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1108223 Life of a hockey nomad: Logan Shaw seeks stability with the Jets after years of moving around

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Column: Ryan Getzlaf is a long-standing constant for a Ducks team that has seen big change

By HELENE ELLIOTT SPORTS COLUMNIST
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Out of habit, Ryan Getzlaf turned toward the space next to him when Corey Perry’s name was mentioned even though he knew Perry wouldn’t be there to respond.

Born six days apart and drafted nine spots apart by the Ducks in 2003, Getzlaf and Perry became regular linemates and steady friends, earning the nickname “The Twins” because they were so often in each other’s company. Their friendship is intact but their partnership was broken up when the Ducks bought out Perry’s contract in June to clear salary-cap space and open a roster spot for a younger and more productive forward.

Getzlaf understands the reasons for the move and said Perry had accepted the club’s decision, too. But Getzlaf, the Ducks’ captain and the last player left here from their 2007 Stanley Cup championship team, still finds it odd that Perry isn’t sitting in the locker stall beside his at training camp.

“I’ve been to 17 of them, I think, and ‘Pears’ has always been on the left,” Getzlaf said, gesturing at the spot now occupied by Adam Henrique. “So it’s obviously a little bit different, for sure.”

HOCKEY

New Kings coach Todd McLellan makes his message clear: ‘It can’t get casual here’

The absence of Perry, who signed with Dallas as a free agent but has been hobbled by a broken foot, is one of many significant changes the Ducks have made since they missed the playoffs last season.

They have a new coach in Dallas Eakins, who worked with many of their young players for their San Diego farm team but is still getting to know the veterans. They have a new training facility in Irvine with four ice sheets, ideal for dividing the mass of bodies in camp into small groups for specialized instruction.

And they have a lot of new faces challenging for lineup spots, the result of good drafting and development. They’ve stockpiled enough talent to avoid a complete rebuild but must make a complete break from their “heavy hockey” and adapt to the NHL’s trend toward youth and speed.

At the center of it all, the biggest constant is Getzlaf, their captain. On Tuesday, a heavy work day, the 34-year-old Saskatchewan native kept up a good pace in scrimmages and didn’t lag behind when they finished a long session with end-to-end sprints. “To be quite honest, Getzy’s been one of the guys really pounding the drum here early to establish our culture,” Eakins said.

Ducks captain Ryan Getzlaf controls the puck during a game against the Arizona Coyotes in March.

Getzlaf, who ranks third among active NHL players with 662 assists and eighth among active players with 923 points, is so intent on setting a new trend for himself and the team that he plans to play more exhibitions than in previous seasons, “just to make sure I’ve got the system and make sure the team’s headed in the right direction going in.” He feels invigorated by what he’s seeing and hearing from Eakins.

“As much as they’re around for training camp, minor league coaches don’t really talk that much or anything like that. So it’s a new voice,” Getzlaf said. “There’s lots of energy around our group right now, which is awesome.

“I’ve been through so many of these camps that they get pretty monotonous at times. I’ve only had two coaches or three in my life,” he said, referring to Randy Carlyle, Bruce Boudreau, Carlyle again, and now Eakins. “Having a new guy in here is a breath of fresh air. You’ve really got to pay attention to what he’s trying to message, his terminology for things, stuff like that, so it keeps you on your toes. Which is great after 17 years.”

Eakins had spoken to Getzlaf “maybe once last year for more than five minutes” during four previous Ducks training camps. “I’ve always quietly admired his career, even when I was in other organizations,” Eakins said. “I didn’t know much about him personally until I got here this summer. I tried to reach out immediately to all of them but obviously with Getzy having such a history here, me doing my homework, the guy’s been a great captain. He’s an amazing father. He’s a good teammate. I knew I was sitting down with a good person.”

HOCKEY

Elliott: Lost leverage by NHL players’ union means it will have to trust Gary Bettman

Like every coach who has worked with Getzlaf, Eakins would like to see him use his natty wrist shot more often. But Getzlaf, who peaked at 31 goals in the 2013-14 season, is more comfortable being a playmaker and that’s fine.

“He’s got eyes in the back of his head when he’s passing that puck. So if he can set up other guys, great,” Eakins said. “Am I going to encourage him and maybe show him some spots where he can get the puck to the net because I’ve seen him shoot it and he can blast it? We’ll see where it goes.”

After being staggered by a barrage of injuries and a belated coaching change that put general manager Bob Murray behind the bench for the final 26 games, there’s nowhere for the Ducks to go but up.

“There’s definitely anger and frustration from what we kind of let slip away. It felt like the waste of a year,” Getzlaf said. “I’m talking about the talent we had, the emotion we had at the start of the year, those kinds of things. We didn’t respond well. Those are things you learn from as a group and moving forward on how to deal with those situations in a better way.

“It’s a mental lesson, I think, the fact that not everything is going to go your way all the time. Last year, the injuries we dealt with were pretty outrageous and we have to understand that the league doesn’t feel bad for you because you have 10 players down, and whoever’s in the lineup has got to be ready to go and compete at this level.”

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In 26-plus years as the NHL’s commissioner Gary Bettman has made lockouts nearly as inevitable as Alexander Ovechkin scoring a power-play goal from the left circle but far less fun to watch.

Of the four major professional leagues, the NHL can least afford to disappear from fans’ radar, yet Bettman shut the doors for nearly half a season in 1994-95 and 2012-13 and cancelled the entire 2004-05 season in order to impose a hard salary cap and a 50-50 split of hockey-related revenues between players and the league. The disputes often got rancorous but Bettman won every time and fans came back every time despite vowing they’d never again watch a Zamboni circle an NHL rink.

But the NHL’s current prosperity means there are no hills for owners to fight for and risk losing all or part of a season. League revenues have soared from $2.27 billion in 2005-06 to $4.68 billion in 2017-18, supporting a rise in the salary cap from $39 million per team in 2005-06 to $81.5 million this season. With that in mind, it made sense when Bettman announced last month the NHL wouldn’t exercise its option to reopen the current collective bargaining agreement and end it next September.

But after years of players bitterly complaining about an escrow system that ensures an even split of revenues but cuts deep into their paychecks, it was a mild though pleasant surprise when the NHL Players’ Assn. announced on Monday it wouldn’t invoke its opt-out clause. As a result, labor peace is guaranteed through Sept. 15, 2022, and hallelujah to that.

HOcKEY

New Kings coach Todd McLellan makes his message clear: ‘It can’t get casual here’

"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."

Cue the unicorns and rainbows. While they line up, here’s Bettman. "We are pleased with the NHL Players’ Association’s decision," he said in a statement. "We look forward to continuing to work with the NHLPA for the benefit of all stakeholders, especially our fans."

It seems the NHL is getting the biggest benefit from this. In deciding to extend the current labor deal, the NHLPA gave Bettman the keys and is letting him drive the car while trusting him when he says he knows the best route.

The union lost its leverage in efforts to modify the escrow system, which has taken 10 percent or more out of some players’ paychecks. Asked in June to identify the two major issues for players in labor talks, Chicago Blackhawks captain Jonathan Toews told reporters, “A—Escrow. And B—Escrow.” Bettman has no incentive now to appease their concerns even if discussions maintain their supposedly cordial tone.

The NHLPA also lost its leverage in trying to get the league to again allow players to represent their homelands in the Winter Olympics. NHL players participated in five straight Winter Games before Bettman kept them out of the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics, saying the league would get no financial benefits if they went and would suffer from interrupting the season for an event that wasn’t planned for North American prime-time TV viewing. It’s a complicated issue that requires cooperation among the NHL, NHLPA, the International Olympic Committee and the International Ice Hockey Federation, and good luck with that.

Players are eager to return to the Olympics at Beijing in 2022, but Bettman has indicated owners oppose the idea. Remember, he works for the owners. If enough of them say they don’t want to halt play for the Olympics, it won’t happen. Three years ago Bettman proposed allowing players to compete at Pyeongchang in exchange for players’ agreement to extend the collective bargaining agreement through 2025 but the NHLPA rejected that because it would have covered “the career lifespan of most players in the league today,” according to an NHLPA press release. So they didn’t play in Pyeongchang and they’ve now agreed to keep a labor deal whose escrow provision they detest and trust Bettman will accommodate their concerns. Good luck with that, too.
Ducks veteran Cam Fowler eager to mentor Brendan Guhle, a likely defense partner

By ELLIOTT TEAFORD | eteaford@scng.com | Orange County Register
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IRVINE — Cam Fowler remembered what it was like. He recalled walking into the Ducks’ dressing room as an 18-year-old, as a young defenseman who was eager to play and willing to learn. He went into his first training camp with his ears wide open in September of 2010.

Fowler received guidance from a number of Ducks veterans, but especially from Scott Niedermayer, a future Hall of Fame defenseman. Now, the 27-year-old Fowler is ready to pass on what he’s learned as he enters his 10th season in the NHL, all with the Ducks.

Fowler was paired with Brendan Guhle, 22, for the first five days of training camp and there’s no reason to believe they won’t start the regular season together. Fowler has taken it upon himself to serve as a mentor to Guhle, passing along the knowledge he first learned from Niedermayer.

“He’s a great kid,” Fowler said. “He has a lot of talent with his legs the way he can skate. In our fitness testing, he tested through the roof. He’s a physically gifted kid. He wants to be great. He’s got a lot of talent. I really enjoy playing with him. I try to help him out as much as I can.

“I know what it’s like to be a young ‘D-man’ and try to play in the league. It’s a big adjustment.”

Ducks general manager Bob Murray paired Fowler and Guhle together for six late-season games, after relieving Randy Carlyle of the coaching duties and stepping behind the bench himself. Dallas Eakins, the Ducks’ new coach, has kept them together to start training camp.

Fowler and Guhle could be the Ducks’ second defense pair behind Hampus Lindholm and Josh Manson. There are also a number of players battling for positions on the third pair, including Michael Del Zotto, Jani Hakanpaa, Korbinian Holzer, Jacob Larsson and Josh Mahura.

The only thing for certain is nothing is for certain.

“I think there’s a lot of potential pairs for the season,” Eakins said. “This is a big training camp for Guhle. The other thing is Guhle is very young in age. Cam played in this league at a very young age. I think he knows about the challenges of being an inexperienced player in the league.

“We think there’s great value in that (pairing an experienced player with an inexperienced one). Cam’s got some great leadership qualities. I think they’re just simmering, waiting to bust out even further. He certainly gets to lead a young player and his partner so far.”

It often takes defensemen, even the best and most skilled of them, many seasons to develop and learn the many tricks of the trade of the position. A left wing can make a mistake with the puck and his linemates, his defensemen and/or his goaltender can make up for it.

A defenseman’s lapses can result in goals for the opposition. What worked in junior-level hockey or in the minor leagues won’t cut it in the NHL, where time and space are limited to nanoseconds and opponents are eager to pounce on the slightest error in judgment or positioning.

“For whatever reason, there seems to be a pretty big learning curve (for young defensemen),” Fowler said. “Every mistake is magnified in this league. Players are so good. If you’re a split second off here or there, it’s either a Grade A scoring chance or it’s in the back of your net.

“In juniors, you can get away with a little bit more anticipation or talent, but you can’t do that here, so it just takes a long time. I’m still learning now and I’m in my 10th season. But he’s picking it up quickly and he’s going to be a great player.”

DUCKS EDGE SHARKS

Max Jones scored the tiebreaking power-play goal 6:43 into the third period and the Ducks took a 4-3 victory from the Sharks at San Jose in the exhibition opener for both teams. Devin Shore, Nic Deslauriers and Adam Henrique scored second-period goals for the Ducks, who erased a 2-0 first-period deficit.

Ryan Miller and Anthony Stolarz split the goaltending duties. Miller started and gave up two goals on 11 shots. Timo Meier, Jonny Brodzinski and Joachim Blichfeld scored for the Sharks. San Jose outshot the Ducks by 26-25.

The Ducks face the Arizona Coyotes in the second of their six exhibitions Saturday in Glendale, Ariz.
Five takeaways from Arizona Coyotes’ preseason split with Los Angeles Kings

Richard Morin, Arizona Republic
Published 10:30 p.m. MT Sept. 17, 2019

The Coyotes split a pair of preseason games with the Los Angeles Kings on Tuesday.

Although the Coyotes dropped a 4-1 decision to the Kings at Gila River Arena, a road unit was able to take a 5-0 victory at Staples Center in Los Angeles.

Here are five takeaways from the pair of games, the Coyotes’ second and third preseason contests thus far:

1. Fast start

Coyotes winger Clayton Keller scored just 18 seconds into the game at Staples Center, ushering in a dominant performance for the road squad on Tuesday.

Tuesday marked Keller’s first preseason game this year and the first game action since signing a massive eight-year contract extension on Sept. 4.

It’s unclear whom Keller will play alongside this season, but the Coyotes are certainly expecting big things out of the third-year forward. It took him just 18 seconds into the 2019-20 campaign to hit the scoresheet.

2. Raanta a bit rusty

While Darcy Kuemper drew the start in net at Staples Center, goaltender Antti Raanta got the nod at Gila River Arena.

Whether or not it was indicative of who will start the series opener on Oct. 3 in Anaheim, Raanta looked shaky in his first game action this preseason, allowing four goals to an inexperienced Kings roster.

"It’s been a long time for ‘Raants,’ ” Tocchet said. "I thought he made some good saves early. But he worked real hard this summer and we’ll get him back in there again."

Arizona Coyotes goaltender Antti Raanta (41) gives up a goal to Los Angeles Kings' Michael Amadio as the puck gets past Coyotes' Brad Richardson (15) and Robbie Russo (5) during the second period of a preseason NHL hockey game Tuesday, Sept. 17, 2019, in Glendale, Ariz.

3. Kessel’s debut

Phil Kessel had a productive debut on Tuesday in Glendale, providing a primary assist on the Coyotes’ lone goal of the game by Derek Stepan.

Kessel feathered a sweet pass through the middle of the ice to find Stepan all alone in the left circle for a good-looking score that tied the game, 1-1, in the first period.

Unfortunately the Coyotes didn’t manage much offense as a team in the Glendale game, but Kessel was among the few bright spots from the home tilt.

4. Two for Garland

Coyotes winger Conor Garland provided two goals and an assist in the club’s 5-0 win over the Kings at Staples Center, scoring in the first and third periods of the game.

Garland, in his preseason debut, also assisted on Jordan Gross’ goal in the third period. Garland also had a productive preseason in 2018-19 and was a candidate for the opening roster had he not suffered an upper-body injury.

Arizona Coyotes’ Conor Garland (83) points after scoring against the Los Angeles Kings during the first period of a preseason NHL hockey game Tuesday, Sept. 17, 2019, in Los Angeles.

5. Lyubushkin’s start

Also providing an assist in the Los Angeles game was defenseman Ilya Lyubushkin, who also scored in the Coyotes’ preseason opener against the Vegas Golden Knights at T-Mobile Arena.

Lyubushkin did not score a goal last season and managed just four assists in 41 games. The defensive specialist already has two points in two preseason games in 2019-20.
GLendale, Ariz. — The Arizona Coyotes won a game and lost another on the same evening. Such is the nature of split squad preseason games, which took place with the Los Angeles Kings on Tuesday.

Arizona won its road game, 5-0, and lost its home game, 4-1, so head coach Rick Tocchet took the optimistic approach when asked what he thought of his team’s home game in Glendale.

“We’re up 5-0 in LA right now,” he said. “So, what is it — 6-4? We win.”

Maybe the joke is a fitting tribute to how much the final score of a preseason game should matter. What does matter, though, is both the preparation and the evaluation that can be had during the preseason.

“I didn’t like the execution,” Tocchet said. “You’ve got some young kids in the lineup and stuff and they’re trying to find their way, and it’s the first game for some guys, it’s been a while. So you can tell. The result? I don’t care about the result. Just the passing wasn’t good. Seemed it was a little bit sluggish. A lot of summer hockey in there.”

Phil Kessel, Nick Schmaltz, Antti Raanta, Derek Stepan, Victor Soderstrom, Michael Grabner, Brad Richardson and Goligoski were among those who played in Tuesday’s home game at Gila River Arena. The lone Coyotes goal was scored by Stepan, assisted by Kessel.

The Coyotes have one more preseason home game coming up on Saturday against the Ducks. From there, they’ll play three preseason games on the road before starting their regular season at Anaheim on Oct. 3.

ANTTI RAANTA’S BACK

Coyotes goaltender Antti Raanta, who entered last season as the starter, played in a game on Tuesday for the first time since Nov. 27, 2018.

“It’s been a long time for Raants,” Tocchet said. “I thought he had some good saves early. We’ve got to get him some work. … Get him back in there tomorrow, practice. I’m not worried about Raants. He worked real hard this summer to get back in there again.”

Raanta only played two periods in Tuesday’s preseason contest. Goalie prospect Ivan Prosvetov played the third period.

THE POWER PLAY

It’s hard to take much away from the personnel groupings in a split squad game, since much of the players weren’t even present in the Coyotes’ game in Arizona. Further still, preseason can give coaches license to experiment, so nothing is set in stone.

That being said, a group with Schmaltz, Kessel, Stepan, Barrett Hayton and Goligoski was one of the five-man power play units featured on Tuesday. At one point, a shot by Goligoski hit the post.

The Coyotes went 0-for-4 on the power play in Glendale and, per NHL.com, 0-for-3 on the man advantage in Los Angeles.

ROSTER CUTS

The Coyotes made their first round of training camp cuts on Monday, reassigning the following players back to their junior teams: goaltender David Tendeck; defensemen Axel Bergkvist, Dennis Busby, Connor Hall, Brady Lyle, Liam Kirk and David Levin; forwards Valentin Nussbaumer and Eric Uba.

The training camp roster is now at 52 players.
With Brandon Carlo signed, Don Sweeney’s work is done — for now

By Kevin Paul Dupont Globe Staff

Updated September 17, 2019, 7:25 p.m.

GLOBE STAFF Bruins general manager Don Sweeney finally put away his 55-gallon drum of midnight oil Tuesday morning, tying up Brandon Carlo, the last member of the club’s free agent class this summer, to a deal that will pay the towering, talented young defenseman an average $2.85 million the next two seasons.

Sweeney is happy, his roster full now, with just enough salary-cap room remaining (approximately $1.2 million) to buy his swashbuckling troops a round of drafts and hot cheesy somethings at TD Garden.

More important, Carlo is happy, although he noted that he initially had his eyes and wallet focused on a deal with a bit more heft.

“As a young guy, you like the security aspect,” acknowledged the 22-year-old Carlo. “But as I went through the process, and things were explained to me, I am very happy with the result of two years.”

Sweeney, his roster complete and hopeful that his club can wing out just one more playoff win than it did last June, won’t have much time to rest.

With the puck set to drop on the new season Oct. 4, he has 10 roster players, including top-scoring blue liner Torey Krug, on target to become free agents as of July 1.

Even before shift No. 1 of the 2019-20 season, more midnight oil, please. That is half the roster.

“There’s no prioritization from the standpoint of one player being in front of the other player,” said Sweeney, asked how he’ll proceed with the group, seven of whom are pegged to be unrestricted free agents.

“It’s just, you know, having the ability to communicate that you have to make those decisions, maybe based on [finances] sometimes, and maybe based on who’s potentially coming along to replace those players.”

It is obvious, however, that Krug, who is Carlo’s blue line partner, has to be considered Job 1 on Sweeney’s Summer 2020 to-do list. Krug is the power-play quarterback and has emerged the last couple of seasons as one of the game’s overall premier back-end diminutive dynamos.

As such, Krug can legitimately ask for a boost from his current $5.25 million to $8 million or $9 million a year, which would place him No. 1 on the Boston pay scale. Never too early to begin that taffy pull.

The restricted free agents include Matt Grzelcyk on defense and forwards Jake DeBrusk and Brett Ritchie.

Sweeney went out of his way at the start of Carlo’s news conference Tuesday to offer a mea culpa. Had he done better, said the fifth-year GM, he would have found a quicker resolution to the contract impasse, enabling the defenseman not to miss four valuable workouts over the weekend.

“I think I could have done a better job in this case,” offered Sweeney. “So that’s on me — 100 percent on me.”

With that in mind, Sweeney would be wise to up his pace now, with July 1 only some 42 weeks on the horizon. He could make life a lot easier in his Causeway Street corner office if, say, he knocked off one deal a month, particularly among the critical likes of Krug, DeBrusk, Coyle, and Grzelcyk. The other six are important, too, but those four are the most vital among the 10, no matter how reluctant the GM may be to make public whom he prioritizes.

“Putting the pieces together is the challenge,” said Sweeney. “I’m not going to tell you it’s not. The pie is only so big and you have to divvy it up.”

Sweeney made fine work this summer of tying up his three top restricted free agents in Carlo, Charlie McAvoy, and Danton Heinen. He landed all three for a total $10.55 million cap hit, a number that looks even better when compared with the $10.893 million the Maple Leafs shelled out for their top scorer, Mitch Marner. Members of the Business School at Sweeney’s old Harvard address would admire that kind of management.

Unlike his predecessor, Peter Chiarelli, Sweeney has shown a capable, if not deft, hand in securing a competitive lineup and done so without the kind of long-term overpayments that dotted Chiarelli’s record here and then later in Edmonton.

Heinen ($2.8 million average), McAvoy ($4.9 million), and Carlo ($2.85 million) all signed up, smiled, and ultimately professed their love of all things Black and Gold, of all things Jacobs family, Cam Neely, Sweeney, Boston, virtually everyone but the Zamboni driver and the new Rafters Club wait staff.

Had there been one more signing so amicable, the summer’s final presser might have been held at Yasgur’s Farm. They are stardust. They are golden. And they’ve got to get themselves back to the Garden (home opener is Oct. 12 vs. the Devils).

The dollars have been dealt. They all have their dough and now it’s up to them to figure out what fortunes await them for 2019-20.

Carlo’s deal will pay him $2.2 million this season and $3.5 million in its expiration year. Carlo, Heinen, and McAvoy all will be at Sweeney’s door again as RFAs in two or three years, only next time with arbitration rights and bigger base salaries to use as leverage. McAvoy made out best on that score, his deal paying him $7.3 million in its final season.

“I remember talking to Sean Kuraly a year ago, and he said something that stuck with me — to always bet on yourself,” said Carlo. “I believe in that 100 percent.”

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Oskar Steen, 21, itching to make move to NHL

By Matt Porter Globe Staff

September 17, 2019, 6:42 p.m.

NEWARK — It was about time for Oskar Steen to get out of Karlstad.

Not that it's a bad place to be. The picturesque city of about 60,000, located in the central Swedish lowland on the north shore of Europe's largest freshwater lake (Vänern), was where Steen was raised. It was also where he developed as a junior hockey player, and, despite being the youngest regular on the team last year (20), became the top-scoring forward for Färjestad, the pro club based there.

"I felt like I had a good season and it was time to move on and do something new," Steen said. "It was a good challenge for me as a player and a person to move away from my hometown, the comfy spot at home."

Steen's horizons broadened, he played his first NHL preseason game Monday and scored the game’s opening goal by zipping a dart past New Jersey’s Cory Schneider. A sixth-round pick (165th overall) in 2016, he is an intriguing prospect given his low profile, recent rise, his versatility, and his high-caliber velocity.

"His shot I've noticed," Bruins coach Bruce Cassidy said. "Smart player. He's quick. I don't know [about] fast, but he's certainly quick enough to get around. He's played at a high level. He's played in the World Junior, he's played in the top level in Sweden, he's played against good players. Hopefully he's not — I don't want to use the word 'rattled' — but not intimidated by NHL competition."

He was not Monday. To score his goal in Boston’s 4-3 overtime loss, Steen rushed through the neutral zone, eluded the stickwork of a backchecking Jack Hughes, and before Andy Greene could close on him, snapped it far side from the top of the right circle.

"That's very big for my confidence," he said. "It's hard to play on the small rinks for the first time. I think it went better as the game went on. I think I'll maybe do a better game next time."

He later drew a tripping call, outworking Devils winger Jesper Bratt, a fellow Swede.

Bratt, also 21 and about the same size (5 feet 10 inches, 175 pounds) as Steen (5-9, 188), was taken three picks earlier in the 2016 draft. He made the Devils’ roster out of 2017 camp and has been a full-timer since.

Steen, a choice recommended by Bruins scout and ex-winger P.J. Axelsson, could have a longer road than Bratt. European players often need time to adjust to 85-foot-wide North American rinks, which are 15 feet thinner and present less time to think and react. Despite Steen’s small size, he is a natural center, and the Bruins are well stocked down the middle.

He may be best served with a year as a top-six center in Providence.

That is, unless he continues to play his feisty, alert game this preseason, and keeps giving the brass reason to consider him as a right wing for second-line fixture David Krejci or with Charlie Coyle on the third line

The Bruins have supply in this area — Karson Kuhlman was solid as a rookie last spring, Brett Ritchie signed a one-year deal, and David Backes, though declining, brings experience — but Steen is making a push.

"He might be a guy who fits in the top six when he hits his peak, because he’s really got an NHL shot and release," Cassidy said. "Or, complement guys down on the bottom lines, at least start there, a bit like Kuhly [Kuhlman] did — here he is, up playing on the second line.

"I don’t want to pigeon-hole a guy, but I think he’s a new-age third-line guy that can score, but still play 200 feet, who’s not that big, heavy guy."

After Steen was drafted, he spent two years as a lower-line player for Färjestad.
Bruins sign Brandon Carlo to two-year contract

By Kevin Paul Dupont Globe Staff
September 17, 2019, 8:49 a.m.

GLOBE STAFF Brandon Carlo followed Charlie McAvoy to the pay window Tuesday, agreeing to a two-year contract and leaving the Bruins with a complete training camp roster only one game into the preseason.

Carlo, about to enter his fourth NHL season, will earn an average of $2.85 million through the 2020-21 season. The deal for the defenseman was announced some 48 hours after McAvoy hitched on for another three seasons with the Black and Gold, for a payout of $4.9 million.

Carlo’s deal leaves the Bruins approximately $350,000 under the $81.5 million salary cap.

The Bruins, who dropped their exhibition opener, 4-3, in overtime Monday night in New Jersey, are not scheduled to practice again until Wednesday in Brighton, where Carlo will join them for his first team workout of training camp.

Carlo will be back for his next deal in the summer of 2021, at which time he will stand two seasons from reaching unrestricted free agency.
Young Bruins look to make their mark in preseason

By MARISA INGEMI | marisa.ingemi@bostonherald.com | Boston Herald

PUBLISHED: September 17, 2019 at 4:45 pm | UPDATED: September 17, 2019 at 7:19 PM

NEWARK, N.J. — Roster spots are up for grabs, and there are young players who have a legitimate shot at cracking the Bruins roster and playing a significant role.

For some of them, Monday in New Jersey was their first time playing in an NHL contest. For others, they got a taste at training camp a year ago. Kyle Keyser was a standout, stopping all 17 shots he saw, while Jack Studnicka tallied a late, game-tying goal.

There still is a long way to go.

“There’s a few who have been here, but not very long,” Bruins coach Bruce Cassidy said. “They’re trying to figure out how to play against good players, NHL players. … I just think typically, to generalize, they don’t manage the puck well. They’re not hard on it, and when you’re soft on it in the NHL, you’re going to pay the price.”

The Bruins — though most of their regular roster players didn’t make the trip to Newark — had some of the same blips as a year ago, such as allowing a shorthanded breakaway and getting caught with too many men on the ice, and they allowed the overtime goal early in the extra frame.

Early on, some of the mistakes in the defensive zone forced Keyser to make tough saves when the B’s didn’t clear the goalmouth, but there still is plenty of time left in preseason.

For young players looking to make an impression, though, those are the kind of things to watch.

Axel Andersson is just 19 years old, but already in his second season of getting into preseason contests with the Bruins. He took three shots and played more than 19 minutes Monday night.

“I gained a lot of experience last year, and think I’m more comfortable now,” he said following the overtime loss to the Devils.

Andersson has taken a step since showing up a year ago, and it has opened the eyes of the coaching staff, too.

“I liked his compete,” Cassidy said. “He’s on top of people, he’s not afraid to engage. As a 19-year-old, it’s always good to see he’s not intimidated by his surroundings. He just wants to go out and play hockey. Of course he’s got to learn some things and he’s going to be playing against men, it’s going to be hard for him, but I like that he just plays. He has good instincts for the game.”

Oskar Steen scored and drew a penalty as one of the standout players Monday. He’s a bit of a wild card in the mix as the Bruins seek a right winger, but strong preseason showings only can help his case.

“I just like the play he made, he separated in the neutral zone and took the ice in front of him and attacked,” Cassidy said. “Young guys come in, and he’s a good example, his first go-around at least in North America. … A little bit tentative early on and you have to prod them to just play hockey. Forget who you’re playing against and go out and do what you do best. I think he did a lot more of that.”

Chris Wagner played in his first game since injuring his forearm in Game 3 of the Eastern Conference Finals, and said he has no restrictions.

He took a hit on his first shift, which got him back into it, but he wasn’t too worried going back into game action.

“That was the first time I took a hit, and my first shift, too,” he said. “I didn’t block any shots. (But) I wasn’t thinking about (the injury).”
Bruins ink Brandon Carlo to two-year pact

By STEVE CONROY | sconroy@bostonherald.com | Boston Herald
PUBLISHED: September 17, 2019 at 9:45 am | UPDATED: September 17, 2019 at 7:09 PM

Don Sweeney is having a pretty good week.

After finding common ground with restricted free agent Charlie McAvoy on a three-year deal worth $4.9 million annually, the Bruins general manager inserted the final piece of the puzzle (at least for now) to this season’s team by signing his last RFA, defenseman Brandon Carlo, to a two-year deal worth $2.85 million per season Tuesday.

Sweeney contended all along he had enough money to sign all three of his RFAs (Danton Heinen signed for two years at an AAV of $2.8 million earlier in the summer), and he pulled it off by getting all three to agree to bridge deals. According to capfriendly.com, the B’s have $1,153,334 of wiggle room left under the salary cap.

That’s a combined cap hit of $10.55 million for all three players, which gets them in under the single hit of the $10.893 million for Toronto’s Mitch Marner, who also signed his second pro deal.

Not bad work by Sweeney, but the GM was kicking himself for not getting the deal done before training camp started and he took the blame for that.

“We all know the RFA market was challenging the last calendar year, but with the Jacobs family and Cam (Neely), the resources of this organization have been there. When we finalized the deal, both sides felt good, and that’s the result we want. But I honestly believe that I could have done a better job to reach that point earlier and not sacrifice any of the days,” Sweeney said. “When you start to count the days of practice time you have before games, they start to dwindle pretty quickly. You realize how short camp is. There’s really six or so practices remaining. I think, as an organization, we need to do everything we possibly can to utilize that time effectively. For an individual player, you’re taking that away from them. I take full responsibility for that.”

While Columbus’ Zach Werenski’s deal (three years, $15 million) gave Sweeney a clear template for McAvoy, Carlo’s pact — though less expensive — was trickier because the burgeoning shutdown defenseman’s game cannot be properly measured by his paltry point production.

“There’s a little more subjectivity involved. … Not that I wasn’t aware of his value to us, (his importance) to the organization and the team, (but) it has to be acknowledged, and I think it’s reflected in our approach and where this deal ended up,” said Sweeney, who believes there is room for growth in Carlo’s offensive game.

With all his teammates in camp, Carlo conceded it was more and more difficult to sit out.

“Through this time, obviously this past week, me and Charlie have been communicating quite a bit. Overall, it was a great process, and I learned a lot,” said Carlo, who’ll have two more RFA years at the end of the deal. “A lot of respect to (Sweeney and assistant GM) Evan Gold and how they handled everything. They were reassuring at times, and it helped a lot. But at the same time, it was stressful for me throughout these past couple of days, especially after Charlie signed and not yet be a part of camp. It’s hard to not be there grinding with your teammates. As much as it sucks being on the ice getting bag skated, when you’re isolated, it’s even worse. I was getting a little antsy. I couldn’t get comfortable on the coach the last couple of days, but I’m really excited to be here.”

While his game might not translate into the cash windfall that’s expected to await McAvoy, this contract is a bridge to presumably bigger bucks for Carlo. He originally hoped for a longer-term deal, but he likes where he’s at.

“I remember talking to Sean Kuraly a year ago, and he said something that always stuck with me, ‘Always bet on yourself.’ And I believe in that 100 percent,” Carlo said.

It’s a never-ending job for Sweeney and his GM brethren. He now must turn his sights on how he can re-sign UFA-to-be Torey Krug plus 2020 RFAs Jake DeBrusk and Matt Grzelcyk, to name just a few players who’ll be looking for new contracts next summer. The biggest will be Krug’s. After Minnesota’s Jared Spurgeon signed a seven-year deal worth $7.575 million annually, Krug will be able to command at least that on the open market. Spurgeon’s highest career point total was 43, last season. Krug has done better than that in each of the past four seasons.

“Everybody has their place on our hockey club, and Torey’s an important part of it,” Sweeney said. “We have some forecasting to do. We have conversations that have to take place. They will. I indicated to each player that we will have those once I have the ability to start to forecast a little more accurately, so I’ll do that accordingly.”

In all, he’ll be looking at seven UFAs and three RFAs next offseason. It’s hard to imagine him taking care of everyone on that list.

“We had players that left this organization because they had other opportunities, and you wish them well,” Sweeney said. “That may happen again. But it won’t be (because of) under-appreciating from the Bruins for what they do for our hockey club. I’ll attack each and every one of them. When they finalize, either here or somewhere else, is to be determined.”

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Don Sweeney says Brandon Carlo is 'really important' to Bruins' success

By NBC Sports Boston Staff

September 17, 2019 7:31 PM

Brandon Carlo is a huge part of the Boston Bruins' success, and general manager Don Sweeney couldn't express that enough Tuesday.

Carlo signed a two-year contract with the Bruins on Tuesday morning worth $2.85 million per season and Sweeney said he couldn't have been happier.

Carlo deal locks things up for B's back end

"It's a really, really important day for us. [Brandon is a] big, big part of our club," said Sweeney according to BostonBruins.com's Eric Russo. "As I referenced with Charlie the other day, really important [pieces] of what we accomplished last year, what we hope to accomplish this year, and many, many years going forward."

He added: "Brandon is going to be a part of the Boston Bruins and I indicated that while we were going through negotiations, to him and to everybody else. I'm very excited to have him back in the fold."

At just 22, Carlo is maturing into one of the best young defensive-defensemen in the NHL, and naturally, Sweeney recognizes that.

"I said this to Brandon this morning - from a leadership standpoint, he's able to now feel comfortable in his own skin to take the next young player and realize this is how we do things," said Sweeney. "And I think he wants that. So, for me, I don't think you can put a ceiling on what he's capable of doing."

Carlo has managed to flourish paired alongside Torey Krug and develop specific skills in order to benefit the Bruins.

"But he also has to live to his own ideals of what he does really well," Sweeney said. "And obviously, shutting down and taking responsibility to end games, to close out games, to protect teammates, to block shots, to do the things that other players might not be willing to do, he does really well."

Carlo will have a lot more responsibility on his shoulders come the start of the regular season, but he should be able to handle it just fine as he's improved each season since joining Boston in 2016.
Don Sweeney expecting ‘to have conversations’ with Torey Krug on extension

By Joe Haggerty

September 17, 2019 2:34 PM

BRIGHTON -- With the Bruins now having cost certainty with Charlie McAvoy and Brandon Carlo in the last couple of days, the expectation is that they will be moving on to extending the players entering the final year of their contracts with the Black and Gold.

One of the top names on that list of players is Torey Krug, who wasn’t shy when asked over the last couple of weeks about his contract status with the Bruins entering the final year of a deal paying him $5.25 million per season. Krug indicated the Bruins haven’t really approached him with any contract extension discussions, but that he’d also be willing to take a hometown discount just as Patrice Bergeron, Brad Marchand and David Pastrnak have with their recent contracts. Given the seven-year, $53 million contract handed out to Jared Spurgeon by the Minnesota Wild less than a week ago, it’s clear that Krug is going to be facing a substantial raise given the market value for offensive defensemen playing top-4 minutes across the league.

Bean: B’s playing with fire with McAvoy deal

The good news is that buyouts for Matt Beleskey and Dennis Seidenberg will be coming off the books after this season to free up some money, and Kevan Miller and Zdeno Chara could potentially be off the books as well. Don Sweeney was fairly non-committal when asked directly about Krug on Tuesday afternoon while discussing Carlo’s two-year extension, but did indicate a conversation was forthcoming between the Bruins and Krug’s representation.

"Everybody has their place on our hockey club. Torey is an important part of our hockey club. We have some forecasting to do. We have some conversations that have to take place and they will," said Sweeney. "I have indicated to each of our players that we will have those [contract discussions]. Once I have the ability to forecast a little more accurately then I will have those conversations accordingly."

There’s little question that Krug holds big time value to both the Bruins, and to any suitors across the NHL that might be looking for him to hit unrestricted free agency.

Krug is amongst the most productive NHL D-men in the league over the last three seasons while averaging nine goals and 54 points over that span, and he’s quarterbacked a PP that’s become a major weapon for the Black and Gold. Both Matt Grzelcyk and Charlie McAvoy have shown some promise when it comes to putting up numbers on the back end, but at this point neither one of them is ready to replace Krug’s production.

Sweeney said, while asked about all of his free-agent players next summer, those kinds of scenarios will be amongst the projections that the Bruins make about a whopping 10 Bruins players headed to free agency after this season including Charlie Coyle, Jake DeBrusk and Grzelcyk among others.

“We’ve got simultaneous things going on. There’s no prioritization from the standpoint of one player being in front of the other player. It’s just communicating that you have to make those decisions, maybe sometimes they are financially and maybe sometimes it’s based on who is actually coming along to replace those players if they decide to leave," said Sweeney. “We have players that left our organization this year because they had other opportunities. We understood that well and it may happen again.

“But it won’t be for the Bruins underappreciating what they do for our hockey club. I’ll attack each and every one of them. When they finalize either here or somewhere else? That’s to be determined. But we have to do it with every one of them.”

One would expect the Bruins are going to “attack” things with Krug sooner rather than later now that they’re through the weeds of this summer’s contract stuff.
Brandon Carlo contract locks things up for the Bruins' back end

By Joe Haggerty
September 17, 2019 11:08 AM

What was once a competitive-looking training camp for Bruins defensemen now becomes a lot less uncertain after the last 48 hours.

Both Charlie McAvoy (three years at $4.9 million per season) and Brandon Carlo (two years at $2.85 million per season) are now signed for the next few years with the Bruins still shimmying under the salary cap ceiling.

While some may see Carlo’s deal as a big-time bargain, the comparable contracts to him (Darnell Nurse at $3.2 million per season and Josh Morrissey at $3.15 million per season both on two-year deals) made this two-year deal a fait accompli once the Bruins had something in place with the 21-year-old McAvoy.

On its face, this means that Don Sweeney has managed to do what many thought would be much more difficult this summer: Fitting Carlo and McAvoy under the cap without moving any big contracts to make room for all the returning players. It also means the Bruins can move on to negotiations with Torey Krug, who will be looking for a substantial raise from the final year of a deal that’s paying him $5.25 million per season.

From a practical standpoint on the ice, the Bruins now have a deep, multi-faceted defensemen corps that doesn’t leave any room on the NHL roster for youngsters like Jakub Zboril or Urho Vaakanainen, or potential veteran tryout campers like Florida’s Alex Petrovic. Most teams would be in a tough spot with veteran D-men like Kevan Miller (fractured kneecap) and John Moore (shoulder surgery) out for at least the first month of the season, but the Bruins will be coming back with the entire group that was playing as they made it all the way to the Stanley Cup Final.

Here’s how the pairings are likely to look to start the season:

Chara-McAvoy
Krug-Carlo
Grzelcyk-Clifton

Certainly it would appear that Steve Kampfer is the only player with competition for the seventh D-men spot to start the season. Otherwise, the writing is on the wall with camp only a couple of days old and any possible drama erased with both McAvoy and Carlo inking new deals over the last few days.

The only point of interest at this point for Boston’s back-enders? It remains to be seen just how good McAvoy and Carlo can be over the next couple of seasons after signing fair, market contracts that may be less than many expected.

If McAvoy turns into the No. 1 defenseman he’s tracking toward and Carlo can build some offense to go with his shutdown skills, the Bruins are going to be paying much, much more for these players the next time at the negotiating table. But then again many of the current high-priced Bruins players will be off the roster at that point, and the Bruins will gladly pay for younger players that outperform their shiny, brand new deals.
Bruins sign Brandon Carlo to two-year contract with $2.85M AAV

By Darren Hartwell
September 17, 2019 8:13 AM

The Boston Bruins have finally finished their business in restricted free agency.

The Bruins have signed defenseman Brandon Carlo to a two-year contract with an annual cap hit of $2.85 million ($5.7 million total), the team announced Tuesday.

Carlo’s deal comes just two days after Boston locked up fellow restricted free agent Charlie McAvoy on a three-year contract with a $4.9 million average annual value.

Bruins general manager Don Sweeney said earlier this week the team had enough cap space to sign Carlo, and it appears he was correct. The B’s now have no more restricted free agents left unsigned, meaning their roster is set one day following Monday’s preseason opener against the New Jersey Devils.

Carlo is a solid foundational piece on Boston’s blue line, with 230 NHL games under his belt at age 22. The 2015 second-round draft pick tallied 10 points (two goals, eight assists) in 72 games last season, and his plus-22 rating was tied for second-best on the team behind Zdeno Chara.
Brandon Carlo’s deal a reminder Don Sweeney has saved face on once-‘ugly’ 2015 draft class

By Joe McDonald

Finding success in the NHL draft is not an exact science. If a team is fortunate enough each year enough to develop one or two draftees who make an impact at the NHL level, then it’s generally considered a success.

So, let’s revisit 2015.

The weekend of June 26-27 in Sunrise, Fla., wasn’t one of the better moments for the Bruins. Don Sweeney had been promoted to general manager a month earlier and the NHL draft was his first big chance to impact the roster. When it was over, many of his peers wondered what he was thinking.

He maneuvered his way toward acquiring three first-round picks, trading Dougie Hamilton to Calgary and Milan Lucic to Los Angeles and emerging with picks 13, 14 and 15. The plan was to use those picks to land defenseman Noah Hanifin, who eventually went No. 5 overall to the Carolina Hurricanes.

The gambit failed miserably when the Bruins couldn’t find a trading partner. Even team president Cam Neely admitted later it was an “ugly” situation. With those three picks, the Bruins drafted defenseman Jakub Zboril, left wing Jake DeBrusk and right wing Zachary Senyshyn, respectively.

Was it a hiccup? Yes. But was it the end of the story of that draft? No.

Here’s why: After the three first-round selections, the Bruins selected Brandon Carlo, Jakob Forsbacka Karlsson, Jeremy Lauzon, Daniel Vladar, Jesse Gabrielle, Cameron Hughes and Jack Becker.

It wasn’t what they had in mind. DeBrusk has become a capable Top-6 wing, but Zboril and Senyshyn have done little at the NHL level so far. It didn’t help that the Islanders selected a foundational player in Matthew Barzal at No. 16 overall, while the Vancouver Canucks landed Brock Boeser at No. 23.

Fast forward to the dawn of this new season. On Tuesday, the Bruins announced a two-year $5.7 million deal for Carlo. It solidifies Carlo’s status as an integral part of the Bruins plans in the near term, and still offers the chance at another deal that could keep the defensive stalwart here long term.

So, with the early success of DeBrusk as David Krejci’s left winger on the second line, along with the impressive defensive contributions of Carlo — especially in the last postseason — it’s safe to say Sweeney and the Bruins have saved face on the 2015 draft. As far as Sweeney is concerned, his success as a GM and the larger record of the organization shouldn’t come down to one weekend in Florida.

"I don’t think I’d reference one specific weekend. It was a steep learning curve that weekend for us and we did put forth a plan as to what we were going to try to accomplish as an organization," he said. "We have accomplished some of those things, we haven’t accomplished the ultimate goal and that’s really what it’s all about. You are proud, as I’ve referenced our team last year and the growth of each individual player is part of that and what they contribute."

"Other players who come along are a part of that will contribute as well. I don’t look at it in one myopic time event, I look at the big package every day and try and get better at the decisions that we have to make. And people who are part of our staff at that time, we’ve learned and grown from that and are hopefully making better decisions going forward. And hopefully the club reflects that and the success we’ve had reflects that."

Other possibilities remain from that draft. Lauzon could eventually play in the bottom pairing if he gets his act together. Senyshyn can skate but needs to figure it out sooner rather than later. Zboril, as yet, is not ready for prime time. JFK went back to Sweden, and maybe he returns physically, mentally and emotionally in check. Vladar hasn’t developed his 6-foot-5, 185-pound goaltending frame into a productive pro netminder and will likely start the season in the ECHL. Gabrielle is no longer with the organization, while Hughes and Becker are still considered prospects in the pipeline.

But ultimately, DeBrusk and Carlo have made the ’15 draft class worth it for the Bruins.

On Tuesday, with his new contract in hand, Carlo appeared as jubilant as a high schooler who just learned he made the varsity team. He was all smiles and thankful for the opportunity to continue his position as Torey Krug’s defensive partner. When asked to describe his NHL career since the day he was drafted in 2015, Carlo’s answer was genuine.

"Whirlwind would be a good word," he said. "My first year I didn’t really know what to expect in the aspect of making the team out here. I was very blessed to be able to jump up and have that experience and learn from (Zdeno Chara) in that regard and start my NHL career faster than I anticipated. The organization has treated me so well and it’s been so fun as well throughout these past three years. I’ve had my ups and downs but one thing that’s stayed consistent is me having fun around this group of teammates and everybody involved in this organization."

What Sweeney has done since that "ugly" weekend in 2015 is remarkable. Yes, he made mistakes, but there’s no denying the impact DeBrusk and Carlo have made, particularly in last year’s run to the final. That progress should continue in the near future, and beyond.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Brandon Carlo was probably looking for more, but new Bruins deal reflects his defense-first game

By Fluto Shinzawa

Sep 17, 2019

It is probably unfair to cap a defenseman’s ceiling at 22 years of age. Brandon Carlo skates beautifully for a 6-foot-5, 212-pounder. He is coachable. Carlo has muscle to gain, which will help him sweat aside any irritants bent on separating him from the puck. The Bruins are intent on incorporating their defensemen more into their five-on-five offense this season. Carlo has much room for growth in that regard.

“I do believe he acknowledges the offensive exploration of his game and the confidence as a result of it,” said general manager Don Sweeney. “We put him in situations last year where there’s all kinds of open ice he can take advantage of: four-on-four, three-on-three. It’s not just from pure shutdown. He’s a tremendous penalty killer. People do not like to play against him. His competitiveness, his appetite to continue to get better, is important for our hockey club as well.”

Data compiled from 230 NHL games, however, signal that for whatever offensive improvements Carlo can unearth in his game, he is what he is: an even-strength shutdown defenseman, first-shift penalty killer, last-minute lead protector.

All that is just fine for Carlo and the Bruins. Zdeno Chara, Carlo’s left-side man on the penalty kill and former even-strength partner, is still playing at 42 years old because of such assets. Thirty other teams would be glad to welcome Carlo, not just because of his on-ice skills but also for his professional approach and off-ice maturity.

This defense-first toolbox, however, is not compatible with a long-term, big-money score from a cap team like the Bruins at this time.

After signing a new deal Tuesday, Carlo is in the fold for two years and $5.7 million. It is not the kind of security the fourth-year man hoped to gain.

“I didn’t really have any expectation for it in my heart,” Carlo said. “From the beginning, I was looking, hopefully, for the longer term. But I’m absolutely fine with any play that it would come in with shorter term. longer term, just to be a part of this organization for any length of time. I was just looking to continue forward and stay here, remain here with this group of guys. I think everybody, as a young guy, you’d like the security aspect. But as I went through the process and things were explained to me, I’m very happy with the result of the two years.”

There was a time the Bruins felt the same way about a long-term settlement. The bosses had accumulated enough viewings to feel secure in what Carlo would become.

But that longer term, and its corresponding rise in salary, became more difficult for the Bruins to incorporate as other commitments loomed. Charlie Coyle, for example, acquired from Minnesota on Feb. 20, is unrestricted after this season. The Bruins would like to extend the 27-year-old to serve as a bridge between Patrice Bergeron and David Krejci to the next generation of centers: Jack Studnicka, Trent Frederic, John Beecher. But Coyle will be due a raise upon his $3.2 million average annual value.

“We did start long term with both those players,” Sweeney said of Carlo and Charlie McAvoy, who signed his own three-year deal days ago. “Just didn’t find a common ground, whether that’s our own influences of how this past year went and adding players. So we just zeroed in on what made the most sense. At this time, for Brandon and for us, two years was the compromise.”

To reach the agreement, Carlo had to withhold services for off-ice physicals and four days of on-ice work with his coaches and teammates. From Sweeney’s perspective, that was not of Carlo’s doing. The GM took the unusual approach of apologizing for not finalizing the deal earlier to allow Carlo to report on time.

“I want to take absolute, full responsibility for the days Brandon has missed,” Sweeney said. “We ask every one of our players, our staff, everybody to try and continue to do things better and improve. I think this is more of a reflection that I could have done a better job in this case in not allowing him to miss any time. So that’s on me, 100 percent on me.”

Carlo is a reserved, introspective and calculated young man. After the playoffs, he believes in his strengths as a shutdown defenseman.

But Carlo is wired to expect a lot of himself. When things don’t go as planned on the ice, his game has suffered. Confidence is critical to Carlo’s success.

In that way, players with Carlo’s personality, more often than not, prefer security. Ivan Provorov, for example, landed a six-year, $40.5 million second contract.

But Provorov had one thing on his side: 97 points over 246 games. Carlo has 32.

“I understood, in my case, what the lack of offense in different regards, that this was kind of a unique contract,” Carlo said. “Overall, I feel very happy with where it ended up. I feel my agents did a great job of trying to push the importance of the style of play I play with this team. Overall, the number we got to was a great reflection of that.”

Even though teams and representatives like Craig Oster, Carlo’s agent, have advanced data to use in negotiations, agreements for defensive-minded defensemen are simply more difficult to put into focus. Carlo’s comparables are scarcer: perhaps Cody Ceci (two years, $5.6 million second contract, according to CapFriendly), maybe Esa Lindell (two years, $4.4 million), probably Ben Hutton (two years, $5.6 million).

There are not many others.

“There’s a little more subjectivity involved with this deal,” said Sweeney. “You have to acknowledge that his representative did a really good job — not that I wasn’t aware of his value to us as an organization and a team — and has to be acknowledged. I think it’s reflected in our approach to where this deal ended up. Sometimes there’s a more linear path for players offensively that put up similar numbers and such. But I don’t think you can underscore the value Brandon brings, both as a leader and to our hockey club overall.”

According to Natural Stat Trick, when Carlo was on the ice, opponents averaged 49.29 shot attempts per 60 minutes of five-on-five play last year. It was the fourth-lowest mark in the league among defensemen who logged 1,000 or more five-on-five minutes. Additional on-ice metrics include scoring chances against/60 (20.35, fewest), goals against/60 (1.53, second fewest), expected goals against/60 (1.91, third fewest).

These numbers help to paint a clear picture: Carlo is a very good defender.

Offense is another story. Carlo averaged 0.33 points/60 last year (second fewest). Bridge deals can serve as springboards to lucrative third contracts. But Carlo, in all likelihood, will not score points at a rate that will deliver him to an eye-popping payday.

“The offensive side of my game, I feel like I can get up in the rush a little more and contribute,” Carlo said. “I think with confidence, I’ll recognize that more on the ice. Defensively, I feel good as a player. I want to continue to remain on a progression of getting more physical in that regard. Overall, continue to just grow the physicality part of my game, and hopefully the offensive side.”

Barring a drastic dip in performance, Carlo will be a Bruin well beyond the expiration of his extension. The really big cash, however, will be handed out elsewhere.

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Linus Ullmark among few bright spots in Sabres’ preseason loss

By Lance Lysowski

Published Tue, Sep 17, 2019|Updated Tue, Sep 17, 2019

COLUMBUS, Ohio – Ralph Krueger noticed the lack of energy early in the first period Tuesday night. His lineup did not play in the preseason opener on Monday, yet the group had been on the ice for five consecutive days.

The Buffalo Sabres showed no signs of the up-tempo attack that the other half of his roster used to mount a three-goal lead against Pittsburgh one night earlier. The second preseason game was filled with poor forechecking, disorganized play in the defensive zone and included few quality scoring chances.

Though the Sabres showed promise at times on Tuesday, their inconsistent play resulted in a 4-1 loss to the Columbus Blue Jackets at Nationwide Arena. While the players are off Wednesday, Krueger and his staff will watch both preseason games to analyze and evaluate.

The Sabres’ coach won’t have to watch the film to assess one of the few promising performances from Tuesday night: goalie Linus Ullmark. Ullmark, who is competing against Carter Hutton to start the season in goal, stopped 19 of 20 shots before being replaced by Andrew Hammond with 10:12 left in the second period. Ullmark flashed a blend of athleticism and sound technique while withstanding a barrage of shots in the first 20 minutes.

“I thought Linus recovered well from that early goal against,” Krueger said. “He gave us a chance and bought us time to find our legs and find our game. Linus definitely left a good mark today.”

The performance was an important step for Ullmark. After all, his first full season in the National Hockey League did not go as planned.

Though Ullmark played a career-high 37 games and almost seized the starting job last January, he finished with a .905 save percentage and 3.11 goals-against average. More concerning, Ullmark’s confidence took a significant hit during the latter part of the season.

The 26-year old won only two of his final 12 starts, posting a .887 save percentage during that span. Prior to the season finale, Ullmark allowed three or more goals in eight of 11 games. Ullmark’s technique deteriorated at times, but he told the media Tuesday that the greater challenge was the mental grind of an NHL season.

“It’s a long season, first of all,” Ullmark said. “It’s way different than being in the minors, with all the travel, all the time zones, all the different changes. Being there every night was tough. Coming into this year, it’s going to be easier mentally because you’re prepared for everything.”

Ullmark was tested almost immediately Tuesday night. Columbus defensemen Seth Jones’ pass to the left faceoff circle was one-timed into the net by winger Emil Bemstrom only 52 seconds into the game.

Bad bounce: The momentum gained from McCabe’s goal did not last long. A routine shot by Blue Jackets winger Kole Sherwood hit Matiss Kivlenieks on McCabe’s goal at 13:43 into the second period. Asplund passed the puck to McCabe near the point, and Kivlenieks had no chance of seeing the defensemen’s high shot, allowing the Sabres to tie the score, 1-1.

Bad bounce: The momentum gained from McCabe’s goal did not last long. A routine shot by Blue Jackets winger Kole Sherwood hit Matiss Kivlenieks on McCabe’s goal at 13:43 into the second period.

Bals: The two goalies finished the season 25th in 5-on-5 save percentage after the team had numerous breakdowns in the defensive zone during the second half.

Rather than adding competition this offseason, the Sabres hired Mike Bales, who is regarded as one of the NHL’s top goalie coaches. Bales won two Stanley Cups in Pittsburgh and his coaching helped Carolina’s goalies lead the Hurricanes to the playoffs last season.

This is a particularly important season for Ullmark. He signed a one-year, $1.325 million contract this past offseason and, although he will still be a restricted free agent next summer, the Sabres’ top goalie prospect, Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, is getting closer to being ready to play in the NHL.

There is no questioning Ullmark’s talent. He made a number of highlight-reel saves last season and has shown the potential to be a possible No. 1 goalie. The problem has been consistency.

“A lot, obviously,” Ullmark said when asked if he is motivated by last season’s struggles, “Looking forward to this season and aiming to [improve my lowest points]. Play my game for a whole season and not have any dips. There are going to be one or two games that are going to be bad, but I’m going to try to keep them as few as possible.”

Rocky start: Winger C.J. Smith, among the young Sabres competing for a roster spot, was penalized for slashing only 42 seconds into the game, and the Blue Jackets’ power play capitalized on Bemstrom’s goal.

Disconnected: Krueger’s mantra for the season is to “Play Connected,” and sound technique while withstanding a barrage of shots in the first 20 minutes.

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Bad bounce: The momentum gained from McCabe’s goal did not last long. A routine shot by Blue Jackets winger Kole Sherwood hit Hammond’s glove and rolled into the net to give Columbus a 2-1 lead at 15:48 into the second period.

Insurance goal: The Blue Jackets pulled away in the third period when Sonny Milano scored at 14:22 for a 3-1 lead. A pass went through the slot in front of Hammond and Milano was left alone near the crease, allowing him plenty of time to shoot into the open net.

Zac Dalpe added an empty-net goal with 1:26 remaining. The Sabres went 0-for-3 on the power play and were outshot, 33-29, for the game.

“They play a pretty simple, straight-line game,” Krueger said of Columbus. “They came with big bodies at us and you have to remember for a lot of guys, it’s been many, many months since they’ve had people run at them. I thought we adjusted better in the second and we were able to get away from that pressure. Never used the o-zone time properly though.”

Possible injury: Sabres winger Scott Wilson left the game in the second period with a lower-body injury and did not return. Wilson, who is competing for a roster spot, played 7:13 against Columbus.

Alternate captains: With Jack Eichel not playing, the Sabres had three alternate captains Tuesday night: Sam Reinhart, Kyle Okposo and McCabe. Defensemen Henri Jokiharju, who played Monday against Pittsburgh, was a healthy scratch.

Buffalo News LOADED: 09.18.2019
Sabres relieved there will be no lockout next year, hope spirit of negotiation continues

By Mike Harrington
Published Tue, Sep 17, 2019|Updated Tue, Sep 17, 2019

This is what labor peace looks like in the NHL: No fears of a lockout and a defined schedule to frame negotiations for a collective bargaining agreement.

The NHL and NHL Players' Association agree they have issues with the current CBA that they would like rectified, but the spirit of collaboration continues. On the deadline for its decision a couple of weeks ago, the league said it was not opting out of the current agreement next year. On their deadline day Monday, the players announced a similar choice in what rates as a major victory for the sport and its fans.

What do those key decisions mean? The current deal will run as scheduled through Sept. 15, 2022 – instead of expiring next year and putting the 2020-21 season in jeopardy of a lockout.

The goal of the sides is now to keep negotiating on an extension reportedly in the range of three or four years, perhaps as far into the future as 2027. And that would take the game into an era of tranquility that would push more than a decade from the 2013 lockout.

"It's good to know and good to let our fans know, tell the people who follow the game of hockey there's not going to be a work stoppage next year," Sabres captain Jack Eichel said Tuesday in KeyBank Center. "It's good for the game, good for revenue. We had a couple good talks with the PA and the executive board. A lot of guys had opinions and it's important they're all brought forward."

"We know what's in front of us now, for sure," added Sabres defenseman Jake McCabe, the team's NHLPA executive board representative. "That I think was the whole point of the (opt-out) deadline, so we knew what we would be dealing with."

The decisions of both sides not only assured no lockout next season, but also took away all the chatter about an expiring CBA that would have surely become a major talking point to this season.

"If we had reopened, it would have been 12 months away and that 12 months comes pretty quick," Eichel said. "The fans have seen in the past with lockouts that it's a tough battle. Obviously, I wasn't around for those, so I'm trying to educate myself now to understand the process and what goes on. It's been good to listen and learn."

The players are looking for relief on the escrow issue that takes money out of their paychecks, in some cases more than 10%, and want a specific calendar for international play starting with the 2022 Beijing Olympics. For its part, the NHL has an industry approaching $5 billion in annual revenues that is sure to grow even more with Seattle coming aboard as the 32nd franchise and a much more lucrative American television contract is negotiated.

As per the 2013 CBA, there is a 50-50 split of revenues between the players and owners. The escrow issue is a complicated one, as Commissioner Gary Bettman noted earlier this month at the league's Player Media Tour in Chicago. Continued revenue growth and a subsequent increase in the salary cap could help mitigate the escrow pinch players are currently feeling.

"Hopefully Gary and the NHL keep working towards an agreement like they've been talking about during this time and we get something done in the next couple of years," McCabe said. "You just want to see revenues grow. We all do. Players had a good discussion and it was a very informative process so we know where we're heading."

As for international play, the NHL is reportedly considering a World Cup in February 2021 in place of the All-Star Game. Players are mostly focused on the '22 Olympics after the league opted not to go to the Games last year in South Korea.

"The World Cup was amazing, a great event," said Eichel, who played for Team North America at the 2016 tournament in Toronto. "But you grow up as a kid and you want to represent your country. I've been fortunate to be able to do that on every stage but the Olympics. The whole experience of being in an Olympic Village, the opening ceremonies, being involved in something that big on a worldwide scale means a lot to a lot of guys in the NHL, including myself.

"Hopefully we can figure out a way to get our best players over there. It's important to put the best product on the ice in the Olympics and that helps grow the game."
Matej Pekar reaches camp goal with chance in Sabres preseason game

By Mike Harrington
Published Tue, Sep 17, 2019|Updated Tue, Sep 17, 2019

As soon as Wednesday, there's a chance Matej Pekar could be shipped back to the Barrie Colts of the Ontario Hockey League. But the celebrated gnat of the Buffalo Sabres' development camps and Prospect Challenges over the last 18 months will first get another watershed moment in his development tonight in Nationwide Arena.

Pekar will make his NHL preseason debut for the Sabres in the game against the Columbus Blue Jackets, playing left wing on a line with veterans Vladimir Sobotka and Kyle Okposo.

"I had it in the back of my mind hoping for it and it's happening," Pekar, 19, said after today's morning skate in KeyBank Center. "I just have to be ready for it. This is the opportunity.

"I'm very excited. It's going to be fun. My first game in an actual NHL arena so it definitely will be fun. I'm just going to try to play my game and not really think about who I'm playing against or where I'm playing."

A fourth-round pick in the 2018 draft at Dallas, Pekar burst on to the scene at last year's development camp by driving Casey Mittelstadt crazy all over the ice – and by taking a huge hit from Rasmus Dahlin during a scrimmage that went viral. He quickly became a favorite of fans at LECOM Harborcenter and had the folks in his corner again this year during the prospect games.

"The energy he's shown in development and rookie camp was fun for me to see in action," said new coach Ralph Krueger. "All of us are looking forward to seeing him in a game at this next level. Tonight will be a good test for him. You'll see some penalty-killing time, the opportunity of him to bring that aggressive game into our mix."

The Blue Jackets are not playing a top-shelf group of forwards but will be strong on defense with standouts Seth Jones and Zach Werenski scheduled to play. Niagara Falls native Adam Clendening, who played four games for Columbus and 45 for Cleveland of the AHL, is also in tonight's lineup on defense for the Blue Jackets.

"Doesn't matter who I play against. If something happens, it happens," Pekar said. "I'm just going to focus on my game and not worry about who is on the other side. These guys have been great, helping me a lot. Whatever I do, I try to take as much as I can from them and bring it to my game. They're experienced, with a lot of games in the NHL, and it's a great learning experience."

Krueger noted that sometimes no-names looking to make a name can be a bigger challenge than stars in the preseason. But the Sabres played an almost-entirely AHL lineup in last night's overtime win against the "Pittsburgh Penguins" (quotes intended) at Penn State, so it will be interesting to see how the Buffalo forwards match up.

"We're happy to see that there's some strong resistance tonight in Columbus," Krueger said. "This group that's playing tonight will be tested in a different way maybe than last night."

Krueger said tonight's game ends phase one of camp. With players off Wednesday, the staff will meet and some roster moves are likely. He said the next phase will end after Saturday's home game vs. Toronto as players are sent to the start of Rochester's camp next week. The final phase with the ultimate roster decisions comes after the preseason finale Sept. 28 in Pittsburgh.

"We don't feel a big need to cut the numbers down quickly here," Krueger said. "We do feel the group is learning a lot together so there's not big urgency in that right now.

"There's no question getting to know all these players so well for the long term is very helpful. Probably tomorrow your brain starts going more toward Oct. 3 (the season opener at Pittsburgh). I really tried in this phase to make this a teaching phase as best as possible where we bring our principles and concepts right through the depths of our organization."
Six observations from the Sabres’ first preseason game under Ralph Krueger

By Joe Yerdon
Sep 17, 2019

STATE COLLEGE, Pa. — The Sabres brought a heavily-loaded NHL roster to Pegula Ice Arena on the campus of Penn State University and dealt with a Penguins team that had more guys destined for Wilkes-Barre/Scranton than Pittsburgh. It was Ralph Krueger’s first game behind an NHL bench since 2013 — one that was filled with plenty of expected ups and downs — and one of four the team will play this week.

So just how did the Sabres look in their debut under Krueger? Here are six observations (with a bonus) from one of the nicest college hockey rinks in the country.

1. Krueger is getting back in the saddle again

The last time Krueger coached NHL players was in the World Cup of Hockey in 2016. The last time he coached a NHL team was 2013 in Edmonton. Krueger was joined on the bench by assistants Don Granato and Steve Smith, while Mike Bales and video coach Myles Fee watched from up high.

“I’m looking forward to using these six (preseason) games to get our bench operating in the way we need to operate, get to feel the personality of the guys, how much teaching are we going to do where,” Krueger said Monday before the game. “I’m bigger on creating flow and energy during a game than I am on over-teaching there.”

Getting back behind the bench on Monday night allowed Krueger to get a full reminder of how the ups and downs of a game can go. After Buffalo got out to a 4-1 lead, Krueger watched that three-goal lead disappear in the third thanks to miscues and turnovers.

“There’s no question that you’re getting used to the rhythm,” Krueger said. “Going through power plays, penalty killing. We’re taking people down and picking his spot for the winner with eight seconds left. It’s one is going to remember it, but it was still weird to see.

Cozens wants to make the NHL right away and he’s learned some lessons already. Applying that against stiffer competition will show where he’s at in the race to make the opening night roster.

4. Up-and-down game for Rasmus Dahlin

Guys won’t always be roaring to go for the first game of the preseason. That’s excusable, but Dahlin was on ice for all four Penguins goals. No one is going to remember it, but it was still weird to see.

Dahlin’s turnover to Penguins forward Adam Johnson led to a breakaway goal that made it 3-1. Krueger’s third period defensive switch was as much a reward to Dahlin, who had a solid game and a nice goal in the first period, as it was a lesson for Dahlin. It wasn’t all bad news because Dahlin can thread a needle like this:

Krueger said Monday morning he wanted to see Dahlin and Jokiharju together to see how they’d function in the defensive zone and how that would translate into offensive chances. Although Jokiharju had a goal in the second period during a 4-on-4 situation, if we’re going to see more of that pair together, crisper play in their own end will be needed.

5. A bigger, stronger Tage Thompson

We all know Tage Thompson is a big guy. According to the latest stats supplied by the team, he’s now 6-foot-7 and 215 pounds, up from 6-6 and 205 last season. When he finished last season in the AHL with Rochester, something he did with a lot of success was dig in around the net and score goals down low. He did exactly that on the power play against the Penguins.

“I love it — anywhere on the power play is awesome — so I can’t complain,” Thompson said. “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.”

Thompson was on a power play unit with Eichel, Jeff Skinner, Jimmy Vesey and Dahlin. The power play formation was similar to what we’ve seen the last few years with a 1-3-1 type of setup in the zone. Last season, Thompson was mostly on the flanks looking to unleash the big shot. This time he was parked in front of the net.

It seems like Thompson has been a bit forgotten about after a difficult season last year, but he’s bulked up a bit and is still a quick skater. His ability to steal the puck from opponents hasn’t disappeared. He’s one of the most skilled players with the defensive stick on the team. Those abilities come in handy and if he can put his size to use all over the ice, he could snag a spot on the right wing.

6. Newsflash: Eichel still excellent at hockey

When Eichel digs in there are very few players in the league that can handle him. He rolled out on a line with Sheary and Jimmy Vesey, but it was in overtime where he showed he can singlehandedly own the moment.

Early on in overtime, he gathered the puck in the neutral zone and went one-on-three against the Penguins and beat all of the opposing players on the way to the net. He uncoffered his trademark wrist shot from the circle towards the far side of the net only to hit the iron about as loudly as you can.

In the closing seconds, after a calamitous breakdown in the defensive zone that saw the Penguins nearly come away with the winning goal, Eichel snuck out of the zone cheating a bit in hopes of getting a breakout pass for a breakaway opportunity. He got it and had enough time to settle the puck down and pick his spot for the winner with eight seconds left. It’s just preseason but it’s still pretty great to see.
Terry and Kim Pegula dropped $80 million to start the men's and women's varsity hockey programs in 2012 and with it the Pegula Ice Arena, which opened in 2013.

It's a gleaming home for hockey and one which was built to make the home ice advantage very apparent. The fans in The Roar Zone, the student section located behind one of the goals, opened each period of Monday's game with a chant of, "Hockey Valley" followed with a chant of "Thank You Terry" with the appropriate rhythmic claps mixed in.

The Roar Zone rises high and steep behind the net to create a wall of sound meant to make life hell on earth for opposing goalies. Penn State fans are rabid, loyal, and don't exactly treat the rest of the opposing roster so kindly either, especially if they've got fodder to be used against them.

“They're crazy there; it was a lot of fun. I think every person in the stands had a picture of me trying to do a pull-up, so that was pretty funny,” Sabres center and former Minnesota Golden Gophers star Casey Mittelstadt said.

Mittelstadt infamously didn’t register one pull-up at the NHL Draft Combine in 2017. In college hockey, where heckling is part of the norm, he was ripe for ribbing.

"I had a lot of it that year from a lot of different teams, but with them, every single person with a piece of paper sized (photo) of me doing (a pull-up)," Mittelstadt said. "It was pretty funny, our whole team enjoyed it – it was pretty funny, we did the same thing to their guys in different ways. It was a lot of fun."

The Pegulas built an outstanding home for hockey at State College and the LECOM Harborcenter bears a striking similarity to it. It makes you wonder what they could do if they built something on a larger scale.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
The hockey world is a spiderweb, interconnecting players, coaches, management — anyone, really, involved in the game.

Someone who knows someone who knows someone.

So, how Andrew MacDonald was able to connect with Ryan Straschnitzki and his family last summer when the Humboldt Broncos defenceman was in Philadelphia for rehabilitation at the Shriners Hospitals for Children, should make some sense.

"It got connected within a half an hour," MacDonald said.

And — from one hockey guy to another — he and his wife Hali extended the couple’s Philadelphia home (and car) to the Straschnitzki family, if they required it during their extended stay in the area.

Ryan, who was paralyzed from the chest down in the Broncos team bus crash last April, was set to receive specialized spinal treatments at the Shriners facilities.

Meanwhile, MacDonald, who is currently with the Calgary Flames on a professional tryout offer after playing out his final year with the Philadelphia Flyers last season, would be gone home to the Toronto area for the off-season, so why not extend the invite?

"When I heard he was going to Philadelphia in the hospital for rehab, I wasn’t sure what he was doing for living arrangements for his family,” MacDonald said. “So, I called a buddy who knew someone who had their number … it was kind of crazy how quick it happened. We weren’t going to be there for the summer so I just wanted to reach out.

"I just figured if they needed a place to stay, or had anyone extra come down, they could crash at our place," MacDonald said. "It was such a terrible event, and you just try to do whatever you can to help … I was talking to my wife and we just said, ‘Our place is sitting empty’ and would have been fairly close to where he was getting his rehab."

"It was something that just happened."

In the end, the Straschnitzkis, who live in Airdrie, wound up staying at the hospital but were grateful for the hospitality — especially considering Ryan’s dad, Tom, is a diehard Flyers fan. And the connection wouldn’t end there. The Flyers organization and then-general manager Ron Hextall toured them around, inviting them to watch the Philadelphia prospects during their summer camp.

The Straschnitzkis also were in attendance when the Flames hosted the Flyers last winter at the Saddledome, a 6-5 overtime win for Calgary. MacDonald ensured he met Ryan and his family face-to-face.

"It was crazy — I didn’t know what to think (when MacDonald reached out)," Ryan said. "Unfortunately we didn’t get to meet when we were down (in Philly) but it’s cool having that relationship and that bond. When we were in Philly, we talked quite a bit, but during the season, he’s a little busy.

"We haven’t really kept in touch but I’m sure if he sticks around in Calgary we might get chatting again. He’s just a regular guy but when you see him on the ice, you’re pretty impressed.”

And, vice versa; MacDonald has been following his progress ever since and admires Ryan’s resiliency, athlete-to-athlete.

"You can’t really imagine having to go through something like that," he said. "Not only to himself, but everyone around him. To just see, he is all smiles and has a good attitude. I was shooting texts with his dad a little bit through the season too. They just seem like a great family. It is obviously such a terrible thing but it seems like he’s handling it well … it’s hard to put into words, really.”

And, in one of those only-in-the-hockey-world coincidences, MacDonald has found himself in Calgary — close to the Straschnitzkis.
In Calgary for a training-camp tryout, rugged rearguard Eric Gryba didn't pack all the tools of his other trade.

So when his former — and hopefully future — teammate Milan Lucic pitched the idea of a Friday night feast, Gryba had some shopping to do.

"I brought Looch a bunch of beef from Saskatchewan, and he's having me over," Gryba grinned. "So I went and picked up a sous vide cooker this morning, and I'm going to cook for him and his wife Britt and their kids. It'll be awesome."

It's not often the guest gets free rein of the kitchen.

Then again, it's not often an NHLer has his own cooking show and a list of mouthwatering recipes — OMG Goose Legs, anybody? — on his personal website.

Gryba describes himself humbly as a "wannabe grill-master," but the folks at Wild TV would disagree. Already with a following of foodies on his Instagram account, higher-ups at the network offered the avid hunter and fisherman an opportunity to show off his culinary skills on camera.

The first season of Grilling with Gryba featured everything from venison jerky to breaded walleye to a wild turkey hunt.

"The outdoors and cooking are both passions of mine, and they kind of came together when I was approached to do my own TV show," said Gryba, who hails from Saskatoon and has so far made NHL stops in Ottawa, Edmonton and New Jersey. "It definitely all came naturally for me, and it's something that I can have fun with during the off-season. I finished all my filming now for Season 2 and it will be airing, I think, in late January."

So what's on the menu for the upcoming episodes?

"There's a bear, there's a couple of turkeys, some snow geese and a wild boar," Gryba revealed. "And then there are some other just normal food recipes too, so it's not all wild game. There's a broad spectrum of stuff."

His current focus is finding the recipe for success as one of a dozen PTO invitees at Calgary's camp.

Gryba, a big dude at 6-foot-4 and 225 lb., wasn't in the lineup for either of Monday's split-squad dates against the Vancouver Canucks, the first opportunity for the Flames' hopefuls to offer a taste of what they can provide against a real opponent. (The results? One of each. Johnny Gaudreau, Mark Giordano & Co. were on the wrong end of a 3-2 overtime loss at the Saddledome, while Austin Czarnik tallied twice in a 4-3 victory in Victoria.)

The 31-year-old Gryba likely isn't a candidate for an opening-night gig — so far, he has been grouped with the prospects, projects and long-shots — but Flames general manager Brad Treliving has repeated countless times that he thinks an organization needs to be 10-deep on defence.

Despite being limited to just 10 appearances last winter with the New Jersey Devils, this stay-at-home sort brings plenty of been-there and done-that at the big-league level. Gryba's career stat-sheet shows seven goals, 43 points and 368 penalty minutes in 289 NHL outings.

If he can turn this audition into a two-way contract offer, he could be provide leadership, toughness and home-cooked meals for the Flames' farm-clubbers in Stockton, Calif., while offering a right-handed insurance policy in case of injuries in Cowtown.

"Calgary is obviously a team that is on the up and up. They had such a great season last year, fell a little short in the playoffs, but a team that has a lot of potential," Gryba said. "I'm trying to come in, impress as much as possible, and be a real solid depth guy for them. You don't want to go to teams that are struggling, especially as an older guy. If you're a depth guy, they're just looking to develop their younger guys in those spots. But if a team is winning and they need a guy to fill a spot, well, chances are they are going to fill it with the best guy possible or the most veteran guy possible."

"And to tell you the truth, I'm kind of sick of losing, to put it frankly. I mean, it's been a few years now of being on losing teams, and Calgary is as good a bet to be a winning team as any. They have a great team in the American League, as well, and a great team in the National League. So to me, it seems like a good fit."

"On the ice and in the locker-room, I think I have a lot to contribute."

Like grit.

Like grub.

That could be an appetizing combo.

"My specialty? Oh jeez," Gryba said, repeating the question. "This is going to sound simple, but I'm getting pretty good at steaks. There is an actual art to getting a perfectly cooked steaks. I'm always dabbling. Now I'm into charcoal and using sous vide cookers and smoking ribs and smoking cheese and all different stuff."

"Once I get something (perfected), I never cook that unless I'm having people over. Because I know it's good. I'm always working on something else at home."

Ice chips: The Flames have returned a hat-trick of teenage prospects to their junior clubs. Dmitry Zavgorodni, a 19-year-old left-winger who clanked the post during Monday's victory in Victoria, will rejoin the QMJHL's Rimouski Oceanic. Meanwhile, netminder Dustin Wolf (Everett Silvertips) and centre Milos Roman (Vancouver Giants) will spend this season in the WHL.

Calgary Sun: LOADED: 09.18.2019
Johnny Gaudreau feels at home in Calgary and winning may be the Flames’ best hope of keeping it that way.

By Eric Duhatschek  
Sep 17, 2019

Johnny Gaudreau is exactly halfway through the six-year, $40.5 million contract he signed with the Calgary Flames coming out of the 2016 World Cup of Hockey.

Folks around here remember that time anxiously – how Gaudreau skipped the early part of training camp, as negotiations stalled, but then magically appeared with pen in hand a few days before they started playing for keeps because, as he put it, he didn’t want to miss any time. Gaudreau received what was then the market value for a player of his stature – Sean Monahan got roughly the same dough, as did Nathan MacKinnon, Mark Scheifele and others.

All of those deals are now deemed team-friendly, as the price for young stars skyrocketed. Many of the players that were in Gaudreau’s category three years ago – coming out of their entry-level deals, seeking to hit a financial home run in their second contracts – are missing from training camps and who knows when the impasses may end?

Chances are players such as Gaudreau and MacKinnon, who signed at what now appear to be comparative discounts, are going to swing for the fences when they are next eligible to sign new pacts.

Naturally, in the anxiety filled-world of the hardcore hockey fan, it isn’t too soon to ask the question: Once Gaudreau’s contract expires, what are the odds that he will remain with the Flames?

Or, could an opportunity closer to home be too good for Gaudreau to pass up?

The answer is, of course largely unanswerable at this juncture in the proceedings, because so much can change in three years. Injuries can occur. Roots in a community can deepen. A winning culture can develop.

Gaudreau is indisputably, first and foremost, about family and friends and so the lure of playing for a team closer to home might be attractive.

On the other hand, he seems happy with how his career has flourished in Calgary and may understand that the grass is not always greener in other NHL pastures.

The question – of Gaudreau’s long-term plans – came up during an Athletic live Q&A just before NHL training camps opened, and I promised a reader that if I could get a private moment alone with Gaudreau, I’d ask him that question:

Even as far out as his next contract negotiation may seem, has Gaudreau given any thought to digging in for the long haul; and maybe ending up as a Flame for life?

“That’d be awesome,” Gaudreau answered. “Yeah, hopefully. There’s a good relationship going on between Brad (Treliving, the Flames GM) and my agent (Lewis Gross). I love playing here in Calgary. It’s like a second home to me. I love playing with Gio (Mark) Giordano and Monny (Monahan). If I could keep playing with them for the rest of my career, I would, so … yeah, it’s probably a really good possibility.”

Now, Gaudreau would have been well within his rights to be vaguely noncommittal in his response.

Instead, he sounded pleasantly receptive to the possibility, which has to be good news for any Flames’ fan whose mind is already set on the 2022-23 season. Naturally, others – Gaudreau included – tend to focus more on the present.

Gaudreau’s been in town for a few weeks already – skating informally with his teammates at Winsport Arena and on Thursday, completing medicals along with the rest of the squad. On Friday morning, they took to the ice for the first time and Gaudreau was in his usual spot, patrolling the left wing with Monahan and Elias Lindholm.

Overall, Gaudreau looks and sounds relaxed and is anxious to get going again after a summer away to recharge the batteries. Gaudreau spends his offseasons on the Jersey shore and two years ago, built a summer place that can accommodate everyone in his immediate family.

Architecturally, his home is a thing of beauty. Room for family and friends. A master bedroom for Gaudreau, complete with TV so he can play Fortnite from the comfort of his king-size bed. There is a wine cellar, stocked with high-end Cabs from the Napa Valley, which Gaudreau toured this summer.

Red wine isn’t necessarily Gaudreau’s beverage of choice, but his buddies like it. Mom too. According to Gaudreau, he doesn’t know much about wine – he wasn’t even aware that the builder was putting in a wine cellar – but it’s turned out to be a good thing: A chance to give something back to his mother Jane after all that she had to endure with him and his brother in hockey.

Meanwhile, father Guy is in charge of cooking the strip loins, to keep Gaudreau’s lean frame as strong as possible. His pool deck is replete with Flames’ paraphernalia – Flames’ themed Adirondack chairs; a Flames-themed bean-bag toss. Even his dog Bailey wears a Flames-themed sweater when the temperature drops. If the neighbors are ever peeking, there is no missing his current professional affiliation.

Gaudreau’s summer place is about an hour from his parents’ home, which allowed them to come down on Fridays and leave Mondays on most weeks this summer.

According to Gaudreau, in summers past, when he and his brother were at his parents’ home, his father spent entire weekends at the rink that he manages.

“So, I tried to figure out the best way to keep him away from the rink as much as possible because he can’t get off the ice,” Gaudreau said. “The next best option was the water and the fishing and the house on the bay. He enjoys it. He loves it. It gets him away from the rink. It gets him to relax a little bit and not worry about hockey all the time. And then my mom, my sisters and brothers love it too. It’s great. It’s a good house and everyone enjoys it.

“They get to go fishing, jet skiing – go to the beach, cooking out all the time. I don’t get to see the family much, so I try to make the most of it in the summer.”

The house even has an elevator that is handicapped accessible so his cousin, Michelle, who is confined to a wheelchair, can visit and move around more freely.

“It was important, for when my family came down, to get her to the pool, to get her outside and upstairs to her room,” he said. “I knew that was important to my family – because they come down throughout the summer to spend a week and a half with us. It was great – great to have that in there.”

Since returning to Calgary most of the questions have been about the beard that Gaudreau grew in the offseason. Initially, he insisted that he didn’t know what he was going to do with it next until Sunday, when he trimmed it down to a pencil-thin mustache, very much similar now to the Auston Matthews look. Gaudreau said he first made a pass at growing the beard early this summer, soon after the Flames were eliminated from the playoffs, largely out of laziness. He shaved it off to do a photo shoot for a clothing company, alongside fellow NHLers Morgan Rielly, Mark Scheifele and Phillip Danault. Upon returning to the Jersey shore, Gaudreau let it go the rest of the summer.

And the fact that he’s taking all this relentless teasing from his teammates ever since?

“I don’t mind it,” Gaudreau said. “It’s good to get back to Calgary and see the guys, giving me a hard time.”

As for the facial hair, it didn’t last long. Gaudreau came to the rink on Monday clean-shaven.

Seeing and chatting with Gaudreau a couple of times now since his return, he’s certainly a far cry from the frustrated star fans saw in exit interviews at the end of last season.

Calgary had just completed the second-best regular season in team history – 107 points – and unexpectedly won the Pacific Division. They were then completely outclassed in the opening playoff round by MacKinnon and the Colorado Avalanche. MacKinnon was arguably
first-round Conn Smythe Trophy winner, if such an award existed. By
contrast, the play of Calgary’s superstars didn’t nearly match up.

Gaudreau finished tied with MacKinnon for seventh overall in NHL
regular-season scoring – 99 points in 82 games, including 35 goals – one
point behind Sidney Crosby and one ahead of Steven Stamkos, so
nothing to apologize for there.

The fact that he couldn’t find the back of the net in the playoffs
is concerning to some because a lot of other small, skilled players found
the going tougher in the postseason, where the room to operate that he
needs to perform at the highest level, closed off fast.

‘Obviously, it’s a crappy way to end the season,” Gaudreu said. “You try
to put your individual accomplishments to the side when it comes to
playoffs. You don’t really have time to think about your own season as an
individual. You want to think of it as a team – because it’s a team sport.
As a player, you don’t really have time to look back at your own season
and feel like how you did because you’ve got to get ready for playoffs
and put all that aside – because it doesn’t mean anything once playoffs
start. That’s kind of the mindset I’ve always had.”

All Gaudreau can do is learn from the past; try to duplicate the results in
the regular season; and if the Flames make the playoffs again, he’ll get
another crack at redemption.

He wouldn’t be the first player in NHL history to find his playoff form in
the middle of his NHL career.

The Flames are a difficult team to pigeonhole heading into the 2019-20
season. They have a strong young nucleus, the reigning Norris Trophy
winner in Giordano and a goaltending tandem – David Rittich and Cam
Talbot – that have at different times, flashed brilliance and at other times
been decidedly ordinary. We always like to say this at least once before
the season starts – that’s why they play the games: To discover the
answers to all the burning questions that every team is asking itself
internally at this time of year.

In Calgary, many of the answers will be predicated upon the performance
of Gaudreau and Monahan. As a duo, they have been a relative constant
together, with a revolving cast of right wingers, some of whom had
greater success than others in terms of completing the line’s chemistry.

Back in 2014-15, Jiri Hudler was an excellent fit, producing 31 goals and
76 points and winning the Lady Byng that year for his contributions
running shotgun on Gaudreau’s line. It’s been something of a revolving
door since Hudler was traded to Florida at the 2016 Draft (landing the
Flames a second-round pick they used to select goalie Tyler Parsons).

Last year, there was some hope that James Neal, an expensive free-
agent addition, might be the missing piece of the line’s puzzle. But the
Flames ultimately gave another newcomer, Lindholm, the first crack at
that spot and he never really gave up the spot.

All three members of the line ultimately ended up among the NHL’s top
30 scorers (Gaudreau 99, Monahan 82 and Lindholm 78). Coach Bill
Peters has indicated he will use training camp to tinker with his
combinations because that’s what training camps are for. But outside of a
major injury, it is hard to imagine a scenario that will prevent last year’s
No. 1 unit from returning intact when the season opens Oct. 2 against the
Avalanche in Colorado.

Lindholm, for one, is fully aboard, noting how “easy Johnny is to play with
for sure.”

“He creates a lot of space for other players and also for himself as well.
He can probably drag two or three people towards him and then find
open spaces. It wasn’t too long ago those small players couldn’t be in the
league, so it’s fun to see everybody can make it now – and obviously,
Johnny’s one of the best players in the league and he’s that size as well.
It’s fun to play with him. He’s probably one of the best playmakers I’ve
ever played with.”

In all, Gaudreau has three years to sort out the next step in his
professional life. If the Flames happen to win a championship in that
time, that may greatly influence his desire to stay. That’s something his
first Calgary roommate Joe Colborne ventured in an interview earlier in
the season – that if the Flames win the Stanley Cup in the next three
years, that would certainly tilt the odds of signing Gaudreau to an
extension in their favor.

Organizationally, the Flames also preach family values and try to make
the Gaudreaus feel as comfortable as possible, whenever they come to
town to visit. Ultimately, they hope that Gaudreau eventually decides that

The status quo represents the best of both worlds – spending summers in
the bosom his family and an escape from the everyday hockey life; and
then once the calendar turns to autumn, he can resume his professional
life in Calgary, where the fit seems snug and comfortable at the moment.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Kris Versteeg paused at the question. He surely knew the answer, surely had admitted it to himself. But it’s one thing to think the worst. It’s another to acknowledge it openly.

As he sat behind a desk on a Sportsnet television set in Calgary last fall, flashing that wit, that charm and that famous grin that are so uniquely Versteeg, the realization must have hit him.

This wasn’t a temp gig. This was his career now. Hockey was over.

“Well, uh, it’s hard,” he said, mulling the question for a bit. “Uh, yeah. Yeah, I’d say in November of last year, I thought I was done in hockey, for sure. Not so much because of my ability. It was just that the older you get, the opportunities start to lessen. And your perspective changes.”

It’s true. No NHL team is really looking for an oft-injured then-32-year-old who hadn’t played more than 69 games since the 2015-16 season. Versteeg couldn’t find an NHL home. He felt like he had been playing on one or no legs for years, a shell of his old self. And a miserable, short-lived experiment in the KHL sent him home to Alberta facing the truth no athlete ever wants to face.

It’s over.

Put it this way: When Colts quarterback Andrew Luck shocked the sporting world by retiring in the prime of his career, Versteeg understood. Better than just about anybody.

“I have a lot of empathy for him,” Versteeg said. “From what he said, the thing that came out the most to me is you can rehab, and it’s like you basically just start at ‘go’ again. You’re rehabbing just to play, you’re not rehabbing to get better. Five of the six of my rehabbers were 4-6 months. So you rehab basically for half a year just to feel OK, and then it happens again. And I empathize with what he was going through, and people coming out and going against him is wrong. Obviously, I’m not at the level of Andrew Luck or anything, but I missed a lot of prime years of my career with rehab, and it is a mental grind, and it can put you in a pretty dark place.”

Versteeg found refuge — and a second career — as a broadcaster, joining Sportsnet’s Calgary Flames coverage as a panelist for pregame, postgame and intermissions. He saw so many of his contemporaries doing it — Adam Burish and Brian Campbell on Blackhawks broadcasts, Colby Armstrong on Sportsnet, Patrick Sharp on NBC Sports, Ryan Whitney on the Spittin’ Chiclets podcast — and figured he could do it, too.

For some athletes in the twilight of their careers, TV can be a lifeline, a way to stay tangentially connected to the game that’s defined their entire lives. For Versteeg, it was different. He liked it. And he was good at it.

In a hockey media world that’s all clichés and Xs and Os, Versteeg brought a little bit of the NBA-style of analysis, the kind he’s always enjoyed watching. He’s no Charles Barkley, but compared with much of the hockey world, he might as well be. He didn’t just break down a goal, he told a funny story about the player who scored it. He didn’t just point the hockey world, he might as well enjoy watching. He’s no Charles Barkley, but compared with much of the sporting world by retiring in the prime of his career, Versteeg understood. It’s over.

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Kris Versteeg put his burgeoning TV career on hold to give hockey one last go

By Mark Lazerus

Sep 17, 2019

“Plain and simple, I think he’s a star,” Leslie said. “If you look at anybody in the game today, I don’t think anybody has a player résumé quite like his. He’s played everywhere — Canadian markets, quiet markets, struggling markets, hockey-mad markets. And he’s pretty much done it all and played with just about anybody and everybody who’s relevant in the game. I think he’s a star waiting for that opportunity in TV. He’ll take it as far as he wants to go. And once the hockey bug is finally behind him, he’s got a spot waiting for him wherever he wants. He’s self-deprecating, he’s hard-working, and he’s got that twinkle in his eye. I know you know it — that little smile, that grin he gets. I was thinking about this earlier today. What do we love about hockey? It doesn’t matter if it’s you, me or a player, we love good stories, and we love making fun of one another. And he can do it. And he’s relatable. He’s a hard-working little guy from Southern Alberta who had some great skill and some good grit and some great stories. He knows how to walk that line — he’s not selling out his brethren, he’s telling us stories. We’re in his kitchen having a beer and you just feel like you finally found that one analyst who can tell you something and make you feel like, ‘Man, I just heard something great today.’”

Another analyst who worked with Versteeg, former NHL goalie Kelly Hrudey, added, “He’s fantastic. A natural. And I don’t say that often.”

By the time he was making such a great first impression in November, Versteeg hadn’t played in the NHL in nearly a year. The only time he was wearing skates was to coach some 15- and 16-year-olds in Ontario. So yeah, Versteeg probably would have been content to make a second career of broadcasting.

Well, mostly content.

“I like doing TV,” he said. “I don’t like it as much as hockey.”

And Leslie could see that. Even as he saw a rising star in his business, he saw a guy who wasn’t quite ready to retire at age 32.

“He wasn’t going to go out like that,” Leslie said.

Versteeg went back to rehabbing his surgically repaired hip. After a stem-cell treatment, he told Leslie that he hadn’t felt this good since 2014, shortly before he won a second Stanley Cup with the Blackhawks (in his second stint with the team). He took a flyer on joining Vaxjo HC of the Swedish Elite League in February.

And then something remarkable happened. He felt like a hockey player again. Like a good hockey player. Like the one who had been a four-time 20-goal scorer and two-time Stanley Cup champion. Like a guy who had some life left in those legs, after all. He had four goals and seven assists in 12 games for Vaxjo HC then posted four goals and two assists in seven playoff games. He felt fast again. Explosive. Ready to give this thing another try.

He had been in touch with the Blackhawks’ Mark Bernard, who oversees the team’s minor-league affiliates, throughout the past year. And when Bernard offered him an AHL contract to rekindle his career where it really began, in Rockford, Versteeg jumped at the chance.

If not for the stint in Sweden, he wouldn’t be wearing a Blackhawks sweater in preseason games this week.

“Probably not, to be honest,” he said. “I’d probably be doing TV or something, and hanging with my kids. I knew I wanted one last opportunity in the back of my mind. And I don’t know if I missed the rest of last year, if I would have been willing to do it. But I think going to Sweden and feeling healthy and having two good hips … gave me a little bit of hope.”

Versteeg knows the deal. He’s on an AHL contract, not a two-way deal. He’s here to play the game he loves and be a mentor to the young prospects in the organization — all of whom are higher priorities to Jeremy Colliton and Stan Bowman than he is. Even if he tears it up in Rockford, younger players are likely to get call-ups ahead of him. That’s the reality of being a 33-year-old minor leaguer.

“I’d be lying to you if I didn’t say it’d be nice to play in the NHL again,” he said. “But I know what I signed up for, a third-year contract. That’s pretty good. I don’t think I’m going to go out there and have a pretty good season. And whatever happens from there, happens from there.”

And yet, to see him flying around the rink in the opening days of training camp, it’s not too much of a stretch to imagine him donning a Blackhawks jersey at some point for the third time in his career.
“You can see he still has some game left,” Colliton said. “You reserve judgment, but he’s got that personality. There’s personality in his game, as well. He makes a lot of plays and gets his nose dirty. Could be an ingredient that’s nice for us.”

If not, so be it. He’ll still be the same affable Versteeg, sure to be giving the kids in Rockford a hard time on a daily basis, sure to be playing deejay in the locker room, sure to have that big grin on his face. And once that’s done, well, there’s a chair waiting for him in just about any TV studio in the hockey world.

“His career as a player really is what he could be as a television personality,” Leslie said. “He could have that variety. What Kris Versteeg is most proud of is that he’s got some hardware under his belt. He’s won the biggest thing you can win in the game. If he wanted to be the equivalent of that in our industry, I think he will be. People are drawn to him. If he wants to be an insider, an analyst, something with schtick — he’ll be it. Whatever he wants to do, he’ll do it.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Want to watch the Canes' preseason games? Here's how

BY CHIP ALEXANDER
SEPTEMBER 17, 2019 04:08 PM

Carolina Hurricanes fans will be able to watch five of the Canes' six preseason exhibition games.

Four of the broadcasts will be video streamed on the Hurricanes web site (CarolinaHurricanes.com) and the Fox Sports GO app. The fifth will be the Sept. 25 game at Nashville, which will be shown by Fox Sports Carolinas.

The games that will be streamed are: the Tuesday, Sept 17 game at Tampa Bay (7 pm); the Wednesday, Sept. 18 game against Tampa Bay at PNC Arena (7 pm); the Sept. 27 game against Nashville at PNC Arena (7:30 pm), and the Sept. 29 game against Washington at PNC Arena (1:30 pm).

Coverage of the Canes-Caps game on Saturday in Washington (7 pm) will be an audio feed on WRALSportsFan.com, which will have the audio feeds from all six games.

John Forslund will handle the play-by-play and Tripp Tracy the analysis for the video streaming and audio feeds. Mike Maniscalco will join Forslund and Tracy as the rinkside reporter for the Sept. 25 game on Fox Sports Carolinas.

News Observer LOADED: 09.18.2019
Canes sign defenseman Fredrik Claesson to one-year contract

BY CHIP ALEXANDER
SEPTEMBER 17, 2019 11:59 AM

RALEIGH

The Carolina Hurricanes added to their defensive depth Tuesday, signing defenseman Fredrik Claesson to a one-year, two-way contract for the 2019-20 season.

Claesson, 26, will be paid $700,000 at the NHL level and $100,000 at the AHL level. He received a $200,000 guarantee.

"It took a long time into the summer and couple days into training camp, but now that I get to be here for this year feels really good," Claesson said Tuesday. "It's really good competition, too, so it will be fun."

Claesson, a native of Stockholm, Sweden, played 37 games with the New York Rangers last season, finishing with two goals and four assists. Listed at 6-1 and 196 pounds, he has 150 games of NHL experience with the Rangers and Ottawa Senators.

