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SPORT-SCAN, INC., 941-284-4129
Max Jones’ push to make the Ducks, Hakanpää’s struggles and other preseason opener observations

By Eric Stephens Sep 18, 2019

Not to disparage one Brian Gibbons, the diminutive journeyman who hustled his way into an improbable NHL career, but it took just one preseason game to see that the Ducks are significantly deeper at left wing.

As position battles go in their training camp, left wing will be highly competitive. Maybe the most competitive. It is a good thing for an organization that hasn’t been terribly deep there.

The Ducks played the first of their six non-counting exhibition affairs Tuesday night at a sparsely attended SAP Center in San Jose. What really counts is the competition on the left side and it was on, as a few wingers notably impacted the 4-3 comeback victory over the Sharks.

Max Jones made a huge statement. The obvious big moment was his tiebreaking goal on a pinpoint low wrister at 6:43 of the third, giving his team a lead it would protect the rest of the way after the Ducks rallied from a 2-0 first-period deficit with a huge middle frame. But that was far from the only thing Jones did.

Anaheim Ducks✔

- Sep 18, 2019

@AnaheimDucks

#AnaheimDucksGooooaal @Jones_Max19 with a top-shelf tally on the power play. We lead, 4-3! #LetsGoDucks #NHLPreseason

Anaheim Ducks✔

Nothing preseason about this beauty! #LetsGoDucks | @Jones_Max19

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Jones was most effective in using his strong skating and long reach to circle behind the San Jose net and create a scoring opportunity on the other side. He did so early in the second period, putting a shot on San Jose goalie Aaron Dell that created a juicy rebound for Devin Shore to successfully bury. His straightaway speed to enter the San Jose zone with space helped define the winner.

Max Comtois is also a central figure in the competition. Comtois didn’t score a goal but he set up one to finish the three-game flurry in the second. Adam Henrique’s successful forecheck on Sharks defenseman Tim Heed forced him to give it up and Comtois jumped on the puck.

He found Henrique, who put his linemate on the scoresheet with a pinpoint shot. He got caught holding Brent Burns midway through the opening period and the Sharks cashed in with a Jonny Brodzinski deflection in front for a power-play score.

Playing with Josh Mahura as his partner, Hakanpää steadied himself and effectively moved the puck over the remainder of his 19:47 of ice time. But he did take a second minor in being whistled for high-sticking Tim Heed just three seconds into a Ducks power play.

The Ducks signed the 6-foot-5 2010 Blues draft pick for $850,000 this season with the idea that the right-shot defenseman could challenge for a roster spot and potentially help solidify the bottom of the corps. The 27-year-old has some work to do. He has a battle ahead with veterans Michael Del Zotto and Korbinian Holzer and youngsters Mahura, Jacob Larsson and Simon Benoit all vying for spots.

• Goaltending is expected to be the Ducks’ strongest asset of the coming campaign. John Gibson didn’t make the trip up north but the netminding didn’t suffer in the first real test.

There wasn’t much Miller could do in the bang-bang play between Thornton and Meier after the early turnover. Brodziński got the deflection goal but Miller made nine saves in playing the first half of the game. His best stop was a second-period right pad save on Marcus Sorensen from the only thing.

Anthony Stolarz replaced Miller and left Ducks officials feeling strong about what they could have in San Diego as an insurance policy. Stolarz got beat clean off the rush by San Jose’s Joachim Blichfeld early in the third period, a goal that forged a 3-3 tie. But the big goalie shut down the Sharks at every other turn, stopping 14 of 15 shots.

Stolarz is expected to contend with Kevin Boyle and Roman Durny (who’s on an AHL-only contract) for the No. 3 job in the organization. A two-year contract inked in July figured to make him the favorite. He did nothing to change that in his first Ducks appearance.

• The first game being played against a half-NHL roster (or third) does not reveal everything. But the Ducks left an encouraging sign with their special-teams play, both parts of which were subpar in 2018-19.
While the penalty kill did give up the Brodzinski score, created off a Ryan Merkley point shot, it got the job done while two men down after Andrew Poturalski and Josh Manson got sent off 30 seconds apart for their misdeeds.

The Ducks did an excellent job of pressuring the puckhandlers when the opportunity was there, and San Jose’s best chance on the 5-on-3 was a Burns one-timer that sailed wide. Henrique forced the Sharks to regroup after disrupting one entry up top, while Benoit was able to put his body on a couple players in assisting Hampus Lindholm within their triangle.

Until the Poturalski and Manson penalties, the Ducks were able to play much of the game at even strength, outside of the two Hakanpää minors. What should be a better-skating team overall paid some early dividends.

Anaheim, which long has run a deficit in drawing penalties compared to committing them, had four power plays Tuesday. The two units occasionally got set up and didn’t exactly pepper Dell or Korenar. But it did deliver the winner as Terry made a smart play in chipping the puck around a San Jose defender off the boards to himself and hitting a streaking Jones in stride.

The Ducks gave Dallas Eakins a win, so to speak, in his first time behind the bench as head coach. They didn’t turn around their lagging possession game in one fell swoop.

Natural Stat Trick had Anaheim with just a 41.6 percent Corsi-for rating. Some of that is a bit skewed. The Ducks were caved in during the third period as San Jose twice had to push for the tying goal. But while they were at only 15.8 percent possession, they limited the Sharks to just two high-danger chances against.

Meanwhile, the game-changing second period was much more to their favor, as you would expect the numbers to reflect. The Ducks generated six high-danger chances to San Jose’s two and had 11 shots on goal at even strength to the Sharks’ five. They were only 22 of 50 in the faceoff circle, though Lundestrom won 10 of 14 draws and made some quality defensive plays in his own zone.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
Vaakanainen looks like Bruins’ top prospect, and other preseason observations

By Matt Porter Globe Staff, Updated September 18, 2019, 11:17 p.m.

GLOBE STAFF PHILADELPHIA — Checking in from Old City, a short SEPTA train ride from where the Bruins take on the Flyers in their second preseason game Thursday (7 p.m., Wells Fargo Center):

The Bruins returned to practice Wednesday after a day off. Patrice Bergeron (groin) and Joakim Nordstrom (foot) went through a full-contact session. Two young players, defenseman Axel Andersson and winger Zach Senyshyn, did not participate. “Minor bumps and bruises,” coach Bruce Cassidy told reporters afterward. “They won’t play [Thursday], for sure.” Both Andersson and Senyshyn played in Monday’s preseason loss at New Jersey, neither making much of an impact.

■ Urho Vaakanainen, despite his overtime giveaway that led to the deciding goal in that 4-3 loss, looked like Boston’s top prospect. He’s not flashy. His shot is decent, and will likely improve. He’s not a drag racer on skates, though he moves well. For now, Vaakanainen is calm and reliable defensively, playing a tight gap and wisely deploying both stick and shoulder. Offensively, he makes smart stretch passes that lead to easy defensive zone exits, and is improving as a transporter of pucks. His fitness — he skated a game-high 24:53 on Monday — is a major plus. It helps the Bruins that he may not be needed immediately.

■ The Bruins wanted to lock up both Charlie McAvoy and Brandon Carlo to long-term deals, but couldn’t find common ground. The good news: Both want to be in Boston. “I didn’t really have any expectations for it,” Carlo said after signing a two-year, $5.7 million deal Tuesday. “In my heart, from the beginning, I was looking hopefully for the longer term, but I’m absolutely fine with (this) . . . just to be a part of this organization for any length of time.” If Torey Krug extends his run, the Bruins will be in good shape with Krug, McAvoy, Carlo and Matt Grzelcyk as a post-season level contract at the end of this season.

■ Cassidy wants to keep Coyle as the third-line center, since his combination of size, skating, puck protection and offensive touch in that role is a matchup issue for most opponents. But he wants to see if unproven Par Lindholm can fill the fourth-line center role, and if Sean Kuraly makes good on another crack at centering the third line. That would allow him to try Coyle as David Krejci’s right wing. If Coyle brought a protect-and-shoot mentality to that line, he could be a very good fit. And put more cash in his pocket, next July 1 or before.

Brett Ritchie would benefit from skating on David Krejci’s line.

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Brett Ritchie would benefit from skating on David Krejci’s line.

GLOBE STAFF ■ Does Ritchie look like a fit for Krejci’s line? Perhaps not for the whole season, but maybe in spurts. He showed a few of his positive attributes in Monday’s game, particularly on one sequence in which he protected the puck down low, separated from a defender, and drew a cross-checking penalty. His size, strength and willingness to finish checks could make him a good bottom-sixer on the right side. “The puck didn’t find him a ton, unfortunately,” Cassidy said after the game. “I think he’s the type of player that will be better when it does.” Not pegging Ritchie to any line, but just saying: There are few better than Krejci at distributing.

■ Wagner’s assessment of Jack Hughes, the No. 1 overall pick who scored a pair of goals on Monday: “Skilled. Really skilled. Shifty. He was good. He was noticeable, at least. I don’t know if that’s going to be the same game in the regular season, but for now, he was pretty good.” Hughes will likely do a lot of damage on the power play, in 3-on-3 and 4-on-4, but it remains to be seen how the 5-foot-10, 170-pound rookie handles himself in heavy battles — or if teams can force him into them.

■ Oskar Steen’s favorite player growing up: Peter Forsberg. An excellent choice. The Swedish legend had few holes in his game, other than his nagging foot woes. Credit Steen for doing his YouTube homework, since the 21-year-old was toddling around when No. 21 was at his physical, playmaking peak.

■ Not everyone cares about such aesthetics, but I’ll miss the old yellow seats at TD Garden, which were ripped and replaced by cushion, all-black versions. Seat upgrades were a necessary part of a much-needed renovation for the 24-year-old barn, but at first glance, the sea of black no longer recalls the Old Garden, and all its golden memories. On the other hand, I suppose all that darkness is a better visual backdrop for the overhauled 4K-resolution video board hanging at center ice . . . and all those banners hanging above it.

Boston Globe LOADED: 09.19.2019
Peter Cehlarik has come up from Providence on occasion the last couple of years and given the Bruins a boost with his skill, vision and knack for making plays.

But those stints have all been short-term bursts. Before too long he’s found himself in Providence. Still, that kind of talent sitting down on the farm has been nice to have. But if Cehlarik can’t stick on the Boston roster out of camp, then the B’s may not have that piece of organizational depth any longer. For the first year in his still young career, the 24-year-old Cehlarik – a third-round pick in 2013 – will require waivers to be sent to Providence (Anton Blidh is in the same boat). While there’s no certainty Cehlarik would get snatched up, there’s certainly a decent chance.

That won’t make the team any easier to make. There is a lot of competition for the left-shot wing. On the left side, he’s not knocking Brad Marchand or Jake DeBrusk out of a job. It appears Anders Bjork could get a long look as the third-line left winger and Joakim Nordstrom has the inside track to the fourth-line spot. There’s also free agent signee center/wing Par Lindholm. On the right side, there’s David Pastrnak, Karson Kuhlman, lefty Danton Heinen, free agent signee Brett Ritchie, Chris Wagner and David Backes.

That’s a lot of bodies to climb over. Maybe it would be a blessing if he got plucked by another team on waivers, but Cehlarik is not looking at what may be in store for him down the road.

"It’s going to a big year. I’m just going to focus on what I can control," said Cehlarik. "I know (his waiver status) is there, but I’m trying not to think about it. I’m here. I’m Boston’s player right now so I’m going to focus on my play."

Cehlarik said he worked with a new skating coach over the summer and believes it paid dividends

"I’ve been working on my edge work, my speed and my agility. I think it’s paid off. I feel a lot better on my skates. That was the biggest thing," said Cehlarik.

"I’m trying to use my crossovers instead of a straight line. I’m trying to be quicker in my change of directions. I’m still a big body and I’m not going to change the style of my game, but it helps." While Cehlarik’s skating may not be his best attribute, coach Bruce Cassidy believes it’s good enough for the NHL. What the coach needs to see is more consistency.

"It was more about his habits with the puck and making sure he stayed consistent, contributing every night," said Cassidy. "I think he’s been hot when he first got here and there’s been a drop-off, so we’d like to see a consistent element out of him. Some of that is opportunity, too. We have to keep him here longer. But it’s getting tougher and tougher with the growth of our younger guys on the wing with the Heinens and the DeBrusks. So it’s a challenge for Pete. We like the way he plays, but it’s too early to say if he’s over that hurdle."

Bruins notes

A promising sign in the second session of practice yesterday was Patrice Bergeron, battling an ongoing groin injury, back on the ice and in a regular jersey as opposed to the red non-contact one he’d been wearing. Bergeron was back in his familiar spot between Marchand and Pastrnak. Nordstrom (foot) was also back. …

Cassidy said Zach Senyshyn and Axel Andersson sustained minor injuries in Monday’s exhibition in New Jersey. While neither undisclosed injury is believed to be long-term, both players were ruled out for Thursday’s preseason game in Philadelphia. …
Jeremy Lauzon fighting long odds to stick with Bruins
Youngster hopes to stand out in crowded field

By STEVE CONROY | PUBLISHED: September 18, 2019

Teenagers make the National Hockey League all the time these days. Tightening of the obstruction rules and the advent of the salary cap forcing teams to look for cheap talent on entry level contracts over a decade have made the league a friendlier place for high-end young talents. Jack Hughes and Kaapo Kakko look to be this year’s models.

But for most prospects, the climb to the NHL can still be slow and uncertain. Sometimes advancement is naturally slow as a young man builds his strength up and hones his skill through his late teens and early 20s. In other cases, a stacked NHL roster serves to keep a youngster on the farm for an extra year or so.

For a player like Jeremy Lauzon, the latter is certainly becoming an issue. Lauzon got a taste of the NHL last year when he played 16 games for the big club, mostly early in the season when the B’s were dealing with injuries to Torey Krug, Kevan Miller, Brandon Carlo and Zdeno Chara. He acquitted himself well as a steady, mostly stay-at-home defenseman. In another situation, the next logical step would seem to be making the varsity roster on his own merit this year.

But a quick look at the preseason depth chart shows that making Boston’s roster isn’t getting any easier. On the left side, Lauzon’s strong side, there are Chara, Krug and Matt Grzelcyk. On the right, Charlie McAvoy and Brandon Carlo will hold down the top two spots while Connor Clifton and Steve Kampfer battle it out for playing time on the third pair. The injured John Moore (left) and Kevan Miller (right) will be added to the mix at some point.

And if the pipeline already looks a little clogged from Lauzon’s vantage point, Lauzon is also battling a couple of first-rounders, Urho Vaakanainen and Jakub Zboril (also lefties), to be next in line.

It might be daunting for a young player but Lauzon, whose competitiveness is one of his best on-ice qualities, is not discouraged.

“The competition inside this organization is just incredible and I’m really happy to be a part of it,” said the 22-year-old Lauzon, one of the B’s three second-round picks in the 2015 draft. “I’m just trying to concentrate on myself. I just try to play my best every practice. Every game, I’ll try to perform at my best and really just concentrate on myself. If I start looking at other players, there are a lot of good players here. I know that, and I think I’m a part of it.”

While conceding that this year’s roster will be tough to crack, coach Bruce Cassidy only has to point at last year to keep a glimmer of hope alive for the players on the outside looking in.

“We talk to those young guys about that,” said Cassidy. “You look at last year and you hope they’ve paid attention and realize we used a lot of guys. Who would have thought that Connor Clifton would have been the guy in the Stanley Cup Final? I think that should be enough of a motivating factor to know it might not be there on October 3, but certainly the opportunity would be there (at some point).”

For players who have to go to Providence, Cassidy said the goal should be to make themselves the first call-up. But he also didn’t completely rule out one of the younger D-men actually forcing his way into the mix, especially with Moore and Miller still not ready to play.

“There could be some opportunity if you look at Grizz with Kampfer or Clifton and you wanted a bigger body,” said Cassidy. “That’s where Lauzon might have to say ‘You know what? Maybe that’s me, playing on my offside and maybe I can give them value there on the penalty kill.’ In games, that’s where he has to stand out in his own mind, play to your strengths, be a big body, be hard to play against and maybe that pushes you up the ladder ahead of the Zborils or the Vaakanainens. I use them because they’re left shots like him. I think those are the things he has to take away when he leaves here and then gets back on the ice, that he can push his way in with that type of play.”
Brui
s' 'preference' is to leave Charlie Coyle at third line center

By Joe Haggerty September 18, 2019 4:52 PM

BRIGHTON -- There was some question as to whether Charlie Coyle might get a little time at wing this season for the Bruins after locking things down at the third line center position last season after coming over in trade from the Minnesota Wild.

The 6-foot-3, 218-pound Coyle brought two-way play, puck possession and offensive upside to the third line upon his arrival, and then he really stepped it up in the playoffs with nine goals and 16 points in his 24 games. So naturally, there is curiosity as to whether his size, strength and offense could move up to right wing on the second line where his game could be paired pretty comfortably with playmaking David Krejci.

Or even more radically, Coyle's size and strength could make an interesting match on the right wing with Patrice Bergeron and Brad Marchand.

One B's player makes 'Top 100 prospects' list

But it sounds like the Bruins are going to keep things strong down the middle with Bergeron and Krejci as their top-6 centers and Coyle and Sean Kuraly as the bottom-6 centers giving the B's depth and quality down the middle of the lineup. Coyle was centering Anders Bjork and Danton Heinen at practice on Wednesday afternoon and has played center throughout training camp.

It may be getting to a point now where they don't want to fool around with things by switching Coyle's positions on him as happened in Minnesota, and it certainly sounds like Cassidy's preference is to leave him at center.

"Generally speaking the match-up is the D-pair and the centerman down low. The wingers obviously matter, but they are less of a factor. At least that's what I think when I think match-ups. So to have Charlie [Coyle] in there [at center] now, and my intention is to keep him there unless the team would be better served with him on the wing," said Cassidy. "Right now, we like the way we played last year and hopefully this year. It makes you a lot more comfortable in terms of defending."

Cassidy reserved the right to change his mind if Trent Frederic really comes along as an NHL-ready center or if all of the top-6 right wing candidates end up dropping the ball in training camp. That doesn't appear to be the case over the first week of training camp and that may just mean Coyle stays in his comfortable position at center where he gives the Bruins the lineup depth that helped catapult them to the Stanley Cup Final last spring.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.19.2019
The Boston Bruins weren't exactly well represented on ESPN's "Top 100 NHL prospects list" heading into the new season.
20-year-old Jack Studnicka was the only B's prospect to make the list, landing in the No. 61 spot. Here's what ESPN's Chris Peters had to say about the 2017 second-round pick:

"A free-wheeling forward who can do a little bit of everything, Studnicka will be put to the test early in the AHL. But he looks more than ready to make the most of it."

In 60 games between the Oshawa Generals and the Niagra IceDogs of the OHL last season, Studnicka tallied 83 points (36 goals, 47 assists). The 6-foot-1, 175-pounder also scored in a playoff game with the Providence Bruins. He'll continue to battle for a spot on the NHL roster throughout camp.

Some of the Bruins prospects left out of the top 100 include Urho Vaakanainen, Anders Bjork, Trent Frederic, Jakub Lauko, Jakob Forsbacka Karlsson, and Zach Senyshyn.

Unsurprisingly, Jack Hughes (Devils) and Kaapo Kakko (Rangers) topped ESPN's rankings.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.19.2019
BRIGHTON — Perhaps it’s because the Bruins made it all the way to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final last season, or perhaps time simply has mellowed any raw feelings over the four-plus years that have passed since then.

But Bruins general manager Don Sweeney was about as forthright as he’s ever been on the very first NHL draft weekend he ran as GM of the Black and Gold, and the “steep learning curve” that took place when things didn’t go off without a hitch for Boston.

“It was a steep learning curve that weekend for us for an absolute certainty. We did put forth a plan as to what we were going to try to accomplish as an organization,” said Sweeney. “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. And 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. Hopefully the club reflects that and the success we’ve had reflects that.”

Sweeney to discuss extension wth Krug

A draft pool stocked with talent produced some very good players for the Bruins, of course, as second-line left winger Jake DeBrusk and shutdown defenseman Brandon Carlo are both products of that draft.

Carlo was the very reason why Sweeney was asked about as he signed a two-year deal worth $2.85 million per season as a second-round pick that went very right for the B’s. But there were also some big misses as their biggest goal from that weekend was to trade up in the first round and get a young franchise defenseman with Noah Hanifin and Zach Werenski as their biggest targets.

Instead, the Bruins traded Milan Lucic and Dougie Hamilton to amass six selections in the first two rounds of that draft, and then were left with three consecutive selections in the middle of the first round when they failed to trade up. Obviously they took care of that defenseman need a year later when they drafted Charlie McAvoy around the very same part of the first round, but in hindsight, they missed badly in the first round.

They obviously hit with a solid player in DeBrusk, who scored 27 goals in his second NHL season last year. But barring a big turnaround for both players, they missed with the other two first-round picks in Jakub Zboril and Zach Senyshyn. When one considers that Mat Barzal, Kyle Connor and Thomas Chabot were taken with the next three picks in the first round, the Bruins missed badly with both of those players given the comparable talent available.

Connor could have been the top-6 winger they’ve been missing the last couple of seasons, and the dazzling Barzal certainly would be the heir apparent in the middle to aging top-6 centers David Krejci and Patrice Bergeron.

Later in the first round Brock Boeser and Travis Konecny, and in the second round Sebastian Aho, were selected as well, further adding to the missed opportunities for the Bruins. They’ve rebounded to further replenish their prospect pool in subsequent drafts and obviously the future is bright for a team with a talented roster coming off three straight playoff appearances and a Stanley Cup Final run last season.

Clearly Sweeney has done enough to make everybody forget the 2015 draft whether it’s signing guys like Brad Marchand and David Pastrnak to team-friendly deals, or learning his lessons well enough from some of the early missteps to be named the 2019 NHL General Manager of the Year.
Sabres assign Matej Pekar to juniors

By Staff

As expected, the Sabres have assigned Matej Pekar to his junior team, the Barrie Colts of the Ontario Hockey League.

Pekar, 19, was in the lineup for Tuesday night's preseason game against Columbus.

A fourth-round pick in the 2018 draft at Dallas, Pekar burst onto 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. The play went viral. Pekar quickly became a favorite of fans at 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 move also opens the possibility of Pekar to play in the World Junior Championships, which begin in December in the Czech Republic, Pekar's home country.

Buffalo News LOADED: 09.19.2019
Sabres Mailbag: Which player on roster bubble is most likely to make the team?

By Lance Lysowski

The first five days of training camp are over. Buffalo Sabres coach Ralph Krueger and his coaching staff planned to spend Wednesday analyzing their first two preseason games.

The film session provided them with a better idea of how they can better prepare the players to properly execute in all three zones. As important, the preseason games were Krueger’s first opportunity to evaluate players during a training camp filled with competition. Individual and team lessons will be delivered before both practice sessions Thursday, and the Sabres will play the Maple Leafs in Toronto on Friday night.

We’re starting to see which players are taking advantage of their opportunity early in camp, but the roster likely won’t be trimmed significantly until the Sabres play their back-to-back against Toronto on Friday and Saturday. With that in mind, let's start the latest mailbag with at least one player whom I believe will make this team:

Tim: Which player on the bubble has the best chance of making the roster out of training camp?

Lance Lysowski: Picking Victor Olofsson would be a cop-out because there’s no question the 24-year-old winger is ready to make the team. Fans might groan at my answer to the question, though: Tage Thompson. The 21-year-old gained 13 pounds, and the improved lower-body strength should help him become a more well-rounded player.

Thompson needs to show he can battle for a loose puck or out-muscle a defender in front of the opposing goalie. He was arguably the Sabres’ best player Monday night against the Pittsburgh Penguins, and it’s clear Krueger wants to give Thompson a significant opportunity. Thompson played on the top power play and took advantage by scoring on a rebound in front of the net. He has the potential to be a top-six forward, so why not try him on the top line with Jack Eichel?

Forwards Curtis Lazar and C.J. Smith, and defensemen John Gilmour and Zach Montour are bubble players I’ll be monitoring over the next week. Lazar and Smith could bring some much-needed skill to the bottom six, while Gilmour has the chance to be a dynamic player on the left side.

Kevin: Who is under more pressure in their contract year: Sam Reinhart, Casey Mittelstadt or Brandon Montour?

Lysowski: For those unaware, all three players are set to be restricted free agents next summer. Montour is under the least amount of pressure, in my opinion. He should receive significant minutes and will contribute on the power play. The points will come since he’s going to be grouped with talented players, and teams are handing out significant term and average annual value to offensively gifted defensemen. I will be surprised if the Sabres are able to keep Montour.

Mittelstadt is under some pressure. The 20-year-old needs to show the Sabres he can play center at this level, particularly in the first five days. The added size and strength should help, and a 20-goal season could earn Mittelstadt a raise in the form of a bridge contract. A strong season would also help Mittelstadt for next season, when Dylan Cozens is expected to be ready for the National Hockey League.

Reinhart is under the most pressure. The 23-year-old needs to show he can drive his own line and contribute more defensively. He has made significant strides on and off the ice the past two years. Let’s not forget Reinhart had a career-high 65 points last season. He doesn’t deserve some of the criticism directed toward him by fans. But there’s no question the Sabres need Reinhart to take another step this season. Doing so could earn him a lucrative long-term contract.

Mike: Does General Manager Jason Botterill lose his job if the Sabres have another horrendous season?

Lysowski: No. Botterill shouldn’t lose his job if the season goes terribly wrong. He inherited a dire situation in Buffalo. There were a number of bad contracts for players with deteriorating skills; the organization had few prospects on the verge of contributing in the NHL; and the entire culture of the organization needed to be changed. There is hope for this franchise. That has been illustrated several times since Botterill’s arrival, most recently the talent on display during the Prospects Challenge.

This management group has made serious progress and was finally able to address the lack of depth on the roster. Botterill and his assistant general managers, Randy Sexton and Steve Greeley, constructed a clear and thoughtful plan to build the organization. The Sabres are doing an outstanding job at drafting and developing young players. Sure, there is parity in the league, but the salary cap makes it difficult to clean up a mess overnight. It’s fair to criticize Botterill for the Ryan O’Reilly trade. It’s important to remember, though, there have also been some extenuating circumstances that have hurt the Sabres’ chances of succeeding, including Patrik Berglund’s departure and Robin Lehner enduring a personal struggle.

Give Botterill a few years. I could hear audible groans as I type that sentence, but this is a young team that needs time to develop. Rasmus Dahlin is only 19 years old. Thompson and Mittelstadt are still developing.

Lou: Why did Rasmus Ristolainen sit out the first two preseason games?

Lysowski: Nothing sinister is going on here. Krueger told reporters neither Ristolainen nor Marcus Johansson would play Monday or Tuesday. Perhaps Ristolainen is dealing with a minor injury or the Sabres don’t see a need to play him in these first few games. The guy has played a ton of hockey since he entered the league, and he could log up to 24 minutes a game if he remains in Buffalo. There’s also the chance the Sabres aren’t going to risk a possible injury in case a trade materializes in the coming days.

The odds of a trade have slightly increased over the past week. Restricted free agents are finally signing with their respective teams, and Sabres fans will want to monitor the situation in Winnipeg. The Jets will be in the market for a right-shot defenseman if Dustin Byfuglien chooses to retire, and they could have the salary cap space to get a deal done.

The Sabres want to give significant power-play and penalty-kill opportunities to younger players who are vying for a spot on the roster, particularly Henri Jokiharju, early in camp. They know what they have in Ristolainen. Perhaps a long look at Jokiharju, who was impressive against the Penguins, will make Botterill more comfortable parting with Ristolainen.

Svotkish: Did Jack Eichel look up to speed in the preseason opener, even against the Penguins’ AHL players?

Lysowski: Don’t worry about Eichel. Sure, he showed some rust at times against Pittsburgh, particularly without the puck, but he showed poise on the power play and we were able to see the skills that helped him become a Hart Trophy candidate during the first half of last season.

Early preseason games can be difficult for established players, especially when they’re forced to face inferior competition. Teams travel the same day and there’s no question the first few days of camp are a grind.

Eichel wasn’t the only one who appeared to be out of sorts. Jimmy Vesey didn’t register a shot on goal Monday. Neither Reinhart nor Mittelstadt looked particularly sharp against Columbus. Remember, the Sabres were inundated with information during their practices to prepare for these games and did not have a 5-on-5 scrimmage.

I was more interested in the fringe roster players such as Thompson, Gilmour and Lazar. The former two were outstanding, while Lazar showed some promise, particularly on the forecheck. There weren’t any standout performances against the Blue Jackets, aside from Linus Ullmark.

Mike: Am I the only one immensely worried about the goaltending?

Lysowski: Your concerns are merited, Mike. Last season, neither Carter Hutton nor Ullmark showed the consistency necessary to lead a team to the playoffs. The Sabres are going to allow more high-danger chances than fans would like, regardless of Krueger’s defensive structure.

The Sabres have defensemen who love to join the rush and their top forwards aren’t always strong defensively, both of which can result in odd-man rushes. I do believe they will be better in that respect under Krueger, however, they will need either Hutton or Ullmark to make at least a few big saves every game.

There is reason for hope, though. Both were at times last season and Krueger hired one of the top goalie coaches in the NHL, Mike Bales.
I don't blame Botterill for gambling on Hutton and Ullmark this season. After all, it's difficult to acquire a goalie via free agency or trade. Drafting and developing is critical at the position, which is why you've seen the Sabres draft two goalies in the past three years: Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen and Erik Portillo.

It's clear the Sabres are hoping either Ullmark or Luukkonen establish themselves as a franchise goalie within the next two years. Bales should increase the chance of that happening.

Tom: Does assistant coach Steve Smith, who works with the team's defensemen, get a free pass for the team's play in the defensive zone Tuesday in Columbus?

Lysowski: Absolutely. Again, the Sabres did not hold a 5-on-5 scrimmage before either preseason game, and the defensive structure installed by Krueger is different than the one used by former coach Phil Housley. It's important to note there weren't many egregious breakdowns. Perhaps the worst mistake was Jake McCabe failing to break up a backdoor pass to Sonny Milano on the Blue Jackets' third goal Tuesday night.

I'm more concerned with the shoddy puck management by Dahlin on Monday, but hey, it's the preseason. As Krueger noted Tuesday night, most of the Sabres have not been pressured on the breakout since the end of last season. Let's withhold judgment for a while. Smith worked wonders for Dahlin last season, and I suspect that relationship will help Dahlin's development this season.

Buffalo News LOADED: 09.19.2019
Dillon Dube capitalizes on audition, leads Flames to exhibition win

Wes Gilbertson

On this night, Dillon Dube didn’t mind being the third wheel.

He made a case for first star. (And settled for second.)

Dube was buzzing in Wednesday’s 6-4 victory over the San Jose Sharks in pre-season action at the Saddledome, clearly amped about the opportunity to audition alongside the top-line tandem of Johnny Gaudreau and Sean Monahan.

Instead of getting lost in the shadows of his big-name linemates, the 21-year-old speedster delivered a goal and assist.

“I’m really excited for the opportunity. They’re obviously top guys in the league,” Dube gushed after Wednesday’s morning skate. “Just their brains, they’re so smart with the puck. They’ve been playing together for so long for a reason — because they think so far ahead of everybody else. The plays someone doesn’t see coming, they always see it. You can almost just see it build from our end to their end, just because of the things they do and the lanes they find … It’s incredible.

“Obviously, Lindy (Elias Lindholm) has played a lot with them and it won’t be the chemistry they have. But I’m just going to be trying to talk a lot and hopefully fit in with them.

“It’s a nice opportunity to try to showcase some offensive ability.”

Lindholm remains the far-and-away frontrunner to man the right wing with Gaudreau and Monahan. That trio did, after all, combine for 259 points last season. (Lindholm, who could also be shifted to centre to add even more depth down the middle, wasn’t in the home lineup for Wednesday’s exhibition.)

The left-handed Dube, however, didn’t waste the chance to prove he can provide some offensive punch, even from his off-wing.

He earned a helper on Monahan’s first-period strike.

In the middle stanza, with Nos. 13 and 23 waiting to hop the boards on a line change, he buried on a smooth deke to his forehand.

The Cochrane kid was a feel-good story for the Flames last fall, emerging as a pre-season standout and scoring an opening-night job at the Saddledome. In his bid to repeat that feat, Dube has three points in two tuneups so far.

“All you hear is about how good the last exhibition was, but it’s a new page. It’s time to turn that. It doesn’t change anything that’s happening in this camp,” stressed Dube, who logged 25 appearances with the Flames last winter and suited up for 37 more on behalf of the American Hockey League’s Stockton Heat. “It’s just going out there and trying to find my way and build each game. It’s nice to be here and feel a little bit more comfortable, but there’s still a lot in the back of your head that this is a huge tryout …

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t have that mindset. I would be sent down to Stockton real quick because there are a lot of guys hungry to take jobs.”

Alan Quine, who was the leading point-producer for the Heat last winter and was also called up for 13 contests with the big club, scored and collected an assist of his own in Wednesday’s win, while Adam Ruzicka and Derek Ryan also tickled twine for the locals and Gaudreau was credited with a late empty-netter after an oopsie by Sharks hopeful Tony Sund.

The night didn’t exactly start the way that Calgary’s masked man, Jon Gillies, would have drawn it up. San Jose’s first shot on goal, off the stick of Lean Bergmann and through a mess of traffic, wound up in the back of net.

The Flames soon equalized on a familiar sequence — a setup by Gaudreau, a snipe by Monahan.

Dube started that rush with a nifty backhand pass from just inside his own blue-line. Gaudreau hauled the puck through the neutral zone, spied his centre sidekick as the trailer and Monahan picked a corner on the glove side.

One of the bubble boys for a forward job, Quine’s tally was a thing of beauty. The 26-year-old shrugged off an opponent, booted a loose puck up to his stick and then dizzied with a deke before firing through the five-hole.

The 20-year-old Ruzicka, anxious to prove he is ready to turn professional after a 35-goal campaign in the Ontario Hockey League, impressed by finishing off a give-and-go with fellow prospect Martin Pospisil, while Ryan lucked out when his attempted pass was deflected home by a defender.

Dube’s marker stood as the game-winner. Quine forced a turnover with a stick-check at the offensive blue-line, and Byron Froese found No. 29 with a clear path to the crease.

Canada’s former world-junior captain has only one lamp-lighting so far at the NHL level but the way he tucked this away, you can tell that number is going to soon grow.

“I say ‘building my game each game,’ but a lot of it is building my game for my future,” Dube said after the victory against the Sharks. “They have such a great development plan here. They’ve had such good players brought up through their organization, so there’s a lot of trust in the management here and if I play good enough and they think I belong, then I’ll stay here. And if I need some more seasoning in the American League, then so be it. It’s just coming out here and trying to play my best every night and give them what I have.”

Manuel Wiederer potted a pair Wednesday for the Sharks — one a rebound and the other a softie — and Ivan Chekhovich also counted for what was mostly a no-name crew of visitors.

The 25-year-old Gillies, who is on a one-way contract this season but is clearly third on the depth chart in Calgary, finished with 15 saves.

The Flames continue their exhibition slate Friday with a road trip north to face the Edmonton Oilers.

Calgary Sun: LOADED: 09.19.2019
Mangiapane thrilled to rejoin Flames teammates

Even during the leisurely laps that precede practice, you couldn’t wipe the smile off his face.

Heck, Andrew Mangiapane barely stopped beaming during Wednesday’s end-of-session bag-skate.

After a brief contract stalemate with the Calgary Flames, the 23-year-old left-winger is back where he wants to be.

Back at the Saddledome.

Back with his buddies.

Back to prove that his breakout last winter was just a sign of bigger things to come.

"Definitely good to get back out and get the lungs going a bit and get in the swing of things," Mangiapane said after Wednesday’s sweat at the Saddledome, his first practice with his pals since he scribbled his signature this past weekend on a one-year, two-way pact worth US$715,000.

“I was happy when (the contract) was done. At the time, you’re waiting and you want to be there. You’re eager, right? I trained hard during the summer and you want to get out with all the guys and you want to prove yourself that you trained hard in the summer and that you’re ready for the season.

“It was tough just sitting at home. You want to be here. It’s my job.”

Unlike last fall, Mangiapane is pencilled in for an opening-night gig at the Saddledome.

He established himself as a full-timer in the second half of last season, collecting his first big-league assist in January, scoring his first big-league goal in February and eventually suiting up for 36 consecutive contests, 41 if you include the playoffs.

The Flames didn’t seem to budge in negotiations with the fleet-footed forward, but Mangiapane also didn’t want to stall his progress by staying away too long.

He ultimately missed three days of practices, plus the split-squad openers. Although he wasn’t in the lineup Wednesday against the San Jose Sharks at the Saddledome, the Flames have five more exhibition dates and No. 88 will certainly see his fill of action.

With Mangiapane’s return, the only regular who has yet to report for training camp is rising star Matthew Tkachuk, another restricted free agent but one poised for a major payday.

“I don’t think it will hurt me. You have a couple weeks here to get your legs underneath you for the start of the season,” Mangiapane said of his delayed arrival. “I think that I’ve proven myself that I can play in this league and that I can be an everyday NHL player and hopefully be a great NHL player. It’s just working hard in camp, getting your shots in, getting your reps, getting your timing down, and then I’ll be ready to play.”

He was ready, too, for some good-natured barbs from his teammates.

While his agent, Ritch Winter, and Flames general manager Brad Treliving completed contract talks, Mangiapane was already getting an earful from one of his best buds. He landed in Calgary on Saturday, crashing that night with defenceman Rasmus Andersson, a fellow sophomore at the Saddledome, a friend dating back to their days with the Ontario Hockey League’s Barrie Colts and a relentless chatterbox.

“He was chirping me a lot,” Mangiapane grinned.

As you would expect in any locker-room, the welcome back has included plenty of wisecracks.

“Hammer, Backs … They’re all a little bit giving it to me. It’s good. It’s all fun and games.”
Jon Gillies, the Flames’ long-time goalie prospect, refuses to get distracted by a numbers game

By Scott Cruickshank Sep 18, 2019

Jon Gillies, as well as anyone, can count. And project.

He knows the Calgary Flames’ crease is crowded. He knows the destinations are spoken for.

With newcomer Cam Talbot and David Rittich locked into Calgary, it appears hotshot rookie Artyom Zagidulin and Tyler Parsons will split the workload in AHL Stockton. Nick Schneider, meanwhile, is bound for ECHL Kansas City. (Feel-good story Dustin Wolf has already been dispatched to WHL Everett.)

What does that mean for Gillies? Possibly being loaned to another AHL outfit.

After his first appearance of the NHL preseason, he declined to speculate on his fate, insisting he’s not obsessing about the organization’s depth chart and any subsequent fall-out.

“Td’t really care,” Gillies said after the Flames’ 6-4 decision Wednesday over the San Jose Sharks at the Saddledome. “I mean, I know what I can do, and guys that have been here in the past know what I can do. It’s about getting an opportunity, it’s about getting a chance.

“Anything can happen. No sense worrying about everyone else. I worry about me.”

In that case, he must have plenty on his mind. During a seven-year affiliation with the Flames, Gillies has somehow transformed from golden child to outcast.

After starring for the Indiana Ice of the USHL, Gillies was drafted 75th overall in 2012 — just a few slots ahead of NHL prime-timers Matt Murray and Frederik Andersen.

One year later — after capturing the Tim Taylor Award as college hockey’s most outstanding rookie — Flames assistant general manager John Weisbrod declared Gillies to be “arguably our best prospect.”

That, at the time, didn’t seem like an outrageous statement.

A two-time participant in the world junior tourney, the Concord, N.H., native finished his college career by carrying Providence to the 2015 NCAA title and, in the process, was named the tournament’s most valuable player.

What followed, though, has been decidedly up and down.

Take last season, alone.

After a terrific preseason in Calgary — 2-0-0, 1.97 goals-against average, .920 save percentage — Gillies ended up in Stockton for the fourth straight year. His numbers there were crummy — 16-23-1 with a 3.51 GAA, 44th among qualified goalies, and a .889 save percentage, good for 42nd.

“The first half of the year, I sucked. The second half of the year, I played to my capability,” Gillies said. “Last year was tough for me mentally. Away from the rink, everything that could happen happened in a such short period of time, it was just trying to get through the year.

“I had Grandpa and Grandma die within three weeks of each other. I grew up very family-oriented and I was very close with them. It was hard.”

The 25-year-old said after the death of his grandmother — “the happiest person in the world” — he was inspired to regroup, to re-embrace the opportunity at hand.

“I felt that a weight was lifted and everything that I was carrying around, putting so much pressure on myself, kind of went away,” Gillies said. “And I was able to just play hockey. I just reminded myself that I am good at this and, with the talent I have, as long as the work matches it, whenever I get my opportunity I know that I’m going to show it.”

Wednesday’s display, however, produced mixed reviews.

Shifting to his left in the second period, Gillies did make a snazzy point-blank save on Ivan Chekhovich from close range. But much of the night he looked unsettled.

That assessment would be news to the man himself.

Gillies didn’t like the fourth goal — “I picked it up late, but it’s still inexcusable for it to hit me and go in” — but he wasn’t going to lose sleep over the first three.

“A screen goal, two nice tip goals,” he said. “I felt good. I mean, I was pretty happy. Obviously, you want to stop every shot, but you’ve got to be realistic, too.

“It’s interesting, because I felt a lot better than I expected to. First games, you never know.”

Entering his fifth pro season, he’s working on a contract worth $750,000. It’s a one-way arrangement, meaning he gets NHL dollars wherever he happens to be stationed.

“I know with the talent I have and the work I put in this summer, it’s going to show,” said Gillies, who, as part of his offseason regimen, did vision training with race car drivers in Indiana. “At the end of the day, I know what I can do. I know the talent level I have.

“It’s just about getting an opportunity. If it’s here, great. If it’s somewhere else, great.”

It was a spot Dillon Dube was merely keeping warm. He — and everyone else — understood that.

The right side on the Flames’ first line — alongside stars Johnny Gaudreau and Sean Monahan — is the well-earned domain of Elias Lindholm. (At least until Matthew Tkachuk arrives. Coach Bill Peters intends to try No. 19 there. Well, eventually.)

But Wednesday, Dube, in the running for everyday work in the NHL, was handed the enviable assignment. For the purposes of flaunting one’s offensive gifts, could there be a better perch?

The forward did not disappoint, picking up a couple of points.

“It’s just going out there and trying to find my way and build each game,” said Dube, 21. “It’s exciting. It’s nice to be here and feel a little bit more comfortable, but there’s still a lot in the back of your head that this is a huge tryout.

“You’re not competing for an (AHL) spot, you’re competing for an NHL (job).”

In the first period, by knitting a backhand pass into the neutral zone, he got the puck onto the stick of Gaudreau, who fed Monahan, who simply shot the puck in.

Next shift — and it’s worth noting Peters said Wednesday morning Dube needs to start winning more board battles — the kid did exactly that, levering loose the puck from tight quarters. In possession, he smartly found Gaudreau, who enjoyed a good scoring chance.

And in the second period, Dube scored a beauty — deking, at high speed, to his forehand — thanks to his linemates. Nos. 13 and 23? Nope. Hopping onto the ice to relieve Tobias Rieder, Dube got immersed in a snappily efficient sequence with Alan Quine and Byron Froese.

Dube, clearly, has put in the work, reporting as the fittest prospect (edging out defender Robert Hamilton and right winger Dmitry Zavgorodnyi) — and he is getting rewarded.

Wednesday, he merited a long look at even strength and on the power play, even getting a penalty-killing peek.

“For me, a lot of it is building my game for my future. A lot of it,” Dube said. “They’ve got such a great development plan here, they’ve had such good players brought up through the organization, there’s a lot of trust in the management here.”

But Peters, still staring at a total of 54 campers, is one tough marker.

He didn’t like the sight of Dube carrying the puck on a two-on-one, failing to get a shot off. He’d opted to force a pass in Monahan’s direction. “He’s probably a guy at this stage, (when) playing with those guys, who is going to defer,” Peters said. “That’s something he’ll learn as he goes. That’s understandable.”
The coach also caught Dube failing to exit the puck from inside the Flames' zone.

“That’s a play that needs to be made — I don’t know why it wasn’t,” Peters said. “It’s those types of things. It’s not always the big highlight-reel clips that you talk about. It’s the subtle little plays.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
The Calgary Flames were simultaneously one of last year's biggest surprises and disappointments. Few expected much from the team at the start of the season, but the Flames proved many wrong by not only making the playoffs but winning the West with 107 points while earning the league's second best goal differential. The Cinderella-esque story came crashing down in the postseason, though, when the team was humiliated over five poorly played games by a wild card team that completely dominated them.

It was a tough end to the campaign, which makes predicting Calgary's upcoming season tricky. Are the Flames the team that finished first in their conference or the team that stumbled when it actually mattered?

The playoffs and the chaos induced by its small sample size usually obfuscate a team's ability, but in Calgary's case it brought about legitimate reasons for concern as the team deserved to lose their first round series, being outplayed handily in the process. The Flames should still be a playoff team this year, especially in a very weak Pacific Division, but should also take a sizeable step back. This team still has a bit to prove.

Repeating last year's season looks like a tall order. The Flames earn 107 points or more just eight percent of the time. Even 100 points isn't a guarantee as the team ends up there just 34 percent of the time. The Flames are a top 10 team in talent, but only finish within that range 47 percent of the time.

Perhaps that's far too pessimistic for a team that had very strong underlyng numbers, but part of the team's success last year can be attributed to strength of schedule and that's a driving force limiting their upside here. The Flames' opponents last season had an average expected win percentage of 0.483 according to my model (which would account for injuries and absences to teams faced at the time), the lowest in the league which leads to lower quality of competition estimates across the roster. If you don't trust that, by actual win percentage their opponents average of 0.490 was second weakest, their opponents' average goal differential was minus-five which was weakest and their opponents' average expected goals percentage was 49.7 percent, which was again the weakest (though a much tighter range there).

None of that should be surprising considering they're in the league's weakest division and that means their schedule won't exactly be difficult again this season, but it's unlikely it'll be to the same degree.

The Flames were also beneficiaries of a number of career seasons from some of their best players, campaigns that likely won't be replicated this season. The Flames' ascent last season had a number of parallels with the Winnipeg Jets from two seasons ago, a team that took a massive step forward before taking a step back following the same season. I'm expecting the same thing for the Flames.

While Calgary has star power in spades and belongs in the league's top 10, what's holding the Flames back are the same issues the team had last season: goaltending and depth. This is a bona fide playoff team, but one that sits just outside the contender tier for now.

Outside the top of the roster, the Flames have a lot of good players, but not a lot of great players. It's not like any single player is bad here by any means (well, maybe one they just traded for), but the team has only six top of the lineup calibre players (elite, top six forward, first pair defender or top 20 goalie). The nine teams above them have an average of 11.2, while the lowest team – the next team on this list – has nine. That team is the only other in the top 10 without at least 10 such players. Not only that, the NHL average is 8.8 and there are 25 other teams in the league with seven or more such players leaving Calgary in very low company with the likes of Arizona, Los Angeles, Detroit, Edmonton and Ottawa.

What separates Calgary from those teams and many of the other teams ahead of them on such a list is their elite core (and the fact that the bottom of their lineup isn’t filled with dead weight). Those guys are crucial parts of the puzzle and it’s why the Flames finished second in the league last year. The team has three such players, something only seven other teams can say, and rank highly as a result. But it’s that next wave of immediate support that puts teams over the top, the top six forwards and top pair defenders spaced around the lineup that reinforces the foundation.

This Flames group is currently projected to be severely lacking in that department and it showed in the playoffs. Though the core guys also struggled, no team is going to go far when the bottom half of the roster is getting completely caved in, earning less than 40 percent of the expected goals share against an Avalanche team that really wasn’t that deep.

That can change, though, and there’s plenty of reason to believe a few players on this team can reach that next tier. Many of the team’s depth options are still quite young while others have shown flashes of being something more throughout their career. That this will also be the second season under head coach Bill Peters also needs to be considered.

First on the docket; Noah Hanifin. He’s the closest to being a top of the lineup calibre player, falling just barely under the cutoff of one win to be considered a top pairing defender. He doesn’t have the Peters excuse because he came over from Carolina as well last summer. What he does have is his entire prime right in front of him and that’s the main reason to be optimistic about the 2015 fifth-overall pick. Over the last two seasons he’s really come into his own as an offensive play-driver, sporting the second highest expected goals for rate on the team while also being the second strongest point scorer behind Mark Giordano. That’s not surprising given how strong he is with the puck as one of the game’s best at entering and exiting the zone.

For young players, offence is the easy part. Figuring out defence is where things get tricky and that applies to Hanifin as well. He was the team’s most porous defender by expected goals and actual goals and for him to take the next step he needs to show further maturation there.

The Flames have a few other young players just entering their prime where fans can be hopeful of a breakout. Up front that’s Sam Bennett and Andrew Mangiapane, who are both 23, while on defence Rasmus Andersson and Oliver Kylington are both 22.

Bennett comes in with the most promise as the 2014 fourth overall pick, but hasn’t been able to live up to that to date. He’s one of the team’s worstest play-drivers and doesn’t produce value on either end of the ice for the future, but there’s signs that things are beginning to turn around. His expected goals rate last year was still at 53 percent and he’s made improvements in each of the last two seasons. He also appears to be gifted with the puck, looking well above average at zone entries, zone exits and even shot contributions. That latter part bodes well for his offensive upside as a future scorer. While his 1.57 points per 60 at 5-on-5 was one of the team’s weakest last year, it still grades out as a second line rate and was his highest since his rookie season. He’s been trending upwards in that regard and what’s more encouraging is that 90 percent of those points were primary. Last season Bennett was getting to dangerous areas more too, sporting a 0.87 individual expected goals per 60. The next step is converting those chances into goals.

Mangiapane was a real revelation last year and the key to him showing more value is earning his trust more than anything – as well as improving last year was no fluke. He only played 44 games in his rookie season, but in that time he was the team leader in expected goals percentage with a stunning 60 percent and his 1.79 points per 60 grades out as a solid second line rate. Those were in very sheltered minutes, but still look impressive nevertheless. He’s a good candidate to move up to the third or even second line this season, and we’ll see if he can keep up his impressive rates further up the lineup.

The third pair is still very green and it showed last season. Though both Andersson and Kylington were strong puck-movers, it didn’t lead to tangible results as the duo had a middling expected goals rate – the worst among the team’s defenders – and they did that in what my model considers to be some of the easiest minutes in the league last season. By my estimation of usage the duo had the 10th and seventh most sheltered minutes in the league last season. The top four handled a lot of the tougher assignments leaving Andersson, Kylington and the injured Juuso Valimaki with some cushy time to thrive, and it’s hard to say that they did. They’re all young and improving, but now it’s a matter of showing they can handle more responsibility.

Derek Ryan isn’t young, but he’s an intriguing player who’s been second line calibre in two seasons running as a capable defensive forward – arguably one of Calgary’s strongest. At 32, age isn’t his friend, however, and the fact he doesn’t play many tough minutes is part of his lower projected value. Michael Frolik is in a similar situation and it’s no certainty
he's even a Flame when all is said and done as the team faces a cap crunch. He can be a solid contributor but his play over the last few seasons has been uneven.

Calgary has a few players that have breakout potential (Hanifin, Bennett, Megna, Juul-Jensen, Kylington) and a couple that may be underrated (Ryan, Frolik), so there is some reason for optimism when it comes to the team's depth.

Goal-tending is a bit of a different story. It's a shaky foundation that may undermine this upcoming season as the team once again enters the year with a goaltending duo expected to be in the league's bottom 10.

Calgary's largest issue last year remains this season as the team goes with a tandem of David Rittich and Cam Talbot, two wholly unsurprising netminders relative to the teams above them. Only one other team, Carolina, has a worse projected duo.

Rittich appears to be the starter, but is largely unproven and was below average in his first two seasons. Last year his .911 save percentage was a bit behind his expected .913, a difference that ranked 27th out of 50 goalies who played over 1,000 minutes last year. That's backup goaltender territory and he was even worse the season prior. It may not be wise to expect a huge leap into starter territory, either. Though this is only his third season, Rittich is 27, which isn't exactly young in hockey terms. Talbot is even older at 32 and it's fair to question whether last year was a sign of the times or if he can indeed bounce back. In 2018-19 he had a .893 save percentage leading to an abysmal 15 goals allowed above expected, the ninth worst mark in the league. My model does think he can regain some of his previous form as he was strong in every season prior – stopping 33 goals combined in the past two seasons – but at his age the signs of decline are troublesome, to say the least.

The team will rely again on its core players and that's where I'm perhaps most apprehensive about Calgary. Johnny Gaudreau, Sean Monahan, Elias Lindholm, Matthew Tkachuk, Mark Giordano and Travis Hamonic all had career years. Mikael Backlund and T.J. Brodie both had resurgent seasons. Are all eight players as amazing as they showed to be last season or can we expect a bit of a drop-off?

Tkachuk is probably safe. He's the youngest in that group, and an elite play-driver who finally got minutes and power play time to prove his worth on the scoresheet. There's little doubt in my mind he can hold steady and become one of the league's best wingers. He forms a terrific one-two punch with Gaudreau and it's the reason the Flames have the best left wing depth in the league. Monahan, who still needs to clean up his defensive game, is firmly in his prime and is a strong scorer. As long as he's on the top line he's a safe bet to continue being a borderline elite centre.

As for the rest, there's reasons for skepticism across the board. Last year the sextet were worth roughly 17 wins, but are projected to be only worth around 11 this year. That's worth 12 standings points, and almost perfectly encapsulates the steep drop-off my model is projecting from 107 points last year to the current 96-point projection. Whether it's fair or warranted will be shown on the ice this season and how much each player can maintain his value from last season will be of massive importance.

The smallest drops in the group belong to Gaudreau, who is projected to regress by about 0.75 wins. Gaudreau is one of the league's most electric players and a treat to watch grading out as a top 15 player and borderline top five winger after looking top 10 and third best respectively last season by GSVa. Another season like that isn't out of the cards, but a small decline might be a safer bet.

Gaudreau is extremely gifted with the puck and unsurprisingly grades out very highly in terms of transitional play and shot assists. Last year that led to the highest on-ice goals for rates on the team which should continue for the foreseeable future, especially if his line keeps creating chances the way they have. His defensive play has also seen improvement too and he remains one of the league's best penalty drawers.

The discrepancy from his 2018-19 season and his projected output for 2019-20 lies in what to make of his point production. Is he the 32 goal scorer he was then the 85-point player or the 70-point player the year before that? Last year's production was a hefty jump and is either his new normal or an outlier season. It's worth mentioning that he slowed down a lot in the second half playing at a near-90 point pace after posting 55 points in his first 40 games. That was while scoring 21 goals on 13 expected goals a mark that corrected itself to 15 goals on 13 expected goals in the second half. It's there where I'd expect the biggest drop for Gaudreau. He's never been a huge scorer and while he upped his individual chance rate last year, the nine goals he scored above expected were more than he had in the previous two seasons combined. Until he proves that scoring prowess again, my model stays on the safe side projecting a lower goal total and a 90-point finish. Given his talent level, though, a repeat performance wouldn't be the least bit surprising.

Expecting a repeat for Giordano is much more of a tall order and he sees a 1.5-win drop as a result after being the league's best defenceman. He's projected to remain a top five defenceman and has long been one of the game's strongest players against tough competition. That's what drives his high value, but it's difficult to imagine he puts up another 70-point season.

Few players manage a career year like that in their mid-30s and the fact he was just a 40-point player in the two seasons prior and had a previous career high 65-point pace five seasons ago says a lot. Being on the power play helped, but what was really driving his insane production more than anything was an absurd 1.71 points per 60 at 5-on-5, the fourth highest mark since 2007-08 buoyed by a 10.5 percent on-ice shooting percentage. Considering his career average point rate is 0.89 points per 60, his previous career high was 1.18, he's an on-ice shooting percentage under 10 percent in nine of the last 10 seasons, earned a point on half the goals scored when he's been at 35 percent in the three years prior and is 35, I'm extremely skeptical.

The high on-ice shooting percentage actually applies to a number of players on the Flames, who were fourth in league at 9.1 percent behind Washington, Tampa Bay and Toronto. The difference is that the previous two seasons those three teams ranked first, sixth and fourth, respectively, while Calgary ranked 25th. There's a lot less history to be sure they're an elite shooting team.

Lindholm also fits the bill as a player likely to regress, going suddenly from being a 45-point scorer to a point per game player in Calgary. As the fifth overall pick from 2013 that's now entering his prime, a breakout was to be expected especially given the opportunity he received, just perhaps not to this degree. After a blistering hot start where he played at a point pace, Lindholm played at a 58-point pace for the rest of the way and that's likely a more reasonable estimate for his abilities. Though he scored 2.07 points per 60 at 5-on-5, he had 0.82 secondary assists per 60 which should come down considerably, even if he should still get a lot of points by virtue of suiting up next to Monahan and Gaudreau.

Those three all play on the team's top power play and it's no coincidence that there was a second half fall considering that's when the team's play with the man advantage tanked. In the first half the team's top unit scored 12.6 goals per 60 off 8.4 expected goals per 60. In the second half that dropped significantly to 8.2 and 7.3, respectively. Finding that first half mojo again will be crucial in beating these projections, but the goal rate there was still likely unsustainable.

On the right side of the defence group, Brodie and Hamonic's presence is critical to the team's top four and both were superb last season. As predicted by the team's management when it shipped out Dougie Hamilton, Brodie's game was revitalized next to Giordano and the duo posted a 55 expected goals rate together. The issue here is that Brodie was closer to low-end second pairing territory in the two previous seasons (without Giordano) and his numbers plummet without him last year to a 47.6 expected goals rate. Giordano's actually go up off Brodie. Those things are both accounted for by my model which gives a lot of the credit for Brodie's strong season last year to Giordano. In Brodie's defence, though, he was excellent in transition last year with strong breakouts, entries, shot assists while also defending his own line quite well.

As for Hamonic, the issue lies entirely in him being well below replacement level the previous two seasons and he was only third pairing calibre prior to that. Before grading him out as a No. 2 defender (which he appeared to be last season), we likely need to see more of it to be sure. The Peters factor can't be ignored here, though, as Hamonic likely responded well to a new coach. I'm optimistic about this one, though interestingly his transitional numbers went down from years prior.

That leaves just Backlund. He's had a sterling reputation as a strong two-way play-driver for much of the past decade and was excellent from 2012-2016, but interestingly looks only just average over the past three seasons when using more advanced methods like RAPM. That's coincidentally when Tkachuk arrived on the scene and I would guess a lot of credit for the second line's work goes to him now as the primary
driver. The team is generally better with him on the ice without Backlund as opposed to the other way around. Backlund’s expected goals impact ranks eighth on the team among forwards as a result which shouldn’t be surprising considering he was ninth last year. Relative to the team, he was actually negative.

On every account, my model is being conservative from the core’s upside to the depth’s ability. It’s better to be safe than sorry and when a team goes from outside the playoffs to top of the conference there’s reason to be dubious about the sustainability of the leap being taken. That’s not at all to say the Flames can’t repeat last season’s magic, it’s just to say that one season isn’t enough to prove they belong there just yet, especially when considering how much easier their schedule was than every other team’s. If I omit the usage factor from my model, the team jumps three points and ranks eighth instead. That might be closer to what most people envision for the Flames and it’s a factor that’s generally difficult to suss out when looking at a team’s results. Calgary had it easy last year and that should be accounted for.

This team is still very young, however, and though they exceeded expectations last season, there’s still plenty of reasons for optimism that they can do so again in 2019-20. Everything clicked under a new coach and that can’t be discounted either. They’re still the second best team in their division too.

Calgary had one of the league’s best teams last season, but after a sputtering first round exit still have a lot of questions surrounding the group. This upcoming season should answer a lot of them as we figure out whether the Flames are a true Western Conference powerhouse ready to make some noise in the postseason or a pretender that struts through the weak Pacific Division only to crash and burn come playoff time.

Market Expectations

Calgary Flames: 96.5 points

Interestingly, the market is right where the model is in terms of forecasting the Flames’ upcoming season. After a 107-point season I expected them to be more bullish on the team’s chances, but perhaps a weak playoff run is driving the conservative total here. If you don’t believe what my model is spitting out, this is a chance to potentially cash out on that belief.

What Fans Predict

Public Sample: 1,337
Fan Sample: 88

I really like how realistic Flames fans are about their team, placing them right in line with public expectations. Both are a bit higher than my model and the market, but not to an insane degree. It’s a fair amount considering how strong the team was last year and I’m not surprised there’s a lot of optimism here.

What The Athletic Insider Thinks

Scott Cruickshank: Despite the public outcry in the aftermath of postseason embarrassment, the Flames roster stayed largely intact. Which actually makes some sense, given that those two dozen players had managed to squeeze 107 points out of the regular season.

Besides, being cap-strapped — restricted free agent Matthew Tkachuk remains unethered — the Flames didn’t go into the summer with a pile of options. But that’s not to say that general manager Brad Treliving didn’t hatch a couple of headline-making transactions.

Including buying out Michael Stone, then re-signing him.

Two of Treliving’s other deals, oddly enough, involved the team’s northern nemesis, the Edmonton Oilers.

In an intriguing decision, the Flames acquired Milan Lucic and his bad contract in exchange for James Neal and his bad contract. How much Lucic can add to the group? That remains to be seen. But Neal’s exit means more clarity up front. Instead of devoting hours and hours of ice time to the winger, all in the name of ‘getting him going’ and justifying a horrible contract, they can move on.

While this is not officially a goalie swap, of course, the Oilers ended up with Mike Smith, while the Flames hired Cam Talbot. The development for the Flames, bringing in a low-luss presence and allowing a big personality to walk, is about David Rittich. The stage, make no mistake, is all his now — he just has to take it. The Czech netminder, freshly signed himself, appears poised to do just that.

Beyond a couple of other issues — losing rugged winger Garnet Hathaway to free agency (Washington) and seeing promising blueliner Juuso Valimaki sidelined by knee surgery — the Flames’ chatter leading into this season has been about expected in-house growth, about being pointed in the right direction.

And, of course, about all those lessons learned at the hands of the Colorado Avalanche last spring.

Presumably smirking, the NHL’s schedule-maker saw fit to have the Calgarians open their regular season in Denver, giving them a ready-made chance to exorcise their demons. Or to reinforce their doubts.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
Carolina Hurricanes' new faces debut at home in preseason under a brighter, shinier newcomer

BY LUKE DECOCK

RALEIGH—There were five new faces in the Carolina Hurricanes lineup Wednesday night, making their preseason home debuts, if such a thing is worth consideration, but none were as new or as bright or as shiny as the new video board that hung over all of them, new and old, for the first time.

This was also the debut of PNC Arena’s gargantuan new scoreboard, many months in the making, which floated above them like a luminous blimp, its corners softly rounded. It was a bit of a soft opening for the new board, its vast potential barely dented. Compared to the dowdy old board, this one is exponentially more capable. Like Marty McFly getting behind the wheel of the DeLorean for the first time, it’ll take a little while to figure out what this thing can really do.

Even in this restricted state, the new board met with the approval of astute critic Petr Mrazek, who relies on scoreboards for replays of what happens at the other end of the ice: “It’s great,” the goalie said. “Couldn’t be any better.”

As this kind of gimmickry goes, PNC isn’t even ahead of the curve, merely astride it. The Philadelphia Flyers and 76ers have a new kinetic board that moves and reshapes itself like a Transformer, presumably without the intent to use earth as the battlefield for an existential contest to decide the fate of the universe, risking all human life in the process. (Yet!)

Still, there was as much excitement about seeing this new toy as any of the new toys on the ice, especially since the second preseason game is usually limited in its capabilities, as well. Ask the veterans to get up a sweat but make it through unscathed, hope any kids with a shot at making the roster fare well against opposition made up largely of their peers, let a couple of your goalies see a few shots.

“Sometimes you get that when you dress a veteran lineup, so to speak,” Canes coach Rod Brind’Amour said.

Predictably, both of the Hurricanes’ goals in this 2-0 win over the Tampa Bay Lightning came from the Charlotte-bound fourth line of Clark Bishop, Steven Lorentz and Julien Gauthier. Somewhat less predictably, the Hurricanes have yet to give up a goal in two preseason games this September or lose a preseason game in regulation in Brind’Amour’s entire coaching tenure.

That was all well and good until Erik Haula left the game with a lower-body injury. (Hold off on the ominous music; even though this was his first game action since knee surgery last November, his absence was precautionary and not knee-related, Brind’Amour said.)

Until Haula’s exit, there they all were, marinating in the glow of their massive new friend, free agents Jake Gardiner and Ryan Dzingel most prominent among them, but also trade acquisitions Haula and Gustav Forsling and new arrival (this week) Fredrik Claesson. Many of the expectations that this team can improve upon last season rest heavily on those shoulders: Gardiner on the power play, Dzingel as a finisher, Haula as the third center the Hurricanes have lacked, Claesson and Forsling for increased depth on defense.

Other than injured college free agent Chase Priskie and goalies Anton Forsberg and James Reimer, who both played Tuesday in Tampa, these are the newcomers en masse, an offseason’s worth of tweaking and retooling getting their first spin on home ice.

It won’t be until opening night that anyone really sees what they can do. The same is true of the video board, imposing as it was in its natural habitat for the first time. Preseason is always a work in progress, especially this early. This was just a glimpse, of the players, of the scoreboard: first chance to see. Everyone was saving their best for later.
Canes shut out Lightning again in preseason game 2-0

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

RALEIGH-The Carolina Hurricanes now have played two preseason exhibition games and only one player has been in both -- Julien Gauthier.

While Canes coach Rod Brind’Amour loaded his lineup with NHL regulars for the first preseason game Wednesday at PNC Arena, he wanted another look at Gauthier. At 6-4 and 225 pounds, the forward is hard to miss on the ice and No. 44 was noticeable enough in a 2-0 win over the Tampa Bay Lightning.

The Canes again shut out a Lightning team missing nearly all of its top-line players. This night, Petr Mrazek and Alex Nedeljkovic split up the goaltending for Carolina, Mrazek starting and facing just six shots.

Forwards Ryan Dzingel and Erik Haula, and defenseman Jake Gardiner made their Canes debut at PNC Arena, although Haula would leave the game in the second period with a lower-body injury -- Brind’Amour later calling it a precautionary move. Canes fans also got their first look at the massive blueline-to-blueline scoreboard, a $4 million addition this season.

A first-round draft pick by Carolina in 2016, Gauthier believes he has reached something of a crossroads at age 21. He has put in two full seasons with the Charlotte Checkers in the American Hockey League, which he call a “man’s league.” He’s ready to make the next step -- the biggest step.

“It doesn’t matter what pick or round it was, you’ve just got to work hard and do your thing,” Gauthier said Wednesday after the morning skate at PNC Arena. “You’ve got to prove yourself and show that you’re different if you want to make it. This is another chance to prove myself.”

Gauthier made a difference in Wednesday’s game. After a scoreless first period, he carried the puck down the left wing, powering his way past defenseman Mikhail Sergachev to the net. Gauthier’s shot was wide but the big man gathered in the puck and centered it, where the Canes’ Steven Lorentz was waiting in front of the crease to bang it in.

Lorentz, a seventh-round draft pick in 2015, scored for a 1-0 lead and Gauthier, who had done the heavy lifting, had the primary assist. Clark Bishop, also fighting for a roster spot, scored the Canes’ second goal.

The Carolina Hurricanes played the Tampa Bay Lightning for a second straight night in preseason and shut out the Lightning again, winning 2-0 at PNC Arena.

After Haula’s injury, Gauthier was moved up to Jordan Staal’s line opposite Andrei Svechnikov. Some bruisers there.

Gauthier was asked Wednesday what he would say to Brind’Amour if asked why he should be on the Canes’ roster.

“Because I can bring the puck to the net and I can skate really fast for a big guy,” he said, smiling.

Gauthier did just that on the kind of play Brind’Amour surely was hoping to see when he gave Gauthier a quick second game, and Gauthier’s forechecking and defensive awareness were sound enough. Brind’Amour said he was a “bull” on the ice.

“We’ve talked about it all camp. There are a few guys we’re obviously looking at a little closer,” Brind’Amour said Wednesday morning. “We have practice but you can’t earn a team spot in practice. We’ve got to make sure they’re getting as many looks as they can. He’s obviously one of those guys who has a good shot at it.”

There were times in Gauthier’s first season in Charlotte when the frustration built, affecting his game. It’s hard to stay patient when much is expected, and his numbers -- 16 goals, nine assists in 65 games -- were modest.

Much changed last season. On a Checkers team that was the AHL’s best, Gauthier had 27 goals and 14 assists in 75 games. He had eight points in 17 games and a plus-7 rating as Charlotte rolled through the Calder Cup playoffs for the franchise’s first AHL championship.

“It’s a process for me,” Gauthier said. “You want to get in the NHL as soon as possible. That’s normal. If you don’t want it, there’s a problem. But I feel I improved so much in the American Hockey League the past year and I’m ready for that next step.

“I feel I’ve improved my overall game, my 200-foot game. Offensively was better, defensively was better. I scored more goals. It just shows the more complete you play, the better you are.”

Gauthier is a righthanded shooter in a training camp filled with left-handed shooting forwards. It could be that he and Martin Necas, another righty, compete for the same roster spot -- Necas a first-round pick in 2017.

“It’s like that on every team and you just have to make your way up,” Gauthier said. “If you’re a good player you’re going to find a way. If you’re not you’re going to find a way to complain. I don’t try to complain, just be myself and work hard and
Carolina Hurricanes

Canes sign forward Ryan Suzuki to entry-level contract

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

RALEIGH-The Carolina Hurricanes have signed forward Ryan Suzuki, their first-round pick in the 2019 NHL Entry Draft, to a three-year, entry-level contract.

Suzuki, 18, will be paid $832,500 at the NHL level or $70,000 at the American Hockey League level for all three seasons, the team announced Wednesday. He will receive a signing bonus of $277,500, which he noted would allow him to pay back his parents for his car.

“That was definitely my main goal after the draft,” Suzuki said Wednesday. “I just came in here and just felt I had a good camp and I think I earned the contract. I’m just glad they think of me as the player I think I am, and I think I’m just really excited.”

Suzuki, the 28th overall pick of the 2019 draft, played in his first game against NHL competition on Tuesday as the Canes topped the Tampa Bay Lightning 3-0 in their first preseason exhibition game. That meant a game against such established stars as the Lightning’s Steven Stamkos.

“I think the first step I took on the ice I saw Stamkos out there in warmups and it was pretty intimidating, but I think once you get out there and get a feel for the game it’s all the same,” he said.

It helped that Nick Suzuki, Ryan’s older brother, has been through the same process. Nick Suzuki was the 13th overall pick of the 2017 draft by the Vegas Golden Knights and signed his entry-level contract with Vegas. Traded to the Montreal Canadiens before last season, he’s in their NHL camp.

“Growing up we always competed against each other and he really pushes me,” Ryan Suzuki said.

Forward Ryan Suzuki, the Carolina Hurricanes’ first-round pick in the 2019 NHL Draft, wants to be a part of a resurgent Canes franchise next season, joining former junior teammate Andrei Svechnikov.

Suzuki had 25 goals and 50 assists in 65 Ontario Hockey League (OHL) games with the Barrie Colts last season. He has 119 points (39 goals, 80 assists) in 129 career OHL games, and also served as an alternate captain in 2018-19.

During the 2017-18 season, Suzuki was teammates with Hurricanes forward Andrei Svechnikov.

Suzuki played for Canada at the 2018 Hlinka Gretzky Cup and at the 2019 IIHF Under-18 World Championship. The London, Ont., native was selected by the Hurricanes in the first round, 28th overall, of the 2019 NHL Draft.

“Ryan is a skilled center with strong playmaking ability,” general manager Don Waddell said in a statement.
Carolina Hurricanes

Canes’ youthful lineup makes good impression in 3-0 preseason win

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

Jesper Sellgren is a small guy at a stacked position in the Carolina Hurricanes’ training camp.

And, it appears, catching the eye of Canes coach Rod Brind’Amour and others at times.

Sellgren, 21, has done what so many came to camp to do — make a favorable impression. The Swedish defenseman has made the most of his chances for a player whose only North American hockey experience is 11 playoff games last season in the American Hockey League.

"I like the way he thinks the game," Brind'Amour said Tuesday. "He's got that smooth, silky way he moves around. That's today's game. It's important."

A year ago, Sellgren was preparing for a season with Lulea HF in the Swedish Hockey League. On Tuesday, he appeared in his first game against NHL competition as the Canes faced the Tampa Bay Lightning in the first of six preseason exhibition games. That's coming a long way in a short time.

The Canes took a 3-0 victory as goalies James Reimer and Anton Forsberg split the time in net, stopping 15 shots. Lucas Wallmark, Max McCormick and Colin Markison supplied the goals — McCormick scoring 30 seconds into the game and Wallmark and Markison getting third-period scores at Amalie Arena in Tampa, Fla.

It was a game in which Brind'Amour filled the lineup with several young guys like Sellgren for a better evaluation. That will change Wednesday when the Canes and Lightning play again at PNC Arena, the lineups having a more veteran look and Brind'Amour noting, "I want to see the same effort."

Sellgren had 19:40 in ice time and was active defensively, making smart plays. He was used on the power play and the penalty kill. He had four shots, picking his spots. During the second period, he found himself battling Tampa Bay’s Steven Stamkos in front of the net, standing his ground against one of the league’s best forwards, who did not have a shot on net in the game.

After Tuesday’s morning skate at PNC Arena, Sellgren tried to downplay the game as best he could.

"I don't want to make too big a deal out of it," Sellgren said in an N&O interview. "I just want to go out there, play some hockey and have some fun, to really show myself to the coaches and for everyone around."

It could have been even more memorable. The Lightning’s Victor Hedman could have been on the ice. But the Norris Trophy winner in 2018 as the league’s best defenseman did not dress for the game.

"He’s a really big name back home and just a great example to look up to and try and follow in his footsteps," Sellgren said.

By “home,” Sellgren meant their hometown — Ornskoldsvik. A city of 33,000 north of Stockholm, it has produced such NHL stars as Peter Forsberg, Markus Naslund, Hedman and the Sedin brothers, Henrik and Daniel.

"Must be something in the water," Sellgren said, smiling. "We have a great hockey culture there."

At 5-11 and 169 pounds, Sellgren is seven inches shorter and 54 pounds lighter than the imposing Hedman. He’s also the smallest of the 15 defensemen in Canes’ camp — his defensive partner Tuesday, Kyle Wood, is 6-7 and 235.

The Canes’ European scouts liked what they saw of Sellgren, a mobile type with strong puck-handling skills and a good head for the game. Carolina was able to get him in the sixth round of the 2018 NHL Draft, the 166th player picked.

After watching his solid play for Lulea last season, in the regular season and then the SHL playoffs, the Canes contacted him and asked that he join the Charlotte Checkers, their AHL affiliate, on a professional tryout. He didn’t hesitate.

"It was an easy decision to come over and play more hockey," he said. "It was one and a half more months, definitely more hockey;"

Talk about timing. Sellgren soon was thrust into the Calder Cup playoffs, getting in 11 games in the Checkers’ championship run. In the midst of that, he signed a three-year entry level contract with the Hurricanes.

"We had such a good team and it was so much fun to come and play," Sellgren said.

Sellgren competed for the Canes in the Nashville Prospects Showcase this month, then took the next step by earning an invite to team’s NHL training camp.

"I didn’t have too much expectations," he said of camp. "I didn’t want to have too much expectations. Just come here, do the best I can, show my skills and what I can contribute to the team. I want to go with the flow."

It’s possible Sellgren could spend this season in Charlotte with the Checkers. He could head back to Lulea for another season in the SHL. But he’s done what he can to be noticed.
Head coach Rod Brind’Amour has been knowingly curt about the 50-car pileup on the Hurricanes’ blue line through the first week of training camp. “Can never have too many good defensemen,” he said Tuesday, after Carolina signed camp invite Fredrik Claesson to a one-year, two-way deal. He’d said the same exact thing two days ago about his group before that deal.

Claesson, 26, has logged 150 NHL games between the Senators and the Rangers, and put up six points (two goals, four assists) in 37 games with the Rangers last season. That he’d been available for the Canes to sign to a PTO in the first place was a bit surprising, then he fit right in at camp, so what’s one more defensemen to GM Don Waddell (who was — you guessed it — a defensemen).

“I want to play the best (defensemen),” Brind’Amour said on the first day of camp at PNC Arena. “It’s a pretty good group, obviously, then we added to it to make it even better. If you want to fast forward to the start of the season, I’m looking to see who plays well with who, what the best pairs are. Got a lot of options there. On paper, it’s easy to say ‘this guy’ or ‘that guy’, but it doesn’t always work out that way.”

Even if Justin Faulk isn’t the odd man out, it’s more likely than not that the Hurricanes will still end up trading a defensemen for help up front in the next few months. The NHL-caliber talent with waiver eligibility will defer to the NHL-caliber talent without waiver eligibility, but that doesn’t mean those players will be stewing in the AHL. Any of them could be involved in deals that will bolster the forward group.

Something absolutely has to give. But for now, the Hurricanes are indulging in the luxury. You can pencil six defensemen into the regular Hurricanes lineup: Jaccob Slavin, Dougie Hamilton, Brett Pesce, Jake Gardiner, Trevor van Riemsdyk and Faulk if he’s still around. What if Faulk gets traded, van Riemsdyk’s recovery takes more time and/or the Canes want to carry more defensemen to give promising players a chance?

Meet the contenders:

Haydn Fleury

Fleury is the most likely next man up, as he can no longer pass through waivers, he’s been a victim of the logjam the longest, he’s familiar with the systems and he has the most experience in a Hurricanes jersey. Brind’Amour is amused that he’s changing his demeanor and frankly he’s looked great at camp.

Season projection: Actual minutes on the third pairing, for real this time. It’s a mutual understanding with the organization and Fleury that this is pretty much it. I felt for him last season — he’d play just enough to garner expectations but not nearly enough to actually get a feel for what his role should be. He’d told me once he just always kept a suitcase packed, and the “will-they-won’t-they” thing hurts most for the subject.

What needs work: Circumstances aside, it’s tough to ignore that the Hurricanes took Fleury seventh overall five years ago and he still has not made any sort of impact in the NHL. That’s the kind of thing that will make Canes owner Tom Dundon promise to never take a defensemen in the first round ever again.

But …

Instead of just accepting how things have gone, Fleury is trying to adapt to what the Canes need right now — a snarly Calvin de Haan replacement. He’s fine with penalty kill shifts, he threw his body around considerably more than usual during the Calder Cup run and clearly he’s in the right headspace.

Usually, when you ask someone how they’re approaching the upcoming season, they respond with an equally cliche answer or just say same as always. Fleury is on a mission to be different. This is his chance to get real NHL minutes, and I think he just might change Dundon’s mind.

Why you’ll like him: You know him by now, but this is the prospect feature format I like and we’re sticking with it. And guess what, y’all, he has the best dog (on the left).

BEST BUDS #INTERNATIONALDOGDAY @TVANRIEMSDYK6 PIC.TWITTER.COM/RCVXCRRTEW
— HAYDN FLEURY (@FLEURY96) AUGUST 26, 2019

He also calls himself a “happy-go-lucky kid,” and it’s honestly tough not to root for someone who has to actively try to smile less.

Gustav Forsling
Vitals: Left-shot, 23-year-old defensemen (there’s dozens of us!). 6-foot-nothing, 186 pounds. Acquired in the post-draft de Haan trade.

This is a tough one, a random return in a random trade. His stats are not great, but he can play in the NHL. He needs to prove that he isn’t just a “can play in the NHL” sort of person on a roster trying to contend for a Cup. The Canes obviously traded for him needing to get rid of one contract and assuming another defensemen was on the move, but here we are.

Season projection: Claimed off waivers by the Oilers or something, but I’m being so rude that I think he might actually make an impact.

Why you’ll like him: You’ll feel guilty because you keep mixing up the eerily similar names involved in the return for de Haan. Anton Forsberg? Gustav Forsling? John Forslund? Or is that just me?

Real talk, I’m sure he’s lovely, and I’m sure he hates being an afterthought. But I’m struggling hard to find a reason for him to be on the roster when there are high upside to explore.

Jake Bean

What needs work: Speaking of high upsides, Bean is one of those people that could have a power play “office,” if only he can improve in literally every other aspect of his game. If Fleury is who turned Dundon off to first-round defensemen, Bean made him double down when I gave him a chance to take it back. Bean does look a little harder on the puck at camp, though, and former Checkers head coach Mike Vellucci had an impact on his two-way game. It’s tough to get past the play away from the puck when someone like Brind’Amour is the coach, though.

Why you’ll like him: Super nice person, but he has resting Jerk face. Dedication to the theme.

He also had one of my favorite quotes of the season when I asked him what it is about the Checkers that would end up winning a championship.

“I don’t know, it’s weird. We just win every game. I think there’s something about us, when it comes down to it in the third period and we need a goal, we have guys stepping up for us up and down the lineup. I think the best teams in the NHL are the teams that can play when they’re down a goal or when they’re up a goal. To have that experience at this level is only going to help.”

Darkhorse potential: Fredrik Claesson, Chase Priskie, Jesper Sellgren

It bites that Priskie got hurt at camp and is now week-to-week, and it equally bites that the logjam is so severe that Sellgren is buried. Both have legitimate NHL potential.

That could mean a trade for a more urgent Canes need down the road. It probably will.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
In hockey, as in life, there are archetypes built on hyperbole and buzzwords that are designed to fit every player into a predefined box. Scouts and evaluators often fall prey to lazily characterizing young prospects in this way: the power forward, the two-way center, the speedy winger, the one-dimensional scorer, the stay-at-home defenseman. But sometimes, just sometimes, there’s a player who is so different from everyone else in approach or ability that he is able to distinguish himself through his uniqueness. These players have turned one skill into the body of their game, and they illustrate the varied ways hockey can be played at the highest levels. “The Gifted” is a 10-part series that examines, through video, the NHL’s most fascinating prospects and the unique skill sets that define them. By popular demand, “The Gifted” is back for a third year at The Athletic. It runs every Wednesday from July 24 to Sept. 25.


When beginning each installment in “The Gifted” I try to ask myself one question: Is the skill that I’ve identified as being the skill that the prospect has built his game around one that can propel a standout NHL player? If the answer is yes, is the prospect proficient enough in that skill to be one of the rare case studies in single-skill dominance? If no, has the prospect built the rest of his game around that skill in order to find success in a unique way?

Sometimes, the answer to the first question is simply no. World-class speed is no longer enough to make an NHL player, Otherwise, players like Michael McLeod would have figured it out. If an elite shot were enough, players like Owen Tippett would progress more seamlessly than they do. Unbelievable puck skill doesn’t automatically equate to NHL offense either. If it did, Vitalii Abramov would have figured it out by now.

But sometimes, the answer is yes. Adam Boqvist’s ability to score from the blueline will make him a very good NHL defenceman, because it will open up the rest of the game for him, even if he lacks defensive skills that you might otherwise think are necessary for a top-of-the-lineup player. Adam Fox’s power play ability is so advanced that even if he didn’t have some other key skills, it would make him a valuable piece to just about any team.

Sometimes, it goes the other way and a player has built a game around one of their weakest — instead of their strongest — skills but the result is the same: a prospect so unique that he defies the expectation of what a player with that skill proficiency (or in this case deficiency) might become. Think of the way defenceman Evan Bouchard and centre Dylan Strome have crafted star-level packages despite lacking the skating you’d want out of a top-10 pick at either position.

And other times, a player is unique by virtue of the way their skills work together. This year, I examined how Cale Makar layered his skills to become unlike any other prospect in hockey or how Aleksi Heponiemi dominates everywhere he goes despite being historically light.

Here, I’ll detail how I navigated the complex game of Hurricanes prospect Martin Necas to come to the conclusion that his game is somewhere in between single-skill dominance and fatal-flaw adaptability.

With Necas, my hypothesis stems from the following question:
Can a forward become a star with a pass-only mentality?

The answer must be yes (or close to it) because Henrik Sedin and Joe Thornton both made careers out of executing passes even when everyone on the ice knew they were coming. But pinpoint passing isn’t all that Sedin and Thornton did. Thornton played at a near-40 goal pace in several of his NHL seasons and made himself a threat to score with his size and control. And we never really found out if Sedin could shoot it, partly because half of his shots were intended to create rebounds for his brother, who could find them better than anyone else. Sedin rarely shot with the intention of scoring.

In order to understand what makes Martin Necas one of the top prospects in hockey, you have to understand the role his approach has played in elevating the rest of his game.

Note: The following clips are from a review of all of Necas’ 18 playoff games with the Charlotte Checkers last season. Necas wears No. 88.

First, let’s talk about that pass-first mentality I hinted at because the numbers don’t tell the full story.

Last season, as an AHL rookie, Necas finished the year with 65 points (21 goals and 44 assists) in 82 combined regular season and playoff games. From the outside looking in, while those numbers clearly indicate that he’s more of a playmaker than a scorer, 21 goals as a rookie isn’t too shabby (his 16 regular season goals was seventh on the team) and his 115 shots on goal finished fifth among all Checkers in the regular season, while his 40 playoff shots finished second.

On that basis, I wouldn’t blame you for questioning why I call him a pass-first player.

His 21 goals also came on 13.5 percent shooting, which suggests he’s actually a pretty proficient finisher.

But Necas generates shots because he has the puck all the time and he scores occasionally because he’s selective about when he shoots and he plays on his off-wing on the power play which makes him a shot option by default (nine of Necas’ 21 goals came with the man advantage, or into an empty net).

If you watch Necas for long enough, you quickly learn that scoring isn’t the first, second or even third thought that enters his mind when he has the puck on his stick.

Necas tends to shoot only when it’s the clear choice.

This sequence is a perfect example of that. I’ll let you watch it, before I dive into why:

Nice shot, right? Sure, but what happened before that shot? Two things: Necas tried a hard pass to the back post for a redirect.

Necas pointed with his stick to the point right before he was passed the puck, telling his teammate to pass high instead of to him — and then literally laughed when he got the puck and scored because he didn’t want it. When his teammate looks off Necas directing him to the point and gives it to him anyway, Necas knows he must be wide open and lets it rip.

