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That's included when we're sure which in succumbing. Support can be delivered by the night's best punch line.

"We don't have too much sushi in Saskatchewan," he said. "You can get raw beef if you want it, though."

If hockey needs anything right now, it's a good belly laugh. The start of another season arrives at a great time, too.

A summer of unsettling news, of young men dying at their own hands, of an entire team being swallowed by unthinkable horror officially ends this week. The NHL returns. The Ducks report for physicals Friday and skate as one for the first time Saturday.

Players around the league will be turning to Twitter to finally share something other than their condolences.

"It's going to be a nice welcome to flip the page," Ducks forward Bobby Ryan said. "With the number of tragedies this summer, the game has been reflected in a negative way a little bit. It's going to be nice to get some news out there that isn't tragic and isn't heartbreaking."

On Monday, Ryan, Getzlaf and newcomer Andrew Cogliano participated in a competition at RA Sushi in Tustin for charity. It was fun, silly and well received.

On Wednesday, the Ducks will play golf for charity in Irvine. Then they have one more off day before starting a season that will begin in Finland and end, they sincerely hope, in June.

Meanwhile, Derek Boogaard, Rick Rypien and Wade Belak are still dead, as the mourning for the Lokomotiv Yaroslavl hockey club continues around the globe.

"This is a time more than ever when we need to get back on the ice and show that support for each other," Getzlaf said. "I'm sure those guys would be thrilled to see us back out on the ice playing again."

Boogaard and Getzlaf grew up in the same area of Saskatchewan. Getzlaf played with Rypien's brother, Wes.

Death has a way of making a man turn inside himself and reflect. Suicide can turn that reflection into something sobering in its intensity alone.

"We're a family," Getzlaf said. "When we're in that locker room, we're in it together. We do a lot of things together. You really need to pay attention and know what's around you and what's going on with the other guys in case somebody does need something."

But can hockey, with its sanctioned violence and bloodied faces and thrown knuckles, really accept the concept of group therapy? The NHL already has support programs in place and that didn't stop these three players from succumbing.

Is hockey simply too tough on the outside for its own well being inside?

"I don't think so," Getzlaf said. "We've become a pretty tight group. Maybe in the public eye it's a macho thing, but we talk about things as a group and we go through things together. We keep a lot of that within the locker room, which is only right. We just definitely need to take a look at things and make sure things are going well."

When he was with the Montreal Canadiens, Brian Hayward's teammates included a player named John Kordic. Like Boogaard, Rypien and Belak, Kordic was paid to serve and protect - with his fists.

They called him Rambo. One season, he had 252 minutes in penalties. That's more than four hours spent in detention.

In August of 1992, Rambo's body was found. Drug overdose. He was 27.

"People say, 'What's the big deal? They play five minutes and they fight once,'" said Hayward, now a Ducks broadcaster. "But the pressures today are so much greater. With YouTube and TiVo... if you lose a fight now, a million people are going to see it. In the past, maybe 50,000 saw it. The pressure is ramped up. Does that have anything to do with it? I don't know, but it's something to look into.

"I really do believe this is something that needs to be looked at closely by the league. Something is going on here. With Derek and Rick, I think everyone knew they had battled some things. But Wade Belak, that one came out of the blue, the complete blue. That one was shocking. I believe there's reason for concern."

Hayward is paid to speak and offer insight, and sometimes he does his job too well, too honestly for some people. His words here should be clipped and taped up in every locker room in the NHL.

Welcome back, hockey. You've been missed.

It's time to flip the page, certainly. But, regarding the lost lives of Derek Boogaard, Rick Rypien and Wade Belak, it's no time to close the book.

Orange County Register: LOADED: 09.14.2011
Ducks, CHOC patients, fans paint it white

By JEFF MILLER

Some 250 gallons of white paint and 40 gallons of colored paint have been applied to ice surface at Honda Center.

So the Ducks aren't the only ones who need a little time to prepare for the 2011-12 season.

The team invited two patients from Children's Hospital of Orange County - Cole LeRoy, 14, and Brendan McGeown, 17 - and eight other randomly selected season-ticket holders to help with the painting process Monday.

"I've seen this done on TV before, but it was still totally strange to me," McGeown said. "It was a lot of fun."

The Ducks open their preseason schedule at Honda Center on Sept. 20 against Phoenix.

Orange County Register: LOADED: 09.14.2011
New season, familiar faces for Bruins

By Steve Conroy

The time for celebration is finally over. It is now time for the Stanley Cup champion Boston Bruins to begin the defense of their title. Bruins rookies are already scrimmaging and the veterans report on Friday, the memory of their magical Cup run a mere 3 months old.

Last year was all about redemption for the B’s, who infamously blew a second-round series to the Philadelphia Flyers. This season, it’s about repeating. On paper, there’s no reason why the B’s cannot compete for the Cup again this season and in the foreseeable future. They return the majority of their roster, one that should have as many as a dozen players under the age of 30. And one of their most promising talents has yet to fully bloom.

But only time will tell if they can be the first team since the 1998 Detroit Red Wings to repeat. They must deal with the dreaded hangover effect and — judging from all the Internet evidence that’s out there — the boys did in fact enjoy the victors’ spoils this summer. And though there is a lot of stability here, they did lose a key member of the leadership group in Mark Recchi as well as the enigmatic but gifted Michael Ryder, who always seemed to show up in the playoffs. On top of that, other Eastern Conference teams like the Canadiens, Rangers and even the Sabres have added some key pieces to their rosters.

Another Cup can be won this year, but no, it won’t be easy.

Here’s a quick look at how the roster shapes up:

ForwardS
LW Milan LucicC David KrejciRW Nathan Horton
W Brad Marchand C Patrice Bergeron RW Tyler Seguin
W Benoit Pouliot C Chris Kelly RW Rich Peverley
W Daniel Paille C Gregory Campbell RW Shawn Thornton

Skinny: The B’s didn’t have a lot of turnover but they are looking to fill a couple of key holes. Pouliot, a former Canadien, was signed ostensibly to replace Ryder, but Ryder left Boston with four 25-plus goal seasons on his NHL resume and the 24-year-old Pouliot’s best season was a 17-goal campaign in 53 games split between Minnesota and Montreal two seasons ago. If veteran Chris Clark, a camp invitee, or rookies Jared Knight and Ryan Spooner are to make a serious play for a roster spot, Pouliot’s might be the most vulnerable.

One of the most intriguing story lines of the upcoming season will be the development of Seguin. After a typically up-and-down rookie season, Seguin not only was able to provide some instant offense when needed in the playoffs, he did not look out of place when the games called for a tight defensive approach. He should be able to at least replace Recchi’s production on the Bergeron-Marchand line (provided the unsigned Marchand comes to terms with the club), but he could also drop down and be the third line center.

Defense
Zdeno Chara Joe Corvo
Dennis Seidenberg Johnny Boychuk
Andrew Ference Adam McQuaid

Skinny: These projections are simply based on left-right combinations, but are surely subject to change once it is figured where the newcomer Corvo is best suited. Coach Claude Julien could just go back with what worked and pair Seidenberg with Chara as he did in the first round against Montreal last April, which was arguably the most impactful decision of the playoffs.

This current six-pack looks fairly difficult to crack, but GM Peter Chiarelli has been stockpiling some young puck-moving defensemen. The one closest to being NHL-ready is Steven Kampfer, who provided a spark for the team when it desperately needed one last December before his play fell off a bit and then he got injured. He should get a long look, as should Matt Bartkowski and David Warsofsky. The play of first-round pick Dougie Hamilton will be one of the more interesting things to watch in camp, but unless he really wows everyone he’ll be back in junior hockey this year.

Goalie
Tim Thomas
Tuukka Rask

Skinny: After his Vezina and Conn Smythe Trophy-winning campaign last year, Thomas is the current "Best Goalie on the Planet" belt holder. But he is also the oldest player on the Bruins at 37 and it’s reasonable to think the short summer could adversely affect him more than anyone. While Julien has been pretty consistent about playing the goalie who is stopping the puck better, it wouldn’t be a shock to see Rask get a lot of action early.

That would not only give Thomas’ body time to recover, but also give the B’s an opportunity to see how Rask responds after having a step-back year after winning the job two seasons ago. The 24-year-old Finn was victimized by some bad luck early last year and then things started to snowball on him a bit. He is in the final year of his contract — he’s scheduled to be a restricted free agent next summer — and the B’s need to know exactly what their long-term net future looks like.
His marriage is comfort for Sabres' Miller

Bucky Gleason

It's a good sign for the Sabres that their franchise goalie has found the right frame of mind heading into the season.

Like many grooms, Ryan Miller figured he would be anxious when the big day arrived. For the first time, the spotlight would be on him as a husband and a man, rather than as the Sabres' franchise goaltender, as he stood before his family and friends, extended his hand and exchanged marriage vows with the woman he loves.

Miller is a complex guy but he realized Sept. 3 that there was nothing complicated about marrying actress Noureen DeWulf. It was a no-brainer. She was everything he wanted in a woman. She was genuine and caring. She understood him, and she loved him.

She was the least of his worries and, if anything, his primary source of peace on his wedding day. By the time their ceremony rolled around, it was as if Miller was in The Zone.

"I thought I would be nervous and scattered," Miller said the other day. "I was more centered and focused than I've been anywhere, including on the ice. Everything happened easily. The words just came out of my mouth, and it was easy. It's because I feel good about myself as a person and the person I'm with."

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to share the continuous maturation and evolution of Ryan Miller. It's not to suggest he was immature earlier in his career, but the truth is he's grown from a young, tightly wound goaltender who was trying to prove he belonged into a respected man, unquestioned leader and chief puck stopper.

While nobody should confuse hockey and honeymoons, it appears the Sabres have found the right companions as they mature and evolve while pushing toward the ultimate goal. They couldn't have asked for a better dance partner than Terry Pegula, who literally and figuratively has become the fantasy owner people envisioned in the years before he arrived. Now, it's time for another step.

"Our goal has always been to win," Miller said. "You have to hit a few checkmarks along the way and do things right. Expectations, it's fine to start talking like that. We tried doing that in past years, but it is a process. You have to figure out what you need to do."

It's a good sign for the Sabres when their franchise goalie finds the right frame of mind going into a new season. The Sabres added two good veteran defensemen in Christian Ehrhoff and Robyn Regehr and a solid, hard-working forward in center Ville Leino. All three should help Miller along with backup goalie Jhonas Enroth.

But let's not kid ourselves. Miller remains the biggest key to their success. At 31, he's in the prime of his career. He appeared much more at ease before the Sabres' golf tournament earlier this week than he did last season, when at times it seemed the pressure that came with carrying this team weighed on him.

Miller is coming off a mediocre season in which he had a 34-22-8 record, a 2.59 goals-against average and .916 save percentage. He didn't crack the NHL's top 15 in the latter two categories, where his numbers were only slightly worse than his career averages. Yet there remains a confidence that he can lead them to the Stanley Cup.

Last season was a step backward after a career year. He refused to accept the "hangover" excuse while acknowledging his play was below his standards. Still, you wonder if he failed to manage the emotional highs that came with 2009-10, when he became an international superstar and Vezina Trophy winner. For whatever reason, he failed to maintain that level.

The Sabres spent the offseason upgrading their roster with the idea they can push themselves into Cup contention. It's no longer a shallow message that comes with every new season. The Sabres haven't backed away from their goal all summer, and they're certainly not shying away from it with training camp opening Saturday.

"We're hoping we can come together as a team and live up to expectations," Miller said. "It's great to have that energy. The buy-in can't happen on one end, and it can't happen just on the other. It only works when everybody equally does it. It's this weird chemistry thing where it has to happen on both sides."

Clearly, ownership and management are pushing their chips into the middle. Miller kept in touch over the summer with several teammates, such as Paul Gaustad, who stuck around for informal training sessions. Patrick Kaleta mentioned the other day that he's never worked so hard in the offseason. Apparently, the players are investing, too.

The Sabres have more pieces in place than they've had since they won the Presidents' Trophy in 2006-07, but it also means they have fewer excuses for falling short. Miller doesn't need to rediscover the Vezina form for them to be successful, but he does need to become more consistent and continue to evolve.

He spent the offseason in Southern California living with DeWulf, clearing his head and rearranging his routine. He trimmed his workouts to three days per week but made them more intense. He put together a skating regimen designed for him to ramp up as the season approaches without leaving him exhausted late in the year.

Everything appears to be going in the right direction. Physically, he feels good heading into the preseason opener less than a week away. Mentally, he's more equipped and tougher than he was in his youth.

Personally, he couldn't be much better. His wife will travel between Los Angeles and Buffalo, a bond not measured by the distance between them. She'll always be at his side, making him feel complete.

"We just try to have fun with what we do for a living, but we try to support each other and do the best we can," he said. "I feel like I met somebody that brings out the best in me, who is very loving and caring. She's a very real individual, and that's what I was looking for for a long time. I just feel very lucky."

Sabres goaltender Ryan Miller, back in town and ready for training camp, made a point earlier this week to say that winning is a process. He has been impressed with the offseason moves and management's approach, but he also believes it's another stage in the Sabres' development.

He wanted to make sure people didn't misinterpret the Sabres' push toward winning this season as if they weren't trying to win in another seasons. Otherwise, he suggested, it would trivialize everything they had been trying to accomplish to this point in their careers.

"For some of our shortcomings over the years, not finishing those great runs, we've had positive seasons, Miller said. "We've had winning records. I don't want to brush it off and say, 'Now, it starts.' It's not that I don't recognize things are changing, but I feel we've all put a lot of work in. That goes for Lindy and Darcy and the whole organization.

"There are certain things we're going to have a little more assistance with, and they've definitely evolved as managers and coaches. The sense seems to be that there has been a little bit of an evolution, which needs to happen."

Miller is certain to be a key to their success. He took a step back from his career year in 2009-10, when he led the United States to the gold medal game in the Olympics and won the Vezina Trophy. He made a conscious effort to take a mental break after the season. Oh, one another change was getting married. He exchanged vows with actress Noureen DeWulf during a ceremony in Los Angeles.

"On my wedding day, thought I would be nervous and scattered," Miller said. "I was more centered and focused than I've been anywhere, including on the ice. Everything happened easily. The words just came out of my mouth, and it was easy. It's because I feel good about myself as a person and the person I'm with."

Sounds like Miller is in good frame of mind, a good sign to be sure.

Sabres in rookie tournament final Wednesday

Staff

Phil Varone and Marcus Foligno scored for the Buffalo Sabres, but the team dropped a 5-2 decision to the Detroit Red Wings at the 2011 NHL Prospects Tournament in Traverse City, Mich., on Tuesday.

Detroit took a 2-1 lead in the first period but Foligno's goal from West Seneca's Alex Lepkowski at 13:14 of the second tied the game for the Sabres.

The Wings then scored three goals on four shots in a 1:31 span in the third to take control of the game. Ryan Rondeau got the start in net for the Sabres.

Detroit held a 37-21 advantage in shots on goal. Despite the loss, the Sabres will play the Rangers in the Prospect Tournament Championship at 7 tonight. The game will be broadcast on MSG in Buffalo and Rochester.

Terry Shafer may never play in the National Hockey League but he'll forever be able to say he made saves on shots by Sidney Crosby.

OK, it was just in a casual practice and in a little two-on-two pickup game. But it was Crosby shooting the puck.

"It's hard to believe," Shafer said. "I stood in goal for Sidney Crosby. He is arguably the best player in the world."

Shafer himself didn't believe it at first. A resident of Penfield and member of the 2008 All-Greater Rochester hockey team as a junior at Aquinas, he is now playing with the Atlanta Knights Junior A team.

Late last month, Crosby visited neurologist Dr. Ted Carrick at the Life University in Marietta, Ga. The Pittsburgh Penguins star is still recovering from a severe concussion that he suffered in January.

While on his visit, he wanted to skate and take shots.

And to do so, he needed a goalie.

Since he was skating at the Knights' rink, the Marietta Ice Center, a couple of players from the junior team were recruited. Shafer was the goalie.

"We got wind that he was going to be skating at our rink, but we had to keep it a secret," Shafer said. "Then my coach asked how I'd like to go out and skate with Sidney Crosby and I thought he was joking."

There was no joke. On Aug. 29 and 30, from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m., Shafer and two or three others with ties to the Knights were on the ice with the NHL's most prominent player.

"I just kept telling myself, 'Don't let in a softy,'" Shafer said. "It was incredible how quick his wrist shot is. It was almost a helpless feeling. His shot would be hitting off one post and then the other and then going in.

"But I stopped a few."

While in Georgia, Crosby was being evaluated by Dr. Carrick. Crosby said that he expects to play sometime this season, but there is no targeted return date.

"I didn't ask a whole lot of questions," Shafer said. "He'd warm up, then he'd push himself in more of a cardio way.

"He was great, though. He walked in the locker room the first day and he didn't walk past us, he introduced himself. He was nice enough to come over to take pictures with us, we didn't have to ask."

In essence, Shafer said it was like skating with any other player.

"He was chirping in the locker room and I chirped right back," Shafer said. "You can't be a hockey player if you can't chirp."

Shafer, 20, hopes to use this season to earn a scholarship at an NCAA Division I school.

He has turned down "five or six" offers from Division III schools.

The Knights play in the Eastern Junior Hockey League, the same league as the Rochester Stars, the team operated by Maksymum Hockey.

Against the odds, defenceman Brodie cracked the opening-day roster last season. He suited up in four games before landing in Abbotsford for the rest of the year.

"Its nice for guys to know that if they come in, play good and prove that we can play at that level, we'll get the opportunity," Brodie said. "It's obviously motivation for the guys, and especially for me."

"But you have to go out and prove you can play there."

With just days to go before the puck drops on training camp, media experts from coast to coast are beginning to go public with their predictions for the coming season. Not many, thus far, see the Flames qualifying for the postseason.

"I'm very anxious to get started," Feaster said. "To be honest, getting tired of answering all the questions. I'm tired of the prognosticators.

"I'm anxious for camp to begin and for the players to perform. We'll see what the results are."


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577990 Calgary Flames

Under Feaster, it's all about merit

By Vicki Hall

PENTICTON, B.C. — As the new sheriff in town for the Calgary Flames, Jay Feaster wants everyone to know the new rules of engagement.

From here on in, Scotiabank Saddledome is officially a meritocracy — a place of employment where jobs and promotions are awarded based on performance.

Forget contract status. Forget reputation. Forget pre-ordained privilege.

"I don't know how to do it any other way than based on merit," Feaster, the Flames' GM, said Tuesday in between meetings at the Young Stars Tournament. "I've never believed in doing it by the draft pick you were selected with or how much money they pay you or how pretty you are or handsome you are.

"I don't know any other way."

With that philosophy in mind, the Flames prospects on display this week have a legitimate shot at making the team. Conversely, the veterans in Calgary risk landing in the press box — or worse yet, down with the farm team in Abbotsford — if they don't live up to expectations.

Under the Feaster system, head coach Brent Sutter ultimately decides which 20 guys suit up on any given night. Ownership has already shown a willingness to dump a big contract in the minors with the demotion last year of Ales Kotalik ($3 million) to the Heat. Paging T.J. Brodie, Chris Breen, Max Reinhart, Carter Bancks and even Sven Baertschi.

"I don't mean to be flippant about it, but it's the same with any of these guys you are asking about," Feaster said. "Can Sven Baertschi stick? Absolutely he could.

"We intend to have him go back to training camp in Calgary and have him practise with established, legitimate National Hockey League players. We'll put him in a pre-season game. If he shows well, he'll get another. If he does well in his second game, he'll probably get a third.

"When we have to submit our opening-night roster, we'll decide which 23 guys deserve to be there. If that ends up being someone we didn't expect to be there, we'll deal with it at that time."

Under the Darryl Sutter regime, whispers persisted that brother Brent wanted to bench the likes of Matt Stajan ($3.5 million) and Niklas Hagman ($3 million), among others. The siblings disagreed.

As a result, Stajan and Hagman played, leaving a youngster like Mikael Backlund to sit.

In the biggest disappointment of this summer for the Flames, former first-rounder Tim Erixon refused to sign in Calgary. Via his agent, Erixon told the Flames he doubted he would actually get the chance to play in the NHL if he stuck around.

As a result, the Flames reluctantly dealt the promising Swedish rearguard to the New York Rangers.

"We're not going to erect barriers for guys who deserve to make this hockey club," Feaster pledged. "This is the way we're going to do things. We're going to earn our way.

"That's the only way we're going to be a success as an organization."

Feaster told the youngsters as much at summer development camp in Calgary. He repeated those sentiments this week in Penticton. And the veterans will hear a similar speech this weekend before main camp opens.

Forward Carter Bancks, for one, is listening.

"That's huge for me," he said. "I wasn't a high draft pick. I just signed an NHL contract in the summer, and I'm just going to try and roll with it the best I can.

"They said to us that there are jobs available if we play well enough. I've just got work hard and deal with whatever comes."
'Electric' Baertschi excites Flames brass

By Vicki Hall,

Calgary Flames hopeful Sven Baertschi has earned rave reviews from general manager Jay Feaster and Abbotsford Heat coach Troy Ward after two games in the Young Stars tournament in Penticton, B.C.

Sven Baertschi made quite the first impression on Troy Ward at the Young Stars Tournament in the picturesque Okanagan Valley.

The Abbotsford Heat head coach is intrigued by the first-round (13th overall) selection of the Calgary Flames in the 2011 NHL Entry Draft.

And that's putting it mildly.

"I guess my first thought would be that he's electric," said Ward, the man in charge of the proceedings for the baby Flames this week. "Things happen around him. I think you feel his presence as a human being. You feel his presence off the ice. You feel his presence on the ice, whether he's doing a drill or whether he's talking to you.

"There's some electricity to that guy. You certainly see it in his skates and his stick."

Only 18, Baertschi displays confidence and poise rarely seen in someone so young. He looks his inquisitors in the eye. He calmly answers all questions, no matter the subject.

Ask the Swiss-born sniper about his goals for the future, and he'll talk about the big dream (making the Flames) and the more realistic short-term objective (returning to the Portland Winterhawks and representing his country at the World Junior Hockey Championships in Edmonton and Calgary.)

Ask him about his family background, and he'll tell you about the heart attack his dad Hansruedi suffered 18 years ago ("I'm so happy to have him in my life") and the pain of the eventual split between his father and mother Daniela Bianchi.

Divorce is never simple, especially for kids.

"They still talk to each other," he said. "So it's not a big thing for them. But it was a big thing for me at that time. I was around 11 or 12. It wasn't easy for me or for my brother, too. I didn't play good in hockey. I didn't do very well in school at that time.

"But when I was over it, it's better in hockey. It's better in school."

Baertschi studied college-level economics last year in Portland. He didn't last long, because he couldn't understand what the heck the professor was saying.

So he switched to English — a language he has impressive command over.

"When you're from Switzerland, you're around four or five different languages," he said. "You kind of learn languages fast. So I came over. It took me two months, and I was OK."

On the ice, Baertschi has performed more than OK in his first two games with his fellow rookies. Playing on a line with Max Reinhart and Patrick Holland, Baertschi took and delivered hits, blocked shots and buzzed around the net.

"He's clearly a guy who is very, very smart in the offensive zone," said general manager Jay Feaster. "He works hard in his zone as well. When you watch him behind the net, he's a guy who buys time and space for himself. He sees the ice very well. He's able to give the puck to his teammates and put them in scoring position."

The kid clearly has vision in a hockey game — and in his career.

"He gets it," Feaster said. "He understands the work you have to put in to be successful."

In Portland, Baertschi is known for hanging around after practice daily to fine-tune his game.

Maybe that's where he generates the "electricity" Ward talks about.

"You can use the time after practice for yourself," he said. "To make yourself a better hockey player. Try to use the time. During practice, you work together as a team. After practice, you work on your own skills: stickhandling, skating.

"Kind of everything."

Nemisz needs to step up

By RANDY SPORTAK, QMI Agency

PENTICTON, B.C. - No bones can be made about it.

It's time for Greg Nemisz to take his game to another level.

That doesn't mean it's now-or-never for the 2008 NHL first-round draft
choice (25th overall) to step into the Calgary Flames roster and make an
impact.

He has time to prove he can be a regular at the top level since the Flames
have plenty of proven veteran forwards, so they don't need to put that kind
of pressure on the 21-year-old right winger who has just one professional
season under his belt.

However, Nemisz is under a magnifying glass to take a bigger role in the
Flames system.

He knows it, too.

"I've been here for a few years now, and I feel better than I ever have," said
the 6-foot-3, 205-lb. product of Courtice, Ont., who won consecutive
Memorial Cup titles with the Windsor Spitfires before turning professional.
"It's an exciting time of year, and I've got to make a push to the next level."

Nemisz is coming off a solid first pro season in which he collected 14 goals
and 33 points in 68 games for the AHL's Abbotsford Heat. His offensive
numbers may not be what fans hope from a first-round draft choice, but the
organization was happy with his contributions and performance while
playing in all situations for the top minor-league affiliate.

Still, Nemisz is looking for more, starting with Wednesday's clash with the
Edmonton Oilers prospects at the Young Stars Tournament in Penticton,
B.C.

He believes he has one element to his advantage, having been able to put
a long summer into training because the Heat failed to make the playoffs.

In the previous two seasons, he was playing well in to May and needed
recovery time before being able to gear up for the coming campaign.

"It's never good to not make the playoffs, but from a personal standpoint, I
had a lot of time to do things I never had a chance to do," Nemisz said. "I'm
coming into this season really hungry to start playing hockey again. It felt
like too long of a layoff.

"The last couple of summers, I only had two months or a month-and-a-half
to train. This summer, I had four or five months, and it definitely allowed me
to get out of the gym and on the ice."

One thing you'll notice about Nemisz is he's leaner, which he says is a
product of more time spent skating during the summer.

"The weight is about the same, but I'm probably proportioned better,"
Nemisz said. "I was back home most of the summer and did a lot more
power skating. Hopefully, that helps out."

Also helping fuel him is the NHL taste he received last season, which
amounted to a six-game audition down the stretch during which he netted
one assist.

"It's just such an amazing experience to see how everything's run. It makes
you really hungry — you want to be there every day," Nemisz said. "You
learn a lot from those guys seeing how they work and how hard they work
every day.

"For me to get the chance to see that before the end of the year was
amazing and made me more motivated.

"The lifestyle is definitely better. It's less of a grind. I think the big things is
the guys are that much better every day. They're ready to go to work. It's
the NHL — they're the best players in the world for a reason — and you
notice it when you're with them."

Young Flames get first look at rivals

By RANDY SPORTAK, QMI Agency

PENTICTON, B.C. - Hate is such a strong word.
Certainly too strong for Sven Baertschi to use to describe his feelings toward the Edmonton Oilers.

"I don't hate anybody and don't hate any team, but I want to win," said the Calgary Flames 2011 NHL Entry Draft's first-round choice. "Winning is what matters. In the business of hockey, you want to win every game.

"I don't care who's on the other side — I just want win every game."

Whether Baertschi is in the lineup remains to be seen, but Wednesday is his first chance to be part of the Battle of Alberta when the Flames and the Oilers square off at the Young Stars Prospects Tournament in Penticton, B.C.

"That's something special," Baertschi said. "The coaches said they don't want to lose, especially against those guys — Edmonton, Vancouver, the Canadian teams ... I felt that right away. There's a big rivalry against Edmonton.

"I'm not sure if I'm playing, but if I am, I'll be going hard."

For the second straight year, the Oilers arrived for this event boasting the first overall draft choice from the most recent draft.

A year ago, it was Taylor Hall.

This season, it's Ryan Nugent-Hopkins.

Hall didn't play the game against the Flames last season, and seeing as Nugent-Hopkins suited up for the first two Oilers tilts at this event, it's likely he won't skate against the Flames.

But there are Flames players who'd like to go up against the Red Deer Rebels star, especially WHL junior teammate Turner Elson.

"I always watched the Battle of Alberta, so it would be exciting if I could play against the Oilers," said Elson, who hails from St. Albert. "I want to play (Nugent-Hopkins) because I'm hoping I can get in his grill. I know how to get under his skin."

Knowledge of how to rattle Nugent-Hopkins could be valuable information to the Flames, seeing as how the highly touted centre could be a cornerstone player for their rivals for years.

However, Elson knows he's treading dangerous ground, since they could both end up back with the Rebels again this season.

"I wouldn't want to hurt him because I'd be out of Red Deer real quick," Elson said. "I'll try to do what I do best, and that's get under the skin of first-liners. I know I'm a pest — that's what I have to do. I'll probably pass information on to the Flames guys. It's a little bit easy to get under (Nugent-Hopkins') skin."

It's possible neither team's first-rounder will take to the ice Wednesday. If they do, it could make for interesting viewing. Baertschi and Nugent-Hopkins met once last season in a regular-season clash which saw Baertschi and the Portland Winterhawks win 4-3 in overtime. Baertschi scored the game-tying goal late in the third period.

"The first-overall pick — that's special," Baertschi said. "He's a really good player. If I go on the ice and see Hopkins out there, I don't really care. It's the team that matters. We want to beat them, not just Ryan Nugent-Hopkins."

PENTICTON, B.C. - Her name is Skarlett, and to Chris Breen, "She's the sunshine of my life."

Breen may be a hulking 6-foot-7, 225-lbs., but his daughter, who is now close to nine-months old, turns the Calgary Flames prospect into the gentlest giant.

"She's saying 'dada' and 'mama' now — it's really cool," Breen said with a big grin coming over his face. "Every day is something new. It's pretty incredible.

"She's actually not crawling yet. I don't know if she's gonna crawl — she doesn't seem too interested — but she rolls over a lot and pulls herself up on furniture."

In the middle of last season, Breen became a father. It's become a life-altering experience for the defenceman who turned 22 years old in June.

When his fellow teammates have a chance for a night out, he'll be home changing diapers or doing other enjoyable jobs which come with fatherhood.

"It's OK — it's something I knew had to do. It's one of the new responsibilities I have, and I'm happy to take it on," Breen said of diaper changing. "It made me clean up all the loose ends I had and just focus on what I had to do as a person."

To AHL Abbotsford Heat head coach Troy Ward, it's also made the blueliner a better hockey player.

Ward, who was an assistant with the Heat last season but has since taken the bench-boss reins in B.C., makes no bones about it — Breen was noticeably one of the better players in the second half of last season.

"As he went through that (becoming a father) process, he was probably our most steady player after," Ward said. "His maturity as a player happened off the ice, and it allowed it to happen on the ice.

"When he was dynamic, he was playing a simple game."

Over the past year, Breen has rocketed up the depth chart in the Flames organization to the point they believe it's not a matter of if he plays in the NHL, it's when.

It's quite the turn of events when you go back to the end of the 2009-10 OHL season.

An undrafted five-year player in the major junior ranks, the native of Uxbridge, Ont., was deciding where he'd attend university in the fall.

"I was looking out east, like UPEI or Dalhousie. That was pretty much set in my mind," Breen said.

Then came the call.

The Heat signed him to an amateur deal after Breen's Peterborough Petes were eliminated in the OHL playoffs. He suited up for one regular-season game. Later in the summer, he signed an entry-level contract.

Through last season, during which he collected four goals and 11 points in 73 games, Breen's name was brought up more and more often as an up-and-comer.

"It's a big confidence booster," Breen said, knowing he can't let the words of praise get to his head.

"Last was a huge year for me.

I improved a ton, all-around, with my game.

"I'm looking forward to this year."

If Breen needs to look at somebody who went the same route, all he has to do is find Mark Giordano, who blossomed with the organization.
Hurricanes' Finnish trio stays intact

By CHIP ALEXANDER - Staff writer

RALEIGH A year ago, Tuomo Ruutu, Jussi Jokinen and Joni Pitkanen were excited about playing the Carolina Hurricanes' opener in Finland, their home country.

And after the season? The three had to wonder if they'd ever play together again as a group.

Pitkanen and Jokinen were due to become unrestricted free agents on July 1. The belief was that both might be able to receive richer proposals from other teams than the Hurricanes might be willing to offer.

But Pitkanen and Jokinen both re-signed with Carolina just before free agency began. The Finns stayed put.

"Obviously it's nice to have some Finnish teammates off the ice, but at the same time they are both great players," Ruutu said Monday at the RBC Center. "Joni has been wonderful the three years he's been here, and Jussi can be used in any situation and he always does his job and is such a professional."

Pitkanen signed a three-year contract that will pay the smooth-skating defenseman $4.5 million a year. Jokinen, one of the Canes' most versatile forwards, agreed to a three-year deal worth $3 million a season.

"I feel I have played 2 1/2 years of my best hockey here, and that's one of the biggest reasons I wanted to sign," Jokinen said Monday. "I believe in this organization. I like how this team is being built and believe we're ready to take the next step and play for the Stanley Cup."

Jokinen said he was told two teams were prepared to make him interesting offers on July 1 had he not re-signed.

"I think some teams really liked me and some of those deals that were signed showed there was big money out there," he said. "But as I've said, money is not the No. 1 to me. This place feels right to me. Me and my wife love living here and how this organization treats its players."

Ruutu, who was married in July, said the pain of missing the playoffs last season, of losing the last game to the Tampa Bay Lightning with so much at stake, did not linger very long.

"Obviously it was really disappointing," he said. "At the same time I'm the sort of person that once it's over and everything is done, it's over and that's it. Just go forward and try to win next season."

Ruutu spent much of last season at center, which he considers his natural position. He played all 82 games and was the Canes' third-leading scorer behind Eric Staal and Jeff Skinner, finishing with 19 goals and 38 assists.

"I felt very comfortable at center," Ruutu said, smiling. "That's the way I started playing hockey. But as long as I'm out there and playing it doesn't really matter."

Ruutu and Skinner were an aggressive, productive pair last season. At times the line also included Jokinen for the "The Finns & Skins" line.

Asked if he hoped to keep the 2011 Calder Trophy winner Skinner on his left wing, Ruutu again beamed.

"Of course," he said. "He's an easy guy to play with. I thought we had some chemistry."

But as Ruutu well knows, Canes coach Paul Maurice likes to tinker and change up lines during the season, looking for effective combinations.

The Hurricanes will have new faces at forward this season -Alexei Ponikarovsky, Anthony Stewart and Tim Brent all signed free-agent deals with Carolina. Ponikarovsky, who was at the RBC Center on Monday, is 6 feet 4 and 226 pounds, and Stewart is listed at 6-3 and 230.

"We added some big guys up front, which should help us a lot," Ruutu said. "It will let the opposition know they've got some big guys coming after them."
Crawford out to prove he belongs in top echelon

By Chris Kuc, Chicago Tribune reporter

Corey Crawford arrived in Chicago a week in advance of the opening of Blackhawks training camp carrying something he hadn't previously had to start a season: The team's No. 1 goaltending job.

A year ago at this time, Crawford was concentrating on securing the backup job to veteran Marty Turco. This time around, after winning the starting job midway through last season and earning a three-year, $8 million contract, Crawford is developing the mindset needed to be a No. 1.

"I'm just trying to prepare myself mentally for that," Crawford said. "It almost seems like you have to work harder and be a little reader when you're in that position. I still have to battle and I still have to work for my ice time."

When the Hawks hit the ice Saturday for the first official practice of camp, Crawford will head to the crease after a summer spent working on improving his game.

"I feel strong (and) quicker," said Crawford, who worked for a week on technique with Hawks goalie coach Stephane Waite during August. "I'm eager to go and I'm excited for the season."

Crawford finished the regular season 33-18-6 with a 2.30 goals-against average and .917 save percentage. The Montreal native was exceptional in the Western Conference quarterfinals when the Hawks fell to the Canucks in seven games as he posted a 2.12 goals-against and .927 save percentage.

Support system: After signing a two-way, free-agent contract with the Hawks in July, NHL veteran Brett McLean is eager to prove his worth.

The 33-year-old center is on his second go-around with the Hawks, having played 78 games with them, mostly in 2003-04, before joining the Avalanche and later the Panthers.

"I can just contribute in lots of different situations in a support role," McLean said. "When somebody's not playing their best or somebody gets injured maybe I can step in and contribute. I was so happy when they offered me the contract (and) I can't wait to earn myself a job here."

Settling in: Andrew Brunette, who signed a one-year, $2 million free-agent contract, spent the summer juggling training and getting established in Chicago.

"It has been a little bit of a hectic summer when you move and you're changing organizations and cities," said the 38-year-old Brunette, who had 18 goals and 28 assists with the Wild last season. "I've been preparing to play at the level I think I'm capable of."

New faces give Blackhawks new optimism

By Tim Sassone

Blackhawks general manager Stan Bowman's off-season game plan was simple: Keep most of the team's core intact while adding the right pieces to make it a much tougher club for opponents to play against.

Did Bowman add the right pieces in forwards Andrew Brunette, Jamal Mayers, Daniel Carcillo, Rostislav Olesz and defensemen Steve Montador, Sean O'Donnell and Sami Lepisto?

That question will begin to be answered on Friday when the Hawks report to training camp at the United Center.

The Hawks believe they have a team ready to challenge for its second Stanley Cup in three years, and there's no reason to doubt such optimism.

"It's a nice mixture of guys added to the ones who have been here a long time," Bowman said. "I think it's going to give us a little more of a bounce in our group and a little more excitement. It's going to be fun to see how it all plays out."

Among the additions at forward, Brunette might have just turned 38 but he was brought in to play on the top two lines and to provide a presence around the net, certainly on the power play, to replace the departed Troy Brouwer and Tomas Kopecky.

Brunette had 18 goals and 46 points for Minnesota last season, but the Hawks envision those numbers improving as he plays with the likes of Jonathan Toews, Patrick Kane, Patrick Sharp and Marian Hossa.

"There's tons of skill here," Brunette said. "You can talk about the toughness, but I think the skill level of this team is as high as there is in the league."

"I've played under Joel (Quenneville) for years in Colorado and it's a fun way to play the game. In Minnesota it was a defensive scheme for many years. That wins too, but it will be a nice change to be back with Joel. I had some of my best years with him in Colorado."

Carcillo and Mayers are likely to be regulars on the fourth line, although the Hawks see Carcillo as someone who can provide a jolt of energy on the top lines with the skill to play there when needed.

"Everybody always talks about that I can fight, that I'm tough and that I can hit, but I pride myself in my game as well," Carcillo said. "I never want to be that fourth-line guy. That's kind of what I turned into last year (in Philadelphia) and what they wanted me to be and I had a really, really hard time with it."

"It's tough for me to do my job if I'm on the ice for two minutes because you're not into the game, you're not into the opponents' head and they don't have to worry about you. I'm at my best when they're worrying about me. I'm looking forward to getting back to doing what I know I can do."

If there's a wild card among the new forwards it's Olesz, acquired from Florida for Brian Campbell.

Olesz never has lived up to expectations after the Panthers drafted him seventh overall in 2004. But Bowman said Olesz, who comes with a hefty $3.1 million cap hit, does figure into the team's plans and that maybe playing on a better club will help bring out his considerable talent.

On defense, Montador will play in the top four and be counted on to be a key penalty killer while O'Donnell and Lepisto will provide depth on the back end.

Bowman said getting a defenseman in free agency was his top priority and that Montador was the Hawks' No. 1 choice.

"We didn't have the style of player that Steve brings," Bowman said at the time of the signing. "We had some guys that play a smaller style and use their quickness and they're puck movers, but we wanted to get somebody with size and strength and plays with an edge."

The other key new face will be in the backup goalie role with veteran Ray Emery and rookie Alexander Salak battling in camp to play behind Corey Crawford.

Bowman has called it an open competition between Salak, who was acquired with Michael Frolik in the trade with Florida last season, and Emery, who was invited to camp on a tryout basis. Daily Herald Times LOADED: 09.14.2011
Blackhawks' Keith key to long playoff run

By Barry Rozner

What happened to Duncan Keith?
What didn't? That's probably the better question.

There aren't many defensemen in the NHL today who could have lived up to what Duncan Keith went through in a span of 18 months, from January 2009 to the moment he drank from the Stanley Cup in 2010.

Consider that in early 2009, Keith was coming into his own as an NHL defenseman, but not talked about frequently as among the best Blackhawks players, certainly not thought of in the same vein as Jonathan Toews or Patrick Kane.

But when he missed four games with a concussion and the Hawks lost three of four, it became obvious that Keith was a key cog and vital to any Hawks success.

He had become their best defenseman and at times their best all-around player, equipped with a brilliant transition game, blazing speed and a complete commitment to puck protection.

He was also, at the time, earning only $1.6 million, less than several Hawks defensemen and far behind one pulling down $7 million. He was due $1.9 million for 2009-10, after which he could become a restricted free agent.

The forecast here at the time was that Keith might ask for $5 million, and that if he got to RFA status, he could be looking at $6 million.

It sounded crazy.

And then the Hawks went to the conference finals and Keith finished fourth in the NHL at plus-33, tops among defensemen.

Duncan Keith had become a star - and not for $6 million. Try $8 million.

On Dec. 3, 2009, the Hawks announced monster extensions for Keith, Toews and Kane. Suddenly, he was in the same headline as the two young stars who had dominated the Chicago hockey scene.

Next came the Olympics in Canada, nearly as big a deal to a Canadian hockey player as skating in the Stanley Cup Finals. It was at home. It was epic.

It would have been something just to represent Canada in Vancouver, but Keith went from being picked for the team to being as important as any member of the squad.

All Keith did was lead Team Canada in ice time, and Canadian defensemen in points and plus-minus.

He played huge minutes when it mattered most and when Canada defeated the U.S. for the gold in OT on Feb. 28, 2010, Keith had become a national hero at home, and the Norris Trophy favorite throughout North America.

Then, there was the small matter of losing half his teeth in the conference finals en route to winning the Stanley Cup, playing 28.11 per game in the postseason (second only to Chris Pronger) while contributing 17 points in 22 games, fourth on the team behind Toews, Kane and Patrick Sharp.

He danced with the Cup, won the Norris Trophy and got about 15 minutes' rest before the 2010-11 season began.

You wonder if he ever took a deep breath.

And that's what happened to Duncan Keith last season, when he rarely looked like the Keith of the previous few years.

In a span of a year and a few months, he went from solid, young, NHL defenseman to big star, huge money, gold medal, Stanley Cup and Norris Trophy.

That's all.

And then he went from averaging a plus-28 the previous three years and 69 points in 2009-10, to 45 points and a minus-1 last season.

Not everyone is made up like Toews. Not everyone can live up to the fame, fortune, stardom and expectations, playing every shift like it's his last, and Keith looked last season like a guy - when he didn't appear exhausted - trying to justify everything he'd earned the previous year.

That's virtually impossible.

So the best thing everyone from Rocky Wirtz to Brent Seabrook - and all in between - could do for Keith is to tell him not to try that again this season.

Go back to doing what you do best and that starts with getting the puck out of your own end. Don't compound your defense and don't feel like the offense is your responsibility.

Join the play when you can and get pucks on net.

Keep it simple and trust your ability.

Duncan Keith had a year that every hockey player dreams of and few believe possible.

It's among the great seasons by a defenseman in hockey history, but it's over and done with.

He doesn't have to live up to that, and he's not playing the game alone out there, even if it sometimes feels that way.

The Hawks don't need him to be Bobby Orr.

They don't need him to play half the game and be perfect.

They don't need him to live up to any standards that are impossible to meet.

They just need him to be Duncan Keith.

If he does that, their chances of getting to the big dance again are very good indeed.

Blackhawks will be without Sharp to open camp

By Tim Sassone

It doesn’t really matter that the Blackhawks will be without Patrick Sharp when training camp opens on Friday, or that they could be without Patrick Kane.

What the Hawks need is for their two offensive stars to be on the ice Oct. 7 in Dallas when the puck drops for the regular season.

Sharp, who underwent an emergency appendectomy Monday night, is expected to be sidelined for 3-4 weeks, which could make him questionable for the season opener.

Hawks team physician Dr. Michael Terry anticipates a full recovery for Sharp, and there have been instances where athletes return quicker than expected from an appendectomy.

Kane had surgery to repair a fractured left wrist on July 19 and is expected to get the splint removed Thursday.

Kane said last week he hoped to be ready to participate on the ice when camp opened, but that will depend on what the doctors say.

Barring an unexpected major setback, Kane certainly should be ready to start the regular season. In fact, he said he is hoping to get in 3-4 preseason games.

The Hawks have no other injuries heading to camp. Left wing Bryan Bickell told reporters Monday he is 100 percent recovered from the right wrist surgery he underwent last April during the playoffs to repair two torn tendons.

Enforcer deaths an eye-opener for current Hawks

Tracey Myers

Andrew Brunette was as touched by the NHL players’ deaths this summer as much as anyone. It stung that much more because he was a former teammate of Derek Boogaard, one of three enforcers who left us way too early.

The deaths of Boogaard, Rick Rypien and Wade Belak in such a short time span made it clear: being an NHL fighter isn’t just a physically tough job, but mentally and emotionally as well.

And this summer’s tragic consequences can no longer be ignored.

“We can’t just sweep it under the carpet. It's something we really need to take a hard look at,” the Chicago Blackhawks’ forward said Monday. “We have to open the lines of communication and players have to be willing to listen and speak.”

And therein lies the most important lesson of this tragic summer: if a player feels he’s in trouble, “I need help” needs to be part of his vernacular.

No, it’s not easy to admit, whether it’s an NHL tough guy or anyone else who has a certain level of pride and would rather just put the stiff upper lip forward. But the consequences of silence, or help not coming in time, has proven deadly.

Blackhawks enforcer John Scott, also a former Boogaard teammate, has struggled with the fighter’s life. He said his wife is his sounding board but that doesn’t stop his family from worrying. But talk, he said, is a big help.

“It just comes with the job and you have to talk about it,” he said. “Wade (Belak) sounded like a fun-loving guy. But worry and fear gets to you, and I guess he couldn’t talk about it, let it out. It’s better to talk than to keep it balled up inside. But it’s something to keep your eye on. Obviously I don’t want it to happen to me.”

New Blackhawks forward Jamal Mayers doesn’t put himself into the enforcer category - “If I’m in a fight it’s more a reactionary thing when I’m mad or upset.” He said he can’t imagine the toll it takes on those who rely on fighting to stay in the lineup.

“Those guys have to fight when they’re not mad and to think about it the night before, I don’t know. That sounds like a tough job,” said Mayers. “It’s awful. You think about them during this time and it certainly raises a lot of questions as to the ‘Why?’”

Three players are gone too soon, the ‘Why?’ for them unanswered. Current and former enforcers can learn from this - anyone that carries a mental or emotional burden of any kind can learn from this. Talking can be healing. It can also be lifesaving.

“The awareness level of players has to be much higher than it has been,” Brunette said. “This has been a real eye-opener.”

Avalanche draft pick Gabriel Landeskog getting acclimated to new team

By Adrian Dater

Gradually, they trickled off the ice until only one player was left, one with the number 92, signifying the year he was born. Don't let the good looks, big contract and fancy high number fool you. Gabriel Landeskog is a rink rat.

"I like to be on the ice. I just want to be out there as much as I can," Landeskog said Tuesday after the first day of Avalanche rookie camp at the Family Sports Center. "Especially, on the first day like this. You want to get the touch and get the feel again."

The second overall pick in this year's NHL draft, Landeskog is getting to know his new team and city. Living in a hotel room in the south end of the metro area with rookie teammate Brad Malone, Landeskog said he's "gotten to eat in just about every restaurant in the Park Meadows Mall by now."

One place Landeskog hasn't visited is the new Ikea furniture and accessories store near the mall. A Swede, new in town, not having gone to Ikea yet?

"I was joking with my dad about it the other day. I said if I miss Sweden a little bit, I'll just go in there and hang out," said Landeskog, a native of Stockholm.

While he still has to prove himself on the ice, beginning with regular Avs training camp Saturday, odds are high Landeskog will be calling Denver his main residence throughout the coming season. He signed a three-year contract with a cap hit of $3.57 million, and the Avs are barely above the NHL's cap floor of $48.3 million. The Avs have plenty of need for size and scoring up front, something Landeskog, 6-foot-1, 204 pounds, is expected to provide.