"You can't have enough good defenders," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Tuesday when asked about the signing. "Good experience there. Hard worker. I like what he brings in that department. And he's tough to play against. He's that kind of player."

Claesson came to Canes camp on a professional tryout contract (PTO). With defenseman Trevor van Riemsdyk still recovering from shoulder surgery, the Canes looked to add to their depth and give coach Rod Brind'Amour another option on the blue line.

"You're talking to your agent the whole summer and he's telling you to be patient but then you just want something to be done," Claesson said. "It's tough. Family friends and members are asking, too, 'Where you going next year?' and you keep telling them the same thing, that you don't know. But I'm really happy to be here."

Claesson also has played 285 career AHL games. Before coming to North America, he played in the Swedish Hockey League games with Djurgardens IF.

Claesson won a gold medal with Sweden in the 2012 IIHF World Junior Championship. He was a fifth-round draft pick by Ottawa in 2011.
James Reimer and Anton Forsberg combined for a shutout as the Carolina Hurricanes beat the Tampa Bay Lightning 3-0 in an NHL preseason game in Tampa, Florida, on Tuesday night.

Reimer and Forsberg each played half the game for the Hurricanes, who reached the Eastern Conference final last spring after missing the playoffs for nine straight years. Reimer started and made eight saves before being replaced by Forsberg, who had seven saves.

Max McCormick, Lucas Wallmark and Colin Markison scored for Carolina.

Scott Wedgewood played the entire game in goal for the Lightning and had 34 saves.

In Columbus, Ohio, Emil Bemstrom had a goal and an assist to lift the Blue Jackets to a 4-1 win over the Buffalo Sabres.

Kole Sherwood, Sonny Milano and Zac Dalpe also scored for the Blue Jackets. Sherwood’s goal, with 4:12 left in the second was the game-winner.

Joonas Korpisalo started in goal for Columbus, and stopped all 12 shots he faced before being replaced by Mattias Kivlenieks, who made 16 saves and was credited with the win.

Jake McCabe scored Buffalo’s lone goal. Sabres starter Linus Korpisalo made 18 saves in his half of the game, while Andrew Hammond took the loss after allowing two goals on 13 shots.

In Uniondale, New York, Mason Jobst scored with 53 seconds left in overtime to help the Islanders rally for a 3-2 victory over the Philadelphia Flyers.

Derick Brassard and Jordan Eberle also scored for the Islanders. Eberle’s goal with 1:34 left in regulation tied the score 2-2.

Jared Coreau made 10 saves in the second, third and overtime periods to get the win. Coreau replaced starter Thomas Greiss, who started the game and made 14 saves.

Michael Raffl and Chris Bigras scored for Philadelphia.

Carter Hart started the game for the Flyers, and made 14 saves before giving way to J.F. Berube midway through the game. Berube allowed three goals on 23 shots against his former team.

In St. John’s, Newfoundland, Tristan Scherwey had a goal and an assist to help the Ottawa Senators beat the Toronto Maple Leafs 3-1.

Scherwey, a training-camp invitee who has spent the last 10 seasons playing for SC Bern in Switzerland, jumped on a loose puck on a Toronto power play and fired it past Kasimir Kaskisuo to give Ottawa a 2-1 lead at 9:45 of the third period.

Max Lajoie and Anthony Duclair also scored for the Senators. Anders Nilsson stopped all 13 shots he faced through the first two periods for Ottawa. Marcus Hogburg had 11 saves in the third.

Kasper Kapanen scored the lone goal for the Maple Leafs to tie the game early in the third. Mitch Marner, who had missed the opening of training camp before signing a six-year, $65.358 million deal last Friday, had an assist on the play.

Frederik Andersen started in goal for Toronto and stopped 12 shots through the first 40 minutes, before Kaskisuo allowed two goals on five shots in the third.

In Detroit, Michael Rasmussen’s tiebreaking goal with 4:37 left pushed the Red Wings to a 5-3 win over the Chicago Blackhawks.


Jimmy Howard and Calvin Pickard each played half the game in goal for the Red Wings. Howard started and stopped seven of eight shots, while Pickard made 15 saves.

Dominik Kubalik scored twice, and Philip Holm added a goal for the Blackhawks.

Robin Lehner and Kevin Lankinen each played half the game in goal for Chicago. Lehner started and allowed two goals on 17 shots before being replaced by Lankinen, who stopped 19 of 21 shots.

In St. Paul, Minnesota, Justin Dowling’s goal with 1:25 left in overtime lifted the Dallas Stars to a 2-1 win over the Wild.

Roope Hintz also scored for Dallas, which had Landon Bow and Colton Point split time in goal. Bow started and stopped 18 of 19 shots in the first two periods, while Point turned away all 13 shots he faced in the third period and overtime.

Ryan Hartman scored for the Wild, while Alex Stalock made 19 saves.

In Denver, Brandon Pirri scored twice and added an assist as the Vegas Golden Knights beat the Colorado Avalanche 5-0.

Valentin Zykov, Nicolas Hague and Nicolas Roy also scored for Vegas, which had nine players record at least one point. Pirri led the way, followed by Zykov (goal and an assist) and Tomas Nosek, who had two points each.

Garret Sparks stopped 23 shots for the Golden Knights.

Adam Werner and Hunter Miska split time in goal for the Avalanche. Werner started and made 11 saves on 13 shots before giving way to Miska, who stopped 13 of 16 shots he faced.

In San Jose, California, Max Jones’ tiebreaking goal 6:43 into the third period lifted the Anaheim Ducks to a 4-3 win over the Sharks.

Devin Shore, Nicolas Deslauriers and Adam Henrique also scored for the Ducks.

Ryan Miller and Anthony Stolarz split time in goal for Anaheim. Miller started and allowed two goals on 13 shots in the opening half of the game. Stolarz was credited with the win after making 14 saves on 15 shots.

Timo Meier, Jonny Brodzinski and Joachim Blichfeld scored for the Sharks. Aaron Dell started in goal for San Jose and made 11 saves on 12 shots in the first half of the game. Dell was replaced by Josef Korenar, who was charged with the loss after allowing three goals on 13 shots.

In Vancouver, British Columbia, Brandon Sutter scored twice to help the Canucks beat the Edmonton Oilers 4-2.

Tanner Pearson and Elias Pettersson also scored for the Canucks. Thatcher Demko finished with 34 saves.

Patrick Russell and Tomas Jurco scored for Edmonton, and Cooper Marody had two assists. Shane Starrett had 21 saves for the Oilers, who played without stars Connor McDavid, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Leon Draisaitl.

In Los Angeles, Connor Garland had two goals and an assist to help the Arizona Coyotes beat the Los Angeles Kings 5-0 in one of two matchups between the teams’ split squads.

Clayton Keller, Christian Dvorak and Jordan Gross scored for the Coyotes, which had seven players record a point. Garland and Dvorak finished with three points each, and Keller and Gross recorded two points apiece.

Arizona had Darcy Kuemper and Adin Hill split time in goal. Kuemper started and made 16 saves in the first two periods, and Hill stopped 10 in the third.

Jonathan Quick allowed three goals on 10 shots in the opening half of the game for Los Angeles, while Calvin Petersen gave up two goals on 15 shots.

In Glendale, Arizona, Akil Thomas had a goal and an assist to lift the Kings a 4-1 win.
Michael Anderson, Michael Amadio and Samuel Fagemo also scored for the Kings. Thomas, Amadio and Fagemo scored in an eight-minute span of the second period to turn a 1-1 game into a 4-1 lead.

Derek Stepan scored Arizona's lone goal.
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Rookie Dominik Kubalik scores twice in the Blackhawks’ 5-3 preseason loss to the Red Wings

By JIMMY GREENFIELD
CHICAGO TRIBUNE
SEP 17, 2019 | 9:16 PM

Rookie Dominik Kubalik scored twice, but the Blackhawks knocked in a pair of goals off their own defensemen, including the go-ahead tally late in the third period, to give the Red Wings a 5-3 preseason victory Tuesday night at Little Caesars Arena in Detroit.

Robin Lehner made his Hawks debut and stopped 15 of 17 shots while splitting the game in net with Kevin Lankinen, who allowed two goals and had 19 saves. The Red Wings added an empty-netter in the final minute.

Michael Rasmussen was given credit for the winning goal, which bounced off Carl Dahlstrom and barely grazed Lankinen’s skate before going into the net. The Red Wings’ second goal caromed off Chad Krys’ upper body and past Lehner.

Philip Holm added a goal and an assist for the Hawks, who dropped to 0-1-1 with their second loss in as many nights.

The Hawks host the Red Wings on Wednesday in their preseason home opener.

Chicago Tribune LOADED: 09.18.2019
Defender Calvin de Haan returns to practice, but his Blackhawks debut is still uncertain: 'I really want to play that first game'

By JIMMY GREENFIELD

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

SEP 17, 2019 | 2:17 PM

Without fanfare or a white practice jersey indicating he was off-limits to contact, defenseman Calvin de Haan on Tuesday participated in his first full Blackhawks practice of training camp.

It was an indication de Haan could be ready for the Oct. 4 season opener. It was not an indication he's ready to take a big hit on his surgically repaired right shoulder.

"Everyone knows not to run me through the boards or anything," de Haan said after practice.

The same can't be said for the Red Wings — the Hawks' preseason opponent Tuesday and Wednesday nights — so de Haan isn't quite ready to make his debut. But he isn't far off.

"I'm going to make it a tough decision on the staff and the doctors to keep me out of the lineup," de Haan, 28, said. "But at the end of the day it's their decision. I feel good. I'm just going to keep working and do as I'm told. I really want to play that first game, but so be it if (I miss it). There's another 81 after that so there's not really a big rush."

Interesting development: Calvin de Haan is practicing in the Hawks' regular practice session today.

De Haan underwent shoulder surgery in late May, shortly after the Hurricanes' season ended with a loss in the Eastern Conference finals and about a month before the Hawks acquired him and Aleksi Saarela for Gustav Forsling and Anton Forsberg.

In addition to his shoulder, de Haan is dealing with a groin injury he attributed to trying to do too much too fast after not skating much over the summer.

Getting de Haan healthy is important — the Hawks have lacked a defensive-minded, shot-blocking defenseman since trading Niklas Hjalmarsson to the Coyotes two years ago. De Haan doesn't think he'll have a problem adapting to the team's man-to-man style, which he said was similar to what the Islanders used when he played for them for six seasons.

"I've been doing the video meetings and watching a little bit of practice," de Haan said. "That's pretty much it. Learning our new system. I feel like you've just got to talk a little bit more … but it should be a pretty simple system to play."

If de Haan isn't ready for the opener, the Hawks will have to decide if top prospect Adam Boqvist should get his roster spot, if even for a brief time.

Boqvist, 19, had a gorgeous goal Monday against the Capitals in the preseason opener but made some mistakes typical of a young player learning how to manage the defensive zone.

"He made some plays and he had some moments where I thought he defended really well," coach Jeremy Colliton said of Boqvist after Monday's game. "And that's going to be the thing for him — learning how to be a pro — and he definitely showed tonight he can do it.

"We want him to be a top player in the league. We know he's dynamic offensively. If we can convince him the defensive side of the puck is really important and not only is it good for the team but he's going to get more offensive out of it. That's the plan. (Monday) was a good step for him."

And Tuesday was a good step for de Haan, whom Colliton said will travel with the team to Europe when it leaves on Sept. 26 — even if he's not ready to play in games.

"He's ready when he's ready," Colliton said. "… We've tried to include him as much as we can with the teaching and video and things. Even just
Alex Nylander had a big night — and Adam Boqvist had a highlight-reel goal: 3 takeaways from the Blackhawks’ 4-3 preseason loss

By JIMMY GREENFIELD

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

SEP 17, 2019 | 7:39 AM

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.

The Hawks left most of their regulars back in Chicago and the Capitals only used a few of theirs, so take this game with a grain of salt. But there were plenty of positives that gave the Hawks something to consider as they try to figure out their opening-night roster.

“It does start the process as far as guys separate themselves based on how they perform,” Hawks coach Jeremy Colliton told reporters after the game. “We got two more games so I think we’ll have a pretty clear picture of — not maybe the team — but how we can get down to some lower numbers. So it’s good.”

Here are three takeaways from Monday’s 4-3 loss:

1. Alex Nylander did nothing but help himself.

The Hawks have around nine forwards competing for one or two spots. If Alex Nylander doesn’t make the team out of camp, it won’t necessarily be because he didn’t play well, and it won’t necessarily be a black eye for the Hawks.

There will be time for Nylander to prepare himself in Rockford if that’s what it comes down to. But it will also be a huge relief to the Hawks if Nylander shows he’s ready to make his mark in the NHL.

On Monday, he looked as comfortable as any player on the ice. The Hawks went up 1-0 when Nylander dug out the puck along the boards and fed a pass to Erik Gustafsson, whose slap shot was tipped in by Aleksi Saarela.

In the second period, Nylander kept skating without the puck and was alone in front of the Capitals net to take Adam Boqvist’s shot — or was it a pass? — from the point and make a quick move to the far side of the net and lift a backhander past goalie Pheonix Copley.

“He made some plays,” Jeremy Colliton said. “He showed some flashes where he was working away from the puck. He got above it a few times and caused turnovers a few times and then when he does that he creates opportunities for himself in transition.”

Nylander seems to understand how important these preseason games are going to be for him.

“It’s huge,” Nylander told reporters after the game. “This is a very important training camp for me. Every game there’s always a close eye on me so I got to perform and work hard because I obviously want a spot on this team.”

2. Adam Boqvist had a strong game, but still looks ticketed for Rockford.

It’s time to get used to the fact that Adam Boqvist is going to make enough highlight-reel plays to have his own reel.

His goal against the Capitals on Monday was a thing of beauty. He settled the puck down behind the Capitals’ net and swung around to the far side slot before getting off a shot at an odd angle that somehow found its way in.

“He’s got great instincts,” Jeremy Colliton said. “He knows when he can jump in and create for himself. He zings it in there and goaltenders are not ready for it so he can score from everywhere it seems like.”

Boqvist is ready offensively, there’s little question about that. What’s holding him back now is his defensive awareness and the not so small fact that the Hawks have six veteran defensemen slotted ahead of him.

Even with Calvin de Haan possibly missing the start to the season while he recovers from shoulder surgery, the Hawks may not want Boqvist to come to the NHL and struggle — even for a brief period.

“He made some plays and I thought he had some moments where I thought he defended really well,” Colliton said. “And that’s going to be the thing for him learning how to be a pro and he definitely showed tonight he can do it.

“For him, we want him to be a top player in the league. We know he’s dynamic offensively. If we can convince him the defensive side of the puck is really important and not only is it good for the team but he’s going to get more offensive out of it. That’s sort of the plan. Tonight was a good step for him.”

3. It was a good night for Brendan Perlini.

Brendan Perlini didn’t get his name on the scoresheet but was active throughout the game.

Aside from one terrible turnover in his own end that turned into a dangerous scoring chance, he helped himself keep the roster spot he held last year after a trade from the Coyotes.

“I liked his skating tonight,” Colliton said. “I thought he was getting in on the forecheck and creating some havoc. He won some races and was flying through the neutral zone without the puck which I think is really important for his game.

“I really liked that he was active away from the puck tonight. That’s what we need to see more of.”
Blackhawks may have found new top-six winger in Dominik Kubalik

By Ben Pope@BenPopeCST
Sep 17, 2019, 9:26pm CST

DETROIT — NHL rinks are, officially, 85 feet wide.
But Dominik Kubalik plays like they’re about 50.
The highly anticipated European import demonstrated in his Hawks preseason debut Tuesday a magnetic attraction to the center of the ice — and a dynamic offensive skill set to complement that.
Kubalik scored twice to singlehandedly bring the Blackhawks back from a two-goal deficit, though they ultimately still fell to the Red Wings 5-3.

"It’s my first game, so obviously I want to show off a little bit that I can shoot, I can do some stuff, so those were my first thoughts," he said. "I felt pretty good today."

His natural tendency to migrate towards the slot — and there’s no better place to go than that — translated into a goal late in the second period when a Carl Dahlstrom point shot rebounded off right to him. He buried it easily on the backhand.

It was a fairly easy goal, but it only happened because Kubalik was where he needed to be. Kubalik’s second tally, however, was by no means easy.
Slotted onto the top power play unit alongside Alex DeBrincat, Dylan Strome and Andrew Shaw — as good an indication as any of coach Jeremy Colliton’s immediate faith in the 24-year-old winger — Kubalik took a pass from Philip Holm and one-timed the puck into top netting 10 times faster than it takes to say, ”You’re on the team.”

"I don’t hold the puck a lot," Kubalik said. "I’m just trying to put it on net whenever I can, and try to be around the net — there’s always rebounds and stuff like that."

A popular dark-horse pick before the preseason started to earn one of the Hawks’ open top-six winger spots, Kubalik is no longer a dark horse. He’s a leading candidate.
In his own Hawks debut, goaltender Robin Lehner made 15 saves on 17 shots over about 29 minutes of action.
The defending Vezina Trophy finalist looked fantastic early, including miraculously deflecting a breakaway attempt over the crossbar with a cobra-speed glove reaction.
His strong first impression took a hit later, as he gave up an unscreened short-side goal in the first period and then a strange second tally. Still, there’s nothing to fret about: the Lehner vs. Corey Crawford battle for the No. 1 goalie role won’t be decided in a day.

"The first goal, obviously I’ve got to have that, but I thought I made some good saves, felt pretty good," he said. "Just going to get better and better — the puck slows down, you see the puck better, every practice now."

Adam Boqvist looked like, well, quintessential Adam Boqvist in the first preseason game Monday in Washington: Dangerous (to the other team) in the offensive zone, and dangerous (to the Hawks) in the defensive zone.
He scored a beautiful, highlight-reel goal in the second period after juggling the puck in midair around the back of the goal, then sniping it far corner from a tough angle. He also lost his man on the penalty kill, leading to a Capitals goal.
And that’s nothing new for the aggressive 19-year-old defenseman, as high as his ceiling is.

"Even though he’s dynamic offensively, if we can convince him that the defensive side of the puck is really important, not only is it good for the team, but he’s [also] going to get more offense out of it,” Colliton said.
"That’s sort of the plan.”
Undistracted by contract drama, Blackhawks forward Brendan Perlini spent his summer exploring America

By Ben Pope@BenPopeCST
Sep 17, 2019, 12:35pm CDT

DETROIT — The routine becomes monotonous. Arrive at an airport that looks like all the others. Stay in a hotel that looks like all the others. Play in an arena that looks like all the others. Return to Chicago.

So when the season ends, and Brendan Perlini finally has the time to see what makes every city unique — what else exists in North America other than O'Hare and some Marriotts — he takes it.

Contract uncertainty? That’s a future problem.

“We travel all year long, but we don’t really get to see too much when we come into these places, so why not in the summertime?” Perlini said. “If you can work it in where you can train with this specific [person] out in Arizona or Utah or wherever, then yeah, let’s go do it. Let’s go see the city and get new experiences. That’s part of life.”

The 23-year-old winger’s willingness to break outside the typical NHL player mold is nothing new, but the fact he found this motivation while his hockey career faced a critical moment — albeit one he had little personal control over — might be the most Perlini thing yet.

His contract expired July 1st. Although he was issued a qualifying offer, keeping him a restricted free agent, he didn’t sign until Sept. 6, one week before training camp, for the same salary as his QO. Agent Darren Ferris was negotiating all the while with Hawks general manager Stan Bowman, yet Perlini essentially told Ferris to just do his thing.

“I’d get the odd update from him, but . . . it’s really the same stuff every day,” Perlini said, chuckling. “Regardless of whether you sign the first day after the season or the first day of training camp, a contract’s a contract.”

In the meantime, Perlini — naturally global, as a dual English and Canadian citizen playing in the U.S. — traveled.

A lot.

A 10-day golf trip with his dad in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. A week in Toronto, working with a movement specialist. Three days at Niagara Falls.

Two weeks in Arizona, his old home base, mixing together on-ice training sessions, tennis games and hiking excursions. Two more weeks in Detroit. A visit to Chicago for the Blackhawks Convention, even while technically unemployed.

And finally, a stay at “home” in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, a small town that Perlini loves to joke about.

“I’ve been off social media a lot — well, partly because our connection up there in ‘the Soo’ sucks,” he chaffed at the convention.

“If you didn’t go back for 20 years,” he said Monday, “it’d be all the same people doing the same stuff.”

So Perlini certainly enters training camp refreshed. He has needed it, as the Hawks brought in a number of new forward depth competitors while he was in limbo.

He generated some promising-looking opportunities in the preseason opener Monday but failed to convert, and Jeremy Colliton later downplayed them as mere “mini-chances.” Still, the coach seemed pleased with Perlini’s skating, long a strong suit.

“He was getting in on the forecheck and creating some havoc, he won some races, [and] he was flying through the neutral zone without the puck,” Colliton said.

Undeniably, Perlini wants to make this team, wants to earn the biggest role he can. He’s quick to clarify, when detailing his vacations, that they were all planned around his training schedule.

But it probably doesn’t come as a surprise that he’s not exactly stressing about his fate.

“As long as you give it your best shot and play, that’s all that matters,” he said. “I’m not going to sit and worry about it and bite my nails over it.”
So far, Alex Nylander looks like the top prospect Blackhawks gambled on

By Ben Pope@BenPopeCST
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

By Ben Pope@BenPopeCST
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.”
Blackhawks’ signings of Dominik Kubalik, Anton Wedin and Philip Holm are a result of a strong European pipeline

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

Dominik Kubalik is one of three new Blackhawks this season brought over from European professional leagues. Victor Hilitski/For the Sun-Times

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.
Get a first look at the United Center's new giant scoreboard

By Ben Pope @BenPopeCST

Sep 15, 2019, 10:26am CDT

Fans attending Blackhawks and Bulls games this season at the United Center will be able to follow the action on a much bigger scoreboard.

Much, much bigger.

The new jumbotron, with 8,600 square feet of displays, debuted Sunday at the Blackhawks' training camp festival scrimmage, captivating the general admission crowd. Stretching beyond the two blue lines, it's four times larger than the outdated scoreboard that it replaced.

Although its much-advertised drop-down technology was not used in the scrimmage — the scoreboard panels will supposedly lower when the Hawks score, once that feature is up and running — the rest was fully functional.

The main screens showing the live camera feed and replays during stoppages are significantly larger and higher-quality than before, and the actual scoreboard portion no longer looks straight out of a 1970s suburban rink.

Still, many fans on social media mocked the undeniably plentiful percentage of the display used for advertisements.

During the pregame introduction, the wraparound panels above and below the main screen were integrated into the video presentation, but during play, they merely displayed sponsors' logos. The white background behind those ads was so bright and similarly shaded to the white ice on the live camera feed that it did prove aesthetically frustrating at times.

The vivid brightness didn’t distract Hawks coach Jeremy Colliton, though, who afterwards said he was impressed by the new mammoth that’ll hang above him.

“No distraction, it’s good for everybody,” he said. “It’s nice to see what’s going on, [especially if] it’s on replay obviously, if you’re a fan. I can’t see a downside to it and obviously, again, they do things the highest end they can.”

The rest of Sunday’s game presentation — from the jersey-stitching pregame intro video to REO Speedwagon’s “Ridin’ the Storm Out” before the third period — was the same as in 2018-19 regular-season contests. Changes in those categories will likely debut at the Oct. 10 true season opener.
Calvin de Haan wants nothing more than to be able to play in the Blackhawks' season opener Oct. 4 in Prague.

Tuesday was a good first step in helping that become a reality.

De Haan, acquired in June from Carolina, took part Tuesday in his first training camp practice at Fifth Third Arena. He's been rehabbing from shoulder surgery and nursing a groin injury he suffered while training.

"Just feels nice to get back out there after a long summer of not really skating that much," de Haan said. "It's nice to get to know your teammates out on the ice as well."

De Haan isn't going to provide much offense, but he figures to help fix the Hawks' league-worst penalty kill by blocking plenty of shots.

His veteran presence will also be a welcome addition at even strength. Too often the past couple of years, the Hawks have been gashed in the defensive zone when playing inexperienced lineups.

De Haan, who had 1 goal and 13 assists in 74 games last season, said he feels good and wants to make it difficult for coach Jeremy Colliton to keep him out of the lineup.

"I'm just going to keep working and do as I'm told," de Haan said. "I really want to play that first game. But … there's another 81 after that so there's not really a big rush."

Dach still out

The Hawks have completed five days of training camp, and Kirby Dach has still not been able to participate on the ice. The No. 3 overall pick of June's draft remains in the concussion protocol. He was run into the boards during the Traverse City prospects tournament last Tuesday.

The question is, how much is this hurting his chances?

"If he comes back and is great, then it won't hurt him. We'll see," coach Jeremy Colliton said. "I would love to see him. I would love him to be able to go through this stretch of camp with the team, getting him used to being around NHL players and how we want to play.

"The most important thing is his health. We've got to make sure he's 100 percent; no question marks when he comes back and then we'll play the cards from there."

What a shot

Adam Boqvist showed off his offensive prowess -- and juggling skills -- during the Hawks' 4-3 overtime loss Monday in Washington. Seconds before he rifled a shot past Capitals goaltender Pheonix Copley, the young D-man settled a puck down behind the net by bouncing it on his stick three times.

Boqvist also earned an assist when he alertly zipped a pass to Alex Nylander as Nylander was going to the net in the second period.

"He's a special player," coach Jeremy Colliton said. "He does some things that not everyone can do. … He's a threat it seems from anywhere. He's got such a quick release and just zings it in."

Extra, extra

Jeremy Colliton said the Hawks will bring a couple of extra players overseas when the team leaves for Europe Sept. 26. "We do have that exhibition game in Berlin (Sept. 29) and there's always a chance of injuries. I don't think we need to name our roster until October, so we'll probably use the whole time."

He said it
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.
All young, promising hockey players know there's only so much time to prove themselves.

Waste too many chances and your career will end in a hurry.

That said, Chicago Blackhawks coach Jeremy Colliton had to like what he saw out of Alex Nylander during the team's intrasquad scrimmage Sunday at the United Center.

Paired with Jonathan Toews and Anton Wedin, the 21-year-old Nylander scored on a penalty shot during his team's 3-1 victory and helped his line control play much of the afternoon.

"He's got a great shot, great release and I thought that line was really good," Colliton said.

The Hawks took a big chance in acquiring Nylander from Buffalo this past off-season for defenseman Henri Jokiharju, so they figure to give the 6-foot-1, 192-pound forward every chance to make the team.

Colliton wants to see the obvious stuff -- such as a willingness to compete for pucks and the ability to play up and down the lineup -- but he also wants Nylander to understand what it takes to play without the puck as well.

"He can fly," Colliton said. "You can see when he's hunting … he can really skate. We're going to want him to show us that persistence away from the puck to try and get it back."

Nylander was the eighth overall pick of the Sabres in 2016, but he has played in only 19 NHL games.

"I've had a great summer training," he said. "(I) had a little bit of injuries last year, but all that's really good now and I feel really good on the ice."

Some other observations from Sunday's scrimmage:

Offensive Olli: Olli Maatta has always been known as a stay-at-home defenseman, but he showed off his passing skills late in the first period by finding a wide-open Brandon Saad in front of the net.

Saad had an easy tap-in to give Team Red a 1-0 lead.

Afterward, Colliton raved about Maatta, whom the Hawks acquired in exchange for Dominik Kubalik and a fifth-round pick in June.

"Of course everyone likes to chip in, but I think he really influences play positively with the puck," Colliton said. "He does a lot of good things, whether it's on retrievals or just being clean with it."

"He defended well tonight, too. Moved well, closed on guys, was able to transition us from defending to going the other way. It was good to see."

Stunning scoreboard: The first thing most fans must have noticed upon entering the United Center was the size of the new scoreboard. It has 8,600 square feet of 4 mm pixel pitch display and has nearly four times more LED screen display than the old scoreboard.

"I don't think there was anything wrong with the scoreboard before compared to some rinks," forward Dylan Strome said. "Now it's just huge. … I'm sure the fans like it."

Players figure to as well. They will be able to watch replays and check out their stats on the bottom when it is activated for the first preseason game against Detroit on Wednesday.

Tap-ins: Duncan Keith and Andrew Shaw were definitely playing like this was more than a scrimmage. Keith was battling hard in corners, while Shaw decked Anton Wedin just after Wedin fired a first-period shot that found its way past goalie Robin Lehner.
Four takeaways: Blackhawks fall to Red Wings, but there were plenty of positives

By Charlie Roumeliotis

September 17, 2019 9:15 PM

Here are four takeaways from the Blackhawks' 5-3 preseason loss to the Detroit Red Wings at Little Caesars Arena on Tuesday:

1. Dominik Kubalik's big night

The Blackhawks acquired Kubalik's rights from the Los Angeles Kings in January for a fifth-round pick. And this could end up looking like a steal when it's all said and done.

GM Stan Bowman said in April that he expects Kubalik to be a solid offensive player for the Blackhawks this season, and the 24-year-old Czech native showed why.

Kubalik found the back of the net twice in his preseason debut, with the second one displaying his absolute rocket of a shot. That's his strength and he's going to be a player to watch for the Blackhawks this season and someone who certainly helped his case as the team looks to finalize its Opening Night roster in the coming weeks.

2. Hello, Philip Holm

The Blackhawks made a low-key signing in August when they agreed to a one-year deal with Holm, a 27-year-old Swedish defenseman who spent the 2018-19 season in the KHL. He might've been the most noticeable player on the ice in Detroit.

Holm scored a goal, added an assist, and led all skaters with 11 shot attempts (six on goal). He also registered a hit and one takeaway, and logged a game-high 21:58 of ice time. Add him to the list of guys who find themselves among the pool of players vying for everyday roster spots.

3. Robin Lehner and Kevin Lankinen split duties

Collin Delia started and finished the preseason opener in Washington, and the plan was for Lehner to do the same in Detroit but the coaching staff called an audible and decided to share the duties between he and Lankinen.

Lehner started the game and was sharp early on before allowing a goal to Red Wings forward Matt Puempel, which Lehner would've liked to have back. The second goal was a fluky one that was put in by his own player. There was nothing Lehner could do. He stopped 15 of 17 shots for a save percentage of .882, but overall it was a successful debut.

Lankinen replaced Lehner near the halfway mark of the second period and he was immediately tested. He faced 10 shots in the first 7:08, which included a Red Wings power play. Lankinen gave up two goals on 21 shots and finished with a .905 save percentage. He was good.

4. DeBrincat-Strome-Shaw trio effective

The Red Wings didn't dress any of their top players so this should be taken with a grain of salt, but the line of Alex DeBrincat, Andrew Shaw and Dylan Strome showed some good chemistry together. Shaw and Strome each recorded an assist, and the trio generated three scoring chances at 5-on-5, according to Natural Stat Trick.

DeBrincat, Shaw and Strome were also on the first power play unit together and recorded eight shot attempts (four on goal) and were on the ice for Kubalik's power-play goal that tied the game up at 3-3.

Note: DeBrincat had an injury scare in the final seconds of the first period when he got the worst of a knee-on-knee collision. He wasn't on the bench to start the second period, but he only missed a shift before returning.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.18.2019
The NHLPA is continuing its deal with the CBA—here’s what that means

By Kelly Twardziak
September 17, 2019 6:46 PM

It was announced on Monday the National Hockey League Players Association (NHLPA) has decided to continue its contract with the Collective Bargaining Agreement.

The CBA sets out the terms and conditions of employment for professional hockey players playing in the NHL, according to the CBA’s website. The current agreement between the NHL and the NHLPA was ratified in January of 2013 and is set to last ten years, expiring in September 2022. The NHL and the NHLPA had the opportunity to opt-out of the deal but have decided to remain for the duration of the agreement.

"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 current CBA came about after a four-month lockout in 2013. Under this agreement, the league has grown in revenue, alongside adding the Vegas Golden Knights to the league in the 2017-18 season. There are plans to add a 32nd team to the league for the 2021-22 season in Seattle.

Why was the CBA under contention? While NHL players have benefited under this agreement, many feel frustrated by the escrow system. Under this system, a percentage of players’ salaries are withheld every season to cover potential owner shortfalls. A portion of this is refunded to the players at the end of season.

Where do the Blackhawks stand on the issue? Captain Jonathan Toews isn’t a huge fan. In 2018, he told ESPN about his dissatisfaction with the escrow system, saying "the No. 1 thing fans don’t know about is that we’re paying 10 to 20% [of our salary] in escrow every year."

NHL players would also like to revisit the current resolution on international play. Specifically, players would like the NHL to break for them to go to the Olympics. NHL players were noticeably absent from the 2018 Olympic Games in Pyeongchang, which ended a streak of five Olympic games with NHL players participating. This matter won’t be easy to fix before the 2022 Winter Games in Beijing. The NHL will have to make deals with both the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

The main takeaway from the NHLPA sticking with the current CBA is that they’re deciding to keep the peace, avoiding another lockout. Fans and players alike will just have to wait and see how the chips will fall in the next few years in the league.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.18.2019
Calvin de Haan practices with Blackhawks for first time: ‘I really want to play that first game’

By Charlie Roumeliotis
September 17, 2019 11:50 AM

Calvin de Haan has been skating for a while now, but he got the clearance from team doctors on Tuesday to participate in his first practice with the Blackhawks. The 28-year-old defenseman has been recovering from a shoulder injury and groin strain.

“Still taking my time with the shoulder and stuff,” de Haan said. “Got a timeline for that, sooner than later. Other than that, feel pretty good. It’s nice to be out there with the guys. Feels good to pass the pucks and get in the corners with the guys and just get into some game-like situations.”

De Haan had shoulder surgery in May and was put on a four-to-six-month timeline by his former team, the Carolina Hurricanes. He admitted that his shoulder “feels fine” and it’s his groin that’s “been a bit of a hinder” more than anything, an injury he said he sustained pushing too hard to get back.

“Not really, no,” de Haan said when asked whether he feels limited. “A little banged up in the lower body right now. But other than that I’m working through that. Just typical bumps and bruises trying to get back into the swing of things. I feel pretty good. It was fun to be out there with the guys.”

The Blackhawks announced on Day 1 of training camp that de Haan will be out of the lineup for two to three weeks. The timeline hasn’t changed, but de Haan’s goal is and always has been to be ready for Opening Night in Prague on Oct. 4.

“I hope so,” de Haan said. “That’s my game plan, anyways. I’m going to do everything in my power to be ready and hopefully make it a tough decision on the doctors and the staff to not let me play ... but at the end of the day it’s their decision. I feel good. I’m just going to keep working and do as I’m told.

“I really want to play that first game but so be it if [I can’t]. There’s another 81 after that so there’s not really a big rush.”

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.18.2019
Alex Nylander making strong first impression, but will he start 2019-20 season with Blackhawks?

By Charlie Roumeliotis
September 17, 2019 10:00 AM

The Blackhawks are a team that likes to take chances on young players who were highly regarded coming out of their draft but have underachieved to start their professional careers.

Take Brendan Perlini and Dylan Strome for example. Both of them are former first-round picks, with Strome being drafted No. 3 overall in 2015. 

Alex Nylander is somebody who falls under this category. Taken No. 8 overall by the Buffalo Sabres in 2016, he put up decent numbers in the AHL but couldn't take that next step in the NHL and hasn't been able to stick. He's trying to change that in Chicago after being acquired by the organization in the summer for Henri Jokiharju.

"I'm just trying to work hard every shift, be consistent out there and just play my game," Nylander said. "Make plays and be good defensively as well."

Nylander has been a standout in Blackhawks training camp so far. He shined in Sunday's team scrimmage at the United Center by scoring a highlight-reel penalty shot goal and followed that up with a multi-point effort in his preseason debut on Monday, scoring a goal and adding an assist against Washington.

It's the consistency and how he plays when he doesn't have the puck that's going to determine whether he sticks with the big club and ultimately thrives.

"I just think learning how to play at a higher pace away from the puck," Jeremy Colliton said. "He is a good skater. He can fly. You can see when he's hunting, he's on offense, he can really skate. We're going to want him to show us that persistence away from the puck to try and get it back. Obviously when his teammates have the puck (or) when he has the puck — when he’s on offense — he's a terrific player. He can be a real asset for us. So we want him to put himself in those situations as much as he can."

There are legitimately eight or nine forwards that are competing for the two or three roster spots on Opening Night. Nylander is one of them. He has such an elite offensive skillset that it's hard to ignore him for one of them, and he's probably better off playing with guys who think the game the same way.

"He can make a lot of plays and he can see the ice as offensive players do," Colliton said. "He's got a great shot, great release. ... Having said that, for him, the more versatile he can show that he can be then it gives us more options and different places to fit him into the lineup. It's a lot easier to make the team. So he'll probably move around here as we go through preseason and see if there's a fit."

While Nylander, in the big picture, is simply competing for a spot on the 23-man roster, he also finds himself battling for a role within the team in the process. But he's not looking that far ahead.

"I'm just trying to do my best out here and take whatever is given to me," Nylander said. "Just do good, play my game and good things will happen I think. I've just been working really hard this summer and I'm trying to take that with me from the past three years in Buffalo and try to be the best player I can be."
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:

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.18.2019
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 throughout 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."
Kris Versteeg paused at the question. He surely knew the answer, surely had admitted to it himself. But it’s one thing to think the worst. It’s another to acknowledge it openly.

As he sat behind a desk on a Sportsnet television set in Calgary last fall, flashing that wit, that charm and that famous grin that are so uniquely Versteeg, the realization must have hit him.

This wasn’t a temp gig. This was his career now. Hockey was over.

“Well, uh, it’s hard,” he said, mulling the question for a bit. “Uh, yeah. Yeah. I’d say in November of last year, I thought I was done in hockey, for sure. Not so much because of my ability. It was just that the older you get, the opportunities start to lessen. And your perspective changes.”

It’s true. No NHL team is really looking for an oft-injured then-32-year-old who hadn’t played more than 69 games since the 2015-16 season.

Versteeg couldn’t find an NHL home. He felt like he had been playing on one or no legs for years, a shell of his old self. And a miserable, short-lived experiment in the KHL sent him home to Alberta facing the truth no athlete ever wants to face.

It’s over.

Put it this way: When Colts quarterback Andrew Luck shocked the sports world by retiring in the prime of his career, Versteeg understood. Better than just about anybody.

“I have a lot of empathy for him,” Versteeg said. “From what he said, the thing that came out the most to me is you can rehab, and it’s like you basically just start at ‘go’ again. You’re rehabbing just to play, you’re not rehabbing to get better. Five of the six of my rehabs were 4-6 months. So you rehab basically for half a year just to feel OK, and then it happens again. And I empathize with what he was going through, and people coming out and going against him is wrong. Obviously. I’m not at the level of Andrew Luck or anything, but I missed a lot of prime years of my career with rehab, and it is a mental grind, and it can put you in a pretty dark place.”

Versteeg found refuge — and a second career — as a broadcaster, joining Sportsnet’s Calgary Flames coverage as a panelist for pregame, postgame and intermissions. He saw so many of his contemporaries doing it — Adam Burish and Brian Campbell on Blackhawks broadcasts, Colby Armstrong on Sportsnet, Patrick Sharp on NBC Sports, Ryan Whitney on the Spittin’ Chiclets podcast — and figured he could do it, too.

For some athletes in the twilight of their careers, TV can be a lifeline, a way to stay tangentially connected to the game that’s defined their entire lives. For Versteeg, it was different. He liked it. And he was good at it.

In a hockey media world that’s all clichés and Xs and Os, Versteeg brought a little bit of the NBA-style of analysis, the kind he’s always enjoyed watching. He’s no Charles Barkley, but compared with much of the hockey world, he might as well be. He didn’t just break down a goal, he told a funny story about the player who scored it. He didn’t just point out when a guy made a mistake, he talked a little trash about him. He was blunt, but always toed the line of civility. There were no cheap shots, but no bland platitudes, either. Some athletes suppress their personalities when transitioning to TV, afraid of breaking some sort of player code or offending somebody. Others struggle mightily with having a voice in their ears at all times, telling them to wrap up a thought in the next 15 seconds or to vamp for a solid minute or two. Meanwhile, Versteeg — who spent years playing hockey with Joel Quenneville screaming in his ear — was loose, confident, comfortable. He was just being himself, the Versteeg everybody around the hockey world knows.

It’s why Sportsnet host Ryan Leslie had been telling him since the previous season that a seat on the panel was waiting for him whenever he was ready to sit in it. It’s why, according to Versteeg, a full-time gig was on the table for him in Calgary if he wanted it.

“Plain and simple, I think he’s a star,” Leslie said. “If you look at anybody in the game today, I don’t think anybody has a player résumé quite like his. He’s played everywhere — Canadian markets, quiet markets, struggling markets, hockey-mad markets. And he’s pretty much done it all and played with just about anybody and everybody who’s relevant in the game. I think he’s a star waiting for that opportunity in TV. He’ll take it as far as he wants to go. And once the hockey bug is finally behind him, he’s got a spot waiting for him wherever he wants. He’s self-deprecating, he’s hard-working, and he’s got that twinkle in his eye. I know you know it — that little smile, that grin he gets. I was thinking about this earlier today. What do we love about hockey? It doesn’t matter if it’s you, me or a player, we love good stories, and we love making fun of one another. And he can do it. And he’s relatable. He’s a hard-working little guy from Southern Alberta who had some great skill and some good grit and some great stories. He knows how to walk that line — he’s not selling out his brethren, he’s telling us stories. We’re in his kitchen having a beer and you just feel like you finally found that one analyst who can tell you something and make you feel like, ‘Man, I just heard something great today.’”

Another analyst who worked with Versteeg, former NHL goalie Kelly Hrudey, added, “He’s fantastic. A natural. And I don’t say that often.”

By the time he was making such a great first impression in November, Versteeg hadn’t played in the NHL in nearly a year. The only time he was wearing skates was to coach some 15- and 16-year-olds in Ontario. So yeah, Versteeg probably would have been content to make a second career of broadcasting.

Well, mostly content.

“I like doing TV,” he said. “I don’t like it as much as hockey.”

And Leslie could see that. Even as he saw a rising star in his business, he saw a guy who wasn’t quite ready to retire at age 32.

“He wasn’t going to go out like that,” Leslie said.

Versteeg went back to rehabbing his surgically repaired hip. After a stem-cell treatment, he told Leslie that he hadn’t felt this good since 2014, shortly before he won a second Stanley Cup with the Blackhawks (in his second stint with the team). He took a flyer on joining Vaxjo HC of the Swedish Elite League in February.

And then something remarkable happened. He felt like a hockey player again. Like a good hockey player. Like the one who had been a four-time 20-goal scorer and two-time Stanley Cup champion. Like a guy who had some life left in those legs, after all. He had four goals and seven assists in 12 games for Vaxjo HC then posted four goals and two assists in seven playoff games. He felt fast again. Explosive. Ready to give this thing another try.

He had been in touch with the Blackhawks’ Mark Bernard, who oversees the team’s minor-league affiliates, throughout the past year. And when Bernard offered him an AHL contract to rekindle his career where it really began, in Rockford, Versteeg jumped at the chance.

If not for the stint in Sweden, he wouldn’t be wearing a Blackhawks sweater in preseason games this week.

“Probably not, to be honest,” he said. “I’d probably be doing TV or something, and hanging with my kids. I knew I wanted one last opportunity in the back of my mind. And I don’t know if I missed the rest of last year, if I would have been willing to do it. But I think going to Sweden and feeling healthy and having two good hips … gave me a little bit of hope.”

Versteeg knows the deal. He’s on an AHL contract, not a two-way deal. He’s here to play the game he loves and be a mentor to the young prospects in the organization — all of whom are higher priorities to Jeremy Colliton and Stan Bowman than he is. Even if he tears it up in Rockford, younger players are likely to get call-ups ahead of him. That’s the reality of being a 33-year-old minor leaguer.

“My coach isn’t going to say to me, ‘Go out there. I need some goals.’”

And yet, to see him flying around the rink in the opening days of training camp, it’s not too much of a stretch to imagine him donning a Blackhawks jersey at some point for the third time in his career.
“You can see he still has some game left,” Colliton said. “You reserve judgment, but he’s got that personality. There’s personality in his game, as well. He makes a lot of plays and gets his nose dirty. Could be an ingredient that’s nice for us.”

If not, so be it. He’ll still be the same affable Versteeg, sure to be giving the kids in Rockford a hard time on a daily basis, sure to be playing deejay in the locker room, sure to have that big grin on his face. And once that’s done, well, there’s a chair waiting for him in just about any TV studio in the hockey world.

“His career as a player really is what he could be as a television personality,” Leslie said. “He could have that variety. What Kris Versteeg is most proud of is that he’s got some hardware under his belt. He’s won the biggest thing you can win in the game. If he wanted to be the equivalent of that in our industry, I think he will be. People are drawn to him. If he wants to be an insider, an analyst, something with schtick — he’ll be it. Whatever he wants to do, he’ll do it.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
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.

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-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 that 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 stick 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 unloaded, 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 rebounced each morning on the ice.

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.

“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, stoic 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 morning, 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, but we had fun, and 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 out-all 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.’ Some guys 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. 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.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
I had no idea what was going on': Oral history of Patrick Kane's 2010 Stanley Cup-clinching goal

By Scott Powers
Sep 15, 2019

Jonathan Toews took one look at the Patrick Kane bobblehead and laughed.

"Look at the hands," Toews said. "That's funny."

The bobblehead, which was to be given out at the Blackhawks training camp festival Sunday, captured a memorable instant in Kane's celebration after he had scored the Blackhawks' Stanley Cup-clinching goal in overtime of Game 6 against the Philadelphia Flyers in 2010. It is a perfect representation of Kane's reaction after scoring that historic goal, from the hands and the placement of his mouthguard.

The mood shifted from tension to confusion to celebration within the span of a few minutes, as Kane's goal was as tough to see as it was to stop. But when he scored, it ended a drought that almost reached a half-century.

"Well, fittingly it was the most mysterious ending not just to a game, but to a final's game that determined who would win the Stanley Cup," Blackhawks president John McDonough recently said. "It was shrouded in mystery."

(All positions and titles are from 2010.)

The Blackhawks led the best-of-seven series 3-2 with Game 6 in Philadelphia. Andrew Ladd put the Blackhawks ahead 3-2 in the second period of, but the Flyers answered with a goal by Scott Hartnell at 16:01 of the third period and forced overtime. Four minutes into overtime, neither team had scored, and the Blackhawks had the puck in their offensive zone.

Patrick Sharp, Blackhawks forward: First of all, overtime was pretty crazy. I think that line that was out there on the ice -- Kaner, myself and Andrew Ladd -- I think that was put together the game before, Game 5, and Joel (Quenneville) saw something there, and we ended up playing as a second line and we scored a ton of goals in that two games. I think we already had two in the game as a line. We felt like we were the line that was going to get it in overtime. I remember all three of us talking about it.

Brian Campbell, Blackhawks defenseman: I remember (the puck) being rimmed around to me, so just trying to make a good play on it like that. ... I still kind of remember that puck was spinning so much coming off the wall. A lot of times when it's spinning like that, you got to be really, really careful. You just hit the puck once and it can just move and take off easy like that. For me, it was almost to get the puck settled down and get the puck stop spinning as much as it was. (That) was the biggest thing.

Patrick Kane, Blackhawks forward: Just kind of remember, it looked like Soupy was about to shoot it and I was calling for it, so he passed it to me.

Campbell: We all know I'm not much of a shooter. So, just kind of walking the line, what I've done a million times in practice and whatever else. Obviously for me, you want to put it into a good player's hands. I think when you see Patrick Kane on a half wall, you feel pretty comfortable when you see Patrick Kane on a half wall, you feel pretty comfortable

Kimmo Timonen, Flyers defenseman: He had the puck the hashmarks. He made a little tiny move, kind of make me go a little sideways this way. I didn't think he had a chance to go the net, but he decided to kind of ... I don't think anyone was expecting him to shoot, and he shot it. He made a nice play. I don't think anybody was expecting it.

Kane: I was pretty much standing still, made a couple head fakes (on Timonen), pulled the puck to my forehand and just kind of pushed it down the wall with one hand, put two hands on the stick and just fired it on net, hoping for a rebound or anything to happen.

Sharp: Usually when he had the puck on the outside that season, I would just try to find an area in the high slot or back door, and Kaner would usually put it on my tape. That's what I was focusing on. Before I really had a chance to square up and get ready to get in that position, I saw Kaner just fire a low, hard shot from a bad angle.

Michael Leighton, Flyers goaltender: I see (Kane) coming down the wall and I see him start cutting towards the net. The way he was holding the puck I thought he was just going to either keep carrying it to the net or pass it up to the front to someone driving to the net. I was holding my post, waiting to push off it and he just took a quick shot, like caught me off guard and put it at the net, real quick at my feet.

It went right underneath me and got stuck underneath the pad of the net. I turned around and I saw it in the net, but nobody else did. I knew as soon as it went underneath me, it went in.

Kane: I saw it go in. I saw it hit the pad. It was stuck underneath and there was no reaction. Even Timonen was still skating with me after the puck was in the net, and I was like trying to skate to get away from him, so I could celebrate ... The celebration is kind of a blur. I was just trying to sell that the puck was actually in the net, you know. I think that's why I celebrated like that.

Timonen: I was able to see it go in through the five-hole and no one else saw it. He started celebrating, obviously. We both skated around the net. I saw the puck get stuck behind the goal. It was hard to see, but it was stuck in there and I knew right away it was in and that was it. Obviously it's not a good feeling. It's the finals, in overtime and Game 6 and we're home. We actually made a nice comeback at the end of the game to make it to overtime. Not a good feeling. It took me awhile to get by that moment. Well, we lost it, that's the feeling, not a good feeling.

Sharp: I was in a great position to see the whole side of the net. I was square right in the slot looking down toward the blue crease area. I knew the puck was underneath the pad or caught in somewhere. But I didn't see the net move. I just saw the back, white pad bulge a little bit. I knew it was going to be a crazy celebration with Kaner scoring because he would always do something special during that time of his career, even to this day he does. I wanted to get to him quick and have a great celebration ... It's not a surprise to me that Kaner was the guy getting that goal in the huge moment because he wants it more than anybody really. He wants that bright lights and the big stage. Time and time again he's going to come up in those big moments.

Campbell: I always say the first thing I did when he shot the puck was I looked in the netting for the ripple in the netting behind the goal. I thought it might have hit Leighton's stick and gone up in the netting. I think that was my first reaction, just trying to find where the puck had rippled into the net and hit. All of a sudden, you look down and he's celebrating. It's just a weird situation from then. Like my mind, I remember I kind of looking at the bench you see guys are celebrating, a few guys wondering if they should celebrate. I knew it was mine, the reason I was celebrating so long was I didn't want to do it again and be picking my gloves up off the ice and having to play more hockey. The biggest thing for me was, look at me, I'm going to be picking up my gloves, how embarrassing is that and having to play more hockey. But that's what I also say, foolish on me, foolish on anybody else, that maybe the greatest player in Blackhawks' history or may be one day, I didn't trust him at that point.

Kris Versteeg, Blackhawks forward: I remember I was sitting like at the end of the bench, kind of catching my wind and I looked up and he shot the puck and it made a "dunk" kind of noise. It's hard to explain. I thought it hit the paddle of his stick and went into the netting. I thinking that was my reaction, just trying to find where the puck had rippled into the net and hit. All of a sudden, you look down and he's celebrating. It's just a weird situation from then. Like my mind, I remember I kind of looking at the bench you see guys are celebrating, a few guys wondering if they should celebrate. I knew it was mine, the reason I was celebrating so long was I didn't want to do it again and be picking my gloves up off the ice and having to play more hockey. The biggest thing for me was, look at me, I'm going to be picking up my gloves, how embarrassing is that and having to play more hockey. But that's what I also say, foolish on me, foolish on anybody else, that maybe the greatest player in Blackhawks' history or may be one day, I didn't trust him at that point.

Jonathan Toews, Blackhawks captain: The same story I always tell is I had no idea what was going on. Guys were just kind of on the fence too, not sure if they should yell or throw their stuff off. We just kind of all had to believe Kaner that he knew what was going on. No one saw it. I was one of the last ones down the pile, kind of looking back. Eventually they took the net off the mooring and saw it sitting there. I'm like it has to be over, Kaner knows what he's talking about. But there was also part of me that maybe this is too good to be true. I didn't want to completely let go yet. It wasn't until the Cup came out, they gave us the Cup we lifted it and that's when I could let go.

Marian Hossa, Blackhawks forward: You saw all the young guys jumping over like it's happening every year. But I was a little more careful.
because I’d been there two times in a row, this was my third time. Obviously I knew they couldn’t be celebrating out of nothing. I knew he knew exactly he had scored a goal, but until the ref pointed at the net, we didn’t have 100 percentage guarantee.

Joel Quenneville, Blackhawks coach: The first thing I wanted to know was whether it was a goal. That was it. We were all sitting there waiting on it asking, “Was it a goal? Was it a goal?” We just kept waiting and waiting. (Kane) knew it was a goal and that was a little reassuring, but we needed to know. It was pretty amazing. Pretty spectacular.

Troy Parchman, Blackhawks head equipment manager: The main thing I remember is not knowing if it actually went in and sort of trying to, not that I could do it, but thinking I had to control things that we didn’t start celebrating prematurely. Like I’m looking around and the coaches are half of like, yeah, it’s in, and then just everybody, let’s see how this plays out.

Brandon Faber, Blackhawks senior director of media relations: We’re sitting there in the (coaches’ office) watching it in overtime. Of course right away, we didn’t know it went in. But it’s like, something’s up. They were showing the replay and (video coach) Brad Aldrich said right away, it’s in, he said over the speaker to Torch (assistant coach John Torchetti) or I don’t know who was on the headset with him, but he said it was a good goal. So we went out to the bench. I’m thinking about it, I don’t know if he’s right. I hope he’s right. I don’t know if he’s right. We went out to the bench, and the coaches are just standing there, so they didn’t even think it was in yet.

Kane: I remember even, there was a celebration down by the net and then they were waiting for the confirmation for the goal and there was another celebration at center ice. And I was kind of skating around looking at my family, and I looked up and my buddies were in the last row of the bleachers. I looked up and they just went, “Holy shit, I think they just won.” Then they were talking about the game-winning goal to win the Stanley Cup, and my buddies are up there and they’re in a fight with the Philly fans. It was funny. When they came down to the ice like five or 10 minutes later, I was like what the hell was going on up there, they said they were chirping them and they chirped them back and just got into it.

Everyone was confused about the goal, from the players on the bench to the fans in the stands to reporters on the scene.

Scott Burnside, ESPN reporter: No one in the stands, no one in the stadium had any sense what happened. As Kane gets closer to the net, that moment is where you’re almost sure what was going on and then it’s over.

Adam Jahns, Chicago Sun-Times reporter: I remember standing up and packing my things to go down to the media work area which was like in a dingy hall in the stadium there in Philadelphia. You’re looking, “Oh, I got to go down. It could be a late night. I don’t know what’s going to happen,” I remember the shot. I was standing and Barry Rozner from the Daily Herald was right next to me. And I see the shot and then I see Patrick Kane skate around and start with like a dancing dead sprint straight at the goal. The goal was reviewed by video and confirmed on the ice about a minute after Kane’s shot went in.

John Wiedeman, Blackhawks radio play-by-play broadcaster: Because of our angle to the net, we couldn’t see the puck go in initially. Like where did it go? I remember saying that it went through the goal crease, that Michael Leighton who was the goaltender had gotten enough of it to knock it down. I couldn’t see it because his body was in the way. He was down in the goal crease and he moved in some way and I saw it behind him. It was underneath the apron of the net. You could only see the back of the puck under the apron of the net. And then I heard Troy say it’s in. I knew because I saw it too. That’s when I changed my call. That’s the only time I really knew.

Mike “Doc” Emrick, NBC television play-by-play broadcaster: Whenever I end up talking to journalism classes, I tell them this is the nature of it. I’ll never forget that Al Michaels when he spoke at the Sports Emmy’s on TV the night he was given the lifetime achievement award. He said the one thing about this, this is not Hollywood. You don’t get 25 takes. You get one. It was never more prevalent in my mind than that night because whenever I speak to journalism classes I will often tell them about that particular play. And it doesn’t make any difference that any others didn’t get it. We’re all paid to see that. The goal was reviewed. On TV you see it doesn’t excuse any of us. It would have been nice if we could have gotten it, especially since it was the last goal of the year. I got two-fifths of it. I got “a” and “c” out of it and I didn’t get 100 percent of it and you’re supposed to get 100 percent of it. I’m happy for Patrick and I’m happy for the Blackhawks that they won. I wish I would have gotten it. It’s one of those things you can’t have back. As Al said, you get only one crack at it. That one remains through my 46 years as the one I’d like to have back the most.

The goal was reviewed by video and confirmed on the ice about a minute after Kane’s shot went in.

Bowman: And then we couldn’t wait to get down there quick enough. We got down to the elevator and ran down to the ice. That was a pretty special feeling thinking back on it. I don’t have any specific recollection other than a sense of, not relief, it was more excitement. I think some of the other Cups was more relief. In 2015, that was such a grind it felt like. This one didn’t seem like a grind because we hadn’t been through it before. It was more giddiness when you get down to the ice. The initial moment when it went in, it was confusion like everyone else.

Hossa: When the ref got the phone call from the video referee and they pointed at the net and said yes it was a goal, a regular goal, obviously the dream came true. I always wanted to win a Cup with a team. It happened right away in my first year in Chicago. That was my third Stanley Cup Final in a row. I was pretty beat up, psychically, mentally and just the
relief and everything, all of the emotions start hitting me. That’s what I remember on the moment. It was the best hockey moment in my life.

Parchman: We were all of sort of in shock because that was for most of us like the first time. It’s kind of making me choke up right now. It’s sort of like, you dream about that kind of thing. You probably don’t quite realize, like you don’t know how to react. Like this is all surreal because that’s all you sort of think about. I’m Canadian, so that’s you play street hockey to win the Stanley and all that other stuff. Never in my life did I dream I’d be part of something like that. It’s sort of crazy.

The Blackhawks collected nearly memorable item after the celebration and brought them home to Chicago. There were a few things that went missing.

Kane: I remember asking the equipment guys afterward, “Was anything taken from the celebration in the locker room? There must have been a bunch of stuff stolen.” “Like actually, just (Adam) Burish and (Colin) Fraser’s helmets.” I was thinking to myself, after the celebration my buddies are walking out with Burish and Fraser’s helmets on. The only two things stolen, my buddies took them, and my buddies ended up getting in a fight with Philly fans. … Actually pretty funny story, my buddy mailed back Fraser’s helmet to him. He was excited when he got it.

Parchman: Good thing (Kane) said that. I didn’t want to rat him out. We knew those things were gone and we actually knew those guys took them. It wasn’t such a big deal. After that, the other two times I don’t think we lose anything.

But the game-winning puck still hasn’t been found. ESPN’s Wayne Drehs did an investigative piece on the missing puck in April 2011, tabbing NHL linesman Steve Miller as the likely culprit. Months later, the Chicago Tribune used its photos to confirm that Miller grabbed the puck, but he denied having it. The saga continues.

Faber: It’s funny I’ve thought about it many times. Nobody ever said where’s the puck. There was so much confusion how it happened. I think there’s obviously theories out there where the puck might be or rumors of who has it. I’m sure it’ll turn up one day.

Kane: (I’m not that curious about it), not really. I don’t know. It’s almost like a foregone conclusion. Who knows if you find it if it’s really the right one? I don’t know. I guess that’s the way it is. Who knows if it’ll show up one day? If not, it’s pretty cool story.

McDonough: I think the league has tried to solve it. But it would be something that would be very valuable to the organization if it was legitimate. It’s hard to believe with the advancement of technology and cameras that someone had to take that puck out of the (net).

Sharp: I figure somebody has it and they’re hanging onto it; a small group of people know where it is. I guess the other option is it just discarded, and it just blended in with another puck and somebody has it and they don’t even realize they do. I got a feeling somebody has it and we’re going to see it sooner or later.

Leighton was a Blackhawk goalie from 2014-16 and became teammates with Kane.

Leighton: I made a quick comment to him why he shot that puck, laughing. That was about it. We didn’t get into it. He knows what happened and I know what happened. Obviously it worked out for him, it didn’t work out for me. … There’s now a technique called the RVH that now if I was in that situation I’d already be down before he even shot the puck. Either way, if he shoots it on the ice, it hits my pad. If he passes it up front, I just push off my post out to the one-timer.

Dave Bolland, Blackhawks forward: Maybe (that’s the case). I don’t know, Kaner’s a pretty snipe shooter. I think he still puts it past him.

Timothen was traded to the Blackhawks during the 2014-15 season. He never won a Stanley Cup with the Flyers, but he did end up winning one with the Blackhawks. He was reminded of his role in the 2010 Stanley Cup when he arrived to Chicago, though.

Timothen: What happened was when I got there the first morning to the morning skate to the practice rink, you climb those stairs to the locker room and there’s a picture on the wall of him scoring the goal. I was like, “Huh, that’s my first memory here.” I saw him and we talked about it right away. We’ve been joking around about it since. Not a good memory for my perspective.

The Blackhawks will be celebrating the 10-year anniversary of that 2009-10 season throughout this season. While it’s been a decade, people involved in that game are reminded of that season and that game seemingly every day.

McDonough: It set the tempo for the rest of the organization. It provided a lot of confidence for everybody.

Leighton: (That replay is) everywhere. It’s not hard to see. If you Google my name, it’s the first thing that pops up. It’s always on highlights and everything with the Blackhawks they’re showing it. It’s hard to avoid it.

Kane: I have that stick. It’s at my place, kind of standing up against the wall. I’m sure someday I’ll do something with it. Yeah, sometimes it’s one of those things you’re in a slump or something you go look at some of the sticks that were important to you or milestones for you. That’s always one of them. It’s a little bit longer than the one I have now. I use the wide, white tape now and I used to use a skinny, white tape, just different things. Always fun to pick that one up. I say I’d pick it up four, five times a year just to look at it. Not for any reason, like it’s just up against the wall. It’s not like I’m going, “I remember I scored the goal; I’m going to go look at my stick.” I could be getting changed or something and walk past it and it’s right here and I kind of pick it up in the moment.

Hossa: It just shows how time goes fast. I want to enjoy every moment because the life just going so fast. It’s hard to believe it’s already 10 years. We’re looking forward to coming to Chicago to celebrate a special night. I think it’s going to be great memories for everybody.

Toews: Actually, this summer I watched a lot of highlights. It’s like you get emotional watching it again. You’re so far removed from the memory and all of a sudden it’s like it’s sometimes hard to believe it actually happened, all three of them really. It’s kind of like a dream almost.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Conor Timmins is healthy and happy after long layoff from hockey

By MIKE CHAMBERS | mchambers@denverpost.com | The Denver Post
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Conor Timmins was among three bright young defensemen in the Avalanche’s preseason opener Tuesday night against the visiting Vegas Golden Knights. Timmins, who turns 21 on Wednesday, and Ryan Graves, 24, and Bo Byram, 18, could each see action with the Avs in 2019-20.

For Timmins, just being in Tuesday’s lineup at the Pepsi Center was a monumental triumph. Colorado’s 2017 second-round draft pick (32nd overall) was a top 2017-18 prospect who missed all of last season with concussion-like symptoms. He hadn’t played in a hockey game for 18 months.

Timmins was cleared for contact at the Avs’ midsummer development camp, competed in the recent rookie camp and was again impressive during training camp. He is finally ready to resume his hockey career following a year of having no fun.

"Can’t go out with your friends. Can’t play sports," Timmins said before Vegas built a 4-0 lead and cruised to a 5-0 victory against a young and inexperienced Avs lineup. "Just the little normal things — so getting back to that was awesome. Obviously, when I missed that much time, I have a little ways to go in terms of getting my timing back. So I’d like to get as many opportunities as I can in the preseason to get back into things and show what I can do."

Awesome is an understatement. He was previously concerned that he would never play hockey again or worried he wouldn’t play effectively and get cut because he was afraid of the physicality of the game.

"At some point, you kind of doubt whether you’ll ever get fully back, but to be at the point I’m at now is a really great feeling," Timmins said. "Once I get out there, the only thing on my mind is hockey. It’s at a good point right now where I can put it completely out of my mind and just focus on my game."

Timmins was paired with Byram in the first period Tuesday. Byram was selected fourth overall in the 2019 draft in June, and because of his age and status in major junior, he is not eligible to play in the minor leagues. He can play up to nine NHL regular-season games before the Avs can return him to the WHL’s Vancouver Giants or keep him the entire NHL season.

Timmins was in the same situation two years ago. Coach Jared Bednar said his staff considered keeping him, but Timmins was returned to the OHL’s Soo Greyhounds after the NHL preseason.

Because his long layoff, Timmins appears destined to begin this season with the Colorado Eagles of the American Hockey League. But he is also expected to be a primary call-up candidate.

Footnotes. The other defensemen in Tuesday’s lineup were Mark Barberio, Nicholas Meloche and Jacob MacDonald. Timmins was paired with Barberio and Byram with Graves in the second period. Barberio and Graves probably will be on the opening-night roster. The Avs also used a young forward corps and goaltenders. The most interesting line was made up of Tyson Jost and top prospects A.J. Greer and and Martin Kaut. Jost and Barberio were team captains, along with forward Sheldon Dries. Colorado’s goaltenders were Adam Werner and Hunter Miska. Werner allowed two goals on 13 shots and Miska faced 15 shots and made 12 saves. Both probably will begin the season as the two netminders with the Colorado Eagles.
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 38 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 defensemen 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 defensive 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 first 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 28-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 struggled 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, Leafsy 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 last season until sustaining a consecutive season-ending injury. He began skating with the team near the end of the regular season and has remained healthy in camp. Nichushkin arrived Friday and practiced with the team this weekend after having his immigration paperwork finalized.

A year ago, Bednar used the fourth line as a way to integrate a forward while strengthening the team’s overall top two lines. “I think for guys like us we want to be playing in the offensive zone,” Bellemare 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.”

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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.”
After the dust settled from the Stanley Cup final, bookmakers were very quick to post their odds for the 2020 Stanley Cup. Tampa Bay … duh, Boston … makes sense, Toronto … sure, Vegas … OK, Colorado … wait, what? A team that lost more games than they won the year prior is now a top five Cup favourite? I’m not convinced.

The hype is very real for the Avalanche after dispatching the top-seeded Flames with ease in the opening round, and coming oh-so-close to beating a veteran Sharks team in the second round. With a strong off-season, one of the best lines in hockey, an elite starting goaltender, and a strong prospect pool I can see the argument being made, but it feels like we need to calm down. Playoff performance tends to cloud people’s judgement and over-hype teams more than necessary – we all remember how Edmonton’s turn as the next great Western power shot out just a few seasons ago.

The Avalanche are not Edmonton – there’s much more to like here in this situation than that one before the 2017-18 season. This is a likely playoff team next season, but a lot of things still have to go right for them to be more than that in an uber-competitive Central Division.

On average, Colorado earns 93.9 points and makes the playoffs 63 percent of the time. That’s not bad, but not nearly as high as the current hype lies with some expecting the team to finish around 100 points. That’s far from impossible, but not the most likely outcome with the team reaching or eclipsing that mark in one quarter of simulations. The team misses the playoffs entirely more often than that.

Expectations need to be tempered here. Colorado wins the Stanley Cup in three percent of simulations here which, again, isn’t bad, but a far cry from the 15-to-1 odds or better currently being given out. This is not a Stanley Cup contender in its current iteration. Not yet anyways. The team has the potential to be that after an impressive showing in the playoffs, no doubt, but the Avalanche haven’t earned it just yet.

While that two round showcase is still fresh on everyone’s mind, it’s important not to ignore a mediocre regular season, a season that would’ve had the Avalanche outside the playoffs entirely in other years and conferences. It took an insane goaltending run down the stretch – one where the team saw 93 percent of its shots against get stopped, third in the league – to get there too.

The Central is one of the tougher divisions and while Colorado has an exciting young team ready to take the next step, making the playoffs again isn’t a given, even if it feels like it with a stronger team on paper after making the postseason in back-to-back years. The Avalanche have a great team with high upside, but this is the NHL where anything and everything can go wrong. Development isn’t linear.

Other teams around them are improving too. While the Avalanche have done well this off-season to fortify their depth, there still appear to be some issues that can hold the team back from taking the next step many expect them to.

For many teams looking to take the next step, putting in place a strong supporting cast around the core group is critical. Over the past two seasons that’s what has separated the Avalanche from true contending teams as they were often a one-line show. The team tried splitting up the big three to modest success last season, but the quest for balance meant sacrificing high end performance very few teams could stack up against. When you have arguably the second best line in hockey, it’s usually worth keeping together – especially if the options to replace one of the cogs have the potential to severely limit its upside.

The Avalanche have done a lot to address that over the summer and the forward group looks much more fortified as a result, where separating the big three in search of balance wouldn’t hurt as much. During the off-season Colorado added not one, not two, but three top six calibre forwards in Nazem Kadri, Joonas Donskoi and Andre Burakovky, a trio expected to be worth 3.7 wins of combined value.

Kadri is the marquee addition here as a player with 60-point upside who can be the missing piece on a stacked Colorado power play. He also provides two-way value, plays against opposing top lines, and looks to be the capable second line center behind Nathan MacKinnon that the team has been missing since trading away Matt Duchene. He’s a good player that flew under-the-radar last season having to slot behind both John Tavares and Auston Matthews on the depth chart. He fits much better as a top six center. Over the last three seasons, his 1.84 points-per-60 at 5-on-5 ranks 1111th, which is solidly second line territory.

Kadri has long been an excellent offensive driver which is something illuminated by his tracking stats where he is elite at creating shots for himself and his teammates. In both shots and shot assists, he’s above the 90th percentile and is in the 98th percentile for shot contributions as a whole. His work at entering and exiting the zone is also strong.

Those skillsets were a common theme in the Avalanche’s summer acquisitions (and on the team in general) as both Donskoi and Burakovsky look excellent when viewed through that lens. Both players have extremely strong transition profiles across the board, excelling at shot contributions, entries and exits to a degree few might suspect from two unassuming forwards. NHL teams have better access to those metrics and from what I’ve heard from some teams is that it’s enough reason to be even more bullish on their value than my model’s already keen projection for the duo. As a lover of all things data (especially those specific tracked numbers), it makes me very curious about the inner machinations leading to those valuations. I would bet it’s why a data-savy team went after these two players in particular and it’s one reason the Avalanche may be better than what’s projected of them here.

Even when looking at regular advanced stats Donskoi looks extremely underrated as he’s been both a strong play-driver and secondary scorer over the last two seasons, where he has a 58 percent expected goals rate and a 1.9 points-per-60. That latter figure is higher than seven of Gabriel Landeskog’s eight seasons, for the record. Burakovsky used to be an analytics darling, but his value has tapered off in that time frame. His play-driving impacts have dropped, but he’s still scoring at a second line rate.

The rub with both is their usage, where it’s no certainty that either can translate what they’ve done in low minutes with more responsibility. Both have had the easiest burdens on the team and did their damage playing 14 minutes or less for the majority of their careers. My model assumes both will be just fine sliding into a middle or top six role and that much of that factor is over-blown – both players deserve more minutes – but it is worth mentioning as a possible caveat to their expected value.

While those additions should bring the Avalanche a lot of value, what has to be factored is what the team has lost this off-season as well. Donskoi was signed in free agency and Burakovsky was traded for nothing of note, but it took giving up the underrated Alex Kerfoot and puck-mover and power play quarterback Tyson Barrie on the back-end. Kadri is an upgrade over Kerfoot, but the difference might not be as large as most think, and while Barrie can easily be replaced internally, his loss still makes the defense thinner. There was also the cap-cleaning trade of Carl Soderberg for Kevin Connauton and a third that became a net loss in on-ice value that needs to be considered, especially as Connauton now grades out as the team’s weakest player with a significant negative contribution to the bottom line.

Soderberg might be missed more than some believe as he was a capable middle six forward for the Avalanche. The hope is that internal improvement bridges the gap and given some of the options, it’s certainly not a bad idea – but from my model’s perspective, they’ll need to actually prove they can provide that value before it’s penciled in. When it comes to the team’s forward depth, a fair amount is riding on Tyson Jost, 21, and J.T. Compher, 24, to take the next step. A breakout season from one or both would certainly bolster the team’s supporting cast, on top of the new additions.

Neither player is a GSVI favourite with both being valued as low-end third line options or worse. That may not be so surprising for Jost who hasn’t really put it all together yet at the NHL level, but might be for Compher who scored at a 40-point pace last season. While both were moderately efficient scorers last season at 5-on-5 with a points-per-60 that was second line calibre, the fact they were at a fourth line rate or worse prior to 2018-19 means the model remains a bit more skeptical about their production, even after adjusting for age. Neither player has very strong shot or shot assist numbers. Both struggling to individually contribute on the power play also hurts their assessment.
The bigger issue though is their inability to drive play with both being among Colorado’s worst options last season, earning a 47 percent expected goals rate while being weak with the puck. That needs to improve and it’s where the new additions might help. In that vein though, it’ll depend on whether Kadri, Burakovskly and Donskoi (and Colin Wilson) can lift these two up in the middle six, or if these two continue to struggle and drag the two lines down.

The fourth line added Pierre-Edouard Bellemare to the mix and he’s come a long way from his much-maligned days in Philadelphia to become one of the most dependable fourth line centers in the league. He can drive play there, especially on defense (though it’s worth noting he played some extremely soft minutes), and join Matts Calvert and Nieto to form quite the stingy trio. The latter two did well last year earning a sterling 58 percent expected goal share together, partially built off the strength of their ability with the puck in transition, which at this point seems like a clear organizational philosophy. That was in a third line role and they should be even better sliding down the depth chart.

The depth looks much better than it has in year’s past, though the team’s strongest asset is still of course the top line, worth 9.2 combined wins anchored by one of the best players on earth.

This is MacKinnon’s team and once he took a leap, so too did the rest of the group. They go as far as he goes and he’s turned in two incredible seasons back-to-back, earning a spot among the league’s elite. My model considers him the league’s ninth most valuable player and that may still be too harsh. After back-to-back seasons finishing just shy of 100 points, it’s only a matter of time before he breaks the barrier. He should be a perennial 40-goal and 100-point threat through most of his prime. As one of the game’s fastest players and most gifted puck-handlers, he is of course the poster child for the team’s mandate of moving the puck up ice with control. He ranks in the 99th percentile or higher for shot contributions, entries and exits and is one of the game’s best players as a result. The sheer difficulty in stopping him also contributes to him leading the league in penalty differential last season.

Couple that with Mikko Rantanen’s vision and Landeskog’s defensive acumen and you get one of the best line’s in hockey. For this trio though, what they do go beyond expected goals, which are quality finishers in their own right, projected to score 27 goals more than expected combined. Last year the line only earned a 51 percent expected goals share, but a 61 percent goals share, completely built upon the strength of their offence. For most lines that’s a bad sign; for this line it’s a signal to how much their talent can drive results. All three are modest play-pliers, but very strong goal-drivers — and in the end that’s all that matters isn’t it?

All three are also key facets to a power play that’s ranked eighth over the last two seasons with MacKinnon and Rantanen earning 89 and 68 points over the last two seasons with the man advantage, good for fifth and sixth in the league. Adding Kadri to that unit makes it even scarier.

If there’s one issue though, it’s the very wide gap between the first and second halves for every member of the top line. In the first half, the trio was torching the league playing at point paces of 127 (Rantanen), 121 (MacKinnon) and 92 (Landeskog). That was partially influenced by a high on-ice shooting percentage and all three predictably regressed to point-per-game pace or worse. Rantanen was hit hardest scoring just 25 points in his final 34 games. None of the three are as bad as the second half, but they were never as good as that strong first half either. The true answer was somewhere in the middle, but it shows the wide variance of performance for even the team’s best players. The key will be surviving a stretch where the top line isn’t producing as much, something the Avalanche should be better equipped to do this season.

On the back-end there’s plenty of upside, but things are much less rosy overall and that’s probably the biggest reason for the current tempered expectations. None of the three look like top pairing numbers — Erik Johnson, Nikita Zadorov, and Ian Cole (who’s injured now, but part of the main six when healthy) — struggle to drive play offensively, but are solid defensively. Johnson gets a pass as the defender with the heaviest usage burden every season, but even after factoring for that he still only looks like an average top four option. The other two aren’t even that. Like Girard, Johnson also excels at moving the puck, making it very curious as to why the Avalanche aren’t generating as many offensive chances as they should with that pair on the ice.

In that vein, trading away Barrie might cause some headaches on the back-end as he was easily the team’s strongest offensive defender. While Makar should replace that, the team will likely see a status quo defense rather than an improved one as the other five might still struggle to help generate offence, leaving a big burden for Makar. That can’t all be on the forwards and thought, but it seems likely to improve, the same can’t be said for the rest of the group.

That all appear defensively should help the goaltending though which looks to be the team’s biggest strength outside of the top line. The lack of offensive is common trait among the Avalanche defense that’s not only on Girard. All three are very strong goalies in their own right. Barrie’s worst options last season, earning a 47 percent expected goals share, but a 61 percent goals share, completely built upon the strength of their offence. For most lines that’s a bad sign; for this line it’s a signal to how much their talent can drive results. All three are modest play-pliers, but very strong goal-drivers — and in the end that’s all that matters isn’t it?

That Makar was so good during the playoffs (and that the team also drafted Bowen Byram fourth overall at the draft) is likely what made Barrie expendable as there’s a good chance he can replace one of Barrie’s value. My model expects Makar to be worth 1.7 wins which would be the highest on Colorado’s blue line and right on the cusp of being a number one defender. If he can prove he’s that in year one, it’s another way to Avalanche can exceed their projection, but that is a very lofty goal. It’s extremely rare for a defender to step in to provide that kind of value in his rookie season, but Makar is a special player and should have every opportunity to do so.

The rest of the group isn’t much to behold though and that’s where my model struggles to see the contender that many are ready to anoint Colorado as. Samuel Girard is the best of the bunch here of course, and at 21 already holds top pairing value with the potential for more. He’s an absolutely elite puck-mover that’s already been challenged by tough minutes, but his ability to drive play isn’t there yet. He looked terrific with Makar in the playoffs, but surprisingly has had the team’s weakest offensive impact by expected goals in his first two seasons. He can hold his own defensively, but generating chances looks to be an issue with him on the ice, leading to a 47 percent expected goals rate over the last two seasons – the worst mark on the team. He does a lot individually and can put up points, but for whatever reason it’s not showing up in his on-ice results.

The lack of offence is common trait among the Avalanche defense that’s not only on Girard. All three are very strong goalies in their own right. Barrie’s worst options last season, earning a 47 percent expected goals share, but a 61 percent goals share, completely built upon the strength of their offence. For most lines that’s a bad sign; for this line it’s a signal to how much their talent can drive results. All three are modest play-pliers, but very strong goal-drivers — and in the end that’s all that matters isn’t it?

Last year was his toughest year though – he only saved two goals above expected and the transition from Washington’s system to Colorado’s might be to blame. It certainly was to start the season and leaves some risk for what he’s capable of over a starter’s workload. If Grubauer falters, the Avalanche will struggle to live up the massive expectations set at their feet, especially since the safety net is the unproven Pavel Francouz. He’s a wildcard with sterling AHL and KHL numbers over the last few seasons, but there’s no guarantee that translates to the NHL. In any

San Jose!} there is likely a major driver of the hype machine and it all started with the arrival of Makar.

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sense, he’ll still likely be better than replacement level as a back-up (goalies without NHL work are the only players without projections) and that’s where the team can find some extra value that bumps this projection up closer to what some fans would hope.

Change one letter from hope and you get hype, and the two are very related concepts when it comes to Colorado’s upcoming season. The hype surrounding this team stems from the hope that a number of players look primed for a breakout. Makar should lead the blue line, Girard should continue to ascend, Jost and Compher should take the next step up front, Donskoi and Burakovsky should prove to be capable top six forwards, and Grubauer should cement himself as one of the league’s better starters.

It’s a lot of should, and not a lot of will and the reason the Avalanche aren’t graded higher is because being that high depends on those things being more certain rather than unproven. It would be no surprise if everything worked out as some foresee, and adding that to one of the best lines in hockey certainly would make Colorado a team to beat come playoff time, but the fact it hasn’t happened yet means it’s better to reserve caution with their forecast, rather then weight the team down with mighty expectations.

Soon, you’ll get better Avalanche fans, that’s a promise. With a very strong prospect pool and an elite core, it’s only a matter of time before Colorado is at or near the top of the league – it might even be this season. But I’m not ready to crown them as a contender just yet.

Market Expectations

Colorado Avalanche: 97.5 points

As alluded to many times above, the Avalanche come into this season with huge expectations with a market price of 97.5 points, a one-point drop from where it opened at 98.5 points. The money is on the under here and for good reason as the current odds are a little overblown at the moment.

What Fans Predict

Public Sample: 1,337

Fan Sample: 122

Everyone only sees upside whether that’s the team’s own fans or optimistic outsiders – almost no one is picturing this Avalanche season going anything but smoothly. I guess that means my model is on its own island. We’ll see who’s wrong come April, and considering how exciting this team looks on paper, I’d be more than thrilled if it was my model.

What The Athletic Insider Thinks

Ryan S. Clark: The thought around the Colorado Avalanche from those within the organization is cautious optimism. It is a franchise that has come a long way since the 48-point campaign in 2016-17. One that Vegas considers to have strong odds to win the Western Conference along with the Stanley Cup. But there are still questions.

Getting Andre Burakovsky and Nazem Kadri should fix all the problems on the second line but that answer will not be known until later. The same goes for defense until Ian Cole returns. Avalanche coach Jared Bednar has a number of potential options – including Bowen Byram – who could challenge for that spot in training camp. Another area where there are questions are goaltending. Most of that talk is around Philipp Grubauer but there is a curiosity to see how Pavel Francouz does as a full-time NHL backup. General manager Joe Sakic has built one of the most promising young teams that could be starting their Stanley Cup contender window right now. What separates the Avalanche from other teams, at the moment, is seeing how certain questions in key areas are solved.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
ESPN places Avalanche #1 in long-term power rankings

By Nate Lundy

September 17, 2019

On Tuesday, ESPN released a set of power rankings for all 31 NHL teams. However, in this list, rather than focusing on just the 2019-20 season, the writers looked at which teams were in the best position for the next three years. The Colorado Avalanche topped the list.

The rankings took four factors into consideration. First, the team's current roster. Second, the team's prospects. Next, they considered the salary cap and contract situation. Finally, they graded the front office and coaching staff.

Based on those factors, the Avalanche checked in with an overall score of 87.8, good enough to beat out the Tampa Bay Lightning (87.7) by just a tenth of a point.

"Everyone in the NHL is talking about the Avalanche these days," said ESPN hockey analyst Emily Kaplan. "They are loaded enough to win now, and their best players are young and cheap; case in point is Nathan MacKinnon, a top-three player in the league, playing on a ridiculous bargain at $6.3 million through 2023. Eventually, these guys will need new contracts, and that will test GM Joe Sakic's discipline."

ESPN's Greg Wyshynski added his own thoughts, including where he has concern about the Avalanche.

"About the only point of concern for the Avalanche at this point is whether they'll meet the expectations that have been placed on them," said Wyshynski. "Because otherwise, they have a young core that's the envy of the league, and a salary cap outlook for the next three seasons that is equally enviable. Coach Jared Bednar and GM Joe Sakic have rightfully earned their admiration with the group they've constructed — now let's see what it does on the ice."

There is no doubt the Avalanche have a lot of pressure on them for the upcoming season. There is a spotlight on them that has not existed for several years, including the fourth-best odds to win the Stanley Cup. With the preseason underway on Tuesday, all eyes will now turn to the talent on the ice to see if the Avs can live up to the hype.
Their careers at a crossroad, two Avs are in danger of being left behind

BY EVAN RAWAL
SEPTEMBER 17, 2019

“They’ve got something to prove, for me.”

Those were the words of Jared Bednar on the eve of Avalanche training camp last week when asked about A.J. Greer and Vladislav Kamenev. While the two of them have had very different paths in the Avs organization, both are in the most pivotal training camps of their careers.

No longer on their entry-level contracts, the two young forwards signed one-year “show me” deals this summer. Once Mikko Rantanen gets extended, the Avs will have 12 “one-way” contracts amongst their forward group, with Tyson Jost being the 13th forward in the rotation.

The numbers don’t look good for the two waiver-eligible youngsters, but don’t tell them that.

“Not at all,” Greer said when asked if he is approaching this camp any differently on just a one year deal. “For me, just to be the hardest working guy out there. To be the best that I can be and excel in the things that I do best. I’ve never been better prepared than I am now.”

Speaking exclusively to BSN Denver, the soft-spoken Kamenev made it clear that he’s ready, and has been, to be a full-time NHL player.

“I think so,” Kamenev said after practice on Sunday, when asked if he’s ready to be full time in the NHL. “I was ready to go last year too, but I had some injury at the beginning of the year so I started playing in the AHL.”

Injuries, unfortunately, have been the story of Kamenev’s career in Colorado. Since being acquired in the infamous Matt Duchene trade in November of 2017, the 23-year-old has been limited to only 35 games total in the organization.

For two straight years, his seasons have more or less ended on long term injuries caused by hits. Just when he was starting to become a regular in the Avs lineup last year, a shoulder injury in a blowout loss to Tampa Bay prematurely ended his season.

“Yeah, of course, especially for the second year in a row,” Kamenev said when asked if the playoff runs have been tough to watch with not being able to help. “It happens almost from nothing. The second one, for sure.”

Still, the young Russian feels “more confident” this year, and has shown well in camp. During the scrimmage on Sunday, he stole the puck on the forecheck, moments later finishing the play off with a great shot, and on Monday he stood out in practice with his precision passing on the power play and willingness to put the puck on net at any moment. Kamenev is ready to play as much as he needs to in the preseason to impress the coaching staff.

“I will play as many games as they want me,” he said. “It’s not my choice. If they tell me, I will play.”

For the 22-year-old Greer, things are a little different. He’s dealt with questions about his maturity, and while he’s shown flashes at the NHL level, he’s only been able to stick with the Avs for 37 games spread across his three professional seasons. Coming off his best season in the AHL with 44 points in 54 games for the Colorado Eagles, and feeling “like a much happier person”, Greer may not have much left to prove in the AHL. He looks at it a different way.

“It’s not about something that I have to prove,” he said after Monday’s practice. “These last three years I think I’ve done really well, and I’m going to continue to do really well wherever I am. I know my abilities. Wherever I am, I’m going to be the best player I can be. I’ve gotten a lot of opportunities in the AHL, and I’ve produced, and going forward I’m not going to change my set of skills.”

Much like Kamenev, Greer has shown well through the four-day training camp. On Saturday, Bednar made it a point to mention that it was “one of the best practices Greer has had in all of his time with us. He looks improved.” The former second round pick has spent most of camp with Pierre-Edouard Bellemare, and the chemistry has been immediate.

“He’s a really good guy,” Greer said about Bellemare. “It’s funny because when we first met each other, we had a scuffle in Vegas, and we immediately laughed it off. He brings a leadership element to his game. He’s really vocal and I need someone like that because I’m vocal as well. I felt really comfortable playing on his line and being around him. There was chemistry there and I hope I get to play with him again.”

Strong showings in camp are just the first step to making the team. With just six preseason games to show they’re worthy, Greer and Kamenev now enter the next phase in their search for a roster spot.

Let the battle begin.
Avalanche Training Camp Observations: Kadri the key

BY AJ HAEFELE

SEPTEMBER 16, 2019

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.

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.

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.
"I want to be better": Joonas Donskoi hoping he and Avs take next step together

BY EVAN RAWAL
SEPTEMBER 15, 2019

Like all of the players, Joonas Donskoi found himself huffing and puffing after the annual conditioning testing on Friday morning. Being one of the Avs new additions, and one who has made many trips to the Pepsi Center on the opposing team, I had to ask: Is the altitude effect a real thing?

"It’s real," Donskoi said after the third day of camp. "Colorado is a tough place to play in when you’re visiting. It’s tough."

That’s something the 27-year-old Finn won’t have to worry about anymore. After signing a four-year contract with the Avalanche in the summer, he decided it would be best to show up early in Colorado and get as used to the altitude as quickly he could.

"Now I’m fine," he told BSN Denver on Sunday. "The first couple of weeks it was tough getting used to the altitude. I’m used to it now."

Coming off the best season of his career in San Jose, the Avs were eager to snag the winger in free agency, making him their top priority and first acquisition of unrestricted free agency. With 14 goals and 37 points last season in San Jose, Donskoi would have finished sixth amongst Avs forwards in scoring.

Still, part of the reason why he chose Denver is that he thinks he has another level he can reach. At an annual cap hit of $3.9M per year, the Avs are banking on that.

"I’m looking to take the next step in my career," Donskoi made clear on Sunday. "I haven’t showed my best the four years I’ve been in the league. This is kind of a fresh start for myself. I want to be better."

Donskoi has wasted no time fitting in with his new teammates. He was one of the better skaters through the first two days of training camp. On Sunday, he opened the scoring in the scrimmage on just his first shift, skating effortlessly through the neutral zone before crossing the blue line and beating Pavel Francouz with a wrister.

Although he looks to have fit in seamlessly with his new teammates, that doesn’t mean Donskoi wasn’t on edge before camp started, having known only Matt Nieto before joining.

"To be honest, I was pretty nervous," he said. "I was super excited to come, but this is the first time for me switching a team. I played for the Sharks for four years, and before that, I was in the Finnish league always with the same team. It’s new talent for me and I couldn’t wait to get going."

The hype around this Avalanche team is growing, and players around the league are taking notice. That’s been a constant theme the new acquisitions have pointed out this weekend, and Donskoi was no different.

"I really liked the Avs team last year," Donskoi stated. "The organization is heading in the right direction. There’s a lot of good young guys who have become great players in the NHL, and I feel like the game style fits my style here too. I really like the team."

The Avalanche are looking to take off and join the NHL’s elite, and if the first few days of camp are any indication, Donskoi’s career may take off with them.
Avalanche Training Camp Observations: Scrimmages open door for competition

BY AJ HAEFELE
SEPTEMBER 15, 2019

After two days of mostly systems installation work, the Avalanche got into some real competitive situations today with small-team scrimmages. The two sessions ran as normal so the scrimmages weren’t too deep with each team only having a couple defensive pairings and lines each but it provided some of the younger guys real opportunities to shine against NHL competition.

As always, a few players stepped up and stood out. A few didn’t. Today, we’re starting at the very top.

Nathan MacKinnon has long been demonstrative at practices in the past. I’ll never forget him firing a stick about 12 rows up in T-Mobile Arena last year during a morning skate. When he gets frustrated, he isn’t afraid to let it out.

He showed that again yesterday when a drill wasn’t going well and he slammed his stick on the ice and shouted some adult language at nobody in particular. He did it again today when his line wasn’t executing the way he expects it to.

There are two ways to look at this: your star player is so locked in on winning a Stanley Cup that he’s setting the tone for what he expects from himself and his teammates on a daily basis. If you’re a member of the Colorado Avalanche this season, you’re coming to work. Every. Single. Day.

The other way to look at it is that the notoriously combustible on-ice personality of MacKinnon is experiencing a blow-up a little bit earlier than normal and he needs to relax some. Getting this way at camp sets up for a very long year if he keeps humming along at this frequency.

The way I see it, it’s a lot more of number one than two because his teammates are responding to it. I’ve talked to several players and the way they’ve read it is “If a guy with that talent is going to work that hard, I have no excuses not to match the effort level.”

This is how a championship attitude is built.

There were a number of standouts today but the guys who caught my eye most frequently all came down the middle.

Pierre-Edouard Bellemare is just so solid at everything he does. I mean everything. He’s sticky defensively, he wins faceoffs, he’s heavy along the wall and has a disruptive stick in the neutral zone. It’s just camp but…I’m a fan early on.

Vladislav Kamenev was awesome today. He used his size well along the wall and was hard on pucks, digging them out against some pretty solid competition. What really stood out, though, was two shots in particular. One was a backhand that he whirled and fired that went up high and hit the post, the other a wrister that was a pure snipe during the scrimmage. A great day for 81.

Mentioned him yesterday but Nazem Kadri continues to be the catalyst of a second line that has found instant chemistry. They scored twice during the scrimmage and even though Tyson Jost appeared to get dinged up early on he came back and finished strong.

Shane Bowers really hasn’t been much of a story through the first two days of training camp after being a stud out in Anaheim during the Rookie Faceoff. That changed today during the scrimmage when he showed off that polished two-way game we keep raving about. He blasted one home on a one-timer that Pavel Francouz never had a chance to stop.

The centers weren’t the only guys who I liked today.

Martin Kaut showed during scrimmages the skillset that is going to make him such an effective NHL player someday. He is the master of the all the little things: stick lifts, the extra pass, waiting the extra second for a passing lane to open, all of that.

I say this all the time but it bears repeating: Kaut isn’t a flashy player but when you watch him closely, you see he consistently finds ways to help his linemates. He made several nice plays today that I saw. He’ll need that to translate to the AHL if he wants to see a promotion this year.

Speaking of promotions, most of us had left A.J. Greer’s NHL career for dead after a disappointing summer that included an arrest in New York and Colorado acquiring enough forward depth where him finding a spot seemed very unlikely.

He just might be carving out that job, however. He’s been very good the last two days while playing alongside Bellemare and Colin Wilson’s lingering injury issues have opened the door for him to get looks with players he may not otherwise have gotten. So far, he’s taking advantage.

As usual with Greer, however, we’ll see.

I mentioned these two guys yesterday but wanted to follow-up and mention how strong they were again today.

A major emphasis from the coaching staff today was players firing passes at NHL speed. Nothing soft just to get the drill done. Bednar wanted crisp, hard passes tape to tape and both Rosen and Byram were able to do that with ease.

To be honest, they both look like NHL players right now. Rosen, 25, should be that way after playing huge minutes with the Toronto Marlies last year in the AHL but Byram’s polish has been damn impressive given he’s a teenager.

The longer Erik Johnson takes to get on the ice, the more these guys should get looks together.

Igor Shvyrev made a number of very nice plays, including helping setup a Luka Burzan goal during the scrimmage. He’s building off a strong showing in Anaheim.

Pavel Francouz looks awesome. I don’t put much stock into training camp performances by goaltenders because very few game situations are involved but the man they call “Frankie” looks locked in already.

Nikita Zadorov left the scrimmage and wasn’t seen again. Bednar didn’t have much of an update on him and said more would be known tomorrow.

Valeri Nichushkin was on the ice for the first time today and him being two days behind really showed. He just got into town late Friday, did physical/medical testing Saturday, and was thrown into the fire today. He struggled but what else did you expect in that situation.
The brave new world of RFA contracts and what it means for Mikko Rantanen

BY ANDI DUROUX

SEPTEMBER 15, 2019

Friday night, Toronto Maple Leaf forward Mitch Marner signed a six-year contract extension worth $65.4 million. His cap hit of $10.9 million now ranks seventh in the league, and he’s now the second-highest paid winger in the NHL.

Why does this matter to the Avs? Because Mitch Marner was drafted the same year as Mikko Rantanen. He’s coming off his ELC, just like Rantanen. He plays wing next to an elite centerman, just like Rantanen. He’s put up 224 points (67G/157A) in 241 games (0.9 pts/GP), which is very similar to Rantanen’s 209 points (80G/129A) in 239 games (0.87 pts/GP).

The biggest difference? Mitch Marner now has a contract for the 2019-20 season. Mikko Rantanen does not.

Resetting the RFA Market

There is no doubt that Marner sets the market for the remaining unsigned restricted free agents. As of this writing, Kyle Connor (67G/61A/128Pts in 178GP, 0.72pts/GP) and Patrik Laine (110G/94A/205Pts in 237GP, 0.78pts/GP) of Winnipeg, Matthew Tkachuk (71G/103A/174Pts in 224GP, 0.78pts/GP) of Calgary, Brock Boeser (59G/57A/116pts in 140GP, 0.83pts/GP) of Vancouver, and Brayden Point (91G/107A/198Pts in 229GP, 0.86pts/GP) of Tampa Bay join Rantanen as high-end young forwards still waiting for a contract.

Now, it’s easy to say that Marner’s contract is an outlier, an overpay. Every year, Luke and Josh Younggren of Evolving Hockey use market trends to project free agent salaries that summer. For Marner, they expected him to receive an 8-year deal at $9.6 per year.

Not only was the actual deal two years shorter to allow Marner to hit unrestricted free agency closer to his prime at age 28 rather than age 30, but it also came in $1.2 mil more per year. They calculated what a six-year deal would look like as well, and pegged $8.9 mil as the expected cap hit. Marner’s actual numbers cleared that by a full $2 million.

Of course, there’s the Toronto factor to consider. According to Forbes’ annual valuation of NHL teams, Toronto ranks only behind the New York Rangers in total value, and third behind NYR and the Montreal Canadiens in revenue. They’re not shy about throwing that money around either.

