Anaheim Ducks
1153020 Labor peace for now: NHL players' union won't renegotiate contract with league
1153021 Few surprises expected in Ducks' lineup for exhibition opener vs. Sharks
1153022 'I can almost sense him': Why the Ducks are (wisely) pairing Hampus Lindholm back with Josh Manson

Arizona Coyotes
1153023 Coyotes' Conor Garland took wellness tips from Tom Brady at training facility this summer
1153024 Arizona Diamondbacks host Coyotes Night at Chase Field
1153025 Arizona Coyotes to host 2020 Rookie Faceoff tournament

Boston Bruins
1153026 Kyle Keyser could be the future in net for the Bruins
1153027 Late comeback for naught as Bruins fall to Devils in overtime
1153028 Par Lindholm centers his focus on finding role with Bruins
1153029 Oskar Steen nets first goal of Boston Bruins' preseason
1153030 Patrice Bergeron makes first Bruins camp appearance in his 'slow ramp-up' to season
1153031 Charlie McAvoy contract continues a long pattern of Bruins players keeping their eyes on the prize
1153032 Bruins playing with fire with Charlie McAvoy bridge deal
1153033 Don Sweeney: Bruins have enough present cap space to sign Brandon Carlo
1153034 How 'North American studies' major Evan Gold came to be Don Sweeney's right-hand man
1153035 How new Detroit Red Wings forward Adam Erne can earn his way to center
1153036 Dylan Cozens gets his welcome to the NHL, Sabres win in Ralph Krueger's debut
1153037 With two-year deal, Jean-Sebastien Dea gives Sabres a new option at forward
1153038 No. 1 pick Dylan Cozens to get a look as Sabres open preseason
1153039 As preseason games come in a rush, a look at several levels of expectations for the Sabres

Calgary Flames
1153040 Phillips feeling right at home in Flames' pre-season win in Victoria
1153041 Flames goalie Talbot knocks off rust in OT loss
1153042 NHL bad boy Rinaldo fired up for PTO with Flames
1153043 Flames forward Mangiapane hoping to cash in on opportunity
1153044 Flames auditions for Zac Rinaldo, Devante Smith-Pelly starting in earnest
1153045 Eight (or nine) position battles to resolve as the Flames preseason begins

Carolina Hurricanes
1153046 'I feel ready.' Is this the season Martin Necas sticks with the Hurricanes?
1153047 Training camp Day 4: The Hurricanes look as fast as advertised, but we're still 'talkin' practice'

Chicago Blackhawks
1153048 Alex Nylander shines with a goal and an assist, but the Blackhawks open the preseason with a 4-3 loss to the C Columbus Blue Jackets
1153049 Brendan Perlini is a free spirit still searching for NHL success. Will he find it this season with the Blackhawk? Are the Avalanche finally a four-line team? It appears that way.
1153050 So far, Alex Nylander looks like the top prospect Blackhawks gambled on
1153051 Blackhawks defensemen adjusting in camp to Jeremy Colliton's possession-focused system
1153052 Blackhawks' signings of Dominik Kubalik, Anton Wedin and Philip Holm are a result of a strong European pipeline
1153053 Added weight should help Andrew Shaw deliver more poundings in Act II with Blackhawks
1153054 Four takeaways: Blackhawks drop preseason opener to Capitals in overtime
1153056 'You don't need to grab that cop's gun!': The 2009-10 Blackhawks played hard and partied harder

Colorado Avalanche
1153057 Sam Girard has a long contract, big future with Avalanche
1153058 Are the Avalanche finally a four-line team? It appears that way.
1153059 Rantanen's contract holdout, Kadri's talent among Avalanche training camp storylines
1153060 Avalanche Training Camp Observations: Kadri the key

Columbus Blue Jackets
1153061 Return to Blue Jackets energizes Marko Dano
1153062 The end of the offseason has not ended the Blue Jackets' consideration of an offer sheet

Dallas Stars
1153063 Takeaways from the Stars' 2-0 preseason loss to St. Louis: Joel Kiviranta flashes potential; Thomas Harley imp
1153064 How Jason Dickinson is learning on the go entering his first season as the Stars' NHLPA players rep
1153065 Stefan Noesen says donning a Stars jersey will be 'surreal.' See why the Plano native is 'optimistic' about ma
1153066 Jim Montgomery, Stars will use preseason to get used to some NHL rule changes
1153067 Inside the Stars crease: Jake Oettinger on homesickness, football and mask design

Detroit Red Wings
1153068 How new Detroit Red Wings forward Adam Erne can earn a roster spot
1153069 Detroit Red Wings want Filip Zadina to establish himself as preseason opens
1153070 Young Red Wings get another chance to make impression as preseason begins
1153071 Autopsy: Ex-Red Wings center Greg Johnson died of self-inflicted gunshot wound
1153072 Red Wings believe gritty Adam Erne has top-nine potential
1153073 Detroit Red Wings won't charge Ticketmaster fees for all 2019 regular season games for a short time
1153074 Red Wings want Michael Rasmussen to establish himself at center
Edmonton Oilers
1153075 Player grades: Joel Persson & other young d-men execute new Edmonton Oilers breakout in win over Winnipeg
1153076 MATHESON: Oilers knock off Jets in first pre-season look
1153077 Pre-season takes on added urgency for new Edmonton Oilers
1153078 JONES: Dave Tippett has list of players to watch at Edmonton Oilers camp
1153079 A big night for Oilers defencemen Joel Persson, William Lagesson and Evan Bouchard
1153080 State of the Franchise: Oilers’ gradual build to contender status is set to begin
1153081 Preseason 2019-20: The Oilers’ journey to respectability begins

Los Angeles Kings
1153082 New Kings coach Todd McLellan makes his message clear: ‘It can’t get casual here’
1153083 Jonathan Quick needs to get back to ‘playing big’ in order to rediscover his game
1153084 EVE OF PRESEASON; KOVALCHUK ON PROKHORKIN’S SKILL; GETTING TO KNOW JOAKIM RYAN

Minnesota Wild
1153085 Wild’s Mikko Koivu scrimmages for first time, could play as soon as this weekend
1153086 Wild’s Mikko Koivu scrimmages for first time since injury: ‘Better than I thought’
1153087 Wild players are literally fighting for jobs in training camp
1153088 Captain’s last ride? In final year of deal, Mikko Koivu out to ‘live in the moment’

Montreal Canadiens
1153089 Rookie Cayden Primeau shines as Canadiens defeat Devils in first pre-season match
1153090 Canadiens’ Charles Hudon is a lot lighter on his skates now
1153091 Stu Cowan: Dale Weise brings ‘physicality, jam’ to Habs’ roster battle
1153092 What the Puck: Stéphane Richer is right to blast Canadiens’ management
1153093 Canadiens Game Day: Max Domi makes it through first pre-season game
1153094 Bubble report: Canadiens rookie hopefuls create a very good first impression
1153095 LeBrun: How lack of comparables affected RFA defencemen this year and why next offseason should be different

Nashville Predators
1153096 Roman Josi contract extension most likely more a matter of when, not if
1153097 Let’s play two: 6 observations from the Predators’ pre-season doubleheader
1153098 Five noteworthy quotes from the first four days of Predators training camp

New Jersey Devils
1153099 Devils’ Jack Hughes scores 2 goals, including OT winner in pre-season debut vs. Bruins
1153100 WATCH: Devils’ Jack Hughes scores goal in 1st NHL preseason game
1153101 WATCH: Live stream of Devils’ pre-season game vs. Boston Bruins (9/16/19) | Updates, chat
1153102 Devils’ lines, pairings vs. Canadiens (9/16/19) | Where John Hayden will play in 1st game
1153103 Devils’ lines, pairings vs. Bruins (9/16/19) | Jack Hughes, Nikita Gusev together for N.J. debut
1153104 NJ Devils roster: Projecting what it might look like on opening night

New York Islanders
1153105 Thomas Hickey trying to secure regular spot in Islanders’ lineup
1153106 12 short stories from Islanders training camp: Mentorships, lessons and life on the bubble

New York Rangers
1153107 Nothing holding back Libor Hajek from earning spot on Rangers blue line
1153108 Henrik Lundqvist bracing for change with young Rangers goalies lurking
1153109 Artemi Panarin and the New York Rangers are all smiles early in training camp
1153110 NY Rangers training camp battle: Filip Chytil gets first shot at second-line center
1153111 Rangers keen on prospect Joey Keane
1153112 Video scouting report: Breaking down Kaapo Kakko’s unique blend of skill and power
1153113 No longer the youngest Ranger, Filip Chytil is embracing expectations of growth in his game

NHL
1153114 KeyArena interior completely gutted as officials prepare for final excavation work ahead of rebuild
1153115 New Seattle NHL arena remains on schedule for summer of 2021

Ottawa Senators
1153116 Connor Brown ready to take the next step with the Ottawa Senators
1153117 Ex-Maple Leafs welcome fresh start and larger roles with Senators

Philadelphia Flyers
1153118 Joel Farabee makes good first impression as Flyers fall to Islanders, 3-1, in exhibition opener
1153119 Flyers fall to Islanders, 3-1, in teams’ exhibition opener
1153120 Flyers’ Travis Konecny signs six-year, $33 million contract
1153121 South Jersey’s Kyle Criscuolo trying to beat long odds and earn roster spot with Flyers
1153122 Flyers’ Morgan Frost injured, won’t play Monday vs. Islanders
1153123 Konecny agreement overshadows preseason opener for Flyers
1153124 Not excited about Kevin Hayes? Newest Flyer shows how he can change things ... with time
1153125 Kevin Hayes impresses, scrapping for spots, more observations from Flyers’ preseason loss to Islanders
1153126 Why Shayne Gostisbehere is saying sorry to Wayne Simmonds
1153127 Travis Konecny, Flyers agree to new 6-year contract
1153128 The breakdown: What the Travis Konecny deal means for the Flyers on the ice and from a salary cap standpoint
1153129 LeBrun: How lack of comparables affected RFA defencemen this year and why next offseason should be different
1153130 Flyers training camp report: Increased pace the name of the game, Nolan Patrick rehabs, Travis Konecny still M

Pittsburgh Penguins
1153131 Penguins rally but drop 5-4 OT decision to Buffalo Sabres in pre-season opener
1153132 Sam Lafferty takes another step from Hollidaysburg to the Penguins
1153133 Five Penguins observations after a fun preseason opener in Hockey Valley
1153134 Mike Sullivan ‘very impressed’ by first-round pick Samuel Poulin in camp
1153135 Penguins offer first glimpse of new-look power play at training camp
1153136 Lemieux history with Afib leads to $1 million donation to AHN
1153137 Penguins camp thoughts: Evgeni Malkin’s wingers are new, yet familiar
San Jose Sharks
1153138 On shorter leash, Sharks’ Aaron Dell out to prove himself once again
1153139 NHL veterans getting opportunity, fresh start with Sharks
1153140 San Jose Sharks 2019-20 preview: Stop with the nonsense
1153141 Sharks counting on certain familiar faces to step up in coming season
1153142 Why Sharks are confident they can make up for lost offensive firepower
1153143 How Sharks’ Evander Kane, wife are healing since unborn daughter’s death
1153144 Officially a Sharks scout, former Dodgers GM Ned Colletti offers new employer much more than that
1153145 2019-20 NHL Season Preview: San Jose Sharks

St Louis Blues
1153146 Blues updates: Thomas making strides in return from surgery
1153147 BenFred’s 5: Scherzer scary good in STL, La Russa wants to keep working, Tarasenko feared trade
1153148 Blues post picture of Stanley Cup engraving
1153149 The party’s over — Blues get back to business with start of exhibition season
1153150 Blues notebook: It’s all a game for Parayko, at least when it comes to other sports
1153151 Digest: Blackhawks’ Mikita had brain disease

Tampa Bay Lightning
1153152 Lightning’s Maroon brings Stanley Cup full of grit
1153153 Q&A with Julien BriseBois: Assessing his first year as Lightning general manager

Toronto Maple Leafs
1153154 Maple Leafs were Mitch Marner’s first, and only, choice
1153155 Life with the Maple Leafs an adjustment for veteran Jason Spezza
1153156 NHL, union are talking CBA extension and giving peace a chance. Wait, what?
1153157 Maple Leafs hold ex-Sens back a day
1153158 LEAFS SNAPS: Bad timing for Neuvirth injury
1153159 SIMMONS: New Leafs centre Jason Spezza’s last shot at glory
1153160 Marner loyalty to Leafs superseded two offer sheets
1153161 Leaf Snaps: Russian rockets up the charts
1153162 Marner, Tavares, Kapanen line up together for Leafs
1153163 Maple Leafs enjoying life in Paradise
1153164 Mike Babcock is holding open tryouts for remaining spots on Maple Leafs defence: ‘I want them to decide’
1153165 Mirtle: 5 early takeaways from Maple Leafs training camp in Newfoundland
1153166 Q&A: Frederik Andersen on his ideal workload, the Leafs’ best goalie and why he has no use for save percentage

Vancouver Canucks
1153184 Flames 4 Canucks 3: Pre-season starts but only Boeser news matters
1153185 Canucks, finally, sign Brock Boeser
1153186 Go with the flow: Canucks, Brock Boeser reach unprecedented compromise with 3-year bridge deal
1153187 Canucks training camp: The Brock Boeser thing, Troy Stecher’s ‘black out’ debut and the importance of winning

Vegas Golden Knights
1153167 Golden Knights TV analyst Mike McKenna fills in at practice
1153168 French connection helps Nicolas Roy at Golden Knights training camp
1153169 NHLPA declines to reopen CBA
1153170 This small change in Golden Knights defense could stabilize blue line
1153171 NHL players stay with CBA, labor peace set to at least 2022

Washington Capitals
1153172 Capital One Arena revises bag policy to ban backpacks of all sizes
1153173 Brendan Leipsic, on his fifth team since 2015-16, hopes to find a home with the Capitals
1153174 3 Caps who impressed in the preseason opener vs. Chicago: Take a bow, Alaksei Protas
1153175 The NHLPA won’t reopen the CBA, what does this mean for the 2022 Olympics?
1153176 Capital One Arena has a new bag policy. Here’s what you need to know
1153177 Brian MacLellan wants to re-sign both Holtby and Backstrom, but is that realistic?
1153178 Kuznetsov’s teammates are supportive but in tough spot after suspension

Websites
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1153193 Sportsnet.ca / ‘Kill or be killed’: Rinaldo fighting for his NHL career with Flames
1153194 Sportsnet.ca / NHLPAs declining to re-open CBA a sign of hope for future labour peace
1153195 Sportsnet.ca / Mitch Marner’s agent: Leafs forward received a couple of offer sheets
1153196 TSN.CA / Andersen will not ‘guarantee anything’ on 2019-20 workload
1153197 TSN.CA / Canucks vs Flames: Split squad game day preview
1153198 TSN.CA / WHL asks judge to toss minimum-wage lawsuit
1153199 TSN.CA / Neuvirth injury clouds Leafs backup goaltending picture
1153200 TSN.CA / Marner confirms he received multiple offer sheets
1153201 TSN.CA / Maple Leafs paid Marner because he makes others better

Winnipeg Jets
1153179 Jets grounded in pre-season opener
1153180 Jets top ‘18 pick — Swedish forward Gustafsson — gets first taste of NHL action against Oilers
1153181 Poolman, Luoto shine as Jets drop preseason opener to Oilers
1153182 Jets’ Perreault just wants a role
1153183 What really happened at Andrew Copp’s arbitration hearing — and what comes next for him in Winnipeg

SPORT-SCAN, INC.  941-284-4129
Labor peace for now: NHL players’ union won’t renegotiate contract with league

By HELENE ELLIOTTSPORTS COLUMNIST SEP. 16, 2019 12:49 PM

The National Hockey League Players’ Assn. said Monday it won’t reopen its collective bargaining agreement with the NHL, paving the way for uninterrupted play and labor peace for the next few years. The league had previously declined to exercise its option to reopen the current agreement, which will remain in effect through the 2021-22 season.

The NHLPA said in a statement that it had advised the league of its decision on Monday, the last day it could have opted out.

"While players have concerns with the current CBA, we agree with the league that working together to address those concerns is the preferred course of action instead of terminating the agreement following this season," Don Fehr, the NHLPA’s executive director, said in a statement. "We have been having discussions with the league about an extension of the CBA and expect that those talks will continue."

If either the league or the NHLPA had exercised its opt-out clause, the collective bargaining agreement would have ended in September 2020. Commissioner Gary Bettman has imposed three lockouts during his tenure: The first cut the 1994-95 season to 48 games per team, the second led to the cancellation of the 2004-05 season, and the third again cut the 2012-13 season to 48 games per team.

Bettman announced late last month that the NHL hadn’t found reasons to terminate the collective bargaining agreement. *Based on the current state of the game and the business of the game, the NHL believes it is essential to continue building upon the momentum we have created with our players and, therefore, will not exercise its option to reopen the CBA,* he said then.

"It is our hope that a continued, sustained period of labor peace will enable us to further grow the game and benefit all constituent groups: NHL players, clubs, our business partners and, most important, our fans."

The negotiations leading up to each side’s decision to stay with the status quo have been characterized as cordial, unlike previous collective bargaining talks. Apparently NHL owners — who pay Bettman’s salary — don’t see an issue or issues that are important enough to them or would bring them sufficient financial gain to justify delaying or canceling a season. It’s expected the sides will continue to discuss issues such as players’ participation in the 2022 Winter Olympics in China and possible adjustments to the escrow system, in which money is withheld from players’ paychecks until each season’s hockey-related revenue is calculated and a 50-50 split between players and owners is ensured.

LA Times: LOADED: 09.17.2019
Few surprises expected in Ducks’ lineup for exhibition opener vs. Sharks

By ELLIOTT TEAFORD | Orange County Register
PUBLISHED: September 16, 2019 at 3:40 pm | UPDATED: September 16, 2019 at 3:43 PM

IRVINE — Sam Steel formed a formidable line with Rickard Rakell on his left wing and Jakob Silfverberg on his right during the Ducks’ controlled scrimmage on Monday at Great Park Ice. John Gibson was in one goal and Ryan Miller was in the other until they were replaced by Kevin Boyle and Anthony Stolarz.

Ducks coach Dallas Eakins didn’t reveal his lineup for Tuesday’s exhibition opener against the Sharks at San Jose, but it was easy to imagine Steel, Rakell and Silfverberg skating together against the Sharks. Or perhaps against the Arizona Coyotes in Saturday’s exhibition in Glendale, Ariz.

Hampus Lindholm and Josh Manson formed a defense pair for the first four days of training camp, and it also wouldn’t be a surprise to see them playing together against the Sharks and/or the Coyotes this week. Or for the entire 82-game regular-season schedule for that matter.

“We’ll go with some things that worked late last season,” Eakins said, referring to his possible line combinations and defense pairs. “Let’s feel good. Let’s be comfortable with the people who are next to you. Let’s try to set them up for success the best we can.”

Asked specifically about the 21-year-old Steel joining two seasoned veterans in Rakell, 26, and Silfverberg, 28, Eakins went into an extended explanation that underscored the vast differences between him and his predecessor, Randy Carlyle.

“It’s like when you’re at your high school dance,” Eakins said. “You could pick out easily who was a good dancer and who was not. When those lines get going and they’re doing well, it just looks like they’re all in rhythm. They’re all listening to the same tune. All three are dancing to the same beat.

“The lines that aren’t going so well, there’s usually a bad dancer in there somewhere.”

Eakins watched plenty of Ducks games on TV from his San Diego home while serving as the coach of their AHL team, the Gulls, for four seasons. When he was hired during the offseason to replace Carlyle, he was very familiar with the Ducks’ personnel. Their roster was not a mystery to him.

“I just like what I saw last year,” he said when asked why he teamed Steel with Rakell and Silfverberg. “They were synchronized. They were reading off each other. That could be all three of them. It could be two of them being drivers.

“The two Swedes obviously speak the same language. They see the game very similar. It could be a thing where we could put anybody in the middle of those two and that line would be very good. So that line, even though it’s been together here for the first little bit, that could change very quickly.

“We’re definitely not there yet on who’s made this team and who hasn’t.”

As for his goalies, Eakins said he planned to divide the workload in each of the first two exhibitions, but he wouldn’t say who would travel to San Jose. In addition to Gibson, Miller, Boyle and Stolarz, Lukas Dostal, Roman Durny and Olle Eriksson Ek are in camp.

Eakins said he approached Gibson and Miller, his top goalies, and asked how much they would like to play in exhibition games in advance of the Ducks’ Oct. 3 season-opening game against the Coyotes at Honda Center. He was surprised by their answers.

“They both came back with, ‘What do you think? I’m good with whatever,”’ Eakins said. “It shows they’re good teammates, and, like, ‘Whatever you think, coach, we’ll go with it.’ They really didn’t have an opinion other than I know they want to play.”
I can almost sense him': Why the Ducks are (wisely) pairing Hampus Lindholm back with Josh Manson

By Eric Stephens Sep 16, 2019

IRVINE, Calif. – Hampus Lindholm tried to describe it and Dallas Eakins so far hasn’t tried to overthink it.

The first few days of Ducks training camp have seen Lindholm paired with Josh Manson on defense. History has shown the two to be highly effective when they’ve been together. Much more effective when operating as a pair than when they’re apart.

It begs a simple question. Why does this partnership work?

“It’s just because we help each other all over the ice,” Lindholm said Sunday. “We make each other look better. If I get the puck, he’s trying to get up the middle to support me and wants the puck. Both of us always want to puck, I feel like. If he goes back for the puck, he can buy that extra second for me to come back and help him. And I can do the same for him.

“I know if I go in the corner and kind of get the puck from my guy, I can almost sense him or see in the back of my head. If I just take a quick peek in front of the net, he’s going to be there open. He’s not going to be sometimes behind the net or sometimes in the corner. I always know where I have him.”

Coming off a season in which Lindholm had a career-high 13 goals and Manson exploded for a personal-best 37 points, then-Ducks coach Randy Carlyle began the 2018-19 campaign with the two playing apart from each other. Lindholm was paired with Brandon Montour while Manson had Cam Fowler next to him.

The season started off fine with a rousing 5-2 win in San Jose in which Montour scored a goal and John Gibson made 31 saves. But some storm clouds were already developing. Manson and Fowler were each victimized on individual plays by the Sharks for their goals.

Subsequent games saw the Ducks bleeding shots against and Gibson (and, to a lesser extent, Ryan Miller) being put under siege. In five of his first 10 starts, Gibson faced more than 40 shots on goal. It wasn’t all the top four’s fault, as Anaheim’s third pairing was poor from the beginning and remained unsettled the rest of the year. But the heavy minutes were being given to the Lindholm-Montour and Fowler-Manson pairings.

And as the Ducks sank into the abyss, Lindholm and Manson were never reunited. Not when Fowler was lost for weeks after suffering facial fractures on a freak play during a mid-November game. Not when he returned in early January. They only reconvened for a game during an embarrassing February road trip. Those were the final games Carlyle would coach.

Bob Murray left his perch above the fray and went behind the bench on an interim basis for the remainder of the season to get a direct view of what all ailed his club. One of the first notable items to address was switching his defense to more of a zone concept when playing against the opposition in its own zone. Another was having Lindholm and Manson working again as his go-to shutdown duo.

As a new season is about to begin with the first preseason game Tuesday night at San Jose’s SAP Center, Eakins hasn’t made any deviation from a pair that had emerged as one of the NHL’s most reliable.

“We see it as a very good possibility,” Eakins said last weekend. “But certainly nothing here is etched in stone two days into camp. I think they’ve been very, very comfortable playing with each other in the past. One of the things that I really wanted to mandate coming into camp was that our partners have to be comfortable, be upbeat, have something comfortable next to them. That’s where that started, and it very well could turn into a pair at some time.”

The underlying numbers only further proved their effectiveness as a pair. Manson played quite a few games with rookie Jacob Larsson on his left side but more of his ice time was split between Fowler and Lindholm as his partners. Even in a down year for the majority of the Ducks, Manson had a 49.45 Corsi-percentage (puck possession statistic) with Lindholm compared to just 43.60 with Fowler. Conversely, Manson’s Corsi-percentage went upward without Fowler (47.21) and ticked downward without Lindholm (45.81). Lindholm, who’s become the Ducks’ top defender, has long held his own in possession numbers regardless of partner.

During an August interview with The Athletic at the Ducks’ practice facility, Manson tried to break down why he and Lindholm seem to click and bring out the best in each other.

“For me, I’m not the best puckhandler,” Manson said. “Let’s be honest here. What Hampus does is he’ll break the puck out by himself. I can support him all I want. He can break the puck out and then I can join the rush. Or I can be in a spot to help defend. I can be a second layer. He’s my second layer a lot of times. And we just kind of work off each other well in that regard.

“It’s something where it has to come natural. You just see where you need to be in relation to your partner. That’s something I think I just kind of had from the beginning.”

There are added benefits beyond sheer comfort to start camp. Lindholm said he can just focus on playing hockey and not tell his partner where he is going to be before every drill. Because the two have a working chemistry that’s been developed over time, they can share the puck quicker and move it faster to “where it probably sometimes looks like we can get out of the zone pretty easy.”

When they do face pressure from opposing forwards bearing down on them, Lindholm said he and Manson can use their size to protect the puck and buy that extra second or two for a teammate to provide support and a passing lane. As Lindholm further described, “Maybe we can just take the hit and eat it and then pass it over, instead of passing over the problem. We try to help each other out that way.”

The element of the working relationship Lindholm most savors is the attitude they carry on the ice.

“The thing that I love about Mans is he’s a guy that you want to go to war with,” Lindholm said. “I know if someone pisses him off, if someone beats him or if they’re coming (down) one time again, he’s going to make sure they don’t beat him again. He’s going to crush him.

“Same goes with me. If someone beats me, I hate it. I hate looking bad. I hate losing. I’m never going to let it happen again. We kind of have the same mindset that way. We play gritty and don’t like to get beat. We don’t like to get scored on. We’re pretty good at holding each other accountable and stuff.

“That’s just how we are. I don’t need to tell him if he’s (made) a mistake. He doesn’t need to tell me. Because we both know that the people most pissed off that we did some mistake is going to be ourselves.”

Reconvening the Lindholm-Manson partnership from the moment camp opened isn’t the only familiar connection that Eakins has formulated as a potential building block. Eakins has mixed around his forward groupings in the opening days, but he has left one together. Sam Steel has been centering wingers Rickard Rakell and Jakob Silfverberg.

These three ended last season together and all three feasted on the opposition over the final two weeks. The numbers were eye-popping: 14 goals and 13 assists combined over the last seven games.

Rakell and Silfverberg were already rolling when Steel was put with them. Then, they were little more than two veterans trying to finish a highly disappointing year on a positive note, plus a newcomer looking to leave a strong and deep impression.

But as he saw with Lindholm and Manson, Eakins was taking notes of how they were succeeding as a unit and filing them away.

“It’s like when you’re at your high school dance,” Eakins said. “You can pick out immediately who was a good dancer and who was not. When those lines get going and they’re doing well, they just look like they’re in rhythm. They’re all listening to the same tune and all three are dancing to the same beat. And the lines that aren’t going so well, there’s usually a bad dancer in there somewhere.
"I just liked what I saw last year. They were synchronized. They were reading off each other. It came very naturally. Now that could be all three of them. And then it could be two of them being drivers."

It seems to make a lot of sense to have two experienced forwards helping to bring along a 21-year-old — even as heady as he appears to be — in what would be a very important position, whether they’d be considered the top line or the second line.

Forward lines, however, rarely stay together as a complete three-man unit in this age. Eakins reserved the right to write a Rakell-Steel-Silfverberg combo down in pencil than ink.

"I think the two Swedes obviously speak the same language," the coach said. "I think they see the game very similar. And it could be a thing where we could put anybody in the middle of those two and that line be very good.

"That line, even though it’s been together here for the first little bit, that could change very quickly as well. We’re definitely not there yet on who’s made this team and who hasn’t."

Things could change and they most certainly will as the days and weeks meander on. But there is an early message. Stick with what has worked. Until it no longer does.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
Coyotes' Conor Garland took wellness tips from Tom Brady at training facility this summer

Conor Garland grew up like many kids in New England over the past two decades, idolizing the guy in the No. 12 jersey. So when the second-year Coyotes winger had his first chance to train at Tom Brady's famous "TB12" training center in Foxborough, Mass., it was a no-brainer for Garland to learn as much as he could about being a professional athlete.

"Brady for sure was a role model," Garland said. "I was a big Patriots fan growing up, a big Bruins fan. They had guys like (Wes) Welker, (Sergei) Samsonov who were smaller guys. They could take a beating and come right back up."

That's right up Garland's alley, as evidenced by his infamous face-goal last season.

Garland grew up on Massachusetts' South Shore in the town of Scituate. Now 23 years old, Garland was just 5 when Brady took over as the Patriots quarterback in 2001 before leading them to the first of their six Super Bowl championships under his tenure.

Now, Garland is taking notes from Brady's patented wellness regimen. In addition to his usual summer workouts, Garland spent some time learning how to take care of his body at TB12 over the offseason.

"As he's become older," Garland said of Brady, 42, "he's almost become more iconic with how to treat your body. I think at a young age it was just talent but now he's shown he can do it for a long time. Tom doesn't take a month in the offseason to eat like crap and go to bed at 11 at night."

"He's like that year-round and he's always in season. I took that to heart and that was some of the best advice I heard."

Garland, who produced 13 goals in his rookie season in 2018-19, admitted he did not properly take care of his body throughout his time in junior hockey and during his first professional season with the Coyotes organization in 2016.

But when one of Garland's trainers with the Tucson Roadrunners, Deven Alves, took a job at TB12, it helped usher in a new era of self-maintenance.

"That definitely helped just being able to go right to (Deven)," said Garland, who signed a two-year contract extension with the Coyotes last season. "I would go in for an hour to get treatment and a massage, work on my hips, quads, groin and then I would skate after that. It's more about training your body to recover quickly, get treatment and focus on eating habits and hydration."

Garland, who recently purchased a home in Scituate, said he expects to continue attending various TB12 sessions in the offseason. Garland said that he's already seen an influx of hockey players since he began training at the Foxborough facility a few years ago.

"There's a lot of athletes that are starting to do that preventative and maintenance work," Garland said.

First cuts are in

The Coyotes announced their first round of cuts from training camp on Monday, sending nine players back to their respective junior teams.

Players trimmed from the roster were forwards Liam Kirk, David Levin, Valentín Nussbaumer, Eric Uba, defensemen Alex Bergkvist, Dennis Busby, Connor Hall, Brady Lyle and goaltender David Tendeck.

The Coyotes have 52 players remaining in camp ahead of their first home preseason game on Tuesday at 7 p.m. against the Los Angeles Kings at Gila River Arena. The Coyotes will also send players to Los Angeles for a split-squad game against the Kings on Tuesday at 7:30 p.m.

Coyotes to host rookie tournament

Just a few weeks removed from the 2019 NHL Rookie Faceoff event in Las Vegas, the Coyotes announced Monday that they would be hosting the event at Gila River Arena in 2020.

The annual rookie tournament is played between the Coyotes, Colorado Avalanche, Los Angeles Kings, Anaheim Ducks, San Jose Sharks and Vegas Golden Knights during rookie camp each summer.

Tickets and broadcast information will be available at a later date, the Coyotes said.
The Arizona Diamondbacks held their Coyotes Night on Monday night, honoring their #AllAZ friends at Chase Field before a game against the Marlins.

Captain and defenseman Oliver Ekman-Larsson was on hand to throw out the first pitch, but first, players and coaches wore white Arizona Coyotes shirts during batting practice.

#Dbacks manager Torey Lovullo wearing #Coyotes gear: pic.twitter.com/gnfvx3woOe
— Matt Layman (@mattjlayman) September 16, 2019

Then, closer to game time, a group of Coyotes players arrived and were on the field in support of Ekman-Larsson’s first pitch. Some of the players were seen chatting with D-backs manager Torey Lovullo.

Manager Torey Lovullo holding court with some players: pic.twitter.com/XkL1Ur6qJ
— Matt Layman (@mattjlayman) September 17, 2019

The group of players seen on the field consisted of Ekman-Larsson, Jakob Chychrun, Vinnie Hinostroza, Barrett Hayton, Lawson Crouse, Victor Soderstrom, Conor Garland and Robbie Russo.

A bunch of #Coyotes at Chase Field: pic.twitter.com/qjax1QCJME
— Matt Layman (@mattjlayman) September 17, 2019

Then, after the National Anthem, the players watched as their teammate tossed a first pitch to D-backs catcher Caleb Joseph.

OEL throwing out the first pitch: pic.twitter.com/jP1vs3U641
— Matt Layman (@mattjlayman) September 17, 2019

The Coyotes had already begun their preseason schedule and will play again on Tuesday night, their first of two home preseason games. Their regular season begins on Oct. 3.

Arizona Sports LOADED: 09.17.2019
Arizona Coyotes to host 2020 Rookie Faceoff tournament

BY MATT LAYMAN SEPTEMBER 16, 2019 AT 2:46 PM

Arizona Coyotes 2018 first-round draft pick center Barrett Hayton (22) skates behind forward Lane Pederson (93) at the team's rookie camp at the Ice Den in Scottsdale, Ariz. on Sept. 7, 2018. (Matt Layman/Arizona Sports)

Not long after returning from the Rookie Faceoff tournament in Anaheim, the Arizona Coyotes announced that they'll be hosting that very event next year.

The 2020 Rookie Faceoff tournament will take place at Gila River Arena, it was revealed on Monday.

Arizona's rookies and top prospects returned from the tournament just days ago, when the Coyotes, Ducks, Sharks, Kings, Golden Knights and Avalanche met up for a series of games that concluded on Sept. 10. That same set of teams is slated to be at the next Rookie Faceoff, too.

"We are thrilled to host the 2020 Rookie Faceoff Tournament at Gila River Arena in September 2020," Coyotes president & CEO Ahron Cohen said in a press release. "Our fans are going to love watching some of the top prospects from the Western Conference competing on our home ice.

"We are constantly looking for opportunities to showcase our team, our community and our State on the national stage, and we will hopefully have many more hockey events coming to Arizona in the not too distant future."

The 2018 Rookie Faceoff tournament took place in Las Vegas.

First-round picks Victor Soderstrom and Barrett Hayton were among the Coyotes participants this year.

Arizona Sports LOADED: 09.17.2019
Kyle Keyser could be the future in net for the Bruins

By Matt Porter Globe Staff, Updated September 16, 2019, 11:14 p.m.

NEWARK — No matter how sharp his eye, no coach can watch every player in training camp.

Of the newcomers among 32 forwards, 16 defensemen, and 5 goalies split into two groups this month, Bruins coach Bruce Cassidy has been trying to determine which young defensemen — Urho Vaakanainen, Jakub Zboril, and Jeremy Lauzon, in particular — might be able to spell his injured veterans once the games become consequential in October.

Cassidy acknowledges that even if he didn’t have an immediate need to watch his netminders in this camp, he’d still have a 4-by-6 blind spot at each end of the ice.

“The details of the game,” he said, elude him when it comes to goaltenders.

His eyes go glassy when Bob Essensa, the Bruins’ longtime goalie guru, peppers him with terminology like “VH” and “Reverse VH” (the methods netminders use to cover their posts when the puck is near the circles).

“Bob starts talking and it’s like, yadda yadda yadda, I don’t understand,” said Cassidy, once an offensive-minded defenseman for the Blackhawks (18th pick, 1983 draft).

While he needs a bit of translation for the technical aspects, Cassidy is an NHL coach. He needs no help noticing which goalie prospects can handle the heat. It is obvious when shots whiz by the gloves and through the five-holes of those not ready for prime time.

Cassidy’s limited viewings of the undrafted Kyle Keyser confirm what organizational voices tell him: the 20-year-old has a chance to one day own the Boston net.

Keyser was fired up for his first appearance in a Spoked-B, which came Monday night in New Jersey. He looked at a Devils lineup loaded for a preseason game — No. 1 overall pick Jack Hughes, his ex-Team USA teammate; star blue liner P.K. Subban; and Russian scorer Nikita Gusev among the headliners — and smiled.

“Yeah. Good,” he said before the game. “Better for me. More competition. I love it. I don’t shy away from anything. It’s never been my M.O. It never will be.”

Keyser made 17 saves on 17 shots Monday, ceding the net to Dan Vladar after 31 minutes in the Bruins’ preseason opener at Prudential Center. He stuffed a Miles Wood shorthanded breakaway and used his quick pads and reactions to keep a messy crease free of pucks.

Keyser had one previous pro start to his credit, allowing four goals on 29 shots in a first-round loss to eventual Calder Cup champion Charlotte last April. He dressed for a varsity preseason game last year against the Capitals, but did not play.

Young netminder Kyle Keyser, who saw action Monday night against the Devils, has impressed Coach Bruce Cassidy.

“Very athletic,” Cassidy said of Keyser pregame. “I noticed it in Buffalo [at the recent rookie tournament]. Gets across the ice. Competitive, almost to a fault. Sometimes he takes himself out of position where he doesn’t need to be that athletic.

“He’s vocal out there. You can hear him on the ice, which is good. It means he’s engaged in the game. He practices hard. He’s a worker. I think he has good hands. There’s something there.”

In his first pro season, Keyser will split the Providence net with 22-year-old Vladar, who has 43 AHL appearances under his belt (including 31 last year) and offseason addition Maxime Lagace, who is 26 and appeared in 17 games in relief for Vegas the last two seasons.

Keyser doesn’t have the pedigree of Vladar, a third-rounder (75th overall) in 2015. He certainly hasn’t followed the path of Tuukka Rask, who was considered one of the world’s top goalie prospects when Toronto took him 21st overall in 2005. He’s more in the Jaroslav Halak mold, though the veteran was drafted (ninth round, 271st overall, 2003), Keyser, passed over by every NHL team in multiple drafts, scored an invite to Black-and-Blue rookie camp in 2017, in part because of his fine season backstopping the OHL Oshawa team captained by Bruins first-rounder Jack Studnicka. He left that camp with a pro contract.

He has tracked upward in all four junior seasons, improving his save percentage from .880 as a rookie for OHL Flint to .915 last year with Oshawa, and lowered his goals-against average from 4.37 to 2.75 in the same four-year span. He proved he could handle a 47-game junior workload, and saw two games with Team USA at last year’s World Juniors, posting a 2.95 GAA and .872 save percentage.

“He does look good,” Cassidy said. “And he’s played well in the time he’s played. Hopefully he goes down to Providence and he can compete and get his share of starts, if that’s the case.”

Keyser understands the Bruins’ situation. Halak, 34, could vacate the backup slot next summer as a free agent. Rask, 32, is a free agent in 2021.

How Keyser, Vladar, Legace and 20-year-old Maine starter Jeremy Swaiman (111th overall, 2017) perform in the meantime will determine the franchise’s plans.

“I’m not trying to think about the future,” Keyser said. “Obviously you always have those thoughts in your mind, but you don’t want to let that carry what you’re thinking about. I have a task at hand tonight, and that’s really all I’m concerned about right now.”

Opening loss

The Devils dropped the Bruins, 4-3 in overtime, in the preseason opener for both teams.

After Studnicka tied it with 49 seconds left in regulation, Hughes tapped a Gusev feed past Vladar at 0:41 of the extra period.

Boston took a 1-0 lead at 5:24 of the second when Swedish prospect Oskar Steen zipped a nifty snap shot past Cory Schneider, slipping through the neutral zone and surprising the Marblehead-bred keeper far side from the top of the circle.

Oskar Steen celebrates his second-period goal against the Devils Monday night in New Jersey.

Vladar relieved Keyser while the Bruins were shorthanded, and gave up the tying goal on the third shot he faced. Hughes beat him with a roof shot from the right circle at 12:05 of the second.

The Devils took a 2-1 lead on a Jesper Bratt tip 29 seconds into the third, but could not hold the lead. Chris Wagner, wearing an “A” along with Steven Kampfer and Paul Carey, tied it at 2:39 off a feed from Anton Blidh.

The Bruins surrendered the lead with 6:59 left, Vladar unable to stop a power-play one-timer from the lower left circle by pinching defenseman Connor Carrick.

Bergeron at camp

Patrice Bergeron (groin) made his camp debut, wearing a no-contact jersey. “We’ll go as Bergy goes, as he says he goes,” Cassidy said. “If he feels good and he wants to wear a white jersey Wednesday, he does. If he wants to wear a maroon one, that’s fine. I’m not worried about him. He’ll go at his own pace.” . . . The Bruins dressed a light lineup, with defensemen Alex Petrovic (263 NHL games) and Wagner (250) the most experienced. Cassidy said most, if not all, of his mainstays will stay home during the remaining preseason road games (at Philadelphia Thursday, at Chicago Sunday) . . . Halak will start against the Flyers. Lagace will go against the Blackhawks . . . Zboril took a pair of penalties, one that mirrored an embellishment call on Wood.

Boston Globe LOADED: 09.17.2019
Late comeback for naught as Bruins fall to Devils in overtime

By MARISA INGEMI

NEWARK, N.J. — Despite a strong showing from Oskar Steen, the Bruins dropped their first preseason game Monday night, losing to New Jersey in overtime, 4-3.

Steen, one of many right wing options vying for a spot with the varsity, sniped the Bruins' first goal with 5:24 gone in the second. The left-handed shot crossed the blue line and got past two Devils skaters, blasting a shot through Cory Schneider for the 1-0 lead.

Kyle Keyser was perfect on 17 shots against until he left halfway through the second period. Jack Hughes beat new Bruins goalie Dan Vladar with 7:44 left in the frame on the power play to tie it 1-1.

New Jersey took its first lead just 29 seconds into the third. Jesper Bratt tipped a Travis Zajac shot past Vladar for the 2-1 advantage.

It took just 2:10 for the Bruins to tie it again at 2-2 as Chris Wagner spun a backhander through with 17:21 left in the third. Connor Carrick put the Devils ahead with seven minutes left, then the Bruins' Jack Studnicka tied the game with 49 seconds left to force overtime.

The Devils scored a minute into overtime, with Hughes netting the game-winner off a redirect of a Nikita Gusev feed.

Kampfer looks to get in groove

When Steven Kampfer was reacquired by the Bruins last season in the trade with the Rangers for Adam McQuaid, it didn’t seem like he would get a chance to play in 35 regular-season contests.

Then with how many injuries the Bruins blue line sustained, he ended up a bigger part of their picture than anyone expected. Given the start for the Bruins defense to this season, with John Moore and Kevan Miller still hobbled, that could be the case again.

Kampfer is used to that, though. He’s become a master of shuffling in and out of the lineup, playing whatever role the Bruins need, whether that’s being thrust into a playoff contest or filling in for a last-second injury.

As usual, what exactly his role looks like on opening night — or a few weeks after that — is up in the air, and all dependent on how the rest of the roster looks.

Kampfer’s preparation for the season remains the same.

“You try to earn your job every year,” he said. “Nothing in this league is guaranteed. You have to work hard every night, you have to perform. It’s no different than any other season. You have to come in ready to go.”

The more anyone plays, the easier it is to get into a groove, so coming in cold has its challenges. Kampfer went long stretches without being called upon — at one point, he didn’t get into an NHL game from Dec. 27 until March 12 — but believed by the end of the year he had settled into a routine and was contributing.

“I thought toward the end of the year I moved my feet really well,” Kampfer said. “Jumped into the play a little bit. Defending well, I have to do a better job at that, a better job of closing quicker. Just work on the things that we talk about at the start of the year.”

Like all returning players, it was a short summer to get prepared. The already mounting injuries on defense, and Brandon Carlo still being unsigned, means Kampfer has had to stay on his toes. He got his first game action Monday night in the Bruins preseason opener against the Devils after another summer of preparing for whatever the season is going to through his way.

“A lot of trying to get a little bit stronger,” he said. “Getting ready for camp, I skated a little bit and get away from everything for a little bit.”

First looks

Much of the lineup in New Jersey was roster hopefuls or players likely destined for Providence. Kampfer, Wagner, Brett Ritchie and Par Lindholm highlighted the NHL-experienced Bruins who made the short trip to Newark, along with professional tryout agreement defenseeman Alex Petrovic.

The rest of the group were players competing for a spot — such as Paul Carey, Zach Senyshyn and Urho Vaakanainen, along with prospects Jakub Lauko, Studnicka and Axel Andersson.

It also was the first looks for Brendan Gaunce, Ritchie, Petrovic, and Lindholm in Bruins uniforms.

Bergeron returns

Patrice Bergeron (groin) skated with the main group Monday morning at Warrior Ice Arena. He donned a non-contact red jersey, but it was his first time skating with the rest of the team during training camp.
Par Lindholm centers his focus on finding role with Bruins

By MARISA INGEMI | PUBLISHED: September 16, 2019 at 6:24 pm | UPDATED: September 16, 2019 at 6:24 PM

NEWARK, N.J. — Out of all the questions surrounding the Bruins entering the season, the center position might have the least. Most likely the Bruins return the same set of four centers with which they finished out last season. There always is the possibility Charlie Coyle or Sean Kuraly move to wing, and that would open up everything else.

One of the roster wild cards is 27-year-old Par Lindholm. The Swedish center signed with the Bruins in the offseason, and there’s enough intrigue that he’s a candidate to be on the NHL roster. He played 61 games in Toronto and then was traded Feb. 25 for Winnipeg, where he appeared in only four regular-season games and two more in the playoffs.

His position is a logjam, but he still came to Boston and is ready to work to try to find a role.

“I’m coming in now as a guy who hasn’t been around,” he said. “I’m not the only one, but it’s special they’re treating me so well.”

Lindholm had three days of training camp to get acclimated to the team and any new systems before playing in the Bruins preseason opener Monday night against New Jersey. It’s not a ton of time before being thrust into everything, but after a long summer off — unlike most of the group, who went to the Cup Final with the Bruins — he feels ready to get to work in games.

“It’s not rocket science,” Lindholm said of getting used to the systems. “It’s kind of the same as other teams. There’s some different things. I think I got it for the most part, but I’m sure there’s going to be stuff I need to work on or stuff I need to think about.”

Lindholm tallied one goal with 12 assists last season between the Maple Leafs and Jets. Most of his game is on the penalty kill or playing a defensive forward type of style, but he would like to get his offense going as well.

But his bread and butter is that bottom-six, two-way style of play, and that’s something the Bruins always have valued in a player.

“If I make the team, I’m not going to play 20 minutes a game, I know that,” Lindholm said. “I think I can contribute with hard work and play as a solid two-way player. Of course I want to show some offense and skill, but most of all I think I need to play the best I can on that defensive end and see where it takes me.”

Monday night was the first look at Lindholm’s game in live situations. He played alongside Chris Wagner and Anton Blidh, centering a mix of the veteran Bruins winger and a future roster hopeful.

The Bruins have five more preseason games after New Jersey, and Lindholm is going to get a chance to show he’s worth a roster spot. It just depends on what direction the Bruins decide to go, and it’s really early to tell what that might be.

Either way, Lindholm is excited to show the group what he can bring after a long offseason of waiting.

“Been kind of a long summer waiting for games to start,” he said. “Really happy it’s here.”

Boston Herald LOADED: 09.17.2019
The Boston Bruins had a quick turnaround in the lead-up to the 2019-20 NHL season. Just a few months removed from a seven-game Stanley Cup Final loss, the team began preseason play against the New Jersey Devil on Monday night. And their first goal of the preseason arrived in that contest.

In the second period of the game, Bruins prospect Oskar Steen was able to net a goal despite being in a 1-vs-2 situation. Here's a look at the goal via the Bruins' official Twitter account.

@oskaarsteen snaps one blocker side for the first #NHLBruins goal of the preseason. pic.twitter.com/LpK6YfS36f
— Boston Bruins (@NHLBruins) September 17, 2019

That was a pretty nice shot by Steen, who was a sixth-round pick of the Bruins back in the 2016 NHL Entry Draft. Steen, 21, has spent the past few seasons developing in his native Sweden. He is coming off a 37-point season (17 goals, 20 assists) and is looking to make an impact with either the Bruins or, more likely, the Providence Bruins.

Steen will have plenty of competition from some of the Bruins' top overall prospects for organizational footing. But if he can continue to demonstrate a scoring touch as he did on his first preseason goal, he should be in good shape.
Patrice Bergeron makes first Bruins camp appearance in his "slow ramp-up" to season

By Joe Haggerty September 16, 2019 7:45 PM

BRIGHTON, Mass — After sitting out the opening weekend of training camp with a lingering groin issue, Patrice Bergeron made his first on-ice appearance with the group on Monday morning at Warrior Ice Arena.

The 34-year-old center was wearing a no-contact sweater as he skated with the rest of the Bruins players sitting out Monday night's preseason opener against the Devils in New Jersey. It was his first on-ice action of training camp after a groin problem bothered him all throughout a summer of rest and he had a PRP shot administered to the troublesome area in July to potentially address the situation once and for all.

Bergeron was obviously happy to be back on the ice and will take it one step at a time while ramping up for the Oct. 3 season opener in Dallas.

“IT felt good. It was great to be back with the group and starting to get the rhythm back slowly,” said Bergeron, who has missed a total of 35 games due to injuries over the last two seasons. “It was part of the program to get on the ice today and see how I was feeling while going full speed with the rest of the group getting the rhythm and my hands back. Everything is going according to plan.

“This summer has been a slow ramp-up and I had to go through a few things to make sure I was fully healthy. We had to take some precautions early in camp, and now it’s pretty early and I’m skating. So I’m happy with the way I feel. There’s a good chance the [no-contact jersey] will stay on for a little bit and I’ll slowly ramp up.”

Bergeron took his usual spot centering Brad Marchand and David Pastrnak during the late camp session and there’s a decent chance he’ll be cleared for full practice when the Bruins get back on the ice for camp on Wednesday. Still, Bergeron won’t see much game action this preseason like many of the other Bruins veterans that tacked on 24 postseason games to their usual season’s worth of work while making the run to the Stanley Cup Final.

Here are the two practice groups with the first set of Bruins hitting the ice on Monday night in New Jersey for the preseason opener:

GAME LINEUP
Line Combos
Carey-Studnicka-Ritchie
Blidh-Lindholm-Wagner
Fitzgerald-Frederic-Steen
Lauko-Gaunce-Senyshyn
Lantosi
D-Pairings
Vaakanainen-Petrovic
Zboril-Kampfer
Breen-Andersson
Sherman
Goalies
Keyser Vladar
Sweeney: Bruins have cap space to sign Carlo

PRACTICE GROUP
Line Combos
Marchand-Bergeron-Pastrnak
DeBrusk-Krejci-Kuhlman
Charlie McAvoy contract continues a long pattern of Bruins players keeping their eyes on the prize

By Joe Haggerty September 16, 2019

BRIGHTON — In the end, Charlie McAvoy did what pretty much all of the key players on the Bruins have done over the last handful of seasons. The 21-year-old McAvoy took less than he probably wanted to on the eventual three-year, $14.7 million cap contract to get into training camp during the opening weekend of on-ice workouts, and now he’s back with his Bruins teammates getting ready for the season without a protracted absence. Make no mistake that some of it was about McAvoy’s 10.2 (c) classification as a restricted free agent where he A) couldn’t be offer-sheed by other teams, B) wasn’t eligible for salary arbitration and C) is still five years away from unrestricted NHL free agency.

Sweeney: B’s have cap space to sign Carlo

Truth be told, McAvoy had zero leverage in negotiations aside from simply sitting out as he’d done the first couple of days. But it was also about following the lead of Patrice Bergeron, Brad Marchand and David Pastrnak, who all left money on the table to sign with the Bruins and create an environment where the salary cap will allow them to sustain a winning hockey club. As it is right now, the Bruins don’t expect to need to trade anybody significant off their NHL roster due to salary cap constraints after getting both McAvoy and Brandon Carlo signed.

That’s because McAvoy is now taking up a reasonable $4.9 million cap hit while Bergeron ($8.875 million), Marchand ($6.125 million) and Pastrnak ($6.66 million) are all under $7 million with their cap hits. Compare that to the Chicago Blackhawks, for instance, where Jonathan Toews and Patrick Kane are over $10 million for their cap hits, and now the Blackhawks can’t build a winning team around them due in part to salary cap issues.

It’s going to be very tough for Kyle Dubas to keep the Leafs together as a sustained winner in Toronto with Mitch Marner, Auston Matthews and John Tavares now all holding cap hits over $10 million per season and now he’s back with his Bruins teammates getting ready for the season without a protracted absence. Make no mistake that some of it was about McAvoy’s 10.2 (c) classification as a restricted free agent where he A) couldn’t be offer-sheed by other teams, B) wasn’t eligible for salary arbitration and C) is still five years away from unrestricted NHL free agency.

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It’s going to be very tough for Kyle Dubas to keep the Leafs together as a sustained winner in Toronto with Mitch Marner, Auston Matthews and John Tavares now all holding cap hits over $10 million per season as well. Think about the astronomical amounts the Leafs are paying that trio while continually losing to a Bruins team whose best players have always kept the eye on the prize in contract negotiations with Don Sweeney.

Now, one can count McAvoy among that group for getting into camp and saving his payday for three years down the line when David Backes, David Krejci, Zdeno Chara and others will be off the books for the Black and Gold.

"I think what we have here is special, there’s no doubt about it. There’s no place I’d rather be. To be a part of such an unbelievable group of men, from staff to everybody involved, it’s just a blast to come to the rink every day," said McAvoy. "It truly is something special. I feel fortunate and blessed to be a part of it. I think that it’s something where we all want to be competitive and we all want to win.

"We were really close to getting that done last year. We all have the same goal this year, and I think that making sure we’re competitive, I think that takes precedent and doing what you need to do to be a competitive team. I think that’s most important to everybody.”

The other part of the equation for McAvoy and the Bruins is becoming the dominant No. 1 defenseman that can earn the long term, massive money deal that he was undoubtedly seeking if the negotiations had turned his way. Part of that will be the good fortune of staying healthy, part of it is developing into more of a young leader on the team and part of it is simply putting together some dominant seasons after averaging seven goals and 30 points over his first two NHL seasons.

McAvoy has the size, strength, offensive skill and temperament to be the heir apparent to Zdeno Chara, and that’s exactly what he wants to do over the next three seasons.

"I always strive to become better, to grow in all aspects, to reach my full potential. This is an opportunity for me to grow into the player that I’ve become. Obviously, I’ve had a little bit of bad luck as far as injuries go, and little stuff like that. Some things are out of your control, you know?” said McAvoy. “But I’ve always been fortunate to have this support of the organization through all that, which means a whole lot to me. My goal is to go out and become the best hockey player I can be, to grow into one of the best defensemen, hopefully in the league. I feel like the sky is the limit.”

The Bruins obviously do as well. That’s why they’re paying him a base salary of $7.3 million in the final year of the three-year contract, which will be the starting point for his next deal three years from now when the Bruins should have ample room to pay him given some of the big-money deals that will come off the books between now and then.

"[We were looking] to find a common ground that everybody seeks to finalize a deal that puts Charlie in a situation where he can take this platform and really launch himself into the player we all believe he is, and will become both on and off the ice, incorporating leadership qualities he exhibits as well,” said Sweeney. "For us, it’s just a good compromise, a middle ground, it allows him to take it wherever he’s capable of taking it. And we’ll be there when he does.”

That was the feeling around the McAvoy signing with the Bruins given the term, the money involved and the commitment the player has now made to keeping the winning thing going in Boston. It’s just the middle chapter of the McAvoyBruins story and the next few years should be among the best for both the blossoming player and his hockey club.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.17.2019
I think Charlie McAvoy is going to be really good, so naturally, I don’t like his new deal.

That will be an unpopular opinion. For the cash-strapped 2019-20 Bruins, this contract rules. The AAV is very low ($4.9 million), which means the Bruins don’t have to subtract from their roster as they try to make one or two more Cup runs during the Chara era. It lets them keep Torey Krug for at least the final year of his contract. You can understand why this pact works for them.

Sweeney: B’s still have cap space to sign Carlo

But that sweet cap hit comes at a price, which is that, if all goes according to plan and McAvoy becomes the player we all think he’ll be, the Bruins will be paying huge dough for his services when it expires in three years.

McAvoy will be 24 when this contract ends. He’ll be in the prime of his career, two years from unrestricted eligibility and will have received Norris votes. Maybe he’ll even have a Norris win, and you don’t want to have to be negotiating with a young franchise player who’s already won a Norris. Ask the Canadiens how that worked out.

Of course, I’m projecting. The Norris talk is hypothetical. His development could stall or he could struggle to stay on the ice. He’s missed at least 19 games a season thus far.

But if you think this is a good contract, you’re projecting, too. You’re projecting that McAvoy will stay where he is, which is a guy who will lead the team in ice time, play in all situations, average half a point per game and miss a good chunk of time each season. You don’t think, as Bruce Cassidy said, that he’ll get stronger. You don’t think, as Cassidy said, that he’ll become a more aggressive offensive player.

If you do think he’s going to keep improving and become one of the top defensemen in the league, you should be worried about what he’s going to cost next. There are currently seven defensemen in the league with an average annual value of $8 million. If McAvoy is a superstar when he signs his next deal, he’ll enter that club and then some. Erik Karlsson and Drew Doughty are at the top of the list at $11.5 million and $11 million, respectively.

Yes, the NHL will have a new TV contract by the time McAvoy’s deal is up, so the cap will in all likelihood spike. David Krejci’s $7.25 million a year will be off the books. More importantly, so will David Backes’ $6 million hit. It’s tough to say what Tuukka Rask’s next contract (he’s up in two years) looks like, if it’s even here.

So the Bruins should be in a better position to spend than they are now. That doesn’t mean they shouldn’t be kicking themselves for having to go the bridge route with McAvoy now.

McAvoy’s contract is similar to that of Zach Werenski (three years at $5 million per), another big-name RFA who took forever to sign this offseason. The better bang for the Bruins’ buck would have been a deal like the one Ivan Provorov just took (six years at $6.75 million annually). It would have taken him straight to unrestricted free agency, but the Bruins would have had two more years before a massive third contract kicked in.

The B’s couldn’t swing that without clearing a good amount of space, and if they were going to trade a first-round pick to get rid of Backes’ deal, they probably would have done it earlier in the offseason. They still have to sign Brandon Carlo and have only $3.2 million in cap room.

Now, it’s logical to argue that it makes sense to wait until McAvoy is a superstar before paying him like one, but the goal is to have great players on bargain deals during their best years. Patrice Bergeron, Brad Marchand and David Pastrnak all fit in this category. Two of those deals, Marchand and Pastnak, were Don Sweeney signings. This McAvoy deal shouldn’t get the gold sticker those deserve.
Don Sweeney: Bruins have enough present cap space to sign Brandon Carlo

By Joe Haggerty September 16, 2019 12:02 PM

BRIGHTON -- Nearly every Bruins follower assumed this summer that the B’s would need to make cap-clearing moves in order to make room for their roster for the upcoming hockey season. It was expected that the Bruins didn’t have enough space to sign both RFA defenseman Charlie McAvoy and Brandon Carlo, and that perhaps a valuable piece might need to be jettisoned for salary cap-related purposes.

Well, maybe not so much.

Miller out for start of B’s season

Don Sweeney confirmed during Sunday’s press conference with Charlie McAvoy that the Bruins have enough salary cap space to sign Carlo as well after inking McAvoy for three years at $4.9 million per season. That means the sky-is-falling crowd that assumed Torey Krug or David Krejci would need to be moved by the Bruins in order to clear cap space was more than a little over-the-top.

According to capfriendly.com, the Bruins have $3.2 million in cap space and that’s roughly what the Bruins would be paying the 22-year-old Carlo in a three-year deal similar to the term used to sign McAvoy.

"It depends on the term of the next deal," said Sweeney, when asked if the Bruins will use LTIR space to make room for the Carlo contract while confirming the Bruins have enough cap space to sign the other RFA defenseman. "We have obviously the opportunity to do that if we need to, because [John Moore] is not going to start the season. Kevan [Miller] won’t start the season either [for LTIR purposes].

“We have a lot of communication and we’re trying to continue to do the same thing with Brandon [as we did with McAvoy]. Every deal takes its time, and that’s my intention is to go back and work and get Brandon back in the fold as well.”

Sweeney did allow that the Bruins might not have enough cap space free if they sign Carlo to a longer-term deal that could include locking him up for free agent years as well But whatever the case, the Bruins also have cap hits for Kevan Miller ($2.5 million) and John Moore ($2.75 million) that will start the season on long term injured reserve due to injuries. So the Bruins have roughly $5 million in LTIR cushion at the start of the season and probably wouldn’t need to find the cap space in the cushions for at least a month while both veteran D-men heal from injuries suffered last spring.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.17.2019
By Fluto Shinzawa Sep 16, 2019

"North American studies," Evan Gold said with a smile of his major at McGill University. “With a minor in math.”

Gold, the Bruins’ director of legal affairs for hockey operations for the last four seasons, officially added assistant general manager to his duties on Sept. 13. Gold assumes the title from Scott Bradley, who is now senior adviser to the general manager.

Assistant GM is easier to comprehend than the somewhat blurry nature of Gold’s undergraduate degree. He acknowledges the major’s fuzziness.

“I basically focused on American history and American literature. Sort of where my interests ended up lying,” Gold said. “It included some economics and some political science too.”

So many of the other executives holding Gold’s title are former NHL players. GM Don Sweeney, assistant to Peter Chiarelli for six seasons, logged 1,115 career NHL games. Ex-players currently holding assistant GM positions include Craig Billington, Craig Conroy, Chris Drury, Tom Fitzgerald, Scott Mellanby, Steve Sullivan and Pat Verbeek. Their on-ice accomplishments include captaincies and Stanley Cups.


The Toronto native played center and wing in high school, except when his services were required on the blue line. Gold took that more as a sign of his team’s lack of depth than his forward-to-defense skill.

“Pretty early, I knew I wanted to try and do something to be in hockey,” Gold said. “I figured my brain would be a little bit better at this than my mitts.

Gold is part of the NHL’s modern movement. What he lacks in goals and assists is counteracted by the initials he can put next to his name: JD and MBA. Gold, who completed his graduate studies at the University of Toronto, has the law background to work within the 540 pages of the collective bargaining agreement and the financial expertise to negotiate the salary cap.

“I don’t know that the responsibilities change all that much,” Gold said of his promotion. “We have a good group. I just stay in my lane and kind of continue. Some of that involves being the point man on the CBA stuff, admin, compliance. Obviously salary cap, Don and I work closely on that. Contract negotiations. Salary arbitration. My job, more or less, will stay the same going forward. I do some scouting in the area, both at the pro and amateur levels, so I’ll try and do a little more of that.”

Sweeney attended Harvard. But in today’s league, even an Ivy League economics major like Sweeney needs white-collar experts to pursue compliance of all kinds. The GM has identified Gold as such a resource. Gold fits within a hybrid staff that includes data engineers like Campbell Weaver, who used to work at Facebook, and ex-NHL players like Chris Kelly, newly hired as player development coordinator.

“Donny’s progressive. He likes to see the new blood come in,” Bradley said. “I think Evan’s going to do a great job. Different lane than me. He’s legal, contracts, money.”

Gold began his career as a summer intern with the Capitals. While he pursued his JD/MBA studies, Gold worked closely with Frank Provenzano, Washington’s former assistant GM, and Don Fishman, who currently holds the title. Gold eventually became a full-time employee in hockey operations under former GM George McPhee.

Gold worked for the Capitals for eight seasons. In October 2015, after Sweeney replaced Chiarelli, the Bruins hired Gold.

“They’ve assembled a really good staff of highly intelligent people, whether they’re former players or not,” Gold said of Sweeney and president Cam Neely. “I feel fortunate to be included in that group.”

Bradley, the former assistant GM, is not stepping away from his responsibilities. The 56-year-old will remain in charge of the draft, although he said he might focus more on the earlier rounds.

Bradley will also continue to counsel Sweeney on personnel. Bradley will travel to the Czech Republic for the 2020 World Junior Championship, one of the must-watch showcases for talent evaluators.

But Bradley, who lives in British Columbia, will remove himself from part of the daily grind. His new title will allow him to spend more time at home with his 2-year-old grandson. Ryan Nadeau, the associate director of amateur scouting, will take on more draft responsibilities, as will amateur scout Dean Malkoc.

“Not much is going to change,” Bradley said. “I’m going to oversee the amateur draft, which I’ve been doing. I might be able to slide in a little more pro. Donny will dictate that stuff. But pretty much status quo. I’m happy for Evan for getting the title. I’ve been doing this for a long time. I think it’s my 26th year. I’ve had every title except the GM job. It maybe gives me a little more leeway to stick around home a little more. I’ve been going pretty hard for a long time. Not that I’m going to step back, but maybe Donny’s got me concentrating more on the top two rounds, the top 50.”

Bradley, son of former Bruins chief scout Bart Bradley, has made his mark at the draft table. He was in charge when the Bruins drafted Joe Thornton and Sergei Samsonov in the first round in 1997, Patrice Bergeron in the second round in 2003 and Brad Marchand in the third round in 2006.

Bradley ceded director duties to Wayne Smith and Keith Gretzky during Chiarelli’s time as GM. But after Gretzky joined Chiarelli in Edmonton, Bradley resumed his previous position for the last three drafts.

“The players that have come through, the Bergerons — we’ve had some duds too — but we’ve had a lot of good players I’ve been directly involved with, with other guys,” Bradley said. “It’s a body of work I’m proud of. I still want to keep doing it and helping the Bruins out as much as I can. And my father’s legacy prior to me. I think the Bradley name’s got a little history with the Bruins.”

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LeBrun: How lack of comparables affected RFA defensemen this year and why next offseason should be different

By Pierre LeBrun Sep 16, 2019

After a summer with barely an inch of progress, the league’s top three young RFA blueliners signed within six days of each other over the past week. And most notably present fresh comparable contracts for next summer’s wave of top, young defensemen coming out of entry-level deals — Mikhail Sergachev and Thomas Chabot, among others.

That was the biggest problem in trying to navigate the waters for new deals involving Zach Werenski, Ivan Provorov and Charlie McAvoy is that there was no fresh comparable for blueliners of their ilk.

You had to go back to Seth Jones and Rasmus Ristolainen in 2016, both of whom signed identical, six-year deals out of their entry-level pacts worth $5.4-million AAV per season. Three years ago is old news when it comes to comparables, especially with what’s going on with the next generation of players.

In a nutshell, that’s what it made these deals so hard to get signed. Trying to figure out what is a fair deal for these three, talented young blueliners coming out of entry-level deals was no small task.

Werenski went first, last Monday signing a three-year deal carrying a $5-million AAV but rather importantly having a Year 3 salary of $7 million. He controls his future now. If talks of a long-term deal with the Blue Jackets aren't going well in three years, he can select salary arbitration or simply sign his $7-million qualifying offer. Either way, Werenski will walk himself into unrestricted free agency one year later in July 2024. Did the Werenski deal help spur on the Provorov and McAvoy negotiations? My understanding is more so on McAvoy which became obvious after he signed a three-year deal worth a $4.9-million AAV on Sunday.

Sandwiched in between was Provorov, who all along had a team in Philadelphia wanting to sign him longer-term and an agent in Mark Gandler that was also focused on that.

I think Gandler would have done a max, eight-year deal with the Flyers but my guess is that would have carried an AAV of at least $8.25 million to $8.5 million a year, so six years made more sense for the Flyers at $6.75-million AAV.

It was huge for GM Chuck Fletcher to get term here. He had no interest in going the three-year route like Werenski (and eventually McAvoy) did. Why? Because had Provorov signed a three-year deal, the sense was that he could use the Jacob Trouba long-term deal ($8-million AAV) as a springboard and the Flyers would be looking at at $8 million in three years but probably closer to $9-millionplus a year on the next contract.

Buying two UFA years from Provorov and getting him locked up through 2024-25 was important for the Flyers.

But it made sense for the player’s camp on many levels, too. He may not get the chance to put up big offensive numbers like McAvoy and Werenski, he certainly isn’t a first unit power-play guy right now, it’s his overall game that makes him so impactful. With the lack of high-end offensive numbers, getting the security of six years and $40.5 million in the bank made sense for Gandler and Provorov as well.

Speaking of Gandler, he also happens to represent Sergachev, who is entering the final season of his entry-level contract. As colleague Joe Smith wrote this past weekend, perhaps Sergachev will start the season on the top pairing with Victor Hedman.

The Werenski/Provorov/McAvoy contracts will have a direct impact on what happens with Sergachev’s deal next year, but given Gandler’s direct involvement with the Provorov deal, I think we can at least extrapolate one important element: the agent would rather go longer term. Which may or may not jive with what Lightning GM Julien BriseBois may want to do given the history of bridge deals in Tampa Bay.

All of which is why Gandler, no question, is keenly observing how the Brayden Point negotiations are currently playing out. If Point ends up signing a three-year bridge deal, it might box Sergachev in and negate the real chance of a longer-term deal out of his entry-level deal. But if Point signs for more than three years, perhaps that’s a path for the Sergachev camp to pursue next summer.

There was a possibility of a long-term deal between McAvoy and the Bruins, both sides at one point mused what it would take over a seven-year deal, but the AAV would have never been high enough to make sense for the player. Instead, while McAvoy did sign for $100,000 less on average per season than Werenski — easily explained by the fact McAvoy was a 10.2(c) free agent not a true Group 2 RFA like Werenski — the Bruins blueliner has a nice launching pad with his Year 3, $7.3-million salary. That was key to get by his agent Micheal Curran. The Bruins may come to the McAvoy camp in two years wanting to negotiate a long-term deal one year ahead of time, but the back-pocket protection here is that McAvoy can either sign a $7.3-million qualifying offer in three years or select salary arbitration.

Either way, all three contracts signed represent fresh, real comparables for the next wave of blueliner coming out of their entry-level deals.

Aside from Sergachev and Chabot, Vince Dunn, Erik Cernak, Sami Niku, Victor Mete and Travis Dermott are among other blueliners coming out of their entry-level deals after this season. So is the talented Samuel Girard in Colorado, but he’s already signed past this year, agreeing to a seven-year, $35-million extension this summer. Not a huge body of work to work off of when signing him to that deal, but you get the feeling the Avalanche won’t regret it by year’s end. By then he might already present a bargain if his usage and role are similar to Provorov in Philadelphia. There’s always a risk jumping in that quickly with these kids, but I think the Avs gambled right. They’ll have Girard at a $5-million AAV through 2026-27 when blueliners of his ilk will be signing for $7- to $8-million a year in no time.

Ben Chiarot in Montreal

It wasn’t the kind of signing that screamed sexy but I believe that Ben Chiarot’s three-year deal ($3.5-million AAV) in Montreal is an underrated move from July’s free-agent activity. Of course Jacob Trouba and Tyler Myers are the bigger losses on Winnipeg’s blue line, but believe me when I say Chiarot was a real glue guy on the Jets and was a popular player there.

“Very,” responded Jets coach Paul Maurice last week when I asked him that via text message. “Good man. Has learned to understand what he’s good at and became a very consistent player. Will miss him.”

In Montreal, he begins camp on the left side of Jeff Petry on the second pairing, which was always the plan when Chiarot talked to head coach Claude Julien after signing, but another option throughout the season is sliding up alongside captain Shea Weber. Julien and Chiarot have talked about that possibility depending on the matchup, the Habs head coach citing last week a heavy team like the Washington Capitals, for example, as a game where perhaps they put two, big physical guys like Chiarot and Weber together for a night.

Chiarot, at least outside of Winnipeg, had not been seen by outsiders as a for sure top-4 guy, but by the end of the season, he will have had the chance to change that perception under the big spotlight of Montreal.
Dylan Cozens gets his welcome to the NHL, Sabres win in Ralph Krueger's debut

By Lance Lysowski
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UNIVERSITY PARK, PA. — When the emotional rollercoaster finally ended Monday night, Ralph Krueger stood in front of his players inside the Buffalo Sabres' dressing room and expressed a blend of excitement and relief.

"Said to the guys after the game, ‘It was good to get that one down,’” Krueger told reporters, his voice hoarse following his first game as an NHL coach since April 27, 2013.

Krueger's return did not go exactly as planned. Despite having only three days to prepare, the Sabres made Krueger's vision a reality by using a fast-and-furious style of play to build a three-goal lead through two periods.

However, the Sabres relinquished the lead and needed Jack Eichel's overtime goal with eight seconds remaining to win Krueger's debut, 5-4, against the Pittsburgh Penguins at Penn State's Pegula Ice Arena. The game provided some semblance of how Krueger wants the Sabres to play in 2019-20 and will give his coaching staff some lessons to teach to players.

Krueger wasn’t the only person in the Sabres’ dressing room getting acclimated, either. Dylan Cozens, the 18-year-old center drafted seventh overall in June, made his exhibition debut against NHL competition. Though Cozens did not record a point, he also expressed confidence in his ability to learn from his introduction.

"Obviously it’s very fast and guys are so strong and just getting used to the quickness of it,” he said afterward. “The little time and space that you have, I think you have to adjust and I’m going to adjust quickly to it. But it was a lot of fun and we got the win, so that was exciting.”

Cozens had only two shots on goal against the Penguins lineup filled with prospects, many of whom played against the Sabres' top draft pick at the Prospects Challenge in Buffalo earlier this month. He took advantage of an opportunity to showcase the skills that made him one of the top players in the most recent NHL draft.

Cozens tipped two pucks near the Penguins net on the power play, the first of which almost snuck past goalie Casey DeSmith. Cozens also broke his stick on a shot attempt that went wide of the net in the third period. But his most impressive work did not show up on a stat sheet. He was fearless driving to the net and used his speed to get behind defenders while showing chemistry with his linemates, Tage Thompson and Remi Elie.

Cozens did not show any sort of hesitation against the Penguins, despite he and his teammates having only three practices to learn Krueger's offensive and defensive systems.

"I think emotionally there are so many things for him to step into this space for the first time,” Krueger said of Cozens. “He managed it really well. He was calm on the bench. He’s an energetic kid trying to learn every shift. It was an exciting coaching opportunity for me to stand behind somebody with that much skill in their very first game at this level. He’s got some exciting years ahead of him.”

Cozens played on the Sabres’ second power-play unit and was trusted to take offensive-zone faceoffs in important situations. He also helped them out-shoot the Penguins, 48-17.

Cozens didn’t commit any egregious mistakes, and he showed poise with the puck, even when facing NHL players Bryan Rust, Zach Aston-Reese and Dominik Simon. Cozen was among the more impressive players during the Sabres' Prospects Challenge in LECOM Harborcenter earlier this month and scored during his first game in Buffalo but didn’t have the same offensive impact against better competition Monday.

Cozens, who underwent surgery on his left thumb in July, played well enough at the Prospects Challenge to raise questions, at least externally, whether he could earn a roster spot in training camp. Now, there's reason to wonder if Monday will be Cozens' only game in a Sabres uniform in 2019-20. Krueger will soon have to trim his roster, and Cozens may not be able to delay his return to Lethbridge of the Western Hockey League.

“So far great,” Thompson said of Cozens. “He has a lot of confidence. I think you see it with his play out there. He’s really fast and dynamic with the puck. I don’t think there are too many nerves with him right now.”

Third-period meltdown: The Penguins scored three goals in less than eight minutes to tie the score with 11:14 left in regulation. Neither Krueger nor his players expressed concern following the game, but the coach acknowledged there will be many lessons to teach.

“When you looked at the opportunities we had versus what they had in the first 40 minutes, we were extremely pleased with the work ethic,” Krueger said. “There’s a lot of information that went into their heads here the last four days and there’s no way they’re going to execute that perfectly, but we saw semblances of what we want to see and we still have time until it really matters. That’s the good thing. ... We lost the way [we want to play], especially with the puck. We got complicated and let them back in the game.”

Early mistakes: Rasmus Dahlin showed some rust with the puck and two of his turnovers resulted in Penguins goals. First, his breakout pass was intercepted by Penguins winger Nathan Legare and resulted in Andrew Agozzino scoring the first goal 4:34 into the game. Dahlin also committed a turnover on Adam Johnson's third-period goal, which cut the Sabres' lead to one with 13:36 remaining.

Serious speed: John Gilmour is making a strong first impression with the Sabres. Gilmour, a 26-year-old defenseman who signed a one-way contract with Buffalo on July 1, scored the team's first goal of the preseason at 5:44 into the first period.

Gilmour collected a pass from Jimmy Vesey, used his elite speed to separate from a Penguins defender and fired a shot over DeSmith's glove to tie the score, 1-1. Gilmour scored 20 goals among 54 points last season for Hartford of the American Hockey League.

Tape-to-tape: Though Dahlin struggled in his own end, he also made a few dynamic plays. The 19-year-old held the puck near the red line, waited for Conor Sheary to skate toward the opposing blue line and unleashed a perfect pass to spring the winger for a breakaway.

Sheary, who won two Stanley Cups with the Penguins, scored with a wrist shot over DeSmith's glove at 18:47 for a 2-1 lead.

Immediate impact: Henri Jokiharju also is making a strong case to stick with the Sabres. Jokiharju, a 20-year-old defenseman acquired from Chicago for Alexander Nylander, scored with a shot from the left circle at 11:40 into the second period. Perhaps Jokiharju's most impressive play came moments earlier when he stripped a Penguins of the puck to create a 2-on-1 rush for Sheary and Evan Rodrigues.

Standing tall: Thompson was among the Sabres' best players Monday night. The 21-year-old winger stick-handled around defenders in the neutral zone to help his line enter the offensive zone and scored the type of goal that shows how effective he can be when using his 6-foot-5 frame around the net.

Thompson screened goalie Tristan Jarry on a second-period power-play play and used his reach to backhand a rebound off Dahlin's shot into the back of the net for a 4-1 lead at 15:58.

"Anywhere on the power play is awesome, so I can’t complain,” Thompson, who skated on the Sabres' top power play, said of being in front of the net. "I feel comfortable there. I’ve played it in the past. Feel comfortable down low, behind the goal line and in front of the net. Popping in and out. It’s a good spot for me.”

Quiet night: Carter Hutton started in goal for the Sabres and stopped two of three shots before he was replaced by Jonas Johansson with 10:38 remaining in the second period. DeSmith, who was replaced by Jarry, stopped 23 of 25 shots.

Veterans sit: Neither defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen nor winger Marcus Johansson will play in the Sabres' first two preseason games, Krueger told reporters Monday. Defenseman Brandon Hickey, who likely will spend this season in Rochester, was a healthy scratch against the Penguins.

Next: The other half of the Sabres' roster — including Sam Reinhart, Casey Mittelstadt, Brandon Montour and Linus Ullmark — will travel to Columbus to face the Blue Jackets on Tuesday at 7 p.m.
With two-year deal, Jean-Sebastien Dea gives Sabres a new option at forward

By Mike Harrington

It might not happen out of training camp, but Jean-Sebastien Dea is a good bet to play with the Sabres this season. And when he's not in Buffalo, the 25-year old figures to be one of the main cogs at center for the Rochester Amerks.

If the Sabres want an upgrade of speed and skill to their bottom six forwards, Dea could be an answer. Particularly if he makes an impact in exhibition games.

"My role in the NHL won't be a goal scorer and I know that," the 5-foot-11 Dea said after practice Monday in KeyBank Center. "Even if I don't play on the first two lines, I can still bring a lot of speed and bring offense and play with energy.

"Those games will be very important for guys like me. I'm excited to play in them. Practices are good to see that you're in shape, but now it's game on and I'm excited for the challenge."

Dea is expected to get his first chance in the Buffalo lineup Tuesday night when the Sabres travel to meet the Columbus Blue Jackets in Nationwide Arena. Dea, who also can play right wing, has been on a line with Scott Wilson and Arttu Ruotsalainen in camp. Dea has spent most of the last six years in the Pittsburgh organization and it was Sabres GM Jason Botterill who signed Dea as a free agent out of juniors for the Penguins in 2013.

Botterill and Dea agreed to a two-year, $1.4-million deal this summer. Of note, it's a one-way deal so he makes $700,000 whether he's in Buffalo or Rochester. Poor play or injuries here likely would make Dea one of the first recall candidates if he starts the season with the Amerks.

"It's great to be back with 'Botts' again and when they called me this summer, I was very excited," Dea said. "My goal was to get a one-way deal because I felt I had shown I was able to play in the NHL as well, so that was a major objective for the summer. When Buffalo called me and offered me two years, I was really excited and I couldn't pass on that deal."

Dea was a two-time 40-goal scorer for Rouyn-Noranda of the Quebec League but went undrafted before Pittsburgh signed him. Dea has averaged 18.3 goals and 41 points per season last four years in the AHL, with a high of 20 goals at Wilkes-Barre/Scranton in 2015-16. He scored 17 last year between the Pens' affiliate and Florida's Springfield team.

"I've kept a good attitude. I'm fortunate and grateful to be able to play hockey, happy to be at the rink every day," he said. "I know it's a business and it's never easy. Some guys have an easier time with that, my situation might be a little harder. But I work hard and I trust myself and think I can make it."

One thing that keeps Dea pushing forward is the fact he's always had teams wanting him. He's already been sent to the minors five different times in his career, waived three times and traded once. But he's been claimed off waivers twice and now has signed his first free agent contract with the Sabres.

"I always have the feeling somebody is going to want me and keep giving me my chance," he said. "That's why I keep working hard, be a good teammate and I think good things will happen."

Dea has five goals in 29 career NHL games, 20 of which came last year with New Jersey after getting claimed off waivers from Pittsburgh.

"It was my first time being in the NHL for a regular period, a couple months," he said. "I kept telling the media how grateful I was to be there and that was true. It's how I feel today. To be able to perform in the NHL is something a lot of kids dream of and I don't take it for granted. It gave me confidence I can play in the NHL."
No. 1 pick Dylan Cozens to get a look as Sabres open preseason

By Mike Harrington

A lot of big names will be in the Buffalo Sabres' lineup when they open the preseason against Pittsburgh tonight at 7 at Pegula Ice Arena on the campus of Penn State. Jack Eichel, Jeff Skinner and Rasmus Dahlin are all scheduled to play in Ralph Krueger's first exhibition game as Buffalo coach.

Another interesting debut will be that of No. 1 draft pick Dylan Cozens, who will be on a line centering wingers Remi Elie and Tage Thompson.

"I've been here at main camp around the guys and I've become comfortable here just on the ice with these guys," Cozens said after today's morning skate in KeyBank Center before the team made the quick flight to State College, Pa. "Obviously it's exciting being in a preseason game with other top guys, stars in the NHL and people I looked up to growing up, so it's going to be exciting.

"I can't be going out there trying to dangle everyone and turning pucks over. I've got to simplify it, especially at this level."

#Sabres morning lineup looks like this:

Vesey-Eichel-Sheary
Skinner-Rodrigues-Lazar
Elie-Cozens-Thompson
Girgensons-Larsson-Oglivie
Dahlin-Jokiharju
Scandella-Miller
Gilmour-Nelson

(Hickey and Ristolainen appear to be extra D)
Hutton-Johansson

— Mike Harrington (@ByMHarrington) September 16, 2019

Krueger agreed.

"What we're looking for is simplicity," said the coach, who added that Cozens should get power play time as well tonight. "I thought in the rookie camp at times, he was trying to be a difference-maker every time on the ice. He doesn't have that pressure here. We'd like to see him execute within the principles, keep it nice and simple and just have fun."

Cozens is a long shot to make the Sabres' roster and there's a chance this could be his only chance to play with the big club in the preseason. He knows that General Manager Jason Botterill has already publicly frowned on an 18-year-old, non-Dahlin division, sticking in the NHL.

"I'm just trying to work as hard as I can every day and learn as much as I can," Cozens said. "My goal is to stick here for as long as I can, but if not I'm going to be happy to go back to Lethbridge and have another year of development. My goal is to make an impression and make it a hard decision for them to make."

Krueger knows he'll have lots of hard decisions to make in the next couple of weeks regarding his roster.

"We really have multiple names, multiple spots, so it's going to be fun now," Krueger said. "The games will definitely influence us moving forward."

Albeit in preseason, this will be the first time Krueger has been behind an NHL bench in nearly 6½ years, since he was fired by the Edmonton Oilers in 2013.

"I haven't been a head coach in a while and I've run it through my head multiple times in the last years," he said. "So I'm looking forward to using these six games also to getting our bench operating the way we need to operate."
As preseason games come in a rush, a look at several levels of expectations for the Sabres

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Jack Eichel wants more goals. Jeff Skinner just wants one.

Dylan Cozens, Victor Olofsson and Curtis Lazar hope they take jobs. Vladimir Sobotka is aiming to keep his.

The opening three days of Sabres training camp featured 48 players split into two groups, and everyone was trying to catch the eye of new coach Ralph Krueger. Here’s what you need to know as Buffalo transitions from practices to four preseason games in six days.

Setting goals for goals

Eichel made a huge offensive leap last season, increasing his goals (25 to 28), assists (39 to 54) and points (64 to 82). His reputation as a playmaker has grown. He wants “sniper” on his résumé.

“I’ve wanted to score more goals, find the back of the net more,” the Sabres’ captain said in KeyBank Center. “I improved from Year 3 to 4, but I think there’s another step to take in terms of becoming an elite goal scorer.”

Eichel finished fifth in the NHL in shots last season, putting 303 on net to trail just Nathan MacKinnon (365), Patrick Kane (341), Alex Ovechkin (338) and Tyler Seguin (334). Yet former coach Phil Housley repeatedly urged Eichel to shoot even more.

That’s the mindset Eichel is bringing into the season.

“At times, I pass up good opportunities,” Eichel said. “The goalies are good, right? It’s tough to score goals in this league. But I worked at it this summer.

“A lot of it, like I said, is a mindset, wanting to shoot the puck more. I shoot the puck a lot, but it’s just opportunities when you’re around the net to get the puck on net. It should help our team.”

If Eichel can add two goals to his total from last season, he’ll become just the second Buffalo player to reach 30 since 2012. The first, of course, was Skinner last year. He’s coming off a 40-goal season that earned him an eight-year, $72 million contract.

He doesn’t feel pressure to follow up with 40 goals again.

“I just go into the season trying to get one, then you go from there,” Skinner said. “Obviously, producing offensively is part of my job, but I don’t think last season adds more pressure. That’s what you expect of yourself. You expect to keep getting better. You expect to keep helping the team win, and that’s what I’m going to keep trying to do.”

Who was that guy?

Just like during the Sabres’ prospect tournament, Olofsson is turning heads. The second-year winger is scoring in drill after drill. New goaltender Andrew Hammond shook his noggin after a few pucks went flying past and needed to know who was beating him.

“I definitely took a look to see what the name bar was,” Hammond said. “He had one in the three-on-three game that was definitely a top-level shot.”

Olofsson picked up the moniker “Goalofsson” while scoring 30 times for Rochester last season. He’s been penciled into a top-nine role for the Sabres and is moving toward permanent-marker status.

Lean and mean

Defenceman Rasmus Dahlin and center Casey Mittelstadt, last year’s top rookies, went into the offseason looking to transform their bodies. Though the stats barely moved — Dahlin is three pounds heavier, Mittelstadt is three pounds lighter — the players certainly look different.

“For me, it wasn’t so much eating poorly,” said Mittelstadt, who is down to 199 pounds. “I think I would just eat too much. Instead of having two plates, I’d have one of whatever my mom made for dinner. It sounds kind of dumb, but I think that’s almost what it came down to.”

The 6-foot-3 Dahlin is up to 193 pounds. As the Sabres leaned on him more last season — he skated 20:26 per game during the first half and averaged 21:52 in the second — Dahlin felt it.

“To be honest, the last 20 games, I think my body wasn’t feeling that strong,” he said. “This year, I’m more prepared for what’s going on, like how I’m going to handle myself throughout the season, do all the small stuff every day. So I think this year I can be not as tired as I was at the end of last season.”

The strength will also help when opponents physically challenge the 19-year-old.

“You know, it’s pretty fun when the games are like that,” Dahlin said. “I kind of like it when it’s intense.”

Forgetting the past

Sobotka refuses to look back.

“It’s a new, fresh year and I don’t want to talk about what happened last year,” he said.

It’s understandable. The center/left winger went 42 games without a goal, failing to find the net from Nov. 10 to Feb. 19. The drought coincided with the Sabres’ plummet in the standings, so plenty of fingers pointed toward Sobotka. He carried the disappointment into the summer.

“Yeah, it took some time, but it’s a new year, new season,” he said.

The 32-year-old is in for a roster battle, opening camp on the fifth line despite a $3.5 million cap hit. He finished with just five goals and eight assists last season. He hurt his cause with uninspired play, but his deployment didn’t help. He started in the offensive zone just 35.1 percent of the time, the 28th-lowest total in the league.

“If you want to play more, you need to deserve that ice time,” Sobotka said. “I think everyone is good with that. We’re trying to push each other to be better and whoever gets it, gets it, you know?”

Trying to fit in

Cozens, the Sabres’ first-round draft pick, is feeling his youth. The 18-year-old noted that some guys in camp have been playing hockey for “as long as I’ve been alive.”

“It’s a little crazy and a little surreal,” he said. “It’s definitely a big change, grown men that are super strong that have been doing this for a long time.”

Still, Cozens doesn’t feel intimidated. He wants to get at least one exhibition game — and then another.

“Obviously, I want to play in the NHL this year,” he said. “But I have to earn it and I know that. You’ve got to take someone’s spot, and I know it’s not going to be easy.”

Krueger’s slogan inspires

The theme of camp is “Play Connected.” The words are emblazoned on the dressing room wall, printed atop a triangle of interlocking swords with the Sabres’ logo underneath.

What does “Play Connected” mean to the players?

“You’re going to be able to make plays without looking,” center Evan Rodrigues said. “You’re going to know where guys are at all times. There’s going to be no question on what we’re doing. It’s going to be plain and simple. We’re going to play fast and play aggressive.”

For teams with a history of success, all of that stuff is inherently present. As anyone who’s watched the Sabres in recent years knows, the unofficial slogan was “Play Disjointed.” So Krueger is using practices, video sessions and backroom teaching to get everyone together.

“I’d like for you to be able to tell me in three, four weeks what you’re seeing and you underline the fact that we’re playing like this and this is Sabres hockey,” the coach said. “More than anything, that’s on the ice. It begins off the ice. We have to work on that unity, and it’s not going to happen overnight.”

Don’t worry, be happy
Lazar and Hammond knew it was coming. Their past is inescapable. So once word got out this summer that they were signing with the Sabres, Lazar sent a text.

"I said, 'Well, here come the hamburger jokes again,'" Lazar recalled. "What can you do?"

In Lazar’s case, you laugh and smile. It seems that’s what he always does.

In the spring of 2015, when Hammond went on a 14-0-1 run for the Senators, fans in Ottawa saluted “The Hamburglar” by tossing burgers on the ice. Lazar infamously grabbed one for a quick meal.

AND WHEN CURTIS LAZAR OFFICIALLY JOINS THE TEAM TODAY, THE COMBO MEAL IS BACK TWITTER.COM/6OUHL4CXJW

— JOHN VOGL (@BUFFALOVOGL) JULY 1, 2019

“It was fully wrapped on the bench,” Lazar said. “It still was disgusting, but I’m all about having fun. I think you guys will get to know that. I always have a smile on my face and I’m just a kid playing a game I love.”

And he’s loving his chance in Buffalo.

“Hopefully,” Lazar said, “I can make some more noise with my on-ice play instead of just eating a hamburger.”

The right winger was one of the top prospects in the 2013 NHL Draft. He went 17th overall to the Senators after a 38-goal season with the Edmonton Oil Kings and celebrated by scoring another 41 in juniors.

The Senators gave him a job the next season, but the goals disappeared. He has just 15 in 246 NHL games.

Calgary sent him to the AHL last year, and he finally rediscovered his scoring touch, potting 20 goals in 57 outings.

“It was huge and—honestly—it was probably much needed for myself,” Lazar said. “I got rushed in the NHL as a 19-year-old. Yeah, I was able to stay afloat on the fourth line and stuff, but I kind of lost that offensive edge.”

The Sabres are giving him the opportunity to show it’s back for good, lining him up with Skinner and Rodrigues. Buffalo signed Lazar for the league minimum of $700,000 after the Flames declined to make him a qualifying offer.

“That’s a big reason I’m here is the opportunity, especially up front for a guy like myself,” Lazar said. “I’ve played in this league before. I know I belong in the NHL, and I’m here to line up with the Sabres on opening night.”

While that’s a serious sentiment, it belies the joy that Lazar exudes. If Buffalo handed out a Happiest Player award for the opening weekend, Lazar would be the unanimous winner.

“I can tell you it’s not fake,” Hammond said. “It’s pretty authentic that he is always smiling and always very happy to be playing hockey, and even outside of hockey it seems like he’s always in a great mood.”

Lazar has been in a great mood since signing, according to Sabres right wing Sam Reinhart. The former Hockey Canada teammates worked out together for a few days during the offseason.

“To see him through the summer and see his motivation, he knows where he stands,” Reinhart said. “He knows he’s going to have to make it and that’s kind of the mindset that he’s brought on. I love to see that.

“We kind of learned from each other growing up, so I know what he’s capable of. I know we’re all thrilled to have him.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
Phillips feeling right at home in Flames’ pre-season win in Victoria

Wes Gilbertson

VICTORIA — He received a standing ovation when the Calgary Flames’ starting lineup was announced.

He was toasted with a video tribute prior to the first intermission.

In between, Matthew Phillips gave the fans reason to roar again when he collected an assist.

The Flames might have been the visitors for Monday’s split-squad date at Save-On-Foods Memorial Centre on Vancouver Island, but this was clearly a special homecoming for Phillips, a former captain of the Western Hockey League’s Victoria Royals.

In any other city, the 21-year-old right-winger would have been one of the unknowns.

On this night, in front of a sellout crowd of 7,006 in his old junior barn, he was treated like … well … royalty.

Fellow mighty mite Austin Czarnik potted a pair to power the Flames to a 4-3 victory, but Phillips was undoubtedly Monday’s marquee man. You never would have guessed from the hero’s welcome that the Calgary-raised forward will be surely be returned to the American Hockey League’s Stockton Heat for further seasoning. (If there was a louder cheer, it came only when the P.A. voice announced that the Canucks had re-signed restricted free-agent forward Brock Boeser.)

“That exceeded my expectations. It was an unbelievable night,” Phillips said after being named second star. “There were a lot of nerves coming in but just more excitement. It’s such a special, unique opportunity, and I just tried to soak it all in but still be focused at the same time.

“You just have to make the most of it, because it’s such a cool thing. Not a lot of people can say that they came back to their junior rink and played a game, so you just kind of turn those nerves into excitement. That’s what I was trying to do.”

A job well done.

“He’s a great kid, he works so hard, he’s a very headsy player,” said Flames associate coach Geoff Ward of Phillips, who totalled 148 goals and 311 points in 245 career contests for the Royals and then made the jump to the AHL’s Heat last fall. “Every game I’ve seen him play, even last year, he has an impact on games. And everybody likes the story. He’s a guy who just has had to work for everything he’s gotten, and here he is again and he’s pushing.

“To have him come back here and get the reception that he did … it was great.”

Fleet-of-foot forward Dillon Dube — ex of the Royals’ division rivals, the Kelowna Rockets — and defenceman Rasmus Andersson also tallied Monday for Calgary’s travelling troupe, a collection of mostly depth sorts, farm-clubbers and up-and-comers. (Back home at the Saddledome, Johnny and Gio and the majority of the regulars suffered a 3-2 overtime loss in the other half of these split-squad affairs.)

The 21-year-old Dube was both the starter and finisher on an early scoring sequence, causing a turnover when he flattened puck-carrier Adam Gaudette in the neutral zone and eventually beeling forward the net in enemy territory. Phillips found his pal with a cross-crease feed, and Dube cashed in his own rebound after Michael DiPietro made the initial save.

Czarnik, a frequent healthy scratch last winter, notched his first of the night on the power-play, taking advantage of a screen by centre Mark Jankowski and sizzling a shot just inside the far post.

The 26-year-old right-winger doubled his fun in the second, this time beating DiPietro on the blocker-side.

