

An Incredible Journey: Artemi Panarin's path from poverty to NHL stardom

By Aaron Portzline (/author/aaron-portzline/)

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The 8-year-old boy stood shaking and scared in the middle of a bus station in Chelyabinsk, Russia, tears gathering in his eyes and dripping off his cheeks. His panicked hands rifled through the same pockets over and over for the bus ticket he could not afford to lose.

At the previous stop, he'd reached into a secret pocket on the inside of his pants — to the left of the zipper, just behind the waist — to buy a snack for the 25-mile trip from Korkino to Chelyabinsk. The ticket must have been left at the counter when he reached for his money.

His grandmother didn't just put the rubles in that pocket, she sewed that pocket into his jeans, too, hoping robbers wouldn't find it when they patted him down. This was more than 900 miles east of Moscow and just eight years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Poverty was a permanent cloud in the Chelyabinsk region, and crime was rampant. Even kids weren't safe.

The boy stood trembling at the world's mercy. Most mistook him for a 5- or 6-year-old, a golden mop of hair on top of a frail 65-pounder, all ribs and elbows and knees.



Artemi Panarin as a 2-year-old living with his grandparents. (Panarin family photo)

Two men emerged from the swirl of legs and luggage. *“Where are your parents? Why are you crying? Are you lost?”*

They looked around the station for an adult accomplice, fearing a ruse. One gave the boy the money in exchange for a promise that he’d spend it on a bus ticket. Even kids couldn’t be trusted.

The tears dried. A natural smile returned. Deep breaths.

Artemi Panarin remembers this as one of the scariest days of his young life. He bought a new ticket and boarded a bus back home to Korkino, but his remarkable journey from isolation and poverty to NHL stardom and immense wealth was just getting started.

Blue Jackets fans have been treated to numerous Panarin highlights this season — the puck dangling, the passing, the scoring. But few in North America know what Panarin has survived to make it this far, how he emerged from an almost hopeless part of the world to become one of the best hockey players of his generation.

The Blue Jackets took a bit of a gamble when they acquired Panarin from the Chicago Blackhawks last June. They'd grown frustrated by Brandon Saad's lack of urgency, so trading him wasn't difficult.

But they weren't sure how Panarin would adapt to a new city, a new coach and a new roster, one without Patrick Kane.

It's turned out to be one of the best moves general manager Jarmo Kekalainen has ever made. Panarin set a franchise record for points (82) and assists (55), climbing over the names of Blue Jackets luminaries Rick Nash and Ray Whitney, respectively.

But it's not the production alone that has blown away the Blue Jackets.

"To me, it's one of the most tremendous drives to be the best you can be that I have ever seen," Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella says, "and it's coupled with him enjoying every minute of it. He loves playing. He just loves being on the ice. It's infectious.

"He's a goal-scorer, but he's so much more, and the stuff that's so much more is more important than the goal-scoring. I think back to when we got him last summer, and I had no idea what we were getting with this guy. No idea."

The Blue Jackets felt they needed a game-breaker when they limped away from a first-round playoff series loss to Pittsburgh last spring, and Panarin has quickly shown a propensity to score big goals. They're counting on him big in this year's first-round series against Washington, beginning Thursday.

Panarin has gradually become more comfortable in the Blue Jackets' dressing room, too.

