



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 21, 2020

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

Five pressing questions for the Hurricanes looking ahead to the 2020-21 season

By Chip Alexander

The Carolina Hurricanes left Toronto on Thursday, headed back to Raleigh and an offseason break that will be brief, with questions quickly to be answered.

The NHL Draft, free agency, contract negotiations, prospect camp, training camp — much will be packed into a tiny window before the 2020-21 season begins in early December.

The Canes will attempt to do what has not been accomplished since the franchise moved to North Carolina in 1997 — reach the Stanley Cup playoffs three straight years. They believe they have the right foundation of players, the right coach and the proper support from management to do it.

The Canes again were ousted from the playoffs by the Boston Bruins, a bigger, more talented team that won in five games despite having their leading goal-scorer, David Pastrnak, miss three games with an injury and goalie Tuukka Rask opt out of the Toronto bubble and postseason. The games were close but the Bruins again too good.

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That remains to be seen on the ice, and with a flat salary cap for next season the options for change might be limited. But here are five pressing questions leading up to the 2020-21 season:

1. WHAT WILL JUSTIN WILLIAMS DO?

Yes, we’ve all been through this before, last September. Williams mulled over retirement after the 2018-19 season and then hedged on his decision, saying he wouldn’t be at training camp or start the season with the team but might return at a later date. Which he did, in January.

Canes ownership and management was fine with that arrangement. Williams will be 39 when a new season begins but should be fresher for it because of the gaps in the past season — the first his choice, the second because of the coronavirus pandemic. He only played 27 games total, so little wear and tear.

Brind’Amour said Wednesday that he would not guess about Williams’ plans but added, “I can’t say enough good things about Justin Williams.” The coach clearly would like his friend and former Canes teammate back to be the wise old head in the room, a calming influence on the group and someone always willing to stand up for his team.

2. WHO WILL THE CANES RE-SIGN?

Williams will be an unrestricted free agent but so will three defensemen: Joel Edmundson, Trevor van Riemsdyk and Sami Vatanen.

The Canes will go into the 2020-21 season with a strong defensive core group of Jaccob Slavin, Dougie Hamilton, Brett Pesce, Brady Skeji and Jake Gardiner. Haydn Fleury is a restricted free agent but the team and player should be able to reach an agreement — Fleury has arbitration rights according to CapFriendly.com, which tracks player contracts.

Vatanen was a trade-deadline pickup brought in as playoff insurance when both Hamilton and Pesce were out with injuries. Van Riemsdyk has given the Canes dependable play but was used sparingly in the postseason.

It’s possible the Canes could look to re-sign Edmundson, a physical type with more offensive upside than first believed, if there are agreeable financial terms and if Edmundson wants to stay.

One side note: General manager Don Waddell said Thursday the Canes would give up a third-round 2020 draft pick to the New Jersey Devils, a condition of the Feb. 24 trade for Vatanen should he play more than 70 percent of the playoff games.

3. WHAT ABOUT THE GOALTENDING?

A year ago the Canes had two goalies, Petr Mrazek and Curtis McElhinney, who were both UFAs, making life interesting for Waddell. Mrazek was re-signed but McElhinney bolted for Tampa Bay.

Mrazek and James Reimer both have one year remaining on their contracts — at a combined \$6.525 million. Both are coming off moderately successful seasons: Reimer was 26th in the NHL in goals-against average (2.66) and 29th in save percentage (.914) while Mrazek was 28th in GAA (2.69) and 47th in save percentage (.905).

Will the Canes look to upgrade? It would involve a trade and the Canes did that last year, bringing in Reimer from Florida while sending goalie Scott Darling to the Panthers.

Among the UFA goalies who could be available are Robin Lehner of the Vegas Golden Knights and a former Hurricanes goalie, Anton Khudobin of the Dallas Stars. But Lehner would be costly and cause cap issues, and would someone like Khudobin be a major upgrade?

4. WILL SVECHNIKOV BE READY?

When Andrei Svechnikov was sent spinning to the ice by Bruins defenseman Zdeno Chara, the torque on the forward’s right leg and ankle was substantial. It appeared to be the kind of injury that might require a long stretch of rehab and perhaps keep him out of the lineup early next season — if not longer.

But as Brind’Amour said, the Canes “dodged one.” The injury apparently was not as severe as first feared and Svechnikov was an observer at Scotiabank Arena later in the series, seen wearing a walking boot.



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5. WILL THE FANS BE BACK?

Interesting question. A quick-reflex answer is that minus a vaccine for the virus, there will be no fans initially at any indoor arena.

Waddell has said the team has looked at various options, from no fans to having, say, 5,000 in the arena, to a full house again for games. The Canes have until early December, when the 2020-21 season is scheduled to begin, to figure that out.

As for Stadium Series outdoor game at Carter-Finley Stadium, Waddell has said the Canes still plan to host the game but that the date of the game — Feb. 21, 2021 — might have to be moved. And again, how many fans could attend?

The NHL wants to play a full 82-game regular season. But so much is unknown for now. Maybe too much.

Former Hurricanes coach Bill Peters tests positive for the coronavirus

By Chip Alexander

Former Carolina Hurricanes coach Bill Peters, now coaching a KHL team in Russia, has tested positive for the coronavirus.

The news was announced Wednesday by the team, Avtomobilist Yekaterinburg, and reported by the TASS news agency in Russia. It was reported that Peters, 54, was asymptomatic for COVID-19.

Peters left his position as head coach of the Calgary Flames in November after accusations by a former player, Akim Aliu, that he had used racial slurs while coaching the defenseman with the AHL's Rockford IceHogs in the 2009-10 season.

After Aliu's accusations, former Canes defenseman Michal Jordan said he was once kicked by Peters, and Peters was alleged to have punched another unnamed Canes player while Carolina's coach from 2014-18.

Rod Brind'Amour, a former assistant coach under Peters and now the Canes head coach, later confirmed the incidents occurred. Peters was said to have apologized to the team but was not fired by Ron Francis, then Carolina's general manager.

Peters agreed to a two-year contract with Avtomobilist Yekaterinburg in April. The KHL season is scheduled to begin Sept. 2.



Hurricanes done in after losing Svechnikov in East First Round to Bruins

Production from Aho, Teravainen, healthy Hamilton bright spots heading into 2020-21

by Wes Crosby

The Carolina Hurricanes were eliminated from the Stanley Cup Playoffs by the Boston Bruins for a second straight season, this time in the Eastern Conference First Round.

After being outscored 17-5 in a four-game sweep by Boston in the 2019 Eastern Conference Final, Carolina led in four of five games in the first round this season. Four of the games were decided by one goal; the Bruins winning 3-1 in Game 3 capped by an empty-net goal from Brad Marchand with 31 seconds remaining.

The Hurricanes, the No. 5 seed in the East, were fourth in the Metropolitan Division for a second straight season. They were sixth in the conference with a .596 points percentage (38-25-5).

Here is a look at what happened during the 2020 postseason for the Hurricanes and why things could be even better next season:

The Skinny

Potential unrestricted free agents: Justin Williams, F; Joel Edmundson, D; Trevor van Riemsdyk, D; Sami Vatanen, D

Potential restricted free agents: Warren Foegele, F; Haydn Fleury, D

Potential 2020 NHL Draft picks: Seven

What went wrong

Losing Svechnikov: After Andrei Svechnikov scored two points (one goal, one assist) in a 3-2 win in Game 2, the forward was injured while battling Bruins defenseman Zdeno Chara in the slot late in Game 3. The Hurricanes scored three goals without Svechnikov in Game 4 but were outshot 16-2 in the third period of a 4-3 loss. In Game 5, they were held to 24 shots in a 2-1 loss.

Lack of power: The Hurricanes were 2-for-15 on the power play in the first round. Bruins forward Sean Kuraly scored the deciding goal shorthanded 1:16 into the third period of Game 3. That left Carolina frustrated after it converted 22.3 of its chances in the regular season, eighth in the NHL.

