



MORGAN RIELLY

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THE LIFE OF RIELLY

THE LEAFS' LEADING DEFENSEMAN HAS A VARIETY OF INTERESTS BEYOND HOCKEY – HE'S INTO MUSIC, FASHION, FOOD, TRAVEL AND MORE. BUT FIRST THINGS FIRST. HE WANTS TO GET OUT OF THE FIRST ROUND FOR THE FIRST TIME – AND THEN GO A LOT FARTHER THAN THAT

BY RONNIE SHUKER |

HE'S NOT exactly a renaissance man, Morgan Rielly. At heart he's still the same big-city boy with small-town values who prefers the simple things in life, like crustless grilled cheese. And the once shy 18-year-old rookie is still very much part of the 26-year-old veteran who looks his interviewer straight in the eye and introduces himself with, "Hi, I'm Morgan," as if his interlocutor wouldn't know.

Yet there's more to Morgan Rielly than the longest-tenured Maple Leaf likes to let on, more than the stereotypical family-oriented homebody he's so often portrayed to be. There's the behind-closed-doors leadership, the behind-the-scenes volunteerism, the forays into fashion, the animal-lover who says he'd be a marine biologist if he weren't a hockey player. There are also the cryptic *Anchorman* references on Twitter, the pragmatism in case of a fire, the Sweet Chili Doritos addiction and the longing to go skiing (which his contract forbids) like he used to as a kid. And then there's the harmless desire to one day, without the twangs of conscience, take a month or two or three to travel into the hearth of Western civilization and get fat and fermented on carbohydrates

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like any regular tourist. After he retires, of course.

"I'd like to go to Italy, I'd like to go to France, I'd like to go to Greece," Rielly said. "Places like that...where you can just drink a bunch of wine and eat a bunch of pasta and get out of shape. I haven't really done that, and that's what I'd really like to do."

Rielly will have to wait a long while to make that gastronomic dream come true. In the meantime, it was another off-season back in Vancouver after yet another early playoff exit for the Leafs. Four straight if you're counting: three first-round flops followed by a qualifying-round faceplant. For Rielly, it meant another chance to regroup and spending the off-season getting ready for another shot at playing past the first round for the first time in his NHL career.

For his first six years in Toronto, this was the life of Rielly: play hockey in Toronto from September to April, lose in the first round or miss the playoffs altogether and then come home to Vancouver, where he lives close to his parents and his brother. The COVID-19 pandemic messed around with the timeline in his seventh season, but it was the same old song and dance for Rielly after the Columbus Blue Jackets dispatched Toronto in the qualifying round.

So, once again, it was time to pack up and head back to Vancouver. Rielly calls it his "comfort zone." It's where his family is, and it's where he likes to spend every off-season. "I'm very lucky," Rielly said. "I'm in Vancouver during the off-season, I'm in Toronto during the winter. Two great cities. I feel really lucky for it, and I definitely don't take it for granted."

Push him hard enough, though, and Rielly admits that he'd give just about anything to spend less time in Vancouver and more in Toronto. Because that would mean playing hockey into June, something Rielly hasn't done his entire career, and something Toronto hasn't seen in, well, the history of the city.

Forget about June, though. Rielly and Leafs Nation might both settle for May. The Maple Leafs haven't even played in



PLAYOFF BUBBLE

The way forward is clear for Rielly and the Leafs – it's all about post-season success.

Round 2, much less the Cup or conference final, since 2004. The last time Rielly played hockey in May was in 2016, when he helped Canada win gold at the World Championship in Moscow, and the only time he's done so in Toronto was back in 2013, when he was with the AHL Marlies during his brief and only stint in the minors. That's the latest he'd ever played hockey as a pro until the five qualifying-round games he played in August. But hey, at least he can check that off his NHL bucket list. His off-ice bucket list? Well, despite being used to sudden free falls with the Leafs, Rielly won't be taking any risks in that regard, before or after retirement, be it skydiving or bungee jumping.

"I will not be jumping out of any planes, regardless of any contract," Rielly said. "I won't be jumping off any bridges on a bungee cord."

With no reason to be in Toronto come early June, it may have been surprising to see Rielly at the Air Canada Centre on June 10, 2019, more than a month after the Boston Bruins had dumped the Leafs in another Game 7. And yet there he was, courtside for Game 5 of the NBA Finals with the Toronto Raptors one win away from bringing the city its first major-pro sports title in over a quarter century. Even though Rielly is a Vancouver boy, born and bred, Toronto has become his home away from home. He got caught up in the hoop hype that had overtaken his adopted city, so he interrupted his off-season training to fly back to Toronto to cheer

on his fellow tenants at the ACC (now Scotiabank Centre).