The decision to sign John Tavares to a seven-year, $77 million deal ($11 mil cap hit) in the summer of 2018 set the internal comparable for Marner much higher than anywhere else in the league. Marner’s similarly-aged teammate, Auston Matthews (111G/94A/205Pts in 212GP, 0.97pts/GP) also inked a five-year deal worth $11.6 million per season in February.

There’s no doubt that this context is critical to understanding how Marner managed to land this contract. However, it’s justifiable in a broader sense as well, even if it does purposely upset the norms and correct a market inefficiency.

Young players begin their NHL careers on extremely cheap three-year, entry-level contracts (ELCs) that are set by the league. After that, their original team retains exclusive negotiating rights (the “restricted” part of Restricted Free Agent (RFA)) until they’re 27 or have 7 NHL seasons under their belt.

However, NHL players – especially elite ones – hit their prime between age 22-25. Under the current system, the best players during their best years have extremely limited negotiating power and are usually highly underpaid for the amount of value they bring to their teams.

Yet once those players have “paid their dues” and hit the magic age of 27, teams pay up. Artemi Panarin became the highest-paid wing in the league this summer when he signed a seven-year deal worth $11.6 million per. However, he’ll be 34 when his contract ends. The Rangers are hoping they get a few highly productive years out of him before they’ll likely sharply overpay for declining play into his 30s.

Compare this to Marner who will only be 28 and still in the tail end of his prime years when his deal is done. Which would you rather pay for over the course of those deals?

Marner is good now. Toronto’s good now. While that’s a team that doesn’t have to worry about cash flow, it’s probably going to hit a peak while Marner is in his prime and fans want to pay up to see exciting players on the ice.

For smaller markets (more on this in a minute), it makes sense to pay good players while they’ll still be good over the course of the full contract. It aligns expenditures with revenue and helps avoid trying to make star players whole when they’re old and bad and the team is slipping into a rebuild.

Ever since the salary cap made finding market inefficiencies more important, the NHL has been trending younger and younger. When RFA aged players bring more value at a similar price than veterans, it makes sense to play them instead. The fact junior development leagues have been producing more pro-ready talent at a younger age than ever before helps as well. Teenagers in the NHL are not the rarity they used to be.

Unfortunately, the league is still largely operating under old-school thinking of when it’s time to pay your players. Six of the top 10 scorers last year were in their RFA years, and more than half of the top 20 could say the same. Some have netted paydays, but most were comparatively underpaid versus their UFA counterparts.

Marner’s contract breaks this paradigm and forces Toronto to pay for his value while he’s generating it. And we know he will – he scored 94 points last season as a 21-year old. Dom Luszczyszyn at the Athletic projects that Marner will be a top 15 player in the league over the next six years and has a 74% chance of providing positive value on this contract.

While it’s easy to look at this from the team side and panic a bit because it puts a greater squeeze on the cap, it also forces clubs to pay their players more equitably and in a time frame more in line with their revenue. In the long run, this is not a bad thing for the health of the league.

It also may even drive down the amount of money teams have to spend on ill-advised UFA salaries, saving GMs from some truly awful contracts. Players deserve to get paid for their services, but doing so while they’re most likely to be good is far less risky than trying to do so after the fact.

Marner’s contract provides a much higher comparable contract for RFA negotiations both this summer and into the future. While the “Toronto factor” and team payroll context likely pushes his pay quite a bit higher than other RFAs will receive, it should considerably bump their salaries as well.

The demographics of the league has changed. It’s high time the pay scale does as well.

Impact on Rantanen & The Avs

So what does this mean for the Avs? With the Marner contract now on the books, Toronto has the most money slated to be paid this year. Colorado has the least. The Avs currently have approximately $15.6 million left in cap space, and while Rantanen will take up some of that, there’s plenty of room for everyone without the cap loophole tomfoolery we’re about to see from the Leafs.

However, the Avs are not the Leafs. They play in a much smaller market and have a much smaller cash flow, which in some cases could make supporting a large, long-term contract difficult. Forbes valued the Avs at $430 million last December, a lowly 24th on their list.

However, the Kroenke family owns not just the Avs, but the arena, ticketing, merchandise, broadcast, and other non-hockey professional teams that often pool resources. Where Forbes draws the lines between the Avs and the rest of the empire is hazy at best, so there’s little doubt the club is more profitable than they appear.

They’re also a team on the up and ups. The NHL is a gate-driven league, so much more in the seats means more money in the bank. The Avs saw the largest increase in attendance (9.9%) between the ‘17-18 and ‘18-19 season, yet were still below capacity. With the projected trajectory of the team, increasing gate revenue is unlikely to be an issue.
Furthermore, NHL players aren’t paid for the playoffs. When they do receive checks, it’s for the amount they’re contracted for in the regular season. Anything above and beyond that (ie, the postseason) by and large goes into the team’s coffers. The same goes for special events, such as the outdoor game in Colorado Springs this year. It’s unlikely the Avs will operate at a loss in the years to come.

And unlike other small-market teams, the Avs have successfully fielded extremely expensive rosters. The $60.8 they paid in salary during the 2002-03 season equates to $86.9 million in today’s dollars, which is $5.4 over the current salary cap. Joe Sakic earned a (non-adjusted) $15 million signing bonus in 1997, and his salaries in the years leading up to the lockout were in the 9.8 million range. By 1999-00, Peter Forsberg was making $9 to $11 million per season. Patrick Roy was making $7.5-8.5.

No matter what Rantanen asks, this ownership and this market can easily support it. The Avs are stable with almost zero risk of relocation and play in a city that owns one of the NHL’s longest sellout streaks. They’re also primed to be very successful over the next few years with Rantanen as a big driver behind it.

They may not be the Leafs, but revenue should not be an issue in Colorado over the duration of Rantanen’s next contract.

Another limiting factor is the other players on the team. The highest internal comp contract-wise is Nathan MacKinnon’s $6.3 mil for the next four years. While you don’t want to anger your star player by paying his linemate significantly more than him, Rantanen’s back-to-back 80+ point seasons finishing out his ELC are a bit more impressive than MacKinnon’s 38 and 52. When MacKinnon’s seven-year deal is up in 2023, there’s very little doubt that he’ll be made whole, but in the meantime, paying Rantanen market rate shouldn’t cause a problem.

The only problem with Rantanen earning Marner-type money starts to arise when said new MacKinnon contract hits in four years. Or the new Kadri contract hits in three. Or the new Landeskog and Makar contracts hit in three.

The Avs have built a promising young team that will earn a lot of money, but figuring out how to proportionally divide that among so many good players, fill out the rest of the roster, and maintain cap compliance is going to be a challenge.

Fortunately, Seattle will be joining the league in two seasons and bringing $650 million in expansion fees with it. The US broadcast rights also expire in 2022 and are expected to bring another huge influx of cash. The salary cap is expected to steadily rise over the next few years at least.

The Avs also have maintained an impressive amount of roster flexibility. Sam Girard is the only player signed past the MacKinnon summer of 2023, and the majority of the Avs projected players – especially depth players – are scheduled to expire this summer. GM Joe Sakic has been careful about minimizing contract terms.

Even though Donskoi and Compher each received unusual four-year deals this summer, the team seems cognizant of the raises that are coming for their main players. While they can’t go too crazy with Rantanen’s deal, they have flexibility elsewhere. If Sakic remains diligent, building around a $9 or $10 million dollar a year contract shouldn’t be a problem.

Paradigm Shift

In the end, the NHL is a balance between the owners and the players. Without the owners, there’d be nowhere to play, no one to sell tickets or broadcast rights, no one to figure out travel arrangements and pay for hotel rooms. But without players, there would be no revenue. Fans pay to see the players skate on the ice, not the mechanisms that keep everything running smoothly beyond it.

Makar’s contract may seem like a wrench in this balance, but it’s not. It’s merely correcting a market inefficiency and paying players for what they’ll help the team bring in, not underpaying them during their best years and compensating on the tail end.

Makar did what he had to do to get this deal. He negotiated publicly through his agent and agent-friendly media personalities. He faced backlash and outrage and fans taking it extremely personally that a boy from Toronto wasn’t taking what the club was offering no questions asked. Since the Leafs had backed themselves into a very problematic cap situation, the fact he was asking for above the going market price instead of taking a

Team concerns shouldn’t be the only ones weighted when discussing RFA contracts. Marner’s contract is a win for the players and should help more fairly distribute revenue to those that are actually responsible for earning it across the league. It’s a healthier way to pay players, both for them and their club’s financials.

And yes, this applies to Rantanen. And in a few years, Cale Makar. And Bowen Byram. And all the other young stars the Avs will ice in the future. “Pay your dues” based strictly on age needs to be – and now finally may be – a thing of the past. If you have the numbers, if you’re an established core member of a team, choosing between long-term security and making bank on your first non-ELC contract shouldn’t be an either/or.

In short, Marner’s new contract is good for Rantanen, good for a league that struggles to proportionately compensate young stars while severely overpaying for aging ones, and isn’t going to critically hamper the Avs cap, profit, or internal team dynamics moving forward.

It’s a paradigm shift and one that may feel like it’s hurting the Avs in the short term. But Mitch Marner will be the first of many young stars campaigning for more equitable pay. The NHL is younger than ever before. With any luck, this brave new world of RFA deals will make it healthier as well.

BSN DENVER LOADED: 09.18.2019
Kole Sherwood of New Albany determined to make Blue Jackets roster

Brian Hedger The Columbus Dispatch @BrianHedger
Sep 17, 2019 at 9:31 PM

The story line remains, but Kole Sherwood is thinking much bigger now.

After making his “hometown” dream a reality last season, logging the first two games of his NHL career with the Blue Jackets, the 22-year-old forward from New Albany feels ready for the next stage of his development.

“It’s a good story, but you’re not going to make it because of that, and you’re not going to have a career just because you’re a hometown kid,” said Sherwood, the only player from the Columbus area to play for the Blue Jackets. “That only goes so far. I’m past that. I’m just in a zone right now. I’m really focused and just determined to make it.”

Sherwood is off to a strong start, impressing with his skating in scrimmages and conditioning tests. He also got a chance to impress Tuesday night in the Jackets’ first preseason game and did, scoring a goal in a 4-1 win over the Buffalo Sabres at Nationwide Arena.

It was a stage that Sherwood had envisioned since the beginning of his offseason training, when he and older brother Kiefer — a 24-year old Anaheim Ducks forward — began their summer workouts, focusing on speed, balance and explosive motion.

“We pushed each other,” the younger Sherwood said. “We want this just as bad as anyone else, so we did some different stuff this summer with our training and how we prepared, and just did everything together. I feel more explosive in my hips now. I feel like I’m one step ahead of everyone else, and that just gives you confidence.”

It’s a confidence that sprouted last season, when each of the Sherwoods made his NHL debut. Now, they are both hunting for full-time NHL work, which Kole isn’t afraid to say.

“I don’t feel like it is (my year), I know it is,” Sherwood said, flatly. “That’s not being cocky. It’s confidence. I know everything’s coming (together), so I’m ready to go. There’s open spots here, not unlike other years, but there’s actually spots open now. So it’s my spot to lose, I think.”

He is certainly in the mix, but it’s a deep field of prospects looking to capitalize on the Jackets’ loss of forwards Artemi Panarin, Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel in free agency. Despite the subtractions, the team’s forward lines are nearly filled with returning players, and Sherwood is competing against a handful of talented forward prospects, headlined by Alexandre Texier and Emil Bemstrom.

Texier made his NHL debut last season, including six playoff games, while Bemstrom, 20, led Sweden’s top professional league in goals at age 19, the youngest player to ever pull that off. Eric Robinson, Sonny Milano, Trey Fix-Wolansky, Kevin Stenlund and Liam Foudy are other forwards competing with Sherwood, who had 16 goals and 25 points as a Cleveland Monsters rookie last season in the American Hockey League.

“I love his skating,” Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella said. “You know how fast the league is. It certainly gives him an opportunity to be looked at because of his skating. You’ve got him, you’ve got Robinson, you’ve got so many guys that can skate. It’s going to be an interesting camp as we start evaluating into those exhibition games.”

Sherwood’s plan, however, is to make it a little less interesting.

“You have to come in here and take someone’s job,” he said. “That’s the attitude I’ve approached it with.”

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 09.18.2019
Blue Jackets’ Ryan Murray gets ‘maintenance’ day

Brian Hedger The Columbus Dispatch @BrianHedger

Sep 17, 2019 at 7:31 AM

It might not be a set maintenance plan, per se, but the Blue Jackets are going to monitor Ryan Murray’s health even closer this season.

Murray will, too, after missing significant portions of the past two seasons with back injuries. Murray told reporters last week he will ask for days off, if needed, to stay available for games. That started Monday with his absence from practice and a scrimmage.

Murray had a “maintenance” day off the ice, after competing in practices and scrimmages during the weekend.

"Whether it is Ryan or any other player, we make decisions based on what’s best for that particular player at times throughout the season,” general manager Jarmo Kekalainen said. “There will be times when guys get maintenance days, if that is what is best for them. Ryan is no different. We understand the injury history and will do what we can to optimize his performance and availability throughout the season, as he is an important part of our blue line.”

The same message was echoed by coach John Tortorella, who has watched Murray develop into one of his most dependable two-way defensemen when healthy.

"I’ll readily admit, I’ve been very hard on (Murray) since I’ve coached him here," Tortorella said. "I watched him play last year and I thought he was outstanding, so he’s a pretty important guy on our back end. We’re going to be really careful, as far as some of the struggles he’s had, as far as his health, and hopefully just try to meet him halfway here, as far as camp and getting him some rest here when he needs it — so we don’t lose him.”

Murray had one goal and 28 assists in 56 games last season before leaving the lineup Feb. 18 against the Tampa Bay Lightning. He didn’t return, missing the final 24 games plus all 10 playoff games. He also missed three-plus months in 2017-18 with a back issue.

"You want to be sharp and be ready to play … but at the end of the day, you want to be in the games," Murray said. "And if you’ve got to take a day off or two, then I’m going to be requesting that. We talked about just (taking it) day-by-day and making sure that we’re staying on top of it.”

Big role for ‘Tex’ ahead?

Nothing is official this early in camp, but it’s starting to look like rookie forward Alexandre Texier might have a shot to start the season on the Jackets’ top line.

If so, he would play in the spot at left wing left vacant by Artemi Panarin — paired with top center Pierre-Luc Dubois and right wing Cam Atkinson.

"He’s going to learn as he goes," Atkinson said of Texier, who scored off a nice wrist shot in Monday’s second scrimmage. "I think he’s ready for the opportunity. Hopefully he continues to play strong, like he has been. He’s got some serious skill, so his confidence backs it up.”

Young lineup vs. Sabres

The Blue Jackets will dress a lineup of mostly prospects against the Buffalo Sabres in their first preseason game Tuesday at Nationwide Arena. New Cleveland Monsters coach Mike Eaves and his staff will run the bench.

Seven players who finished last season on the NHL roster will play, led by defensemen Seth Jones and Zach Werenski. Forwards Texier, Emil Bemstrom, Kole Sherwood and Sonny Milano will also suit up, along with goalies Joonas Korpisalo — who has the most NHL experience in camp — and 23-year-old Matiss Kivlenieks.
Blue Jackets | Cam Atkinson enjoying spotlight in 9th season with team

Adam Jardy The Columbus Dispatch @AdamJardy
Sep 17, 2019 at 6:23 AM

The process was a grind. Commercials were filmed, photographs were taken and interviews — so many interviews — were scheduled for Cam Atkinson as the lone Blue Jackets representative at the NHL Player Media Tour in Chicago shortly before preseason camp.

The process itself wasn’t glamorous. But Atkinson’s inclusion, as well as the resulting exposure in the form of promotional materials for national media outlets, has the longest-tenured Blue Jackets player in prime spotlight position as he begins his ninth season.

The spotlight isn’t something Atkinson has coveted. It is one he’s prepared to embrace while being asked to build on a career-best 69-point season a year ago.

“It’s nice to be one of those go-to guys,” he said after Monday’s practice. “I feel like I have been, it’s just I haven’t gotten the notoriety — not that I need to. I kind of like going under the radar, but it is also nice to be noticed for your hard work you do on the ice and off the ice as well. I’ve been ready.”

Atkinson has totaled at least 40 points in six consecutive seasons while playing in at least 78 games in five of those six years. He was a All-Star in 2016-17, setting career highs with 35 points and 27 assists without missing a game. Last season, in 80 games, he topped those scoring totals with 41 goals and 28 assists just before turning age 30 in June.

So it’s not like Atkinson hasn’t been a significant piece of the Jackets’ puzzle. But with the Jackets faced with replacing their leading point-getter from the past two seasons in Artemi Panarin, coach John Tortorella said he’s leaning on Atkinson for even more.

“It’s a guy that’s small in stature but doesn’t play that way,” the coach said. “It’s a huge piece this year to where he’s got to be even better, but I think people understand what he’s given to the organization.” Tortorella noted Atkinson’s 41 goals last season and said, “we’re going to need more out of him and I believe we’ll get that. I think he knows there’s more there.”

To that end, Atkinson said he spent the offseason putting in extra work on his endurance that included nighttime 10-mile bike rides at roughly 18 mph. It’s made an impression on Tortorella, who cited Atkinson as a veteran who has shown great improvement handling the heavy-volume skating that is a hallmark of the coach’s camps.

How it translates to game action won’t be known for some time. The Jackets play their first exhibition game Tuesday night against the Buffalo Sabres, but Atkinson won’t play. Tortorella said he will play more young players than veterans in the first few exhibition games.

If there’s more in the tank for Atkinson to give, he’s ready to find out. And if a greater appreciation for his standing both within the team and the league is a byproduct, so be it.

“Maybe in a sense (I’ve felt underappreciated), but at the same time I don’t care because I know the type of player I am,” he said. “I feel like until we’ve won something or proven ourselves maybe that’s when we get talked about a little bit more, but we still have a lot to prove and still have a lot to accomplish.”
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 off-season 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 preseason 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.

Colorado, with $15.6 million available under the cap, could easily match any offer made to Rantanen (31-56-87). Point (41-51-92) has made it clear, for now, that he doesn’t want to leave the Lightning.

Winnipeg, with two big-ticket RFAs still unsigned, would appear particularly vulnerable.

The Jets have $15 million under the salary cap, but that might not be enough to sign Laine, who has scored 110 goals in his first three years, and Connor, who has had back-to-back 30-goal seasons.

Of the two players, Laine might be the easier player to pry out of Winnipeg, but the Jets would be loath to part with either.

Calgary has just $6.3 million available under the cap, so keeping Tkachuk (34-43-77) could get tricky if another club intervenes.

The Blue Jackets open their preseason Tuesday against the Buffalo Sabres in Nationwide Arena. But Kekalainen and the Blue Jackets haven’t entirely left the offseason behind just yet.

Notebook

• The NHL Players’ Association decided not to opt out of the current collective bargaining agreement, meaning the current deal in place between owners and players will be extended through Sept. 15, 2022. Three more seasons without labor strife.
• Blue Jackets captain Nick Foligno, asked earlier in the day about the players’ vote: “It’s been well documented that we’re not happy with some of the things that have gone on. We just feel like there could be a more fair deal in some aspects. At the end of the day, though, we get to play hockey, and we enjoy that we know how lucky we are to do that.”
• D Ryan Murray was held out of today’s scrimmages as a precaution, Kekalainen said. The Blue Jackets don’t want to overwork him early in camp. As of today, there is no plan in place to give Murray regular rest during the regular season, but it could come to that. He’s missed time the last two seasons with back injuries.
• After missing Sunday’s scrimmages with an illness, defenseman Markus Nutivaara was back on the ice Monday.


The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Kole Sherwood has caught John Tortorella’s eye, and an NHL job is within reach

By Aaron Portzline
Sep 15, 2019

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Soon enough, it’ll happen. Kole Sherwood, a Blue Jackets prospect, and Kiefer Sherwood, an Anaheim Ducks prospect, will play against each other in an NHL game, a storybook scene for the New Albany brothers and another milestone moment for the central Ohio hockey community.

For now, though, Kole Sherwood has arrived at his fifth training camp with the Blue Jackets with a much simpler goal — carving out a spot on the NHL roster.

“You’re always figuring things out at this level, I don’t care who you are,” Sherwood said. “But my confidence is really good. I feel like I belong here. I know I belong here, it’s not just a thought anymore.

“I’m ready to go. I feel like the stars are aligning and I’m ready to go.”

Sherwood still faces a steep climb to make the Blue Jackets out of training camp, but he’s made remarkable progress on the organization’s depth chart over the last 12 months.

At this point a year ago, Sherwood could only be called a “prospect” in the loosest sense of the word. He was under contract, sure, but his game was under major construction, too.

An early-season demotion to ECHL Jacksonville was explained by the Blue Jackets organization as the result of a glut of forwards on the AHL Cleveland roster. But it served as a wake-up call, too.

Sherwood began working extensively after minor-league practices with AHL Cleveland coach Trent Vogelhuber — also a Columbus hockey product — to improve his play away from the puck. Once it began to click, Sherwood’s game became more consistent, and then it elevated.

“A little bit of adversity early on (in my pro career), but I thought I bounced back and I handled it,” Sherwood said. “I grew a lot as a player, and I ended up moving up the lineup, getting rewarded and eventually I ended up here in Columbus.”

Sherwood had 16-9-25 with a plus-1 rating and 71 penalty minutes in 56 games with Cleveland. In mid-February, he was called up to play two games with the Blue Jackets.

Now Sherwood finds himself among the Blue Jackets’ “depth” forwards, a cluster of players who have an outside shot to make the roster out of training camp, but, failing that, will be on a shortlist for a recall as the 2019-20 season moves along.

The Blue Jackets have 1o players on one-year contracts, one surefire roster player on his entry-level deal (Pierre-Luc Dubois) and a rookie who is almost certain to make the grade (Alexandre Texier),

That likely leaves one roster spot for an extra forward, putting Sherwood in heavy competition with players like Emil Bemstrom, Marko Dano, Eric Robinson and Sonny Milano to earn the final spot.

Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella has taken notice. He’s “watching the kids” closely in the early camp scrimmages, he said.

“I don’t know a lot about him,” Tortorella said. “I love his skating. You know how fast the league is. It certainly gives him an opportunity to get looked at because of his skating.

“I saw him before camp started. He looks to be in great shape. He’s looked great in the testing. You’ve got him and Robinson and all these guys who can skate. It’s going to be interesting.”

Sherwood’s most noticeable moment in camp came Saturday when he crashed into Blue Jackets stay-at-home defenseman David Savard while in pursuit of the puck. It was Savard who ended up on his backside, which rarely happens.

Always a physical specimen, Sherwood is now up to 214 pounds on a 6-foot-2 frame. He gained 13 pounds and allowed his body fat to creep from 6 percent to 9 percent.

“I like feeling a little heavier,” he said. “I feel like I’m more powerful.”

Sherwood said he spoke with one of his best friends, Toronto’s Mitch Marner, on Saturday, congratulating the Maple Leafs star forward on his new six-year contract. The two met in 2015-16 when they played for the OHL’s London Knights.

At the end of the conversation, they looked forward to a face-to-face meeting Oct. 4, when the Blue Jackets open the season by hosting Toronto in Nationwide Arena.

Wishful thinking on Sherwood’s part, perhaps. But no longer out of the question.

“I don’t say I’m comfortable,” Sherwood said. “I say confident. I know what it takes now.”

Notebook
• D Markus Nutivaara missed part of Saturday’s scrimmages and all of Sunday’s activities due to illness.

• One of the bright spots early in camp has been center Alexander Wennberg, who is trying to bounce back in 2019-20 after two subpar seasons. On Saturday, Wennberg scored a goal that brought a loud cheer from a packed crowd in IceHaus. It was not a Bronx cheer; it felt like the crowd was trying to help lift Wennberg, who turns 25 next week.

• Tortorella on the Wennberg cheer, and his play: “Absolutely. They’re pulling for him. They’re pulling for him and they’re pissed at me because they think I’m screwing him. I don’t care what people think, all I want … I thought he had a terrific scrimmage. You can see where his concentration is, in keeping the puck. I thought he played really well. Really, in both scrimmages, that line (Gustav Nyquist, Wennberg, Oliver Bjorkstrand) played well. It could be a huge thing for this organization — huge — if he can find his way.”

• Goaltender Elvis Merzlikins snuffed an odd-man rush to preserve a 4-4 tie in the closing seconds of the first scrimmage Sunday, then stopped Bjorkstrand in the first round of the shootout to clinch a 5-4 win. There was quite a celebration with his new teammates, but, alas, no hugs.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Here's what to expect from Miro Heiskanen's second season, now that he's added some 'man strength'

By Matthew DeFranks
12:48 AM on Sep 18, 2019

FRISCO — It was in New Jersey during the first road trip of Jim Montgomery's first season that he wondered aloud about what Miro Heiskanen could become.

At the time, Heiskanen was five games into his career, a 19-year-old wunderkind who had already sent ripples around the league with an eye-popping second shift in the NHL. He hadn't drawn comparisons to Hall of Famer Scott Niedermayer yet or hadn't been snubbed in Calder Trophy voting. But still, Montgomery thought about the future of the then-rookie.

"Eventually, he's going to be a 40-point guy in this league," Montgomery said on Oct. 16. "And that's, I think, at the minimum. But he's going to be a guy that not only gets 40 points but he's also going to get 28 minutes and match up against other team's top lines once he develops some man strength."

Ask and he shall receive.

Over the summer, Heiskanen added eight pounds of muscle, both he and Montgomery said, bumping his weight up to 190 pounds. The added weight sets the stage for Heiskanen's sophomore season after he led all rookie defensemen with 12 goals and all rookies by averaging 23:07 of ice time.

On Tuesday morning ahead of the Stars' preseason game in Minnesota, Montgomery was asked how Heiskanen can improve more this season.

"He did most of the work already with his off-ice stuff, he's come back with I think eight pounds more muscle mass, which is going to help him log more ice time and also win more battles," Montgomery said. "There's little things to his game, stick positioning, defending the rush, not getting on his toes. He's so good with his defensive stick causing turnovers that sometimes he relies on it too much and it takes away from his skating ability to pivot and go."

Heiskanen attributed the weight gain to a longer summer than he's previously had. The previous year, Heiskanen played in the World Championships after also participating in the Olympics, the World Juniors and his team's season in Finland's Liiga. This summer, he was done playing in the first week of May.

Heiskanen is arguably the Stars' best skater (Denis Gurianov may be close) and he possesses a smooth and easy stride that makes him dangerous off the rush and difficult to lose when he's backchecking. In the offseason, Heiskanen said his biggest goals were to get stronger and accelerate faster when skating, and he has good news for the Stars.

"I think I'm a better skater now than I was last year," Heiskanen said. While the Stars have little concern for Heiskanen, Montgomery and his staff will have to find a partner for him. Last year, Roman Polak was Heiskanen's primary partner, but Montgomery said over the summer that Polak is better served for third-pairing matchups and minutes. Stephen Johns could have been a solution, but he's out indefinitely with post-traumatic headaches.

In the first five days of the preseason, Andrej Sekera has been paired with Heiskanen and the pair skated together in Minnesota on Tuesday night. Sekera is a 33-year-old veteran who was bought out by Edmonton this summer but has been a puck-moving, top-four defenseman in the past. Sekera is left-handed but said he's played about half his career on his off side.

Dickinson's role: Where Jason Dickinson plays will be an under-the-radar storyline the rest of the preseason. His spot on the NHL roster is assured, and he has the ability to be the top-six winger the Stars are looking for or the fourth-line center.

"I think I showed a lot of upside last year in that they know they can trust me in any position," Dickinson said. "They're comfortable putting me out on the wing, they can put me at center, they can put me on the first line, they can put me on the fourth line. It really doesn't matter where they put me."

On Tuesday night, he played on the top line with Roope Hintz and Denis Gurianov. As the roster is trimmed, Dickinson's role should come into focus better.

— Heiskanen, Sekera and Dickinson wore "A"s on their jerseys in Minnesota with the Stars' usual captain and alternate captains not in the lineup.

Dallas Morning News LOADED: 09.18.2019
Stars forward Joel Kiviranta displayed flashes of potential 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. Tuft manned the net-front on the first power play unit, and Gardner went 7-for-12 on faceoffs.

Tufte also had a glorious chance almost seven minutes into the second period when Noesen and Dellandrea set him up with an open net on a 3-on-1. He missed wide.
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 Anton Khudobin may be the NHL’s best backup. On top of that, 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 goalies 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 next in the series is Colton Point, who turned pro before the 2017-18 season and struggled to acclimate early to the pro game. He also dealt with injuries and, after a stellar NCAA career, began to lose his confidence in the ECHL. This is a reclamation season for Point, who is hoping to work his way up to the AHL and potentially challenge for a future NHL job.

He and I spoke in Traverse City during last week’s prospects tournament about his past and how he’s trying to mentally reset and find his game.

Was there ever a time you weren’t going to become a goalie?

For a long time when I was younger, my parents didn’t want me to be a goalie, but I always asked. Begged and begged and begged. Eventually, my dad got a loaner set of pads from the league, and I was wearing them around the house, and after my first game, I was hooked. So I don’t think there was ever a time I wasn’t gonna be a goalie, I enjoyed playing player, but I thought goalie was the coolest thing in the world, and that’s all I wanted to do.

How old when that breakthrough happened?

It was my second year of novice (Under-9 hockey). After the first game, I was hooked.

What do you think drove that desire to ask mom and dad in the first place?

I thought the gear was really cool. I was a little bigger as a child, so I thought I would get away with skating less, honestly. But I quickly learned that is not the case. But even then I thought the gear was super cool and just the idea of being the last man back there. You win, you take it and just the idea of being the last man back there. You win, you take it humbly. You lose, it’s on your shoulders. It’s a very rewarding position, but it’s very demanding. As a kid, even I realized that. And it’s exciting.

Were you good at it right away?

I wasn’t very good at it for a while. Until I was about 14, 15, is when I finally stopped growing, got some coordination and really started to dedicate myself to hockey. Growing up, I played a lot of sports and never really took hockey very seriously. I didn’t play Triple-A until my last bantam year. So I always played in house leagues, Single-A type stuff, and I was happy with that.

I had a coach that sort of asked me, “You gotta pick now. Do you wanna just do it for fun or do you want to make a go of it?” I’m a competitive person, and I feel like every person who tries to go to the NHL is. And I took that challenge on to keep getting better, keep developing, and I got more serious. Started focusing more on my health and stuff like that. There are a lot of different roads you can take.

What other sports where you playing as a kid?

I played a lot of volleyball and baseball in high school. Baseball is good for puck tracking, volleyball is good for explosive power, so I do think those things helped me. But at a certain point, you’re trying to practice every night for hockey, and you are trying to make this practice or that practice for something else, so you pick one. I didn’t focus solely on hockey too early, but at some point, you have to.

What position did you play in baseball?

I was a catcher for a bit, but a little hard on my knees when you are squatting like that all the time. So I switched to first base. I love baseball, baseball is fun.

Last season was a tough first pro season for you between results and injuries. What did you take away from that coming into this season?

You need confidence. Confidence is huge in goaltending. When you’re not starting and moving around (from team to team), that can take a toll on you and your mental state. It took me a long time to come to terms with how pro hockey is. I played college hockey; I knew they couldn’t trade me and they couldn’t send me down. It’s different in pro. Know that I’ve been through the wringer once, learned the ropes. I’m now approaching every day with full confidence. You need to believe you can be the best goalie in the world, and you know what? You may not ever be the best goalie in the world, but having that self-confidence will get you further than self-doubt and stuff like that.

So how do you find confidence? Is it something you can find right away heading into this season?

That’s a hot topic in the goaltending world as a whole right now. I think that the best goalies can find confidence right away, and when they slump, it’s because they are struggling to find their confidence again. It’s easy to say, ‘Oh, just be confident.’ People say it all the time.

But it comes down to trusting yourself and trusting the process and doing the little things right. Going out in practice and just working as hard as you can. Eventually, and it might not be right away, you might have to battle for a week or two, but it’s gonna start coming back and that’s the great thing about hockey. If you work hard, you can make it far.

You’re in much better shape now, you can see it in your movement on the ice. How do you look at your growth in that regard?

In college, you play a game or two a week. And you’ve got six days to rest and help your body heal. You don’t have that here (in the pro game). You’ve got to be on top of it every day, do what needs to be done. You can’t just let time do it. Help your body along; that’s something you need to learn. It takes a lot of effort, you know, you have a day off to get out of bed and do something instead of just being lazy all day, right?

So that’s the stuff you need to learn and the guys who get it have longer careers.

You made the decision to leave college after your sophomore year. You’ve said it’s a decision you don’t regret, but if you could what advice would you give yourself after your first pro season?

I would say stay humble and just appreciate every moment and don’t take it for granted. Just because you have one good season, or a couple good seasons strung together, that doesn’t always guarantee your next season is going to be your best one. Just have to battle for it. You can’t let what’s happening on the ice affect you off the ice. And don’t let what’s happening off the ice affect you on the ice. Coming in with an open mind and just taking it one day at a time, that would be my advice.

It seems like you’ve accepted some blame for things last season. Was that important for your growth heading into this season?

Everyone is going to have a bad season in your life. If you don’t want to repeat it, you need to take the lessons that you learned during it and apply it so it doesn’t happen again. So you know, when I was struggling, I remember how it feels, and I think about it a lot. But I don’t dwell on it, right? So I learned stay positive, keep battling no matter what. All these things now, I can let in a bad goal, let’s say, you know all those lessons I learned the hard way last year through a whole season, now it just applies to a single moment, right? Applying those in a single moment will make me a better person later on in a game. Allowing me to stay focused off and on the ice and make the next save.
Last season the Stars were one game away from winning the Stanley Cup. That’s the way the team sees it anyway as Dallas took the eventual champions to overtime in Game 7 in the second round. This team expects to be playing June hockey in 2020.

I’m hesitant to go that far. While there’s clear separation between the remaining teams and the rest of the league, Dallas comes in at the bottom of that list. Dark horse? Definitely. Legitimate contender? Not right now.

After adding the second best forward on the market in the offseason, it’s hard not to be optimistic about a deep playoff run in Texas. The Central is a gauntlet, though. The Stars are in a good spot, but they have a lot to prove before they can unseat the defending Stanley Cup champions and a team that has won the division two years running.

A 100-point season isn’t out of the question, with the team finishing above that cutoff in 33 percent of simulations, but the most likely outcome still falls just under that. Dallas finishes with somewhere between 90-99 points 45 percent of the time and finishes outside the division’s top two 71 percent of the time.

That’s still a strong season, and there’s a decent chance the team does better than last season’s 93-point finish, doing so 62 percent of the time; it’s just not a season that screams Cup contender. And while they’re busy chasing St. Louis and Nashville, they’ll have the Avalanche, Blackhawks, Jets and Wild chasing them. If the Stars do make the playoffs, there’s no guarantee the team would go far, either. At this juncture, they lose in the opening round more often than they win, being 47 percent underdogs on average.

That’s not bad, but the team isn’t that young despite their recent lack of consistent success. This is an aging group in win now mode, all in for this season despite their contender status being in question. Dallas will need to make a few moves between now and April to get the team into shape, because as the Stars currently stand, barring a major breakout, they don’t have enough depth to go toe-to-toe with some of the league’s elite teams.

Depth, depth, depth. It’s repeated ad nauseam in almost every team’s preview, but as you’ll see soon with many of the top 10 teams it makes a big difference. It’s what separates teams like Dallas from teams like Tampa Bay. At this point, every team ahead of the Stars has high-end talent as strong as them or close to it and what separates the two is the supporting cast. The top tier guys are strong enough to get Dallas close to the top 10, but it's the rest that holds the team back from being anything more than that.

Last year the Stars finished third last in the league in goals for with just 209 and that was despite an 11th ranked power play. At 5-on-5, only Arizona scored fewer goals per 60 and a cursory look through the forward ranks explains why.

In last season’s Stars preview, I emphasized how lackluster the team’s forward depth was, illustrated by the stunning number of players that scored at a fourth line rate or worse. That hasn’t changed as the only returning player outside the top line who scored at an above fourth line rate last season was Jason Dickinson, whose 1.42 points per 60 ranked 236th in the league, firmly third line material. Radek Faksa, Roope Hintz, Blake Comeau, Andrew Cogliano, Denis Gurianov? All fourth line scorers.

Newcomer Corey Perry? Also a fourth line scorer. Rookie Ty Dellandrea, who may make the team out of camp? Probably a fourth line scorer (for now anyway). Likely 13th forward Matthias Janmark? Fourth line scorer.

Predictably, none of these players drive offense either, so it’s hard to call it bad luck. With the exception of Cogliano, everyone listed above has a negative impact on expected goals for and the effect is significantly worse when looking at goals for specifically. Aside from Hintz, who has the benefit of playing more minutes, no player is expected to eclipse 35 points this year (and Hintz is only at 39). The team really lacks finishing talent here as there are five players who are projected to score three fewer goals than expected. Combined, the seven players listed are projected to score 82 goals off 98 expected goals.

It’s quite bleak, and yet the bottom nine isn’t littered with fourth-liners and sub-replacement level players. There’s some value here, especially considering the value in creating those chances. Hintz looks like a dependable middle six center while Faksa, Dickinson, Cogliano and Perry all carry third line value. Even Comeau, the team’s weakest offensive player, isn’t below zero. The reason for most is defense, and while this bottom nine will struggle to score to an extreme degree, most of them will be strong enough in their own end that it won’t be a massive detriment. Having depth players that can score at a reliable rate is still the goal, but there aren’t any liabilities here either.

Hintz and Dickinson are the strongest as a result of leading the Stars forwards in expected goals against, allowing 2.1 apiece last season. That’s stingy and bodes well for the second line considering they parlayed that into a 52 percent expected goals rate. Figuring out the offensive side of the game will be the key to creating a capable second line. That’s where one member of the team’s big four forwards up front comes in.

Joe Pavelski was, for my money, the best signing of the offseason. Short term and below-market salary for his on-ice value – plus he fits a desperate need for the Stars as an offensive weapon with the versatility to play center or right wing. Pavelski isn’t the 70-point player he used to be, but he’s remained in the mid-to-high 60s over the last three seasons. My model expects him to post around 54 points this season and his offensive upside should provide a big boost to the second line. Pavelski’s expected goal for impact is the largest on the team.

It’s also stronger than Mats Zuccarello’s, last year’s big trade deadline acquisition and the main reason the second line has so much promise with Pavelski. With depth being the issue in Dallas, the Stars bolstered it by acquiring Zuccarello and he immediately changed the makeup of the roster.

The second line as we know it wasn’t put together until the playoffs, but once it was the team caught lightning in a bottle. The trio of Hintz, Dickinson and Zuccarello played 60 minutes together and were very strong in that time, earning a 55 percent expected goals rate with both current Stars players seeing a boost in their goals rate. It led to a lot of fanfare for Hintz’s game in particular; it’s funny what playing with an actual offensive weapon can do for a player’s game. Teammate effects matter a ton when it comes to individual production. With Zuccarello, Hintz scored 1.98 points per 60 at 5-on-5 while Dickinson was even stronger at 2.26. Of course, that’s in a very small sample size.

In Pavelski, the team is hoping that effect can be replicated and it’s a decent bet to make considering Pavelski is an arguably much stronger player than Zuccarello, especially offensively. He’s also a big time power play asset, earning slightly more points there. As primarily a net-front slot player, he’s also a better fit as it means the team can keep its big three on the top unit, something they struggled to accomplish in the playoffs. Pavelski is also good at drawing penalties too and is projected to lead the team in penalty differential as a result.

The fear is that as his age, Pavelski’s contract runs the same course as Marleau’s and that Pavelski was, for my money, the best signing of the offseason. Short term and below-market salary for his on-ice value – plus he fits a desperate need for the Stars as an offensive weapon with the versatility to play center or right wing. Pavelski isn’t the 70-point player he used to be, but he’s remained in the mid-to-high 60s over the last three seasons. My model expects him to post around 54 points this season and his offensive upside should provide a big boost to the second line. Pavelski’s expected goal for impact is the largest on the team.

It’s also stronger than Mats Zuccarello’s, last year’s big trade deadline acquisition and the main reason the second line has so much promise with Pavelski. With depth being the issue in Dallas, the Stars bolstered it by acquiring Zuccarello and he immediately changed the makeup of the roster.

The second line as we know it wasn’t put together until the playoffs, but once it was the team caught lightning in a bottle. The trio of Hintz, Dickinson and Zuccarello played 60 minutes together and were very strong in that time, earning a 55 percent expected goals rate with both current Stars players seeing a boost in their goals rate. It led to a lot of fanfare for Hintz’s game in particular; it’s funny what playing with an actual offensive weapon can do for a player’s game. Teammate effects matter a ton when it comes to individual production. With Zuccarello, Hintz scored 1.98 points per 60 at 5-on-5 while Dickinson was even stronger at 2.26. Of course, that’s in a very small sample size.

In Pavelski, the team is hoping that effect can be replicated and it’s a decent bet to make considering Pavelski is an arguably much stronger player than Zuccarello, especially offensively. He’s also a big time power play asset, earning slightly more points there. As primarily a net-front slot player, he’s also a better fit as it means the team can keep its big three on the top unit, something they struggled to accomplish in the playoffs. Pavelski is also good at drawing penalties too and is projected to lead the team in penalty differential as a result.

The fear is that as his age, Pavelski’s contract runs the same course as his former Sharks teammate, the ill-conceived Patrick Marleau deal that forced the Leafs to spend a first-round pick just to get out of it. While Pavelski’s win rate has dropped in four straight seasons, he was starting at a high enough place as one of the league’s best players that he still grades out quite strongly now amidst his decline. Pavelski is better than Marleau at the time of each player’s signing and is younger too. On Day 1 he’s worth the money (and more), while for Marleau the value was already questionable at the time. No need to panic here.

That leaves the top line who can now hopefully stick together uninterrupted with Pavelski anchoring the second line (though dropping one of them down a line to form two strong top six pairs isn’t a bad idea either). With the rest of the team struggling to produce offense, the Stars used the lineup blender throughout the year in search of balance, something they hopefully won’t have to do much of this season.

The Stars’ top line of Jamie Benn, Tyler Seguin and Alexander Radulov ranks as the sixth best in the NHL and when together looks virtually unstoppable. They only spent 486 minutes together, but man were those minutes special as they earned a 59 percent expected goals share while outscoring opponents 33-16. Those are lethal figures that ideally a team should find a way to keep together. With all three being legitimate star
players, the Stars could have something like what Boston and Colorado have in the league, but they just need to play together more consistently. The line above about how Hintz’s game changed once he saw time with an offensive player? Multiply that by three when all three guys on the line are strong in their own right – they elevate each other into something that’s so much more. It’s chemistry, and this trio unequivocally has it.

While the rest of the team struggled to score, this trio obviously didn’t with all three hovering around the 30-goal mark. It’s a lonely world up front when only one other forward, Faksa, scored more than 10 goals last season for the Stars, which truly highlights the team’s issues. The average NHL team had more than twice as many last year. I mean, that’s almost unfathomably bad and it’s hard to believe a team that thin up front not only made the playoffs but managed to win seven games.

That figure wasn’t just low for last year – it was historically low. Since 2007-08, only two other teams have had just four forwards chip in 10 goals or more in a season. One of them was the abstractly awful 2013-14 Buffalo Sabres team that was actively losing games on purpose. The other? The 2011-12 Stanley Cup champion Los Angeles Kings. Go figure.

Last season, Seguin, Radulov and Benn combined for 89 goals, which is 43 percent of the team’s total 209. That’s the second highest ratio of goals coming from a team’s top three scorers in the league, behind only the Edmonton Oilers, who were at an astounding 52 percent. That’s obviously bad company to be in. Pavelski alleviates some of the pressure from the big three, but the team can’t be that top-heavy again – everyone else needs to step up. It can’t be a 3-4 person show if this team has serious goals of playing hockey in June.

If it is the Stars’ playoff hopes will dwindle, barring another exceptional season in net. That’s where the team looks strongest and, with the duo both playing so strongly, it was enough to give the Stars the second best team save percentage in the league. That’s where the team looks strongest. Making it a likely possibility, and it’s why the team’s playoff aspirations look relatively safe despite the dire offensive outlook. Like San Jose surviving without goaltending, Dallas too can survive without offense. Having said that, goaltending is the most volatile skill to project forward and relying on it is still a dangerous game to play, despite the current rosy projection. Things change quickly with goalies.

Ben Bishop was phenomenal last season, earning a .934 save percentage in 46 starts. Down the stretch he was a brick wall and a major factor in pushing the Stars into the playoffs. He saved 20 goals above expected, which ranked third in the league behind John Gibson and Robin Lehner – very impressive stuff. He was more than worthy of being a Vezina finalist last season, ultimately finishing as the runner-up to Andrei Vasilevskiy.

Bishop didn’t start that many games for a starter as the Stars kept his workload light, especially as he dealt with some injuries. Meanwhile, Anton Khudobin turned in a strong season of his own with a .923 save percentage. With the duo both playing so strongly, it was enough to give the Stars the second best team save percentage in the league.

Usually when things are that high, though, regression is in the forecast. It was said for the sabres as it applies here too. The reason for that is neither goalie has a long track record of playing that strongly. Before Bishop saved 20 goals above expected he looked mighty average in the seasons prior ranging from saving seven goals above expected to allowing five in the previous four seasons. My model only uses the last three and in those years he allowed just over three goals above expected in the two seasons before 2018-19. As for Khudobin, he’s hovered between plus-three and minus-three goals saved in the same time frame. This year, it expects the duo to save just 6.5 goals above expected, down a fair amount from last year’s 26 goals saved. Over the last three seasons though, the duo saved about nine goals above expected combined on average – the rest is further regression to the mean.

What the Stars goalies did last season holds the most weight giving them a high standing that puts the duo in the league’s top five (even at that modest goals saved total), but that’s built on a somewhat flimsy foundation. It’s why figuring out the scoring issues is paramount as future goaltending value is often difficult to trust. Bishop turns 33 in November and is injury-prone, which only complicates that matter further. Dallas’ skaters grade out as the league’s 17th best which means that getting just average goaltending might leave them outside the playoff picture in a very competitive division.

While Bishop and Khudobin were excellent last season, they were partially buoyed by a strong defensive system, one where they had an expected save percentage of .919 and .918 respectively, both top 15 marks in the league. That’s one reason to breath a sigh of relief as even if the goaltending contributions drop off slightly, the defensive scheme should keep them afloat. The defense group makes that possible, but they’re not without their own flaws and grade out as just average. You can probably guess why from the big red flags illuminating the depth chart above.

The Stars – for whatever reason – still have Roman Polak in a top four role despite him providing well below replacement level value for the past two seasons. The “defensive” stalwart allowed the most expected goals against last season while being the least disciplined player on the team and providing nothing in the way of offense. His puck skills are among the worst in the league, specifically on the breakout. While his reputation may list him as one of a dimensional defensive defensмен, even giving him that dimension is far too generous. And no, he doesn’t limit shot quality. The team may have allowed very few goals against with him on the ice, but that was by no means doing – the team’s expected save percentage with him on the ice was the lowest of all defenders here.

Hanging in a top four role is a massive detriment not only because it means he gets the requisite minutes for it, but also because he brings down the contributions of young stud Miro Heiskanen. The slick and speedy defender took the league by storm in his rookie season and already grades out as a borderline No. 1 defensмен. One can only imagine the possibilities if he weren’t shackled to one of the league’s worst defenses. But in this case, one doesn’t have to imagine. Last year the Stars experimented with putting their best two defenders together on the top pair and wouldn’t you know it, the duo was exceptional. In 343 minutes together Heiskanen and John Klingberg outscored teams 18-8 and earned an absurd 61 percent expected goals share. The duo had their fair share of offensive zone starts in those minutes, but that doesn’t mean the game is away from them as much as history would suggest. Just like the top line, putting two strong drivers together makes both look even better as the two are the team’s best defenders with the puck. Unfortunately, with the team’s depth on defense being what it is, it’s not a realistic scenario for the sake of balance.

It’s a shame because it would be a top five pair. A move like that would also free Klingberg from being paired with the overrated Esa Lindell (sorry Stars fans, I will die on this hill) who, despite his own sterling reputation as a defensive stalwart, had the second highest expected goals against rate against of any player. One of them was the abstractly awful 2013-14 Minnesota Wild franchise. Lindell is very strong on the rush, limiting teams from entering the zone with control, but that doesn’t seem to translate into actually strong defensive results. More troubling is that he had an even worse impact on offense, despite his stronger point totals. His expected goals for per 60 of 1.97 was the 11th lowest in the league and that’s while primarily playing with one of the game’s best defensmen in Klingberg.

To date, Klingberg really hasn’t received the love he should be getting with his highest Norris finish being sixth in 2017-18. He was arguably the league’s best defensмен that year, at least according to my model, finishing 0.8 wins higher than the eventual winner, Victor Hedman. Last year he was ranked 20th, but that was primarily due to him missing 18 games – he would’ve easily been in the top 10 if fully healthy. The knock on him is his defensive rating, which doesn’t rank too highly as history would suggest. His performance there has been above average in back-to-back seasons all while playing tough minutes. That’s to go with elite offense. My model considers him to be a top five defensmen.

The third pair will depend on whether Andrej Sekera can bounce back. Injuries have derailed his recent career and he’s 33, but before that he was decent as a capable puck-mover and entry-defender. Jamie Oleksiak looks passable too, though playing on his off side isn’t ideal. Taylor Fedun is an option here and my model loves him. He may play cautious minutes, but hetotaled with putting their two best defencemen eight points and 29 percent expected goals rate to lead the team last season on both offense and defense. Who cares if he’s not in the top four if he’s doing that on the bottom pair. You also can’t convince me that he’d be any worse than Polak anyway. Stephen Johns and Julius Honka looked like they might be options, but the former won’t be skating during training camp after missing an entire season while the latter requested a trade.

Overall it’s a promising group and one that should make the playoffs led by its very strong top end. The team’s seven player core (Seguin, Radulov, Benn, Pavelski, Klingberg, Heiskanen, Bishop) is worth 17.6 wins combined which is behind only the league’s three best teams. What separates Dallas from that group and being a top five or top 10 team themselves is the supporting cast, a problem that’s been plaguing the Stars for the past few uneven seasons.
Maybe the team’s best players will be enough, and maybe adding Pavelski onto the second line will bring up the players on it. But for now the Stars rate as one of the league’s most top-heavy teams. It should be enough to make the playoffs, but at this point in time they probably won’t be favorites once they get there.

Market Expectations

Dallas Stars: 97.5 points

The market comes in just a shade higher than my model, but overall it’s very close with just a 1.6 point difference separating the two. That’s basically splitting hairs and it’s easy to see things going either way.

What Fans Predict

Public Sample: 1,337

Fan Sample: 102

When it comes to the Stars, the public and my model are basically that handshake meme right now in near-perfect agreement. Dallas is one of nine teams where the difference there is only a point or less in either direction and the 0.1 difference here is obviously one of the closest. The distribution of results looks very close too.

The fans are a little higher as expected, but not obnoxiously so. After a strong playoffs and offseason, they have every right to expect a season close to 100 points.

What The Athletic Insider Thinks

Sean Shapiro: The Stars believe they were a Cup contender last season and believe that they’re in a better position heading into the second year under Jim Montgomery. Dallas had another season where they were labeled a team that “won the offseason” which seems quite common, and has been misleading at times for a franchise that hasn’t gone to the playoffs in back-to-back years since 2008.

Dallas should be a playoff team this season and by that ideology, they’ll be a contender since randomization in May and June creates the drama we love. Whether they’ll be a clear Cup contender throughout the season will be interesting to watch, but in reality they’re more likely going to be playing in the 2 vs. 3 matchup in the Central since I still don’t see them winning the division.

The goaltending was tremendous last season and the defense should be able to perform at a similar level, but the lack of Stephen Johns on the back end and a true top four defender to pair with Miro Heiskanen could be the biggest downfall this season. Andrej Sekera seems to be poised to play in that top four role now, but if he doesn’t fare well enough it could be another year of Heiskanen paired with Polak.

The power play should be fun to watch with Pavelski’s addition, I personally think he fits perfectly with how Klingberg and Heiskanen can float pucks through and the penalty kill should be solid again — so special teams could be a position of strength in a loaded division.

Because of Bishop, and if he’s handled properly when it comes to starts and injuries, Dallas could be a legitimate contender. Making the playoffs should be the expectation and we’ll see from there.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
The Detroit Red Wings began their exhibition season with a lineup light on NHL regulars and prospects. It was mostly minor leaguers who played Tuesday night at Little Caesars Arena in the first game since breaking training camp one day prior. Moritz Seider, the team’s first-round pick in June, watched from the press box, along with several other prospects.

Forward Luke Glendening, newcomer Patrik Nemeth and goaltender Jimmy Howard were the ranking NHL veterans as the Wings beat the Blackhawks, 5-3, on the strength of a late power-play goal by prospect Michael Rasmussen and an empty-netter from Glendening.

"It was a good win for a young team we had tonight," Glendening said. "I thought we were competitive, had a great work ethic. At this time of year, that’s what you’re looking for."

Prospects Dennis Cholowski and Christoffer Ehn assisted on goals by minor leaguers Matt Puempel, Matthew Ford and Chris Terry.

Svechnikov returns to ice

Evgeny Svechnikov said it felt "amazing" to play for the first time since suffering a knee injury during last year’s exhibition season. Svechnikov had anterior cruciate ligament surgery in October and missed the entire 2018-19 season.

"I felt like I’m in there for the first time, like a kid, like going into first grade," he said. "Amazing feeling, and even better to win the game."

He played right wing on a line with fellow former first-round pick Michael Rasmussen (ninth, 2017) at center and Taro Hirose on the left, and earned an assist on Rasmussen’s goal.

Svechnikov had a scoring chance during a second-period power play, a one-timer off a pass from defenseman Filip Hronek.

Coach Jeff Blashill has stressed the 22-year-old needs to relax and realize it’s a marathon, not a sprint, as he tries to live up to the expectations of being a first-round pick (19th overall, 2015).

"I think it’s just because I want it really, really bad," Svechnikov said. "If I would have five hands, I would grab that with five hands."

Blocking for fun

Blashill made a comment during training camp that Nemeth "blocks shots for fun." He blocked two during a penalty kill in the second period Tuesday and three overall.

"He’s awesome," fellow penalty killer Glendening said. "I said, ‘We’re going to have to see who can block more this year.’ That guy, he’s great at blocking shots."

The Wings signed Nemeth, 27, during free agency, scouting the 6-foot-3, 228-pound defenseman as a guy who can help them play better team defense. He plays like an ox, wins puck battles and net-front battles. He was paired with Hronek, and will end up playing either with him or Mike Green, both offensive defensemen who shoot right.

Hicketts hits

Defenseman Joe Hicketts showed off what makes him fun to watch, drawing fan appreciation with a big hit in the first period on Chicago forward Anton Wedin, knocking the puck loose and sending Glendening off on a breakaway.

Hicketts also assisted on Puempel’s goal that made it 1-0. He brings energy and physicality, but he’s not a strong skater and dropped on the depth chart (behind prospects such as Cholowski, Seider and Oliver Kaski).
Detroit Red Wings

Game recap: Detroit Red Wings defeat Chicago in preseason opener at LCA, 5-3

Kirkland Crawford, Detroit Free Press Published 12:00 p.m. ET Sept. 17, 2019 | Updated 10:05 p.m. ET Sept. 17, 2019

Preseason opener: Detroit Red Wings vs. Chicago Blackhawks
When: 7:30 p.m.
Where: Little Caesars Arena.
TV: Fox Sports Detroit-plus.
Radio: WXYT-AM (1270; other radio affiliates).
Game notes: It's the first of nine preseason games for the Red Wings, five of which will be in the state of Michigan – four at LCA and one in Calumet.
Detroit Free Press LOADED: 09.18.2019
Detroit — The Red Wings are back, but if you attended Tuesday, you wound up cheering for a whole lot of future Grand Rapids Griffins.

The Wings opened the exhibition season against Chicago — supposedly the Blackhawks, but mainly a whole lot of their minor league Wolves — and came away with a 5-3 victory.

Michael Rasmussen, fighting for a roster spot after spending all of his rookie season in the NHL with the Wings last season, scored a power-play goal at 15 minutes, 23 seconds of the third period, breaking a 3-3 tie.

Rasmussen, parked in front of Chicago goalie Kevin Lankinen took a pass from Taro Hirose and bounced a shot off a Blackhawks defender and past Lehner.

Goaltender Jimmy Howard stopped seven of eight shots before being replaced by Calvin Pickard in the second period.

► Howard looked sharp in his time on the ice. Wings fans got their first look with the Wings' late last March, and all three have had solid minor league careers.

► Along with Svechnikov, it was good to see Jacob de la Rose back on the ice for the Wings.

His season cut short by a heart ailment in the season's final weeks, de la Rose had a minor procedure after the season and was cleared to play.

de la Rose was a one line with Glendening and Christoffer Ehn.

► Puempel, Ford and Terry may not be household names for Wings' fans.

But they will be counted on for offense and veteran leadership in Grand Rapids, where they'll lead what could be a real young roster.

Puempel had a brief look with the Wings' late last March, and all three have had solid minor league careers.

► Howard looked sharp in his time on the ice. Wings fans got their first look at Pickard, who is ticketed to play in Grand Rapids, splitting time with prospect Filip Larsson.

Detroit News LOADED: 09.18.2019
Evgeny Svechnikov dealing with knee pain, Red Wings future, as season nears

Detroit — There’s always been a sense of honesty and no sugar-coating of anything around Evgeny Svechnikov.

The young Red Wings forward will answer a question and doesn’t hesitate.

Recovering from ACL surgery on his right knee, which forced him to miss all last season, Svechnikov didn’t downplay how he’s feeling currently with the exhibition season beginning.

Is he feeling like his old self?

“Not even close,” said Svechnikov, the Wings’ 2015 first-round pick who was in the lineup Tuesday against Chicago. “I don’t feel like myself out there yet. It’s tough. It’s not easy. I just have to go through it and push myself.”

Facing, arguably, the biggest season of his young career so far, Svechnikov is going through added adversity.

Not only is Svechnikov still getting stronger following the surgery, but he’s also in the final year of his three-year entry-level contract.

And, with so many prospects already here or on the way, you feel the sense that Svechnikov, 22, needs to establish himself this season.

“For sure, it’s big,” Svechnikov said of the coming season. “Every year is big, like I said before, but this is the (biggest) one. When I do good and when I feel good on the ice, when I feel like my knee is good, I’m just good.

“We will talk about it, but I have to do it.”

Coach Jeff Blashill agreed this might be a key season for Svechnikov, but said he believes Svechnikov can face the pressure.

But what’ll be important for Svechnikov is to relax and not put undue, added pressure on himself — something Svechnikov has tended to do through his young career.

“It’s a big year for him, especially after missing a full year,” Blashill said. “The league always has room for great players, so just play great.

“He tends to put lots of pressure on himself. He can’t. Just relax and just go and play and understand it’s a marathon and not a sprint.

“He’s going to have good moments, going to have bad moments. He just has to keep working through it.”

Svechnikov was having a positive preseason last September, and making a run toward a roster position only to suffer the torn knee in the final week of the exhibition season.

Svechnikov gradually built strength in his knee as the season went on, and was hopeful of returning to play for Grand Rapids in the American League playoffs.

But the Wings and Svechnikov decided on squashing that idea, not wanting to aggravate the injury.

Svechnikov admitted he’s felt like a player who hasn’t practiced in nearly a year during training camp workouts.

Patience is going to be required, said Blashill, for any player going through a similar surgery.

“It’s a long time to be out and super hard: (there are) no real high expectations, let him go out and feel his way into this thing,” Blashill said. “It’s hard.

“Your body, No. 1, No. 2, you have to get used to how your leg feels. It’ll be different, never going to be the same.”

“Anyone who’s had any kind of injury knows it’s never the same. It becomes your new normal but it takes time to become your new normal.”

Svechnikov has spent time with former Red Wings defenseman Niklas Kronwall and former Griffins teammate Matt Lorito, both of whom had similar knee surgeries, talking about the rehabilitation they went through.

What Svechnikov found was there is no firm, consistent timeline to recovery.

“Everybody takes a different (amount of time),” Svechnikov said. “Lorito, it took a while. He said he’s just feeling — after 16 or 17 months — he’s just feeling normal.

“Kronner said he was playing after six months. It’s different for everybody, but we’ll see how I feel. It’s still sore, still a process (right now).”

Tuesday’s return to the lineup was a milestone of sorts, a reward for all the work and sweat Svechnikov put into this season and returning.

He’s intent on continuing to put forth the effort to get back to how he felt before the surgery.

With his future in the organization unclear, it’s another obstacle Svechnikov must overcome.

“You do what you can up to this point,” Svechnikov said. “I just have to push it and stay positive.”

Preseason hockey: Red Wings at Blackhawks

Faceoff: 8:30 p.m. Wednesday, United Center, Chicago

TV/radio: NHL Network/no radio

Outlook: It’s the second game in two nights for the Wings, both games against the Original Six rivals. …Expect a stronger, veteran lineup from Chicago, and likely from the Wings, who play the second of their nine exhibition games, in 12 days.
Red Wings 27th in ESPN's future power rankings

The Detroit News Published 3:18 p.m. ET Sept. 17, 2019

The Detroit Red Wings haven't made the playoffs since the 2015-16 season. It might be a while before they return.

The rebuild could be a slow one for the Red Wings, who come in 27th in ESPN's NHL future power rankings, which projects where the 31 teams stand for the next three years.

ESPN gives the Red Wings an overall score of 71.6 in the rankings posted Tuesday, placing them in the "C" range on their grading scale.

"When the Red Wings' dynastic run fizzled out, all that was left was the memories and bloated contracts," writes Emily Kaplan, an ESPN hockey reporter. "OK, it wasn't that dire. But the rebuild has been slow, as Detroit waits for unfavorable contracts to get off the books. Now that Steve Yzerman is in charge, there's hope that the path back to winning can be expedited."

The ESPN crew, which includes senior NHL writer Greg Wyshynski and NHL draft and prospects analyst Chris Peters, rated each team in four categories — roster, prospects, salary cap situation and front office/coaching — to come up with the final score.

The Wings graded highest in the front office and coaching, which includes the return of Yzerman to the organization as general manager. ESPN ranked Detroit 12th in the category with a score of 81.7. Prospects are close behind, with ESPN ranking the Wings 12th at 79.3.

"Even though Filip Zadina underwhelmed last season, I think he still has the ability to be a game-breaking player and a long-term top-six winger for the team," Peters writes. "Joseph Veleno might be the Swiss army knife who does a little bit of everything, and now we're going to have to see what recent first-rounder Moritz Seider brings to the table. That trio gives the Red Wings a decent core of young prospects who could eventually fill significant roles."

Seider impressed during the Red Wings camp in Traverse City, while Zadina will be looking to earn a roster spot after spending most of last season in Grand Rapids.

The Red Wings, who finished 32-40-10 last season, ranked lowest with their roster, checking in at 30th (59.7).

Detroit opens the preseason Tuesday night at home against the Chicago Blackhawks. The regular-season opener is Oct. 5 at Nashville.

Detroit News LOADED: 09.18.2019
DETROIT – Michael Rasmussen scored a power-play goal with 4:37 remaining in the third period Tuesday to lift the Detroit Red Wings past the Chicago Blackhawks 5-3 in their preseason opener at Little Caesars Arena.

Rasmussen, the 6-6, 221-pound forward the Red Wings selected ninth overall in the 2017 draft, is competing for a roster spot after appearing in 62 games with the Red Wings last season as a rookie. He wasn't able to play in the AHL in 2018-19 (except for a brief conditioning stint) because he still had junior eligibility.

This season, he can be assigned to the Grand Rapids Griffins if the Red Wings believe he is not NHL-ready.

The Red Wings got a boost from some of the Griffins’ veterans. Matt Puempel, Matthew Ford and Chris Terry also scored goals. Luke Glendening sealed the outcome with an empty-net goal with 1:00 remaining.

Jimmy Howard stopped 7-of-8 shots in 29 minutes before being replaced by Calvin Pickard, who stopped 15-of-17 shots he faced.

Both teams dressed only a handful of players expected to make their season-opening rosters. The clubs will meet again Wednesday night at the United Center in a game that figures to feature more regular NHL players.

Puempel opened the scoring at 10:38 of the first period with a blast from the top of the faceoff circle.

Ford snapped a 1-1 tie at 6:27 of the second period by crashing the net and swatting in the puck.

Terry gave Detroit a 3-1 lead at 15:26 of the second, scoring from close range.

Dominik Kubalik scored a pair of goals for the Blackhawks (0-1-1) to tie it at 3-3.
Evgeny Svechnikov returns from ACL injury for Red Wings’ preseason opener

By Ansar Khan

DETROIT – Evgeny Svechnikov’s excitement level rose Monday when he realized he will be playing tonight in the Detroit Red Wings’ preseason opener.

“This is it. This is the day. I was counting for this day all year,” Svechnikov said. “I’m super-excited, super-pumped, also tired but that’s really nothing that matters now. The camp was real tough, but it’s all behind and now it’s fun time to go.”

The game against the Chicago Blackhawks at Little Caesars Arena (7:30, Fox Sports Detroit Plus, WWJ-AM 950) isn’t an ordinary exhibition for the team’s top pick in 2015. This will be Svechnikov’s first game in nearly a full year, after he suffered a torn right ACL in a 2018 preseason game.

Four intense days of skating in training camp were tough but helped him prepare.

“It’s a little bit, I wouldn’t say not in shape, but I can feel that I was not on the ice for all season,” Svechnikov said. “It’s kind of double work for me. It’s conditioning-wise and just feeling the game again. I feel it’s going to take a little bit of time, but it’s coming. Every day it’s better and better and it feels like it’s going to be getting better. I’m looking forward to it feeling better.”

A good-sized winger (6-3, 212) with offensive ability, Svechnikov, 22, will be skating on a line with Michael Rasmussen at center and Taro Hirose.

“I think it’s a long time to be out and super hard,” coach Jeff Blashill said. “No real high expectations; let him go out and feel his way into this thing. You got to get used to how your leg feels. Anyone who’s had any kind of injury knows it’s never the same. It’s hard at the beginning of any year to have all your habits ingrained and be able to play without thinking, but it’s really hard for a guy who’s missed tons of time to play without thinking. That’s the way you have to play to be faster.”

Svechnikov called it his most important season. It’s going to take time, but at the same time, he must not stress about the added competition he faces from several players who have joined the organization since he was drafted, like Rasmussen, Filip Zadina, Hirose and Ryan Kuffner.

“The league always has room for great players, so just play great,” Blashill said. “He tends to put lots of pressure on himself. He can’t, he’s just got to relax and play and understand it’s a marathon and not a sprint. He’s going to have good moments; he’s going to have bad moments. He’s just got to keep working through it.”

Svechnikov surely will start the season with the Grand Rapids Griffins (he is waiver-exempt for one more season). He played well in 2016-17, his first pro season (20 goals, 31 assists in 74 games). He struggled early in his second season but improved enough mid-season to earn a 14-game stint in Detroit (two goals, two assists).

The Red Wings were hopeful Svechnikov could play some games for the Griffins late last season, but the knee was too sore and painful.

“I was just going through the season of rehabilitation and workouts and getting better and ready for this season,” Svechnikov said. “I’m still feeling it. It’s still going to take time. It’s still a process. I don’t know how long it’s going to take.”

He talked to others who have gone through ACL surgery, including former Griffins teammate Matt Lorito and recently retired Red Wings defenseman Niklas Kronwall. He learned timetables vary.

“(Lorito) said after 16, 17 months, he’s just feeling normal,” Svechnikov said. “Kronner said he was playing after six months. Everybody’s different, but we’ll see how I feel. It’s still sore, still process. It’s not easy, especially in the summer, because you want to do conditioning, you want to be out there with the guys and doing things with the guys. But injuries won’t let you and my knee wasn’t able to do that. It’s been tough mentally to stay and do what you can for the knee. At the same time, that’s what you have to do at this point. That’s what I’m going through. Just have to push it and stay positive.”

Red Wings lines for tonight’s game:

Evgeny Svechnikov-Michael Rasmussen-Taro Hirose
Luke Glendening-Jacob de la Rose-Christoffer Ehn
Chris Terry-Dominic Turgeon-Matthew Ford
Turner Elson-Chase Pearson-Matt Puempel

Defense pairs:

Patrik Nemeth-Filip Hronek
Dennis Cholowski-Madison Bowey
Joe Hicketts-Dylan McIlrath

Jimmy Howard (starting) and Calvin Pickard will split time in goal.

Michigan Live LOADED: 09.18.2019
Position battles loom during Red Wings’ compressed preseason

By Ansar Khan

The exhibition season will be compressed and competitive for the Detroit Red Wings.

They will play nine games in a span of 12 days, starting tonight against the Chicago Blackhawks at Little Caesars Arena (7:30, Fox Sports Detroit Plus).

They will use these games to sort out position battles at forward and on defense prior to their regular season opener Oct. 5 at Nashville.

The Red Wings wrapped up four days of training camp in Traverse City on Monday.

"Unreal work ethic. Unreal competitiveness," coach Jeff Blashill said. "I thought (Sunday’s) Red and White game was as competitive as any Red and White game we’ve ever seen. (Former defenseman) Nik Kronwall echoed that."

Several former first-round picks will be vying for roster spots -- forwards Evgeny Svechnikov, who missed all of 2018-19 due to a knee injury, Michael Rasmussen, Filip Zadina and Joe Veleno and defensemen Dennis Cholowski and Moritz Seider.

Undrafted free agents in the mix include wingers Taro Hirose and Ryan Kuffner and defenseman Oliwer Kaski.

"It just gives us a real good chance to watch a whole bunch of guys in action," Blashill said. "The challenge in the exhibition season is the varying rosters. Sometimes you are seeing guys that are real NHL players and sometimes you’re seeing guys that’ll probably play in the American League. You try to balance that.

"You’d think that when we go to (Pittsburgh) we’ll probably see a really good roster (on Sept. 25), so you try to put a similar roster together. When you go to the New York Islanders (Sept. 23) I’d like to get a hold of (coach) Barry Trotz and have a conversation, just so we know if we can try to match up rosters the best we can. We got a whole bunch of competition for jobs. I think that’s shown in how competitive each practice was. This gives us a chance to see those guys play."

The Red Wings have an extra preseason game this season -- the Kraft Hockeyville game Sept. 26 in Calumet, Mich., against St. Louis.

Finishing with four games in four nights, they will be keeping a lot of players around until the end of the preseason.

"We play the maximum of exhibition games, so we got to make sure basically that we keep two teams around," Blashill said. "At that point, you almost keep two teams plus, because Grand Rapids can’t run their own camp. If they were running a camp it would be with guys that probably aren’t going to play there. This made the most sense for us, is to keep everybody in Detroit through the whole exhibition season."

Michigan Live LOADED: 09.18.2019
Russell again shows why he’s gone from outsider to having a shot at NHL spot

Jim Matheson, Edmonton Journal

VANCOUVER — Patrick Russell’s hockey journey has always been one of life on the fringes.

He’s heard the word “can’t” at just about every turn as in he can’t skate well enough, he can’t score enough, he can’t do this or that so this Danish winger who played his kid hockey in Sweden and has a name more out of Camrose than Copenhagen, can’t be an NHLer.

And truthfully, his name was pretty far down the list of bottom six possibilities when camp opened because several others have better NHL pedigrees, but Russell, who got into his second straight exhibition in Vancouver Tuesday, tends to grow on you and he had a goal and an assist in the Oilers’ 4-2 loss to the Canucks.

He’s still in tough to be one of the 7-14 forwards on the roster because Riley Sheahan, Josh Archibald, Jujhar Khaira and Markus Granlund, even if he did little against the former club, are locks to be there. Tomas Jurco, who also scored and helped set up Russell’s goal, has played 201 games, Colby Cave was a fourth-line regular last year, and Cooper Marody, who had two assists here, Joe Gambardella and Tyler Benson were bigger names in Bakersfield last year.

But, coach Dave Tippett has noticed Russell, who got into six Oiler games last season but it might have added up to 40 minutes total. He started on a line with Cave and Granlund against the Canucks but was moved onto an offensive line with Marody andJurco. He got an assist when he got the puck to Marody whose shot was put back by Jurco, then ripped one past Thatcher Demko off feeds from Marody and Jurco, who looked like a guy who led Charlotte to the AHL title last spring.

But back to Russell.

“Patrick does little things that allow teams to win...not just putting points on the board,” said Tippett.

There are players who don’t put up big AHL minutes who can be NHLers because of the style of game they play, no matter where it is. Maybe Russell is that guy but if not, it’ll be back to work for the 26-year-old who was never drafted but in college (St. Cloud State) and the AHL has gotten better every year. He did have 40 points in 51 games last year in Bakersfield.

“Russell helps the Bakersfield team win and he plays in the same role there as here which is a conscientious game,” said Tippett. “It’s penalty-killing, it’s board work and it’s playing really smart when you have the lead. Smart role players do this and they’re able to play at the NHL level because of it.”

Russell, who played with Brad Malone and Gambardella last year in Bakersfield on the Condors’ second line, has never been a big scorer. But he’s got from 17 to 27 to 40 points in the AHL. In college, he went from 25 to 41 in his two years there.

“You have to know your role and what you’re good at.”

“My style is paying attention to the details, playing simple” said Russell.

“I’ve always had to prove something. I was injured (ACL knee) my entire draft year...played in Sweden in junior (Linkoping) but they told me they didn’t want to sign me (senior team) so I had to figure out what to do so went to the USHL...I like the underdog role,” said Russell.

Starrett didn’t have much work or much chance on Brandon Sutter’s penalty-shot deke goal after Sutter was hooked by Dmitri Samorukov on a breakaway in the first or Sutter’s goalmouth tap-in midway through the third. He was on the bench when Tanner Pearson got the empty-net last goal. He gave up a long rebound of a Micheal Ferland shot though that Elias Pettersson banged home.

He was outstanding in the second, robbing Ferland twice, Pettersson on a one-timer and Reid Boucher in tight, all in the span of 15 seconds. He also stopped Tanner Pearson with a glove in alone.
There is a 100 per cent chance Markus Granlund will make the Edmonton Oilers’ penalty killing better.

And, no, not just because it’s virtually impossible for the Oilers’ penalty killing to get any worse.

After the PK finished 30th overall last season, and 31st at home two years ago (with a historically bad 64.6 per cent efficiency rating), it’s no surprise that fixing this momentum-draining mess became one of GM Ken Holland’s first priorities.

So he bolstered the goaltending (he hopes) and brought in some players with solid PK pedigrees, Granlund foremost among them, who might be able to tackle the problem.

“He’s a solid player,” said head coach Dave Tippett. “I’ve had a lot of players from Finland and they’re quiet, smart guys, very respectful. You give them a job to do and they can usually get it done."

That job is clear. Kick in about a dozen goals from wherever they play him in the lineup and, just as importantly, help prevent them from bleeding out on the penalty kill.

“The PK here last year wasn’t really good,” said the 26-year-old forward, being as diplomatic one can possibly get when describing a plane crash.

“You need to have good special teams if you want to win games.”

That would explain why they haven’t won a lot of games in the last two years.

So what makes Granlund the right man for the job?

“Anticipation,” said Tippett. “He has enough quickness, but he anticipates plays, understands the structure of how we want to play.

“We put some things in place we want to focus on and in the meetings you can tell he understands what we wants to do. He’s a smart player and he has good enough skill to go with it. That turns him into a good two-way player."

Granlund, who had a good tour of duty in Vancouver before coming to Edmonton as a free agent, sees the move as an opportunity to recharge his batteries in a new and challenging situation.

“It’s a fresh start. It was a good three and half years in Vancouver but I’m excited to be here. They we’re excited about me and wanted me here. It’s a good start for me.

“(Having a new coach) is a new start for almost every one here. That’s a good thing for me.”

The 26-year-old understands his place here could very well be that of third-line PK guy, which doesn’t normally result in very much space on the marquee, but he is willing to adapt to whatever the Oilers want.

Yes, penalty killing is thankless work that nobody pays attention to unless it’s to criticize it when something’s going wrong, but Granlund said he doesn’t care — it’s part of his role he’s always fully embraced.

“For sure. You have to enjoy it, being on the ice killing penalties. You have to take pride in it. Your teammates in the locker room will tell you you’re doing a good job, that’s what matters.”

That’s the kind of atmosphere Tippett needs to see more of in Edmonton. He wants the kind of culture Mark Messier worked so hard to cultivate back in the day, where even on a team with Wayne Gretzky, Jari Kurri and Paul Coffey, every single player was made to feel like he was making a vital contribution.

Because they were.

“That’s a focus of ours,” said Tippett. “We have to have that. I thought that was one of the things with the team last year, there was too much separation between the top and the bottom. We have to have players in roles who feel like they are a bigger part of our team winning.”
It's unusual for a 26-year-old to be mentoring players who are older than he is, but with three new hopefuls coming over from Europe and playing their first NHL games, it's nice that they can lean on someone who's been there before.

That's where Markus Granlund comes in. Not that he needs to hold the hands of Joakim Nygard, Gaetan Haas and Joel Persson, but he's there if they need him.

"It's a big difference between European hockey and hockey here," said Granlund, who made the trip from Finland six years ago. "The ice is smaller, so everything happens more quickly. It takes some time to get used to it.

"You just need to play games to get used to it. You can skate around in practice but it's not the same thing. You have to play games and try to get used to it."

He says it takes a few weeks to get used to the NHL's time, space and intensity, and time and repetition are the only things that help.

"You try to give them some tips, but I haven't done anything special. They're smart guys, they will know how to play this game here.

"It's still hockey. They're not young guys, they've been playing a lot and they're getting comfortable every day."
Is it time for Western Canada’s NHL teams to start holding their pre-season exhibition games off Broadway?

Similar gatherings attended the split squad games between the Canucks and Flames in Calgary and Vancouver.

Which makes you wonder.

Is it time for Edmonton, Calgary, Los Angeles, Anaheim and San Jose, who moved their AHL farm teams to California, to move their training camps and pre-season games there, too? Stay away until for opening day like the major league baseball teams heading north from spring training.

The reception the Toronto Maple Leafs received in St. John’s, N.L. these last few days has been exceptional.

It may happen. But not next season.

“The pre-season games are mostly locked in for next year with Calgary, Vancouver and Winnipeg. We’re going to play somewhere between six and eight, for sure, but it would still be here. The California concept is something we might look at not next year but the year after,” said Oilers CEO Bob Nicholson.

Times are changing when it comes to pre-season games in pro sports. NFL coaches are more and more reluctant to play their No. 1 quarterbacks in the pre-season and the NHL may be headed in that direction, too.

In Edmonton, Connor McDavid won’t likely play any this year coming off an injury.

As long as the player is going hard through training camp, that makes sense to me. Not just for McDavid-level players, but any star player, especially in the first five pre-season games when few NHL regulars are involved.

I remember going to Oklahoma City during the lockout where the Oilers had several of their first-round picks playing on the farm team after having already played more than a 100 games in the NHL.

They insisted getting injured was a concern because in the NHL players were generally where they were supposed to be and that wasn’t always true in the AHL.

These are tough economic times in Alberta and season tickets might be a lot easier to sell if you didn’t have to pay for those four extra pre-season games, although reducing the cost of tickets for exhibition games recently by 40 percent was certainly a positive move.

“We realized we needed to do that. It’s not the full roster,” said Nicholson.

No kidding.

The name bars on the back of the Winnipeg sweaters last night were Chibisov, Little, Shaw, Bourque, Letestu, Roslovic, Luoto, Gustafsson, Appleton, Harkins, Suess, Lipon, Stanley, Pionk, Beaulieu, Biletto, Schilling, Poolman, Valatii, Chisholm, Comrie and Berdin.

The California concept is something we might look at not next year but the year after.

BOB NICHOLSON

Change is coming for the pre-season in other directions.

“There has been lots of discussion about re-inventing the rookie tournament,” Nicholson said.

“Kenny Holland was the guy who created the tournament in Traverse City, Mich., and he definitely wants to put something like that together to involve the Oilers.

“We went through our two rookie camp games against Calgary, one in Red Deer and the other in Calgary. They were fine but he really wants that Traverse City concept which is more than just a few games.”

The 21st annual Detroit Red Wings NHL Prospects Tournament in Traverse City was held this year and it involved eight teams with Toronto, Chicago, St. Louis and Detroit in the Gordie Howe Division and Columbus, Dallas, Minnesota and the N.Y. Rangers in the Ted Lindsay Division. The top teams in each division played in the final and the second place teams played each other in a consolation final.

So look for the first annual Edmonton Oilers NHL Prospects Tournament with Wayne Gretzky and Mark Messier divisions to be created somewhere next year.

“It’s certainly going to be Kenny’s decision and I believe it’s going to happen very quickly,” said Nicholson.

Holland is probably looking at the Okanagan despite the fact that a previous attempt, in Penticton, didn’t survive.

Things are definitely going to change on the training camp front here under Holland.

“That ‘White vs. Blue’ game that we threw at everyone quickly Sunday came from Kenny. He wants competition and he wants fans to be in the building.

“That was one of the criticisms we found in interviewing fans last year. Not enough access. We’ve been making plans around that but it’s great to see that’s being generated by the general manager as well.”

Edmonton Sun: LOADED: 09.18.2019
Four players who helped, three who hurt their Oilers hopes in Edmonton’s second preseason game

By Jonathan Willis Sep 17, 2019

Edmonton’s second preseason game was markedly different from its opening win over the Jets. The roster it sent to Vancouver, featuring just one definitive NHL forward, was weaker. The opposition, headlined by Elias Pettersson, was quite a bit stronger.

Then there was the result: A 2-1 lead turned into a 4-2 loss after a pair of quick third-period goals against and an empty-netter.

Naturally, the results don’t actually matter; the name of the game is evaluation, and if the preseason predicted the regular season with any degree of accuracy, the Oilers would have turned their 7-1-0 exhibition record last season into a more successful year than they actually had. It’s all about individual performance for the guys on the cusp of making the team, and letting the bona fide NHLers find their legs.

“I liked the effort. There’s some mistakes we can clean up,” coach Dave Tippett said afterward, before keying in on the main point. “But good evaluation game.”

Helped their chances

Patrick Russell celebrates a preseason goal against Vancouver. (Anne-Marie Sorvin / USA Today)

Two games into the preseason, it seems safe to say Patrick Russell has done himself some favours. He started Tuesday’s game on the “second” line, was promoted to the “first” unit with Tomas Jurco and Cooper Marody, and the result was a pair of goals for the line. The offence was a nice touch and won’t hurt his chances any, but he continues to be hard to play against in the true sense: not just physical, but a winger any time there’s a 50-50 puck up for grabs.

“The key is right now, your checkers have to be able to score, too,” Tippett said. “If you want depth scoring in your lineup, you just can’t have checkers that check. You have to have checkers that can contribute offensively.

“That’s what makes (Russell) an interesting player. His skill comes from hard work, finding pucks, digging pucks out on the forecheck, getting pucks at the net; things like that. He’s been a good player so far in camp.”

It’s probably worth pointing out Russell also had seven shots without getting a lick of power-play time.

There were subtle things about Marody’s game when the offence came, starting with that great bank pass off the post to Jurco (a move Russell tried to duplicate a shift later). That he added an assist on the second goal and put his own shot off the post later.

It might seem a backhanded compliment (it’s not) but Marody is reminiscent of that favourite son of Newfoundland, Teddy Purcell. Purcell wasn’t all that quick, but the puck just stuck to him; if it was up for grabs or passed anywhere near him, he had a knack for getting it under control and moving it in the right direction. Marody has the same gift and showed it repeatedly against the Canucks even before the results came.

Jurco is obviously in the mix for a depth job, and his puck skills stand out against that group. He’s sneaky whether passing or shooting. It’s not hard to see what the scouts saw in 2011 when he almost snuck into the first round of the draft. He scored one goal and picked up an assist with a nice zone exit on the other and drew a penalty, too. Tippett’s comment about checkers applies, too, especially since the coach speculated afterward “it would be interesting to see if he can score at the NHL level.”

Tyler Benson had a couple of nice looks, a couple of great passes, and with the exception of a single offensive zone turnover, he avoided any egregious mistakes. That his line with two likely AHL-bound players (Ryan McLeod and Cameron Hebig) had such a solid night is also a mark in his favour.

Also, a stat to be used for entertainment purposes only: shot attempts were 23-5 in Edmonton’s favour at five-on-five with Benson on the ice.

Hurt their chances

Josh Currie wasn’t bad, but he has two tremendous items working against him. The first was he made the dangerous drop pass that Evan Bouchard missed, ultimately leading to Brandon Sutter’s 1-0 goal. The second was that the moment he got bumped off the top line in favour of Russell, that unit came alive.

The decision to play high-quality AHLers Brad Malone and Joseph Gambardella with an enforcer on a minor-league contract was an interesting one by the coaching staff. Anthony Peluso found ways to be involved but is one of the last of a dying breed and not a guy with an offensive tool kit. As a line, the trio was the weakest on offer by the Oilers and that’s not a great preseason start for two players who should be in the mix for end-of-roster jobs.

Other notes

It wasn’t a perfect game for Brandon Manning, who looked really good when he was making passes in the first two periods and then had a rough couple of shifts in the third when he flubbed multiple pucks. He got piled on a little bit last season because his contract is too rich and the trade that brought him in so baffling; that he landed in the AHL and then got scratched in favour of guys who’d been there all year didn’t help, either.

Leaving all those things aside, Manning is a plausible candidate for a press box role and there aren’t many of those. He looked Tuesday like he might fit as the No. 7 defenceman. His greatest threat in competing for that job just might be William Lagesson, who at 23 has two years of pro experience and two years of college and might be a better fit for that part-time role than a younger prospect.

A lot of players who either aren’t in the mix for jobs, or who it would be hard to imagine on a Ken Holland run team at their age/experience levels, had good nights.

McLeod is at the top of that list. He had an impressive night, winning puck battles, stealing pucks, and creating offensive opportunities. His best chance was a gimme that somehow didn’t go in, but that aside, he’s impressing for the second straight training camp.

McLeod’s camp experience is a little reminiscent of Tyler Pitlick in that he just looks like a hockey player, junior production notwithstanding. Pitlick eventually carved out a nice career despite a brutal run of injuries in key development years, and with good health, McLeod might arrive faster and have a higher ceiling.

His inlame, Hebig, also impressed. Hebig was red hot in the AHL at the start of last season before disappearing in the second half to the point where he was a spare part in the postseason. At his best, he’s skilled and tenacious and he showed those things Tuesday. He’s further down the depth chart than McLeod but seems to be setting himself up well for his eventual AHL assignment.

A lot of depth defencemen ended up broadly in the same camp as Manning, neither greatly helping nor hurting their cause.

The on-ice shot numbers for the Bouchard/Dmitri Samorukov pairing were great, and Samorukov showcased his skill against NHL-level opposition, but both also had rough moments defensively. With Bouchard notably slow to react on Vancouver’s second goal, Manning’s partner, Ethan Bear, had some nice moments, but the competition is fierce and it’s debatable whether he made any headway.

Colby Cave has been getting strong reviews to date but got quiet in after Russell left his line. He also lost the defensive zone draw against Sutter on Vancouver’s game-winning goal and, worse, released the centre low in the zone, creating a two-on-one in front of the net and allowing Sutter to tip a pass by Alex Edler into the net.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
How an offseason adding more pop in his stick and skates has James Neal primed for first Oilers season

By Daniel Nugent-Bowman Sep 17, 2019

The question about his first goal as an Oiler started with a disclaimer, a preamble to note the subpar quality of competition. James Neal softly interjected.

“That’s OK,” he said. “It was a great feeling.”

Sure, it was preseason game against what was essentially the Jets’ farm team. But the first period goal in Monday’s 2-0 win meant a little more than that to Neal.

A proven goal scorer until he signed in Calgary last summer, Neal saw the once bright goal lights dim out while with the Flames. He’s now in Edmonton after a July trade for fellow hulking winger Milan Lucic and the Oilers are counting on more typical production from Neal.

After a summer spent trying to revive what was his most notable skill during the first 10 years of his NHL career, an early goal provided some validation.

“It was nice to see one go in,” he said.

After a seven-goal campaign – the first time in 11 years he didn’t at least net 20 – Neal once again turned to his close friend Shawn Allard of Perfect Skating.

Allard, who doubles as an on-ice performance coach for the Avalanche, had worked with Neal in each of the previous five summers. They were first connected by Allard’s first client and Neal’s then-Nashville teammate Mike Fisher. Neal was immediately won over by Allard’s enthusiasm, devotion and attention to each player’s individual needs.

Neal needed Allard more than ever after his season with the Flames.

Neal arrived in Calgary “exhausted mentally” after consecutive trips to the Stanley Cup final with two different teams both ended unsuccessfully. He thought he’d have a long leash to prove himself with the Flames after signing a five-year, $25.75-million deal.

But the plan to play him with Johnny Gaudreau and Sean Monahan didn’t last long. Neal was bumped down the lineup and struggled to career lows.

“Since the trade I’ve had a lot more time to myself,” said Neal. “I’ve been able to refocus. I couldn’t be more excited with the progress I’ve made.”

Neal feels rejuvenated, not just by the work he put in this summer but the goal, which helped once he hit the ice.

Adrian Vilaca, a pro mixed martial arts fighter. Increasing his mobility was another.

Neal felt his skating was a sore spot and he and Allard aimed to improve it. Allard wanted Neal to use his outside edges more and change his skating patterns, meaning less linear or straight-line movement.

Some sessions were spent with just Allard and others featured several NHL players like Josh Anderson and the Tkachuk brothers. Oilers captain Connor McDavid joined him for a few days, providing a near-perfect template for Neal to watch.

Allard said players like McDavid or Avs star Nathan MacKinnon have a limited inside edge push accounting for less than 10 percent of their stride count. Neal’s is more like 30 to 40 percent, which requires an abundance of energy from big muscles in the legs, quads and glutes.

With less than 60 days available and with Neal in his 30s – he turned 32 this month – a complete biomechanical overhaul of his skating wasn’t feasible. Allard likened the adjustment to a golfer altering his stance rather than the swing itself.

“He doesn’t change guys. He works with you and helps you get back to your fundamentals,” Neal said. “That’s one of the most impressive things about him. He sees what your skill level is. He sees what you’re good at. He sees where you move, how you move.

“I feel great.”

Allard feels they’ve taken one of the weaker points of Neal’s game – “He’s not the fleetest of foot” – and made progress. Allard believes Neal has improved his elasticity.

“It allowed us to get a little pop out of him. He’s doing better,” Allard said. “He’s bouncing out there. I think you’re gonna notice a big difference with him.”

It hasn’t hurt that Neal had a full summer of training for the first time in three years after the Flames were quickly ousted in the first round.

Off-ice training began before he met up with Allard and was led by former NHLer Gary Roberts and his head strength and conditioning coach Adrian Vilaca, a pro mixed martial arts fighter. Increasing his mobility was the goal, which helped once he hit the ice.

Neal feels rejuvenated, not just by the work he put in this summer but because of the trade that sent him to the Oilers.

He was training with McDavid and former Calgary teammate Mike Smith when the deal went down.

“You hear rumblings that you’re gonna get traded. I was just praying that I was gonna get traded,” Neal said. “I was so happy when things got done.”

“I’ve been able to refocus,” he added. “I couldn’t be more excited with the fresh start here.”

His leash to stay on a scoring line last season was a short one. That won’t be the case this year.

The plan is to give him a long look with Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, the 2011 first overall pick who posted career highs in goals and assists in 2018-19.

“The more we get to know each other, the better we’ll be,” Neal said.

Sam Gagner, Neal’s 2007 world junior teammate, is getting the first audition as their linemate, although coach Dave Tippett has said he’ll probably try other wingers with them.

It’s entirely possible Neal gets ice time with McDavid later in the season, too.
How Neal produces offensively could dictate if the Oilers – a long shot to make the playoffs – can reach the postseason.

Playing with an excellent centre has led to positive results for Neal in the past, whether Evgeni Malkin in Pittsburgh or Ryan Johansen in Nashville.

“He’s not a guy that’s gonna wow you with his ability to log pucks up the ice. He’s a finisher,” Allard said. “He’s a guy that needs a guy to see him, a guy who’ll put pucks to areas.”

Last season was a nightmare for Neal. He’ll get more ice time and a passing pivot to make amends with his new team.

Was 2018-19 an aberration or a sign of things to come? One goal in one preseason game is a nice start. The summer work could provide more of an indicator from here.

“The best of the best guys can overcome some of these obstacles. James has (in the past),” Allard said. “He’s been a consistent scorer in this league. There’s no doubt in my mind he’s gonna get back to that level of performance that we’re all used to seeing from him.”
Troy Brouwer in unfamiliar spot of having to fight for a roster spot

By George Richards Sep 17, 2019

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Troy Brouwer was back in a Panthers sweater on Monday night, playing on what looks like could be a potential fourth line, which is where he spent much of last season.

Only this year, things are markedly different.

At this time last year, Brouwer was with the Panthers on a one-year deal at a bargain price after the final two years of an $18 million contract was bought out by Calgary.

This year, after a summer of wondering where he might end up, the right wing is back with the Panthers.

Only he is here on a professional tryout — one the Panthers could release him from at any time.

Brouwer is working toward making sure that does not happen any time soon.

Monday night, during what would end up a 1-0 exhibition loss to the host Predators, Nashville forward Mathieu Oliver skated by Brouwer and jokingly told him to cool it a bit.

“We were talking and he said, ‘Relax, you’re a vet,’” Brouwer recalls Oliver saying. “But I have a job to earn out here and I have to be on my game from beginning to end.

“I have to work hard and make sure I constantly prove what I can do out there. It feels like when I was a young guy trying to make it. It really is no different except it is 14 years later.”

Brouwer, who turned 34 last month, is looking for (at least) one more NHL season and he hopes it happens with the Panthers.

Last season, Brouwer found success with the Panthers on the ice and his family enjoyed their time off of it.

As the season wound to a close, Brouwer spoke with GM Dale Tallon about possibly renewing his $800,000 deal for another season.

With the Panthers looking to be major players in the free-agent market and trying to land not only goalie Sergei Bobrovsky but his Columbus teammate Artemi Panarin as well, Tallon couldn’t commit to anything.

On July 1, the Panthers signed four players — including Bobrovsky — but Brouwer still waited. Brouwer has played 838 NHL games in parts of 13 seasons with the Blackhawks, Capitals, Blues, Flames and Panthers.

“I was talking to a few teams, but there were teams who had restricted free agents and didn’t know how all that would work out and the delay just kept going,” Brouwer said.

“Until I came to camp here, I was still talking to teams but no one would come off their stance. I wanted to come to a place where I thought I had a good chance to make it and where I felt comfortable around the guys, the facilities. And I know Q, know his expectations not only in camp but during the season.

“And, listen, I love what the Panthers did during the offseason. I want to be part of this.”

Just before camp, Brouwer accepted Florida’s offer making him the latest former Florida player to take a PTO.

David Booth (2015) and Brandon Pirri (2017) were cut from their PTOs.

“I am ready to push for a spot even though it has been a while since I have been in this kind of a position,” said Brouwer, who scored 12 goals with 21 points last year.

“This is a whole new aspect, there is nothing comfortable about it. I cannot wait for exhibition games and hope for a look; it has to start from the first practice and continue on.

“You always want to make a good impression in camp, but when you (have a contract), yeah, you can be a little lax at times. I do not have that luxury.”

Although he is in on a PTO, there is a general feeling Brouwer will get a chance at a second season with the Panthers.

Florida is said to be looking to move a few players off its roster to create a little salary cap breathing room. If the Panthers were to make a deal or two, a roster spot (or two) could open up along with the cap relief.

That would be good news for Brouwer — a player not only well-liked among his peers in the Florida locker room, but also by Tallon and coach Joel Quenneville.

Brouwer was brought to the Chicago Blackhawks by Tallon and won the Stanley Cup with Quenneville in 2010.

“I like how he battled, how he competed,” Quenneville said. “He plays with purpose, has an awareness and knows how to play. We can use him in all situations and he has the experience you can appreciate.”

Making the Panthers is not going to come easy, and Brouwer seems OK with it.

The exhibition game Monday was the continuation of a hard couple days of training camp and Quenneville put Brouwer on a line with expected fourth-line center Noel Acciari and winger Dryden Hunt.

Brouwer said he would like to stick with those guys for a while longer.

“I like playing on that line,” he said with a gap-toothed grin. “Hopefully it continues for us a little bit. I would be happy with that. But we will see. As the game went on, I thought our line really created some opportunities, had some speed and some chemistry.”

Panthers goaltender Sam Montembeault was credited with 18 saves Monday night — including going 8-for-8 during four Nashville power plays. (Robert Mayer / USA Today)

Goals look sharp

Bobrovsky did not make an appearance in the two preseason games the Panthers and Predators played at Bridgestone Arena on Monday but goaltending was the highlight of the Panthers’ game regardless.

