



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • September 24, 2019

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

With a flurry of moves at the goalie position, Canes' Alex Nedeljkovic isn't fazed

By Chip Alexander

In the span of eight days this summer there were six goaltending moves involving the Carolina Hurricanes.

All of them, in a sense, affected goalie Alex Nedeljkovic and

where he might play this season.

Nedeljkovic's reaction to that flurry of goaltending activity?

"You see it, everybody sees it but I try not to look too deep into it, just focus on myself," Nedeljkovic said Saturday in an N&O interview. "It's the same with any situation, whether it's two new guys here or me coming in by myself. You've got to find that compete inside you, that drive inside you, to get better."

Nedeljkovic, 23, said general manager Don Waddell's job was to put the best team on the ice, adding, "If that's bringing in other guys that are doing better than me, then obviously I've got some work to do. But the only thing I can do is worry about myself. That's what's going to get me to the next level."

For Nedeljkovic, named the American Hockey League goaltender of the year in 2018-19, the "next level" would likely mean Mrazek's backup with the Canes this season. There were six goalies in training camp before Callum Booth and Jeremy Helvig were reassigned Saturday to the Charlotte Checkers, the Canes' AHL affiliate.

It's now three for one: Nedeljkovic, Reimer and Forsberg competing for that second position on the roster. But Nedeljkovic has a two-way contract this season (one-way in 2020-21) and is waiver exempt. Reimer and Forsberg have NHL contracts, Reimer drawing a \$3.1 million salary and Forsberg being awarded a one-year, one-way deal after he filed for arbitration following the trade from Chicago.

Nedeljkovic wins the Calder Cup

When practice was held Monday, Mrazek and Reimer were with the more veteran group. Nedeljkovic and Forsberg were with the second group, with a primary camp roster cut down still to be announced.

Reimer and Forsberg were in the NHL last season, Reimer appearing in 36 games for the Panthers and Forsberg 35 for Chicago while also playing in the AHL. Both put up pedestrian NHL numbers, generally in backup roles.

Nedeljkovic, a second-round draft pick by Carolina in 2014, had one game for the Canes, making his first NHL start in

the Jan. 23 game at Vancouver and earning his first NHL victory with 24 saves as the Canes won 5-2. The Canes had lost three of four games, the victory allowed them to go into the NHL All-Star break on an uptick.

"Really special," Nedeljkovic said of the game. "My parents were in town and it was a dream come true, to be able to make it to that level and win that first start."

Another special game was to come in early June. The Charlotte Checkers beat the Chicago Wolves to clinch the AHL's Calder Cup. That ended a dream season for the Checkers, team owner Michael Kahn and Nedeljkovic, who had a 34-9-5 record in the regular season and was 10-4 in the postseason.

Nedeljkovic, called "Ned" by teammates and coaches, doesn't recall much about the aftermath of that clinching game, that moment. He said, with a smile, that it was as if he blacked out from the excitement.

"Just jumping around, screaming and yelling," he said. "I do remember the one big roar when we got to see Mr. Kahn raise that Cup over his head."

Much like the Stanley Cup, the Calder Cup later is passed around from player to player to have their "day" with the cup. Nedeljkovic, from Parma, Ohio, said he low-keyed it, taking the cup to downtown Cleveland for a few photos with family, then on to a pool party.

Come September, Nedeljkovic hopped behind the wheel of his F-150 and headed south, putting in the miles and jumping into the logjam at the position.

Brind'amour feels good about goaltending

Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Saturday morning that he felt "really good" about the goaltending after more than a week of camp.

"I like all of them," he said. "I think it's certainly different from last year, coming into this situation, so I feel way better."

The Canes suffered a 3-2 preseason loss Saturday night in Washington, in a game Brind'Amour called disgusting. Forsberg, the starter, allowed two goals on 10 shots and Reimer one goal on 10 as they split up the game.

Nedeljkovic's only preseason appearance was Wednesday against Tampa Bay. Coming in midway through the second period after Mrazek started, he stopped all 15 shots to complete the 2-0 shutout.



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Being a good goalie calls for sound technique and quick instincts but also mental toughness. For the past few years, Nedeljkovic has consulted with Dr. Saul Miller, a mental coach who has worked with other pro athletes and is the author of "Hockey Tough: A Winning Mental Game."

"Every year I feel like I'm mentally stronger, mentally tougher," Nedeljkovic said. "I can get over a bad night. I don't turn one bad night into two and two doesn't go into three."

"If you have a bad night, shake it off, try to refocus and get back to being consistent. It so easy for things to go south or go sideways on you. You have to come to the rink and it's a new day, a fresh start."

Canes' Martinook helps Pack crank up the volume

By Chip Alexander

Jordan Martinook of the Carolina Hurricanes scored some field passes to N.C. State's football game Saturday and took some friends with him to Carter-Finley Stadium.

Then, the fun began.

Martinook, wearing a floppy hat and red No. 19 Wolfpack jersey, posed for photos with teammates Andrei Svechnikov, Warren Foegele, Trevor van Riemsdyk, Dougie Hamilton and Clark Bishop on the sideline. Before long, the Canes forward was leading State fans in the "Wolf! Pack! Wolf! Pack!" cheer, waving his arms, asking for volume, clearly the ringleader.

"It was cool," Martinook said Monday. "That's the first time I've ever been down there that close to the game. Walking behind the bench, it's cool to see how big those boys are. Real big. The atmosphere was just awesome."

Martinook, a native of Brandon, Manitoba, said he played a little football as a kid. Wide receiver, running back, quarterback, safety ... Martinook said he tried those positions until his first year of bantam hockey as a young teenager.

"I was a big, big football guy but it comes to a point where you have to pick, right?" he said. "I was going from hockey game on a Saturday afternoon to a football game Saturday night. It was a lot back then. But I love football, I love watching it."

Martinook and the Canes contingent watched as the Pack topped Ball State 34-23, the biggest play coming on Thayer Thomas' 76-yard punt return for a score in the third quarter.

"I'm a big fan of Thayer," Martinook said. "Reminds me of Renfrow from Clemson."

That would be Hunter Renfrow, now with the Oakland Raiders, a smaller receiver with deceptive speed and good hands.

"That punt return was cool," Martinook said.

As for leading the cheers with the fans, Martinook said, "I went to a game last year and saw it and knew it was a thing they do. They kind of had it going there and I stepped in late."



Gold: Hurricanes preseason diary (roster breakdown)

By Adam Gold radio host 99.9 the Fan

Want to have a good laugh? Take a look at the Carolina Hurricanes roster at the end of the 2017-18 season and count how many players are no longer here. Five of the top nine scorers on that team are gone. Jeff Skinner is in Buffalo, Elias Lindholm, Noah Hanifin and Derek Ryan are in Calgary and some guy named Williams is in a Wake County carpool line.

A lot has changed. Nino, Marty, McLovin and Svech arrived, the goalies have turned over a time and a half, and the Canes have restocked a system with prospects. Some will rise to play in Carolina, others will be used as assets to bring more into the mix. But, over the course of the last few seasons, the Hurricanes have dramatically remade their roster and completely changed their culture.

And, last year, thanks to the guidance of first year head coach Rod Brind'Amour and his friend and captain Justin Williams, it culminated in the first playoff appearance in ten years. Now what?

Here's my look — or my guess — at the roster with less than a week before decisions need to be made. And, just to make it even more interesting, I'll put the groups into forward lines and pairs. How much fun will it be to argue over? It's not like Rod actually listens to me.

Sebastian Aho, Nino Niederreiter and Andrei Svechnikov. In the game last Wednesday at home against the Lightning, Niederreiter was playing the right side and it just didn't look right to me. Svechnikov arrived a right wing, I think he can be very Erik Cole like on that side with Nino back on the left.



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Jordan Staal, Warren Foegele and Tuevo Teravainen. The skill level of the Hurricanes has increased to the point that each of the top three lines is going to have at least one player capable of a 25-goal season. Turbo became a complete player a year ago and can fit in many different spots along the forward line. The real intrigue here is which Foegele are we likely to see? The one who went 27 games without a goal in the middle of the season, or the one who scored four times and haunted the Capitals in the opening round upset of Washington.

Erik Haula, Ryan Dzingel and Julien Gauthier. A couple of new guys with speed to burn and a former first round pick who's seen the light bulb go on. Transitioning to a new team isn't easy, so we're all going to have to be a little patient with the two vets (a term that is all relative on this team). Gauthier, however, has been a revelation in training camp. Physically gifted with size, strength and speed, it's taken some time and a fair amount of healthy extra nights in the minor leagues for the 2016 first rounder to finally put it together. According to the head coach, the right side power forward has arguably been their best player in the preseason.

Lucas Wallmark, Brock McGinn and Jordan Martinook. Remember the days when McGinn was a second line winger? I do. And, that wasn't a pretty time. But, both he and fellow penalty killer, Martinook are perfect energy line wingers who can play up if needed. And, while Wallmark is more skill than grit, he is good defensively and will win more face offs than he'll lose.

Notably missing is Martin Necas. The 2017 first round pick made the team out of training camp twice before. He played in one game in 2017 before returning to the Czech Republic, then played in seven before he was sent to Charlotte a year ago. He hasn't been bad, but he hasn't been great either during this training camp. And, with three games left to play in the preseason, he's been outplayed by Gauthier. While they could keep both, Necas really has to play in the top nine. It would help his cause greatly if the Canes kept 13 forwards, but the salary cap constraints probably won't allow that to happen.