"People were asking me if I'm jealous of them because they're in Toronto, in our market, in our building basically, right? It's not at all like that," Rielly said. "At Game 5, I was fan, I'll say that. I was cheering for them so hard and really wanted them to win, but there is that part where you want to experience that and you want to do that. You look at how they've changed the people of Toronto...We want to do that."

The Raptors lost the game but got the job done in Game 6 in Oakland, and a few days later there was a record-setting parade. Rielly returned home to Vancouver to resume his off-season regime, but it wasn't long before he was back in Toronto. A few weeks later, he came back for another parade: Pride. Rielly had marched in Vancouver's parade before, but his appearance in Toronto was significant. A few months earlier Rielly was alleged to have uttered a homophobic slur during a game in Toronto against the Tampa Bay Lightning. Rielly immediately denied it, and investigations by both the NHL and the Maple Leafs later cleared him.

It was just the second hiccup in Rielly's seven years in Toronto. The other was his careless "You're not here to be a girl about it" comment during a lengthy losing streak back in early 2015, for which Rielly immediately apologized after it did the rounds through the Twittersphere. The

On the ice, Rielly has done just that. Off the ice, he has gone above and beyond the call of duty. He's physically and emotionally invested in the city, and he puts in the work. Whether through social media or on-the-ground charity work, Rielly has thrown his support behind gay rights, mental

"You're given an opportunity to create your opinions and make them public. I don't get into the politics of it or anything like that. You just have to stand up for what you believe in, and being in Toronto's pretty cool. We're given an opportunity that we feel very fortunate to have. We feel very spoiled, if you will. It's good to make the most of it and make sure your views are in line with what you believe to be right."

When I first got here we weren't the team we are now. That's obviously very helpful – Morgan Rielly

rest of his time in Toronto has been basically without blemish. Rielly's ride with Leafs Nation has been a relatively smooth one – a rarity for any player in Toronto, much less one with seven seasons under his belt. "I've been pretty lucky, to be honest," Rielly said. "During my time

health, veterans, homeless shelters, #MeToo, cancer research and overcoming physical disabilities, just to name a handful of issues. He's not afraid to make his opinions known, but he's also not one to point fingers at anyone. About the only group of people Rielly will take aim at are those

When Rielly returns to Vancouver in the off-season for training, he goes to Molly O'Brien, director of strength and conditioning at the Fortius Institute in Burnaby, B.C. The two have worked together the past four years. O'Brien handles his dryland and weight-room training, while a nutritionist takes care of his diet. Rielly, meanwhile, rules the gym's playlist with his eclectic musical tastes.

"He's all over the map, that's for sure," O'Brien said. "He can pull something out of his back pocket and everybody's going to it. He's everything from hip-hop to '90s, he's got a really good '90s playlist. He's got the tunes, and if anybody else touches the playlist he's over there pretty quick to switch it back."

He's also hands-on when it comes to his training, a rarity among NHLers. Typically, athletes like to leave their off-season regimen to their trainers. Most prefer to be told what, when, how and how long to work out. They want it all laid out for them to follow, including what to eat. But not Rielly. O'Brien calls him one of the most "collaborative" athletes she's ever worked with.

"One of the really special things about Morgan is that he's extremely intuitive and self-aware," O'Brien said. "He comes in and has a really good idea of what it is he wants to work on... He's always right on the money, and that's not very common for athletes to have such a good idea of where their needs really are."

Over the years, Rielly's needs have trended away from strength and lifting weights (O'Brien: "he's the kind of guy who can look



HOOP DREAMS

Rielly, next to Leaf Auston Matthews, wants to replicate the Raptors' title run.

there, there's been some drama and obviously the team has taken a turn. When I first got there we weren't the team we are now. I think that's obviously very helpful. The most important part is just playing well and being a good teammate and hopefully the rest takes care of itself. I think it's just important to do your job and stay focused."

on Twitter who enjoy pointing out his periodic grammar gaffes. Yet even then the big-city boy with small-town manners opts for the far more mild, and almost affectionate term "grammar sticklers," when "grammar Nazis" would be more apropos.

"I didn't really understand how big the platform is in Toronto when you play there," Rielly said.

OPENER: SERGEI BELSKII/USA TODAY SPORTS; TOP: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI/USA TODAY SPORTS

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his own admission, there's not much to it. "I'm not sure I want to be perceived as a guy where there's lots to write about," Rielly said. "It's good to be a bit more low-key...I'm a pretty normal guy. I don't think there's too much going on that needs to be written about. But that being said, playing in Toronto, playing on a good young team, I feel very lucky. If people want to write, they're bound to write certain points, but hopefully it's all good stuff."

It usually is. The book on Rielly has always been that of a quiet, family-oriented homebody who keeps to himself and prefers to stay in his lane. That may be true of Vancouver Rielly, but not Toronto Rielly. After all, seven-plus years in a new city is bound to change anyone.