No goals from Aho: Forward Sebastian Aho had four assists in five games after scoring eight points (three goals, five assists) in a three-game sweep of the New York Rangers in



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the Stanley Cup Qualifiers. He led the Hurricanes with 12 points (three goals, nine assists) in eight postseason games, but Carolina was likely hoping for more after a strong showing against New York.

Reasons for optimism

Top three forwards: Aho led the Hurricanes with 66 points (38 goals, 28 assists) this season, Teuvo Teravainen was second (63 points; 15 goals, 48 assists) and Svechnikov third (61 points; 24 goals, 37 assists). The production from Aho and Teravainen was in line with what they had in previous seasons, but Svechnikov improved from his 37 points (20 goals, 17 assists) in 82 games as a rookie last season.

Healthy Hamilton: Defenseman Dougie Hamilton scored 40 points (14 goals, 26 assists) in 47 games before having

surgery Jan. 17 to repair a fractured left fibula. He didn't return until Game 1 of the first round and was held without a point before scoring the game-deciding goal of Game 2. With the top pair of Hamilton and Jaccob Slavin intact, the defense could improve from allowing 2.84 goals per game in the regular season, tied with the Pittsburgh Penguins for 11th in the NHL.

Goalie tandem: Petr Mrazek was 21-16-2 with a 2.69 goals-against average, .905 save percentage and three shutouts in 40 games (38 starts). In his first season with Carolina, James Reimer was 14-6-2 with a 2.66 GAA, .914 save percentage and three shutouts in 25 games (24 starts). They shared the starting role in the postseason, when Mrazek started five games and Reimer three. In those eight games, Mrazek and Reimer each allowed no more than two goals six times.



Hurricanes have a lot to be proud of, and what's next?

The Hurricanes have had a lot to smile about over the last two years.

By Andrew Schnittker

There's no doubt the Canes' result in their Stanley Cup Playoffs first-round series with the Boston Bruins was disappointing. After the Canes' domination against the Rangers, expectations were a lot higher than a five-game loss.

But that's what happened. Better officiating, a better power play and better finishes to games could have made for at least a closer series, as every game was within one goal in the final minute.

There were plenty of positives to take from the series, chief among them the emergence of Haydn Fleury as a key contributor. But at the end of the day, the result was the Canes bowed out in the first round a year after making it to the Eastern Conference Finals.

And you know what? That's OK. Is it disappointing? Sure. Is there a lot to be proud of and look forward to still? Absolutely. I'm not trying to mood police here. How you feel is how you feel.

What I am going to do is give my thoughts about what the Canes have to be proud of from this season and beyond, and a little about what the next steps might look like.

Still a fun season

While last season was not on the same level as the 2018-19 run to the Eastern Conference Finals, that was still a once in a lifetime kind of season.

But, as someone who watched the regular season from afar as a fan, I can say with confidence that this season had a lot of fun moments to look back on as well.

The 5-0 start. Dougie Hamilton's play before his injury. Sebastian Aho being well on his way to the 40-goal

club. The Svechnikov breakout season and lacrosse goals. The 4-0-1 Western swing in December. A solid rookie season from Martin Necas. David Ayres. One of the most exciting trade deadlines in recent memory. Justin Williams' return. The sweep of the Rangers.

While this season ended sooner than anyone hoped in disappointment, it still provided for a hell of a lot of fun.

A lot to be proud of

Rod Brind'Amour repeatedly used the word proud in his post game five press conference, and he should be.

His stated goal when he took over as head coach was to make the team relevant after and, after two playoff appearances in two years (the first time that's happened since 2001 and 2002), I'd say, mission accomplished.

"That's what I take the most pride in," Brind'Amour said. "That's what we talked about. We want to win. We're saddened that we're not still playing, that's why we do this, but there's more to it. We want to be that organization that's continually talked about to have a chance to win and for our community to be proud of the team and how they play, how they represent. It means more than it has in the past, I think. I feel like our guys buy that and show it by the way they play."

He's absolutely right on that point. Before last season, the yearly disappointments were a hell of a lot more crushing than losing a first-round series. I'm not saying playoff losses should be excused because the team isn't far removed from a 10-year drought, but perspective is important.

The Hurricanes are talked about locally. I went for a walk before game five, and saw multiple Canes flags flying from cars, for a game that was being played in a bubble thousands of miles away. I remember seeing all of the flags and signs last year, and watching game seven against the Capitals in a Player's Retreat packed to the rafters with Canes fans (obviously don't do that right now.)



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They've become somewhat of a national media darling, with the majority of writers picking them to win this series (oops).

Obviously the Canes want to win, and that should be goal number one. However, being a consistent playoff team means they simply are not going to make the final four every time they make it (not to mention the Canes likely aren't playing the Bruins in the first round if this year is a normal playoff).

The goal of returning to relevancy both locally and nationally was an important step, and one that's been achieved.

A young core

This is an obvious one I won't spend too much time on, but it's worth noting this team is built for the long haul.

Svechnikov, Necas, Sebastian Aho, Teuvo Teravainen, Jaccob Slavin and Brett Pesce are all 26 years of age or younger and under contract (at bargain rates, in many cases), for several years. This team has the foundation in place, and it's just a matter of finding the missing pieces.

Which brings us to...

What's next?

Now comes the hard part. It's clear that the Canes are a clear step above playoff tweener teams like the Rangers. It's also clear that the Canes are a step below elite contenders like the Bruins.

That step from good, consistent playoff team to elite Cup Contender is a hard one, but it's the one the Canes are faced with now. We'll get more into this in the coming days and weeks, but adding a legit number one goalie and another top-six forward (both will be easier said than done) this offseason are among the logical next steps.

While this won't be an easy step to take, and it could even take a year or two, it should be a much more enjoyable one than figuring out the step up from "just good enough not to make the playoffs."

The Canes dealt with disappointment earlier than they have in any postseason since 2001, but the overall picture remains overwhelmingly positive.

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Articles from outlets covering the Hurricanes' upcoming opponents and league-wide news

1191683 Carolina Hurricanes

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BY CHIP ALEXANDER

AUGUST 20, 2020

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News Observer LOADED: 08.21.2020

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AUGUST 20, 2020

Carolina Hurricanes head coach Rod Brind'Amour, back center, looks on as players on the bench hang their heads after being eliminated by the Boston Bruins in an NHL Eastern Conference Stanley Cup playoff hockey game in Toronto, Ontario, on Wednesday, Aug. 19, 2020

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New York Rangers' Ryan Strome (16) fights with Carolina Hurricanes' Justin Williams during the first period in the NHL hockey Stanley Cup playoffs in Toronto, Saturday, Aug. 1, 2020

2. WHO WILL THE CANES RE-SIGN?

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Carolina Hurricanes defenseman Joel Edmundson (6) hits Boston Bruins right wing David Pastrnak (88) during the first period of an NHL hockey Eastern Conference Stanley Cup playoff game in Toronto, Wednesday, Aug. 12, 2020

3. WHAT ABOUT THE GOALTENDING?

A year ago the Canes had two goalies, Petr Mrazek and Curtis McElhinney, who were both UFAs, making life interesting for Waddell. Mrazek was re-signed but McElhinney bolted for Tampa Bay.

Mrazek and James Reimer both have one year remaining on their contracts — at a combined \$6.525 million. Both are coming off moderately successful seasons: Reimer was 26th in the NHL in goals-against average (2.66) and 29th in save percentage (.914) while Mrazek was 28th in GAA (2.69) and 47th in save percentage (.905).

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News Observer LOADED: 08.21.2020

1191761 Websites

The Athletic / Meet Veeti Miettinen, the 2020 NHL Draft's under-the-radar top prospect

By Scott Wheeler

Veeti Miettinen is betting on his unconventional route paying off.

For two years now, Miettinen, a 2020 NHL Draft prospect, has watched as his equals — in talent and age — have progressed to Finland's professional levels while he remained in its under-20 junior ranks.