Jacob Slavin and Dougie Hamilton. Slavin is the stud, potentially a future Norris Trophy candidate, but I don't have to tell you that. Steady as the sun rising in the morning and as good with his stick as anyone on the roster. There's another level of offense for him to find and that's when he'll be mentioned with the top defenders in the game. Dougie enjoyed a great second half of the season and if that continues into this season the Canes could reap the benefits of a duo that might threaten to combine for 90 points.

Brett Pesce and Justin Faulk. Pesce was wasting away on the right side of Carolina's third pair a year ago when the switch was made to move Brett to the left side next to Faulk. He played there plenty at the University of New Hampshire and over his last 55 games, posted 5 goals, 26 points and was a plus-31. Yes, I understand that +/- is not a perfect, or even a particularly accurate statistical measure. But, when you get no power play time, it's at least a good sign that Pesce was impactful. Spoiler alert; he was. As for his

partner, Faulk's 2019 was simply his finest season as a pro. He was their best defenseman in the Washington series and, entering the final year of his contract, he is aiming towards a great year and a massive free agent payday.

Jake Gardiner and Haydn Fleury. Gardiner can make his biggest impact quarterbacking the power play that proved to be the Canes' downfall against the Bruins. Not that it was great by any stretch during the regular season, but it just became that much more glaring in the playoffs. Now, deciding on which player to pair with Gardiner, at least until Trevor van Riemsdyk returns from injury, is the trick.

All of the choices are also left shot defenders, Gustav Forsling, Jake Bean, Fleury and the newly signed Frederik Claesson, who was placed on waivers yesterday. It's worth keeping in mind that van Riemsdyk has yet to practice with the team, so at the very least you'd expect him to miss the first 2-3 weeks of the season. Meaning, whomever slots in aside Gardiner would only be a place-holder until TvR is ready to return.

Right now, I'd give the edge to Fleury based on familiarity. Though, to be fair, Forsling has probably played the best of that group. With three exhibition games to go, it's anyone's position to win.

One editorial comment about the blue line I'd like to make deals with the constant chatter of a trade involving Justin Faulk. We know that the Canes' second round pick in 2010 essentially nixed a trade with Anaheim, and he's unlikely to accept a below-market deal to extend his stay with the Hurricanes. But, the team is better with him than without him, and while I don't want them to move anyone off the blue line, if they had to move a right shot defenseman, I'd find a deal for Hamilton over Faulk.

Is that a popular opinion, no? But, I just think Faulk is clearly the better player overall, even though Dougie is the superior offensive player. Again, I say keep them all, as the blue line is where the Hurricanes should have a huge edge over most — if not all — of the league.

Petr Mrazek and James Reimer. Petr is going to be the starter October 3 when the Montreal Offer Sheets come to PNC Arena. That is undeniable, barring injury. Reimer is a steady understudy who is used to playing a lot, even by back up standards, and would take a lot of pressure off of Mrazek to play more than 50 or so times. But, there's something about Alex Nedeljkovic that is worth keeping our eyes on. He wins, a lot. And, I would not be surprised if we end the preseason with him on the opening night roster. For now, knowing he can still head back to Charlotte without having to clear waivers, it's a better bet that he starts the year with the Checkers.

There aren't a lot of available roster spots on Edwards Mill Road. But, it's still going to be an interesting final few days before head coach Rod Brind'Amour, general manager Don Waddell and the rest of the decision-makers have to put it all on paper.

Fasten your chin straps.



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Hurricanes Uniform Schedule for 2019-20 Season

New white jerseys will be featured most prominently
by Michael Smith

The Carolina Hurricanes' new white road uniforms will be the team's most popular set in the 2019-20 regular season.

The Canes are scheduled to wear their white jerseys for 42 games, including all road games and once at home on Saturday, Oct. 12 in a "White Out Night" showcase.

The Canes will wear their third jerseys for the maximum regular-season allotment of 15 games, including all 11 Friday home game dates.

[UNIFORM SCHEDULE \(PDF\) | THIRD JERSEY SCHEDULE](#)

The green Whalers throwback kits will make a return at home on Saturday, Jan. 11 when the Hurricanes host the Los Angeles Kings on Whalers Night.

In total, here is the Hurricanes uniform breakdown for the 2019-20 regular season:

White: 42 games

Red: 24 games

Black: 15 games

Whalers: 1 game



Maturing Hurricanes eye second-straight playoff berth

By JOEDY McCREARY

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — The Carolina Hurricanes ended a nine-year postseason drought last season.

This year, their goal: to end an even longer one.

The Hurricanes are looking to reach the postseason for a second straight year — something they haven't done in 18 years.

Carolina advanced to the Eastern Conference final last season before Boston swept the Hurricanes. That deep run gave a largely young team a taste of the postseason, after only a handful of players had any playoff experience entering that first-round series with Washington.

"It's a whole new year, so what's done is done," coach Rod Brind'Amour said, "and you've got to move on and you've got to find a way to be that much better."

And find a way to avoid the playoff hangovers that have plagued this team in the past.

In the three seasons that followed their three most recent playoff appearances — 2003, '07 and '10 — Carolina's point total has dropped by an average of 26.7 points. The Hurricanes finished last in the old Southeast Division the year after making the 2002 Stanley Cup final, and wound up third in the five-team division after both the 2006 Cup title and the run to the 2009 conference final.

WHO'S HERE

The Hurricanes didn't make many flashy acquisitions during the offseason, instead sprinkling some solid veterans throughout the roster. They re-signed free-agent goalie Petr Mrazek to a two-year contract, picked up James Reimer as his likely backup, brought in center Ryan Dzingel for two years and gave defenseman Jake Gardiner a four-year deal shortly before camp.

Their most significant move was keeping one of their young stars — Sebastian Aho. Less than 24 hours after Montreal tendered him a \$42 million offer sheet, they matched the deal and signed the 22-year-old restricted free agent to a



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front-loaded, bonus-heavy contract that locks him up through 2023-24.

"I think we assembled another solid team, and I think had some good additions," forward Jordan Staal said. "I think we'll be a team that's, obviously with Roddy, going to be one of the hardest-working teams, and we'll give it everything we've got every game, and that's going to give us an edge."

WHO'S NOT

Justin Williams — for now, anyway. The captain of last year's team said he was taking a break from the sport to start this season, but left the door open to the possibility of a midseason return. Carolina also traded defenseman Calvin de Haan to Chicago and let forwards Micheal Ferland (Vancouver) and Greg McKegg (New York Rangers) and goalie Curtis McElhinney (Tampa Bay) leave via free agency. They also cut ties with Scott Darling, sending him to Florida in the Reimer trade.

KEY PLAYERS

All eyes will be on Aho, especially during the opener — which, coincidentally, comes against the very same Canadiens team that tried to pry him away. He isn't worried about handling the pressure that comes with that big contract won't be a problem, and says he doesn't set his goals in terms of goals or points: "I just want to be a better player," said Aho, who had team highs of 30 goals and 83 points last season.

NHL teams aim to fill arenas, drawing fans away from screens

By LARRY LAGE

DETROIT (AP) — Detroit Red Wings season-ticket holder Matt Larson pays about \$74 for two of the cheapest seats in Little Caesars Arena. The 32-year-old fan gets a pair of high top chairs set up behind a counter, giving him plenty of space for food and drink, in a spacious area perched near the rafters behind a net.

"There's nothing better than watching hockey in person," Larson said recently while watching Detroit hosted Chicago in a preseason game.

The Red Wings, and every other NHL team, hope there are a lot of people who agree with him.

Detroit is desperately trying to keep hockey fans filing into its arena, which is a little more than two years old, as the allure of the spectacular facility wears off while the team trudges through a multiyear rebuild.

The Red Wings overcame the lack of success on the ice last season to be at 98 percent of capacity on average. They ranked in the middle of the pack in a league that generally is able to draw fans to watch its high-speed, full-contact product in person. Ten teams averaged sellouts and just five of 31 franchises had an average attendance last season that didn't fill at least 90 percent of their arenas.

While Detroit did not have trouble selling tickets last year, it wasn't always playing in front of a packed house because some fans simply couldn't get people to take and use their tickets. To make unoccupied seats stand out less on TV for

Keep an eye on Reimer, too. Mrazek and McElhinney were almost interchangeable last season, pairing to give the Hurricanes a solid one-two combination in both the regular season and playoffs. A key question: Can Reimer seamlessly slide into that No. 2 role while bouncing back after a season in which he matched his career worst save percentage (.900)?

OUTLOOK

It's been a challenge over the past two decades for the Hurricanes to build upon their successes. A key to doing so this season might come with the man advantage. Carolina scored on less than 10% of its postseason chances on the power play — the worst rate of any team that reached the second round — and went stretches of 24 and 13 consecutive power plays without scoring. Dzingel, Erik Haula and Gardiner should help with that.

PREDICTION

The Hurricanes went 46-29-7 last season and their 99 points ranked second in team history only to the 2006 Cup champions, and their 31-12-2 regular season record after Jan. 1 was no fluke. Aside from Williams, the core of that team — chiefly Aho, Teuvo Teravainen, star-in-waiting Andrei Svechnikov and virtually the entire defensive unit — is back and a year more mature. It might be too much to expect another run to the East final, but a second straight playoff berth is very much within reach.