That’s true on this sequence too. Watch how Necas’ head doesn’t even look at the net when he gets the puck on the right wing:

Necas’ head is up the whole way and he tries to feather the original pass through traffic to a teammate by waiting for the seam to open. It’s only after the Bears do a nice job and deflect his pass that his mentality changes and he’s thinking shot when the puck gets back to him.

In almost every scenario when Necas has the puck, he’s thinking one thing: pass.

And his entire skill set has been built around that approach to the game.

There are three layers:

The actual skill as a passer to regularly hit seams and place the puck in everyone else in approach or ability that he is able to distinguish himself through his uniqueness. These players have turned one skill into the body of their game, and they illustrate the varied ways hockey can be played at the highest levels. “The Gifted” is a 10-part series that examines, through video, the NHL’s most fascinating prospects and the unique skill sets that define them. By popular demand, “The Gifted” is back for a third year at The Athletic. It runs every Wednesday from July 24 to Sept. 25.
The puck-handling skills needed to draw attention and hang onto it, thus giving others the opportunity to get open, when the quick give-and-go plays aren’t there.

Necas has mastered all of these things.

Watch below the way Necas accelerates after giving the puck in the neutral zone so that he can get back open to get it back:

There, Necas is playing catch with himself and his teammates are merely the conduit. It’s about quick passes and the little accelerations needed to remain involved. He passes, he hits a hole, he gets the puck back, he passes again (this time high to the point). Even though it may look like Necas didn’t directly contribute to the goal that was scored moments later, he gets an assist on the play and it’s deserved because he started the play as a passer (twice).

And watch the way that approach created an empty net goal against the Wolves below. Here, there are a lot of players who get that puck high in the zone and their goal is to try to beat the defender 1-on-1 so that they can score. Necas scores, but that wasn’t his goal. His goal was to make the right play as a passer (which he does). The goal is the byproduct of that initial pass and … you guessed it … the burst of speed.

It’s not as though Necas is a high-end top speed guy, either. He’s not the type to burn a defender wide. The strength of his skating isn’t that he’s fast, it’s that he’s quick.

Here, after entering the zone with speed, Necas could try to drive the middle or shoot from the high slot. Instead, he’s thinking pass, makes the lateral pass to his teammate, takes a shot that’s given to him (key word: given), and collects another assist from a sequence that didn’t necessarily end with him but began with a decision not to shoot:

Notice the attention his skating draws, thus benefiting his passing. Here’s a still of what that looks like:

That’s three (!) guys in maroon converging on him, opening up space for the guys in white and red:

When you put all of these skills together, it can create an electric, dominant player who doesn’t need to threaten as a shooter to create goals.

Watch the way he gives and goes (again) to burst into the zone at the start of this sequence, stops up with those puck skills, executes a high-end pass to a teammate for a Grade A scoring chance, uses his speed to get the puck back when it doesn’t go in, and makes a second pass to set up a goal in front.

Not once during the above play does Necas look shot but he’s the lone reason the goal is scored anyway.

Despite the fact that the second pass is the play that leads to the goal, it’s the first cross-ice pass that highlights Necas’ skill level as a playmaker.

On the following play, watch Necas’ line of sight (a lot like on a couple of the plays above) and you’ll notice that he’s not hiding the fact that he’s looking pass.

There, once again, he never really looks at the net for the shot. The opposing defenders know he’s looking pass, they know he’s looking cross-ice, and he still manages to place the puck through them for the scoring chance, which goes off the post but ultimately leads to a goal and another assist for Necas.

Perhaps no play from the Checkers’ playoff run best exemplifies Necas’ talent as a pass-first player than the secondary assist below, though.

At first glance, it appears unspectacular (especially side-by-side some of the highlight reel plays I’ve touched on above).

But watch Necas’ line of sight before he makes his short pass down low:

There, Necas is playing the entire play one step ahead. When he makes his otherwise unremarkable short pass down low, he’s doing it while looking at the backdoor option (and waiting for him to get into scoring position), knowing that if he times his pass down low with the shot option at the far post that his pass is just the first step to a wide-open chance. The Checkers score on that wide open chance because Necas sees it before it’s there:

None of this is to say that Necas doesn’t have other elements of his game that make him dangerous, beyond his passing or the way his skating works to complement his passing.

He does. I touched on that puck skill off the top. That skill created this goal:

But it’s his skating and his execution of a tough pass that creates this goal:

And it’s definitely his passing that creates this one:

To understand Necas, we must understand that.

Because while Necas will chip in with the occasional goal, it’s everything else that makes him special.

Those skills contribute to this brilliant 30-second sequence, which features, in order:

A Necas entry with speed.

A Necas pass when he draws the defenders.

A Necas burst through the hole as soon as that pass is made to complete the give-and-go with a chance in front.

A Necas burst up the wall with the puck, with a display of his handling ability to stop up, curl, and leave the pass a teammate after drawing attention.

A Necas burst of speed back down the wall and a cut to set up …

A Necas cross-ice pass.

You get the idea.

Is Necas ever going to be a dominant scorer? Nope. Will that hold him back like it sometimes holds other pass-first players back (Jeremy Bracco comes to mind)? Nope.

You don’t have to want to be a scorer if you can find other ways to contribute to a lot of scoring. And while that’s easier said than done, Necas has it figured out.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
Blackhawks beat Red Wings 2-1 on goals by Brandon Hagel and Duncan Keith for their 1st preseason victory

By JIMMY GREENFIELD

The Blackhawks concluded a stretch of three games in three days with their first preseason victory, topping the Red Wings 2-1 Wednesday night at the United Center.

Duncan Keith and Brandon Hagel scored for the Hawks, who took a bunch of their regulars off the shelf in their preseason home opener. Patrick Kane, Jonathan Toews, Brandon Saad, Brent Seabrook and Corey Crawford were among the players making their first appearances.

Crawford wasn’t challenged much against a Red Wings team that used mainly prospects for the second time in as many nights against the Hawks. He stopped 23 shots, allowing only a first-period power-play goal by Taro Hirose.

Hagel’s goal tied the score at 1-1 early in the second period, and midway through the period Keith took a feed from Kane and fired a slap shot from the left faceoff circle past goalie Jonathan Bernier.

The Hawks improved to 1-1-1 in the preseason.
Erik Gustafsson could be entering his final season with the Blackhawks — whether he has a good one or a bad one

By JIMMY GREENFIELD CHICAGO TRIBUNE | SEP 18, 2019 | 2:54 PM

If once was enough, Erik Gustafsson would have been a lot less restless this summer. The Blackhawks defenseman scored a career-high 60 points last season — the sixth-most among NHL blueliners — to put together the kind of breakout year both he and the Hawks were expecting when he signed as a free agent in 2015.

Now Gustafsson just has to do it all over again.

"I've been thinking about that the whole summer," he said after a recent practice at training camp. Summer is over and it's time for Gustafsson to prove last season wasn't a fluke. The Hawks are depending on him to again quarterback their power play and be an offensive weapon while showing he's responsible enough defensively to continue to warrant big minutes.

Duncan Keith has led the Hawks in ice time for 12 consecutive seasons, including last year, when he logged 23 minutes, 1 second per game. That was Keith's career low, however, and at 22:35 per game Gustafsson was on his heels.

"I've got to be ready for the start," Gustafsson said. "What happened last year is (over) and whatever comes into this year I'll be more focused. I know I have my offensive skill with the puck and on the power play. But this summer I've been working on the defensive part and (being) hard on guys coming into our zone. Mentally it's tough, but it's fun to have this pressure one me too.

"It's fun to be the guy that needs to be good out there. I want to play big minutes too. I want to play (on the penalty kill), too, which I didn't do last year. What I can do for that is work on my defensive part and see what happens."

Blackhawks defenseman Erik Gustafsson (56) loses his helmet during a game against the Islanders on Jan. 22, 2019.

The Hawks front office will be watching but so will others around the NHL. Gustafsson will be an unrestricted free agent after the season. He currently carries a $1.2 million cap hit, one of the best deals in the NHL among players who aren't on entry-level contracts.

It could be a challenge for the Hawks to re-sign Gustafsson next summer if he has another strong season and is able to command a multiyear deal in the $6 million-per-year range. Gustafsson, 27, was one of only six defensemen to score 60 points last season and each of the other five had cap hits of at least $5 million.

Coyotes defenseman Keith Yandle, who scored 62 points last season, might be the best comparison. Like Gustafsson, Yandle is an offensive-minded left-shot blueliner whose defense has been suspect. That didn't stop Yandle from landing a seven-year, $44.45 million deal three years ago, just before he turned 30.

Yandle has a much longer track record of offensive success than Gustafsson, which puts even more importance on him to deliver another strong season.

The worst-case scenario? The Hawks aren't in the playoff hunt and put Gustafsson on the trading block in February, paving the way for top prospect Adam Boqvist to assume his role as their main offensive weapon on defense.

Gustafsson doesn't want it to come to that, in part because he and his wife — who is expecting the couple's second child in the next week — are very happy in Chicago.

"I just want to help the team and I want to stay here in Chicago," he said. "I will do whatever it takes to help the team win here."

Hawks coach Jeremy Colliton got tough with Gustafsson last season and benched him for a game in December. That sent a message that Colliton needed more from Gustafsson defensively, and he felt he got it as the year went on.

"You look at how he was probably viewed on the outside going into the season and how he's viewed now, it's a pretty big jump," Colliton said. "There's no reason why he can't continue to improve. It's a big offensive boost when he's on the ice. Offensive guys like playing with him because he sees the ice and makes a lot of plays. He's great for our power play. In order to have him out there as much as we can, we want to him to really focus on defending. Play with a tight gap, do a great job at the line so he doesn't have to be in D-zone.

"You spend a lot of time in there, it can wear you down, and then you can't play as much. So keeping his shifts short, all those little things that he improved (as the season went on), and hopefully he will continue to do that."

Chicago Tribune LOADED: 09.19.2019
Blackhawks’ core veterans make 2019 preseason debuts in win against Red Wings

Plus, injury updates on Calvin de Haan, John Quenneville and Kirby Dach.

By Ben Pope

The Blackhawks iced much of their veteran core for the first time in the preseason on Wednesday.

Jonathan Toews, Patrick Kane, Duncan Keith, Brent Seabrook and Corey Crawford all played as the Blackhawks won 2-1 at home against the Red Wings.

The vets had little to prove — it was more of a dress rehearsal than an audition, unlike how these preseason contests are for the organization’s depth spot competitors — put did come through with a goal, when Kane found Keith on a fast rush in the second period. Crawford was solid in net, making 23 saves on 24 shots.

“There’s just a few situations during a game that you just don’t get during practice that are good to see,” Crawford said. “Power play, obviously, we practice it but it’s a little bit different in a game — guys aren’t hammering it in practice they would during the game, [because] we’ve got our own guys standing in front.”

A key objective of camp is to find linemates for the pre-established duos of Kane-Toews and Alex DeBrincat-Dylan Strome. Alex Nylander played with Kane and Toews on Wednesday and picked up an assist — upping his preseason points total to three in two games — while looking confident and effective.

DeBrincat and Strome, meanwhile, were dominant with Andrew Shaw on Tuesday in Detroit. They didn’t play Wednesday, but Jeremy Colliton indicated he’ll likely try that trio together again.

“[Shaw is] an element that I think will be good with those two, as far just getting after the opposing defensemen and finding a way to win some loose pucks, and then those other two make some good plays,” the coach said. “They played well enough to get another look, for sure.”

Colliton said he also liked Dominik Kubalik’s game again Wednesday on a line with David Kampf and Brandon Saad.

Injury updates on Quenneville, de Haan, Dach

The most promising injury news for the Hawks recently comes on the Calvin de Haan front, as the newly acquired defenseman has returned to full participation in practice the past two days.

Considering that, he seems on track to be ready for the start of the regular season, which was initially considered unlikely after he underwent shoulder surgery following Carolina’s spring playoff run. De Haan said recently that a groin issue he picked up while rehabbing over the summer had lately been bothering him more than his shoulder.

It’s bad news, conversely, for John Quenneville, who was originally supposed to play Wednesday but was scratched after the morning practice, with Tyler Sikura taking his place. The depth forward and cousin of Joel Quenneville already had his work cut out to make the Hawks’ ultra-competitive forward roster.

Colliton said he had no update on Kirby Dach, who remains in concussion protocol after a hit sustained in the Traverse City prospects tournament.

New scoreboard now has fewer ads

Fans on social media were up in arms during Sunday’s intrasquad scrimmage when the new United Center scoreboard displayed a disproportionately large amount of advertisements.

Thankfully, that proved to be only a short-term filler.

The wraparound panels above and below the main screens, which were laden with ads and ads only Sunday, found far more useful purposes.
Slater Koekkoek and Carl Dahlstrom are main — but not only — competitors for Blackhawks’ 7th defenseman role.

The Blackhawks treated their defense this offseason like an airline treats an in-demand flight: they overbooked it.

Slater Koekkoek spent his summer weekends in the most low-key way imaginable: living out of a trailer by the Rideau River outside Ottawa, muskie fishing every morning and evening.

Then he arrived in Chicago, and found himself in the most heated battle imaginable for a seventh defenseman role.

The Blackhawks treated their defense this offseason like an airline treats an in-demand flight: they overbooked it. Entering training camp, they own eight blueliners on one-way contracts, plus late veteran addition Philip Holm and top prospect Adam Boqvist. Only seven will make the opening day roster, and only six will play in that first game.

In other words, some players are going to be squeezed out — and they won’t be rebooked on a later flight.

“That’s the nature of the game. Everybody’s competing for a job,” Koekkoek said.

Koekkoek, 25, and Carl Dahlstrom, 24, are the true bubble guys. The former, a onetime top prospect acquired from the Lightning last season, tallied five points in 22 appearances with the Hawks. The latter, the Hawks’ 2013 second-rounder, recorded six points in 38 games last season.

If Dahlstrom makes the team, it’ll functionally be his second year in Chicago — he made only 11 appearances in 2017-18 — following two years in Rockford and two years with the Swedish club Linkopings HC.

At each stop, he felt far more comfortable in the second year, and his performance profited. That trend was especially noticeable with the IceHogs, as his production from the blue line jumped from 11 to 28 points in year two (which also happened to be Jeremy Colliton’s year in charge).

“Throughout my career, my first year has always been a transition year — there’s new ways of playing at every team, everywhere you go,” Dahlstrom said. “My first year, I was decent. My second year, I was a lot of better. … I’m hoping to do the same thing here, continue on the same path.”

Koekkoek is beginning, rather unbelievably, his sixth professional season, although a combination of injury issues and stalled development in Tampa means he’s never played more than 35 NHL games in a single campaign.

Holm, meanwhile, is the dark horse candidate, the late-summer signing who excelled in the AHL in 2017-18 and in Russia’s Kontinental Hockey League in 2018-19.

With a solid mixture of size (6-foot-1), poise and puck-moving ability, the 27-year-old journeyman has been impressive so far in camp. He recorded a goal and an assist in 21:58 of ice time in his preseason debut Tuesday.

“I’m more of a two-way player,” Holm said. “As a defenseman, our main job is to try to play solid on the defensive end. But in today’s hockey, it’s a lot about skating and, especially for ‘D’s, to join the rush. So I want to try to contribute in the offensive game, too.”

Boqvist should get some looks with the Hawks later this season, as the dynamic youngster certainly has a higher long-term ceiling than any of Koekkoek, Dahlstrom or Holm, but he’ll likely start autumn in the AHL, adjusting to the defensive requirements of the pro game.

The seventh defenseman spot will scarcely receive a moment’s glance in many organizations, but given the Hawks’ back-end struggles last season, the winner determined over the next few weeks will have practically won the Hunger Games.

They just don’t like thinking of it that way.

“I can’t really focus on the other guys,” Dahlstrom said, echoing Koekkoek and Holm, too. “I’m just trying to be the best version of me, and see where that takes me.”
Blackhawks beat Detroit 2-1 in preseason home game

John Dietz

Duncan Keith and Brandon Hagel scored second-period goals and the Blackhawks defeated Detroit 2-1 in preseason action at the United Center on Wednesday.

Keith, who scored 6 goals last season, gave the Hawks a 2-1 lead midway through the period after one-timing a shot off a pass from Patrick Kane.

Hagel, who scored 41 goals in juniors last season and played eight games in Rockford, hustled down ice and stole the puck from goaltender Jonathan Bernier to put the Hawks on the board.

Corey Crawford made 23 saves, including a clutch one with 2:38 remaining on a wraparound attempt by Chris Terry.

Detroit's lone goal came on the power play.

"Just want to get a good start going," Keith said afterward. "Nice pass by Kaner. … We needed a little bit of momentum. It's nice to get this win. We hadn't won so far in preseason, so it's always kind of good to build off that."

Other Hawks who shined included Adam Boqvist, who dazzled the home crowd with two impressive moves in the offensive zone, Jonathan Toews (16 of 20 on faceoffs) and D-man Dennis Gilbert (6 hits and an impressive fight with Red Wings antagonist Givani Smith). Alexander Nylander (assist) also played well while skating with Toews and Patrick Kane.

Daily Herald Times LOADED: 09.19.2019
Lehner will push Delia out of Blackhawks’ top tandem, but goalie’s taking it in stride

John Dietz

From backup NHL goalie to starting AHL goalie. That pretty much sums up what happened to Collin Delia the moment the Blackhawks inked Robin Lehner to a one-year, $5 million deal when free agency opened on July 1. Delia was shopping for groceries when his agent dropped the bombshell news on him. But as is typical, the California-cool Delia took the news in stride.

“I was like, ‘OK. It doesn't really mean anything for me in this moment,’” Delia said Wednesday before the Hawks hosted the Red Wings at the United Center in their third preseason game in as many nights. “I mean I just kept doing what I was doing.

“That's the same mindset that I've carried throughout the summer and throughout camp. I wanted to be the best goalie out here. I want to be a starting goalie in the NHL regardless of who they sign or we already have.”

That may happen one day, but Delia’s path figures to travel through more minor-league cities in the meantime.

Adding Lehner, who has 265 games of NHL experience under his belt, was a no-brainer for the Hawks once the Islanders elected to go another direction. He will back up Corey Crawford to give coach Jeremy Colliton one of the best 1-2 netminding tandems in the league.

Delia, meanwhile, will grow his game in Rockford.

One could argue that 45-50 starts at the minor-league level will only help the 25-year-old’s development. But Delia doesn't necessarily agree.

"Everybody talks about if you are (an NHL) backup, 'Oh, you're not getting your reps,'” Delia said. "But are we talking about just because you're playing games you're getting better? I don't think so.

"It's all about how you prepare. If you're crap for half of those 20 games, what's the point? But if you can play 20 really good games as a backup, that's something to build upon."

It's a fair point -- and one that Colliton certainly understands.

"I mean he's a competitive guy," Colliton said. "I expect him to handle it really well, and all he can control is his own performance. So I would expect him to continue to improve. He's still young and we still think highly of him and his chance to be a top guy in the league down the road."

Delia, who signed a three-year extension worth $3 million in February, played 16 games for the Hawks last season and 26 in Rockford. His NHL numbers were pedestrian at best -- a .908 save percentage and a 3.61 goals-against average -- but remember there were plenty of personnel and coverage issues the Hawks were dealing with during Colliton’s first campaign.

One big change Delia made going into the 2019-20 season was to make his permanent home in Chicago.

"I'm 25 years old -- can't be living with my parents anymore," said Delia with an ear-to-ear smile.

Although the change came with an added financial burden -- it's not cheap living in the city, after all -- Delia pulled the trigger because he's determined to be the best goalie he can be.

And that's a lot easier to do when you're not in the car all the time.

"If I'm in California and I want to get a good skate, I'm driving like two hours one way," said Delia, who allowed 4 goals (1 in OT) on 29 shots in Monday's preseason loss at Washington. "So you spend four hours a day driving. That's four more hours I could have here for recovery and nutrition."
Four takeaways: Standouts from Blackhawks first preseason win against Red Wings

By Charlie Roumeliotis September 18, 2019 10:45 PM

Here are four takeaways from the Blackhawks’ 2-1 preseason win over the Detroit Red Wings at the United Center on Wednesday:

1. Alex Nylander gets a shot on the top line

After having a goal and an assist in his preseason debut on Monday, Nylander was rewarded by the Blackhawks coaching staff by starting on the first line with Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews. And he certainly didn't look out of place.

The trio logged 14:28 of ice time together at 5-on-5 and generated 18 shots for and only five against, according to Natural Stat Trick. They also teamed up on Duncan Keith's eventual game-winning goal in the second period.

Nylander finished with a secondary assist, three shot attempts (two on goal) and one takeaway in 20:44 of action. He's going to give the Blackhawks management something to think about.

"I thought he was good," coach Jeremy Colliton said. "Again, we're looking for his play without the puck. We know he's going to do a lot with the puck. It's their first time playing together so there's always going to be some kinks you're working out as far as the plays they're making and what not but he had a great net drive on Dunc's goal. Those are the things that people don't notice but opens up ice.

"We want to open up ice for those skill guys he's playing with. I thought he had a couple really good tracks. He was forechecking, he was skating. That's what we're looking for and if he continues to do that then he can be effective at this level no matter who he's playing with."

2. Individual standouts

— Dominik Kubalik was given a top-six role again after his two-goal night in his preseason debut on Tuesday in Detroit. And he was noticeable. He recorded three shot attempts (one on goal) and had a game-high four takeaways in 14:29 of action.

— The Olli Maatta and Brent Seabrook pairing turned in a strong showing together. They were on the ice for 20 shot attempts for and seven against and eight scoring chances for and two against in 13:28 of 5-on-5 ice time.

— Brandon Hagel was named the second star of the game after scoring a goal and tying Keith with a game-high four shots on goal. He also logged 11:58 of ice time and won both of his faceoffs.

— Adam Boqvist showed why he was drafted No. 8 overall in 2018. He's flashy and has elite offensive skill, which you can see in the video below. He also earned some praise from his head coach for his defensive play, which is the part of his game that's going to be a constant work in progress.

Adam Boqvist is silky smooth. And doesn't lack confidence. #Blackhawks pic.twitter.com/el7Zj2hIqx

— Charlie Roumeliotis (@CRoumeliotis) September 19, 2019

3. Penalty kill still ironing out some kinks

The top priority for the Blackhawks this summer was to shore up their defensive issues, and that included the penalty kill. And even though we shouldn't put too much stock into overall team performance and results in the preseason, the Blackhawks have given up at least one power-play goal in each of their first three games.

Fortunately for the Blackhaws, these games and stats don't count, but it obviously would be nice to head into the regular season with some positive momentum. Once the Blackhawks start to finalize their 23-man roster we should get a pretty good idea of what the special teams units could look like on Opening Night and beyond, and more chemistry will develop among the everyday players.

4. Roster cuts looming

In the last four days, the Blackhawks hosted their team scrimmage at the United Center and followed that up with three consecutive preseason contests. That was a significant evaluation period for the coaching staff and management.

Colliton said the Blackhawks are expected to make their first wave of roster cuts between now and Saturday, which is when their next preseason tilt is. The 23-man roster should start to take shape in the coming few days.

"We're going to start," he said. "I don't know exactly the timeline and how many and which day, but I can tell you it won't all be in one day. And we'll sort of work up to the game Saturday and we'll have a tighter group, and especially for next week."

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.19.2019
Five Blackhawks make top 100 prospect list

By Dan Santaromita September 18, 2019 4:50 PM

After missing the playoffs for two straight seasons, the Blackhawks are in a transition period coming off the team’s long run as a Stanley Cup contender. There is hope for a relatively quick return to contention with a number of highly-regarded prospects.

ESPN ranked the top 100 NHL prospects on Wednesday and the Blackhawks have five skaters on the list.

Leading the way for Blackhawks prospects is Kirby Dach, who was the third pick in this year’s draft. He is ranked No. 6 overall. The top two picks from that draft, Jack Hughes and Kaapo Kakko, are the top two prospects in the rankings.

Adam Boqvist is the second Blackhawks prospect, coming in at No. 29 overall. The defenseman was the No. 8 overall pick in the 2018 draft.

Defensemen Ian Mitchell (No. 68) and Nicolas Beaudin (No. 82) and right winger Alexander Nylander (No. 88) round out Blackhawks prospects in the top 100. Mitchell opted to return to the University of Denver for his junior year. Beaudin was the Blackhawks’ second first-round pick in 2018, picked No. 27. Nylander was acquired in the offseason in exchange for young defenseman Henri Jokiharju.

With five prospects on the list the Blackhawks had more than most teams. The Los Angeles Kings had the most prospects on the list with seven while the Edmonton Oilers and New York Rangers each had six.

ESPN also ranked the Blackhawks pool of prospects as ninth-best in the NHL.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.19.2019
Former Blackhawk Dustin Byfuglien considering future in the NHL

By Kelly Twardziak September 18, 2019 1:21 PM

Former Blackhawks player Dustin Byfuglien is taking personal time off to consider his NHL future, with sources speculating he may retire this year. Dustin Byfuglien, currently on personal leave from WPG, is believed to be using the time to ponder his NHL future. I'm not saying Byfuglien is retiring; I'm not saying he's coming back to play. Only that he's contemplating his options and there's no timetable for a decision.

— Bob McKenzie (@TSNBobMcKenzie) September 18, 2019

Byfuglien is 34 years old and currently plays on the Winnipeg Jets. The Jets announced on Sept. 13 that Byfuglien would be taking time off from the team, declining to cite an official reason for his departure.

"I met with Buff yesterday and we had some conversations and in the conversations, he indicated that he needed some personal time," Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff said last week to the Canadian Press.

Byfuglien has two years left on his contract, with an annual value of approximately $7.6 million.

Byfuglien was an eighth-round, 245th overall draft pick for Chicago, entering the NHL in 2003. He played with the Hawks until 2010. In his NHL career, Byfuglien has played in 869 regular-season games, scoring 177 goals, 525 points and 1,094 penalty minutes.

While many fans of the Jets and Byfuglien may be sad if he does decide to retire (remember, nothing is official yet), it wouldn’t be unreasonable for Byfuglien to be considering retirement considering his age. According to Natural Stat Tick and The Athletic, the average age for an NHL player during the 2017-18 season was 27.1, with Chicago and Winnipeg at the center of the bell curve. Byfuglien is seven years older than the median and while he isn’t the oldest player in the NHL by a long shot, he’s no spring chicken either.

Whatever Byfuglien decides to do, he has had an illustrious and impactful career in the NHL and we wish him nothing but the best going forward.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.19.2019
Why Dominik Kubalik could be Blackhawks' breakout candidate in 2019-20

By Charlie Roumeliotis September 18, 2019 10:20 AM

Dominik Kubalik is somebody the Blackhawks have had their eye on for a while, and now he very well could be the team’s breakout candidate for the 2019-20 season.

Drafted in the seventh round (No. 191 overall) of the 2013 NHL Draft by Los Angeles, the Blackhawks acquired Kubalik’s rights in January for a fifth-round pick. They signed him to a one-year, $925,000 deal in May.

But even before that, the Blackhawks knew he would play a role for them this upcoming season.

"Dominik Kubalik, he is someone we expect to have a similar impact [as Dominik Kahun] next year," GM Stan Bowman said in April. "A dynamic offensive player, he's got size and speed, can score. We're hoping he can come in and we're expecting him to be on the team and where he fits is going to be a question. We'll see where it plays out, but I expect him to be an offensive player for us."

Kubalik was named MVP of the top tier hockey league in Switzerland after finishing first with 57 points (25 goals, 32 assists) in 50 games, and adding one goal and five assists in five playoff games. He also stood out at the 2019 IIHF World Championship for the Czech Republic after compiling 12 points (six goals, six assists) in 10 games.

"He's probably as advertised," coach Jeremy Colliton said. "Going to be somewhat of an adjustment for him. He hasn't played in North America before, so that's good. But it's still going to take some practices and games. So he's another guy, excited to get him playing and see how it plays out."

Kubalik certainly strengthened his case of making the 23-man roster in his preseason debut on Tuesday against the Red Wings when he scored two goals and recorded five shots on goal. He's a player that likes to shoot, and his second goal in Detroit showed how heavy and deceptive of a shot he has.

"I think I'm playing pretty simple," Kubalik said. "I don't want to handle the puck for a while, I just want to put it as quick as possible to the net. If there's a chance to shoot I'm just going to take it. And I'm trying to use my speed, so those two are probably my biggest strengths."

Similar to what they did with Kahun last season, it's easy to see a scenario where the Blackhawks give Kubalik a shot in the top-six right away. Obviously, he has to earn his spot, but there's real offensive upside and he could work well with Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews, and even be a threat on the power play.

Put that all together and Kubalik gives the Blackhawks some legitimate options on offense, which could be key for a team that relied so heavily on their top guys last season and didn't get enough scoring from their depth players.

"Obviously everything is pretty new," Kubalik said. "I'm just trying to get used to it as quick as possible. But I feel great. ... I'm feeling more and more comfortable and that's great. I hope it's going to continue."
Alex Nylander builds his case for an NHL chance with the Blackhawks

By Scott Powers Sep 18, 2019

The spotlight has been pointed at Alex Nylander throughout his hockey career.

It comes plenty of positives and negatives, but what it especially does is get you comfortable with having everyone’s attention and dealing with pressure. The big moments just don’t seem so big after a while.

Wednesday brought a big moment for Nylander. He was put alongside Jonathan Toews and Patrick Kane on the Blackhawks’ top line against the Detroit Red Wings, and there was no mistaking what coach Jeremy Colliton’s motive was for doing so. He sought to see how the 21-year-old would perform alongside two of the Blackhawks’ most skilled players.

To many, that would seem like a grand opportunity but also an immense amount of pressure. Nylander’s NHL chances could have hinged on how he performed Wednesday.

Nylander shrugged off the pressure and focused on the opportunity.

“Not that much,” Nylander said when asked if he felt pressure. “I just try to play my game, work hard every shift and prove I can be here.”

Wednesday was another step toward that. Nylander stepped on the ice with Kane and Toews time after time and held his own. He wasn’t simply playing on a line with Kane and Toews; he contributed to it.

Colliton wanted to see Nylander and that trio as much as he could Wednesday. If Nylander is going to make the team, it likely means either re-assigning or sitting someone who probably expects right now to be in the Blackhawks’ lineup come the season opener. The Blackhawks obviously thought highly enough of Nylander and his potential to trade away Henri Jokiharju, but Colliton will want to make sure Nylander is ready for the NHL.

Where no other Blackhawks line played 10 minutes of five-on-five ice time together, the Nylander-Toews-Kane line played 15:15 together, according to NaturalStatTrick. The Red Wings didn’t exactly bring anywhere near their A-team, but the sample size was at least significant, which will enable Colliton to see many shifts when he goes back and watches the video.

In that time together Wednesday, the line was definitely effective. It was on the ice for 18 shot attempts for and five against, 10 shots on goal for and three against and one goal for and zero against. Nylander also led the Blackhawks with an 80.0 Corsi percentage and had a secondary assist on one of the Blackhawks’ two goals in the 2-1 win.

Nylander was especially noticeable in creating opportunities for his linemates. There were a few times where he helped get Kane and Toews the puck in favorable spaces. Nylander nearly scored on a two-on-one opportunity with Toews, but he couldn’t get his stick on the puck. He finished with three shot attempts and two on goal.

Overall, Nylander was pleased.

“I kind of just want to create plays offensively, and also I want to score goals,” Nylander said. “We had a good game. We had a lot of chances. We just couldn’t capitalize on them tonight. We got the W. That’s the most important thing.

“It’s awesome to play with two of the best players in the league. I was watching them, too, growing up before I got drafted and stuff like that. Just try to enjoy every moment of it and obviously try to find chemistry. I think we did good. We created a lot of chances. I think we did well today.”

More importantly for Nylander, Colliton thought well of the effort, too.

“I thought he was good,” Colliton said. “Again, we’re looking for his play without the puck. We know he’s going to do a lot with the puck. It’s their first time playing together, so there’s always going to be some kinks you’re working out as far as the plays they’re making and whatnot, but he had a great net drive on (Duncan Keith’s) goal. Those are the things that people don’t notice but opens up ice. We want to open up ice for those skill guys he’s playing with.

“I thought he had a couple really good tracks. He was forechecking, he was skating. That’s what we’re looking for, and if he continues to do that then he can be effective at this level no matter who he’s playing with.”

Kane had been impressed by Nylander before Wednesday.

“You can tell he has that skill level, right?” Kane said after the morning skate Wednesday. “Just watch him in practice, just stickhandling, shooting, the way he skates, he’s always got his head up when he’s skating. He has the ability in my mind, there’s no reason he shouldn’t be a player in the league. Sometimes it’s fun to play with guys like that. They’re young, they’re motivated, things might not have worked out the way they thought right away to start their career but there’s a lot of talent and a lot of potential so looking forward to skating on a line with him tonight.”

Nylander cleared another hurdle with his performance. Colliton will begin making cuts over the next few days and start getting closer to his NHL roster. Nylander is likely to remain.

Nylander showed Wednesday that he can play in all zones with two elite players. Colliton’s next question will likely be whether he can play consistently in all zones with others, too. In two preseason games, Nylander has excelled regardless of linemates. If he continues to do that, he’ll have a strong case to stick with the team.

Colliton made it sound as if he’ll continue mixing up the lines in the coming games to get a sense of a variety of combinations.

“I’m not really leaning toward anything right now,” Colliton said when asked of Kane and Toews playing together. “I think we have some more games that we need to play. I need to try some different combos, and it’s an option. And you know what? Regardless of what happens, if we start with them together, they’re also going to play apart. And if we start with them apart, they’re also going to play together. We’re going to be flexible with how we build a lineup, and that may even be within the game. That’s what they can do. I’m not so worried about them working together. It’s more like, if they are going to play together, who may be an option with them? And how can we build a lineup with them playing apart? We’ll figure that out.”

Nylander is a confident player, but he’s certainly not getting ahead of himself. As good as he’s felt about his game, he knows there’s work to be done.

“I think I’ve been playing really well,” Nylander said. “I need to keep working hard, keep playing the same way and just create even more chances and just shoot the puck a little more.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
Powers Points: Dominik Kubalik could be the real deal for Blackhawks

By Scott Powers Sep 18, 2019

One of my favorite stories this offseason was written about Dominik Kubalik.

As a reporter, you’re just sometimes pleased with how a piece turns out. With that one, I thought I had done my research, talked to an assortment of people and had written about a subject not a lot of people were talking about at the time. It was unique.

Based on the traffic for that story, you may not be familiar with it. I don’t blame you. It was published in early June. The only hockey topics on Blackhawks’ fans minds then were figuring out a way to prevent the St. Louis Blues from winning the Stanley Cup and who the Blackhawks would take with the No. 3 pick.

So if you didn’t read it, I recommend you do so. It’s relevant. For now, the CliffNotes version of that story is Kubalik has the tools to step in this season as a rookie and put up some points for the Blackhawks.

Kubalik began pushing that same message to a wider audience in his first NHL preseason game on Tuesday. He scored two of the Blackhawks’ three goals and did so in ways that made him one of Switzerland’s top players last season. He was active around the net and cashed in a rebound for the first goal. On the second one, he just crashed a one-timer past the goalie.

1. It’s just one game, but Kubalik’s skills sure look like they’re transferable from one league to another. He finished with five shot attempts, all on net, and the two goals.

2. It’ll be interesting to see which positions are actually considered roster battles by Jeremy Colliton.

The forward looks to be Drake Caggiula, Ryan Carpenter, Alex DeBrincat, Dennis Gilbert and Sikora followed him.

Brendan Perlini is a near lock. He has to go through waivers, and he would certainly be picked up if the Blackhawks let him go. He can be a game-changer with his offense. He had some dangerous chances in the first couple preseason games. He can also get on the wrong side of Colliton with his play away from the puck. He should make the team.

Kubalik is probably No. 12. The Blackhawks probably don’t want to hand out NHL roster spots, but his circumstances were unique in being traded to the Blackhawks and signing from Switzerland. Either way, it looks he’ll be fine in the NHL.

John Quenneville’s waiver status could also be a factor in his making the team. He has some NHL experience and can play a bottom-six role or be a healthy scratch if needed.

Anton Wedin is another forward the Blackhawks have to be considering for a depth role. He can play up and down the lineup. He could benefit from time in Rockford just to adapt to the North American game, but he’s 26 and that could be part of the equation, too. If they’re going to keep 13 or 14 forwards, they don’t want a young player sitting and holding back his development.

The question is where Alex Nylander, Aleksi Saarela, Dylan Sikura and some others fit in the equation. Are they really competing for spots? We’ll find out soon.

3. As for the defensemen, the most interesting battle has to be Carl Dahlstrom and Slater Koekkoek. If Calvin de Haan is ready to return for the opener, which it sounds like he will be, that likely means Dahlstrom or Koekkoek will be heading through waivers. Colliton could keep eight defensemen, but it’s unlikely. Phillip Holm could be a long shot for that competition, too. He was impressive in Tuesday’s preseason game.

4. Colliton was asked about his final roster number after the scrimmage on Sunday. He didn’t commit to 22 or 23 players.

“I think we’ll let it play out,” Colliton said. “We’ll see. Obviously, we got the Europe trip. We’ll take a couple extra players for that. Just depends how the battles shape up. Obviously, there’s always waivers issues and things we’ll consider. I think it’s important to let it play out.”

5. What’s clear watching the Blackhawks’ first two preseason games is the Rockford IceHogs are going to be a lot more offensive this season.

The Icehogs scored a league-low 184 goals last season. Expect many, many more this season. With a lineup that could consist of forwards Nylander, Saarela and Sikura, plus defensemen Boqvist, Holm and Chad Krys, the IceHogs will score goals.

6. Kirby Dach’s concussion obviously affected his chances to make the Blackhawks this season. Now the Blackhawks have to probably decide when to send him back to his WHL team.

I would imagine they keep him under their medical care until he’s cleared of any symptoms. If that happens in the next week, they could have him practice with the Blackhawks and get in a preseason game. The other part to consider is the Saskatoon Blades begin the regular season on Friday.

7. Erik Gustafsson will be a permanent fixture on the right side. He’s a left-handed shot, but the Blackhawks have come to really like him on the right side. He was there alongside Duncan Keith throughout the final portion of last season.

“We like him better on the right, both offensively and defensively,” Colliton said. “I think he sees the ice well. He’s a guy as far as his puck plays and stuff, he’s probably better on the right. He’s such a good skater, I’m sure he’s equally good defensively either side.”

The Blackhawks want more of their defensemen to get comfortable playing both sides. Part of that is the Blackhawks don’t have a lot of right-handed shots under contract. Connor Murphy, Brent Seabrook and Adam Boqvist are the organization’s only right-handed shots. Ian Mitchell could add to the group later this season. In camp, we’ve seen Krys, Lucas Carlsson and others get work on both sides.

8. The Blackhawks had a more all-around effort in their first preseason game than their second. Production definitely matters, and that Nylander and Saarela scored in the first one has to help. Boqvist also continued to show why he’s a special offensive player. It’s also of note that Boqvist had the Blackhawks’ highest expected-goals percentage in the first game, according to NaturalStatTrick. Gustafsson, Matthew Highmore, Dennis Gilbert and Sikura followed him.

Here’s Boqvist’s highlight goal:

9. Colliton will no doubt be looking at what went wrong in the preseason opener, too. It’s about limiting mistakes.

First, let’s look at the Washington Capitals’ first goal. The puck gets dumped and Collin Delia goes behind the net to gather it. His play is to push it behind the net to a defenseman and Boqvist is that person.

Boqvist appears to be heading there, but he pulls up, the puck gets passed and it’s turned over. Boqvist then has a chance to knock the puck out, but he has stick lifted. There’s not much he can do there, but that still has to be frustrating. In the end, it’s not Boqvist’s fault the Capitals score, but there are things he can learn from that play.

In this second clip, the Capitals don’t score, but they create a great opportunity. Kampf is on the forecheck pressuring the puck. The Capitals get the puck past him too easily, and it become a numbers game. To make things worse for the Blackhawks, Nylander breaks for an apparent loose puck and fails to snatch it. The Capitals turn it into a four-on-two, and Delia saves the day.

10. Kris Versteeg and Dylan McLaughlin are two players under AHL contracts who could push for NHL deals. Versteeg is the obvious one. McLaughlin was a Hobey Baker finalist at Canisius last season. He played well at the Traverse City prospects tournament and continued to catch some eyes early in camp. It’s why he was included in the first preseason game.

“We thought he was really good in Traverse City,” Colliton said. “His line, I think it was (McKenzie) Entwistle and (Mikael) Hakkarainen, they were really good up there, that I saw. We got good reports for the other games I wasn’t up there for, and in camp, he’s had his moments. He’s a really good skater, hard-working, conscientious. I think he’ll fit right in. it’s a great opportunity for him to show us something.”
11. Prior to the Blackhawks training camp, I went back and watched a number of Nylander’s games with the Buffalo Sabres at the end of last season. I was curious what he did well and what he struggled with. I watched every one of his shifts over four games. It came out to be 61 shifts. I cut a number of clips that stood out for various reasons. I then passed those clips onto someone whose opinion about skill development I trust. I feel like I’ve gotten better at identifying things, but this person is at a different level.

First, here are some overall observations the source made was about Nylander’s game.

"Nylander struggles possessing the puck while crossing over. He cannot blend two skills. This is crucial in creating space and being deceptive."

"I’m getting the feeling he relies on his size too much. Being a big kid in junior may have led to bad habits. He’s now a big playing against players with the same size or with smaller players who make up for their lack of size with skating ability."

"Every shot attempt, he stops movement. It’s almost as if he thinks the puck is going in or his job is done. After his shot, he needs to continue his momentum and movement and his production could increase. Everywhere he’s played, he’s had more assists than goals, which can be normal, but I wonder how many of those assists were not generated from a shot/rebound."

12. Here are three clips with the source’s insights:

"(He) crosses over just before receiving the puck, but not while receiving it. As soon as he gets the puck, he then strides laterally, not changing direction. (He) does a good job of manipulating the puck before the shot, as the defender overestimates where the shot is originally taking place."

"Look how far Jake Allen is. He knew Nylander was going to shoot it on the basis of his stick angle and footwork almost as soon as he crossed the blue line. He enters the zone at the perfect spot by the dots, but then continues to skate laterally because no crossovers towards the boards."

"This is a great play here. He enters the zone at the dot, shows the shot and then makes a slip pass to his teammate. He raises the top hand inward, raises the elbow of his top hand and slips the puck past the defender’s stick. The next step would be to be more deceptive on making the pass."

13. Here are three more clips:

"Upon on receiving the pass, Nylander takes 13 strides before hitting the blue line. Twelve are straight strides and only one crossover. He struggles to blend speed with changing direction."

"His highest stride to crossover ratio: six to three. He takes about nine strides during the possession, six of which are straight and three are crossovers. This is a pretty good play here."

"I love how much he reloads here. After the puck is in the corner, he skates back toward the blue line and gains momentum. He almost disappears for a moment and reloads his potential. He saw the hole here. That’s a huge factor why he scored the goal. He escaped his check by reloading."

14. Something I try to keep handy early in the season is the pronunciation guide for the newcomers. Here are a few you should probably get to know as well.

Calvin de Haan — Calvin DUH HAWN
Dominik Kubalik — DAHM-ihn-ihk KOO-bah-ihk
Robin Lehner — RAW-bihn LEH-nuer
Olli Maatta — OH-lee MA-TA
Alex Nylander — Alex NEE-lan-duhr
Aleksi Saarela — Aleksi sah-REH-lah
Anton Wedin — AN-tawn vuh-DEEN

15. Something I noticed while attending Darryl Belfry’s camp in Florida last month was Kane was taking away a lot of pucks by lifting sticks. We’ve seen that at times when he’s been with the Blackhawks. I mentioned to him my observation.

I think I can be really good at that, to be honest with you," Kane said. "I mean, it’s probably like me and (Mathew) Barzal kind of go at each other a little bit. We’ve been giving each other stuff throughout the (event). It’s kind of fun to go up against him because he’s like a similar player to me, I would say. I mean, he is a better skater and better on his edges, but I find myself, when he gets the puck, I go a little bit harder and try to lift the puck and take it from him, so, fun little competition."

16. The Blackhawks’ prospects in Russia are worth keeping an eye on this season. There’s a chance two or three of them head to North America next season.

There’s obviously been a lot of talk about Max Shulanov in recent years. His contract with CSKA will be finally up after next season. His production dropped last season and he’s had a slow start to this season with one goal and one assist through seven games, but I still imagine he and the Blackhawks will have some discussions. He has some NHL tools and could be worth a look at for at least a season.

Artur Kayumov and Andrei Altybarmakyan, who are both 21, are two prospects who probably have a more long-term outlook with the Blackhawks. Both have gotten to solid starts in the KHL. Kayumov has two goals and is averaging 16:42 in five games. Altybarmakyan has two goals, two assists and is averaging 12:35 of ice time in five games. Altybarmakyan recorded six points and averaged 9:35 of ice time in 38 games last season, so he’s made a considerable jump. Altybarmakyan’s agent said this week he’d sit down with his client and discuss his options after the season.

Jakub Galvas is playing in Finland this season. (Scott Powers / The Athletic)

17. Outside of Russia, college hockey and probably the WHL with Dach, Finland could be where some of the Blackhawks’ more interesting prospects are playing this season.

Defenseman Jakub Galvas, 20, left his home country of the Czech Republic to play for Jukurit in the Liiga, Finland’s top division. Through two games, Galvas has two assists and averaged 20:32 of ice time. Also of note is the Liiga is using tracking stats this season and Galvas was second among skaters in ice traveled in his first game and first in his second game.

Winger Niklas Nordgren, 19, is another player to watch if he can get healthy. He had a tough 2018-19 season due to injuries and just couldn’t consistently get on the ice. This season hasn’t gotten off to a good start, either. He’s missed HIFK’s early games due to a “health condition concern,” according to a source.

18. Sweden has a few notable players, too.

Víctor Ejdell’s NHL rights are still owned by the Blackhawks. As reported before, he was offered a contract after last season and chose to sign with Farjestad in the SHL. The Blackhawks did give him a qualifying offer, so they continue to hold his rights.

In his SHL opener last week, Ejdell had a goal and an assist. He was among the league’s offensive leaders when he departed a few seasons ago. Ejdell and his agent have said they’re open to returning to the Blackhawks one day, so he’s worth keeping tabs on.

Mathias From is playing in Sweden’s second division for MODO. His numbers haven’t been great in Sweden, but he’s shown some offensive potential whenever he’s played in North America.

19. I ran most of the best quotes while reporting on the Kane goal oral history story. Here are a couple that didn’t make it for one reason or another.

John Wiedeman: "It was 49 years since they won the Cup. I was already calling history here, and I had thoughts going through my mind and I had to slap myself. ‘Get focused here, like that.’"

Marian Hossa: "I definitely mentioned (the goal) to (Kane) a few times. I think on the plane from Philly, I told him, ‘You know what, buddy? Thanks a lot. It’s my third final in a row, and you made it happen for me. Obviously, not just him, but the whole team, but he was the game-winning goal. We had a good laugh with the champagne in our hands. That was just something always to think about. When you always think about these moments, goose bumps go on your body.’"

Doc Emrick: "It’s Halloween in 2010 and I’m there doing a Devils game there in Chicago. Morning skate takes place and the Blackhawks are
first, of course. I haven’t see Patrick since. I didn’t go down to the dressing room that night because we’re on rather long afterward. The last memory I have as we’re signing off is Brent Sopel holding his young daughter by the arms and spinning her around the ice at Wells Fargo Center. … I hadn’t seen (Kane) all summer, of course. So, I let the pack interview him and then I went over and sat down to Patrick, and I said, ‘OK, what did you see?’

John McDonough: “I remember coming back on the light and sitting down with Jay (Blunk) because we didn’t into the parade business. You don’t even want to think about that, be presumptuous to leap to that. So, we knew there was something going to be going on in Chicago. You know that’s imminent, but I don’t want to talk about that. I remember I was with the Cubs during the 2003 season and Game 6 when we had the lead, somebody from Major League Baseball had instructed our staff to grab the T-shirts and drape them over the chairs in the locker room. And I said, ‘Absolutely not. You got to be careful not to wag your finger at the hockey gods or the baseball gods.’”

Kane: “I used four different sticks that night. I took all of those. I knew which one (scored the goal). That was pretty important.”

20. In talking to Dave Bolland for the story, he did reveal some possible life news.

“For myself, I’m looking to move back to Chicago, maybe start doing something with the Hawks slowly,” Bolland said. “I miss the Hawks. I miss that atmosphere, being around Hawks fans, everyone there. It’s one thing that I do miss in Chicago.”

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Avs' Nathan MacKinnon expected to "take another big step," Sidney Crosby says

By STEPHEN WHYNKO | The Associated Press September 18, 2019

Editorial: Fisher’s Peak acquisition is a big win for Colorado. Now get ready to explore.

Ryan O’Reilly stockpiled quite the hardware to show off at his Stanley Cup day.

On display next to the Cup he helped the St. Louis Blues win in June were the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP and the Selke Trophy as the NHL’s best defensive forward. Any player would gladly celebrate with those shiny centerpieces, though O’Reilly — at 28 and on his third team — is only now showing he is this kind of elite player.

“People didn’t realize how good of a player Ryan O’Reilly was until this year,” Vancouver forward Bo Horvat said. “All the players knew how good he was and how big of a part of that team he was and how special of a player — just his two-way game, his faceoffs. Obviously his point production this year was outstanding. His play in the playoffs, winning MVP and obviously the Stanley Cup, it was a great year for him and I think he opened up a lot of eyes.”

O’Reilly said he figured something out during the playoffs: how to clear the puck around the league.

“Winning the Selke was evidence enough of O’Reilly’s strong regular season. He ranked eighth in the league in faceoffs, which is part of what makes him so tough to play against.

“His approach will not change,” Lundqvist said. “I need to reach and sustain throughout the year, and then I know I can make a difference.”

HENRIK LUNDQVIST

The release of “Ovi O’s” cereal marked his 34th birthday. If anyone has shown age is just a number, it’s Ovechkin, who is now the Washington Capitals’ oldest player and still could score 50 goals. Even though Ovechkin said he’s “not a grandpa” and trained differently this summer, don’t expect him to alter his style too much.

“Ovechkin is a born leader,” Vegas forward Carl Hagelin said. “A guy like that doesn’t come around very often. He’s one of those energetic guys even though he’s 33, 34 years old. He comes to the rink with a smile every day. He does what he has to do.”

MARK STONE

There may not be more complete winger in the NHL than Stone, who put up 12 points in the Vegas Golden Knights’ seven-game first-round series against San Jose. Stone is free of Ottawa’s long-term rebuild and starting a $76 million, eight-year contract with big expectations to help Vegas make another long playoff run.

“Stone is one of the fastest guys out there, but he’s so good positionally and just aware of where guys are and what to do with the puck. I think he’s just an all-around super intelligent player.”

NATHAN MACKINNON

Already considered one of the fastest hockey players on earth, MacKinnon carried the Colorado Avalanche to within one victory of the Western Conference final and is the biggest reason they’re a fashionable Cup contender this season. Fellow Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia, native Sidney Crosby said MacKinnon is in the category of Pittsburgh teammate Evgeni Malkin and Edmonton star Connor McDavid as players who can take over games.

"We saw a pretty good glimpse of that in the playoffs," Crosby said. "He did it consistently. … I’d expect him to take another big step."

Rookie Avalanche defenseman Cale Makar said it’s electrifying to watch MacKinnon on the ice. And the 24-year-old center is an example to his younger teammates and those around the league.

"He’s just a super committed guy," Makar said. "He loves hockey, and that’s the way he plays. It shows on the ice. Just the way he handles his routine is very specific and you just learn from star players like that."

ALEX OVECHKIN

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“Get you a No. 1 forward,” Golden Knights forward Jonathan Marchessault said. “He’s an unbelievable player. He does everything well on the ice. He puts up great numbers every year, and he’s a successful player.”

Vegas is one of several NHL teams without a captain. That might not last long with Stone in the fold.

“Vegas is a different talent,” Washington winger Carl Hagelin said. “A guy like that doesn’t come around very often. He’s one of those energetic guys even though he’s 33, 34 years old. He comes to the rink with a smile every day. He does what he has to do.”

RASMUS DAHLIN

The 2018 No. 1 pick had 44 points to lead all rookie defenseman. It was just the floor for where Dahlin wants to start.

“Of course I want to score more goals, have more assists and stuff like that,” Dahlin said. “Last season, I had more points than I expected, but this year, I always want more. That’s why I play.”

The Buffalo Sabres are counting on that in their first season under coach Ralph Krueger. Captain Jack Eichel has big expectations for Dahlin, who he believes “lived up to all the hype.”

“Eichel said. “I think he’s primed to have a monster season.”

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Analysis: Avalanche preseason opener in the books. When will Mikko Rantanen show up?

By MIKE CHAMBERS | PUBLISHED: September 18, 2019 at 6:00 am | UPDATED: September 18, 2019 at 9:56 am

Editorial: Fisher’s Peak acquisition is a big win for Colorado. Now get ready to explore.

Mikko Polo.

This game with Mikko Rantanen is getting old.

If he had a contract, Rantanen would not have played in the Avalanche’s preseason opener Tuesday. None of the club’s top players suited up against the Vegas Golden Knights at the Pepsi Center.

But there is virtually no chance Rantanen agrees to a contract and plays in Thursday’s preseason game versus the Dallas Stars or this weekend’s home-and-home stretch against the Minnesota Wild on Saturday (in St. Paul, Minn.) or Sunday (Denver).

Because of travel, there is very little chance Rantanen gets a chance to settle in with the Avs before the Oct. 3 season opener against the Calgary Flames.

Rantanen, 22, is still presumably still in his Finland, where he was last week, and he’s probably not traveling to North America until he signs a contract or he and the Avs agree to terms and trust each other.

Meanwhile, coach Jared Bednar is not thinking about Rantanen or his 60 goals and 171 points over the last two seasons.

Bednar is thinking about replacing Rantanen with 24-year-old newcomers Andre Burakovsky or Valeri Nichushkin, both are eager to take his place by default. Like Rantanen, Burakovsky (6-foot-3, 201 pounds) and Nichushkin (6-4, 210) are large left-shooting right-wingers who are champing at the bit to play on a line with Nathan MacKinnon and Gabe Landeskog.

Burakovsky is currently practicing on that line and has also replaced Rantanen on the No. 1 power play. Nichushkin was late to report for training camp because of visa issues but he was drafted 10th overall in 2013 for a reason — to play with guys like MacKinnon and Landeskog.

Bednar said this about Rantanen after Tuesday’s 5-0 loss to Vegas:

“He’s obviously a great player and I’d love to have him here. But, you know, he’s got some negotiations to go through, as do we. So I’ll be honest with you, I haven’t thought about Mikko Rantanen since camp started. I can’t. I don’t have the time. I got to worry about the guys we have here and some decisions that we have to make, you know, who’s the best option to play on that line and that power play and all those situations that a guy like Mikko plays for us.”

He added: "If he doesn’t get here, we’re going to have to play without him, and focus on the guys that are in our room."

Rantanen remains without a contract despite his best comparable, Mitch Marner agreeing to a six-year, $65.4 million contract with the Toronto Maple Leafs on last Friday. Marner, 22, is scheduled to be an unrestricted free agent when that deal expires.

Avs fans can only hope that Rantanen and Colorado might consider a short-term “bridge” deal that has restricted free agency at the end of it — like Brock Boeser’s three-year, $17.62 contract he signed with the Vancouver Canucks on Tuesday.

Long- or short-term, Rantanen and the Avs should agree on a fair deal before this relationship turns ugly.

Ugly means the Dec. 1 deadline, the time Rantanen must be under contract or forbidden to play in the NHL in 2019-20.

Nobody wants that.
Year-long concussion rehab brings Conor Timmins back to action on Avalanche’s home ice

Ryan S. Clark Sep 18, 2019

One of Conor Timmins’ final acts as a 20-year-old was to skate upon a pristine ice sheet at the cavernous Pepsi Center, which was also one of the first things he did upon turning 20 a year ago.

This is significant because of what Timmins endured during the past 364 days while working to overcome concussion-like symptoms. A hefty portion of that rehab work took place at the Pepsi Center. But during those sessions, each of the arena’s 18,007 black seats was empty while Timmins skated in an unnumbered red, non-contact sweater before the Avalanche’s morning skates.

Fast forward to Tuesday night. His rehab work is complete and on the day before his 21st birthday, he wore a Colorado Avalanche sweater with “TIMMINS 20” on the back and took the ice for warmups. Thousands of fans watched his every move before Tuesday night’s exhibition against the Vegas Golden Knights.

“It was obviously a really tough year-and-a-half just from the standpoint of not playing hockey, which I love to do. It was really tough,” Timmins said. “And then also, daily day-to-day things. It was hard not being able to do those things but I just tried to stay hopeful and each day take it a day at a time and I am glad to be back where I am now.”

Beyond his private sessions with skills coach Shawn Allard, Timmins was hardly visible around the Pepsi Center or at the Avs’ practice facility in Centennial.

He became slightly more visible in Loveland, where he continued his rehab work with the Avalanche’s AHL affiliate, the Colorado Eagles. Timmins never played a game with the Eagles but he was at every practice, made every road trip and was in practically every meeting.

The reason fans cared about Timmins’ progress is the same reason his agent and the Avalanche’s front office were so regimentally structured regarding his recovery: promise.

“Concussions and other injuries that come with a concussion create a situation where you have to show a certain level of maturity to handle it,” said Timmins’ agent, Anton Thun. “I’ve had many clients in the past who’ve had a concussion. None of them were quite as young as Conor but it takes mental strength to handle the ups and downs with a young athlete with a potential career-ending injury and how to come back from that. He’s handled it well as have the Avalanche.”

It was not that long ago when the Avalanche were at the bottom of the NHL standings. They had building blocks on the roster and the high first-round picks that later became prospects with upside. Timmins is still one of those prospects within a system considered one of the best in the league.

Avalanche general manager Joe Sakic and his front office staff have developed a blueprint with intelligence, speed and youth as its focal point. Timmins checks all those boxes, which is why he was selected with the first pick in the second round back in 2017, the same draft they took defenseman Cale Makar with the fourth pick in the first round.

Makar and Timmins represented a blue line of the future. The desire to see them together in Denver only intensified after their puck-moving prowess, quickness and smooth skating helped lead Team Canada to the 2018 U-20 World Junior Championship gold medal.

Timmins was a serious challenger for a roster spot with the Avs at the start of the 2017-18 campaign, but the plan was for one more year of Major Junior to further prepare him for the NHL.

When he sustained a concussion playing with the Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds of the Ontario Hockey League later that season, his career was placed on hold.

“Conor was very even keel and pragmatic about it,” said Dan Timmins, Conor’s father. “He was like, ‘What’s next?’ … I never saw him get too down. He just said ‘OK’ to whatever they told him to do and he did it to the best of his ability.”

Everyone, from Timmins to his family to his agent and the Avalanche’s front office, was in agreement about how to handle his rehab. If the Avs were in town, Timmins lived at a hotel in Denver. And when they were on the road, he flew back home to Thorold, Ontario, about a 20-minute drive from Niagara Falls.

Sakic and his staff wanted Timmins to go home so he could both continue his rehab work there while also having his family around for support.

“We felt that they were definitely concerned about him as a hockey player and were concerned about him as a person,” Dan said. “We have a lot of respect for how they dealt with it. It was nice to have him home but we would have loved to have had him in the state of Colorado playing somewhere.”

Being around the Avalanche allowed him to develop a relationship with other injured players such as Sven Andrighetto, J.T. Compher and Tyson Jost, whom Timmins knew from different Hockey Canada events.

Sending him to Loveland was part of a plan to have him work with Eagles coach Greg Cronin and his staff while also being around teammates of a similar age.

“He’ll talk to you one-on-one, but he’s a pretty quiet guy in a group setting,” said winger Sheldon Dries, who split time between the Avalanche and Eagles last year. “You get him in a one-on-one situation, he’ll talk your ear off for sure.”

Dries said every player goes through injuries, but concussions are different. The former Western Michigan University captain said including him in team activities helped Timmins maintain some sense of normalcy while he lived in a hotel room across the parking lot from the arena.

Toward the end of the season, Timmons got some company. Shane Bowers, who was part of the three-team Matt Duchene trade and another member of the 2017 draft class, signed with the Eagles after his sophomore year at Boston University.

“You never want to see anyone go through that because that’s tough and scary,” Bowers said. “Any type of injury is tough and scary but with what he had going on with the head is serious stuff. Kudos to him from what I have seen. He’s always coming to the rink with a smile and he worked hard. It’s not easy being in that situation and he always handled it really well.”

Bowers and Dries were not the only teammates who got a chance to know Timmins.

“He’s a great guy to be around and he’s really smart and a really nice guy, too,” said defensemen Nicolas Meloche. “For sure, last year was hard for him but we tried to make it the best for him and make him comfortable with practices and talk to him every day with how he was doing. It’s great to see him back.”

Martin Kaut, the team’s first-round pick in 2018, is also rather fond of Timmins.

“It was a tough year last year for him because he did not play in any games but he worked hard every day,” Kaut said back in June during the team’s development camp.

The Eagles got to know Timmins through dinners and other activities. But they got to know more about him and everything he went through by going to a team chapel service where they shared whatever was going on in their professional or personal lives.

Opening up to his teammates about his experience was not intimidating, Timmins said. He described team chapel as a “really safe space” that he was glad the Eagles provided for their players.

“I’ve always been a pretty religious person and I like to lean on my faith, especially in hard times,” Timmins said. “There were other guys on the team who shared those values. So to be able to talk about things like that with them was really helpful and it really helped me through that time.”

Did he ever feel like stepping away from the game?

“Not really,” Timmins said. “I think obviously there were days that were tougher than others and you kind of have doubts about whether you can get back or not. But, for me, hockey has always been what I loved. I’ve
been doing it since I was 3 or 4 years old and this has always been my
dream and I just want to do what I can to get back now.”

Thun has a long-standing relationship with the Timmins family going back
to his childhood. He met Timmins’ grandparents as a 12-year-old and
even babysat Dan Timmins as a child. One of Thun’s priorities is making
his client’s well-being a primary concern and it was a goal he shared with
the Avalanche’s front office.

Avalanche assistant general manager Craig Billington was one of Thun’s
clients during his playing career. That connection along with the one he
had with former Avs forward Mike Ricci played a significant role in
establishing a relationship with Sakic when he was a player.

His comfort with the Avs’ front office made it easier to have open
discussions about Timmins’ prognosis.

“I think it’s always helpful when you have like-minded people who care
about an individual rather than those who care about a result,” Thun said.
“With a younger player, you never know what is going to happen when it
comes to a concussion.”

The Avalanche are four days into training camp and Timmins is getting
opportunities. Nikita Zadorov was his partner for the first two days before
Zadorov sustained a lower-body “tweak,” according to Avs’ fourth-year
coach Jared Bednar. The Timmins-Zadorov pairing was an interesting one.

Zadorov, 24, is nearly 300 games into his NHL career. He is a defensive-
minded presence whose bone-jarring hits along with his 6-foot-5, 237-
pound frame make him menacing. Timmins, meanwhile, is a smooth
skater who moves the puck well and has offensive upside, as evidenced
by the 115 points he scored in 163 OHL games shows.

Monday, his first day without Zadorov, was an opportunity to see what
else he can provide. It starts with his defense and how he applies that
smooth stride to hang back at the top of the zone knowing he can quickly
get back. There was a sequence when he calmly assessed an odd-man
rush without placing himself in a compromising position.

The puck went behind the net as did the curiosity about how Timmins
would handle contact. He was not hesitant about fighting for possession
or going into the corners.

“I thought he’s been pretty good,” Bednar said of Timmins’ camp
performances. “My biggest concern with him is to make sure he is
involved and engaged physically and mentally. That he’s thinking things
through and playing the right way. Again, that he is not shying away from
any physical play because of his injury. He’s been out a long time, so I
expect some rust and he’s gotta get used to pace out there, which is
understandable having the amount of time off that he’s had.”

Seeing how Timmins performs and where he fits is a long-standing story
that will bear watching until he reaches the NHL.

“I feel really good,” Timmins said. “Once I’m out there, I try and separate
all of that and focus on the hockey. But at the same time, it’s a game and
you think you’ll always have the family and support system to go back to
and that’s really nice to have in the back of your mind.”

The Avalanche enter training camp with a roster that is secure in most
areas with third-pairing defense being a need worth filing over the next
few weeks. Ian Cole underwent offseason dual hip surgery but has been
skating for several weeks. Bednar said he is progressing and could
return ahead of schedule.

Finding Cole’s temporary replacement in addition to a partner, now that
Patrik Nemeth is with the Detroit Red Wings, has Bednar and his staff
considering a number of options. Timmins is doing what he can to make
their choice more difficult, but it comes with a caveat.

His lengthy layoff has generated discussion he will likely begin the
season in the AHL.

Sakic said a year ago he was not going to rush Timmins because he
anticipates he’ll have a long NHL career.

And besides. He’s only 20. Well, 21 as of Wednesday.

Development has become a priority for the organization and
development is paramount with Timmins. The Avs want to make sure he
is both physically and mentally prepared to play a serious role in the
future.

The Avalanche acquired Samuel Girard in the Duchene trade and drafted
Byram, Makar and Timmins, potentially establishing a young, puck-
moving defense for years to come.

“I am very proud of what he has accomplished, but there is still a long
road ahead and any time there is an injury like this, you have to know
how to manage it,” Thun said. “It’s no different than if you are a pitcher in
baseball. Life is never the same because you have to manage that injury.
I can’t tell you how pleased I am that he is playing tonight.”

Timmins logged 19:10 in ice time in what was a 5-0 loss against the
Golden Knights. He finished with 3:04 in power-play ice time while also
recording two heavy slap shots from the point. Bednar trusted him to
facilitate the second-team power-play unit while making other plays to
retain possession or orchestrate reloads.

Maybe the most telling aspect of the night was Timmins absorbed
contact and even went looking for it at the end of the first when he
collided with a Golden Knights player. They exchanged stick checks
before being separated by an official near the penalty boxes.

The first tentative strides on Timmins’ return to action.

“I think this is probably one of the first times I’ve had to face real
adversity,” he said. “I’m pretty proud of myself and how I handled it. … I
also learned I have a lot of people around me who have been really
supportive and were there through the tough times.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
The Avalanche opened their 2019 preseason on Tuesday, falling 5-0 to the Vegas Golden Knights in a game that featured a majority young and inexperienced lineup. Avs coach Jared Bednar made true on his promise and started a younger lineup that featured four 2019 draft picks, including blueliner Bowen Byram, who was selected fourth overall in the first round.

The other three, forwards Alex Beaucage, Luka Burzan, and Sasha Mutala were all sent back to their respective junior teams after the game. Colorado also sent defenseman Sasha Larocque to the Colorado Eagles of the AHL.

"Some of those guys are playing their first pro game," Bednar said followed the opener. "Just kind of watch them, see how they do this year and then they'll be back next year. That's for the whole training camp, how they handle practices, did they mature or get better with the big guys next year."

The Avs dressed a number of familiar faces, including forwards Tyson Jost, Sheldon Dries, A.J. Greer, and Vladislav Kamenev. Veteran defenseman Mark Barberio was also in the lineup. "For some of the pro guys, they're fighting and trying to earn a spot on our roster," he said. "I expect more than just a first impression. I want to see who is going to be able to carry that through two or three weeks of exhibition because you got to maintain your game at a high level."

The Avalanche are still without All-Star Mikko Rantanen heading into the second week of training camp and preseason play. The Finnish forward is in Switzerland skating with SC Bern, where fellow countryman Patrik Laine is also practicing.

Rantanen’s agent was interviewed on Sportsnet 650 radio in Canada on Wednesday and said that Rantanen was not yet close to a deal with Avs GM Joe Sakic and his front office.

"We're not close," Liut said. "There is nothing that’s gone on that we didn’t anticipate. These things usually get done when people move. If one side doesn't move or both sides don’t move, it doesn’t get done."

Liut later went on to say that Rantanen is going into contract negotiations using Toronto Maple Leafs forward Mitch Marner a direct comparative. The young winger recently signed a six-year, $65.4 million deal with an AAV of $10.993 million.

The Avalanche are set to continue their preseason with another home game against the Dallas Stars on Thursday, where Bednar will look to dress a more veteran-laden roster.
By AJ HAEFELE SEPTEMBER 17, 2019

When Bowen Byram made his unofficial Avalanche debut in the first game of the Anaheim Rookie Faceoff, it all seemed so easy for him.

He registered two assists and generally dominated most of his shifts in a breezy 5-2 win over Vegas. Everyone more or less had the same thoughts following that performance – that sure looked easy.

Things got tougher for Byram from there, however, as he went through the rigors of training camp and into tonight’s game against the Golden Knights to open the preseason.

“I think just how fast the game is,” Byram reflected on what he noticed the most about his first game. “There’s a lot of good players on the ice. It’s not easy. I think the team played pretty well throughout the game.”

Colorado’s 5-0 loss began with Byram putting the puck in his own net as he tried to chip it away from Valentin Zykov. Instead, he deflected it past a surprised Adam Werner to make it 1-0.

That mistake was the lowlight of a rough first period for Byram but he got better as the game progressed and his offensive instincts were on display more and more throughout, mirroring the way he felt about his game at the start of training camp.

“I think I got better every day throughout camp,” Byram said. “I’ve just got to take positives and negatives away from this game and improving into the next and just trying to get better every day.”

After playing a game-high 24:50, Byram now has a baseline on NHL ice to begin working from. With that experience should come the improvement he so frequently talks about.

“There’s a lot more NHL-caliber players on the ice,” said of his first preseason action. “It’s definitely a lot more tough but it’s fun, fast hockey. It’s fun to play in. But like I said, I’ve got to adjust and keep moving forward.”

The old hockey cliche of “play your game” is what Byram looked to lean on in his first game. It didn’t always work out for him as there were a few miscues beyond the own-goal, including a passive approach in defending his blue line at times.

At this point in Byram’s nascent career, mistakes are just opportunities for learning. That largely appears to be his approach at this point, a positive sign for a young defenseman trying to accomplish the rare feat of playing in the NHL as an 18-year-old.

“Play the way I play, move pucks quickly, get back to pucks, play tight defensively,” Byram said of his goals going into tonight’s game. “I think that was what I was focused on going into it. I feel like I did a decent job. Obviously, coming away from it, I think that’s not what you want and gotta learn from it and move forward.”

Move forward he and the Avalanche both will. But tonight sure was a good reminder of one thing: This isn’t easy.

TAKEAWAYS

This was an ugly hockey game. Welcome to the preseason! It had to be a frustrating evaluation for the coaching staff because every step forward was met with a step back from all of the key players.

Shaking off the rust of his long layoff, Conor Timmins continues to be a work in progress in getting his timing back. Tonight was his first game back in a big arena with all the bright lights. According to him, no setbacks and no issues.

Timmins’s actual performance varied quite a bit. It was poor early on but he got stronger as the game wore on. His confidence activating from the back end has to be exciting for a coaching staff that badly wants its defenders to be more aggressive on the offensive side of the puck.
The Colorado Avalanche opened the preseason with a disappointing 5-0 loss to the Vegas Golden Knights. Coach Bednar was looking for some of the younger players to step up and make him take notice but came away less than impressed, unable to name any standout games after the game.

How did each player perform? Let’s find out...

Jayson Megna – C: A veteran AHL player with some NHL experience. Megna did look a lot more polished than the rest of the young lineup. He missed his assignment on Vegas’ second goal by following a player that was already covered, but at least was able to contribute four shots on net.

Sheldon Dries – F: A surprise at training camp last season, Dries really struggled in game one, taking two penalties and failing to make an impact at either end of the ice. His game tailed off last season, and a poor training camp could drop him down the depth chart a little further.

Tyson Jost – C+: Jost at least flashed a little bit, standing out amongst his teammates because of his understanding of the system. At this point, he probably should stand out a little bit more. He drew two penalties on the same shift in the second period, and at least was able to put four shots on net.

Conor Timmins – C+: The first period was rough for Timmins, with a few turnovers adjusting to the speed of the game. From the second period on, he was the most active of the Avs defensemen and seemed to adjust to everything. A few of his reads jumping into the play at least created a little bit of chaos for Vegas. For someone who has played very little hockey in the last year and a half, you have to be encouraged.

A.J. Greer – C+: The effort was clearly there from Greer, but what was apparent was his lack of high-end skill. On multiple occasions, he had a chance to make a play with the puck and failed to do so. To earn a spot on the team, he needs to stand out among the rest, and he didn’t necessarily do that.

Ryan Graves – D: Everything went right for Graves last season when he got a chance in the lineup, but tonight was a struggle for him. Coming off a strong camp, Graves handed the puck directly to the Golden Knights on multiple occasions, including twice on the opening shift of the game. He took a stick in the face late in the game but after the game everything is okay.

Jacob MacDonald – C+: A proven AHL player, MacDonald didn’t look completely out of place tonight, at least jumping in occasionally. He did have a few plays in the second period that show why he’s never taken that jump to be a full-time NHL player.

T.J. Tynan – D: Tynan is an easy player to notice because there is flash to his game and when he gets the puck, he has the ability to make plays, but tonight was not one of those nights.

Erik Condra – C: Brought in for some experience on the Eagles, Condra, who has a good chunk of NHL games under his belt in his career, showed that he will be a steady presence in the AHL. He hit the crossbar late in the game, which is about as close as the Avs got to scoring tonight.

Mark Barberio – C: Coming off a lost season, Barberio is in need of a massive preseason to earn a spot on the team. Tonight was just an okay start. He had a few moments jumping into the rush, but was unable to bury anything, and was one of many Avs players caught watching on the final goal of the game.

Bowen Byram – D+: This isn’t rookie camp anymore. “A slow start” is how Jared Bednar described Byram’s first period, which was very accurate. He ended up (accidentally) scoring on his own net just a few minutes into the game, and late in the game got burned on a zone entry for the final Knights goal. There were definite flashes of ability from him in the second period, but a very uneven night for him. He will get plenty of chances to prove himself later in the preseason.

Nicolas Meloche – C: I actually thought Meloche was quietly solid for most of the night, but he had a brutal turnover that led to the fourth Vegas goal. Beyond that, he battled and tried jumping into the play when he could. Given what’s in front of him on the depth chart, I’m not so sure he will get another chance to show himself in the preseason.

Luka Burzan – C: Of all the junior eligible forwards, I liked him the most. He was a little too pass-happy but showed some skill and a willingness to get his nose dirty.

Martin Kaut – C: Like the rest of his line, Kaut had flashes, including a nice drive through the center ice and drop to Jost for a scoring chance. He looked a little lost on the 5 on 3, floating aimlessly at times, and completely missing a pass, which killed a good chunk of the power play.

Nick Henry – C+: If nothing else, Henry’s ability and willingness to shoot the puck stood out among the mediocrity of the evening. For a first-year pro, he has a heavy shot and wasn’t afraid to use it on the power play. It will be interesting if he gets another game to make an impression.

Alex Beaucage – D: Not to be too hard on a guy who clearly isn’t going to be in the NHL this year, but it was a tough night all around for him. He had several chances at breaks early in the game but missed the passes. Everything with the puck seemed to be off for him tonight, and he took a penalty late in the night to cap it all off. I’m sure nerves played a role for the teenager.

Vladislav Kamenev – D: After throwing a big hit on his first shift, it looked like it would be a different night for Kamenev. His next shift, he took two massive hits and looked tired the rest of the night. There wasn’t enough offensively from Kamenev, who really needs to stand out this preseason, and he got outmuscled too frequently. The best part about his game was his face-off ability, winning 60% of his draws, including a few in the defensive zone on the penalty kill.

Sasha Mutala – C: A relatively quiet night for the teenager. I didn’t notice any glaring mistakes from him, but nothing stood out either. Like the rest of his junior-eligible forwards, he was sent back to his junior team after the game.

Adam Werner – C: After the first goal of the game, it seemed like Werner really started to settle in, flashing the leather a few times and looking confident in net. He looked a little scaredly on the second goal by the Golden Knights but it was a definite breakdown by the Avs defense.

Hunter Miska – D: Coming in cold is never easy, but Miska’s issues were in the third period. The second goal he gave up was a brutal rebound, and he put himself in a very tough position on a shot that probably shouldn’t have generated much of a rebound at all. Goal tending depth is a definite concern at the moment.

The Avs next preseason game is on Thursday when they take on the Dallas Stars. The game starts at 7 PM MST.
Blue Jackets 4, Sabres 1 | Jackets open preseason with win

Brian Hedger The Columbus Dispatch

Hockey is back in Columbus.
The Blue Jackets opened the preseason Tuesday with a 4-1 win over the Buffalo Sabres, thanks to strong goalkeeping and a balanced scoring attack.

Emil Bemstrom opened the scoring before most of the fans in Nationwide Arena had found their seats, rifling a one-timer into the back of the net 52 seconds into the game. Alexandre Texier and Seth Jones picked up assists on the power-play goal.

Bemstrom, brought in to help facilitate the Blue Jackets’ power play, also picked up an assist on Sonny Milano’s third-period goal.

The Jackets answered two minutes later on a wrister goal from Kole Sherwood of New Albany. Sherwood had team-high four hits and logged 18:04, highest ice time among all Blue Jackets forwards.

“His energy was there all night long,” said Monsters coach Mikes Eaves, who ran the Jackets bench Tuesday. “That’s the kind of thing I think Kole knows he needs to bring to the team.”

Starting goaltender Joonas Korpisalo finished with 12 saves, and Matiss Kivlenieks stopped 16 of 17 shots.

Zac Dalpe added an empty-net goal with a little over a minute left.

Buying time
The players association is banking on the NHL to make a concerted effort to increase revenue in the next three years.

That was a big reason for the NHLPA’s decision Monday not to reopen the current collective bargaining agreement after this season. The CBA will now last through the 2021-22 season, which buys time for the league and union to hammer out a new deal and allows NHL commissioner Gary Bettman a chance to score big with a mega television deal — something that could solve the escrow issue atop the players’ list of complaints.

Escrow is a tax used to assure a 50/50 split of the league’s annual revenue, and player salaries have exceeded revenue since the current CBA was forged in 2013.

“We don’t hate everything about this deal,” the Jackets’ Nick Foligno said. “There are just certain parameters within it that we want to see improve. You’ve heard us talk about escrow, you’ve heard us talk about benefits, you’ve heard us talk about this upcoming TV deal. We need to start seeing the needle move to where our league is climbing in revenues over salaries — and there really isn’t a reason why it’s not.”

Fitter, faster
Zach Werenski, who is heading into his fourth season, has already caught the eye of coach John Tortorella with improved conditioning.

“He looks like he’s in great shape,” Tortorella said. “It’s the best condition I’ve seen him since I’ve coached him.”

Werenski agreed, citing offseason changes in his diet, sleep and training.

“I feel really good this camp, probably the best I’ve felt since I’ve been to one of these,” he said. “Having that full offseason (healthy), knowing what to expect and how hard it’s going to be, I just prepared for it mentally and physically, and I feel really good right now.”

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 09.19.2019
Blue Jackets counting on The Maestro, Oliver Björkstrand, to orchestrate a breakout season

Aaron Portzline Sep 18, 2019

COLUMBUS, Ohio — While the rest of the amateur scouting world was sticking in Breclav, Czech Republic, to watch Canada and Russia play in the quarterfinals of the 2012 IIHF World U-18s, veteran scouts Bob Strumm and Don Boyd rented a car and headed east.

For Strumm and Boyd, it was a chance to get caught up. They’d both been fired one year earlier when the Blue Jackets overhauled the hockey operations department, and they’d caught on with two junior clubs doing what they do — Strumm scouting for the Portland Winterhawks of the Western Hockey League and Boyd scouting for the London Knights of the Ontario Hockey League.

“We drove about an hour away to (Znojmo) for a relegation game, Denmark vs. Latvia,” Strumm said. “I didn’t tell Boydy this, but I had an ulterior motive. There was this kid playing for Denmark …”

There were 202 people in the building on April 19, 2012, according to the official IIHF box score. “Forty of ‘em were players,” Strumm jokes, “and four of ‘em were scouts.”

But there was one player in particular. A string bean forward named Oliver Björkstrand was all over the ice that day, assisting on three goals in the third period and overtime that aided Demar’s come-from-behind win.

“The hardest part of that trip was keeping my mouth shut on the way back to our hotel in Vienna,” Strumm said. “Boady saw him, too. But I didn’t want him to know how much I liked this kid.”

Maybe it’s because Strumm was staying during the tournament in Vienna — home of the great classical composers — but he settled on a nickname for Björkstrand during that game. He began his postgame scouting report that night with the following: “The maestro showed up tonight.”

Oliver Björkstrand with scout Bob Strumm. (Aaron Portzline / The Athletic)

“Bjorky was so dangerous with the puck that when he had it on his stick everybody else fell in line,” Strumm said. “I’ve only seen a few players do that at any level. He was in charge of what was going on all over the ice. Everybody was looking at him, on both sides.”

Two months after that relegation game, Portland made Björkstrand the eighth player taken in the WHL import draft. One year later, in general manager Jarmo Kekalainen’s first draft with the Blue Jackets (2013), he drafted Björkstrand in the third round, with the No. 89 overall pick.

It’s not so easy being a maestro in the NHL, of course. But six years later, after a few stumbles and setbacks, the Blue Jackets believe Björkstrand is ready to be not just a lineup regular, but also a difference-maker.

Where it all began

Todd Björkstrand grew up playing hockey in Minneapolis, then played at the University of Maine. Example No. 2,897 that hockey is a small world: John Tortorella was in his final year with the Black Bears (1980-81) when Björkstrand arrived as a freshman.

After playing four seasons in the U.S. minor league, Todd Björkstrand signed to play in Denmark, where he ultimately put down roots. He was married (Janne), raised a family and transitioned in coaching after a 14-year playing career.

Patrick Björkstrand, who plays in Finland, was born in 1992. Oliver came along three years later, forming a hockey-mad family of four in Herning, Denmark, a town of 50,000 people.

Todd Björkstrand coached Herning’s club in Denmark’s top league throughout Patrick and Oliver’s childhood, so getting ice time was easy … and yet there was never enough of it.

Hockey-obsessed kids have been known to trash garage doors and clothes dryers with their incessant shooting of pucks, but Todd Björkstrand was no dummy.

In the small backyard of their home on Klavermarken Street, Björkstrand sank two poles into the ground about 8 feet apart and strung a rubbery tarp between them. On the tarp was the outline of a goal, with four targets: a goalie’s chest, five-hole and the high corner on each side.

“They would spend hours out there,” Todd Björkstrand said of his two sons. “I had this rule that they had to shoot 200 pucks a day, but that was really never an issue. They wouldn’t have been out there if they didn’t want to be.”

Oliver said they could fit 40 or 50 pucks into a bucket, and he always wanted to shoot at least 200 pucks a day.

“But most days, I’d lose count,” he said.

When Oliver and Patrick needed to hurry to get their 200 pucks in, Todd would head out back with them, drop to his knees and slide pucks across the mat to speed up the process.

These are the type of stories that make Kekalainen smile.

“I hear people say it all the time, that you’re born with a shot like that,” Kekalainen said. “And I always call bullshit.”

“You only get a shot like that from working on it over and over and over again, from repetition and practice.”

Björkstrand’s wrist shot is considered one of the most lethal in the NHL due to his many different release points, his accuracy and the quickness with which it’s unleashed.

Early in camp, Björkstrand “welcomed” goaltender Elvis Merzlikins to a training camp scrimmage with his signature shot.

“It’s like he flicks the puck, but it’s an absolute laser,” Blue Jackets right winger Cam Atkinson said. “With his accuracy, it’s pretty dangerous. He has that one shot where he gets it off and it’s by the goalie’s ear before he knows it. Not one goalie can save that shot.”

Goaltender Joonas Korpisalo has played with Björkstrand for several seasons now, going back to their time with AHL Cleveland on the Calder Cup winner in 2016.

He’s fought off more Björkstrand shots in practice than he cares to remember.

“He’s one of those rare guys whose release is something that goalies can’t read,” Korpisalo said. “It’s really hard because he can shoot in any position he wants to.”

“A lot of guys load it a little bit, so you know it’s coming. But Bjorky will be stickhandling and … I don’t know how he does it.”

Björkstrand would have likely found his way to the NHL even if Strumm hadn’t helped pave his path to the Canadian junior ranks. His shot and his offensive instincts would have garnered attention eventually.

But the Blue Jackets are hoping Björkstrand is ready to put it all together this season, that the maestro is tapping the music stand and ready to conduct a breakout campaign.

A bigger role

The plan, as of now, is to play Björkstrand on the second line with left winger Gustav Nyquist and center Alexander Wennberg — “the Scandinavian line,” he called it — along with a significant role on the power play.

But forward lines in today’s NHL are as fickle as the weather. Suffice it to say, wherever he slots, Björkstrand is one of the players who will be expected to help fill the offensive void created by the free-agent losses of Artemi Panarin (New York Rangers), Matt Duchene (Nashville) and others.

“It’s a big year,” Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella said. “He knows what he meant to us in that second half, or the last quarter of the year and into the playoffs. He saw what was happening as far as his ice time, and how we were counting on him. He wants more of that.”

Björkstrand finished with 23-13-36 in 77 games, but those numbers demand closer inspection.
On Dec. 22, Bjorkstrand had 3-5-8 and was minus-5 in 30 games. He was in and out of the lineup as a healthy scratch, he was benched in games for long stretches, and he had several games when his ice time was less than 10 minutes. He couldn’t stick in the top six, didn’t fit in the bottom six, and was the odd man out for Anthony Duclair and, at times, Markus Hannikainen.

That’s all hard to imagine when you look at what Bjorkstrand did the rest of the season.

From Dec. 23 until the end of the season (46 games), Bjorkstrand was one of the most offensively dangerous players in the NHL. His 20 goals were tops on the Blue Jackets and tied for 19th in the NHL with some marquee players — Tampa Bay’s Brayden Point, Calgary’s Johnny Gaudreau, Florida’s Aleksander Barkov, etc.