At a glance, his static progression might prompt some questions. But the reality of his come-up is that he chose not to advance. While most Finnish prospects grow up to play professional hockey for their hometown team in Liiga and later move to North America to play in the NHL, he opted against that path, choosing instead to commit to play for St. Cloud State University in the NCAA.

It's a choice that kept him, in spite of his talent, from turning pro — and garnering the limelight that comes with that leap as a teenager. And it's a choice that, according to those most familiar with his game, has made him underrated in the 2020 draft class.

They, too, aren't going to bet against him.

Juha Ylonen is one of the success stories of the traditional Finnish hockey development path. He grew up playing for his hometown team in Espoo, outside of Helsinki. He progressed from its under-20 program to its pro level. He was drafted out of Kiekko-Espoo's professional team in the fifth round of the 1991 draft and eventually made a career of it in the NHL with the Coyotes and the Lightning. His son, Jesse, was born in 1999 and has followed the same path out of Espoo and into NHL prospecthood as a 2018 second-round pick of the Canadiens.

The Ylonens met Miettinen in Espoo, where he grew up as their neighbour and would play hockey in the street with Jesse. When Miettinen became the area's best player in his age group, Juha became his family advisor when he was just 15.

But Miettinen has known, since he was a kid, that he didn't want to follow the same path as his neighbours. He was a good student and he wanted to go the school route, even if it meant it might stunt his ability to progress as far as his talent could carry him.

"It was the best decision for me. I don't want to throw (school) away and I've heard only good things about college. It just sounds perfect for me," Miettinen said.

By 16, he had already been promoted to the under-20 level, where he'd immediately become a top forward on his team. By 17, a full year before his draft year due to his September 2001 birthday, Miettinen led his under-20 team in scoring with 61 points in 48 games, outscoring another of the draft's top prospects, Roni Hirvonen (a projected first-round pick), in the process. Throughout, he was a go-to player for Finland internationally at under-17 worlds, under-18 worlds, and the Hlinka Gretzky Cup — and consistently one of the youngest players on the team.

A full year before his NHL draft year, professional offers had already begun to be made.

"There was a lot of Liiga that would've liked to sign him and he has always wanted to focus on school," Ylonen said.

He kept turning them down.

His track record, those who coached him believed, should have made him a top prospect in the 2020 draft. But when NHL Central Scouting released its preliminary players to watch list, Miettinen received a C grade, which "indicates a 4th/5th/6th round candidate."

Jaakko Heikkilä, Miettinen's head coach with Kiekko-Espoo's under-20 team, believes his best player would be viewed differently had he been one of the small number of draft-eligible players to make the full-time leap to pro.

"If he wouldn't go to college next season, I think he would've played most of the year in the adult league in Finland, he's that good," Heikkilä said. "Even during last season, he would have played in the Finnish league for sure, for a few games at least."

So when Miettinen's draft year started, he felt he still had something to prove, despite having routinely produced while playing above his age group. But he knew he didn't want to change course or abandon his college aspirations, so he had to produce more than could even be expected out of a top prospect in junior.

And he did. In 2019-2020, he scored 42 goals and racked up 73 points in just 52 games. The 73 points won the league's scoring title by a 12-point margin over Hurricanes fourth-round pick Tuukka Tieksola. The 42 goals were a further 14 clear of the next nearest player. He led his own team in scoring by a 24-point margin.

When the season was cancelled due to the pandemic, his 1.40 points per game as an 18-year-old stood as one of the Jr. A level's most productive seasons in recent memory, placing him among statistically-equal peers who are almost exclusively top NHL prospects or players. But while those players quickly progressed and gained the notoriety that comes with the next level, Miettinen's draft stock remained stagnant. When NHL Central Scouting released its final rankings, Miettinen ranked 72nd among European skaters, further reinforcing their belief that he was a late-round prospect.

Miettinen believes there are just two things working against his status. The first, is his decision to go to college, which has kept him out of pro. The second, is his size. If he were a little bigger and taller (he says he's 5-foot-8 and around 160 pounds), he believes scouts would view him differently.

"I play like I'm bigger," Miettinen said. "My shot is always going to be my trademark though. My strength has always been my shot and my game sense. I'm not the biggest player on the ice so I've learned to be creative and score."

Heikkilä believes if Miettinen falls out of the draft's second or third rounds, he will be a steal.

"He was a very big part of our team last season in the locker room as well. He's very good but he's coachable, he's a smart boy, and he wants to learn new things. He's an ideal player for a coach," Heikkilä said. "And he's a scorer. He has a good shot, he's very fast, and he likes to make the winning goal."

Miettinen's draft status is a problem of evaluation and hype, according to Ylonen.

"If you are playing in Liiga, it doesn't matter if you are making any points or anything. I'm not sure if it's just media and we'll see at the draft what the scouts think of him at this moment, but that's the way it is," Ylonen said. "He could not have played any better than he played last year...He's fast and he will be strong as well. If you're small you have to be strong and fast and that's how he is."

Heikkilä argues that Miettinen's size won't be a barrier and that concerns about it are overblown.



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"I think he'll have an impact in college right away. Because even if he's small, he's very fast and he can win the battles by speed not by strength. He can be faster than the opponent to pucks," Heikkilä said. "Plus his character, he's not afraid of battles in the corners. He's not afraid to go to the corners to snatch a puck or protect the puck. He's brave."

For a while, Miettinen and staff at St. Cloud State worried that his decision to wait, forgo playing pro, and go the college route, may not even come to fruition.

When embassies across Europe closed in response to the pandemic, Miettinen had not yet acquired a student visa.

"It was a little scary," said St. Cloud State head coach Brett Larson. "Just getting him over was our biggest concern for quite a while. When we got the good news that the embassies were opening up and that they were going to be giving out student visas, we felt a lot better. So now it's just when do we get him in? Hopefully sooner rather than later."

St. Cloud State had dedicated significant resources to the recruitment of Miettinen in recent years. That process started with veteran assistant coach Mike Gibbons, who has coached some of the NCAA's top programs since the early 1980s and recently retired. Gibbons built a network of connections in Finland over the years and has been responsible for convincing some other prominent prospects to take a different path to the NHL.

Over the course of the last two years, several program staff have also made repeated trips to Espoo to watch Miettinen play, spend time with him and his parents, and sell them on the choice. That process has included sending him videos, giving him presentations on the school, and even a virtual campus tour.

In time, Gibbons wasn't the only one who'd fallen in love with his game, either. So too had Larson and assistant coach Nick Oliver.

"I went over to watch him play last year and everyone has talked about his scoring and obviously that's going to be a big part of his game but his team was down 7-1 in the game that I was watching and it was late third period and a puck turned over and the guy was going for a breakaway and he tracked that guy down from a half zone behind him and literally dove to lift the guy's stick at the last minute," Larson said. "And to me, that just showed me everything I need to know about the kid. A lot of kids would have given up at that point in the game."

St. Cloud State staff don't expect there to be a major adjustment for Miettinen once he arrives. He's nearly completely bilingual, his grades are excellent, and they already have one Finn on the team in sophomore Jami Krannila.

They're not worried about his size, either. Where some freshmen struggle to find their footing, they expect him to play a prominent role from the start.

"We believe that he can be an impact player in college hockey even as an 18-year-old. And that doesn't happen often. But we think he can be a special player," Larson said. "We feel at his size and the type of player that he is that college hockey is the perfect route because it affords him the flexibility to stay in college until he's ready. I think he's going to be an impact player immediately. I really do."

Oliver can't wait to begin working with him.

"We're extremely excited about him. College hockey has just got so good the last 10 years with players stepping right out of college and into the NHL and Veeti's runway to develop gets that much longer now. He's going to be put in a situation where he's going to have a chance to succeed and have a great opportunity," Oliver said. "Whether we play in October or even have to move back a month to November, the college hockey setup is perfect because once he gets over here he's going to have two or three months where he'll be training and practicing and doing skill development every day. So even though we may be starting a little later, the development may actually increase for a player like Veeti."

