

The Radio man

The game helped bring Royals broadcaster Ryan Lefebvre back from the brink after he suffered a breakdown last year

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PHOENIX — Ryan Lefebvre stands near the entryway of Rustler's Rooste, a cowboy-themed restaurant atop South Mountain. He is 35 years old and still looks like an Abercrombie model, tan and fit with high cheekbones and blue eyes that reflect off the steel slide beneath his feet.

To get to his table, Lefebvre can either walk down a dozen steps or take the slide. For a second, he waffles. A 6-year-old boy eggs him on. Another kid joins in.

"Of course I'm going down the slide," Lefebvre says.

He leans back and lets go. At the bottom, Lefebvre raises his hands, like he's on a roller coaster, and yelps. It's far different than the polished sound thousands of listeners hear every summer night on the radio.

For 162 games every year, fans invite radio play-by-play men into their cars and homes.

They are the game's greatest boosters, its wordsmiths and poets. At 3 hours a game, that's more than 20 full days of baseball per season, enough for audiences to regard the best announcers more like friends. Every great one has a distinctive style, whether it's the soothing calmness of Vin Scully or the rat-a-tat-tat warble of Harry Kalas or the velvety professorship of Jack Buck.

Entering his eighth season with the Royals, Lefebvre is still searching for his voice, though he's in no hurry to find it. He'd rather go down a few slides, laugh for a while, be himself. It's the only thing that can save his world from collapsing again, like it did last summer.

For Ryan Lefebvre, last year will always represent one thing. "The year I realized," he says, "that I suffer from depression and anxiety."

He remembers four days from the 2005 baseball season.

On Aug. 7, years of apprehension and fear released themselves.

"I had my breakdown," Lefebvre says. "I was in therapy the next day."

On Aug. 27, he watched the Royals lose in New York when pitcher Jeremy Affeldt slipped on a rosin bag. That day, Lefebvre felt like he couldn't breathe.

"I was out to dinner at Tao Restaurant with Mike Sweeney, and I had this enormous panic attack," Lefebvre says. "I thought I was going to die. I don't know how I got through dinner. My heart was pounding. I was sweating. I thought I was going to pass out. Mike asked what was wrong. I couldn't answer."

On Sept. 16, in Cleveland, Lefebvre nearly committed himself.

"I was going to wait for everyone to go to the ballpark, and at 4 o'clock I was going to call in sick," he says. "I've never called in sick. I was going to check myself into a hospital."

And on Oct. 1, during the last series of the year in Toronto, he thought about ending his dull pain.

"That's when I really started to question whether I wanted to do this anymore, whether I wanted to walk on this planet," Lefebvre says.

"It was this living hell. That was the one-month mark. I started on medication Sept. 1, and I thought that if I made it a month it would start improving. It hadn't. I was thinking, 'Am I going to be that one guy who doesn't recover?'"

When he couldn't answer that question, Lefebvre went to his church and had his priest anoint him.

"I know this sounds dramatic," Lefebvre says. "I promise you, it's not. Depression is serious, and so many people are afraid to talk about it."

At first, Lefebvre admitted his depression to only his closest friends. He told his mother, Jeane, Sweeney, Royals vice-president David Witty and Fred White, who in a twist had turned into a father figure after Lefebvre replaced him in the Royals' broadcast booth.

And every day, he showed up at Kauffman Stadium wearing a mask — sometimes a smile, other times a laugh, but always a façade.

"I had to keep working," Lefebvre says. "If I took time off, I would have been home alone, by myself, with those voices telling me I was losing my mind, that I was going to be alone the rest of my life, that I don't even know who I am. I was fully aware of the classic, homespun principles of follow your heart and be yourself. I didn't know what my heart was."

"I needed those games."

On the way to the stadium, Lefebvre would call his mother. After the postgame show, he would call again. He would talk, she would cry. She would talk, he would cry. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, he would wake her up just because he needed to talk some more.

"I had all the things in life you'd think a guy would want," Lefebvre says. "A great job. A big house on the lake. Two nice cars in the garage. A boat and Jet Ski. I've dated some pretty girls. I got everything I thought would make a guy happy. And it came to a point where I realized that it wasn't making me happy. It might be the dream life for someone on the outside looking in, but I realized I was living someone else's life."

"I had to figure out what I wanted."

On Aug. 8, the day after his breakdown, Lefebvre started exploring his psyche. His therapist told him to close his eyes and try to remember the first time he felt scared and alone.

"I was 4 years old," he says. "So I don't know if I've ever known myself."

Lefebvre grew up in Southern California. His father, Jim, was National League Rookie of the Year with the Dodgers and later managed the Mariners. His mother was a model. They later divorced, with Lefebvre spending summers in big-league clubhouses alongside his father.

“Ryan was always very mature,” Jeane says. “We used to go to Japan every summer, where his dad was playing, and taking Ryan on the airplane was like traveling with an adult, from the time he was 2 years old. One year I couldn’t go because I was working. He was 6. Our travel agent, who was a big Dodger fan, said she’d take Ryan. I said, ‘You want to take a flight with a 6-year-old to Tokyo from Los Angeles?’ And she said, ‘Ryan will be fun.’”

He was fun, to the girls from Little Red School House preschool who called him on the phone to the ones he charmed as a standout baseball player in high school to the ones who chased him at the University of Minnesota.