Czarnik was touted as a could-be breakout candidate when he signed with the Flames last summer, but he managed just six goals in 54 regular-season outings and only suited up for one playoff contest.

The 5-foot-9, 165-lb. speedster is anxious to become a more significant contributor in his second campaign at the Saddledome.

He might, meanwhile, be a good role model for Phillips — both short and slight, both skilled but not in the same stratosphere as a Johnny Gaudreau.

Guys like Czarnik and Phillips have to prove they can be effective bottom-sixers, not always an easy feat at that size.

In fact, Phillips’ most impressive moment Monday — at least, in the eyes of the Flames’ brass — likely came when he swiped a puck from Canucks veteran Chris Tanev on a backhand. The 5-foot-7, 155-lb. youngster will be kicking himself for a third-period cough-up that resulted in a scoring opportunity for the other guys.

Czarnik deserves kudos for blocking Bo Horvat’s shot with about 12 seconds remaining in regulation and the hosts threatening to force overtime.

“I think the biggest advice I’d give to (Phillips) is just play his game,” Czarnik said. “You know, obviously he’s not going to win all the battles because of his stature, same way as me. So pick and choose your battles. You have to be smart when you’re approaching top-end guys, where they’re stronger, bigger and sometimes faster. I think you just have to wait for your time to attack them, have a good stick and when you’re on offence, you just need to shoot the puck and be relentless.”

Phillips posted a very respectable stat-line — 13 goals and 38 points — as a rookie pro in Stockton. The next step is to emerge as a go-to guy in the minors.

He is no sure-thing to someday star at the Saddledome, but it was oh-so-clear Monday that Victoria’s fan-base is certainly pulling for him.

In the late stages, as Loui Eriksson, Josh Teves and Horvat scored for the Canucks to trim the deficit, a few guts even tried to start a ‘Matt-hew Phil-lips’ chant.

“For him coming back, I don’t think there’s any better feeling, especially for the team they saw him get drafted to,” Dube said. “They are all hoping he’s going to be an NHLer for Calgary. He brought a lot of support to our team, and every guy was so happy for him.”

In the Flames’ crease, Artyom Zagidulin was perfect on 15 shots. It’s been an impressive audition for the 24-year-old from Russia, who also pitched a shutout in a prospect game against the Edmonton Oilers.

Zagidulin was relieved by Tyler Parsons, who was foiled three times but still finished with 16 saves.

Andersson’s third-period marker — the first-pairing candidate snuck a shot through traffic for an unassisted strike — turned out to be the game-winner.

Calgary Sun: LOADED: 09.17.2019
In the end, the shots were 38 complicated.

Faced four shots and stopp

In just over 32 minutes of work, Flames netminder David Rittich only period's end.

At that point, the shot

It

period, and it only got busier for Bachman.

Flames' first pre-season game — albeit, against a pile of Canucks prospects that are likely bound for AHL Utica. As for Lucic, he had a glorious opportunity to score in the final seconds of regulation, but Bachman kicked out a save on the wily veteran.

Meanwhile, Glenn Gawdin, who had earned rave reviews from the head coach earlier in the day, was between PTO players Zac Rinaldo and Devante Smith-Pelly and logged 12:56 of ice time in the end.

But at the end of the day, there’s a reason why teams play pre-season.

“A good opportunity, obviously,” Peters had said prior to Monday’s clash.

“But, again, it’s Game 1 and there’s going to be some rust. Good or bad, we’re going to be very calm with an evaluation of a player.

“A guy isn’t going to make our team or get cut off our team based on (Monday).”

Goaltenders included.

Calgary Sun: LOADED: 09.17.2019

There were other highlights to consider.

Frolik’s marker came with 4:58 remaining in the second period, a floater which was made possible thanks to Sam Bennett’s work to dig out the puck along the boards. And, in fact, Bennett looked decent as a fill-in for Matthew Tkachuk on Frolik’s line with Mikael Backlund as the trio nearly scored a handful of times throughout the game.

Bill Peters kept that line largely in tact, and ditto for Flames 2019 first-rounder Jakob Pelletier who was with NHLers Milan Lucic and Derek Ryan. Pelletier did not look out of place in the first NHL pre-season game — albeit, against a pile of Canucks prospects that are likely bound for AHL Utica.

The last time Cam Talbot saw actual game action was in the springtime, a lopsided loss to the Dallas Stars while he was a member of the Philadelphia Flyers.

It was a forgettable year, one that prompted an off-season change of scenery and motivated him to ink a one-year contract with the Calgary Flames on July 1.

Fast forward to Monday — the 32-year-old’s debut at Scotiabank Saddledome as he was called into action in the second half of the Flames’ first pre-season action, a split-squad game against a very rookie-laden Vancouver Canucks team.

The exhibition docket is designed for teams to figure out what works and to shake off rust.

And in allowing three goals on nine shots which, in the end, was the difference in a 3-2 overtime loss to the Canucks, it’s clear Talbot and the Flames still have work to do.

“We have done some stuff in practices, but you can’t really replicate game reps,” Talbot said. “So it was nice to be out there and to feel the puck a little bit to get that game pace going.

“But I’m going to need a lot better out of myself coming into the season.”

The Flames dressed a group in Calgary which will closely resemble what the 2019-20 squad is going to look like in early October when the season kicks off for real.

The results are meaningless at this time of the year. Truly, they are.

And part of Jake Virtanen’s game-winning goal at 1:32 of overtime can be attributed to poor execution of a two-on-one by Flames defender TJ Brodie. But Talbot, who is supposed to be part of a 1A/1B goalie tandem with incumbent David Rittich, knew he needed to make that save.

All three of them, in fact.

*On Mitch Eliot’s goal, a third-period slapper that got through Talbot’s five-hole from the point to make it 2-1: “First one beats me right through my legs — not good.”

*On Virtanen’s first goal, a short-side marker that found a space between Talbot’s elbow and the post with 4:19 remaining in the third to make it 2-2: “Second one, I was just transitioning as he shot it and gave him a little bit too much of my short-side as I went down.”

*On the game-winner: “Third one I kind of flattened out and over-played the pass a little when he pulled up. I thought he was going to make that pass, and once he didn’t, I didn’t correct my positioning.”

All fixable mistakes, Talbot said.

“Things that can be cleaned up on my part, and a better result next time,” he said.

At one point, the game looked like a predictable outcome as the Flames were up 30-7 on the shot-clock after 40 minutes.

Michael Frolik and Johnny Gaudreau had Calgary’s goals — Gaudreau scoring first when he stopped netminder Richard Bachman’s clearing attempt just inside the blueline. Before the Canucks goalie could return to position, shot it essentially into an open net. That was 7:30 of the first period, and it only got busier for Bachman.

It took over 12 minutes for the visitors to register an attempt on net, and, at that point, the shot-clock was at 14-1 for the Flames and 17-2 at the period’s end.

In just over 32 minutes of work, Flames netminder David Rittich only faced four shots and stopped all of them. Talbot’s night was a little more complicated.

In the end, the shots were 38-13 shots in favour of the Flames.
NHL bad boy Rinaldo fired up for PTO with Flames

Zac Rinaldo is new around these parts, currently occupying the last stall in the Calgary Flames dressing room which, prophetically, is situated right next to the exit sign.

Just the way he likes it.

"I live for this sh**," said the chatty left-winger, with a grin.

The 29-year-old winger is fired up and, it seems, is his natural state. But he is here, in the city, on a professional tryout offer, for the first time in his NHL career.

"I'm not ramped up," he insisted, during the morning skate at Scotiabank Saddledome prior to Monday's split-squad preseason clash against the Vancouver Canucks. "I'm calm right now. If I do get ramped up, then I go over the edge, I do. I've learned that the hard way. I've been suspended here. I've been suspended there, I've gotten fined. As long as I stay, level-headed, I'm myself."

And similar to how he's managed to last this long in the NHL, he plans to scrap and claw and hang onto any role the team gives him. Quite literally, in fact.

Rinaldo is part of what some perceive as a dying breed of player. He is (or was) an agitator who once shared enforcing duties with Jody Shelley and the Philadelphia Flyers when he broke into the NHL — officially — in the 2011-12 season after spending the previous campaign, racking up 331 penalty minutes in 60 American Hockey League games with the Adirondack Phantoms.

But this is the first time he's been in this scenario, where he has to impart his energy and physicality in order to earn a job this season. A "kill or be killed mentality," he says.

"I thrive for these uncomfortable scenarios," said the Mississauga, Ont., native. "I like where I am right now. "That kill or be killed mentality is what I've lived for my whole life."

It got him a job in the NHL and a foothold with the Philadelphia Flyers for four seasons before bringing his energy to Boston in a trade where he had 52 games (and 83 points) with the Bruins in 2015-16. There, a springtime suspension saw him slapped with five games for an illegal hit delivered to Tampa Bay Lightning forward Cedric Paquette.

The last two years, he's been with Arizona and Nashville, respectively, but he will tell you that he has toned down his energy, although he still believes there is a place in the game for fighting. He admits the way he has played over the years has cost him.

Also, quite literally.

An eight game suspension in 2015 for charging Pittsburgh Penguins defenceman Kris Letang cost him US$73,170.72; the aforementioned hit on Paquette cost him US$51,829.25.

He also missed six games in 2017 when he sucker-punched Colorado defenceman Samuel Girard — another US$22,580.64.

"I learned the hard way," said Rinaldo who has 719 penalty minutes on his NHL resume along with 15 goals and 22 assists in 351 games. "I hated getting suspended. It’s not cool. I lose money and I don’t get to play hockey at the same time. It sucks. And I don’t regret anything I did but it comes with the game and it’s part of the territory."

Rinaldo is the definition of a repeat offender by the NHL’s department of player safety, with five NHL suspensions on his record. He has a reputation and he knows it. But, in Calgary, this is a clean slate.

"I’m in a really good place mentally and physically right now," he said. "And I know what I need to do and I’m just going to bring it (tonight) . . . this is a new day, a new team."
He’s understandably biased, but Ritch Winter thinks the Calgary Flames are a bargain.

Winter is the agent for speedy left-winger Andrew Mangiapane, a restricted free agent who scribbled his signature Sunday on a one-year, two-way contract, ending a brief stalemate and reporting for training camp at the Saddledome.

This wasn’t a case of meet-in-the-middle. With the Flames apparently not budging and Mangiapane not having arbitration rights until next summer, the 23-year-old left-winger ultimately signed for US$715,000, the qualifying offer that had been on the table since late June.

"It's a crazy system when you think about it — we all, in the real world, get to work wherever we want, whenever we want. Athletes are restricted in where they can go," Winter said during an interview Monday on the Eric Francis Show on Sportsnet 960 The Fan. "Andrew is clearly underpaid for what he is capable of delivering this year, but the system doesn't provide him with the opportunities that he wants.

"The system has become really problematic as we move forward. The system is getting so capped out throughout the league, it is becoming increasingly difficult to sign players. Teams are going to find they're going to have to trade some of their best players. It affects teams, it affects the fan-base and ultimately affects people like Andrew because when players have rights or significant leverage, like a Matthew Tkachuk as a result of his performance over an extended period of time . . .

"Guys that have limited rights, they get squeezed a bit. This deal doesn't fairly reflect Andrew's value. It clearly reflects the rights that have been granted to Andrew by the NHLPA."

When news of the signing broke Sunday afternoon, after the emerging forward had already missed three days of training-camp practices, some fans must have been wondering, 'What was he waiting for?'

Without a doubt, Mangiapane's camp was shooting for a little more loot. (Although he settled for a two-way pact, the Flames aren't going to risk losing him on waivers by assigning him to the minors.)

However, as Winter made clear during Monday's radio segment, they were also wary that an extended absence might cost an even bigger chunk of change during negotiations next summer.

Mangiapane emerged as an everyday NHLer in the second half of last season, celebrating his first big-league goal Feb. 9 and soon scoring seven more. His career stat-sheet currently shows eight tallies and 13 points in 54 showings at hockey's highest level.

"Sometimes the timing isn't what you want it to be and it overlaps into camp — not a big deal when you're looking at three or four days early in camp," Winter told Sportsnet 960 The Fan. "So the urgency doesn't really manifest itself until you get to about Day 5, 6 and 7. We evaluate these things based on what is likely to happen based on a player's performance this year, what that will lead to in arbitration next year. You're fighting over $150,000. Important, big money, significant to a young player . . .

But at the end of the day, if he is not prepared for the season and has a down year compared to what we would project him to have, then he could be costing himself five- or six- or seven-hundred thousand dollars.

"By the time you get to Day 5, 6, 7 in camp, you're running into that stage of camp where his lack of attendance is going to lead to affecting his performance during the season. Then the cost-benefit analysis changes. I always tell players, there are two things in every deal — money and opportunity, and don't squander the opportunity.

"Ultimately, that was the genesis of the conversation that we had (Sunday)."

While his pals were preparing for split-squad exhibitions against the Vancouver Canucks, Mangiapane was completing his fitness-testing Monday.

He will practise with his teammates Wednesday.

In an ironic twist, Mangiapane is now among the guys try to capitalize on another contract stand-off. As long as Tkachuk remains unsigned, there is an opening on the second line and top power-play unit.

The 21-year-old Tkachuk is among a handful of rising-star restricted free agents yet to report to their respective camps, a list that is also headlined by Brayden Point of the Tampa Bay Lightning, Mikko Rantanen of the Colorado Avalanche, and Patrik Laine of the Winnipeg Jets.

Those gents need to be signed by Dec. 1 to be eligible to skate this season in the NHL.

Winter, who also represents Flames captain Mark Giordano, suggested that date is way too late.

"We all know historically, players who miss camp, miss part of the season, are going to — generally — massively under-perform. And that's something that I think ultimately players, agents and management have to take a look at," Winter said during his radio interview. "Maybe the simple solution is if you're not signed Sept. 1, you're playing in the KHL, back home in Sweden or somewhere else.

"Deadlines are what get things done, we all know that. The deadline got Mangiapane's deal done. It wasn't the deal that we wanted, but it was the deal we wanted at the deadline."

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By Scott Cruickshank Sep 16, 2019

The newcomer’s pace, considered from every vantage point, is noteworthy.

Bill Peters, unprompted, brings it up the morning of the first day of the NHL’s preseason — the fact that No. 36 really moves.

“Well, (Zac) Rinaldo can fly,” the Calgary Flames coach said. “I didn’t know he was this fast. So I’ve been impressed with him — his work ethic and his ability to follow through. And he understands how to track.”

Too, for appreciative reporters, Rinaldo has provided a gale force of interview activity — peppery and cliche-free, with a rat-a-tat-tat delivery.

Wearing a bushy beard and a strip of nasal tape — he needs help breathing after having had his nose busted a half-dozen times, including twice during one painfully memorable weekend — Rinaldo leaps at every post-practice question.

Including the possibility that maybe, just maybe, he’s getting too ramped up to perform at his best.

“I’m not ramped up, I’m not ramped up at all,” he countered following Monday’s morning skate. “No, this is me calm, right now. You don’t want to see me ramped up, I’m telling you.”

Even a boilerplate query about his approach to the visiting Vancouver Canucks, the contract-free winger’s first display on behalf of the Flames, elicits an interestingly blunt take.

“For me, this is like kill or be killed, do or die, and I thrive in those situations. I really do,” the 29-year-old said. “I thrive in those situations when I’m very uncomfortable and that makes me perform, that makes me a lot hungrier. So, like I said, it’s kill or be killed, and I’m ready to kill.

“It’s more of a mindset — kill or be killed — as opposed to a (declaration of intent), you know what I mean? Every day I’m leaving everything here. I don’t go home and second-guess my work ethic or second-guess what I should have done here, what I should have done there.”

No different than the other gents here on professional tryout agreements — forwards Devante Smith-Pelly, Tobias Rieder, Alex Grenier; defencemen Andrew MacDonald, Eric Gryba — Rinaldo needs to prove he can still perform.

Fair to say that Monday — an oddball match in which the locals outshot the Canucks 38-13 but fell 3-2 in overtime — Rinaldo lived up to his billing, delivering a game-high six belts.

“It felt good,” Rinaldo said afterward. “It felt like I was exerting myself, getting all that pent-up energy that I was holding all summer long out of my system. It was nice.”

In a twist of line-making, Rinaldo patrolled the left side — with impressive rookie Glenn Gawdin in the middle — while Smith-Pelly held down the right flank.

Smith-Pelly noticed the arrangement.

“Yeah, it’s interesting,” he said of joining forces with Rinaldo, a depth-chart rival, “but it pushes me and I’m sure I’m pushing him as well. But I think everyone is pushing, PTO or not. You’re trying to make the team, so it gives you a little extra oomph if you aren’t feeling it on a particular night.”

As an opening bid for work, Smith-Pelly didn’t hurt himself — five hits, three shots, some power-play shifts.

“I thought personally I played pretty good,” the soft-spoken 27-year-old said. “Obviously, the role on the fourth line is to get in there, make it hard on the D, create energy, but I think I showed that I’m able to make some plays, too.

“I think everything I’m trying to show was showed a little bit tonight, but obviously you have to keep showing it.”

If everyone had been dealing with the effects of a summertime layoff, consider Rinaldo’s coat of rust.

He missed most of 2018-19 after wrenching his rotator cuff, an injury that required surgery. But one of his 23 appearances for the Nashville Predators did happen to take place at the Saddledome — where he scored his only goal of the campaign. Game-winner, to boot.

That kind of Calgary karma means, well, nothing to him. “If I dwell on that, I’m going to want to do it all the time,” Rinaldo said. “And if it doesn’t happen, I might get pitted off.

“This is a new day, a new team.”

Besides, his game is less about offence and more about offending. An undersized toughie — 5-foot-10, 192 pounds, more than 120 fights through junior and pro — he is well-established as a line-crocker. He’s been suspended at least five times at the NHL level, most recently for sucker-punching Colorado Avalanche defender Samuel Girard in December 2017.

“I do go over the edge and I’ve learned the hard way,” Rinaldo said. “Which all you guys have seen — I’ve been suspended here, I’ve been suspended there. I hated getting suspended. It’s not cool. I lose money and I don’t play hockey at the same time. It sucks. But I don’t regret anything I did — I don’t at all.”

Asked about that bad-boy notoriety, Rinaldo dives head-first into his response: “I mean, I didn’t choose that. I didn’t go out and say, ‘I want a reputation of being a so-and-so.’” He shrugs. “It’s all good to me. It doesn’t matter what you think of me. I really don’t care what people think of me as long as I’m true to myself.”

The Flames, on a regular basis, make noise about needing more speed, more snarl. Here it is, in one bargain-priced package. Rinaldo’s last two deals — with Arizona and Colorado — were one-year (two-way) jobs, topping out at $700,000.

At the moment, of course, he’s got no guarantees.

But worried? Not him.

“I live for this,” Rinaldo said. “I like where I am right now. The kill-or-be-killed mentality is what I’ve lived by my whole life. Getting drafted not in the top rounds” — 178th overall in 2008 — “and fighting my way through this, fighting my way through that. But I don’t have a contract, so it’s a little bit more amplified than in the past.”

For the PTO gang, it’s worth remembering the preseason is an unofficial look-see for every club in the loop. Not just the team that invited you.

After all, Brendan Morrison once upon a time went through a tryout with Vancouver, then signed with Calgary. Ditto Kris Versteeg, going through Edmonton’s camp, then committing to Calgary.

Rinaldo, however, insists he is singleminded in his pursuit of employment.

“Honestly, I don’t think, ‘Who else is watching?’ I don’t think that way, all day, every day. ‘Oh, I hope so-and-so’s watching.’ I don’t really care,” he said. “If you’re good enough, someone’s going to come knocking, no matter who it is. I’m just here to work every day and keep my nose to the grindstone and stay positive and out-work everybody.

“I’m bringing the same character, the same personality, that I have my whole life.”

Report from colleagues Thomas Drance and Harman Dayal who were monitoring Monday’s action in Victoria (where the Flames prevailed 4-3):

Former WHL Victoria Royals captain Matthew Phillips returned to his old stomping grounds to a warm reception from the home fans. And he paid them back by buzzing all night. “Playing in front of a soldout crowd — regardless of how much you want to make a game-600, more snarl. But one of his 23 appearances for the Nashville Predators did happen to take place at the Saddledome — where he scored his only goal of the campaign. Game-winner, to boot.

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Phillips hounded aquds on the forecheck throughout the evening, the energy he brought culminating in a brilliant individual effort that led to Dillon Dube’s goal in the first period. After receiving an outlet pass, Phillips entered the offensive zone and turned on the afterburners to turn a fairly harmless one-on-two into an excellent chance. He was able to take Canucks rookie defender Josh Teves wide, beat him with his speed, then curl a slick feed to the slot for Dube, who did a great job of catching up and burying the chance after his initial shot was denied.
For Phillips, though, the thrill was really in the return to Victoria.

"It was a classy organization, so many great people here," he said. "I can't say enough good things."

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
Eight (or nine) position battles to resolve as the Flames preseason begins

By Darren Haynes Sep 16, 2019

For the Flames, the preseason begins tonight and in earnest, so do the position battles.

There are a lot of them, too.

Up and down the lineup, both at forward and defence, there are job openings, and from returnees to rookies to veterans in training camp on PTOs, there’s no shortage of candidates auditioning for those roles.

Ahead of Calgary hitting the ice for two split-squad games with the Vancouver Canucks, here’s a primer on the many spots potentially available and the leading candidates, as well as dark-horse contenders, in each competition.

1. First-line right wing

This is a battle with an asterisk. It will only be a competition if coach Bill Peters follows through with his desire to try Elias Lindholm at centre. In their many years together, a revolving door of candidates has cycled through that right side beside Johnny Gaudreau and Sean Monahan. While Lindholm brought the most stability and was the best all-round fit so far, that coveted spot could become open again if Peters is intrigued enough to move forward with that shuffle.

Incumbent: Elias Lindholm

Lindholm played in that high-profile right wing spot most of the 2019-20 season and had a breakout season with 78 points (27 goals, 51 assists). His previous highs were 16 goals and 45 points. Shifting the 24-year-old to centre would add depth to the lineup as either he, or fellow Swede, Mikael Backlund, would then become the club’s third-line centre, but it would leave a big void on the team’s most important and most impactful trio.

Challengers: Sam Bennett, Matthew Tkachuk

It’s time for Bennett to show that the form he displays in the postseason can be a thing over 82 regular-season games. In the summer, as the ink dried on his new deal, he expressed interest in moving to his off-wing, which makes sense given he’s been stuck behind Gaudreau and Tkachuk on the left side the last three years. That limits not only the amount of top-six minutes but also means skating with the team’s third-best centre. Peters tried Bennett on the top line in Game 5 against Colorado. Should he get another chance, it’s incumbent upon him to seize the moment.

Tkachuk is another option and he would certainly drag his linemates into the greasy parts of the game. His unwavering desire to go to the net and battle for playing time between the pipes is expected to be just as tight. A wide-open competition to be the starter wasn’t the case the last two years when Mike Smith was the de facto No. 1 guy, even last year when Rittich started 42 times to Smith’s 40. Sure enough, come playoff time, it was the veteran that got the net. But this year, you sense the starter when the season begins has not yet been penciled in and this two-week edition of Goaltending Idol begins tonight.

Incumbent: David Rittich

If Brodie ends up moved and Peters wants to keep Anderson on the third pairing to anchor that duo, maybe it’s Stone who climbs onto that top pairing. He logged top-four minutes alongside Brodie when the Flames originally acquired him in February 2017. While far from ideal, you get the sense Peters could put almost anyone in that spot and Giordano would make the duo work.

3. Starting goaltender

David Rittich and Cam Talbot will make identical money this season — $2.75 million each — and the battle for playing time between the pipes is expected to be just as tight. A wide-open competition to be the starter wasn’t the case the last two years when Mike Smith was the de facto No. 1 guy, even last year when Rittich started 42 times to Smith’s 40. Sure enough, come playoff time, it was the veteran that got the net. But this year, you sense the starter when the season begins has not yet been penciled in and this two-week edition of Goaltending Idol begins tonight.

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At age 27, five years younger than Talbot, as the returnee and on a two-year deal compared to Talbot’s one, you’d think ‘Big Save Dave’ would get the starting nod against the Avs on Oct. 3 if neither separates themselves during the preseason. In other words, a tie goes to Rittich. But this is more than just about opening night. Who will emerge as the clear-cut No. 1 because no doubt this competition will continue all season. In increasing his workload from 16 to 42 starts in Year 2, Rittich’s save percentage also climbed from .904 to .911. If he keeps that going, the starting job will be his.

Challengers: Cam Talbot, Jon Gillies

I list Jon Gillies here in addition to Talbot because he’s 25 and he’s played four seasons in the minors. It’s go time for the former Providence College star. But the reality is there won’t be enough playing time in September for Gillies to unseat either Rittich or Talbot so it’s the former Oiler who is the biggest threat to secure the No. 1 job. Talbot’s coming off a bad year and we’re about to learn if that was a one-year blip, as the Flames believe, or the beginning of the end. He’s saying the right things about being ready to bounce back and a one-year deal can be a great motivator, but time will tell.

Dark horse: Tyler Parsons

He’s the biggest long-shot on this entire list — at any position — but Parsons, 21, says he’s feeling as good as ever coming into camp, thanks to his new Functional Range Conditioning style of training. He has the athletic ability and pedigree to open eyes in September. He won’t be able to win the job, but could he get a shot later this season, especially if one of Rittich or Talbot struggle? Stranger things have happened.

4. Second-line right wing

For this exercise, let’s assume Tkachuk signs soon and is back in his regular spot by October. His potential absence and any competition that results from that is looked at below. For now, the what-if is the potential opening on the right side of the second line, alongside the longtime duo of Tkachuk and Mikael Backlund. If Lindholm remains on the right side of Gaudreau and Monahan, this is the one top-six opening there could be and competition for that spot should be fierce.

Incumbent: Michael Frolik
Forming the 3M line, Michael Frolik has been the most frequent third wheel on that trio over the years. Inexplicable at times, this wasn’t the case last year. While a detailed review of how Peters deployed his lines in 2018-19 shows that Frolik spent the most there — nearly 50 percent of the games — Peters also used Frolik in the bottom-six. As the Czech enters the final season of his deal, he’s not a lock to be in that coveted spot and he may not be with the team. Like Brodie, Frolik’s contract ($4.3 million) also makes him a possibility to be moved to open up cap space.

Challengers: Sam Bennett, Derek Ryan, Andrew Mangiapane

Bennett is the guy to watch here. A prolific scorer in junior who has never had an extended opportunity to skate with top-six players in the NHL, he is anxious for that chance and feels given such a shot, he could break out offensively. Ryan is another intriguing option as it increases his role and gives the shutdown line a left/right faceoff option.

While it would be his off-wing, the newly re-signed Andrew Mangiapane is someone else who could get a look.

Dark horse: Austin Czarnik

For eight games last season, Austin Czarnik skated on a line with Tkachuk and Backlund. Coming off a disappointing season in which he spent plenty of nights as a healthy scratch, Czarnik is hoping to bounce back and earn regular playing time. He has the offensive skill set to provide a boost to that second line and while it’s a stretch to see him skate with that trio, Czarnik in that spot would deepen the Flames lineup and make them that much more formidable.

5. Third line centre

With Monahan and Backlund entrenched up the middle in the top six, one area for potential growth for the Flames is getting more out of their third line and that begins with the guy shouldering the responsibilities of center on that unit. The production from the third line was not good enough last year and one would think all options are on the table for this season.

Incumbent: Mark Jankowski

After starting on the fourth line and even being plucked in the press box for games three and four last season, Jankowski took over as the third line center shortly after and he remained in that role the rest of the season. While Jankowski was a threat shorthanded, he and James Neal and whoever was on the left side — most frequently, Bennett — were never able to generate much at even strength. As that prototypical big, strong centre, the team likes the 6-foot-4 Jankowski. But performance, not a player’s dimensions, should be the deciding factor.

Challengers: Derek Ryan, Dillon Dube

The obvious and easy alternative to try is Ryan, who centered the far more effective fourth line last season. You don’t have to squint to envision Ryan and Jankowski potentially flip-flopping lines this year if Ryan picks up where he left off a year ago and Jankowski is unable to generate offence at 5-on-5.

The wild card is Dillon Dube, who made the team right out of junior last year and is determined to make the team again this year, but this time not be sent to the AHL after a couple of months. Dube put up huge numbers in the AHL as both a left wing and a centre, making him another threat to form the 3M line shortly after and he remained in that role the rest of the season. After starting on the fourth line and even being plucked in the press box for games three and four last season, Jankowski took over as the third line center shortly after and he remained in that role the rest of the season. While Jankowski was a threat shorthanded, he and James Neal and whoever was on the left side — most frequently, Bennett — were never able to generate much at even strength. As that prototypical big, strong centre, the team likes the 6-foot-4 Jankowski. But performance, not a player’s dimensions, should be the deciding factor.

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Dark horse: Glenn Gawdin

It’s probably going to take an injury for Glenn Gawdin to break through this camp, but his game has come along nicely as he enters his second year of pro hockey. He’s on the radar because of the gaudy offensive numbers he produced in junior, but also as someone who prides himself on his 200-foot game and his work at the dot.

6. Third-line right wing

The ‘for sale’ sign went up on the lawn of the Flames’ third line RW spot as soon as James Neal was jettisoned out of town this summer. The one position where there is no incumbent, it’s a wide-open competition with many candidates. The pressure will be on this player, too, as the third line needs to be better and shoulder a greater share of the team’s offence this year.

Incumbent: James Neal (traded to Edmonton)

Five even-strength goals are all Neal mustered in a miserable one-and-done season with the Flames. Replacing Neal’s offence shouldn’t be an issue, the challenge will be getting two to three times that production from that spot this year, helping to take some of the pressure off of the top-six.

Challengers: Andrew Mangiapane, Austin Czarnik, Derek Ryan, Michael Frolik, Milan Lucic, Dillon Dube, Devante Smith-Pelly (PTO)

This could go one of many different directions. You could have a centre like Ryan move to the wing. You could have left-shooters like Mangiapane, Dube, Frolik or Lucic line up in their off wing. Or there’s Czarnik, who more often than not was stuck watching Neal’s lethargic play from the press box. In his second year with the Flames, could the talented Czarnik provide a jolt with regular top-nine playing time? Devante Smith-Pelly, in camp on a PTO, is another right-shot winger with a chance. We could be looking at a completely revamped third unit.

Dark horse: Tobias Rieder (PTO)

Two years ago, Rieder scored 16 goals with the Coyotes. That after notchting 13 and 14 goals in his first two NHL seasons. You don’t hear much about that though due to his output, or lack thereof, last season. Over 67 games in his one season with the Oilers, the left-shooting German, who plays the off-wing, got skunked — zero goals. He’s speedy and is only 26 years old. If he could rekindle his offensive game, he could earn a contract and surprise in this role.

7. Sixth and seventh defencemen

Four locks on defence are Giordano, Hanifin, Hamonic and Andersson. Assuming he remains with the team, you can also add Brodie to that list. Then things get interesting due to the result of Juuso Valimaki’s torn ACL, which has him hobbling around on crutches instead of retrieving dump-ins in his corner. Valimaki’s absence opens up a spot in the opening night lineup that otherwise would not have been there.

Incumbents: Juuso Valimaki (injured), Oliver Kylington, Michael Stone

When Valimaki went down with a high ankle sprain last season, it was Kylington that came up from the minors, took his place and in his first extended NHL audition, filled in admirably. After playing three full seasons in the AHL and being assigned to Stockton for the first couple months last year, those 187 minor league games, combined with his 38 NHL games last year, makes him the leading candidate for that No. 6 job. But he will have to earn it and there is competition all around him, including Stone, the recently re-signed (after being bought out) veteran.

Challengers: Brandon Davidson, Andrew MacDonald (PTO), Eric Gryba (PTO)

With Brodie being a left shot, who prefers the right side, it leaves the door wide open for the sixth and seventh defenceman to be a left shot (like Kylington) or a right shot (like Stone). With Kylington still waiver exempt and Stone likely being a guy who would clear waivers — after all, he was unsigned until Calgary circled back to him — that also raises the possibility that those two open spots on the roster could go to anyone, including the two defencemen in camp on a PTO. 33-year-old Andrew MacDonald (left shot) and 31-year-old Eric Gryba (right shot). Brandon Davidson, 28, a left-hand shot, is another option. The 28-year-old from Taber has spent most of the past five seasons in a depth role in the NHL, accumulating 162 games while bouncing between Edmonton, Montreal, New York Islanders and Chicago.

Dark horse: Alexander Yelesin

The youngest of the candidates at 23, the Russian free agent played the last three years in the KHL. While not tall at 5-11, he’s stocky and brings some toughness. His right shot is also attractive. He’s likely to begin in the minors as he gets acclimated to North America, but depending on how his game translates to the smaller ice surface, he could force himself into the mix sooner rather than later.

8. Thirteenth forward

If there are no surprises, no trades, no injuries and if the Flames get Tkachuk’s name on a new deal, there are 12 forwards that are virtual locks in their corner. Valimaki’s absence opens up a spot in the opening night lineup that otherwise would not have been there.

Incumbent: Austin Czarnik
A frequent spectator last season, the Neal departure should open up playing time for Czarnik. But there’s no guarantee of that if Czarnik doesn’t take a step forward himself and lock up one of those dozen starting jobs. It’s not a stretch to see Czarnik remaining as the extra forward with someone else passing him and securing a job.

Favourite: Dillon Dube

By thirteenth forward, that means 12th forward if it’s Dube as the club will not want the 21-year-old top prospect to be languishing in the press box when he could be playing 20-plus minutes in the AHL. Dube was the talk of last year’s training camp, grabbing an opening night spot right out of junior and remaining in the NHL for the first two months before the club decided he needed more playing time and sent him down. If he makes the team again this year, it could be for good, and it may not be in a fourth-line role either. Watch for him to threaten a top-nine job.

Challengers: Alan Quine, Devante Smith-Pelly (PTO), Tobias Rieder (PTO), Zac Rinaldo (PTO), Byron Froese

When it comes to experienced call-up options to have in Northern California or veteran press-box sitters to munch popcorn in Calgary, there is a long list of candidates thanks in part to all the PTOs in camp. The aforementioned Smith-Pelly and Rieder are guys you could see the Flames add as depth forward options. Zac Rinaldo, also on a PTO, is another candidate for that type of role. Already under contract, don’t forget about the versatile Alan Quine, who could play center or right wing. Quine got into 13 games for Calgary last year and put up five points (three goals, two assists).

Dark horse: Ryan Lomberg

Another option already in the organization is Ryan Lomberg. A poor man’s Garnet Hathaway, the scrappy Lomberg plays centre or left wing and at age 24, and after four seasons in the minors, he’s at the age where sitting in an NHL press box isn’t as detrimental to his development as it once was. While the upside is limited, he brings a shot of adrenaline to the lineup whenever he gets the tap.

Bonus: 9. Second-line left wing

In the continued absence of Tkachuk and with no progress being reported in those contract talks, it’s time to look at contingency options in his familiar spot alongside Backlund on the Flames second line.

Incumbent: Matthew Tkachuk (holdout)

The spot is his as soon as he signs. Tkachuk broke out with a 77-point season last year (34 goals, 43 assists). But until then, let the auditions begin.

Challengers: Sam Bennett, Andrew Mangiapane

It would be a huge opportunity and the two guys next in line are the two behind him on the left side depth chart — Bennett and Mangiapane. Bennett likely gets the first crack at it as he’s got the longer resume and it would be a natural progression for him on that left side. Plus, he’s performed well in short cameos alongside Backlund.

However, Mangiapane is also an intriguing option given how well he played in the second half last season. Conceivably, going back to the potential right wing opening on the same line, both could move into the top six if Peters tried a Mangiapane-Backlund-Bennett unit.

Dark horse: Dillon Dube

Just because he was slotted into the fourth line last season, Dube’s upside is real, so don’t rule out the possibility of him getting a look in Tkachuk’s spot. A Dube-Backlund-Bennett trio, for example, packs some intrigue.

With Calgary’s eight preseason games packed into 13 days, these next two weeks of auditions will offer plenty to talk about. Add in the uncertainty of Tkachuk’s situation, the potential of centres shifting to the wing and vice versa and the veterans on PTOs who are battling for jobs and there’s a myriad of possibilities to how everything will shake out.

September hockey is nowhere near as good as the real thing that gets going next month, but with so many jobs up for grabs, it will nonetheless be very interesting.

Let the auditions begin in 3, 2, 1 …

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
I feel ready. Is this the season Martin Necas sticks with the Hurricanes?

BY CHIP ALEXANDER SEPTEMBER 16, 2019 03:43 PM

RALEIGH-Is this the year for Martin Necas?

Is this the year the Carolina Hurricanes forward, a former first-round draft pick, finally combines his offensive cleverness and creativity, his slick hands and his innate speed with some dogged 200-foot intensity and determination all over the ice to make himself a full-time NHL player?

Necas would like to think so. He’s 20. He has had a taste of the NHL, briefly as it was. He wants more.

“I feel pretty good on the ice,” he said in an N&O interview Monday. “I feel like I’m a little stronger than last year. I feel ready but now I have to show it in the game, on the ice.”

Show it to Canes coach Rod Brind’Amour. While admiring the speed and skill that Necas can bring to the game, Brind’Amour wants a better-rounded player willing to do the dirty work on the ice as well as score pretty goals.

Asked Monday if he liked what he has seen out of Necas in the first four days of training camp, Brind’Amour said, “No.”

Brind’Amour didn’t elaborate and then said more good things than bad about Necas, the 12th overall pick in the 2017 NHL Entry Draft.

“He looks like he’s more mature,” Brind’Amour said Monday during his camp press conference. “He’s certainly more mature than he was last year on the ice. And off the ice he’s physically more mature. But again, we’ll see how it all comes together when he starts playing for real.”

NECAS TRIES TO STAY PATIENT

The Canes play their first preseason exhibition games this week -- at Tampa Bay on Tuesday, against Tampa Bay in Raleigh on Wednesday and then at the Washington Capitals on Saturday. Necas has been used on the right wing on Erik Haula’s line in camp opposite winger Warren Foegele, and the three could be used as a line in an exhibition game or two.

Necas made the Canes’ opening-night roster each of the past two seasons. He had a one-game cameo in 2017-18, making his NHL debut at Edmonton early in the season before returning to HC Kometa Brno in his native Czech Republic to finish out the season, also competing in the World Junior Championship and later the World Championship for the Czechs.

A year ago, he put in a full season on North American rinks that are smaller than the European ice. Again, he made the Canes’ opening-night roster. Again, he did not stick with the big team. After seven games, he was sent to the Charlotte Checkers, the Canes’ American Hockey League affiliate.

Necas expected to be recalled by the Canes last season. He tried to stay patient. That call never came.

“It was tough,” he said. “Some (Canes) guys are injured and sometimes you’re waiting (for) the call up and you’re feeling good on the ice but it doesn’t come. But that’s hockey. That’s hockey in the NHL.”

Necas tried to make the most of his time with the Checkers. Drafted as a center, he spent most of the season on the wing. He adjusted to the more confined rinks, which call for quick plays in tight spaces, finishing the regular season with 16 goals and 52 points in 64 games.

“The biggest thing was probably those little battles around the net, around the corners, and play more defensively,” Necas said. “It was hard the first couple of months but then I get used to it and I felt pretty good out there.”

And won a championship. The Checkers swept through the Calder Cup playoffs for the first AHL title in franchise history, beating the Chicago Wolves in the Cup finals. Necas had five goals and 13 points in 18 playoff games, including a team-high three power-play goals.

“It was a great run for us in the playoffs,” he said. “We had a really good team on the ice but also off the ice, which is really important, especially in the playoffs. That was cool. I really enjoyed it. It was great to win it.”

But that was last year. What Necas wants is to spend a full season with the Canes in the NHL.

BENEFICIAL ON THE POWER PLAY

When Carolina reached the Stanley Cup playoffs last season, Necas could only watch as a few of his Checkers teammates — Greg McKegg, Saku Maenalanen, Clark Bishop — all got their chances in the Canes’ lineup, in playoff games. The Checkers’ Calder Cup run didn’t end until early June, cutting into his offseason recovery time in the Czech Republic.

But Necas again threw himself in his conditioning workouts. He said he reported to camp at 195 pounds, about 20 pounds heavier than he was two years ago when the 6-2 forward was so slender, all arms and legs.

The Canes are overloaded with left-handed shooting forwards and Necas would give Brind’Amour a right-hander in the lineup. That also could be beneficial on the power play.

Necas scored his first NHL goal on Oct. 16, 2018 against Tampa Bay, with a one-timer off a Foegele pass, the force of his shooting motion causing him to pitch forward on the ice. The Canes lost 4-2 and Necas did not play another game for Carolina, being sent down to Charlotte the next day.

And this year?

“I want to spend the whole season here,” Necas said.

In Raleigh, with the Hurricanes, showing why Carolina made him a first-round pick.

Carolina Hurricanes forward Andrei Svechnikov says he has added confidence in his second preseason training camp.

News Observer LOADED: 09.17.2019
It's Day 4 of Hurricanes training camp, so while the lines still don't technically matter, they matter slightly more than they did the day before. And the so-called "Top Six" in session two Monday — Ryan Dzingel, Sebastian Aho, Nino Niederreiter, Erik Haula, Martin Necas, Warren Foegele — was flying.

It was hard to temper training camp expectations.

"Well, I don't know about (flying)," Dzingel contested, laughing. But he fits right in, huh?

"Yeah, for sure, that's how we want to play," he said. "And that's part of the reason I chose here, that's how Coach wants us to play and it's my style. Playing with Aho and Nino, you've gotta use your speed and get open for them. That's what I'm trying to do."

Head coach Rod Brind'Amour has a way of bringing you right back down to Earth.

"I hope we're fast, but there's a lot that goes into it," he said. "People said we were fast in years past, and we actually weren't very fast. It's how you play. You can have a lot of guys that fly around, but if the puck's not moving and you're not in the right places, it doesn't work."

If "expect to win" was last season's mantra, "expect to be really, really, ridiculously fast," might be in the running this year.

"What, you mean in practice?" Brind'Amour channeled Allen Iverson again when I asked if he likes what he sees. "We talkin' practice again? I don't know, it's hard to say. I'm hoping that when we get in the games I get a better feel for it. They're our best players, they should look good out there. It's funny, right? You have those guys and then there's a certain drop-off. So they should look like our best guys out there. It'll all come in the games. We'll see."

What about chemistry?

"We're not doing anything enough to say, 'Oh, there's chemistry there.' We're doing a lot of five-on-zero stuff so if we don't have chemistry in there then that's a problem."

OK, fine, he's absolutely right. But trust me, those guys were flying.

I'm starting to think Andrei Svechnikov actually lives at PNC Arena. He was on the ice so long Monday after his group's session that he started to collect a pile of ice chips, so he got the broom and swept them away himself. Brind'Amour had to coax him off the ice so the next session could begin. He's a special kid. Last season when he messed up a drill, he'd sort of beat himself up. This year, he's laughing a bit more. That's good.

You know what definitely doesn't live at PNC Arena anymore? The Justin Williams mural. He very well may be coming back, but for now, it's time to move on. The sense around the room is that obviously no one is going to replace Williams, but a few leaders will need to step up and do it their way for now.

There frankly wasn't much going on Monday and Brind'Amour basically told me to relax, but I figured I wouldn't quit on my training camp mission. Not sure if anyone could sum up the first few days of training camp quite like Brind'Amour: "Ask me all these questions later."

Finally. Sort of real hockey Tuesday. Will post lines.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
Alex Nylander shines with a goal and an assist, but the Blackhawks open the preseason with a 4-3 loss to the Capitals in OT

By JIMMY GREENFIELD CHICAGO TRIBUNE | SEP 16, 2019 | 8:47 PM

The competition to nab one of the few available forward spots on the Blackhawks got underway in earnest during Monday night's preseason opener.

Your early leader? Alex Nylander, who scored a goal and an assist in the Hawks' 4-3 overtime loss to the Capitals at Capital One Arena. Nylander was acquired from the Sabres over the summer for Henri Jokiharju.

Defensive Adam Boqvist also had a strong game, scoring a highlight-reel goal and assisting on Aleksi Saarela's first-period goal. Collin Delia made 25 saves for the Hawks, who left almost all of their key players back in Chicago.

Tom Wilson scored the winning goal for the Capitals.

Chicago Tribune LOADED: 09.17.2019
Brendan Perlini is a free spirit still searching for NHL success. Will he find it this season with the Blackhawks?

By JIMMY GREENFIELD

The passage of time has been the Blackhawks’ friend over the past year. Their prospects are starting to blossom, the front office has added considerable depth and talent, and the coaching staff has won over skeptical veterans.

For Brendan Perlini, time has seemingly come to a halt. It has been nearly a year since he joined the Hawks from Arizona in the Nick Schmaltz trade and not much has changed for him.

He’s still a happy-go-lucky sort who is as comfortable talking about soccer and movies as he is hockey.

He’s still as friendly and laid back as he was on the day he arrived on a 5:45 a.m. flight from Phoenix, hours after learning he’d been traded to the Hawks.

Perlini, 23, has the benefit of nearly a full season under his belt to feel acclimated to the organization, but he remains in the position of having to explain how he’ll find success rather than sustain it.

"Just come in and play my game," Perlini said. "I’m more comfortable here now than last year. Obviously, know all the guys and coaching staff. Come in, play my game, play hard every shift and wherever they put me out is where I’m going to work the hardest."

By the time the Hawks acquired him in November, Perlini had not lived up to the promise he showed when the Coyotes made him the No. 12 pick in the 2014 draft. There were times during parts of three seasons that he looked like the offensive weapon he was supposed to be.

The numbers his first two seasons were not terrible. He finished with 21 points (14 goals, 7 assists) as a rookie in 2016-17 and raised that slightly to 30 points (17 goals, 13 assists) a year later. But last season he had two goals and four assists in the Coyotes’ first 22 games and soon found himself headed to Chicago.

Perlini’s talents afforded him opportunities, but he remained maddeningly inconsistent with the Hawks. He failed to register a point during his first nine games after the trade. While Dylan Strome, who also came over in the Schmaltz trade and was similarly in need of a change in scenery, was elevated to the power play and began scoring at nearly a point-per-game pace, Perlini was in and out of the lineup.

But for a stunning seven-game stretch in March when he had eight goals in seven games, Perlini was ineffective. He closed out the season with one goal — on the final day — in his last 10 games.

"He plays with joy," Colliton said. "He loves being at the rink. We just want him to influence play away from the puck, work hard to get it back for himself and his linemates because when he’s on offense he’s extremely dangerous. That’s what we’re looking for."

And that’s what Perlini still believes he can give the Hawks. He should get more chances this season, but they won’t last forever.

"As long as you’re on the ice you can always do something," he said. "That’s the main thing for me. Just going to try to work my hardest wherever it is."

Perlini’s talents have tantalized Hawks coach Jeremy Colliton, who recognizes the benefits it would bring if those talents could be unlocked permanently and not just every few games.
So far, Alex Nylander looks like the top prospect Blackhawks gambled on

The former eighth overall pick always will be compared critically to Henri Jokiharju. But through four days of camp, he’s living up to the comparison.

By Ben Pope Sep 16, 2019, 9:06pm CDT

WASHINGTON — Alex Nylander always will be compared critically to Henri Jokiharju, the top defensive prospect the Blackhawks traded to the Sabres for the maligned forward.

Through four days of camp, however, Nylander is living up to the comparison.

“I feel comfortable there on the ice,” he said Monday. “I feel confident.”

Playing alongside Jonathan Toews and Anton Wedin in the Hawks’ intrasquad scrimmage Sunday, Nylander was very noticeable in possession — and he had a lot of possession.

But that was with Toews, that was an intrasquad scrimmage and that wasn’t his second full game in as many days. That’s a possible concern with Nylander, considering his reputation for inconsistency and even laziness with the Sabres.

In the preseason opener Monday, however, Nylander looked even better. He had a goal and an assist in the Hawks’ 4-3 overtime loss to the Capitals.

In setting up the Hawks’ first goal, the 21-year-old winger sprang the breakout with a smart pass, then got the puck back and put the moves on a Capitals defenseman before sending a perfect saucer pass to Erik Gustafsson for a one-timer.

“I felt like I couldn’t really dump it in or anything, so I turned back and saw [David] Kampf there, coming alive with speed, so I just tried to pass it to him,” Nylander said. “Got it back, tried to make a move, then I saw Gus waiting for the one-timer.”

For the second goal, Nylander showcased some different offensive skills by gliding through the goalmouth and backhanding the puck home after it had landed softly on his stick after a deflection.

Coach Jeremy Colliton had said Sunday that although playing Nylander alongside Toews looked good, he wanted to see him excel in other situations, too. On a line with Kampf and Aleksi Saarela, Nylander demonstrated he could.

“He made some plays,” Colliton said. “He definitely showed flashes where he was working away from the puck. He got above it a few times [and] caused turnovers. And when he does that, he creates opportunities for himself in transition. He’s got a great release. He went to the net on his goal, so good to see that.”

NHLPA opts not to reopen CBA

The NHL Players’ Association announced it won’t opt to reopen the collective-bargaining agreement with the league next summer, guaranteeing it will remain in place until it expires in 2022. NHL owners had announced their decision not to reopen the CBA in late August.

That’s good news for Hawks fans hoping to avoid — or at least delay — another lockout. Still, the parties have some differences to work through, including health care, escrow payments, Olympic participation and the definition of “hockey-related revenue,” the Associated Press reported.

That list likely will grow by 2022, especially because league revenues are expected to rise significantly in the next three years. The NHL’s U.S. television contract with NBC expires in 2021, and the ensuing sweepstakes and deal(s) are expected to be a windfall for the league.
Blackhawks defensemen adjusting in camp to Jeremy Colliton’s possession-focused system

Training camp offers opportunity for Blackhawks’ old-timers and newcomers alike to finally fully acclimate to Colliton’s philosophy.

By Ben Pope Sep 16, 2019, 12:52pm CDT

WASHINGTON, D.C. — NHL scoring rose to 6.02 goals per game last season, topping the six-goal plateau for the first time since 2006, as the league continues to shift from size and strength to speed and skill.

With young Blackhawks coach Jeremy Colliton at the forefront of that revolution, the Hawks’ defensemen have spoken repeatedly — since the start of camp Friday — about their new focus on puck possession.

“When there’s opportunities to jump in, I think everybody has to do that,” Olli Maatta said Sunday. “That’s hockey. Nowadays, when you watch teams that have success, they get all five men on offense and defend with all five men.”

“Tactically now, you’re trying to put [opposing forwards] in a bad situation, and then jump in when you have the upper hand,” Brent Seabrook said Saturday. “Whereas before, you were trying to jump [immediately] and get them to get rid of the puck as fast as you could.”

“We’re trying to dictate a lot more.”

The Hawks brought in Maatta and the currently injured Calvin de Haan over the summer to restructure their back end, which last season allowed a whopping 3.56 goals per game. Maatta and de Haan were known with the Penguins and Hurricanes, respectively, as responsible defensive defensemen.

Their reliability will certainly be needed in the defensive zone: the Hawks’ 14.2 high-danger scoring chances allowed per game last season were the most in the 12 years the statistic has been kept.

But they’ll also be needed to help transition the puck from defense to offense, an expectation only recently asked of even hockey’s most conservative defensemen.

The Hawks, unsurprisingly, also struggled in that regard last year, with only the Devils failing on a higher percentage of their defensive zone exit attempts (per data analyst Corey Szajder). Duncan Keith was the team’s only defenseman to grade above-average in exit attempt frequency and below-average in failure rate.

Maatta — who was criticized often in Pittsburgh for his slow pace — and Seabrook, who has faced the same criticisms in Chicago lately, will likely struggle the most with such roles.

That fact makes Colliton’s first impressions of Maatta encouraging.

“He makes a lot of plays. Like, he’s great on the breakout,” the coach said after Sunday’s intrasquad scrimmage. “He really influences play positively with the puck. ... [He] moved well, closed on guys, was able to transition us from defending to going the other way.”

Seabrook, on the other hand, said he sought out assistant coach Sheldon Brookbank during the opening practices of camp to work specifically on adapting to Colliton’s schemes.

He needs the work: he had the second-highest zone exit failure rate among all NHL defensemen in 2018-19. And he admits he’s still not fully comfortable: “I think I’m still sort of stuck in between a little bit,” he said.

There’s plenty of time yet to get there, however. Camp is just four days old, and although neither Maatta, Seabrook, Keith nor any of the Hawks’ other vets will play in Monday’s preseason opener in Washington, they’ll all likely appear in a few of the home games before heading to the Czech Republic for the Oct. 4 regular-season opener.

“Systems nowadays, with the way teams are, it’s important that everyone’s on the same page,” Keith said. “[If we] try to get on the same page early on, the quicker we can iron out everything, the better off we’re going to be.”

Chicago Sun Times LOADED: 09.17.2019
Blackhawks’ signings of Dominik Kubalik, Anton Wedin and Philip Holm are a result of a strong European pipeline

Another year, another three European free agents battling for roster spots with the Blackhawks.

By Ben Pope Sep 16, 2019, 6:55am CDT

Two-way defenseman Philip Holm had an excellent first season in Russia’s Kontinental Hockey League, and a number of KHL teams spent their summers pursuing him.

His NHL opportunities were far less guaranteed. He had failed to break out of the American Hockey League, playing a single game for the Canucks in 2017-18. But then the Blackhawks called.

“I wanted to give it a shot,” Holm said Sunday. “It feels like the past couple of years, they’ve been signing a couple of European guys [every year], and they’ve taken a spot on the team and made a big impression. So, of course, that was one of the things that made me want to sign here.”

Holm is right about the Hawks’ affinity for Europeans. General manager Stan Bowman had success bringing in overseas free agents Erik Gustafsson in 2015, David Kampf in 2017 and Dominik Kahun in 2018, so he went for the trifecta in 2019, signing Holm, Dominik Kubalik (the leading scorer in Switzerland’s pro league) and Anton Wedin (a star in Sweden’s top league).

By reaching so frequently into the European leagues for players overlooked by the NHL — of those six aforementioned signings, only Gustafsson and Kubalik were drafted, and neither were Hawks picks — and giving those players substantial roles on the NHL team, the Hawks have developed a strong reputation across the Atlantic.

That reputation now is developing into something of a pipeline.

Coming off a breakout season with Swedish club Timra IK, Wedin talked to a number of countrymen after the Hawks invited him to North America. Like Holm, he liked what he heard.

“Everyone was like, ‘Chicago is a great place to be and great people in the organization and the best crowd in the league, and it’s a really great sports town,’” Wedin said. “Everyone had good memories from here, so that’s one reason [I came].”

The Hawks are considered a Swede-heavy team around the NHL, with Wedin and Holm joining Gustafsson, Robin Lehner, Carl Dahlstrom and others. But they could be described more broadly as Euro-heavy.

Even for Kubalik, a native of the Czech Republic, Chicago offered the ability to reunite with Kampf, a teammate on the under-20 Czech national team.

“It’s always nice to come somewhere where you know somebody who can help you,” Kubalik said. “He’s a little bit mad at me right now because I’m still asking him: ‘What’s that? Where [are] we going? Where’s the training room?’”

Kubalik, Wedin and Holm aren’t locks to make the Hawks’ roster this season, which perhaps reflects even better on their collective willingness to sign with the team.

Wedin and Holm will have to battle past a number of others ahead of them on the depth chart, although they’re off to good starts. Holm has been impressive in practice, and Wedin drew praise from coach Jeremy Colliton for his play alongside Jonathan Toews and Alex Nylander in the intrasquad scrimmage Sunday.

Kubalik, a playmaking wing who has mentioned several times how quickly he gets the puck off his stick (whether for pass or shot), is the best bet to land among the Hawks’ 18 skaters for their season opener Oct. 4 in Prague.

Oh, yes, Prague. That’s just 60 miles from Plzen, his hometown. That, too, was an enticing perk.
Added weight should help Andrew Shaw deliver more poundings in Act II with Blackhawks

John Dietz

Andrew Shaw and Jonathan Toews have a way of getting under each other's skin. They've jawed at each other countless times while working on faceoffs at practice. "Cheater!"

They didn't hold back last season when Montreal was in town, engaging in a shoving match near the Blackhawks' bench in the first period.

Then they exchanged pleasantries Sunday, twice shoving each other around during the second period of an intrasquad scrimmage at the United Center.

"We always go at it," Shaw quipped. "We went at it in the room after. ... (Right from the) first camp that's when it started off, and I'm sure it'll continue until we're both done playing hockey."

Yes, Andrew Shaw is definitely back.

He may have a wife and a toddler -- with another baby on the way -- now, but this version of Shaw isn't all that different from the one who was traded to the Canadiens in 2016.

Well, that's not entirely true.

While he still plans on playing with the hellbent style that made him a near overnight success and instant fan favorite almost eight years ago, the 5-foot-11-inch Shaw is about 15 pounds heavier now. That added weight -- mostly muscle, but perhaps with "a couple beers in there, too" -- allows the veteran to attack opponents more efficiently.

"I'm more solid out there," said the 182-pound Shaw, whose contract carries a $3.9 million cap hit and runs through 2021-22. "I'm still physical. I'm just not maybe as reckless. And with being heavier I can go into an area and don't have to throw my entire body to kill somebody. It's more I have strength and weight behind me."

After a disappointing 2017-18 campaign in which he managed just 10 goals and 10 assists, Shaw posted a career-high 47 points and scored 19 goals for Montreal last season. Some of that production can be traced to the fact that he saw significant time on the Canadiens' top line with Jonathan Drouin and Max Domi.

And now he's definitely a candidate to play with Toews, Patrick Kane, Alex DeBrincat, Brandon Saad and/or Dylan Strome in a top-six forward role.

"Sure," said coach Jeremy Colliton. "But that's part of what we're trying to build. Whether he's top six or on the fourth line, he's still going to contribute. We want to have that personality to our lineup. We've got a bunch of guys that can move up and down."

The key for Shaw will be staying healthy.

The 28-year-old missed an average of 20 games a season with Montreal as he dealt with multiple concussions and an issue with his left knee.

Another concussion could spell trouble, but Shaw said the rehab helped him strengthen the knee.

"It just helped my stride," he said. "I feel like I'm a better skater since."

When the Hawks were swept by Nashville in the 2017 Stanley Cup playoffs, some pointed to the fact that they weren't "playoff ready." Sure, they were the No. 1 seed in the West, but players like Shaw were nowhere to be found.

That theme continued over the last two seasons, both of which ended without playoff berths.

With Shaw back in the fold and the addition of the tough, rugged Drake Caggiula last December, it should be much tougher to push Colliton's team around during the 2019-20 campaign. They also figure to score more of those dirty goals around the net.

And behind the scenes, it figures to get a lot louder -- and a lot more interesting -- in the locker room.

"Oh yeah," Shaw said when asked if he's already started chirping some of his new mates. "I like (Calvin) de Haan right now. I've kind of been all over him a little bit. Stromer (Dylan Strome) as well. Good, fun guys.

"It's going to be a good year. I think we're going to have a lot of success as well."

Daily Herald Times LOADED: 09.17.2019
Four takeaways: Blackhawks drop preseason opener to Capitals in overtime

By Charlie Roumeliotis September 16, 2019 8:45 PM

Here are four takeaways from the Blackhawks’ 4-3 overtime loss to the Washington Capitals at Capital One Arena in Monday’s preseason opener:

1. Alex Nylander’s impressive debut

The Blackhawks have about eight to nine forwards vying for a few spots on the Opening Night roster and Nylander is one of them. After standing out in Sunday’s training camp festival at the United Center, he did so again in the Blackhawks’ preseason opener in Washington.

Nylander scored a goal, added an assist and registered three shots on goal in 16:40 of ice time. The offensive upside is evident; it’s all about whether he can put it together and do so on a consistent basis.

2. Adam Boqvist stands out

GM Stan Bowman revealed on the first day of training camp that Boqvist will be turning pro this season, and the 2018 No. 8 overall pick had a strong preseason debut on Monday.

Boqvist recorded a primary assist on Nylander’s tally in the second period and later scored a pretty goal when he roofed one past Capitals netminder Pheonix Copley. He finished with four shot attempts (three on goal), two takeaways, two blocked shots and one giveaway in 16:10 of ice time. He was noticeable at both ends of the ice, which must be encouraging for the coaching staff.

3. Other standouts

— Aleksi Saarela was on a line with Nylander and David Kampf, and all three of them played well. The trio generated seven scoring chances at 5-on-5, according to Natural Stat Trick, and connected for two goals. Saarela was credited with the first after parking himself in front of the net and redirecting Gustafsson’s shot from the point.

— Brendan Perlini had a strong finish to the game. He led all skaters with eight shot attempts and five shots on goal, registered two hits and one takeaway in 16:40 of ice time.

— Ryan Carpenter won eight of 13 faceoffs for a percentage of 61.5. Expect him to be relied on frequently for defensive zone draws this season.

4. Overtime winner

It was an entertaining 3-on-3 overtime for preseason hockey, but the Blackhawks came up on the losing end of it. Good thing the points don’t count this time of year.

Dylan Sikura was caught playing the role as a defenseman and Tom Wilson took advantage by blowing right past him and putting it behind Collin Delia for the game winner:

Tom Wilson called GAME! pic.twitter.com/XlKf2RSz6U

— NHL on NBC (@NHLonNBCSports) September 17, 2019
What kind of role will Andrew Shaw have with Blackhawks?

By Charlie Roumeliotis September 16, 2019 10:20 AM

Andrew Shaw is back in Chicago, but things are different from the last time he was here.

His teammates have changed, the practice facility is new and the state of the team recently went through a retooling period. Perhaps most notably, the entire coaching staff has been overhauled and is now led by 34-year-old Jeremy Colliton.

It's a different system than Joel Quenneville's and Shaw is trying to get caught up to speed as quickly as possible.

"Watching a lot of tape," Shaw said. "Want to make sure come season time there's no thinking, it's just doing. Just repetition is going to get over that and watching video and really focusing on every drill and every video session as well." 

What Shaw's role will be with the Blackhawks this season remains to be seen, but the early answer is: it could be anything and everything.

Last season in Montreal he had his best offensive output playing on the wing — right to be exact. But in the first three days of training camp, including the team scrimmage game on Sunday at the United Center, Shaw was centering a line with Patrick Kane.

Colliton is simply experimenting with the idea to see what kind of options he may have during the season, not necessarily how he wants to start on Opening Night.

"It's an option," Colliton said. "We just wanted to try it. He'll probably play wing, too. You'll see him in exhibition, we'll move him around. There's a bunch of guys who we're just looking to see if we can find some chemistry and where they're comfortable and where they can help us and maybe multiple positions, multiple roles, where guys can be valuable. I think that's important as a coaching staff, we want to find that out as early as we can."

Shaw is a player who can and probably will play on all four lines this season. He's also someone who can play any of the three forwards positions. That's what makes him a valuable cog in the system because he can be moved around basically anywhere.

"I think that's part of what we try to build is to have, whether he's top six or could be on the fourth line, he's still going to contribute," Colliton said. "We want to have that sort of personality through our lineup. We have a bunch of guys who can move up and down. That's probably, obviously the lines [Jonathan] Toews and [Patrick] Kane are on, they're going to be dangerous and are always going to be thought of as Top 6, but we want to keep teams honest no matter who's on the ice."

Asked what role he expects to play this season, all Shaw would say is he plans on playing the same way no matter where he's placed in the lineup on a nightly basis.

"Same thing," Shaw said. "Go to the net, go to the dirty areas, get pucks, skate hard, play physical. Same thing. Same thing I've been doing no matter where I play. It's what makes me successful, it's what I'm good at, it's what's going to keep me in the league."
Ben Eager remembers one particular practice after a rough night out. He ran a drill, stickhandled, took a shot, scored, and nearly collapsed in the corner as his teammates laughed.

"You don't need to grab that cop's gun!": The 2009-10 Blackhawks played hard and partied harder.

By Mark Lazerus Sep 16, 2019

Ten years ago this week, the Blackhawks embarked on an unforgettable season that ended in the franchise's first Stanley Cup in 49 years. Throughout the season, The Athletic will be looking back on the 2009-10 campaign, and the colorful cast of characters that re-established Chicago as a hockey town. Read Scott Powers' oral history on Patrick Kane's Cup-winning goal.

This excerpt from If These Walls Could Talk: Chicago Blackhawks by Mark Lazerus is printed with the permission of Triumph Books. For more information and to order a copy, please visit www.triumphbooks.com/WallsBlackhawks.

On Jan. 22, 2010, a Friday night, Patrick Kane, John Madden and Kris Versteeg found themselves in the back of a limousine with some young women. Kane's and Madden's shirts were off. Kane's belt was unbuckled. Madden was photographed flexing his bicep with a champagne flute in his hand. Beers were everywhere. The photos, as such photos do, quickly found their way to the Internet, and controversy ensued.

Kane apologized, and said it was maybe time to "grow up a little bit." It was one of those incidents that reporters love to deem a "black eye," and the word "embarrassment" certainly got thrown around.

But here's the thing. That night wasn't so much the exception as it was the rule.

"They just got caught," Adam Burish says with a laugh. "It was the same thing every night in almost every city.

The 2008-10 Blackhawks were the last of a dying breed — a team of kids who genuinely enjoyed each other's company, and who spent nearly every off night (and then some) painting the town red. They were modern-day throwbacks — hard-drinking, hard-living, hard-working, seemingly invincible 20-somethings who came along just before Twitter and Instagram put the fear of God into every athlete and celebrity.

They didn't go out for a beer. They went out for beers.

"It was the closest team I've ever been on, it was great," Dave Bolland says. "Whenever we'd go out and have beers, the whole team would be out. Not just a few guys, but the whole team. We were a really tight group. That's one thing you don't see that much in the NHL. A lot of guys have wives and kids and it's tough to get everybody out. But we were all young, and whenever we did something, we did it as a team. You didn't have Instagram or Twitter. We had tons of fun. We'd always go out and have drinks. And that just made us closer. When we went into games, we knew we were so tight with each other, that if anything happened on the ice, you'd go down for one guy. You'd be there to pick up for one another."

There was safety in numbers, too. With a bunch of reckless 21-year-olds running around, it helped having a phalanx of teammates in the bar at all times to make sure things stayed fun and goofy, not reckless and stupid.

"Everybody looked out for each other," Burish says. "If somebody was doing something stupid, or crossed the line where they might get in trouble, somebody would smack them and say, 'Knock it off. Buff (Dustin Byfuglien), stop it. You don't need to grab that cop's gun! I know he's going to give it to you, but don't run around the bar with it. I know it's unloading, but put the gun away, man! Everybody made sure things didn't get out of hand."

Their drinking exploits — many of which centered around The Pony, a pretty standard bar in the Lakeview neighborhood of Chicago, where much of the team lived — are legendary. And even the Blackhawks themselves were often surprised at how well they rebounded each morning on the ice.

"I don't know how that just happened," Eager gasped at the time. "Muscle memory just took over."

"As you get older, that muscle memory leaves you," Eager says. "My last two years, I didn't have that. I couldn't do that anymore. But back then, it felt like we could do anything."

And the Blackhawks, now one of the most buttoned-down, stodgy operations in professional sports, didn't discourage it. Joel Quenneville wasn't exactly a teetotaler during his playing days, and as long as the players worked hard on the ice, he didn't care if they played hard off the ice. During the annual "ice show trip" in 2009, when Disney On Ice took over the United Center, Quenneville brought the team to Las Vegas in between games in San Jose and Edmonton. It became an annual trip, but at the time, it was something of an experiment.

The Blackhawks stayed at the Bellagio, watched the Super Bowl together in a special party room set up by the team, and then, in Burish's words, "went crazy." The next day, they trudged through one of the hardest practices of their lives, sweating pure alcohol on the ice before boarding a plane to Edmonton. It was a serious party, and led to some serious discussions on the flight.

"Guys, we've gotta win," Burish told somebody, anybody, everybody. "We've gotta rattle off a couple wins here. I know we're hurting, but let's go. Because we want to do this again."

Sure enough, the Blackhawks beat the Oilers 3-1 and beat the Flames 5-2 before exhaustion finally caught up to them in a 7-2 loss in Vancouver.

"Quenneville was the best thing to happen for us, because he recognized that we partied hard, we had fun, but we practiced and played really hard, too," Burish says. "We practiced less than anybody, because he wanted us fresh for the games. So it was good for us, because we could do more stuff as a team and be close, have fun, get a couple days off, and go all-out at the rink instead of doing it half-assed. He just let us run and let us do our thing. As long as we showed up for those 30 minutes of practice, 'Hey, whatever you guys want to do, go do it.'"

Much of that bond was formed in the minor leagues, in Norfolk and Rockford, where so many of the players — Troy Brouwer, Bolland, Burish, Colin Fraser, Versteeg, Byfuglien, Niklas Hjalmarsson — came up together. A hockey dressing room can be a lot like a high school cafeteria, broken down into cliques with little interaction between them.

Not that Blackhawks team.

"You're always going to have your friends on the team that you like more than others, that's just natural," Brouwer says. "And all hockey players are nice guys, but it's basically a forced friendship. You're put in a room with 30-35 guys, including trainers, and you have to interact with them every day. But the great thing about that team is we actually liked everybody. We'd get off the bus and it'd be like, 'Everybody meet in the lobby at 6:15.' Someone would want to go out for steaks, some for Italian, whatever. And you didn't go just with your specific friends, you'd go where the food you wanted was. Because you liked everybody. It was such an easy team to get along with. It's kind of a cliché when you say you always remember the people on your championship team. But it's true. You might not see them for four or five years, then you go and have dinner and a beer with them and you never stop talking. It was fun to be a part of."

Patrick Sharp has been on four championship teams, including a Calder Cup in the AHL, and even he says there's never been a team like that 2010 squad.

"That 2010 team was as close on and off the ice as I've been on," Sharp says. "I think it was just a perfect storm of a lot of guys that had been in Chicago for a couple years together. Then you had a group of players that were in the minors together, who all graduated to the NHL together. And you had basically the same exact team for two, three years. All our girlfriends at the time were the same age and hung around together. On any given night, there wasn't any cliques, it was a group of people — it could be completely random. Whoever was hanging out that night, was hanging out. I think that's a huge part in why we had the success we did."

At 33 years old, Brent Sopel was basically a grandpa on that squad.

"Burish, Colin Fraser, Versteeg, Byfuglien, Niklas Hjalmarsson — came up together. A hockey dressing room can be a lot like a high school cafeteria, broken down into cliques with little interaction between them. Not that Blackhawks team.

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At 33 years old, Brent Sopel was basically a grandpa on that squad. Playing with a bunch of wild and crazy kids was like finding the hockey fountain of youth. Sopel could hold his own with the young guys from time to time, but he had a family. Being on the road with those guys was like being a kid again.
“When you’re on the circus trip and you’re stuck in San Jose for six fucking days, oh, my God,” Sopel says. “You’ve got to break up the monotony somehow.”

Sopel’s adopted son, Paul, was 17 at the time, so his teammates were closer in age to his son than to himself. He called himself a “babysitter, basically.”

“I’ve never been a part of a team that got along on all levels through every single guy as much as that team,” Sopel says. “That team was special for so many reasons.”

Not the least of which is that it was the last of its kind.

“Who are you getting a beer with these days?” Fraser asks, wistfully.

“They just play video games. From birth, all these kids are born and bred superstars. From age 5, all they do is live, breathe and eat hockey. They’re like robots. They’re professional athletes with perfect bodies. They don’t put any poisons into their bodies, no extracurriculars. Meanwhile, we’d get into Nashville and roll right out to Tootsie’s — not five of us, not 10 of us, all 20 of us. Every time. These guys nowadays? They’re sitting in their rooms playing video games.”

There might never be another team like the 2010 Blackhawks, not in the age of social media, not when everyone has a camera on them at all times. And the way they see it, that’s too bad.

Because it turns out, being a professional athlete can be all sorts of fun.

“When I got to San Jose, it was just a boring culture, a boring team,” Burish says. “I liked nothing about it. I remember guys saying, ‘Well we don’t do team parties and we don’t do stuff in the playoffs, we don’t go for team dinner, blah blah blah, good teams don’t do that.’ I said, ‘Yeah? Well, this little Stanley Cup team I was on a couple years ago? After we swept you guys in four games? It was an afternoon game. We were done by 6. The entire team — the wives, girlfriends — we went to a bar until 4 in the morning. Everybody. Every single one of us. With the Stanley Cup Final coming up, everybody was there until at least 1 or 2, and half the team stayed ‘til 4 in the morning. And you know what? We wound up doing OK.”

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Sam Girard has a long contract, big future with Avalanche

By MIKE CHAMBERS | September 16, 2019 at 5:23 PM

The Avalanche’s smallest player unveiled a big smile when looking back on his summer.

July 31 highlighted Sam Girard’s summer in his native Quebec. When the 5-foot-10, 170-pound defenseman signed a seven-year contract extension on the last day of July, Girard obtained the most NHL security among all Avs players.

Girard, 21, will be under contract for eight years, because this season he will conclude his three-year entry-level contract paying him $700,000, plus bonuses. He’ll make $5 million annually from 2020-21 to 2026-27.

“It’s fun to be back with the boys. I had a great summer. Trained a lot — on the ice and off the ice. And I got the good news (the contract), and I’m really happy to be here for eight years,” Girard said Monday during the fourth and final day of training camp. “Lot of confidence from (the Avs), and that’s what I want. I want to stay here a long time. I really like the city, the organization, all the guys. They are so nice. I feel at home here. I’m just happy about it and excited for the next eight years.”

Girard played in all 82-regular-season games last season and committed just three penalties, joining Chicago’s Dominik Kahun as the only NHL players to play in every game and have six or fewer penalty minutes.

Girard’s average ice time of 19:53 was the second-highest average of anyone who committed just three minor penalties.

His goal this season is again to stay out of the penalty box, make clean breakouts and help maintain possession at the blue line in the offensive end. But the big thing he wants to add to his game is more shots and, he hopes, more goals.

Girard had just four goals last season.

“I need to shoot more,” he said. “My vision is one of my qualities, and I know I’m capable of doing more offensively. That’s going to be my goal this year. I’m going to be better in all areas. I think that’s everybody’s job, to be better.”

The left-shooting Girard probably will begin the year paired with a righty — either veteran Erik Johnson or rookie Cale Makar. The 6-foot-4, 225-pound Johnson had Girard’s back throughout the regular season before Makar joined the team in the playoffs after winning the Hobey Baker Award as college hockey’s best player.

Girard and Makar (5-11 and 187 pounds) were a terrific pairing during the second-round playoff series against the San Jose Sharks. But in the regular season, the Avs might put a bigger guy with each of their two young puck-moving standouts.

“I don’t really care who they’re going to put on the ice with me, because we’re so deep at D,” Girard said.

Power up. The Avs practiced their power play for the first time Monday, and the first unit featured the top line of Nathan MacKinnon, Gabe Landeskog and Andre Burakovksy, plus second-line center Nazem Kadri and Makar. Burakovksy is replacing unsigned right wing Mikko Rantanen, and Kadri is replacing Colin Wilson, who is recovering from shoulder surgery. Kadri is expected to remain the crease-front presence when Wilson is cleared.

Footnotes. Defenseman Nikita Zadorov didn’t skate Monday after suffering a lower-body injury Sunday. Bednar said Zadorov is day to day.

… The Avalanche reassigned the following players to the Colorado Eagles of the American Hockey League: defenseman Josh Anderson, winger Travis Barron and centers Josh Dickinson, Brandon Saiyeon and Igor Shvyrev. The Avs also returned goalie Trent Miner to his junior team, the Vancouver Giants.
Are the Avalanche finally a four-line team? It appears that way

By Ryan S. Clark Sep 16, 2019

Six exhibition games along with approximately three weeks of preseason camp practices will likely provide Jared Bednar and his coaching staff further insight into shaping the roster that will be the Colorado Avalanche.

One thing they already know? This is the most forward depth they have enjoyed in Bednar’s tenure. Everything Avalanche general manager Joe Sakic did this offseason came with the premise of making his team stronger. Typically that conversation begins with how he acquired Andre Burakovsky, Joonas Donskoi and Nazem Kadri to supplement the top line while strengthening the team’s overall top-nine forward setup.

Don’t forget Sakic’s decision to recruit and then sign Pierre-Édouard Bellemare. Because that move could prove to be just as vital in that it potentially allows the Avalanche to possess the personnel needed to consistently deploy four line combinations over the course of the regular season.

Here’s why that matters. Part of what plagued the Avalanche last season was generating and then sustaining continuity among the team’s four lines. Bednar had it with the first and third lines. The second and fourth lines? Yeah, not so much. Exactly how many different fourth-line combinations did Bednar shuffle through in 2018-19?

Try 36 amalgamations over an 82-game regular-season slate. It rotated through 16 forwards such as Sven Andrighetto, Gabriel Bourque and Marko Dano, all of whom are no longer with the Avalanche. Bednar, later in the season, turned the three-person line into a two-forward makeshift unit to allow defenseman Ryan Graves to receive more playing time.

“I don’t think of myself as I am already on the team,” said Bellemare, who signed a two-year contract. “I know I have to work hard to be able to earn that spot. This is why I think I am here because I am going to compete for whatever the reason is. … I am ready to take the role that the team needs me in. Having a reliable fourth line often helps you go a long way and it helps your top line with their minutes so they can be fresher the whole year.”

Bellemare’s humility comes days after Bednar said during media day the 34-year-old was fourth on the center depth chart behind Nathan MacKinnon, Kadri and J.T. Compher. The initial belief is Bellemare would anchor a fourth unit consisting of wingers Matt Calvert and Matt Nieto.

Creating a Bellemare-Calvert-Nieto line hypothetically gives the Avalanche a multi-faceted shutdown line. This is a construct that Bednar has had in previous campaigns. Including last season when he paired Calvert and Nieto alongside center Carl Soderberg for a combination that simultaneously served in a defensive-minded role while also being counted upon to help supplement the team’s scoring efforts beyond the top line.

So, what’s the difference between last season and this year minus Soderberg? The moves Sakic made in free agency or with trades led to the Avalanche adding five new forwards. Burakovsky and Kadri are expected to pair up with Tyson Jost to create a second line while Donskoi could be playing with Compher and Colin Wilson to comprise a third line.

If that happens, it pushes Calvert and Nieto to the fourth line where they would potentially be with Bellemare. They would be able to fulfill that demand of being a shutdown line. Bellemare has won more than 50 percent of his faceoffs over the last two seasons to immediately give his team possession. Combine that with Calvert and Nieto’s quickness and it could create a combination capable of going from end-to-end in a smoother manner compared to what the Avalanche had last season with its numerous fourth lines.

“As far as us three being a line, it’s just so much easier to play with two guys who you know are extremely defensively responsible,” Calvert said. “It just makes you feel solid every time and it allows you to go on offense. You know your centerman is going to have your back. You know (Nieto) is going to be backing you.

“It’s going to be a solid line if that’s the way it shakes out.”

There are a few more potential benefits in creating a Bellemare-Calvert-Nieto line. One of them being all three can either combine or individually find a way to work an opponent’s last nerve. Bellemare kindly described Calvert and Nieto as “pests on the ice but in a good way” with how they play.

Calvert reinforced his antagonistic tendencies while also surprising his teammates with his willingness as a new-age enforcer in a contemporary NHL setting. The 5-foot-11, 192-pound Calvert was tied for the league lead in fights with six and that was as many as Calvert had in his final three seasons combined with the Columbus Blue Jackets, according to HockeyFights.com.

“You have to be bacteria for the other team,” Bellemare said. “Be kind of a nightmare to play against and when you have four lines maybe we are not getting the goals but the crowd can either get rattled or pumped up and then when your top line is coming off, then you can just finish the job, right? That’s the goal for a fourth line.”

And then there is actually getting goals.

Calvert scored 11 goals last season and it was the fourth time in the last five campaigns he reached double figures. He also finished with a career-high 26 points while playing all 82 games for the first time in his career. Injuries held Nieto just 64 games but the 26-year-old former Boston University winger came away with 23 points. Nieto was on pace to score what would have been a new personal best with 29 points if he would have played a full season’s worth of contests.

Bellemare also hit the double-digit mark for the fourth time in his five-year career. He finished with six goals and nine assists for 15 points across 76 games with the Vegas Golden Knights last season.

“I think for guys like us we want to be playing in the offensive zone,” Nieto said. “We take pride in playing defensively but we are at our best when we are applying pressure in the other team’s zone. All three of us have the ability to make plays and go to the hard areas in front of the net and get goals like that. If I end up with those two, I’ll be real excited to play with them.”

Perhaps the most notable facet of playing them together is it would create a familiarity on the penalty kill. Calvert and Nieto were both key members of a unit that overcame struggles to become the fourth-best kill in the league starting in mid-February en route to helping the Avalanche reach the playoffs.

Calvert was 12th in short-handed ice time among forwards in the NHL last season with 184:28, per MoreHockeyStats.com. Nieto was 20th with 168:14. The Avalanche will be counting upon them and Bellemare to fill the void left by Soderberg. He was third in the league among forwards in short-handed ice time with 203:55.

“I think most teams around the league find themselves not wanting their fourth line against other team’s first and second lines,” Nieto said. “I think when you have four deep lines like that, you can put a fourth line against any of the other top lines and if it is me, Belly and Calvy, we’re such defensively responsible players that if we end up against a top line, we’ll get the job done.”

Notice how all three couched the idea of playing together? Each one of them knows Bednar could opt to go in a different direction because there are other alternatives to consider. The Avalanche re-signed promising center Vladislav Kamenev while also adding winger Valeri Nichushkin.

Kamenev was starting to find consistency while playing on the fourth line when he paired Calvert and Nieto alongside center Carl Soderberg for a combination that simultaneously served in a defensive-minded role while also being counted upon to help supplement the team’s scoring efforts beyond the top line. A year ago, Bednar used the fourth line as a way to integrate a forward coming back from injury or one who was called up from the AHL to assimilate into the team. He would also use it as a proving ground for a struggling skater in need of a strong performance.

It is possible he could do the same this year. Either way? He’ll have options.

“If you have four lines firing, that’s a dangerous team to defend,” Calvert said. “Because a lot of times you go up to the game sheet before the game and they got the other team’s roster there. You’re looking and going, ‘I know I need to worry about these guys because line two’s decent’ and after that you see what you got and what your matchups are...
like. ... If we're that deep, it's going to put wins on the board for us and it's going to be a fun year."
Nikita Zadorov locked into the top four.

There are roster spots to be had on the blue line. The injuries to veterans Compher, Donskoi, and Sam Girard at the point. A line that could provide a more established center core behind MacKinnon for the first time in three seasons. The Avalanche's top power play unit could be more effective this season. The Avalanche's second power play unit on Monday consisted of MacKinnon, Gabriel Landeskog, Andre Burakovsky, and Kadri with defensemen Cale Makar at the point. Once Rantanen is under contract, the expectation will be to push one of Kadri or Burakovsky to the second unit. Since Kadri is prepared to set up camp in the opposition's crease, similar to the role Colin Wilson played last year, he is the more likely player to remain on the top unit.

The situation does not seem to be as cutthroat as other restricted free agents around the league. But with that being said, Sakic would be wise to eliminate the distraction on what could be a Stanley Cup contending season and sign his young forward to a contract as soon as possible.

Nazem Kadri has impressed his peers with his all-around play. The blockbuster deal the Avalanche and Toronto Maple Leafs announced on July 1 made sense for both teams. Colorado desperately needed a second-line center, while Toronto was able to sacrifice a talented forward to upgrade its blueline with Tyson Barrie. But what comes as a surprise to most, most notably Nathan MacKinnon, is just how talented Kadri actually is.

“His a lot better than I thought he was,” MacKinnon said. “I think in Toronto he was held back a little bit. He’s a great shutdown player and will continue to be that, but he’s got a lot of offensive upside that I don’t think the league has seen yet.”

Kadri has been skating on a line between young forward Tyson Jost and newcomer Joonas Donskoi. The three have impressed from the onset, even drawing praise from head coach Jared Bednar in the early days of camp.

With the acquisitions of Kadri and Pierre-Edouard Bellemare, Colorado has solidified its center position. Bednar confirmed that the Avalanche will utilize Bellemare in a shutdown role on the fourth line. Last year Colorado rotated forwards on its fourth line, often using it ineffectively. Bellemare on the fourth line, along with Kadri on the second and J.T. Compher on the third, gives Colorado a more established center core behind MacKinnon for the first time in three seasons.

Colorado is set to open its 2019 preseason at 7 pm on Tuesday at home against the Vegas Golden Knights. Here are the biggest stories coming out of training camp.

The Colorado Avalanche kicked off their 2019 training camp last Thursday with medical and physical testing. Since then, the Avs completed three days of on-ice camp sessions and on Monday morning, their first practice of the preseason.

The Colorado Avalanche’s contract holdout, Kadri’s talent among Avalanche training camp storylines...
The final day of training camp for the Colorado Avalanche wrapped up today as the Avs took to the ice to work predominantly on special teams work.

Each session was broken into PP/PK units and boy were there some interesting looks. Colorado has more intriguing PP QBs than at any other time that I could recall. Today they had Bowen Byram, Calle Rosen, Conor Timmins, Cale Makar, and Sam Girard all running units today.

That’s a pretty deep and intriguing group, especially when you consider Erik Johnson is still on the NHL team and he’s spent a lot of his career on the PP.

But as intriguing as those defensemen were, it was a variety of forwards who stood out the most.

Nazem Kadri, game-changing center?

Once again I use this space to be impressed with Kadri. The center was acquired over the summer to bring stability to a second line that had very little the last few years and early returns are positive.

Kadri took the ice with the big guns today and dropped right into the middle, a spot last year where J.T. Compher and Colin Wilson frequently rotated in and out. While no Mikko Rantanen meant this unit wasn’t operating at full strength, Kadri’s addition will clearly have an impact here.

Compher and Wilson were used primarily to fight for rebounds, screen goalies, and pass the puck right back to whichever player passed it to them. Kadri showed today that he brings a significantly more dynamic element to that spot.

When there was space, Kadri shot. When there wasn’t, Kadri passed. When he shouldn’t have gotten the puck in the first place because he was being hounded by penalty killers, he still made something happen with the puck. The skill level was impressive and Colorado has to feel encouraged by what it saw today. If they ever get Rantanen back, this unit should easily be in the top 10 again, if not much higher.

Second unit struggles

The second unit consisting of Compher, Tyson Jost, Girard, Valeri Nichushkin, and Joonas Donskoi certainly didn’t have the same juice as the top unit. The lack of a true triggerman on that unit was a glaring issue as they could move the puck around but none of them were comfortable letting it rip.

When each of them did try to shoot, it was an adventure. Jost’s one-timer looks totally unnatural to him, much as it did Compher last year when he tried to let it fly. Girard still doesn’t look comfortable getting pucks through traffic but he looks great as a distributor.

This whole issue is probably temporary, however, because the second unit will likely get Andre Burakovsky once Rantanen does join the Avs. Until that happens, though, it’s fair to wonder what all the puck movement on the second unit is even building towards.

Injured guys make their mark

Two prominent young players have missed significant time due to injuries but had impressive days today and are looking to make their mark this preseason.

Conor Timmins finally flashed today as he efficiently ran a power play and was able to get pucks through traffic and on net. He was strong today as he continues to work himself back into shape after missing last season with the concussion.

Vladislav Kamenev continued his strong training camp with another good day as he aggressively fired pucks when it came his way. He was set up as a triggerman on the half-wall so his willingness to shoot was a welcome sight to those who remember Colorado’s PP being extremely passive last year as they looked for the perfect pass.

Kamenev also made several nice passes through traffic that were tape to tape and on point. The more he can play like that, the harder it will be to keep him off the final roster.

Other notes

Nikita Zadorov left the ice yesterday during the scrimmage and did not return. His update came today as he tweaked something in his lower body and is considered day to day.

Cuts began today as the Avs sent Trent Miner back to the WHL and Brandon Saigeon, Josh Dickinson, Igor Shvyrev, Josh Anderson, Travis Barron to the Colorado Eagles. The roster sits at 51 players with the preseason beginning tomorrow. They have to get to 23 players before opening night on October 3.

I wasn’t a fan of his signing but it’s been hard to Valeri Nichushkin so far as he’s been two days behind the team in their camp work. He’s clearly struggling with conditioning and you can bet he’s been dealing with jet lag after flying in late Friday. Hopefully, the preseason games give him an opportunity to really show what he can do.

Avalanche goaltending prospect Justus Annunen signed a two-year extension with Karpat of the Liiga today. While Annunen is getting ready for his first season in Finland’s top pro league, that security means he likely won’t be making his leap to North America until that deal expires in 2022. His rights with the Avalanche expire June 1, 2022, so he has the next few years to prove himself before Colorado has to make a decision whether or not to give him an ELC. If he really lights it up, most of these European contracts do contain out-clauses regarding NHL opportunities.

BY AJ HAEFELE  SEPTEMBER 16, 2019

Avalanche Train
Marko Dano says it “feels great” to be back in Columbus.

If Dano can replicate the strong rookie season he had for the Blue Jackets five years ago, chances are that most of Columbus will be happy he’s back, too.

Dano, who was chosen by the Jackets with the 27th overall pick in the 2013 draft, recorded eight goals and 13 assists in 35 games in his rookie season, 2014-2015.

The summer after that, however, he was dealt to the Chicago Blackhawks as part of the Brandon Saad trade, which began a period of turmoil for the 24-year-old.

After spending half a season with the Blackhawks, he played two and a half years with the Winnipeg Jets, where he had 22 points over 82 games. Last season, he went scoreless in eight games with the Colorado Avalanche.

Now he’s back where it all started.

"I'm happy that I'm going to be a part of this organization again,” said Dano, who has 45 points in his career. "Everything was going perfect here, but then once I left, I couldn't find a way to be a successful part of an NHL team.”

For a Blue Jackets team looking to make up the 87 points it lost with the departure of Artemi Panarin, an invested and productive Dano could be a godsend.

"For any team that loses a couple of big names, there's an expectation that the new guys will help," Dano said. "We have a group of guys who are excited for the opportunity.”

Scrimmage season

For the second straight day, the Blue Jackets had two scrimmages in the middle of their practice schedule. As on Saturday, both practices consisted of Blue, White and Gray teams and had a 20- to 25-minute running clock.

The first game, like the two on Saturday, ended in a shootout. Riley Nash, Josh Anderson, Emil Bemstrom and Nick Foligno scored for the White team, while Seth Jones (two goals), Ryan McInnis and Justin Scott scored for the Gray team. Nash scored the game-winner in the shootout.

The second scrimmage ended with a 3-1 win for the Gray team. Not only was it the first scrimmage of training camp that didn’t end in a shootout, but it also featured the goal of the weekend from Ryan Murray. He slotted a shot between two defenders over the glove side of goalie Elvis Merzlikins to give the Gray team the lead. Markus Hannikainen and Oliver Bjorkstrand also scored in the scrimmage.

"I thought the scrimmages today were markedly sloppier," coach John Tortorella said. "It was slower, which I think is due to that fact that it was the fourth day … we have some guys who are really tired right now.”

As on Saturday, all six goalies played in the scrimmages. Joonas Korpisalo, Veini Vehvilainen and Brad Thiessen all started in goal. Hayden Stewart, Merzlikins and Matiss Kivlenieks saw time in goal as well.

Weekend atmosphere

If this weekend was any indication, Blue Jackets fans are ready for the hockey season to start. Saturday's crowd was standing room only for almost all of the practice, even with Ohio State playing at noon. Although the IceHaus was significantly less crowded on Sunday, the fans were vocal throughout the scrimmages.

"It was great," Tortorella said.

Tortorella watched both scrimmages from the bleachers, where he took time to sign autographs and chat with fans.
The end of the offseason has not ended the Blue Jackets’ consideration of an offer sheet.

By Aaron Portzline Sep 16, 2019

COLUMBUS, Ohio — You can believe Blue Jackets general manager Jarmo Kekalainen has faith in his veteran core, is excited about the club’s many rookies and has confidence that his young, untested goaltenders are ready to play in the NHL.

But it would be foolish to assume Kekalainen and the Blue Jackets aren’t still considering major moves to bolster their roster in 2019-20 and beyond.

The end of the offseason has not brought an end to the Blue Jackets’ interest in other teams’ restricted free agents, even though their attempts to sign RFAs to an offer sheet have so far been unsuccessful.

Sources have confirmed to The Athletic that the Blue Jackets were among the NHL teams that had conversations in July with the agent for Toronto Maple Leafs forward Mitch Marner, who signed a six-year, $65.4 million contract with the Leafs over the weekend.

The agent, Darren Ferris, told TSN on Monday that he discussed offer sheets on Marner’s behalf with two clubs, but would not disclose which teams. He said he “discussed numbers” with the clubs, but no offers were extended or rejected.

But Marner’s signing does not end the potential for offer sheet drama. Winnipeg’s Kyle Connor and Patrik Laine, Calgary’s Matthew Tkachuk, Colorado’s Mikko Rantanen and Tampa Bay’s Brayden Point are all unsigned as NHL pre season games begin and training camps head into their second weeks.

The Blue Jackets have had repeated internal discussions this summer about offer sheets — whom to target, how to arrive at an agreement with a player that would be nearly impossible for the player’s current club to match, etc.

These discussions could drag into the season, too. RFAs must sign (with somebody) by Dec. 1 or they have to sit out the entire season, but there’s nothing preventing an offer sheet until that date.

Kekalainen declined to speak directly about offer sheets, but offered his standard line from earlier this summer: “We’re looking at all ways possible to improve our club.” He repeated that Monday.

The Blue Jackets match all the criteria for a club in a position to sign a player to an offer sheet:

• they are roughly $10.5 million under the NHL’s salary cap, the fourth most in the league. (This is counting their 12 projected forwards, eight defensemen and two goaltenders.)

• they have a need for high-end talent, after losing forwards Artemi Panarin, Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel to free agency over the summer.

• after putting together a club he believed could win the Stanley Cup last season, it’s difficult for Kekalainen and the front office to accept taking a step back.

• the Blue Jackets have all of their future first-round draft picks. If they acquired a player via offer sheet with an average annual value worth $10.568 million, they’d have to compensate the club that’s losing the player with four first-round draft picks.

The Blue Jackets believed Marner, who had 26-68-94 in 82 games last season, was worth four first-round draft picks, but only if they could get him signed to a long-term contract, preferably a seven-year contract.

Marner said all along that he didn’t want to leave Toronto, and he reiterated that after signing his long-term deal with the Leafs. But there were reports, by Sportsnet’s Elliotte Friedman, that Marner’s agent and the Blue Jackets discussed deals involving shorter terms.

Now, perhaps, the Blue Jackets have moved on to other targets.
Dallas Stars

Takeaways from the Stars’ 2-0 preseason loss to St. Louis: Joel Kiviranta flashes potential; Thomas Harley impresses

By Matthew DeFranks

Stars forward Joel Kiviranta displayed flashes of potential during Monday night’s 2-0 preseason loss to St. Louis, his first game for Dallas after signing as a free agent out of Finland over the summer.

Kiviranta finished the game with two shots on goal, but found his way to the slot often, generating some of the team’s best scoring chances. In the first period, he deflected a Denis Gurianov feed wide of the net. He also had the Stars’ first shot of the game when he took a puck wide and wristed a shot on net with 4:03 left in the period. (St. Louis had the game’s first eight shots.)

Kiviranta sailed a shot high of the net in the second period on another feed from Gurianov, and glanced a puck off Adam Wilcox’s glove on a third-period rush.

“We thought he was good tonight,” Stars coach Jim Montgomery said. “He was one of the guys that did win battles on walls and made good plays through the neutral zone. ... A couple chances, drove the net. He’s one of the forwards that if you’re rating on a scale of five like we do postgame, he’s probably at least a three.”

Kiviranta played the last five seasons in Finland’s Liiga, averaging 34 points across the last two seasons.