Over his time in Toronto, living in the city has given him the confidence to push himself out of his Vancouver comfort zone and try new things. In 2019, between Game 5 of the NBA Finals and marching in Toronto's Pride Parade, Rielly did just that when he puddled-jumped over to Montreal to sneak in a photo shoot with the fashion brand RW&CO. He'd never done anything more than model athletic gear and equipment, so mugging for the camera in the brand's line of suits was new for him. Despite being used to the bright Toronto spotlight, Rielly was admittedly a little overwhelmed by it all. At times he looked awkward and even intimidated, as any newbie understandably would. "Yeah, a little bit at first when you walk in," Rielly said. "At first me and Johnny both were a bit surprised by it, but the people have been really friendly and that makes it fun."

That would be Johnny Gaudreau, a teammate of Rielly's from Team North America at the 2016 World Cup of Hockey. It helped that Rielly had another fashion rookie in Gaudreau with whom to share the shoot. It also helped that the crew pumped such hip-hop classics as "Jump Around," "Gangsta's Paradise" and "Hypnotize," all of which, as an aficionado of '90s music, fell right in Rielly's wheelhouse. Gaudreau got into it, juggling tennis balls, hopping around

He'll do something unbelievable in the weight room and I'll be losing my mind, 'I can't believe you just did that!' He's just like, 'Uh, yeah,' and moves to the next thing — Molly O'Brien, trainer

at a weight and put on size") to more mobility and agility training. At 6-foot-1 and 220 pounds, he's about the size of Mike Tyson when 'Iron Mike' ruled the boxing world. And yet the same guy who can stack plates on a barbell like he would stack his dishwasher is the same guy who can dunk a basketball with ease.

"There'd be times where he'd do something unbelievable in the weight room, and I'll be losing my mind," O'Brien said. "I'll be like,

'Morgan, I can't believe you just did that!' And he's just like, 'Uh, yeah,' and moves on to the next thing. He can clean 255 pounds from blocks, from just below his knees, which is incredible. That's something that good weightlifters might struggle with."

Away from the gym, Rielly resumes his Vancouver lifestyle: spending time with family, hanging out with friends, golfing, fishing and playing with his yellow Labrador retriever, Maggie. By

and doing rabbit ears behind Rielly. Rielly took a little longer to get warmed up, but there he was, putting himself out in an unfamiliar venue, pushing himself beyond his comfort zone to try something new, even if he's not quite ready to push the boundaries of hockey's comparatively conservative fashion culture to those in other sports.

"In basketball there are lots of guys wearing cool stuff," Rielly said. "I don't think I could pull it off, but if you look at (Russell) Westbrook, (James) Harden and Chris Paul, they're doing some pretty crazy things. I like that. I'm not saying that I would do that, but looking at it I think it's cool, and it's a good way to express yourself. And more power to them."

LEFT: NICK TURCHIO/USA TODAY SPORTS; RIGHT: PERRY NELSON/USA TODAY SPORTS



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There was a point in Rielly's life when none of this was going on, when there were no off-ice pursuits, no distractions from hockey, no grammar geeks to swat away on social media – a period when life was simply all hockey all the time.

As a kid, Rielly played his youth hockey in West Vancouver all the way up to bantam and was always one of the best players on his team. In an insular hockey program, however, that didn't mean much, and Rielly knew it.

five Toronto streetcars. White knew right away that the Hounds had something special in Rielly. He had seen players of Rielly's ilk before.

"He had his eye on the prize right from the get-go when he stepped on campus here," White said. "He was focused and ready. He was doing all the things he needed to do to give himself the best chance to get his ultimate goal, which is every high-level hockey player's goal, to play in the NHL. He was focused right from the get-go. He wanted to be drafted highly, and when he came back for Grade 10 he only wanted to be here for one more year so that he could move on and play in the Western Hockey League. Yeah, he took care of business."

Rielly never wavered from that plan. His 41 goals and 84 points in 43 games in his first year with the Notre Dame Hounds got him selected second overall

population nearly 34,000, and it has barely budged since Rielly arrived in 2010. Rielly impressed in his first year with the Warriors, and by November of his second season he'd become a projected first-rounder for the 2012 NHL draft. Then, just 18 games into the season, on what looked like an innocuous play, Rielly injured his ACL. He was told he was done for the season.

The news was disappointing for just about everyone around him, including coach Mike Stothers, who felt bad for the kid because it was his draft year. Until



He would have to push himself beyond his comfort zone and leave Vancouver if he was to go anywhere in the game.

Sandwiched in between Rielly's happy childhood in his Vancouver comfort zone and living in the hockey fishbowl of Toronto were five formative years in Saskatchewan. Just about every player who has made it to the NHL has had to leave home as a teenager to pursue the dream. For most that age is about 16, when players jump to some form of junior, and few make that kind of life-changing decision on their own. Rielly made that decision two years younger, and he was the one who insisted on it.