“It was excellent, all day long,” Quenneville said. “It has been excellent all camp. It is definitely the most positive aspect so far.”

Quenneville took the four goalies looking for spots — Bobrovsky’s place on the team is quite secure — and split up the work fairly evenly.

All four goalies would get as close to half a game as they could.

In the opener, Chris Driedger — who is considered Sam Montembeault’s primary challenger for the backup gig — started and played 31:27.

Driedger was terrific in the first period, making 13 saves as the Panthers staked themselves to a 2-0 lead.

When Driedger left, the Panthers led 3-1 and he ended with 15 stops.

“I felt good out there, although there were some nerves, which is always good,” said Driedger, who spent last season at AHL Springfield and earned a new contract from the Panthers. “It was good to be back in the rink again, felt good to work the kinks out and get a feel for the game.”

Philippe Desrosiers, who is expected to be the backup in Springfield this coming season, gave up three goals on 11 shots as the team looked a bit tired in front of him.

Florida lost the opening game, 6-3, as the Preds closed the scoring into an open net.

In the nightcap, the lone Nashville goal came on a play that was originally waved off by the on-ice official but later reviewed and given to the Preds.

It was the only blemish of that game against Florida as Montembeault was credited with 18 saves — including going 8-for-8 during four Nashville power plays.

“I took a lot of shots at the beginning of the game, so I saw a lot of action and that put me into the game quickly,” Montembeault said. “I feel comfortable and it was nice to play in some scrimmages early in camp, have a feel for game-like action.”
Rookie Ryan Bednard then took over in his first professional game and stopped all eight shots he faced in the second half. Bednard, from Bowling Green University, has looked good so far in camp.

“That was probably the biggest crowd I have played in front of and it was pretty cool to finally put on the Panthers jersey,” Bednard said. “It was an honor. I feel good out there. It took me a few shots to get going, but I had fun.”

- The Panthers will hold two practice sessions in Nashville on Tuesday before continuing on their preseason road tour.

Florida will set up camp in Montreal on Tuesday night and travel to Renous, New Brunswick, to take on the Canadiens as part of the NHL’s Kraft Hockeyville series.

The Panthers and Montreal will play a second game at Bell Center on Thursday. The Panthers end the trip Saturday in Tulsa with a game against the Dallas Stars.

Quenneville hinted the 51-player roster could be pared down before the team takes off for Montreal on Tuesday.

“We are going to look to get down to some numbers here before Montreal,” he said. “When we get back from Montreal, we may lighten up as well. It’s a possibility for (Tuesday).”

- Brett Connolly signed a four-year deal with the Panthers on July 1 and was one of a handful of expected everyday players in the opening game lineup Monday.

Connolly got the Panthers on the board early, deflecting a Tommy Cross shot in front of the net for a 1-0 lead. Colton Sceviour, another regular, made it 2-0. Jayce Hawryluk scored Florida’s third goal.

“It was nice to play in my first game, put the new jersey on and get that out of the way,” said Connolly, who left the Capitals to sign with the Panthers.

- Just about every big name on Florida’s roster took Monday off, including Bobrovsky, Sasha Barkov, Jonathan Huberdeau, Vincent Trocheck, Keith Yandle and Aaron Ekblad.

Expect those players to all see time in the games against the Canadiens.

Quenneville said the team tried to split up the players who did play to not only see different combinations but also give players a chance to log some heavy minutes.

“We have some guys who are here so we can see what they can do,” he said. “We want to give them a chance to play organizationally and we got a feel for that.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Kings sign defenseman Ben Hutton to 1-year contract

By ROBERT MORALES

Defensiveman Ben Hutton has signed a one-year contract with the Kings, the club announced late Tuesday.

Hutton's contract calls for a salary of $1.5 million.

Hutton, 26, who played the past four seasons with the Vancouver Canucks, has 70 career points (11 goals, 59 assists) with 111 penalty minutes.

The 6-foot-2, 207-pound Hutton had five goals, 15 assists and 43 penalty minutes this past season for a Canucks team that went 35-36-11 (81 points) and missed the playoffs. He was minus-23.

A fifth-round draft pick of Vancouver in 2012, Hutton won a gold medal with Team Canada at the 2016 World Championships.

The Kings on Tuesday went 1-1 in a pair of split-squad exhibition games with the Arizona Coyotes, losing 5-0 at Staples Center and winning 4-1 in Glendale, Ariz.

Orange County Register: LOADED: 09.18.2019
Matthew Villalta, on earning a “save” in his first NHL game:

Yeah, I like that type of play:

Carl Grundstrom, on whether the more aggressive forecheck fits his style of play:

Yeah. Yeah, I like that type of play, so I think it’s going to fit me really well to play that type of game.

Matthew Villalta, on earning a “save” in his first NHL game:

Yeah, I just want to show my best and I thought I had a good shot to the net to create scoring chances and hopefull
On how it felt being behind an NHL bench for the first time in 300+ days
I was, much like some of our veteran players, I was a little bit rusty, so I’ll take some of that responsibility. I can’t come in here and just go after individuals, because I wasn’t as sharp as I needed to be either, but that’s what exhibition is for. It’s been a long time since I’ve been back there, but I will get better, I’ll get sharper and I’m excited about being behind there. It’s disappointing we came out with the results we had, but I think there’s some real teachable moments. I think there were some good nights by some individuals, some disappointing nights from some players that maybe know better and we expect a lot more from, but now we have evidence and that’s what we’re looking for. We can begin to sit down with some players, walk them through some shifts and some expectations and start to develop our team.

On specifically how he himself wasn’t sharp back there
For me, just the new rules, line changes, I got caught watching the game a few times and didn’t have the lines ready. Little details that I’d normally have, at the back end of a power play who’s going because used four forwards and one D, you get lost and confused in that. There’s no doubt that I have to have to sharpen up, but it’ll happen for all of us.

On the addition of Ben Hutton to the organization
With our situation here, with LaDue still not being ready to play and Forbort injured and struggling to get healthy right now, no one has any idea on his timeline. A position that we thought we might have a little bit of depth in, all of a sudden, it’s gone quite quickly. The first thing he’ll do is provide us an NHL presence, somebody that’s played a number of games, he’s played in the Pacific Division, he’s been able to play 15-20 minutes a night and for me, he’s a mobile puck mover. Like any player, there’s things that you think he can do better, but he does bring some valuable tools to the table. The fact that he’d feel comfortable jumping on that ice tonight, in an NHL building, in an NHL uniform, is real important right now for our backend.

On turnover created in the first period, and if that’s the style he’s looking for
It’s such a ping-pong night. There were times when we were doing so many good things and then there was a mistake made and we were out of position and they capitalized on it. The very first shot on goal, what was it 20 seconds into the game…for the most part we were positioned, Lewie lost the puck and stumbled or whatever and all of a sudden they’re gone. We had moments where we were in position, we made a few mistakes off of it but I think we can fix those types of things. Offensively, we created some offensive zone time, wore out the coyote on the crest, I didn’t think we had a very strong intensity in and around the blue paint. There were a few scrums, a few scrambles but nothing that was of NHL, dirty-goal caliber, I think we have to get some of that in our game. We saw some good things and some bad things on the penalty kill, some good things on the power play, some weak things. At the end of the day, we have evidence now, that’s the most important thing. Excited about some players, disappointed in some others, it’s also the first night.

On who he was excited about
I thought some of the young kids, that I had a chance to watch in Anaheim at the [Rookie Faceoff]. They played well there, but they didn’t necessarily catch you, you weren’t driving home talking about them. I thought Kupari had a very good night here. We weren’t talking about him that way leaving Anaheim, he did some good things here. Some of the American League players that I didn’t know much about, they performed fairly well. Some of the veterans that I know more about, some off nights so we’ve got to fix that.

On whether or not he’ll name names publically, with who did/didn’t play well, or if that stays in the room
First of all, I understand that you guys have a job to do and I’ve got to participate in that, but I will always be respectful enough to the player that I get to deal with them first. I don’t want to say that, you know what. Rob Blake wasn’t any good tonight, he was our weakest defenseman, and then have him surprised by that, that’s just not the way I operate. They owe it to hear it from me first and for me to give them a chance to fix it. You guys watch the same game I do, you guys are smart hockey people, you know who we’re talking about. They’ll hear about it tomorrow, there will be some that will sit with me, others that will see some video clips and we’ll try and fix it. If it’s error by commission we can live with it. If it’s error by omission then we’ve got problems.

On Kupari’s poise in the offensive zone and his puck control something that stuck out.
I thought he was more aggressive and assertive offensively then he was in the rookie games. Did Rasmus make some mistakes? Yes he did, but they’re teachable moments. He also did some really good things. Now, I can see why there was excitement about him, why he was picked where he was. I think he’ll need some time to ripen up and just get more confident. He’s asking some great questions on the bench, he wants to know why things are happening. For me, it’s a step in the right direction for him.
KINGS AGREE TO TERMS WITH LD BEN HUTTON ON ONE-YEAR, $1.5-MILLION CONTRACT

JON ROSEN SEPTEMBER 17, 2019

CONTRACTS AND FINANCES

The LA Kings agreed to terms with 26-year-old free agent Ben Hutton on a one-year, $1.5-million contract on Tuesday. A 6-foot-2, 207-pound left-shot defenseman from Brockville, Ontario, Hutton appeared in 276 games with Vancouver over the past four seasons, totaling 11 goals, 70 points, a minus-75 rating and 111 penalty minutes in 276 career games. Originally selected by the Canucks in the fifth round in 2012, the former Maine Black Bear is coming off a season in which he totaled five goals and 20 points in 69 games and set a career-high in his 2015-16 rookie season with 25 points (1-24-25) in 75 games.

This signing is linked largely to Derek Forbort’s back injury. The Kings had communicated with Hutton earlier in the off-season but also wanted to provide time and opportunity for young players to battle for available defensive spots. Though their conversations had cooled after earlier dialogues, the two sides remained in touch in advance of coming to terms.

“I’ve obviously read some stuff on him,” Blake said at the State of the Franchise forum in late August. “We looked at him, and like I said, if there is a potential fit – but like I said, we have a lot of young defensemen that we want to get some playing time. We’ve got to sort it out through our defense, for sure, if we can.”

Hutton’s signing changes the makeup of the defense that Los Angeles plans to open the season with. Drew Doughty and Alec Martinez are locks, though Hutton’s arrival makes things slightly more complicated for waiver-exempt defensemen Sean Walker, Matt Roy, Sean Durzi, Mikey Anderson and Kale Clague and waiver-eligible defensemen in Joakim Ryan, Paul LaDue and Kurtis MacDermid.

The financials can also be updated, though as of now the extent of Forbort’s injury isn’t crystal clear. (The prognosis is clearly not great, given that he hasn’t skated yet in camp and the Kings acquired a left-shot defenseman. The asterisk below denotes the possibility that he’ll open the season on IR.)

Forwards (14 / $44,009,671): Kopitar, Kovalchuk, Brown, Carter, Toffoli, Iafallo, Kempe, Lewis, Clifford, Grundstrom, Wagner, Luff, Prokhorkin, Amadio
Defense (8* / $21,970,000): Doughty, Martinez, Forbort*, LaDue, Walker, MacDermid, Roy, Hutton
Goalies (2 / $6,475,000): Quick, Campbell
Mike Richards Cap Recapture: $1,320,000; expires after 2019-20
Mike Richards termination: $250,000; expires after 2031-32
Dion Phaneuf Buyout: $2,187,000; fluid, expires after 2022-23
Total: $76,211,171
2019-20 Salary Cap: $81,500,000

Hutton averaged a career-high 22:21 in 2018-19, which included 1:51 of power play time and 2:18 of shorthanded time per game. With Hutton coming off a two-year contract with a $2.8M AAV, the Canucks chose not to qualify him in June, thus affording him unrestricted free agency.

LA Kings Insider: LOADED: 09.18.2019
15:27 – LAK Penalty – Durzi for tripping, race back for a puck on what could have been an icing, Durzi got tangled with an Arizona player and brought him down into the boards.

13:27 – Kings get the kill, though Arizona had puck control for nearly the entire final 60 seconds. Couple good saves from Quick.

7:45 – Cal Petersen enters the game for Jonathan Quick – Quick finishes with seven saves on 10 shots in his preseason debut.

5:27 – LAK Penalty – Clifford sits for high sticking, followed by a media timeout. Coyotes will have a man advantage on the scrapped ice, call the conspiracy theorists.

4:18 – Rasmus Kupari getting time in all situations, out here on the PK alongside Kempe. He and Rempal have connected well at even strength, good showing from 89 so far.

3:40 – Good work from Kempe, to weave into the attacking end and hold long enough to get support. Puck eventually finds the trailer, Rempal, who is turned aside by the blocker of Kuemper from a good area.

1:59 – LAK Penalty – Brickley sits for tripping. Put into an awkward position at the blue line, Brickley takes the hook to prevent an odd-man rush the other way.

1:25 – The Cornell man! What a stick from Ryan, who denies an Arizona bid on a gaping net, after a Petersen save. Easily prevented a goal.

1:10 – ARI Penalty – 4-on-4 hockey as Soderberg sits for Arizona.

0:00 – A tidy seven saves in seven minutes for Petersen since he entered. 3-0 Coyotes through 40 minutes of play.

FIRST PERIOD

20:00 – Underway in LA!

19:42 – ARI Goal – Coyotes get a 3-on-1 rush inside the game’s first 20 seconds. Keller keeps it himself, looks off Quick and scores blocker side. Kings with an early deficit.

16:45 – Nice moves from Lewis, weaves through the defense but his shot is blocked aside by Kuemper from the high slot.


14:08 – Kings not able to generate much on the man advantage. Second unit consisted of Clifford-Prokhorkin-Kupari-Luff-Durzi.

12:50 – Good chance for Kovalchuk – Toffoli slides around a defenseman down the right wing, flings to the center. Kovalchuk collects, spins and fires, saved by Kuemper. Nice effort by #17 to corral it.

10:13 – Keller & Garland combine on a chance down the left wing. Keller curls off after attacking hard, slips a backhanded feed to a trailing Garland, whose shot is gobbled up by Quick at the top of his crease.

7:01 – Good work in transition from Rempal and Kupari springs Kaliyev for an open look in the left-hand circle, but Kuemper swallows the shot at the top of his crease. Rempal has looked threatening early on.

6:38 – ARI Penalty – Fischer sits for interference, Kings get another shot on the PP in the opening period.

5:15 – What a look by Kovalchuk…threads the needle through two penalty killers, but Kupari’s back-door pass is deflected away. Best opportunity yet for LAK on the power play, as they fall to 0-for-2.

3:38 – ARI Goal – Looked like Conor Garland from the right wing as the visitors double their advantage. Goal came off the rush, Garland took a cross-ice feed from Schnarr and finished low blocker side. 0:50 – Great shift from Rempal. Worked a nice passing play with Kupari, set up a second chance from the point and then went hard on the forecheck to create a turnover and prevent ARI from clearing the zone. Liked his game a lot in the opening 20.

0:00 – 2-0 Coyotes through 20 minutes.

PRE-GAME

Jeff Carter, Trevor Lewis & Tyler Toffoli have an “A” for tonight’s game.

Clifford – Carter – Lewis

Kovalchuk – Kempe – Toffoli
Anderson-Dolan – Prokhorkin – Luff
Kaliyev – Kupari – Rempal
Ryan – Spence
Brickley – Clague
Bjornfot – Durzi
Quick
Petersen

See here for notes from morning skate and here for quotes from Head Coach Todd McLellan from earlier today.

LA Kings Insider: LOADED: 09.18.2019
Grundstrom has come on very well in this game.

Thought Wagner should’ve received an assist on a quick look, but what happened on Amadio’s line. Wagner makes a hit below the goal crease to Schmaltz, one pass wide.

More to come.

Amadio high-grade look in front; Raanta glove save. No rebound.

Amadio glove save on Amadio from the right circle.

Lizotte mostly being used high on the power play. Both units are going with four forwards and one defender.

Good back check by Wagner to deny Chychrun of a decent look from the right circle on a 2-on-2 rush.

Huge hit by MacDermid on Merkley after an ARI zone entry draws gasps. Merkley gets back on his feet and blazes down the right wing past any sort of resistance but catches the outside of the far post. Puck deflects out of play.

SOG: ARI – 0; LAK – 26
PP: ARI – 0/4; LAK – 0/4

Underway in the desert

Bahl for hooking.

Very good Villalta save on Steenbergen’s bid from the bottom of the Crease. LAK

14:24 – GOAL, LOS ANGELES. 1. Stepan (1) (Kessel). Kessel feeds Stepan in the slot. They criss-cross, allowing Kessel to provide a screen as Stepan timed well wide.

15:10 – Good back check by Wagner to deny Chychrun of a decent look from the right circle on a 2-on-2 rush.

14:24 – GOAL, LOS ANGELES. 1-0. Anderson (1) (Frk, Lizotte). Anderson hits Frk in stride through some traffic for a mini-break. Frk tries to deke around Raanta and runs out of room, but is still able to dish the puck back to the low slot, where Anderson had activated before chipping the feed high into an open net past a prone Raanta.

10:55 – PENALTY LAK. Bouma for interference.

Good back check by Wagner to deny Chychrun of a decent look from the right circle on a 2-on-2 rush.

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10:55 – PENALTY LAK. Bouma for interference.

9:20 – Angled chance for Crouse, who gets good composite on it, but Campbell makes the shoulder save. Merkley pushes the rebound just wide.

7:31 – PENALTY ARI. Anderson catches an edge and falls to his knees, and Pederson attempts an iffy hit with him in a vulnerable position. LAK didn’t appreciate it, but nothing extracurricular.

7:20 – Excellent look. Lizotte to Fagemo, whose redirection saucered just wide of the net. Lizotte has been good through his first several shifts.

5:00 – Austin Wagner turns on the jets and blazes down the right wing past any sort of resistance but catches the outside of the far post. Puck deflects out of play.

3:30 – Huge hit by MacDermid on Merkley after an ARI zone entry draws gasps. Merkley gets back on his feet and blazes down Amadio.

2:30 – PENALTY ARI. Merkley.

1:50 – Amadio misses wide on a good look from the right circle.

2:30 – PENALTY ARI. Merkley.

1:50 – Amadio misses wide on a good look from the right circle.

0:51 – PENALTY LAK. Sutter for slashing.

0:02 – Goligoski post from distance.

0:00 – HORN.

PRE-GAME
Alec Martinez, Michael Amadio and Kurtis MacDermid are serving as alternate captains. No captaincy is assigned for this game.

PRE-GAME
Alec Martinez, Michael Amadio and Kurtis MacDermid are serving as alternate captains. No captaincy is assigned for this game.

Grundstrom-Amadio-Wagner
Sodergran-Dudas-Bouma
Sutter-Thomas-Fagemo
M.Kempe-Lizotte-Frk
Martinez-Roy
MacDermid-Walker
Anderson-Strand
Campbell
Villalta

Jack Campbell and Matt Villalta are expected to split time in net evenly. Click here for today’s morning skate report.

LA Kings Insider: LOADED: 09.18.2019
BOUMA TO DEBUT AFTER LENGTHY ABSENCE; MACDERMID’S PATIENCE; MARIO KEMPE

JON ROSEN SEPTEMBER 17, 2019

INSIDERS. A fine Tuesday evening to you from Glendale, Arizona.

First, the “actual” list of important dates that I intended to post in yesterday’s notebook:

Before we get to the notes and stories, several things to reinforce: Both games will be broadcast by the home team’s radio broadcasters and carried on the home team’s I Heart Radio station, as well as eight games with the Philadelphia Phantoms in 2009 – he had appeared in 294 SHL games and another 166 in the KHL interspersed around international competition with Tre Kronor.

It was a good time to unwind for MacDermid, who appeared for two teams in 2018-19 that finished a combined 36 points out of playoff spots. When asked to weigh his season, it was the team’s shortcomings, rather than his own improved play, that he focused on.

“Obviously for the organization as a whole, it wasn’t acceptable,” he said. “You just try to think of things that you do the best to help the team win and you just have to make sure you’re doing the right things to bring that game for the team to get the wins – stuff like that.”

MacDermid says that it usually takes a week or “to decompress and take your mind off things and refresh the brain,” and once he did so, he again took stock of his own performance. He’ll always be a hardened deterrent and energy-provider, but there were other abilities that meshed collaboratively with his punishing physicality.

“Getting a lot of reps in Ontario helped my game a lot, rounding out my game,” he said. “To get that confidence with the puck and making really good plays coming out of the zone – first pass type of thing – and maybe jumping up in the rush and creating some offensive zone time and space for other players.”

“I think it’s just providing a little bit of energy and emotion and physicality to some games that needed it. And other games don’t need it as much,” he continued. “I just have to pick my times and have a feel for the game and where it’s going. Each game is different, so you’re going to have to vary your game a bit to how the game is going. I just went out there and did my thing and tried to bring all the elements that I usually bring to the game.”

MacDermid is now 25, and while he has 194 AHL games under his belt, his 11 games with Los Angeles late in the 2018-19 season seemed to be the most pronounced. He was assertive and confident with the puck and played at a better pace than the prior season, demonstrating admirable patience and focus. MacDermid, who signed his ELC on September 12, 2012 and played his first NHL game five years later, is not waiver exempt – but that might not matter for a player vying (and likely on the inside of the bubble on the precipice of the preseason) for a depth defensive role. Team executives have always been high on his ability to receive instruction and process information. He’s very coachable.

“They signed me, and I was really grateful for that,” he said. “They had a lot of patience with me, and I just tried to work my hardest and learn as much as possible with the unbelievable development staff they have. They showed patience with me, so there are times where I have to show patience and just bide my time, just keep working at my game. You can’t be in a better spot organization-wise than this one, so I’m happy to be here.”

— From Curbed LA, it’s El Segundo’s origin story:

Around 1911, scouts for the Standard Oil Company discovered an old coastal melon patch in the South Bay. “The area they were looking for had to be adjacent to the seashore, where tankers could transport oil to all parts of the world,” Atkinson explains. Standard Oil snapped up the melon patch and named it El Segundo, meaning “the second” in Spanish. Some say that the name was inspired by a woman who enthusiastically do...
“Obviously being in the KHL, you get good money, so players can be comfortable there, too,” he said. “But how we grew up, how we were taught how to handle life, it’s to search for new opportunities. The NHL is the best league in the world, so I said, ‘if I get one shot to come over here, I will take it.’ So far I’ve been doing pretty well, and now it’s the next step to be a full-time NHLer and play a full season.”

He had a sense he’d make the jump back to North America when he visited Los Angeles upon the conclusion of his 2016-17 KHL season with Vityaz Podolsk. With his family also present, he attended a morning skate in El Segundo, and not long after that was in attendance at Staples Center when Adrian, eight years his junior, scored his first NHL goal in a game against the Washington Capitals.

“A lot happens in three years at that age. For me, back then, he was just like a little kid, but now he’s grown up, and I think he can do big things in this league,” he said.

You’ve probably heard some of this by now: Mikael Kempe, Mario and Adrian’s dad, is trained in martial arts and has also coached and worked in management and skill development in Sweden’s Division I and Division II. Mario praised his dad’s ability to motivate and instill a strong work ethic in his kids.

“Obviously we had some talent, but I think the biggest thing he taught us was how to work hard – and how to like to work hard – and how to like to compete when it’s getting tougher. Like I said, he’s really good at motivating people. If you talk to him before a game, you feel like you can go through a wall or something like that. That’s what he taught us the most – how to be ready for big games and tough games,” he said.

While the brotherly companionship is a welcome and therapeutic perk and played a role in his decision to sign with the Kings, it was also due to what he viewed as a good opportunity.

“Obviously, I wanted to stay over here, and I just thought it was a good place to go to. I had heard a lot of good things about it, speaking to my brother, too,” Mario said. “He said only good things about it. I wouldn’t say it was only because of that, but I just feel it was the right choice to make.”

LA Kings Insider: LOADED: 09.18.2019
MCLELLAN LOOKING TOWARDS SPLIT-SQUAD SET FOR “FIRST CHANCE” TO SEE KINGS IN ACTION

ZACH DOOLEY SEPTEMBER 17, 2019

MORNING SKATE NOTES
MORNING SKATE QUOTES

Tonight marks LA Kings Head Coach Todd McLellan’s debut behind the Kings bench, coming on home ice at STAPLES Center. McLellan, alongside Marco Sturm and Chris Hajt will direct operations for the home group, while assistant coach Trent Yawney and Ontario Head Coach Mike Stothers will be behind the bench in Arizona, with Bill Ranford monitoring from upstairs.

Lineups for tonight’s action (HOME and AWAY) were reported earlier today following the Kings’ respective morning skates.

“What do we want to get out of the game? We want to be competitive right off the bat and we want to see if we can adhere to some structure,” McLellan said following today’s morning skate in El Segundo. “I don’t expect them to be perfect or be in the right spot all of the time. The fear of a coach is you try to put some structure in place and you take away their tenacity and their pace because they become thinkers and we would like to avoid that as much as we can. A lot of unknowns going into the game, hopefully we’ll have some information to work with after the night.”

Tonight’s lineup in Los Angeles is a hodgepodge of experience, ranging from the veteran Jonathan Quick, as one of the evening’s two goaltenders, to Arthur Kaliyev and Jordan Spence, skating in their first NHL preseason games as 18-year-olds. Up front, expect to see nine of 12 forwards who played NHL games last season, with just two such players on the blueline. The group in Arizona features a little more experience on the backend and more youth at forward, with Jack Campbell and expected first-year pro Matt Villalta in goal.

That’s a pretty broad question. I was asked that yesterday and I actually put some more thought after. We can’t just assume that we know Carter, we know Clifford, we know Lewis until we spend more time with them. That was an assumption I made and perhaps it was wrong, so this will be our first chance to see the veterans play, the usual names if you will, the “San Jose, Edmonton names” that we saw all the time, so we’ve got to deal with that group. There are some other players that are breaking into the league, and I think that’s Roy, Walker and Luff, those types of players that are close and their on the cusp. They’ve been here for a little while, but I don’t know a lot about them. We balance that out with the young prospects, some are going to go back to junior and our lifeline with them is running its course quickly, so we’ve got a lot to observe.

On what part of tweaking the systems will help the team most, if they get it, and hurt the team most if they don’t?

It is a tough question to really answer until we get a little more evidence from the group. Some of the areas that we tweaked I think will eventually help them, but it may hurt them to start with, simply because of habit. Four of the five guys will be doing what we need to be doing and the fifth guy, out of habit, will go out of position and it affects everybody. The fear of making mistakes throughout training camp, you feel like you have to be perfect to make the team and we want our players to make mistakes right now. It gives us a chance to work on it. I think we need a little more time together, a little more evidence to see where we’ll be productive with changes and where it may hurt us for a little while.

On whether he’s been surprised to learn anything about the veterans he’s coached against for so long

At this point, no, but their personal characteristics. Take Clifty for example – He was about as hateful as you could get as an opposition coach, a fan, or whatever because he just competed hard. He’s one of those guys that you didn’t like playing against but you loved having him on your team. Yet, when you come in here, you see his personal side, there’s some humor to him, there’s a little bit of a spark to him, an energy, you don’t know if that exists or not. For me, with those veteran guys, it’s been more about off the ice, the way they carry themselves in the locker room, their habits, who’s open to conversation, who’s a little more private, those types of things. You’ll eventually learn a lot more about them on the ice surface.

On the youth on the blueline and what he’s looking for out of those younger players

Just the confidence that that individual has in himself to believe he belongs. I think, once a young player gives himself permission...after warmups they’ll look around, big building. They’ll look over and they’ll see NHL players on the other side. The puck will drop, a couple shifts, maybe nervous and then they’ve got to give themselves permission, they’ve got to allow themselves to belong at that level. Some guys do it quickly, some guys never do it, but the youth part of it on the blueline is fine. We need to see people play and I’m not worried about the inexperience there. Will it hurt us or help us, I don’t know, but at the end of the night, we’ll have something to work from, we’ll have evidence.

On if he plans to do anything specific with special teams

Well, we tried to put a little bit of structure in place, whether it’s a breakout or a penalty kill forecheck. It’s likely going to look somewhat disorganized, just because we didn’t have a lot of time. We’ll have a few weeks now to work on it and build on it, but let’s hope that what we put in place we’ll see a little bit of.

LA Kings Insider: LOADED: 09.18.2019
LINEUP CHANGES
MORNING SKATE NOTES

Expect the following split-squad lineup in Glendale, Arizona:
Grundstrom-Amadio-Wagner
Sodergran-Lizotte-Fagemo
M. Kempe-Thomas-Dudas
Frk-Sutter-Bouma
Martinez-Roy
MacDermid-Walker
Anderson-Strand
Campbell
Villalta

Paraphrased, but overheard downstairs: You know it’s a young lineup when #27 is only the fourth from the left on the stick rack.

Jack Campbell and Matt Villalta will each play one half of the game. Cole Kehler and Markus Phillips are the extra skaters. Trent Yawney and Mike Stothers will run the bench, while Bill Ranford will watch from upstairs.

“This’ll sound funny – we want to see them make some mistakes so that with some of the changes that were made it’ll be a lot easier to teach off of those,” Yawney said. “Probably most of all, it’s just ‘go play.’ Todd pretty much said that he wants them to just go play hockey and then we’ll deal with everything else.”

A projected Arizona lineup for tonight’s Gila River Arena game:
Hayton-Stepan-Kessel
Grabner-Richardson-Fasching
Crouse-Schmaltz-Merkley
Steenbergen-Pedersen-Martin
Goligoski-Hjalmarsson
Chychrun-Soderstrom
Ness-Mayo
Raanta
Prosvetov

The Coyotes didn’t hold a full-team morning skate, though a dozen or so players got onto the ice before the Los Angeles group left for the airport and the Glendale group returned home for a pre-game nap. More to come from both El Segundo and Glendale, including chats with Kurtis MacDermid, Mario Kempe and Lance Bouma.

LA Kings Insider: LOADED: 09.18.2019
Hockey is back, Insiders!

The Kings and Coyotes will square off in a pair of preseason matchups, split-squad style. Jon has made the trip to Arizona and I'll have the coverage tonight in Los Angeles.

Projected Lineup In Los Angeles
Clifford – Carter – Lewis
Kovalchuk – Kempe – Toffoli
Anderson-Dolan – Prokhorkin – Luff
Kaliyev – Kupari – Rempal
Ryan – Spence
Brickley – Clague
Bjornfot – Durzi

Quick / Petersen

*Quick was the first goaltender off but Petersen was off quickly thereafter. As per Jon below, expecting goalies to split time.

Tomorrow’s split-squad groups will be a mix of the current groups, McLellan said. He’ll stay at Staples with Sturm, while Yawney and Stothers will travel to Glendale. Goalies will split time in net.

— Jon Rosen (@lakingsinsider) September 16, 2019

For Arizona, expecting the following group of players, though still not known on line combinations
Forwards: Keller, Dvorak, Chaput, Miele, Soderberg, Fischer, Bennett, Bunting, Jenik, Schnarr, Burke, Garland
Defensemen: Russo, Lyubushkin, Dineen, Demers, Smerek, Gross, Oesterle
Goaltenders: Kuemper, Hill

LA Kings Insider: LOADED: 09.18.2019
Wild loses in overtime to Dallas but looks good

By Sarah McLellan Star Tribune SEPTEMBER 18, 2019

Some of the factors studied the most in the preseason — chemistry among new linemates, a return from injury and debuts from new players — were in play for the Wild’s exhibition opener Tuesday at Xcel Energy Center.

And the outcomes from each were encouraging, even if they culminated in a 2-1 overtime loss to the Stars.

“Not the result [the team wanted] at the end of the day,” winger Ryan Hartman said. “But I think overall it was a pretty decent game by us.”

Stars forward Justin Dowling capitalized on a breakaway 3 minutes, 35 seconds into the extra period, this after the newbie Hartman cashed in on a shorthanded breakaway at 14:43 of the second period to even the score. Hartman finished an assist shy of a Gordie Howe hat trick, as he also flexed his physical side by dropping the gloves for a fight earlier in the frame.

“He scored that goal, and he looked like he knew what he was doing,” Wild coach Bruce Boudreau said.

Dallas’ Roope Hintz made it 1-0 off the rush on the power play with 40 seconds left in the first.

Alex Stalock made 19 saves for the Wild, while Landon Bow had 18 through two periods for the Stars before Colton Point turned aside 13 in the third period and overtime.

This was defenseman Matt Dumba’s first game since he suffered a torn pectoral muscle in December, and he looked comfortable settling back — particularly on the power play where he was active in getting shots off.

Despite not getting on the scoresheet, the Zach Parise, Ryan Donato and Mats Zuccarello line had some good looks, and Zuccarello continues to skate like the playmaker he was brought in to be.

“You’d like to win all the time, but I try to take the positives and the teaching negatives out of there,” Boudreau said. “You can watch the teaching negatives, and hopefully we get better on that.”

New look

Aside from contributing more offense and being a physical presence, a responsibility stressed to him by General Manager Bill Guerin, winger Marcus Foligno hopes to resume his post as one of the Wild’s top penalty killers — a role he had plenty of practice at Tuesday, with the Wild putting the Stars on the power play five times and Foligno on the ice for the start of each shorthanded situation.

Dallas went 1-for-5, while the Wild was 0-for-5 during a special-teams slugfest.

“I want to be counted on to be [the] first penalty-killing line,” Foligno said.

After Foligno worked with Eric Fehr last season, his new partner could be captain Mikko Koivu since Boudreau wants someone who can win faceoffs on the ice.

Last season, the Wild had the seventh-best efficiency in the NHL at 81.7%.

Foligno occasionally killed penalties Tuesday with Hartman, and that’s a duo that could stick together on a line during the season.

“He seems like he has a pretty good set of hands for a guy that’s kind of labeled as a depth player,” Foligno said of Hartman.

“I think he has a little more finishing than guys I’ve played with before on the fourth line.”

Fiila update

Boudreau now anticipates winger Kevin Fiala, who has been unable to join the Wild until he secures a work visa after signing a two-year, $6 million contract a week ago, arrives by Friday.
Mats Zuccarello exceeded his boyhood dreams by reaching the NHL. As a youngster, Wild forward Mats Zuccarello wanted to play in Sweden.

By Sarah McLellan Star Tribune SEPTEMBER 18, 2019

There isn’t typically ice to skate on in the summers in Norway. Rinks are scarce compared to the United States and Canada, and what facilities are available are concentrated in the same areas rather than scattered throughout the country. Soccer is more popular. So is handball and cross-country skiing.

But hockey is the sport Mats Zuccarello, growing up in Oslo, wanted to play. And his dream was to make it to Sweden. "The NHL is so far away," Zuccarello explained.

It wasn’t until after he accomplished his goal of starring in Sweden that the NHL became a reality for Zuccarello.

CARLOS GONZALEZ • CGONZALEZ@STARTRIBUNE.COM

Wild forward Mats Zuccarello, playing against Dallas in an exhibition game Tuesday, likes to pass more than shoot.

Teams were interested, especially the New York Rangers, and once he accepted the opportunity, Zuccarello set out on a journey to become crowned as the best in a league that at one point didn’t seem attainable — a chase for glory that now continues with the Wild.

"Your career is short. You can play for 15 years. That’s still a short career," Zuccarello said. "In normal life, you work for 50, 60 years. So it's a short amount of time."

... Everyone every day works toward winning a Stanley Cup. But when you’re there, you gotta be willing to sacrifice because you don’t get those chances that often."

Even though he had his sights set on Sweden growing up, Zuccarello was aware of the NHL. He watched highlights Sunday nights on one of the two Swedish channels broadcast on TV, and when he was 13 — 10 years after he first started playing hockey — Zuccarello’s mom, Anita, bought him the VHS commemorating the 2001 Stanley Cup champion Colorado Avalanche.

Colorado became Zuccarello’s team, and Peter Forsberg his favorite player. "I probably watched it 2,000 times," Zuccarello said.

He ultimately chose hockey over soccer, relishing the emotional roller coaster a game offered. "You can be as happy as you’ve ever been in one second, and you can be sad in the other second," he said.

By the age of 15, the kids who were bigger than Zuccarello started to take over — this after he thrived when he was younger because the competition couldn’t catch him. Zuccarello’s high school years became formative, with maturity fueling his progress.

Finally, after a stint in Norway’s top league, Zuccarello made it to Sweden. He spent two seasons with Modo, and Forsberg became his teammate. "I had a great time there," Zuccarello said.

In Year 2, he scored 23 goals and racked up 64 points in 55 games. Glen Sather, the Rangers’ GM at the time, called. "This is a step up," Zuccarello said. "Obviously, I gotta go and see what happens. If not, I’ll come back. I've got nothing to lose."

It took a couple of years for Zuccarello to settle into New York; he had to adapt to speaking conversational English, and he was sharing the ice with players he admired as a child — such as Chris Drury, who was on that Avalanche tape Zuccarello watched repeatedly. "Coming from a small country and never being part of something that serious and big before," he said, "it took me some time to adjust and really get comfortable."

Eventually, Zuccarello did.

Before getting traded to Dallas ahead of last season’s trade deadline, the 5-8, 184-pound right winger logged more than 500 games with the Rangers — putting up 352 points (239 on assists).

Zuccarello emerged in the NHL as the player he was in Norway and Sweden: A setup artist. "I always liked to pass more than shoot, see other people score, help other people score, see their joy," Zuccarello said.

This pass-first style joined the Wild after the team signed Zuccarello to a five-year, $30 million contract in July, and it was on display in practice before the 32-year-old made his Wild preseason debut Tuesday at Xcel Energy Center against the Stars.

"There were some times I’d almost be getting lazy assuming he’s going to shoot, and next thing I know it’s in my wheel house but I’m not ready," said winger Zach Parise, who’s filled out a line with Zuccarello and center Ryan Donato in training camp. "I've kind of learned to always be ready with him."

What the Wild is also getting with Zuccarello is someone who believes the expectation every year should be playing beyond the regular season. After all, that’s a prerequisite to winning the Stanley Cup.

"You gotta make the playoffs," Zuccarello said, "and give yourself a chance."

Star Tribune LOADED: 09.18.2019
Ryan Hartman does Gordie Howe impression in Wild preseason opener

By DANE MIZUTANI

The result couldn’t have mattered less.

All Wild coach Bruce Boudreau was looking for was a solid effort from his team during Tuesday’s preseason opener against the Dallas Stars at the Xcel Energy Center.

Newcomer Ryan Hartman gave him that, and then some, nearly recording a Gordie Howe hat trick in his unofficial debut with the Wild.

Essentially locked into a bottom-six role, at least for the time being, after signing a two-year, $3.8 million contract this offseason, Hartman gave a glimpse of what to expect from him this season.

He was solid in both ends, beat the living daylights out of something named Tye Felhaber, and recorded a breakaway goal for good measure in the 2-1 overtime loss.

The only thing missing from the Gordie Howe hat trick was the assist, though the Wild will no doubt take that kind of effort from Hartman this season.

"It’s good to get that first game out of the way," Hartman said. "Not the result at the end of the day. But I think overall it was a pretty decent game by us."

Moving forward, Hartman will almost certainly play opposite Marcus Foligno when the regular season rolls around, and regardless of who’s centering them, they shouldn’t be a menace to play against.

"I thought they played well together," Boudreau said. "I thought that was our best line."

DUMBA RETURNS

Nobody was more charged up for Tuesday's meaningless game than Matt Dumba.

It served the culmination of hours of hard work for the Wild defenseman as he recovered from a torn pectoral muscle that knocked him out of last season.

"It’s pretty special," Dumba said. "Not taking anything for granted even though it’s the preseason."

That said, Dumba knows the real thing is still a couple of weeks away, and because of that, he made sure to stay smart out there.

"Not getting fired up like it’s the playoffs," Dumba said. "Just checking off all the boxes and trying to get back into my routine."

FIGURING OUT FIALA

It could still be a couple of days before Kevin Fiala is back in the mix. He’s still in Europe trying to figure out the details surrounding his work visa.

"The only thing I’m guessing is he should be here by Friday," Boudreau said. "I heard rumblings that he’s getting his paperwork Tuesday, then maybe leaving Wednesday, and Thursday is a day off. But I don’t know 100 percent for anything."

As for whether Fiala will be too far behind at that point, Boudreau said a lot of that will come down to how hard he’s been working back home.

"If he’s been working with a pro team, then probably, physically, he’s not behind much," Boudreau said. "If he misses two games, there’s still four games, and he plays a minimum of three games. He should be able to be ready for the start of the season."

Pioneer Press LOADED: 09.18.2019
Mats Zuccarello fitting in with Wild … and Zach Parise couldn’t be happier

By DANE MIZUTANI

In the immediate aftermath of the first scrimmage of training camp, Wild coach Bruce Boudreau had a chat with star winger Zach Parise as they walked off the ice.

The topic? Crafty new winger Mats Zuccarello.

"He said, ‘Jeez. If I was ready for it, I would have had three or four tap-ins,’ “ Boudreau recalled of his back-and-forth with Parise. "I think that’s what he brings to the table."

If the Wild have their way this season, those tap-ins will come in actual games. That was the whole idea of putting Parise and Zuccarello together with Ryan Donato sandwiched in between.

"Just playing with Zucs and Zach, it doesn’t get much better than that," Donato said. "You’ve got a guy that can play any facet of the game with Zucs and a guy that’s super experienced with Zach that can score goals and really do anything we need him to do."

Widely regarded as a top-tier playmaker in the NHL, Zuccarello made a name for himself playing nearly a decade with the New York Rangers. He accumulated 113 goals and 239 assists in his career in the Big Apple and this offseason, was rewarded with a five-year, $30 million to come to the Mini Apple.

Essentially, Zuccarello will serve as a replacement for Mikael Granlund, who was flipped for Kevin Fiala last season at the trade deadline.

"When I used to play with Granny, he kind of knew that I’d be going to the net at all times and he was so good at feathering those passes," Parise said. "You see a lot of that in Zuccarello, too."

"In the scrimmages, there were some times I’d almost be getting lazy assuming he was going to shoot and next thing I know it’s in my wheelhouse and I’m not ready," Parise added. "I’ve kind of learned to always be ready with him because he fakes me out sometimes with a great pass. I’ll get more and more used to that and be aware."

As excited as Parise is about playing with a playmaker of that ilk, Zuccarello sounds equally as excited about playing with someone who isn’t afraid to let it rip from anywhere on the ice.

"Obviously I played against him a lot of times," Zuccarello said. "I like the way he plays. We kind of play a little similar style, only that he shoots more than me. We both are hard workers. We both win the puck battles. We both are hard on the forecheck. It’s just that he’s a shooter, so I don’t have to shoot that much. That’s a good thing."

No doubt the Parise-Donato-Zuccarello combo will develop more chemistry throughout the preseason, starting with Tuesday’s exhibition game against the Dallas Stars at the Xcel Energy Center.

"It’s tough to tell in practices and even in scrimmages," Parise said. "It’s a little bit of chaos on the ice, and things will slow down once the games start and we will learn more."

As soon as things start to click, Zuccarello believes the Wild could surprise some people this season.

"All the guys that I’ve been with and talked to and been around have been great," Zuccarello said. "We want to prove that we’re a playoff team. That’s our goal. We are working toward that and excited to get going."

Pioneer Press LOADED: 09.18.2019
It was Taco Tuesday down at the Bar Down Sports Grill inside the Poplar Creek bowling alley in Hoffman Estates, Ill.

The official Chicago Blackhawks bar 40 miles northwest of the Windy City announced on Twitter early in the day that they would naturally be carrying the Blackhawks’ exhibition game against the Detroit Red Wings and, of course, Ryan Hartman’s preseason debut with the Minnesota Wild on several of their 23 TVs.

Wait … what?

Seriously.

In fact, not only was Bar Down showing Hartman’s first-ever game in a Wild sweater, if you were a hockey fan who showed up to the Blackhawks bar donning rival Wild garb, your first drink was on the house courtesy of a couple bartenders named @MrsHartz and @HartyzOnTheFly.

Who are @MrsHartz and @HartyzOnTheFly?

You guessed it, Ryan’s mom and dad, Craig and Kim.

“My dad took over the bar when I still was playing with Chicago,” Hartman, a free-agent pickup, said after scoring the lone goal in Tuesday’s 2-1 overtime loss to his kinda, sorta previous team, the Dallas Stars. “It’s a Chicago Blackhawks bar most of the time, but when I was traded to Nashville, it was a Nashville bar for a little bit and then it became a Flyers bar for a little bit when I was traded to Philly. Now, I guess, it’s a Wild bar. It’s wherever I’m at, that’s what it’s going to be.

“I don’t know how many showed up today in Minny gear, but I’ll have to find out.”

The answer? Ten.

“We’re hoping for a better following going forward,” Kim Hartman said during an interview with The Athletic on Tuesday night.

The Hartmans hope Bar Down will remain a Wild bar for at least the next couple years.

A 2013 first-round pick by his hometown Blackhawks, Ryan Hartman, 24, who was born in South Carolina but grew up in Illinois and rooted wholeheartedly for the Hawks, signed a two-year, $3.8 million contract with the Wild on July 1. Former GM Paul Fenton, part of the management team that once acquired Hartman in Nashville, thought the Wild were too easy to play against last season, so he wanted to add what he called a forward player with energy and an edge. He skates well, is always in the middle of the madness and isn’t opposed to dropping the gloves. He demonstrated that Tuesday night against Tye Felhaber, a 21-year-old former OHL scorer with the Ottawa 67s who was nailed by five consecutive lefts before being thrown to the ice by Hartman, who immediately turned bee-lined right to the penalty box.

TYE FELHABER TAKES A GO AT RYAN HARTMAN AFTER THE WHISTLE…DIDNT END WELL FOR HIM. #DALVSMIN PIC.TWITTER.COM/QB8FDOQUA

— DYLAN NADORNOY (@DNADDERs) SEPTEMBER 18, 2019

But again, Hartman’s first-roundener, somebody who scored 19 goals for the Blackhawks in 2016-17. So perhaps there’s a little untapped offensive potential in those veins. He has scored 42 goals and 89 points in 245 career games.

Less than two minutes after his fighting major ended, Hartman received a home-run pass from defenseman Carson Soucy on a delayed penalty. Hartman was so alone inside the Stars’ zone, it took a few seconds for the TV cameraman to even realize where the puck was and to catch up. Hartman picked his spot and tied the score at 1-1 with a shorthanded breakaway goal.

Let’s say, Hartman went … bar down.

THIS IS THE BEST REPLAY OF RYAN HARTMAN’S GOAL YOURE GOING TO GET. #DALVSMIN PIC.TWITTER.COM/D38VDRZZQT

— DYLAN NADORNOY (@DNADDERs) SEPTEMBER 18, 2019

“I don’t think I’ve ever had that much time before,” Hartman said. “Good heads up play by Soucy.”

“He scored that goal, he looked like he knew what he was doing,” said coach Bruce Boudreau, who felt Hartman and linemates Marcus Foligno and Gabriel Dumont made up the Wild’s best line against the Stars.

At Bar Down, the patrons erupted when @MrsHartz and @HartyzOnTheFly’s son scored.

“Oh my gosh, ecstatic,” Kim Hartman said, laughing. “A good start, for sure. I don’t know about the fight. But he likes to get the crowd going.”

Hartman had a pretty weird summer, to say the least, as did his mom, who went viral with a tweet June 25 that read, “Ryan u need to call your mom! Lol.”

“I like to try to be funny. Being funny took on its own life,” Kim said Tuesday night.

Ryan Hartman, acquired by Philadelphia from Nashville in February, was a pending restricted free agent for the Flyers. But they decided they couldn’t tender him a qualifying offer because his price on a next contract was going to be too much to stomach.

So Chuck Fletcher traded Hartman’s rights to the Stars, who 24 hours later cut him loose and made him an unrestricted free agent.

As a restricted free agent, Hartman figured it was safe to go with some buddies on a fishing excursion to the middle of nowhere an hour’s flight north of Kenora, Ontario, on the Manitoba border.

Three or four days later, his group was flying to a new lake when he was finally relayed the news by the pilot who came to pick him up that he needed to call his agent, Matt Oates, immediately. That’s how he learned that he was about to become a free agent and would need to pick a new team.

Over the next four days during the free-agent courting period, Hartman checked in with Oates once in the morning and once in the evening via satellite phone, weighed his options and ultimately agreed to come to Minnesota once he got reconnected to technology.

I THOUGHTS FROM RYAN HARTMAN AND ALEX STALOCK FOLLOWING TONIGHT’S FIRST PRESEASON GAME #MNWILD PIC.TWITTER.COM/M1447THPSC

— MINNESOTA WILD (@MNWILD) SEPTEMBER 18, 2019

“I had options last year to sign a longer-term deal in Nashville, but it never worked out, so I did the one year,” Hartman said. “So it’s nice to get two years here and feel appreciated for the work you do.”

Plus, Hartman’s girlfriend Lauren’s entire family is from the Twin Cities. They’re longtime Wild season-ticket holders, so this should be a good fit.

“I’m just coming in and trying to give everything I have,” Hartman said.

“You’ve got to show the hard work you put in the summer and try to hit the season full-speed. It’s good to get that first one out of the way. I’m not too worried if I show up on the score sheet. I just try to do the things at the end of day for us to be up at the end of the game. That’s making plays, if that’s laying the groundwork for another line to go out there and get a goal, if that’s drawing a penalty, that’s how my role is played.”

So, good first impression for Hartman, who could cost his parents a lot of free drinks the next couple years at this rate.

“He’s always like, ‘You’re trying to buy my fans,’” Kim said, “but it’s a fun thing. I think Minnesota will like him.”

One game in, if he keeps bringing physicality, and solid penalty killing and chips in offensively, he could become a fan favorite. He’s that fun to watch.

Matt Dumba returns
Defenseman Matt Dumba played his first game since tearing his pectoral muscle in a fight last December. He played a game-high 26 minutes, 57 seconds, had five shots, two hits and three giveaways. He lost the puck behind the Stars net en route to Justin Dowling’s breakaway winner with 1:25 left.

**A GAME-WINNING OVERTIME BREAKAWAY GOAL?**

YOU LOVE TO SEE IT. @THEREALJDOWLS | #GOSTARS
PIC.TWITTER.COM/8DOEZP39JL
— DALLAS STARS (@DALLASSTARS) SEPTEMBER 18, 2019

“I think what happened with Dums is once he missed that really good chance in the third period, he was like, ‘I’m going to score,’” Boudreau said. “And he started taking some pretty big chances after that.”

On the losing goal that also included Jason Zucker and Eric Staal on the ice, Boudreau said, “There was enough fault to go around there.”

**Mats Zuccarello debuts**

Mats Zuccarello, signed July 1 to a five-year, $30 million deal, also played his first game in a Wild sweater. He set up Zach Parise and Dumba for near goals.

“He tries to make the hard play all the time,” Boudreau said. “Very similar to (Mikael) Granlund, they think they can make it all the time. So you better be ready when he’s got (the puck).”

Boudreau liked the Foligno-Dumont-Hartman line and the young Colton Beck-Luke Johnson-Will Bitten line, but wasn’t exactly in love with the Parise-Ryan Donato-Zuccarello and Zucker-Staal-Drew Stafford lines. He indicated he thought it was typical first preseason game stuff by veterans.

**Mats Zuccarello**

Zach Parise and Mats Zuccarello, who made his Wild debut Tuesday. (Brad Rempel / USA Today)

Kevin Fiala arrival on horizon?

The saga to get Kevin Fiala the two work visas he needs to cross the pond appears to be coming to a close. He was interviewed at the U.S. Embassy in Stockholm, Sweden, on Tuesday with the hope of getting approved to work in the U.S. this season.

Assuming all went well, Fiala is expected to fly to Minnesota on Wednesday. The Wild have a full team day off Thursday, so Boudreau is hoping Fiala will be available to practice for the first time Friday.

“But I don’t know 100 percent for anything,” Boudreau said.

Fiala signed a new two-year, $6 million contract with the Wild on Sept. 11. Asked if he’ll be behind missing a week of training camp in addition to not skating with his teammates during pre-camp skates, Boudreau said, “I think a lot of it depends on what he’s been doing. If he’s been working with a pro team, probably physically he’s not behind much. It’s just getting position-wise with his linemates is where he’d be behind. But there’s still four preseason games (starting Saturday) and he plays minimum three of them. He should be able to be ready for the start of the season.”

**Drew Stafford update**

Stafford, in camp on a pro tryout, has been skating on Fiala’s presumed spot on the line with Zucker and Staal. Stafford has mostly looked good in camp and scored a power-play goal in Monday’s scrimmage. On Tuesday night, he nearly set up Jared Spurgeon for a third-period go-ahead goal.

“He’s professional,” Boudreau said. “He’s good on the power play in that spot here. He knows how to play. It’s not something that you have to do a lot of teaching with him. He’s motivated. There’s a lot of good things to see, and he’s pushing people.”

It’ll be interesting to see if he earns a contract out of camp. If so, he may have to accept a two-way contract, but that would mean Victor Rask and/or J.T. Brown could be Iowa-bound via waivers. One complication that could affect all three and the Wild’s decisions with all three: Teams can only play six “veterans” at a time in an AHL game and Iowa is expected to already have what the AHL deems six veterans — Cody McLeod, Kyle Rau, Colton Beck, Matt Bartkowski, Mike Liambas and Gabriel Dumont. So if a combination of Rask, Brown and Stafford end up there, Iowa Wild coach Tim Army will have nightly decisions as to which six vets play.
Issues remain, but NHLers welcome labour peace, Habs' Gallagher says

The NHlPA decided to not reopen the collective agreement on Monday, averting the threat of a strike or a lockout for the next three seasons.

PAT HICKEY, MONTREAL GAZETTE Updated: September 17, 2019

"As players, we just want to play."

That was the way Brendan Gallagher described the NHL Players' Association's decision Monday not to revisit the 2013 collective bargaining agreement with the National Hockey League.

"There are still issues to be discussed, but we're optimistic that the NHL will work with us and create an agreement going forward so we can play without a work stoppage," Gallagher said Tuesday. Gallagher and Paul Byron serve as the player representatives for the Canadiens.

The CBA, which ended a 119-day lockout, expires in 2022 but each side had the option of reopening the agreement this year. The NHL had a Sept. 1 deadline and announced it was happy with the status quo. The NHlPA decided to stand pat on Monday after getting a one-day extension on its Sept. 15 deadline. The decision averted the threat of a strike or a lockout for the next three seasons.

"We're hopeful that the NHL can continue to create revenue growth," said Gallagher. "That's the important thing as players. We think we have a great sport and a great product and we're hopeful it will continue to grow in the right direction."

The two sides started talking in February and they will continue to talk in hopes that a new agreement will be in place before the current one expires.

The most contentious issues are escrow, medical coverage for players beyond their playing days and international play.

"Our main objective is to play hockey, but we have a responsibility to leave the game in good shape for future players," said Gallagher. "We've had a lot of discussion and we realize there are flaws in the system and we had to decide whether we could sort it out while we're playing or we really need to have another lockout or strike. We're putting a lot of faith in the NHL to continue the negotiations and we can come to a solution that makes everybody happy."

The players are not happy about escrow. There's a 50-50 split of revenue between the players and the owners. At the end of the season, salaries are adjusted. If the total payout to the players is under 50 per cent, the salaries are topped up, and that happened in the early years of escrow.

But escalating salaries have pushed the total over the 50-per-cent mark and the salaries have been clawed back. Last year, the payers gave back 9.5 per cent in escrow. That's a lot of money for Carey Price, who earns US$10.5 million a season, but it's more of a hardship for a player at the bottom who makes US$600,000.

Many players were upset that the NHL didn't allow them to compete in the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea, because of concern over travel, injuries and a disruption to the NHL schedule. If the NHL applies the same logic to its decision, it won't be represented at the 2022 Winter Games in Beijing.

"Representing your country is the ultimate thing for some players," Gallagher said. "When I was growing up, every kid dreamed of putting on the jersey of whatever country you represent and you feel that should be one of your rights. We love playing this game and not having the ability to compete at the highest level is something we're not happy about."

Uncertainty over a work stoppage led to the cancellation of a World Cup tournament in 2020, but that competition could be revived in 2021.

Montreal Gazette LOADED: 09.18.2019
PAT HICKEY, MONTREAL GAZETTE Updated: September 17, 2019

A lot of young players feel the need to bulk up, but Canadiens defence prospect Cale Fleury arrived in camp this year with that lean and hungry look.

"I leaned out this year," Fleury said after practice in Brossard Tuesday. "I worked on my skating to be more explosive and shedding a little bit of that weight helped out with that."

The 6-foot-1 Fleury said a "strict diet" led to the weight loss. He weighed 215 pounds at the Canadiens' development in camp in June and he reported to the team's rookie camp this month at 205.

Fleury has attracted a lot of attention in the early days of the camp. After a solid performance in a three-team rookie showcase in Belleville, Ont., last week, Fleury was named one of the three stars Monday night as the Canadiens opened their preseason schedule with a 4-2 win over the New Jersey Devils at the Bell Centre.

"The biggest thing in the NHL is consistency," said Fleury. "It's good if you have one good game but in the NHL, you have to be good every night."

Fleury is a right defenceman and the way the depth chart looks, he'll be fighting Christian Folin for a spot behind Shea Weber and Jeff Petry. The Canadiens will probably carry seven defenceman to start the season, but Fleury would have to find a spot in the top six because the team doesn't want a prospect sitting on the bench when he could be logging big minutes in Laval.

Fellow rookie Josh Brook and 2015 first-rounder Noah Juulsen are also in the mix, but Fleury has the early edge. Brook has looked out of place in the early going, while there are health concerns surrounding Juulsen, who was shut down last season after suffering an eye injury.

Headaches have kept Juulsen on the sidelines at camp and the team announced Tuesday that Juulsen will consult a specialist. Head coach Claude Julien described the move as precautionary and noted that Juulsen is not dealing with a concussion.

"It's unfortunate when guys get hurt like that," said Fleury. "You don't like to see that but if I can take advantage of that, I'll take it. I came into camp to make the team."

A third-round draft choice in 2017, Fleury played in Laval last season and had nine goals and 14 assists in 60 games.

"Having the year in Laval really helped me, just getting into the pro game and feeling comfortable," said Fleury. "(Coach Joël Bouchard) was great and he continued to help me with advice in the summer and in this camp."

"The biggest adjustment was handling the pace of play," said Fleury. "There were times last year when I felt the pace was too quick for me. It's tough when you're used to playing in junior and you go into scrimmage where it's so much faster. This year, I feel confident with the pace."

Fleury said he felt comfortable Monday because he was paired with Xavier Ouellet.

"We have good chemistry from playing 40 or so games together in Laval," said Fleury.

In Bathurst, he'll be paired with Otto Leskinen, a free agent from Finland.

Montreal Gazette LOADED: 09.18.2019
Shea Weber’s presence at training camp cannot be ignored as the biggest change for the Canadiens.

By Arpon Basu Sep 17, 2019

The Canadiens opened their preseason schedule on Monday and because the focus this time of year is often on rookies and others trying to crack the roster, a very significant thing happened without much fanfare, one that had nothing to do with Nick Suzuki or Jake Evans or Cale Fleury or Cayden Primeau and his ridiculous saves.

No, that significant thing had more to do with the second-oldest guy on the roster, the captain, who for some reason logged a team-high 21:26 of ice time against a split-squad New Jersey Devils team. The same one who was wishing he could do something like this a year ago at this time.

Shea Weber’s presence at training camp this season feels like it is being taken for granted, but it might be the biggest reason why the Canadiens can appreciate improve on last season’s results. The offseason changes essentially amount to a swap of Andrew Shaw and Jordie Benn for Nick Cousins and Ben Chiarot. There are young players who could take a step up, but the impact of a healthy offseason of training and a full training camp on Weber’s performance – both on and off the ice – can’t be ignored.

A year ago, Weber was trying to learn the nuances of a fully revamped system from the video room while spending extra hours in the gym to expedite his recovery from knee surgery.

“I was in all the systems meetings and all that stuff, but I definitely wasn’t on the ice,” Weber said over the weekend. “I mean, I got up to speed relatively quickly as the season went on, but now it’s nice to be a part of these practices right from the start of the year because our practices were also kind of revamped into what we wanted our system to be like. A lot of the things we did in practices were how we played in the games.”

While it might be nice for Weber to be part of these practices right from the start of the year, it is perhaps less so for some of his teammates.

Just ask Jordan Weal.

In the first on-ice session of camp Friday, Claude Julien decided to have the players engage in a battle drill. In other words, Weber’s bread and butter.

Weal was the first one to go up against Weber, tasked with trying to get to the front of the net against him. It didn’t go very well.

The next thing he knew, Weal was airborne, going in the opposite direction he was attempting to travel and landing with a hard thud on the ice.

Weber basically threw a professional hockey player through the air, away from his net, using his stick as the throwing mechanism.

“Yeah, I’m actually still feeling that one pretty good,” Weal said two days later, on Sunday. “First drill, first rep, that’s how you want to start it.”

“He kind of got me right in the kidney and it buckled my leg. That 170 flex there is pretty stiff. But you want those guys on your team. Webb’s been a top-4 for Team Canada for his whole career and to be able to play with a guy like that is pretty special. For him to be able to stay in the shape he has and the level he’s been playing at even later into the twilight of his career …”

Weal drifted off a bit at that point, just began shaking his head, marveling at what Weber does and who he is and what he represents.

“It’s like guys like Tom Brady too, the way they diet, the way they work, guys are able to play longer,” Weal continued, after snapping out of it by spontaneously swearing and immediately apologizing for doing so. “It’s great to have a guy like that in the room, on the ice and having him as our captain.”

This is the type of reverence Weber regularly commands, to the point it becomes almost routine hearing it. But it shouldn’t be routine because it is relatively rare for players to have the level of universal goodwill Weber has accumulated over the years. Comments like Weal’s encapsulate what Weber means to the group, what his health and presence among that group means to the Canadiens’ fortunes this season.

This summer in Kelowna, Weber made a point of noting how difficult it was for him to miss training camp last year. He seemed to feel it was being somewhat overlooked in evaluating how his season went.

He was right, by the way.

“It’ll be good to have a training camp,” Weber said in late June. “Not a lot of people talk about how important training camp is. You look at a lot of guys, even healthy guys who hold out and miss a full training camp, I’ve played with guys that did that, and you’re behind. You are. Training camp is so important systems-wise, practice-wise and getting up to speed.”

(Arpon Basu)

“It was kind of like hitting the ground and the ground was moving and you’re trying to get your feet under you. But I think I handled it pretty well, to be honest.”

There will be no moving ground for Weber to deal with this season, no getting his feet under him. He won’t be watching his teammates go through the process of becoming a team without him.

“I had a lot of work to put in last year just to get back,” Weber said Saturday, “but doing it with the guys builds a camaraderie and a bond right from the start of the year the way guys get through these practices and battle each other and grind and do everything they can to make a spot (on the roster), get more minutes, move up the lineup. Guys are all trying to push each other and it’s fun being a part of it.”

Doing it with the guys builds a camaraderie and a bond right from the start of the year.

That’s the other aspect of missing last year’s training camp that was a hindrance for Weber. Remember, Max Pacioretty had just been traded. Everyone knew Weber would be named captain as his replacement, but that didn’t officially happen until Oct. 1.

Being a leader when you can’t be on the ice with your teammates is difficult. Starting your captaincy that way makes it even harder.

“When you’re injured it’s tough to feel like that (leader),” Weber said. “But for last year … I got to go on the first road trip just to be with the guys. It is hard to a certain extent because you’re not in those battles, so you don’t want to say too much, you know what I mean? You feel out of place a bit.”

But Weber did what was necessary regardless.

“The core group of leaders with this team makes things a lot easier,” he said. “When I’m not with the guys I can talk to them and get a feel for how the guys are. I still could talk with guys and we did a couple of things at the start of the year that I set up for the guys to try and get a bond and get to know each other.”

Oh yeah? Could you give me an example?

Weber just shook his head in response. He didn’t want to talk about those couple of things he set up to make sure the team bonded during training camp. I tried to get it out of him, but he flat out refused.

“If you want to ask the guys what we did last year you can ask them,” he said. “I don’t like to pump my own tins.”

Ok, so I did.

Victor Mete said one of those “couple of things” was an outing to a golf simulator where the entire team spent the day just playing golf and hanging out. This is notable because Weber, in his state, couldn’t even take part in the event he planned.

“He was just sitting there at the table with the boys,” Mete said.

But the day had the effect Weber desired because the day wasn’t about golfing. It was about sitting there at the table with the boys.

“I thought it was awesome,” he said. “Guys had a great time. We’ll try and do something again this year. I know we’re short on time, especially playing every second day. It’s going to be tough fitting something in. Maybe the last week there.”

Josh Brook is a pretty quiet kid. He speaks in short sentences, rather monotone and generally appears unexcited in an interview. He is in training camp fighting for a spot on the team and was being asked about
the opportunity of being paired up on defence with Brett Kulak, an ironclad member of the team.

Brook wasn't buying it.

But after a few minutes of answering questions about himself and responding in a consistently unenthusiastic way, Brook was asked about being on the ice with Weber for the first time.

Suddenly, the monotone disappeared, and a big smile came across Brook’s face.

“He’s massive. He’s a huge dude,” Brook said. “Watching him on the ice is just amazing. Everything’s on the tape, he’s so strong. He’s just a great player.”

Weber had a full summer to train and prepare for the season, but he did so amid a climate where NHL players are looking to become leaner to adapt to the increasing emphasis on speed and quickness in today’s game. Charles Hudon lost 17 pounds in the offseason. Karl Alzner slimmed down a bit in the hopes of becoming quicker.

Weber is a different category of player, and Brook’s reaction when talking about him explains why. His strength and heft are what sets Weber apart – just ask Weal if you want a reminder why – and he was not about to change that this summer in his preparation for the season, despite the league-wide trend we are witnessing now.

Weber is beginning the season at 230 pounds, down from the 235 he weighed when he returned in late November last season, but not significantly down.

“That’s the trend for sure, you see it around everywhere, guys are showing up to camp lighter, leaner, less body fat,” Weber said. “The transition towards the faster game, that’s the best way to do it; you get lighter and it makes you hopefully quicker or more efficient.

“But for me to drop 15 pounds, for one it would be tough to do, I think, just because of the structure of my whole body. But I don’t think it would benefit me a whole lot either because my strength and power, I need as much of that as I can get while getting my quickness as much as I can as well.”

That strength and power are what makes Weber unique, what makes him feared and revered by opponents, but it only scratches the surface of why the Canadiens missed him so much at the start of last season.

They missed his presence, his influence, how he makes everyone on the team feel important, something he vowed to do the day he accepted the captaincy and something he has followed through on every day since.

Weber is the Canadiens’ captain in every possible sense of the word. Having him around while the team is in the formative stages of coming together has immeasurable value.

It is a value that should not be taken for granted.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Go back and watch Game 6 of the 2017 Stanley Cup Finals if you want an excruciating experience, and I don’t mean because the Nashville Predators were robbed of a goal by an early whistle and had to endure former Predator Patic Hornqvist breaking a scoreless tie with 1:35 left followed by the sight of the Pittsburgh Penguins skating around the Bridgestone Arena ice with the Cup.

No, just watch Ryan Ellis. Keep in mind that he had a torn-up knee — oh wait, sorry, it’s the NHL preseason, I forgot the rules, he had a “lower body injury of some sort” — and had to leave Game 5 in the second period because of it. He was questionable for Game 6. He decided he would give it a go. He moved gingerly, the other ginger, not the ginger of his ZZ Top beard, the ginger of an athlete in pain, during warmups. This was setting up to be a case of individual courage harming a collective pursuit, but then the game started and Ellis looked like Ellis. He got to his spots and battled with every bit of his 5-foot-10, 180-pound body. He did things in that game that made you wince at the thought of those stressed ligaments.

He did things that made you wonder how anyone on this team could be tougher. Surgery and six months of rehabilitation immediately followed for Ellis. Then he came back, played well right away in early 2018 but had a forgettable postseason. He got paid. He followed that with a decent season — better by the numbers than by the sight of things — and another forgettable postseason, bounced around by the big, burly Dallas Stars in a bitter first-round defeat.

And this is how someone goes from a 26-year-old crafty of legend to a 28-year-old source of uncertainty. The long-term question is whether Ellis will be healthy and effective enough to earn the $50 million he is due to make over the next eight seasons. That’s fair reason for concern, even though $6.25 million a year is a friendly number and less than what Ellis could have fetched on the open market.

More immediately, this Predators team that opened the preseason Monday at Bridgestone with a pair of wins over the Florida Panthers could be a contender. The preseason hype isn’t there, even for the reigning Central Division champ. But the players are there, if enough of them can find their best this season. And if new addition Matt Duchene is better by the numbers than by the sight of things — and he responded with a “not gonna comment,” which — whether he realized it or not — made it sound like he needed another knee procedure.

But when I asked him about that response Monday, Ellis said: “That’s not my place. David (Poile) has made that clear from day one that it’s his place to tell you guys (about injuries). So I followed protocol.”

I asked specifically about the knee and he said: “That’s been great.”

I also ran into Poile in the concourse and tried one more time to get him to specify on Ellis’ health situation. He gave me only a smirk, which is still better than having to hear “lower body” or “upper body” for the thousandth time in an NHL arena. They should just go all the way and designate everything as “body.”

Right now Ellis would have no designation. He said he’s 100 percent and he looked it Monday on the ice. That’s as good as things can be right now. They don’t stay that way long in this sport. But maybe Ellis will have better luck this season. And maybe he’ll opt for caution when the luck turns, to keep it from getting worse. Toughness is big in hockey. Performance is bigger.

“I think hockey, it’s a sport where guys almost take pride where if they are hurt, they play,” Ellis said. “I’m no different.”

Except every guy isn’t one of the most important players on a Stanley Cup contender.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Devils’ roster for Wednesday’s preseason game vs. Rangers | No Jack Hughes vs. Kaapo Kakko just yet

By Chris Ryan

Jack Hughes vs. Kaapo Kakko will have to wait.

Hughes, the No. 1 overall pick in the 2019 NHL Draft, will not play for the Devils on Wednesday when the team continues their preseason slate with a 7 p.m. game at Madison Square Garden against the Rangers and Kakko, the No. 2 overall pick of the draft.

Wednesday’s lineup will feature a handful of players battling for NHL roster spots in the preseason. Jesper Boqvist, Ty Smith, Michael McLeod, Nathan Bastian and Brett Seney are all scheduled to play.

The Devils’ roster will also feature several veterans, including Nico Hischier, Jesper Bratt, Miles WoodSami Vatanen, Damon Severson and Cory Schneider.

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The game group will hold a morning skate in Newark on Wednesday morning before traveling to New York. The rest of the Devils’ remaining training camp roster will practice in Newark later in the morning.

Here’s the full roster for the Devils for Wednesday’s game:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cory Schneider</td>
<td>G</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evan Cormier</td>
<td>G</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connor Carrick</td>
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<td>Will Butcher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nico Hischier</td>
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<td>John Hayden</td>
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<td>Kevin Rooney</td>
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<td>Ty Smith</td>
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<td>Mirco Mueller</td>
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<tr>
<td>Damon Severson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brandon Baddoek</td>
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<td>Michael McLeod</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nathan Bastian</td>
<td>RW</td>
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<td>Brett Seney</td>
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<td>Miles Wood</td>
<td>LW</td>
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<td>Sami Vatanen</td>
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<td>Nikita Vatangev</td>
<td>RW/LW</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jesper Bratt</td>
<td>LW/RW</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nikita Gusev</td>
<td>LW</td>
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Star Ledger LOADED: 09.18.2019
Devils make 1st roster cuts of training camp | Which players are heading back to junior hockey?

By Chris Ryan

The Devils made their initial cuts from their 2019 training camp roster, reassigning five players to their respective Canadian junior teams, one to the USHL and one to the Binghamton Devils in the AHL.

Here’s a look at the players the Devils reassigned on Tuesday:

F Mitchell Hoelscher (Ottawa, OHL)
F Graeme Clarke (Ottawa, OHL)
D Xavier Bernard (Charlottetown, QMJHL)
D Nikita Okhotyuk (Ottawa, OHL)
D Michael Vukojevic (Kitchener, OHL)
G Akira Schmid (Omaha, USHL)
G Eamon McAdam (Binghamton, AHL)

Hoelscher and Bernard were participating in their second training camps after being selected by the Devils in the 2018 NHL Draft. Both will enter their final seasons of junior hockey in 2019-20.

Clarke, Okhotyuk and Vukojevic were all members of the 2019 draft class, participating in their first NHL training camp. Okhotyuk did not skate during the camp after undergoing surgery on a broken index finger in early September. He is expected to be out until later October or early November.

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That leaves the Devils with 49 players at training camp, and the team will be down to two practice groups until they make more cuts to merge into one.

Here are the players remaining at camp:

2-Colton White, D
5-Connor Carrick, D
6-Andy Greene, D
7-Matt Tennyson, D
8-Will Butcher, D
9-Taylor Hall, LW
13-Nico Hischier, C
14-Joey Anderson, W
15-John Hayden, RW
16-Kevin Rooney, C
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17-Wayne Simmonds, RW
19-Travis Zajac, C
20-Blake Coleman, D
21-Kyle Palmieri, RW
24-Ty Smith, D
25-Mirco Mueller, D
28-Damon Severson, D
29-Mackenzie Blackwood, G
31-Gilles Senn, G
34-Brandon Baddock, W
35-Cory Schneider, G
36-Ben Street, C/W
37-Pavel Zacha, C
38-Michael Paliotta, D
40-Josh Jacobs, D
41-Michael McLeod, C
42-Nathan Bastian, RW
43-Brett Seney, F
44-Miles Wood, W
45-Sami Vatanen, D
46-Blake Speers, C/W
47-Julian Melchiori, D
48-Dakota Mermis, D
50-Evan Cormier, G
51-Brandon Gignac, C/W
53-Yegor Sharangovich, C/W
59-Fabian Zetterlund, W
63-Jesper Bratt, W
67-Marian Studenic, W
70-Nikita Popugaev, W
71-Colby Sissons, D
73-Mikhail Maltsev, C/W
74-Ludvig Larsson, C
75-Jeremy Groleau, D
76-P.K. Subban, D
79-Ryan Schmelzer, C
86-Jack Hughes, C
90-Jesper Boqvist, C/W
97-Nikita Gusev, W

Star Ledger LOADED: 09.18.2019
How Devils’ Nikita Gusev, Jesper Boqvist, Ty Smith performed in preseason debuts | 5 observations from split-squad games

By Chris Ryan

The Devils opened up their preseason schedule with a pair of split-squad games on Monday, ending with a 4-3 overtime win against the Boston Bruins at Prudential Center in Newark and a 4-2 loss to the Montreal Canadiens at Bell Centre in Montreal.

Aside from Jack Hughes putting on a show in Newark, there was a lot to sort through from the start of exhibition play. Here are five other observations from the Devils’ two games, including Nikita Gusev’s debut, strong outings for Ty Smith and Jesper Boqvist, and more.

Nikita Gusev seemed to fit right in

Prior to the start of the preseason, Devils coach John Hynes raved about Nikita Gusev’s ability to play on the half wall on the power play. In his preseason debut on Monday, Gusev showed why he got that praise.

“His deception. He’s one of those guys, where, defensively, do you pressure him? Do you sit?” said assistant coach Rick Kowalsky, who was running the Devils’ bench against the Bruins. “(It was) a Boston team with a lot of young players, but you could just kind of tell, he was just baiting guys in. He makes the play to Boqvist and surprises him with it, and he gets it right back and makes a seam pass to Bratt. His deception, his play-making ability, I was really impressed with him.”

And at 5-on-5, Gusev fit right into the mix. Playing with Hughes, Gusev helped combine for some dangerous chances at even strength, and he eventually connected with Hughes on an assist for the overtime-winning goal.

Adjusting to the NHL-sized rink will be one of the biggest challenges for Gusev during his transition from Russia this season, and one game in, he appears to be taking that change in stride.

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Jesper Boqvist’s line drove possession

The top line of Hughes, Gusev and Miles Wood did fine possession-wise, with all three finishing a tick under 50 percent in terms of shot attempts for and against.

But the second line of Travis Zajac, Bratt and Boqvist really drove possession. The three all finished at 66.67 percent or better in terms of corsi-for at 5-on-5, meaning the line controlled the vast majority of shot attempts while on the ice.

That’s not shocking for Zajac and Bratt, two experienced NHL players against a young Bruins lineup. But to see Boqvist fit right in with them was an encouraging sign for the roster hopeful. Along with Bratt, Boqvist buzzed in the offensive zone all night, and Boqvist ended with three shot attempts.

“He’s got a lot of poise with the puck. He’s good in tight, he can skate,” Zajac said. “He’s got a lot of skill, a lot of talent. And it just seems like the game’s effortless for him when he’s out there.”

Carrick impressed with Ty Smith

After missing Sunday’s practice due to illness, Ty Smith was well enough to suit up for Monday’s game, and the Devils didn’t hold him back. He led all Devils skaters in ice time at 23:16, playing both aspects of special teams long the way. He also picked up a secondary assist on Hughes’ first goal of the night.

Smith was partnered with Connor Carrick, and the two played together for the first time after being in separate practice groups over the weekend. Carrick came away impressed with the 2018 first-round pick.

“He’s a great skater, he’s got a great stick. We were egging each other on to communicate early,” Carrick said. “It’s the first time we’re taking real contact where guys are really coming for you. And I thought he did good. The workload’s been pretty high, it’s no secret, the past few days, and that’s a challenge you’re faced with as a young pro. ‘How can I come in against these veteran players that have been through this and show my best?’ With all the hype, all the pressure, all the fatigue, I thought he did well.”

Hischier and Palmieri look ready to roll

Shifting north of the border to the Devils’ other game, it was the usual suspects putting their collective best foot forward in a 4-2 loss to the Canadiens.

Nico Hischier and Kyle Palmieri didn’t have Taylor Hall with them (though Blake Coleman was a more than qualified substitute), and the two top-line forwards clicked quickly. Neither got on the scoresheet, but Hischier hit the crossbar on a power play, and he set up Coleman for a dangerous rush shot at 5-on-5. Palmieri accounted for two shot attempts and one dangerous scoring chance at 5-on-5.

Will Butcher’s strong showing

While Smith got a big workload against the Bruins, Will Butcher and Damon Severson shouldered that load against the Canadiens. Playing on the same pairing, the two led the Devils in ice time, and Butcher drove offense throughout the night. Along with his power-play goal, he generated three shot attempts at 5-on-5, creating two scoring chances and one high-danger chance.

Star Ledger LOADED: 09.18.2019
Just 1 game in, Devils’ Jack Hughes flashes his potential for future

By Chris Ryan

Let’s start with the obvious caveat: Monday was just a preseason game, played against a Boston Bruins roster that lacked any serious NHL talent.

But, man, Jack Hughes delivered a performance to back up the months of hype leading up to his debut.

Playing in his first actual game inside an NHL arena against pro competition, Hughes didn’t disappoint. The No. 1 overall pick of the 2019 NHL Draft scored two goals, including the overtime winner to propel the Devils to a 4-3 victory over the Bruins at Prudential Center.

His second-period power-play goal from the right circle was the Devils’ first of the night, and after more than 30 minutes of feeling out the game and the pace, Hughes converted a shot that helped him feel right at home on the ice.

“I think on that first goal, that’s where I kind of got more comfortable,” Hughes said. “Wanted the puck on my stick more, so that was kind of the turning point.”

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From there, Hughes kept creating. He nearly picked up an assist in the third period on a crafty feed to winger Nikita Gusev in the slot. Hughes wheeled around the net, and from the left corner, he pivoted and fired a pass through two defenders, right onto Gusev’s tape. A tight shot was saved, but the play showed off the vision Hughes can have on the ice.

In overtime, Gusev returned the favor, delivering a pass to a cutting Hughes as the 18-year-old slipped behind the defense en route to the net. All Hughes had to do was hit the open window to end the game.

As Hughes enters the NHL in 2019-20, there are going to be endless comparisons to how other highly touted prospects and current stars entered the league. Similar to what Hughes said after being drafted, P.K. Subban isn’t interested in those.

“Jack Hughes is going to be the best version of Jack Hughes,” Subban said. “He’s 18 years old. (Andy Greene) and I looked at each other and said, ‘Some of these kids can really play.’ He’s one of those guys. He’s got a bright future. It’s just about sticking to the process.

“As his career goes on, he’s going to have to continue to learn how to be that player. At some point he’s going to be a leader in his career, and all those things are going to be important. But right now, I don’t think we’re helping him at all by trying to compare him to other players. Just let him be Jack Hughes and be the best version of himself.”

However Hughes’ 2019-20 season and NHL future play out, Monday’s performance in a preseason game will eventually fade into memory. But for now at least, the center used his first opportunity to display what he could potentially mean for the franchise in the coming years.

“It was really good to get out there. Thought I played good,” Hughes said. “It’s nice to get those two goals, but then put it in the perspective too that it’s only preseason. There’s a lot of work still to be done.”

Star Ledger LOADED: 09.18.2019
Why a refined Michael McLeod is off to an impressive start early in Devils preseason

By Chris Ryan

While the Jack Hughes and half of the Devils' training camp roster were busy notchin g a dramatic overtime win in Newark on Monday, the other half spent the night in Montreal making their preseason debuts. The Montreal Canadiens won that game, using a pair of late goals to finish a 4-2 victory at Bell Centre, but the night included a strong outing for Devils 2016 first-round pick Michael McLeod. The forward finished with two points, notching a primary assist on a Will Butcher power-play goal in the first period before scoring his own goal in the third period.

Points aside, the performance continued an early trend for McLeod, adding to the noticeable play that began at the start of preseason practices. After getting his first taste of the NHL last season, McLeod now has the advantage of integrating some of the little things he learned into his game, and they can go a long way toward making a difference.

Having the speed to quickly jump into plays is one thing, but McLeod spent the summer focusing on how to deploy his best weapon better while getting to more effective spots on both ends of the ice to make plays.

"I worked a lot on my skating, kind of straight-line speed and balance and everything like that," McLeod said. "My edges, turning down low, kind of getting away from defenders. I've been working on my hands, shooting a lot. Little things and a lot of video. It's helped me and I feel a lot more confident going into camp this year."

That work seemed to pay off during the first few days of practice at training camp. Ahead of his performance in Monday's preseason game, he appeared in two scrimmages over the weekend, where he also scored a goal and found ways to help drive possession.

From watching McLeod through the first few days of camp, along with his work during development camp and at the Prospects Challenge during the offseason, Devils coach John Hynes said he's seen a more mature presence from the forward.

"Some of it is just knowing more what to expect," Hynes said. "We've talked with him at length about his identity and using his speed and competitiveness to an advantage and to skate, playing with his head up and understanding what to do with the puck before he gets it."

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McLeod is one of a handful of prospects fighting for one of the limited number of spots on the Devils' opening-night roster, and getting off to a strong start in the preseason is a key for any prospect hoping to earn a job in the NHL to start the season.

During his 21-game run with the NHL club last season, McLeod had just three assists and didn't score. So in an effort to boost his offense, McLeod has also worked to put himself in better positions on the ice to find the net. For him, that means finding his way to the crease, even when he doesn't have the puck.

When he scored in the scrimmage on Saturday, he did so by cutting down the slot without the puck, and he set himself up to quickly release a shot off a pass from fellow prospect Nathan Bastian.

"I kind of know where I score most of my goals from, so my focus has been getting in front and getting in those areas, getting in the dirty areas," McLeod said.

Star Ledger LOADED: 09.18.2019
The past few days have gone pretty well for the Boqvist family. Jesper Boqvist, a second-round pick by the Devils in 2017, began his first NHL training camp by scoring two goals in the first three-and-a-half minutes of his first scrimmage. Two days later, he was one of the Devils’ best forwards in their first preseason game, a 4-3 overtime win against Boston at Prudential Center.

Adam Boqvist, a first-round pick by the Blackhaws in 2018, opened his 2019 preseason with a highlight-reel goal against the Capitals.

“That’s a beauty,” his older brother said, having watched video of Adam’s goal after the end of his game and the postgame media session.

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The Boqvist brothers, both among the top prospects for their clubs, are trying to earn a place with their NHL teams. If Adam doesn’t nail down a spot in Chicago, his general manager said he’ll play in the AHL. He played for London in the Ontario Hockey League last year and could return, but Stan Bowman said he’s ready for pro hockey, either in Chicago or Rockford.

For Jesper, the circumstances are trickier. He has a contract for the 2019-20 season with Brynas IF, the Swedish Hockey League team in Gavle, a short drive from his hometown. There’s an out clause for him to join the Devils and play in the NHL, but he’ll return home if he doesn’t make the opening-night roster or the organization decides he’s not ready for a full season after he plays some early games.

Before the Devils won the 2019 draft lottery, Boqvist was the organization’s top forward prospect. Ty Smith, the team’s first-round pick in 2018, was the club’s top defensive, and overall, prospect. Now both are trying to join Jack Hughes and inject a jolt of speed, skill and youth in an already revamped New Jersey lineup.

“I have to be as good as I can every second out there,” Boqvist said.

Boqvist is off to a strong start in his bid for a roster spot. It started with the prospects tournament in Buffalo, where he played pretty well in the first two games and then looked great in the final contest. Assistant general manager Tom Fitzgerald said shortly after that game that you can pick out the NHL players on the ice at this type of tournament, and Boqvist was one of them.

His first NHL camp scrimmage was a success, and not just because of the two goals. He flicked a saucer pass to his center, Travis Zajac, in the neutral zone that ignited a New Jersey offensive possession. Later, he worked a smooth give-and-go along the wall near the offensive blue line with countryman Jesper Bratt for one of the prettiest zone entries from the first weekend.

Coach John Hynes praised his competitiveness, which was significant because if Boqvist was going to struggle, it figured to be with the transition to the smaller ice surface and the more physical style of play. We still haven’t seen him against a real NHL lineup — the Bruins’ roster Monday night was filled with young players who had limited NHL experience and a few bottom-of-the-roster veterans.

That said, the transition has not been a problem so far. He’s found some immediate chemistry playing with Zajac and Bratt, and it’s not hard to piece together an opening-night lineup where those three make up New Jersey’s third line. They’ve controlled the puck in a scrimmage and a preseason game and have been responsible defensively.

Bratt scored a goal on a deflection Monday night and then set up Connor Carrick for a four-on-four tally, with Boqvist and fellow potential rookie Ty Smith on the ice. Boqvist resembles Marcus Johansson with his skating stride and how smoothly he zips around the ice.

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“He’s super high-talented, sees the game very well, and he’s a great skater,” said Bratt, who played with Boqvist for Sweden in international events for four years when they were younger. Bratt was a 2016 draft pick, but he’s only three months older than Boqvist and the IIHF eligibility calendar is different than the NHL draft rules.

“I mean he’s a really smart player. He knows where to be on the ice and he knows how everything works, so for him it’s just going to be to come in here and show what he can do and work his hardest and I mean, I think it’s going to go well for him.”

Bratt was a huge surprise at training camp in 2017, before winning a job at 19 and becoming a key member of New Jersey’s young core. In what could be a breakout season for him, he might also have a pal from back home around to mentor and share it with.

“It is huge,” Boqvist said on media day before camp began. “I got over here a little bit before him, but right away he came here and he showed me Jersey City and where he is going to stay.”

Boqvist said on Monday night that this experience already feels different than development camp. He’s beginning to figure out northern New Jersey.

Both of the Boqvists worked out and skated in Gavle this past summer with other local NHL players. The most famous of the group is Capitals center Nicklas Backstrom. He and Washington teammate Christian Djoos celebrated their 2018 Stanley Cup with the trophy in Gavle.

Backstrom and Djoos were on the ice with the Boqvists for four days a week while everyone was preparing for the start of camp.

“It was real fun to be on the ice with them and all that so and see how good (Backstrom) is that close up,” Boqvist said. “I asked some questions, but not that much. He’s still like a hero to me.”

Boqvist is the key figure in New Jersey’s potential rugby scrum at the bottom of the roster. Assuming good health for these 11 forwards — Hughes, Bratt, Zajac, Taylor Hall, Nico Hischier, Kyle Palmieri, Nikita Gusev, Wayne Simmonds, Blake Coleman, Pavel Zacha and Miles Wood — it would be stunning for one of them not to be on the ice Oct. 4 in the regular season opener against Winnipeg.

If Boqvist is deemed ready for the NHL, or a trial run at the very least, the other young forwards on the bubble could find themselves in Binghamton. There are various dominoes at play in these decisions:

Hughes — Is he definitely playing center from the start? Will he need a sidekick who has played there before? Considering that he scored two of the team’s four goals against Boston while playing with Gusev and Wood, who was filling in for an injured Simmonds, after one game it looks the answers are yes and no. But he’ll need a few more strong performances, particularly without the puck, before that’s decided.

Zach — He signed a contract to be in camp on time, but has missed the start because of immigration issues and getting his visa paperwork in order. If Hughes starts on the wing or needs some help, that could bump Zacha up to his line and leave an opening in the middle of the fourth line. The Devils have let Boqvist play a game in Buffalo at center and he was taking faceoffs on the power play Monday night, so he could be a 4C candidate if needed. But it could also be a battle between Kevin Rooney, Michael McLeod and Brett Seney.

13 or 14? — The Devils have seven defensemen on one-way contracts, not including Smith. If he makes the team, there will likely be room for just one extra forward. They could go with two, which would open a spot for one of the three guys mentioned above, or a wing like Joey Anderson or Nathan Bastian.

John Hayden — He’s on a one-way contract after arriving in a trade from Chicago for John Quenneville. Hayden would need to pass through waivers to go to Binghamton, but his contract is small enough that he wouldn’t count against the salary cap in the AHL. Still, he seems like a favorite to stick with New Jersey, either as the 13th forward if Boqvist makes it or as a fourth-line regular if Boqvist does not.

It’s possible that by sometime next week, the Devils will decide that one of the other young players is more equipped to handle the rigors of the NHL schedule, the battles in the corners and the two-way play they’ll need from the guys who aren’t on a line with Hischier or Hughes.

It’s still early in this process, but Boqvist’s upside is clearly higher than the other candidates. He said the games in Buffalo helped a lot. Really, he might just be a quick learner.
While having Hughes contribute right away has obvious benefits, getting Boqvist and Smith acclimated to the NHL this season could be a boon for the Devils in the next two seasons to come, when they’d have three potential impact players on entry-level contracts.

“It’s helpful, that’s for sure,” general manager Ray Shero said. “As you start building as a team, you have to start paying some of those players and there’s only so much to go around. Then you’re hopeful that those younger players — every Cup winner has it — push on entry-level contracts. Pittsburgh had some of those players: Matt Murray, (Bryan) Rust and all these guys, (like) Jake Guentzel. You don’t win without that.”

Some other observations from the first two camp scrimmages and the first preseason game of the year …

1. Hughes might be pretty good at this. He set up two chances on his second shift Monday night and whipped a slick pass to Gusev in the slot from behind the goal line later in the game. He also danced through the slot with the puck with a ridiculous move and scored the two goals, one on the power play and one in overtime.

2. Gusev’s brain works a little differently than other players, which is going to make him a fascinating (and fun) player to watch. Assistant coach Rick Kowalsky loved his work on the power play, but was also surprised he didn’t shoot as much as expected. It was only one game, but it looks like it could be hard to keep Gusev off PP1. Putting him on the left wing and Hall on the right looks pretty tantalizing.

3. P.K. Subban dominated the Sunday scrimmage and played well Monday against the Bruins. He dictated the scrimmage with his ability to retrieve the puck, protect it and distribute it. Hynes called him a one-man breakout afterwards. One on play, he shielded off a forechecker and then snapped a perfect pass to Wood — a prime example of something he can do that only a select few at that position can.

He attempted more 100-foot stretch passes to the far blue line in the preseason game than the Devils did last year in a week’s worth of games. He committed one bad turnover, but also a half-dozen Grade A-plays.

4. Speaking of grades, if Boqvist deserves an A or an A-minus for his work from Buffalo through Monday night, Smith’s marks are not that high but are trending in the right direction. He had a couple of plays Monday where it looked like he hesitated early on — one on a power play where he wanted to jump up and keep the puck in but waited a second too long to decide, and other times when he got knocked down in battles for a loose puck. He also had some long shifts with Carrick prolonged by missed chances to get out of trouble.

Smith also played better as the game wore on. He made a nice play to break up a foray by a Bruins forward who thought he had a step. His passes, when he had a little space, were crisp and good decisions. I’d guess he’ll play in at least three of the final five preseason games, and possibly four.

5. While the team with Subban, Hughes and Gusev was dominating the Sunday scrimmage, Cory Schneider kept them off the scoreboard. We don’t have the official shots on goal for the one half he and Mackenzie Blackwood played against each other, but Schneider faced significantly more shots and stopped them all. He stopped 17 of 18 against Boston, the goal coming on a play where Carrick got caught off balance for a split-second and didn’t defend the rush as he should have (or Schneider expected).

6. Simmonds didn’t play Monday. He skated a little at the start of the morning skate and then left the ice. Hynes said it was a minor lower-body injury from the scrimmage the day before and they don’t expect it to be anything serious. Simmonds has missed parts of the past two seasons with injuries and tried to play through some of them, so this isn’t an ideal start to camp.

7. Sami Vatanen looked fine next to Subban on the top pairing, although he did lose his stick three or four times. I don’t think that was related to him being on his weak side.

8. McLeod had a strong finish in Buffalo, then a goal in the Saturday scrimmage and two points in Montreal when the other half of the Devils’ split squad lost Monday night in Montreal. He played on both special teams in Buffalo and again (more on the PK) in Montreal. If the coaching staff trusted him as the No. 4 or 5 forward on the penalty kill, that would be a boost for his chances of making the team. But the most likely scenario for McLeod is to play on one of the top two lines with Binghamton.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Oliver Wahlstrom, Noah Dobson give Islanders glimpse into future in preseason win over Flyers

By Andrew Gross

The Islanders certainly hope Tuesday night marked a glimpse into their future, quite possibly their near future.

Right wing Oliver Wahlstrom and defenseman Noah Dobson, the 11th and 12th overall picks in the 2018 NHL Draft, respectively, dressed for their first preseason game together as the Islanders beat the Flyers, 3-2, in overtime, at NYCB Live’s Nassau Coliseum on Mason Jobst’s goal at 4:07.

“It was a pretty good experience,” said Wahlstrom, who logged 14:56 of ice time and tied for the team high with five shots. “It was good to get the summer legs out of you and play a game.”

Both certainly have a chance to make the opening-night roster, though Wahlstrom is eligible to be re-assigned to the Islanders’ AHL affiliate in Bridgeport. Dobson can only either be kept on the NHL roster or be re-assigned to his Quebec Major Junior Hockey League team.

Dobson had 21:25 of ice time and had the secondary assist on Jordan Eberle’s equalizer at 18:26 of the third period with the Islanders’ skating six-on-five. He skated with Eberle and Mathew Barzal in the three-on-three overtime.

Both saw time on the power play and the penalty kill.

“As a player, you want to be used in all situations,” Dobson said.

Wahlstrom, poking away at the crease on the power play after ex-Islander goalie J.F. Berube clamped down on the puck with his glove at 3:49 of the third period, got into a shoving match with defenseman Travis Sanheim.

Wahlstrom and Dobson both also played in a 5-4 rookie game shootout win over the Flyers at Allentown, Pennsylvania on Sept. 11, with Wahlstrom scoring the only goal in the shootout.

Dobson played two games during the preseason last year, with one assist, before being re-assigned to his junior team. Wahlstrom was starting his freshman—and only—season at Boston College.

"Last year, I don’t think I really got to a comfort level where I was able to make plays and play to the capability I’m able to," Dobson said.

As he was for one of last year’s preseason games, the right-shooting Dobson was paired with top-four fixture Nick Leddy on Tuesday.

“For his age, he seems to have a certain poise about him, a way of seeing the game and a way of executing,” Trotz said of Dobson. "We’ll see if he can take the next step because he’s a real good prospect.”

Trotz added Wahlstrom, “looks like a man now, he’s a big body. He’s got those special hands and release and he’s learning to keep his feet active.”

Notes & Quotes: Starting goalie Thomas Greiss stopped 14 of 15 shots in 30:02 and Jared Comerio made 10 saves…Derick Brassard tied the game at 1-1 at 6:52 of the third period…Barzal had two assists and Anders Lee and Leddy each had one…Ross Johnston caught the Flyers’ Kurtis Gabriel at 15:20 of the second period, also receiving a 10-minute misconduct...Wednesday will be the Islanders’ first day off since training camp opened and the first cuts to the 70-man roster may be made. Trotz said special teams’ work would begin on Thursday.
Laura Curran has called for an investigation into whether the use of a county police helicopter to give a Floral Park Village police officer an aerial view of construction at Belmont Park represents a “misuse of police resources,” spokeswoman Christine Geed said.