Red Wings and Pistons games, the red material covering chairs has been replaced by black to blend in throughout Little Caesars Arena.

"It was an expensive choice," Larson said. "I would've hated to foot the bill for it."

NHL teams are invested in enhancing game-day experiences, knowing there's a lot at stake to keep them coming to arenas instead of staying at home.

Franchises with a lot of fans at their games strive for ways to keep them and those who regularly have empty patches of seats are trying to come up with creative ways to get people to witness the sport in person.

"Our biggest competitor is Netflix," San Jose Sharks vice president Doug Bentz said. "The one advantage we have over Netflix is you're a part of a community at a Sharks game. We want more of that in our world where so many are stuck on devices in isolation or binge-watching on a couch maybe with one other person."

On streets and in living rooms, St. Louis is still buzzing from its first Stanley Cup.

The Blues will raise a championship banner on Oct. 2 before opening the season against the Washington Capitals. Blues season-ticket holder Mike Buschhorn plans to be there for the party, deciding not to cash in on his tickets by selling them and watching the festivities on TV.



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"You have to be at a hockey game in person to get it," the Blues fan said. "TV doesn't do it justice. It is the most exciting sport to be at."

The price of tickets, however, plays a part in keeping some fans at home.

"It's a lot cheaper for a 12 pack on the weekends," Blues fan John Fuchs said.

The Carolina Hurricanes have gotten creative, trying to climb up from the bottom of the NHL's attendance figures in terms of percentage of capacity. Carolina sold a little more than three-fourths of its tickets last season to rank ahead of only Ottawa after a three-year run of being last in the league.

The Raleigh, North Carolina-based team has been offering monthly subscription passes, giving fans access to a certain number of games for a one-time fee at a substantial savings compared to individual tickets. The mobile-only, ticket-selling innovation has become relatively common in Major League

Baseball, but the Hurricanes are a unique team in the NHL to try it.

"It gets people in the building for an affordable price," Hurricanes vice president Mike Forman said. "We think if we can get people to a game, they're hooked."

Red Wings fan Melanie Bidwell was one of the many hooked on hockey in the Motor City for years, proudly counting herself as a season-ticket holder for more than a decade. When the team moved from Joe Louis to Little Caesars Arena two years ago, she continued to buy season tickets.

Last season, she gave up her tickets as her family got busier and doesn't regret it.

"It's nothing against the Red Wings, we still love them, but it's not convenient to get to games when you're juggling work schedules and a 9-year-old boy playing hockey," she said. "I'm excited that the season is starting again, but our family priorities will keep us at home watching games on TV so we can get our kid in bed for school and we can get up for work."



SB NATION
CANES COUNTRY

Carolina Hurricanes 2019-20 Season Preview: Centers

Carolina enters 2019-20 deeper down the middle than they have been in quite a while.

By Andy House

The Carolina Hurricanes will enter the 2019-20 season with fewer question marks at Center than any year in recent memory. Gone are the questions of whether or not Sebastian Aho can play the position. Gone are the questions of whether or not youthful players counted on in the bottom-six Center spots are capable of holding up defensively. Instead, the Canes are presented with more possibility than questions. If they can grow stronger from their already strong position, Center could be an area of significant advantage on many nights in the future.

Jordan Staal

Age: 31

2018-19 Totals: 50 GP, 11 goals, 17 assists, 28 points

Career Totals: 893 GP, 217 goals, 293 assists, 510 points

Acquired: Via trade with Pittsburgh on June 22, 2012

For the first time in his Hurricanes career, Jordan Staal was able to experience postseason play. Ironically, the big push that catapulted the Canes into serious contention just after the first of the season coincided with an extended absence from Staal due to injury. During that timeframe, as the Canes

played some of their best hockey of the season, Rod Brind'Amour marveled at how his team was able to overcome a loss that he felt was as key as any player on the roster. As the Canes inevitably slowed down their pace, and Staal returned with his heavy, impactful game, it became clear that Brind'Amour was right in his assessment that the Canes improvement along the rest of the roster without Staal was merely coincidental, and that with Staal involved the Canes immediately became a much more dangerous team.

Typically tasked with leading a line that draws some of the toughest defensive assignments, Staal was able to win faceoffs at a 55.8 % clip, while taking over 1000 draws even in a shortened season. His physical game brings an important element that is reinforced by the likes of Jordan Martinook and Brock McGinn, but comes in a massive 6'4 frame and with a sturdy flash of skill from the man from Thunder Bay.

In order for the Canes to maintain their status as a contender and a postseason team, they will likely need a healthier season from Staal as he continues to evolve into the true veteran leader on this young and talented roster. Leading a top-six line that also can take on tremendous defensive responsibility is a great task, but one that Staal is uniquely qualified to perform.

Sebastian Aho

Age: 22



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2018-19 Totals: 82 GP, 30 goals, 53 assists, 83 points

Career Totals: 242 GP, 83 goals, 114 assists, 197 points

Acquired: 2nd round (35th overall) pick, 2015 NHL Draft

There were questions amongst fans and observers around the league as to how viable the transition to Center would be for Sebastian Aho in 2018-19. Rod Brind'Amour was insistent that his then-21 year old Finnish star could handle the additional responsibility of playing in the middle and that he could provide from within the long awaited "number one Center" that many have pined for in Raleigh. Well, perhaps not even Brind'Amour could have expected Aho to take so strongly to the role. For Aho, 2018-19 served as a true breakout season as he finished top-10 in the Hart Trophy voting and solidified himself as an upper echelon performer in the NHL.

Aho had a tremendous season numbers-wise, but was slowed at the end of the season by various injuries that did not keep him off the ice for the Canes playoff run, but did hamper his effectiveness. Perhaps most telling was that he did not take many draws as the season ended. Nevertheless, Aho managed to average over 20 minutes per night (20:09), while playing every single night. And not only did Aho play each night, but he was able to excel in the one area that many believed he would initially struggle at Center: defense. Aho was quickly given even more responsibility on that end as he became one of the top penalty killers for Carolina and admirably played the role of ace defensive Center in the absence of Jordan Staal.

Taking as a whole, Aho's 2018-19 season did not perhaps have the increase in goal-scoring that many would have expected. It did have him growing his game rapidly in every other area that could be measured. As such, his third NHL season was his best yet. And for the Canes, a healthy Aho in 2019-20 is something that will get everyone excited to see what he is capable of next.

Erik Haula

Age: 28

2018-19 Totals: 15 GP, 2 goals, 5 assists, 7 points

Career Totals: 357 GP, 73 goals, 78 assists, 151 points

Acquired: Via trade with Vegas on June 26, 2019

Coming off his first injury-plagued campaign, Erik Haula joins the Canes as a salary cap casualty from the Vegas Golden Knights. Haula, a huge part of the Golden Knights run to the Stanley Cup Final in their inaugural season, played only 15 games last year due to leg injury. He provided this after putting together a 55 point season the year before and appeared to be a building piece for the future in Vegas. The Hurricanes hope he can regain something resembling that 2017-18 form to become part of what the Canes hope is a retooled third line offensively.

Another left shot, Haula could pair with any combination of Canes on a third line, including Andrei Svechnikov, Warren Foegele, Martin Necas, Brock McGinn, and others. It is also possible that Rod Brind'Amour determines that Haula is best distributed on left wing, but as of now expect Haula to get his initial looks at Center. The addition of Haula and free agent

Ryan Dzingel were intended to help the Canes overcome the lost production from Justin Williams' "soft retirement", but also provide some added juice to a third line that the Canes hope can do more than hold their own, but rather dominate the bottom-six from their opponents. If Haula is healthy, he should be more than capable of assisting in that, no matter where he ultimately slots into the Carolina lineup.

Lucas Wallmark

Age: 24

2018-19 Totals: 81 GP, 10 goals, 18 assists, 28 points

Career Totals: 100 GP, 11 goals, 20 assists, 31 points

Acquired: 4th round (97th overall), 2014 NHL Draft

Lucas Wallmark completed his first full NHL season in 2018-19, and showed the kind of steady growth that you would expect from a young player who continues to learn how to apply his game in the toughest league in the world. Just like fellow rookies Andrei Svechnikov and Warren Foegele, Wallmark was at his best as the season finished and into the playoffs. In 15 playoff games, Wallmark posted just five points, but his consistency and possession of the puck made him a comfortable play for Brind'Amour.

Even though Wallmark emerged from the season with a modest 10 goals and 28 total points, his play gave indications that he may have only scratched the surface of what he is capable of offensively. If his ice time remains at or above 15 minutes a night, Wallmark may yet become a consistent 40+ point performer that provides solid all-around play. If Wallmark is given the task of Centering the fourth line in Raleigh, perhaps that point total is ambitious. But if that mark is not met, it doesn't mean that Wallmark cannot contribute mightily. Performing at over 50% (50.9%) in the faceoff dot in his first season as an NHL Center, there is reason to think that Wallmark can slot in at Center on the second, third, or fourth lines and not appear out of his depth. Such a versatile and growing young player can provide terrific value for a coaching staff that is willing to mix up lines if they are not clicking.

If Wallmark can take yet another step forward like he did in 2018-19 where he earned a consistent role in the NHL for the first time in his career, he will be well on his way to positioning himself as another important piece in the Canes dynamic young core of forwards.