In recent weeks, Miettinen has submitted everything he needs for his student visa. Classes start at St. Cloud on Aug. 24 and he hopes to not be too far behind. And neither Larson nor Oliver believe COVID will have a major impact on their team's schedule within the NCHC, despite some other conferences electing to push their fall sports (hockey included) into the winter.

Though Miettinen said most everything was shut down for about a month and a half in the spring in Finland, he has spent his summer skating and training like he normally would, hoping to finally get the go-ahead to fly to the United States.

"This visa has been a pain in my neck. But I almost have it so I just want to get there and see all of the guys and get on the ice," Miettinen said. "I can't wait to start the season. They're such good people there at St. Cloud. Such good people. I'm just going to take it in and learn a lot."

By the time the draft — which is planned for Oct. 9 and 10 — happens, he'll already be settled at school. Oliver thinks a celebration might be in order.

"Normally when we get the kid, they've already been drafted, so we'll be able to have a little celebration for him when he gets picked. That'll be really fun actually, having him over here and getting him up and running with his classes, and then that will be a first," Oliver said.

The draft is just his first step, though. Miettinen has always been playing the long game.

"I can't wait for the draft but it won't change anything," he said. "I'm going to be the same guy and player no matter what."

The Athletic LOADED: 08.21.2020

1191762 Websites

The Athletic / The butterfly effect: How research into skate blade placement might help goalies

By Sean Fitz-Gerald Aug 20, 2020

It was the equipment that made Colin Dunne want to become a goaltender in the first place. All of the other kids got to race up and down the ice, but the goalie was special, because they were the only one who got to wear "the painted helmets and the coloured pads."

And what about the different skates?

"I didn't have a clue," Dunne said.

Today, he is a 28-year-old graduate student whose research into skates might help goaltenders improve their speed in the butterfly position. In lab work completed at Brock University, Dunne discovered that, when he repositioned the blades on his boot, he could drop down milliseconds faster than normal.

"These differences are minute," he said. "Some of these differences — when you actually look at them outside the context of the game — that's such a small number."

Inside the context of a game, though, milliseconds matter.

"If you can get down a fraction of a second earlier," Dunne said, "it might be the difference between you making that save and not."

He spent about 10 hours in his skates over a three-week span, using 3D motion analysis and a sensor in the boot to track the differences. Dunne is going into the second year of his PhD, and he also still tends goal, playing senior hockey in Ontario with the Elora Rocks last season.



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"Guys are looking — no pun intended — for that edge," said kinesiology professor Kelly Lockwood, his supervisor. "They're looking for: 'I'm as good as everyone else on the ice, but I need to stand out, so I need to be that fraction of whatever.'"

Lockwood is a trained figure skater who has been studying the nuances of blades for decades. She was a graduate student in Edmonton when she worked with the Oilers in the early 1990s, and a decade later she was leading a study to determine the effect skate sharpening might have on injuries.

"There was a ton of big, strong guys who were on the ice and becoming groin injured," she said. "It wasn't acute. It was long-term. It was over-use. And we realized that the skate-sharpening was a primary contributor to groin injuries."

They looked at the part of the blade known as the hollow, which is the middle section between the two edges. A deeper cut in the sharpening process created a deeper hollow, and depending on the weight of a player, the sharpened edges could dig to an unwanted depth in the ice.

The problem, Lockwood said, was basic physics.

Colin Dunne, the researcher and the subject, tests out new blade alignments during research at Brock University. (Photo courtesy Brock University)

"You put very deep, deep hollows on guys who weigh 250 pounds — a lot of mass — you're driving those spikes into the ice, and they're working harder than they should be," she said. "They're skating through the ice as opposed to staying on top of the ice."

Players today are more educated in the equipment they wear, Lockwood said: "The bottom line is: You can be physically fit, you can be technically astute, but if your equipment isn't working for you, it's sometimes all for naught — especially when it comes down to the blade."

For the goalie skates, she and Dunne looked at three different alignments. They charted the time it took to move with the blade in a neutral position — down the middle of the foot, as usual — and again after moving it .55 centimetres closer to the big toe, and .55 centimetres closer to the pinky toe.

They tested two movements: Getting down into the butterfly and recovering, as well as dropping into a butterfly, sliding to the side, and getting back up. Both movements are common to the position, both in practice and in regular game play.

Dunne was both a researcher and the sole research subject.

"An individual trial was extremely quick," he said, smiling. "Not to toot my own horn."

When the blade was moved closer to the inside of the foot — the blade moved a half-centimetre — the research showed Dunne could drop into the butterfly faster than when the blade was in its usual spot. It did not speed up his recovery (getting back to his feet), but it helped him get down.

"The easiest way is to say you've positioned the athlete to go right into the drop," said Lockwood. "If you think of the difference between a sprinter starting without sprint blocks, versus one starting with blocks — the gun goes off, the guy who's already in sprint blocks, he's ready to move."

Both the supervisor and the student acknowledge the limitations of the research. Dunne was the only subject, and while shifting the blade worked for him, it remains to be seen whether it would work for other goaltenders.

There are plenty of other variables — maybe another goalie would have a different technique, maybe another goalie is more physically fit — that the work was not able to address.

"My first instinct in moving the blade: It's an adjustment, skating and balance-wise," said former NHL goaltender Jamie McLennan. "If you

have a goaltender who's really active with stopping pucks — Carey Price, Mike Smith — that would be an adjustment, I think."

The research was completed in a lab, and not on an ice surface, so Dunne and Lockwood were not able to test how the shifted blade might impact a goalie skating behind the net to play the puck. McLennan, who is a co-host on OverDrive, TSN 1050 Radio's afternoon drive show, had not heard of any goalies who had tried to customize their skates by moving their blades.

But he was intrigued.

"I think it could work," he said. "And I think it's ingenious if it does give you any type of advantage to get into one position. I guess my contrarian view is: Are you giving up anything?"

"That's kind of where this research is handcuffed, I would say," said Dunne. "Some sports are very boxed, and you do this one movement and you do it throughout. And hockey — goaltending, especially — is so dynamic."

As recently as that morning, though, Lockwood said she had heard from at least three NHL equipment managers. She said modern players are more likely to have nutritionists and psychologists and coaches who specialize in different areas of the game.

Even a millisecond was worth a phone call.

"They're interested," she said.

The Athletic LOADED: 08.21.2020

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Sportsnet.ca / Flames' productive playoff run unravels in horrific, historic finale

Eric Francis

EDMONTON — After spending the bulk of the playoffs stealing wins from the opposition, Cam Talbot stole plenty of ammunition from those looking to pin the team's horrific exit on the coach.

"Can't say I blame him — I would have done the same thing if I was him," said the Flames netminder, who was pulled early in the second period of a 3-3 game after surrendering his third goal on eight shots.

"It was a 3-0 hockey game for us and I had been there all playoffs for us. When we needed it the most, I wasn't there. Some of those shots are obviously saveable and the onus is on me there. As much as I hated getting pulled, the momentum was changing and we had to do something. I could feel it coming."

Talbot's diplomacy came hours after he angrily skated to the Flames bench as he saw David Rittich fumbling to put on his gloves for his first NHL playoff duty.

With a remarkable early field goal by his squad just six minutes in suddenly squandered, there was the team's playoff saviour skating angrily to the bench and down the hallway as the team's season appeared to be unravelling.

"I was angry, disappointed at myself, frustrated for my teammates," said Talbot, who stayed in the dressing room while Rittich was scored on twice as part of a five-goal second-period binge.

"Just went to the locker-room for five or 10 minutes, just to more or less calm down. I didn't want to show my emotions on the bench. It doesn't help anyone else on the bench, it's a 3-3 hockey game. I tried to remove



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myself from the situation and not project that on anybody else because we still had a chance to win the hockey game.”