And Landeskog's former junior team, the Kitchener Rangers of the Ontario Hockey League, were so convinced he'd make the Avalanche this season they released him from their roster. OHL bylaws say they can keep only two European players at a time, and Kitchener did not protect his rights.

"He's going to stay in Colorado out of training camp," Kitchener coach Steve Spott said recently.

"I talked with Steve Spott recently, and I always told him my goal is to play in the NHL this year. But I don't look at it at all like I've got some guaranteed spot here."

Landeskog and other rookies skated and did drills for an hour with coaches, then spent another hour skating with veterans. Landeskog spent some time on a line with Matt Duchene, among others.

"The first time I skated with him a few days ago, I was pretty nervous. My passes were all over the place," Landeskog said. "But I'm feeling more comfortable with everything a little bit every day."

Hishon sidelined.

Avs rookie and 2010 first-round pick Joey Hishon did not take part in camp Tuesday. Hishon, drafted 17th, is suffering from concussion symptoms suffered during the playoffs with Owen Sound of the OHL. The Avs said Hishon has not been cleared by the team's medical staff.

Bankruptcy proposal, if approved, could allow sale of Stars to proceed

KATE HAIROPOULOS

The next step in the drawn-out sale of the Stars is expected to happen as early as Wednesday in a Delaware district court. Monarch Alternative Capital, which took control when Hicks Sports Group defaulted on $525 million in loans in 2009, has plans to submit a prepackaged bankruptcy proposal to the court. Delaware's known as an efficient place to handle bankruptcy cases.

Vancouver businessman Tom Gaglardi has already submitted a bid to buy the Stars. Once the court deals with the bankruptcy filing, it can allow the sale to proceed.

Prepackaged bankruptcy is considered to be a smooth process, as long as the Gaglardi bid appeases creditors. Other interested parties could still place higher bids than Gaglardi's.

With the Stars practicing in Frisco in advance of training camp opening Friday in Prince Edward Island, Canada, captain Brenden Morrow said Tuesday that the sale is not a major topic of conversation in the locker room.

"I've heard for a year-and-a-half now it will be done next week," he said. "It happens when it happens.

"It's really nothing that between these doors here we're concerned with. Our checks don't bounce. We want to have stable ownership and some leadership from upstairs long term, but right now it's not something we focus on."

Bernhardt dismissed: Tim Bernhardt, the Stars' director of amateur scouting, has been dismissed, general manager Joe Nieuwendyk said. Bernhardt has been with the club since 1993 and played a role in the Stars' decisions in the NHL draft. Les Jackson, director of scouting and player development, will absorb Bernhardt's duties. Speaking from the NHL prospects camp in Traverse City, Mich., Nieuwendyk said the dismissal was a result of "difference of opinion" but credited Bernhardt for doing "some very good things over the years."

‘Difference of opinion’ leads to Stars dismissing director of amateur scouting

Kate Hairopoulos / Reporter

Tim Bernhardt, the Stars’ director of amateur scouting, has been dismissed, general manager Joe Nieuwendyk said.

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Brenden Morrow: Benn 'as good as any' Star in years; team thrives in underdog role

From Staff and Wire Reports

The turmoil that has followed the Dallas Stars in recent years has only intensified over the past five months. After missing out on a playoff spot by two points in April, the Stars lost one of the league’s best players when center Brad Richards signed with the New York Rangers in July. All the while, Tom Hicks’ shadow has been looming over the franchise, and until the team can find a new owner, it’s likely to be strapped for cash.

But none of that has tempered Brendan Morrow’s optimism about the upcoming NHL season. The Stars’ captain told USA Today’s Kevin Allen that though the loss of Richards will sting, the Stars have young players who can step in and fill the void.

Specifically, Morrow is pinning his hopes on young winger Jamie Benn.

"If you don't know about him now, you will know about him soon, because he is as good as any player I've seen come through Dallas in a long time," Morrow said of Benn.

At age 22, Benn is coming off his second consecutive 22-goal season despite missing 13 games with injuries. Benn’s production soared at the end of the year, when he averaged a point per game over the Stars’ final 36 contests.

Morrow was also encouraged by the mid-season acquisition of Alex Goligoski, who the Stars picked up from Pittsburgh in exchange for James Neal and Matt Niskanen. Morrow said Goligoski reminds him of another defenseman from the Stars’ past.

"I was blown away with how good Goligoski is," Morrow told Allen. "He is so smooth. We haven't had a player like that since (Sergei) Zubov. Goligoski makes plays with his head up. His passes are all crisp, on the tape. He shoots for sticks on the power play, which is an element we haven't had since Zubov."

Morrow readily admitted that the Stars can’t completely replace the production they lost when Richards bolted for New York, but he says his team has embraced the role of underdog for the 2011-12 season.

"We feel pretty good about ourselves," Morrow added. "We are right where we want to be. We want to fly under the radar."

Stars to honor late Skrastins

Kate Hairopoulos / Reporter

The Stars will wear a No. 37 decal on the back of their helmets for the upcoming season in honor of former defenseman Karlis Skrastins, who died last week in a tragic plane crash, along with his new Russian team, Lokomotiv.

The Stars will also honor Skrastins and other NHL players and alumni who passed away this summer and pause for a moment of silence before the Stars' first home preseason game Sept. 22 against Colorado.

Stars lenders support bankruptcy plan

By Steven Church

Lenders for the Dallas Stars hockey team, the last professional sports club owned by former billionaire Tom Hicks, voted to support a pre-packaged bankruptcy that would sell the team at a court-approved auction, a person familiar with the results said.

Under the proposed bankruptcy plan, investor Tom Gaglardi, chairman and chief executive officer of Sandman Hotels, Inns & Suites, would be the lead bidder for the team, said the person, who declined to be identified because the plan is not yet public.

Among lenders who voted, those holding more than two-thirds of the Stars' bank loans support the proposal, the person said. The team plans to file bankruptcy, most likely in Wilmington, Del., within the next few days and seek approval from a judge to hold an auction, said another person who is involved in the bankruptcy planning.

The Stars, who moved to Dallas in 1993, would be the fifth professional sports team to file bankruptcy in the last two years.

The Los Angeles Dodgers baseball team filed in June, the Texas Rangers baseball team -- at that time owned by Hicks -- filed last year and the Chicago Cubs baseball team filed in 2009, one year after former owner Tribune Co. went bankrupt.

The Phoenix Coyotes hockey team filed in 2009 and, like the Rangers and the Cubs, was sold under court supervision. The National Hockey League took ownership of the Coyotes and is looking for a buyer willing to keep the team in Arizona.

Hicks, 65, fell off the Forbes list of billionaires in 2010.

Hicks' holding company for the Stars and the Rangers defaulted on $525 million in loans after missing interest payments, Bloomberg data show.

All Cory Emmerton is thinking about is making Red Wings’ roster

By HELENE ST. JAMES

Cory Emmerton spent his summer thinking and talking about the Detroit Red Wings. He wants to make the team this season, and odds are that he will. He still had to explain to family and friends why it's not a given.

Emmerton, 23, is a talented forward, a player who is good defensively and who can handle the puck. The Wings picked him up with the No. 41 selection in the 2006 NHL draft, and he has spent the past three seasons maturing in the American Hockey League. He can't, in fact, be sent down without being exposed on waivers anymore, and the Wings aren't going to risk losing a promising prospect for nothing. That still doesn't mean Emmerton will be a regular, as the Wings already have 13 forwards allotted toward this season's team.

"You just kind of have to use that pressure to work that much harder," Emmerton said after an informal skate at Joe Louis Arena this week. "They're not just going to give me a spot because I can be put on waivers. They're going to look to see who is playing the best and who is going to help the team. I just look at it as there being one spot open, and it's whoever is going to play the best is going to get that spot.

"It's one thing to make the team, it's another to be an everyday player. So I'm just looking at phase one, just making the team for now and then working my way up the lineup. It's not going to be easy, and it might take awhile, but I feel like I'm ready to play. We'll see what happens in preseason and at training camp."

Emmerton, 6 feet and 190 pounds, showed some of his skill last season, when he scored in his NHL debut on Jan. 22 against Chicago. He played two games for the Wings, hindered from being first to be called up after spraining his right MCL early in the season with Grand Rapids. He had 12 goals and 26 assists in 65 games for the Griffins, despite not feeling fully comfortable with his knee until close to season's end.

"It took awhile after I got back playing in January," Emmerton said. "I basically wore a brace 24/7. I wasn't doing anything for a month straight. It didn't even bother me late in the season, I just didn't feel as good on the ice. Now I feel great, and I feel ready."

Emmerton spent his summer preparing to earn a spot in the Wings' rotation, spurred by the enriching experience of spending the playoffs with the Wings.

"It doesn't seem like a lot, just practicing with the guys, but it helps more than you could ever really know, or, at the time, really think," he said. "It really sets yourself up to improve -- you're always at that high intensity, and just playing with the best players in the world makes you that much better. I just think the playoffs from last year really helped me, and I stayed at that high intensity going into summer and built off that."

Summer was spent in St. Thomas, Ontario, where Emmerton found himself explaining many times to those around him that, yes, he's on a two-way contract, but, no, that doesn't mean he's automatically spending another year in Grand Rapids. "It's tough to explain to them that I don't really have anywhere to go," Emmerton said. "I have to make the team. I don't want to go anywhere else, and I don't want to go to Grand Rapids. I don't want to be in another organization. So I just told them that I plan on making the team so I don't have to worry about any of that stuff.

"It's the only thing I've really thought about all summer. There's not much else to think about besides that spot and making the team. Camp is coming closer, but it's going to feel like an eternity before that kind of decision is made. I'm just here enjoying myself, trying to get ready."

Red Wings: Notebook

Ted Kulfan/ The Detroit News

Detroit— It’s not like winning the lottery, but you have to believe Ian White is feeling like that just happened.

The defenseman, signed as a free agent over the summer by the Red Wings, will open training camp and the exhibition season as Nicklas Lidstrom's partner.

Welcome to the Red Wings, Ian White, indeed.

"Hopefully the coaches see something and there's good chemistry," White said. "He makes it pretty easy to play with him. I'm going to try not to screw up and make some plays."

When Brian Rafalski retired in June, the Red Wings were left without a puck-moving right-hander who could develop some chemistry with the seven-time Norris Trophy-winning Lidstrom.

Enter White, who signed a two-year contract worth $5.75 million July 2. He's not Brian Rafalski, but the Red Wings believe White can help fill Rafalski's void.

"He's just a hockey player, he knows how to play," coach Mike Babcock said.

White is not big (5-foot-10, 190 pounds), but can be feisty, thick-bodied and intense.

White had four goals and 22 assists in 78 games with three teams (Calgary, Carolina, San Jose) last season, with 26 penalty minutes. With San Jose in the playoffs, he had one goal and eight assists in 17 games.

"Playing against him, he's a competitive guy who works hard and he's able to join the rush," Lidstrom said. "He's a good puck-mover and skater.

"It's just a matter of finding chemistry early. Sometimes you just click right away. It's just little things, reading off each other, and after a while you don't think even about it, you know where the other guy will be."

Defensive pairings

Babcock said he'll open the exhibition season keeping Brad Stuart and Niklas Kronwall together, while pairing Mike Commodore with rookie Brendan Smith.

Commodore, a free agent who also signed over the summer (one year, $1 million), provides size (6-4, 233) and can kill penalties.

"Commodore is a physical guy who we need to play hard, be a good penalty killer and be a good teammate," Babcock said.

Smith is a former first-round pick who is likely to start the season in Grand Rapids.

In mourning

The plane crash that killed the Lokomotiv hockey team in Russia last week still resonates with Pavel Datsyuk.

Skating for the first time since the accident in his home country, Datsyuk mourned the loss of former Red Wings teammate Ruslan Salei, assistant Brad McCrimmon (Lokomotiv's coach) and the others.

"Everybody kind of wants to know, 'Why did this happen?'" Datsyuk said. "It's just sad."

Datsyuk, however, doesn't believe the accident will sway players from going to the KHL if an opportunity arises.

"Not too much will change," he said. "You don't know what reasons (players have). (The KHL) pays good money and the hockey is better there."

Detroit — The plane crash that killed the entire Lokomotiv hockey team in Russia occurred a week ago, but the sadness is still evident in Pavel Datsyuk.

Skating for the first time at Joe Louis Arena since the devastating accident back in his home country, Datsyuk mourned the loss of former Wings teammate Ruslan Salei, assistant coach Brad McCrimmon (who was to be Lokomotiv's head coach) and numerous other Russian players who were aboard the flight.

"Everybody kind of want to know, 'Why did this happen,'" said Datsyuk, who alerted his teammates of the crash the morning it happened.

Along with Salei and McCrimmon, Datsyuk said he played with several of the players on Russian national teams, played against many of the players either in the NHL or Russia, and was friendly with some of Lokomotiv's support staff.

"It's just sad," Datsyuk said.

The crash brought attention to Russia's troubling transportation system, which has been plagued with loose safety standards.

The Lokomotiv flight was a charter flight, which Datsyuk said is popular among Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) teams because of the ability to easily transport equipment.

Datsyuk doesn't believe this incident will sway players from going to the KHL if an opportunity arises.

The salaries and level of play has improved to the point where the KHL is a viable alternative to the NHL.

"Not to much will change," Datsyuk said. "You don't know what reasons (players have)."
Detroit — Detroit Red Wings captain Nicklas Lidstrom has a long history of turning his defense partners into better players.

This year, Ian White hopes to reap the benefits of playing alongside the future Hall of Famer.

Red Wings coach Mike Babcock said Tuesday that White will be paired with Lidstrom during training camp and the preseason. If they click, the partnership likely will extend into the regular season.

"I'm probably the luckiest guy in the hockey world right now," White said. "To be a new guy coming in here and to be paired up with one of the best defensemen to ever play the game, it's quite an honor. He's got a lot to teach me."

The Red Wings signed White, 27, to a two-year, $5.75 million deal July 2, not only because of his skill and competitiveness, but also because he's a right-handed shot, something the club was lacking on defense after Brian Rafalski retired in May.

The left-handed shooting Lidstrom likes being paired with a righty.

"I think it's very important," Lidstrom said. "It's easier (passing) D-to-D, it's easier to look up ice and make plays.

"And on the power play, you have the threat for a one-timer, instead of switching sides, and you can make those passes along the blue line much quicker. It makes it easier."

Lidstrom won his seventh Norris Trophy in 2010-11, when he was paired most of the season with the defensive-minded Brad Stuart, a left-handed shot. White is more similar in style, though not as dynamic offensively, as Rafalski, Lidstrom's partner the previous three seasons.

Lidstrom doesn't believe it will take long to develop chemistry with White.

"Sometimes you click right away," Lidstrom said. "You have to get a feel for each other and get an idea of how he's reading plays — whether he likes to step up at the blue line, or how we play in our own zone, whether we're switching off. After a while, you're not even thinking about it. You know where he's going to be."

White's defense partners during a six-year career with Toronto, Calgary, Carolina and San Jose have included Luke Richardson, Hal Gill, Robyn Regehr and Nicklas Wallin. White has been getting accustomed to playing with Lidstrom during informal practices at Joe Louis Arena over the past week.

"He makes it pretty easy to play with out there," White said. "I'm just going to try not to screw up, and make some plays. It's going to be a great experience and I'm really looking forward to it.

"If we get off to a good start and work well together, it will be the start of a good partnership."

Babcock likes White's ability to move the puck and join the rush, his shot and his competitiveness. He's not big (5-foot-10, 200 pounds), but he gets his nose dirty and even fights on occasion.

"You don't say he's a world-class skater, he's just a hockey player," Babcock said. "We got to get him to be very good with his stick in the D-zone and not as confrontational. The smaller you are, the more you can play with your stick and the less you can play with your body the better off you are.

"Just move the puck and get 'er going, and if you get in trouble pass it to Nick. That's not a bad idea."

White is coming into an unfamiliar dressing room, never having played with anyone on the Red Wings and not knowing anybody on the team. But he already is impressed with Lidstrom as a person.

From everything I've heard about him, everything is true," White said. "He's a great leader and one of the all-time greats in the league. He's a very amiable person and likeable guy. He's a great captain and treats everyone with the utmost respect."

"He's a great influence. He's someone I can look up to."

Red Wings' Mike Babcock impressed by Gustav Nyquist, sets defense pairings for camp, preseason

By Ansar Khan

DETROIT – Detroit Red Wings coach Mike Babcock watched part of the prospects tournament in Traverse City over the weekend and was particularly impressed with forward Gustav Nyquist.

"What I saw in the rookie camp is Nyquist is going to be an NHL player for sure," Babcock said Tuesday. "When is he going to be that?"

Not this season. Nyquist will spend his first pro season with the Grand Rapids Griffins, honing the skills that made him a two-time finalist for the Hobey Baker Award at Maine.

The future is bright for this strong two-way player who has a nose for the puck.

"He's like Pav (Datsyuk) in that he skates faster with the puck than he does without it, creates space every time he's on the ice," Babcock said. "He's professional with and without the puck. Looks like a hockey player. He's an NHL player."

--Also on Tuesday, Babcock revealed his top-four defense pairings for training camp and the preseason:

Nicklas Lidstrom-Ian White
Niklas Kronwall-Brad Stuart
Jonathan Ericsson-Jakub Kindl
Brendan Smith-Mike Commodore

"I'll play (Kindl) and Smith probably six games in exhibition to give them the opportunity they need to show what they're capable of doing," Babcock said. "The main guys I'll play four, Commodore probably five, White probably five just because I don't know them as good."

--Kronwall stepped up in the playoffs last season, surpassing Lidstrom as the team's leader in ice time, as Lidstrom wasn't used on the penalty kill. Babcock said that won't change this season.

"Kronner's got to play," Babcock said. "Kroner should be our highest minute guy and Nick (Lidstrom) 2."

--Babcock wouldn't reveal the line combinations he'll start with, saying it doesn't matter because he'll change things up anyway. As for whether Datsyuk and Henrik Zetterberg will play together, he said, "First day of training camp they're apart, third day they're probably going to be together."

--He said they need "bounce-back years" from Johan Franzen, Valtteri Filppula and Jiri Hudler.

--Hudler is the only regular who hasn't yet arrived in Detroit to skate with the team, but Babcock said he's fine with that. He said Hudler is working out like crazy in Montreal and should arrive for camp in great shape.

--Babcock said goaltender Jimmy Howard is in very good shape. He's also not ready to hand over the back-up job to Ty Conklin, the ex-Red Wing who is coming off a mediocre season in St. Louis.

"No question (Conklin has to play better)," Babcock said. "Mac (Joey MacDonald) wants to play, too. Mac doesn't think he's going anywhere. Conks thinks he's on the team, so that's a great thing."

DETROIT -- Detroit Red Wings forward Pavel Datsyuk was back on the ice Tuesday at Joe Louis Arena, skating with teammates for the first time since Sept. 7, when he lost a few friends and many acquaintances in the Lokomotiv Yaroslavl plane crash that claimed 44 lives.

Datsyuk, the team's only Russian player, said he is still trying to get over the tragedy in which former Red Wings assistant coach Brad McCrimmon and defenseman Ruslan Salei died.

"I talked to my friends in Russia, now everybody waiting (to find out) why this happened, why the plane crashed," Datsyuk said. "I lost friends, everybody still sad about what happened."

Air travel in Russia has been a concern for many years. Datsyuk said it's something that players in the KHL and others who fly in that country just have to deal with.

"We really have no choice. If we have contract, we have contract," Datsyuk said. "We take what they give us. We want to fly better, but sometimes (it's) a lot better when you fly charter. It's more problem when you fly the other way (commercial)."

He said the disaster is sure to be ing out changes in regulations and safety standards.

"For sure it's changed now," he said. "I wish it changed not after it happened, I wish it changed before."

He doesn't believe the crash will prompt North American players from avoiding the Kontinental Hockey League.

"They pay good money," Datsyuk said. "I think so, not too much change."

Oiliers shut out Jets, remain undefeated at Young Stars tournament

By Joanne Ireland,

PENTICTON, B.C. - When Tyler Bunz skated out to the crease to face the baby Winnipeg Jets, he was determined to put in a solid night's work.

He did better than that.

In the lone game on Tuesday's calendar at the Young Stars tournament, the Edmonton Oilers goaltending prospect turned away all 24 shots he faced in a 2-0 victory.

"I was watching the clock right from the first period, trying not to allow a goal," he said after registering his shutout. "It was one of those games where I felt real confident. At the morning skate, I felt really good on the ice, really good in the crease and that transferred over to the game. The guys did a real good job of blocking shots as well. That helped a lot."

Three minutes into the contest, Chase Schaber put away a rebound - the first goal Winnipeg had allowed in the tournament having rolled over the San Jose Sharks 4-0 in their opener. Still in the first, on the heels of some impressive power-play work by Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, Ryan Lowery turned a man advantage into a 2-0 lead with a shot from the point.

Bunz, meanwhile, set the stage for his night's work with a short-handed stop in the first and continued with a rebound he snagged out of the air in the second. He made another head-turning save in the third, then for good measure denied Levko Koper on the doorstep in the dying minutes.

"We got two quick goals, and for any goalie, that allows you to settle in," Bunz said. "Great team effort."

The Oilers, 7-2 victors over the Vancouver Canucks, are now the only undefeated team and will close out their appearance in the event with a game Wednesday against the Calgary Flames (0-1-1).
Edmonton Oilers' goalie Nikolai Khabibulin says his incarceration at the Tent City in Arizona for drunk driving earlier this summer was a sobering experience, something he's very glad is over with as he tries to rebound from last year's miserable season.

"I'm not going to lie ... it wasn't much fun and I learned my lesson," said the 38-year-old netminder, who was first charged in February of 2010 while driving to his home in the Phoenix area. "It was pretty hot there and you have boundaries and you have to do certain things. It's not what people are used to."

Certainly not hockey players.

Khabibulin was sentenced to 15 days but was allowed to leave on work release from 9 a.m. until 9 p.m. on weekdays. He spent the first 48 hours at the Tent City - an extension of the Maricopa County Jail. There were 24 bunks in his tent, about 15 occupied by a cross-section of people, all under the watchful eye of hardline Sheriff Joe Arpaio, who doesn't believe in coddling any of his prisoners.

"He's a unique character. Whatever, he's doing he believes in it," said Khabibulin, who was on the ice Tuesday with his teammates for an informal practice at Kinsmen Arena.

With Oilers' official training camp starting Friday with medicals, Khabibulin seems healthier and wiser after his error in judgment when he got behind the wheel of his Ferrari. "It certainly nice to put this behind me. I didn't want this dragging into another year. As much as I tried not to think about it last season, it was there in the back of my mind. If the season had been better (10-32-4, 3.40 average, .890 save percentage) it would have been easier but we weren't winning and it (upcoming incarceration) was always there. I'm more relaxed now," he said.

Also humbled. "There were a lot of people I talked to. Contractors, some are CEOs of companies, some regular people and we all talked about the things we did. We all said if we could get this back, we'd never do it. It's tough to deal with, especially when you're in the media. My daughter just turned 19 and she reads the Internet. She wasn't very happy. It's not like she was giving me a hard time ... she would say something funny to me, but I know she was crying the first few days I was there. That was hard on me. I'm pretty sure with what I've done, she'll learn from this too."

The desert was hot. "One day it was 108 degrees in the shade without AC," said the goalie. "We could get water from a vending machine (area) ... that was the only place that was cool. You would try to spend an extra five minutes there." The food was very bad. "I tried it once and I didn't want to try it again. The first 48 hours I was there, I lost six or seven pounds. That is just sitting on a bed, laying around."

Khabibulin behaved himself. "If I did something wrong, they could put you in pink," said the goalie, who was recognized by a few inmates.

"People wanted to talk. There were no hockey guys but some (prisoners) were from Boston or people who used to watch the Coyotes from when I played there," said Khabibulin, who sheepishly admitted he signed a few autographs for prisoners. He was also called to the detention office a few times to do the same thing.

The goalie can drive a vehicle now after "some traffic school" and says he has a "piece of paper" that allows him to cross the border to play.

Now, he has to get back to playing like an NHL starter. He still feels he's got the goods to be the No. 1 guy after starting 48 games last year, with Devan Dubnyk pushing him.

"It's always a matter of pride, whether you're a goalie or another player ... you want to believe in your ability. I believe I can still play at a high level," said Khabibulin, who had some dark days last season, winning just 10 times, but says he's never thought he was done as an NHLer.

"When you go on a long losing streak and nothing seems to go right, it's more discouraging than having lost your confidence. I've put a lot of work in this summer, starting earlier, not many days off. I have a little extra motivation this year to be in better shape (he was coming off back surgery last fall) and be quicker. I still have the motivation. You see a guy like (Dwayne) Roloson who is almost 42, who had a pretty good regular season and a really good playoff. I think that's encouraging for anybody."

There are question marks from the management, probably from fans, who want to see if he can talk the talk and walk the walk.

"The only way is to go on the ice and prove I can still play. It comes down to when the games start. If I do well, everybody will be happy. If not, then I guess not," he said.

Edmonton - Near as Ryan Martindale can tell, he has finished growing
lengthwise.
It's the width he is working on, even after packing another 15 pounds onto
his six-foot-three frame this past off-season.
"Two-hundred and seven pounds," he proclaimed after another practice
with the Edmonton Oilers prospects.
"I definitely still have a lot of filling out to do. I think I could get 215. I think
that would be a good playing weight."

A third-round pick of the Oilers in the 2010 draft, Martindale had been
turning heads at this edition of the Young Stars Tournament, just as he did
in the previous seasons at last fall's inaugural event. It's hard not to stand out at
his size, but Martindale hasn't always done enough with his physical tools.

He has been encouraged to play bigger more often. And he did just that,
levelling two of the baby Winnipeg Jets before he wound up leaving
Tuesday's game with a hip flexor injury.

"At this size, I have to incorporate the physical aspect," Martindale
continued in pre-game chat. "(The Oilers) want me to be stronger on the
puck and use my body more and that's what I'm trying to do."

Martindale, who has played four seasons with the Ottawa 67's in the Ontario
Hockey League, is still young enough to go back for another season in
major junior, but it is far from his first choice.

Convinced he's ready to shift to the professional ranks, Martindale, who
turns 20 on Oct. 27, is currently auditioning for a contract.

"This is the first time in my career where I don't know where I'm playing. I'm
hoping for the best. Hopefully, I can earn a contract and play at a higher
level," he said.

Martindale played in the opening game of the tournament, when the Oilers
thumped the Vancouver Canucks 7-2, and again Tuesday against the
Winnipeg Jets when he was a late addition to the lineup. He took Cameron
Abney's spot, and was moved from centre to wing.

"We want versatility ... and organizationally, we're deep up the middle," said
Todd Nelson, the head coach of the Oklahoma City Barons, the Oilers' American Hockey League affiliate.

This is the Oilers first chance to have a look at Martindale this season. He
did not make it to the development camp in July as he had been knocked
out with another bout of tonsillitis. The tonsils were removed to put an end
to that ongoing trouble, and a couple of weeks later he was back in the
weight room.

"That was a missed opportunity, but that's why I worked so hard this
summer. I knew I had to make up for that at this tournament," he said. "I
feel a lot stronger on the ice and a lot quicker, too."

Martindale, who hails from Bronklin, Ont., which is about an hour's drive
from Toronto, is coming off an 83-point season. He played on one of the
league's more dominant lines with Tyler Toffoli (a second-round pick of the
Los Angeles Kings in 2010) and Shane Prince (the Ottawa Senators' second-rounder in 2011).

"Last year, if I remember correctly, in the first game (of the Young Stars
Tournament) he was just OK," said Nelson. "You didn't really notice him,
then he got better as the tournament went on. The other night, he was
playing with confidence."If I remember correctly, in the first game (of the
Young Stars Tournament) he was just OK," said Nelson. "You didn't really
notice him, then he got better as the tournament went on. The other night,
he was playing with confidence."
Edmonton Oilers

Oilers' Pitlick raring to go

By Joanne Ireland,

PENTICTON, B.C. - It has been six months, 13 days and way too many wasted hours since he last played a game.

And yes, Tyler Pitlick was counting.

"I've been itching to get back at it. It's been a long time," he said, before charging out on to the ice with the Edmonton Oilers prospects in a game against the Winnipeg Jets.

Pitlick had his season with the Medicine Hat Tigers cut short when he got tangled up behind the net with a defenceman from the Red Deer Rebels.

Left with a broken ankle, the Oilers 2010 second-round selection was not able to take part in the Tigers playoff run - one that ended with a loss to the Kootenay Ice in Game 4 of the Western Hockey League final.

"It was right before playoffs and I was just starting to get going, I thought," said Pitlick, who put up 62 points in the 56 games he did play. "I was really looking forward to continuing the season and making a run with the boys.

"(But) I worked hard in the summer and I'm ready to continue on. I'm going to get back to doing what I was doing."

Pitlick signed his NHL entry level contract in April and will likely start the season with the Oklahoma City Barons. After spending the season on the wing with the Tigers, he has been shifted to centre at the tournament.

"He covers a lot of ice quickly, he has a great shot," said Todd Nelson, the Barons head coach. "I just want to see how he plays in his own end."

So long Atlanta

Nelson was on the coaching staff with the Atlanta Thrashers for two seasons (2008-10) and was not among those supporting the relocation to Winnipeg.

"I still think to this day that that market could have a team," he said. "But eventually you have to have a winner, and if the ownership had made a commitment to spent a few bucks things could have worked.

"I had a lot of friends who worked for the organization and some lost their jobs ... so it hits home with me. It's a wonderful city and it's too bad it didn't work."

Hamilton no longer hobbling

Curtis Hamilton, who left Monday's practice because of a bothersome leg, was back on the ice the next day and in the lineup for the game against the Jets. He did not take part in the team bike ride from Naramata to Penticton - a downhill trek that didn't seem to tax any of the participants.

EDMONTON - Talk to the key members of the Edmonton business community, the movers and shakers, the people who make things happen politically, and they'll tell you the latest Katz controversy is of little consequence or significance.

Daryl Katz making Vancouver a more primary residence than Edmonton for the next few years shouldn't create a problem in closing the downtown arena deal.

"Daryl Katz isn't any less committed to Edmonton or the Oilers now than he was before," offered one source who ranks as one of the most credible of all.

"I don't believe there is any case to be made or any concern whatsoever about Daryl Katz abandoning Edmonton or abandoning the Oilers. I think there is a real confidence that Edmonton and the Oilers are going to remain a big part of his world."

Katz has spent significant time at various residences in the past couple of years, including Vancouver and Palm Springs, but this is more about his kids reaching the age to be enrolled in Mulgrave, a highly regarded private school in West Vancouver offering "inspiring excellence in education and life."

When you're a multi-billionaire and can buy perhaps Position A of all Vancouver penthouse condos at the top of the Fairmont Pacific Rim Hotel, a reported 6,000-square-foot pad worth $15 million, in addition to maintaining a fully-staffed house rumoured to be worth $24 million in Edmonton, another pricey piece of property in Palm Springs, etc., it must be nice.

A politically well positioned source also said he doesn't believe the revelation of Katz' Vancouver condo and kids starting school at Mulgrave will affect the completion of the downtown arena deal.

"The arena project is still on track. It's important for the city and it's important for the province. The city is committed. The province is committed."

So stand down, Edmonton.

What we're dealing with here is another massive Daryl Katz failure to communicate problem.

Edmonton shouldn't have a big problem with Daryl Katz spending more days living in the penthouse of a Coal Harbour complex in Vancouver than in his multi-million-dollar house in Edmonton. Nor should people have a problem with his kids going to school in Vancouver.

But Katz, predictably, is going to have a perception problem with the populace. The man has a way of inviting that.

Most of Katz's problems as owner of the Edmonton Oilers are perception problems caused by heavy-handed actions and massive failures to communicate.

Hostile takeover to become owner. Slight-of-hand $100-million contribution toward the construction of the arena, redirected toward the surrounding downtown district project and then back to the arena as a negotiation tactic. Less-than-subtle implied threats suggesting potential for relocation to Hamilton, Quebec City and even - gimme a break - Enoch.

Another source said Katz and the Oilers have made it far more difficult for the province to produce a creative way to contribute the final $100 million to complete the financing of the project than it has had to be. But there's still the confidence it will get done.

"The worst government relations you could possibly have had," said another source, also confident it will still get done.

The perception of Katz becoming something less of an Edmontonian doesn't help that.

Every city would love to have a year-round resident, a born-and-raised, live-here-till-he-dies guy owning their hometown teams. And Katz's problem is that he tried to paint that perception of himself when he took over the ownership of the team.

His record as a philanthropist in Edmonton is such that his status as an Edmontonian ought not be questioned.

Owners don't do anything. They don't have to go to the Oilers office every day to work on their property.

A significant number of pro sports franchises around the world, including the top soccer teams in England, are owned by people who don't live in those communities.

Many, like Katz, choose to have little or no communication with their customers or overall fan base.

In the case of Daryl Katz, though, it's sad.

When he took over the Oilers with the vision of building the much needed, new state-of-the-art NHL arena and image-changing downtown development to go with it, Katz had a chance to become Good King Daryl in Edmonton.

With every move he makes, including this one with the abominable lack of communication to precede it, he becomes just another ... owner.

Bunz still under Oilers spell

By ROBERT TYCHKOWSKI, QMI Agency

PENTICTON, B.C. - When you've been cheering for a team since you were so young that your second-favourite team was the Teletubbies, wearing their sweater, even in a prospects tournament, never gets old.

"It's pretty special, I grew up watching these guys my whole life," Tyler Bunz, Edmonton's starting netminder Monday night against Winnipeg. "Being from St. Albert it was pretty cool to be drafted by these guys, putting on an Oilers jersey for the first time last year, I don't think words can describe how I felt.

"I still get the same feeling every time I put it on. I want to go out there and represent the Oilers well."

Another year older, and that much closer to being a pro, Bunz views this year's camp as more of a business trip than a thrill - even though it's still pretty thrilling.

"I feel a little bit more comfortable this time," he said. "Last year the whole camp I was in awe of all the attention the Oilers get. This year it's a little different, I have one year under my belt and I'm more comfortable."

With Edmonton's long-term goaltending situation still uncertain, Edmonton's fifth-round pick in 2010 knows an opportunity to realize the lifelong dream is very real.

"That does enter your mind, you're getting to the age where you're going to have to start competing for a spot on this team," said Bunz, who went 35-13-8 last year with a .919 save percentage and 2.47 GAA in junior last year.

"It's quite the journey and it's not going to be easy. I know that I'm going to have to work hard on and off the ice.

"This year I have to focus on my season in Medicine Hat. It's going to be huge for me, I need a good start to have a crack at the World Junior team, which is something I really want to do."

Edmonton

Oilers' Nelson sad hockey failed in Atlanta

By ROBERT TYCHKOWSKI, QMI Agency

PENTICTON, B.C. - Todd Nelson wasn't popping any champagne corks or waving any flags when the Thrashers became the Jets last summer.

For him, it was a sad day when Atlanta's team moved to Winnipeg.

And not just because it's, you know, Winnipeg.

Nelson spent two seasons as an assistant coach with Atlanta and hates that hockey didn't get a fair chance to succeed.

"It's disappointing," said Nelson, a few hours before Edmonton played Winnipeg for the first time in 15 seasons. "I worked there for two years and I thought - I still think to this day - that that market can have a team.

"It's a shame because I really enjoyed my time there and really enjoyed the city. There are passionate (hockey) people there, but once again, they're paying top dollar to watch hockey and they want to have a winner."

The Thrashers had some big names who pass through town - Ilya Kovalchuk, Marian Hossa, Dany Heatley and Marc Savard, but only made the playoffs once in their existence. In a non-traditional southern U.S. market, that's pretty much a death sentence.

"After 12 years, eventually you're going to have to get a winner," said Nelson. "People want to see winners. If ownership had made the commitment to spend a few bucks, I think that things could have worked.

"They made the playoffs one year and in the two games they had at home, it was just electric in the building."

Nelson knows a lot of Thrashers employees who lost their jobs when the team packed up, forgotten victims in all the Manitoba euphoria.

"I have a lot of friends who worked in the organization, so it kind of hits home a bit with me. It's a wonderful city, it's too bad it didn't work.

"On the flip side of it, Winnipeg has an NHL team and tremendous support. It's a very exciting time for the Winnipeg fans."

TOUGH ONE TO MISS: Too bad the guys making up the Edmonton rosters for the Young Stars Tournament don't have a better eye for a good story.

If they did, the only Winnipeg-born player in Edmonton's camp would have been in the lineup for their first game against the Jets.

Instead, defenceman Tyler Schmidt had to watch from the stands.

"It would have been nice to play against the Jets and have that story for the rest of your life," he said. "Hopefully some day I'll get another crack at it."

Schmidt already has a decent story to tell from being on the front lines, right there among the screaming fans, the day Winnipeg got a team back.

"I was there when they announced it, down at The Forks," he said. "For the city, it's unbelievable. Everyone is so excited; it's going to be a great year."

But only being 21 he admits most of his memories of the original Jets are either foggy or second hand.

"I was probably five or six years old when they were there," he said. "I don't remember much of them, but I heard my grandparents and parents talking about the games through the years."

Florida Panthers’ Jacob Markstrom impressive in goal

By George Richards

The Panthers might have a rookie game left to be played, but it appears goalie Jacob Markstrom’s development camp is over. Next stop: Training camp.

Markstrom went 1-1 in the Panthers’ mini-tournament, beating Tampa Bay 4-2 on Sunday night before losing 3-1 Tuesday afternoon. Markstrom won’t be in goal for Wednesday’s game against the Lightning, as the Panthers have apparently seen enough — for now — of their supposed “goalie of the future.”

The Panthers’ rookie game against the Lightning will start at noon at the Coral Springs IcePlex. Admission is free. Brian Foster will play the entire game in goal, coach Chuck Weber said.

“I think you can see a huge difference in him from last year,” goalie coach Robb Tallas said of Markstrom. “You can see the confidence. And this from a guy who hasn’t played a full game since [February]. I’m real happy with how he played. He tracked the puck well, the goals that beat him were good shots. He’s made big saves. He wants to stop every single puck. He came into camp with a mind that he’s showing everyone he’s healthy. He’s making a stand for himself.”

Markstrom missed the second half of last season after injuring his knee while playing for Florida’s AHL affiliate in Rochester, N.Y. Although it looks like Markstrom will start this season with the Panthers’ new AHL team in San Antonio, Markstrom has looked sharp and should push goalies Jose Theodore and Scott Clemmensen. If one of them is injured or falters, Markstrom is working toward being ready to make the jump.

Clemmensen has just one year left on his contract, meaning Markstrom probably will be with the Panthers no later than next season.

For now, the next step is training camp. The Panthers will have physicals Friday and hold their first practice of the 2011-12 season Saturday in Coral Springs.

“I felt pretty good, but it’s been some time since I last played,” Markstrom said Tuesday. “I got two games in and feel good. It’s getting there. This was a good game to play in, but it’s too bad we couldn’t get the win.”

elsewhere

• The Panthers had a 1-0 lead Tuesday on the Nashville Predators after Jonathan Huberdeau redirected a rebound from an Erik Gudbranson shot past Atte Engren. Nashville scored twice in the second period and once early in the third to get a 3-1 win. The Predators went 2-0 in the rookie tournament.

• Nashville forward Craig Smith, 21, had an impressive few days, scoring four goals Monday against Tampa Bay and two against Florida on Tuesday. Smith had three goals and three assists in seven games at the World Championships this summer in Slovakia, prompting him to forgo his junior season at the University of Wisconsin to give it a go with the Predators.

Smith should play in one of the two preseason games against the Panthers next Monday in Sunrise.

“I knew he was a good player,” Markstrom said.

• Florida’s Quinton Howden left the game after a big hit in the second period. Weber, the Panthers’ AHL coach who is behind the bench for the rookie games, said Howden came out of the game for precautionary reasons.
Huberdeau makes big opening impression

By George Richards

The question isn’t whether Jonathan Huberdeau will make the Florida Panthers roster. It’s when.

Huberdeau, the third overall pick of the 2011 NHL Draft, played in his first game as a member of the Panthers on Sunday evening. Yes, it was just a rookie league game against the Tampa Bay Lightning, but for Huberdeau, it was nice to put the hectic summer behind him as he begins his long climb toward making the Panthers this season.

“I thought it was pretty good for the first game,” the 18-year-old said after scoring a goal in Florida’s 4-2 win against the Lightning at the Coral Springs IcePlex. “I have to prove a lot and have to be better in the next game. This is just the first game, and we haven’t played together often. I’m looking forward to the next game.”

When Florida drafted Huberdeau in June, the roster was in a state of flux. The Panthers had less than $20 million committed to the 2011-12 roster, something that was fixed after Florida’s spending spree when the free agency market opened.

The Panthers signed a lot of veteran forwards after drafting Huberdeau, making his odds of making it this season a little longer. The front office said it is done rushing prospects up to the big club, so Huberdeau needs to be very impressive in the following weeks to make it.

“I think he has a lot more confidence since being at the Hockey Canada tryout this summer,” said defenseman Erik Gudbranson, the third overall pick by the Panthers in 2010. “He played extremely well there, and he brought that here. He continued the pace he was playing at. He’s making a huge difference out there.”

Florida has a number of options for Huberdeau. If it signs him to an entry-level contract, he could make the team and be given a nine-game regular-season “tryout.” If Florida likes what its sees and keeps Huberdeau after that point, his contract would kick in and he would likely stick for the rest of the season. If not, he would be returned to his junior team in the Quebec league for another year of seasoning.

“He’s a special player, can play any forward position,” Panthers general manager Dale Tallon said. “He is unselfish and makes other players better. He’s responsible defensively and competes each shift. He never takes one off. And he’s a wonderful kid. We’re in this for the long haul.”

On Sunday, Florida and the Lightning were tied at 1 in the second period when Huberdeau swept in and beat Jaroslav Janus with a sweet move.

The Panthers would like to see Huberdeau develop physically, although it’s apparent the skill and the talent is there.

“You can see the play there,” said Chuck Weber, coach of Florida’s AHL affiliate in San Antonio. Weber will coach the Panthers rookies this week. “He’s still working on his game, he’s learning the pro game. But you see a lot of special talent in that young man.”

Huberdeau was named the first star of Sunday’s game with Scott Timmins — who played in 19 games for the Panthers last season before sustaining a season-ending concussion — and Gudbranson following suit. Timmins scored the first goal on a rebound from a shot by Alex Petrovic. Florida built its lead to 3-1 in the second period when John McFarland picked off a pass at center ice and drove in on Janus and scored short-handed. Florida’s final goal came from Corey Durocher.

Goalie Jacob Markstrom played the entire game for the Panthers, making 17 saves.

“I thought we got off to a great start, really pushed the pace,” Weber said. “We had a great penalty kill, got a short-handed goal and a power-play goal. We got goals from all over. It was fantastic.”

• The Panthers’ rookies will have a short practice Monday morning in Coral Springs with the Lightning rookies taking on Nashville at 6 p.m. The Panthers will play the Predators on Tuesday at noon and have a rematch with the Lightning on Wednesday.
Wilson hopes 'dirty' style earns him a job on Panthers

By Harvey Fialkov, Sun Sentinel

One of the Panthers’ major weaknesses in recent seasons has been their inability to score those “dirty” goals in front of the net, a lost art not seen since Scott Mellanby or Dino Ciccarelli patrolled the crease in the ’90s.

Now that the Panthers are led by coach Kevin Dineen, who made a habit of deflecting shots in the crease during his stellar NHL career, they will seek out such players. They might just have one in rookie left wing Garrett Wilson.

“He’s a hard-nosed kid who goes to the net, kind of like Kevin Dineen, scoring the dirty goals,” Panthers GM Dale Tallon said.

Wilson, 20, a fourth-round pick from the 2009 Draft, has steadily progressed in his three seasons with Owen Sound of the OHL, and last year led the Attack to a championship with 40 goals and 46 assists, not including 21 points in 22 playoff games.

“I want to show Florida’s brass that I’m ready to make the next step to pro,” said Wilson, who didn’t distinguish himself in Tuesday afternoon’s 3-1 loss to the Nashville Predators prospects at Saveology.com Iceplex.

“I might’ve been trying too hard, so I need to slow it down a little tomorrow and keep it simple. … I need to prove I can be a third- or fourth-line guy in the NHL, a role player. I’ve accepted that. I like to bang in goals and hunt around the net for loose pucks. That’s what I do best.”

Wilson is over a concussion sustained in the third round-robin game of the Memorial Cup playoffs last season.

“[Wilson] comes in with great size and has a skill set to go with it, with a decent set of hands,” Dineen said.

Howden injured

Forward Quinton Howden, who has a chance of making the Panthers this season, was crushed against the boards by Nashville defenseman Scott Valentine in the second period and didn’t return.

AHL Rochester coach Chuck Weber said he kept him out for precautionary reasons after sustaining an upper-body injury.

Jonny on the spot

The Panthers’ top two picks from the past two years combined on Florida’s only goal, as Jonathan Huberdeau knocked in a rebound of Erik Gudbranson’s shot in the first period.

“They were a little bit bigger. They were a little bit more skilled [than Tampa],” said Huberdeau, who has two goals in two games. “We have to forget about that and get ready for tomorrow.”

Markstrom’s ready for camp

Nashville’s 2009 fourth-round pick Craig Smith beat goalie Jacob Markstrom twice, giving him six goals and an assist in two games.

“I knew he was a good player and you got a lot of good players on every team now, so you can’t just focus on one player, you’ve got to focus on the whole team,” said Markstrom, who gave up five goals on 56 shots in the two games.

Brian Foster will be in the nets for Wednesday’s rematch against Tampa Bay. …

Panthers skilled rookie Jonathan Hazen scored the winning goal in the postgame shooting exhibition, giving him two in two tries.

“Normally it’s tough for me, the shootout,” Hazen said with a thick French accent. “Huberdeau is good in shootout and doesn’t score. I have a lot of chances and am happy with that. I try to finish.”

Kings to give longtime N.Y. Islanders forward Trent Hunter a tryout

By J.P. Hoomstra Staff Writer

NHL: Forward has spent entire career with N.Y. Islanders.

Veteran forward Trent Hunter will join the Kings in training camp on a pro tryout contract.

The 31-year-old forward has spent his entire NHL career with the New York Islanders, for whom he played only 17 games last season before tearing the medial collateral ligament in his left knee Nov. 24.

Hunter can provide a physical presence from the right wing at 6-foot-3 and 210 pounds, but also brings some scoring touch. He had never scored fewer than 11 goals in an NHL season before 2010-11, when Hunter scored just one.

In 459 career NHL games, he has 99 goals, 229 points and 201 penalty minutes.

The Kings already signed a similar player, albeit with less offensive upside, in Ethan Moreau. Forward Colin Fraser is also in the mix for a bottom-six role along with Kyle Clifford, Brad Richardson, Trevor Lewis, Scott Parse and Kevin Westgarth. Jarret Stoll seems to have the third-line center position locked down, so that means Hunter will likely have to beat out one contracted player for a roster spot.
Question: Then with Europe, that’s obviously a big investment in terms of time, resources, etc. What is the trade-off there, in terms of what you invest versus what you get out of it?

MCGOWAN: “As an organization, we just kind of all come together, from Dean and Ron, Tim on the AEG side and me and Luc on the business side, and just determine if it’s something that makes sense for our organization. We all kind of have a gut check, get in a room and sign off on it and then go for it. The same thing applies, playing in Hamburg, playing in Berlin, taking the Kings to different places is, I think, a good thing for the NHL but also for the Kings. I think it’s just a unique thing. The players, it’s tough on them because the travel requirements are a little extensive, but I think when they look back on their careers, to be able to say they played NHL games in Berlin and Stockholm, I think that’s something they’re going to look back on fondly. It’s going to be cool to see how many Anze Kopitar fans come to Berlin. For a lot of those people, that’s going to be their only chance to ever see him play a live game, and I think that’s really unique. When we went to London (in 2007) and we played in Austria, I was amazed at the amount of Kopitar fans who were there. I think that’s just a cool thing to be a part of. Then, financially, it all makes sense for us. The league does very well on it and it’s another way for us to help AEG, by playing in AEG buildings, so it makes sense all around.”