Martin Necas

Age: 20

2018-19 Totals: 7 GP, 1 goal, 1 assist, 2 points

Career Totals: 8 GP, 1 goal, 1 assist, 2 points

Acquired: 1st round (12th overall), 2017 NHL Draft

While he has made cameo appearances in each of the last two seasons, many are wondering if the 2019-20 campaign is when Martin Necas earns an opportunity to stay in Raleigh for most if not all of the season. While Necas played seven games in the NHL last year and recorded his first NHL goal, he spent most of his first season in North America at the AHL level with the Calder Cup Champion Charlotte Checkers. In 64 games, Necas posted a solid 52 point season (16 goals,



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36 assists) and was a fabulous performer on the powerplay unit. Whether he can earn those sorts of opportunities at the NHL remains to be seen, but Necas is part of the group of young forwards who are either just establishing themselves at the NHL level (Wallmark, Foegele, Svechnikov) or are looking to consistently crack the NHL lineup for the first time (Necas and Gauthier).

In order for Necas to earn a spot with the Canes, he must show that he is physically ready to play, as his smaller frame was noticeable in his brief past appearances. There is little doubt that Necas has the skill to make a significant impact at the NHL level. If his physicality and speed in decision-making

have caught up to his talent, the Canes might have their hand forced to include him sooner rather than later.

Scoring Projections (Assuming 82 GP)

Jordan Staal: 23 goals, 33 assists, 56 points

Martin Necas: 15 goals, 24 assists, 39 points

Erik Haula: 22 goals, 25 assists, 47 points

Sebastian Aho: 40 goals, 53 assists, 93 points

Lucas Wallmark: 15 goals, 18 assists, 33 points

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SportScan

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

1153905 Carolina Hurricanes

Canes' Martinook helps Pack crank up the volume

BY CHIP ALEXANDER SEPTEMBER 23, 2019 04:56 PM

RALEIGH-Jordan Martinook of the Carolina Hurricanes scored some field passes to N.C. State's football game Saturday and took some friends with him to Carter-Finley Stadium.

Then, the fun began.

Martinook, wearing a floppy hat and red No. 19 Wolfpack jersey, posed for photos with teammates Andrei Svechnikov, Warren Foegele, Trevor van Riemsdyk, Dougie Hamilton and Clark Bishop on the sideline. Before long, the Canes forward was leading State fans in the "Wolf! Pack! Wolf! Pack!" cheer, waving his arms, asking for volume, clearly the ringleader.

"It was cool," Martinook said Monday. "That's the first time I've ever been down there that close to the game. Walking behind the bench, it's cool to see how big those boys are. Real big. The atmosphere was just awesome."

Martinook, a native of Brandon, Manitoba, said he played a little football as a kid. Wide receiver, running back, quarterback, safety ... Martinook said he tried those positions until his first year of bantam hockey as a young teenager.

"I was a big, big football guy but it comes to a point where you have to pick, right?" he said. "I was going from hockey game on a Saturday afternoon to a football game Saturday night. It was a lot back then. But I love football, I love watching it."

Martinook and the Canes contingent watched as the Pack topped Ball State 34-23, the biggest play coming on Thayer Thomas' 76-yard punt return for a score in the third quarter.

"I'm a big fan of Thayer," Martinook said. "Reminds me of Renfrow from Clemson."

That would be Hunter Renfrow, now with the Oakland Raiders, a smaller receiver with deceptive speed and good hands.

"That punt return was cool," Martinook said.

As for leading the cheers with the fans, Martinook said, "I went to a game last year and saw it and knew it was a thing they do. They kind of had it going there and I stepped in late."

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1153906 Carolina Hurricanes



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With a flurry of moves at the goalie position, Canes' Alex Nedeljkovic isn't fazed

BY CHIP ALEXANDER SEPTEMBER 23, 2019 11:20 AM

RALEIGH-In the span of eight days this summer there were six goaltending moves involving the Carolina Hurricanes.

All of them, in a sense, affected goalie Alex Nedeljkovic and where he might play this season.

To quickly recap:

The Canes traded for goalie Anton Forsberg on June 24 in the deal that sent defenseman Calvin de Haan to the Chicago Blackhawks.

The Canes re-signed Nedeljkovic to a two-year contract on June 28.

Carolina traded for James Reimer in the June 30 deal with the Florida Panthers in which goalie Scott Darling went to Florida.

The Canes then re-signed Petr Mrazek on July 1, the start of NHL free agency, as Curtis McElhinney left and signed with Tampa Bay.

Nedeljkovic's reaction to that flurry of goaltending activity?

"You see it, everybody sees it but I try not to look too deep into it, just focus on myself," Nedeljkovic said Saturday in an N&O interview. "It's the same with any situation, whether it's two new guys here or me coming in by myself. You've got to find that compete inside you, that drive inside you, to get better."

Nedeljkovic, 23, said general manager Don Waddell's job was to put the best team on the ice, adding, "If that's bringing in other guys that are doing better than me, then obviously I've got some work to do. But the only thing I can do is worry about myself. That's what's going to get me to the next level."

For Nedeljkovic, named the American Hockey League goaltender of the year in 2018-19, the "next level" would likely mean Mrazek's backup with the Canes this season. There were six goalies in training camp before Callum Booth and Jeremy Helvig were reassigned Saturday to the Charlotte Checkers, the Canes' AHL affiliate.

It's now three for one: Nedeljkovic, Reimer and Forsberg competing for that second position on the roster. But Nedeljkovic has a two-way contract this season (one-way in 2020-21) and is waiver exempt. Reimer and Forsberg have NHL contracts, Reimer drawing a \$3.1 million salary and Forsberg being awarded a one-year, one-way deal after he filed for arbitration following the trade from Chicago.

NEDELJKOVIC WINS THE CALDER CUP

When practice was held Monday, Mrazek and Reimer were with the more veteran group. Nedeljkovic and Forsberg were with the second group, with a primary camp roster cut down still to be announced.

Reimer and Forsberg were in the NHL last season, Reimer appearing in 36 games for the Panthers and Forsberg 35 for Chicago while also playing in the AHL. Both put up pedestrian NHL numbers, generally in backup roles.

Nedeljkovic, a second-round draft pick by Carolina in 2014, had one game for the Canes, making his first NHL start in the Jan. 23 game at Vancouver and earning his first NHL victory with 24 saves as the Canes won 5-2. The Canes had lost three of four games, the victory allowed them to go into the NHL All-Star break on an uptick.

"Really special," Nedeljkovic said of the game. "My parents were in town and it was a dream come true, to be able to make it to that level and win that first start."

Another special game was to come in early June. The Charlotte Checkers beat the Chicago Wolves to clinch the AHL's Calder Cup. That ended a dream season for the Checkers, team owner Michael Kahn and Nedeljkovic, who had a 34-9-5 record in the regular season and was 10-4 in the postseason.

Checkers JUMP MAIN

Nedeljkovic, called "Ned" by teammates and coaches, doesn't recall much about the aftermath of that clinching game, that moment. He said, with a smile, that it was as if he blacked out from the excitement.

"Just jumping around, screaming and yelling," he said. "I do remember the one big roar when we got to see Mr. Kahn raise that Cup over his head."

Much like the Stanley Cup, the Calder Cup later is passed around from player to player to have their "day" with the cup. Nedeljkovic, from Parma, Ohio, said he low-keyed it, taking the cup to downtown Cleveland for a few photos with family, then on to a pool party.

Come September, Nedeljkovic hopped behind the wheel of his F-150 and headed south, putting in the miles and jumping into the logjam at the position.

BRIND'AMOUR FEELS GOOD ABOUT GOALTENDING

Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Saturday morning that he felt "really good" about the goaltending after more than a week of camp.

"I like all of them," he said. "I think it's certainly different from last year, coming into this situation, so I feel way better."

The Canes suffered a 3-2 preseason loss Saturday night in Washington, in a game Brind'Amour called disgusting. Forsberg, the starter, allowed two goals on 10 shots and Reimer one goal on 10 as they split up the game.

Nedeljkovic's only preseason appearance was Wednesday against Tampa Bay. Coming in midway through the second period after Mrazek started, he stopped all 15 shots to complete the 2-0 shutout.

Being a good goalie calls for sound technique and quick instincts but also mental toughness. For the past few years, Nedeljkovic has consulted with Dr. Saul Miller, a mental coach who has worked with other pro athletes and is the author of "Hockey Tough: A Winning Mental Game."

"Every year I feel like I'm mentally stronger, mentally tougher," Nedeljkovic said. "I can get over a bad night. I don't turn one bad night into two and two doesn't go into three."

"If you have a bad night, shake it off, try to refocus and get back to being consistent. It's so easy for things to go south or go sideways on you. You have to come to the rink and it's a new day, a fresh start."

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1153907 Carolina Hurricanes

Maturing Hurricanes Eye Second-Straight Playoff Berth

BY THE CANADIAN PRESS SEPTEMBER 23RD, 2019

RALEIGH, N.C. — The Carolina Hurricanes ended a nine-year post-season drought last season.

This year, their goal: to end an even longer one.



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The Hurricanes are looking to reach the postseason for a second straight year — something they haven't done in 18 years.

Carolina advanced to the Eastern Conference final last season before Boston swept the Hurricanes. That deep run gave a largely young team a taste of the post-season, after only a handful of players had any playoff experience entering that first-round series with Washington.