No they didn't. Not after the team's best player was hoisted in an age-old ploy to try shaking up momentum.

Remaining Time -1:13

Ward explains why Talbot was pulled in Game 6 but returned in the third

Problem with this scenario was that the replacement had only played half an exhibition game in the previous five months — an impossibly tough situation to put a man who didn't have the luxury of a warmup stretch before playing his first NHL playoff action.

By period's end, after a shaky performance from Rittich that produced just six stops on nine shots, the Flames' season was over — finished off in six games by a Stars team that ended Calgary's season with a thud.

Unlike the bulk of the hockey world, Geoff Ward wasn't about to second-guess himself.

“No, I don't think I made a mistake,” said the Flames interim coach, who put Talbot back in for the third period to surrender the final goal in a 7-3 trouncing by the Stars.

“The goals were a little bit unfortunate. I just felt like we needed to change the momentum and that was the initial thought on how to do it. Originally the plan was to get him out, get him re-focused and get him back in. He had an equipment issue, so he had to go down the tunnel and get it fixed. It's probably an unfair spot to bring Ritter into with how little he's played since returning.”

The equipment issue wasn't mentioned by Talbot, but nonetheless, the Stars team that had trouble scoring all year had a bit of help from the two men with the most playoff experience of them all — Ward and Milan Lucic.

Shortly after the Flames' phenomenal start saw Rasmus Andersson put them up 3-0, Lucic needlessly cross-checked a Stars defender into Anton Khudobin for a penalty the Stars cashed in on to get the ball rolling.

In the second period, another Lucic transgression helped Dallas to its fourth goal.

Ward spent plenty of time discussing the importance of managing moments, which was part of their downfall in their most humiliating playoff exit in recent Flames lore.

Remaining Time -3:25

Flames' Backlund says he feels 'empty' after elimination in Game 6

No team in Stanley Cup history has trailed by three only to go up by four. Impossible, some would have guessed.

Not so with this group, which put a horrific punctuation mark on an otherwise productive playoff — a playoff that could have seen the Flames break through to the second round had they been able to preserve a Game 4 lead that would have put them up 3-1 in a series they never got back into.

“We might be talking about a whole different can of worms if we can take those 12 seconds off — it's a whole different series then,” said Ward.

Don't blame the series loss on the coach or suggest for a second he shouldn't be the team's coach next year.

Hindsight makes it clear his goalie move backfired.

“What Wardo was trying to do was trying to get momentum to shift there,” said captain Mark Giordano.

“I was happy to see Talbs get (put back in for) the third because he deserved to get back in there and battle with us, because he's been our best player the whole playoffs. He's the reason why we're here — how

many games did he win for us in this little run we had. My view was nothing more than a few tough bounces.”

Followed by the next three months of tough decisions for a GM whose core couldn't get it done once again when it mattered most.

But that's a column for another day.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks' Benn the latest surprise in club's unpredictable playoff run

Iain MacIntyre

EDMONTON — Jordie Benn is still so new to the playoff bubble that he doesn't know he's not supposed to actually say anything on the National Hockey League's media calls.

The Vancouver Canucks depth defenceman was on fire Thursday like his team was on fire Wednesday, when they improbably roared back from a two-goal deficit that should have been at least four goals and deservingly beat the Stanley Cup champion St. Louis Blues 4-3 in hermetically-sealed Rogers Place.

Benn on Canucks goalie Jacob Markstrom, whose astonishing series of saves in the second period had the Blues still muttering a day later: “When Marky is doing those things it's pretty incredible to see that a human being can make saves like that. So, I mean, it fires us up.”

On 20-year-old rookie Quinn Hughes: “The kid, it's incredible to watch him. I've played with some good players and he's up there as one of the best I've ever seen, personally. We were talking. . . last night after the game, and it's just scary that we say that kid is going to get better. I don't know how that's possible because he's so good already. But it's going to be scary in a few years when he is better and older and dominating this league.”

Benn on defenceman Alex Edler, injured in Wednesday's game when he suffered a skate cut to his face: “We were all hoping Eddie was going to come back. He was half-dressed (to play) when we came back into the room after, so he's fine and ready to rock.”

This made it difficult for coach Travis Green, who is as communicative on injuries as the stone heads on Easter Island, to play the game-time-decision card when asked if Edler will be available Friday for Game 6 when the Canucks have a chance to eliminate the Blues and move into the final eight of the Stanley Cup tournament.

“I won't say that he's in and I won't say that he's out,” Green nonetheless persisted after following Benn to the interview room.

Pressed, Green relented slightly, offering: “I'll check in with Benner to make sure that he's in or out.”

The stitches that Edler required after being caught by the skate of Jordan Kyrou were so deep and extensive that doctors simply couldn't get him sutured in time to return. He'll be monitored for infection and discomfort but is expected to play Game 6. Jordie Benn said so.

Benn will be playing Friday, too, and that would seem quite remarkable were it not for the talented and wonderfully-unpredictable Canucks gobsmacking us on a nightly basis.

Signed as a free agent last summer to bolster the bottom end of Vancouver's blue line, Benn had a fairly miserable season, losing his



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lineup spot to Oscar Fantenberg in December and getting healthy-scratched for 25 of the Canucks' final 32 games.

With both the blessing and scheduling bad luck of returning to his off-season home in Texas for the July birth of his daughter, Benn missed half of training camp and nearly all of the Canucks' playoff preparation and practices in Edmonton.

But when defenceman Tyler Myers suffered a shoulder injury in Game 2 on a hit from behind by Brayden Schenn, Benn was suddenly back in Green's lineup. And with Edler unavailable in the third period on Sunday, Benn played four shifts in the last 5 ½ minutes and was on the ice for the final 51 seconds as the Canucks just held off the Blues.

"Benner, coming in cold the way he did, I don't think people understand that's not easy to do," Green said. "That's hard. We probably weren't fully committed to it until I talked to him about how he felt. I wanted to see if there was any doubt in his mind about playing. That's one thing about veterans, they can understand the magnitude of maybe an injury or the situation you're in. And there was never a doubt in Benner's mind that he was ready to go. I think he has looked stronger every game. He's got some composure.

"I know for us, that meant a lot just to hear the confidence he had in himself, and that carried over a long way."

Shots were 8-7 for the Blues when Benn was on the ice and the 33-year-old finished with a shots-for percentage of 54.2. It doesn't make sense that Benn, having played seven games in eight months, should have one of his best performances of the season under unforgiving playoff circumstances.

But there are incredible things happening within the Canucks. Hughes is playing like the best defenceman in the world even if it looks like his playoff beard won't be finished until 2028. Markstrom is making saves like he has come flying off the turnbuckle. Speedy checker and penalty killer Tyler Motte scored two — TWO! — highlight reel goals on Wednesday. And Jake Virtanen, who rivals pipelines for controversy on the West Coast these days, scored against the Blues as Green's savvy line-blending freshened his forwards and made it difficult for Blues monster Ryan O'Reilly to shut down everyone.

These are team-building times for the Canucks, who appear to be coming of age before our eyes.

"I think I'd have been more surprised if we didn't come out and play a helluva game," Green said, a couple of days after guaranteeing his young team would rebound from losing its 2-0 series lead. "I just feel like our team is all-in. They're here to win; they're not here for experience. They've got a lot of belief in themselves and we're going to try to do it again tomorrow."

You can't take your eyes off this team.

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Sportsnet.ca / Future of Capitals' Holtby, Reirden in doubt after 'unacceptable' exit

Luke Fox

TORONTO — Something went rotten in Washington.

All the magic and mojo the Capitals captured on that cathartic, electric June 2018 night just off the Vegas strip — when they guzzled from the first Stanley Cup in franchise history and proceeded to turn public

fountains into personal splashpads during a week-long bender — it's gone.

And watching this talented, veteran core bow out of the bubble Thursday night with an empty performance inside an empty building, one must wonder: Do they even have another deep run in them?