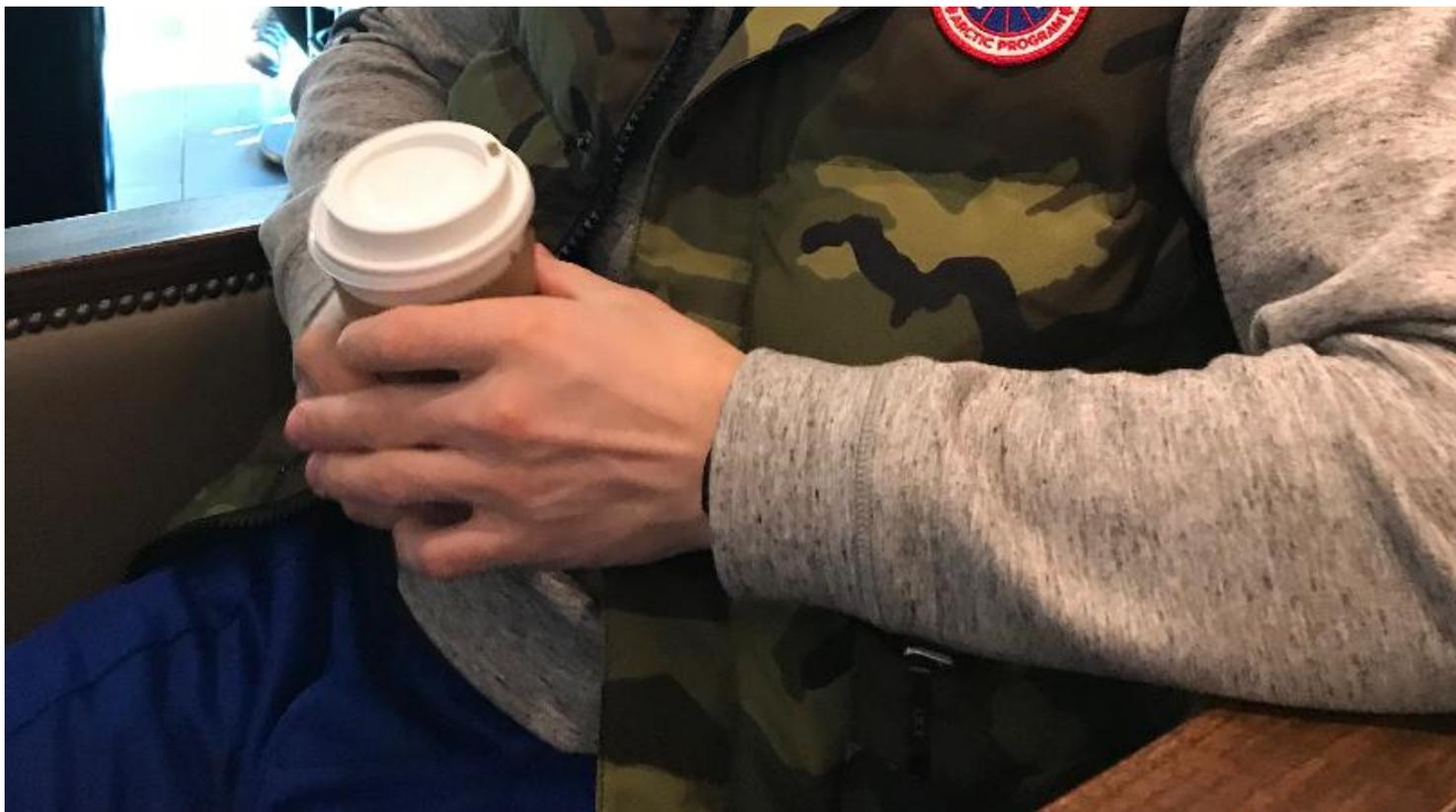
The ever-present smile helps, of course, and he's gone from conversing through spotty English with a couple of players — fellow Russian Sergei Bobrovsky and linemate Cam Atkinson were the first to click with him — to now speaking more freely in front of the group, players said.

And in recent weeks, as the Blue Jackets have begun to form a bond at the end of a long regular season and the start of the Stanley Cup playoffs, Panarin has started to open up more with his teammates about his past, his path to the NHL.

They had no idea.

Panarin has never shared his story with media in North America, but he agreed to a sit-down with *The Athletic*, and an independent interpreter, in mid-March.





Artemi Panarin during his interview with *The Athletic's* Aaron Portzline. (Aaron Portzline/*The Athletic*)

When Panarin, an only child, was only 3 months old, his parents divorced and he was adopted by his grandparents, Vladimir and Nina Levin. They lived in Korkino, a mining town of about 40,000. The quarry on the edge of town — it's 1,500 meters in diameter and 500 meters deep — looks like it could swallow the village.

“It is my home,” Panarin told *The Athletic*. “But there is not much opportunity there outside of the mine.”

Vladimir was a celebrated hockey player in his day, but could never play his way out of Korkino as a pro. He'd mined a bit, worked in the factories and bought a cow to sell its milk, all to get by. Nina made money as a seamstress and sold baked goods.

They were barely scraping by when baby Artemi arrived in their tiny apartment in early 1992.

The hockey career that escaped Vladimir became his obsession all over again, but this time for Artemi.

By the time he was 5 years old, Artemi was up on skates that Vladimir would pull out of the discard pile at the local rink. The first pair was for a figure skater; the second were hockey skates, but they were so big that Artemi wore a pair of shoes *inside* them.