Montgomery said he was overall disappointed in the forwards that nobody took a step forward to claim the few open spots available at the bottom of the Stars roster. Gurianov, Kiviranta, Jason Robertson, Stefan Noesen and Ty Dellandrea are all in the mix for roster spots and all of them played Monday night.

Montgomery said Gurianov, Dellandrea and Nick Caamano would also play Tuesday night in Minnesota.

-- Thomas Harley, the Stars’ most recent first-rounder, got off to an uneven start on Monday night, taking a hooking penalty, falling in open ice and looking like a 188-pound teenage defenseman, but settled down in the final two periods.

When asked who impressed him on Monday night, Montgomery singled out Harley.

“Real good poise, our best breakouts and I thought our best passing plays he was involved in,” Montgomery said.

Harley has been paired with veteran defenseman Roman Polak throughout training camp and was again on Monday night. Polak played with Miro Heiskanen for the majority of the season last year, and Montgomery said pairing Polak with first-round phenoms

“Roman’s good, his communication is excellent and having someone 240 pounds out there with a first-round pick makes sense to me,” Montgomery said.

-- Joe Pavelski made his preseason debut for the Stars, centering the top line with wingers Kiviranta and Gurianov. Pavelski brings a dash of versatility to the team, and he’s capable of shifting to right wing as well to potentially play on a line with Tyler Seguin or to allow Roope Hintz to play center.

On Monday morning, Montgomery said Pavelski would likely play right wing in the next preseason game he plays and that he’d move around the different forward positions during the regular season.

-- Dawson Barteaux looked overmatched multiple times during Monday’s game, which is not surprising for a 19-year-old, sixth-round pick playing in his first NHL preseason game. The right-handed defenseman (one of the few in the Stars’ pipeline) plays for Red Deer in the WHL.

-- While the teenagers sometimes looked physically overwhelmed Monday, college products Riley Tufte and Rhett Gardner played to their size. Tufte is listed at 6-foot-6 and 230 pounds; Gardner at 6-foot-3 and 210 pounds. Tufte manned the net-front on the first power play unit, and Gardner went 7-for-12 on faceoffs.
How Jason Dickinson is learning on the go entering his first season as the Stars’ NHLPA players rep

Dickinson serves as his teammates’ liaison to the NHLPA, taking their concerns to the association.

By Matthew DeFranks

FRISCO -- Jason Dickinson feels like he's being thrown into the fire.

As a potential top-six winger for the Stars? Nope. As their fourth-line center? Nope. For the first time in his career, Dickinson enters a season as the NHLPA’s player rep for the Stars, and it came during an important summer of negotiations for the NHLPA with the league.

"I'm learning as I go, but there's a lot of phone calls, a lot of meetings, a lot of trying to sort out where we're all at, where negotiations are at with the NHL," Dickinson said. "I'm trying to wrap my head around everything as I'm going because it's only my second year in the league, I'm a little bit naïve to some of the rules and things that we've got right now. It's very eye-opening."

On Monday afternoon, the NHLPA announced that they would not opt-out of the current collective bargaining agreement at the end of this season, and that the CBA would instead run through the 2021-22 season.

"While players have concerns with the current CBA, we agree with the league that working together to address those concerns is the preferred course of action instead of terminating the agreement following this season," NHLPA executive director Don Fehr said in a statement. "We have been having discussions with the League about an extension of the CBA and expect that those talks will continue."

The NHL previously declined to opt-out of the CBA on Aug. 30, with commissioner Gary Bettman saying it was important to build on momentum created with players instead of potential "disruptive consequences" that could have come with ending the agreement after this season. Escrow and international hockey could be points of contention between the league and its players during negotiations for the next CBA.

Dickinson serves as his teammates’ liaison to the NHLPA, taking their concerns to the association and also reporting back to them about what's happened in meetings and phone calls. He was the alternate player rep last season, but assumed the role after player rep Connor Carrick was traded to New Jersey in February. Now, Ben Bishop is Dickinson's alternate.

"For me, this is going to shape part of my career," Dickinson said. "A lot of the older guys, it'll only be a portion, but for me, this is going to be a huge chunk of my career here. It's something I should take an interest in. Even if I wasn't a rep, I'd want to be involved in at least knowing what's being said.

"I've always been fascinated by it, like it is a whole different world and I didn't really appreciate it or understand it to the extent that I do now. But now that I've been involved with it, I'm extremely interested in it. It's amazing the stuff that actually goes into all that. It was way over my head before that."

Dallas Morning News LOADED: 09.17.2019
Stefan Noesen says donning a Stars jersey will be ‘surreal.’ See why the Plano native is ‘optimistic’ about making the team

By Matthew DeFranks

FRISCO — Stefan Noesen tried to imagine what Monday night would feel like, when the Plano native got to don a Stars uniform and play a preseason game at the American Airlines Center.

"I think putting on the initial uniform is going to be a little bit more surreal," Noesen said. "First shift, you’ll probably see me running around. Might run through a wall or something, I don’t know."

Noesen, 26, is in Stars training camp on a professional tryout, his potential ticket to an NHL contract after the Devils did not extend a qualifying offer to him, making him an unrestricted free agent. He only played 41 games for New Jersey last season due to a knee injury, totaling three goals and five assists.

"Getting up and down the ice last year was kind of a hassle for me," Noesen said. "Walking up stairs was not great. This year, just starting to get back in the swing of things feels good."

Noesen skated at the Stars’ facility in Frisco when he was back in Texas for his grandfather’s golf tournament in Lubbock, and later heard from the organization about a PTO.

Eleven forward spots are spoken for, leaving two or three openings at the bottom of the roster. Noesen is battling prospects Ty Dellandrea and Jason Robertson and players who spent time in the AHL last season like Justin Dowling, Joel L’Esperance and Denis Gurianov.

"I’m optimistic, just in the sense that it’s home for me," Noesen said. "I’m a little more comfortable. ... Had a couple teams that were sniffing, but home’s home. When you get a chance to make the team, there’s probably five or six of us competing for a couple spots. Kind of fun."

Noesen was a minus-1 in 14:03 of playing time in Monday’s game, a 2-0 Stars loss to St. Louis.
Jim Montgomery, Stars will use preseason to get used to some NHL rule changes

Beginning this season, teams can now choose which side of the ice (left or right) the ensuing faceoff is following an icing or beginning a power play.

By Matthew DeFranks

FRISCO -- Jim Montgomery's job this preseason includes some strategy.

While much of his time will be spent evaluating the 60-something players currently on his roster and fine-tuning his puck pressure and puck possession system, Montgomery also has to adjust to new rule changes implemented by the NHL.

Beginning this season, teams can choose on which side of the ice the ensuing faceoff takes place following an icing or beginning a power play. It allows a team to pick the strong side for its center or the weak side for the opposing center. For the Stars -- whose top six includes two right-handers (Tyler Seguin and Joe Pavelski) and two left-handers (Jamie Benn and Roope Hintz) capable of taking faceoffs -- the distinction could lead to more offense.

Montgomery said that instead of a 50% chance of winning a faceoff, teams could skew the odds as high as 75% or 80%.

"There's no question as a staff we've talked at length about it and how we need to be prepared," Montgomery said. "I'm glad we have seven exhibition games. I wish we had eight, so we would be pretty familiar with it. Those faceoffs can be a huge advantage if you know who's on the ice and who's beating who on faceoffs. ... It's almost like you can run a play that you think is going to work."

A less subtle change in Montgomery's job is the adjustment to coach's challenges.

While more plays that lead to goals are now challengeable (hand pass, high-sticking the puck, and puck out of play), a lost coach's challenge now results in a two-minute penalty for delay of game. A lost offside challenge already carried that penalty last season, but a lost goaltender interference challenge was penalized only with the loss of a timeout.

A second lost challenge results in a double-minor penalty.

"We've got to be 99% sure now," Montgomery said. "I like the rule, because now it's do it for the obvious ones. The [offside] ones that are like a back leg is up in the air that take away a goal, we need more goals in hockey, so I'm all for this. I don't like to slow the game down either. The less challenges, the better. It might be more challenges here early as us coaches get used to it, but I think the games will speed up."

Dallas Morning News LOADED: 09.17.2019
It’s a big year for the Dallas Stars in the goaltending department.

The NHL tandem is coming off career seasons; Ben Bishop probably should have won the 2019 Vezina Trophy; and the future in the crease will be greatly shaped during the 2019-20 season as Jake Oettinger, Landon Bow and Colton Point jockey for the top spot as Bishop’s heir apparent in the organization.

Progress in the crease will greatly determine the present and the future for the Stars, which is why the five NHL-contracted goaltenders were among the most-watched players this past weekend at NHL training camp.

With that in mind, I wanted — to steal a cliche — to better know the men behind the mask. Over the course of this week, we’ll be running the five conversations in order of pro experience, from Jake Oettinger today to Ben Bishop on Friday.

The conversations have two things in common: all the subjects are goalies and each interview starts with the same question, “Was there ever a time you weren’t going to become a goalie?”

Up first is Oettinger, whom the Stars drafted in the first round of the 2017 NHL draft. He recently finished his collegiate career at Boston University and is embarking on his first full pro season. We chatted last week during the NHL Prospects Tournament in Traverse City, Michigan.

Was there ever a time you weren’t going to become a goalie?

No, I think the reason I played was we had a really good goalie on our team, and he got pulled up to play on the Squirt A team, it might have been peewees. So we needed a guy, and I filled in and liked it and had fun. (I) played defense and goalie that whole summer, like going back and forth, and then I think I was a little bit better at goalie, so I stuck with it.

So around 10 or so you made the full commitment to the position?

Maybe a little bit older than that. I think I became full-time at 11 or 12, so I think my first year as a goalie was a Squirt A.

Is it something you were pretty good at right away?

I think it’s something I was pretty decent at. Just had fun doing it. My dad was a goalie in soccer, so maybe there was something there. So just had fun with it and stuck with it.

Did your dad also play hockey?

No, just soccer.

So how’d you end up playing in the first place?

My mom was a big Minnesota Gopher hockey fan. She went to the U for college. Being from Minnesota, I think if you are a boy, it’s a path that you play hockey, and I kind of fell in love with it. Then (mom and dad) were both (good) at doing whatever they needed to do to make sure I was having fun.

So did dad give you any tips on how to play goalie as a kid? It’s the same name, but not really the same thing compared to soccer.

No, I think his thing was more about effort and that type of stuff. He wouldn’t really get technical on me, but I think it was more, ‘Make sure you are giving a good effort and having fun.’ And he kind of left the technical side to the guys who were coaching.

The technical side is a strength for you now. How did you develop that base, and when did you first have a goalie coach?

I think my first legit goalie coach was when I got to the NTDP (National Team Development Program), and I think I thought I was pretty decent at the time. But I was pretty raw, and I had a lot of work to do. You know, Kevin Reiter at the NTDP recognized that, and he liked what I saw from my upside, and I think that was kind of big. He worked with me and (current Toronto Maple Leafs prospect) Joe Woll every single day on technical side. I think that’s the reason both of us can say one of the strong suits of our game is technically. I think you have to rely on that when stuff’s not going well, so it’s definitely good to have a strong foundation.

So you figured it out on your own for a bit before that. What went into your form and performance that got you recognized by the NTDP in the first place?

Honestly, I don’t know. I think it was a little bit of luck and some good timing. I was a freshman at Lakeville North and had never really heard of the NTDP. Was just playing with my buddies, we had a great season, we lost in the State Championship game.

And I was recognized by the NTDP, and I had no idea what that was. My adviser at that time said it would be a good idea to go try out for them, and I went there with the expectation to leave it all out there and if you don’t make it, it wasn’t meant to be. So no pressure at all. I ended up making that team, and it was a big decision at the time to leave home because I had such a great situation, but I’m so grateful I ended up going there.

Have you talked to your parents about what that was like to have their son move away from home at 14?

I haven’t. I think things have just moved so fast that it’s become the norm now for a couple years. The big thing for them was to make sure I was happy. You know, my dad asked me what my ultimate goal was in hockey, and I said I want to play in the NHL. When you look at it that way, I think it was a no-brainer to play with the best people in the world at my age. I think they just did such an unbelievable job being my support system. When you are 14 years old, living a 10-hour drive away, you need a whole crew of people behind you that make sure your getting through. There was ups and downs, but at the end of the day, I’m happy I did it.

Did you get homesick?

Oh, yeah. I still get homesick; everyone does. But I think just remembering my why and why I went there in the first place, it helped to push me forward on the days where it was really tough. Like I said earlier, you need a whole crew to make sure you are sticking with it, and they definitely did it.

You also graduated high school a year early to enroll at Boston University as a 17-year-old. Why was BU the right path for you?

First and foremost, making sure I was finished with classes to have that opportunity to go there. I think originally in my head I was thinking I would have to go to the USHL after my second year (at NTDP). So I had a bunch of great help. The academic coordinator at the NTDP and my stepmom, as well, were both on me all the time to make sure I was getting my classes done. And I didn’t talk to anyone before my first year at NTDP, then had a good first half and then a lot of teams, a lot of universities called, and I wanted to take my time and not rush everything. When I went out to Boston, I was blown away. Anyone that meets with Coach (David) Quinn, not many guys walk out of there saying they don’t want to play for him. It turned out to be the best decision of my life, and some my best friends that I have are from BU. I can’t say enough things about what they’ve got at BU.

Quinn is now the coach of the New York Rangers, have you caught up with him this weekend in Traverse City?

Yeah, I talked to him for 20 minutes. It was good catching up with him. He did so much and gave me the opportunity to play my freshman year and believed in me. If he wouldn’t have brought me in, I really think I would have been drafted by Dallas and where I was picked. Having that belief by your head coach is huge for a young goalie.

I noticed sitting behind the net the other night you’ve got a Dallas Cowboys helmet painted on your mask.

On the other side is actually a UT (University of Texas) helmet. I was in college. Being from Minnesota down here, so I thought it was a little rush to get my first mask done, and I thought it would be kind of cool. Football is like hockey is in Minnesota down here, so I thought it would be cool to get a little tribute to those two teams on my helmet for the spring (with the Texas Stars) and then I’ve got another one in the works right now.

Who paints your mask?
I use Dave Art (David Gunnarsson). It was a dream come true because I was a big, or still am, a big Henrik Lundqvist fan, and all the masks he’s done through the years, all the cool ones I remember as a little kid, they were painted by Dave Art. So to have him doing mine is really cool. I was excited to be able to have him paint my mask.

So another one coming soon?

Yeah. Hopefully should be here in the next couple weeks for this year. Every time I get one from him, it’s like opening a Christmas present. It’s beautiful artwork. It’s really cool to work with him in general.

So, back to the current mask. Are you a big football fan?

Yeah, I’m a huge Minnesota Vikings fan. I get a little bit of crap because I had Tom Brady on my helmet (at Boston University). All of my BU guys are Patriot guys, so looking back I kind of regret getting (Brady) on my helmet because I get all the crap for it, but huge football fan. Huge Vikings fan.

No Division I football team at Boston University, so do you have a favorite college team?

I was in Ann Arbor for two years so I kind of find myself rooting for Michigan for a little bit, and when I was looking at schools, I went on a couple visits. And when you are looking at Michigan, they’ll bring you to a football game and stuff. I sat, like, front row a couple times with a couple of my buddies that ended up going there. So it’s a really cool place and a special football program, so probably those guys.

Aside from the mask, are you big into designing your gear? Some goalies are more particular than others.

I would say I’m on the less side compared to some other guys, for sure. I know what I like, and Bauer has done such a good job with my gear and figuring out what I like and making it the same way every time. I have a great relationship with those guys, and I believe their stuff is the best stuff out there, and they continue to make strides.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
TRAVERSE CITY — Adam Erne begins his audition for a job with the Detroit Red Wings with as good a confidence booster as there is.

General manager Steve Yzerman traded for Erne in August, re-acquiring a guy he had drafted while GM of the Tampa Bay Lightning. It wasn’t a big trade — the Lightning received a fourth-round pick in 2020 — but it fit into Yzerman’s plan because Erne is a big, physical forward who can provide some of the bite the Wings lack.

"I think Adam has a chance to be a top-nine forward in the NHL," Yzerman said. "I think he’s got good puck skills, I think he’s got a good shot and he’s worked extremely hard — his skating is good, he’s a very powerful, strong guy. Difficult to play against because he’s thick and he’s a hard. He’s got pretty good hockey sense. He fits in with our group of players and the young guys coming up."

Yzerman signed Erne, 24, for one year at $1.05 million. It’s a no-risk contract — if Erne does not make the team, his salary is covered by the exemption if he’s sent to the minors. But Erne has a good shot: He’s sound defensively, kills penalties and uses his 6-foot-1, 214-pound body to punish opponents.

"I think he can bring a pretty good combination of physicality and skill," coach Jeff Blashill said. "That’s a rare combination in the league — not very many guys in the league are super physical and still have skill to play in the top nine. I think he’s got that ability. He just has to make sure he separates himself from other players."

Erne could fit as a third-line checker, maybe on a line with Luke Glendening and Darren Helm. Erne was drafted at 33rd overall in 2013, and has 27 points in 114 NHL games. Erne is competing with guys like Jacob de la Rose and Christoffer Ehn for a role.

Coming to Detroit is a great opportunity for him, one he didn’t have on a team as deep as the Lightning. The fact Yzerman sees Erne as a fit is a nice starting point.

"I was with him in Tampa so he knows what I can bring to the table," Erne said. "I’m just trying to play my game and work my way into the lineup. I’m a big two-way forward who can make plays, score goals. Someone who can be used up and down the lineup. We’ll see where I fit."

Mighty righty

Oliwer Kaski is another prospect who’ll get lots of looks during exhibition season. Kaski was heavily scouted by Jiri Fischer, associate director of player personnel, along with former general manager Ken Holland, and signed after the 2019 World Championship. Kaski has an accurate, right-handed shot, and exhibition season will afford to a chance to see if he defends well enough to earn a spot on the roster.

"One of the things that can really separate him is his offensive ability," Blashill said. "He can really pass and he can really shoot. He’s got to learn to move his feet more consistently defensively, but if you one-time pucks, you will have a way better chance of scoring than if you stop and shoot it. I’m really intrigued with his skill set. Now he has to show he can defend on a regular basis."

Barring injuries, Mike Green, Patrik Nemeth, Danny DeKeyser and Filip Hronek have dibs on the top four spots. Then there’s veterans Trevor Daley and Jonathan Ericsson, plus top drafted defense prospects in Dennis Cholowski and Moritz Seider, and trade acquisition Madison Bowey.

Green, Hronek, Kaski, Seider and Bowey all shoot right-handed.
Detroit Red Wings want Filip Zadina to score goals. Here's their plan

Helene St. James, Detroit Free Press
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TRAVERSE CITY — There was a sequence during Sunday’s Red-White game when Frans Nielsen drove to the net and slipped a pass to Filip Zadina, who tried to stuff the puck around the goal post.

That’s where the Detroit Red Wings want Zadina to be: in a rectangular area around the net, roughly from hashmark to hashmark and hashmark to goal line, where the Wings say an estimated 40% of NHL goals are scored.

It’s the same message the Wings stressed to Anthony Mantha a couple years ago: find ways to be around the net and the goals will start piling up.

Zadina is in his second training camp with the Wings and under scrutiny as the No. 6 overall pick in the 2018 draft. He’s coming of an average first year of pro hockey, when he scored 16 goals among 35 points in 59 games in the American Hockey League and had one goal among three points in nine games with the Wings.

Zadina is touted as a player who could be a game-changer, but he’s still figuring out how to do that at the pro level; hence, the emphasis on being around the net.

“Probably it’s going to be my game — go more to the net and I’ll be more productive,” Zadina said Sunday. “There are some places around the net where you can score more goals than the other, so if I will be there more, I will probably get more goals.”

Zadina’s White team prevailed 2-1 on the strength of shootout goals by Nielsen and Anthony Mantha. Defense prospect Oliwer Kaski showed off his shot by scoring on a pass from newcomer Adam Erne, and defender Moritz Seider — this year’s No. 6 overall pick — set up Andreas Athanasiou’s goal for the Red team.

The Wings’ nine-game exhibition slate begins Tuesday. Zadina is one of several prospects vying for a job. Asked how confident he feels, Zadina smiled.

“I can’t tell you,” he said. “I’ll show you on the ice.”

Confidence matters for every player, but it’s also precarious for a high draft pick like Zadina. He wants to be a sniper like Tampa Bay’s Nikita Kucherov. He wants to live up to what he said on draft night, when he spoke of filling the nets of the teams that passed on him.

The Wings want him to get there.

“The secret is learning how to earn your own confidence through the work you put in, and being mentally tough enough when your place slips a little bit that you know it’s going to come back,” Wings coach Jeff Blashill said. “But that comes back to putting the work in and having that true self confidence where you know you have the skill set to succeed and you know you’ve put the work in to succeed.”

Zadina spent most of the offseason training in Detroit and is coming off a five-assists-in-four-games showing at the NHL Prospect Tournament. He’s trying to be a 200-foot player who is dangerous in any situation.

Last year, he struggled to create enough time and space for himself to be dangerous (he was unused to the much faster speed of the pro game compared to juniors). He’ll get opportunities during exhibition season, possibly with the line he played on Sunday: Nielsen, a sound defensive center who can get Zadina the puck, and Erne, a sound defensive winger with a physical edge.

Zadina said this summer he felt more comfortable in the NHL because of the quality of players he was with, but that’s not really something the Wings want to hear.

“Ultimately great players carry lines,” Blashill said. “So be a great player and carry your line. I don’t like giving guys the out that, ‘well, my linemates …’. No, the best players carry a line. Kucherov carries his line every night. So, just focus on his own game.”
Young Red Wings get another chance to make impression as preseason begins

Ted Kulfan, The Detroit NewsPublished 2:50 p.m. ET Sept. 16, 2019 | Updated 6:17 p.m. ET Sept. 16, 2019

Traverse City — The first phase is done.

The Red Wings left Traverse City after Monday's practice, concluding a training camp that began Friday and christened yet another hockey season.

Players have "tweaked" muscles, the hockey clichés are rolling, prospects are being compared to Hall of Famers, and the sight of Steve Yzerman wearing a Red Wings' jacket is again quite comfortable after not seeing it for so many years.

But it's definitely time for the next phase: Exhibition games.

The Red Wings have their first Tuesday at Little Caesars Arena, scrimmaging (which is essentially what it is) against the Chicago Blackhawks.

The next phase before — the regular season — begins in October.

But before then, let's take a look at the some developments from the past few days here in Traverse City, which remains a fine spot to get hockey underway.

Seider-mania

Can defenseman Moritz Seider make the jump from playing hockey in Germany to the NHL?

It's not likely to happen immediately. But it might not take nearly as long as maybe originally thought.

You see North American 18-year-olds who've played against stronger competition than Seider has struggle to simply adjust to the minor pro leagues here, never mind the NHL.

It will be intriguing to watch Seider these next two weeks against NHL competition getting ready for this season.

Seider's approach to the game, his demeanor, and size and talent, are beyond most 18-year-olds. That should serve him well in the years ahead.

You have to think Seider is best served by playing, at least for a while, in Grand Rapids and getting acclimated to North American pro hockey.

But with the maturity and poise of this kid, it wouldn't be shocking to see Seider fairly soon.

Rasmussen's crowded path

It was interesting listening to coach Jeff Blashill on Sunday talk about 2017 first-round pick Michael Rasmussen.

The Wings have decided that long-term, Rasmussen's best position is center, where he spent most of his time in junior. The Wings envision a big, 6-foot-6, shut-down center who can also provide offense around the net.

But with that switch, Rasmussen's chances to opening the season in Detroit are slim.

"If you looked at Ras' long-term outlook, he's a center," Blashill said. "Those guys can be really, really hard to play against because they're so good defensively. If he's a guy who can shut down other teams' best players, that's a real positive."

"His ability to score net-front is a real positive. But ultimately, he's going to have to beat out (Dylan) Larkin, Fil (Valtteri Filppula), (Frans) Nielsen, Glennie (Luke Glendening), Ehner (Christoffer Ehn), (Jacob) de la Rose."

Unless there are injuries, Rasmussen isn't likely to pass that many players on the depth chart.

But, it would help Rasmussen, also, to play in Grand Rapids and reclaim some confidence lost during a tough rookie season in the NHL.

Busy schedule

The Wings play 82 games during a long six-month (plus a week, or two) NHL regular season.

But they'll play nine preseason games in the next two weeks.

It's a game more than usual because of the Wings' participation in the NHL's Hockeyville event in Calumet, located in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Along with keeping the coaching, training and equipment staffs busy, there will be players who get plenty of chances to show what they can do.

Nobody will play all nine games, obviously. But young players on the brink of the NHL likely will get about five or six games to show they deserve an opportunity.

This schedule is perfect for them.

Zadina's future

Filip Zadina, the 2018 first-round pick, didn't meet the largely unrealistic expectations fans had for him last season.

Zadina spent the majority of the season in Grand Rapids and had 16 goals.

"It's part of hockey life," said Zadina, of last season's education. "No one has an easy way to the NHL. I was glad I could spend one year in the AHL. It opened my eyes to what I have to do better.

"I worked the whole summer and I'm a better player."

Preseason hockey: Blackhawks at Red Wings

► Faceoff: 7:30 p.m., Tuesday, Little Caesars Arena, Detroit

► TV/radio: Fox Sports Detroit-plus/950 AM

► Outlook: The first of nine preseason games for the Wings, who travel the Chicago for a game 24 hours later. … Dylan Larkin, Andreas Athanasiou, Mike Green and Darren Helm are some of the Wings' who aren't likely to play, nursing minor aches and pains. … Keep an eye on prospects such as D Moritz Seider, C Joe Veleno, RW Filip Zadina, C Michael Rasmussen, and D Dennis Cholowski, all recent first-round picks attempting to earn roster spots.

Detroit News LOADED: 09.17.2019
Autopsy: Ex-Red Wings center Greg Johnson died of self-inflicted gunshot wound

Former Detroit Red Wings center Greg Johnson died of suicide by a gunshot wound to the head, according to an autopsy report obtained by The Detroit News.

Johnson’s body was void of any evidence of drugs or alcohol, according to a toxicology report, also obtained by The News.

Both reports were compiled by the office of the Oakland County Medical Examiner.

Johnson died July 7 at his home in Rochester. He was 48.

There was no suicide note at Johnson’s home, according to a Rochester Police report.

Johnson, a native of Thunder Bay, Ontario, played for the Red Wings from 1993-97 during a 14-season NHL career. He also played for Pittsburgh, Chicago and Nashville.

Johnson’s wife, Kristin, told police that Johnson suffered “numerous concussions during his playing career,” but she witnessed no signs of depression.

In recent years, several former football and hockey players have been diagnosed with chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), which can result from numerous blows to the head, causing brain trauma.

Detroit News LOADED: 09.17.2019
The Detroit Red Wings believe Adam Erne has the potential to be more than a fringe fourth-line player who hits and brings energy. He has skills, which is why Steve Yzerman drafted him 33rd overall in 2013 for Tampa Bay. The Red Wings will give him an opportunity to demonstrate that ability in the preseason and possibly earn a spot on the third line.

Yzerman said Erne (6-1, 214) has a chance to be a top-nine NHL forward.

"I think he’s got good puck skills, he’s got a good shot, he’s worked extremely hard on his skating," Yzerman said during training camp at Centre I.C.E. "He’s a powerful, strong guy, difficult to play against because he’s thick and he’s hard and he’s got pretty good hockey sense. He’s 24 years of age, fits in with our group of young players coming up."

The Red Wings acquired Erne in August for a fourth-round pick in 2020. He is coming off his first full NHL season, picking up seven goals and 20 points in 65 games.

Erne described himself as a two-way forward who likes playing at a high pace, can make plays and score goals and can be used up and down the lineup.

"I like to have the puck on my stick, I like to play a north-south game, pick the pace up, be able to make plays and shoot the puck," Erne said. "I just try to be versatile and wherever they need me, that’s where I play."

Opportunity for advancement was lacking with the Lightning, the best regular season team in the NHL.

"In Tampa, with all the skill we had, sometimes I was just relied on as a bigger body," Erne said. "I’m just looking to get back to creating offense and be good on that side of the puck for sure."

"It’s an opportunity that I see available here now. It’s exciting. There’s a lot of talent and so far, a really great group of guys. From old to young there’s no cliques. A really good mesh."

Erne has been skating on a line with Frans Nielsen and Filip Zadina. He made a good play to set up Oliwer Kaski’s one-time goal in Sunday’s Red/White game.

"Like I said about any player, you have to be a good 200-foot player; I think he has that in him," coach Jeff Blashill said. "I think he can bring a pretty good combination of physicality and skill, and that’s a rare combination in the league. Not very many guys in the league are super-physical and still have skill to play in the top nine. He’s just got to make sure he separates himself from other players."
Detroit Red Wings won’t charge Ticketmaster fees for all 2019 regular season games for a short time

Updated Sep 16, 12:41 PM; Posted Sep 16, 11:31 AM
By Edward Pevos

DETROIT, MI - Detroit Red Wings fans can score a sweet deal on tickets for the entire 2019 season, but they have to act fast. The team is waiving Ticketmaster fees for all preseason and regular season games.

The deal is valid right now through Friday, September 20 at 11:59 p.m. The Ticketmaster fees will be waived at the end of the purchase. It’s not valid on Ticketmaster verified resale tickets.

The preseason begins tomorrow at home against Chicago. The regular season kicks off on Saturday, October 5 at Nashville. The home opener is the following night on Sunday, October 6 against Dallas.

Preseason tickets start at $15. Regular season tickets are as low as $30.

Michigan Live LOADED: 09.17.2019
Red Wings want Michael Rasmussen to establish himself at center

Updated Sep 16, 10:11 AM; Posted Sep 16, 6:05 AM
By Ansar Khan

TRAVERSE CITY -- Michael Rasmussen's future is at center, and the Detroit Red Wings currently don't have a roster spot available at that position.

That could prompt the Red Wings to send their top 2017 draft pick to the Grand Rapids Griffins to start the season.

"He’s going to have a chance over a number of exhibition games to have big impact on the games, so ultimately, he’s going to have to have a good impact on the game," Red Wings coach Jeff Blashill said.

The 6-6, 221-pound Rasmussen played mostly on the wing during a difficult rookie season (eight goals, 18 points in 62 games). Ordinarily, he would have played all or most of the season in the AHL. But he wasn’t eligible for the AHL (except for a brief conditioning stint) because he had junior eligibility. And the Red Wings didn’t want to send him back to Tri-City (WHL), figuring he would gain little by dominating again at that level.

Rasmussen, 20, now can be assigned to Grand Rapids. That appears where he will be headed unless he excels in preseason and the Red Wings have a couple of injuries at center or decide to move him back to wing.

"If you looked at Ras' long-term outlook, he’s a (6-6) center -- those guys can be really, really hard to play against because they’re so good defensively, so if he’s a guy who can really shut down other teams’ best players, that’s a real positive," Blashill said. "I think his ability to score net-front is a real positive. He’s got to score, but ultimately, he’s going to have to beat out (Dylan) Larkin, Fil (Valtteri Filppula), (Frans) Nielsen, Glenny (Luke Glendening), Ehrn (Christoffer Ehn), (Jacob) de la Rose.

"Just got to beat guys out. That’s the NHL. You got to grab spots. I’d like to see him -- Steve (general manager Yzerman) would like to see him -- long-term at center, so those are the spots. You got to win one of those spots."

Rasmussen has been centering a line with Ehn and 2015 top pick Evgeny Svechnikov, who missed all of 2018-19 due to a torn ACL.

Michigan Live LOADED: 09.17.2019
Player grades: Joel Persson & other young d-men execute new Edmonton Oilers pre-season win, even one as satisfying as Edmonton’s 2-0 win over the Winnipeg Jets on Monday night.

This was, after all, not the real Jets, but the faux-Jets. Out of their top 18 scorers from 2018-19, Winnipeg iced just two players, Bryan Little and Jack Roslovic. Half of those 18 Jets aren’t with the team due to trades, free agency and contract hold-outs. It left Winnipeg with a seriously lacking line-up.

That said, the Oilers did indeed look good, especially when it came to executing the new up-the-middle break-out play that new Asst. Coach Jim Playfair described in a TSN radio interview earlier this summer.

Said Playfair of the new up-the-middle gambit: “We’ve been brought up in minor hockey to never pass to the middle of the ice and now were seeing the change in the game, that’s a really viable option in the game to get them out. So you have to support them, you have to encourage them to do it and then when they’re having a bad game, they don’t want to do it. They want to shy away from that. So it’s a process, but it’s a trust process… I think that when those things break down, and the opposition has a scoring chance and the guy comes back to the bench you have to tell him that pass was right, we want to keep doing that. That’s not something you have to get scared and come away from. That’s our structure, that’s our system, it’s not going to work 100% of the time.”

Against the weak Jets, it worked almost 100 percent of the time with young d-men like Joel Persson, Evan Bouchard, Caleb Jones and Matt Benning threading the needle on break-out plays (see video below. And note: these videos are off Facebook, hence the emoticons on the screen).

I don’t know if these Oilers are any faster than last year’s team, but they sure looked faster, largely due to this kind of strong puck-moving. Can they move the puck in this way against real NHL opposition? That’s another question.

James Neal, 7. Had a few good moments. He positioned himself in the slot, which got him his first Oilers goal on a bang-bang play, then he had a nifty rush up ice a moment later to get off a Grade B scoring chance shot.

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, 8. Scored a sensational goal late in the second, ripping the shot in with a bullet backhander to the top corner. His line had some good offensive zone time, but then we’d expect RNH to do well against AHL competition.

Sam Gagner, 6. Some solid work on the boards. Does he have the speed to help drive this line? Hmm.

Jujuh Khaira, 6. Part of a group with Caleb Jones and Josh Archibald that left Jack Roslovic open for a slot shot off a face off in the first. He later showed some hustle in the first, streaking up ice on a William Lagesson dump in, winning the puck and threading it to Alex Chiasson in the slot for a Grade A one-timer blast.

Riley Sheahan, 6. Did some good forechecking with Khaira on a shift in the second. He worked hard and made a smart pass to set up Khaira in the slot in the third.


Joakim Nygard, 6. He showed his speed and skill a few times. He made a sweet stretch pass to send in Alex Chiasson on a semi-breakaway early in the third. He also made a fast move into the slot for a backhand shot to the head of the Jets goalie.

Gaetan Haas, 5. He did an impressive job covering his man in the defensive slot in the first during an extended Jets offensive zone cycle. He also looked cool and calm protecting the puck. But does he have any offence? Hmm.

Alex Chiasson 6. His turnover in the first led to a Grade A chance against. But he had some decent moments as the game progressed.

Tyler Benson, 7. All kinds of sharp passes and battles won, though nothing too spectacular.

Colby Cave, 7. He, Benson and Patrick Russell were the best line early in the game, putting on some forechecking pressure. His clearing pass sent Benson and Russell on a two-on-one break in the third, but Russell could not bury the one-timer shot. Cave also won 8 of 13 faceoffs.

Patrick Russell, 7. Good effort, good board work.

Oscar Klefbom, 7. Numerous slick moves with the puck. Had five shots on net. Combined well with Joel Persson, who is written in right now in pencil as his d-man partner.

Joel Persson, 7. He made a few mistakes on defence, but he also took a step towards earning full-time NHL employment here. He led the team with six shots on net. He also directed a shot at net that Neal knocked down and slammed home for a goal. On numerous occasions Persson and Klefbom combined on a series of short passes under pressure to control the puck and the situation. He walked the line well in the third, then penetrated to get off a dangerous shot. He doesn’t seem to be a fast skater, but he showed some cleverness in this game.

Caleb Jones, 6. He played the least of any Oilers d-man as his coaches kept him off the penalty kill, which isn’t a great sign for the young d-man hoping to make the team. He had a solid enough game and made a few strong defensive clearances, but he did get caught flat-footed once or twice on the Winnipeg rush.

Matt Benning, 7. He had one rancid moment in the first (see video below) where he had enough time to make a pass and instead he put it off the boards and iced it, exactly the kind of play we saw far too much of from Benning and the Oilers the last two seasons. But then Benning caught fire, making a handful of excellent break out passes. He showed in the 2017 playoffs he can play a smart game. It was good to see that version of Benning again.

William Lagesson, 7. He had a few bad moments in the first, once when he lost his man and got caught wandering in the d-zone on a chance against. But then the big Swede found his footing, starting to take the man and make simple passes, which he executed well.

Evan Bouchard, 7. Bouchard has amazing hands. Numerous times he won battles by batting the puck out of the air with his stick. He also threw a number of sweet passes this game, including a great stretch pass to Khaira in the third and a fine cross-seam feed to RNH, where RNH failed to get good graphite on the shot attempt.

Stuart Skinner, 7. Played well, stopped a few Grade A chances, but also let out a big rebound into the inner slot half-way through second that almost bounced onto a Jets attacker’s stick.

Dylan Wells, 6. Hardy any difficult work, as the faux-Jets couldn’t maintain sustained pressure.

Edmonton Journal: LOADED: 09.17.2019
Once the music stops after the seven Edmonton Oilers’ exhibition games, there may only be one chair for a young farmhand defenceman which means William Lagesson, Caleb Jones and Ethan Bear may all be scrambling for the same seat as one of the seven D on the opening roster.

That’s if Swede Joel Persson, armed with a one-way contract and setting up James Neal’s first Oiler goal and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins’ nifty backhand Monday in the Oilers’ 2-0 win, also makes the grade.

Lagesson’s major at UMass Amherst was sports psychology so maybe he can use some of those skills to handle the nervousness or the spike in confidence that he may be going through, but it’s his tools on the ice that coach Dave Tippett is looking at. He’s evaluating Lagesson, who played in the USHL at Dubuque, Iowa two years after Matt Benning was there before both went to college, Jones and Bear, knowing maybe there’s just one spot open for the Bakersfield kids.

“They’re all friends but they have to recognize they want that job in the NHL,” said Tippett. “So far the competition’s been pretty good and the evaluation process continues.”

Bear is an offensive right-shot D who had 31 points in 52 games in Bakersfield after 20 Oiler games in 2017-2018 and he’s had a helluva camp through practices and a scrimmage. Jones can play both sides and was up for 17 NHL games last year. Lagesson’s game leans more to the Adam Larsson prickly shutdown side. He’s not sexy, at all.

But Jones had 29 points and Lagesson 27 on the farm so they aren’t one-trick ponies.

Lagesson, who played with Evan Bouchard (21 minutes on the night) won’t bring you out of your seat with any electric plays, but he’s solid. His game grew in leaps and bounds in Bakersfield.

Edmonton Oilers William Lagesson (84) playing against the Winnipeg Jets during pre-season NHL action at Rogers Place in Edmonton, September 17, 2019.

“You can’t have all flashy players … you need some clock munchers, too,” said a veteran GM

“How do I make an impression? I play hard and do everything 100 percent,” Lagesson said.

And try to stay upbeat and in the moment, which brings us to the sports psychology.

"I thought that would be good for an athlete, looking at the mindset because it's a huge part of the game ... I can learn some stuff and take it from there (classroom)," he said.

Lagesson, who has abandoned his long, blond locks and gone to a more aerodynamic look, grew up admiring Niklas Hjalmarsson as much as Erik Karlsson. But that’s fine. Hjalmarsson was the soul of the Blackhawks’ Cup teams as the ultimate warrior. And the Oilers need all kinds on D.

"My mentality in all sports has been defense first. I looked at a lot of (Victor) Hedman and Hjalmarsson. Teams need defense too," he said.

Lagesson never really had an NHL shot last year, but he does now.

"I'm coming here to make an impression and grab one of those spots," said Lagesson.

"Lagesson's an interesting guy for me because he's hard to play against. We're looking for him to get up and down the ice with the speed we're looking for and moving the puck as efficiently as he did in Bakersfield. I like that he can kill penalties, too. He's a two-way guy for me," said Tippett.
When a rookie gets ready for his very first NHL pre-season game, his nerves are so frayed he can barely keep his hands steady enough to tie his laces. It’s his big chance to impress the coach and see how he stacks up against real NHLers, a landmark event he will remember like it was his first kiss.

“It was really, really nerve-wracking,” Oilers forward Jujhar Khaira said of his first time. “I think I was 18. I didn’t know what to expect. I was gripping the stick pretty tight.”

Five or six years later, for the ones good enough to become veterans, that same pre-season game is reduced to a necessary evil, where the only two objectives are: 1. Not getting injured. 2. Trying not to make it obvious that you’re just trying not to get injured.

In between the “most exciting thing ever” guys and the “let me know when the season starts,” guys are where most of the Edmonton Oilers training campers stand this season.

With a new coach evaluating a mass of players airlifted in over the summer, on a team where jobs and roles are up for grabs everywhere, emotions are all over the spectrum as pre-season begins.

For European imports Gaetan Haas, 27, and Joakim Nygard, 26, Monday night against some guys dressed in Winnipeg Jets sweaters was the first step in a very steep North American learning curve.

For winger Colby Cave, it’s a chance to get his foot back in the door with a new coaching staff after playing 33 games last season.

For Oscar Klefbom, whose roster spot will never be in doubt, it’s trying to lead by example in games he knows don’t really matter.

“We have some new guys in the group and it’s not an easy transition for them to come from Switzerland or Sweden or wherever,” said Klefbom, who was paired with Swedish newcomer Joel Persson Monday.

“I remember how it was for myself, so I want to be a leader and mentor out there like older guys were for me when I came into the league.

“If I go out there at 80 per cent, it’s going to send the wrong signal to a lot of guys out there. I want to show the guys in there what it takes to get a job here.”

Haas has been around hockey all his life, but everything about this training camp and the NHL is foreign. So he is embracing these pre-season games as an opportunity to get acclimatized.

“At the beginning, we were just doing skates,” he said. “Then we started practising plays and that was an adjustment for me. It was pretty tough. Every day I learn something. Every day I feel a little better. It’s good that we have games now so I can learn a lot more.”

He’s also learning that there is considerably more competition in camp than he was used to back home. Back in Switzerland, he was one of the veterans who was just trying to stay healthy. Now, he’s fighting for a place.

“It’s new,” he said. “There are a lot of players here. Much more than in Europe. In Europe you’re going to start with 25, maybe. You already have your spot. Maybe the fourth line has to work to get its spot.”

This year it’s a free-for-all. With Ken Holland and Dave Tippett taking over a team that missed the playoffs two years in a row, nothing is set in stone other than first line centre.

“That’s good for the new guys,” said Haas. “Everybody has to prove himself. You have to show every day that you can play hockey.”
Meet Dave Tippett’s Training Camp Ten.

As the Edmonton Oilers head into their first pre-season game Monday against the Winnipeg Jets, you best get to know the players you’re going to be seeing again and again and again in the seven-game schedule before you finally get to see Connor McDavid play his first game on opening night October 2.

“I have a list of 10 players I really think we really have to find out about,” said head coach Dave Tippett. “And they’ll play a LOT of exhibition games. That’s what those games are for.”

“What’s ‘a LOT’?” I asked.

“Four or five, maybe six exhibition games,” he said.

So who are the 10?

It might be an interesting office pool to pick the 10 and the combined number of games they’d play.

“There are not just the jobs that are open,” said Tippett. “It’s jobs on the team. It’s ice time. It’s roles. And there are a lot of different people who are vying for those roles.

“We have seven or eight forwards who you’d say are really looking to establish their position in the line-up. With some of them it’s a jersey in the line-up. With others it’s the role they play.

“I have a pretty good idea where we’re at. I have a pretty good concept of some pairs of forwards I’d like to put together and how I’d like each line to look. But until you get into training camp and see them in games, that’s hard to say.

“Some of it is getting people up to speed, but there is a lot of competition for jobs. Jobs and roles.

“There’s a good handful of players here that I know well, but there are some pairs of forwards I’d like to put together and how I’d like each line to look. But until you get into training camp and see them in games, that’s hard to say.

“There are people kind of have pegged for each spot and they’re from those 10 we want to look at.”

While plenty of people in the organization are more than familiar with local product Tyler Benson, Edmonton’s second-round (32nd overall) pick in the 2016 NHL Entry Draft, the new coach is going to have to see lots of him if he’s going to put him with Nugent-Hopkins and Neal.

An obvious member of the Training Camp Ten would be Joel Persson the 25-year-old Swede who is penciled in to play as the partner of Oscar Klefbom as the playmaking right defenceman charged with giving service to Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl.

There are several other European pros that GM Ken Holland signed as possible solutions to the salary cap situation he was saddled with like 26-year-old Swede LW Joakim Nygard, and 27-year-old Swiss centre Gaetan Haas.

Neither have played an NHL game.

And then there are the young ones.

Tippett totally agrees with GM Ken Holland’s philosophy.

“If you’re a young player you need to be playing not sitting in the stands. Young players need to play. If they’re good enough to play in the NHL then they’ll play in the NHL. The NHL isn’t a development league. It’s a league to win. That said if a young player is good enough to be playing in the NHL and they’re good enough to hold their own, there’s no reason why they shouldn’t be playing in the NHL.”

The obvious player topping that category would be 19-year-old Evan Bouchard, the Oilers No. 1 overall pick in the 2018 NHL Entry Draft who returned to junior and had a sensational season.

Holland said they definitely wouldn’t keep Bochard as a seventh defenceman.

Fifth or sixth? Maybe.

Klefbom’s partner? That’s a possibility, too.

Other organizational guys such as Caleb Jones, Ethan Bear and William Lagesson might be on the Tippett Training Camp Ten too. All three are considered close to being NHL ready.

Also pegged to be a future Oiler blueliner from the organization is radating junior Dmitri Samorukov, who Tippett hasn’t seen either but is almost certainly ticketed for a development year.

Whatever, get ready to make a deep dive study of Dave Tippett’s auditioning Training Camp Ten, whoever exactly they might be.

You’re going to see “a LOT” of them.

You might even see all 10 in the lineup against Winnipeg.

Edmonton Sun: LOADED: 09.17.2019
By Allan Mitchell Sep 16, 2019

The Edmonton Oilers and Winnipeg Jets opened the exhibition schedule at Rogers Place on Monday night, the home team winning 2-0 and the local fans going home happy. Any opinion given after the first game of an NHL preseason must first attach a giant asterisk and spend several words on the extremely small sample size and low quality of competition.

If we can agree on the sample size issue (draw no conclusions, only observations), and reiterate the quality competition problem (Edmonton’s lineup was much stronger), who stepped forward in Monday night’s game? Who took a sideways or backward step? Let’s have a look.

First star

Joel Persson played 16:40 at even strength, posting two assists while giving fans a very good first impression. On the first goal, he changed the angle slightly to get the puck through and on the second tally, it was his dash down the right wall with the puck that got the goalie moving (leading to a gorgeous Ryan Nugent-Hopkins backhand goal). Persson also showed very good wheels, especially backward off the mark. It was an impressive debut.

It didn’t start smoothly, as Persson was hesitant in his own zone early in the first period, leading to his being caught and losing a puck battle. Chaos ensued. After that, things settled down, with Oscar Klefbom providing a veteran presence. The duo did get caught late in the game, after Alex Chiasson made a poor play, but survived the onslaught.

Overall, Persson’s lapses defensively weren’t close to his overall contributions.

One thing I wanted to check after the game was Persson’s performance with each of Edmonton’s centres. We can all agree the Nuge line dominated, but how did the newcomer from Sweden perform with Riley Sheahan, Gaetan Haas and Colby Cave? All numbers five-on-five:

Persson with Nuge: 7:21 together, 9-2 shots, 2-0 goals and 3-1 high-danger scoring chances.
Persson with Cave: 4:58 together, 4-5 shots, no goals and 0-1 high-danger scoring chances.
Persson with Sheahan: 3:58 together, 3-2 shots, no goals and 1-0 high-danger scoring chances.
Persson with Haas: 0:30 together, 1-0 shots, no goals and 1-0 high-danger scoring chances.

Small sample size but that’s a nice set of numbers away from the big line. Persson did play more than 80 percent of his five-on-five minutes with Klefbom, and more than 40 percent with Nuge, but took advantage of the opportunity. He more than held serve on pre-camp hype and gets the highest mark from me among hopefuls Monday night. After the game, Coach Tippett said, “Klef is just so stable and steady. Persson is really smart with the puck, really smart. They had a good start.”

William Lagesson and Evan Bouchard were also quality. I saw the Swedish blue as a 200-foot asset on the evening. He displayed calm feet (specifically against the Jack Roslovic line in the second period) and settled a chaotic situation in the neutral zone by skating the puck out of danger and sending it deep. Bouchard’s outlet passes were important to the pair’s success, and although he didn’t get a point, his pass to Nugent-Hopkins in the slot was a thing of beauty. Bouchard is going to have an impact, the question is where?

Among forwards, I thought Patrick Russell stood out for intelligent play. I had him in my notes four times:

Impressive forecheck in the first period behind the Winnipeg net led to possession for the Oilers and the makings of a chance.

He showed good speed in the second period after a nice Matt Benning outlet pass, got a shot away from a reasonable angle.

Had some nice chemistry with Tyler Benson in the second period, Benson with the shot.

Roles reversed in the third period, Benson with a lovely pass, Russell the shot (didn’t get a lot on it, though).

No real downbeat

You have to be a very hard marker to find fault with the 2-0 effort by the Oilers Monday night, but the line of Joakim Nygard, Gaetan Haas and Alex Chiasson chased the game early before settling in (although Chiasson had a dandy chance off a Jujhar Khaira feed earlier in the game).

The line did start to find the way right after Stuart Skinner exited the net in the second period. A strong shift featured Nygard using his plus speed to gain the zone, then working hard to get possession behind the net. Chiasson had a good look. The trio delivered three high-danger scoring chances but was outshot 0-6 otherwise. Here are the five-on-five minutes and possession numbers by line (all stats courtesy Natural Stat Trick):

Benson-Cave-Russell: 10:22 together, 12-0 shots, 2-0 goals and 3-0 high-danger scoring chances.
Nygard-Haas-Chiasson: 8:43 together, 3-6 shots, no goals and 3-1 high-danger scoring chances.
Khaira-Sheahan-Archipald: 8:30 together, 4-3 shots, no goals and 1-0 high-danger scoring chances.

Notes

Great stories everywhere on the evening. The pairing of Caleb Jones and Matt Benning got no mention above, but both played well. Stuart Skinner was quality in net, Dylan Wells wasn’t tested as much but also played well. The Nuge line clashed twice, it’s too early to conclude there’s enough defensive conscience on the wings for long-term success. Khaira was impressive on the penalty kill, an encouraging sign. He was money four-on-five in 2017-18 but had a setback last season. If he can nail down one of the PK jobs, Edmonton’s outlook improves in an important area.

The takeaways from Monday: Edmonton’s command in its own zone was impressive, and the outlet passing sublime. It is absolutely true the Jets sent a lesser group, but the Oilers hopefuls can only play the team presented to them as opposition. On this night, there was a lot of success. Tuesday is Vancouver and the Canucks.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
By Daniel Nugent-Bowman Sep 16, 2019

A new 1B goaltender, an influx of depth forwards and switching one underachieving veteran forward with another has given the Oilers a facelift heading into the season. But how much better does the updated look make them?

In his first summer as general manager, Ken Holland avoided using his limited cap space on long-term deals for middling talent. Instead, he plans to have problem contracts expire and let prospects develop, so the Oilers are in a good spot to start making noise two seasons from now.

The goal for 2019-20 is to be playing meaningful games in late March. The playoffs would be gravy.

Logically, the Oilers are long shots to make the postseason. Nearly everything will have to go right for that to happen.

Connor McDavid, his timeline to return from a knee injury still unclear, will have to hit the 100-point mark for a fourth straight time.

Leon Draisaitl was the only NHLer to record 50 goals and 100 points last season; his production can’t drop off much – if at all.

The sixth-leading goal-scorer among forwards was Drake Caggiula with seven and he was traded before the calendar flipped to 2019. More production from others up front is paramount – primarily a bounce-back effort from newcomer James Neal.

The penalty kill, a problem area for years and ranked 30th last season, has to improve. As does their overall defensive play as evidenced by the 271 goals they surrendered. Along those lines, and probably most importantly, it’s imperative that one of their goaltenders emerges as an above-average puck-stopper. (Given the expectation is Mikko Koskinen and Mike Smith will get their share of games, it up would be greatly beneficial if both could perform at that level.)

That’s a lot to ask for.

Now that the doom and gloom is out of the way, there are a few positives.

McDavid and Draisaitl are in their primes and are two of the league’s best players. It’s a lot to ask, but if McDavid can find another gear, he might be able to make up for some of the team’s shortcomings.

Like McDavid and Draisaitl, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins set career highs in goals and assists. His production was buoyed by personal bests in those categories on the power play. Neal’s addition means Nugent-Hopkins will almost certainly start the season skating alongside someone with scoring chops at even strength. That didn’t happen in the second half of last season.

There should also be a little more speed and skill in the bottom six and an infusion of young talent that’s been percolating in Bakersfield, junior or overseas.

Perhaps the biggest plus is that the Oilers play in what’s expected to be the league’s worst division. (Although that should result in two wild card teams coming out of the Central.) Sure, the Oilers appear to be in the bottom-tier of that group on paper, but there’s no Tampa Bay at the top. Every team has a hole or two, which should provide some optimism if things break right for the Oilers.

With the Oilers set to begin their preseason schedule on Monday against the Jets, this is a comprehensive look at where the franchise stands.

Biggest on-ice question

As mentioned earlier, there are several with this team. The most pressing is McDavid’s health, but he’s looked great in the early days of camp and he’s not expected to miss much time, if he misses any at all.

Therefore, two other issues jump to the forefront: What kind of goaltending will Koskinen provide? And can Neal return to his 20-goal form? Let’s deal with the first question.

How Koskinen plays could dictate how the Oilers fare this season. There’s no question Smith’s performance will play a factor, too. He’s a longtime NHL starter who arrives in Edmonton with the clear backing of his former and current coach Dave Tippett. But Smith is also 37 and on a one-year contract.

Koskinen, on the other hand, is more than six years younger and is about to start that three-year extension he signed in January. Coincidentally, that’s around the time his play began to drop off. He boasted a .911 save percentage when the deal was announced on Jan. 21. It settled in a .906 by season’s end.

While Koskinen refused to say so, Tippett felt the goaltender wore out down the stretch. The organization did him no favours in that regard by having him start all but two games after Cam Talbot was dealt to Philadelphia in February.

He shouldn’t be overworked now with Smith in the fold rather than Anthony Stolarz. With the likelihood of adequate rest, it’s on Koskinen to re-establish himself as the starter.

As for the second question, it doesn’t take a genius figure out last season was a disaster for Neal. He scored at least 20 goals in his first 10 campaigns but managed just seven in 63 games with Calgary. He’ll get every opportunity to play top-six minutes in Edmonton, something he seldom earned with the provincial rivals.

The Oilers desperately need more secondary scoring and a revival of the Neal of old would do the trick. Does he have it in him?

Biggest off-ice question

How will the Jesse Puljujarvi saga end?

Even if Neal returns to his old self, the wing is still a position of weakness for the Oilers. There’s a top-nine – maybe even top-six – spot there for the taking if Puljujarvi wanted it.

But Puljujarvi and agent Markus Lehto haven’t waivered since February in their stance that the winger wants a fresh start. That didn’t change even though the team has a new GM and coach.

We’re now entrenched in a game of chicken. The 21-year-old, who was the fourth overall pick just three years ago, is back in his native Finland playing in Liiga for Karpat. He has one goal and an assist in two games. All he can do – barring a change of heart – is continue producing and hope Holland trades him.

Puljujarvi has little leverage. He’s a restricted free agent and the Oilers currently own his rights until his 27th birthday. While there’s little denying the previous Edmonton regime mismanaged his early development years, his career stats – 37 points in 139 NHL games – don’t exactly leap off the page.

Holland has made it crystal clear that he’s not doing Puljujarvi any favours; he’s not giving him away just to help him out. He wants a good prospect – or a younger, controllable player with NHL experience – and ideally a draft pick, too. That’s a big package given Puljujarvi’s NHL track record.

But Holland’s in prime position to wait it out. It’s not like the Oilers are contending and are missing one last piece. And it’s not like the market for Puljujarvi is white-hot.

Puljujarvi’s best hope for finding a new NHL home this season is if he plays great in Finland and another team suffers a string of injuries and is short on depth. The answer will come by Dec. 1 at 3 p.m. MT. That’s the deadline for restricted free agents to sign if they want to play this season.

Depth chart analysis

Centre

The Oilers could have the league’s best centre depth – if they choose to play their best three players at that position. Instead, because of the chemistry displayed by two players and weakness on the wings, they’re left with an excellent centre, a very good one and a lot of uncertainty after that.

Connor McDavid is, of course, the excellent one. He’s the NHL’s most electrifying player, a two-time Art Ross Trophy and Ted Lindsay Award winner and three-time 100-point-getter. As long as he’s healthy – and stays healthy – expect a repeat performance, especially if centre-turned-winger Draisaitl stays put as his running mate.
With Draisaitl expected to skate on McDavid’s wing, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins remains in the No. 2 centre spot. Nugent-Hopkins posted career highs of 28 goals and 41 assists, doing so with little help at 5-on-5. That could change this season, priming Nugent-Hopkins to perhaps establish a new personal bar.

After those two, however, it’s far from a pretty picture. Former Red Wing Riley Sheahan signed earlier this month and has the leg up for one of the last two centre slots. With 447 NHL games on his resume, he’s by far the most experienced centre left standing since Kyle Brodziak (917 games) won’t play this season because of a back injury.

After Sheahan, there are several players in the running for a job. Colby Cave returns after recording eight points in 53 games after he was claimed off waivers last January. For what it’s worth, he at least impressed Tippett at Sunday’s scrimmage. Swiss signee Gaetan Haas will get a shot, and Brad Malone, who finished the season with the Oilers, will get a look as well. If the Oilers can find him enough ice time, prospect Cooper Marody could be a viable candidate. He had 64 points with AHL Bakersfield and doesn’t turn 23 until December.

If all else fails, Jujhar Khaira and Markus Granlund can play centre. However, they’re both probably better suited to play the wing.

Left wing
Leon Draisaitl is likely due to regress. He surpassed his previous highs in goals by 21 and points by 28 – both earned in 2016-17 – and scored on 21.6 percent of his shots on goal. Draisaitl would still be in line for a good season though, even if his production slips a bit.

James Neal is locked into second-line duty with Nugent-Hopkins until further notice. It probably won’t take long to find out if last season was an aberration or a harbinger of things to come. One thing’s for sure: he’ll get a longer leash on an offensive line than he did in Calgary. Neal can play either wing and will likely try out on both during the preseason.

Things get a little murky after Draisaitl and Neal, but options are aplenty. Jujhar Khaira is a lock to be on the opening night roster after re-signing for two years on July 1. He has something to prove, however, after three goals in 60 games. He can play any of the forward positions, so his place on the roster is still to be determined.

Markus Granlund is another offseason signee with an inside track on a job. He’s said he prefers to play wing.

Tyler Benson is the organization’s most promising prospect drafted outside the first round in years and was nearly a point-per-game player in the AHL as a 20-year-old. Tippett called his two rookie games “just OK,” but liked him a lot more in Sunday’s scrimmage. Benson is going to get a heavy dose of pre-season games to prove he can make the team in a top-six – or even bottom-six – role.

Joakim Nygard was second in Swedish league goals and was one of the most impressive players in the most recent scrimmage. He’s doesn’t require waivers to be sent to Bakersfield, so he’ll have to beat out players on one-way contracts to earn a job. The 26-year-old is an unrestricted free agent next summer.

Tomas Jurco and Joseph Gambardella spent all or most of the season in the AHL. Jurco, 26, is a former Red Wing who’s played for Holland before. Gambardella, 25, was a point-per-game player during the regular season and playoffs in the AHL and played 15 games for the Oilers.

Right wing
Tippett said it best on Friday. This is a big year for Zack Kassian.

Once McDavid’s ready for game action, Kassian will be patrolling the right wing alongside him – and Draisaitl, too. He’ll start the season on the first line, exactly the way he finished 2018-19 when a strong second half pushed him to a career-high 15 goals.

The underlying numbers of the trio at 5-on-5 were decent, a 51.27 Corsi For percentage and 23-19 goal share per Natural Stat Trick. But there’s room for improvement. As an unrestricted free agent next summer, a big season could help the 28-year-old cash in – either with the Oilers or with another team.

Sam Gagner gets the first look as the third member on the Neal and Nugent-Hopkins line. Acquired from Vancouver in February for Ryan Spooner, Gagner was amid a miserable season that saw him demoted by the Canucks to the Leafs’ AHL affiliate. He re-established himself with the Oilers, the team that drafted him sixth overall in 2007. Now back with Tippett, his coach in Arizona in 2014-15, Gagner has a new lease on his career.

Alex Chiasson has an uphill climb ahead if he wants to duplicate his personal-best totals of 22 goals and 38 points (not to mention a 17.9 shooting percentage). Chiasson, who re-signed with the Oilers for two years on July 1, will almost certainly get ice time in the top six and on the power play.

Without Puljujarvi in the picture, Josh Archibald, Patrick Russell and Josh Currie are the candidates for the last spot on right wing. Archibald has a leg up due to his 121 games of NHL experience and because he was held out of Sunday’s scrimmage, reserved for mostly for bubble players.

The last player worth mentioning is Kailer Yamamoto, who didn’t participate in two rookie games or the scrimmage after undergoing offseason wrist surgery. Working off some rust in Bakersfield won’t be the worst thing for him.

Left defence
Darnell Nurse is coming off a career season offensively and now will be tasked to do more. Associate coach Jim Playfair wants him and Adam Larsson to go against opponents’ top lines and shut them down. Nurse insists he’s up for the challenge and has slimmed down to 215 pounds from 225.

The Oilers’ 2018-19 campaign was derailed when Oscar Klefbom blocked a shot in December and broke a finger, an injury that kept him sidelined for nearly two months. Staying healthy has been an issue for Klefbom in his career; he’s missed 37 games over the last two seasons.

With Larsson moving to a pair with Nurse, the Oilers need to find Klefbom a new partner.

Barring a sudden change, the oft-maligned Kris Russell will slide down to the third pair and play his natural side. That likely won’t happen until at least the second week of camp because Russell’s in concussion protocol after colliding with a teammate during an informal skate.

After the three returnees, the Oilers have a couple of young players in Caleb Jones and William Lagesson eyeing a roster spot. Jones played 17 games for the Oilers last season, whereas Lagesson could be the most NHL-ready blueliner who played in Bakersfield.

Dmitri Samorukov is a promising youngster, but, at 20 years old, will start with the Condors. Lastly, Brandon Manning has been an affiliate. He re-established himself with the Oilers, the team that drafted him sixth overall in 2007. Now back with Tippett, his coach in Arizona in 2014-15, Gagner has a new lease on his career.

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The incumbent, Mikko Koskinen, has appeared in 59 NHL games (55 of which came last season) and he’s no spring chicken. The 31-year-old posted a .906 save percentage in 2018-19 and needs to be much better.

Speaking of the opposite of spring chickens, the offseason recruit, Mike Smith, had his worst NHL season by save percentage. He’s 37 and his odds of rebounding aren’t good.

If at least one of them doesn’t buck the trends, it could be a long season for the Oilers.

Power play

This was one of the few bright spots for the Oilers last season.

Even when Klefbom got hurt, Nurse stepped in and the top unit didn’t miss a beat. Assistant coach Glen Gulutzan, the only holdover from the last coaching staff, will try to maintain or improve upon the league’s ninth-best mark.

The top group is expected to consist of the same five players that finished 2018-19: McDavid, Draisaitl, Nugent-Hopkins, Klefbom and Chiasson. Nurse and Neal are candidates to replace the latter two members, although Neal bumping Chiasson would give the first unit an all-lefty look.

Two of those players, plus Gagner, make the starting of a second unit that already appears more powerful than anything the Oilers iced there last year.

Penalty kill

The PK was ranked 30th by season’s end and has often been a sore spot in recent years.

Previous coach Ken Hitchcock identified poor faceoffs and struggles clearing the puck as problem areas.

The former problem should be helped by the addition of Sheahan, who’s won at least 50 percent of his draws for three straight years and four of the last five.

Other than any tweaks from Playfair, Tippett is hoping a change in personnel works out. He doesn’t want his stars killing penalties and will instead rely on his bottom-six players like newcomer Granlund to improve the sore spot.

Salary cap

CapFriendly lists the Oilers as spending $79.97 million, leaving a little more than $1.5 million under the cap. There are few things to consider before locking in this projection.

The biggest variable is performance bonuses for Smith could reach as much as $1.75 million on top of his $2-million cap hit. Smith has games-played bonuses that max out at $1 million after 45 games. He’s owned another $250,000 if the Oilers make the playoffs, the same if they win a round and an additional $250,000 if they reach the conference final.

Holland has a total of $3 million earmarked for Smith’s contract, not $2 million, to hopefully avoid an overage for next season.

If Manning is placed on waivers, clears and is demoted to Bakersfield, the Oilers would save $1.025 million on his $2.25-million cap hit. However, most of those savings would be offset by having to add a defenceman, one most likely still on his entry-level contract.

Jurco and Cave are listed as being on the roster, which is no sure thing. They make $750,000 and $675,000, respectively, and replacing them with another player would be more costly.

Lastly, Brodziak, as indicated by CapFriendly, is expected to start the season on injured reserve. He won’t play this season due to injury. The Oilers may move him to long-term injury reserve later in the season if they get into a cap crunch or want to add salary closer to the trade deadline.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
**By Allan Mitchell Sep 16, 2019 10**

The Edmonton Oilers haven’t been truly balanced in any training camp this century. The closest one could come might be the lockout team (2004-05) that never played. That group had a strong defence and exceptional two-way wingers, while lacking strong goaltending and impact offensive players. The Hockey News listed 2004 strengths as “speed and emotion” and noted the forwards would have to score via the cycle and winning puck battles. Fifteen years later, a fan waking up from a 2004 coma might suffer whiplash with the roster reversal since, with the only true resemblance between then and now being a lack of playoff berths.

When the 2004 edition of the Oilers finally played hockey in anger (2005-06), veterans like Ryan Smyth (36 goals) and Shaw Horcoff (22 goals) were aided by a flood of young forwards who could cash (Raffi Torres 27, Jarret Stoll 22, Ales Hemsky 19 goals) along with the acquisition of impact defenceman Chris Pronger.

The current Oilers are badly in need of the same kind of transfusion, and new coach Dave Tippett will be juggling role players until the new Torres, Stoll and Hemsky can be identified in the system or procured from outside.

The preseason

Tippett’s vision of ideal deployment will differ from Todd McLellan’s, we’re already seeing some differences like Darnell Nurse and Adam Larsson being used as a shutdown pair. Tweaks will continue through camp and into the regular season, as Tippett (and general manager Ken Holland) will no doubt change the roster via recalls, waiver claims and possibly trades.

Beginning Monday, with a home game against the Winnipeg Jets, the coaching staff and management are going to be looking for specific items. Tippett has identified issues (a third for Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl, finding someone who can help with chem on the Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, James Neal line) and offered possible solutions (Joel Persson paired with Oscar Klefbom) to other problems. Here’s a list of players to watch and the matching problem each man could solve this season in Edmonton.

**EVAN BOUCHARD RECORDS TWO GOALS AND TWO ASSISTS IN THE OILERS SCRIMMAGE. NOT BAD AT ALL.**

— DANIEL NUGENT-BOWMAN (@DNBSPORTS) SEPTEMBER 15, 2019

**Top six defenceman**

Based on Tippett’s verbal, the Oilers would like to start the season with Nurse and Larsson as a shutdown duo, with Klefbom freed up to whereas in the offensive zone. His partner becomes the first hurdle for the coaching staff, and early intel is trumpeting Joel Persson as first option. If he can deliver in the role, that might allow Edmonton to run an experienced third pair of Kris Russell and Matt Benning. It might also force a trade to find room for one of Caleb Jones, William Lagesson or Ethan Bear, all of whom will be waiver eligible this time next year.

The potential “loud noise” in Edmonton’s defence is Evan Bouchard. He tore through last year’s preseason, going 1-3-4 in about 90 minutes over four games, and made the team out of camp. Bouchard turns 20 in 35 days. The prudent call would be to send him down, but he is the one player in the hopeful group who could derail stated plans. Bouchard’s ability to generate offence may eventually make him the ideal partner for Klefbom on the top offensive pairing, but time of arrival is the question. After the intrasquad game at the Rogers community rink yesterday, a game in which Bouchard posted four points, Tippett said “that’s what he does. It’s amazing. He creates opportunities, not only for himself but for his teammates.” Something to watch this fall.

**Nuge needs a line**

I mentioned in the “reasonable expectations” series that Nugent-Hopkins played over 1,150 minutes at five-on-live in 2018-19, but did not play even 100 minutes with a specific trio during the year. Ken Holland’s big move of summer (James Neal) may help, and other candidates include rookie Tyler Benson, 22-goal man Alex Chiasson and veteran Sam Gagner (who got the first look on the line in practice).

One name to keep in mind? Joakim Nygard. He’s fast and skilled, two attractive attributes Edmonton was missing on the line for much of 2018-19. He was one of the highest scoring forwards in the SHL one year ago, and could slide into the lineup as a regular on Nugent-Hopkins’ line opening night.

**Bottom-six forwards**

Ken Holland signed several free agents (NHL and Europe) in an effort to give Tippett options on the third and fourth lines. The first order of business will be finding centres who can play behind top pivots McDavid and Nugent-Hopkins. A good guess has Riley Sheahan, Gaeten Haas and Colby Cave as the likely keepers opening night at the position, although several wingers (Markus Granlund, Juho Khaira, Sam Gagner) can play the middle.

One early line at practice featured Sheahan between Khaira and Josh Archibald. The trio is aggressive, physical and might be a suitable checking unit for Tippett. The key is scoring close to what is given back, something this Oilers team hasn’t had from a third line in a couple of seasons.

Two Bakersfield Condors worth watching are Joe Gambardella and Josh Currie. Gambardella spiked offensively in the AHL last season, adding 29 goals to a resume that included intelligent play and strong forechecking. I asked him about the increase in goals (from 13 to 29) and he told me “last summer, I went home and worked on my shot a lot. I wanted to take more shots this year.” Currie is a right shot centre-wing with a great deal of utility. His NHL audition last season was impressive and like Gambardella he is solid as a checker with some offensive potential. Both men are worth watching in this year’s preseason.

Who’s number three?

Mike Smith has the flu, meaning the Oilers are down a man in net. Although Smith will recover and likely form an NHL tandem with Mikko Koskinen, his absence points out a fact about Edmonton’s pro goalie depth chart. It’s two deep in NHL experience.

Shane Starrett was outstanding for much of the AHL season in 2018-19. His point was a key element in the Condors’ first trip to the playoffs in five tries. Starrett’s .916 save percentage and pro experience make him the obvious third option for the NHL net. Dylan Wells and Stuart Skinner have shown potential but will be entering their second pro season this fall.

**Outliers**

There’s always a chance for a player to emerge unexpectedly, and this year it might be Kailer Yamamoto. He told Daniel Nugent-Bowman before training camp he was uncertain if his wrist injury would keep him out of camp early, and so far he hasn’t seen game action. When he does, Yamamoto becomes one of the most attractive scoring options on right wing. If he flourishes, and he has in the last two training camps, we might see him in Edmonton sooner than later.

**Back to 2005**

The 2005-06 opening night Oilers were strong at centre (Shawn Horcoff, Michael Peca, Jarret Stoll and Marty Reasoner) and flush with quality two-way wingers (Ryan Smyth, Radek Dvorak, Ethan Moreau, Fernando Pisani).

This Edmonton Oilers team has checked off the most difficult items: World’s best hockey player, 50-goal winger. That’s a helluva start, but the key for 2019-20 will come in goal differential when Connor McDavid is off the ice. Tippett needs a strong push from the farm, and there are candidates who are NHL-ready or close. I’d suggest Bouchard, Jones, Bear and Lagesson fit the description on defence, and forwards include Benson, Cooper Marody, Yamamoto, Gambardella and Currie. Starrett is stone alone as an option in net, and of course not all of these men will have NHL careers.

Dave Tippett is a veteran coach who has an idea about winning games while being outmanned in the Pacific Division. That might be the most encouraging thing about this year’s Oilers team. The journey begins, tonight.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
New Kings coach Todd McLellan makes his message clear: 'It can't get casual here'

By JACK HARRIS
STAFF WRITER
SEP. 16, 2019 2:12 PM

The shriek of a whistle brought the practice to a halt.

During the Kings' first 15 minutes on the ice Saturday morning, they'd stayed in constant motion. A neutral-zone stickhandling warm-up drill. Several hard laps around the rink. A simple five-on-zero breakout drill.

At first, new coach Todd McLellan hardly said a word.

But once he saw an issue, McLellan stopped his players in their tracks. Because, as much as the straight-talking, silver-haired coach wants up-tempo practices from his team, he wants their sessions to be mistake-free.

"I want to be direct," McLellan said. "I would like us to be very clear as a coaching staff of what we require of them, what their responsibilities are in certain areas and then, most importantly, why we're doing it.

"I continue to try to get that point across. If they understand why, they have a better chance at success."

In the first weekend of training camp, the Kings' McLellan-led practices have followed the rhythm of a retro jazz band. Most of the time, they're hectic and high-paced, a kinetic quality attached to almost every drill. Then the action will stop on a dime, slowing to a hum as the veteran NHL coach delivers detailed instructions.

If the sound of carving ice isn't filling the air, McLellan's deep, booming voice usually is.

"He's going to be straightforward," forward Tyler Toffoli said. "If it's good or bad, he's going to let us know."

Here is how the rest of the Kings' Saturday morning practice unfolded:

McLellan sent the team skating in laps again, shouting, "Move! Move! Move!" as they passed him.

They spent a few moments huddled around the coach, listening as he quickly sketched directions using a whiteboard on the glass.

During the ensuing offensive-zone entry drill, McLellan had defenseman Alec Martinez redo a rep, instructing him to carry the puck across the blue line when given space, instead of dumping it in.

Later, midway through a neutral-zone regroup exercise, McLellan called for another pause and gathered his entire group of defensemen for a short chat near center ice.

After another stretch of unimpeded play, McLellan stepped in once more after Adrian Kempe missed a chance to drive into open space and past an opposing defenseman. One of the lines McLellan uttered perhaps sums up his message best:

"It can't get casual here!"

McLellan, who signed a five-year, $25-million contract with the Kings this offseason, is expected to have a lot of freedom behind the bench. He has called such autonomy one of the most appealing aspects of the job. But when it comes to his big-picture objective, he and management already see eye to eye.

They want to re-instill the aggressiveness the Kings seemingly lost last season. McLellan hopes the structure of his training camp practices can help do it.

"What hockey used to get done in 60 minutes, you can almost get done in 40 minutes now," McLellan said. "Keep the pace up, keep the heart rate up, you don't have to line guys at the end of practice all the time and skate them."

Martinez said that at the start of one ice time over the weekend, rink employees hadn't yet cleared the surface when McLellan whistled for practice to begin. "When he blows that whistle," Martinez said, "he wants to get going."

McLellan has maintained a similar tone away from the ice as well. For example, captain Anze Kopitar said McLellan showed the group tape of the San Jose Sharks' and Nashville Predators' fast and firm systems.

"Just trying to be more aggressive," Kopitar said. "[We want to] turn the puck over quicker, or be on offense a lot more. We've got to score more goals than we did in the past. The first step is being more aggressive."

Of course, rebuilding the Kings will take more than a new mind-set. McLellan wants to implement an entirely new style of play, one that transforms the Kings from a one-dimensional defensive stalwart to a heavy-forechecking, high-scoring squad. He wants to reestablish a Stanley Cup-winning culture. And he needs his players to adjust to his unique terms, phrases and philosophies.

"By the time we get up and running and playing, hopefully it just comes to them naturally," McLellan said, "and we're a little more assertive."

Until then, he won't waste time or words on the ice. There's a long road ahead, but he wants the Kings to do everything as fast and as perfectly as possible anyway.

"It's not a complicated switch, but [when] you do something for 15 years, that's where the mistakes are going to be," forward Dustin Brown said. "You're going to see it in practice out there, all the reads and reacts. But having him be able to break it down for us is a big key."

LA Times: LOADED: 09.17.2019
Jonathan Quick needs to get back to ‘playing big’ in order to rediscover his game

By Lisa Dillman Sep 16, 2019

EL SEGUNDO, Calif. — It’s early days, yes. But the difference between Kings goaltender Jonathan Quick in training camp this season, compared to the unapproachable Quick a year ago, is worth noting.

It’s a change for the better.

The wall around Quick, while not completely lowered, wasn’t like the barricade it often was during an altogether forgettable 2018-19 season. At 33, and coming off his worst season of his career, Quick is at an absolute career crossroads that can go one of two ways. Either he proves that it was simply an aberration, because everyone can have an off year.

Or it’s the start of a slow and inexorable decline. But for his part, Quick will insist: “This year is no different than any year. It doesn’t matter what happened the year before. There’s obviously years where we were successful, and you come back to training camp and you’re starting at zero then, too. But, obviously, last year was disappointing.”

Quick had an .888 save percentage last season, appearing in 46 games. The only goalie who was lower (having played 25 or more games) was Aaron Dell of the San Jose Sharks. A closer comparison would be Keith Kinkaid, then of the New Jersey Devils (.891), who appeared in 41 games. But Dell and Kinkaid are career backups, whereas Quick has been among the NHL’s elite goalies for closing in on a decade now.

Quick is a two-time Stanley Cup champion, Conn Smythe winner and two-time Jennings Trophy winner. A lot of what may happen with the Kings this coming season will depend on if Quick can get his A-game back.

Age isn’t always the only measuring stick. Look no further than Marc-Andre Fleury, now 34, who has had a late-career renaissance with the Vegas Golden Knights. For any team, in any year, the sort of goaltending Quick has been capable of providing in the past can help mask other shortcomings.

For that matter, it’s far easier to integrate young players into the lineup, especially young defensemen, if your goalie is playing rock solidly behind you.

“When you look back at his career, that’s the first bad year he’s had and we just have to get back on track,” Kings goaltending coach Bill Ranford said. “We understood the areas that have to be cleaned up, and that was kind of our approach this summer. Adjust the things that we think we can improve on and move forward. I think he wants to prove to everybody that he’s still the goalie that we’ve seen, and he’s worked hard this summer to be ready for the start of the season.

“We’re going to need great goaltending out of him and Jack (Campbell). If we want to get back in the playoffs, it’s got to start from our back end and move up.”

Before we get back to Quick and Ranford, it’s always worthwhile to get some perspective outside the organization.

A goaltending coach from another NHL team and a former NHL goaltender addressed what kind of concessions Quick needs to make to bounce back from an injury-riddled campaign, in which the Kings were 30th in the NHL.

“He has to get back to playing big,” the goaltending coach said, via text. “He has been playing so small of late. If he can get back to cleaning up his execution, he could bounce back.

“Also, some help from his team would help!!!”

Former NHL goalie Kevin Weekes, who now works with NHL Network, didn’t dispute the observation.

“At times, he looked smaller,” Weekes said. “That’s like saying to Tom Brady, ‘Hey Tom, be patient in the pocket.’ All of a sudden you’ve got these pass rushers that are blowing through your line and all of a sudden you’ve got to get rid of the ball faster.”

Like the goaltending coach suggested, Quick could use some help.

“I don’t disagree with that,” Weekes said. “But here is what I would say: When you know that your D-man or that low center in the D-zone is helping and they’ve got a stick or they have a body and you naturally play aggressive, it allows you to naturally play aggressive.

“When you’re unsure if they have a stick on the back door or if they’ve tied up that body at the back post … you’re kind of unsure (overall) as well.

“Then you’re playing 50-50, ‘Ok man, can I still be as aggressive?’ You’re always kind half guessing.”

Last season, Quick was injured twice before the calendar flipped over to November, and he needed surgery in October to repair torn cartilage in his knee. He went 2-8-2 in his first 12 games played, dropping a couple of choice F-bombs after a loss in Pittsburgh in December.

Perhaps the most visible symbol of frustration was when he skated to the bench in Carolina on Feb. 26 and gave interim coach Willie Desjardins an earful for not challenging a Hurricanes goal.

During training camp, one common theme among the Kings is not to dwell on last season — but not to forget it, either.

“We’ve got to learn from it because by no means do you just throw it out and say, ‘Oh, wow,’” Ranford said. “But you got to learn from it and then build off of it.

“When you look back at last season, for the first time in his career, usually he was able to stop the bleeding at three or four goals and there was too many times it was four, five and six. You wipe out those types of games and now all of a sudden his numbers come back to be respectable numbers again.

“That’s just the little bit of frustration on everybody’s part and maybe the dig-in sometimes wasn’t as much as it used to be in the past, or just frustration was overtaking stopping the puck. That’s the learning part that I’m talking about where you just sometimes have to find a way to get past that frustration and still worry about doing your job and stopping the puck.”

Considering how wildly the season veered off the rails, did Ranford let some time pass before he re-engaged with Quick?

Quite the opposite happened.

“We talked right away. I had some ideas and I wanted, while it was fresh in my mind, I wanted to get feedback from him,” Ranford said. “It was such a disappointing season for everybody last year that I think we all got caught up in it and I think that’s a real lesson to be learned for everybody. Even though things aren’t going well, you still have to dig deep and find the positives and build off it.”

Quick and his teammates are getting used to the new coaching staff and adjusting to and seeing how Kings coach Todd McLellan likes to run practices and meetings.

“It’s obviously different, so you have to have pay attention,” Quick said. “You can’t have some of the same habits that you might’ve used to, just like everyone. Everyone’s starting from scratch and looking forward to seeing what we can do as a team this year.”

Head coaches have come and gone, in fact, many of them during Quick’s tenure with the Kings. He has played for Marc Crawford, Terry Murray, Darryl Sutter, John Stevens, Desjardins and, now, McLellan.

Ranford, however, has been a stabilizing force for Quick’s entire time in Los Angeles.

“The one message obviously that’s always the most important is just stop the puck,” Quick said. “But at this point in the year, there’s some new concepts that you don’t really get to see in summer skates and things like that, so it’s just focusing on the details and make sure all your structure’s there, and when you do all the little details and the structure part of your game is intact, then that allows you to start branching out and making different types of saves like that.”

There is a special bond and an unofficial club membership between the men who have played the position. Weekes will often text Quick after a good game.
“If he sees I had a bad game, he’ll text me still, so he’s just a good guy,” Quick said. “He’s awesome.”

It was pointed out that the versatile Weekes reports and breaks news, also.

“Still, he’s a goalie first, you know?” Quick said.

Weekes believes Quick is capable of bouncing back. I asked him why he thought it could happen.

“Look, man, Jonathan Quick, to me, is the money goalie of this generation,” Weekes said. “I’m getting goosebumps and the air conditioning is not that high.

“He’s willing to go in and battle and Dominik Hasek-it up. I played against both of them. He’ll do whatever it takes to make a save. Very rarely, if ever, will he quit on plays. He is a max-effort guy. Max-effort goalie, whose body and athleticism and competitiveness and explosiveness allow him to do things that hardly anybody else’s body will allow them to do.”

In short, Quick needs to get back to being the take-no-prisoners player from his past.

Said Weekes: “They can make some tweaks to Quickie’s style. But Jonathan Quick is Jonathan Quick. It’s a matter of him coming out the way he typically does. I’m Jonathan Quick, put my mask on and let’s go!”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
EVE OF PRESEASON: KOVALCHUK ON PROKHORKIN’S SKILL; GETTING TO KNOW JOAKIM RYAN

JON ROSEN
SEPTEMBER 16, 2019

INSIDERS. A fine Monday evening to you and yours. Notes from the fourth day of training camp:

— The practice groups have remained constant minus some shuffling on the periphery, but they won’t be indicators of tomorrow’s game groups. Todd McLellan said after today’s sessions that the two groups would be mixed and matched and that he’d remain at home with Marco Sturm as Trent Yawney and Mike Stothers head to Glendale. “We’ll split up the rest of the staff so everybody gets a fair viewing by both NHL and American League staffs,” said McLellan, who said that the plan will be to split goaltenders in the two games. Jonathan Quick, Jack Campbell, Cal Petersen and Matt Villalta have been the four goalies assigned to the two main camp groups, though Cole Kehler has also rotated in as needed.

There was ample teaching once again, and after structural breakouts and continual systems implementation, the ice was cut, and the players returned to run special teams detail. It’s the first split squad game in advance of early cuts, so power play units were simply grouped by line and pairing.

Nick and Darryl will handle the play by play in Staples Center, which can be heard on the LA Kings Audio Network. Likewise, Bob Heethuis and Paul Bissonette will broadcast the Gila River Arena game, which can be streamed from Southern California on Arizona’s 1Heart Radio station.

— There was an interesting exchange between McLellan and Patrick O’Neal, who was asked whether McLellan will rely on more familiar groupings – Kopitar/Brown, Carter/Toffoli, Clifford/Lewis – when he ultimately looks to build the line he’ll take into the regular season.

“The familiarity is comfort right now for the players, and I look at a couple Stanley Cups every time I walk in here, and those players were familiar with each other, they played with each other,” McLellan answered. “But that was a long time ago. Familiarity hasn’t necessarily produced winning results. But, right now throughout training camp we’re going to try to put concepts in place. I think I’d like them together. If they perform well, they’ll stay together. If they don’t, we’ll find new combinations until we get enough to be pleased.”

I’m not expecting cuts until after Tuesday’s split-squad games. There will be an additional round in advance of Ontario opening camp next Monday, which will leave a final group of players battling to be named to the opening night roster, which is due October 1.

“The actual final roster spots where we sit down and we start talking to players about their lifelines, how much lifeline they’ve used up, how much they have left, will happen later on,” McLellan said.

Keep in mind that the Kings will have the second waiver claim between the wire opens on September 20 through October 31.

A handy guide of important dates, courtesy of Cap Friendly:

— I’m excited to get to know Nikolai Prokhorkin, who hasn’t been seen around these parts since leaving Los Angeles for Manchester (and then Manchester for Moscow) in the fall of 2012.

We didn’t have a ton of time to speak today, and the center who turns 26 on Tuesday is fluent in English, but not quite yet at the Hey Let’s Ask You Rapid Fire Questions stage. But he did update us with the pronunciation of his name.

Pronunciation of Prokhorkin is closer to pro-HORR-kin than pro-KORR-kin. Like the Hebrew “ch.”

— Jon Rosen (@lakingsinsider) September 16, 2019

Ilya Kovalchuk was Prokhorkin’s teammate at SKA for three years and a teammate of his at the PyeongChang Games, where they both scored twice in a 4-0 dismantling of the United States. While Prokhorkin played a role on OAR’s third line in that tournament and demonstrated a good firmness and willingness to work that perhaps signaled a skill set that could apply well to the NHL, he’s also coming off a season in which he and New Jersey’s Nikita Gusev were the only two players under 27 who averaged better than a point a game.

“The actually, I think his skill is very underrated. He sees the ice really well,” Kovalchuk said. “Sometimes he’s a little inconsistent, but I think he worked really hard this summer, and he looks way, way better – in better shape than he used to, so it’s good.”

Along with Gusev, and Vladislav Gavrikov, who was 22 when he won gold as a top-pairing defender and will join a talented Columbus defense this year, Prokhorkin is part of an intriguing crop of emerging Russian players to make the North American jump.

“He’s a really top talent, obviously,” Kovalchuk said. “It’s the reason why he signed here, and I think he’s showed that he can play at this level. To me, he looks really good during the camp, so hopefully he’ll do well in the exhibition and have a chance to play in the regular game.”

Todd McLellan, on Nikolai Prokhorkin voting to earn an NHL role:

Well, they all want to do that. It doesn’t matter what league you come from. We’ve got kids that just turned 18 that are trying to do that. Prokhorkin is in that situation where he’s competing against them. The edge that he has is that he’s been here before. He was that young player that came in and was maybe overwhelmed at times. Went to the minors, ended up going home and worked on his game. Pretty evident he had some good years over there and has grown as a player, and we hope now that the language barrier, the maturity factor all come in to play on the positive side so that he can compete for a job, and thus far, I think he’s done a pretty admirable job. Anything that he’s confused about or not sure, he’s asking questions, wants to see more video, and I can only assume that probably didn’t happen the first time through because he didn’t have the courage to ask for that. But as you get a little older, you’re willing to do that more.

McLellan, on how he familiarized himself with Prokhorkin, and whether he relied on video:

Actually, not much. He was one of those guys that I didn’t want to know a lot about him. I wanted to find out once he got here and formulate my own opinion. I was aware of his background, I knew where he played, I knew the type of year that he had. But since then, our opinion of him has been formed over the last four days and those days were important. But the big days coming up now are the games and what we get out of playing against the opposition.

— McLellan’s impression on Matt Luff seemed to be in concert with Luff’s own self-evaluation and focus. He commended the young winger’s ability to position himself well to shoot and generate good velocity and accuracy, “but there’s more to the game than just firing away, and I think he can use his size and his pace to create time and space for other players. Again, he’ll be in that same boat where not only is he battling and fighting to get a roster spot, but to be on the fourth line isn’t something that anybody should be happy with. They should want to be on that third or second line and I think he has the skill and talent to do it, but we’ve got to wait for it to come out now in the games.”

— Joakim Ryan called himself a “two-way, puck-moving defenseman,” and as someone who previously skated alongside Brent Burns, he appears set to line up for some minutes to the left of Drew Doughty.

“I like to get back quick and breakout of the zone efficiently and jump up into the rush when the opportunity presents itself. I like to use my feet, my skating and having a good stick to my advantage,” he said. The 5-foot-11, 185-pound Garden Stater hails from Rumson, New Jersey, which isn’t too far of a drive down the Garden State Parkway from New York and is situated at the north end of the Jersey Shore, much farther north than the Ventnor and Sea Isle homes of Justin Williams and John Stevens.

Before he was selected in the seventh round in 2012, he played four seasons at Cornell, and anyone who’s experienced the atmosphere at Lynah Rink probably understand his “no-brainer” decision.

“I always wanted to go to college. I never even really considered the OHL or anything like that,” he said. “I went on a few visits to Cornell before committing there and I just fell in love with the place. The atmosphere at the home games there is second to none, I just loved my time there.”

It’s not easy to balance school and athletics at an Ivy League school, and Ryan acknowledged the difficulties many students face as freshmen.
“Obviously if you’re going to be a biology major, it’s going to be super tough. I was just a communications major, just tried to take the easiest classes I could and get that degree,” he said, sharing a laugh with several reporters.

The last Cornell grad to play for L.A. was Ben Scrivens, who enrolled in the university’s renowned School of Hotel Administration.

“Actually, I wanted to go into that school, but when I was applying, I applied there and the coach – I was playing in the USHL at the time – he said I would have to go on campus to do an in-person interview. So, he was like, ‘just switch to communications, it will be a lot easier to get in, and then once you’re in, you can try to transfer if you want.’ I took a couple classes in the hotel school, it didn’t go too well for me, so I just stayed with communications.”

We’ll continue to speak with Ryan as camp progresses, but obviously there’s the one question to get out of the way – is it strange to go from San Jose, an arch-rival, to Doughty’s potential defensive partner?

“I mean, obviously San Jose and LA have had a rivalry, back when they were playing each other in the playoffs all the time,” he said. “… It was just the best opportunity for me. It’s a business. When I was deciding this summer, it wasn’t like ‘oh I’m not going to go to LA because they’re a rival of the Sharks,’ I didn’t look at it as that. I’m really happy I’m here, I think I made the right decision and I love it down here.”

ALEC, 32, sits in his gitch at a stall beside his D-partner, MATT, 24. JON, 38, rogue and handsome, enters with a notebook and recorder intending to ask Alec questions about the CBA — and MATT’S mysterious pseudonym. pic.twitter.com/nVT10lO2Z7

— Jon Rosen (@lakingsinsider) September 16, 2019

LA Kings Insider: LOADED: 09.17.2019
Mikko Koivu was nervous about getting back on the ice.

The first few months after the Wild captain had surgery to repair the torn anterior cruciate ligament and meniscus in his right knee were mentally draining, the toughest spell he had experienced since that center-ice collision in Buffalo ended his season Feb. 5.

When it was time to try skating again in mid-June, he wasn’t sure how he would respond.

But he moved better than he anticipated, an immediate boost that Koivu embraced.

“You get that progress that you’re getting stronger, that you’re getting better,” he said, “that gets your hopes up and your mind where it needs to be.”

Koivu took the next step in his recovery Monday, scrimmaging at TRIA Rink for the first time during training camp.

He won’t be in the lineup for the Wild’s preseason opener Tuesday at Xcel Energy Center against the Stars, but he could play as soon as this weekend.

Not only will that return to action signal he is getting closer to resuming his career, but it also puts him back on track to reach 1,000 games this season after his bid was abruptly halted.

And while continuing the pursuit of that milestone motivated him during the summer, Koivu is otherwise trying to keep his focus off a future that holds ample uncertainty for the 36-year-old veteran in the final season of his contract.

“I’m trying to enjoy every day now, and I’m happy that I’m back practicing and around the guys and I really enjoy that,” Koivu said. “So I don’t want to look too far ahead of ourselves on how it’s going to end up.”

In 14 years with the Wild, Koivu has scored 201 goals and assisted on 487, for 688 points — output that makes him the franchise leader in a host of offensive categories.

Chasing specific numbers each season, however, hasn’t been the objective.

Playing 1,000 times is.

At 973, he’s 27 games shy of the mark, a gap that could be closed as soon as Dec. 1 at home vs. Dallas.

Although he has a plan, Koivu doesn’t want to share a timeline for a return. But what he has shown on the ice has been encouraging, especially in the scrimmage.

“It’s a process that you feel 100 percent and you don’t think about the injury or you don’t think about when you go into the battle,” Koivu said. “I think at the same time, you’ve got to be comfortable out there and that’s the process where I’m at now.”

Linemates in camp suggest Koivu might find himself lower in the lineup than previous seasons, but wherever Koivu lands, coach Bruce Boudreau isn’t expecting Koivu to change his approach — that of a defensive stalwart who can also create offense.

“He’s going to fight for every bit of ice time that he gets,” Boudreau said. “He’s a proud guy, and he’s our captain and our leader. I anticipate him to come out here and defy people to be better than him.”

How Koivu re-establishes himself could hint at what happens when his two-year, $11 million contract expires.

While he’s trying to keep his attention on the present, Koivu acknowledged he has thought about life after this season, even if he isn’t sure what it will look like.
Wild's Mikko Koivu scrimmages for first time since injury: 'Better than I thought'

By DANE MIZUTANI | September 16, 2019 at 4:09 PM

Wild captain Mikko Koivu was huffing and puffing following Monday’s scrimmage at TRIA Rink, trying his best to catch his breath as reporters fired questions his way.

"It's been a while," he said. "Even if it's scrimmage, it's still different than practice. Just getting into a rhythm and things like that."

It was the first time Koivu has scrimmaged since suffering a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee in February. After missing the second half of the 2018-19 season, he spent countless hours in the offseason rehabbing, and with the season opener against the Nashville Predators a little more than two weeks away, Koivu has a mental checklist he needs to complete before then.

"I think first step is to get out there and practice and get into the battles," said Koivu, who accomplished that by competing on the opening day of training camp last week. "Then playing in a scrimmage is probably next step."

Which is why Monday's scrimmage at TRIA Rink was so important.

"To be honest, I was a little nervous how it was going to go, and if I'd be thinking about it, and if things would come kind of naturally," Koivu said. "It was better than I thought it would be."

Even though there was some rust, Koivu looked more or less like his usual self on the ice, winning board battles with regularity while playing solidly in both ends.

"For sure, some plays when I got the puck, or when I made a quick play, it's not quite there," Koivu said. "But I think that's reasonable."

Perhaps most importantly, Koivu barely thought about his injury when he was on the ice, an important mental hurdle he still has to clear as he works his way back into the lineup.

There were a couple of times this offseason that Koivu struggled to see the light at the end of the tunnel, especially early on in the recovery process when he couldn't do much of anything.