Kings of the road

Posted by Rich Hammond

It’s almost time for Kings hockey, and that’s the case whether you happen to live in the greater Los Angeles area, Phoenix, Kansas City, Las Vegas, Anaheim, Germany or Sweden. From late September — the start of preseason play — to mid-October, the team will definitely be the Kings of the road. The preseason starts with split-squad games on Sept. 21 against Phoenix — one here, one there — and also includes two games at Staples Center and one in Anaheim, plus the annual Frozen Fury game in Las Vegas against Colorado (Oct. 1) and a game against Pittsburgh at the Sprint Center in Kansas City (Sept. 27), plus a road game at Colorado. After the Vegas game, it’s off to Europe for a preseason game in Hamburg and regular-season games in Stockholm and Berlin.

Of course, not every player/coach will make every preseason trip, but if you were to hit every game — including the two pre-Europe games in New Jersey and Philadelphia — you’d be flying a total of 16,870 miles in 26 days. Hopefully not in a middle seat.

Tickets are still on sale for the games in Las Vegas and Kansas City, but both are expected to sell out. That’s notable in terms of the Kansas City game, given that the Sprint Center holds 17,752 for hockey. The Kings played there in 2008 and drew 11,603, then again in 2009 and drew 9,972. The Sprint Center is owned by the city and operated by AEG, so the tie-in with the Kings is obvious. I spoke with Chris McGowan, the Kings’ chief operating officer, about the preseason games and the games in Europe, and why they take place...

Question: Over the years, the Vegas game seems to have evolved into a happening, instead of just a preseason game. What’s the importance of that game on your side of things?

MCGOWAN: “It’s viewed as important because it’s one of those unique events that we have on the calendar that we’ve been doing consistently. It’s an event that has become a tradition, and fans really look forward to going out to Las Vegas for a special weekend of Kings hockey. I think it’s just so unique. There’s really nothing like it around the NHL, where you go into a different market and play a preseason game every year like we do. So it has just been built into something that people put on their calendar every year and say, ‘I’m going to Vegas for the weekend and I’m going to enjoy a hockey game as well.’ Organizationally, it’s an important thing for us as well. For our business, it’s important for us to get a lot of Kings fans out in Las Vegas. There are a lot of Southern California natives who live out there who have grown to like hockey and like the Kings. There are a lot of people who drive to games from Vegas, or fly in and go to games. And they can get our games on TV out there, so it’s an important market to have a bunch of Kings fans there. We’ve been building in that market for 13, 14 years, and it’s a good market to build our brand.”

Question: Most fans understand why the Vegas game is done. Maybe fewer understand the Kansas City game. Is that more important to the AEG side of things? What’s the benefit on the Kings’ side?

MCGOWAN: “Clearly, there’s an importance on the AEG side of things. It’s an AEG building, and it’s good when we, as the Kings, can go and do something that helps AEG as a whole. AEG is a great owner for us, so we always like to repay them back, so to speak, and put another great event in the Sprint Center, which is another good hockey market. But I also think it’s good for the Kings as well. As your team gets better and has a wider appeal throughout the country, it’s good. I have no problem with having Kings fans in Kansas City who can go online, watch Center Ice or go on NHL.com and buy a jersey. As you’re building a brand, it’s just good to play in as many places as you can in the country. I also like going to Europe. Taking the Kings brand where it’s typically not, overall it’s just good for our organization.”

Question: And, if you sell out that game, it makes the market look stronger if there happens to be an NHL possibility...

MCGOWAN: “It’s definitely not a bad thing when you’re talking about a preseason game selling out, and when you’re talking about a potential market for a team to go there.”
AHL

I’ll be hosting a live chat on startribune.com Wednesday at noon, so please stop by with your Wild and NHL questions.

I’ll also be on KFAN with Paul Allen Friday morning at 10.

I went down to St. Thomas this morning, and the entire Wild NHL roster was down there skating.

The Wild just released its training camp roster, but that will expand in a few days when the Wild promotes a bunch of youngsters from the Traverse City Prospects Tournament.

Players report for training camp Friday. Friday will entail of physicals, fitness testing and photos. The first on-ice sessions begin Saturday.

The Wild will hold scrimmages Saturday and Sunday that will be open to the public from 10-11 a.m. at Xcel Energy Center.

Gate 1 at the X opens at 9:50 a.m.

Here is the prelim roster:

2011-12 MINNESOTA WILD TRAINING CAMP ROSTER

LEFT WINGS HT WT SHOOTS BORN BIRTHPLACE 2010-11 TEAM LGE GP PIM APTS ACQ

96 Pierre-Marc Bouchard 5-10 173 Left 4/27/84 Sherbrooke, Quebec Minnesota NHL 59 12 26 38 14 EN/02

18 Colton Gillies 6-4 207 Left 2/12/89 Surrey, British Columbia Houston AHL 64 11 15 26 82 EN/07

28 Matt Kassian 6-5 240 Left 10/28/86 Edmonton, Alberta Houston AHL 60 4 4 8 132 EN/05

48 Guillaume Latendresse 6-2 230 Left 5/24/87 Sainte-Catherine, Quebec Minnesota NHL 11 3 8 6 8 TRD/09

23 Eric Nystrom 6-1 193 Left 2/14/83 Syosset, New York Minnesota NHL 82 4 8 12 30 FA/10

CENTERS HT WT SHOOTS BORN BIRTHPLACE 2010-11 TEAM LGE GP PIM APTS ACQ

27 Cody Almond 6-2 221 Left 7/24/89 Calgary, Alberta Houston AHL 65 15 19 34 124 EN/07

21 Kyle Brodziak 6-2 209 Right 5/25/84 St. Paul, Alberta Minnesota NHL 80 16 21 37 56 TRD/09

7 Matt Cullen 6-1 200 Left 11/27/76 Virginia, Minnesota Minnesota NHL 78 12 27 39 34 FA/10

9 Mikko Koivu 6-2 214 Left 3/12/83 Turku, Finland Minnesota NHL 71 17 45 62 50 EN/01

45 Carson McMillan 6-1 190 Right 9/10/88 Brandon, Manitoba Houston AHL 78 12 10 22 80 EN/07

43 Warren Peters 6-0 201 Left 7/10/82 Saskatoon, Saskatchewan Houston AHL 62 15 17 32 47 FA/10

14 Darroll Powe 5-11 212 Left 6/22/85 Saskatoon, Saskatchewan Philadelphia NHL 81 7 10 17 41 TRD/11

36 Chad Rau 5-11 188 Right 1/18/87 Eden Prairie, Minnesota Minnesota Houston AHL 60 13 27 40 12 FA/10

19 Jeff Taffe 6-3 215 Left 2/19/81 Hastings, Minnesota Rockford AHL 74 30 37 67 22 FA/11

17 Casey Wellman 6-0 184 Right 10/18/87 Brentwood, California Houston AHL 42 14 21 35 14 FA/10

RIGHT WINGS HT WT SHOOTS BORN BIRTHPLACE 2010-11 TEAM LGE GP PIM APTS ACQ

73 Joel Broda 6-0 208 Left 11/24/89 Prince Albert, Saskatchewan Bakersfield ECHL 32 17 13 30 39 FA/10

22 Cal Clutterbuck 5-10 209 Right 11/18/87 Welland, Ontario Minnesota NHL 76 19 15 34 79 EN/06

29 Jon DiSalvatore 6-1 200 Right 3/30/81 Bangor, Maine Houston AHL 80 28 33 61 57 FA/09

15 Dany Heatley 6-4 220 Left 1/21/81 Freiburg, Germany San Jose NHL 80 26 46 64 56 TRD/11

41 Jed Ortmeyer 6-1 205 Right 9/3/78 Omaha, Nebraska San Antonio/Houston AHL 60 8 11 19 45 FA/11

79 Jarod Palmer 6-0 200 Right 2/10/86 Fridley, Minnesota Houston AHL 65 9 19 28 64 FA/10

10 Devin Setoguchi 6-0 200 Right 1/1/87 Taber, Alberta San Jose NHL 72 22 19 41 37 TRD/11

16 Brad Staubitz 6-1 215 Right 7/28/84 Edmonton, Alberta Minnesota NHL 71 4 9 173 TRD/10

DEFENSEMEN HT WT SHOOTS BORN BIRTHPLACE 2010-11 TEAM LGE GP PIM APTS ACQ

42 Drew Bagnall 6-3 222 Left 6/3/83 Oakbank, Manitoba Houston AHL 72 0 2 2 112 FA/10

44 Justin Falk 6-5 217 Left 10/11/88 Snowflake, Manitoba Houston AHL 55 3 11 14 41 EN/07

25 Jordan Hendry 6-2 200 Right 2/11/86 Milo, Alberta Chicago NHL 37 1 0 1 4 TRD/07

2 Mike Lundin 6-2 191 Left 9/24/84 Burnsville, Minnesota Tampa Bay NHL 69 1 11 12 FA/11

51 Jeff Penner 5-10 183 Left 4/13/87 Steinbach, Manitoba Providence/Houston AHL 67 5 18 23 38 TRD/11

39 Nate Prosser 6-2 221 Right 5/7/86 Elk River, Minnesota Houston AHL 73 8 19 27 31 FA/10

6 Marco Scandella 6-3 206 Left 2/23/90 Montreal, Quebec Houston AHL 33 3 16 19 17 EN/08

55 Nick Schultz 6-1 203 Left 8/25/82 Strasbourg, Saskatchewan Minnesota NHL 74 3 14 17 38 EN/00

46 Jared Spurgeon 5-8 171 Right 11/29/89 Edmonton, Alberta Minnesota NHL 53 4 8 12 2 FA/10

4 Clayton Stoner 6-3 206 Left 2/19/85 Port McNeill, B.C. Minnesota NHL 57 2 7 9 96 EN/04

5 Greg Zanon 5-11 198 Left 6/5/80 Burnaby, British Columbia Minnesota APTS 82 0 7 7 48 FA/09

3 Marek Zidlicky 5-11 186 Right 2/3/77 Most, Czechoslovakia Minnesota NHL 46 7 17 24 30 TRD/08

GOALTENDERS HT WT SHOOTS BORN BIRTHPLACE 2010-11 TEAM LGE GPI W-L-OT SO GAA SV% ACQ

32 Niklas Backstrom 6-1 186 Left 2/13/78 Helsinki, Finland Minnesota NHL 51 22-23-5 3 2.66 .916 FA/06

30 Dennis Endras 6-0 167 Left 7/14/85 Immenstadt, Germany Augsburger GER 46 20-22-1 3 1.34 .900 FA/10

37 Josh Harding 6-2 199 Right 6/18/84 Regina, Saskatchewan Minnesota NLDN – Injured EN/02

2011-12 MINNESOTA WILD TRAVERSE CITY PROSPECTS TOURNAMENT ROSTER

FORWARDS HT WT SHOOTS BORN BIRTHPLACE 2010-11 TEAM LGE GP PIM APTS ACQ

75Alex Belzile 5-11 188 Right 8/31/91 St-Eloi, Quebec Rimouski QMJHL 64 27 40 67 78 TRD/09

posted by: Michael Russo

578025 Minnesota Wild

Wild’s preliminary training camp roster: Open scrimmages Saturday and Sunday.

578025 Minnesota Wild
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Position</th>
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**GOALTENDERS**

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Former Wild enforcer Todd Fedoruk is in the fight of his life because of substance abuse.

By Dan Gelston

VOORHEES, N.J. - As rain washed over him, Todd Fedoruk stumbled on the streets of Tampa, Fla., in his latest haze, this one ignited by a concoction of booze and cocaine.

His secret, reckless lifestyle had fueled his transformation from NHL enforcer to a junkie hooked on cocaine and marijuana that threw his life and career into jeopardy. Fedoruk, a former Minnesota Wild winger, had been in this dark place before, believing he beat his addiction the first time with the same steely will he needed to scrape with the baddest bullies in the league to earn his keep in the NHL.

Yet here he was, back socializing with the wrong crowds, patronizing the seedy part of towns, hustling for whatever type of drugs he could abuse. On a rainy pre-dawn trip after the 2010 season, a disgraced Fedoruk had nowhere to hide.

"I didn't want to drive anywhere because I was loaded," he said. "I couldn't stay in the house because I was paranoid. All the insanity came back.

"I knew everything was coming to an end. I didn't care about hockey anymore. I didn't care about my family. I was struck with this feeling of: 'How the hell did I get back here after everything I've been through? How the hell did I get back in this position again?'"

He needed help. Drug addiction was not a disease he could fight alone.

Sitting in an NHL locker room, drinking a cup of coffee, Fedoruk now believes he's one of the lucky ones. In a summer that has the NHL reeling from three chilling deaths of noted tough guys, Fedoruk is alive to share his story.

"A lot of guys in my role," he said, "kind of carry these demons around with them."

Guys such as former Wild enforcer Derek Boogaard.

WHEN TODD MET BOOGY

The first time Fedoruk met Boogaard, they were teenage prospects in Regina, Saskatchewan. Fedoruk, four years older, saw a kid who couldn't skate, couldn't fight a lick, yet already had grown into his 200-plus-pound frame that would serve him well as one of the league's top instigators.

Boogaard and Fedoruk would meet up again in the NHL under more unruly circumstances.

The first time they brawled in 2005 - Boogaard with Minnesota and Fedoruk with Anaheim - it resembled the scene out of one of those cartoon dust clouds. Each player got in shots, jerseys were yanked over heads, and helmets went flying before the officials broke it up.

On Oct. 27, 2006, they had the rematch. Boogaard threw a couple of jabs at Fedoruk's face during what at first appeared to be just a replay between two men who made a living as guardians of the game.

Boogaard, though, ended the fight like it was Tyson-Spinks when he dropped Fedoruk with a punishing right hand. Fedoruk clutched his face and dropped to his knees before quickly popping up and skating back to the locker room. Boogaard raised his arm in victory as he skated to the penalty box and an appreciative Wild crowd roared in approval.

Fedoruk needed five plates on the right side of his face to recover from the beating and missed 18 games. He returned to the lineup in December and kept fighting - even after removing his face shield. Faces can always be repaired. Reputations as a soft player are harder to overcome in the rough-and-tumble NHL.

Even with titanium plates in his face, Fedoruk wasn't about to fall off the wagon. He had been clean for nearly six years and had been scared straight when his first organization, the Philadelphia Flyers, ordered him to rehabilitation.

It wasn't until Fedoruk found himself playing for Minnesota - and formed an unlikely alliance - that the sober ship started to steer off course.

The Wild claimed Fedoruk off waivers in 2007 and assigned him a conjoined stall with Boogaard. Boogaard dressed to the immediate right of his one-time victim. Fedoruk eased tension in the locker room among his new teammates with humor.

"I said I didn't feel comfortable with him on my right side. I asked if he wanted to switch stalls," Fedoruk said. "He chuckled and he laughed at it. It was kind of an icebreaker."

The pairing also started a friendship.

Boogaard apologized repeatedly to his friend through the years for the attack, and the duo became late-night running buddies. They were roommates and vacationed together. They forged a bond based on a common background, common goals - and a shared knack for self-destructive behavior.

Boogaard carried those demons Fedoruk described and partied hard. Fedoruk went harder. He relapsed during the 2006-07 season and plummeted deeper into the abyss of addiction each year, hitting a peak in Minnesota, even as he knew Boogaard was battling his own troubles.

"I don't think we were good for each other," Fedoruk said. "We had a common 'misery loves company' type of relationship. I remember always talking to him about being careful.

"But it was the pot calling the kettle black, because I was messed up, too."

As Fedoruk bounced from Phoenix to Tampa Bay, he stayed in touch with Boogaard. He heard Boogaard was in rehabilitation and reached out to his troubled friend, hoping he could offer the type of advice he longed for through his own journey.

It was too late. Fedoruk talked to Boogaard's brother, but that was as close as he got to Boogey.

Boogaard was found dead in May because of an accidental mix of alcohol and the painkiller oxycodone. His death gave Fedoruk the kind of scare he wouldn't get on his loneliest, drug-addled nights. It could have been him.

"I was doing," Fedoruk said, "the exact same things."

A NEW FRIEND

With his blond hair, blue eyes and good-natured personality, Fedoruk could pass as the All-American boy if you didn't know he was from western Canada. He was raised in Redwater, Alberta, a small farming community where hockey was the only way for him to escape boredom. He beams as he talks about skating down roads to three rinks created in empty lots for the neighborhood kids. How fathers competed to create the best rink - his dad affixed lights to metal poles - so kids could stay outside and play hockey through the winter chill all night long.

As he got older, there were more hazardous ways to pass the time than with a stick and puck.

He remembers being 14 or 15, hanging with a group of older teens, when he got drunk for the first time. A shy kid, Fedoruk was suddenly the center of attention. His social fears and anxieties evaporated one sip at a time. His idea of an alcoholic was some bum under a bridge with a brown bag in his hands, not a blossoming hockey star with his eyes on the NHL.

"What booze did for me at that age, I fell in love with it instantly," Fedoruk said. "What I felt that night stayed with me forever. I had found a new friend. And it was alcohol."

He could have used a more pious sidekick. Fedoruk's drinking increased, and he spent a night in jail at 19 because of a bar fight directly related to his drinking.

Fedoruk moved on to harder partying and later nights. His drinking morphed from casual fun to an addiction. That didn't prevent him from getting drafted. The Flyers made him a seventh-round pick in the 1997 draft.

What drinking did was halt his promotion to the NHL. He was out of control at 20 when the Flyers gave him an ultimatum: Get help, or he'd be sent packing.

Fedoruk did what he could to salvage his career and get clean. He checked in to Marworth in Waverly, Pa., for alcohol and chemical-dependency treatment. He was admitted for a 28-day stay but was let out after only 17 days.
Fedoruk always felt like he didn't fit in and was socially awkward around people. At Marworth, he found answers and ways to cope that didn't involve hitting the bottle.

For almost six years, he found a new friend in sobriety. He was promoted to Philadelphia and played 53 games as a rookie. He played four seasons with the Flyers, then won a championship with their AHL team during the lockout.

His best years, personally and professionally, were sober. Fedoruk met his wife - they wed after a Flyers practice - and had their first child when he was clean.

He was traded to Anaheim and the gritty forward had a career year in 2005-06 with 23 points in 76 games.

And he never refused a fight.

Fedoruk underwent surgery in November 2003 after a fight with Eric Cairns of the New York Islanders left him with a broken face. He was clobbered by New York Rangers enforcer Colton Orr in 2007, caught with a hard right against his reconstructed left cheek that sent him down and out on his back. Surgeons implanted a small, permanent titanium plate in Fedoruk's upper cheekbone to stabilize the orbital structure.

Fedoruk couldn't maintain his straight-and-sober lifestyle for much longer.

He was just a young, rich athlete having a good time in a sport where alcohol is about as ingrained as nets and pads. That's not milk champions swing out of the Stanley Cup.

Eventually, his run of good fortune collapsed again.

"I always told myself, as long as you're not doing coke," he said, "it's not going to be that bad."

But there was more coke.

'LET'S KEEP IT GOING'

Fedoruk says he lived three lifestyles.

One as a brawling hockey player who upheld a code of conduct, one as a devoted family man, and one as a relapsed drug addict who secretly prowled the streets for his next big score. There was no trigger point, no defining incident that sent his life spiraling back out of control. He simply says he lost focus on the big picture of how to maintain his sobriety.

He wanted to be the life of the party.

"I was loud, somewhat obnoxious," he said. "It was always, let's go, let's keep it going. It was 6 a.m. and I was looking for people to wake up and keep going."

Fedoruk insisted fighting and years of absorbing blows was not the sole reason he returned to drugs. He had money and some fame, and he couldn't handle the fine line between needing a weekend binge and falling into the deep end of addiction.

"I wanted that oblivion. That's what I craved, that escape," he said. "With being sober, everything is real. You've got to deal with (stuff)."

He had to cope with the offseason deaths of Boogaard and enforcers Wade Belak and Rick Rypien. Belak hanged himself, and Rypien was discovered at his home in Alberta after a call was answered for a "sudden and non-suspicious" death.

Like Fedoruk, all three prided themselves on answering the bell for the next fight.

"Could the pressure of fighting make you want to pick up? Yeah, I think that can be a trigger," Fedoruk said. "I think it is a trigger. For me, it was. You just want to forget about having to fight the guy. You line up against a guy like Boogey, God rest his soul, but he's 267. He's a big man. You think about that a week before you fight him."

After some soul searching in April 2010 following the rainy Tampa meltdown, Fedoruk felt worthless and turned to rehabilitation for a second time. In this stint, he completed a 28-day intensive outpatient program at Turning Point of Tampa.

Fedoruk calls April 26, 2010, his sobriety date - and not a day too soon.

"Everything you put in front of me," he said, "I did."

Even with cocaine in his system, Fedoruk said, he never failed a drug test. He also said he never took hard drugs with other NHL players.

Fedoruk entered the NHL/NHL Players' Association Substance Abuse and Behavioral Health Program, which he knows helped save him. He truly believed the league cared about the physical and mental health of its players.

His wife, who could have bolted so many times, stuck by him. Fedoruk took a self-imposed sabbatical from the game last season and put his health and family life in order. The couple celebrated the birth of their third child, and his break made him realize how much he wanted to play again.

Fedoruk had 97 points and 1,050 penalty minutes in 545 NHL games with six teams over nine seasons. His agent let teams know Fedoruk was primed for a comeback, and he signed a tryout contract with the Vancouver Canucks in August.

Assistant general manager Laurence Gilman said the Canucks did their homework and had a candid conversation with Fedoruk about his ordeal. The Canucks found a player who loved the game and had his priorities in order.

"We felt it was worth it to give this person an opportunity," Gilman said. "If he comes to camp and performs well, and fits in with our group, he'll have every opportunity to make our team."

If Fedoruk makes the roster, he'll keep throwing punches if that's what it takes stay in the league.

"If he plays here," Gilman said, "we expect him to play in the same manner."

'THERE IS A WAY OUT'

In the weeks leading into mid-September training camp, the 32-year-old Fedoruk frequently trained at the Flyers' practice facility in Voorhees, N.J.

Drug abuse or not, a year off for any reason can be fatal to a 30-something athlete, and Fedoruk needs all the work he can to make a team fresh off a run to the Stanley Cup finals.

He knows questions about his hockey abilities are a distant second to ones about maintaining his sobriety. Fedoruk calls it a "healthy fear" that he could relapse and vows to take the necessary steps to prevent one in Vancouver.

He wanted to share his story before camp because he's tired of keeping secrets, and to maybe help the next Fedoruk - and prevent the next Boogaard.

"There is help out there. There is a way out," Fedoruk said. "It's just getting to the point where you can say, all right, I give up. I'm done. I don't want to fight this fight anymore."

He keeps a close circle of sober friends now and, while not becoming an overbearing born-again, more frequently attends church.

His confidence and a healthy lifestyle have been restored, and he understands the daily maintenance needed to live the rest of his life without succumbing again to drugs.

"I don't want to relapse again," he said. "I know that much."

Montreal Canadiens' Scott Gomez looking to bounce back this season

By Dave Stubbs,

MONTREAL - Canadiens centremen Scott Gomez didn't easily forget a season that was entirely unforgettable - the worst of his 11-year National Hockey League career.

But at some point last spring, after considerable time spent clearing the fog and taking stock of what he did and mostly didn't do through his 80 regular-season games and seven in the playoffs, Gomez stopped looking back and started focusing his view forward.

"It was never like: 'The season's over, yay, summer's here!'" Gomez said Tuesday night. "It wasn't dandy. It wasn't like: 'Well, I'm glad that's over.' I asked myself a lot of questions and I had to clear my mind. It wasn't a couple of days. I needed the time to think, to re-evaluate.

"But once I'd done that, it was: 'Hey, here we go. Let's get back to work.'"

His 2010-11 statistics are as rude as they come. Gomez scored seven regular-season goals and added 31 assists, both career lows, and was minus-15, another low-water mark. In the Canadiens' seven-game Eastern Conference quarterfinal loss to the Boston Bruins, he had no goals, four assists and was minus-6.

The 31-year-old Alaskan was brutally self-critical the morning after the Habs were sent packing.

"I was awful and I let the guys down," Gomez told reporters at the team's postmortem. "There's no one more embarrassed than me. ... If I had pulled my weight, who knows? I didn't. I'll be the first to look my teammates in the eye and say it. It won't happen again. It can't. It just won't."

Normally, Gomez would have charted a path directly home to Alaska, where he enjoys his family and the great outdoors.

Not this summer. He headed to New York and after about one week off he returned to the gym with a personal trainer.

"It's not like I've ever come to a training camp without having done the work. You just can't do that," Gomez said. "But this was the earliest I've ever gotten back into training. If there's one thing that can get you out of anything, it's hard work.

"I want to deliver this season. Whether you've had a great season or a bad season, we're now at a new season. Everyone wants to get off to a great start."

There is nothing Gomez can do about the massive target that comes with his colossal paycheque. He will be paid $7.5 million this season, $5.5 million in 2012-13 and $4.5 million in 2013-14 to finish up a contract negotiated by the New York Rangers, who dealt him here on the eve of 2009 free agency. His cap hit each of the next three years is $7.3 million.

But offering a better return for the dollar is in Gomez's gloved hands.

Last September, Canadiens goaltender Carey Price faced the inquisition at the team's annual golf tournament, a fundraising event that tees off Wednesday morning at Laval-sur-le-Lac. Price was coming off a shaky season, the name of recently traded playoff hero Jaroslav Halak still on everyone's lips.

Price said he understood the challenge before him, then went out and enjoyed a brilliant season, carrying his team to victory many nights.

In some ways, Gomez now is in Price's vacated boat, even if redemption is perhaps too strong a word and a forward cannot shoulder an entire team.

"Everyone here has to keep proving themselves," Gomez said. "I haven't done anything that guarantees me a job. There's always someone who wants to have your spot. I'm ready to play and I'm excited to play in Montreal."

At no point, Gomez said, did he want to bail on this city, no matter the heat he faced last season.

"My toughest critic is me, and it's always been that way," he said. "I want to deliver for the fans. Whether it's gone great or bad, there's no looking back. You have to move forward. This is a special place, and I tell people all the time how great a hockey city Montreal really is."

Gomez says he's arriving at camp in excellent shape, adding: "You'd be doing an injustice to yourself and the organization if you even dared not coming in 100 per cent in shape or very close to it. Those days are long gone. You'd be cheating everyone."

He, and every other player with at least one year's experience in Montreal, will find new faces among the coaches, Hamilton Bulldogs assistants Randy Cunneyworth and Randy Ladouceur promoted with the departure of longtime assistant Kirk Muller.

"We all learned from Kirkie, but he's moved on," Gomez said. "Guys who have played for (Cunneyworth and Ladouceur) have nothing but praise for them."

Gomez watched none of the playoffs after the Canadiens' elimination. Twice a Stanley Cup winner in New Jersey, don't include him among those who quietly pulled for the Bruins to say the Habs had been bounced by the eventual champion.

"From a selfish standpoint, they were the last team I wanted to win," he said, laughing. "Any time I lose to a team, I want to see them lose right away. Especially a rival like (the Bruins)."

Before Friday's medicals and fitness tests comes Wednesday's tournament, in which first-year golfer Gomez hopes to shoot in the mid-90s. Finally bitten by the golf bug, he shared the scores of his summer's best and worst rounds, then insisted they not reflect on the record lest he endure the abuse of his more skilled teammates.

Gomez's go-to club Wednesday will be his sand wedge, "because it seems like I'm always in the sand." A hockey helmet or a ditch would be advised for playing partners when he reaches for a wood.

But golf will be just a pleasant diversion before the business of hockey resumes.

"As a team, you definitely can see the excitement in us," Gomez said. "This is the third year together for most of us. We're more of a family, and we know we have a group in here that can contend from the get-go."

Montreal Canadiens Swiss prospect Alain Berger throws his weight around

By Pat Hickey

MONTREAL - Switzerland has a well deserved reputation for producing high quality watches, superb chocolate, discreet bankers and cheese with holes.

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Hockey has been a popular sport in the mountain nation for the better part of a century. Switzerland was one of the founding nations of the International Ice Hockey Federation and the first hockey competition at the winter Olympics was held in 1924 at St. Moritz.

Switzerland has won a silver medal and six bronze medals at the world championships, although the last medal was won in 1953.

The NHL has never been a goal for most Swiss players. They have been content to play at home where the well-organized domestic league offers decent salaries and competition with a minimum of pressure.

But that situation may be changing and Canadiens' prospect Alain Berger is an example of a new generation of Swiss players who grow up with NHL ambitions.

"All along, my goal has been to play in the NHL," said Berger, a 20-year-old from Burgsdorf. "When I was a teenager, I told my agent that I wanted to play in North America and he arranged for me to play in Oshawa."

He said he takes his inspiration from former Canadien Mark Streit and from contemporaries like Luca Sbisa, Nino Neidereitter and Yannick Weber.

Berger, who is among 31 players currently attending the Canadiens' rookie camp in Brossard, has spent the past two seasons playing for the Oshawa Generals and his only disappointment in that time was a loss in the second-round of the Ontario Hockey League playoffs.

"I have to thank the coaches in Oshawa for helping make the adjustment to hockey in North America," said Berger, who scored twice in the first scrimmage Monday. "I think the game here suits my style of play."

Berger's style is what you hope to get from a player who packs 210 pounds on a 6-foot-4 frame. While Switzerland is known for its neutrality, Berger has shown a tendency to throw his weight around and he was tagged as the instigator in two of his five fights in the OHL.

Berger appeared in 44 games as a rookie in Oshawa and had 19 goals and 14 assists and was a minus-4. He improved in the past season with 29 goals and 23 assists in 65 games with a plus-19 rating. He added five goals and three assists in 10 playoff games.

He would have been available in the June draft, but the Canadiens didn't leave anything to chance. Because he had been previously ignored by NHL teams, he was a free agent and the Canadiens signed him to three-year entry-level contract. It's potentially worth $2 million if he plays in the NHL, but he'll be happy to start in Hamilton where he will earn $65,000 a year. He will also collect a $200,000 signing bonus spread over three years.
Montreal Canadiens: Unbridled optimism will reign as team gathers on the links

By MIKE BOONE.

MONTREAL - Is this a great hockey town or what?

Let's hope no dramatic news happens in Montreal at 9 Wednesday morning, because the satellite transmission trucks will be off-island. The Canadiens' annual golf tournament will be played at the posh Laval-sur-le-Lac club, and tee-off will be preceded by "media availability."

It will be a circus - although, mercifully, the ink-stained wretches and beauties of broadcasting won't all be climbing out of a Volkswagen Beetle.

The Canadiens expect all hands on deck, including the team's non-golfers. Two years ago, Georges Laraque blithely announced "I hate golf," but the excuses will be more diplomatic.

Political correctness will extend to the players' comments. Unbridled optimism will reign, at least until someone slices a ball into the trees.

And by then the media scrums, scheduled for 9 to 10:30, will be over.

Max Pacioretty will have said he's totally recovered from the Zdeno Chara assassination attempt and rarin' to go.

Josh Gorges will say his surgically repaired knee is good to go, and Andrei Markov will say his surgically repaired knee is even better than Gorges'.

Scott Gomez will direct at least one zinger at the media corps before saying he's been working hard through the offseason and is looking for a bounce-back year.

Eric Cole - facing the crush of cameras, notebooks and microphones reserved for college basketball in North Carolina - will say he's excited to be in a hockey city.

The quantity of revelations will be in inverse proportion to the number of news-gatherers assembled at the golf club. But the tournament is the unofficial beginning of the hockey season, so attention must be paid.

Actually, there's already been a good deal of attention lavished on the fresh-faced youngsters at the Canadiens' rookie camp. When it began on Monday afternoon, I counted 15 print, radio and TV reporters in the press gallery of the training complex. And during the late-afternoon media availability, at least 10 of us were crowded around Louis Leblanc in the dressing room.

If the attention spooked the team's 2010 first-round draft choice, he didn't show it. As befits someone who got into Harvard and spent a year there, Leblanc is bright, articulate and totally unfazed by media attention - in two languages.

"It feels like every year there's something going on, whether it's my shoulder or trade to Shawinigan," Leblanc said. "It's part of being in Montreal."

Leblanc's shoulder feels fine after summer surgery, and Cataractes fans shouldn't hold their breath on seeing him back in the Q. The likelier scenario has Leblanc's ticket punched for Hamilton, where scrutiny of the Bulldogs will be less intense than what Leblanc will be facing soon enough in Montreal, if he's the player the Canadiens hope he'll be.

"It gets easier to deal with," Leblanc said of the media crush.

He's been scrummed regularly since the draft, when the West Island native was an immensely popular homeboy selection.

"Hockey is like a religion here," Leblanc said. "So many people follow it, and when things go great, it's awesome. When things aren't so good, it can be a little frustrating. But it's part of the game."

Leblanc said he's relaxed in the face of media attention.

"I try not to think about it too much. When the media's here, you talk to them and try to give the best answers possible. The most important thing is to concentrate on hockey."
Montreal Canadiens’ golf tournament kicks off training camp frenzy

By Dave Stubbs,

MONTREAL - The fans will be at the stone gates of Laval-sur-le-Lac by 7 a.m. Wednesday - school and work can wait - and they’ll be tweeting which Canadien is arriving in the hottest wheels for the team’s annual golf tournament.

Ninety minutes later, the clubhouse steps will be cluttered with reporters eager to get a jump on the season’s first clichés from players and management whose holiday from the media is officially over.

In fact, journalists and truant bloggers already are two days into coverage of the Canadiens’ rookie camp a dozen traffic jams to the southeast in Brossard.

You can’t say that hockey is back in Montreal because it’s never really been away, no matter that 140 days have passed since the Canadiens were 4-3 season-ending overtime losers to the Boston Bruins in Game 7 of the Eastern Conference quarterfinal.

(A bonus point for those who remember that defenceman P.K. Subban scored the Habs’ most recent goal back on April 27, assisted by Tomas Plekanec and captain Brian Gionta at 18:03 of the third period.) The Canadiens offseason, as it were, was one of watching the loathsome Bruins hoist the Stanley Cup, second-guessing choices made in the NHL entry draft, the angst of free agency, then a development camp for prospects, an occasional conference call or visit of an eager, incoming player - greetings, Erik Cole - and the generous manufacture and cloning of rumours, all these embers needlesslyoked to keep the hockey flames alive.

There’ll be plenty of time, beginning in Laval, to debate how far the Canadiens will go this season, the team’s 2010-11 core kept largely intact by general manager Pierre Gauthier.

Some of the key talking points - and there are many more - with the Canadiens a full season removed from their tantalizing three-round playoff run of 2009-10:

In goal: Can Carey Price be the miracle worker/workhorse he was last season, with incoming backup Peter Budaj replacing Alex Auld in the wings?

On the blue line: Will Andrei Markov and Josh Gorges play on a combined four good knees, both having undergone major reconstructive ACL surgery last season? Does sophomore Subban, a player of tremendous potential, take another dramatic stride forward? What kind of impact will be felt with the departures of veterans Roman Hamrlik and James Wisniewski, and the arrival of long-counted Alexei Yemelin?

Up front: Will centreman Scott Gomez rebound from his career-worst year? Has Max Pacioretty’s near-crippling injury faded fully from his view, or will he be bearing footsteps when he skates into a corner? Is Cole, the four-year, $18-million free-agent addition, the power forward the Canadiens have needed roughly forever? Which Andrei Kostitsyn comes to play?

Behind the bench: What about the fit with head coach Jacques Martin - and the players - of new assistants Randy Cunneyworth and Randy Ladouceur, both promoted from Hamilton, the player-popular Kirk Muller departed to Nashville’s farm in Milwaukee? And will Clément Jodoin, the Bulldogs’ new boss, keep the prospect pipeline flowing to Montreal?

The Canadiens head from Wednesday golf to Friday’s medicals and muscle- and lung-searing fitness tests in Brossard, the final step before training camp begins in earnest on Saturday.

Every player will arrive in peak condition or as near to it as the rehab of injury will permit, having spent most of the summer diligently working with trainers and following the counsel of nutritionists. No longer do the Canadiens work summer jobs to make ends meet.

The quotable Cole surely will be a favourite destination for the notebooks and microphones, the fifth estate having grown to almost ridiculous size since the Internet gave a voice to anyone with a computer or smartphone.

It is a training-camp scrutiny that never was faced by Canadiens icon Jean Béliveau, who won 10 Stanley Cups as a centreman and seven more in the team’s front office.

Le Gros Bill arrived at his first camp in 1949, so stressed that he could barely lace his skates.

“Yes, I was very nervous,” Béliveau said in a talk we had a few seasons ago. “It was quite an experience. Imagine what it was like to play alongside your heroes, men who were practically legends.”

Béliveau skated in the Canadiens’ camp for five consecutive years, dazzling railbirds with his impressively strides and butter-soft stickhandling. He even had a five-game taste of the NHL in 1950-51 and ’52-53.

But every autumn he returned to Quebec City, fiercely loyal to the people who were paying him $20,000 a year to play for the Quebec Aces of the Senior League. At last, on Oct. 3, 1953, he signed with the Canadiens to begin an 18-year career that finally would drop anchor at the doors of the Hall of Fame.

In those days, the Canadiens’ training camp would run 32 or 33 days, nearly two weeks longer than this year’s session. Béliveau remembered usually reporting 10 to 12 pounds above his playing weight of 205 or 206 (a featherweight by today’s NHL standards), excess baggage he would easily shed from his 6-foot-3 frame once workouts began.

“There were other boys who would report heavier than that, but we were professionals and we were conscious of our responsibilities,” he said. “We had to determine what weight was best.

“And then,” he added with a laugh, “(coach) Toe Blake always had his charts to help us find that weight.”

Scale readouts will be just one of many benchmarks compiled Friday by the Canadiens’ medical and training staff, body-fat percentage of more importance than weight.

No one will be sitting in a sauna Thursday night to sweat off a few ounces; instead they’ll be drinking ugly protein cocktails that have neither a tall ship nor the word “ale” on the label.

Last September, outside the Laval-sur-le-Lac clubhouse, Carey Price considered the challenges facing a team that had enjoyed a marvellous 2009-10, and himself, who had not.

“We’re all excited. Be excited,” he suggested to fans. “We have a really good team here and we’re looking forward to building on that. It should be a lot of fun.”

Expect to hear much more of the same Wednesday and until Oct. 6 in Toronto, when the puck drops for real.

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Erudite Halpern took long road to NHL

By PAT HICKEY

When you watch Jeff Halpern play hockey, it's difficult to believe there was a time when he couldn't attract the attention of recruiters from NCAA Division I college programs in the United States.

Halpern was playing at St. Paul's School in Concord, N.H., during the mid-1990s and hoping to earn a scholarship. But there was little interest in the Maryland native who moved north to find a better level of competition.

"There were a few Division III programs, like Bowdoin, that were interested in me, but I believed that I could play Division I," said Halpern, whose versatility has made him a valuable member of the Canadiens after signing a free-agent deal a week before the start of training camp.

Halpern decided he had to go even farther north to refine his game, playing one season with the Tier 2 junior team in Stratford, Ont.

"It was a good move," said Halpern, who had a chance to get stronger and play against better players.

By the end of the season, he had collected five or six Division I offers and elected to attend Princeton University, an Ivy League school that was founded in 1746 as the College of New Jersey.

Halpern said he wasn't sure how far his hockey career would go, and selected Princeton because it offered a balance between academics and hockey. He wasn't selected at the National Hockey League entry draft, but played well enough to sign a free-agent contract with his hometown Washington Capitals and made a seamless jump to the NHL after a six-game apprenticeship with the American Hockey League's Portland Pirates.

Halpern studied economics at a time when the chair of the economics department at Princeton was Ben Bernanke, the current chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve System.

One of the requirements for a Princeton degree is a senior thesis, and Halpern produced a paper entitled: The Stadium: The Economics of Publicly Subsidized Stadiums.

"I was studying economics and I liked sports and, at the time, it was a hot topic," Halpern said. "It was in the middle of this boom of building these new baseball stadiums. There were some new hockey buildings, but the way these baseball stadiums were being built was in the news. Some of those articles came up in class and I thought I could grind out 50 pages about the topic."

Halpern's paper came in at 72 pages, and his conclusion may not go over well with hockey fans who are hoping for new arenas in Quebec City, Edmonton, Calgary, or even Long Island.

Halpern concluded that the economic impact of publicly subsidized stadiums was not beneficial to economic stimulus in the city.

Proponents of public financing point to job creation and the dubious concept of the multiplier effect of dollars moving through the economy, but as Halpern's paper noted: "People have only so many dollars to spend on leisure and the question is whether they spend it on a hockey game or spreading it around the city."

That's not to say Halpern is opposed to new arenas.

"If the people feel good about themselves because they have an NHL team, that can speak volumes," he said. "As far as increasing anyone's average income or helping businesses, it won't do that. It won't be an economic gain,

but there could be a sociological gain."

And, as Halpern pointed out, Quebec represents a different case. He noted his study looked at cities that were replacing stadiums for existing teams.

Halpern made his NHL debut five years after the Quebec Nordiques departed for Colorado, but he has experienced the passion of the city's fans.

"I played in the peewee tournament, I played an exhibition game before the world championships, and I played the exhibition game there with the Canadiens," he said of Quebec City. "It's a great city and I hope they get a team."

Montreal Canadiens

Time to reunite Habs' Punch Line

By RED FISHER,

MONTREAL - Your Canadiens will be holding a one-of-a-kind gala on Dec. 5, one day after the franchise celebrates its 100th birthday.

The rich and famous from business and politics will be there at this black-tie affair, rubbing shoulders with many of the players of the past who have brought so many Stanley Cups home since Dec. 4, 1909.

What, however, is a birthday party without surprises? I cannot crawl into the minds of the people responsible for this night reserved for the celebration of excellence, but one comes to mind.

The names and numbers of the superb athletes who contributed so much to the history of the franchise and to the winning of Stanley Cups now hang on 15 banners at the Bell Centre. Fifteen names that will be remembered forever, 14 numbers never again to be worn by those fortunate enough to wear a Canadiens jersey.

You want names and numbers? Here they are: Jacques Plante (1); Doug Harvey (2); Jean Béliveau (4); Bernard Geoffrion (5); Howie Morenz (7); Maurice Richard (9); Guy Lafleur (10); Dickie Moore and Yvan Cournoyer (12); Henri Richard (16); Serge Savard (18); Larry Robinson (19); Bob Gainey (23); Ken Dryden (29) and Patrick Roy (33).

It's not engraved in stone, but the indication from Canadiens management was that when Roy's number was retired, it would be the last one to be raised to the Bell Centre rafters. On the other hand, if there's a surprise to be unveiled at the birthday bash, is there a better one than announcing the name(s) and number(s) on Dec. 5? In recent weeks and months, this question has been put to me: who is the best player whose jersey hasn't been retired? In my view, none better than Elmer Lach, a member of the revered Punch Line in the 1940s along with Maurice Richard and Toe Blake. It was a line that is remembered to this day, one that delivered 220 points in 1944-45, an NHL record that lasted until the late 1960s.

In its time, there was no better or, at least, more exciting line in the NHL. Lach was the league's best centreman. He joined the Canadiens for the 1940-41 season and retired in 1954. He was a member of three Stanley Cup teams, and while the Rocket always will be remembered as the first NHLer in history to score 50 goals in a season, it was Lach who led the league in scoring during that 50-game 1944-45 schedule. Among Lach's 80 points were an NHL-high 54 assists. He also won the Hart Trophy.

Three years later, he again led the league in scoring - the first winner of the Art Ross Trophy.

Lach was blessed with a competitive fire that placed him near the top of the hit list by players on the remaining five teams. Not to worry, even though at 5-foot-10, he weighed only 165 pounds. He played mean. He skated tall.

With Lach, on every game night, the flame never died, but there was a price to pay for it.

Only five times was he able to play a full season, and few players have matched his resolve to return to action after career-threatening injuries. For example, one night in February 1947 against the Toronto Maple Leafs, he suffered a fractured skull. It was feared his playing days were over, yet he returned the following season to win the Art Ross Trophy.

Passing the puck was Lach's greatest talent, but his Cup-clinching goal against the Boston Bruins in the second minute of the first overtime period in the 1953 playoffs remains among his most treasured memories.

"I took the hardest check of my life when the Rocket jumped on top of me when the puck went in," Lach said.

The question often has been asked why a banner with Lach's name wasn't raised along with Henri Richard on the night the latter's No. 16 was retired. No explanation was given then, and none since. It's time to right this wrong.

The suggestion has been made - and it's a good one - that the Punch Line should be reunited in the Bell Centre rafters. Why not have the banners of Richard, Lach and Blake alongside another? All three are in the Hockey Hall of Fame in the players' category.

Other lines have scored more points, but none is recalled with more reverence. None has been as exciting, and in Blake, with eight Stanley Cups in 13 seasons behind the Canadiens' bench, we're talking about the greatest coach in franchise history.

Dickie Moore recalls to this day: 'The first thing he ever said to us was: 'I can't coach you guys. You're too good. Just go out there and play your game.' " Butch Bouchard is another name frequently mentioned worthy of joining those whose numbers have been retired.

He played 15 seasons with the Canadiens, the last eight as one of the most popular captains in franchise history. At 6-foot-2 and 205 pounds, he was a formidable figure on the ice and admired by fans and foes off it.

Lach, Blake, Bouchard. I have no idea whether or not their numbers will be called at the Canadiens' 100th birthday gala, but just thinking about it leaves me giddy with pleasure.

Once, the players decided who was to wear the "C". No longer. Now, for some reason, the responsibility belongs to management. Some teams even alternate their captains on a month-to-month basis. Frankly, it's impossible to imagine the Canadiens going through the entire season without a captain, if only because that would represent a break in tradition for the franchise. Markov would be the logical first choice, but in my view Brian Gionta, now one of three players wearing the "A", would be a fairly close second.

Don't wait till spring. Do it now. It's time.

Nashville Predators rookies emerge as viable replacements

Josh Cooper | The Tennessean

The exodus of players took only a few weeks this summer. J.P. Dumont was bought out. The Nashville Predators announced Steve Sullivan and Shane O’Brien would not be re-signed. Cody Franson was traded. Then Joel Ward and Marcel Goc signed elsewhere.

Throughout the process, General Manager David Poile remained bullish that he could replace the departed veterans with rookies within the organization. And as rookie camp ends today, Poile has a better idea of which players he can slot in where.

“We’ve created some opportunities for these younger players to win a position,” Poile said. “It should be a very fun and competitive training camp.”

Forward Craig Smith’s performance in South Florida during the rookie games against Tampa and Florida created such a buzz that Predators defenseman Jonathan Blum noted it on Twitter Monday evening. Smith scored six goals and notched an assist in the two games.

“He’s ultra-skilled,” Predators defenseman Shea Weber said. “You saw him skate out there with us. He can really shoot the puck. He has a quick release, and he really knows where to put it. He has a goal-scorer’s touch.”

Poile listed Smith’s two games as one of the top rookie game performances he has seen in the last 14 years.

“He was as dominant a player as I’ve seen in a rookie tournament in all the years I’ve been with the Predators,” Poile said.

While Smith presents the best chance of a rookie camp forward to make the team, the competition should be more spirited on defense. The Predators will be without three defensive regulars from last season to start training camp — along with Franson’s and O’Brien’s departures, Francis Bouillon is out with a concussion.

Thus far, 2009 first-round pick Ryan Ellis has impressed the most in the rookie games. He had two assists, but his presence went beyond the numbers.

“He can control a game and the pace,” Milwaukee Admirals Coach Kirk Muller said of the 5-foot-9 Ellis.