After a standout four-year college career with the Gophers, Lefebvre was drafted by the Indians. He quit professional baseball the next season and returned to school for the requisite broadcast training. Two years after he graduated, the Minnesota Twins’ flagship TV station, looking for a young face to increase its female audience, hired Lefebvre for its pregame show.

“They really wanted me to be the heartthrob,” he says.

Subconsciously, Lefebvre always chafed at the issue of image. He was never comfortable with himself, always trying to be friendlier, better looking, smarter — more, more, more.

To that end, Lefebvre drank heavily. For years, alcohol had been his salve, letting him escape in a haze.

Lefebvre took his last drink in January 1998. He was 27 at the time, about to enter his fourth year with the Twins. He got into a fight with a University of Minnesota baseball player at a bar. The next day, the Twins gave him a leave of absence to dry up, and Lefebvre went to Wisconsin and stayed in his grandmother’s empty house. He volunteered at a hospital and went to church every morning. Sobriety, it seemed, wasn’t too bad.

Yet, inside of Lefebvre grew the insecurity that alcohol had masked. He had addressed the problem, but not the cause.

The symptoms slowly manifested. Lefebvre, initially loathed by fans in Kansas City because he replaced White, began to withdraw to his house in Lake Winnebago. No longer would he invite friends over for barbecues. He stopped painting and writing. His relationships soured.

Lefebvre, paid to talk for a living, couldn’t muster up the right words for how he felt.

“I didn’t have my medication anymore, my alcohol to feel better,” he says. “I was so worried about everyone accepting me, I used alcohol to become someone else. Now you quit drinking and don’t have your medicine, and you’re stuck with your feelings. What happened Aug. 7 was years of the water rising to the top.”

“I lost it, man. It was the worst thing that ever happened — and the best. Because it resulted in me realizing that I need to go live my life.”

Lefebvre remembers one more date from last year: Nov. 5, when his recovery started.

At a wedding on Sanibel Island, Fla., Lefebvre stood outside his room and swallowed a delicious breeze. He began thinking how he loves seeing new places and meeting new people, and it occurred to him that now, more than ever, was the right time.

The next day, when Lefebvre returned to Kansas City, he used his 250,000 airline miles to book plane tickets to Jamaica and Rome.

In Mandeville, Jamaica, a small bauxite-mining town, Lefebvre visited Bishop Gordon Bennett, his high school principal who now has a diocese in Mandeville. For four days, they talked about life and love and spirituality.

Two days after he returned, Lefebvre flew to Rome. He went to Midnight Mass at the Vatican and gorged on Italian food. He was by himself and, for the first time since he could remember, that was OK.

“I was scared to death of the offseason,” Lefebvre says. “I was going to be alone. What was I going to do? I was going to go crazy. And it ended up being the best offseason I’ve ever had.”

Every week, Lefebvre would visit the children and elderly at John Knox Village in Lee’s Summit. He took communion to the sick at Lee’s Summit Hospital and hosted a Bible study for local high school kids.

To get his life back in order, Lefebvre reasoned, he first needed to help others with theirs.

“For a period of two or three months, it seemed like that guy, the fun-loving Ryan, was missing,” Sweeney says. “He was a shell. Now, I see the sparkle in his eye and the joy in his heart.”

For 11 days, Lefebvre attended a seminar with Gary Kuzmich, a local life coach and motivational speaker. In group sessions, the participants talked about their lives, what they liked and disliked about themselves, how they felt.

One particular part struck home. As the separation of personal and professional gets blurrier by the day, you can lose yourself. Lefebvre had grown up surrounded by baseball, played it, announced it for a dozen years — let the game identify him instead of forging his own path.

“We’re always asked what we want to be when we grow up,” Kuzmich says. “Everything seems to be focused on what we do, and not who we are.”

Discovering that was the easy part. Eventually, Ryan Lefebvre had to return to his job and face it.

Just once, Lefebvre would like a big-league at-bat. He would love to hear Vin Scully announce his name.

“He brings the players to life,” Lefebvre says. “He reminds you that they are ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. He takes a big person, as far as their name and notoriety, and shows the commonness in that big person. I want to bring players to life.”

It's an art that he hasn't perfected yet, one that he doesn't know if he ever will. It's the one that makes announcers so adored and makes baseball the perfect game for radio: slow enough to enjoy, interactive with fans, ripe for description — the sounds and smells and sights.

When he returned here for spring training, all of his senses heightened by the past six months, Lefebvre was nervous. He'll soon have to visit the hotels where he had his episodes, sit in the same broadcasting booths where his panic erased a year from his memory, guide himself through a baseball season.

"I was excited, too," Lefebvre says. "I couldn't wait to get here. I feel so renewed. I really want to enjoy what I do."

And that's calling ballgames. Baseball play-by-play announcers are beloved because they represent the last romantic vestiges of the game. The idea of two men wearing fedoras, smoking cigarettes and talking ball into a vintage microphone is quixotic, even though it's no longer true.

"Play-by-play is a very interesting thing," White says. "Nobody can teach it. You can't show a person how to look at a situation and interpret it. Ryan can do that. He takes to situations, familiar and unfamiliar, and does it so smoothly."

His on-air voice does, at least. Lefebvre's real voice, the one he spent so much time locating, is back as the Rustler's Rooste dining staff waits for its last customer.

It's Lefebvre, and he's standing at the top of the stairs again. He walks over to the slide and looks at it one more time. One step onto it, then two. He sits, lets go and raises his arms, only this time there's not a peep.

Ryan Lefebvre is happy, and he doesn't have to say a word.