“It’s not his gifts, and it’s not his goal-scoring,” Tortorella said, explaining what impressed him about Bjorkstrand’s second-half play. “It’s just how hard he worked around the puck, how hard he worked at his positioning, his wall play … everything about his determination within the game, I thought, had a tremendous improvement in the second half.

“He has to find his determination right away (this season), without somebody prodding him … meaning me. I think it’s part of maturity, part of the process for a young player. We all know what he is as far as the skill and how he can shoot the puck, the different angles it comes off his stick. We all know that.

“I think he found a little bit of a recipe, and he’s going to take care of (the slow starts) by himself.”

Remarkably, Bjorkstrand averaged only 12:45 in ice time during those final 46 games of the season. His 12:20 ice time average across the season is the least ice time by any NHL player who scored 20 goals last season.

Tortorella has to find more ice time for Bjorkstrand, but Bjorkstrand has to give Tortorella a reason to keep sending him over the boards.

Bjorkstrand spent most of his summer training in Minnesota, and he’s spent considerable time and energy thinking about how he can avoid a slow start in 2019-20. It’s entirely mental, he said.

“I’ve come to camp in good shape the last three years, but I need that extra little thing to start a game the right way, start the season the right way,” Bjorkstrand said.

Bjorkstrand said he watched a lot of video clips from last season, sequences during the stretch of games in which he was playing his best hockey. It was his energy all over the ice — being engaged and disruptive defensively, carrying the puck into high-traffic areas, etc. — that led to his awakening.

When the Stanley Cup playoffs arrived last spring, Bjorkstrand was one of Tortorella’s most trusted players. His goals in Game 3 and Game 4 of the first-round sweep of Tampa Bay were both game-winners.

“I do trust him, there’s no question,” Tortorella said. “When a player goes through the evolution of struggling, being out of the lineup, and then finds himself …

“We had conversations last year when things were going well, and we talked about why I thought it was going well. I think he’s found himself.

“He’s a great kid. We want everything right now with young players. It takes some time. Each player is different in understanding what they need to do. But he’s certainly on the right road.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
A constant during the Stars' postseason run, Justin Dowling is now battling to reclaim a roster spot
With many forward slots already spoken for, bubble players like Dowling need to make an impression.

By Matthew DeFranks 12:19 AM on Sep 19, 2019

FRISCO -- When Justin Dowling leaves the Stars' practice facility in Frisco, he returns to the Animal House.
During training camp, Dowling -- like nearly all of the Stars' other roster hopefuls -- is staying at the Tom Gaglardi-owned Sandman hotel a mile away from the Comerica Center. Unlike the rest of them, he returns to company: his wife Megan, who is expecting the couple's first child in March, and toy Australian shepherds Jett and Pearl.

"The whole family's staying in the Sandman," Dowling said. "We've got the whole Animal House there."

Staying in a hotel isn't new for the Dowlings, who are spending camp together for the first time. When he was a late-season recall from AHL affiliate Texas last season, Dowling spent nearly two months in the Omni downtown as he played in all 13 Stars playoff games. Entering this season, Dowling doesn't have the luxury of planting roots in the area given the precarious nature of his job status.

As it stands, Dowling is in a crowded group of forwards vying to make the opening day roster in Dallas. The Stars have 11 roster spots taken by forwards, leaving two or three positions available.

Dowling, Denis Gurianov and Joel L'Esperance each spent the majority of last season in the AHL, but are in the mix this training camp for an NHL spot. Prospects Ty Dellandrea and Jason Robertson entered camp with high expectations. And Finnish import Joel Kiviranta impressed in his preseason debut.

Among that group, Dowling is the only one with a goal this preseason, scoring the overtime winner in a 2-1 victory at Minnesota on Tuesday night. He's also the only one that played every playoff game for the Stars last season.

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 it gives me definitely more confidence and a little bit more comfortability with everyone and the systems and how we play, terms when it comes to some of the systems," Dowling said. "You're not thinking so much on the ice, you're just playing hockey at that point when you've done it."

Dowling, who turns 29 on Oct. 1, was a career AHL player prior to last year's late-season push. He's still only played 20 regular-season NHL games (compared with 435 in the AHL) and doesn't yet have a goal. In the playoffs last season, he centered the fourth line, was on the second power-play unit and averaged a modest 10:43 of ice time per game.

Against Minnesota on Tuesday night, Dowling was on the ice for both Stars goals (and the Wild's only goal) and led all Dallas forwards by playing 18:43.

"I thought last night, his details and habits were really good," Stars coach Jim Montgomery said. "He reloads above the puck really well. He knows his layers in the defensive zone. Within our structure, he plays really well and has the ability to make plays.

"He made some plays on entries and obviously the game-winning goal. I didn't particularly think that was a high-level game for Justin Dowling last night, so he needs to continue to build upon what he did last night and get better."

One school of thought says that a roster spot shouldn't be used on a 29-year-old without an NHL goal to his name. The other says that Dowling's versatility as a fourth-liner down the stretch and a top-six wing in a pinch could help massage a roster crunch.

"I think the more tricks you have in your bag, the better opportunity you have to make the hockey team," Montgomery said. "You can play center, left wing, right wing, that's a bonus. ... Being able to win faceoffs, little details, add a special teams element to you, gives us trust to [say] 'Well, we can't live without this guy.'"

At the end of last season, Dowling met with the Stars brass and the message was simple.

"All it is is 'Don't take your foot off the gas,'" Dowling said. "Just because you played however many straight games, you played a good role in the playoffs doesn’t mean that it’s guaranteed or given to you next year."

Dallas Morning News LOADED: 09.19.2019
How many spots do the Dallas Stars have open for young forwards?

By Josh Lile

The Dallas Stars came into training camp with some young depth for the first time in ages. Young players with something to prove and talent, are all over the forward depth chart from Roope Hintz to Ty Dellandrea. Jason Robertson, Joel Kiviranta, Denis Gurianov, Adam Mascherin, Riley Tufte, Rhett Gardner, Ty Felhaber...the list goes on and on. How many legitimately have a chance to break camp on the roster?

Ehhh.

Hintz is a given. After him though the picture is not quite so clear. The roster simply doesn't have that many openings without the Stars moving some guys out, and we've seen in the past how much value the Stars place on depth. Waiving guys when others have the ability to go to the minors isn't something they do very often.

Jamie Benn, Tyler Seguin, Alexander Radulov, Joe Pavelski, Jason Dickinson, Radek Faksa, Blake Comeau, Andrew Cogliano, Mattias Janmark, Corey Perry, Justin Dowling, and Hintz give you 12 active forwards. Martin Hanzal will go on IR at some point. Of the other 12, if you're being realistic, how many can you see being moved if a prospect pushes his way into the mix? Dowling is the only one I see. That gives you 11 spots definitely spoken for, with 14 forwards being carried at most.

The Stars clearly want Gurianov to seize one of the spots. He's logged 30 minutes in the two preseason games. Five of those are on the powerplay. He's made a couple nice plays offensively. However, he has one shot across two games. I'm close to as big of a Gurianov supporter as you will find, but that isn't good enough. He has a roster spot sitting there for the taking. He has to actually take it though. The 35% expected goals for percentage he has in the two games at even strength isn't going to cut it.

For now let's assume he has that spot. That leaves you with one or two spots who will, most likely, be semi-regular healthy scratches. Who do you want in those spots? Do you want young players who will play semi-regularly, or do you want some dependable veterans you aren't worried about keeping on the ice consistently?

Through the preseason thus far, Joel Kiviranta is the player who has stood out the most. He should. He's played against grown men in Finland for several seasons. The 23-year old needs to be playing. He seems like he should be a near lock to make the roster after his showing in Traverse City and training camp. I wouldn't put a ton of stock in Traverse given his age. It's hard to not at least acknowledge how hard he showed out in the tournament though. So, let's count him as on the roster.

That last spot could go any number of ways. Dowling has proven to be a solid depth player. Gardiner is an exceptional face off specialist with a track record as an elite defensive player in college. He would crush it as a bottom six forward. He looks like a guy that could be dropped in the bottom six now without a ton of stress.

BUT! There's a slight problem in all of this. You need centers. The potential depth chart to the right highlights the issue. If the Stars want Pavelski and Hintz to be in the top six they will likely need five centers in the lineup so one of Dowling or Gardiner will need to be dressed. This would give them a full 12 skaters and the Stars need to make room in that group when Perry is healthy enough to play. So as much as it seems like Kiviranta is playing himself into a roster spot, I think the numbers game is going to squeeze him out.

Seguin, Pavelski, Hintz, Faksa, Dowling, Dellandrea, and Gardiner have rolled out there down the middle through two games. If the Stars choose to put Pavelski or Hintz on the wing, they're going to need that extra center in the mix. If they wanted to roll Seguin, Pavelski, Hintz, and Faksa as their centers they would need an extra winger. They have some flexibility here. Going hard down the middle would seem to open up the playing time needed for Perry when he's available without too much roster flux.

Deep breaths.
Inside the Stars crease: Landon Bow on stopping Crosby, learning from Bishop and fights

By Sean Shapiro Sep 18, 2019

It’s a big year for the Dallas Stars in the goaltending department. The NHL tandem is coming off career seasons; Ben Bishop probably should have won the 2019 Vezina Trophy and 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 goaltenders were among the most-watchted 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 Landon Bow who enters this season at the No. 3 goalie on the depth chart and has turned from an undrafted AHL-contracted goalie into a legitimate NHL prospect. Bow and I met for coffee back in July after a summer training session with Jamie and Jordie Benn.

Was there ever a time you weren’t going to become a goalie?

I don’t really think there was a time. There were times when it was hard as a kid and you’d say, ‘I don’t know,’ while seeing all the other guys have a lot of fun. But I’ve been a goalie since I was eight, so it was my second year of Novice. We all had to play goalie back then, and I just liked it a lot and nobody else wanted to play goalie, so I was able to get in and just enjoyed it as a kid. So I never really had a point where it was ‘I don’t really want to do this.’ But you did see the other guys and sometimes you wanted to score goals and make plays, but I was never good (enough) to do that anyways.

It was probably halfway through the season I was the permanent goalie. We only play 30-something games when you’re a kid, and I had gotten to go in a couple times for kids who didn’t want to do it, and then it was just like, ‘Ok, I can do this for everyone,’ and everyone was totally happy because they all had more skill and liked to play. Because when you are a goalie that young, you can barely move in the stuff. I just like it. My dad was reluctant about it because it was a little expensive.

Were you good at it right away?

I think I was decent. My only issue was that was when I was kid, whenever I let in a goal, I’d always look at my dad in the stands and was always looking for his approval or disapproval if it was a good or a bad goal. So that was a really bad habit I had as a kid. And then there was one time I remember the puck got shot in, and it was kind of going beside the net, and I kind of turned my stick over to stop it with the back of my blade. It hits my blade and goes in, and I just look at my dad, and he’s just so mad at me.

Did Dad play goalie?

He played. But he didn’t play a very high level of hockey. They were from Winnipeg and they moved to St. Albert, my hometown, when he was 16 or 17. He used to be good when he was younger, he used to be a lot faster, but he didn’t have his growth spurt until way later on. He ended up just playing Junior C to finish off his hockey career. But he’s always been good teaching us and helping us, especially being a goalie. Because you don’t really have a goalie coach as a kid on most teams, so what he’d do is he’d find videos, or if I did a goalie camp, he’d check the drills so he’d be able to come out and help me and the other goalie we had on the team.

So when you were young did you model game after certain goalies?

Just as a kid being from right near Edmonton, I was a big Tommy Salo fan. So you always wanted to be like him. That’s who I watched as a kid growing up. Carey Price was drafted in, what, 2005? I kind of became a Canadiens fan watching him because he was so good at such a young age, and I loved watching how technical he was. So he was great for like me to kind of learn because he was always in position. He was kind of in that revolution of the style that is now.

You were probably at the ideal age to embrace the current style, which really came into effect probably around the time you were 12 or 13. That’s kind of perfect. There was no more big pad stacks and all that diving around. As a kid, you were able to go make mistakes, but 12, 13, that’s bantam hockey – right before you get drafted into junior or you decide you want to go to college – so I think it was good for me that the transition happened around then to adapt.

So if you had been a couple years older, you would have had to re-learn the position a bit.

Yeah, during junior, that would have been the case. You see how some guys have to change with NHL; even with how it’s changing now, there is all the different styles that used to be. You have the Brodeurs, the Roys, that certain style – and then it just changed over a couple years. I can’t even imagine what it’s like for the guys that were in the minors or junior then, having to switch.

So when you say style, how would describe yours?

When I was younger, you’d be a butterfly or a stand-up goalie, so I was big enough to be a butterfly goalie as a kid. So I kind of stuck with that, and as you get older you learn more about your angles, and back then you’d come flying out of your net. Everything is so tight now. That was kind of the big change; you don’t see many guys come crazy far out.

There are a few guys and the crazy odd situation where you have to, but you watch a guy like (Ben Bishop), and that guy is a foot, foot and a half off the goal line, and he’s always there. Anton Khudobin is still one of those guys that comes flying out.

They are completely different goalies. That’s kind of fun, and you can learn from both of them. You just see the positioning of Bish and then the athleticism of Anton. Because when you are smaller, you have to work and be athletic for those angles.

You’ve been working with Bishop during the summer. What have you learned from him?

Bish has been great with me. He’s a really good teacher, so whenever we go on the ice and how we are doing drills, whether it’s how I hit a post or taking different angles on certain plays. He’ll have (Stars goalie coach Jeff Reese) out there on the ice, but instead of just having his input, Bish will have his input and say how he would play it, so I can kind of play around with that.

The one thing he’s been helping me out a lot with has been my puckhandling. I wasn’t the greatest puckhandler, and you can see how controlled and comfortable he is, so there are days where it’s just me and him, and we go out and practice puckhandling. Just to get that comfortability, that’s all it is. Once you’re comfortable with it, (that) opens up a whole lot of more plays to make.

Can you expand on the puckhandling? I think it gets oversimplified when people just say Bishop is a good puckhandler.

Well, confidence is a big thing, because you don’t want to be running out there and always worried and feeling like you are always rushed. So just kind of practicing and getting back and feeling pucks and turning up. Like, a lot of puckhandling is really technical, but the technique is in your footwork. Because if you have quick footwork, and you have quick backward crossovers to get behind the net quicker, guys aren’t going to come after you because you are always looking up the ice, and they don’t want to make a bad play where you make a bad pass and they are caught. We’ve been working a lot on footwork behind the net, just help clearing and keeping it simple (because) you don’t want to be stickhandling too much. The one thing I noticed was I would take an extra stickhandle, that I would have to, instead of just pulling the puck and it’s already on your forehand, you don’t have to do anything fancy with it.
And your footwork in general has improved greatly in the past couple years working with Texas Stars goalie coach Jim Bedard, right?

Yeah, that was huge. Because you can get away with stuff like that when you are playing junior when you are just bigger. Now everything is so fast, I learned a lot from Jimmy and Mike (McKenna). They both really helped me out and pushed me to that next level. That’s something you can always improve on, is making sure something crisper and cleaner to make it simpler.

You finished the season as the black ace goalie for the NHL team, and you spent the summer here in Dallas skating with Jamie Benn. Was it important for you to be one of the earlier guys arriving in Frisco?

For me, it was great to be around (Benn) and see how hard he works in his summer. If you want to be on the team, you have to see where you want to be. So that’s good just to work out with those guys and see their work ethic. Then being on the ice with them and being on the ice with Reeser, so if there are any issues you had during the season that you knew or he saw, there are drills we’ve been working on since the beginning of playoffs that we’re able to keep playing with over the summer.

You weren’t supposed to be here. You were the undrafted guy who only got an AHL contract and then earned the NHL deal while other drafted goalies have left the organization. Now you have two younger more-highly touted goalies trying to take your spot as No. 3 in the organization. Have you thought much about that?

I thought about it a little bit when I was looking at how old all of our guys are that look like they’re in the Texas roster area. I’ll be 24 in a couple weeks, and you see you are the oldest guy, and it’s a cool thing for that, and you know have to keep pushing. Like, I still want to make that push for an NHL job, and you never can quit because there is always going to be those kids that come up, and they’re doing the exact same thing I was, and they want my job.

Everyone has that same hunger, and that’s just how the league is. You’ve got to have that internal drive and battle, you all want to be the best. For me, having two younger guys (in the organization), it’ll be different in that dynamic. But I think it’s good, and everyone will be pushing each other.

You made your NHL debut last season, and no matter what happens going forward, you can tell the story that you stopped Sidney Crosby on a backhand in your first NHL game.

It’s cool. It’s funny, after just getting back from being home, a couple of my buddies always bring it up and they’ll say, ‘Man, you stopped Crosby on a half breakaway.’ They love that kind of stuff. It’s kind of cool to think about that after you watch guys like Crosby as a kid, and you are like, ‘I stopped him.’ Those are cool little memories I’ll have, and hopefully, I’ll keep playing better and make even better memories.

Don’t hate me for bringing it up, but first career NHL goal you allowed was in Tampa Bay to the Hart Trophy winner.

Exactly, I was thinking if I didn’t do that, he might not have won. Who knows?

I know you were also a bit of a Ray Emery fan growing up.

He was just something totally different that you usually don’t see — well, at least in my time, you hadn’t seen that tougher goalie — so I liked watching him, and back when they had the old brawl, it was kind of fun to see. He was kind of interesting, so after that, I watched a little bit more to see more about him.

And you’re still waiting for that first fight yourself.

Yeah, I’ve tried a couple times. I believe it was three times in junior I tried, I didn’t get any bites.

How were you trying, just eyeing him down?

Oh yeah, I was screaming. Sometimes, the game is just out of hand, and you’re just like ‘Everything else is going crazy, everyone is fighting, and I just want to do it, at least once, just to see what it’s like.’ I don’t even know if I’m any good at fighting.

Well, you’ve seen the fight that Bishop was in when he played in Frisco, right?
Joe Veleno spent most of the offseason in the Detroit area training and working on his shot.

He's one of the reasons the Detroit Red Wings are encouraged over the state of the rebuild, because Veleno looks like he could develop into a No. 2 center behind Dylan Larkin. Veleno is a fleet-footed playmaker who can operate in tight areas and makes good decisions with the puck. He models his game after Chicago's Jonathan Toews, one of the game's premier two-way centers.

This is Veleno's second camp with the Wings; he looked comfortable at last year's event, after being drafted 30th overall in 2018. Now he's auditioning for a job, hoping to use his skill set to separate himself from other prospects.

"What do I better than other guys?" Veleno said after Wednesday's morning skate. "Make a difference whether it's creating a chance or playing well defensively, all the little details are going to be important to my game. One of my best attributes is using my speed.

"You know you can always get better at something every year and I guess in a lot of players, it's looking to score more goals. You want to contribute offensively and having a good shot, being able to score goals, have that skill, comes a long way."

Veleno is hoping to do what Larkin did and make the Wings at 19 years old. Larkin had a terrific rookie year (23 goals, 45 points) but he spent the season playing wing on a line with veteran Henrik Zetterberg at center. Veleno is up against a depth chart down the middle that numbers Larkin, Valtteri Filppula, Frans Nielsen and Luke Glendening, plus prospects Michael Rasmussen, Christoffer Ehn and Jacob de la Rose (some of those players could also make it as a wing).

"It's a hard league to play in and you have to work hard for every little bit of it," Veleno said. "For some guys, it's pretty much their jobs and you're trying to earn a spot, trying to take someone's job. That's what it comes down to now."

Veleno scored seven goals during the prospects tournament that preceded training camp. The Wings told him to shoot more going into his final year of junior hockey, and Veleno responded with 42 goals — a 20-goal improvement over 2017-18 — among 104 points in 59 games.

Now the Wings want to see Veleno excel with and without the puck.

"My biggest message to him is become a great two-way center," Wings coach Jeff Blashill said. "It's hard to be a pure point guy. You look at his points in junior, they were good, they weren't astronomical, and so to think that all of a sudden you come here and go astronomical in points would be misleading.

"I told him the quickest way to the NHL is to earn trust. If you earn trust from the coach, you get out there way quicker. So be great defensively, transport the puck up the ice like he does and the produce offense. You have to do both if you want to be in the top two center role."

As with Larkin, the coaching staff has stressed Veleno study video of Zetterberg, Pavel Datsyuk, and Boston Bruins center Patrice Bergeron, another elite two-way center. Blashill stressed that Larkin is stronger and faster than Veleno, and so "Dylan can probably get away with a little bit more because he can win a puck battle even if he doesn't put himself in the best position, where Joe is going to have to be smarter about putting himself in those positions.

"If guys want to make this team, show us every time that you're one of the best players on the ice. That's what Larks did."

It wasn't until his third year that Larkin looked really comfortable playing center in the NHL. Veleno is just getting started on his pro career. Blashill likes to remind young players it's a marathon, not a sprint. Veleno may not start this season in Detroit, but he looks like he could develop into a good building block.

Day-to-day business: Larkin, Andreas Athanasiou, Tyler Bertuzzi, Justin Abdelkader and Oliwer Kaski are among those nursing soft-tissue issues. "I don't expect any of them not to be ready for the regular season," Blashill said, adding some could be ready for the weekend games. Larkin has been skating the past couple days after missing Sunday's red-white game.
Detroit Red Wings goalie Filip Larsson (38) misses a goal made by Chicago Blackhawks' Duncan Keith during the second period of a preseason game on Wednesday.

Another day, another exhibition game — get used to it — and this one didn’t go as well for the Red Wings.

Playing the back end of a back-to-back against Chicago, the Red Wings lost, 2-1, at United Center on Wednesday night.

Taro Hirose (power play) opened the game’s scoring in the first period — putting in a rebound off Filip Zadina’s deflected shot — but the Blackhawks responded with two goals in the second period by Brandon Hagel and Duncan Keith and held on.

Goaltenders Jonathan Bernier stopped 10 of 11 shots and Filip Larsson made 15 of 16 saves. Chicago goalie Corey Crawford played the entire game and stopped 23 shots.

Chicago outshot the Red Wings 28-24, including 22-14 over the final 40 minutes.

The Wings host the New York Islanders at 7:30 p.m. Friday (97.1/no TV).

Here are a few brief observations from Wednesday’s exhibition:

► Taro Hirose: The key for Hirose this training camp is produce offense the way he did in his 10-game stint with the Wings after signing from Michigan State.

If he does, Hirose will likely make the roster.

Hirose isn’t the biggest guy in the world by any stretch, and he isn’t the fastest either. So, Hirose has to outsmart opponents, use his instincts, and he did a good job of it in March.

He was in the right spot on Wednesday, getting to a puck that deflected off a Blackhawks defender after Zadina’s shot, and Hirose snapping a shot past Crawford.

Hirose had three shots on net in 20 minutes, 11 seconds of ice time, Zadina had no shots in 20:19 and Joe Veleno had three shots, including a couple quality chances, in 16:39.

► Goaltending: Bernier misplayed the puck behind the net leading to Hagel’s goal, which tied the game in the second period.

Larsson replaced Bernier midway in the second period and was still cold when Keith skated down wing and beat Larsson from the dot.

After allowing that goal, Larsson settled down and made several good saves in the third period with the Blackhawks pressuring.

► Moritz Seider: In his exhibition debut, the rookie defenseman played 23:19, had one shot and was minus-1. Only Mike Green (23:57) played more on defense than Seider, who looked poised going against Chicago’s best players most of the night.
Detroit – OK, so it wasn’t like winning the Stanley Cup. But Joe Veleno and the rest of his Red Wings teammates that won the eight-team NHL Prospects Tournament last week in Traverse City still feel good about their accomplishment.

“It was good time over there,” said Veleno Wednesday, hours before taking off for Chicago for an exhibition game. “A lot of guys had a lot of fun, especially winning that tournament. It was pretty special for the whole organization and for us players.”

No question, Veleno and the rest of the roster took the tournament seriously.

“We really wanted to win,” Veleno said. “We showed it in all of our games, always coming back from a deficit.”

One of the best players during the tournament was Veleno, who led all goal-scorers with seven.

Veleno, still only 19, scored 42 goals in his final season of junior last winter, in Drummondville, and the scoring in Traverse City further showed the improvement in his shot and willingness to shoot rather than pass.

The performance in the Prospects Tournament also gave Veleno plenty of confidence heading into the NHL exhibition season.

“Obviously high,” said Veleno of his confidence level. “I had a pretty good tournament but I have to reset myself here. I know it’s a different level. This is like the real stuff.”

The Wings’ coaching staff and player development staff worked with Veleno the entire summer and last season to improve the velocity and accuracy on his shot.

“That was one thing I wasn’t doing as much in junior a couple years ago,” Veleno said. “Once I got drafted here, they kept telling me to shoot the puck. I worked on my shot during the summer and got stronger.”

Another item coach Jeff Blashill wanted to stress was Veleno concentrating on becoming a complete two-way center, effective on the defensive side as much as becoming a threat offensively.

“It hard to be a pure point guy, and you look at his point (totals) in juniors, they were good but they weren’t astronomical,” Blashill said. “To think you come here and all of a sudden go astronomical in points would be misleading.

“So become a great two-way center.”

Blashill told Veleno to concentrate on defense, too, and that can help any young player get to the NHL.

“I told him the quickest way to the NHL is to earn trust,” Blashill said. “That’s true of every organization. So if you earn trust from the coach, you get out there way quicker.

“So be great defensively, transport the puck up the ice like he does and produce offense, like he does. You have to do both, for sure, if you want to be a top-two line center, but you better make sure you are good defensively.”

With the deep pool of centers the Wings have currently, it’s a long shot that Veleno makes the opening night roster. It’s probably for the best for Veleno to earn some pro seasoning in Grand Rapids and gain confidence with a productive AHL season.

Regardless, Veleno is playing with more confidence this preseason.

“Last year I wasn’t ready to play at the next level,” Veleno said. “I knew I was going to go back to junior and get another year there, try to play world juniors and dominate the (Quebec junior league). I met all the expectations and now I’m coming into this season, turning pro.

“I cleaned up a lot of my game defensively and focused on the little details to play in the NHL. We’ll see how it goes.”

Blashill has had veteran defenseman Trevor Daley paired with June’s first-round pick, Moritz Seider.

The two were scheduled to be a defensive pairing Wednesday in Chicago, which would be a stern opening test for Seider facing the likes of the Blackhawks’ Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews.

“He’s one of the most experienced guys in the league,” said Seider of Daley. “Over 1,000 games, it’s great. He helps me a lot, we communicate. It makes it a lot easier.”

Blashill believes the experience and poise Daley plays with benefits the 18-year-old Seider.

“Daley has been around a lot of situations,” Blashill said. “He can tell him where to stand, tell him about different situations.”

Early in the season, look for goaltender Jimmy Howard and Jonathan Bernier to split the workload, judging from Blashill’s comments.

Bernier didn’t play as much early last season and didn’t really get into a rhythm until later in the schedule when Blashill evened the workload.

The Red Wings open the season with a back-to-back against Nashville and Dallas (Oct. 5-6), so it’ll be easy to get both goaltenders work as soon as the schedule begins.

“We’re going to get them both going early,” Blashill said. “I’d like to get Bernier a few more games early than I did a year ago and try to get them both in a groove.”

More injuries

Add Justin Abdelkader and Oliwer Kaski to the list of Red Wings nursing minor injuries, joining Dylan Larkin, Andreas Athanasiou, Tyler Bertuzzi and Darren Helm.

Blashill said Larkin has skated on his own the last two days but not with the rest of the team.

“They’re not all the same (injuries) but I don’t expect any of them to not be ready for the regular season,” Blashill said. “Any soft tissue stuff, you worry about pushing them too fast and it turns into two weeks (of missed playing time).”
Taro Hirose scored the lone goal for the Detroit Red Wings Wednesday in a 2-1 preseason loss to the Chicago Blackhawks at the United Center.

Hirose converted on the power play at 18:09 of the first period to put his team ahead 1-0. After Filip Zadina’s shot was blocked by Brent Seabrook, Hirose corralled the puck and fired it into the open side of the net before goaltender Corey Crawford could get across to cover.

The Blackhawks (1-1-1) scored twice in the second period to take the lead.

Brandon Hagel tied it at 3:33. After Jonathan Bernier misplayed the puck behind his net, Hagel swooped in and tucked it past the goalie.

Duncan Keith scored what proved to be the game-winner at 10:55, taking a pass from Patrick Kane and blasting a shot past Filip Larsson, who made his NHL preseason debut (16 saves on 17 shots in 28 minutes). Bernier stopped 10-of-11 shots.

Zadina led Detroit forwards in ice time (22:19). Defenseman Mike Green, who missed the final five weeks of the season following a recurrence of a virus, led all Red Wings in minutes (23:57).

Moritz Seider, the defenseman Detroit selected with the sixth pick this year, made his NHL preseason debut, logging 23:19 and playing on the power play and penalty kill. He had one shot, two hits, two blocked shots and a minus-1 rating.

The Red Wings (1-1) face the New York Islanders Friday at Little Caesars Arena (7:30 p.m.).
Red Wings’ Moritz Seider ready for challenging preseason debut

Updated Sep 18, 5:54 PM; Posted Sep 18, 1:08 PM
By Ansar Khan | akhan1@mlive.com

DETROIT – The Detroit Red Wings wanted Moritz Seider to face a stiff challenge in his first NHL preseason game, and that’s what he’ll get tonight.

The 18-year-old defenseman, selected sixth overall this year, will make his exhibition debut against the Chicago Blackhawks at the United Center, likely matched up much of the time against Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews.

Seider is not nervous, just excited.

"It’s a great opportunity playing in the United Center against some very, very good NHL guys, I think one of the best (Kane)," Seider said after the morning skate at Little Caesars Arena. "It’s always nice when you have a challenge in a game or a nice, important role. I had the opportunity to play one of the best NHL guys in an exhibition game already against USA (Kane at the World Championship) so I’m kind of familiar with that. It was on the big ice. I think it’s completely different in the States (smaller ice)."

The game starts at 8:30 p.m. and will joined in progress on the NHL Network following the Florida-Montreal game that starts at 7 p.m.

Seider (6-4, 203) is coming off his first NHL training camp, following a strong showing at the Prospects Tournament, where he logged a lot of ice time and played physical.

"I think when you’re tall you have to use your size and that’s what I try every single night," Seider said. "I think playing hard and making the opponent tough to play against me is probably one of the parts of my game, too."

Coach Jeff Blashill wants Seider to be efficient.

"One of the ways you can become a great defenseman is be as efficient as possible," Blashill said. "The best D in the world are super-efficient. In terms of winning D, we had the best of all-time here in Nick Lidstrom probably in terms of pure efficiency, created offense without hardly giving anything up. I’m not comparing the two by any stretch, but I think Seider has to be super-efficient, he has to use his offensive instincts when the opportunity presents itself but not at the risk of 50-50 plays.

"Sometimes in the Prospects Tournament he was trying to force things that aren’t necessarily there and that’s how you end up beating yourself as a hockey team. I think he’s got real good offensive and defensive instincts, so use them and be impactful and be a great defender. The quickest way to the NHL is to earn trust."

Seider will be paired with Trevor Daley, his partner at training camp.

"Veteran presence with a younger player," Blashill said. "Daley has been around a lot of situations. He can help tell him where to stand, tell him different situations, they can talk."

The Red Wings lineup also will include 2018 first-round picks Filip Zadina and Joe Veleno. Jonathan Bernier will start in goal and Filip Larsson is expected to enter midway through the game.

Blashill said Seider and Zadina also will play Friday at home against the Islanders.

The list of players dealing with minor injuries includes Dylan Larkin, Andreas Athanasiou, Tyler Bertuzzi, Justin Abdelkader and Oliwer Kaski.

"Any soft tissue stuff, you worry about pushing them back too fast and it turns into two weeks," Blashill said. "They’re not all the same, but I don’t expect any of them to not be ready for the regular season. We’re hoping to get them all in on Friday or in some instances Sunday."

Larkin skated the past two days but not with the team.

Blashill said he’d like to balance the goaltending load early in the season between Jimmy Howard and Bernier. Playing back-to-back to start the season, Oct. 5 at Nashville and Oct. 6 vs. Dallas at home, each will get a start.

“We’re going to get them both going early,” Blashill said. "I like to get Bernie a few more games early than I did a year ago, try to get them both in a groove."
Impressions of Rasmussen, Nemeth, Svechnikov in Red Wings' preseason opener

By Ansar Khan | akhan1@mlive.com

Detroit Red Wings

DETROIT – Some highlights of the Detroit Red Wings' 5-3 victory over the Chicago Blackhawks Tuesday in their preseason opener at Little Caesars Arena:

Michael Rasmussen snapped a 3-3 tie by scoring from the net front on the power play with 4:37 remaining in the third period.

"I think he put some weight on, gained some strength this summer," Luke Glendening said. "I think he’s a little more confident. He looks good.

"To score goals in this league, that’s where you got be (net front). If he can be great there, that’s good for us."

Said Rasmussen: "I think I’m stronger on the puck and I’m just stronger with my skating."

Rasmussen looks forward to playing center, his natural position, this season after playing almost exclusively at wing in 62 games as a rookie with the Red Wings. He is competing for a roster spot because he can be assigned to the AHL Grand Rapids Griffins this season.

"Just way more skating (at center)," Rasmussen said. ‘I need to get my body up and down the ice a little bit different than wing. Just getting up and down and you got to play as the third D-man pretty much in the zone.”

Rasmussen’s net-front ability on the power play could give him an edge in competition for a spot on the third line.

“He knows how to screen the goalie, he knows how to present his stick, he’s got pretty soft hands in those areas,” coach Jeff Blashill said. “We’ll keep working on trying to find different ways to be super-dangerous when he gets the puck there.”

Defenseman Patrik Nemeth demonstrated his shot-blocking ability by blocking three shots. The Red Wings expect to see a lot more of that from the free agent they signed in July to a two-year deal.

"Our penalty kill is going to be better because he knows how to kill,” Blashill said. “You got block shots and he’s great at it. Somebody told me that at one of the summer skates, he blocked 15 shots. He doesn’t flinch. He blocked a shot in practice this morning that I was like, ‘I don’t know if we need to be doing that.’ But that’s just what he does.”

Said Glendening: “He’s awesome. We’re going to have to see who can block more this year. That guy, he’s great at blocking shots. He’s a great ad for our team.”

Evgeny Svechnikov logged 12:30 in his first game since the 2018 preseason, when he suffered a torn right ACL. He assisted on Rasmussen’s goal.

"It felt like I’m in there for first time, like a kid, like going into first grade,” Svechnikov said. “Amazing feeling. Even better to win the game and just be with the guys. There’s no better feeling.

"My stride is not there yet and I can still feel the knee.”

Svechnikov said the knee still feels sore. Blashill told him it’s going to take time.

"He didn’t play tons of minutes, but I thought he played pretty good,” Blashill said. “You’re cut a full year, you have major surgery on your knee, it’s hard. Just knowing that he played well and have a positive impact on the game is a real confidence booster.”

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Cholowski knows that now, and he has taken plenty of lessons from his past year. He talked Tuesday morning about getting sent down to midseason and what he gained from a mental standpoint — coping with the fact he had been sent down, that he had made mistakes, and that there were things the coaching staff didn’t like in his game. He says he learned how to be mentally stronger, have a good frame of mind and just get to work.

And of course, he now knows he needs to be harder to play against and win battles defensively.

He also knows, by virtue of having made the team last year, what it’s going to take to do so again. It’s the flip side to Blashill’s point about expectations rising with familiarity and experience: Those watching might be expecting more, but the players also knew what to expect, too. It gives a frame of reference for how to win a job again.

“I think they like what I do, for the most part,” Cholowski said. “Just add that little bit in the D-zone, being more aggressive and being harder to play against, and I’ll be all right.”

And he very well might be. Cholowski’s in a truly open competition on the blue line, with five players realistically competing for two starting jobs.

Blashill said Tuesday morning, “the third pair on D is pretty wide open, for sure.”

The exhibition season will go a long way toward figuring that answer out, and in the first such game Cholowski posted an assist, ran the top power play and played "solid" overall, according to his coach.

“I thought he ended enough plays and did a good job,” Blashill said. “I thought he moved the puck well. He had one, maybe two, overaggressive at the offensive blue line situations, where it ended up in potential rushes against. … That’s just that ‘recognizing danger’ (idea) that I talked about earlier, that he’s gotta continue to learn.”

It was some level of progress, albeit just one game against a middling Chicago delegation.

Rasmussen, meanwhile, is in a different situation altogether. In addition to being AHL eligible now after a rocky first NHL season, Rasmussen is also transitioning back to center, which he calls his “natural” position. That’s a big change from last season, when he played on the wing all year. He did show some ability defensively throughout the season, which was a positive, but he also looked like he could have used some time at a middle level between juniors and the world’s best hockey league.

Switching back to a more demanding position will likely only enhance that need.

So when Blashill was asked over the weekend what Rasmussen would have to do to make the team, he ended up having to give context for the situation as much as anything else.

“If you looked at Ras’ long-term outlook, he’s a 6-foot-6 (center),” he said. “Those guys can be really, really hard to play against because they’re so good defensively. If he’s a guy who can really shut down other teams’ best players, that’s a real positive. I think his ability to score (at the) net front is a real positive, so especially on the power play, he’s gotta score.”

Blashill pointed out that ultimately, though, Rasmussen would have to beat out Dylan Larkin, Valtteri Filppula, Frans Nielsen, Luke Glendening, Christoffer Ehn and Jacob De La Rose.

“That’s the NHL man,” Blashill said. “You’ve gotta grab a spot. I’d like to see him long-term, Steve (Yzerman) would like to see him long-term, at center. So those are the guys (to beat out). Those are the spots. You’ve gotta win one of those spots.”

That’s a really tall task, especially because beating out Ehn and De La Rose still might not actually be enough to make the team. As a top prospect, the Red Wings are going to want Rasmussen to play a lot of minutes, which means he would likely have to unseat a center in the starting lineup to make the roster. For a 20-year-old who played all year last year, that’s going to be a tough sell.

Rasmussen, of course, did score that game-winner Tuesday, and he did so shortly after he had almost scored on a different chance at the net front. He still looks like a fierce presence down low. Those are positives. But making this team down the middle is a whole other animal. Realistically speaking, it’s a significant long shot. And if everyone’s being honest, it’s probably in the best interest of his development to spend some time in the AHL anyway.
But this is how the Red Wings have arrived at this weird situation, with two top prospects who made the cut last year back in the same spot fighting for jobs.

Their circumstances are very different, as are their respective chances of being in Nashville on Oct. 5 for the regular-season opener. So is what each player will be looking to show over the next two weeks.

But they’re both trying to force the team’s hand once again.

“For those guys, they’ve gotta come, they’ve gotta have a great camp, they’ve gotta play great every chance they can,” Blashill said. “They’ve gotta find ways to make themselves important and find ways to say, ‘I’m going to make this team better.’ I think the whole group of us are trying to find a way to be a better hockey team. So we’re not interested in guys — I’ve said this before — that can make the team, we’re interested in guys that can make us better. That’s what they have to show.”

Strange as it might sound, it might just be even harder the second time around.
Jujhar Khaira ready to make an impact for Edmonton Oilers

Derek Van Diest
September 18, 2019 10:02 PM MDT

Jujhar Khaira expects his third full season with the Edmonton Oilers to be his best and worked extremely hard in the summer to prepare for the year following the dreaded Sophomore Slump.

Khaira, 25, came into training camp in the best shape of his life and is putting a disappointing second season behind him.

"It was a good summer," Khaira said Wednesday. "It was a summer where I can now come into the season with confidence. I feel like I put in the work this summer. I focused a bit more on shooting, a lot in tight areas. Last year, I didn’t score a lot so that was a big thing I wanted to stress on this summer."

Khaira had three goals and 18 points with the Oilers last season, which was disappointing considering the potential displayed in his first full season with 11 goals and 21 points.

The Oilers were hoping to get 10-15 goals out of the Surrey, B.C., product, but Khaira was unable to gain any traction scoring.

This season, he comes in a more mature and established NHL player and is a lock to start the year in a bottom-six role.

"The first year is all excitement, the second year you have expectations from the first but it’s a completely new year," Khaira said. "I think this year, the past is in the past; it’s a new brass and we have a different team here so it’s a fresh start for everybody. I think I approached the summer like that and am approaching it like that coming into the season too."

At six-foot-four, 212-pounds with excellent skating abilities, Khaira has all the tools to be an impact player for the Oilers.

"He’s a big, strong guy, he’s a presence on the ice," said Oilers head coach Dave Tippett. "For a big man like that he has decent hands around the net. He’s a guy that I’ve had a lot of guys like that, that if you get him in a role or you put him in a spot on the team and he feel ownership to that role, they really dig in."

"I think there’s a lot of upside on him yet. But we want to get him a real defined role where he has a real purpose on our team. I had two or three talks with him this summer about that situation. We just have to get him stabilized, because I think he’s going to be a real valuable player for us."

Selected in the third round — 63rd overall — of the 2012 NHL Entry Draft, Khaira had developed in the Oilers system and is one of their few success stories outside of the top two rounds. He spent parts of four seasons in the minors before breaking through in 2017-18. Heading into his third year, Khaira now exudes the poise of a veteran.

"I think there is a confidence with players," Tippett said. "Instead of every day being nervous whether you’re going to be in the lineup, there is a confidence that you walk in and you play with. For a guy like that, when you get into that confidence level, they’ve earned that confidence because of their play."

Much like the rest of the veterans in the Oilers dressing room, Khaira believes the pieces are in place to make a run at a playoff spot, even if some fans are taking a wait-and-see approach.

"There is a calming feeling in the dressing room," Khaira said. "The last couple of years I feel like we got caught up in the expectations and what was being said around us. I think this year, it’s one of the things where it’s on us, what we do is what’s going to show on the ice and everybody has settled in. We don’t want to go through the last two years again. I think you get to a point where you go numb from that and you strive for much better."

While there are still a number of questions surrounding the opening night roster on Oct. 2, against the Vancouver Canucks, barring injury, Khaira will be in the lineup as an anchor on one of the bottom two lines. He skated on the left wing with centre Riley Sheahan and Kailer Yamamoto in practice Wednesday.

The line could remain intact against the Vancouver Canucks on Thursday (7 p.m.) at Rogers Place depending on the health of Yamamoto’s wrist.

"I want to be a guy that’s reliable right off the bat and a guy that plays consistently throughout the season and not have ups and downs throughout the season and then get caught up in those," Khaira said. "They’re going to come, but at the same time, you have to manage them and shorten them up."
Edmonton Oilers head coach Dave Tippett has more questions than answers heading into the third and fourth pre-season games Thursday and Friday against the Vancouver Canucks and Calgary Flames, respectively.

The Oilers top line of Leon Draisaitl, Connor McDavid and Zack Kassian have yet to see the ice in a game and there are still a number of players vying for bottom-six spots.

While McDavid is not expected to play in either game this week, Kassian and Draisaitl may get an opportunity before the Oilers take a weekend retreat to Kelowna, B.C., following their contest against the Flames.

“Kassian has been struggling with a sore groin or leg,” Tippett said. “I’d like to get him into one of the next two games. Probably Leon in one of the next two games also.”

On the bottom six, forward Cooper Marody made a good account of himself with two assists in the 4-2 loss against the Vancouver Canucks on Tuesday.

“He’s in the mix, that was his best outing of camp, last game,” Tippett said. “He’s got skill, he can make good plays. Does he fit in that third (line centre) hole? I’m not sure yet. We still have a bunch of guys vying for those jobs.”
Edmonton Oilers centre Connor McDavid may get an opportunity to play in the pre-season after all.

McDavid had been all but ruled out from pre-season play by Oilers general manager Ken Holland prior to the start of training camp, but things are progressing well with his knee injury and may suit up in a game sometime next week.

"First off, the doctors are making the final decision," Holland said Wednesday. "Secondly, we’re going to err on the side of caution. But obviously, if the doctors sign off and Connor wants to play, then we’ll play pre-season.

"Is there a chance he can play next week? There’s a chance. I think we need to run off another four, five or six days and then we’ll see. I’m not going to say, yes, I’m not going to say, no. I think we’re pretty optimistic for opening night."

McDavid tore the PCL in his left knee after crashing into the goalpost in the final regular-season game, on the road, against the Calgary Flames after he was tripped by defenceman Mark Giordano on a rush to the net.

McDavid has been skating with the Oilers throughout training camp, but has not been cleared to play by doctors. On Monday, McDavid said he would like to get into an exhibition game or two if cleared.

The Oilers host the Vancouver Canucks on Thursday (7 p.m.) at Rogers Place and the Calgary Flames on Friday before going on a three-day retreat to Kelowna.

They host the Arizona Coyotes on Monday and conclude the pre-season, on the road, against the Winnipeg Jets and Calgary before opening the regular season on Oct. 2 against the Canucks at Rogers Place.

"We’ll get to Kelowna, we’ll practise and we’ll make the determination," Holland said. "He’s going to talk to some doctors, get some pictures and ultimately it’s the doctors final say."

McDavid had 41 goals and 116 points to lead the Oilers in scoring last season. He finished second in league scoring to Nikita Kucherov, who had 41 goals and 128 points.

"He’s kind of got the same mindset, he’s practising, getting treatments and he’s doing everything in practice," Oilers head coach Dave Tippett said. "I think we’re going to get through the weekend and reevaluate once we get back from Kelowna and see where we are."

Holland was not prepared to pay for Russian forward Anton Burdasov sight unseen, but did agree to give him a late look in training camp, signing the 28-year-old forward a professional tryout contract.

Fresh off the plane from Russia, where he spent the past two seasons with Salavat Yulaev Ufa, Burdasov jumped on the ice with the Oilers for a practice Wednesday afternoon. He could be in the lineup as early as Friday, when the Oilers host the Calgary Flames at Rogers Place.

"He’s 28 years of age, he’s played in the KHL for a lot of years, his agent over here, Ritch Winter, has been talking to me over the course of the summer about Burdasov," Holland said. "I have not personally seen him. When I was in Detroit I had people who’d seen him. His dream is to play in the National Hockey League. I was not prepared to offer him a contract and he ultimately made the decision that he wanted to come over here for a tryout."

Burdasov had 19 goals and 31 points for Salavat Yulaev last season. He had 11 goals and 19 points the previous year.

A product of Chelyabinsk, Russia, Burdasov was not drafted into the NHL and has spent his entire career in the KHL. He was a member of the Russian World Junior team that won gold in Buffalo in 2011.
Edmonton Oilers

Blueline logjam: Competition for two Oilers defence spots still wide open

Jim Matheson, Edmonton Journal
September 18, 2019 4:36 PM MDT

VANCOUVER — If Evan Bouchard feels like the helpless frog in freshman biology, who could blame him? He’s being dissected every day and every night.

The 19-year-old was cool and collected in his first Edmonton Oilers exhibition game against an ersatz Winnipeg Jets team Monday with only a few real NHLers on their roster. But he wasn’t as unfappable here Tuesday against a deeper Canucks team at Rogers Arena, if you are asking. And, everybody keeps asking.

“I thought he looked a little tired but that’s the challenge you want to put on some of these players because these are things that happen in a regular season where you play back-to-back and have to play 15 to 20 minutes in a game,” said Oilers’ coach Dave Tippett, who had Bouchard paired with Dmitry Samorukov. (The Russian teenager played well but is definitely bound for Bakersfield.)

If you ask him, Bouchard thought his play was average in the 4-2 loss to the Canucks.

“I was OK…there’s definitely room for improvement,” said Bouchard, who had two shots on net with another seven wide or blocked and couldn’t quite turn fast enough to get his stick on a rebound that Elias Pettersson banged home in the third.

If Bouchard is making the Oilers it’s as Oscar Klefbom’s right-shot partner, where Joel Persson shone in game one against a team that was closer to the Manitoba Moose than the Winnipeg Jets, and Ethan Bear, the forgotten one who was on the Oilers for 20 games two years ago.

“I thought Bear was solid, played a lot of minutes and he seems quicker than I’ve seen him. He’s had a good summer (training). He looks like he’s playing with more jump,” said Tippett.

Bouchard is a slow-twitch guy. He doesn’t race around the ice but he knows he has to get back for pucks quicker than he did in junior, for sure. He’d rather play with it than chase it as he says.

“He’s going from a junior mentality where he can do whatever he wants to an NHL mentality where he has a lot more pressure to make the plays at the essence of his game. He’s got ice in his veins,” said Tippett.

“People are flying around and he just moves the puck. He can make plays when he’s tired and he’s been out there 50 seconds and other players are going to the bench for a change. He just doesn’t dump it out the puck’s back into our end. He makes the play and buys some time.”

Tippett does see a fair bit of Hall of Famer Larry Murphy in Bouchard.

“I played a season with Murph in Pittsburgh. That’s exactly who it is,” said Tippett.

Host Craig Ellingson talks to hockey beat writers Rob Tychkowski and Derek Van Diest about the blueline corps, plus they wonder aloud what it would mean to the Oilers if star Connor McDavid missed any time — even a measly half-dozen games, let’s say. It could certainly be disastrous to their season as he factored in on half the NHL team’s offensive output a year ago.

ROUNDING OUT THE TOP 6

If Bouchard isn’t in the top six, he’ll be in the first defence pair in Bakersfield.

He’s not staying in Edmonton as a No. 7.

“I don’t think it puts more pressure on me,” said Bouchard. “I’ve got to make it tough on them (management picking the team) to send me back (AHL) or not. In the end, you’re fighting for a job and you want to be in the top six regardless. It’s going to be a battle either way.”

If Klefbom, Darnell Nurse and Kris Russell are the top three left-side D and Adam Larsson and Matt Benning are two of the right-shot guys in the top six, it’s fairly cut ’n dried. Nurse and Larsson are a shutdown pair and Benning and Russell are in the third.

But Klefbom still needs a partner.

“Kenny (GM Holland) doesn’t want a young player there,” said Tippett.

“That’s not going to happen. Same with (Caleb) Jones. Probably Bear, same thing.”

Maybe Persson could? Or William Lagesson? Or Brandon Manning, who was good here.

Persson is 25, Lagesson 23. Manning got the mushroom treatment last year where he didn’t play in Edmonton or much in Bakersfield, but he was aggressive with Bear against the Canucks.

“Persson is going to have to defend by having the puck more to make plays out of his end,” said Tippett. “Lagesson a powerful player and his skating isn’t an issue. It may look a little awkward but he’s an efficient skater.”

TOMAS JURCO STEPS UP

One player who stepped up big-time in Vancouver was Tomas Jurco, whose NHL career looked like it had maybe flat-lined after time in Chicago, then Carolina but for a dazzling playoff with the AHL Charlotte Checkers which caught the attention of his old Red Wings’ GM Ken Holland.

He signed him to a one-year, two-way deal.

“Signing here was huge because I knew Kenny and he always has believed in me even though I didn’t play much in Detroit,” said Jurco, who was dealt to the Hawks to hopefully get his career out of neutral. “It was a mutual decision because I wasn’t getting much opportunity.”

Injuries have put Jurco’s career in serious jeopardy, too.

“The last three years I’ve had two back surgeries,” said Jurco.

“I was worried about coming back because some doctors weren’t sure I could play anymore. But I was always optimistic.”

“He’s come with the mindset that he’s going to make the team. He’s got good skill, he holds on to pucks and he’s scored at the American League level and it’d be interesting to see if he can do it in the NHL,” said Tippett, who doesn’t see him as a pure scorer but he gets into holes.

“His good hands and anticipates well. If he competes as hard as he did here, he’s a good player.”

“Every game you see players separating themselves from others and that’s what you’re looking for,” said Tippett, who tried Josh Currie on the line with Cooper Marody and Jurco to start but midway through put Patrick Russell there and he had seven shots including one that beat Thatcher Demko.

Marody didn’t have a good prospects tournament but he setup the goals for Jurco and Russell, and came on after a so-so start. He was better than Gaetan Haas Monday in a fight for a centre spot.

STARRETT ANSWERS THE BELL

Shane Starrett, who’ll be the starter in Bakersfield, gave up three but made some 10-bell stops in the middle period, two on Micheal Ferland, one on a breakaway by Tanner Pearson. He had little chance on Brandon Sutter’s penalty-shot goal or his tap-in at the crease but he wasn’t happy with Elias Pettersson’s 2-2 goal off a poor rebound.

“He got me to bite (penalty shot) and got around me. Wish I’d played it a little differently,” said Starrett, who wanted the Pettersson goal back more. “I was trying to reach a little far. The first shot (Ferland) hit my stick and my toe and I overplayed it.”

OTHER NOTES …

Currie probably didn’t do himself any favours with his play and Markus Granlund, returning to Vancouver, was minus 2…The Oilers killed the Canucks in the face-off circle, going 72 percent. Ryan McLeod was outstanding winning 12 of 15, Colby Cave was 13-4 and Brad Malone 11-3.
That's the way the business is. I'm not one to sit there and make excuses. That's the way hockey is.

The picture isn't rosy, even if there's some hope. The Oilers then needed to clear cap room and a roster spot once veteran Andrej Sekera came off long-term injured reserve. Manning was waived and sent to AHL Bakersfield after just 12 appearances with Edmonton. He wasn’t asked to suit up in any of Bakersfield’s 10 playoff games either.

Sekera was bought out in the summer and no veteran defencemen were added to the mix. But GM Ken Holland has said he wants at least one of the younger players to earn that vacant spot.

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Manning’s $2.25-million salary also doesn't work in his favour. While the Oilers can fix his contract in under the cap, the $1.025 million savings they’d receive if he played in the AHL would more than offset the cost of one of the young players.

The one thing he has going for him is the organization is reluctant to have an early-20s blueliner act as the seventh man on the depth chart, one who will likely not play on a regular basis. Manning, 29, is no prospect.

The picture isn't rosy, even if there’s some hope. “There’s no job there, no job sitting waiting for him,” Tippett said early in camp. “He’s all business right now. He’ll be an interesting one to watch.”

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Paired with Bear, Manning made his preseason debut in a 4-2 loss in Vancouver on Tuesday. He played 16:45 – lowest among Oilers defencemen – had two shots on goal, two hits, a blocked shot and was on the ice for both Edmonton goals.

Before playing in the game, Manning spoke to The Athletic about his current plight.

What has the start of camp been like for you after your summer?

It’s been good. No matter how long your break is it’s always tough to get right back in the full swing of things … You feel a little better each day. As you get into games, it should come a little easier.

How would you categorize your last season? It seemed like it was a rollercoaster, to put it lightly.

Definitely. It was a good learning experience. I was in Philly’s organization for seven years and made the switch over to Chicago and come here and then down to Bako (Bakersfield). Changing teams three times. I was in Chicago; the coach was fired. I came here; the GM was fired. It kept me pretty humble. It kept me level-headed.

Going into the summer, I tried to get strong, work on my game and come in with a clear head. I was able to do that this summer.

Every time there was a coaching change and a GM change, you fell on the wrong end of that. How did that happen?

I’m not one to sit there and make excuses. That’s the way hockey is. That’s the way the business is.

I came off a pretty good year in Philly and signed a good deal in Chicago. There, with (Jeremy) Colliton coming in, he had some young D-men from the previous year in their playoff run and Chicago wasn’t sure what direction they were going in. It was almost just the circumstances there where they wanted to give young guys a look. They hadn’t sent down (Henni) Johkharju yet. They sent him down later.

Coming to Edmonton, it was almost like the same thing. I came in and there was already nine or 10 D-men here. Klef was hurt; Rusty was hurt. And then those guys get healthy. I’ve been around long enough to understand how it works. For me, the most difficult part was, when I went to Bakersfield and not playing. I’ve played a lot in this league. I’ve played a lot in that league as well. It was really disappointing and really tough to go down there and not play. That was probably the hardest part in my career.

I was told you handled it pretty well. How do you handle that well?

I’ve played with guys in similar situations. When I was with the (Adirondack) Phantoms, guys like Bruno Gervais and Andreas Lilja – I was able to see how they handled themselves. I’d like to think I’m in a different circumstance where those guys were kind of at the end of their careers.

I still wanna push to establish myself here. I tried to do me and build relationships with those players and just be a good team guy. That’s the same thing I’m trying to do here in training camp.

There are a lot of young defencemen here. They’re who everyone’s talking about. How can you possibly win a sixth or seventh job on the blue line?

That’s been the story of my career no matter where I’ve been: going to training camp and prove yourself. Play my game and good things will happen. That’s kind of what happened in Philly. Here, you go out and play in the scrimmage. I felt really good. I felt like I moved puck and skated well. At the end of the day, Bouch has two goals.

I can’t control what those guys are doing. It’s great for them to have opportunities and get looks. For me, it’s different because I’m a different player. I’m not gonna go and score points and put up numbers. Sometimes fans and the media see that from a different perspective. I try to just be a good team guy and play my game, stick up for my teammates and show a little more once the real games get going here. I just try to keep a level head and control what I can control.

Roberto Luongo once infamously said, “My contract sucks.” Do you have that sense where, if you made a little less, your contract might be more palatable to have on a roster? It seems like you’re in limbo.

Yeah. After the trade, I think it definitely hurt me. Something had to happen last year (once Sekera returned). I was the culprit of that – whether it could have been someone else or not.

This year, I don’t know what the cap number is. I haven’t paid attention to that. I’m worried about my agenda every single day.

I don’t think it’s helping me in any way. Hopefully, it doesn’t cost me a job or an opportunity. For me, it’s about trying to be here as long as I can and build for next year. Get another contract and keep growing my game. I feel like I can still play at this level.

The message from the organization is they don’t want a young player sitting in the press box. Not that you’re old, but you’re older than those guys. Would a seventh job be better for you (than the AHL), knowing you might have to sit out?

Yeah. You ask me that a couple of years ago, and you probably don’t wanna be in that spot. Now, especially last season with my experience in Bakersfield and being around here, it’s not that I ever took it for granted, but I realize what a privilege it is to be in the NHL every day – whether that’s playing or not playing.

Jim Playfair’s gonna do a great job with the defence here. Tipp’s come in and done a good job so far. Things are changing for the better here.

There are always injuries, but if I have to be that guy, I have no problem with that. Be a team guy; have fun. If there is a young defenceman here, help him out. I’ve always enjoyed that, bringing along a young guy and helping him out whether it’s giving him a ride or having him over for dinner. I know what it’s like when you’re stuck in a hotel or you’re away from family. I’m not opposed to anything like that for sure.
You talked about wanting to get another contract. How much would that situation put you in a tough spot?

Not playing? For sure. Last year was a little easier to accept because I had one year left on my deal. But this year, definitely. I need to play hockey.

Your resume can only do so much for you. I played 30-some NHL games (39 total) and five or six in the AHL (eight total). You go two years without playing a lot of games and that can definitely hurt you going forward.

I'd like to think my reputation speaks for itself and I can still help a team. It's one day at a time for me. It's a cliché. But I'm trying to grow and trying to get better and help out whoever I can along the way.
Florida Panthers

This Florida Panthers player might be consider the steal of the year. Here is why

BY WALTER VILLA MIAMI HERALD WRITER

SEPTEMBER 18, 2019 01:04 PM

The Boston Bruins’ march to the 2019 Stanley Cup Finals featured point-per-game players such as Brad Marchand, David Pastrnak and Patrice Bergeron.

But new Florida Panthers coach Joel Quenneville, who has won three Stanley Cup titles, saw something a lot less obvious when watching the Bruins. He saw 5-10, 205-pound Noel Acciari, who led a fourth line that often shut down big-time scorers.

“The one thing you noticed about the Bruins was the line [Acciari] played on,” Quenneville said. “He has that grit factor, killing penalties and winning face-offs. He has ingredients our team needs.”

That’s why Acciari, 27, is now a member of the Panthers, signing in July as a free agent after the Bruins came within one win of knocking off the St. Louis Blues in the Finals.

“Being one [win] away from the Stanley Cup [title and losing] is disappointing,” Acciari said. “But it puts a fire in you, and you want to get back out there.

“I’m excited to see where [the Panthers] are headed.”

Panthers GM Dale Tallon, who signed Acciari to a three-year, $5 million contract, expects this deal to pay off. Acciari could be Florida’s most underrated addition this fall.

“The physicality and the goals-against were the biggest concerns we had with our team, and I think we did a really good job in addressing those needs,” Tallon said. “Acciari is going to make people accountable. He’s versatile, wins face-offs and will take pressure off of [Aleksander Barkov on draws]. He gives our fourth line more spirit and passion.”

Acciari has a knack for playing on winning teams. He went undrafted in 2015 despite helping Providence College win the only national title in school history. Providence rallied for a 4-3 win over Boston University, which was led by forward Jack Eichel (the second overall pick in the 2015 NHL Draft) and coached by David Quinn (who now directs the New York Rangers).

After winning the national title, Acciari signed with the Bruins and served an apprenticeship in the American Hockey League before making his NHL debut in 2016.

Acciari produced just six goals and eight assists this past season, but his contribution was much bigger than that, according to writer Kevin Paul Dupont of the Boston Globe.

Dupont praised Acciari as a “forechecking menace and a tone-setter”, questioning why the Bruins ever let him go.

Noting that Acciari played much of Boston’s two-month playoff run with a broken sternum, Dupont said the ex-Bruin’s “pain threshold is higher than the national debt.”

Added Dupont: “The Bruins would’ve been better positioned for another 100-point season had they kept Acciari on the payroll. They will miss him – not for his offense, which was meager, but for his presence.”

Dupont mentioned opposing defensemen “scurrying in fear of being pasted to the wall” by Acciari.

THIS AND THAT

▪ The Panthers, who started their exhibition season by dropping a doubleheader at the Nashville Predators on Monday, have cut their roster from 61 to 51 and now 41.

The most noteworthy cut on Tuesday was 20-year-old center Aleksi Heponiemi, a dynamic playmaker who is expected to make the team next season.
Panthers cut Aleksi Heponiemi, Brady Keeper, but other hopefuls continue battle for spots

By George Richards
Sep 18, 2019

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The Florida Panthers made more cuts to their training camp roster Tuesday morning, sending nine players off to minor-league camp in Massachusetts.

Some players who were thought to have an outside chance of making Florida’s opening-night roster — such as Aleksi Heponiemi and Brady Keeper — are among those no longer with the team.

For others, however, the opportunity remains to break camp with the Panthers — although it is a long way from here to the opener on Oct. 3.

The Panthers left for Montreal on Tuesday with 41 players so, barring injury or a trade, 18 players still need to be moved to get to the 23-man limit.

Check that: General manager Dale Tallon said last week he only expects to keep 22 players, so make it 19 who need to go. And with five goalies in camp, three moves are spoken for.

The Panthers are expected to make more cuts as the week goes on since they play three exhibition games in the span of four days.

But by the time the Lightning visit Sunrise next Tuesday for the Panthers’ sixth preseason tilt, Florida’s roster should look a lot more like the finished product.

“When you get your guys, you can start getting the systems down, zones down and get deeper into your special teams,” coach Joel Quenneville said after the second of two practices at Bridgestone Arena on Tuesday.

“There are some things we have to look at as we keep going here, look for progress and see some improvement.”

Two players thought to be destined for the AHL when they signed in July still have a chance to make the Panthers after surviving the first two rounds of cuts.

Forwards Kevin Roy and Dominic Toninato are both former captains of their college teams who have played in the NHL — and they both would like to do so again with the Panthers.

Roy, 26, was a fourth-round pick of Anaheim in 2012 and went on to play four seasons at Northeastern.

After his first full pro season at AHL San Diego, Roy split time between the Ducks and Gulls in 2017-18, scoring six goals in 25 games with Anaheim. Last year, he was limited to a total of 14 games between the two clubs due to injuries. Now healthy, he is battling a number of forwards for a spot with the Panthers.

“It was a long year, but I have learned from it and have moved on,” Roy said. “I feel good. Nothing is guaranteed here. You have to work hard and prove yourself every day to force them into some tough decisions. I have some NHL experience, I know I can play there and know I can make an impact. I just have to find my role and keep moving forward.”

Assistant GM Eric Joyce said he likes the way Roy competes and gets into tough places trying to score. At 5-foot-7 and 147 pounds, Roy is not the biggest player on the ice, but he gets into the corners and will mix it up fighting for the puck.

“What I have seen of him is a guy who can really transition the puck through the neutral zone, has skill and can make plays with the high-end players,” Joyce said. “He goes to the net, and for a guy his size, he is fearless. We need that in our organization.”

Like Roy, Toninato signed a two-way contract with the Panthers hoping for a new opportunity.

Toninato, 25, played collegiately for his hometown school of Minnesota Duluth. Toninato was team captain as a senior when the Bulldogs lost in the national title game in 2017 to Henrik Borgstrom’s squad from the University of Denver.

A former draft pick of the Maple Leafs, Toninato spent the past two seasons in the Colorado organization. In his first season after leaving UMD, Toninato split time between the Avalanche and their AHL team in San Antonio, playing 37 games for the Avs as a rookie in 2017-18.

Last season, Toninato played in just two games for the Avs and spent the bulk of his season in the AHL. The openings on the Panthers are in the bottom six, and Toninato has the size and speed to potentially be a fit either on the initial roster or down the road.

“Guys are trying to make an impression to get a spot on this team,” said Toninato, who won 11 of 15 draws on Monday night. “It’s day-by-day and I am happy to be here right now. (I) hope to be here at the end. …

“I’m trying to prove myself and crack that lineup. I know my role: a responsible 200-foot player, a penalty killer. I want to be an energy guy and a reliable guy out there.”

After cuts on Tuesday, the Panthers have 23 forwards in camp. They’re expected to keep 13 after opening camp with 36.

In Monday’s 1-0 loss to the Predators in the second game of a preseason doubleheader, Dryden Hunt — who played in 31 games for the Panthers last season — led all Florida forwards with 20:08 of ice time.

Toninato was second (18:33) and Roy was third (17:97) and both got good looks on both the power play and penalty kill. With three more preseason games this week, they should continue to see a lot of playing time in the coming days.

“Both guys have had a taste of the NHL and know what it is going to take to play here,” Joyce said. “They bring a level of desperation and competition to camp.”

On the blue line, the Panthers have cut or reassigned six of the 19 defensores they opened camp with.

If Florida carries seven at the position (as it usually has), six will be headed elsewhere.

Josh Brown appears to be in the best situation to hold onto the spot he had at the end of last season, but Riley Stillman — entering his second pro season — has had a strong start to camp, too.

“We still have 41 players, so there are a lot of guys here,” Quenneville said. “There are a lot of opportunities for the guys who are still here. But they have to earn that opportunity and playing time.”

Heponiemi, Keeper to AHL

Just before the team’s first practice Tuesday, the Panthers sent nine players to AHL Springfield and released goalie Joseph Raaymakers from his professional tryout.

Springfield opens its camp on Saturday.

The biggest names on Tuesday’s transaction page were Heponiemi and Keeper.

Heponiemi, 20, was a second-round pick by the Panthers in 2017 and, after being one of the leading scorers in Canadian junior, played professionally in his native Finland last season.

The thought coming into camp was that Heponiemi needed to blow Florida out of the water to make the team, but the winger — who is listed at 5-foot-7 and 147 pounds — did not do so.

Joyce said the first two preseason games were chances for some players on the bubble to impress. The ones who did were on the ice Tuesday.

“We rolled lines, didn’t really do any situational matchups,” Joyce said. “In talking to Joel, we wanted to see how players competed in all three zones, and I think we were able to see that. We got a good assessment of who is almost ready, who is not quite ready and who is a little bit of a ways off.”

Borgstrom said he and Heponiemi spoke about the possibility of starting the season in the minor leagues.

Last season, Borgstrom was one of Florida’s last cuts and played in Springfield until he was recalled in December. The two are friends and played together on the same line the past few days.
"I only got to see him in the elevator today, but we talked about it earlier," Borgstrom said Tuesday. "We talked about places to live, what Springfield is like, that sort of thing.

"He is a really skilled guy, but NHL camp is tough, and he is not the kind of guy you want to play just four or five minutes. You have to be unreal in just about every situation. But I think he will do well in Springfield. He will succeed there.

"I know how the coaches treated me there, so he will get a lot of chances. The style of play may take a little getting used to, especially since he played in Finland last year, but he'll be just fine."

In the case of Keeper, the Panthers planned to have him start the season in Springfield and load up on experience after he spent the past two seasons playing collegiately at Maine.

Florida signed Keeper as a free agent last spring and had him with the team for the final weeks of the season. Keeper, 23, made his NHL debut in Ottawa on March 28.

"We had to make some decisions which were hard but necessary for the good of the organization as well as the good of the player," said Joyce, who is also GM of the Springfield team.

"This year there is a tremendous amount of competition, and with Q here, it is about winning and finding the right 20 guys to play every night. If a guy isn’t ready, we’re not just going to keep him around to make him feel good. We are going to send him to where he needs to be to continue to prepare in a situation where they can have success and go from there."

Aside from Keeper and Heponiemi, the Panthers also reassigned forwards Patrick Bajkov, Blaine Byron, Jake Horton, Cliff Pu, Sebastian Repo and Adam Rockwood as well as defenseman Will Lochead.

— The Panthers’ game Wednesday against the Canadiens will be played in tiny Renous, New Brunswick, as part of the NHL’s annual Kraft Hockeyville series.

The game will be shown on NHL Network.

"I think it will be a fun experience," Quenneville said of playing an exhibition game at a small-town rink. "I am sure they are all excited to see a game with the Canadiens and Florida coming in. We have a lot of Canadian boys who are excited about being a part of it."

The Panthers will also play in Montreal on Thursday and face off against the Dallas Stars in Tulsa, Okla., on Saturday night.

After this week, the Panthers will not leave the state of Florida for some time. Next week, the Panthers play the Lightning three times — twice at home and once in Tampa.

The two teams also open the regular season in Tampa on Oct. 3 and play again at BB&T Center on Oct. 5. The Panthers’ second road game is not until Oct. 11 at Buffalo.

Florida Panthers training camp roster as of Sept. 17

Forwards (23 in camp, 13 projected to be on opening roster)
Battling for a spot: Troy Brouwer (PTO), Anthony Greco, Jayce Hawryluk, Dryden Hunt, Denis Malgin, Kevin Roy, Owen Tippett.
Looking at Springfield: Rodrigo Abols, Jonathan Ang, Joel Lowry, Paul Thompson, Dominic Toninato.
Back to junior: Serron Noel.

Defensemen (13 in camp, 7 projected to be on opening roster)
Locks (6): Aaron Ekblad, Mike Matheson, Mark Pysyk, Anton Stralman, MacKenzie Weegar, Keith Yandle.
Battling for a spot: Josh Brown, Ian McCoshen, Ethan Prow, Riley Stillman.
Looking at Springfield: Tommy Cross, Thomas Schemitsch, Jake Massie.

Goalies (5 in camp, 2 projected to be on opening roster)
Battling for a spot: Sam Montembeault, Chris Driedger.
Kings GM knows a return to Stanley Cup contention leans on prospect development

By JACK HARRIS STAFF WRITER
SEP. 18, 2019 5 AM

Rob Blake took the stage last month at a state-of-the-franchise event to the playing of an organ and a smattering of applause. With an easy smile and familiar face, the former Kings player is still treated like a fan favorite. But after the team’s discouraging two-season rut with him as general manager, Blake has started to sound like a man on trial.

“Let you understand what the vision is, how we’re going to create this team,” Blake has repeatedly testified to his missteps — how under his watch the Kings have slipped from playoff contention, hired three coaches in three years, whiffed on ambitious free-agent signings and lost the disciplined culture that led to two Stanley Cup championships.

Blake is building his defense around the promise of tomorrow. He points to the Kings’ replenished farm system, a pipeline flowing with talent and widely considered one of the best in the league, as the central source of optimism.

“We’ve been focused on this the past three years,” Blake said. “Let us understand what we had and the direction we wanted to go. We wanted to protect our picks, protect our prospects.”

As the Kings trudge through an awkward transition, Blake is trying to protect his plan for the future, too, making sure the talent the Kings have collected has plenty of time to prepare for the NHL.

“It’s not horrific. But it’s bad.”

That was the ESPN.com assessment of the Kings’ prospect pool in August 2016, ranking it 29th in the NHL at the start of Dean Lombardi’s final season as general manager.

The cause of the decay was simple. Between 2010 and 2016, the franchise continually sacrificed draft picks and prospects to chase the Stanley Cup.

Some moves were worth the price. The Kings parted with their 2011 and 2012 first-rounders in deals for Dustin Penner and Jeff Carter, respectively, key pieces to Cup-winning teams. Other trades were less fruitful. They swapped their 2015 first-rounder — a lottery selection — and goalie Martin Jones for Milan Lucic. They coughed up their top pick in 2016 in a trade for Andrej Sekera.

Kings forward Dustin Penner celebrates with the Stanley Cup following the team’s victory over the New Jersey Devils in 2012.

By the end of the seven-year stretch, the Kings had made just three first-round picks (Derek Forbort, Tanner Pearson and Adrian Kempe). Of their seven second-round selections, only 2010 draftee Tyler Toffoli has developed into an NHL mainstay.

Blake had a part in many of those decisions, having joined the Kings’ front office as an assistant general manager in 2013. But once he replaced Lombardi at the end of the 2016-2017 season, he pulled the Kings out of the league’s buyer’s market. He decided it was time to change course.

“That was our focus right from Day 1,” Blake said.

In their three drafts under Blake, the Kings have made four first-round picks, four second-round picks and 23 selections overall. Last year, they had four picks in the first two rounds, their most since 2003.

“We wanted to make sure we kept our picks,” said Nelson Emerson, director of player personnel. “We’re no longer in the business of trading those picks away to add an established player. With the vision of what we’re trying to do here, it’s important for us to stay on that path.”

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

Disappointing results on the ice helped the resurgence of the farm system. Missing the playoffs in 2017 and 2019 gave the Kings a pair of lottery selections and little reason to move their best assets.

Blake’s protect-the-picks philosophy has pushed the process along too.

He held onto his draft picks during his first trade deadline in 2018, even with the Kings headed toward the playoffs. He sent defenseman Jake Muzzin to Toronto last season for a first-rounder (which was used to draft defenseman Tobias Bjornfot) and prospects Carl Grundstrom and Sean Durzi.

He acquired an extra second-round pick to snap forward Samuel Fagemo 50th overall, then grabbed a goaltender, Lukas Park, by design in the third round.

Even without the greatest lottery luck — the status of 2017 first-rounder Gabriel Vilardi remains unclear as he battles a chronic back injury, and the team dropped to No. 5 in the draft order this year, where they selected Alex Turcotte, despite having the second-best odds for the top pick — the reconstruction of the Kings’ prospect pool is still on schedule, if not ahead.

The Kings drafted Alex Turcotte with the fifth overall pick of the 2019 NHL draft.

“Some of these young guys that have come in the last couple years have been really skilled, fast players,” said Mikey Eyssimont, a Kings draft pick in 2016 who has seen the talent level rise first-hand. “These guys have a mix of grittiness and skill, guys that can play power play as defensemen, guys that like to join the rush. The forwards complement it really well.”

Most prospect pundits concur. The Athletic called the Kings’ farm system the fourth-best in the NHL. Sporting News pegged it No. 2.

ESPN also placed it second-best, administering a new analysis of the Kings’ once-beleaguered pipeline: “One of the best and deepest prospect pools in the entire NHL,” it said.

Now comes the hardest part for the Kings.

Their restock is nearly complete, but most of their young players are still years from their primes. In the interim, it’s unclear how competitive the club’s NHL roster will be.

Back when Blake was planning out the rebuild, he thought this transition would be smooth. He admired teams such as the turn-of-the-century Detroit Red Wings, who repeatedly reloaded during a 25-year playoff streak that included four titles.

He studied the San Jose Sharks’ recent run, in which they’ve missed the playoffs just twice since 1998 despite several rounds of roster turnover.

Hiring inherited a championship-winning core in Anze Kopitar, Dustin Brown, Drew Doughty and Jonathan Quick, all of whom are locked into long-term contracts, Blake thought the Kings could achieve something similar.

Kings general manager Rob Blake, left, sits next to Kings president Luc Robitaille. But since winning the Stanley Cup in 2014, the Kings have won one playoff game. Last season, they finished next-to-last in the league in points.

Blake is now simply relying on the Kings to rebound.

“You’ve got to make sure the veterans are willing to try to get better,” Blake said. “As soon as they’re not getting better anymore, then you’re probably better cutting ties and moving on.”

The Kings haven’t reached that point yet, Blake said. For now, he is hopeful that a new coach (Todd McLellan) and a new system can breathe life back into a club that seems to have lost its way, and buy enough time for the future stars to develop.

“There will be an influx,” Blake said. “But you have to put the development and the resources in those kids to be ready when the time comes. They’re not ready yet.”
Ron Hextall finds ‘fit’ in return to Kings, while Rob Blake values his ‘wealth of knowledge’

By Lisa Dillman
Sep 18, 2019

There was little doubt Ron Hextall, a hockey lifer, would find his way back to the sport and the NHL after the Philadelphia Flyers surprisingly fired him as general manager in November 2018. It was just a matter of where and when.

The where and when became Los Angeles and Wednesday, when the Kings welcomed back a familiar face and announced Hextall had joined their hockey operations staff in a part-time advisory role.

There was comfort in the familiar. When Hextall was in Los Angeles — as assistant GM from 2006-13 — the Kings went through a rebuild and won their first Stanley Cup championship, in 2012. For Hextall, the decision about where to go after Philadelphia became clear after talking with Kings general manager Rob Blake.

“I’ve had conversations with a few people in the hockey world. It just seemed to be the best fit for myself,” Hextall said in a telephone interview with The Athletic. “I had some good conversations with Blakey, which was what turned me. What he wanted out of me and what he was looking for, essentially. I had been in L.A. before, and I’m familiar with the organization and I know a lot of the staff members.

“I’m excited about getting going here.”

Hextall’s strengths can help Blake, who is starting his third season as general manager, and assist the Kings in getting to the next point, having the patience to build the right way. That same patience, oddly, led to his downfall in Philadelphia.

He went through one rebuild with the Kings under then-general manager Dean Lombardi, then got the Flyers out of a deep hole by drafting well and with effective cap management.

Blake, in a separate interview, confirmed that the agreement is for this season.

“I envision bouncing ideas off him and getting his opinion because he’s been a GM in the league and he’s been in a couple of organizations, different styles,” Blake said. “It will be beneficial for me. Someone who has done it before and has relationships with other GMs, understands potential deals and different things.

“We didn’t have anybody in the organization that has done that.”

Blake said he and Hextall had been discussing a job for the last four or five months. In August, Hextall interviewed for the Minnesota Wild’s general manager vacancy. The Wild hired Bill Guerin, who had been an assistant GM in Pittsburgh.

Interestingly enough, Hextall’s departure for the Flyers, first as assistant GM and director of hockey operations, led to Blake being named his successor as Kings assistant GM in July 2013.

Their plan is to have Hextall come out for a few games per month and look in on the Kings and the AHL Ontario Reign. Blake said Hextall brings a “wealth of knowledge” with him.

“He seems very patient and methodical in what he does in his preparation,” Blake said. “The playing career speaks for itself, the character and type of person he is.

“He went through the whole transition here in L.A. and then he’s been through that in Philly also. A tremendous resource and help in gathering information on different things. He’s seen players at all different levels of their development, stages of their career.”

With training camps underway, Hextall, 55, was ready to get going again. It is not exactly in his DNA to be on the outside looking in. The often fiery goaltender won 296 games in a 13-year career with the Flyers, Quebec Nordiques and New York Islanders, and won the Vezina Trophy in 1986-
The Ben Hutton signing, explained, and young players who stood out for the Kings in Arizona

By Lisa Dillman
Sep 18, 2019

LOS ANGELES — The only thing better than an in-game acquisition for enlivening a preseason game would have been a multi-player trade. But you can’t have everything.

Free-agent defenseman Ben Hutton became a Los Angeles King after two periods of a split-squad game against the Arizona Coyotes at Staples Center on Tuesday night, when the team put out a news release saying he had agreed to terms on a one-year contract worth $1.5 million.

Suddenly, there was plenty of news to digest on what had been looking like a dreary affair, one the Kings lost 5-0 to the Coyotes.

“There were some good nights by some individuals,” new Kings coach Todd McLellan said. “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.”

It was a better night for the Kings’ youngsters in Glendale, Ariz., in their 4-1 victory against the Coyotes.

How did the Kings look in their split-squad games on Tuesday? Here are some observations from the night Hutton joined the Kings.

Why now?

The summer courtship heated up when the Kings surveyed their blue line, taking stock of the injuries to Derek Forbort (back) and Paul LaDue (knee).

“With our situation here, with LaDue still not being ready to play and Forbort injured and struggling to get healthy right now and no one has any idea on his timeline,” McLellan said in Los Angeles, “a position we thought we might have a little depth in, all of a sudden it’s gone quite quickly.”

Hutton, a left-shot defenseman, has played his entire NHL career (276 games) with Vancouver. He became an unrestricted free agent when the Canucks did not give him a qualifying offer in June. But that move likely had more to do with internal concerns over what Hutton might have gotten in salary arbitration.

(Hutton is scheduled to arrive in L.A. on Wednesday, according to his agent. He is expected to practice on Thursday.)

“It was definitely a whirlwind summer,” Hutton said Wednesday morning during a radio interview on Vancouver’s Sportsnet 650.

He said he thought the Kings offered the best fit after a “stressful” summer of free agency.

“There’s always that little voice in the back of your head, saying, ‘What the heck is going on? Where are we going? What are we going to do?’” Hutton said.

Kings assistant coach Trent Yawney, tasked with running the defense and penalty kill, is a Pacific Division veteran, having coached in Anaheim and Edmonton. So he has seen plenty of Hutton in Vancouver.

“I remember him as a steady player — your prototypical NHL D-man that can move the puck and be part of the offense a little bit,” Yawney said.

“It’s good for us, and he’s a lefty, too. And that helps.

“It’s unfortunate for him (Forbort) to have an injury this early in camp. At the same time, you can never have enough D. I’ve been through that too many times.”

The first sign it would be a long night arrived when the Kings gave up a goal 18 seconds in (by Clayton Keller) at Staples Center. Kings starting goaltender Jonathan Quick faced 10 shots and allowed three goals, playing 32:15 before giving way to Cal Petersen, as scheduled. The only Kings line to finish even was Jaret Anderson-Dolan, Nikolai Prokhorkin and Matt Luff. Kyle Clifford, Jeff Carter and Trevor Lewis combined for a minus-8.

There were plenty of rusty veterans, and by his own admission, a rusty coach.

This was McLellan’s first game behind an NHL bench since Nov. 18, 2018, with Edmonton against the Vegas Golden Knights. The Oilers fired McLellan two days later in San Jose.

“That’s a long time,” McLellan said. “In dog years, that’s a long time.”

“Like some of our veteran players, I was a little rusty,” McLellan said.

“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 exhibitions (are) for.

“I will get better. I’ll get sharper.”

The kids were all right (in Glendale)

Yawney got on the phone with The Athletic for a few minutes after the game in Arizona and said he thought some of the elements McLellan has been trying to implement were sinking in, systemically.

“The guys executed very very well, to a T almost, and were rewarded with some offense,” Yawney said. “When he (McLellan) looks over the tape, he’s going to be pleased with the execution of some of the things he has changed a little bit from how the Kings used to play. That was a big positive.”

Yawney thought defenseman Mikey Anderson and forwards Blake Lizotte, Akil Thomas and Samuel Fagemo played strong games. Of that group, Lizotte, 21, is the oldest and Fagemo, who was drafted in the second round (No. 50) in June, is the youngest at 19.

Anderson turned pro after two years at the University of Minnesota-Duluth, having won back-to-back NCAA titles. He had a goal and an assist and was plus-4 against the Coyotes.

“There’s a lot there to like,” Yawney said of Anderson. “It’s just a matter of him getting reps and gradually progressing. It’s the biggest jump he’s going to be making, the one he’s making right now, from college to pro.

“So far, he’s kind of handled it seamlessly. We’ll see how it goes. As the exhibition games get knocked off, the competition gets a little stiffer. I’m looking forward to watching him going forward.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
Todd McLellan, who coached Tuesday's Staples Center group, watched as much of the Glendale group's 4-1 win over Arizona as was possible via video. "Sent a lot of workers there, and they got the work done," he said. "Here in L.A. it was disappointing group-wise, but also for some individuals. So, first impressions weren't the greatest, but we've got to give them a little more time to adjust to and to adapt and figure things out."

The mistakes in Los Angeles were "glaring" errors that directly led to scoring chances, and at the other end of the ice, he didn't see enough of "net intensity on the few chances we created here." There weren't enough scrums, second chances or looks around the blue paint.

It's interesting – the Arizona game group, a much younger group, forechecked extremely well. They slowed Arizona's transition and ease in entering the offensive zone, and at the other end, made battle on the opposing defense below the Coyotes goal line that directly led to offense. The L.A. group didn't forecheck as well. Given that the structure of the forecheck has changed and the team is looking to play more aggressive, is that difference because it's easier to impart newer concepts onto younger players than is onto older players who are more set in their ways and structure?

"I think there is a theory behind it. I think your thought process is generally pretty accurate, it could exist," McLellan said. "I look at our group here, the older team, I believe the willingness to do the things that we set out to do existed for about 10 seconds. Then we got scored on, and as soon as that happens, the trust factor diminishes a little bit more. Now you've got people doing half their job and all of a sudden you break down anymore. I'm not sure if it was the youth or the elderly, if you will, for a lack of a better word. I think it was more situational. We got back off with an error 10 seconds into the game and all of a sudden we're making more and more mistakes that we have to eliminate."

There weren't all bad things. Check-ins back at Staples Center indicated strong games from Kale Clague and Tobias Bjornfot, the latter of whom drew a very positive evaluation from McLellan when prompted.

"I thought he was fine. Very seldom was he out of position," said McLellan, who also shared a positive impression of Clague. "If [Bjornfot] was out of position, or it looked like he was out of position, it was usually because something else broke down and his thought process was correct. He's been very impressive. A very impressive young man. I was telling Blakey he reminds me of one of my old partners in Marc-Edouard Vlasic. Young, confident, feels like he belongs, really good positionally. You have to watch him to really appreciate him, but that was Marc-Edouard in San Jose our first few years."

