

# Sun Journal

## Visa change opens door

By **Justin Pelletier**, *Staff Writer*

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It took three years and some heavy hitting from one of Maine's senators, but the Lewiston Maineiacs will have the opportunity for another franchise-first next season - a season-opening home game.

The U.S. House of Representatives passed immigration legislation early Saturday morning, authored by Sen. Susan Collins, that will allow minor-league athletes, like players on the Maineiacs, to qualify for the same level of immigration visas currently used by major league athletes.

Under the old system, those in the minor leagues were in the United States under an H2B visa, where they were included in a pool of migrant workers like apple pickers and farmers. There is a cap on the number of H2B visas given each year, leaving players vulnerable to not receiving one, until the next round that begins in October.

"Even though we got visas before, the kind of visas we were getting was like putting a square peg into a round hole," said Maineiacs' Vice President and Governor Matt McKnight. "We were nervous every time, because they weren't made for hockey players, and all it would have taken was one person who felt that way to say, 'No, I'm sorry, your applications are denied.'"

Under the new legislation, the Maineiacs will be treated like a professional sports team, which means they won't have to deal with the potential of having to wait until October to get a visa.

"Senator Collins has been working with us the whole time, and using us as a model for this legislation," McKnight said. "Every time someone wanted to make a change to the bill, her office called us and asked how it would affect what we were trying to accomplish."

The new, P-1 visa designation will make it easier for players in all minor league systems - including the Portland Sea Dogs - to bring in players and personnel from other countries.

The bill qualifies players on teams located in the United States that are part of a league based outside of the country comprising at least 15 teams, if the league is the highest level of amateur performance of that sport in the country, if the players are ineligible to play in the NCAA, and if there are significant numbers of players within the league drafted by a major league team.

The Maineiacs qualify in each instance.

"I'm glad that the Maineiacs players and coaches will no longer end up sitting on the bench before every season, wondering if they will get the visas they need to come to this country to play," Collins said in a statement issued Friday.

McKnight conceded that in one way, the long road trips to open the season had been good for the team.

"Over the past three seasons, we've had to start the season on the road, usually on a long trip," McKnight said. "Those trips are long and costly, but they also had a benefit. The team got to grow as a team and gel together on the road. We'll just have to find other ways of doing that now."

The team's schedule will also be more balanced, avoiding long stretches of home games, like it had this season.

"Home games every weekend, one right after another, that's asking a lot from the fans," McKnight said. "This way, the schedule can be broken up more, which will make it better for everyone."

The change applies also to team personnel, in the event that the Maineiacs want to hire new assistant coaches, trainers, equipment managers or front-office staff.