If they do, the group's composition and attack plan cannot resemble what we witnessed this month in Toronto.

Absolutely, New York Islanders coach Barry Trotz and his disciplined, organized, score-by-committee players deserve a heap of credit for skating for the logo on the front and dispatching another team from the bubble in rather swift fashion. The Isles' 4-0 Game 5 victory, powered by two pretty Anthony Beauvillier goals, improved their post-season record to 7-2. Their stab at another series upset and an Eastern Conference Final berth will be legitimate.

That said, outside of 40 inspired minutes in Game 4, the Capitals looked a shadow of their former selves.

Yet the man who guided the best version of this core is anything but a spectre. He's real and he's the one still winning series.

Trotz's quiet revenge has been continuing to win playoff series while the organization that let a good coach go must now wear consecutive first-round exits into a complicated off-season. This after a four-year rip under Trotz in which Washington won at least one round each spring and culminated in the ultimate prize in '18.

Two years removed from that glorious night in Vegas, Trotz says the strangeness of coaching against his former team is starting to dissipate. The happy memories the coach shares with Alex Ovechkin and Nicklas Backstrom and Braden Holtby, however, are indelible. Even as he shook their hands goodbye Thursday.

"We did something very special. So, that'll never go away. That'll be the same till I'm on my deathbed. That will not dissipate. That will be part of who we were in 2018," Trotz says. "But it's 2020. It's a different situation. I'd love to have that experience with the group I have right now. That's been the goal from Day 1."

It's 2020, and the Washington Capitals will be besieged with hard questions.

Foremost among those circles around Trotz's former assistant and successor, Todd Rierden, and whether he will coach this roster next season.

Rierden has been favoured in both playoff series he's lost and has been out-coached by the better motivator.

As a whole, the Caps lacked focus, discipline and connectivity this post-season.

"I think they wanted it more than us," Backstrom said.

Sure, we could find some excuses — the unavailability of stud rookie netminder Ilya Samsonov, Backstrom's concussion, Norris finalist John Carlson's uncharacteristic minus-10 showing — but the Caps were severely and roundly outclassed here.

They committed a reckless 41 minor penalties over eight post-season games and spent way too much time relying on an overworked penalty kill.

They mustered all of eight goals and 124 shots on net over their five-game set. A complete list of Capitals who found the net in the series: Ovechkin, Evgeny Kuznetsov, T.J. Oshie, and end of list.

Deadline rental Ilya Kovalchuk was but a rumour, contributing a single assist in eight post-season games and costing GM Brian MacLellan a third-round pick. Jakub Vrana was literally a non-factor (zero points) after his breakout 25-goal regular season.



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"They scored; we didn't," Ovechkin said. "It's a tough year. Strange year. We tried to do our best, obviously."

With an average age of 29 this season, Washington was the second-oldest club in the conference (to Boston). The signed core should keep that age high again in 2020-21, and history tells us the Caps are on a cap and performance trajectory similar to the once-mighty outfits in Chicago and Los Angeles.

"It's always tough to lose in the playoffs. Doesn't matter how old you are," Backstrom said. "Somehow you gotta regroup and get back for next year."

Is this really a roster built for another Cup run?

"Yeah. I think we got some incredible talent," insisted Carlson, who's been gritted through some ailment here. "We have some young guys that can really bring it. I think there's a lot of good days ahead for this team."

But first: more clouds.

Reirden couldn't say with any confidence he'd be back behind the bench, and some high-profile UFA coaches (Peter Laviolette, Mike Babcock, Gerard Gallant, et al) might love to get their mitts on Ovechkin's contract year.

"I'm confident that I'm a young coach that continues to improve and continues to get better," Reirden responded to a direct question about his job security. He also said: "This is not acceptable for our organization."

Free agents Kovalchuk, Brenden Dillon, Radko Gudas and, most importantly, Holtby won't all be back under a flattened cap ceiling.

Lose Holtby, and, like Trotz, the Capitals lose another slice of that 2018 magic. Fitting, then, that the two men were the last to shake hands at centre ice, sharing a chat as they headed in opposite directions. Sort of.

"We had a lot of success when he was here: a guy that I have a ton of respect for. He's an honest guy. You just wish him the best because he's one of the good guys in hockey," Holtby said of that chat.

The goalie knows Thursday night might've been his final game with the Capitals.

"Certainly, a chance it is," Holtby said.

"Just disappointed. We had more to give, and we just didn't find a way to do that. It's never a fun thing to go through."

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Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens must ignore optics of Niskanen ruling, play in Gallagher's image

Eric Engels

TORONTO — The optics are bad.

Brendan Gallagher will be getting his jaw wired shut after Matt Niskanen broke it with a cross-check in the dying minutes of Game 5 of Montreal's series with Philadelphia, and we don't know when he'll be able to return. We do know it won't be for Game 6 — or 7, if the Canadiens win on Friday — but Niskanen will be available to the Flyers come Sunday.

In a just world, that wouldn't be the case. But justice appears to be a rather complex principle in the NHL.

Only in this league can a boarding minor — trumped up to a major and a game-misconduct because the victim of the hit suffered a small cut —

equate to a crosscheck that causes someone a trip to the dentist, and one to the doctor for a procedure that ensures they'll be drinking their food through a straw for the foreseeable future.

Granted, Jesperi Kotkaniemi's punishment for the hit that sliced Travis Sanheim was 21 minutes and 45 seconds shorter than Niskanen's will be. But we digress.

The NHL's department of player safety put out a two-minute-and-24-second video to explain how they arrived at their conclusion following Niskanen's 3 p.m. Eastern hearing on Thursday. There were 618 words spoken in there, but the only ones that resonated were the ones in the very first sentence.

"Wednesday night in Toronto, Flyers defenceman Matt Niskanen recklessly delivered a crosscheck to the face of Canadiens forward Brendan Gallagher, knocking him to the ice and causing an injury."

And yada, yada, yada, that amounts to a one-game suspension.

For a league that wants to curb concussions and eliminate head-shots, it's a bad look.

And this ain't pretty, either: The Canadiens were 4-7-1 sans Gallagher this season, and now, following a win with their backs against the wall in Game 5, they have to go runner, runner against a Flyers team that hasn't lost consecutive games since early January, which was well before the world as we knew it stopped turning and COVID-19 paused the NHL season.

And then there's the fact that the one thing the Canadiens proved, as they plummeted to 24th in the standings from October to March, was that they weren't able to overcome injuries to Jonathan Drouin and Paul Byron, never mind one to the player who has led them in goals in each of the past three seasons. You know, the guy who interim head coach Kirk Muller referred to on Thursday as "our heartbeat."

But here's the thing: The Montreal team we've seen in this unprecedented summer tournament for the Stanley Cup bears little resemblance to the one that needed to be gifted the opportunity to play these games in Toronto. Against all odds, the Canadiens handled a championship-calibre Pittsburgh Penguins team in less than the maximum number of games it required to advance beyond the qualifying round, and they've been every bit as good as the top-seeded Flyers so far in this first-round series.

Their coach, Claude Julien, suffered a cardiac event, was hospitalized, operated on and sent home to Montreal after a hard-fought Game 1 loss to Philadelphia, and they responded to that adversity with a resounding 5-0 win in Game 2. They were shut out in Games 3 and 4 and did everything they could (and succeeded) to chase Carter Hart from his net in Game 5 — even if Flyers coach Alain Vigneault was going to pull the young goaltender but suddenly decided against it after a bad goal allowed was overturned due to a missed offside call.

Speaking of missed calls, there was Gallagher, pinned up along the boards, clutching at his mouth to keep his teeth from falling out, bleeding profusely before he got up from Niskanen's "reckless cross-check" and berated the officials on his way off the ice.

It was wasted breath, and he knew it.