Artemi Panarin wearing equipment that is way too big for him. (Panarin family photo)

The gloves he salvaged were completely worn out in the palms. Vladimir patched the palms with leather from a worn-out pair of leather boots, and Panarin had his gloves.

This is how the rest of his gear came together, too. Vladimir would find something salvageable at the rink, Nina would retrofit it to Artemi's small frame, and the skating lessons could move forward.

His skates didn't even have laces.

“My grandpa found this rope that would fit,” Panarin says.

Nina would try to find the material to replicate the sweater the rest of the boys on the team were wearing, but she could only get so close.

Most days, Vladimir would drive Panarin to the rink in his World War II-era utility vehicle — a YA3-469 — that had more rust than steel. It broke down frequently, making Panarin late to practice or Vladimir and Artemi late arriving back to Korkino.

The boys his age took notice of the scrawny kid in ill-fitting equipment. Bullying knows no borders.

“The (other kids), they were laughing at me when I got to the rink,” Panarin says with a smile. “They laughed at my grandpa’s car. They laughed at what I wore. They just laughed at me.

“It was not really comfortable to skate in my equipment. The other kids, they had the stuff. I used things that were left by the older guys. Some of the things, my grandma was making herself.”

The practices were relentless. Panarin didn’t really enjoy it, didn’t see the point in all of this. His grandfather would entice him with chocolate candies to keep him motivated.

“Even when I was first starting, my grandfather was very strict about my skating,” Panarin said. “It wasn’t enough to just stay up on my skates and learn to stop. It was always ‘Bend your knees!’ And he was right.”

When he was 8, Panarin started traveling to Chelyabinsk six days a week for practice and games. The only day off was Sunday.

On days when Vladimir couldn’t drive — or the old car wouldn’t start, or they didn’t have money for gas — Panarin would take a bus to Chelyabinsk, with enough money for a snack stuffed into his secret pocket. He played with Matchbox cars to pass the time.

“It was hard for him,” Georgi Belousov, a childhood friend of Panarin’s, wrote in an email to *The Athletic*. “There were kids who had everything handed to them, while Artemi had to borrow things or just have his grandfather ask for help around town. You can’t describe it. There are no words in Russian or English to describe how sad and humiliating it was for Artemi.

“But he was such a strong kid that he somehow always managed to deal with everything with the help of his grandparents. Others helped, too, but it was mostly him and his family. It was hard to look (at) sometimes.”

The worst day, Panarin says, was the day when he was 8 years old and lost his ticket in Chelyabinsk.

“I didn’t have a phone; I had no money,” he says. “I lost my ticket and I was all by myself. I just started crying for somebody to come to me and help. That was a bad day.”

But Panarin makes a careful distinction between poverty and being poor. He didn’t have much, but his grandparents gave him everything they could, and it was everything he needed.

He winces at some memories but smiles at many others.

In the living room of their tiny apartment, Vladimir would move around the furniture, set up a makeshift net and play a game with Artemi, drawing the ire of Nina when a shot went astray.

“What are you both doing, breaking everything in here!” Nina told a Russian TV documentary on Panarin. “That’s what I was saying to them!”

Panarin was a fast skater, but nothing special as a hockey player in his early teen years, when the separation of talent typically begins. Most of his teammates still towered above him.

When he was 13, he endured a crushing blow. He was cut by Chelyabinsk’s top junior club and relegated to the second tier, a team called Signal. Vladimir was irate; Panarin was devastated, and nearly quit.

“I didn’t have big hopes at this point,” Panarin says.

Belousov’s father went to work trying to find a place for them to play, one that would have a future. He found a boarding school in Moscow that was connected to a club in Russia’s top league, the KHL, but Panarin would have to try out.

Suddenly, the bus rides to Chelyabinsk were child’s play. Panarin took a two-day train ride to Moscow and said goodbye to Vladimir and Nina for the entire school year, including the holidays.

Boarding schools in Russia are not as we think of them in America. They aren't college prep schools for the ultra-wealthy. The conditions were meager, Panarin says.

But Panarin's outlook started to change when he arrived at the Podolsk boarding school. For the first time, Panarin was fitted for new hockey gear: skates that fit, new gloves, a composite stick, etc.

About those new gloves ...

"I didn't know I wasn't really feeling the puck before," Panarin says. "The old gloves, with the boot leather, were really thick. I couldn't feel the stick in my hands, really.

"When I went to try out in Podolsk, I was shocked by the feel of the puck on my hands. I could feel the stick in my hands, the puck on my stick, those things. It was exciting."