"Mentally, that was the biggest battle," he said. "You have to go through that and realize how it goes and kind of the different parts of the recovery process."

No doubt the last step for Koivu is playing in a preseason game. He won't play in Tuesday's preseason opener against the Dallas Stars at Xcel Energy Center, though it wouldn't be a surprise to see him slot into the lineup at some point this week.

"I've been on schedule so far," he said. "It's day by day and week by week. We'll talk with the trainers and talk with the coaching staff and talk with management. That said, at the end of the day, it's about me feeling comfortable out there."

"It's been a long road for myself. Just being around the guys, and being a part of the team, I appreciate that now even more than I did before."
Wild players are literally fighting for jobs in training camp

By DANE MIZUTANI | PUBLISHED: September 16, 2019 at 4:07 pm | UPDATED: September 16, 2019 at 5:49 PM

As the Wild progress through training camp, with coach Bruce Boudreau saying cuts would happen faster than usual this season, some players are doing everything they can to stand out.

That would explain why winger JT Brown and defenseman Louie Belpedio — both fringe players — dropped the gloves during Monday's scrimmage.

"You could see there are guys, when I say fighting for jobs, are really fighting for jobs," Boudreau said. "That's what we want to see. Just guys competing with everything they have for jobs.

"That comes with it. It's something we expected to see a lot from (Brown) last season. He's there doing it and he knows he's fighting for a job and he wants to stay relevant, I guess is the right word. I think the competitiveness is there, so I didn't mind it."

In that same breath, Boudreau recalled how it used to be much worse than it is now, suggesting that the spat during Monday's scrimmage was relatively minor in the grand scheme of things.

"You used to have to call the scrimmages off because there were so many fights, and I'm not exaggerating one iota," Boudreau said. "In the late '80s and early '90s, there were 15 fights per scrimmage."

Though Brown and Belpedio tried their best to prove their worth during Monday's scrimmage, neither was in danger of being cut this early in training camp.

The Wild did cut 14 players, trimming their training camp roster to 55.

Adam Beckman, Shawn Boudrias, Damien Giroux, Fedor Gordeev, Matvey Guskov and Hunter Jones were assigned to their junior teams, while Gabe Gagne, Shawn O'Donnell, Brett Pollock, Jordan Topping, Josh Atkinson, Lester Lancaster, Matt Register and Keaton Thompson were released from their professional tryouts.

BRIEFLY

As the Wild shift to mobile entry for all home games at Xcel Energy Center this season, fans are encouraged to add their tickets to their devices prior to arrival for Tuesday’s preseason game. Tickets will be accessible through Apple, Android or Google devices.
Captain’s last ride? In final year of deal, Mikko Koivu out to ‘live in the moment’

Michael Russo Sep 16, 2019

It’s strange to think about because Mikko Koivu has been part of the Wild for as long as some high school graduates have been alive, but the 2019-20 season could represent an end to an era.

The Wild franchise was born in the Year 2000.

One year later — or 18 years ago — Koivu was drafted sixth overall. Four years after that, Koivu debuted in the NHL, and for the past 14 years, Koivu has been a fixture inside the locker room and on the ice at Xcel Energy Center.

He has seen it all.

He has played for the only two majority owners the Wild have known, all four general managers, two interim GMs, all four head coaches and one interim coach. Mats Zuccarello and Ryan Hartman will become the 203rd and 204th teammates to play at least one game for the Wild since Koivu first stepped on the ice.

The franchise’s one and only permanent captain is also the franchise’s all-time leader in games played (973), points (688), assists (487), power-play points (244), plus/minus (plus-68), shots (2,196) and shootout goals (41) and is tied for first in power-play goals (59). He ranks second in goals (201), shorthanded goals (10) and game-winning goals (33).

He has won 6,510 more faceoffs (9,923) than the next closest teammate. He has logged almost 4,100 more minutes (18,862) than the next closest teammate.

Only 61 players in NHL history have played 1,000 games with a single franchise. Koivu is 27 games from achieving that feat.

Yet, as he returns from last February’s season-interrupting torn ACL and enters his 15th season in the final year of a two-year, $11 million deal, Koivu knows his fifth contract with the club could very well be his last.

The once skittish kid that used to sit wide-eyed in a locker-room stall next to Brian Rolston is now 36 years old. And with the team looking to get younger and Koivu for the first time staring at the possibility of seeing his ice time and role decrease, this could possibly be Koivu’s final year in Minnesota.

He’s trying not to think like that.

Mikko Koivu

We were all 18 years younger in 2001 when the Wild made Mikko Koivu their second-ever first-round pick. In the time since, he’s become the franchise leader in a slew of statistical categories. (Brace Hemmelgarn / USA Today)

“I’ve been trying to live in the moment, especially after the injury, the only goal that I had was to get back on the ice and make sure that I get back in the lineup for the regular season,” Koivu said. "Other than that, to be honest with you, of course you think about it. But (am I) worried about it? I wouldn’t use that word necessarily. It’s too far away. I know it goes quick. Every season goes by fast. I know that.

"But if you do the right things and if I just take care of myself and do the things that I’ve been doing throughout my career to prepare and take care of my body and all that, I think the rest will take care of itself. Also, for myself I need to feel comfortable and know where I’m at, so even that is too early to say. I’m trying to enjoy every day now and I’m happy that I’m back practicing and around the guys, and I really enjoy that. So I don’t want to look too far ahead of ourselves on how it’s going to end up."

If you read between the lines, when Koivu says he needs to "feel comfortable and know where I’m at," Koivu is insinuating that he needs to know he can still play the game at a high level in order to know if he even wants to continue playing past this season.

He’s coming off a major injury, one that even slowed a youngster like Luke Kunin last year. So, imagine how difficult the rehab process and return will be for somebody 14 or 15 years Kunin’s elder.

So, if by season’s end new general manager Bill Guerin even wants to retain Koivu, the veteran will have to first determine how his body feels. That’s way too early to say. Guerin also first wants to see how Koivu performs and needs to determine which players are coming behind him or if there would be replacements in the marketplace via trade or free agency.

“These are things that we’ll all sort out,” Guerin said recently. “We’ve got to see how things go. But he’s a very important guy in this organization. He’s had a hell of a career, and you know what? If it makes sense, it makes sense.”

If Koivu wants to keep playing but the Wild don’t plan to re-sign him, Koivu indicated that he also have to decide if he even wants to play elsewhere.

“I think there’s so much that goes into that,” said Koivu, who also has a no-move clause so he’d control if he stays past the trade deadline if this season goes haywire and Guerin wants to investigate trading him. “At that point, I think first of all, obviously I love it here, my family loves it here, I’ve always been here and this is all I know. So, I think a change would be a big thing. It’s new management now, so it’s a fresh start for everyone. I think that’s a great thing, but at the same time, what are (Guerin’s) plans and all that, we don’t know. There will be a time to worry about that. I’m just worrying about right now and what’s ahead of us here for training camp and going into the season.”

Koivu took part in his first scrimmage of training camp Monday and played on a line with Marcus Foligno and Will Bitten. Coach Bruce Boudreau was encouraged. He showed no signs of injury, nor showed signs that he was thinking about the injury.

“For sure some plays when I got the puck and when I make a quick play, things like that, it’s not quite there,” Koivu said. “To be honest, I was a little nervous how it was going to go and if I’d be thinking about it and if things would come kind of naturally. It was better than I thought it would be.”

Koivu probably won’t play in a preseason game until Saturday’s home date against the Avalanche. The Wild open the preseason Tuesday in St. Paul against Dallas and also play Wednesday in Winnipeg.

He admits half the battle of training camp will be mentally not thinking about the injury.

“I’ve been a part of every drill, but I think it’s a process to feel 100 percent and not think about going into a battle,” Koivu said.

Koivu said having last season end abruptly after a fluky collision Feb. 5 in Buffalo is making him appreciate more being part of the team. Unless he really eases Koivu into the season, Boudreau plans on starting Koivu on a line between youngsters Jordan Greenway and Kunin. But with Koivu starting camp slow, Joel Eriksson Ek has taken that spot and has looked exceptional.

Remember, Eriksson Ek showed flashes of being a solid player once he bit off more ice time after Koivu’s injury last season, too.

But Boudreau says Koivu looks “strong and defiant. He’s got so much pride. He’s out there and he’s going, OK. You want my job. You’re going to have to take it from me.” That’s the way he’s locked to me. He looks leaner. His stride is the same. I haven’t noticed anything from the injury that has made him limp or anything. Like (Ryan Suter) last year at the beginning, you could tell that he was coming off an (ankle) injury because you could see after the games and after practices that he was still limping (when he walked). I don’t see anything like that with Mikko.”

Koivu is technically starting his 11th season as full captain and is the NHL’s fourth-longest tenured captain behind Boston’s Zdeno Chara, Pittsburgh’s Sidney Crosby and Chicago’s Jonathan Toews. But the NHL actually considers Koivu the captain in 2008-09 because he wore the “C” every month but two during Jacques Lemaire’s old rotating captancy system.

Mikko Koivu

A fluke injury ended Koivu’s 2018-19 season after just 48 games, 27 shy of 1,000 for his career. Back from a long rehab, Koivu says he’s ready to go, no matter what his role. (Tom Szczotkowski / USA Today)
According to the NHL, there have been 10 players in NHL history who were captain or co-captain for all or part of 12 or more consecutive seasons with one franchise. Toews and Koivu will join that list in 2019-20.

He is anxious to hit the 1,000-game milestone this season and admits the benchmark served as a source of motivation during many of those exhausting rehab sessions since his surgery last February.

"I think it's always important to have goals when you come into a season," Koivu said. "I don't really put any numbers for myself or anything like that, but (1,000 games) is a goal that I have. I don't think about it all the time, but it's something that I have thought about and it motivates you going forward and for the summer as well. You know that you missed it last year and you want to get back healthy and hopefully get there."

Koivu said the first two or three months of the offseason were tough. He said, mentally it was a constant battle. But once he got on the ice in June to take his first twirl without pucks, it was a lot better than he expected.

"Once you get through the skate and things like that, and you get that progress that you're getting stronger, that you're getting better, that gets your hopes up and your mind where it needs to be," Koivu said. "It's a process. I heard that before that once you get hurt and after surgery, but at the same time you have to go through that and realize how it goes and kind of the different parts of the recovery.

"The training staff here, they did an unbelievable job the first couple months, and my trainers back in Finland, they were really good as well. It feels good to be in good hands."

Koivu doesn't seem bothered that he may not start the season in a top-six role. He really likes playing so far with Greenway, 22, and Kunin, 21, two guys that were barely out of diapers when Koivu was drafted.

"Lines, I'm sure they will change throughout the camp and once we get closer to the regular season," he said. "I just like them as individuals on and off the ice. They're good kids, they work hard, they appreciate the game, I think they play the game the right way, so it's easy to fit in with those two. They can help me as much as I can help them, so I think that's a good feeling.

"It makes life a lot easier when you got guys that you can trust both sides of the ice. Even if they're that young, you can see the comfort level for both of them after last year with Kunny coming off an injury and Greener getting a year under his belt now. I think they're a lot more comfortable and they need to be. They're a big part of the team and they need to help us to win hockey games and be a successful team here.

"I'm looking forward to what they can do. They need to be comfortable and we have to help them out."

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
Rookie Cayden Primeau shines as Canadiens defeat Devils in first pre-season match

PAT HICKEY, MONTREAL GAZETTE Updated: September 16, 2019

Cayden Primeau’s first NHL save showed why he’s considered one of the Canadiens’ brightest prospects.

Primeau replaced Carey Price midway through Monday’s exhibition opener against the New Jersey Devils and he didn’t have to wait long for his first test. He faced a 2-on-1 break with Nico Hischier, the No. 1 overall draft pick in 2017, bearing down on him with Blake Coleman.

“I don’t know who they were but they were coming down on a 2-on-1 and I knew I had to respect the shooter (Hischier), especially at this level.” said Primeau, “It looked like he was going to pass and I kind of blacked out and pushed over as hard as I could.”

The result was a spectacular save on Coleman, which had the Bell Centre crowd chanting his name.

“I couldn’t help but crack a smile,” said Primeau, who made another big save on Kyle Palmieri during a third-period power play. He finished the game with 16 saves on 17 shots and became the winning goaltender when Jake Evans scored a shorthanded goal at 17:22 of the third period to snap a 2-2 tie. Nick Cousins added an empty-net goal for a 4-2 win.

Primeau was the victim of a bad bounce early in the third period that allowed Michael McLeod to tie the score at 2-2. Primeau, who spent time this summer working on his skating, went behind the net to cut off a rim pass, but the puck took a strange bounce off the glass and came out to McLeod, who deposited the puck in an empty net.

“There are bounces here and there, and sometimes you’re on the wrong side,” said Primeau. “It’s a part of the game. (Cale) Fleury made a great effort to try to save it but it went in.”

Primeau is a longshot to make the Canadiens roster because you don’t want to have a 20-year-old sitting on the bench as Price’s backup. But the top goaltender in U.S. college hockey last season showed why he’s considered a prospect for the future.

Evans, who played in Laval last season after four years at Notre Dame, said he was trying to clear the puck when he suddenly found himself with a breakaway and beat goaltender Evan Cormier off the rush.

“I got a lucky bounce,” said Evans, who was tangling with Palmieri at centre ice. “I haven’t been very good at dekes lately so I just shot it and it went in.

“I didn’t have my best game and to get that goal at the end feels good,” said Evans. “I thought I was little hesitant. When you’re playing against the best players in the world, you have to be a little smarter, and I think I was as the game went on. I was glad the coach had confidence to use me in that situation and all I wanted to do was make sure they didn’t score.”

Artturi Lehkonen deflected Shea Weber’s blast from the blue line for the first Montreal goal, while Nate Thompson made it 2-0 when he buried a rebound on Mackenzie Blackwood after Cousins’s shot was deflected in front.

Price stopped eight of the nine shots he faced. Defenceman Will Butcher beat Price with a shot off the rush during a power play late in first period.

The Canadiens play the Florida Panthers Wednesday in the Kraft Hockeyville game in Bathurst, N.B., and again Thursday night at the Bell Centre.

Montreal Gazette LOADED: 09.17.2019
The Canadiens' Charles Hudon was asked after Monday's morning skate in Brossard what he'd like to do different this season.

"Play," he said with a smile.

Last season, Hudon played in only 32 games with the Canadiens, posting 3-2-5 totals and a minus-9 rating while averaging 11:40 of ice time. The 25-year-old forward did not dress for any of the last 22 games and played in only two of the last 27. The last game Hudon played in was on Feb. 19.

So, it was a bit of a surprise when Canadiens GM Marc Bergevin signed Hudon, who was a restricted free agent, to a one-year, one-way contract this summer worth US$800,000. It was also a bit of a surprise when Hudon showed up at training camp 17 pounds lighter than he was at the end of last season, now listed at 5-foot-10 and 190 pounds.

"First of all, not 17 pounds from the weigh in last year (at training camp)," Hudon said. "It's more like at the end of the year when I was at 207, I think. I've lost 17 pounds since that date."

Not playing for the last month-and-a-half of the season probably didn't help.

"It was tough," Hudon said. "Me and (trainer) Stéph Dubé worked a lot in the gym, a nutritionist, too. With my wife we tried to find some new recipes and stuff like that to help the body coming back in good shape and lose some weight. My family and stuff like that did a great job. Even the people around me."

Did he find a favourite new recipe?

"We tried some vegan stuff," Hudon said with a grin. "Well, it's a new generation now. It's good ... it's different. Sometimes I don't want to ask her what's inside my plate, but I'm still eating it."

Hudon has noticed a difference on the ice early in training camp and was in the lineup for the Canadiens' pre-season opener Monday night against the New Jersey Devils, playing left wing on a line with Nick Suzuki at centre and Jordan Weal on the right.

"More speed, more execution, stuff like that," Hudon said after the morning skate about how he now feels on the ice. "I'm pretty much not a second late like I used to pretty much last year. So I'm feeling good. Just going day by day and we'll see what's going on for the game tonight."

Gaining weight during the summer can be a key for young NHL players looking to improve their strength, like the Canadiens' Jesperi Kotkaniemi, who now weighs 14 pounds more than he did at the start of last season. But training during the summer has changed over the years for veteran players.

"You see the way guys train now, it's not a lot of weights, to be honest with you," Dale Weise, 31, said after the morning skate. "It's more about making sure your body can move, mobility. You see a lot of guys doing pilates, yoga, all that kind of things. Just because you got to be able to skate and with your body working at such a high speed now and high tempo it takes such a toll on your body. You got to be able to keep that up for eight months and then some in the playoffs."

Weise said he weighed about 215 pounds when he first played in the NHL and now carries 196 pounds on his 6-foot-2 frame.

"Personally, I think the last four or five years I've been training the other way," he said. "Staying away from the weights, not trying to get too big. More about speed and making sure your body moves the right way and being explosive. You just learn to eat better, you learn to train better, especially now the way the game is. The game is so fast."
The Weise household is a hectic place these days.

Dale Weise and his wife, Lauren, have four children and the oldest is son Hunter, who is 6. Daughter Jordana is 4 and twins Jersey Taylor, a girl, and Hayes Randall, a boy, are almost 5 months old.

That probably makes Lauren the MVP of the household.

"Definitely, she is," Weise said with a smile after the Canadiens held a morning skate Monday in Brossard. "Big time because it's pure chaos. It's crazy. We've got four now, so it's a lot."

While Lauren is handling things at their Montreal home, her husband isn't looking to be the MVP of the Canadiens — just trying to earn a spot on the team — and he was in the lineup for the pre-season opener Monday night against the New Jersey Devils at the Bell Centre. Marc Bergevin brought Weise back to Montreal — where he played for three seasons — last February when the Canadiens GM acquired the 31-year-old forward from the Philadelphia Flyers, along with defenceman Christian Folin, in exchange for forward Byron Froese and defenceman David Schlemko.

Weise was unable to earn a regular spot with the Canadiens last season, held pointless in nine games and not playing in any of the last 13. Weise scored two goals in the three games he played with the AHL's Laval Rocket. This is the final season of his four-year, US$9.4-million contract with a $2.35 million salary-cap hit.

"I'm pumped," Weise said about being back in Montreal. "I had the time of my life here last time. I love playing here. You've got the greatest fans in the world and this is the best organization in hockey, so you've got to be happy about that."

Bergevin traded Weise to the Chicago Blackhawks on Feb. 26, 2016, along with Tomas Fleischmann, and got a great return in centre Phillip Danault and a second-round pick at the 2018 NHL Draft that was used to select Russian defenceman Alexander Romanov, who could be with the Canadiens next season after his KHL contract expires. That summer, Weise signed his current contract with the Philadelphia Flyers as a free agent.

Weise said what he missed most about Montreal was the fans.

"They make you want to play, they make you want to play hard," he said. "You walk around, people are so positive about the team and they're such big fans. You kind of miss that. You go to other places, there's a lot of negativity and advice that gets thrown your way. I think the fans here are just so happy when they run into a player."

Weise is battling for a spot on the fourth line and Monday night he was at right wing with fellow veterans Nate Thompson at centre and Nick Cousins on the left. Head coach Claude Julien loves veterans and there's a chance that could be on the fourth line when the regular season starts, depending on how prospects Ryan Poehling and Nick Suzuki perform during the exhibition season.

"To be honest with you, I don't really care about anybody else," Weise said. "You just kind of worry about yourself. Maybe when I was younger and I was trying to make a team, I was sitting there and you're like analyzing everything. I don't really do that anymore. I just go out and do what I do, and that's all you can do. You save a lot of stress and anxiety that way. Just go about your job, do what you can do and you'll be a lot happier and better in the long run."

"I think when you're a little bit younger and you're fighting for a spot, every single day is so tense and you're so nervous and it's really, really hard to show your best," he added. "For me, obviously, I have experience, I've been in the league a long time. I feel good about my game and every time I get a chance to play, just show what you do. I don't think it's a surprise what I bring to our team and I think it's a valued asset for this team."

Does Weise feel he has something to prove?
What the Puck: Stéphane Richer is right to blast Canadiens' management

BRENDAN KELLY, MONTREAL GAZETTE Updated: September 16, 2019

Why is it that the Montreal Canadiens organization is so intent on keeping a Berlin Wall between its players and the rest of the world?

This sorry state of affairs has existed ever since Bob Gainey took over as general manager in 2003, but it has gotten worse in the Marc Bergevin era, as was made clear over the past week with L’Affaire Richer.

Stéphane Richer, the last Hab to score 50 goals in a season, went public last week with some complaints about Canadiens management, saying they do their best to keep Habs alumni away from the current players. He also said management tries to make sure the players are tight-lipped when it comes to talking to the media.

The outburst came after Richer met 21-year-old Canadiens defenceman Victor Mete at the Habs’ official golf tournament Sept. 9. Turns out Mete had no idea who Richer was and was surprised when he saw the former Hab signing hockey sticks for fans.

Richer twice scored 50 or more goals for the Canadiens — once in 1987-1988 and again in 1989-1990. He won the Stanley Cup with Montreal in 1986 and won it again in 1995 with the New Jersey Devils. In the days that followed the golf tournament, Richer talked publicly about how Bergevin was openly hostile to former Habs turning up in the Canadiens entourage.

Richer told a story of being invited to the press box at the Bell Centre one night. He said Bergevin gave him a funny look and that he had to go over to the Canadiens GM and tell him not to worry, that he wasn’t looking to find a scoop. Richer went on to say that the Canadiens players today are afraid of the media, a climate fostered by all-controlling management.

“The players are all afraid to talk,” Richer said.

Late last week, Paul Wilson — senior vice-president of public affairs and communications for the Groupe CH Club — told Benoît Dutrizac on Québecor’s QUB Radio that it’s not true that Habs management tries to control what the players say.

“We don’t want to control the messages,” Wilson said. “When Carey Price said he wanted to win the Stanley Cup quickly, that was a message he was sending to management and honestly no one told Carey Price what he was allowed to say. Same thing with Shea Weber or Brendan Gallagher. These guys talk when they want to.’

But there is a problem and it speaks volumes about the corporate culture surrounding the CH over the past couple of decades. Hockey reporters here have a much easier time gaining access to management and players from the 30 other teams. It really started with Gainey, who started putting up barriers between the journalists and the players, notably by banning the reporters from travelling on the same flights as the players.

After the disastrous 2017-2018 season, Canadiens president Geoff Molson promised the organization would have a new transparency and it’s true that Wilson, who took over as head of communications in May 2018, has made efforts to be more accessible to the media.

But the fundamental culture hasn’t changed. The bottom line is the CH brass want to control the media because they’re afraid of the impact of what we write and say. And that’s wrong. The team’s management also lives in fear of players who speak their mind, both alumni like Richer and Guy Lafleur, and players like P.K. Subban.

Why be afraid? The Montreal Canadiens are a powerful entity, one of the greatest franchises in hockey and far and away the organization that receives the most media coverage in Quebec. And most of that coverage is relentlessly positive, in part because many of the outlets covering the team have commercial ties to the Canadiens.

The other thing is Bergevin and his colleagues should welcome with open arms the presence of former Habs greats and do everything possible to let them interact with today’s players. Imagine how great it would be for Mete to sit down with Larry Robinson and have a chat about the glory years of the Habs in the ’70s. Do you think it would be a bad thing for inconsistent winger Jonathan Drouin to have a coffee with the Flower, who undoubtedly would have some great tips about how to snap out of a scoring slump?

Last but not least, someone in the Canadiens’ communications department should have told Mete who Richer was. Hey maybe the two could’ve hit it off better together and maybe Richer could’ve offered some insight as to how Mete could break his career-long NHL scoring slump. Richer had 421 NHL goals to his credit when he hung up his skates.

Mete has yet to find the back of the net in the big league.
Canadiens Game Day: Max Domi makes it through first pre-season game

STU COWAN, MONTREAL GAZETTE Updated: September 17, 2019

"I made it through the first game, right?" Max Domi said with a smile after the Canadiens beat the New Jersey Devils 4-2 Monday night at the Bell Centre in their NHL pre-season opener. "Good start."

You might remember that Domi got ejected from his first pre-season game in a Canadiens uniform last year after sucker-punching the Florida Panthers’ Aaron Ekblad. Domi was then suspended by the NHL for the rest of the pre-season.

Domi lost his cool again during the first period Monday night after the Devils’ Brandon Baddock hammered Jonathan Drouin into the boards from behind and also took a run at Domi, who responded by throwing an elbow. Domi then chased Baddock around the ice and could have picked up a penalty hat-trick after slashing and cross-checking the Devils’ forward. But Domi was only given a two-minute penalty for roughing.

Domi, who is 5-foot-10 and 192 pounds, showed once again he won’t back down from anyone since Baddock is 6-foot-4 and 225 pounds. The 24-year-old Baddock has never played a game in the NHL and had 5-7-10 totals and 154 penalty minutes in 67 games last season with the AHL’s Binghamton Devils.

Baddock’s name might sound familiar to Canadiens fans because he’s the player who fractured a bone in former Canadien Nicolas Deslauriers’ face during a pre-season fight last year at the Bell Centre.

"I didn’t even know that, actually," Domi said after Monday’s game when asked if he remembered Baddock. "I didn’t know that. I have no idea who he is.

"It’s part of the game," Domi added. "You got to respect that. Guys are obviously trying to make a name for themselves and stuff. But sometimes they cross that line and when a guy’s got his back turned to you, you don’t hit him. It’s part of the game, stuff happens, but obviously we don’t like that."

The Canadiens got goals from Artturi Lehkonen, Nate Thompson, Jake Evans (short-handed) and Nick Cousins (empty-netter). Carey Price played the first half of the game in goal for the Canadiens, allowing one goal on nine shots, before being replaced by Cayden Primeau, who allowed one goal on 17 shots.

"Our group identity is fast speed and competing, battling, doing everything you have to do," Domi said. "Obviously, it’s the first game of the pre-season so it’s a little sloppy and all that. But I think the boys played great. The young guys are obviously all trying to find a spot here and worked very hard. Price made some great saves, Primeau made some great saves, too, and obviously we got the win, so it’s nice.

"Pre-season’s always tough," Domi added. "It’s the first time playing a game in a while, so you’re just trying to get your legs under you and your patterns down and all that stuff and build some chemistry with your teammates. It’s your first real time battling hard … it’s getting summer habits out and all that and trying to execute. I think our boys did a good job tonight of doing that and getting ourselves ready for the regular season."
After the game, Julien said Lehkonen was the best player on that line against the Devils.

“To be honest with you, I thought he worked hard, he played well,” the coach said about Lehkonen. “He was good. I think the other two were just OK for me tonight. It’s the first pre-season game, so it’s nothing to worry about. But if you’re asking me my opinion on that line tonight, (Lehkonen) was definitely the guy that probably played the best.”

Leaves
First preseason win

Didn’t fall 🌵 #GoHabsGo pic.twitter.com/7j38LsfxJb — Canadiens Montréal (@CanadiensMTL) September 17, 2019

Drouin on point for power play

Drouin was used on the point on the first power-play unit against the Devils, with Shea Weber set up at the top of the left faceoff circle, as the Canadiens used an umbrella format.

“I think we know that Shea is in the right spot there to shoot,” Julien said after the morning skate. “Jonathan, not only does he have good vision, but he also has a good shot and we expect him to use his shot from there with some screens in front. We’re working on that as an experiment in training camp with the guys that we have in our lineup tonight. Again, guys, it’s all about evaluating. I can’t stand here without having seen a game yet and tell you like we’ve got everything figured out … this is the answer. We have to look at it and decide by the time the puck drops for real in October whether you’re still going with that same situation.”

The Canadiens were 0-for-2 on the power play against the Devils.

Quand tu es invaincu. 😊

TFW you’re undefeated.#GoHabsGo | @max_domi pic.twitter.com/eIE61Pmel — Canadiens Montréal (@CanadiensMTL) September 17, 2019

Fourth line produces

Julien used three veterans on his fourth line against the Devils with Thompson at centre between Cousins and Dale Weise. Thompson scored a goal, while Cousins had an empty-netter along with an assist and led the Canadiens with four shots. Weise led the team with four hits.

When asked after the morning skate about the possibility of that being the fourth line when the season starts, Julien said: “I don’t want to read too much into it because part of it we try to balance things out and give guys opportunity to, I guess, showcase what they do best in the best position. In that situation there, I’d say all three have a lot of experience and gives us that. Now, we’ll see what transpires in the game. We like the experience. Can they also defend and bring some offence to our game? You can never have enough offence, but what you don’t want from a fourth line is a costly line. So right now they got an opportunity to take advantage of their experience as a threesome and show us they can do the work.”

Canadiens give Varone a look

Canadiens fans got a chance to watch forward Phil Varone in action against the Devils after GM Marc Bergevin signed the 28-year old to a one-year, two-way contract this summer that will pay him US$700,000 in the NHL and $450,000 with the AHL’s Laval Rocket. Varone logged 15:08 of ice time, including 1:13 on the power play, and had one shot on goal.

Last season, the 5-foot-10, 193-pounder had 3-4-7 totals in 47 games with the Philadelphia Flyers and 11-17-28 totals in 22 games with the AHL’s Lehigh Valley Phantoms. The previous season, Varone had 23-47-70 totals in 74 games with the Phantoms to finish second in the AHL scoring race, one point behind Chris Terry, who had 32-39-71 totals with the Rocket.

“Pretty skilled player,” Julien said about Varone after the morning skate. “He’s a smart player, offensively gifted. He’s been one of the better players in the American league now, so he’s getting an opportunity to be looked at again in his strength position, power plays, and he’ll get an opportunity to play with some good, decent players as well tonight. Let’s just give him a chance to show us what he can do.”

The lineup

Here’s how the Canadiens’ forward lines and defence pairings looked against the Devils:

Lehkonen – Domi – Drouin
Hudon – Suzuki – Weal
Cousins – Thompson – Weise
Varone – Evans – Barber
Mete – Weber
Kulak – Brook
Ouellet – Fleury
No Subban or Hughes

Montreal fans who were hoping to see P.K. Subban and Jack Hughes in action for the Devils Monday night at the Bell Centre were out of luck.

The Devils brought a split squad to the Bell Centre since they had two pre-season games Monday night. Subban and Hughes played in the other game the Devils had as they beat the Boston Bruins 4-3 in overtime in New Jersey.

The Devils acquired former Canadiens defenceman Subban from the Nashville Predators in a trade made during the NHL Draft on June 22 in exchange for defencemen Jeremy Davies, Steven Santini, a second round pick at this year’s draft (right-winger Bobby Brink) and a second-round pick in 2020.

The Devils selected Hughes with the No. 1 overall pick at this year’s draft after the 18-year-old centre posted 25-75-100 totals in 50 games last season with the USA Hockey National Development Team Program’s U-18 team.

What’s next?

Team B is scheduled to practise at 10 a.m. Tuesday at Brossard’s Bell Sports Complex, followed by Team A at 12:50 p.m.

The Canadiens will then face the Florida Panthers Wednesday night in Bathurst, N.B., (7 p.m., SN1, TVA Sports, TSN 690 Radio) in the NHL’s annual Kraft Hockeyville game and will meet the Panthers again Thursday night at the Bell Centre (7 p.m., TSN2, RDS, TSN 690 Radio). The Canadiens will wrap up the week when they travel to Ottawa to face the Senators on Saturday (7:30 p.m., TSN5, RDS, TSN 690 Radio).

Montreal Gazette LOADED: 09.17.2019

The lineup

Drouin on point for power play

Drouin was used on the point on the first power-play unit against the Devils, with Shea Weber set up at the top of the left faceoff circle, as the Canadiens used an umbrella format.

“I think we know that Shea is in the right spot there to shoot,” Julien said after the morning skate. “Jonathan, not only does he have good vision, but he also has a good shot and we expect him to use his shot from there with some screens in front. We’re working on that as an experiment in training camp with the guys that we have in our lineup tonight. Again, guys, it’s all about evaluating. I can’t stand here without having seen a game yet and tell you like we’ve got everything figured out … this is the answer. We have to look at it and decide by the time the puck drops for real in October whether you’re still going with that same situation.”

The Canadiens were 0-for-2 on the power play against the Devils.

Quand tu es invaincu. 😊

TFW you’re undefeated.#GoHabsGo | @max_domi pic.twitter.com/eIE61Pmel — Canadiens Montréal (@CanadiensMTL) September 17, 2019

Fourth line produces

Julien used three veterans on his fourth line against the Devils with Thompson at centre between Cousins and Dale Weise. Thompson scored a goal, while Cousins had an empty-netter along with an assist and led the Canadiens with four shots. Weise led the team with four hits.

When asked after the morning skate about the possibility of that being the fourth line when the season starts, Julien said: “I don’t want to read too much into it because part of it we try to balance things out and give guys opportunity to, I guess, showcase what they do best in the best position. In that situation there, I’d say all three have a lot of experience and gives us that. Now, we’ll see what transpires in the game. We like the experience. Can they also defend and bring some offence to our game? You can never have enough offence, but what you don’t want from a fourth line is a costly line. So right now they got an opportunity to take advantage of their experience as a threesome and show us they can do the work.”

Canadiens give Varone a look

Canadiens fans got a chance to watch forward Phil Varone in action against the Devils after GM Marc Bergevin signed the 28-year old to a one-year, two-way contract this summer that will pay him US$700,000 in the NHL and $450,000 with the AHL’s Laval Rocket. Varone logged 15:08 of ice time, including 1:13 on the power play, and had one shot on goal.

Last season, the 5-foot-10, 193-pounder had 3-4-7 totals in 47 games with the Philadelphia Flyers and 11-17-28 totals in 22 games with the AHL’s Lehigh Valley Phantoms. The previous season, Varone had 23-47-70 totals in 74 games with the Phantoms to finish second in the AHL scoring race, one point behind Chris Terry, who had 32-39-71 totals with the Rocket.

“Pretty skilled player,” Julien said about Varone after the morning skate. “He’s a smart player, offensively gifted. He’s been one of the better players in the American league now, so he’s getting an opportunity to be looked at again in his strength position, power plays, and he’ll get an opportunity to play with some good, decent players as well tonight. Let’s just give him a chance to show us what he can do.”

The lineup

After the game, Julien said Lehkonen was the best player on that line against the Devils.

“To be honest with you, I thought he worked hard, he played well,” the coach said about Lehkonen. “He was good. I think the other two were just OK for me tonight. It’s the first pre-season game, so it’s nothing to worry about. But if you’re asking me my opinion on that line tonight, (Lehkonen) was definitely the guy that probably played the best.”
With less than three minutes left in the third period, Evans channeled his need to be like Paul Byron. Playing on a line with Phil Varone and Riley Barber, a potential preview of the Rocket’s first line this season, Evans did just that, providing Julien of the Canadiens with quick, crisp passes through the neutral zone. But as Fleury gained momentum, it came to notes on Evans. Though that’s not a bad thing in his case, why he became one of Joël Bouchard’s most trusted defencemen why he became one of Joël Bouchard’s most trusted defencemen last year at the tender age of 20.

His ability to quickly escape his own zone with control of the puck was on full display, culminating in a great play which led to the Canadiens’ second goal of the game. But it wasn’t just his controlled exits that stood out, he also did a great job ditching any forecheckers when pressured in the defensive zone. Unlike Fleury, who actually started the game with a few rough shifts, Brok got off to a very solid start. His defensive positioning was excellent and he created two good scoring chances for the Canadiens with quick, crisp passes through the neutral zone. But as Fleury gained momentum, Brok faded, with the exception of a smart rush in the third period.

The final race for the third pairing won’t be decided any time soon, but if we’re keeping score, Fleury took the first heat. It’s when he stops moving his feet that he gets in trouble. As the game progressed, Suzuki created a few chances, but it was Fleury who stole the show Monday night. He put his year of professional experience to good use, reminding Claude Julien and company why he became one of Joël Bouchard’s most trusted defencemen last year at the tender age of 20.

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LeBrun: How lack of comparables affected RFA defensemen this year and why next offseason should be different

By Pierre LeBrun Sep 16, 2019

After a summer with barely an inch of progress, the league’s top three young RFA blueliners signed within six days of each other over the past week.

And most notably present fresh comparable contracts for next summer’s wave of top, young defenseman coming out of entry-level deals — Mikhail Sergachev and Thomas Chabot, among others.

That was the biggest problem in trying to navigate the waters for new deals involving Zach Werenski, Ivan Provorov and Charlie McAvoy is that there was no fresh comparable for blueliners of their ilk.

You had to go back to Seth Jones and Rasmus Ristolainen in 2016, both of whom signed identical, six-year deals out of their entry-level pacts worth $5.4 million AAV per season. Three years ago is old news when it comes to comparables, especially with what’s going on with the next generation of players.

In a nutshell, that’s what it made these deals so hard to get signed. Trying to figure out what is a fair deal for these three, talented young blueliners coming out of entry-level deals was no small task.

Werenski went first, last Monday signing a three-year deal carrying a $5-million AAV but rather importantly having a Year 3 salary of $7 million. He controls his future now. If talks of a long-term deal with the Blue Jackets aren’t going well in three years, he can select salary arbitration or simply sign his $7-million qualifying offer. Either way, Werenski will walk himself into unrestricted free agency one year later in July 2024. Did the Werenski deal help spur on the Provorov and McAvoy negotiations?

My understanding is more so on McAvoy which became obvious after he signed a three-year deal worth a $4.9-million AAV on Sunday.

Sandwiched in between was Provorov, who all along had a team in Philadelphia wanting to sign him long-term and an agent in Mark Gandler that was also focused on that.

I think Gandler would have done a max, eight-year deal with the Flyers but my guess is that would have carried an AAV of at least $8.25 million to $8.5 million a year, so six years made more sense for the Flyers at $6.75 million AAV.

It was huge for GM Chuck Fletcher to get term here. He had no interest in going the three-year route like Werenski (and eventually McAvoy) did. Why? Because had Provorov signed a three-year deal, the sense was that he could use the Jacob Trouba long-term deal ($8-million AAV) as a springboard and the Flyers would be looking at at least $8 million in three years but probably closer to $9-million plus a year on the next contract.

Buying two UFA years from Provorov and getting him locked up through 2024-25 was important for the Flyers.

But it made sense for the player’s camp on many levels, too. He may not get the chance to put up big offensive numbers like McAvoy and Werenski, he certainly isn’t a first unit power-play guy right now, it’s his overall game that makes him so impactful. With the lack of high-end offensive numbers, getting the security of six years and $40.5 million in the bank made sense for Gandler and Provorov as well.

Speaking of Gandler, he also happens to represent Sergachev, who is entering the final season of his entry-level contract. As colleague Joe Smith wrote this past weekend, perhaps Sergachev will start the season on the top pairing with Victor Hedman.

The Werenski/Provorov/McAvoy contracts will have a direct impact on what happens with Sergachev’s deal next year, but given Gandler’s direct involvement with the Provorov deal, I think we can at least extrapolate one important element: the agent would rather go longer term. Which may or may not jive with what Lightning GM Julien BriseBois may want to do given the history of bridge deals in Tampa Bay.

All of which is why Gandler, no question, is keenly observing how the Brayden Point negotiations are currently playing out. If Point ends up signing a three-year bridge deal, it might box Sergachev in and negate the real chance of a longer-term deal out of his entry-level deal. But if Point signs for more than three years, perhaps that’s a path for the Sergachev camp to pursue next summer.

There was a possibility of a long-term deal between McAvoy and the Bruins, both sides at one point mused what it would take over a seven-year deal, but the AAV would have never been high enough to make sense for the player. Instead, while McAvoy did sign for $100,000 less on average per season than Werenski — easily explained by the fact McAvoy was a 10.2(c) free agent not a true Group 2 RFA like Werenski — the Bruins blueliner has a nice launching pad with his Year 3, $7.3-million salary. That was key to get by his agent Micheal Curran. The Bruins may come to the McAvoy camp in two years wanting to negotiate a long-term deal one year ahead of time, but the back-pocket protection here is that McAvoy can either sign a $7.3-million qualifying offer in three years or select salary arbitration.

Either way, all three contracts signed represent fresh, real comparables for the next wave of blueliner coming out of their entry-level deals.

Aside from Sergachev and Chabot, Vince Dunn, Erik Cernak, Sami Nisku, Victor Mete and Travis Dermott are among other blueliners coming out of their entry-level deals after this season. So is the talented Samuel Girard in Colorado, but he’s already signed past this year, agreeing to a seven-year, $35-million extension this summer. Not a huge body of work to work off of when signing him to that deal, but you get the feeling the Avalanche won’t regret it by year’s end. By then he might already present a bargain if his usage and role are similar to Provorov in Philadelphia.

There’s always a risk jumping in that quickly with these kids, but I think the Avs gambled right. They’ll have Girard at a $5-million AAV through 2026-27 when blueliners of his ilk will be signing for $7- to $8-million a year in no time.

Ben Chiarot in Montreal

It wasn’t the kind of signing that screamed sexy but I believe that Ben Chiarot’s three-year deal ($3.5-million AAV) in Montreal is an underrated move from July’s free-agent activity. Of course Jacob Trouba and Tyler Myers are the bigger losses on Winnipeg’s blue line, but believe me when I say Chiarot was a real glue guy on the Jets and was a popular player there.

“Very,” responded Jets coach Paul Maurice last week when I asked him that via text message. “Good man. Has learned to understand what he’s good at and became a very consistent player. Will miss him.”

In Montreal, he begins camp on the left side of Jeff Petry on the second pairing, which was always the plan when Chiarot talked to head coach Claude Julien after signing, but another option throughout the season is sliding up alongside captain Shea Weber. Julien and Chiarot have talked about that possibility depending on the matchup, the Habs head coach citing last week a heavy team like the Washington Capitals, for example, as a game where perhaps they put two, big physical guys like Chiarot and Weber together for a night.

Chiarot, at least outside of Winnipeg, had not been seen by outsiders as a for sure top-4 guy, but by the end of the season, he will have had the chance to change that perception under the big spotlight of Montreal.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
Roman Josi's "how I spent my summer vacation" includes getting married at Reba McEntire's former estate to Ellie Ottaway and spending two weeks with her and the lions in Africa.

And not much hockey.

What the Predators captain's extended break didn't include is a contract extension. The waiting game didn't surprise Josi, given his schedule after the Predators were eliminated in the first round of the playoffs in April.

Still, according to Josi and general manager David Poile, the "when" far outweighs any "if"s about whether an extension will be signed.

"Every negotiation is different," Josi said Thursday, when he reported for training camp. "They had stuff going on; I had stuff going on this summer. All I can do is get ready for the season and prepare for training camp.

"I understand ... it's a topic. You knew the longer the summer goes the more it becomes a topic. That's just part of it."

Josi, whose seven-year, $28 million contract expires after this season, anticipates he will stay with the Predators. He's been eligible to sign a contract extension, which could land in the $9 million-plus per year range, since July 1.

Poile believes a deal is inevitable, too. He said the team has been talking with Josi's representatives for more than a year and said the No. 1 priority remains signing Josi to a deal.

Last year, the Predators extended defenseman Ryan Ellis' contract eight years and $50 million by mid-August.

So, what's the holdup with Josi?

"He was gone almost a month, not any communication," said Poile, who added that talks are ongoing between the two. "Could we blame him? He just went on his honeymoon.

"There are a lot of guys who are unsigned this year, RFAs (restricted free agents), what have you, you could say is a factor. There's (a) lot of different things."

Josi had 274 points (70 goals, 204 assists) during the past five regular seasons, which tied him for third with the Lightning's Victor Hedman among defensemen. His 0.7 points per game are sixth in the span, while his 25 power-play goals are fourth.

He also has 1,143 shots on goal, second-most, to go with 15 game-winning goals during that span.

Goalie Pekka Rinne called Josi the team's best player.

Josi made no bones about where he'd like to be beyond this season.

"I love it here," Josi said after last season ended. "I love the city. I love the team. It's the only team I've ever played for. Definitely want to be here."

His second big commitment this summer, after his marriage, seems imminent.
Let's play two: 6 observations from the Predators' preseason doubleheader

By Adam Vingan Sep 16, 2019

It's a tradition unlike any other.

Every September, the Predators and Florida Panthers open their preseasons with a doubleheader. It's an opportunity for the decision-makers from both teams to evaluate a large number of players in a short period of time.

The Predators won both games, but similar to an episode of "Whose Line Is It Anyway?" the points don't matter. Here are a few things that could, though:

First, the lineups …

Game 1
Rem Pitlick — Colton Sissons — Calle Jarnkrok
Yakov Trenin — Nick Bonino — Austin Watson
Rocco Grimaldi — Philip Tomasino — Anthony Richard
Tanner Jeannot — Thomas Novak — Colin Blackwell
Mattias Ekholm — Steven Santini
Jarred Tinordi — Yannick Weber
Matt Irwin — Frederic Allard
Troy Grosenick
Connor Ingram

Game 2
Eeli Tolvanen — Kyle Turris — Craig Smith
Daniel Carr — Josh Wilkins — Mikael Granlund
Egor Afanasyev — Freddy Gaudreau — Lukas Craggs
Miikka Salomaki — Laurent Dauphin — Mathieu Olivier
Matt Donovan — Ryan Ellis
Dan Hamhuis — Alexandre Carrier
Jeremy Davies — Dante Fabbro
Juuse Saros
Ken Appleby

Who could be on the power play?

If you were hoping for immediate improvement from the Predators’ power play, then you were left disappointed Monday. The Predators went a combined 0-for-10 against the Panthers, though, to be fair, they’re just starting to implement new assistant coach Dan Lambert’s system.

"Obviously, we weren't happy with the way things were on the power play last year," Sissons said. "We're feeling optimistic about (Lambert) taking over and trying to turn things around for us. It's more just the mentality of us attacking the power play and just hunting pucks, getting pucks on the net. It's really simple right now."

Courtesy of Natural Stat Trick, here are the power play heat maps from each game:

The Predators were better at generating scoring opportunities from high-danger areas during the second game, totaling eight such attempts on the power play. To put that into context, the Predators' single-game high last season was seven.

After the second game, Predators coach Peter Laviolette hinted at what his main power-play units could be.

"There's one unit that we've been working with, those players didn't play tonight," he said. "There was one unit in the second game that we've been working with, but we only got to work with them one time. … I think once we get the unit that didn't play tonight and this other unit a little bit more ice time, the unit that didn't play tonight, they had two really good sessions for an hour each (Sunday) and (Monday). That was on purpose to keep them out of the lineup just to work on it, and I thought it was really good (Monday) morning. We'll see that at some point during camp."

By process of elimination, the group that didn't play Monday consists of Filip Forsberg, Ryan Johansen, Viktor Arvidsson, Matt Duchene and Roman Josi. The one that did featured Turris, Smith, Granlund, Carr and Ellis.

Steven Santini’s uninspiring debut

Santini, acquired as part of the P.K. Subban trade with the New Jersey Devils, did not have a strong first showing, with the Panthers finishing with a 14-5 advantage in shot attempts when he and Ekholm were on the ice at five-on-five. They started 55.56 of their shifts in the offensive zone and weren’t matched against tough competition, as the Panthers dressed few of their regulars.

Santini’s 36.99 offensive zone start percentage between 2016-19 was the lowest in the league among defensemen with at least 1,500 minutes of ice time, but he’s not cut out for tough defensive assignments. The Predators won’t lean on Santini as much as the Devils did in those situations, though.

"I love to play those hard minutes against top lines and defend and PK,” Santini said. “Guys like Ellis and Josi, they can have the offensive-zone draws, and that will help us as a team. If I can take any of those (hard) minutes off them and just help this team in any way I can, that'd be great."

Rem Pitlick stands out again

Pitlick continues to impress as he competes for a roster spot. In the first game, he drove hard to the net and successfully redirected Sissons’ centering pass.

Pitlick’s time around the team last season after turning pro is having a positive effect, according to Laviolette.

"The rookie tournament, I thought he played great," he said. "He's had a strong camp so far. I do think when you come into an NHL locker room with some pretty good players and some pretty good talent, when you get in there and you actually go to work with them for a week, you find out they're just hockey players. They're just good guys and good people to hang out with. Our guys really do a good job taking care of the young players, so when you get here and get to be here for two weeks, a month, a month and a half and work with these guys every day, I think it does a lot for confidence. It does have an impact."

What position will Kyle Turris play?

As previously noted, Turris practiced at left wing on a line with Johansen and Arvidsson on Saturday. He returned to his natural position Monday, a month, a month and a half and work with some pretty good players and some pretty good talent, when you get in there and you actually go to work with them for a week, you find out they're just hockey players. They're just good guys and good people to hang out with.

"The rookie tournament, I thought he played great," he said. "He's had a strong camp so far. I do think when you come into an NHL locker room with some pretty good players and some pretty good talent, when you get in there and you actually go to work with them for a week, you find out they're just hockey players. They're just good guys and good people to hang out with. Our guys really do a good job taking care of the young players, so when you get here and get to be here for two weeks, a month, a month and a half and work with these guys every day, I think it does a lot for confidence. It does have an impact."

What position will Kyle Turris play?

As previously noted, Turris practiced at left wing on a line with Johansen and Arvidsson on Saturday. He returned to his natural position Monday, and it’s possible he does the same once the regular season starts.

"We could be dynamite with three lines with Kyle being one of the three centers," Predators general manager David Poile said Sunday. "We haven’t had three centers like that with (those) offensive capabilities. On the other hand, that’s a very coveted spot to play on the left wing with (Johansen) and (Arvidsson) if Peter decides to play (Forsberg) with Duchene like he had in practice (Saturday). I think it’s a new opportunity for Kyle, and I think this experimentation is just going to be part of training camp."

DM-Ex

The Predators appear to have replaced DMX’s "Party Up (Up In Here)" as the song they play before each power play. The musical selections Monday included “5-1-5-0” by Dierks Bentley, “Let’s Go” by Trick Daddy (feat. Twista and Lil Jon), “Danza Kuduro” by Lucenzo (feat. Don Omar) and “The Next Episode” by Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg. My suggestion would’ve been the more accurate “Another One Bites the Dust." (This entire note was just a setup for that joke.)

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
Five noteworthy quotes from the first four days of Predators training camp

By Adam Vingan Sep 16, 2019

It’s easy to overreact to what we see during the first days of training camp.

After a long summer, the very sight of hockey practice is enough to make our minds race with possibilities. But as players, coaches and executives are quick to point out, it’s too early to draw meaningful conclusions.

“I wouldn’t take out a pen and write anything down today,” Predators coach Peter Laviolette said Saturday.

Laviolette is right. There’s little to glean from one practice and a scrimmage that didn’t include most of the team’s veteran players. Of course, that’s not going to stop us from trying to do just that.

In a nod to colleague Justin Bourne’s “Thoughts on Thoughts” column, here’s a collection of the more interesting sound bites through four days of camp:

“It’s exciting. They’re great players. Having the opportunity to line up on (Ryan Johansen’s) wing with (Viktor Arvidsson) is lots of fun. Just trying to gain some chemistry.” — Kyle Turris

The most intriguing development over the weekend was Turris switching positions. It’d be difficult not to produce on a line with Johansen and Arvidsson, so if Turris were to stick there, it could be just what he needs to regain his form.

Although he hasn’t shown it much since being traded to the Predators, Turris possesses strong shooting ability, and playing on the wing would free him to put it to use more often. Laviolette also prefers to have two forwards with experience at center on each line, so Turris playing with Johansen would check that box.

“Ottawa, when I got traded there, and then Columbus, it can take like 20 games (to adjust). I don’t expect it to be the same with this situation because I’m coming in in camp right off the bat, so you get a month where you can get used to it, which is nice. I’m expecting a quicker turnaround. I’ve been through it a few times now, so I know what to expect.” — Matt Duchene

To put it lightly, the past two years of Duchene’s career have been hectic. On his fourth team since the start of the 2017-18 season, Duchene is relieved to have stability after signing a seven-year, $56 million contract with the Predators in free agency. Duchene centered Mikael Granlund and Filip Forsberg during Saturday’s practice, an appealing combination based on their complementary skill sets. (The Predators’ first preseason games are Monday against the Florida Panthers in their annual doubleheader, which will give us a better glimpse of what the coaching staff is thinking.)

Nobody wakes up in the morning when they’re 6 years old and dreams of playing in the American Hockey League.” — Daniel Carr

Kudos to Carr for keeping it real. As the reigning AHL MVP, Carr is ready to earn a steady role in the NHL, which he hasn’t been able to do over the past four seasons. Carr sounds a lot like Rocco Grimaldi, who was in a similar position last season. The Predators didn’t sign Carr, 27, to bury him on the depth chart, so he is among the players to watch closely once the preseason schedule starts.

“I don’t want to make change for the sake of making changes. I want to make changes for getting better. That’s really what I told the players when we started training camp. A lot of the decisions that we’re going to make at training camp will be with an eye towards offense.” — David Poile

Over the past few years, the Predators’ preference has been to carry eight defensemen, which they might do again this season when they submit their opening-night roster. Poile’s comments, though, suggest a possible change in thinking. That seems to bode well for the offensive-minded bubble forwards in camp, like Carr, Eeli Tolvanen and Rem Pitlick. Of course, they have to earn their spots. And what could that mean for Mikka Salomaki and Freddy Gaudreau, who haven’t proven to be scorers at the NHL level?

“I feel like I’m going to have the year of my life and help the team as much as I can. I can’t see any reason why that can’t be done and why I couldn’t play my best hockey this upcoming season. But I also know that any amount of games (I play), I’ve got to earn it. Juuse Saros is more than ready to play games, and he’s more than ready to be a No. 1 goalie in this league. He’s shown that time and time again. But it’s a healthy situation for myself. He really pushes me, and I feel like I have something to give to him.” — Pekka Rinne

Last season at five-on-five, Rinne had a goals saved above average of 13.54, .875 high-danger save percentage and .930 overall save percentage, all of which were among the best marks in the league among starting goaltenders. The 36-year-old, who turns 37 on Nov. 5, has aged gracefully.

Rinne will continue to be the Predators’ starter until he retires or his play deteriorates, whichever comes first. Now is the time, though, to start preparing Saros for the future. The 24-year-old started 27 games last season, and it’ll be interesting to see how the Predators manage his workload as he continues to be groomed as Rinne’s successor.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
Devils' Jack Hughes scores 2 goals, including OT winner in preseason debut vs. Bruins

Updated Sep 16, 11:10 PM; Posted Sep 16, 9:38 PM
By Chris Ryan

One goal wasn't good enough for Jack Hughes.

Hughes, the Devils' No. 1 overall pick in the 2019 NHL Draft, opened the Devils' scoring in his first career preseason game, tying the contest against the Boston Bruins in the second period. He then ended the game in overtime with his second of the night, giving the team a 4-3 victory on Monday at Prudential Center in Newark.

Hughes scored off a give-and-go with Nikita Gusev to win the game in extra time after the Bruins forced OT with a late regulation goal.

After the two sides traded goals to open the third period, Devils defenseman Connor Carrick buried a blistering one-timer with 6:59 to play to give the Devils a 3-2 lead.

Positioned at the bottom of the left circle, Carrick connected on a pass from Jesper Bratt at 13:01. Bratt recorded two points in the final period after scoring a goal 29 seconds into the third to give the Devils a brief 2-1 lead.

But Jack Studnicka scored with 49 seconds left in regulation, sending the game to overtime. That came after Chris Wagner tied the game at 2-2 just two minutes after Bratt's go-ahead goal in the third period.

Following a scoreless first period, both teams broke through in the second for one goal apiece.

The Bruins opened the scoring when Oskar Steen turned an innocent zone entry into a goal. After evading Hughes at the Devils' blue line, he rounded toward net as he approached the left circle and snapped a shot past Cory Schneider at 5:24.

Hughes tied the game at 12:06 of the second period, converting on the Devils' third power play of the game. He took a pass in the right circle from Sami Vatanen, settling the puck and scoring short side at the right post.

Schneider exited the game after the second period. He allowed one goal while making 17 saves on 18 shots.

Next up
The Devils' next game on the preseasone schedule is on Wednesday, when the team will travel to Madison Square Garden to play the Rangers.

Star Ledger LOADED: 09.17.2019
WATCH: Devils’ Jack Hughes scores goal in 1st NHL preseason game

Updated Sep 16, 8:39 PM; Posted Sep 16, 8:38 PM
By Chris Ryan

Jack Hughes didn’t wait long to give the fans a reason to cheer. Playing in his first career game at Prudential Center during the Devils’ preseason opener against the Boston Bruins on Monday, Hughes scored his (unofficial) first NHL goal by netting a game-tying shot on the power play during the second period.

Situated in the right circle, Hughes received a cross-ice pass from Sami Vatanen in the left circle. After quickly settling the puck, Hughes ripped a shot shortside, beating Bruins goalie Dan Vladar inside the right post to even the game at 1-1. Devils defenseman Ty Smith also picked up an assist on the goal.

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The Bruins took a 1-0 lead earlier in the second period when Oskar Steen beat Cory Schneider for a 5-on-5 goal.

Hughes had one other shot in the game before converting on his second.

Hughes made his debut playing on the top line and in the starting lineup on Monday against the Bruins. At 5-on-5, he skated with Nikita Gusev and Miles Wood. Forward Wayne Simmonds was initially set to play there instead of Wood, but Simmonds was scratched due to a lower body injury suffered on Sunday. He’s day-to-day.

Star Ledger LOADED: 09.17.2019
Jack Hughes, P.K. Subban, Nikita Gusev, Ty Smith and Jesper Boqvist will all be on the ice when the Devils open their preseason slate against the Boston Bruins with one of two split-squad games at 7 p.m. on Monday at Prudential Center in Newark.

You can watch a live stream of the game in the YouTube video above. The game may be blacked out for people outside of New Jersey’s TV market due to NHL broadcast rules.

Wayne Simmonds, who was initially slated to play in the home game, was scratched due to a lower body injury suffered in Sunday’s practice scrimmage.

Simmonds briefly participated in Monday’s morning skate, but the Devils elected to play it cautious with the forward, who signed as a free agent on July 1. Simmonds is considered day-to-day.

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Here’s the Devils’ lineup for Monday’s game against the Bruins:

**FORWARDS**

Nikita Gusev - Jack Hughes - Miles Wood
Jesper Bratt - Travis Zajac - Jesper Boqvist
Ryan Schmelzer - Mikhail Maltsev - Joey Anderson

**DEFENSEMEN**

Sami Vatanen - P.K. Subban
Andy Greene - Josh Jacobs
Ty Smith - Connor Carrick

**GOALIES**

Star: Cory Schneider
Backup: Gilles Senn

Schneider will play the first two periods before Senn plays the third.
While half the Devils are busy kicking off the preseason schedule in Newark on Monday night, the other half will be commencing game two just a bit later.

The Devils will visit the Montreal Canadiens in the second of two split-squad games at 7:30 p.m. at Bell Centre in Montreal.

The Newark roster will feature plenty of new additions, such as Jack Hughes and P.K. Subban, but the Montreal roster will also include plenty of returning NHL talent. Nico Hischier and Kyle Palmieri will make the trip north, along with Blake Coleman, Will Butcher, Damon Severson, Mirco Mueller and Mackenzie Blackwood.

John Hayden will also make his Devils debut in Montreal.

The team skated in Newark on Monday morning prior to making the trip north of the border. Here’s how the group will line up in Montreal:

**FORWARDS**
Blake Coleman - Nico Hischier - Kyle Palmieri
Brett Seney - Kevin Rooney - John Hayden
Brandon Gignac - Michael McLeod - Nathan Bastian
Brandon Baddock - Ben Street - Blake Speers

Buy Nico Hischier Devils jersey: Fanatics, NHL.com, Lids, Dick’s Sporting Goods

**DEFENSEMEN**
Damon Severson - Will Butcher
Mirco Mueller - Dakota Mermis
Colton White - Matt Tennyson

**GOALIES**
Starter: Mackenzie Blackwood
Backup: Evan Cormier

Star Ledger LOADED: 09.17.2019
UPDATE (12:22 p.m.): Wayne Simmonds will not play Monday after getting banged up in the practice scrimmage on Sunday, according to coach John Hynes. He briefly participated in morning skate on Monday. It’s not considered serious, and the Devils are taking the extra precaution at this point.

The Devils’ home preseason opener will serve as the Newark debut for the team’s biggest offseason additions.

Jack Hughes, P.K. Subban and Nikita Gusev will all be in the lineup when the Devils host the Boston Bruins in one of two split-squad games at 7 p.m. on Monday at Prudential Center. Another roster will head to Montreal to play the Canadiens at 7:30 p.m. at Bell Centre.

Hughes and Gusev will play on a line together, like they did during Sunday’s intra-squad scrimmage, while Subban will be partnered with Sami Vatanen.

Hynes will give a better idea about the exact goalie split later this morning, but expect both Cory Schneider and Gilles Senn to get time in net. Schneider typically plays between 30 minutes and two full periods in his first preseason game, so Senn should take over after the game’s halfway point.

Here’s how the Devils will line up against the Bruins:

FORWARDS
Nikita Gusev - Jack Hughes - TBD
Jesper Bratt - Travis Zajac - Jesper Boqvist
Miles Wood - Mikhail Maltsev - Joey Anderson
Marian Studenic - Yegor Sharangovich - Graeme Clarke

DEFENSEMEN
Sami Vatanen - P.K. Subban
Andy Greene - Connor Carrick
Ty Smith - Josh Jacobs

GOALIES
Starter: Cory Schneider
Backup: Gilles Senn

SCRATCHES
Forward: Wayne Simmonds

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Taylor Hall, as planned, will not play in either preseason game on Monday, as the Devils steadily build up his workload while targeting a preseason debut later in the schedule. Prospect Fabian Zetterlund will not play in either preseason game while he continues to rehab from January knee surgery. He has practiced both days of training camp.

Pavel Zacha will not play Monday after missing both days of practice over the weekend while sorting out his work visa. He is expected to return to the ice early this week.

Star Ledger LOADED: 09.17.2019
The New Jersey Devils are through their first week of training camp and ready to drop the puck on their first two preseason games. A split-squad match against the Rangers at home and the Canadiens in Montreal will kick things off for the Devils on Monday night.

The roster is still at 60 players but four will not play Monday. Taylor Hall isn’t quite sure when he’ll get into a preseason game but it won’t be Monday. Pavel Zacha is still waiting for his immigration paperwork, Nikita Okhotyuk is dealing with an injury to his right index finger and Brian Strait is not in camp.

Cuts may be made after these first two games but they won’t be anything major. There is very little to take from these preseason games, especially these first few, so don’t panic when you see a lineup regularly get burned on a goal.

We know the core of this team but there are still a few gaps to fill in. Here is an early look at what the roster might look like come opening night.

**Roster Rules:** Just so we’re all on the same page, the NHL mandates a roster of no more than 23 players from the start of the season through the trade deadline. Each roster needs 18 skaters and two goalies.

**Goalies**
- Mackenzie Blackwood
- Cory Schneider

This is an easy one. Evan Cormier will be in Binghamton this season with Gilles Senn coming stateside to back him up. The goalies will platoon, with the top guy penciled in to start roughly 50-55 games.

**Forwards**
- Taylor Hall
- Nico Hischier
- Kyle Palmieri
- Nikita Gusev
- Jack Hughes
- Wayne Simmonds
- Miles Wood
- Travis Zajac
- Blake Coleman
- Pavel Zacha
- Kevin Rooney
- Jesper Bratt
- Jesper Boqvist

Boqvist scored twice in the first scrimmage and is already making management’s job difficult. He’s a crafty playmaking center but the team has talked about moving him out to the wing.

Kevin Rooney and/or Pavel Zacha could also move out to the wing, which would allow them to keep Boqvist at his natural position. However, if they can’t find a place for him in the lineup they may have to send him back to Sweden. He’s not eligible for the American Hockey League and they don’t want to sit him in the pressbox every night.

Benching a young player impedes development. Boqvist needs to be playing every night, so if it’s not in the NHL it will be in Sweden. If Boqvist doesn’t make the roster, look for someone like John Hayden to join the team to bring size and physicality on the back end.

**Defensemen**
- Sami Vatanen
- P.K. Subban
- Andy Greene
- Damon Severson
- Will Butcher
- Connor Carrick
- Mirco Mueller
- Ty Smith

In the past, the Devils have carried eight defensemen. While John Hynes said that number isn’t exactly set in stone, they need Mirco Mueller to help balance out a right-shot heavy group and they like what Connor Carrick brings to the table. Ty Smith has made no secret of the fact that he thinks he’s ready for the NHL and he’s taken the necessary steps the organization told him he needed to take in the last year. He put on weight, he improved his defense and he can move the puck as well as many established NHL players.

Smith is another player who can’t go to the AHL this season because of his late birthday. Expect Smith to make the team but if he doesn’t, look for the Devils to carry another forward.
Thomas Hickey trying to secure regular spot in Islanders' lineup

By Andrew Gross
Updated September 17, 2019 12:37 AM

PHILADELPHIA — Thomas Hickey leaned into the slap shot from the left point and the puck navigated its way through traffic before trickling through the pads of Flyers goalie Brian Elliott for the Islanders' first goal of the preseason.

But the harsh reality is that Hickey might not secure a regular spot in the lineup regardless of how well he plays in the preseason. He ended last season as the seventh defenseman after a head injury sidelined him from Dec. 18-Feb. 26, allowing for rookie Devon Toews' emergence.

"I think everything is up to interpretation, from the talks I've had," Hickey said before the Islanders opened their seven-game preseason schedule with a 3-1 win at Wells Fargo Center on Monday night. "I had a tough injury. At the end of the year, I was in a spot that I didn't like, that nobody likes. At the same time, I understood it."

Hickey, 30, finished with no goals and four assists in 40 games, then stepped in for an injured Johnny Boychuk in the Hurricanes' four-game sweep of the Islanders in the second round of the playoffs.

He is one of seven returning defensemen from last season under contract. Prospects Noah Dobson and Sebastian Aho, among others, also are likely to get long looks.

"You just do the best job you can, you control the things you can control," Hickey said. "I'm educated in what we have on our team. I want a bigger piece of things. It's my job to go out and get it."

"We have some defensive depth," coach Barry Trotz added. "It makes it harder and harder on the veterans when you've got young guys coming up. That's pro sports."

Hickey and Scott Mayfield — along with Luca Sbisa, in training camp on a professional tryout offer — were the three veteran defensemen in Monday's lineup.

Trotz paired Hickey with undrafted free agent Grant Hutton and used him on the top penalty kill unit as well as on the point for the five-on-four and five-on-three power plays.

"Absolutely there's something for me to prove," Hickey said. "I had these coaches for a whole year but I feel like I only played for half a year. It still feels like I have things to show them."

Notes & quotes: Starting goalie Semyon Varlamov was sharp in allowing one goal on eight shots in 30:13. Christopher Gibson stopped all 15 shots he faced . . . Sbisa's unassisted power-play goal was the winner at 2:24 of the third period. Erik Brown added a power-play empty-netter with 50.7 seconds remaining . . . Forward Colin McDonald, who spent the past three seasons in the Flyers' organization, returned in the second period after blocking Justin Braun's first-period slap shot and crawling to the bench. "In the preseason, beggars can't be choosers when you're getting a game," McDonald said . . . Forward Tom Kuhnhackl (lower body) skated with teammates for the first time in training camp with a non-game group in East Meadow . . . The Islanders will face the Flyers on Tuesday night at NYCB Live's Nassau Coliseum. Trotz said no player will dress on back-to-back nights.

Newsday LOADED: LOADED: 09.17.2019
Barry Trotz had this first weekend diagrammed from just about the week after the Isles were eliminated by the Hurricanes in the second round in May. Day One was for hard work, and Days Two and Three were for the team’s systems — breakouts, tracking and those sorts of details that aren’t always apparent to the fan’s eyes.

For the 70 players — well, the 66 of them that hit the ice at least — these first few days could be a bit of a trap: You might not get anything more than a tap on the pants for skating hard or doing a drill correctly the first time. Dog it or mess up, though, and the two dozen sets of eyes from president/GM Lou Lamoriello on down to the Bridgeport assistant coaches will make a note of your mistake.

And everyone here, whether he signed a seven-year extension worth $7 million per like captain Anders Lee or whether he’s here on a tryout to maybe grab $150,000 on an AHL contract like Ryan Bourque, has a different set of experiences and is at a different stage of his career.

So, before the first round of obvious cuts are made and before the exhibition games start, here are 12 short stories about one thing: Camp.

The captain and the kids

Lee has that new contract and he also has the “C” on his sweater for the first time at a training camp, his seventh in the organization. The “C” is metaphorical at this point, since everyone wears practice jerseys with iron-on numbers and names, but there’s a reason Trotz and Lamoriello saw what they needed to see last camp to make Lee the captain the night before the regular-season opener in Raleigh 11 months ago.

It’s for things like Lee giving little pep talks here and there to the kids.

“Yes,” Koivula said with a shake of his head. “Yes.”

For Koivula, the adjustment from playing in the QMJHL to the NHL is a bit more awareness no. He’s one of the youngest in camp; the 57th pick in the June draft has been in the QMJHL for two years now, but his Blainville-Boisbriand team plays barely 20 minutes from his hometown in Laval, just outside of Montreal.

If you’re 20 or 40, you have to approach camp the same way — you’re fighting for a job,” he said. “It’s the only way to prepare the best way you can.”

A young man on D

“Whether you’re 20 or 40, you have to approach camp the same way — you’re fighting for a job,” he said. “It’s the only way to prepare the best way you can.”

Big brother, part two

Less a mentor-protege relationship than perhaps two skilled players who think along the same lines, Barzal and Oliver Wahlstrom skated together this past weekend — not just in the same group but through most of the drills on ice, as well.
Those two, the Isles’ one bona fide star and a hopeful future star, were wedged into the space just behind the door in that tiny change room with Lee and company. Every time the door opened, it banged Wahlstrom’s knee pads. Not exactly a place of honor for the 11th pick from 2018, but maybe that wasn’t so random, either.

“I’m just trying to take it all in,” Wahlstrom said. “I was on the same line with Barzal today — he had some tips on how to enter the zone, so I took that in. Also in the D zone telling me where to be sometimes. It’s great to learn from those guys.”

Trotz didn’t know what he had in Barzal last year at this time, and it was a slow process of the team’s top talent gaining his coach’s trust over the season and the playoffs. Now Barzal, at 22, is doing out advice.

“I don’t really see it that way — we’re both young, he’s got a ton of skill and he’s going to be up here one day soon,” Barzal said. “Maybe when that happens we’ll play together. It doesn’t really matter who I’m with, just want to develop chemistry with whoever.”

Return of the Mac

It is almost certain that Colin McDonald will not play another NHL game. He came to understand that a couple of years ago, while playing for former Islanders coach Scott Gordon in Lehigh Valley, the Flyers’ AHL affiliate. He also took the rare step of acknowledging it publicly, making people wonder why exactly he was hanging in.

“I’m finally able to just enjoy hockey,” he said. “I was always that bubble guy; even when I was in the NHL, I was one spot from being out of the lineup and then one spot from being sent down. And that happened when I was here. As much as I enjoyed playing in the NHL, it’s a stressful environment. Since I made that switch mentally, I’m able to go out and play, just enjoy hockey.”

So McDonald signed an AHL deal, meaning he’d need a new contract if he were to be summoned to the Islanders. It’s the same with Steve Bernier, who has been in the organization for four years now. McDonald played 133 of his 148 NHL games for the Isles between 2012-2015; two weeks shy of 35, he’ll be a leader for Brent Thompson in Bridgeport for $175,000.

When he was an Islander six years ago, he roomed with John Tavares when they were both bachelors. McDonald and wife Lexi have a five-month-old daughter and Tavares and wife Anye had their first, a boy, just last week. There’s no throwing money around either for a guy like McDonald, who’s had a very nice career but never made more than the $675,000 the Isles paid him in 2014-15. He and Lexi, a healthcare consultant, got set up at a rental in Milford, Conn., two weeks ago as her maternity leave is about to end.

So, he’s at his 13th NHL camp not in search of an NHL job, but to get ready for an AHL season in which he can be a sounding board for the Wahlstroms of the organization.

“I had a lot of responsibility in Lehigh under Gordo. He gave me a lot of leeway there and I hope I can continue to do that now that I’m here,” McDonald said. “They know I don’t have any ulterior motives. I think I know I’m not necessarily getting back to the NHL. It’s not in a sense that I don’t believe I can play, I just am aware of where I’m at in my career. Guys I think can trust me because I’m very up front about that.”

The power within

Jared Coreau is accustomed to fighting for his spots in the pros. The 27-year-old goalie signed with the Red Wings as an undrafted free agent out of Northern Michigan and bounced around three levels with Detroit. He signed with the Islanders for a $275,000 guarantee ($700,000 in the NHL) on July 9.

Since then, the organization had 2018 draft pick Jakub Skarek open to staying in North America. Between Skarek and Linus Soderstrom, the road to getting a chunk of even AHL starts became murkier for Coreau, who won a Calder Cup in Grand Rapids three years ago.

“It’s good to have realistic goals,” Coreau said. “The plan is to start in Bridgeport with Christopher Gibson — he’s a good goalie, I’ve played against him some over the years. The goal down there is a healthy competition, take over the main role. And the No. 1 guy down there is the No. 3 guy up here. So that’s my goal, it’s his goal, as well. And then whatever happens, the goal transitions to doing well if you make it up here.”
“nerves” at his first camp with the Kings in 2007. But Hickey’s focus is on proving he’s still a top-six defenseman.

“There’s definitely urgency,” he said. “I’ve always approached every camp the same way — play within yourself and play the best you can. Right now, it’s all about working hard and attention to detail. I got hurt last year and never got back to the point I’d have liked. It still sits with me now. So there’s something to prove and training camp’s a good time to show that because Barry’s certainly shown he’ll play the guys that are going good.”

Fighting for attention

Parker Wotherspoon is at his fifth Islander camp, which seems like a lot for a young defenseman who hasn’t really climbed the ladder beyond mid-pair AHL player. But the 22-year-old reminds himself that you can’t even get in line for a promotion without having the right approach to camp, even with a passel of defensemen ahead of him on the depth chart.

“You don’t try to anticipate too much, just work as hard as you can,” he said. “There’s so many good players here to learn from, you don’t want to miss an opportunity to pick something up from the coaches or one of the veterans.”

Wotherspoon and Mitch Vande Sompel were taken a round apart in 2015 and their progress has been similar. Both emerged as regulars for Bridgeport last season and, along with Sebastian Aho, are the three main, homegrown prospects who are fighting to be the next in line when the crowded Isles D sorts itself out.

Vande Sompel’s spot on that ladder may have fallen a bit. During a two-on-two drill Saturday, he crashed awkwardly into the goal post, then left the ice holding his arm. That arm was in a sling on Sunday and Trotz said Vande Sompel would be out for a while.

It’s the sickening truth of training camp: A good friend going down with an injury creates an opportunity. Wotherspoon may get a longer look now that Vande Sompel is sidelined.

The new guy

Derick Brassard has been to four different teams’ NHL camps, starting with his first in Columbus back in 2006.

“They’re all pretty much the same,” he said. “You have that hard practice the first day to get your legs under you, then some systems work to get ready for the games.”

This one feels a little different for Brassard, not only because it’s a new team. After his forgettable 2018-19, when he was traded twice and “felt like I didn’t really play at all,” the Islanders took a cheap flier on him at $1.2 million and he’s got the preseason to show he’s a better option than Koivula or someone in another camp. There’s a chance he could be the only skater the Isles changed from last season.

“You’re the new guy,” he said. “You want to show you can help the team right away.”

Brassard has figured out one of the Islander pastimes — chirping Barzal. It’s almost a tradition among the Isles veterans now and after Sunday’s faceoff session, Brassard and Barzal went back and forth across the tiny public locker room about who won the 10-faceoff series.

“Hey, if I can help him with faceoffs this year, that’s good for us,” Brassard said. “He’s 0-for-1 so far.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
The left shoulder injury sustained by Libor Hajek on a check from Blake Coleman at the Garden on March 9 that ended the rookie defenseman’s season after five games is a thing of the past. There are no physical complications to prevent the 21-year-old Czech from nailing down a job on Broadway right out of the gate.

“There is nothing bothering me from that,” Hajek said after Monday’s training camp scrimmage. “I did some [physical therapy] before I went home and then took a couple of months off after I left New York before I started training again.”

Hajek, penciled in on the left side with Brady Skjei and Marc Staal, worked with a skills coach from the Czech national program when he got back on skates.

“Twice a day, all summer,” Hajek said. “Then I came here and worked with [conditioning coach Ben Prentiss]. It helps a lot.”

Hajek, the featured piece of the package including Brett Howden and Vladislav Namestnikov that came from Tampa Bay in exchange for Ryan McDonagh and JT Miller at the 2018 deadline, impressed during his five-game NHL cameo. That followed what had been a disappointing freshman pro season with the AHL Wolf Pack.

“Libor is picking up where he left off,” David Quinn said. “His skating, quick decision-making below the tops of the circles in our end, physical on the puck … He looks as good as he did last year when he was playing for us.”

Hajek, selected by Tampa Bay with the 32nd pick in the 2016 entry draft, has had an impressive opening of camp, but the plan is for the 21-year-old Finnish lefty defenseman to return to his native country and play on loan for Lukko.

Joey Keane, the 20-year-old righty defenseman who created a strong impression in last year’s camp, looked good in Monday’s scrimmage that was pretty much a 23-and-under affair. It’s a stretch to believe Keane is close to being NHL-ready, but Tony DeAngelo’s continued absence has created an opportunity for a defenseman to perhaps earn a job.

Where Rangers are at in final contract standoff

If DeAngelo’s contract impasse lasts long enough to have an impact on his readiness to start the season (or if he offers-sheets his way out of New York), veteran lefty Joe Morrow may have the inside track. The 26-year-old, who has played 162 career games and is in camp on a tryout, skated a fair amount on the right last season with the Jets with Dmitry Kulikov and Sami Niku.

Yegor Rykov, who suffered an ankle injury at Traverse City, skated for the fourth straight day and is close to joining the group. It is possible the Rangers could take a look at the lefty on the right side. … Sean Day, who underwent offseason hip surgery, has also been skating but he is not expected to begin group activities for a spell.

The Blueshirts open the exhibition schedule Wednesday at the Garden against the Devils.

The Rangers trimmed their training-camp roster by seven. Francois Brassard, Ryan Gropp, Tom McCollum, Ville Meskanen and Ty Ronning were assigned to camp with the Hartford Wolf Pack. Nico Gross and Hunter Skinner were assigned to their junior teams in the OHL.
Henrik Lundqvist bracing for change with young Rangers goalies lurking

By Larry Brooks

September 16, 2019 | 2:49pm | Updated

It is going to be different this year and Henrik Lundqvist knows it. Gone are the seasons in which the Swede starts nine of the first 10 games, 23 of the first 26 and 35 of the first 41 as he did two years ago for Alain Vigneault, or even seven of the first eight, 13 of the first 16 and 25 of the first 32 as he did last year under David Quinn.

“I always like to get going with a lot of games early, but we’ve already talked about it, and how the league is trending in an opposite direction from one goalie having such a heavy workload,” Lundqvist told The Post following Monday’s training camp practice. “The way the game is going, how intense it is and how many scoring chances there are, I know how much it takes — and takes out of you — to play a game.

“So it is going to be up to me to adapt to whatever schedule or rotation the organization thinks is best. I have to adjust to make it work. I’m going to work on that. If I’m not playing as much as I’m used to, the key will be to work hard in practice. But this isn’t something I’m worried or concerned about. I’m just very excited to be back here and get the season going.”

Lundqvist is 37 and entering the penultimate season of his contract. Those are facts that perhaps might be pinned to the top of every piece analyzing the King’s game and status not only around the NHL, but within the organization where Alex Georgiev and Igor Shesterkin are pressing up behind Lundqvist on the depth chart.

The organization will dictate the goaltending rotation in the early going, likely dividing somewhere around 60/40 between Lundqvist and presumably, Georgiev, but the goaltenders’ play will determine how it all shakes out over the full 82. It’s a fool’s errand to attempt to project the final number of starts that will be awarded to each member of New York’s goaltending crew.

Of course, that in and of itself represents a massive change in the dynamic. Since Lundqvist’s 2006-07 sophomore season, one could routinely pencil in No. 30 for between 65 and 75 starts. That not only reflects the reality of NHL trends, it reflects the reality of Lundqvist’s 2-11-3/.906/3.19 meltdown the final two months of 2018-19 during which he admittedly became overwhelmed with frustration over the direction of the season.

But the summer gave Lundqvist the distance required to put last season in the rearview. Signing Artemi Panarin and trading for Jacob Trouba, in addition to drafting Kaapo Kakko, didn’t hurt either.

“I needed to get away from everything before I could put my focus on this season,” Lundqvist said. “The second half of last season was so hard. I needed to recharge. I wanted to stay away from hockey as long as I needed to get back to the feeling where I’d missed it and would feel excited about coming back.

“That’s where I am. I’m super excited about being back, very excited about being with this group. The signings and the trades have put us in a very good position to compete and accomplish a lot of things. I think we can move forward with this group, and that’s important from a mental perspective.

“Last year it was kind of like we were taking one step forward, then one or two back, and so on.”

Lundqvist, who was consistently at the top of his game through last season’s opening two months (9-8-2/.920/2.62), said that he did not change his workout regimen. He is “slightly lighter,” at 181 or 182 pounds, than he’s been for a few seasons after playing at 198 for most of the first 10 years of his career.

“The last couple of summers I’ve done more work with my legs,” Lundqvist said. “And I think playing at this weight helps me the way the game is played.

“But I can tell you that I feel really good, and that’s physically, technically and mentally. I’m excited. I like our direction here. I have good feelings about the team. I just want to do my part in helping us win and getting us to the playoffs.
Artemi Panarin and the New York Rangers are all smiles early in training camp

TARRYTOWN – In between nearly every drill the New York Rangers have run during their first few training camp practices, new linemates Artemi Panarin, Mika Zibanejad and Pavel Buchnevich can be seen huddled together. There are lots of smiles and laughs, but the end goal is all business. “It’s important to build that chemistry on a hockey level,” Panarin said through translator Elizaveta Nemchinov. “We have everything we need for that, and it’s great that I can speak in my native language with Buchnevich.”

Playing next to a fellow Russian adds to the level of comfort for the Rangers’ top free agent prize. As for Zibanejad — the Swede who will play center in between the Russian wingers — they communicate through what Panarin deemed “hockey language.”

Buchnevich jokingly referred to himself as the translator, but the language barrier hasn’t been much of an issue. All indications are that Panarin — who took less money to fulfill his desire to come to New York, but still landed a hefty seven-year, $81.5 million deal — is feeling right at home. “He’s always got a smile on his face,” coach David Quinn said. “He’s very coachable. He’s been very receptive the few times we’ve talked about some of the things we’re trying to do. You tell him something once, and he does it.”

The 27-year-old isn’t as talkative or boastful as some star players, but he carries himself with a quiet confidence — whether it’s his cheerful demeanor off the ice or the way he moves effortlessly on it. It’s that unassuming swagger that fueled his desire to play at Madison Square Garden. So far, he’s met every other challenge. “He’s competitive — really competitive,” said team president John Davidson, who worked with Panarin while they were both with the Columbus Blue Jackets. “The big spots in games, he likes to find a way.”

Panarin wasn’t considered a high-end prospect. He went undrafted and eventually signed to play in Russia’s KHL. He had a breakout season in 2014-15, which earned him an NHL chance with the Chicago Blackhawks. Despite his success with the Blackhawks — back-to-back seasons with 30-plus goals and 74 or more total points — he was traded to Columbus prior to the 2017-18 season, where he continued to build his reputation as one of the best players in the world. He admitted to feeling like he had to prove himself during his first four NHL seasons, but signing with the Rangers served as validation. “I felt a bit more pressure in Chicago and Columbus,” he said. “Now I’m here, and I’m just really excited to be here. I’m enjoying every single moment. … I don’t feel that pressure here.”

Panarin will give new life to the Blueshirts’ attack. He’s surprisingly strong for a player who is listed at 5-foot-11, 168 pounds, but it’s his explosiveness and creativity that sets him apart. During practice, it often looks like he has another gear compared to others, and his movements with the puck are sharp and purposeful. “I feel like he’s unpredictable, and it’s hard to read him,” Zibanejad said. “You just don’t really know what he’s going to do. He can really shoot, he can pass, he can take you on one-on-one. … Playing with him, you always have to be ready. He doesn’t always show when he’s going to pass — or rarely — so just be ready for that, and be ready for the shots and rebounds that are going to come out.”
TARRYTOWN - When asked about which position group has the most to prove during training camp, New York Rangers team president John Davidson didn't hesitate.

“Our center ice position is something we’re going to look at and try to improve and see who’s going to step in and give us some games there,” he answered directly.

Mika Zibanejad is entrenched as the top-line center, but which players will center lines two, three and four is to be determined.

The leading contenders are three second-year players who are 21 or younger — Filip Chytil, Lias Andersson and Brett Howden — with veterans Ryan Strome and Greg McKegg serving as the insurance plans.

The first order of business is determining who’s No. 2, with Chytil getting the first crack based on the lines the Rangers rolled out for their first two practices Saturday and Sunday.

“I wouldn’t say leg up,” coach David Quinn said of Chytil. “But he’s got a great opportunity.”

Chytil has been grouped with veteran Chris Kreider and top draft pick Kaapo Kakko on what has the makings of a dynamic second line. The key will be Chytil’s development after a rookie season in which he had 23 points (11 goals and 12 assists) in 75 games with a minus-22 rating.

Kreider, in particular, seems to be taking Chytil under his wing.

“He’s helping me a lot,” Chytil said. “I have a lot of fun with him off the ice. We do a lot of funny things. (He tells me) to stay positive all the time, and when we jump on the ice, everything is professional and trying to focus on the details.”

Quinn said last season Chytil had “moments and stretches where he was doing the things he needs to do, but there were inconsistencies.”

The coaching staff tasked Chytil with adding strength in the offseason and Quinn thinks it translated to the ice in the first couple practices.

“I thought Fil competed hard,” he said. “I thought Fil, right from the get-go at practice, he was setting the pace and setting the tone. He wasn’t shying away from any contact, and he was actually engaged. It was a great sign. You see something different in his eye. There’s a level of confidence that he’s walking around with that I think will hopefully transfer onto the ice.”

Others in the mix

Like Chytil, who just turned 20 about two weeks ago, the Rangers are talking up the physical growth of their other young centers.

“Howden has come a long way,” Davidson said. “He looks like he had a great summer and I hear great things about him. Lias Andersson, they’re telling me he’s completely changed his whole body — and that’s what happens when kids are kids. Sometimes it takes them a little bit.”

Andersson, who was the least effective of the young trio with just six points (two goals and four assists) in 42 games last season, is being given a chance to impress early in camp. He’s been grouped on the potential third line with Strome and Vlad Namestnikov.

Howden has been centering the fourth line, where the competition for the winger spots is ongoing. He posted 23 points (six goals and 17 assists) in 66 games last season with a minus-16 rating.

The Rangers are deliberately giving the early centering responsibilities to the young players to see how they respond, but Quinn noted any of them could be moved to the wing, as many prospects are early in their career, “and then they learn to play the middle cause it’s such a demanding position.”
GREENBURGH, N.Y. — A year ago, a teenager named Joey Keane made an impression in his first pro training camp when he knocked the wind out of the Rangers’ top player, Mika Zibanejad, in a one-on-one drill. Zibanejad was OK, and Keane survived the Rangers’ first cuts and got to play in a preseason game before being returned to his junior team in Barrie, Ontario.

Now 20, Keane is still drawing positive attention to himself. On Monday, the 6-foot, 187-pound defenseman from Chicago scored a goal in the Rangers’ first training camp scrimmage.

“It was nice,” he said of the only goal his team scored in a 4-1 loss. “I got up [on the rush], got a pass right in the slot. I was [at point-blank range], so I just had to put her in.”

“Joey’s got a lot of great qualities about him,” coach David Quinn said. “I love his skating. He’s strong. I think, as you get older, as a defenseman, a lot of guys are gifted offensively, and they’re offensive defensemen. I think he’s still finding his way as to who he’s going to be at our level. He’s certainly a great prospect for us. There’s a lot of things to like about Joey.”

One of two third round draft picks by the Rangers in 2018, Keane had eight goals and 31 assists in a combined 66 games for Barrie and the London Knights of the OHL last season in his final year of junior hockey.

The righthanded-shooting defenseman normally would have been ticketed for the Hartford farm team this season, but with restricted free agent Tony DeAngelo unsigned and not in camp, there is ice time and opportunity for other players to show the coaches what they can do.

Quinn said “there’s certainly a chance” for him to impress with DeAngelo out.

“I don’t read into it too much,” Keane said when asked if DeAngelo’s absence works in his favor. “That’s the coaches’ decisions. I’m just going to try to get better every day and compete every day. So that’s my goal.”

Keane, who had 12 goals and 44 points for Barrie in his draft year, said he doesn’t consider himself an offensive defenseman.

“I would say I’m a skating defenseman,” he said. “I move the puck up. I do like to get in the offense. But I wouldn’t say I’m like a Drew Doughty or someone who’s trying to dangle all the time.”

Keane spent most of the summer in Connecticut and trained with Ben Prentiss, who works with many of the Rangers to get them into top shape. Keane did a lot of work in the weight room and worked on his skating speed.

“That was unbelievable,” he said. “A great opportunity to be able to be around the pro guys again and just kind of see how that works. And yeah, my goal is to get stronger. And that’s what the Rangers told me I had to do. And I did get stronger.”

Notes & quotes: The Rangers made their first cuts of camp, assigning goalies Francois Brassard and Tom McCollum and forwards Ryan Gropp, Ville Meskanen and Ty Ronning to Hartford and returning defensemen Nico Gross and Hunter Skinner to their junior teams. The cuts leave the Rangers with 48 players . . . . Boo Nieves (two), Phillip DiGiuseppe and Tarmo Reunanen scored for Team Leetch, which beat Team Graves. Quinn singled out Adam Fox, Kaapo Kakko, Nieves and Filip Chytil when asked who stood out. Quinn said defensemen Sean Day and Yegor Rykov, who have not participated in camp because of injury, are getting closer to returning.

Newsday LOADED: LOADED: 09.17.2019
This is the second in a six-part series where Mitch Brown will use video analysis to take a deep dive into what makes some NHL prospects so special.

Last week, the New York Rangers and the NHL saw their first glimpse of second overall pick, Kaapo Kakko. The Rangers prospect team scored four goals, Kakko had points on each of them. To top it off, he scored a goal that sent Hockey Twitter into a frenzy. Kakko gained the zone, drove around a defender behind the net. Then, he did another lap before scoring on a wraparound.

It was a masterclass of puck protection.

As impressive as that sequence was, no one leaned on Kakko. But I’m not here to say Kakko won’t do that in the NHL. I’m here to say Kakko will do better in the NHL. For a better representation of Kakko’s skill set, watch this incredible shift by a 17-year-old Kakko mere months into his professional career — he’s the one with the puck nearly the entire time.

In that sequence alone, Kakko split the defence, drew a penalty, beat two players out of the corner, lapped the offensive zone twice, and set up a tap-in. For many players, that’s the shift of a season; for Kakko, it’s just another day at the office.

To fully understand how Kakko creates sequences like those with obsesive frequency, we must first understand the little skill details of his game. Namely: Physicallity, footwork, and puckhandling. It’s impossible to separate the three in Kakko’s case because they work in symphony to raise their impact far beyond their isolated ability.

Let’s start with an example of Kakko’s hands and footwork. Kakko uses sudden, powerful swings of his hips and drives of his feet to quickly cutback. Kakko’s lower-body strength and application allow him to exit these cutbacks with speed on both sides, which is unusual, even for slippery NHLers. His hands work in unison with his feet, maintaining a tight handle on both puck and stick. But the puckhandling also works separately from his feet, which arguably makes him even more dangerous. His hands show one move, but his feet show another, and the defender is forced to guess.

In the edited sequence below, notice not only the power generated by the cutbacks but the deception. Let’s return to the symphony comparison for a minute. Like a symphony, Kakko switches tempos through the clip, the symphony switching between the fast-paced allegro to separate to the slow-paced adagio to draw in defenders, and back again. He finishes the play with a cross-slot assist to a moving target. High-end vision.

The power and physicality of Kakko manifest themselves in several ways. First, he’s unmoveable in tight quarters. Defenders routinely try to punish him, sensing a player fixated on the puck instead of his surroundings. But instead, defenders are the ones who end up paying. The same lower-body strength and quickness that facilitate the cutbacks also give Kakko an impenetrable base.

Second, Kakko seeks out contact while in possession, throwing a shoulder or a hip into an incoming defender. Usually, the contact is small bumps, used to keep the defender on Kakko’s backside as he prods for his desired seam. The force of the defender hitting the brick wall that is Kakko results in them losing speed, while also pushing Kakko forward. It’s a smart tactic that most NHLers use, but few use it with such effectiveness.

Third, Kakko can outmuscle his way into the lane he wants. In footraces, defenders often try to pass him, but Kakko sticks with or shoulder out to force them to engage him in a battle. Guess what? The defenders lose most of the time. He uses a heel-to-heel or pivot to separate, morphing the power balance of the battle — it’s essentially a way of gaining the higher ground. Just as impressively, Kakko’s strength allows him to maintain his stride in the engagement, giving him a boost of speed that the poor defender isn’t able to match.

The interaction between the handling, agility, and strength allows Kakko to create sequences like the first two clips in the piece, the stretches of dominant possession. All of this would be for naught if Kakko couldn’t turn his limitless possession ability into scoring chances. Great news! He’s a high-end dual-threat attacker, building off his possession ability to score, well, a whack load of points.

Before delving into the actual passing and shooting ability, it’s essential to understand the purpose of all those cutbacks, hits, and protection. Kakko is generally using those maneuvers to create space; not just any kind of space, but the area to pivot and face the slot. On the perimeter, the most dangerous position for a player to be is facing the slot because it allows them to (a) identify their passing and shooting options, (b) identify defenders, and (c) provides escape options in all four directions.

In the video below, I’ve edited some of the clips already shown, demonstrating how Kakko’s insistence on facing the slot creates offence.

We’ve seen a bit of Kakko’s playmaking already in this piece, so let’s continue to flesh that out. After bullying defenders down low, he often throws a pass through the slot if the goaltender’s sealed to the post, hoping to cause a bit of chaos. Sometimes, the puck pinballs around and finds a teammate in scoring position — it’s a good play for the most part.

However, Kakko’s precision is what causes excitement for his playmaking. He can feather passes through the smallest of openings. In this sequence, after Peter Forsberg-ing a defender, he makes a cross-slot backhand pass underneath the goaltenders stick.

A technically gifted passer who already has harnessed his natural gravity to find teammates in a better position, Kakko’s every bit as talented of an open-ice passer as he is down-low. The skill of his passing is not to be underestimated: He’ll find teammates on the backhand, with saucer passes, and in-stride. He’ll feather passes to teammates streaking down the opposite wing, or shred a team that’s employing the There’s Kakko! Panic and Double-Team Him defensive structure that so many Liiga teams experimented with.

The dual-threat nature of Kakko’s attacking ability allows Kakko to be one of the most versatile power play menaces I saw all season. Between various levels of competition this season, Kakko played on the right circle, the left circle, the right goal line, net-front, the middle-man in a 1-3-1, and I’m sure he could run the power play from the point just fine. That’s a lot of positions. And he excelled in all of them.

However, I think Kakko’s likely home is on the right side, probably as a particularly active passing and shooting threat. He proses the penalty kill, moving downwards the see how the defenders react, then circling back and trying again with a plan. He bounces between the threat of a shot to pass and vice-versa, moving the sticks and bodies of penalty killers out of his desired lane.

In the diagrammed sequence below, watch how Kakko proses the defence until he manipulates the defenders to open the cross-slot lane. Then, notice how he immediately prepares for a shot to blast a one-timer past the goaltender.