“People might mention his size. The good players who are small and do well in the league are guys with great instincts and ability to get in and out of trouble. He knows the game and played a lot of elite games as far as the World Juniors and Memorial Cups. He knows how to play the game; he has the skill. He’s a smart player.”

Mattias Ekholm is another rookie who is considered a candidate to make the Predators’ roster. But per the team, he still needs to learn the nuances of the North American game on smaller rinks.

“I think there is some adjustment with the size of the rink, style of play and angles,” Poile said of Ekholm, who has played only in Sweden. “You just don’t get that overnight.”

Roman Josi was not put on the rookie camp roster, but he has drawn rave reviews after a stellar season in Milwaukee last year.

“We’re trying to treat him like he’s ahead of guys, based on what he has accomplished and seniority,” Poile said. “I’ve heard our coaches say really good things about him.”

Predators rookies roll in first pre-training camp scrimmage

By dboclaire

Craig Smith scored four goals and Taylor Beck had a goal and three assists as the Nashville Predators routed the Tampa Bay Lightning 7-3 Monday in a rookie scrimmage in Coral Springs, Fla.

Smith, who decided late in the summer for forgo his remaining eligibility at the University of Wisconsin, scored three times in a span of 8:03 as the Predators prospects took control of the game. His first broke a 1-1 tie with 4:01 to play in the first period, and he followed with two more early in the second to complete the natural hat trick to make it 4-1. His last goal was the first of three third-period Nashville tallies.

Beck, a third-round pick in 2009, gave the Predators a 1-0 lead 10 seconds into the contest and then added assists on three of Smith's four goals.

Gabriel Bourque assisted on each of the first four goals. Austin Watson, the team's 2010 first-round choice, capped the scoring for Nashville with an unassisted goal at 18:56 of the third.

Goalies Chet Pickard and Atte Engren split time in goal and faced 22 and 21 shots, respectively. Pickard allowed two goals and Engren allowed one.

Predators rookies began workouts Saturday. They will conclude two days of scrimmages with the Lightning and Panthers on Tuesday.

The team officially opens training camp Friday with off-ice testing. The first day of on-ice practices is Saturday.

By William Williams

From some of the earliest days of the franchise, Nashville Predators General Manager David Poile talked about his dream that players ultimately would settle into Middle Tennessee during their playing careers, remain here after those careers to raise their children and become productive everyday citizens.

Presumably, that meant that eventually those same players would perish here.

Of all the things that had to happen ahead of schedule.

None of the following players actually were in Nashville at the time, but in just more than a week the franchise lost three alumni — Wade Belak, Karlis Skrastins and Josef Vasicek — and one prospect — Robert Dietrich — in two stunning, virtually unthinkable incidents.

Belak took his own life in a Toronto hotel room, and the other three were members of a Russian hockey team, all of whom were lost when their plane crashed shortly after takeoff as it was bound for its season-opening contest.

The Predators have not been around long enough to retire anybody’s number, yet the organization’s members and their supporters have to mourn a handful of losses in such short order.

At this point — as far as one franchise official is concerned, at least — the start of the 2011-12 season can’t come soon enough.

“One of the great things about being on a team — in any type of sports — is that it’s a team,” Poile said. “… You’re sometimes able to leave a lot of your problems behind when you get together on the ice. … When you get into a family atmosphere and you’re able to talk these things out, I think it kind of brings some kind of closure and allows you to move on.

“From that standpoint, I can’t wait until training camp starts so that we can all be together.”

That includes the fans.

The players will have their time in the locker room, the weight room, the training room and every other place they spend time together to sort through their feelings and manage their memories.

Ultimately, though, that support system has to extend to those in the seats. That makes the Sept. 24 preseason game (the first at home) against Winnipeg, which also lost a player this offseason, an important moment for the franchise.

No doubt, team officials will come up with some way to remember Belak, Skrastins, Vasicek and Dietrich on that day. A moment of silence, a video tribute, some designation on jerseys, the boards and/or the ice all make sense.

While the players have no choice but to move on and continue their careers and the progression of the franchise, it is important to make sure that the fans never forget.

The Predators recently embarked on a series of renovations and improvements at Bridgestone Arena designed to enhance the fan experience throughout the venue. Those plans now ought to be amended to include some sort of tribute wall, kiosk or whatever where fans can learn a little about these players and others who follow them. Like it or not, death now is a significant part of the Predators’ history. It should not be ignored.

Truth is, this is not the first time the franchise suffered a loss. In 2002, forward Alexandre Krevsun (a 1999 fourth-round draft choice) sustained a brain hemorrhage and died during a training run with his Russian club.

Krevsun never really made an impact locally to the degree that Belak and Skrastins did, but he played in Milwaukee (one season) as Dietrich did. Vasicek spent less than a season with the organization, but there’s no telling how many autographs he signed or the number of hands he shook in that time.
By William Williams

There was a time — not too long ago, in fact — when it was hard enough for Nick Spaling to score even a single goal in the National Hockey League.

It was in his 50th NHL appearance — and thanks to the efforts of teammates who worked to get him the puck during a power play late in a December 2010 contest that was well in hand — that the Nashville Predators forward finally found the back of the net.

“I tried not to think of it, but it obviously was a huge relief to get it,” Spaling said. “After that, you feel the pressure [ease] a little bit. Now I want to keep building every year.”

The 22-year-old is going to get more opportunities to score this year, and it will not be because his teammates see to it. Management already has taken care of that with offseason moves designed to transfer more of the offensive burden to some of the team’s younger players.

When the Predators open training camp this week — off-ice testing takes place Friday, and the first on-ice training session is Saturday — Spaling, Colin Wilson (also 22) and even Jordin Tootoo (28) will be among the most watched and discussed players.

Each is expected to expand his role with the team this season after four veteran forwards — Steve Sullivan, J-P Dumont, Marcel Goc and Joel Ward — moved on in free agency or simply were cut loose by Nashville. General Manager David Poile equates this year’s transition up front to the one a couple years ago when he made room on the roster for defensemen Ryan Suter and Shea Weber, now one of the top blue line pairings in the NHL.

“These players are going to be put in positions where they are going to be given every opportunity to play at a much higher level,” Poile said. “… So it’s their ice time to earn if they play well.

“If we’re going to improve as a team, if we’re going to improve offensively, it’s going to be players like Spaling and Wilson who are going to have to produce. They’re going to be put in positions where they’re going to have that opportunity.”

It is no secret that offense rarely has been the Predators’ forte. They finished in the bottom third of the NHL last season with 213 goals, which was just slightly off their all-time average (215.4) through their first 11 seasons.

At first glance, therefore, a player such as Spaling, who needed more than half a season to get his first goal, hardly seems like an obvious solution.

However, Spaling averaged 25.5 goals in his final two years of junior hockey and scored 12 in his first American Hockey League campaign (2008-09). Once he got the first one out of the way in the NHL, he added seven more before the end of the regular season, including a pair of multi-goal games (both against Minnesota). Spaling also scored twice in the series-clinching Game 6 victory over Anaheim in the playoffs.

“We really feel strongly about Nick and his future,” Poile said. “He was a very good scorer in junior. Our coaches have loved him since [he was 18]. The reason they have loved him is because he paid terrific attention to detail. So the defensive part of the game he has down pat. The coaches use him in checking line situations and use him in penalty killing.

“But we want more, and he has more.”

More goals, to be exact.

Ward scored as many as 17 in a season with Nashville, but his production declined steadily over a three-year period. Sullivan is one of only four players ever to score 30 or more in a season for the Predators, but health issues in recent years drastically limited his contributions. Prior to last season, Dumont scored more than 15 goals in four straight.

“That’s obviously something I want to make part of my game — contributing on a regular basis, and try to help out offensively,” Spaling said. “I’m really excited, for sure. I’m looking for more myself as well. Obviously, I want to be a bigger part of the team this year and to contribute more frequently.”
New Jersey Devils

Devils release 60-man training camp roster

By Rich Chere

The Devils today released their 60-man training camp roster. It includes six goalies, 19 defensemen, 12 centers, 12 right wingers and 11 left wingers.

Numerical roster:

1. JOHAN HEDBERG G
2. MARK FRASER D
3. KEITH KINKAID G
4. MAXIME CLERMONT G
5. SCOTT WEDGEWOOD G
6. ANDY GREENE D
7. HENRIK TALLINDER D
8. DAINIUS ZUBRUS RW
9. ZACH PARISE LW
10. ROD PELLEY C
11. NICK PALMIERI RW
12. DAVID STECKEL C
13. JACOB JOSEFSON C
14. Ilya Kovalchuk LW
15. VLADIMIR ZHARKOV LW
16. TRAVIS ZAJAC C
17. MATT TAORMINA D
18. MATTIAS TEDENBY RW
19. ERIC BOULTON LW
20. DAVID CLARKSON RW
21. BRYCE SALVADOR D
22. CAM JANSSEN RW
23. PATRIK ELIAS C
24. ANTON VOLCHENKOV D
25. PETER HARROLD D
26. MATTHEW CORRENTE D
27. JAY LEACH D
28. MARK FAYNE D
29. ALEXANDER URBOM D
30. ERIC GELINAS D
31. BRANDON BURLON D
32. DAN KELLY D
33. PETR SYKORA C
34. HARRY YOUNG D
35. ADAM LARSSON D
36. JOE SOVA D
37. RYAN SCOTT RW
38. MAXIME KERSTEIN LW
39. TIM SESTITO C
40. STEPHEN GIONTA C
41. BRAD MILLS C
42. NATHAN PERKOVICH RW
43. ADAM HENRIQUE C
44. STEVE ZALEWSKI C
45. ANTON STRALMAN D
46. JEREMY FRASER LW
47. CHAD WISEMAN LW
48. JOSEPH WHITNEY RW
49. REID BOUCHER RW
50. J.T. BARNETT LW
51. THOMAS NESBITT RW
52. KORY NAGY LW
53. MYLES STOESZ LW
54. J.S. BERUBE LW
55. MATT ANDERSON RW

Depth chart:

Goalies (6):

Martin Brodeur, Johan Hedberg, Jeff Frazee, Scott Wedgewood, Maxime Clermont, Keith Kinkaid

Defense (19):

Henrik Tallinder, Andy Greene, Anton Volchenkov, Bryce Salvador, Adam Larsson, Mark Fayne, Mark Fraser, Matt Taormina, Matt Corrente, Jay Leach, Alex Urbom, Eric Gelinas, Anton Stralman, Harry Young, Joe Sova, Brandon Burlon, Dan Kelly, Peter Harold, Reece Scarlett

Center (12):

Patrik Elias, Travis Zajac, Jacob Josefson, Adam Henrique, Rod Pelley, David Steckel, Steve Zalewski, Petr Sykora, Darcy Zajac, Tim Sestito, Stephen Gionta, Brad Mills

Right wings (12):

Mattias Tedenby, David Clarkson, Dainius Zubrus, Nick Palmieri, Cam Janssen, Nathan Perkovich, Steve Bernier, Mike Sislo, Joseph Whitney, Reid Boucher, Thomas Nesbitt, Matt Anderson

Left wings (11):

Zach Parise, Ilya Kovalchuk, Vladimir Zharkov, Eric Boulton, Steve Veilleux, Mike Hoeffel, Chad Wiseman, J.T. Barnett, Kory Nagy, Myles Stoesz, J.S. Berube

Devils coach Pete DeBoer counting on Bryce Salvador's return

By Rich Chere

Devils defenseman Bryce Salvador hopes to be cleared for training camp when he takes a physical on Friday.

Devils veterans won't take part in their first day of training camp until Saturday, but the morning before could prove to be important to the club this season.

That's when defenseman Bryce Salvador, who missed all of last season with a cochlear concussion, will take his physical and find out whether he is cleared for camp.

"I've seen him skating here and talked to him a few times. He's taken some bumps but sounds real optimistic," coach Pete DeBoer said. "At least in my mind, I'm going in figuring this guy is going to be a part of our opening day roster and ready to go."

Salvador, 35, believes he is ready. He skated and trained hard this summer.

But Devils management is being cautious.

"We're waiting for the physical for him to get clearance. All indications are that he will, but we don't know yet," general manager Lou Lamoriello said.

Salvador engaged in a preseason fight with Kris Newbury of the Rangers last Sept. 25 and then suffered a hard hit from Philadelphia Flyers forward James vanRiemsdyk in a Sept. 28 exhibition game. But the defenseman feels his problems began when he was hit by a shot from the Pittsburgh Penguins’ Alex Goligoski much earlier — Dec. 10, 2008.

The Boston Bruins' Marc Savard, who suffered a concussion from a blindside hit from Pittsburgh's Matt Cooke, played just 25 games last season and is expected to miss all of this season.

Pittsburgh's Sidney Crosby has been sidelined with post concussion symptoms since Jan. 5 and is not yet cleared to play. His return is uncertain and Crosby said he doesn't know if he'll be involved in training camp.

For Salvador, however, there is optimism that his comeback is about to begin this weekend.

It takes more than getting fired to shake Pete DeBoer.

If DeBoer had any doubts about taking over as the Devils' head coach, however, it would have been understandable if he was a bit rattled by a couple of ‘Welcome to New Jersey’ moments he experienced during his first week of living in the Garden State.

The deposed Florida Panthers coach was meeting with general manager Lou Lamoriello in the Prudential Center office Aug. 23 when the room started to wobble – the effect of the far-reaching tremors of an earthquake centered in Virginia. Four days later, Hurricane Irene howled through the area, leaving widespread power outages and flooding in her wake.

DeBoer felt “fortunate” there was no damage to the house he had just moved into with his wife, Susan, and their three children.

“Hopefully, all the bad stuff,” he said, “is out of the way.”

The Devils have a similar hope heading into the new season – rookies report for training camp physicals Thursday and veterans Friday. They’re looking to rebound after missing the playoffs last season for the first time since 1995-96.

DeBoer, 43, believes he’s the right man to guide them back to the postseason. In the process, he intends to demonstrate he’s a better coach than his 103-107-36 record over the last three seasons with the Panthers.

“I think so, and I think that’s going to be proven out,” he said. “I don’t have any doubt about that.”

Neither does Lamoriello. Even before starting his search for a successor to the re-retired Jacques Lemaire, Lamoriello was familiar with DeBoer from watching him when he coached major junior in the Ontario Hockey League, and from DeBoer’s friendship with former Devils coach Brent Sutter.

Lamoriello also admired the effort of DeBoer’s Panther teams when they faced the Devils.

Lamoriello’s admiration for DeBoer only grew after interviewing him, which, after a lengthy process, led to his hiring July 19.

“Now, having him here and spending the time with him, I really feel comfortable and really feel good that what I saw on the surface was exactly what I see on the inside,” Lamoriello said.

DeBoer said being fired by the Panthers – his first firing at any level – was a “humbling” experience.

The Panthers missed the playoffs by a tiebreaker in DeBoer’s first season and never got that close again. He went through three general managers and an ownership change.

When DeBoer was hired, promises made about adding players to help the team contend went unfulfilled. There were reports he wasn’t on speaking terms with GM Dale Tallon at the end of last season, but DeBoer insists, “That wasn’t the case.”

Still, the Panthers finished 30-40-12, and DeBoer was fired the day after their season finale. A few days later, he told the Miami Herald he had been “cocky” when he took the Panthers’ job in jumping straight to the NHL after a highly successful, seven-year run with the Kitchener Rangers.

Now, he says a more accurate term would be “very confident and maybe a little naive.”

“I think I’m still very confident,” he said. “But this league has a way of humbling you pretty quickly, and I think that’s one of the lessons you learn.”

DeBoer’s belief in himself is no surprise to Carolina Hurricanes coach Paul Maurice, a member of DeBoer’s “inner circle of friends” whom DeBoer leaned on following his firing.

“He has always had that kind of fire,” said Maurice, who was junior teammates with DeBoer and gave him his first coaching job as an assistant with the Detroit Junior Red Wings in 1994-95. “He would take that very personally what happened in Florida, whether he was responsible for it or not, and he would certainly be driven to prove to people who wouldn’t know the quality of his work [that he is a good coach].”

DeBoer never doubted he would get a second chance and believes his experience with the Panthers will help him be a better coach. “The key thing,” he says, was finding the right team to lead.

“I always felt that I’d be able to work again,” he said. “I felt that people noticed how we played and how prepared we were despite our record, but I feel very fortunate that I got the right job and I feel this is the right job for me.”

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New Jersey Devils strongly deny report in New York Post of organization being near bankruptcy

By Kristie Ackert

The Devils angrily denied a story published Monday that claimed the team was on the brink of filing for bankruptcy.

"The NY Post story is inaccurate. The notions that the Devils are facing bankruptcy or that the Devils have told their banks to 'get lost' are patently untrue," the Devils said in a statement issued by the team's business department.

"The Devils value their relationship with their banks and are confident a refinancing will be completed shortly. As stated previously, ownership is close to finalizing an agreement that would lead to a buyout of (minority owner) Brick City's share of the company."

The report claimed the Devils had missed a Sept. 1 loan payment to a CIT-led lending group that could push the leveraged-team into bankruptcy.

It is not the first time the Devils' financial situation has made headlines because of a battle with controlling owner Jeff Vanderbeek.

A February report that Ray Chambers had put his non-controlling interest in the team up for sale claimed the team was heavily leveraged.

Vanderbeek declined comment through a team spokesman Monday. At the time it was announced that Chambers would be selling his interest in the team, Vanderbeek said he would not give up control. A former vice president at Lehman Brothers, Vanderbeek is said to be close to putting together a refinancing deal that would lead to the buyout of Chambers' portion of the team.

While the Devils disputed the report of their impending bankruptcy, the team cannot deny that it has struggled with attendance. Even after moving to the state-of-the-art Prudential Center in Newark in 2007, the Devils have been stuck near the bottom of NHL crowd figures. Last season, the Devils averaged 14,775 fans a game and finished 25th in the 30-team NHL.

Last season, the team also missed the playoffs - and the ticket revenue that comes with it - for the first time in 14 years.

The team-owned Prudential Center, aka the Rock, picked up revenue this past season as the temporary home to the Nets, so the current NBA lockout could become costly to the Devils.

Still, Devils president and GM Lou Lamoriello had been adamant at the end of last season that the uncertain ownership situation would not affect the team. In fact, the Devils are more limited by the 15-year, $100-million deal they gave Ilya Kovalchuk last offseason.

This year the Devils re-signed Zach Parise to a $6 million, one-year deal.

Lamoriello declined comment on the team's financial situation Monday.

An NHL source also declined to discuss the team's financial state, but did note that the published report included "several inaccuracies."

DiPietro sticks with it after painful letdowns

By BRETT CYRGALIS

The locker room smells actively rank, the smell only freshly dampened hockey equipment can produce. There are about 40 people moving about frantically, some Islanders players undressing and heading to the showers, some young public relations men in suits trying to rein in the chaos, and a handful of media people, including one cameraman, moving from station to station conducting interviews as if on a conveyor belt.

The losing goalie, Rick DiPietro, steadies himself before the scrum and looks up as if he's in a hurry. He's already told the assembled ragtag group of media to come back once, and now they are reassembling in front of him as the rest of Nassau Coliseum empties out.

It's December 2006, and the 25-year-old was in nets for all of a 4-2 loss to the Canadiens, two of the goals coming on distinct deflections and one coming through a screen. He hardly moved his head as any of them went by.

It's about 10 months after DiPietro was named the best goalie in the United States, starting for his country in the Turin Olympics. The only reporter who covers the team on a daily basis asks him about the goals. "It didn't seem like you were seeing the puck all that well tonight," the reporter says.

"The goals were on deflections and screens," DiPietro responds. "I saw the puck just fine."


DiPietro calls out to the man who asked the first question.

"You don't watch the game," DiPietro insists. "You gotta watch the game!"

A young man standing nearby, still wet behind the ears, gets an impression of DiPietro, an impression that's not too different from what he's heard about the combustible netminder. Walking out, he looks back and DiPietro is shaking with his pads, still shaking his head at the notion of someone thinking he didn't see the puck well.

That guy's gotta watch the freaking game!

"I remember it, sure," DiPietro told The Post in mid-August, about that day five years ago. "You get pissed and prodded with enough of the right questions, you're going to get aggravated. Everyone does, right?"

DiPietro is laying face down on a trainer's table at the Islanders' facility in Syosset, getting his hips massaged as he readies himself for an offseason skate, three weeks before training camp opens this Saturday.

"Sometimes you feel like you're damned if you do, damned if you don't, just because you don't want to throw around clichés the whole time," DiPietro said. "Then there are going to be times when a person's true feelings come out. You know, that's what the people want, right? They want you to be real, and show emotion and show you care."

"I don't think it's ever been a question that I care more about winning and this organization than a lot of people," he continued, "and if that comes off as me having an attitude every once in a while, I apologize, but it's never meant to be that way."

It's been a long time since that day, and like all of us, DiPietro is a different person. It was only three months before his off-camera outburst that DiPietro signed the first modern day NHL mega-deal, getting a 15-year contract worth $67.5 million. The deal was laughed at by league rivals -- who spent a couple years laughing then quickly started replicating -- and owner Charles Wang was remembered mostly as the man who walked into his first press conference in 2000 holding the book "Hockey for Dummies."

Like most huge contracts, it was hard for DiPietro to live up to the expectations. The season following his Olympic run and the signing of the deal, DiPietro put up a 2.58 goals-against average and led the Islanders to the playoffs as the final seed in the East. They ended up taking only one game in a first-round loss to the Sabres, keeping the franchise's streak alive -- zero playoff series won since 1993.

"The bigger the contract, the more pressure there is," DiPietro says now. "Throughout a long-term contract like that, there will be years when you're underpaid and there will be years when you're overpaid. That's just the commitment both sides make. Winning cures everything. The Stanley Cup and being successful here will definitely validate the contract."

The summer of 2007, DiPietro went home, relaxed, and got ready for not just the next season of promise, but for a career full of it. It was the last summer before this one that he would spend training rather than rehabbing an injury.

In the 2007-08 season, DiPietro started a career-high 63 games. In the three years since, he's started 39 games - combined.

"The past three years, for both of us, have been as tough as it's ever been," says DiPietro's wife of two years (and girlfriend of 10), Cassandra. "I've felt for him. It's like he lost his identity, everything he knew was taken away from him. He felt helpless, worthless, depressed. And there was nothing I can do to help."

It goes something like this: surgery on both knees, surgery on his hip, groin injuries, neck injuries and numerous concussions. And with DiPietro's unending desire to get back on the ice as fast as possible, no matter the team's standing, many of the injuries were not given as much time to recover as most doctors would've liked.

To look at DiPietro's face when he's talking about all his injuries is like being a fly on the wall in a psychiatrist's office.

"You don't feel a part of it, there's no way to contribute," DiPietro said. "It's definitely one of the more depressing things as a professional athlete you have to go through."

"I think the best word to describe what Rick has gone through the last few years is resilient," said Islanders general manager Garth Snow, who was a teammate and fellow goalie with DiPietro for four years before retiring and immediately being named GM in 2006. "The one thing that you don't have control over as a professional athlete is injuries, and in Rick's case they happened a little more frequently then anyone expected. With his resiliency to get back to his level when he was an All-Star, playing 50 games, I give him a lot of credit."

No setback in DiPietro's career was more brutal, more publicly baring, and more widely criticized than what happened last Feb. 2, as DiPietro finally made his way back onto the ice for some meaningless games in order to sharpen up for this coming season. His team was 16-28-7, had won just a single game in the month of November, and was far on the outside of the playoff picture.

As a scrum broke out amongst the Islanders and Penguins skaters, DiPietro took off his helmet and began to skate out to mid-ice, staring down his opposing netminder, Brent Johnson. DiPietro wishes now that he knew Johnson was 6-foot-3 and had a left arm that hung down around his knees. He fout out quickly, as the two engaged and Johnson leveled DiPietro with one punch, shattering his right orbital bone and dropping him to the Coliseum ice like a rag doll.

He didn't play for another month and a half, getting plates put into his face and allowing his surgically repaired right knee to stop swelling.

"I would put myself in the [category of] hockey player who happens to play goalie," he said. "I enjoy fighting and I enjoy trying to contribute. That becomes a frustrating part of the game for me sometimes; as a goalie you're kind of limited in how much you can do."

"At that point in the season, we were losing, and I was trying to stir it up a little bit, and maybe change the momentum of the season," he continued. "I mean, it worked. I wish you told me at the beginning of the year that getting into a fight like that would have changed our luck a little bit and I would have done it in a heartbeat."

After that game, the young Islanders went 14-11-6, somewhat righting a sinking ship. And if it was DiPietro finding an unconventional way to contribute, it wouldn't be the first time.

Jack Parker heard about this high school phenom goalie from a pretty credible source: 1980 U.S. Olympic team captain Mike Eruzione. As the longtime coach at Boston University, Parker had seen some of the best come and go, including Eruzione. But now the Olympic star was telling Parker he found the next great goalie, a kid from his hometown of Winthrop, Mass., playing at the famed prep school, St. Sebastian's.
"He was pretty confident from before we met him," Parker said of the young DiPietro. "I was always amazed at how cool and calm and collected he was. He was a fabulous goaltender in high school and college."

One of the things that drew Parker to DiPietro was his uncanny ability to move the puck. Few goalies in history are as great with the puck on their blade as they are stopping it with their bodies, and Parker was afraid that DiPietro's frequent play out of the crease would stunt his growth in it.

"But it didn't affect his effectiveness at all," Parker said. "I knew it was something we didn't want to take away from him."

Parker can't remember the exact game, but it was during that freshman season -- the only season DiPietro would spend in college -- that the risk-taking goalie misplayed a puck in the corner and it resulted in a first-period goal. Parker intentionally didn't say a word to DiPietro at intermission, and within the first two minutes of the second period, without hesitation, DiPietro jumped out of the crease and into the corner, retrieved a puck and fed it to a streaking left winger, starting an offensive breakout.

"We knew right then it was no problem," Parker said.

Nearing the end of that year, DiPietro started talking with then-Islanders GM Mike Milbury. The conversations were ones that would make any 18-year-old's head swell, with Milbury telling the college freshman he was going to be the savior of a franchise, he was going to be the first goalie since Michel Plasse in 1968 to be taken with the No. 1 overall pick, he was going to be loved by all of the people of the greatest city on Earth.

"When Milbury told him he'd take him No. 1, it was a feather in the cap," Parker said. "Ricky was pretty sure he was coming back. But Milbury said, 'I'm going to anoint Rick DiPietro.' That's the only reason he chose to leave was to be the No. 1 pick. If he was No. 6, he wouldn't have done it."

The draft rules have changed since then, and now DiPietro would have been allowed to return to school after being drafted. Instead, Milbury traded the young goalie on his roster that everyone had already said would be great, Roberto Luongo, to make room for DiPietro on the NHL ice. It didn't take him long to get out there, as a 19-year-old DiPietro went 3-15-1 with a 3.49 GAA in 2000-01. He didn't return to the NHL until the end of the 2002-03 season.

"I really thought he'd be a longtime NHLer, and he is," Parker said. "I think he's a No. 1 NHL goalie. But there's a lot that has stopped him from becoming Marty Brodeur."

After the massage back in the training room in Syosset, DiPietro heads out to the ice with 18-year-old sniper Nino Niederreiter and a local forward, Tony Romano, who plays for the Islanders' minor league team in Bridgeport, Conn. Joined by goalie coach Sudarshan Maharaj (hockey name: "Sudsy") and NHL veteran Ioslovak Satan (who lives on Long Island and is looking for a job), DiPietro begins to skate around and warm up.

He saunters in between the pipes. He looks down at his new -- but retro -- light-brown leg pads and matching waffle on his left wrist. He then snaps his head up and focuses his eyes upward through the face mask, like only goalies can.

The group spends about 10 minutes sending soft shots that DiPietro kicks away. Then one puck begins to float back and forth across the ice, ends up on the blade of Niederreiter and is rifled over DiPietro's right shoulder, snapping the net backwards.

He finds the lone puck behind him and flings it out to center ice with a loud and unprintable exclamation.

A couple pucks later, Niederreiter fires the same shot and DiPietro whips his glove up and catches it with a crack of leather. He doesn't say a word, tosses the puck aside, and looks to the next one already moving, already looking like pucks used to look with him in net - like they're destined to disappear somewhere within his person.

"I put more pressure on myself to be successful than anyone could," DiPietro said afterwards. "If [really] kills me to not be what I expected to be so far. I'm trying hard now to rectify that."

To rectify opportunities lost is a heavy weight to carry, but one that is on DiPietro's shoulders nonetheless. Come Monday, when he turns 30, a lot of pressure will be on the finally-healthy goalie, who is now closer to the back end of his career than the front.

"His 20s weren't so good," Cassandra DiPietro says, "so his 30s has to be better."

For the first time in a long time, the Islanders enter a year with DiPietro in nets and a legitimate expectation of making the playoffs.

So is it a make-or-break year?

"Oh yeah," DiPietro said.

And a lot of that depends on ... 

"Me," he said quickly. "That's understandable. I agree 100 percent."

Snow, on the other hand, isn't ready to risk his team's fate on DiPietro's inconsistent health. Last season, Snow claimed former Vezina Trophy finalist Evgeni Nabokov off of waivers, but like many free agents in the recent past, Nabokov spurned the Islanders and decided to sit out the season. Yet Snow said that he recently sat with Nabokov for dinner, and the two are on the same page concerning his future on Long Island.

To solidify that, Nabokov got to training camp early and has been skating on Long Island for over a week.

"It's not a situation where it's one side versus the other," Snow said. "We're in it to win enough hockey games to solidify a playoff position, then compete for a Stanley Cup. We're all pulling the rope in the same direction."

DiPietro said he has no opinion either way about Nabokov's signing, but he will welcome him into camp with open arms.

"Hopefully he has a good camp, and, you know, I'm coming to go to work," DiPietro said. "If there's one thing I've learned in this business it's not to take anything for granted. One thing I do every summer - well, more this summer - is make sure I come to camp as ready to go as I've ever been."

The franchise will also be dealing with the overhanging issue of the decrepit Nassau Coliseum, which is entering its 40th year. On Aug. 1, Nassau County voters rejected a joint proposal by the Islanders and the county executive for a new arena to replace the Coliseum, and with the current lease set to expire at the end of 2015, the future of the once-pride franchise is uncertain.

"The best way to get people to want a new arena or to push for a new arena is to win hockey games and make the playoffs and be successful," DiPietro said. "That's everyone's main focus."

So now, finally, the focus returns to the ice. More appropriately, the blue ice between the pipes, where the spotlight will be the brightest on a man who has never reflected it back with the image he has desired.

"Like anyone else, you want people to like you," DiPietro said. "At the end of the day, you're only human, and no one likes being a villain or a jerk."

"I remember being a kid, [and] you want kids to appreciate what you're doing," he continued. "You want fans to appreciate what you're doing, and that's the thing I cherish the most - how the fans feel about me. I want them to know how hard I work and how much I care. I don't want them to think I'm a spoiled athlete and I take this for granted."

The wet hair in DiPietro's face and the preemptive playoff beard are beginning to show signs of gray. The Islanders goalie tosses his head, his pads again starting to give the empty locker room that distinctive odor.

The look on his face says he is again ready, now it's just up to everyone else to watch the freaking game.

Another week, another ownership crisis

david shoalts

Life never changes for Gary Bettman and the NHL. Just when the commissioner has one fire (the Dallas Stars) almost under control, another one (the New Jersey Devils) erupts.

Either Wednesday or Thursday, according to an investment banking source, the Stars will file for bankruptcy in a Delaware court, which will pave the way for Vancouver businessman Tom Gaglardi to buy the team for an estimated $230-million (U.S.).

Officially, Gaglardi’s offer is considered a stalking-horse bid by the bankruptcy court, one designed to attract higher bids, but those close to the deal do not expect a competing bid from any of the local groups who have been kicking the tires on the team for almost two years.

If the Stars’ creditors approve the plan and Mark Cuban, the owner of the NBA’s Dallas Mavericks, does not make a surprise bid, Gaglardi will achieve his dream of being an NHL owner. He will get the Stars and 50 per cent of the American Airlines Center. (Cuban owns the other 50 per cent of the arena, which is why some insiders think he might make a bid through the courts.)

Gaglardi could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

Another franchise sale may be close at hand, according to Robert Caporale, chairman of Game Plan LLC. Caporale is the investment banker in charge of selling the St. Louis Blues, and he is hopeful a deal will be ready for the approval of the NHL board of governors by the end of the month.

Caporale declined to identify the prospective buyer, but the most recent contenders were Chicago businessman Matthew Hulsizer and Blues minority owner Tom Stillman.

A new NHL crisis emerged this week, when it became known the Devils missed a payment Sept. 1 on a $100-million loan with CIT Investment Banking Services.

By Tuesday, the Devils made it known that co-owner Jeff Vanderbeek plans to buy out fellow owners Ray Chambers and his son-in-law, Mike Gilfillan, as part of a refinancing plan. The team also said it received an extension on the bank loan.

Chambers and Gilfillan own 47 per cent of the Devils and their operating company, Devils Arena Entertainment, through a company called Brick City LLC. They have been trying to sell their stake for almost a year. Vanderbeek also has 47 per cent of the team, while Peter Simon owns 6 per cent.

While Chambers was said to be seeking $160-million for the Brick City shares, a banking source was skeptical anyone would be willing to pay that much. The source was also dubious about Vanderbeek’s chances of being able to finance a purchase of Brick City’s share.

It is possible Vanderbeek could get the additional 47 per cent for little, if any, cash if he agrees to assume all of the bank debt. In addition to the $100-million loan, Devils Arena Entertainment has another loan for almost $180-million, which means the team’s total debt could be more than the franchise value.

But if Chambers and Gilfillan are no longer responsible for the bank debt, it might be enough for them to walk away with nothing, since it’s assumed Chambers is the one covering the Devils’ annual losses.

If so the question is who would take the chance of lending Vanderbeek enough money to pull this off. Vanderbeek could not be reached Tuesday for comment.

In any event, the Devils will not be pushed into bankruptcy during the coming NHL season because of a “stand-still” clause in their lending agreement.

The consent letter forces the banks to wait a minimum of 180 days after they declare a team in default on its loan before moving to take over the team and place it into bankruptcy. If the 180 days end during the NHL season, as they would in this case, the banks are bound to “stand still” until the day after the last game of the Stanley Cup playoffs.

Not only does this spare the NHL embarrassment during the season, it gives the team owner and league commissioner time to find new financing and work out an agreement with the lenders.

Meanwhile, a report out of Phoenix said talks with former San Jose Sharks executive Greg Jamison about buying the Coyotes are progressing, but it could not be confirmed.

Toronto Globe And Mail LOADED: 09.14.2011
Brain tests add to hockey concussion controversy

carrie tait, james mirtle AND sean gordon

The introduction of mandatory testing to help reduce the damage of head injuries in young hockey players has done nothing to snuff out the controversy over concussions in sport.

Medical experts remain skeptical, if not dismissive, of decisions by some hockey associations to implement baseline testing for players, and not all parents have expressed whole-hearted support. The tests are meant to prevent injured players from returning to the ice before they have fully recovered, but the worry is parents, players and coaches may rely on them too heavily.

Head injuries have become a weighty issue as professional athletes are sidelined due to concussions. NHL star Sidney Crosby’s ongoing struggle is the most prominent in Canada, and CFL and NFL players have criticized the way their sports address the subject.

In Canada, some hockey parents want baseline tests implemented, if only to gather more data to determine whether they are reliable. And parents stressed that the tests should not be used to decide if it is safe for youngsters to return to the ice but to indicate whether further medical examinations - and patience - are needed.

Baseline tests, some of which are done online and take about 25 minutes, examine such things as memory and attention span. Proponents say that the results can be compared to tests done after an injury to see if the player has recovered. Some tests cost $25.

Blair Dimock, who has volunteered as a minor hockey coach in Toronto for nine years, wants to experiment with the tests to see if they are reliable and valid. If so, he said, they should be used in conjunction with other tools to determine whether an injured player is fit to get back in the game. Parents, coaches and trainers would need to rely on more than online tests gauging memory and attention spans.

"If there's anything that can give us an even better sense of what we need to do and how quickly we need to act, I would be all for it, recognizing that at the end of the day, these are complicated medical issues that we would need to get proper medical advice," said Mr. Dimock, the father of 13-year-old twin boys.

"Anything we can do to make our understanding and our decisions about head injuries more evidence-based, with good reliable kinds of tests and data, would be a huge step forward," he said. "[But] we have got to be honest about what the limits are on these kinds of tools at the moment."

Christopher Randolph, a clinical professor of neurology at the Loyola University Medical Center, called the tests unreliable and said they could put kids in danger if false results are trusted and players return to the game prematurely.

Concussions, he said, should be treated like any other injury, with physicians calling the shots.

"You should manage a concussion in a kid the same way you would manage a sprained ankle - you have appropriate medical personnel evaluate the kid, and consult with the team about how he is doing and when he or she is ready to play," he said.

"We don't baseline test people in terms of their ankle flexibility before the season to determine that their ankles are just as flexible after they’ve been sprained [before] returning to skating. And we probably shouldn't be doing it for a concussion either."

Even if the tests were trustworthy, a number of problems remain, Dr. Randolph said. If the online tests are administered in a group setting, for example, kids could goof around, skewing the results. Further, teens may sandbag their baseline test so that if they get hurt and have to take another before being cleared to play, the odds of passing will be higher.

"It is nothing more than a scam," Dr. Randolph said.

Despite skepticism, the Greater Toronto Hockey League at its annual meeting in June had a motion to make baseline testing mandatory for its competitive players, but the motion was tabled until 2012.

"Some of our members had different pieces of information as to the validity of it, the proper age that baseline testing can be used," said Scott Oakman, executive director of the GTHL. "There were some concerns around the cost of it. But I think we're working at addressing those issues. ... Quite frankly, our board has been a huge proponent for the need for baseline testing. And we have a number of our organizations that have implemented it anyways."

But some of Canada's leading neurological experts have pointed out that little independent peer-reviewed research exists.

A study published during the summer indicated that baseline data collected from the SCAT2 test - a standardized oral test designed by concussion specialists - can have a beneficial effect in diagnosing and treating subsequent concussions.

But previous studies, including one by Canadian researchers published in a British medical journal last year, indicated it's harder to establish the benefits of baseline testing among youths, partly because of continuing neurological and cognitive development during childhood and early adolescence.

Leslie Kenyon, a hockey parent in Saskatchewan, is cautious about baseline testing because of the changes children go through as they mature. Her 11-year-old son had a concussion last December, and was further hurt when he returned to playing shortly after. He still gets symptoms such as headaches, but that may be attributable to puberty, she said. Her son has an appointment with a neurologist this month.

Ms. Kenyon supports computerized baseline testing, but said she would not exclusively rely on its results.

"At the end of the day, I would still want a professional's opinion."

Toronto Globe And Mail LOADED: 09.14.2011
Referee community gets together to prepare for NHL season

Jonathon Jackson

THORNBURY, ONT.-Players aren't the only ones preparing for a new hockey season.

The NHL's on-ice officials have gathered in Thornbury, 20 kilometres west of Collingwood, for a training camp that will get them ready - and which also serves as their annual staff meeting.

This camp is the only opportunity supervisors such as NHL director of officiating Terry Gregson will have to brief the officials on new developments, such as rule changes. A significant example is Rule 48, which has been revised to outlaw all targeted hits to the head, rather than just hits from the blind side.

"We have to go over the standard of enforcement that we want to put into place for the season," Gregson said. "We have to discuss the parameters that are going to be followed, how we want it called."

"I've just empowered the guys that, when they see contact with the head, react to it."

Reacting is something that's always an issue with on-ice officials in a fast-paced game, which is why emphasis is placed on making sure they're always in a position to be able to make the best possible call.

"We demand excellence, but perfection is an impossibility," said Gregson, an NHL referee for 25 seasons.

"We have given out the guidelines. If the guys are following the guidelines, it's great, and we reinforce it. If not, we have to figure out why and work with them to get back in line."

This is the fifth straight year the officials have stayed and trained in Thornbury and its surrounding municipality, The Blue Mountains. The decision to come here was influenced by Gregson, who lives in the area.

"Historically, we usually did it in Toronto or bigger cities, but we just thought it would be nice to get to a smaller community, a more relaxed atmosphere, and interact with the community a little better," he said. "The guys really enjoy this because most of us are small-town guys."

"They feel when they walk in the lobby of this arena that they're back in their hometown."

For linesman Steve Barton, the community feel is in full effect.

"It's the only time all of us are together," said Barton, who's entering his 12th NHL campaign.

"It's a good time to talk about the rules and talk about maintaining consistency throughout the league. And it's just a good time for camaraderie as well, to spend some time as a big group. It's a lot of fun."

The camp began on the weekend with medical and fitness testing for 66 NHL referees and linesmen, along with seven American Hockey League referees, one NHL linesman and seven prospects who were also invited to give them some brief exposure to the pro level.

Classroom and on-ice sessions followed for the NHL and AHL officials. Gregson said they're expected to show up in top physical condition, allowing for refinement and execution of the skills they already have.

The camp is ending with an intramural hockey tournament that's designed to be fun but is also intended to get officials somewhat reacclimated to a game situation. The competitive nature also tends to remind them once again of what it's like to be a player.

"They can understand, when a guy gets whacked in the ankle in the wintertime, why there's a bit of a reaction - because it happens out here," Gregson said, laughing.

Barton also sees the value in the exercise.

"Part of our job is to have empathy for the players, to know what they're thinking, what they're feeling," he said. "It really does make you remember what it was like to be a hockey player."

"It gives you a perspective when you go out and officiate the best players in the world, how tough they have it some nights, how hard they're working and what a great job they do."

And that, in turn, inspires the officials to be the best that they can be.

"We can all get better, and we need to be better too," said Brian Murphy, a linesman entering his 24th NHL season. "The teams are working to get better, so why shouldn't we?"

The community was treated on Tuesday to a number of events involving the officials, including a barbecue and a Hot Stove-type question-and-answer session moderated by Elliot Friedman of CBC's Hockey Night in Canada.

The Stanley Cup - its bowl still noticeably dented from a mishap last month in Newfoundland - was present, as were the Hart, Calder, Lady Byng and Rocket Richard trophies.

"It's just an opportunity to interact with the community and say thank you for what they've done for us," Gregson said.

Toronto Star

New helmet sensor hopes to give coaches, trainers a heads up

Randy Starkman

The new Shockbox helmet sensor, bottom, measures the impact of a collision and sends live data to a smartphone to determine whether a concussion has occurred. The device is expected to go on sale next season.

When Scott Clark's son slid headfirst into the boards during a game, the hockey coach had no idea the impact the collision would ultimately have.

For one thing, it sparked a career change for Dad.

Clark and partner Danny Crossman are now producing a wireless impact sensor for helmets called Shockbox that is designed to try to help coaches, trainers and parents determine whether a concussion might have occurred.

When a collision occurs, a sensor fitted to the top of the helmet sends live data to a smartphone for impacts registering within a range of acceleration to the head (between 60-160 Peak G). Some clinical studies indicate that forces of 90 G or higher cause 65 per cent of concussions.

The sensors won't be for sale by Ottawa-based Impakt Protective Inc. to the general public until next season and are expected to sell for $100 to $160. They are slated to be tested shortly by Ontario university hockey and football teams and a team in the Ontario Hockey League among others.

Crossman said they are also negotiating with a few NHL teams.

"Our plan is that we want to thoroughly validate it first," said Crossman. "You can't just release something to the market and people buy it and it doesn't really work, because there's actually a kind of complex science behind it all."

It all started as a discussion between Crossman and Clark on their daily jog. A bomb disposal expert in the army, Crossman first proposed the idea of trying to apply technology used in the forces to the sports concussion issue.

It didn't go anywhere until Clark's 10-year-old son Cameron had that unfortunate run-in with the boards.

"I like to think I have a pretty good eye for what's going on on the ice, but when my boy came back to the bench he obviously wasn't altogether there," said Clark.

Clark had one question: Did anyone see how hard he hit his head?

"As I'm asking that question, it keeps resonating in my head: 'How many other coaches and other trainers are asking that same question every day?'" said Clark.

"These are the kids that we see get hit and we're expected to assess them in the moment when the game's going and the kids are going to talk you out of it every time. They're going to say 'Send me back, coach. I'm ready to play.' Trainers are going to be talked out of assessing kids further.

"If we can provide another tool that says you actually have to do a further assessment, then it takes the guesswork out of the equation."

Some concussion doctors interviewed don't agree.

Dr. Scott Delaney, research director at the McGill Sport Medicine Clinic, said previous research projects have shown it's very difficult to pin down a threshold where concussions occur.

"It also showed us you may have situations where you might not intuit there'd be a problem and it ended up giving athletes symptoms of a concussion, showing us that while it may be a function of energy it's also a function of where on the head the collision occurs and an individual's pre-disposition for a concussion. . . . It showed us one size doesn't fit all."

Delaney said the most important diagnostic tool remains educating athletes on the symptoms of a concussion and the dangers of ignoring them.

Dr. Paul Echlin said he didn't think such technology should be marketed until it has been proven effective in peer-reviewed studies.

Dr. Charles Tator, founder of ThinkFirst Canada and one of the leading voices on the concussion issue, is on the Shockbox board of advisers. Tator said he accepted the position because he believes there is a need for an inexpensive, relatively simple device to record forces between the helmet and the brain.

"We need to learn a lot more about concussions and other brain injuries in sports, and we are hoping that this device will help us get some of the missing answers," said Tator.
Enough piling on! 0

By Steve Buftery, Toronto Sun

In the matter of Derek Boogaard, Rick Rypien and Wade Belak, the rush to judgment continues and the exploitation continues.

We're still being bombarded with the suggestion that there is a definitive link between what these young men did for a living and their premature deaths.

Nobody has proven that connection, yet the argument is constantly being advanced on the air and in print - that there is a link, and therefore fighting in NHL hockey should be banned.

If you’re against fighting in NHL hockey, fine, only stop exploiting the deaths of Boogaard, Rypien and Belak to further that agenda.

NHL enforcers aren’t an island unto themselves. Former Blue Jays pitcher Mike Flanagan committed suicide this summer and he wasn’t an NHL enforcer. Nor were Erica Blasberg, Solen Coulot or Jeret Peterson, all professional athletes who committed suicide in recent months.

If there’s a hue and cry to be made, perhaps it should be for a study into depression and pro sport. It’s time to stop pretending that depression is somehow unique to NHL tough guys.

"It f---ing pisses me off that people take this opportunity to try to exploit a certain part of the game." Boston Bruins enforcer Shawn Thornton told reporters this week, when asked for his opinion on the topic. "Those are very sad instances and I don’t think exploiting a part of the game is the right way to go. I think we should remember the people as the men they were and not what they did for a living."

Amen to that.

I think part of it is, people want easy answers, and it’s easy to conclude that the deaths of the three deceased warriors were linked to the fact that they were NHL enforcers. But that doesn’t make it right.

It’s your prerogative if you don’t like fighting. But stop cramming down our throats the idea that most NHL fans don’t want fighting, and most NHL players don’t want fighting.

LISTEN TO PLAYERS

Time and again NHL players, even non-fighters, have resisted the idea of an all-out ban on fighting.

My colleague Steve Simmons suggested that NHL players should be polled, via a secret ballot, as to their thoughts on fighting. I think that’s a good idea. I also think the result would be the status quo, that they wouldn’t want fighting eliminated from the game. And neither would most fans. The vast majority of fans at NHL games love it when there’s a fight. Their enthusiasm is real.

Many who want fighting eliminated from the game argue that their goal is to cut down on serious injuries. That’s fine. But if that’s your priority, you’ve got to get past fighting.

You’ve got to look at the size and speed of the players in relation to the size of the ice they play on.

You’ve got to look at the equipment, which is like medieval body armour.

And you have to look at hitting.

Belak claimed that he never suffered a concussion in a fight. But like most NHLers, he did suffer injuries as a result of hits. There are probably more NHL players who suffered career ending concussions as a result of open ice hits than because of fights.

