

## **BEHIND THE STATS**

**Lefebvre back on track after depression**

**April 1, 2006**

By Matt Fulks

It was a typical sun-filled Midwestern summer afternoon, August 7 of last year. The temperature hovered around 90 degrees. Perfect for baseball, but even better for some time on a lake.

Ryan Lefebvre had the best of both worlds. After his job of announcing that Sunday afternoon's Royals game on radio, Lefebvre planned to go to hang out with some friends at his home on a Kansas City area lake for an afternoon of playing on the water and cooking out.

What a life. Being in his early 30s, single, calling games for a major-league team. Along with those came a nice income, a four-bedroom house, two expensive cars, not to mention a boat and a jet ski parked at his dock. Then there are the road trips, spent at incredible ballparks, the best hotels and exquisite restaurants. As if those things aren't enough for a guy's dream life, Lefebvre's girlfriend at the time was a former Miss USA runner-up.

Only, as Lefebvre hung out that afternoon with his girlfriend and Dave Witty, the Royals' Vice President of Communications and Marketing, and Witty's family, he felt uneasy.

The feeling worsened. He was alone, jealous, empty, a hole in his stomach. He didn't know this feeling. He knew it wasn't alcohol or drug-induced. He was all too familiar with those nightmares before sobering up in January 1998. No, this was different. Much different.

After everyone left that night, Lefebvre had a breakdown. As a child would when he's scared, Lefebvre went to his bedroom closet and hid, huddled in the corner, and cried uncontrollably for an hour.

As he went to bed that night, Lefebvre didn't think he could sleep this one off. He was right. The next morning, he called his mom in New Mexico.

"She's been through clinical depression twice, and she's been through disappointments with me during my entire life," said Lefebvre. "She knew something was different with this. She made me promise that I'd make an appointment (with a psychologist) that day."

That afternoon, August 8, Lefebvre began a life-changing process.

### **NOT JUST A WOMAN'S ILLNESS**

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, approximately 6 million men are treated for depression each year. The number of women treated? A little more than 12 million.

In today's world, or really at any other time in history, men are taught to be tough. It isn't cool to talk about feelings. Heck, it isn't even hip to think about feelings.

Hollywood and Madison Avenue both reinforce that idea more than ever today. They show a world that Lefebvre was living with the cash, cars, chicks and celebrity. Crying and depression and all that other womanly stuff is taboo for today's "real" man.

"Even though I had everything I thought I wanted, I was miserable," said Lefebvre, who still takes medication for major depressive disorder. "I had everything but at the same time I had nothing. My purpose had been fulfilled, but I was empty."

The result often becomes suicide. In fact, the Mayo Clinic reports that depressed men are four times more likely to commit suicide than depressed women.

Despite his personal hell, Lefebvre says he never seriously considered killing himself, although at one point late in the season, he realized that was an option. It came on Oct. 1, the day before the season finale in Toronto.

Lefebvre suffered another breakdown.

"Short of planning my own suicide, it occurred to me that if worst came to absolute worst, there was a way out," he says. "For a man of faith, I realized that it wasn't about quitting on life, it was about being in a better place with God. It wasn't as dramatic as people would assume; it was more peaceful. But it also crossed my mind how much it would hurt people, namely my family and friends, if I were to do that."

### **LIVING UP TO AN IMAGE**

On the surface, Ryan Lefebvre's childhood in southern California sounds blissful. He lived in Manhattan Beach with his parents. During his early childhood, his mom, Jeane, was a model. His dad, Jim, was a baseball player.

Indeed, Jim Lefebvre was a solid major-league infielder for the Los Angeles Dodgers during 1965-72, where he played in two World Series. After doing some acting, including television roles on "Gilligan's Island" and "Batman," Jim Lefebvre went on to manage Seattle, the Chicago Cubs and Milwaukee. He's also coached with the Dodgers, San Francisco and Oakland.

Most recently, he managed China in the World Baseball Classic.

But Ryan's relationship with his dad throughout the years has been OK at best. Ryan's parents separated when he was 18 months old and divorced when he was 6 years old. He grew up with his mom, whom he considers a close friend.

"There's a certain image attached to my father being a major leaguer and to my mom being a former model," Lefebvre said. "As they went their separate ways after the divorce, I thought I needed to get their attention through an image that was either taught to me, or others believed I should portray. Regardless, I wasn't living my own life."

Take baseball. Lefebvre enjoyed playing through his years at the University of Minnesota and then a season in the Cleveland organization, but he was playing because of his parents. Truth be told, it wasn't making him happy. All the while, beginning early in his high school years and continuing until his late 20s, Lefebvre turned to alcohol and drugs.

"I think most people drink or do drugs because it makes them think they're portraying the image that everyone wants," he said. "But the problems don't actually go away."

Even after Lefebvre sobered in 1998, shortly before his final season with the Minnesota Twins and his first with the Royals, his burden grew. He likens it to carrying a backpack of rocks representing life's good and bad experiences, and expectations. The rocks, much like life's burdens, are dead weight.

"Sometimes the burden becomes too much and you can't carry anymore," he said. "I think it's an interesting analogy because putting the rocks in your backpack puts them in a place that you can't see them, but no one else can, either."

Ryan's mom carried many of his rocks on a daily basis during his bout with depression. He still hasn't told his dad.