Speaking of goals, Kakko scores a lot of them. The most ever by a first-time draft-eligible in Liiga. While he can beat goaltenders from a distance, the way he’ll score most of his goals in the NHL will be by getting to the net. The variety ways of he gets to the net stands. He’ll power forwards for a point-blank look, stickhandle around the goaltender, or score with brute force around the paint.

Gone are the days of standing around taking punishment around the net. In today’s NHL, the best finishers score by moving in and out of the slot, timing their movements with a shot or a pass.

In the sequence below, Kakko’s attempt to dip off the radar fails as a defender picks him up lurking on the far post. Just as the defender thinks he has taken away the pass, Kakko moves toward the goal timed with Oula Palve’s turn to face the slot. Palve makes the pass, and it’s a tap-in for Kakko.

This next example is a bit more exciting, I promise. Kakko’s supporting his teammate’s pinch. As the puck moves down to Palve, Kakko instantly reacts by altering course to the slot. Many players will skate in front of the defender while moving down low, which allows the defender to both grab the stick of the player and watch the pass. Cleverly, Kakko goes behind the defender’s back, forcing the defender to choose stick or pass. The
defender chooses pass. Meanwhile, Kakko reaches out to receive the pass and shoot without breaking stride. That’s an expression of high-end skill right there, seamlessly integrated with brilliant awareness. Yowza.

Let’s change course and talk about skating. With a prospect of Kakko’s calibre, flaws aren’t preventers of NHL careers; they’re limiters. Possessing an NHL average open-ice stride might be a death sentence for players who rely heavily on turning the corner on defenders at lower levels. But Kakko’s game isn’t built on what he can do as a primary transition option. Therefore, I doubt his open-ice stride will prevent him from having an NHL career or even becoming a top-line winger, but it might alter the type of offence he’s able to create. I doubt his game will feature Pavel Bure-like wide drives to the net or Nathan MacKinnon-type defence-splitting rushes with any regularity, but does that really matter? I doubt it.

The open-ice stride isn’t an issue given his skill set; it’s a minor inconvenience at worst. It’s not that he can’t turn the corner on defenders on occasion, either. After reaching top-speed, his execution (i.e., shooting, passing, handling) remains at a similarly high level, indicating he’ll have no issue making plays at NHL pace. Unlike many players with similar skating ability, if defenders can catch up, he’ll find a way to create regardless. Just as he does in the corners, Kakko swats away defenders with a single hand or pulls off a clever maneuver on his edges to find that little extra room to operate.

The open-ice stride does have some (minor) ramifications for Kakko’s impact in defence and transition. With an emphasis on zone-stretching counterattacks and high-pace players in today’s NHL, a forward’s defensive impact is often aided by their small-area quickness. The best defensive forwards are proactive (switching between man-coverage and support with to prevent plays), possess closing speed, and defend with pace — quickness helps with of all these. That’s not to say that average skaters can’t make a defensive impact, but being faster in small areas provides a better base.

While Kakko lacks the ideal small-area quickness defensively, he’s a proactive defender who takes away passing lanes and pressures the puck carrier. He funnels plays away from the slot and supports battles without hesitation. His relatively average starts from a standstill and lack of aggressiveness make his closeouts on shooting threats relatively weak. With his anticipation and physicality, he has the skill to be a plus-defensive impact winger in the NHL, but that’ll require a more assertive attitude and repetitions.

At 5-on-5, Kakko’s transitional impact is adequate, but with plenty of room to grow. His pass-carry-dump decisions indicate a player who is acutely aware of his surroundings and strengths. However, I often found that he was missing must-hit targets in the neutral zone. Typically, the passes we’re too far ahead of the intended recipient, rather than behind, which indicates he’s overly eager and not lacking in vision. I suspect that it’ll improve with time, but perhaps it means he’s not an immediate high-impact player in transition. We’ll see.

Given more time, I’m confident Kakko’s open-ice skating will improve. The mechanical issues are small; I doubt they require an overhaul. With coaching and improved strength, he’ll extract plenty more out of his stride. The best players always find ways to improve. I suspect Kakko will be no different.

Is Kakko a potential star in the NHL? Absolutely. Is he one right away? I’m not so sure. There’s likely to be a (short) adjustment curve as Kakko figures out how to navigate the NHL neutral zone with pace and time his down-low maneuvers with the faster-paced defending of the NHL. That’s nothing unusual, but it will be particularly interesting to monitor given how distinct his skill set is.

I’m confident that even with the adjustment curve, Kakko’s going to make a notable offensive impact this season. He was a top player in Liiga last season, spending most of the season as a 17-year-old. The skill and physicality combination won’t just translate; it’ll be a standout in the NHL. I have little doubt that those stretches of down-low dominance will terrorize more than a few NHL teams this season.
No longer the youngest Ranger, Filip Chytil is embracing expectations of growth in his game.

By Rick Carpiniello Sep 16, 2019

GREENBURGH, N.Y. — He’s not the baby anymore. Filip Chytil laughed when he was told he’s no longer the youngest Ranger, with 18-year-old Kaapo Kakko and 19-year-old Vitali Kravtsov now in the mix.

“But still one of the youngest,” Chytil said.

He just turned 20 on September 5th, having one full season and a small part of another’s worth of NHL experience.

With the changes (read: talent upgrades) the Rangers have made over the summer, adding not only Kakko and Kravtsov, but also Artemi Panarin, Jacob Trouba and Adam Fox, it’s easy to overlook Chytil.

But with those changes — and the fact that Kevin Hayes no longer plays here — the Rangers need Chytil to take a big leap forward. They need him to become a factor. And at least at the start, to prove he can (or can’t) be a second-line center. For now, coach David Quinn has made the commitment to Chytil as a center after he spent a big chunk of last season in a more protected role on the wing.

“Center is my natural position, so I’d like to fight for it, for a spot, and try to earn that spot and play second center … play more minutes than last year and be an important (part of) the team,” Chytil said Sunday at training camp.

What the Rangers will need from Chytil is simple: More.


More need. More responsibility for a young player.

“He’s earning that responsibility,” Quinn said. “But also I want to give him the opportunity to cash in on his hard work and all the results we’ve seen over the last four or five months.”

Quinn and Rangers president John Davidson have already admitted the team’s strength is not down the middle. Behind Mika Zibanejad are Chytil, Lias Andersson and Brett Howden, all of whom played their first full NHL seasons last year. Ryan Strome, for now, is a winger, and the Rangers also have centers Boo Nieves and Greg McKegg in camp, but first dibs are going to the three kids.

Though nothing, as Quinn often says, is given.

“After talking to him and just looking at him, the way he’s carrying himself, he certainly seems ready to get to the next level,” Quinn said. “What that level may be, who knows? But we’re going to find out. But he certainly looks different, acts different. He’s more mature.”

Chytil’s 19-year-old season was expectedly rocky. He didn’t score in his first 17 games of the season. Once he popped that bubble, Chytil scored goals in five straight games in late November and early December. But in his final game of the season he broke a 22-game goal-free streak. Chytil finished with 11 goals and 12 assists in 75 games, certainly not awful numbers.

But for a kid who was picked in the first round of the 2017 draft, more is expected now. In fact, never mind the draft. More is expected because it’s easy to see that more is there. And more is needed.

So there he was at camp Sunday, centering Chris Kreider on his left and Kakko on his right — which could very well be the second line on opening night.

“The difference between 18 and 19 is amazing,” Kreider said. “I mean, it’s not easy for an 18-year-old or 19-year-old to play in the league. The amount that you mature and the strength that you put on, especially if you’re doing the right things from year to year, when you’re that age you can make huge leaps. With a mature approach like Fil has, I think he’s going to see that. He just gets better every day.”

Kreider should know. He did his usual exemplary off-season workouts with Chytil (and many other Rangers) at Ben Prentiss’ hockey gym over the summer, encouraging, helping and leading the kiddie corps.

“You can tell that he worked hard over the summer,” Kreider said. “He should be proud of how hard he worked. He put himself in a really good spot. He’s shown his teammates, he’s shown the coaching staff, that he wants that responsibility. He wants to be counted on to play in all situations. He’s in very good shape. He’s put himself in a good position to continue to grow and to help this team.”

Brady Skjei went one-on-one with Chytil in a drill on Saturday and came back to the coach and said, “Boy, is Fil a lot stronger than he was last year.”

“So with that comes confidence and this is a game where you’re going to have confidence, but confidence is earned,” Quinn said. “You don’t just give it to people. I’ve said that before. But I think all the work Fil’s put in this summer has given him a lot more confidence.”

Chytil (listed as 6-foot-2, 208 pounds last season) put on some pounds of muscle and feels faster — Kreider said he still beats Chytil in a race, but just not by as much — and worked on his improving English, which had a long way to go when he first arrived in North America two Septembers ago.

“So I feel much more comfortable and more confident,” Chytil said. “I’m a year older. I have a little more experience from last year. I know how it’s going in the NHL now. I know what to expect.”

He also struck up a friendship with Kravtsov at development camp in the summer of 2018 and they texted throughout all of last season. Chytil is close with Andersson, his fellow first-rounder from ‘17, and with countryman Libor Hajek, among others. His polite way and his quick smile makes him a popular teammate.

Now he has to do it on the ice.

“I just learned from (last season) and take the positive things from that,” Chytil said. “And maybe the negative things, and try to focus on that and bring it for the next season and be better. I knew what I got to do in the offseason, I knew what I had to improve and I’m here right now and trying to prove I can play better than last year. I’ll be better after this summer and more ready for this season.

He might also sneak under the radar with the eyes on the other newer additions.

“Maybe in the media, but he’s got expectations for himself,” Kreider said. “I mean, that’s important. I think everyone in this room has higher expectations for themselves than anyone else has.”

Chytil’s excitement stems not just about his own opportunity and the added responsibility, but from the Rangers’ upgrade in skill.

“It’s great for our team,” Chytil said. “They can help us to make the playoffs. We have a lot of young players on the team right now, and our young guys can bring a lot of energy to the team, and bring speed, and I think there will be good chemistry with the older guys. They have a lot of experience and they can give us some advice and they’re helping us all the time.

“Can’t wait for the season to start. It will be a good season for us.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
KeyArena has been completely gutted beneath its 44-million-pound roof, which is currently being held up by dozens of steel supports ahead of a planned rebuild to double its square footage.

That was the takeaway from a Monday media tour of the facility, which the Los Angeles-based Oak View Group (OVG) is rebuilding for a current price tag of $930 million ahead of the October 2021 arrival of a National Hockey League expansion franchise. Construction officials said the project is still on track for a “summer 2021” completion but will not be more specific until next year.

“We’re going to set that in early spring,” OVG construction executive Ken Johnsen told reporters after the tour. “You just walked through that building with us. There’s work to be done to get all the way down to the bottom. Once in early spring we see where we are and everything’s on-track with that we can set a target date.”

The building would need to be ready by June 2021 for the Seattle Storm to begin their regular season there on time and also to play host to the NHL draft. The league is prepared to wait until next June to make a final call on that.

The interior grandstands within the arena as well as adjacent smaller buildings have now been demolished as crews continue pushing back several tons of dirt ahead of further excavation. The plan is to dig an additional 15 feet below the current arena floor — roughly 60 feet below street level — and then spread the base of the arena wider to encompass more than 800,000 square feet.

For now, the 44-million-pound roof is being held up by a series of temporary steel support beams along the outer rim and a larger steel shoring beam directly in its center. All told, about half the 72 support beams needed for the project are currently in place while the remainder are expected to be in by year’s end.

“The beams are nearly completed on the north side of the building, meaning excavation can start there shortly. Once all of the beams are in, the remaining dig work can take place.

“By Christmas, we’ll be standing 60 feet below here pouring our first foundation,” said Greg Huber, project executive for Mortenson, which is serving as general contractor on the rebuild.

Huber said the steel support beams alone will tally 4,500 tons, which is more than all the steel Mortenson used to build the Allianz Field soccer stadium in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Mortenson took over the project from Skanska Hunt earlier this year as OVG sought maximum price guarantees to prevent further cost overruns on the privately-financed project. Initially pegged at just under $600 million when OVG was awarded the renovation contract by the City of Seattle, the price soared beyond $900 million earlier this spring due to planned upgrades and rising materials costs.

Taxpayers are not on-the-hook for any of the construction costs. Johnsen said the project remains on-track for the $930 million amount OVG and NHL Seattle made public last April.

Seattle Times LOADED: 09.17.2019
The arena for Seattle's NHL expansion franchise remains on track to open sometime in the summer of 2021.

Construction officials said Monday that the entire bowl of the former KeyArena has been demolished and excavation work is ongoing. Officials hope to begin digging down 15 feet from the current floor by year's end and to spend most of 2020 constructing the new seating bowl from the bottom up.

Ken Johnsen, who is overseeing the construction project for Oak View Group and the NHL franchise, says the most challenge part so far has been putting in supports to take on the weight of the 44 million-pound roof, which is staying in place. The new arena is being built under the roof, which has historical landmark status.

Johnsen says the budget for the project remains around $930 million.
Connor Brown ready to take the next step with the Ottawa Senators

Bruce Garrioch

ST. JOHN'S, N.L.— Connor Brown will have to play the waiting game to face his old teammates.

Fortunately, he won't have to wait long.

While the newly-acquired winger won't face the Toronto Maple Leafs in the pre-season opener at the Mile One Arena here Tuesday night, he should be in the lineup Wednesday in the second game of this back-to-back series at the Canadian Tire Centre.

Brown has a chance to make his mark with his new teammates and the belief is he'll make an impact.

With general manager Pierre Dorion, coach D.J. Smith and the staff trying to figure out where everybody fits, the answers to those questions will begin Tuesday night when the Senators open the exhibition schedule against the Leafs.

Among those with a chance to play a big role for the Senators this season is the 25-year-old Brown. Acquired from the Leafs in the deal that brought defenceman Nikita Zaitsev here July 1 and sent Cody Ceci to Toronto, Brown has the chance to be in an offensive role with the Senators and he's shown in the past he's got plenty of skill.

While he finished with eight goals and 29 points in 82 games with Toronto last season, Brown is only two years removed from a 20-goal campaign with the Leafs in 2016-17. He has been on the top line with Colin White and Brady Tkachuk during camp and there's belief this is a group that's going to be given every opportunity to find chemistry.

Brown feels he can play a big role in helping the Senators get where they want to be.

"Anywhere you play you want to cement yourself as a core guy," Brown said in an interview during camp. "That's what I'm going to try to do here and I'm going to do my best to fit in."

Brown's role had changed under Toronto coach Mike Babcock and it was a big reason why he was part of the deal to the Senators. Smith, who spent the last four years in the Leafs' organization, feels if Brown is given the right role then he can be an offensive player for this team and also be responsible at both ends of the ice.

He could read the situation and felt his days with the Leafs may be numbered because he's making $2.1 million this season with Toronto trying to make room to sign restricted free agent Mitch Marner.

"I was at a wedding so it was a bit of a shock but I did think that something might be coming and I didn't think my future in Toronto was cemented or certain," he said. "I knew with the salary cap going on there, and just with the kind of role I was being used in, I knew that I was the kind of guy that would have been easier to move.

"I wasn't with myself and honest about the situation so I wasn't too shocked." 

Given the fact the Senators are going young — and Brown isn't old by any stretch of the imagination — his three years of experience are certainly going to help.

"It's a little bit (of a fresh start)," Brown said. "I just think I was playing a different role in Toronto with the type of players they have up the middle and with all the offence they have. I was on the penalty kill and trying to be as defensive-minded as possible playing against some of the better guys on offensive teams.

"Hopefully this year I expand the offensive side of my game."

Brown feels there could be a fit long-term with White and Tkachuk.

"Those guys are really easy to play with," Brown said. "Both are really good players. We'll continue to build. I think we're all pretty keen and we enjoy playing with each other. That's the first step."

Of course, Brown is well aware the position the Senators are in with young players learning on a nightly basis.

There was no shortage of expectations with the Leafs, but those don't exist here. People want the Senators to be competitive and take a step in the right direction this season.

"In Toronto, we felt we were a Cup contender and it's a little different here being in a bit of a rebuild," Brown said. "I've gotten accustomed to the team and the kind of guys we have in the system and the way we want to play. I think we'll be a lot better than people think."

The adjustment has been easy for Brown.

"You always think when you see everybody around you getting traded it's going to be you and now it comes," said Brown. "It's going to be a good opportunity for me here. I fit in well with the guys, everybody seems to get along and there's a good group in there. I'm just excited to get it going."

Twitter: @sungarrioch

The Senators will bring 25 players to St. John's to face the Maple Leafs in the pre-season opener.

Here's the roster:

Goalies
31 Anders Nilsson
34 Joey Daccord
35 Marcus Hogberg

Defence
2 Dylan DeMelo
23 Nick Ebert
26 Erik Brannstrom
29 Cody Goloubef
39 Andreas Englund
46 Hubert Labrie
50 Maxence Gunette
58 Max Lajoie

Forwards
10 Anthony Duclair
19 Drake Batherson
37 Josh Norris
38 Rudolfs Balcers
44 Jean-Gabriel Pageau
45 Parker Kelly
47 Mark Kastelic
53 Jack Rodewald
55 Morgan Klimchuk
59 Alex Formenton
64 J.C. Beaudin
71 Chris Tierney
85 Vitaly Abramov
93 Tristan Scherway

Ottawa Sun LOADED: 09.17.2019
Growing up in the Toronto area, it was never a dream of Connor Brown’s to help deliver a Stanley Cup to the Ottawa Senators. But following an off-season trade from his hometown Maple Leafs to the Senators, a lot has changed for the 25-year-old.

Brown, who was a depth winger on a Stanley Cup contender last season in Toronto, now finds himself in a prominent role on a rebuilding Senators team.

And he’s not the only member of the 2018-19 Maple Leafs expected to take on more responsibility now that he finds himself in the nation’s capital.

On July 1, the Senators acquired Brown, along with defenceman Nikita Zaitsev, in a trade with Toronto in exchange for Cody Ceci, Ben Harpur and Aaron Luchuk. The Senators added further members of the 2018-19 Maple Leafs by signing unrestricted free agents Tyler Ennis and Ron Hainsey. The four will play in Ottawa this season for new Senators head coach D.J. Smith, who spent last season as an assistant for Mike Babcock on Toronto’s bench.

The four players and coach Smith are moving from a Cup hopeful to a likely lottery team. From one side of the somewhat-dormant “Battle of Ontario,” to the other.

“It’s definitely a little odd,” Brown said about the unusual circumstances. “But it’s comforting. You know, you feel a little bit more relaxed knowing some guys are coming over with you. It can be intimidating coming into a new team, a new dressing room. So it makes that transition a little easier.”

Hainsey agreed that having familiar faces around can help. In most cases.

“Some of the faces I like better than others, so it depends on who you’re talking about,” he said with a smirk. “I’ve played against a lot of these guys too, so as you move around over the years you have some familiarity.”

The change of scenery represents a fresh start for each of the former Leafs and current Senators, albeit for different reasons.

In Zaitsev’s case, his arrival in Ottawa comes after having requested a trade out of Toronto back in May. He later spoke to a Russian media outlet about his unease with the Toronto media and how Babcock was quieter here and it’s a good city to come to.

When asked about the trade, Zaitsev told The Athletic he was happy to be in Ottawa.

“I feel comfortable here,” he said after a scrimmage on Friday. “I like the coach, I like the guys, I like the city. It’s quieter here and it’s a good city to come to.”

Brown, who was a sweetener in the six-player trade – along with prospect Michael Carcone – admits he was caught off guard by reports of the deal as they emerged while he was attending then-teammate Zach Hyman’s wedding.

“Obviously it was a bit of a shock, but I did think something might be coming,” he said. “I didn’t think my future in Toronto was cemented or certain and obviously I knew with the salary cap and everything going on there and just the kind of role I was being used, I knew I was a guy that would have been easier to move.”

Meanwhile, free agent Ennis said his familiarity and relationship with Smith was “everything” when considering where to sign once free agency opened July 1.

“There was just a lot of talk and mulling over a lot of different stuff (including staying in Toronto), but ultimately my decision was to come here and play with D.J. and help this Ottawa organization,” he said.
"I'm excited to see some of the people, some of the regulars out there, (they are) some of the nicest people on earth. So I'm kind of thinking of that more at the moment," he said with a smile. "There will be more nerves certainly in game one (of the regular season)."

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
Joel Farabee makes good first impression as Flyers fall to Islanders, 3-1, in exhibition opener by Sam Carchidi,

Joel Farabee makes good first impression as Flyers fall to Islanders, 3-1, in exhibition opener With Travis Konecny signing a six-year deal Monday, mega-prospect Joel Farabee – who has been spending time on the top line in training camp – will likely be back in the crowded battle for the third-line right-wing spot. Morgan Frost (when healthy), another rookie with impressive credentials, and German Rubtsov are also among a huge contingent of candidates.

“People say that we make the decisions,” new coach Alain Vigneault said before the exhibition game Monday about coaches and management filling out their rosters, “but we really don’t make the decisions. The players make the decisions for us by how they play.”

Though jittery in his first few shifts, Farabee passed his first test to show he could play at the NHL level. Many more tests are needed. The 19-year-old rookie made some slick passes, controlled the puck, was active on the forecheck, and played solid defense in the Flyers’ 3-1 loss to the visiting Islanders.

Vigneault said he has seen Farabee play better, “but I thought some of that had to do with the opposition. I like that kid. I like his skill level. I like that he can play in tight. I think we have a good young player there.”

A young player knocking on the NHL door.

“As camp moves forward, competition is going to get better, and it’s going to get more demanding on everybody,” Vigneault said.

In the 2018 draft, when the Flyers selected Farabee with the 14th overall selection, the speedy winger said he always wanted to play for the Orange and Black. His father was from Philadelphia and Joel Farabee grew up rooting for all the city’s sports team, especially the Flyers.

So, yes, it was a bit emotional for him to play at the Wells Fargo Center for the first time.

A cerebral 200-foot player with good speed and hands, Farabee played right wing on a line with rookie left winger Isaac Ratcliffe and Cal O’Reilly, a 13-year pro and a five-time AHL All-Star.

Frost missed the game with a minor groin injury and is listed as day to day, and O’Reilly, who turns 33 later this month, took his spot.

O’Reilly likes Farabee’s game.

“He has great skill,” said O’Reilly, who appears ticketed to the AHL’s Phantoms. “He has speed, smarts. He’s going to be a heck of a player.”

The Flyers will have six more exhibitions games, and Farabee will probably play in at least four of them.

“I’m pretty optimistic. I think I’m ready for the challenge,” said Farabee, named the nation’s top first-year NCAA player while at Boston University last season. “I think one of my strengths is I can play all different kinds of roles. I think I can play top-six and I can also play bottom-six, and that really helps me out.”

Farabee said there wasn’t as much time and space as he had in last week’s rookie game in Allentown. “I thought every time I touched the puck, there were three guys on me,” he said, “so I just [need to be] finding ways to hold onto the puck a bit more and make some plays.”

Breakaways

James van Riemsdyk scored for the Flyers, who will face the Islanders at Nassau Coliseum on Tuesday; they play four exhibition games in six nights this week. … Former Flyers defenseman Luca Sbisa gave the Islanders a 2-1 lead by scoring with 17:36 left in the third. … In addition to Farabee, several young players played well for the Flyers, including defensemen Phil Myers and Egor Zamula, and forwards Rubtsov and Mikhail Vorobyev. … The Flyers will reduce their 62-player roster by sending some players to juniors in a few days, and they will start cutting some AHL players this weekend. … Chris Stewart decisioned the Isles’ Kyle Burroughs in a second-period fight. … Led by Kevin Hayes, the Flyers killed a two-man disadvantage that lasted 1:55 late in the second.
Flyers fall to Islanders, 3-1, in teams’ exhibition opener

by Sam Carchidi,

One preseason game down, six more to go.
The Flyers opened their exhibition season with a 3-1 loss Monday to the New York Islanders at the new-look Wells Fargo Center.

Defenseman Luca Sbisa, a former Flyers first-round draft pick, gave the Islanders a 2-1 lead by scoring on a point drive with 17 minutes, 36 seconds left in the third period.

The puck may have deflected off a defenseman in front of Flyers goalie Alex Lyon.

As expected, there were some sloppy moments in the teams’ first game.

“In exhibitions, you’re going to get some of this, where the execution is a little off. It’s quite normal,” Flyers coach Alain Vigneault said. “It’s the first game. The players have to get their timing.”

Vigneault said there were “quite a few teachable moments” in a contest in which the teams were a combined 0 for 9 on the power play. The Islanders were 0 for 5, and the Flyers were 0 for 4 and had just one power-play shot.

The Flyers outshot the Isles, 26-16, including a 12-6 advantage in the middle stanza.

“I really liked our second period,” Vigneault said. “Thought we played at a better tempo, a North-South type of game where we made their defense turn a little bit more and used our size down low.”

Just 2:03 into the game, the Islanders took a 1-0 lead when defenseman Thomas Hickey’s shot hit off goalie Brian Elliott’s glove and trickled through his legs.

James van Riemsdyk converted a Jake Voracek pass to knot the score at 1-1 with 15:33 left in the second. Kevin Hayes, playing in his first game with the Flyers, also recorded an assist on the play.

Late in the second period, Hayes led the way as the Flyers killed a two-man disadvantage that lasted 1:55.

Hayes was the Flyers’ best player.

The second period also included Chris Stewart decisioning the Islanders’ Kyle Burroughs in a fight. Burroughs had knocked down Stewart before the bout started.

“The guy caught me with my head down,” said the 6-foot-2, 243-pound Stewart, who is a battling for a roster spot. “And good for him to answer the bell (in a fight), and it gave me a chance to step up. I respect that.”

Elliott stopped 11 of 12 shots before being replaced by Alex Lyon midway through the second period.

The Islanders closed the scoring on Erik Brown’s empty-net goal with 50.7 seconds remaining.

The teams will meet again Tuesday night, this time at the Nassau Coliseum. Goalie Carter Hart will get the start for the Flyers.
Flyers’ Travis Konecny signs six-year, $33 million contract

by Sam Carchidi,

Right winger Travis Konecny got what he wanted Monday. The restricted free agent was seeking a long-term deal, and he signed a six-year pact with the Flyers that totals $33 million, an annual $5.5 million cap hit.

General manager Chuck Fletcher, who originally was seeking a shorter term, praised Konecny for his “progression in each of his three seasons” and called him an “integral part of our group of young forwards. His speed, skill, and tenacity sets him apart in today’s NHL.”

Konecny, 22, who scored 24 goals in each of his last two seasons, said he was “excited to be able to call Philadelphia home for the next six years.”

He will practice with the Flyers on Tuesday.

The signing leaves the Flyers with just $1.17 million in cap space, according to capfriendly.com. They have $80.3 million earmarked to just 21 players. It is not known if they will carry 22 or 23 players.

Konecny, who will become an unrestricted free agent in 2025-26, is expected to be the Flyers’ top-line right winger. Down the road, some view him as the heir apparent to Claude Giroux as the Flyers’ captain.

Konecny has the fifth-highest annual cap hit among Flyers forwards, behind Giroux ($8.28 million), Jake Voracek ($8.25 million), Kevin Hayes ($7.14 million), and James van Riemsdyk ($7 million).

Sean Couturier, 26, regarded as the Flyers’ best all-around player, has a $4.33 million annual cap hit. He has three more years on his team-friendly deal.
Growing up in South Jersey, Kyle Criscuolo got interested in hockey at a young age and followed the Flyers.

Now the diminutive forward is trying to make their roster.

Oh, he’s a long shot. But numerous long shots have earned NHL spots with strong performances in the exhibition season.

For the 5-foot-8, 181-pound Criscuolo, the opportunity begins Monday night at the Wells Fargo Center, where the Flyers will face the New York Islanders. He will play right wing on a line with left winger Maksim Sushko and center Mikhail "Misha" Vorobyev.

"It’s been a great first few days here," Criscuolo said of training camp. "I’m just doing my best to give myself a shot to play for the Flyers.”

A native of Southampton Township, Criscuolo was a free agent when he signed a two-way contract with the Flyers on July 1. He will earn $700,000 if he makes the Flyers, and $200,000 if he plays for the AHL’s Lehigh Valley Phantoms.

Criscuolo played at St. Joseph’s Prep in Philadelphia and at a Connecticut boarding school before starring at Harvard, where, as a junior, he was the first non-senior to become its captain since 1946.

Kyle Criscuolo trying to put a puck past goalie Carter Hart at training camp Saturday.

Flyers general manager Chuck Fletcher is familiar with Criscuolo. When Fletcher was the GM in Minnesota, Criscuolo worked for him as an intern in the Wild’s analytics department. Coincidentally, both attended Harvard, though many years apart.

When Fletcher showed interest in signing him, Criscuolo didn’t have to think long.

"I’ve always wanted to play for the Flyers," he said.

Criscuolo, 27, had a brief stint with the Buffalo Sabres (nine games, no points) in 2017-18, sandwiched by two seasons with their AHL affiliate in Rochester. He had 15 goals and 34 points in 51 games two seasons ago, and 20 points (six goals, 14 assists) in 43 games last season.

"It’s been a great first few days here," Criscuolo says of training camp. "I’m just doing my best to give myself a shot to play for the Flyers.”

Monday’s lineup

Highly touted center Morgan Frost is injured and won’t play Monday.

Here is the Flyers’ lineup for the 7 p.m. game, which will be televised by NBC Sports Philadelphia:

FORWARDS
- Kevin Hayes centering James van Riemsdyk and Jake Voracek.
- German Rubtsov centering Oskar Lindblom and Chris Stewart.
- Cal O’Reilly centering Isaac Ratcliffe and Joel Farabee.
- Vorobyev centering Sushko and Criscuolo.

DEFENSE
- Shayne Gostisbehere and Justin Braun.
- Egor Zamula and Phil Myers.
- Samuel Morin and Andy Welinski.

GOALIES
- Brian Elliott (starter) and Alex Lyon (scheduled to play the last 30 minutes or so).
Flyers’ Morgan Frost injured, won’t play Monday vs. Islanders

by Sam Carchidi

This is not how the Flyers wanted to start their training camp.

Mega-prospect Morgan Frost has a groin injury and will not play in Monday’s exhibition opener against the New York Islanders at the Wells Fargo Center.

Frost was going to center Isaac Ratcliffe and Joel Farabee. Cal O’Reilly, who had 16 goals and 67 points for Iowa and was an AHL all-star last season, will take Frost’s spot. O’Reilly, who will turn 33 later this month, is a five-time AHL all-star.

Frost, 20, trying to earn a spot on the Flyers’ roster, is listed as day to day. Coach Alain Vigneault downplayed the injury, saying that Frost tweaked his groin at practice Sunday and that he was held out for precautionary reasons.

Vigneault said there was a chance Frost could skate Tuesday.

The Flyers are also missing right winger Travis Konecny, a restricted free agent who is unsigned, and injured center Nolan Patrick.

All three young players could be key pieces in 2019-20.

Farabee, 19, said O’Reilly, a 13-year pro, was a “real good player, and the systems are in place, so we know what we have to do. I think we’ll have a lot of adrenaline playing our first game here.”

It will be Farabee’s first time playing at the Wells Fargo Center.

“I’m pretty excited,” he said. “I’m sure I’ll be nervous up to game time, but after my first shift, I’ll be good to go.”

O’Reilly, who has spent time in the NHL with Nashville, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and Minnesota, is looking forward to centering Ratcliffe and Farabee.

“I’ve seen them play here the last few days; they’re both really good young kids,” he said. “They’re smart. It’ll be fine.”

Konecny agreement overshadows preseason opener for Flyers

By Rob Parent

PHILADELPHIA — For a team that wanted to make a grand debut in its still-being-renovated (again) new digs, the Flyers didn’t get much return from playing several of their top skill players Monday night in the preseason opener.

But it was a return of another sort that had them excited.

Hours before they listlessly drifted through a 3-1 practice loss to the New York Islanders at the latest incarnation of Wells Fargo Center, the Flyers announced that projected top-line forward Travis Konecny had been kindly accepted back into the fold, and for only $33 million spread over a six-year term.

Thus ended restricted free agent Konecny’s half-hearted holdout from training camp, which he’s determined to put behind him as quickly as possible.

“I’m really excited about signing with the Flyers and being able to call Philadelphia home for the next six years,” Konecny said in a statement released by the team. “I can’t wait to get back with my teammates and to start a new relationship with the coaching staff. It’s on me now to work hard and make up for the couple days I wasn’t able to be here.”

Actually it’s been more than a couple of weeks since the Flyers' regulars began informal skating drills at their Skate Zone practice facility. But why fret over split money?

After all, Flyers head coach Alain Vigneault, another new part in this gleaming machine, intends to double down on that Konecny assessment.

“He’s missed three days, and I think we can effectively catch that up here,” Vigneault said after the loss to the sort-of Isles. He added that Konecny is expected to skate with the “second group” Tuesday while the real Flyers get a day off.

“We're going to bring him in Wednesday, catch him up on what he's missed video wise and we have some good coaches. We're going to be on top of him to do extra work on the ice and extra work in the video room so that he catches up,” Vigneault added. “He’s only missed three days and I'm real happy that got done. I think it's real good for our team, real good for the young man.

"He needed to be here and he's here now."

The Konecny camp had to agree to certain parameters ... such as the defensive shortcomings in his game. But he can argue that being limited to 24 goals in each of the past two seasons came with the reality that former coach Dave Hakstol seemed to have trouble putting him to the test in pressure situations.

As it is, Konecny is expected to man right wing on the top line next to Sean Couturier and across from Claude Giroux.

With an annual average value of $5.5 million, Konecny, 22, is more than a mill above that of the much more accomplished and complete player Couturier ($4.33M), who at 26 is bound for three more seasons under his current deal.

Can’t wait to see the fallout of his next contract.

Or to see how soon it will be before general manager Chuck Fletcher agrees to tear up this one.

For now, however, it’s safe to say Fletcher is through with signing people, as the Flyers are only a touch above $1 million under the payroll cap. Not that this last signing wasn't worth it.

“Travis has shown progression in each of his three seasons and is an integral part of our group of young forwards,” Fletcher said. “His speed, skill and tenacity sets him apart in today’s NHL.”

Speed, skill and tenacity are several of the facets of the sport frequently missing in preseason games, and this one was no exception. That it started with a New York first-shot flip that went through Brian Elliot's legs, well ... nothing shakes up veterans at this time of year.
Not excited about Kevin Hayes? Newest Flyer shows how he can change things ... with time

By Jordan Hall September 17, 2019 1:15 AM

The listed attendance for the Flyers' preseason opener Monday night was 16,570. The crowd was sparse and that comes with preseason hockey.

Kevin Hayes, the team's most notable offseason acquisition who signed a seven-year, $50 million contract, played his first game in front of the new home fans.

There has been some debate over the level of excitement regarding the 2019-20 Flyers and the addition of Hayes, a 6-foot-5, 27-year-old center that doesn't exactly dazzle across the ice.

"I think the fans should be excited — I think they're excited, some of them might not be too excited — but I feel great," Hayes said last weekend. "This is the best I've ever felt and probably the most in shape, most excited I've ever been in my hockey career."

If he doesn't dazzle, he does just about everything else. The Flyers want to win hockey games again and Hayes brings winning qualities — pretty or not.

On Monday night, he showed his game — the puck protection, the utilizing of his size, the disruptiveness on the penalty kill, the potential on the power play (see observations).

Those traits were why the Flyers wanted Hayes so badly and believe he can be integral to the team contending again — you know, generating excitement.

"I'm not a horrible skater, but I'm not the best skater," Hayes said after the Flyers' 3-1 loss to the Islanders. "So I need to get an upper hand somehow and that is the stuff I work on in the summer."

The Flyers need that stuff. They allowed far too many goals last season, far too easily. They surrendered the NHL's third-most markers per game at 3.41 and finished with a minus-37 goal differential. Hayes had a career-high 55 points last season and a career-high 25 goals the year prior. However, he developed a defensive-minded, penalty kill pedigree under Alain Vigneault with the Rangers. Maybe that's not exciting.

"I actually got to the league as not a PK guy," Hayes said. "A.V. put it on me and I challenged myself to become one of the better PK guys in the league and I thought over the last couple of years, I've done that. I try to outsmart the other five guys."

Hayes did his usual work on the penalty kill and made an impressive play to set up the Flyers' lone goal. He played with James van Riemsdyk and Jakub Voracek, making up a line in which possession is the name of the game.

I like those three and that effort from that line. I expect more and more will come as their timing gets better. They spent a lot of time in the offensive zone and didn't get probably as much as they would have liked.

But the time spent in the offensive zone was good. Their execution is going to get better, but that is a pretty big line. They get pucks in deep and go retrieve it and make the plays that I think are available, just the execution was a little bit off tonight. But if the plays are available, that could be a really good line.

- Vigneault

It doesn't scream excitement, nor does Hayes' style of play.

But if it results in wins, fans will get on board.

It might just take some time.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.17.2019
Kevin Hayes impresses, scraping for spots, more observations from Flyers' preseason loss to Islanders

By Jordan Hall September 16, 2019 9:22 PM

Hockey was back in South Philadelphia as the Flyers unveiled head coach Alain Vigneault and center Kevin Hayes at the Wells Fargo Center on Monday night.

The Flyers lost their preseason opener, 3-1, to the Islanders, starting a stretch of four games in six days. They have seven exhibition games overall.

Let's get into some observations from the first one:

• On the Flyers' only goal of the game, the team saw exactly why it was drawn to Hayes. Thanks to his long reach and big frame, Hayes corralled a pass behind him and then shielded his man to eventually ignite the goal.

He found Jakub Voracek, who quickly fed James van Riemsdyk right in front to draw the Flyers even at 1-1 in the second period.

Those qualities are what make Hayes a difference-maker. Maybe it's not flashy, but size and smarts can lead to possession and quality playmaking. The Flyers' front office must have loved that opening goal.

This line though. 😎💪FlyOrDie pic.twitter.com/SrqNMZkRLq

— Philadelphia Flyers (@NHLFlyers) September 17, 2019

• Speaking of Hayes, he's disruptive out front on the penalty kill because of the aforementioned reach. He can be a workhorse type of player for the Flyers, similar to Sean Couturier and his responsibilities of playing both special teams units.

Both Couturier and Hayes impact the game in all areas. Ideally, the Hayes addition should lighten the load for Couturier, which could make the 26-year-old even better.

• Joel Farabee has another gear and when he changes to it, the 2018 first-round pick really stands out. During the second period, he made an explosive burst to the net with the puck on his stick and nearly scored. Moments later, he impressively took a sharp pass and wrapped it around to a streaking Cal O'Reilly for another scoring chance.

Good stuff from Farabee in his first Wells Fargo Center game action.

• Chris Stewart, with the Flyers on a pro tryout, dropped the gloves in the second period and landed some heavy punches. He's a big dude at 6-foot-3, 243 pounds, and general manager Chuck Fletcher knows him well from time together in Minnesota.

The 31-year-old will have to show more than just that to make the club but toughness doesn't hurt when you're aiming for a bottom-six job.

It's been a battle after 40 minutes. One more break and then we'll look for the go-ahead marker in the third. #FlyOrDie pic.twitter.com/8RyDWd1qVY

— Jordan Hall (@JHallNBCS) September 17, 2019

• Fletcher spoke highly about Egor Zamula during rookie camp. There's a lot to like with the 6-foot-3, 172-pound defenseman. He looked cool and comfortable playing alongside Philippe Myers and there's offensive upside, as well.

• German Rubtsov did some good things. The 21-year-old forward can kill penalties and has deceiving offensive abilities. Fresh off a two-goal rookie game, he didn't hurt his chances Monday.

"I saw him at the rookie game and I thought he played well," Vigneault said last week. "He had good pace to his game and good hockey sense."

• Isaac Ratcliffe, who came into camp with an outside shot at a roster spot, seems likely to spend the entire 2019-20 season in Lehigh Valley. His game stood out in junior hockey, but now everyone is bigger and faster at this level.
Why Shayne Gostisbehere is saying sorry to Wayne Simmonds

By Jordan Hall September 16, 2019 12:45 PM

Wayne Simmonds knows Philly all too well.

The two had become synonymous during Simmonds’ eight years in Philadelphia.

On Oct. 9, the Flyers’ 2019-20 home opener, Simmonds will play in the Wells Fargo Center for the first time as a visitor since being traded at last season’s deadline.

He returns as a New Jersey Devil. And he wants Philly to be Philly.

Wayne Simmonds says he’d be mad if Flyers fans don’t boo him when he returns to Philly. The Devils visit the City of Brotherly Love on Oct. 9.

— Joshua Clipperton (@JClipperton_CP) August 29, 2019

Shayne Gostisbehere smiled at the sheer thought of this city booing Simmonds.

I think Simmer knew that they’re not going to boo him, he was so beloved here. We still love him, I’ll be cheering him on, I definitely won’t be booing him," Gostisbehere said last month in a sit-down interview with NBC Sports Philadelphia’s Derek Souders. "When he comes back, it’s definitely going to strike some people hard. He was such a good guy, such a good guy for the community, too. His dealings with Snider Hockey, he did so much for the community. On the ice, he gave it all. He was a true Flyer — I think he could have played back in the day, for sure. I don’t think you’ll hear too many boos. Sorry to say that, Simmer.

Oct. 9 will be an emotional night for Simmonds and Flyers fans. As tough as Simmonds is, he was emotional following the Feb. 23 Stadium Series game at Lincoln Financial Field, what turned out to be his final time wearing a Flyers jersey.

And he clearly has Oct. 9 circled on his calendar.

Question: "Do you know when #NJDevils first play the Flyers?"

Wayne Simmonds (without hesitation): "October 9th."

pic.twitter.com/h6LFTxF20Y

— Amanda Stein (@amandacstein) September 12, 2019

Simmonds signed with the Devils in the offseason on a one-year deal and will play the Flyers four times in 2019-20. New-look New Jersey is looking to jump back into contention just like the Flyers. The matchups should be intense … but booing Simmonds?

Not happening.

For more from Gostisbehere on last season’s trade rumors that lingered into the offseason, his expectations and the team’s makeup, watch the “Break the Ice” video above.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.17.2019
Travis Konecny, Flyers agree to new 6-year contract

By Jordan Hall September 16, 2019

The Travis Konecny drama is over.

The Flyers on Monday agreed to terms on a six-year, $33 million ($5.5 million AAV) deal with Konecny.

"We are happy to have Travis under contract for the next six seasons," Flyers general manager Chuck Fletcher said in a statement released by the team. "Travis has shown progression in each of his three seasons and is an integral part of our group of young forwards. His speed, skill and tenacity sets him apart in today's NHL."

Konecny was a restricted free agent and missed the first three days of training camp. The Flyers open their preseason schedule Monday night and play four games in six days.

Fletcher wasn't kidding when he said negotiations can change quickly. At the start of camp Friday, a somewhat confounded Fletcher said the Flyers and Konecny's representation had "a ways to go" on finding a solution to a new deal, while head coach Alain Vigneault didn't hide his disappointment with the 22-year-old's absence from camp. He subtly reiterated that disappointment two days later.

But now all is well. It became clear that Konecny's camp wanted to go the route of a long-term deal rather than a bridge contract. The 2015 first-round pick put up back-to-back 24-goal seasons over the past two years and has seen his role fluctuate at times. Konecny has done most of his damage at even strength. Since 2017-18, he owns the same number of even strength goals (43) as Sidney Crosby and David Pastrnak, and has more than Artemi Panarin (42).

With greater responsibility, there's no reason Konecny can't turn into a 30-goal player.

"I'm really excited about signing with the Flyers and being able to call Philadelphia home for the next six years," Konecny said in the release. "I can't wait to get back with my teammates and to start a new relationship with the coaching staff. It's on me now to work hard and make up for the couple days I wasn't able to be here."

At a $5.5 million average annual value, it's an excellent deal for Konecny and a pretty good one for the Flyers, too. Konecny is only 22, entering his fourth NHL season and expected to make a bigger jump in production. If he performs, having him locked up through the 2024-25 season at a reasonable figure will be a major plus.

Think about it: Sean Couturier came into the league at 19 years old and didn't score more than 40 points until his seventh season when his role truly expanded.

Travis Konecny's contract has a $5.5 million AAV.

Sean Couturier's has a $4.333 million AAV for the next three seasons.

Just shows you how much of a bargain Couturier has become for the #Flyers.

— Jordan Hall (@JHallNBCS) September 16, 2019

Now the question becomes how quickly can Konecny catch up? He missed three important practices of training camp under a new head coach and two new assistant coaches.

Competition is currently ripe among the Flyers' group of forwards. Joel Farabee has impressed (even playing alongside Couturier and Claude Giroux) and others like Morgan Frost, German Rubtsov, Chris Stewart, Andy Andreoff, Kurtis Gabriel, Isaac Ratcliffe, Mikhail Vorobyev and Nicolas Aube-Kubel are vying for spots, as well.

If Nolan Patrick and Tyler Pitlick are healthy by the season opener (a big if), how does this sound for Oct. 4 in Prague, Czech Republic?

Claude Giroux-Sean Couturier-Travis Konecny

James van Riemsdyk-Keven Hayes-Jakub Voracek
Konecny wing.

to Horvat's deal that accounted for 7.33 percent of Vancouver's cap deal.

Konecny actually came in a little under expectation, as their model based norms. In fact, based on Evolving Wild's contract projection model, that of his cousin Horvat.

It's worth pointing out that the numbers cited for Alexander Wennberg becomes the obvious com-

Konecny went with seven years, Schmaltz's $5.85 million cap hit that term, probably leaning closer to Wennberg's cost. If the Flyers and

But even though Konecny and the Flyers saw their negotiations last into training camp, the final agreed

It seems clear that, at least in the short term, Konecny's best fit in the

Konecny's absence from camp may have seemed like an abnormal occurrence for Flyers fans, and it certainly wasn't received well by new head coach Alain Vigneault. But the contract itself ended up looking very normal.

Is the contract a good one for the Flyers and Konecny?

As we broke down in June, Konecny's game isn’t without holes at this stage of his career. His issues away from the puck are very real, and explain why he’s been more of a break-even play-driver at even strength so far with the Flyers rather than a forward who can push a line to success largely on his own. He’s also yet to establish himself as a legitimate power play weapon, though that can be blamed at least in part on a Flyers second unit that has been toothless for years. He also did not “break out” as hoped last season; after a monster second half in 2017-18, Konecny appeared poised for as much, and instead basically replicated his point production and dipped in terms of value added by Luszczyszyn’s Game Score model and Evolving Wild’s Goals Above Replacement as well (10.1 to 4.6).

But offensively, Konecny is one of the more dangerous young forwards in hockey. No Flyer has scored more goals at 5-on-5 over the past two seasons than Konecny with 39 tallies, and Konecny ranks 16th in the NHL over that time span in 5-on-5 Goals Scored per 60 minutes of play. He’s become the closest thing the Flyers have to a bona fide sniper.

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Importantly, Konecny’s advanced stats weaknesses have largely disappeared when playing with high-end forwards. Some play-driving liabilities drag down the results of all of their linemates by the numbers; however, Konecny is a bit unique in that when he plays with forwards who can both score and drive play, he actually has improved the quality of their results, even as his work further down the lineup has consistently underwhelmed.

Konecny might not be able to drive a line yet. But given star-level linemates — say, Sean Couturier and Claude Giroux — he not only won't hold them back, but he’ll also push them to new heights. Over the past two seasons, the Giroux-Couturier-Konecny line (out of lines with at least 400 minutes together) ranks seventh in the NHL in Corsi For Percentage, ninth in Goal Differential, and 12th in Expected Goals For Percentage. It’s been a high-end top-line, and Konecny has been a big part of it.

It’s worth pointing out that the numbers cited for Alexander Wennberg and Bo Horvat are a bit out of date — they were adjusted for salary cap inflation, operating under the assumption that the 2019-20 season would have a ceiling of $83 million (the original projection), instead of the $81.5 million that ultimately was set. Still, the updates simply drop the projected range to $5.32 million to $5.97 million. That’s right where Konecny landed — and just as predicted, he fell closer to Wennberg’s cap hit than that of his cousin Horvat.

In other words, Konecny’s deal pretty much followed established market-based norms. In fact, based on Evolving Wild’s contract projection model, Konecny actually came in a little under expectation, as their model anticipated a six-year term requiring a $5.1 million cap hit to seal the deal.

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Just because a deal is fair in terms of market comparables doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s a shrewd piece of business. The market still values points and time on ice more than anything else when it comes to structuring new contracts, which leaves out key elements of determining a player’s value.

Luckily, we have our very own statistical model-builder in Dom Luszczyszyn to help us account for those missing factors, which range from even-strength play-driving to penalties drawn/taken differential to individual scoring chance creation.

How does Dom's model evaluate the Konecny contract? You have to see it to believe it.

That’s right, folks — a perfectly fair value deal for both sides. Fletcher and Konecny's agent Mark Guy have officially solved the problem of player/labor relations via one negotiation.

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In the end, the deal is an exact copy of the one that Horvat signed in 2017 — except this one was put together two years later and takes up only 6.75 percent of the cap ceiling at the moment of signing, as opposed to Horvat’s deal that accounted for 7.33 percent of Vancouver’s cap allotment. An understandable discount, considering the fact that Horvat plays center (traditionally viewed as a more demanding position) and Konecny wing.
deliver six seasons of “just a bit better than he was in 2018-19” value and be worth his contract. That seems a safe bet.

Truthfully, the most reasonable criticism of the Konecny deal centers on the concept that a player’s second contract heading into RFA status historically tends to be team-friendly, and the Flyers didn’t get a massive, slam-dunk bargain here. But the marketplace does seem to be changing, with players coming out of their entry-level deals now starting to be paid far closer to their actual on-ice value than ever before (again, see the Marner situation). In terms of the health of the game, it’s not a bad thing if the market is finally readjusting in that regard to pay in-prime players what they are actually worth, even if other NHL clubs already have contracts on their books that took full advantage of the “old normal.” As long as the new trend holds, eventually every team will be hit by it.

What it means for the Flyers’ cap situation

Finally, on Sept. 16, it can finally be said that the Flyers’ salary cap situation for the 2019-20 season is clear. Mostly.

With Provorov and Konecny now signed, the Flyers are completely finished with re-signing their own players. Assuming full health for Game 1 of every projected NHLer, and no surprise trades prior to the start of the season, Philadelphia now has 21 spots on its 23-man roster locked up, and about $1.867 million in cap space to fit in two more players.

All numbers in millions.

That’s an extremely tight squeeze, especially accounting for the fact that Nolan Patrick, Oskar Lindblom, Philippe Myers and Carter Hart all have bonuses in their contracts that they could certainly achieve in 2019-20. But purely in terms of being cap compliant on Day 1 of the season, the Flyers have just enough space available to do so.

How? When it comes to the eight forwards who currently seem to be “on the bubble” to earn a job — Andy Andreoff, Joel Farabee, Morgan Frost, German Rubtsov, Nicolas Aube-Kubel, Kurtis Gabriel, Mikhail Vorobyev and Chris Stewart — the highest combined start-of-season cap hit they can add up to be is $1.819 million (Farabee + Rubtsov). That would leave the Flyers about $50,000 below the $81.5 million salary cap ceiling.

Of course, being this close to the cap ceiling isn’t ideal. If the entry-level contract players achieve their bonuses and the Flyers haven’t banked enough daily cap space over the course of the season to accommodate them, the bonus overage rolls over into the 2020-21 season, when the Flyers will need all of the cap space they can get.

The only money scheduled to come off the books this summer is the contracts of Justin Braun ($3.8 million cap hit), Tyler Pitlick ($1.0 million) and Brian Elliott ($2.0 million), in addition to the $1.005 million of salary retention from the Matt Niskanen-Radko Gudas trade — but Patrick, Lindblom and Myers will all be in line for raises. Unless there is a surprise dramatic increase in the cap ceiling next summer — and the consensus is that such a jump won’t come until the new television deal, which doesn’t kick in until 2022 — things will get very tight for the Flyers (that’s an article for another day). Frankly, they already are.

But in the here and now, the Flyers are largely set for the 2019-20 season. They can allow camp battles to play out naturally and not have their hands forced by immediate cap concerns, or have to make a trade just to make sure everyone fits. Contract negotiating season is over for the Flyers; let hockey season commence.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
Brayden Point negotiations are currently playing out. If Point ends up with a direct involvement with the Flyers regarding Sergachev’s deal next year, but given Gandler’s desire to sign him to another long-term deal, the impact on the top pairing with Victor Hedman could be significant.

The Werenski/Provorov/McAvoy contracts will have a direct impact on the overall game that makes him so impactful. With the lack of high offensive numbers, ge...

Why? Because had Provorov signed a three-year deal with the Flyers, he certainly wasn’t a first unit power play guy. Either way, the three contracts signed represent fresh, real comparables for the next wave of blueliner coming out of their entry-level deals.

Aside from Sergachev and Chabot, Vince Dunn, Erik Cernak, Sami Niku, Victor Mete and Travis Dermott are among other blueliners coming out of their entry-level deals after this season. So is the talented Samuel Girard in Colorado, but he’s already signed past this year, agreeing to a seven-year, $35 million extension this summer. Not a huge body of work to work off of when signing him to that deal, but you get the feeling the Avalanche won’t regret it by year’s end. By then he might already present a bargain if his usage and role are similar to Provorov in Philadelphia. There’s always a risk jumping in that quickly with these kids, but I think the Avs gambled right. They’ll have Girard at a $5 million AAV through 2026-27 when blueliners of his ilk will be signing for $7-8 million a year in no time.

Ben Chiarot in Montreal

It wasn’t the kind of signing that screamed sexy but I believe that Ben Chiarot’s three-year deal ($3.5 million AAV) in Montreal is an underrated move from July’s free-agent activity. Of course Jacob Trouba and Tyler Myers are the bigger losses on Winnipeg’s blue line, but believe me when I say Chiarot was a real glue guy on the Jets and was a popular player there. “Very,” responded Jets coach Paul Maurice last week when I asked him that via text message. “Good man. Has learned to understand what he’s good at and became a very consistent player. Will miss him.”

In Montreal, he begins camp on the left side of Jeff Petry on the second pairing, which was always the plan when Chiarot talked to head coach Claude Julien after signing, but another option throughout the season is sliding up alongside captain Shea Weber. Julien and Chiarot have talked about that possibility depending on the matchup, the Habs head coach citing last week a heavy team like the Washington Capitals, for example, as a game where perhaps they put two, big physical guys like Chiarot and Weber together for a night.

Chiarot, at least outside of Winnipeg, had not been seen by outsiders as a for sure top-4 guy, but by the end of the season, he will have had the chance to change that perception under the big spotlight of Montreal.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
The Philadelphia Flyers haven’t stormed out of the gate to start a season in years, instead digging early holes for themselves that require epic second-half runs to overcome. Whether they will break that trend under a new coaching staff in 2019-20 remains to be seen. But at the very least, Alain Vigneault isn’t about to let training camp begin as slowly as recent Flyers’ seasons have.

The mantra from Day 1 at camp has been pace: high-speed drills, very short breaks between repetitions and constant preaching to instill a mentality — this team is now expected to play fast. For Vigneault, it starts with an efficient, high-tempo approach to practice that bears little resemblance to the way things were done by the old staff.

“Yeah, I’ve never done it before,” Jakub Voracek acknowledged Saturday after a high-intensity session. “And I think a lot of guys haven’t done it like that. It’s a really fast tempo, and obviously, it’s different. I think that’s what we’re going to try to do in the season, to play like that.”

Dave Hakstol’s practices weren’t necessarily slow, but they did include significant periods of down time as the coaches mapped out each new drill for the players at center ice. Vigneault is different; he walks through each drill for the day before the start of practice, which allows for more seamless transitions between different segments of the session. The result? Less standing around, less on-ice group instruction and more skating. A lot more skating.

“There’s no down time,” Vigneault said. “We pre-ice all the practices, they know the drills that are happening. So they can go on the ice and focus and they know what’s going to happen. We’ll re-emphasize certain drills (while on the ice), certain aspects that we want to make sure we’ll do well. But all the players know the drills, they know the intensity that we’re looking for, and it usually pays off during the regular season.”

The details of the system that Vigneault and his assistants have constructed will become more apparent in exhibition games and early in the regular season; while the team has been working on X’s and O’s this weekend, the intricacies are tough to track when even the players on the ice are still trying to get a handle on what to do. But one thing is clear: A rapid tempo will be required to satisfy the new man in charge. So far, the players seem to be embracing the new mentality.

“I think that’s how AV wants to play and and how it’s going to go, so I think that’s a good start for us the first two days,” Scott Laughton said Saturday. “To have that, and to do everything high-paced, that’s how we’re going to have to play to win hockey games, so I’m excited about it.”

The returning Flyers — particularly those who’ve never played for another NHL team — have been most surprised by the adjustment. The emphasis on pace in practice (and ultimately game situations) is new for much of the old guard such as Voracek. Ironically, it’s been the new faces at camp who seem most at ease with the changes. Kevin Hayes, who played under Vigneault in New York, said how amused he was on Day 1 of camp, when he found himself doing the same drills he remembered from years ago. Justin Braun, who joked he enjoyed the pace because “you get kind of cold out there,” explained that the consistently successful Pete DeBoer-coached Sharks teams have a similar tempo-centric approach. And Matt Niskanen delivered a hammer of a statement on the usefulness of fast, efficient practices.

“On the good teams I’ve been on, the practices have been like this,” he said. Niskanen should know; during his five-year tenure with the Washington Capitals, they won four division titles, two Presidents’ Trophies and a Stanley Cup.

Kevin Hayes said the Flyers camp practices have reminded him of his days with Alain Vigneault on the New York Rangers. (Zack Hill / Flyers)

The moves the Flyers made this summer — hiring a big-name coach, handing Hayes a massive contract to join the club, trading away assets for two veteran blueliners — hint that the aim is to quickly become the kind of team that Niskanen described. But it can take time for a club to grasp new tactics; think back to the 2015-16 season, Hakstol’s first year as head coach. After an unimpressive 21-18-8 start to the season (87-point pace), the Flyers finally got going in the season’s final two months, achieving nearly a 108-point pace from February through the end of the season. To a man, players attributed the improvement to finally grasping Hakstol’s system to the point that it had become second nature.

Might history repeat itself with Vigneault in Philadelphia? Voracek had a theory as to why, if all goes well, it’ll be different this time around. And — surprise! — it all goes back to pace.

“The thing is, if you’re prepared and you’re skating fast and if you play a high-tempo game, if you can sustain it for a whole game, maybe you can afford to make a little more mistakes during a game,” he said. “(If) you can catch up to the other player, you can take a little bit more risks because you know you can catch up, and you know that one of your teammates is going to cover you, because you were prepared well, you know what I mean? So if you’re going to be a good-conditioned team that skates fast and plays a high-tempo game, it’s always easier to adjust to the new system. Because if there’s some flaws or mistakes, you can always make it up with your speed.”

General manager Chuck Fletcher seems to like what he sees so far. After stressing the need for a “mindset change” from the start of the offseason, it sounded on Friday like he was observing what Fletcher believes is the makings of that change on the ice in Voorhees, N.J.

“I’ve been doing this a long time, been around the game for a long time — this is the best first day of camp I have ever seen,” Fletcher said. “The players are executing great, the coaches are incredibly prepared. That was a great practice. There is literally 10 seconds in between drills. The players are moving, there’s competition. They’re moving the pucks around. I think if you have three weeks of this, that’ll bode well for our ability to play at tempo and conditioning.”

Patrick’s surprise absence from drills

Here’s what we know for sure about Nolan Patrick, 2017 second-overall pick and presumptive third-line center. He’s healthy enough to skate by himself on a daily basis with Flyers training staff, but he has not yet joined his teammates on the ice in competitive drills or games.

Everything else? Currently unknown.

Shortly before camp began Friday morning, the Flyers announced that Patrick was dealing with an upper body injury that kept him from being cleared to officially participate. It was a legitimate surprise, primarily because Patrick had arrived in Voorhees days before camp began, and skated with his teammates in unofficial sessions, seemingly looking no worse for the wear. That raised hope that Patrick’s issue might be minor, which Fletcher dashed when he called Patrick “week to week” later Friday.

“We’ve known about it for a while,” Fletcher said. “We’ve been working with him for a while, trying to get him healthy as quickly as we can.”

Some of the Flyers’ work with Patrick has been public; the 20-year-old forward has skated each day of camp, away from his teammates (aside from Tyler Pitlick, who is recovering from offseason wrist surgery). Patrick’s mobility does not seem severely hampered, and while none of his work involves contact, it also can’t be characterized as low-stress.

Patrick isn’t healthy — there’s no other reason the Flyers would hold him out of such an important camp — but at least to the naked eye, he doesn’t obviously look hurt.

Still, Fletcher didn’t seem overly optimistic about Patrick’s recovery timeline. “Week to week” is ominously vague, and while Fletcher said the issue would not require surgery, he included a “not at this point” qualifier, which implies that it hasn’t been ruled out as a potential solution — presumably if the rehabilitation plan proves ineffective.

From the outside, it appears that uncertainty exists regarding Patrick’s timeline, to the point where Fletcher chose not to respond with confidence when asked if the third-year pro would be ready for Game 1. “That’s tough to say” was all he would share.

For Patrick, it’s an especially bad-luck injury because he’s missing key practice sessions meant to familiarize the players with Vigneault’s new systems. But the head coach noted that just because Patrick isn’t on the ice with his teammates, it doesn’t mean that he’s not getting the same crash course in Vigneault Hockey 101 that every other camp attendee is receiving.
"It's unfortunate," Vigneault said Sunday. "But at the same time, he's in all the meetings. He's doing on the ice with our skill coach. Hopefully this upper-body injury will leave and he'll be back with us. But I think the fact that he's here, and he's (able) to see the video that we're showing, and he knows all the drills that we're doing … he is behind, but he is not as far behind as someone who is not physically here at this time."

Konecny absent, Farabee the key beneficiary
And with that pointed comment from Vigneault, it's now time to turn our attention to the player not "physically here" at camp: Travis Konecny.

Unlike fellow 2015 first-round pick Ivan Provorov, Konecny and the Flyers were unable to agree on a new contract before the start of camp. Fletcher was surprisingly candid on Friday regarding the disconnect between the two sides. Essentially, Fletcher said Konecny's camp is pushing for a long-term deal, and while the Flyers are open to the possibility, the two camps haven't been able to find a number that works for both. A short-term bridge deal always seemed like it would be the "easier" contract to negotiate; if that possibility is currently off the table, as Fletcher implied, it's not a shock that talks over the more-difficult-to-negotiate long-term contract have become fraught.

In fact, in a strange way, Konecny's absence hasn't even been the most newsworthy aspect of the situation. It's been the Flyers' reaction to Konecny's absence — specifically, Vigneault's reaction to it.

Vigneault's thinly veiled shot at Konecny when discussing Patrick's status Sunday wasn't the first time this weekend the head coach did a little message-sending. He didn't mince words on Day 1 when it came to the young winger's status, saying that he felt the early portion of camp was pivotal in setting the table for the coming season, and that Konecny missing any time would be a setback for the player.

"I am very disappointed that TK is not here," Vigneault said. "It's the start of a new era. (a) new group. I felt that it was very important for everybody to be here. With my time in the NHL, my experience, anyone that falls behind — whether it's injury or, in TK's situation, not coming to camp — it usually takes them a little bit of time to get back at it. Especially this time, with a new coaching staff and new way of doing things. It's unfortunate, but I am going to work with the players that are here, and I am going to work extremely hard with those players."

The Flyers and Ivan Provorov were able to come to terms before the official start to camp, but the team has yet to reach a deal with Travis Konecny. (Zack Hill / Flyers)

It's easy to read Vigneault's comments as more than spur-of-the-moment honesty, but as a calculated attempt to influence Konecny to rejoin the club. Still, it's important to note that this isn't an Ezekiel Elliott or Melvin Gordon NFL-style holdout, where a player is under contract and refusing to report. Yes, Konecny could "cave" and agree to the best offer on the table, but the Flyers could also acquiesce to the player's demands. For Konecny to return, both sides need to agree on a deal — it's not just on Konecny and his camp to resolve the situation.

Negotiations don't solely take place in one-on-one conversations between the two parties, however. Public comments by a new coach are one way for a club to (intentionally or not) manufacture leverage; giving the player's lineup spot to a blue-chip prospect and praising said prospect effusively for his work just might be another.

That's not to say, of course, that Joel Farabee hasn't been impressive. He stood out in the rookie portion of camp last week, delivered an eye-opening rookie game performance and hasn't looked out of place at main camp. It's not difficult to make a case that he's been the best forward prospect in Voorhees over the past nine days, especially in terms of all-around play. But watching Konecny's presumed spot on the top line next to Claude Giroux and Sean Couturier be handed to the team's top winger and how they can complement each other, "It's not just on Konecny and his camp to resolve the situation."

Sanheim-Meyers pair reunited early in camp
When the Flyers sent Travis Sanheim back down to the AHL midway through the 2017-18 season, he made it quickly apparent through his play that he had no business playing games at that level. He was a cheat code — per PhancyStats.com, the Phantom's performed 8.96 percentage points better in terms of shot differential when Sanheim was on the ice at 5-on-5, and outscored the opposition 18-7. His partner during that stretch of dominance? Philippe Myers, who was playing in his first AHL season. It looks like the Flyers might try to recapture that magic.

Sanheim and Myers began camp as a duo for the first two days, while Provorov skated with Niskanen and Shayne Gostisbehere paired with Braun. It was a mild surprise, since Sanheim spent the second half of the 2018-19 season in top-pair duties, and Myers appears ticketed for the third pair if he makes the big club. If this mix is a preview of the pairings for Game 1, the risk is that Sanheim — arguably the Flyers' best defenceman last season — ends up receiving less ice time at 5-on-5 than his play warrants. The potential reward, of course, is that the Sanheim-Myers duo dominates just as it did in the AHL.

Braun both the Ghost whisperer and … seaweed?
"I am very disappointed that TK is not here," Vigneault said. "It's the start of a new era. (a) new group. I felt that it was very important for everybody to be here. With my time in the NHL, my experience, anyone that falls behind — whether it's injury or, in TK's situation, not coming to camp — it usually takes them a little bit of time to get back at it. Especially this time, with a new coaching staff and new way of doing things. It's unfortunate, but I am going to work with the players that are here, and I am going to work extremely hard with those players."

The decision to pair Sanheim and Myers was surely influenced by their past success together. But another factor helped drive this blue line mix: the theory that new acquisition Braun could become something of a "Ghost whisperer."

"Today (Shayne Gostisbehere) was paired with Justin Braun, which makes an awful lot of sense when you think about their contrasting styles and how they can complement each other," Fletcher said after the early session on the first day of camp.

Gostisbehere is coming off a disappointing season by his standards, as his offense dried up and the 26-year-old slid down the depth chart. The hope appears to be that Braun — a veteran, stay-at-home right-handed defenceman — can function as the stabilizer on Ghost's pairing, doing the dirty, necessary work defensively while allowing Gostisbehere to freelance and create just a bit more.

Of course, there's no guarantee Braun will succeed in that role, if he indeed begins the season with Gostisbehere. Braun's play-driving metrics at 5-on-5 have been underwhelming for at least the past two seasons, and public statistical models aren't optimistic about his ability to bounce back in a new locale. That said, Braun has shown well in Voorhees, looking consistently disruptive in one-on-one rush drills and protecting the net well in defensive zone work. He's even flashed some German Rubtsov didn't receive a "fun" line combination assignment like fellow young roster hopefuls Farabee, Frost and Ratcliffe (the latter two skated with Voracek) during the first two days of camp, instead centering long shots Connor Bunnaman and David Kaše. It was fair to wonder if that was a sign Rubtsov might start camp a step behind his closest competition.

Sunday put at least a temporary halt to that line of thinking. In a practice that essentially was a dress rehearsal for Monday's pre-season opener, there was Rubtsov, centering roster lock Oskar Lindblom and nine-year NHL veteran Chris Stewart. It showed Rubtsov remains very much in the mix.

"I saw him at the rookie game the other day, and I thought he played well," Vigneault said after Sunday's session. "I thought he had good pace to his game, and good hockey sense. He's playing with two good players, it'll be fun to see what he can do. It's going to be a one-game evaluation there, so there'll have to be more, but hopefully he does well for us."

Rubtsov has been his usual self at camp — not flashy, but positionally strong and holding his own physically against older players. He's struggled at times with puck control, and he hasn't been as obviously impressive as Farabee. But quality of linemates must be taken into account; it's easier to look like an NHLer when you're playing alongside two of the better forwards in hockey than if you're between two likely AHLers. Monday will be the real test for Rubtsov — a chance to show that, with NHL inmates, he can look like an NHL player in game action.

New York Islanders — was also meant to send a message to Konecny, who surely sees all these young forward prospects with top-six NHL potential remaining and wonders how the Flyers will ultimately choose to accommodate them all.

Fletcher was surprisingly candid on Friday regarding the disconnect between the two parties, however. Public comments by a new coach are one way for a club to (intentionally or not) manufacture leverage; giving the player's lineup spot to a blue-chip prospect and praising said prospect effusively for his work just might be another.

That's not to say, of course, that Joel Farabee hasn't been impressive. He stood out in the rookie portion of camp last week, delivered an eye-opening rookie game performance and hasn't looked out of place at main camp. It's not difficult to make a case that he's been the best forward prospect in Voorhees over the past nine days, especially in terms of all-around play. But watching Konecny's presumed spot on the top line next to Claude Giroux and Sean Couturier be handed to the team's top winger prospect and then hearing Vigneault say Farabee "showed he belonged there" could certainly increase Konecny's urgency to get into camp.

Again, Vigneault's praise of Farabee seems sincere. The 19-year-old is having a great camp, even if he's struggling to finish on some of the quality chances he's helped to create. He's right at the top of the "prospects with the best chance of making the Flyers' list, in no small part due to where he's been placed in the lineup. It sends a message that the organization is satisfied with Farabee's work. But a more cynical interpretation is that Farabee's 1RW audition Friday and Saturday — he was back with Morgan Frost and Isaac Ratcliffe on Sunday since Giroux and Couturier will not play in Monday's pre-season opener against the New York Islanders — was also meant to send a message to Konecny, who surely sees all these young forward prospects with top-six NHL potential remaining and wonders how the Flyers will ultimately choose to accommodate them all.
physicality, knocking over Stewart and Sanheim in consecutive reps Saturday, even if Braun laughed off the implication that he was trying to flex his muscles for his new teammates.

“Well, I think Stewy tried to hit me, and I wasn’t close enough for the reverse hit, I think he lost his balance,” Braun chuckled. “(And) yeah, I’m not sure what happened to Sandy there. (He) just kinda tried to shoot and then fell down. Those probably weren’t actual hits, but I’ll take it!”

Both Vigneault and Fletcher singled Braun out for praise, with the general manager dropping one of the odder compliments you'll hear about a defenseman.

“He’s like seaweed, there’s arms and he’s battling and pushing you and poke checking, and he brings a veteran savvy to the defensive part of the game,” Fletcher said.

Even in a hockey world largely devoid of unique nicknames, it’s hard to imagine “seaweed” sticking for Braun.

Quick hits

Oskar Lindblom spent camp’s first two days playing right wing rather than his usual left side. While Konecny’s absence played a role in the position switch, Vigneault confirmed that it was always the plan to try out Lindblom on his off-wing in September. Lindblom was back at LW on Sunday, however, with Rubtsov and Stewart, and is expected to play there in Monday’s game.

He may be on a PTO, but Chris Stewart has been given the opportunity to skate with high-profile linemates, first playing RW on a line with Laughton and Michael Raffl, and then with Rubtsov and Lindblom. Fletcher noted that with the departures of Wayne Simmonds, Radko Gudas and Dale Weise, the Flyers might benefit from an infusion of physicality or intimidation. Stewart, who entered camp listed at 243 pounds, can certainly make a claim to possessing those attributes. He’s very much in the mix.

In a surprise move, David Kaše received an opportunity to play right wing with Couturier and Giroux in the second group Sunday. A small but feisty player, Kaše has consistently shown shiftiness at camp, and scored a beautiful goal in the rookie game. He earned the reward of getting to skate with the superstars, even if it’s just for one day.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
Penguins rally but drop 5-4 OT decision to Buffalo Sabres in preseason opener

Seth Rorabaugh

UNIVERSITY PARK — The Penguins opened their preseason with a 5-4 overtime loss to the Buffalo Sabres on Monday at Pegula Ice Arena.

The scoring opened at 4 minutes, 34 seconds of the first period when Penguins forward Andrew Agozzino, a journeyman signed to a two-way contract, fired a shot from the slot past Buffalo goaltender Carter Hutton. The lone assist was recorded by Nathan Legare, the Penguins’ third-round pick in this year’s draft.

Buffalo tied the score at 5:44 of the first on a goal by defenseman John Gilmour, who lasered a wrister from the left circle past goaltender Casey DeSmith.

Buffalo took the lead at 18:47 of the first when former Penguins forward Conor Sheary got loose down the slot and lifted a wrister over DeSmith — by design — at the 9:22 mark.

It became a 4-1 score when Sabres forward Tage Thompson chopped in a rebound past Jarry during a power play at the 15:58 mark of the second.

The Penguins’ second goal was scored only 51 seconds into the third period by forward Sam Lafferty, a prospect from nearby Hollidaysburg. Defensive prospect John Marino went wide on the right wing and pushed a pass through the crease to Lafferty, who fired a forehand shot past goaltender Jonas Johansson.

It became a one-goal contest at 6:24 of the third when Penguins forward Adam Johnson collected a sloppy Sabres turnover at the Buffalo blue line, raced in on his backhand and lifted a sly forehand shot past Johansson’s glove. It was unassisted.

The Penguins tied the score at 8:46 of the third when defenseman Jack Johnson chopped a puck at the left point on net, where forward prospect Ryan Haggerty deflected it past Johansson.

With only eight seconds remaining in overtime, Sabres forward Jack Eichel scored on a breakway to earn the victory.

The Sabres, who dressed a lineup primarily composed of their top players such as forward Eichel and Jeff Skinner, considerably outshot the Penguins, 47-18. The Penguins’ lineup had only a handful of NHL regulars such as Bryan Rust and Johnson.

Jarry was credited with the loss.

The Penguins’ next preseason game is 7 p.m. Thursday at PPG Paints Arena against the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Tribune Review LOADED: 09.17.2019
Pittsburgh Penguins

Sam Lafferty takes another step from Hollidaysburg to the Penguins

Seth Rorabaugh

UNIVERSITY PARK — Sam Lafferty was pretty happy Saturday. Skating on a line with the likes of NHL regular Zach Aston-Reese and 2019 first-round draft choice Samuel Poulin at training camp in Cranberry wasn’t the source of his blitheness, however.

It was Penn State’s 17-10 triumph over Pitt. The Hollidaysburg native had a pretty obvious rooting interest.

“I’m a Penn State guy, just because I grew up so close to there,” the center prospect said. “It wasn’t looking too good for a bit there. But they got it done.”

Lafferty, 24, accomplished quite a bit last year during his first full professional season with Wilkes-Barre/Scranton. In 70 games, he scored 49 points (13 goals, 36 assists), second most on the AHL Penguins.

He did a lot of his damage during the final stretch of the regular season, when he recorded 19 points (five goals, 14 assists) in the final 12 games of the schedule. Much of that offensive outburst came with Ryan Haggerty and Sam Miletic on his line.

“We were getting into a playoff push there, and so we all needed to elevate our games a bit,” Lafferty said. “And I think just complement each other really well. They’re both very good players, both can skate, win battles, got great shots. It was really fun and pretty easy to play with those guys. We just had great chemistry and ran with it.”

Lafferty’s rookie season came after he spent four years at Brown, where he never played more than 31 games in an NCAA season, almost exclusively on weekends. A different type of schedule was a welcome change.

“I’m a big fan of the pro schedule,” he said. “It’s a lot more fun playing more games.”

Plus, the business of being a student at an Ivy League institution was behind him.

“You’re not staying up late to write papers and stuff like that,” said Lafferty, a business major who also was a member of Brown’s golf team. “Definitely a big part of being consistent is taking care of yourself off the ice.”

Lafferty received an education on the details pro game last season.

“Just the little things on the ice, the subtleties of the game,” he said. “Knowing where to be, especially the center on the breakout, holding the guy up when they’re trying to forecheck. Just little things like that I think all the veteran players seem to be good at.

“I definitely learned a lot. You still want to keep learning and keep getting better, but I think there’s just an added confidence being a full year experienced and knowing what the season is like. Knowing what to expect, you just feel that much more confident.”

Lafferty, who grew up playing at Galactic Ice rink in Altoona, participated in Monday’s preseason opener at Penn State’s Pegula Ice Arena, a 5-4 overtime loss to the Buffalo Sabres. Playing primarily on a line with Teddy Blueger and Adam Johnson, he scored a goal 51 seconds into the third period, which prompted a robust outburst of cheers by several members of his family and friends who made the roughly one-hour trek up Interstate 99 from Hollidaysburg.

“It was amazing,” he said. “It was a special night. It’s just something I’ll remember forever.”

Even more special would be participating in a game of consequence for the Penguins. A fourth-round pick of the Penguins in 2014, Lafferty was inspired to take up skating at the age of 6 during Mario Lemieux’s comeback season of 2000-01.

“He is in the conversation right now for this roster,” said head coach Mike Sullivan. “His body of work in Wilkes-Barre has been really strong. That’s certainly something that we’ve taken into consideration as well. He’s earned the opportunity to play in these (preseason) games.”

Making the NHL roster out of training camp may be a long shot given the Penguins’ depth at center, but a recall in the event of an injury or other absence is an attainable possibility in 2019-20.

“It’s definitely my goal,” said Lafferty. “It’s a process where you’ve just got to keep getting better and keep showing (management) that you’re working as hard as you can. It’s my goal. I want to play for the Pittsburgh Penguins, but I’ve just got to stick with the process really.”
Pittsburgh Penguins

Five Penguins observations after a fun preseason opener in Hockey Valley

Matt Vensel

UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. — The first 40 minutes of Monday’s game at Pegula Ice Arena felt something like the team across the road hosting Kent State or Akron.

The Buffalo Sabres, owned by the man who paid to have this place built, brought along some of their top players for a preseason opener against the Penguins. They clearly wanted to make the boss happy with a big win at his alma mater.

And through two periods, it looked like it would indeed be a blowout. The Sabres led, 4-1, and had 37 shots. The Penguins, with a top line of Dominik Simon, Zach Aston-Reese and Bryan Rust, were credited with nine. That seemed high.

The undermanned Penguins came charging back in the third, though, scoring three goals in eight minutes to tie it up. They lost, 5-4, in overtime after All-Star center Jack Eichel scored on a breakaway. But coach Mike Sullivan liked the fight they showed at Pegula Ice Arena, home of the Penn State Nittany Lions.

“I thought our guys battled hard. I was really happy for them. In the third period, we got a lot of juice. We got a couple of goals. You could see the excitement on the bench,” he said. “Our guys played pretty hard against a real strong lineup.”

Obviously, the numbers on the scoreboard at the end of the night were not of much importance, especially with Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin watching the game on TV at home. But we were able to glean a few things from the loss.

1. The Penguins are serious about this Dominik-Simon-at-center thing.

Simon has played exclusively on the wing during his time with the Penguins and a position switch wasn’t on the radar when they had their exit meetings in April.

But Simon opened their eyes at the world championships. He played center for the Czech team and finished ninth in scoring at the tournament. The Penguins figured they would try him there during the preseason and see where it goes.

Simon played center on the big rinks overseas, so the position is not foreign to him. Still, this has been an adjustment that, as he put it, is “a little different, not extra different.” It’s probably most challenging in the defensive zone, where he must battle in the corners and in front of the net instead of floating up high.

“It was not the best at the start of the game but throughout the course of the game it felt better to me,” Simon said. “It’s a little different, but it was fun.”

One thing to monitor is his work on faceoffs. Matt Cullen, who is now a player development coach and is with the team at training camp, has been working with Simon and the team’s other centers to help them get better in that regard.

We’ll see if Simon sticks at center. If not, that versatility surely can’t hurt.

2. Sam Lafferty is in the mix — right now — to make the NHL roster.

Lafferty, whom we wrote about Sunday, scored the first of those third-period goals. Blue-liner John Marino made it happen, charging into the corner and sneaking a pass through the skates of defender Henri Jokiharju to Lafferty, who buried it. One group of Penguins fans in front of the press box went wild.

They were presumably friends and family of Lafferty, a 2014 fourth-round pick who was born and raised in Hollidaysburg, not far down the road from here.

Afterward, Sullivan was asked if the local kid could play his way into the call-up conversation at some point this season. The coach said he’s already there.

“His speed is one of his best strengths,” Sullivan added. “He’s got a pretty good straight-ahead game. He’s a big, strong kid. And he scored a nice goal tonight.”

3. Teddy Blueger looks quicker this season. And he’s still a pest.

We’ll have more on Blueger in the next couple of days. But he definitely looks to have a little more burst and agility entering the season. If that is indeed the case, he’s going to be even more obnoxious for other teams to play against.

It didn’t show up on the scoresheet, but Blueger made a play that directly led to Adam Johnson’s third-period goal. Blueger harassed Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin at Buffalo’s blue line, pivoting three times to prevent an easy out.

Dahlin, the No. 1 overall pick in 2018, eventually coughed up the puck to Johnson, who sped in on Jonas Johansson, made a deke and flipped it inside the post.

4. Casey DeSmith and Tristan Jarry stood tall to give them a chance.

The Penguins say they haven’t decided which goalie will back up Matt Murray to open the season. The cap situation could be a big factor in that decision. Both guys got plenty of action Monday. Both guys made the most of it.

Both goals against DeSmith came with a Sabres player screaming in alone. He faced 25 shots in 29 minutes before making way for Jarry. No, the switch wasn’t due to utter exhaustion. Sullivan planned to give each goalie equal time. But DeSmith would have been forgiven had he slid his recliner over to the bench.

Jarry was tested right away when Tage Thompson barreled in on a breakaway. He stretched out his left pad to deny a one-handed try. Moments later, Jarry shuffled across the crease to stop Conor Sheary on a 2-on-1. While Jarry was regaining his bearings, the Sabres scored. They made it 4-1 a few minutes later.

Jarry made nine saves in the third period and overtime. The game-winner came on a breakaway, one of about five or six the Penguins surrendered. So if not for the goalies, who combined to make 42 saves, this would have been ugly.

5. On a hockey night at Penn State, Hockey Valley lived up to the hype.

Pegula Ice Arena is a beautiful barn and the atmosphere here was pretty cool, even for a preseason game. The Sabres were technically the home team because their owner, Terry Pegula, built this place. But there was significantly more black and gold. This place got loud when the Penguins came back to tie it up.

The student section was highly amusing. Behind the goal, a row of college kids in jerseys of various NHL teams rattled the glass while Juuso Riikola stood there waiting for a breakout to develop. During play, they chanted “Hockey Valley”! Clap. Clap. Clap-clap-clap. And “Thank You, Terry!” Clap. Clap. Clap-clap-clap.

And they were still on their feet singing fight songs later in the third period.

I know it only seats 6,000, but any way we can get a Penguins-Flyers game here?

Post Gazette LOADED: 09.17.2019
Mike Sullivan ‘very impressed’ by first-round pick Samuel Poulin in camp

Mike DeFabio

Pittsburgh drafted the power forward with the 21st overall pick in this year’s draft

Practice was long over. Many of the Penguins had already changed out of their uniforms, showered and dressed. Others were busy packing their bags for the first exhibition game of the preseason at State College.

But out on the ice at UPMC Lemieux Sports Complex, Penguins first-round pick Samuel Poulin lingered behind.

He fired some pucks at an empty net and worked on some small details of his game. And if things work out the way Poulin hopes, this won’t be the only time he sticks around the facility longer than expected.

“I’m doing my best to stay here as long as possible,” Poulin said after leaving the ice. “It’s going to be their decision at the end of the day. I have one rule. That’s to play hockey and do my best every single shift. That’s what I’m doing.”

As an 18-year-old power forward prospect, odds are Poulin will spend the season with his junior hockey team, the Sherbrooke Phoenix of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League. That’s just the way things go in the NHL, where even those with the highest ceilings take a little time to complete their development.

The challenge in Pittsburgh got even greater this offseason when the Penguins added to their forward depth by acquiring Dominik Kahun, Brandon Tanev and Alex Galchenyuk. That’s not stopping Poulin from trying his best to make the team out of camp anyway.

So far, he’s made a good first impression.

“He’s a real good player,” Penguins coach Mike Sullivan said. “He’s strong. He has good hockey sense. He can really shoot the puck. I think that’s probably his greatest strength that I’ve witnessed in this early part of training camp.”

During his first camp with the Penguins, Poulin said he’s enjoyed meeting professional teammates and “living the life of a pro.” The pace of the game and the precision with which it’s played have been some of the most noticeable differences from previous levels of competition.

“You’re playing against men now,” Poulin said. “Guys are stronger. You’ve got to be ready every battle. If you go into the corner soft, you’re going to lose that battle.”

After years of trading draft capital to help their win-now approach, the Penguins invested in their future by picking Poulin. The move marked the first time since 2014 that Pittsburgh used its first-round pick instead of trading it.

Now the biggest question is if he can help the Penguins win games sooner or later.

“I think he has a real shot at being an impact player in this league,” Sullivan said. “We look forward to watching him moving forward.

“But our initial impressions are really good. We’ve been very impressed by his play so far.”

Simon gets his shot at center

Dominik Simon has been listed for years as a center on the Penguins roster. This year, he just might get a chance to play there.

After playing on the wing last year during his 71 games in the NHL, the Penguins have been working the 25-year-old in the middle during camp. It’s something that comes naturally to him.

Simon played center during the Czech Republic’s appearance in the World Championship this offseason and was among the most productive players in the tournament, recording 12 points — eight assists and four goals — in 10 games.
Penguins offer first glimpse of new-look power play at training camp

Mike DeFabo

Life after Phil Kessel continued into its next phase on Monday, when the Penguins practiced their power play for the first time this training camp.

The five-to-10 minute segment offered a brief glimpse at the new look. Well, actually, new looks — with a heavy emphasis on the “s” at the end, because there were several.

“It’s certainly different,” Sullivan said. “We’ve had that group together [with Kessel] for a long time. I think with some of the players we’ve added to our team and some of our returning players, we have an opportunity to allow our power play to evolve a little bit.”

Change was inevitable on the man advantage, considering Kessel is in Arizona instead of growing roots in the left circle. But if Monday taught us anything, it’s that the Penguins plan to change more than simply the personnel when they’re on a man advantage.

The two biggest takeaways: Expect the Penguins to experiment with multiple different options. They showed four different personnel groupings on Monday (more on those later). And look for a more free-flowing power play that encourages skaters to move around the ice, a noticeable shift from the more stagnant-style power play of years past.

Are two defensemen better than one?

The first power play grouping on Monday featured three forwards (Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and Jake Guentzel) with two defensemen (Kris Letang and Justin Schultz).

Last year, Letang was the lone defenseman on the first power play and Schultz the only defenseman on the second power play. Playing the two together serves a couple of purposes.

For one, Sullivan noted that both have the talent to be with the first unit, calling them “both Number 1 power play defensemen.”

But it goes beyond that. Even though the Penguins scored on 24.6% of their power plays last year, good for fifth-best in the NHL, they gave up a league-worst 15 short-handed goals. This look could help reverse that trend.

“To have two defensemen on the ice isn’t necessarily a bad thing,” Sullivan said. “It should hopefully limit the amount of [short-handed] goals that we give up, which was something that was a little bit of an issue for us last year.”

Letang initially lined up as a backside flanker and Schultz quarterbacked the unit from up top. But because there was so much motion and both players are right-handed shooters, they can be somewhat interchangeable.

Lots of moving pieces

The other three looks featured just one defenseman.

Crosby, Malkin, Guentzel and Letang were joined by newly acquired winger Alex Galchenyuk in one look. Crosby, Malkin, Guentzel, Patric Hornqvist and Schultz played together as another option. And in the final look, Crosby, Malkin, Hornqvist, Galchenyuk and Letang worked together.

In the brief workout, it was difficult to define exactly which piece of ice each player was supposed to occupy and what his responsibilities were. That’s partially by design.

Sullivan said one of the Penguins’ objectives in camp is to create and encourage more movement and freedom on the power play.

“We, as a coaching staff, believe in giving them the latitude to do that. That was one of the discussions we had in the offseason with the personnel group that we have. We certainly want to encourage that, as well.”

The Penguins power play has been among the league’s best for years. In 2017-18, Pittsburgh set a new franchise record by converting on 26.2% of opportunities. Last year, they ranked fifth in the league, scoring 24.6% of the time when the opponent was in the box.

Kessel was, obviously, a big piece of that. He paced Pittsburgh with 24 power play goals over the past two seasons. An underrated passer, Kessel also had 54 power play assists in the span, eight more than Crosby.

Can the Penguins continue their power play prowess without Phil? Sullivan sure thinks so.

“We still believe we have the fire power on that unit for it to be very effective,” he said.

Post Gazette LOADED: 09.17.2019
Lemieux history with Afib leads to $1 million donation to AHN

Sean D. Hamill Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When hockey fans remember the health problems that plagued Mario Lemieux’s Hall of Fame Pittsburgh Penguins career, they usually recall his severe back problems and his battle and ultimate triumph over Hodgkin’s lymphoma.

“But people forget that he retired because of Afib,” Tom Grealish, president of the board of directors for the Mario Lemieux Foundation, said Monday, using the shorthand name for the heart rhythm disorder, atrial fibrillation.

It is because of Mr. Lemieux’s connection to Afib — the most common heart rhythm disorder affecting more than 6 million people in the United States annually — that on Monday his foundation announced it was donating $1 million to Highmark Health to help establish the Mario Lemieux Innovation and Research Fund in the division of cardiac electrophysiology at Allegheny Health Network’s Cardiovascular Institute.

Highmark Health, AHN’s parent company, will match funds, contributing $1 million itself to a program that will be run primarily out of AHN’s flagship hospital, Allegheny General Hospital.

Mr. Grealish told an audience in the lobby of the Highmark building, Downtown — which was made up largely of cardiac electrophysiology doctors, nurses, and some patients — that when Mr. Lemieux was diagnosed with Afib in 2006, ending his career, the “best care [for Afib] was found out of state. And now that has changed.”

The donation will support a program that has been working to advance research and technology to help with Afib and other heart rhythm disorders.

“Our foundation is committed to supporting important research and patient care, and we are pleased to give this gift that will help so many people in our community,” Mr. Lemieux said in a press release.

Though he and his wife, Nathalie, were at the press conference and sat in the front row, the press release remark was the only statement that came directly from Mr. Lemieux.

At the end of the ceremony, Mr. Lemieux, who now owns the Penguins, did warmly accept a gift from Dr. Amit Thosani, director of AHN’s division of cardiac electrophysiology.

“We don’t do [hockey] jerseys,” Dr. Thosani said from the podium, before a new, bright white AHN lab jacket was handed to Mr. Lemieux with “Mario Lemieux/Cardiac Electrophysiology/Cardiovascular Institute” sewn above the left side breast pocket.

Mr. Lemieux has loaned his voice in the past to trying to elevate Afib awareness, hoping people learn from what he went through before his disorder was addressed.

The gift on Monday follows Mr. Lemieux’s tradition of medical-related gifts that relate to issues he and his family have experienced themselves.

As a result, Mr. Lemieux, who was treated at UPMC for Hodgkin’s lymphoma in 1994, has given millions to UPMC’s cancer programs. After their son, Austin, was born prematurely in 1997 at UPMC Magee-Womens Hospital and had to spend more than two months in UPMC’s care, his foundation gave millions more to UPMC for neonatal research, and to the Children’s Home to help with that nonprofit’s work supporting families whose children require medical care. The foundation also has contributed millions more to the creation of more than 30 Austin’s Playrooms, primarily in hospitals in Western Pennsylvania, after the Lemieuxs found it difficult to occupy their other children when visiting Austin at the hospital.

While most of the medical-related donations the foundation, created in 1993, has made over the years have gone to UPMC facilities, Mr. Grealish said Monday’s donation was in no way an effort to finally give a grant to UPMC’s rivals Highmark and AHN.

“No, we look for opportunities that are good for the community,” Mr. Grealish said in an interview. “They go into areas that affect [the Lemieuxs’] lives.”

Highmark Health CEO David Holmberg said the grant just means that “The Lemieux Foundation is sending a message that they work with everyone.”

“This just reflects the Lemieux Foundation and who they are as people,” said Mr. Holmberg, whose father died earlier this year from a sudden heart attack.

In addition to being the first research-related grant to Highmark/AHN, Monday’s grant was the first gift to an adult cardiac program from the foundation.

Though there is no ongoing contribution planned beyond the $1 million gift, Mr. Grealish said there could be further support in the future.

“We just wanted to help get it started,” he said.

“We try to be really thoughtful about the gifts that we’re giving,” Mr. Grealish said, “and it’s important for Mario and Nathalie that it touches their life in some way.”
Alex Galchenyuk is big and has a bigger shot. Brandon Tanev is fast and tenacious.

Coach Mike Sullivan might not need to know anything else about two of his newest players to have figured they should get a look with Evgeni Malkin early in training camp for the Penguins.

While in Moscow over the summer, Malkin said something that did not make it into this story. He noted that many of the wingers with whom he played also experienced production dips last season.

He had a point.

Phil Kessel’s scoring decreased by seven goals and 10 points. Patric Hornqvist fell off by 11 goals and 12 points. Carl Hagelin had scored only a goal and three points when he was traded.

The point? After captain Sidney Crosby and winger Jake Guentzel, there was a lot of “bad” to go around when it came to top-six scoring for the Penguins last season.

It wasn’t just a Malkin matter. It does matter who plays with Malkin. A lot.

“Hockey is a team (sport),” Malkin said. “More important (than yourself) is your line.”

Through three days of practices and scrimmages at UPMC Lemieux Sports Complex, Malkin’s line comprised Galchenyuk and Tanev. Though nobody had come right out and said it, we think this might be a case of “Back to the Future” for the Penguins.

Malkin has said he prefers knowing what his wingers are going to do. It explains why he has clicked with the likes of Ryan Malone (a net-front presence), James Neal (a sniper) and Chris Kunitz (a puck provider). It might also explain his uneasiness with Kessel, one of hockey’s great shooters who became increasingly passive.

Malkin doesn’t necessarily need, say, a shooter and a defensive-minded winger on his line. Malkin does look and produce better when his wingers do one thing well and then keep doing it.

Sullivan could reasonably anticipate that Galchenyuk and Tanev stick to their strengths this season.

Galchenyuk, who is set to become a free agent next summer, has a lot of motivation to make the most of playing with Malkin, one of hockey’s best playmakers. If he gets open in the offensive zone with any frequency while on Malkin’s line, Galchenyuk should be able to finish with at least 250 shots.

He is a career 12.4 percent shooter. If Galchenyuk plays to his average as a shooter and takes 250 shots, he would hit the free-agent market as a 26-year-old winger coming off a 31-goal season. He need only to inquire with Tanev about what it’s like to hit free agency in your mid-20s after a career-best season in goals.

You get paid. You get paid for a long time.

The Penguins paid for Tanev, who scored 14 goals last season with the Jets, in part because his penchant for peskiness was an element they sorely missed last season. Also, as general manager Jim Rutherford has repeatedly said, there is a general confidence within the organization that Tanev has untapped offensive upside and could develop into a top-six winger.

Of course, a GM who guaranteed $3.5 million annually to somebody who has been a bottom-six forward would say he sees upside in that player. The GM had better see upside in that player.

Once upon a time, Ray Shero saw similar upside in Kunitz, who was hardly a high-profile acquisition when the Penguins traded for him midway through the 2008-09 season. Certainly, nobody then — not Shero, not Kunitz, not anybody — envisioned Kunitz becoming the most productive winger to play with Sidney Crosby for the Penguins.

In fact, Kunitz’s strengths proved complimentary to Crosby and Malkin. He was the left winger for the seasons when Malkin (2011-12) and Crosby (2013-14) won the Art Ross and Hart trophies this decade.