The risks are there. The players understand the risks.

I will never buy into the argument that eliminating fighting from NHL hockey will make the game safer or better.

If players can’t fight - if the NHL somehow finds a way to stop players from dropping the gloves on the ice - players will figure out other ways to enforce pay-back, and to protect their more skilled teammates.
MOSCOW — In the aftermath of the plane crash that decimated a beloved Russian hockey team last week, fans clung to one filament of hope: a single player, 26-year-old Aleksandr Galimov, had somehow survived, staggering from the wreckage under his own power and telling a pair of astonished police officers, "Brothers, I am Galimov."

Aleksandr Galimov, 26, was expected to play in the 2014 Winter Olympics in Russia.

Over the next five days, Mr. Galimov became a sort of talisman for fans, who flowed out into the street in the tens of thousands to grieve the loss of the team, Yaroslavl Lokomotiv.

The crowd that converged on the team’s arena chanted “Galimov, live for the whole team” and “Sanya, fight!” Though his injuries were grave — he had burns to his respiratory tract and covering 90 percent of his body — fans on one Web site asked people "not to discuss the topic," as if they could keep him alive through sheer force of will.

Five days after the crash, Mr. Galimov died on Monday, administrators at a Moscow burn clinic told the Interfax news service. His death brings the toll of the catastrophe to 44 and deepens what is already being called the greatest tragedy in the history of Russian hockey. The sole remaining survivor is a member of the crew, Aleksandr Sizov, who is reported to be in stable condition.

Aleksandr V. Nabokov, who edits a Web site devoted to sports in Yaroslavl, Lokomotiv’s home city, 160 miles northeast of Moscow, said the grief seemed to reach its apogee over the weekend. The crowd of mourners numbered up to 100,000, according to Russian news outlets. With the news of Mr. Galimov’s death, Mr. Nabokov said, “most people feel emptiness inside them.”

"Sasha wasn’t any worse or better than the rest of them, but he survived," Mr. Nabokov said. "People saw him as the last ray of light in this darkness. The team perished, and so he came to personify the whole team. That is why they reacted this way."

Most of Russia has now seen footage of the wreckage of the plane, which struggled to gain altitude on takeoff and crashed about a mile from the end of the runway, scattering seared wreckage over a tributary of the Volga River.

Oleg Smirnov, a police officer, described arriving at the scene moments after the crash to see a man standing in shallow water, tearing off what remained of his flaming T-shirt and saying, “Brothers, help me.”

"At first we thought maybe he was a fisherman who happened to be sitting on the riverbank and was splashed by burning kerosene,” Officer Smirnov said. The man was already in the ambulance when the officers asked his name, Lt. Dmitri Konoplyov told Komsomolskaya Pravda.

"He whispered, 'Brothers, I am Galimov,' " Lieutenant Konoplyov said.

Fans formed groups with names like “Aleksandr Galimov Is Alive!” and posted regular updates on his condition. Mr. Galimov was a hometown hero in Yaroslavl, where he began training at age 5, and was expected to compete in the 2014 Winter Olympics in Russia’s Black Sea resort town of Sochi.

Safety officials have said pilot error or a technical malfunction might have contributed to the crash. The International Aviation Committee announced on Monday that its inspectors found no problems with the engines, stabilizers or flaps on the plane, a Soviet-era Yak-42. Its weight was normal at the time of takeoff, and preflight control checks were in order, the committee said.

President Dmitri A. Medvedev met with hockey officials on Monday to discuss gradually rebuilding the team, which he said would be “the best monument to those who have been killed.” He called the crash “an absolutely unprecedented tragedy, a tragedy which has never happened in Russian sports,” and promised to compensate the families of the deceased, including fulfilling the players’ contracts.

In Yaroslavl, many fans have been venting their anger at the government, saying the team’s game schedule and transportation plans were disrupted by a Kremlin-backed political forum held in its arena last week.

“It’s all based on emotions,” Mr. Nabokov said. “People want to know — must know — who is to blame for the death of those who are near to them. They need an explanation, even when all the answers are right there on the surface.”

On Monday, a few fans visited the clinic where Mr. Galimov died, visibly struggling not to cry, and wove flowers between the bars of an iron fence.

“We thought if he survived, Lokomotiv would survive,” said Vassili Kurilov, 22. "There’s no team without him. He was the last one."

Olga Slobodchikova contributed reporting.

Nets coach Avery Johnson calls Russian hockey plane crash 'devastating'

By Colin Stephenson/

Russian hockey team plane crash (wire)Maxim Shipenkov/EPANets coach Avery Johnson was in Russia when the plane carrying the Lokomotiv Yaroslavl team crashed last week.

Avery Johnson was in Russia when the plane carrying the Lokomotiv Yaroslavl hockey team crashed shortly after takeoff, killing the team's coaches and players. The news hit the Nets coach hard.

"I mean, you basically just, you know, it's emotional, because we fly so much, as athletes and coaches," Johnson told reporters today in a 30-minute sit-down at the Nets' offices. "We're gone all the time, and we're flying on different aircraft that we don't know the maintenance of the different aircraft, we don't know, necessarily, how old they are, and how many miles, and we don't really know the pilots.

"It's just so much that's not really, anything that you can control," he continued. "So to understand how much we travel as an NBA team, and to see that plane go down like that, and so many lives are lost and for it to happen not too far from where we were in Moscow, it's devastating."

What made it even a little bit more personal to Johnson was the fact that Nets assistant coach Popeye Jones was in Russia with Johnson, giving coaching clinics to coaches and youth players. Jones' sons plays hockey (middle son Seth is on the U.S. Under-17 team), and would have been familiar with several of the Lokomotiv players who were killed in the crash.

The rules against head shots are tougher now in the NHL with the issue at the forefront of the upcoming season.

But the players will still skate around the rinks at breathtaking speeds, which increase in relation to advances in training techniques. So there will be concussions, despite penalizing targeted head shots and a broader interpretation of boarding.

The tougher rules, though, give Brendan Shanahan more leeway to hand out fines and suspensions as the league's head of discipline, a role he inherited from Colin Campbell prior to the Stanley Cup Finals.

"They're making steps in the right direction but there are still going to be collisions and there are still going to be guys moving fast," the Senators' Jason Spezza said.

A huge step in the right direction is having Shanahan, the former Devil and Ranger now serving as the league's vice president of hockey and business development, mete out justice.

Shanahan, who last played in the 2008-09 season – his second tenure with the Devils – has fresh insight into how a player thinks and reacts on the ice.

"We're going in the right direction," said Canadiens captain Brian Gionta, an ex-Devil, who was then asked if it was safe to keep fighting in the NHL.

"Yeah. College hockey doesn't have it and sometimes that gets out of control and players lose some respect [for each other]."

Shanahan gets all this.

He accomplished the unique feat of 656 goals and 2,489 penalty minutes in his career, meaning he understands what it is to be a skilled and physical player. His four predecessors as the NHL’s disciplinary czar – Colin Campbell, Brian Burke, Gil Stein and Brian O’Neill, all suspended him.

"I think the familiarity makes the players feel comfortable," Spezza said. "He's a real intelligent guy who likes the game a lot. He definitely can give a little more of a player outlook and aspect on what would be going through a scenario. That's no knock on Colie but he's been out of the game for a long time. It always helps to have a guy that's closer to the ice."

Where, as Shanahan knows, the action is pretty fast-paced.

The Record LOADED 09.14.2011
Wiercioch pushing for Senators roster spot

By ALLEN PANZERI

Ottawa Senators prospect Patrick Wiercioch has worked on his strength to make him a more formidable defenceman in the pro game.

Ottawa Senators prospect Patrick Wiercioch has worked on his strength to make him a more formidable defenceman in the pro game.

With all the attention on the competition between Jared Cowen and David Rundblad for the one spot open on defence on the Ottawa Senators' roster, Patrick Wiercioch has become the forgotten man.

It was only three years ago that he was in the same position that Cowen is in today, as one of the team's top defensive prospects.

In 2008, the year before Cowen was drafted, the 6-4, 200-pound Wiercioch was taken by the Senators in the second round, 42nd overall.

With Erik Karlsson, who was picked in the first round (15th overall) that year, and with Mark Borowiecki, a longshot who was picked in the fifth round, Wiercioch was part of an effort by general manager Bryan Murray to restock the team's defensive pool.

It has worked.

Murray has since added Cowen through the draft and Rundblad through a trade. The result is that, in three years or so, once these players all make the team and gain a bit of experience, the Senators could have the best group of defencemen in the National Hockey League.

Finding a place for all of them has been a problem, though, and for Wiercioch it's a perfect example of how timing can work against a player.

In a perfect world, he'd already have a spot on the team.

However, he spent two years at the University of Denver after he was drafted, delaying the start of his professional career, and then he hit some speed bumps in his first pro season with the American Hockey League's Binghamton Senators.

The result is that Wiercioch finds himself behind Cowen and Rundblad on the depth chart.

The highlight of Wiercioch's first season as a pro was playing eight games, and collecting two assists, for the NHL Senators, but his season in Binghamton wasn't smooth sailing.

He played 67 of the 80 regular-season games and 15 of 23 playoff games, missing five because of injury and being scratched in three.

That's telling, because Borowiecki, a much less heralded defenceman, played 21 of 23 playoff games. In three of those playoff games, he was selected to play over Wiercioch.

It wasn't fun being a healthy scratch after being a star in college.

It's not that Wiercioch can't play, Binghamton coach Kurt Kleinendorst said, but rather that he has to grow - literally - into the professional game.

"(Wiercioch's) issue is probably more strength than anything," Kleinendorst said.

"He's really smart. He has got the offensive instincts. He's very comfortable with the puck.

"But in the AHL, you're playing against men. In college, you're playing against younger men, older boys.

"Strength-wise, you really can't compare college to the (AHL). So for (Wiercioch), I think it was just an adjustment to the pro game. It was an adjustment to his strength. He just needed to get stronger, and I think he has, and now we'll just have to see if he's got strong enough."

Wiercioch says he has. Last season he played at about 185 or 190 pounds. Now, during this Senators' rookie camp, he is around 200 or 205.

That, he hopes, will help him stand up to rigours of the long regular-season schedule.

"I did what they've been telling me to do for the last couple of years," he said.

While Wiercioch knows he's battling the odds to make the Senators' NHL roster, he's not in camp to be an also-ran in the competition for a spot.

"I'm pushing for a spot on the team and I don't think I'd be here if I wasn't," he said.

"There's an opening. It's going to be tight. But you have to play your way onto the team, and hopefully you can do a good enough job where you make their decision hard to send you down.

"I'm another year older, another year stronger and wiser. Hopefully I'll stick all those aspects into my game and play well."

While chances are that Wiercioch will end up in Binghamton again, he remains very much in the Senators' plans, assistant general manager Tim Murray said.

It's only a matter of time before other Senators defencemen leave, either through trade or the expiration of contracts. Wiercioch, Cowen, and Rundblad will fill the holes.

"They're top-end prospects, and they should be," Murray said. "Jared was a first-round pick, and Rundblad was a first-round pick, and Wiercioch was a second-round pick, so they have the pedigree, and we've got high expectations for them.

"What that does, though, is that you're expecting a lot early, so, when you see a bad shift, you get mad.

"You just have to realize it's early and it's a long process to get to October, but they're going to play tons of minutes in exhibition games."

Stone scores winner as Senators top Leafs in rookie tournament game

By Allen Panzeri,

OSHAWA - Mark Stone scored in overtime to give the Ottawa Senator rookies a 4-3 victory against the Toronto Maple Leafs and first place overall in a National Hockey League rookie tournament.

The Senators finished the four-team with a 3-0 record, while the Maple Leafs were 2-1.

The Maple Leafs, who played from behind for almost the entire game, tied this contest with 48.2 seconds left in the third period, when Greg McKegg scored.

Stéphane Da Costa, with his fourth goal of the tournament, Jakub Culek, Mika Zibanejad scored for the Senators in regulation.

Senators goaltender Robin Lehner picked up his second win of the tournament. He also played the first game, a 4-0 win over the Pittsburgh Penguins.

This marked Ottawa's first solo title in the annual rookie tournament after finishing tied for first in the previous three. The Senators rookies' defeated the Chicago Blackhawks 6-5 in their other game.

Matt Frattin and Norwegian Sondre Olden scored the Maple Leafs' other goals in regulation.

The roster for the Senators main training camp, which begins with physical examinations on Friday, is expected to be announced today. The players will be on the ice for the first time on Saturday.

By BRUCE GARRIOCH, QMI Agency

OTTAWA - The next phase of the rebuild starts Saturday.
That's when 60 Senators players - split into three teams - will hit the ice at the Bell Sensplex for the opening of training camp.

After missing the playoffs for the second time in three years, Senators owner Eugene Melnyk has given GM Bryan Murray and his staff the job of getting this franchise back to respectability.

Changes have been made. Coach Cory Clouston and his staff were fired the day after last season ended.
Now, it's new coach Paul MacLean's job to get this group - made up of plenty of young players - on track.
Here's a pre-camp interview with Murray.

QUESTION: Are you excited to get going with a new season?

MURRAY: For the new staff and for a whole group of new, young fresh faces, I think it's exciting. We're looking for some of our veterans to come back, have some health and be ready to go after the year we had. There are lots of reasons to like the startup of training camp this year."

Q: How difficult was that whole "teardown" for you and the rebuild last spring?

M: What was difficult was we let some good people go and some good guys go. They weren't playing the best, but there was some good people there. A whole group didn't play well, so some people have to get traded or pay the price. That part in itself was somewhat difficult, but in return you get draft picks and a chance to go forward with a new group. Partway through last year we realized that particular core group was not going to be the team that led us to the Stanley Cup or the chance to play in the playoffs even. Realistically, we had to do what we did. We think the end result will be much better.

Q: On the decision to change your coach, what were you looking for and what did you get in Paul MacLean?

M: It was a given that some of our veteran players in particular thought the approach had to change. What I tried to do was get a staff with personality, a willingness to communicate and not be intimidated by the players. They (have to) do everything in their power to make things work with the group that we have. (MacLean), Dave (Cameron) and Mark (Reeds) understand that we're coming off a terrible year. A re-focus has to take place here. There's more skating and conditioning that has to take place. But the biggest thing is the players, in a lot of cases, have to be pushed and included. You not only have to talk (to them), you have to listen. That's what I think we got.

Q: Do you already see a change in the atmosphere around here?

M: Yes, the players I've spoken with, and been around with, at (Scotiabank Place) really sense that as well. They sense a kind of togetherness and an opportunity with a confidence in our staff. They're all successful men, they've all been through it, they've all played in the league and they understand what we want with the changes. They want to be part of what we've built. It's a compliment to them, but also to the fact the players seem to have bought into the idea.

Q: Do you expect kids like (David) Rundblad, (Jared) Cowen, (Stephane) Da Costa and (Mika) Zibanejad to push for spots in training camp?

M: I think you'll see that when the NHL players step on the ice, the level of (the young players) is likely to step up because the puck will come back more often. When you make a play, and jump up in the play, you have a chance to be included in an attack that maybe at a lower level doesn't take place. I think they have a chance to push.

Q: Are you going to have a healthy Daniel Alfredsson?

M: It sounds like it. When I talked to him a week ago, he told me that particular day was the day that he was starting to feel the best he has in two years. It looks like it has taken a while for the surgery to kind of heal up properly and to make him feel better. It sounds like he's very happy with what's happened.

Q: Can a healthy, 38-year-old Alfie still be a No. 1 player at some point on the team?

M: I don't think he has to be that. His character tells me he can be, but I think what Alfie brings to the table so much more than that is that work ethic. It's an attitude, a confidence, a willingness to do whatever it takes to be successful that will rub off on other people. So, even if on any given night he's not the best player on the ice, I think he'll have a big impact at any rate. I really do think he can come back and be a productive player. Not only offensively, but with the work ethic as well.

Q: Some people have picked you to finish 15th, others have said 12th in the East. What are your expectations? What do you think of those predictions?

M: I don't know. I think everybody has to have an opinion when they look at our roster. They wouldn't know the younger players as well as we think we do and they probably haven't seen some of our other guys play. There has to be some questions and I understand that. I think we'll be a team that pushes for a playoff spot and we have a chance, but some things have to fall in place. Like every team, you have to get good goaltending. The veteran players - like Chris Phillips and (Sergei) Gonchar - have to have better years. If they do that, and a couple of these young guys that we think are good players and prospects can contribute the way we think they can, then we can have a fun, exciting team.

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Kessel grateful for face time with Flyers

By FRANK SERAVALLI

BLAKE KESSEL laughed.

He knew the question was coming - the same question that fellow prospect Eric Wellwood answered ad nauseam about his older brother. Jets forward Kyle Wellwood, last fall when he broke into the NHL with the Flyers.

If the name sounds familiar, Blake Kessel is the younger brother of Maple Leafs All-Star Phil Kessel. But his last name isn't what is going to win him a job in pro hockey.

Kessel, 22, knows that the deck is stacked against him. He is in this week's Flyers rookie camp - and full training camp, which begins on Saturday - on a tryout contract. Most years, on most teams, that wouldn't mean much.

With the Flyers, it has an entirely different meaning.

The Flyers are at the NHL's 50 contract limit, meaning they cannot sign or add any more players to their organization without first freeing up a spot. Sources said they are expected to reduce that number to 49 later this week when former draft pick Joonas Lehtivuori, who left the Phantoms midway through last year to return to Europe, is released from his contractual obligations.

But that would only make room for one player. And veteran Michael Nylander, who racked up more than 200 career points alongside new Flyer Jaromir Jagr, is also in town on a strictly tryout basis to see if the two can rekindle their magic.

It is the same reason why No. 8 overall pick Sean Couturier, who has yet to sign a deal, remains a long shot to make the team. Couturier likely will end up back in Quebec for a fourth season of junior hockey.

And the Flyers also have a tryout offer extended to former Devils forward Adam Mair, though he has not yet responded to let the team know he will attend.

"I do feel a little pressure, but it's a good thing," Kessel said yesterday. "I think you need to put a little pressure on yourself to get the best out of yourself. Whatever happens, it will be a good experience either way just getting playing time with these guys.

"I'm going to see guys that I've always watched on TV."

Unlike his brother, who is a gifted scorer, Blake Kessel is a defenseman. He was a sixth-round pick of the Islanders in 2007 and played with James van Riemsdyk at the University of New Hampshire before using a loophole to become a free agent on June 1 after finishing his junior season. Kessel never signed a contract with the Islanders because of his amateur status and allowed 4 years after his draft day to lapse.

Kessel has been consistently graded as a "B" prospect.

"It didn't quite work out with [the Islanders], but they've done a great job scouting over the last couple of years stocking up on defensemen," Kessel said. "So I thought it might be in my best interest to try and explore other options."

Kessel's agent, Wade Arnott, drummed up opportunities from four different NHL teams and they decided on the Flyers.

With two preseason games against Toronto, there is a good chance we could see Kessel and fellow Flyers prospect Brayden Schenn face off against their older brothers next week. It was Kessel's brother who provided the important pointers this summer.

"We worked out this summer and skated at home [in Wisconsin]." Kessel said. "He just said to make the most of the opportunity, told me to leave it all out on the ice. He said to expect mistakes and keep playing. I'm excited to make the most of the opportunity."

Kessel, who has skated in the top defensive pair in camp with Oliver Lauridsen, undoubtedly will get a shot to show his skills. With a strong performance, Kessel knows the Flyers would not let him walk based on numbers alone.

"I guess we'll cross that bridge when we come to it," general manager Paul Holmgren said. "I guess you can always do something."

Progress for Pronger

Holmgren said yesterday that Chris Pronger, recovering from his fifth surgery in the last 14 months, could be ready to start the season on Oct. 6 despite not being cleared to lift weights until August.

Pronger has skated twice by himself in full equipment.

"I think he is doing better than even he thought he would," Holmgren said. "He's pushed the envelope a little bit over the last few days, going on the ice and shooting the puck. I think he's right on track for all he's been through. I'm excited for him being ready at the start of the season and I think he is, too."

No word on 'C'

Holmgren said he has had initial discussions with coach Peter Laviolette about the candidates to replace Mike Richards as the 18th Flyers captain.

"I've had some talks with 'Lavi' about the direction," Holmgren said. "I wouldn't go any further than that. I don't think we're in any rush."

Flyers GM expects Chris Pronger to play on opening night

By Sam Carchidi

Flyers defenseman Chris Pronger is making so much progress that general manager Paul Holmgren expects him to be ready for the Oct. 6 opener in Boston.

Speaking for the first time since he broke his shoulder and ribs in a bicycle accident Sept. 5, Holmgren said Pronger was "on track" to start the season with the team.

"Physically, Chris is feeling better than even he thought he would," Holmgren said after the rookies went through the second day of prospect camp at the Skate Zone in Voorhees. "He's pushed the envelope a little bit the last few days, going on the ice and shooting the puck. I asked him the other day how far behind he is in terms of what he would have done in a normal year. He said, 'I probably would have skated a couple weeks ago.' So I think he's right on track for all he's been through."

Pronger had four surgeries (back, hand, foot, knee) in a 91/2-month span last season. He skated Friday for the first time in four-plus months, and he has skated two more times since that day.

Holmgren said there was no timetable for naming the team captain. Pronger, who will turn 37 next month, is expected to be named, though Danny Briere and Kimmo Timonen are also candidates.

"I've had some talks with Laviolette," Holmgren said, referring to head coach Peter Laviolette. "I don't think we're in any big rush."

After watching Tuesday's practice, Holmgren praised several prospects, including 20-year-old left winger Tyler Brown. "His speed has caught my eye," he said.

Holmgren downplayed the fact that the Flyers will have to find ways to replace the 78 goals scored last season by Jeff Carter, Mike Richards, and Ville Leino.

"A lot of times our offense has been questioned," Holmgren said, "and we always seem to be in the upper echelon of the conference in terms of goals scored."

Holmgren said newcomers Jakub Voracek, Wayne Simmonds, and Jaromir Jagr and the development of Claude Giroux and James van Riemsdyk will offset the offensive losses.

Said winger Scott Hartnell, one of many veterans who arrived early to train in Voorhees: "You hate to see a lot of your good friends go - and great players in the league - but it is kind of a meat market, and if they can sell you for somebody younger who they think can do the same job, they're going to do it."

The Flyers' veteran camp begins Saturday.

Breakaways. Speedy Eric Weillod is among the prospects vying for a winger spot. "You're not going to camp just to practice. You're coming here to make the team, and it seems like there are opportunities," he said of the difference between the last two camps. . . . Holmgren said his recovery from his bike accident was "slow going." . . . The Flyers have the maximum number of contracts (50) and would have to make a roster move if someone such as veteran Michael Nylander made the team. They also have an offer to Adam Mair to come to camp on a tryout. If he accepts, "I think it will raise the level of competitiveness," Holmgren said.

Flyers in no tweet zone

By Wayne Fish

VOORHEES — Expecting to find and read an in-game tweet from someone like Matt Carle or James van Riemsdyk this Flyers season?

Forget about it. Not happening.

While the National Hockey League has yet to set a policy regarding social media — leaving such rules and regulations to individual teams — the Flyers are going to make it clear to their players that tweeting and texting during “business hours” will be out of bounds.

Prospect Zac Rinaldo learned this the hard way.

The other day he tweeted that he would not be playing in Thursday’s rookie scrimmage against the Washington Capitals at the Wells Fargo Center.

Not a good idea, according to general manager Paul Holmgren.

“Zac got in trouble,” Holmgren explained on Tuesday at the Skate Zone. “That’s team business. But a lot of time, they don’t know. We’ll set the record straight.”

Holmgren said it’s just a matter of common sense. He wants his players focusing on games and practices, not tweeting about what they had for breakfast.

The NFL has banned social media on game day and the NBA prohibits such activity for hours before, during and after games. But the NHL isn’t acting yet.

“We will have something in place when we get to our opening meeting on Friday,” Holmgren said. “Those things will be addressed with our players.”

No rush on captain

While the first preseason game in Toronto is just a week ago, Holmgren said there’s no rush to replace the traded Mike Richards.

While Chris Pronger, recovering from back surgery, is thought to be the frontrunner, Daniel Briere and Kimmo Timonen are also worthy candidates.

Pronger won’t be ready for the game against the Maple Leafs but Holmgren expressed optimism that he could be a go when the Flyers open their regular season in Boston on Oct. 6.

“Physically, I think Chris is finding out that he’s feeling better than even he thought he would,” Holmgren said. “He’s pushed the envelope the last few days, on the ice and shooting the puck.

“I asked him the other day how far behind he is in terms of how he would be in a normal year,” Holmgren said. “He said I probably would have skated a couple weeks ago. I think he’s probably on track for all he’s been through. I’m excited about him being ready for the start of the season. We haven’t had any setbacks ... he continues to get better everyday.”

Holmgren said he’s had some talks with coach Peter Laviolette about the captaincy but added, “I wouldn’t go any further than that. I don’t think there’s any rush.”

Wellwood fired up

Eric Wellwood, who got a three-game call-up with the Flyers last November after Briere received a three-game suspension, enters camp with some additional confidence.

Wellwood was a big part of a Windsor Spitfire junior team that won back-to-back Memorial Cups (Canada junior championships) and makes up for lack of size (5-foot-10, 180 pounds) with speed.

“This season there seems there are some jobs open,” the left wing observed. “There are some opportunities and hopefully someone is going to take advantage of it. No one seems to have a set-in-stone place.

“After all the trades, it seems like they’re going younger. It’s not a rebuilding year, more of a reset.”

This is Wellwood’s second camp, which makes it a little easier.

“I feel a lot more comfortable,” he said. “I know what to expect. I think that helped me with my summer training, too.

“Right now, I feel really confident and really calm, too, which is nice for my game.”

Couturier keeps possibilities open

By Wayne Fish

VOORHEES — In a normal year, job openings on the Flyers’ roster would be few and far between.

But this isn’t your normal year. Not by a long shot.

With so many new faces in town, lines are anything but set and even the defense should have at least one spot to fill.

So when Flyers rookie camp opened Monday at the Skate Zone, speculation had already begun about young players like Sean Couturier and Zac Rinaldo opening the season with the big team.

Couturier, the No. 8 overall pick in last June’s draft, comes in with an impressive resume. Last year, before a case of mononucleosis set him back, some scouts had him rated the No. 1 prospect.

Now that he’s recovered and put back the weight he lost, the Phoenix, Ariz., native has set his sights on making the team.

Coach Peter Laviolette didn’t do too much to discourage that notion.

“Anybody who gets on the ice has a shot,” Laviolette said. “Players should be judged on the way they play. If somebody comes on here and they’re dynamic and they deserve to make this team, then they will get a good long look.

“Not everybody will get good looks. The rookie camp is important, the practices are important. The game (on Thursday against Washington) is important on how we move forward through our camp.”

Couturier, a center, might be able to move to the wing but would prefer the middle. With the exodus of Mike Richards and Jeff Carter, his chances are a little better in the pivot.

The 6-foot-4, 200-pound Couturier has been training with Team Canada’s world junior team and this is the first chance Laviolette has had to look at him.

So the coach wants to see how his fitness evaluation scores look before making a full assessment.

If the scores come in favorably, it all comes down to how Couturier performs on the ice. If that goes well, there’s the possibility Couturier could make it.

“A lot of times you go into camp and you say there’s an opportunity for everyone,” Laviolette said. “But this camp is different. Last camp there were a lot of slots that were filled. There were a lot of positions that were set in stone, line combinations that were set, defensive pairings that were set.

“This year is completely different. There are a lot of new faces, a lot of new players to look at. In that first exhibition game at Toronto, we’re going to be looking at so many possibilities of players that could make our (look) completely different than in the past.

“This year there is a lot of opportunity. Camp really has a lot of meaning this year, a lot of value, a lot of stock.”

Couturier said: “It’s up to the staff what happens to me. I’m just giving it everything I’ve got. Over the summer, I just tried to gain some weight and get stronger. I have to keep working on my skating, my speed.”

Since he doesn’t turn 19 until December, Couturier realizes this isn’t a make-it-or-break-it camp. If he doesn’t make the Flyers, there will be plenty more chances. Another year of junior hockey won’t hurt.

“My main goal is to make the team but I’m just trying to get better every day,” he said.

Because of the mono, Couturier’s stock dropped last year. He acknowledges that falling to No. 8 could be a blessing. It might be a motivating factor, in a sense, to show people he’s a bit underrated.

“Maybe I was a bit overlooked,” he said. “But overall it’s past now. I’m just focusing on this season.”

Schenn fitting in

Brayden Schenn, the centerpiece of the Mike Richards trade with Los Angeles, has been skating quite a bit this summer and starting to fit in with the surroundings.

He’s also a center and one of the players who could keep Couturier in juniors for another year.

“I feel more confident, more comfortable out there,” Schenn said. “I guess the third time around (in an NHL training camp is easier). Hopefully I get a good opportunity and, for me, I just have to make the most of it.”

Schenn, whose style has been compared to that of Richards, knows there’s some room for improvement.

“I think in the defensive zone,” he said. “Last year, I guess that’s one of the reasons — in L.A.’s opinion, anyway — as to why I didn’t stick up there. So for me, I just have to focus in the defensive zone. Just try to play a well-rounded game, and if there’s one area I have to try to pinpoint, it would be just to be stronger and better in my own end.”

Pronger skates

Defenseman Chris Pronger, who underwent offseason back surgery, continued skating Monday. He started last Friday and hopes to be ready shortly after training camp opens on Saturday.

Mair gets offer?

Two New Jersey media outlets are reporting that free agent center Adam Mair has been offered a tryout contract by the Flyers.

General manager Paul Holmgren has declined to comment.

Hartnell excited about Flyers’ changes

Staff

Scott Hartnell said he’s excited to meet Jaromir Jagr later this week. (AP)

FOLLOW SARAH BAICKER ON Scott Hartnell had already been smiling, but when asked about the Flyers’ newest players, his grin grew larger.

“I can’t wait for [Jaromir] Jagr to get here,” he said, “to meet him.”

Hartnell has been practicing with a number of his Flyers teammates over the past weeks, and he’s already met most of them. But there’s still a few new faces to get acquainted with. Jagr, the ex-Penguins superstar who’s expected to arrive Thursday, is just one of them.

“I can’t wait to meet Jakub Voracek as well,” Hartnell said. “I’ve basically met everyone else, but it’s basically a lot of the simple conversations – where you grew up, talk about buddies you’ve played with on other teams that you’re good buddies with.

“Off the ice conversation is just as important as on the ice, playing together, as well. That’s when you become a team. So we’re excited about that.”

As for the teammates he’s grown to know over the past few seasons, Hartnell couldn’t be more excited about how they’ve been looking so far this September.

“[Claude] Giroux looked like he’s in mid-season shape,” Hartnell said. “He looked so good out there. Riemer (James van Riemsdyk) was skating like the wind like he was in the playoffs. I think we’re going to go good together. We’re all having fun, and that’s the main thing, when you’re having fun, you play well together, and hopefully that’ll lead to winning games.”

Perhaps one of the biggest questions facing Hartnell is whether he and Danny Briere will still play on a line together, now that Ville Leino has departed for the Buffalo Sabres.

“I love playing with Danny,” Hartnell said. “He’s an incredible player. He’s so good around the net, making things happen, keeping plays alive. I think he’d maybe say the same thing about me, he likes playing with me. … I think we complement each other pretty well.

“Missing Ville, I think we had a good thing going there, a good relationship as well. And whoever comes in with us, we’ll obviously make it work.”

If Briere and Hartnell remain on a line, who occupies the remaining wing is anyone’s guess. Some have suggested the spot could be Voracek’s to lose.

Rookie camp feels a lot different for Eric Wellwood this year. And not just because the 21-year-old left wing’s been to a couple of them in the past.

“It seems like nobody’s got a set-in-stone place,” Wellwood said, referring to the Flyers’ roster. “I mean, last year, you’re not going to beat [Mike] Richards or [Jeff] Carter out of a spot on the team. But this year, it seems like there’s going to be some more openings.”

Although many spots on the roster are presumed to be filled, as Wellwood pointed out, at this point it’s all conjecture. For instance, Brayden Schenn may very well center one of the Flyers’ lines this season — but it’s also possible he might not.

Wellwood, who played three games with the Flyers last November before returning to the AHL’s Adirondack Phantoms, probably won’t start this season in the NHL. But he’s already garnered an invite to the full Flyers’ training camp, which starts at the end of this week.

That, and the knowledge that the Flyers’ lines are anything but set for this year, has helped push him to work hard during the off-season and, now, at camp. He’s not alone.

“You’re not going into camp just going to practice,” Wellwood said. “You’re going in to make the team. It seems like there’s some opportunities to make the team, and that’s exciting. Now you want to put your best game out every day.”

Last season, the Flyers’ top three lines were pretty much set from Day 1. Players like Wellwood and Zac Rinaldo were pleased to get invites to training camp, but with guys like Carter, Richards, Ville Leino and Dan Carcillo holding on to roster spots, they didn’t have much of a chance to go further with the club.

As Wellwood said repeatedly, last season, rookies felt like they were practicing just to practice — that there was no meaning attached to whether they performed above expectations. Returning players were already practicing as an exclusive group.

Not so, this season.

“You go right through our third and fourth lines, and there’s going to be a lot of competition,” Scott Hartnell said. “Even our top two lines. I don’t think anything’s set in stone. Someone stumbles out of the gate, and someone has a great start — it’s a good thing to have.”

A number of players, from Hartnell to Wellwood, acknowledged the feeling of “excitement” surrounding rookie camp and the approach of training camp. The Flyers’ practice facility is a very different place now from what it was a year ago.

“I think probably you sense it more with the older guys who have been training here, as opposed to, for me anyway, the younger guys who are here now for the rookie camp,” said general manager Paul Holmgren. “But I think a lot of [the rookies] know too, from Wellwood to Rinaldo, that group that’s been here for a little bit of time.”

With that in mind, it should come as no surprise that this year’s rookie camp — now two days old — has a pace much quicker and seemingly more intense than last year’s. Accordingly, a few skaters have already made an impression on Holmgren. He mentioned Wellwood, Rinaldo and Tyler Brown by name.

“This year is completely different,” coach Peter Laviolette said on Monday. “There is a lot of new faces. There’s a lot of new players to look at. In that first exhibition game, when we go to Toronto, we’re going to be looking at so many different possibilities of players that could make our club, it’s completely different from what it’s been in the past.”

The uncertainty extends from empty roster spots to roles that need to be filled by veterans, too. With players like Darroll Powe and Richards gone,
Would Adam Mair fit with Flyers?

(US Presswire)

FOLLOW TIM PANACCIO ON Forget that Adam Mair was minus-16 with the New Jersey Devils last season, compiling just four points in 65 games.

Usually, aging veteran wingers with bad plus/minus figures don’t get a tryout with the Flyers, but if Mair shows up in camp, this is probably a Don Luce “good faith” gesture.

Luce was a big fan of the tough-as-nails 32-year-old right wing, who spent seven years in Buffalo and still calls it home during the summer.

My Sabres sources say Mair has been skating very intently the last several weeks there with the kind of urgency that the Sabres had not seen before they waived him in November 2009.

Sabre players see him as a “glue” guy – kind of what Max Talbot was brought in here from Pittsburgh to do for the Flyers in the absence – again – of Ian Laperriere.

I’m not sure where Mair fits because frankly, the Flyers really don’t have room for him and if there’s a 13th forward spot maybe they ought to consider a younger player.

Talbot has many of these attributes.

General manager Paul Holmgren likes “grit” guys who push the envelope at times, and Mair is capable of not only doing that, but raising the stakes in training camp.

For now, Holmgren isn’t saying whether Mair will accept his tryout offer.

Given the financial condition of the Devils, it is more likely Mair would get a low-end contract there. Yet New Jersey’s finances being what they are, makes it a crapshoot – so Mair might not have any other options.

Neumann University honors Primeau

By FRANK SERAVALLI

ONE OF THE proudest moments of Keith Primeau's hockey career was blasting a wrist shot over Ron Tugnutt's left shoulder on May 4, 2000, to end the longest game in modern NHL history, the Flyers beating the Penguins in the fifth overtime.

An equally proud "life" moment was when he was able to finally phone his parents, Mike and Peg, in Whitby, Ontario, last fall to tell them he had completed all his curriculum requirements to earn a degree in liberal studies from Neumann University in Aston.

In a twist of fate, Primeau, now 39, received his diploma on the same day his oldest son, Corey, graduated from Neumann this spring. It just took the elder Primeau nearly 15 years longer to complete his degree work.

On Oct. 12, Primeau will be presented with Neumann's inaugural Institute for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development Award for exemplifying the development of strong character through athletics and the embodiment of good that exists in sports.

Primeau, who announced his retirement on Sept. 14, 2006, as the Flyers captain, always has been an outspoken critic of head shots in hockey and a proponent for more stringent rules and rigorous concussion research.

He already has pledged to donate his brain to concussion research when he dies.

"Like my degree, which I first started at the beginning of my career, it was really an evolution," Primeau said. "I was not searching for recognition about concussions. I certainly am not a crusader. I just have strong beliefs on certain topics. I've tried to be as candid as possible about postconcussion syndrome and its effects."

At Neumann, Primeau began taking classes not long after announcing his retirement.

"I was looking for things to do," Primeau said. "It was a challenge to finish schooling - and it can be a bit of a strain when you're raising four kids and handling a few small businesses. But it's something that has always been important to me. Watching some of my other classmates turn in papers at 2 o'clock or 3 o'clock in the morning, I had a greater appreciation for what people have gone through."

Primeau, a two-time NHL All-Star who skated with the Flyers from 1999 to 2004, also will speak on the "Ethical Value of Sports: Building Character through Competition," and answer questions after receiving the award. Tickets to the Oct. 12 event (7 p.m.) are $5 and available at www.isscd.org or calling 484-840-4707.

Fast, physical Rinaldo trying to stand out in Flyers rookie camp

By FRANK SERAVALLI

THE ENTIRE experience lasted just 5 minutes and 46 seconds, start to finish, over two different games in two different rounds of the Stanley Cup playoffs.

But Zac Rinaldo’s first call-up to the NHL - barely enough to qualify as a cup of coffee - was more than enough to keep him salivating all summer.

“I realized halfway through the summer; ‘I am here,’ ” Rinaldo said. “I am so close to somewhere I always wanted to be, growing up. It’s surreal. I needed to change my workout - and I wanted to get better as a player and a person.

“I killed it all summer, I made sure I busted my [butt] in every workout. There is no place I’d rather be in my life.”

Noticeably slimmer and faster, Rinaldo entered the Flyers’ annual 3-day rookie camp - which kicked off yesterday at the Skate Zone in Voorhees - as not just one of three players with NHL experience but also the only one with valuable playoff time.

While all eyes were focused on highly touted rookies Brayden Schenn and Sean Couturier as camp opened, Rinaldo is flying under the radar as perhaps the next likely player to make a big impact when the Flyers’ full training camp opens on Saturday. Rinaldo, a center, was a sixth-round draft choice in 2008.

“He is going to [have an impact] for sure,” Flyers assistant coach Craig Berube said yesterday. “He really wants to play - and that's important. Everyone wants to play, but there's some guys that really push the envelope to force their way onto the roster. He could be one of those guys.”

Rinaldo, 21, was lauded for his commitment to strength and fitness over the summer by head coach Peter Laviolette. Last summer, Rinaldo entered rookie camp overweight and with a body fat percentage that he called "through the roof."

This summer, Rinaldo left his hometown of Mississauga, Ontario, on July 20 to spend the rest of the summer training with strength and conditioning coach Jim McCrossin and teammates Jason Akeson, Harry Zolnierczyk and Tom Sestito.

"He's been here all summer,” Laviolette said. "He's trained hard, he's gotten himself in much better shape. You can see it on and off the ice. I think he was one of those guys that stood out in [July's] development camp."

Rinaldo is such an interesting prospect for the Flyers' brass because he could possibly bring the physical element and play the role of an enforcer at a cheap price - an important piece in a salary-cap world. Rinaldo would make just $544,000 on the Flyers' roster.

Even though he is just 5-11 and 180 pounds, few breed fear on the ice like Rinaldo.

"He's a really good hitter, one of the best I've ever seen," Berube said. "When you have a guy that can skate and hit like that, he really creates confusion and makes people think out there and makes them throw the puck away. This guy can really punish people and he is strong. He's an effective guy."

He can fight, too. Some of Rinaldo’s teammates have called him "certifiably crazy." Rinaldo is willing to take on any challenger. He is also one of the most well-liked players in the AHL Phantoms’ locker room.

Half of the enforcer's role is mental, knowing when and where to drop the gloves. Rinaldo spent most of his first season of pro hockey, when he racked up 331 penalty minutes in 60 games with the Phantoms, learning how to harness his energy.

"With the way the league is these days, you need to watch your hits,” said Rinaldo, who scored three goals with six assists last season with the Phantoms. "I realized that a lot more as the year went on. I need to pick my hits, know when to hit, and know when to slow up a little bit."
Prospects Brayden Schenn and Sean Couturier working to make Flyers’ roster

By Sam Carchidi

Centers Brayden Schenn and Sean Couturier are taking different approaches as they try to earn spots on the Flyers roster.

Couturier is trying to gain weight on his slender frame, while Schenn is more particular about what he eats and is attempting to hone his body.

Cheesesteaks are off limits, Schenn said with a smile.

"I actually tried one in the summer, so I guess I'm good to go for now," he said after the Flyers prospects camp opened in Voorhees on Monday.

Most of the fans' eyes were on Schenn and Couturier, two heralded young players.

Schenn has a much sturdier and compact frame than the 6-foot-4 Couturier. Couturier is listed at 191 pounds by the Flyers, but he said he is actually 200.

Couturier, 18, said he has been trying to bulk up to give himself a better chance to make the team.

Schenn, 20, worked out this summer with former NHL player/fitness guru Gary Roberts, who helped Tampa Bay's Steven Stamkos blossom into a star. Schenn has been on a strict diet and a rigorous workout schedule.

"I feel quicker, and we'll see when the games come," Schenn said. "That's when it counts. I felt pretty good out there. I'd say the best I've ever felt."

Acquired in the deal that sent Mike Richards to Los Angeles, Schenn said he feels "more confident and comfortable" than he did at any training camp with the Kings.

"I guess the third time around" is easier, he said. "Hopefully, I get a good opportunity, and I just have to make the most of it."

Schenn, generously listed at 6-1 (he appears shorter) and 191 pounds, said he needs to improve his defense to make an impact. "I guess that's one of the reasons - in L.A.'s opinion anyways - as to why I didn't stick up there," he said. "So for me, I just have to focus on the defensive end. Just try to play a well-rounded game."

Because of his experience, he is given a much better chance to start the season with the Flyers than the ultra-promising Couturier, the No. 8 overall pick (acquired in the Jeff Carter trade) this summer.

The Flyers veteran camp opens Saturday. Twenty-nine prospects were at Monday's camp. The Flyers will play Washington's rookies Thursday at the Wells Fargo Center.

Couturier will either earn a roster spot with the Flyers or be sent back to juniors. He also could be shifted to wing, a position in which he has some experience in juniors.

Breakaways. Coach Peter Laviolette praised Zac Rinaldo, a scrappy left winger who is vying for a roster spot. . . . Forward Adam Mair, who had a total of four points in 65 games with the Devils last season, is expected to be among the camp invitees on Saturday. . . . Jaromir Jagr and Jakub Voracek attended a memorial service in Russia for the Lokomotiv players Saturday, and they are slated to report Thursday.

Couturier keeps possibilities open

By Wayne Fish

VOORHEES - In a normal year, job openings on the Flyers' roster would be few and far between.

But this isn't your normal year. Not by a long shot.

With so many new faces in town, lines are anything but set and even the defense should have at least one spot to fill.

So when Flyers rookie camp opened Monday at the Skate Zone, speculation had already begun about young players like Sean Couturier and Zac Rinaldo opening the season with the big team.

Couturier, the No. 8 overall pick in last June's draft, comes in with an impressive resume. Last year, before a case of mononucleosis set him back, some scouts had him rated the No. 1 prospect.

Now that he’s recovered and put back the weight he lost, the Phoenix, Ariz., native has set his sights on making the team.

Coach Peter Laviolette didn't do too much to discourage that notion.

"Anybody who gets on the ice has a shot," Laviolette said. "Players should be judged on the way they play. If somebody comes on here and they’re dynamic and they deserve to make this team, then they will get a good long look.

"Not everybody will get good looks. The rookie camp is important, the practices are important. The game (on Thursday against Washington) is important on how we move forward through our camp."

Couturier, a center, might be able to move to the wing but would prefer the middle. With the exodus of Mike Richards and Jeff Carter, his chances are a little better in the pivot.

The 6-foot-4, 200-pound Couturier has been training with Team Canada's world junior team and this is the first chance Laviolette has had to look at him.

So the coach wants to see how his fitness evaluation scores look before making a full assessment.

If the scores come in favorably, it all comes down to how Couturier performs on the ice. If that goes well, there’s the possibility Couturier could make it.

"A lot of times you go into camp and you say there's an opportunity for everyone," Laviolette said. "But this camp is different. Last camp there were a lot of slots that were filled. There were a lot of positions that were set in stone, line combinations that were set, defensive pairings that were set.

"This year is completely different. There are a lot of new faces, a lot of new players to look at. In that first exhibition game at Toronto, we're going to be looking at so many possibilities of players that could make our (look) completely different than in the past.

"This year there is a lot of opportunity. Camp really has a lot of meaning this year, a lot of value, a lot of stock."

Couturier said: "It's up to the staff what happens to me. I'm just giving it everything I've got. Over the summer, I just tried to gain some weight and get stronger. I have to keep working on my skating, my speed."

Since he doesn't turn 19 until December, Couturier realizes this isn't a make-it-or-break-it camp. If he doesn't make the Flyers, there will be plenty more chances. Another year of junior hockey won't hurt.

"My main goal is to make the team but I'm just trying to get better every day," he said.

Because of the mono, Couturier's stock dropped last year. He acknowledges that falling to No. 8 could be a blessing. It might be a motivating factor, in a sense, to show people he's a bit underrated.

"Maybe I was a bit overlooked," he said. "But overall it's past now. I'm just focusing on this season."

Schenn fitting in

Brayden Schenn, the centerpiece of the Mike Richards trade with Los Angeles, has been skating quite a bit this summer and starting to fit in with the surroundings.

He's also a center and one of the players who could keep Couturier in juniors for another year.

"I feel more confident, more comfortable out there," Schenn said. "I guess the third time around (in an NHL training camp is easier). Hopefully I get a good opportunity and, for me, I just have to make the most of it."

Schenn, whose style has been compared to that of Richards, knows there’s some room for improvement.

"I think in the defensive zone," he said. "Last year, I guess that's one of the reasons - in L.A.'s opinion, anyway - as to why I didn't stick up there. So for me, I just have to focus in the defensive zone. Just try to play a well-rounded game, and if there's one area I have to try to pinpoint, it would be just to be stronger and better in my own end."

Pronger skates

Defenseman Chris Pronger, who underwent offseason back surgery, continued skating Monday. He started last Friday and hopes to be ready shortly after training camp opens on Saturday.

Mair gets offer?

Two New Jersey media outlets are reporting that free agent center Adam Mair has been offered a tryout contract by the Flyers.

General manager Paul Holmgren has declined to comment.
If Sean Couturier had been drafted a year ago, his chances of making the Flyers' roster would have hovered somewhere between "nonexistent" and "very, very, very slim."

Between the lack of open roster spots and the log jam at center, there simply wouldn't have been a place for him - or even a player whose spot he could have challenged.

But now, Mike Richards is gone. Jeff Carter is gone. So too are Ville Leino, Darroll Powe, Dan Carcillo and Nikolay Zherdev. Roster spots are vacant. Lines are far from defined.

All the questions surrounding just how the new-look Flyers will actually look benefit Couturier, the eighth-overall pick of this year's draft.