I'd heard Rasmus Kupari had skated well, and McLellan said that the young Finn "gave us some real good teaching moments. He looked like he was much more confident with the puck and made plays that maybe he didn't make on the offensive side in the rookie tournament."

Thursday's game against Vegas will likely draw a good mix of veterans into action for the first time this postseason; Anze Kopitar's line didn't play Tuesday, nor did Drew Doughty. Goaltenders are at the point where they'll be expected to go the distance, according to McLellan. "For me, goaltending's like pitching, especially early in the year. You've got to get them their reps, and they're probably the last position to really polish things up," he said. Ben Hutton was expected to arrive late Wednesday and practice on Thursday.

McLellan said that "a fair amount" of Thursday's roster had been put together and that they were just waiting for an update "on bumps and bruises."

"What will happen now as we go forward, we'll mix both groups together," he said. "There are still some really young organizationally players that are just entering that need to experience a game. We obviously believe we can be competitive and win those games, but more importantly, we've got to go give them a night where they experience NHL hockey before we run out of exhibition games?"
I thought I overheard something tangentially related to this yesterday but
had a difficult time placing it. Still, I’d be lying if I said this wasn’t way out
of left field when it showed up in my inbox today:

The LA Kings announced today that Ron Hextall has been hired as a
part-time advisor to hockey operations.

Hextall, who has had a distinguished career as a player and in the front
office, returns to the Kings organization after spending the majority of the
last five seasons as General Manager of the Philadelphia Flyers. He also
spent seven seasons in LA as Vice President and Assistant General
Manager with the Kings.

The netminder enjoyed a successful playing career, retiring in 1999 after
appearing in 608 regular season games during a 13-year career with
Philadelphia, Quebec and the Islanders. He posted a 296-214-69 record,
along with a 2.98 goals-against average and a .895 save percentage.
Among his accolades, Hextall won the Vezina Trophy in 1986-87 as “the
goaltender adjudged to be the best at his position” and the Conn Smythe
Trophy as “the most valuable player for his team in the playoffs.”

I hope to find out a bit more about what’s happening here in due time, but
if personal satisfaction is worth anything, I give this high marks. Ron
Hextall treated many figures – players, personnel, staff – in the
organization with great class, so I’m eager to learn what this “Part-Time
Advisor” role entails. More to come!
KOVALCHUK "TWEAKED SOMETHING," LEAVES PRACTICE EARLY; LADUE CLOSE, WILL PLAY IN PRESEASON

JON ROSEN
SEPTEMBER 18, 2019

INJURIES
Ilya Kovalchuk suffered an undisclosed injury Wednesday during an afternoon training camp session and left the ice midway through the skate. He did not return, and Head Coach Todd McLellan confirmed that the injury occurred during the practice and wasn’t something left over from Tuesday’s split-squad game.

“I don’t even know what happened – he tweaked something and left, but as far as last night goes, he was fine, he played good minutes, so it was more today than anything,” McLellan said. As of now, there’s no sense of the severity of the injury or whether Kovalchuk would have to miss practice or game action.

Kovalchuk, 36, totaled 16 goals and 34 points in 64 games last season.

“I’ve enjoyed my time around Kovy so far,” McLellan said Monday. “He’s a really smart guy. He looks at the game a certain way and he’s given us what he has at camp so far. He’s been willing to open up and learn. All of that’s great to this point now when the games start and coach-player relationship, player-team relationship, the whole group together all has to blend and everybody has a job to do. I’m going to give our group everything I have and I expect them to give each other that as well – and that goes from Kovy all the way through Kopi down to Bjornfot, who’s been here for 10 days now. Everybody has to give each other what they have, and there’s no cutting corners or cheating. If we get that from each other on a daily basis, I don’t know if that’ll be enough to win a championship, but that’ll be enough for growth, and that’s what we’re looking for.”

The two had met recently met for lunch to establish and build their relationship – and, per Kovalchuk, McLellan paid. “How does that happen?” the coach joked.

“It was a great lunch. We talked a little bit about the past, and the past isn’t just last year, his time here. The past can go way back. I know other people that have coached him, i know players that have played with him. We talked about his family, the importance of what happens there and how his kids are involved in different sports. I talked to him about how I would likely use him, a t least to start with, and then after that, he and all the players, they dictate how much they play, where they play, who they play with with their performances. It’s what i really believe in. People think that we determine ice time and we determine who’s in and out of the lineup. Quite often, the players do that themselves, and i know you asked about Kovy, but this is a general, ‘everybody’ comment in my mind.”

Better news!
Paul LaDue is getting closer. As I shared Sunday, he was on the verge of joining one of the regular practice groups. That happened today as he skated with the 12:00 p.m. group, and the plan will ultimately be to integrate him into preseason action.

"It’s funny, because I addressed the group yesterday with him being out and got good news. He was back out there today, involved more than I thought he would be, which is a good sign, and he’ll get some games in in the exhibition season, for sure," McLellan said.

LaDue, 27, recorded two goals and five points in 33 games with Los Angeles last season. He has five goals, 17 points and an even rating in 67 regular season NHL games.
The LA Kings made their first round of training camp cuts, assigning Aidan Dudas (OHL-Owen Sound), Jacob Ingham (OHL-Kitchener), Arthur Kaliyev (OHL-Hamilton), Lukas Parik (WHL-Spokane) and Jordan Spence (QMJHL-Moncton) to their junior teams and releasing Billy Constantinou (OHL-Kingston) and Jonathan Yantsis (OHL-Kingston) from their ATOs.

Major junior teams begin play this weekend, so there’s nothing particularly shocking among this round of roster moves. While all of these players are certainly worth keeping tabs on, keep a close eye on Spence (2019/4th) this season. The mobile 5-foot-10 defender saw regular time in the main groups rather than Group C as camp progressed and made his NHL preseason debut as an 18-year-old at Staples Center last night. I’d been hearing some good things about him that I’ll expand upon this season.

As for Constantinou and Yantsis, the Kings will continue to keep an eye on them. Constantinou, especially, is a player who’ll continue to draw focus and essentially should go through a second draft year. Keep in mind that in 2011, Colin Miller was an invite to training camp and returned to Sault Ste. Marie, where he built on his previous season and was selected by the club in the fifth round in 2012. The Kings like both players, and watching Constantinou in the Anaheim rookie tournament, much of his ability was as advertised: he evaded forechecks to advance the puck, got pucks through to the net and provided offense, and was occasionally beaten on coverage and down low in the defensive zone. He’s a good skater with some skill, though, and teams are always keen on defensemen with the capacity for offense, so he’ll be another to continue to watch.
Staff Report
SEPTEMBER 18, 2019 — 11:35PM

Winnipeg – Two preseason games, two goals for the Wild.

After a 2-1 overtime loss to Dallas on Tuesday in St. Paul, the Wild went up to MTS Bell Place on Wednesday and lost to the Winnipeg Jets 4-1.

It was already 2-0 just a minute, 37 seconds into the game. Andrew Copp and former Gopher Blake Wheeler scored 38 seconds apart, beating Wild goaltender Kaapo Kahkonen. Defenseman Sami Niku assisted on both goals.

With most of its firepower back home with the night off, the Wild opened the game with a forward line of Jordan Greenway, Luke Kunin and Joel Eriksson Ek. All three were making their first appearances of the preseason.

Nico Sturm had the only goal for the Wild, making it a 2-1 game at 8:44 of the third period when he banged in his own rebound. Greenway and Brad Hunt assisted. The Jets then put the game away with goals by Josh Morrissey and C.J. Suess, an empty-netter.

Gerald Mayhew, Iowa’s leading scorer last season in the AHL, played 18:58 for the Wild and had a team-high four shots. Kyle Rau and Victor Rask also got extended minutes up front. Louie Belpedio played a team-high 23:10 on defense.

Kahkonen, a 23-year-old from Finland, settled in after the two early goals and stopped the final 18 shots he faced before he was replaced by former Gopher Mat Robson at the start of the third period. Robson stopped 10 of 11 shots in the first Wild action of his young career.

Laurent Brossoit, who made 19 starts for Winnipeg last season, made 20 saves as the Jets evened their preseason record at 1-1.

The Wild was outshot 32-21.
New Wild forward Ryan Hartman adds depth, grit and the occasional goal

By RACHEL BLOUNT

SEPTEMBER 19, 2019 — 12:52AM

Ryan Hartman is used to the description. During his three NHL seasons, the Wild winger has been called an agitator, a pest, an energizer, a guy no one wants to play against.

That’s the primary reason the Wild signed him as a free agent this summer. Tuesday, in the team’s preseason opener against Dallas, Hartman showed he has something more to offer. He was the only Wild player to score, snapping in a shorthanded goal in the second period of a 2-1 overtime loss.

That’s unlikely to change the way Hartman is perceived. Only a few minutes before his goal, he played his usual role, pummeling the Stars’ Tye Felhaber with six rapid-fire left jabs before hurling him to the ice. Still, the former first-round draft pick appreciated the chance to demonstrate a wider skill set, one that should come in handy for a team in need of scoring depth.

“It’s always been there. I know how to score goals,” said Hartman, who got the night off Wednesday in Winnipeg. “The people who have actually watched me know. I’ve always been a guy that can help out offensively.”

Hartman, who will be 25 on Friday, has 42 goals, 47 assists and 218 penalty minutes in 245 NHL games.

Former Wild General Manager Paul Fenton snapped up Hartman on the first day of the NHL’s free-agent signing period, giving him a two-year deal worth $3.8 million. The winger, who turns 25 on Friday, was drafted 30th overall by Chicago in 2013.

Hartman scored 19 goals in 76 games as a rookie in 2016-17. Over the past two seasons, he has played for three teams—Chicago, Nashville and Philadelphia—and was traded to a fourth in June, when the Flyers sent him to Dallas.

Fenton, who said he liked Hartman’s “grizzle,” signed him July 1 after Dallas did not make a qualifying offer. Wild coach Bruce Boudreau said Wednesday that he instantly pictured Hartman at right wing on a line with left winger Marcus Foligno, who plays a similar style. Boudreau used them together Tuesday with center Gabriel Dumont, a combination the coach considered the Wild’s most consistent in the loss to the Stars.

Should Hartman and Foligno start the season on the fourth line, Boudreau said they would be “as strong [a fourth line] as we’ve had since I got here.” He expects Hartman to gain confidence from his older teammate, allowing both sides of his game to thrive.

“He’s a guy that scored 19 goals [as a rookie],” Boudreau said. “And 13 goals last year, in limited time with two teams. I just think the upside is there. He’s still a young man.”

Though Boudreau said Hartman will have to earn playing time, the coach will try to assist him by giving him positive feedback—another factor that Boudreau anticipates will unlock Hartman’s full potential. Hartman also is entering camp in top condition. For the first time since 2016, he didn’t have any injuries that cut into his offseason training, giving him an entire summer to prepare for the upcoming season.

Foligno said the Wild needs to get more goals from its bottom-six forwards. While he and Hartman will be counted upon to kill penalties, provide muscle and give the Wild dependable defense, he said Hartman is a “very skilled” player who can finish a scoring chance as well as a big hit.

“I like the way he brings energy to the game,” Foligno said. “I think he’s really good on the forecheck. He’s not shy about getting nasty.

“He just seems like a guy that can rattle some guys’ cages. But at the same time, like [Tuesday], he can score. We have to provide that depth.”

Hartman is all in on that challenge.
Marcus Foligno and Ryan Hartman vow to ‘rattle some cages’ for Wild

By DANE MIZUTANI | dmizutani@pioneerpress.com | Pioneer Press
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As soon as the Wild signed Ryan Hartman this offseason, coach Bruce Boudreau immediately imagined what he’d look like on a line opposite Marcus Foligno.

"I don’t know if that’s what the thought was from someone else,” Boudreau said. "It was just the first thing I thought of when I found out.”

It shouldn’t come as a shock then that Foligno and Hartman have played exclusively opposite one another in training camp. They play similar styles, capable of putting the puck in the back of the net from time to time yet unafraid to drop the gloves at a moment’s notice.

"They give each other strength,” Boudreau said. "They know they’ve got Big Brother out there and that somebody’s got their back all the time. That’s really important.”

They showcased some budding chemistry in Tuesday’s preseason opener, a 2-1 overtime loss to Dallas at Xcel Energy Center. And whether it’s Joel Eriksson Ek or Mikko Koivu centering them when the regular season rolls around, it isn’t hard to envision that line being hard to play against this season.

"It was fun playing with him last night," Foligno said. "He’s scrappy and can kind of take care of himself. He’s a guy that can kind of push me, too, if I’m not physically going that night, and vice versa. He seems like a guy that can rattle some cages, and I’m going to help out with that as well.”

Still, that doesn’t mean Foligno and Hartman will be enforcers. Far from it.

Foligno has spoken at length about being more of an offensive contributor; Hartman sniffed the 20-goal plateau as a rookie with the Chicago Blackhawks and scored Minnesota’s lone goal on Tuesday.

"I’ve always known how to score goals," Hartman said. "Typically, when I’m playing my best I’m generating two, three, four Grade-A chances per game. It comes down to me bearing down and capitalizing on those opportunities. … It’s that secondary scoring that wins championships.”

Gone are the days when the bottom-six of the lineup consisted of unskilled grinders; one must play an all-around game to have any shot of garnering playing time nowadays.

"It’s changing; we have to provide that depth scoring,” Foligno said. "That’s something we didn’t have much of last season. If we can contribute 10 goals apiece, or something like that — or even more — it’s going to bode well for this group.”

It wouldn’t be a surprise if Hartman hit that benchmark at some point this season.

"He seems like he’s got a pretty good set of hands for a guy that’s kind of labeled as a depth player,” Foligno said. "He has a little bit more finishing ability than I’ve seen with guys I played with.”

As for the fact that Hartman is also willing to drop the gloves, Foligno appreciates the help. He stood mostly alone as the Wild’s resident bodyguard last season.

"Does it take the load off me a little bit? Maybe,” Foligno said. "I want him to save his hands, though, because he’s very skilled. I think there’s going to be times where he gets the fans going and he gets the team going. That’s exciting for me. I know he’s going to be pushing our guys every night and I’m trying to do the same thing.”

Which is exactly what Boudreau is hoping for from both players.

"Yeah," Boudreau said. "If that’s our fourth line, that’s as strong as we’ve had since I got here.”
Wild training camp notes: Mayhew’s chance, Suter feeling good, Shaw's injury

By Michael Russo
Sep 18, 2019

On a night when most the intrigue for the Wild will be on the Jordan Greenway-Joel Eriksson Ek-Luke Kunin line, how Nico Sturm performs in his first career preseason game and if Victor Rask and J.T. Brown can make a positive impression after a rocky start to each of their training camps, one player looking to prove himself all over again during Wednesday night’s exhibition game in Winnipeg is Gerry Mayhew.

When Mayhew earned his first NHL contract back in May, the thought was the strong-skating, energetic, high-scoring right winger would have an inside track to making the Wild out of training camp.

But then the Wild made no trades at the draft, former GM Paul Fenton added two players — Mats Zuccarello and Ryan Hartman — at Mayhew’s same position in free agency and new GM Bill Guerin brought in another veteran — Drew Stafford — at Mayhew’s same position on a pro tryout.

“I’ve been in the game long enough to know what is going on,” Mayhew said. “You can’t get down on yourself or think negatively. Just come out and work hard and see what happens.”

The 5-foot-10 Mayhew, 26, who was so good last season for the Iowa Wild that he had his own Twitter hashtag (#GerryTime), set an Iowa franchise record with 27 goals during the regular season, then scored another nine in two playoff rounds to finish second in the AHL during the Calder Cup playoffs.

He did all this on an AHL contract, so the Wild awarded him with his first career NHL two-way deal.

Mayhew, a Michigan native and former Ferris State standout, worked hard during the offseason with the hopes of turning some heads this training camp.

Iowa GM Tom Kurvers, director of player development Brad Bombardir and Iowa coach Tim Army know how good Mayhew is. Guerin and even Wild coach Bruce Boudreau are just learning this.

So impressed, Boudreau actually yelled out loud, “Wow,” when Mayhew flew by Rask, then Brown en route to an overtime winner during Sunday’s scrimmage.

“I think he’s high-energy,” Boudreau said. “I’m trying to think of who exactly he reminds me of, but I’ve seen those smaller forwards that can skate, that compete and they get in everybody’s faces. Seen them a lot. And he can score. He’s by no means out of contention of being here. We want that kind of hockey player. Worst-case scenario is he’s pushing somebody to the limits to stay here.”

The one thing working against Mayhew is he doesn’t require waivers to get to Iowa. Rask, Brown and Stafford, if he earns a contract in training camp, would need waivers.

The Wild also ordered his knee brace and as soon as it arrives this week, Shaw will start to go on the ice, skate on his own and work toward his latest comeback. The team estimates that he will come around the New Year.

“We won’t rush him,” Army said. “When it first happened, I said in my mind February or so, knowing how long it takes. But look, he has been through it and he’s in great shape. So comparing that to Mikko (Koivu) right now being about two months behind him with the same type of injury, that puts Mason around Dec. 1 and being really safe, around the holidays.”

Army says nobody, from the fans to the media to the Wild brass, should discount Shaw’s ability to come back yet again from this latest adversity.

He’s very much still a prospect, Army insists.

“It’s the third time, but if anybody can handle it, it’s this guy,” Army said. “He’s a hard-nosed kid. He has such a good attitude. I promise you, he’s a prospect to play in St. Paul someday. Because he plays with grit, smart. He can play on your PK, he can play on your power play. We put him at center. He’s really an intelligent, hard-nosed guy, he’s in the middle of everything. He’s one of those guys that after every scrum, guys are trying to punch him in the head because he’s in the middle of everything. He won’t let this deter him. It’s his mindset.

“I remember, in Milwaukee after the injury, his dad flew in. They were having something to eat. I went over to say hi and said to his dad, ‘I’m sorry you had to come out under these circumstances,’ and his dad just said, ‘Hey, he’s just got to get it done.’ The kid’s got that attitude. He’s not, ‘Why is this happening to me again?’ It’s like, ‘I’m going to get it done.’

“He’s a fantastic kid. He’s great in the room. He’ll be a leader on this Minnesota Wild team someday. He plays hard. He’s tough to play against and he had such a good year last year. So, yeah, it is a shame, but I’m already talking to him about when he comes back to give him something to look forward to.”

What a difference a year makes for Suter

Boudreau has been raving all camp about how good defenseman Ryan Suter is skating compared to last fall when he was returning from a career-threatening ankle injury.

“Yeah, totally different,” Suter said. “When you don’t start skating until the end of August and really don’t feel good at all, compared to this year, where you start skating in the middle of July, I just feel comfortable and the way that you’re supposed to feel.

“I’m healthy, so you have high expectations for yourself. For our team, you always want to be the best and you always want to hope your team wins. For us, I think we have the guys, now we just need to go and perform.”

Suter expects himself to be a much better player this season.

“If I can do it on one foot, I should be able to do it on two,” Suter joked. “I mean, I’m 34. What did (Chris) Chelios play until, he was 45? So I’ve still got a little time.”

Suter also is getting reacclimated to what it’s like to play with the Wild stallion that is Matt Dumba, the high-risk/reward defenseman coming back from a season-ending injury.

“I think expectations are high,” Suter said. “Obviously he’s a really good player and a big part of our team. It’s good to have him back. We just gotta keep him under control out there. He doesn’t need to be doing some of the stuff that he thinks he has to do, but that’s what makes him an explosive player.”

Mason Shaw just can’t catch a break.

For the third time in his young hockey career, the 20-year-old 2017 fourth-round pick is rehabbing from a torn ACL, this one sustained in last spring’s AHL playoffs.

The Wild just ordered his knee brace and as soon as it arrives this week, Shaw will start to go on the ice, skate on his own and work toward his latest comeback. The team estimates that he will come around the New Year.

“We won’t rush him,” Army said. “When it first happened, I said in my mind February or so, knowing how long it takes. But look, he has been through it and he’s in great shape. So comparing that to Mikko (Koivu) right now being about two months behind him with the same type of injury, that puts Mason around Dec. 1 and being really safe, around the holidays.”

Army says nobody, from the fans to the media to the Wild brass, should discount Shaw’s ability to come back yet again from this latest adversity.

He’s very much still a prospect, Army insists.

“It’s the third time, but if anybody can handle it, it’s this guy,” Army said. “He’s a hard-nosed kid. He has such a good attitude. I promise you, he’s a prospect to play in St. Paul someday. Because he plays with grit, smart. He can play on your PK, he can play on your power play. We put him at center. He’s really an intelligent, hard-nosed guy, he’s in the middle of everything. He’s one of those guys that after every scrum, guys are trying to punch him in the head because he’s in the middle of everything. He won’t let this deter him. It’s his mindset.

“I remember, in Milwaukee after the injury, his dad flew in. They were having something to eat. I went over to say hi and said to his dad, ‘I’m sorry you had to come out under these circumstances,’ and his dad just said, ‘Hey, he’s just got to get it done.’ The kid’s got that attitude. He’s not, ‘Why is this happening to me again?’ It’s like, ‘I’m going to get it done.’

“He’s a fantastic kid. He’s great in the room. He’ll be a leader on this Minnesota Wild team someday. He plays hard. He’s tough to play against and he had such a good year last year. So, yeah, it is a shame, but I’m already talking to him about when he comes back to give him something to look forward to.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
In the Habs’ Room: ‘Bottom two lines were better than our top two lines’

STU COWAN, MONTREAL GAZETTE
Updated: September 18, 2019

BATHURST, N.B. — The Canadiens got off to a good start Wednesday night en route to a 4-3 win over the Florida Panthers in the annual Kraft Hockeyville game.

Matthew Peca opened the scoring at 5:47 of the first period on a beautiful 200-foot play that displayed the kind of hockey coach Claude Julien wants his team to play.

Jake Evans started the play when he picked up a loose puck in the corner behind the Canadiens net and chipped it along the boards to Alex Belzile, who then passed it to Otto Leskinen in the middle of the zone, followed by a stretch pass to Evans crossing centre ice. Evans carried the puck into the Panthers zone down the left side before passing across to Belzile, who was the middle man in the tic-tac-toe finish with a pass back across the ice to a wide-open Peca in front of the net with goalie Chris Driedger caught out of position.

It really was a thing of beauty.

“That was a great goal,” Julien said after the game. “That was created with a good middle drive which opened up a lane, and so we encourage our guys to do that as much as they can. At the same time, for a lot of those guys, it was their first game this year, so there’s still a little bit of rust in the game. It’s not as sharp as it will be in a few weeks from now. But we certainly saw some good things.”

It was a also good ending for the Canadiens, who got other goals from Jeff Petry, Riley Barber and Belzile, potting the winner short-handed. The Canadiens were trailing 3-2 before Barber scored at 11:23 of the third period and then Belzile at 13:57.

“His work ethic, his compete level is as good as it gets,” Julien said about Belzile, who had 19-35-54 totals in 74 games last season with the AHL’s Laval Rocket. “You watch him tonight … that line was probably our best line tonight because of just their compete level. All three of those guys competed hard.”

Belzile was on the fourth line with Evans and Peca. Belzile and Peca both finished with a goal and an assist, while Evans’s assist gave the line five points.

“I could say the same thing about (Ryan) Poehling’s line,” Julien added about the third trio that included Nick Cousins and Barber. “Our bottom two lines were better than our top two lines.”

Barber had a goal and an assist, while Poehling had an assist.

Defenceman Jeff Petry also had a goal and an assist.

The top two lines had Phillip Danault between Tomas Tatar and Jonathan Drouin, and Jesperi Kotkaniemi between Charles Hudon and Joel Armia.

“You got some veterans that are trying to not ease their way in, but they’re trying to work their way in,” Julien said. “They know there’s a lot more games and stuff like that. And you got other guys that really want to make an impression, so there’s no doubt the enthusiasm and the energy is a little bit higher on the part of those guys.”

Belzile, 28, was an offensive star in junior, posting 22-70-92 totals in his final season with the QMJHL’s Rimouski Océanic. He had to change his style of game after turning pro.

“To be top six in the NHL, you have to be like elite level,” he said. “I’ve been taking pride on the PK. For me, I’m a really intense guy. I play a good 200-foot game.”

Julien had some reasons to smile after this one.

“(Defenceman) Cale Fleury had another solid game again tonight,” the coach said. “So a lot of good things and a lot of reason to be optimistic about not only our team but the depth.”
Packed Hockeyville crowd in Bathurst, N.B., revels in Canadiens’ win

STU COWAN, MONTREAL GAZETTE
Updated: September 18, 2019

BATHURST, N.B. — Just before Wednesday night’s Kraft Hockeyville game between the Canadiens and Florida Panthers, someone in the press box joked: “The Panthers’ mascot has probably never performed in front of this many fans before.”

Good line — unless you’re one of the few Panthers fans in Florida.

The K.C. Irving Regional Centre, with a capacity of just over 3,500, was packed for the pre-season game and Stanley the mascot wasn’t a happy cat after the Canadiens won 4-3 on a short-handed goal by Alex Belzile at 13:57 of the third period.

Matthew Peca, Jeff Petry and Riley Barber also scored for the Canadiens, while Evgenii Dadonov, Mike Hoffman (power play) and Jonathan Huberdeau replied for the Panthers.

Charlie Lindgren played the entire game in goal for the Canadiens, stopping 18 of 21 shots.

Jonathan Drouin was in the lineup for second straight pre-season game at right wing, taking Brendan Gallagher’s regular spot with Phillip Danault at centre and Tomas Tatar on the left.

Coach Claude Julien has been experimenting with the left-shot Drouin playing the right side, something the player hasn’t done since the 2016 playoffs with the Tampa Bay Lightning.

“I was looking back at clips of how I played with the puck and without it in those days,” Drouin said after the morning skate. “It’s a little adjustment at first, but I’m not too worried about how it’s going to play out on the right side.

“It’s changing things a little bit for me,” Drouin added. “I’m still getting adjusted. ... I played left wing for a while, so I’m still adjusting a little bit.”

Drouin really liked starting training camp with Domi at centre, the same way they started last season before Julien split them up for good in January.

“That was cool,” Drouin said about playing again with Domi. “I was happy. Obviously, playing with Max we had a good chemistry for a lot of games last year. Same with (Artturi Lehkonen) ... we played with Lehky a bit. So for us it’s just to be simple if we get back on the same line again. We know how to play with each other, but it was definitely exciting.”

Julien has to find a way to get more production out of Drouin this season and the coach continues to use him on the point on the first power-play unit. Drouin was held pointless on this night and so was the Canadiens’ power play.

The game also gave Jesperi Kotkaniemi, 19, a close-up look at the Panthers’ Aleksander Barkov, who has developed into one of the top centres in the NHL at age 24 and picked up two assists against the Canadiens.

“I think if he’s not perfect, he’s pretty near,” Kotkaniemi, who played well but was held pointless, said after the morning skate.

The Canadiens will be back in action Thursday night when they play the Panthers again, this time at the Bell Centre (7 p.m., TNS2, RS, TSN 690 Radio).
STU COWAN, MONTREAL GAZETTE
Updated: September 18, 2019

BATHURST, N.B. — Wednesday night’s Kraft Hockeyville game between the Canadiens and Florida Panthers was a bit of a homecoming for recently retired Panthers goalie Roberto Luongo.

Luongo finished his junior career with the QMJHL’s Acadie-Bathurst Titan, helping them win the President’s Cup championship in 1999 following a late-season trade from the Val d’Or Foreurs. The 40-year-old Luongo announced his retirement in June, after playing 19 seasons in the NHL with the New York Islanders, Vancouver Canucks and Panthers.

“It’s exciting. It’s fun to be back,” Luongo said Wednesday morning after watching the Panthers’ morning skate at the K.C. Irving Regional Centre, where he used to play. “It’s been a while. Just to see the people outside and the enthusiasm and all that kind of stuff brings back some great memories. I’m really happy to be here even though I’m not playing.”

There was a huge crowd outside the arena to meet the Canadiens and Panthers players after they got off their team buses for the morning skates and they were given the red-carpet treatment entering the rink.

Luongo wasn’t surprised.

“I was expecting it,” the Montreal native said. “I know what kind of town we have here. People love their hockey and it’s not every day you get an opportunity to come and see an NHL game here, so I wasn’t shocked to see that many people out there.”

The fans were nearly all decked out in Canadiens colours, which also wasn’t a surprise to Luongo.

“It’s nationwide, for sure,” Luongo said about the Canadiens’ fan base. “Even when I was playing in Vancouver there was a ton of Montreal Canadiens fans. So they’re everywhere and that’s great. It’s great for them. They have such a great fan base. I was saying I’ve never signed so many Montreal Canadiens jerseys in my life. So it was kind of weird.”

As for retirement, Luongo seems to be adjusting fine to his new life.

“It’s been a bit of a different summer,” he said. “Obviously, I haven’t missed working out. I think that’s one part of the summer that was always a little bit tough every year. But this year I got to relax a bit more and enjoy some time with the family. I kind of did what I wanted to do and not put that pressure on myself to make sure that I’m working out every day and eating healthy and all that kind of stuff. That’s the part I didn’t miss. But the part I did miss, obviously, is playing hockey and all that kind of stuff. At the end of the day, I’m happy with my decision. I think it was the right one for me and I’m just looking forward to the next chapter.”

Luongo officially announced his retirement on June 26 on his very entertaining Twitter account, writing: “I’ve decided to take my talents to a South Beach retirement home.”

On July 6, he tweeted: “I’m floored by the fact that in a two months span I went from being a fine tuned professional athlete to only wearing shorts with an elastic band ...”

On Aug. 12, Luongo tweeted out a poll, writing: “I’m a man of the people. So I need some advice,” asking whether he should go on a diet or buy a new wardrobe. There were 48,348 responses with 83 per cent voting for a new wardrobe.

“I’ve been a pizza guy for a long time,” Luongo said when asked about his retirement diet. “So I’ve had a few slices more than usual.”
BATHURST, N.B. — There were no rental cars left at the Bathurst airport when I landed here Tuesday afternoon, so I had to take a taxi to the Canadiens' morning skate Wednesday at the K.C. Irving Regional Centre.

The driver who picked me up at the hotel was wearing a red Canadiens jersey with "Gallagher" and No. 11 on the back.

"Brendan Gallagher's my favourite player," the driver, Kevin Doucet, said with a big smile.

Wednesday night's Kraft Hockeyville pre-season game between the Canadiens and Florida Panthers is a really big deal, not only for Bathurst, but New Brunswick as a whole.

Renous, a tiny community located about 125 kilometres from Bathurst — won the annual Kraft Hockeyville competition and will get $250,000 in much needed renovations for its 34-year-old Tom Donovan Arena, which is too small to host the game. There were events held in Renous on Tuesday, including a pep rally at Blackville School and a community celebration outside The Renous Rec Centre with former Canadiens Yvan Cournoyer and Patrice Brisebois, along with the Stanley Cup.

My taxi driver wasn’t lucky enough to get one of the roughly 3,500 tickets for the game, but was going to watch it at the Au Bootlegger bar.

"I think every bar in town is showing the game tonight," he said.

The driver had to drop me off in front of the arena because he couldn't get into the parking lot, which was jammed. In front of the arena were approximately 2,000 people — the majority wearing red Canadiens sweaters — waiting for the team bus to arrive for the morning skate.

When the bus pulled in around 9:45 a.m., there were screams of excitement as the players, coaches and GM Marc Bergevin got the red-carpet treatment, stopping to sign autographs and pose for pictures while walking to the arena entrance. One of the fans was Don Daley, who made the 55-minute drive from his home in Miramichi with his daughters and some of their friends. He was wearing a red Canadiens sweater with "Lafleur" and No. 10 on the back.

"Guy Lafleur has always been my favourite player and I finally got to meet Kirk Muller, who is my second favourite player of all time," the 44-year-old said. "I got to shake his hand … I'm just like the kids right now. I'm on Cloud 9."

Daley also had a ticket to the game.

"I'm lucky," he said. "A friend of mine won some tickets and asked me to go. This is just great. The fact that Renous was able to do this and win this Hockeyville — and it's not just Renous, it's the whole surrounding communities that won. My kids are getting selfies with all the players and having a blast. A lot of kids here from minor hockey … this is the time of their life."

Some fans were also lucky enough to get tickets to the morning skate.

"There's a lot of empty classes right now, I think," Canadiens head coach Claude Julien said with a smile. "I saw a lot of kids out there, so it's obviously a special day for them and it's great. It's a lot of fun for us to be able to come here and see the joy that you're able to put on a lot of people's faces."

The Canadiens’ Jonathan Drouin played junior hockey against the Acadie-Bathurst Titan when he was with the Halifax Mooseheads and wasn’t surprised by the fan turnout.

"This is a hockey town — all the Maritimers love their Canadiens," Drouin said. "My billets used to watch the (Canadiens) games in Halifax all the time. It's cool to see. Obviously, they don't get to see a Habs practice or a Habs game all the time. For us to be here and sign all that stuff for them, its something they'll remember and we will, too."
Montreal Canadiens

Canadiens Game Day: 'Wow!' a good word to describe reception in Bathurst

STU COWAN, MONTREAL GAZETTE
Updated: September 18, 2019

BATHURST, N.B. — A lot of people must have phoned in sick here Wednesday morning and the school classrooms were probably half-empty.

When the Canadiens’ team bus pulled up in front of the K.C. Irving Regional Centre just after 9:30 a.m., there were what looked like a couple of thousand people waiting for them before their morning skate ahead of Thursday night’s Kraft Hockeyville game against the Florida Panthers (7 p.m., SN1, TVA Sports, TSN 690 Radio).

The players, coaches and GM Marc Bergevin got the red-carpet treatment after they got off the bus and walked through a sea of Canadiens jerseys, stopping to sign autographs, shake hands and pose for photos. Joining them as a team ambassador was former captain Yvan Cournoyer, wearing one of the 10 Stanley Cup rings he won.

"Unbelievable," Cournoyer said about the reception. "I was beside Marc and I said: Wow! Can you believe this? It’s very nice. I travel a lot around the world and there’s not too many places that they don’t know the Cournoyer retired 40 years ago, so the kids outside the arena — and some of their parents — never actually saw him play for the Canadiens but the Hall of Famer was still treated like royalty.

"The Montreal Canadiens are so popular, it’s unbelievable," Cournoyer said. "I’ve been retired for like 40 years and it seems like I still play because the people recognize me and they want a picture and they want an autograph and they remember the old days."

What about those fans too young to remember the old days?

"Well, they have their parents behind them and they tell them who I was," Cournoyer said. "After that, they want to see a Stanley Cup (ring) and they want to take a picture of it and they want to touch it."

On Tuesday, Cournoyer spent two hours signing autographs in Miramichi, located about 80 kilometres from Bathurst, as part of the Kraft Hockeyville festivities. The community of Renous, located about 125 kilometres from Bathurst, actually won the Kraft Hockeyville competition and will get $250,000 in renovations for its Tom Donovan Arena, which is too small to actually host the NHL pre-season game.

When asked why the Canadiens are so popular in the Maritimes, Cournoyer said: "With the six teams (in the NHL’s Original Six) we had the Montreal Canadiens and Toronto. I’m sure people were cheering more for the Montreal Canadiens, but a lot of people were cheering for Toronto, too. This is the mentality with the two teams … I mean, it never changed. Even now, I think Toronto and Montreal are good competition. It’s been like that all the time."

The old and the new

Cournoyer, 75, has been a longtime ambassador for the Canadiens and said he hopes to continue in that role for many more years.

"It’s very nice to be around," he said. "You don’t have to tell (the players) what to do. You just say hello and you tell them who you are. After you tell them who you are, I think they might look at what we did and say: ‘Hey, this guy’s got a few Stanley Cups.’ I know a few (players) on the team, but it’s natural I don’t know everybody. Them, too. I don’t think they know me. But it’s nice to be here with the coach, the assistant coaches. That was fun before the game today. We talked a lot and that was great."

Cournoyer noted that training camps have changed a lot since his playing days.

"We have skating in the morning of the game (now)," he said. "They have six or seven coaches and we had two or three, maximum. They have people reviewing the video. For me, this morning, I think it’s a nice thing to see (all the fans) because I know how hard (the players) work now."

Cournoyer looks in great shape for his age.

"Well, I try to stay in shape the most that I can," he said with a smile. "I represent the Montreal Canadiens, too, so it’s important to look like an old hockey player, maybe, and to be a little bit in shape. But I would like to lose another six or seven pounds, it would be good."

Second straight game for Drouin

Jonathan Drouin will be in the lineup for the second straight pre-season game Wednesday night, but with new linemates.

After playing right wing in Monday night’s pre-season opener at the Bell Centre — a 4-2 win over the New Jersey Devils — Drouin was on a line with Phillip Danault at centre and Tomas Tatar on left wing for Wednesday’s morning skate.

Julien was asked what his thinking was behind that move.

"There’s no thinking," the coach said. "Just Jonathan Drouin is in the lineup tonight. I said that yesterday, guys are going to play games and there might be some mix and matches in lines just to look at different things. But nothing more than that."

Reilly fighting for job

Canadiens defenceman Mike Reilly is one of the players fighting for a job at training camp and will be in the lineup Wednesday night playing on the left side with Christian Folin as his partner.

Reilly only played 37 games last season, posting 3-8-11 totals and was even in plus-minus, as Julien lost confidence in his defensive play. GM Bergevin signed Reilly, 26, to a two-year contract this summer worth a total of US$3 million.

Reilly, a left-hand shot, has told Canadiens management he’s willing to try playing on the right side in an effort to make the starting lineup.

"I think he’s a veteran that, obviously, has a lot of skill," Julien said about Reilly. "I think it’s just up to him. It’s not so much what do you want to see? I want to see him play and I want to make sure that he’s a solid defenceman in both areas. We know he’s got great offensive skills and he can certainly move the puck. So we want to make sure that he’s the best of the seven (defencemen) that we’re going to keep around. I think any player that wants to play in the NHL will tell you he’ll play wherever he can to stay there and I don’t think he’s any different."

Memories from junior days

The K.C. Irving Regional Centre opened in September 1996 and has 3,162 seats with a total capacity of 3,524 for hockey games. It is home to the QMJHL’s Acadie-Bathurst Titan and it will be packed to the rafters Wednesday night.

When the arena first opened, Julien was coaching the Hull Olympiques and led them to the QMJHL President’s Cup championship that season before moving up to the AHL’s Hamilton Bulldogs the next year.

"The rink was actually fairly new when I came and (the Titan) had moved before moving up to the AHL’s Hamilton Bulldogs the next year.

"The rink was actually fairly new when I came and (the Titan) had moved from Laval," Julien recalled. "So, this was a new rink and a nice rink, too, to come to. So again, the Maritimes itself was always a good place to come because there’s a lot of good people, friendly people and passionate hockey fans, too."

The junior rink will provide a totally different environment from a regular NHL pre-season game for the Canadiens and Panthers players.

"I think at the end of the day, when the puck’s dropped, it’s a game as much as any others in an NHL rink," Julien said. "I think probably the difference is this morning it’s probably a little bit of fun to see how many people are watching the morning skate and the interest that’s shown here so far. I think that’s a lot of fun for the players. But when the puck drops tonight at 8 o’clock — Maritime time — it will be business as usual."

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Montreal Canadiens

Bubble report: Ryan Poehling steals the show in Bathurst

By Marc Dumont
Sep 18, 2019

There were a few standouts among the bubble players on the Canadiens who faced the Florida Panthers in Bathurst, N.B. on Wednesday, but it was Ryan Poehling who stood out more than the rest. In his first NHL preseason game, Poehling was the most exciting Canadiens prospect on the ice, playing a strong game down the middle in a 4-3 win.

I’m going to focus on the play of those prospects because, well, it’s the preseason. Though it should be noted the veterans didn’t give me much to write about in any case.

If Poehling is hoping to make the case that his spectacular debut against the Toronto Maple Leafs last season wasn’t a fluke, he’ll need to follow it up with a strong performance throughout the preseason. He got off to a great start against the Panthers by winning the majority of his faceoffs, which led to several scoring chances for the Canadiens.

They weren’t just faceoff wins. They were clean faceoff wins.

Once a coach trusts a player to win a faceoff, opportunities tend to multiply, which would bode well for Poehling if he can keep it up. But it wasn’t just his faceoff dominance that was noticeable. He was constantly driving the net and played a sound defensive game, culminating with a great shorthanded play to set up Alex Belzile in the third period.

Cale Fleury isn’t known as overly physical, but if you underestimate his ability to throw a check he’ll remind you very quickly that he’s not a timid player. The first time I noticed it was when he demolished fellow Canadiens prospect Josh Brook in 2018, and it became a semi-regular occurrence in Laval last season.

Fleury threw three big hits against the Panthers, which isn’t out of the ordinary, but the manner in which he delivered them makes the hits a little more special. All three of the hits resulted in a forced turnover, two of them led to grade-A scoring chances, and one of them ended up in the back of the Panthers net.

Jake Evans played on the fourth line with Matthew Peca and Belzile, and though their ice time was limited, they made a lot of noise in the offensive zone. Both his linemates scored, with Peca showing the kind of sustained forecheck that was suspiciously absent from his game last season.

Evans was the catalyst for the first goal, starting the breakout and then providing the crucial cross-ice pass to Belzile that forced Florida goalie Chris Driedger to push hard to his left before Belzile set up Peca for a tap in.

Though Evans’ offence attracts more attention, it was his defensive play that probably earned him the most brownie points with his coach. He kept opposing players to the outside and did a very good job clogging up passing lanes on the penalty kill.

It’s way too early to start criticizing veterans, but I have to admit the use of Jonathan Drouin at the point on the power play is fascinating, albeit incredibly unnerving. There’s no way that ends well.

Nick Cousins played well for a second consecutive game. He employs the type of speedy, ferocious forecheck that Claude Julien adores.

Charlie Lindgren played a decent game and was not to blame on any of the Panthers goals, but he continues to have a hard time tracking pucks, an issue that plagued him last season in Laval.

Otto Leskinen got off to a good start, displaying his speed and offensive prowess, but quickly faded as the game progressed.

In case you were wondering, the power play is still awful.

One of the new rules for the 2019-20 season dictates that players who lose their helmet must either immediately retrieve their brain protector and put it back on or leave the ice. It’s a smart rule, and as an added bonus, it should lead to more hilarious situations like this one:

It was just a preseason goal, but it probably felt like more to Belzile. This guy is the epitome of a hard worker, and even though he’s destined for Laval, it was nice to see him score in the Bleu, Blanc, Rouge.
The thoughtful musings of Cale Fleury, a rookie caught in the glare of training camp’s Twilight Zone

By Arpon Basu

Sep 18, 2019

The time between the first and second game of the preseason schedule is always dangerous. There is invariably a rookie who has a good game against a team dressing close to the minimum number of NHL players, and that player becomes the focal point until another game is played.

It happens every year and though it can seem a tad irrational, it is actually a good exercise for a young player to go through because it is an early taste of the reality of playing professional hockey in Montreal. Criticizing this reality is fine and valid, but it doesn’t make it any less of a reality.

This year, the player in the crosshairs of this intense glare is defenceman Cale Fleury. The first game of the preseason Monday against a shell of the New Jersey Devils was like a perfect storm because not only did Fleury play very well, to the point Claude Julien called him one of his best defencemen on that night, but Fleury also has a legitimate chance to play his way onto the roster by the end of camp.

The right defence spot on the third pair is an open competition, with Christian Folin the most likely winner. But Fleury, Josh Brook and Mike Reilly could also conceivably play their way into that spot, a competition that has lost a candidate with Noah Juulsen’s unfortunate absence due to headaches.

Fleury will play a second straight game Wednesday night when the Canadiens take on the Florida Panthers in Bathurst, N.B., while Reilly and Folin will get their first game of the preseason playing on the same pair. Brook will get his second game playing next to Brett Kulak, who is basically guaranteed to partner with the winner of this competition when the regular season begins, on Thursday when the Canadiens host the Panthers again.

What’s important to observe here is how Fleury reacts to all the praise he’s being heaped with in this danger zone, the one where a young player suddenly feels like Montreal is his oyster because he played a good preseason game, an annual rite of passage in Canadiens training camp.

It is in this context that it is worth sharing something Fleury said Monday night after that game against the Devils, because I found it to be a somewhat revealing window into what makes him tick. In fact, Fleury has said a number of things while in the temporary glare of this training camp spotlight that would suggest he is not your average, wide-eyed NHL rookie.

Fleury was waiting at his stall as reporters streamed into the Canadiens dressing room. Directly opposite him, Nick Suzuki and Jake Evans, two other candidates to play the temporary role of the chosen one over the other candidates to play the temporary role of the chosen one over the next 48 hours or so, were holding court surrounded by reporters. Max Domi, Jonathan Drouin and others on the opposite side of the room were also running the postgame gauntlet of questions, blissfully unaware at the time their coach was about to walk out in front of reporters and call their game that night “just OK.”

On his side, there was Fleury and Charles Hudon, sitting at opposite ends of the room and experiencing far different pressure points in this training camp, waiting patiently for the media to make its way to them.

As they waited, I walked over to Fleury to talk to him alone for a bit. I asked a few pretty standard questions about the value of his year in Laval in helping him present the best version of himself in training camp. He, predictably, said it has helped measurably and has given him the confidence to believe in his chances.

“Because,” he continued, “it’s not as if I showed up at camp last year expecting to make the Montreal Canadiens.”

Now that is something you don’t hear every day from a hockey player. Fleury explained he quickly came to the realization in camp last year that he was in a bit over his head, that the pace was too quick, the players were too good, that he wasn’t ready. He did the best he could, but he knew.

I wondered what that must feel like, because it is not a feeling these players are accustomed to. For many, Fleury included, they have never really felt that way at any other point in their hockey journey. Up until that point they have been among the best players in practically every league they have ever played in, adulated and doted upon through the minor hockey ranks as their talent set them apart.

Now suddenly, their talent sets them apart in a different way, a way that is completely foreign to them.

Having that realization hit while at the same time you are still reveling in the experience of playing in the greatest league in the world, the league you have dreamed of playing in your whole life, must be a terrible fall.

For some reason, I had never thought of this until Fleury said what he said, probably because I’m not sure I’ve ever heard a hockey player say what he said; that he knew he wasn’t good enough. I’m sure many hockey players have felt that way but saying it out loud is an entirely different matter.

“I found it motivating,” Fleury said, very matter-of-factly, after giving it a bit of thought. “I told myself I never wanted to feel that way again.”

It just came out of Fleury, very naturally and calmly. But it is perhaps the most realistic self-assessment I’ve heard a prospect give about his first NHL training camp, and perfectly encapsulates the challenge he, Suzuki, Evans and other Canadiens rookie hopefuls face to varying degrees. It is how they react to that discomfort that will set them apart and determine whether their arrival in the NHL will be a quick one or will take a bit more time.

Fleury, for one, appears to have adjusted very well from one year to the next, though that guarantees absolutely nothing for him. Still, first impressions do count for something, and he’s created a good one.

“For me, (it’s) just handling the pace of play,” Fleury said Tuesday. “I remember last year maybe feeling like the pace was a little too quick for me almost at times … but this year I’ve felt real confident with the pace.”

Fleury had an excellent rookie season in Laval playing on Joël Bouchard’s top pair, but he also had an unusual explanation for why that was. Most young players try to highlight something they do particularly well when asked to identify their strengths. Canadiens assistant GM Trevor Timmins often uses the word “dimension” when discussing prospects, as in what specific skill will allow that player to set himself apart at the NHL level, whether it is a plus shot or plus skating or plus vision.

But there generally needs to be plus something. Not in Fleury’s eyes there doesn’t.

“I don’t feel like I have one major strength,” he said. “I feel like my strength is being good at most things, not great at everything. I try to be an all-around player … I think it just means I can go either way with my development. Like, in Laval last year I had a more offensive role than I would maybe have this year if I made the team. I was on the power play last year and I obviously wouldn’t expect to be on the power play here.

Maybe in the future I can develop into that, or maybe I can develop into a shutdown guy. Being able to do everything I think is good.

“I think being on a struggling team in junior kind of helped with that, just because I was asked to do everything. We had a younger team that was in the middle of rebuilding when I was there for a couple of years, so having all that responsibility there made me play an all-around game.”

Of course, giving thoughtful and unique answers to questions will not clear Fleury’s path to the NHL. In fact, it doesn’t even make him unique among the players fighting to win that sixth defence spot in camp.

Both Folin and Reilly said Canadiens GM Marc Bergevin expressed his interest in re-signing them right in their exit meeting at the end of last season, which is somewhat unusual, especially considering the depth roles they would be expected to fill. Folin quickly earned Julien’s trust at the end of the last season and became Jordie Benn’s primary partner on the third pair. Julien’s trust in Reilly, meanwhile, plummeted.

At the beginning of last season, Reilly played so well he looked like a potential partner for Shea Weber when he returned from injury. He admitted Tuesday that got to his head.
"I'd say the one thing I took away from last year was, the way the first 10 or 15 games went, I think I got a little complacent, a little bit too comfortable," he said. "Obviously at the time you don't really realize that because you think things are going well. I think I got a bit too comfortable. That's one thing, each day for me is a tryout, that's how I've got to approach it. If it's two good games in a row it doesn't matter, I'm not established like some of these other guys are."

Reilly said he took no news from the coaching staff as good news, assuming he did nothing wrong if his mistakes weren't specifically pointed out to him, with the result being those mistakes turned into habits. He intends to cut those off at the pass this season, and was proactive over the summer in informing assistant coach Luke Richardson and Julien that he would be open to playing the right side this season, realizing that was where the opening was in the lineup.

"Usually I like to reflect after game and see what I did, good and bad, and if there are certain trends a little bit, whether it's good or bad habits that are starting to build, you either try to change those or continue those," Reilly said. "I think it's trying to be a little bit harder on myself. Every single day come to the rink and act like somebody's coming to take my place a little bit more compared to last year in that first quarter of the season."

The reality of this battle is that the burden of proof lies with Reilly, Fleury and Brook to take what was Folin's job at the end of last season away from him. Folin brings an element, a dimension, that Julien appreciates having in his lineup and that none of the other candidates bring, which is size and physical play.

Folin averaged 15:49 of ice time in 19 games with the Canadiens, 19 of their most important games of the season, and topped 17 minutes in five of those games. He killed penalties. He hit people.

So he was useful, but he is hardly irreplaceable. We should have a better idea over these next two preseason games against the Panthers whether any of the candidates to replace him can prove they are more useful than Folin.
Nashville Predators' Bridgestone Arena renovations include 300% bigger scoreboard, better concessions

Mike Organ, Nashville Tennessean
Published 4:35 p.m. CT Sept. 18, 2019 | Updated 6:39 p.m. CT Sept. 18, 2019

A much bigger, state-of-the-art scoreboard, better food and waterless urinals were part of the Bridgestone Arena renovations unveiled Tuesday by the Predators.

The upgrades were part of more than $8 million in renovations made to the 23-year-old facility since the end of last NHL season.

The Predators signed a new 30-year lease agreement with the city in June, and the renovations are part of a long-term plan to spruce up the building.

"The new lease takes us forward for the next 30 years, which really allows us to continue this pretty aggressive wave of renovations," Predators President and CEO Sean Henry said. "The biggest visible renovation we're doing this year is our scoreboard. Our renovations are never finished until our fans see them, review them, critique them and give us that always-needed feedback on how we can do things better."

Introducing FangVision

The video scoreboard is called FangVision and is the culmination of a project that began when the organization started renovating the sound and lighting system two years ago.

The new scoreboard is 22 feet tall and 34 feet wide. It's predecessor was 12 feet tall and 20 feet wide. That means the new one is 300% larger.

It also has 450 percent higher resolution.

All four sides of the scoreboard are the same dimension. A 27-foot tall fang is on each corner.

Phase I of the project, which was done in summer 2018, consisted of new LED ribbon boards and lighting in the arena.

The total cost of the multi-phase upgrade was $15 million.

In addition to new counter tops and sinks in the Club Level restrooms, new waterless urinals in 100-Level restrooms have been installed.

New water fountains throughout the building will provide filtered water. Fans will be allowed to bring in 32-ounce plastic bottles to fill with water.

A new premium space room that can accommodate up to 50 people was built on the suite level. It will be available for civic groups, church groups and others.

Smashville's catfish tank was moved from the concourse to the AT&T Fan Information area.

Tennessean LOADED: 09.19.2019
Predators’ Eeli Tolvanen’s goal remains the same: Make the team, make an impact

Paul Skrbina, Nashville Tennessean
Published 5:00 a.m. CT Sept. 18, 2019

Most of his friends still live with their parents.
Eeli Tolvanen is going into his third season with the Predators.
He’s been on his own since he was 18. He’s moved to a different continent.
Sometimes it’s easy to forget Tolvanen is 20 years old.
He lost 15 or 16 pounds during the summer, an effort, he said, to find more speed.
An effort he hopes will erase the disappointment of not making the team out of training camp last year. He contemplated returning to Europe.
"Of course you're pissed off," Tolvanen said of starting the year in Milwaukee. "You want to play here. You want to be one of the top guys. Last year was a big year for me going to the AHL, learning the system, playing the small rinks. That was a good decision for me to stay here and not go back to Europe."

Predators forward Eeli Tolvanen was called up from the Milwaukee Admirals of the AHL on Saturday Nashville Tennessean
General manager David Poile has preached patience when it comes to Tolvanen, whom he picked 30th overall in the first round of the 2017 draft.
He has high hopes for the forward, but he understands the hype that has come with it.
Tolvanen had 25 goals and 18 assists in 60 games on bigger KHL rinks.
His 36 points (19 goals, 17 assists) in 49 regular-season games is a KHL record for players under 19 years old.
"He’s been here for one (full) year. That’s the problem," Poile said. "He got so much hype that KHL year. Last year was not an easy year for him. It was an OK year. This year he’s already better.
"His expectations are probably as high as anybody from what he’s gone through with success at the KHL level. Got a lot of recognition, a lot of fanfare. It takes time. To me we’re way ahead of where we were last year."

Beyond the numbers
Tolvanen can run -- it’s something he took up during the summer, along with an improved diet. And he’s not trying to hide from the aforementioned hype.
But he’s still admittedly learning that in order to get where he wants to be, he might have to go places he doesn’t want to go. Like running, for instance.
"It’s not my favorite thing to do," he said. "If you want to results you have to do things you don’t like. That was a good thing for me -- getting out of bed and doing the run."

Tolvanen scored four goals during the Predators’ recent rookie and prospect camp, which led the team. It was his second such camp. He has one goal and one assist in seven NHL games.
He had 15 goals and 20 assists in 58 games with the Admirals last season.
Those numbers mean very little now, or even in the grand scheme of Tolvanen’s career.
His offensive abilities have been apparent. His skill on the power play, the sorest of sore spots for the Predators last season, has been evident.
But there’s still a lot of work to be done.

Players such as Daniel Carr, last season’s AHL MVP, and Rem Pitlick could prove to be more NHL-ready at this point.

Man with a plan
But Tolvanen has no plans to go back to Milwaukee quietly, if that’s his destination.
"I noticed him quite a bit," Predators coach Peter Laviolette said. "When he’s on the power play he seems to have a really good knack of knowing how to run a wall on a ... and finding lanes and moving to areas and moving to create shots.
"As we move through camp it will be a continuation of that in five-on-five play."

As for age, Tolvanen believes that’s mind over matter. And his mind is made up about what matters.
"I know I’m young but there’s .... younger players in the NHL than I am," he said. "My goal is to be there as fast as I can. I want play a key role, be the goal soccer they want me to be. Just seeing the young guys do it in the NHL last year (motivates me)."

Tennessean LOADED: 09.19.2019
Kyle Turris was among the Predators’ 44 healthy scratches for their preseason opener Monday.

No cause for alarm though. Turris dressed for the second game of the doubleheader against the Panthers.

He centered Eeli Tolvanen and Craig Smith on the top line.

This was nothing like last season, either, when Turris was benched for two games, against his will.

Still, the 30-year-old will spend most of this training camp trying to forget a forgettable 2018-19 season that was littered with injuries and poor play.

He’ll also spend a fair amount of time playing left wing, not center, in an attempt to rejuvenate his confidence.

Turris was there during the first day of camp, playing with Ryan Johansen and Viktor Arvidsson.

Free-agent signee Matt Duchene, who is destined to be the second-line center, played with Filip Forsberg and Mikael Granlund.

"I wouldn’t write anything down in pen," Predators coach Peter Laviolette said. "We’re still trying to find the fit. Kyle’s going to get an opportunity, but other players are going to get the opportunity to jump up there and take down some minutes.

"That’s the position that’s open right now. We’re going to roll through some people. I talked to Kyle. It would be great if it was Kyle."

The offseason signing of Duchene creates a logjam at center for the Predators, which have more than $26 million tied up at the position.

But would playing Turris on the third or fourth line help him recover from last season’s disaster? Will a position change, allowing Turris to play with playmakers, make a big difference?

Time will tell.

"Kyle probably will be the first to admit he didn’t have the year he wanted to have – a couple of injuries – it didn’t happen for him," Predators general manager David Poile said. "Our secondary scoring wasn’t there."

Then Poile cut to the chase about the third overall pick of the 2007 draft.

"Kyle needs to be what he was when we first traded for him," he continued. "If he gets back to that level again, I don’t care where we play him. That’s going to be great for our team."

In other words, the only way for Turris, who carries a $6 million cap hit for the next five seasons, to crack the top two lines will be a position change.

Turris had four goals and 12 assists in his first 16 games with the Predators after he was acquired from the Senators early in the 2017-18 season.

"Every year can’t be a great year. There’s always ups and downs," Laviolette said. "Today starts a fresh day, a new year. That’s no different with Kyle."

Turris managed just seven goals and 16 assists in 55 games last season, and missed 25 because of injury.

He paused Saturday when asked whether he remembered the last time he played wing.

"Trying to think," he said. "There’s been spots here and there. ... It’s not something I’m completely unfamiliar with. I’m exited about the opportunity and looking to get more comfortable with it."

Turris never seemed comfortable last season. But he was a captain for Team Canada this summer during the men’s world championships and said that helped get his mind off last year.
After an MVP season, Daniel Carr is ready for more: ‘Nobody … dreams of playing in the American Hockey League’

By Adam Vingan

Sep 18, 2019

Sandwiched between the usual cliches about working hard and taking things one day at a time, Daniel Carr spoke the truth.

“Nobody wakes up in the morning when they’re 6 years old and dreams of playing in the American Hockey League,” he said.

It was a moment of unfiltered honesty, the kind you want to hear from a player eager to make a strong impression. After all, Carr is right. What hockey-loving kid imagines scoring the winning goal in Game 7 of the Calder Cup final?

Carr, 27, received the Les Cunningham Award last season as the AHL’s MVP, totaling 30 goals and 71 points in 52 games with the Chicago Wolves. He didn’t see much room for advancement with the Vegas Golden Knights, leading him to sign a league-minimum contract with the Predators in free agency.

“You look at the guys on this team that you can hopefully have the opportunity to play with,” Carr said. “I think that was the most appealing part. The guys here, there’s so many good players here that if you get the opportunity to play with them, who knows?”

The Predators’ objective during the offseason was to improve their offense, and general manager David Poile implied Sunday that the opening-night roster will be geared toward meeting that goal. That seems to bode well for Carr’s chances of making the team. (The risk of losing him through waivers also works in his favor.)

In 100 NHL games across four seasons with the Montreal Canadiens and Golden Knights, Carr has demonstrated an ability to get to the prime scoring areas around the net. Between 2015-18 with the Canadiens, Carr ranked 10th and 18th in the league, respectively, with 5.11 high-danger attempts and 0.86 expected goals per 60 minutes at five-on-five among 322 forwards with at least 500 minutes of ice time within that time frame.

Of course, success in the minor leagues doesn’t guarantee the same at the NHL level. The list of recent AHL MVPs is less a who’s who and more a “who’s that?” You have to go back to at least 2012-13, when Tyler Johnson won the award before graduating to the Tampa Bay Lightning, to find the last recipient who parlayed his MVP season into a steady job in the NHL.

Carr, despite his skill at generating high-quality chances, hasn’t been able to translate it into goals at the highest level, scoring 15 in his NHL career.

“I stopped trying to be so vanilla,” Carr said of his MVP season. “I think I got myself in trouble in the NHL. When you’re playing on the fourth line or your role changes every night, you can’t let yourself get vanilla. Vanilla gets you nowhere in hockey. As a player, you’ve got to keep the play moving and make plays, even if you’re on the fourth line. I think I’ve gotten better at that. When you’re not vanilla, you end up producing and making plays. That leads to offense and leads to production.

“You’ve got to be able to play hard, too. I played top six in the AHL, and everybody who’s AHL MVP is probably a top guy on their team playing big minutes. That doesn’t necessarily translate to the NHL, where you’ve got guys (in those roles) who are here for a reason. If you don’t play hard or can’t play a couple different roles, I don’t think it translates.”

Still, when considering the Predators’ general lack of offensive production from their depth wingers in recent seasons and their stated desire to have a more balanced attack, Carr would represent an upgrade over most of the forwards who have held those positions.

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<th>EXPECTED GOALS/60</th>
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Source: Corsica

Even after his candid remark, Carr was hesitant to declare that he’s proven all he can in the AHL. But it’s clear he’s eyeing something bigger.

“It’s not a sure thing for us or for Daniel,” Poile said. “But he’s been knocking on the door for a couple years, and the opportunities that he’s been given, they’ve been very limited, so I’m sure he would say the same thing from his standpoint. I mean, what if (Peter Laviolette) put him on a line with (Ryan Johansen) and (Viktor Arvidsson)? I guess you could find out right away whether he can do it. I don’t have a crystal ball to know what’s going to happen. I hope it works out for Daniel and for us.

“In the worst-case scenario, he adds to our depth. When you look at the 82-game schedule and the players you call up, what’s happened the past few years when we’ve run into injuries, we’ve been able to call up some decent players, but with all due respect, it’s been more for a lower line. To have Carr in our organization, whether he’s playing for us regularly or as a call-up, it all has good possibilities. I think he’s going to have an impact on our team at some point.”
NEW YORK -- The Devils used their home preseason opener on Monday to show off all their shiny new toys, with offseason additions Jack Hughes, P.K. Subban and Nikita Gusev making their first home appearances with the team.

Wednesday was that kind of night for the Rangers, but the Devils spoiled the Madison Square Garden debut of Artemi Panarin, Jacob Trouba and Kaapo Kakko.

With all three on the ice in the starting lineup, Devils forward Nico Hischier scored 37 seconds into the game, and goals from Mikhail Maltsev, Gusev and Brett Seney helped propel the Devils to a 4-3 victory over the Rangers at MSG.

Panarin did strike for a power-play goal in the second period, connecting on a one-timer from the top of the right circle off passes from Trouba and Kakko, to cut the Devils’ lead to 2-1 at 7:33. Panarin exited the game later in the same frame due to a mild groin strain, per the Rangers.

Following Hischier’s goal in the opening seconds of the game, Maltsev padded the Devils’ lead with a ridiculous finish in the closing seconds of the first period. He jumped a soft pass at the Rangers’ blue line before falling to his knees and dangling the puck past Rangers goalie Alexander Georgiev at 19:56.

And after Panarin pulled the Rangers within one goal, Gusev struck for his (unofficial) first NHL goal later in the second period to push the Devils’ advantage to 3-1. On a 2-on-1 rush, winger Brandon Baddock waited out Rangers defenseman Brady Skjei before sliding a pass to Gusev in the middle, where the Russian forward popped in a shot at 10:10.

A miscommunication between Cory Schneider and Ty Smith behind the Devils’ net led to a goal for Rangers forward Micheal Haley at 12:36 of the second period, making it 3-2. Schneider exited after the second period, finishing his second preseason game with 27 saves on 29 shots.

Seney pushed the Devils’ lead back to two goals when he poked in a John Hayden rebound at 3:55 of the third period. Lias Andersson scored on new Devils goalie Evan Cormier at 10:02 of the third period to make it 4-3, but the Devils rode out the final minutes to hold on for the victory.
NEW YORK -- If you were looking for a Russian forward to score a spectacular goal on Wednesday at Madison Square Garden, you probably would have pointed to Artemi Panarin of the Rangers or Nikita Gusev of the Devils.

Instead, it was Devils prospect Mikhail Maltsev who had you covered.

Maltsev gave the Devils a 2-0 lead over the Rangers when he scored in the closing seconds of the first period of Wednesday’s preseason game, and the 2016 fourth-round pick did so in style.

He jumped on a soft pass between Rangers defensemen Brandon Crawley and Brendan Smith, and Maltsev got tangled up with Smith while trying to drive toward net. He went to his knees, but managed to maintain control of the puck.

Maltsev then pulled the puck to his forehand at the left post, forcing Rangers goalie Alexander Georgiev to slide with him. That’s when Maltsev popped back up to his feet while pushing the puck to the middle of the crease on his backhand, allowing him to slide it into net.

The oddest thing about the goal was the clock malfunction that occurred during the play. The in-arena clock froze at 30 seconds, before eventually jumping and staying at 18.3, before Maltsev drove down and scored his goal. Referees conferred at the scorers’ table after the goal, and they determined four seconds were still on the clock when the puck entered the net.

So luckily for Maltsev, his highlight-reel goal counted.
NEW YORK -- The New Jersey Devils will dress Nico Hischier, Nikita Gusev, Jesper Boqvist, Jesper Bratt, Ty Smith and Cory Schneider when they continue their preseason schedule with a road game against the New York Rangers at 7 p.m. on Wednesday at Madison Square Garden.

While the Devils aren’t playing No. 1 draft pick Jack Hughes in the game, the Rangers will dress No. 2 overall pick Kaapo Kakko for the team’s first preseason contest. Artemi Panarin, who signed with the Rangers as a free agent during the offseason, will also make his debut with the team.

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Join NJ.com in our live chat in the comments section during the game.
Devils forward Pavel Zacha is still absent from the team's training camp while he and the team continue to get his work visa straightened away.

Zacha is currently in Toronto, according to multiple people familiar with the situation, where he's working on finishing the process to get his visa approved to return to camp. Zacha was briefly in Newark for the start of training camp, but he traveled to Toronto over the weekend in order to deal with his visa.

Zacha, a native of the Czech Republic, needs a P-1A Athlete work visa from United States immigration in order to play and live in the U.S. — the same goes for any foreign professional athlete playing and living in the country.

But in order to get the visa approved, it must be done so at an embassy outside the United States, hence Zacha’s travel to Toronto to complete the process.

Since Zacha didn’t sign his newest contract until the days leading up to training camp, it explains the delay in acquiring the visa, where others could get that paperwork done during the summer months.

Minnesota Wild forward Kevin Fiala also faced a similar visa issue after signing with the team as a RFA last week. He remained in Sweden during the start of camp while getting his approved.

Once the process is complete, Zacha will be able to quickly fly back to Newark to begin practicing with the team. The Devils didn’t expect the process to take more than a few days, so he should back on the ice relatively soon.
Miles Wood wasn’t planning on playing with Nikita Gusev during the Devils’ preseason opener. He got vaulted onto the same line as the Russian winger when Wayne Simmonds needed to miss the game with an injury, so Wood got to be one of the first players to see Gusev up close in game action.

Like a lot of other Devils who have seen Gusev in practice, Wood walked away impressed.

“His skill is clearly there. You can just look at that pass (to Jack Hughes in overtime) as just a blip of what he can do,” Wood said. “On the power play, he’s a special player. He can find the seams across ice, makes it tough on the opposing goaltender.”

During Gusev’s debut in the Devils’ 4-3 overtime win over the Boston Bruins on Monday, he made his biggest mark on the power play. Though he didn’t record any points in that state of the game, he quickly showed what kind of weapon he can be on the wing.

Gusev will skate with Nico Hischier and Jesper Boqvist in his second preseason game against the Rangers on Wednesday. The three haven’t played much together in training camp yet, but Hischier entered familiar with Gusev since they both played at the 2019 World Championships.

“You put him in line, give him the puck and something’s going to happen, he’s is a great playmaker,” Hischier said. “I think for sure there will be a little transition (for Gusev in North America). It was the same thing for me. But for me, I will say hockey’s hockey, and I’m pretty sure he’s going to do just fine.”

As the Devils continue to trim their camp roster and play more games over the next two weeks, more players will get the chance to skate with Gusev, and we’ll get a better idea of where exactly he’ll line up on opening night.

When the Devils traded for Gusev in July, the best-case scenario for his first NHL season was him quickly adapting and grabbing a top-six role with the team. Based on what he’s done so far, there’s a very good chance that happens.

“He’s slick with the puck, obviously. He has a pretty weird tape job from what I can see, but certainly with the puck he looks confident,” Taylor Hall said. “He’s a guy that’s probably going to be a lot of fun to play with.”
Jesper Boqvist is getting another big opportunity to show he's ready to make the jump to the NHL.

Boqvist will skate on the top line alongside Nico Hischier and Nikita Gusev when the Devils visit the Rangers in a preseason game at 7 p.m. on Wednesday at Madison Square Garden in New York.

Defenseman Ty Smith, who is also battling for a spot on the final NHL roster, will skate on the team's second defensive pairing with Damon Severson. Will Butcher and Sami Vatanen will play as the top pair.

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Jack Hughes, the No. 1 overall pick in the 2019 NHL Draft, will not play Wednesday, while Kaapo Kakko, the Rangers' pick at No. 2, will be in the lineup.

Star Ledger LOADED: 09.19.2019
Nearly one week into training camp, all players on the Devils’ roster have had the chance to start making their case for the final NHL team. With two preseason games in the books, we’re ready to take an early crack at picturing the final 23-man crew.

For each player on the roster, we’ve designated them in one of three tiers to show their odds of making the team:

**Lock** - The player is definitely making the roster.

**Good** - The player is in strong position to make the team, but needs to keep performing in camp.

**Fighting** - The player is battling for his spot.

So here’s a look at our latest projection for the Devils’ roster:

### FORWARDS (13)

- **Taylor Hall**
  - Roster odds: Lock
  - Hall has practiced each day so far in camp, keeping him on track to make his preseason debut later in the schedule in preparation for his full return on opening night.

- **Nico Hischier**
  - Roster odds: Lock
  - There’s not much to think about for Hischier, Palmieri, Zacha and Gusev. Assuming health, all will have top-nine roles on the roster all season.

- **Wayne Simmonds**
  - Roster odds: Lock
  - Simmonds was scratched from the Devils’ first preseason game due to a lower body injury. It’s not considered serious, so as long as he returns to the ice in the next two weeks, he’ll start the season on the roster.

- **Jack Hughes**
  - Roster odds: Lock
  - Hughes will be on the roster on opening night. That’s not a question. At this point, the rest of camp will determine where he lines up to start the season. He’ll likely be the second or third center, so he’ll have a few more weeks to show he’s ready to handle a top-six role right away.

### DEFENSEMEN (8)

- **P.K. Subban**
  - Roster odds: Lock
  - For the Devils’ top five defensemen, it’s pretty cut and dry. Vatanen has looked good so far partnered with Subban, and Severson is going to slot into the second pairing on the right side. It will be interesting to see if he ends up with Greene or Butcher, though. Butcher could make the case to see some top-four minutes early in the season.

- **Connor Carrick**
  - Roster odds: Lock
  - Mueller and Carrick are in similar spots. They will probably have to fight for playing time, but the Devils need depth on their blue line, and both can easily step in at any point to fill a role. Regardless of what the Devils do with Ty Smith, both should be on the final roster.

- **Ty Smith**
  - Roster odds: Lock
Cory Schneider
Roster odds: Lock

Mackenzie Blackwood
Roster odds: Lock

There’s plenty of competition among the Devils’ forwards and defensemen, but there’s virtually none for the two goalie spots. Schneider and Blackwood will be battling each other for playing time during the regular season, but barring injury, both will be on the NHL roster.

Compared to any past Devils roster projections I’ve done, this was by far the toughest. By including both Boqvist and Smith, that meant making some really tough decisions with the final spots.

The most notable absence here is Kevin Rooney, and even after all the roster moves the Devils made during the offseason, I wouldn’t have guessed I’d be leaving him off the opening-night roster. But I don’t see the Devils carrying just seven defensemen if they keep Smith, so he’s the odd-man out here. Of the players not included in the projection, Rooney has the best case for a roster spot.

Outside Rooney, there’s a big group of forward prospects that will still get the chance to make their cases for the remainder of camp. Michael McLeod is having a good preseason, while Joey Anderson, Nathan Bastian and Brett Seney all have NHL experience and could play their way into an NHL job to start the season.
Islanders trying to find something special for special teams

By Andrew Gross
andrew.gross@newsday.com  @AGrossNewsday
Updated September 18, 2019 10:06 PM

Pay little attention to any special teams play by the Islanders through two preseason games.

Exactly “zero point zero” time was spent on it during the first three days of training camp, per coach Barry Trotz, who said the real work begins on Thursday when practice resumes.

“That’ll be a common thing from now until the start of the season,” Trotz said before Tuesday night’s 3-2 preseason overtime win over the Flyers at NYCB Live’s Nassau Coliseum as he gave the team Wednesday off. “I want to get the foundation.”

The first two preseason games — the Islanders also won, 3-1, at Philadelphia on Monday night — did serve as a preliminary audition for spots on both the power play and particularly the penalty kill, missing Valtteri Filppula after the steady veteran center signed with the Red Wings as a free agent.

The team is a combined 0-for-7 on the man advantage, including a failed five-on-three on Monday night, and 7-for-7 on the penalty kill. But the players were essentially going off instinct, save for brief, pre-game meetings.

And Trotz spent plenty of time in each of the two games trying out different players on the penalty kill. Left wing Anthony Beauvillier got a long look on Monday and Derick Brassard and Mathew Barzal, typically known for their playmaking ability, each were on the penalty kill on Tuesday.

“You’re going to see guys killing penalties you’ve never seen before,” Trotz said. “You’re always looking at each individual player, if they have a role. You want to give them at least an opportunity to add something to the toolbox and we’ll see who’s going to do that.

“Mathew Barzal, can he kill a penalty?” Trotz added. “If he can, he’s a right-handed shot. There are a lot of attributes. He’s got speed. He’s got skill. He can become dangerous. The glamour position is the power play. The penalty killers are the ones that are sometimes the unsung guys that have to chew on pucks when things break down.”

With Filppula, the Islanders’ penalty kill ranked 17th in the NHL last season at 79.9 percent.

Barzal and Brassard each saw extensive power-play time as well on Tuesday and Trotz will need to manage their minutes if they are being used on both special teams. They showed good chemistry with each other at even strength as Barzal went cross-ice to set up Brassard’s one-timer to tie the game at 1 at 6:52 of the third period.

Assistant coach Jim Hiller is now running the power play, which finished 29th in the league last season at 14.5 percent under departed assistant coach Scott Gomez’s guidance. The Maple Leafs, with Hiller running their power play last season, ranked eighth at 21.8 percent.

Right wing Jordan Eberle spent time on the power-play point on Tuesday as did Noah Dobson, the 12th overall pick in 2018, who is in strong contention to earn a roster spot despite seven defensemen returning from last season.

Right wing Oliver Wahlstrom, the 11th overall pick in 2018 who has had a strong training camp, also figured prominently on the power play.
Thoughts on the Islanders’ first two preseason games, including the ‘sorting hat’ on defense

By Arthur Staple

Sep 18, 2019

A good chunk of the 67 Islanders participating in training camp got into some game action Monday and Tuesday. Here are some knee-jerk assessments from those opening two games against Flyers campers with a wide variety of pro experience. (Philly, like most teams, had a few of its NHL regulars play Monday at home and sent a large contingent of AHL players to the Coliseum on Tuesday.)

So here we go, with the full knowledge that some cuts will be made Wednesday with the Islanders off and Bridgeport’s camp set to open this weekend:

— The NHLeers who played Monday and Tuesday looked like NHLeers usually do in these early preseason games, and that’s a bit rusty and unfocused. Makes sense, given most of them know their spots are assured and they’re playing with one or two linemates they won’t see again once the camp numbers are pared down.

Mathew Barzal had a couple out-of-character moments on Tuesday, letting a puck slide away as he tided up a play alone in the high slot and then crashing into the end wall while trying to spin into one of his signature curls in the offensive zone. Of course, he followed that up with two beautiful assists on third-period goals, so not much to worry about there.

Also among the vets who looked solid were both Semyon Varlamov and Thomas Greiss. It’s never a bad thing to have your expected Nos. 1 and 1A goalies start off strong.

— You could do a little reading into Barry Trotz’s forward lines and D pairs, even though he reiterated his desire to see a mix of guys on lines and defense.

Barzal and Jordan Eberle together seems obvious, and you can expect to see them start working together more as the younger players are either sent down or back to junior. Matt Martin and Casey Cizikas are another obvious call, since Trotz isn’t messing with the fourth line.

Michael Dal Colle and Derick Brassard got a spin together on Tuesday to mixed results — not much outside of a third-period push happened and Trotz called out the entire lineup for wanting to play a contact-free game in the opening period.

Another interesting pairing was Anthony Beauvillier and Leo Komarov on the wings with Otto Koivula on Monday. Those three have worked together since camp began and, while the focus has been on the Finns and Komarov mentoring Koivula, Beauvillier was that LW3 in the playoffs last season and the line played reasonably well.

Of course, Valtteri Filppula was in the middle, not Brassard, the presumed 3C this year. Brassard and Beau trained together for a time in Montreal this summer, so maybe there’s something there. But that raises the question: If Beau is your LW3, who’s your LW1/2? Dal Colle could certainly get a look with, say, Brock Nelson and Josh Bailey, while Anders Lee slides in next to Barzal and Eberle as he did at the end of last season.

It’ll be something to watch as Trotz starts to form lines he wants to see in the regular season.

— On defense, the most intriguing pair is Nick Leddy and Noah Dobson, which got a ton of minutes on Tuesday. Dobson looked as advertised: calm in all zones and decisive. He made a couple of step-up plays to disrupt the Flyers in the neutral zone that you don’t normally see 19-year-olds make, even in the preseason.

If Dobson makes the roster, pairing him with Leddy seems to be the natural choice. Trotz said he’s got Adam Pelech and Ryan Pulock penciled in at the top of his defense once again and Devon Toews and Scott Mayfield have worked together for most of camp.

Where that leaves Thomas Hickey, who had a goal and a decent game on Monday, and Johnny Boychuk is … well, it’s still hard to say. Trotz went with a Harry Potter reference on Tuesday about the defense, saying he’s “got the sorting hat out.”

— We’ve discussed here almost since the middle of last season how a trade of one of the veteran defensemen would alleviate the crowd and, at least earlier in the offseason, possibly bring back a top-nine forward. The adding part seems to be past now, unless Lou Lamoriello is ready to send one of his defensemen (plus prospects and picks) to the Jets for one of their RFAs and then give Kyle Connor or Patric Laine a big contract.

That sounds complicated and unlikely. More likely may be trying to send Hickey and his monstrous hit of $2.5 million for the next three years somewhere to simply give Dobson room to join the squad; it’s easy to see a situation where Lamoriello increases whatever return he could bring by retaining some of Hickey’s cap hit.

Hickey was the first player Lamoriello signed — a four-year deal that got lost in the John Tavares shuffle last July 1. He’s as loyal as can be and he took the rarest of indignities — losing his spot in the lineup to an injury — with his usual professionalism. But there simply seems to be no room on this defense for him right now and it might be best for all parties if there’s a trade to be made.

Leddy works best with a stay-at-home type like Boychuk, but the Dobson pairing might bring out more of what Trotz wants and needs to see from Leddy, if he’s going to be strictly a 5v5/PP2/occasional PK guy. Namely, that’s being a little more aggressive, both physically and with the puck. He was physical on Tuesday and, while there weren’t many end-to-end rushes, Leddy seemed more assertive. If he’s going to be a regular and the partner of the franchise’s future No. 1 defenseman, Leddy has to step into the sort of role he’s never seemed comfortable performing.

— Trotz also said he feels center is as deep as he’s seen the position with the Islanders. If the Isles hadn’t signed Brassard, perhaps he’d feel differently. But it’s a compliment to the presumed Nos. 5 and 6 centers differently. But it’s a compliment to the presumed Nos. 5 and 6 centers.

— Another smart move by me, he joked. His fight with Stewart on Monday, then accepted Stewart’s fight Tuesday and, while there weren’t many end-to-end rushes, Leddy seemed more assertive. If he’s going to be a regular and the partner of the franchise’s future No. 1 defenseman, Leddy has to step into the sort of role he’s never seemed comfortable performing.

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Josh Ho-Sang had a decent game on Monday and he’s bulked up to 190 pounds, adding 10 pounds this offseason. He clearly knows getting knocked off pucks too easily was one of his issues the last few seasons. Whether he’s in the mix for a job is still up in the air, but he’s been quiet and present since the start of camp, so that’s a plus.

— Another depth player to watch down the road: Grant Hutton. He played alongside Hickey on Monday and didn’t look out of place. “Just trying to keep it simple, stay between my guy and the net,” he said. Like Jobst, Hutton is on the older end of the younger crowd, which could help him get steadier time in Bridgeport and climb the crowded depth chart on defense.
Rangers’ Artemi Panarin should be OK after injury scare

By Brett Cyrgalis
September 18, 2019 | 11:43PM

A bit of a scare went through Rangerstown when it was clear Artemi Panarin had left the bench late in the second period of the preseason opener Wednesday night at the Garden, then did not return to the game due to what the team called a “mild groin strain.”

But after the Rangers lost to the Devils, 4-3, with Panarin scoring a power-play goal before exiting, coach David Quinn quelled some concern.

“Just a mild groin strain, more precautionary than anything,” Quinn said. “Should be fine.”

Panarin didn’t play the final 6:16 of the second period after he managed three shots on net in five attempts over 12:59, skating on a top line with Kaapo Kakko and Mika Zibanejad. The 27-year-old Russian signed a seven-year, $81.5 million deal to join the Rangers this offseason, and has already impressed with his skill.

“It’s a big thing for me to play with him,” Kakko said. “He’s [such] a skillful player.”

It might have been a dream come true for native Long Islander and childhood Rangers fan Adam Fox to pull on the sweater and skate at the Garden. But his dad, Bruce, a former season-ticket holder, was not in attendance.

Adam said his dad sent him a text after the game, and Bruce seems to be waiting for the regular-season opener on Oct. 4 — assuming his son is on the team.

“He’s a tough nut to crack,” Adam said.

The No. 1 vs. No. 2 matchup will have to wait for another day — and likely the regular season — as the Devils sat top-overall pick Jack Hughes while the Rangers played second-overall Kakko. It’s unclear if Kakko would play in the second (and final) preseason meeting between the two clubs on Friday night in Newark.

The first regular-season game between the two is Oct. 17 at Prudential Center.

Hughes already made his preseason debut, scoring twice — including the game-winner — in a 4-3 win over the Bruins on Tuesday night in Newark.

Alexandar Georgiev started in goal for the Rangers and allowed three goals on 11 shots over 30:18 of ice time. He gave up a goal on the first shot of the game, a deft tip from Nico Hischier just 37 seconds in.

Georgiev was replaced by Igor Shesterkin, who allowed one goal on 13 shots over 27:28.
Igor Shesterkin’s hyped Rangers debut was years in the making

By Larry Brooks
September 18, 2019 | 11:33PM

The countdown, more than five years in the making, arrived at 10:10 of the second period of the Rangers’ exhibition opener against the Devils at the Garden on Wednesday.

That is when 23-year-old Igor Shesterkin, the Moscow-born 118th-overall selection of the 2014 entry draft, replaced Alexandar Georgiev in nets and thus made his quasi-varsity debut in Blue.

The goaltender has represented his native land in the World Championships. He has been in nets in KHL playoff games for SKA St. Petersburg.

Yet this …

“It is [such an] important game for me,” the Moscow native told The Post, without aid of an interpreter, before the game. “My first time at MSG. So I am a little bit nervous. I want to play really well. From the time when I was drafted, it has been my goal to play for Rangers. “All the years, I have wanted this.”

Shesterkin did fine, surrendering one goal on 13 shots in 27:28 of work before being pulled for the extra attacker in the Rangers’ 4-3 victory. He seemed spry and technically sound, beaten only by Brett Seney’s third-period rebound off a blocker save on John Hayden from a sharp angle from the right.

He made a nifty left pad save on Nico Hischier with 5:10 remaining in the second period and soon after reached back into the crease to cover the puck after Nikita Gusev had rung one off the left post. It was a nimble and heady maneuver, and after all these years of waiting for the netminder, the crowd responded with chants of “Igor, Igor.”

You of course know Shesterkin has long been considered the heir apparent to Henrik Lundqvist. The line of succession is no longer so clear or immediate, given Georgiev’s excellent play last season. There is also the understood degree of difficulty in making the transition from the large European rinks to the North American game.

Still, nothing that has transpired since Shesterkin first reported for duty a couple of weeks ago has dimmed his future star or wounded the goaltender’s confidence.

“It’s my first time playing on smaller rinks, so it has been a little bit hard for me,” Shesterkin said. “I would like to be better every day, so I am working hard and am getting more comfortable all the time with this transition.”

Shesterkin, who will turn 24 on Dec. 30, has been working assiduously with goaltending coach Benoit Allaire. They communicate through goalie-speak, which is the same language used when Henrik Lundqvist made the transition from Sweden during his rookie 2005 NHL training camp.

“I remember that I was a little too aggressive my first couple of weeks before Benny pulled me back,” Lundqvist said. “I had to adjust. But I felt pretty comfortable, pretty fast.

“Benny allows you to play your own style and then he critiques and works with you on adjustments. It’s different for everybody. I talk to Igor, of course, and I like what I see from his talent and his work ethic, he has very quick feet, but I don’t give him technical advice.

“What works for me might not work for Georgie or Igor. It’s very personal.”

