

LOVERRO: Cheers for Ovechkin have taken a sinister turn since Ukraine



A sign is held up showing Vladimir Putin and Washington Capitals' Alex Ovechkin during warmups before an NHL hockey game between the Capitals and the Seattle Kraken, Saturday, March 5, 2022, in Washington. (AP Photo/Nick Wass) more >

By Thom Loverro - - Wednesday, April 27, 2022

A photograph can be a powerful thing. It can arouse emotions, good and bad. It can represent joyful and meaningful moments.

It can also represent horror.

Earlier this week, the Washington Capitals took their annual team photo. Alex Ovechkin was part of it, as he has been for the past 16 years.

That's a lot of team photos for the Russian hockey legend to value. Some teams certainly meant more to Ovechkin than others, and so those photos likely have special meaning. I'll bet the 2018 Stanley Cup championship team photo is one of those.

Ovechkin, like most of us, can retrace the years through photographs — a lifetime of magical moments, memorable milestones and, through it all, the familiar faces of family members.

When it comes to picking out one special image to represent who he is, Ovechkin has a lot to choose from.

But the image he continues to use in the profile for his Instagram account is a photo of the most hated and despised man in the world today — Russian strongman Vladimir Putin.

Vladimir Putin, who has been called a “butcher, a “war criminal” and a “murderous dictator” by the president of the United States.

Vladimir Putin, who has been compared numerous times to Adolf Hitler for his invasion and destruction of Ukraine. “Is Putin the new Hitler?” the headline on the March 8 Voice of America story asked.

Vladimir Putin, who is still “my president,” as Ovechkin told reporters on Feb. 25 when asked about the dictator.

Now, as Capitals fans get ready to fill up the arena to root for their beloved hero as the Stanley Cup playoffs begin, Ovechkin, 36, continues to display the photo of him and Putin.

My question is how will those Capitals fans feel in their guts as they cheer for the Russian star who makes no apologies for his support of the “butcher,” the “war criminal” and the “murderous dictator?”

It should make them feel a little sick.

We've let Ovechkin, who missed Tuesday night's game with what was described as an upper-body injury, skate too long for his relationship with this thug — myself included.

We noticed when Ovechkin created his "Team Putin" social media campaign in 2017.

"I never hid my relationship with our president, always openly supported him," Ovechkin said in a social media post that was translated by the Washington Post. "Today, I want to announce a social movement in the name of Putin Team."

When he was asked by reporters about "Team Putin," Ovechkin replied, "It's not about political stuff."

That was nonsense then. It was nonsense in February when Ovechkin said, "I am not in politics, I am an athlete."

It is nonsense now.

By 2017, Putin had already invaded Crimea and was locking up dissidents and poisoning opponents. Yet once everyone raised their eyebrows about Ovechkin's "Team Putin," we all went back to hockey.

But there is no moving on from what is happening in the world now. There is no compartmentalizing the hockey from the horrors on the internet and news broadcasts.

There should be no celebration of Ovechkin's goal-scoring — like owner Ted Leonsis did Tuesday night at Capital One Arena with a painting of his long-time star and the hockey legends he passed on the career scoring list —

without also noting the daily body count of Ukrainians injured and killed by Ovechkin's "president."

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2,345 civilians have been killed and 2,919 injured, as of April 20. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky told CNN last week about 2,500 to 3,000 soldiers have been killed.

Oh, yes, and the Russians — British Defense Secretary George Wallace said Monday about 15,000 Russian troops have been killed since the Ukraine invasion began.

ESPN reported last month that the Capitals asked Ovechkin to take the Putin photo out of his profile or deactivate his Instagram account. Ovechkin refused, citing fears for the safety of his family in Russia.

That has been the defense that Ovechkin supporters have hidden behind — that he would put his family at risk. No one of authority has supported that claim.

"With Ovechkin being one of the most visible Russian players in his home country, any retaliation against him or his family would be difficult," said Jason Mollica, a lecturer at American University who specializes in social media and politics.

"You aren't retaliating against, say (New York Rangers forward) Artemi Panarin (who came out supporting Russian opposition to Putin's invasion)," Mollica said. "While Panarin is a star with the New York Rangers who has voiced his opposition of Putin, his stature isn't on the level of Ovechkin's.

Panarin was smeared by a former coach in Russia (who accused Panarin of striking an 18-year-old woman 10 years ago) and took a leave from the Rangers (he missed nine games)."

Jean Levesque, associate professor of Russian History at the University of Quebec in Montreal and an expert in Russian sports history, also questioned how much Ovechkin and his family would be at risk if he stepped away from his support for Putin.

"I do not think he and his family are risking anything," Levesque said. "He is one of the few athletes who are closest to the regime. He comes from a family of elite athletes who are integrated into the political-sporting structure."

Levesque suggested that the NHL has the power to ban Ovechkin and other Russian players "if they are uneasy with his political leanings. After all, Russian athletes have been banned from most sports and this would fit with the current political atmosphere. But the NHL and Gary Bettman have decided that the show must go on."

