

Lokomotiv Moves On From Crash in Amish Country

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Lokomotiv player Alex Kruchinin, left, laughing during a weightlifting session with teammate Emil Galimov. **Matt Slocum**

MANHEIM, Pennsylvania — Alex Kruchinin can step out the front door of his hotel and see nothing across the street but miles of farmland. Just down the road that weaves through the quiet countryside, there are farms and silos and enough wide-open spaces that it's almost impossible for a bunch of young hockey prospects thousands of miles from home to fall into trouble.

In the heart of Amish country, Kruchinin is confined to two-a-day training sessions, regimented meals and not much to do outside the occasional trip to a nearby outlet mall.

Fun, for the most part, is on hold, for now.

Plucked from Russia and dropped into southeastern Pennsylvania, hockey team Lokomotiv

Yaroslavl's reinvention continues not on the banks of the Volga River, but inside a weight room where each day they train like world-class athletes. The makeshift team that picked up the pieces of both the club and spirit of a city following one of the worst aviation disasters in sports history has hunkered down for five weeks here, for an introduction of Western training into their regimen, trying to add the speed and strength necessary to win championships in the Kontinental Hockey League.

The makeshift
Lokomotiv
Yaroslavl
hockey team,
formed after
the plane crash
that killed
the former
squad, goes
abroad
for training.

This is a new Lokomotiv. Rebuilt from tragedy, the next generation of players push on for several grueling hours a day with one of sports' elite trainers.

Never far from their thoughts are the lost friends or former teammates who were killed not long after boarding a chartered Yak-42 jet. Lokomotiv's plane crashed September 7, 2011 shortly after takeoff outside Yaroslavl, killing 44 people. All its players, coaches and staff were wiped out, a catastrophic loss that evoked memories in the U.S. of the fatal Marshall University football team flight.

Lifting weights and forgoing favorite foods are small sacrifices for Lokomotiv.

"It's hard, but it's not a problem," the 22-year-old Kruchinin said. "Life is hard."

No team knows just how hard like Lokomotiv. Tom Rowe, a former NHL forward and Lokomotiv's American coach, was tasked with guiding the team through the aftermath of the accident and, somehow, into the playoffs. Each game was accessorized with teary tributes for the victims before they buried their feelings for 60 hard minutes of hockey still ahead.

"I wouldn't say we've moved past it. We don't ever want to forget that team," Rowe said. "But we need to take the next step."

The journey of molding a group of undersized teens into rugged pros starts nearly 7,700 kilometers away just outside Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Kruchinin arrived with eyes as wide as the city skyline when he landed in New York last month. His dream of training in the big city was dashed on the car ride to Pennsylvania.

There's not much to do in Manheim. So they may as well work out at Power Train Sports

Institute.

Led by Steve Saunders — who's trained NFL stars such as James Harrison to Hollywood's Liam Hemsworth — each player is on an individual workout plan and pushed to his limit, balancing everything from proper nutrition to suitable rest periods, all crafted to give them an edge next season, and beyond.

"They're pleasers," Saunders said. "You can tell they're used to being coached heavily."

Overseeing it all from the sidelines for the first few weeks was Rowe, the first American-born player to score 30 or more goals in an NHL season.

Former NHL general manager Mike Smith, who voluntarily offered his services to Lokomotiv following the disaster, approached Rowe about taking over the team as it shifted back to the KHL following a one-year stint in the minor leagues. Rowe trusted Smith and he enjoyed his interview with team president Yury Yakovlev. He also knew that if the situation was right for former coach Brad McCrimmon, killed in the crash, then it could work for him.

McCrimmon was survived by wife Maureen and children Carlin and Liam. Rowe exchanged emails with Maureen around the anniversary date to let her know how many people still cared for her.

All the Lokomotiv players knew someone on that plane. Kruchinin played on the national team with Daniil Sobchenko and Yury Urychev.

"That's why I accepted the offer to come to the team," Kruchinin said. "They were my friends. It's hard, but we must be strong. We play for our team and we play for that team."

The disaster will never be forgotten by Lokomotiv. Before each game, two youth players wear the Lokomotiv jersey and hold the team flag as they skate a lap in silence. They join a third youth player, who tolls a bell three times in memoriam for the victims. Unlike a statue or a portrait that fans could breeze past, the tribute will remain a permanent part of Lokomotiv's pregame, a solemn reminder of all that was lost.

Much like when tragedy strikes sports such as the Boston Marathon bombing in the United States, other cities rallied together in comfort during the aftermath. There were moments of silence at away games and Rowe said Lokomotiv received a standing ovation before every game, no matter how deep the rivalry.

"I don't think there's a person in the hockey world, or around the world, that didn't hear about what happened," Rowe said.

Inside the locker room, the accident was rarely discussed.

With heavy hearts, Lokomotiv players dedicated the season to the victims and throughout the season visited graves of every player who perished.

"They all wanted to go and grieve at every cemetery and have their moment of silence with that particular player," Rowe said. "It was pretty special. As we'd get closer to the cemetery, things would get a little bit quieter. When we'd leave, it'd be fairly somber. But it was a good

way for everybody to bring closure to what happened and just pay their respects.

"Hockey players in general are a special breed. They're caring guys. They thought it was important. But they knew when it was time to play, they had to be focused."

And they had to win.

There was no grace period for Lokomotiv in a season where it served as a beacon of hope for a city of 600,000 people living about 250 kilometers northeast of Moscow. Yakovlev told Rowe he needed to accomplish two things in the first season back in the big leagues: Win and develop young players.

"The pressure that comes with coaching this team is probably more pressure than a lot of teams in the KHL, maybe even some teams in the NHL," Rowe said.

Led by forward Sergei Plotnikov and center Artem Anisimov (of the Columbus Blue Jackets, who played during the NHL lockout), Lokomotiv went on a nine-game winning streak over October and November. Lokomotiv, a three-time KHL champion, finished 34-18 and lost in the first-round of the playoffs.

"Everybody understands how important it is for this team, the people, the city," Kruchinin said. "It's a big responsibility."

Yegor Yakovlev, a 21-year-old defenseman, was the first player signed by the franchise after the crash. He's enjoyed the rare chance to improve his game in the States, even if there's not much scenery to chew.

"There's not a lot of fun," he said. "I go on the Internet."

It's not all power lifts and Google searches. Kruchinin's Twitter feed is dotted with pictures of players in the pool, chilling on a bench with dozens of Nike, Gap and DKNY bags at their feet, and a maze of roller coasters at Hershey Park. They also attended a Philadelphia Flyers game. After the game, some players told Rowe they wanted to play for the Flyers.

"When we were playing, we played not only for ourselves," Yakovlev said, "but for the guys. We want to do them proud, even here."

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