Just like these Canadiens know it would be a waste of energy to get bogged down in L'Affaire Niskanen. They can't do anything about the fact that one of their best players will be unavailable to them for the rest of this series, nor can they change the fact that Philadelphia will have one of theirs back if it gets to Game 7.

Not that all recent history is irrelevant.

The Canadiens shouldn't forget what they did to win Game 5. They overcame the early departure of their leading goal scorer in these playoffs (Kotkaniemi), and they battled back after blowing two leads. They should also remind themselves that they managed to get this far with just one goal in eight games from Gallagher, and, in his absence,



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they should play in his image — with reckless abandon and caution thrown to the wind.

We know there's at least one person who believes they can do it. He's the guy who wasn't supposed to make it to the NHL — especially not just two-and-a-half years after being drafted 147th overall. The guy who no one thought would last in this league but is now eight years into his career. You know, the guy who's made his living turning the optics upside down.

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1191767 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Creating offence in today's NHL and a trend to watch in the playoffs

Justin Bourne

As much as fans and maybe the league itself don't want it to be true, the NHL is a defence-first league. The NBA exists at the other end of the spectrum, where a perfectly executed offensive play and shot is essentially unstoppable (say, a step-back jumper from a seven-footer like Kevin Durant or Dirk Nowitzki). On the ice, a perfectly executed defence is all-but impenetrable.

It's why Columbus can beat or at least hang with more skilled teams. It's what makes Boston The Bruins. It's how the Blues can win the Stanley Cup without a cadre of superstars.

To make matters worse for lovers of offence, goalies continue to get better to the point where getting beat unscreened on basically any shot leaves people going "Geez, I dunno about that one, keeper."

To wit: this goal, a wide-open look from the top of the hashmarks that pings the crossbar/post elbow, made me momentarily wonder if it was a "bad goal" on Carey Price. That points to just how extreme expectations have become for goaltenders.

Because of these two factors, offence in the NHL has essentially become trying to create chaos, then taking what the defence gives you. You're looking to force the defence to "change their shape," which aims to force coverage switches given those ask the D to make decisions and communicate with their teammates. That's where mistakes can come. You're constantly prodding to the inside and getting rebuffed, then asking the question "Are you prepared to stop me if I challenge in?" and making the defence answer.

The most effective methods of making the D change their shape are moving the puck from east-to-west sides behind the net (as defencemen generally hand off their check to their partner instead of chasing around the zone man-on-man), and moving the puck low-to-high (where low forwards can get lost in traffic).

At the same time, though, you can't just be moving the puck side-to-side and low-to-high around the outside. Once you've made the defence switch and think, you've still gotta find your way in. Teams like the Islanders and Blue Jackets, who have the work ethic and communication down to voraciously defend, are more than happy to let you have your party out by the yellow paint and trust their goaltenders to stop any pucks that come from out there. They work to keep you to the outside.

The Toronto-Columbus series was almost too perfect for illustrative purposes here.

Even with all these defensive forces working against them, offence in the NHL has ticked slightly up the past few seasons, as crazy-skilled players

and creative thinking have combined forces to generate new avenues of scoring.

The one that stands out to me most after watching weeks of hockey all day every day isn't new, per se, but man it's been refined and perfected to combat both of the problems I've mentioned above: great goaltending and "keep 'em to the outside" defence.

That would be the off-hand redirect "shot."

Players today rarely have clean possession of the puck in the offensive zone for long, let alone in the slot. It's hard to get there with it and, while you can get there without it (which is a nice change from the '90s where you'd take 100 crosschecks to the lower back for having such audacity), you're never going to be able to get a pass to the slot and have the time to do much.

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So, the off-hand re-direct happens when a player skates through a dangerous area of the ice and his teammate fires a "shass" off the net for a shovel-tip of sorts. (A "shass" being a shot-pass, a play with enough gusto to get by a goalie like a shot, but that was never meant to go on net without another touch).

On the power play, all offences have a "bumper" guy (because league copy-cattery is absurd right now) who pops high as an option for his teammates when the puck is low and slides low when the puck is high. For a number of years now we've seen that player looking to get a high-tip on "shass" plays, which isn't exactly what I'm seeing more of these days; I'm seeing it at 5-on-5 on rushes and even offensive zone possessions. Timing a player's arrival in that dangerous spot for a quick touch redirect is wreaking havoc on goaltenders.

Here's a look at the "shovel shot" off the "shass," which is much simpler than I'm making it sound. A couple of these are just high-tips, but the point remains the same — get the puck coming at the net from a different angle.

Recently on Hockey Night in Canada, Kevin Bieksa explained how a D-man taking a shot from the point would much rather shoot it off the side of the net towards teammates sticks than risk getting a shot blocked, and that concept feeds into the shass-and-off-hand-shovel-push we're talking about. Shot-blocking in the NHL is at a premium, and is one of the ways great defensive teams excel at keeping pucks from their net. The aforementioned Islanders and Blue Jackets defences were numbers one and three in the league in blocks-per-game, because they keep everything to the outside.

There has always been an understanding that tips are good and even shooting for teammates' sticks has been a smart next level. But as defensive structures have improved it's gone from "stand in front and have a guy fire it into the crowd" to looking for plays higher out from the goalie where a more dangerous redirect can take place.

Old guy note on this: this play, particularly from farther out when the player redirecting or shooting the shass has to put some additional mustard on it, was way harder before one-piece sticks. If you ever tried this with even a one-percent-soggy wood blade you might as well have passed it to the goalie for a whistle. Today's hard stick blades that come with some flex make adding force to the shass possible, as opposed to just having it die off your blade.

Keep an eye out for this play in the next game you watch and you'll likely note just how common it's become. It takes advantage of teams allowing players without the puck to get to the inside, it only takes a quick second of touch on the puck, and it sends the puck at the goalie from a new angle (and makes them move).

If nothing else, a well-executed off-hand shot off a shass likely results in a rebound and chaos at the net, and in a bounce-heavy game like hockey, that in itself is an offensive win.



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TSN.CA / Montreal Canadiens and Philadelphia Flyers turn up the hate

Frank Seravalli

The ice in front of the benches looked like a crime scene.

Spitting and grinning as he became the face of these Stanley Cup playoffs so far, blood from Brendan Gallagher's mouth spotted the ice red as the Canadiens forward continued to jaw with the Philadelphia Flyers' bench in the waning moments of Game 5 on Wednesday night.

It should be no surprise, then, that the war of words spilled over into Thursday's off-day – a delicious back and forth straight out of a series from 1987, aside from the fact that interviews were conducted via Zoom.

The only thing missing from Game 6 on Friday night will be Ed "Boxcar" Hospodar in warmups – and maybe Flyers defenceman Matt Niskanen.

Niskanen will have a hearing with the NHL's Department of Player Safety on Thursday for his cross-check to Gallagher's face.

"There's no doubt that there's no love between both teams," Flyers coach Alain Vigneault said.

The spin cycle was in full motion long before the Flyers and Habs hit the podium for their media availabilities Thursday morning.

First, word leaked that Gallagher may have sustained a fractured jaw from Niskanen's crosscheck late in Game 4. Then word came that Gallagher would require a CT scan for his injury.

Finally, came the video enticement from the Canadiens in the form of a reverse angle of the Niskanen incident that was shot along the glass by a team employee.

Acting Habs coach Kirk Muller said the Canadiens sent that footage to the NHL for review. The team also tweeted it out on its official account, with the caption of "OUCH." It's rare for a team to post sensitive footage; the Winnipeg Jets did not publicly share their own blueline camera feed of Matthew Tkachuk's controversial hit on Mark Scheifele in the qualifying round.

"You know what, we have footage of it from our organization, we sent it to the league," Muller said. "I think the video will definitely explain what you see. We'll leave it with the league and we're confident that the video will show what it shows."

That three-step process – from two injury updates at a time of year when injuries are akin to closely guarded state secrets, to the video – certainly seemed like the handiwork of a Canadiens front office seeking to influence the availability of the Flyers' second-most minute-logging defenceman.