Coaches in Podolsk could see what coaches in Chelyabinsk were missing, perhaps because Panarin was wearing proper equipment.

"I remember this day (he arrived) very well," said coach Sergey Levashov, speaking to the Russian TV documentary. "He was like the Ugly Duckling, you know? But you could see a swan growing in him anyway. We just had to look closely."

Panarin says he didn't quite realize then how much pressure he was under in Podolsk. If his tryout hadn't gone well — if he'd not been accepted by the boarding school — he would have been sent back to live with his grandparents in Korkino.

What then? His hockey career likely would have been finished, and Panarin would be living in Korkino ... a coal miner, a factory worker or such.

Panarin spent four years at Podolsk, taking the two-day train ride to Moscow each fall and back to Korkino each summer. Vladimir kept close tabs on him, and the dream of a career in the KHL was starting to seem possible.

When he was 16 years old, Panarin says, the shame and embarrassment he was made to feel as a child started to boil up in him. He was already a better hockey player than the kids who used to laugh at him, but now he was determined to set his sights higher.

“It was a strong feeling,” Panarin says. “It made my desire very strong. Those were the years ... that was the motivation, what made me want to go really high with my career.”

Panarin made his KHL debut as a 17-year-old in 2008-09, but he spent the next two seasons bouncing from the KHL's Chekhov Vityaz to a second-tier team.

It was in 2011 that the rest of the world learned his name.

Panarin was one of the least-heralded players on Russia's roster at the 2011 World Junior Championships in Buffalo, but he moved up in the lineup because of an injury after two periods of the gold medal game between Russia and Canada.

With Russia trailing 3-0 in front of a heavily pro-Canada crowd, Panarin scored at 2:33 of the third period to make it 3-1, sparking a Russian rally. Only 13 seconds later it was 3-2, and at 7:29 of the third it was 3-3.

Panarin scored the game-winning goal with 4:38 remaining. As he celebrated, he pulled on his sweater and yelled “Korkino!!!”



Artemi Panarin, wearing his World Junior Championships medal, with his grandfather Vladimir Levin. (Panarin family photo)

“That is something, a memory, that I will always think about,” Panarin says. “It is a proud moment for Russia, right?”

“This was a highlight for me, yes, but there’s always another game, always a bigger goal to achieve.”

Four years later, after establishing himself in the KHL and winning the KHL’s Gagarin Cup with SKA St. Petersburg, Panarin began to be hounded by NHL teams.

He signed a two-year entry-level deal with the Chicago Blackhawks on April 29, 2015, turning down several other NHL teams. (The Blue Jackets were not in on the bidding.)

“This was not the goal that my grandfather put before me,” Panarin says. “Even when I had a chance to come to the NHL before, he was saying, ‘Don’t do this.’ He was afraid. He was afraid that in the NHL I would be broken.”

The 35-minute bus ride that became a 12-hour train ride was now an 18-hour flight to the other side of the world.

Panarin became an instant star in Chicago, skating on a line with Kane and riding high in one of the NHL's great cities in which to play.

The trade to Columbus after only two seasons was an adjustment, sure. But not in a bad way.

“We talked about this on the day he was traded, that he was fortunate he ended up in Columbus,” says Daniel Milstein, Panarin's agent. “He was in the role of No. 2 guy in Chicago. Now he's No. 1 in Columbus.

“To me, that's his team in Columbus. It was time for him to step up and be the guy.”

If Panarin hadn't learned to face the world alone at such a young age, maybe he doesn't have the guts to leave Russia for the NHL in a new world. He spoke almost zero English and still isn't comfortable speaking to reporters without a translator.

All of Panarin's hardships, though difficult to endure, might have led directly to the wondrous skills he possesses today.

Tortorella always marvels at how strong he is on the puck despite weighing “a buck seventy!” Maybe those outsize skates, and the challenges they provided at an early age, helped make him such a strong skater.

His teammates rave about his ability to handle pucks in heavy traffic. Maybe the boot-leather gloves he used until he was 13 years old sharpened his ability to focus and control pucks.

Maybe the poverty and struggles of his youth have created an unquenchable desire for success.

“It's unbelievable,” says Blue Jackets captain Nick Foligno, who spoke with Panarin recently about his backstory. “You just don't think that in this day and age a 26-year-old would have a story like that.