Kevin White was his houseparent when Rielly showed up in 2008 at Athol Murray College of Notre Dame in Wilcox, Sask., where the population is just a shade over the capacity of four or

TRAINING FREAK

Rielly does things in the gym that "good weightlifters might struggle with."

on a random Saturday night. It was Rielly's second year with the Hounds but his first in midget, and he hadn't gotten off to the best of starts. With his team down, he scored a natural hat trick – shorthanded – in a come-from-behind 5-4 victory. "I can count on one hand how many times I've seen a defenseman score three goals in game," Pedrick said. "But to do it shorthanded was something I'd never seen before."

After two years at Notre Dame, Rielly was ready for the WHL. He admits his eventual destination wasn't his first choice, but at least he didn't have to go far.

Just 50 miles northwest of the village of Wilcox sits Saskatchewan's fourth-biggest city, Moose Jaw,



in the WHL bantam draft. Then, in his second season in Wilcox, Rielly co-captained the AAA team to the national midget title.

That memorable season included a game that coach Del Pedrick remembers vividly, even a decade later. It was a regular-season home game against Tisdale

he spoke with Rielly. "The crazy thing was he never gave it a second thought," Stothers said. "He said, 'Listen, I'm going to come back and play. I'm going to come back and help my teammates. I'll be fine. I'm not going to get hurt. My play will dictate where I go. I'm not worried about it.' He just wanted to help his teammates. I knew right then and there that, again, it was proof positive what a good person he is and what a good teammate he is and what a good leader he was for us."

Most players would've erred on the side of caution, not taking the chance of returning too quickly and getting reinjured. Rielly's stock was high, and the Maple Leafs were clearly interested. But he wanted to play.

Rielly spent the rest of the regular season and the first two rounds of the playoffs rehabbing while the Warriors ran away with

the WHL's East Division title and made a run in the post-season. Even though he was rehabbing, though, Rielly was never far from his teammates. After every road trip, he would be outside the arena in the frigid Moose Jaw winter weather, waiting patiently for the team bus to return so that he could help the guys unload their bags and get caught up.

"It never felt like he left because he just made himself available all the time," Stothers said. "He just wanted to hang around. He just has a passion to play. He's just got an enthusiasm that you really don't see anymore. He just loves to be around his teammates, and he just loves the game."

Rielly made good on his promise to Stothers and came back for the third round of the playoffs. The Warriors made it no further, but Rielly didn't reinjure his knee and his stock didn't drop at the draft, as the Leafs selected him fifth overall.

He would've gone even higher had then-GM Brian Burke picked first overall – after drafting Rielly, Burke boldly declared he would've taken him No. 1 had he owned the top pick. Most people in the hockey world rolled their eyes to the back of their skull

When he went to Toronto, I knew the Leafs were getting a hell of a player and an even better person – Mike Stothers, WHL coach

at that bit of bluster, but hindsight in 2020 proves Burke was at least somewhat right. Do the draft over again and Andrei Vasilevski, taken 19th overall by Tampa Bay, is the only slam dunk who would get picked ahead of Rielly.

After seven-plus seasons in Toronto, Rielly is 13th in games played, 10th in goals, sixth in assists, seventh in points and sixth in points per game (500 games or more) among Maple Leafs defensemen all-time. If he plays out his contract in Toronto, he'll be in the top five in all of those categories. If he re-signs after his deal expires in 2023, he'll be well on his way to breaking Hall of Famer Borje Salming's franchise records.

"When Morgs went to Toronto, I just knew that Toronto was getting a hell of a hockey player," Stothers said, "and an even better person."

But not the same person, eight years later, no matter how many "Morgan Rielly the homebody" stories have been published. He's still the same family-first, pragmatic guy with unexpected humor, who when asked what he would grab in the event of a fire quips the Captain Obvious answer: "pants." But Rielly isn't the same person he was when he arrived full time in Toronto in 2013-14. Leafs Nation can only hope more change is on the way, in the form of a prolonged post-season run. For now his focus remains on playing hockey into June – to replicate the Raptors' success

and end the Leafs' ignominious 53-year Stanley Cup drought. The Raptors' run in 2019 gave Rielly a taste of what the city would look like should the Leafs remove that millstone from their fans' necks.

"It helps when the people who are paying to own your jersey or watch you play live really understand how much you appreciate being in Toronto," Rielly said. "We have incredible fans and have unbelievable support. It's important for players to be aware of just how fortunate we are to play there."

Rielly said he enjoyed every minute of his time in Vancouver during the off-season, but he couldn't wait to return to Toronto when it came time for the 2020-21 campaign. After seven years, it feels like home.

"More and more every year," Rielly said. "It's always good being home and it really feels more like home." **H**

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