"A lot of times, you go into camp and you say that there's an opportunity for everyone, but this camp is different from last camp," coach Peter Laviolette said. "Last camp there was a lot of slots that were filled and there was a lot of positions that were set in stone. There were line combinations that were set and defensive pairings that were set."

As it currently stands, Couturier is the very definition of a bubble player. There's a very good chance he'll be returned to his junior team in Canada once the NHL season begins - but there's a shot (albeit a small one) that the 18 year old earns himself a spot in the big league.

"Anybody who goes on the ice [during camp] has a shot," Laviolette said. "It would be unfair to say, 'This guy's got a shot and this guy doesn't have a shot.' Ultimately, players should be judged on the way they play. If somebody comes on here and they're dynamic and they deserve to make this team, they'll get a good, long look. Not everybody will get good looks."

Couturier, one of the participants in rookie camp, which kicked off Monday, is sure to get a lot of good looks from Flyers coaches and management over the coming days. And they will extend well into next week; the team's full training camp begins Saturday. Couturier has already earned an invite.

"My main goal is to make the team, but I'm taking it one day at a time, working hard every day," Couturier said. "Just trying to get better every day. It's going to be up to the staff to decide whether they keep me or not."

"I'm just hoping to make a good first impression," he added.

Of course, there will be some hurdles for Couturier to overcome before he's able to land a spot (and we're talking about on-ice hurdles, not cap-related).

Since he was last at Skate Zone, back in July for prospect camp, Couturier has added a couple pounds, bringing his weight up to about 200 pounds. But for a 6-foot-3 center, he's still thin.

In addition, in order to compete for a spot, he might have to consider a move to wing. That's not unprecedented (he spent time on the wing during his first season of junior hockey), but he's still admittedly more comfortable at center.

And, he added, there's always elements of his game that could be improved.

"My skating has always been a lack, but I've been working on it, and I've got to keep working," Couturier said. "That's probably the biggest thing I've got to work, my speed."

Laviolette said he was pleased with what he saw from Couturier on Monday, though it's the days ahead that will help the Flyers decide his fate for this season.

"Sean is just coming in recently now because he has commitments with junior hockey and Hockey Canada, so there's less time to see him," Laviolette said. "Today was our first time to see him get on the ice and taking a look at him, but he seemed to be able to move the puck and get up and down the ice pretty good as well."

Couturier and the Flyers' other rookies will practice again Tuesday and Wednesday, and then play in the annual rookie game against the Washington Capitals rookies on Thursday. And it's that game, Laviolette said, that will really give a true indication of what Couturier can do.

"That game at the end of the week is important on how we move forward through our camp and where we place people and how we look at people and opportunity presents," he said. "This is a big week for a lot of people, but there is opportunity and that opportunity is for everybody."

The kids come first.
The adults will join them this weekend.

Four months after the Flyers hasty exit from the second round of the playoffs by the eventual Stanley Cup champion Boston Bruins, Peter Laviolette’s club begins to make its return the ice, starting on Monday at Skate Zone when rookies and prospects report.

Given the amazing upheaval this summer, there will be no less than seven new faces on the roster.

Yet this three day camp, which concludes on Thursday with a rookie game at Wells Fargo Center against the Caps youngsters, is really about who has chance to emerge on the big roster and who will earn brownie points for call-up duty later.

Laviolette has emphasized several times in recent weeks that spots are up for grabs. They are. But .... it would take some extraordinary measures from the rookies/prospects to grab a spot on the main roster, outside of likely one spot that goes to either Brayden Schenn or Sean Couturier.

For the 18-year-old Couturier to make it, he has to beat out Schenn, who will go into the camp on a fifth line with Michael Nylander and Matt Read.

Nylander is on a tryout. Couturier has to climb a big ladder here, but so does Schenn if he’s going to have an impact after playing just eight games with the L.A. Kings last season.

"Last year, I got a little taste of being in L.A. and playing on the fourth line," Schenn said. "For me, I feel I am ready to make that jump and try to have an impact on this hockey team.

"I try to learn from Danny [Briere] and [Claude] Giroux and the other centermen. I’m definitely ready to be part of this hockey club."

There will be seven centermen when the full training camp opens on Saturday -- including Nylander and former Penguin Max Talbot.

"There are great centers here," Schenn said. "We had [Anze] Kopitar and [Jarret] Stoll and [Michal] Handzus last year. I’ll just try to work my way in there with Giroux, Briere and [Blair] Betts. Guys like that. You have to learn from them and compete with them."

Schenn has been doing that for a couple of weeks during the daily player scrimmages at Skate Zone. He worked hard to get an edge over the summer with Gary Roberts in Toronto.

He’ll need it.

"Players realize what is at stake and want to give themselves the opportunity," Laviolette said. "When you get out of your hometown gym and rink and work with your peers, it really raises the level of play and raises the level of the workout.

"There’s a lot of new faces in the room and that leads to opportunity. Camp this year is a lot different from last year. With regards to availability, spots are open. Line opportunities are open minutes are available throughout the course of games.

"Training camp will decide a lot of that at start of year. There will be a level of competition without the room to earn those spots and keep those minutes. That’s the exciting thing."

Ice time and duty will be determined in the main camp.
One player to watch is Zac Rinaldo. Much like Dan Carcillo, he walks a very fine line between being on edge and going over the edge because of his emotional style of play.

Rinaldo is likely going to start the main camp on a line with Blair Betts and Jody Shelley.

What it will eventually come is whether the Flyers want another agitator on their roster, like Rinaldo, or a 13th skater with skill and scoring potential.

To that end, Eric Wellwood is a candidate. A skill player who has spent time on the Flyers roster, he needs to make an impression in camp just to earn “call-up” duty this season.

In reality, Rinaldo, Wellwood and a few others need to impress the coaching staff just to assure they remain in the pecking order for future call-ups. Making the roster outright likely isn’t in the cards for them.

Erik Gustafsson, at age 23, is a player who, at this point, should emerge on defense in this rookie camp and challenge for spot on the Flyers’ roster.

Yet Gustafsson enters camp listed behind both Oskars Bartulis and Matt Walker -- the seventh and eighth defensemen, now that Andreas Lilja was signed in free agency to replace Sean O’Donnell.

It appears the Flyers want a defense anchored by veterans, especially given that Chris Pronger (wrist/back) won’t make an appearance until late in camp and could miss the start of the regular season.

Pronger’s initial absence should act as an incentive for Gustafsson to position himself to make the roster.

Keep in mind, however, the Flyers will not allow a young player to sit as an eighth D-man while ice time is available in the minors. Which means Gustafsson needs to crack the lineup as a No. 7.

The battles in the main camp will be for ice time, specials teams, and line positioning. Again, it's going to take a lot for any of the Flyers’ prospects other than Schenn and Couturier, to crack that particular lineup.

"When you are in the minors and get opportunities in camp, you want to make the most of those opportunities," Laviolette said. "Be in shape. Show that you are sharp and ready to play at the practices and you hope they are sharp when they get into the rookie game and our exhibition games.”

It starts today.

Phoenix Coyotes center Andy Miele uses hard work to counteract lack of size

by Jim Gintonio –

One thing that he cannot change is his size, but Coyotes prospect Andy Miele knows he can counteract that with a fierce work ethic. His hard work is a point of pride with him, and that attribute is something the coaches at rookie camp immediately noted.

Miele, a 5-foot-9, 175-pound center, parlayed that mind-set into winning the Hobey Baker Award at Miami (Ohio), and his next goal is finding a way to make the Coyotes' roster.

"Being a little guy, you have to work that much harder than anyone else, and I get that from my mom," he said. "My mom's a very hard worker, and I've been lucky enough to have that intense effort on the ice and off the ice."

"I think that's why I've been successful every year and developed every year; hopefully I can keep doing that."

Coach Dave Tippett, while noting that Miele is a skilled and crafty player, says work ethic is the first thing that jumps out watching him on the ice.

"He's relentless on the puck, he's around it, he's a very, very diligent player," Tippett said. "We'll see how he does in the exhibition games here, but he certainly hasn't hurt his case."

Tippett said how a players uses his size is what's important.

"He's obviously not the biggest guy out there, but... gets into battles, his body positioning is strong... He's been a good player so far in this camp, but there's a long way to go yet."

Miele always has had to prove to doubters that size is not a handicap in the way he plays the game.

"Some people might see that, but obviously I can't look at it that way," he said. "I feel that being a smaller guy is an advantage to me because then I would have to work that much harder, and in the long run that will be better for me."

Miele likely will get his chance at center and not on the wing, and that means he needs to work on face-offs and stronger play in the defensive zone.

"If I can't do well in the defensive zone I'm not going to play, so I really need to bear down in the defensive zone, stop thinking too much out there, and just play my game and play smart," he said.

The rookies play games Wednesday and Thursday in Los Angeles to wrap up camp.

Training camp physicals are Friday, and the Coyotes take the ice Saturday to begin three days of practice before the start of preseason games.

A close look

Many of the players at rookie camp will wind up with the Coyotes' top-minor league affiliate, the Portland Pirates of the AHL. Coach Ray Edwards, who missed development camp and is running the rookie sessions, was glad to get a look at all the prospects.

The biggest surprise for him was the development of defenseman Mathieu Brodeur, who is an imposing 6-foot-6, 215 pounder.

"What a metamorphosis from the last time I saw him to now," Edwards said. "He's done an excellent job over the course of the summer."

Looking ahead to the games in LA, he said winning would be nice, but that's not the bottom line.

"These guys that are getting to main camp, they're trying to get themselves in a position to be prepared to compete against the best," he said. "There's some guys trying to get an opportunity to get to camp, so going down to LA, yeah, we'd like to win, but some of these guys that are looking on to next week are trying to get themselves as ready (as possible) to compete at a higher level."
During his junior career, Uher showcased a high-energy style that caught the attention of coaches. This style was evident when he was listed as a third-round draft choice by the Penguins in June. Despite not having a chance to prove his worth, he invested himself into the Western Hockey League (WHL) season, which lasted from October 2010 to April 2011. Over the course of 18 games, Uher accumulated 21 goals and 39 assists in 65 games, demonstrating his potential as a center.

Uher's infectious work ethic and willingness to battle all over the ice earned him the respect of his teammates. According to former NHL player and current developmental coach Bill Guerin, Uher's high-energy style led him to compete at a high level, and he was always ready for the next game.

Uher's physical nature and his ability to play both center and left wing made him a versatile player. He was known for his speed and agility on the ice, which allowed him to get open for passes and make his presence felt in the offensive zone.

When asked about Uher's potential, Guerin described him as a North American player who would make a big impact on the ice. He praised Uher's work ethic and ability to compete against players of higher stature.

The Penguins' coaching staff recognized Uher's potential and invested in him, giving him the opportunity to prove himself in the WHL. Uher made the most of his time with the team and showed his dedication to the sport.

Regardless of his position, Uher was always ready to compete. He played multiple games in a row, often playing 15 to 20 minutes per game, and was known for his ability to stay on the ice for extended periods. This dedication and hard work paid off, as Uher was able to prove himself as a valuable player for the Penguins.

Uher's journey has not been without its challenges, but his perseverance and determination have helped him to overcome them. His high-energy style and physical nature have made him a player to watch for the future, and he continues to impress with his work ethic and dedication to the sport.
Penguins to use Winter Classic sweaters

By Dave Molinari,

The sweaters the Penguins wore at the 2011 Winter Classic at Heinz Field Jan. 1 will, as expected, serve as the team's third jersey for the coming season.

They will be worn starting with an Oct. 15 game against Buffalo at Consol Energy Center and will be used for 11 other home games over the course of the season.

The third-jersey dates:
Oct. 15 -- Buffalo
Oct. 27 -- New York Islanders
Nov. 15 -- Colorado
Nov. 25 -- Ottawa
Dec. 27 -- Carolina
Jan. 6 -- New York Rangers
Jan. 7 -- New Jersey
Jan. 20 -- Montreal
Feb. 11 -- Winnipeg
Feb. 12 -- Tampa Bay
Mar. 7 -- Toronto
Mar. 22 -- Nashville

Malkin surprises North Side girl with Penguins tickets

By Josh Yohe,

Sara Harper has spent many cold days walking from her Troy Hill house to a bus stop, and ultimately waiting in line for student rush Penguins tickets. She even made the drive to Detroit in 2009 to see the Penguins win the Stanley Cup at Joe Louis Arena.

For one day, a Penguin came to her.

Harper, 20, a student at the Pitt-Johnstown, had her season tickets delivered personally by Penguins star Evgeni Malkin on Monday.

"I'll be 21 next month," Harper said. "And there's no way any of my friends are getting me a better birthday present. Never."

Sidney Crosby also participated in delivering tickets to local fans, as did standouts such as Jordan Staal, Marc-Andre Fleury and Kris Letang. In all, 14 Penguins took part in the annual event, making 30 stops around the Pittsburgh area.

Harper's family was on hand for the ticket delivery and said she was deserving of such an experience.

"She didn't even go to her prom at North Catholic High School because there was a chance the Penguins would have had a playoff game that night," said Alice Slagle, Harper's grandmother. "She's walked all the way to Pittsburgh just to wait in line and get tickets. I was always afraid she'd get frostbite."

There was nothing but warmth in Slagle's house on this day.

Malkin, showing off his improved English and underappreciated sense of humor, mingled comfortably with Harper and her family. After posing for pictures with individuals, Malkin said, "Time for the family picture," and everyone gathered around the Russian star.

"It was like having Frank Sinatra walk into your house," Slagle said.

Harper offered Malkin chocolate muffins, but he politely declined. Instead, he engaged in conversation with everyone, explaining that he is excited for the start of the 2011-12 season.

Then, he made a promise.

"I'll come back sometime," Malkin said. "We'll have muffins then."

Malkin not backing down from challenge of carrying Penguins

By Josh Yohe

Penguins star Evgeni Malkin has no desire to begin the season without Sidney Crosby. Should Crosby, however, not be ready for the regular-season opener Oct. 6 in Vancouver -- and that scenario seems probable -- Malkin isn't backing down from the challenge of carrying the Penguins.

"I think it's not for sure if Sid will start playing at the beginning of the season," Malkin said. "If not, it will be hard. But I think we have a good team. I'm ready."

Malkin has a track record of carrying the Penguins when Crosby has sustained injuries, and he will be called upon to return to his previous form eight months after tearing his ACL against the Buffalo Sabres.

Pronouncing himself to be 100 percent healthy, Malkin said he could have played in the Eastern Conference final last season.

"I worked with (Penguins strength and conditioning coach) Mike Kadar this summer," Malkin said. "We worked hard. It feels pretty good. I've been skating a lot."

Malkin has always been happy to avoid the spotlight that is customary for Crosby. Arguably equal talents on the ice, Crosby has always diligently handled media responsibilities and off-ice duties while Malkin has been more comfortable in the background.

With Crosby's return date from a concussion uncertain, Malkin will be, at least temporarily, the team's face.

"We have 25 good players," Malkin said. "But I think, yeah, (if Crosby is out) it's my team. If he doesn't play, I'll try (to play at) 100 percent. I'll try my hardest."

Malkin was one of 14 Penguins to deliver season tickets to fans' homes and, about to enter his sixth season in Pittsburgh, seems more comfortable than ever when dealing with the public.

"I enjoy it," Malkin said. "It's a good time. I see the fans are happy when we come."

They'll be even happier to see him on the ice for the first time since February.

"I believe in our team," Malkin said.

The Russian star is excited for the start of the season but admits to still feeling somber about last week's plane crash that killed every member of the KHL team Lokomotiv.

"I knew all those guys," Malkin said. "A couple were good friends."

Malkin was close with assistant coach Igor Korolev and player Gennady Churilov, whom he played with on Metallurg Magnitogorsk.

"Good friends," he said. "I feel so bad now. We've tried to help the families and support them. I couldn't believe it. Just stayed home and watched the news."

Sidney Crosby signs the T-shirt of Sebastian Mihalko, 13, after delivering season tickets Monday in Kilbuck Township. Crosby delivered the tickets to Gary and Annette Henzler and stayed to sign memorabilia for the family.

This is the fifth year Penguins players have spread out around town for a season ticket delivery mission, and the fifth year that team captain Sidney Crosby has participated.

This time, the goodwill tour helped lend a sense of normalcy to Crosby, who is unsure of his playing status as training camp approaches because he still is recovering from a concussion.

"This is a nice thing we do, and I think when this comes up we realize we're getting closer to camp and things are starting soon," Crosby said Monday at his first delivery stop, the Kilbuck home of Gary and Annette Henzler.

Crosby, who was diagnosed Jan. 6 and missed the rest of the 2010-11 season, might be able to participate on some level when Penguins training camp opens this week. Players report Friday, with the first practices scheduled for Saturday.

"I'll find out this week and see how things go and get evaluated before camp," Crosby said. "I'm not sure what it's going to be exactly, but I'll have a better idea this week."

At a news conference Wednesday after months of silence, Crosby and two concussion specialists explained that he has made a lot of progress, particularly lately, but still has been having headaches when he reaches 80 percent to 90 percent exertion.

It's possible he will be cleared to join his teammates on the ice for certain drills, but it's doubtful he will participate in scrimmages immediately. Even if he is cleared for contact soon, it will be light contact at first as he goes through a progression of reconditioning steps.

Crosby will not be allowed to play until his medical team is convinced he has fully recovered. That will mean passing imPACT neurocognitive tests and advancing through his progression of steps without having concussion symptoms.

It's not known if there is a chance he will be ready when the Penguins open the season Oct. 6 at Vancouver.

"It's just a matter of making sure that I'm ready to go," Crosby said. "I'm excited and looking forward to getting back. When that is exactly, I don't know."

Crosby was one of 14 Penguins who made more than 30 stops to deliver a satchel of tickets to season-ticket holders. The others were Evgeni Malkin, Marc-Andre Fleury, Jordan Staal, Kris Letang, Brooks Orpik, Tyler Kennedy, Chris Kunitz, Matt Cooke, Pascal Dupuis, James Neal, Zbynek Michalek, Paul Martin and Deryk Engelland.

Inside the Henzel home, Crosby signed several items, then posed for pictures.

Prospects build reputation, but returns scarce

By Dave Molinari, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

OSHAWA, Ontario -- They don't keep statistics on this. Probably wouldn't serve any real purpose. And might be more than a little discouraging.

Every autumn, players on amateur tryout contracts (ATOs) turn up at just about every NHL training camp and prospects tournament in North America.

And a few weeks later, the vast majority of them have little to show for it except a best-of-luck handshake and whatever per diem money they were able to squirrel away.

Those with eligibility remaining return to major-junior hockey. Others move into the work-a-day world they were hoping to escape.

Or avoid.

The Penguins have five ATO players -- forwards Jessey Astles, Stefan Fournier, Danili Tarasov and Ian Watters and goalie Maxime Lagace -- on their roster for the prospects tournament that ends today.

Whether any of those guys has a future with them, or any other club, isn't clear.

Assistant general manager Jason Botterill said the Penguins retain exclusive rights to those players until they either release them or pass a deadline next month for giving them a contract.

He acknowledges that the percentage of ATO players who end up with pro contracts is "for the most part, pretty low," but was quick to point out that some players do catch on.

The Penguins got a firsthand look at one in their 5-1 loss Sunday to Toronto.

Maple Leafs forward Andrew Crescenzi accepted an ATO offer from Toronto a year ago and now, according to Botterill, has an NHL deal.

"You always have success stories," he said.

To this point, Astles and Watters look to be the ATOs who have done the most to grab the attention of the scouts and front-office people attending the tournament.

Astles, in particular, has been hard to overlook, because he has handled his role so effectively.

He is a 6-foot-1, 192-pound right winger who got an invitation because of his grit and toughness, and he hasn't given management any reason to second-guess its decision.

He already has had two high-energy fights, with Toronto forward Sam Carrick on Sunday and Ottawa left winger Darren Kramer on Saturday.

"I'm a hard-working player," Astles said. "I'll do anything the coach says. If we're down by a goal or two, if someone needs to step up, I'll be that guy. Anytime."

Astles, who plays for Kelowna in the Western Hockey League, had several offers to audition for NHL teams this fall after going unclaimed in the June entry draft, and decided the Penguins were the best fit.

"I looked at all the rosters, and saw that Pittsburgh could need some guys who could step up [physically], like myself," he said.

"That's my role. It's what I do."

His stat line from the 2010-11 season underscores the point: Astles had three goals, three assists and 129 penalty minutes in 59 games with the Rockets.

Suffice to say, if the Penguins finally find a scoring touch in their tournament finale today against Chicago, Astles probably won't be one of the guys piling up multiple points.

While his hands might be suspect -- at least when they're not being made into a fist -- Astles' toughness is beyond reproach.

He took a puck squarely in the mouth Sunday in the third period against Toronto.

He bled heavily and ended up with the right side of his upper lip grotesquely swollen, but was back on the ice a few minutes later.

Whether Astles' fearlessness and feistiness will earn him a longer look, and maybe even a contract, when the Penguins' main training camp opens in a few days is impossible to say, and could be influenced by any number of variables.

Astles, though, seems to have made the most of the chance players seek when they accept an ATO.

"The biggest thing is the opportunity to come to a camp and showcase themselves," Botterill said.

"Most guys in a development camp this summer want to impress a team.

"I think there are close to 20 NHL teams who have [teams in] rookie tournaments, so they're obviously trying to impress the team they're on in the NHL, but also the other teams in the tournament.

"These tournaments are very well-scouted, so they're just trying to build their reputation."

No matter how much the odds are against it.

NOTES -- Defenseman Robert Bortuzzo, who got an unspecified injury in the first period of the Toronto game, has been ruled out today. His injury is to be evaluated after the team returns to Pittsburgh. ... The Penguins are 0-2 and have been outscored, 9-1, in the tournament. The Blackhawks also have lost both of their games, but have seven goals.

Malkin ready for leadership role

By Sam Wener

Penguins season-ticket holder Sara Harper is stunned to find Evgeni Malkin at her door Monday delivering her tickets for the 2011-12 season.

If Sidney Crosby's injuries prevent him from leading the Penguins when the season opens next month, Evgeni Malkin said Monday that he's up to the task.

"If [Crosby can't play], of course its a little bit harder, but I think we have a good team," Malkin said. "All the players will play, and I'm ready, too."

Malkin spent the offseason recovering from a February surgery to repair a torn anterior cruciate ligament. After a summer of skating and working out in the gym, Malkin said his knee felt "pretty good."

Malkin delivered season tickets Monday to Sara Harper, 20, of Troy Hill, as part of the Penguins season-ticket delivery program. Thirteen players and head coach Dan Bylsma delivered more than 30 sets of season tickets.

"There are a thousand things I want to say right now," Harper said when she saw that it was Malkin delivering her tickets.

Harper, a student at the University of Pittsburgh-Johnstown, has been a season-ticket holder since the year after the 2005 NHL lockout, and was formerly a member of the student rush program. She routinely would walk from North Catholic High School to Mellon Arena and wait hours through any weather conditions to score cheap tickets.

"We went to so many games, and then the lockout happened, and I thought, 'I can't live without this,' " Harper said. "My friend and I just jumped on and said, 'We're getting season tickets.'"

Harper now shares her tickets with her older brother, Alan. Because she goes to school in Johnstown, Sara said she would attend only a handful of games this season. She will sell the rest of her tickets to help pay for tuition and, of course, playoff tickets. Harper and her brother traveled to Detroit in 2009 to see the Penguins win their third Stanley Cup title.

Harper knew a player would be delivering the tickets, but didn't know who it would be until Malkin arrived. He posed for pictures, signed autographs and spoke briefly with reporters before he left.

"It's a good time," Malkin said. "I see the fans happy when we come."

While Malkin enjoyed himself Monday, he said he was still mourning those who died Wednesday when the team plane of Lokomotiv Yaroslavl, a Russian hockey team, crashed, killing 37 players, coaches and staff, as well as seven crew members.

Malkin said he knew all the players and coaches in the crash, and was good friends with two: coach Igor Korolev and player Gennady Churilov.

"I feel so bad now," Malkin said. "We'll try to help the families and support them."

Crosby unsure how much he'll participate in Penguins' camp

By Shelly Anderson,

Penguins captain Sidney Crosby said today that he's not sure what, if any, participation level he will be able to have at training camp.

"I'll find out this week, see how things go, and get evaluated before camp," said Crosby, who has been out since Jan. 5 because of a concussion. "I'm not sure what it's going to be exactly, but I'll definitely have a better idea of what it's going to be this week."

Players report Friday and take the ice on Saturday.

Crosby spoke after making his first stop of the day on the Penguins' annual player season ticket delivery outing. He was at the Killbuck home of Gary and Annette Henzler. He signed autographs and posed for photos.

New group interested in buying Blues, source says

By JEREMY RUTHERFORD

A new name has emerged as a potential buyer for the Blues.

Max Chambers, a Calgary businessman who was once interested in purchasing the Phoenix Coyotes, has been in discussions with Blues' ownership recently, a source close to the situation told the Post-Dispatch.

The front man for Chambers' group is former NHL standout Bryan Trottier, who played 18 seasons in the league and won the Stanley Cup six times as a player and one as an assistant coach.

Chambers entered the picture in the "last few weeks," the source said, and he has "all the financing in place that would allow him to proceed quickly."

Game Plan LLC, the firm conducting the sale, has indicated that the process could be completed by start of the NHL season. That remains to be seen, however, with only 23 days left before the Blues open Oct. 8.

Robert Caporale, chairman of Game Plan, was not available to comment Tuesday. But the source said a purchase agreement between the Blues and a prospective buyer is not imminent. The negotiations are being described as "active discussions" at this point.

The Blues have been on the block since March 16. That's when chairman Dave Checketts announced that his company, SCP Worldwide, could not come to agreement with its top investor in the Blues, TowerBrook Capital Partners, on the selling price of its shares. TowerBrook, a private equity firm, has the largest stake in the team at 70 percent.

The sides agreed to sell the entire package: the Blues, the Scottrade Center lease and the Peoria Rivermen of the American Hockey League. The Peabody Opera House, which Checketts also controls, has been mentioned in the sale, although a spokesman for SCP said last month that "our intention is not to sell our interest in the Peabody Opera House."

The Blues' asking price for the package — minus the Peabody — is approximately $180 million, according to another source with knowledge of the process, although Checketts and Caporale both have indicated that it could fetch as much as $200 million.

"It's a healthy price because we have a healthy franchise," Checketts said in June. "I don't want to spend my time justifying the sale price. It is what it is."

The sale process, however, continues six months after it was announced that the Blues were for sale.

This summer, Game Plan sent out letters to 10 groups that had shown some type of interest in buying the Blues.

It set a deadline of Aug. 22 to accept offers from those groups and on that day, a spokesman said that the team received multiple bids.

It's unclear how many offers were made before the deadline, but multiple sources have told the Post-Dispatch that there are currently four groups in the mix, three of which are known: Blues minority owner Tom Stillman, Chicago businessman Matthew Hulsizer and now Chambers.

Stillman, who is CEO of Summit Distributing in St. Louis and heads a group of local investors, has made two confirmed bids to buy the club. The Blues and NHL rejected Stillman's first offer, which was believed to be $110 million. His second offer was believed to be in the same neighborhood.

Hulsizer, founder of PEAK6 LLC, a financial services firm, made an undisclosed initial bid that was also rejected. It's not believed that Hulsizer submitted a second bid by the Aug. 22 deadline but he remains involved in discussions with the Blues, the source said.

Little is known about Chambers, an oil man, other than his brief flirtation with the Phoenix Coyotes in 2009.

An article in the Toronto Globe & Mail listed Chambers among the groups "kicking the tires" with the Coyotes, who have since been taken over by the NHL.

In the article, Earl Scudder, a lawyer for former Coyotes owner Jerry Moyes, indicated that Chambers was "more interested in buying an NFL team."

It's unclear how Chambers and Trottier got linked, but Trottier would bring tremendous NHL experience to the group. Drafted No. 22 overall by the New York Islanders in 1974, Trottier won the Stanley Cups four times with the Isles (1980-83), two with the Pittsburgh Penguins (1991-92) and another as an assistant coach with Colorado (2001).

In 1,279 NHL games, Trottier had 524 goals and 1,425 points, numbers that led to his induction into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 1997. His career also includes a Conn Smythe Trophy (Stanley Cup most valuable player), Hart Trophy (league MVP) and Calder Trophy (rookie of the year).

The Blues are not yet focusing on one group, but the source said that "it's moving in the right direction."

Once the Blues enter a purchase agreement with a prospective buyer, the sale would need NHL approval. The league's next Board of Governors meeting is Sept. 20 in New York.

In 2010-11, Blues forward T.J. Oshie scored 12 goals, including a couple that made the highlight reels, and posted 34 points. But for the second time in his three years in the NHL, Oshie's season was defined by a costly injury.

In the 13th game of the season, Oshie fell to the ice during a scrum and landed awkwardly, breaking his ankle. The injury required surgery and he missed 31 games.

Oshie returned to the lineup, but in the second-to-last game of the season against Chicago, he blocked a shot with his left hand and suffered a broken thumb. Despite the injury, Oshie played in the season finale at Nashville, but then needed offseason surgery to fix the thumb.

Now armed with a one-year, $2.35 contract extension, Oshie says he's healthy and ready to begin the 2011-12 season. Here's my conversation with T.J. Oshie...

**JR:** Congratulations on your contract. What was that process like for you?

**TJO:** It was tough. The first time for me. I was kind of just sitting back, trying to take it all in ... take it slow. It came down to the wire (before the start of restricted free agency). They threw out a number that we were really comfortable with and felt like it was best for both sides.

**JR:** Some Blues fans were hoping that you would signing a long-term deal. Why only one year?

**TJO:** It's a chance for me to prove that I can go away for a summer, have a good summer on my own, working out and training. I was doing all of (Blues strength coach) Nelson Ayotte's stuff, but I just wanted to prove to them after everything that happened (an unexcused absence at practice, leading to a two-game suspension), that I've matured and have grown up. I'm just ready to step in and hopefully play as good as I can for that big contract next year.

**JR:** The word is that you've had your best summer of training? What did you do?

**TJO:** I didn't really take any days off. I remember I went like a month where I was really determined. I wouldn't even take the weekends off. I trained with a couple of my old North Dakota buddies and they're both bigger than me. I told them what I wanted to throw on for my first set of leg (exercises) and they were like 'You sure?' I was like, 'Yeah, yeah, I can do it.' A lot of leg work, a lot of quickness, a lot of explosion ... My body fat was 11.3 percent last training camp. Right now it's 9.7, and I'm about the same weight. Dropped some of the baby fat that I held onto for a while.

**JR:** You had an injury at the end of last season that was kept fairly quiet, but was pretty serious. You broke your thumb against Chicago and then played in the season finale against Nashville. What happened and what led to surgery?

**TJO:** It was a tough break. I actually rebusted my thumb in the same spot I broke it before (as a sophomore at North Dakota). All that new bone got busted up again. After the season, they thought it was going to be all right, but it wasn't quiet healing properly, so after about 2 1/2 weeks, they decided to rush me into surgery the next day. I had to go through all that process. There were three pins sticking out of my thumb for six weeks. Everything is 100 percent now. Some little things are always going to nag me, but I've learned to deal with it.

**JR:** You actually referred to the injury on Twitter and got some fans nervous. I know you've increased your Twitter messages in the last year. Do you enjoy that?

**TJO:** Yeah, but it's hard sometimes. I'll go a couple of days without really thinking about it. Then all of the sudden, I'll write about five messages. It's fun to see what the fans have to say and stay in touch with some people.

**JR:** Your buddy Patrik Berglund was on Twitter for a while, but he didn't last long, did he?
Four questions face Blues as camp opens

By NORM SANDERS

While there will not be many open roster spots when the St. Louis Blues open training camp Friday, there is plenty of healthy competition for ice time and important roles.

Training camp opens Friday at St. Louis Mills, with on-ice training sessions set for 9 a.m. and 10:45 a.m. Two Saturday practices are scheduled for 10:10 a.m. and 12:10 p.m.

All practices are free and open to the public.

One of the main camp battles will be between Ben Bishop and newcomer Brian Elliott for the backup goaltending job behind Jaroslav Halak.

But there are some other intriguing names that bear watching, including former San Jose star Jonathan Cheechoo and new Blues winger Evgeny Grachev.

"There's limited roster spots available," Blues General Manager Doug Armstrong said. "The competition is going to be more for the ice time with the players that are there. Maybe in the past, players have gotten ice time by default. I don't think that's going to be there right now."

As a result, the Blues coaching staff and front-office staff will be keeping a close eye on players like defense prospect Ian Cole and forward hopefuls Ryan Reaves, Cheechoo, Chris Porter, Philip McRae Stefan Della Rovere and the 6-foot-4 Grachev.

"They have to come in and differentiate themselves from the group," Armstrong said. "What it does is it makes us make our decisions."

Blues coach Davis Payne will be taking a close look at the roster hopefuls not only in practice, but during scrimmages and exhibition games.

He has no problem with players coming out of nowhere, or adjusting the previous scouting report that has followed them throughout their career.

"We may have guys slotted here, we may have this opinion and impression of where they fit in," Payne said. "They've got to come in and change our minds."

Here are four questions facing the Blues as they prepare for the 2011-12 NHL season:

Q: How is this team better than last year's version? The Blues faded after a 9-1-2 start, hammered by injuries to T.J. Oshie, David Perron, Andy McDonald, Roman Polak and others along with scoring problems and general inconsistency.

A: Besides being another year older, the Blues added some experience for its young roster to lean on by signing forwards Jamie Langenbrunner, Jason Arnott and Scott Nichol and defenseman Kent Huskins.

"We think they're going to be able to help our group get through some of the ebbs and the flows that you go through in a season, but we don't want to take away from the leadership that we have here," Armstrong said with a nod toward new captain David Backes and assistant captains Barret Jackman and Alex Steen .

The Blues also should benefit with full seasons from power forward Chris Stewart and defenseman Kevin Shattenkirk, both obtained from Colorado last season in the Erik Johnson trade.

Q: How much is expected of young defenseman Alex Pietrangelo, the former fourth overall pick who blossomed into one of the team's best performers last season?

A: Pietrangelo appears to be the workhorse, play-in-all-situations defenseman they were hoping he'd become when drafting him in 2008. A year ago, he posted 11 goals and 43 points in 79 games and may only be scratching the surface.

How Pietrangelo deals with the added responsibility -- and added attention from other teams -- will be interesting to watch. Former Blues star defenseman Chris Pronger made huge strides after a slow start with the team.

Q: Halak's first year as a full-time starters included a hot start, inconsistencies, an injury and some up and down patches the Blues would rather not see repeated. How is he better than last season?

A: "Jaro's a big part of our team, but Jaro's not our team, totally," Armstrong said. "If our goaltender tandem is in the top 10 or near the top 10 in (the league) in all the categories, we're going to have a good season.

"They don't have to be No. 1, 2 or 3 for us to be successful. That's the strength of conviction that I have in the rest of that team."

Q: A year ago, no one was counting on 21 goals and 46 points from Blues winger Matt D'Agostini, who earned a two-year, $3.3 million contract extension in the offseason. Are there any similar players that could make an impact on this squad?

A: Though something of a known commodity, Shattenkirk is only in his second full season in the NHL. A year ago he led all NHL rocks defenseman in scoring with nine goals and 43 points in 72 games.

He's a heady defenseman and valuable in the transition game as well as the power play because of his skating and playmaking skills.

A former first-round draft pick, Shattenkirk could be ready to play a much larger role with the team this season.

Kubina excited to be back on ice

By ERIK ERLENDSSON | The Tampa Tribune

Pavel Kubina sat and watched, his head in dazed state, as the Lightning marched to within a game of reaching the Stanley Cup Finals last season. Instead of blocking Boston shots in front of the net, Kubina was trying to block out doubts about his playing future as he struggled through a concussion suffered at the start of the second round of the postseason. From Game 1 of the conference semifinal, when Kubina was struck in the back of the head by Washington's Jason Chimera as the defensman's head hit the end boards, until Tampa Bay was eliminated by Boston in the conference final, Kubina showed little sign of improvement.

Stationary bikes, light workouts and brisk walks all brought out the common symptoms of post-concussion syndrome. That frustration led Kubina from worrying about whether he'd be able to return to Tampa Bay's postseason run to whether he'd ever be able return, period.

"The first couple of weeks I wondered when I was ever going to be better, and I started thinking about some other guys who were out for a couple of months or a season, stuff like that, and some guys who never come back," Kubina said on Tuesday while taking part in informal on-ice workouts at the Ice Sports Forum. "So that was on my mind."

Tampa Bay's playoff run ended on May 27 at TD Garden in the Game 7 loss at Boston. It took another month after that for Kubina to start feeling well enough to begin regular workouts. After constant treatment from the Lightning's medical staff, along with local medical professionals, he was declared symptom free at the end of June and able to resume regular workouts so he could begin training back home in the Czech Republic for the remainder of the summer.

Since being declared concussion-free, Kubina has not suffered any setbacks and is ready for the start of training camp on Friday.

"I always believed that I would get better, and our medical staff with Tommy (Mulligan), they took care of me, I went to see many different doctors and we were trying pretty much different things every day and I think that helped, thanks to our medical staff and the doctors in Tampa," Kubina said.

With concussion problems plaguing the NHL in recent seasons, the most notable being the current absence of top star Sidney Crosby -- who has been out since January, the subject of blows to the head and how to reduce them is a common topic in hockey circles. Kubina would like to see a standard established that sets a precedent for all players, and not on a case-by-case basis.

"You know, the headshots, it's always going to happen in hockey," said Kubina, who received a three-game suspension in March for an inadvertent elbow to Chicago's Dave Bolland. "I would just like to see that if you hit somebody in the head, whether it's accidental or not, it should be the same for everybody, whatever it is, three games, five games, 10 games, it's up to the league. It can't be like before where some guys don't get anything while some guys a few games here or a few games there.

"If you elbow somebody in the head, it should be the same for everyone, that's how I feel."

The Tampa Bay Lightning will begin training camp Friday at the Ice Sports Forum in Brandon with off-ice testing and physicals. There will be ice available for players who want to skate, but there are no organized practices. On-ice workouts Saturday, Sunday and Monday begin at 10 a.m. All are free and open to the public.

Here is the announcement and complete schedule from the team:

The Tampa Bay Lightning announced the schedule for its 19th training camp, which opens with physicals and fitness testing on Friday, September 16. Though there will be optional ice time available to players on the 16th, the full squad will hit the ice on Saturday, September 17. Fans are encouraged to attend and celebrate the start of the 2011-12 Lightning season. All on-ice sessions are free and open to the public.

Camp will open at 8 a.m. on Friday morning as the first of three groups begins medical testing. The third and final group is schedule to be complete with medical and off-ice testing at 1:15 p.m. A full breakdown of each group can be found in the schedule below. For the rest of camp the players will be broken in to two groups, blue and white, for practice, scrimmages and off-ice workouts. Saturday and Sunday’s sessions will be highlighted by a scrimmage between the teams on each day along with an on-ice practice session.

On Saturday and Sunday, ThunderBug, the Lightning Girls and the Bolt Brigade will welcome fans to the Brandon Ice Sports Forum. Parking at the Ice Sports Forum is free but limited. Assorted food and beverages will be available for fans, while kids can have their face painted. Select Lightning alumni will sign autographs. Lightning in-arena host Brittany Zion will be on hand to emcee the event, which will also include a number of contests and prizes.

Tickets for the Lightning’s preseason games against the St. Louis Blues at the Amway Center in downtown Orlando on September 21 and against the Florida Panthers at the St. Pete Times Forum on September 23 are now on sale. For more information, or to purchase, visit tampabaylightning.com, ticketmaster.com or call 1-800-745-3000. For the best value fans are encouraged to purchase a Lightning ticket package. For more information call 813.301.6600.

BRANDON — We may never know if Lightning wing Mattias Ritola actually had, or has, Meniere's disease.

There are no tests that indicate it, head athletic trainer Tommy Mulligan said, so any diagnosis is one of exclusion, in which other afflictions are ruled out.

What we do know is Ritola hasn't had an attack since Feb. 3. And his career — which he believed over in December, when headaches, dizziness and ringing in his right ear were so severe it made flying nearly impossible — gets a healthy restart Friday when training camp opens at the Ice Sports Forum.

"I don't even have to worry about it," Ritola, 24, said Tuesday, "and that's the biggest relief."

The biggest surprise was how little it took to alleviate the symptoms, which surfaced in September 2010 after Ritola was claimed off waivers from the Red Wings.

Ritola took several medicines and wore earplugs on planes to mitigate pressure changes believed to be sparking attacks. He wore a hearing aid in his right ear, the drum of which he ruptured in summer 2010 diving into a pool.

But what finally did the trick, Ritola said, were neck-cracking sessions with Brad Robinson, a chiropractor who works with Tampa Bay's AHL affiliate in Norfolk, to where Ritola was demoted Feb. 9, six days after an attack kept him out of a game with the Maple Leafs.

"When Mattias came in and explained what was going on, I said, 'Let me take a look at your neck.' " Robinson said. "I felt what was going on, a big muscle spasm on the right side.

"Any time you have a tense muscle compared to the other side, that means the spine is distorted and that leads to pressure on the nerves. The nerves supply the upper cervical spine, which leads to the skull and into the ear and sinuses. That's what gives those kinds of symptoms."

Robinson said Ritola's misalignment likely was from the abuse a body takes from hockey.

"I moved the bone back into proper alignment and took the pressure off the nerves," Robinson said. "The muscles balanced out, the nerve supply was restored back into the skull, and the body started working the way it is supposed to."

The story still has loose ends.

Mulligan said Ritola had received chiropractic treatment from the Lightning; Ritola said he could not recall whether he did. And given what happened in Norfolk, Ritola said he doesn't believe he had Meniere's, which the National Institutes of Health says is caused by a buildup of fluid in the inner ear and a constriction of blood vessels similar to what causes migraines.

But Mulligan isn't discarding the diagnosis of Tampa Bay's doctors.

"Since (Ritola) improved with the chiropractic, does that mean he doesn't or didn't have Meniere's? No," Mulligan said. "It could be a situation where he is in a dormancy period and that was enough to put him over the edge. Whether it's related to the chiropractic, we'll never know."

Whatever happened, Ritola said he is confident it is in the past and is eager to really show the Lightning what he can do.

Last season, the 6-foot-2, 192-pound Swede had four goals and eight points for Tampa Bay in 31 games, most of which were played while he stressed over his health. He had nine goals and 27 points in 17 games for Norfolk.

"The biggest thing for him is he's got very good hands and protects the puck extremely well," Lightning coach Guy Boucher said. "That's a huge asset."
Lightning's new marketing slogan: Be The Thunder

Posted by Damian Cristodero

Here is the announcement from the team:

The Tampa Bay Lightning unveiled its ‘Be The Thunder’ marketing campaign for the 2011-12 regular season today, calling on all hockey fans throughout the Bay Area to come together and be loud in support of the Bolts all season long as the highly-anticipated start of the regular campaign quickly approaches.

Launched as the direct result of countless interviews with the same raucous crowds which packed the St. Pete Times Forum each night during an exciting and improbable playoff run, the ‘Be The Thunder’ campaign features a refreshed focus on the team’s identity and its brand, highlighting and paying tribute to the Lightning’s passionate fan base. Both the exterior and interior of the St. Pete Times Forum are being transformed to offer guests the best fan experience possible, presenting signage consistent with the campaign throughout various parts of the building.

“The new campaign calls on our dedicated, passionate fans to ‘Be the Thunder’ behind the Lightning,” said Chief Operating Officer Steve Griggs. “Through strength in numbers, our fans are encouraged to serve as that force of nature as we implore them to create a raucous atmosphere in our building for every home game and provide unwavering support in the community.”

The vision for the campaign is being brought to life through several traditional advertising mediums, along with a newly-placed emphasis on social media across multiple platforms; cultivating Lightning fans for life with interactive fan outreach initiatives and online contests. The campaign will also recognize the diversity of Tampa Bay Lightning fans, assisting in reaching the numerous demographics that encompass the fan base.

“Last season we placed great emphasis on our ownership and management’s commitment to the team’s long term success and to the community,” Vice President of Brand Management Lynn Wittenburg said. “Now, we’re turning our attention to the fans, the most integral players on our team. We encourage them to come together, be loud and share with us a one-of-a-kind experience as we continue to proudly cement our presence in Tampa Bay.”

Cory Conacher scored his second goal in as many games, but the Lightning fell 7-3 to the Predators Monday night in a prospects tournament in Coral Springs.

Brett Connolly and Alex Hutchings also scored for Tampa Bay (0-2), which plays its final game Wednesday against the host Panthers.

Tampa Bay Lightning captain Vinny Lecavalier's brood about to swell to two

Posted by Damian Cristodero

Tampa Bay Lightning captain Vinny Lecavalier has a bit more on his mind than the start of training camp. He and wife Caroline are expecting their second child, a boy, in about five weeks. He will not, Lecavalier said, laughing, be named Vincent. The couple's first child, Victoria, is 16 months.

"I'm excited," Lecavalier said after his skate Monday at the Ice Sports Forum.

But he also is a little wary, in a good way.

"It's been almost too good to be true with Victoria. She's such a good baby," Lecavalier said. "The next one might be a little more of a challenge. But families have five, six, seven kids and they can do it, so I'm not worried."

Besides, Lecavalier said, "My wife is a great mother."

Leafs prospect pipeline appears headed in right direction

There's an easy joke to be made about how the Toronto Maple Leafs are, as of yet, undefeated.

After all, they’re 2-0 heading into their final game tonight at their rookie tournament, having beaten the Chicago Blackhawks and Pittsburgh Penguins prospects on the weekend.

No one in their right mind would read much into those games, which are played between prospects who for the most part don't know one another, have recently stepped off a plane and haven't played together.

From a Leafs perspective, however, what you can see on the ice in Oshawa the past few days is that they finally have a little more depth to their prospect pool.

And that's been a long time coming.

Toronto hasn’t made the playoffs since 2004, but in recent years, you wouldn’t know it looking at their minor league club. The Marlies team that had 109 points in the standings in 2007-08 ultimately produced exactly one player - fourth-line centre Darryl Boyce - expected to be on the team this season, an incredible lack of development of prospects of any sort.

While those AHL teams won games, they did so with mostly minor-league veterans. This season, win or lose, the Marlies will almost certainly have young players with NHL potential like Jake Gardiner, Matt Frattin, Joe Colborne, Jesse Blacker and Ben Scrivens playing key roles.

Groups that rank prospects, meanwhile, have shifted the Leafs up the list, with Hockey’s Future placing them ninth in their latest rankings and Hockey Prospectus putting them 11th.

(And that's without the benefit of the three high picks they moved in the Phil Kessel deal.)

"The Leafs’ system has a ton of depth," Hockey Prospectus' Corey Pronman said. "While they won't be churning out top-line type of players left and right over the next few years, there's quite a few names who have top six [forward] or top four [defencemen] potential."

Those who have been in the organization for the past five or six years, meanwhile, agree that there's been positive progress.

"I think the pedigree [of our prospects] is just that much higher," Leafs director of player development Jim Hughes said. "They've done a great job drafting. We've gotten some great players out of trades, and there's probably just a lot more to work with.

"We feel we've got a real competitive environment right now. Guys are pushing each other, competing for jobs. That only propels the entire operation forward."

Most of that competition is going to come at the Marlies level, as it's unlikely anyone outside of Frattin pushes for an NHL job. But when there are injuries, some of those prospects are going to be asked to fill in - just as Keith Aulie did last season when Dion Phaneuf went down.

And, unlike with that 2007-08 team, it's fairly safe to say a few of those players are going to be contributing regularly two or three years from now.

"We're in a much better situation, but I wouldn't say that we're completely content with what we have," Brian Burke's right hand man Dave Nonis told TSN yesterday. "You always want to have those players coming. I think we as an organization have been in trouble in the past because we have not had players coming, whether they've been moved to try to take a run at it or what have you. We want to make sure that that pipeline is continually being filled."