The additions of second-overall selection Kaapo Kakko and free agent signee Artemi Panarin have been the talk of Rangerstown for weeks. Kakko hardly looked out of his element, involved throughout in 20:50 of ice time that included 5:48 on the first power-play unit. Panarin ripped a one-timer home from the top of the left circle on a second-period power play, but left the match before the end of the period with a “mild groin strain” the Rangers said was not at all serious. We’ll see.
Rangers' power play already looks drastically different

By Brett Cyrgalis
September 18, 2019 | 11:03PM

Watching the Rangers power play operate — even after just a short amount of practice and one measly preseason camp — is a smack in the face, revealing how much more offensive skill exists on the roster compared to a year ago.

The cross-ice saucer passes from Artemi Panarin to Kaapo Kakko are a thing to behold, as are the one-touch passes from Mika Zibanejad in the middle. Jacob Trouba orchestrates from the top with deft puck movement and a blistering low shot, while Chris Kreider sets up for screens in front, also using his big body to win loose-puck battles.

That top unit took their skills from practice to the exhibition opener, with Panarin scoring on one of four man-advantages during the team’s 4-3 loss to the Devils on Wednesday night at the Garden.

“Even if they hadn’t spent much time together — if any at all — up to three days ago, they certainly found some chemistry,” coach David Quinn said. “There is pace to the power play, and so far, so good.”

Panarin left the game after the second period with a mild groin strain that doesn’t seem too concerning, but that came after he rifled home a one-timer from the top of the left circle — assisted by Trouba and Kakko, to make the fans’ mouths water. Earlier in the game, the quintet managed to hit three posts in a matter of 10 seconds or so, also forcing Devils goalie Cory Schneider to make a sprawling save in the sequence.

And this was all done with no mention of a second power-play unit that could have the offensive talent of Adam Fox, Filip Chytil, Pavel Buchnevich and Vitali Kravtsov.

Yes, it’s early. Very early.

But the man-advantage is where the Rangers’ uptick in skill has been most apparent.

“You don’t have to coach when the power play is clicking,” Quinn said. “To me, a power play, you give them some structure, and give them the mindset, some things you look to do. But at the end of the day, they’re out there and they have to read off the penalty kill.”

It’s going to be hard for penalty kills to read when Panarin has such a dangerous shot for a player with a penchant to distribute. And with his righty-shot from the left circle, and Kakko’s lefty-shot from the right circle, the threat of pucks going towards the net is omnipresent.

Which is also what is keeping Kreider on his toes in front, with such skill around him now that he can be deceived as much as the opposition.

“Some players are pretty good at hitting the other team with misdirection, and it’s just getting comfortable with the things they’re trying to sell to manipulate the penalty kill,” Kreider said. “It’s knowing they’re trying to sell ‘this’ because they’re going to take ‘that.’ There’s a steep learning curve for me. I’m sure I’ll get popped by a couple pucks that I don’t expect, and I’m sure that I’ll miss a couple screens early.

“But there’s a reason those players are as good as they are, and why their skills are so effective. It’s because they’re constantly hiding what they’re trying to do.”

When it comes to expectations for the power play as a whole, Quinn laid it out simply by saying: “A lot of goals. A lot of production. Even when your power play looks good, it gives your whole team a lift.”

This past season, when the Rangers continued their rebuilding and missed the playoffs for the second straight year, their power play ranked 17th in the league, scoring on 19.4 percent of their chances. A lot of things, between now and the season-opener Oct. 4, will determine if they’re going to improve in that area, but one thing the man-advantage has already made clear is that there has been a large improvement in the amount of offensive skill on the roster.

“Yeah, a lot of skill,” Kreider said. “A lot of potential.”
Artemi Panarin leaves New York Rangers preseason opener with ‘mild groin strain’

Vincent Z. Mercogliano, NHL writer
Published 9:13 p.m. ET Sept. 18, 2019 | Updated 1:01 a.m. ET Sept. 19, 2019

NEW YORK - Artemi Panarin began his first night as a player for the home team at Madison Square Garden on a high note, but the welcome party ended early.

The New York Rangers’ big free agent addition scored the first goal of the preseason in the second period during a 4-3 loss to the New Jersey Devils on Wednesday. Shortly thereafter, he exited with what the team announced was a “mild groin strain.”

After the game, coach David Quinn said they were just being overly cautious with their new star winger.

"More precautionary than anything," Quinn said. "He should be fine."

Before the groin tweak, Panarin had been a spark while placed on the top line for the night with Mika Zibanejad and No. 2 overall draft pick Kaapo Kakko. Those three teamed with Chris Kreider and Jacob Trouba on what looked like a strong power play unit through the first period and a half. They were on the ice together when Trouba set up Panarin with a one-timer for the first goal. Kakko also had an assist on the play.

"Of course I feel it’s a big thing for me to play with him," Kakko said of Panarin. "He’s a such a skillful player, and of course, there are good players on the (power play) like Trouba, Kreider and Mika. We can play better, but so many chances."

Panarin was signed to a seven-year, $81.5 million deal during the offseason after averaging 80 points per season in his first four NHL campaigns. He’s been one of the main reasons the Rangers are expected to be much-improved in 2019-20.

Kaapo Kakko is a cool customer

Even though he’s only 18, it doesn’t seem like much fazes the Finnish rookie.

When asked if he was nervous for his first game at MSG, Kakko shrugged and said, "Not really."

He exhibited the same cool demeanor during a conversation with Quinn at the MSG Training Center Wednesday morning.

"He’s played in some big games, so excited was probably more what he was than nervous," Quinn said. "I said to him in the pregame skate this morning, ‘Are your parents going to be able to watch?’ He said, ‘Yeah, they’re going to be watching on the internet.’ Then I skated around and said, ‘I’ll bet all of Finland will be watching.’ He goes, ‘Probably.’ "

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NY Rangers star Mika Zibanejad happy to ‘let the hockey talk’ while others get attention

Vincent Z. Mercogliano, NHL writer

Published 2:46 p.m. ET Sept. 18, 2019 | Updated 9:32 p.m. ET Sept. 18, 2019

TARRYTOWN – The New York Rangers’ best player last season was Mika Zibanejad.

Few would argue with that.

But through the first week of training camp for the 2019-20 season, he hasn’t received the attention that most top players in the NHL do. That’s been reserved for shiny new toys like Artemi Panarin, Jacob Trouba and No. 2 overall draft pick Kaapo Kakko.

That’s fine with Zibanejad, who actually seems to prefer it that way.

“You just let the hockey talk,” he said after Tuesday’s practice.

The talented center is coming off a breakout season—one in which he carried the team and continued to produce after a trade deadline selloff which saw linemate and close friend Mats Zuccarello among the players dealt.

He finished with a career-high 74 points, which was 22 more than any other Ranger.

“I don’t think that should change your effort level,” Zibanejad said of the trades. “That shouldn’t change your mindset of giving your all. I played with (Chris Krieder) and (Pavel Buchnevich), and we had a good thing going. You want to win. There’s two months out of the season left. It’s going to be a long two months if you just give up. I think we tried to stick to it. Some nights were harder than others, but at the end of the day, it’s hopefully something good for this year.”

Zibanejad came to the Rangers in a 2016 offseason trade with the Ottawa Senators in exchange for Derick Brassard. (The Rangers also sent a 2018 seventh round pick and received a second-rounder.)

That trade looks like a steal now.

Henrik Lundqvist is one of the few remaining teammates from when Zibanejad first arrived in New York.

“You could see the skill when he came here,” the veteran goaltender said. “Obviously, I’d played against him, too, but when he came here his first year, you could see he was very skilled with the puck. But the last year and a half, he’s really looked so strong on the puck. It’s really hard to get the puck from him. His skill, now he uses it at the right time. He’s aware of puck management. He’s a very smart player on both sides of the rink.”

The skill was one thing, but learning how to prepare his body was another.

That took more time — and figuring it out may have been the key to Zibanejad’s success last season.

“Mika didn’t do a great job of taking care of himself early in his career and conditioning was an issue,” coach David Quinn said. “(Now) he’s a guy that can skate, he’s quick, and he played a lot of minutes for us last year. ... We demanded a lot from him. We put him in all key situations and there really weren’t many nights, if any, where you thought, ‘Mika looks a little tired.’”

It’s a lesson that Zibanejad has tried to impart on his younger teammates.

He specifically mentioned spending time with fellow Swede Lias Andersson, who Quinn has praised during training camp for his added strength and improved conditioning.

“Mika certainly has done a heck of a job mentoring him,” Quinn said. “It actually cost me a dinner at TAO (a restaurant in New York City) last year when I walked in and those two were sitting there having dinner, and I was nice enough to buy them dinner.”

It’s that type of leadership which has led to discussion about Zibanejad as a candidate to be the Rangers’ next captain.

He’s only 26 — “I always think he’s older because he’s been in the league for a while now,” Lundqvist said — and he’s not the loudest presence in the locker room. But as Quinn noted, “He’s got a great way about him to keep it even-keeled.”

Zibanejad doesn’t seem entirely comfortable talking about the “C” word.

He quietly worked his way into the conversation as one of the better forwards in the league, and if he becomes the next captain, he’s going to do it the same way.

“It’s nothing that I really focus on,” he said. “We have great leaders in here, so for me to be part of that leadership group last year was obviously a huge honor for a team like this. I didn’t think last year changed me in any way of how I am as a person, or what you would call a leader or whatever. I don’t think anything has changed — and nothing is going to change.”

Bergen Record LOADED: 09.19.2019
NY Rangers training camp battle: Which forwards will fill out the bottom of the roster?

Vincent Z. Mercogliano, NHL writer
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TARRYTOWN - The intrigue surrounding how the New York Rangers will deploy new forwards Artemi Panarin and Kaapo Kakko has been a hot topic early in training camp. What the top line will look like — which coach David Quinn has said will start with Panarin, Mika Zibanejad and Pavel Buchnevich — and where the rookie sensation from Finland fits in are important questions to ask.

But what about the forwards further down on the depth chart? The Rangers are dealing with a logjam — a good problem to have — but eventually decisions are going to have to be made about which players will fill out the bottom of the roster.

"When you add players of that talent, your lineup gets longer and better," Quinn said. "That's just the bottom line."

A healthy mix of prospects and veterans makes the final few forward spots the most difficult to predict.

Quinn has sent the message to his team that there are positional battles to be won.

"Our competition is real here, and I said to our guys before training camp that I think they'd be hard-pressed to find a training camp in our league that has more opportunity than ours," Quinn said Tuesday. "Not just from a making the roster standpoint, but putting yourself in a spot on the roster. These (preseason) games mean an awful lot, and we're looking forward to seeing what these guys can tomorrow night against a different opponent."

Wednesday night's preseason opener at home against the New Jersey Devils will have added significance for the forwards who are on the fringe.

Let's start with who we will know will make the final cut. The top line is set with Panarin, Zibanejad and Buchnevich, while Kakko has been grouped on the initial second line with Chris Kreider and Filip Chytil.

It gets crowded after that.

Ryan Strome figures to make the roster one way or another, whether he's playing center or on the wing. Vlad Namestnikov is also a virtual lock, and it would be a surprise to see either Jesper Fast, an alternate captain last year, or Brendan Lemieux, who signed a one-year deal last week, miss the cut.

Those four could easily be the wingers on the third and fourth lines. And as we touched on earlier this week, the Rangers are giving youngsters Lias Andersson and Brett Howden every chance to lock up the center positions on those lines.

So where does that leave depth pieces like Boo Nieves, Vinni Lettieri, Greg McKegg, Danny O'Regan, Phil Di Giuseppe and Michael Haley? They each have varying NHL experience and could make the roster as an extra forward or be sent to AHL Hartford.

And then there's the biggest wild card of them all: 2018 first-round pick Vitali Kravtsov.

"He's definitely in the mix and I really like his progression," Quinn said. "He made strides while he was out in Traverse City. I thought he got off to a little bit of a slow start, but I thought as the tournament went on, he got better and better. I think you can say the same thing here in training camp."

Kravtsov is only 19, but he's highly-skilled and looks like he could make a real impact this season. But he's clearly behind Kakko on the depth chart and would have to bump Fast, Lemieux, Andersson or Howden out of the lineup to crack the third or fourth line.

The Rangers will likely carry a 13th forward, and maybe a 14th, but they'll only dress 12 per game. That means an extra forward or two will be a healthy scratch most nights, which is easier to stomach for a journeyman like McKegg or Di Giuseppe than it would be for developing players like Kravtsov or Andersson.

Would Quinn rather see a young player get consistent playing time in Hartford if they weren't assured a nightly role with the Blueshirts?

"It's a good question, but it's hard to answer," he said. "Some players you can say, 'You know what? He's going to be better off being in Hartford.' And there are some players you'll say, 'He's probably better off being here.' ... It's all up to the individual."

It'll be hard to deny Kravtsov and Andersson if they play well in the preseason games, but at who's expense? We should find out soon.

"I'll have a clearer picture after another week-to-10 days," Quinn said.

Bergen Record LOADED: 09.19.2019
Artemi Panarin scores a goal, then leaves with injury in Rangers’ preseason loss to Devils

By Colin Stephenson

Updated September 18, 2019 10:54 PM

Artemi Panarin, the electric winger who made his preseason debut for the Rangers Wednesday night, scored a power play goal, but was forced to leave the game against the Devils at Madison Square Garden in the second period with what the team said was “a mild groin strain.”

“Just a mild groin strain, more precautionary,” Rangers coach David Quinn said of Panarin after the Rangers’ 4-3 loss. “He should be fine.”

Panarin, the former Columbus Blue Jackets star who signed a seven-year, $81.5 million contract with the Rangers in July, scored the first goal for the Rangers on a power play at 7:33 of the second period. He blasted home a one-timer from the top of the left wing circle off a pass from Jacob Trouba to get the Rangers on the board after the Devils had scored the first two goals of the game. But he left the game midway through the period. Chris Kreider, who had been playing left wing on the second line, moved up to take Panarin’s spot on the first line, with Mika Zibanejad and rookie Kaapo Kakko.

Before he left, Panarin was part of a Rangers power play that seemed dominant, and despite scoring only one goal in four attempts, the extra man unit – with Panarin, Zibanejad, Kreider, Kakko and Trouba making up the first group – generated many chances and shots on goal. Overall, the Rangers outshot the Devils 42-24 and the power play was responsible for much of that.

“I was a little shocked, to be honest with you,” Zibanejad said of the power play’s performance. “First game with that group – we had one practice (Tuesday) and a little bit this morning, but I thought we moved the puck well.

“The biggest thing was the second pucks, I think, after the shot - the rebounds, the loose pucks that we won back – we were able to keep the momentum, and we didn’t have to start over again from behind our net,” he said. “I think that was a big thing. The power play was clicking.”

Zibanejad had a game-high eight shots on goal. Kakko and Kreider had four shots each, and Trouba and Panarin each had three. On one power play, the Rangers hit the post three times.


“I was going like this when I put it through his legs,” Kreider said, raising his arms in the universal hockey goal celebration.
Rangers’ Brendan Smith could be assigned to minors to free up cap space

By Colin Stephenson

Updated September 18, 2019 11:15 PM

The NHL’s salary cap is unforgiving, and has already forced the Rangers to cut ties to one veteran defenseman this offseason — they bought out Kevin Shattenkirk at the end of July. And there’s been plenty of speculation that Brendan Smith might soon be another victim. Or he could be assigned to the minor leagues in order to free up cap space the team might need to preserve roster flexibility.

Smith, who is entering the third year of a four-year contract that carries an average annual value of $4.35 million, insists he hasn’t been paying attention to the speculation. Instead, he said, he has been focused on doing the things he needs to do to secure a spot on the opening night roster.

“You come out and try and give it your best,” Smith said before Wednesday’s preseason opener against the Devils at the Garden.

“Everybody has certain qualities that, if they can achieve them at their best in camp, you showcase that, and you fall into where you belong.”

Smith signed a four-year, $17.4 million deal with the Rangers in the summer of 2017 after he was acquired in a trade deadline deal from the Detroit Red Wings that February and playing well for the Rangers the rest of the season and in the playoffs. But in the fall, Smith reported to camp a little too heavy, and he didn’t play well when the season started. Midway through the season, he was placed on waivers and sent down to AHL Hartford.

He reported to camp a year ago in much better shape, and, playing for coach David Quinn, with whom he had a good relationship ever since Quinn tried to recruit him to play college hockey a decade earlier, Smith made the roster and played in 63 games last season. He had four goals, five assists and was a minus-7.

Some of those 63 games were spent playing forward, and Quinn has said during camp the 6-2, 200-pound Smith figures to be a “swingman” this season, playing some defense and some forward. Smith prepared for that role by working with his brother, Reilly, a forward for the Vegas Golden Knights all summer, and he said he’s prepared to play whatever position Quinn asks him to play.

“I just want to help the team win — and I want to play,” he said. “By helping the team win, I want to contribute in either way. And to me, it doesn’t matter. Coach has the confidence in me on both sides of the ice, so, that’s obviously a quality.”

It all sounds good, but the Rangers are up against the cap, and even if Smith — who played on defense Wednesday, partnered with youngster Brandon Crawley — plays well in the preseason, the team would save $1.075 million under the cap if it were to stash Smith in Hartford. And the Rangers will need savings, especially if unsigned restricted free agent defenseman Tony DeAngelo signs a deal and comes to camp. If that happens, Smith’s fate could be sealed, no matter how well he plays.
Panarin: (Soon to be known here as the item "Daily Bread.") On the third power play, Kreider’s clever skate-kick back to Trouba started a play that ended with Kreider one-timing a Zibanejad pass in the slot. Schneider stopped that one.

Moments after the next draw, won by Zibanejad, Panarin one-timed a Trouba pass through Schneider, perhaps off defenseman Will Butcher. Kakko got the second assist, cutting the Devils’ lead to 2-1.

He was creative, and well, exactly what the Rangers thought they were getting … until he left the game.

Kakko: For an 18-year-old who never played a pro game on this continent, there was plenty to see.

“So good,” he said of the debut. “Of course, I feel like it’s so big thing for me to play with (Panarin), so skilful player, and of course all the players on the PP, like Trouba, Mika, Kreider. So, we can play better, but so many chances.”

Was he nervous.

“Not so much,” he said.

“He’s played in some big games, so ‘excited’ was probably more of what it was than nervous,” Quinn said. “I said to him in the pregame skate this morning, ‘Are your parents going to be able to watch?’ He said, ‘Yeah, they’ll be able to watch on the Internet.’ I said, ‘All of Finland will be watching.’ He goes, ‘Prob-ab-ly.’”

Kreider noticed something familiar, too.

“Kakko wants the puck on his stick,” Kreider said. “He’s got it on a string, that tiny little stick that’s tight to his toes. It’s hard to poke it off him. It kind of reminds me of Marty St. Louis, just in terms of how tight it is to his feet. Panarin does a lot of the same things. Mika, too. He’s got it in tight, baits guys to him and creates space. And he plays a very heavy game for an 18-year-old, making good reads to get on pucks, then he’s holding onto pucks. He’s just going to get better.”

He had a good chance outside the left post very early, but Schneider squeezed the post to stop him. On the first power play, he took a cross-ice pass from Panarin, then sent it back across the rink again for a Zibanejad one-timer that Schneider smothered.

Kravtsov: Almost immediately after the Panarin goal, Kravtsov followed with a pair of chances — one on a breakaway as he tried to go five hole, and another off a pass from Lias Andersson. Kravtsov had another chance from Zibanejad and tried to go between his own legs before the play was broken up. Midway through the third, Kravtsov assisted on Andersson’s goal to cut it to 4-3.

“I really like his progression,” Quinn said a day earlier. “The thing I love about him is he’s very coachable. He wants to learn. You say something to him, he absorbs it and he gets better at it.”

Fox: He didn’t go viral at Traverse City as Kakko did, but, paired with Matt Robertson, who’s a legit prospect himself, he was the Rangers’ best player in that tournament. And against New Jersey, Fox looked solid again, paired with Libor Hajek. He’s gonna be the goods.

“I’ve coached against him many times. Too many,” Quinn said of his Boston University days. “And obviously, when we made the trade, I had a lot of familiarity with him and knew he had an NHL brain. The question was, was he going to be able to defend quick enough, and compete quick enough, to be successful at this level, and so far he’s done that very well. Playing as fast as he does, with his brain — I know he’s got the skill set — you saw what can happen tonight. He made a lot of great plays tonight. I loved the way he defended. A lot of good things out of him tonight.”

Asked what some of the things are he needs to see from Fox, Quinn said, “Things from a defensive perspective — gap control, stick positioning, things of that nature, faceoff coverage. Things he’s capable of learning. He went to Harvard, so …”

Answering our own questions: Rangers writers preview the preseason

Shesterkin: He replaced Georgiev midway through the second, as soon as the Devils scored their third goal, and when he acrobatically covered a loose puck that had dented the post, the place chanted “Igor, Igor” … and why not? Fans have been hearing and reading about Shesterkin for a
long time — he was a fourth-round pick in 2014 and deemed Henrik Lundqvist’s successor for years.

For a first time out, he was pretty good. Much better than his debut in Traverse City.

One more thing, because some readers brought it up: SKA’s home rink, in which Shesterkin played in Russia, is indeed Olympic-sized. There was some talk that it had been converted to North American-sized, but while that is happening where it’s economically feasible in Russia, he played on the big rink. Hence, as he has said, it’s important for him to get used to the angles and such while playing on the smaller rinks here. And he almost certainly is going to start in Hartford.

Thoughts
1. Kakko-Meter: I looked in the team stores and there is nary a “Kakko” jersey to be had, which continues the mystery: Will Kakko return to his old No. 24 (Boo Nieves has switched from No. 24 to No. 15) or will he stay with No. 45? My theory now goes like this: Kakko doesn’t want to be presumptive and assume he will be on the team opening night, so he’s waiting until Oct. 3 to switch to No. 24. Thus, the Rangers aren’t making his jersey available with No. 45. Otherwise, the store would be filled with his jerseys and they’d be flying off the hangers.

2. Thirty-seven seconds in, Nico Hischier got away from Zibanejad’s check and deflected Sami Vatanen’s shot past Georgiev. 1-0. A quick minus-1 for Zibenajad, Panarin, Kakko, Skjei and Trouba.

3. Early first, Micheal Haley hit Connor Carrick high and hard and hardly dirty. Brandon Braddock tossed the gloves and challenged Haley, who chucked his mitts, too, for an extremely disappointing bout. Of course there was no instigator. The rule has apparently been erased.

4. Whenever I see Haley, I think of the five All-Stars who were on the ice for the Rangers for the final goal of the John Tortorella era — in Boston in 2013, just before the mutiny. Haley, Kris Newbury and Arron Asham, and Roman Hamrlik and Steve Eminger. And you wonder how the Rangers lost that series.

5. Kreider looks stronger and faster than ever — and very motivated, and not just because it’s his walk year. He threw some thumping hits. I think the Rangers would love to keep him on a new deal. I think it’s going to be nearly impossible to do so, especially given the cap situation that will be created by the dead cap space for the Shattenkirk buyout next season.

6. The Devils were quicker on pucks, at least at the start. In the final seconds of the first — with the clock frozen at 18.3 seconds left — Mikhail Maltsev broke in against Brendan Smith. As he went around Smith, Maltsev’s arm caught Smith in the mush. The defenseman spun around to check his mouth as Maltsev put a move on Georgiev and scored a beaut. 2-0. Eventually, the clock was corrected to have four seconds left, but there was a question whether the period should have expired before the goal.

7. After the Rangers cut it to 2-1, Nikita Gusev sped in behind Nieves and Trouba, after a failed Skjei snow angel, and neatly beat Georgiev to make it 3-1.

8. Haley was the beneficiary of a Greg McKegg steal, with Schneider behind the net, for an empty-netter to make it 3-2 and make Haley an assist short of a Gordie Howe hat trick.

9. The first line (minus Panarin) and first pair were out again for the fourth Devils goal, by Brett Seney (unchecked by Zibanejad).

10. Good Tony, Bad Tony: Not sure what Tony DeAngelo is thinking he’s going to accomplish by not signing and getting into camp. He’s not going to squeeze any extra cash and he’s not helping his career sitting out. Yes, the Rangers need him and his righty shot on the back end. No, they won’t crack … nor can they, with their cap situation. It’s sticky, but it can’t really end well.

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Answering our own questions: Rangers writers discuss the team’s biggest storylines heading into the preseason

By Rick Carpiniello and Shayna Goldman

Sep 18, 2019

After an offseason filled with changes such as the drafting of Kaapo Kakko, signing of Artemi Panarin and prospects Vitali Kravtsov and Igor Shesterkin and trades for defenders Jacob Trouba and Adam Fox, the 2019-20 New York Rangers are going into the season with a new look.

Preseason gives us the first chance to get a glimpse of those upgrades on the ice in a game setting. Since there’s a lot to keep an eye on over the next few weeks, we’re going to go through some players and storylines to watch.

Which player has the most to gain moving forward under coach Quinn this season?

Goldman: Lias Andersson. I think Andersson’s style — from his two-way play to his hard-nosed attitude — really fits with head coach David Quinn. It’s just a matter of earning minutes and maintaining. Quinn has noted already how he wants to see Andersson at his natural position of center in the bottom-six. Andersson’s offseason training may be what earns him the third-line role instead of the fourth. It’s up to Andersson to take those minutes and run with it to show that he belongs. I think he can do that. As long as he shows the coach that he’s growing and working hard, he’ll continue to get chances.

Carpiniello: I’m going with Brady Skjei, who is going to get the opportunity to finally be a first-pair defenseman while playing with his childhood buddy Jacob Trouba – arguably the best righty partner Skjei has had as a pro. With Skjei’s size and speed he ought to be able to handle more responsibility. Despite his indecisiveness — probably what has held him back so far — he’s a smart, heady player. It’s actually surprising that Skjei hasn’t earned a top-pair spot the last two seasons and that the Rangers felt they had to trust Marc Staal in that type of role last season.

Which player has the most to lose?

RC: It’s funny, but these first two questions can be the same player(s), because with opportunity comes the possibility of great success or great failure. But I’ll go with another player who is being given (though ultimately he has to earn) a great chance to shine. That is Pavel Buchnevich, who will at least start in the primo position of right wing with Artemi Panarin and Mika Zibanejad.

They say that if you want to see what a guy is made of, if you want to push him, give him more and see what he can handle. Buchnevich showed Quinn a lot late last season and that he learned that being engaged can’t be a part-time gig. When he was engaged, he shined. Playing with Panarin and Zibanejad, he’s going to get chances to dipsy-doodle and he’s going to get tons of chances to score goals. But as I said, with such opportunity comes the possibility of failure. I’m not saying Buchnevich will fail, nor do I think he will. I suspect he’ll be terrific there. If not? Then what?

SG: Buchnevich is definitely a leading pick here. Each year, we’ve been waiting for him to break out. If not this year alongside Panarin and Zibanejad, then when? There won’t be that many more opportunities. But Quinn is betting on Buchnevich to show his skill on a consistent basis and putting him in the best position to do so. The only reason for a demotion should be because of playing styles, whether Kaapo Kakko’s style is more fitting with Zibanejad and Panarin or if the second line is in need of a winger.

Another player who I think has a lot to lose is Tony DeAngelo. Here’s an example of another skater who has to put his skill on display consistently at the NHL level. Last year was a step in the right direction, but there were still disciplinary issues that left him sitting in the press box for a few games. Plus, he had to battle Neal Pionk for minutes at times.

With the buyout of Kevin Shattenkirk, there should be a slot open for him on the right side of the blue line unless another player earns it in training camp while he’s still unsigned. DeAngelo has every right to advocate for himself and his next contract, but a holdout could give him quite the hill to climb if his slot in the lineup is filled. There’s only so much time for DeAngelo to show that he can reach his ceiling. If Adam Fox surpasses him on the depth chart or he can’t reach expectations before incoming prospects join the team, it could leave him without a role in New York.

Who could be the biggest surprise this season?

RC: Brett Howden. Yeah, he had his share of struggles and slumps as a first-year pro and his underlying stats weren’t very good. But I think this is a hockey player, with hockey player DNA, good instincts, good skating and size and a great motor. The coach loves him and I think he’ll make a big improvement over last season with the coaching he gets and the work he’s done this summer.

SG: Lias Andersson. I think the expectations are too high for Andersson and have been from the start. He moved around a lot in his first year of professional hockey. Last year wasn’t great either. While he didn’t do enough to move up in the lineup and Quinn isn’t the kind of coach to just hand out ice time without a player earning it, he should have been in a better position to start.

This year, Andersson may start out as the team’s third-line center. That, paired with his offseason training and the shared spotlight with other incoming prospects — who unlike last year, won’t all be vying for the same position — could help him succeed and maintain the 3C role.

Who could be the biggest disappointment?

SG: Over the last few years, the expectations have been very high for incoming defensemen from Keith Yandle to Shattenkirk and Brendan Smith. That may once again happen with Trouba, who is coming in as a legitimate first-pair defenseman. As much as that elevates the blue line, he alone can’t fix it. So while I don’t think he’ll actually be disappointing, I think if expectations are too high, which they could be, then there may be that perception.

Also, maybe Ryan Strome. I’m very doubtful that he can repeat shooting 22.5 percent, which was just less than double his career best of 11.4 and more than double his career average of 10. He could still be serviceable, but I doubt the Rangers see him score at that rate again.

RC: Again, not that I think Andersson will be a disappointment, but if he is it won’t be good. He has drawn a lot of ire due to the place he was picked in the draft. Like Howden, he does a lot of good things on the other side of the puck and is a smart player. But the Rangers have three young centers and they are backed up by three somewhat older centers in Ryan Strome, Boo Nieves and Greg McKegg. The Rangers are going to give Andersson a chance to be a better player and he has improved his strength and conditioning. But there will be pressure to not disappoint.

Which combination/pair are you most looking forward/hoping to see in preseason?

RC: Filip Chytil and Kaapo Kakko, with Chris Kreider on the left. Chytil is the Rangers’ No. 2 center, ready or not. He thinks he’s ready at barely 20 years old. Kakko, at 18, well, you know all about him and the expectations of what he will be. And Kreider the mentor is due to have a big season as he plays for the big contract that very likely will result in this being his final season as a Ranger. This line could make or break the Rangers’ chances to compete for a playoff spot.

SG: Kreider-Chytil-Kakko was the combination I was going to pick because I think it’ll be interesting to see how two dominant puckpossessing wingers play on the same line, as well as three players who can get the puck to the dangerous areas of the ice.

Luckily, they aren’t the only line to talk about. Panarin-Zibanejad-Buchnevich should also be an awfully tough combination to get the puck from. Playing an elite playmaker like Panarin with Zibanejad, whose evolution made him one of the best players on this team last year should create a dynamic pair. Buchnevich, another playmaker who showed more of a willingness to put the puck on net in the second half of last season, is a really interesting choice to round out the line. There’s a lot he can learn from his fellow Russian winger.

Really, what I’m most looking forward to is how many options there are with these top players, as well as Kravtsov. It should help the Rangers have a multi-dimensional offensive attack with a lot of creativity and puck possession.
Which player returning from last year’s team will take the biggest step forward?

SG: Filip Chytil. I think Chytil could have played higher in the lineup more often last year, and more often at center. This year, it looks like he’ll start with both as the team’s second-line center. Chytil knows how to navigate the ice with and without the puck on his stick, is a great passer, and is very willing to shoot the puck and take a number of those shots from scoring areas.

Having a play-driver like Kreider should help that shift back to center and the increased minutes and responsibilities of the second line. Whoever completes the line, whether it’s Kakko, Buchnevich, or even Kravtsov, gives that pair a different dynamic. I think between those players, Chytil should take strides forward and excel as the team’s 2C.

RC: This might be seen as a weak choice, but I’m going with Zibanejad, because he looks so completely energized and challenged by having Panarin on his wing. Last year he proved to be a No. 1 center. This year I think he could step up to being a top center in the league. He has the skill, size and speed, and seems pushed to match Panarin even while they play together and compete in practice. Not only that, but I think the “C” he’s likely going to get sewn onto his jersey will further motivate Zibanejad to be great.

Who is the best player who will not make the team on opening night?

RC: Nieves. Unless it’s Andersson. But the Rangers are committed to Chytil, Andersson and Howden at the moment, and if that’s how it breaks down, then Nieves probably starts in Hartford. The most seasoned player who won’t make the team is Brendan Smith, though, because the Rangers need to stash his contract in the AHL.

SG: Igor Shesterkin. I think he starts in Hartford. If any of the top prospects like Kravtsov or Fox don’t make the team, they could easily be the answer to this question, but of those prospects, Shesterkin is the least likely to start at the NHL level because of Alexandar Georgiev.

Which prospect do you think is the most likely to make the team?

SG: Adam Fox. I think Kakko (the obvious choice), Kravtsov (who may be overlooked because of Kakko and Panarin, but has the skill to shine), and Fox all make the team. But with Fox, as talented as he is and seemingly NHL ready, he fits a need more than the others. The Rangers could roll with Greg McKegg, Vlad Namestnikov, or Ryan Strome to fill slots if needed. Young players are likely to round out the blue line and if DeAngelo isn’t signed by opening night, there’s another right-handed slot to be filled. Brendan Smith can fill one and Fox is the obvious answer for the other over any other prospect defender.

RC: Vitali Kravtsov. Even though he’s not on the top two lines at the outset, I think he makes the team and could move into a top-six role at some point. Kid is bigger, a good skater, ridiculously skilled and coachable. And it will be good for him to be here, surrounded by the other Russians.

Who is your dark horse pick to make the team after preseason/training camp?

RC: Of course, a lot depends on Tony DeAngelo’s contract situation. If it doesn’t get resolved and he sits out, there’s a spot for a righty defenseman. Joey Keane? Darren Raddysh? Brandon Crawley, a lefty, played the right side next to Libor Hajek in Hartford last year. And Hajek is a prospect who is going to be on the opening roster. I don’t see any surprises or dark horses among the forwards.

SG: Agreed that a lot of this depends on the DeAngelo contract situation. I’d be curious to see if Yegor Rykov makes a push to be on the opening night blue line, along with Joey Keane. Next year, maybe it’s Tarmo Reunanen whose the dark horse pushing for a role.

Who do you think backs up Lundqvist?

SG: Alexandar Georgiev — at least to start. I don’t think it’s going to be as simple as Georgiev earning the backup position and Shesterkin only playing in Hartford, unless the former is that outstanding this season. It would make sense to rotate the two here and there, just to give Shesterkin more of a look at the NHL level if he seems ready and getting Georgiev more playing time, which he’d have in a stint with Hartford.

RC: The only way Alexandar Georgiev doesn’t back up Lundqvist is if Georgiev wins the No. 1 job and Lundqvist is the backup. Igor Shesterkin will start the season in Hartford, and though he might get some call-ups depending on injuries or scheduling, I think he will spend most of his first pro season in the AHL. Then next season will be the one in which management will have a very difficult decision to make.
GREENBUSH, N.Y. — Ready or not, Brady Skjei is a first-pair defenseman for the Rangers.

Skjei is due, if not overdue, to be ready. Skjei believes he’s ready. His new defense partner, Jacob Trouba, thinks Skjei is ready. And so does David Quinn, the Rangers’ second-year coach.

"Why do I believe it?" Quinn asked. "Well, I think he’s done it a bunch of times in his career. I thought he had a much better second half than he did first half last year. We’ve talked an awful lot about that. I think he’s in a great mindset. It doesn’t hurt that Trouba’s here. I think they have a great relationship on and off the ice. And he’s of that age when it’s time for him to do it on a consistent basis. I feel very confident that he will do it on a consistent basis."

This much was realistically expected of Skjei since he was drafted by the Rangers in the first round in 2012 (he’d also be their last first-round pick for five years). It was realistically expected, too, of Skjei after an impressive debut when he played seven games in 2015-16 and then became one of the few Rangers to distinguish himself in an uncompetitive first-round playoff loss to Pittsburgh. His first full season brought five goals and 39 points, plus four goals in 12 playoff games.

But he was behind Ryan McDonagh and Marc Staal on the left side, and when he needed to do more, inconsistency and indecisiveness crept into his game.

Those things largely negated his assets — his speed and size. Skjei still played plenty of even-strength minutes because he wasn’t on the power play or the first penalty kill. But he wasn’t a shutdown defenseman and wasn’t on the first pair in the year-plus after McDonagh’s departure.

The Rangers’ brass still believed he would be the guy. In July 2018, Skjei signed a six-year contract worth $5.25 million per through 2023-24 at a time when no other Ranger was on the books past 21-22.

But the season before signing was wildly inconsistent — albeit on a rebuilding team that collapsed in all areas — and the season after started poorly too, forcing elder statesman Marc Staal to handle most of the first pair matchup assignments. It was the inconsistency that prevented Skjei’s rise up the depth chart.

"For sure," Skjei said. "You can’t make excuses. I think I need to be more consistent. I think at the end of last year I was playing really good hockey and I carried that over into the World Championships and played well there. So I’m confident going into this year. Our team has struggled the last couple of years and I’m just excited for this year and the new opportunity and the new tools we added. I feel really confident going into this year and ready to get back to that consistency and trying to solidify myself as a top-pair defenseman."

Skjei will get that chance from Quinn, with newcomer Trouba, his longtime buddy from the U.S. Development Program, on his right.

"I thought he was in a better place at the end of the year last year and he feels really good about his summer and where he’s at mentally," Quinn said. "The contract’s behind him and he’s in a much better place."

Trouba is easily the best righty with which Skjei has been paired in the NHL — his most frequent partners were Kevin Shattenkirk and Brendan Smith, and he might have played his best hockey last year with Adam McQuaid.

"You’ve still got to earn it, but as of now, skating with Trouba, it’s nice to be back together with him," Skjei said. "We have that familiarity just from knowing each other so long. We’re both really focused and been talking a bunch and trying to get ourselves ready to have a good start and hopefully solidify ourselves and play well and make an impact right away, be a partner that’s hard to play against. It’s a great opportunity and we’re both excited."
ice makes things a lot easier. On the ice we know how to approach each other. Talking on the bench, there’s no pins and needles trying to talk to someone knowing how they’re going to react. I know how he’s going to react and he knows what I’m thinking and I know what he’s thinking when he wants to talk to me. So that’s the different level of comfort you normally don’t get playing with a new partner.

“Our goal as a team is everybody wants to be the best player they can be. You get different paths getting there, different times. I don’t think I’ve established myself there yet. I want to and I’m working towards that.”

Trouba is one of the new faces along with top-skill guys like Artemi Panarin, Kaapo Kakko, Vitali Kravtsov and Adam Fox – who have fired a shot of enthusiasm through the organization as it begins its preseason Wednesday at the Garden against the Devils, with Skjei and Trouba on defense together.

“There’s an excitement in the locker room with the guys we’ve added and with the guys with one year under their belts,” Skjei said. “It’s an exciting time. Nothing’s given. We’ve got to go out there and earn it, and earn teams’ respect. We all believe that we can do that. We have a team right now that can compete for sure, and be playing in late April or May. That’s our goal. Our goal is to get into the playoffs and there’s a ton of work that has to go in before that, but I think that should definitely be our goal going into this year.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
Senators hang on to knock off Maple Leafs for second straight night

Ken Warren

The wannabe Ottawa Senators’ No. 1 line delivered an up-and-down performance in its debut on Wednesday.

Perhaps it was a fitting outing for the Brady Tkachuk-Colin White-Connor Brown trio, given the overall sloppiness in what ended up as a 4-3 victory.

“We have a lot to improve upon,” said Brown, who scored twice in his first meeting against his former Maple Leafs teammates. “At times they took it to us. I thought we had some good shifts and some bad shifts. We made some nice offensive plays and some boneheaded ones.”

Playing against a shell of what they’ll face against the Maple Leafs on the opening night of the regular season Oct. 2 — no Mitch Marner, no John Tavares, no Tyson Barrie, no Jake Muzzin, no Frederik Andersen, to name but a few of the missing — the current top Senators trio had some solid moments early.

Tkachuk opened the game with a pair of solid body checks on William Nylander and remained a nuisance in front of the Maple Leafs net and along the boards for the rest of the night. He finished with seven shots on goal and five hits.

He also picked up an assist on Brown’s first goal as a Senator, a first period deflection of a Mark Borowiecki shot. It was fitting that Brown received credit for the goal, because he started off the play by slipping around former Senator Ben Harpur.

Come the regular season, of course, any top Senators line will likely be seeing a Maple Leafs top defence pairing of Muzzin and Barrie, where there will be significantly less space and time.

For his part, White did a decent job of shutting down Maple Leafs centre Auston Matthews — in the first two periods, anyway.

White was on the ice as Matthews found an opening to fire a shot off the roof of the net.

But when Matthews and the rest of the Maple Leafs turned things up a notch in the third period, White and company had their hands full with the pressure.

Matthews slipped by White, finding open ice outside the crease before whacking a shot out of mid-air past Filip Gustavsson, who played the final period in goal for the Senators. Give Matthews a foot, he’ll find the roof of the net.

Brown got a vital insurance goal against his former squad, icing the game by scoring his second of the night into an empty net.

Seconds later, Nick Shore made it a one-goal game again to complete the scoring.

ABOUT THE OTHER EX-LEAFS

Tyler Ennis joined Brown on the scoresheet, capitalizing on a turnover created by Artem Anisimov to beat Maple Leafs netminder Michael Hutchinson from the slot. How much time did Ennis have? If the puck had slipped past him, the other member of the line — Bobby Ryan — was already in his backswing to fire the loose puck.

“For the most part, we’re just trying to get the rust off and the kinks out,” said Ennis. “They took it to us a bit in the second half of the game, but our goalsies played fantastic.” … Defenceman Ron Hainsley, also playing his first game for the Senators, picked up an assist on Max Veronneau’s first-period power-play goal.

ABOUT THE OTHER BROWN

Logan Brown, bidding to somehow find a way on to a squad that already has four established NHL centres, showcased his power-play presence in the first period, repeatedly finding open bodies, leading to Veronneau’s goal. In the defensive zone, however, he struggled. After he and Nick Paul crossed signals and knocked each other out of the play late in the second period, only a spectacular Anderson save kept Nic Petan from scoring.

WELCOME BACK

Nice touch by Maple Leafs coach Mike Babcock, giving Cody Ceci an “A” in his return to Canadian Tire Centre. Ceci was in the Maple Leafs starting lineup, paired with Morgan Rielly — a likely regular-season combination. There wasn’t much of a reaction, positive or negative, when Ceci touched the puck. Maybe it was the No. 83, not the familiar No. 5, that caught fans off-guard. Ceci did wear 83 with the Ottawa 67’s…Harpur, the other returning former Senators defenceman, received a fighting major and a 10-minute misconduct for a spirited first-period bout against Scott Sabourin, an American Hockey League veteran here on a professional tryout offer.

FACING THE MENTOR

After defeating the Maple Leafs on Tuesday, coach D.J. Smith got the upper hand in his first meeting against his former boss. But Smith is full of praise for having lived the Babcock experience.

“The one thing Mike does tremendously well is his team is detailed and organized and he’s a tireless worker,” Smith said.

That’s actually three things, but you get the point.

“Under him for four years, I’ve had the opportunity to learn how to grind in the NHL. It’s not just five games, 10 games, it’s 82 games and you’ve got to gr...” … For Babcock to stay around in Toronto for the 2020-21 season, though, it’s all about what he does after 82 games. Changes will be coming if there’s another first-round playoff exit.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS …

Speaking of big-name coaches, what are the chances Columbus Blue Jackets boss John Tortorella would have ever used Anthony Duclair to kill penalties and/or defend a one-goal lead in the final minutes? Smith says assistant coach Jack Capuano pushed for Duclair to be given the chance to play in shorthanded situations, which is why he was in that spot on The Rock.

BOEDKER BACK?

Mikkel Boedker’s name hasn’t been mentioned much in all the talk about potential line combinations for the regular season. But the largely forgotten winger, out with a hip flexor since the start of camp, is expected to be back at practice on Thursday and Friday. So, too, will be Filip Chlapik, who suffered an undisclosed injury last weekend.

PATIENCE IN THE NET

Gustavsson acknowledges there are times when frustration at the long road to the NHL sets in, but he can take some solace from looking at Anderson’s career. Anderson, who played the first two periods on Wednesday before giving way to Gustavsson, didn’t become an NHL regular until he was 27, and a No. 1 netminder until he was 28.

“You just want to be there, but you don’t just come in here and take (Anders) Nilsson’s and Craig’s spot just like this,” the 21-year-old said, snapping his fingers.

Gustavsson had a 12-18-1 record, 3.38 goals-against average and .887 save percentage with Belleville last season. Marcus Hogberg is the unuestioned No. 3 in the organization, the first to be called up if Anderson or Nilsson are injured.

“I had those highs (in 2018-19), but I had way too many lows, too,” said Gustavsson. “I want to get those lows to a normal decent game where I give the team a chance to win and then I still have the highs where I can win the games for the team.”

Ottawa Sun LOADED: 09.19.2019
The Senators will have decisions to make on defence before camp ends

By Bruce Garrioch

The Ottawa Senators will have to determine what’s their best line of defence before the season opens in two weeks.

As they prepared to face the Toronto Maple Leafs on Wednesday night at the Canadian Tire Centre in their pre-season home opener, the Senators had six different defencemen in the lineup as general manager Pierre Dorion, coach D.J. Smith and the staff determine what’s the best route with some difficult decisions that will have to be made at training camp.

While Thomas Chabot, Dylan DeMelo, Nikita Zaitsev, Ron Haisey and Mark Borowiecki are all locks for spots when the Senators face the Leafs at Scotiabank Arena in the season opener Oct. 2 in Toronto, the club has to determine who will fill the final two positions on the roster and if Ottawa would consider the possibility of keeping eight blueliners to start the season.

And, it has become one of the more interesting battles to watch because after Christian Wolanin suffered a shoulder injury just before camp changing the way the Senators had to look at the roster. As Smith has noted in the past “nobody is going to be handed anything” and players will have to earn their jobs.

Yes, blueliner Christian Jaros, who showed consistently last season that he can be a regular in the NHL, made his debut against the Leafs Wednesday. He has the inside track because not only did the 23-year-old suit up for 61 games with Ottawa last season, he worked on getting stronger in the off-season and can bring a presence this club needs.

From there, it’s going to be up to a couple of young guys who are in the mix. Though draft pick Maxence Guenette and Belleville’s Justin Murray had the opportunity to suit up against the Leafs, they aren’t likely to start the season here when the 23-man roster is due at the end of camp. Instead, those last few spots are going to involve the young players.

In the club’s 3-1 victory over the Leafs on Tuesday night at the Mile One Centre in St John’s, N.L., it was Erik Brannstrom and Max Lajoie who were among those that had the chance to show what they could bring to the table on The Rock. If Jaros picks up where he left off last year he’s got the No. 6 spot sewn up and it will become a two-man race.

There are 15 healthy defencemen in camp with four pre-season games remaining to play.

“These exhibition games will sort it out,” Smith said Wednesday morning following the club’s skate at home. “I thought (Tuesday) night you saw how hard it’s to break the puck out in the National Hockey League when the forecheck is on. It’s certainly a big-time skill and how you keep people away from your net.

“It’s certainly different than playing against your buddies in scrimmages where you don’t want to hurt them and these exhibition games will sort that out for sure. By the end, you’re playing against a real NHL team and that’s a really big difference compared to training camp scrimmages.”

Lajoie, who made the team out of training camp last season, put himself back in the mix with a strong effort in Newfoundland. Not only did he score a goal, he was physical and coming off sports hernia surgery that ended his camp late last year it’s the kind of effort he needed to put himself back on the club’s radar screen.

Though Brannstrom, the centrepiece of the deal to send Mark Stone to the Vegas Golden Knights last February, has gotten plenty of focus because of his tremendous upside, the reality is the Senators aren’t going to keep him here if he’s going to be No. 7 on the depth chart. Brannstrom could start the season with the club’s AHL affiliate in Belleville.

“I want young players but only if they’re going to play,” Smith said. “We’re not keeping a seventh defenceman that’s a 20-year-old kid to sit in the crowd. It’s better off for him to go to Belleville and play all the time.”
The Ottawa Senators will lighten their load before they head to Vancouver on Sunday.

That was the word from coach D.J. Smith as the Senators prepared to face the Toronto Maple Leafs at home Wednesday night at the Canadian Tire Centre.

The Senators have 52 players in camp — including injured defenceman Christian Wolanin. The club needs to get down in numbers before they face the Canucks Monday night in Abbotsford, B.C., and Wednesday at Rogers Arena.

Yes, the club will practice in two groups Thursday and Friday, but Smith indicated Wednesday morning that some players will be either sent to the club’s AHL affiliate in Belleville or returned to junior before Ottawa hosts the Montreal Canadiens at home Saturday night.

“We'll look to shorten it down before the Saturday game before we head off to Vancouver,” Smith said.

Most of the decisions will be expected and the reality is the players who make the trip out West will have a chance of being called up during the season even if they aren't kept when the final roster announced before the season opener Oct. 2 against Toronto.

Last year, the Senators held a team-building retreat at Mont Tremblant and you have to think at least part of the time in Vancouver will be spent doing similar exercises.
Chabot gradually working his way into regular season form

Ken Warren

For all the changes the Ottawa Senators went through during the summer, at least one vital ingredient to long-term success didn’t change.

Thomas Chabot remains the front-line star on defence, the club’s defensive kingpin. Considering that he’ll likely play 25 minutes per night and quarterback the power play, he could very well go where Erik Karlsson went five times – leading the team in scoring.

He ended up with 14 goals and 41 assists in 2018-19 and if not for the 12 games he missed with shoulder and toe injuries, he would have out-pointed the departed Mark Stone and Matt Duchene.

For now, though, Chabot isn’t getting ahead of himself, comfortably working his way through the pre-season into the games that matter.

Chabot was expected to play his first game of the pre-season Wednesday against the Maple Leafs, but he wasn’t feeling well before the game. Rather than forcing him into a meaningless pre-season contest at less than full health, the Senators sat him out for precautionary reasons. Hubert Labrie was inserted into the lineup in his place.

Before that news came down, Chabot talked about eventually finding “a rhythm” and re-discovering sound defensive zone coverage as the exhibition schedule continues, but there are still no guarantees about his eventual defence partner.

The Senators also threw a bit of a curveball Wednesday morning. Nikita Zaitsev, who is expected to get a long look as Chabot’s right hand man, sat out against his former Maple Leafs teammates. According to coach D.J. Smith, Zaitsev asked to play in the final four pre-season games, thus avoiding a rematch against Toronto until the regular season opener Oct. 2.

Chabot was originally expected to see some time Wednesday alongside 38-year-old Ron Hainsey and 18-year-old Maxence Guenette, the Senators seventh round pick (187th overall) back in June.

“We’re trying a bunch of different things,” said Chabot. “We’ll see as the (training camp) numbers go down. It is important to get something going, to get the feel (of a regular partner) on the ice. I’m not too worried about it.”

It was the first time Guenette stepped on the ice for an NHL game.

“He’s a guy I work out with in the summer (in Quebec City),” said Chabot. “I’ve skated with him a bunch of times. He’s a very talented player, with great skating ability. He can move the puck really well.”

Guenette probably won’t receive much more time to showcase himself before being re-assigned to Val d’Or of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League and Senators coach D.J. Smith says he hopes Wednesday’s opportunity works as a confidence boost. Guenette’s mother and father were at Canadian Tire Centre for the occasion.

“I’ve seen him grow and see how good he is now,” Guenette said of Chabot. “I’m a two-way defenceman. Very efficient. I’m not the flashy one.”

No, that role belongs to Chabot.

Ottawa Sun LOADED: 09.19.2019
Flyers trim 8 players from roster to leave 54 in training camp

by Sam Carchidi,

The Flyers made eight roster trims Wednesday, including impressive 19-year-old defenseman Egor Zamula.

Zamula, a 6-foot-3, 178-pound Russian, had an eye-opening camp and was returned to Calgary in the Western Hockey League. He had 56 points in 61 games with Calgary last season.

Ron Hextall, then the Flyers general manager, signed the undrafted free agent to an entry-level deal last year.

New Flyers coach Alain Vigneault liked what he saw from Zamula.

"There’s a young kid that’s got good mobility and can make good plays with the puck," Vigneault said after Zamula, showing poise beyond his years, made a strong preseason debut Monday against the Islanders. "There’s no doubt in my mind he’s got a chance to play [with the Flyers] at some point."

The Flyers returned three other players to their junior teams: defensemen Mason Millman (Saginaw in the Ontario Hockey League) and Wyatt Wylie (Everett in the Western Hockey League) and right winger Egor Serdyuk (Victoriaville in the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League).

The Flyers also released four players who were in camp on amateur-tryout invites: left wingers Max Golod, Ben McCartney (who was injured before camp) and Mika Cyr, and defenseman Sean Comrie.

The Flyers have 54 players left in camp. General manager Chuck Fletcher said there will be more roster cuts this weekend as players are assigned to the AHL’s Phantoms.

The Flyers (0-1-1) will play their third preseason game Thursday, hosting the Boston Bruins. The game will be shown on NBC Sports Philadelphia.
Flyers goalie Carter Hart hits the ground running in preseason debut

by Sam Carchidi,

UNIONDALE, N.Y. -- Most NHL goaltenders making their preseason debuts need a period or two to get into a rhythm and shake off the rust. And then there is Carter Hart.

Rust?

Hart, who will be playing in his first full NHL season, doesn't believe in it.

Making his first start in more than five months, Hart was extremely sharp in his preseason debut Tuesday, stopping all 14 shots he faced in the Flyers' 3-2 overtime loss to the New York Islanders at Nassau Coliseum.

"He looked pretty solid, so it's a good sign for us," defenseman Robert Hagg said.

Hart, 21, played the first 30 minutes, 2 seconds and left with a 1-0 lead. The Flyers hope it was an indication of things to come.

"I felt really good," Hart said. "I was seeing the puck pretty good. The Islanders kind of have a gritty style that they play in front of the net. They whack away at pucks, and the biggest thing against a team like that is that you just have to battle, and our guys did a good job in front of the net of battling."

Travis Sanheim led all defenders with 26:43 of ice time. Sanheim and Hagg were the only Flyers defensemen in the lineup who are expected to be on the opening-night roster.

"We did a really good job of defending in our own zone," Hart said. "A lot of guys were playing their first preseason game ... and it can be tough maybe playing with guys you're not used to playing with. But I thought we did a good job of sticking with our system at both ends of the rink."

The Flyers used a much more youthful lineup than the Islanders and didn't dress any forwards who are locks to be in their top nine, and the defense had mostly players ticketed for the AHL's Lehigh Valley Phantoms.

Still, the Flyers controlled the first two periods before the Islanders dominated the third session.

"It's unfortunate we had a couple bad bounces at the end and to lose the game, but it's preseason, and there's time to correct things," Hart said. "I thought there were a lot of positives to take from the game."

The biggest positive was that Hart looks on track to improve on his impressive rookie season.

"He was in control," first-year Flyers coach Alain Vigneault said. "He was taking the angles away when he had to, so I thought he played real well."

Breakaways

Defenseman Chris Bigras, 24, signed as a free agent July 1 and probably headed to the Phantoms, opened some eyes in his Flyers debut. A former second-round pick (Colorado, 2013), Bigras had a goal and an assist in 22:29 of ice time. "You always come into camp trying to make the team. That's the focus," he said. "If it doesn't happen, there's a really good group of D down there [in Lehigh Valley], and we're going to push each other, for sure. I think it'll translate to everyone being better... and hopefully getting a chance to come up with the Flyers at some point."

With Keith Gabriel suffering a leg injury Tuesday and Andy Andreoff not having his best night, Chris Stewart appears to be the top candidate if the Flyers want a physical right winger on the team. The Flyers host Boston in an exhibition game Thursday, and Claude Giroux and Sean Couturier are expected to make their preseason debuts.

Flyers preseason 2019: TV schedule, game times and how to watch and stream

by Rob Tornoe,

The Flyers will take the ice for seven preseason games ahead of the 2019-20 season. The team will play two games each against the New York Islanders, Boston Bruins, and New York Rangers, and then conclude the preseason with a match-up against HC Lausanne at Vaudoise Aréna in Prilly, Switzerland. They'll then turn around and open the regular season Oct. 4 against the Chicago Blackhawks in Prague, Czech Republic. It's the first time in franchise history the team (regular season or otherwise) will play games outside of North America.

All but one of the Flyers' preseason games will air on either NBC Sports Philadelphia or NBC Sports Philadelphia+, and available to stream on both the NBC Sports app and the MyTeams app. Jim Jackson and Keith Jones will call the team's preseason games, with Taryn Hatcher handling ringside reporting duties. Fans can also hear the games on 97.5 The Fanatic, with Steve Coates and Tim Saunders providing the call.

I asked my colleague Sam Carchidi, the Inquirer's Flyers beat reporter, what he's most interested in watching during the preseason:

Seeing who wins the third-line, right-wing spot. There are several intriguing candidates, including mega-prospects Joel Farabee and Morgan Frost.

The Flyers will also be featured on NHL Network's second season of Behind the Glass, which will shadow team president Chuck Fletcher, new head coach Alain Vigneault, and defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere. The four-part weekly look behind-the-scenes at Flyers' training camp premieres Wednesday, Sept. 25, at 8 p.m.
Travis Konecny back on skates and striving to get up to speed

By Wayne Fish Posted Sep 18, 2019 at 9:00 PM

VOORHEES — Being last one into training camp always means there's some catching up to do.

And that's what Travis Konecny did on Wednesday at the Skate Zone. The Flyers had the day off but Konecny, who agreed to a new six-year, $33-million contract on Monday, certainly did not.

He was put through a variety of demanding drills by the coaching staff as he attempts to make up for lost time.

"Yeah, it was a hard skate," the 22-year-old right wing acknowledged.

"There were lot more reps (than usual). But it kind of gives you an opportunity to work on the things that the guys have been working on so you can catch up a little bit."

When Ivan Provorov inked a $40.5-million contract last Friday just before camp opened, it left Konecny as the only player not in the fold.

No doubt he was getting a little anxious.

"It feels great to be back," he said. "It's always hard when your teammates are here and you're excited to be around them. Especially meeting the new coaching staff. So it feels great to be back and catching up on things."

"I wasn't worried that it was going to be extended for a long period of time. I knew that both sides, (general manager) Chuck (Fletcher) and I, wanted this done as soon as possible so that I could get back into the swing of things and kind of go through the same process that everyone else is going through at camp. I think we did a pretty good job of me missing only the first two days."

Konecny is one of the quicker players on the team and that should fit well into new coach Alain Vigneault's up-tempo style.

Does Konecny think he can get up to speed in time to play in one of the upcoming exhibition games?

"That's hard to say," he said. "I'm kind of going through the process as if I was here at the start of training camp. I'm not going to play until it's the proper time for me to play in an exhibition game."

Entering his fourth season, Konecny is coming off back-to-back 24-goal campaigns.

That said, he might be battling to crack the top two lines this season.

"Right now I'm more or less worried about getting systems down and getting into the swing of things," the London, Ont. native said. "It's about the speed and the tempo of the game."

Konecny is a plus-11 over his first three seasons with the Flyers and has missed only one game the past two years.

Transactions

The Flyers announced on Wednesday they have sent four players back to their junior teams and released four players from their amateur tryouts.

Returning to their junior teams were defensemen Egor Zamula (Calgary, WHL), Mason Millman (Saginaw, OHL) and Wyatt Wylie (Everett, WHL), plus right wing Egor Serdyuk (Victoriaville, QMJHL).

The players released from their amateur tryouts were: Max Golod (left wing, Erie, OHL), Ben McCartney (left wing, Brandon, WHL), Sean Comrie (defenseman, Kelowna, WHL) and Mike Cyr (left wing, Moncton, QMJHL).

The Flyers training camp roster is now at 54 players.

Philadelphia looks for its first preseason win when it takes on the visiting Boston Bruins on Thursday night at the Wells Fargo Center. The Flyers are coming off back-to-back losses to the New York Islanders to stand at 0-2.
Former Flyers GM Ron Hextall finds new job with Los Angeles Kings

By Noah Levick September 18, 2019 8:18 PM

Former Flyers general manager Ron Hextall has found a new job in the NHL.

Hextall has been hired as a part-time advisor to hockey operations for the Los Angeles Kings, the team announced Wednesday.

Fired by the Flyers in November after a poor start to the 2018-19 season, Hextall, a former goalie who played 489 games with the Flyers, served as general manager for four-plus seasons.

At the time, then-president Paul Holmgren said, “it has become clear that we no longer share the same philosophical approach concerning the direction of the team.”

The Flyers did not win a playoff series under Hextall, going 165-128-58 and losing twice in the first round.

The team relieved head coach Dave Hakstol of his duties in December. Chuck Fletcher took over Hextall’s position, and he hired Alain Vigneault in April as head coach.

Hextall said in November he was “proud” of the groundwork he built as general manager, and that he believes the team is “poised to do something great.”

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.19.2019
Joel Farabee climbing, Samuel Morin's complex case, more in Flyers stock watch

By Jordan Hall September 18, 2019 6:50 PM

The Flyers are two games into their seven-game exhibition slate. The competition for jobs will only heat up with three games in the next five days.

"We've got some decisions to make," Flyers head coach Alain Vigneault said last weekend. "That's what you want in camp. You need surprises, we need some of these young kids to step up and force us into some decisions. That's how your team gets better and we're going to give them an opportunity to do that."

Who's trending up? Who's trending down? Let's take a look at the stock of those players who could impact the staff's decisions:

Stock up

Joel Farabee

From rookie camp to now, the heralded prospect has done everything to fuel his roster case. He's exhibited skill, smarts and, most importantly, his effort. Farabee has put the whole package on display and the 19-year-old winger has been impossible to not notice. In the preseason opener Monday night at the Wells Fargo Center, Farabee showed impressive burst to create some quality scoring chances during a game that featured a lot of rust from both sides.

"Farabee, I think everyone can see the skill set," Vigneault said afterward. "I didn't think he was as good tonight as what I've seen, but some of that had to do with the opposition. I like that kid. I like his skill level. I like that he can play in tight. I think we've got a good young player there."

Farabee's stock is rising, too, because it appears he'll get a game with the big guns Claude Giroux and Sean Couturier, two players he excelled with during the opening days of camp.

German Rubtsov

Rubtsov's steady and cerebral game has impressed the coaching staff and front office. The 21-year-old center's defensive strengths were well-documented entering camp, but he's beginning to grow into his offensive upside.

The 2016 first-round pick scored two goals in the rookie game and was recognizable in both of the preseason games.

If he's not winning a bottom-six job now, he's showing he can be relied upon as one of the first call-up options throughout the season.

Stock down

Samuel Morin

Morin's camp is an interesting case study. It's tough to make out how he's done. He hasn't necessarily hurt himself, but he's a 2013 draft pick and the Flyers' current regime really likes mobile defensemen that skillfully push the puck up ice and jump into the play.

Morin is a 6-foot-6, stay-at-home kind of blueliner. My gut just tells me the Flyers are much higher on guys like Philippe Myers, Egor Zamula and maybe even Mark Friedman.

We'll have to see if the Flyers carry eight defensemen. Right now, Morin is probably their eighth and he would have to clear waivers to go to AHL affiliate Lehigh Valley.

Isaac Ratcliffe

Ratcliffe is an exciting prospect with a 6-foot-6 frame that can belie his superb skill.
The Flyers made a round of cuts Wednesday following their first two preseason games.

The team returned prospects Egor Zamula, Wyatte Wylie, Mason Millman and Egor Serdyuk to their junior clubs.

Zamula is a rising prospect that looks like a promising undrafted discovery by the Flyers. The 6-foot-3, 172-pound defenseman is a smooth skater with developing skills. The 19-year-old drew the praise of general manager Chuck Fletcher during rookie camp and was impressive in Monday night's preseason opener.

"I really like [Zamula]," Flyers head coach Alain Vigneault said after the game. "I have seen him in practice, I see that there's a young kid there that's got good mobility and can make good plays with the puck. 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're looking and you say, 'This guy's got a chance here.' There's no doubt in my mind that this young man's got a chance to play at some point."

He'll be a prospect to keep an eye on this season with the WHL's Calgary Hitmen.

Wylie, a 19-year-old defenseman, is a notable move given the Flyers have yet to sign him to an entry-level contract. During this summer’s development camp, Wylie was unsure if he would return to the WHL's Everett Silvertips for his fourth and final junior season. There was a possibility the 2018 fifth-round pick could earn his ELC and join AHL affiliate Lehigh Valley.

Instead, he'll head back to the Silvertips and shoot for his contract throughout the season.

The Flyers also released camp invitees Maxim Golod, Ben McCartney, Sean Comrie and Mika Cyr from their amateur tryouts.

The team's roster is at 54 players.

Forwards
Andy Andreoff
Nicolas Aube-Kubel
Connor Bunnaman
Greg Carey
Sean Couturier
Kyle Criscuolo
Joel Farabee
Gerry Fitzgerald
Morgan Frost
Kurtis Gabriel
Claude Giroux
Kevin Hayes
David Kase
Travis Konecny
Pascal Laberge
Scott Laughton
Oskar Lindblom

Cal O'Reilly
Nolan Patrick
Tyler Pitlick
Michael Raffl
Isaac Ratcliffe
German Rubtsov
Chris Stewart
Matthew Strome
Maksim Sushko
Carsen Twarynski
James van Riemsdyk
Jakub Voracek
Mikhail Vorobyev

Defense
Chris Bigas
Justin Braun
T.J. Brennan
Josh Couturier
David Drake
Mark Friedman
Shayne Gostisbehere
Robert Hagg
Robert Michel
Samuel Morin
Philippe Myers
Matt Niskanen
Nate Prosser
Ivan Provorov
Travis Sanheim
Andr Welinski
Reece Willcox
Tyler Wotherspoon

Goalies
Jean-Francois Berube
Brian Elliott
Carter Hart
Alex Lyon
Felix Sandstrom
Kirill Ustimenko

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Phil Myers recognizes the test of exhaustion Flyers preseason can be

Dave Isaac, NHL writer Published 3:29 p.m. ET Sept. 17, 2019 | Updated 3:32 p.m. ET Sept. 17, 2019

PHILADELPHIA — Phil Myers knew it was a test. He's a cerebral defenseman anyway but recognized that he kept getting pushed, more than normal, and it was an unusual schedule.

Last year was his second training camp as a pro and he had a shot at making the team because Andrew MacDonald started camp hurt. The recovery time for MacDonald was supposed to draw into the regular season, but he returned early and ended up keeping his roster spot. Myers' audition included playing in six of the Flyers' eight preseason games. Only Mikhail Vorobyev (seven) played more.

"We had...I think it was four hard practices that were similar to game loads. We were working hard doing conditioning after," Myers recalled Monday night. "I think I just sort of ran out of gas at the end. This year I'm trying to be a little smarter out there. By all means I'm not going soft in practice or anything, but I'm trying to conserve my energy whenever I can and manage it a little bit better, little things like that so I have a little more energy during the games. I'm just trying to be smart and recover as much as I can when I get on the ice and feel fresh before every game."

Phil Myers was paired with Egor Zamula in the Flyers' first preseason game Monday night, a 3-1 loss to the New York Islanders.

This time around Myers figures to be the one locked in for an NHL spot. Others will face that similar test, though. Some won't even get that far. The Flyers are expected to make a few cuts Wednesday morning and a larger round of cuts over the weekend.

After playing Monday against the Islanders, Vorobyev, Chris Stewart, German Rubtsov and Maksim Sushko all suited up for the rematch Tuesday night on Long Island. Rookies Morgan Frost (who is day-to-day with a tweaked groin) and Joel Farabee figure to get similar treatment at some point. It's a sign that the Flyers aren't sure where those players belong or that they want to test their endurance.

For Stewart, in camp on a pro tryout, it's to test if he's worthy of signing a contract. For Sushko it's a test of where he is in his first pro season and for Vorobyev and Rubtsov it's mostly an endurance test to see how they fare by the end of the exhibition schedule when their fights for NHL slots could still be ongoing.

"One of the things I found throughout the years is people say we make the decisions, but we really don't make the decisions," Flyers coach Alain Vigneault said Monday morning. "The players make the decisions for us by how they play and how they continue to improve. (Monday) for me is the first test, first opportunity for those guys to show they can play at this level. As camp moves forward, competition's gonna get better. It's gonna get more demanding on everybody. They'll make the decisions for us, by how they play and how they compete and how they perform."

The motivation is obvious. All these players have dreamed of playing in the NHL, not the American Hockey League. There's the money component as well. For players on entry-level deals like Sushko, Rubtsov, Myers and Vorobyev, it's $70,000 annually in the AHL for the Lehigh Valley Phantoms or more than $600,000 annually in the NHL.

There's a lot on the line and Myers in particular doesn't want to go backward after finishing the Flyers' season with them and playing 21 games.

"I think a little more I know what to expect," he said. "I think being up here last year made me want to work that much harder this summer and try to stay up here this season and try to make an impact with the team. I don't just want to make the team; I want to be a player that's relied upon and they depend on and I just want to help the team win. That's my goal coming into this year. I was talking to the coaches at the end of the year last year and they thought I should be champing at the bit for training camp this year and I'm excited to get things going this year."
The Flyers’ roster picture with 54 players remaining in camp

By Charlie O’Connor Sep 18, 2019

The pare-down process has begun at Philadelphia Flyers training camp. Technically, Wednesday’s cut was the second round, since Roddy Ross received a rookie camp invite but the team returned him to his WHL club before the main camp began. Still, this felt like the first true cutdown day, as eight players were excised from the training camp roster: prospects Egor Zamula, Wyatt Wylie, Mason Millman and Egor Serdyuk, along with camp invites Maxim Golod, Mika Cyr, Ben McCartney and Sean Comrie.

There’s a common thread that runs through the eight cuts: they’re all ticketed for Canadian major junior hockey. The remaining players — 54 of them — will be in professional hockey leagues this year. The next round of cuts, which could come as soon as this weekend, will likely involve players who were always locks to end up in the AHL or the ECHL.

There weren’t any major surprises Wednesday. McCartney was the only camp invite who seemed to have a remote chance of earning an entry-level contract, but he battled a hip flexor injury from the start of rookie camp and never really had an opportunity to impress. Some thought Zamula might earn a longer stay due to his strong play — head coach Alain Vigneault singled him out for praise after Monday’s game, after all — but he was a lock to return to the WHL for another season. And while Wylie aimed to earn an entry-level contract and turn pro with the Lehigh Valley Phantoms this season, he didn’t stand out at rookie camp, consistently outshined by Philippe Myers (no surprise) along with Zamula and Millman.

Now, the focus turns to the 54 remaining players. With less than a week of camp and preseason in the books, it’s no surprise there isn’t much separation between the bubble players as they fight for open spots in the lineup and on the roster. The next two games will be pivotal, in part because, starting Thursday, Vigneault will take a larger role in choosing lineups and combinations. Previously, general manager Chuck Fletcher and assistant GM Brent Flahr were driving the personnel decisions. Now, we’ll get a chance to see how the new head coach really views his charges.

In the wake of Wednesday’s cuts, let’s take a second look at the camp roster picture (read our first version here), breaking it down into updated tiers.

Locks (16)
Claude Giroux
Sean Couturier
Jakub Voracek
Kevin Hayes
James van Riemsdyk
Nolan Patrick
Travis Konecny
Scott Laughton
Oskar Lindblom
Michael Raffl
Ivan Provorov
Shayne Gostisbehere
Matt Niskanen
Justin Braun
Travis Sanheim
Carter Hart

In strong position (3)

Philippe Myers
Robert Hagg
Samuel Morin

Myers hasn’t delivered a true “statement game,” but nothing at camp has hinted that his spot in the Game 1 starting lineup is in jeopardy. He’s consistently been in the top half of the depth chart during every practice and game. He’s shown that he is physically ready for the NHL. And his raw talent is still staggering. Myers’ chances remain strong.

As for Hagg and Morin, neither has particularly stood out, but they’ve held their own and largely played to their strengths. Whether both end up on the final roster will depend on whether the Flyers carry eight defensemen, but given the nature of the position when it comes to injuries, organizations tend to prioritize blueliner depth. Since Hagg and Morin would each need to clear waivers to be sent to the minors, keeping them with the big club — even if they’re out of the starting lineup to begin the year — is the best way to ensure one isn’t lost to another club.

On the bubble (8)

Andy Andreoff
Joel Farabee
German Rubtsov
Chris Stewart
Mikhail Vorobyev
Morgan Frost
Nicolas Aube-Kubel
Kurtis Gabriel
Not much movement in this group, aside from the addition of Stewart to the bubble. He’s been skating with NHL players from the start of camp, and received the back-to-back treatment in the first two preseason games. It’s clear that this wasn’t a “charity” professional tryout invite extended by Fletcher; Stewart is getting a real chance to impress.

Andreoff entered camp as the favorite to fill the “gritty, physical veteran forward” role, if the coaches deemed such a role necessary. Despite an underwhelming performance in Tuesday’s game, Andreoff has been fine in practices, delivering his most impactful day to my eyes as camp opened. He entered with significant organizational momentum, and I don’t get the sense it’s halted - though it is interesting that Stewart got the nod for Monday’s game and Andreoff did not; both played Tuesday.

Kurtis Gabriel is in the mix for the role that Stewart and Andreoff are gunning to fill, but his health is now in question due to an injury suffered late in Tuesday’s game. There’s been no word on his status; it’s expected the Flyers will know more Wednesday and will provide an update by Thursday morning. Any missed time would clearly hurt Gabriel’s chances, and the injury certainly didn’t look minor in real time.

This roster battle could quickly turn into a two-man race by default (assuming the coaches decide the need to fill this role).

Of the prospects, Farabee and Rubtsov appear to have the most momentum. Farabee began camp by skating with Giroux and Couturier after impressing in the rookie portion of on-ice activities. As The Athletic’s Justin Bourne wrote this week, lineup placement matters in training camp, and Farabee is being placed in prime spots. Rubtsov hasn’t received the same cushy treatment, but unlike Farabee, he dressed for both games of the back-to-back, which reads as a way to test his endurance. Rubtsov held his own in both games, which bodes well for his chances to remain in the mix over the final week and change of camp.

Frost would likely be right with Farabee and Rubtsov, but a minor groin injury has kept him from participating in games. Until he rejoins the active portion of camp and has an opportunity to impress, he’ll remain behind his peers. Time is running short for Frost to make a case.

Like Rubtsov, Vorobyev played in the first two preseason games, and Patrick’s uncertain status does open the door a bit wider for him. But to my eyes, Rubtsov has outperformed him in practices and games.

Vorobyev also has the baggage of the organization knowing that his last two NHL stints weren’t successful.

That leaves Aube-Kubel, who might have dropped down a tier entirely had he not delivered a strong showing Tuesday night. Still, it’s unclear whether the performance changed the organization’s view of him; that will become more obvious when rosters are announced for the Thursday and Saturday games.

Small chance, need fantastic camp or injuries to others (6)

Connor Bunnaman
Mark Friedman
Alex Lyon
Isaac Ratcliffe
Carsen Twarynski
Andy Welinski

In this group, Bunnaman has shown the most, and the organization seems to agree — he notably had the opportunity to skate alongside two roster locks, Raffl and Laughton, in Tuesday’s game. Bunnaman has carried his strong rookie camp play into the main camp, and continues to have a small chance of rising up this list. Keep an eye on whether he plays in the Thursday and/or Saturday games, and (if he does), who his linemates prove to be. So far, Bunnaman has outplayed Twarynski, just as he did during the 2018-19 AHL season.

Ratcliffe was always a longshot to force himself into roster contention, but it was a possibility if he stormed out of the gate in the main camp. Instead, he struggled a bit with the increased pace of the NHL preseason Monday, and has looked the part of a talented youngster in need of more seasoning. He might not be long for this camp.

As for Friedman, Lyon and Welinski, they remain insurance in case of an injury to a defenseman or goalie, or a surprise trade. The Flyers have been lucky on the injury front, and they certainly hope that will hold out for another two weeks.
Three games against the New York Islanders down, five more games to go before the outcomes start to matter.

The Philadelphia Flyers jumped out to leads of 1-0 and 2-1 in their second official preseason contest, but failed to hold either, as the Isles came away with the 3-2 victory via an overtime goal from Mason Jobst, a former teammate of Flyers prospect Tanner Laczynski at Ohio State. Carter Hart stopped all 14 shots he faced in his half of the game, but Jean-François Bérubé could not match the work of his younger counterpart; he allowed three goals on 23 shots and took the loss.

Still, that Philadelphia battled with New York despite the massive talent gap is worth noting.

The Flyers’ best line on paper consisted of two NHL bottom-sixers (Scott Laughton and Scott Currie) and a long-shot candidate for a roster spot (Connor Bunnaman). By comparison, New York had an above-average NHL top line of Mat Barzal, Anders Lee and Jordan Eberle. The Flyers dressed one defenseman who will definitely be in their opening night lineup (Travis Sanheim); the Islanders sent out three, and arguably four, depending on the quality of 19-year-old Noah Dobson’s camp. Preseason sloppiness notwithstanding, this game probably should have been a blowout in front of the Nassau Coliseum crowd.

Instead, Philadelphia held its own. In fact, it’s not difficult to argue that the Flyers were the better team through two periods; they outshot the Isles 22-19 and led in Expected Goals 1.79 to 1.53. Yes, New York took over in the final stanza and ultimately grabbed the win in overtime. But the Flyers possessed the puck for long stretches and were tenacious on the forecheck, which allowed them to close the talent gap for awhile. Considering that head coach Alain Vigneault is implementing new systems and trying to foster a new mindset during training camp, it’s a positive sign that the Flyers overachieved — even if the outcomes in preseason don’t matter.

2. Rubtsov solid again

After a solid performance Monday in Philadelphia, German Rubtsov was again in the lineup Tuesday — one of four players (along with Mikhail Vorobyev, Chris Stewart and Maksim Sushko) with back-to-back duties.

Asking players — particularly youngsters with no professional experience — to dress for back-to-back games in preseason isn’t a decision made lightly. Last year, Philippe Myers had his endurance “tested” by playing in nearly every game from the start of the preseason, and Ivan Provorov received a similar treatment in 2016 when he successfully nabbed a roster spot. Essentially, the goal is to see if a player can overcome fatigue and stay effective — a question most relevant for those with a real chance of making the roster (ruling out Sushko) and without extensive pro experience (knocking out Vorobyev and Stewart). After practice Tuesday, Vigneault essentially confirmed that was the thinking in giving Rubtsov the back-to-back.

“That’s one of the reasons he’s playing tonight,” Vigneault said. “There’s some decisions to be made, and some of the things that we’re going to do is put some of the players in a tougher spot, and see how they react to it.”

So how did Rubtsov react? More or less by delivering the same type of game he did the night before.

There were signs of potential fatigue, as Rubtsov looked a bit weaker on the puck and didn’t show the same burst as on Monday — though that could also have been impacted by the increased quality of competition. But he had a number of impressive moments. Rubtsov helped his line to move up ice, including one occasion early when he got the better of Lee in the defensive zone. His passing remained crisp and decisive. In his best moment, he won a center-ice puck battle and quickly turned it into an odd-man rush, and only the goalpost prevented him from scoring his first preseason goal. (He scored twice in the rookie game.)

GREAT WORK BY RUBTSOV. WINS A PUCK BATTLE AND SKATES UP THE ICE TO GET A QUALITY SCORING CHANCE, UNFORTUNATELY HITS THE POST

— BRANDON MURPHY (@2MURPHY8) SEPTEMBER 18, 2019

The Flyers held their own territorially with Rubtsov on the ice at 5-on-5, posting a 49.08 percent Corsi For and a 51.92 percent xG For rate after adjusting for score effects. Rubtsov produced those results spending most of his ice time (11:30) against either Barzal (3:54) or Derick Brassard (3:51). He wasn’t facing scrubs.

This didn’t qualify as a breakout performance by Rubtsov. And he is still getting pushed around on occasion — Luca Sbisa bullied him in the corner Monday, and Nick Liddy sent him to the ice hard Tuesday. But it’s tough to imagine that Rubtsov failed the back-to-back test with his performance at Nassau.

3. Aube-Kubel most consistently noticeable youngster

Nicolas Aube-Kubel seems like a player who should be in the thick of the race for an NHL roster spot.

After all, he’s been one of the better 5-on-5 forwards statistically in the AHL for two years running, and even received a nine-game NHL stint last season. Add in that he’s no longer waiver-exempt (meaning he cannot be sent to the minors at the end of camp without first being offered to every other team in the league for free), and Aube-Kubel would appear poised to earn a spot with the Flyers if he has a strong camp.

But aside from one “his time is now” comment from assistant GM Brent Flahr to The Athletic back in July, there hasn’t been much obvious organizational momentum surrounding Aube-Kubel’s chances this month. He was conspicuously absent in general manager Chuck Fletcher’s preseason rundowns of young players with legitimate shots at earning a showing in the lineup for the first preseason game, even though forwards such as Joel Farabee, Rubtsov, Morgan Frost (later pulled due to a mild groin issue), Isaac Ratcliffe and Vorobyev were included. That seemed like a peek at the organization’s view of the frontrunners, and Aube-Kubel wasn’t included.

On Tuesday, he responded to the apparent slight in the most productive way possible: by taking it out on the Islanders.

From the opening faceoff, Aube-Kubel emphasized playing with energy and physicality. It took some time for that effort to manifest itself in tangible on-ice successes, but Aube-Kubel got stronger as the game progressed. He forced turnovers, sent pucks toward the net (he led all Flyers forwards with six shot attempts) and generally outworked the opposition. He was rewarded for his efforts with an assist on Bigras’ goal (Note: The goal was ruled as unassisted even though Aube-Kubel clearly helped move the puck to his teammate on the play), but he could have easily finished the night with two or three points. His shot off Bunnaman during a second-period power play rang off the cross bar, and he later set up Bunnaman again for a golden opportunity that could have ended up in the back of the net had his linemate handled the pass properly.

NICE WORK BY AUBE-KUBEL TO GET THE PUCK DOWN LOW TO BUNNAMAN HERE. PIC.TWITTER.COM/SCZELEK9HGE

— BROAD STREET HOCKEY (@BROADSTHOCKEY) SEPTEMBER 18, 2019

The numbers backed up the eyes: Aube-Kubel’s 58.42 percent score-adjusted xG rate led all forwards, and his 61.62 percent Corsi rate ranked second behind Vorobyev. But Aube-Kubel has posted strong advanced metrics in the past — even during limited minutes with the Flyers last season. The word that always gets brought up in organizational circles regarding Aube-Kubel is “consistency” (or a supposed lack thereof), on both a shift-over-shift and game-over-game basis. The 23-year-old is aware of the
criticism. "It’s hard to work on that, I guess, because it’s more (mental) than (physical)," he said before the game. "I guess I’ll just have to be stronger mentally."

He certainly looked it Tuesday.

4. With another long look, Stewart has good and bad moments

If you needed more evidence that Chris Stewart is going to receive a real shot at earning a spot with the Flyers, take a look at his ice time in Tuesday’s game. Despite playing the previous night, Stewart was granted 17:46 to make his case — second only to Raffl, a roster lock.

Whether Stewart made a particularly strong case is another question entirely.

Stewart had his moments — a flash of decisive speed down the wing here, a dash of physicality there. He didn’t luck into 160 career NHL goals, after all. But there were negatives to his play. He took an ugly, unnecessary tripping penalty on Oliver Wahlstrom in the second period, and showed his frustration after the mistake. He also wasn’t much help in the transition game, which partially explains his poor showing by advanced metrics. Stewart’s line spent a lot of time on defense, despite the fact that his linemates (Rubtsov and David Kaše) were consistently impactful. At times, he struggled to keep up with their younger legs.

On the whole, Stewart showed more Monday than he did Tuesday.

5. Tough nights for Andreoff and Gabriel

The good news for Stewart was that his closest competition didn’t have strong nights, either. Andy Andreoff and Kurtis Gabriel are presumably fighting for the same spot as Stewart — a "grit" forward meant to fill the void after the departures of Wayne Simmonds and Radko Gudas. Andreoff entered camp as the clubhouse favorite — if the new coaching staff deemed such a job necessary — with fellow new acquisition Gabriel giving chase. For Stewart to make the Flyers, he would need to jump both of them, at least.

Neither Andreoff nor Gabriel exited Tuesday’s game in a strong place. The former wasn’t noticeably poor — he just wasn’t noticeable at all, aside from apparently trying to stir the pot early on, in what could have been an attempt to match Stewart’s willingness to drop the gloves the night before. Andreoff’s mediocre evening would have been welcomed by Gabriel, who was demolished in a fight with Isles heavyweight Ross Johnston and then suffered a potentially serious injury on a Lee hit in the third period. Gabriel left the ice in obvious discomfort, favoring his left leg (which appeared to get caught underneath him in the aftermath of the collision). He did not return and his status is unknown.

Hopefully, Gabriel’s injury isn’t serious. That would essentially make it a two-man race if the Flyers have determined this particular role needs to be filled — and neither of the leading candidates has created any separation yet.

6. The grit forward question

The Stewart/Andreoff/Gabriel "race" leads us to an obvious question: Should these candidates really be competing for a unique spot on the roster, apart from the ones the prospects are gunning to nab? Or, to put it another way: Should the addition of a gritty, intimidating forward be a priority in building out the final roster?

Here’s what we know, based on Fletcher and Vigneault’s public comments. On the first day of camp, the general manager opened the door to possibly giving one of the open roster spots to this type of forward — provided the coaching staff deemed it necessary.

"Frankly, not having Wayne Simmonds this year, not having Dale Weise, not having Radko Gudas, it’s important to have some elements that can compete for some openings on our roster if that’s what the coaches want," Fletcher said.

On Tuesday, Vigneault was asked about Stewart’s camp. "That type of role, there’s a spot for that on our team. I think we’ve got a couple guys who are fighting for that spot, and we’ll see how it unfolds," he responded.

It sure sounds like Vigneault wants those elements.

Now, it’s important to note that these players could be battling for a 13th or 14th forward job, functioning as something of an "emergency" option if the team lacks in-game pushback over an extended stretch. Still-developing prospects generally only make NHL rosters if they’re going to play regularly; depth veterans are the ones asked to spend weeks watching games in the press box with smiles on their faces. It makes sense that Farabee, Frost and Rubtsov aren’t competing for that job.