Is it possible the Penguins envision Tanev as their next Kunitz? Uh, yeah.

Knowing as much, why wouldn’t the Penguins coach give Tanev and Galchenyuk a look as Malkin’s wingers? After all, Sullivan has heard from Malkin himself that Kunitz hasn’t been as physically and mentally prepared for an NHL season since he returned for that 2011-12 season ready to show everybody his best days weren’t in the past.

Even if they aren’t quite the pedigrees of what Neal and Kunitz were then, Galchenyuk and Tanev would bring similar traits as Malkin’s wingers. To open camp with each in those roles is the first great decision of this season by Sullivan. Developing chemistry with Malkin is not easy for any winger, especially wingers new to Pittsburgh.

But if that chemistry does develop, the prospects of Malkin making good on his pledge to “get back my level” increase significantly. And if that happens, the Penguins’ chances to compete for the Stanley Cup go up by a lot.

Our other thoughts through three days of camp:

1. Third-line center is a duo

The Penguins’ three best centers are Crosby, Malkin and ... Teddy Blueger.

Stop blinking. You read that right.

Don’t mistake that as an opening campaign statement for Blueger to anchor the third line. He probably won’t, and definitely shouldn’t. He’s not been tested enough in the NHL to handle that tricky task.

It’s just that nobody on the Penguins seems like an ideal fit for third-line center, either.

In the offseason, Rutherford said the No. 3 center slot could be filled by several players. He specifically noted Nick Bjugstad and Jared McCann. We sort of shrugged upon hearing their names because it sure seemed to us as though McCann looked like a great fit with Crosby and Guentzel late last season.

In camp, McCann and Bjugstad have played on a line with Hornqvist. And if that is a line the Penguins are trying out, we know one thing: Hornqvist is a right winger.

But who is his center?

The answer could be Bjugstad. Or McCann. Uh, both?

We’re intrigued by the possibility for a pliable third line. We would at least like to witness how McCann and Bjugstad are used in various spots during exhibition games. Who takes the defensive-zone faceoffs? Which player assumes a more defensive role, and when? And how will any/all switching impact Hornqvist?

This wouldn’t be the traditional model for the Penguins, whose 2009, 2016 and 2017 title teams had set-in-stone third centers in Jordan Staal and Nick Bonino.

That doesn’t mean making McCann and Bjugstad hybrid a hybrid center/winger on a third line wouldn’t work. It could work to the Penguins’ advantage.

It is worth exploring as camp continues.

2. It’s Johnson vs. Riikola on D

Erik Gudbranson played some of his best hockey after joining the Penguins at the trade deadline last season. He has looked confident early in camp, too.

He continues to spend extra time after practices working with defensemen coach Sergei Gonchar, who is confident Gudbranson’s skills will translate even better into Sullivan’s system after a full camp. The Penguins are especially impressed with Gudbranson’s decision-making with the puck — a critical component for any defenseman in Sullivan’s system.
With eight defensemen expected to make the 23-man roster, it appears Gudbranson is a lock for the Penguins' top six. Barring injury, that makes it a battle between Jack Johnson and Juuso Riikola to dress.

Given their cap situation, the Penguins are obviously not best served by Johnson being deemed be a seventh defender — or even a platooning sixth — at a $3.25 million hit.

It will be interesting to watch as camp progresses if coaches give Riikola a look with Justin Schultz, who likely will be paired with a left-handed shooting partner to give the Penguins a left-right dynamic on defense at all times. It could be telling, as well.

3. Prospects aren’t pushing anyone

At one point over the summer, winger Zach Aston-Reese’s future with the Penguins seemed murky at best. He was headed for arbitration, and the hearing probably wouldn’t have been much fun.

It was an open secret management had higher expectations for him last season than Aston-Reese’s eight goals and 17 points in 43 games.

But it became clearer over the first weekend of camp as to why the Penguins pushed to sign Aston-Reese instead of going through arbitration or trading him. And that likely is saying more about their prospects than Aston-Reese.

None of the next-in-line forwards stood out enough during scrimmages for Aston-Reese — or, for that matter, Dominik Simon — to feel threatened. Of course, what with their respective contract situations, it’s not likely either Aston-Reese or Simon would have felt threatened at this camp.

Might have been nice if a prospect had pressed them to push the issue. That had not happened headed into the exhibition games.

NHL training camps are short. If you’re Sam Lafferty or Adam Johnson or Ryan Haggerty, every exhibition-game shift should be treated like Game 7 of a playoff series.

That’s what we think, anyway.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
On shorter leash, Sharks’ Aaron Dell out to prove himself once again

By CURTIS PASHELKA | PUBLISHED: September 16, 2019 at 3:08 pm | UPDATED: September 16, 2019 at 3:37 PM

SAN JOSE — The situation that Sharks goalie Aaron Dell finds himself in this season — of having to show that he belongs in the NHL — is nothing new.

"Through my whole career, I’ve had to prove myself every year," Dell said Monday. "I’m kind of used to that."

Perhaps those experiences can be of some benefit now, as Dell, 30, tries to remain the Sharks’ backup to No. 1 goalie Martin Jones. Antoine Bibeau and Josef Korenar, the Barracuda’s 2018-19 goalies, and Andrew Shortridge, who was signed out of Quinnipiac in April, are the other goalies in camp.

Given Dell’s one-way contract, which carries a $1.9 million salary cap hit for 2019-20, and that he’s now in his third full NHL season, it would be a shock to see anyone else as the Sharks’ No. 2 goalie for their opener Oct. 2 in Las Vegas.

The more realistic scenario is having Dell again start the season with the Sharks, but with less wiggle room. If he falters, like he did last season at times, then perhaps the Sharks start to look to the farm or for outside help.

The Sharks do not want to have to do that, knowing how well Dell played from 2016-2018 when he went 26-11-5 in two seasons and posted a .920 save percentage and a 2.37 goals against average.

"Aaron’s built up enough credibility with me that I know what he can do," Sharks coach Pete DeBoer said Sunday. "Having said that, he needs to deliver. I’m going to give him every opportunity to show that he can get his game back to where I think it belongs. But, like everybody, that leash is only so long."

Dell, who will start Tuesday’s preseason game at SAP Center against the Anaheim Ducks, is determined not to have a repeat of 2018-19. In 25 games, including 20 starts, Dell’s save percentage dipped to .886 — the worst he’s had at any level, college or pro — since he was a teenager in the Alberta Junior Hockey League from 2007-2009.

After the Sharks’ season ended in late May, Dell said he and Sharks coach Johan Hedberg began to communicate a couple times a month, and that he worked on both the physical and mental aspects of his game.

From a technical standpoint, Dell said he wants to be become a bit calmer in his net. Too often last season, he felt he found himself scrambling around, whether it was trying to make a first or second save.

"I think that was kind of the main focus," Dell said, "kind of move under control and get set as much as possible.

"Those have been things that I’ve been strong at before and I think at some part of the way last year, I kind of lost that without realizing it."

If bad habits do creep back into his game at some point this season, Dell wants to make sure he can fix them before they linger too long.

"The thing I worked on was finding out how I feel where I kind of revert back to (bad habits), how I can correct that if that’s happening again," Dell said, "and go through kind of the checklist of making sure I go back to the basics."

Part of that is enjoying himself and the game. Toward the end of Monday’s scrimmage, with his team up two goals and the net empty at the other end, Dell fired a puck down the ice and came within a couple inches of a goal.

"The only real pressure you get is (what) you put on yourself for the most part," Dell said. "So, I just have to go out and have fun and play my game. The rest is out of my control, really. I can just go out and do what I do and (the Sharks) have to decide from that."

DeBoer said Sharks management largely decides which goalies play these first two preseason games, including Wednesday’s game in Calgary. "They’ve got some guys they really want to look at,” he said. “I know how many games I want Jones to get into in preseason, and I want to get (Dell) in there, too. So, we’ve probably got four of the six games slated for those two guys.” The other two games, DeBoer said, will be split among the remaining goalies in camp. The Sharks’ third preseason game is Saturday at home against the Golden Knights.

▪ DeBoer felt Monday’s scrimmage didn’t have quite the same pace as Sunday’s, but was pleased overall with how guys responded over two days.

“Some of the young guys, between the rookie (tournament) in Anaheim) last week and camp, have played a lot of hockey,” DeBoer said. “But I still saw a lot of good stuff.”

San Jose Mercury News: LOADED: 09.17.2019
SAN JOSE — Forward Jonny Brodzinski and defenseman Dalton Prout both sensed an opportunity when they signed as free agents with the Sharks earlier this summer.

Brodzinski knew the Sharks would be in need of experienced right wingers after the departure of Joe Pavelski and Gus Nyquist. Prout, listed at 6-foot-3 and 215 pounds, felt he could provide a greater physical presence on the right side of the blue line, which features Erik Karlsson, Brent Burns and Tim Heed.

"I don't think it's any secret with a couple of big dogs ahead of me, a couple Norris Trophy candidates," Prout said of his role with the Sharks. "I'm just going to try and support them, be a depth role player for this team, try and make everybody better. Fitting in on the (penalty kill), blocking a shot, maybe standing up for teammates when you can, be physical."

Brodzinski and Prout were the only free agents with NHL experience signed by the Sharks in the offseason. They're both one-year, low-risk moves, with their combined salary cap hit for this season — should they remain in the NHL — a modest $1.5 million.

Perhaps it was a surprise that general manager Doug Wilson didn't chase after a higher-scoring winger in free agency this summer, or a bigger profile defensemen that could eat up the same kind of minutes that Justin Braun did in his Sharks career.

Still, though, both Brodzinski and Prout have the potential to add value.

Brodzinski has started camp on the right side of Joe Thornton’s line with Marcus Sorensen. Prout will also likely get plenty of ice time in preseason games.

Brodzinski found out he would be skating with Thornton for at least the start of the preseason right after the team’s pre-camp meeting last week.

"I'm excited about it," Brodzinski said of playing with Thornton. "He's one of the best playmakers in this league and I'm a shooter and that's kind of been my role for a long time. Putting us together I think is going to be pretty special."

So, just like Brodzinski and Prout initially thought, the opportunity is there to not only make the team but make an impact in the regular season.

"I just thought there was no better fit," Brodzinski said of signing in San Jose.

Brodzinski, a fifth round draft pick by Los Angeles in 2013 and a Group 6 free agent, spent the last four seasons in the Kings organization. He played in 35 games with the Kings in 2017-18, but a dislocated shoulder injury he suffered in an exhibition game last September kept him out of action for several months as he played in just 13 NHL games.

"As soon as the free agency window opened up, (the Sharks) contacted me right away and showed extreme interest," Brodzinski said. "That was one thing that I kind of latched onto right away was that it was going to be a really good opportunity here, especially for a right winger and a shooter."

Prout played in 262 career NHL games with Columbus, New Jersey and Calgary. He’s familiar with the Sharks coaching staff from his time in the Ontario Hockey League. Both he and assistant Bob Boughner are from Windsor, as Prout played with Sarnia (2006-2008) and Barrie (2008-2010) as the same time Boughner coached the Windsor Spitfires.

It could be a situation where Prout and Heed platoon as the right side defensemen on the Sharks third pair, depending on the opponent.

In the Western Conference Final against St. Louis in May, for instance, the Sharks came across a St. Louis Blues defense corps that averaged well over six feet and about 210 pounds.
Another year, another season in which the Sharks fail to win the Stanley Cup.

That’s how you might expect a Sharks season preview to start. Although we won’t take the time to catalog the various season previews published over the past decade, it is safe to assume that most summaries of the Sharks focused on playoff disappointment, followed by an opining of what could have been, accentuated by pondering whether the Sharks could ever get over the hump.

That is not how this preview is going to go.

Why?

Well, first of all, you can’t come within two victories of reaching the Stanley Cup Final and call it a bad year. The Sharks were the third-best team in the playoffs, and only five teams had a better regular season record.

Plus there was the Game 7 against Vegas!

The team also locked up another future Hall of Famer in Erik Karlsson. Tomas Hertl became a dominant force, Joe Thornton was arguably the best third-line center in the league and Brent Burns was nominated for a Norris Trophy.

So enough of this playoff disappointment stuff! Fans had the right to complain about playoff flops when the team lost against the Ducks in the first round after winning the President’s Trophy in 2009. The playoff disappointment trope is just lazy and not true after last season.

Rant over.

The Sharks enter the 2019–2020 season with a team similar to the one that played in Game 6 of the Western Conference Finals last spring. Although some core pieces have departed, most of the core remains.

We will analyze the various aspects of the team, speculating as to whether or not GM Doug Wilson did enough to address issues in each area.

Today’s focus: Goaltenders

Martin Jones had a perplexing year. He has had a perplexing tenure as a Sharks goalie. His second year with the team saw him backstop the Sharks to their first ever Stanley Cup Final appearance. Would the Sharks have won, he and Logan Couture would have been the Sharks top vote-getters for the Conn Smythe.

Fast-forward to the 2019 Vegas series, and it seemed as if something was wrong with Jones. Sharks fans knew he was a good goalie, but for some reason, he was not NHL-quality until Game 6 when he made 59 saves to save the season.

Jones’ regular-season stats were not good last season. His .896 GAA is nowhere near the level of a starting NHL goaltender, let alone one of his $5.75 million-a-year cap hit.

There is an advanced stat called Goals Saved Above Average (GSAA) that shows how a goalie compares to a league-average goalie. Jones had the second-worst GSAA in the league last year, surrendering nearly 23 more goals than the average goalie (in his 62 starts). To put that into easily understandable terms, Martin Jones let in one extra goal every third game he played.

That is not good.

What is good? He is going to be better. Over the course of his career, Jones has been an above-average goaltender in GSAA. His stats from last year are an aberration, not a regression in his ability. Add to that a defensive group that is bound to improve with a healthy Karlsson, and Sharks fans should expect the return of the steady Martin Jones they saw in previous seasons.
Sharks counting on certain familiar faces to step up in coming season

By Chelena Goldman September 16, 2019 4:50 PM

SAN JOSE -- The Sharks know there are new opportunities on the table ahead of the 2019-20 season, and not just for the new crop of fresh faces that have entered training camp. Some more familiar faces have the chance to step up and take on bigger roles for San Jose.

The question now is: Are they up to that challenge?

Here are just a few players who have the opportunity to step it up big time ahead of the new campaign:

Tim Heed

The Swedish defenseman was one of two players last season who were tasked with filling in when Erik Karlsson and Radim Simek both came out of the lineup with injuries. Now, after inking a one-year deal with the Sharks over the summer, Heed has the opportunity to really make an impact.

Heed spent some time playing alongside Marc-Edouard Vlasic last year, a pairing that could be revisited now that Vlasic’s former de facto partner, Justin Braun, was traded to the Philadelphia Flyers. With Karlsson likely remaining linked up with Brenden Dillon and Radim Simek being paired back up with Brent Burns when he returns to action, Heed could find himself back on Vlasic’s right side.

But Heed isn’t a shoo-in for the job. San Jose acquired right-handed blueliner Dalton Prout over the summer and has a couple promising young defensemen coming up the pipeline. How Heed skates over the next couple of weeks could say a lot about where he’ll be in the lineup at the start of the new season.

Melker Karlsson

Speaking of Justin Braun, San Jose will miss his presence on the penalty kill. His absence affords players like Karlsson the chance to step up and help make the Sharks’ kill as dominant as it was at the very beginning of last season. (Remember, even when the team wasn’t playing particularly well, their penalty kill was still pretty darn good.)

But despite being a guy coach Peter DeBoer loves having as an option to move throughout the lineup, Karlsson still has to be better. His numbers have taken a bit of a dip over the last couple of seasons, and there is going to be competition within the bottom-six for a starting spot.

Any kind of boost in Karlsson’s game will help the team out.

Antti Suomela

After a couple of good games at the start of last season, the Finnish forward was reassigned to the AHL and had trouble getting things going with the Barracuda. When NBC Sports California caught up with Barracuda head coach Roy Sommer midway through last season, he said Suomela was still figuring things out.

"With him, the work ethic is there, and he has a big compete to his game," Sommer complimented back in January. "I think he just has to figure out the North American game. Things happen a lot quicker here than where he was at. But he’s picking it up."

With roster spots up for grabs this preseason, this is the opportune time for Suomela to put what he’s learned on tape.

Aaron Dell

Not to sound like a broken record, but neither Martin Jones nor Aaron Dell played particularly well last season and that has to change if the Sharks are going to remain a threat in the West. Dell, in particular, has a prime chance this preseason to right the ship.

As Dell told NBC Sports California on the first day of training camp, the previous season is in the past regardless of how good or bad it was.

"You’re only as good as your last game, that’s kind of how it is," he explained. "They want to see how you are now and how it was then doesn’t really matter. You always have to perform."
Why Sharks are confident they can make up for lost offensive firepower

By Chelena Goldman September 16, 2019 11:29 AM

SAN JOSE -- There has been a lot of talk outside the Sharks dressing room about whether this season's roster can make up for the offensive firepower the team lost during the offseason.

Sure, some of that talk may be circulating within the dressing room as well. But San Jose knows it has the tools to fill the void -- regardless of what the outside world is saying.

"I think the media's going to talk about those things," defenseman Brenden Dillon said as camp opened up. "And in our room too -- there are lockers that are open. There are positions open. You see different line combinations throughout camp."

In addition to losing regular-season goals leader Joe Pavelski (Dallas) for their upcoming campaign, San Jose will be without depth scorers Joonas Donskoi (Colorado) and Gustav Nyquist (Columbus), as well as defenseman and penalty-kill staple Justin Braun (Philadelphia).

While most NHL teams see some sort of turnover in the offseason -- heck, the Sharks are no strangers to how the business of hockey works -- there has been plenty of speculation ahead of the 2019-20 campaign as to how the Sharks will compete since they didn't add a big-name player to their roster to make up for their losses.

But as Dillon explained, he and his teammates have to focus on the guys who are on the roster with them right now --- not who they're missing from last year.

"I think it's about realizing the opportunity for us," he summarized. "Whoever's in this room, whoever's dressed for game nights, that's your teammate. That's who you're going to battle with."

Logan Couture had a similar message on the first day of training camp.

As hard as it may seem to fill in for the departed players, that's part of the game. Plus, it gives emerging players like Tomas Hertl, Timo Meier, and Kevin Labanc the chance to fill in those roles.

"It's not an easy task, but that's the way it works," the captain said. "Same thing happened when Patty (Marleau) moved on somewhere else. Other guys got opportunities to step up and our scouting staff did a tremendous job bringing in European players as well as Timo and Banker, guys like that they drafted. There's a new wave of younger players we're excited about and hopefully this year they can break through like Timo and Banker and Tommy Hertl did."

The Sharks are, in fact, putting a lot of stock in the crop of youngsters that have come into this year's training camp. General manager Doug Wilson went so far as to say earlier this month the team is "as excited about this group of forwards coming in as we've ever been."

After just a couple days of practicing and scrimmaging, those younger players already are starting to show that they are ready to compete for big jobs.

Seeing such positive results at the start of the preseason makes it easier for the Sharks to look forward with the players they currently have in their dressing room.

"I think it just shows the future is bright for us," Dillon said. "And I think for a lot of -- whether it's analysts or (whoever) -- saying we've got 'too many holes to fill' and missing too many things, camp so far has been really good, and there's a lot of talent."

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.17.2019
How Sharks’ Evander Kane, wife are healing since unborn daughter’s death

By Brodie Brazil September 16, 2019 7:00 AM

SAN JOSE — Evander Kane had a relatively visible summer, including his near-nude photo shoot with ESPN and some back-and-forth jawing with Las Vegas’ Ryan Reaves.

However, none of that carried the same importance as the recovery that the Sharks winger and his wife, Anna, continue to make following the passing of their unborn daughter, Eva, at 26 weeks, almost exactly six months ago.

“It definitely makes you realize what’s important,” Kane said last week. “Every minute, you had different emotions, different feelings. My wife, seeing what she went through, it was harder on nobody else but her.”

Kane’s absence from the Sharks in late February initially corresponded with a high hit that Boston Bruins captain Zdeno Chara laid on him. Most of the public thought Kane’s extended leave was related to injury, until March 14, when he publicly revealed the tragedy on Twitter.

“It takes a real big toll on you, and I had to step away for a week there, in order to re-group and gather myself. And to be there for my wife,” Kane said.

The hockey community across North America instantly responded to Kane via social media and other platforms. And it made a difference.

“It was humbling, actually, the support that we got,” Kane said. “Especially from the hockey world. I don’t want to say surprising, but it was, in the amount of support we got, and we’re very appreciative of it.”

Evander and his wife also received special support from a much closer place. Sharks defenseman Erik Karlsson and his wife, Melinda, had lost their unborn child in March 2018, and were quick to be of comfort, given their unfortunate bond.

“Having a fellow teammate that has been through that process as well, and our wives being good friends, I think that definitely helped,” Kane said.

Despite all of last season’s turmoil, Kane still managed to be one point shy of his career-high 57, while missing seven games. It’s amazing what he went through on a personal level during those final months, and leads you to believe some fresh beginnings will do he and his wife well.

“It’s still a process,” Kane said. “It was six months [last month]. It will always be a process, and we just want to cherish her much as we can. For me, that’s how I’ll move on. I find myself talking to her, even though nobody is around. It’s one of the ways I kind of find peace with it.”
Officially a Sharks scout, former Dodgers GM Ned Colletti offers new employer much more than that

By Kevin Kurz Sep 16, 2019

IRVINE — Ned Colletti and Ron Hextall had a running joke.

Colletti, while general manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers, would frequently show up to the Staples Center press room before Kings hockey games. Sometimes for dinner he would sit with Hextall, the assistant general manager of the Kings from 2006-13. But just as often, Colletti would end up at a different table chatting with an executive, coach or scout from another organization.

If the Sharks were in town, he’d track down Doug Wilson. If the Flames were visiting, he’d chew the fat with Calgary general manager Brian Burke. Ray Shero, the current Devils general manager who served in that same role with the Penguins, was also a friend.

But there were many others.

“He would always see me with all these people and say, it must be good to be you — every year one of your buddies wins the Cup,” Colletti recounted last weekend while the Sharks were taking part in a rookie tournament with five other NHL teams.

When Colletti, the 65-year-old longtime major-league baseball executive, was officially hired by the Sharks as a professional scout on Sept. 6, Hextall couldn’t resist sending him a quick jab via text message.

“It told him now he has to burn the 30 other jerseys he has,” Hextall said with a chuckle.

Hextall, who served as the general manager of the Philadelphia Flyers from 2014-18, was hardly the only one to reach out to Colletti, an unconventional hire by the Sharks if there ever was one. Colletti made his name as the Dodgers’ GM from 2006-14 and served as the assistant general manager of the Giants from 1996-2005.

Colletti figured he got at least 400 messages from friends and colleagues after the Sharks announcement, including “a lot of NHL people.”

“I think for Ned, his love and passion for the game of hockey runs extremely deep, so that’s going to help him a lot,” Hextall said. “He’s been to a lot of hockey games over the years, he loves talking hockey, he loves talking to hockey people. So he’s a knowledgeable guy when it comes to hockey.

“The one thing about Ned is he’ll work extremely hard and he will love what he’s doing. He loves to be out there in the trenches, and I think it’s going to be a good hire because he’s an extremely sharp guy, but he’s also a guy that listens, and asks a lot of questions and wants to learn. So he’s going to be a sponge around there. It’s an out-of-the-box hire, obviously, but I find it fascinating. It’s going to be interesting, but I believe Ned will be successful.”

While he’s earned his living in baseball, Colletti is considered a hockey guy by many of the people he has developed relationships with over the years.

Colletti’s first job in sports came as a writer covering the Flyers for the now-defunct Philadelphia Journal. He started just before the 1980-81 season, and one of his first experiences with an NHL player came at a little, four-story hotel in Portland, Maine, where the Flyers held their training camp.

“Got on the elevator to go to the rink one of my first days, the new guy in town, and (Flyers captain) Bobby Clarke was getting on the elevator and he introduced himself and knew who I was. Pretty impressive,” Colletti said.

Al Morganti, who covered the Flyers for the Philadelphia Inquirer back then and is still a media fixture in the city, was impressed by Colletti right from the start. The Flyers were still a tough group at the time, just a few years removed from their days as the two-time Stanley Cup-winning Broad Street Bullies of 1974 and ’75, a persona they still embraced at the time.

“(Colletti) came into Philly with some pretty tough characters on the team — Behn Wilson, Paul Holmgren, Ken Linseman — and stood his ground from Day 1,” Morganti said. “Really respected the sport and players, but not nervous about going eyeball to eyeball with guys like Wilson. I always thought I could hear his eyes roll when a player or coach was giving him a line of bull. One of my favorite people on the planet for work ethic, sense of humor and intensity. … Despite the baseball stuff, I always thought of Ned as a hockey guy.”

Colletti said: “It was a great beat, I loved it. I thought it was maybe the best job I’d ever have.”

It didn’t last long, though. The newspaper folded just a year and a half later, and Colletti, with a wife and new son, was suddenly unemployed. Meanwhile, his 49-year-old father was dying of lung cancer back in Chicago, where Colletti grew up as a kid in a family that struggled to make ends meet in a gritty part of town.

Fortunately, the Cubs were hiring, with one opening in their media relations department and another in publications. Rather than take a significant pay cut from making about $19,000 at the Journal to $13,000 for one of the two Cubs jobs, Colletti convinced general manager Dallas Green he could do both for $15,000.

“So I saved them salary, made a couple extra thousand to try and get out of the financial spot I was in because of the newspaper closing and everything,” he said. “But that’s how I started in baseball.”

Colletti and Doug Wilson were concurrently in Chicago, Wilson as an elite defenseman for the Blackhawks, but they didn’t really get to know each other well until Colletti went to the Giants, where he was tasked with negotiating contracts. Wilson, of course, joined the Sharks organization as its first captain in 1991 and has essentially been around ever since, including as the general manager since 2003.

Colletti started attending Sharks games more frequently around 2000, becoming familiar with then-Sharks GM Dean Lombardi. But he got to know Wilson, then serving as the Sharks director of pro development, better.

“We had the connection of Chicago, some of the same friends, restaurants, people. Just made a habit of going down whenever I had a free moment and sitting and talking with him and Ronny Wilson, who was the coach there that I got to know pretty well,” Colletti said. “You just sit and talk. Probably since about 2000 that I’ve had a conversational-type friendship with Doug. There’s a handful of GMs in the NHL, either currently still there or in different spots now, that I’ve spent a lot of time with.”

One of those former GMs is Burke, who was in that role with the Anaheim Ducks from 2005-08. Burke and Colletti quickly developed what is still a deep friendship, often meeting in the early hours of the morning near Colletti’s home in Manhattan Beach to bounce ideas off of one another about being the lead executive of a professional sports team.

When Colletti was struggling with a decision about a manager’s future, for instance, one of the first people he wanted to talk it out with was Burke.

“I was going through a tough manager time and he said, ‘I’ll meet you at 5 o’clock,’” Colletti recalled. “We met at 5 o’clock in the morning at Manhattan Beach. We walked the Strand for an hour and a half and went and had breakfast. Did the same thing if he was in a tight spot down here (with the Ducks).”

Burke recalled that moment, too.

“I was going through my checklist with Ned, and I said here’s what I expect from my coach. This is what you can reasonably expect from a manager, which is the same job as a head coach in the NHL,” Burke said. “So I went through my checklist — here are the things that if he’s doing these things well then he’s doing his job. Usually if there’s a problem with your manager or your coach, there are telltale signs of that. … So I went through all that with Ned, and he’d thought of it all. None of it was news to him. But it’s helpful when someone in the business goes through it with you.”

Colletti has always watched plenty of hockey. Helpfully, the NHL and major-league baseball seasons don’t have much overlap.

“I’m passionate about it. I watch so many hockey games,” he said. “I start at 4 o’clock and I’ll watch a Metro (division) game, and then I’ll tape
another Metro game, and then I’ll watch a 7 o’clock game, and then at 10 o’clock, I’ll go back and watch the Metro game that I taped.

“And I watch. I watch people. I’m an observer of people and how people perform, how people think, how people sacrifice, how people are selfish sometimes. Building teams is something that I’ve done for a long time, and something that I’m passionate about and curious about.”

Officially, Colletti will scout most of the Metropolitan Division for the Sharks, and there will even be a few road trips involved where he’ll go east in between attending games in Los Angeles and Anaheim. He actually did a bit of scouting for the Sharks last season on a trial basis before they agreed to the official role this offseason.

“As we got to the end of the season and a little bit thereafter we started having more concrete conversations,” Colletti said. “Talked to (scouting director Doug Wilson Jr.) a lot and (assistant general manager Joe Will) a lot, and this is what we ended up with. It didn’t really take any convincing. I just love the sport and I love the complexity of the entire dynamic of trying to figure out how to win.”

It’s not just NHL players that Colletti will focus on, either, as he’ll be tasked with keeping a close eye on the AHL, too. That’s something else that Colletti enjoys, as he’s attended the World Junior Championships at least half a dozen times.

Longtime Sharks executive Tim Burke has also gotten to know Colletti over the years, often running into him at the World Juniors and other places. Burke has some baseball experience himself, serving as an assistant coach for the Princeton Tigers in 1985. There are enough similarities to what they’ve experienced in the past in each of their two primary sports that the conversations can be valuable.

“There’s a lot of things we bounce off of him about building teams, developing, how long it takes, what’s important in developing,” Burke said. “Some of the best home run hitters in baseball have 10 home runs in the minors. So how do you look at goalie stats in the minors or in junior and then they become great goalies? And then hockey guys that don’t score a lot at a certain level, and at the next level, they do. There’s a lot of little things that cross over.”

Hextall said: “I was always fascinated with baseball in terms of their area scouts and whatnot, and I used to talk to Ned about it. You learn a lot from each sport, and I know Ned will learn things coming into hockey, but he’ll also bring a wealth of knowledge. We tend to be a little bit stuck in our ways sometimes in hockey.”

Colletti can plainly offer more than just his services as a scout, including being a sounding board for just about any situation that Wilson or other members of the Sharks front office might want to run by him.

Wilson said: “He’s followed hockey, he’s got a brilliant mind — you don’t become a general manager on a major-league baseball team without having a great mind. I like the fact that he’s always had passion for our game, he has questions, and we try to be very open minded to hear those types of questions. … I look at him as a sports guy. In this business, you want minds that can ask questions. You can’t be afraid to look at things differently.”

Brian Burke said: “Are those (baseball and hockey) skills transferable? On a guy that’s smart enough, the answer is yes. But Ned’s already got hockey acumen.”

He’ll get to put that acumen to good use now.

“Not everybody gets these opportunities. I’m honored to have it,” Colletti said. “There may be things I can help with, there may be a conversation with Pete (DeBoer) and the coaching staff … whatever it is, I’ve seen a lot of different things.

“Some of it is similar, because it’s professional athletics at the highest level. Any way I can help them, I’ll use my experience to do it.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
well for the team’s fortunes, but Barclay Goodrow doesn’t seem to be a much better option, offering similar scoring rates and play-driving ability.

The wild card here is rookie Sasha Chmelevski, who not only looks likely to make the team out of camp but also play a prominent role in the top six. The team doesn’t have many other options. The 20-year-old sixth-round pick from the 2017 draft has looked very strong since being drafted and put up 75 points in 56 games last year in the OHL. The Sharks will need that scoring upside to translate to the NHL quickly, and he’ll be put in a position to do so. That’s on a line with Timo Meier and Logan Couture, two of the team’s strongest players where the valuations of both may be surprising for entirely different reasons.

Meiers grades out as the team’s best forward at exactly three wins, an elite rate. When you see “elite forward” Meier is probably not who immediately comes to mind but he’s building a very solid case. It stems primarily from his ability to create chances for himself and he’s establishing himself as one of the league’s best in that regard, earning 1.1 individual expected goals per 60 at 5-on-5 last year, second in the league behind only Brendan Gallagher. Over the last three seasons, he’s one of just four players to average over one per 60.

That’s led to Meier having the league’s eighth largest projected offensive impact by expected goals, behind dignitaries like Connor McDavid, Sidney Crosby, John Tavares, Auston Matthews and Mark Stone. That’s incredible company to be in and it didn’t happen overnight. He’s been driving expected goals since he stepped foot in the league, growing stronger with every season.

Last year it finally translated on the scoresheet with a career-high 66 points as he finished top 20 in goals per 60 at 5-on-5 and with some solid playmaking, finished top 20 in points per 60, too. He was two spots ahead of Leon Draisaitl, a 105-point scorer. With Pavelski gone, there’s a spot open on the team’s top power play with Meier’s name on it and it wouldn’t be at all surprising to see him do even bigger damage there and add to that point total with more opportunity. That he managed over 60 points despite only getting 37 percent of the available ice time there is impressive.

Couture’s prognostication is much less rosy at just two wins. That’s still first line calibre, but not all that close to being considered elite. For a team with contending aspirations, it’s actually a pretty weak rate. The big thing to remember here is that the only data used here is regular season data and not the playoffs where Couture is an entirely different animal. There, he’s a near point-per-game player. In the regular season, the 70 points he hit last year at age 29 was a career high. My model believes he can approach those heights again but sees some issues when it comes to Couture’s defensive play.

Though he does see some of the team’s tougher usage, his defensive impact on expected goals ranks as the lowest on the team thanks to him finishing with a team worst 2.44 rate last season. His offense was good enough to still earn a 53 percent share, but that was actually three percentage points lower relative to the team. He’s been below the team average in each of the last three seasons. My model still grades him as above average, not punishing him as harshly for simply playing on a good team, but he’s likely not the driving force on said team either. Last year, Meier’s expected goals rate was 14 percentage points higher when not playing with Couture in 291 minutes of time.

It’s a real changing of the guard in San Jose as the team’s best center currently looks to be Tomas Hertl, who also set a career high last season putting up 74 points in 77 games. A jump to the top power play looks like a possible cause, but it only added three more percentage points year-over-year. The big bump was at 5-on-5 where he was the most efficient Shark scoring 2.61 points per 60, one of the league’s best marks.

There’ll be some concern over his extremely high 20 percent shooting percentage, but it may be warranted given his own strong individual expected goals rate. With 27 expected goals, he only scored eight more than expected, which isn’t outlandish and makes up for the year prior where he only scored 22 on 32 expected goals. It may simply be a matter of one of the game’s better players around the net finding a scoring touch in that zone, making him one of the Sharks’ most dangerous weapons. Hertl should be a 30-goal scorer again this season and though he doesn’t shoot a lot, when he does he shoots to score.

Those three project to be the team’s only first line calibre players, though Evander Kane is close. Kane has a similar impact on 5-on-5 offense to those above him, but what separates him from the others is his lack of power play value. He’s very strong at 5-on-5, but without much mana advantage time, he’s good for 35-36 points tops. The other thing is that
he’s one of the team’s least disciplined players, projected to have a penalty differential of minus-14. That’s the third worst among forwards behind only the brothers’ Ritchie.

The rest of the team’s forward corps doesn’t move the needle as much, but there are some solid contributors here leading to some serviceable depth. Joe Thornton and Marcus Sorenson make up a passable duo on the third line, one that can provide some secondary scoring punch while being stingy on defense. Their points per 60 last year were 1.95 and 1.76 respectively, very solid marks in the high-end second line tier. The Sharks were chock-full of productive 5-on-5 players last season with eight players at or above 1.9 points per 60 (though two of those players are in different area codes now). I’m not sure how they’ll fare with Karlsson on the right side, though.

Thornton isn’t what he used to be, obviously, and the main issue with him is whether he can still handle the rigors of an 82-game season. He was dynamite in the first half (where he played a lot of minutes with Pavelski), but struggled down the stretch (coinciding with him no longer playing with Pavelski). Through the team’s first 50 games, Thornton had an excellent 60 percent expected goals rate that was among the team’s best, but that dropped to 49 percent in the final 30, one of the worst marks on the team. His scoring rate went up, but that was on the back of an elevated shooting percentage that can’t be counted to continue. At his age, he might be at his best with some load management. First, they’ll need to see if someone like Dylan Gambrell can handle more minutes (and he didn’t exactly look the part in a brief eight-game stint last year).

There were some whispers about the team bringing back Patrick Marleau to shore up the forward corps and while it’s nice to have an old friend around, at this point of his career he doesn’t offer much aside from emotional sentiment. He’s a replacement level player and the team is much better served with internal options. He’s likely not an upgrade over the underrated Lukas Radil.

On defense, the team ranks in the league’s top five almost entirely due to the contributions of the two mammoths on the blue line: Erik Karlsson and Brent Burns. Both players bring roughly three wins of value (Karlsson is stronger when fully healthy), with everyone else worth just over one combined. It’s clear who’s driving the bus here on the back end.

Both Karlsson and Burns were two of the Sharks’ most valuable players last season with Karlsson being worth 3.5 wins (in just 55 games!) by my model and Burns at 4.1. They drove offense to an extremely high degree on top of their strong individual totals and they’re likely the main reason the Sharks were able to have such a dominant expected goals share last season. Being able to run Karlson on one pair at a 60 percent expected goals rate and Burns on another pair at a 55 percent expected goals rate for 77 percent of the game at evens is a huge advantage. That the Sharks will be able to do that again this season – with Karlsson hopefully playing more than 50 games – is one reason they can likely beat this projection. Every player looks better when playing with these two and that should elevate the forward group, alleviating some of the losses there.

Karlsson is elite with the puck and is a generational talent on the back end. Some may say he looked cooked last year, while he may have lost some foot speed, he was probably at his most effective in years on a better team. He’s incredible in transition and lands in the 100th percentile for shot contributions and pretty close for zone entries and exits. If that wasn’t enough, he added a strong zone entry defense to his arsenal over the last two seasons too. All that contributed to his insanely high expected goals percentage last season, one of the best in hockey among defenders. Most of those same things apply to Burns as he’s elite in most of those categories too, just to a smaller degree. His defensive shortcomings are a bit more significant than Karlsson’s, though.

The big question in San Jose when it comes to these two is what to do about the power play. Recent research has revealed that teams are generally better serving penalties with a 4-on-4. But with four of the defenders happen to be the league’s two best offensive defensemen, does that still apply? And if not, who gets the premium spot on the top unit? Both are tough questions to answer, but if last year is any indication, the team might in fact be better served using both. In 95 minutes together, the Sharks scored 10.1 goals per 60 with the man advantage off 7.9 expected goals. That drops to 7.9 goals with just Burns and a similar expected goals rate of 8.2 in 176 minutes. In 70 minutes of just Karlsson, the goal rate is strong at 10.2, but the lower expected goals rate of 6.4 is concerning. With Karlsson’s vision and playmaking coupled with Burns’ booming shot why choose just one, especially when it seems as if the Sharks work best when the duo is together. The team had the sixth best power play last season and should be in the conversation for league’s best again this season with these two running the show.

Marc-Edouard Vlasic is often grouped in with the two players above in terms of value, but last season was a major step back for him and at 32 there’s no guarantee he gets back to his previous level. He’s dropped in value in three straight seasons now, going from the three-win player in 2015-16 many still think he is to 1.8, then 1.6 and then hugely below replacement last season. That’s due to him scoring a 51 percent expected goals rate that heavily paled in comparison to every other player on the team, not to mention a 45 percent goals rate that was better than only his primary partner Justin Braun. His relative expected goal rates over the last three seasons have been minus-six percent, minus-two percent and minus-three percent. In previous years it could be excused due to usage, but last year’s was a new low with lighter usage and it’s what brings his projected value way down from his previous standing as a top pairing defender. He looks to be the team’s current weakest play-driver on the back end at both ends of the ice.

Much of that can be attributed to playing with Braun, though, and without him on the roster there’s plenty of room for optimism that Vlasic’s value can bounce back fully despite his age, especially if he’s back to playing with Karlsson. The duo started last year together playing the toughs and earning an incredible 68 percent expected goals rate together throughout the process. The bounces didn’t break their way, though, and they were outscored 13-9 in 221 minutes. Vlasic was then partnered with Braun and performed significantly worse in the process in both expected and actual goals.

With the huge chance share at Karlsson and Vlasic’s advantage, that difference was bound to break the other way and hopefully this year the pair can get more leeway in getting there, especially with DeBoer’s safety net the other side of the country. It might be the only way for Vlasic to recuperate some of his lost value, and I’m guessing he could benefit from playing with an elite puck-mover considering that’s one of his weakest skills.

If not, Brenden Dillon could be an option as he played extremely well with Karlsson last season (63 percent goals and expected goals) and earned the team’s best expected goals against rate. The argument that he played pretty soft minutes to earn his great numbers isn’t wrong, but it’s worth noting that when Vlasic’s struggles reached a breaking point last year, the team did turn to Dillon as an option on the shutdown pair with Braun where they earned 57 percent of the expected goals rate (though they were still outscored badly).

That group will be in charge of making sure the team isn’t undone by goaltending, its Achille’s heel. The Sharks will need to a much better job than they did last season in that regard. While a lot of that is on Martin Jones and Aaron Dell for performing worse than expected – both finishing with save percentages under .900 – the defense in front did them zero favors providing the duo with a .905 and .900 expected save percentage, the worst mark in the league. It’s hard to succeed under that context and it’s why neither grades out as replacement level despite appearing to be just that last season. At 5-on-5 the worst offender was Vlasic where the team had an expected .917 when he was on the ice, though the team getting an .889 instead probably wasn’t his fault. That should regress next season.

Jones remains the starter and is just a year removed from strong seasons, saving 15.7 goals above expected in the two years prior and looking like an above average starter. While I’ve been harsh on Jones in the past, he’s likely stronger than given credit for. Still, he needs to bounce back from a season where he did allow 16 goals above expected, the seventh worst mark in the league. The defense may have failed him, but he didn’t exactly save them either. It’s a two-way street.

Preventing goals will be critical and it goes beyond limiting chances – the quality of those chances needs to be tightened up. The Sharks thrived last year in trading those chances with teams thanks to their lethal offense. It’s a testament to how strong that offense is when a team with one of the league’s best drivers on the back end does it. Marc-Edouard Vlasic is the one of the league’s best drivers on the back end does it. Marc-Edouard Vlasic is...
San Jose isn’t as deep as it used to be, but that can be masked with the elite forces at their disposal on the blueline. Meier and Hertl are the team’s next wave and the team’s forward group flows through them now. Another big season is a must for both and further improvement can offset the loss of the team’s former best player.

There’s a lot to like here obviously and much will depend on how much some of the team’s prominent elders can stave off the effects of age. Couture, Thornton, Burns and Vlasic are all 30 or older now and they’ll have a say on how good this team can be. Younger players like Chmelevski and Gambrell also play a role in the team’s chances as the question of how well they can fill the holes up front is crucial.

The Sharks have been a near playoff lock for most of the last two decades. Until some questions are answered, it’s hard to call them that this year as there’s plenty of uncertainty. In a weak Pacific they still have a very good shot, but as currently constructed that shot likely won’t be enough to capture the team’s ultimate goal: a championship. That’s always eluded them and with a worse roster on paper it would be a surprise if this year turned out any different.

Market Expectations
San Jose Sharks: 95.5

It seems the market isn’t quite sold on the Sharks either, pegging them under 96 points to start the year. That’s a little higher than my model, but not enough to split hairs as the difference could be as simple as how much this team’s age is adjusted for. The Sharks have some work to do to become a true contender this season.

What Fans Predict
Public Sample: 1,337
Fan Sample: 85

Interestingly, fans of the team and outsiders alike are still quite high on the Sharks with much of the distribution of results on the best case scenario side. Given their consistent history to date and the likelihood of a healthier Karlsson, I don’t blame either party for being high on the Sharks – I just think it’s underselling the loss of Pavelski.

The difference between my model and the public is 4.3 points which is the largest negative gap on record here. That makes the Sharks the team most underrated by my model this season relative to the court of public opinion.

What The Athletic Insider Thinks
Kevin Kurz: I’m a little more bullish on the Sharks’ chances than Dom, for a few different reasons. For one, they will presumably have a healthy Erik Karlsson for much longer than they did last season. After Karlsson settled in and found his stride with the Sharks in early December, he was probably the best defenseman in the NHL for about those six weeks before he originally hurt his groin before the All-Star break. If he is able to play at that level for a longer stretch this season it makes the Sharks an entirely different team.

I do agree with the weaknesses mentioned above. The Sharks didn’t do enough to replace the offense they lost with Joe Pavelski (and, to a lesser extent, Gus Nyquist and Joonas Donskoi), and that right side of their forward lines needs some help. Perhaps there are one or two rookies ready to stake their claim to that spot, including Chmelevski, but I have little doubt that general manager Doug Wilson is keeping tabs on the rest of the league in case a player becomes available that he could snag in a trade. The goalies will also have to be better, especially, of course, Jones, who remains the undisputed starter. But don’t underestimate the return of Bob Boughner, who is back as one of Pete DeBoer’s assistants after getting let go in Florida. Boughner will be tasked with cutting down on the amount of scoring chances the Sharks gave up last season, and if he’s successful, the save percentages of both Jones and whoever his backup ends up being should be improved.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
Blues updates: Thomas making strides in return from surgery

By Jim Thomas St. Louis Post-Dispatch 12 hrs ago 0

Robert Thomas moved up to the Blues’ second practice group Monday at the Centene Community Ice Center, a sure sign that he’s marking strides in terms of his rehab and recovery from offseason wrist surgery.

“He’s feeling a lot better,” coach Craig Berube said. “I thought he got through practice fine.”

With the exception of about a half-dozen players who headed to Dallas on Monday afternoon for the team’s preseason opener, the second group contained most of the returning players from the Blues’ Stanley Cup championship team.

Thomas ripped off some wicked shots in practice, a sign that his surgically-repaired left wrist is doing fine.

“Yeah, he’s shooting the puck well,” Berube said. “But it’s the other stuff. The battling and things like that, that you gotta be careful of. We’ll just take it day by day and when he’s ready he’ll let us know.”

But Berube wouldn’t rule out the possibility that Thomas sees action in exhibition play.

“We got a lot of games yet in the preseason,” Berube said. “So he’s got time yet. We’ll see.”

Until Monday, Thomas had been skating with the Blues’ third group, a smaller in numbers unit consisting mainly of players ticketed for juniors or San Antonio, or players coming back from injury.

KYROU, KASPICK RETURN

Speaking of coming back from injury, Jordan Kyrou was back on the ice after missing practice Saturday and Sunday due to soreness resulting from kneecap surgery. He was with the third group, under the direction of San Antonio coach Drew Bannister on Monday at Centene.

Also on the ice Monday was prospect Tanner Kaspick, a forward who spent most of last season with San Antonio. Kaspick suffered concussion symptoms in the Blues’ first game at the NHL Prospect Tournament in Traverse City, Mich. 10 days ago. He missed the final three games in Traverse City, as well as the first three days of Blues training camp.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

For players such as Austin Poganski, Mathias Laferriere, Michael Vecchione and Jake Dotchin, all of whom are in the lineup tonight in Dallas, they’re getting a rare opportunity to impress the boss _ Berube. They may only get one or two chances during the preseason to play in a game.

“That’s true. But we got eight games,” Berube said. “So it’s a good chance they can play more. But you’re right _ one or two games are maybe all they’re gonna get, so they gotta show something.”

As such, the Blues’ preseason opener gives Berube a chance to look at possible depth players down the line.

“We got a lot of young guys in there,” Berube said. “Again, I talk about our depth is important, and throughout the whole season. So a lot of these guys could be good depth guys for us. Who knows? If they play well enough they could maybe get a spot. Depth’s really important for sure.

“We’re gonna look at that and just get into our game. Try and instill our game through these preseason games _ what kind of team we want to be and working on that and getting to that.”

STARS LINEUP

Most of the top scorers will be missing from the Dallas lineup in tonight’s game. Here are the lines and pairings as provided by the Stars:

Forwards:

Kiviranta-Paveliski-Gurianov
BenFred's 5: Scherzer scary good in STL, La Russa wants to keep working, Tarasenko feared trade

6 hrs ago
Ben Frederickson

Five topics from columnist Ben Frederickson that St. Louis sports fans should be discussing:
1. Hide your loved ones — here comes Mad Max

The Cardinals should have signed Max Scherzer.
They know it. Scherzer knows it. And pretty much every time Mad Max gets a chance to pitch in his hometown, he makes sure we all remember it.

The Parkway Central and Mizzou product is a three-time Cy Young Award winner who has been an All-Star seven consecutive seasons.

His 12-season career has produced a 3.18 ERA and 2,671 strikeouts in 2,277.1 innings pitched.

Against the hometown team that passed on a chance to sign him, he's a special level of elite.

In his eight starts against the Cardinals since he signed his seven-year, $210 million contract with the Nationals, Scherzer has a 2.67 ERA and an opponent batting line of .209/.256/.284. He has 70 strikeouts to 42 hits and 11 walks allowed. He's pitched six or seven innings every time.

Somehow, the Cardinals have won four of these eight games.

Somehow, Scherzer has been even better against the Cardinals when the games are played in St. Louis.

Check out his last three starts at Busch Stadium . . .

- September 2, 2015: 6 innings, 11 hits, 2 runs, 1 home run, 0 walks, 10 strikeouts in a 4-3 Nationals win.
- May 1, 2016: 7 innings, 4 hits, 0 runs, 0 home runs, 0 walks, 9 strikeouts in a 6-1 Nationals win.
- July 2, 2017: 7 innings, 2 hits, 0 runs, 0 home runs, 2 walks, 12 strikeouts in a 7-2 Nationals win.

That's a 0.90 ERA in 20 innings pitched. That's 14 more strikeouts than hits allowed. Cardinals hitters are slashing .221/.241/.273 against Scherzer in these three games. He's on the mound Wednesday, facing off against Cards starter Adam Wainwright. You better believe both will be fired up.

And yes, I know Scherzer has been dealing with some back and shoulder issues. He has alternated between looking like himself and looking human since he returned from the injured list on Aug. 22.

"There's no excuses in this league," Scherzer told MLB.com after his last start. "You've got to post and you've got to go out there with everything you've got, and you've got to execute. Everything is on the line every time you take the mound. It's Major League Baseball."

Batten down the hatchs.

Mad Max is coming home again.

2. TLR says he's not done yet

We were not the only ones wondering what the firing of Red Sox president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski might mean for his vice president and special assistant, former Cardinals manager Tony La Russa.

Here's what the Hall of Fame manager told Fox2 sports director Martin Kilcoyne in their latest "Tony Talk" podcast.

"I don't want to retire," La Russa said. "I love the game. I think there is a lot to be offered to the game in a lot of different capacities, whether you are a scout, player development, or someone like myself, with some experience. So, as long as somebody feels like the experience can be helpful, I want to be a part of it."

You can listen to the full interview, including La Russa's thoughts on Chris Duncan, right here. Where La Russa will be working after this season sounds TBD. Could be in Boston. Could be somewhere new. But he's still planning on having some sort of job in the game. That's good for the game.

3. Tarasenko feared a trade

It turns out that a fun story about Vladimir Tarasenko stiff-armin' the Stanley Cup curse had a more serious undertone.

While discussing with Joan Niesen of Sports Illustrated how his newborn son was photographed in the Cup before the Blues secured it with their Game 7 win in Boston, Tarasenko shared a bit more about the stress he played under before the Blues made their worst-to-first championship run. Do you remember that chatter about Tarasenko potentially being traded if the Blues did not find traction under then-interim coach Mike Yeo? It weighed hard on No. 91.

"I (felt) like I make my family (be) in a bad spot, because she's pregnant, we have a school, we have kids, and if they trade me ... it's a tough time," Tarasenko said in Niesen's piece. "I never usually say that something was bothering me, but that time was not good."

Things worked out, and this weekend Tarasenko dropped another money quote.

"One (championship) is not enough," he said to us at Blues training camp.

If this is not on a shirt by the time the season starts, the Blues are missing a chance to make some money.

It would be the biggest marketing whiff since the Cardinals have ignored my suggestion for the Marcell Ozuna oven mitt giveaway.

4. QB curse in the SEC East

SEC East teams have played a grand total of 20 football games this season. So, they are averaging a season-ending injury for a starting quarterback every 6.7 games.

The brutal trend continued Saturday, when Florida's Feleipe Franks went down with a dislocated and fractured ankle in the Gators' win against Kentucky. UK was playing that game without its starter, Terry Wilson, because he hurt his left knee in the Wildcats' week-two win against Eastern Michigan. South Carolina can relate. The Gamecocks lost veteran starter Jake Bentley to a broken foot in the season opener.

Of all the backups who just became starters, South Carolina seems to have the best. Freshman Ryan Hilinski has completed 69 percent of his passes and posted a QB rating of 138.1 through two games, one of which was against a feared Alabama defense. He was just named SEC freshman of the week after he completed 35 of 57 passes for 324 yards with two TDs and one interception in the 47-23 loss to the Crimson Tide. I would not expect the young man to be too nervous entering the first road start of his college career this weekend in CoMo.

5. Blues tease Cup names

If you refused to believe the Blues won the Stanley Cup until you saw their names engraved into it, you're in luck.

St Louis Post Dispatch LOADED: 09.17.2019
The St. Louis Blues are on the Stanley Cup. 
The team posted a picture of the names on the cup to their social media accounts today.

View this post on Instagram

Stanley has never looked better. #stlblues #StanleyCup

A post shared by St. Louis Blues (@stlouisblues) on Sep 16, 2019 at 11:06am PDT

Benjamin Hochman previously wrote about the engraver, Louise St. Jacques, who has apparently completed stamping each name.

It is an "honor and privilege that I cherish," St. Jacques said in the column. "It is such a coveted trophy. ... And it's an amazing story that St. Louis, through sheer determination, heightened their level of play to winning the Stanley Cup."

The Blues start the exhibition season today; the regular season is 2 1/2 weeks away.

St Louis Post Dispatch LOADED: 09.17.2019
The party's over — Blues get back to business with start of exhibition season

By Jim Thomas St. Louis Post-Dispatch 14 hrs ago

About 10,000 people showed up when Vladimir Tarasenko had his Stanley Cup day last month in Novosibirsk, Russia.

"So maybe like 5,000, 6,000 had a chance to take a picture with the Cup," Tarasenko said.

Was Tarasenko in all those pictures?

"Almost every time," he said. "But I needed to have a rest. It's a lot of people."

Those were the warm and fuzzy days of summer. They were pretty crazy, too. The post Cup celebration and parade in St. Louis. Partying in Vegas. The sight of goalie Jordan Binnington wearing sunglasses indoors at the ESPY awards.

"I know some of the NBA players and rappers wear shades inside," Binnington deadpanned on Sunday. "I'm trying to make it my thing with the black shades there. I think it suits me. What do you think?"

There's more. During a rush hour traffic jam on Interstate 64 — on an exit ramp no less — a Blues fan popped out of his car to greet Binnington, who was stuck in traffic as well.

"We talked for a couple minutes and he was on his way," Binnington said. "He's a funny guy. I wasn't sure what he was doing, but he opened the door. Usually that means he's coming at you. But he was a pretty friendly guy and happy."

Last year at this time, Binnington was anonymous in this town. Those days are over.

"I can't really fly under the radar here," he said. "It's something to get used to. It comes with the territory. It's been a lot of fun. You can tell the influence this team has had on the city is very positive and it's fun to be a part of."

Young center Robert Thomas said the same thing happened to him this summer — he was approached by a fan while in his car. At least Thomas was at a stop light.

And count Tarasenko, Binnington and Thomas among what surely is a large number of Blues players who got meals and beverages comped for them at restaurants and establishments all over town.

"After we won, the people are paying for dinners and lunches," Tarasenko said. "They never show up (identify themselves), so you never know who it was. That was pretty nice. But St. Louis has been a nice hockey town always."

"You always appreciate a free meal," Binnington said. "I mean, free, right? It's been great, and I'm looking forward to more."

In a city that loves sports and loves its hometown sports heroes, these Blues will forever be legends in St. Louis after ending a half-century's worth of a Stanley Cup drought.

All fine and dandy. But training camp started Friday, and the Blues are actually playing an exhibition game — at least some of them — Monday night in Dallas.

Perhaps Tarasenko put it best when meeting with reporters Friday.

"I know you guys have a lot of questions about the Cup and all this stuff," he said. "Summer was nice, but it's time to get back to work. If we keep living with the Cup memories you don't have any success in the future."

It's a new season, and time to turn the page, to the point where the Blues even want to put their beloved celebration song — "Gloria" — to rest.

"I saw some 'Petro' words about it and I agree with him," Tarasenko said, referring to team captain Alex Pietrangelo. "It was a cool thing for last year. It'll be in our memories, too. But it's time to move on. I think we gotta get a new song. So we'll see. It's not about a song, it's about winning here."

It was a short offseason. Compared to a year ago, when the Blues didn't even make the playoffs, it was shorter by about more than two months.

But the players have returned to camp looking refreshed and ready to go.

"We've got to start building what we want to do this year," veteran Alexander Steen said. "Bring with us what we can from last year, all the learning experiences that we went through, because we had a lot of them, especially looking at the first half of the year."

"But I think you start fresh. We've got to redo everything again. Build the same structure, the same team camaraderie and all those selfless things we were doing last year."

The Blues know if they don't, if they live in the past, they will be passed in the standings.

"You can't sit there and (say), 'We're Stanley Cup champions,' " coach Craig Berube said. "It's a tough league. It's tough to make the playoffs. There's a lot of good teams. Our division's very good. We gotta get ready. We gotta work to put in."

Berube was all about setting a tone and getting a pace established in the initial practices over the weekend.

"As a coaching staff, we gotta make sure we're monitoring our guys," Berube said. "They just finished playing, not long ago. But on the other side of things, we gotta get the tempo back up and get 'em going. We've gotta find a mixture there."

With an eighth preseason game this season and a short offseason, monitoring the workload of veteran players is one of the key points of emphasis in September.

"We'll have a 'big' camp longer than previous years, just because we're gonna want to make sure we have enough bodies to get through those games without taxing guys," Blues general manager Doug Armstrong said. "But we have to get ready for opening night (Oct. 2). It's coming very quickly. And Craig will work with his staff and talk to the veteran players on the number of games they feel are necessary."

With 22 of the team's 23 playoff participants returning, camp competition will be more about ice time than earning a roster spot. But hockey's here. The Blues play three exhibition games this week — all on the road.

The regular season is just 2½ weeks away.
Blues notebook: It's all a game for Parayko, at least when it comes to other sports

By Tom Timmermann St. Louis Post-Dispatch 22 hrs ago

If you go to a sporting event around St. Louis, there’s a good chance you'll see Blues defenseman Colton Parayko.

There he was at Busch Stadium on Friday night, throwing out the first pitch. The Saturday before that, he and some teammates made the trip to Columbia for the Mizzou-West Virginia football game. And before that, he was at the IndyCar race at Gateway, where he took some laps around the track in a two-seat IndyCar, hitting, he was told, about 160 mph.

“They gave me the fire suit, gave me the helmet, gave me the gloves,” he said Sunday. “They suited me up. It was pretty fun.”

And he got a lesson in physics.

“The first corner when they start going, you feel the gravity,” he said. “That’s what’s scary. You feel like you’re going to slide out (into the wall) and the tires just grip. It’s kind of a cool concept of aerodynamics and how it works.”

Scary in a different way was his first pitch at Busch Stadium.

“I wasn’t really that nervous before I got up there,” he said. “Then I started walking and it’s like, ‘This is kind of a long walk.’ Then I got up there and turned around and I’m like, ‘This seems a little far.’ I was, ‘Do I try to rip one in there but who knows where it goes?,’ or do I lob one in there and at least get in there. I just lobbed it in there.”

Still to come on Parayko’s St. Louis sports list is a soccer game. He just likes sports.

“I enjoy going to sporting events,” he said. “I like sports in general. They’re cool, they bring communities together, they bring schools together. You gain appreciation for different sports and different players and how different things work when you actually go live and make an effort to go to different events. I enjoy them. I try to make some baseball games. It brings the city together.”

GAME 1

With three days of training camp behind them, the Blues head off for their first of eight exhibition games, on Monday night in Dallas.

None of the team’s big names are making the trip, with the top forwards being fourth-liners Oskar Sundqvist and Ivan Barbashev, plus Sammy Blais, and the top defensemen are Joel Edmundson and Robert Bortuzzo. Ville Husso and Adam Wilcox, the two goalies ticketed for San Antonio, will have the netminding duties.

Also making the trip is forward Robby Fabbri, who hasn’t played much the past two seasons after two knee surgeries. Fabbri, like some of the other young Blues forwards, figures to get a lot of looks in camp as how the last few forward spots shake out is one of the few mysteries on this team.

“(We’ll be) looking at players, looking at our depth,” coach Craig Berube said. “That’s the most important thing. Guys like Robby Fabbri too, coming off his two years of being injured and in and out. I thought he had a real good session today and looked good. He came in in great shape. (We’ll be) looking at guys like that, looking at our young guys, see where they’re at, see how they’re doing and getting our guys ready to start the season.”

This game will also mark the first Blues broadcast on their new radio home, WXOS (101.1 FM). Unlike past seasons, when the Blues would get two preseason games on KMOX (1120 AM) or an affiliated station, every preseason game this year will be broadcast on the radio. (Only one game will be televised, by NBCSN.) WXOS will have a one-hour pregame show before the 7:30 p.m. start on Monday.

INJURY PROGRESS

Berube said that Robert Thomas, who has been working out separately from the team’s two main groups in practice in the first three days, would be rejoining the regular squad on Monday.

“I thought he was really good out there today,” Berube said. “That’s the plan (Monday) for him.”

Forward Jordan Kyrou missed practice for the second straight day as he recovers from surgery to fix a kneecap injury, and Berube hopes he will return to practice on Monday.

“He was a little sore the other day,” Berube said, “so hopefully (Monday) he’ll be back on the ice. We’ll see how he feels.”

BACK TO JUNIORS

The Blues reduced their number of players in camp to 53 by sending five players back to their junior teams: goalie Colten Ellis, defenseman Tyler Tucker and forwards Nikita Alexandrov, Jeremy Michel and Kean Washkurak.

St Louis Post Dispatch LOADED: 09.17.2019
Stan Mikita, the Blackhawks legend and Hockey Hall of Famer who died last year at 78, had the degenerative brain disease chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, according to a postmortem study. Dr. Ann McKee, director of the Boston University CTE Center, revealed the findings of the study. Mikita was diagnosed with having had Stage 3 of the disease. Stage 4 is the most severe form.

"Stan Mikita was diagnosed with two neurodegenerative diseases that our research has shown are associated with a long career in contact sports such as ice hockey: CTE and Lewy body disease," said McKee, according to a release.

Mikita, a center who played for the 'Hawks for his entire 22-year career from 1959-80 and won the Hart Trophy as the NHL’s most valuable player in 1967 and 1968, the Art Ross Trophy as the league’s leading scorer in 1964, 1965, 1967 and 1968 and the Lady Byng Trophy for gentlemanly play in 1967 and 1968, making him the only player in history to win the Triple Crown of awards in the same season — and he did it twice.

In January 2015, Mikita’s family said he had been diagnosed with Lewy body dementia, a progressive disease with symptoms similar to those of Parkinson’s or Alzheimer’s. He died Aug. 7, 2018. The study’s findings, presented at the request of the Mikita family, make the Hawks icon the latest athlete to be diagnosed with CTE, which is associated with repeated blows to the head. The disease can be found only after death.

"We hope Stan Mikita’s pledge and CTE diagnosis will inspire greater participation in research from the hockey community," said Dr. Chris Nowinski, co-founder and CEO of the CLF. "Without greater participation from the hockey community, we have little hope for treating or preventing CTE within our lifetime."

Frontier League title on the line: The River City Rascals and Florence Freedom are set to meet Monday in Florence, Ky., to determine the champion of the Frontier League, an independent baseball circuit. The contest is set for 5:35 p.m. (St. Louis time). The Freedom beat the Rascals 3-2 on Saturday to set up the winner-take-all game in the best-of-five series. (News services)
Lightning’s Maroon brings Stanley Cup full of grit

By Martin Fennelly

Published Yesterday
Updated Earlier today

BRANDON — In the dream, which wasn’t a dream at all, at least not for him, Pat Maroon gets up on a mid-June morning and comes down to breakfast in his St. Louis home.

His son, Anthony, 10 at the time, joins him. They have their usual cereal.

“Cinnamon Toast Crunch,” Maroon said.

But they were out of bowls. On purpose.

“We ate out of the Cup,” Maroon said with a smile.

The Stanley Cup.

Food for thought.

Maroon, with his St. Louis Blues teammates, lived that dream last season, winning it all for his hometown and the team he rooted for growing up.

He will always be a Stanley Cup winner, part of St. Louis’ remarkable worst-to-first 2018-19 season that ended with the first Cup in 52 years of Blues history.

But did he save some grit and pixie dust?

The Lightning might have that question in the back of their minds after bringing in the 31-year-old Maroon on a one-year deal for $900,000, a song by today’s standards. Tampa Bay gets a rough, tough 6-2, 236-pound left winger with a scoring touch. It gets a big man, just the type to go into the boards, to track down beastly opponents for righteous toe-to-toe.

Just as important, the Lightning, whose record-setting season and Cup dreams were swept out of existence, get someone who knows that championship beat, one that played out across two months of playoffs, with Maroon hoisting the Cup in Boston after a Game 7 win over the Bruins.

Maroon’s mother and father and fiancee watched on the ice. So did Anthony. Everybody cried. You never know the tune until you’re the only one left singing.

“It’s a feeling you’ll know the rest of your life,” Maroon said.

The unquestionably talented Lightning yearn for such memories. They have come close and they have come not so close. Comes now Maroon, who has been there, won that, going so far as to knock home a Game 7 overtime winner in the second round last May.

It seems like more than a coincidence that in the last quarter century, no NHL team has won a Stanley Cup without having at least one player who had previously held Stanley aloft. The Lightning had no such person on the roster as they nose-dived against Columbus.

Mind you, the formula is not full-proof. The 2017-18 Lightning had four-time Cup winner Chris Kunitz and his sage experience couldn’t help them out of the Eastern Conference final against eventual Cup winner Washington.

“I’d rather have a guy like (Maroon) than not have a guy like him,” Lightning defenseman Ryan McDonagh said. “He brings that experience. He has been through all you go through to get what you want.”

“I’m a believer that experience helps, that guys who’ve been there before matter,” said Lightning coach Jon Cooper, who hasn’t won a Cup either. Cooper goes way back with Maroon, having coached him in junior hockey with the North American Hockey League St. Louis Bandits in 2006-07. “He barely had hair on his face then.”

Cut to Maroon’s woolly playoff beard.

“There are a few guys in (our) room who have played in the Stanley Cup finals but not been able to get it across the finish line,” Cooper said.

“Pat’s one of those guys who did get it across the finish line, and was a big contributor, scored some big goals for them on their way.”

Maroon isn’t here to tell his new teammates playoff stories by the campfire. He is here to bring what he can, including a net presence the Lightning haven’t really had since Brian Boyle was parked in front.

“I can bring skill,” Maroon said. “A lot of people don’t understand, but I have good hands below the top of the circles. I can create space for my teammates. I can stick up for my teammates. I can be a good presence in the room. I can make guys loose, joke around a little bit.”

That might come in handy as the Lightning try to get up off the canvas after the nightmare end to last season.

“The last thing you want is them going into a season gripping their sticks tight, putting pressure on yourself,” Maroon said.

The Blues began the 2019 calendar year dead last in the NHL. Coach Mike Yeo was fired in November after the team’s sluggish start. Who knew what would happen next? Lesson: You don’t know until you know.

“Sometimes it just comes together,” Maroon said.

For the Blues, it came together during a franchise-record 11-game win streak after the All-Star break, which included a Florida swing punctuated by a shutout win over the Lightning at Amalie Arena.

“When we came back and beat the Panthers from a 2-0 deficit, and then we came in here and won 1-0, we kind of looked around the room and thought ‘We’re a good hockey team,’” Maroon said. “It was just a matter of showing everyone.”

The Blues grinded past Winnipeg in the first round of the playoffs, then Dallas. They overcame a controversial Game 3 overtime loss on an illegal hand pass to beat San Jose to win the Western Conference final and reach the franchise’s first Cup final in 49 years. The Bruins followed.

“We just played a style as a team, we just wore guys down, we just wore teams out,” Maroon said. “The deeper it got into a series, we knew there would be more grind time and we knew we had the toughness.

“You just start to get that feeling. In the San Jose series, they took it to us the first game, but after the hand-pass game, we took it to them, just wore them down. We got pucks in and went after them. It’s all mental. You make them frustrated. When they go back for the puck, they’re breathing heavy, thinking ‘Here we go again.’ You want that. We did that.”

That doesn’t sound like the 2018-19 Lightning.

Maybe it will be different this time around.

Maroon can tell you: it’s worth it.

“Seeing my son and mom and dad and fiancee, giving them hugs and saying we did it, we did it, over and over again,” he said. “Some guys play 20 years and never get their hands on a Stanley Cup. My dad had a Blues fan his whole life. I’ll never forget it.”

The parade was in downtown St. Louis. The bar was open.

“We got off the floats with the Cup,” Maroon said. “We made sure the fans were part of it because they’d waited 52 years.”

On his day with the Cup, Maroon took the trophy to the St. Louis arenas he grew up in, including his uncle’s roller rink. He took the Cup to the Italian restaurant owned by his fiancee’s family. He took Stanley swimming and tubing. Everyone ate ice cream outside of Stanley.

“To do it in my hometown, in front of my family, it was just truly amazing, especially with the team I grew up watching my whole life,” Maroon said.

“It was a special group of guys. Just like here. They’re searching for their first one here. They’ve been so close. They’ve been to conference finals, losing Game 6s and 7s, but they came up a little short. This isn’t easy. No one ever said it was. It isn’t supposed to be.”

Meet a guy who lived it.

“I can’t really put it into words,” Maroon said.

Try these:
Cinnamon Toast Crunch.
Q&A with Julien BriseBois: Assessing his first year as Lightning general manager

By Joe Smith Sep 16, 2019

Brandon, Fla. — Between all of his team’s summer moves, Lightning general manager Julien BriseBois squeezed in some time for his passions.

He traveled, taking his family to Europe, where his sons, Justin, 12, and Jacob, 10, enjoyed hiking around the Austrian Alps. BriseBois breezed through a half-dozen books, including “Howard Stern Comes Again,” the autobiography of Nike founder Phil Knight, “Success Equation: Untangling Luck in Business, Sports and Investing” and “MVP Machine,” which details the use of technology in baseball.

“It opens your mind to new possibilities and ideas,” he said.

Then BriseBois opened his mail. He found handwritten letters from Lightning fans thanking him for the NHL-record tying 62-win season, the one that finished in a stunning first-round collapse in the playoffs.

“Considering how our season ended, I didn’t expect that,” BriseBois said.

“But I really appreciated it. I got a few (negative) ones. I don’t know what the ratio was, but it was substantially more positive than negative.”

That’s how BriseBois, 42, evaluated his first year as Lightning general manager. Since Steve Yzerman shocked the hockey world by stepping down last September, BriseBois made what he labeled a “seamless” transition after a serendipitous rise to his dream job.

“That was my hope, that was the plan, and it was somewhat by design,” BriseBois said. “There was no bump in the road because we switched from Steve to me being the GM. We kept humming and kept our standards high. Over the course of this year, there wasn’t a day where I said, ‘Wow I didn’t know being a GM involved this. I can’t ask for more than what (owner Jeff) Vinik provides me and our organization as a whole, the vision for how you’re going to do things and hire really good people.”

In our summer sit-down, Vinik was bullish on his support of BriseBois, saying, “I have all the confidence in the world (in him).”

“He’s not Steve Yzerman,” Vinik continued. “He’s different from Steve Yzerman. He’s Julien BriseBois. He came in and he’s confident. He knew he wanted to do the job.”

Agents and coaches say there are a lot of similarities between Yzerman and BriseBois, including how the new GM flew to Stuarts, Fla., from Montreal to put the finishing touches on Andrei Vasilevsky’s eight-year extension. “Stevie did the same thing for (Nikita Kucherov),” said agent Dan Milstein, who represents both players. “They’re very similar. Always available by phone and work well.”

BriseBois made a ton of trips to AHL Syracuse, where I spent a game discussing his development philosophies. He went the extra mile in December to seal the deal on signing coveted free agent Jimmy Huntington, attending one of the forward prospect’s games in Rimouski, Quebec.

“There was a team that was very, very close to signing him, and Julien did what he is good at — be professional and do whatever it takes,” Rimouski GM and coach Serge Beausoleil told The Athletic. “It’s really rare that the GM himself would take the time to spend time with you, make sure that the guy has what he needs. Honestly, Julien is unique.”

BriseBois has said building a team is like “putting together a puzzle,” and now his challenge is to bring the Lightning a Stanley Cup. With BriseBois hitting the one-year mark as GM last week, The Athletic sat down with him to get his thoughts on an array of subjects, from making culture-based moves to resolving Brayden Point’s contract situation and whether coach Jon Cooper should worry about his seat getting warm.

I know you said nothing really surprised you in this job, but is there something you learned in the last year?

There was no moment like, “Wow, I didn’t see that coming.” … Well, I didn’t see us getting swept in the first round. But I don’t know if that was because I was a first-year GM. It was just considering how our team performed all season and had problem-solving all year. They found a way to win, and I expected that to carry us beyond the first round. We knew Columbus was going to be a good team and they could quite possibly beat us. I didn’t anticipate us getting swept.

A lot of people say there are similarities with how you and Yzerman run the team, and it makes sense since your work side-by-side for so long. But are there ways you’ve made your own mark, made this your job?

Responsibilities have been re-allocated between our hockey-ops team. New people have been brought in like Mathieu Darche. He’ll do a lot of the things I used to do (as assistant GM). The way I put it, it’s my job to help everyone in the hockey-ops side. Jamie Pushor was elevated to oversee player personnel. Al Murray is more involved in day-to-day activities and the grand scheme of what we’re trying to do.

There’s a really positive vibe around the whole management team — a lot of new ideas and questioning why we do the things we do and (asking) is there a way for us to do it better. It’s a very stimulating environment.

One of your early moves as GM was terminating the contract of defenseman Jake Dotchin (which could have been precedent setting). I know you’ve declined to discuss the specifics of that situation (which was resolved this summer in an undisclosed settlement). But, in general, are there moves you’ve made with the big picture in mind that revolve around culture and standards that could have a ripple effect?

I wanted the transition to be seamless. I wanted to make sure our standards weren’t going to slip. And our vision for our team wasn’t going to change either. I was involved with Steve in coming up with this vision, coming up with these standards — and good organizations, they keep elevating the standards. You can never take a step back. As a GM, one of the important roles I had is ensuring our standards are high and (that) we don’t let them slip. So along the way, did I have to make decisions that reinforced that vision I had for our hockey-ops department? I’m sure I have. But they weren’t hard decisions to make because I believe in what we’re trying to do here.

Do you have any regrets over moves you made or didn’t make this season?

Hindsight is always 20-20. But I can’t say that there was a situation where there was an opportunity for me to improve our chances of winning the Stanley Cup and I passed on it. Every opportunity I could take advantage of to move us forward, I think I did. So there was not one thing where I’m like, “I wish I would have done that.” Not in those types of decisions. On a day-to-day basis, I’m sure. None pop into my mind. But now that I’ve been a GM for a year, am I better than I was a year ago? I sure hope so. I think that comes with experience.

When Yzerman was here, he said he didn’t tell coaches who to play or tinker with the lineups because once he did that, he knew he’d need a new coach. What’s your approach?

I agree with that. Managers manage and coaches coach. We work together, he helps me manage, I help him coach. But there are some decisions that are general manager decisions and some decisions that are coaches’ decisions. We have a really good understanding of where that line lies.

There’s a mutual respect there. I enjoy working with Coop a lot. I get a sense he enjoys working with me. We appreciate that we don’t agree all the time and can have honest, candid and frank conversations about our different views and it comes down to the best decision for the group. Sometimes we make it together, sometimes it ends up being a GM decision and I make it and Coop lives with it, and sometimes it’s a decision that’s best made by the head coach. Coop makes those decisions and I support him and we move on.

BriseBois, right, hoped to make as seamless a transition as possible to the GM role after Steve Yzerman stepped down. (Tampa Bay Lightning / Scott Audette)

You were pretty bullish on (Cooper) and his future after the season, and Vinik told me that you guys would have signed him to his three-year extension even after the first-round sweep. But is there any added pressure on Cooper this year where the proverbial hot seat could come into play with another disappointing ending?

I wouldn’t consider his seat very warm in terms of job security at all. He, myself, the players, we all know we have the opportunity here to have a
really good year, have a special season and contend for the Cup — but it’s not going to be easy. It will never be a harder year to make the NHL playoffs than this year. But, for every team, the parity is unprecedented, maybe in any of the professional sports leagues. The talent redistribution that’s happening this offseason, I don’t remember seeing that where so many good players ended up on teams that didn’t make the playoffs. It really levels the playing field.

It’s going to be really hard for the 16 teams to make the playoffs, and we can’t take for granted we’ll be one of them. I like our chances, and I’m very optimistic. I sure as heck hope we’ll be one of them, but I have no guarantees. It’s that close.

How much do you use analytics as an organization?

We have a staff whose job it is to gather information, gather data, collate data and present that to us, so we definitely use it. I’m not privy to what other organizations do, so it’s relative. Are we at the forefront? I would hope so. That’s the mandate I’m giving our staff. We want to be at the forefront in every area.

How much do you factor in chemistry or personality when building a team, and how do you identify that?

Intangibles are very important over the course of an 82-game season. Guys having the right mindset, I think, is critical for team success.

Because on paper, we look at everyone’s roster and they’re really close. I know it makes for a better narrative when you say, “This team is historic” or “This team is bad,” but, in reality, we are closer to the middle at both ends of the spectrum.

You have been pretty transparent in your summer sessions with the media on several topics, from Louis Domingue’s status to the goalie situation and Ryan Callahan. What is your philosophy on communicating with your fan base?

Our fans have questions, and I hope they have a lot of questions because that means they care. Part of my job as GM is to answer their questions, and your job as a media member is to ask those questions on behalf of the fan — kind of the middle guy. You ask a question (that is) on fans’ minds, and part of my job is to provide them with information. I think it’s a question of respecting the fans.

Still, there’s going to be occasions knowing the best interest of the organization is (to keep) things (quiet). Taking about the details of Brayden Point’s contract negotiations will hurt the process. I don’t know if fans care about the process as much as the result. As long as it doesn’t negatively impact our team’s chances of being successful, I don’t know why we’d hide anything from our fans.

Do you get noticed more or approached by fans around town? I know Steve was more recognizable.

He was more so than I am, I’m sure. My life is pretty predictable. I’m either at the rink with the NHL team, at the rink with one of my boys or at home. I don’t really go outside of those areas, and yes I will hit a few gyms in town depending on what I’m doing, some tennis courts. But I don’t go out and about much.

Do you still speak much with Steve (Yzerman)?

I do, (but) nowhere near as much as before. Not a daily thing, not a weekly thing. We’re so busy focusing on the task at hand. You don’t have the time. I did text him: “Enjoy your first day, first camp as GM of the Red Wings.” We had a back and forth: “How is the family? How are the girls doing, my boys doing?” We did the Adam Erne trade. We talk quite a bit.

It’s a small community. There are 32 GMs, (so) we pick each other’s brains, and you have some relationships that are stronger than others.

But I’m sure it’s harder for a guy like Yzerman to give you tips or insight.

You still can. The camaraderie among all GMs is pretty impressive. I knew that already from my time in the AHL: There’s a lot of good people working in this game. We compete against each other, but there’s also an exchange of ideas, (like) “Why did you make this decision?” You learn from each other.

You weren’t surprised when Yzerman left (for the Red Wings)? I know you said all year you held out hope he’d like his senior advisor role and stay.

I wasn’t surprised, no. I’m happy for him. He got to be an NHL GM and live in Detroit. It checks both boxes. Good for him.
Maple Leafs were Mitch Marner’s first, and only, choice

By Kevin McGran

Mon., Sept. 16, 2019

ST. JOHN’S, N.L.—Mitch Marner shunned two NHL teams that presented offer sheets in the off-season, saying his heart was with the Maple Leafs.

“It was early in the summer, and the whole goal was to be a Maple Leaf, so it wasn’t in my head too much,” Marner said. “I didn’t want to miss training camp, I didn’t want to miss any games this season. That’s why I really forced the issue with (GM) Kyle (Dubas) to get something done here.”

Marner signed a six-year extension worth $64.5 million on Friday and joined his teammates Sunday.

His agent, Darren Ferris, told TSN Radio 1050 that two teams had approached with offers that would have put the Maple Leafs in a position to match or let him leave and accept draft picks as compensation. It’s believed the Columbus Blue Jackets and possibly the Montreal Canadiens were the two teams involved, though Ferris wasn’t saying.

The pull of the Blue and White is strong, said Leafs coach Mike Babcock.

“Mitch wants to be a Leaf for life, and that’s why in the end you were pretty comfortable it was going to happen,” he said. “In the end, Mitch would tell you the business part of it was not much fun.

“But knowing what you want and knowing where your heart is is important. We wouldn’t have John Tavares here if he hadn’t felt that way. You also have to get guys who weren’t born in Toronto to want to be Leafs, too.”

PERFECT NUMBER: Goalie Frederik Andersen didn’t want to put a number on how many games he will play this season when asked if somewhere between 50 and 60 was right.

“I can’t say anything, I don’t want to lock us in or anything,” he said. “I have some say, for sure. But I don’t want to go far into it. We’ll see after 82 games how many games I played.”

Part of the issue is how well his backup performs.

“You have to be in a spot to manage (Andersen’s) workload,” Babcock said. “You’ve got to be in a good spot in the standings. And the (backup) guy you go with has to be able to play and have a chance to win.”

MENDING NETMINDER: Goalie Michal Neuvirth is nursing an undisclosed injury. Vying for the backup job and in camp on a professional try out, Neuvirth worked out with injured players Monday after having been given Sunday off.

“He wasn’t feeling good bodywise,” Babcock said. “Obviously it’s not ideal for him. If he wants to battle for a job, he’s got to be in a position to do that. He’s also got to be healthy.”

Toronto Star LOADED: 09.17.2019
Life with the Maple Leafs an adjustment for veteran Jason Spezza

Kevin McGran
Mon., Sept. 16, 2019

ST. JOHN’S, N.L.—Jason Spezza will tell you his transition from first-line centre to fourth-line role player wasn’t easy.

“That doesn’t happen overnight,” Spezza said. “I produced my whole life, and you have a high expectation of where you’re at and where you should be in the lineup. So the first year of transition was tougher than others.

“But now I’ve played that role for a couple of years and I feel comfortable doing it. And I know what it has to look like, what I have to do.”

The 36-year-old Spezza suits up Tuesday night for the first time as a Maple Leaf in the team’s exhibition-season opener against the Ottawa Senators. Spezza began his career with the Senators; he was the second overall pick in the 2001 draft, a Mississauga kid thrust into the heyday of the heated Battle of Ontario.

Back then, Spezza was a top producer, routinely eclipsing 30 goals and averaging better than a point a game. He led the Sens to their lone Stanley Cup final in 2007, where they lost to Anaheim. His best season was in 2007-08, when he put up 34 goals and 58 assists for 92 points.

Spezza was traded to the Dallas Stars in 2014, where he was passed on the depth chart by Tyler Seguin and Jamie Benn, and the veteran centre’s role changed.

“You become a little more of a specialist,” said Spezza. “You start playing on special teams, finally taking faceoffs. And when guys go down with injuries you have to move up and down the lineup.

“You have new linemates all the time instead of, when you’re the top guys, you have set lines. And so there are some different challenges, but basically it comes down to, ‘Do you want to keep playing or do you want to hang on to the old days?’ And I want to keep playing.”

So it is that Spezza became a Maple Leaf over the summer as a free agent. Toronto is a team with a need for a veteran presence who can fill multiple roles and produce, if only in limited amounts, a modicum of offence from the fourth line.

Spezza has been practising with Pierre Engvall on his left side and Trevor Moore on his right in what might end up being the Leafs’ fourth line when the season opens Oct. 2.

But Spezza has to earn his spot, and there’s no guarantee he will.

“There’s a role here for him, but he’s got to be able to do it,” said Leafs coach Mike Babcock. “We’re going to see over exhibition games whether he likes it, whether he wants to do it. We’re just in the process of feeling him out and he’s feeling us out as well.

“It’s probably a different cat for him, but he loves hockey.”

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Off the ice, Spezza can also be a mentor, as Patrick Marleau had been, sharing his wealth of experience.

“You’ve got to be upbeat at the rink every day, you’re going to be looking around the room to see who needs to be picked up a little bit,” said Spezza. “Your role broadens and then, on top of that, you have to focus on the game. So it’s different responsibilities than when you’re the top guy.

“Definitely it’s a change. And you have to learn to judge your game differently than you have in the past. So it’s important to have good communication with the staff, what the expectations are of you. And also internally, you get used to trying to produce every night and be in a big role. And some nights it doesn’t happen that way as you get older. So you have to judge yourself on different things.”

If there’s one thing Spezza has experienced in his career, it’s disappointment; he thinks often about that 2007 Stanley Cup loss, when Anaheim won the series 4-1.

“That’s why I’m still going,” he said.

“And that’s why you want to change your role. You want to stick around and you want to keep playing. I love coming to the rink. I love playing the game. When you haven’t won and you’ve played this long, it becomes definitely something you think about all the time.”

Toronto Star LOADED: 09.17.2019
For long-time hockey fans who've been scarred by the memory of even one of NHL commissioner Gary Bettman's career trifecta of lockouts, Monday brought a bit of news that, to some eyes, should have been filed under "unexpected."

The NHLPA announced it was declining its option to reopen the current collective bargaining agreement, only days after the league announced it was declining its option to do the same. The gist of those duelling decisions meant a guarantee of labour peace until at least 2022, when the current agreement is set to expire. And there was more: Both the league and the players' association spoke of their intent to continue negotiations on an extension to the current CBA that could extend that peace a few more years beyond that.

Say what?

Could these possibly be the same two parties who, when last they engaged in talks while saddled with an imminent deadline, could only seem to agree on matters of mutual mistrust and liberal leaks of misinformation? Could these possibly be the same two historical adversaries whose squabbles cost hockey the handing out of the Stanley Cup in 2005 and, during the lockout of 2012-13, put the NHL on hold for most of four months, reducing an 82-game season to 48 and leaving the sport the lesser for it?

Ah, the lockout of 2012-13. U.S. president Barack Obama publicly scolded the two sides for disregarding the feelings of hockey fans while bickering over billions. Maple Leafs players, among them Joffrey Lupul and James van Riemsdyk, complained about being barred from making reservations at the team-owned sports bar across the road from the rink. And, as always, all players lost, agreeing to give-back upon give-back to a merciless league that tried hard to break them.

Still, the takeaway from that debacle was that both sides took their hits. There was a feeling, in the wake of another tedious exercise in greed, that Bettman might have presided over his last lockout — that retirement might be in the offing. There was a feeling NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr might have been making a cameo appearance in hockey after making his name in baseball. In times of conflict, after all, it's the chess masters whose moves get scrutinized and second-guessed and resented. It's the leaders whose reputations take the grimmest beatings.

Fast forward more than a half-dozen years and maybe it says something that neither Bettman nor Fehr don't appear to be going anywhere. Both still in charge of their respective sides despite those post-lockout murmurs of their imminent demise, they certainly don't appear to be going anywhere near another labour battle.

"While players have concerns with the current CBA, we agree with the league that working together to address those concerns is the preferred course of action instead of terminating the agreement following this season," Fehr, 71, said in a statement on Monday. "We have been having discussions with the league about an extension of the CBA and expect that those talks will continue."

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Added Bettman, 67, in a league-issued release: "We are pleased with the NHL Players' Association's decision. We look forward to continuing to work with the NHLPA for the benefit of all stakeholders, especially our fans."

Right. The Dark Lord of Lockouts is "especially" working his butt off for the good of the butts in the seats. Clearly you don't need a lockout to fire up the bizarro-world spin machine.

And clearly the players still have their qualms, chief among them the escrow payments that have lopped about 10 per cent off the typical players' paycheque over the past seven-plus years.

"Escrow is still the main topic, and what we want to try and fix," Bo Horvat, the Vancouver Canucks union rep, told reporters on Monday. "But at the same time — good news for the fans. There's going to be hockey for the next few years ... Obviously we're happy to play hockey for the next three years, but there's still some things that have got to be done."

You can understand where the players are coming from, even if you can quibble with escrow being at the top of their list of complaints. Escrow, after all, is simply a matter of accounting. Because salaries are based off a projection of hockey-related revenue the league and players divide 50-50, escrow payments go into a reserve fund to ensure a proper split. When projections fall short, as they typically have, the balance is made up with escrow. The alternative is lowering the salary cap, and in turn lowering salaries, which is an even less popular option. It seems simple, and yet even the savviest of players seem hung up on the issue.

"A) escrow and B) escrow," Jonathan Toews was quoted as saying a while back, after he was asked to name the two biggest issues in labour talks.

Reopening the deal would have seen the CBA come due a year from Sunday. And if you reopen, you declare your intention to ignite a labour war, or something close. If you reopen, it's giving a commissioner who's scored victories over the union in three previous lockouts a reason to summon his powers for a four-peat.

So playing nice makes sense, to some eyes. These are boom times in pro sports. And even if the other big three North American leagues have made bigger leaps into different financial stratospheres — even if Bettman can be accused of a lack of vision that's forever failed to maximize revenue — the NHL's got Seattle expansion in the offing, plus the prospect of gambling-related revenue and a U.S. TV deal that's expected to bring with it an influx of cash.

Which is why, to other eyes, this would have been a good time for the players to arm for battle. With expansion and gambling and a new TV deal lining up, more than a few player advocates saw this as a moment to test the league's appetite for conflict. The league clearly didn't want a fight. Which is why the players might have been smart to push for one — or, at least, make a bluff to that effect.

But that's an argument for the backrooms. For fans of a sport marred by plenty of greed-induced interruptions, it's difficult to make an argument against a staying of an unexpected peace.
ST. JOHN'S, NL — Before they can leap ahead as Maple Leafs, it's back to the future for defencemen Cody Ceci and Ben Harpur.

Toronto's first two NHL exhibition games Tuesday and Wednesday are against their former Ottawa Senators and it looks like the pair draw into the second one, Wednesday at the Canadian Tire Centre. John Tavares, Mitch Marner their converted left winger Kasperi Kapanen, centre Jason Spezza, defenceman Tyson Barrie and Frederik Andersen get first crack here Tuesday at Mile One Centre.

The roster split of 48 players in the two games came down to a number of factors, including the ratio of veterans to rookies under NHL regulations to ice a competitive team at top-dollar ticket prices. But coach Mike Babcock added something innovative, letting those Leafs who scored highest on the training camp fitness tests pick which of the two Ottawa games they wanted to play in. Those might have contributed to Ceci and Harpur going in Wednesday with Auston Matthews, William Nylander, Andreas Johnsson and defenceman Morgan Rielly. Both of the new Leafs came in the trade that sent Connor Brown and Nikita Zaitsev to the Sens.

"Either way (works)," Ceci insisted. "If I get the game in Ottawa, then I get to see family and friends again. If I get the game here, I get it out of the way early."

"It will be a little weird, especially the jersey. A lot of the guys I came up with in the Sens' organization are gone now so it won't be as weird, teammate wise, but just seeing the jersey and being on the opposite side will be for sure."

Added Harper: "I don't really have control over that, or a preference, whatever happens, I'll be ready."

Ceci will be playing with projected regular season partner Morgan Rielly, while Harpur's opposite number has yet to be determined. Coach Babcock said he didn't interfere with the selection process after Richard Rotenberg and the sports science staff gave him the fitness scores, even if he thought it would be better to let Ceci and Harpur get this mental hurdle out of the way as fast as possible on Tuesday.

Babcock and general manager Kyle Dubas are beginning the annual juggling act of seeing as many newcomers as possible in these eight matches, get the veterans some ice time and reward the average campers with a look on home-and-home preseason dates against Ottawa, Montreal, Detroit and Buffalo.

"They (the stars) will play four times, split squads this week and with an NHL lineup next week as we get ready," Babcock said "It's not hard (reaching an exhibition roster balance) at the start, but when you try to put more NHL and American League in your second week, then it's harder to get enough guys in the one game."

Andersen said he wanted a total of 12 periods by the Oct. 2 season opener against Ottawa, including three full games. The whole idea of load management, which Andersen seems to accept, but can't yet define, points to a lower workload than his 60-plus games of previous seasons, depending on who wins the back-up role and how much the No. 2 plays.

"It's a topic that's interesting for a lot of people," Andersen said of the pool betting on his final game total. "I don't want to go too far into it. We'll talk to the sport science guys and coaches when they talk about how many games and stuff."

Would the mid-50s be a desirable target for games?

"That could be a number," Andersen said. "I don't want to lock us in or anything, but if everything goes well and we're able to play well, we'll try and go a little bit lower than before. We'll see what comes along the way."
ST. JOHN'S — Michal Neuvirth needed every minute of exhibition action to make a case for a job in net with the Maple Leafs, but will be playing from behind.

The veteran Czech, here on a pro tryout contract, wasn't on the list for either of the Ottawa exhibition games Tuesday and Wednesday, spending Monday doing restricted workouts with injured Leafs, slowed by what coach Mike Babcock vaguely described as body soreness.

"He wasn't feeling good body-wise (Sunday) and we kept him off," Babcock said. "Obviously, it's not ideal for him; if he wants to battle for a job, he has to be in position to do that, but he also has to be healthy."

Thus Michael Hutchinson remains the favourite to hold the back-up role with Frederik Andersen, with a key start Wednesday at Canadian Tire Centre after Andersen plays all or some of Tuesday's match here. Marlie Kasimir Kaski is Tuesday's sub.

Babcock had his own injury scare on Monday, colliding with centre Alexander Kerfoot in the day's second practice at Mile One Centre, but he finished the workout.

ALL THAT SCHMALTZ

Any connection to the Stanley Cup champion St. Louis Blues is noteworthy, even if defenceman Jordan Schmaltz wasn't on the ice when they defeated Boston.

Now a Leaf, Schmaltz recalled watching that celebration from afar with their San Antonio farm team, demoted before the big spring run.

"I was happy for the guys, such as Craig Binnington," said Schmaltz, scheduled to play Tuesday night against Ottawa. "He was my roommate in Chicago (the Wolves were the Blues' earlier AHL affiliate), a guy who paid his dues through five or six years to get to the top. He's set the mould, made guys like me (aged 25) believe it could happen for them. He's definitely put his time in."

Schmaltz's tenure as a Blue ended in a summer trade for defenceman Andreas Borgman, giving Toronto another needed right-handed shot. The deal might have been influenced by new assistant coach Dave Hakatol, now on Toronto's bench, who ran the University of North Dakota program when Schmaltz, a native of Madison, Wisc., was there.

"I played three years for Hak. He's honest, a straight shooter, tells you what he sees, what he thinks. He's been good around the guys here."

Schmaltz's other Leaf connection is winger William Nylander.

"We've been family friends about 10 to 15 years, through his Dad (Michael). William and my brother, Nick, played together in Chicago on peewee and bantam. We've been across the pond to visit them in Stockholm and he's stayed at our house."

SANDMAN HAS BIG PLANS

Rasmus Sandin continues to do and say the right things, keeping himself in the picture for a crack at the Leafs' blueline, though many believe the 2018 first round pick is better off playing major minutes again with the Marlies.

"It was different than the OHL," said Sandin of 44 games in the AHL and a very useful 13 playoffs starts on top of that. "But I got settled in pretty quick and learned a lot."

A sprained elbow sidelined him after the world junior championships, but part of his NHL education around the Leafs summer skates was getting a better grip on conditioning — and hanging with NHLers such as Schmaltz, whom he was partnered with early in this camp. They had some good hockey talk over lunches.

"Man, I didn't even know he was born in 2000," Schmaltz laughed. "That's kind of scary for me. I'm used to being one of the younger guys. He's a good player and a good kid."