The NHL has cut business ties with Russian partners in support of Ukraine. But ban players? Wimbledon has banned Russian and Belarusian players. They were barred from participating in the Paralympics. The Boston Marathon did the same. Russia was banned from World Cup qualifying.

Far-fetched? We are, for all intents and purposes, in a war with Putin. President Biden pledged an additional \$1.3 billion last week for new weapons and economic assistance for Ukraine. U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet

Yellen, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell and other top officials walked out of the G-20 meeting when the Russian delegation started speaking.

But Ovechkin, two months after his “president” invaded Ukraine, is still waving the Putin flag with his profile photo on his Instagram account — giving aid and comfort, you might say, to the enemy.

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- *Thom Loverro can be reached at tloverro@washingtontimes.com.*

LOVERRO: Former Redskin answers calling to guide 'fatherless' inmates



*Defensive tackle Tim Johnson (78) of the Washington Redskins, wraps up running back Ricky Watters (32) of the San Francisco 49ers during their first quarter of play at RFK Stadium in Washington, D.C., Nov. 6, 1994. (AP Photo/Denis Paquin) **FILE** more >*

By Thom Loverro - - Wednesday, July 13, 2022

This was the July 12 headline in the New York Times:

“In a Rikers Jail Cell, a Man Lay Dead for Hours Before He Was Discovered.”

A few months earlier, NBC News aired a segment about the New York City jail called, “An In-Depth Look at Rikers Island — Hell, Plain and Simple.”

This was where pastor and former Washington Redskins Super Bowl defensive tackle Tim Johnson believed he was needed.

The minister of the Orlando World Outreach Church was in Nashville on March 12 when Rikers Island became part of his world.

“As I do every morning, I prayed,” Johnson said. “I speak to my father in heaven because Jesus made the relationship with the father real. Sometimes he speaks back. On this morning, I hear Rikers Island. My mind is blown. I don’t understand what this could be. I paused in my prayer and I googled Rikers Island. It said it was the worst jail in the world — a place they called hell on earth. I am thinking, what does this have to do with me?”

Johnson, 57, was drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers in the sixth round out of Penn State in 1987. He played three seasons in Pittsburgh before being traded to the Redskins before the 1990 season. He played with Washington for five years, helping to anchor the defensive line on the 1991 Super Bowl team and was named to the Pro Bowl in 1992. He played with the Cincinnati Bengals in his final season in 1996, retiring with 31.5 sacks.

He became a minister in 2000, starting in Nashville. He moved to Orlando in 2007, where he has been the pastor of the Orlando World Outreach Church and has established himself as leader in the religious community.

In 2013, Johnson walked across the state of Florida — from Pensacola to South Beach — to pray for politicians, police chiefs and schools in the towns and city he passed through. He has held large stadium gatherings to help thousands of homeless people with food, clothing and legal and personal services.

Johnson has been working on a book called, “Fatherless No More,” speaking to what he believes is an issue that is at a “pandemic level ... the focus of ‘Fatherless No More’ is to address the issues of fatherlessness and to provide a path for people to experience freedom.”

In this moment, he felt that work needed to be done in hell on earth — Rikers Island, the New York jail located on an island in the East River with a reputation of violence and abuse where approximately 10,000 detainees are imprisoned daily. Some of the detainees are awaiting court proceedings and others serving short time.

Johnson had little knowledge of the world of Rikers, but he believed he was being called there.

“I am just completely blown away by this,” he said. “I ended up in tears, overwhelmed by this presence of the Holy Spirit. I don’t know what is happening to me right now. This is supernatural.”

Johnson spoke to his wife about the calling. Then he called a friend in New York to see if he knew anyone connected to Rikers Island. He booked a one-way ticket to New York “to find out if this is real or my imagination”. He would connect with Department of Corrections officials, who Johnson said welcomed his plan with open arms.

“And 12 days after I got that word, I was standing in Rikers Island,” Johnson said.

He wasn’t alone. Former teammate and Hall of Fame receiver Art Monk was there with him. When they played, Monk, Charles Mann, Earnest Byner and Johnson were partners in the Good Samaritan Foundation, working with children in low-income families to help provide opportunities for employment and to be evaluated in a work environment. Monk and Johnson have remained close. Monk lives in Orlando and is a member of Johnson’s church.

"His son James Monk is my youth pastor in my church," Johnson said.

"I see him (Art) on a regular basis," Johnson said. "I was over at his house picking something up and I wound up speaking to him about what I was doing. I asked him if he would want to participate, and Art said yes. Do you want to come this trip? We arranged it, and it was beautiful to have him there. We are teammates for a different game now."

