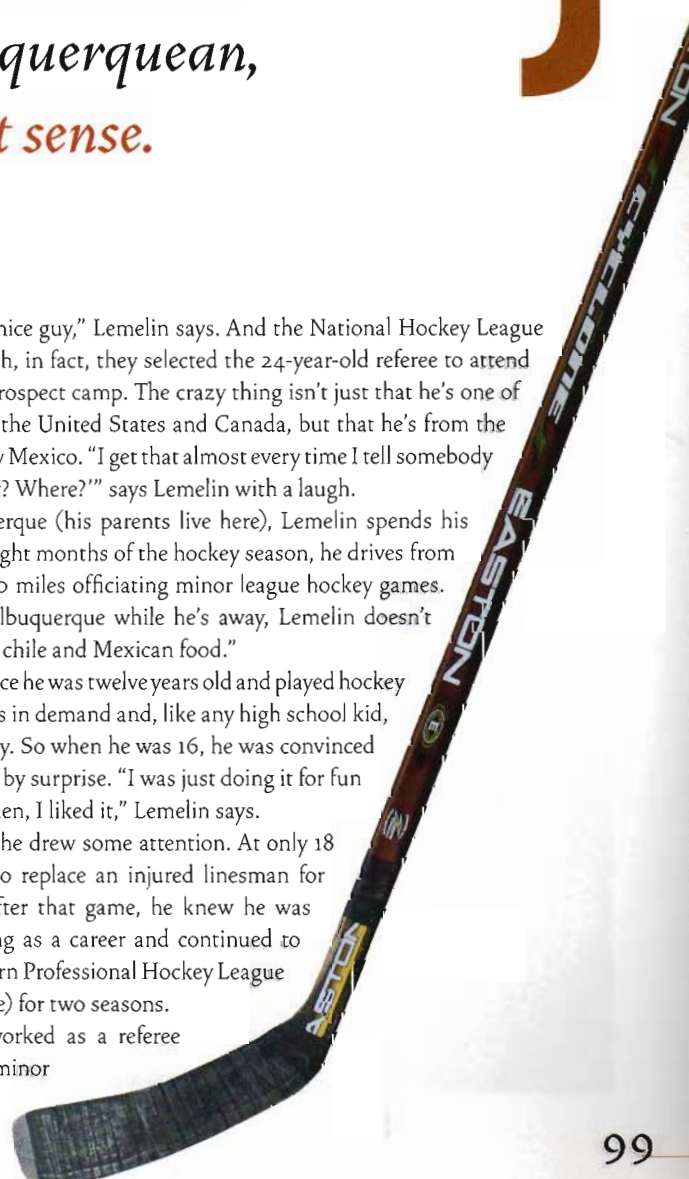
"I'm not mean. I'm really a nice guy," Lemelin says. And the National Hockey League thinks a lot of him, too. So much, in fact, they selected the 24-year-old referee to attend the world's most elite officials prospect camp. The crazy thing isn't just that he's one of only eight officials invited from the United States and Canada, but that he's from the middle-of-hockey-nowhere, New Mexico. "I get that almost every time I tell somebody where I'm from. They say, 'What? Where?'" says Lemelin with a laugh.

Born and raised in Albuquerque (his parents live here), Lemelin spends his summers in town. During the eight months of the hockey season, he drives from city to city, logging over 40,000 miles officiating minor league hockey games. Asked what he misses about Albuquerque while he's away, Lemelin doesn't miss a beat. "Green chile. Green chile and Mexican food."

Lemelin has been skating since he was twelve years old and played hockey as a teenager. Officials are always in demand and, like any high school kid, Lemelin wanted spending money. So when he was 16, he was convinced to try officiating and was caught by surprise. "I was just doing it for fun on the side and then all the sudden, I liked it," Lemelin says.

Zippering through the ranks, he drew some attention. At only 18 years old, Lemelin was called to replace an injured linesman for the New Mexico Scorpions. After that game, he knew he was interested in pursuing officiating as a career and continued to work as a linesman for the Western Professional Hockey League (now the Central Hockey League) for two seasons.

Since then, Lemelin has worked as a referee for several other professional, minor



(AA) hockey leagues across the country, as well as the top junior league in the U.S. (20 years old and under), the United States Hockey League. Last season, he worked 140 games—about twice as many as a professional player plays—earning an average of \$200 per game (an NHL referee earns an average annual salary of \$132,000).

Now relaxing in the shade, Lemelin reveals a common misconception fans have of officials. "I'm a regular person. But people expect us to be perfect every night," he says. "There are nights you're not going to be perfect, especially working so many games. We make mistakes just like everybody else."

And when a referee makes an unpopular call, he gets an earful. In a society that struggles with anger management over things like rush-hour traffic, Lemelin keeps his composure and employs the calming tactics of a parent. "When I first



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started, some things got me flustered because usually we're working in front of ten thousand fans. I just learned to block them out when I'm on the ice. If there's a big melee, I make sure I take my time instead of getting excited. If a coach is yelling, I'll talk back to him in a soft tone and not get him excited."

No one likes to be caught misbehaving and Lemelin is no exception. Before he wore the stripes, Lemelin admits of referees, "I didn't like them. I was actually a dirty player. It helped me out because I knew what to look for." Lemelin has heard just about every excuse from penalized players, but agrees that the stories and insults get more creative as the skill level and competition increases.

"It does get more colorful. The first couple times they saw me, I got a lot of comments about being so young, whether I was old enough to drive or go to the bar. Usually I shoot it right back at them. If you let it affect you, they'll be on you even more. So I usually kind of make fun of myself," he says.

If he appears ready after the NHL camp, Lemelin could be working in the AAA American Hockey League in the fall where, much like a player, he'll develop the necessary skills for the NHL. If not, other leagues have offered him a job for the upcoming season. "My goal is to be in the American League within two years. Once you're there, you're waiting for a spot to open up in the NHL," he says.

As for his hometown, Lemelin is hopeful that the enthusiasm for and understanding of hockey is growing in Albuquerque. On the ice, chances are good that the most sophisticated insults are in his future. But Lemelin isn't worried. For a professional referee, it's all in a night's work. —By Sonya Ewan