I don’t discount the importance of a team having at least one player who everyone knows will "have their back," Scott Gordon famously noted that Simmonds’ presence made everyone “braver,” and it’s hard to doubt that assertion. It’s also too early to entirely write off players such as Stewart and Andreoff. Andreoff is coming off his best offensive season as a pro, and Stewart has been a solid NHL forward in the past. They could earn spots on their own merit.

But it’s worrisome that a player in this designated group might slip onto the final roster largely based on checking a stylistic box, not because he actually outplayed those on camp who lack that element. Aube-Kubel is a perfect example of a player who could fall into the latter group; it would be rough if the Flyers lost a prospect with NHL upside to waivers in order to keep a gritty 14th forward with little offensive or play-driving upside. As Vigneault said, we’ll see how it unfolds.

7. Hart still looks like Hart

The rust factor kicked in early Monday night for Brian Elliott, who allowed a weak goal through his five-hole during the first period. In a preseason opener, such a mistake is easily forgivable, if not expected.

There were no such forgivable mistakes from Hart on Tuesday, though.

It’s a stretch to say that Hart already looks in midseason form — a technician like Hart could surely find areas of his game to nitpick. But Hart was flawless in terms of goals allowed in a preseason game — stopping all 14 shots he faced in the first half of the game. In particular, Hart’s puck tracking was on point, as he made medium-difficulty saves look easy and tough saves appear less so. In other words, he was the same Carter Hart from his rookie year.

Strong preseasons don’t necessarily equate to strong regular-season starts — just ask Shayne Gostisbehere and Ivan Provorov to recount their experiences in 2018-19. But considering how much is riding on the performance of Hart this season, early sharpness is certainly better than the alternative.

8. Vorobyev’s numbers strong, but it’s not 2018 all over again

If you only looked at the stat sheet, you might think that Vorobyev, playing in his second game in two nights, had delivered a performance reminiscent of the ones that earned him a spot on the roster to begin the 2018-19 season. No Flyers forward posted a higher Corsi For percentage at 5-on-5 (62.11%) on Tuesday, and only two were better by Expected Goal differential. Vorobyev is back rolling, right?

Unfortunately, that’s not really the case. Vorobyev’s stats and instincts have never really been in question, but what separated him from the pack last season was his ability to consistently assert himself on the ice. Not only was Vorobyev scoring points last preseason, but his experiences in 2018-19 don’t necessarily equate to strong regular-season starts — just ask Shayne Gostisbehere and Ivan Provorov to recount their experiences in 2018-19. But considering how much is riding on the performance of Hart this season, early sharpness is certainly better than the alternative.

9. Kaše’s strong camp

Another pleasant camp surprise has been the work of Kaše, who was right there with Aube-Kubel and Rubtsov as one of the most noticeable young forwards on the ice Tuesday. While Rubtsov provided the smarts on the line, Kaše brought the speed and shiftiness that Rubtsov can lack. Kaše pounced on loose pucks and kept offensive zone threats alive. A case could be made that he was just as integral to the line’s success as the higher-profile Rubtsov.

Kaše’s strong game didn’t come out of nowhere. He spent Sunday and Monday morning with Sean Couturier and Claude Giroux in drills, a tacit acknowledgement of his impressive work in Vorobets. While I still have skepticism regarding his ultimate fit in an NHL lineup — I wonder if he lacks the offensive ability to be a top-nine player and the physicality to be a fit on most coaches’ fourth lines — it’s clear Kaše has legitimate talent. He’s opened some eyes during this camp.
Finally, we get to the veterans who are NHL locks. Laughton and Raffl were unsurprisingly two of the best players on the ice for the Flyers, as they should have been. Laughton flashed his skating ability, Raffl his puck protection skills and both reminded any remaining skeptics that they are useful players. Raffl even potted one of the Flyers’ two goals.

Laughton and Raffl each dealt with injury scares, but both returned to the game looking no worse for the wear. If last night was any indication, they’ll be ready for the start of the season.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
Jared McCann vows to contribute more to Penguins

SETH RORABAUGH | Wednesday, September 18, 2019 7:40 p.m.

Mike Sullivan isn’t big on numbering his lines.

During the Halcyon days of the HBK Line, which was composed of Carl Hagelin, Nick Bonino and Phil Kessel, Sullivan explained how he labeled his lines.

“We call Sid’s line Sid’s line, Geno’s line Geno’s line and Bones’ line Bones’ line.”

Nicknames? Sure.

Numerals? Never.

That brings us to the current non-third line, which, based on the early days of training camp in Cranberry, is made up of Jared McCann, Nick Bjugstad and Patric Hornqvist.

McCann appears to share Sullivan’s disinclination for line enumeration, especially given what he feels this trio could accomplish.

“I feel like we’re not just going to be labeled as a third line,” said McCann. “We have the skill on the line that can create like a first or a second line. Putting it just as third line is kind of tough, but we’re going to go out there and show that we can contribute no matter what.”

McCann contributed quite a bit upon his arrival in Pittsburgh in February via a trade which also netted Bjugstad. In 37 games with the Penguins, he scored 17 points (11 goals, six assists). And despite playing less than half the season with Penguins, he led the team with three short-handed goals.

In comparison, he only scored 18 points (eight goals, 10 assists) in the 46 games he played for the Florida Panthers last season.

McCann had the benefit of ample playing time with Sidney Crosby after the trade, but his increase in offense went beyond simply being on the No. 1 … err… Sid’s line.

“They just gave the opportunity to play,” he said. “I hadn’t had that in a long time. I came here and it was my first game, I played a lot of minutes. I was excited.”

“He knows he’s a good player,” Bjugstad said. “He had some good flashes down in Florida. A lot of times, it’s just opportunity and he took it and rolled with it when he was here. He was able to play a little more free here and play offensively. This guy’s got a lot of high-end talent. When you get the reins freed up a little bit, sometimes it changes your confidence and everything.”

McCann will presumably get the opportunity to play on … “Bjuggy’s line” when the season opens in October. Sullivan is intrigued by the trio, which saw sporadic time with one another in 2018-19.

“It’s a conscientious line in the sense that they play at both ends of the rink,” Sullivan said. “We can play them against other teams’ top lines and have a comfort level. They are a line that can score. There’s skill there. They’re all pretty accomplished offensive players. What I’ve liked about it – and we had that line together last year – was they’re hard to play against. They’re conscientious.

“If we don’t go power against power, say, for example, and we don’t play Sid’s line against another team’s top line, that’s another line potentiality that we could use if we want to take Sid out of some defensive responsibilities and (defensive) zone starts. We could use Nick and that line in defensive zone starts.”

There’s also the benefit of having two centers capable of taking draws.

“It’s nice to have Nick, that’s a righty, and Jared, that’s a lefty, that can both take faceoffs because they’re both center icemen,” Sullivan said. “If one of them gets kicked out, there’s a comfort level with a center iceman going in to take draws. We can put them in difficult situations and they’re effective.”

And while “grit” has become something of a vulgarity in the age of advanced metrics, McCann, Bjugstad and Hornqvist do offer some pushback to the opposition, much like a classic third line.

“We’re going to do whatever it takes to help the team win, whether it’s getting in guys’ faces and kind of creating that way,” said McCann. “If we’ve got to do it, we’ve got to do it. We’ll do whatever it takes.”

Regardless of what line he finds himself on or what it’s called, McCann is eager to enter his second season with the Penguins after rediscovering his joy for the game following last season’s trade.

“I came to the rink every day and I was excited to play,” McCann said. “It was something I got away from. Now, every day is something new. I got to play on every single line so far. I’m just excited to be here.”

Scheduled to become a restricted free agent next offseason, McCann is eager to build off the success he had during the final three months of last season.

“I know I’ve got better,” he said. “I know I can contribute a lot more and I’m going to do that this year.”

Tribune Review LOADED: 09.19.2019
Penguins prospect Filip Hallander suffers broken leg in Sweden

SETH RORABEAUGH  | Wednesday, September 18, 2019 5:27 p.m.

Penguins forward prospect Filip Hallander is expected to be sidelined until after Christmas due to a fractured leg, according to a release from his team in Sweden.

Hallander, 19, is said to have fallen into the boards while playing for Lulea of the Swedish Hockey League against Orebro. Prior to the injury, he had one assist in two games this season.

The Penguins selected Hallander, a native of Sundsvall, Sweden, in the second round of the 2018 draft and signed him to a three-year entry-level contract last offseason.

Tribune Review LOADED: 09.19.2019
The Penguins announced their expected lineup for Thursday’s preseason game against the Columbus Blue Jackets at PPG Paints Arena:

Forwards: Kasper Bjorkqvist, Alex Galchenyuk, Jake Guentzel, Patric Hornqvist, Dominik Kahun, Sam Lafferty, Nathan Legare, Evgeni Malkin, Samuel Poulin, Dominik Simon, Brandon Tanev.


Goaltenders: Alex D’Orio, Matt Murray.

The Blue Jackets’ lineup will include:


Goaltenders: Elvis Merzlikins, Veini Vehvilainen.

The game is scheduled to begin at 7 p.m.

Tribune Review LOADED: 09.19.2019
Mike Sullivan continues to sort out Penguins defense

SETH RORABAUGH  | Wednesday, September 18, 2019 4:07 p.m.

Entering training camp, one of the biggest question marks surrounding the Penguins concerned who will play with whom on defense, particularly with the departure of Olli Maatta this past offseason.

"There's a pretty good chance you'll see (Brian) Dumoulin play with (Kris) Letang," coach Mike Sullivan suggested with a flawless deadpan following practice Wednesday in Cranberry.

Considering Letang and Dumoulin have been virtually arc welded onto one another as the team's top defensive pairing since the 2016 postseason, there's little to ponder over that duo.

The bottom two pairings are still up for speculation, however. During practice, the team skated with most of its projected NHL roster on the ice together for the first time this camp and blue line was sorted out a bit.

Letang skated with Dumoulin while Justin Schultz was teamed with Marcus Pettersson. On the third pair, it was Erik Gudbranson and Jack Johnson. A fourth pairing was composed of Chad Ruhwedel and Juuso Riikola. All four pairings combined a left-handed and right-handed shot.

Sullivan was asked specifically about the pairing of physical presences such as Gudbranson and Johnson, neither of whom are threats to participate in the NHL's fastest skater competition at the All-Star break. Sullivan suggested the blue line — beyond Dumoulin and Letang — remains a work in progress.

"We're going to explore different options here," Sullivan said. "We've got a number of defensemen that are in the mix. We have a comfort level with certain combinations. … We're just trying to explore some different looks and see how it goes. We don't have any real preconceived notions going into it.

"Usually we try to put complementary skillsets together. We try to put a puck mover with a stay-at-home guy and we've done that a lot over the last handful of years. But we'll see how it goes moving forward."

Tribune Review LOADED: 09.19.2019
Penguins prospect Samuel Poulin learning about life in NHL

SETH RORABAUGH  | Wednesday, September 18, 2019 1:48 p.m.

The NHL isn’t foreign to Samuel Poulin. After all, the Penguins forward prospect is the son of a former NHLer, Patrick Poulin.

But playing in the league is a different endeavor.

He was introduced to that aspect of the game Monday during the Penguins’ preseason opener, a 5-4 overtime loss to the Buffalo Sabres at the Pegula Ice Arena in University Park.

Poulin, the Penguins’ first-round pick in this year’s draft, was one of the more notable members of a lineup festooned with names one will likely see in the lineups of AHL, ECHL or junior teams this season. In contrast, the Sabres dressed a NHL-caliber lineup with the likes of star forwards Jack Eichel and Jeff Skinner and defenseman Rasmus Dahlin.

“(Buffalo) had a big lineup so it was a good test for us, especially for me,” Poulin said. “I got a good overview of what the NHL looks like.”

It would be a stretch to predict Poulin will see much of the NHL this season other than as a spectator. At 18, he’ll likely be returned to his junior team, the Sherbrooke Phoenix of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League. Wednesday’s practice in Cranberry certainly suggested that will be the case, as Poulin skated with several players who are also eligible for junior hockey or signed to AHL contracts.

Regardless, the experience of training camp and Monday’s contest has offered a pretty vivid lesson.

“I would say the preparation,” Poulin said. “Before every practice, before every game, after practice, after games … they want to be ready as much if it its game or if it’s a practice. That’s what stood out to me.”

Assuming he is indeed returned to Sherbrooke, Poulin’s goals are simple.

“I really want to win this year,” he said. “If I go back to junior, I want to win the President’s Cup (the QMJHL’s championship) and the Memorial Cup (the Canadian Hockey League’s championship) this year.”

Notes

• Poulin practiced in a group that included defenseman Matt Abt, Michael Kim, Calen Addison and Jon Lizotte, forwards Justin Almeida, Chase Berger, Jan Drozg, Jake Lucchini and Nathan Legare and goaltender Alex D’Ono.

• The second group was composed primarily of players expected to open the season on the NHL roster. They included forwards Zach Aston-Reese, Nick Bjugstad, Teddy Blueger, Sidney Crosby, Alex Galchenyuk, Jake Guentzel, Patric Hornqvist, Dominik Kahun, Evgeni Malkin, Jared McCann, Bryan Rust, Dominik Simon and Brandon Tanev, defensemen Brian Dumoulin, Erik Gudbranson, Kris Letang, Jack Johnson, Marcus Pettersson, Juuso Riikola, Chad Ruhwedel and Justin Schultz, and goaltenders Casey DeSmith, Tristan Jarry and Matt Murray.

• A third group primarily had players who will likely open the season with Wilkes-Barre/Scranton. They included forwards Andrew Agozzino, Anthony Angello, Jordy Bellerive, Kasper Bjorkqvist, Joseph Blandisi, Joseph Cramarossa, Thomas Di Pauli, Ryan Haggerty, Adam Johnson, Sam Lafferty, Sam Miletic, Oula Palve and Ben Sexton, defensemen Niclas Almari, Kevin Czuczman, Pierre-Olivier Joseph, John Marino, Zach Trotman and David Warsofsky, and goaltenders Emil Larmi and Dustin Tokarski.

Tribune Review LOADED: 09.19.2019
Mike Sullivan’s message to Penguins goalie Matt Murray: ‘Stay hungry’

MIKE DEFABO

A few weeks ago, Penguins coach Mike Sullivan met for lunch with an athlete who has played a key role in Pittsburgh sports history.

Let’s see if you can guess who. He’s a two-time Stanley Cup champion, an IIHF World Championship silver medalist and, after eloping this offseason with his long-time girlfriend, he’s a newly married man.

Can you guess?

OK, one more hint: He’s just 25 years old.

Nick Bjugstad goes through drills Saturday, Sept. 14, 2019, at UPMC Lemieux Sports Complex in Cranberry.

Matt Vensel

This ‘conscientious’ third-line option intrigues Penguins coach Mike Sullivan

The last stat might give it away. It’s also perhaps the most remarkable thing about Penguins goalie Matt Murray.

What many athletes strive their entire careers to achieve, Murray has enjoyed twice before he was even legally allowed to rent a car in the United States. But while the start of Murray’s career has been remarkable, it’s also just that: the start.

When they met for lunch, Sullivan relayed one key piece of advice. It can be boiled down to two words: “Stay hungry.”

“He is a terrific goaltender,” Sullivan said after Penguins training camp practice on Wednesday. “But we’re all capable of more. We’re all going to push one another to be better. Matt is no different in that regard.

“As I said to him, complacency is the enemy of progress. He’s got to continue to push himself on a daily basis to be at his very best. We know he’s capable of great things. We know he plays his best when the stakes are high. But I strongly believe there’s more to his game.”

By now, anyone who has watched Murray knows how high his ceiling can be when he’s on top of his game.

There’s obviously a reason Pittsburgh protected Murray in the expansion draft and went all-in on their young netminder instead of protecting Marc-Andre Fleury, a franchise icon and a figure beloved in the locker room and in the community.

Bryan Trottier moves the puck up ice against the Capitals during the Penguins-Capitals alumni game at Heinz Field in 2010.

But last year was a bit of an odd season for Murray.

At the start of the year, he battled through several injuries, including a concussion and a lower-body injury. At one point in late November, he had a 4.08 goals-against average and .877 save percentage. The stretch included a period when Murray got pulled from the game three times in three weeks.

Yet, by the end of the season, Murray was playing like one of the league’s best. Over the last 26 games of the season, he put up a 2.7 save percentage and looked every bit like the goalie who stood tall during those back-to-back Cup runs.

For Murray, the challenge this season is to stay healthy and play a random Tuesday-night game in November like it’s an elimination game in April.

“Just being more consistent is a big one,” Murray said. “When you’re feeling great and have a good game, everyone is capable of that. It’s how often you can do it and how consistently you can do it that I think I’ve struggled with.”

There might be no better time to show that attribute than this year.

Murray is entering the final season of the three-year deal he signed following the 2015-16 Stanley Cup run. The way it stands currently, he’ll be a restricted free agent at season’s end.

His contract is expiring at an ideal time. This offseason, several goalies around the league signed mega deals that could impact Murray’s pay day, whenever that might come.

Tampa Bay goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy signed an eight-year extension that will pay him $9.5 million per year for eight years once it goes into effect next season. Meanwhile, former Columbus Blue Jackets goalie Sergei Bobrovsky inked a seven-year deal with the Florida Panthers for an average annual value of $10 million.

“You feel good for them first of all,” Murray said. “As players, we definitely have a bond. You want to see other guys succeed and get their payday. ... The guys that you’re talking about are unbelievable goalies and guys I really look up to.”

Now, as Murray prepares for what will essentially be a contract year, the question is if Murray can join them as one of the league’s best-compensated netminders. A strong season certainly wouldn’t hurt when it comes time to sit at the negotiating table.

For what it’s worth, Murray said he’s not focusing on the contract situation.

“I have an agent that takes care of that,” Murray said. “That’s out of my control, so I don’t have to worry about it.”

What Murray can control is approaching the game the way Sullivan talked about at lunch. It’s only mid-September. But if you listen to Murray talk, it sure seems like he and Sullivan are on the same page.

“My competition is to be better than I was yesterday,” Murray said. “If I can do that and just keep building and building, that’s the best way to do it.

“Your days are going to compound. That’s where you’re going to see the most improvement.”

Post Gazette LOADED: 09.19.2019
The Penguins didn’t come right out and say it, but their roster for “Team 1” at Wednesday’s practice sure looked like a projected regular-season lineup.

And six days into training camp, Nick Bjugstad is still between Jared McCann and Patric Hornqvist on the third line. And it sounds like this trio could stick.

“What I like is … they’re hard to play against,” coach Mike Sullivan said.

As you may recall, there was a lot of talk from Sullivan and general manager Jim Rutherford this summer about that not always being the case with the Penguins last season. So those three getting Sullivan’s stamp of approval is noted.

Mike Sullivan’s message to Penguins goalie Matt Murray: ‘Stay hungry’

“It’s a conscientious line,” he said. “They play on both ends of the rink. We could play them against other teams’ top lines and have a comfort level. And they are a line that can score. … They’re all pretty accomplished offensive players.”

McCann, Bjugstad and Hornqvist played together at 5-on-5 for just over 33 minutes last season. They out-shot opponents, 36-29, while creating 10 more scoring chances. Bjugstad also clicked with Hornqvist and Dominik Simon.

Sullivan is intrigued by the possibility of using McCann, Bjugstad and Hornqvist as a checking line, in part because McCann and Bjugstad are both capable faceoff men. McCann, a lefty, would handle draws in the left circle, Bjugstad the right.

“They’re conscientious. If we don’t go power against power and don’t play [Sidney Crosby’s] line against another top line, that’s another line potentially that we could use if we wanted to take Sid out of some defensive responsibilities,” he said, adding, “We can put them in difficult situations and they’re effective.”

“We’re just exploring’

The Penguins, as was also the case Monday, spent a significant chunk of practice working on special teams. They again cycled through personnel on the top unit, with six different forwards mixing in with Kris Letang and/or Justin Schultz.

“I think they just want to try different things,” Letang said when asked about the new looks. “Different guys in different spots. We’re just exploring, I guess.”

The only two power-play mainstays? Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin.

“We have two guys that obviously touch the puck a lot. They’re really creative players. They open so many things for everybody out there,” Letang said of their philosophy. “It’s just up to the other guys to fit in and try to create things.”

The other guys include Jake Guentzel, Patric Hornqvist and Alex Galchenyuk.

Third-pair problems?

With Marcus Pettersson elevated to the second defensive pair to play with Justin Schultz, the third consisted of Jack Johnson and Erik Gudbranson.

Sullivan likes to place at least one puck-moving defenseman on each pair. But neither Johnson nor Gudbranson is known for his passing prowess.

“Usually, we try to put complementary skill sets together,” he acknowledged.

Sullivan explained that the Penguins will continue to “explore different options here” and that “a number of defensemen” are in the mix as they sort it out. Juuso Riikola and Chad Ruhwedel was the fourth pair while Team 1 skated.

“We have a comfort level with certain combinations. There’s a pretty good chance you’ll see [Brian] Dumoulin play with Letang,” he said with a playful smirk.

So, yeah, it’s a good bet they will still be his top pair of the season opener.

‘Special’ experience

Nathan Legare, the team’s third-round pick in June’s draft, will be returned to his junior team before the start of the regular season. In the meantime, the winger is soaking in the experience of being part of a “first-class organization.”

“It’s a dream come true,” he said. “I’ve learned from the best in the world, like Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin. For sure, it’s special.”

Legare, who made a nice centering pass to set up Andrew Agozzino in Monday’s preseason opener, has learned where he needs to improve this season.

“My explosion,” he said. “To play with guys like this, I have to work a lot on my speed. For sure, it’s going to be very good for me if I go back to junior.”

Thursday’s lineup

After Wednesday’s practice, the Penguins announced their lineup for Thursday’s preseason game against the Columbus Blue Jackets at PPG Paints Arena.

Brandon Tanev, Alex Galchenyuk, Samuel Poulin and Legare are set to play their first home game as Penguins. Noteworthy incumbents include Malkin, Guentzel, Hornqvist and Schultz. Matt Murray is expected to get the start in goal.

Hallander injured

Filip Hallander, a 2018 second-round pick who currently plays for Lulea of the Swedish Hockey League, fractured his leg in a game Tuesday. In a statement, Lulea general manager Stefan Nilsson said Hallander should be in a cast for six weeks and likely won’t be back on the ice until late December.
Jon Lizotte went from selling fireworks to turning heads at Penguins training camp

Matt Vensel

Had Bob Motzko not come calling at the last minute, Jon Lizotte might be back home in North Dakota right now, planning for the next Fourth of July.

In 2015, Lizotte was playing out his final few weeks of eligibility in the North American Hockey League, a Tier II junior league. He had solid stats for the Minot Minotauros but hadn’t heard from a single school about a scholarship.

Lizotte being nearly old enough to legally drink was surely a factor. At that point, the blue-liner figured his future would be in fireworks.

His parents founded Lizotte Fireworks in Grand Forks, N.D., two decades ago. It is a seasonal business, one that keeps the family in a frenzy for two weeks every summer. Lizotte has “kind of ran it for them” since he was 16 or 17.

“We’re only allowed to sell for nine days out of the year,” Lizotte, now 24, said Wednesday. “It’s in a warehouse we use for storage. We start around June 27. We do that until July 4 and tear it all down. People come down from Canada and all over. Anywhere close that doesn’t have fireworks, they head over.”

With another Fourth on the horizon, Lizotte finally got his lifeline. Motzko called, offering Lizotte a chance to walk on at St. Cloud State.

Lizotte would be the last guy on the team and little else would be guaranteed.

“I knew that you have to earn everything,” he said. “You just need an opportunity to showcase what you have. I kind of stepped into the role and things happened so that I got an opportunity. And it kind of just went from there.”

It sure did. Four years later, Lizotte is participating in his first NHL training camp. He won’t stick around too much longer. But he is already exceeding expectations here, too, making him someone to monitor in Wilkes-Barre/Scranton.

An injury opened the door for Lizotte to play right away at St. Cloud State. He stayed in the lineup for the Huskies, who won a conference championship that season. The rugged, stay-at-home defender would suit up for 147 games for the program. He scored 10 goals with 36 assists and a plus-47 rating.

Lizotte credited the staff at St. Cloud State, from his two coaches in Motzko and Brett Larson to the rink staff that let him in the building to skate and train, for helping him to develop into the person and the player he is today.

“I had a great career and a fun time at St. Cloud State. I met a lot of great people there,” he said. “They do everything top-notch. Every year that I was there, we were contenders, a team talked about nationally. To be able to do that, you’ve got to be doing something right.”

Last offseason, the Penguins invited Lizotte to their prospect development camp on a tryout basis then kept tabs on him from afar during his senior year.

“It gives them an opportunity for them to show what they can do,” coach Mike Sullivan said when asked about that process. “I think it’s a great way for us to discover players. We can learn more about them. They can learn more about us. And good things can potentially materialize. So it’s a win-win for both.”

After the Huskies got knocked out of the first round of the NCAA tournament, the Penguins asked Lizotte to skate for their American Hockey League club.

“It happened real quick,” he said. “I didn’t ask my agent too many questions.”

Lizotte had a goal and an assist in three games while playing on an amateur tryout agreement. In June, the Penguins signed him to an AHL contract.

Lizotte was not on Pittsburgh’s initial training camp roster. But after he held his own while skating on their third defensive pair at the Prospects Challenge in Buffalo earlier this month, the Penguins invited him to their NHL camp.

“He’s had a strong camp so far. He had a strong rookie camp in Buffalo,” Sullivan said, adding, “He skates well. He’s strong. He’s moved the puck well.”

Pretty high praise for a fireworks salesman.

Lizotte says he’s “getting better every day” by battling Sidney Crosby and other NHLers at training camp. But he is realistic about his future. His goal is to maintain a regular role in Wilkes-Barre/Scranton this season and go from there.

“I just need to play my game,” Lizotte said. “That’s what got me noticed. There’s no reason to change too much. There’s obviously areas I can improve, but I don’t want to stray too far from what makes me a good player and a good teammate. I hope to perform well and we’ll see where it takes me.”

Post Gazette LOADED: 09.19.2019
Erik Gudbranson on Jack Johnson: ‘If we play together, we will make it work’

By Josh Yohe Sep 18, 2019

There are a few trigger terms that are useful if your intention is to disrupt a member of the sports analytical community's day.

Saying someone "passes the eye test" is always good fun. The word "grit" commonly draws a reaction.

Then, there is this: Jack Johnson and Erik Gudbranson skated together in practice on Wednesday at the UMPC Lemieux Sports Complex.

Johnson has long been dismissed by advanced stats disciples as his numbers have generally been poor during his career. Gudbranson struggled mightily in Vancouver before a trade to Pittsburgh seemed to revive him. The third overall pick in the 2010 NHL Draft, Gudbranson never developed into a star but was a perfectly dependable player during the first stage of his career in Florida. He seems to have very much righted himself in Pittsburgh after falling into analytics hell in Vancouver.

Still, the idea of these two playing together would seem to contradict the Penguins' preference of showcasing a puck-moving defenseman and a stay-at-home defenseman on each pairing. Both are old school, physical defensemen who don't necessarily blend seamlessly with the fast and skilled direction the NHL has taken in recent years.

"We usually try to put complementary skill sets together," Mike Sullivan acknowledged.

There is a real possibility that these two will play together. Simply put, as Sullivan acknowledged following practice, Kris Letang and Brian Dumoulin are going to play together. The Penguins want to see what Justin Schultz and Marcus Pettersson can do on the same pairing.

Those are four of the starting six defensemen. Do the math.

Gudbranson isn't coming out of the lineup, as the coaching staff was delighted with his performance last season. Johnson was only a healthy scratch in one of 88 games last season, including the postseason, so it's safe to assume there is a good chance that he will be in the lineup, unless he is upended by Juuso Riikola.

Gudbranson welcomes the idea of playing with Johnson.

"I think we'll be really good if we play together," Gudbranson said quite matter-of-factly. "If we play together, we will make it work."

Gudbranson was successful last season playing with Pettersson. He believes the comfort level that he felt in Pittsburgh last season will carry over.

He also believes in Johnson.

"Jack's a really good hockey player," Gudbranson said. "He skates well, he's a really strong, physical guy. And he's always been a very cerebral defenseman. You can always make it work with a player like him."

Gudbranson dismissed the notion that they are too similar stylistically. Once upon a time in Florida, Gudbranson found success playing with another stay-at-home defenseman.

"It doesn't matter what your style is," he said. "One of my best years ever was when I played with Willie Mitchell. If Jack and I end up playing together, we can make it work."

Gudbranson doesn't get too concerned about advanced statistics, either. He shook his head before the question was even completed.

"No," he said. "No. No. No. I mean, no. Not at all, actually. I would say that I start most of my shifts in the D-zone anyway. I'm not going to start in the offensive zone on draws much. I'm not (Letang)."

Gudbranson is a big believer that hockey teams can't consist of 18 skaters who essentially do the same thing. Rather, a blend of finesse and power, he believes, is necessary.

"I'm always going to chip in offensively when I can," he said. "But my job is to defend. There's a lot of pieces to the puzzle that make a team go forward. I'm a defenseman. I defend."

Johnson struggled during the first half of last season but saw his play improve during the second half while paired with Schultz. The Penguins, though, are somewhat eager to see how Pettersson looks in a pairing with Schultz.

"We are going to explore different options," Sullivan said. "A number of defensemen are in the mix. We have comfort levels with certain combinations. We'll see how it goes. We don't have any preconceived notions going into it."

Gudbranson insists he will be comfortable no matter what his defensive partner may be. Something changed when he showed up in Pittsburgh. He can't put a finger on it, but he's not complaining.

"Not at all," he said. "And no, I really don't know what it is. Sometimes things just work out, you know? I don't know why, but I found my confidence here again. I certainly feel a lot better about my game than I did where I was previously. That's not to say that I didn't have good coaches and good resources in Vancouver, because I did. But for whatever reason, I just feel more confident in Pittsburgh. Camp's been good so far. Shaking off some rust, little things. But I feel really good about myself and my game right now."

As usual with reclamation projects in Pittsburgh, Sergei Gonchar is getting his share of praise. Gudbranson counted him as a primary reason why his career has been resurrected.

"That guy is absolutely amazing," he said. "So much wisdom. I used to appreciate watching him play. I played against him. Always in position. He couldn't necessarily get away with things physically, so he had to be positionally sound. You an learn a lot from guys like that."

Gudbranson and Johnson can't necessarily get away with mistakes because neither is going to win a fastest skater competition.

The veteran defenseman, however, remains convinced that two players cut with similar skills.

"Not a doubt in my mind," Gudbranson said. "We'll be just fine."

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
If we learned anything about the Penguins leading up to the start of training camp, it’s that they were opening their doors for the 2019/20 season with a primed and motivated Evgeni Malkin. Malkin shared with The Athletic’s Rob Rossi that last season was “the worst” of his 13 year NHL career, one that saw him feel frustrated on and off the ice for a variety of reasons. While Malkin’s year was far from a disaster, it did leave a lot to be desired. I think some of the revisionist histories about Malkin’s purportedly career-worst year come from a combination of a lower goal total and a higher number of giveaways. Those are two issues that both fans and pundits are always going to notice, and they plagued Malkin from the onset of the 2018/19 season.

From the perspective of raw points per 60 minutes of even-strength ice time, Malkins 2.46 points per hour last year was his 3rd highest total of the last six years, so a middle of the pack performance from a recent memory perspective. The real anomalies occurred in the aforementioned buckets of goals and giveaways. Malkin’s goals per hour (.68) in 18/19 was the lowest of the last six years, and his number of giveaways per hour (4.06) was the highest of his career so far. We can extend that six-year analysis to penalties taken and penalties drawn, where he again posted six-year lows in terms of results.

All this is to say, while Malkin’s year wasn’t a complete disaster, it wasn’t a banner one, either. With Malkin fresh on American soil with a new training regimen that included a bit of power and speed skating, he sounds and looks the part of a re-focused player. If the goal is to put Malkin on the rebound, how can the Penguins best maximize his deployment to kickstart him to success?

For an answer to that question, we’re going to turn to a tool of Sean Tierney of @ChartingHockey on Twitter. Sean has provided a Wins Above Replacement lineup tool that allows you to predict a team or a line’s WAR totals for the year. You can read more about the tool and how it works by reading this piece by Sean. Suffice to say, the tool goes as far as to predict TOI totals and ages a player’s production by one year. It’s an impressive tool that allows us to try and forecast specific line combinations and their contributions to win totals.

This WAR model is attempting to predict a line’s value to the team’s overall win total above what you’d get out of a replacement-level performance. It’s predictive in nature and takes just about every element of player performance in prior seasons into account — things like shot attempts, shot quality, defensive performance, penalties and zone transitions. Fear not, this is fairly an all-encompassing endeavor.

With that in mind and your refresher on the methodologies behind this, let’s dive into potential line combinations for Malkin and how they project towards total WAR for the season, giving us a glimpse into the potential best and worst scenarios for his deployment.

1. LW: Alex Galchenyuk | C: Evgeni Malkin | RW: Brandon Tanev
Projected Full Season WAR: 1.8

We start with the line that has debuted in the early portions of training camp.

Of all the possibilities we’ll examine, this one produces the lowest WAR total, one that is close to being replacement level (meaning the most average of NHL trio’s would likely procure the same result). Brandon Tanev has a lot of gifts and there’s a place for him on this Penguins team, but his overall impact at even-strength isn’t worth the ice-time that comes with playing on Malkin’s right-wing.

As far as setting Malkin up for success is concerned, this training camp experiment doesn’t bode well in Sean’s WAR model. The Penguins coaching staff and Malkin himself have been complimentary of Tanev’s intangibles through the first few days of camp, but the Penguins have richer opportunities afforded to them for the right-wing spot on the second line.

If we’re to assume Brandon Tanev is the issue here with the low WAR totals here, let’s tinker with that right side spot and see how many additional wins we can accrue.

2. LW: Alex Galchenyuk | C: Evgeni Malkin | RW: Bryan Rust
Projected Full Season WAR: 1.9

We aren’t improving as rapidly as I had hoped in this exercise. Bryan Rust’s insertion to the second line has produced us a total of .1 WAR. That’s a negligible effect and somewhat indicative of what this model thinks about Rust’s impact.

Rust’s total’s last year in terms of shot and scoring chance control were right in line with team averages. His shot-attempt share was +.58 percent better, relative to the rest of the Penguins. His scoring chance share was -.99 percent relative to the rest of the team. Not bad, but certainly not enough to tip the scales of this line over the hump we’re looking for.

Let’s switch things up again on the right-wing and see what impact it has. I am hesitant to immediately adjust Galchenyuk off of the left side. His locker is next to Malkin’s, and that’s not a coincidence. I think the Penguins are going to try and make this partnership work.

3. LW: Alex Galchenyuk | C: Evgeni Malkin | RW: Patric Hornqvist
Projected Full Season WAR: 4.0

Now we’re starting to cook with fire. I know Hornqvist’s presence in the top six is a contested topic among many people, and that’s understandable. Age has taken bits and pieces away from Hornqvist’s game over the year’s, and he’s struggled to stay healthy.

But when he’s in the lineup, he’s still assisting the overall process in a positive way. I’ve long been a fan of Hornqvist’s work as a puck-retriever, and his net-front presence is a magnet for defensive players, inherently opening up space for talented players like Malkin or snipers like Galchenyuk.

This line features a little bit of everything, but let’s jump off the deep end and see what we can do if we change things up on the left side.

We know Hornqvist gave us a big bump, what happens if we exchange Galchenyuk for another offensive-oriented forward? Let’s see if we can find our ceiling of wins.

4. LW: Jared McCann | C: Evgeni Malkin | RW: Patric Hornqvist
Projected Full Season WAR: 5.7

For those keeping track at home, we’re now +3.9 Wins Above Replacement since we started this exercise.

Jared McCann’s age plays a role here, as his overall offensive outputs from last season weren’t remarkable relative to team average, but the arrow is still pointing up for him as far as his development is concerned.

We did see flashes of offensive brilliance, and the building blocks are there for McCann to take a big step forward. I was surprised by his ability to create on an individual level last season. That would parlav well into a partnership with Malkin.

McCann is in an environment where his deployment is much different from that to which he was accustomed, and he’ll have a bit of offensive freedom that should play out positively over the course of the year, as evidenced above.

But there’s another combination worth checking out here that might really give us the bump we’re looking for, one that is likely going to be a bit controversial.

5. LW: Dominik Simon | C: Evgeni Malkin | RW: Patric Hornqvist
Projected Full Season WAR: 7.1

This final combination brings us +5.3 Wins Above Replacement from our initial trio. For a frame of reference, a combination of Jake Guentzel, Sidney Crosby, and Dominik Kahun projects at 7.8 WAR over a full year, and we’re come close to replicating that here. Having 14.9 Wins Above Replacement from the top two lines would be a good way for the Penguins to make a living.

Simon is the object of a lot of criticism for a low shooting percentage and lack of goals. In reality, Simon positively impacts shot rates, scoring chance rates and goal rates just about everywhere he plays.
For instance, last year Simon had a shot-attempt share percentage that was +8 percent relative to the rest of the team and a scoring-chance share that was +9 percent relative to the rest of the team. His impact on the lineup was tangible via all the peripheral metrics available to us.

What Simon didn’t do was score a lot of goals, and that’s where the argument occurs. For me, giving Malkin a bump on shot share and scoring-chance share is a prerequisite to playing on his line. Malkin’s performance in these buckets last year was average, at best, and having a supporting cast that can let Malkin be Malkin while supporting his ability to carry the play will go a long way toward nurturing his success.

The Penguins rollout of Malkin in camp alongside Galchenyuk and Tanev doesn’t bode well from the perspective of projecting wins. If the Penguins want to buoy Malkin and help him along his path to redemption, there are better options available to do so.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
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 just was 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:

Jake Guentzel—Sidney Crosby—Dominik Kahun
Brandon Tanev—Evgeni Malkin—Alex Galchenyuk
Jared McCann—Nick Bjugstad—Patrick Hornqvist

Those are, on paper, three perfectly good lines. But the absence of Rust from this top-nine is difficult to ignore. Some believed he would start the season with Crosby and Guentzel on the top line, as that trio has certainly enjoyed some success in the recent past. Others thought Rust would be a natural with Malkin and Galchenyuk on the second line, as he is capable of doing the dirty work and handling defensive responsibilities while stilling banging in 15 or 20 goals.

He hasn’t practiced with Crosby or Malkin yet. Heck, he hasn’t even skated with Bjugstad.

Rust says he doesn’t care. Most players say they don’t care which line they play on, of course. And while it’s easy, and probably accurate, to assume that Rust would prefer to play with Crosby or Malkin, he has always been one to take things in stride.

"It has never mattered to me where I play," he explained. "It’s not a big deal."

Rust has literally participated on all 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 camp. Able to protect the puck? I don’t think so. He’s not 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.

• Sam Miletic. He’s been terrific during the early days of camp

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• Dominik Simon. He’s been terrific during the early days of camp

• 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.
Neither Johnson nor Ruhwedel is a particularly gifted skater. This is a unit that could be exploited.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
Winger’s successful return from major injury a bright spot in Sharks loss

Manuel Wiederer scored two goals in his first game in seven months as Sharks lose 6-4 to the Calgary Flames

By CURTIS PASHELKA [PUBLISHED: September 18, 2019 at 8:39 pm | UPDATED: September 18, 2019 at 9:28 PM]

Manuel Wiederer scored two goals in his first game in seven months and Jayden Halbgewachs and Tony Sund each added two assists in the Sharks’ 6-4 preseason loss to the host Calgary Flames on Wednesday.

With the score tied 2-2, the Flames scored three goals on three consecutive shots on Sharks goalie Antoine Bibeau in a span of 2:48. Bibeau, starting his third season in the Sharks organization, finished with 17 saves on 22 shots.

Ivan Chekhovich and Lean Bergmann also scored for the Sharks, who fell to 0-2 in the preseason. The Sharks’ next preseason game is Saturday at home against the Vegas Golden Knights.

As they did Tuesday against the Anaheim Ducks, the Sharks only dressed a handful of NHL regulars Wednesday with their top line comprising of Tomas Hertl, Evander Kane and Dylan Gambrell.

All three players, though, had a plus-minus rating of -3 through two periods, and Gambrell was replaced by Lukas Radil on that line in the third period.

Both of Wiederer’s goals came in the second period, with his second coming on a nifty individual effort. Wiederer, 22, stickhandled through three defenders before he beat Flames goalie Jon Gillies with a wrist shot with 2:06 left in the second period to make it a 5-4 game.

Wiederer picks up his 2nd goal of the period. Sharks down 5-4, as Halbgewachs and Chekhovich get the helpers. #SJSharks | #SJsvsCGY | Flames1stGoal pictwitter.com/2RBWzilliMD

— Teal Town USA (@TealTownUSA) September 19, 2019

Wiederer, the Sharks’ fifth round draft pick in 2016, had 16 points in 39 games with the Barracuda last season. Wednesday’s game was his first since Feb. 10 when he suffered a season-ending knee injury in a Barracuda game against Ontario.

"I think I had a pretty rough first period, but after that I picked it up," Wiederer said. "I’m pretty happy for my first game in about seven months. It was pretty good."

Wiederer, a native of Deggendorf, Germany who competed for his country at the 2018 IIHF World Championships, has been working his way back from surgery and might even a sleeper pick to make the Sharks roster out of training camp.

He’s one of a handful of right wingers competing for open spots in camp after Joe Pavelski and Gus Nyquist left as free agents. If he doesn’t crack the opening night lineup, he might at least be able put himself in position to be called up at some point in the regular season.

"Just take it day-by-day," Wiederer said after the game. "I don’t think I’m at 100 percent yet, conditioning-wise. First game in a while, so just day by day, I’ll get better every day and make a good impression and who knows what’s going to happen."

Forwards Dillon Dube and Alan Quine each had a goal and an assist for the Flames, who come to San Jose on Sept. 26.
Why moving to wing might benefit Sharks’ Dylan Gambrell

Dylan Gambrell expected to play on Sharks’ top line with Tomas Hertl and Evander Kane in Wednesday’s preseason game vs. Calgary Flames

By CURTIS PASHELKA [PUBLISHED: September 18, 2019 at 2:05 pm | UPDATED: September 18, 2019 at 2:06 PM]

SAN JOSE — At the time, it could have either been considered a tough spot to be in or a golden opportunity. Sharks forward Dylan Gambrell chose the latter.

With Tomas Hertl, not to mention Joe Pavelski and Erik Karlsson, injured and unable to play in Game 6 of the Western Conference Final, Gambrell was suddenly thrust into the lineup as the Sharks’ third line center in an elimination game against the St. Louis Blues.

The decimated Sharks lost 5-1 to the Blues, but Gambrell came away from the experience with a little more confidence than before. Playing alongside Evander Kane and Joonas Donskoi in just his second NHL postseason game, Gambrell scored the Sharks’ only goal, ripping a wrist shot just inside the far post past goalie Jordan Binnington midway through the second period.

“It was big for my confidence,” Gambrell said of his first NHL goal, regular season or playoffs. “Kind of get the monkey off the back there. It just gave me a lot of confidence going into this year.”

A spot on the Sharks’ roster once the regular season gets underway next month is anything but a guarantee at this point for Gambrell, a 2016 second round draft pick. At 23 with just 11 NHL regular season games under his belt, he’s still waivers-exempt and might even benefit from more time in the AHL.

But it’s clear the Sharks want to give him every chance to succeed, and just like that night at Enterprise Center four months ago, he’s hoping to take advantage of the extended look in an important role.

For complete Sharks coverage

Gambrell was expected to play right wing a line with Hertl and Kane — the same spot he’s been since the start of training camp — for the Sharks’ preseason game against the Calgary Flames on Wednesday night.

“He’s skilled, and a righty, too, which we kind need a little bit,” said Hertl, who also started his NHL career as a winger after he was drafted as a center, of Gambrell. “You can talk to him very easily. Great guy, and hopefully we get a couple games together so we can build some chemistry and maybe start the season together.”

With Pavelski and Gus Nyquist departing via free agency, the Sharks are searching for right wingers to take steps forward and grab NHL jobs this preseason. Jonny Brodzinski, Joachim Blichfeld, Lukas Radil and Sasha Chmelevski are also in the mix.

Gambrell has mostly been a center in recent years, but it might be a tad easier for him to establish himself in the NHL on the wing.

“It’s an opportunity for him,” Sharks coach Pete DeBoer said of Gambrell playing the wing in the top six forward group. “I don’t know if that’ll be the role or not. But right now, he’s getting an opportunity to play with two real good players and get a really good look. What he does with that it up to him.”

Gambrell spent most of 2018-19 with the Barracuda, finishing second on the team with 20 goals in 51 games. He was held off the scoresheet in eight games with the Sharks, with his ice time ranging from 5:38 to 13:03.

He said last season that at times with the Sharks he was maybe thinking too much on the ice, instead of just playing and being more instinctual. That’s something he wants to correct this season.

“For me, it’s just playing fast and being more assertive,” Gambrell said. “I think I have most of the tools, but for me it’s just going out there and doing it and being assertive, winning battles.”
San Jose Sharks

Sharks goalie Martin Jones aims to prove himself yet again this season

By Brodie Brazil September 18, 2019 10:51 AM

SAN JOSE -- The Sharks went 39-1 last season when allowing two goals or fewer. Scoring rarely was an issue for them, which meant many games were decided on their play without the puck.

“We scored a lot of goals, but unlike other years, where we relied on being tight defensively, those goals came at the expense of being a little looser defensively,” Sharks coach Peter DeBoer recently said at training camp. “And they were getting different looks.”

Criticism of goals allowed thickened during the final stretch of the regular season, and fingers were pointed in two distinct places: Team defense and goaltending.

“I’m sure [Martin] Jones is the first guy to say he wishes he played better at times,” Sharks captain Logan Couture said of his goalie. “But there were a lot of times we didn’t help him out. We gave up too much.”

The plot thickened in Round 1 of the Stanley Cup playoffs, when Vegas took Games 2, 3 and 4 by scoring goals early and often. The Golden Knights looked unstoppable on the scoreboard.

In retrospect, Jones believes he tried to do too much.

“You want to go out and make a difference,” he said. “But as a goalie, you need to have more patience and let the game come to you. You can’t race out and make 30 saves in the first period. You have to take what comes to you.”

Facing elimination in Game 5, the Sharks turned their Achilles heel into a strong point.

“Breakaways, odd-man rushes, tap-in goals -- he didn’t have a chance,” Couture said. “I don’t know how we did it, but we flipped a switch, and buckled down after that.”

Added DeBoer: “I know the group around him takes some responsibility for the ups and downs of last year. To his credit, he found a way. He dug himself out of that place where he wasn’t feeling great about his game.”

The final 16 playoff games should clearly indicate what Jones -- who posted a career-worst .896 save percentage and 2.94 goals-against average in the regular season -- can do, especially in the most critical junctures. That must breed confidence in what the Sharks can accomplish this season, if they can support their goalie.

“I can tell you this,” DeBoer said confidently, “the group never wavered once, even at the lowest moments, about whether he could get the job done.”

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.19.2019
Jonny Brodzinski's audition for Sharks roster spot off to good start

By Chelena Goldman September 18, 2019 10:40 AM

SAN JOSE - When Jonny Brodzinski played on the Ontario Reign during the 2016-17 season, he regularly faced a San Jose Barracuda roster consisting of Timo Meier, Kevin Labanc, and Marcus Sorensen -- among other names familiar to Sharks fans.

Now, the 26-year-old out of Minnesota is sporting the same teal sweater as the aforementioned players while the Sharks preseason gets underway.

Heck, he and Sorensen are even playing on a line together to kick off training camp.

"I played against a lot of these guys, yeah," Brodzinski reflected after Tuesday evening's preseason game. "Played against a lot of them and now we're teammates. It's exciting."

The Sharks have roster spots to fill on offense and having a player with Brozinski's skillset could help fill out their forward attack. While Sharks' bench boss Peter DeBoer insisted he isn't penciling in his final roster just yet, he's impressed with what he sees from Brodzinski so far.

"He's got a great shot, he's got good speed, he works hard," DeBoer observed. "He's auditioning for some pretty big roles we have open here. He's one of a handful of guys here where tonight was the start of that audition."

The coach was right. Although Tuesday's contest against the Anaheim Ducks ended in a 4-3 loss, it did help kickstart observing the talents of San Jose's roster hopefuls. And Brodzinski's resume was on display.

Following an NCAA career at St. Cloud State where he posted 112 points (64 goals, 48 assists) and a minus-42 -- and helped lead the Huskies to their first Frozen Four appearance in 2013 -- Brodzinski spent four seasons with the Reign and occasionally got recalled to play for the Kings. The 6-foot-1 winger spent a lot of time traveling back and forth between the AHL and NHL as he developed his game, building himself up to be a regular goal-scorer.

That scoring consistency, mixed with the element of speed Brodzinski demonstrated in Tuesday evening's game, could be one piece of the puzzle pieces the Sharks are looking for to bolster their bottom six.

Brodzinski may still be in the audition phase of his tenure in teal, but he's also getting some veteran guidance along the way. Playing wing opposite Sorensen also means he's spent the start of the preseason on a line with Joe Thornton. Sharks' general manager Doug Wilson said ahead of training camp how excited the organization was that No. 19 would be around for another season to help usher in the next wave of new players -- much like Thornton did with Sorensen last season. So far, Brodzinski is getting that exact opportunity.

"All of those guys, especially Joe, are pretty easy to play with," Brodzinski complimented. "He sees the ice really, really well."

This isn't to say the line combinations won't get mixed up at some point before the regular season starts. DeBoer isn't one to get too attached to combos and pairs, no matter what time of year it is. For the time being, though, Brozinski is trying to figure out how he can best contribute to that line.

"Those guys have a lot of chemistry already," he said of Thornton and Sorensen. "So, I'm just trying to mesh. Find the way that they play and try to acclimate my game as much as I can to the way they play."

"Now I just have to take this opportunity and run with it."

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 09.19.2019
Sharks prospect Joachim Blichfeld is ‘near the top of the list of guys who have taken a big step’

By Kevin Kurz Sep 18, 2019

A year ago, the Sharks had a decision to make regarding forward Joachim Blichfeld, a seventh-round pick from the 2016 draft who was in San Jose attending training camp.

The prospect was coming off a 2017-18 season in which he posted 56 points (24g, 32a) in 56 games for the Portland Winterhawks of the WHL, and joined the Barracuda for a pair of playoff games in April. At 20 years old, he was eligible to start the 2018-19 season with the Barracuda, or he could return to Portland as an over-age junior player.

The Sharks determined that he was better off returning to Portland. Just one week into camp, on Sept. 20, 2018, Blichfeld was officially on his way back to the City of Roses.

Sharks scouting director Doug Wilson Jr. had a hand in that decision.

"Joachim has been a goal scorer at every level," Wilson Jr. said on Wednesday. "He's always had an NHL-caliber shot. The question with those types of prospects is do they have the fire to improve the rest of their game? Will they put in the gym effort? Will they be as effective defensively as they are offensively? We challenged him last year to do that in Portland. To his credit, he has that inner fire and took our challenge head on. He's so much better all-around and is a pain in the ass to play against."

Blichfeld, now 21, said: "Obviously I came to camp (last year) and they made a decision for me to go back and play my over-age season. I was disappointed at first but tried to make the best of it. I think I did, for sure."

Did he ever.

Blichfeld more than doubled his scoring output from the prior season, posting 53 goals and 114 points 68 games for the Winterhawks and was selected as the WHL’s Player of the Year. He led the league in scoring and was tied for first in goals.

It must be noted that Blichfeld spent last season playing with one of the league’s better prospects in center Cody Glass, the sixth overall pick of the Vegas Golden Knights in the 2017 draft. Glass could end up on the league’s better prospects in center Cody Glass, the sixth overall pick of the Vegas Golden Knights in the 2017 draft. Glass could end up on the NHL roster of the Sharks’ biggest rival this season.

Still, 114 points is 114 points. One NHL scout familiar with the WHL told us in July that Blichfeld is "an excellent seventh-round pick that may provide depth in the organization at the NHL level. Good goal-scoring instincts and shooter." Although he benefitted from playing with Glass, Blichfeld still "did his part in finishing/scoring."

"He’s probably the best player I’ve played with on a line," Blichfeld said of Glass. "Playing with him was obviously really, really fun and cool. He was finding me all over the ice, so I just had to get open and I had the puck on my stick. It was awesome playing with him."

It's easy to recognize why Glass wanted to get Blichfeld the puck in scoring areas, as the strength of his game seems to be his quick release and accuracy.

Since his successful junior season ended, Blichfeld has been noticeable in virtually every game he's played while wearing a Sharks sweater. He scored in the prospect scrimmage in June, added a goal and an assist in two rookie tournament games in Southern California a week and a half ago, fired in a high shot from the slot over Aaron Dell’s shoulder in an intra-squad scrimmage on Sunday, and scored the Sharks’ prettiest goal of their preseason opener on Tuesday at SAP Center when he froz

Anthony Stolarz and whipped it past the Anaheim Ducks goalie’s short side.

Has he caught your attention, Pete DeBoer?

"Yeah, he has," DeBoer said Wednesday. "When I look at the prospect pool and I look at where guys were a year ago and where they are now, he’s got to be right near the top of the list of guys who have taken a big step. I think he’s had a really good camp. He’s trending in the right direction. He looks like he’s going to play in the NHL one day to me if he keeps improving."

Could Blichfeld make the Sharks out of training camp, though? It seems possible, as the only proven top-nine right wing they have right now is Kevin Labanc. Blichfeld spent all of last season on the right side, so he’s comfortable playing that position.

DeBoer offered a reminder after Tuesday’s game that he’s not handing out any jobs after just one preseason game. Many of the Sharks’ other forward prospects like Sasha Chmelevski, Ivan Chekhovich and Alex True were set to make their preseason debuts on Wednesday night in Calgary, and there are several others in the mix, too.

The Sharks coach also has the reputation of making young players earn their ice time, and never giving them too much responsibility unless they’ve proven they can handle it. You can’t argue with the results, as guys like Labanc, Timo Meier and Tomas Hertl have all gotten better each season they’ve been with DeBoer and staff.

Blichfeld might have been an over-age player in junior last season, but he only turned 21 two months ago.

"I look back to when Kevin Labanc and Timo Meier were that age. Were they ready to play in the NHL? They went down to the American League, they did their thing, they played well and three years later they’re very good NHL players," DeBoer said. "There’s the odd guy that can step in out of junior hockey — Logan Couture, Marc-Edouard Vlasic. But, it’s a rarity.

"Let’s be honest, we’re trying to win a Stanley Cup here, too. I think the good thing is that we’ve seen over the years that regardless of where you start, we need bodies, we need depth. Guys are going to get opportunities throughout the season regardless of where they end up starting (the season)."

Still, there are at least a few holes to be filled up front. Unless Doug Wilson makes a trade to land an NHL-caliber forward, the club might have to rely on one or two unproven players for the early part of the season.

Blichfeld knows that the competition is on.

"That makes it a lot more fun, for sure," he said. "You’ve got to be on your game, and I’m just trying to be my best every time I’m on the ice and show the coaches that I’ll be battling for a spot."

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
Farewell Gloria: Blues looking for new song

By Jim Thomas St. Louis Post-Dispatch 12 hrs ago 0

You may have heard by now, but it's over for "Gloria" as the Blues postgame victory song. It was fun while it lasted, to say the least. But it's a new season and Blues players are moving on.

"I was there for 'Gloria,' so that worked out," defenseman Joel Edmundson said.

He was speaking of the bar in Philadelphia where the Blues heard the Laura Branigan dance song from the early '80s and decided to adopt it in early January.

"Hopefully, I can be there for the next one," he said. "It just came organically. So it'd be nice if the song just came to us that we can use. But I think we're leaving 'Gloria' in the past. It's gonna stay in 2019. But we'll definitely find a new one, and it'll be a fun song again."

Edmundson said Blues fans already are sending suggestions for a new song.

"Oh yeah, they've been sending them all summer," he said. "It's obviously nice hearing what the fans think. Some people tweet me (suggestions). I listen to the song."

Edmundson said he even got one suggestion from a beer league team after it won its championship.

"So they're trying to hand it over to us," Edmundson said. "I was just like, 'Ah, I think we'll pass on that one.' "

The new song has to come from within the team. And it can't be forced.

"You want to let it happen," defenseman Robert Bortuzzo said. "That goes with a lot of things in life. You don't want to force it — that's when you get the best results.

"It's gonna be a team-oriented thing that we've either agreed on our experienced as a group. So yeah, Gloria's 'Gloria.' We're on to the next one, as Bill Belichick would say."

BARBASHEV HAD "OPTIONS"

Forward Ivan Barbashev said there was sincere interest from the Kontinental Hockey League over the summer as he weighed his future with the Blues and the NHL.

"There was some options, like I had to look through everything," Barbashev said. "But my plan was to play in the NHL for a long time, and I'm just happy I signed here."

"It took a while. But everybody's happy, both sides. And I'm glad it's over right now, and now I can just focus on the game."

Barbashev, 23, was the last of nine restricted free agents to come to terms with the Blues, signing a two-year contract worth $1.475 million a year in late August. In theory, the deal keeps him with the team through the 2020-21 season. He will still be a restricted free agent at the end of this contract.

After scoring a career-high 14 goals and becoming an integral part of the team's fourth line and penalty-kill unit, how do you leave a defending Stanley Cup champion?

"I know," Barbashev said. "It's a good squad. A lot of good guys."

SUNDOVIST LEAVES EARLY

Center Oskar Sundqvist, working with the "non-travel" group Wednesday morning at Centene Community Ice Center, left practice early.

"He tweaked something but we'll see tomorrow how he is," coach Craig Berube said.

TONIGHT'S LINEUP

Here are the expected lines and defensive pairings for tonight's game in Washington:

Forwards
Schwartz-Bozak-Tarasenko
Sanford-Fabbri-Poganski
Stevens-Olsen-Lappin
Polei-Darcy-Toropchenko

Defensemen
Dunn-Parayko
Borgman-Reinke
Walman-O’Gara

Goalies
Binnington
Fitzpatrick

(Carl Gunnarsson originally was listed on the travel squad paired with Mitch Reinke, but Berube said that was a glitch and Gunnarsson never was scheduled to make this trip.)

St Louis Post Dispatch LOADED: 09.19.2019
Five things we’ve learned in the first five days of Lightning training camp

By Joe Smith Sep 18, 2019

Brandon, Fla. — The Lightning’s No. 1 center is without a contract, working out somewhere near Calgary and recovering from offseason hip surgery.

It’s not an ideal situation, but as the Brayden Point contract saga continues, Tampa Bay has no other option but to (temporarily) move on and continue training camp without him.

Wing Alex Killorn said a few teammates have kept in touch with Point throughout the process.

“He’s not on his cell phone as much as a lot of other guys — he lives more of a simple lifestyle,” Killorn said. “We know he wants to be here. It’s not about a situation of him not wanting to be here. It’s about him getting a higher number, the right number for the team.’’

While Point mulls the Lightning’s three-year, $5.75 million annual average offer (which likely isn’t enough), the Lightning have shifted to an interesting Plan B. Anthony Cirelli has been centering the top line with Steven Stamkos and Nikita Kucherov, including in Tuesday’s 3-0 loss to Carolina in the preseason opener.

“I think Cirelli is a great guy to step up,’’ said Killorn, who played with Stamkos and Cirelli before leaving with a minor undisclosed injury. “He was starting to show his offensive potential, and you could see he got more comfortable. That just came with time.’’

Cirelli, 22, said playing for Team Canada at the World Championships in May was a confidence-booster, especially playing with Sean Couturier and Sam Reinhart. Said Canada captain Kyle Turris, the Predators forward, “Man, is he a player. So fast. So smart. He makes plays, is able to play with a special player like ‘Stammer,’ I just feed him the puck.”

The Swede, who rounded player.”

Cirelli finished the season on a line with Stamkos and Kucherov, and embraces anytime he can center one of those elite scorers. “Being able to play with a special player like, ‘Stammer,’ I just feed him the puck,” Cirelli said. “He’s so skilled, he works so hard, he’s easy to play with.’’

It’s dangerous to read too much into early line combinations, but Cooper said the fact Cirelli was so dependable last year — a key cog on the PK — showed he’s ready for an expanded role if need be.

“Training camp is the time to look at all different angles,’’ Cooper said. “We’re missing a centerman on our team, so other guys are going to have to jump into those situations. But the one thing that has happened, we’ve had centers have to play wing and guys have played all over. So I don’t think it hurts us in that regard. Naturally, you’d like to have your whole team here and understand that’s not the case right now, but guys have got to fill those roles.”

Anthony Cirelli skates with the puck as Carolina’s Jordan Martinook attempts to defend. (Kim Klement / USA Today)

There’s not a sense that any deal is imminent with Point, and you wonder if as the season gets closer, there will be more pressure to get a deal done. Killorn was among many other Lightning players who took a bridge deal after his entry-level was done and now is in the middle of a seven-year long-term deal.

“If you take a long-term deal, you’ll probably end up with less but have more security,’’ Killorn said. “If you take a shorter-term deal, he’ll make more on the back end and for the next few years, it helps us cap-wise. But it’s up to him, it’s his life. It depends on what he wants. Regardless of what he wants, he doesn’t have the means to argue (arbitration rights). It’s the situation he’s in.’’

What the lines say about who’s in and who’s out

Beyond the Cirelli-Stamkos intrigue, there’s a lot of unsettled parts up front.

This is what we’ve seen so far:

Killorn-Cirelli-Stamkos
Ondrej Palat-Tyler Johnson-Nikita Kucherov
Yanni Gourde-Cory Conacher-Mathieu Joseph
Alex Volkov-Cedric Paquette-Pat Maroon

The fact Tampa Bay is missing Point could be a factor in Johnson being back in the middle (and Cirelli up top), but it would be interesting to see if the former All-Star center gets a shot at his natural position. Johnson, who has played wing the past couple seasons, said he doesn’t mind either way.

What Volkov getting placed with Paquette and Maroon tells me is that he’s getting a strong look to make the team as the fourth-line winger.

“Volkov was an early arrival for informal skates with vets after participating in the NHL rookie symposium on the east coast. Danick Martel and Mitchell Stephens were on another line with Ross Colton. Cooper said while they didn’t see much of Martel in game action last year — just nine games — that he handled the role well, and that he did so with such a great attitude. The Lightning also have a comfort level with Conacher, who is in his second stint with the organization. Those two would be the safe choices for the 13th forward spot as Cooper said “ideally” you don’t have a younger prospected sitting in the stands.

“It was tough for (Martel) last year,’’ Cooper said. “He was kind of on the outside. But when he did get in, and we asked him to have an impact on the game, for the most part, he did. Now he’s got to make an impact in camp. I’m sure it was tough for him, but you’re always dependable in practice and he was always the guy who has to sit there and stay later and skate extra, (and) he did so without complaint. He’d drag other guys into the fight in that regard. You have to really appreciate him. He’s working his butt off again and that’s a great trait in a player.’’

What defensive pairs say about who’s in and who’s out

One big question heading into camp was whether Mikhail Sergachev could make a case to play with Victor Hedman in the top pair. Sergachev will get his share of reps with the Norris Trophy winner, though Kevin Shattenkirk has also spent some time with the Swede.

Cooper said the Ryan McDonagh-Erik Cernak shutdown pair, which worked so well last season, will start the year together. If it’s not happy, why fix it?

It’s the third pair where things get murky. On Tuesday, you saw Braydon Coburn with Jan Rutta. Luke Schenn, who rejuvenated his career last season with Vancouver, was signed to a one-year, $700,000 deal and should get a look. What we do know is this: GM Julien BriseBois said the eight NHL defensemen on one-way contracts are, barring injuries, expected to open the season with Tampa Bay.

That means that Luke Witkowski, signed to a two-year, two-way deal, is likely to get sent down to AHL Syracuse, where he’d provide some depth. The fact Witkowski has experience playing fourth-line wing, a conversion he made a few years back with the Lightning, makes him an interesting depth option. Witkowski looks great, having slimmed down, and is really skating well. But he’d have to really blow coaches away to grab one of the eight spots on the blueline or the 13th forward position.

“Luke checks all the boxes,’’ Cooper said. “He can play multiple positions. He’s been around a little bit in the league now. He’s got great leadership qualities. He’s a complete team-first guy. He’s got the skating ability to play both positions in this league, and so he’s a luxury to have. … It’s great to have him back. It was tough when he left, I understand why he did. But you know when you bring him back how much he meant to us before he left. Hopefully, there’s good things to come from him.”

I think whichever defenseman — between Sergachev and Shattenkirk — doesn’t end up with Hedman will slide into the third pair with Coburn. Having Rutta and Schenn provides healthy competition, and perhaps not playing Coburn 82 games would be a good thing.

“Luke came here cause he wanted a chance to win,’’ Cooper said. “We felt especially with the loss of Dan Girardi, maybe Luke could come in and fill that type of role for us because he’s been a warrior in the league, and I think after having some tough times, I think he really re-established himself as an NHL player. Where he fits with us, we don’t exactly know, it’s hard to say that in mid-September. But he showed a lot of traits, both on and off the ice, of something we wanted to be part of our organization.”
Ondrej Palat looks primed for a bounce-back season

Yes, it is early, but Ondrej Palat certainly looks like a different player than the one Lightning fans witnessed for most of last year.

Palat, 28, was held to a career-low eight goals in 64 games, with his first not coming until December. Part of the issue was that it took a while for Palat to regain his game, and confidence, after missing a month with a fractured foot suffered in late October.

But Palat also felt his offseason training hadn’t worked the way it intended. “Last year, in the gym, I was an animal,” he said. But he’d get gassed after 20-25 seconds on the ice.

This summer, he switched it up, not doing heavy weights at all, focusing on sprints, cores and jumps. He lost a few pounds but feels quicker on his feet. “I feel so much better,” he said.

Part of last season was how he felt physically but also mentally. He lost that assertiveness, which you saw come back during the first-round playoff series.

“I want to be more productive and be more dangerous,” Palat said. “I was sort of looking for passing so much, but I want to be a threat, too. When you play with ‘Stammer’ and ‘Kuch,’ you try to find them. Everyone knows ‘Kuch’ and ‘Stammer,’ so they’ll cover them and I have to make space for them. When I have the puck, I have to create something. I’m working on that.”

Palat started camp on the line with Stamkos and Cirelli and moved to one with Kucherov and Tyler Johnson — reuniting the old Triplets line — Tuesday morning. Palat has a history of being able to produce — four seasons of at least 15 goals, with a career-high 23 as a rookie. But he has to show he can be that kind of factor to stick in the top-six.

“I don’t know how I’m going to feel during the season,” he said. “But I feel better.”

Don’t sleep on Mitchell Stephens for a roster spot

Mitchell Stephens played in Tuesday’s preseason opener likes he wants to stick around.

The Lightning forward prospect, among the candidates to snag one of the final couple roster spots, created two quality scoring chances in the first period alone. He sprung free for a breakaway, then forced a turnover on the penalty kill, flipping a backhand off the post.

“He’s a gifted skater, so it really helps his game,” Cooper said. “I thought he was on the puck a lot tonight. He was one of the guys who was skating tonight.”

Though Volkov, Carter Verhaeghe and Alex Barre-Boulet are intriguing options, don’t sleep on Stephens making a case to land a fourth-line winger/penalty killer. The 5-foot-11, 190-pounder, who can play wing or center, finally feels healthy after being limited to just 33 games last season.

“I think as the summer progressed, a month into the summer I started to feel injury-free,” Stephens said. “I had to build up my strength again after being out so much. I watched a lot of hockey, though, and it helped me sort out my mindset. There were different aspects of the game I had to work on.”

Stephens felt he needed a change in his summer training, and went to former NHL forward Gary Roberts’ facility in the Toronto area, the one with Steven Stamkos, Connor McDavid, James Neal. “It was a body-changer,” Stephens said.

The Lightning are making subtle D-zone changes

When the Lightning met for the first time Thursday as training camp opened, the message was laid out pretty directly: they needed a better commitment defensively to limit the grade-A scoring chances. The analytics supported that theme, with Tampa Bay among the worst in the league in giving up inter-slot shots, grade-A chances and its turnover-per-60 ratio.

While coaches, as usual, stressed drills during the first few days of camp, along with forecheck and breakouts, there hasn’t been a complete makeover as far as systems go. But players sense a subtle shift in how they defend in their own end.

“It’s just protect the middle,” Killorn said. “If you look at last year, even though we did really well in goals against, it was because of ‘Vasy’

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019

(Andrei Vasilevskiy). He was making saves that, statistically, were supposed to go in. It was making it harder on him and making it a lot easier to play against us. We’re just tightening up in those areas.

“It’s more that the wingers are staying more in the middle, giving up more on the outside. Trying to give them the bad shot.”

Nuts and bolts

Lightning first-round pick Nolan Foote showed up for camp and on day one had a locker next to Steven Stamkos. Needless to say, he soaked it all in. “It was really cool,” Foote said. He said he has watched the veterans work, how they prepare and has learned some things. He has made a strong impression, too, and might get into a preseason game as early as Wednesday in Carolina. “He’s a big boy and has a real cannon for a shot,” Cooper said. “He’s fun to watch. Just his size. In the past, we’ve had smaller players in that role, and he’s so big and strong. You can tell he’s got good hands down low. He’s hard to take off the puck.”

Foote’s older brother, Cal, the first-round pick from 2017, said he’s much more ‘at ease’ in this camp. Cal Foote, who is getting closer to NHL ready, played with McDonagh in Tuesday’s exhibition, playing 21 minutes, 23 seconds. “He’s definitely more comfortable,” Cooper said.

“He was someone that you don’t want to say he was nervous, but at times he looked that way (last year). This camp, he’s much more comfortable…” … Louis Domingue has been working out on the side with fellow goalie Mike Condon, and while it could be an awkward situation with the Lightning trying to move him, he put a photo on Instagram of him and his kids watching Tuesday’s preseason opener from the stands. A class act. … Killorn, the Lightning’s NHLPA player rep, said the fact the union didn’t decide to re-open the CBA by Monday’s deadline was a show of good faith, with the chance an extension could be done in the next few years. “In our talks that we’ve had with the NHL, they were definitely not contentious,” Killorn said. “There were certain issues that we need to get resolved, but we couldn’t get resolved by the deadline. If both sides talk amicably, we can get something done. There’s leverage on both sides.”… The most interesting thing from Sunday’s Fan Fest? Owner Jeff Vinik owns a sushi business and has never tried sushi; he calls himself one of the pickiest eaters in the world. Best question in the “Kids Press Conference” Sunday to Coburn and Johnson, “How do you get dressed by yourself?”
Jason Spezza wants to ‘pay it forward’ as veteran voice with Maple Leafs

JOSHUA CLIPPERTON

Jason Spezza remembers what it was like being a young star in the NHL – the demands, the pressure, the expectations.

The impact that veteran leaders had on his early career remain equally fresh in his 36-year-old mind. It wasn’t so much what they did, but how they did it.

That’s part of the package Spezza is hoping to bring to the Toronto Maple Leafs after signing with his hometown team for the league minimum in free agency this summer.

Selected second overall at the 2001 NHL draft, the flashy centre with silky-smooth hands had all the tools when he first walked into the Ottawa Senators’ locker room.

Soaking up the knowledge offered him by the team’s veterans is what he credits with keeping him in the game long enough to see an 18th professional season.

“I had great leaders … Daniel Alfredsson, Chris Phillips, Curtis Leschyshyn, Bryan Smolinski,” Spezza recalled at the start of Leafs training camp. “They were just every-day pros, and that taught me to be an every-day pro.

“I think that’s why I’ve been able to play for so long.”

On a roster in Toronto loaded with young star power like Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner – 22-year-old forwards carrying burdens not unlike what Spezza experienced in the country’s capital – he’s ready to help.

“It’s almost like a ‘pay-it-forward’ thing,” Spezza said. “Now it’s your job to show the way.”

Born in Toronto and raised in nearby Mississauga, Ont., Spezza had a difficult final two seasons with the Dallas Stars before signing with the Leafs, putting up just 26 and 27 points, including eight goals in each campaign.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

He’s scored 332 times and registered 915 points in 1,065 regular-season games with Ottawa and Dallas to go along with 70 points (25 goals, 45 assists) in 80 playoff outings.

But long gone are the days of Spezza putting up 80-plus points as a No. 1 centre. He knows his role will be much different in Toronto – he got a taste of it last season in Dallas when he was bumped to the bottom-6 forward group.

“At first it’s a difficult transition when you’re used to kind of being ‘The Guy’ and you’re judged by how you’re producing offensively,” he said. “It becomes a reality of how you’re going to contribute. Once you get comfortable with it, it becomes easier.”

Spezza has made nearly US$90-million in his career, so it goes without saying the six-foot-three, 215-pound forward didn’t come home for the $700,000 heading his way in 2019-20.

It’s about legacy and getting what could be one last opportunity at hoisting the Stanley Cup after getting agonizingly close when Ottawa lost to Anaheim in the 2007 final.

“It gives me a chance to play on a team that has a real chance to win,” Spezza said. “It’s an exciting core.”

Leafs head coach Mike Babcock has sent mixed signals about Spezza in recent days, but it’s believed along with providing depth up front and helping in the faceoff circle, he’ll be tasked with bolstering the team’s No. 2 power-play unit that struggled to create last season.

“There’s a role here for him, but he’s got to be able to do it,” Babcock told reporters in St. John’s, N.L., earlier this week. “We’re just in the process of feeling him out, and he’s in the process of feeling us out.”

Stan Butler coached Spezza when he was an under-age star at 15 with the Brampton Battalion in the Ontario Hockey League, and the two have remained close.

Butler pumped the brakes a little on the idea that Spezza would ever be a defence-first player, but said that doesn’t mean he can’t be valuable if used properly.

“Most NHL teams now want four lines that can score,” said Butler, who currently heads the OHL’s North Bay Battalion. “No team’s more into analytics than the Leafs.

“I’m sure somewhere, somehow something’s come up favourable on him and having him in whatever role they envision.”

Butler added Toronto will be getting the best Jason Spezza the player can provide at this stage of his career.

“1f he didn’t think he could do it, he wouldn’t do it,” Butler said. “There’s two motivations for him to play in Toronto. One is he’d love to finally win a Cup. And two, that he’s going to play in his hometown.

“When you’re a Toronto kid, there’s something special there.”

Leafs centre John Tavares, who himself came home last summer in free agency, said Spezza’s impact will be important after veterans Patrick Marleau and Ron Hainsey moved on this summer.

“Spezz is going to be able to relate in very similar ways to our group,,” Tavares said. “His skill set and his desire to be here and fit a role and come be a part of this, I think speaks volumes.”

Dallas sniper Tyler Seguin said in August after Spezza signed with the Leafs that he’ll miss bouncing ideas off his older teammate in both good times and bad.

The veteran centre will no doubt be there to do the same if Matthews, Marleau or another young Leaf comes calling.

“It was a very important part of my development to have good leaders around me,” Spezza said. “Now you try to give that back.”

Globe And Mail LOADED: 09.19.2019
Bobrovsky and letting trade deadline pickups Matt Duchene and Ryan Pedersen to Columbus will undoubtedly take a step back after losing Artemi Panarin and Patrik Laine. We'll have to see what we can do with that.”

Pittsburgh’s captain said. “We’re younger, so I think we’re going to be probably a quicker team, probably an energized team and a little bit bigger, too,” Pittsburgh defenceman Nick Nurse said. “We have a lot of scorers and we’re going to make a lot of people correct that.”

Devils got Norris Trophy winner P.K. Subban and selected centre Jack Hughes first overall. “They got a young goaltender who’s getting better and better every year and their D corps is pretty solid,” Carolina defenceman Jacob Slavin said. “Their forward group is so skilled and solid that I would still say it’s Tampa.”

The Penguins believe their championship window is still open. “The Capitals believe their championship window is still open. “Expectations are high: Of course for everyone the main goal is to win the Cup,” Vasilevskiy said. “We’re more mature now. We have more experience. … I think the last few seasons people [say], ‘Tampa will win the Cup 100 per cent’ every time. That’s the expectation, but the reality is every team can win the Cup. We’re playing in the best league in the world, so anything can happen.”

With Tampa Bay, Boston, Toronto and Florida, the Atlantic Division looks like murderer’s row. The Bruins got through only after coming back from a 3-2, first-round deficit against Toronto and aren’t feeling cocky. “Our division’s been great the past couple years and there’s no end in sight there,” Boston goaltender Tuukka Rask said. “We feel that we have to go through Toronto, we have to go through Tampa, we have to go through Florida and everybody.”

The Panthers signed two-time Vezina Trophy winning goalie Sergei Bobrovsky and hired three-time Cup-winning coach Joel Quenneville to take the next step. Across the East in the Metropolitan Division, the improved New York Rangers and New Jersey Devils are rejuvenated with some big additions.

“The Rangers signed elite winger Artemi Panarin, traded for top defender Jacob Trouba and drafted Finnish sensation Kaapo Kakko, while the Devils got Norris Trophy winner P.K. Subban and selected centre Jack Hughes first overall.”

OLD GUARD

Pittsburgh still has Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin, Washington still has Alex Ovechkin and Nicklas Backstrom, and yet each team has undergone a transformation since last lifting the Cup. The Penguins look closer to falling down the East standings at this point, and Crosby acknowledged there are some question marks.

“We’re a little bit younger, and in some ways we’re maybe a little bit older, too,” Pittsburgh’s captain said. “We’re younger, so I think we’re going to be probably a quicker team, probably an energized team and we’ll have some guys that are pretty excited to be in the positions they’re in. We’ll have to see what we can do with that.”

The Capitals believe their championship window is still open. “We expect to be amongst the league leaders in terms of wins and points,” coach Todd Reirden said. “That’s the culture that we’ve established now and now we need to continue to build it.”

CHER ON SHOULDER

Columbus will undoubtedly take a step back after losing Panarin and Bobrovsky and letting trade deadline pickups Matt Duchene and Ryan Merzlikins. “The biggest question is goaltending,” Atkinson said. “That’s going to be the biggest thing. The St. Louis Blues won with a rookie goaltender coming in in the middle of the season and look what happens to that team.”

The Islanders let starting goalie Robin Lehner depart in free agency and replaced him with Semyon Varlamov. Coach Barry Trotz’s structure remains, but no one’s going to underestimate them this time around.

MAYBE NEXT YEAR

No team since Pittsburgh in 2009 has won the Cup after losing in the final the previous year. Bruins defenceman Torey Krug said the “taste is still there” from the Game 7 defeat at home. “It will probably always be there,” Krug said. “It’s how you manage it individually to use it as motivation.”

It could be neck and neck between the Blue Jackets, Rangers, Devils, Carolina Hurricanes and Philadelphia Flyers for the final playoff spot. Carolina will need stable goaltending to duplicate a surprise run that ended in the East final. Philadelphia added coach Alain Vigneault, centre Kevin Hayes and defencemen Matt Niskanen and Justin Braun, but remains a bit of a mystery amid inconsistent play. The Buffalo Sabres will get a boost from new coach Ralph Krueger, but more rebuilding is likely. Defenceman Rasmus Dahlin wants the Sabres to “trust the process,” which is ongoing not just in Buffalo but also Montreal and Detroit before those teams can target a post-season run. Ottawa’s long-term rebuild should set them up for a top draft pick.

PLAYOFF PREDICTIONS (IN ORDER)

Atlantic: Lightning, Bruins, Maple Leafs
Metropolitan: Capitals, Islanders, Penguins
Wild card: Panthers, Blue Jackets

Globe And Mail LOADED: 09.19.2019
Senators beat Leafs 4-3 to sweep two-game pre-season series

THE CANADIAN PRESS

It’s only two games and it’s still the pre-season, but the Ottawa Senators feel pretty good after beating the Toronto Maple Leafs on back-to-back nights.

Brady Tkachuk’s empty-net goal wound up the winner as the Senators held on for a 4-3 win over the Leafs on Wednesday in pre-season action. Ottawa took home a 3-1 victory Tuesday night in St. John’s, N.L.

“It’s a good feeling for sure,” said Senators defenceman Mark Borowiecki, who chipped in with two assists. “It doesn’t matter what the stakes are, we hate losing. We’re all competitors in here.”

Connor Brown, Tyler Ennis and Max Veronneau also scored as Ottawa stayed undefeated in the pre-season.

Craig Anderson allowed one goal on 21 shots through two periods before Filip Gustavsson took over in the third giving up two goals on 18 shots.

Auston Matthews, making his pre-season debut, scored twice for the Leafs. Nick Shore also scored while Michael Hutchinson gave up three goals on 20 shots through two periods, before Brandon Halberson took over in the third and faced six shots.

After a week of training camp and watching the team in action Tuesday night, Matthews was excited to get back to work.

“Obviously it feels good to get back into a game,” said Matthews. “It’s our first game so you’re not really sure what to expect, just trying to get back into it, get your timing back and get adjusted with your linemates.”

Any win against the Leafs is cause for celebration by the Senators, but for new head coach D.J. Smith it’s more about the experience gained playing against some of the league’s top players.

“To play two of the top lines in the National Hockey League, Tavares’s line (Tuesday) and then Matthews, if you’re a young defenceman and you’re out there playing against them you’re not going to get that experience anywhere else,” said Smith. “You’re not going to experience guys who can hold on to the puck that are big, that are strong, so these exhibition games are great.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Both teams have players looking to make good first impressions including the Senators trio of Tkachuk, Brown and Colin White, who played well together for the first time.

“I thought we had some good shifts and some bad shifts,” said Brown. “We made some nice offensive plays and a couple boneheaded ones, but that’s what pre-season is all about. We’re still getting better and better playing with each other, but it’s coming.”

Matthews made it a one-goal game at the seven-minute mark of the third as he batted a puck out of mid-air and past Gustavsson.

The Senators appeared to ice the game when Tkachuk put the puck into Toronto’s empty net, but once again the Leafs were able to make it a one-goal game as Shore beat Gustavsson with 44 seconds remaining in regulation.

The third period was a good lesson for the Senators about playing a complete 60 minutes.

“It’s not always going to be pretty for us, especially against a team like that who has some fire power,” said Borowiecki. “They start coming in waves when they turn it on, but we had some outstanding goaltending.

“We found a way to win and those are the lessons that are kind of nice to learn in the pre-season because they prove valuable down the road.”

Ottawa regained its two-goal lead less than two minutes later as Ennis picked up the puck in the slot and rifled a shot past Hutchinson.

The Senators got off to a good start taking a 2-0 first period lead with goals by Veronneau and Borowiecki.

Thomas Chabot was a late scratch for the Senators as he wasn’t feeling well after the warm-up and was replaced by Hubert Labrie.

Globe And Mail LOADED: 09.19.2019
Matthews scores a pair but Maple Leafs drop second straight to Senators

By Lisa Wallace The Canadian Press

OTTAWA—Brady Tkachuk’s empty-net goal wound up the winner as the Ottawa Senators held on for a 4-3 win over the Maple Leafs on Wednesday in pre-season action.

Connor Brown, Tyler Ennis and Max Veronneau scored for the Senators as they beat Toronto for the second straight night to remain undefeated in the pre-season. Craig Anderson allowed one goal on 22 shots through two periods before Filip Gustavsson took over in the third, giving up one goal on 18 shots.

Auston Matthews, making his pre-season debut, scored twice for the Leafs. Nick Shore also scored while Michael Hutchinson gave up three goals on 20 shots through two periods before Brandon Halberson allowed two goals on seven shots.

Matthews made it a one-goal game at the seven-minute mark of the third as he won a battle in the slot and batted a puck out of mid-air and past Gustavsson.

The Senators appeared to ice the game when Tkachuk put the puck into Toronto’s empty net, but once again the Leafs were able to make it a one-goal game as Shore beat Gustavsson with 44 seconds remaining in regulation.

Trailing 2-0, the Leafs cut the lead in half early in the second period on a delayed penalty call as Matthews played give-and-go with Morgan Rielly before beating Anderson. Ottawa regained its two-goal lead less than two minutes later as Ennis picked up the puck in the slot and rifled a shot past Hutchinson.

The Senators got off to a good start, taking a 2-0 first period lead with goals by Veronneau and Borowiecki. Veronneau opened the scoring midway through the first with a power-play goal, while Brown tipped a Borowiecki shot from the blue-line.

Ottawa defenceman Thomas Chabot was a late scratch for the Senators because of illness after the warm-up and was replaced by Hubert Labrie.

Toronto Star LOADED: 09.19.2019
Blue-line survivor Kevin Gravel brings a healthy attitude to Leafs camp

By Kevin McGran Sports Reporter Wed., Sept. 18, 2019

Kevin Gravel, in camp with the Maple Leafs at age 27 and trying to grab a spot on the blue line, remembers when his career was proceeding nicely.

A late bloomer, the six-foot-four left-handed shooter from Kingsford, Mich. had joined the Los Angeles Kings almost six years after they drafted him 148th overall in 2010. He spent four years at St. Cloud State University before going pro in the AHL. A handful of NHL appearances in the 2015-16 season led to a more prominent role, 49 games in 2016-17.

His entry-level contract expired, though, and that left him feeling a little stressed.

"Then I just started feeling really lethargic and not very hungry," said Gravel, who won the 2015 Calder Cup with the Manchester Monarchs. "Started losing weight. I came home from workouts and wouldn't get out of bed all day. Then I started having the other issues."

Diarrhea, nausea, bloating.

"My girlfriend (Morgan), who's now my wife, told me to get checked out because something wasn't right. We went in, got looked at, did a bunch of labs (blood work). Came back normal. So I had to do a scope. That showed there was a ton of inflammation. They weren't able to do the full scope. It was too inflamed. Didn't want to risk ripping my colon and intestines."

The diagnosis was Crohn's disease, an inflammatory bowel disorder that causes inflammation of the digestive tract, which can lead to the symptoms he was suffering.

"Literally, the day after the scope is when it turned downhill for me. I had a few other complications."

An abscess on the colon needed to be removed. Sores appeared all over his body.

YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN...