LOOSE LEAFS

As the former Sens gets ready to face their old club the next 48 hours, the Leafs will be looking for their departed pals such as Ron Hainsey, Connor Brown and Nikita Zaitsev and of course, ex-assistant D.J. Smith behind Ottawa's bench .... Former Oiler defenceman Kevin Gravel is also in the mix for Tuesday's game .... Leafs including Auston Matthews, Tyson Barrie and Mitch Marner visited Janeway Children's Hospital in St. John's on Monday. All three played a game of Hungry Hungry Hippos with a young patient.
The Toronto Maple Leafs

SIMMONS: New Leafs centre Jason Spezza’s last shot at glory

Steve Simmons
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ST. JOHN’S, N.L. — This is how old Jason Spezza happens to be: Auston Matthews was three when Spezza was the second pick in the 2001 NHL draft.

Mitch Marner was five when Spezza scored his first of 332 goals. Six different men have coached the Maple Leafs in his time in pro hockey, dating back to the late Pat Quinn.

And this is how experienced he is: Spezza is father to four daughters. The rest of the Leafs roster, combined, have three children, and that includes the recent addition to the John Tavares family. Spezza broke into the lineup of the Ottawa Senators in the same season in which Mike Babcock began his NHL career coaching the Mighty Ducks in Anaheim.

That long ago.

And now here, near the finish line, the one-time star with career earnings of more than $87 million, the 18th-highest-paid player in hockey history, is playing a bit part with a somewhat undefined role with the Maple Leafs. And he’s smiling on his way through training camp — maybe his last camp — because that’s what Spezza always does.

Ron Hainsey is gone to Ottawa. Patrick Marleau has gone home to California, and who knows where, hockey-wise. The old guys from the Leafs’ dressing room have moved on.

Spezza has inherited the role of sage around the dressing room and maybe even on the ice. The Leafs aren’t sure how much he has left, but mostly they’ll settle for the occasional faceoff won, some power-play time, some centring the fourth line, moving up in the lineup if need be on occasion.

Spezza has played 1,065 games in the NHL, averaged 70 points a season over 16 years.

Once, he had as many as 92 points, which is more than Tavares has ever scored.

Once, he had 71 assists in a season. Last year, Marner had 68. That’s the kind of skill he had to display along with his length. Production-wise, he’s been where many of these young Maple Leafs hope to go — with one thing missing. He’s played for the Stanley Cup. Like them, he hasn’t won. And he yearns to have that championship ring.

“I think about it all the time,” Spezza said in a lengthy interview. “That’s why I’m still going. That’s why you want to change your role. You want to stick around, you want to keep playing. When you haven’t won it and you’ve played this long, it becomes all you think about.

“You just wonder (looking back) what could you have done differently? What could you have changed? What adjustment could you have made? Got close a couple of other times. Those three years we had (in Ottawa), we were knocking on the door and probably should have won a few years, and just didn’t get it done.”

Now he comes to Toronto as the lowest-paid player on the Leafs. A homecoming, really. He’s already made the big money and, by hockey standards, this is the small money now. But none of this is about money.

It’s about a game he loves and can’t leave. It’s about finding a way to win with the team he grew up watching. We started hearing about Spezza as a minor-hockey whiz kid some 20 years ago. We saw him all those years with the Senators, all those interviews while he rode the exercise bike.

Now he’s a sound voice of experience on a team that doesn’t have a lot of it.

“It’s a challenge for me to find a role here and be part of such a young, exciting group … It’s a challenge, and that’s fine. I understand that.”

It’s hard for a professional athlete to be great and then pushed to the fringe. It’s more than an adjustment. Some can’t do it, consumed with what used to be. Some can’t adjust to going from first line to fourth, from power play to press box. Some get angry, some play the blame game: Athletes aren’t known for being particularly self-aware.

Spezza seems to understand the process better than most especially from what he’s already played through the past five seasons in Dallas.

“This doesn’t happen overnight,” he said of dealing with his hockey mortality. “You go through a lot. You demand a lot of yourself. I’ve produced my whole career and you have high expectations of where you’re at and where you should be in the lineup.

“Now, I’ve played that role for a couple of years and I feel comfortable doing it. It basically comes down to: Do you want to keep playing, or do you want to hang on to the old days? I want to keep playing.”

There isn’t much Spezza hasn’t seen in his pro career. He played with Hall of Famers and future Hall of Famers such as Dominik Hasek, Daniel Alfredsson, Marian Hossa and Zdeno Chara in Ottawa, among others. He played with Tyler Seguin and Jamie Benn in Dallas. He knows what it is to be surrounded by young talent.

“These guys (here) are elite, elite young players,” said Spezza. “They’re barely over 20. We’ve come into a window here where the team has a chance to win and get over some past failures.”

And he wants to play whatever part he can in making a difference.

“It’s different,” said Spezza. “You learn to judge your game differently than you did in the past. You get used to producing every night and having a big role and, as you get older, you have to kind of judge yourself on different things. You have to look around the room sometimes and see who needs to get picked up that day. Your role sort of broadens. You have to focus on your game and make yourself ready to go, while thinking of the bigger picture.”

But first, a pre-season game on Tuesday night against Ottawa. The first step on a new team and maybe one last season for Spezza.

After 16 years, it’s one shift at a time, one pre-season game at a time.

One more shot at glory.

Toronto Sun LOADED: 09.17.2019
Marner loyalty to Leafs superseded two offer sheets

Lance Hornby
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ST. JOHN'S, N.L. — Mitch Marner had two chances to sign his Leaf life away, likely for more money than Toronto offered him as a restricted free agent.

Agent Darren Ferris told TSN Radio on Monday that oft-rumoured offer sheets by rival NHL teams did indeed cross his desk in the course of the summer, by a couple of clubs, though Marner refused to pick up the pen.

Marner, who signed a six-year, US$65.4-million deal on Friday, delved into the outside interest on Monday morning as the Leafs continued training camp here. He didn't specify which two teams, the money or the timing of the offers after he became a restricted free agent on July 1, but the Leafs' leading scorer said the overtures made him urge Ferris harder than ever to get a deal done to remain in his hometown.

"Darren mentioned (the offer sheets) and got told right away, 'I don't want to explore that option,'" Marner said. "I don't really want them, so I didn't ask too much (money and term) detail. It was obviously nice hearing other teams valued me, but like I said, after four years, I knew this team valued me as well."

Enough that GM Kyle Dubas gave him him almost as much money as Auston Matthews and John Tavares instead of using Marner's stated Leaf loyalty and the rejected offer sheets to get a more favourable deal.

"I didn't think about it too much in my head, I kind of got rid of it," Marner said of being tempted by the offer sheets. "It was keeping my mind clear, not listening to any outside noise. I didn't want to miss any games this season, that's why I forced the issue with Kyle that we get something done."

The two held a mutually agreed Thursday summit which helped speed things along.

"Kyle worked tirelessly with me and my colleagues," Ferris told TSN. "I laughed when I heard some of the reports going on. But it was unfortunate the way the events were going during the summer and I had to keep Mitch at bay, too, not to be on social media."

"It was rough going, but as we got closer to the numbers we were comfortable with, Mitch and Kyle did have a meeting, with myself, and Kyle and I were able to fine tune everything."
PARADISE, NL — Ilya Mikheyev hasn’t said much at training camp, but Maple Leafs sure talk a lot about him.

The young Russian free agent whom coach Mike Babcock keeps hinting will make an impact this year, has not yet given a full interview because of his lack of English. But the left winger must be excited at Babcock’s early plan to use him with centre Alexander Kerfoot in a potential third attack chain. Kasperi Kapanen would be on the right, but is currently on trial up top with John Tavares and Mitch Marner, playing on his opposite wing.

“That could be a real good line for us, that’s what we’d like,” Babcock said of Mikheyev-Kerfoot-Kapanen, while acknowledging Zach Hyman is projected to miss “14 or 15 games”.

The 6-foot-2 undrafted Mikheyev improved his KHL goal total every year from 8 to 12 to 19 to 23 with Omsk Avangard before taking the Leafs offer in free agency. Jason Spezza befriended him from early August at the club’s training facility.

“I’ve seen different Russians come over at different times and it can be difficult for them,” said Spezza. “Ilya seems really eager to learn, has a great attitude. He got here early which is important because the language can be a barrier. He’s older, too, 24, a step ahead of younger guys who come in from Europe.

“There will be an adjustment. Things happen quicker out there than on the big ice.”

Nic Petain is on the left side with Kerfoot and Mikheyev so far.

MARNER POWER

Three days into camp, Babcock is already in power play tinkering mode.

Most interesting is shifting Mitch Marner to the left side, an idea that likely sprang from new assistant coach Paul McFarland, who ran a pretty good group in Florida. Marner cautioned that he still hasn’t practiced with the projected No. 1 unit, namely centre Auston Matthews.

“It’s a feel-out moment to see what Paul wants to do with us,” said Marner, whose presence on the right was seen as too predictable for rivals to thwart by the end of the season. “I’ll just try and adjust quicker, become more of a shooter.”

CUTS IN CLASS SIZE

Sunday afternoon was the Leafs’ last day in Paradise after three days of workouts and scrimmage games, followed by the first round of cuts from the 75 players in attendance.

The first amalgamation of the Marlies, to be coached by the Leafs player development staff, will include Matthew Bradley, Justin Brazeau, Giorgio Estephan, Brady Ferguson, Alex Gudbranson, Ryan Johnston, Michael Kapla, Aaron Luchuk, Tanner MacMaster, Zach O’Brien, Scott Pooley, Marcus Power, Sergei Sapego and goalies Ian Scott and Maksim Zhukov. The Marlies’ camp under coach Sheldon Keefe begins Sept. 24.

Seven Leafs went back to junior clubs, including 2019 first pick Nick Robertson who returned to Peterborough. Also sent back were Mikhail Abramov (Victoriaville), Semyon Der-Arguchintsev (Peterborough), Filip Kral (Spokane), Kalle Loponen (Sudbury), Marc-Antoine Pepin (Shawinigan) and Riley Stotts (Calgary).

LOOSE LEAVES

Jiminy Crickets, the pre-game pep talk before Sunday night’s Leaf alumni game against a team of local Canadian Forces personnel at Mile One Centre was delivered by 95-year-old former analyst Howie Meeker. The oldest living Leaf was an inspired choice, having lived on The Rock for many years before moving to B.C, and serving in the Canadian army in World War II … With a new $65 million contract in his hockey pants, Marner was asked if he was footing the bill for a players’ dinner at some point. “I don’t know,” he said. “Kappy and Johnny (Andreas Johnsson), they’re both undercover right now (new contracts both signed the summer). We’re going to get them going, too” … Spezza continues to dwell on how important this first season with the Leafs is, given the 36-year-old’s shrinking window to win a Cup. “That’s why I’m still going. When you’ve played this long and haven’t won, it’s something you definitely think about all the time” … Tyson Barrie and Frederik Andersen were among the Leafs getting ‘Screeched In’ with Auston Matthews on Saturday night: “Quite the scene,” Barrie said. “I like rum but that (Screech) didn’t taste good at all. I was last in line to kiss the fish so it was a bit slobbery when I got around to it.”

Toronto Sun LOADED: 09.17.2019
PARADISE, NL — Sunday morning in Newfoundland had a new Maple Leafs line comprised of a new left winger, a new father and a new multi-millionaire.

About a thousand locals had the first look at Kasperi Kapanen, John Tavares and Mitch Marner before their NHL debut, perhaps in Tuesday’s exhibition at Mile One Centre in St. John’s or a night later against the same Ottawa Senators. After a whirlwind few days of life-changing events in Toronto, there was a huge ovation when the re-signed Marner and proud papa Tavares made their first appearance on the ice. They quickly got down to business with Kapanen, who gets the first chance to plug in at left wing in place of the injured Zach Hyman.

Kapanen not only has to switch sides, he’s expected to fill Hyman’s bloodhound role on retrieval.

“I’ll let them do all the nice things and I’ll do the dirty work,” Kapanen cackled. “It will be skating, getting the puck to them and standing in front of the net. (Left) is something I haven’t played in awhile, but I was there when I was younger and back and forth with the Marlies. It’s nothing that new to me, but something to adjust to and get better at. Obviously, when we break out I’m getting the puck a lot on my back hand, but like I say, it’s just hockey and I’ll try and figure it out.”

As if by magic, a sea of Marner sweaters were visible in the crowd after three days of Auston Matthews’ prominence. Marner and Tavares hooked up to beat Frederik Andersen on the first drill and just like that came the Marner celebratory fly past of fans. A few minutes later during a break, he came to the glass to pose for selfies with some young kids and the off-ice animosity of a year-long contract dispute started to fade.

Marner signed Friday night for $65 million US over six years and was on the same plane here from Toronto with Tavares on Saturday.

“It was pretty cool,” Marner said. “When we got off the plane, people (in Leafs colours) were waiting for us. It’s not close to Toronto so you see how many fans you have world wide.”

Marner insisted his conditioning was fine after skating parallel to the Leafs summer workouts with other NHLers in the GTA. Marner and Kapanen horsed around in practice, Marner given the celebrity status of leading the team stretch.

“It should be a lot of fun,” Marner said of his new line. “(Kapanen) has a lot of speed. Either of us, when we don’t have the puck, we’re going to try and find some open space for each other.”

Marner and Tavares are already established, a team-high 94 points and 47 goals, respectively. Tavares thanked the team for allowing him a few days at home with his wife and new son, Jace, and came here with plenty of adrenaline.

“It’s just great to have everyone in,” he said of Marner’s signing coinciding with his arrival. “We’ve talked about Mitch’s importance to our team on and off the ice. It’s just about getting ready for the season, focusing on the long journey ahead and building towards that. Now the work starts.”

Kapanen, who has been in the shadow of Marner and William Nylander on the right side, is ready to rock on the left.

“Everybody knows what type of players Mitchy and Johnny are. It’s easy playing with them. We’re just getting a little chemistry going.”

PROUD PAPA JOHN

The first thing John Tavares realized of his split role as father/NHLer is most Maple Leafs teammates will be zero help providing baby-rearing tips.

“We have a pretty young team,” laughed Tavares, whose wife Aryne gave birth to son Jace on Wednesday. “But I’ve known Jason Spezza a long time, he has four girls and has his hands full every day. I talk to him a lot and seeing Jake Muzzin go through it at the end of last season (also a first-time parent), it’s nice to have a couple of guys for sure.”

The 28-year-old Tavares called it “a hell of a few days”, with Jace’s birth, the start of camp and linemate Mitch Marner signing a new deal. Both men jump on a plane Saturday for a three-hour flight to join the Leafs in Atlantic Canada.

“It’s a very emotional thing, really thinking I’m a dad, and it’s still kicking in,” Tavares said. “Mentally it will just be an amazing thing to be a father, to go home and have him and my wife to look forward to and just cherish those times and those memories.”
Maple Leafs enjoying life in Paradise

Steve Simmons
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ST JOHN'S, NL — Scenes from a training camp weekend in a place called Paradise.

Auston Matthews kissed a cod — and he liked it.

It was all part of the growing education of the soon-to-be Maple Leafs captain. He — and a number of his Leafs’ teammates — got Screeched in, a not necessarily religious but culturally appropriate experience at a George St. bar called Christian’s.

It was part fun, part dare, part ceremony, and in the words of new teammate Tyson Barrie, pretty awful. Matthews, his first time in Newfoundland, batted first for the Leafs in cod kissing.

“Td heard you had to kiss the fish and drink the shot (rum), but the whole ceremony beforehand, laying down some history about The Rock, that was pretty sweet. I figured I’d want to kiss it first and (the other Leafs) could have sloppy seconds.”

He kissed. He drank the rum — pretty powerful stuff.

It didn’t taste great,” said Matthews, “but it wasn’t like it was gasoline or anything.”

Matthews survived, not sure he’d ever do this again.

The woman behind the rental car counter is wearing her Maple Leafs jersey with the No. 34 on the back. Almost everyone around St. John’s, it seems, is wearing a Maple Leafs jersey of some kind this weekend, so many with 34 on the back.

I asked her if she was going to put a ‘C’ on her jersey in the inevitability that Matthews is named team captain.

This seemed to throw her off. She said she had no plans to put a ‘C’ on her jersey, then turned around to show me why. She was wearing a James Reimer jersey.

“Old school,” she said. “I’ve had this one for years. I love James Reimer.”

Mike Babcock hasn’t kissed a cod, but he has vowed he won’t be leaving St. John’s without doing so.

Babcock breathes in Canada. East Coast. West Coast. It doesn’t matter where. He has been and coached just about everywhere in the country. Team Canada at the Olympics. Team Canada at the world championships. Team Canada at the world juniors. His career reads like a Burton Cummings song. He’s coached in Moose Jaw, Lethbridge, Red Deer, before running back to Saskatoon.

But this is trip is different, eye-opening, special.

“It’s awesome,” said Babcock. “Where were we last night? Mallard’s Cottage, Quidi Vidi (which is pronounced Kitty Vitty)? I don’t know what the place is, honest to God, the scenery, we have so many beautiful things in our country and it’s great to see it. The thing about the people here, they’re happy and they appreciate you.”

Two things to know: The Leafs are loving this training camp in St. John’s. And St. John’s is loving them right back.

This is Ben Harpur’s second time having training camp in Newfoundland. The first time was as a member of the Ottawa Senators. The two experiences couldn’t seem more different.

Here, everything is Maple Leafs. Everywhere you look, a blue Maple Leafs jersey. At the arena, around town, in the bars, in stores, everywhere. When Harpur was here the first time, he saw the odd Ottawa Senators jersey, “but mostly Leafs jerseys then. But nothing like this year. I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

Harpur is one of many battling for one of the two available spots on the Leafs defence. He has size and penalty-killing ability. Whether he has enough to beat out a group of six fighting for two places will be determined by the end of camp. But as many coaches have said — you can’t coach size. And the Leafs don’t have a lot of it on defence.

“You get here (rink) early in the morning and they’re people who are lined up to get in. I’m told some of them were sleeping overnight just to get in. It’s pretty crazy, really. Makes you realize just how big the Leafs following is and how exciting this for a community like this one.

“This is pretty far away from the rest of Canada and I guess this is their opportunity to see the NHL in some way. You know, I played my first ever exhibition game here against the Islanders. But it was nothing like this.

“This is Leafs country.”

The three little guys in Leaf jerseys, no more than eight years old, were banging on the glass, screaming loudly, jumping up and down, trying anything to get Mitch Marner’s attention.

The rink was jam-packed with people, not a seat to be had on this Sunday morning as Marner returned to the Leafs on the ice with his first practice of training camp.

Marner was skating on a line with John Tavares, at camp for his first practice after becoming a father for the first time, and with a new winger, Kasperi Kapanen, taking the place of the injured Zach Hyman. And the crowd was clearly inspired with Marner’s appearance, after him being signed to his $65-million US, six-year contract.

And at the end of the drill, Marner made his way to the glass, made a face and posed for a selfie with the three little boys. It was an old kid and three young kids having some fun.

“That’s a $65-million photo,” one of the dad’s from the stands yelled. Pretty much everybody around laughed. Marner continued to smile.

“Kids love him,” said Tavares, who is in St. John’s for the second time in his life. “They really do. Everybody saw Mitch today, the crowd was going nuts. That’s pretty special.”

An American has never been captain of the Maple Leafs. The people of St. John’s are voting for Matthews to be the next Leafs captain, if only by their actions since training camp began.

On Sunday, after the parking lot at the Paradise Double Ice Complex was cordoned off by barriers to set up for an afternoon of autograph signing, the place almost exploded when Matthews walked through the barriers and towards the stage.

The cheers went on and on and on. One young man held up a sign: “When I grow up I want to be Auston Matthews.”

Matthews walked to the stage and after answering a few softball questions by the host, he took the microphone himself and talked about how great this camp visit has been. Then he gave away one of his jerseys, to a young fellow sitting on his father’s shoulders. The gesture was a lot like this training camp in Paradise — pretty close to enlightening, pretty close to perfect.

Toronto Sun LOADED: 09.17.2019
Mike Babcock is holding open tryouts for remaining spots on Maple Leafs defence: ‘I want them to decide’

By Jonas Siegel Sep 16, 2019

ST. JOHN’S — Just watch.
That’s all Mike Babcock is going to do.

How will the Leafs coach know if Rasmus Sandin is ready to play in the NHL at 19?

“Youah, great question,” said Babcock, sounding hoarse after another day of shouting instructions at training camp. “I’m just gonna keep watching him.”

Babcock is holding open tryouts on defence. Two spots are up for grabs in the opening night lineup with Travis Dermott on the shelf for up to 14 games to start the season.

“I want someone to be better than someone else,” Babcock said. “I don’t want to, at the end, have to decide. I want them to decide and I want it to be so obvious you all know too.”

Reading the early tea leaves suggests the competition might come down to four players: Sandin, Martin Marincin, Jordan Schmaltz and Ben Harpur. Hopeful to nudge their way into that mix are Justin Holl, Kevin Gravel, and probably to a lesser extent, Timothy Liljegren and Teemu Kivihalme.

Sandin is the most intriguing of the group, obviously, given his age, upside and knack for looking a lot more experienced than his age would indicate. Cucumber in a bowl of hot sauce, he most certainly is, particularly with one training camp (last fall in Niagara Falls) already under his belt.

“(I’m) more calm and more confident in myself this year,” said Sandin, who looks like he’ll play the right side, with Harpur on the left, when the Leafs play their second preseason game in Ottawa on Wednesday night.

What the Leafs are going to have to decide is whether their No. 1 prospect is ready to give them 10-15 minutes a night in sheltered duty on the third pair. Babcock can protect him with a healthy batch of starts in the offensive zone, opposite third and fourth lines, and lean on his ability to move the puck, likely alongside someone who doesn’t have quite that same degree of touch — like Marincin or the 6-foot-6 Harpur.

What seems to give those guys a leg up on Schmaltz and Holl, is simple: they’ve shown they can kill penalties in the NHL. The Leafs need penalty killers after parting with Ron Hainsey and Nikita Zaitsev, their No. 1 and 2 options on defence there last season. Jake Muzzin can expect to grab more PK time as a result, and another new Leaf, Cody Ceci, will undoubtedly step into the void. Morgan Rielly, who averaged just over a minute per game shorthanded last year, should also figure in the mix.

The Leafs need at least one more sturdy body on the penalty kill, though, and that’s where Harpur thinks he can gain an edge. He and Ceci were 1-2 in nightly PK duty for the Senators last season, mostly playing together.

However, Harpur said his role with the Leafs was not specifically addressed when he talked to Babcock following the trade.

“They thought they could use some size on the back end and they lost a lot of their penalty killing minutes to Ottawa,” said Harpur. “That was a role that I had in Ottawa so if I can fill that role I think that gives me a bit of an advantage in terms of having a unique skill set. That’s something I’m focusing on.”

Those that can’t fill those gaps could be in tough to crack the roster because as Babcock said, “What role can you provide?”

Schmaltz and Holl could play the point on power plays in the NHL, just not with the Leafs. That would seem to hurt their chances somewhat depending on which other defencemen Babcock ends up wanting in the lineup.

Neither has the PK tool in their toolbox.

Marincin does, along with an ability to play either the left or right side. He spent Monday’s practice with Schmaltz, a conceivable third pair for Oct.

2. If the Leafs opt for Sandin in one of those spots they would presumably want an experienced penalty killer beside him — a Harpur or Marincin to share some of the shorthanded load.

Sandin was paired with Harpur on Monday after starting camp with Schmaltz.

“They know how I play my game and how my game is, so I think they just want me to play how I play,” Sandin said of what he thinks the Leafs are looking for from him this fall. “I think they want to see me just play my game and see where that leads.”

The Leafs could give Sandin the month of October, while Dermott is out, and then determine whether he’s ready to stick all season. Or they could opt to get him more time with the Marlies right away, where he played big minutes in all spots for Sheldon Keefe last season.

“Whatever is going to be best for him, in the end, is the decision we will make,” Babcock said.

Sandin making the team could push someone like Holl off the roster entirely, though the Leafs could also opt for eight defencemen until Dermott returns. That said, Kyle Dubas would presumably want to protect the younger, team-controlled players — Schmaltz and Harpur are RFAs at the end of the season — over the ones who are older and unprotected; Marincin and Holl are UFA next summer.

It’s also a much better bet that Holl and/or Marincin slide through waivers.

In theory, the Leafs could go with a group that looks like this to start the season, with any of those bottom four trading places:

Rielly-Ceci
Muzzin-Barrie
Harpur-Sandin
Marincin-Schmaltz

Or maybe Holl demands a spot.

“Technically, I’m a returner on the team, but I don’t feel like I really am because I didn’t play as much,” said the 27-year-old, who got into only 11 games last season. “So I want to be an everyday guy and then I’ll really feel like I’m on the team and I’m part of the deal. That’s going to be a big deal this year. I’ve just gotta prove myself.”

Holl got married over the summer, a destination-type deal in California. He’s been paired throughout camp with Gravel and thinks he has a chance to win over Babcock. He certainly fits Dubas’ puck-moving priority on the back end and believes he can play defence well enough to carve out a career for himself in the NHL.

Holl played forward until high school and worked hard to improve defensively after that as a defenceman at the University of Minnesota.

“I don’t think that defensive zone is a huge flaw for me,” he said. “I just think that it’s a lot easier to play hockey when you don’t have to play in the defensive zone.”

Holl’s situation feels a bit like Josh Leivo’s last fall. The big difference is the opening Leivo had at camp a year ago with William Nylander still unsigned. That gave him runway to start the season in Toronto before he was traded to Vancouver when Nylander returned.

Leivo also had Dubas’ word that the Leafs GM would find him an opportunity elsewhere if the path turned back toward the press box. Holl was a healthy scratch 71 times last season, and while he says he’s had no such conversation with Dubas, who found him and developed him while still running the Marlies, “I respect that Kyle did give Josh an opportunity and I’m really happy that Josh has taken advantage of it.”

In short, Holl would probably welcome a chance to play somewhere if it’s not with the Leafs.

“Usually the guys that are better come to the forefront,” Babcock said. “So we just keep watching them each and every day.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
Mirtle: 5 early takeaways from Maple Leafs training camp in Newfoundland

By James Mirtle Sep 15, 2019 71

PARADISE, Newfoundland — The initial few days of any NHL training camp are often chaotic, with so many players, new locations and unfamiliar team staff.

The Maple Leafs’ first few skates here were even more scattered given their injuries (Zach Hyman and Travis Dermott) and absences (John Tavares for the birth of his son and Mitch Marner with the tail end of a contract stalemate), meaning there was a bit of a line-blender effect.

On Sunday, however, we started to get a closer look at what Mike Babcock and his new assistant coaches are piecing together, including a little special teams.

With the caveat that it’s very early, here are a few thoughts on the Leafs’ early progress in camp.

(Steve Russell / Toronto Star via Getty Images)

1. What the lines say about who’s in and who’s out

Even though it’s Sept. 15 and a few days into camp, you can still get a sense as a player what your chances are based on whom you’re lining up with.

If it’s Auston Matthews, that’s probably a pretty good sign you’re getting the full three weeks and preseason games.

If it’s someone like Marcus Power — the undrafted local kid who had a big year with his hometown Growlers last season after four years of university hockey — probably less so.

The lines have been a little scattered through three on-ice days, but these were most of the combinations with NHLers on them on Sunday (the locks are in bold):

Johnsson – Matthews – Nylander
Kapanen – Tavares – Marner
Mikeyev – Kerfoot – Petan
Moore – Spezza – Aberg
Timashov – Goat – Korshkov
Marchment – Brooks – Bracco
Conrad – Shore – Read

Kenny Agostino also spent some time with Kalle Kossila at centre in Group 1. That accounts for 23 of the 42 forwards skating in camp and most of those who will survive the first big cuts as they get down to two groups of players before Tuesday’s first exhibition game here against Ron Hainsey’s Ottawa Senators.

Barring something unexpected, the top two lines are probably what we’ll see on the opening night of the regular season. KHLer Ilya Mikheyev — or “Mickey,” as Babcock calls him — and Nic Petan getting long looks with projected 3C Alexander Kerfoot bodes very well for them making the team, too.

Jason Spezza obviously isn’t going anywhere and is ideal as a 4C and PP2 quarterback. Trevor Moore will almost certainly make the team after a strong audition last season.

So that puts Pontus Aberg in a decent spot for consideration, as the staff gets a handle on some of the more unfamiliar newcomers.

Surprisingly, however, Babcock reserved some of his nicest comments this weekend for Yegor Korshkov, a controversial second-round pick from 2016.

“I thought Korshkov had a real good day (Saturday),” he said. “A big man, makes plays. What slows him down right now is you’ve got to have him understand the language. Mikheyev’s another big guy who can really do it. But Kappy will get first kick at the can there (on left wing with Tavares and Marner). We’ll take a look and see how that looks.”

His Jeremy Bracco comments were less effusive, even though Kapanen moving to the left side seems to open a lane for the Marlies’ scoring leader in a point-producing role.

“I’ve had lots of conversations with Braccs,” Babcock said. “Braccs has got an unbelievable skill set, the things he can do with the puck. It’s what he’s got to do without the puck and what he’s got to do in his own zone that are in the way of him being an NHL player. We always talk — are you on the four-year plan or the five-year plan?

“For most kids coming out of junior, it’s a five-year plan. It’s that hard to play in the league. But I think he’s taken huge strides. He’s a good kid. He wants to be a player. He’s tried to work hard at it.”

This will be Bracco’s fifth season since his draft year and his third as a full-time pro. Time’s not running out by any means, and on a weaker NHL club he probably makes it.

But he’s going to have to have a great camp to convince Babcock he’s ready.

2. What the D pairs say about who’s in and who’s out

Similarly, the Leafs’ top two D pairs are completely locked in, right from day one of camp.

Everything else is up in the air.

Here’s the list of what the coaching staff has been working out so far:

Muzzin – Barrie
Rielly – Ceci
Sandin – Schmaltz
Harpur – Marincin
Gravel – Holl
Kivihalme – Liljegren

That’s 12 of the 23 defencemen in camp, and all of the ones who have a hope of playing in the NHL in the near future. Expect 14 or 15 to get a longer look, with maybe a couple of the young Marlies like Joseph Duszak or Mac Hollowell getting into a preseason game or two.

The Leafs are likely going to carry seven defencemen out of camp, so depending on what kind of camp Sandin has.

Kivihalme had a strong showing at prospects camp last week, but I expect they’ll want him to start in the AHL, potentially on a top pair with Liljegren. Gravel and Holl are probably the wild cards at this point, depending on what kind of camp Sandin has.

It really does feel like any of the six or seven defencemen after the big four could get one of the final three spots.

“I’d love to tell you I do,” Babcock said when asked whether he had any idea what his third pair could look like this season. “I’m just going to keep on watching. No idea. That’s the truth. I know who four (of my D) are. But you guys do, too.”

3. Kasperi Kapanen = the new Hyman

Babcock revealed that Hyman could miss 14 or 15 games to start the regular season, which takes the Leafs up until early November at minimum.

That opens the door wide for Kapanen to impress on Tavares’ left wing in nearly 20 percent of the season, a spot he played very sparingly in last season (under 50 minutes at even strength).

Hyman-Tavares-Marner drove a lot of the Leafs’ success at five-on-five last year, eating tough matchups while also producing huge point totals.

It was probably going to be tough to duplicate exactly that given their high on-ice shooting percentage, but now they get a new look with a different speedy right-shot left-winger and it’s hard to forecast how that will play out.
Kapanen isn’t as hard on the puck on the forecheck as Hyman, but he has some higher-level skill tools to work with and he’ll get them the puck in the offensive zone more frequently. The organization played Kapanen on left wing a lot with the Marlies because they knew they were loaded on the right side, with Marner and Nylander blocking him for years, so it’s not as if the position will be altogether unfamiliar.

Playing the off wing, generally speaking, is harder in the D zone, but it could open up more scoring opportunities, especially with Marner’s playmaking abilities on the opposite wing.

It’s going to be important that Kapanen’s awareness when he has possession continues to improve, as finding his high-profile teammates and getting them the puck in the offensive zone will be a must.

“It’s nothing that new, but it’s something I have to adjust to and get better at,” Kapanen said. “Playing with those guys, obviously I’m going to be the guy skating and getting the puck to them and standing in front of the net. I’ll let them do all the nice things and I’ll do the dirty work.”

“There’s a real good opportunity for someone else: Why not Kappy?” Babcock said. “Kappy plays hard. He works hard. He’s got to adjust his game a bit, but he can.”

4. Ice-time distribution possibilities

One thing I really like about having Kapanen on the Tavares line and Johnsson on the Matthews line is they can lean in on their top two lines more than they did last season.

Conversely, if they put someone like Mikheyev on left wing on one of the top two lines, they’d have to worry about workload and strength of competition for a new player in the league.

Tavares was 21st among NHL forwards last year with 16:18 minutes per game at even strength. Matthews was 33rd with only 15:57.

Both of those figures will go noticeably up this season as Babcock dials back his third and fourth lines. The ice time breakdown from lines one through four could look something like 20-20-13-8 once you factor in special teams and overtime.

“We’re going to be able to get (Matthews), especially without Naz here, and Johnny more than their fair share of what’s coming (in terms of minutes),” Babcock said.

Twenty-six forwards around the NHL averaged at least 20 minutes a game last season. That would mean another minute for Tavares and another minute and a half for Matthews, which will be welcome news to much of the fan base.

The Leafs are very top-heavy on the cap, so it makes sense they’re going to need to be top-heavy on minutes, too.

5. Power-play roles shifting

New assistant coach Paul McFarland’s special-teams influence has been apparent early. Mitch Marner was working on some power-play drills Sunday as part of the early on-ice group.

And he was on the left flank instead of the right, where he has been the Leafs PP1 general for years.

It’s hard to read too much into what the Leafs are doing on the man advantage at this point given all of their best players are split up over three separate groups, but Marner confirmed he expects to be in a different role.

“We’ll see,” Marner said. “I think the plan is still to have me and Auston on the same unit. So until that happens, it’s just kind of a feel-out moment, trying to see what Paul (McFarland) wants to do with us and seeing how he wants it to run.

“But I mean last year our power-play ranking was pretty high up there. Hopefully, that can happen with this team.”

On paper, the Leafs had the NHL’s eighth-most effective power play at 21.8 percent, but it struggled in the second half of the season as opposing teams adjusted to what they were doing.

The plan this year will be for the unit to be more unpredictable, with shooting threats from more than only Matthews and Tavares.

“I’ve tried to work on my one-T because I thought I’d be in that position (on the left wall),” Marner said. “We’d talked about it kind of at the end of last year and throughout the summer, what was going to happen with the power play. I guess I just try and adjust quickly, try and be more of a shooter.”

“I think it’s good for the players,” Babcock said. “They’ve got a new voice (in McFarland and Dave Hakstol). A new way, a different term, different thoughts on the power play and the penalty kill. We all need to get better, and they’re going to help us.”

The Leafs are expected to make a huge mass of cuts late Sunday or early Monday, a group that will be made up of players going to the Marlies, Growlers or back to junior. I’ll update in this space when that comes down.

These seven players were sent to junior: Mikhail Abramov (Victoriaville), Semyon Der-Aruchintsev (Peterborough), Filip Kral (Spokane), Kalle Loponen (Sudbury), Marc-Antoine Pepin (Shawinigan), Nicholas Robertson (Peterborough) and Riley Stotts (Calgary).

These 15 players were sent to the Marlies ahead of their 2019 training camp, which opens Sept. 24: Matthew Bradley, Justin Brazeau, Giorgio Estephan, Brady Ferguson, Alex Gudbranson, Ryan Johnston, Michael Kapla, Aaron Luchuk, Tanner MacMaster, Zach O’Brien, Scott Pooley, Marcus Power, Sergei Sapego, Ian Scott and Maksim Zhukov.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
Q&A: Frederik Andersen on his ideal workload, the Leafs’ best golfer and why he has no use for save percentage

By Jonas Siegel Sep 16, 2019

ST. JOHN’S — Even though he may be his team’s most important player, Frederik Andersen tends to blend into the background on these Maple Leafs.

Maybe that’s because of all the star power. Maybe that’s because Andersen, despite standing 6-foot-4 with bright red hair, is more on the reserved side. Whatever the case, the 29-year-old remains hugely critical to the Leafs’ cause, with the power to drive a Stanley Cup run or imperil it.

In a conversation with The Athletic, the Leafs’ No. 1 goaltender attached a number to his ideal workload this season, shined light on how he and the Leafs measure his job performance (it’s not save percentage) and detailed what he thinks will make Auston Matthews a good captain if he draws the honour.

What was the most interesting thing you did in the offseason?

(Long pause). I don’t know. Maybe it wasn’t that interesting if I can’t come up with something.

Did you do any family trips?

No. I just went home to see everyone back home. (Another pause). I guess, a Jewish wedding would be considered pretty interesting if you haven’t done it before, with Zach (Hyman) being married. A lot of guys went to that and Matt Martin’s wedding. We were able to do that over that same weekend, so that was pretty fun.

Did you see Zach get hoisted up on a chair?

Oh, yeah. Yeah, the whole deal.

You get involved?

Yeah, we were all in there. I don’t think I was all the way in tight, but I was definitely seeing and taking in the experience, so that was a lot of fun.

Do you play any tennis, golf, any of that stuff in the summer?

Yeah, I play a lot of golf. I actually got a lot of rounds in, a little bit too many.

Is Denmark good for golf courses?

Uh, not great. There’s one I wanted to try, but I didn’t really play much when I was home. There’s supposed to be a new course that’s pretty good. I would say the average standard of golf course is not really up to par from what it is over here. I think in my hometown, in the district, they’re not really allowed to use too much sprays and stuff for the soils. They’re trying to be very climate-friendly.

So you play more in California?

Yeah, California has really good courses. They had a really nice course in Minnesota. I was skating a little bit there.

How did you end up in Minnesota?

I was just doing some of the goalie camps, some camps going up to get ready (for the season), just try to work out a little bit in different places because you’re going to be in Toronto all year. It’s nice to move around. I was on the way down to that camp I did with Auston and (Darryl) Belfry, so it worked out pretty good.

Who’s the best golfer on the team?

I think (Jake Muzzin) is probably the best. He’s really good. He’s got a very high ceiling.

So he fluctuates between being really good and not good?

Yeah, I played with him and (Nick) Shore in LA, out west in the summer. I think he shot like four or so under through like nine or something. He was on a heater. But like everyone, he can fall apart, too. (Laughs.) He finished with a good round, but obviously not as good as he was trending.

Is there anyone on the team who’s surprisingly not good?

Uh.

Like where do you fit in?

I would say pretty average. Not great. I can play a decent high ceiling, but also some trouble keeping the ball in play. I think I ended up around 11 handicap, so not terrible, but not great. I think it’s fun when you get the bug of wanting to play (a lot) and play cool courses. That’s when I enjoy playing golf more is getting to play a little bit better and then getting a chance to play some really nice courses.

Well, is it like a recent thing that you started playing golf the last couple of years?

I always played a little bit of golf, but I think this year I definitely got a little bit better at enjoying being out there. You try to get out a lot, because sometimes in the summer it’s long days if you work out from 8-11 (in the morning), you have a full day of sitting on the couch. That’s not what you want to do. You want to get out and enjoy the weather and do stuff you can’t necessarily do much of in the Toronto winter.

Speaking of Toronto, how did you feel about last season? Were you happy with the way everything went?

Of course not! No. Of course not. You enjoy the day-to-day process. I think that’s something we want to keep doing moving forward is just focus on what we can do today and not really focus on the end result yet. I think it’s cliche, but you’ve gotta enjoy the process and enjoy the growth you have and ability to grow together as a team from right now. There’s 31 teams that want to win the Cup every year. You still gotta find a way to really enjoy that day-to-day process. I think that’s something we can all be better at. And I think that will make you enjoy your life more, if you actually find joy in doing small things every day. Like, working hard out here (in Newfoundland), which is obviously awesome. I think we lucked out with the weather, too. But overall, obviously the end result (last season) not happy about not winning. It doesn’t really matter what round it is. If we would’ve gone all the way to the final and lost we’d have the same feeling.

Your performance in the playoffs, were you at least happy with that part of it?

Yeah, I thought I played well. We think as a team we didn’t come out the way we wanted to in the last game and get the win. But again, we had a lot of good stuff to get to Game 7, had good moments in the series. It’s not really a focus (now). You don’t want to look back too much, because you can’t really do much about it. All you can do is try to focus on today.

Andersen had a .943 even-strength save percentage in the playoffs. (Greg M. Cooper // USA Today)

So looking ahead, you look at your save percentage year by year by year, and it’s very steady. It’s almost the same every year. Do you think there’s another level for you to get to? Do you think that includes a Vezina? Do you think there’s still another tier for you to climb?

Yeah, of course. I think I have the ability to be up there. I think I have more to give. I don’t really look at save percentage too much.

So what do you judge yourself on?

We use different ways of grading goals actually: something that you have no chance on; goals that you have somewhat of a chance on; and then, obviously, goals that you should have saved. Because I don’t get to decide if there’s 40% chances from the blue line or if there’s seven grade-A chances right in the middle of the slot. I don’t get to decide that.

Save percentage is a very broad and a very average stat. I think every goalie goes through ups and downs (with it). Obviously, I’m aware of my save percentage. I saw later in the year it was pretty high, and then all of a sudden — I remember the Tampa Bay game where literally everything bounced in off someone, and you end up on the paper it’s a (bad night).

Yeah, it’s four goals on 15 shots.

Exactly. So then you actually look reasonably on it, and be like, Well, what can you do different on a goal that hits the guy here left of me, bounce over, you try to play that one, and then it bounces back-door on an empty net.
So do you guys have a tally at the end of the year of all those goals?

You’d have to talk to Stevie (Briere). He has the understanding and breakdown of what he wants. You obviously don’t want the should’ve-had goals at the highest (level). The should’ve-had goals should be lower than the ones you had no chance on. In a perfect world, it’d probably be a good chunk of those no-chance goals.

And very few of those ones that you should’ve stopped.

Yeah, exactly. That’s kind of how I look at it. Then you see where you’re actually at. I’m sure you can double-check with the math, but if you let in seven goals less over the whole year you’re jumping up something crazy on the save percentage. (Editor’s note: Subtract seven goals from Andersen’s 2018-19 regular season and he would’ve ended up with a .921 save percentage, as opposed to .917.)

And that’s like two of those nights where nothing is going your way.

Exactly. You can’t really worry too much about that stuff. That’s where looking back or forward, there’s not really anything you can do. You can just focus on what you can do today. Even in this one situation with practice, where it’s like one shot, worry about that, and that’s it.

You saw Kawhi in the playoffs with the Raptors. The whole load management thing was a big thing. Did that change anything you thought about it?

I don’t really know enough about basketball to really see how that affected him. They still play quite a bit right when they do play.

Have you talked to the sports science team about it this year or Kyle Dubas?

I definitely talked a little bit about (how many games I want to play). The ballpark probably would be mid-50s, maybe go a little bit lower and see where that leads us. Because it has been a lot of hockey. It’s tough to say before the season even starts where you’re going to end up. It also depends on where we are in the standings. You want to go out there and try to win every night. You can’t rest for the playoffs if you don’t get in. That’s the first goal is to try to get in obviously.

You know Auston pretty well. There’s obviously a lot of talk about him becoming the captain. What do you think would make him a good leader knowing him pretty well?

He’s a guy who’s very dedicated. I think he enjoys being out shooting pucks, especially after practice and stuff like that. He’s in the, I think, I don’t know if you want to put him as the very best, but definitely top-3 in goal-scoring, I think. There’s some other good candidates, but I’d definitely put him up there. And his release is right up there as well. And he’s still out there working on it. That’s a thing that tells me how much he wants to be better. I think a lot of things as a captain, it’s not just vocal. It’s your attitude and it’s the way you lead by example. I think that could be a way he could lead, that’s for sure. And regardless of if he has the C or not, he won’t change, and I think that’s probably the most important thing with whoever gets named. We have a really good group of guys who’ve been around and (become) more mature. I think whoever gets the C obviously gets some added pressure, but I think it’s upon the whole group to be part of that.

I know it’s important to you. That’s something you mentioned wanting to do more last year.

Yeah, of course. I think everyone’s got to lead in (their own) way. I think that’s when guys and groups come together and do something special is when you can have everyone on the team lead and push the bus in the right direction.
Golden Knights TV analyst Mike McKenna fills in at practice

By David Schoen
September 16, 2019 - 5:02 PM

Mike McKenna is not coming out of retirement.

But as the Golden Knights’ studio analyst said on his Twitter account, old habits die hard.

McKenna, who hung up his goaltending gear in August after 14 seasons as a professional, was back in the crease Monday during the Knights’ practice at City National Arena.

Look at Golden Knights studio analyst Mike McKenna fighting around that screen.

McKenna, who started his pro career with the Las Vegas Wranglers in the ECHL, was in net today at practice. (No Dylan Ferguson, who Gerard Gallant said Sunday wasn’t feeling well.) #VegasBorn pic.twitter.com/ER7dJP8R82

— David Schoen 📰🗞🏒 (@DavidSchoenLVRJ) September 16, 2019

The 36-year-old filled in while Dylan Ferguson remained sidelined with an undisclosed injury or illness. Marc-Andre Fleury did not participate in either of the two practices, leaving the Knights with three available goaltenders.

McKenna started his career with the Las Vegas Wranglers of the ECHL in 2005 after he spent four seasons at St. Lawrence University.

He appeared in 35 games for seven NHL organizations and spent the majority of his career in the American Hockey League. Last season, McKenna played for Ottawa (10 games) and Philadelphia (one game), and he also suited up for AHL clubs Belleville and Lehigh Valley.

The Knights hired the personable native of St. Louis last month to serve as the studio analyst for its pregame, intermission and postgame shows.

McKenna also will appear in several other media platforms for the team, but don’t expect him to serve as the team’s emergency goaltender.

Subtle changes

The Knights lost two of their top penalty killers from last season (Pierre-Edouard Bellemare and Ryan Carpenter), and coach Gerard Gallant added an intriguing name to the list of possible replacements.

Winger Alex Tuch is expected to play in short-handed situations after rarely killing penalties during his first two seasons in the league.

Tuch logged 27 seconds of ice time on the penalty kill last season, but his speed and reach could make him a threat during 5-on-4 situations.

“You try and make different guys,” Gallant said. “We’ll see. There’s exhibition games for that later on. But I bet Alex Tuch is going to get some looks in the preseason.”

One other move Gallant divulged is Nate Schmidt will slide back to right defense. Schmidt has been paired with rookie Nic Hague, a left defenseman, through the first four days of training camp.

Sparks to start

The Knights did not announce their roster for Tuesday’s game at Colorado, but Gallant indicated goaltender Garret Sparks will start.

Sparks went 8-9-1 as the backup for Toronto last season and was acquired by the Knights in July.
French connection helps Nicolas Roy at Golden Knights training camp

By Ben Gotz Las Vegas Review-Journal
September 16, 2019 - 4:33 PM

As Nicolas Roy traveled across the country to join the Golden Knights’ organization, the team prepared to make him feel right at home during training camp.

The 22-year-old prospect was placed to veteran Jonathan Marchessault’s left in the locker room and to the right on the ice, so the elder Quebec native could help the younger one adjust to Las Vegas. It’s made a hectic time simpler for Roy as he tries to earn a bottom-six role with the Knights.

“(Marchessault has) been in the league for a couple years now, so he knows what to do and he talks a lot on the ice,” Roy said. “It helps me a lot.”

Roy started training camp by centering a line with Marchessault, the Knights’ leading scorer last season, at left wing. The team also placed the two French speakers’ locker stalls next to each other, a savvy move as it tries to evaluate the 6-foot-4 center’s readiness for the NHL.

Marchessault remembered how much speaking French to teammates David Savard and Michael Chaput in the minors meant to him and he is happy to pay it forward.

“It always helped me out, so I’m trying to be there (for him),” Marchessault said. “It would just make your life a little easier.”

Easy would be welcome for Roy, who joined the Knights via trade in June after three seasons in the Carolina Hurricanes’ system. He was acquired, along with a conditional 2021 fifth-round draft pick, in exchange for forward Erik Haula.

The Knights scouted him plenty before making the deal. He led the Charlotte Checkers, the Hurricanes’ AHL affiliate, to a Calder Cup championship earlier that month. Their opponent in the final was the Knights’ affiliate: the Chicago Wolves.

“He led their team in chances created when they played against us,” Wolves coach Rocky Thompson said. “He was in all situations. He was a defensive penalty killer. He was on their first-unit power play. He took important faceoffs.

“He was a good player. And he’s big. I thought he skated well. He was difficult for us. They were putting him against (Knights’ top prospect) Cody (Glass) in the playoffs to try and nullify that line.”

Roy and Glass met again in training camp as they try to prove they don’t need to play another game in the AHL. For Roy, that means showing the Knights his size and well-rounded game could make an impact at fourth-line center or higher up the lineup. His large frame could serve him well in a checking role, but he’s capable of doing more than delivering hits.

“I don’t think he’s a prototypical power forward,” Checkers coach Ryan Warsofsky said. “He has more finesse to his game.”

He showed that skill on a line with Marchessault in the Knights’ first preseason game Sunday and also on the team’s second power-play unit. He received time on the penalty kill as well, all the while getting advice in French from a veteran teammate willing to lend an assist.

“He’s really good offensively and defensively,” Marchessault said. “He’s aware everywhere he’s on the ice. Smart player. I think it’s going to be a tough battle for him and a few other guys to get those last spots on the team.”

LAS VEGAS REVIEW JOURNAL LOADED: 09.17.2019
There will be labor peace in the NHL for the next three seasons.

The league’s player association announced Monday that it will not reopen the current collective bargaining agreement, which keeps it in place until the end of the 2021-22 season. If the players had reopened, the CBA would have expired following this season and raised the threat of a work stoppage.

The decision shows that the optimism around the labor talks for the past nine months wasn’t all lip service. It also proves the money at stake was enough to prevent the contentious negotiations that led to work stoppages in 1994-95, 2004-05 and 2012-13.

The league and the players will now work toward a CBA extension to maintain labor peace beyond 2022.

“While players have concerns with the current CBA, we agree with the league that working together to address those concerns is the preferred course of action instead of terminating the agreement following this season,” NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr said in a statement. “We have been having discussions with the league about an extension of the CBA and expect that those talks will continue.”

The NHL has seen franchise valuations rise, salaries soar and job opportunities increase under the current CBA, so the two sides were motivated to work together. The league declined to reopen Aug. 30, but the NHLPA’s decision carried more intrigue because it was the side pushing for change.

The players’ issues with the current CBA largely revolve around “logistical money issues” such as escrow. Golden Knights NHLPA representative Nate Schmidt told the Review-Journal in August. Schmidt declined to comment after practice Monday because the NHLPA hadn’t announced its decision yet.

Escrow is a portion of each player’s salary that gets withheld to ensure a 50-50 split of hockey-related revenue with the owners. Other issues expected to be discussed in the ongoing negotiations include international hockey participation and alterations to the pension plan and long-term health benefits.

The decision not to reopen ensures the CBA will be in place when the NHL’s national TV deal with NBC expires in the 2021 offseason.

Lee Berke, whose LHB Sports, Entertainment & Media advises more than 30 professional and amateur teams, said the league’s next national TV deal could be worth double its current $200 million annual value — or more.

A new TV deal could keep league revenues and player salaries on the upswing. The NHL’s lower and upper limits for team salaries were set at $48.3 million and $64.3 million in 2011-12. They will be $60.2 million and $81.5 million this upcoming season.

Franchise evaluations are also skyrocketing. Before the last lockout in 2012, Forbes said the average NHL team was worth $240 million. By December 2018 that average climbed to $630 million.

That amount of money will motivate owners and players to keep working together for at least another three seasons.

“We are pleased with the NHL Players’ Association’s decision not to reopen the collective bargaining agreement,” commissioner Gary Bettman said in a statement. “We look forward to continuing to work with the NHLPA for the benefit of all stakeholders, especially our fans.”
This small change in Golden Knights defense could stabilize blue line

By Justin Emerson
Tuesday, Sept. 17, 2019 | 2 a.m.

Golden Knights coach Gerard Gallant made a minor announcement Monday, one that won’t perk too many ears but will get hardcore fans rethinking what the Vegas blue line will look like this season.

By saying that Nate Schmidt is going to play on the right side, it confirmed the suspicions that both of the Golden Knights top-four right defensemen will be left-handed. Schmidt and Shea Theodore will anchor the right side, with Brayden McNabb pairing with one of them.

“When he plays good over there, that’s where you want him to play, where he plays his best hockey,” Gallant said. “Similar to Shea Theodore ... it changes but they’re both playing real well on that side.”

As a lefty, Schmidt likes playing in the defensive zone to help him extend his stick but keep his body facing the play, and it’s easier to fire off a shot after taking a pass along the blue line in the offensive zone.

But there are also challenges, notably on defensive zone breakouts and carrying the puck through the neutral zone where he is on his back hand. When he’s in the offensive zone it’s a tougher to pick the puck up when it’s rolling around the boards.

“Both of them have their benefits,” Schmidt said. “Personally, I like it when I’m defending and when I’m in the offensive zone are the two best times.”

Statistically, Schmidt is better on the right side than the left. He played most of 2017-18 and a lot of last season as a right defenseman with McNabb on his left. In 39 games last year, Schmidt boasted a 51.2 Corsi percentage and 54.17 expected goals percentage when on the ice at 5-on-5 from the right side. When he shifted to the left for the final 22 games alongside Deryk Engelland, he sat at 48.9% Corsi and 49.0% expected goals.

Justin Emerson and Case Keefer continue their preseason series looking at every player on the Vegas Golden Knights' roster with top defenseman Nate Schmidt.

The trickle-down effects of Schmidt playing on the right are intriguing as well, namely who he pairs with. Schmidt playing on the right this season eliminates the possibility of returning to the right-handed Engelland as his partner. Considering how well Theodore and McNabb played together last year, it’s safe to say they will remain together.

Schmidt has skated alongside rookie Nicolas Hague during training camp, but nearly every veteran is paired with a rookie so there isn’t much to read into there (it could, however, be interesting if Hague wins a roster spot out of camp). Jon Merrill and Nick Holden are Vegas’ other unaccounted-for returning left-handed defensemen. Schmidt will play top-four minutes, meaning whoever he partners with will be elevated to that role as well, something Merrill, Holden and obviously a potential rookie have not done consistently with the Golden Knights.

Odds are, where Schmidt or Theodore or McNabb play on opening night is not where they play for 82 games. Injuries happen, adjustments are needed and things just change over the course of a hockey season.

“I’m not saying (Schmidt) can’t play the left side in some situations,” Gallant said. “Just in case of that so you won’t come back at me and say ‘Why are you playing him over there?’ ”

The plan is for Schmidt to play the season on his off-side. Who he pairs with will have a major impact on team success. Both Schmidt and Theodore were better on the right side last year, but that was with McNabb on their left and no real way to differentiate which variable, the position or McNabb, is more to credit.

If Schmidt’s numbers look more like they did when he was on the left, it would not be hard to draw the conclusion that McNabb’s presence is a boon to his partner.
NHL players stay with CBA, labor peace set to at least 2022

By Stephen Wynno, Associated Press

Monday, Sept. 16, 2019 | 4:42 p.m.

The National Hockey League will play its next three seasons without the threat of a work stoppage amid optimism that labor peace will stretch beyond 2022.

The NHL Players’ Association on Monday announced it would not opt out of the current collective bargaining agreement. Combined with the owners’ decision earlier this month not to trigger their opt-out clause, the current CBA remains in effect until September 2022 and the sides will continue working on an extension.

"While players have concerns with the current CBA, we agree with the league that working together to address those concerns is the preferred course of action instead of terminating the agreement following this season," NHLPA executive director Don Fehr said. "We have been having discussions with the league about an extension of the CBA and expect that those talks will continue."

Not terminating the CBA is a positive sign that negotiations are progressing toward an extension that could last until 2025 or 2026. That would be the longest period of labor peace in hockey in decades.

"Ultimately, it's nice there's going to be labor peace now for the next three seasons," Philadelphia Flyers player representative James van Riemsdyk said. "That's going to be good for everyone, and I'm sure fans are excited. I'm sure they hate hearing about that stuff."

Owners and players have been meeting since February and sessions increased in frequency in recent weeks. When the league also did not opt out of the CBA, Commissioner Gary Bettman cited momentum and the importance of labor peace overriding any issues the owners might have.

Bettman said Monday the league is pleased with the players' decision and looked "forward to continuing to work with the NHLPA for the benefit of all stakeholders, especially our fans."

Players made significant concessions in the last CBA, which was agreed to in 2013. Escrow payments, health care, Olympic participation and what qualifies as hockey-related revenue are things players have cited as some of their top concerns.

Vancouver Canucks player representative Bo Horvat said escrow is still the main topic players want to fix, and there seems to be general agreement across the union about that.

"Obviously it's the greatest league to play in, but you want it to be fair and stuff like that," Washington Capitals forward Chandler Stephenson said.

Players held two conference calls in recent days to discuss the situation after almost 50 met in person in Chicago on Sept. 4. Very little information has come out of the talks, which is considered a signal of a more united NHLPA and optimism that progress was being made.

"Every time you have any type of negotiation between two parties, those are the two parties that should be talking and it should not be through media or a third party because there's a lot of things that get twisted and the more time the story gets told, something will change a little bit," New York Rangers goaltender Henrik Lundqvist said recently. "If you can stick to just talking to the other side, I think it's easier to get to the right answers and solutions."

In a departure from labor negotiations of 2004-05 and 2012-13 that were full of rancor, Fehr has called this round cordial and pleasant. Bettman referred to it as "joint problem-solving" rather than a combative relationship.

"It's a dialogue that continues," Bettman said. "It's a relationship that's important, there's mutual respect, there's good communication flow and we're busy focused on what may for each of our constituents be the appropriate path forward."

The league and players seem to be on the same page at least in drawing up a calendar of more international play, which could mean another World Cup of Hockey as soon as February 2021. Hockey business is booming, and the NHL will be able to negotiate a new U.S. television rights deal that begins in 2021.

"I'm very optimistic about future possibilities, especially with U.S. media negotiations coming up in an environment that we haven't yet had an opportunity to negotiate in," Bettman said. "I remain very optimistic that revenues will continue to grow and will grow at a very healthy rate."

The health of the league is a significant reason why neither players nor owners wanted to set up another labor confrontation over the next 12 months. If talks became contentious, there remains the threat of games being canceled for the fourth time since 1994.

"Just kind of hearing guys that went through the last one, it was kind of more of a war than a negotiation," Stephenson said. "I don't know if the players want to go through that again or even the owners."

LAS VEGAS SUN LOADED: 09.17.2019
Capital One Arena revises bag policy to ban backpacks of all sizes

By Scott Allen

September 16 at 2:03 PM

Capital One Arena, home of the Capitals, Wizards and Georgetown men’s basketball, is the latest venue to ban backpacks of all sizes. A Monumental Sports and Entertainment spokeswoman said the revised bag policy, which will take effect when the Capitals host the Chicago Blackhawks in their preseason opener Monday, was mandated by both the NHL and NBA.

In addition to backpacks and backpack-style bags, such as drawstring bags, luggage bags, roller bags, hard-sided bags and briefcases of all sizes are prohibited inside Capital One Area, as are bags larger than 14 inches long, 14 inches tall and 6 inches wide. All of those restrictions were in place last season. Adults accompanied by small children are permitted to bring diaper bags into the arena, and exceptions will also be made for fans who use backpacks or other types of bags for medical reasons.

Baggage restrictions have tightened at sports venues in recent years, with the NFL introducing a clear bag policy in 2018. The San Jose Sharks, Carolina Hurricanes and St. Louis Blues are among the NHL teams going one step further than teams like the Capitals, by implementing clear bag policies at their arenas for the coming season. Bans on backpacks, regardless of size, are increasingly common. Citing safety concerns, the Nationals joined a handful of MLB teams in banning backpacks at Nationals Park this year. Scott Fear, the Nationals’ VP of public safety and security, said the ban would “make the stadium safer and much more secure, by prohibiting the bag that has the most compartments.” The Nationals have continued to allow drawstring bags since implementing their backpack ban.

There are no plans to have temporary storage lockers installed outside Capital One Arena on game nights, as is the case at Nationals Park and D.C. United’s Audi Field. In hopes of expediting the entry process, which requires all guests to walk through a metal detector, Capital One Arena will introduce “No Bag/Express Lines” at the F Street Entrance for fans without bags or bags smaller than 4.5 inches by 6.5 inches.

The backpack ban isn’t the only change at Capital One Arena this season. Monumental Sports and Entertainment announced Monday that the second phase of renovations to the 22-year-old venue are on track to be completed by the Capitals' regular season home opener on Oct. 5. While the full capabilities of the new center-hung scoreboard will not be on display during the preseason, Monday’s game should provide fans a first look at the behemoth’s 360-degree continuous video screen and 7,000 total square feet of LED display across eight distinct display areas.

Phase II of renovations at @CapitalOneArena are slated for completion for the @Capitals season opener Oct. 5.

Washington Post LOADED: 09.17.2019
With any move there is an adjustment period, but Wilson, who knows Leipsic from playing with and against him in camps when the two were growing up in Canada, believes the dressing room in Washington is different. Players who have bounced around the league find a sense of comfort and “feeling at home” in D.C.

“A guy like Brett Connolly, a good buddy of mine, he said it was so easy to just worry about playing hockey because the off-ice stuff was just not a big deal,” Wilson said. “And that is the mentality that I think the leadership group here has had for a long time.”

Leipsic said the transition has been good so far. He is staying in a hotel until he is able to find a more permanent place in the area. But as far as the on-ice stuff goes, he feels ready to show he is able to slot into the lineup every day and gain the trust in the coaching staff.

“I’m just coming in here and still trying to prove myself as an NHL player,” he said.

Washington Post LOADED: 09.17.2019

By Samantha PellSeptember 16 at 1:14 PM

At 25 years old, Brendan Leipsic has already had a long, winding journey in the NHL. The left winger has been traded twice, selected in the expansion draft, waived, claimed off waivers and finally this summer become an unrestricted free agent after not being offered a contract. For some teams, Leipsic’s inability to stick with one club would be a red flag. The Washington Capitals see it as an opportunity.

The Capitals have had success with low-risk, inexpensive reclamation projects in recent years — notably forwards Brett Connolly and Devante Smith-Pelly. And while the organization knows taking a chance won’t always work out, Leipsic could be the Capitals’ next successful addition.

The 5-foot-10, 182-pound forward, who signed a one-year, $700,000 contract in July, made his debut with Washington in the team’s 4-3 overtime win against the Chicago Blackhawks in its preseason opener Monday at Capital One Arena. In a game featuring mostly prospects, Leipsic skated on a line with forward Tom Wilson and center Travis Boyd. Wilson scored the game-winning goal.

“It’s not easy,” Leipsic said of his constant bouncing around. “You want to stay in one place and get some traction, and hopefully this can be the spot.”

Leipsic, a Winnipeg native, is on his fifth team since making his NHL debut with Toronto during the 2015-16 season. Vegas selected him in the 2017 expansion draft, then traded him in February 2018 to Vancouver. After getting waived by the Canucks, he was picked up by the Los Angeles Kings in December.

He set career highs with seven goals and 23 points in 62 games last season with the Canucks and the Kings. The year after he was drafted by Nashville in 2012, he tied for the Canadian Hockey League lead with 120 points for the Portland Winterhawks (49 goals, 71 assists), so he has an offensive pedigree.

The Capitals’ turnover among their bottom-six forwards has been one of the major story lines entering the season after a first-round exit against Carolina in last season’s playoffs exposed a lack of depth. Leipsic, along with Garnet Hathaway and Richard Panik, were the organization’s free agent forward additions this offseason.

Leipsic is the biggest question mark of the group. He will be the favorite to win the left wing job on the fourth line but will face competition from Boyd, Chandler Stephenson and other top organizational prospects.

“We’re going to be open to evaluating performance,” General Manager Brian MacLellan said. “There’s certain things we’re looking for in our bottom six, and hopefully some guys are going to provide that.”

Capitals Coach Todd Reiden said he envisions Leipsic as a player who can be moved up and down the lineup if the team has injuries or other extenuating circumstances in the top six. Carl Hagelin, also known for his fast skating, played a similar role last season. The Capitals also used Connolly and Smith-Pelly in similar capacities during their time in Washington.

“When we were evaluating [Leipsic], we liked a lot of things that he did in L.A.,” Reiden said. “He was able to slot up in their lineup and make some plays with some pretty good players. He doesn’t really feel out of place with the higher-end guys, and they have some there in L.A.”

Leipsic can’t pinpoint exactly what went wrong during his other stops, but when he was searching for the right organization this summer, he was drawn to the Capitals’ team culture and their up-tempo, physical style.

“There were some spots where I was trying to be a part of the youth movement, and it just didn’t work out,” Leipsic said. “I think I had a good run in L.A. last year, but they just sort of went in a different direction, so here I am in Washington and hopefully I should have a fresh start and make a really good first impression.”

By Samantha Pell

Brendan Leipsic, on his fifth team since 2015-16, hopes to find a home with the Capitals

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“I’m just coming in here and still trying to prove myself as an NHL player,” he said.
WASHINGTON -- Hockey made its long-awaited return to Capital One Arena on Monday as the Capitals opened their preseason slate with a 4-3 overtime win over the Chicago Blackhawks. Tom Wilson was the best player on either bare-bones roster and he scored the overtime winner.

Besides Wilson, here are the players who impressed on Monday.

Aliaksei Protas

Protas already stands out because of his size at 6-foot-6. It was his play that stood out during the game, however, as Protas was the best player of the night for Washington.

Playing in the high slot on the power play, Protas took a pass from Christian Djoos. Chicago's penalty kill box collapsed around him and he calmly backhanded a pass to a wide-open Travis Boyd who ripped the shot past goalie Collin Delia.

Less than two minutes later, Protas took the puck from behind the Caps' net and started the breakout. He passed off the puck then made a beeline down the ice. When he saw Beck Malenstyn grab the puck along the boards, he headed to the front of the net and was there when Delia lost control of the puck to get the goal.

In addition, Protas recorded an assist on the overtime winner and was impressive for his all-around play. He forced Chicago to the neutral zone with a poke check on the blue line out of the defensive zone and he recorded two blocked shots.

Christian Djoos

The Capitals will need to cut salary early in the season to get under the salary cap and to many, Djoos looked like a possible candidate to be headed out of Washington. He did what he could on Monday, however, to show he should stick around.

Djoos does not typically get much power-play time during the regular season -- he had a grand total of 3:15 power-play TOI in 45 games last season -- but he got plenty of it on Monday and he looked right at home. He was good holding the blue line with the extra man and distributed the puck well from the point. He was rewarded with a secondary assist when he fed Protas in the high-slot in the second period.

Djoos, however, needed to show more than his prowess on the power play -- where he likely will not get much time again this season -- and he did that with an overall solid effort on defense. He outplayed his counterpart, Jonas Siegenthaler, whose place on the team seems all but assured. The only of Chicago’s three goals Djoos was on the ice for was Adam Boqvist’s wicked shot off the post and in and there was nothing anyone could do about that one whether it was Djoos, John Carlson or Bobby Orr.

Beck Malenstyn

If Malenstyn has a future in the NHL, it will be as a fourth-liner. He gave a glimpse of what he had to offer at that NHL level in this game with his high-energy play.

Malenstyn was relentless on the forecheck and looked like he was in constant search of something to hit every time he was on the ice. He was also great on the penalty kill and recorded an assist on Protas’ goal when he flung the puck at the net from the sideboards.

Malenstyn is not going to be a top-six NHL player. He’s not going to put up 20-30 goals. What he can provide, he showed on Monday and it was exactly what you want from a fourth-liner.

Honorable mention: Connor McMichael had the play of the game with his no-look backhand pass to set-up Damien Riat for Washington’s first goal of the game. His overall game was solid with one assist, two shots on goal and another two attempts blocked.
The NHLPA won't reopen the CBA, what does this mean for the 2022 Olympics?

By J.J. Regan September 16, 2019 10:40 PM

The NHL Players' Association elected Monday not to exercise its right to reopen the Collective Bargaining Agreement with the NHL. The deadline for the NHLPA's decision was Sept. 15, but, as that date fell on a Sunday, an exception allowed for the deadline to be extended to Monday, the next business day.

"While players have concerns with the current CBA, we agree with the League that working together to address those concerns is the preferred course of action instead of terminating the agreement following this season," NHLPA executive director Don Fehr said via a statement. "We have been having discussions with the League about an extension of the CBA and expect that those talks will continue."

The NHL also had the option of reopening the CBA, but like the NHLPA elected to keep the current CBA in place. The league's deadline was Sept. 1.

What this means is the current CBA will remain in place until Sept. 15, 2022 ensuring an additional three years of labor peace. That is significant news for a league that has experienced two work stoppages in the last 15 years.

That's the good news. The potential bad news is what this could mean for Olympic participation.

The next winter Olympic Games will be held in Beijing in 2022 months before the current CBA will officially expire. Olympic participation is not guaranteed under the current CBA and the players were not allowed to participate in the PyeongChang games in 2018.

Every issue the league had with PyeongChang in terms of having to pause the regular season to participate and the time difference restricting viewership and interest will still be present in the 2022 games.

You have to wonder how that may impact the future of Alex Ovechkin. Ovechkin takes Olympic participation very seriously and 2022 will likely be the last time for him to represent his native Russia in the Olympics and compete at a high level. If there is no sense that the NHL will allow its players to participate, does that affect Ovechkin's future plans when his current contract expires in 2021?

Having said that, the league has made a concerted effort of growing interest in China. Recent years have seen preseason games played there and Ovechkin took a tour through China during the offseason as an NHL ambassador. It seems likely the NHL would be much more interested in participating in Beijing than they would have been in PyeongChang.

To reopen the CBA for the Olympics and its other concerns, however, would have been too much of a gamble. The league has shown its willingness to miss games in order to get a favorable CBA in the past and there is no reason to think that option would not be on the table in 2020.

The NHLPA's decision on Monday ensures we will see hockey through the 2021-22 season and that's good for everyone.

"We are pleased with the NHL Players' Association's decision not to reopen the Collective Bargaining Agreement," NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman said in a statement. "We look forward to continuing to work with the NHLPA for the benefit of all stakeholders, especially our fans."

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.17.2019
Capital One Arena has a new bag policy. Here’s what you need to know

By Julia Karron September 16, 2019 2:17 PM

Capital One Arena announced Friday they have initiated a new bag policy for the upcoming Capitals and Georgetown basketball season.

The biggest change includes a firm no backpacks policy. No matter the size, any kind of backpack will not be allowed in the arena, and luggage, roller bags, hard-sided bags/briefcases and bags larger than 14” long, 14” tall, and 6” wide are still prohibited.

Diaper bags and medical bags will be allowed into the arena but will need to be searched first.

Additionally, the arena will now have a no bags and express line at the F Street entrance for guests who are not carrying bags or are carrying a clutch or purse smaller than 4.5”x 6.5”.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.17.2019
Brian MacLellan wants to re-sign both Holtby and Backstrom, but is that realistic?

By J.J. Regan September 16, 2019 12:37 PM

As the Capitals prepare for the upcoming season, talk of next season is already starting to take over due to the uncertainty surrounding Braden Holtby and Nicklas Backstrom's future. Both players are in need of new contracts and, not surprisingly, general manager Brian MacLellan would like to keep both.

“We’re going to communicate with both players,” MacLellan said at media day. “Both guys have been a big part of our organization, big part of our success. We’d love to keep both. We’re going to play it out until the end here.”

But is it realistic to keep both players? The unfortunate reality is that it’s not.

First, we have to project how much Holtby and Backstrom could sign for.

Holtby has a very close comparable with Sergei Bobrovsky who just signed a seven-year, $70 million contract. Holtby and Bobrovsky’s regular season stats are almost identical while Holtby has enjoyed much more playoff success. That means the Caps would be looking at a cap hit somewhere in the $10 million range.

For Backstrom, a player of his caliber will be able to command a sizable contract from around the league even at 32 which he will be when he hits free agency. A 34-year-old Joe Pavelski just got a contract from the Dallas Stars with a $7 million cap hit. I view Backstrom’s range to be about $7 to 8.5 million, but $7 million at an absolute minimum.

Basically, to re-sign Holtby and Backstrom will cost the team about $17 million in cap space per year at a minimum.

But wait, those guys want to stay in Washington, right? So they definitely will be willing to take less!

Don’t count on it.

“There’s always that area where you can work with, but at the same time you have a responsibility to the other players in the league too,” Holtby said at media day when asked about taking less money to stay with the Caps.

As for Backstrom, he has played the last 10 years with a cap hit of $6.7 million which is an absolute steal. Why would he take less now when he has already been taking less for a decade?

Let’s ignore the discussion of whether it is worth committing that much money to two players who are over 30 on an aging roster. The question is if the Caps have room under the cap for $17 million?

Alex Ovechkin, Evgeny Kuznetsov, T.J. Oshie, Tom Wilson, Lars Eller, Jakub Vrana, Carl Hagelin, Richard Panik, Garnet Hathaway, Nic Dowd, John Carlson, Dmitry Orlov, Michal Kempny, Nick Jensen and Pheonix Copley are all under contract for the 2020-21 season. That’s just over $62 million in cap space committed to 10 forwards, four defensemen and one goalie. Add in Backstrom and Holtby and their potential $17 million hit and you have a cap hit of over $79 million for 11 forwards, four defensemen and two goalies. The team will still need to sign two more forwards and three more defensemen.

We do not know what the cap ceiling will be for next season, but it is not expected to climb significantly. Let’s say it goes up to $83 million. That means the Caps will have less than $4 million to sign another five players. The minimum NHL salary for next season will be $700,000. If the Caps add five players at the league minimum, they can just barely fit under the ceiling, but that obviously is not a realistic scenario for how to build a competitive roster. Anything above the league minimum the team will not be able to afford and there are only two players in the entire organization, including prospects, who will carry a cap hit of $700,000 in the 2020-21 season.

Now that is just a projection, we ultimately do not know if the salary cap could go up more, but this projection also does not take into account any of the team’s RFAs including Jonas Siegenthaler who by that point will be due a significant raise.

The bottom line is that there is no way for the Caps to afford both Holtby and Backstrom without a significant trade to free up salary. Even then, whatever extra cap room the team gains from such a trade, much of it will go to RFAs, prospects and other UFAs the team may pursue.

An extension for Holtby and Backstrom handcuffs the entire offseason and would not allow Washington to do pretty much anything else. Whatever other needs the team may have, MacLellan would not be able to afford to address.

That’s not a recipe for success.
Kuznetsov's teammates are supportive but in tough spot after suspension

By J.J. Regan September 16, 2019 11:03 AM

ARLINGTON, Va. -- In a team sport, every mistake a player makes affects the team. On Saturday, the news came out that Evgeny Kuznetsov misleading the NHL about cocaine usage and his subsequent failed IIHF drug test will now cost the Capitals one of their top centers for the first three games of the season. It is a tough blow for a team in a highly competitive division facing a brutal October schedule.

Kuznetsov's actions have put the team at a disadvantage to start the season, but despite that, his teammates remain unwaveringly supportive.

"It's not easy moment for him and for his family, but it is what it is right now," Dmitry Orlov said of Kuznetsov's suspension. "He cannot do anything about that now. He's going to sit for three games and then come back and we're going to help him and support him. He's still our friend, our teammate. He should move forward past that, forget it and just focus on this season."

With the support, however, also comes the reality that the team is going to have to find a way to win without him.

"The team has kind of accepted that and it's going to be a huge loss for us through the first three games," Chandler Stephenson said.

The schedule makers did Washington no favors with their first three games as the Caps start on the road in St. Louis where the Blues will raise their Stanley Cup banner, then play in New York for the Islanders' home opener before the home-opener in Washington on the second night of the back-to-back.

Those are three tough games in a schedule that is not advantageous for Washington and now they have to navigate it without Kuznetsov.

"You never want to lose a player like [Kuznetsov] out of your lineup, whether it's the positive light that he brings to the rink or his skill and ability to take over games," T.J. Oshie said. "But we've got some guys that'll step in and try to do a good job and try to get some wins without him.

"I think we're comfortable with whoever's in there," Oshie added, "So for those three games whoever happens to be in there whether it's Lars or whoever they slot in there, we'll be comfortable with it, but we'll always miss Kuzy being in the middle."

With Kuznetsov out, Lars Eller will move up to the second line. The major question mark now is who centers the third line for those three games? The likely candidate is Travis Boyd who entered the league as a center before being used primarily as a winger. With all the offseason acquisitions, Boyd is considered someone who has to re-earn his spot in training camp.

The extra cap space the team has with Kuznetsov out the first week could also potentially open up some possibilities for younger players the team otherwise would not have been able to afford, guys like Connor McMichael.

With all due respect, losing Kuznetsov and gaining a player who is fighting to stay on the NHL roster or an 18-year-old prospect is a pretty dramatic drop-off.

Even if those first three games are a struggle, however, the team is not focusing on that. The players are ready to get through those three games, move on and support their teammate.

"It's unfortunate for us," Oshie said. "I'm sure he's pretty upset about it. We'll get through the three games and welcome him back with open arms."
Jets grounded in pre-season opener

By: Mike McIntyre

Posted: 09/16/2019 11:21 PM | Last Modified: 09/16/2019 11:34 PM | Updates | Comments: 1

It had all the scintillating action you’d expect from the first pre-season game of the season for two NHL teams sitting most of their stars. Which is to say that if you like mistimed passes, broken plays, multiple offsides and icings, you were in for a thrill-a-minute experience.

In the end, a collection of Edmonton Oilers players and prospects skated to a 2-0 victory over a makeshift group of Winnipeg Jets regulars and hopefuls Monday night at Rogers Place in Edmonton.

Yes, the final result was moot, as all exhibition contests are. But that doesn’t mean there wasn’t value to the whole exercise.

Jets head coach Paul Maurice iced a rather inexperienced lineup containing a number of players battling for forward depth positions and spots on the blue-line. While no decision will be made on one game, there was plenty of opportunity for players to make an impression, one way or the other.

With that in mind, let’s break it down.

THE SKINNY: not that it matters to Winnipeg fans, but the Milan Lucic for James Neal trade already looks like a big win for Edmonton. Neal acquitted himself quite nicely on a line with Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and veteran Sam Gagner, as they combined for both goals.

In both cases, the Jets got caught running around in their own end against what was Edmonton’s top line on the night, with Connor McDavid sitting this one out. On the first goal, defenceman Cam Schilling appeared to lose Neal in front of the net, as the Edmonton winger’s shot hit rearguard Tucker Poolman before beating goaltender Eric Comrie.

On the second goal, it was Poolman unable to handle a puck behind his net, which the Oilers took advantage of as Nugent-Hopkins found veteran Sam Gagner, who combined for both goals.

With so many changes to the Winnipeg defence core — Jacob Trouba, Tyler Myers and Ben Chiarot have all departed while Dustin Byfuglien is in the early stages here as everyone gets accustomed to their new roles.

It’s worth noting Jets assistant coach Todd Woodcroft, who normally observes game from high above the ice, joined the rest of the staff on the bench Monday for some additional hands-on teaching, which is apparently by design this pre-season.

Comrie was the busiest and most reliable Winnipeg player with 31 saves, and you have to wonder if general managers from other NHL clubs were paying attention. Assuming No. 1 netminder Connor Hellebuyck and backup Laurent Brossoit are both healthy to start the year, Comrie will be sent to the Manitoba Moose but first has to clear waivers. Could another team take a flyer on him?

With offensive stars such as Blake Wheeler, Mark Scheifele and Nikolaj Ehlers kept at home, and snipers Patrik Laine and Kyle Connor still without contracts and not in camp, there wasn’t a whole lot of firepower in Winnipeg’s lineup. And it showed. The try was there, including 25 shots, but just not a whole lot of polish around the net as Oilers prospect Stuart Skinner recorded the shutout.

5 PLAYERS WE WATCHED CLOSELY:

1. D Neal Pionk: Playing his first game since coming over from the New York Rangers in the Trouba trade, Pionk showed off his offensive skill and puck-moving ability on several occasions. He led all defencemen with four shots in 21:22 of action, quarterbacked a pair of power plays (which had a couple decent chances but didn’t score) and managed to avoid any glaring gaffes. He’ll never be mistaken for an overly physical player, but his positioning was sound and he blocked three shots and threw three hits.

2. F Andrei Chibisov: The book on the Russian free agent, who was signed out of the KHL this summer, was that he was big. But not every player with size uses it to their advantage. Chibisov threw a hit on his first shift of the night and stood out a few times for the way he used his powerful frame to win puck battles — including one in the corner on the power play, and another down the left ring on a rush. He did make one high-risk cross-ice pass attempt that Edmonton’s Gagner nearly picked off for a breakaway. Finished the night with three hits, a takeaway and was minus-one in 17:39 of ice time, and won the only faceoff he took.

3. F Joona Luoto: He had one of Winnipeg’s best scoring chances early in the second period, getting a shot from in tight and collecting his own rebound for another attempt. Later in the frame, the Finnish free agent had a terrific backcheck to break up an Edmonton rush, then drew the first penalty of the game as his stick was slashed out of his hands as he led the rush. He also had a great chance from the slot on a third-period power play, and tied Pionk with a team-high four shots while playing 13:11. Also blocked two shots.

4. D Logan Stanley: Did our eyes deceive us? Was that really a between-the-legs breakaway pass from his own zone? Yes, yes it was, as the 6-7, 231-pound defenceman showed a bit of flash on the night. The first-round draft pick also led an offensive rush where he gained the zone, disked the puck and then kept on cycling behind the net, Byfuglien-style. All in all, a pretty strong showing for a player whose NHL regular-season debut may be a lot closer than many people thought. A solid 19:44 of action, with three blocked shots and one shot on goal.

5. F Mason Appleton: There wasn’t a whole lot to report from Appleton on a night where there were few offensive chances for either squad. He did get his only shot on goal off the rush late in the middle frame after receiving a tape-to-tape stretch pass from Poolman, then had one rush early in the third that was thwarted. Played 14:38. Frankly, we expected to see a bit more from a player who should be in the mix for an increased role this season, if he can earn it.

HOW THEY LINED UP:

FORWARDS:
Chibisov-Little-Shaw
Bourque-Letestu-Roslovic
Luoto-Gustafsson-Appleton
Harkins-Suess-Lipon

DEFENCE:
Stanley-Pionk
Beaulieu-Bitetto
Schilling-Poolman

GOAL:
Comrie

WHAT’S NEXT?
The team flew back to Winnipeg following the game, and on-ice sessions resume to at Bell MTS Icplex. Group A will be on at 9 a.m., with Group B at noon.

Winnipeg will play its second pre-season game Wednesday night when the Minnesota Wild come to Bell MTS Place. Expect a more experienced group, with the likes of Scheifele, Wheeler, Ehlers, Adam Lowry and Josh Morrissey likely to make their pre-season debuts.

Winnipeg Free Press LOADED 09.17.2019
Jets top '18 pick -- Swedish forward Gustafsson -- gets first taste of NHL action against Oilers

By: Mike McIntyre | Posted: 09/16/2019 7:00 PM

Butterflies? You could say David Gustafsson had a few on Monday as he prepared to make his Winnipeg Jets NHL debut.

Sure, it was just a pre-season tilt in Edmonton against the Oilers. But in these early days of his pro career, it may as well have been Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Finals for the 19-year-old Swedish centre.

As Gustafsson met with a few media members following the morning skate at Bell MTS Iceplex, he was a big, nervous ball of energy. At one point, his fidgety hands accidentally karate-chopped the iPhone I was holding to record our chat, sending it crashing to the ground.

Like I said, the kid had a case of the jitters.

And who can blame him. This is all still fresh, exciting and no doubt a bit scary for Gustafsson, who was drafted by the Jets in the second round (60th overall) in 2018 but didn't attend training camp last fall as he remained in Europe with HV71 of the Swedish Hockey League.

It's a different story this year, with Gustafsson now getting his first taste of North American game action. He suited up for the rookie prospect tournament in Belleville earlier this month and acquitted himself nicely, then joined main camp in Winnipeg last week.

On Monday night, he was expected to be anchoring an intriguing line that included the ever-improving Mason Appleton and Finnish free agent signing Joona Luoto.

"I'm just going to go in and do my best and have fun while I'm doing it. I don't know what they're expecting from me but I am going to go in and do my best," said Gustafsson.

In some ways, Gustafsson might be a bit of a forgotten or even overlooked prospect by some fans. The 2018 draft marked the first time Winnipeg had a first-round pick, thanks to the inclusion of Mason Appleton and Finnish free agent signing Joona Luoto.

"I make a mistake out there but he already knows it before I skate over and say 'you're supposed to hold that position a little longer' ... he's going 'I know I have to hold that position a little bit longer'!

-Jets head coach Paul Maurice on Gustafsson

But within the organization, Gustafsson is seen as an extremely valued player who won't be rushed. He's one of the few natural centres in the system — a position that has been the source of concern for the big club in recent years.

Some scouts have compared the 6-2, 196-pound Gustafsson to another big centre who was drafted in a similar spot (67th overall) by the team in 2011. That would be Adam Lowry, and coach Paul Maurice said drawing such parallels wasn't off base.

"Not in terms of respect for the game and (knowing) what that role is. He's very conscientious about his job on the ice. He's not looking to cheat the game. The interaction between himself in the middle and those four other players (on the ice) is really important to him. There's a version there (of Lowry)," said Maurice.

There's no question a centre spot is up for grabs at this training camp, especially with Andrew Copp and Jack Roslovic set to begin the season on the wings. Who plays behind Mark Scheifele, Bryan Little and Lowry will have to get sorted out over these next couple weeks.

Veteran free agent addition Mark Letestu would seem to be the early favourite, but the opportunity exists for Gustafsson to open some eyes.

"A real, smart kind of grinder and I mean that in the good sense. He's a two-way player. He's going to be physical. He makes a mistake out there but he already knows it before I skate over and say 'you're supposed to hold that position a little longer' — he's going 'I know I have to hold that position a little bit longer.' He's that kind of player. Real smart positionally and he's real strong and he's got some bite and some grit to his game and he works the corners," said Maurice.

"What we saw in development camp last year was that he was one of the guys who at the end of each skate, he was still driving just as hard as he was (at the beginning). He had the capacity to do that. He hadn't fatigued. And he had a big smile on his face. So, he likes the work, he's in good shape and you can see that he can push through."

Maurice has often moved centre prospects to the wing, believing it helps get them to the NHL quicker given all the added responsibilities up the middle. Roslovic would be a recent example of that. Whether Gustafsson follows suit remains to be seen.

"He's going to tell us that over the next two or three years. We have a lot of time on this guy. So he will get into his pro game and everybody has a chance to make the team, most of these young guys start with the American League. I'm not saying he will, I'm just saying most do. And then you learn. If he can handle it, then you'll leave him. And if you think a player is struggling a little bit but still like the player, like Jack Roslovic, you'll get him out to the wing and buy him some time," said Maurice.

Gustafsson struggled with an early-season injury last year that impacted his production, with just two goals and 10 assists in 36 regular-season games. He felt like he hit his stride come playoffs, with a goal and three assists in nine games.

"It's a really good league, it helps you a lot and develops you lot. It was an important year for me last year. It started off actually pretty bad for me. I had some injuries and when I came back I didn't play the game as I used to. But then after Christmas and into the playoffs, I feel like I really stepped up my game and learned a lot from it," said Gustafsson, who is now trying to adjust to the smaller North American ice surface.

"It's a lot more different than you think it is. It's a different game, too. It's a lot faster here. You got to have some time to adjust to it," he said. "The first games I played here (at the rookie prospect showcase), I was a little too slow with the puck and coach said to me, you have to have in your mind already down what you're going to do with the puck before you get the puck. That's the thing I need to work on and that's the thing I feel I've improved a lot."

If he doesn't stick with the Jets, Gustafsson will have to be returned to Sweden for one more year with his pro team there, as playing in the AHL with the Manitoba Moose is not an option since he wasn't selected in the first round.

"I try not to think about it that much. Of course, I came here to take a place on the team. To just see and learn, I'm wanting to take a place," said Gustafsson.

There's talk he could captain the Swedish squad at the World Junior Championships, which will be playing this coming holiday season in the Czech Republic. He had three assists in five games with the squad last year.

"I feel like I've got a lot of support from back home in Sweden. The coaches are always happy for me, but of course they want me to go back," said Gustafsson.

Whether they get their wish remains to be seen.

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Poolman, Luoto shine as Jets drop preseason opener to Oilers

Scott Billeck
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EDMONTON—If you were expecting to glean from a particularly juicy trove of information from the first preseason game for the Winnipeg Jets, you were probably left wallowing in your own self-induced disappointment.

Those looking for answers to all of the offseason's burning questions weren't likely to find them in a game populated primarily by prospects and minor leaguers.

But there were morsels to be had in a 2-0 loss to the Edmonton Oilers at Rogers Place on Monday evening. James Neal and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins provided the damage for the Oilers.

Scoring clearly wasn't one of them. Winnipeg failed to produce a goal in the game so take what you may from that.

"They've had three heavy days, right?" Jets head coach Paul Maurice said. "We on-ice test them and then the next two (days) are an hour and a half of grinding, from start to finish. You could see in the third period that we came off it a bit, but I expected that, from the young guys especially. They haven't developed their tank yet. They're not at their physical peak, but they were grinding through it."

Preseason isn't just about clapping bombs and twisting twine, although it can go a long way for those looking to procure full-time work.

Often, especially in its infancy, preseason games are about subtle developments where offseason tweaks and natural career progression meet in hopes of everything moving in the same direction.

The games often require those watching to peer past the scoresheet, to the little plays that show a player has, indeed, taken that next step.

Tucker Poolman has been riding along on a steady hump every day now. Injuries have lessened its steam somewhat, but with Winnipeg's mass exodus on defence over the summer, it hasn't taken much for it to come back. Poolman provided the damage for the Oilers.

"I knew what it takes to get back," Suess said. "We on the line that plays hard and conscious on the line that plays hard and has got some hands on him."

"We think we're going to have a guy here who might be able to play up the lineup. Not necessarily in that kind of pure skill idea but a guy with a conscious on the line that plays hard and has got some hands on him."

The Jets are back in action Wednesday as they host the Minnesota Wild at BellMTS Place.

MORE GUSTO FOR GUSTAFSSON

Attuning himself to a less spacious sheet of ice was top of the order for David Gustafsson.

Winnipeg's first preseason game was a lot of things to a lot of different players, a roster that primarily featured a selection of the organization's young guns.

Gustafsson, the 19-year-old Swede, fits into that category. Drafted by the club in the second round, 60th overall in 2018, Gustafsson already has a full plate in his first NHL training camp. Managing with a smaller, North American ice surface is just one of the challenges he's been tasked with.

"It’s a lot more different than you think it is," Gustafsson said after Winnipeg’s pre-game skate at BellMTS Iceplex. "It’s a different game, too. It’s a lot faster here. You got to have some time to adjust to it."

Gustafsson got his first taste of the smaller rink during the team's rookie tournament earlier this month. There, he learned that possession the puck in the NHL needs a little more urgency attached to it.

"Coach said to me, ‘You have to have in your mind already down what you’re going to do with the puck before you get the puck,’ " Gustafsson said, admitting his decision making was a step behind. "That’s the thing I need to work on and that’s the thing I feel I’ve improved a lot."

That will help him live up to some of the comparisons that are being made to him, including a version of his game that mirrors Adam Lowry.

"What we saw in development camp last year was that he was one of the guys who at the end of each skate, he was still driving just as hard as he was (at the beginning)," Maurice said. "He had the capacity to do that. He hadn’t fatigued. And he had a big smile on his face. So, he likes the work, he’s in good shape and you can see that he can push through."

Gustafsson isn't eligible to play in the American Hockey League this year, so he either makes the Jets out of camp or heads back to HV71 in the Swedish Hockey League.

SUSS ITCHING FOR ACTION

It was a particularly grimy injury to his ankle back in high school playing baseball that prepared C.J. Suess for a significant spell on the sidelines in his first pro season in the American Hockey League last year.

A post-whistle fracas during a mid-December game with the Manitoba Moose ended with Suess heading to the dressing room favouring a portion of his upper-body.

That portion would be later revealed as his shoulder, one would be surgically repaired in the last week of 2018, cutting his first pro season short.

"I knew what it takes to get back," Suess said.
He learned that less.

His freak injury on the ball diamond concluded with a shattered ankle. The ensuing surgery to correct would include six screws to fasten all the pieces back together.

In both instances, the stakes were fairly high.

The ankle injury happened in Suess' final year of high school and he needed to get it rehabbed in time to secure a roster spot in the USHL. This time, Suess is trying to compete for a roster spot in the NHL with the team that took him in the fifth round in 2014.

"It definitely helps going through (the ankle injury)," Suess said. "I knew the strain it was going to be on my body."

Staying on top of his rehabbing regimen has given Suess the confidence that he’s right back to where he was prior to that altercation in December. Monday’s game was a good test for that as Suess got his chance to play across from the likes of James Neal and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, two well-versed veterans.

"That’s why I play," Suess said.

LAINE SKATES WITH SC BERN

Patrik Laine skated with Swiss hockey club SC Bern on Monday and spoke to local media about the decision to train with the team while his contract impasse with the Jets drags on.

"I was thinking about it will my agent that it would be a good idea to come here and practice," the restricted free agent told reporters. "I know three or four coaches, I played on their teams before.

"It was an easy decision to come here. A great organization and a great city, so it was an easy choice."

Reports from Finland over the weekend suggested that Laine would make the move to Bern to keep himself fit while his contract situation plays out across the pond.

Over the weekend, Maurice said he was happy to see Laine going to a professional team while he’s away from his NHL team.

LABOUR PEACE

In a bit of good news for everyone involved in the NHL, the National Hockey League Players' Association chose not to re-open the current collective bargaining agreement on Monday.

The move, following the same made by the league on Sept. 1, ensures hockey will be played, in full, through the 2021-22 season.

"While players have concerns with the current CBA, we agree with the league that working together to address those concerns is the preferred course of action instead of terminating the agreement following this season," NHLPA executive director Don Fehr said in a statement. "We have been having discussions with the league about an extension of the CBA and expect that those talks will continue."

The current CBA, a 10-year deal that was ratified in 2013, included an opt-out clause for both sides after eight years.

If one side enacted the clause, the league would have faced a potential work stoppage as early as next season.

With both sides agreeing to carry on as is, it guarantees at least three more seasons of uninterrupted play.

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“It’s a great age,” Mathieu Perreault was saying on Monday. “But it’s challenging.”

The Winnipeg Jets forward was talking about his Winnipeg-born twins, who join the terrible twos later this month.

He may as well have been talking about himself and his hockey career.

Perreault will turn 32 midway through the coming season. Prime working years for most of us, the back nine for most NHLers.

When you don’t have a spot on the top two lines and you’re earning just north of $4 million a season for two more years, you’ll even find plenty of people who say your contract is a problem.

Especially when your team is trying to scrape together enough dough to re-sign stars Patrik Laine and Kyle Connor.

Perreault read those opinions after last season and when they quickly became full-blown trade rumours, he got a little concerned.

“Just like the kids are going through,” Perreault said. “I could see what the salary cap situation was, and they were trying to sign some of these guys, so… I talked to my agent to get a feel for what’s going on. Obviously I have a family, so if I’m going to move somewhere, I like to know, so I can plan on moving everybody.

“So I asked, but it was not real. Sigh of relief, for sure.”

Players Perreault’s age who don’t have a contract face the prospect of nobody wanting them.

When the so-called kids start landing deals worth eight, nine, even $10 million a season, it can squeeze out the vets.

“That’s just how this game is going,” Perreault said. “It makes it harder for the older guys like us. A good friend, Derick Brassard, felt that this summer. He’s still a good player, but because of all this salary cap stuff and young guys signing big contracts, he couldn’t find a job for the longest time. He did eventually. But it was maybe not what he was expecting.”