Whether it worked or not remains to be seen, but the NHL did announce at 12 p.m. ET – after that was all out there – that a hearing was coming for Niskanen.

Vigneault lobbed back his take in the Flyers' availability that followed.

Spoiler alert, with the least shocking revelation of 2020: Both coaches, when asked about the questionable hits that their players threw in Game 5, labelled them simply as "hockey plays."

Vigneault even went as far to say, "sometimes boys will be boys."

"My estimation though, Gallagher got up and seemed fine," Vigneault said. "He was talking to the referees. The whole time that he was on the bench, he was talking to our players for the rest of the game. Gallagher's a very competitive player. I don't think it's [Niskanen's] fault that he might not be as tall as some of the other guys, but he competes as big, if not bigger than anybody else.

"Just seemed a hockey play that unfortunately cut him a little bit."

On Jesperi Kotkaniemi's hit on Travis Sanheim - whistled as a boarding major that also resulted in blood spillage - Muller said: "We saw KK as a hockey play, finishing his check. We get a penalty in the game, we can live with that, but that's the most of it."

Go figure.

Surprise, surprise. Coach says it's an unfortunate hockey play when it is his player who was the aggressor. If his player was the victim, he'd be crying 🥹 for a suspension. And it is a suspension. Vicious cross-check to the head. Height has nothing to do with it. @CanadiensMTL #<https://t.co/iotNYIGTIO>

— Craig Button (@CraigJButton) August 20, 2020

In this series, one that started off sleepy but has managed to turn into a classic Habs-Flyers tilt from the late '80s, one just short of a Chris Chelios butt-end to Brian Propp, Vigneault had been the master of persuasion up until Thursday.

The former Habs coach mentioned in his post-Game 2 press conference about the Canadiens' lack of respect for putting out their top power-play unit late while up by five goals.

"We had embarrassed ourselves enough," Vigneault said on Aug. 14. "I don't think we needed to get embarrassed more, so I'm going to make sure our team is very aware of that next game."

As designed, that took the attention away from young goalie Carter Hart – who was pulled earlier in that game – and the heat off of the Flyers' top scorers who had yet to hit the scoresheet. Four of Philadelphia's top five goal scorers from the regular season - Travis Konecny, Claude Giroux, Kevin Hayes and Sean Couturier - still have not registered a goal in eight games in the bubble.

On Thursday, Montreal GM Marc Bergevin and the Habs gave them a taste of their own medicine.

Muller wouldn't say whether Gallagher will be ready for Game 6 on Friday night, saying "you can never count him out because of the character he has."

Either way, get your popcorn ready.

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TSN.CA / Four teams separate themselves from the pack during the NHL playoffs

Travis Yost

To say the first round of this year's Stanley Cup Playoffs has been on the more predictable side of things would be quite an understatement. We have long grown accustomed to a modern era of hockey where parity is omnipresent, and upsets, especially earlier on in the tournament, are quite common.

The preceding play-in round – a unique feature of this year's postseason due to the stoppage of the regular season back in March – was wild,



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frenetic, and full of surprises. Some observers felt that these Cinderella teams – the teams that pulled off upsets in the play-in round and had an additional week of competitive hockey to get back to playing shape – would be able to stick around for a deep run.

The extra playing time may or may not have helped. But one thing we do know is that there is still a sizable talent gap between the league's elite teams and the muddled middle of the NHL. It would appear that any positives teams realized from participating in the play-in round diminished as soon as the level of competition increased.

Four teams – the Tampa Bay Lightning and Boston Bruins out East, and the Colorado Avalanche and Vegas Golden Knights in the West – have established themselves as favourites to reach their respective conference finals. Add the St. Louis Blues into the fold, and you have the betting market's five favourite teams.

The Blues are in a dogfight with a very game Vancouver Canucks team. The other four rolled in stunning fashion:

You might look at this and think that the Blues deserve a better fate than facing elimination in Game 6 on Friday night, and you wouldn't be wrong. But it is important to note that these even-strength measures, while hugely important, aren't the entire story. Losing the special teams and goaltending battle can be killers, and the Canucks have the Blues edged considerably there too. (St. Louis is also driving their numbers primarily from the Ryan O'Reilly line, though to understate that trio's dominance would be a colossal mistake.)

The other four teams? I mean, what more can you say? The Western Conference matchups weren't competitive. Chicago and Arizona both pulled off impressive play-in round upsets as the two lowest-seeded teams in the play-in round, and then were demoralizingly picked apart by Vegas and Colorado – two teams with no holes in their current lineups.

The Eastern Conference matchups were more of the same. Columbus worked tirelessly to try and bog down the Tampa Bay attack, and goaltender Joonas Korpisalo was outstanding in keeping games close. Boston drew – by a considerable margin – the toughest opponent of the four and had their starting goaltender leave in the middle of the series, but still held a very strong Hurricanes team to just eight goals over a five-game span.

These teams are flush with stars, but the mismatches down the lineup can be just as noticeable. The Vegas-Chicago series was a great example of this – even the fourth line for the Golden Knights (which generally features Ryan Reaves and Will Carrier with a rotating third forward) was carrying nearly 60 per cent of the play, a jaw-dropping number for depth skaters:

The point here is that these series weren't one-sided merely because the stars at the top of the lineup went wild. They did, but so did many players behind them.

These four teams are certainly unique from one another – Vegas and Colorado have a decisive depth advantage over any team in the league, Tampa Bay's offence can rarely be slowed and Boston's defence is capable of shutting down any club in hockey. But even with varying identities, their overall team talent appears materially higher than the rest of the pack. We expected that to be the case, and Round 1 is reinforcing it.

I do think there are interesting offshoot questions for the league to consider going forward. It's hard to react to just one year and a handful of matchups, but the tremendous excitement generated by the play-in round can create diminishing returns in subsequent rounds as the talent disparities widen.

The good news? A lack of upsets in Round 1 creates some really intriguing matchups in Round 2 and beyond where we're going to be served full portions of best-on-best hockey.

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USA TODAY / Flyers' Matt Niskanen gets one-game suspension for cross-check that broke jaw of Canadiens' Brendan Gallagher

Mike Brehm USA TODAY

Philadelphia Flyers defenseman Matt Niskanen was suspended for one game for a cross-check that bloodied the Montreal Canadiens' Brendan Gallagher in Game 5 of their first-round series.

But Gallagher is expected out longer because Canadiens general manager Marc Bergevin announced that the forward suffered a broken jaw and would need surgery. Because Gallagher has to leave the Toronto bubble, he'll need to quarantine before resuming play. The Canadiens ruled him out of the rest of the series.

The NHL noted that Gallagher's sudden movement contributed to Niskanen making contact with the Montreal player's face, but objected to the force and intent of the cross-check.

"Players are responsible for their stick at all times, and when a player attempts to intentionally use his stick to deliver a blow to an opponent, he cannot necessarily be excused from responsibility when the blow recklessly lands in an unintended area," the league said.

The Canadiens had tweeted out a video of the third-period incident, which went unpenalized. The team decided to reveal the nature of his injury, rather than sticking with the NHL protocol of merely saying that Gallagher was deemed "unfit to play."

Flyers coach Alain Vigneault said before the suspension and announcement of the injury that he thought it was a hockey play.

"In my estimation, Gallagher got up and he seemed fine," he said. "He was talking to the referees the whole time he was on the bench, talking to our players for the rest of the game. I think Gallagher's a competitive player, but I don't think it's Nisky's fault ... (Gallagher) might not be as tall as some of the other guys, but he competes as big, if not bigger than anybody else."

The Flyers lead the best-of-seven series 3-2 and can wrap it up Friday.

Gallagher has four points in nine postseason games, including a goal in the Canadiens' 5-3 win Wednesday that extended Montreal's season.

Niskanen has averaged 22 minutes a game this postseason, second on the Flyers. Defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere could end up replacing him.

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