"All of those are side effects of Crohn's that not everybody gets, but unfortunately I did," said Gravel. "That took a little time. I was in hospital for a week or so. That's when it went even more downhill. I lost, like, 40 pounds."

The Kings re-signed him, but it took a while to heal. He didn't feel himself until Christmas of 2016. He signed as a free agent and played for the Edmonton Oilers last year. This summer, he signed with the Leafs.

Medication and a strict diet — no beer or anything containing wheat, for example — have helped him feel normal again.

"This past year I was fine," said Gravel. "Everything was all normal. It's under control."

There are two or three jobs open on the Leafs blue line and Gravel, who played in Tuesday's exhibition opener against Ottawa, hopes to grab one of them.

YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN...

"It's exciting," he said. "All you can ask for is to have an opportunity and to have a fair shot. The team here is very exciting. Playing against them the last few years, they're not a fun team to go up against, all the skill that they have."

He admits to being nervous.

"Everything is a little bit new," said Gravel. "Maybe a little bit of nerves coming in, the unexpected. It's nice to get your feet in under you and get around the guys a bit and learn the nuances. I just need to come in here and do what I've been doing, play my game. Try to be a calming presence out there, be a steady guy, get the puck off my stick and get it to the forwards."

Toronto Star LOADED: 09.19.2019
Ex-Leaf Warren Rychel now an OHL coach, after selling Spitfires stake

By Kyle Cicerella The Canadian Press

Warren Rychel was out of the junior hockey scene and sitting at home watching a movie when he missed a call from Barrie Colts owner/president Howie Campbell one evening this summer.

Little did Rychel know there was an offer to get back into the game waiting for him on the other end.

"I thought, 'what's this guy want?' And I let it go," said Rychel, who has known Campbell for years. "He then texted me in the morning saying to call him.

"He asked me to come meet him. That was less than two weeks ago and it's all history from there."

Rychel accepted the head coaching position with the Colts on Sept. 9. It came as a surprise to many after it looked like he had walked away from the Ontario Hockey League. The former Windsor Spitfires executive also never envisioned replacing Dale Hawerchuk, who is on a leave of absence for medical reasons after being Barrie's bench boss since 2010.

The OHL season opens Thursday with the Niagara IceDogs hosting the Sudbury Wolves. Barrie's opener is Friday in North Bay against the Battalion, the same night as an OHL final rematch between the defending champion Guelph Storm and visiting Ottawa 67's.

After more than a decade as co-owner of the Spitfires, Rychel sold his share in June hoping to make a change in his day-to-day life. Believing that he had accomplished everything he could with Windsor as Spitfires vice president and general manager, he parted ways with the organization and had a new goal of getting to the NHL level in some capacity.

He had mixed emotions when he parted ways with the Spitfires, his hometown team that he watched as a kid before going pro in 1987. But he said the timing to sell "made sense" in more ways than one.

YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN...

"I was hoping to catch on with an NHL team, management or development department. I had some leads (but) wanted to make sure it was a good fit for me after 13 years in the OHL," Rychel said.

"I'm 52 years old, it had to do with financial as well. It was favourable for myself and family. Time to start to move on to something in the NHL, time for a change, combined with financial it was something I couldn't refuse."

Working for an NHL team didn't end up happening for Rychel, and he had no intentions of returning to junior until Campbell reached out. But after talking with friends and family, he felt it was the right opportunity.

Even though his coaching experience is minimal — some summer hockey back in the day with his kids and nine games last season when Spitfires coach Trevor Letowski was away at the world junior championship — Rychel is confident that he can help take Barrie to the next level after the club missed the post-season two of the past three years.

Since accepting the position, he's leaned on friends for help, including NHL coaches D.J. Smith and Bob Boughner, as well as Rocky Thompson of the American Hockey League, for a better understanding of what it takes to run a team from ice level on a day-to-day basis.

"I've worked with good coaches, played for good coaches," said Rychel. "It's a change for me but I do have an appreciation for coaches for sure and the work they do."

Rychel has been forced to play catch-up, so he has been spending extra time with Colts staff Todd Miller, Billy Smith and Taylor Carnevale. But with only three pre-season games under his belt ahead of Friday's opener, he jokes there could be some hiccups.

"I'm sure there will be a few too-many-men on-the-ice penalties," he said.
Matthews ready already, nets a pair in Leafs’ pre-season loss in Ottawa

Terry Kosha

OTTAWA — Well, Auston Matthews’ ability to shoot the puck didn’t quite dissipate over the summer.

The star centre’s first goal for the Maple Leafs against the Ottawa Senators on Wednesday night was equal parts skill, release and deception, coming in the second period when he whipped a shot past goalie Craig Anderson.

Matthews’ goal at 4:45, during a delayed Senators penalty, came off a pass from Morgan Rielly, the shot banking off the post and behind Anderson.

Matthews scored again in the third, batting the puck past Sens goalie Filip Gustavsson.

Those Matthews goals were among the highlights for the Leafs in their second pre-season game, as Toronto lost to Ottawa for the second night in a row, this time 4-3 at the Canadian Tire Centre.

“I feel good, a lot of guys feel good,” Matthews said. “This is more of an individual time of the year, so guys are trying to make impressions and fight for spots.

“For guys like myself, Willie, Johnny (Andreas Johnsson), we’re trying to work hard every night and build our chemistry and try to have the puck as much as possible and be good defensively, as well.”

Just as importantly, Rielly and new partner Cody Ceci showed signs of getting the kinks out, becoming more comfortable as the game progressed.

“It was great — lots of talk,” Rielly said. “Went pretty well, to be honest. There’s lots of room to get better. We both want to have great years. We want to work well together.”

Among the Leafs newcomers who impressed coach Mike Babcock was forward Ilya Mikheyev, who skated on a line with centre Alex Kerfoot and Nic Petan.

“Real good skater, real strong on the puck, makes intelligent plays, he is probably finding the rink a little small right now and he will need all of exhibition,” Babcock said of Mikheyev. “He is a good hockey player. I have no question about that.”

Babcock’s thoughts overall?

“I thought Johnny was unbelievable for us, Matty had a good night, and I thought on the back end, I really liked Rielly, Sandman (Rasmus Sandin) had a good night,” Babcock said. “(Ben) Harpur did his job for us (in a fight with Scott Sabourin). I was impressed with him.”

GAME ON

The Leafs didn’t have centre Kalle Kossila after the first period, keeping him out for precautionary reasons after he suffered an undisclosed injury. Babcock didn’t have a post-game update … Ex-Leafs Connor Brown and Tyler Ennis scored for Ottawa, while Ron Hainsey had an assist on a goal by Max Veronneau … Who is Sabourin and what was he doing running around the ice? Trying to make a name for himself, apparently. The 27-year-old forward, who has never played a game in the NHL, took Rielly’s feet out from under him and later hit Johnsson along the boards, drawing Harpur into a fight. And that was just in the first period. The NHL has done a fine job in recent years of weeding out players who can’t play, something which seems to have escaped the attention of Sabourin, who has spent the past six seasons in the minors. Cameras at one point caught Matthews trying to look over Sabourin’s shoulder, as if to learn the player’s name … Nick Shore scored in the final minute for the Leafs after Brady Tkachuk scored into an empty net for Ottawa … Michael Hutchinson allowed three goals on 20 shots before Brandon Halverson went in the Leafs net for the third. Overall, Hutchinson was strong in the face of several point-blank Ottawa chances.

Ex-Leaf Nikita Zaitsev, who asked for a trade out of Toronto and was granted as much when he was shipped to the Senators in the off-season, didn’t play for the second pre-season game in as many nights against the Leafs, despite being healthy, and was not made available to the media after the morning skate, in which he participated.

“We wanted him to hold him out and he wants to play the last four (pre-season games),” Sens coach D.J. Smith said. “I didn’t see any real need to put him in right now. We have enough guys, we want to give some young guys a look.”

Perhaps, but Zaitsev is going to have to face his former team at some point.

Under contract through 2023-24 to the tune of a $4.5-million US annual average value, Zaitsev won’t have much choice but to pick his game up once the regular season gets underway.

LOOSE PUCKS

Matthews, Rielly and Ceci were the Leafs’ alternate captains … Just a guess: The Leafs will name their new captain on or about Sept. 30, two days before the regular-season opener. Less of a guess: It will be Matthews, with Rielly and John Tavares the obvious candidates to be alternates. But will Mitch Marner deke his way into the mix? … Leafs fans in the nation’s capital could go into withdrawal before getting their next blue-and-white fix. Toronto doesn’t visit Ottawa in the regular season until Feb. 15, and again on March 28 … Smith’s philosophy this season for a Senators club that will be short on talent: “(We) can’t be easy to play against. You can’t come in here and take points,” he said pre-game. “We have to make it hard to play against, hard to get in our zone, hard to get to our net. We have to make it so when you come in here, you have to work to leave with points.”

Toronto Sun LOADED: 09.19.2019
OTTAWA — Cerebral, prickly, accommodating.

Reporters can count on Ron Hainsey to be any one of the three during interviews, though the veteran defenceman usually covers each of those bases any time he talks to the media.

Now several months removed from his tenure with the Maple Leafs, Hainsey, who signed with the Ottawa Senators in July, was asked on Wednesday what he sees in the Leafs’ future.

The insinuation being that the Leafs seem poised to take a long run at a Stanley Cup next spring.

“That’s why they play the games,” the 38-year-old Hainsey said. “How would I know?”

Because, Hainsey was reminded, though he’s on the other side of the Battle of Ontario now, he has an inside view considering he helped lead the past two years in Toronto.

“They have a lot of new players, who knows?” Hainsey said. “They have a ton of top-end talent up front, added some different guys on D, that’s why they play the 82. We’ll have to wait and see.”

On players such as Morgan Rielly and Auston Matthews, Hainsey was a little more forthcoming.

Leafs coach Mike Babcock incessantly beat the drum for Hainsey’s role in helping Rielly develop, more or less arguing that Rielly wouldn’t have had the rise that he did — culminating in serious consideration for the Norris Trophy last season, finishing fifth in voting — without the presence of Hainsey as his partner.

Rielly led all NHL defencemen with 20 goals in 2018-19 and was third with 72 points, behind Brent Burns (83) and Mark Giordano (74), who won the award.

“I played with him — he’s the one who went out and continued to improve every day,” Hainsey said of Rielly. “He had a great year, huge year last year numbers-wise.

“Whatever part I played in that, that’s what they brought me there for, but he’s the one who went out there and did that and he continued to improve. Hopefully he continues on that path.”

As for Matthews, Hainsey predicted we can expect to see more to come from No. 34 when the Leafs don’t have the puck, while noting that Matthews always has possessed defensive instincts.

“From the day I got there, he was always a big body down low, competing down low,” Hainsey said. “All the centres there, the focus is certainly on defence as much as offence from how we wanted to play.

“(Matthews) will improve as far as knowing when to go, when to not, in certain situations, as anyone will. I never had any complaints of any of our centres. Right when I first got there, they were all defensively aware if nothing else, as far as what would hopefully be successful.”

Hainsey wasted no time when free agency opened on July 1, signing a one-year contract for $3.5-million US with the Senators, one of a group of ex-Leafs including Nikita Zaitsev, Connor Brown and Tyler Ennis who found the way to the nation’s capital. And never mind D.J. Smith, who departed Babcock’s staff to become the head coach in Ottawa.

Fresh off a Stanley Cup in Pittsburgh, Hainsey signed with the Leafs in the summer of 2017 and was a dependable player for Babcock.

Now, it’s about helping right the ship in Ottawa, with Smith in charge.

“His enthusiasm he brings every day and his communication with the players — he put his time in,” Hainsey said. “Hopefully we can get on the right track right away.”
Leafs winger Johnsson hopes to help Matthews soar

Lance Hornby

ST. JOHN'S, N.L. — Usually, Andreas Johnsson isn’t a fan of exhibition games.

"I think they're more important this year than last year because we have a lot of new players getting in the system," the Maple Leafs winger conceded. "How do I personally feel? It's a waste of time, honestly. There's even more in Europe and it's worse."

But this season, Johnsson can’t wait to get out there ASAP, whether it’s for keeps or not, as he gets first chance to play left wing with Auston Matthews in what could be the most dominant season for the centre along with William Nylander. Matthews' place in the hierarchy of the team is entrenched, a cover boy in fashion magazines and computer games and an expected confirmation of the captaincy in the coming weeks. Matthews only needs a full, healthy season to make an already impressive .966 points per game shine even brighter. That’s where Johnsson comes in.

"Now I get a chance to play with him from the beginning (not just portions of the NHL schedule as dictated by injuries and other Leaf roster issues)."

"It's been feeling good in these practices and we've played well in the scrimmages. I'm excited to see what we can do in a game."

"(Matthews) has been at it for three great seasons now," Johnsson said. "There is no limit for him, he can be as good as he wants to be, that ceiling is so high. I feel he's looking better every year, every time I see him. I'm excited to see what he can do."

That first chance in a live fire exercise came Wednesday in Ottawa, a rink where Matthews has done well.

Johnsson will have to do that heavy lifting role Zach Hyman used to do for Matthews and that Kasperi Kapanen is learning now, moved to the left with John Tavares and Mitch Marner with Hyman expected to miss the first month of the season.

"I think (Matthews) is such a smart player, he’s really good at reading people, whoever he plays with," said Johnsson. "The only thing you really need to do is to work hard and be in a really good position and make space for him or get a pass from him."

Johnsson could extend his time with Matthews as a deputy on the power play, but that will be a work in progress while the Leafs' roster is still bloated.

"HEY, AREN'T YOU …"

The Leafs faced some old friends who have switched sides on Wednesday, with Connor Brown, Ron Hainsey, and Tyler Ennis in the Sens’ lineup, while former Ottawa players Cody Ceci and Ben Harpur were back in Bytown wearing Leafs jerseys.

"It’s always a little strange at the beginning," Tavares said of such first encounters, his versus the Islanders last winter after nearly a decade with that club. "You almost try and be a little extra serious because it’s easy to crack a smile and just know what a lot of those other guys are like off the ice."

"You develop close relationships and bonds. Yes, it will be strange because there were so many guys, but at the end of the day, once you put the gear on and know who you are playing for, that’s where the focus is."

NEW VIKINGS ARE LOST

Swedes might be in better shape than Canadians, mass produce more furniture and meatballs.

But it looks like their history courses have slipped a bit.

In 2001 when the Leafs last camped in Newfoundland, captain Mats Sundin knew about the Viking long ships that explored and settled the region nearly a thousand years earlier from school studies, even boasting about it to Canadian teammates. This week, when we asked a few Scandinavians about their ancestors being here, there were blank looks.

"Do you mean they were in Toronto?" inquired one.

LOOSE LEAFS

Coach Mike Babcock has a lot of rookies and players on one-year contracts to sort through in a short time. A few likely will be exposed and lost on waivers to protect the core, but he and general manager Kyle Dubas are high on 6-foot-4 newcomer Yegor Korshkov, who got his feet wet with the Marlies in the playoffs last year and played solidly in most of Toronto’s 3-1 loss to Ottawa on Tuesday with Frederik Gauthier at centre and Dmytro Timashov on the left. "Big Korshkov has really good hands and he’s a big, big body. We’d love for one of these guys to be NHL ready, but that doesn’t mean it’s going to happen. They have a couple of weeks here to show it" … As the Leafs prepare to anoint a new captain, Darryl Sittler turned 69 on Wednesday.
I’m back for a second edition of preseason report cards. Remember, I’m going to be doing these after every Maple Leafs game this season. We’re still working out the kinks throughout the preseason (just like NHL teams), so if you have any suggestions on things you’d like to see included in these postgame articles, be sure to let me know!

Without further ado, let’s break down The Cody Ceci Revenge Tour:

Episode 1 — The Return to Ottawa.

Key takeaways from the game

1. Matthews looks incredible on the right wall of the PP

It’s clear the Leafs are trying to get Auston Matthews more open looks on the right wall (with William Nylander on the left wall) in power play and six-on-five situations. Remember, Paul McFarland was brought in during the offseason to replace Jim Hiller in running the power play. This appears to be one of the changes he’ll be making to the power play, and it looks like Matthews has been working on his game from that side of the ice (for example, you could tell he’s been practicing his release from the top of the right circle).

2. Cody Ceci … wasn’t that bad?

I know a lot of Leafs fans feared what Ceci would look like in a top-four role (considering how poorly he played in the top half of Ottawa’s lineup), but I thought he played pretty decently. We’ll discuss this more when I give him his grade, but considering what most of us in the analytics community have said about him, I think it’s fair to say he surpassed expectations.

3. Ben Harpur … was that bad?

This is going to result in a discussion about the merits of toughness and fighting in general, which I actually think is an interesting topic when we debate it respectfully. The problem is Harpur is such a net negative at five-on-five when he’s on the ice it’s hard to justify his place on the roster if not for his physicality. The way I see it, if the Leafs decide they need that kind of player on their roster, they need to be getting it from a player who can give them effective minutes, like Mason Marchment on the fourth line, for example.

Player reports

☆☆☆☆☆

Best player on the ice: Rasmus Sandin (LHD, No. 38) — At 19, I thought Sandin looked like the most confident blueliner on the ice. He has the vision and confidence to make the kind of plays with the puck most defencemen like to see (for example, the slip pass he made to Matthews up the middle of the ice on a breakout in the first period, or the way he holds the puck on the blue line to draw in a defender on the power play before slinging it to the open forward on the half-wall). I’ve been blown away with his development over the past year or two. I wouldn’t be shocked if he makes the opening night roster if he keeps playing like he has been, but that’s a decision that will ultimately come down to management. The big question I have is whether it’s better to give him 22 or more minutes a night on an NHL first pairing or 15 to 16 minutes a night on an AHL third pairing.

Your answer to that question probably dictates where you think Sandin should play to start the regular season.

Auston Matthews (C, No. 34) — I’m still not sure if I’m in love with the moustache (he doesn’t pull it off as well as Gardner Minshew), but when we’re talking about how good Matthews looked on the ice, he looked like a player who could score 50 goals if he plays 82 games. That’s always been the concern with Matthews, but at 22, he appears to be taking a step forward physically with his skating. He looked more powerful out there to me.

More importantly, I love that he’s looking to dictate play more in transition as a puck-carrier. I’ve always felt he deferred too much to Nylander (who’s also an excellent puck carrier), but as a top-10 talent in the world, he doesn’t need to be differing. Matthews looks like he’s in the mindset he’s the best player on the ice and is looking to lead the charge offensively, which could be a lot of fun to watch alongside two skilled linemates for a full season — something he’s never had before.

☆☆☆☆☆

William Nylander (RW, No. 88) — Remember when Nylander returned in December and the raw talent was there but the timing was off? Well, everyone’s timing was off Wednesday (it’s most players’ first real competitive game in months), so he wasn’t at a disadvantage. With everyone on a level playing field, Nylander’s skill was on full display as he made a few great plays in the offensive zone. I’m always impressed with how strong he is on the puck.

If he plays a full 82-game season with Matthews, I have a feeling he’s going to have the bounceback season everyone’s been expecting from him.

Andreas Johnsson (LW, No. 18) — I thought Johnsson looked speedy on the left wing of the Matthews line. He showed off some of his nifty moves earlier in the game, drawing a tripping penalty in the neutral zone, and made some nice passes in the offensive zone to his linemates, particularly on the power play when he had more open space. If he plays a full season alongside Matthews and Nylander, not to mention potential top power-play duties in the middle of the 1–3–1 formation, it could end up being a big year for Johnsson.

Ilya Mikheyev (LW, No. 65) — Early, I wasn’t quite sure what to make of Mikheyev. He looked a bit clunky and awkward out there in the first period, but once he started to get a feel for things, I thought he looked fantastic from the second period onward. He made a few shifty little moves to create space for his teammates or to create his own shot in transition. At 6-foot-3, I think he’s going to be a favourite of Mike Babcock’s, but with the plays he can make at the NHL level, that might not necessarily be a bad thing. We’ll see how he plays over the next few games, but there’s a chance the Leafs have found themselves a bonafide NHLer (though remember, we said the same thing last year with Igor Ozhiganov.).

Morgan Rielly (LD, No. 44) — This was the quintessential talented veteran preseason game. Rielly clearly wasn’t looking to over-exert himself by flying up the ice in transition, but he was able to slow the game down a few times and make really good decisions with the puck. Whether it was on the breakout in the defensive zone or along the blue line in the offensive zone, it felt like he was always making a positive play with the puck, which is a big part of the reason the Leafs generate so much offence when he’s on the ice.

Nic Petan (RW, No. 61) — I thought Petan played really well. He had that Tyler Ennis-esque energy to him when he would rush the puck up the ice with speed before making a clever little pass to gain the zone. He also made a few great passes in the defensive zone when he was under pressure, giving his teammates open space to break the puck out (which is an underrated part of the game, in my opinion).

☆☆☆☆☆

Teemu Kivihalme (LD, No. 45) — What’s weird about Kivihalme’s game is I didn’t notice him much in the first half, but was blown away by his end-to-end rush that resulted in a Grade-A scoring chance for Petan. It reminded me a bit of Andreas Borgman when he played for the Leafs: You don’t notice him for several minutes, but then he’ll decide to go for a skate and make a play up the ice. I love that aspect of his game, but was a bit disappointed to see he didn’t use his quickness and “escapability” to make a bigger impact in the transition game.

Kalle Kossila (C, No. 48) — I know Kossila probably isn’t going to be a factor for the Leafs this year (he’s likely to play with the Marlies in 2019–20), but I really enjoyed his game. He was well-positioned in all three zones, aggressive without the puck and just seemed to have a knack for making smart plays throughout the course of the game. I’m not sure if he has the speed or skill to thrive at the NHL level, but at the AHL level, he’s probably going to be a key contributor for the Marlies.

Kenny Agostino (LW, No. 20), Tyler Gaudet (C, No. 32) and Matt Read (RW, No. 12) — All three players got limited opportunities on the fourth line, but I thought they quietly played some solid hockey. Agostino had a few chances, Read looked confident with the puck on his stick and...
The issue is I don’t think Harpur is an NHL player. He can’t skate, he can’t make a breakout pass and he can’t use his size to defend the rush in transition.

PIC.TWITTER.COM/BXD4R0YDY5
— MANNY (@MANNYELK) SEPTEMBER 19, 2019

In the modern NHL, Harpur just isn’t a strong enough player at even strength or on the penalty kill to justify being on the roster. Now, I still think there’s an argument to be made a player with some more physicality could provide value (e.g. Marchment), but you can’t prioritize toughness to the point that you’re playing an AHLer to get it.

Most important clip of the night

AUSTON MATTHEWS TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHO THIS GUY IS
PIC.TWITTER.COM/CYMZWHOWJA
— BRADY TRETTERNO (@BRADYTRETT) SEPTEMBER 19, 2019

This is (and has been) my favourite chirp. It reminds me of the time Drew Doughty told someone he was bad at hockey. That player, coincidentally, ended up being a very good hockey player in Patrick Maroon, but the point remains: This is an A-plus chirp. It’s simple, it’s clever and it’s demoralizing for the other player.

Hockey needs more of this.

Final thoughts from the game

Again, let’s try our best not to get too carried away with overanalyzing a preseason game (with most guys playing their first competitive game in months). The main takeaways from the game I’ve found are:

Harpur is going to be a topic of discussion (the Roman Polak debate is back!)

The Johnsson-Matthews-Nylander trio looks deadly offensively (especially on the power play)

There are six more of these preseasons games. Oof.

Final Grade: B-

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019

Gaudet got to punch Brady Tkachuk in the face. I’d say all of them are pretty happy with that kind of night.

Timothy Liljegren (RD, No. 37) — Frankly, I was a bit disappointed with Liljegren’s first preseason game. With that being said, we did get to see a few flashes of his brilliance. He’s a big player who goes through his reads as a passer; much like a quarterback, he’s always looking for the big play downfield before settling for a short pass. It reminds me of the way Jake Gardiner broke the puck out, and I say that as a positive. Liljegren will need to clean up some of the other aspects of his game — gap control, one-on-one puck battles, decisions at the offensive zone blue line — before he can reach that kind of offensive potential, but you can see the glimpses of it. He may not make the Leafs out of preseason, but one thing I think we can say for certain is he’s the best puck-moving right-handed defenceman in the organization not named Tyson Barrie — and that has to count for something.

Cody Ceci (RD, No. 83) — As I mentioned, Ceci has been a major topic of disagreement among Leafs fans. The analytics nerds like myself don’t think he’s an effective NHL player, whereas the Ceci truthers argue his numbers in Ottawa, alongside Dion Phaneuf and facing 99th percentile competition, aren’t a fair representation of his value as a defenceman.

Where do I fall? Personally, I think he might be a No. 5, who you’d prefer to see sheltered on a bottom pairing and can help out on the penalty kill, much like Nikita Zaitsev. Both players are known for making frustrating decisions with the puck — Ceci made a few breakaway passes to nobody in particular — but we also got to see a glimpse of Ceci making some smart plays with the puck. Who knows, maybe alongside Rielly, he could have a bit of a bounce-back year. Is that pushing it? Has the Cody Ceci Redemption Tour officially started, or is this going to be a Zaitsev 2.0 situation? I guess time will tell, but I don’t consider myself optimistic quite yet.

☆☆

Michael Hutchinson (G, No. 30) — I thought Hutchinson made a couple nice saves throughout the game (and made a brilliant breakaway pass on the power play), but he also let in a few goals he probably wants back. It’s going to be interesting to see how his battle with Michael Neuvirth, who is on a professional tryout, plays out, but Hutchinson certainly didn’t make a great case for himself with his performance — unlike Garrett Sparks, who had a shutout in Vegas!

I’m sorry, I promise to never bring up Sparks again.

Pontus Aberg (LW, No. 46) — As an Aberg truther, I was disappointed in his performance. He’s usually a shifty, dynamic little bottom-six player in the same mold of Ennis, but we didn’t see much from him.

Nick Shore (RW, No. 26) — Again, you probably won’t find a bigger Shore fan out there than me (Ryan Stimson and I are the co-presidents of his fan club), but I was underwhelmed with his play. He did make a few smart passes and finished the game with a lucky goal in garbage time, but his play away from the puck was concerning. There was one play where he and Kerfoot ran into each other in the defensive zone, which led to a goal two seconds later. That’s going to be a concern for Babcock where he and Kerfoot are playing.

Liljegren will need to clean up some of the other aspects of his game — transition. Much like Nylander, he’s excellent at picking the puck up low in particular and that has to count for something.

Let me start by saying I love the fact Harpur stood up for Rielly. I know this makes me a caveman, but part of me always liked seeing players stick up for each other. I completely understand why a large segment of the fan base wants a player like Harpur on the roster to provide an element of the game the Leafs appear to be missing.

☆
Golden Knights tickets remain top seller on StubHub

By Ben Gotz Las Vegas Review-Journal
September 18, 2019 - 3:03 PM

The Golden Knights are the top-selling NHL team on the ticket exchange website StubHub for the third straight season, according to a release by the company Wednesday.

StubHub said the Knights outsell the second-best team, the New York Rangers, by 28 percent.

The other top selling teams are the Boston Bruins, Chicago Blackhawks, Toronto Maple Leafs, Montreal Canadiens, St. Louis Blues, Nashville Predators, Pittsburgh Penguins and Buffalo Sabres.
Golden Knights try out new players as penalty killers

By David Schoen Las Vegas Review-Journal
September 18, 2019 - 2:34 PM
Updated September 18, 2019 - 4:22 PM

Alex Tuch hasn’t killed penalties in, well, the Golden Knights winger was embarrassed to say how long it’s been.

“A while,” he confessed, emphasizing that last word for effect.

Tuch is hoping to add penalty killing to his list of duties and got his first work Tuesday during the Knights’ 5-0 preseason road victory over Colorado.

He teamed with forward Tomas Nosek on the top unit and helped the Knights successfully kill all six Avalanche power plays.

"I was able to watch some really good penalty killers the last two years, and I’ve paid attention," Tuch said. "I think I did a pretty good job out there. There’s some little things I’ve got to learn, try to get a little hesitation in my game on the penalty kill because I’m still really new."

Tuch said he likes the idea of killing penalties in part because it allows him to stay loose, even when the Knights get into penalty trouble. He logged 2:02 of ice time on the penalty kill against the Avalanche as part of his 16:11 of action.

In 158 career NHL games, Tuch has been on the ice short-handed for a little less than four minutes (3:57 to be exact).

“But you know what? It gives me a lot of confidence that (coach Gerard Gallant) has confidence in me to be able to go out there and penalty kill,” the 23-year-old said.

Gallant also used winger William Carrier in short-handed situations, as the Knights look to replace penalty-killing specialist Pierre-Edouard Bellemare along with Ryan Carpenter.

Carrier totaled 45 seconds of penalty-killing time in his 91 career games with the Knights, but has experience in that role with Buffalo.

"If they give me my chance, I’ll take my opportunity," Carrier said.

Tuch and Carrier are two of the Knights’ fastest skaters, and Gallant said that separates them from the Knights’ other penalty killers.

"Those guys, they can skate, they can move their feet and they can get some good clears," Gallant said. "As long as they get the pattern down, we’ll give them some opportunities (in the preseason) and see where it goes."

Time changes

The Knights announced new start times for two regular-season games.

The Nov. 16 matchup at Los Angeles will start at 1 p.m. rather than 7 p.m., and the Nov. 17 game against Calgary begins at 4 p.m. at T-Mobile Arena.

The latter date was moved up an hour to accommodate the Rock ‘n’ Roll Marathon.

No. 1 on StubHub

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Roster cuts
Golden Knights defensemen share advice for rookies

By Ben Gotz Las Vegas Review-Journal
September 18, 2019 - 1:19 PM

NHL players never forget their firsts.

First training camp, first game, first goal, all of it. So with the Golden Knights set to break in at least one rookie on their blue line this season, the Review-Journal polled the team's veteran defensemen to learn what went into their debuts and what helped them stick around.

Their answers and advice were as varied as the players themselves and showed there's more than one way to reach the NHL.

Brayden McNabb: "You’ve got to do something to keep yourself around"

NHL debut: Nov. 26, 2011, for the Buffalo Sabres (age 20)

McNabb, the Knights’ burly, shutdown D-man, came into the league as a different player entirely.

The season before he was called up, he scored 72 points in 59 regular-season games in junior hockey and another 27 in 19 playoff games.

"I was more of a skilled guy before that,” McNabb said. “But you slowly learn you have to find a way to stay and maybe it’s not the way you thought it was going to be.”

McNabb soon discovered that being a good defender and delivering hits were more important to his NHL career than his offense. Now he rarely looks to score (his career high in points is 24), but he’s carved out a career shutting down the opposition.

"I always remember telling myself, ‘You’ve got to do something to keep yourself around,” McNabb said. “For me, it was working on the defensive side of the game and being physical.”

Vegas Golden Knights defenseman Jon Merrill during the third period of an NHL hockey game against the St. ... - LAS VEGAS REVIEW JOURNAL LOADED: 09.19.2019

Jon Merrill: "It’s about being a professional all day long"

NHL debut: Nov. 3, 2013, for the New Jersey Devils (age 21)

Merrill made his debut on a team featuring the NHL’s second all-time leading scorer, Jaromir Jagr, Hall of Fame goaltender Martin Brodeur and Devils all-time leading scorer Patrik Elias.

"Just to walk into that locker room was amazing,” Merrill said. “You felt you had really made it at that point.”

He played 52 games his first season out of the University of Michigan and found the on-ice adjustments weren’t the most difficult ones. For him, the toughest thing to learn was the off-ice discipline it takes to carve out a career.

"It’s a lifestyle, the professional game,” Merrill said. “It’s not just when you’re at the rink. You have to take care of yourself away from the rink with everything you eat and the sleep you get. It’s about being a professional all day long. It’s about learning how to completely alter your lifestyle.”

Vegas Golden Knights defenseman Deryk Engelland (5) plays against the New Jersey Devils during ...

Deryk Engelland: “Stick with what got you there”

NHL debut: Nov. 10, 2009, for the Pittsburgh Penguins (age 27)

It took Engelland a long time to get to the NHL, but the former Las Vegas Wrangler finally received a call-up when Penguins defenseman Alex Goligoski was sick before a game against the San Jose Sharks.

Unfortunately for Engelland, Goligoski felt better by puck drop.

So Engelland made his debut the next game against the Boston Bruins and, because of an injury to Brooks Orpik that forced the Penguins to play with five defensemen, received 19:20 of ice time.

"That made my game easier,” Engelland said. "Less time to think about it.”

Engelland’s advice to rookies is to keep things simple. Focus on what you can do and let the rest take care of itself.

"Stick with what got you there,” Engelland said. "Just work hard. That’s all you can control. When the decision comes, that’s from upstairs. As long as you work hard and play your game, you’ve done your job.”

Vegas Golden Knights defenseman Nick Holden warms up before an NHL hockey game against the St. ...

Nick Holden: “Just pass it hard”

NHL debut: Oct. 20, 2010, for the Columbus Blue Jackets (age 23)

Holden’s career began with fits and starts, as he played in five games for the Blue Jackets in October 2010 but didn’t reappear in the NHL until February 2013.

He finally became a regular the following season and scored his first goal on Stanley Cup-winning goaltender Braden Holtby on Nov. 10.

"As a kid, you’re playing road hockey and at the outdoor rink (dreaming of that),” Holden said. "It was cool scoring on an elite goalie.”

Since then, Holden has played with a lot of rookies and noticed the habits of many of them. There’s one in particular that stands out to him on the ice.

"I find lots of times younger guys, they pass a little softer,” Holden said. "Usually what I’ll tell my D partner is ‘just pass it hard.’ I’d rather it miss me hard than us have to stop and go back for a puck that’s slow.”

Nate Schmidt: “You’re here for a reason”

NHL debut: Oct. 12, 2013, for the Washington Capitals (age 22)

It should surprise no one that the Knights’ personal Energizer Bunny was hyped for his first game.

"I think my first shift I was out there for 20 seconds because I was just way too excited,” Schmidt said. "You just get yourself into a position where you just have to relax. That’s the hardest thing. Us now, it’s so easy to go, ‘Hey, man, relax, it’s going to be just fine,’ but when you’re in it, it’s a lot harder to actually do that.”

Schmidt’s other piece of advice to rookies: Remember that it’s the NHL, and everyone is capable of making a play. But so are you, and that’s why the organization put you on the ice.

"If you get caught out there with some really good players, some of the other team’s top forwards, you just have to understand you’re there for a reason,” Schmidt said. "That’s the biggest thing that I try to tell guys: ‘You’re here for a reason.’ It’s not that you can’t play against these guys. You can. It’s just getting experience and reps against them. That’s what allows you to gain confidence against some of the better players.”

"Stick with what got you there”

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Golden Knights announce changes to schedule

By Rochelle Richards Las Vegas Review-Journal
September 18, 2019 - 11:26 am

The Golden Knights announced a couple of changes to their schedule Wednesday morning.

The Knights have changed the start times for two games in November:
— Saturday, Nov. 16 at Los Angeles has moved from 7 p.m. to 1 p.m.
— Sunday, Nov. 17 vs. Calgary has moved from 5 p.m. to 4 p.m.

The start time of Sunday’s home game was changed to better accommodate Knights fans as well as participants and spectators attending the 2019 Las Vegas Rock ‘n’ Roll Marathon.
Inside LVSportsBiz: End Game of Leagues Cup Is North America Super League; Golden Knights Prez Says Raiders Arrival In LV Will Help VGK Business

September 18, 2019
By Alan Snel
LVSportsBiz.com

Where there’s a buck to be made, there’s a new league to be made.
And that’s a story line of Wednesday’s night final of the inaugural Leagues Cup at Sam Boyd Stadium not drawing a lot of attention.

Four teams from Major League Soccer and four teams from Liga MX participated in the first-ever Leagues Cup in an eight-team single-elimination tournament.

The public narrative was bringing together North America’s two most prominent soccer leagues would create more soccer buzz in the U.S. and Mexico and unite soccer fans across two giant markets.

But behind closed doors, there’s lots of talk of a master plan to unite Major League Soccer and Liga MX into a North American super soccer league that would compete for headlines with the big leagues of European soccer, said a soccer source with knowledge of MLS operations.

MLS Commissioner Don Garber is in town for the Leagues Cup title game at Sam Boyd Stadium, matching Cruz Azul against Tigres UANL.

MLS Commissioner Don Garber is in Las Vegas today for the Leagues Cup final.

The conventional story line is having Garber in Las Vegas can only help the city’s aspirations for hosting an MLS team one day. A representative for a downtown Las Vegas development group looking at re-developing the Cashman Center site and buying the United Soccer League Las Vegas Lights club attended the most recent MLS board of governors meeting two months ago.

And it’s true that Las Vegas-based MGM Resorts International, the official sports betting partner of MLS, played a pivotal role in arranging the Leagues Cup final game here in Las Vegas.

But it’s an open secret that there are efforts underway to have a combined MLS-Liga MX league to showcase North America’s best soccer.

And this summer’s eight-team MLS/Liga MX competition served as a trial balloon for the super league concept.

The Raiders are coming to Las Vegas in 2020 and Golden Knights President Kerry Bubolz said the presence of the NFL in Las Vegas will bring national corporate sponsors to this market that could potentially also sponsor the Knights.

That’s why Bubolz is so bullish on the Raiders planting roots at Allegiant Stadium near the trip and at their corporate headquarters in Henderson near the Henderson executive airport.

The Las Vegas market is a busy sports market, but has not drawn major national advertisers because it’s still not a Top-35 market in terms of size.

But having the Raiders and the NFL in Las Vegas next year will bring major corporate advertisers, which can potentially mean sponsorship deals with the Golden Knights.

“Adding the Raiders will attract companies into our valley,” Bubolz told LVSportsBiz.com in an interview on VGK’s season 3. “We’re excited about (the Raiders’) arrival.”
As Richard Panik thought about his career-best 22-goal season with the Chicago Blackhawks three years ago, a sly smile crept across his face. The Capitals’ offseason acquisition knows that 44-point season is the standard for his future in Washington — and he isn’t shying away from it.

“I had to execute them,” said Panik, a forward who signed a four-year, $11 million contract with the Capitals in July.

On his fifth team since he made his NHL debut with the Tampa Bay Lightning during the 2012-13 season, Panik made his Capitals debut Wednesday in a 3-2 preseason win over the St. Louis Blues at Capital One Arena. Panik scored the game-tying goal with the Capitals on a power play with a minute left in the third period. Center Nicklas Backstrom scored the game-winning goal with 6.9 seconds left in the game.

Panik tallied 14 goals and 19 assists with the Arizona Coyotes last season, calling it the most consistent campaign of his NHL career. The 28-year-old Slovak averaged 16:37 of ice time, a career high.

“The style we play in Arizona, I didn’t have much offense, but yeah, I just want to transfer [the consistency] to this season and be ready every game,” Panik said. “It sounds cliché, but that is what I was struggling with in the past, and I think now I’ve figured it out — to be there at the right time, right position, and play the game hard.”

In Washington, Panik also will be expected to contribute on the penalty kill, an area Capitals Coach Todd Reirden stressed all last season. The unit struggled last season until the Capitals acquired Hagelin and defenseman Nick Jensen at the trade deadline. With the additions of Panik and forward Garnet Hathaway, the group will look to compensate for offseason departures.

Panik spent nearly 90 minutes on the penalty kill for the Coyotes last season. He had done small stints on the power play and penalty kill with other teams but never had a regular role until last season. Panik drew two holding penalties during Wednesday’s preseason game, with one coming while he was killing a penalty in the first period.

“When I was younger, I didn’t want to play that,” Panik said. “I wanted to play more power play. Now when I am older, I think it gets you more in the game and

And as Panik continues to work on his consistency and adjustments on the ice, his off-ice transition to Washington has been fairly seamless. He moved into the area with his wife, Nikola, and 16-month-old daughter, Lilien. They are staying in a hotel, awaiting the arrival of furniture before they move into their new home.

The hotel room can be a little small for Lilien, who Panik concedes always has a lot of energy to burn. Panik posted an Instagram story of himself this week holding Lilien at the top of an escalator, her little feet quickly trying to keep up with the fast-moving staircase in a treadmill-like fashion. Lilien had started wandering toward the escalator seconds before, so Panik crouched patiently and held her until she was done experimenting with the foreign contraption.

“I had to hold her, you know. I can’t just let her go. And my wife, she just started videotaping,” Panik said.

As for the Instagram caption?
Washington Capitals center Lars Eller day-to-day with upper-body injury, scratched from preseason game

By Isabelle Khurshudyan
September 18 at 11:54 AM

Washington Capitals center Lars Eller will miss Wednesday night’s preseason game against the St. Louis Blues because of an “upper-body” injury that’s considered day-to-day. Coach Todd Reirden said the team is holding out Eller just to be cautious.

“It’s preseason, so we’ll have him play hopefully next game and do the right thing,” Reirden said. “We’re not going to play a player who’s not 100-percent in a preseason game.”

The Capitals already will be down a center to start the regular season because Evgeny Kuznetsov is suspended for the first three games for “inappropriate conduct,” and Eller is expected to center the second line in his absence. That leaves Washington looking for a short-term fix for Eller’s usual place on the third line. Center Connor McMichael, the Capitals’ 18-year-old first-round draft pick, will be in that spot Wednesday night, centering wingers Carl Hagelin and Richard Panik.

While McMichael almost certainly will be returned to his Canadian junior club in London, Ontario, before the seasons starts, the Capitals are giving him a chance to show he belongs beside NHLers before the first round of training camp cuts Thursday. He played in Monday’s preseason opener, tallying a primary assist on a goal by Damien Riat.

“He’s excellent with the puck,” Reirden said. “His offensive reads and feel for the game has been very strong for a young player so far. And we’ll continue to work on his play away from the puck and the challenge of playing defense in this game is so important at this level. St. Louis has got some good players in the lineup, so we’ll see him playing against a good group of players and evaluate after again.”

Prospect forwards Riley Sutter and Kody Clark and defenseman Alex Alexeyev haven’t skated at all during the first week of training camp because of upper-body injuries. Defenseman Michal Kempny, who tore his hamstring late last season, remains limited, participating in drills but still donning a noncontact jersey. Washington is optimistic he’ll be ready for the regular-season opener on Oct. 2.

Lars Eller sustains upper-body injury, day-to-day for Capitals

By Adam Zielonka - The Washington Times

Wednesday, September 18, 2019

The Washington Capitals planned to play Lars Eller in Wednesday’s preseason game, but the center has an upper-body injury and was scratched from the lineup.

Eller is considered day-to-day, so it’s unlikely the injury will cause him to miss any time in the regular season, which begins Oct. 2.

"It’s preseason, so we’ll have him play hopefully next game and do the right thing," coach Todd Reirden said. "We’re not going to play a player who’s not 100% in a preseason game."

When the regular season begins, Eller is the likely candidate to fill in for Evgeny Kuznetsov on the second line when Kuznetsov serves a three-game suspension for “inappropriate conduct” related to a positive cocaine test.

Eller will be replaced in Wednesday’s lineup with Connor McMichael, the team’s first-round draft pick in 2019. McMichael made his NHL preseason debut Monday and tallied an assist. The Capitals host the St. Louis Blues Wednesday.
Alex Ovechkin to receive Wayne Gretzky International Award

By Adam Zielonka - The Washington Times
Wednesday, September 18, 2019

The U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame will give Alex Ovechkin the Wayne Gretzky International Award for “international individuals who have made major contributions to the growth and advancement of hockey in the United States,” it was announced Wednesday.

“Alex Ovechkin has inspired the next generation of players in the greater Washington, D.C. area and well beyond,” USA Hockey president Jim Smith said in a news release. “Apart from his talent on the ice, he’s made an enormous contribution to the hockey community off the ice as well.”

The Russian has played his entire NHL career with the Washington Capitals and helped make the sport popular in the region. He’s also being recognized for his work with the American Special Hockey Association.

Previous winners of the award include Gretzky, Scotty Bowman and Bobby Hull.

The U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame’s annual induction ceremony will take place Dec. 12 at the Marriott Marquis in Washington, where Ovechkin will accept the award.

3 Caps who impressed against the Blues in preview of the season opener

By J.J. Regan
September 18, 2019 9:36 PM

Nicklas Backstrom scored with less than seven seconds remaining to give the Capitals the 3-2 win over the St. Louis Blues on Wednesday in a preseason preview of the regular-season opener. Radko Gudas and Richard Panik also scored.

Here are three players who impressed for the Caps.

1. Richard Panik

Panik got plenty of practice on the penalty kill with 4:16 of shorthanded ice time shorthanded. In that time he gave a glimpse of why he was so coveted by the Caps as a free agent.

In the first period, Panik pounced on a loose puck at the top of the faceoff circle in the defensive zone. Seeing he had room to work with, he did not just clear it down the ice and instead elected to skate up with it. He fought off the backcheck from Tyler Bozak through the neutral zone, drew an additional two Blues players to him, then drew a holding call from Bozak because he would not give up the puck.

Panik’s 4:16 of penalty kill time was more than top penalty killer Carl Hagelin’s 2:26, though the fact that Hagelin took two minors on the night probably had something to do with it.

Late in the game, Panik was also added to the power play as a sixth attacker with the goalie pulled. He would score the game-tying goal with just 1:09 left in regulation.

2. The goalies

Vitek Vanecek and Ilya Samsonov both played about a half of the game. It is really hard to evaluate a goalie on just 30 minutes of work, so I will give a shoutout to both as both played very well.

Vanecek got the start. He looked a little awkward at first, but settled in as the game went along for a solid performance. He stopped 13 of the 14 shots he faced with the only goal he allowed a weird deflection off of Brett Leason’s skate.

Samsonov took over about halfway through the second period and within minutes found himself defending the net on a 5-on-3 penalty kill. The penalty killers helped out their young netminder allowing only one shot on goal, but it was a good one. Colton Parayko one-timed a slap shot, but Samsonov was there to stop with no rebound. Soon after the penalty was over, Vladimir Tarasenko was all alone in front of the net, but was denied by Samsonov’s who stretched the blocker to deny the high shot.

Sanford scores on the PP. Samsonov wasn’t tight against the post. Showed him too much daylight and Sanford made him pay.

3. Connor McMichael

Boy, somebody got a confidence boost from Monday’s game.

McMichael was given a second preseason game as a reward for his solid performance on Monday and he definitely showed off the confidence that comes along with being a first-round draft pick.

In the first period, McMichael found himself all alone with the puck on a mini-breakaway on Jordan Binnington. Just a reminder, this is the Binnington who was the starting goalie for the Stanley Cup champions.

So what did McMichael do? He skated to the front and tried the stick between the legs shot. It may not have worked, but you have to respect the confidence this kid had just to try, though no doubt the coaches probably had a few words for him in the locker room about it.

There was one area in which McMichael struggled, however, and that was on the faceoff where he lost all five draws he took on the night.
Ovechkin awarded the prestigious Wayne Gretzky International Award

By NBC Sports Washington Staff
September 18, 2019 11:47 AM

Alex Ovechkin has already collected almost every award in hockey imaginable, and he just won another.

USA Hockey announced on Wednesday that Ovechkin will receive the prestigious Wayne Gretzky International Award. He will be honored at the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony on Dec. 12.

The award recognizes international players who have had a significant impact on advancing hockey in the United States.

After the Capitals drafted him first overall in 2004, Ovi has used his prominence in hockey to make an impact on the Washington area. Ovechkin started Ovi’s Crazy 8’s in 2006, providing more than 5,000 tickets to help underserved children attend Caps games.

2019 marks the sixth consecutive season that he will be hosting a skating event for the American Special Hockey Association. Ovi has also worked with several foundations to grant the wishes of ill children.

Over the course of Ovechkin’s NHL career, youth participation in hockey in the DMV has nearly doubled, rising from 13,923 to 22,500, according to the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame.

"His performance on the ice and efforts off the ice have certainly translated into more kids and families wanting to be involved in our sport," said Pat Kelleher, executive director of USA Hockey, in a press release. "He’s been a great ambassador for hockey and embodies what the Gretzky Award represents.”

Entering his fifteenth season in Washington, Ovechkin has made a habit out of winning awards.

Ovi's scoring prowess has him ranked thirteenth on the NHL’s all-time goal list, and another 50 goal season would push him all the way to seventh.

Finishing his career as the top-ranked goal scorer is not out of the question, as Ovechkin continues to chase the namesake of his most recent award.
Nothing motivates quite like the chance to be a hometown hero. That potential role for Joe Snively of Herndon, Virginia, runs deep as he celebrated the Capitals' first franchise Stanley Cup Championship as a fan with the rest of D.C. around Capital One Arena mere months before signing his first professional contract with them as an undrafted free agent.

The Yale bulldog scored in each of his four seasons in New Haven, and before that he was learning youth hockey in the Capitals' community programs held where the Capitals practice, at MedStar Iceplex in Arlington, Virginia.

Snively, born in 1996, has watched the Alex Ovechkin impact spread a passion for the Capitals and hockey itself across the DMV. Ovechkin was selected first overall by the Washington Capitals in the 2004 NHL Entry Draft.

Todd Reirden noted that with area prospects, "you don't want to force them, just because it's a nice local story," but it's about evaluating what the team needs. In Snively's case, he adds "forward depth" that Washington is looking for.

"He's here not because he's from there area," assistant GM Ross Mahoney said. "He's here because he got a good chance of playing for the Capitals in the future.*

Mahoney oversees the Capitals' NHL Entry Draft, developmental programs, keeping tabs and evaluating league prospects and Washington's amateur scouting staff.

Snively, at 5'9" and 180 pounds, said his size "has always been a knock" on him as a player and is a reason why he wasn't drafted.

Because of the similar story, many compare Snively to Jeff Halpern, a former Capital and current assistant coach for the Tampa Bay Lightning. Halpern hails from Potomac, Maryland, played for the Capitals twice over 14 seasons, and was the first member of the Capitals to ever come from the D.C. area.

As for his hopes for potential impact on young hockey players around the DMV, "I don't know if inspire is the right word," Snively said, but he definitely wants to show them that anything is possible.
During a break between training camp sessions this week, Olle Kölzig sat down with The Athletic to discuss a variety topics, ranging from his current job as professional development coach to getting his name etched onto the Stanley Cup.

As usual, Olle the Goalie was insightful, funny and honest. The following is a transcript of the conversation:

You've held a number of titles with the Capitals over the years, including starting goaltender and goalie coach. For the past few years, though, you've been the professional development coach. What does that entail?

My job is to help these kids transition from junior, college and European hockey to the pro game. It's a combination of different things. Not so much skill stuff on the ice, but some things that have to do with the mental part of the game. Things that have to do with stuff away from the rink so that they can focus on the ice.

The first year for these kids (after being drafted) is really up and down. They have a little bit of success early, and they think they've got the game figured out. And then they go through a stretch where they're struggling, and they think they can't play the game anymore. So, for me, it's about keeping the mountains low and valleys high so they play even keel hockey.

It wasn't always easy for you at the start of your career. Did going through those peaks and valleys help you relate to the prospects you're trying to guide?

There's no question. I can honestly have a conversation with any player and I can probably relate to them. Whether it's a high pick, a kid that was drafted late, a kid that's playing in the American League, a kid that is a superstar in the NHL, a kid that got sent down the East Coast League. So I can kind of relate to everybody that I talk to. And they can rarely say to me, "Well, you don't know what you're talking about because you've never been in that situation." I have been in that situation. That's what qualifies me for this job really well. I was a goalie that wore my emotion on my sleeve, so, for me, early on in my career I had to get that figured out in order to advance my career and become more of a consistent player. And then once I did, I took off. So that's what I'm trying to do with these kids. There's a process to this.

Where do you spend the majority of your time?

I'm based out of Washington state, where I played junior at Tri City. (Kölzig is still part owner of the team). And then I commute most of the time to Hershey (Pennsylvania). The last few years, we haven't had anybody in South Carolina as far as prospects go, so I haven't gone there. But I'm doing a little bit more now of going out and seeing our young prospects that aren't necessarily playing pro, but that we've drafted, so that I can start building a bit of a relationship with them before they come (to Hershey or Washington).

I really enjoy it. Before (as goalie coach) I was really just dealing with two athletes on each team as far as the goalies go. So now I'm a little bit more involved and have a little bit more influence on a lot more guys on the team.

You made $42 million in your career. You could be doing whatever you want right now. But you're in the game still. Why?

I don't know, I just need to be involved in something. Hockey's my life. It's the thing that's given me the flexibility to do what I'm doing and not rely on it as a sole means of income. The one thing you'll miss as a player is being around the team. I don't necessarily miss the preparation, especially what I had to go through in my late 30s. But I miss being around the guys and I miss winning and I miss competing. Last year was the best feeling ever when we won (the Stanley Cup), and that's why I do it. I've had so much experience. I feel like I can have an influence on the younger generation, and hopefully down the road see those kids have the success I had. And I don't enjoy golf that much that I want to be on a course every day. It keeps me busy, keeps me out of the house so that my wife won't strangle me. I'm still relatively young, 49 years old. It's just good to be around the guys.

Your name is on the Cup. But not as a player, it's as management. Is that bittersweet? How do you digest that?

I had my time. We didn't do it. We fell short in '98. We thought maybe we would have another opportunity sometime down the road. It just never happened. I don't have any regrets. If guys, in their career, think their life's worth is based on winning or losing the Stanley Cup, then I feel bad for him. I'm fortunate that I had the career I had. I've got a great family. And I've been fortunate enough to get back with the organization that drafted me and be part of the management side. It's still part of the team, regardless of being the starting goalie or not. I'd like to think I had a little bit of an influence on Braden Holtby at the start of his career. Maybe had a little bit of an influence on Nick (Nicklas Backstrom) and Ovi (Alex Ovechkin). So for me, I'm just as happy with how we won last year than I would have been if we won it as a player. It was just, it was surreal and fantastic and unbelievable.

Speaking of Oвечkin, you were a star when Ovi burst onto the scene in D.C. What do you recall about those days?

Ovi and I had a great relationship. I said from Day 1, this kid is special. I loved the kid. I loved how involved he wanted to be in the North American culture, learning the language as quickly as he could. There was just this exuberance about him that everybody fell in love with -- until he became a star, and then everybody villainized him for it.

What I always admired about Ovi was that he just truly loves playing hockey. He's excited to come to the rink.

Do you recall the time when Ovechkin may have celebrated a bit too much after scoring a shootout goal on you in practice? You got pretty mad.

Yeah, I yelled, "Why didn't you do that in the game?" We had competitions in practice. He actually got a kick out of me chasing him around. It was a lot of fun.

The end to your time in Washington was kind of messy. How did you get past that and end up working as a coach and now in the front office?

I want to say it was (former goalie coach) Dave Prior. I was retired for two years after my stint in Tampa. I had been in touch with Dave. He knew I wanted to get back in the game. I was retired and it was OK. I got to spend a ton of time with my kids, but I still had the itch to get back into the game. And so we both felt enough time had gone by. When you're done playing, you look back at things. I realized I did some things wrong. And I think (former General Manager George McPhee) realized he didn't handle the situation great, either. So I came into town for a fan convention, and I saw (Team President Dick Patrick and McPhee) and we just started talking. Then Dave asked if I wanted to be an associate goalie coach and work with the kids down in Hershey and South Carolina. And I said I'd love to. So that's how it all came back together. It wasn't that someone picked up the phone and apologized or anything like that. It's just enough time had gone by and it was water under the bridge.

There's part of me, after the year in Tampa -- and I enjoyed my time in Tampa -- in hindsight I probably should have retired after that final season (in Washington). But your pride, your ego tell you can still do it. My body had enough and so it was time.

So what's next? You've done the goalie coaching thing. You're in hockey ops now. Do you want to be a coach? How about a GM or assistant GM?

I don't want to get into coaching. Have you seen how much time it takes? You come into training camp, you see how much work these (coaches) put into it. The video. The prep work. To be honest, it's not for me.

But I like the management side of it. I like meeting with our scouts and player development group and putting a puzzle together, putting a team together. I don't know where this is going to lead for me. I still have my kids who are in school and still a few years away from going to college. And it would probably also mean that I'd have to move back to the D.C. area, which I wouldn't be adverse to, except that we really like it out west. We love the West Coast and just the way of life out there. So I don't know. Yeah, for now, I enjoy what I'm doing.
Jets defenceman Josh Morrissey says his time as a young player alongside Dustin Byfuglien improved his game.

Josh Morrissey won't speculate on a hockey life without Dustin Byfuglien, but gets intensely personal when acknowledging how his own rapid growth in the NHL has been due, in large part, to the enormous presence of his fellow Winnipeg Jets blue-liner.

"I miss seeing him every day at the rink. He keeps it light. He keeps it fun," Morrissey said Wednesday morning from Bell MTS Iceplex.

"We've developed a cool relationship over the last few years.

"He was one of the big reasons for me stepping in when I first got into the league, and over the years, we've become good friends."

Morrissey was part of a trio of Jets offered up to take questions on a report that Byfuglien, currently on a personal leave from the Jets, might be contemplating retirement. TSN’s Bob McKenzie tweeted early Wednesday that Byfuglien, 34, is believed to be taking the time to "ponder his NHL future."

The product of Roseau, Minn., who broke into the league full time with Chicago during the 2007-08 season and was a major force as the Blackhawks won the Stanley Cup in 2010, is in the fourth year of a five-year, US$38-million contract with Winnipeg. He’s on the books to make US$8 million this season and US$6 million next.

Byfuglien’s departure from the game would have a cataclysmic effect on the organization.

“Everyone knows what type of player he is, what he means to our team. We’d love to have him, obviously. But at the same time I totally respect what he’s got to do,” Morrissey said.

“Each player has their own relationship with Dustin, and trying to respect him and his family. We just want to keep it private at this time.”

Prior to Morrissey’s rookie season (2016-17), Byfuglien asked the coaching staff in training camp to pair him with the young defenceman — who’d come off a strong campaign with the Manitoba Moose.

"I want the kid," Byfuglien told Jets head coach Paul Maurice. "Put me with the kid." Or so the story goes.

When the season opened, Byfuglien patrolled the right side with Morrissey to his left.

"I remember countless times in the pre-season (and) even into the regular season, we got scored on or something and you come off the ice and you get this big hug from Buff or the arm over the shoulder, and almost knocks me off the bench, basically, because he’s so big," Morrissey said. "(He) just said, ‘Hey, welcome to the NHL. Now you finally got scored on, now you can just go play.’

"The one thing is he has a huge heart, he’s a great person. He really wants to help out his teammates. Again, when you’re coming in and you have a guy who’s won a Stanley Cup and had been in the league I don’t know how long it was at that point and had already been a top player for a long time, to kind of say, ‘Hey, I want to play with you, I want to help you get acclimatized getting into the league and feel comfortable,’ it means the world,” Morrissey said. "It’s immediately a weight off your shoulders as a young player, and it speaks volumes to him and the kind of person he is.”

Jets forwards Andrew Copp and Mark Scheifele had little to say about the possible retirement of one of the team’s alternate captains.

"He’s taking his time. The reasons behind that are very private, so I’m not going to comment on what those are. The organization put out a release saying that he needed some time, so we’re going to respect that,” Copp said. “And we hope that he’s back soon. The reasons (for personal leave) are definitely a very private matter for him.”
Clearly we did when he first came up. And then part way through his tour where he got away from a hit. I don't know if I look at that an forecheck well, spinning out of trouble on several occasions and helper on Wheeler's snipe as well. H

SAMI NIKU: there was a lot to like about the smooth

5 PLAYERS WE WATCHED CLOSELY:

C.J. Suess sea

there's some new wrinkles we can add to that power play and it's a fresh rust there in terms of some of the plays we made. But overall it's exciting, definite

"First time we've done it, we haven't even practised it. There were some encouraging signs with how his group moved the puck. That's going to be a key area, especially with so much turnover on the blue line.

"I thought we were right there. I liked how we moved, how we moved the puck," said Maurice. The Jets are 1-1-0 in their seven game pre-season schedule after dropping a 2-0 decision to the Oilers Monday night in Edmonton.

THE SKINNY

Miss the first couple minutes? You missed a lot.

Andrew Copp opened the scoring just 59 seconds into the game, taking a stretch pass from defenceman Sami Niku and beating Wild goalie Kaapo Kahkonen with a long-distance wrister. Copp was hampered by a mild groin strain at the start of training camp last weekend but looked fine playing on a line with Adam Lowry and Blake Wheeler.

"Copp, Lowry and Wheeler are going to be a pretty good line on any day, but in exhibition maybe even more so. They're all guys that play the exact same way every night," said Maurice. The trio combined to make it 2-0 just 38 seconds later, as Copp set up Wheeler for his first of the pre-season.

"It felt good to see a couple go in and be involved offensively and pick up where I left off last year," said Copp, who is looking to carve out an even bigger role with the Jets this season and may have plenty of opportunity to do that with Patrik Laine and Kyle Connor still without new contracts.

Goaltender Laurent Brossoit wasn't very busy, especially early in the game. He faced just five shots in the opening frame, and didn't see a puck come his way in the second period until it was nearly 11 minutes old. He finished with 20 saves.

Nico Sturm was the only Wild player to beat him, knocking home his own old. He finished with 20 saves.

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Andrei Chibisov: playing his second straight game of the pre-season, the big Russian shifted to the right wing and skated on a line with Scheifele and Mathieu Perreault. He whiffed on an open net on his first shift, then used his powerful frame to throw a heavy hit later in the period. Chibisov also did some good work down low in the cycle in the second period, creating a scoring chance for Scheifele.

Chibisov also had a lovely backhanded dish to Scheifele later in the game, but the No. 1 centre was stopped by Wild goaltender Mat Robson. Chibisov ended the night with two shots on goal and one hit in 16:13 of action.

"His first game in Edmonton, he was on the left side. He can play both sides, but he's clearly more comfortable on the right, A couple good reads, good plays, he's got a physicality that we're hopeful he's kind of learning how to use," said Maurice.

JOONA LUUTO: did some nice work on the penalty kill, with Minnesota going 0-for-3 on the night. Like Chibisov and Poolman, he was also playing for a second straight game.

Maurice is clearly wanting to get to know the Finnish free agent, so expect him to get plenty more looks in the remaining five pre-season contests. Was on a line with Moose regulars Suess and Reichel, and ended up with one hit and one takeaway in 15:20 of ice time.

KRISTIAN VESALAINEN: after a pretty quiet rookie prospect tournament, Vesalainen had a pretty quiet start to his pre-season. There's no doubt he has the talent, but Vesalainen will need to show more on a regular basis if he wants to not only make the Jets' opening night roster, but stick as a regular.

The Finnish forward had a nice forecheck in the second period where he poked a puck loose, and had a great scoring chance a short time later after linemate Michael Spacek set him up for what looked like a tap-in goal.

Vesalainen had two shots while playing 12:45.

The Jets return to training camp sessions at Bell MTS Iceplex today. Group A will be on at 9 a.m., with Group B hitting the ice at noon.

Winnipeg will play its third pre-season game on Friday night when the defending Stanley Cup champion St. Louis Blues come to Bell MTS Place. No. 1 netminder Connor Hellebuyck is likely to get his first taste of pre-season action, and forward Nikolaj Ehlers (dealing with a minor injury) could as well.
Big Buff retirement rumours hit full stride

By: Mike McIntyre

Posted: 09/18/2019 12:00 PM

There’s nobody quite like Dustin Byfuglien, who can turn a hockey game on its head with one jaw-dropping dash up the ice or devastating bodycheck. Both feats, I might add, typically done with a huge smile on his face.

Whether it’s bopping his head along to the in-arena music while sitting in the penalty box, rag-dolling two or three opponents in a scrum or trash-talking his teammates on the bench and during practice, “Big Buff” brings a unique blend of levity and intensity whenever he laces up his skates. Despite being an intensely private person away from the rink, he’s one of the biggest personalities in the NHL.

All of which is why his absence during Winnipeg Jets training camp is looming larger by the day — and a future without the one-of-a-kind Byfuglien in the lineup may be coming a lot sooner than anyone had thought.

Byfuglien was granted an indefinite leave of absence just as the action began last Friday, the result of a face-to-face conversation 24 hours earlier in which he dropped a bombshell on general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff, who was already dealing with a couple other major headaches with Patrik Laine and Kyle Connor still unsigned and must have initially wondered if he was the subject of some elaborate prank.

 Naturally, the whispers began and the rumour mill was cranked to high. Coach Paul Maurice said there was nothing “sinister” at play here, and from everything I’ve found that is true. There’s no scandal or smoking gun to be found.

Regardless of what might be happening in Byfuglien’s personal life, which frankly is none of our business, this really is about one core issue: How much longer does he want to keep playing hockey?

"...Using the time to ponder his NHL future. I’m not saying Byfuglien is retiring; I’m not saying he’s coming back to play. Only that he’s contemplating his options and there’s no timetable for a decision."

Veteran TSN journalist Bob McKenzie reported Wednesday that Byfuglien is "using the time to ponder his NHL future. I’m not saying Byfuglien is retiring; I’m not saying he’s coming back to play. Only that he’s contemplating his options and there’s no timetable for a decision."

That certainly lines up with what we’ve been hearing around the team for several days, but nobody would confirm, including his agent who has declined comment. Other than saying Byfuglien has their full support and they’ll give him as much time as he needs, nothing else has been offered up by the organization.

Maurice provided a few additional soundbites on Wednesday morning regarding Byfuglien, who is one of the team’s alternate captains along with Mark Scheifele.

"We know that when you have a player ask for some time, and privacy then is paramount in all these, you open up to all the speculation. And I understand that," said Maurice.

"Our options are to be completely forthcoming and then we open up the question and answer period, or to do what is almost always done and explain that it’s a private matter. So I get it if you’re going to ask for 20 different permutations of what would cause a player to ask for a leave, but privacy is paramount so I won’t comment on any speculation."

Maurice said there have been “a number of open lines of communication” through the process, but provided no other details or timeline for any kind of finality to the situation. Obviously the sooner some clarity is provided to the team the better, considering just how big an impact this is going to have.

Let’s assume for a moment Byfuglien has lost the passion that makes him such a treat to watch. It’s not hard to fathom, with the 34-year-old coming off a truly miserable season in which he suffered three different injuries — a concussion and two ankle-related ailments, and only played in 42 regular-season games. That took a major toll, physically and, no doubt, mentally.

It was somewhat telling that Byfuglien opted not to play this summer in Da Beauty League, which was put together by his agent, Ben Hankinson, in Edina, Minnesota. The annual event features NHL, AHL, ECHL and college-level players who live and train in Minnesota during the off-season, and Byfuglien had been a staple in previous years.

Having watched some of the league’s games in person in 2018 for the purpose of a feature story I wrote, I can tell you the pace isn’t exactly off the charts. It’s a fun way for players to keep in shape and interact with fans. Did Byfuglien just need some extra time away from the rink to allow his body to heal? Perhaps.

It’s also notable that Byfuglien appeared down at Bell MTS Icest pec a few days before camp began and skated with a large group of teammates, even participating in the club’s production day in which videos and promos were shot for the upcoming season. A small group of us watched Byfuglien skate one day, and he didn’t appear to be his usual jovial, fun-loving self. There was a more business-like approach as he simply went through a handful of drills.

A couple days later came the stunning announcement.

Byfuglien has two years left on his contract, with a salary cap hit of $7.6 million. In real money, he’s set to pocket $8 million this year and $6 million next year. He was expected to be a major part of a depleted defence core this year that lost Jacob Trouba in a trade (for Neal Pionk) and Tyler Myers and Ben Chiarot in free agency.

Without him, the Jets blue line currently consists of Josh Morrissey, Dmitry Kulikov, Pionk, Nathan Beaulieu, Sami Niku and Tucker Poolman, with others like Anthony Bitetto, Cam Schilling, Logan Stanley and Nelson Nogier providing additional depth.

Not even those downing the Jets Kool-Aid on a daily basis can possibly see that as the defensive corps of a Stanley Cup contender, can they? And when the inevitable injury bug hits, as it does every year, how thin will that top-six D group really start to look?

"Dustin missed half the hockey season for us last year, so this is specific to us. We’re used to not having him in the lineup," Maurice said Wednesday of trying to keep a level-head throughout this. That’s fair, but the Jets also had a heck of a lot more depth to help off-set the loss. And it still wasn’t good enough to accomplish their goals.

Sure, the Jets would free up some much needed salary cap space with Byfuglien off the books, but what might they be able to actually do with it now, in time to actually help for what was shaping up to be an all-important season but is starting to feel like its circling the drain before the puck has even dropped?

"We’ve developed a cool relationship the last few years and he’s really been one of the big reasons for me stepping in when I first got in the league," Morrissey said Wednesday. "Of course, I miss seeing him every day.

“Everyone knows what type of player he is, what he means to our team. We’d love to have him, obviously, but at the same time I totally respect whatever he’s got to do. I think it’s a really private matter."

Fresh off signing an eight-year, $50-million extension last week, Morrissey might just have to play 60 minutes a night for the Jets to have a fighting chance.

All the big free agents are locked up, and you have to think the Jets would have taken a run at the likes of Jake Gardiner, or even re-signing a couple of their own free agents like Myers and Chiarot, had they had an inkling this was coming.

There’s always the possibility of a trade, but now you’d be depleting another area to try to fill a need. And with Laine and Connor still without contracts — and the ever-increasing possibility one or both won’t be here when the regular-season begins in two weeks — the Jets don’t exactly have a surplus of talent to work with.

The idea of walking away from $14 million would seem ludicrous to most of us, which is what would happen if Byfuglien opted to retire. But the Minnesota product has already made a boatload of money — $50 million over his career, according to CapFriendly — and this is a man whose tastes aren’t exactly luxurious.
A Stanley Cup champion (Chicago, 2010) and veteran of 869 career NHL games (177 goals, 348 assists, 1,094 penalty minutes), Byfuglien has had the kind of career most players can only dream of. He loves fishing, and hunting, and living more of a low-key lifestyle. He would probably be just fine, financially, to say the least.

This is about much more than dollars and cents, but what makes sense for his long-term health and enjoyment of life. Unfortunately for the Jets and their fanbase, what ultimately might be best for Byfuglien is probably going to come with a significant cost.

Winnipeg Free Press LOADED 09.19.2019
Jets’ Copper shines in pre-season debut

Paul Friesen
September 18, 2019 10:45 PM CDT

Andrew Copp saw his first pre-season game as an early audition for a top-six role up front with the Winnipeg Jets. Storming on stage with a goal and assist in his first shift couldn’t have hurt his cause, as the Jets downed the Minnesota Wild, 4-1, on Wednesday.

“Good to feel good right away,” Copp said. “It felt good to see a couple go in and be involved offensively and pick up where I left off last year. I don’t know if I count those as good as regular-season. The real games start Oct. 3. But it’s not a bad feeling.”

Playing with Blake Wheeler and Adam Lowry, Copp opened the scoring by taking a nearly no-look, blue-line-to-blue line pass from a whirling Sami Niskanen from a bad angle past a surprised Kaapo Kahkonen in the Wild goal.

“Sami obviously sees the ice really well, is a very dynamic player,” Copp said. “We’ve got some guys on that back end that can move the puck, for sure, and it should lead to some chances offensively.”

Barely half a minute later, Copp set up Wheeler for another.

“Copper was really strong all over the ice,” Wheeler said. “He’s such a smart player. You could tell he was on.”

Other notable aspects of the Jets second exhibition contest included the performances of AHLeR Michael Spacek, newcomer Andrei Chibisov, who was playing on a line with Mark Scheifele, and goalie Laurent Brossoit.

Head coach Paul Maurice also singled out 18-year-old defenceman Ville Heinola.

Defenceman Tucker Poolman ingratiated himself with teammates when he dropped the gloves with Minnesota’s Mike Liambas midway through the first.

Liambas had just taken his second run at a Jets player, Kristian Reichel — Dmitry Kulikov was his first target — when Poolman decided to let him know that was enough.

That he ended up on the bloody end of the scrap only heightened the level of appreciation Poolman felt from people like Wheeler.

Expect the schmooze of line combinations for a couple more games.

“I thought there’d be a three- or four-game threshold on this,” Maurice said, pre-game. “Then we’ll get back to a lot of what we know.”

While the temperature was up from Monday’s low-pulse affair in Edmonton, it was still, well, a pre-season game, Minnesota dressing mostly non-NHLers.

Scheifele might have said it best when asked before the game about how many of these he’d like to play.

Patrik Laine’s agent says the Finnish star didn’t waste any time in doing some damage control with his Jets teammates.

Mike Liut said Laine reached out to Bryan Little after comments that appeared to cast some shade on the second-line centre.

“Patrik went through a pretty tough year last year because everybody expected him to score 50 or 60 goals and he’s trying to explain away what happened, or at least defend himself a little bit,” Liut told Sportsnet in Vancouver on Wednesday. “When the writer takes it to another step or a false conclusion and takes a shot at guys, then that’s not Patrik’s intent and certainly not what he said.

“Patrik reached out to Brian immediately … they’re more than fine.”

The comments Liut was referring to were made to a Finnish newspaper.

“With the merits I have, somewhere else I’d have an opportunity to play with the best players,” Laine was quoted as saying. “There are top lines and then there is our line. But I play with the guys I’m told to play.”

Liut says for the Finnish writer to look at the number of primary assists Little has on Laine’s career goals (11 of 110) was “unfortunate,” and ignored the fact more than one third of Laine’s goals have come on the power play.

As for an update on contract talks between Laine and the Jets, Liut was blunt.

“We’re not close, how about that,” Liut said. “Nothing has gone on that we didn’t anticipate. Clubs have to manage their cap, we have to represent our client. We have our convictions, they have theirs. Generally these things get done when people move. If one side doesn’t move, or both sides don’t want to move, then it doesn’t get done.

“Until such time as it needs to get done.”

Liut downplayed the possibility of Laine playing in Europe this season.

The Jets winger is training with a pro team in the Swiss league.

Paired with Josh Morrissey, Niku showed off his skills with the puck Wednesday night, even if he tried a little too much on occasion.

He’s said he’d be thrilled to play with Morrissey, a duo Maurice likes because of the things the veteran can teach the kid.

“Mo (Morrissey) would be a guy that would come back to the bench and tell you where the other nine guys were on the ice,” the coach said. “So Sami will learn from that.”

Niku, 23 next month, suited up for 30 games last season, recording a goal and three assists.

“He’s a fun guy to play with, fun to watch,” Morrissey said, pre-game. “He’s really skilled, moves the puck really well. We saw in his opportunity to play last year, he’s good on the breakouts, he turns off guys really well and makes plays.”

Morrissey had the Jets third goal on the power play late in Wednesday’s third period, while C.J. Suess added a empty-netter.

Winnipeg Sun LOADED 09.19.2019
A day after absorbing a Patrik Laine blast from across the pond in Finland, the Winnipeg Jets on Wednesday faced the possibility of a crushing check from defenceman Dustin Byfuglien.

Actually, they didn’t so much face it as do the two-step around it.

A report on Wednesday morning suggested the 34-year-old assistant captain, on a personal leave from the Jets since training camp opened late last week, is contemplating retirement.

Neither Byfuglien’s agent nor the Jets would confirm it, but that would certainly explain an absence the team has said is not a health matter for No. 33 or his family.

Perhaps the big man spent the summer perched in his boat with a fishing rod in his hands, thinking about the big picture. Perhaps he showed up in Winnipeg and told the Jets his heart wasn’t in it anymore, the grind too much for his body to endure.

He is, after all, coming off a season in which a concussion and two ankle injuries limited him to a career-low 42 games.

That’s how much is left on Byfuglien’s contract, which runs two more years.

Publicly, the Jets called it a personal matter, which I suppose on one hand it is. On the other, it’s a hockey matter, one which profoundly affects the coming season.

If Byfuglien decides to hang up his considerable blades, it would cut a massive slice out of a Jets blue line that already resembles a brick of Swiss cheese, with the holes left by Jacob Trouba, Tyler Myers and Ben Chiarot.

TSN hockey insider Bob McKenzie, who reported the news via Twitter, said there was no timetable for Byfuglien’s decision, which echoes what the Jets have said.

Talking to players on Wednesday was like hearing echoes, too.

“Everyone knows what type of player he is, what he means to our team,” defenceman Josh Morrissey said. “We’d love to have him, obviously. But at the same time I totally respect what he’s got to do. It’s a really private matter.”

Ditto, from forward Andrew Copp.

“The organization put out a release saying that he needed some time, so we’re going to respect that,” Copp said. “The reasons are definitely a very private matter for him.”

From Mark Scheifele, the Jets other assistant captain last season: “It’s his life and his family. I don’t feel up to talking about that.”

And, finally, the head coach.

“Privacy is paramount,” Paul Maurice said. “So I won’t comment on any speculation.”

Maurice also said he hasn’t made any long-term contingency plans, which seems a little odd.

If he hasn’t, certainly Kevin Cheveldayoff, who generally manages things in Jets HQ, has.

If Cheveldayoff hasn’t entertained the thought of a winger-for-defenceman swap before, he has to be now.

An adage Jets management has always believed in: you can’t have too many defencemen.

The resulting conclusion: you’re screwed if you don’t have enough.

The only good news for the Jets if Byfuglien lumbers into the sunset is a ray or two of financial relief.

Walking away from the $7.6 million annual average on his deal would allow more room under the brim of the team’s salary cap.

If Byfuglien continues to hum and haw, the Jets could put him on the suspended list and start saving daily increments on his cap hit.

Either move would allow Cheveldayoff to toss more bags of money at restricted free agents Laine and Kyle Connor, if he’s so inclined.

So the Jets probably need a decision before the start of the regular season, Oct. 3 in New York.

Ideally, Byfuglien would have let them know his heart wasn’t in it back in May or June, allowing the brain-trust to plan their replacement strategy ahead of free agency.

Of course, he probably didn’t know.

Byfuglien’s a different cat. Not the type to share his feelings with anyone.

He’s a giant presence on and off the ice, though, delivering as many zingers to teammates in the dressing room as limb-separating checks to opponents in games.

He’s Winnipeg’s best offensive defenceman, its power-play quarterback, its enforcer and fan favourite — all wrapped in one 6-foot-5, 260-pound package.

He’s also a guy who’d love to skip training camp and jump straight into the regular season.

So I wouldn’t be at all surprised if Byfuglien doesn’t follow through on this particular hit.

As always, the mere threat of it gets everybody’s attention.

Winnipeg Sun LOADED 09.19.2019
Morrissey blossomed under big Buff’s wing

Paul Friesen
September 18, 2019 3:33 PM CDT

Josh Morrissey says he misses No. 33 every day that he’s away from training camp.

The Winnipeg Jets defenceman says Dustin Byfuglien was a big part of his being able to make the jump straight from the AHL to the NHL three years ago.

The two were paired together at the beginning of Morrissey’s rookie year.

“As a young guy trying to make the team you’re nervous all the time,” Morrissey said. “One of the biggest things is being able to let a bad play, a bad shift go, not dwell on it and feel like, ‘Oh, man, I just made a mistake. Could that be what gets me sent down?’”

That’s where Byfuglien came in.

“You come off the ice and you get this big hug from Buff or the arm over the shoulder, and almost knocks me off the bench, basically, because he’s so big,” Morrissey said.

Byfuglien’s words: “Hey, welcome to the NHL. Now you finally got scored on, now you can just go play,” Morrissey recalled. “Which is true. Any NHL career, you’re going to get scored on.

“And having fun every day, on the ice, in the game, whether it’s yelling at guys on our team or the other team. He really helped me feel relaxed and calm, coming in.”

Three years ago, Byfuglien made it clear he wanted the then 21-year-old Morrissey as his blue-line partner.

“It means the world,” Morrissey said. “It’s immediately a weight off your shoulders as a young player.”

Byfuglien is reported to be contemplating retirement, at the age of 34.

Winnipeg Sun LOADED 09.19.2019
Today, with Bob McKenzie reporting that Dustin Byfuglien is taking his leave to "ponder his NHL future," the prospect of Winnipeg’s decimated defence opening the season without its most iconic player is an actual possibility.

Argue that the losses of Tyler Myers and Ben Chiarot can be absorbed by Niku, Neal Pionk and Tucker Poolman all you like. There are strong analytical cases to be made in that regard. Still, Byfuglien is an even better player than Jacob Trouba and, by most metrics, Trouba is a top-pairing defenceman. Winnipeg’s blue line has already suffered a big loss. If Byfuglien retires, the impact will be massive.

To make matters worse, Byfuglien’s pondering takes place with Laine and Connor on the sidelines due to ongoing contract negotiations. Laine’s words to Ilia Letlisi may not have been as unreasonable as first reported but they continue to draw all kinds of ire.

This is tragic approaching comedic approaching “I can’t believe this is happening” approaching —

There. Did you feel that? I did it. I finally descended into melodrama. Mark your calendars!

Before we continue, I want to make a few points abundantly clear.

This article is 100 percent about the worst-case scenarios in Winnipeg this season. It is not an assertion that the sky is falling.

Byfuglien could return to the Jets in a heartbeat. He’d be welcomed with open arms. Laine and Connor are still high-end scorers. The moment Blake Wheeler finds Laine for his first one-timer goal of the season, you can bet the three of them will hug in the offensive zone to celebrate it whether Byfuglien is there or not.

All three of Byfuglien, Laine and Connor carry — or are projected to carry — large cap hits. As such, there are ways to weaponize even worst-case scenarios.

Finally, my position on Byfuglien’s personal leave is simply that I wish him and his family all of the best. He has every right to take the time necessary to make a decision this foundational to find peace in his life.

With that out of the way, let’s dig into the worst-case scenarios. How bad could they really be?

Let’s start with what we know.

As mentioned, Byfuglien is on personal leave. Winnipeg is respectfully accommodating that leave, giving their star defenceman as much time as needed to make a decision in peace.

Laine and Connor don’t have contracts. Mike Liut recently told Sportsnet 650 in Vancouver that the Laine negotiations are “not close.”

There are a few different scenarios for Winnipeg’s cap hit, depending on Byfuglien’s decision and the time it takes to make it.

1. According to section 16.12 of the CBA, Winnipeg can apply to the NHL for Byfuglien to be listed as an “active, non-roster” player. If the NHL approved this request, Byfuglien’s cap hit would still apply but he wouldn’t count against the Jets’ 23 man roster limit. You may recall that this is precisely what happened with Nic Petan last season after the passing of his father.

In Byfuglien’s case, this would only be a short term solution — Byfuglien’s cap hit plus the cap hit of whichever defenceman took his spot would eat up some of Winnipeg’s available cap space each day. It would buy a little bit of time for Byfuglien to come to his decision but would be less and less ideal as time went by.

2. According to TSN’s Frank Seravalli, Winnipeg could suspend Byfuglien and apply to the NHL for his cap hit not to apply while he was away from the team. The suspension would be more about paperwork than discipline, of course — the goal would be to create a more ideal medium-term solution than “active, non-roster” status.

If the NHL accepted Winnipeg’s petition not to have Byfuglien’s cap hit count while he made his decision, the Jets would come out ahead in terms of cap space — there’s no way Anthony Bitetto, as one example of a replacement, would cost nearly the same as Byfuglien’s $7.6-million cap hit.

3. If Byfuglien does retire, his $7.6-million cap hit this season and next would simply be wiped clean from the books. There wouldn’t be any “cap recapture” cost.

If Byfuglien retires — and if Winnipeg opens the season without Laine and Connor — the Jets would just squeak over the $60.2 million salary cap floor.

The following 22-man roster has a cap hit of $60.4 million:

It certainly doesn’t look impressive.

In this scenario, Nik Ehlers gets promoted to the top line where he had success with twin towers Wheeler and Mark Scheifele. Mathieu Perreault returns to a top-six forward role with Bryan Little and Jack Roslovic, while Andrew Copp, Adam Lowry and a promoted Mason Appleton are made to take on the tough assignments. The fourth line is a throwback to the era before Winnipeg’s superlative forward depth — it’s more full of role players than the overpowered likes of Perreault and Roslovic.

And of course, the defence is terrifying.

That’s just an editorial opinion of course. To get a sense of just how terrifying, I reached out to resident chart whiz Dom Luszczyszyn — author of the NHL-wide season previews. — to see if he could build a doomsday season preview for this version of the Jets? Recall that his original Jets preview featured all of Byfuglien, Laine and Connor and projected Winnipeg to be a playoff bubble team.

Let’s start with the worst it could get: Laine signs a contract with SC Bern, Connor signs an offer sheet and Byfuglien retires.

This is not a playoff team. This is not even close to a playoff team. And yet, due to Winnipeg’s incredible forward depth, these Jets aren’t even bad enough to get great odds at a top pick in the 2020 Draft. This is as bad as it gets.

For context, Winnipeg’s projected 83 points would have ranked the Jets approximately 21st in the NHL last season. Could this version find a way to squeak out enough wins to get across the playoff line? In a word, no. It would take a Vezina season from Connor Hellebuyck, a Morrissey-esque season from Pionk, a Trouba-esque season from Poolman and one heck of a resurgence from Little.

Next, let’s tackle what happens if Byfuglien retires but Winnipeg can sign Connor and Laine?

Here is an example where the Jets sign Connor in time for the start of the regular season but Laine’s contract negotiations drag on until mid-November. As such, the “Game Score Value Added” that Dom applies here represents Laine playing just 68 games.

Doomsday scenario 2: Dustin Byfuglien retires but the kids are alright

Connor is back from Michigan. Laine is back from Bern. Byfuglien has hung up his skates for the last time and, just as before, Winnipeg’s defence looks like a mess without him. The Jets improve to 87 points (18th place by the 2018-19 standings) but still miss the playoffs.

In this case, Dom’s model gives the Jets slightly better odds of squeaking in — 33 percent instead of 17 percent — but the post season is still a pipe dream. There are only so many saves Hellebuyck (and his beautiful new Heritage jersey inspired mask) can make. There are only so many goals that Connor and Laine can score. The defence is simply not good enough and the team’s 5-on-5 issues live on.

Does all this catastrophizing feel better, in a way? No? I’m sorry. This truly is a walk down Winnipeg’s darkest roads.

Of course, if Byfuglien does retire, Winnipeg isn’t going to just sit on its hands. The top-heavy roster with great forwards and question marks on defence already prompted off season trade rumours. Without Byfuglien,
one suspects that the Jets will shop the NHL markets for a right-handed D-man.