"It's a whole new year, so what's done is done," coach Rod Brind'Amour said, "and you've got to move on and you've got to find a way to be that much better."

And find a way to avoid the playoff hangovers that have plagued this team in the past.

In the three seasons that followed their three most recent playoff appearances — 2003, '07 and '10 — Carolina's point total has dropped by an average of 26.7 points. The Hurricanes finished last in the old Southeast Division the year after making the 2002 Stanley Cup final, and wound up third in the five-team division after both the 2006 Cup title and the run to the 2009 conference final.

Who's Here

The Hurricanes didn't make many flashy acquisitions during the off-season, instead sprinkling some solid veterans throughout the roster. They re-signed free-agent goalie Petr Mrazek to a two-year contract, picked up James Reimer as his likely backup, brought in centre Ryan Dzingel for two years and gave defenceman Jake Gardiner a four-year deal shortly before camp.

Petr Mrazek, Carolina Hurricanes

Their most significant move was keeping one of their young stars — Sebastian Aho. Less than 24 hours after Montreal tendered him a \$42 million offer sheet, they matched the deal and signed the 22-year-old restricted free agent to a front-loaded, bonus-heavy contract that locks him up through 2023-24.

"I think we assembled another solid team, and I think had some good additions," forward Jordan Staal said. "I think we'll be a team that's, obviously with Roddy, going to be one of the hardest-working teams, and we'll give it everything we've got every game, and that's going to give us an edge."

Who's Not

Justin Williams — for now, anyway. The captain of last year's team said he was taking a break from the sport to start this season, but 1153957 Nashville Predators

How is the Predators' roster shaping up as opening night approaches?

By Adam Vingan

Sep 23, 2019

The Predators made the first significant cuts to their roster Sunday and Monday, leaving 26 players in training camp.

Based on who remains, it appears the Predators' 23-man opening-night roster, which must be submitted by Oct. 1, won't feature many surprises.

Forward

Locks: Viktor Arvidsson, Nick Bonino, Matt Duchene, Filip Forsberg, Mikael Granlund, Rocco Grimaldi, Calle Jarnkrok, Ryan Johansen, Colton Sissons, Craig Smith, Kyle Turris, Austin Watson

left the door open to the possibility of a midseason return. Carolina also traded defenceman Calvin de Haan to Chicago and let forwards Micheal Ferland (Vancouver) and Greg McKegg (New York Rangers) and goalie Curtis McElhinney (Tampa Bay) leave via free agency. They also cut ties with Scott Darling, sending him to Florida in the Reimer trade.

Justin Williams

Key Players

All eyes will be on Aho, especially during the opener — which, coincidentally, comes against the very same Canadiens team that tried to pry him away. He isn't worried about handling the pressure that comes with that big contract won't be a problem, and says he doesn't set his goals in terms of goals or points: "I just want to be a better player," said Aho, who had team highs of 30 goals and 83 points last season.

Keep an eye on Reimer, too. Mrazek and McElhinney were almost interchangeable last season, pairing to give the Hurricanes a solid one-two combination in both the regular season and playoffs. A key question: Can Reimer seamlessly slide into that No. 2 role while bouncing back after a season in which he matched his career worst save percentage (.900)?

Outlook

It's been a challenge over the past two decades for the Hurricanes to build upon their successes. A key to doing so this season might come with the man advantage. Carolina scored on less than 10% of its post-season chances on the power play — the worst rate of any team that reached the second round — and went stretches of 24 and 13 consecutive power plays without scoring. Dzingel, Erik Haula and Gardiner should help with that.

Prediction

The Hurricanes went 46-29-7 last season and their 99 points ranked second in team history only to the 2006 Cup champions, and their 31-12-2 regular season record after Jan. 1 was no fluke. Aside from Williams, the core of that team — chiefly Aho, Teuvo Teravainen, star-in-waiting Andrei Svechnikov and virtually the entire defensive unit — is back and a year more mature. It might be too much to expect another run to the East final, but a second straight playoff berth is very much within reach.

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Fighting for a spot: Daniel Carr, Frederick Gaudreau, Miikka Salomaki

Assigned to the AHL: Colin Blackwell, Lukas Craggs, Laurent Dauphin, Tanner Jeannot, Zach Magwood, Thomas Novak, Mathieu Olivier, Joe Pendenza, Rem Pitlick, Anthony Richard, Hugo Roy, Cole Schneider, Eeli Tolvanen, Yakov Trenin, Josh Wilkins

Assigned to juniors: Egor Afanasyev (OHL Windsor), Philip Tomasino (OHL Niagara)

Any potential drama disappeared when the team assigned Tolvanen and Pitlick, both of whom stood out during the preseason, to the Milwaukee Admirals. Neither required waivers to be sent to the minors, which was always working against them, even as they had strong showings in the rookie tournament and preseason games.

The decision to send Tolvanen to the AHL makes sense, as he doesn't belong in a bottom-six role. Pitlick, though, wouldn't have looked out of place on the Predators' third line.

"They both had good camps," Predators coach Peter Laviolette said Monday. "Eeli really showed improvement from last camp to this camp. Rem coming in and really getting a look at him for the first time, he played the one game at the end of last year, but that was when he first got here, and he's a completely different player now."



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We've got good players up here as well. (Tolvanen and Pitlick) are good players. It's a chance for them to continue to develop and play in all situations.

"Young players sitting out of the lineup up here or playing fourth-line minutes, especially those two players, doesn't really accomplish anything. They both had terrific camps. We're really happy with them. They're part of the future. ... We're really happy with the camp of both of them. I think it's a really good, positive thing for our organization to have that depth."

Last week, Predators general manager David Poile said, "A lot of the decisions that we're going to make at training camp will be with an eye towards offense." The projected bottom six will not accomplish that. Carr's ability to generate high-quality scoring opportunities should help, and it's possible Smith moves to the third line if Turris, who practiced with Johansen and Arvidsson on Monday, starts as a top-six winger. But there are too many question marks.

Salomaki and Gaudreau, who have a combined 14 career goals, aren't going to provide much of anything in the offensive zone. Salomaki's straight-ahead, physical style has made him a favorite of the coaching staff, but his impact has been negligible. Gaudreau has never let his brief stardom affect his mindset, but the 26-year-old has reached his ceiling as a solid but unspectacular forward. At least one of them will be waived by next week.

Defense

Locks: Mattias Ekholm, Ryan Ellis, Dante Fabbro, Dan Hamhuis, Roman Josi, Yannick Weber

Fighting for a spot: Matt Irwin, Steven Santini, Jarred Tinordi

Assigned to the AHL: Frederic Allard, Arvin Atwal, Alexandre Carrier, Jeremy Davies, Matt Donovan, Brandon Fortunato, Josh Healey, Scott Savage, Adam Smith

The Predators' third defense pairing is going to be a weakness this season, regardless of which two players are on it. Ideally, Irwin and Santini are used sparingly, but there figures to be some sort of rotation throughout the season. Santini being acquired as part of the P.K. Subban trade might give him a slight edge over Irwin if the team carries seven defensemen.

Irwin and Weber were the Predators' most commonly used third pair last season, though that was a product of Hamhuis either being injured or filling in for Subban when he was out of the lineup. Hamhuis and Weber should start the year there. Tinordi hasn't played in the NHL since March 2016, and that isn't expected to change this season.

On Monday, Laviolette paired Josi with Ellis and Ekholm with Fabbro.

"He got put into the biggest stage last year, and he did it without much of an introduction to the regular season," Laviolette said when asked if he'll monitor Fabbro's usage at the start of his first full season. "When he got here, he played, and when he got to the playoffs, he played really well. We'll obviously keep an eye on him and how we go about business with him, but right now, he's shown that he belongs."

Goaltender

Locks: Pekka Rinne, Juuse Saros

Assigned to the AHL: Ken Appleby, Connor Ingram, Troy Grosenick

The goaltending tandem is set. Rinne will start the Predators' season opener for the 10th consecutive year Oct. 3 against the Minnesota Wild.

Adam Vingan

The Athletic LOADED: 09.24.2019

1153958 Nashville Predators

2019-20 NHL Season Preview: Nashville Predators

By Dom Luszczyszyn

Sep 23, 2019

Three years ago the Nashville Predators began their ascent to contention with a surprising trip to their first ever Stanley Cup final, losing to the Pittsburgh Penguins. Two years ago the team won the Presidents' Trophy, but lost in the second round. Last year they won the division for the second straight season, but with 17 fewer points en route to a first round exit.

That's not a great trend.

The Predators are in the thick of their window, but are struggling to make it over the hump. They have a bunch of phoney banners and paper rings, but they're still on the hunt for the real thing and a real ring. Not to take anything away from those accomplishments — this is a tough league and those achievements deserve some recognition — it's just not what teams play for. It's Stanley Cup or bust.

Big moves were made this summer in the name of balance with the goal of winning it all and the team looks to be in good shape to make a run. The one issue is that last year's defending Stanley Cup champion hails from their division, putting a musical shaped roadblock between Nashville and eternal glory.

The battle between the two looks tight, though, and it wouldn't be a surprise to see either team represent the West. For now, Nashville is a top five team, but a small step behind the West's best in St. Louis.