Geed said in a statement that Nassau police Commissioner Patrick Ryder and Curran had not been aware of the helicopter flight, which took place Sept. 5, four days before Floral Park filed a lawsuit in state Supreme Court to try to halt construction on the Islanders’ $1.3 billion development.

Geed said Curran asked the police department to look into “this apparent breach of established police protocol by the Village of Floral Park.”


In a statement, Ryder confirmed the department is investigating the flight.

Stephen McAllister, Floral Park police commissioner, said in an interview that the village police department’s request “for a bird’s-eye view” of construction at Belmont was legitimate.

McAllister cited the need to develop a new emergency evacuation plan for Floral Park-Bellerose School, an elementary school that abuts the northwest side of the Belmont parking lot.

McAllister said village police previously had planned to use the parking lot in a school evacuation plan but weren’t sure whether they could use it during construction.

“This was intelligence gathering, information gathering on our part, and it was a good use of police resources,” McAllister said.

The dispute over Floral Park’s request for use of a county helicopter comes at a time of tension between the village, the county and state regarding New York Arena Partners’ plans for a 19,000-seat arena, 250-room hotel and 350,000 square feet of retail on 43 acres of state land at Belmont.

Floral Park Mayor Dominick Longobardi said village concerns about the possible negative impact of the Islanders’ arena and retail development had nothing to do with their police department’s recent request to survey construction.

“We were in no way trying to do anything nefarious here,” Longobardi said. “This was purely a safety question, and I know the county executive shares our concern for the safety of the children.”

McAllister said the county helicopter took a Floral Park police lieutenant and the new superintendent of the Floral Park-Bellerose School District, Kathleen Sottile, over Belmont for about 10 minutes and they took pictures of the construction.

Flight radar24, a global flight tracking service, shows the county police helicopter made several loops around Belmont’s north lot around 1:30 p.m. on Sept. 5.

A spokesman for the school district said Sottile agreed that the purpose of the helicopter ride was to view the Belmont property to assist in planning for a temporary evacuation plan during construction at Belmont.

Ryder declined through a spokesman to discuss the flight.

In his statement, Ryder said only that the flight “was never authorized to include a civilian. The department is conducting an internal investigation as to how this violation of our rules and regulations occurred.”
Kaapo Kakko’s top-line Rangers ride will be temporary

By Brett Cyrgalis September 17, 2019 | 6:48PM

David Quinn insisted there is nothing to read into the fact that his announced top line has a different right-winger for the first preseason game, Wednesday night at the Garden against the Devils.

The Rangers’ head coach made it very clear that Pavel Buchnevich was going to get the first crack at the right side of the top line next to Artemi Panarin and Mika Zibanejad. But Buchnevich is not set to play on Wednesday, and taking his spot next to Panarin and Zibanejad will be Kaapo Kakko, the No. 2-overall pick from June’s draft.

“Over the course of a lot of exhibition games, there are a lot of different line combinations,” Quinn said after Tuesday’s practice. “We all want to read into all of it. But, no, Butchie is going right back with those two guys.”

Kakko has spent the early part of camp on another impressive line, the presumed second line with Chris Kreider and Filip Chytil. That is likely where he will return after this game — but Quinn just couldn’t wait to see him on the ice in a real game.

“I’m curious to see [Kakko] in a NHL game, especially playing with those two guys,” Quinn said. “There’s nothing wrong with playing with Chytil and Kreider, either …. It’s just trying people in different positions. Not everybody is playing in all the exhibition games.”

Kakko continued wearing No. 45, but he said he hasn’t decided if he’ll wear that or No. 24 when the season starts.

“We’ll see before the first game,” he said.

Boo Nieves wore No. 24 this past season, but switched to No. 15 to give Kakko the option to switch.

Vitali Kravtsov, the No. 9-overall pick from 2018, is set to start at right wing on a line with center Lias Andersson (No. 7-overall in 2017) and Kreider on the left.

Behind the presumed opening-night first pair of Brady Skjei and Jacob Trouba, the second defensive pair on Wednesday is set to be Libor Hajek and Adam Fox, followed by Brandon Crawley and Brendan Smith.

New York Post LOADED: 09.18.2019
The American Duo, coming to save the day.

At least, that would be the hope for the Rangers, as Minnesotan Brady Skjei has been joined by Michiganite Jacob Trouba to ostensibly create a first defensive pair that the club has been wanting after for years. And following two straight seasons when the Blueshirts’ play in their own end has been a sore point, the two good buddies from their time at the U.S. Development Program could be a solution to having a real top unit.

“I think that’s definitely our goal,” Skjei told The Post after Tuesday’s practice, as the first look at the duo will come with the preseason opener, Wednesday night at the Garden against the Devils. “Top teams definitely have that top pair … We’re trying to be that pair. We’re trying to be hard to play against for opposing teams.”

Skjei is now 25 years old, and, as coach David Quinn pointed out, he already got his big second contract when he inked a six-year, $31.5 million deal just over a year ago. The $5.25 million annual salary-cap hit is pretty reasonable—as long as Skjei continues to come through on the promise that he showed in his first two seasons, when his skating ability set him apart and put him on a track to big minutes and responsibility.

“He’s at that age where I think it’s time for him to do it on a consistent basis,” Quinn said, “and I think he will do it on a consistent basis.”

It will certainly help to have a guy like Trouba, arguably the best partner Skjei has had since coming up at the end of the 2015-16 season. In fact, Trouba may be the best right-handed defenseman the Rangers have had since the prime of Dan Girardi, and the ceiling is certainly higher than that.

The talent level is why general manager Jeff Gorton traded for the 25-year-old restricted free agent, sending the Jets Neal Pionk and a first-round pick — No. 20 overall, the pick Gorton had obtained from the Jets previously in the trade deadline deal that sent Kevin Hayes to Winnipeg. Trouba then signed a seven-year, $56 million deal, with the $8 million annual cap hit representing the third highest salary on the roster behind only Artemi Panarin and Henrik Lundqvist.

Helping Trouba settle into the New York life is his new partner, Skjei, who just bought a home in TriBeCa, blocks from where Trouba is renting. The two carpool to the practice rink up in Tarrytown, and Trouba is easing his way into a new way of life with his good friend at his side to help, both on and off the ice.

“The biggest thing I find is good is just being comfortable with someone, talking to them after a play — you’re not really on pins and needles talking to them, and seeing how they’re going to react or what they’re going to say,” Trouba told The Post. “I think he trusts me and has a pretty good idea of how I think, and I trust what he says. We can talk more and work out the kinks in a little bit faster than someone I didn’t know.”

It should also help Skjei, who has had more than his fair share of partners over the start of his career. But if it’s possible to stick with one person — especially someone as good as Trouba — then Skjei thinks that can be to his advantage of finding consistency in his own play.

“It helps a ton,” Skjei said. “You just get that familiarity with each other, you pick up little things. Whereas, if you’re switching partners all the time — not like it’s a bad thing — but [staying with one person brings] more familiarity and being more comfortable.”

So the plan the Rangers imagined when they obtained Trouba is now going into action, and it’s up to Skjei and Trouba to see if The American Duo sticks together.

“From the start of the season,” Skjei said, “we’re trying to get a good start and solidify ourselves as a top ‘D’ pair.”
The New York Rangers are counting on Jacob Trouba to have a trickledown effect on defense.

Vincent Z. Mercogliano, NHL writer Published 2:05 p.m. ET Sept. 17, 2019 | Updated 2:10 p.m. ET Sept. 17, 2019

TARRYTOWN - Brendan Lemieux warned us.

Fresh off signing his one-year deal at the beginning of training camp, the winger who spent four years in the Winnipeg Jets organization with Jacob Trouba told reporters not to underestimate the toughness of the New York Rangers' big addition on defense.

"He's obviously offensive-minded, but he's extremely good defensively and plays with a lot of grit," Lemieux said. "He's hard to play against. He won't be pushed around. I think that's maybe one part of his game that's underrated. He doesn't let guys walk all over him. He plays with backbone."

That was evident the next day at the Rangers' first official practice.

Trouba was the most physical player on the ice, announcing his presence with a few hard-but-clean checks that knocked Filip Chytil and top draft pick Kaapo Kakko off their skates.

"That's just part of how I play," he said. "Once you're out there, you just play and fall back on your instincts."

Welcome to the NHL, Kakko.

(Hit courtesy of Trouba, who Lemieux told us yesterday would surprise us with his toughness.)#NYRpic.twitter.com/Ag4j34aqez

— Vince Z. Mercogliano (@vzmercogliano) September 14, 2019

After trading for Trouba and shelling out $56 million over seven years to retain him, the Rangers are counting on the 25-year-old righty to bring that intensity on a nightly basis. Coach David Quinn made it clear at his opening press conference that defensive coverage and penalty kill are the two areas where his team needs to show the most improvement.

Adding Trouba moves everyone else into more fitting spots in the lineup.

"Our D-core in general is going to feel a little bit better about themselves because now people are going to be put in position for success," Quinn said. "Whereas maybe last year we were asking guys to do a little bit too much, and now what Trouba gives us is the opportunity to put people in position to succeed. It's amazing what one guy can do for that position."

Trouba's offensive reputation was bolstered last season by a career-high 50 points (eight goals and 42 assists), but he believes his game is well-rounded — and he plans to show it.

"I wouldn't label myself as an offensive guy," he said. "I play what I think is the right way to play defense — the proper way. I don't try to sacrifice any defense to risk for some offense. I'm a defenseman first. I think I take a lot of pride in my own zone and being hard to play against. And then the offensive side, when you get into the play, that just kind of comes along naturally when it's there. It's not something I try to force."

The plan is to pair Trouba with lefty Brady Skjei, giving the Rangers a duo that's capable of holding their own against the best forwards in the NHL. It helps that they've known each other since they were teenagers playing in the U.S. Development Program, with Trouba noting that he moved close to Skjei and has leaned on him as he gets acclimated to New York. (They were also assigned lockers next to each other.)

The Rangers are hoping Trouba can be just as helpful for Skjei on the ice.

Skjei has been a mainstay since entering the league in 2016-17, but he hasn't quite matched the production from his breakout rookie season.

"Nothing has changed between us two," Skjei said. "We're obviously really good buddies off the ice and he's a great guy to play with on the ice. We played with each other in Ann Arbor (at the University of Michigan) for a bit, and he's such a solid defenseman. He's really easy to read off of, plays a full 200-foot game, hard to play against; so he makes it really easy for his partner."

The importance of Trouba having a trickledown effect is magnified with each passing day that fellow right-handed defenseman Tony DeAngelo continues his contract holdout. Rookie Adam Fox is probably next on the depth chart, followed by a series of question marks.

Trouba stressed that tightening up the defense needs to be "a team effort," which includes the forwards. But as Lemieux predicted, Trouba's willingness to set the tone has been apparent through his actions.

"I think it's great that's an added element to our practices," Quinn said of Trouba's physicality. "He just instinctively does that. Guys are born with that DNA. Some guys have it to another level. I think he's one of those guys."

Bergen Record LOADED: 09.18.2019
NY Rangers training camp battle: Libor Hájek leads the field of young lefty defensemen

Vincent Z. Mercogliano, NHL writer Published 6:00 a.m. ET Sept. 17, 2019 | Updated 6:33 a.m. ET Sept. 17, 2019

TARRYTOWN – It’s hard to judge a player based on five games — and perhaps ill-advised — but that’s all the New York Rangers have to go off when it comes to Libor Hájek.

The 21-year-old left-handed defenseman made his NHL debut March 1 and impressed in his short stint. But after scoring his first career goal against the New Jersey Devils on March 9, his season ended with a separated shoulder.

“I was kind of sad it happened, but there’s always something good (to takeaway),” he said. “I’m going to be more careful without being tight. I know how the league is right now. I was there, so I know where I’m going.”

Now that he’s fully healthy again, the Rangers are giving Hájek the chance to play much more than five games this season.

There is a clear opening for a left-handed D-man. Brady Skjei and Marc Staal are established veterans on that side, but the lefty spot on the third pair is up for grabs.

Coach David Quinn said it’s an open competition, and the Rangers are deep with lefty prospects on defense. But he’s also spoken highly of Hájek, a 21-year-old who was acquired along with Vlad Namestnikov, Brett Howden and two draft picks in the February 2018 deal which sent Ryan McDonagh and J.T. Miller to the Tampa Bay Lightning.

“It’s too bad he got hurt last year because he did a really good job in his five games,” Quinn said. “(I like) his skating, his quick decision-making below the tops of the circles in our end. He’s physical on pucks and he’s picked up where he left off.”

Quinn also mentioned Brandon Crawley and Ryan Lindgren as options for the open position, and Tarmo Reunanen looked impressive at the Traverse City Tournament and now early in camp. Yegor Rykov has missed time with an ankle injury, but he was signed to an early-level contract this offseason and is ranked by several sites as one of the Rangers’ 10 best prospects.

“There’s a bunch of guys who are fighting for that position,” Quinn said.

Crawley and Rykov are the oldest of that group at just 22, so there is plenty of time for any of the defensive prospects to make a jump and earn a chance. But with Rykov missing the first few practices and the Rangers holding the option to send Reunanen back to Liiga in Finland to continue his development, the signs are pointing toward Hájek getting the first crack at the job.

He sees the opportunity in front of him, but last season taught him to take nothing for granted.

“There are still lots of good defensemen,” Hájek said. “It’s going to be a lot of hard work. I’m just enjoying every moment being here and keeping it simple.”

Bergen Record LOADED: 09.18.2019
LI's Adam Fox 'pretty excited' for first preseason game with Rangers at Madison Square Garden

Colin Stephenson

Adam Fox, the 21-year-old defenseman from Jericho, via Harvard, has been a Rangers fan his entire life, and so, yes, he said, he is "pretty excited" to make his Rangers preseason debut Wednesday against the Devils.

"My first time in a Rangers jersey at MSG, yeah," Fox said after practice Tuesday. "Obviously, it's preseason, so it's a little different, but I'm definitely excited to get out there with some of the guys in a Rangers sweater, definitely."

Fox, a right-handed-shooting, offensive-minded defenseman, is slated to partner on defense with fellow 21-year-old Libor Hajek, a lefty shooter who plays a two-way game and who looked strong in five games with the Rangers after getting called up from AHL Hartford last season. They are penciled in as the second pair, behind the top pair of Brady Skjei and Jacob Trouba.

Asked if he will get tickets for his dad, Bruce, a former Rangers season ticketholder, and his mom Tammy, Fox quipped, "I get a few tickets, so we'll see if I give them some."

Fox, whom the Rangers acquired in a trade from the Carolina Hurricanes after last season, was a standout player for the Rangers' team of prospects that went to the Traverse City Prospects Tournament just before training camp and has drawn praise from coach David Quinn for his play so far in training camp. He's expected to help the Rangers' power play (he's slated to be on the second power play unit Wednesday) and could get even more opportunities to play big minutes if Tony DeAngelo continues to stay away from camp. DeAngelo is a restricted free agent and does not have a contract.

As far as what he thinks he needs to do in camp to secure a spot on the opening night roster, Fox said, "I think just show that I can play with these guys. I think that's what everyone's trying to do. It's obviously a lot of great players out here, but just show that I can bring some offense and kind of fit in with everyone."

Newsday LOADED: 09.18.2019
Kaapo Kakko on first line for Rangers’ preseason opener

By Colin Stephenson

GREENBURGH, N.Y. — There will be a little more excitement than usual for a preseason game when the Rangers open their preseason schedule Wednesday at Madison Square Garden against the Devils. Kaapo Kakko, the Finnish superstar the Rangers took with the second overall pick in this year’s NHL Draft, will play his first game in a Rangers jersey in the Garden. Not only that, but he’ll be doing it against the team that had a chance to take him No. 1 overall, but opted to take Jack Hughes instead.

Kakko said Tuesday he was “of course” excited to make his Rangers debut, and not really nervous. As far as playing the Devils, he said there was no special significance to him.

“Yeah, I know there is Hughes, but it doesn’t matter,” he said. “It’s a game against the Devils and that’s it.”

Kakko isn’t just making his Rangers debut, however. He’s playing on the first line Wednesday, with center Mika Zibanejad and left wing Artemi Panarin. That has Rangers fans excited, but coach David Quinn was quick to insist the line assignment for Kakko isn’t a permanent move.

“That’s just temporary,” Quinn said. “That’s just for Wednesday. Don’t read into that.”

The plan remains to play Pavel Buchnevich on the right wing with Panarin and Zibanejad, Quinn said. Buchnevich is not scheduled to play Wednesday night.

Zibanejad speaks some Finnish and can communicate with the 18-year-old Kakko in his native language. He called Kakko, who played in Finland’s top pro league last season and won gold medals with Finland in both the World Junior Championships and World Championships, “a great player; young, but strong.”

“He’s doing the little things really good,” Zibanejad said. “Super skilled, can pass, can shoot. His hockey IQ is at a very high level and he’s an exciting player.”

Zibanejad said he is excited to play with Panarin, the top prize of the free agent market this summer who chose the Rangers and signed a seven-year, $81.5 million contract.

“It’s going to be fun,” Zibanejad said of playing with Panarin, who had 28 goals and 59 assists in 79 games last season for the Columbus Blue Jackets. “You’ve been waiting for it since July 1st. It’s been something that you’ve been excited about and you know, the opportunity and possibility of playing with him was big, and now we get to do it, so I’m super amped just to start off playing games, obviously, but to get going with him, and to see how Kakko looks next to us, it’s going to be a lot of fun.”

Panarin, asked if he was excited to get the preseason going, said, “Of course. Are you?”

Also making their Rangers debuts Wednesday will be defensemen Jacob Trouba and Adam Fox, the 21-year-old Jericho native, and young Russians Vitali Kravtsov and Igor Shesterkin. Kravtsov, 19, was the first of three first-round picks for the Rangers in 2018. He is slated to play on the right wing of the second line, with Chris Kreider and Lias Andersson. Shesterkin, 23, a goaltender who has been considered the heir apparent to Henrik Lundqvist, will split time in the goal with Alexandar Georgiev, Quinn said.

Trouba, the former Winnipeg Jets defenseman who was acquired via trade in June and then signed a seven-year, $56 million contract as a restricted free agent in July, is slated to play on the first pair defense, alongside Brady Skjei. The two are close friends who played together on the US National Team Development Program, and Trouba got an apartment in the city near where Skjei lives. They spend a lot of time together away from the rink.

Newsday LOADED: LOADED: 09.18.2019
By Shayna Goldman Sep 17, 2019

Last summer, we explored a potential breakout for Pavel Buchnevich. 

The expectations were for the playmaking winger to put it all together in his third season, despite the hurdles of the New York Rangers’ rebuild and coaching change.

But it didn’t happen — at least not consistently enough — so we’re talking about this again.

This year, there’s a twist. It’s not a contract year after he signed a two-year, $6.5 million contract in July. Because he’s yet to fully show the skill and potential that he’s thought to have, that could likely become a very team-friendly contract once he hits his stride. This bridge deal gives him the chance to prove that he’s worth more of an investment by the time of its expiration in 2021.

There’s risk for Buchnevich, though. If he doesn’t start proving himself sooner rather than later, that payday may never happen. That role in the top-six won’t last forever, not with the influx of talent the Rangers added upfront, especially after a year of development for two of the names highlighting that group in Kaapo Kakko and Vitali Kravtsov.

Yet Buchnevich is in the best position of his career as he starts what should be a make-or-break 2019-20 season.

The 24-year-old winger has three NHL seasons under his belt; a 20-point performance in 41 games as a rookie, 43 tallies in 74 games in 2017-18, and 38 points in 64 games last year, when he hit the 20-goal mark. But there’s more to the story than his 101 points in 179 NHL games can show.

Buchnevich is the only pick from the 2013 draft still in the Rangers’ lineup and experimenting with time on the left, which was unfamiliar which helped him start to earn the trust of his new coach, who put him on Buchnevich started 2018 puck possession game.

That changed when he scored at the rate of a first-liner, he was limited to fourth-line minutes on average. Again, usage was an issue in 2017-18. Buchnevich wasn’t without fault for his play, but unfortunately his demotions didn’t appear to be particularly constructive in showing the winger how to become more of a mainstay.

Chart via HockeyViz

That changed when the Rangers replaced head coach Alain Vigneault with David Quinn. There was a shift in philosophy with Quinn, which put an emphasis on developing this rebuilding team, systems, and more of a puck possession game.

Buchnevich started 2018-19 with an offensive spark in the preseason, which helped him start to earn the trust of his new coach, who put him on the first line with the familiar combination of Chris Kreider and Mika Zibanejad.

The winger didn’t get off to the best start, which led to him shifting around the lineup and experimenting with time on the left, which was unfamiliar to a left-handed shooter who is more accustomed to right wing. While the onus was on Buchnevich for not playing up to expectations, it was a challenge to get back to the top-six consistently. A broken thumb in November only added another hurdle.

Some of Quinn’s methods can be questioned, as well as whether he held struggling forwards equally accountable. But it was clear that the coach was trying to push Buchnevich to elevate his game because he thought he had a higher ceiling than what he was showing. Unlike years past, there was a coach who seemed more willing to communicate why he was a scratch and how to change that.

Buchnevich scored 21 goals, 17 assists in 64 games last season. 12 of those points were collected on the power play. Those 38 points ranked fourth on the team, as did his all-situation scoring rate. While his ice time was reflective of a third-liner on average, his scoring rate at even strength was just shy of a first-liner, while his power play scoring was that of a player on the first unit.

The question now is whether there’s more to Buchnevich’s game and if this is the season it’s finally seen.

Based on Buchnevich’s career to this point, some projections aren’t too inspiring for him. According to The Athletic’s Dom Luszczyszyn, he projects to have game score value added of 0.9 wins this year. Next year, he only reaches 1.0 before dropping back to 0.9 the following season. That technically falls into second-line territory, but falls short of the value of an average contender’s second-line right wing, let alone their first-line winger.

But Quinn seems to think there’s more, as he intends to have him round out the first-line with Artemi Panarin and Zibanejad. But why after earning just 38 points last year?

If we focus on the second half of the season, or at least, the calendar year 2019, Buchnevich’s scoring is more impressive with 27 points in 42 games. That’s more than 70 percent of his total scoring for the season. Those 27 points ranked second on the team to Zibanejad’s 40 in the last 44 games.

There were still some ups and downs, such as a healthy scratch in late January, but he showed more of the consistency the team has been looking for — and not just with his scoring, but how much he shot the puck and created quality chances to help generate offense.

So how will his playing style mesh with the new first line?

Buchnevich has played with Zibanejad in each season of his NHL career. It’s clear the two have chemistry. As last season showed, the first-line pivot’s accuracy and location improved when he had at least one playmaker on his wing after losing both Buchnevich and Mats Zuccarello to injury.

Buchnevich’s ability to move the puck up the ice and enter the zone with possession draws defenders to him. It gives his linemates — especially one with as stellar a shot as Zibanejad — time and space to get in position to create a scoring opportunity.

That vision for the ice and ability to anticipate where his teammates may go can help the Rangers even when there already is a lot of space on the ice, such as during 3-on-3 overtime. Before last year, Buchnevich didn’t always have the opportunity to help his team get the extra point. With Quinn, there was more of a willingness to play in key situations and overtime. The winger made the most of some of the moments by playing to his strengths — reading the ice, entering the zone with possession, getting the attention of opposing players and getting the puck across the royal road to an incoming teammates for a shot. That pre-shot movement is what helps make it a more dangerous chance.

With a pass-first winger on the ice, the Rangers do generate some quality offensive opportunities, but isolating just his shots changes that picture. That’s why having a player who is an underrated passer, like Zibanejad, on his line could help him shoot more frequently, like he did after New Year’s.

Even if Buchnevich’s job for a season was just to feed Zibanejad the puck, it would likely positively influence his scoring. Now add Panarin into the mix. He should reach new heights.

With a winger as crafty as Panarin, teams are far better offensively. The speed at which Panarin operates, how strong he is on the puck and how he deceives defenders makes it tough to get the puck away from him.

Along with his elite playmaking and transition game, Panarin is more willing to shoot than his fellow Russian teammate. Having another player who is capable of providing offense both with his shots and passes gives their offensive attack another layer. By pairing Panarin with another passer, as well as someone with Zibanejad’s skillset, it can make for some really creative plays that are challenging to defend against.

Another aspect to having Buchnevich play with Panarin is the chemistry the two may be able to develop because of their backgrounds. Buchnevich has yet to play with another forward from the KHL since joining the Rangers; Panarin has yet to play with most, if not all, members of this club. So their similar experiences in the KHL and common language could help them blend together and figure out a way to communicate, which is key for a line to thrive.

What also may help Buchnevich take a step forward this year is studying Panarin’s game. Effort has been a critique before and some of that may
stem from the fact that he’s a lankier skater. But more than anything, it’s just having the chance to learn from an elite player of a similar style firsthand.

But what if it doesn’t work on the first line?

Underperforming doesn’t necessarily have to be the reason that this line changes. It could be, and would be awfully telling, but lineup balance could be another reason why Buchnevich is moved off the top line. Stacking two playmakers on the first line may lead to an imbalance on the second line if it’s Kreider-Filip Chytil-Kakko. So maybe, the Rangers eventually experiment by moving Kakko and his dominant play to the first line, while adding the cerebral Buchnevich to the second line.

If Buchnevich finds himself with Kreider and Chytil, he’d still be in a position to succeed. On the left wing, there’s a player with a nose for getting to the front of the net who Buchnevich is very familiar with. In Chytil, there’s a young player looking to shift back to his natural position; having a play-driver like Kreider on his left should help that. The center is known as more of a playmaker, but has shown his willingness to shot the puck and ability to take shots from the scoring areas.

Chytil’s game could be viewed as more balanced while Kreider is more of a shooter. That leaves room for a passer. Experimenting with Buchnevich there would make sense. With two capable passers in Chytil and Kreider, Buchnevich could still work on increasing shots.

If Kreider is traded and a rookie like Vitali Kravtsov moves up as a result, maybe having Buchnevich on the second line would be fitting in that instance — making him the more experienced player on a very young line, instead of rolling with two rookies and a sophomore.

By starting the year on the first line, Quinn and the Rangers are asking a lot of Buchnevich. They’re asking for him to be the dynamic player they’ve seen glimpses of on a consistent basis.

To do that, they’re starting him in the best position to succeed — alongside Panarin and Zibanejad. The only way he can go from the first line is down and last year showed just how tough it can be to make his way back up. That may be even tougher with three new wingers in the mix between Panarin, Kakko, and Kravtsov all vying for long term places in the top-six.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
ST. JOHN'S, N.L. — The auditions started for the Ottawa Senators on Tuesday night.

A victory in the Battle of Ontario never gets old for the Senators, even if it won't mean anything in the standings, so they'll take their 3-1 win over the Toronto Maple Leafs in front of a packed house of 6,287 at the Mile One Centre.

While defenceman Max Lajoie scored for the Senators in the first period, Kasperi Kapanen tied it up for Toronto at 3:37 of the third, when he beat Marcus Hogberg with a shot from the slot. Tristan Scherway, who plays for Bern in the Swiss league, beat Toronto goalie Kasimir Kaskisuo at 10:15 to restore Ottawa's lead.

Anthony Duclair, the club's best player, scored into an empty net to put it away.

After evaluating the players on the ice for three days at home and then cutting down to 52 on the weekend, new Senators head coach D.J. Smith, making his debut behind the Ottawa bench against his former team, was happy to see training camp move to its next phase.

"I liked our effort," a smiling Smith said. "Really, the guys played hard, they worked, they blocked shots. We've got a really young team and a bunch of guys trying to make the team so I would expect that from them."

This was a chance for the likes of Vitaly Abramov, Josh Norris, Alex Formenton and Drake Batherson to show where they fit up front.

Defencemen Erik Brannstrom and Lajoie were in the lineup and they're trying to prove they belong, too.

One line that made an impression and could start the season is Jean-Gabriel Pageau with Duclair and Drake Batherson. Acquired from the Columbus Blue Jackets in the Ryan Dzingel deal at the deadline, Duclair killed penalties as well with Pageau.

"It's a big opportunity for me this year and I've just got to take it and run with it," Duclair said. "I have a chance to play in the top six role and I just want to make a good first impression on the coaching staff and make sure that I work hard every day."

There aren't a whole lot jobs open, but the Senators started looking at forwards who are battling for the two positions available up front. On the back end, it's expected Christian Jaros will be the sixth blueliner, so at this point there may only be a seventh spot open unless Brannstrom can show in camp he belongs in the National Hockey League full-time.

There won't be any quick decisions made before the weekend, but the Senators want to have close to their opening-game roster by the time they face the Vancouver Canucks next Wednesday on the West Coast, so there isn't a whole lot of time, either.

Through 40 minutes, the Senators holding onto their 1-0 lead. Nilsson was tested early in the second period, when the Leafs had a power play, but shut the door. From there, the Senators did a better job in front of Nilsson and the Leafs didn't get many chances.

"To be honest I really didn't know what to expect from myself in the first game here," Nilsson said. "There's only been three practises going into this game but I was just trying to go in and focus on myself and focus on getting back into the routine. I was happy I was able to make some saves and get the first game out of the way."

"It's something to build on and to build off this game."

The first period looked like it was a game between two teams that hadn't played in months. Yes, the Senators were ahead 1-0, but the Leafs held the shot advantage at 5-4. There weren't a whole lot of opportunities, but Toronto's Frederik Andersen did stop Duclair on a breakaway.

Lajoie opened the scoring at 8:08 of the first, when he beat Andersen through the five-hole. The Leafs' goalie may have been screened, but Lajoie, who had surgery to repair a sports hernia at the end of last season, will take it anyway.
Ceci returns, Brown-Paul battles heat up, Jeopardy hits rink

Ken Warren

Not to dehumanize the situation too much, but Mark Borowiecki couldn’t help but talk about the big business picture of the National Hockey League when discussing Cody Ceci’s impending return to Canadian Tire Centre.

“It’s always a little strange seeing a guy you came up through the system with, (being) on the opposite side,” said Borowiecki, who will be in the lineup against Ceci and the Toronto Maple Leafs on Wednesday night in the second game of the back-to-back preseason series.

“But such is life in pro sports. At the end of the day, you’re an asset. You’re a player on a team. You’re going to get moved, regardless of the relationships you have.

“Things can happen. I wish him nothing but the best … as long as it’s not against us.”

Pre-season game or not, it figures to be an emotional night all around.

Nikita Zaitsev and Connor Brown, who came to the Senators in the Canada Day trade for Ceci, will play against the Maple Leafs for the first time. The same goes for Ron Hainsey as the Senators will dress a far more competitive lineup than they did Tuesday in St. John’s.

The mood will be at a different level for Ceci, of course. He’s an Ottawa kid who played four seasons with the 67’s in the Ontario Hockey League and was drafted 15th overall by the NHL Senators in 2012. After a quick start to his career, he was eventually forced into a role as a shut-down defender, a position that he was ill-suited for. Accordingly, he became the poster boy for everything and anything that went wrong inside the defensive zone in recent seasons.

Borowiecki said he did a “double take” when Ceci first wore his Maple Leafs gear (he’s also wearing 83 now) at an informal skate in Ottawa in August.

He suggested it might be easier for Ceci to get through his return to the building by playing in an exhibition game.

“I think it’s good for everyone to get it out of the way in the pre-season,” Borowiecki said. “There’s a little less anxiety about it. There’s already enough pressure in the regular season. It’s good for guys to get their feet wet a little bit. On our side, too.

THE LOGAN BROWN WATCH: Among the endless storylines to watch Wednesday (including how Zaitsev looks on defence beside Thomas Chabot and whether the Tkachuk-Colin White-Connor Brown line has chemistry) is the on-going trial by Logan Brown to wedge his way into an offensive role with the Senators.

“Those intrasquad games are good, but they are pretty choppy with not that much structure,” the 6-6, 223-pound centre said. “So, I’m excited to get into a game against a real team and show them what I can do.”

Brown has had some solid moments so far — he showed off his vision to set up Max Lajoie for a goal in an intense scrimmage Sunday — but he knows he’s must push even harder to find his way onto a team that already has White, Jean-Gabriel Pageau, Artem Anisimov and Chris Tierney pencilled in at centre.

“I’ve got to keep bringing more things to the table and create plays,” Brown said. “It’s a tryout and it’s against another team, so it’s definitely going to be big.”

PAUL’S PUSH: Brown and 6-3, 219-pound Nick Paul proved to be an imposing force playing together with Belleville last season and they’ve been on a line (with Max Veronneau) since training camp started. The more success now, the better their chances are of making the opening-game lineup, but they aren’t really fighting for the same spot. Paul’s goal is to land a fourth-line position. “I know my role here,” he said. “There’s a spot for me to come in and bring energy and throw my body around. I’m not going to be a skilled guy (in Ottawa). I know I’m a forecheck, backcheck player and if the opportunity comes in offensive zone, I’m going to take it because I can capitalize.” Paul had only one goal and one assist in 20 games in Ottawa last season, but scored 16 goals and 23 assists in 43 games in Belleville.

A HOMECOMING, OF SORTS: Holding a morning skate in Ottawa, leaving immediately for St. John’s and flying home after the game made for a long Tuesday for all involved, but there was no complaining coming from Drake Batherson, who was to play on a line with Anthony Duclair and Jean-Gabriel Pageau. “I’m excited about going to Newfoundland,” he said following the morning skate at Canadian Tire Centre. “My whole mom’s side of the family is from there. We used to go fishing there all the time, so it will be a cool experience, for sure.”… After spending the opening days of camp as a defensive pair, Ron Hainsey and Erik Brannstrom were broken up for the back-to-backs against the Maple Leafs. Brannstrom went to St. John’s, lining up beside Dylan DeMelo, while Hainsey stayed at home.

SCHOOL IS IN SESSION: Senators head coach D.J. Smith has had fun at the tail end of training camp workouts, asking players to answer trivia questions to avoid extra wind sprints. But, just like the games to come, Smith said the queries would get trickier. “I’ve given them a few lob balls here early to let them learn the game, but then they will get harder as we go.” Would math be involved, asked TSN’s Brent Wallace. “Absolutely,” Smith said. “Math, spelling…we bring it all out.”

Ottawa Sun LOADED: 09.18.2019
Leaf Morgan Rielly has much respect for D.J. Smith’s coaching skills

Bruce Garrioch

ST. JOHN’S, N.L. — Morgan Rielly had mixed feelings when D.J. Smith was named the head coach of the Ottawa Senators.

The Toronto Maple Leafs’ top defenceman was happy for the 42-year-old Smith, but sorry to see him go after they had worked closely together for four seasons.

"It was a little bittersweet because I really enjoyed working with him," Rielly, 25, said Tuesday morning before the Maple Leafs faced the Senators in a National Hockey League pre-season game at the Mile One Centre. "We had a really good relationship, but, that being said, you’re happy for him because this is what he wanted … He wanted to be a head guy.

"I don’t know if proud is the right word, but he goes out there and creates a job for himself. He deserves it. He’s got a great personality, guys are attracted to his energy and the way he goes about his business. He’s going to do a great job. He did a great job in Toronto, so I would expect nothing less."

Rielly said Smith was driven by his desire to have success.

"He wants to win," Rielly said. "It’s like anyone … he’s got an outstanding personality and he can make people laugh all night if you want, but, that being said, he wants to win. He wanted to win in junior and he got that done. He wants to win at this level and that’s what he’s trying to do.

"He puts that first. You look at his career as a player and he did it the hard way, so it’s proof he’s not afraid of the hard work. He’ll do stuff that maybe other people don’t want to do. That’s a great combination. He can make me laugh pretty much on command, but the great part is when he goes about his business he’s focused, motivated and he wants to win."

They spent countless hours together because a big part of Smith’s responsibility with Toronto was defence.

"We were tight. He was great. He went out of his way early when he got here to make sure that there was going to be trust between him and I," Rielly said. "He wanted to accomplish the goal of being a head coach in the NHL and I wanted to be (an) elite (defenceman), so we were really working as a tandem to help each other out.

"It wasn’t just him and I. It was him and Jake (Gardiner) and all the guys. He took it very seriously. He had a big impact on me and he was awesome. Am I surprised he got a head coaching job? No. Am I happy for him? Yeah, but it’s a bit bittersweet because he had a big impact on our team."

TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF FOR SPEZZA

Switching sides in the Battle of Ontario won’t feel strange to Jason Spezza until Opening Night at Scotiabank Arena.

At that point, the reality will set in for the 36-year-old former Senators centre.

For parts of nine seasons the Maple Leafs were such bitter rivals for Spezza that he couldn’t ever envison the day he’d actually suit up for them. But here he is after spending five seasons with the Dallas Stars, trying to carve out a role with the Leafs, and he was to face the Senators here on Tuesday night.

Still, this one and a rematch Wednesday night at Canadian Tire Centre are just exhibition games, while there will be two points on the line for the regular-season opener Oct. 2 in Toronto.

"Opening night will be a different feeling," Spezza said Tuesday morning. "That Ottawa-Toronto first game of the season was such a big game for us. It was just such a fun game to play in and we started there a lot of times.

"Now, to be on the other side of it, it’s going to feel a little bit weird."

Spezza always made his off-season home in Toronto, but even after he was drafted by the Senators second overall in 2001 with a pick acquired in the deal that sent Alexei Yashin to the New York Islanders, he didn’t give much thought to playing for the Leafs.

"Not really to be honest because of how bitter the rivalry was between Ottawa and Toronto. I don’t think I ever would have thought about playing for the Leafs," Spezza said. "But then, leaving for five years for Dallas in between, then it became somewhere (where), if I got to this point, that it would be something I would be really interested in doing.

"Especially with where they’re at and the curve this franchise is taking. Once I got drafted by Ottawa and ingrained in those rivalries, I didn’t think I’d ever be part of the Leafs."

The way Spezza looks at it, the rivalry was just too bitter in those days and the possibility of playing for the Leafs didn’t make sense. Now, it’s different. The teams have even made a couple of trades in the past few years.

"That was No. 1 rival and they were big, big rivalries for us, there were playoff losses and eight regular-season games," Spezza said. "Back then, you didn’t jump from Ottawa to Toronto. Now, there’s been the (Dion) Phaneuf trade, there’s the (Cody) Ceci trade.

"I can’t imagine John Muckler and Bryan Murray making Ottawa-Toronto trades back then, but the game has changed. I didn’t ever think I’d be a Leaf."

Life has a strange way to take twists and turns.

Ottawa Sun LOADED: 09.18.2019
D.J. Smith couldn’t hide his excitement at returning to the Rock.

The Ottawa Senators’ head coach suited up for the St. John’s Maple Leafs in the American Hockey League from 1997 to 2002, so he was thrilled that his new club had a chance to play a National Hockey League pre-season game against Toronto at the Mile One Centre on Tuesday night.

“I didn’t know what the rule was. I don’t know if I’ve got to get re-screched in,” Smith told reporters in Ottawa before the fight here. “My screech certificate might have expired. It’s been 17 or 18 years since I’ve been there. I’ll find out when I land. Some of the old boys might take me down to kiss the cod.

“But, other than that, we’re good to go.”

Smith said he enjoyed his time here. Most of his playing career was spent in the minors.

“When I went there, when I was 19 or 20 years old, everybody told me how far it was and I ended up just loving it,” Smith said. “They were the nicest people in the world. They took you in. Families brought you over for dinner, so I can’t say enough nice things and it will be nice to see some of those people.”

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The Senators released their 25-man roster for Wednesday’s game at home vs. the Toronto Maple Leafs. Game time is 7:30 P.M.

Goaltenders
41 Craig Anderson
30 Filip Gustavsson

Defence
22 Max Lajoie
46 Hubert Labrie
50 Maxence Guenette
72 Thomas Chabot
74 Mark Borowiecki
81 Ron Hainsey
83 Christian Jaros
96 Jordan Murray

Forwards
7 Brady Tkachuk
9 Bobby Ryan
13 Nick Paul
14 Max Veronneau
17 Jonathan Davidsson
21 Logan Brown
27 Jordan Szwarz
28 Connor Brown
36 Colin White
47 Mark Kastelic
49 Scott Sabourin
NCC still open to an arena at LeBreton Flats, but after getting burned, will now play the long game

By Chris Stevenson Sep 17, 2019

After getting caught up in the train wreck that was RendezVous LeBreton, the National Capital Commission is forging ahead on a different track with its plans to develop LeBreton Flats.

But — and don’t get too excited, hockey fans — a new rink on the downtown site remains in the mix from NCC’s standpoint.

“It’s very much still alive,” Tobi Nussbaum, NCC’s chief executive officer said on Tuesday after an update from the Crown corporation’s “Building LeBreton” initiative. “One of the things we’ve said from the very start is 55 acres is a lot of space and so we’re very much open to the idea of some kind of central amenity or great public events space.”

It was obvious on Tuesday that the NCC board is still feeling the sting from their experience with “RLG” as they called it (RendezVous LeBreton Group). That was the toxic alliance between Senators owner Eugene Melnyk and Ottawa developer John Ruddy and his Trinity Developments that started out looking like a sure bet and devolved into lawsuits and countersuits with seven-figure dollar amounts attached.

The NCC pulled the plug on that group in December and regrouped to come up with the “Master Concept Plan,” which is being fine-tuned after input from the public.

Despite the dithering over the past four years, Nussbaum said the project is still on track to begin construction on the first part of LeBreton — the Library District (Albert and Booth) — in 2021. In a sad coincidence, that was about the timeline for the new arena when RendezVous LeBreton was given preferred proponent status in 2016.

(NCC Graphic)

When I asked if there had been any communication between the Senators and the NCC about keeping open the idea of the NHL club moving to LeBreton, Nussbaum replied: “I haven’t personally spoken to the Senators, but we have been clear in our public utterances that we are very much open to the idea of a major event centre should there be interest in the future. It’s not a decision that needs to be made in the short term from our perspective.

“Fifty-five acres can’t be built overnight. That’s something that allows us to have some flexibility in terms of the implementation.”

NCC chairperson and president Marc Seaman interjected: “The key element here is to continue moving forward and not be held up.”

Zing.

When asked by The Athletic if there was anything new on the arena front from their perspective, the Senators replied with the following statement:

“The Ottawa Senators have not engaged in renewed conversations with the NCC regarding their plans for LeBreton Flats. The focus of the club remains on delivering an exciting experience for fans at Canadian Tire Centre for the 2019-20 NHL Season, starting with the home opener against the New York Rangers on Oct. 5.”

The message from the NCC is clearly, once burned in a dumpster fire, twice shy. Rather than handing over the entire development of LeBreton to developers, the NCC is keeping its hand on the tiller this time around.

It’s also listening to the public. And in this case, the public is telling them it wants an arena at LeBreton Flats. That was the message in the Public Consultation Report which was released on Tuesday.

When asked to share their “big ideas,” the report said — after the usual nebulous “creating community” — “participants focused on making LeBreton Flats a Capital experience, suggesting that an arena, stadium, theatre, concert hall or water park would enhance the redevelopment.”

Given a lot of people feel the Senators have trouble keeping their heads above water, maybe there could be some synchronicity there.
Five things to watch as Senators begin their preseason schedule

By Chris Stevenson Sep 17, 2019

The Ottawa Senators will begin their preseason schedule with a “home-and-home” set with the Toronto Maple Leafs — in St. John’s on Tuesday and back at Canadian Tire Centre on Wednesday — and there are several trends worth watching after three days on the ice to begin training camp.

Here’s a look at five things to watch through the first couple of exhibition games ...

1. Speed

The pace at which coach D.J. Smith has conducted the training camp workouts has been impressive. It's been a long time since the Senators have practiced at the pace they have been going at over the first three days at camp. It will be interesting now, given there has been taken pressure in the drills, to see if they can carry that speed of execution over to game situations.

It is the constant emphasis.

"Full speed, full speed, full speed," shouted Smith during one drill on Sunday.

"I want you flying through the neutral zone," he yelled later.

When it doesn’t happen, Smith is pulling players aside and making his point.

When has veteran Bobby Ryan last experienced this kind of tempo?

"Not for a long time. Actually, I don’t think ever in my six years (in Ottawa), give or take," he said. "It's been taken down. Even just the downtime between drills. No board talk. Call the veterans to the front of the line and say here’s what we’re doing, you’ve done the drill, but it’s different, here’s the wrinkle. The next group can see us do it and you move on. The first three days have moved great."

"The high pace is a culture we are trying to bring back," veteran centre Jean-Gabriel Pageau said. "We want to be in top shape. We know the situation that we’re in. We want to get out of it and I think the way is by working hard. We have to be able to work for 60 minutes. I think bringing that pace is going to get us to the level of compete we want to be." There are a few benefits of working this way. The quick, intense practices keep the players’ attention. There’s not much standing around. The brisk pace is good for conditioning and pushing the speed should serve as better preparation for games.

That’s the key, right? So far the Senators have just been going up against their teammates. We’ll see what happens when things get a little more physical against players from other teams.

2. Connor Brown

The 25-year-old is an intriguing story to me. On the Maple Leafs, he was a role player. He was ninth among Toronto forwards in TOI/GP last season at 13:48; 1:58 of that playing short-handed.

He’s come to the Senators and has been playing on what looks to be the top line with wing Brady Tkachuk and centre Colin White. Brown could see his ice time boosted by perhaps as much as five to six minutes a game this season.

He’s been an offensive player at every other level of hockey, register 250 points in three seasons with the Erie Otters of the OHL, 61 points in his rookie season in the AHL and scored 20 goals in his rookie campaign with the Maple Leafs.

As the talent level of the Maple Leafs increased, Brown was put into a different role by coach Mike Babcock.

"Sometimes you can get typecast into a role and Brownie was the penalty kill, defensive guy in Toronto," Tyler Ennis said, who followed Brown to Ottawa from Toronto. "Babs really looked at him to play that style. I think if you look at Brownie’s numbers, he scored 20 before. He’s put up crazy numbers in the ‘O.’ He’s got talent. The biggest thing is you are not going to find a guy who works harder than Brownie on the ice. Every shift. He’s impressive because his work ethic is second to none."

Brown has been leading his group in skating drills, first off the mark and first to finish which fits with what Ennis said.

Brown said he’s looking forward to the chance to be a big contributor on offence again.

"Absolutely. I’d be lying if I said no," he said. "I want to expand offensively. I’ve always been a guy on the team that’s been relied upon to score goals until the last couple of years, the last two years in Toronto because of the type of role I was in and the type of team that we had. "Whatever role I’m put in, I’ll try and do the best at it, but like you said, I would like to expand (the offence)."

3. Pleasant surprise (Part 1)

The first thing that stood out for me when watching Vitaly Abramov after he joined Belleville last season from Columbus in the Matt Duchene deal, was how he went hellbent for the net.

Built low to the ground, whenever Abramov would get bent over and drive the net, he’d either get to the blue paint or wind up sprawled against the boards.

It hasn’t been that much different from the Rookie Showcase (where he scored four goals) to the first three days of training camp. He has, as the scouts like to say, a good motor.

Your eye gets drawn to him during the scrimmages and practices because you can’t miss the speed at which he does everything. He looks like a kid who wants it.

He’s been on a line with Josh Norris at centre and Alex Formenton and they will get a chance to start the pre-season Tuesday in St. John’s.

4. Pleasant surprise (Part 2)

Left wing Joe LaBate might have been the most noticeable player on the ice during Saturday’s scrimmage. That’s saying something for a 26-year-old in camp on an AHL contract. He scored two goals, and but for a sharp toe save by Joey Daccord, would have had a hat trick.

The No. 101 pick in the 2011 draft by the Vancouver Canucks (he played 13 games for the Canucks in 2016-17), LaBate played last season in Belleville and, frankly, there wasn't much to indicate he would be much more than one of those players who fill out the training camp roster.

But at 6-5, 212 pounds, Labate has been earning himself some notice from the coaching staff with his skating, which is much improved after a season battling back from surgery to correct a hip injury.

He didn’t get permission to train until a month before training camp started, meaning he spent most of last season trying to get his feet back under him. Now, after a full off-season of training, he has looked like a different player.

"He certainly looks quicker," Belleville coach Troy Mann said. "He’s not necessarily a pleasant surprise because he’s a likable kid and he’s coachable. He played mostly fourth-line minutes last year and some PK. If he can take the next step in camp here, it should be good for us."

"I thought he was (Team Red’s) best forward (Saturday) and he had a really good practice (Sunday) and he had a really good practice (Sunday), so good for him."

"Big surgery, but I’m 100 percent healthy. We didn’t make the playoffs, so I took advantage of a full summer of training," LaBate said. "I really focused on my game and just trying to get stronger. I was pretty anxious to get camp going and it’s nice to start off on the right foot. I’m just going to keep going and keep trying to do the best I can."

LaBate is an AHL depth player, but good for him to make a good impression on a new coaching staff in Ottawa. If he can improve, he’ll help Belleville be more competitive which is another important part of an organizational rebuild.
Maybe he’s even earned himself an exhibition game.

5. Erik Brannstrom

The big return in the Mark Stone trade, Brannstrom will also get a chance to play in St. John’s.

I’ve thought Brannstrom has been just decent in both the Rookie Showcase and in training camp. He’s still prone to trying to do too much which usually manifests itself in attempting high-danger passes (one in the Rookie Showcase up the middle of the ice from beside his net that was picked off at the blue line comes to mind).

That said, he shows those flashes that made him the No. 15 pick in the 2017 Draft by the Vegas Golden Knights. One of the things that really stands out is his ability to shift the point of attack to open up shooting lanes.

He’s got a gift for being able to get the defender to shift and find a way to get the puck on net.

In his own end, he’s been competent defending off the rush, but he’s been overmatched at times in board battles. That’s a work progress.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Robert Hagg, battling for spot, plays well in Flyers' preseason loss to Isles; Carter Hart shines

by Sam Carchidi

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — Defenseman Robert Hagg is a good-natured person whose disposition turns nasty on the ice.

But despite leading the Flyers in hits (258, eighth in the NHL) and blocked shots (158, 13th in the NHL) last season, he is the team’s forgotten man.

When the Flyers acquired veteran defensemen Matt Niskanen and Justin Braun in the offseason, it pushed the 6-2, 216-pound Hagg down on the depth chart.

At training camp, Hagg, 24, is trying to show he should stay in the regular rotation.

"I think everyone has to prove themselves in camp," Hagg said before the Flyers' 3-2 overtime loss to the Islanders at Nassau Coliseum on Tuesday. "It's a new coaching staff, new management. I'm just trying to prove what kind of player I can be. That's all I'm focusing on right now.

Every single game, every single practice, you have to prove to everyone that you're ready.

"It's a part of the job, I guess."

Goalie Carter Hart was sharp in his first preseason performance, stopping all 14 shots he faced before leaving with a 1-0 lead midway through the second period. He was replaced by J-F Berube.

Chris Bigras' point drive gave the Flyers a 2-1 lead with 11:37 left in regulation. With 1:34 to go, the Isles pulled their goalie and tied it at 2-all as Jordan Eberle converted a pass from Mathew Barzal.

The Isles won it when Mason Jobst banged home a rebound with 52.3 seconds remaining in overtime.

Hagg did his part, contributing four hits and four blocked shots while playing in all situations. He took seven shots and put three on goal.

"Hagger did a great job tonight blocking shots and getting into lanes," Hart said. "He’s one of our most solid defenders."

For Hagg, earning a spot will be an uphill climb. Niskanen looks set to play with Ivan Provorov on the top pairing. Braun, who excelled in Monday’s 3-1 exhibition loss to the Islanders, has displayed a good stick and smarts in camp. After Monday’s game, coach Alain Vigneault praised Braun and said he could see him sometimes playing against opponents’ top lines.

Braun has been paired with Shayne Gostisbehere, whose true value is as the power play’s quarterback.

The other pairing might have Travis Sanheim and Phil Myers. Sanheim was arguably the Flyers’ best defenseman in the second half last season, and Myers has been a standout in camp.

That means Hagg and Samuel Morin could be extras when the season opens Oct. 4 against Chicago in Prague.

Against the Isles on Tuesday, Hagg was paired with Sanheim, and the duo was solid.

"You practice and practice and want to play the games," said Hagg, who made his preseason debut.

Last season, Hagg chipped in with five goals and 20 points and finished with a minus-3 rating, the second-best mark on the team’s defense. As a team, the Flyers were 29th in the NHL in goals allowed as all the defensemen were too careless with the puck.

"I've played two years now and know what I have to do to play at this level," Hagg said. "Play my game. That's all I can do out there, and we'll see what happens."

Vigneault likes what he has seen from Hagg in camp.

"I like his demeanor, and his size, strength and reach on the ice," he said before the game. "I've heard a lot of a good things about Hagg. He's battling right now with a lot of guys. I like good internal competition. I want guys to step up."

They have five more exhibition games to show their stuff.

Breakaways

The Flyers, who used a youthful lineup, played a crisp first two periods and took an early first-period lead as Michael Raffl redirected Bigras’ shot past goalie Thomas Greiss. Bigras, a 24-year-old defenseman signed as a free agent on July 1, had two points. The line of German Rubtsov, David Kase, and Chris Stewart created several good scoring chances for the Flyers. Right winger Kurtis Gabriel, battling for a roster spot, was hit hard by Anders Lee and limped off the ice early in the third. T.J. Brennan went after Lee before order was restored. ... Sanheim played 26:43. ... The Flyers will not practice Wednesday; they host Boston on Thursday. Captain Claude Giroux and Sean Couturier are expected to make their preseason debuts in that game.

Travis Konecny welcomed with open arms at Flyers camp, expected to play Saturday

by Sam Carchidi

Travis Konecny is a relentless pest on the ice who likes to agitate opponents by calling them nerds (among several unprintable words), and gets under their skin with an oh-so-active stick.

And, so, naturally, Flyers players and coaches were thrilled to see the chirpy right winger finally sign a contract and join them at training camp Tuesday.

"It's about time he showed up," defenseman Robert Hagg cracked after Tuesday's morning skate in Voorhees.

Hagg turned serious.

"It's good to have him signed and back before the season starts," he said. "It's nice to have him around in the locker room. He's an awesome guy to be around. I mean, just look at him and you can get a laugh."

"I think everyone knows what he brings — so much speed and tenacity — and he brings a lot of energy to the room," forward Scott Laughton said.

After participating in drills Tuesday, Konecny, who signed a six-year, $33 million contract, said he was excited to be back.

"You want to be there with them," he said of his teammates. "You want to be at training camp and all the ups and downs and hard stuff. You want to be there with everybody. I guess it's part of the process and I just had to trust it, and thankfully I'm here now and it wasn't too long."

Konecny, 22, said coach Alain Vigneault’s comments early in camp about his needing to arrive and learn the system didn’t necessary speed up the negotiating process. "I had already wanted to be here," he said.

While negotiations were taking place, Konecny did a lot of work on his own in his native London, Ontario. He said it won’t take him long to get into game shape.

Vigneault said he was targeting Saturday night’s home game against the Rangers — the fourth of the Flyers’ seven preseason contests — for Konecny to be in the lineup.

Konecny, a 24-goal scorer in each of the last two seasons, missed four days of camp and had some expected rust at Tuesday’s session. He will skate Wednesday with new skills coach Angelo Ricci and Watch video to catch up on the team’s new system. A 2015 first-round draft pick who is entering his fourth year with the Flyers, Konecny will practice Thursday and Friday and "in theory" should be ready to play Saturday, Vigneault said.

"I think by that time, video-wise, he'll be up to speed," Vigneault said. "He might be a couple days behind drill-wise, but I think with the video work, he should be fine."

Vigneault was pleased that the contract negotiations didn’t linger any longer, saying it was important for Konecny to get into camp and get acclimated to his system.

"I'm happy to see him, and he's happy to be here," Vigneault said. "There's some issues sometimes, but he's here and now let's get back to work and get caught up here."

Konecny said the Flyers are improved from last season.

"I'm really excited," he said. "We put a lot of pieces of the puzzle in place. Just being around here today and seeing how some of the new guys are already really comfortable and good team guys, I can just tell it's going to be a great fit for us."

Kevin Hayes’ past history with Alain Vigneault makes for easy transition with Flyers

Wayne Fish
www.flyingfishhockey.com

UNIONDALE, N.Y. – Any hockey coach will tell you that after goaltending, strength down the middle just might be the second-most important element to a team’s success.

Recognizing this, the Flyers made pending free-agent center Kevin Hayes their No. 1 priority in the offseason.

General manager Chuck Fletcher pulled off a trade with the Winnipeg Jets to acquire the negotiating rights to Hayes, who wound up signing a seven-year, $50-million before the July 1 start of free agency.

Now, with Sean Couturier in the No. 1 slot, Hayes at No. 2 and third-year pivot Nolan Patrick at No. 3, the Flyers believe they have enough firepower to get the job done.

On top of that, when Hayes began his career with the New York Rangers, he played four years under coach Alain Vigneault, who now runs the Flyers’ bench.

So it should be a good fit.

"It’s funny,” Hayes said. “Watching him (Vigneault) before a practice, the way he goes over the drills. It’s the same routine I went through for four years back when I was a rookie.

"I started chuckling to myself a couple times. It’s old stuff but with a new team. It’s relieving to kind of be comfortable with the coach as soon as possible."

It’s no secret, when the veterans heard Hayes was signing with the Flyers, a number of them grilled him to gather a scouting report on the coach’s likes and dislikes.

"As soon as I signed I was getting text messages,” Hayes said. "I’m an older guy now, kind of (he’s 27). I tried to explain to the young guys how quick the drills go, from one drill to another. He likes to keep the practice short, but the pace up."

Early in the preseason, it looks like Hayes and James van Riemsdyk will be a match for a while.

On Monday night against the Islanders in Philadelphia, Jake Voracek played the right side with that unit.

"Any center would be excited about playing with those two guys, they’re elite players,” Hayes said. “We’re big bodies so it’s hard to take the puck from us."

Hayes is more a grinding type player than a highlight reel scorer. His career high for a season is 25. But he’s strong with the puck and good defensively. In his five-year career, he’s a plus-28.

"That’s what I pride myself on,” he said. “I’m not a horrible skater but I’m not the best skater. It (puck protection) is something I worked on in the summer."

Braun might be good fit with Gostisbehere

Over the weekend, veteran defenseman Matt Niskanen talked about a possible pairing with Ivan Provorov, who just signed a new six-year, $40-million contract, and how it might help the young Russian’s progress.

Now there’s another tandem forming which could help Shayne Gostisbehere, who could be seeing some playing time with new arrival Justin Braun, late of the San Jose Sharks.

’Ghost’ slumped a bit last season but maybe this will help turn things around.

"It’s been good,” said Braun. “You want to try to get some chemistry with any of the guys you’re paired with. I thought we looked pretty good out there (in Monday’s game)."
German Rubtsov continues roster push, Carter Hart sharp, more from Flyers' OT preseason loss

By Jordan Hall September 17, 2019 10:05 PM

The Flyers couldn't get one back against the Islanders.

Alain Vigneault's team dropped consecutive preseason games to New York after losing, 3-2, in overtime Tuesday night at Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum. The Flyers never trailed until the Islanders' OT winner.

They have five exhibition games remaining. Big names like Claude Giroux, Sean Couturier, Travis Konecny, Ivan Provorov and Matt Niskanen have yet to dress for the Flyers.

Let's get into some observations:

- German Rubtsov came into the action as one of the must notable roster hopefuls on Tuesday night's game roster. He has played a lot. He competed in rookie camp, scored two goals in the prospects game, performed well in Monday night's preseason opener and was back in the lineup Tuesday.

The Flyers are challenging him.

"That's one of the reasons he's playing tonight," Vigneault said after morning skate. "There are some decisions to be made and some of the things we're going to do is put some players in a tougher spot to see how they react to it."

Rubtsov once again did some positive things. During the second period, he stripped the puck in a battle along the boards and rung the post, nearly giving the Flyers a 2-0 lead. However, he lost 10 faceoffs.

But he really showed himself when he raced out of the chute with AHL affiliate Lehigh Valley last season before suffering a season-ending shoulder injury. He's healthy, strong and is looking more and more like an NHL center.

- Michael Raffl opened the game's scoring with a first period goal on a deflection. He and Scott Laughton were the only forwards in the lineup Tuesday.

Raffl will be a quietly reliable guy for the Flyers in 2019-20. Expect to see him on the fourth line and the penalty kill. The 30-year-old played a career-low 11:25 per game in 2018-19 and his minutes should be in that ballpark this season. Those lesser minutes are important, though, when they come on the PK and against the opposition's better lines to give the Flyers' top-six guys a break.

Tip drill. pic.twitter.com/xNCP9J3GY4

— Philadelphia Flyers (@NHLFlyers) September 17, 2019

- Carter Hart made his preseason debut and stopped all 14 shots he faced in 30 minutes.

He has been sharp in camp and the anticipation is there for his first full NHL season.

"For me, I'm here and I'm ready to play," Hart said last weekend. "I put in a lot of work this summer, on and off the ice. I added some muscle, added some durability and I feel really healthy in net, really strong."

Jean-Francois Berube allowed three goals in relief, including the OT winner, when he couldn't locate the puck after making the initial save.

- After a recent camp practice, Maksim Sushko spent a lot of time deflecting pucks at the net. He did about four or five rounds of redirecting shots.

The practice paid off as Sushko screened the goalie on a Chris Bigras goal in the third period. Sushko may have gotten a piece of it. Those role forwards understand that scoring chances will come from effort in limited minutes. Sushko is a 2017 fourth-round pick with speed and entering his first season with the Phantoms.
VOORHEES, N.J. — The Flyers and Islanders are back at it Tuesday night.
Alain Vigneault's team travels to New York for its second exhibition game.

Let's get into the essentials:

• When: 7 p.m. ET
• Where: Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum
• Broadcast: NBC Sports Philadelphia+

A roster hopeful to keep an eye on will be German Rubtsov. He scored two goals in the rookie game, played well Monday night and he's right back out there Tuesday night. It appears like the Flyers could test his endurance and consistency with plenty of looks during the exhibition slate after an injury-shortened 2018-19 season.

"That's one of the reasons he's playing tonight," Vigneault said. "There are some decisions to be made and some of things we're going to do is put some players in a tougher spot to see how they react to it."

Rubtsov does a lot of things that profile well for a bottom-six role.

"I liked his game," Vigneault said. "I thought we put him in penalty killing situations, I thought with his linemates he was good and I liked his pace."

"When I watched him in the rookie game, you could see the skill. ... He has to continue to improve. There seems to be a lot of upside there."

Connor Bunnaman has had an underrated camp. The 2016 fourth-round pick scored 19 goals in his first year of pro last season with AHL affiliate Lehigh Valley. He has good size and some sneaky speed.

The 21-year-old did not play in the rookie game or the Flyers' preseason opener, so this will be our first look at him in game action.

Many players did not partake in morning skate, so the Flyers' projected lineup is to be announced. Below is the game roster:

Forwards
Andy Andreoff
Michael Raffl
Scott Laughton
Mikhail Vorobyev
Kurtis Gabriel
Chris Stewart
German Rubtsov
Nicolas Aube-Kubel
Maksim Sushko
David Kase
Matthew Strome
Carsen Twarynski
Connor Bunnaman

Defense
Travis Sanheim
Robert Hagg

Goalies
Carter Hart
Jean-Francois Berube
Sights and scenes from Travis Konecny's first day back at Flyers training camp

By Jordan Hall September 17, 2019 4:14 PM

VOORHEES, N.J. — Travis Konecny didn't expect to play like Wayne Gretzky.

"If you guys watched it, I didn't look too great out there, bobbling the puck a little bit," he said with a laugh. "But it's just rust, it's going to come back. Just being patient right now and going through all the aches and pains that come with it." Konecny will be himself again. He missed the Flyers' first three days of training camp but is ready to catch up (see story). He started that goal Tuesday after signing a six-year, $33 million contract Monday.

His teammates love his energy and spirit. He's become a fan favorite and his Stadium Series show solidified that status.

The Konecny vibes were back at the Flyers' practice facility Tuesday. Here are some of the sights and scenes:

You're gonna want to Take a look at who's here.
pic.twitter.com/UCeyrc2Xz9

— Philadelphia Flyers (@NHLFlyers) September 17, 2019

Look how happy Claude Giroux is to see Travis Konecny.
pic.twitter.com/tmDq65W3jl

— Jordan Hall (@JHallNBCS) September 17, 2019

"Being a part of this organization is an honor." TK's ready. #FlyOrDie pic.twitter.com/EoegFxp1M8

— Philadelphia Flyers (@NHLFlyers) September 17, 2019

Let's eat. 🍽️ pic.twitter.com/Qnr3XlQIsL

— Philadelphia Flyers (@NHLFlyers) September 17, 2019

Travis Konecny. pic.twitter.com/mAfZ2UN4XJ

— Jordan Hall (@JHallNBCS) September 17, 2019

James van Riemsdyk on the return of Travis Konecny: "I think he brings that energy to our team for sure. He's a guy going 100 an hour, his mouth maybe going faster than he is sometimes."

— Adam Kimelman (@NHLAdamK) September 17, 2019

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.18.2019
VOORHEES, N.J. — Joel Embiid would have been proud of Travis Konecny.

The Flyers' 22-year-old dynamo was back in town Tuesday and wanted everyone to know this is where he wanted to be. Despite a little bit of drama swirling around the unknown as he missed the first three days of 2019 training camp, Konecny is now here and will be for the next six years after signing a $33 million contract Monday.

He didn't like being away.

"It was stressful because you want to be back with the guys, getting ready with them," Konecny said.

"You want to be there with them. You want to go through the process — training camp, all the ups and downs, the hard stuff — you want to be there with everybody."

How did he ease the stress?

"I guess it's part of it, it's part of the process, so I just had to trust it," Konecny said. "Thankfully, we're here right now and it wasn't too long and I'm just thankful for that."

The Sixers' 7-foot-2 superstar would approve.

He also would approve of Konecny's desire to be in Philly long term. Konecny and his camp were eyeing a lengthier deal as opposed to a bridge contract in which the winger could have proven himself even more and potentially landed a bigger payday around the age of 24 or 25.

Konecny wanted more years in Philadelphia.

You guys have all been around here and you know what the team is all about. Our goal is to bring a championship back and I want to be a part of that. To be locked in for six years and have a chance to play with this organization is an honor and I'm just really happy we could get it done.

Konecny took part in his first practice Tuesday. The team plays preseason games Tuesday and Thursday night. Head coach Alain Vigneault said the Flyers are shooting for Konecny to make his preseason debut Saturday night at the Wells Fargo Center.

"He's going to skate [Wednesday] with our skills coach," Vigneault said. "He's got video sessions planned as far as catching up to what he's missed. That will permit him to practice on Thursday, practice on Friday and in theory it should be the same amount of time."

Vigneault and the Flyers were excited to see Konecny. The 2015 first-round pick has the potential to be a 30-goal guy. His role will continue to grow in his fourth NHL season and his presence bolsters the Flyers' depth at forward. The team's third line could feature Oskar Lindblom, Nolan Patrick (when healthy) and possibly a prospect like Joel Farabee.

The 23-year-old Lindblom scored 17 goals last season as a rookie, the 20-year-old Patrick was the 2017 second overall pick and the 19-year-old Farabee has many buzzing.

"Happy to see him, he's happy to be here," Vigneault said of Konecny's return. "In talking to him briefly, I know he wanted to be here, just an issue sometimes. But he's here, we're happy to have him. Now let's get to work and get caught up here."

Konecny undoubtedly makes the Flyers deeper and more dangerous for Oct. 4 in Prague, Czech Republic.

"I'll be ready," he said. "I didn't miss too much time, I did a lot of work on my own when I wasn't here. I think we've got a great group here that's going to pick everybody up. They're helping me a lot and just going to make sure we're ready for when the puck drops."

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.18.2019
The reality of attending an NHL training camp on a tryout

By Scott Burnside Sep 17, 2019

PHILADELPHIA -- Chris Stewart is a few minutes late for our chat at a modest suburban hotel a few hundred meters from the Philadelphia Flyers' practice facility in Voorhees, New Jersey. His explanation is in the shopping bag he holds in his hand with a just-purchased adult-sized ninja costume for Halloween.

Stewart already purchased matching ninja outfits for his 5-year-old twin sons, who are at home with their 2-year-old brother in Pickering, Ontario, just east of Toronto. Not only did the twins insist Stewart buy a ninja outfit, but he needed to model it for them via Facetime, which is part of their daily routine with dad right now.

"The last three days they've been calling me saying, 'hey, dad, put it on, we want to see it,'” Stewart said Sunday with a laugh. "So they gave me an ultimatum. Tonight I have to put it on so I had to run back to the store and pick it up."

For the record, the costume was a big hit.

For a man whose NHL career hangs in the balance as he tries to make the Flyers by virtue of a professional tryout invite from Philadelphia GM Chuck Fletcher, Stewart seems pretty zen about the whole thing.

The reality is that a PTO isn’t something that every player can wrap their head around.

Stewart couldn’t a year ago when, about to turn 31 and with 652 NHL regular season games to his credit, he was offered a couple of tryout opportunities but no guaranteed contract.

"I had a couple of PTO options and mentally I wasn’t there. You know how it is,” Stewart said relaxing in the hotel lobby after a morning on-ice session in advance of the team’s first preseason game.

"I’ve played a decade and I thought, definitely thought I deserved a lot more respect. Not to say I’m looking down at a tryout, but the perception at that point I thought I was at least worth a minimal contract to come to camp.

"Obviously you’re afraid of getting cut, too. I didn’t want to get cut. That’s pride. I definitely didn't want to go out on a low. Obviously a year later my perception’s changed a hundred percent. The difference between this year and last year, I believe I’m an NHLer and the difference is I’m willing to prove it this year."

The PTO is the ultimate in playing without a safety net in the NHL.

No security. No guarantees. Nothing but per diem, a hotel room and faith.

One veteran agent said this week that he doesn’t like to send his clients to NHL camps on a PTO because of the impression that they’re on the outside trying to bang back into gainful NHL employment.

Even Fletcher doesn’t like them as a team-building tool unless there is a very specific need to be filled.

"I’m not a big fan of PTOs unless you have a legitimate opportunity,” Fletcher said. “Especially with veteran players that have played in the league for a while. To bring them in just to cut them is not a lot of fun, and it’s not really fair to them, so I’ve always felt that, if there was a legitimate opportunity, then why not."

Around the NHL there are a handful of dramas similar to the one playing out with Stewart and the Flyers.

The Calgary Flames have six players on PTOs.

The Leafs are auditioning Michal Neuvirth, and he could end up being the backup to Frederik Andersen.

Drew Stafford is getting good reps in Minnesota with Kevin Fiala figuring out visa issues after signing a new deal.

Troy Brouwer has a shot in Florida where he played last season.

And Stefan Noesen could stick with the Stars.

But the reality is that with the salary cap and the emphasis on younger, faster players, the PTO is often a last-ditch opportunity for a player looking to hang onto the NHL dream. For teams there is little ventured but realistically little to be gained from the process.

"It’s sort of like no harm, no foul,” said Nashville Predators GM David Poile.

GMs and coaches will look at players on tryouts wondering if they can play at their previous levels and whether it’s worth keeping that player ahead of a younger player. A team’s overall depth and, specifically, depth at a given position or skill set also factors in, but the odds all conspire against the player on the PTO.

“I would say 90 percent of the PTOs just go away,” Poile said. "But every once in a while you get lucky.”

Like Poile and the Predators did coming out of the 2004-05 lockout.

When the lockout ended in the summer of 2005, Yanic Perreault was an aging player with modest foot speed and no contract, wondering if his career was over. He had several tryout opportunities as teams began assembling but ended up in Nashville where the Predators were looking to add some center depth.

“Obviously you know your back is a little bit against the wall and you’re in a bit of a survival mode,” Perreault said. "It’s a different kind of pressure. Every practice would count. I was ready for the preseason games like it was a playoff game.”

At the same time, Perreault felt there was a kind of narrowing of focus in knowing what was at stake.

"You’re at peace,” he said. "You take one day at a time and you stay at peace. At the end of the day, you’re going to have everything on the table. You’re happy that you’ve tried and you have no regrets at the end of the day.”

The only thing Perreault asked of the Predators was that he have his own room during camp so he could get a good night’s sleep and be at his best for the daily tests that he was facing.

Perreault impressed the Predators with his veteran presence in the room and his uncanny work in the faceoff circle, and he was offered a one-year deal. He proceeded to record a career-best 57 points. He signed in Arizona the next summer and played in the NHL All-Star Game. In all, Perreault played two more seasons after the Nashville PTO experiment, finishing up in Chicago where he currently works as a development coach.

Stewart, the 18th-overall pick in the 2006 NHL Draft, certainly seems to have taken a page from the Perreault PTO playbook in terms of his approach to this opportunity.

Stewart knows that a decade of NHL play is a formidable feat, especially growing up in Toronto with a large family that didn’t have a lot of resources to spend on extracurricular activities like hockey.

"I’d give anything for the 11th year, but am I going to feel any less complete or is my legacy going to be any tarnished because I played a decade, not 11 years?” Stewart said. "It took a while for that to sink in. It took a hard three months to come around and turn that page, but it was needed, it was part of the process.”

Heading into the 2018-19 season, Stewart initially agreed to play in the KHL with the team based in Bratislava. But he felt in his heart that it was not the right move and decided not to go. Something got lost in translation, however, and the team purchased a ticket for Stewart and when he didn’t show up at training camp local reporters were told he was "missing.”

“Now everyone in my family’s reaching out to me and saying ‘hey, is everything OK? Are you missing?’” Stewart said. "I said what, I just dropped the kids off at school. I’m not missing. Did you check my house? I’m at home.”

For a time this looked like it might be it for Stewart, who will turn 32 at the end of October.

He stepped away from the game. The family went on vacation to Jamaica. But there was still something that kept him going back to check what was happening in the hockey world.
“My wife is calling me crazy because you say you’re done with hockey and what’s the first thing I do? I turn on the hockey game and I’m watching the game. So she knows me. She’s letting me go through my process. She knows I’m not done,” Stewart said.

At the suggestion of his brother Anthony, the 25th-overall pick in the 2003 NHL Draft, Stewart ended up playing 23 games last season for the Nottingham Panthers in the British Elite League – because Chris wanted to play where English is the main language and “he’s a picky eater,” according to Anthony. This reignited Chris’ desire to give the NHL one more shot. And he spent this past summer working out with Matt Nichol, who runs the highly regarded BioSteel program in Toronto.

It was while he was in England with his family that Stewart took note of the changing of the guard in Philadelphia.

He is best pals with former Flyers power forward Wayne Simmonds, who was sent to Nashville at the trade deadline last season. The Flyers also parted ways with Dale Weise and bruising defenseman Radko Gudas.

Before the free agency period began in July, Stewart had his agent, Eustace King, contact Fletcher to let him know of Stewart’s interest in trying to revive his NHL career.

Fletcher was certainly cognizant of the potential size and physicality void that had been created by the offseason moves and made an effort to bring in players with good size.

The fact that Fletcher twice acquired Stewart during Fletcher’s tenure as GM in Minnesota was also a factor in extending an invite to camp.

“In our case, we’re a little thin up-front. We have a lot of young players coming into camp. Many of them first- and second-year pros, and they may or may not be ready,” Fletcher said. “Coming into the season we felt we had 11 legitimate returning NHL forwards and so when we looked at Chris, he’s a right shot, right wing, which we’re a little thin on. He brings a physical presence, and he’s had a good career, so we felt there certainly was opportunity in our roster, and Chris brings some of the attributes we’re looking for.”

The fact that Stewart was all the way out of the league a year ago likely gives him a different perspective on the opportunity with the Flyers.

“I think he came to realize he really wants one more crack at the NHL and so I think he has that mindset where he’s coming in probably understanding the odds are never really, really in your favor, but this is something that is worthwhile to him to make an attempt,” Fletcher said.

If there were concerns that it might be awkward coming to camp as a PTO, they were quickly dispelled.

Captain Claude Giroux reached out to Stewart shortly after the invitation was made public. The training staff and coaches have been supportive, with Stewart’s gear arriving well ahead of formal workouts.

He feels like he’s been embraced, but Stewart is likewise taking nothing for granted.

“You’ve got to live in the moment. If there’s one thing I know right off the bat, I’m going to be given a legit shot here. As an athlete, as a player, that’s all you can ask for. Let the cards fall where they’re going to fall,” Stewart said.

“You look at one of my good friends, Joel Ward, he goes into Montreal last year, he plays one exhibition game, he gets an assist, plays well and gets cut the next day, so it’s like you know he didn’t have a sniff from the jump.”

With Tyler Pitlick injured, there are obvious opportunities beyond simply being a big body. Early in camp, Stewart skated alongside experienced NHLers Scott Laughton and Michael Raffl. In the first preseason game, Stewart played with Oskar Lindblom and German Rubtsov. Stewart endeared himself to the Flyer faithful by fighting Islanders defenseman Kyle Burroughs after Burroughs stood Stewart up at the blue line with a hard check.

“As nerve-wracking as it is, the upside’s there too,” Stewart concluded. “You just got to be you. I think I can write my way onto this team. I think it’s there. But it’s on me, it’s on my shoulders. That’s a good position to be in.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
particularly in terms of puck control. “I was pretty nervous heading in, so I thought I was fumbling the pucks a bit,” he said. “I don’t know, when I got it, I was a little nervous with the puck.”

Considering his strong rookie camp and time alongside Sean Couturier and Claude Giroux at the main camp, it’s easy to forget Farabee’s youth — 19 is young even for the AHL level. It’s not fair to expect him to blow the doors off NHL competition at the start. But as head coach Alain Vigneault noted, Farabee showed more than enough to leave open the possibility that those fine plays might turn into great ones by the end of the preseason.

“Farabee, I think everyone can see the skill set,” Vigneault said. “I didn’t think he was as good tonight as what I’ve seen, but some of that comes from the opposition. He did some good things. I like that kid. I like his skill level. I like that he can play in tight. I think we got a good, young player there.”

3. Myers flashes his talent, still has some rough edges

This is meant to be Philippe Myers’ camp. Last September, he was given a legitimate chance to earn his way onto the big club, but this time it’s more of an expectation that he will be wearing Orange & Black come Oct. 4. The spot won’t be gifted to him; Myers will need to earn it with hard work in practices and solid play in games.

Monday night was a good start, as he built on his positive momentum from rookie camp. Myers showed early on that the tentativeness that seemed to creep into his game last preseason would not be an issue, as the Isles’ Matt Lorito can attest.

As anyone who watched Myers in his 21-game NHL stint knows, the young defenseman has proven, even against the highest-quality competition, that he’s still bigger, faster and stronger than pretty much everyone on the ice. But that doesn’t mean he dominated with the Flyers back in March and April, and some of the issues in his game from last season appeared at times on Monday.

For starters — fantastic maneuver in the video aside — Myers still needs to work on getting his shot from the point through traffic. About eight minutes after the wraparound chance, Myers blasted a shot right into the shin pads of Matt Martin that nearly led to an odd-man rush going the other way. Myers recovered to stymie the rush — again, he’s bigger and faster than everyone — but ideally that recovery wouldn’t have been necessary. Myers also took two penalties: a delay of game call that put the Flyers down two men and a cross-checking minor in front of the Isles’ net. Taking too many minor penalties was a recurring issue for Myers in the minors.

Monday should still be considered a net positive for Myers. He didn’t do anything to hurt his chances. But he’s not firing on all cylinders yet.

4. Rubtsov simply plays his game

Farabee and Rubtsov may have both been drafted in the first round, but at this point, it seems likely that Rubtsov’s offensive upside is dwarfed by that of his organizational counterpart. If all goes right for Farabee, he could end up a first-line caliber player; Rubtsov grades out more as a best-case scenario strong middle-sixer. That played out on the ice Monday — Farabee showed the ability to spark far more plays with game-changing potential, even if he couldn’t finish them. Rubtsov, at this stage of his career, can’t match Farabee in that regard.

That said, there’s a strong case to be made that Rubtsov played closer to his best moment coming on a cross-slot pass to Morin right after a wraparound chance, Myers blasted a shot right into the shin pads of Matt Martin that nearly led to an odd-man rush going the other way. Myers recovered to stymie the rush — again, he’s bigger and faster than everyone — but ideally that recovery wouldn’t have been necessary. Myers also took two penalties: a delay of game call that put the Flyers down two men and a cross-checking minor in front of the Isles’ net. Taking too many minor penalties was a recurring issue for Myers in the minors.

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That said, there’s a strong case to be made that Rubtsov played closer to his plausible 2019-20 upside Monday than Farabee did his.

Rubtsov’s game will never be flashy, and he lacks the top gear and relentlessness of Farabee. What Rubtsov does possess, however, is an ability to make the kind of plays that spark forays up ice and lead to positive outcomes. And that’s exactly what Rubtsov did Monday. He helped out on defensive zone exits, consistently avoiding turnovers even while under heavy pressure. He made creative passes on the attack; with his best moment coming on a cross-slot pass to Morin right after a second-period penalty expired. He even proved to be a disruptive penalty killer.

Rubtsov wasn’t dynamic offensively. There were a few occasions where his lack of a high-end top gear was noticeable (particularly when his line tried to transition up ice). But he’s not competing for a job in the Philadelphia top six; he’s trying to make the team as a bottom-six winger or center. Players in those roles don’t necessarily need to rack up scoring chances (though it wouldn’t hurt). They do, however, have to be sound defensively, capable of making crisp passes and have the ability to help out on the PK. In other words, everything that Rubtsov did well Monday.
It remains to be seen if the Flyers’ coaching staff agrees. Rubtsov hasn’t been showcased in the lineup thus far, even if he played next to roster lock Oskar Lindblom on Monday. And Rubtsov ending the game by getting bullied in the corner by Luca Sbisa wasn’t a great closing statement. But he seems to be having a strong camp; he scored two goals in last week’s rookie game even as Farabee received more hype in its wake. It seems plausible that Rubtsov is still right in the mix.

5. Hayes stands out among the vets

For fans who were hoping the Flyers would go hunting for star-level talent this summer, just as the Sixers and Phillies had recently done, it was a major disappointment when Kevin Hayes proved to be the headline offseason addition. Hayes is a useful player but not an eye-catching or exciting one.

On Monday, he made a strong case as to why any remaining skeptics should begin to get excited about their new second-line center.

Hayes doesn’t possess blinding speed, nor will he regularly appear in highlights. Instead, his game is centered on playmaking and puck protection, and both were repeatedly on display against the Isles. Are the above flashy plays? Of course not. But the first directly led to a van Riemsdyk goal, and the second came against Thomas Hickey, a solid veteran defensemen. The plays hint at a sustainable formula for success that won’t stop working once the games begin to count. A 6-foot-5 center with puck skills and an innate understanding of leverage and how to use it to his advantage is going to make an impact on a nightly basis, and Hayes certainly did that Monday.

“I’m not a horrible skater, but I’m not the best skater,” he acknowledged after the game with a smirk. “So, I need to get an upper hand somehow, and that’s the stuff I work on in the summer.” The “stuff” worked in his Flyers debut.

6. Vigneault system isn’t yet second nature

Early in training camp, Vigneault has started to put his mark on the Flyers, from emphasizing pace to implementing his preferred systems. His new players aren’t going to grasp the new system overnight, however. It’s not that the players don’t know what they’re supposed to be doing; they’ve played the sport since childhood and know how a 1-2-2 neutral zone beforehand should look, for example. What takes more time is knowing exactly what Vigneault wants them to do in each potential situation, and doing it fast enough that it appears to be second nature.

Vigneault knows that type of mastery won’t come immediately, and surely not in the first preseason game.

“I thought there was definitely a mental awareness on what they were trying to do, but as you are trying to learn a system, it has to come like—when you are driving your car,” he explained. “When you’re driving a car, you know when to press on the brake, and you know when to press on the gas to keep it going. System-wise, it has to become the same thing. You see what’s there, and you see what you have to do when you have the puck and when you don’t have it. We aren’t quite there, but we are going to get there, don’t worry.”

7. Zamula a pleasant surprise

This time last year, Egor Zamula was just trying to earn a spot in an NHL organization after being passed over in his first year of draft eligibility. His strong work in the preseason earned him an entry-level contract. So perhaps it shouldn’t be a major surprise that Zamula appears to be taking another step in his second NHL preseason.

Paired primarily with Myers, Zamula more than held his own Monday. While he doesn’t possess the skating ability of his partner, Zamula’s aggressive defensive instincts stood out, particularly in the neutral zone. He wasn’t afraid to attempt to cut off passes or challenge oncoming forwards, and for good reason: Zamula rarely got burned. The 19-year-old’s play didn’t escape Vigneault’s eyes.

“I see that there’s a young kid there that’s got good mobility and can make good plays with the puck,” Vigneault said. “Tonight, against an NHL opponent, I really liked his poise and his demeanor on the ice. I thought stick-wise and mobility-wise, he did a lot of good things on the ice that, as a coach, you say that this guy’s got a chance there. There’s no doubt in my mind that this guy’s got a chance to play (in the NHL) at some point.”

Zamula isn’t NHL ready yet. His shot that was blocked high in the Isles’ zone sent New York down the ice to score the game-sealing empty-net goal, so it’s not like Zamula had a perfect night. He needs to fill out his game dramatically before he can take a real run at a job with the Flyers. But he’s looking more and more like a viable blueliner prospect.

8. Elliott shaking off the rust

Around the time that Zamula was earning an entry-level contract last September, Elliott was racing back from offseason surgery with the goal of being ready for Game 1. Elliott succeeded in that task, but then fell victim to injury again in November, setting the wheels in motion for the Flyers’ collapse.

This year, Elliott enters the preseason coming off a productive summer of training. But even in apparent full health, it still takes time for a 34-year-old goalie to knock off the rust, and that’s exactly what happened in the early stages of Monday’s game. Elliott started out about as shaky as possible — allowing a long-distance shot that never went more than five inches off the ice surface to slip between his pads and into the net. But it proved to be his only mistake in about 30 minutes of game time.

Injuries remain a concern with Elliott. The clean summer bodies well, but this is still a netminder who has watched similar injuries tear apart two consecutive regular seasons. The emergence of Carter Hart means that an Elliott absence wouldn’t bury the team this year, but the organization still hopes that Elliott can appear in about 30 games at least. That means he’s still an important roster piece, and it also means that any preseason game — even one that includes a weak goal — that ends with Elliott making it through unscathed is good news for the Flyers.

9. Checking in on other notables

Myers, Farabee and Rubtsov weren’t the only players on the roster bubble to appear in Monday’s game. Isaac Ratcliffe, Mikhail Vorobyev, Morin and Chris Stewart all have work to do to either solidify or outright steal a spot on the final 23-man roster, and they all attempted to advance their causes in the preseason opener.

Vorobyev tried to follow Rubtsov’s road map to success: strong PK work and smart plays at 5-on-5. But his best moments were far more scattered than those of Rubtsov, and it’s hard to say he had a major impact on the game. Stewart, on the other hand, certainly made an impact on New York’s Kyle Burroughs, easily winning the decision in a second-period fight after Burroughs dropped Stewart to the ice with a hit. Aside from that noticeable moment of toughness, however, Stewart didn’t stand out.

That was also the case with Morin, who threw his body around on occasion but struggled to assert himself on the back end. As for Ratcliffe, he had positive moments but seemed behind the play a bit too often to regularly be a part of the transition game. He’s clearly fallen behind Farabee and Morgan Frost (who missed the game with a minor groin issue) in the scoring-forward prospect pecking order. It’s looking more like extended time in the AHL would benefit Ratcliffe.

10. Vigneault lays out planned preseason game structure

It’s still not clear how the Flyers will pare down their roster over the next two weeks, though it’s fair to presume that the first major round of cuts will come before the weekend. But Vigneault provided clarity Monday morning about how he is mentally segmenting the seven preseason games.

Vigneault noted that he planned to leave lineup construction in the first two preseason games to general manager Chuck Fletcher and assistant GM Brent Flahr, but said he would take a more active role in the decision-making process for the games Thursday and Saturday. Then, in the final three preseason games, the Flyers will zero in on plausible opening night lineups.

So things start to get serious from a coaching evaluation standpoint starting Thursday, and the final picture will begin to take shape Monday in Boston. The regular season is closer than you might think.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Penguins giving Dominik Simon a look at center

Seth Rorabaugh

UNIVERSITY PARK – Three days prior to Christmas in 2017, Dominik Simon got a bit of a present when he filled in at center during practice for former teammate Carter Rowney, who was sidelined due to an illness.

Simon, primarily used as a winger, was asked afterwards about potentially playing center. Flashing a classic hockey smile, the incisor-deficient Simon spoke enthusiastically about how he enjoyed the position and went into great detail over the nuances of being a center.

A few minutes later, Mike Sullivan stuffed some coal into Simon's stocking.

"Probably not," Sullivan said, with a smirk, when asked if Simon was possibility at center. "Probably not."

A mere 21 months later, Simon is back at the position he is listed as but has rarely played during his professional existence.

During the team's preseason opener, a 5-4 overtime loss to the Sabres at Pegula Ice Arena Monday, Simon centered a "top" line with Zach Aston-Reese and Bryan Rust on his wings. Simon had a secondary assist on a goal by forward prospect Ryan Haggerty. Additionally, Simon centered the Penguins' top power-play unit.

So, how does he look in the middle?

"If you watched the World Championships this past spring," Bryan Rust said, "pretty damn good."

Considering the IIHF World Championship tournament in May was played in Slovakia, in a time zone six hours ahead of the East Coast, the Pittsburgh-centric viewership of Simon's play in those contests may have been limited.

Those who did see the tournament witnessed Simon center the Czech Republic's top line between Philadelphia's Jakub Voracek and Calgary's Michael Frolik, finishing ninth in the tournament in scoring with 12 points (four goals, eight assists) in 10 games. The Czech Republic finished in fourth place, its highest ranking since 2015.

"We liked what we saw when we saw him at the World Championships," Sullivan said. "And that's when we started to discuss Dominik as an option. I'm not sure where we're going to go with it, but we thought we'd certainly explore it through this exhibition season."

"I used to play (center) when I was younger, when I was not pro," Simon said. "Then I played center this last (season) at the World Championship. But I always play winger my whole pro career. It's a little bit different. You've got to adjust the game a little bit and not think too much."

The center position typically carries more defensive responsibilities than wing.

"You have to defend more as a center," said Simon. "You're lower, getting more pucks. You've got to skate a little deeper into your zone, a little more responsibilities in your (defensive) zone. I guess that's the biggest difference."

Then, of course, there is the most obvious duty the position demands.

"Faceoffs," Simon said. "That's something that definitely needs worked on. I haven't done that for a while."

Simon was 9 for 24 (37.5 percent) on draws Monday. In his four-year NHL career, Simon has taken all of 36 faceoffs -- none since 2017-18 -- and has only won 12 of them (36.4 percent).

"We've already got Matt Cullen on that right now," Sullivan said. "That's one of the responsibilities that we've given him. He'll spend some time with Dom."

Cullen, who retired this past season and joined the team as a player development coach, won 9,423 of the 18,373 faceoffs he took (53.3 percent). His faceoff total is officially the 10th highest in NHL history.

The league did not record the statistic until 1997-98, Cullen's rookie season.)

Simon has almost exclusively been a winger since coming to this continent and playing with Wilkes-Barre/Scranton in 2015-16.

"We didn't think at the time that was the right option for Dominik," said Sullivan, who served as the AHL Penguins' coach early in the 2015-16 campaign. "It's hard enough to make the adjustment going from a big ice surface, the international ice surface, to the North American ice surface. The responsibilities of playing the wing are a little bit less than the responsibilities of playing the center-ice position. But he's been here for a couple of years now."

Considering the changes the Penguins made this past offseason at the winger position, adding another layer or two to his skillset would only increase Simon's value to management when it comes to determining a nightly lineup or the NHL roster. And especially when he becomes a restricted free agent next offseason.

"I'm still young," said Simon, 25. "I want to show what I can do. I'm ending my contract so I definitely want to have a good year."

"He's a guy that distributes the puck extremely well," Sullivan said. "He's got a high hockey IQ. And those are usually prerequisites of being a good center iceman. We'll see how he does."

Note: The Penguins had a scheduled day off Tuesday. They will resume training camp Wednesday in Cranberry.

Tribune Review LOADED: 09.18.2019
The Steelers return to the road to face the San Francisco 49ers on Sunday in Santa Clara, Calif. Here are some things to know about the NFC West squad that’s off to a strong start.

1. Jimmy Garoppolo is back and settling in — The veteran quarterback looked rusty at times in Week 1 and during the preseason, his first action since tearing his ACL early last year. Sunday, however, he looked great while throwing three touchdowns and racking up almost 300 yards through the air in a blowout win at Cincinnati.

Opening drive results in this @JimmyG_10 to @marquisegoodwin 38-yard touchdown 👏

— San Francisco 49ers (@49ers) September 15, 2019

Sure, it was the Bengals’ defense, but he appears to be rounding into form nonetheless. The Steelers have to expect he’ll be at full strength for his first start against them.

2. The lead runners have dominated — Matt Breida and Raheem Mostert are probably not the guys who come to mind when you think of top running back combos across the NFL. Their stats still demand your respect, though. Through two games, Breida has 158 yards on just 27 attempts. That’s a healthy average of 5.9 yards per carry. And his counterpart isn’t far behind — Mostert is averaging 5.6 yards on 22 carries. Two games isn’t much of a sample size, but the early results should be enough to warrant the Steelers taking them seriously.

3. A key lineman is hurt — Nope, the Steelers aren’t the only team in this matchup navigating a disruptive injury on the offensive side of the ball. San Francisco lost left tackle Joe Staley to a broken left fibula Sunday. ESPN reports that he’s expected to miss six to eight weeks with the injury, which means he’ll be out for the game against the Steelers on Sunday. His absence could help the Steelers get more pressure on Garoppolo than past opponents have — he’s been sacked just one time through two games.

4. So are some other useful players — Running back Tevin Coleman suffered a high-ankle sprain early in the Week 1 win against Tampa Bay. Receivers Trent Taylor and Jalen Hurd have been out since the preseason, too. Coach Kyle Shanahan told reporters last week that the goal is to get them back after the team’s Week 4 bye, but at least one may be available as soon as this week. Their status is worth monitoring in the days ahead.

5. The pass rush is as advertised — San Francisco really beefed up along the defensive front this offseason by adding defensive end Nick Bosa as the No. 2 overall pick in the draft and signing fellow end Dee Ford from Kansas City in free agency. That strategy has paid dividends. The 49ers are tied for fifth in the NFL with seven sacks through two games and got to the Bengals’ Andy Dalton four times in the win Sunday. That’s a tough assignment for the Steelers’ Mason Rudolph in his first career start, for sure.
Bryan Rust opens up about trade rumors as Penguins drop preseason debut in OT

By Josh Yohe Sep 17, 2019

UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. — Bryan Rust never changes his approach, even if his role with the Penguins remains in constant motion.

He was one of the few regular NHL players in the lineup during the Penguins’ preseason debut, a 5-4 overtime loss against the Buffalo Sabres at the Pegula Ice Arena on Monday.

Rust was typically tenacious, drawing two penalties with a combination of speed and will. He looked like a guy who was fighting for a job, even though he isn’t. Not really, anyway.

This summer was a particularly noisy one for the Penguins, as the Phil Kessel trade highlighted some serious change to the Penguins’ forwards. Given the team’s precarious salary cap situation, it has been widely suspected that Jim Rutherford would deal a player to relieve the Penguins financially. Even Rutherford himself admitted such a scenario was likely.

Throughout most of the summer, Rust’s name appeared on many of the short lists of trade candidates. He wasn’t unaware of this.

“I saw a lot,” he said. “Pretty much everybody was saying something to me. I heard about it.”

And?

“I just think everyone likes to find something to talk about in the summer,” he said. “I was never concerned about it, to be honest with you. I was just trying to go about my business every day. I wouldn’t say that it affected me at all.”

If one didn’t know better, it might seem the Penguins are still preparing themselves for the possibility of life after Rust, who has been among their most versatile and clutch forwards during the past five seasons.

After all, look at the line combinations they’ve been experimenting with this summer:

• Jack Johnson and Chad Ruhwedel. There is a lot of speed and will. He looked like a guy who was fighting for a job, even if his role with the Penguins remains in constant motion.

• Sam Miletic. He’s an intriguing forward but was essentially invisible all summer.

• Zach Aston-Reese. I didn’t care for his game. He strikes me as a player who isn’t a top-nine player. Of the four lines during his time with the Penguins. The odds would still seem good that he’ll begin the season in the top-nine, as the early portion of preseason is often designated for experimentation.

• Dominik Simon — I’m a bit baffled as to why the Penguins are experimenting with him this summer. In Crosby, Malkin, Bjugstad and Teddy Blueger, the Penguins appear to have an especially deep group down the middle.

• Aston-Reese. I didn’t care for his game. He strikes me as a player who isn’t a top-nine player. Of the four lines during his time with the Penguins. The odds would still seem good that he’ll begin the season in the top-nine, as the early portion of preseason is often designated for experimentation.