This brings us to our third doomsday scenario. A sudden retirement by such a good defenceman on a team that already needed more good defencemen would put the Jets at an incredible position of weakness, bargaining wise.

What if they swung for the fences … and missed?

Let’s return to Carolina for this. You’ll recall that we discussed Justin Faulk to the Jets as a non-imminent possibility the day Carolina signed Jake Gardiner.

Do you see what we’ve done here?

In this scenario, the Jets have traded Ehlers to the Hurricanes for Faulk. Winnipeg tried to trade from a position of strength to address a position of weakness … and got worse.

Without Ehlers and with Faulk, Dom’s model projects the Jets to miss the playoffs. For the sake of argument, let’s assume Faulk has signed a contract extension with Winnipeg (otherwise a trade of this nature goes from worst-case possible to sheer lunacy.) The problem for Winnipeg is that the right-handed defenceman rumoured to be available — Faulk and Rasmus Ristolainen — don’t move the needle enough to solve the Jets issues.

The Winnipeg Jets were already in tough to make the playoffs with all of Byfuglien, Laine and Connor in the lineup. Without them, the team would be in a terribly awkward position — not good enough to reasonably compete for the playoffs, not bad enough to reasonably compete for a high draft pick.

These doomsday scenarios are a twisted bit of fun. In the here and now, the Jets will do everything they can to accommodate Byfuglien during a critical juncture in his life. If the team is made to continue without him, there are avenues of cap relief and perhaps even a few ways to weaponize their newfound cap space.

Wherever this story goes, it projects to be a tough season in Winnipeg.
“We’re all friends here, we all want to see each other succeed and we’re all here for each other. I think you have to have that if you want to be a successful team.”

Troy Stecher’s friendship with Boeser goes back to their college days, when they played together at the University of North Dakota. He was able to fly out and visit his buddy a few weeks ago.

“When I went to North Dakota my freshman year, my dad got really sick and I never came home. As I’ve got older, I kind of wish I did just to be there.

“I’ve seen pictures, now that I’m older my family felt comfortable to show me and it really hit home for me and then just understanding that his dad was sick, I was just like I want to be there for him,” Stecher said.

“It was awesome, any time you get to see one of your best friends it’s super nice,” Boeser said of the visit. “Get your mind off things. He’s such a great friend.”

And the messages and calls from his teammates carried extra meaning too. It was a reminder of the quality of people he’s surrounded by on the Canucks.

“It goes a long way when they do that for someone,” he said.

Stecher grinned when he said he saw his friend Wednesday morning, in a familiar spot. Boeser was on the trainer’s table, getting loosened up for practice.

“It was like nothing’s changed, he’s already back in the medical room all the time,” Stecher laughed. “We’re going for lunch and for dinner tonight. He wants to see Phoebe (Stecher’s dog) right away and it just seems back to normal. We’re thrilled Brock is back.”

ICE CHIPS: Boeser said he was confident a contract deal would get done and if words became heated between his agent Ben Hankinson and general manager Jim Benning, he tried not to let that bother him. “That’s why you have an agent. You let him do the dirty work,” Boeser said.

“They worked to get the deal done. And I’m glad that we figured something out.”

Bo Horvat said it was the least the players could do.

“It can’t be easy, you know, especially, contract talks. And on top of that, having his dad out in the hospital … it’s kudos to him for staying positive and dealing with it the way he has because he’s dealt with it tremendously,” Horvat said.
Stability, ability should push Pearson to higher goal plateau

BEN KUZMA
September 18, 2019 3:19 PM PDT

Pre-season proficiency should come with these NHL disclaimers:

"Objects are not as close as they appear."

"If it's too good to be true, it probably is."

The annual passage to the real season is often a plodding, rust-filled procession. Wins and losses and goals and assists don't really mean anything in the big picture, unless you're Tanner Pearson.

The Vancouver Canucks' winger, who won a Stanley Cup in 2014, lost his confidence and was traded twice last season before finding stability when he arrived on the West Coast at the trade deadline in a swap for Erik Gudbranson. A spurt of seven goals in the final seven games on a line with Bo Horvat offered hope that Pearson is capable of returning to 20-plus goal production.

"One of the knocks since I've been a pro is that I've kind of been a streaky scorer and to finish like that was nice," he said. "It rebuilt my confidence and I brought that into this year."

It showed Tuesday at Rogers Arena. Pearson displayed flashes of what made him mesh on 'That '70s Line' alignment with Jeff Carter and Tyler Toffoli that produced a career-high 24 goals in 2016-17.

In a 4-2 pre-season victory over the Edmonton Oilers, the 2012 first-round pick of the Los Angeles Kings had an assist and an empty-net goal, led his club with four shots and added two hits and two blocked shots on a line with Brandon Sutter and Zach MacEwen.

Pearson also turned back the competitive clock with a heavy slapshot, strong net presence and scoring chances off an Elias Pettersson rebound and backhander off a saucer feed by MacEwen.

Again, it was only a pre-season outing, but Pearson believes he's building something. Especially if he gets power-play looks, gets to the net, holds on to pucks longer and shoots more. Last season, he had a combined 147 shots with three clubs and that would have placed him fourth among Canucks.

"For sure," he said of surpassing 24 goals. "If I stick to playing my game and play it the right way and keep getting my looks, I think I have a good enough shot to score off that and also get to the net — you go there and anything can happen.

"When I was playing with Bo, you just take care of your D-zone and go from there. He's always in the right position and talking to you. It's an easy transition out of the zone and to create odd-man rushes."

He sounds like a guy who has found a career lifesaver in Vancouver after last season. How bad was 2018-19?

"Adventurous, crazy, whatever you want to call it," said the 27-year-old Pearson. "Not an ideal year for anyone and I felt like I've ended up in a good spot. It's a great group of guys and it was such an easy transition right from the start. It's been good."

Part of that is being looked upon as a key element of the top-six mix. Part of it is taking his off-ice dedication to another level during the off-season and understanding what you put in your body is directly related to your performance.

"I switched gyms and got a new trainer and I'm doing more nutrition stuff on the side," added Pearson. "Not that I'm getting old, but to keep up with the same body, you have to keep the stuff in shape.

"I met with doctors in the summer and did a lot of tests and it helped. It's what foods to eat, what your body can absorb and taking the wheat and the dairy out."

Pearson is also a Pilates believer and knows that any player who has had issues with the core can benefit from strengthening that area before hitting the ice.

"I started doing Pilates last summer and it's hard," he said. "It's especially good for hockey because when you start off (in the summer) you're not skating that much and it works every muscle that you use to skate. So, it goes a long way."

It should help strengthen his body and resolve after a wild roller-coaster ride last season.

Pearson was traded to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Nov. 13 for Carl Hagelin and to create salary cap space. The Kitchener, Ont. native had just one assist in 17 games, was a minus-9 rating and mired in a 30-game goal drought.

He wasn't going to help supplant the Kings' eventual transition from veterans like Anze Kopitar and Dustin Brown. In short, with a lack of production and this season plus the next at a $3.75 million annual cap hit, he was expendable.

If that wasn't enough, Pearson scored three goals in his first six games with the Penguins, but would finish with just nine through 44 and was a frequent healthy scratch.

"There was so much talk in L.A. with how the team was going and that things were going to happen," recalled Pearson.

"Pittsburgh was kind of the same way and then I ran into an injury and wasn't able to play. It started well and trickled down."
“Opportunity”: Ben Hutton lands in LA

PATRICK JOHNSTON
September 18, 2019 9:56 AM PDT

The Kings are struggling with injury and adding the ex-Canuck was a pretty straightforward choice, it sounds like.

Hutton agreed to a one-year, $1.5 million deal.

“Well, with our situation here, 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 may have a little bit of depth in, all of a sudden it’s gone quite quickly,” Kings coach Todd McLellan told reporters post-game. “So first thing he’ll do is provide us an NHL presence, somebody that has 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’d like to think he can do better, but he does bring some valuable tools to the table. And the fact that he’d be comfortable jumping on that ice tonight in an NHL building in an NHL uniform is real important right now for our back end.”

Hutton on his summer with no contract: “I might have had a couple of grey hairs. It was a grind, very stressful and you say what the heck is going on but you believe in yourself and keep plugging away.” — Rick Dhaliwal (@DhaliwalSports) September 18, 2019

Hutton’s agent Andy Scott said in an email to Postmedia News that the Kings were just the fit he and his client had been waiting for.

“Theme for Ben this summer was ‘opportunity,’” he explained. “L.A. gives him the chance to re-establish himself as a top-four defenceman with a new team and continue playing significant minutes … He had significant interest from teams this summer and we turned down offers with more compensation to play for the Kings. He is very excited about this season.”

Hutton averaged more than 22 minutes of ice time per night last season and scored five goals and added 15 assists last season in 69 games for the Canucks. In all, he skated in 276 games for Vancouver, who drafted him in the fifth round of the 2012 draft.

He made $2.8 million last season with the Canucks, the second year of a two-year $5.6 million deal.
Hockey is back. If you squint really, really hard.

The rosters aren’t exactly NHL quality, though there’s still a lot of high-end skill on display.

The games aren’t meaningful, but they can be entertaining, as it was on occasion Tuesday night at Rogers Arena as a relatively stacked Vancouver Canucks side defeated a squad of EDM顿ton Oilers hopeful 4-2. There were some fun moments. Canucks prospect Jalen Chatfield threw a couple of nice hits, as did Micheal Ferland. Brandon Sutter came in hot and scored a pretty sweet goal on a penalty shot. Alex Edler found Sutter with a lovely backdoor pass.

And even though the lower bowl of Rogers Arena wasn’t nearly full, the crowd buzzed when Elias Pettersson led a rush through the neutral zone in the first period.

Still, if you ask around an NHL locker room to describe what unfolded on the ice at this time of year, the refrains are restrained and familiar.

“Pretty scrambly out there.”

“Pretty scrambly out there.”

“Exhibition hockey.”

“No one feels good at this time of year.”

Players are finding their feet and so are organizations. Even the game presentation is pared down, the big new features and open save to debut on opening night.

So as the first week of the NHL preseason unfolds, we should tread with caution and avoid wading too far into the muck looking at ice time and real-time stats and line combinations for some sort of deeper meaning. Especially when a club is playing its third game in its third city over a span of 27 hours, like Vancouver was Tuesday night.

Despite a rush that electrified the building in the first period and a third-period goal that probably swung the game, Pettersson had a quiet night overall. It was still impressive, but it wasn’t up to his own standard.

“I was losing the puck all the time,” Pettersson said of his performance. “I was always trying to do the hard (thing) out there, trying to make the hard play.”

“Maybe for a preseason game I should simplify a little bit because I had too many turnovers out there.”

Green said Pettersson’s line was “only OK,” before opining of Pettersson specifically that, “man, he was picture-perfect in my eyes.”

This is part of what makes Pettersson so exciting. He scored a goal. He electrified the crowd. And for all of his self-flagellation over turnovers, he was only credited with two giveaways.

For his coach and for the crowd, Pettersson’s performance on Tuesday night was another exciting sign.

For the Alien, however, it wasn’t good enough.

“I know the expectations are higher for me, but I’m the one who puts the highest expectations on myself,” he said. “I don’t think (about) what our people want to see from me, I’m just trying to play my best every game.”

If that level of focus, that level of inner drive isn’t scary enough, Pettersson suggested Tuesday night that he thinks he’s added to his overall arsenal.

“I feel much better (this year than last) apart from conditioning,” Pettersson said. “I feel more balanced when I’m shooting. I feel I can shoot a little harder, I feel like I’m in more control of everything. It feels good out there, even though I was a little tired today after training camp ...”

Pettersson is a game-changer. You know that if you’ve watched him play.

And as you might imagine, the Alien’s game-breaking ability extends past the confines of the regulation NHL ice surface and into the realm of media assignments.

Pettersson has meant so much to the Vancouver market that he’s changing the way hockey is followed and covered in the city — and across Canada. TSN just can’t afford not to have a camera around to follow all of the latest Pettersson news.

So the job has fallen to intrepid TSN 1040 reporter Jeff Paterson, of Patcast fame. You probably know him as JPat. This year the “Pettersson effect” has completely changed JPat’s job responsibilities day-to-day, to the point where he’s actually shooting interviews that are posted regularly to TSN.ca and aired on TSN broadcasts. It’s now JPat’s job to pick up the slack and gather additional Pettersson updates.

This is JPat’s new lightweight set up, built for his iPhone:

Now here’s the problem. The camera setup shoots extremely wide. Like, wider than Tanner Glass in Game 5 of the Stanley Cup final.

It’s a wide lens and the video it shoots is iPhone width. And Jeff isn’t setting up at the top of the scrum with the other video cameras, he’s standing to one side, where he needs to be in order to procure crisp, quality audio clips for 1040.

The ripple effects of this are endless, but one major change from the rank-and-file media’s perspective is that we’re entering an era of Vancouver media pool “Scrum Lurker” inflation, and I want to make sure Jay and Dan are aware of this.

Vancouver media caught in JPat’s wide shot should be exempt from Scrum Lurker consideration — lest we dominate the year like no media pool has ever dominated the segment.

Here’s some highlights just from the past weekend. JPat caught Batch:

He caught IMac really enjoying a Travis Green joke:

He caught Kuz listening in:

And then, because Kuz is a grizzled veteran on this Canucks beat, JPat also caught Kuz ducking out of the shot behind the backdrop:

When JPat caught me talking to Quinn Hughes during prospect camp, I could tell immediately where this was headed.

Luckily, this is one of those situations where “you don’t have to outrun the bear, you just have to outrun the other person you’re with.” So I also knew that I wasn’t the most likely target:

As I predicted, that’s how The Vancouver Courier’s Daniel Wagner became the Jay and Dan — do the right thing and help us fight Scrum Lurker inflation. Recognize that being on the side of the scrum isn’t lurking by any reasonable definition. Give the Vancouver media pool immunity from Scrum Lurkers — or at the very least immunity on all footage shot by JPat. We shouldn’t have to pay for the Alien’s excellence.

Banner night

The Canucks are celebrating their 50th anniversary season this year and unveiled two new end-zone banners during the first preseason game of the year.

One of the banners looks backward. It features Canucks captains, and also Daniel Sedin, in five different uniforms and the tagline “Colourful Past.” Sharing the banners on Twitter set off some classic bar debates, the sort that are restricted solely to the most committed, nostalgia-indulgent sports fans. Ultimately I decided to do a “biggest snubs” poll — because of course.

Personally, as someone who very recently helped quarterback an NHL franchise’s 25th-anniversary celebrations, I admire the self-deprecating slogan and the way it leans into a perceived negative — the club that changes jerseys every decade — and turns it into a cause for celebration, a source of strength. Essentially it’s a celebration of the club’s diverse eras and identities over 50 mostly painful years. It’s pretty cool.
This is what’s fun about an anniversary season. It’s an opportunity for fans to revel in shared experience, relive cherished moments and re-litigate the debates of yore. It’s also an opportunity for us to try and share in that experience by shedding new light onto some of the greatest moments in franchise history, for the VIPs.

In one end zone of Rogers Arena hangs the “Colourful Past” banner. A celebration of 50 years of Canucks history.

In the other, a banner featuring the so-called core four: Pettersson, Brock Boeser, Quinn Hughes and Bo Horvat. This is the forward-looking banner and the tag line reads: “Bright Future.”

No pressure, guys.

If the expectations in Vancouver are high for the Canucks as a team this season, they’re higher still for the “core four.” And yet with the exception of Horvat, the “core four” is composed of players who haven’t entered their prime yet. They’re still learning, still earning experience in the NHL.

“We’re still evaluating players, I have to see where these guys are,” Green said on Wednesday, ruminating on the subject of his young core and the high expectations surrounding them in the Vancouver market.

“There’s been so much hype on some of our young guys that I have to make sure, ‘Where’s Quinn Hughes at?’ I hope he’s great, but I’m not going to sit here and say, ‘Tonight he has to be dynamic.’ I want him to be as good as everyone else in this city does, but I also don’t need to put the heat on him.”

This balance is a serious consideration for Green. These are four players who, along with the goaltenders, will ultimately play the biggest role in dictating the Canucks’ success or lack thereof this season and for seasons to come. And yet they still have a lot of improving and learning to do.

Most of them have shown they can excel in the NHL, but it’s a big step from excelling as an individual to winning as a team. And they can’t do it alone — they’ll need to improve, and they’ll also need significant support, something Green also touched on at length on Wednesday.

“You look at different teams, and if you want to be good in this league you better have a good core of players,” Green said. “The higher number of players you have in that core, the better chance you have of winning.

“You can look at every good team in the league and count the core. So we’re hoping to keep adding to that core in terms of young, good, high-end players.

“And then you look at the age of the players, where they’re at, the experience they’ve had in the league. Are they the best players yet in the league? You look at some of these teams, they have four or five core guys that have been in the league six, seven, eight years and they’re in a different stage as an organization.

“It’s an exciting time for our organization because we have these young core players that are skilled, but they’re also still learning. They’re going to become better. That’s why I’ve talked so many times about building something where we’re not just a team that gets into the playoffs and is out — we hope and we feel, this group is growing and on the up. They’re climbing, but there’s still going to be some pains. You hope that when this group is ready to compete and win they’re doing it for four, five, six years and we’ve seen that around the league.”

For Canucks fans, it’s easy to dream on what this core could develop into. For the guy responsible for working with the core players and getting them there though, this is a process.

“Everything plays itself out,” Green said in discussing his approach to balancing teaching and winning this season. “Sometimes there’s old sayings and they’re there because they mean something. We want to take it a day at a time.

“We want to develop these guys into great hockey players, I think they’ve got a chance.

“I still think our organization is going in a great direction — but we have to make sure we’re pushing in the right direction at the right time. No one wants to win games more than me, I can tell you that, and we’re hoping those guys are part of the primetime part of it. I truly believe they will be.”

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
Major change in his GAR over the last two seasons, which could show that he’s still playing. On a disappointingly team approach and The Athletic’s Dom Luszczyszyn’s top 200 for nerds. The winger’s GAR of 7.3 this past season dropped -9.9 over the last season. From his 22.25 GAR in 2016-17, the drop is even steeper to -15.2 in two years. Based on a more traditional sense alone, his 2018-19 season of 42 points, which was a 22-point slide from the year prior, the drop in rankings make sense. But if we dig deeper, there’s more to the story — such as the fact that the Wild still took 53 percent of the shot share with him on the ice and the fact that his shooting percentage dropped from 11.49 to 6.82 last year. While he was expected to score 16.45 goals, he only netted 12.

While it’s possible that he just peaked in 2017-18, a look below the surface shows that his balanced offensive contributions, power play time, and willingness to shoot (his 320 attempts at 5-on-5 were in the top-25 in the league last year, as were his shots that reached the net) make him a valuable fantasy addition.

Having a player who is eligible at more than one position can be handy; the center/right wing adds versatility to a manager’s team. But why the exodus has put a damper on a handful of CBJ’s players in fantasy rankings and drafts. Without an elite playmaker like Panarin, the potential for some of these players dips. However, there are still some offensive generators who can be relied on — and a few of them, like Anderson, could see more ice time as a result.

If you read anything from Alison Lukan and I last season, you already know that we’re Kase fans and that he hasn’t gotten enough respect from fantasy owners.

Kase isn’t a player to jump at in the first few rounds, but he should at least have an ADP that’s lower than 200 so he could have an actual ranking.

The only question owners should have with Kase is where he’ll be playing this season, with speculation of him being traded to the Hurricanes. If he’s with the Ducks, he’ll likely be on the top line with Ryan Getzlaf which could lead to a breakout year. However, with the Hurricanes, a team whose decision-making process embraces data (hence why they may want to acquire him), he’d have more support because of their skill throughout the lineup.

Niederrieter being under-appreciated isn’t anything new — although not to the extent of Kase. In Minnesota, even leading up to the trade, his role limited his ability to be as much of an impact player. With the Hurricanes though, there’s much more of an appreciation for his skill set, hence the more appropriate top-six minutes.

Nylander being under-appreciated isn’t anything new — although not to the extent of Kase. In Minnesota, even leading up to the trade, his role limited his ability to be as much of an impact player. With the Hurricanes though, there’s much more of an appreciation for his skill set, hence the more appropriate top-six minutes.

Having said that, he still may be a valuable fantasy add thanks to his ability to generate offense from quality areas, to his power play production, and shooting. His attempts and shots on net were second on Columbus last year. Plus, he draws penalties, which means more chances on the power play for him; the 15 he drew last year were second on the team.

The winger also adds in hits without sacrificing skill, which can be helpful for owners in need to fill this category each week. Managers who fill their team with offensively capable players sometimes lack the more physical categories, but Anderson checks both boxes.

Even with the bad-team-effect in mind, though, Reinhart’s play last year should inspire some confidence. So should the fact that there wasn’t a major change in his GAR over the last two seasons, which could show some consistency in his game, instead of pointing to an upcoming regression.

Ondrej Kase, RW, Anaheim Ducks (-59)

Dylan Larkin, C, Detroit Red Wings (-42)

Have a question or suggestion? Contact me at sreichart@gmail.com or follow me on Twitter @SamReichart.
points — and they were fairly balanced between goals (32) and assists (41). Plus, the Red Wings took about 54 percent of the shots with him on the ice.

Few players fire the puck as often as Larkin. The center’s 494 shot attempts ranked 10th in the league in all situations last year. Of the 494 attempts, 287 reached net, which put him a slot higher on the league’s rankings. Shots on goal are an important category to cover, and Larkin does that while still contributing to other offensive categories. The risk with any player on a bad team is +/-, but that shouldn’t stop owners from adding the shoot-first center.

Chart via HockeyViz

Honorable Mentions

Cam Atkinson, RW, CBJ (-50): Atkinson was a very good player before Panarin, and he still is without him.

Sean Couturier, C, PHI (-31): Couturier may always be an underrated two-way center, but his place on the Flyers’ top line and power play should keep him higher in the draft than his ADP of 114.9.

Andrei Svechnikov, LW/RW, CAR (-21): Svechnikov had excellent underlying numbers last year and should get the ice time to show that more this year – but Alison will get more into that next week, so stay tuned.

Players to Watch

Taylor Hall, LW, New Jersey Devils (-15.9 GAR)

Dom’s Ranking: 23 | NHL.com: 18 | ADP: 28.9

With the Devils’ star winger, the disparity we’re going to focus on is his year-to-year GAR, from 22.7 in 2017-18 to 6.8 last year, which headlines our list. Context is key, especially with a counting statistic like GAR. Hal’s season was shortened to 33 games because of a knee injury, which stunted all of his numbers. Even when converting to a rate stat, his GAR still dipped between years — although, with 33 games, we have the issue of a small sample.

It’s fair to ask if his 93-point 2018-19 campaign was just a fluke, along with his 22.7 GAR, because last year’s rate converted to a full season would only be 10.1.

So here’s what we do know: in his 33 games last year, Hall tallied 37 points — a dozen of which were scored on the power play. With some of the upgrades the Devils made this summer — from drafting Jack Hughes first overall and trading for P.K. Subban and Nikita Gusev, as well as adding Wayne Simmonds (who may help out their star winger with his net-front presence on the power play), Hal should be able to bounce back with a better team than the one he left last year.

The winger checks off all of the offense categories of goals, assists, points, power play points, and shots, and they get the added bonus of some blocked shots. The only hesitation with Hall should be his injury history, not his skill.

Phil Kessel, RW, Arizona Coyotes (-7.4 GAR)

Dom’s Ranking: 48 | NHL.com: 60 | ADP: 62.8

We get it. Kessel was traded from the Pittsburgh Penguins, who have been a fixture in the playoff picture, to the Coyotes, who haven’t made the postseason since 2012. There are rightful concerns about how productive he’ll be in Arizona this year.

Those concerns stem from how he’ll mesh with the young talent in Arizona, and whether the 32-year-old will decline. Is another 80-point season possible? Will he have power play help to play to his strengths?

Here are the positives: first, Kessel will be reunited with coach Rick Tocchet, who has been credited with elevating Kessel’s game in Pittsburgh as an assistant. What also helps is seeing that below the surface; it was a “down year,” where his GAR decreased from 9.6 to 2.2, even though the forward still managed to score 82 points. If Kessel can improve there, particularly at even strength where the GAR drop was the most significant, or even just get closer to his career average of approximately six, the results should continue to come.

Mathew Barzal, C, New York Islanders (-13.2 GAR)

Dom’s Ranking: 108 | NHL.com: 92 | ADP: 134.8

Owners might have some questions with Barzal. Was his rookie season just a flash in the pan? Did he just slump last year when he scored 23 fewer points? Should we be confident that he can bounce back, especially when the Islanders made minimal changes in the offseason?

All of these are valid questions. Not only did Barzal’s point total drop, but so did his GAR, from 19.2 to six. So where does Barzal actually belong?

The Barry Trotz-effect helped make Barzal more defensively responsible. While there was an adjustment period after learning the head coach’s system, he eventually found his groove and the balance of being both defensively responsible and offensively dynamic. Through all of that, his transition game was still stellar and he drove play. This year, he should only build on that.

Chart by Corey Szajder

The other hiccup last season was his power play usage. Barzal often was moved down to the second unit, which had far less talent on it. When he was on their first unit, though, it wasn’t a slam dunk because of the struggles the team had on the man-advantage in general. To end the Islanders’ year, in the playoffs, Barzal was more consistently deployed on the first unit, and should continue to be as their best forward. That, paired with the addition of assistant coach Jim Hiller to run the power play, should help Barzal rebound in year three.

Max Pacioretty, LW, Vegas Golden Knights (-6.1 GAR)

Dom’s Ranking: — | NHL.com: 72 | ADP: 81.3

Pacioretty’s gap isn’t just GAR, where he dipped from 11.2 in 2016-17 to 2.9 in 2017-18, then to -3.2 in his first year in Vegas, it’s in the rankings too; the gap is at least 128 since he isn’t even in Luszczyszyn’s top-200.

The winger scored just 40 points in 66 games this past year, which was a slight improvement from 37 points in 64 games with Montreal, which was widely considered a down year. Neither hits the mark of the 60-point seasons he had in each of the previous four years.

But at the deadline, the Golden Knights traded for Mark Stone and created a second first line of Stone-Paul Stastny-Pacioretty. With them on the ice, the Golden Knights took 58 percent of the shot share at 5-on-5, and were expected to score 66.6 percent of the goals. If for some reason the line is broken up, it’ll likely be to mix things up with their other first line, keeping Pacioretty with top players. Either way, along with some of these top players, this should be a better year for Pacioretty.

Rickard Rakell, LW/RW, Anaheim Ducks (-7.3 GAR)

Dom’s Ranking: 137 | NHL.com: 127 | ADP: 117

The Ducks weren’t good last year, so there’s a reason why some fantasy owners may not want to add Rakell to their roster. Rakell’s 26-point drop to 43 points in 2018-19 is another reason why some owners may not want to draft him. Plus, his GAR was pretty low at 4.8. However, it was fairly uncharacteristic for a player whose numbers ranged from 12.1 to 14.7 in the three years prior.

Luszczyszyn’s model has Rakell bouncing back with a 27 goal and 31 assist season, for a total of 58 points. That, paired with his versatility of being listed with two positions, should inspire managers to add him.

The Athletic’s Eric Stephens has Rakell opening the year on a line with rookie Sam Steel and fellow Swede Jakob Silfverberg. In a small sample to end the year, the line had solid results that they could build on this year — and this time, I’ll be under head coach Dallas Eakins instead of Randy Carlyle hockey, which ended in general manager Bob Murray going behind the bench.

Matt Duchene, C, Nashville Predators (+10.8 GAR)

Dom’s Ranking: 133 | NHL.com: 78 | ADP: 122.8

For our last player, we’re going to look at a center who could trend in the opposite direction and regress.

Duchene’s second best 16.8 GAR was earned last year in 50 games; before that, his best was 18 in 2013-14. Between then and this past year, his best was 7.5, which is below his career average of 8.3. His power play component was slightly higher, but really it was his even strength play that boosted his numbers — and not even in Columbus, the playoff team he joined, but Ottawa.

Chart via Evolving-Hockey

So what does that tell us?
It's not to say that his 70-point season which just fell short of a career high was a fluke, it's just a point for managers to be cautious when drafting him because it was such a significant change.

The Athletic's Adam Vingan projects him playing alongside a playmaker in Mikael Granlund and a shooter in Craig Smith, and that balance between his wingers could work. With the hiring of Dan Lambert to fix the Predators’ power play, he could continue to contribute to that category as well. Nashville’s major investment in the center could pay off, but whether he’ll be as valuable to a fantasy team on a second line, versus a team’s top line like he was in Ottawa with a thinner lineup, and a team with power play struggles, remains to be seen.

Honorable Mentions

William Nylander, C/RW, TOR (-9.6 GAR): Actually being a part of training camp and being up to speed when the season starts should do wonders for Nylander’s fantasy value. While his underlying numbers were positive despite not impressing on the scoresheet, both should be true this year.

Jordan Eberle, RW, NYI (-12.5 GAR): See: Barzal’s description of The Trotz Effect. Plus, reuniting with the crafty center elevated his game at the end of the season. Expect to see more of their chemistry this year.

Andre Burakovsky, LW/RW, COL (-0.4 GAR): The difference between seasons doesn’t seem too major, but it’s less about the change before and the change that may come. After receiving less-than fourth line minutes this past year, that should change after being traded to Colorado, where he may get second line minutes besides Nazem Kadri. This could be his breakout year.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
Kuemper, though, last season was revealing both to others and himself. Then Raanta got hurt again. Kuemper played 44 of Arizona's final 54 that in 2018 struggled over 10 games following the deal, games he got in large part Angeles. He was dealt to Arizona at the 2018 trade deadline and Minnesota then had a great run as Jonathan Qu. It's a situation to which Darcy Kuemper and Carter Hart should be able to the 2004 American system and how it works."—Na upset with that too. It has taken me some time to understand the course of the whole season, took backseats in the second half. Nevertheless, it's a good starting point to the topic of why No. 1 goalies lose their jobs.

As the numbers demonstrate, injury remains the surest route for a backup to supplant a starter. In 1999-00, a 27-year-old Steve Shields played a single season as an NHL starter for the San Jose Sharks. After a college career and AHL apprenticeship, he'd outplayed Mike Vernon the previous year and pushed his way into a No. 1 position. His .920 even strength save percentage ranked ninth among starting goalies that year and his NHL future seemed assured. In San Jose's second game the next season, Shields injured his ankle, opening the door for a 25-year-old rookie who had played just 400 minutes in the majors. That player, Evgeni Nabokov, would go on to win the Calder and maintain an iron grip on the Sharks' starting job for the next nine seasons.

It was a highly improbable outcome for a player whose journey to the NHL, as excellently chronicled by Sports Illustrated's Michael Farber, almost ended during a dismal first minor-league season in North America where Nabokov struggled with English, struggled on the ice and had to be talked into staying by his agent.

"When you go into the locker room and you don't understand what they are telling you, it hurts you on the ice..." Nabokov recalled after supplanting Shields. "I didn't play enough games in my first season. I was upset with that too. It has taken me some time to understand the American system and how it works."

Shields would not have been a long-term fit anyway — he had one good year and one bad year as a platoon goalie before his game declined in his 30s, ending up as just one more veteran who couldn't keep up after the 2004-05 lockout. Yet his injury opened the door for a backup who was ready but who under normal circumstances would not have been given such a chance to prove it. It's a situation to which Darcy Kuemper and Carter Hart should be able to relate.

Kuemper spent four mostly good years as a backup to Devan Dubnyk in Minnesota then had a great run as Jonathan Quick's No. 2 in Los Angeles. He was dealt to Arizona at the 2018 trade deadline and struggled over 10 games following the deal, games he got in large part because incumbent Antti Raanta was injured. His indifferent play meant that in 2018-19, the top job was once again Raanta's to lose.

Then Raanta got hurt again. Kuemper played 44 of Arizona's final 54 games, and his .925 save percentage was the biggest reason an injury-ravaged Coyotes team was in the mix for a playoff spot.

Now the Coyotes have two options for a tandem deployment, and no firm plan as to which might emerge as the starter as the year goes on. For Kuemper, though, last season was revealing both to others and himself.

"I always believed that I could do it but it's another thing to actually do it, that I can handle the workload and kind of carry the weight of those games," he told The Athletic's Craig Morgan. "Now that I know that I can do it, that I can be that guy, it's just about going out there and playing with confidence."

Hart's story is different. The Flyers' goalie of the future since being selected in the second round of the 2016 draft was a rookie pro with a .902 save percentage in the AHL when Philadelphia handed him the reins.

It was in some respects a desperation move. The Flyers ran through eight different goalies last season thanks to health and competence concerns, including Anthony Stolarz, who was recalled before Hart. His coach Scott Gordon told The Athletic's Scott Burnside that the turning point” for Hart, “I almost felt he was sensing how close he was. He played at a different level.”

Hart's improved performance in the minors and the Flyers' need got him a shot. A 16-13-1 record and .917 save percentage mean he'll get a legitimate chance to win the job outright this season. He'll still have to beat Brian Elliott, the goalie who began last season as Philadelphia's No. 1 before a lower body injury knocked three months out of his season.

What Kuemper and Hart had in common with Nabokov was resumes which made them plausible threats to the top job. That separated them from someone like Cam Ward in Chicago who, like Nabokov, got a chance to play regularly when his starter went down early.

It didn't help Ward that Corey Crawford was no Steve Shields. Even if Crawford had been vulnerable, Ward's .879 save percentage as the No. 1 over his team's first five games was not a starter-making turn. Yet even had Ward played well, inertia would have worked against him, just as it once worked in his favour. Ward's last .910-plus save percentage season came in 2011-12, yet four times in the years that followed he started the majority of his team's games, in each case starting as a platoon goalie with a newcomer and in each case inheriting the job by default when the new guy faltered.

By 2018-19, though, Ward was a designated backup. If his brilliant early career (including a Stanley Cup and Conn Smythe win as a rookie) led Carolina to trust him with a significant role for far longer than it should have, his prolonged mediocrity in the end imposed a ceiling. When Crawford got hurt again later in the season Ward was given no opportunity to run with the job, instead splitting time with rookie call-up Collin Delia (25 and one year removed from the ECHL) immediately. He wasn't the only one. Although they didn't hit the 60 percent bar over their teams' first eight games, Jack Campbell in L.A. and James Reimer in Florida both played a lot early thanks to injuries to veterans Jonathan Quick and Roberto Luongo.

Campbell significantly improved his stature around the NHL, becoming the latest in a long series of goalies — including Kuemper, Martin Jones and Ben Scrivens — to post flashy numbers when Quick was out of the way. Working against Campbell is the fact he also got hurt, which allowed goalie of the future Cal Petersen to come up and match his fine work.

Campbell, at 27, could be a late-blooming starter, but for those players there's always the question of whether the flash is real, or whether like Shields and Scrivens they'll fall back as quickly as they've risen.

Opportunities are double-edged swords, as Reimer, a long-time quality platoon goalie, found last season. He entered the year as a plausible starter, having performed well over 40-plus appearances in three prior seasons. He stumbled, and found himself dealt over the summer for the quickly bought-out Scott Darling.

Injuries are commonplace, as is a backup excelling or not when given a chance. All one can really do in terms of prediction is identify which starters are prone to time on the shelf, and which backups stand the best chance of making the most of the opportunity. These days, that's most of them: with a handful of exceptions, a goalie who looks like a pure No. 2 in the summer is not a luxury teams can afford.

Somewhat less common than injury is the unique situation in Boston, where long-time starter Tuukka Rask took a back seat at the start of last season despite good health. Jaroslav Halak was essentially the Bruins’ No. 1A in the early going: through the end of December he appeared in 22 games to Rask's 19.
Rask is of course an infinitely slow starter. His save percentage over 51 career October starts is just .913. In every other month of the year it is at least .919, and frequently much higher.

"He’s admittedly said he’s a little slower out of the gate," Boston coach Bruce Cassidy acknowledged in a Nov. 1 press conference. "I don’t think you want to peak in October, but you need to be on, especially in that position.

"Now we’ve been fortunate this year, Halak’s come in, done a really good job. We’ve been able to allow (Rask) time to hopefully have, like his past, good Novembers and Decemberers. I know November has historically been very good."

The decision to entrust Halak with such a heavy load was a departure of Cassidy’s strategy the previous season, his first full year as the Bruins’ head coach. In 2017-18, Anton Khudobin played 10 games in the first two months of the year, going 7-0-2 with a .932 save percentage. Rask in contrast was 4-8-2 with a .899 save percentage in 14 games over the same span.

Boston then has become a rare exception to the general rule that the No. 1 goalie must begin the season playing a lot of games. Cassidy deserves credit for his willingness to move away from Rask during his annual sleepy period.

True tandems remain relatively rare. Although much has been made of the decline of the 70-game goalie (and the rarity of the 60-game goalie) the average starter in the cap era has always been somewhere in the 50s in games played. Last year’s average of 53 appearances was the lowest in the cap era, but given that the number was 55 in 2005-06 we’re talking about evolution rather than revolution.

That’s understandable, since competitively there’s no reason for true parity between starter and backup. There’s an edge to be gained by better load management, but there’s also an edge to be had in playing the better player more often.

Carolina didn’t have a clear No. 1 last season, and engaged in a season-long back-and-forth between Curtis McElhinney and Petr Mrazek. The longstanding tie was broken in the summer, probably based on age as much as anything else: Mrazek was re-signed as starter (with Reimer a potential challenger if he rebounds) while McElhinney is the clear backup to Andrei Vasilevsky in Tampa Bay.

A similar situation existed for the Stars and Islanders. In the former case, the collective success of Ben Bishop and Anton Khudobin bred stability; in the latter, Semyon Varlamov will try to replicate what Robin Lehner had with Thomas Greiss last season. Whether the equilibrium is short-term or long-lasting remains to be seen, since injuries or runs of hot/cold play can disrupt the status quo more easily in these situations than in clear starter/backup arrangements.

Calgary thought it had a clear hierarchy coming into the season, but Mike Smith handed the job to David Rittich with four awful months to start the year. Even there coach Bill Peters let Smith keep a foot in the door, and when Rittich stumbled late in the season Smith was able to win the top job back, eventually emerging as Calgary’s playoff starter, in yet another example of the coach’s early goalie decision being remarkably durable.

Taking injuries and tandems out of the equation, the ironic trend last season was that the most vulnerable starters were the players leaned upon most heavily in the early going. Three of the NHL’s five most-used goalies through the first 10 percent of last season would ultimately lose their starting gigs.

The other two, Craig Anderson and Henrik Lundqvist, deserve special mention. They finished the season splitting time, though as elder statesmen on non-playoff teams that sort of thing comes with the territory, creating opportunities for newcomers (Anders Nilsson and Alexandar Georgiev, respectively) to audition.

NHL coaches don’t make their early goalie decisions lightly; they weigh the evidence and aside from the rare close case make a choice based on a long-term perspective. Once that choice is made, it takes an injury or a very long run of good play to change it.

Ultimately, Talbot made the decision. After going 4-3-1 with an underwhelming .901 save percentage through those eight straight starts to begin the season, he got worse. By the end of November he had two losses for every win and a .889 save percentage. Koskinen had two wins for every loss and his number was 35 points higher.

In New Jersey, the Devils’ early faith in Keith Kinkaid was more understandable. Not only was their schedule light — two five-day breaks, plus one three-day and no back-to-backs — but Kinkaid was dynamite, winning five of eight and posting a .925 save percentage.

Then, inexplicably, Kinkaid came apart. From Dec. 1 on, he won just six of his 20 decisions. His .873 save percentage over that span was the sort of number that would derail a mid-70s Canadiens squad, never mind last year’s Devils. Montreal will just have to hope the version of Kinkaid playing for the Habs this season looks more like the guy who used to be a competent platoon goalie.

The biggest story of all in this group is the one featuring a player who technically still played more than half of his team’s minutes. Jake Allen was a pivotal figure in the early-season collapse of the Blues: one which got the coach fired, ineffectual backup Chad Johnson traded and pushed the team to install its best minor-leaguer in net.

Allen was poor early but Johnson was worse. By the time Jordan Binnington took over the starting job in January, Allen’s save percentage was below .900, which is the sort of goaltending that can kneecap even a first-rate team.

St. Louis made a lot of changes in an epic journey from last in the league on Jan. 1 to Stanley Cup champion just five months later, but arguably none was more important than handing the top goalie job to Binnington. His .927 save percentage was a revelation for the struggling team, which promptly won 24 of his 30 starts to close out the year.

What happened to Allen in the aftermath is noteworthy, too. Although he won just five of his 12 games, his .927 save percentage in the aftermath of losing the starting job was every bit as good as Binnington’s. That all 12 of those starts came on the road, and frequently (five times) in the second half of back-to-back sets makes the accomplishment more impressive.

If Allen is to reestablish himself as a starter, though, he’ll need to do what Binnington and so many of last year’s other upstarts did: wait for an opportunity and then seize it.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.19.2019
Missing training camp in Victoria last weekend at least allowed Brock to be with his dad when Duke’s breathing tube was removed and he began to actually eat food again. He was with his dad when Duke was taken outside, into the late-summer sunshine, for the first time since his cardiac arrest.

Laurie took him to the park again on Wednesday while Brock practised with the Canucks at Rogers Arena, where he skated with Bo Horvat and J.T. Miller. Laurie showed Duke a video the team posted of Horvat greeting Boeser in the dressing room.

She spends mornings at work — “to kind of get her mind off things,” Brock said — and afternoons with her husband at a rehabilitation facility. Duke’s cancer treatments are ongoing.

“This morning, he was telling (the staff) very clearly that Brock plays pro hockey, that he was drafted and he has a new contract,” Laurie said. “But as the day goes on and he’s fatigued, he asks: ‘When is Brock coming, where is Brock right now? This is all (part of the recovery) process. I just kept reminding him, here’s where Brock is and I show him pictures on my phone.”

When he was first asked about his dad during Wednesday’s press scrum, Brock stopped to control his emotions.

“Sorry,” he said. “Um… even just spending that extra week, he just started eating this past week. He became really alert. He still has some delirium and hallucinations, but it meant a lot to be there.

“That’s what kind of kept me sane through this whole process, just being able to see him each and every day and be there to support him. Seeing him these last couple of days, it really kind of let me relax a bit to see how well he’s doing and how well he’s coming along.”

Brock describes his dad as a “fighter.” So is the son who has endured a lot, including the death of a close high-school friend in a car accident Brock avoided only because he was playing for Team USA in Europe the summer before his draft.

Boeser said he is grateful for the outpouring of support and prayers this summer from friends, teammates and fans. He also said the Canucks organization, despite the difficulty of negotiations, always supported him. Contract talks were put on hold as Duke spent three weeks in intensive care.

He has no hard feelings towards the Canucks and said he get a long after this.”

He also declared that Duke will see him play again.

“I know how thankful Brock is that he got to buy a home and he has his father. He has no hard feelings towards the Canucks and said he

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He has no hard feelings towards the Canucks and said he’ll try again to get a long-term contract in Vancouver when his bridge deal ends in 2022.

“My plan isn’t just to play three years and get out of here,” he said. “My plan is to play here as long as I can. I love the city, I love the fans, I love the organization. So just take it year by year, and hopefully I can sign a longer one after this.”

He also declared that Duke will see him play again.

“I know how thankful Brock is that he got to buy a home and he has his toys at the lake,” Laurie Boeser said. “To have the experiences (in hockey) he has had, he’s so grateful for. But he values people so much. I think he grasps that life and the values to a person are so important. Yes, money’s nice. But life and love and having connections with people, the money can’t ever replace that.”

Laurie said she’ll drive Duke to a game if they can’t fly to Vancouver.

“It’s going to be a slow road due to his other health compromises, with Parkinson’s and the active cancer,” she said. “But we’re very encouraged with the progress he’s made in 6 1/2 weeks. It has absolutely, really astounded us that he’s doing as well as he is. I think that will continue. And he’s mentioning watching hockey games again.”

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 09.19.2019
The Winnipeg Jets blue line was a big point of uncertainty entering training camp and has now exploded into a Big Buff-sized question mark with the news another of the club’s top defencemen from last year may not be with the team for the 2019-20 season.

The Jets initially tamped down outside concerns when Dustin Byfuglien was recently granted leave from the organization. Such cases are often linked to difficult personal or family circumstances, but the message coming out of Winnipeg indicated that was not the case with Byfuglien. On Wednesday, rumblings that may yet grow into a roar suggest the 34-year-old may be seriously contemplating stepping away from hockey, the grind of the game — and the injuries that often come with playing it — robbing him of the devotion required to play hockey at the highest level.

A similar story unfolded in the NFL just a few weeks ago, when star Indianapolis Colts quarterback Andrew Luck decided enough was enough and hung up his cleats at age 29.

Senior Writer Ryan Dixon and NHL Editor Rory Boylen always give it 110%, but never rely on clichés when it comes to podcasting. Instead, they use a mix of facts, fun and a varied group of hockey voices to cover Canada’s most beloved game.

Exactly what’s going through Byfuglien’s head is impossible to know. What we can say for sure is, without him an already-thin defence corps would officially be in tatters following a summer that also saw Jacob Trouba, Tyler Myers and Ben Chiarot leave Winnipeg.

Winnipeg was already counting on the likes of Neal Pionk — acquired in the trade that sent Trouba to the New York Rangers — Sami Niku and Tucker Poolman to push for prominent roles within the top six. Dmitry Kulikov, who’s been slowed by injuries for two consecutive seasons after signing as a free agent with Winnipeg in 2017, was also a candidate to step up. Now, we’re staring at a situation where the Jets could require all of those guys to play over their heads, while Morrissey would suddenly be promoted to the role of No. 1 D-man whether he’s ready or not.

It’s hard not to feel for Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff, who already had a lot on his plate with unsigned RFAs Kyle Connor and Patrik Laine twisting in the wind. It’s also difficult not to wonder if the solution to a couple problems could come with one strike.

Considering its well-established track record of shrewd selections, give Winnipeg time and it could likely draft its way out of this issue. But with a crop of fantastic forwards, you have to believe — even if Buff steps away — the Jets will remain in win-now mode. Justin Faulk’s name is the most enticing one believed to be on the market, as the 27-year-old, right-shot defenceman appears to be the odd man out on a stacked Carolina Hurricanes blue line. Even with just one year remaining on his contract before he becomes an unrestricted free agent, acquiring Faulk would require parting with something of significance.

Could that be Laine? Of all the RFA standoffs still going on, the one happening between Winnipeg and Laine seems the furthest away from finding common ground. If you could move Laine and wind up with two significant pieces on the back end — if it was Carolina, Faulk would be just part of the return — surely that’s a deal worth exploring, especially if it allows you to ink Connor and move forward with a patched up defence and a forward crew that still contains Connor, Blake Wheeler, Mark Scheifele and Nikolaj Ehlers.

As it stands right now, though, every defenceman in the Jets fold is going to get a long, hard look as management tries to sort through this mess.

“Sometimes all you need to see a huge improvement in a player is an opportunity,” Morrissey told me on the eve of camp, when we were still just talking about Trouba, Myers and Chiarot leaving. “You see a guy completely come out of his shell with a little more opportunity.” That may be the case. But if this Byfuglien news does, in fact, turn into another blue line blow, outside intervention may become necessary.
OTTAWA — They’ve both been major minute-eaters who drew tough assignments and became lightning rods for criticism.

And now that Cody Ceci and Nikita Zaitsev have swapped addresses as part of an off-season trade between Toronto and Ottawa, they are both looking to parlay a fresh start into a career resurgence.

The chance appears to be there. The six-player trade completed on July 1 was motivated as much by salary cap maneuvering as the transfer of assets between the Leafs and Senators, but each team received a right-shot defenceman that it will drop immediately into the top-four as part of that transaction.

“We believe that he’s just scratching the surface,” Leafs coach Mike Babcock said of Ceci.

“You know what? He’s been great,” Senators coach D.J. Smith said of Zaitsev. “He competes in practice and I expect he’ll be very good for us this year.”

It must be noted that this is a hopeful month on the NHL calendar. Flowers are still in full bloom and no one’s lost a game that matters.

But there’s also something to be said for a fresh start when you’re the local kid who gets drafted in the first round and arrives in the NHL as a teenager carrying huge expectations. A lot was asked of Ceci during a tumultuous six seasons for the Senators organization, and he felt the increasing wrath of fans and media while playing 23 minutes a night on a last-place team drowning in shot attempts.

“That kind of came on the last couple years and it was a little frustrating,” said Ceci. “You don’t like to think that it was only me that everything was falling upon and there was a lot of different things that happened, a lot of moving pieces in the last couple years. I was the steady guy that stayed behind and grinded it out.

“That was tough — tough at times.”

The Leafs are intent to ease the burden, uniting him with Morgan Rielly while asking him to focus on being the steady conscience of the pairing. They handled a monster workload in Wednesday’s 4-3 exhibition loss to Ottawa — a game where both defencemen joined Auston Matthews in wearing an ‘A’ — but will likely line up as the second pairing behind Jake Muzzin and Tyson Barrie once things get going for real.

Ceci had a knot in his stomach while making an early return to Canadian Tire Centre but looked surprisingly comfortable once the puck dropped. “I was definitely nervous coming into the game and didn’t feel great getting off the plane,” he said.

In Babcock’s eyes he was “steady,” which amounts to a compliment given what the Leafs will be asking of their No. 4 defenceman this season.

“It’ll be a more of a supporting role and play as well as I can defensively,” said Ceci. “Still join [the rush] when I get a chance, but primarily just to move the puck and play well with [Rielly].”

Zaitsev was evidently in need of his own reboot after requesting a trade from the Leafs two years into a seven-year contract. A serious guy who is known to be hard on himself, he’s never publicly revealed what motivated the trade request — although he did complain about the way his play was discussed by the Toronto media during an interview with a Russian reporter after last season.

The Senators declined requests to speak with Zaitsev after he practised on Wednesday morning, and Smith indicated the 27-year-old had a say in the team’s decision not to play him in either of the exhibition games against his former team this week.

“We just wanted to hold him out and he wants to play the last four [pre-season] games,” said Smith. “I thought why not just hold him out [against Toronto] until the regular season?”

Zaitsev appears destined to start alongside Thomas Chabot and will be given more opportunity to chip in offensively with the Senators, according to his coach. He finished last year’s playoffs in a matchup role with Muzzin but his usage should look more like his first year in North America, when he put up 36 points (before dipping to 13 and 14).

“He’s a really competitive, really good — in my opinion — two-way defenceman and I think it’s fresh for him to get here and to get touches on pucks,” said Smith, the former Leafs assistant in charge of defencemen. “Maybe get a little bit of clean-up power play, some 4-on-4 and try and get some of his touch back that he had a few years ago.”

Unlike Zaitsev, who remains under contract through 2024, Ceci will be playing for his future this season.

His stay in Toronto may only last one year with unrestricted free agency on the horizon. There were some talks about signing a longer extension with his hometown Sens before the trade went down. “We weren’t really back and forth all too much, which was a little disappointing for me,” he said.

Now he is adjusting to life in a bigger city where he and his fiance only brought one car because they can walk around much easier than before. Leaving the comfort of friends and family is a work in progress after being raised here, playing four seasons for the OHL’s Ottawa 67’s and another six with the Senators, but he’s already found some other benefits to being a Leaf.

 “[Ottawa] will always hold a place in my heart, just starting out my NHL career there,” said Ceci. “But I’m glad to be in Toronto and have a fresh start, and to play with the players that are here.”

Chris Johnston

Sportsnet.ca / Leafs’ Ceci, Senators’ Zaitsev looking for reboot after swapping locker rooms

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 09.19.2019
CALGARY — The smile on Matthew Phillips’ face was as priceless as the moment unfolding in front of him.

Standing four feet away, in front of his Saddledome locker stall, was his 84-year-old grandfather, who suddenly found himself in the midst of an impromptu media scrum, speaking proudly as Phillips’ No. 1 supporter.

A survivor of three open-heart surgeries, cancer and diabetes, Don Winsor knows a thing or two about overcoming obstacles — something Phillips clearly learned from him as a five-foot-seven, 155-pound mini-mite.

“It’s unbelievable how far he’s come and how proud I am,” said Winsor, visiting from tiny Happy Adventure, Nfld. “Matthew has had a lot of disappointments. He wasn’t picked for the under-16, under-17 and world junior teams, but all those setbacks didn’t set him back at all. He just accepted it and moved forward.

“He’s done it with grit and determination. From the first time he hit the ice at age five, I watched how much he wanted that black piece of rubber and he still wants it today.”

An athlete himself who competed at the national level in soccer, basketball and fast pitch, Winsor was Newfoundland’s first parks and recreation director who wrote a sports column for 25 years for the province’s 14 community papers.

Long before his 21-year-old grandson was born, he reached out to Flames PR director Rick Skaggs to ask if he could have media access at the Dome for his annual family visits to Calgary where Phillips grew up. The team obliged annually, and for the bulk of two decades they’ve heard plenty about the talents of young Matthew, who the Flames drafted in the sixth round in 2016.

“I predicted it way back when he was a child — I knew that Calgary would one day draft him,” smiled Winsor, fondly recalling how he watched Phillips win honours as MVP, top scorer and most gentlemanly player at Calgary’s famed Mac’s midget tourney with the Calgary Buffaloos.

“TI told the boys upstairs, ‘There’s a future Flame.’ I can’t put into words how proud I am of him. I’m so glad he’s here.”

The feeling is mutual.

“He’s been around the rink and has been coming to these Flames camps for a lot of years and for him to be here to experience this, as he has before, I’m lucky to be part of it,” said the beaming winger, whose solid camp earned him another break as he drew into Wednesday’s lineup for the Flames’ 6-4 win over San Jose only because Austin Czarnik came up injured after blocking a shot with his ankle Monday.

“He loves sports more than anyone I ever talked to. He’s been really encouraging for me and has always been so positive, ever since I started playing hockey he’s been there for me, watching and following.

“He really believes in me and that means the world to me. He’s kind of a backbone for me and my whole family, for that matter. Never really hard on me after things don’t go too well, just supportive.”

He’s had plenty to cheer about as Phillips overcame his size to slice up the WHL, becoming captain of the Victoria Royals, scoring 48 goals and 112 points his last year. One year earlier he scored 50 as part of a brilliant junior stint that included 135 goals and 281 points in 215 WHL games.

On Wednesday the kid who would be the NHL’s smallest player, played a chunk of time alongside one of its biggest, Milan Lucic, and Derek Ryan.
The opening of NHL training camps brought with it a wave of RFA signings, with Mitch Marner, Brock Boeser, and Charlie McAvoy among the biggest names to re-sign with their clubs and reunite with their teammates ahead of the 2019-20 season.

But there's still a number of contracts unresolved, with two of the biggest names being Patrik Laine and Mikko Rantanen.

Longtime NHL player agent Mike Liut, who represents Laine and Rantanen, was asked about the status of talks between the Winnipeg Jets, the Colorado Avalanche and their respective talented RFAs during an appearance on The Starting Lineup on Wednesday morning.

"We're not close," Liut said, also indicating that the current state of talks isn't surprising.

"Nothing happened that we didn't know was going to happen. Nothing has gone on that we didn't anticipate," Liut continued. "There's term, there's AAV, there's structure, and clubs have to manage their cap, we have to represent our clients. We have our convictions, they have theirs."

"Generally these things get done when people move," Liut explained. "If one side doesn't move, or if both sides don't want to move, then it doesn't get done, until such time as it needs to get done."

Among this year's crop of RFAs, while unique in many ways — factor in the depth of talent, the flat salary cap, and the desire of many players to sign a bridge deal — there are a number of strong comparables to make between players, leading to a game of chicken that lasted all summer to see who would sign first and set the market.

Marner's six-year, $65-million deal is one of the more term-heavy contracts and features the biggest cap hit of the bunch, while both Boeser (three years, $17.625M) and McAvoy (three years, $14.7M) signed bridge deals with smaller cap hits. While Liut didn't tip his hand in terms of contract asks for his clients, he pointed to Marner as a strong on-ice comparison for Rantanen in terms of performance on the ice.

"Is there a comparable? Yeah, I think Mitch Marner and Mikko Rantanen are probably the two closest comparables in terms of how they play the game, where you have wingers that are adept at creating offence for those that they're playing with," Liut said. "And they do it maybe a little bit differently — I mean, Mikko's 225 [pounds] and Mitch is not, but Mitch is a terrier and he's a great player."

Laine, who has long been reported to be a strong candidate for a Boeser-like bridge deal, made headlines on Tuesday when he expressed his desire to play on the Jets' top line. While those quotes could easily be perceived as a shot at his second-line centreman Bryan Little, Liut insisted that it was "not Patrik's intent, and certainly not what he said."

"In contract negotiations, one thing always is who you are playing with," Laine told Ilta-lehti writer Pekka Jalonen in Finnish, as translated by Jalonen on Tuesday. "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."

"There's top lines and then there's our line," Laine, who played most of his 2018-19 minutes on the Jets' second with Bryan Little and Nikolaj Ehlers, said. "I play whoever I'm told to play with."

Liut, when asked about the quotes, also acknowledged the pressure Laine has been under both at home in Finland and in his second home of Winnipeg.

"Patrik went through a pretty tough year last year because everybody expected him to score 50 or 60 goals and I think he's trying to explain away what happened or at least defend himself a little bit and that's an impossible thing to do," Liut said.
With the puck drop on the NHL season only two weeks away just three of Canada’s seven NHL teams are favoured to advance to the playoffs next spring, with the Toronto Maple Leafs leading the way as a -350 wager on that prop at sportsbooks monitored by OddsShark.com.

The Maple Leafs have enjoyed a strong run over the past two regular seasons. Toronto recorded a team-record 49 wins and 105 points in 2017/18, and followed that with a 100-point campaign last season, earning the team a playoff berth in three straight seasons for the first time in the NHL’s salary cap era.

Toronto has emerged as a -130 bet to tally OVER 102.5 points in the upcoming campaign, and trails only the Tampa Bay Lightning as a +900 second favourite on the Stanley Cup odds.

The Winnipeg Jets sit second to Toronto among Canadian-based NHL squads, sporting -250 odds of advancing to the postseason, just ahead of the Calgary Flames, who sit at -205 on those NHL season props.

The Jets took a step back last season after racking up 114 points in 2017/18, compiling 99 points, which was good enough to earn a second-place finish in the Central Division standings for a second straight year.

However, the Jets have endured a number of personnel changes during the offseason, and with the status of Dustin Byfuglien and restricted free agents Patrik Laine and Kyle Connor still uncertain as opening night approaches, the Jets are a +195 wager to finish this season outside the playoff picture.

The Flames are coming off their best season since their lone Stanley Cup win in 1989, finishing atop the Western Conference with 107 points. And while Calgary is set as a -120 bet to tally OVER 96.5 points this season, they lag behind the favoured Vegas Golden Knights at +450 odds to repeat as Pacific Division champions.

The Montreal Canadiens fell just two points short of a playoff berth last season and return to action with +115 odds of returning to the postseason for the first time since 2016/17. Relying on Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl to generate offence, the Edmonton Oilers sport -190 odds of missing the playoffs, while a flurry of signings have failed to boost the Vancouver Canucks, who are a -175 wager on those NHL odds to come up short in their playoff bid.

And last-place finishers in the NHL standings last year, the Ottawa Senators hope to turn the corner on their rebuild this season. However, they sit at the bottom of the odds to make the NHL playoffs at sportsbooks heading into the campaign as +625 longshots.
EDMONTON — The danger of being too opinionated on a mid-camp acquisition like Russian Anton Burdasov, the left-shot right-winger who joined the Edmonton Oilers Wednesday on a professional try-out, is the lack of information.

How good can he be if he has never scored 20 goals in the KHL? How come he had seasons where he only played 41, 35, 21 or 18 games? How will he catch on here, if he is as severely limited in English as we are hearing?

The tendency is to comb back through the many KHL imports — particularly players who come over at age 28, like Burdasov — and unfavourably lump him in with, say, an Anton Belov, or a Vadim Shipachyov, who flamed out in Vegas after playing just three games.

We wouldn’t compare Bo Horvat to Zach Hyman, simply because they both carry Canadian passports. So we will be careful with the comparables on Burdasov, who perhaps has one in Nikita Gusev, the 27-year-old trying to crack the New Jersey Devils lineup this fall.

Gusev had 82 KHL points last season, and 144 points over the past two seasons. Burdasov had just 40 points in 79 games over the past two seasons, and on his own team in Ufa last year he trailed in production behind names like Linus Omark and Teemu Hartikainen — two players who proved in Edmonton they were unable to play in the NHL.

So what DO we know about Burdasov?

We reached out to Russian correspondent Igor Eronko, a writer for Sport-Express and a sideline reporter on KHL broadcasts, who broke the Burdasov signing. With his permission, we give you his take on Burdasov:

"His skating is OK. He’s not the best skater out there, but he can skate," said Eronko in a direct message on Twitter. "His biggest weapon is a wrist-shot. In that he could be compared to Tarasenko. It's really lethal.
He’s a very talented guy, he just needed different work ethics. And more than a year ago he decided to have a diet, not drinking beer etc. I have a real doubt he could make it in the NHL, but talent wise he sure should be in Oilers' Top 6. And I hope he gets it."

Eronko reported in Russia that the Oilers have promised a one-year, $1.7 million contract if Burdasov makes the opening night roster, a report that was disputed by my sources within the team. Burdasov is a Ritch Winter client, and the fact that he is signing this PTO a week into training camp tells us that Winter was unable to find his client a guaranteed contract, and settled for a PTO on a team that is light on Top 6 wingers.

In 10 seasons Burdasov has donned the sweaters of five different KHL teams. Now, James Neal is the same guy in the NHL — and he has maintained his level of production, other than last season in Calgary. But coming over to a completely different style of hockey, on smaller ice and conducted in a language we are told Burdasov does not speak — all at age 28 — is a mighty tall order.

Back in 2013, then-Oilers GM Craig MacTavish brought over the reigning KHL Defenceman of the Year Anton Belov, who was 27. He simply could not play at the NHL level, and in fact returned to a successful KHL career which is ongoing, not to mention a spot on Russia’s Olympic team.

Artemi Panarin was just shy of his 24th birthday when he opened the 2015-16 season with the Chicago Blackhawks. He would score 30 goals and 77 points, and is currently an NHL superstar plying his trade with the New York Rangers.

Defenceman Igor Ozhiganov joined the Toronto Maple Leafs last season just shy of his 26th birthday. He simply could not defend at an NHL level, and went home after one season.

On the other hand, Nikita Zaitsev had played seven KHL seasons when he joined the Leafs just before his 26th birthday. He had one good season, two decent ones, and was dealt to Ottawa in the Cody Ceci deal. Zaitsev is a much better player than Ozhiganov and could have a long NHL career.

It’s interesting how a mysterious, older Russian winger still peaks the interest of a fan base, with fans hoping their team has unearthed the next Pavel Bure or Alexander Mogilny. The reality of our international hockey world today is, the best Russians are picked over in the draft, or snapped up at younger ages if they have been KHL stars and their first contract expires there.

It is the rare player who blossoms at age 28, and can overcome all the challenges Burdasov will face in Edmonton, where he will practice with the Oilers on Thursday.
The restricted free agent is skating with his old OHL team, the London Knights, while he awaits a contract resolution with the Flames.

Tkachuk, 21, played one season for the Knights in 2015-16, scoring 30 goals and 107 points in 57 games. He played on a line with Toronto Maple Leafs forward Mitch Marner and Arizona Coyotes forward Christian Dvorak, helping the club win the OHL championship and Memorial Cup. Tkachuk scored the overtime winner in the Memorial Cup-clinching win over the Rouyn-Noranda Huskies.

The Flames drafted Tkachuk sixth overall after that season and he's been in the NHL ever since.

Tkachuk and the Flames have both been fairly quiet during their negotiation. In February, after Auston Matthews signed for five years and $58.17 million, Tkachuk said the Maple Leafs centre “definitely set the bar for this year.”

More recently, after Marner signed a six-year, $65.358-million contract with the Leafs, Flames general manager Brad Treliving downplayed the impact that deal would have on negotiations with Tkachuk.

“Everybody has their own individual situations, no different than any other organization or any company,” Treliving said. “You know what’s going on out there, but you have your own situation and your own structure and all the things that you do internally.”

After falling just short of the 50-point mark in his first two seasons, Tkachuk exploded offensively last year with 34 goals and 77 points.

The Flames open the regular season on Oct. 3 against the Colorado Avalanche. Time will tell whether Tkachuk is playing in the game, or watching from London.
MONTREAL — It was a National Hockey League-quality play, executed at full speed and with great determination.

Jake Evans stabbed at Damon Severson’s pass, stole the puck inside the Canadiens’ blue line, outraced Severson and nine-year NHL veteran Kyle Palmieri down the ice and uncored a half-swinging snapshot that landed in the top-right corner of the net for a short-handed goal that gave his team a precious one-goal lead with minutes remaining in their pre-season game against the New Jersey Devils on Monday.

Evans centred a line with two players, Phil Varone and Riley Barber, who were near point-per-game producers in the AHL last season. Two players in their mid-20s who have already gotten their feet wet at the NHL level.

Behind them, 2017 third-round pick Cale Fleury was a standout on a defence pairing with Xavier Ouellet, the 26-year-old who’s slated to start the season in the American Hockey League after gaining 161 games of NHL experience over the last six years.

Montreal’s second-rounder from that year, defenceman Josh Brook, played alongside presumed top-six lock Brett Kulak and, after starting out nervously, got better and better as the game went on.

Up front, Nick Suzuki, the 13th-overall pick in 2017, showed off all the traits that have people referring to him as one of Montreal’s best prospects. On a line with Jordan Weal and Charles Hudon, Suzuki flashed his smarts all over the ice, generating quality scoring chances on offence and ensuring his line wasn’t on the other end of them in the defensive zone.

In net, Cayden Primeau, picked 199th in 2017, had the crowd chanting his name after making a 10-bell save on a two-on-one involving 2017 first-overall pick Nico Hischier and 180-game NHL vet Blake Coleman. He picked up the win in his NHL pre-season debut.

Ryan Poehling, the 25th-overall pick in 2017 who made his NHL debut with a hat trick and a shootout winner in a 6-5 win over the Toronto Maple Leafs last April, looked on from the press box. He couldn’t have been too far away from AHL coach Joel Bouchard, who was probably smiling ear-to-ear while thinking about what he’ll have at his disposal this season.

The Canadiens have to be excited about it. A year ago at this time, they had almost no one of note to pluck off the farm if they suffered an injury. They were beyond fortunate to have suffered so few over the course of the season, finishing with just 163 man games lost to injury or illness — the eighth-least amount in the NHL. And yet they still fell two points shy of a playoff berth.

If things go worse for them in that department this season?

"I think we’ll be better able to handle it," said the team’s first-line centre, Phillip Danault on Tuesday. "I think (Canadiens general manager) Marc (Bergevin) has done an excellent job filling up the cupboard. There are a lot of guys competing for spots this year. It’s a good competition. It’s good for our team to have so many good young guys, a good group of veterans with Laval, depth at all the positions. I hope they all follow and are on the same page as we are up here. I see a lot of these guys capable of playing at this level."

It’s the type of quality reservoir the Canadiens haven’t been able to drink from in recent memory. In four of the last five seasons, their AHL team has missed the playoffs. Last season, it finished seventh in its division and missed by 12 points.

“We had, I think, the second-youngest team in the league,” Bouchard said on the opening day of rookie camp, two weeks ago.

The Rocket was also exceptionally thin on NHL-capable talent.

But that won’t be the case this year.

“The guys that, whether they start the year here in Montreal and are extras or they start the year in Laval, it’s good to see bodies that are fit to come and play and legitimately contribute,” said Canadiens defenceman Jeff Petry on Tuesday. “It looks like we have a bunch. There’s more than a handful of guys that you can see have the skill. And though some of them are young and would be getting their first pro action, you can see they’re developing quickly, and we’re going to have a lot of depth to rely on beyond them if we need it.”

Should the Canadiens make it through camp healthy, should they remain largely unscathed as the regular season rolls along, Charlie Lindgren, Noah Juulsen, Matthew Peca, Karl Alzner, Dale Weise and Mike McCarron — players who all have NHL experience — could also be among those skating for Bouchard for long portions of the year.

They’ll only help make the Rocket a more competitive team, and that will help to create the type of environment needed to advance the development of the organization’s youngest pros.

“IT’s good for the whole organization. The NHL team gets the type of cushion injury-wise that you need to have in this league — especially for a team that’s not as top-heavy, a team like the Canadiens, who rely on balance to succeed more than a number of other top teams do in the Atlantic (Division),” said an Eastern Conference scout via text message.

“If they’re not forced to rely on most of these players in the NHL, they still have a young group and those guys are gaining valuable experience all together in the American League — and probably in more of a winning atmosphere.

“That’s one of the biggest keys to roster-building now. It’s how you mitigate short-term and long-term risk and they look like they’ll be able to do that better this year.”
Matthews, who lined up with Patrick Marleau and Tyler Ennis to start last season, will be a day off for the team.

TSN.CA / Matthews expects one-timer to be more of a weapon

By Mark Masters

TSN Toronto reporter Mark Masters checks in daily with news and notes on the Maple Leafs, who held a team meeting (game group) at Mile One Centre in St. John's on Wednesday before flying to Ottawa. The non-playing group held a practice before heading home to Toronto. Thursday will be a day off for the team.

Auston Matthews turned 22 on Tuesday while Alexander Ovechkin turned 34, but the NHL forwards share more than a birthday. They are also among the game's most gifted goal scorers. Since Matthews entered the league in the 2016-17 season, the Capitals winger is first in goals per game (0.54) and the Leafs centre is second (0.52).

Matthews opens his preseason campaign tonight in Ottawa and is eager to add one of Ovechkin's best weapons to his toolbox. The Leafs new power-play alignment will feature the left-handed Matthews on the right flank, which should create more opportunities for one-timers.

"I hope so," said Matthews when asked if one-timers will be more of a weapon this year. "You kind of get me and Mitch [Marner] on those one-timer sides, dual threats, and kind of have more options to look at so hopefully we can dial in on that." Matthews has scored 111 goals in the NHL, but only three have come by way of the slap shot. Matthews is quick to point out he's not at the Ovechkin level.

"It's kind of tough to shoot the puck like that, like him, [Patrik] Laine, [Steven] Stamkos, those guys are just automatic from there, but I think it's mostly just timing and as a power play working as a five-man unit, working the puck around and then kind of finding that opening where you can get that quick shot off." Matthews has scored 111 goals in the NHL, but only three have come by way of the slap shot. Matthews is quick to point out he's not at the Ovechkin level.

At even strength, Matthews will skate with Andreas Johnsson and William Nylander, who missed training camp a year ago due to a contract impasse. The Leafs new power-play alignment will feature the left-handed Matthews on the right flank, which should create more opportunities for one-timers.

"I'm comfortable with both guys," Matthews said. "I played quite a bit with both guys. We want to get off to a good start. I think camp's been pretty good for us. It feels like we don't really have to feel each other out. We kind of know where each other's at most of the time." As he starts the second contract of his NHL career, Matthews is setting the bar high.

"I expect a lot out of myself," he said. "The preseason is good to get your legs and timing under you. You kind of use it more for conditioning and stuff like that." Matthews is expected to play a bigger leadership role for the Leafs this season.

"He's really evolved," said head coach Mike Babcock. "I think the biggest thing with Matty is how comfortable he is now compared to what he used to be with all this (gestures to media) and with the guys. He was always comfortable on the ice, but it's bigger than that when you're leading. The biggest thing is sharing himself. That's what leaders do. They do their job and they do it good enough that they have time to help you as well."

Earlier in camp, Babcock listed basketball star Kawhi Leonard as an ideal leadership role model for the next Leafs captain.

"He was just a machine all season, all playoffs," Matthews observed of the former Raptor. "He's a quiet guy, obviously, just kind of goes about his business and it was fun to watch. The whole team was fun to watch and it was amazing what they did for the city so we're trying to replicate that."

"The main thing was he didn't do much talking," said Marner, who wore an 'A' in Tuesday's preseason debut, "he just went out there and played, led by example every time he got the ball or got back on the defensive end of it. That's something everyone wants in leadership."

The Leafs will name a captain at some point this season and Babcock was asked if that announcement will come sooner or later. That led to this interaction with your humble correspondent.

"When's the season start?"

Oct. 2.

"Is that later or sooner?"

Later.

"Oh, (smiles) see ya guys."

Will Leafs name a captain sooner than later?

Mike Babcock was asked if the Maple Leafs would name a captain sooner than later and the head coach responded by asking when the season starts. He also touched on his young players who haven't been in the league that long, but are learning what it takes to be a leader on and off the ice.

Alexander Kerfoot will make his Leafs preseason debut tonight skating between KHL import Ilya Mikheyev and Nic Petan. The 25-year-old, acquired from Colorado in an off-season trade, is looking to tweak his game.

"I've tried to change it up a little bit," Kerfoot revealed. "I want to be a little more aggressive defensively."

What's that mean?

"You always work on your shot in different areas of the ice and getting it off quickly and adding some velocity, but I think more than anything it's a mindset thing," he explained. "I've always been a pass-first guy and I think sometimes I've been a little stubborn with the puck and I've tried to change that up, but it's hard to do. It's always being conscious of it."

While it has been tricky communicating with Mikheyev, who speaks limited English and has been reluctant to do any interviews at camp, Kerfoot is familiar with Petan, who should ease the transition to Toronto. "I know him quite well, because we're both from Vancouver and grew up playing together, Kerfoot said.

Kerfoot looking to be more aggressive defensively this season

Alexander Kerfoot discusses how excited he is to get his first taste of the Battle of Ontario when he plays in the second pre-season game of a back-to-back Wednesday. Kerfoot also explains how he wants to be more aggressive offensively this season, and shares his takesaways from Mike Babcock's coaching style.

Like Kerfoot, Cody Ceci will also be making his preseason debut with the Leafs tonight. The Ottawa native played six seasons with the Senators and four more with the 67s before that.

"I'm definitely feeling a little bit nervous," he admitted, "especially going back home and playing in front of friends and family on a new team. It'll be a little different." Ceci will skate alongside Morgan Rielly, who was a former teammate of his in the Hockey Canada program at the under-18 level.

"He's just very talented," Ceci said. "I'm lucky to be playing with him. He's a good skater and reads the play very well. He likes to get up in the play and take some chances. I'll have to do a better job of staying back and..."
protecting him when he's up there and getting the puck out of the zone quickly and letting him do his thing offensively."

TSN's Kristen Shilton has more on Ceci's return to the nation's capital and role with the Leafs here.

TSN.CA LOADED: 09.19.2019
Does Patrik Laine have a legitimate beef with the Winnipeg Jets?

That is the question of the week after a story by Pekka Jalonen – a sportswriter for the Finnish publication Ilta-lehti – who has covered Laine since the earliest stages of his career. The subject of Laine’s supposed frustration is the quality of linemates he has played with over the years. Jalonen discussed the story with CBC Radio on Tuesday:

"I felt he was really frustrated … especially five-on-five and with whom he’s playing," said Jalonen.

Laine expressed his dissatisfaction with the line combinations and opportunities he was getting last season but didn’t name anyone, Jalonen said.

He only said "somewhere other than Winnipeg he would have the chance to play with the best players," Jalonen said. If Jalonen’s read of things is correct, there’s an interesting debate to be had about whether or not Laine has been unfairly deployed.

It’s not as if Laine has had a lack of success at the NHL level – his 110 goals over the first three years are sixth best in the entire league, ahead of the likes of Sidney Crosby, Patrick Kane and Vladimir Tarasenko.

And Laine certainly hasn’t been buried in the depths of the lineup. Only Blake Wheeler and Mark Scheifele have played more minutes across all situations than Laine, and those minutes are usually of the top-six variety. By extension, Laine’s most common teammates over the period are headlined by Bryan Little, Nikolaj Ehlers, Mark Scheifele and Blake Wheeler. (Though, it is worth noting that the 2018-19 season saw Laine playing more with the likes of fellow restricted free agent Kyle Connor, and less with Ehlers.)

A look at Laine’s most common linemates over the years are broken out below:

This ice time allocation is a blended top-six role, where Laine historically has played on the team’s second line with spot opportunities to take shifts with the team’s true first-line centre, Scheifele.

There is no argument that Little is an inferior player to Scheifele at this point in their respective careers, but coaches constantly have to weigh the value of creating “super lines” against the value created by spreading their best talent throughout the lineup.

So while Little might be an inferior choice to centre Laine relative to a player the calibre of Scheifele, it’s not as if Laine has played with slouches. His second most common winger (Ehlers) has generally been a more productive even-strength player than Laine has over the years, and his third-most common linemate is actually Scheifele himself.

The argument laid forth is that Laine may be disproportionately impacted by the quality of teammates he has played with over the years relative to other high-end scorers. To that end, we can measure the average quality of teammate Laine has played with using statistical measures, and then repeat that for other forwards around the league.

To quickly assess Laine’s standing relative to his peers, I looked at the top 10 goal scorers amongst wingers from last season and their most common centres over the years.

A few of these players circumstances have changed – Mark Stone, who spent most of his time with J.G. Pageau, is now with Paul Stasny; Jeff Skinner, who spent most of his time with Derek Ryan, is now with Jack Eichel – but for the most part we tend to see top-six wingers playing with top-six centres:

As is the case with most debates in hockey, there seems to be some degree of truth on both sides of the argument. In Laine’s defence, similar scorers around the league tend to play with better centres than the likes of Little. While Little has been reasonably productive over the last few years, he certainly pales in comparison to some of the other centres identified here.

But on the other side of the equation, there are players certainly doing more with less – I mentioned Skinner playing heaps of minutes with the likes of a player like Derek Ryan, but Brendan Gallagher, Sebastian Aho, Tarasenko and Kane have been similarly handcuffed over the years.

The other point that I think is worth raising is that Laine is quite a unique player – one of the three or four best shooters of the puck we have seen over the last couple of decades, but also a defensively challenged forward who requires a bit more insulation than the average forward around the league.

It will be interesting to see how this plays out in Winnipeg. Laine is still in need of a contract, and the 31-year-old Little has five years left on his deal.

Unless the Winnipeg coaching staff has a serious change of heart, there is a real likelihood that the Jets lineup sees similar structure to what we saw a year ago – Scheifele playing with Connor and Wheeler, and Laine as a potential odd man out.

Does Patrik Laine have a legitimate beef with the Winnipeg Jets? By Travis Yost

TSN.CA LOADED: 09.19.2019
Winnipeg Jets captain Blake Wheeler said Tuesday restricted free agent Patrik Laine has benefited from his linemates throughout his first three seasons in Winnipeg.

Laine told Pekka Jalonen of Finland’s Iltalehti that he believes he would be a first-line player on most NHL teams, but instead has played lower in the Jets lineup. Wheeler, who called Laine’s comments a non-issue and said he remains in communication with the winger, pointed to Laine’s power-play time and statistical success over the past three years as a counterargument.

“He’s certainly one of our best players,” Wheeler said. “He spends a good deal of time on that top unit on the power play. We’re top five in the league in the past couple years and a big part of that is what Patty does.

“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.

“And I think it’s a great trait to have to want more, to want more ice time, more playing time. I would say those are all good things, man. You want guys that are hungry for more and not content with where (they’re) at.”

Laine scored 15 of his 30 goals on the power play last season and notched 23 of his 50 points with the man advantage. He has a total of 110 goals and 184 points in 237 career games with the Jets.

Wheeler noted Tuesday that he’s never gotten the impression Laine wants out of Winnipeg, but will work to ensure comments made by the winger don’t affect the team’s chemistry.

“You just try to empower everyone to get the best of their abilities, and just realize that everyone on a hockey team, maybe more than any other sport, has a role, has a buy-in,” Wheeler said.

Laine told Iltalehti that his linemates have become a topic of discussion in his contract talks. The 21-year-old spent most of last season of a line centred by Bryan Little.

“When you’re having contract negotiations, one thing always is who are you playing with,” Laine explained, as translated by Jalonen for Winnipeg’s TSN Radio 1290. "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 is currently in Switzerland skating with SC Bern and Wheeler said his comments likely came from a place of frustration with his current situation.

“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,” Wheeler said. “There’s probably a lot of frustration in the fact he’s not where he wants to be.”

TSN.CA LOADED: 09.19.2019
St. John's, N.L. — Being traded from his hometown Ottawa Senators to the rival Toronto Maple Leafs last summer was odd enough for Cody Ceci, and he's expecting the reality of his Leafs' debut during Wednesday's preseason tilt in Ottawa to be equally strange.

"I've been going [out] the last six years and playing for the Sens and everything was kind of normal. It'll be weird now, definitely," Ceci said after the Leafs' team meeting on Wednesday at Mile One Centre. "Going into preseason you're never too nervous, but I'm definitely feeling a little bit nervous, especially going back home and playing in front of friends and family on a new team. It'll be a little different."

Fortunately for Ceci, he's unlikely to be the only player feeling disoriented.

In the July 1 deal that brought him to Toronto, the Leafs also acquired defenceman Ben Harpur, while shipping Nikita Zaitsev and Connor Brown to the Senators. Harpur and Brown are expected to also suit up for their respective teams on Wednesday, as will former Leafs' defenceman Ron Hainsey and forward Tyler Ennis, both of whom joined Ottawa as unrestricted free agents over the summer.

"There are a lot of [our] guys that will be playing ex-teammates as well, so it'll be weird for all of us," Ceci acknowledged. "And it'll be good to just get it out of the way. You just have to go out there and enjoy it."

That's the same approach Ceci has applied while transitioning directly into a top-four role with the Leafs, paired up alongside Morgan Rielly. Viewing his role as a stay-at-home defensive presence to complement Rielly's more offensive-minded game, Ceci is out to prove he can handle the pressure of a top-pairing job and leaning on his previous familiarity with Rielly.

The blueliners have been friends for years, first meeting in 2011 as part of Team Canada at the U-18 world championship tournament, and going on to be first-round picks in the 2012 NHL Entry Draft (Rielly went fifth to Toronto, Ceci went 15th to the Senators).

"He's just very talented; I'm lucky to be playing with him," Ceci said of Rielly. "He's a good skater and reads the play very well. He likes to get up in the play and take some chances. I'll have to do a better job of staying back and protecting him when he's up there and getting the puck out of the zone quickly and letting him do his thing offensively."

While Rielly and Ceci came into the NHL around the same time, their career trajectories have taken different directions.

In Toronto, Rielly has established himself as the Leafs' No. 1 defenceman in recent years, while Ceci was struggling in Ottawa, producing 45 points (12 goals, 23 assists) in 156 games over his last two seasons, with a minus-49 rating.

In trading for the 25-year-old and signing him to a one-year contract, Toronto is hoping a change of scenery will revive Ceci's game.

"Everybody is a work in progress. We know that," said head coach Mike Babcock. "Any time you go to a new situation and there's a change, there's anxiety, there's lots of new terms, there's lots of new things, and it takes you a while to get comfortable. It's our job, the team's and Morgan's, to get him comfortable as fast as we can."

Even with their off-ice relationship, Rielly knows breaking in his new partner won't be easy, but he can see their potential to succeed in the long term.

"He's a good defencer and he's got good size, so I think it's going to work well," Rielly said. "We're just going to have to work at building some chemistry and learning how to work with one another. He can really move well, moves the puck well, so hopefully given some time we can work on things and get going in the right direction."
By Frank Seravalli

There is a thread hanging off the Winnipeg Jets this training camp. If you pull on it hard enough, it’s not difficult to imagine the 2019-20 season unravelling before it even begins.

Wednesday’s bombshell that blueliner Dustin Byfuglien has arrived at a career crossroads – he’s believed to be using his personal leave of absence from the team to contemplate retirement – tugged on that narrative in a big way.

There is no timetable for a decision. The belief is the Jets, who haven’t publicly commented on Byfuglien’s status, are willing to give Byfuglien all the time he needs. Because losing ‘Big Buff’ would be, well, an enormous problem for the Jets.

Byfuglien, 34, would become the fifth defenceman to play at least half of last season’s games to not return this year, including Jacob Trouba, Tyler Myers, Ben Chiarot and Joe Morrow.

In the absence of those four, Byfuglien – Winnipeg’s leader in average ice time for each of the last four seasons – was going to be counted on to bite off an even bigger chunk of the game.

Byfuglien has missed 53 games over the last two seasons. His battle with injuries (including a concussion last season) makes you wonder if Indianapolis Colts quarterback Andrew Luck’s decision to step away from the NFL at 29 at the apex of his career in August had any impact on his thought process.

Byfuglien would potentially be walking away from $14 million in salary if he retired. He has earned more than $66 million in his career, according to CapFriendly.com.

Byfuglien was as impactful as ever when he was on the ice last season. He collected 31 points in just 42 games - the second-highest points per game mark of his career. Byfuglien led the Jets with eight points in their first-round series loss to the eventual Stanley Cup champion St. Louis Blues. He had points in five of six playoff games.

There is something so captivating about Byfuglien’s game. His sheer size married to those soft hands, his booming shot, his reckless abandon style, even the little shimmy-shake at the blueline after a goal.

Off the ice, Byfuglien’s private nature made him more of a mystery. His love for fishing – and even ice fishing during Winnipeg’s long winters – is well known.

Talk to those around the Jets and they’ll say Byfuglien’s laid-back personality made him an integral part of Winnipeg’s leadership team. He acted as a buffer, or in this case a ‘Buffer’, to captain Blake Wheeler’s admittedly intense approach.

Now, adding to the mystery is the unending list of questions that have surfaced in the wake of Byfuglien’s leave of absence, about both the future and the recent past of the Jets.

Clearly, the Jets must have been blindsided by Byfuglien’s notice on the eve of training camp. If they had any inkling that this was a possibility, would GM Kevin Cheveldayoff have approached this off-season differently?

Could the Jets have re-signed their other twin tower on defence in Tyler Myers? Would the Jets have forced their hand on restricted free agent Jacob Trouba and gone to arbitration to keep him under club control, even if they knew it was only going to be for one season?