The top prospects

Asked for his thoughts on who from the Leafs rookies has impressed him leading up to the start of the main training camp on Friday, Hughes picked out these four players yesterday:

Kenny Ryan, 2009 second-rounder who plays for the Windsor Spitfires: "He's a very high character kid, and when he goes away for the summer, you know he's doing the work. He's got great habits away from the rink. He proved it the other night ... and he's really responsible in all three zones."

Jake Gardiner, a Ducks 2008 first-rounder who they acquired in the Francois Beauchemin trade: "He's a very special kid in a lot of ways. He's on a mission. The guy's the real deal. He's got the right mentality and obviously has the right physical skills. He's been terrific."

Jesse Blacker, a 2009 second-rounder who was with the Owen Sound Attack last year but will make jump to the Marlies: "He had a great year last year, had a great Memorial Cup, had a great summer ... He's somebody who's someday going to put on a Toronto Maple Leafs jersey."

Matt Frattin, 2007 fourth-rounder who led the NCAA in goals last season: "He's got an NHL skillset. He can shoot, he can skate, he's strong."

The development role

One other thing worth noting is that the job Hughes is doing for the Leafs is a relatively new one for NHL teams. Player development has taken on a lot more importance in recent years in general, with more and more teams adding someone in the role, and essentially what that person is for is to watch over players in the system who aren’t playing for the Leafs or Marlies.

Hughes, for example, has been watching someone like Blacker in the OHL for a few years and offering him advice. He said that he often gets phone calls after games that he’s at from Leafs prospects who want more information on how they did and how they can improve.

It's a job that directly ties someone in the organization to their draft picks full time and during their seasons, and it's a role that teams are dedicating more and more resources towards. (The Leafs have both Hughes and long-time former NHLer Bobby Carpenter now working on the development side.)

One agent told me today that 10 years ago "teams used to just throw their prospects in the deep end," expecting them to figure things out after they were drafted. Because organizations have invested so many millions in scouting and the draft, however, they're now realizing they don't want to leave players' development entirely to their junior or college teams and are taking a more active role.

So when you see former players like Bill Guerin and Cory Stillman retire to take player development jobs - as they have with the Penguins and Panthers recently - that's essentially what they're doing.

Often they aren't even spending time with the minor league team and instead simply focusing on those who haven't yet made the jump to pro.
Leaves rookies end with loss, and invitation to main camp

Kevin McGran

The baby Maple Leafs may have lost their last game, but rookie camp finished with a happy ending.

Every member of the Leafs team that went 2-0-1 in the rookie tournament at Oshawa's GM Place was invited to the main camp that opens Friday.

"It's a pretty exciting day right now," said forward Mitchell Heard, an undrafted prospect who really clicked on a line with Greg McKegg and Josh Nicholls. "There's no words to describe the feeling right now."

It doesn't usually work out like this for the guys who come to rookie camps on tryout contracts, especially with a team like the Leafs, who will open camp top heavy. There were eight players on tryout deals in all with the Leafs.

Outside of a spot on the third line, there really isn't much open. Few, including Marlies coach Dallas Eakins, expected every one of these players to go to the main camp. But the team produced solid efforts in each game, including Tuesday's 4-3 overtime loss to Ottawa.

"We were getting ready to send some guys on their way, but we kept playing well, we played well as a group, we liked the way they competed and in the end my bosses decided to bring every guy here," said Eakins, the bench boss for rookie camp.

"Listen, when you're a draft pick, you kind of know you're going to go to the main camp, but good on these tryout guys, they came in and worked their butts off and now it's something really special for them. Some of the kids are local guys and that's a really big deal."

Heard, from Bowmanville and a member of the Plymouth Whalers, was a standout in the summer at prospects camp. He had two assists Tuesday night, giving him a goal and three assists for the tournament. His second assist set up McKegg in the last minute of the third period to force overtime.

"He's played well and it carried over from development camp," McKegg said of Heard. "It's been fun playing with him. We've had chemistry and hopefully we can keep that going."

McKegg, captain of the Erie Otters, was one of the better Leafs on the ice all night.

"This kid has some great hands and he knows how to score," said Eakins. "I know he continues to work on his skating. When he gets the puck, he is clearly very dangerous."

One of few players who may actually get some ice time with the Leafs this year is Matt Frattin, easily the best player on the ice Tuesday night. The puck followed him around, it seemed. He scored the Leafs' first goal, on a fine feed from defenceman Jake Gardiner.

It was a power-play goal with Frattin - a forward - playing the point.

"He clearly showed some of what he can do and I think he still has more to give," Eakins said of Frattin. "We used him in all situations. We had him on the point on the power play, up front on the power play, 5-on-5, 4-on-4, penalty killing and he wasn't falling away. It looks like he's fairly fit as well."

At 23, Frattin was one of the older players at the four-team tournament. It was expected he would dominate and he did. GM Brian Burke was impressed.

"I think he's a good player," Burke said of Frattin. "He's going to get a good look in camp."

Frattin, who played the last game of the year last season with the Maple Leafs, says he can't wait to get into an exhibition game.

"I played with confidence today and I've got to carry my confidence into camp, into scrimmages and practices," said Frattin, adding that making the team is "definitely one of my goals. There will be a lot of people in main camp with that goal, battling for that same spot.

"I've got a little experience now. It's a fresh start."

Another player under the microscope here was Gardiner. He may not crack the starting six defencemen out of camp, but he may well position himself to be the first call-up from the Marlies in case of injury or trade.

He appeared to struggle at times, making a few giveaways. Other times, his passes were crisp and on the money.

"It's part of the learning process," said Eakins. "I'm encouraging him to do it. I'd rather he make his mistakes now. Let's push the envelope too far and we'll see the line where we've got to pull him back. He's a smart kid."

Players have only a couple of days before they must report for physicals on Friday at the MasterCard Centre.

"We've got to start the process of getting to know them, of seeing what makes them tick," said Eakins. "It's been nice to see them play against their peers. Now is when the real fun begins. They're going to be playing against men in the next few days, some very young savvy men. We'll see what they're made of."

Leaf prospect Blacker makes solid start to pro career

Mark Zwolinski

Leaf defence prospect Jesse Blacker - as Marlies coach Dallas Eakins notes - loves hockey. How much hockey loves him back will be one of the more intriguing questions this season.

Blacker, the Leafs' second-round pick in 2009, 58th overall, finished up this week's rookie tournament in Oshawa having made a sound first impression in what is a pivotal year in his young pro career.

"He loves hockey, it's crazy," said Eakins in praise of Blacker, who joined the rest of the Leaf prospects in trying to wrench the tournament title from the Ottawa prospects Tuesday night in Oshawa.

"I know this kid totally expects to play in the NHL and I like that, I like to see kids who wear it on their sleeves."

Blacker, who hoisted the OHL championship trophy last spring with the Owen Sound Attack, entered the Leafs scene with top-shelf expectations. Born in Toronto, Blacker has been targeted in all media accounts as a strong bet to play in the NHL, and the opportunity to play for his hometown team has not been lost on the 20-year-old.

Those expectations rose to a new level with the rookie tournament. Blacker, it's expected, is not returning to junior as an overage player. His goal has always been the Leafs, but his next playing stop should be with Eakins and the Marlies.

"My goal is to play (with the Leafs), but you go and play your hardest and whatever the results may be, you can't dwell on it," Blacker said.

So far, Blacker has taken the first small steps in this pre-season that should see him land a job on the Marlies blue line.

The next steps begin with the opening of Leafs camp today. There appears to be a script with Blacker, a process from junior to the AHL and then the NHL, and the Leafs certainly have a shiny student willing and excited to do what it takes to cover all those stops to the top.

Ultimately, though, Blacker's ascent relies on performance rather than glowing promise. The Marlies blue line has been populated with veterans - Korbiniand Holzer, Juraj Mikus, Dan Richmond, Simon Gysberg, and a host of other prospect hopefuls like Blacker.

Blacker's success seems to be accompanied with an expectation that he will excel within this lineup. He's been a proven commodity in the OHL; now the time has come to elevate that to the AHL and possibly the NHL as a call-up.

"A year ago he played with us (one assist in the final six games of the 2009-10 season) and was taking so many chances running out of position ... it was great to see his enthusiasm but we wanted to kind of corral him a bit," Eakins said.

"He's back in the direction we talked to him about and his junior coaches did a great job with him. He's doing everything the right way now."

While there are high levels of expectation for Blacker, it's difficult to find a situation that will cut very far into all the enthusiasm for the game he carries.

He's forming the Leaf rookie blue line with Stuart Percy, a rival in the OHL last season with the St. Michael's Majors. The two were often locked in heated battles - the kind that carry over - but Blacker and Percy appear to be carrying good will towards each other now that they're on the same training camp team with the Leafs.

"The hockey world is a small world sometimes, and I think what happens in junior hockey stays there, I don't think either of us have a problem with any of that stuff, there's no hard feelings now," said Blacker, whose Attack downed the Majors in an intense Game 7 of the OHL final last spring.

With camp opening today, Blacker joins Percy, Jake Gardiner and more than a dozen rookies looking to make impressions on Leafs management. For Blacker, there appears to be more of an immediacy to his NHL situation than most of the other hopefuls.

He's worked out the past three seasons with Leafs strength coach Anthony Belza, and the results in size, strength and physical confidence are noticeable.

The rest is performance, but Blacker - despite all the promise - takes none of that for granted.

"It's my first impression (here in camp) and I guess another first impression that I have to make in my career," Blacker said.

"Any time you can do that it's a big first step. It'd be great if I could make that good first impression at this point (in training camp)."

New deal for Schenn close? 0

By Terry Koshan, Toronto Sun

There appears to be a light at the end of the tunnel in the Luke Schenn contract negotiations, and it’s not an opposing forward bearing down on the Maple Leafs defenceman.

IN THE WORKS

An NHL source indicated on Tuesday that a new contract for Schenn "should be done by Friday."

In other words, the expectation is Schenn will be at camp on the first day, when players undergo medicals.

Schenn's agent, Don Meehan, and the Leafs have been negotiating on a new pact for several weeks. Two other young NHL defencemen, Drew Doughty of the Los Angeles Kings and Zach Bogosian of the Winnipeg Jets, also are without contracts as the start of training camp approaches.

Toronto Sun LOADED: 09.14.2011
Canuck knocks out top Oilers prospect

By HOSEA CHEUNG, QMI Agency

PENTICTON, B.C. - Like most defensive defencemen, Adam Polasek takes pride in not being noticed on the ice.

Polasek went about doing his job quietly in the Vancouver Canucks' first game of the Young Stars tournament Sunday -- but he managed to make it on to the highlight reel nonetheless.

The 6-3, 200-pounder dropped the gloves with Edmonton Oilers prospect Colten Teubert, knocking out the former 13th overall pick with a right hand. Teubert suffered a broken nose and won't play the remaining two Oilers games in the tournament.

"I had no idea who he was," said Polasek, who was a scratch in Vancouver's Monday game against the Calgary Flames. "I just (found out) after that he was a first-round pick."

"It was kind of a lucky shot. I had a better block on my shoulder and I hit him right on the nose."

The 20-year-old Czech, who played with the P.E.I. Rockets of the QMJHL the past two seasons, spent most of the summer training in Vancouver. He skated with a mix of veterans and rookies two weeks ago, and stood out because of his size, looking more like an NHLer than a prospect.

"I always try to use my height, use my long arms and long sticks," he said. "It's really easier to protect the puck and go one-on-one in the corner."

Polasek, a Canucks fifth-round pick in 2010, has focused on his growth as a player in recent years. He came to Canada two seasons ago, leaving his HC Vitkovice junior team, to gain experience in the North American style of play.

"For me it was everything different, the jump from the big ice in Europe to the small rinks in Canada," said Polasek, who had 39 points in 61 games with the Rockets in 2010-11.

"In Canada, it's lots of hitting, lots of physical play."

He also strived to improve his English, which he speaks fluently now.

"When I came here, I knew a couple lines like 'I'm hungry,' " he said with a laugh. "The guys in P.E.I. helped me a lot."

Winnipeg Sun LOADED: 09.14.2011
Canucks' Roberto Luongo back to take care of 'unfinished business'  

By Brad Ziemer, Vancouver Sun  

VANCOUVER - Three months later, the wounds have healed and Roberto Luongo insists he has put last season behind him.  

At least the bad ending.  

Luongo, who joined many of his Vancouver Canuck teammates on the ice Tuesday morning for an informal workout prior to Tuesday night's induction into the B.C. Sports Hall of Fame, said he prefers to dwell on all the positives of last season.  

"All I can say is now when I think about last year I don't think about disappointment, I don't think about negative things," Luongo said after attending a luncheon honouring the Hall of Fame inductees.  

"I think about the season we had as a group. We did some phenomenal things, not only in the regular season. We were one game away from winning the Cup. That's a good year for us and now we just want to take the little step that's left. We came close and know we can do it again.  

It's just a matter of going out there and playing."  

Luongo would not say how long it took him to put the devastating seven-game loss to the Boston Bruins in the Stanley Cup final behind him, but insisted it is now in the rear-view mirror and will remain there.  

"It's hockey, you know what I mean," he said of the Canucks coughing up a 2-0 series lead to the Bruins. "That's all I can say. Things happen. You want to keep things under your control as much as you can, but sometimes things happen.  

"Unfortunately, we let it slip away, especially in the Boston games, and we never really recovered from that. At the end of the day I think we can all be proud of what we did last year from the beginning of the season all the way to the final. We did a lot as individuals and as a team and that is why we are so happy to be back and give it another try."  

The Canucks veterans report for training camp Friday at Rogers Arena.  

With the Canucks going so deep into the playoffs, Luongo said summer has literally flown by.  

"It feels a bit surreal that we are back for another year already," he said.  

"But at the same time we are excited. We have a little bit of unfinished business to settle and I think as a group we are really excited to get it going again."  

The short off-season forced Luongo to alter his summer workout routine. He gave himself a lengthy rest after returning to his off-season home in Florida and got back on skates about a month ago.  

"It's been a bit different preparation-wise," he said. "You pretty much shave a month off your training. Physically and mentally I feel like I am ready to go at the same pace I was last year at training camp.  

"I have been skating for about four weeks now. I think after a season like last year the most important thing is to make sure you are well rested mentally and focused and ready to go. The physical part will take care of itself if you are doing the right things off the ice and making sure you are in shape. Like I said, I took care of what I had to this summer and I am looking forward to next year."  

Luongo's summer ended with a pair of Hall of Fame inductions. Last week, Luongo joined Bobby Curtola, Connie Stevens and three others as inductees into the Italian Walk of Fame in Toronto.  

On Tuesday night, he and B.C. natives Shea Weber, Duncan Keith, Brent Seabrook and Scott Niedermayer were to be honoured as members of Canada's 2010 Olympic gold medal-winning hockey team.  

"It's a huge honour," Luongo said. "I think that day in particular is a day that I know myself and a lot of people will never forget. The fact it will be recognized by something like this forever is really special and it's a great honour for me to be part of, even though I wasn't born in British Columbia."  

Luongo likes the fact the Canucks haven't made a lot of off-season moves.  

"We are very, very comfortable with our team," he said. "You saw how close we came to winning it all. I don't think there were many moves needed to be made."  

He also didn't want to hear any suggestions about how difficult it has been for teams who lose the Stanley Cup final to get there again the following year.  

"You look at it that way, but I thought of the Pittsburgh Penguins right away," Luongo said.  

The Penguins, who ironically will be Vancouver's first regular-season opponent on Oct. 6, won the 2009 Stanley Cup after losing the 2008 final to the Detroit Red Wings.  

"That's all that matters," Luongo said. "If someone else can do it, we can do it, too. The playoffs are what hockey is all about. It was fun no matter if we won or lost.  

"When you think about it, it was exciting. There were a lot of great moments in those two months and unfortunately we didn't have the ultimate win, but when I think back about it there are a lot great moments that I will carry with me forever."  

Canucks prospect Kevin Connauton muscles up in NHL bid

By Ian Walker,

PENTICTON - High on Kevin Connauton's left shoulder is a tattoo of the Lion Rampant of Scotland. Above it, engraved in capital letters, you'll find the Vancouver Canucks prospect's last name, while below, juxtaposed in lower case, are the words "dearthaireacha go deo." It's Irish Gaelic and stands for "brothers forever."

"Me and my brother are really close and we decided we wanted to get something together a few years ago," said Connauton, following the Canucks practice at the South Okanagan Events Centre on Tuesday. "To me, getting a tattoo, I'd never want to get something that didn't hold a strong meaning to it. My family is extremely important to me and Sean, being three years older, has always been a role model and guided me."

Sean Connauton spent three years as a bruising defenceman in the Alberta Junior Hockey League, where he recorded 42 points and 492 penalty minutes in 162 games, before going on to play three more seasons at Brown University, where he is currently finishing up his degree.

"Growing up we were pretty competitive," said Kevin Connauton, a sly grin spreading across his face. "He'd win all the fights. Come to think of it, I don't know if I had any career wins against him. I think now, though, that I'm a little bit stronger than he is and the tide has turned a bit."

The 21-year-old former third-round pick of the Canucks has packed about five pounds of muscle onto his 6-2, 200-pound frame and he hasn't wasted any time throwing it around through Vancouver's first two games at the Young Prospects Tournament. Although admittedly, the physical side of the game is still a work in progress.

The former Vancouver Giant almost knocked himself silly attempting a big hit on Calgary Flames prospect Gaelan Patterson early in the Canucks' 4-3 overtime win on Monday. Connauton ended up crashing into the side boards and was definitely showing the effects as he made his way to the bench to get his wind back.

"The elevation of the competition forces guys to reinvent themselves a little bit at the next level, I certainly know that was the case for me," said Chicago Wolves head coach Craig MacTavish, who is behind the Canucks prospects bench all week. "You have to find a way to fill a role and then expand on it. He definitely wants to make a case for himself to stay with the Canucks this year and he looks like he's going to be able to do that."

Well, that may be pushing it. Unless general manager Mike Gillis has a trade in the works.

Connauton looks to be at least No. 9 on the Canucks' depth chart heading into main camp, behind Dan Hamhuis, Kevin Bieksa, Alex Edler, Sami Salo, Keith Ballard, Aaron Rome, Andrew Alberts and Chris Tanev. There's also Alexander Sulzer, who signed with the team in the off-season, and Ryan Parent in the mix.

But what do we know? This is a player who went from the AJHL to the NCAA to the WHL to the AHL all in a span of four years. A guy who set franchise records for goals (24) and points (72) by a defenceman in his one season with the Giants and last year had 11 goals and 24 points in 73 games despite being the youngest blueliner on the AHL's Manitoba Moose.

It's worth noting Vancouver also lost its top-scoring defenceman from last season with Christian Ehrhoff signing with the Buffalo Sabres this summer.

"I have a lot of optimism that he's going to get there," continued MacTavish, when pressed. "You have a kid with that raw skill set, a highly intelligent and determined kid, I'd bet that. Ideally, he's going to want to go in and compete for a job in Vancouver and that's the next step for him. He's right there at the end of the decision making for the Canucks coaches and managers and I think that's the natural progression."

Connauton played most of his minor hockey career at centre before converting to a defenceman just five years ago. It's the main reason why the offensive part of the game comes so easy while the defence not so much. The Edmonton native finished a team-worst minus-11 with the Moose.
Excited about Canucks, healthy Marco Sturm feels Vancouver's hockey pulse

By Brad Ziemer, Vancouver Sun

VANCOUVER - On Monday, the three-week anniversary of his new life as a Vancouver resident, Marco Sturm was extolling the virtues of his latest hockey home.

"It's been even better than I thought," Sturm said after skating with some of his new Canuck teammates at Rogers Arena. "I knew from when I played in San Jose and in the West that Vancouver was always one of my favourite cities. But I only saw the downtown area, that's it.

"But now living here and seeing a bit more of the area - we have been to Whistler and stuff like that - it's just beautiful here."

Sturm says he and his family - wife Astrid and their children, Mason, 7, and Kaydie, 5 - have made a seamless transition to their new home.

"We were a little nervous about a new city, a new school, it's always tough to move with a family," Sturm said. "But the first few days at school were really, really good, no crying, so that is a good sign, right?"

Even the weather has been great. Sturm knows all about Vancouver's rainy climate, but he's only seen the rain once.

"The day we came [Aug. 22] it rained all day and then that was it," he said with a smile, knowing full well that all this sunshine is not going to last.

Sturm, Vancouver's most notable off-season free-agent signing, only hopes he can fit in with his new team as well as his family has adapted to life in a new city and country.

Vancouver general manager Mike Gillis has acknowledged he was rolling the dice when he signed Sturm, who turned 33 last week, to a one-year, $2.25-million deal on July 1.

Teams weren't exactly lining up to sign Sturm, who has had two major knee surgeries in the last three years. But Gillis was willing to gamble on a player who has scored 20 or more goals seven times in his National Hockey League career.

Sturm sounds determined to make that eight this season.

"That's my goal, to reach that 20-goal mark again," he said Monday. "I know I can do it. But I know I have to be healthy. I feel good right now, I just have to get into that rhythm that I was in before. There's a deep lineup here and it doesn't matter which line you play on, they can feed you the puck, and I just have to make sure that I am ready right from the start."

Last year, in hockey terms, was something of a disaster for Sturm. He began the season rehabbing from off-season knee surgery after tearing ACL and MCL ligaments during the 2010 playoffs.

Before he had even returned to play, the Boston Bruins traded Sturm in December to the Los Angeles Kings. Sturm played 17 games - scoring four goals and adding five assists - before the Kings waived him. The move caught Sturm by complete surprise.

"No one talked to me there," he said. "I just got put on waivers. When I got traded from Boston I knew I was not ready. But you get traded and you want to play. Unfortunately it didn't work out."

Sturm was not unemployed for long. The Washington Capitals picked him up and it wasn't until the playoffs when Sturm felt like he was fully recovered. He relies heavily on his speed to succeed and feels like he has that quickness back in his game.

"It just took a while," he said. "But I got stronger, I felt better and in the playoffs I felt really good."

When the Caps were knocked out of the playoffs, Sturm returned home to Dingolfing, a small Bavarian city near Munich. He didn't quite know what to expect as July 1 approached. He was delighted when the Canucks came calling.

Ironically, it was Christian Ehrhoff, a fellow German player who left Vancouver for Buffalo the same day, who helped convince Sturm that the Canucks were a good fit for him.

"I talked to him before I signed," Sturm said of Ehrhoff. "I just had a little bit of time. He only said great things about the organization. I knew about the city, but he was talking about the guys in the locker-room, coaching staff and everything around the organization and he said, it's all really good and that I am going to have a lot of fun."

Sturm thinks the Canucks' style of play also suits his game. "They don't mess around, they just go straight forward, drive to the net hard and play pretty simple, and that's how I am, too."

When the Canucks' training camp begins this weekend, Sturm will be given every chance to earn a spot on Vancouver's second line. A left-hand shot, he can play either wing, but has played more on the left side the last few seasons.

"I have usually played in the top six and played some on the power play," he said. "I hope I can do it again here."

He is anxious to get his first taste of hockey in a Canadian market. Sturm knows how passionate fans in Vancouver are about the Canucks and has already been approached in restaurants and on the SkyTrain by fans who recognize him.

"People here love hockey and I can feel it already," he said. "I hope it is going to be good. I like to feed off the crowd. They push you pretty hard and I like that."

The struggles of the past year have Sturm particularly pumped about the coming season. He has something to prove to himself and others.

"It has been a hard year," he said. "I just was not healthy enough and like I said July 1 I didn't know what to expect. I was hoping for a good team. I'm at the age now where I just want to try and win it [the Stanley Cup] and I think with this team I definitely am going to get that chance."

Vancouver's Yuen could make history

By Jim Jamieson

PENTICTON - The Facebook messages were flying in China when Zach Yuen was drafted last June by the Winnipeg Jets.

The Vancouver born and raised defenceman had obviously distinguished himself as a special hockey player just being drafted 119th overall.

But for anyone of Chinese ethnicity it's just a little more special.

Yuen, 18, is the first Chinese blueliner to be drafted into the league and, according to the NHL, would, if he gets to the big league, become one of the rare few to make it all the way to the top.

Larry Kwong, a resident of Vernon, was the first Chinese Canadian to play in the NHL, when he got into one game for the New York Rangers in the 1947-48 season.

"There really hasn't been any full Chinese-Canadians playing at such a high level, and I hope I can be a role model and inspire other kids to pursue hockey," the 5-foot-11, 196-pound Yuen said Tuesday, before his Jets prospects team took on Edmonton.

Yuen sees a day when more players of Chinese descent are playing in the NHL.

"There's language barrier for sure," he said. "There isn't much hockey in China, although it's starting to develop there. When people immigrate over here, they don't know what hockey is. It's hard to get immersed in it because it's all in English. But right now I think it's really starting to grow. You see the Canucks have a huge Asian fan base and lots of Asians are starting to play hockey."

If anyone has a chance to achieve his hockey goal - and be an excellent role model - it's Yuen. He graduated with honours from Vancouver private school St. George's and is a classically trained pianist, earning a Diploma from the prestigious London College of Music at 13.

Clearly, attention to detail and focus are not issues with Yuen.

"You want your kids to pick up something and want to do well," said Zach's father, Charles, who's here for the prospects tournament.

"We never pushed hockey on Zach - he played soccer and lacrosse, too - but he always loved hockey."

Charles emigrated from Hong Kong at 13 with his family in 1978. There, he met his wife, Mary, who was born in Vancouver after her parents came from Hong Kong in the late 1950s.

Charles, who's done some colour commentary in Cantonese for the 2010 Olympic soccer tournament and the Vancouver Whitecaps for Omni TV, said hockey was unknown in Asia, but that's all changed now with digital media almost everywhere.

"Now there are about 400 playing hockey in Hong Kong," said Charles. "In Hong Kong and China a lot of people follow him. This is the best league in the world so a lot of people are really excited about it."

Zach was thrilled to hear his celebrity is raising hockey's profile in China.

"I just heard it through my dad," said Zach, a mobile two-way D-man who's played two seasons with the WHL's Tri City Americans.

"Apparently, there's some discussion on the blogs in China. That's pretty neat that they are following it so closely."

From an early age, Charles took Zach and older daughter Montana to public skating. Both kids also took figure skating along with piano lessons.

Zach was on skates at 20 months, playing hockey at four - the age he started piano - and by age 9 had left Vancouver Minor for the North Shore Winter Club program.

So does piano still fit in Zach's busy life? Apparently, he's instructing teaching two youngsters in Kennewick, Wash., where he plays junior. But there 'more to it than that.
Cody Hodgson makes a fresh start

By JASON BOTCHFORD,

Cody Hodgson slices through the slot, calling for the puck. It lands on his stick and, in a wink, it's over Eddie Lack's shoulder and in the net. Pretty slick play in a pretty sloppy game of shinny with the Canucks at UBC Tuesday.

Twenty minutes later, Hodgson is still on the ice. It's 90 minutes since he got there. He's alone now, and doing laps.

Flush in sweat, he finally steps off.

"I always feel better when I do that," he says.

In his second sentence he says he's approaching this season with a "fresh start" perspective. He needs one. And it couldn't come at a better time.

Hodgson, you'd think, is about to get the opportunity he's long needed. A report Monday suggests Ryan Kesler could be out until mid-November. That's a long time for the Canucks to be without their linchpin centre. It could be jarring for some, who heard reports earlier in the summer which suggested Kesler hadn't ruled out the start of the season.

But once everyone bit the inevitable bullet and green lit Kesler for his hip labral surgery on July 25, playing at the beginning of the season was relegated to a pie-in-the-sky possibility.

Could Kesler have made it for opening night? Maybe, but why try? Why push it? There's no playoff game, which means there's no reason for him to rush. It's that reality which should unlock a meaningful door for Hodgson.

After his first healthy offseason in three years, and with the addition of five pounds of muscle, you believe Hodgson when he says he's stronger.

He went into the offseason determined. He is coming out refreshed. He can't say enough about Gary Roberts. His fitness program, which Hodgson follows closely, includes nutrition and yoga.

No indication yet if any of it will help Hodgson get faster on blades. But he does have tangible improvements he believes he's made because of his commitment to the program.

The routine work he still needs to do for his back is not nearly as intense as it was a few months ago. It's gone from something he had to worry about daily, to something he has to attend to every couple weeks. It represents a significant, and unexpected, progression.

"I feel lighter," Hodgson said, even with the added muscle. "I just feel better. It's tough to explain. It's a good feeling. I feel a lot stronger on the ice. I feel smoother and overall better.

"I've been able to cut down on a lot of the maintenance on (my back). Every once in a while, I have to make sure everything is firing right. But it is feeling strong.

"This is a new start and a new opportunity."

For now, Hodgson is brimming with confidence. The Canucks should run with it. Take full advantage of where he's at, feeling better than ever. Let him play to start the pre-season on a second line with good players. Let him play centre in the Kesler role. Let him be offensive and do it without worrying about making mistakes. Let him feel out his game, rediscover the dynamic player who was first muffled by chronic back problems, and then hindered by a broken toe and a busted up orbital bone.

Give Hodgson plenty of power play time and lots of minutes. The Canucks have to be looking for young players to help carry the load on what promises to feel like the longest regular season in team history. Few have a chance to make more of an impact than Hodgson. He's calling this a fresh start. The coaching staff would be wise to call it a clean slate.

The 10th overall pick from 2008 hasn't got many breaks in the past two years. This could be a significant one. Everyone should be careful not to waste it.
Gallagher: Canucks have learned from their mistakes

By TONY GALLAGHER,

“All the time last year we heard of our team that we didn’t know what it meant to win and how hard it was and maybe we still don’t, but I think you can say we got a pretty damn good look,” says Jannik Hansen.

It was a pitcher for the Pittsburgh Pirates by the name of Vernon Law who won a world series the same year he won the Cy Young award in 1960 who is credited with a quote which may well ring true to the Vancouver Canucks as they head into this NHL season.

“Experience is a hard teacher,” said the big Mormon righthander, “because she gives the test before she teaches the lesson.”

So it was with this hockey club last spring when they got all the way to the seventh game of the Stanley Cup final only to be found wanting for perhaps the first time all year on home ice when it counted most. That was the exam and the subsequent lesson has been given and what remains to be seen is what the Canucks have learned from their encounter with this cruel teacher.

General manager Mike Gillis has been asked this question and he comes with a reasoned answer about knowing that his approach was the right one given the great regular season to get them to the playoffs, the three earlier series wins over Chicago, Nashville and San Jose and the formula employed to get them through. You know, Kesler roars when the Sedins are shut down and vice-versa.

He insists they just need to ‘be patient and continue to battle toward that ultimate goal’.

The response to that ‘experience’ last year was a lot more varied among a smattering of veterans polled at the informal skate out at UBC prior to the start of training camp later this week but one or two were very positive indeed, beginning with Jannik Hansen who seemed to strike the most upbeat note.

“All the time last year we heard of our team that we didn’t know what it meant to win and how hard it was and maybe we still don’t, but I think you can say we got a pretty damn good look,” said the plucky winger who just keeps getting better.

“When you go that far and sacrifice as much as we did, I don’t think they can say that about us now. We know we can do it now and we know how much we have to sacrifice to get back there.”

Alex Burrows was not really quite as positive saying there’s ‘not much’ that can be learned from going through the anguish of that game seven experience but thinks the way to get back is for everyone once again to say ‘no’ to self and put the team first the way this group did last season.

“We just have to continue to put team first and the personal stuff aside and keep or redevelop the same feeling we had last season,” says Burrows. “We have a good group here, we’ve had great chemistry before and we know that’s what it’s going to take for us to keep this thing going. It’s not guaranteed you have that same chemistry every year, you have to know the things that make it up.”

The introspective Alex Edler has obviously given the topic a lot of mulling over in his mind over the summer, much of this done subconsciously one suspects. But he outlined the formula that’s going to have to be a big part of it.

“You learn a lot from that game seven experience I think and what you learn from it is concentrating on the first things and by that I mean right now we have to concentrate on having a good training camp, to come out of it playing good hockey and go into the season that way from the beginning and then start working towards making the playoffs. But it starts now, with the things in hand, the things you can control and do now.”

For a young guy who doesn’t say much, Edler seems to have learned a good deal because that exactly outlines the formula they used last year to give themselves the chance they did, albeit with a poor start and a very humdrum October which would be nice to change just for the sake of throwing a curve at their own fans. They took it one game at a time, the mantra coach Alain Vigneault used to repeat as his mantra at pre-game press conferences to get a laugh from the media tired of the same old quotes. And they did that by breaking it down even further to the smallest portion, even to use the one shift at a time cliché.

They can only give themselves a chance to get back for another shot by concentrating on what they can do right now. If they can pull that off, maybe one day they really will be able to call that game seven nightmare a learning experience.

Canucks goalie prospect Karel St. Laurent rock solid

By Jim Jamieson,

PENTICTON - Nearly a year ago Karel St. Laurent was wondering if his professional hockey dreams were over.

After an outstanding performance in the Canucks prospects' 4-3 overtime win over the Calgary Flames prospects, St. Laurent's aspirations appear to be very much alive.

The 6-foot-4, 190-pound goaltender, who's here on tryout contract, delivered a 44-save beauty, while centre Nathan Longpre - also on a tryout - had two goals and assisted on the OT winner just 16 seconds into the extra period.

St. Laurent, 20, who put in a solid 24:12 of relief, stopping 13 of 14 shots, in Sunday's 7-2 loss to the Edmonton Oilers prospects, found himself without a team to play for last October when he was cut by the St. John Sea Dogs of the Quebec Major Junior League.

"It was pretty hard," said St. Laurent, who's from the Montreal suburb of Ville Ste-Catherine "I'd been drafted by St. John so it was home for me and at first I was pretty down. But I talked with family and friends and there was a future for me."

The future was a move to the Surrey Eagles of the BC Hockey League. Yes, it was a step down from major junior, but the BCHL is a high-level league and St. Laurent would be the No. 1 goalie.

"It opened the door for me and I'm really thankful to them," said Laurent, who had a 19-12-1 record and goals-against average of 2.74 with Surrey.

"To go junior A and to work on my game, it was really important for me. It made me a better goalie and a better person. I just enjoyed the moment. It got me an invite here and I'm just thankful for everything that's happening.

The Canucks thought enough of him that they invited him to their July rookie camp. St. Laurent was over the moon when they called in August, offering him a spot in the prospects tournament.

"Just to be here now I'm really thankful to get an opportunity and I'm just trying to make the most of it," said St. Laurent. The immediate goal, of course is to get to main camp, but that's still a few steps away.

"I just want to show what I can do," he said.

Canucks defenceman Yann Sauve was a teammate of St. Laurent for two seasons in St. John and isn't surprised to see him doing well.

"When it he was in St. John he was back and forth," said Sauve, who had a strong game himself. "Playing time is an amazing thing. You can improve so much if you're playing a lot. Me and Karel were pretty good friends in St. John. He had an amazing game tonight. I'm happy for him. He's worked hard to get here."

Abbotsford's Kellan Tochkin and Antoine Roussel (OT winner) also scored for the Canucks, as the prospects put in a much more cohesive effort than in Sunday's 7-2 blowout.

Winger Bill Sweatt left the game late in the third period, but coach Craig MacTavish wouldn't elaborate on his condition, offering: "He had a little bruise there and we'll assess him tomorrow."

The prospects get a day off tomorrow and play San Jose on Wednesday.

Garrett Mitchell adjusting to life as a pro hockey player

By Katie Carrera

Unlike his previous trips to Washington for rookie camp, Garrett Mitchell won't be returning home to Regina, Saskatchewan, this fall. In the midst of his third rookie camp, Mitchell is set to turn pro and hopes to earn a spot in Hershey, where some of his most significant adjustments may come off the ice.

"I think the biggest thing is I've never lived away from home," said Mitchell, who grew up and played his junior hockey in Regina. "I went to Hershey two years ago, I didn't know how to do laundry – how much soap to put in. But just small things. I'm a pretty good cook, so I can cook. I'm not too worried about it; I think it's just something I can go and play it by ear."

Mitchell has since learned how to do laundry, and over the course of three consecutive rookie camps, the 20-year-old forward has become comfortable with the systems and style of play that the Capitals and Bears use.

Even though he's familiar with these camps and the NHL and AHL coaching staffs, Mitchell remains inquisitive and eager to pick up the nuances of how he will be expected to play as a pro.

"He asks questions, but it's not like the student who asks questions because he wants the teacher to think he's interested," said Boudreau, who acknowledged that Mitchell has the same type of infectious, energetic personality as forward Matt Hendricks. "He asks questions to learn, and he gets it and takes the answers and applies it to the next drill. It's not hard to like a person like that."

Mitchell is also known for his willingness to drop the gloves in defense of a teammate, regardless of how daunting the foe might be. On Thursday, when the rookies have the chance to play against an unfriendly opponent in the form of the Flyers’ prospects, it's possible he could display that side of his game as well.

Mitchell's feistiness and ability to fight is also something Boudreau respects.

"I know how tough it is, because I didn’t do it. Scared to death to fight when I played, for 17 years," Boudreau said. "Those guys that do it, you have more respect for. When you're a smaller guy and you do it against bigger guys with no fear, it's an awful tough job. The people that haven’t played have no idea how tough that is."

In adjustment to North American hockey, Dmitry Orlov’s biggest off-ice hurdle is learning English

By Katie Carrera

When prospect Dmitry Kugryshev returned to Russia to play in the KHL, concerns arose about how the absence of a fellow countryman and defacto translator would impact Dmitry Orlov, who is gradually learning English.

But as rookie camp progresses at KCI this week, Hershey Bears coach Mark French isn’t worried about Orlov, the 20-year-old defenseman who draws comparisons to John Carlson and impressed the Capitals’ brass so thoroughly with his North American debut in the AHL last year.

“I think it’s probably better cold turkey for him, so he’s forced to fully immerse himself in the English language might be better for him, instead of using a counterpart who speaks Russian as a bit of a crutch,” French said.

“It’s an uncomfortable feeling for a coach when you don’t know if the message is truly getting to the player,” French said. “I think this year, with Washington making the commitment to get him some English lessons in the summer and into the fall, I think that’ll be a big part of his development with the full grasp of the English language.”

Both French and Capitals Coach Bruce Boudreau pinpointed language as arguably the most difficult hurdle for Orlov to overcome at this point, but that doesn’t alter how much he stands out on the ice among other young prospects.

Already a sizable presence for his age at 6 feet, 197 pounds, Orlov arrived in Washington, along with fellow prospect Stanislav Galiev, to train with strength and conditioning coach Mark Nemish. It was a decision that speaks to his drive to reach the NHL, coaches say, and willingness to seek out instruction.

“What’s good about [him] is the attitude of just wanting to improve, wanting to get there quicker and not being satisfied with what I can do at home,” Nemish said. “When you have the comforts of home, and kind of getting out of that comfort zone and kind of taking the initiative of, ‘I’m going to come here early, I’m going to work my butt off, I’m going to make some sacrifices and do whatever I can to get in that position.’ It’s not just with the training, but it’s learning English and all of those things to get him on the fast track of being a more well-rounded, developed professional.”

While there may not be a spot for Orlov on the NHL roster when the season starts, it would hardly be surprising to see him in Washington at some point if the Capitals are in need of a call-up.

Orlov turned heads upon joining Hershey last season after the conclusion of his KHL season and racked up nine points in 19 regular season AHL games. French said that once Orlov arrived “he clearly was our most skilled defenseman in Hershey” and that he possesses the same type of confident swagger on the ice that John Carlson does. But while Orlov’s skill is unquestioned, the next step involves working to create a more well rounded game.

“I think he’s got to refine some of his game to become a better defensive defenseman,” French said. “That will never be his calling card, but I think to play at the next level, he’s got to get more comfortable with defending in a number of areas.”

Ted Leonsis talks Capitals, defends Alexander Semin

By Katie Carrera

Ted Leonsis was on Elliot in the Morning Monday and discussed the upcoming season, the playoffs and numerous other issues.

When asked about the criticisms former Capitals Matt Bradley and David Steckel raised about the team, though, Leonsis stressed the need to move forward — and defended winger Alexander Semin once more.

Leonsis on Bradley and Steckel’s comments:

“I think it’s best we all look forward. I don’t think it’s appropriate ever to talk about a player on another team. I just wanna talk about our players, and I think that we have a really really good team.”

“You know, those guys talked about Alex Semin, and I’m an Alex Semin supporter. He’s on our second line, we expect 30 to 40 goals from him, and my big hope is that he stays healthy. If Alex Semin stays healthy and is focused, I think he is one of the 10 best players in the NHL. He certainly has that skill level, and I like him. I’ve gotten along with him, so I’m supporting our players, and I’m hoping that he comes out with a chip on his shoulder and is very motivated to have a great year.”

On the changes for this upcoming year:

“We injected a lot of change this year because we weren’t satisfied with the results we had in the playoffs. We understand, we get the joke. Over the last four years, we might have the best record in the NHL over the regular season. We won the East the last two years, we’ve had a really good team, but we can’t seem to get past that last round of the playoffs. And that’s obviously what the focus is.”
By Stephen Whyno

When Washington Capitals prospect Dmitry Kugryshev departed for Russia’s Kontinental Hockey League, it didn’t create too many shock waves around the organization.

Kugryshev’s time to blossom into an NHL-caliber player had most likely passed, and the team released him and relinquished his rights.

But Kugryshev served a specific purpose: translating for young Caps defensive prospect Dmitry Orlov, whose English was just about nonexistent when he came over to North America to play for the Hershey Bears (AHL) last winter. And while hockey comes quickly to Orlov, the language hasn’t - though it might speed up quickly with Kugryshev gone.

“I think the timing is good for him to kind of go cold turkey on it and to be fully immersed in the English language rather than having the crutch of another Russian player,” Bears coach Mark French said.

It’s the next step in Orlov’s development as he’s set to spend his first full season on this continent. Coaches and teammates have lauded the 20-year-old for being eager to leave home, and he certainly didn’t disappoint.

“I think he kind of came to us with a lot of expectations, and I think when he first came in, he probably exceeded them,” French said. “Instantly he fit into our top four and we played him a ton down the stretch.”

It didn’t go perfectly, though, despite Orlov’s offensive upside and the fact that he looks a bit like a young, unpolished John Carlson.

That’s because even during games, French noted that often he and his staff would have conversations with Kugryshev before that information was passed along to Orlov.

“I think as time went on, the biggest thing we found was the ability to communicate with him. Our job is to develop in Hershey, and without the ability to truly communicate with him, we felt that hindered it at times,” French said. “It’s an uncomfortable feeling for a coach when you don’t know if the message is truly getting to the player.”

Because of all that, the Capitals have made a commitment to helping Orlov get English lessons over the summer, French said. And the defenseman has committed himself to his on-ice game by arriving in the D.C. area early and working with older players and strength and conditioning coach Mark Nemish.

“What’s good about [him] is the attitude of just wanting to improve, wanting to get there quicker and not being satisfied with what I can do at home when you have the comforts of home … [and thinking] I’m going to work my butt off, I’m going to make some sacrifices and do whatever I can to get in that position. ’” Nemish said.

Orlov would need to blow the Caps away during main camp to make the NHL roster, meaning he’s likely to at least start the year in Hershey. There remains the possibility that he shuttles between the Caps and Bears, like Karl Alzner did a couple of years ago, but it’s easier to compare Orlov to Carlson, with a bit more of a desire to play physical.

“Dmitry might be more confrontational physically than what John is,” French said. “He enjoys that part of the game. John is a guy who will sit back a little - he doesn’t shy away.”

Orlov takes some risks with the physical game and jumping up into the play. Capitals coach Bruce Boudreau mentioned that Orlov looks eager to make passes from board to board, and decision-making is among the things he needs to improve on to make the next step.

“He does things that guys don’t do. I think those things will define him,” French said. “I think he’s got to refine some of his game to become a better defensive defenseman - that will never be his calling card, but I think to play at the next level, he’s got to get more comfortable with defending in a number of areas.”

Boudreau cautions that Orlov is still a young prospect, so there’s no sense rushing him right now.
Orlov likely a victim of numbers this year

By: Brian McNally

Dmitry Orlov, who helped Russia win the world juniors title earlier this year, has seven or eight defensemen ahead of him with the Capitals.

Russian defenseman still showing promise

The initial reports on Capitals prospect Dmitry Orlov were glowing when he took the ice with American Hockey League affiliate Hershey in February. But it takes more than a strong first impression to crack one of the NHL’s top lineups.

Orlov, a 20-year-old Russian defenseman, is taking part in Washington’s rookie camp this week and almost certainly will earn an invite to the main training camp, which begins Saturday. From there, his work becomes tougher. The Caps have seven NHL-caliber defensemen under contract and an eighth blueliner, veteran Tom Poti, fighting to return from a career-threatening groin injury. There just isn’t enough room for Orlov yet.

So barring a dominant camp, he will head back to Hershey to continue his development. Orlov is an offensive defenseman, according to Hershey coach Mark French. That likely will always be his strength. But few defensemen in the NHL survive as one-dimensional players.

The Orlov file

» Dmitry Orlov helped Russia win a gold medal at the 2011 world juniors tournament in Buffalo. Russia hadn’t won the event since 2003.

» Orlov played alongside veteran NHL defenseman Sheldon Souray during the final weeks of the American Hockey League season. Souray, buried in the minors thanks to a contract dispute with Edmonton, is back in the NHL with Dallas.

"I think to play at the next level [Orlov] has to get more comfortable defending in a number of areas," French said.

That development process will get easier as Orlov continues to improve his English. He lost his translator -- and teammate -- when fellow Russian Dmitri Kugryshev decided to leave North America for a Kontinental Hockey League club in Russia. It’s not necessarily a bad thing for Orlov, who will be forced to fend for himself in the communications department this season.

Washington was concerned enough that it provided Orlov with English classes this summer. Those will continue into the fall, but it’s still a difficult task for a player who eight months ago couldn’t speak the language at all.

French likes the swagger Orlov possesses, a trait similar to Caps defenseman John Carlson, who also was a revelation in the AHL at age 19 and is now an established NHL player at 21. Orlov provides an even stronger physical presence. He certainly didn’t back down from that side of the game after joining the Bears. But he will have to learn when to deliver a big hit and when doing so simply pulls himself out of position and allows a scoring chance. That’s one of several adjustments needed before the front office is willing to deem Orlov NHL ready.

"You think about a Russian kid coming over to play in North America for the first time, and you thought there’d be a bit of a grace period where he’d take his time getting into it," French said. "But he was an impact player right off. I think that caught a lot of people by surprise."

Jets to honour Rypien with helmet decal

By: Tim Campbell

WINNIPEG — The Winnipeg Jets will honour Rick Rypien throughout the 2011-12 season by wearing a special decal on their helmets.

The double "R" initials in blue, the Jets main colour, inside a black circle first appeared on the team’s gear this week while players are skating informally at the MTS Iceplex.

Rypien, 27, was found dead in his home in Coleman, Alta., on Aug. 14, just a little more than a month away from the Jets training camp.

He had played parts of five different AHL seasons for the Manitoba Moose since 2005, when he burst onto the scene here as the fiesty, underweight underdog who wasn’t afraid of anything.

Rypien played for the Moose again late last season and into the Calder Cup playoffs after returning from his second leave of absence — he was now known to have been battling depression — with the NHL’s Vancouver Canucks.

The undrafted forward signed a one-year contract worth $700,000 early this summer once the NHL free-agent season opened.
Jets invite Aebischer, three others, to camp

By: Staff Writer

The Winnipeg Jets have invited goaltender David Aebischer, left winger Troy Bodie, forward David Koci, and left winger Janne Pesonen to their upcoming training camp on professional tryout contracts.

Aebischer, 33, spent last season playing for HC Lugano of the Swiss Nationalliga A where he appeared in 36 games (12-24, 3.10 GAA, .855 sv%). The Swiss goaltender has played in 214 NHL games between Phoenix, Montreal, and Colorado - winning the Stanley Cup with the Avalanche in 2001. He was originally drafted by Colorado in the sixth round, 161st overall, in the 1997 NHL Entry Draft.