Sullivan already knows what Rust can accomplish with Crosby and Malkin. The same can’t be said of Kahun nor Tanev.

It’s hard to imagine Rust starting the season as a fourth-line player. Of course, the Penguins are tremendously deep at forward right now, and it’s not like Rust would complain if that were the case when the season begins against these same Sabres on Oct. 3.

“It really doesn’t matter,” he said. “It doesn’t. I’ll play anywhere they want me to play. I’ll play on the first line, the second line, the third line, the fourth line, on defense, goalie. I don’t care. It doesn’t matter to me. I’m going to play where I’m told to play and I’m going to play hard.”

Players trending up

• Casey DeSmith — DeSmith stopped 23 of 25 shots in about 30 minutes of playing time Monday. Simply put, he was the Penguins’ best player.

The Sabres fielded a significantly more talented lineup, with the likes of Jack Eichel and Jeff Skinner in the lineup. On paper, this game was very much a mismatch. DeSmith, though, stopped it from getting out of hand. He made a number of acrobatic saves and his rebound control was quite good.

“I actually surprised myself a little bit,” DeSmith admitted following the game. “I felt really good out there. I wasn’t necessarily expecting that in the first preseason game of the season. But yeah, I was pretty pleased. I felt sharp.”

It should be noted that Tristan Jarry was quite effective as well. He stopped 19 of 22 shots, though many of them were of the Grade-A variety. Jarry was beaten for the winner in overtime with eight seconds remaining before a shootout, as Eichel scored on a breakaway. When these two teams played at Penn State two years ago in preseason action, Eichel scored the game-winner.

“I seem to remember that game having a very similar ending,” DeSmith said.

What also has become a familiar theme is DeSmith enjoying wonderful training camps and exhibition games. His start was typically good.

• Samuel Poulin/Nathan Legare — We’ll stick these two together since they were both drafted by the Penguins in June.

Poulin got noticeably better as the game went on. He was hit hard during his first shift but responded by playing with a bit of an edge the remainder of the game. There were encouraging signs.

Legare, though, really jumped out at me. This kid has a presence about him. He’s big, strong and a good enough skater. He’s got a real pizzazz to his game, too. He almost pulled off a couple of spectacular one-on-one moves. He set up the game’s first goal, scored by Andrew Agozzino.

Yes, Legare is just a kid. But you can see why the Penguins traded up to get him. It’s early for me to make such of a projection, but I think he’s going to be a very good NHL player. He isn’t the least bit afraid.

• Dominik Simon — I’m a bit baffled as to why the Penguins are experimenting with him this summer. In Crosby, Malkin, Bjugstad and Teddy Blueger, the Penguins appear to have an especially deep group down the middle.

However, Mike Sullivan confirmed that Simon’s strong World Championship performance while playing center last spring compelled the Penguins’ coaching staff to try him in the middle.

While I think the decision was a curious one, Simon played quite well. His ability to protect the puck was on particularly strong display.

Honorary mention: John Marino has been terrific during the early days of camp and didn’t look out of place in the least against the Sabres. Keep this kid on your radar. There’s a lot to like, and he was pretty good against the Sabres.

Players trending down

• Zach-Aston Reese. I didn’t care for his game. He strikes me as a player having a bit of an identity crisis. Is he a power forward? Is he going to play with more skill? I don’t think he knows. The Penguins will need a lot more from him.

• Sam Miletic. He’s an intriguing forward but was essentially invisible all game. That won’t cut it with this roster of forwards.

• Jack Johnson and Chad Ruhwedel. There is a chance this could be the Penguins’ third pairing, with an injury here or there. The Sabres are probably hoping so. Johnson was responsible for a couple of breakaways against. Ruhwedel, meanwhile, was burned on the game’s first goal.
Neither Johnson nor Ruhwedel is a particularly gifted skater. This is a unit that could be exploited.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Highs and lows from Sharks’ preseason opener vs. Ducks

San Jose Sharks’ Aaron Dell solidifies his spot as the backup to No. 1 goalie Martin Jones

By CURTIS PASHELKA | PUBLISHED: September 17, 2019

SAN JOSE — The good news from the Sharks’ perspective following their 4-3 loss to the Anaheim Ducks on Tuesday night is that Aaron Dell solidified his spot as the backup to No. 1 goalie Martin Jones.

The question remains, though, can one or more of the Sharks prospects make a serious challenge for a roster spot once the regular season begins next month?

Tuesday’s preseason opener at SAP Center offered only a few hints. Timo Meier, Jonny Brodzinski and Joachim Blichfeld all scored, and Ryan Merkley added two assists, but the Sharks also got away from their structure at times and the foundation that coach Pete DeBoer and his staff have been harping on since the start of camp.

Anaheim scored three straight goals in the second period and Ducks forward Max Jones scored the eventual game-winner off the rush at the 6:43 mark of the third.

“I liked out start, I liked our first period. I liked Aaron Dell’s game, I thought he was really solid,” DeBoer said. “In the second period, we lost a little bit of our commitment to playing the right way and they took the game over.

“We pushed back in the third, but it wasn’t enough.”

Some standouts from Tuesday night.

1. Aaron Dell solidifies his spot: It’s the first preseason game and both teams only played a handful of NHL regulars, but DeBoer liked what he saw from Dell, who stopped 11 of 12 shots.

2. Dell allowed all seven shots he faced in the first period when the Sharks took a 2-0 lead on goals by Meier and Brodzinski.

3. Dell allowed a goal by Devin Shore at the 5:53 mark of the second period after a Max Jones shot on goal, but finished his night by stopping a point blank try by Jones. On a Ducks 2 on 1, Daniel Sprong slid a pass across to Jones, but Dell got across this crease to make the save.

“I felt pretty comfortable,” Dell said. “I felt pretty confident in the work I’ve put in this summer. I felt good out there.

“I felt more control. Didn’t think I tried to do too much and try and oversave things.”

Dell will probably get at least one more start, maybe more, before the end of the preseason.

Josef Korenar was playing in his first NHL preseason game and allowed three goals on 13 shots — not all his fault — after he took over from Dell with 9:51 left in the second period.

Realistically, Korenar was going to have to have a dynamite camp to really push to be the backup goalie to Jones. For now, he’s trying to soak everything in and learn as much as he can before he heads to the Barracuda camp.

“Every goalie has something they’re working on, or something they want to do better,” Korenar said. “I’ve got to work on everything.”

2. Should we be talking more about Danil Yurtaykin? Yurtaykin, signed by the Sharks out of the KHL in April, flashed his skill set on a handful of occasions Tuesday. He didn’t look tentative, or afraid to make plays.

He nearly set up a goal in the first period. Coming in on a rush, Yurtaykin, like most of the prospects in Tuesday’s game, will likely need time in the AHL to become a more complete player and get used to the North American-size ice surface and style of play. Still, he doesn’t lack for confidence.

“He definitely wasn’t overwhelmed by the game. That’s a good thing,” DeBoer said. “But again, like Brodzinski, like everybody else, we’re game one into a tryout here and auditions. So, we’re not handing out any jobs tonight.”

3. Other notables: DeBoer said of Brodzinski, who had a team-high six shots on goal in 14:30 of ice time, “My first chance to watch him. He’s got a good shot, he’s got good speed, he works hard. He’s auditioning for some pretty big roles we have open here and he’s one of a handful of guys here where tonight was the first night of that audition.”

Ryan Merkley, assisted on Brodzinski and Blichfeld’s tallies, but was also on the ice for Devin Shore’s goal at the 5:53 mark of the second period.

“He’s obviously elite-skilled,” DeBoer said. “I think, like with all young players, if you create two goals and give up two goals, you’re not helping us win games. That’s the message.”

DeBoer on Antti Suomela, who played 1:55 on the Sharks’ penalty kill. “I don’t know if he will (kill penalties) for us during the year. He’s another one of the guys in that group of Brodzinski and Yurtaykin that are fighting for NHL time, and where he fits once we get the whole group together.

“I want to see him on the ice to play some minutes that he can show us that when you’ve got penalties, sometimes you can use him on the PK. I thought he actually did a pretty good job out there.”

San Jose Mercury News: LOADED: 09.18.2019
Sharks fall to Anaheim Ducks in preseason opener

Starting goalie Aaron Dell stops 11 of 12 shots in the Sharks’ 4-3 loss to the Anaheim Ducks at SAP Center

By CURTIS PASHELKA | PUBLISHED: September 17, 2019 at 9:28 pm | UPDATED: September 17, 2019 at 10:36 PM

SAN JOSE — Starting goalie Aaron Dell stopped 11 of 12 shots in the Sharks’ 4-3 loss to the Anaheim Ducks at SAP Center on Tuesday in the NHL preseason opener for both teams.

Dell stopped all seven shots he faced in the first period when the Sharks took a 2-0 lead on goals by Timo Meier and Jonny Brodzinski.

Dell allowed a goal by Devin Shore at the 5:53 mark of the second period after a Max Jones shot on goal, but finished his night by stopping a point blank try by Jones. On a Ducks 2 on 1, Daniel Sprong slid a pass across to Jones, but Dell got across this crease to make the save.

Josef Korenar came on in relief of Dell with 9:51 left in the second period. The Ducks scored twice in 6:01 to take a 3-2 lead, with both Nicolas Deslaurier and Adam Henrique registering even strength goals.

Sharks prospect Joachim Blichfeld scored 2:55 into the third period to tie the game 3-3. The Ducks, though, took the lead for good just 4:48 later, as Jones took a pass from Troy Terry in the high slot and beat Korenar to the blocker side. Korenar, who spent last season with the Barracuda and who is hoping to make an impression in training camp, allowed three goals on 13 shots.

Both teams played only a handful of NHL regulars, with Joe Thornton, Brodzinski and Marcus Sorensen forming the Sharks’ top line for the first two periods.

Most of the other Sharks in camp will travel to Calgary on Wednesday to play the Flames in the team’s second preseason game.

San Jose Mercury News: LOADED: 09.18.2019
San Jose Sharks forward’s NHL career at a crossroads

NHL: Antti Suomela competing for a spot on San Jose Sharks roster after an inconsistent year in 2018-19

By CURTIS PASHELKA

SAN JOSE — Forward Antti Suomela, arguably the Sharks’ biggest free agent signing out of Europe in 2018, is now fighting for a job to stay in the NHL.

“This is the biggest year for me, absolutely,” Suomela said Tuesday. “I really want to play well this year.”

Suomela, 25, receives his first opportunity Tuesday to show he belongs, as he’ll start on a line with Timo Meier and Kevin Labanc for the Sharks’ preseason opener at SAP Center against the Anaheim Ducks.

Suomela made the Sharks’ roster at the end of training camp last season and was the team’s third line center for most of the first two months of the regular season.

But after recording three goals and five assists in 20 games, Suomela’s game hit a snag. He not only went without a point in seven straight games from Nov. 20 to Dec. 7, but also lost about 60 percent of his faceoffs.

Suomela was reassigned to the Barracuda on Dec. 11, and really never made a compelling case to rejoin the big club with 20 just points in 47 AHL regular season games. He was also scratched for two of the team’s four playoff games.

“He’s fighting for a spot,” Sharks coach Pete DeBoer said. “I think he showed last year that he can play at this level. Then like all young players, it’s can you do it for 10 games, 20 games, 30 games, 80 games, and then can you do it in the playoffs and take it to another level.

“Like all young players, he stumbled around a little bit after he got to the 20-30 game mark. He went back down to the American League and I thought he was kind of just OK down there, especially down the stretch.”

For complete Sharks coverage

Still, the Sharks weren’t ready to part ways with the Finnish centerman just yet, as he was given a qualifying offer in late June and was signed to a one-year deal in early July.

“He’s got a lot to prove,” DeBoer said. “He’s shown he can play at this level, but we need 82-game players. We’re not looking for 20-game players. For me, I like a lot of pieces to his game, but it’s about consistency and bringing that every night.”

Suomela trained in the offseason with fellow Finnish players like Carolina’s Teuvo Teräväinen with the goal of getting stronger and improving his skating. He’s about five pounds heavier now than he was when he first signed with San Jose in June 2018 out of Liiga, where he recorded a league-best 60 points in 59 games with JYP.

“I learned a lot,” Suomela said. “I think I’m stronger right now.”

Suomela also wants to get back to simply enjoying the game, something that wasn’t necessarily easy to do last season as a point producer that wasn’t producing many points.

“Last year was my first year here and everything was new for me,” Suomela said. “I learned a lot and I think now I’m ready.”

Becoming a regular in the Sharks’ lineup this season won’t be easy for Suomela. If he makes the team out of camp, he may have to do so as a winger.

The Sharks are fairly set down the middle on their first three lines with Logan Couture, Tomas Hertl and Joe Thornton. At 6-foot and 180 pounds, Suomela doesn’t necessarily fit the mold of a prototypical Sharks fourth line center, although he was skating on Melker Karlsson’s line through the first few days of camp, including the two scrimmages.

Suomela spent some time as a winger with the Barracuda last season, so he has some familiarity with the role and what is expected within the system.

“It’s a new place for me,” Suomela said, “but I think I’m ready if they need a winger.”
San Jose Sharks 2019-20 preview: Serious questions on the blue line

By BRIAN RICKS

SAN JOSE — The Sharks are entering their 2019–2020 season with a similar team that played Game 6 of the 2019 Western Conference Finals. Although some core pieces have departed — salute, Joe Pavelski — most of the core remains.

In this three-part series, we will analyze the various aspects of the team, examining whether GM Doug Wilson did enough to address issues in each area.

Today’s focus: Defense

Erik Karlsson: The star Swedish defenseman did not have a dream start to his career as a Shark. Injuries plagued his first season in teal, leaving many Sharks fans wondering if he would ever return to his Norris Trophy-winning form. Although Karlsson never seemed in full health for a prolonged stretch of time, his creative ability (in particular his ability to break the puck out of the defensive zone) was undeniable. The advanced stats on Karlsson show that he was a great player in spite of his injury.

There is a stat called Corsi For (CF%) that is meant to explain how often a player’s team possesses the puck while he is on the ice. Karlsson led the Sharks in this stat. In other words, the Sharks were on the attack more when Karlsson was on the ice than any other Shark. He drove the team’s offense more than any player, and did it all while his groin was in tatters.

Sharks fans will of course remember the Vegas series in which Karlsson’s defense and ability was openly questioned. While he was not up to his own standards in that series, it is important to remember that he was attempting to play the highest level of his sport with an injured groin. That is a body part very important in skating, let alone playing in the NHL.

With a full summer to recuperate from off-season surgery, we expect Karlsson will be in elite form this year.

Brent Burns: While many fans love the personality and excitement that Burns brings to the Sharks, there is a similar concern for defensive awareness as there is for Karlsson. What some might not account for, however, is the incredible dynamic player that Burns is. He plays the position of defensemen as few do. Perhaps this is because he was drafted as a forward, shifted to defense in the minors, then moved back to forward under Todd McLellan, then back to defense where he has remained… It is dizzying to even write that; imagine trying to live it.

Either way, Burns is a great offensive talent, albeit in a different way than Karlsson. Burns shoots the puck often while also driving possession for the Sharks. This is demonstrated by him being second on the team in Corsi Factor. While his hard-skating, heavy-hitting, always-shooting style can be erratic, it also is often unpredictable and can leave opposing teams guessing. Unless they are guessing that he wants to shoot, in which case they are almost always right.

Burns was a finalist for the Norris Trophy last year, and deservedly so. His wild coverage in the defensive zone is well worth the amount of offense and X-factor he provides for the team. With a healthy Karlsson, it would not be out of the question to see both of the Sharks blue liners nominated for the trophy honoring the league’s best defenseman.

Marc-Edouard Vlasic: The yin to Burns’ yang, Steady Eddie is pure system, a team-defense-first kind of guy. If you are looking for someone to lead by always making the safe and right play, then the lifelong Sharks defenseman is your guy. The importance of the 31-year-old defender was demonstrated in the games he missed during last year’s playoffs. The Sharks struggled to shut down Vegas’s top line in his absence. His return was one of the most underplayed reasons for the team reaching Game 7.

In spite of this, Vlasic had a down year. This is most strongly demonstrated by him finishing the season with a negative plus-minus for the first time since the 2008–2009 season. Also, Vlasic had the team’s worst Corsi number. This means, more than any other regular player, the team was on its heels the most when Vlasic was on the ice.

Stats aren’t everything, though. Any observer of the team knows Vlasic always draws the assignment of shutting down the opposition’s best players. Therefore, it is no surprise that Vlasic’s stats should suffer. But last year was more than the result of tough assignments. Vlasic had a poor season, especially considering his high standards.

The Supporting Cast: Beyond the top three defensemen, the Sharks are thin. Brendan Dillon tops the list of the remaining d-men. He is a solid defender who matched his career high in points (22) while playing alongside Karlsson for most of the year. Although he did not have an impressive playoff, sporting a team worst plus-minus of 8, he is the fourth-best defenseman on the team and will be relied upon heavily in penalty killing and defensive assignments.

Radek Simek is the real wildcard in the defense core. Once he found himself paired with Burns in 2019, the young Czech hit his stride. Unfortunately, the start of his career was interrupted by an ugly leg injury he suffered against Winnipeg. If he and Burns find a similar chemistry, the Sharks might have found a diamond in the rough.

The sixth defensemen spot is an unknown. Although Dalton Prout was brought in as a low-priced free agent, he seems better slotted in as a seventh or eighth defensemen. Sharks fans should expect Prout, Tim Heed or Jacob Middleton to battle it out for the final spot. Heed may have the upper hand because of his ability to man the point on the power play. But expect whomever has the best preseason to start as the sixth defensemen against Vegas on opening night (Oct. 2).

If Simek isn’t healthy, assume that Prout will man the third pair with either Heed or Middleton as a partner, as coach Peter DeBoer prefers to lean on veteran players.

Baby Sharks: Ryan Merkley remains the Sharks’ top defensive prospect. The 19-year-old first-round pick got a taste of the pros playing six games with the Barracuda last year. This skilled offensive defenseman will be a delight to see in teal, but only after adding some muscle and learning to translate his skill possession game to the pro level. Mario Ferraro is another prospect. He is a year older than Merkley and will need seasoning in the American Hockey League. He and Merkley both played well in the Sharks rookie tournament this month.

Summary: The Sharks are the only team in the NHL with two No. 1 defensemen. You can argue that the Sharks, instead of extending Karlsson, should have used the money and cap space to bolster the offense. But you would be wrong. Karlsson & Burns is the strength of the Sharks, and their presence provides a 1-2 punch that only the Sharks can claim.

The depth of the Sharks defense does provide some questions. An injury to Burns or Karlsson would obviously devastate the team. But, an injury to Dillon or Vlasic could do the same. Beyond the Sharks top four defensemen, there is lots of ambiguity. Should the Sharks position themselves as Stanley Cup contenders, do not be surprised to see Wilson trade for help on the backend. An early-season injury might also result in Wilson tapping the thin remaining free agent market for a veteran defenseman to fill in a hole on the backend.

Part I: The Goalies


San Jose Mercury News: LOADED: 09.18.2019
San Jose Sharks

Why these four Sharks have high chance of cracking NHL roster in camp

By Chelena Goldman September 17, 2019 5:49 PM

SAN JOSE -- Since hosting their prospect development camp in July, the Sharks have boasted about the players who will challenge for a roster spot at training camp.

Now that San Jose's preseason officially gets underway Tuesday against the Anaheim Ducks at SAP Center, we have a better idea of who has the best shot of making the NHL lineup. Here are four players with a good chance of breaking camp with the Sharks.

Mario Ferraro, D

The 21-year-old defenseman has skated alongside fellow prospect Ryan Merkley in training camp, but don't be surprised if he gets a look alongside one of San Jose's veterans soon -- or in a few regular-season games.

Ferraro has been putting on a show since development camp in July. Sharks director of scouting Doug Wilson Jr. went so far as to call him "one of the most high-energy guys you've ever seen. He does not have a bad day."

Through both development camp and the start of the preseason, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst product -- who played college hockey alongside Colorado Avalanche blue liner Cale Makar -- has demonstrated a high level of physicality that could make his game very effective on the NHL mainstage.

Plus, with Radim Simek still rehabbing, there's a chance Ferraro -- as well as familiar faces like Jacob Middleton and Nick DeSimone -- gets a look on the big club's blue line.

Antoine Bibeau, G

Some fans wondered if the San Jose Barracuda netminder would get a look with the Sharks last season when Aaron Dell had some hiccups backing up Martin Jones. After a promising 2018-19 campaign in the AHL, his chances of getting an NHL shot this season appear more likely.

Bibeau started two games with the Toronto Maple Leafs three seasons ago, going 1-1-0 with a 1.99 goals-against average and .927 save percentage. While that isn't exactly a deep body of work, his AHL numbers in San Jose (.912 save percentage in two seasons) are enough to get the Sharks excited about his future with the organization.

Alex True, F

Like Bibeau, True was a player last season some thought would get a crack at the Sharks' roster. In his second campaign with the Barracuda, the 6-foot-5 Dane tallied 55 points (24 goals, 31 assists) and was a plus-16 in 68 regular-season games.

While True has most recently been lumped into a group of young roster hopefuls including Ivan Chekhovich, Sasha Chmelevski and Joachim Blichfeld, the 22-year-old appears to be the readiest to make the leap to the NHL. Those other three still have very promising futures with the Sharks, but our guess is they'll see more playing time with the Barracuda first.

The Sharks have spots to fill at forward and could greatly benefit from adding a big-bodied scorer to their bottom six. If True continues to have a good camp, he could get an NHL look in his third season with the organization.

Jonny Brodzinski, F

Although not as recognizable of a name as some of the names coming out of the Barracuda, Brodzinski likely will get a crack at the Sharks' roster ahead of some of the organization's top prospects. He's only on a one-year contract, and he has previous NHL experience.

Through three seasons with the Los Angeles Kings, the 26-year-old Minnesota native scored 11 points (six goals, five assists) and a plus-6 rating over the course of 54 NHL games. He also tallied 108 total points in 156 games with the AHL's Ontario Reign.

Given the aforementioned holes up front, playing a consistent AHL scorer like Brodzinski could make the most sense -- at least to start the season off.
Handicapping the competition for the Sharks’ backup goalie job

By Kevin Kurz Sep 17, 2019

It shouldn’t have been all that surprising, considering the Sharks had the worst combined save percentage in the league for the 2018-19 regular season. But earlier this week when coach Pete DeBoer left open the possibility that Aaron Dell’s place as the backup to Martin Jones might be vulnerable, it was still noteworthy.

“It’s a good question,” DeBoer said Sunday when asked whether Dell was locked into the No. 2 role for opening night. “Aaron’s built up enough credibility with me that I know what he can do. 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 has served as the primary backup to Jones for the past three seasons, the first two of which were solid, as he posted a 2.37 goals-against average and .920 save percentage in 49 combined games in 2016-17 and 2017-18. Midway through that second season on Feb. 28, 2018, he was rewarded with a two-year, $3.8 million contract.

Last season, though, he could never quite find any consistency despite multiple opportunities to take the ball from the equally shaky Jones. That was a particular letdown from the coaching staff’s perspective, as Dell went on to post a 10-8-4 record with a 3.17 GAA and .886 SP.

“One of the disappointing parts for me was I thought there was opportunity for Dell, like he had in the past, to really grab some momentum back for us,” DeBoer said. “Maybe the team was struggling, maybe Jonesy had an off week, and in the past Dell’s always kind of grabbed those opportunities and really run with them. I thought last year that he didn’t seize those opportunities as much.”

Pushing Dell now are a couple of goalies who have had success at the AHL level. Antoine Bibeau was solid in 2017-18 in particular, while last season the young Josef Korenar represented the Barracuda at the AHL All-Star game while platooning with Bibeau.

“I think a lot of clubs would like to be in our situation right now,” said Barracuda coach and the AHL’s all-time wins leader, Roy Sommer. “You’ve got a legitimate No. 1 (Jones), and there’s a couple of guys that are vying for the other spot. I don’t know who’s coming out of it. I guess you’d have to give the edge to Dell, just because of his NHL experience, but Korenar hasn’t played and ‘Beebs’ hasn’t played, so we don’t know. That’s the question mark.”

Barring anything unforeseen, Jones will be in goal when the Sharks open the season at T-Mobile Arena against the Vegas Golden Knights on Oct. 2. Who will be his backup?

Let’s handicap the race.

The favorite

Dell’s fate is almost certainly in his own hands, and in that regard he did himself a favor with his performance in the Sharks’ preseason opener against Anaheim on Tuesday at SAP Center. He made 11 saves on 12 shots in a little more than 30 minutes, the best of which came on Max Jones on a two-on-one rush in what was his final stop of the evening.

When asked what he liked about the Sharks’ eventual 4-3 loss to the Ducks, DeBoer mentioned the team’s first period, but also “Aaron Dell’s game. Really solid.”

The 30-year-old goalie stuck around the San Jose area for the summer, and after taking some time to unwind following the Sharks’ deep playoff run, worked with assistant/goalie coach Johan Hedberg to get back to playing a more controlled game. Dell, a pending unrestricted free agent next season, indicated that was the biggest difference between his first two NHL seasons when compared with his struggles last season.

“I think I was getting a little scrappy last year too quick, so I think that was kind of the main focus, was trying to move under control and get set as much as possible,” he said Monday.

It was the sort of issue that can be difficult to fix in the middle of the season.

“You sometimes make adjustments without knowing, and they are just kind of small things that when you realize it, it’s usually too late at that point,” he said. “You’ve kind of developed a (bad) habit. … The thing I worked on a little bit (this summer) was finding out how I can recognize if that’s happening again, and then go through the checklist of things to go back to the basics.”

If Dell is feeling any pressure from the guys behind him, he’s not letting on. Although this is the first time in three years that his roster spot could be in jeopardy in September, that uncertainty is really nothing new for the guy, as Dell was never really considered a true NHL prospect in college and was playing in the ECHL as recently as the 2014-15 season.

“Through my whole career it’s kind of been I’ve had to prove myself every year,” he said. “I’m kind of used to that now.”

Don’t count him out yet

Along with Jones and Dell, Bibeau is the only other goalie in the organization with NHL experience, playing in two games for the Maple Leafs in 2016-17 stopping 51 of 55 shots in two games. He’s in the second of a two-year contract and is a pending restricted free agent.

Bibeau is scheduled to play the entirety of the Sharks’ second preseason game Wednesday night in Calgary.

His best season with the Barracuda was his first, in 2017-18, when he posted a 24-14-2 mark with a 2.37 GAA and .919 SP in 43 games. Bibeau’s playing time was reduced last season as he platooned with Korenar, but he was the better of the two over the final few weeks of the regular season, finishing with a 16-18-3 record, 2.89 GAA and .904 SP.

“Obviously my goal right now is to make the team,” Bibeau said. “I’ve had a taste of the NHL a few years ago and obviously I want to get back into it. But, I’m not putting any pressure on myself. I’m really just focusing on myself and focusing on every time I’m on the ice, it doesn’t matter if it’s practice, morning skate, game. Just give it everything I had and just go one shot at a time.”

Now 25 years old, Bibeau has worked primarily on his skating and mobility since arriving in San Jose in the 2017 offseason. He’s already got good size, at 6-foot-3 and 207 pounds.

“I think I’ve grown a lot, not only as a hockey player but as a person,” Bibeau said. “It’s going to be my sixth year pro, so you learn every year.”

Sommer said: “I think he’s in a good spot. He’s coming off another good year. … Big, doesn’t move a lot. He’s developed into … it’s hard to say, because I really want to see him in some NHL games and see how he performs in there. He deserves a chance to play in the National Hockey League. He’s put his work in. What’s he now, 25? So, he’s at that right age.”

The young long shot

There’s no question the organization likes what it has in Korenar, keeping the undrafted Czech native around as the emergency backup during last year’s playoff run. At just 21 years old, though, he would probably be best served starting the season in the AHL and getting more pro experience.

Even he seems to expect that he’ll be back with the Barracuda in a few weeks.

“It was my first year last year, so (I’ll) probably be still in the AHL,” Korenar said Tuesday night, after allowing three goals on 13 shots in a little less than 28 minutes against the Ducks, his first career NHL preseason game.

At the time he was chosen as an AHL All-Star in January, Korenar was leading the AHL with a 2.19 GAA and was second in save percentage (.924). He finished with a 2.54 GAA and .911 SP, though, so he’s probably correct in assuming he needs more work in the minors before thinking about making the leap.

Fortunately, he’s eager to learn, Sommer said.

“For a 20-year-old goaltender coming into the American Hockey League, (last season) is as good as you’re going to get,” Sommer said. “Made the All-Star team. His numbers were good. … He was kind of a sponge, easy teach. He was in the top three probably (among) goalies in the American League, and that’s saying something.”

There’s no reason to rush Korenar at this point, considering the guys above him.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Decision by NHL Players Association means the games — and labor talks — are on for next three seasons

By Tom Timmermann St. Louis Post-Dispatch

The NHL Players Association on Monday chose not to re-open its collective bargaining agreement with the NHL, assuring that hockey will be played through the contract’s end after the 2021-22 season. Both the league and the NHLPA had the choice to opt out of the deal, causing it to end after this season and throwing the 2020-21 season into doubt. But the league opted not to by its Sept. 1 deadline, and the players did the same at their deadline.

"Everyone says if you opt out, there’s going to be a lockout," said Blues defenseman Jay Bouwmeester. "That’s not necessarily true. Then it becomes a deadline, and if there were things like that that guys felt more strongly about that they wanted changed, then (opting out) would have been the way to go because you could seriously negotiate it in the hope to change things. But now it’s going to run its course, but in three years where you have that deadline, (talks) will be taken more seriously.

"I think (the NHL) is in an OK place," the defenseman continued. "I’ve been through two lockouts, and there’s not the issues that were staring us in the face that there were those previous two times. You take a step back and look at it and maybe there’s a little fight over stuff that can hopefully be worked out in the meantime and is probably not worth it.

"There’s apparently different streams of revenue that are going to be coming to the pot in a few years. There are the issues that guys have exceptions with, but I guess we’re OK with it in the meantime. They don’t renegotiate things until there’s a deadline, but it’s a situation where guys have seen what’s gone on in the past and we’re good enough with it right now to not disturb things."

"We just want to play,” forward Jaden Schwartz said. “That’s what we do and that’s what we love and that’s our job. We won’t have any stoppages."

GAME 2

The Blues will take an almost entirely new lineup with them to Washington on Wednesday for their second preseason game, against the Capitals. Puck drops at 6 p.m. Central time, and the game will be broadcast on WXOS (101.1 FM).

Only three players who played against Dallas on Monday — forwards Robby Fabbri, Ryan Olsen and Austin Poganski — will get a quick reprise. The rest of the squad is new, including Vladimir Tarasenko, Jaden Schwartz, Colton Parayko and Jordan Binnington.

Fabbri, as he comes back from two seasons largely lost to knee surgeries, figures to get a lot of action in the preseason. He looked like some of his old speed was back Monday.

"I thought he had a good game, he looked really good," coach Craig Berube said. "Good jump, energy, his quickness looks good. I think he did some good things last night."

JUNIOR’S PROMISE

Of the seven players bound for juniors whom the Blues had in camp, only one of them, forward Mathias Laferriere, got in a game. He had an assist and played 13:02 against Dallas on Monday. He was sent back to his junior team Tuesday, but the Blues staff came away liking what they saw from the 19-year-old forward.

"He’s got talent, good hands. His skill set’s really good," Berube said. "We saw him and wanted to see him in a game. I thought he did some really good things. He didn’t get pushed off the puck. Made some nice plays with the puck, had a few scoring chances. I actually thought he had a goal there, but it didn’t go in. For a young kid like that, that’s good experience for him to get in a game."

Laferriere had 28 goals and 46 assists in 68 games for Cape Breton in the QMJHL. He also had three goals and seven assists in 11 playoff games.

The Blues also sent goalie Joel Hofer back to his junior team, which leaves 51 players in camp. It also meant the team could consolidate into two groups for practice purposes. The “third group,” if you want to call it that, on Tuesday consisted of two injured players, Jordan Kyrou (kneecap) and Tanner Kaspick (concussion) who skated separate from the rest of the team.
Gordo: Strong defense gives Binnington, Blues good chance to repeat

Jeff Gordon

The Blues’ defensive corps is a known commodity. While some experts still wonder about goaltender Jordan Binnington — who hasn’t played a full NHL season after toiling in minor-league obscurity for years — they can respect the combination of size, ability and experience of those men protecting him.

Whatever reality checks that await Binnington this season will be eased by Colton Parayko and Co.

General manager Doug Armstrong is old school. He believes winners are built from the blue line out.

That is never more true than in today’s fast-paced game, since the league’s crackdown on interference freed teams to attack with a full-tilt forecheck. Defensemen who make good first passes under duress are in demand.

That crackdown also stripped defensemen of their ability to clutch and grab opponents, putting a premium on sound positioning, strength on the puck and shot blocking prowess.

In today’s go-go NHL, defensemen must be able to trigger breakouts, and join the rush and pinch in from the blue line to sustain offensive zone pressure.

The Blues did all of that very well last season and they returned their top seven defensemen from their Stanley Cup run, which is no small accomplishment in the salary cap era.

Armstrong’s commitment to defense showed before the summer market opened. He signed Robert Bortuzzo to a three-year extension last December, then signed Jay Bouwmeester to a one-year extension in April and secured Carl Gunnarsson with a two-year deal in June.

“That’s sort of our philosophy, that we deal with these guys as they come up, when it’s comfortable for everybody,” Armstrong said.

It was widely assumed that Bouwmeester and/or Gunnarsson would move on due to salary cap constraints, but Armstrong valued leadership and continuity at the position.

“Having those guys back is certainly a comfort for us,” he said.

At the start of training camp, coach Craig Berube rolled out familiar pairings, using Bouwmeester with Parayko, Vince Dunn with Alex Pietrangelo and Bortuzzo with Joel Edmundson.

Bouwmeester, at 6-foot-4, and Parayko, at 6-6, blossomed into a formidable shutdown pair last season. They logged big, tough minutes against top forward lines.

After a difficult first few months last season, Bouwmeester, who turns 36 this month, found his skating stride after recovering from offseason hip surgery.

Parayko blossomed into an elite defender with the help of Blues adviser Larry Robinson, a legendary NHL defenseman. He uses his long stick and freakish reach to close passing lanes and keep play on the perimeter.

Could Parayko be more physical? Sure, and he’s learned to throw his body into the fray.

Could he be more assertive with his big slap shot? You bet, and he has — as Ben Bishop verified during the playoffs.

With Parayko and Bouwmeester doing the heavy defensive lifting, Pietrangelo and Dunn could produce more offensively. Pietrangelo scored 30 points in his last 45 regular-season games and 19 points in 26 playoff games, capped by his pivotal Game 7 goal against the Boston Bruins.

Now he is the captain of a Stanley Cup champion and due the sort of league-wide respect accorded Drew Doughty of the Los Angeles Kings and Duncan Keith of the Chicago Blackhawks.

Expect Pietrangelo to get a huge new contract before next summer so he can finish his career here. Armstrong will have some tough financial decisions to make after this season, but that one will be a no-brainer.

Dunn’s ability to operate in the offensive zone like a fourth forward replaced the skills the Blues lost with Kevin Shattenkirk’s departure. Dunn’s 1.47 points per 60 minutes last season ranked eighth among regular NHL defensemen.

He should make another big offensive leap this season when new Blues assistant coach Marc Savard fixes the team’s power play.

The depth behind that top four is impressive. Bortuzzo and Edmundson are both 6-4 and can both mix it up. Gunnarsson is a heady puck-mover who restores order whenever he fits into the lineup.

Edmundson has played in the top four at times, but his inconsistency forced him to go through salary arbitration to get his $3.1 million award for this season. Armstrong still needs to see more.

If he can finally elevate his game, Edmundson could earn nice long-term money here. If he doesn’t, the Blues will likely spend his cap money elsewhere moving forward.

The No. 8 man on the Blues depth chart is either the top-scoring rookie defenseman in the American Hockey League last season (Mitch Reineke), the eighth overall pick in the 2012 draft (Derrick Pouliot) or a rangy prospect (6-4 Niko Mikkola) who starred for Finland at the 2019 World Championships.

Mikkola, in particular, looks like he was born to play for the Blues.

“We believe in big defense,” Armstrong noted during the playoffs. “We have had a lot of big defensemen over a number of years. It’s probably not as physical of a game as it was, but those guys are like seaweed, they’re tough to get through back there. Like going through a car wash sometimes when you got Bouwmeester and Parayko up there.”

St Louis Post Dispatch LOADED: 09.18.2019
Rare pairing of Edmundson-Bortuzzo shines on defense for Blues

By Jim Thomas St. Louis Post-Dispatch

For a guy with only 16 goals over 375 NHL regular-season and playoff contests, it was a strange place to be: No. 1 star as chosen by the Dallas media after Monday's 2-0 Blues victory in their preseason opener.

Presenting defenseman Robert Bortuzzo.

"First and second (stars)," Bortuzzo smiled, nodding in the direction of teammate Joel Edmundson outside the visitors' locker room at American Airlines Center. "Joel Edmundson, No. 2. So I don't know what the Vegas odds would have been on that, but could've made some money."

Bortuzzo said he couldn't remember the last time he was named No. 1 star after a game, but he has a short memory. It happened on May 13 in the Western Conference finals, when he scored an improbable and highly skilled game-winning goal in a 4-2 triumph over San Jose in Game 2 of that series.

A beaming Blues chairman Tom Stillman best summed up that dramatic play afterward: "Backhand, top shelf, from the slot."

Bortuzzo said he watched the play maybe five times in the offseason, usually when he got tagged on Instagram. Asked if he'd been working on any other more offensive moves during the Blues' truncated offseason, Bortuzzo replied: "Nah, I think they encouraged me to get that move out of my game to be honest. But it worked out there."

While Bortuzzo was not working that move over the summer, Edmundson was not playing ball hockey with the locals at his summer home in Kelowna, British Columbia.

His team, the Ice Dogs, won the title last summer. Then Edmundson went out and won another championship trophy about 10 months later — the Stanley Cup.

The Ice Dogs, by the way, won again this summer.

"I think that's four years in a row they've won," Edmundson said. "I played one game, and I was just like 'it's not for me. It's too risky.' So I went and cheered them on and they won. … I hung up the shoes, I guess."

So you could say after a summer of not working on things, Bortuzzo and Edmundson found themselves working together as a defensive tandem Monday in Dallas.

Over the past couple of seasons, they haven't been paired all that much. They were paired just five times in both the 2017-18 and 2018-19 regular seasons. During the Blues' 28-game playoff run to the Stanley Cup, they formed a tandem in the first four games of the opening-round series against Winnipeg. But they weren't paired together again until Game 2 of the Cup Final against Boston.

Preseason or not, they sure looked good against Dallas. They were confident, aggressive and physical. Besides his strong defensive play against the Stars, Bortuzzo scored the game's second — and final — goal, pushing him into No. 1 star status.

"Two big guys," coach Craig Berube said. "They both kind of have the same mindset a little bit. They can play physical and just be hard to play against. When they're out there, players know who they're against. They wear guys down."

Since the start of training camp, Berube has used the same forward lines in practice that he sent out in Game 7 of the Cup Final. Minus, of course, Pat Maroon, who signed a free-agent contract with the Tampa Bay Lightning last month.

If the lines worked in the Cup Final, why change things at the start of this season? No need to overthink things.

Interestingly, there have been a couple of tweaks on defense in practice. Yes, Jay Bouwmeester is back with Colton Parayko as the Blues' shutdown tandem. But Vince Dunn has been paired with Alex Pietrangelo. And there's Edmundson-Bortuzzo.

Berube cautioned against reading too much into that.

"Don't look into pairings and things like that right now," he said. "It is what it is right now. A lot has to do with where we're gonna use Petro and Bouwmeester in exhibition games, and some of our older guys. So that's got a lot to do with it."
Youngster Laferriere shows well in Blues' camp before being set back to juniors

By Tom Timmermann St. Louis Post-Dispatch

14 hrs ago 0

The Blues sent Mathias Laferriere, their sixth-round pick in the 2018 draft, back to his junior team in the QMJHL on Tuesday, but not before they played him in their preseason opener on Monday night in Dallas. He's the only player the team is sending back to juniors who will get in a preseason game, so Blues management obviously sees something they like in the 6-foot-1 forward.

"He's got talent, good hands, his skill set's really good," coach Craig Berube said. "We saw him and wanted to see him in a game. I thought he had a real good game, did some really good things. Didn't get pushed off the puck, he kept the puck, he was strong. Made some nice plays with the puck, had a few scoring chances. I actually thought he had a goal there but it didn't go in. I thought he had a good game. For a young kid like that, that's good experience for him to get a game."

Laferriere, who is heading back to Cape Breton of the QMJHL, had an assist in 13:02 of ice time. He had 28 goals and 46 assists in 68 games for Cape Breton last season, and three goals and seven assists in 11 playoff games.

The Blues also sent goalie Joel Hofer back to juniors. With Hofer joining Colten Ellis in going back to juniors, the Blues have five goalies left in camp: Jordan Binnington, Jake Allen, Ville Husso, Adam Wilcox and Evan Fitzpatrick.

GAME 2

Robby Fabbri, Ryan Olsen and Austin Poganski will play in their second game in the Blues preseason on Wednesday when the Blues face the Capitals in Washington.

Those are the only players who will appear in both of the first two games. Otherwise, it will be a new group of players. Here's the roster:

Forwards: Zach Sanford, Robby Fabbri, Jaden Schwartz, Tyler Bozak, Nick Lappin, Nolan Stevens, Austin Poganski, Dakota Joshua, Evan Polei, Alexei Toropchenko, Cameron Darcy, Ryan Olsen, Vladimir Tarasenko

Defensemen: Carl Gunnarsson, Vince Dunn, Mitch Reinke, Rob O'Gara, Jake Walman, Colton Parayko,

Goalies: Jordan Binnington, Evan Fitzpatrick

There are 13 forwards on the roster, so one of them will be scratched.

The veterans who won't have gotten into one of the first two games will be Jake Allen, Jay Bouwmeester, Ryan O'Reilly, David Perron, Alex Pietrangelo, Brayden Schenn, Alexander Steen and Robert Thomas.

INJURY WATCH

With all the junior players having gone, the Blues' third "group" in practice is essentially gone. Robert Thomas has graduated back to the main group and seven players have gone back to juniors. All that's left in that group are players not ready physically for training camp. On Tuesday, that meant Jordan Kyrou (kneecap) and Tanner Kaspick (concussion) skating alone with one assistant coach.

Mackenzie MacEachern was back in practice after taking a puck to the face in the first period of the Dallas game, though he returned to finish the game. MacEachern is sporting a huge cut on a swollen right cheek, and it looks as though his nose was cut up in the process.

Forward Klim Kostin briefly left the ice during Tuesday's practice after being hit near his right eye, but after a brief visit to the dressing room, he was back, though by then, the structured part of practice was over. Berube said he didn't even notice Kostin had left the ice.
Blues show pep in their step in preseason opener

By Jim Thomas St. Louis Post-Dispatch 14 hrs ago 0

DALLAS — There was a quick-strike goal by prospect Klim Kostin. There was aggressive, effective play by Joel Edmundson and Robert Bortuzzo as a defensive pair. And solid work in goal by Ville Husso and Adam Wilcox.

But the one thing that stood out most about the Blues’ play in their preseason opener — a 2-0 victory over the Dallas Stars — was the quick overall play by St. Louis, particularly in the first period.

“Yeah, everyone was energized, everyone was skating,” Bortuzzo said. “We looked fast. We played fast in our structure as a team. I think that’s where we have success. Everyone’s kind of buying into that structure and you have a cohesion and you’re looking quicker than you are.”

The Blues controlled possession and had the puck in the Dallas end for much of the first two periods. The Stars didn’t have their first shot on goal until just four minutes remained in the opening period. The Blues outshot their second-round playoff opponents from a year ago 10-2 in the opening 20 minutes and outshot them 16-8.

Robby Fabbri set the tone early, outracing a Dallas defender for the puck early in the Stars zone for a mini-breakaway but his shot missed the net.

Dallas played the Blues more evenly over the final two periods, but the Blues got the game’s only two goals — by Klim Kostin and Robert Bortuzzo — in their preseason opener played at American Airlines Center.

“I thought our guys did a good job, start to finish,” coach Craig Berube said. “Work effort was good, competitiveness was good.”

If you practice fast, you usually play fast, regardless of the sport. And Berube has stressed tempo from Day 1 of camp.

“It just goes with the way we practice,” he said. “We try to play fast and quick, aggressive. And then (the players) executed that.”

The Blues aren’t known as a speed team, but you wouldn’t have known it Monday.

“I know,” Ivan Barbashev said. “I was actually a little bit surprised. First game in the preseason, but I thought we did a pretty good job. Everybody was on top of the game. The third period was a little bit sloppy with the turnovers but otherwise it was a good game.”

There were only a few times when the Blues got caught running around in their zone. They were positionally sound and more often than not got the puck out of quickly.

Playing in his first game for the Blues’ organization since early March of last season for San Antonio, Husso stopped all 13 shots he faced in two periods of work.

“He didn’t have a lot of action in the first period, but he got some in the second,” Berube said. “Stood his ground, he was aggressive. I thought he looked calm in net, which he always normally is.”

Ankle problems sabotaged most of Husso’s season last year for the Rampage, but he’s eager to regain his standing in the organization.

“It was nice to have a start,” he said. “It’s been a long time since when I played last game. So it was pretty exciting. It’s been long way (back). It’s nice to be healthy right now. I’m super happy.”

Adam Wilcox, new to the Blues this season after playing for the Buffalo Sabres’ AHL affiliate in Rochester, N.Y., took over in the third period and was equally effective in goal, stopping all nine shots he faced.

“He moved the puck well, too,” Berube said. “I thought he was aggressive. Made a couple nice saves. Made a couple good puck plays with the puck which was important.”

Stars goalie Ben Bishop, of Chaminade College Prep in St. Louis, matched Husso save-for-save until Kostin sent a rocket of a shot past him at the 9:02 mark of the second period.

“He played with an edge,” Bortuzzo said of Kostin. “I think someone (on the bench) yelled, ‘That’s it!’ right before it got to his stick. He’s known for his shot. Barby put it right on a tee. A shot like that, it’s tough for the goalie to react.”

Barbashev, centering a line that included Kostin and Jordan Nolan, got the only assist on the goal.

“(Kostin) told me he closed his eyes when he was shooting,” Barbashev said. “I don’t know if we can believe it or not, but it was a good shot.”

Just 5 ½ minutes after Kostin’s score, Bortuzzo made it 2-0 Blues when his slapshot found its way through traffic past Anton Khudobin, who had just replaced Bishop in goal.

“Got a fortunate bounce off something,” Bortuzzo said. “We had two guys converging. . . .We had a couple great plays just to get the puck back (to the point).”

The Blues had several other prime scoring chances. Austin Poganski hit the crossbar on a tip-in attempt in the first period. In close in the third period, Oskar Sundqvist had an open net with Khudobin out of position, but was shaking his head when he failed to score.

With many of the team’s regulars staying back in St. Louis, Sundqvist centered what was the Blues’ top line Monday, flanked by Fabbri and Sammy Blais.

Mackenzie MacEachern missed some time in the first period after taking a puck to the face, but returned for the second period after getting treatment.

“I thought our whole team, the effort made and competitiveness was really at a high level,” Berube said. “We played fast. We played our game. From man to man, I didn’t think there was anybody that really had an off-game to be honest with you. I thought everybody was dialed in.”

St Louis Post Dispatch LOADED: 09.18.2019
Blues’ Sanford hoping for uneventful — but productive — camp for once

By Tom Timmermann St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Training camp usually is a time of optimism for hockey players, a time when anything is possible. For Blues forward Zach Sanford, it’s hard to find a worse time of the year.

Two years ago, he went into his first training camp with the Blues after being acquired in the Kevin Shattenkirk trade and, about 15 minutes into the first practice, was hit into the boards by teammate Dmitrij Jaskin. He suffered a dislocated shoulder and his season was limited to 17 AHL games.

Last year during camp, while Sanford was battling for a roster spot, his father, Michael, died (on Sept. 20). In addition to dealing with the grief from that, he missed enough of camp that he started the season in the minors.

“I’ve had a pretty crazy last two training camps,” Sanford said. “Hopefully there’s no bumps in the road this year and I come out healthy and positive on the other side.”

By his own admission, this is a big season for Sanford. He was in and out of the lineup last season, playing 60 games in the regular season — twice during the season he was briefly sent down to the AHL — but played in only eight of the team’s 26 playoff games. He was dropped from the lineup after the third game of the first-round series, with Winnipeg, and didn’t get back in until Oskar Sundqvist’s suspension created a spot in Game 3 of the Stanley Cup Final. Sanford played well enough to stay in, including scoring a goal in Game 7 against his hometown team, the Bruins, as the Blues won the Cup.

Think they’ve moved on in Boston? When Sanford took part in a charity game in the area this summer, he got boosed.

“It’s a good reason to get booed for, I guess,” he said.

Sanford got a two-year contract from the Blues in the offseason and a raise. The next step is to raise his game — and most importantly, the consistency of a game — to a point at which he’s in the lineup every day. He’ll certainly be getting every opportunity, starting camp where he was at the end of last season, on a line with Ryan O’Reilly and David Perron, which is one of the most attractive pieces of real estate the team has to offer.

“Fear for me and ‘O’Ry,’” Perron said, “we want to help him out as much as we can, but I also think he’s helping us out a lot, too. He’s going to the front of the net, doing a lot of work in the corner and he can get us the puck with his work ethic. I think we’re excited to play with him.”

To improve his consistency, Sanford worked on adding weight over the summer — he said he’s been between 205 and 212 lately — and did lot of weight lifting so he can be stronger on the puck and win more puck battles. Ideally, he wants to land somewhere between 210 and 215 pounds.

“I just worked on a lot of the things that were making me successful at that time,” Sanford said. “Playing hard, playing physical and being able to hang on to pucks. For me, that all starts with my size and my strength, so a big focus for me was, with the short summer, being able to stay strong and put on some weight. I think that went pretty well. I’ve been feeling pretty confident and comfortable coming back into this year.”

The challenge will be bringing that every day. Last season he would play well, then over time his game would weaken until he was a scratch. Then he’d get back in the lineup, do well, and repeat the process. It’s what happened at the start of the playoffs. In Game 3 against Winnipeg, he played just 5:09 and then wound up in the press box watching for six weeks. But when he got back in the Stanley Cup Final, he was hot again.

“I thought that early on in the playoffs he looked a little overwhelmed, maybe,” Blues coach Craig Berube said. “Later on, I thought he was strong, competed hard, big body guy. He’s got good hands, can make plays.

“(Consistency) is a big part of it. The other part is, with these younger guys, it’s just becoming real good pros. Day in and day out putting the work in in practice and putting the work in in games and understanding you’ve got to make sure you stay on top of things. If you don’t there’s other guys that want to take your job.”
DALLAS — Klim Kostin might be in a hurry, but the Blues aren’t.

“We’re not trying to put too much pressure on him,” general manager Doug Armstrong said last week at the NHL Prospect Tournament in Traverse City, Mich. “He’d like to get right into the sprint, and we’re telling him it’s a process and we’re trying to work with him on the process.”

Then again, if Kostin keeps scoring goals, even the Blues might speed up the process. The first-round draft pick in 2017 broke a scoreless tie midway through the second period Monday at American Airlines Center, beating Dallas goalie Ben Bishop with a one-timer from the slot.

It was all the scoring the Blues would need in a 2-0 victory over the Stars in their exhibition opener, their first contest as the reigning Stanley Cup champion.

Kostin’s score gave him a goal in each of his last three games wearing a Blues jersey. OK, the first two came in Traverse City with the prospects. But you get the point. The forward from Penza, Russia, has been playing well.

“Klim’s an interesting one,” Armstrong said. “There’s not too many 18-, 19-year-olds that do well in the American Hockey League in the sense that it’s a man’s league that’s (without) a lot of structure. It’s probably easier to play in the NHL than it is in the American League for some guys.

“So the statistical line for Klim isn’t maybe what he’d hoped it be. But we’re not surprised by that in the sense that when we saw him against his peer group at the World Junior he was a dominant player. This should really be his first year of pro hockey.”

Instead of playing junior hockey, Kostin jumped right into the AHL as an 18-year-old in 2017 after being drafted by the Blues. He had that option as an overseas player.

“He’s a big, strong kid,” Armstrong said. “He’s gonna make a team as a north-south player that’s got good hands.”

With 22 of their 23 playoff participants back from their Stanley Cup championship team, the Blues’ roster will be tough to crack. But with top prospect Jordan Kyrou still completing his comeback from kneecap surgery, Kostin’s chances might have improved somewhat.

Countryman Ivan Barbashev came up with a loose puck in the Dallas zone and feathered a quick pass to Kostin, who did the rest. Bishop, the Chaminade College Prep product from St. Louis, otherwise was in midseason form, stopping 16 of 17 shots.

With 6 minutes 18 seconds left in the second period, Bishop gave way to Anton Khudobin. Less than a minutes after Khudobin took over, defenseman Robert Bortuzzo scored on a slapshot from the point. It was the first shot Khudobin faced.

Ville Husso played the first two periods in goal for the Blues, stopping 13 shots. Adam Wilcox handled the third period.

THOMAS IMPROVING

Robert Thomas moved up to the Blues’ second practice group Monday in St. Louis, a 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.”

Thomas ripped off some wicked shots in practice, a sign that his surgically-repaired left wrist is doing well.

“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.

Until Monday, Thomas had been skating with the third group, a smaller-in-numbers unit consisting mainly of players ticketed for juniors or San Antonio.
I'm tired of watching: The Blues' Robby Fabbri understands the skepticism but is ready to earn a top-six spot

By Jeremy Rutherford Sep 17, 2019

Robby Fabbri
couldn't have predicted the Blues were going to win the Stanley Cup, of course, but he felt there was a chance the club may be playing into June. So as a player who was regularly being scratched last season, he started training — for the 2019-20 season.

For professional athletes, there are differing approaches to working out in-season and in the offseason. During the year, it's about light lifting, rest, recovery and maintenance, and when the schedule is over, many focus on bulking up a bit and building strength.

It's not as if Fabbri wasn't ready when called upon, but he played in only three of the Blues' last 18 regular-season games and just 10 of their 26 playoff games. Instead of sitting around waiting in his down time, he decided to put more weight on the dumbbells.

"I made a point of it near the end of the regular season, I wanted to start to get my jump back then," Fabbri said. "With the team we had and what we were going to do, I knew we were going to have a short summer. I'm not saying I knew that we were going to have that result, but I just had that feeling, so I started that work last year.

"The lifts were a little heavier, just knowing you're not in the lineup the next night. You can kind of hit it a little harder in the gym and just try to make sure I'm getting what I needed without playing the games. I felt great in the playoffs when I got in, but with the short summer we had, I felt like that extra work that I did really made me feel as good as I do right now."

Fabbri, 23, feels good and looks good. He had a scoring chance on the first shift of Monday's 2-0 preseason win in Dallas, and finished with three shots on goal in 16:30 of ice time. And he'll be back in the lineup Wednesday night when the Blues continue their exhibition schedule in Washington.

"I thought he had a good game," Blues coach Craig Berube said. "He looked really good. Good jump, energy, his quickness looks good. He did some good things last game."

Blues forward Robby Fabbri nearly puts a shot past Dallas goalie Ben Bishop in a preseason game Monday. (Scott Rovak/St. Louis Blues)

That description has become common during Fabbri's four-year, injury-riddled career with the Blues, which included tearing the ACL in his left knee twice in a matter of seven months, costing him the entire 2017-18 season. Much was expected from him in 2018-19, but a groin injury in training camp, a shoulder injury in December and ineffective play down the stretch dashed his comeback.

That's why, even with the departure of Pat Maroon during the summer, it seems like Zach Sanford will fit on the second line alongside Ryan O'Reilly and David Perron, and the names most often mentioned for Maroon's spot on the third line include Sammy Blais and Jordan Kyrou, who underwent knee surgery and isn't even practicing.

Perhaps, though, it's unwise to sleep on Fabbri. Sure, it's unlikely he'll be the same player he was as a rookie in 2015-16, when he scored 37 points in 72 games and had 15 in 20 playoff games, but the knee injury is now two years in the past, and if not for the shoulder injury, the knee may not even be a talking point anymore.

He missed the first 10 games of last season with the groin injury, but returned to the lineup Nov. 1, and jumping from the Blues' fourth line to their second line, he posted four points in his first 15 games back. But on Dec. 1 in Arizona, playing alongside Brayden Schenn and Perron, he separated a shoulder delivering a hit on the Coyotes' Josh Archibald.

ROBBY FABBRI WENT STRAIGHT TO THE LOCKER ROOM AFTER THIS COLLISION. THIS LOOKED AWFUL. #STLBLUES PIC.TWITTER.COM/GBQAOSPKI

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Fabbri is 5-foot-10 and 190 pounds and Archibald is 5-foot-10 and 176 pounds, but remembering back to that play, the winger admitted it probably wasn't wise. After being out of the lineup for so long, he was trying to prove he belonged.

"Coming up as a top-six forward my whole life, I've never been a player to rely on hitting," he said. "But I'm a team guy, and I know my role, and I just try to do it as best as I can. Obviously, thinking I'm 6-5, 220, going into the corners, isn't always the best idea with what happened in Arizona, but that's just my competitiveness. It's the way I play. I play fearless."

In the aftermath of the collision in Arizona, though, Fabbri feared the worst immediately.

FABBRIS REACTION SAYS IT ALL. THIS IS BAD. #STLBLUES PIC.TWITTER.COM/79RERTLBI

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CRISTIANO SIMONETTA (@CMS_74_) DECEMBER 2, 2018

"Right when it happened, knowing I was going to be out for a little bit again, it was tough," he said. "I felt like I was getting my game back, and then getting that shoulder (injury) was a little tough mentally. It definitely wasn't easy mentally or physically. It took me a little bit to get back from that, but I think toward the end of the year, I was where I wanted to be."

Fabbri might have been where he wanted to be, but evidently was not where the Blues wanted him to be. He returned to the lineup Dec. 31, but never played more than three consecutive games through the end of the regular season. He suited up for a total of 17 games, in which he had no goals and two assists and was a minus-4.

"I'm not going to sugarcoat it: As much as I'm smiling around the room, I was never happy about sitting out," he said. "I love the guys, and I'm never going to bring anyone down for what I'm going through, but I was never happy about it."

The Blues were playing as well as any team, climbing from last place to near the top, so Fabbri couldn't complain. But while a lineup spot in the top nine wasn't in the offing, he was passed up in favor of Sanford, Blais and even rookie MacKenzie MacEachern, who was called up from the American Hockey League and played 29 games.

"There's nothing against those guys, obviously," he said. "They're great players and really good friends and I was happy for them, happy for them do a great job and earn that spot. But it's definitely tough to have that happen, to watch different guys coming up and going in, while I'm sitting there."

In the first two rounds of the postseason, Fabbri played eight straight games against Winnipeg and Dallas, but not once in the Western Conference final against San Jose. He was in the lineup for only Games 2 and 3 against Boston in the Stanley Cup final.

"You dream about winning and you dream about playing in it, so it was definitely tough, but everyone has their roles throughout a playoff run," he said. "I just did my part in the room, keeping things light, keeping guys up, even when I wasn't in the lineup."

"But it drove me as well. I wanted to work that extra little bit to try to not have that happen again. Coming into this season, I'm not coming here to watch the guys play anymore. I've done that for three years now. I'm tired of watching, and I want to come back and be an impact player." (Scott Rovak/St. Louis Blues)

Fabbri, however, went one step further than saying he wants to be an impact player. He believes he should be in the mix for a spot on the second line.

"Yeah, I feel like I've been overlooked a little bit," he said. "But it's been a tough situation for myself and the coaches, you know, being off for so long, with changing the coaches, and the run we went on when I had my shoulder (injury). You've got to understand, it's tough to get slotted in there when things are going well. So I totally understand that part."

"(But) I'm coming in this year to try (to) earn that top-six spot back and be that impact player I was my first one and a half years, before I (hurt) my knee the first time, because that's when it was easy to slot me in there. Coming in 100 percent and having a summer of no treatment and no limitations was awesome, refreshing. So now my mindset is it's my spot to lose."

Teammate Jaden Schwartz was asked if people are again counting Fabbri out too soon.

"Yeah, I'm sure Fabs is motivated," Schwartz said. "When you come back from not playing games for a couple of years, you don't have that same power, that same step. But he's had last year and this whole summer to get prepared and get used to being back on the ice and playing games. He's put a lot of work in, and we're excited to see what he has moving forward. He's had really tough luck with those injuries, but he looks good right now."
“I’ve only been on the ice with him once or twice, but yeah, he looks good,” Jay Bouwmeester said. “He looks like he’s in good shape. It looks like he did everything that he needed to do to put himself in a good position. You feel for the guy because he’s missed so much time that hopefully, he can just kind of clean the slate and have some fun with it. If he’s in good shape and he’s feeling good, I think it will make everything so much easier for him.”

Five years ago, Fabbri was drafted No. 21 overall. As a frame of reference, six spots earlier, Detroit took Dylan Larkin, who signed a five-year, $30.5 million contract in August 2018. Three spots earlier, Minnesota selected Alex Tuch and he has since agreed to a seven-year, $33.3 million contract with Las Vegas. One spot earlier, Chicago took Nick Schmaltz, who eventually inked a seven-year, $40.9 million deal with Arizona. Even four spots back, Boston grabbed David Pastrnak, who got a six-year, $40 million deal.

Meanwhile, Fabbri, whose rookie statistics were comparable, if not better, than many of them, is on his second straight one-year contract worth around $900,000.

“Contracts, (they) doen’t matter to me,” he said. “I’m just coming in to do what I know I can do. I’ve had one goal in my mind since my second surgery — to get back. It was easy for me to sacrifice this summer and do what I had to do to feel as good as I do right now. I’ve got my legs underneath me, which is nice, and feeling the way I do coming in gave me confidence right off the hop. It’s a refreshing feeling. I’m confident in myself, I know what I can do here, and given the right opportunity, I won’t let it go to waste.”

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New dad Steven Stamkos talks career mortality and the ‘search for that elusive trophy’

By Joe Smith Sep 17, 2019

BRANDON, Fla. — Lightning captain Steven Stamkos didn’t get to hoist hockey’s holy grail this summer, as his team fell well short of the Stanley Cup.

But Stamkos, 29, did get to hold something even more life-changing: his first-born son, Carter.

Stamkos’ wife, Sandra, gave birth in July, and the superstar center spent the first few months soaking in every aspect of fatherhood.

“You almost can’t put it into words,” Stamkos said. “It’s surreal. Until you go through the experience and go through the day-to-day stuff, you have a new appreciation for all the mothers out there in the world, that’s for sure. It’s not easy. But it’s an amazing feeling.”

Stamkos has grown up before Lightning fans’ eyes, with the No. 1 pick in 2008 arriving in Tampa as a prized, 18-year-old prospect. What started with “Seen Stamkos?” billboards turned into the face of the franchise and, eventually, its all-time leading goal-scorer.

Stamkos will turn 30 this season, his 12th in the NHL, and while he has plenty of hockey left in him, he can sense a bit of career mortality.

“It goes by quick,” said Stamkos, who is expected to play in Tuesday’s preseason opener against Carolina. “This is year 12. You can’t take anything for granted. It’s the best time of your life, but it goes by fast. You see a lot of great people come and go. You try to enjoy it. Before you know it, it’s over.”

You can sense Stamkos’ excitement — and urgency — for the season, having spent a good chunk of the summer training in Tampa with fellow franchise cornerstones Nikita Kucherov and Andrei Vasilevskiy. The captain sent a group text to the rest of the team in mid-August hoping to spark some cohesiveness, and everyone showed up a week ahead of camp.

Stamkos has been to the Stanley Cup final and lost in Game 7 of the Eastern Conference final three times. But the veteran has also broken his leg, torn a meniscus and suffered from a scary blood clot.

So getting unceremoniously swept by Columbus in the first round of the playoffs last April left an especially sour taste in his mouth, particularly after a historic 62-win season.

“Every year that passes that you don’t win, it’s another opportunity that’s gone by,” Stamkos said. “I’ve dealt with a lot of things in my career in terms of injuries and have overcome that. But you never know what’s going to happen. You want to take advantage of playing on a team of this caliber. The search for that elusive trophy continues and you just want to do anything you can to win.”

Stamkos did just that last season, playing arguably the best hockey of his career. He racked up 45 goals, his highest total since scoring 60 in 2011-12, while averaging almost four fewer minutes of ice time per game (18:18 vs. 22:01). Stamkos, determined to evolve into more of a well-rounded player, won 53 percent of his faceoffs (well above his career average of 48.9 percent) and even got more time on the penalty kill.

“It’s the best (I’ve probably played since the broken leg in 2013),” Stamkos said. “I thought the level I was (playing at) before the broken leg was the best of my career. It’s tough to attain that now with the physical part of it, but it’s just continuing to try to get better. There are definitely areas I’m better at now than I was then, like defensively or faceoffs, the little parts of the game. You realize now all you want is to chase the Stanley Cup. The goals, the assists, the points: they’re nice. But our goal now, and (what it) should have been, is to bring home the team trophy.

“A lot of guys won individual awards last year, which is great on the resume at the end of your career. But everyone is judging you on championships. You’ve got to find a way to win them.”

Stamkos had just two points in the four-game playoff sweep last spring at the hands of the Blue Jackets. (Aaron Doster / USA Today)

Stamkos can’t do it alone, but he realizes he has to do a better job of delivering in the playoffs: He was shut out against the Blue Jackets until Game 4, and he was a combined minus-9 in the series.

And no one is comparing him yet to Patrice Bergeron in terms of his defensive play. But coach Jon Cooper points out how much the six-time All-Star works on his two-way game. He wants to be depended on. You saw coaches trust Stamkos in more high-leverage situations when protecting a lead last year, something he’s desired. The penalty-killing assignments were another indication: “He knows what he’s good at and tries to improve on the things he’s not,” Cooper said. “That’s what you like to see.”

“He doesn’t get enough credit,” said Hall of Famer Martin St. Louis. Stamkos’ close friend and former teammate. “People don’t understand how hard it is to keep evolving as a player and not just be a one-trick pony. I think his faceoffs were really good. He’s improved in so many other ways, (and) he really took his career to another level. It’s not about scoring goals, which he does. But he’s gotten better at everything else. That doesn’t happen a lot.

“It’s impressive. And having him play with (Kucherov), he finally has that (connection) that I had with him. He just has more tools right now.”

With the Lightning having undergone a summer of healing after their early playoff exit, there will be some challenges mentally in navigating through this season. And Stamkos will have to set the tone, having already pointed out when the team opened camp how they need to be better defensively.

“I think with how sourly things ended, guys are just excited to get back and start winning some hockey games. I don’t think that’s going to be a problem. I talked the other day about not getting too far ahead of ourselves. That’s our job as leaders, and the coach’s job is to make sure we don’t do that.

“I think we got a little bit ahead of ourselves last year. It was such an unusual situation with the way things played out at the end of the year with having so many wins and points and not having games in the last 12-15 games really mean much. That was probably a situation that is not going to happen again. So I think … we’ll be more prepared to play the right way and adjust some things in our team game.”

The Lightning leadership group will be very different as some of the team’s strongest veteran voices — Ryan Callahan, Anton Stralman and Dan Girardi — will not be back. There has been a sprinkling of experienced additions, including Cup winner Pat Maroon, defensemen Kevin Shattenkirk and Luke Schenn and backup goalie Curtis McElhinney.

Still, it’s going to be quite an adjustment.

“It’s going to be tough,” Stamkos said. “We brought in some guys, so it’s not like we lost veterans and brought in some young guys. But ‘Cally,’ ‘G,’ ‘Strals,’ those are all big voices in the room. Even J.T. Miller had a great personality in the room. And whatever happens with Louis Domingue, another great personality. Those are guys that were kind of glue guys to the team. Other guys are going to have to step up and feel more comfortable after playing a couple years here. And everyone has to take a step forward in the leadership department.”

While the Lightning are Cup favorites again, GM Julien BriseBois pointed out that this year might be the hardest for any team to make the playoffs due to the parity and summer moves. With Stamkos, Kucherov, Vasilevskiy, Hedman and soon — they hope — Brayden Point locked up long-term, their championship window isn’t closing anytime soon.

“The window has been wide open for a long time now,” Stamkos said. “It’s going to continue to stay that way as long as we’ve got the core intact and ‘Vasy’ back there. ‘Heddy’ and ‘Kuch’: you can always build a team around guys like that. But you have to get it done.”

The fact that Stamkos’ son, Carter, is now in the picture will no doubt make it easier to shake off losses or setbacks. As he’s only a couple of months old, he doesn’t do much yet in terms of activities: “It’s just eat, sleep and shit, pretty much,” Stamkos joked.

The fact that Stamkos’ son, Carter, is now in the picture will no doubt make it easier to shake off losses or setbacks. As he’s only a couple of months old, he doesn’t do much yet in terms of activities: “It’s just eat, sleep and shit, pretty much,” Stamkos joked.

“But as he gets older and starts moving around, starts to be able to hold his head up by himself — the little things,” Stamkos said, “the little milestones are what I’m looking forward to.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Tristan Scherwey scored the go-ahead goal midway through the third period to lift the Ottawa Senators to a 3-1 victory over the Toronto Maple Leafs in the preseason opener for both teams.

Scherwey, a training-camp invitee who has spent the past 10 seasons playing for SC Bern in Switzerland, jumped on a loose puck on a Toronto power play and fired it past Kasimir Kaskisuo to give Ottawa a 2-1 lead at the 9:45 mark.

Max Lajoie also scored for the Senators, with an assist by Scherwey, in an otherwise uneventful first period. Anthony Duclair added a goal late in the third.

Kasperi Kapanen scored the lone goal for the Maple Leafs to tie the game early in the third period. Mitch Marner, who had missed most of training camp while awaiting a contract extension, assisted on the play. Toronto signed Marner on Friday to a six-year, US-$65.358 million deal.

The exhibition matchup marked the Maple Leafs’ return to St. John’s, a city that has historically played host to Toronto-affiliate teams.

Tight defence defined the larger part of the game.

Lajoie’s goal was the only shot that made it past goaltender Frederik Andersen in the first 40 minutes.

Anderson stopped 12-of-13 shots by the end of the second period before Kaskisuo allowed two goals on five shots in the third.

Ottawa goalie Anders Nilsson stopped all 13 shots he faced through the first two periods. Marcus Hogburg stopped 11-of-12 shots.

Kapanen, Marner and John Tavares were among a handful of star players on the ice for the Maple Leafs. Auston Matthews did not play in preparation for Wednesday’s game between the two teams in Ottawa.

TIGHT DEFENCE DEFINED THE LARGER PART OF THE GAME.

Lajoie, forward Duclair and alternate captain Jean-Gabriel Pageau were among the regular Senators players.

The Maple Leafs played their home game to an enthusiastic, packed Mile One Centre in downtown St. John’s.

The city is host to the Leafs’ ECHL affiliate, the Newfoundland Growlers, which captured the league’s 2019 Kelly Cup in their inaugural season.

St. John’s was also home to the AHL’s Maple Leafs for 1991 to 2005, before the team relocated to Toronto as the Marlies.

Excitement over the Leafs’ return was palpable Tuesday afternoon, with a sea of blue-and-white jerseys flooding in to the city’s downtown.

Fans also came out in droves this past weekend for the team’s training camp in Paradise, N.L., about 20 minutes west of the provincial capital.

Retired sports broadcaster Bob Cole of St. John’s was in the crowd and received a round of applause.

Globe And Mail LOADED: 09.18.2019
Mike Babcock’s long coaching playlist feat. D.J.

By Kevin McGran Sports Reporter

ST. JOHN’S, N.L.—Maple Leafs coach Mike Babcock said he is proud of D.J. Smith, who got his first NHL head coaching job with the Ottawa Senators. Smith had been an assistant under Babcock in Toronto the last four years. He ran the defence and penalty kill.

“D.J. did a real good job for us,” said Babcock. “When he first interviewed with me, he (hoped) he’d have an opportunity like that, put his time in. He sent me a real nice text about feeling really prepared and confident. You’re trying to develop people in the organization. I’m real proud of the fact that lots of my guys have moved on to become head coaches.”

It’s an impressive list that includes Jeff Blashill in Detroit, Bill Peters in Calgary, Todd McLellan in Los Angeles and Paul MacLean, who coached the Senators for four years.

SPLIT DECISION: Asked Tuesday whether he thought— at least at this stage of his career — exhibition games were a drag, John Tavares couldn’t have disagreed more. “These games are crucial to get ready to play,” said Tavares. “You see guys that don’t play in many exhibition games or that miss time in camp, it takes time to get that rhythm back. You haven’t played in four or five months. That’s a long time. It’s a way to get back into that routine, that feeling … You’re playing in the greatest league in the world at this level. You never take anything for granted.”

Teammate Andreas Johnsson had a different point of view: “It’s more important this year than last year to get in the system, so this year it’s more important, but um, what I personally feel about exhibition games: waste of time.”

MORE FOR MOORE: Trevor Moore, who played 25 games in his rookie year last season, isn’t taking for granted anything in this Maple Leafs camp. Pencilled in for third- or fourth-line work, Moore knows the competition for jobs is high. “For me, I’m not going to get out there to feel it out. I want to get out there and prove that I belong. They added some good players here, which is good. They added depth. It’s my job to prove I can contribute. If I do that, I’ll stay.” He has been practising on a line with 16-year NHL veteran Jason Spezza and Marlie Pierre Engvall. “It’s competitive. You’ve got to show (what you can do),” Babcock said of Moore. “Initially, you get in (the NHL) and you think you’re in for life. The great thing about the NHL is, you’re in for that year and you have to keep going.”

HUDSON’S WAY: Hudson Elynuik has had a pretty good few months. The 21-year-old former draft pick of the Carolina Hurricanes signed with the Marlies last season after five years with the WHL Spokane Chiefs. He split time with the AHL team and the ECHL’s Newfoundland Growlers, who won the Kelly Cup. He survived the first round of cuts, meaning he got to work out with the Leafs at Mile One Centre, home of the Growlers. “Any time you get to win a championship, that opens up a lot of eyes,” said Elynuik, a six-foot-five centre from Calgary. “The support we had throughout the whole playoffs was unbelievable. My time here was very fun.”

Toronto Star LOADED: 09.18.2019
Leaves caught fishing for the puck too often and drop pre-season opener to Senators

By Kevin McGran

ST. JOHN'S, N.L.—It had been shaping up as maybe one of the best Maple Leafs training camps ever. The people of Newfoundland treated the team like heroes. Mitch Marner signed a contract. Fish were kissed. Coach Mike Babcock filleted a cod with some local fishermen. The 6,200-seat Mile One Centre was sold out with Leafs fans spending upwards of $500 for a ticket on the secondary market.

It was a five-day celebration of all things blue and white.

Then the Ottawa Senators came to town with a barely recognizable roster and skated off with a 3-1 win on Tuesday night.

"We made a couple of mistakes and it was in our net," said Babcock. "We've got to play a bit better. There was lots of things in our team game I didn't like. We're going to work on that."

The game: It was sloppy, it was messy. There were a lot of bad passes and giveaways. That’s to be expected in the first pre-season game with players trying to get used to new positions, new teammates and new roles. The Leafs’ first line — Kasperi Kapanen, John Tavares and Mitch Marner — provided some oohs and ahhs. Kapanen scored the lone Leaf goal, tying the game 1-1 in the third period on a great feed from Marner behind the Ottawa net. But the line also provided an oh no, when Marner coughed up the puck and sent the Senators on their way to a 2-1 lead with Tristan Scherway — on loan from a team in Switzerland — scoring unassisted. Anthony Duclair finished the scoring into the empty net. "I thought our line played well, but obviously I want that one back," said Marner.

Best player: Frederik Gauthier played a very strong game for the Leafs. He’s feeling some heat for a job with the signing of Jason Spezza. "I'm here trying to give it my best, try to keep my job, or get a job," said Gauthier. The two could end up as linemates, but Gauthier had a terrific game, even if he failed to convert on three or four scoring chances. That’s Gauthier. He played in the offensive zone a great deal, with Dmitri Timashov and Egor Korshkov. "I liked Goat," said Babcock. "I thought he was strong, I thought he was good without it and good with it. I thought he was a factor for us, for sure."

Spezza WATCH: Babcock usually really likes veterans and praises them up and down. But Spezza, who also had a strong game and played in all situations, is not getting that treatment. He’s a 16-year veteran who killed penalties, played five-on-five and a bit of the power play on Tuesday. A few passes went awry, but he was hardly the only guilty party on that front. "I tried (him in) lots of spots," said Babcock. "He’s trying to figure out if he is interested, and we’re doing the same. He’s never had a role like this. We’re going to have him penalty killing, taking faceoffs, playing on the fourth line. It’s not what (he’s) used to." Spezza doesn’t sound like he has any issues. "Penalty kill is something I want to take a lot of pride in, and they’re giving me a good opportunity to do that."

YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN...

Newfound love: The Leafs will have a practice in St. John’s on Wednesday, with half of the remaining players in camp facing the Senators again in Ottawa later in the day. As their Newfoundland experience wraps up, it’s safe to say they all loved it. Said Babcock: "I just think the people were unreal. We went to a family place the other night, a whole bunch of music. I was filleting fish with the cod fishermen, having a beer. It was spectacular. It was fun and it was different and I think it’s a big reason you do this stuff. Added Spezza: "The people have been so welcoming, so fun to be around. It’s been a really pleasant experience. It’s too bad we couldn’t give them a win, something to cheer about."

Up next: Wednesday in Ottawa, 7 p.m. faceoff (TSN).

Toronto Star LOADED: 09.18.2019
After a solid rookie season with the Flyers, winger Matt Read hasn't been an NHL regular since 2016-17. He said injuries played a big part, and that he's healthy for the first time in a long time, helping his cause in the Maple Leafs' camp.

By Kevin McGran Sports Reporter

ST. JOHN'S, N.L.—Veteran NHLer Matt Read knows this might be his last chance.

The former Philadelphia Flyer, now 33, is in camp with the Maple Leafs on a professional tryout, trying to land a contract.

"It's kind of the last go at trying to be an NHL hockey player again," said Read. "It's obviously a great opportunity. This is a great team."

"I watched the playoffs from afar last year (and) they kind of struggled on the penalty kill last year. I pride myself on that. I thought when the opportunity came, this is a great opportunity. Have a good camp and see where it goes."

Read is not alone, of course, in trying to earn a spot on the fourth line. The incumbents are still around: Frederik Gauthier, Trevor Moore and Nic Petan, each taking turns killing penalties in practices this week.

Some Marlies are also pushing for promotion from the AHL: Egor Korshkov, Jeremy Bracco, Pierre Engvall and Mason Marchment, all of them working mostly on power plays.

And some free agents have been brought in, again with an eye on special teams: Jason Spezza, Nick Shore, Pontus Aberg and Kenny Agostino.

"It's tough," said Aberg. "It's a really good team, good depth, from the American league team up to here. It's tough, but I'm going to do everything I can."

YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN...

After the Leafs opened their pre-season against the Senators in St. John's on Tuesday night, Read and Aberg could see their first pre-season action in the return engagement Wednesday night in Ottawa.

In a way, they're vying to become the next Tyler Ennis — the winger who was underused with the Minnesota Wild and found new life in Toronto, then parlayed that into a one-year deal in Ottawa worth $800,000 U.S.

Read grew up in Ilderton, Ont. near London, and is friends with another Ilderton notable: figure skater Scott Moir. The lure of the Leafs was pretty strong.

"When I heard (professional tryout) here, I thought it'd be nice to have something on paper, where you have an income and a job somewhere," said Read. "I thought this was the best spot to be. When I heard it was Toronto, I was very excited (after) growing up in the area."

Read has 449 NHL games to his credit, with 88 goals and 100 assists. His best season was his first in 2011-12, with 24 goals and 23 assists.

YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN...

That sparked a pretty good run with the Flyers, but he hasn't been a full-time NHLer since the 2016-17 season after a series of injuries. He split last season between the Wild (12 games) and Iowa of the AHL (61 games). He says the injuries, including a high-ankle sprain, have all healed.

"This is the first summer I've had in a long time where I've been healthy the whole summer," said Read. "I felt good. I've been on the ice a lot more than normal, trying to keep up with all these young guys who've been on the ice the whole year."

"I've changed a little bit, but being healthy is probably the biggest aspect, having come to camp and having good health and being able to skate out there."

If he makes the final roster, it will likely be at the NHL minimum of $700,000 — the Leafs are tight to the salary cap and can't afford much more — and because assistant coach David Hakstol believes he can help the penalty-killing unit. Hakstol also coached the Flyers when Read was there.

"They talked to my agent a little bit, and they're looking for a solid two-way forward that can play on any line, fill in some spots and help this
SIMMONS: Maple Leafs’ trip of a lifetime ends with a game to forget

Steve Simmons

ST. JOHN’S, NL — The days were almost perfect, all five of them. The city, the outings, the atmosphere. Mostly the people. This is a place where traffic stops when pedestrians go to cross the street. A place where you ask for directions and five people — none of whom are known to each other — gather around to tell you where to go. And it’s not that kind of where to go.

This is a once-in-a-lifetime part of Canada and the Maple Leafs did everything right in what could best be described as a once-in-a-lifetime training camp trip — everything except put on a show for the good people of St. John’s at the sold-out Mile One Centre on Tuesday night. The Leafs lost a pre-season game that frankly looked like a pre-season game.

A little out of sync. A little disjointed. I’m sure when Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers danced for the very first time, it wasn’t magic. There was little hockey magic as part of the Leafs played part of the Ottawa Senators. But that was all that was wrong in a training camp week that included the historic signing of Mitch Marner, a kiss of the cod from Auston Matthews and friends, a trip to the indescribable row of colourful houses, a bar that is called Quidi Vidi, and the kids, with autograph books everywhere, the whole city seemed to turn blue and white for a week, and in between there were hockey practices, scrimmages, some whale watching, and the friendliest people most of us have ever met in our lives.

"What I’d say to you is, I think the people are unreal," said Leafs coach Mike Babcock. "We went to a place the other night and there was a whole bunch of people and music and it was just a fantastic time. I was filleting fish with the cod fisherman the other day, having a beer, I thought that was spectacular.

"Everywhere I went, the people were beyond nice and supportive. It was fun and it was different and that’s a big part of why you do this stuff.”

Sometimes hockey gets in the way of life. Sometimes life gets in the way of hockey. The faces of the children, so young and so enthusiastic, so dressed up in Maple Leafs colours, will be with me forever. They were so happy, so excited, so thrilled to have someone they know only from a television screen walk past them.

"The people," said Kasperi Kapanen, "were spectacular. I like the atmosphere. They really love the Leafs (here)."

Babcock liked the camp and the trip more than he cared for the game Tuesday night. There wasn’t a whole lot that stood out for the Leafs. He liked Freddie Gauthier and with good reason. The normally invisible big man had four decent scoring chances. He didn’t make good on any of them but one of his goals for this season — other than the obvious one of finding a place on the team — is to be more involved with the offence, to be a player that matters.

"I liked Goat," said Babcock, when asked what he liked about the 3-1 defeat. "I thought he was strong. I thought he was good without it, good with it. I thought he was a factor for us.”

 Said Gauthier: “We had an unbelievable week here. The diehard fans were wonderful to us. I wish we’d given them a better show.”

That’s what most of the Leafs were saying after the game, wishing they had ended this visit in a way more fitting of their Newfoundland experience, except for Marner though who thought they played fine. His definition of fine seemed somewhat different than those he played with and from Babcock’s perch on the bench.

There were some things to notice. Jason Spezza killed penalties for the first time in years and looked like this might be something he may be capable of. Some of us were more impressed with Spezza than Babcock seemed to be. It was virtually impossible, though, to determine anything from watching four defencemen fighting for two spots, at least until Travis Dermott returns from injury. Justin Holl, Martin Marincin, Jordan Schmaltz and Kevin Gravel all played regularly against Ottawa. Nobody made the team with their play. Nobody played themselves out of a job. Babcock is looking for someone to step up and show something: That something will have to come on another night.
ST. JOHN'S, NL — Where Canada’s day begins, the Maple Leafs had a sleepy start to their exhibition season on Tuesday night.

After making Newfoundlanders roar at the practice rink, at the Screech bars and on the streets, the quietest part of the past five days was Tuesday’s 3-1 loss to the Ottawa Senators in the opener of a back-to-back.

There were a few things to like, but more rough spots than expected, as the Leafs’ split squad tried out new linemates, defensive pairings and coach Mike Babcock worked his first game with two new assistant coaches, while facing his former understudy, D.J. Smith.

“You obviously, we have to play a lot better. Things in our team game I didn’t like,” Babcock said. “But for me, a big part of it was just watching the guys play. We’ll know them pretty good by the end of this week (three more games, including two against Buffalo).”

The $65-million dollar question was how fast would it take Mitch Marner to make up with Leafs fans after a sour summer of contract talk. After looking for some spark with John Tavares and Kasperi Kapanen, Marner hit the post on a third-period backhand, then kept the play alive to set up Kapanen for Toronto’s only goal.

But Marner was also fingering in a botched breakout — the puck slipped off his stick and slid into the slot as he skated out from behind the Leafs net — that Tristan Scherway converted into the eventual game-winning goal.

That came against Kasimir Kaskisuo after No. 1 Frederik Andersen made one mistake in 40 minutes. Anthony Duclair, who failed to beat Andersen on a spectacular deke and pad save that knocked the net off, added an empty-netter.

Andersen was just happy to face live fire instead of scrimmages.

“You want to play in a real game,” said Andersen, who had a wakeup call given me an opportunity. It’s something I can do well. Years ago (in Ottawa) I did it a lot.”

Kapanen, playing his off-wing while Zach Hyman heals, had to re-master taking breakouts on his backhand and find the slippery Marner and Tavares.

“It’s always hard getting the chemistry going right away and we haven’t been practising together too much anyway,” Kapanen said. “There were a lot of good things I didn’t think we’d be doing and some things we need to be better at.

“John and Mitch have a lot of chemistry, I’m just trying to fit in, get to those loose pucks, be heavy, go to the net and get rebounds back to them. Communication is the big thing, on the bench and in the locker room. It’s especially important for us because it’s our first game and we haven’t been interacting much.”

Kapanen has an interesting challenge: Stay at right wing in the shadow of Marner and William Nylander or go to the left in this short window and carve a role with the team’s leading point-producer and goal-scorer.

“(Babcock) is giving me an opportunity and I’m trying to do everything I can to play with those guys,” Kapanen said. “They’re amazing, I just have to play my game, everything you guys saw last year, but hopefully a bit better.”

Marner liked Kapanen’s addition.

“He brought a lot of speed. I think in our other games, our mindset has to be shooting more (just six combined shots, none by Tavares, with the Leafs mustering only 25 in all).”

New defenceman Tyson Barrie, paired with Jake Muzzin at even strength, was utilized with the Tavares-Marner duo on power plays, but the Leafs were 0-for-3. Babcock dismissed the lack of special teams success.

“We had some looks, but I’m not very concerned,” he said. “We get our groups together, the rest are on the other team (Auston Matthews, William Nylander, Morgan Rielly) and we don’t have them combined. If you look at our game, we weren’t very good without it at times and (Ottawa), used speed to flip it like we do and get us in trouble.”

The one man getting frequently open ironically enough was defensive centre Frederik Gauthier, who had a couple of chances close in, but shot wide or fumbled the puck.

Barrie was jumping into the play, Muzzin clearing snow for Andersen and almost sending Sens’ Rudolfs Balcers into the harbour with a stiff shoulder check.

Andersen was busy early: The Duclair save, holding steady when Nick Ebert swept around the net untouched and gloving a Drake Batherson tip. But he muffed a Duclair spinaround shot from the boards through the five hole.

Michael Hutchinson starts his quest to secure the backup role in Wednesday’s rematch in Ottawa.

SPEZZA’S ROLE A WORK IN PROGRESS

The Jason Spezza project could take some time.

The 36-year-old centre’s role with the Maple Leafs will not be easily defined as coach Mike Babcock moved him all around the blueprint during Tuesday night’s 3-1 pre-season loss to the Ottawa Senators, but most notably on the penalty-kill, where he hasn’t played in a while.

“I’m definitely going to figure it out, right?” Babcock said. “I tried lots of spots there. He’s trying to figure it out and we’re doing the same.”

The coach later clarified his vague comment.

“He’s never had a (limited) role,” Babcock said. “So we’re going to have him killing penalties, taking faceoffs on our fourth line. It’s not what you’re used to. We’re just going to plug away and see where it goes.”

Spezza did generate some chances against the Senators while playing on a line with Trevor Moore and Pierre Engvall.

“Maybe a little rusty around the net,” Spezza said. “That’s to be expected early on.

“The penalty-kill is something I want to take a lot of pride in and they’ve given me an opportunity. It’s something I can do well. Years ago (in Ottawa) I did it a lot.”

Toronto Sun LOADED: 09.18.2019
Maple Leafs’ Babcock, Rielly happy for new Sens coach Smith

Lance Hornby

Mike Babcock and D.J. Smith exchanged humorous texts this summer about matching their coaching wits in the coming Battle of Ontario, but the fog rolled in on that frivolity here Tuesday.

Smith, Babcock’s former assistant, now runs the Senators and after Tuesday’s 3-1 win over his mentor, meets the Maple Leafs again Wednesday, with an eye to the Oct. 2 NHL season opener at Scotiabank Arena.

“I’m really proud, really happy for him,” Babcock said at Mile One Arena before the Sens arrived. “D.J. did a really good job for us (running the Leafs defence). We talked about this when he first interviewed with me five years ago, that he would have an opportunity like this. He sent me a really nice text the other day about feeling really prepared and confident.

In the belly of Mile One. #LeafsForever pic.twitter.com/d9mE5evr33

— Toronto Maple Leafs (@MapleLeafs) September 17, 2019

“That’s what it’s all about. You’re trying to develop people in your organization and move on. I’m proud that lots of my guys have become head coaches (such as Bill Peters, Todd McLellan and Paul MacLean).”

The blooming of Morgan Rielly’s career as a Leaf came with Smith as the blueline tutor.

Just Muzzin around. pic.twitter.com/L350vYHser

— Toronto Maple Leafs (@MapleLeafs) September 17, 2019

“It was a little bittersweet,” Rielly told Postmedia of Smith’s departure. “We had a really good relationship, but that being said you’re out there and get impatient people stomping their feet asking ‘where are the whales?’ But Leaf fans, they’ve waited 52 years for a Stanley Cup, so they’re the most patient of all.”

LOOSE LEAFS

The Leafs arrived here with the City of St. John’s and the Newfoundland Growlers in a war about renewing the lease at Mile One, which threatened the ECHL team staying beyond 2019-20 and perhaps future Leafs camps here. But the temperature came down in recent days and a new deal could be announced soon … Auston Matthews turned 22 on Tuesday, taking best wishes from among other Newfoundlanders, HNIC’s Bob Cole. One birthday sign from a kid read “Long May Your Big Jib Draw” … The 86-year-old Cole, who retired last year, was given a standing ovation when recognized in the Mile One press box named in his honour … The Leafs have one more practice day here, with half the team heading to Ottawa for Wednesday’s game and the rest home … Assistant general manager Laurence Gilman, who monitors the Growlers, exchanged greetings with a Mile One employee who remarked how fast the summer flew by for the Kelly Cup champs. “In this business, short summers are good,” reminded Gilman.

Toronto Sun LOADED: 09.18.2019
Maple Leafs hold ex-Sens back a day

Lance Hornby

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 pre-season 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.”

Toronto Sun LOADED: 09.18.2019
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 star Wednesday at Canadian Tire Centre after Andersen plays all or some of Tuesday’s match here. Marlie Kasimir Kaskisuo 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.

Newfoundlanders certainly have a way with words.

Watch the Leafs get a language lesson on the Rock 🤣 #LeafsForever pic.twitter.com/mMvn3dLZP3

— Toronto Maple Leafs (@MapleLeafs) September 16, 2019

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 Jordan 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 Hakstol, 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.”
Steve Simmons

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 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: 09.18.2019
Marner loyalty to Leafs superseded two offer sheets

Lance Hornby

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."

Marner, Tavares, Kapanen line up together for Leafs

SIMMONS: Maple Leafs enjoying life in Paradise

Leaf Snaps: Russian rockets up the charts

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 Petan 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-Aruchintsiev (Peterborough), Filip Kral (Spokane), Kalle Loponen (Sudbury), Marc-Antoine Pepin (Shawinigan) and Riley Stotts (Calgary).

LOOSE LEAFS

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: 09.18.2019
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 worldwide."

Marner insisted his conditioning was fine after skating parallel to the Leafs summer workouts with other NHLers in the GTA. He 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 adrenalin.

"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
Steve Simmons

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.

“I’d 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 a size and penalty killing ability, Whether he has enough to beat out a group of about 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 $6.5-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 $6.5-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.”

Another held up a sign: “Welcome to the Rock, 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: 09.18.2019
The Leafs don’t have an obvious fallback option if Kasperi Kapanen can’t play left wing.

By Jonas Siegel Sep 17, 2019

ST. JOHN’S, Newfoundland — Mike Babcock took a good long pause when asked what he thought of Kasperi Kapanen’s debut at left wing.

The Leafs coach said he wasn’t judging veteran guys too harshly this early in training camp.

“Obviously, he’s a real good player for us and normally plays in a different-type role,” Babcock said. “But that line had the puck a lot.”

That line, the one that Kapanen is currently auditioning for, is the one, of course, that features John Tavares and Mitch Marner — and normally, Zach Hyman. But with Hyman still recovering from a torn ACL, the Leafs need someone to slide into his spot.

Right now at least, that guy is Kapanen, who spent all of last season and just about every minute of his NHL career so far (133 games) at right wing.

In other words, his experience there in the NHL is lacking.

And this is no side gig he’s trying out for. Babcock is likely to count on Tavares and Marner and whomever else joins them to tackle opposing top lines again this season, a role they performed masterfully last year.

“He’s giving me opportunity right now,” Kapanen said of the Leafs head coach. “I’m trying to do everything I can to play with those guys. Obviously, they’re amazing players, and I’ve just gotta play my game and do what I do best and that’s use my speed and be heavy and get under the skin of the opponent. Everything that you guys saw last year, but hopefully a bit better.”

Kapanen took his first spin at left wing with Tavares and Marner on Tuesday night and looked uncomfortable and a little unsure of himself.

He seemed not to know how to translate his big weapon — speed — onto the other side of the ice.

Typically, Kapanen is that deep threat bursting up the right side. When teammates find him he gets the puck in stride and takes off. It doesn’t quite work the same though for the right shooter coming down the left — at least not yet.

There was bound to be an adjustment for Kapanen. Not only was he playing a largely unfamiliar position (he got some time at left wing with the Marlies and actually played an exhibition game on the left of Marner and Tavares last fall) but also he was doing so in the very first preseason game, a predictably sloppy deal against Ottawa.

“Just some minor things,” he said of adjustments to his off-wing.

“Obviously coming out of the (defensive) zone you’re getting passes on your backhand so you gotta be ready to bring it on your forehand again. They’re little things. But it’s starting to feel better.”

“I didn’t know what to expect,” he added. “But it’s feeling better and that makes me happy.”

Babcock has obviously been planning for this, knowing he wouldn’t have Hyman — the best checker in the league in his estimation — for the month of October, he pinned Kapanen onto left wing as soon as training camp got going.

This new-look threesome, however, only got two practices together ahead of the preseason opener, with Marner (contract dispute) and Tavares (birth of his son) both late to arrive at camp.

Kapanen did find the back of the net against the Senators, burying the first Marner primary assist of the (exhibition) season.

“Obviously John and Mitch have a lot of chemistry together,” said Kapanen, who potted a career-best 20 goals and 44 points last year, largely playing the right with either Auston Matthews or Nazem Kadri.

“I’m just trying to fit in there and get to those loose pucks and be heavy and just go to the net and try to get rebounds and get the puck back for them.”

Which sounds a lot like what Babcock is after.

“Kapanen will get the first kick at the can there, and we’ll take a look and see how that works,” Babcock said of the opening at left wing with Tavares and Marner over the weekend. “The thing about Zach, he’s such a good checker, but he’s so heavy on the net that he gets those guys the puck over and over and over again. So we need someone to do that for them.”

Kasperi Kapanen played right wing almost exclusively last season and throughout his young NHL tenure. (Sergei Bezlik / USA Today)

The question is, if Kapanen can’t do it, if his skills don’t quite translate or he can’t get comfortable there, what do the Leafs do until November without Hyman? There’s no obvious fallback option for a really important position on maybe the team’s most important line.