The margins between Nashville, Carolina and Vegas for the final spot in the top five are razor-thin with just 0.5 points separating the three. Nashville gets the slight edge for now, but that doesn't mean it won't be the other two (or another team) in the top five come April. While Nashville is ranked fifth overall, that's not a guarantee by any means. The Predators end up in the top five in just 38 percent of simulations and only the top two teams are above 50 percent. Even making it to the top five is a difficult feat. A third consecutive 100-point season looks likely, but isn't a promise either at 56 percent probability.

That's the regular season, though, and it's hard to care about that anymore in Nashville after the disappointing way the last three seasons ended. The Predators have the sixth best chance at the Cup at seven percent. The path through the Central will be grueling where even the first round will be tough — the Predators only look to be 55 percent favorites there. That could mean a repeat of last year's playoffs where Nashville was upset by the Stars and went home early. With a 14 percent probability, that just so happens to be their most likely playoff opponent come April too.

This is a different team, though. Last year's version was built off an incredible defense group with a forward core that just didn't stack up to other elite teams. The Stars' elite forwards made them pay. While the Predators still lack the high-end talent up front to go toe-to-toe with other elite teams, they've bridged the gap slightly with a big-time offseason add. It took a big sacrifice on defense to make it happen, but one that should pay off.

The big difference between last year's team and this year's is that Matt Duchene is in via free agency and P.K. Subban is out via trade. The team had long had an interest in Duchene dating back to the Kyle Turris deal, but fitting him under the cap meant getting rid of



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equivalent salary elsewhere. With the team quite deep at defense, it meant Subban was expendable, especially after a down season by his standards. Both players have similar win valuations around roughly two wins, but this change shifts the balance back to the forward ranks. Before the "swap" the Predators forward group ranked 17th while their defense ranked fourth. After, the forwards and defense now both rank ninth. Now the team is top 10 at every position, rather than having an elite defense corps and an average forward group.

Duchene is a bona fide first-liner that gives the team a decent one-two punch with Ryan Johansen, but he's not the elite star down the middle that most contending teams are built around. It's the type of player the Predators have long craved practically since the team's inception, but one that remains elusive to them. The hope was that Johansen could be that, but he never reached that apex and I have my doubts Duchene will get there either.

Duchene can score, there's no question about that, but there are questions about how much. Last year was his strongest season since 2013-14 scoring 70 points in 73 games, but there should be concern with how often pucks were going in for him. He scored on 18 percent of his shots, a career peak and a touch higher than the 13.6 percent he managed the three seasons prior. That was driven by a power play shooting percentage of 26 percent, which is unlikely to repeat. Nashville struggled mightily on the power play last season, but unless Duchene can manage to pull that off again it's unlikely he's going to be the answer as he's never had the strongest power play numbers himself. He should be in the ballpark of 70 points this season and anything more would likely mean some things falling his way a bit.

The bigger issue is Duchene's ability to drive play as he's had a below average expected goals rate in five straight seasons. He has the talent and personal finishing ability to offset that, but arguably not enough to consider him an elite option. He's personally strong with the puck with good entry, exit and contributions numbers – it just hasn't translated to on-ice success often in his career. It's a lot of flash, but not as much substance as his reputation might suggest.

He's never had much support, though. From Colorado to Ottawa it's been a long time since he's been with a franchise with a winning culture, one with talented players to surround him with. His most common linemates have been Ryan Dzingel (in both Ottawa and Columbus), Mike Hoffman, Bobby Ryan, and a complete line blender through most of his time in Colorado featuring Jarome Iginla, Nail Yakupov, Alex Tanguay and pre-breakout Nathan MacKinnon. Hardly a murderer's row of players who can drive play. Nashville has that in spades with very strong winger depth in the top six, guys that may be able to elevate his game to another level. Fit matters a ton and it's why the match made a lot of sense for both parties. It gives reason for optimism that Duchene can be better than shown and hopefully live up to the massive contract he's signed.

While the lineup is still very much in flux, there seems to be a good chance that Duchene starts the season with Nashville's most talented forwards flanking him: Filip Forsberg and Mikael Granlund. Together, they form what could be a top 15 line in the league, one that may be even better than the famed JOFA line. Splitting up the team's best line may feel like a risk, but it should be worth the reward given the talent on display.

As mentioned above, fit and chemistry mean a lot and this potential line feels like a great spot for Duchene as he'll be sandwiched between two players with first line caliber scoring rates that can put up 65 points, but perhaps more importantly have had a strong history of pushing play in the right direction. Forsberg is easily the team's strongest forward and should be more highly regarded as one of the game's strongest play-drivers. He'd be in the elite tier if not for his relative fragility. Over the last three seasons he leads all Predators forwards in expected goals RAPM by virtue of being the team's best player at pushing offense. He's the engine on the top line and was the team's best player at entering the zone until

Duchene arrived. Having two weapons like that on the top line make it that much more dangerous.

Granlund, a byproduct of Minnesota's stingy system, is the defensive muscle here and should help Duchene improve his standing there. He's a strong two-way winger who's a gifted playmaker, which should fit right in with two players that love to score. His first 16 games with Nashville didn't go according to plan as he managed just five points total – only one of which was at 5-on-5 – while getting outchanced and badly outscored, but he has a lengthy history of significantly stronger results. In his previous three seasons with Minnesota he has a sterling 56 percent expected goals rate buoyed by a 1.94 expected goals against per 60 rate that would easily be the team's best mark, and a 1.91 points per 60 that falls just shy of first line territory. His best strength, though, is on the power play where he's scored six points per 60 over the last three seasons, but it appears he won't be used there to start; an odd choice for a team so anemic in that area.

Despite the Duchene addition, the Predators' very expensive center depth still ranks in the league's bottom third. The team has spent a lot of money and resources there trying to shore things up and while it's the deepest it's arguably ever been, it still pales in comparison to a lot of other teams. That's at their current projection, though, and the hope is that the addition of Duchene can spark a trickle-down effect that gets Johansen playing his best hockey now that the focus is on another line (while Johansen may be first on the depth chart for now according to lines from Adam Vingan, I know which line I'm trying to shut down if I'm an opposing coach).

Johansen's 64 points last year were a Nashville high built off a 2.21 points per 60 at 5-on-5 that was a career high thanks to his place on a high octane top line. Johansen and company had no trouble generating offense, but last season it was at the expense of defense – a part of Johansen's game that has deteriorated over the last few seasons. Three seasons ago, the Predators allowed just 2.12 expected goals against per 60 with Johansen on the ice, leading to a strong 54 percent expected goals rate. At that point, you could consider Johansen a strong two-way center, but that's not really the case anymore. Last year, that figure ballooned to 2.89 expected goals against per 60, the worst mark of his career and the second worst mark on the team ahead of only linemate Viktor Arvidsson. It showed up on the scoresheet too where he only carried 51 percent of the goals, a sizeable dropoff from the 56 percent he was at in Nashville prior. Johansen should also consider cleaning up his penalties too as he's the team's least disciplined player with a projected minus-eight penalty differential – a difficult accomplishment for a forward. For him to be a bona fide top line center, he needs to get back to being a complete 200-foot player, especially if the new guy isn't very adept in his own end either. He'll have a better chance to do so on the second line.

That he's still paired with Arvidsson doesn't bode well for that as the gifted goal scorer is the team's worst defensive asset, though there's a chance the lesser assignments help his standing too. What Arvidsson gives up in his own end he more than makes up for on offense, though, with last year being his strongest season to date. He's been quite the find for Nashville since arriving onto the scene three seasons ago, scoring well above a first line rate in every season. Last year he became the premier scorer many hoped he could be, especially at 5-on-5. While his individual shot rates have remained unchanged over the last three seasons always hovering around 11.4 shots per 60, the relative danger of those chances have gone up as he's elevated his individual expected goals per 60 from 0.89 to 0.96 to 1.06 last season, the 15th best mark in the league. Arvidsson took full advantage of that scoring 1.85 goals per 60, a figure that not only led the league, but was also the second highest since 2007-08 behind only Sidney Crosby's ridiculous 41-game run in 2010-11. That's incredibly impressive, and though he likely has 35-40 goal upside, I'd bet he gets there with volume more than the 16 percent shooting percentage he earned last season.



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Less impressive is his work on the power play. For such a gifted goal scorer, it's strange that Arvidsson hasn't been able to figure things out on the man advantage scoring just three goals and four points in 164 minutes last season. His 1.46 points per 60 was the 12th lowest among forwards who played more than 100 minutes.

It's worth noting too that last year that duo struggled mightily in its 150 minutes without Forsberg on the left side. With Forsberg likely lining up with Duchene, Turriss slides onto the left side and that lessens the duo's likely impact barring a big bounce-back season. Turriss was among the many stopgap solutions to the team's center problem and was the consolation prize to the team missing out on Duchene just two seasons ago. He was a worthy one at the time and was excellent in 2017-18 but experienced a steep dropoff last season. He's gone from decent second line center to third-liner who's been relegated to the wing. This switch to wing represents a rehabilitation project after his struggles last season.