"I wanted to sit down with him alone during spring training and talk to him about it, but we couldn't work out our schedules," said Lefebvre. "I'm trying to plan a trip for him to come to my house in late April so we can sit down and talk about it."

## **THE LONG SEASON**

As the Royals continued working toward their club-record 106 losses in 2005, Lefebvre did his best to make it through each day, thanks to a team of people led by his mom and his psychologist, Dale Williamson.

On a perfect day, he could escape his thoughts for 30 minutes or so. Unfortunately, there weren't many of those.

Although going to the ballpark everyday opened up the possibility of questions from others about Lefebvre's abnormally somber demeanor, that sure beat the "living hell" that he faced with being alone at home or in a hotel room, trapped with his thoughts.

Those times never were easy. Like September 16, in Cleveland, when Lefebvre was going to wait until everyone had left for the stadium, and then call in sick before checking himself into a hospital. His mom convinced him otherwise.

Even life outside of hotel rooms wasn't easy. Three weeks before the Cleveland incident, Lefebvre suffered a public panic attack while out for a night with Mike Sweeney and John Buck in New York.

"I don't think anybody had any idea how deeply troubled I was," said Lefebvre, who talked with his mom at least twice a day from Aug. 7 until the end of the season. She often reminded him that fighting depression was "one day at a time, one step at a time and one foot in front of the other."

Unlike his previous 11 years announcing in the big leagues, Lefebvre doesn't remember much about the games on the field in 2005. Looking back, he recalls the early part of the season. Then, as June rolls around, details are fuzzy. July and into August become more blurry.

"From then on, I remember hardly anything from the field," he admits. "But I remember vivid details of some of my worst days at home and on the road. Like most people, I've lost my personal problems in my work. But with this, I simultaneously called the games and focused on my problems at the same time."

And he remained to himself, embarrassed and unwilling to talk about his depression. In fact, only a handful of people knew of Lefebvre's torment. He didn't even tell his radio partner, Denny Matthews, or their producer/engineer, Don Free. Not until their last day in Arizona for spring training.

## **THE BISHOP'S FRIENDSHIP**

As with former alcoholics and drug addicts, most people who have suffered through depression say that recovery is a long and arduous process. Usually, it's the rest of the person's life.

"I don't think I'll ever feel like I'm cured," Lefebvre agrees.

Lefebvre's road to recovery, however, gained momentum in early November 2005, when he traveled to Florida for a wedding. As he strolled down the beach one day, watching families build sand castles along the Gulf of Mexico shore, he realized he felt better. He had an "even keel." He was thinking more rationally.

Lefebvre decided to spend the rest of the offseason doing things he wanted to do. Things that would help him in recovery. He volunteered at John Knox Village and Lee's Summit Hospital. He hosted a weekly bible study for high school students at his house. He got back to playing weekly pick-up hockey games with a few friends, including Matthews.

And, he planned vacations. One to Jamaica, where he'd visit Gordon Bennett, one of his former principals who's now a bishop in the Catholic Church; and then his first trip to Europe, specifically Rome.

"Meeting with Bishop Bennett was almost my own 'Tuesdays with Morrie,'" Lefebvre said, referring to the best-selling book. "During our discussions I asked him what common characteristics he saw in a good man. One that stuck like glue was the difference between a tough man and a brave man.

"He showed me that tough gets you nowhere. Or, you can be brave and be the type of man to say, 'this is what happened to me.'"

Lefebvre's also sharing his story with others. It started as a self-realization of how far he'd come. It's transformed, though, into helping other men.

Said Lefebvre: "When I began sharing this with people, it was incredible how many men would come up to me and say, 'I haven't really told anyone about this...,' and then they'd tell me their story about depression.

"There are too many men in this world who are more frightened by the cure than they are the disease. They settle into not being happy and feeling like they can deal with it. But there's no better feeling than chiseling away all those layers of grime that collects around our hearts, and getting back to who God designed you to be."

Lefebvre's biggest project, however, is still a work in progress. He wants to touch a bigger audience through a book, which is near completion.

"I accept what happened to me, and I'm not ashamed of it now," he said. "Maybe a man who's ashamed to go to therapy and share his emotions with a doctor, can read a story or listen to my experience and draw strength from it. That's all I wanted and needed to hear during the whole thing. When you're going through this, you want to feel like you're not losing your mind, that you're normal and you're going to be OK.

"I know how that felt, and I want to provide that for someone else."

### **EVERYDAY IS OPENING DAY**

The 2006 season marks Ryan Lefebvre's 12th opening day as a major-league announcer. He enters this one, however, with a little more optimism, a little more zeal.

"I'm excited about this season because, regardless of how the team does on the field, I'm going to just go out and enjoy it," he said.

After all, it was just six months ago when Lefebvre felt he'd be the one guy who ended up in an institution.

"Going through this was horrible; there's no other way to describe it," he said. "But, with all the things I've discovered, had I not gone through this I wouldn't feel as good as I do now. This was the worst thing that's ever happened to me, but at the same time it was the best thing that could've happened to me.

"I've never felt better in my life. I've never experienced the joy that I have now."

If you'd like to contact Ryan Lefebvre, go to <http://www.kcfootprints.com>, or send email to Ryan via Matt Fulks at [mattfulks@hotmail.com](mailto:mattfulks@hotmail.com). "Behind the Stats" appears each Thursday. Be sure to catch Matt Fulks on Metro Sports Talk each Monday night around 6:50.