Babcock needs someone he can trust to play against the big boys of the league, which seems to cross off most of the candidates. The Leafs coach is obviously a big fan of Ilya Mikheyev, but the Russian winger hasn’t played a game yet in the league. Thrusting him into the most onerous duty possible probably wouldn’t be wise.

Kenny Agostino just got his NHL break last season and has been in definite bubble territory so far in camp. Pontus Aberg, meanwhile, is here for his skill and like Agostino, just fighting to make the team.

Which leaves only two candidates: Andreas Johnsson and Trevor Moore.

Johnsson played well with Marner and Tavares on the somewhat rare occasion that he played there last year — about 94 minutes. The Leafs won about 58 percent of the scoring chances and stood about even in expected goals.

With his skill and energetic bounce chasing down loose pucks, Johnsson would be an easy fit. The problem? He’s poised to play the left with Matthews and William Nylander on what’s already looking like an explosive line, one that could pick apart teams that try their best hands guarding Tavares and Marner. Take Johnsson off that unit and suddenly that group is weakened, and then there’s also a hole to fill elsewhere.

Maybe Babcock would be morecontent subbing an inexperienced type into that spot. When the Leafs have home ice, he’ll be using that group against secondary competition anyway — with Tavares and company drawing the big assignments — and on the road he won’t have control of the matchups anyway. He could slide Moore or Mikheyev onto the left of Matthews and Nylander and plug Johnsson into the void left by Hyman.

That’s passable certainly, that doesn’t feel quite ideal, especially when you consider how fearsome Johnsson-Matthews-Nylander were together (even with a Nylander who wasn’t all the way back last season): The Leafs had an expected goals mark of 59 percent in their 173-plus minutes together.

The other option is Moore, who managed to win Babcock’s respect in only 25 games last year (plus all seven games in the playoffs). But it’s that inexperience at the NHL level, along with the fact he’s started camp for only a month.

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Johnsson played well with Marner and Tavares on the somewhat rare occasion that he played there last year — about 94 minutes. The Leafs won about 58 percent of the scoring chances and stood about even in expected goals.

With his skill and energetic bounce chasing down loose pucks, Johnsson would be an easy fit. The problem? He’s poised to play the left with Matthews and William Nylander on what’s already looking like an explosive line, one that could pick apart teams that try their best hands guarding Tavares and Marner. Take Johnsson off that unit and suddenly that group is weakened, and then there’s also a hole to fill elsewhere.

Maybe Babcock would be morecontent subbing an inexperienced type into that spot. When the Leafs have home ice, he’ll be using that group against secondary competition anyway — with Tavares and company drawing the big assignments — and on the road he won’t have control of the matchups anyway. He could slide Moore or Mikheyev onto the left of Matthews and Nylander and plug Johnsson into the void left by Hyman.

That’s passable certainly, that doesn’t feel quite ideal, especially when you consider how fearsome Johnsson-Matthews-Nylander were together (even with a Nylander who wasn’t all the way back last season): The Leafs had an expected goals mark of 59 percent in their 173-plus minutes together.

The other option is Moore, who managed to win Babcock’s respect in only 25 games last year (plus all seven games in the playoffs). But it’s that inexperience at the NHL level, along with the fact he’s started camp for only a month.

Which leaves only two candidates: Andreas Johnsson and Trevor Moore.

Agostino, just fighting to make the team.
Welcome back, ladies and gentlemen! We've been running these postgame Report Cards for the past few years now at The Athletic. Last season, Dom Luszczyszyn and I split the carries, but he's officially passing the torch to me for the 2019-20 season.

It feels like I've been handed the keys to a new Ferrari (or at least a Mazda RX-8), so I want to make sure I treat this properly. I'm going to be changing the format of last year's Report Cards throughout the course of the preseason, using these first eight games as a "test phase" (after all, that's what coaches use it for). If you have any recommendations for things you'd like to see in these postgame reports, please let me know in the comments section and I'll see if I can make it work. The goal is to make these thoughtful with smart analysis, but also try to have some fun along the way.

I'm very "by the people, for the people," so here's hoping I don't let you down. Here's an idea of the postgame format that I was thinking of ...

Key takeaways from the game

1. It's preseason

I know it's fun that we finally have hockey back in our lives, but it's important to remember this is the preseason. Most of these skaters haven't played competitive hockey in months, so we should expect things to be rusty. The passes aren't crisp, teams are still figuring out their systems, and with brand new linemates, that means a lot of sloppy hockey.

Please keep all of this in mind before overreacting to preseason hockey (I fall into that trap every year).

2. Toronto's breakout "feels" different

Amid the aforementioned sloppy play, one thing was clear about Toronto's breakthroughs: The passes were much shorter. Rather than relying on their infamously stretch passes, the Leafs' defencemen were looking to make short passes underneath the closest forward. This resulted in a much more fluid breakout, which helped the team maintain puck possession throughout the majority of the game.

3. The positional battles for D spots could get interesting

If there's one lineup-related topic to take out of the game, it's that the defensive depth chart could be more up in the air than most of us thought. Martin Marincin and Justin Holl did not look good, while newcomer Jordan Schmaltz played confidently with the puck on his stick. Throw in the speculation that a rookie like Rasmus Sandin or Timothy Liljegren could make the team out of camp, a 6-foot-6 defenceman in Ben Harpur that Mike Babcock is going to drool over, some guy named Teemu Kivihalme, and we could see any one of those players on Toronto's opening night roster — on the Leafs or Marlies.

Player reports

Best player on the ice: Jason Spezza — I don't think there are going to be any questions about his place on Toronto's opening night roster after seeing how Spezza looked. He still has it at 36, making clever little passes in all three zones. His foot speed clearly isn't what it once was, but you could see his vision and skill remain in fine form.

With today's game being primarily on speed, he probably tops out as an offensive bottom-six centre who can help out on the power play (and penalty kill with his faceoff ability), but I'm pretty confident he can give that to Toronto in 2019-20.

Frederik Gauthier — If I asked you before the game started, "Who's going to finish with the most scoring chances?" how many names would you get to before Gauthier? The answer is probably "a lot" but it was clearly the case. Now, I'm not sure it should come as a shock that he didn't score on those opportunities, which is why he probably loses the fourth-line centre role to Spezza, but we need to give Freddy some credit; he's come a long way over the past few years, to the point where he's clearly an NHL player (albeit a fourth-liner).

Mitch Marner — "...and that's why Marner's worth $11 million!"

But in all seriousness, it was nice to get a chance to talk about Marner's play instead of his contract, which many have touched on over the past few days. We got to see why he's been such a fun player to watch over the past few years. His vision and ability to make plays out of nothing is a big part of the reason Toronto stayed in the game, albeit a meaningless one. Now, he was also a big part of the reason they lost the game, giving the puck away on the game-winning goal, but I think it's safe to say the pros outweighed the cons.
Martin Marincin — Here’s the thing, Marincin’s my guy (I’ve always defended him, always believed in him, and still firmly believe there’s a spot for him on an NHL roster out there). I’m not sure if that team should be Toronto. Even though he looked great on the penalty kill, his complete inability to move the puck feels like something that could be improved with someone like Rasmus Sandin (or Calle Rosen, which is why I didn’t love the Leafs including him in the Barrie-Nazem Kadri trade).

Who did we forget?

Yegor Korshkov — I didn’t love his performance tonight. I thought he looked pretty slow out there, even by his standards. He didn’t use his 6-foot-4 frame to his advantage in tight situations and looked out of place at the NHL pace. He probably needs another year in the AHL before we can consider him a legitimate NHL option, which is frustrating when you remember he was picked ahead of Alex Debrincat.

Kevin Gravel — I’m pretty sure Gravel was signed to play on the Marlies’ blue line (he’s behind a bunch of LHD in the organization), so I don’t want to be too critical of his performance. He didn’t look great, but was he really supposed to?

⭐️

Worst player on the ice: Justin Holl — Poor Justin Holl. If a puck isn’t bouncing over his stick, it’s bouncing into his direction, where he can misplay it. He’s another player I’ve always believed in, but I’m beginning to think it’s just not going to happen in Toronto. I’d be curious to see if he could provide value as a bottom-pairing puck-mover in another organization (and under another coach), but at this point, it feels like he’s a replacement-level player at the NHL level, if that.

Most important GIF of the night

TAVARES WITH A NASTY DANGLE AROUND PAGAEU.
PIC.TWITTER.COM/MVC6TSQER1

— FLINTOR (@THEFLINTOR) SEPTEMBER 17, 2019

Should you watch the preseason? No, probably not (it’s awful). But the one fun thing about it is when a star player actually moves into “playoff” gear for a shift or two. This is only going to happen a couple of times a night, but it makes the grind through these meaningless games much more enjoyable.

Final thoughts from the game

It was a weird, sloppy, preseason game — they all are. Please don’t take too much meaning out of it.

Final grade

B’y’s (it’s a weird Newfoundland thing … I don’t get it, either.)

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Two Growlers from last season remain in training camp with the Leafs after they cut down to two squads on Sunday.

One is Kristians Rubins; the other is Hudson Elynuik, whose father, Pat, starred for the original Winnipeg Jets 30 years ago. Elynuik, 21, credits the experience he received with the Growlers, in big minutes during their championship run, as a key factor in his development. Rather than sitting on the bench all postseason with a deep Marlies team, he produced nearly a point a game in his first pro season in 33 regular-season games and 14 more in the playoffs.

The Leafs were heavily involved throughout, supplying development staff and trainers during the year to ensure their young players below the AHL level were still getting support.

The ECHL can sometimes become a forgotten league, with only loose affiliations with the parent teams and harsh minor-league conditions.

But that’s not what’s happening with the Growlers.

“It was unbelievable — the atmosphere throughout the city,” Elynuik said on Tuesday after taking the pregame skate with John Tavares, Tyson Barrie and the Leafs other stars. “I’m very grateful for the opportunity I had to win a championship with the special group we had here in Newfoundland. I’m going to try and carry that experience throughout my career from now on.”

Newfoundland Growlers owner Dean MacDonald lifts the Kelly Cup as players cheer him during their championship parade celebration last June. (Jeff Parsons/Newfoundland Growlers)

MacDonald believes that win, and the growth of the players involved, will only strengthen his team’s relationship with the Leafs in coming years.

It’s his hope they make St. John’s a routine stop for training camp each year, for example, and that players begin to see it as the first stage in their pro career.

“The Leafs want to push everyone in their organization here first,” MacDonald said. “From a strict economics point of view, the salary cap and everything, what they’ve said is — and they presented this to the league — if we can get one or two players that come through the league every year, from the ECHL, and they make it to The Show, we get talent cheaply.’ Versus picking up a veteran (free agent). That pays for their time. Flying development staff in. Trainers working there on their payroll.

“That’s why it works for them. That model, of true Double-A baseball, where they’re moving people up through, they think it’s good economics and that they’ll find diamonds in the rough down here… Players develop at different times and levels. Not everyone who’s 20 years old is ready for the NHL. Maybe not even the AHL.

“To the Leafs, it just seemed to be a reasonable investment for them. You’re going to get some good players out of it.”

The ECHL has produced some solid players for the Leafs in the past, but it has never been part of a larger organizational blueprint. James Reimer played down there before his fairy-tale rise to the NHL back in 2008-09, as did Ben Scrivens.

One of the Leafs top prospect goaltenders, Joseph Woll or Ian Scott, will likely get the starting role with the Growlers this year in order to get them plenty of starts in year one as a pro.

One benefit of having a tighter relationship with the Growlers is the Leafs can influence those starts and minutes more than they would with a different ownership and management arrangement. They can also implement elements of their system so that defencemen and forwards are familiar with the system.

That relationship and continuity, between three levels of the game, is fairly unprecedented in hockey.

“By giving people minutes in their system, when they get up there, they understand the system,” MacDonald said. “It’s inbred in them. There’s some commonality of training and systems that is so important.”

The Leafs clearly hope the relationship with their fans in Newfoundland will remain an enduring one, but some things are out of their control.

During this week in St. John’s, there have been headlines in the local newspapers about Growlers ownership battling for better lease conditions at Mile One Centre. MacDonald and Stanford have toured other arenas under construction in cities like Trois Rivières, Que., to consider their options, although both remain hopeful the team stays.

( Jeff Parsons/Newfoundland Growlers)

It’s the kind of talk that local hockey fans have grown accustomed to, after losing three teams in the last 14 years. There’s apathy here when...
the Growlers lease dispute comes up and suspicion of the process involved.

The fans here love the Leafs, and this new connection they are forging back in St. John’s, but the impermanence is a problem.

MacDonald’s hope is that Dubas will prove the usefulness of his model and that the NHL as a whole will see reason for greater investment in lower minor leagues like the ECHL. He believes this should be the start of something new, not the continuation of a cycle, where the local geography outweighs the passion of the fans when it comes to keeping teams in St. John’s.

He wants the Growler model to take hold and become a story more people are talking about in the game.

"Because the fans have been whipsawed so many times, with teams coming and going, you can’t build any kind of trust," MacDonald said. "But this is different. I think that’s why you see fans feel like they own the team. It’s owned by a Newf. This is our team. You see that on social media: There’s a lot of pride that the team is owned right here on The Rock."

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
By Scott Wheeler Sep 17, 2019

There are a lot of new faces in the Leafs organization — and I’m not talking about Tyson Barrie, Alex Kerfoot, Ilya Mikheyev, or Jason Spezza.

Kyle Dubas and Laurence Gilman were busy this summer. The organizational depth chart is suddenly more crowded than it has been for, well, as long as I can remember.

There are going to be good young players who are either thrust into lesser roles than you — and they — might expect, or bound for the Growlers altogether. By my count, there are six lines worth of forwards who deserve to play with the Marlies this year, another five pairs of defencemen, and at least three goalies. Those numbers don’t include a plethora of players who are competing for Leafs jobs and may end up in prominent roles with the Marlies if they aren’t dealt and clear waivers.

And that’s made even more complicated once Zach Hyman and Travis Dermott return and the Leafs are forced to carry one extra in the press box instead of three.

Here, I’ve broken down what the organizational depth chart may look like at each position for the new-look Marlies and Growlers.

Let’s sort through it, beginning with the forwards.

Note: These aren’t my guesses at lines, but rather at the depth chart as far as call-ups are concerned.

There are two things that jumped out at me as I really sat down to put this together.

The first, is that there are three former Growlers who deserve a shot to play with the Marlies this season.

One, Hudson Elynuik, is a lock. Several people within the organization, from Laurence Gilman to Sheldon Keefe, have made it clear to me that Elynuik was their prized possession with the Growlers last season. He is pencilled in as one of the four centres with the Marlies this season.

That doesn’t bode well for the second and third players, Brady Ferguson and Zach O’Brien. Ferguson is a favourite of mine and someone who I think, whether at centre or at wing, could be a really good AHL player. O’Brien was one of the best forwards in the ECHL (if not the best) last year and has proven he can be a solid AHLer (hell, he won a Calder Cup). Their challenge is that Adam Brooks is a lock for the centre depth chart and even if the Marlies decide to move Pierre Engvall (who they liked at centre last year) back to the wing full-time, there are other names there (Tanner McMaster, who was in and out of the lineup last season, and Tyler Gaudet, who is a decent AHLer and has played for Keefe before) who aren’t hard to imagine factoring in at centre ahead of Ferguson or O’Brien.

In the big picture for the Leafs, these battles don’t matter. O’Brien is 27 and Ferguson is 25. But in the grand scheme of what the Marlies and the Growlers are doing, the system should reward two players who carried their ECHL team to a title and don’t belong in that league anymore. The Marlies pursued Ferguson, in particular, because they felt there was something there after a standout collegiate career. Now he’s in a tough spot while his age makes him less and less of a commodity. Things get even more complicated if one or both of Nic Petan and Frederik Gauthier end up AHL-bound at some point.

The wings aren’t any simpler, either. Jeremy Bracco and Egor Korshkov are locks for two of the right-wing spots because they’re draft picks and the organization has invested in them. Colt Conrad is the college free agent that Keefe has taken the most shining to and I really believe they’re going to give him a good opportunity this year. And Garrett Wilson is a dominant, physical AHL player who played 50 games in the NHL last year, shoots left but has played a lot of the right side, and may end up wearing a letter.

That makes things tough for Justin Brazeau, who outside of Bracco is probably the most intriguing player of the bunch — and whose development is probably best served with Marlies staff, instead of with the Growlers. And then there’s Nick Baptiste, who is a serviceable depth guy with speed and finish at the AHL level (and was also in the NHL too long ago). One of Brazeau or Conrad may be pushed to the Growlers due to numbers, especially if Pontus Aberg doesn’t make the Leafs and ends up with the Marlies.

At left-wing, things are a little more straightforward. Mason Marchment and Dmytro Timashov remain regulars and the Marlies insert veteran Darren Archibald as well as new signee Kaile Kossila, who is an excellent offensive forward at the AHL level and will be a factor on the power play. If Kenny Agostino is placed on waivers and clears, or Keefe wants Wilson on the left side, Archibald probably bounces in and out of the lineup.

That leaves eight AHL-contracted players to round out the Growlers’ forward group, and three ECHL-contracted players as the extras, with room for one (or multiple) of the far-too-many Marlies to slide down and take on a leading role. I just don’t see a path to the AHL for players like Aaron Luchuk, who led the OHL in scoring just two seasons ago, barring injury or several transactions.

(This exercise has assumed that Trevor Moore and Nick Shore are both in the NHL.)

And if you thought the forward groups were complicated, just wait until you consider the makeup of the organizational depth chart on defence.

Here, things get tough because as with Elynuik, I know that the Marlies want to get Kristians Rubins into their fold full-time on defence after liking what they saw of him last season with the championship-winning Growlers (and briefly with the Marlies). I just don’t know where he fits into that equation on the left side, though.

There, you’ve got Rasmus Sandin and Teemu Kivihalme, who should both be locks to play in the top-four. Ultimately, that leaves Rubins in a competition with Kevin Gravel, who spent the majority of last season in the NHL, and Michael Kapla, who has followed an excellent NCAA career with two decent AHL seasons. If one of Martin Marincin or Ben Harpur is placed on waivers, the Marlies are suddenly in a spot akin to their Furious situation up front where the organization should be able to reward someone like Rubins but can’t.

That’s true on the right side, as well.

Liljegren is a lock for huge minutes, the team was so high on Joey Duszak that he got an NHL deal, and Mac Hollowell is a draft pick who tore up junior hockey and the organization really believes in. All three of those young players deserve to be regularly (bouncing in and out of three-in-three weekends). But then you’ve got another draft pick, Jesper Lindgren, who just had a third strong year in Europe and looks like he’s prepared to stick around in North America, as well as the recently-signed Ryan Johnson, who played in the NHL two years ago before performing well in two seasons in the SHL.

Somewhere I doubt Johnston left the SHL to return to North America because he wanted to play for the Growlers. Somewhere I also doubt Lindgren sticks around in North America if he’s not playing on a regular basis (which could well happen, especially if one of Justin Holl or Jordan Schmaltz are cut and clear waivers).

The depth chart with the Growlers is otherwise fairly straightforward. WHL standout Sergei Sepego, signed to an AHL deal this summer, will start there and the rest are either Growlers returnees or signed to ECHL deals.

Then, there’s the goalie situation.

In theory, you might think this is relatively straightforward. One of Ian Scott or Joseph Woll (the two prized prospects in this equation) plays their rookie season out in an AHL tandem, while the other is the de facto starter for the Growlers, with Kasimir Kaskisuo (who ended a bad season on a positive note last year) in the AHL and Maxim Zhukov as the Growlers’ backup.

But that’s not a situation Mike Babcock will be comfortable with because it leaves Kaskisuo as his third guy if Andersson goes down. As a result, I suspect one of two scenarios plays out in camp: Michael Hutchinson makes the Leafs, they don’t sign Neuvirth out of his PTO, and they claim another goalie off of waivers as the third-string guy. That could put Kaskisuo in a tough spot, because I doubt he’s happy playing in the ECHL and the Marlies aren’t going to lone him out again.

Michael Neuvirth earns the backup job, Hutchinson ends up with the Marlies, and the Leafs don’t claim anyone off of waivers. Either way, Kaskisuo might be in a bind.

At all three positions, the Leafs and Marlies will probably be faced with some tough questions this season: Does the organization want to hang on to the Gauthiers or the Gravel’s, who could help the NHL club if injuries strike? Or does the team value real AHL playing time for the Duszaks, the Hollowells, and the Brazeaus more than that NHL depth?
I’d lean toward giving the young kids more of an opportunity and using players like Adam Brooks and Jeremy Bracco as your NHL insulation instead (what is the drop-off between Gauthier and Brooks at this point, really?), thus trading or moving on from some of that late-20s depth and freeing up opportunities for guys like Rubins.

The same is true in net. The Leafs shouldn’t allow Kaskisuo’s late-season resurgence last year to dictate the roles of Woll or Scott, who should be their focus. If both Hutchinson and Kaskisuo end up with the Marlies, that shouldn’t prevent one of Woll or Scott from getting regular starts there. Ultimately, that probably requires moving Kaskisuo because Babcock will want Hutchinson in his back pocket.

Needles to say, there’s a lot to sort out — and those decisions extend well beyond who will play on the Leafs’ fourth line, or who will make their third pairing.

No matter which direction the organization chooses to go, there should realistically be contending aspirations for all three teams. And that’s exactly how the Leafs want it.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Once Dermott returns from injury, there’s only one spot in Toronto’s defensive top six available.

The influx of new players — including those deemed reclamation projects — makes for a lot of discussion about how Toronto’s roster will look. It also makes for a lot of similar questions for players to answer this season.

Which one of these defencemen, all in their mid-20s and all of whom have yet to establish themselves as regular NHLers, has the best shot of becoming a regular?

All four have a cap hit between $700,000 and $800,000 on one-year deals. Gravel has the most NHL experience at 106 regular season games. Schmaltz is the only right-handed shot among the bunch.

Kivihalme is a bit of an unknown after two seasons in Finland’s top league, the Liiga, but appears to have a high ceiling as a fluid, offence-generating defenceman.

We’ll get some sense of how this is going to play out in training camp.

Can Justin Holl earn Mike Babcock’s trust?

Despite only playing 11 games last season, Holl displayed a sense of resiliency in the Leafs dressing room. He took pride in being one of the last off the ice after practices and of course, maintained his place as the Leafs’ secret jam band leader.

But in the final year of his contract, and with even more defencemen pushing for one of the final roster spots, it’s worth wondering if the party’s over.

As James Mirtle recently pointed out, it seems like when head coach Mike Babcock makes his mind up on a player one way or the other, it’s difficult for that player’s circumstances to change.

There’s reason to believe Holl can be a productive NHL defenceman, especially after leading the 2017-18 Calder Cup-winning Marlies in scoring among defencemen. Something has to give for the sake of Holl’s career. Either he changes Babcock’s perception of him and becomes more of a regular NHL contributor, or he continues to watch games from the press box and has his audition time for another club also diminish.

Is this season Martin Marincin’s final stand?

Marincin played 24 games for the Leafs last season and signed a one-year deal ahead of the season, making that his fourth contract with the Leafs. All four have been for two years or less. With a number of new defencemen signed, it’s starting to feel like it’s now or never for Marincin to stick with the Leafs. He’ll turn 28 this season, which isn’t exactly the time when NHL defencemen prove they’re capable of being regulars in the league.

Does Jake Muzzin have a long-term future with the Leafs?

With Mitch Marner having signed, the conversation about how the Leafs have just one defenceman locked up beyond this season will soon begin. Barrie’s name may be at the top of that list, but that doesn’t mean Marincin’s future with the team is less intriguing.

After being traded to the Leafs ahead of last year’s trade deadline, both Muzzin and the Leafs will probably benefit from having a full season to understand how well he would fit the club moving forward. Being lumped with Nikita Zaitsev for the majority of last season didn’t hold back Muzzin from becoming one of the Leafs’ better possession-drivers at 5-on-5 and a serious difference maker in the playoffs. But he’s also turning 31 this season. I’m inclined to think that’s not so odd for a defenceman who has maintained a relatively healthy past few seasons.

For a team whose window to win a Stanley Cup is wide open, locking up a Cup winner like Muzzin for a few more years seems like a sensible move.

What would Morgan Rielly look like paired with another offensive defenceman?

The Morgan Rielly for the Norris train was moving along at a mighty clip early in the season, but began slowing down as the games piled up. The smooth-skating offensive defenceman carried Ron Hainsey far too often throughout the season. Could things have been different had Rielly been paired with another puck-moving blueliner? Would the Leafs be far too exposed defensively in those situations? Rielly seems likely to be paired with Ceci this season. Line balance is important, but what if a pairing of Rielly and Barrie wasn’t used as the nuclear option but one that could maximize the talent of both players? The Leafs want to move the puck quickly. It’s easy to wonder how much more influential Rielly could be were he paired with another puck mover.

Is Kenny Agostino the safe option for a spot on the fourth line?

The thing I heard repeatedly when talking to people about the new Leafs winger earlier this summer was how he’s evolved from a player with high-

By Joshua Kloke Sep 17, 2019

It was an off-season of change for the Toronto Maple Leafs. The team welcomed a number of players to compete for various positions in the lineup. As a result, there are bound to be questions about where these new players fit in and how the team’s core — with their own storylines — will progress through what should be an intriguing season in Toronto.

Here is one question for each member of the Leafs this season:

How many games will Frederik Andersen play?

Let’s get the load management reference out of the way early. Andersen seems to understand it’s better for him and for a possible deep playoff run if he plays less than the 60 regular season games he played last season. Is there a magic number he, or the Leafs have in mind?

“There’s a lot of different factors in that but obviously the goal is to be as rested and feeling as great as possible when we get that far into the playoffs and that part of the season,” said Andersen.

The Leafs have just four back-to-backs from January to the end of the regular season. It will be intriguing to see how much more time off the Leafs give Andersen than just in those four sets of games.

Will Michael Hutchinson or Michal Neuvirth be the backup?

In bringing Michal Neuvirth in on a PTO after trading away Garret Sparks, the Leafs have provided some competition to Michael Hutchinson for the backup role. Hutchinson posted a .914 save percentage in his five games with the Leafs last season and a .910 save percentage in 23 games with the Marlies. Given Neuvirth’s injury history, Hutchinson feels like the safe choice here. But there have been more sustained spells at the NHL level for Neuvirth that suggest he’d also be a very capable backup. Either way, there’s some depth to support Andersen, and an opportunity to possibly play more games than in seasons past.

Can Tyson Barrie continue his offensive progression?

Barrie was the most notable offseason addition as the right-handed, offensive defenceman the Leafs long coveted. He’s had increased point totals in his last two seasons with the Colorado Avalanche and his 59 points last season were seventh among NHL defencemen. Time on the top power-play unit could provide Barrie with an opportunity to improve on that number.

Will Cody Ceci reveal what the Leafs see in him that others don’t?

The acquisition of Cody Ceci had some wondering what the Leafs saw why would an analytically inclined team sign a player whose numbers were underwhelming? With Ottawa, the mistakes in his own end were glaring, as were his poor possession numbers.

But Dubas and the Leafs see something in the 25-year-old and believe they can turn him into a different type of player than he was with the Senators.

“We think we can bring him in here, we can inundate him with our staff and he’ll probably play a little bit of a different role here, in terms of the expectations and where he’s at,” said Leafs GM Kyle Dubas on July 1 after he was acquired.

Perhaps there’s information that the Leafs have that others don’t. If all goes according to plan, Ceci’s career could be revamped in Toronto.

“We can find certain parts of their game and dig into and hopefully we can improve,” said Dubas.

Can Travis Dermott become a top four defenceman?

Dermott is an RFA at the end of the season, but he’s still very much a part of the Leafs long-term future on the blue line. A second round draft pick in 2015, Dermott has become the kind of modern, offensively-inclined defenceman that Dubas favours. Yet in a season-and-a-half with the Leafs, he’s consistently received sheltered minutes alongside some often-ineffective defencemen. The Leafs want the 22-year-old to be a top four defenceman, but with their top four also seemingly set, Dermott’s path up the lineup isn’t as smooth one. His poor playoff performance, no doubt worsened by his shoulder injury, is still lingering.

Who will stick with the Leafs: Kevin Gravel, Ben Harpur, Teemu Kivihalme or Jordan Schmaltz?
end skill into one who understands his role as a bottom-six forward and contributes the safe, smart play. Does that approach, one that could very well endear him to Babcock, make him a good fit for the revamped fourth line? Or will that high-end skill be missed?

Can Frederik Gauthier provide enough offence to play on the fourth line?

With Jason Spezza likely centering a fourth line that will go heavy on skill, where does that leave the Goat? Is he destined to become a continued healthy scratch? Last season, Gauthier was last among regular Leafs forwards with 14 points in 70 games. If he does get into the lineup, will a lack of point production be too glaring to keep him in there?

How much will Zach Hyman's style of play be impacted by his ACL injury?

Hyman has established himself as a tenacious forward. His ability to fight for pucks in the corners to create opportunities for some of the more skilled forwards has made him an indispensable part of Babcock’s lineup.

There’s a level of physicality that’s required to play the way Hyman does, so will his game look any different when he eventually returns to the Leafs lineup?

“I’ve surprised myself with how much I’m able to do out there,” said Hyman. “But you have to make sure that you’re only pushing yourself so far and you don’t have a setback.”

“I’m always used to going fast,” he added when discussing his rehab. “And this is something that you have to go slow (with).”

Will Andreas Johnsson have another slow start?

Johnsson, to me, remains one of the most fascinating players on this roster. In the numerous conversations we had last season, he struck me as an incredibly self-aware player who is still working towards solidifying his place in the NHL. His game is multi-faceted, but he often struggles early. He scored just three points in his first 18 games last season, and just two in his first nine games with the Marlies the season before. He admitted last season that he perhaps wasn’t as prepared for the start of the season as he should have been.

He wants to take another step in his game and develop more responsibility within the team.

“I had a full season,” said Johnsson, “Now I know what to expect from it.”

Johnsson said the longer summer has allowed more conditioning time and more time to properly prepare physically for the season.

“Hopefully it’ll show this year,” said Johnsson.

Can Kasper Kapanen make a top-six role permanent?

I had originally detailed the chances of Kapanen sticking with Tavares on a line if Hyman and Marner didn’t return until after the start of the season. Now that Tavares and Marner will be reunited, does Kapanen have a chance of locking down a top-six role? It’s going to take some work for him to develop the playmaking aspect to his game, but given the kind of scoring chances Kapanen has proven he can generate, a consistent top-six role wouldn’t feel like a stretch for him. He can produce more consistently when playing with other talented players. Will that chance come this season? Babcock isn’t adverse to juggling lines when things aren’t going well for the club, so for Kapanen to move up the lineup, he’ll have to make things work in a short amount of time.

What can Alex Kerfoot bring as the Leafs' third centre?

Kerfoot remains a bit of an unknown heading into this season with the Leafs. He’s not necessarily a shoot-first centre and it’s too early to determine exactly who will play with him. And it’s still unclear if he can handle the ice time and workload that Nazem Kadri shouldered as Toronto’s 3C last season.

The 25-year-old clearly knows he has to be flexible as he adapts to his first season in Toronto.

“I’ve got a playmaking aspect to my game but I know that everywhere you go you’re going to be playing a different role,” said Kerfoot. “I think I’m someone who will go out there and compete. I like to learn. I think I can help the team in different ways.”

Is this the season Mitch Marner becomes a face of the NHL?

He has the game-changing ability, and now the contract, that ranks him among the league’s best. What he can do that many high-profile players have not done is unleash his personality on the masses. The NHL is starved for outspoken players who drive attention to the game via their personality. We know Marner is a fan of the NBA and the theatrics that come along with that league.

And we’ve seen enough of Marner and heard from enough of his teammates to know he’s got a bubbly personality, plays for his hometown team and with time, probably will become a little less guarded with the media. He’s the perfect foil for the serious John Tavares. He plays without restraint and the league could stand to propel more players like him.

How will Matthews perform with the (expected) captaincy?

Matthews has been the captain-in-waiting for what feels like ages for the Leafs. He is their best player and is the kind of special, game-changing centre that doesn’t come around very often. Matthews wants the captaincy, and the responsibility that comes with it. As he enters the first year of his five-year, $58.17 million extension, there’s no doubt Matthews is the face of the team. Will the added duties that come along with being a captain impact Matthews at all or has all the talk just been, as Dubas put it, “a good topic to write about on days when there maybe isn’t the most interesting stuff.”

There are a lot of other questions surrounding Matthews this season, including whether his time will increase, especially in the playoffs, over last season and what kind of scoring totals he can put up in a full 82-game season. But his role within the team’s leadership, even as nebulous a term as that is, will be examined constantly.

And for what it’s worth, I think Matthews’ moustache is a tour de force of a core, and I wholeheartedly embrace anyone who grows one in a non-ironic manner. Leafs writer Jonas Siegel said last week he thinks I could pull one off. Stay tuned for the answer to that question.

Is Ilya Mikhayev a sure thing?

Mikhayev is a 25-year-old who has spent the last four seasons developing in the KHL. He’s a speedy winger who is relentless in the offensive zone. Babcock likes Mikhayev, that much is obvious.

But beyond all that, there’s still a lot of uncertainty. The transition from Europe to the NHL is one that not every Leaf, including Par Lindholm and Igor Ozhiganov, has mastered in recent years.

Justin Bourne had an excellent breakthrough of how Mikhayev finds space on the ice and how his Leafs teammates will help him along, as well as benefit from his style of play.

While so many of the roster questions will get ironed out in training camp, this one promises to go a little deeper into the season. With Babcock’s interest in the player, he’ll likely get an extended chance to solidify his roster spot, but no guarantees.

Could Trevor Moore become the Leafs’ best value contract this season?

Moore exceeded expectations as a rookie last season with serious speed and work rate. He might have only played 25 games with the Leafs last season, but he led the team in 5-on-5 Scoring Chances For Percentage (59.15%) which would suggest that he could continue to be an important offensive contributor with talented line mates over an entire season. Babcock’s a fan too, as Moore played every game against the Boston Bruins in the playoffs.

After Moore’s eight points through 25 games last season, is something in the neighbourhood of 20 points out of the question for Moore over a full season with consistent line mates? At $775,000 AAV, that would be a great bargain for the Leafs.

Can William Nylander bounce back from a disappointing 2018-19 season?

There’s really no other question that can be asked of Nylander right now. He looks to be starting the season on Auston Matthews’ wing. That should help him rebound from a frustrating campaign which saw him score 27 points in 54 games after only returning to the team in December last season. Expectations, rightly or wrongly, will be heightened for Nylander.

Is Nic Petan or Nick Shore the better option for a spot on the wing?

There could be room on the fourth line for one of these right-wingers. Petan clearly has the eye of Dubas, who traded for Petan last season and then signed him to a two-year extension after he scored one goal in 18 games last season. He’s 24 years old, and has failed to display the kind of offence he did for the WHL’s Portland Winterhawks when he had back-to-back 100-plus point seasons. It feels like there’s some upside there, although it has yet to materialize.

If Babcock isn’t willing to bet on Petan contributing offence, then the 26-year-old Shore is a safer option. He can kill penalties and has far more experience at 236 NHL games.

Can Jason Spezza be Patrick Marleau 2.0?
I’m working on something far more in-depth on Spezza, but for now, one takeaway from Leafs media day was how open the 36-year-old Spezza was to becoming a guiding voice in the Leafs’ dressing room. It’s a not a role that every veteran just naturally embraces.

“It’s almost like a pay it forward thing,” Spezza said of how he learned from veterans when he was younger. “Now it’s your job to show the way to guys. It was a very important part of my development to have good leaders around me. Now you try to give that back.”

Patrick Marleau was undoubtedly that type of leader for the Leafs. His impact on Mitch Marner on Auston Matthews was noticeable. Who will benefit from Spezza’s leadership this season?

How will John Tavares adapt to new linemates?

There won’t be a lot of questions surrounding Tavares, since he proved to be the model of consistency for the Leafs in just one season. But as Zach Hyman will miss the beginning of the season, Tavares will have a new winger. His line was one of the most depended on by Babcock, as Tavares benefitted from the creativity of Marner, as so many centres would, but also from Hyman’s ability to win puck battles. Will that continue with a new winger? And will multiple wingers get a chance? Professional athletes are creatures of habit, and until Hyman returns, how players perform with Tavares and his net-front presence will be closely watched.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Golden Knights shut down Avalanche 5-0 in preseason road victory

By David Schoen Las Vegas Review-Journal

September 17, 2019 - 8:44 PM

Updated September 17, 2019 - 10:39 PM

DENVER — None of the Golden Knights' regular top-six forwards were in the lineup Tuesday, and Avalanche center Pierre-Edouard Bellemare didn't face his former team.

Of the 40 players who suited up at Pepsi Center, journeyman Colorado center Erik Condra was the only player over the age of 30.

With both clubs icing teams full of prospects and roster long shots, it was the Knights' veterans who made the difference in a 5-0 victory over Colorado.

Brandon Pirri notched two goals and an assist and linemates Tomas Nosek and Valentin Zykov each finished with two points. Garret Sparks finished with 24 saves to record the shutout in his debut.

"I thought the first two periods we weren't near as good (as Sunday)," coach Gerard Gallant said. "We had too many turnovers. … But the guys found their legs in the third and played real well."

Here's what we learned from the Knights' victory:

1. Zykov continues to impress.

After being robbed of a goal in the preseason opener by Arizona's Adin Hill, the hockey gods paid back Zykov with interest.

The winger was credited with the opening goal at 4:08 of the first period when Avalanche defenseman Bowen Byram poke-checked the puck off Zykov's stick and into the Colorado net.

Good fortune aside, it was encouraging to see Zykov keep his feet moving and drive hard to the net. That's something the Knights would like to see more.

He also had a beautiful assist for Pirri's second goal.

"When he holds onto the puck, he has the confidence to make plays," Pirri said.

Zykov spent the summer in Las Vegas working out and is in noticeably better shape than he was when the Knights claimed him on waivers in December. There is an opening on the third line, and the new-and-improved Zykov helped himself Tuesday.

"He went to the net hard," Gallant said. "He didn't put the puck in himself, but it wouldn't have happened if he wasn't moving his feet. I thought he played a good game."

2. Sparks stands tall.

The Knights' goaltender was bulldozed in his crease on three occasions but managed to stop everything the Avalanche threw his way.

Sparks made five stops on two first-period penalty kills and used his lightning-themed pads to kick out a shot during a 5-on-3 in the second period.

Sparks is trying to challenge Malcolm Subban for the role as Marc-Andre Fleury's backup, and this was a positive first impression.

"It's not just me keeping the puck out," Sparks said. "Guys were blocking shots in the slot and there was stuff that wasn't getting through that I couldn't see. Guys picking up sticks, picking up guys backdoor. That's how you get a shutout. It's a team effort."

3. Are Hague and Coghlan separating from the pack?

Gallant said Monday that Nate Schmidt is expected to play right defense this season, and he had been working with left defenseman Nic Hague during training camp.

But Schmidt moved to the left side against the Avalanche to partner Dylan Coghlan, who has been this year's version of Jake Bischoff as the surprise of training camp.

Coghlan had two shots on goal in 15:49 of ice time, and his long pass to spring Tyrell Goulbourne for a first-period breakaway was a highlight.
Golden Knights top 10 prospects for 2019-20 season

By David Schoen Las Vegas Review-Journal

September 17, 2019 - 5:57 PM

When the Golden Knights entered the NHL, the front office prioritized building through the draft.

The result is a talented farm system stocked with several players ready to contribute at the NHL level despite two of the Knights’ top prospects being traded.

Here is a look at the top 10 prospects in the Knights’ system for the 2019-20 season:

1. Cody Glass

The Knights have been methodical in their development of the 6-foot-2, 192-pound center, who was the first draft pick in franchise history in 2017 (No. 6 overall). Glass averaged almost two points per game in his final season in major-junior and played a pivotal role in the Chicago Wolves’ run to the American Hockey League’s Calder Cup final with 15 points in 22 postseason games.

2. Nic Hague

Assistant coach Mike Kelly once described the lanky second-round pick in 2017 (No. 34 overall) as “Bambi on ice,” but Hague now has the most upside of any defenseman in the system. Teammate Max Pacioretty likened the 6-6 youngster to Hall of Famer Chris Pronger, citing his size, reach and nasty streak. Hague posted 32 points and a plus-31 rating in the AHL in 2018-19.

3. Peyton Krebs

The playmaking, two-way center fell to the Knights in the first round of the 2019 draft (No. 17 overall) after he underwent surgery for a partially torn Achilles tendon. He’s expected to make a full recovery. Krebs (5-11½, 183 pounds) served as captain for Team Canada during the Under-18 World Championship and posted 19 goals and 49 assists for his major-junior team in the Western Hockey League.

4. Lucas Elvenes

The flashy 6-1, 187-pound winger impressed in the Swedish Hockey League against professionals, posting 20 points in 42 games for Rogle BK after showing 5-11½-16 in 28 games the previous season. Elvenes was a fifth-round pick in the 2017 draft and will play for Chicago (AHL) as he continues to adapt to the smaller North American ice sheet.

5. Zach Whitecloud

The 6-2, 206-pound defenseman skated on the top pairing with Hague and led the AHL in plus-minus rating (plus-39) during his first full professional season. Whitecloud, who signed as a free agent out of Bemidji State in 2018, is a reliable defender and showed his two-way potential with 15 points in 22 games during the postseason.

6. Dylan Coghlan

The Knights signed the British Columbia native as an undrafted free agent in 2017, and he opened eyes in his first season in the AHL. Coghlan (6-2, 202) led Chicago’s defensemen with 15 goals, 25 assists and 40 points. He produced more than half of those points on the power play and continues to improve his work in the defensive zone.

7. Pavel Dorofeyev

The Russian winger showed his quick hands during Development Camp and appears to be a steal after being selected in the third round of the 2019 draft. Dorofeyev (6-1, 171) toyed with players his own age in the Russian junior league, scoring 17 goals and 31 points in 19 games in 2018-19, and the Knights believe his skating will improve as he gets older.

8. Jack Dugan

A fifth-round pick in 2017, Dugan led all NCAA freshmen in assists (29) and ranked second in points (39) while helping Providence to the Frozen Four. The 6-2, 194-pound wing was a consistent performer at Development Camp in the summer and could factor into the Knights’ plans for 2020-21 with a big sophomore campaign for the Friars.

9. Jimmy Schuldt

The 24-year-old defenseman signed as a free agent after a decorated four-year college career at St. Cloud State and recorded an assist in his NHL debut. He was a two-time finalist for the Hobey Baker Award as the top player in college hockey and also was named the 2018-19 National Collegiate Hockey Conference Player of the Year.

10. Kaedan Korczak

The Knights traded up in the second round of the 2019 draft — with rival San Jose Sharks, no less — to select the 6-3, 197-pound stay-at-home defenseman from Kelowna of the WHL. Korczak isn’t flashy offensively, but he is a fluid skater and underrated puck mover who also has plenty of sandpaper to his game.

Note: Prospects must maintain rookie status when they enter the NHL. (“Must not have played in more than 25 NHL games in any preceding seasons, nor in six or more NHL games in each of any two preceding seasons. Any player at least 26 years of age by Sept. 15 of that season is not considered a rookie.”)
Golden Knights players want changes to CBA

By Ben Gotz Las Vegas Review-Journal
September 17, 2019 - 3:01 PM

Despite the decision Monday by the NHL Players Association to not reopen its collective bargaining agreement with the league, Mark Stone of the Golden Knights said the players still have issues they would like to address with the owners.

"I think the game is in a great place right now," Stone, a right wing, said. "At the same time, there are some things that us as players would like to iron out. We'd like to have a few changes."

Chief among them is lowering escrow, the money taken out of each player's paycheck to ensure a 50-50 split of hockey-related revenue with the owners.

"We feel that with (NHLPA executive director) Don (Fehr) and our association we're going to be able to find ways to do that and try to grow our game in a positive way," Stone said.

The decision not to reopen keeps the deal in place until the end of the 2020-21 season and creates short-term labor peace. A reopening would have caused the CBA to expire following this upcoming season. Both sides are expected to discuss an extension that would give the league longer-term stability as well.

League revenues, franchise valuations and player salaries have risen under the current CBA, and future windfalls are on the horizon. The NHL's national TV contract expires after the 2020-21 season, and the league anticipates being able to sign an even more lucrative deal in its next contract. Then in the fall of 2021, a Seattle franchise will begin play and bring more jobs and revenue.

Goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury, who has been through two lockouts since debuting in 2003, said he was happy with the decision.

"I think there's a few points we can improve or talk about when the CBA is up, but overall the game's growing and it's been doing well," said Fleury, whose contract expires the same offseason the CBA now will. "I'm glad we're not bringing on a stoppage to our game."

Coach Gerard Gallant said goaltender Oscar Dansk probably will play in the Knights' next preseason game Thursday against the Los Angeles Kings.

That means goalie prospect Dylan Ferguson likely won't get into a preseason game. Ferguson, 20, was scheduled to start the team's preseason opener Sunday, but he "didn't feel that great," according to Gallant, and Malcolm Subban played instead.

The Knights gave away Stone bobbleheads Sunday and the team's highest paid player gave them his endorsement.

"It looked pretty good," Stone said. "Pretty accurate."

The Knights will hand out Nate Schmidt (Sept. 25), Jonathan Marchessault (Sept. 27) and William Karlsson (Sept. 29) bobbleheads at their remaining preseason home games.
DENVER — Goaltender Garret Sparks is expected to make his debut Tuesday when the Golden Knights face Colorado in a preseason game at Pepsi Center.

Opening faceoff is 6 p.m. Pacific time, and the game will be televised on KTNV-13.

“We liked Sunday a lot, so hopefully the same thing will happen tonight,” coach Gerard Gallant said. “We killed too many penalties last game, so a little bit more 5-on-5 (would be good). You like to work a little bit your PP, your PK. We don’t need those 5-on-3s. We can stay from that.”

Sparks, 26, was acquired from Toronto in a July trade and hopes to challenge Malcolm Subban for the job as Marc-Andre Fleury’s backup.

He was the No. 2 for the Maple Leafs last season and was off to a promising start until he suffered a concussion in January. Sparks went 2-7-0 with a .899 save percentage in his final 10 appearances and was effectively exiled after he criticized his teammates’ lack of emotion in a 6-2 loss to Ottawa on March 16.

The Knights rolled to a 6-2 victory over Arizona in their preseason opener Sunday, as left wing Max Pacioretty finished with hat trick as part of his four-point night.

The Knights killed all seven Arizona power plays.

Colorado, which lost to San Jose in the Western Conference semifinals, is playing its preseason opener. Coach Jared Bednar told the media Monday he expects to ice a young team.

“It is rewarding guys for coming to camp in good condition, for playing well in rookie camp,” Bednar said. “I think there are some guys that have earned the opportunity coming into camp here to get a look in the exhibition games and get a taste for it, some draft picks. Same goes for some of the guys coming in on the tryouts.”
Golden Knights shut out Avalanche in lopsided preseason win

By Justin Emerson (contact)

Tuesday, Sept. 17, 2019 | 9 p.m.

The Golden Knights continued their strong preseason Tuesday night, pulling away in the third period and blanking the Colorado Avalanche at Pepsi Center in Denver, 5-0.

Valentin Zykov was credited with the first Vegas score via own-goal by Colorado, and Brandon Pirri notched the second. Nicolas Hague opened the third period with a goal and Nicolas Roy followed shortly after, the first of the preseason for each of them. Then Pirri added another on the power play with 3:56 to go.

Goalie Garret Sparks made his Vegas debut, stopping all 23 shots he faced.

Despite losing just one forward from their regular penalty-killing rotation (Pierre-Edouard Bellemare), the Golden Knights wanted to get some new players some looks. On Tuesday, William Carrier and Alex Tuch both saw short-handed time after combining for 33 penalty kill seconds during the regular season.

The trial is off to a good start. Both are deceptively fast for their size and used their speed and physicality optimally. Vegas was perfect on three short-handed chances, including a full two minutes at 5-on-3. The Golden Knights are 12-for-12 on penalty kills in the preseason.

Nicolas Roy has also looked good short-handed through two preseason games. Roy, who was acquired from Carolina in the Erik Haula trade, profiles best as a fourth-line center and Bellemare replacement and is making a strong impression.

The decision on who plays the third-line left wing won't be easy. Three of the top contenders were all on the same line Tuesday, with Pirri, Tomas Nosek and Zykov battling to see who joins Cody Eakin and Tuch.

And all three did what they needed to do. Nosek won faceoffs and was steady defensively, Pirri scored twice on the power play and Zykov's hustle forced a miscue by Colorado rookie Bowen Byram that led to a goal and set up Pirri's second. The trio each does something different and while it's likely all make the team, who dresses on that line is not yet evident.

On Monday, the NHL Players' Association announced it would not opt out of the current collective bargaining agreement and end it next September, ensuring there would be labor peace through at least the 2022 season.

"Life's good on both sides. Could it be better on both sides? Yeah, but eventually that's what a new CBA does, it kind of tinkers with what both sides what a little bit," center Paul Stastny said at practice Tuesday. "I was part of the lockout seven years ago, and you fight for certain things and they fight for certain things, but in the end, nobody wins."

The last lockout was in 2012-13, when the league canceled half the season and played a 48-game schedule. He was not yet in the league the last time the league called off an entire season, in 2004-05. Marc-Andre Fleury was, and the Vegas goaltender hopes it doesn't happen again.

"There was always talk about the lockout ending and we'd play two-thirds of the year, half the year, a quarter of the year and it never happened. Your hopes come up and it's disappointing when it doesn't happen," Fleury said. "The game's been growing, it's been doing well and I'm glad we're not bringing on a stoppage to our game for us, for the fans, for the league; it's good news."

LAS VEGAS SUN LOADED: 09.18.2019
Determined to make the Golden Knights, Valentin Zykov ‘made Las Vegas his home’ this offseason

By Jesse Granger
Sep 17, 2019

Golden Knights players scattered across the globe during their down time this summer.

William Karlsson was in Sweden; Brayden McNabb was in Saskatchewan, Canada; and Tomas Nosek was in the Czech Republic. Valentin Zykov, born and raised in St. Petersburg, Russia, spent his entire offseason in Las Vegas at his new home: City National Arena.

The Russian winger frequented the Golden Knights team gym nearly every day this summer, according to teammates. And when a few players arrived to Las Vegas early from their summer breaks, Zykov was there waiting to skate.

“I’m really excited to see Valentin in camp,” Golden Knights GM Kelly McCrimmon said Thursday. “He made Las Vegas his home and trained here in the summer. He’s in very good condition. He’s starting with this team on day one, which I think is going to be a real advantage for him, and I can’t wait to see how he performs.”

Last season Zykov was claimed by Vegas on Dec. 29, 2018, after being waived by Edmonton after playing only five games for the Oilers – this coming a month after was waived by Carolina and claimed by Edmonton.

The 24-year-old was trying to settle into his third city of the young NHL season, all while attempting to learn Gerard Gallant’s system and play well enough to keep a job. It’s not an ideal situation, and the Golden Knights knew that. Then-GM and now president of hockey operations George McPhee said the move to claim Zykov wasn’t about his current impact on the team, but rather a move for the future.

“We saw a young man who can score goals,” McPhee said following the transaction. “He’s a real powerful kid, real strong hands and really good around the net. We wanted to have the opportunity to work with him.”

Zykov made only 10 appearances for the Golden Knights last season, scoring two goals. His conditioning was clearly a problem, but after a full summer in the organization he returned a much improved version of himself.

“I decided to stay here for summer. I just feel more comfortable to get ready for a season if I’m here for the summer workouts,” Zykov said. “It’s much better once you get to know the people and you feel more comfortable.”

The hours in the gym have paid off, as Zykov crushed his previous off ice physical tests.

“From what I’ve seen I’m really, really happy,” Gallant said. “He worked real hard this summer and stayed in Vegas most of the year. He did really well in the physical testing, and I thought he looked real good on the ice today.”

Zykov popped during each of the team’s scrimmages during training camp, showing off the hands and shooting ability that allowed him to lead the AHL in scoring in 2017-18.

He racked up 33 goals and 21 assists in 63 games with the Charlotte Checkers, adding another four goals in eight playoff games that season. Zykov has been a goal scorer since his early years of major junior hockey. His numbers with Baie-Commeau Drakkar of the QMJHL were phenomenal, tallying 84 goals and 100 assists in 162 games.

Zykov’s offensive talent hasn’t translated to the NHL, but to be fair, he hasn’t been given much of an opportunity. He scored four goals and seven assists in 25 games with the Hurricanes — respectable numbers for a young player with no prior NHL experience.

“What I would tell him is, ‘you don’t know how strong you are. You should use your body to keep the puck on your stick longer,’” said teammate Jonathan Marchessault, who played on a line with Zykov in the Golden Knights’ preseason opener on Sunday. “If he plays with a little more grit, I think he can be a great NHL player.”

By all accounts Zykov is a bigger and stronger player from a year ago. His teammates can feel the difference in practice. It’s up to him to use it to his advantage on the ice. His flashes of offense were apparent in Sunday’s game against the Arizona Coyotes. He nearly had an easy goal off a gorgeous dish from Marchessault, if not for a spectacular save by Arizona’s Adin Hill.

But Zykov made the little plays as well. Late in the second period, Zykov raced down the ice with Marchessault for an offensive rush. Marchessault’s centering pass deflected off a defenseman’s skate and just out of the reach of a driving Zykov in the slot.

Zykov transitioned quickly to the forecheck, skating up from behind Arizona’s Ilya Lyubushkin. Zykov, along with Cody Glass, pressured Lyubushkin to force a turnover, then grabbed the loose puck and fired a pass directly to Marchessault in front.

Marchessault tapped the one-timer just wide of the left post, but the play showed multiple facets to Zykov’s game that could help him earn a roster spot in Vegas. Gallant highly values the forechecking tenacity shown by Zykov to chase Lyubushkin down, and the Golden Knights’ third line could use the vision and scoring touch Zykov has shown in spurs.

In the end, Zykov was held off the score sheet, with only one shot on goal, but he came inches away from a two-point night. He’ll need to cash those opportunities in eventually this preseason if he’s going to edge out other forwards like Brandon Pirri, Tomas Nosek or Curtis McKenzie.

“He definitely has the tools for it,” Marchessault said. “He has the shot and the hands. He has the size. He just needs to be opportunistic like everyone when they get here. He’s going to have another chance.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Golden Knights Season 3 Preview: Team President Bubolz Outlines Business Game Plan For 2019-20

September 17, 2019
By Alan Snel
LVSportsBiz.com

Kerry Bubolz stalked down a flight of stairs from the Vegas Golden Knights headquarters, turned right to walk through the team store called the “Arsenal” (the NHL team takes the medieval military play-on-words quite seriously) and emerged into the lobby of the City National Arena ice center in suburban Summerlin.

There they were before his eyes: several dozen little kids with their parents tightening the laces on their children’s skate boots near one of two ice rinks in the building.

Bubolz, the Golden Knights president, displayed a calm and subtle smile as he soaked up the scene late Tuesday afternoon.

“Community,” Bubolz said. “That’s what we were talking about.”

Indeed, we were discussing that subject during an hour-long discussion on how the not-your-conventional NHL expansion team was approaching the launch of a third regular season Oct. 2 when the Golden Knights host the San Jose Sharks at T-Mobile Arena.

For Bubolz, seeing the youngsters lace up their skates was akin to a proud farmer surveying a rich bounty from crops planted more than two years ago. The VGK’s team to skate program — the bottom rung of the team’s hockey development model — began with 1,100 kids from 2017 to 2018. One year later, that number has ballooned to 4,400 for 2018 to 2019.

The Golden Knights’ metrics for gate revenue, merchandise sales and local sponsorships are all top five in the NHL.

So sustaining those lofty revenue numbers for years down the road rests on the backs of these pint-sized, 60-pound six-year-olds.

“Kids who are five to eight years old are making lifetime decisions about who their favorite team is,” Bubolz told LVSportsBiz.com during a sweeping interview in the VGK business office meeting room dubbed, “The Chambers.” (We’re not kidding about the medieval references.)

As the young Las Vegas-based franchise enters Season 3, the business growth can be measured in several ways. In early July 2017, LVSportsBiz.com interviewed Bubolz about the role of growing hockey in the desert to lay the team’s foundation for years to come. At the time before Year 1, the Golden Knights converted an astonishing 85 percent of 16,000 season ticket commitments of $100 into real game ticket buyers, Bubolz recalled.

VGK Prez Kerry Bubolz in action at T-Mobile Arena.

Now, more than two years later with the Golden Knights already in their third preseason (they defeated the Avalanche, 5-0, in Denver Tuesday night), Bubolz said there are more than 15,000 full season equivalent ticket holders, with more than 5,000 fans on a season ticket waiting list called the “Can’t Wait List.”

Bubolz outlined the strategy behind beefing up the number of different ticket holders didn’t renew their deals for 2019-2020, fans on the can’t wait list were sold partial ticket deals instead of full season deals in order to get more new fans involved.

Keep in mind, the Knights averaged 18,319 fans a game in 2018-19 in a building where capacity is 17,367. The Golden Knights filled the Big Ice House by the Strip to 105.5 percent of capacity, second highest in the NHL behind Chicago last season.

Let’s look at other Season 3 changes via Tuesday’s Bubolz interview:

Number of workers. Outside of the hockey players, the Golden Knights have more than 150 full-time workers and more than 200 part-timers. When the team started, the numbers were half of those.

Broadcast staff changes. Studio host Nick Gismondi, studio analyst Brad May and rink reporter Alyson Lozoff were let go and Darren Millard, Mike McKenna and Stormy Buonantony are in. The new trio will join arena emcees Mark Shunock and Darren Eliot, VGK VP for hockey programming and facility operations, in creating more local programming for the team’s TV rights holder, AT&T SportsNet. Bubolz said. On McKenna, who just retired as an NHL goaltender, Bubolz said, “He brings a certain intangible, charisma and knowledge of the game. We’re excited.” And on Buonantony, “She’s local and Vegas born.” Millard has an interesting tie to the VGK: He hosted the expansion draft in June 2017.

Sponsorships and partnerships. The Knights are approaching 150 sponsors, and there will be a more announcements to come. Bubolz declined to identify the categories of the new sponsors. Partnerships are worldwide as the Knights have ties with two bars — or VGK embassies — in Vienna, Austria, called 1516 Brewing Company and Charley P’s.

Allegiant stage on plaza outside arena. The stage platform has been raised thanks to a new base of three feet of concrete that gives the permanent platform a “true stage feel” so that fans can see what’s happening from further away. There will be a countdown to open the arena doors before VGK home games — and a goal horn blast will also signal the opening of the doors.

Pregame sword-in-rock ceremony. It’s owner Bill Foley’s pride and joy. Bubolz was a bit coy on the topic, but it does appear to be sticking around for season three with an “evolving” sword ceremony.

Ticket prices. The average ticket price is more than $100. Fans have been complaining about the high ticket prices on the second market, including the team’s own VGK Ticket Exchange. But Bubolz pointed out: “We don’t direct them on what to ask (for a ticket). We just provide the marketplace.” He said tickets when bought directly from the team are cheaper than buying them on the secondary market.

License plates. The number of VGK car tags has hit 35,000 and Bubolz hinted that drivers of cars with VGK plates will be eligible for special prizes when they show up for games.

Taking operations in-house. As the Golden Knights organization matures, more operations will be taken in-house. The new broadcasters were an example, he noted, and the team is no longer using a third-party company, MeiGray, to handle its game worn items like jerseys.

Pregame march to the arena. Not only will some marches begin at the Brooklyn Bridge on the Strip in front of New York-New York, some will now start at Park MGM. Plus, a new battlewagon will join the team’s medieval crew of characters that include the knight, Chance the mascot and the Knight Line drummers. Also, some staff name changes — the Golden Aces cheerleaders are now the Vegas Vivas and the Vegas Bellies showgirls are now the Golden Bellies.

Pregame videos. Bubolz said he received encouraging comments about a new pregame player intro video that appeared before Sunday’s first preseason game. The video, which included Deep Purple’s 1971 hit, “Smoke on the Water,” as a musical track had scenes of players like Mark Stone amid fire on ice. “If your hair on your arm stands up,” Bubolz said of the pregame video and player intro program, “you did your job.”

LVSportsBiz.com LOADED: 09.18.2019
Evgeny Kuznetsov’s suspension leaves the Capitals in a bind. Travis Boyd could be the answer.

By Isabelle Khurshudyan

September 17 at 6:30 AM

Travis Boyd still had a year left on his contract with the Capitals when July 1 arrived, but the first day of NHL free agency still brought uneasiness. He had finally broken through to the big leagues last year, spending all of it in Washington — though not always in the lineup. This campaign was supposed to feature more stability, but then three bottom-six forward signings spelled anything but.

“I’m not going to lie and say I was happy seeing that. I mean, I wasn’t,” Boyd said. “Ultimately, I can read between the lines and see that the more people who were signing, that’s just more people I need to beat out to have my job back and to stay up here full-time.

“I don’t want to be in the situation I was in last year. I don’t want to be going in and out of the lineup and playing three games, sitting for four, playing for two. I want to play every night. I think I’ve proven last year that I can play in this league every night, and my big thing this year is just trying to establish myself even more and become an everyday player.”

A first-round playoff exit last season left the Capitals underwhelmed with their depth, something they addressed with the free agent additions of Richard Panik, Garnet Hathaway and Brendan Leipsic. Panik is expected to slot in at third-line right wing, replacing Brett Connolly, who signed with the Florida Panthers; with Nic Dowd presumably retaining his role as the team’s fourth-line center. Hathaway and Leipsic are the front-runners to play beside him. That means, after Boyd had five goals and 15 assists in 53 games as a rookie, his job is in jeopardy.

But Boyd might have a different way into the lineup to start the season. With center Evgeny Kuznetsov suspended the first three games for "inappropriate conduct" after testing positive for cocaine at the world championships in May, Washington will be temporarily shorthanded up the middle. Lars Eller will almost certainly move up to the second line, meaning the Capitals need a short-term solution for their third trio.

Consider Boyd the favorite.

“You never want to see [a suspension] happen, especially to a teammate, and I love Kuzy — one of the nicest guys in that locker room,” Boyd said. “But I mean, from my standpoint of it, absolutely that’s a chance — three games early in the year to hopefully get a chance to show what I can do. And if I get that chance, I’ve got to take advantage of it.”

While Boyd was used more on the wing down the stretch last season, he’s a natural center, and the Capitals have turned to him for similar spot duty before. He even briefly centered a top line with captain Alex Ovechkin and Tom Wilson when Kuznetsov was injured two seasons ago. Coach Todd Reirden listed Garrett Pilon and Michael Sgarbossa — neither played in the NHL last year — as other possible third-line center options, as well as Connor McMichael, Washington’s 18-year-old first-round pick in the most recent draft.

“They understand the situation,” Reirden said. “This is something that was discussed with all players that were involved, that there may be a suspension. … They have to be prepared to take advantage of any opportunity they get and showcase themselves. There’s a number of players and a number of different directions we can go in.”

Boyd’s speedy skating creates offensive opportunities, but he went into the summer wanting to get stronger without slowing down. He said he gained roughly 10 pounds of “good weight,” maintaining his body fat percentage while adding muscle so he wouldn’t be pushed off the puck as often. That meant cutting out sugar all summer and opting for water while friends ordered beer.

“I mean, it’s grown men [in the NHL], so if you’re in the corner and going up against a 6-foot-3 [defenseman] who’s 225 or 220 or even 215, it was tough for me for where I was at last year,” he said.

He also struggled with faceoffs, winning just 36 percent of the 210 he took last year. In Washington’s preseason opener against Chicago on Monday night, Boyd centered a first line with Wilson and Leipsic, and while he was officially credited with winning just three of nine draws, Reirden said the Capitals’ internal metrics had him at above 50 percent.

He also scored a power-play goal with a shot from the left faceoff circle, a role that’ll be open on Washington’s second unit after the departure of defenseman Matt Niskanen.

“That’s what he was able to show us last year — the ability to, when he was given the opportunity, convert,” Reirden said.

That bodes well for Boyd in his audition to start the season as Washington’s substitute center, a first crack at a lineup he doesn’t intend to leave.

“Last year was a lot of learning experiences for me, just coming to the rink every day and practicing against these guys,” Boyd said. “And I think the one big thing for me is just my mentality and my attitude when I’m at this rink now is just a little more comfortable, feeling a lot more settled in and confident around here. And I think that translates over to the ice and hoping that I can continue to carry that confidence through this training camp. And if I do that, everything will be well.”

Washington Post LOADED: 09.18.2019
No, Axel Jonsson-Fjallby is not going back to Sweden if he doesn’t make the Caps

By J.J. Regan

September 17, 2019 1:35 PM

ARLINGTON, Va. -- We already know where the vast majority of players at Capitals training camp will be playing for a majority of the season. Some players have contracts with other teams, the NHL players know they will be with the Caps, junior players know they will be with their respective junior teams, etc. There are few spots on the Caps’ roster that are up for grabs and only a handful of players who are actually competing for them.

And then there is Axel Jonsson-Fjallby.

Recognizable for his long, blonde hair, Jonsson-Fjallby has become an intriguing prospect. He already possesses NHL speed and it is just a matter of waiting for the rest of his game to catch up before making the NHL roster becomes a real possibility.

But he is also an intriguing player because of the uncertainty of where he may play.

Last season, Jonsson-Fjallby was sent to Hershey, but returned to his native Sweden after just 16 games. That led many to wonder just where he would be playing this season. If he did not make the NHL squad, which seems very unlikely at this point, would he again choose to return to Sweden?

In May, Jonsson-Fjallby said he would be staying in North America regardless of whether he was in the NHL or AHL. Now at training camp, he reiterated that sentiment.


Even if you are sent to Hershey?

“Yeah.”

No plans to go back to Sweden?

“No.”

Whatever the personal reasons may have been for Jonsson-Fjallby’s decision to, it appears to have been ill-advised in terms of his NHL hopes.

Clearly general manager Brian MacLellan was displeased with the performance of the Caps’ fourth line and penalty kill as he made a number of acquisitions in the offseason to address those needs. But as those are spots that Jonsson-Fjallby could have potentially competed for, it also shows the team still believes Jonsson-Fjallby still has more work to do before he can realistically compete for a spot on the NHL roster. Perhaps if he was fully adjusted to the North American game he would have had more of a shot. Just 16 games at the AHL level, however, are not enough.

“I feel like I’ve been playing a lot,” Jonsson-Fjallby said, “But you can still get used to it more.”

The ice rink is much smaller in North America which makes the game both faster and more physical than in Europe. Adjusting to the different style is hard for players to do and will require more time from Jonsson-Fjallby than 16 games, a rookie tournament and a training camp to figure out.

Jonsson-Fjallby said he is working on the details of his game to make it simpler.

“Plays on the board, playing simpler sometimes,” he said. “Since I don’t have as much time here since the ice is smaller, I just feel like sometimes I can make an easier play.”

With Nic Dowd, Garnet Hathaway, Brendan Leipsic, Chandler Stephenson and Travis Boyd all competing for fourth line spots, Jonsson-Fjallby will almost certainly be headed to Hershey this season, but that is the best thing for him. He struggled during the Prospects Showcase and at times in camp and he is not yet ready to take on a full-time NHL role. That is something he can work on in Hershey if and only if he remains in North America and, for now, he says he is committed to doing just that.
Tom Wilson knows how hard the Kuznetsov suspension will sting: 'It's not easy to watch your team go into battle'

By J.J. Regan
September 17, 2019 10:53 AM

ARLINGTON, Va. -- When the Capitals start the 2019-20 season, Evgeny Kuznetsov will not be on the ice. He will not play in the season opener against the St. Louis Blues, he will not play former coach Barry Trotz when the team travels to play the New York Islanders and he will not play in the home opener against the team that eliminated Washington from the playoffs last season.

Tom Wilson knows how Kuznetsov feels.

"It's not easy to watch your team go into battle and you be on the sidelines," Wilson told NBC Sports Washington. "You definitely want to be out there with them, but can't do anything about it now and you've just got to make sure that you're ready to go once you're back out there."

Wilson missed the first 16 games of the 2018-19 season when he was suspended for a preseason hit to St. Louis Blues forward Oskar Sundqvist. Like Kuznetsov, Wilson was also forced to miss the start of the season.

When Kuznetsov spoke to the media on Saturday regarding his suspension, he expressed his appreciation to the fans for their support. With his suspension, however, Kuznetsov will be forced to miss the home opener on Oct. 5 and will not be able to play in front of those fans when the city celebrates the return of hockey.

That was even tougher for Wilson last year as he was not able to play in the home opener when the team raised its Stanley Cup banner to the rafters.

"It is tough," he said. "It's a cool moment for the fans, it's a cool moment for the players. Stuff happens and you have to deal with it, but you never want to miss a game whether it's the first game or the 50th or whatever. You want to be on the ice every night. That's what we love to do."

"It'll be alright. I'm sure he'll be around to take it in, he just won't be out and playing."

But the suspension to Kuznetsov will not just be hard on him, it will be hard on the team as well.

Washington faces a brutal schedule and, though Kuznetsov will only miss the first three games, the schedule and matchups in those three games were going to be difficult even before the team knew it would be without one of its top two centers.

The Caps open the season in St, Louis on the night the Blues celebrate their Stanley Cup victory and unfurl their championship banner. Two days later, the team will be in New York for the Islanders' home-opener. The first game in Washington will come the next day on the back-end of a back-to-back and it will pit the Caps against the Carolina Hurricanes who eliminated them from the playoffs last season.

That's a tough stretch and if the team struggles, that could make the suspension even harder for Kuznetsov, according to Wilson.

"When you're watching those games, you just have that motivation that when you come back, just to try to make up for lost time and be the best player that you can be in order to make it up to your teammates," Wilson said.

There is a silver-lining to glean from Wilson's suspension last year and that is what happened when he returned.

"When you're watching those games, you just have that motivation that when you come back, just to try to make up for lost time and be the best player that you can be in order to make it up to your teammates," Wilson said.

There is a silver-lining to glean from Wilson's suspension last year and that is what happened when he returned.

When Wilson's suspension finally ended in 2018, the team got back a motivated winger who was dominant in his return. Wilson recorded eight goals and six assists in his first 10 games back including a goal in his very first game. After a lackluster season, perhaps the suspension can jolt Kuznetsov back into the 2018 playoff form that allowed him to dominate the league.

"I expect him to come back flying and playing his best hockey," Wilson said. "We'll appreciate having him back in the lineup and a little spark in Game 4 for sure."
Capitals' first-round pick Connor McMichael knows patience is key in his path to the NHL.

By Caroline Brandt
September 17, 2019 10:00 AM

Connor McMichael looks forward to the day when he puts on a red sweater for the Capitals in his NHL debut.

"It's something special coming to Washington and hopefully be the next player who comes out here as one of the legends." McMichael said.

But for now, the Capitals' 2019 first-round pick will continue to develop his skills under former Caps head coach Dale Hunter in the Ontario Hockey League for the London Knights. Hunter's brother Mark is also a part of the Knights as the general manager.

"We're excited that Dale's gonna have him for another year or two," Capitals general manager Brian MacLellan said. "That's really gonna help his development."

McMichael has been a standout player for the Knights, leading the team in scoring and to a first-place finish in the Western Conference last season. Many NHL prospects do not get the immediate call-up to the big leagues, so having a former Capitals great play a big role in McMichael's development is a big plus.

"He's very well-coached," Capitals head coach Todd Reirden said. "He's played in kind of a bigger stage in terms of the number of people who come to watch London play. We like that fact that he's already dealt with some of that pressure and he's succeeded."

The 19-year-old from Ajax, Ontario, is patient, knowing further development of his skills is a necessity to succeeding in the NHL.

"Dale's been huge for my development and so has Mark so I'm thankful to have them," McMichael said.

What attracted the Capitals' top brass to McMichael was his ability to play both ends of the ice, a 200-foot player.

"He's got a knack for scoring goals around the net," MacLellan said. "He's got a little extra sense or intelligence, hockey intelligence that a lot of players don't have."

For McMichael, patience is key, and a virtue that will pay off for both him and the Capitals in the long-run.
Laine’s lukewarm relationship with the Winnipeg Jets just got a lot more complicated

By: Mike McIntyre

Posted: 09/17/2019 7:00 PM | Comments: 10 | Last Modified: 09/17/2019 7:04 PM | Updates

Like a marriage on the rocks, the Winnipeg Jets and Patrik Laine don’t seem very long for each other, do they?

It’s not just the fact they’re currently separated by distance — 7,042 kilometres, to be exact, between Bell MTS Icetplex, where Jets training camp is underway, and Bern, Switzerland, where restricted free agent Laine is working out with a pro team while contract talks remain stalled.

No, it’s more than that. A complicated relationship that can be described as lukewarm at best over recent months took another dramatic turn, seemingly putting even more space between the parties. Words were said. Feelings were likely hurt. And you wonder just how many episodes of this soap opera are left before what is starting to seem like an inevitable breakup occurs.

Is it possible this really isn’t a match made in hockey heaven, as it first appeared when the Jets hit the jackpot in the draft lottery and selected the Finnish sniper second overall in 2016? Now three seasons and 110 goals later and all is not well.

"When you're having contract negotiations, one thing always is who are you playing with. With the merits I have, somewhere else I'd have an opportunity to play with the best players. Everybody who understands hockey knows that."

Laine, 21, took his biggest shot of the pre-season during an interview with a Finnish newspaper, Ilta-lehti, in which he made a number of comments that appear to paint both the club, and some teammates, in a negative light. His words quickly travelled across the pond and resulted in some interesting responses from Jets’ personnel.

"When you're having contract negotiations, one thing always is who are you playing with. With the merits I have, somewhere else I'd have an opportunity to play with the best players. Everybody who understands hockey knows that," Laine told journalist Pelkka Jalonen, who provided a translation to the Free Press.

Everyone, the comment implies, but his veteran head coach.

"I can handle the shade. That part's not going to bother me a whole hell of a lot," Paul Maurice said Tuesday.

Laine told Jalonen how that trio was often used as a third line, behind Mark Scheifele's top group and the Adam Lowry-Andrew Copp-Brandon Tanev checking unit.

"There are top lines and then there is our line. But I play with the guys I'm told to play," said Laine.

Jalonen then remarked to Laine that Maurice seemed to have an affinity for Bryan Little.

"It has been noticed," Laine replied.

It’s true Laine was rarely used on the top line with Scheifele and Blake Wheeler last season, spending the bulk of his time with Little despite a lack of sustained success. Of course, the Jets didn’t exactly believe in Little, either, when they tried to replace him as second-line centre at the last two trade deadlines, acquiring both Paul Stastny and then Kevin Hayes in consecutive years. Stastny had great success with Laine, while Hayes did not.

"There are top lines and then there is our line. But I play with the guys I'm told to play."

Laine isn’t going to simply be given what he wants, no matter how much he pouts. Maurice even used what he called his “driver’s licence analogy: Nobody gets the keys at 14," to describe his handling of Laine and other young wingers on the Jets. He said requests to play with Scheifele and Wheeler are frequent.

"And that’s understandable. Everybody wants it. They want more minutes, they want to play with the team’s best, for sure," said Maurice, who flew to Finland this past summer to meet one-on-one with Laine in an attempt to try and get everything back on track after a frustrating end to last season.

And yet it feels like we’ve quickly derailed once again.

In Laine’s case, he clearly believes the lack of opportunity played a role in a career-low 30 goals and 20 assists last season which, along with major inconsistency in his overall two-way game, is likely being used against him by the Jets in contract talks.

"I’m not privy to any contracts but at no point I’m sure in the Kyle Connor negotiation will they say, ‘Hey, we’ll take a little less because we understand he played with Scheife and Wheels and that’s going to get me 30,'” Maurice said of the other unsigned RFA in Connor, who has been a staple on that line the last two seasons.

"I don’t think they’re saying. ‘Hey, I’ll sign a contract if I get used this way.’ I think they’re saying, ‘Hey, if I get used this way, I might have scored a bit more, maybe you could pay me more.' It’s an assumption. I don’t know. I’m not part of it. That’s what I’d argue."

Maurice rattled off a list of star players who don’t always play with other stars, including Evgeni Malkin, Phil Kessel and Sidney Crosby often being on different lines in Pittsburgh and Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews on different lines in Chicago.

"Nobody brings their contract out to the bench and says, ‘Hey, I probably should be playing there,'” said Maurice, who paused and added "yet."

"I think he’s certainly one of our best players. He spends a good deal of time on that top unit on the power play. We’re top five in the league last couple years, a big part because of what Patty does. I think he’s a young kid that’s certainly had a lot of success in three years. He’s definitely not doing it by himself, I can guarantee you that."

As for Wheeler, he quickly noted he spent ample time on the top power play unit with him and Scheifele last season.

"I think he’s certainly one of our best players. He spends a good deal of time on that top unit on the power play. We’re top five in the league last couple years, a big part because of what Patty does. I think he’s a young kid that’s certainly had a lot of success in three years. He’s definitely not doing it by himself, I can guarantee you that," Wheeler said Tuesday.

The captain also referenced Laine’s age, saying "he’s still a young kid, still growing up and off the ice."

He was specifically asked whether Laine should have gone public, as he implied by the Jets in contract talks.

"I don’t know. I’m not him. I’m not in his shoes. I don’t know exactly how he’s feeling. I haven’t spoken on the phone with him for a couple weeks. He’s a guy that has certainly had a huge part in what we’ve done here and help get us to the point where we can be talked about as Stanley Cup contenders. I think maybe there’s some frustration in that, I can’t speak for him. I don’t know," said Wheeler, who has no issue with Laine being vocal about wanting to play a bigger role.

"It’s a great trait to have, to want more, to want more ice time, more playing time. So I would say those are all good things, man. You want guys that are hungry for more and not content with where he’s at," he said.

Lowry, another centre who has spent some time on a line with Laine, believes all of this may be tied to ongoing negotiations and will quickly blow over.

"Everyone’s entitled to their own opinion. He’s a premier goal scorer, so maybe he’s just trying to use that as some leverage for his contract. I wouldn’t put too much weight into those comments," Lowry said.

"Stuff like this, you look at even the (Mitch) Marner contract negotiations, people were pissed off at him for not signing earlier. And then he signs and all is good in the world. So I would expect something similar to happen with Patty. The contract gets resolved and we’re going to welcome him back with open arms. We’re excited to get him and K.C. back. Hopefully it’s sooner rather than later.

Jalonen told me he believes Laine still wants to remain with the Jets, but is getting increasingly frustrated by the situation.

Despite the current state of affairs, perhaps these are not irreconcilable differences and the parties can ultimately find a way to live happily ever after together. But it’s hard to see that right now for a Jets team already dealing with a number of distractions, including the mysterious, indefinite leave of absence for Dustin Byfuglien.

"What’s that quote about rough seas making a good sailor? Something like that. But I haven’t felt it in the room. It’s been good, guys are working their asses off. Player’s got a little bit of turbulence, maybe, outside the jet, but inside the jet it’s good," said Maurice.

A view through rose-coloured glasses, perhaps.
I've long maintained trading Laine would be a foolish move, so getting the Jets and Laine on the same page should be a top priority if they want to avoid another Jacob Trouba "get me out of here" situation on their hands and have him ready to walk in unrestricted free agency four years from now.

Assuming it's not already too late for that.
It was a jarring way to start training camp. But now, Winnipeg Jets Sami Niku and Kristian Vesalainen are ready to start making an impact on the ice after recovering from a minor car crash.

The two young Finnish players were left shaken and a bit sore after their vehicle T-boned another car on Portage Avenue last Friday. They were headed to the rink for on-ice testing at the time.

Sami Niku (left) and Kristian Vesalainen were left shaken and a bit sore after their vehicle T-boned another car on Portage Avenue last Friday. (John Woods / Free Press files)</p>

Sami Niku (left) and Kristian Vesalainen were left shaken and a bit sore after their vehicle T-boned another car on Portage Avenue last Friday. (John Woods / Free Press files)

Niku, who was driving, estimates he was going about 60 km-h at the time. The driver of the other vehicle was making a turn at the light and cut in front of their path, but wasn't injured. Airbags were deployed and police and first responders attended.

"I had a few seconds when I realized, 'Oh my god, we're hitting.' But after that we were both in shock. We didn't know what to do. It was a tough time," Niku recalled Tuesday as he spoke with media for the first time since the incident.

"I was looking up and saw the car and was like 'Ahh, now it's going to be a huge mess.' I didn't have so much time to think about it, it came pretty fast," added Vesalainen.

Niku, 22, and Vesalainen, 20, were held out of skating with the main groups for the first few days of camp as a precaution, allowing their bodies extra time to heal. But they've now got a clean bill of health and are expected to be in the lineup Wednesday night as the Jets host the Minnesota Wild at Bell MTS Place for the second of seven pre-season games.

"Obviously it's good that nobody got hurt. That's a big thing. Sometimes that happens, and life moves on. So nothing that big," said Vesalainen.

Niku was skating in practice Tuesday with No. 1 defenceman Josh Morrissey, so it's possible coach Paul Maurice will give that duo a look together.

"I really like to play with him. We are both same type of players. I think we play very good together," said Niku. "We lost some D, so I have a big opportunity to go to top-six. And I think I'm ready. I had a good summer. So I have good possibility to take my spot in top-six."

Vesalainen was doing drills on a line with No. 1 centre Mark Scheifele and veteran Mathieu Perreault.

"First, thank God they're healthy, like at the end of the day they're OK. And then you work your butt off all summer, you're ready to roll, it's tough for them. But hey, welcome to the NHL, you're always going to have some turbulence in your career," said Maurice.

Hockey fans are breathing a bit easier these days with knowledge that the next NHL lockout or strike is at least three years away. Players made sure of that on Monday when they opted not to trigger an opt-out clause in the current collective bargaining agreement after this season, meaning it now runs through the 2021-22 campaign.

"We've had some good talks with the league and they're going to continue to negotiate, and hopefully we can find a resolution to some of these issues," Adam Lowry said.</p>

"We've had some good talks with the league and they're going to continue to negotiate, and hopefully we can find a resolution to some of these issues," Lowry said Tuesday.

Indeed, there is hope further negotiations could ultimately produce an even longer extension.

"We agreed the game is continuing to grow and is in a good spot. But like I said there's still some issues players feel need to be resolved. This just gives us a way to continue to grow the game while we work on those issues," said Lowry.

"We're continuing to talk to the league. Hopefully those productive talks continue. I don't think there's a time line to possibly have anything extended, but we're still open to extending the CBA."

Lowry, who is about to begin his sixth full season with the Jets, said the entire process has been a real eye-opener.

"You start running through the numbers, and you get informed on a lot of things. There's a lot more things that go into it than you'd be aware of if you aren't in the room or you haven't been through one of these things before," he said.

"I find this stuff interesting. It's good to learn about the league and your union and be able to be informed and make sure the other guys are informed. I enjoy doing this stuff."
Laine’s comments back home raise fuss in Winnipeg

By: Mike McIntyre
Posted: 09/17/2019 12:17 PM

“Everyone’s entitled to their own opinion. He’s (Patrik Laine) a premier goal scorer, so maybe he’s just trying to use that as some leverage for his contract. I wouldn’t put too much weight into those comments,” Adam Lowry said this morning. (John Woods / Canadian Press files)

“Everyone’s entitled to their own opinion. He’s (Patrik Laine) a premier goal scorer, so maybe he’s just trying to use that as some leverage for his contract. I wouldn’t put too much weight into those comments,” Adam Lowry said this morning. (John Woods / Canadian Press files)

Patrik Laine may be far, far away from Winnipeg Jets training camp right now. But it’s safe to say the restricted free agent has become the focal point down at the rink.

Laine, 21, gave an interview with Finnish newspaper Iltalehti this week, and some of his comments appear to paint both his team, and some teammates, in a negative light.

“When you’re having contract negotiations, one thing always is who are you playing with. With the merits I have, somewhere else I’d have an opportunity to play with the best players. Everybody who understands hockey knows that,” Laine told journalist Pekka Jalonen, who provided an English translation to the Free Press.

Laine was rarely used on the top line with Blake Wheeler and Mark Scheifele last season, spending the bulk of his time with centre Bryan Little and winger Nikolaj Ehlers. He told Jalonen how that trio was often used as a third line, behind Scheifele’s group and the Adam Lowry-Andrew Copp-Brandon Tanev checking unit.

“There are top lines and then there is our line. But I play with the guys I’m told to play,” said Laine.

Jalonen then remarked to Laine that coach Paul Maurice seemed to have an affinity for Little.

“It has been noticed,” Laine replied.

Jalonen told the Free Press he believes Laine still wants to remain with the Jets, but is getting increasingly frustrated at both his role and the lack of progress on contract talks. Laine is coming off his worst offensive season of his three-year career, with 30 goals and 20 assists in 82 regular-season games.

Laine’s words quickly made their way across the pond and were put to a number of Jets players and coaches down at Bell MTS Iceplex.

Wheeler spoke on the matter this morning after the first on-ice session of the day, noting Laine did spend ample time on the top power-play unit with him and Scheifele last season.

“I think he’s certainly one of our best players. He spends a good deal of time on that top unit on the power play. We’re top five in the league last couple years, a big part because of what Patty does. I think he’s a young kid that’s certainly had a lot of success in three years. He’s definitely not doing it by himself, I can guarantee you that,” said Wheeler.

Laine’s words quickly made their way across the pond and were put to a number of Jets players and coaches down at Bell MTS Iceplex. (Mikaela MacKenzie / Free Press files)

Wheeler was specifically asked whether Laine should have voiced his concerns publicly, as he’s done in this case, or if there was a better way to handle it.

“I don’t know. I’m not him. I’m not in his shoes. I don’t know exactly how he’s feeling. I haven’t spoken on the phone with him for a couple weeks. He’s a guy that has certainly had a huge part in what we’ve done here and help get us to the point where we can be talked about as Stanley Cup contenders. I think maybe there’s some frustration in that, I can’t speak for him. I don’t know,” said Wheeler.

Assuming a new deal is reached at some point, Wheeler said there won’t be any issues in the room with Laine going forward,

“I think he’s just in a spot right now where he’s caught in limbo and probably wants more than anything to just get here and play and be an NHL player again. There’s probably a lot of frustration in the fact he’s not where he wants to be right now,” said Wheeler.

Maurice was to address the matter later this afternoon.

“Everyone’s entitled to their own opinion. He’s a premier goal scorer, so maybe he’s just trying to use that as some leverage for his contract. I wouldn’t put too much weight into those comments,” Lowry said this morning.

Winnipeg Free Press LOADED 09.18.2019
Jets open armoury for second preseason tilt

Scott Billeck
September 17, 2019 6:48 PM CDT

Well, we may just see a reasonable hockey game on Wednesday night.

After a bit of a slop-fest in Monday’s first preseason game for the Winnipeg Jets — a 2-0 loss away to the Edmonton Oilers — the team’s lineup for Wednesday’s contest at BellMTS Place will feature a more veteran-laden contingent for the visiting Minnesota Wild.

That might just mean some offence, which Monday’s game was simply devoid of for the traveling Jets.

The team was convincingly outshot five-on-five, with the Jets controlling just 37.8% of the shot share in the game.

Preseason isn’t all about scoring, per se, and the first game of the preseason isn’t exactly going to resemble a crisp, clean January tie, but there wasn’t much flow on Monday.

“That was by design,” Jets head coach Paul Maurice said after the loss. “Both teams are working to become better defensive hockey clubs, so there weren’t a lot of plays up and down the ice at all. There weren’t a lot of shots from the slot, they were covered off pretty good. We gave up a little more from their blue line than we would probably like, but a good grinder.”

The Oilers produced eight high-danger chances in the game and made good on two of them. Winnipeg had four and couldn’t take advantage of their opportunities.

Monday’s game was about working on some system work, including transition defense, which had been a mainstay in Winnipeg’s first few skates heading into the game.

“How many times did we give up the line when we didn’t have to? Not too many,” Maurice said. “We had some sort outs in our line changes and things, but I liked it. I think the D had the idea that we want to have there. So, not bad.”

Wednesday’s game will be littered with point producers.

Preseason debuts for Mark Scheifele, Blake Wheeler, Andrew Copp, Adam Lowry and Josh Morrissey are all on tap.

Kristian Vesalainen and Sami Niku, both who were involved in a car crash last Friday and missed the first two days of training camp, will also be in the lineup.

Nikolaj Ehlers will have to wait for his preseason debut, meanwhile.

As for lines, we'll know more one the playing group hits the ice for their morning skate.

But if the lines from Monday’s practice hold true, the top six will look something like this:

Kristian Vesalainen – Mark Scheifele – Mathieu Perreault

Andrew Copp – Adam Lowry – Blake Wheeler

Joona Luoto, who stood out in Monday’s game, gets a second test, as does C.J. Suess and Andrei Chibisov.

Tucker Poolman and Anthony Bitetto are the two defencemen who will see a second straight game on the blue line.

Jets backup Laurent Brossoit is set to get his first start of the preseason.

It’s likely that Connor Hellebuyck will take the crease for his first start Friday against St. Louis Blues.
Things are going too well right now to risk a lockout.

That’s why NHL players this week decided not to re-open the collective bargaining agreement, thereby ensuring labour peace for three more years.

"Obviously there are still some issues in the CBA players aren’t happy with," Jets player rep Adam Lowry said, Tuesday. "We’ve had some good talks with the league and they’re going to continue to negotiate, and hopefully we can find a resolution to some of these issues. We agreed the game is continuing to grow and is in a good spot. This just gives us a way to continue to grow the game while we work on those issues."

Lowry was part of teleconference calls on Friday and Sunday, with players union reps discussing their options.

Re-opening the CBA could have led to a possible work stoppage next year.

Those negotiations can now be held with less urgency to get a new deal done.

"Hopefully those productive talks continue," Lowry said. "I don’t think there’s a timeline to possibly have anything extended, but we’re still open to extending the CBA."

It’s just Lowry’s second year as a player rep, and he’s glad to be involved.

"I find this stuff interesting," he said. "It’s good to learn about the league and your union and be able to be informed and make sure the other guys are informed. I enjoy doing this stuff."
It's not the first time a seemingly disgruntled Patrik Laine has voiced his discontent.

He's slammed his own game in the past, admitting a lack of confidence in times of drought.

He's questioned his usage at others, including as recently as Monday with a report out of Finland where he took another swipe at the subject.

"With the merits I have, somewhere else I’d have an opportunity to play with the best players," Laine told Iltalehti reporter Pekka Jalonen.

If everything were rosy, Laine and the Winnipeg Jets may not be embroiled in a contract impasse that appears to have no resolution on the horizon. The restricted free agent would shed that title and would be in training camp sharing smiles with good friend Nikolaj Ehlers, lending a helping hand to the team's burgeoning Finnish contingent, and preparing to put a down year behind him.

Perhaps the contract impasse wouldn't have come at all if Laine didn't sail through the final 58 games of the season with just nine goals. If an 18-goal month in November from the man who scored 44 a year earlier would have been the rule and not the exception.

If he hadn't been left to sort it out on a line that simply didn't work.

If Kevin Hayes could have been Paul Stastny 2.0.

If a complementary centre could have been acquired.

If Laine's play down the last couple weeks of the season and into the playoffs had been the standard, not a late-season revelation that, indeed, he could play at a level worthy of being a top-line player.

There are a lot of 'ifs' upon review.

But here we are, several days into training camp and sans Winnipeg's second overall pick in the 2016 draft.

Winnipeg used to be good and perhaps still is in the eyes of Winnipeg's most popular 21-year-old.

For now, Laine has holed himself up in Switzerland, training with Swiss professional team SC Bern and giving juicy interviews with subtle jabs — perhaps just the latest round of posturing — to Finnish reporters.

Laine's frustration is evident. And he has valid reasons to be disgruntled.

In theory, the line should work. One creative, albeit unpredictable at times, winger in Ehlers who drives shots for, a defensively responsible centre in Bryan Little, and Laine, a threat so grave to opposing goalies one of the world's best shots.

I reject the notion that Laine is a one-dimensional player, capable only of one of the world's best shots.

We've seen that he can operate at a higher level. Just watch the last couple weeks of the regular season from this past year and the first round of the playoffs. Even in its brevity, Laine was hard on the forecheck, grinding for pucks, doing more to make the play come to him and less waiting around for something good to happen.

He seemed to get it and then he began to put it together. And most importantly, he did so under his own volition.

Nothing about playing with Little is holding Laine back from playing at the pace set out by Wheeler and Scheifele, the requirement to receive a bump up the lineup.

Laine's job is to get out of his own way. The team's task is making sure they aren't impeding him, either.

He shouldn't have been left to wallow during the biggest slump of his young career.

A 21-year-old — a kid by NHL standards and by life standards, too — with immense expectations atop his broad shoulders and a history of really getting pretty low with how he views his game needs to be carefully managed.

Again, he's 21 and human, one complete with unique flaws and intricacies, just like you or I. That gets lost in the shuffle of annual average value, term and not living up to a certain standard.

The expectation that these young players should be able to handle the rigors professional sport bestows without skipping a beat, simply because they play at the highest level of their sport, is silly.

None of this is to excuse Laine from his portion of the blame. Any player wanting a multi-million dollar contract needs to prove his worth by his play.

I'd argue more goals in three seasons by anyone not named Alex Ovechkin and Nikita Kucherov warrants many millions, down season notwithstanding.

The Jets need more from Laine and Laine needs more from them.

Winnipeg Sun LOADED 09.18.2019
Jets' Niku, Vesalainen 'in shock' after crash

Paul Friesen
September 17, 2019 3:17 PM CDT

They were all gung-ho about the start of training camp, both with golden opportunities to grab meaningful jobs with the NHL’s Winnipeg Jets.

Day 1 of training camp for defenceman Sami Niku and winger Kristian Vesalainen last Friday kicked off with a bang, all right – the crunch of steel and the explosion of air bags.

The two Finns were in a car crash on Portage Avenue on their way to the Iceplex.

"I had a few seconds when I realized, ‘Oh my god, we’re hitting,’” Niku, who was driving, said on Tuesday, the first day the pair were made available to talk about the incident. “But after that, we were both in shock. We didn’t know what to do. It was a tough time.”

Niku says he was going around 60 kilometres an hour when he broadsided a car making a left turn at an intersection.

"All airbags went off," he said. "That’s why both our necks hurt.”

Niku and Vesalainen missed two days of full practice as a precaution, before returning on Monday.

"It’s pretty shocking,” Vesalainen said. “Obviously I’ve never been in a car accident before that, so it was a huge shock for me. I was looking up and saw the car and was like, ‘Ah, now it’s going to be a huge mess.’ I didn’t have so much time to think about it. It came pretty fast.”

Niku says the woman driving the other car wasn’t hurt.

He wasn’t sure if she realized she’d collided with a couple of Jets.

“She didn’t talk to us,” Niku said. “The cops were right there.”

Neither player got a chance to suit up in Monday’s pre-season opener in Edmonton. But they could on Wednesday at home against Minnesota.

Jobs are open, both on defence, with the departures of Jacob Trouba, Tyler Myers and Ben Chiarot, and on the wing, as Patrik Laine and Kyle Connor remain without contracts and Brandon Tanev left via free agency.

"I think I’m ready,” Niku said. “I had a good summer. So I have good possibility to take my spot in top-six.”

Jets head coach Paul Maurice was just glad nobody was hurt

"First, thank god they’re healthy… they’re OK,” he said. “And then you work your butt off all summer, you’re ready to roll – it’s tough for them. But hey, welcome to the NHL. You’re always going to have some turbulence in your career.”

Winnipeg Sun LOADED 09.18.2019
Jets' Maurice to Laine: 'Nobody gets the keys at 14'

Paul Friesen
September 17, 2019 5:28 PM CDT

It was the shot heard 'round the hockey world, a Patrik Laine howitzer that rattled off the bar in Finland and clanged down Portage Avenue past the Perimeter, all the way to the Icetplex.

The Finnish forward may still be without a contract, but he made his presence felt at Jets training camp on Tuesday.

That's what happens when you throw some shade on your teammates and coaches, as Laine did in an interview with a Finnish reporter.

The high-scoring winger, a restricted free agent embroiled in a contract stalemate with the Jets, suggested he'd be used differently and likely be more productive if he were with another team and had better linemates.

"When you're having contract negotiations, one thing always is who are you playing with," Laine told the newspaper Iltalehti. "With the merits I have, somewhere else I'd have an opportunity to play with the best players. Everybody who understands hockey knows that.

"There are top lines and then there is our line. But I play with the guys I'm told to play."

Laine's comments indicate he's not thrilled with how head coach Paul Maurice employed him on the Jets second line with Bryan Little as his centre.

It doesn't reflect well on Little, either.

Maurice did his best to shrug it all off to just a young, talented player wanting more ice time and a bigger role.

"Here, over the last two years, we've had three really, really young players," Maurice said, referring to Laine, Kyle Connor and Nik Ehlers.

"We can all do the math on that. That means two of them are going to be on one line and one's going to be on the other. And he would be 100 percent right... there's nine other forwards that wouldn't mind playing a little left wing on that line. I get that. Everybody wants it.