Turriss isn't a liability in his own end like Arvidsson, but if last season was any indication he's somehow turned into an expensive black hole on offense. Overnight he seemingly lost a lot of his puck skills, shooting less, creating shots for teammates less and carrying the puck up ice with control less. It was a mess and led to a steep drop in his on-ice expected goals rates from 3.1 to 2.4 year-over-year. In 55 games last season, Turriss had an abysmal 1.1 points per 60 at 5-on-5, scoring just two goals there all season. It was a sharp decline from the 1.7 points per 60 from a year ago that hinged almost entirely on Turriss' own inability to create chances. Some blame can be placed on his woeful 3.4 percent shooting percentage, but when a player is only generating 0.38 expected goals per 60 himself, it's to be expected that not a lot of them are going in. That's a big drop from the 0.67 he generated in his first year in Nashville and ranked as the eighth worst mark in all of hockey.

At 30, it's hard to know whether he can get back to his previous level, but that would provide a big boost to Nashville if he could. That'll be easier to do if he sticks in the top six with Johansen and Arvidsson, but if he can't cut it there all hope may be lost for him in the bottom six where it'll be a struggle to recuperate his value depending of course on potential linemates.

With Turriss moving up and the deadline addition of Granlund, it looks like Craig Smith and his wicked shot volume will be relegated to the third line with Colton Sissons and Calle Jarnkrok. Smith looks like a player that can drive goals and has earned a first line caliber scoring rate in each of the past two seasons, but that'll be much more difficult to accomplish with two players that are more defensively minded. Aside from Granlund, who spent nearly all of his time in Minnesota, Jarnkrok and Sissons grade out as the team's best defensive forwards.

They were the team's stingiest forwards last season along with Rocco Grimaldi and Nick Bonino on the fourth line. Bonino had a renaissance 2018-19 season, but that looks largely percentages driven. I'm not sure the team will outscore opponents by 1.2 goals per 60 with him on the ice again when he's carrying a below break-even expected goals rate, but he still looks to be a decent player who is a luxury on the fourth line. A well-paid luxury who was another one of the team's center solutions that didn't quite pan out. At the very least, it gives the team four lines they can run, though hopefully they proportion the minutes between the top and bottom six better than they have in years past.

On defense, Subban is gone but the hope is that the team doesn't miss a beat as long as Roman Josi, Ryan Ellis and Mattias Ekholm pick up the slack. All three grade out as No. 1 defenders who can put up points, drive offense, defend well in tough minutes and move the puck. The complete package to varying degrees.

Josi appears to be the best (though the weakest defensively) and is one of the game's best offensive forces from the back end, excelling at gaining the zone, breaking out the puck and creating chances on offense. He's amazing with the puck and creates his own chances

on defense better than any other. His projected 14.8 individual expected goals leads all defensemen and he led the league last year with 17. His 15 goals scored were legit. He forms an elite pair with Ellis on the right side, the fifth best in hockey that's earned 58 percent of the goals and 53 percent of the expected goals together over the last two seasons. Ellis is the team's next best offensive option, forming a high octane pair that could make Nashville's top five-man unit one of the league's most dangerous. A very underrated trait from these two, though: their strong discipline. Josi is expected to have just a minus-2.5 penalty differential while Ellis is even stronger at plus-4.7. That's difficult to do for a defenseman and the latter mark ranks second in the league to only Colorado's Samuel Girard.

When it comes to Ellis, his impacts are always strong, but it's worth noting his numbers aren't as strong as his reputation might indicate. He's still above average at breaking out the puck, but he's not elite like Josi. With Subban gone, he'll need to step things up in that department.

Ekholm mans the second pair as always and though it's still a top 30 pair, it likely won't be the elite one it's long been in the past without Subban on the right side. That's the sacrifice that needs to be made to boost the offense and I think the team will be just fine having its second pair still be top pair caliber. Ekholm himself was magnificent last year, arguably his best season to date and there's a case to be made he was the team's best last year – at least he was by GSVA. He's the underrated gem on this blueline and in terms of defensive impact he's a top 10 defenseman. He's elite there and last year he showed some offensive flair scoring a career-high 44 points.

He'll be paired with rookie Dante Fabbro, a prospect so tantalizing that the team felt he could step right into the top four making Subban expendable. The idea is that Fabbro can reasonably fill some of the void at a steep discount, giving the team flexibility to solve some of their forward issues in the form of Duchene. It's a big ask, but this team knows defensemen and the 2016 17th overall pick looks ready after tearing up Hockey East with Boston University, scoring 33 points in 39 games. He suited up for four regular season games and six playoff games last year and performed admirably, earning a stellar 56 percent expected goals share. Cale Makar and Quinn Hughes are understandably getting a lot of hype among rookie defensemen, but Fabbro deserves some love too. He should be able to provide top four value this season.

The top four is strong and is the league's fourth best, but it's partially undone by a weak bottom pair. Both Dan Hamhuis and Yannick Weber project to be below replacement level on the basis of modest play-driving numbers in very sheltered minutes while providing little offensive upside. Both are very weak at breaking out the puck, which may explain some of the weaker numbers from the team's bottom six. The duo ranks as the second worst pair by my model.

While the team ranks in the top 10 at both forward and defense, the true strength looks to be in net where Nashville is carrying a top five tandem with two of the league's best goalies.

Pekka Rinne is the present. He's just one season removed from a Vezina Trophy, a season where he saved 17.7 goals above expected, the sixth best mark in the league that year off the strength of a .927 save percentage. Those numbers both dropped last year to 9.5 goals saved and a .918 save percentage, but were still very strong with the former number ranking in the league's top 10. Over the last two seasons he ranks third in the league behind John Gibson and Sergei Bobrovsky and is projected to be firmly in the league's top 10 this season.

Juuse Saros is the future. How soon depends on Rinne's play which doesn't appear to be slowing down soon. But if he does falter Saros looks very ready to step right in and shoulder the load. Over the last three seasons as the backup his delta save percentage has actually been stronger than Rinne's in each season and over the last two seasons he's saved 20 goals above expected – an elite number for



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a backup. The 24-year-old has a lot of upside and with Rinne turning 37 in November it's only a matter of time before it's his net.

There may be questions about Nashville's standing as a top five team thanks in part to their lack of elite forward talent, but they belong here. That's because of a clear mandate for better balance this offseason, one they accomplished in adding Duchene and subtracting Subban. The Predators are one of just three teams in the league to rank top 10 at every position, a huge advantage that makes them a significantly more formidable opponent than in year's past. Everyone knows they have great goaltending and they're deep at defense, something that remains even without Subban. Now they're deep at forward too.

The contending window is wide open for the Predators and they should once again challenge for the division crown after winning it in back-to-back seasons. Whether they can go further and get over the hump to deliver the city of Nashville a championship is the real question, though.

Market Expectations

Nashville Predators: 97.5 points

The market is a bit lower than I am on the Predators, likely due to an aging core and questions about the way the team is trending over the last season. Nashville's underlying numbers last year weren't the best either, leaving room for regression as well.

What Fans Predict

Public Sample: 1,337

Fan Sample: 34

The public is right on the money with the market while my model is closer in line with Nashville's own fan base. I see the reason for both arguments, but I'm not convinced the Predators should be downgraded just yet. My model has been high on the Predators since its inception, being bullish on the team before its improbable Cup final run.

What The Athletic Insider Thinks

Adam Vingan: Admittedly, I'm not sure what to make of this team. I expect the Predators to reach the playoffs for the sixth consecutive season, but I'm not convinced that they're a legitimate Stanley Cup contender, which is what they've been constructed to be.

Duchene improves a forward corps that annually is among the least productive in the NHL. In terms of the percentage of goals scored by forwards, the Predators have finished no higher than 27th in the past five seasons. Their high-scoring defense has been a luxury but hasn't helped them win a championship.

There are too many question marks for me to be confident in their Stanley Cup chances. Is a potential move to the wing going to revive Turriss or is it simply a last-ditch attempt to squeeze value from him? Will Granlund regain his 60-point form in a contract year? Can Forsberg and Arvidsson take the next step and reach 40 goals, which no Predators player has ever done? Where are the goals going to come from in the bottom six? Can Rinne, who will be 37 when the playoffs start, hold up long enough to provide the goaltending that propelled the Predators to the Stanley Cup final in 2017?

The Predators are going to be good, but the Central Division is Thunderdome. Seven teams enter, and I don't think the Predators are going to be the team that leaves.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.24.2019

1153957 Nashville Predators

How is the Predators' roster shaping up as opening night approaches?

By Adam Vingan

Sep 23, 2019

The Predators made the first significant cuts to their roster Sunday and Monday, leaving 26 players in training camp.

Based on who remains, it appears the Predators' 23-man opening-night roster, which must be submitted by Oct. 1, won't feature many surprises.

Forward

Locks: Viktor Arvidsson, Nick Bonino, Matt Duchene, Filip Forsberg, Mikael Granlund, Rocco Grimaldi, Calle Jarnkrok, Ryan Johansen, Colton Sissons, Craig Smith, Kyle Turriss, Austin Watson

Fighting for a spot: Daniel Carr, Frederick Gaudreau, Miikka Salomaki

Assigned to the AHL: Colin Blackwell, Lukas Craggs, Laurent Dauphin, Tanner Jeannot, Zach Magwood, Thomas Novak, Mathieu Olivier, Joe Pendenza, Rem Pitlick, Anthony Richard, Hugo Roy, Cole Schneider, Eeli Tolvanen, Yakov Trenin, Josh Wilkins

Assigned to juniors: Egor Afanasyev (OHL Windsor), Philip Tomasino (OHL Niagara)

Any potential drama disappeared when the team assigned Tolvanen and Pitlick, both of whom stood out during the preseason, to the Milwaukee Admirals. Neither required waivers to be sent to the minors, which was always working against them, even as they had strong showings in the rookie tournament and preseason games.