Bodie, 26, appeared in 50 games with the Carolina Hurricanes last season where he accumulated three points (1g, 3a) along with 54 penalty minutes. He also played in nine games with the Anaheim Ducks where he earned an assist and seven penalty minutes. The Portage la Prairie, MB native has played in 107 career NHL games between Anaheim and Carolina for a career total 11 points (6g, 5a) and 141 penalty minutes. He was originally drafted by Edmonton in the ninth round, 278th overall, in the 2003 NHL Entry Draft.

Koci, 30, spent the season in Colorado last year, playing 35 games for the Avalanche earning one goal and 80 penalty minutes. The native of Prague, Czech Republic has played in a career total 142 NHL games between Colorado, St. Louis, Tampa Bay and Chicago where he has scored four points (3g, 1a) and 461 penalty minutes. Koci was originally drafted by Pittsburgh in the fifth round, 146th overall, in the 2000 NHL Entry Draft.

Pesonen, 29, played the 2010-11 season with Kazan Ak-Bars of the KHL where he appeared in 46 games for 27 points (14g, 13a) and 28 penalty minutes. He has played in seven career NHL games with the Pittsburgh Penguins. The Suomussalmi, Finland winger was originally drafted by Anaheim in the ninth round, 269th overall, in the 2004 NHL Entry Draft.

Jets rookies lauded, asked for encore

By: Ed Tait

PENTICTON – It's a simple message, but it's one coach Keith McCambridge delivered to the Winnipeg Jets rookies Monday night and hammered home again Tuesday morning at the South Okanagan Events Centre:

The 4-0 victory over the San Jose Sharks in the Young Stars tournament debut for the Jets was a dandy performance. Now do it all over again Tuesday night against the Edmonton Oilers.

"We want to see the same energy level," said McCambridge, the St. John's IceCaps head coach who is working the Jets' bench and running practises here.

"I really thought we came out and, to simplify things, we really out-worked San Jose in that first period. It got a way a bit in the second period, but we're looking for consistency and see if the guys can put together back to back games like that.

"It's another chance as a tool to evaluate."

Chris Carrozzi, the 21-year-old Ottawa product who spent most of last year with Gwinnett of the ECHL, will get the start against the Oilers. He’ll be attempting to follow-up the solid work of Edward Pasquale, who shut out the Sharks with a sparkling effort Monday.

As well, Jets' brass will be looking for more of the same from first-round draft pick Mark Scheifele -- who was superb in Monday’s win with a goal and an assist -- and linemates Jason Gregoire and Carl Klingberg.

McCambridge also singled out defenceman Zach Redmond, the former Ferris State star who is wearing the captain's 'C' and right winger Austen Brassard, the club's fifth-round draft pick this spring.

"I thought Brassard had a strong game from not seeing too much in the previous practices," he said. "And Eddie Pasquale... I watched him play in Chicago (with the Wolves), watched some tape this summer and he was someone who needed to have a strong game to make a statement and he did.

"And the Scheifele line... the offensive chances they were getting you can see why they're at the level they are. Overall, a lot of strong first games."

The game against Edmonton will also give the Jets a first-hand look at Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, the highly-touted Oiler draft pick selected first overall in the 2011 draft.

"I've heard a lot about him," said Redmond. "He's a little bit younger than I am so I haven't followed him a ton. But I heard he's a great player and I'm definitely going to have to watch him when he's on the ice."

Byfuglien passed breathalyzer, in town for camp

By: Gary Lawless

A police report, expected to be released in the next 48 hours will state Winnipeg Jets defenceman Dustin Byfuglien passed a breathalyzer test administered by Hennepin County Sheriff's department police officers.

Byfuglien submitted to a breathalyzer test but refused to provide a urine sample when asked, according his lawyer Mitch Robinson.

Byfuglien was arrested on suspicion of boating while impaired and refusing a test.

"The sheriff's patrol officer, based on observations of Dustin, asked Dustin to take a preliminary breath test. The results of the preliminary breath test are not admissible in court and can only be used to substantiate further investigation. Dustin was cooperative and provided a sample of his breath and it came back at .03. That's about a beer and a half in his system," said Robinson. "The legal limit in Minnesota is .08. So he's well under the legal limit."

Robinson said Byfuglien was then placed under arrest and taken downtown.

"For whatever reason the officer felt he needed further chemical tests from Dustin. So he took Dustin into custody, placed him under arrest and transported him to the sheriff's department and then asked him to take a urine test," said Robinson. "In Minnesota, it's a crime to refuse to take a test when lawfully requested by a police officer to do so. Dustin had received bad advice and the advice he had previously received was to never take a test. That's bad advice. He refused to take the test. If he would have taken a blood or urine test he could have definitely proved he was not under the influence of alcohol or a controlled substance. Once he refuses, that's it, the officer fills out the paper work. You've refused and that's in itself a crime. They don't have to prove Dustin was intoxicated, they don't have to prove he even had anything to drink. All they have to show is he was lawfully requested to take a test and he refused. So that's what we're dealing with now."

Byfuglien was originally stopped for operating his boat without navigational lights according to Robinson.

"It was around 8:15 which is when the sun sets around here at that time of year," said Robinson. "Was he technically operating his boat without lights after dark? I don't know that yet."

Minneapolis criminal defence attorney Jeffrey Schiek told the Free Press on Tuesday there is limited grey area in refusal cases.

"If he refuses to give blood or urine, that's the refusal part of the charge and it's very difficult to defend a refusal because you have to establish extreme circumstances for a person to refuse. I'll offer an extreme case but if somebody had an heart attack or something that would qualify as a reason to refuse," said Schiek, a partner at Bloomington based Villaume and Schiek

Steve Tallen, a Lake Minnetonka Conservation district attorney, gave his legal blessing Monday for the case to proceed. A spokesman in his office told the Free Press the file has now been put back in the hands of the Hennepin County sheriff's office to formally lay the charge. That will likely be completed within the next month.

Byfuglien, 26, was first arrested Aug. 31 for "probable cause" and spent three hours in custody before he was released. Tallen received the file after the Labour Day long weekend and has been reviewing the evidence compiled by police to determine if there were sufficient grounds to bring the case to court. He had the option of dismissing the case or recommending it go forward, which he has now done.

"I've seen some of the different reports, but we really haven't heard anything," said Jets' GM Kevin Cheveldayoff at the Young Stars tournament in Penticton. "It's a legal matter and those things take care of themselves."

The Jets are expecting Byfuglien to be at the opening of main training camp on Saturday at MTS Centre. In fact, Byfuglien was in Winnipeg on Monday looking for a place to live.
Money and money alone is at the heart of any friction between Zach Bogosian and the Winnipeg Jets.

Bogosian said all the right things on Monday, which is well and fine, but only goes to underscore that cash is what his agent Bob Murray and Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff are going round and round over.

So no, location is not the sticking point. The length of a deal may also be at issue but when it all comes down to it, money is the only thing grinding the gears between Bogosian and the Jets.

The 21-year-old, who arrived in Winnipeg on Sunday and skated at MTS Iceplex on Monday, wants to be paid at a certain level and the Jets want to pay him less. Depending on who one talks to, the two parties are either getting close or remain far apart.

"We continue to work towards an agreement and I'm confident something will be in place soon," was the latest lukewarm offering on the subject from Cheveldayoff.

With training camp opening on Saturday and Bogosian now on the ice with his teammates there will be increased focus and pressure on these negotiations. Opening camp without the player in-house would be difficult for both sides to swallow. Bogosian is here and ready to go and skating in Jets colours sans contract. He's doing his part to inch things along.

"It's ongoing just like Chevy says. I'm here for a reason and that's because I want to be here and I want to play here," said Bogosian, minutes after an informal workout with his teammates.

It's one thing to skate with his teammates prior to training camp but if a deal isn't reached by Saturday it's unlikely Bogosian will take part in any workouts. "I'm not even thinking about that. I think there's a will to get something done and I hope it does," said Bogosian, who has spent three years in the NHL and is one of three young defenders without deals right now, the other two being Luke Schenn of the Leafs and the L.A. Kings' all-star Drew Doughty.

"It's good to be here but Saturday is coming quick. It's something you think about... but I'm optimistic something will get done by then."

Bogosian admitted last season was not what he had hoped for in terms of personal and team play as he scored five goals and 12 assists while posting a minus-27 mark over 71 games.

"I'd be the first one to admit I didn't have the greatest season," he said. "I'm young and I'm always up to learning new things."

Bogosian was taken third overall in the 2008 NHL Entry Draft but in 199 games has only 24 goals and 35 assists with a career minus-34 mark. It's difficult at this point to pin down what he is as a player and what he'll become. Not an easy position for the player or management.

For Bogosian, arriving in Winnipeg has given him a look at what is in store if and when he can officially sign.

"Landing here in Winnipeg you can feel the energy and you see all the guys walking around the airport in Jets gear and it gets you excited," said Bogosian. "I wouldn't come here if I didn't want to be here. I'm not obligated to be here until training camp begins."

No doubt being the first player to engage in a protracted negotiation with Jets management presents its own challenges.

Cheveldayoff wants to be seen as fair but also tough. The Bogosian contract sets a precedent for agents to work off in the future, which puts extra emphasis on the deal.

But not having a young defender with lots of upside signed by the start of camp is a negative the organization would like to avoid.

Money, some say, fixes everything.
Yuen showcases an awesome skill set

By: Ed Tait

PENTICTON, B.C. -- He is big. He is strong. And like the rest of his fresh-faced teammates he more than occasionally showcases a skill set that has made him a legitimate National Hockey League prospect.

Now, if the stereotype for such a player is built around this template -- singularly-focused, hockey-obsessed Canadian teenager -- then the Winnipeg Jets’ prospect wearing No. 60 here is an absolutely perfect fit.

But then there are these tidbits that we can guarantee are unique to Zach Yuen’s resume and make him one of the most intriguing prospects participating in the five-team Vancouver Canucks Young Stars tournament:

-- He is a classically trained pianist with a diploma from the London College of Music.

-- He took figure skating lessons from former Olympic silver medallist and world champion Karen Magnussen.

Oh, and there’s this: as a player of Chinese descent -- his father moved to Canada from Hong Kong when he was 13 -- if Yuen makes it to the bigs one day he could help open up the NHL to a billion fans in an untapped market.

“There’s actually a lot of people from China, from Hong Kong and locally in Vancouver who are following him now,” said his father, Charles, looking remarkably fresh after driving six hours from Vancouver to watch his son at the South Okanagan Events Centre.

“I’ve seen a lot of Facebook pages, articles, blogs about him... it’s good. Hopefully this encourages more Chinese to play hockey as well. It’s very exciting.”

A swift-skating, 5-11, 196-pound defenceman, Yuen is likely headed back to the Tri-City Americans where head coach Jim Hiller hopes to increase his workload and lean on the 18-year-old for leadership.

Yes, Yuen’s career arrow is definitely aiming skyward.

"I'm like every kid who dreams of playing in the NHL," Yuen said Monday. "This is another step towards that goal.

"I'd love it if one day I could be a role model for Chinese Canadians. Most of them come over and they don't speak too much English. It's hard for them to immerse themselves in a game they don't understand. But there is a growing interest in the Chinese community, especially in places like Vancouver and Winnipeg where there are big communities.

"Hopefully there will be a couple guys who are of Asian descent playing at the highest level and that will inspire other Chinese Canadians to participate in hockey. There was nobody like that for me growing up, hopefully I can grow into that role model."

His father is a part-time sportscaster for a Cantonese/Mandarin channel in Vancouver who has done some research on Chinese players in the game. According to NHL records, Larry Kwong -- who was born in Vernon, B.C. -- was the first Chinese Canadian to play in the NHL, suiting up for one game with the New York Rangers in 1947-48.

After immigrating, Charles first picked up the game playing ball hockey in the back alleys with his new friends, before moving on to roller hockey and, finally, to the game on ice. He had his son on the ice at 22 months and Zach began taking figure skating while playing hockey at the age of eight.

In between all that, he found the time to learn the piano. And not just banging out Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, but excelling to the point that three judges flew to Vancouver from London when he was 13 to watch him play and grant him a diploma.

"He told me when he was eight years old he thought the piano helped him with his hockey," said his father. "He understands rhythm and timing."

"And when you have to sit there for a couple of hours," adds Zach, "it sure helps with your discipline."
ONDREJ Pavelec had only been in town a few hours when he made his intentions very clear for this season with the Winnipeg Jets.

"Absolutely, we can make the playoffs. We're a young team but we're a year older and we have more experience," said Pavelec, who went 21-23-9 in goal for the Atlanta Thrashers last season.

"We lost eight in a row at one stretch and any team that does that won't make the playoffs. But if we don't lose those games we make the playoffs and that has to be our focus this season."

Pavelec and defenceman Zach Bogosian were the latest Jets to report to Winnipeg with defenceman Dustin Byfuglien the lone big name not in town at this point.

The rookies and prospects are in Penticton this week for a Young Stars tournament and main camp opens in Winnipeg on Saturday.

Pavelec says he's ready for lots of action.

"I want to play every game. Every player does," said the 24-year-old Czech. "But it's a team game and I want what is best for the team."

Watching his team move from Atlanta to Winnipeg from afar kept Pavelec glued to the Internet this summer.

"Absolutely. This is your team and your job. I have one year left on my contract so of course you want to know where you're going to play," said Pavelec. "Right after the season we had some direction that this might happen so we just waited and it did happen. Now we're here and going to enjoy being with a new team."

The change in address is a positive for Pavelec.

"It's Canada. I played two years of junior in Canada and I told people it would be crazy here but I didn't realize it would be this crazy," he said.

For many of the Jets this is their first experience in Winnipeg but Pavelec knows the city from his time in the AHL.

"I played here a couple of times with the Chicago Wolves. It's freezing here and bad weather, but we're here for hockey," he said. "Atlanta was a nice city but the hockey market wasn't that good. It's awesome here and it's great to be here. The city will love the hockey and the building will be sold out every night. That's huge."
PENTICTON, B.C. -- Bits and pieces, notes and quotes from Day 3 of Winnipeg Jets' rookie camp and the first session here in the Okanagan Valley:

Goaltender Edward Pasquale, drafted by Atlanta in the fourth round in 2009, started Monday night's late game (see: winnipegfreepress.com for results) and was to alternate with Chris Carrozzi in the three games here.

Pasquale started 24 games for the AHL's Chicago Wolves last year, posting an 11-11-1 record with a 2.93 goals against average and .900 save percentage. He was also 7-4 in 12 games with Gwinnett in the ECHL.

"Any time you're playing and you've got the GM and all the scouts watching it's a lot of pressure," Pasquale said. "But that's part of the position if I want to move up and get where I want to be.I've got to start playing well in tournaments like this and in practices."

The rookie Jets' top line featured first-round draft pick Mark Scheifele centering Carl Klingberg and Winnipegger Jason Gregoire.

"They are good players, they work hard, battle hard and are very skilled," said Scheifele. "I think we're going to play a very good game. We've had some chemistry over the last few days so I think it'll be a good game."

"We are all smart hockey players so we are able to read each other on the ice and off the ice so that helps. Just talking to each other at all times to find that chemistry. Those guys can score. I'm just hoping to put it on their stick and hopefully they can pop it in."

The Jets' rookie lineup is the youngest at the Young Stars tournament. Managing that inexperience and the pressure of representing the Jets for the first time is the task of Keith McCambridge, the St. John's IceCaps head coach who is running practices here while the big bosses, including Claude Noel, watch and evaluate.

"We have a young group," said McCambridge. "Looking at the other rosters from the other teams who are here, they have some AHL experience. The amount we have is one with nine games and the rest are guys coming out of college and junior. They are going to be excited, as other teams are, but we just want to make sure they go out and play to their strengths."

Once again, Scheifele was asked by journalists -- particularly those in the broadcast biz -- how to pronounce his last name.

"It's Shy-Flue," he said. "It's OK, lots of people get it wrong. Even my junior team (the Barrie Colts) got it wrong for the first half of last season. I didn't say anything until Christmas and then they corrected it."

Jets' Byfuglien will face charges

By QMI Agency

A Minnesota district attorney is giving the go-ahead for drunk boating charges against Winnipeg Jets defenceman Dustin Byfuglien.

Byfuglien was arrested Aug. 31 on suspicion of boating while intoxicated on a lake in a Minneapolis suburb.

"A complaint has been approved but it's not been filed yet to our knowledge," said Steve Tallen, a Lake Minnetonka Conservation District attorney.

The 26-year-old Roseau, Minn., native, spent about three hours in jail in Minneapolis following his arrest by a Hennepin County Sheriff's Office deputy on Lake Minnetonka, in Excelsior, Minn.

He was released from custody early the following day after being booked for "probable cause" on intoxicated boating, and for allegedly refusing a blood or urine test.

The sheriff's office gave no information on possible sentences if Byfuglien is charged and convicted, but if he ends up with a criminal record, he could run into legal roadblocks with the Jets and entering Canada.

Winnipeg Sun LOADED: 09.14.2011
Scheifele shows dazzling potential

By KEN WIEBE, QMI Agency

Plenty of folks simply couldn’t wait to get their first glimpse of Mark Scheifele in game action, even if it came in a game against fellow prospects in the 2011 Young Stars tournament.

Well, Monday night brought that opportunity and Scheifele didn’t disappoint.

The seventh overall selection in the 2011 NHL Entry Draft was quite simply the most noticeable player on the ice — and almost always for the right reasons as the Winnipeg Jets defeated the San Jose Sharks 4-0 at the South Okanagan Events Centre.

“There’s definitely a lot of pride,” said Scheifele, who had a goal and an assist. “It wasn’t the actual jerseys, but to be the first to wear the logo in the game was an honour. All the guys took it to heart and wanted to get the win in that first game.”

Among other things, Scheifele provided the highlight of the night — and some might argue, the signature moment in the Jets unofficial return — at 15:24 of the first period.

On a shorthanded breakaway, Scheifele demonstrated another one of the qualities that helped convince the Jets brass that he was the best player available at No. 7 in St. Paul, Minn. — even when a guy like Sean Couturier was still out there as well.

Scheifele showed plenty of poise as he walked in alone, and waited until he froze San Jose Sharks goalie Thomas Heemskerk.

That’s when his lightning-quick and equally soft hands took over as Scheifele moved effortlessly to his backhand and lifted his shot over the sprawling Heemskerk.

It was the type of moment that brings out the ooh’s and ah’s, whether you were at the game live or watching it on the internet. A moment that gives you a glimpse of the dazzling potential Scheifele carries with him each and every time he steps on the ice.

Scheifele, who centred the top unit with Carl Klingberg and Jason Gregoire, wasn’t done there.

In the opening shift of the third period, Scheifele showed ridiculous patience, carrying the puck into the offensive zone before freezing a Sharks’ defenceman before slipping the puck through his legs and onto the tape of Gregoire — who buried the pass at 22 seconds of the frame to make it 3-0.

The only small criticism is that Scheifele occasionally stays on the ice too long, which is a by-product of playing in a lot in junior.

He can get away with it here, but now is the time to create good habits that will carry over into main camp.

We understand it’s nit-picking and we’re not here to rain on Scheifele’s parade at all but shortening his shifts is a must when the games against NHL competition begin.

However, what stood out most on this night is that Scheifele’s enthusiasm for the game is infectious and his skill-set becomes clearer with each viewing.

The scary thing is that the youngster only has one season of major junior hockey under his belt.

Scheifele seems to be getting better every day and he’ll need to, in order to realize his goal of making the NHL this season.

Whether or not Scheifele is able to beat the long odds against an 18-year-old stepping right into the lineup and making the Jets isn’t important right now.

What’s becoming crystal clear is that Scheifele is a bona fide talent and has a bright future ahead of him.

The present might turn out to be pretty darn good as well.

“His puck-handling, his creativity, I really thought he stood out with his 1-on-1 play,” said Keith McCambridge, who ran the bench for the Jets. “He has a lot of poise, a lot of polish.”

JETS REPLAY

Winnipeg Jets 4, San Jose Sharks 0

The three stars

1. Jets F Mark Scheifele — A highlight-reel goal and an equally impressive assist as the seventh overall pick of the 2011 NHL Entry Draft lived up to the hype in his debut.

2. Jets G Edward Pasquale — A rock-solid performance for the Toronto product, as he turned aside 27 shots.

3. Jets F Klarc Wilson — The gritty winger was involved all night, throwing big hits, creating some havoc in the offensive zone on the forecheck and even dropped the gloves in a first-period scrap.

The skinny

Levko Koper scored a pair. Scheifele had a goal and an assist and Winnipegger Jason Gregoire provided the offensive punch in what was a solid showing from the Jets in their first game of the tournament. Plenty of passion and pretty good attention to detail, considering the condensed time to prepare for game action.

The schedule

The Jets face the Edmonton Oilers on Tuesday night at 9:30 p.m. in their second of three games in the tournament. The Oilers, whose roster includes 2011 first overall pick Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, smoked the Vancouver Canucks 7-2 in their tournament opener on Sunday.

Winnipeg Sun LOADED: 09.14.2011
Addition of Winnipeg all good for NHL

By CHRIS STEVENSON, QMI Agency

If we needed any other evidence the Winnipeg Jets had arrived and impacted the economy of Manitoba, it came when the Mounties and the Canadian Border Services agency seized a shipment of bogus Jets sweaters.

They were intercepted at the border a couple of weeks ago.

When criminals are trying to jump on the bandwagon, you know something special is happening.

Winnipeg got the Atlanta Thrashers. A crook would have his street cred ripped in Atlanta for even thinking about trying to counterfeit a Thrashers jersey. He'd have better luck moving Michael Vick gear.

Or a bus from the 1996 Olympic Games.

So, a previously irrelevant NHL franchise has become relevant and, of course, it had to come to Canada for that to happen.

Canada has another NHL team, which should satisfy all those passionate Jets fans who saw their franchise ripped from them and shuttled off to Phoenix where it has become hockey's longest-running reality show, edging out "Islanders Got No Talent."

The Coyotes have become like Liz Lemon on 30 Rock.

She keeps looking for a boyfriend and winds up finding out they all ultimately have some kind of fatal flaw. It's kind of what happens a couple of times a year when an owner is rumoured to be courting the City of Glendale and the Coyotes.

It is starting to sound like the NHL and Glendale have found a way to wrap up the situation Entourage-style with a group headed up by former San Jose Sharks executive Greg Jamison. (That's enough of the television analogies.)

Meanwhile, Jets 2.0 sold out season tickets at the MTS Centre in 17 minutes, or about as long as it took to write down the names of all the fans in attendance at all the Thrashers home games.

The Jets are back and in addition to the good folks of Winnipeg, people across Canada feel good that an NHL franchise has been repatriated to hockey's heartland. (Billionaire Jim Balsillie will have to spend a little bit of money -- not that he can't afford it -- to change his website to makeitnine.ca.)

After a spring and summer in which the news was overwhelmingly sad, the return of the Jets to the NHL after a 15-year absence is good, if for no other reason than the game is going to be played in a place where it's loved.

There's been a lot of talk about the viability of the Jets as a business in a market like Winnipeg.

Just what the Jets do for the financial picture of the NHL isn't quite clear yet. Despite selling out their season tickets in a gate-driven league, the Jets are a bubble team when it comes to the league's revenue-sharing program.

"They definitely won't be a giver, but it remains to be seen if they will be a taker," according to one NHL insider.

As the Thrashers in Atlanta, the franchise did receive some of the league's revenue-sharing pie.

From another key business standpoint, one television executive said he didn't think the Jets will add appreciably to the ratings in Canada.

"Most of the hockey fans in Manitoba were probably already watching TSN or Hockey Night in Canada, even without having a home-town team to root for," he said. "I think we'll see a very small uptick in the overall audience for a Saturday night game on the CBC, for instance. The ratings for their regional package should be OK because the building is sold out and there will be a lot of interest in the early stages, but we're not talking about a big marketplace here."

But, even if it's a small uptick, that is a positive.

How will the Jets help their NHL partners as a road draw? Can they be worse than the Thrashers?

The Thrashers filled buildings to an average of 90.3% capacity, which was the fourth-lowest in the league (Nashville was the worst road draw at 87.6%). The Jets would certainly draw better in Canada than the Thrashers, if there were any seats to be had in Canada -- outside of Ottawa.

Winnipeggers will have to continue to deal with pro sports doing everything they can to make them part of the East. The Jets are in the Southeast Division and so, along with the CFL's Blue Bombers, who play in the East, they continue the city's professional sports geographical misplacement.

The folks at True North Sports and Entertainment run a tight ship and there's not much to quibble with in the way they've done their thing so far, but they clearly needed to take better advantage of their travel options.

A long homestand in February and early March, only interrupted by a one-game trip to Minnesota?

That's the time for a business trip to Florida.

The Jets are going to be run on a skatelace budget. According to capgeek.com, they currently have the second-lowest payroll in the NHL, next to the Islanders. The franchise has made the playoffs only once in its 12-year existence. That's probably not going to change this year.

In this honeymoon year, that won't matter.

What matters is, in the minds of Winnipeggers and most Canadians, a wrong has been righted.

Who knows? If the the Jets prove they can make a go of it, maybe they'll pave the road to Quebec City.

Balsillie can afford to change that website to makeitnine.ca.

Winnipeg Sun LOADED: 09.14.2011
WINNIPEG - They are the two Swedes on the Winnipeg Jets blue-line, one a small, slick puck handler who might remind people of Lars-Erik Sjöberg. I'm talking about Tobias Enstrom, a 5-foot-10 package of skill who put up 10 goals, 51 points, last season.

The other, well, we're not sure which former Winnipeg Jet he's going to remind us of.

Getting a handle on Johnny Oduya isn't as easy.

Heck, hockey people in his homeland didn't know what to make of him, either.

While his birth certificate reads "Stockholm, Sweden," Oduya played the game as if he grew up in Winnipeg's North End.

As a 16-year-old, he amassed 70 penalty minutes in just 26 games, and that was only the appetizer.

By the time he was playing pro in the Swedish Elite League — after one season of junior hockey in Canada — Oduya had become downright scary. For a European.

"There were a lot of upset people," Oduya was saying, Tuesday. "Back then you have one fight a year, it's a big thing. I probably had a couple of suspensions. The longest one was five games or something like that."

"I think I was the first guy over 200 minutes."

You think he's kidding.

Then you look up his career stats and see he actually spent exactly 200 minutes in the sin bin in Sweden's top league in 2002-03.

The next season, another 173 minutes.

What's this, a Swedish goon?

"No, I wasn't a tough guy," Oduya objected. "I played a little bit of a different style."

Enstrom, three years younger than Oduya, remembers Oduya in the Elite League.

"Growing up, I was watching him a little bit," Enstrom said. "And he had a couple of fights. I've been asking when am I going to see him fight over here."

That's just it, Oduya must have undergone some sort of transformation.

Because since joining the NHL five years ago, he's barely dropped a glove in anger, with no more than 30 penalty minutes a season in each of the last three.

"He's on me all the time," a chuckling Oduya said of Enstrom. "Like I've played with you now for a year and a half and haven't seen anything. I'm like, 'We'll see.' I had one my first year, and that was about it. Craig Adams, I think. Nobody got hurt, so it was all right."

So what happened that made Johnny-O drop the mitt-dropping?

It sounds like he simply realized he could do so much more.

"My last year in Sweden I tried to play more and use my skating and a little bit more offensive ability," Oduya said. "I've gone back to being maybe a little bit more defensive. Maybe this year I can make another move forward and combine it."

The way Oduya sees it, he's kind of a jack-of-all-trades, master of none.

Three-plus seasons in New Jersey proved he could put up 25-30 points and a similar plus-minus every year.

With a weaker team in Atlanta his production dipped to 17 points last season, his rating to minus-15.

In a couple of weeks Oduya will turn 30, making this a pivotal season, of sorts.

"It's a new experience," he said. "I played juniors in Canada about 10 years ago so I kind of know a little bit how big the sport is. It's almost like a religion. That year is probably one of the most fun years of my career. I'm looking forward to having a good year. I'm excited like every one else in this town."

Who knows, he might even drop the gloves, just for old time's sake.

"For me it was always a part of the game. That's one part of why I wanted to come over and play juniors, too. I like that style of hockey. Even now, it's not like I'm afraid. It's just being smart about it."

"Back in the day a lot of European players were maybe a little bit nervous coming over and playing here. I hope it's changed a little bit."

Lars-Erik, Anders and Ulfie would, no doubt, be proud.

Winnipeg Sun LOADED: 09.14.2011
TSN Jets channel yet to land on MTS, Shaw

By ROSS ROMANIUK, QMI Agency

WINNIPEG - It appears far from a sure thing that Winnipeg subscribers to MTS TV and Shaw Communications will score the new TSN Jets cable television channel to watch their NHL team’s action.

MTS Allstream is continuing to negotiate with TSN owner Bell Media in hopes of working out a service agreement to offer the specialty channel to its digital TV customers. But slow progress has brought no deal to secure the more than 60 televised Jets games for MTS’s tens of thousands of Winnipeg TV subscribers, while the beginning of the NHL regular season is less than a month away.

“We’re trying to negotiate the best deal for our customers, and for our business,” said MTS spokeswoman Selina Hinds. “We’re not there yet. And I should be clear — there is no guarantee we’re going to get the channel.”

The delay in MTS and Shaw arranging agreements to carry TSN Jets reportedly stem from Bell Media’s asking prices that they find too costly.

“The issues are around pricing and packaging. There hasn’t been any substantive progress in the discussions that we can report right now,” said Hinds. “The offer from TSN, or Bell, still isn’t acceptable to us.”

Shaw Communications and TSN did not return calls for comment.

Jets spokesman Scott Brown said the team remains “hopeful and confident” the channel will find its way into MTS and Shaw subscribers’ homes. He pointed out, however, that the club has no say at this point in how or where it’s offered.

“We’d be a little disappointed if things weren’t worked out right at the beginning of the season, to have everyone able to see the games,” Brown said. “At the same time, we understand our place in the whole process.”

Meanwhile, the separate NHL Centre Ice cable TV service “blacks out” games played by teams that are based in the viewers’ home markets. That means Centre Ice subscribers in Winnipeg will not be able to watch either home or away Jets games on that service.

Individual tickets

Less than a week before the Winnipeg Jets play their first pre-season home game and less than a month before their regular NHL season begins Oct. 9, individual tickets — those held back by the team from season subscription purchases — have yet to go on sale.

And the Jets haven’t yet revealed when those tickets — likely no more than a few hundred available for each game — will be sold. But team spokesman Scott Brown said Tuesday that fans clamouring for them don’t have long to wait for an answer.

“There will be an announcement on that issue coming shortly,” he told QMI Agency.
Bogosian sees himself in different boat from other RFAs

By PAUL FRIESEN, QMI Agency

WINNIPEG - They're the Big Three from the Class of '08, all looking for new NHL contracts.

Drew Doughty of the Los Angeles Kings, Zach Bogosian of the Winnipeg Jets and Luke Schenn of the Toronto Maple Leafs — the second, third and fifth overall draft picks that year, respectively — still haven't signed with their clubs, with training camps just days away.

It could be one signing will set the financial precedent for the others. But Bogosian discounts that theory, at least where he's concerned.

"I'm in a little bit of a different boat than them," Bogosian said after an informal skate with Jets teammates, Tuesday. "Obviously Doughty has had a couple of good years. I haven't exactly had the greatest start to my career... but I'm still young and up to learning new things and looking forward to good things here in Winnipeg."

While Doughty has spent the last three seasons becoming a star at both ends of the ice and Schenn has become a reliable defender, Bogosian has struggled to adapt to the big-league game.

After a promising rookie campaign, he posted career lows in points (17) and plus-minus (minus-27) last season.

"It's a tough job every night," Bogosian said. "A lot of times I was going against the other team's top lines. It's good to get experience like that. I know I'm not going to blow anyone out of the water every year. But you just take it in stride and try to move forward. You can't dwell on it."

Bogosian made his remarks to a scrum of nearly a dozen reporters, and training camp isn't even underway, yet — just another example of the intense spotlight on the team compared to the attention it received in Atlanta.

The 21-year-old hopes the scrutiny lifts his play to another level.

"I put pressure on myself, but anytime you play in a hockey market obviously the stakes are a little higher."

Winnipeg Sun LOADED: 09.14.2011
Jets fall to Oilers

By KEN WIEBE, QMI Agency

PENTICTON, B.C. - A slow start put the Winnipeg Jets in a hole against the Edmonton Oilers and although they didn't fold, the deficit proved to be too much to overcome.

The Oilers scored twice before the game was nine minutes old and cruised to a 2-0 victory in the lone game played in the 2011 Young Stars tournament on Tuesday at the South Okanagan Events Centre.

Oilers goalie Tyler Bunz made 24 saves to record the shutout.

Chris Carrozzi finished with 24 saves for the Jets.

The Jets fall to 1-1 at the tournament, while the Oilers improve to 2-0.

Chase Schaber scored on a goalmouth scramble at 2:57, while Matt Lowery snuck his point shot through the five-hole of Chris Carrozzi for a power-play marker at 8:30.

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, the first overall pick in the 2011 NHL Entry Draft, lived up to his advance billing, picking up an assist and showcasing his soft hands and outstanding vision on several occasions.

Nugent-Hopkins also got involved physically, delivering a couple of big hits.

The Jets came out sluggish but managed to find their legs during the final half of the first period.

Jets forward Carl Klingberg did knock in a rebound, but he directed the puck home with a high stick and the goal was waved off immediately.

The Jets opened the tournament with a 4-0 victory over the San Jose Sharks on Monday, while the Oilers smoked the Vancouver Canucks 7-2 on Sunday.

Winnipeg Sun LOADED: 09.14.2011
NBCSports.com / Bruins tough guy Shawn Thornton fights for his right to fight in the NHL

Joe Yerdon

After a summer filled with sadness linked to the deaths of NHL tough guys Derek Boogaard, Rick Rypien, and Wade Belak, the one thing that’s come out of that is the debate over whether or not fighting should stay part of the game in the NHL. While fighting didn’t kill those three players, their role as enforcers and intimidators in the league led them to careers filled with pain and injury.

The fighting debate is often linked to concussions, a debate big enough to fill an entire book on its own, and concussions are linked to depression (believed to have contributed to both Rypien and Belak’s deaths) it’s the perfect hot button issue the NHL would rather not have. While former fighters in the NHL like Georges Laraque and Jim Peplinski have spoken up and against fighting now that their careers are over, one current tough guy is standing up for what he’s doing.

Bruins enforcer Shawn Thornton doesn’t much care for what people are saying about getting rid of fighting in the wake of what’s happened this summer and he tells CSNNewEngland.com’s Joe Haggerty that if they want to take up their argument about dumping fighting, they should come talk to him first.

"It kind of [expletive] pisses me off that people take this opportunity to try and exploit a certain part of the game," said Thornton. "I think those are very, very sad instances, but I also think exploiting them for a part of the game isn’t the right way to go."

"I think we should remember those people for the men that they were, and not what they did for a living," said Thornton.

Thornton’s never been a guy to hold back on his thoughts and his feelings and the role of an enforcer in its roots is a noble one. The enforcer is the valiant knight of the team standing up for teammates and protecting the weaker players on the team. Ideally that’s what they’re supposed to do.

Thornton’s message about remembering the guys that have passed away for who they are is a stand-up move and typical of the role he plays on the Bruins. You’d have to assume that any of Boogaard, Rypien, or Belak wouldn’t just want to be remembered as being labeled a “goon” or “thug” for doing the job they were hired to do for their teams. There’s a reason why these guys are the most popular ones in the locker room and amongst the fan base as well.

For Thornton’s piece in this debate he’s justifying his existence in a very loud and meta kind of way. Standing up for fighting while also standing up for guys who have passed away and can’t speak for themselves makes you appreciate Thornton as a teammate. Whether you feel he’s right or not about doing part of his job with his fists is a matter of debate that surely won’t stop raging. One thing that’s for sure is that Thornton is awfully good at his job.

When Jonathan Ericsson arrived on the scene in Detroit during their run to the Stanley Cup finals in 2009, he showed up as a 6'4 220 pound revelation. He jumped into the starting lineup scoring four goals and four assists in the playoffs from the blue line and nearly helping lead the Red Wings to the Stanley Cup against Pittsburgh.

Since then, Ericsson’s last two seasons have seen him kind of find his way through action and not using his size nor his skills to their optimum levels. Two seasons ago, Ericsson dealt with injuries and played in 62 games and put up a stunningly low plus/minus for a Red Wings player at -15. Last season in particular was a rough one for Ericsson as his play had him permanently fixed on the third pairing and sometimes getting swapped out of the lineup as a healthy scratch.

Heading into this season with Brian Rafalski suddenly retiring, Ericsson has the chance to seize the day and become the blue line force many thought he would be. After signing a big free agent deal this summer to stay in Detroit (three years, $9.75 million), the pressure is on for Ericsson and Chuck Pleiness of the Macomb Daily Newspaper finds that Ericsson knows it’s time to show that he’s worth the faith the Wings have put into him.

“It’s up to myself now,” Ericsson said. “They’re going to have higher expectations of me. I’m looking forward to it. It’s a little more pressure but that’s always good. That always helps players, most of the players, anyway. You always want to put more pressure on yourself. It’s going to be fun, too.”

While the Wings’ top three defensemen are easy to pick out in Nicklas Lidstrom, Niklas Kronwall, and Brad Stuart landing the job as the #4 guy is between Ericsson, Ian White, Mike Commodore. For Ericsson, the opportunity to capitalize on the situation is right there for the taking. While Ericsson had his struggles at times the last two years, perhaps that shot of faith (and big bucks) is what he needed to get faith in his own game. The Wings are banking on it happening or else.

With Lidstrom eventually hanging it up sooner than later, the Wings will need someone to step up and become that big game kind of player on defense. Replacing a guy like Lidstrom is impossible, but if Ericsson and Kronwall can reach the heights they’ve shown they’re capable of with their play, replacing that production by committee would be a bonus for Detroit. There are high hopes for youngsters Jakub Kindl and Brendan Smith to also someday join that defensive corps, but they haven’t had much opportunity in the NHL to show what they can do. Smith is just two years removed from the University of Wisconsin and has yet to play in the NHL.

For Ericsson, there’s no time like the present to make his presence felt. The Wings have ponied up the cash to keep him in town, now he has to show that he’s worth the dedication and hype, otherwise they’ll be paying $3.25 million a year to a third-pair defenseman for the next three years. Those kinds of mistakes in the salary cap world can’t happen, but as Ericsson says, it’s up to him to make it work now.
Yesterday, the New York Post published an article stating that the New Jersey Devils missed a September 1st deadline to pay $100 million to lenders. Later in the day, the Devils organization announced that the Post’s story was “patently false.” If that’s the case, it sounds like Forbes has the same false information—because they too are reporting that the franchise was unable to pay creditors on September 1st.

Forbes goes deeper to explain that even if the team failed to make promised payments earlier this month, any bankruptcy proceedings would still be in the distant future (read: after the season). Forbes Executive Editor Mike Ozanian explains the details:

“Despite being unable to pay lenders $100 million that was due September 1, the NHL’s New Jersey Devils do not have to worry about being forced into bankruptcy by creditors for at least nine months because a consent letter stipulates lenders cannot take action against the Devils until after the last game of this season’s Stanley Cup playoffs, which should be around mid-June.”

Jeff Vanderbeek and Brick City LLC currently co-own the Devils with each claiming 47% in the NHL franchise. Brick City LLC has been looking to sell off their interest since February—an interest that Vanderbeek now plans on purchasing in order to refinance the team. Where it could get interesting is the value of the team vs. the amount of the debt. Forbes valued the Devils at $218 million last December—a value that includes money made from non-NHL events. Unfortunately for Vanderbeek, those projections for the coming year can be expected to decrease as forty-one New Jersey Nets home games would vanish if a potential NBA lockout wipes out the 2011-12 season. Even if the teams can salvage part of the season, revenue will be lost with each and every game missed. Mix in the fact that the outstanding debts stand at $250 million and refinancing the team might not be as easy as it sounds.

For the moment, we can give both sides the benefit of the doubt. Yes, the New York Post was correct when they said the Devils could face bankruptcy proceedings for failing to pay on September 1. On the other hand, the Devils don’t believe their facing bankruptcy because they have until June to hammer out the Brick City buyout and refinance the team. Either way, we’re splitting hairs.

No matter how you slice it, it would help everyone involved if the Devils could get off to a good start. They’ve already sold more tickets than they had at this time last season—so there’s potential to start bringing fans into the building. In a gate-driven league, there’s no substitute for sellout crowds packing the arena, paying for parking, buying beer, and picking up merchandise at The Rock.

Let’s be honest: nothing brings in fans and revenue quite like winning.

PENTICTON, B.C. -- Trivia Question: Who is Levko Koper? Is he:
A: Salesman of the Month at the local Skoda dealership.
B: Chief perogy pincher at Yosh and Stan Shmengre's Fine Ukrainian Foods.
Or, C: The kid who scored the first goal in the history of the reincarnated Winnipeg Jets franchise.

On a day when defenceman Zach Bogosian rolled into Winnipeg and stated emphatically, "I want to play here. I want to be here," the Junior Jets opened the reincarnation of this franchise in Penticton, B.C., with a perfect game, beating San Jose 4-0.

"That's all I'm trying to do here -- try to get a contract and play for the Jets," said Koper, who is here on a no-strings-attached tryout and scored twice in the opener. His Plan B will be the University of Alberta Golden Bears.

"Yeah, school is an option," he admitted. "Don't really want to do that."

Koper, a seventh-round draft pick born in Edmonton, scored the first goal, added the fourth into an empty net, and had the first Winnipeg penalty.

Meanwhile Mark Scheifele -- the first player drafted by the new Winnipeg franchise back in June -- scored the second one and added a beauty assist.

He looks like a fine young player, and speaks respectfully. IF he pans out to be the face of this franchise one day, well, the Jets couldn't do much better than this.

A young goaler named Ed Pasquale, another fine trivia answer in years to come, came away with the win. All his stats are being dutifully recorded back in the Manitoba capital, where the locals paid slightly more attention to this Young Stars result than folks down in the Silicon Valley.

"Yeah, it's definitely a lot of pressure," Scheifele said. "You get the nerves starting the game. But you've got to ... do it for the people back in Winnipeg.

"There is definitely a lot of pride. They weren't the actual jerseys, but to be the first one to wear that logo in a game, it's a real honour."

Festooned in practice jerseys -- the real ones will be donned in the opening preseason game -- the Jets took one more small step in a journey that has been meticulously charted by a community that has never quite felt whole since the Jets rolled south in 1996.

As sad as those days were, it has been nothing but unbridled joy in Manitoba since the story broke that the Atlanta Thrashers were heading back to the town where Ernie Wakely tended the twine for both the junior Winnipeg Warriors and the World Hockey Association's Jets.

The moment that story broke, a road hockey game erupted at Portage and Main, using -- of course -- a beer can for a puck. The iconic intersection soon became clogged with Jets fans that May night, and they drank from fake Stanley Cups 'til the sun came up.

As Opening Night draws near, the buzz in Winnipeg has been unique. You have to have loved and lost to become a city that produces a crowd of 1,000 at a practice for rookies, where they cheered as each player stepped on to the ice.

When Blake Wheeler tweeted in August, "No jerseys for a while. Just got pants and gloves from Warrior ... I'll throw some pics on tomorrow," the ensuing story became the one of the top stories on the Winnipeg Free Press web site.

Not for the new uniforms. For the new pants.

This is the week when players will arrive in Winnipeg in time for Friday's medicals. All that concern about players perhaps not wanting to move from Atlanta to Winnipeg will be put to rest, as every one of them will follow their paycheque to a city where hockey matters as much as football and basketball did in Georgia. If not more.
OSHAWA - The Toronto Maple Leafs have their goaltending set for now with James Reimer as the starter and Jonas Gustavsson the most likely candidate to serve as backup.

But when you're dealing with a kid, Reimer, who has just 37 NHL games under his belt and a backup, Gustavsson, who hasn't exactly dazzled when he's been healthy, things can change in a hurry. The Maple Leafs did not add any veteran goaltending depth to their organization in the off-season, so it will be a group of basically inexperienced kids trying to get them into the playoffs for the first time in seven seasons.

So where does Mark Owuya fit into the equation? Well, in all likelihood he'll start the season in the ECHL with Reading, just the way Reimer did four years ago.

Owuya played decently against the Chicago Blackhawks Saturday night and then took the loss as the Ottawa Senators beat the Maple Leafs 4-3 in overtime Tuesday night. He didn't have a bad game, but nor did he do anything to suggest he'll be waiting in the wings if Reimer stumbles out of the gate.

Leaves back on ice
In 32 games with Djurgarden of the Swedish Elite League last season Owuya posted 2.18 goals-against average and .927 save percentage. He understands there are significant differences playing in a rink that is smaller than he is accustomed to, but doesn't feel that should be an excuse or a crutch for bad play.

"A lot of people back home told me that the angles are different in NHL rinks, but to me it's a bad excuse," Owuya said. "Of course it's different, but no matter what, you still have to stop the puck. Actually I think it would be harder for a goalie to go from playing on a North American-sized rink to playing on the bigger European rinks."

Owuya made a couple of nifty glove saves in the opening period, but then allowed a quick 20-foot snap shot to beat him - a goal he would certainly love to have back. Toronto feel behind 2-0, but tied it and then trailed 3-2 in the third before forcing overtime with Owuya pulled in favor of an extra attacker. Mark Stone scored the winner for the Senators who won the tournament with a 3-0 record.

Owuya is a bit of a project for the Leafs, but goalie coach Francois Allaire - who has known the youngster since he was 15 - is convinced the kid has what it takes to make the NHL. The 6-foot-2, 200-pound stopper attended Allaire's goalie schools in Europe and was signed as a free agent by the Maple Leafs in April.

"Mark is a good athlete," said Allaire said. "He has a very solid build for a 21-year-old. You don't often see goalies who are as toned as he is. He had a very good year last season playing in Sweden and now he has to come here and learn to play the North American game. It is an adjustment for European goalies, but I am confident he can come over and be a very good goalie.

"When I started working with him as a 15-year-old, he was very rough around the edges. He has worked very hard on his game and now it's time for him to come over here and see if he can make it in this business."

Owuya said he has no timetable in terms of when he sees himself playing in the NHL. His game plan is simple.

"My goal is to simply work hard on and off the ice," he said. "I will do whatever I am asked to do. I have never played in the NHL or the AHL or the ECHL so it is all new to me. But working hard is not new."

If the Leafs are going to make the playoffs this season - and that is a big IF - they will need excellent goaltending. Reimer surprised many last season by getting the Leafs into the playoff race and he'll get the chance to lead the team this year. But when it comes to goalies, well...

"You know things can change very quickly," Allaire said. "Last year at the start of the season Reimer was No. 3 on our depth chart and Ben Scrivens was No. 5. By the end of the year Reimer was No. 1 and Scrivens was No. 3."

ONE FOR ALL AND ALL FOR ONE: The entire cast of rookies that appeared in the rookie tournament in Oshawa will pick up and move down the 401 to the Maple Leafs main camp. Players will take physicals Friday and will begin practicing on Saturday. "I told the players if they work and grow and support one another as a group then that will take care what happens to individuals," said Toronto Marlies coach Dallas Eakins, who guided the rookies in Oshawa.

SEEN AND HEARD: One of the great stories for the Leafs rookies is Mitchell Heard, a walk-on who was thrilled when he found out he'd been invited to the Leafs main training camp. "I can't find the words to describe how I feel right now," said Heard, wearing a monster-sized grin. "It's a pretty exciting day. I tried to take each day as a learning experience and now I have been rewarded." Heard scored against Pittsburgh Sunday and set up the tying goal late in the third period Tuesday night. He showed great poise and patience with the puck in the offensive zone; not to mention a solid drive for the net.