Brassard, also on the verge of 32, finally landed a one-year deal with the Islanders, taking a pay cut from $5 million to $1.2 million.

Of course, nobody’s going to feel sorry for players who’ve earned millions over their careers.

You might have felt sorry for Perreault at the end of Monday’s practice, though, as head coach Paul Maurice capped it with yet another hard skate for those who weren’t making the trip to Edmonton for the first pre-season game.

“For a guy like me, it’s definitely a good opportunity to grab one of those spots right now and show the coaches I can fill in that hole and do a good job,” he said. “This is where my head’s at right now. Grab what you can.

“It’s been like that my entire career. Every training camp for me is kind of the same. It starts back at pretty much the bottom, and work your way up the lineup.”

Perreault is even thinking of trying something he’s never tried at the NHL level before: becoming a penalty killer.

“I thought about maybe bringing it up,” he said. “I’ve always been an offensive player, so the PK was never even mentioned to me… over the next two years if the power play gets crowded and he wants to try other guys, maybe he can play me on the PK. I’ll wait to see how this all starts.

“I just want to have a role, I just want to have a chance to be part of this. And not just a guy that knocks a few minutes off for the other guys to rest. I want to be part of the solution.”

That would sure beat being seen as a problem.

Call it the terrible 32s.

You don’t grow out of them.

You just try to play your way out.

Winnipeg Sun LOADED 09.17.2019
What really happened at Andrew Copp’s arbitration hearing — and what comes next for him in Winnipeg

By Murat Ates Sep 16, 2019

Andrew Copp’s arbitration case was one of the most interesting and impactful situations of the Winnipeg Jets offseason. The cap savings the Jets were able to squeeze out of Copp’s arbitration hearing are critical. Those savings from Copp’s contract make just a little more room for Josh Morrissey’s eight-year, $6.25 million AAV contract extension. It should make room for Kyle Connor and Patrik Laine’s big-ticket RFA deals, too.

They make Copp feel an extremely wide range of emotions. The road to Copp’s two-year, $2.28 million AAV arbitration award was a long one. It wasn’t always easy for Copp to wrap his head around — especially given that the day he received Winnipeg’s arbitration briefing (and the dollar figure it contained) was a day he’d have preferred to spend celebrating the success of one of his best friends. On July 19, the exact same day Jacob Trouba signed his seven-year, $8 million AAV contract extension in New York, Copp got his first look at Winnipeg’s two-year, $1.5 million AAV offer.

It was tough to swallow for Copp and his agent Kurt Overhardt alike. They told Ken Wiebe at the time that “We are going to arbitration and look forward to it.” They were, in Copp’s more recent words, going to war. They had asked about where we were at in contract talks and wanted to see what they said. I was curious to see if they would make more room for Josh Morrissette’s extension. It should make room for Kyle Connor and Patrik Laine’s big-ticket RFA deals, too.

For some, the story gets more worrisome. Those who read Craig Custance’s story showing that two-thirds of players who make it to an arbitration hearing get traded within three seasons. It felt like an assurance Copp’s days in Winnipeg are numbered. It happened to Trouba after all. And if Copp’s good friend followed his arbitration deal through to a trade request and a big-ticket signing with the Rangers, wouldn’t it make sense that Copp would try to follow suit?

Copp says no. In an interview with The Athletic this week, Copp detailed his reasons for choosing arbitration, the agony of feeling “disrespected” during the process, and even some parts of arbitration that flat out made him laugh. For Jets fans, it’s not all roses. It’s also not something to fear.

Copp is a three-dimensional thinker who can see the positive elements of a negative situation and the negative elements of a positive situation. He is adamant that he’s not fleeing Winnipeg and that he completely understands the Jets’ position — that every little bit of cap savings helps the team fit Connor, Laine and Morrissey into their future plans.

“Before we get into how I felt disrespected, the team has to do what they have to do,” Copp said. “We’re obviously in a numbers crunch and we have two guys that are not signed yet that are going to be important pieces of our team going forward.

“It’s hard to fault them for trying to save every possible dollar they can. I just wish I wasn’t the guy they grinded to the point where we had to go to arbitration.”

Here is how Copp’s arbitration hearing really went down, according to Copp himself.

Pre-arbitration

Why choose arbitration at all?

As summer negotiations began, Copp and his team didn’t feel comfortable with any of the offers they had received. They looked at his uptick in point production at the end of the season — nearly half a point per game over his final 51 games, including the playoffs — and saw a sign his production is trending upwards.

The ask, according to Copp, wasn’t absurd.

“I believe in myself,” Copp said. “I know what my capabilities are. Obviously, I’m not asking to get paid Connor McDavid money but I felt like there was some wiggle room there. Especially with two of my (former) linemates in certain spots. If we look at what they were offering, it was half as much as the guy that was paid the least (Lowry) between my two linemates over the past two years.”

After acknowledging that Brandon Tanev — his other most frequent linemate over the past two years — had signed his deal as an unrestricted free agent, Copp said that he was hurt when he saw the Jets arbitration briefs. The ongoing RFA negotiations he had with Winnipeg weren’t as low as the Jets’ arbitration ask of two years, $1.5 million, but they weren’t what he thought he deserved.

“To be honest, I felt disrespected.”

Arbitration, then, was partly about finding the right venue to speak his mind.

“Someone’s coming to you and saying you only deserve this much,” Copp said. “And you get the opportunity to go in front of someone else and say why you deserve more. And it’s not just about the amount of money, it’s about the value they place behind that — where they see you going. It’s a lot more than just dollars and cents.”

On July 1, while sharing a car ride with his mom to the family cabin in Michigan, Copp’s curiosity got the better of him. He tuned into the live stream of Kevin Cheveldayoff’s media availability.

He says he completely understood at the time why Winnipeg would approach him with low contract offers but, as far as he was concerned, Cheveldayoff’s press conference was an opportunity to read the room.

“I wasn’t watching the entire thing,” Copp said. “But you want to see how we feel.”

“July 1st is an important date when you look at the makeup of your team. You just want to know what’s going on — not that they give you guys everything but I wanted to see what they said. I was curious to see if they had asked about where we were at in contract talks and their response was going to be — maybe get my blood boiling a little bit.”

To be clear, Copp laughed as he said that last bit. Still, he was fired up and ready to get to his arbitration hearing.

“This is my job. This is my livelihood. I love hockey. I’ve put in every ounce of effort over the past 10 years of my life working towards being an NHL player. It matters. And that’s why you take it to heart.”

Friday, July 19 — Receiving the briefs

Copp knew what to expect throughout arbitration. Not only was he in constant communication with Trouba leading up to his hearing, Copp directly observed a part of Trouba’s arbitration process the previous summer.

“I was actually in Toronto last year, working with Adam Oates the night before his hearing,” Copp said. “I went to dinner with him and our agent so I was up close and personal to everything that was going on. I watched him go through it so I knew it sucked but it was something I could mentally wrap my head around. I would say I was ready and prepared and knew what to expect, to a certain degree.”

Small world. But all of the expectations and communications in the world couldn’t prepare Copp for the initial emotional shock. At 9:00 a.m. in Michigan, he was on his way to a workout with his trainer when a text came in. It was from Trouba.

“He’s like, ‘What did they come in at? Have you read the brief?’” Copp said. “I was like, ‘No, I haven’t gotten it yet. It probably just takes a couple of minutes.’”

“He says, ‘OK, well call me — I want to see your face right after.’”

“I was like, all right?”

1153183 Winnipeg Jets
Copp continued to his workout. He knew the Jets’ briefing documents would get e-mailed to him any minute.

Still, he had a job to do.

He warmed up. He started his exercises. And then, partway through his workout, Overhardt sent him the email from Winnipeg. It’s wasn’t nearly as short as he expected it to be — it’s close to 50 pages instead of five. And seeing the players Winnipeg has compared him to hits Copp hard.

“My trainer saw me reading it,” Copp said. “And he kind of saw me fuming up a little bit. He said, ‘OK, go upstairs, get on the bike today. We don’t need you getting hurt or anything — just take it easy.’”

Copp followed his trainer’s orders but getting on the bike wasn’t enough to calm him down. He was so frustrated with the situation that he left Trouba on “read.”

“After that, I still wasn’t in the mental capacity to call Trouba yet but he texted me again: ‘It must have been pretty bad if I didn’t get a call.’”

And that’s when the emotional conflict took its next turn. On the same day Copp got his brief from the Jets — and the $1.5 million suggestion it contained — Trouba signed his seven-year, $56 million contract with New York. When Copp finally did get in touch with Trouba, he heard all about his friend’s good news. It was difficult to share in the joy.

“Oh man,” said Copp. “On the day when you read ($1.5 million) from your organization, you’re at the lowest of your lows. And then your best buddy is at the highest of his highs, signing his new deal in New York. It was an interesting day, that’s for sure.”

Then, as the day went on, Copp’s frustration turned into action. Instead of just reading over the Jets’ briefs and fuming, as was his first response, he decided to do his homework.

Through the rest of Friday afternoon and well into Friday evening, Copp crunched his numbers. Nobody knew his story better than him, he thought. And it was hard to just sit by and accept that somebody else would make his case for him. Copp went gamesheet by gamesheet through 2018-19, scouring his own stats for details that could help his case.

“I wasn’t going to allow myself to just sit there and think about it and do nothing while other people were working on my behalf.”

What did his agent, Kurt Overhardt, think of all of this? Did he support Copp’s commitment to his homework or did he just laugh it off?

At this, Copp laughs.

“I think it was a combination of things. He would just say, ‘Good stuff! Keep going!’ to anything I would send him. I would make up tables and send them over to him.”

“He was like, ‘I love this. We’ll have to get our interns to check it but keep going. Keep doing what you’re doing.’ Because who knows my story better than me, right? Who knows everything that’s gone on over the past few years, the numbers, everything like that? No one does better than I do so I felt like I should put my fingerprints on it.”

Saturday, July 20 — Trying to hammer out a deal

The offers Winnipeg made to Copp and his team weren’t nearly as low as the figures included in his arbitration briefs.

When Copp drove from Michigan to Toronto on the day before his hearing, he put aside his initial shock. He calmly made the drive into Toronto. Upon Copp’s arrival in Toronto, he and his team went out for dinner. They even met with Cheveldayoff and assistant GM Larry Simmons in an attempt to come to an agreement before his arbitration hearing.

It wasn’t meant to be.

Were the Jets’ offers outside of arbitration as low as the $1.5 million they argued for in the hearing?

“No. But with that said, if you say one thing in private and you go out in public and tell the world it’s this, what’s the difference?”

Sunday, July 21 — The day of the hearing

Trouba gave Copp several pieces of advice heading into arbitration.

The most important? Get a good breakfast.

Copp’s hearing was a seven-hour marathon. At times it made him angry, it made him laugh, and as the day went on, it made him hungry. But in the end, he was prepared for war.

“It wasn’t us and them, it was us vs. them,” Copp said. “And getting the opportunity to make your points in front of management, I feel like you’ve got to put your heart and soul into it. It wasn’t something I was afraid of doing and it wasn’t something I was going to shy away from just to save face. I was doing what I fully believed I deserved.”

The hearing began at 9:00 a.m. Sunday morning in a Toronto hotel conference room. Copp, Overhardt and Overhardt’s assistant took their seat at the U-shaped table. Cheveldayoff, Simmons and their lawyers sat down across from them. The arbitrator, of course, sat at the crux of the “U.”

The room was full — roughly 20 people, according to Copp — because in addition to the player, his representation, and Jets management, there was the arbitrator, his scribe, three lawyers from the NHLPA, four NHLPA interns and three NHL lawyers. That’s a lot of people on hand to take in one of the more frustrating days of your professional career.

And the coffee wasn’t even that good. Copp laughed when remembering it, mentioned that there were pastries in the room — not “quite donuts but something like that.”

Then he explained why the day took so long.

There is CBA-mandated procedure to arbitration which the NHL and NHLPA follow rigorously. Each side gets 90 minutes to make its case and its rebuttal to the other side’s case. Each side gets an additional 10 minutes to make a subrebuttal, upon hearing the other side’s initial rebuttal.

And, if the arbitrator has never heard an arbitration case before — as was the case between Copp and Winnipeg this summer — then each side gets 15 more minutes just to make sure everything goes smoothly.

There are mandated breaks. Lunch is provided. And of course there is the debate which occasionally gets heated.

“I felt Kurt, especially, was fantastic in terms of dealing with Winnipeg,” said Copp. “I felt like he was fighting very hard for what we believed in and he believed in my game. It was like ‘This is why this guy is my agent. This guy goes to bat for me.’”

The arguments and the comparisons to lesser players were not shocking to Copp. Overhardt had prepared him for that.

Copp knew that Winnipeg would compare him to players paid as little as possible, just as Copp’s side would argue his performance was worth as much money as possible. But as the day went on and those arguments ran their course, Copp quickly realized that arbitration itself was only part of the work he’d have to do that day. Players and teams are allowed to come to an agreement outside of arbitration right up until the award is announced 48 hours after the hearing.

That negotiations for a non-arbitration contract — at much bigger dollar amounts — continued separately from the hearing itself was a little bit jarring.

“The weird part is that there are negotiations going on during the breaks,” Copp said. “Then you come back and what they just said three minutes ago is no longer valid. And now they’re coming back at whatever number they were at before. And we’re doing the same thing, too. We’re coming down from our number and then we go back in and say the other number.”

Surely, that must be difficult to keep track of. Did he feel like Winnipeg was treating him fairly?

“I don’t necessarily think it’s OK but it’s the process, right? And both sides are doing it. Both sides are guilty of it. It was just interesting hearing them to go from one spot to another — and we were doing it too, so it’s not like I can blame them. It’s just an interesting dynamic of figuring out a contract.”

Copp and the Jets tried but were unable to agree to contract terms on their own.

The most surprising part, to Copp, was how low Winnipeg went and the players they compared him to. The most frustrating part was that the
arbitration offer was less than half the RFA deal of Lowry, his good friend and longtime linemate.

The funniest part was seeing just how much the presentation of different stats could be used to distort the truth.

"Oh yeah," said Copp, laughing, when asked if he found any part of the process so ridiculous that it became funny. "I don’t remember what I laughed at the most but, I don’t know, you’re basically preaching to one person why you think you’re great at hockey and they’re preaching why you’re not as valuable as you think you are."

For example?

"The one in particular that I’m thinking of: You show a graph and how a graph can be manipulated to make it look better or worse depending on how big the bars are and where the graph starts. Just little things like that, I thought were funny."

Lies, damned lies and statistics, I think the saying goes.

When the hearing was all said and done, Copp’s emotions took hold. He shook hands with Cheveldayoff and Simmons. He said goodbye to Overhardt and checked out of his hotel. It was a long drive home from Toronto to Michigan.

The next 48 hours were difficult. Copp hashed and rehashed everything that went on during the hearing. Time passed slowly.

"I was thinking about everything that was said," he explained. "I was thinking about where it would end up. (Those two days) were filled with calls to my dad, my brother, friends from back home, Troubs, Scheifs, yeah."

The award came in late on Tuesday afternoon. Two years, $2.28 million. Winnipeg quickly accepted.

Copp says he feels no regret. He had said his piece, and in that process, found his peace.

He doesn’t expect Winnipeg feels regret, either.

"They got me at a manageable number for them in terms of knowing where I’m at for the next two years — especially with Kyle and Patrik coming up. There’s a lot of unknowns so figuring it out that way for them, I’m sure it was very worth it. Like I said earlier, I don’t hold hard feelings or anything like that — especially going forward."

Let’s look forward for a moment.

This calls Copp’s future into question … Doesn’t it?

Here is Copp’s answer to that question, unedited:

"No. That’s not a part of my thinking at all. We were hoping to sign longer than two years for sure. We’re at a place where I’ve learned my way around the city a little bit. I’ve got friends here. I’m definitely not asking for a trade or anything like that. I’m not crossing this city off the list of places for when I have the opportunity to go whichever direction I want. When the time comes again in two years, hopefully we’re at a place where I’m happy with my role and my value here and they’re happy with where I’m at and we can come to some sort of agreement.

"I’m going to tell you every emotion I felt during arbitration but I’m also logical enough to know that, if it was a different team, it could have ended up being the same thing. I’m logical enough to know that if this is a good fit over the next two years and I see a spot that I’d like to be in, I like my role, I like my value, it’s definitely a place where I’d be willing to stay and sign another deal.

"I’m logical enough to know it was worth it probably for them too in the short term. I’m not going to close the door on it because of what happened two years ago. I’m going to take it one day at a time here and move our relationship forward and hopefully it turns out well over the next few years."

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
PATRICK JOHNSTON
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The Victoria game was one of two on the night for the Pacific Division rivals, as they split their squads and also faced off at the Scotiabank Saddledome in Calgary. The Canucks won the Alberta tilt 3-2 in overtime, despite being heavily outshot by their hosts.

The Flames out-shot the Canucks 38-13 in Calgary, but a pair of late goals from Mitch Eliot and Jake Virtanen evened the contest and Virtanen won the game in overtime.

Cam Talbot, who was signed by the Flames on July 1, had entered the game midway through the second period, relieving counterpart David Rittich, who faced four attempts from Vancouver. Talbot conceded all three goals. Eliot’s and Virtanen’s first two shots he’d surely like to have back.

Nice patience by Virtanen to stop, hold up and snipe one to win it for the #Canucks in Calgary. pic.twitter.com/weRRPO61Lv — Grady Sas (@GradySas) September 17, 2019

In Victoria, the Flames burst out of the gate, outshooting the Canucks 15-8 in the first period (the Flames outshot the Canucks 41-34 overall). Dillon Dube opened the scoring, while Czarnik added a second goal for the visitors on a power play.

Czarnik scored again in the second period to stake the Flames to a three-goal lead.

The Canucks did start to generate some chances as the second period wore on, but struggled to get on top of the Calgary crease, which featured Russian netminder Artyom Zagidulin to start and Tyler Parsons to finish.

The Flames got a fourth goal when Rasmus Andersson flooted a point shot towards the net and Zane McIntyre, who replaced starter Mike DiPietro, never picked up the puck before it flew into the net.

Lou Eriksson finally got the Canucks on the board when he picked up a Guillaume Brisebois rebound on top of the crease and flipped a backhander past Parsons. Josh Teves added a second Canucks goal late in the third.

Bo Horvat thrilled the fans by pulling the hosts within one with a hard wrist shot from the top of the slot with the goalie pulled and less than a minute left. The Canucks got a flurry of other chances, but couldn’t find another goal.

“I liked our second half of our game. I talked to our group after the first period, I thought we had a couple young guys that looked a little nervous,” Canucks coach Travis Green said. “And when you’re nervous your feet don’t move as quick as they should, your hands don’t work as well as they should. And I thought we got faster as the game went on.”

Much better for DiPietro

The last time we saw DiPietro in green and blue, he was getting shellacked by the San Jose Sharks.

On Monday night, he saw plenty of rubber and while he’d like Czarnik’s first goal back — the winger seemed to elude DiPietro’s outstretched glove — the young netminder looked much more solid than that effort last February.

He’s still got a long way to go, but he’ll be heartened that professional hockey doesn’t look foreign to him anymore.

“I think you’ve got to get used to the speed of the shots, the pace of play,” DiPietro said. “Not many rushes are wasted; like in junior, patient play, you know, nominee rushes are wasted like in junior … there seems to be something always generated and that’s something I took from my first game that I played last year and something to continue to take and, you know, to learn from and make sure that … I move efficiently in the net, making sure I don’t really waste any movement and, you know, as I mature here, as I get older and as my game matures, it’s going to benefit (me),”

“He looked good. You know what, he falls into that (young) group. It’s a lot of young guys out there that haven’t played a lot of NHL hockey games. So even though it’s exhibition, still their nerves are high,” Green said. “It’s big for them. And he’s going to feel a lot better the next time he gets in the lineup.”

Rafferty gets PP1 time

“I’m really excited about it,” rookie Brogan Rafferty said. “World class players on the first unit, for coach Green to put me in that position and to trust me a little bit, it’s huge for my confidence.”

The former Quinnipiac blue-liner signed with the Canucks last spring because of the opportunity that the right side of the Canucks’ defence presented. He got into two games to close the season but never had a chance to skate in a practice.

His first game against Nashville started with him looking a little like a deer in the headlights, but he quickly found his feet and by the end of the second game in St. Louis was showing plenty of confidence.

Over the summer he spent a lot of time working with the Canucks’ coaching staff in a special post-season camp, then again at the summer development camp, again at rookie camp last week then this weekend’s main training camp.

“The players here are so good, you pick up a lot from them just watching them … it pushes you that much further to be great every day,” he said.

“Everything’s so crisp and so clean and structured, it’s really cool to see.”

The Canucks’ power play went 0-for-3 on the night, but Rafferty did pick up an assist on Horvat’s goal.

Hands up if you had Mitch Eliot scoring the first #Canucks pre-season goal! He cuts the Flames lead to 2-1 on the night. pic.twitter.com/iBAPSUWjG3 — Vancouver Canucks (@Canucks) September 17, 2019

Jordie Benn plays at home

It wasn’t just the first time that Jordie Benn has played in Victoria since 2009 — hat tip to Canucks.com’s Derek Jory and Tyson Giurato for pointing that out one — it was also the first time in years that Benn found himself able to have a family dinner at this time of year.

He visited his parents’ home on Sunday night and his sister and his niece were there as well.

“It’s the first time in a long time where I’ve been at a camp and I got to go home and eat a home cooked meal,” he said. “It’s pretty cool. It’s fun to be here.”

Calgary connection

The split squad the Canucks sent to Calgary was very light on rivals, as they split their squads and also faced off at the Scotiabank Saddledome in Calgary. The Flames outshot the Canucks 41-34 overall.

Dillon Dube opened the scoring, while Czarnik added a second goal for every Canuck with a Cowtown connection in the lineup.

Calgarian Jay Beagle led the way, along with a trio of former Flames in Sven Baertschi, Oscar Fantenberg and Carter Bancks, plus a former Hitman in Jake Virtanen and a current Hitman in Jett Woo.

Woo, who missed training camp last year because of knee surgery, was excited to both make his Canucks debut and also to play at the rink he’ll call home this coming WHL season.
"Last year not being to participate (in camp) because of the surgery was a bummer," he said. "I know coming into camp and seeing the schedule and having the chance to play in Calgary, that's going to be fun."

Vancouver Province: LOADED: 09.17.2019
Brock Boeser is a Vancouver Canuck once again. The sniper agreed to a three-year deal Monday evening, just as his Canucks teammates were getting set to face the Calgary Flames.

Boeser’s deal averages US$5.875 million per season. That average annual value is the second-highest among forwards on the team, after Loui Eriksson, but it’s also a nice number for the team and matches what at least one salary-projection analytics site suggested.

We have his 3 year deal at $5.76MM, 15% chance. Will be interesting to see what the AAV is if it is, in fact, a 3 year bridge.https://t.co/Mv6sz3GpWP— EvolvingWild (@EvolvingWild) September 17, 2019

The deal is structured so that he’ll make US$4 million this season, US$6.125 million in 2020-21 and US$7.5 million in the final year of the deal.

Canucks general manager Jim Benning said that after off-and-on talks over the summer, he and Boeser’s agent Ben Hankinson finally found some common ground Sunday and finalized the deal Monday.

“Very happy and excited to get Brock in here and up-and-going,” Benning said.

No doubt Chris Gear, the team’s capologist, had a strong hand in sealing the deal as well.

Canucks head coach Travis Green was very happy he can start putting into place his full practice plans as well as having his lineup at full strength.

“You know, as a coach, you’re always trying to plan your lineup, trying to look ahead and it’s in the back your mind. You’re wondering, is Brock going to be here,” he said after Monday’s 4-3 loss to the Calgary Flames in Victoria. “Definitely happy that he’s signed.”

Bo Horvat was delighted that his friend and teammate is on his way back. Horvat said he texted often with Boeser, though he didn’t want to overwhelm him with questions. He said Boeser kept the situation pretty close to the vest.

“She wasn’t giving us any tips or anything,” he said.

Upon expiry, Boeser will be a restricted free agent (RFA), with arbitration rights. To keep him as a RFA, they’ll have to make a qualifying offer of US$7.5 million; if the Canucks want to keep arbitration as a possibility, they can make him an offer that’s 85 per cent of the salary: $6.375 million.

The Canucks can dodge a $7.5m qualifying offer by electing salary arb in year 4 – in which they can push for a 15% pay cut to $6.375m. Not committed to a $7.5m minimum. https://t.co/euqj0z1Fkv— Rory Johnston (@rrfjohnston) September 17, 2019

Ideally, the Canucks would surely like to have locked Boeser down to a longer-term deal, but to sign such a contract Boeser would have been looking for a higher annual cap hit. The team couldn’t go much higher than about US$7.5 million, though, because of how the rest of their contracts line up. The Canucks could have done that, but they would have needed to do some roster juggling.

The Canucks will still have to demote one skater and place Antoine Roussel on long-term injury relief, but Boeser’s lower cap hit means that shouldn’t be too much of a challenge.

If Boeser performs as well as the Canucks hope he will, it’s likely he’ll now be after a much larger contract in 2022. But that’s also a problem the Canucks will surely be happy to have because it would mean Boeser’s had an excellent three years.

Boeser, 22, scored 26 goals last year, mostly playing on Elias Pettersson’s wing.

In 140 career games, Boeser has scored 59 goals.

When Boeser needs a new deal, the Canucks will have Bo Horvat, J.T. Miller, Micheal Ferland and Tyler Myers signed for US$20.25 million, plus whatever Thatcher Demko, Pettersson and Quinn Hughes will have signed for two years from now, when their deals have expired.

A new deal for Boeser likely won’t be too difficult to fit in, provided the Canucks are smart with the rest of their cap space in the interim.

“These RFAs are looking for shorter-term deals, we looked at trying to do a longer-term deal, but at the end of the day, you know, I guess doing a shorter-term deal puts some responsibility back on him now to come in and have three good years,” Benning said. “Then we’ll try to get them signed long term after that.

“We’re happy with the number,” he said, with a smile.

Boeser will fly to Vancouver on Tuesday, Benning said — though not in time to play that night. He will join his teammates Wednesday.
Go with the flow: Canucks, Brock Boeser reach unprecedented compromise with 3-year bridge deal

By Thomas Drance Sep 16, 2019

The wait is over. Just as the puck dropped to kick off the Vancouver Canucks’ preseason Monday night, the club agreed to a contract with All-Star winger Brock Boeser. It’s a three-year bridge deal with a palatable $5.875 million annual average value.

Boeser missed the club’s training camp over the weekend as the contract stalemate dragged on. This new contract will get him back into the fold quickly. He’s expected to be back on the ice with his teammates by Wednesday morning.

“We’ve been working on this for the last, you know, three, four months,” Jim Benning said Monday evening. “We talked about what a long-term deal looks like and what a short-term deal looks like and found that we had more common ground in doing the shorter-term deal. And so yesterday, (Boeser’s agent Ben Hankinson) and I talked again, most of the afternoon.

“Kind of last night things came together, and we got it done today. (We’re) very happy and excited to get Brock in here and up and going.”

This is a reasonable outcome for all sides, a fair deal. That the Canucks didn’t get their star winger signed to a long-term contract carries subtle downside for the club over the long run, however.

The central conflict in these second contract negotiations involving star players tends to be relatively straightforward. The club’s rational self-interest is best served bybuying the entirety of a player’s prime years at the most reasonable possible rate. This is done by signing a long-term contract that favourably uses the player’s cost-controlled seasons to restrain the annual average value of the six-, seven- or eight-year deal.

Meanwhile, it’s in a star player’s best interest to preserve his ability to hit unrestricted free agency at the age of 25, 26 or 27. That’s the blueprint for hitting a home run in unrestricted free agency, especially in an already youthful league that’s trending younger every season.

“I think there’s more eagerness from young players to do bridge deals now, going forward,” Benning said. “We’ve got Seattle coming into the league and in the next few years, there’s the new television deal. Young players now, they have a lot of confidence in their game that they’re going to produce and put up the numbers and get the money when their contracts are up.”

In signing the three-year contract, Boeser has preserved that flexibility. He’s also set himself up well.

The deal will expire in the summer of 2022 and carries a $7.5 million platform-year salary. That will provide Boeser with a quality launch pad as he goes into his first arbitration-eligible season of Group 2 restricted free agency.

“Big platform years are the new black,” texted one rival executive. If Boeser continues to be the go-to triggerman on the Canucks power play and on a line with reigning Rookie of the Year Elias Pettersson, he’s clearly capable of building an epic arbitration case.

“It’s a decent compromise,” opined one veteran agent, “but one that will ultimately benefit Boeser. His next contract will be exponentially higher.”

The bridge deal might work in Boeser’s favour over the coming decade, but it can’t be understated that this deal gives Vancouver real flexibility — especially as it navigates a delicate cap situation. The three-year term means Boeser’s deal will expire after, or in concert with, a variety of other expensive contracts the club has on the books, including the Loui Eriksson millstone.

As Vancouver looks to maximize the two remaining years of Pettersson and Quinn Hughes’ entry-level contracts, it’s extremely useful to have Boeser in the fold on a cap-hit under $6 million.
Canucks training camp: The Brock Boeser thing, Troy Stecher’s ‘black out’ debut and the importance of winning

By Harman Dayal Sep 16, 2019

It’s become something of an unofficial tradition for a young player to use Canucks training camp as an opportunity to stick their flag into the ground and show they can make an impact in the NHL.

Last year, it was the magical arrival of Elias Pettersson. The year before that it was Brock Boeser who proved he didn’t need any AHL time. Flip the calendar another year back and you’ll find the inspiring underdog story of the bunch in Troy Stecher — the local, undrafted 5-foot-10 defenceman just signed out of college.

It was this time three years ago that Stecher impressed through camp scrimmages and preseason to plant the roots for a swift call-up. The subsequent game that followed produced a wicked ‘welcome to the NHL’ moment — one Stecher will hold onto for the rest of his life.

“My first game ever was against Ottawa at home, I completely blacked out,” recalled Stecher.

“I don’t really remember too much in that game other than I remember I got put out for an offensive zone faceoff in the first period. The faceoff was on the board side and so I lined up near their bench.

“They called (Erik) Karlsson to jump over the boards, he was the captain there at the time and I just double took, I was like ‘oh shit’ that’s Erik Karlsson. I (realized) I was like … ‘oh I’m on the ice’ but those first 10 games it’s just kind of a blur.

“You’re just running on adrenaline and emotion like you’re just so excited to be up (in the NHL). My fourth game, I got jumped by Matt Martin so that was crazy in Toronto.”

To say that moment in Toronto was crazy is an understatement. Ryan Miller raced out of his crease to take on Martin after the latte of a second-period battle rang out and the time clock seemed to slow to a crawl.

The sequence, of course, also led to Erik Gudbranson infamously yelling death threats in the hallway to Martin.

The one commonality between Stecher’s first-ever training camp and this one? He pushed himself so hard that he puked after Friday’s bag skate — making it four years in a row that he’s vomited.

Dare to dream: A Stecher and Hughes pairing

It’s a long shot to ever become a thing — and who knows if it’s even practical — but imagine the fun of having Stecher paired with Quinn Hughes. We may not see such a reality unfold in regular season games, but those that attended camp in Victoria have been treated to the sight.

“I’ve enjoyed it,” Stecher said of playing with Hughes in the scrimmages. “I was actually asked that earlier about playing with Benn and a lot of it right now is just cardio, even with the scrimmages like one team practices and the other team comes on fresh … but I’ve enjoyed it,” Stecher wryly smiled.

“We both move our feet. I think today in the scrimmage he went around the net … it’s not very often a D-man’s gonna do a drop pass to (another) D-man, but it’s creativity.”

The play Stecher’s referring to is reminiscent of the first time Hughes made a dash in activating down the boards and around the net, a sequence that led to the latter’s first point in his NHL debut.

It didn’t lead to a goal this time around in the scrimmage, but it was certainly a ton of fun to watch him paired up with Stecher.

Dare to dream about one day seeing a Hughes-Stecher duo

Best Opportunity

The Canucks are gearing up for life without Brock Boeser in the lineup.

Monday’s matchup against the Calgary Flames may only be a preseason game, but it means we’ve passed the pivotal training camp checkpoint without a deal in place.

There’s not one player on the Canucks who doesn’t want Boeser with the team right now, but everyone is also well aware that it creates a coveted opportunity and guys are ready to step up to use that to prove themselves.

“I mean we all want (Boeser) here, but it’s a business and he’s doing his part, but we’re focused on our season and we gotta be ready,” Josh Leivo told The Athletic when asked about Boeser’s absence from camp.

“That’s obviously a sign to step up and jump up and so, yeah I see it as a positive right now and I just gotta work my butt off.”

The need for a ‘digger’ with Pettersson

Both spots on the wing are currently open on Pettersson’s line and one role that’s bound to get filled with one of those flanks is what colleague Thomas Drance referred to affectionately as the digger role. In short, it’s the energetic, physical forward who’s perhaps a little less skilled, but retrieves the puck and fills his role as the complementary piece extremely well.

Alex Burrows played it to perfection for the Sedins here and Zach Hyman in Toronto is a current example of this type of complementary winger. It’s also the type of role that Micheal Ferland’s mastered over the past couple of seasons.

“(If) you got two skilled guys on a line that want the puck, it’s tough when you got maybe three that always want the puck,” Ferland said.

“I don’t mind playing like that, give it to the skilled guy and I’ll just try and get a lane open, just shoot pucks and be ready at all times and I think I don’t change too much. I know I’m not a skilled player, I know what got me here.”

Ferland brings up a very good point in how it can sometimes be tough for three players who all want to drive offence and create plays to mesh with each other. Adding a different dimension like that of Ferland’s could prove to be an indispensable asset.

“Every guy is different, it’s good to play with guys say like Ferland, he’s a power forward,” Pettersson said when asked about what his ideal wingers look like.

“He’s powerful, he wins the puck and can make a turnover from him hitting a guy. If you play with Brock, he’s good at passing, so it’s a lot of different (types) of wingers that always help you.”

Pettersson expressed that he isn’t sure what type of winger suits his game best, but it’s definitely a good thing if Ferland is one of the first names mentioned as far as what he’d like from his prototypical winger.

Head coach Travis Green also conceded that he didn’t feel like he had enough of that hard-nosed, puck retrieval element on Pettersson’s line last year, although he felt that to be the case for the entire team.

“I think it’s important for every line (to have a puck retriever),” Green said. “Quite frankly, in the NHL, puck retrievals are big. If we keep pucks alive and deny the other team from breaking out, you’re gonna spend a lot more time in their zone.”

Is it something that was missing from the Pettersson line last year?

“At times,” Green bluntly responded. “It was an element missing through our (entire) team at times.”

Pettersson’s lateral shiftiness

Everyone recognizes that Pettersson is a special player. Most would jump at the chance to line up on his wing, but developing chemistry and understanding how to work off an extremely smart but also unpredictable talent, is a lot harder than most would think.

“You’ve gotta be able to read them, understand what they’re trying to do out there — I think that’s the biggest thing,” Sven Baertschi said, who got a small taste of playing with Pettersson for parts of last year.

“When you have linemates for a while you get used to each other, but at the same time, if you can connect with someone things just seem to flow. That’s one of those things where especially with Petey as well, you gotta be able to read him, know that he might cut across before the blueline, so you gotta be ready for all sorts of situations, so that’s what I sort of get out of it (as the key).”

Baertschi’s spent a lot of time over the past few seasons playing with another high-end pivot in Bo Horvat, but compared to the latter’s simple north-south game, Pettersson can weave laterally at will.
Leivo deployed. This wasn't just a case of being carried by spending time with the team, as Vancouver held onto 56.9 percent of the expected goals when Leivo played away from Pettersson too.

Some players can help you outscore the opposition without necessarily scoring a lot of goals or points individually — early signs would suggest Leivo is built in that mold. Again, I don't think playing him with Pettersson is the best fit, but he's a valuable two-way piece for the second or third line.

Leivo's spent a ton of time focusing on his skating this offseason and truly believes he's capable of bigger things as a goal-scorer as well.

"For sure, I'd like (20 goals). I had 14 last year and I was I wouldn't say disappointed, but wasn't too happy with it and that's just motivating me for more," Leivo said. "Twenty is a goal, but I'd love to get more and it starts from Game 1, so I just gotta work, work, and work."

Confidence reset for Nikolay Goldobin

Nikolay Goldobin created a ton of chances for both himself and his linemates last year. He converted that into 21 points through the first 35 games, a 49-point pace, but as Goldobin began squandering chances, finishing became a constant problem.

For Goldobin to stick it as an NHLer, he'll need to do two things he showed in 2017-18 — the ability to produce away from Pettersson as well as much better conversion on his chances. The latter of the two goals should become easier with a fresh start to the season.

"Going through the moment even though I don't score one goal I know there will be chances, not a lot, but two or three (in a game) and I'm still thinking how I didn't score that one it really hurts me inside," a candid Goldobin explained.

Confidence can run high and low for every player, especially for one that needs to score to maintain a regular roster spot. Goldobin has lots of offensive skill and is very smart in how he sees the ice with the puck on his stick — now it's time to translate that into consistent production.

Boucher cameo

If the Canucks are looking for the closest stylistic fit to replace Boeser, then they haven't skipped a beat in slotting sniper Reid Boucher on Pettersson's wing.

For his part, Boucher has found it a pretty seamless transition: "I've played with guys not of his (Pettersson's) calibre, but like I've played with Goldy in Sarnia together and in the American League and he's kind of similar in that regard, where both are really shifty, have very high skill, good passers, so I've kind of gotten used to that over the years I guess, but now it's just a little more magnified."

Boucher's calling card obviously comes from his heavy shot — one that aided by a very unique and whippy stick flex. For him to stick it and be a potential replacement for Boeser, however, he'll have to show improvement with his skating and two-way game. It might be a little bit too late for Boucher, but he's come to camp noticeably leaner and is motivated to show his worth.

The toll of losing and why the Canucks are hungry to win again

Stecher is driven by his hate for losing. Suffice to say, it's been tough for him to miss out on the postseason in three consecutive seasons since breaking into the NHL.

"It's just tough mentally and physically when you set your mind and you want to achieve something as a team and you come short," Stecher articulated. "It doesn't sit well. I think winning becomes addictive.

"I've been fortunate to play on some really good teams and we've gone a long way. It's tough to really put in perspective because everybody hates to lose and obviously when you lose, you come back next year and you want a little taste of (the playoffs)."

That hunger for winning has been driven by decorated success growing up as a younger player. In 2012, Stecher's Penticton Vees went on a record-setting 42 games win-streak en route to a BCHL championship. In the NCAA, he and Boeser led the North Dakota Fighting Hawks to the NCAADivision I national championship. It's easy to see why that type of success becomes so intoxicating and hurts so much when it can't be attained at the next level.

"It's no different this year, like we're eager to make the jump in the postseason and then last year you even look at the standings, it was like three or four of the wild card teams that were in the final eight, so it's like..."
you give yourself a fighting chance (for the Cup) if you make the playoffs and that's what we're believing in.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
The Athletic / Five takeaways from the NHLPA not opting out of the current CBA

By Katie Strang Sep 16, 2019

After months of tempering every sense of positivity emanating from collective bargaining agreement talks between the NHL and NHL Players’ Association, and offering caveats with each tidbit of progress, it now seems that the optimism about avoiding another labor dispute, at least in the immediate future, was genuine after all.

I’ll readily admit that I was definitely in the pumping-the-brakes camp, not quite believing the level of cordiality between the two sides would be sustainable as the deadline on an opt-out decision drew near.

And yet here we are, with the NHLPA announcing on Monday that the executive board decided not to reopen the current CBA in 2020, which means the current agreement will not expire until the end of the 2021-22 season.

“While players have concerns with the current CBA, we agree with the league that working together to address those concerns is the preferred course of action instead of terminating the agreement following this season,” NHLPA Executive Director Don Fehr said in a statement.

The NHL notified the NHLPA of its intention not to opt-out of the agreement before the league’s Sept. 1 deadline. So what does it all mean?

Here are five takeaways from that decision, and what it will ultimately mean for NHL fans in the future:

1. Immediate Labor Peace

In the most immediate sense, the NHL will not have the same sort of looming cloud of uncertainty that has cast a pall on previous seasons. Rather, this decision assures that there will be no interruption to play next season and that the gulf between the two sides in brokering a new deal must at least seem manageable for the union to eschew its right to opt-out of the CBA next year. This decision instead means that this season, and potentially the following two, will be played under the parameters of the current CBA, though the two sides can always mutually agree upon amendments and modifications to be addressed in an a la carte fashion or as part of a jointly-brokered agreement on a new CBA.

It is not believed that the two sides have gotten down to the true nitty, gritty details as of yet, though Monday’s decision by the NHLPA indicates a willingness on both sides to keep at it on the negotiating front. There certainly does not seem to be the appetite from within either camp to force the issue or go looking for a fight.

From a 30,000-foot view, the entry of an NHL team in Seattle and the impending U.S. television rights deal are both likely impacting the tenor of talks, with both sides hoping that this tandem of developments helps foster revenue growth for the future, a fundamental issue that is at the heart of one of the CBA’s thornier issues (See: Takeaway No. 3).

2. Then vs. Now

Even if the NHLPA isn’t crazy about some of the terms of the current CBA (the union acknowledged as much in its statement announcing the decision), the decision not to reopen is one that displays a level of trust and good faith that was conspicuously absent from similar talks prior to the 113-day lockout that impacted the 2012-13 season. In those discussions, and in previous labor standoffs, talks appeared much more rancorous, and often devolved as both sides aired their grievances and plead their cases through the media. This time around both sides were relatively light-tipped in what was revealed publicly and the same level of enmity just didn’t seem to exist. Fehr even described talks as “pleasant” during a press briefing earlier this month. It’s hard to know what to make of that, especially since so much was made of the tête-à-tête between Don Fehr and NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, Round 1, and the personalities at the head of the discussions haven’t changed.

Perhaps what has changed, rather, is that the owners did not want to see their business impacted and players didn’t feel like the issues they had with the CBA were enough to stomach sitting out games and sacrificing paychecks.

And if there was progress on a major issue, like escrow, it’s probable that the two sides were wary of losing momentum. Had the union utilized the opener, that could have widened a chasm between the NHL and NHLPA, and forced both camps to become further entrenched in their positions rather than willing to find middle ground.

Had the re-opener been triggered, we may have seen the gloves come off, with owners taking on a more active role in talks, and the ensuing effect that may have had on the players. That still may happen down the road, but it’s not on the immediate horizon, at least.

3. What Happens Now?

The fact that the NHLPA made this decision means that there is a possibility (if not a likelihood, depending on who you ask) that the two sides can come to an agreement on an extension to the current CBA. And by all indications, that is what the two sides will aim for as they continue to discuss matters in the weeks to come. However, it shouldn’t be taken as a given simply because the NHLPA passed up on the opportunity to opt-out. Within the rank-and-file, a new CBA is not seen as a fait accompli.

However, multiple people with knowledge of the discussions have indicated that a new agreement that would extend two or three years beyond the current CBA, which is set to expire at the end of the 2021-22 season, would be the most likely scenario if the two sides are able to iron out a deal.

You have to imagine that the league is breathing a huge sigh of relief here, for a number of different reasons.

For one, the league is set to welcome its 32nd franchise with Seattle slated to begin play in the 2021-22 season. Additionally, the NHL is on the cusp of negotiating a new television/media deal with the U.S. television rights up in 2021, a deal that the league is expecting to be a financial boon and its first real crack at landing a significant deal within the new streaming rights landscape.

Additionally, the legalization of sports gambling will add another wrinkle into the revenue stream discussions, particularly if the NHL believes there is potential to be captured by way of a sports betting “integrity fee” (more or less a royalty tax).

4. Issues that remain

The players hate escrow, that much is clear. We’ve written extensively about why that is the case, and why that is hard to reconcile when the league’s economics function as they do. However, both sides indicated that they have discussed ways to compute the salary cap in a way that can at least mitigate the percentages of escrow.

That will likely be a big issue as talks continue. If there is a way to diminish the escrow rates, that may feel like a coup for the players; but it’s hard to imagine that happening in a way that doesn’t include lowering the cap to bring contracts better in line with growth projections and revenue.

The league addressed its distaste for front-loaded contracts and deals that are particularly heavy with signing bonus money. Bettman told The Athletic last week that the league feels that those “cash over cap” deals inflates the escrow players see taken out of their paychecks.

Since the last CBA, players have also made an effort to push for better post-career health care, which feels like a compensatory benefit the league would yield on and would be impactful. Remember that not all players will be impacted by any of the “sticking points” of the current CBA talks — i.e. signing bonuses, front-loaded contracts, etc — but all players will have to grapple with post-retirement health care. As awareness grows about the effects of playing the game and the potential post-career health risks that lie ahead, players are likely thinking of that as a bigger priority at the bargaining table.

5. International calendar

One non-monetary issue that remains important to players is Olympic participation, and the NHL has been rather bearish on this in recent years. The league did not participate in the 2018 Olympics in PyeongChang, and Bettman affirmed his stance recently as not just a matter of agreement between the NHL and NHLPA, but also one that is complicated by some of the issues that have arisen in trying to work with the International Olympic Committee. Bettman said the ability to promote
the league at the Olympics in the past has been “non-existent,” the IOC has been “completely inflexible on that” and, in discussions before the last Olympics, the IOC “didn’t even want to pay the cost of us going.”

“I think international (play) is a wonderful opportunity for us as a game and as a league, not just as revenue-wise but 25 percent of our players come from outside of North America, and we want to continue to encourage the development of world-class hockey players,” Bettman said, citing the exhibition and regular-season games played overseas.

“All that’s good. International competition is great. Do I regret not going to South Korea Olympics? Not one bit because, at the end of the day, that was a terrific season that wasn’t disrupted; and how much any of you think Olympics is a good or a bad thing, it does disrupt our season in a whole host of ways.”

Also on the international calendar front, the two sides recently indicated hope for staging a World Cup of Hockey in 2021, provided that the then-promising CBA talks continued in earnest. Recent developments would then indicate that such a tournament could occur, with the possibility of an in-season format replacing the annual All-Star Game. So if talks continue to go well, expect a firmer international calendar to take shape soon.

“The fact is we do this jointly with the Players’ Association and we can’t move forward unilaterally, and there’s been lots of other things to discuss,” Bettman said earlier this month.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019

By Sean McIndoe Sep 16, 2019

We made it. With training camps now in full swing around the league, the NHL offseason is officially over. Teams had their chance to remake their rosters, hire new people and set a course for the upcoming season. Now, that season is here. Pencils down, everyone. (Not you, teams with unsigned RFAs. You still have work to do.)

Looking back on the last few months, some teams did well. Some teams came up empty. And some teams, well, they just got weird. Those are the teams I’m interested in. As a diehard fan of Team Chaos, I’m always happy to see a team do things that confuse the rest of us. And that’s where the Bizarro-meter comes in.

I wrote my first Bizarro-meter column way back in 2013 when I was trying to make sense of the infamous Maple Leafs offseason that saw them make a series of truly confusing moves. Did it work? It did not. To this day, nobody has been able to figure out what the Leafs thought they were doing that summer. But the concept was fun and morphed into an annual league-wide ranking. And now it’s time to blow the dust off of the Bizarro-meter, plug it in and spit out some 2019 ratings.

As always, remember that a bizarre offseason is not necessarily bad. Sometimes, the decisions that leave everyone scratching their heads are the ones that work out the best. And often, a safe, by-the-numbers approach is exactly the wrong choice for a team that needs a more creative approach. This isn’t about picking winners and losers. It’s about recognizing those teams who failed at the NHL’s prime directive of being dull and predictable.

We’ll do this by division, starting with the Atlantic and Metro today and wrapping with the Pacific and Central tomorrow. As always, we’ll work our way up the scale as we go.

Atlantic Division

Boston Bruins

The offseason so far: They didn’t do much, which was no surprise. They’re already good, the cap situation is manageable and Don Sweeney never makes trades during the summer and we’ve all just apparently decided to act like that’s not weird. Their biggest story was probably yesterday’s Charlie McAvoy signing to a thoroughly team-friendly deal, which might have been surprising from another team but was par for the course for the Bruins.

But their strangest story was: Jeremy Jacobs not being the owner anymore. He’s keeping the team in the family, handing it over to his six children, and will presumably still have an important voice in guiding the franchise. But one of the most influential names in modern NHL history will be stepping back, which will take some getting used to.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 3.2/10. I guess Jacobs felt it was important to make his exit at the right time. Maybe now he can explain the concept to Brad Marchand.

Buffalo Sabres

The offseason so far: They didn’t make any blockbusters like last year’s Ryan O’Reilly or Jeff Skinner moves, but they did add Marcus Johansson in free agency and swing deals for Colin Miller, Jimmy Vesey and Henri Jokiharju. The bigger move was bringing in Ralph Krueger to replace Phil Housley behind the bench.

But their strangest story was: Not really addressing the goaltending. It’s back to the tandem of Carter Hutton and Linus Ullmark, which was a bust last year (especially in the second half). There’s something to be said for consistency and not just chasing last year’s hot hand, but the status quo is a gamble.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 4.1/10. They were busy. But given the pressure on Jason Botterill and company to finally breakthrough, you wonder if they were busy enough.

Tampa Bay Lightning

The offseason so far: The first real offseason of the Julien BriseBois era didn’t produce many big headlines. Unloading Ryan Callahan’s deal helped, and they did well on the J.T. Miller trade. Their main goal was to clear out some cap deadwood, and they did it well.

But their strangest story was: The fact that their offseason started in April, not June. But mainly the lack of a Brayden Point deal, largely because we all assumed he was going to sign some ridiculously team-friendly contract that would make fans of every other team tear their hair out. And he still might, at least if the Lightning get their way. It’s just taking longer than we thought.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 4.5/10 for now, pending whatever happens with Point.

Florida Panthers

The offseason so far: They upgraded on and off the ice, landing two of the biggest free agents in the sport in Joel Quenneville and Sergei Bobrovsky. They also added Anton Stralman and Brett Connolly.

But their strangest story was: Roberto Luongo announcing his retirement. Wait, players can do that? They don’t just have to come up with a suspicious “injury” and finish their career on the LTIR?

Bizarro-meter ranking: 4.8/10. The Panthers were certainly among the biggest newsmakers of the offseason. But it feels like we had Quenneville and Bobrovsky penciled in here since January, so nothing they did felt all that surprising.

Ottawa Senators

The offseason so far: Their biggest move was hiring former Leafs’ assistant D.J. Smith as their head coach, one of several ex-Leafs they loaded up on. They also traded Zack Smith for Artem Anisimov and acquired Ryan Callahan’s LTIR charge. But apart from that, and a new deal for Colin White, it was relatively quiet. No new deal for Thomas Chabot yet, no major additions and no reason to think they won’t endure another tough season.

But their strangest story was: A team that’s notoriously frugal going out and trading for one of the worst contracts in the league. Nikita Zaitsev can eat minutes, and the Sens have to spend on somebody to get to the floor. But they say they expect to contend again in a few years, and having Zaitsev still on the books might be an issue by then.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 5.1/10. One year after earning the ultra-rare 10/10 rating, they almost made it through the entire offseason before hitting their first-off-ice embarrassment. I’m guessing Senators fans will happily take it.

Detroit Red Wings

The offseason so far: The Wings didn’t do much to remake the roster, bringing back Valtteri Filppula and saying goodbye to the retiring Niklas Kronwall. None of that really matters all that much, because the big news is that Steve Yzerman is back and ready to use his Jedi skills to rebuild the roster.

But their strangest story was: Taking Moritz Seider a dozen or two spots ahead of where most of the draft boards had him, in what was easily the biggest surprise of the first round. Nice bow tie, though.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 6.1/10. After two decades, it’s going to take some time getting used to talking about the Red Wings without mentioning Ken Holland. But Yzerman’s return just feels right.

Toronto Maple Leafs

The offseason so far: Kyle Dubas remade a big chunk of the roster. He traded Nazem Kadri for Tyson Barrie, shipped Patrick Marleau’s albatross of a contract to the Hurricanes at the cost of a first-round pick and signed veteran Jason Spezza to take over fourth-line duties. He re-signed Andreas Johnsson and Kasperi Kapanen to reasonable deals, which was good, and dumped Nikita Zaitsev, which was great, and acquired Cody Ceci, which was acquiring Cody Ceci.

Oh, they also brought back David Clarkson. Everyone mumbled about LTIR and cap rules and pretended like we understood what that was all about.

But their strangest story was: The Mitch Marner saga, which ended on Friday with a massive six-year, $65-million deal that sure feels like an overspay. Marner’s a great young player coming off a career year who wanted to reset the RFA market, and the Leafs let him do it rather than...
digging in for an extended fight. Now we see if the rest of the league follows along, or if this deal ends up being an outlier that ages badly.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 10.893/10. Just kidding, that would be way too high. Let’s give them a 7/10.

Montreal Canadiens
The offseason so far: The roster looks pretty much the same. There’s a new backup in Keith Kincaid and a handful of depth pieces moving in and out, but this is basically the same core that put up 96 points and barely missed the playoffs last year.

But their strangest story was: The Sebastian Aho offer sheet drama, in which Marc Bergevin and the Habs apparently decided that the best way to land a young franchise player was to offer him less money than everyone assumed he could get.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 8.3/10. While a big part of me was just happy to see an NHL front office remember that offer sheets exist, I still don’t understand what the Habs thought they were accomplishing here. Sure, it’s the Hurricanes, who in theory could be susceptible to a front-loaded contract. But when that contract is also a certifiable bargain, what do you realistically think is going to happen? Pretty much exactly what did. Good try, I guess.

Metropolitan Division
Washington Capitals
The offseason so far: It’s mostly been about tinkering around the edges. They traded Matt Niskanen for Radko Gudas. They re-signed Jakub Vrana. They signed Carl Hagelin and Richard Panik and traded Andre Burakovsky. That was about it.

But their strangest story was: Evgeny Kuznetsov testing positive for cocaine at the Worlds, which will earn him a brief NHL suspension.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 3.7/10. Was it a good offseason? I’m not blown away, even as others seem to like it. But putting aside Kuznetsov’s office troubles, there wasn’t much here to wonder about.

New York Rangers
The offseason so far: They won a share of the lottery and drafted Kaapo Kakko, then landed the top UFA of the summer by signing Artemi Panarin. They also squeezed the Hurricanes in the Adam Fox deal and lured John Davidson away from Columbus to become the team’s president.

But their strangest story was: Trading for Jacob Trouba, and then giving him a seven-year, $56 million contract. The trade itself came dirt cheap, but the contract carries some risk and basically forced the Kevin Shattenkirk buyout. Still, as gambles go, this one felt worthwhile.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 4.8/10. The Rangers were busy, dominating the headlines through early July. But for the most part, everything they did made sense.

Philadelphia Flyers
The offseason so far: They hired Alain Vigneault as their head coach, traded for Justin Braun, bought out Andrew MacDonald and jumped the contract was sho

But their strangest story was: Parting ways with Robin Lehner after a career year and instead, signing Semyon Varlamov to a four-year deal that carried the same $5 million cap hit that Lehner eventually got from Chicago. Maybe Varlamov is the better goalie. Or maybe he’ll be a better mentor for eventual starter Ilya Sorokin. Still, Lehner was a key to last year’s turnaround and said he wanted to stay, and it’s rare to see a team let a goaltender walk after a year like he just had.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 6.1/10. Losing arguably their most important player to free agency? Clearly, the Islanders are doomed!

New Jersey Devils
The offseason so far: They won the lottery and drafted Jack Hughes, traded for P.K. Subban without giving up much of anything, snagged KHL star Nikita Gusev from the cap-strapped Knights, got Wayne Simmonds on a low-risk-one-year deal and locked in Pavel Zacha after a brief war of words. Other than that, not much.

But their strangest story was: The lack of progress on a Taylor Hall extension—or really, the apparent lack of any real effort at progress.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 6.3/10. It’s rare to see a team add this much talent in one offseason. Is it enough to make up the 26 points they missed the playoffs by last year? Some Devils fans seem pretty sure that it will be. I’m not as confident, but I’ve been wrong before.

Columbus Blue Jackets
The offseason so far: As expected, they lost three of their best players to free agency, as Panarin, Bobrovsky and Matt Duchene all left. Does the addition of Gustav Nyquist make up the difference? (Takes long swig from a water bottle.) Not really.

But their strangest story was: Not being more aggressive in free agency apart from Nyquist. They weren’t going to find another Panarin, but you might have expected them to use that cap space on more veteran depth, especially in goal.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 6.8/10. The Blue Jackets are a tough team to rate. On the one hand, pretty much everything that happened to them this summer was something we already expected, so none of it seemed all that strange. On the other, it’s almost unheard of to see a team decimated by free agency like this. Just because we knew it was coming doesn’t make it normal.

Pittsburgh Penguins
The offseason so far: They finally pulled the trigger on the long-rumored Phil Kessel trade, sending him to the Coyotes in a deal that saw Alex Galchenyuk come back the other way. Kessel always wears out his welcome eventually, but it was fun while it lasted.

But their strangest story was: The absolutely mind-boggling Brandon Tanev signing. Seriously, there may not have been an offseason move that was more widely criticized. Oh wait, I wrote that exact same sentence about last year’s Jack Johnson deal. Maybe free agency just isn’t this team’s thing.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 7.1/10. Six years! For a depth forward! I am using exclamation points!

Carolina Hurricanes
The offseason so far: It’s been busy, and all over the map. They managed to avoid the RFA headaches that have hit just about everyone else, thanks to Montreal’s failed offer sheet on Aho. That locked in their franchise player at what’s already become below-market value, so even if the contract was shorter than the Hurricanes would have preferred, it’s a win. But it’s also weird that the situation even got to that point; when your franchise player is signing an offer sheet on Day 1 of free agency, something has gone wrong somewhere in the relationship, and all the spin in the world won’t disguise that.

On top of all of that, they lost Micheal Ferland, Adam Fox and, at least temporarily, heart-and-soul leader Justin Williams. But they also signed Ryan Dzingel, then landed Jake Gardiner on what may have been their most team-friendly UFA deal off the offseason. Oh, and they spent millions on a Patrick Marleau buyout in a deal that saw them essentially buy the Leafs’ first-round pick. One way or another, just about everything they do makes you go “huh, that’s interesting”.

But their strangest story was: When we found out their GM, Don Waddell, didn’t have a contract because their owner didn’t think he needed one.
We learned this because Waddell, who I again remind you was the Hurricanes' GM at the time, was interviewing for the same job with another team. That's not how any of this is supposed to work.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 9.1/10. I can't figure the Hurricanes out, and I acknowledge that there's a non-zero chance that the problem is that they're just way smarter than me. But it would be nice if they could go a few weeks without being in the middle of something that feels like some sort of glitch in the AI for NHL 20.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.17.2019
VICTORIA, B.C. — A match made in heaven? Ask Brock Boeser and the Vancouver Canucks in three years.

For now, the two sides badly needed each other, which is why the free-agent winger and National Hockey League club ended their standoff Monday and agreed to a three-year bridge deal for Boeser that averages US$5.875 million.

The 22-year-old Minnesotan will rejoin the team Wednesday after missing the Canucks’ three-day training camp and first three pre-season games. Boeser will have two weeks to get ready for Vancouver’s season-opener Oct. 2 in Edmonton.

And general manager Jim Benning and his staff have about the same time to make the Canucks salary-cap compliant after Boeser’s signing, which caps a hectic off-season for the team where Vancouver went $1.72 million over the $81.5-million limit.

“We want him up and going so he’s ready for the start of the season,” Benning told reporters Monday night before the Canucks and Calgary Flames opened the pre-season with split-squad games in Victoria and Calgary. “So it was important we get him done now.

“I talked to him this afternoon. Obviously, he’s very excited. He’s been talking to some of the guys and getting a feel for how camp is going and wanted to be here. He’s happy (negotiations are) over.”

Vancouver coach Travis Green said he always believed Boeser would re-sign.

“I don’t think Brock wanted to be out and we definitely wanted him to be here, so we had those two elements,” Green said after his team in Victoria fell behind by four goals before losing 4-3 to the Flames.

“As coach, you’re always trying to plan your lineup and trying to look ahead. And in the back of your mind, you’re wondering: Is Brock going to be here or not? So I’m definitely happy he’s signed now and will be in town soon.”

Green said he hadn’t decided if Boeser will have to do the gruelling skating test teammates endured on the first day of training camp.

“Oh, yeah,” Canucks centre Bo Horvat said. “He’s coming back, he’s going to have to do it. We’re going to make him. He’s not going to get off that easy.

“He kept saying he wants to be here with us and he wants to be with the team. I’m glad they finally got it done.

“I couldn’t be happier for him and I couldn’t be happier to have him back in our lineup. I’m really happy he’s going to start the season with us because we definitely need him.”

In two-plus NHL seasons, Boeser has 59 goals in 140 games despite serious injuries that ended his rookie campaign and slowed the start to his sophomore season. At this point, his offensive ceiling is unlimited.

But he needs to play. Ineligible for free-agent offers from other NHL teams, his value to Vancouver — as well as his conditioning — wasn’t likely to improve while sitting out. But the Canucks also could not afford to proceed without him.

Adding wingers Micheal Ferland and J.T. Miller, and defencemen Tyler Myers and Jordie Benn make the Canucks a better team. But the organization is far from talented enough to lose one of its best young players without it diminishing the Canucks’ playoff hopes.

An extended standoff looked like a huge lose-lose.

Benning and agent Ben Hankinson never got close to an agreement on a long-term deal, and focused for much of the summer on a bridge contract for Boeser.

Even on a short-term deal, it’s believed Boeser wanted in excess of $6 million annually, while the Canucks were wary of paying more than the $5.5 million Horvat accepted on a six-year-deal signed before the 2017-18 season.

The sides finally reached a compromise late Sunday, Benning said.

Boeser’s average salary is behind only the $6 million the Canucks are paying to Myers, Alex Edler and Loui Eriksson — all of whom leveraged their deals through unrestricted free agency.

With 26 NHL players on its pre-season roster – three over the regular-season limit – ducking under the salary cap shouldn’t be a problem for Benning. And the inflated salary of $7.5 million for Boeser in Year 3, which will be the launch point on his next contract negotiations, should also be manageable for the Canucks. If Boeser continues to improve.

But there is also an uncomfortable truth after these negotiations: if the Canucks were convinced that Boeser is a long-term cornerstone, they’d have found a way to pay him now on a six- or seven-year deal.

But Vancouver has Horvat, 24, Pettersson, 20, and defenceman Quinn Hughes, 19, to build around, too, and management will have to make difficult value choices in the future. They are not wed to Boeser.

That freedom, however, works both ways. In five years, Boeser becomes eligible for unrestricted free agency, so the three-year bridge deal tees him up for a potentially huge payday.

“We looked at trying to do a longer-term deal,” Benning said. “At the end of the day, I guess doing a shorter-term deal puts some responsibility back on him now to come in and have three good years and then try to sign long-term after that.

“He’s one of our core, young players that we want to build the team around.”

Yes, but will they?

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 09.17.2019
MONTREAL — Picture this if you can: Keith and Lisa Primeau step through the entrance of section 114 at the Bell Centre and as they make the walk down to their seats warmup is just getting underway, the Montreal Canadiens are taking to the ice, and their son Cayden, wearing that prestigious uniform, is skating over to the boards by the penalty box.

The kid, who’s appearing in his first-ever NHL game, is just 50 feet away from his parents, hunched over in a full stretch. They’re standing at their seats, snapping pictures and shooting them off to the rest of the family via group text when suddenly he pops up and heads to his net. They look at each other and shake their heads in unison.

The Primeaus had an inclination Cayden would be making his NHL debut on Monday when they got a text from him at 4:45 p.m. ET on Sunday.

"I’m dressing tomorrow but I’m not playing, he said," explained Keith, who split 15 years in the NHL between the Detroit Red Wings and Philadelphia Flyers—appearing in over 900 games and registering over 600 points over his career. "I said, ‘That’s great, that’s awesome. Congratulations. Who’s playing?’ And he’s like, ‘Carey (Price).’ So now it’s like, ‘Are we going to go up? Are we going to fly? He’s not playing but he’s dressing.’ And then I think, ‘Wait a minute…’"

"I text Cayden and say, ‘How did they tell you? Did they say Carey’s backing up?’ He says, ‘Nono. It was just Price and…’"

"So I started thinking, when I played early exhibition games they split goalies. And I went back and looked at last year’s early exhibition games and the Habs split the goalies. So I didn’t even tell him, I just told Lisa that he was going to go in and I felt confident he was going to get some time. So we packed up in like 45 minutes and we were in the car by 6:00 p.m. and on our way and we pulled into Montreal at 3:00 a.m. this morning."

It was a tense day for all three of them. Keith, who’s a part owner in a Montreal-based company that sells recycled cardboard boxes, spent it at the office keeping his mind occupied as best he could. Cayden tried to treat it like it was just any other gameday when it was anything but that.

And then there was Lisa, who was left to her own devices.

"She was a basket of nerves and she said she almost felt like throwing up and that she had tears in her eyes all day," said Keith.

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In Lisa’s mind, the moment she was preparing to witness later in the day was 20 years in the making.

"I don’t want to sound like that mom," she said moments before getting to her seat at the Bell Centre. "But I saw how hard he worked for this. I couldn’t imagine that he wouldn’t achieve it. I always knew he would."

It was anything but guaranteed. It wasn’t that long ago that Primeau and his parents were sitting in Chicago’s United Center, waiting to hear Cayden’s name called at the NHL Draft. They thought he’d probably go in the fourth round, and then it seemed like he wasn’t going to go at all.

Relief came for the family when the Canadiens made a trade with the Flyers for a seventh-round pick and finally selected Cayden 199th overall.

His rise since that June day in 2017 has been meteoric. First it was on to Northeastern University, where he stole the net from the starting goaltender within a month of being there. He authored a remarkable rookie season and then followed it up with an even better sophomore year.

At the end of it, Primeau signed his entry-level contract with the Canadiens. Thirteen days later he took home the Mike Richter Award as the NCAA’s best goaltender. Then it was off to the world championships with Team USA.

Before he knew it, he was back in Montreal.

On Monday, Primeau watched from the bench as Price made eight saves to help the Canadiens preserve a 2-1 lead through the first 30 minutes of their game against the New Jersey Devils.

"I was just trying to take it all in," he said. "It was my first time experiencing something like this."

His parents were on pins and needles.

"He just needs to feel the puck early," Keith said moments before Cayden took off his baseball hat, pulled on his mask and skated into the action.

Seconds later, Devils superstar Nico Hischier came streaking down the left side of the Canadiens zone on a 2-on-1 break with Blake Coleman. Hischier waited for the opening, put a perfect pass on Coleman’s stick, and Coleman ripped a shot at what he thought was an open net.

That’s when Cayden slid across his crease and stuffed Coleman’s shot with his left pad. The crowd roared, “Primeau! Primeau! Primeau!”

"I was just trying not to cry," said Lisa.

"That’s not what I meant when I said he just needs to feel the puck early," said Keith.

They were beaming with pride.

"His first game for the most storied franchise ever? It’s surreal," said Keith. "Right from the first day I saw him play goal, he could stop a puck. I said, ‘He’s a good seven-year-old,’ and my friends agreed. And then it was, ‘He’s a good 12-year-old, and he’s a good 15-year-old, and he’s a good 18-year-old, and now he’s a good 20-year-old.’ For me, that’s all it’s ever been."

In the third period, Cayden made 11 more saves. His best one came on a half-break for Kyle Palmieri, who shifted quickly from forehand to backhand and tried to beat him on the blocker side. This came just a few minutes after he had scrambled out of his net to stop a rim-around on the glass and the puck had taken a horrible bounce to the slot to give Mike McLeod an easy goal to tie the game 2-2.

"There’s bounces here and there and sometimes you’re on the right side and sometimes you’re on the wrong side," Cayden said. "It’s part of the game."

He shrugged it off and kept the Canadiens in the game before Jake Evans scored a short-handed goal to put them up 3-2.

Nick Cousins added one to secure the 4-2 win for Montreal.

Afterwards, Cayden was all smiles.

"This was pretty special," he said.

Then Cayden showered up, put on his suit, and walked past security to find Keith and Lisa.

Lisa hugged him tight. He shared a laugh with off-season goaltending coach Chris Kanaly, who grabbed a 3:00 p.m. flight from Philadelphia just to be there, and he embraced Keith’s partner Brian Young.

And then it was a high-five and a big hug from Keith.

"You can always dream, but that was something special," Cayden said.

It was all that and more for his 31-year-old brother Corey, his 24-year-old sister Kylie and his 22-year-old brother Chayse, who all found a way to watch from home.

It was pure magic for Keith and Lisa to witness it live in person.

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EDMONTON — Joakim Nygard isn’t like every other Swede who comes West searching for a National Hockey League job. First of all, he is 26 years old. And something else, he and girlfriend Lisa named their recently-born son Todd.

Ever meet a Swede named Todd? Neither had they.

"Only 32 persons in Sweden with that name," said Joakim Nygard. "I looked on Google."

The good news for Nygard Jr.? He won’t have his first name mispronounced nearly as much as his last name. Pronounced "YO-akim NYG-gard," Todd’s old man is finally ready to test the waters here in North America, after playing a full six seasons in the top Swedish League with Oscar Klefbom’s old team, Farjestads.

"Of course it was always a dream to come over, but when I was 20, 21, 22, I wasn’t good enough to come here," he said. "And it’s a big change: New country, new language… Everything is new."

His agent told him a year ago that he could find Nygard an NHL deal, but the left winger backed off. "I wasn’t ready. I wanted to stay in Sweden for one more year, to develop me as a hockey player even more."

So he went out and finished second in goals in the SHL, scoring 21 times in 21 different games. He didn’t have a two-goal game, sniping in 21 of his club’s 52 games. "I had twice, like, seven games in a row where I scored a goal."

In his first pre-season action Monday night, he showed flashes of what the Oilers hope to see, in a 2-0 Oilers win over the Winnipeg Jets. There is speed and there are hands, but the two did not always intersect in a scramble affair that opened the pre-season.

"I’ve always been pretty fast," Nygard said. "I can jump high, jump long. I never competed in (track and field), but I was the best one in school. I have always been a fast skater."

In today’s game, that is an entry point. Coming over at 26, from the ultra-defensive Swedish league, we’ll assume Nygard knows how to defend. Now, can he give the Oilers 10-15 goals coming off the left side? That would be gold, Jerry.

"I don’t think he understands how fast he is," said Klefbom, who skated with Nygard back home this past summer. "He is something else. Crazy fast — really explosive. He will create a lot, and not only for himself. But for all our guys."

"Time will be the biggest difference for him. I know what it’s like over there, where you can create your own time, because you have three seconds. Here, people are on you."

Nygard is the son of a realtor and a mother who is a maternity ward nurse, and his delivery to the NHL comes at a time when a swift Euro can come in handy for Edmonton. In fact, the new NHL might be a better place for speed and skill than the Swedish League, where the big ice and strict defensive systems rule the day.

"You come here, you beat a guy coming out of the corner, you have a scoring chance. You beat a guy in the corner in Sweden, and you have two more guys to beat," he said, "I am good in one-on-one situations, so hopefully I can create a lot of chances here too."

Nygard hopped inside to create an excellent chance in the third period, perhaps a flash of what’s to come. With Leon Draisaitl locked in at first-line left wing, Oilers head coach Dave Tippett would love some speed and skill at the second left wing, where he had Sam Gagner playing alongside Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and James Neal on Monday.

Jeff Marek and Elliotte Friedman talk to a lot of people around the hockey world, and then they tell listeners all about what they’ve heard and what they think about it.
Sportsnet.ca / 'Kill or be killed': Rinaldo fighting for his NHL career with Flames

Eric Francis September 17, 2019, 12:07 AM

CALGARY – The coach likes his speed.

The players like his energy.

The league likes suspending him.

Everyone is familiar with Calgary Flames hopeful Zac Rinaldo, who finds himself in the unfamiliar position of being one of six PTOs in camp.

Brought in to fight for his NHL career, not to mention his teammates, the 29-year-old native of Mississauga, Ont., has impressed early with a weapon few think of when they recall the man suspended five times.

“Rinaldo can fly – I didn’t know he was this fast,” said coach Bill Peters, who emphasized his team’s desire to get quicker ahead of Monday’s 3-2 split-squad exhibition overtime loss at the Saddledome against the Vancouver Canucks’ youngsters.

“I’ve been impressed with his work ethic and his ability to forecheck. He understands how to track.”

Jeff Marek and Elliott Friedman talk to a lot of people around the hockey world, and then they tell listeners all about what they’ve heard and what they think about it.

Rinaldo also understands he’ll need to focus on his main weakness, which is crossing the line.

“My mentality is kill or be killed – always has been,” said Rinaldo, who played 23 games last season for the Nashville Predators, his fourth stop in an eight-year NHL career.

“You don’t want to see me ramped up, I’m telling you right now. If I do get ramped up and I do go over the edge … I’ve learned the hard way. You guys have seen that. I’ve been suspended here and suspended there and fines here. As long as I’m level headed I’m myself.”

It’s that sort of loose wire the Flames have been missing since Brian McGrattan was demoted more than four years ago, keeping the opposition honest when contemplating a slash to the wrist of Johnny Gaudreau.

However, with Milan Lucic in town to keep the order, there’s risk involved in signing a five-foot-10, 193-pound pepper pot famous for being suspended by two leagues simultaneously.

After all, his next trip to Toronto for a hearing would likely net him at least eight or ten games – an absence the cap-strapped Flames could ill-afford.

• In 2017 he earned a six-game sit-down for a sucker punch on Samuel Girard.
• In 2016 he was handed five games for a check to the head of Cedric Paquette.
• In 2015 he sat eight games for charging Kris Letang.

“I hated getting suspended – it’s not cool,” scoffed the affable winger.

“I lose money and I don’t play hockey at the same time. It sucks. I don’t regret anything I did – I don’t at all. It comes with the game – it’s part of the territory. It’s how you overcome it and how you do learn from it then you’re going the right way.

“If you don’t learn from it and those bad habits are still there I’m probably out of the league. I know what I need to do.”

He figures his task here is to prove he’s a good teammate, a positive influence in the room and an energizer on the ice. So far, so good for a guy who has stood out with Tobias Rieder in a group of four PTO forwards that includes Devante Smith-Pelly and Alexandre Grenier.

“I’m leaving everything here on the ice, so I don’t go home second-guessing my work ethic or what I should have done better here or there,” he said.

Does he find the do-or-die nature of his tryout nerve-wracking?

“No, I live for this,” smiled the former sixth-round pick.

“I thrive in these uncomfortable scenarios. I like where I am right now. The kill or be killed mentality is what I have lived by my whole life. Being drafted not in the top rounds and fighting my way through this and that. Because I don’t have a contract it’s a little more amplified.”

On Monday, Rinaldo’s speed was evident while playing alongside Glenn Gawdin and Smith-Pelly, forming the game’s most menacing trio. Two of his game-high six hits were notable, including a solid unloading on Wacey Hamilton and another biggie that stunned Alex Biega.

“It’s nice to hear, but it kind of goes in one ear and out the other because if I get too comfortable in these situations I get out of my character and my role as a player,” said the owner of 15 goals and 719 penalty minutes in 351 NHL games when told of the coach’s praise for his speed.

“I’ve never told myself I’m here to fight, but if I hit someone or there’s an argument on the ice and someone doesn’t like my teammate, or vice versa, that’s part of the game and you fight. You’re allowed to do that.

“I think the mentality of guys going out there just to fight has calmed down a lot, but fighting is part of the game and always will be, I hope. So, ya, I do that.”

Fact is, the Flames may not be able to sign anyone to anything other than a two-way deal with the AHL’s Stockton Heat in mind, thanks to their salary cap issues. The second-biggest hurdle for Rinaldo may just be overcoming his reputation.

“I didn’t go out and say, ‘I want a reputation of being so and so,’ it just happened,” he shrugged.

“I take it, but I don’t care what people think of me as long as I’m true to myself.”

OTHER STUFF: Johnny Gaudreau and Michael Frolik scored for the Flames only to see the Canucks score three on Cam Talbot, including an overtime winner from former Hitmen star Jake Virtanen.

Flames registered 14 shots before the Canucks got their first against David Rittich with 7:31 left in the first. Rittich left 33 minutes into the game with a shutout on four (yep) shots. Cam Talbot mopped up, stopping six of the nine shots he faced … Flames outshot the Canucks 38-13 … First “Looch” bellow from the crowd came at 13:13 when Rittich couldn’t contain Virtanen.

Gaudreau, Monahan, Lindholm
Bennett, Backlund, Frolik
Lucic, Ryan, Pelletier
Smith-Pelly, Gawdin, Rinaldo

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The NHL will enjoy labour peace for at least three more seasons.
That’s the biggest takeaway from Monday’s decision by the NHL Players’ Association not to trigger an early end to the current agreement.

It should also raise hopes that an even longer extension might be in the offing, although the league and players now have until Sept. 15, 2022 before this deal expires. The sides met regularly throughout the summer and then from Monday to Friday last week and are believed to be making progress towards a potential three-year extension that would run through 2025.

This is a welcome change for a league that has experienced three straight lockouts and saw the entire 2004-05 season shuttered before the salary cap was instituted. It’s come about because the owners feel they have a fair system where revenues are split 50-50 and the cap is tied to the overall growth of the business.

So while there are tweaks to be made, they are not rebuilding the foundation. There’s no reason to go to war.

“While players have concerns with the current CBA, we agree with the league that working together to address those concerns is the preferred course of action instead of terminating the agreement following this season,” said NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr. “We have been having discussions with the league about an extension of the CBA and expect that those talks will continue.”

The NHL had previously let its own deadline to re-open the CBA pass on Sept. 1.

Had the players decided to trigger a September 2020 end to the agreement, there was some fear that it might derail the positive bargaining that’s already happened. Now the work can continue without the semi-imminent threat of a deadline.

At issue is making changes designed to limit the amount of escrow deducted from player salaries. There has been some talk about keeping the salary cap ceiling flat for the next two years until the league renegotiates national U.S. television deals that could be worth as much as eight times what they bring in now.

That kind of windfall would have a positive impact on the cap long term.

The players are also seeking to have a defined calendar of international events, starting with a World Cup in February 2021. The decision not to re-open the CBA will likely pave the way for that event to return as deputy commissioner Bill Daly told Sportsnet last month that they had already tentatively agreed on holding the next one in-season, pending the outcome of their CBA talks.

“It would be kind of a mini tournament about a week in length. Tack on a couple days to the typical all-star break and fit in an international event,” said Daly. “So that’s something I think we have an agreement that if we get past this phase we should work on.”

For the first time since Gary Bettman was hired as commissioner more than a quarter century ago, there appears to be a spirit of cooperation in bargaining. That’s quite the development in itself.

Let’s hope it continues.
Mitch Marner’s agent says his client received a couple of offer sheets while he was a restricted free agent but his goal all along was to stay with the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Darren Ferris says Maple Leafs general manager Kyle Dubas was aware of the offers although can’t disclose which teams were involved.

“Mitch did not want to entertain them,” Ferris said Monday morning on Sportsnet 650’s Starting Lineup.

“Our goal, always, was to have Mitch play for the Maple Leafs and that’s what he wanted,” Ferris added.

Marner and the Maple Leafs agreed to a new contract on Friday night, a six-year deal with an average annual value of $10.893 million. His contract negotiation was one of the most talked about stories in the NHL off-season with several storylines and information released along the way.

Ferris said 99 per cent of the rumours on social media were fabricated and there was a lot of numbers discussed between himself and Dubas.

One news item released was that Marner’s camp had been in contact with the Zurich Lions of the Swiss League. Ferris said should negotiations have stretched out a long time, his client would have went there to train with the team.

Although Ferris said he can’t comment on the cases of other restricted free agents such as Vancouver’s Brock Boeser or Calgary’s Matthew Tkachuk, he said he doesn’t think the current NHL salary cap system works and that teams are handcuffed.

“Teams have to be able to secure their star players and keep them long term,” Ferris said.

The 22-year-old star led Toronto in scoring for a second-straight season last year when he had 94 points, including 26 goals.
TSN.ca / Andersen will not ‘guarantee anything’ on 2019-20 workload

Mark Masters

TSN Toronto reporter Mark Masters checks in daily with news and notes on the Maple Leafs, who practised in two groups at Mile One Centre, N.L., on Monday.

Frederik Andersen started 66 games in each of his first two seasons with the Leafs. Last season, he made 60 starts and that total would've been higher had he not missed three weeks with a groin injury. In an interview with The Athletic on Sunday, Andersen said the target for this season is lower.

"The ballpark probably would be mid-50s," Andersen told Jonas Siegel, "maybe go a little bit lower and see where that leads us."

On Monday, he back-pedalled, but only a bit.

"That could be a number," he said when asked to expand. "I don't want to guarantee anything or lock us into anything, but if everything goes well and we're able to play well we can probably try to go a little bit lower than what we have before."

Andersen will work with the coaching staff and sport science department as the season progresses to determine what makes sense. One thing is clear, this is not a topic Andersen or coach Mike Babcock likes to go in-depth on.

"I have some say, I'm sure, but I don't really want to go too far into what we talk about," Andersen said. "You'll see after 82 games how many games I'll be playing. We can talk about the number then."

Babcock outlined some preconditions that must exist before load management takes effect.

"You got to be in a good spot in the standings," he said. "No. 2, the guy you go to has to be able to play and have a chance to win so that's what we're looking for."

Is mid-50s the target for Andersen's workload?

Frederik Andersen wouldn't give an exact number but did admit that if the team plays well, he might be aiming for less starts than last year, which could put him somewhere in the mid-50s.

Toronto's goalie depth is a big question mark entering the season and another red flag popped up on Monday. Michal Neuvirth is at camp on a pro tryout, but after an injury-plagued run with the Flyers in Philadelphia he's already dealing with an issue this season and skated separately from the main groups.

"Obviously, it's not ideal for him," Babcock said. "If he wants to battle for a job he has to be in position to do that, but he also has to be healthy too."

That leaves Michael Hutchinson, who played just nine NHL games last year, as the frontrunner to win the backup job.

"Regardless how many (games I play) there will be good amount of games still to be played with the other goalie," said Andersen, "and it's important we, as a team, have the confidence in whoever gets the job there."

After playing five games for the Leafs last season and spending time around the team in the playoffs, Hutchinson insists he's ready for a bigger role.

"It's one of those things where the more often you play, the more comfortable your teammates feel in what you bring to the game," said the 29-year-old. "I definitely feel ready. As a goalie, the more you play the easier the game becomes and the more the game slows down."

After practising on his natural left side over the weekend, defenceman Rasmus Sandin skated on the right side with Ben Harpur on Monday.

"I played a little bit on the right side last year and played on the right side before that so I'm pretty comfortable on the right," Sandin said.

The 19-year-old is aiming to win a spot on Toronto's third blueline pair.

The competition is wide open, according to Babcock.

"I want someone to be better than someone else," the coach said. "I don't want to, at the end, have to decide. I want them to decide and I want it to be so obvious you all know, too."

Leafs Ice Chips: Does Sandin have the 'right' stuff to seize job?

Rasmus Sandin has been showing off his versatility so far at Leafs camp playing both the left and right sides on the blue line. Mark Masters has more on the Swedish defenceman and why Mike Babcock wants someone to separate themselves to earn one of their open jobs.

Lines at Monday's Leafs practice:

GROUP 1
Playing Tuesday
Forwards
Kapanen-Tavares-Marner
Engvall-Spezza-Moore … Baptiste rotating in
Marchment/Elynuik-Brooks-Bracco
Timashov-Gauthier-Korshkov
Defencemen
Muzzin-Barrie
Marincin-Schmaltz
Gravel-Holl
Duszak-Lindgren
Goaltenders
Andersen
Kaskisuo
Power play units:
Barrie
Marnier-Tavares-Spezza
Korshkov
Schmaltz
Timashov-Brooks-Bracco
Marchment
GROUP 2
Playing Wednesday
Forwards
Johnsson-Matthews-Nylander
Mikheyev-Kerfoot-Petan
Agostino-Gaudet-Read / Conrad
Aberg-Kossila-Shore / Clune
Defencemen
Rielly-Ceci
Harpur-Sandin
Kivihalme-Liljegren
Rubins-Hollowell
Goaltenders
Hutchinson
Halverson
Power play units:
Rielly
At what point does an unsigned Brock Boeser become a villain to Canucks Nation?
Right now
Come opening night
Closer to December
Never
Total Results: 0

Assistant coach Nolan Baumgartner will join the Utica coaching staff to run the bench in Calgary while Comets assistant Gary Agnew will help out Travis Green, Manny Malhotra and Newell Brown in Victoria.

Face off tonight is at 6pm Pacific in Calgary and 7pm for the game in Victoria.
The Western Hockey League has asked a Calgary judge to dismiss a class-action lawsuit filed by former players who are suing the league for back pay, alleging provincial governments have already weighed in on the matter, that players have had appropriate legal advice, and that much of the time players spend off the ice with their team is voluntary.

The WHL is among three major-junior leagues that have been battling minimum-wage lawsuits for the past five years.

Current and former players suing the leagues have argued the teams are for-profit businesses—some of which make millions of dollars in annual profits—and that players should enjoy protection under employment rights legislation. The lawsuit suit alleges players have been paid less than the minimum wage—as little as $35 per week for between 40 to 65 hours of work. The leagues have countered that players are amateur student athletes and that they already have access to valuable educational scholarships.

In its statement of defence, filed in court on Sept. 3, the WHL said the amount of time its players commit to games, practices and workouts is no different than university athletes.

"The hours of practice and play are similar to elite amateur athletes in other sport including those in Canadian university sport who play hockey, basketball or football," the WHL’s lawyers wrote in the league’s 28-page court filing. "Beyond practising and playing hockey, the plaintiffs’ only other activities with their teams included attendance at community or team-building events, which were largely voluntary."

The WHL pointed to changes made recently by Canadian provinces and U.S. states that amend employment legislation and provide junior hockey teams with an exemption from paying major junior hockey players at least minimum wage.

"The defendants deny that they conspired or otherwise acted to breach the Employment Standards Acts," the league wrote. "Such legislations has never been determined to apply to the players, and the governments of eight of the nine provinces in this country in which players compete have expressly confirmed that it does not."

(Alberta is the only province host to Canadian Hockey League teams that has not yet weighed in on the question.)

The WHL also rejected claims that its teams have an unfair bargaining advantage over players such as former Saskatoon Blades forward Travis McEvoy and former Kootenay Ice forward Kyle O’Connor, who are both named plaintiffs in the class-action lawsuit.

"All of the [Standard Player Agreements] contain a schedule that allows players to negotiate certain benefits with their team," the WHL wrote in its filing. "When players are under the age of majority… the player’s parents must sign the SPA as well. Travis and Kyle were represented by agents and were able to obtain legal advice before signing their SPAs. There was no imbalance in bargaining power."

Rather, the WHL said its teams’ coaching staffs and trainers offered guidance to players regarding nutrition, hockey training, and their studies.
St. John’s, N.L. – Michal Neuvirth’s bid to win the Maple Leafs’ backup goalie spot took a hit over the weekend when he suffered an undisclosed injury during training camp activities.

“He wasn’t feeling good body-wise [on Sunday], and we kept him off today,” head coach Mike Babcock said after the Leafs’ practices at Mile One Centre on Monday. “Obviously it’s not ideal for him. If he wants to battle for a job, he’s got to be in a position to do that. But he’s also got to be healthy.”

Neuvirth wasn’t part of either group practice on Monday, but did go out afterwards for some individual work with the Leafs’ training staff. The 31-year-old is at Leafs’ camp on a professional tryout, and was projected to be in the mix with Michael Hutchinson for the spot behind starter Frederik Andersen.

Babcock didn’t have an updated timeline on when Neuvirth might be ready to return, so the Leafs have retained Brandon Halverson, also playing on a PTO, for the time being.

Neuvirth has a long history of injuries, most recently battling a lower-body injury that limited him to just seven games for the Philadelphia Flyers in 2018-19. His numbers were abysmal when he did play, finishing the shortened campaign with a 1-4-1 record with a .859 save percentage and a 4.27 goals-against average.

Despite his struggles, Neuvirth told the Czech Republic news outlet iSport in late July that he’d been talking to a few teams and had settled on a tryout with the Leafs.

Around the same time, Toronto announced its trade of last season’s primary backup Garret Sparks to the Vegas Golden Knights, leaving Neuvirth to challenge Hutchinson for the backup role.

Hutchinson is still relatively new to the Leafs, traded to the team from Florida in December last year. He suited up in five games for Toronto right after while both Andersen and Sparks were injured, posting a 2-3-0 record with a .914 save percentage and 2.64 goals-against average.

After spending the end of the regular season with the American Hockey League’s Toronto Marlies, and amassing a 14-7-1 record with .910 save percentage and 2.70 goals-against average, Hutchinson backed up in several games for Andersen during the Leafs’ first-round playoff series against Boston.


Whether he’s the right guy for the Leafs remains to be seen, but with Neuvirth’s status up in the air, Hutchinson could have the advantage in helping Andersen manage his workload this year.

Toronto’s starter has played 60 or more games in each of the past three seasons, but looking ahead, Andersen told The Athletic in an interview on Sunday that somewhere in the mid-50s would be an ideal number of starts.

“That could be the number,” Andersen confirmed on Monday. “I don’t want to guarantee anything, or lock us into anything. But if everything goes well and we’re able to play well, we could try and go a little bit lower than we have before.”

Babcock’s objective through the rest of camp will be determining the best backup to maximize Andersen’s rest, without sacrificing wins.

“That’s the great thing about managing his workload,” Babcock said. “Number one, you’ve got to be in a spot to manage it – in other words you have to be in a good spot in the standings. Number two, the guy you go to has to be able to play, and have a chance to win. That’s what we’re looking for. We thought Hutch did a good job for us last year. He’s here [again], and we brought in other guys for the same opportunity and we’re going to watch and see what happens.”
Mitch Marner has confirmed what his agent, Darren Ferris, told TSN1050's First Up on Monday, saying he received multiple offer sheets from other teams during his restricted free agent negotiations with the Maple Leafs this summer but wasn’t interested in pursuing them.

“The whole goal of this was to be a Maple Leaf, so [the offer sheets weren’t] in our head too much,” Marner said on Monday from Leafs’ training camp at Mile One Centre. “As soon as Darren mentioned [them], I told him right away I don’t want to explore that option. But I didn’t want to miss training camp, I didn’t want to miss any games this season, so that’s why I really forced the issue with [Leafs’ general manager Kyle Dubas] to get something done and get me here. I’m happy it happened.”

In revealing some inner workings of the negotiations with Toronto, Ferris said Marner’s commitment to the team never wavered.

“He told me, ‘Darren, I don’t want to sign [the offer sheets], I want to be a Leaf,’” Ferris told First Up. “So we declined both of those opportunities and I know Kyle [Dubas] was aware of one of them, the team had actually told him that they had made the overture to Mitch and there was a very strong likelihood there were more that would be presented once the season started. As you know, the cap number gets set and makes it more difficult for a team to match.”

Marner demurred when asked about specific figures on the offer sheets, admitting, “I didn’t really want them, so I didn’t ask too many details about it,” But regardless of the numbers, receiving outside interest didn’t give Marner any extra validation.

“It was nice hearing other teams valued me, but I knew this team valued me too,” Marner said. “In our four years being here, I knew how much faith they have in me. And that’s another reason why I wanted to come back, to show them they made the right decision and I made the right decision staying here.”

It was Marner’s meeting with Dubas last Thursday that ultimately pushed talks over the finish line, culminating in the six-year, $65.36 million contract Marner signed Friday night. The closer Marner came to missing time on the ice, the more he felt that dealing with Dubas directly was their best path towards a solution.

“I thought it was good it brought us face-to-face and expressed both of our feelings,” Marner said. “The whole waiting part and seeing what was going to happen, that’s the part where you’re sitting at home and you keep hearing the discussions between the two [sides], and I think that’s why Kyle and I met – just to clear the air and make sure we’re talking to each other and figuring it out.”

Since the middle of last season, Marner had been steadfast in not wanting to know much about what transpired between Ferris and Dubas, hoping only to be informed about a deal when it was close. Marner says now that proved mostly impossible, and made the process more stressful than he anticipated.

“It’s hard. I live there. You aren’t getting away no matter who you talk to, family or friends,” he said. “It’s always in the back of your mind, but you just try to get away, down to the lake or out of the city a little bit and clear my head through that.”

Now that Ferris has had his say publicly on the negotiation, Marner hopes attention turns to what he and the Leafs do on the ice.

“Since day one, I’ve been super happy being here, it’s been great,” Marner said. “And now I’m happy we got that deal done and we can get to work now. This team is together for a while now, so we have to make sure we make [these years] work.”
What does the word playmaker mean to you?

It’s not a trick question. I suppose if you ask 10 people, you will get 10 different answers. But broadly speaking, I’ve always classified it as an individual who is responsible for the initiation of offensive sequences.

In hockey terms, the league’s most iconic playmakers – think Pittsburgh’s Sidney Crosby, as one example – tend to have world-class vision and passing abilities in the offensive zone. They create lanes, break down the structure of opposition defences and open up scoring opportunities for themselves and their teammates.

That brings us to Mitch Marner, who signed a huge deal with the Toronto Maple Leafs on Friday afternoon. His six-year, $65-million contract made him the second-highest paid winger in the league behind Artemi Panarin of the New York Rangers. With the hefty price tag come incredibly high expectations, and Toronto – considering their salary cap situation – will need him to continue his rise to stardom.

There is already plenty of debate as to whether or not Marner can meet the expectations of his contract. Wingers often get squeezed on contracts, relative to their centre counterparts, unless they are phenomenal goal scorers. But in Marner’s first three years of his NHL career, he’s averaged 0.94 goals per 60 minutes across all situations – 114th in the league amongst qualified forwards, trailing players like Jordan Eberle, Kevin Hayes, Brock Nelson, and even the recently departed Patrick Marleau.

But Marner is a bit of an oddball, and I mean that in the most complimentary way possible. He hasn’t manifested into a high-end goal scorer quite yet, but he has dominated the assist category like few others. His primary assist rate (1.45 per \( \frac{60}{60} \) minutes) over the same interval is fifth in the entire league, and the names ahead of him – Connor McDavid, Blake Wheeler, Steven Stamkos and Nikita Kucherov – are of the superstar variety.

It’s an important point, because the biggest argument in favour of signing Marner to such an expensive deal is that he elevates the goal-scoring abilities of his teammates. One of the most fascinating data points on this front is how his teammates tend to see big shooting percentage spikes when playing on lines with Marner – the reasonable inference being that Marner continuously opens up premium shooting lanes for his teammates through spacing and passing.

Consider the eight forwards who have played at least 100 minutes with Marner at 5-on-5 over the last three seasons. Below, you can see each player’s shooting percentage with Marner, and each player’s shooting percentage without Marner:

The majority of Marner’s teammates – notably Tavares, his most common linemate during the 2018-19 regular season – saw substantial shooting percentage boosts playing with Marner. At aggregate, the group was about two percentage points better when skating with Marner. That’s not insignificant, and it’s one of the reasons Marner has carried lofty assist totals throughout his career. That’s true whether you are looking at just primary assists or total assists in the given period.

Living up to the expectations of such a lucrative contract would be a challenge for anyone, let alone a winger who doesn’t regularly fill up the goal column. But Marner’s playmaking abilities are hugely valuable to the Maple Leafs organization, and it’s one of the biggest reasons the team was ready to commit to him with such significant money and term.

It will create cap challenges, undoubtedly. No team will have more pressure to regularly deliver productive depth forwards and defencemen than the Maple Leafs, who simply will not be able to afford to spend at the margins for the next few years.

But with their core group in place, Toronto is going to remain a force for a considerable amount of time. And Marner will play a big role in determining just how successful this franchise will be for the foreseeable future.