“Now you know why he is so humble and so kind. And so hungry. This guy just works for everything, and he wants to be the best player. It's made him who he is.”

Tortorella almost choked up when he heard about Panarin's background for the first time.

“Bread is one of the strongest guys on the ice,” Tortorella says. “It’s a mental toughness that transforms into physical skill.

“What he’s had to do to get here ... we talk about adversity? We’re worried about getting into the playoffs. We’re talking about losing streaks. Compared with what this guy had to do?”

Panarin and his girlfriend, Alisa, have grown close with Bobrovsky and his wife, Olga. But how much longer they’ll play together in Columbus remains a mystery.

The Blue Jackets would like to sign both players to contract extensions this summer, but both might be in line for salaries of \$10 million or more per season.

Both Panarin and Milstein, his agent, say they are willing to talk with the Blue Jackets about an extension this summer, but it’s unclear how much the Jackets will be willing to spend — and able to spend, given the constraints of the NHL’s salary cap.

Panarin and Bobrovsky can be unrestricted free agents after the 2018-19 season.

Panarin seems comfortable in Columbus, says he’s fond of Tortorella and his teammates and says he has nothing to complain about.

“For me, it’s not all about the money,” Panarin says. “I want the things that money can’t buy.”

Then he flashes an ornery grin.

“But don’t tell the general manager this, right?”

The scene plays out every time Panarin is packing his hockey bag, either in Nationwide Arena for a road trip or in the visitors’ dressing room on the road before they come home.

Panarin has a travel-sized icon set of Christ and the Virgin Mary on the top shelf of his locker. He kisses both sides of the picture, folds it closed, makes the sign of the cross twice from his forehead to his chest and both shoulders, and places it in his travel bag.

Before every game in Nationwide Arena, Panarin leaves his LeVeque Tower apartment with enough time to stop at a nearby Russian Orthodox church before heading to the rink.

“Some days it’s open and I go inside, just to be alone and think,” Panarin says. “Some days it’s not open, so I sit outside, just to be around it.”

Panarin says he’s not deeply religious — “I don’t agree with everything that is written in the Bible,” he says — but he believes in a God and enjoys being alone with his thoughts.

It’s also an attachment to something from his days in Mother Russia, something he can hang on to, even if he’s not sure how much he believes.

Panarin has stayed in contact with his mother, Elena, and says he holds no ill will. “She was trying to make progress with her career,” Panarin says. “It’s really hard for you to give birth to a kid at 20 years of age.”

As for his father, Sergey, they speak about twice a year. “He’s my father,” Artemi says. “Still my father.”

But there’s a part of Panarin that isn’t whole.





Artemi Panarin during a visit to Korkino last summer. (Panarin family photo)

“I don’t have these feelings like regular kids do, the kids who are around their parents all the time,” he says.

“I still feel something towards my family. But I don’t have a big heart towards my family.”

His grandparents are another story.

Panarin bought them an SUV with his first paycheck from the Blackhawks. When he and Alisa travel home in the offseason, they stay on a sofa bed in the cramped living room, not in a hotel.

“Artemi is like his grandfather,” says Belousov, his childhood friend. “He has great jokes, he can toy around, but at the same time, when it’s needed, he’s all business.”

“His grandfather is strict but so kind. That’s Artemi, too. He’s one of those people his friends can always reach out to. I recall once calling him early in the morning while it was (late at) night in North America, just to talk. He didn’t flip the phone on me, either. He picked it up and we talked a couple of hours even though he had a game the next day.”

From their Korkino apartment, Vladimir and Nina are able to watch almost all of Artemi’s games with the Blue Jackets via the internet. When Artemi played in Chicago, he and Vladimir would talk after every game.

They still speak a couple of times a week, but not after every game. They’ve had a few spats on the phone, one that lasted in a three-week standoff they laugh about now. Normal stuff.

Family stuff.

“I score two goals and he says, ‘You should do this better or that better,’” Panarin says with a laugh. “I say, ‘Papa, I’m gonna take a break from you, OK.’ We don’t ever go too long without a talk, though.

“I was pretty young at the time. I was a child. So I didn’t understand all of this, all of what they did for me. Now I understand how difficult it was, and, of course, I owe them so much. Everything.”

— **Reported from Columbus; Andriy Stepanov provided independent translation services for *The Athletic*. Aivis Kalnins, a contributor to *The Athletic*, translated a Belousov interview via email.**

Top photo: Artemi Panarin (Adam Hunger/USA Today Sports)

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