They've made two trips to Rikers, living in an RV inside the walls, working with a group of about 14 detainees. "It has been an amazing experience to see the walls come down in their hearts and in their minds, to trust me and Art Monk," Johnson said. "We spend the day in jail doing communication skills, problem solving, critical thinking. We do all kinds of things to build trust and community for the next phase, which is really talking about the effects of fatherlessness, to take these young men through the process of seeing the effects of fatherlessness and then experience the freedom from fatherlessness."

Johnson said he is planning a documentary about their work at Rikers. He also said the Washington Commanders have connected with Johnson and are looking to support the program.

"Rikers used to be a dump," Johnson said. "Now it is a human dump, where humanity gets dumped. Art and I are on the treasure hunt. Instead of trash, we are digging for treasures, and there are treasures in that place."

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LOVERRO: Late father is a 'hard voice to replace' in boxer's corner



Dusty Hernandez Harrison (R) from DC wit a record of 17-0 will fight at Madison Square Garden this weekend. Photo courtesy of Golden Era Entertainment more >

By Thom Loverro - - Thursday, September 29, 2022

When Anthony Peterson and I spoke before his last fight in May, we talked about death.

He told me about his first time in a boxing gym, when he saw a fighter die after a sparring session. He was also in the arena at the MGM National Harbor in 2019 when Maxim Dadashev died in the ring. And he grew up on

the streets of the District. He has seen his share of senseless death.

But perhaps no death will hit him as hard as Saturday's senseless murder of local boxing legend Buddy Harrison.

Peterson saw his friend early on the day he was killed, when Harrison opened his Old School Boxing Gym in Hillcrest Heights, Maryland, so that Peterson could work out.

As Harrison left, Peterson hugged him. "I said, 'Bye Buddy.' And that was it," he said.

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Not long after, the 62-year-old street saint was gunned down outside his home in southeast Washington by two unknown assailants. Police are still looking for the gunmen.

“He was one of my good friends, and I miss him,” Peterson said. “Right now, I’m not the same. I’m not right. It hurts me.”

Peterson will carry that hurt when he steps into the ring again, and so will Dusty Hernandez-Harrison — Buddy Harrison’s son.

Both fighters were on card for Saturday’s 10-bout Beltway Battles: Round Three at the D.C. Entertainment and Sports Arena that was unexpectedly postponed for a second time this week.

Dusty, 28, was set to make his return to the ring after 2½ years of inaction, frustration and confusion that put his life at risk with some poor choices, including an arrest on gun possession charges five years ago. His weight ballooned up to 270 pounds, as he tried to get his life together. He had worked as a promoter for earlier Beltway Battles before realizing, in April, that he wanted to climb back into the ring.

From 2011 to 2020, Dusty was undefeated, with a 34-0-1 record. His last fight was a knockout win over Les Sherrington in February 2020. He was a middleweight (160-pound limit) at the time.

These days, he’s a heavyweight, but he says that he’s in peak condition and, at least physically, he’s ready to restart his boxing career.

His mental outlook, in the wake of his dad's complicated life and tragic death — that's another thing.

"Me fighting is something he took great pride in," Dusty said. "If I don't fight, what is it all for? Why did he make it the biggest thing in our lives? Why did he open a gym?"

"When he had cancer, he would get up and run at 5 in the morning before his chemo treatments and then go to the gym later and workout," Dusty said. "Nothing would get in the way of doing it."

When Buddy wasn't working with fighters at Old School Boxing, he was just as devoted to helping the less fortunate. A ex-convict and fighter who had spent much of his childhood in reform schools, Buddy had an awakening when his son Dusty was born and created a small gym of sorts for his son and the neighborhood kids in the basement of the Naylor Gardens Apartments. He also had a spiritual revelation — he could be found most early mornings at church praying. He began devoting his life away from the gym to doing good works, for which he became legendary.

You could find Buddy most weekends in the city handing out donated clothes to the homeless from the back of his pickup truck. There are stories of him giving the shoes he was wearing to a homeless person. He stocked a street pantry with food for anyone who needed supplies. He would often announce on Facebook that any child who came to his gym would get a meal and have a safe place to be.

"His job was truly to help people out," Dusty said. "We would hear stories about this all the time. But he wouldn't brag about it."

As far as carrying on Buddy's work, Dusty said, "He was a one-man army. It would take six or seven of us to do the work that one man did."

Dusty has his own gym — Round 15, in Marlow Heights, Maryland, — and hopes to continue promoting fights in the District and to see how far his comeback in the ring will take him. He will have to do it now without his father.

There have been times when he preferred it that way, when the presence of Buddy as his trainer, manager and father was so great that it drove Dusty away and they had a falling out.

"I'll be honest ... at times it sucked. Boxing has given me everything I love in life, but also everything that I have to hate about it. When you have your dad as your coach ... most people go to the gym, they've got a coach for three hours of the day. I had one for 24 hours a day."

But they reconciled and Buddy was going to be in Dusty's corner Saturday night. "He will be a hard voice to replace," Dusty said.

You would need a choir to replace the voice of Buddy Harrison.

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