"I'll use my driver's license analogy: nobody gets the keys at 14."

Laine is coming off a season that saw his goal total dip from 44 to 30. He scored 18 of them in 12 games in November, and had long slumps after that.

Maurice tried to give him a boost with a brief stint on the top line with Blake Wheeler and Mark Scheifele, beginning in late February. He also dropped Laine down to a fourth line for a time.

So this topic isn't new.

Neither is the notion of Little and Laine being a less-than-ideal match.

The Jets have spent the last two trade deadlines paying steep prices for second-line centres.

The one thing that is new: Laine usually just blames himself.

"I can handle the shade," Maurice said. "That part's not going to bother me a whole hell of a lot. The individual experience is secondary to the team experience."

The captain of that team found himself fielding difficult questions about a teammate he'd rather be passing pucks to on the power play, if not as a regular linemate.

"He spends a good deal of time with that top unit on the power play," Wheeler said of the 21-year-old Laine. "He's a young kid that's had a lot of success in three years. He's definitely not doing it by himself, I can guarantee you that. It's a great trait to have to want more ice time, more playing time. Those are all good things."

Wheeler read mostly from his coach's play book, and suggested Laine's comments might have been borne out of frustration of being on the sidelines.

At one point he said Laine is still "growing up, on and off the ice."

Wheeler acknowledged his job as captain includes helping players accept their roles and buy in to the team concept.

But he brushed aside the notion this could make his job harder, or that he had to reach out to Laine.

"It's a non-issue today," Wheeler said. "None whatsoever. I'm sure there's parts of that that are not exactly how he meant it and blown out of proportion. Just knowing Patty it's not something where he's trying to get his name in the newspaper. It's not a big deal. We'll wake up tomorrow with new headlines.

"This is just something I've become accustomed to doing around here."

Through five days, there's been no shortage of headlines.

The stir caused by Laine, amid his and Connor's ongoing contract impasses, is just the latest in a training camp news cycle that's included Wheeler's own acknowledgement of the personal toll last season took on him, a car crash sidelining up-and-comers Sami Niku and Kristian Vesalainen for three days and the unexpected personal leave of absence for Dustin Byfuglien.

"What's that quote about rough seas making a good sailor?" Maurice said. "Something like that. But I haven't felt it in the room. It's been good, guys are working their asses off. Players got a little bit of turbulence, maybe, outside the jet. But inside the jet it's good."

That may be. We're not allowed in, after all.

But eventually the team's got to step out and play. And then we'll find out if everything's good, like they say.

Just like we found out last spring.
Life of a hockey nomad: Logan Shaw seeks stability with the Jets after years of moving around

By Ken Wiebe
Sep 17, 2019

EDMONTON – Logan Shaw is already ahead of the game when it comes to knowing the city he’s going to be playing in this winter.

By signing a one-year, two-way deal with the Winnipeg Jets, Shaw finds himself in a relatively unique situation – since his organization is one of only three NHL teams to house their American Hockey League affiliate in the same city (the Toronto Maple Leafs and San Jose Sharks are the others).

At this time last year, Shaw took a calculated risk in accepting a tryout with the Calgary Flames and his reasoning for that decision was sound.

“I couldn’t get any (NHL) deals anywhere,” said Shaw, originally a third-round pick (78th overall) of the Florida Panthers in the 2011 Draft. “I was offered a couple of contracts with PTOs (pre-tender offer) with a big club, but I thought I had a good chance in Calgary and that’s why I took that opportunity. But, things happen and it didn’t happen the way that I wanted it to.”

“(Calgary) was a good fit. They were looking for a third or fourth-line player. I know my role. I know I’m not going to score 50 goals in the NHL. I know my role and I can play my role fairly well. I tried to go to (Calgary) and not doing anything else. That was the best opportunity for me to get back to the NHL. Obviously, it wasn’t but you’ve got to live with your decisions, you learn from that. I was happy with it. I wouldn’t be here today if I hadn’t made that decision. I’m happy with the way everything went down so far.”

Unable to crack the roster with the big club, Shaw headed to Stockton, home of the Flames’ affiliate.

That stop was brief, as he ended up signing a pro tryout offer with the San Diego Gulls, the AHL farm team of the Anaheim Ducks, a few days later instead.

Shaw has history with the Ducks, having spent 92 games with them over two seasons before he was claimed off waivers by the Montreal Canadiens, where he closed out the 2017-18 campaign by appearing in 30 games.

Shaw also had a relationship with Ducks general manager Bob Murray, who he also had an understanding with him – if an NHL team came calling, Anaheim would have the right to match, otherwise, he would be released from his AHL contract and allowed to pursue the job elsewhere.

The 26-year-old from Glace Bay, Nova Scotia got off to a strong start, producing two goals and seven points in five games for the Gulls.

That’s when the Jets came calling with an offer for a two-way deal on Nov. 11.

After mulling it over, Shaw decided to take the offer, with the Ducks blessing.

To review, before the regular season was even two months old, Shaw was about to join his third organization – and his fifth team.

“It sucked moving around so much, but that’s part of the game,” Shaw said. “As much as it’s a business, these are our homes, and we have to move around. My family is back home and it’s tough. They want to come out and watch, but I never know where I’m going to be.”

“That’s how my career has been. A dozen different teams. But again, that’s my career. Everyone’s path is different. To have the support that I do at home, that’s the biggest thing that keeps me going. It makes me happy.”

Spoken like a true hockey nomad.

The move to join the Jets organization turned out to be a wise one, as Shaw took on an important role with the Moose and restored his offensive confidence, recording 27 goals and 46 points in 63 games.

About the only tough thing for Shaw to deal with was not getting a sniff with the Jets.

“That’s part of the business side and that comes and goes,” Shaw said. “Maybe on a different team, you do get called up but maybe you don’t. That’s the situation you’re in and I was really happy last year with where we were with the Moose.”

Given the type of offensive production he managed, coupled with his experience, in most other seasons Shaw would have received at least a cameo appearance.

But with the Jets viewed as a serious Stanley Cup contender and trying to find enough playing time for a number of forward prospects, Shaw was left to shine in the minors.

“I mean, everything happens for a reason,” Shaw said, sounding very much like a glass-half-full optimist. "Maybe if I didn’t go to Calgary, maybe I wouldn’t have ended up here last year. So, there are always ways to look at it and that’s the best way to look at it for me.”

Given the lack of a promotion, it would have been natural for many in Shaw’s position to look elsewhere as an unrestricted free agent.

After all, his goal totals put him in a position where he could have done one of two things – earn a bit more money on the AHL portion of his salary on a two-way deal or seek an opportunity with a club where he had a better shot to crack their NHL roster.

It turns out Shaw may achieve both of those goals by staying in the fold with the Jets.

“Wherever I end up, it’s going to be a great situation,” Shaw said.

Coupled with the departure of Brandon Tanev to the Pittsburgh Penguins in free agency and Kevin Hayes in a trade to the Philadelphia Flyers (who ended up signing the pending unrestricted free agent) and the continued contract stalemate with restricted free agents Patrik Laine and Kyle Connor, the battle for the 12th and 13th forward spots with the Jets are basically up for grabs.

Mark Letestu, Gabriel Bourque and Mason Appleton are considered the front-runners, but Shaw is very much in the mix, especially given his versatility in being able to play either centre or wing.

“I played wing for most of my life, but the last two years I played centre. I’m comfortable playing both, whatever keeps me in the lineup, I will play. That’s the way it really doesn’t matter. Whatever it takes,” Shaw said.

“There are spots (available), for sure. The biggest thing is to just focus on what I can do and not trying to play like Mark Scheifele, just play like Logan Shaw. I’m here for a reason and I hope it’s because of the game that I play. That’s the best way to look at it. Every exhibition game is a huge game for me.”

Although the organization is familiar with what Shaw can do, this is his first training camp with the big club and his opportunities to leave an impression began on Monday night in a preseason game against the Edmonton Oilers.

Shaw got some time on the power play and finished with two shots on goal and three hits in just over 16 minutes of ice time.

Jets head coach Paul Maurice isn’t one to make snap judgements this early in training camp, but he admits Shaw has several important qualities required for a guy battling for work on the periphery of the roster.

“So I know he’s a pro, I know he’s played in the NHL,” Maurice said.

“We’ve got him out here, I’ll want to get to know him, I’ll want to get to know his game a little bit. The American Hockey League is a great league, but it’s a different league. There’s a real premium on some of these more veteran players that we brought in, there’s an awful lot of character there in Logan’s game. So for a lot of these guys that are competing for maybe those three positions on the fourth line, that’s an important part of what we’ll look for them to bring.

“So he’s earned it, right? He’s going to get some time, we’ll throw some power-play time at him because his year last year was very valuable to him and the Moose. He did a really good job in that locker room as well. So we want to respect that. He’s going to get a legitimate shot, we’re going to give him a good look.”

Moose head coach Pascal Vincent quickly found out last season that Shaw was willing to do anything that is asked of him and that stretched beyond being one of his top point producers.

For his part, Shaw is taking a simple approach in his quest to return to an NHL roster for the first time since 2017-18.

“For me, it’s just play playoff hockey. That’s what I have to do. If goals come, they come and that’s awesome. The bonus for me is that I got some confidence back in the O-zone last year than maybe I had in previous years,” Shaw said, who has 12 goals and 31 points in 180 NHL
games. “A big thing for me is to play my role and play simple, play hard, get pucks to the net. One of the reasons I got released from Anaheim a few years ago is because I wasn’t driving the puck to the net. As a third or fourth line player, you have to take the puck to the net.

“Just show them that I’m capable of doing that and helping this team win.”

The calendar might only say September, but Shaw’s ability to channel the type of game required to succeed in the spring could make the difference between him getting another chance at the NHL level or returning to the AHL once again.

To do that, the key for Shaw is finding a way to do more with less. While the ice time will be reduced significantly at the NHL level, he still must find a way to contribute and be a useful player.

When you’re not playing special teams and your ice time hovers around the 10-minute mark, instead of being closer to 20, players in that position must find a way to bury their chances when they come.

“You don’t want to mess up,” Shaw said, talking about the mentality bubble guys often adopt when they see their respective roles reduced. “The biggest thing is if you have the puck in the O-zone, you don’t want to turn it over. But it is a game of mistakes and that’s what you learn as you get older. You see that more and you just have to put them in the past.”

That lesson really hit home last season with the Moose.

“Pascal gave me a little bit more of a leash,” Shaw said, noting that if a mistake happened, he wasn’t necessarily going to be riding the pine for an extended period. “That helped me last year. Just forget about your mistakes, because you’re going to make them.”
There was plenty of sloppiness due to rust and less-than-NHL ability, but there were also some moments of brilliance, like on three of the Canucks' goals.

Pre-season hockey is what it is. There can be sensational moments, perhaps not quite like Elias Pettersson's first pre-season game in 2018, when he didn't score but still reminded us all of Pavel Bure, but fun stuff nonetheless.

And there can also be long limp stretches, like we saw on Monday night in Victoria and Tuesday night in Vancouver.

Tuesday's affair, a 4-2 win for the Canucks over the Edmonton Oilers, was a typical pre-season affair in that regard.

There was plenty of sloppiness due to rust and less-than-NHL ability, but there were also some moments of brilliance, like on three of the Canucks' goals.

Brandon Sutter opened the scoring by making a lovely backhand move on a penalty shot, a chance drawn after he was fouled on a breakaway. Pettersson got the Canucks' second goal in the third period, hammering home a rebound to even the score at two and the go-ahead goal was potted by Brandon Sutter after a perfect shot-pass was fired his way by Alex Edler.

Sutter was left unattended on the right side of the crease and delfted the puck into the yawning Oilers cage behind goalie Shane Starrett.

"I told Eagle I'll take 30 of those if I can," Sutter said with a smile after the game. "We managed to win a faceoff back. Eagle saw me the whole time, I'm not sure what happened on their end. I just went back post and I could see he was looking at me … I think anyone could score one of those."

Tanner Pearson added an empty net marker to seal the deal.

"Probably want to spend more time in the offensive zone," Sutter said post-game about his team's performance.

The Oilers did dominate the first period but Canucks netminder Thatcher Demko stood tall. He would make 35 saves on the night.

The Oilers' goals were scored by Tomas Jurco and Patrick Russell.

Here's what we learned…

Petey's ready to go

Elias Pettersson said on the weekend he's just ready to get to the real games.

"I'm definitely ready to get the season going," he said Sunday after scoring a thrilling Forsbergian deke in a post-scramble shootout.

He put his readiness fully on display in the first period.

He found himself essentially on a one-on-two and still managed to find an opening on the left as he entered the Edmonton zone. He attacked the gap and created a shooting opportunity.

And then on the Canucks' first power play of the game, he displayed his crafty stick-handling, creating space for himself in tight quarters more than once.

In the third period, Pettersson was in the right place at the right time when he banged home a Micheal Ferland rebound to knot the game up at 2-2.

"I saw he was was out of the net and I knew he would extend himself to the maximum so I tried to go five-hole," Pettersson said of the goal.

Even so, the young star said he still has much to improve.

"It's always nice to score but like I'm not happy with my game," he said. "I lost too many pucks. I don't know. The puck was slipping from me … got to work on it. I'm going to get better."

This season is going to be fun, at least when No. 40's on the ice.

Power up

Adding Tyler Myers and Quinn Hughes gives the Canucks multiple options for how the first power play unit gets assembled.

It's almost certain that the first quintet will feature just one defenceman manning the point.

In seasons past, the primary point man has almost exclusively been Edler.

The Eagle did take plenty of turns with the first unit on Tuesday night, but Hughes was also in the mix and the difference between the two is stark. Rotating the D-men can be effective in keeping the penalty killers off balance. Edler, of course, is more of a stationary option, while Hughes is always moving his feet.

Myers' pass

Tyler Myers, the real big guy, showed on his first shift what the Canucks hope he'll do all year: great breakout passes.

He wired a cross-ice, cross-neutral zone pass to Tanner Pearson.

Didn't see that kind of pass very often in 2018-19.

Lost chiclets

Quinn Hughes lost a couple teeth to an errant stick by Oilers forward Cameron Hebig.

This of course prompted at least one joke about how this might not have happened if the Oilers' last name was Hesmall instead.

He left the bench for about 10 minutes in the first period as the medics tended to his wounded face.

The young defenceman left the bench again in the third period and didn't return, but the cause wasn't clear.

Travis Green said post-game that his removal from the game was only "precautionary," though he didn't indicate what exactly the injury was.

"Not sure where it's at but it's nothing major," Green said.

Juolevi is good but still may not play

Asked if Olli Juolevi might play in a pre-season game, Green demurred.

"I'm not sure if we'll see him or not," he said. "We'll take it day by day."

"He's good," he added, when asked if there's an update on his injury status.

Tough start

The first period wasn't a great one for the Canucks, as they managed just three shot attempts at even strength to the Oilers' 25.

Then again, it's just pre-season.

Lucky bounces

The Oilers hit a pair of posts, including on a backhanded deke by Ryan McLeod that would have made it 3-1.

They also hit the post with the goalie pulled.

Boeser's on his way

At least one fan spotted Brock Boeser on the plane on his way from Minneapolis to Vancouver.

The star winger spent the day with his family before taking an evening flight west. He's expected to join his teammates at practice on Wednesday.

Camp cuts

There are a bunch of faces who likely won't be around in a day or two, Travis Green confirmed post-game.

FWIW: There appear to be 11 players remaining who don't need waivers to be assigned to Utica.

Team has 49 players remaining on camp roster after cuts Tuesday. https://t.co/3JhWtZMx— Ben Birmell (@OD_Birmell) September 18, 2019

Bless the restricted list

Every player who NHL teams still have rights to appears in the league’s database, which makes for some pretty hilarious scratches printouts in pre-season.
Kirill Koltsov bolted from the Canucks’ minor league squad, the Manitoba Moose, halfway through the 2004-05.

Good story

Zane McIntyre may not be around much longer — he played the third on Monday, backed up on Tuesday — but he’s got a good story to him.

More here from the Grand Forks Herald’s Brad Schlossman.

You think he doesn’t still care?

Spotted pre-game: Ken Holland watching pre-season Red Wings.

Old habits are heard to break.

Hard moments

The Canucks are indeed planning a way to honour our late friend Jason Botchford. Details to be announced, but from what I’ve heard, it’s going to be excellent.

"Which one was Botchford’s seat." I was asked earlier.


Vancouver Province: LOADED: 09.18.2019
Vancouver Canucks

Patrick Johnston: Bo Horvat takes lead as Canucks’ ‘middle man’ in union politics

PATRICK JOHNSTON
September 17, 2019 5:43 PM PDT

The star centre, now his team’s players’ association representative, feels fortunate to have had ex-teammate Erik Gudbranson as a role model.

Six months ago, Bo Horvat wasn’t following the National Hockey League’s collective bargaining agreement debate too closely. He may have been an alternate NHL Players’ Association representative to Erik Gudbranson, but given how dialled into the facts and union politics Gudbranson was, that was alright.

And then the big defenceman was traded.

Suddenly, Horvat found himself the Vancouver Canucks’ player representative. It was a whirlwind, he admits in hindsight.

“I kind of got thrown into the fire a little bit after Guddy left,” Horvat said. “As a young guy coming into it, it’s a big eye-opener.”

There was a lot to get his head around.

The current CBA still has issues, many players believe. Escrow, in which the players have parts of their salaries clawed back by the owners to maintain a 50/50 split of hockey-related league revenues between the owners and the players, has been a big issue.

They also have to think about what they might want the next edition of the CBA to look like, too.

The players’ association announced Monday it would not reopen the CBA, ensuring another three years of labour peace. The agreement isn’t perfect, but the players are hopeful they can work with the league’s owners to refine its current shape and also set up a framework for the future.

The players made their decision on a Sunday afternoon conference call; the voices on the call were predominantly veterans, Horvat said.

“But there was a good amount of young guys listening in on the call and giving their input as well,” he said.

Horvat was proud of how the process had played out.

“You want to play, you want to play for the fans and play for yourselves … but at the same time you’ve got to do what’s fair for all of us as well,” he said.

To get up to speed after Gudbranson left, Horvat quickly immersed himself in the issues. He asked questions whenever he could, he said, looking to get up to speed on what opinions were out there, and what he needed to know to keep his teammates fully informed.

“Just talking to our reps, talking to different guys who have been around the league, who have been through the last CBA,” Horvat said of how he learned on the job. “I went to one of the meetings in Chicago, and just chatting with different guys and chatting with the guys who work for the NHLPA, trying to get up to speed.”

On top of sharing his and his teammates thoughts to the rest of the association as the team’s representative, it’s also Horvat’s job to fill his teammates in on what’s going on with the association’s business and debates and also be the local expert for questions they might have.

He’s a middle man, both in his role and in his age.

“I’m kind of like the middle man a little bit in the room, because I’m, you know, 24, and we’ve younger guys and older guys. So to be a guy who can relate to both sides, I think, is great.”

Horvat feels fortunate to have had Gudbranson as a role model.

“He was really good at it. It’s tough to fill his shoes for that, he’s very involved,” Horvat said. “He does have strong opinions.”

Horvat agreed with the notion that Gudbranson, a confident speaker who was always well-versed in the issues, could have a future in politics.

“He should. I think that’s his calling,” he said.
The Vancouver Canucks demoted 13 players to their AHL affiliate on Tuesday; none of the names are a surprise.

Forwards Carter Bancks, Dylan Blujus, Carter Camper, Tanner Sorenson, Wacey Hamilton, Dylan Sadowy and Dyson Stevenson, and defencemen Stefan Leblanc, Mitch Eliot, Zach Frye, Matt Petgrave and Aaron Thow, plus goaltender Jake Kielly, are the first group of players to be farmed out.

Most of the demoted are AHL veterans, though both Eliot and Kielly are young, although long-shot prospects for the Canucks.

The Canucks also sent Carson Focht (Calgary), Ethan Keppen (Flint), Arturs Silovs (Barrie) and Jett Woo (Calgary) back to their junior clubs.

Will Warm, who will play this season for the WHL’s Victoria Royals, was at Canucks camp on a tryout deal but has been released.

There are still 46 players in camp with the Canucks, who face the Edmonton Oilers at Rogers Arena on Tuesday night before playing the Oilers back in Edmonton on Thursday and the Los Angeles Kings on Saturday in Salt Lake City.

Vancouver Province: LOADED: 09.18.2019
Why Brock Boeser’s bridge deal incentivizes the Canucks to expedite their contention timeline

By Harman Dayal
Sep 17, 2019

Brock Boeser’s three-year bridge deal with an annual average value of $5.875 million carries implications that go beyond what meets the eye.

The more obvious takeaway is that it signals a market correction with RFAs coming off their entry-level contracts as they push for shorter-term contracts that allow them to negotiate a third deal while still in the heart of their prime. Look at some of the best value deals in the NHL, most of them are from budding stars signing lengthy agreements off their ELCs — whether it’s Nathan MacKinnon ($6.3 million), Mark Scheifele ($6.125 million) or even Bo Horvat as a local example.

“I think there’s more eagerness from young players to do bridge deals now, going forward,” Jim Benning explained immediately after the extension was announced. “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.”

With a bridge deal, a player is betting on himself knowing that he has an opportunity to cash in big-time later on. From the team’s perspective, they lock in their young star on a cheap cap hit — Charlie McAvoy and Zach Werenski’s $4.9 million and $5 million price tags as two of the most recent examples. These teams are likely to have to pony up for a much bigger ticket down the line, but you can understand the philosophy and how it serves the needs of both the players and the team in some situations. Keeping this context in mind, let’s look at Boeser’s agreement and the value it provides.

What’s Boeser worth?

Boeser is a great player, but putting a number behind his value and then comparing that to the contract he received isn’t as easy.

Fortunately, we can use Dom Luszczyszyn’s Game Score model — a tool that takes individual and on-ice production into account to provide an estimate of Boeser’s value. Thanks to the salary research Dom has done, we can put dollar figures on the star winger’s value. This is not a projection of what he should have made on his second contract, but simply what he’s worth.

Boeser’s free market value as a player amounts to $66.7 million over seven years — meaning he provides the value of a $9.5 million player for the next seven years based on talent alone. Of course, the 22-year-old doesn’t have the open market rights of a UFA and had even less leverage than a regular RFA as a 10.2(c) player. So it’s not fair to say the Canucks got a steal because it assumes a free market scenario that doesn’t exist for Boeser.

But what’s Boeser’s worth as a player once we take into account his RFA status and the player-friendly three-year term? With this context, Dom’s same model projects Boeser to provide the value of a $6.6 million player. The Canucks were always going to get a bargain when they went the bridge route, but even with that background considered, they got good value.

Vancouver’s in a unique window right now where they have their high-end talent locked up on very cap-friendly rates: Elias Pettersson and Quinn Hughes have two years left on their ELCs, Bo Horvat clocks in at $5.5 million and now Boeser’s on a discounted hit as well.

In a cap world where money is a finite resource, extracting great value at the top of the lineup allows a team to bolster the other areas of its roster in a way other teams that are paying full value for their elite players simply can’t. Complicating matters for the Canucks, however, is that the rest of their squad isn’t built to contend because of the deadweight salary attached.

The Canucks aren’t quite far enough along in their rebuilding stage to take full advantage of Pettersson and Hughes’ ELC window. There is, however, a similar, staggered window that might look more attractive to an organization that’s looking to turn the proverbial corner sooner rather than later.

In the chart above, I’ve listed the open market value per Dom’s model for some of the Canucks’ top players for the years they have left on their deal. In the column furthest to the right, I’ve compared that value to their current cap hit. Pettersson and Hughes, for instance, provide a surplus value of $10.58 million and $4.58 million, respectively, for the next two years while they’re still on their ELCs. It’s not just them, though — Boeser, Horvat and J.T. Miller are all providing value well in excess of what they’re being paid.

The Canucks have staggered their contract structure in a very interesting way, Vancouver has a huge advantage for the next two years thanks to the ELCs for Pettersson and Hughes. They’ll still yield meaningful excess values for the third year, however, with Boeser, Horvat and Miller. The fourth year will represent a key timeline because at that season’s conclusion both Horvat and Miller will be eligible for significant pay raises as UFAs.

Four years from now, the Canucks will have lost their massive contract advantages. Sure, prospects like Vasily Podkolzin will likely emerge, but there’s no denying that it’s a lot easier for a team to win when the cost for their high-end talent is coming in well below market value. Managing the cap and building the depth of a Cup contender around a core is a challenge when the best players are getting the big paydays they deserve.

Some of Vancouver’s bad contracts will come off the books during this time, too, which will partially offset the value contracts that expire, but the Canucks are in a unique window for the next four years.

Teams have typically yielded terrific value by giving their high-end RFAs like Boeser lengthy extensions as they come off their ELCs, but with a correcting RFA market, it’s hard to tell what dollar figure it would have taken for a six- or seven-year deal to get done.

I’m always one to favour a team locking in its best players when they come off ELCs to lengthy terms, but at this point, it’s not the reality Vancouver is going to live with. This scenario leaves two factors to consider — the Canucks will extract bargain value from Boeser for the next three years, which is great, but it comes at the potential cost of a much bigger price tag thereafter. That hiked up cost will be determined over the following three seasons, but I’d bet it’s very high if he continues riding shotgun with an only improving Pettersson.

With a bridge deal, teams create a short-term competitive advantage at the price of a greater long-term cost compared to what a six or seven-year contract might have looked like. This is very beneficial for a team like the Bruins, for example, who must be giddy at the idea of locking in McAvoy at under $5 million annually.

The Canucks aren’t in a position that compares as favourably, but with Boeser inked for a discounted cap hit for three years, their high-end talent is coming in well below market value. Managing the cap and building the depth of a Cup contender within the next four years. This doesn’t preclude Vancouver from contending beyond that, but by then they’ll need to grasp a different sort of contract and cap maneuvering.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Canucks preseason: Jake Virtanen’s redemption, Jim Benning’s harsh zinger and the Brock Boeser Plan

Sep 16, 2019

By Harman Dayal

Sometimes a little chip on your shoulder is all you need.

Jake Virtanen being banished to the third group on the first day of training camp looks to have stoked the fire for a strong start.

Carrying an undermanned roster with them to Calgary, the Canucks were outmatched — and outshot 38 to 13 — almost all game against a talented Flames squad that had almost all its regulars. Richard Bachman’s superb goaltending kept Vancouver in the contest, but it was Virtanen’s two goals, capped by the overtime winner, that made the difference in the end.

“Man, what a win by those guys,” said Travis Green, who was coaching the team in Victoria. “It’s great to see. That’s one of those games where you look at it on paper and I was a little worried for those guys going in and man, they must have played hard and played well so I’m happy, real happy for them.”

Virtanen has struggled through his career with tunnel vision, suppressing creativity and resulting in poor decision-making. He’s been someone who generates so many offensive zone entries with possession but hasn’t been able to convert them into goals on a consistent basis. This play flashed the vision and patience that many have been dying to see out of the 23-year-old, as he waited out the sprawling defender before calmly corralling and whipping a rocket top corner.

I’d hesitate to read too much into preseason, and it’s far from a realistic gauge for player evaluation, especially if we’re talking about one game, but it’s encouraging nonetheless to see that Virtanen’s responded in a positive way.

Victoria: Hockey Town

It was a great weekend in easily one of the most charming cities in the country.

Victoria’s hockey fans were loud, welcoming, fun. They seemed to enjoy themselves.

Roughly 10,000 people attended training camp over the three days this weekend, including nearly 5,000 fans on Sunday. Those 5,000 fans were treated to Elias Pettersson’s Forsberg deke and couldn’t have been more appreciative.

Long lines of autograph seekers followed the Canucks everywhere, and the players obliged.

The Canucks charged fans $5 to attend training camp with a portion of the proceeds benefitting BC Hockey, which will distribute the funds to help support the growth of the sport at the grassroots level in Victoria.

Meanwhile, it was a sellout crowd of over 7,000 for Monday’s preseason tilt.

The crowd made up for a game that got interesting only in the final five minutes. Fans gave former Victoria Royals captain and Calgary Flames prospect Matthew Phillips a rousing ovation when he was recognized on the jumbotron during a stoppage. They cheered the Brock Boeser contract extension when it was announced in arena. Victoria’s hockey fans were genuinely loud — during a preseason game! — and even caused the energy levels on the ice to briefly lift as Vancouver mounted a comeback late in the third period.

And at the end of the game, the fans gave both teams a standing ovation.

“Hockey has always been big here,” Saanich peninsula product Jordie Benn said of the experience. “I hear the Royals produce a pretty good crowd, it’s good to see. There’s a lot of hockey out here, a lot of kids playing hockey. I mean, it’s Canada!”

There’s not much to glean from training camp and preseason, but one of the pivotal things to watch for is how new players mesh with the team.

It’s a particularly pertinent factor for a Canucks team that’s gone through a lot of offseason changes and needs to play its best hockey from Day 1.

From the start of camp, Bo Horvat and JT Miller have been a promising fit.

“He’s been great, so smart, undercover fast, he’s got a big body, but he’s got some skill and he can shoot the puck,” Horvat said at camp when asked about his first impressions of Miller.

“I think we can complement each other well, be big bodies and protect the puck down low. Hopefully, we stick together for a while.”

For his part, Miller was just as excited when asked the same question about Horvat: “There’s nothing to not like about his game. He’s a bulldozer north-south, he takes pucks to the net, he’s hard to play against, he plays penalty kill, power play, wins faceoffs. I don’t know what more you could want. He’s a stud.”

The duo got its first taste of game action Monday.

Their connection was evident throughout and eventually paid dividends during a third-period goal. Miller bats the defenders into thinking he’s going back to the point for the pass — creating the lane for a no-look feed into the slot for Horvat.

“I thought it was pretty good,” Horvat said when asked about his experience with Miller on Monday. “He hit me with a backdoor pass in the first period. He’s such a smart player and you saw the pass he made to make it 4-3, that was a good pass too. It was a hard camp, and we were starting to feel it toward the second half there, but he’s definitely a special player, and hopefully, we can stay together here.”

Miller has changed teams a few times in his career. How long does it take him to get used to a new system and linemates?

“It takes a camp for sure,” Miller said. “I think it takes all the preseason games that I play, the terminology here is a little different, the drills for practice are a little bit different, building chemistry with your linemates is different so it takes time.

“Some guys can pick it up faster than others, so I’m working really hard to make sure … that I can be in the picture and ready to go (for the season opener) on Oct. 2.”

Jim Benning met with the media to discuss the Boeser deal in Victoria following warmups on Monday night.

It was all normal enough. Benning politely answered pointed questions regarding Boeser’s three-year bridge contract. And then Patrick Johnston from Province Sports stepped up.

Johnston asked a pretty good question about the lower-than-expected $5.875 million cap hit, and how it matched up with Benning’s hopes at the beginning of the contract talks.

Benning responded with an out-of-character zinger.

Johnston: “When you broke down, you know, at beginning of (these talks), you had an ideal number. How close did you get it?”

Benning: “Oh thank god it wasn’t your number this morning!”

“No, we didn’t know, when you go through a negotiation you think about what it’s going to look like long term and what it’s going to be short term. … So we’re happy with the number.”

After the media session, I made a mental note to figure out what number Jim meant. Johnston’s notebooks, recent stories and Twitter feed yielded nothing.

So if Johnston didn’t present the number, then presumably Benning was referring to Province Sports as a whole.

We suspect that Benning is referring to this Ed Willes column published on Sunday by the Province Sports.

“OK, Marner has been the more productive player,” Willes writes in the column. “But, if you believe the Canucks are trying to bring Boeser in at $7 million per, is that difference worth $4 million a year? Let’s look at it another way. Even if it’s worth $2 million a year, that puts Boeser in the $9 million ballpark and that will impact the negotiations for Elias Pettersson in two years and Bo Horvat two years after that.”

We can’t be sure, but it makes sense.

The Boeser Plan

What’s next for Boeser now that he’s signed?

Well, we all know he’s had a trying summer back home in Minnesota. Now that the ink is drying on his new three-year contract, he’ll take the day to sort out stuff and fly to Vancouver on Tuesday night. He’s expected back on the ice with his teammates on Wednesday morning.
“He’ll go through his own mini-camp,” Green said, summarizing his plans to reintegrate Boeser. “We’re out of that stage where we’ve pushed the players now, and now we’re starting to manage the players and work on a few of the finer details — faceoffs, power plays, special teams, little areas of our game we want to get better at. So we’ll have to talk about that as a group, trainers and strength coaches. But I’d think he’ll play in the Salt Lake City game or the game after that.”

Green wouldn’t commit to making Boeser complete the bag skate, which the rest of the Canucks went through on the first day of camp. Horvat, however, sounded like a guy who might blow the whistle himself.

“He’s coming back, he’s going to have to do it,” Horvat joked. “We’re going to make him. He’s not getting off that easy!”
The Athletic / LeBrun: NHL owners ecstatic over the rare forecast for CBA peace

By Pierre LeBrun
Sep 17, 2019 7

NEW YORK – Gary Bettman had two different speeches ready for Tuesday’s Board of Governors meeting.

The NHL commissioner got to use the one he most definitely wanted to deliver.

A day after the NHL Players’ Association announced it wasn’t opting out of the CBA next year, providing at least three years of labour peace, the mood in the room full of NHL owners and team executives was a mix of ecstatic, blended with a touch of relief.

“Very important, hugely important,” Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment chairman Larry Tanenbaum beamed after the three-hour meeting wrapped up. “I must tell you, it was the right thing to do for both sides. I couldn’t be happier. Let’s play hockey.”

That the owners announced a similar decision earlier this month was a no-brainer, it’s the players that had everyone in the game on pins and needles because it wasn’t nearly as obvious a decision.

But in the end, the players decided to believe in the current process, and it was welcome news from the men in suits signing their paycheques.

“I think it was a wise decision,” Jeremy Jacobs, the Boston Bruins owner who remains chairman of the Board of Governors, said afterward. “I think all of us will profit from it.”

Jacobs meant player and owners would profit, in case that wasn’t obvious. I’m not kidding when I say both Jacobs and Tanenbaum, two of the most influential owners in hockey, had genuine excitement in their faces. These weren’t cliches they were throwing at me, it was a bonafide feeling – and a rare one – of labour peace.

Jacobs, for one, hasn’t been present in the CBA sessions between the NHL and NHLPA, no owner has yet, frankly a welcome reality from the players’ perspective. Had the players opted out of the CBA, you had to wonder how the tone of these negotiations might have changed, particular if Jacobs and a few other hard-line owners suddenly entered the negotiation room.

All of which weighed on the players at least to some degree, I think, before their decision Monday, even if it wasn’t the main factor. As I’ve said before, the idea not poking the bear – or the owner of the Bruins – well, you can’t discount that.

Time will tell, of course, but the players made the assessment that negotiating concessions and changes with Bettman and Daly, and without Jacobs and other owners in the room, was the right path to stay on.

The players’ decision was tremendously welcomed by the Board of Governors, who can now stay focused on selling the game.

“Frankly, I think we all think the game is on a rocket ship,” said Vegas Golden Knights president George McPhee.

For a market like Las Vegas, which has taken the NHL by storm, a work stoppage next year would have been harmful to that momentum. Instead, McPhee was delighted with the players’ decision.

“Really satisfying, it’s great for the game, it’s great for everyone in the game, and everyone that watches it, to have the stability and continuity,” he said.

“The game is in a really good place, and growing in popularity. High hopes for continued discussions regarding the CBA.”

Think of Carolina, too, a market that came alive again last season.

“I think it’s good for all markets,” said Hurricanes owner Tom Dundon when asked about labour peace.

Is it perfect? Of course not. There are owners who would like to see certain changes to the CBA.

“Peace is good, but we have lots to fix,” said one NHL owner who requested anonymity.

But the CBA negotiations to date have really been more about the league trying to appease the NHLPA, which conceded a lot in 2004-05 and 2012-13.

The risk, of course, from the players’ perspective is that they lost their biggest leverage point by not opting out. It didn’t take long for Monday’s announcement to come out before some nay-sayers wondered exactly what the motivation was for the NHL to push ahead in CBA talks with the same urgency. A narrative that I put to Bettman on Tuesday.

“I don’t think that’s a fair characterization, that sounds like yours, it doesn’t sound like any credible source,” the commissioner responded in a jousting mood. “But no, seriously, we have the same interest that the players do. And that’s to make sure that the game is good for all stakeholders especially and including our fans.”

Talks are scheduled to continue, and sources suggest if all goes well – if all goes well – there would even be a tentative CBA extension in place within two months, if not sooner.

Imagine that for a moment, a CBA extension two and a half years ahead of expiry.

That’s if this thing doesn’t go off the rails, which well, you have to always allow as a possibility given the history between the two parties.

But the league’s interest in labour peace does seem real, more so than I’ve ever seen in some 25 years covering the NHL.

And it made me wonder about Bettman’s own legacy, about perhaps wanting his final years at the helm of the NHL to be punctuated without a labour fight.

I put that angle to him on Tuesday, and he waived me off immediately.

He’s not thinking about that at all, the commissioner insisted.

Besides, he added, when I referred to this being his last CBA: “Who says it’s my last?” he smiled.

Such as it is.

“There’s no update on that, we talk regularly,” said veteran Nashville GM David Poile after the Board of Governors meeting.

I do think a new contract for Predators captain Roman Josi will get done, but I’m always intrigued by negotiations with pending UFAs on the Predators ever since the day Ryan Suter left town. I just know that Poile vowed to himself he would never lose a player of that magnitude for nothing again.

So there is a time element to all this even if we’re far away from having to make that kind of drastic decision. The Predators’ only focus is getting Josi signed and there’s been much effort all summer on doing that.

“We haven’t even started the season,” Poile said to all that. “We both have the right intentions. We’ve both said all the right things to each other. We just haven’t agreed to the number. That’s really where we are.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
On Monday, Sept. 16, 2019, a crazy thing happened. By god, 18 real NHL teams dressed players in their teams' real equipment and actual colours and damned if they didn’t face off against one another in nine separate hockey matches.

Sort of.

If you wanna get technical, all of the Predators, Panthers, Devils, Canucks and Flames had their players divided to make two split-squad teams, so all told it was more like 13 teams that threw players over the boards to create nine games. So things aren’t quite normal yet, but dammit, there was hockey, and hockey is entertaining as hell. It also gives us our first chances at answering questions we have about what teams really are, where individual players are at and who we get to make fun of most on social media. (My goal is to cut the Sens some slack this year, if — and this is a pretty sizeable if — Eugene Melnyk will just let me. I’d bet against that happening.)

The question we all have with hockey this time of year, or at least should have if we’re trying to be savvy hockey watcher-inners is, “how much do these current results matter?” What from this week’s outcomes tell us anything at all? Because frankly, it’s very easy to look at those games and disregard just about everything that isn’t “Player X scored a few, Goalie Y let a few in.”

There’s minor leaguers out there. Few have skated in a meaningfully competitive game in 3-5 months. Even fewer are on the same page with systems, there’s little chemistry anywhere and the varying amounts of pressure on players — from near-zero for some to soaring amounts for others — all combine to make it seem impossible to know which grains of information actually point us in the right direction.

Fans have the luxury of being preseason nihilists. Teams don’t, and finding the signals in the noise is harder now than ever for them.

So that’s what teams are doing every day right now — scrutinizing the context around the results like the ones we were given last night, to determine what’s worth weight. That’s what I want to do here today — help you scrutinize the context of the information that’s starting to pour in.

Did the guy who scored a couple times in preseason get lucky or did he make that luck? Did the defenseman who played error-free hockey just have chance on his side, dealing him an easy hand? Or was he with a great partner who made it easy?

As an evaluator, you’re basically trying to process “results rel,” a not-at-all-real stat I just made up that refers to success/failure of results relative to the opportunity that player was given. It’s a lot easier to score the OT winner when you’re actually put on the ice in overtime, and with good players. It’s pretty hard to get points alongside pure grinders. Small samples are tortuously misleading in hockey, yet preseason games can have life-altering consequences for fringe players.

So without further ado, to help with your own interpretations of “is that something or is that nothing?” with the mountains of preseason information we’re getting right now, here’s five pieces of context to help you sift through it all. I’ve picked these things up over my years as a player, on a coaching staff in the AHL, and as a member of the media.

Many teams started training camp with something like 70-plus players before cutting that down fairly quickly to a number somewhere closer to 40. It’s at that point that some people start to think “Boy, they kept Tim Timmersley, hey? They must like him more than I expected.” Or they think, “Whoa, they kept Timmersley, but not Frank Frankerson. I thought they’d have liked Frankerson more for sure.”

Don’t … don’t have those thoughts. Frankerson, Timmersley or whoever else at the fringes of the 40-plus skaters? There’s very little to be learned by when those guys get sent away. A lot of those moves are just scheduling convenience.

Among those players that are clearly not going to be on the team, first cuts are generally made with one goal in mind: having two functional practice groups. That means the priorities are having the right amount of LWs and Cs and RWs, and at least three (maybe four) D pairs per group.

You need enough guys to do drills without bagging everyone (fewer guys means if once you’re done a drill you’re right back up, so more regs … every drill becomes a bag skate), and not so many that the ice isn’t clogged-up shitshow with inactive bodies standing all over the rink.

(Preseason means WAY too many coaches on the ice as is. I was the AHL video coach and it’s not like the Leafs are the only team clogging skates. The more, in these cases, is not actually the merrier, as much as I enjoyed it.)

So yes, the roster trims are just about making functional groups, which is often awkward when there aren’t clean talent tiers that break off as tidy as you’d like. Sometimes a player you like as much as the next guy has to go, sometimes you’re keeping players that can barely keep up just to have enough bodies. But the comfort of having proper numbers trumps other considerations here.

Lineup composition shouldn’t be as quickly written off as I’ve seen some on social media suggest it should. The obvious caveat I keep seeing is that “it’s preseason,” and that’s fair. Sometimes weird numbers means a seemingly random skater is handed legit star linermates. Sometimes a pencilled-in NHLer has to skate with obvious minor leaguers. Sometimes a past AHL-r that might make the NHL club is written in on the fifth line because of some subjective decision by who wrote the lines (the drama with how you list the lines is a fascinating thing behind the scenes). But in the end practice time is scarce and valued. Particularly in the early season, and so teams generally don’t start the year all fun and experimental. Most want the guys who are going to be playing together to play together. They want to test their theories. These are our first real looks, at least at the top part of the rosters, of what each team’s coaching staff has in mind.

Something to remember about how these decisions all work: an NHL team is made up of 20-plus different individual stories, and the more people you can put in a position to succeed, the better. Obviously. So teams set out a plan early in the year for how to get the most out of the most people, with the priority being getting the most out of the players who matter most. Picking apart roster construction will probably yield more about how a team is thinking than any preseason game possibly could.

Within each game, it’s impossible to keep track of each player and to tally up some sort of mental performance score for everyone. Going into each season, most teams have relative certainty around what their team will look like, some sort of “no one changes our mind, this is what we’ve got” roster. Sometimes they’ll have two guys pencilled in for the same spot, otherwise, their team is mostly set in their heads.

So what you’re looking for is things that are unusually good or bad, and I don’t mean goals or points. I mean the fifth year NHLer who shows a speed burst he hasn’t shown in the past. The second year player who outmuscles someone for the first time ever. The aging vet who gets walked wide by the 19-year-old rookie. And the player whose linemates get noticeably better or worse as camp goes on as a result of these things. That’s where you’ll find the good stuff.

As nothing happens, the preseason vision comes closer to fruition. To change that vision, players have to show something beyond (or below) what’s expected. (Which is another reason preseason hockey looks different – individual goals put “winning the game” near the bottom of the priority totem pole, well below “demonstrating skill.”)

In practice, teams can build the drills to test the questions they need answered. If they want to know how their defenders stack up, they can play even-man (2-on-2 or 3-on-3) below the tops of the circles for 20 minutes. They can run full-ice rush drills. They can spend as much time as they want getting a feel for what players did with their offseasons much better than they can over 17 minutes of shifts when a player might have been involved in five meaningful moments. They can create 10 of those in practice immediately. That’s probably worth noting for beat writers. What they’re working on in practices might not be for the player’s education so much as for those of the evaluators.)

And finally …

You can be terrible at blackjack, but sometimes you’re just dealt 21. Likewise, you can name some pretty not-great NHLers who’ve scored NHL goals. Sometimes the cards just go your way. And BOY, are you hoping to get dealt some cards in preseason.

Because there are so few hard stats in hockey that are readily available, goals and assists will always be more valuable than a great backcheck or a great breakout pass or anything like that. Nobody misses those moments. If a roster race is close between two players, the guy with the raw numbers will always have the leg up.

As great as it is to have on-ice puck back, that’s not the part that intrigues me most. It’s how a team’s lineups change as they go on, it’s which players earn more opportunity or less, it’s how the chaos shakes out into
clean opening night lineups. Information on what we can expect to see this season is starting to trickle in – filtered through enough layers of context, the start of the season picture can start to emerge.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Yesterday, we fired up the Bizarro-meter for our annual rundown of the offseason’s strangest moves, starting with the Eastern Conference. It barely registered a reading for the Capitals and Bruins, beeped a few times for the Islanders and Red Wings and was actually starting to smoke by the time we got to the Habs and Hurricanes.

Today, we move on to the Western Conference. Will anyone top Carolina’s East-leading score of 9.1? Let’s find out.

Pacific Division

Anaheim Ducks

The offseason so far: They didn’t add much to a roster that missed the playoffs. But they did subtract — getting younger in the process — by using a buyout on Corey Perry and preparing for a future without injured veterans Ryan Kesler and Patrick Eaves.

But their strangest story was: They made the expected choice behind the bench when they hired Dallas Eakins as coach, although it took long enough that by the time they actually announced it you went “Wait, didn’t that already happen a month ago?”

Bizarro-meter ranking: 3.5/10. The Eakins hiring took longer than it should have and the Perry move was jarring, but both made sense.

Arizona Coyotes

The offseason so far: They added Carl Soderberg and hired former Sabres coach Phil Housley as an assistant. But their biggest move was a blockbuster trade that brought in Phil Kessel, who should address their lack of scoring right up until Rick Tocchet strangles him. So, mid-October.

But their strangest story was: Signing Clayton Keller to an eight-year, $57.2-million extension that everyone agrees was either way too much money or a brilliant bargain.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 3.8/10. The Kessel deal, while big and not without some risk, fit where this team is at right now, and looking up a young star long-term usually works out. But I did award a few bonus points for this quote.

Los Angeles Kings

The offseason so far: The big news was the hiring of Todd McLellan, who replaces interim boss Willie Desjardins. They also bought out veteran Dion Phaneuf.

But their strangest story was: Not really doing anything else aside from a few extensions. You might imagine that a team that just finished 30th overall would do more to reshape the roster, but the Kings pretty much stood pat.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 4.2/10. A little bit of patience with a rebuild isn’t necessarily a bad thing, especially if the alternative is throwing money at bad-fit veterans. Still, you’d typically see a bit more turnover from a last-place team.

Seattle Kraken

The offseason so far: They hired Ron Francis as the team’s first GM, and started filling out the front office. That included hiring analytics guru Alexander Mandrycky away from the Wild, having her sit in on the hiring process for the new GM, and declaring that analytics is going to be “a way of life.” Uh oh, this team doesn’t even have a name yet and it’s already smarter than most of the competition.

But their strangest story was: Existing.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 4.5/10. How many times do you think Francis has already called Dale Tallon, just to mess with him?

Calgary Flames

The offseason so far: They looked at last year’s Oilers and said: “Let’s be more like them.”

But their strangest story was: Gambling on Cam Talbot to rebound enough to be an upgrade over Mike Smith seems reasonable. But the Milan Lucic trade was a head-scratcher, as they took a mistake in the James Neal contract and flipped it into something worse.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 5.4/10. We’re having some fun with the Oilers stuff, but for the most part, the Flames are a good team who didn’t change much, and that makes sense. Like a few other teams, their grade is subject to change based on how their ongoing RFA drama plays out, but unless the Matthew Tkachuk situation gets crazy then the Flames will stay near the middle-of-the-pack.

Oh hey, speaking of Edmonton…

Edmonton Oilers

The offseason so far: They found their new GM in Ken Holland and a new coach in Dave Tippett. They also did the seemingly impossible by trading Lucic and brought in a veteran goaltender in Smith.

But their strangest story was: Once again not doing all that much to improve the forward group around Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl. They were limited in what they could do, of course, both by cap constraints and a lack of desirable assets to trade with. With a new brain trust having just been installed, expecting a massive overhaul was probably a pipe dream; Holland may be a veteran and a Cup winner, but he’s not a miracle worker. Still, the roster that will be taking the ice on opening night looks a lot like the one that finished last year, which doesn’t inspire much optimism.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 5.5/10. Maybe they can go into the options menu and turn line changes off.

San Jose Sharks

The offseason so far: They re-signed Erik Karlsson before free agency and re-signed Joe Thornton two months into it. But they watched their captain, Joe Pavelski, walk in free agency. And while everyone assumed they’d bring back ex-captain Patrick Marleau for an inexpensive feel-good reunion, that never happened.

But their strangest story was: Re-signing RFA Kevin Labanc to a dirt-cheap deal that stands as the strangest extension of the offseason.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 7.1/10. You can understand the Pavelski and Marleau stories because this is a business and sometimes tough decisions come before sentiment. As for the Labanc contract, um, I’m still working on that one.

Vegas Golden Knights

The offseason so far: They stayed active on the trade front, moving Colin Miller to the Sabres and sending the unsigned Nikita Gusev to the Devils, both for picks. They also traded David Clarkson back to the Maple Leafs, which confused the hell out of everyone.

But their strangest story was: GM George McPhee stepping down so that Ken Holland can take the job. That made a certain amount of sense since McPirim had been rumored for the top job in Edmonton, as well as expansion Seattle. But McPhee had just had the two best years of any GM in recent memory, so it’s very weird to see him no longer in charge. Unless he still is in charge, which is what everyone seems to assume.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 7.2/10. You have to hand it to them, in the entire history of the franchise, the Knights have never been boring.

Vancouver Canucks

The offseason so far: The big news came last night, as they got RFA Brock Boeser signed to a three-year bridge deal. Beyond that, they added a bunch of veteran talent, including Tyler Myers via free agency (with a contract nobody liked) and J.T. Miller via trade (for a price nobody liked). They also landed Micheal Ferland on a decent deal and re-upped Alex Edler. The team should be better, even as they’re older and facing a cap crunch down the road once Elias Pettersson comes off his entry deal. Still, you do what you have to do when your GM very obviously needs to make the playoffs to get an extension.

But their strangest story was: Giving Jim Benning an extension. Oh. Ok then.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 7.5/10. The pre-emptive Benning extension was hard to figure out. But if it’s any consolation, hey, it was nowhere near the worst contract he’s been involved in signing in Vancouver.

Central Division

St. Louis Blues

The Athletic / Down Goes Brown: Looking back on the Western Conference offseason with the Bizarro-meter

By Sean McIndoe

Sep 17, 2019
The offseason so far: Lots and lots of parties. Other than that, not all that much.

But their strangest story was: The several days of offseason that went by before Craig Berube was officially named permanent head coach. But that was about it. Even the Jordan Binnington contract, which had the potential to get strange, ended up with a pretty reasonable deal all around.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 1.5/10. We’ll give them a few pity points for letting hometown hero Patrick Maroon leave, which wasn’t bizarre but was at least mildly disappointing. Beyond that, the champs kept the band together as you’d expect, registering the lowest Bizarro-meter rating in the league.

Colorado Avalanche

The offseason so far: They made a nice trade with the Leafs to land Nazem Kadri and drafted yet another future stud for the blue line. They also haven’t signed their star RFA yet, which in today’s NHL isn’t all that weird.

But their strangest story was: Letting Semyon Varlamov walk without adding any veteran insurance to back up Philipp Grubauer, I guess?

Bizarro-meter ranking: 3.2/10. Joe Sakic and friends were busy, but nothing was especially odd.

Dallas Stars

The offseason so far: They needed scoring, so they went out and got Corey Perry, who came cheap, and Joe Pavelski, who did not. They also added former Oiler Andrej Sekera as blue line depth but might lose Julius Honka, who has asked for a trade.

But their strangest story was: Their late-June trade for Ryan Hartman, who a.) they did not bother re-signing and b.) initially may not have known he’d been traded.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 3.8/10. Seeing both Pavelski and Perry in different uniforms is going to take some getting used to, but for the most part, the Stars are another example of a Central team having an offseason that was newsworthy and quite possibly important, but not all that bizarre. They’re a good team that needed offensive help and they bought some. Makes sense to me.

Winnipeg Jets

The offseason so far: It’s been mostly about who won’t be there as camp opens. They lost Tyler Myers, Ben Chiarot and Brandon Tanev to free agency and Jacob Trouba to a trade they had to make and didn’t replace any of them.

But their strangest story was: The ongoing Patrik Laine and Kyle Connor negotiations. Having a star RFA still unsigned heading into camp was part for the course this year, but having two puts the Jets in a unique position.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 4.4/10. The offseason hasn’t been great. But bizarre? Only mildly. We knew Myers was leaving and the Trouba situation was always likely to end with a trade. Even the Laine and Connor RFA standoffs make sense given how the summer went around the league, although we’d expect something to happen soon now that the market is moving again.

Nashville Predators

The offseason so far: You know those movies where there’s a couple you just know is going to wind up together but life keeps throwing obstacles in their way. They move on, find a new partner and just when you’re about to give up, they find each other? That’s Matt Duchene and David Poile.

But their strangest story was: Trading P.K. Subban for a handful of magic beans to clear the cap room to make Duchene happen.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 6.2/10. The Subban trade was a jaw-dropper at the draft, but with some benefit of hindsight, it doesn’t seem quite as surprising as it did in the moment. The Preds needed the cap space, not just for Duchene but for new deals for Colton Sissons and (eventually) Roman Josi. I’m a Subban guy and I’m far from sold on the Duchene signing, and there’s a strong possibility that Preds fans eventually look back on this summer with regret. But as newsworthy as the Predators’ offseason became, at least some of it felt inevitable all along.

Chicago Blackhawks

The offseason so far: They focused on upgrading the blue line, although time will tell whether they did enough. Still, adding Olli Maatta and Calvin de Haan should help. They also traded for Zack Smith and Alexander Nylander, so you can’t say Stan Bowman took the summer off. And they raised a few eyebrows with the third overall pick by grabbing Kirby Dach over Alex Turcotte or Bowen Byram.

But their strangest story was: Landing reigning Jennings co-winner Robin Lehner in free agency to replace Cam Ward, with the strange part being that a guy coming off that kind of season was available in the first place.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 6.8/10. They certainly kept us on our toes.

The offseason so far: They had a draft where their GM was impressed by tall people. Then they signed Mats Zuccarello because their GM thought he looked like a lizard. Then we all started to side-eye each other and wonder if their GM was a little bit off. Then they fired that GM at the end of July, the way nobody does. Then we found out that this franchise has apparently been a madhouse for the last year or so.

That led to a bizarre late-summer search that somehow included another team’s current GM, plus just about every assistant in the league. They eventually settled on Bill Guerin, which seemed like a pretty reasonable choice, forcing the team to find the weirdest possible photo of him for the announcement to make up for it.

Also, they might have tried to offer sheet Mitch Marner. What would that have looked like? The mind boggles.

But their strangest story was: Guerin’s first major move was to give Jared Spurgeon a new deal, which was probably too many years but otherwise fine and nobody got called a lizard. Given how everything else went this summer, seeing the Wild do something normal felt weird.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 9.2/10. Every offseason features stories that are weird and stories that are important, but it’s been years since one of them checked both boxes as well as the Wild’s midsummer GM drama. This team might not win very much this year or in the near future, but at least now they can raise a Bizarro-meter banner on opening night.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Troy Brouwer has a shot in Florida where he played last season.

Drew Stafford is getting good reps in Minnesota with Kevin Fiala figuring out visa issues after signing a new deal.

Michal Neuvirth, and he could end up being the backup to Frederik Andersen.

Around the NHL there are a handful of dramas similar to the one playing out with Stewart and the Flyers.

For a man whose NHL career hangs in the balance as he tries to make the Flyers by virtue of a professional tryout invite from Philadelphia GM Chuck Fletcher, Stewart seems pretty zen about the whole thing.

"The last three days they've been calling me saying, 'hey, dad, put it on, we want to see it,'" Stewart said Sunday with a laugh. "So they gave me an ultimatum. Tonight I have to put it on so I had to run back to the store and pick it up."

The reality is that a PTO isn't something that every player can wrap their head around.

Stewart couldn't a year ago when, about to turn 31 and with 652 NHL regular season games to his credit, he was offered a couple of tryout opportunities but no guaranteed contract.

"I had a couple of PTO options and mentally I wasn't there. You know how it is," Stewart said relaxing in the hotel lobby after a morning on-ice session in advance of the team's first preseason game.

"I've played a decade and I thought, definitely thought I deserved a lot more respect. Not to say I'm looking down at a tryout, but the perception at that point I thought I was at least worth a minimal contract to come to camp.

"Obviously you're afraid of getting cut, too. I didn't want to get cut. That's pride. I definitely didn't want to go out on a low. Obviously a year later my perception's changed a hundred percent. The difference between this year and last year, I believe I'm an NHLer and the difference between this year and last year, I believe I'm an NHLer and the difference is I'm willing to prove it this year."

The PTO is the ultimate in playing without a safety net in the NHL.

One veteran agent said this week that he doesn't like to send his cl

For the record, the costume was a big hit.

His explanation is in the shopping bag he holds in his hand with a just purchased adult-sized ninja costume for Halloween.

Philipp Grubauer has a lot ofP

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Nottingham Panthers in the British Elite League – because Chris wanted to play where English is the main language and “he’s a picky eater,” according to Anthony. This reignited Chris’ desire to give the NHL one more shot. And he spent this past summer working out with Matt Nichol, who runs the highly regarded BioSteel program in Toronto.

It was while he was in England with his family that Stewart took note of the changing of the guard in Philadelphia.

He is best pals with former Flyers power forward Wayne Simmonds, who was sent to Nashville at the trade deadline last season. The Flyers also parted ways with Dale Weise and bruising defenseman Radko Gudas.

Before the free agency period began in July, Stewart had his agent, Eustace King, contact Fletcher to let him know of Stewart’s interest in trying to revive his NHL career.

The fact that Fletcher twice acquired Stewart during Fletcher’s tenure as GM in Minnesota was also a factor in extending an invite to camp.

“In our case, we’re a little thin up-front. We have a lot of young players coming into camp. Many of them first- and second-year pros, and they may or may not be ready,” Fletcher said. “Coming into the season we felt we had 11 legitimate returning NHL forwards and so when we looked at Chris, he’s a right shot, right wing, which we’re a little thin on. He brings a physical presence, and he’s had a good career, so we felt there certainly was opportunity in our roster, and Chris brings some of the attributes we’re looking for.”

The fact that Stewart was all the way out of the league a year ago likely gives him a different perspective on the opportunity with the Flyers.

“I think he came to realize he really wants one more crack at the NHL and so I think he has that mindset where he’s coming in probably understanding the odds are never really, really in your favor, but this is something that is worthwhile to him to make an attempt,” Fletcher said.

If there were concerns that it might be awkward coming to camp as a PTO, they were quickly dispelled.

Captain Claude Giroux reached out to Stewart shortly after the invitation was made public. The training staff and coaches have been supportive, with Stewart’s gear arriving well ahead of formal workouts.

He feels like he’s been embraced, but Stewart is likewise taking nothing for granted.

“You’ve got to live in the moment. If there’s one thing I know right off the bat, I’m going to be given a legit shot here. As an athlete, as a player, that’s all you can ask for. Let the cards fall where they’re going to fall,” Stewart said.

“You look at one of my good friends, Joel Ward, he goes into Montreal last year, he plays one exhibition game, he gets an assist, plays well and gets cut the next day, so it’s like you know he didn’t have a sniff from the jump.”

With Tyler Pitlick injured, there are obvious opportunities beyond simply being a big body. Early in camp, Stewart skated alongside experienced NHLers Scott Laughton and Michael Raffl. In the first preseason game, Stewart played with Oskar Lindblom and German Rubtsov. Stewart endeared himself to the Flyer faithful by fighting Islanders defenseman Kyle Burroughs after Burroughs stood Stewart up at the blue line with a hard check.

“As nerve-wracking as it is, the upside’s there too,” Stewart concluded. “You just got to be you. I think I can write my way onto this team. I think it’s there. But it’s on me, it’s on my shoulders. That’s a good position to be in.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.18.2019
Bigger, stronger, faster and he continues to work to build his "professional" Pettersson is already.

Vancouver Canucks veterans such as Jay Beagle have a hard time believing how

He's just insane to watch. He throws that flip pass to guys over their

Almost everything Pettersson does thrills and amazes, which in itself is remarkable since so much is expected of last season's Calder Trophy winner and one of the National Hockey League's greatest young talents.

On the opening day of camp in Victoria, Pettersson not only survived coach Travis Green's infamous conditioning skate, but dusted his group — unheard of for a second-year player.

The next day, the Swedish centre won the scrimmage in a shootout, using his reach to finesse the puck one-handed around the goalie like Peter Forsberg at the 1994 Olympics. Sweden made a stamp of that one. The City of Victoria may settle for a statue.

Then, Pettersson spent nearly an hour signing autographs for fans, turning no one away.

"I feel much better," he said after the game. "Apart from conditioning, I feel much more balanced when I'm shooting. I feel like I can shoot a little harder and I feel like I have more control of everything. It feels good out there, even though I was a little tired today after training camp."

"He’s just driven," Green told reporters at camp. “There are certain players that you get to coach every once in a while that you don’t feel you have to worry about. How he thinks about the game, and not just the game but about winning, I don’t worry about him.”

There was one ripple of concern for Vancouver after Tuesday’s win: outstanding rookie Quinn Hughes left the game with 12 minutes remaining, two periods after losing a couple of teeth after getting high-sticked by Oiler Cameron Hebig. Hughes missed most of the first period, but played the entire second and looked excellent.

"Precautionary," Green said. "I’m not sure where it’s at but from what I hear, it’s nothing major."

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embrace the challenging days that come along with the job. The love for the game has never left him. He’s even learned how to talk hockey. Just a contagious personality you want to be around.”

Deep down, Jason Spezza knows this could be it. There’s a chance this is his final season in professional hockey.

The biggest reason he’s here is the chance to play with the Toronto Maple Leafs — playing on a league-minimum $700,000 contract near the end of a career that’s netted him almost $90-million — is because the game has left him with some unfinished business.

“There’s one thing missing from my career and it’s winning a Cup,” said Spezza. “I feel like this team has a great chance to do it.”

That and that alone is how he’ll measure the success of this season, the 17th where he’s pulled on a NHL sweater.

On a personal level, he’s trying to delay the inevitable. Spezza, at age 36, is now the fourth-oldest forward under contract to an NHL team. Last season he was the 14th-oldest forward to play in the league.

These are stats he’s aware of and help explain the urgency he feels to carve out his specific niche with the Leafs. The clock is ticking. Spezza views himself as a potential “Swiss Army Knife” for head coach Mike Babcock — a veteran who can win key faceoffs, distribute on the power play, kill penalties, move up the lineup when injuries hit and help mentor those around him.

“I hope to have a good year and be a part of the team here and grow with some of these guys,” said Spezza. “If I keep feeling the way I feel physically I think there’s a job for me and I’d like it to be here for a little bit. I don’t plan on bouncing around too much.

“I’m not trying to break the bank at this point of my career, I’m just trying to play on a good team and be a part of something kind of cool.

“I don’t think it’s my last year.”

Spezza wants to make a strong first impression by dialling in his special teams assignments early in pre-season and had some encouraging moments in Tuesday’s 3-1 loss to the Ottawa Senators at Mile One Centre.

He saw time on both the power play and penalty kill, and had a hand in creating a couple scoring chances at even strength.

Even with his credentials as a former No. 2 overall pick and a longtime No. 1 centre, Spezza still has something to prove in the coming weeks.

There were candid conversations with Babcock and general manager Kyle Dubas about expectations before he signed in Toronto on July 1 and he’ll need to demonstrate he can meet them.

“There’s a role here for him but he’s got to be able to do it,” said Babcock. “And so we’re going to see over exhibition whether he likes it, whether he wants to do it and go [from there]. So we’re just in the process of feeling him out and he’s feeling us out right now.”

The father of four daughters seems like an ideal role model to throw into a young dressing room, especially with the departures of trusted voices Patrick Marleau and Ron Hainsey over the summer.

Spezza has seen it all.

He understands the demands and expectations Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner are shouldering. He can speak with authority about the importance of seizing on opportunities like the one the Leafs have this season. He is also a hockey encyclopedia who, according to former teammate Ben Bishop, watches as many games in his down time as any active player in the league.

“He’s a really smart hockey mind. He’s one of the most caring guys you’ll meet,” Bishop told Sportsnet during a recent interview. “If there’s a rookie that comes up from the minors, Spezz is the first one to go sit next to him and talk hockey. Just a contagious personality you want to be around.”

The love for the game has never left him. He’s even learned how to embrace the challenging days that come along with the job.

“I love the intensity of it, I love the challenge of trying to get ready, I love the challenge of being 36 and trying to reinvent myself a little bit,” said Spezza. “I like hanging out with the guys, the banter in the room, the practices. I don’t know if I’m a little bit crazy, but I like the grind of it.

“I kind of appreciate the grind.”

This will be its own unique challenge.

Coming to play close to home in what will almost certainly be a limited role and trying to be a good influence on a group looking to win a Stanley Cup despite not previously having even won a playoff series.

“You have to not ride the roller-coaster so much when you’re one of those teams. You need to try to be steady,” said Spezza. “Really you’re just going to get judged on the success you have in the playoffs. You have to make sure that you’re playing good hockey and creating good habits.”

There is still some regret about the way everything played out way back when in Ottawa, where Spezza centred one of the best lines in the league with Daniel Alfredsson and Dany Heatley for three years coming out of the 2004-05 lockout but couldn’t get the Senators to the top of the mountain.

He still thinks about the loss to Anaheim in the 2007 Stanley Cup Final “all the time.” It’s part of what keeps him going today.

“Those three years we had there, we were knocking on the door and probably should have won,” said Spezza. “We were a perennial powerhouse for a few years and didn’t get it done.

“You don’t want to see that happen again.”
EDMONTON — Evan Bouchard came to training camp more fit than ever, testing right near the top of all rookies. A nice show of commitment for a first-round draft pick who turns pro this season, right?

“You know, I've seen lots of guys who are amazing in the gym who aren't good on the ice. And I've seen guys that are terrible in the gym who are real good on the ice,” said a dismissive Oilers captain Connor McDavid. “It doesn’t really matter. You want to be in good shape, but I think all of us are in pretty good shape.

“Good for him for coming in and having good fitness testing. But he’s got to have a good camp on the ice.”

That, in a nutshell, sums up the collective attitude of anyone who has spent any time around these Oilers. Stats are nice, being in shape is great, and potential is also a handy attribute.

But it’s about winning, and winning now. Bring it on the ice, or don’t bring it all, is what McDavid is saying.

Harsh? Maybe.

Realistic? Absolutely.

Then there was this clinical observation from Dave Tippett, a head coach who sees a top pairing defenceman in Bouchard — once the prospect figures out that the NHL game is played with urgency. Not at the comfortable pace that Bouchard mastered as an Ontario Hockey League all-star in London.

"He's a smart enough kid that he knows what he has to do to (make the NHL),” Tippett said. "Once you get to the NHL level, if you don't go back and get those pucks you're not going to have the time you need to make those plays.

"He’s going from a junior mentality, where he can really just do whatever he wants, to an NHL mentality where you're going to have a lot more pressure. But he's still got to make those plays that are at the essence of his game.”

Here’s what Bouchard can do: He is that patient holder of the puck with the panic level that is higher than most. That player whose threshold for divesting himself of the puck is elite — even at the NHL level — so it is important that he have the puck, with time to make use of his considerable puck-moving skills.

"Retrieval. Getting to pucks quicker. Skating," Bouchard said. "It all ties in to wanting to spend more time with the puck, and less time chasing it. Raise your intensity every time you're out there.”

Bouchard is, as a human being, somewhat of a slow-twitch guy. He thinks before he speaks. He considers before he moves. Whatever a guy like McDavid — who does everything at warp speed — is, Bouchard is the opposite.

"He’s got ice in his veins, watching everyone fly around, and he’s just standing there and movin’ the puck,” marvelled Tippett. “He’s got to get to the puck quicker, to make sure he’s got the puck more. Bouchard, the more he has the puck, the more good things are going to happen. So, go get it. And sometimes you have to go quicker to get it.”

"It doesn’t have to change too much,” said Bouchard, who is still over a month away from his 20th birthday. "There are places where you have to have more of a jump, but I don’t think it’s about changing it. It’s about adding it into my game.

“The one thing I did work on this summer is hustling back for pucks. That’s the main thing for me. Do you want to have the puck, or chase the puck? You want to have time with it once you get it, rather than coast back and (have to) make a quick play."

Do you want to be first in fitness testing? Or on the first power-play unit?

Do it on the ice, kid. The captain said so.
The Vancouver Canucks ended a potential lingering distraction by signing forward Brock Boeser to a three-year, $17.6-million contract Monday.

"I'm relieved, Brock is more relieved, and the fans are most relieved," Boeser's agent Ben Hankinson told Sportsnet 650 on Tuesday.

As Hankinson explained, negotiations had been ongoing and both sides were left slightly disappointed — which often means a fair deal was reached.

"At the end of the day we compromised, both sides, and did a fair deal," Hankinson said. "They were stuck on an offer that they hadn't moved from in a long time and so were we. They thought their offer was fair. I obviously didn't think so. I thought our deal was fair and Jim (Benning), on Sunday night, we kind of huddled with the owner and Chris Gear (the team's vice president and general counsel) and his group.

"We kind of met in the middle, basically. (Benning) wasn't happy, I certainly wasn't happy with where he got to and that's usually a good sign. We swore at each other a little bit and got the deal done."

Boeser will be 25 and a restricted free agent when this deal expires in 2022. When asked why a long-term deal wasn't reached, Hankinson said the two parties were initially headed down that road.

"We started over a year ago, in August, going through long-term options and we sat down and huddled and going into his last season (of his entry-level contract) last year we had seven-year deal options, six-year deal options," Hankinson said. "It wasn't where we thought it should be. The market obviously changed, so we're happy we didn't sign what the numbers were back then."

Prior to this past June's NHL Draft, the Canucks reportedly had a lucrative offer on the table but nothing came to fruition.

"There were some rumblings that there was a $7-million offer at the draft and that's fairly accurate, and at that point we were really close to getting a long-term deal done," Hankinson added. "We weren't there yet and if I look back I'm still happy we didn't do that deal, but it was getting in the 'take it' zone right about then."

Around that same time, though, the Canucks traded for J.T. Miller ($5.25-million average annual value), re-signed Alex Edler ($6-million average annual value), signed Tyler Myers ($6-million average annual value), Roberto Luongo retired, adding an annual recapture penalty of $3,033,206 to the cap and all of a sudden the team had some cap issues to manage.

Negotiations were pushed back as the two sides regrouped before they ultimately settled on three years and a $5.875-million cap hit.

Boeser leads all Canucks players in goals and points over the past two seasons, despite some injury problems, and Hankinson said the Burnsville, Minn., native is coming into the 2019-20 season "fully healthy, fully ready to go."
On a day like today the saying “no news is good news” applies for Winnipeg Jets fans. Especially when the alternative is an unsigned RFA venting about his playing situation.

That’s what the hockey world woke to on Tuesday as an interview by Finnish journalist Pekka Jalonen revealed a frustrated Patrik Laine, who said he thinks he should be surrounded by better linemates than the ones coach Paul Maurice has provided.

“In contract negotiations, one thing always is who you are playing with,” Laine told Jalonen in Finnish. “With the merits I have, somewhere else I’d have an opportunity to play with the best players. Everyone who understands hockey should know that.”

But if there’s worry that Laine’s comments will create a wedge between himself and his Jets teammates, captain Blake Wheeler wants to make it clear that won’t be the case.

“It’s a non-issue today. I mean none whatsoever,” Wheeler said.

At the same time, Wheeler wasn’t buying into Laine’s premise of playing with better players.

“We’re top five in the league (on the power play) the last couple of years. (That’s) a big part of what Patty does,” said Wheeler. “He’s definitely not doing it himself I can guarantee you that.”

The fact Laine is bringing up his beef about desiring better linemates in the context of his current contract negotiations is telling. Multiple reports (including information from Sportsnet’s Elliotte Friedman) suggest Laine and the Jets are looking at a bridge deal, which would provide Laine a chance to bet on himself after a down season. The problem is, you can’t bet on yourself without also betting on your situation, and Laine clearly has issues with his.

Jets management and Maurice would never tell you second line centre Bryan Little isn’t up to the task, but actions speak louder than words — and there has been no shortage of action on this file. GM Kevin Cheveldayoff has traded his first round pick at two consecutive trade deadlines to bring in a new second line centre (Paul Stastny in 2018 and Kevin Hayes in 2019). Cheveldayoff also pushed hard to keep Stastny in the summer of 2018, going as far as saying he may have overextended financially with a contract pitch. It was ultimately turned down, though, and Stastny left for the Golden Knights in Vegas.

These moves should tell you that the Jets organization is seeing the same thing a lot of fans are: Little is a great hockey player as is Laine, but the pair have shown very little chemistry together.

Go back two seasons to Laine’s finest goal scoring campaign, when he netted 44 goals and finished second in the league behind Alex Ovechkin. Of those 44 goals, Little assisted on just six. Last season, Little assisted on only nine of Laine’s 30 goals. All together, just over 20 per cent of Laine’s goals from the past two seasons were set up by his primary centremen. For a little context, Wheeler assisted on 58 per cent of Mark Scheifele’s goals.

Pressed on the usage of his young sniper on Tuesday, Maurice preached patience with Laine.

“I’d like to play with Sidney Crosby if I’m a player,” Maurice said. “I’d really like to. But Phil (Kessel) didn’t play there and neither does Evgeni (Malkin). Patty Kane doesn’t play with Jonathan (Toews) consistently.

“I’ll use my driver’s license analogy. Nobody gets the keys at 14.”
Sportsnet.ca / Canucks, Boeser compromise, but difficult decisions could lie ahead

Iain MacIntyre

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 – lacking 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 defencemen 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?
As the NHL trends younger, it’s noteworthy that Alex Ovechkin turns 34 today, Sept. 17. At an age when most players begin their decline, the Capitals’ captain doesn’t appear to be slowing down.

Ovechkin has accomplished virtually everything in his career, but there is still one summit left for him to conquer: Wayne Gretzky’s all-time goals record. In this context, at only 34 years old time is on Ovechkin’s side.

“The most important thing is (to be) healthy. If you’re healthy, you can still play the game the way you want to play,” Ovechkin said in a recent interview on the 31 Thoughts podcast. “Of course (the record) matters, but like I said, I’m not going to score 300 goals in two years. It’s going to take five or six years. I have to be healthy enough to do that.”

With 658 goals, Ovechkin enters this season ranked 13th all-time and 237 away from passing Gretzky. The eight-time Rocket Richard Trophy winner has been scoring at a nearly unprecedented rate for his entire career and he could very well surpass 700 goals by the end of the season. If he does that, he will become only the eighth player ever to hit the milestone.

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*Numbers from the day player turned 34.

The list of 700 goal scorers is impressive, but what Ovechkin has done to this point in his career is better than almost all of them. Gretzky is the outlier of course, but Ovechkin is far ahead of where the six others on the list were by their 34th birthdays, and he should hit 700 faster than any of them too.

In other words, it’s safe to say that Ovechkin has a better chance than anyone else ever has to break Gretzky’s record.

“It was always the goal to score as many goals as I can,” Ovechkin said in Chicago. “But every year is harder and harder.”

Gretzky retired at age 38 but Ovechkin will likely need to play past that to have a chance at breaking the record. His desire to play into his 40s is questionable — especially once his current contract expires in two years — but his durability shouldn’t be a problem. Ovechkin has missed a combined 30 games over his entire 14-year career (not including lockouts), and only one in the last three seasons — a suspension for skipping the all-star game.

That near perfect bill of health is why the entire hockey world took notice when he went down briefly in a pre-camp skate earlier this month. While the injury wasn’t serious, the incident showed how quickly things can change for even the healthiest players.

Still, to forecast how Ovechkin can break the goals record, we’ll assume his healthy streak will continue for a little while longer. If it doesn’t, the record will be safe.

Ovechkin is scoring at a 0.61 goals per game average (or 50.2 goals per 82 games) for his career, which is second behind only Mario Lemieux among players with 600 goals. If he stays on that pace, and plays 82 games a season, Ovechkin could catch Gretzky in 389 games. That’s four seasons and 61 games, when Ovechkin will be only 38.
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 NIGH-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.

Juha Khaira is in the mix, as is Tyler Benson and Gagner. But the job is open for the taking.

Wide open, really.
Monday's morning skates. On Tuesday, the power play featured Pettersson, Ferland, Nikolay Goldobin, Tanner Pearson and Quinn Hughes at one point in the second period. They stormed the Oilers net and did everything but score. It's hard to get worked up about a lack of power play proficiency in the first week of exhibition action, but the countdown to the team's October 2nd opening night is on and with Boeser back in the fold, it's time the Canucks get down to special teams business.

TAKEAWAYS

1) Brandon Sutter scored just four goals in the 26 games he appeared in last season. On Tuesday night, he scored twice to lead the Canucks to a 4-2 win over a youthful group of Edmonton Oilers. More than the goals, though, Sutter appears to be fully recovered from the abdominal injuries that have plagued him the past two seasons. His first goal came on a first period penalty shot. The goal was good. The play to draw the penalty shot was better. For a guy who has had issues with his explosiveness due to injury, Sutter broke away and gained a step on the Oilers defense and forced Dmitri Samorukov to haul him down with a hook. There were times last year Sutter would not have been able to separate from the defense like he did on Tuesday night. The fact he had that extra gear to go to -- even if it was against non-NHL competition -- should serve him well in the confidence department as he works his way to the start of the regular season.

2) Thatcher Demko was terrific on Tuesday. He was thrust into the fire early during a 1:15 two-man advantage for the Oilers with Vincent Arsenau and Tyler Myers in the penalty box. Demko stopped all 14 first period shots he faced and made 35 saves on the night. He was aided by a pair of goalposts in the third period including Oilers forward Ryan McLeod missing what looked like an empty net which would have extended Edmonton's lead to 3-1 at the time. Demko looks like he has found a comfort level knowing that his job in the NHL is secure for the first time in his career. Last year at this time, he suffered a concussion that derailed the first half of his season. When he finally got a look late in the year he was able to amass a body of work in the NHL that gave him a baseline of things to work on over the off-season. He looked focussed and determined on Tuesday night and opened his preseason in style.

3) We all saw it on many nights last season, but there's no question Elias Pettersson is a showman. Like so many great performers, he simply refuses to take nights off -- even in the first week of preseason. Pettersson crushed his group in the bag skate on the first day of training camp in Victoria. He opened the camp scoring in Saturday's scrimmage and then wowed Island hockey fans with a spectacular shootout goal on Sunday. Tuesday had its moments of Pettersson doing his dekes and controlling play and then when the Canucks needed something good to happen, the Alien landed. Down 2-1 midway through the third, Pettersson pounced on a rebound of a Micheal Ferland shot and beat Oiler netminder Shane Starrett through the five-hole. It sparked a Canuck comeback with Brandon Sutter putting the team in front for good just 1:19 later. Every time he's hit the ice since the first day of camp, Pettersson has given fans a moment -- something that makes you sit up and take notice. And the exciting part is that he's just getting warmed up and will soon have his buddy Brock Boeser back beside him.

4) Olli Juolevi's past two weeks have been a roller coaster. From the positives of looking good and participating in all three days of Canucks development camp to what appeared to be some kind of set back on the first day of main camp in Victoria to now being nowhere to be seen through three preseason games. Juolevi and Jacob Markstrom are the only two main camp attendees who have yet to appear in game action. The young defensemen struggled with the heavy skate at the end of Friday's first day of main camp last weekend. On Saturday, he was assigned to skate with the Utica group but returned to the main group Sunday and participated fully in scrimmage action. This brings us to the second day of the preseason and the fact that Juolevi still hasn't suited up for an exhibition contest and following Tuesday's game Travis Green seemed to hint that the Finnish blueliner quite possibly won't get the chance: "I'm not sure if we'll see him before the end of camp." When pressed if the absence is due to injury, the coach said no: 'He's good'. It's been a tough year for Juolevi since injuring his knee last November in Utica and requiring surgery just prior to Christmas. The kid deserves a break, but just can't seem to catch one.

5) The Canucks reduced their roster to 46 skaters prior to Tuesday's game against Edmonton. And it sounds like more cuts re coming. Green said after the game that the team would likely pare its roster further before Thursday's rematch in the Alberta capital. With just four games remaining on the preseason schedule, it would serve the Canucks well to get down to manageable numbers as quickly as possible. With the return of Brock Boeser, Travis Green hinted that he and his coaching staff would likely start to work with the power play groupings -- something they haven't done to this point in camp save for a few brief line rushes during
TSN.CA / Tavares treating preseason as crucial preparation

Mark Masters

TSN Toronto reporter Mark Masters checks in daily with news and notes on the Maple Leafs, who held a morning skate and practice (non-playing group) on Tuesday at Mile One Centre in St. John’s, NL.

As he starts his 11th NHL season, it was suggested to John Tavares that some veterans see the exhibition schedule as a bit of a drag. Wouldn’t it be nice to fast forward to opening night?

But Tavares doesn’t see it that way at all.

"I mean, these games are crucial to get ready to play," said Tavares, who turns 29 later this week. "You see guys that don’t play in many exhibition games or miss time in camp; it takes time to get that rhythm back. You haven’t played in four, five months. It’s a long time so it’s a way to get back into that routine, that feeling. All those things, as best as you can mimic them in training camp and practice or preparing in the off-season, there’s nothing like playing in a real game and what that type of environment is, so they’re crucial."

Toronto’s top players are scheduled to suit up in four of the eight preseason games, two this week and two next week. The two next week against Montreal and Detroit will feature the NHL lineup.

"You’re playing in the greatest league in the world, at this level you never take any [games] for granted, whether they matter or they don’t," Tavares said.

After a strong first season in Toronto while playing with Mitch Marner, Tavares isn’t about to rest on his laurels.

"With the chemistry we were able to develop and the success we had it, just leaves you hungry for more," said Tavares. "It doesn’t change the feeling or make you feel relaxed. I think it just continuously to fuel the drive that we want to continue to get better.”

Tickets for tonight’s tilt on The Rock sold out in mere minutes and the anticipation has been building in the Newfoundland and Labrador capital since the Leafs landed here Thursday night.

"It’s been amazing just the buzz around town," said Tavares, who was sporting a Danny Cleary Hockey School hat during his media session, "us going out to eat and even just walking around, the amount of people that recognize us and are so passionate about the team ... it’s not every day we come out here so it’s a big deal [and] looking forward to it. It should be a great atmosphere and obviously want to go out and play well and put on a good game."

You can understand why Tavares is placing so much emphasis on the exhibition season. He and Marner have a new linemate to build chemistry with in Kasper Kapanen. Tavares will also have a new role on the power play as he shifts to the bumper/middle spot vacated by Nazem Kadri.

"Obviously, some guys who were in that role aren’t here this year, so we talked about me being in there and thought it was a good spot to try out and felt I could be good in that role," Tavares explained. "I try to be as versatile as I can be and play wherever the team needs me and try to be effective there and productive. I played quite a bit there my last year in New York so I have some familiarity in that spot."

Tavares scored 10 of his 47 goals on the power play last season while playing primarily as the net-front presence and a bit on the flank.

John Tavares will be given the opportunity to fill Nazem Kadri’s old spot centering the team’s top power play unit tonight when the Leafs face the Sens in pre-season action, and it’s a role he’s familiar with from his last season playing in New York. Mark Masters has more.

Toronto’s top unit at the morning skate featured Tavares, Marner on the left flank, Tyson Barrie at the point, Jeremy Bracco on the right flank with Egor Korshkov in front.

"It’s a pretty good unit," Bracco said with a big smile. "There’s a lot of money on that unit. When those guys talk you be quiet and listen, for sure."

While training camp is "crucial" for Tavares, it’s arguably even more important for someone like Bracco, who is facing an uphill battle to snag a job despite racking up 79 points in 75 games with the Marlies last season and finishing second in AHL scoring.

"To be honest, I think he’s probably one of the better passers on our team," said Kapanen, who was on a line with Bracco the first two days of camp before Tavares and Marner arrived. "He just sees the ice really well. His skating isn’t [pause, smile] the best we’ve ever seen, but his vision is something else, for sure. Just looking at all the plays he makes you kind of envy him."

Bracco worked hard this summer with skating consultant Barb Underhill to try and improve his stride.

"She tries to get me to skate forward instead of sideways and we’re still working on that," the 22-year-old said.

After posting 79 points in 75 games with the Marlies in the AHL, Jeremy Bracco is out to prove he’s ready to make the jump to the NHL. The 22-year-old winger scored a goal during scrimmage at Monday’s informal skate, but says he’s more eager to show off his defensive improvements once camp opens.

While Bracco is on the outside looking in right now, Trevor Moore is trying to maintain his spot. The winger made his NHL debut with the Leafs last year, playing 25 games in the regular season and not looking out of place while suiting up in all seven playoff games against Boston.

"When you’re in the American League you’re not always sure. You have the confidence that you can play at this level, but you don’t know that you can play at this level," the undrafted 24-year-old said. "Being able to come here I gained the confidence that I belong and now it’s about building on that.”

Much like last year with Andreas Johnsson and Travis Dermott, Babcock sent out a warning that nothing will be guaranteed for Moore.

"He’s like the other guys. There’s eight games right here, it’s competitive, you gotta show," the coach said. "I think initially you get in and you think you’re in for life. The great thing about the National Hockey League is you’re in for that year and you got to keep going. Now, there are a few guys who are just that good, but the rest of us are on a tryout."

Moore worked on getting a bit faster during the summer and has no intention of taking a backseat in tonight’s game.

"For me, I’m not going to get out there and try and feel it out," he vowed. "I want to get out there and prove I belong here and make an impact.”

Moore hoping to prove in pre-season he belongs with Leafs

Trevor Moore says he’s focused on proving in the pre-season that he belongs with the Leafs this season, and explains that despite the competition the team added in the off-season, it’s up to him to secure a spot with the big club. Meanwhile, Mike Babcock discusses what the next step is for Moore.

Moore will be skating on a line with Jason Spezza, who is starting his 17th NHL season.

"You’re pretty fortunate to come in here and play on a team lower in the lineup and get to play with a guy like that," Moore said. "I mean, his knowledge of the game and the way he approaches it is, I got to think, second to none."

Moore is still getting used to playing alongside the 36-year-old centre, but even at the morning skate found a reason to be impressed noting Spezza threaded the needle to fellow linemate Pierre Engvall for a backdoor tap-in on a three-on-two rush.

However, Babcock has made it clear that Spezza’s veteran status doesn’t mean he’s immune from the same training camp pressure guys like Moore face.

"There’s a role here for him, but he’s got to be able to do it," Babcock said in response to a question about Spezza being a good role model for younger players. "And, so, we’ll see over exhibition what he’s like and whether he wants to do it. So we’re just in the process of feeling him out and he’s feeling us out right now so it’s probably a different camp that way for him. But, he loves hockey."

Spezza, who averaged 13:16 of ice time in 76 games with Dallas last season, insists he’s ready to fully embrace whatever the Leafs ask of him. He’s already made the transition to a bottom-six mindset in recent years.

"I’ve produced my whole life and you have a high expectation of where you’re at and where you should be in the lineup so, yeah, the first maybe year or a little bit of transition was tougher than others, but now I’ve played that role for a couple years so I feel comfortable doing it and I know what it has to look like and what you have to do," he said.

"You become a little more of a specialist. You play on special teams, you know what it has to look like and what you have to do," he said. "I think initially you get in and you think you’re in for life. The great thing about the National Hockey League is you’re in for that year and you got to keep going. Now, there are a few guys who are just that good, but the rest of us are on a tryout."
move up and down the lineup. You have new linemates all the time, instead of when you're the top guys you kind of have the set lines so there's some different challenges. Basically, it comes down to, do you want to keep playing or do you want to hold on to the old days and I want to keep playing."
Websites

TSN.CA / Barrie feeling anxious ahead of Leafs debut

Kristen Shilton

St. John’s, N.L. – Meaningless preseason games don’t tend to intimidate NHL veterans, but Tyson Barrie couldn’t quell some unexpected butterflies before his first outing as a Maple Leaf on Tuesday.

“It’s probably the first preseason game I’ve played in a while where I’m a little nervous, a little anxious,” Barrie said ahead of Toronto’s exhibition matchup against Ottawa at Mile One Centre. “It’s kind of a crazy experience getting traded and this is the first real crack I have at a game where I get to put that uniform on. I’m looking forward to it.”

It’s been months since the Colorado Avalanche sent Barrie and Alexander Kerfoot to the Leafs in exchange for Nazem Kadri and Calle Rosen on July 1, but in some ways the trade is still sinking in. Barrie had spent his entire eight-year professional career in the Avalanche organization, producing 307 points (75 goals, 232 assists) in 484 NHL games.

He’s emerged as one of the league’s top offensive defencemen in recent seasons, posting 154 points (35 goals, 119 assists) in 220 games since 2016–17 – the ninth-most among defencemen in that stretch. But playing in the Western Conference meant Barrie wasn’t as scrutinized as he’s expecting to be with the Leafs. That will come with its own challenges, particularly in fending off criticism that he’s not consistent enough in the defensive zone.

“It’s up to me to come as advertised and play well,” Barrie said. “Whatever the pundits think, if [they think] I’m good, that’s great. And hopefully I’m not in the spotlight for the wrong reason.”

Fortunately for Barrie, he landed not only on the same roster as his good friend Jake Muzzin, he’s also been paired with him so far at Toronto’s training camp. The two blueliners won gold together playing for Team Canada at the World Championship in 2015, and it was a no-brainer for head coach Mike Babcock to try them together out of the gate in Toronto.

“I think they complement each other,” Babcock said. “Muz’s intelligence in the game and his experience is really, really good and he’s a calming force. Barrie is a confident guy who has a high skill set who I think is just scratching the surface. I think he can get way better. I think he wants that, and we’re looking forward to that.”

Being able to lean on Muzzin and their close off-ice relationship has made all the difference for Barrie, especially during Babcock’s up-tempo practices.

“It’s nice to have him guiding me around and showing me the ropes on the drills,” Barrie said. “There are so many things you become accustomed to on one team when you’re there for so long, and to switch it up when things are moving fast, I’m always checking in with Muz like, ‘Hey, what do we do? What do I do here? What do I do there?’ He’s been great with me.”

Having already spent two seasons with Barrie in Colorado prior to the trade, Kerfoot doesn’t think his teammate will need too much help finding his way with the Leafs and duplicating the success he had out west.

“You just see him around the rink, on the ice; he just has that attitude about him. He knows he’s a good player,” Kerfoot said. “It’s not cockiness by any means, but he’s got confidence on the ice. He’s got confidence to make plays and he’s confident when he’s playing with good players.”

That’s what Barrie sees when he looks at Toronto’s defence, despite knowing how maligned the blueline has been the past few seasons. Barrie remembers well how former Leaf Jake Gardiner was booed on home ice during the Avalanche’s 6-3 win over the Leafs last January and feels strongly there won’t be any need for such reaction this season.

“I didn’t like seeing [Gardiner booed] because I think Gards is a great guy and a great player, so it can be a tough place to play if you get the fans against you,” Barrie said. “But it can also be an amazing place to play. Our d-corps is mobile and we’ve got some guys with a lot of games back there, so we shouldn’t have any issues.”

Given the enthusiastic reception Toronto’s players have received in Newfoundland, it’s unlikely there will be any boo birds coming out on Tuesday. And if those lingering nerves don’t subside, maybe it’s for the best that Barrie makes his anticipated debut on the road.
With training camps opening last week, we got to hear two different mind-bending quotes that defy all logic.

Both related to long-time players who are known quantities in this league, and the continued justification of their use in high-end situations.

First was Rasmus Ristolainen, one of the worst dollar-for-dollar blue-line values in the league, talking about the rumours that he had requested a trade out of Buffalo. Asked about his decision to vent to the media in his native Finland, he told the Buffalo press, "I was just explaining, personally, how I felt and when you have rough years like I’ve had here the past six years and you don’t win much, that’s what you want."

The other was from Mike Babcock, in revealing that he would at least start camp with a top pair of Morgan Rielly (great) and Cody Ceci (maybe the worst defender in the league). Of the latter player, acquired from Ottawa where he anchored the Senators blue line — that is, weighed down to the point it was never going to go anywhere — Babcock said, "We think there’s growth potential there for sure."

In both cases, we of course have long, long track records of these players proving time and again that they are not what everyone thinks they are. Imagine having a six-year NHL career, looking back and saying, "Well, I’ve had six rough years, I know I can be better." At some point, how is a six-year period not representative of what a player is? What are the Sabres, or anyone else for that matter, going to be able to do to get more value out of him, besides shuffle him way down the lineup to the point where you basically have a third-pair power-play specialist who costs $5.4 million?

Ristolainen had 31 points in the final year of his ELC while getting north of 25(!) minutes a night, and that number got bigger in each of the following two years before falling back to 24:36 last season. He’s been great on the power play and absolutely abysmal at full strength for years, but this has not deterred any of Buffalo’s coaches in that time to actually throttle back his minutes.

The same is true of Ceci. He had one year where he scored 10 goals and that alone was enough to make everyone think this guy was the defenceman of the future. He went from playing 19 minutes a night to 22 or 23. He has been predictably below replacement level at 5-on-5 ever since.

Another guy who falls into this category, and who just signed a good-sized contract for the next six years, is Ivan Provorov. He went from about 22 minutes as a rookie to 24-plus and then more than 25 in the following two seasons, respectively.

Here, too, we’re dealing with a player who has shown a lot offensively on occasion (he had 17 goals in 2017-18 but only 13 in his other two seasons combined) and has been reliable defensively, but is otherwise such a drag on his team that you have to use him somewhat selectively.

It’s a big bet that he’ll be worth anything close to the money he got for that big blue-line-sized contract for the next six years, is Ivan Provorov. He went from playing 19 minutes a night to 22 or 23. He has been predictably below replacement level at 5-on-5 ever since.

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As the NHL’s RFA dominoes begin to really fall into place after the Toronto Maple Leafs’ signing of Mitch Marner, one of the league’s marquee shooters seems to be getting further and further away from a resolution to his standoff.

Just days after heading to Switzerland to join club SC Bern to prepare for the upcoming NHL season while his contract gets sorted out with the Winnipeg Jets, Patrik Laine opened up about what he feels has been a lack of support in regards to his ice time and usage.

In a recent interview with Pekka Jalonen, a sportswriter with Finnish outlet Iltalehti who has been following Laine his entire career, the 21-year-old lamented his middle-six role and the linemates he’s been skating alongside for the past three seasons, particularly down the middle.

“When you’re having contract negotiations, one thing always is who are you playing with. With the merits I have, somewhere else I’d have an opportunity to play with the best players. Everybody who understands hockey knows that,” Laine explained, as translated by Jalonen.

“There are top lines and then there is our line. But I play with the guys I’m told to play.”

This sure sounds like a guy who feels he should be playing with Mark Scheifele on the Jets’ top line, rather than alongside centres Bryan Little, Andrew Copp or Adam Lowry in the team’s middle-six like he has for much of his first three NHL campaigns.

Jalonen noted that the Jets appear to understand their problem at the 2C slot — and have for some time — with the team’s recent history of personnel moves a clear indication.

“I have never heard him speak like this before in public. I’m not sure if the Jets have to be concerned about this because of course, this can make some bad blood between the two sides,” Jalonen said.

“But the Jets know the situation. They need a second-line centre. They have traded two first-round picks to get a second-line centre, so they know what the problem is there.”

Winnipeg traded for two big-name pivots the past two campaigns, but both Paul Stastny and Kevin Hayes were essentially playoff rentals and neither a long-term solution on Laine’s unit.

Things have seemed a little contentious between Laine and the Jets this summer as both try to work out a new contract extension. In mid-August, Laine raised some eyebrows and had many questioning how invested he was in the city of Winnipeg.

“You never know where you’re going to play next year so I’m just prepared for anything,” he said to Sportsnet’s Chris Johnston before the conversation shifted to the city of Winnipeg itself. “Well I’ve got nothing bad to say about Winnipeg, you know? It’s been good so far. But you never know.”

Laine posted the worst season production-wise of his young career in 2018-19, scoring 30 goals and adding 20 assists — a 14-goal and 20-point drop from the previous campaign.

He’s averaged 17:11 of TOI over his first three NHL seasons.