The decision to send Tolvanen to the AHL makes sense, as he doesn't belong in a bottom-six role. Pitlick, though, wouldn't have looked out of place on the Predators' third line.

"They both had good camps," Predators coach Peter Laviolette said Monday. "Eeli really showed improvement from last camp to this camp. Rem coming in and really getting a look at him for the first time, he played the one game at the end of last year, but that was when he first got here, and he's a completely different player now. We've got good players up here as well. (Tolvanen and Pitlick) are good players. It's a chance for them to continue to develop and play in all situations.

"Young players sitting out of the lineup up here or playing fourth-line minutes, especially those two players, doesn't really accomplish anything. They both had terrific camps. We're really happy with them. They're part of the future. ... We're really happy with the camp of both of them. I think it's a really good, positive thing for our organization to have that depth."

Last week, Predators general manager David Poile said, "A lot of the decisions that we're going to make at training camp will be with an eye towards offense." The projected bottom six will not accomplish that. Carr's ability to generate high-quality scoring opportunities should help, and it's possible Smith moves to the third line if Turriss, who practiced with Johansen and Arvidsson on Monday, starts as a top-six winger. But there are too many question marks.

Salomaki and Gaudreau, who have a combined 14 career goals, aren't going to provide much of anything in the offensive zone. Salomaki's straight-ahead, physical style has made him a favorite of the coaching staff, but his impact has been negligible. Gaudreau has never let his brief stardom affect his mindset, but the 26-year-old has reached his ceiling as a solid but unspectacular forward. At least one of them will be waived by next week.



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Defense

Locks: Mattias Ekholm, Ryan Ellis, Dante Fabbro, Dan Hamhuis, Roman Josi, Yannick Weber

Fighting for a spot: Matt Irwin, Steven Santini, Jarred Tinordi

Assigned to the AHL: Frederic Allard, Arvin Atwal, Alexandre Carrier, Jeremy Davies, Matt Donovan, Brandon Fortunato, Josh Healey, Scott Savage, Adam Smith

The Predators' third defense pairing is going to be a weakness this season, regardless of which two players are on it. Ideally, Irwin and Santini are used sparingly, but there figures to be some sort of rotation throughout the season. Santini being acquired as part of the P.K. Subban trade might give him a slight edge over Irwin if the team carries seven defensemen.

Irwin and Weber were the Predators' most commonly used third pair last season, though that was a product of Hamhuis either being injured or filling in for Subban when he was out of the lineup. Hamhuis and Weber should start the year there. Tinordi hasn't played in the NHL since March 2016, and that isn't expected to change this season.

On Monday, Laviolette paired Josi with Ellis and Ekholm with Fabbro.

"He got put into the biggest stage last year, and he did it without much of an introduction to the regular season," Laviolette said when asked if he'll monitor Fabbro's usage at the start of his first full season. "When he got here, he played, and when he got to the playoffs, he played really well. We'll obviously keep an eye on him and how we go about business with him, but right now, he's shown that he belongs."

Goaltender

Locks: Pekka Rinne, Juuse Saros

Assigned to the AHL: Ken Appleby, Connor Ingram, Troy Grosenick

The goaltending tandem is set. Rinne will start the Predators' season opener for the 10th consecutive year Oct. 3 against the Minnesota Wild.

Adam Vingan

The Athletic LOADED: 09.24.2019

1153958 Nashville Predators

2019-20 NHL Season Preview: Nashville Predators

By Dom Luszczyszyn

Sep 23, 2019

Three years ago the Nashville Predators began their ascent to contention with a surprising trip to their first ever Stanley Cup final, losing to the Pittsburgh Penguins. Two years ago the team won the Presidents' Trophy, but lost in the second round. Last year they won the division for the second straight season, but with 17 fewer points en route to a first round exit.

That's not a great trend.

The Predators are in the thick of their window, but are struggling to make it over the hump. They have a bunch of phoney banners and

paper rings, but they're still on the hunt for the real thing and a real ring. Not to take anything away from those accomplishments – this is a tough league and those achievements deserve some recognition – it's just not what teams play for. It's Stanley Cup or bust.

Big moves were made this summer in the name of balance with the goal of winning it all and the team looks to be in good shape to make a run. The one issue is that last year's defending Stanley Cup champion hails from their division, putting a musical shaped roadblock between Nashville and eternal glory.

The battle between the two looks tight, though, and it wouldn't be a surprise to see either team represent the West. For now, Nashville is a top five team, but a small step behind the West's best in St. Louis.

The margins between Nashville, Carolina and Vegas for the final spot in the top five are razor-thin with just 0.5 points separating the three. Nashville gets the slight edge for now, but that doesn't mean it won't be the other two (or another team) in the top five come April. While Nashville is ranked fifth overall, that's not a guarantee by any means. The Predators end up in the top five in just 38 percent of simulations and only the top two teams are above 50 percent. Even making it to the top five is a difficult feat. A third consecutive 100-point season looks likely, but isn't a promise either at 56 percent probability.

That's the regular season, though, and it's hard to care about that anymore in Nashville after the disappointing way the last three seasons ended. The Predators have the sixth best chance at the Cup at seven percent. The path through the Central will be grueling where even the first round will be tough – the Predators only look to be 55 percent favorites there. That could mean a repeat of last year's playoffs where Nashville was upset by the Stars and went home early. With a 14 percent probability, that just so happens to be their most likely playoff opponent come April too.

This is a different team, though. Last year's version was built off an incredible defense group with a forward core that just didn't stack up to other elite teams. The Stars' elite forwards made them pay. While the Predators still lack the high-end talent up front to go toe-to-toe with other elite teams, they've bridged the gap slightly with a big-time offseason add. It took a big sacrifice on defense to make it happen, but one that should pay off.

The big difference between last year's team and this year's is that Matt Duchene is in via free agency and P.K. Subban is out via trade. The team had long had an interest in Duchene dating back to the Kyle Turris deal, but fitting him under the cap meant getting rid of equivalent salary elsewhere. With the team quite deep at defense, it meant Subban was expendable, especially after a down season by his standards. Both players have similar win valuations around roughly two wins, but this change shifts the balance back to the forward ranks. Before the "swap" the Predators forward group ranked 17th while their defense ranked fourth. After, the forwards and defense now both rank ninth. Now the team is top 10 at every position, rather than having an elite defense corps and an average forward group.

Duchene is a bona fide first-liner that gives the team a decent one-two punch with Ryan Johansen, but he's not the elite star down the middle that most contending teams are built around. It's the type of player the Predators have long craved practically since the team's inception, but one that remains elusive to them. The hope was that Johansen could be that, but he never reached that apex and I have my doubts Duchene will get there either.

Duchene can score, there's no question about that, but there are questions about how much. Last year was his strongest season since 2013-14 scoring 70 points in 73 games, but there should be concern with how often pucks were going in for him. He scored on 18 percent of his shots, a career peak and a touch higher than the 13.6 percent he managed the three seasons prior. That was driven by a power play shooting percentage of 26 percent, which is unlikely



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to repeat. Nashville struggled mightily on the power play last season, but unless Duchene can manage to pull that off again it's unlikely he's going to be the answer as he's never had the strongest power play numbers himself. He should be in the ballpark of 70 points this season and anything more would likely mean some things falling his way a bit.

The bigger issue is Duchene's ability to drive play as he's had a below average expected goals rate in five straight seasons. He has the talent and personal finishing ability to offset that, but arguably not enough to consider him an elite option. He's personally strong with the puck with good entry, exit and contributions numbers – it just hasn't translated to on-ice success often in his career. It's a lot of flash, but not as much substance as his reputation might suggest.

He's never had much support, though. From Colorado to Ottawa it's been a long time since he's been with a franchise with a winning culture, one with talented players to surround him with. His most common linemates have been Ryan Dzingel (in both Ottawa and Columbus), Mike Hoffman, Bobby Ryan, and a complete line blender through most of his time in Colorado featuring Jarome Iginla, Nail Yakupov, Alex Tanguay and pre-breakout Nathan MacKinnon. Hardly a murderer's row of players who can drive play. Nashville has that in spades with very strong winger depth in the top six, guys that may be able to elevate his game to another level. Fit matters a ton and it's why the match made a lot of sense for both parties. It gives reason for optimism that Duchene can be better than shown and hopefully live up to the massive contract he's signed.

While the lineup is still very much in flux, there seems to be a good chance that Duchene starts the season with Nashville's most talented forwards flanking him: Filip Forsberg and Mikael Granlund. Together, they form what could be a top 15 line in the league, one that may be even better than the famed JOFA line. Splitting up the team's best line may feel like a risk, but it should be worth the reward given the talent on display.

As mentioned above, fit and chemistry mean a lot and this potential line feels like a great spot for Duchene as he'll be sandwiched between two players with first line caliber scoring rates that can put up 65 points, but perhaps more importantly have had a strong history of pushing play in the right direction. Forsberg is easily the team's strongest forward and should be more highly regarded as one of the game's strongest play-drivers. He'd be in the elite tier if not for his relative fragility. Over the last three seasons he leads all Predators forwards in expected goals RAPM by virtue of being the team's best player at pushing offense. He's the engine on the top line and was the team's best player at entering the zone until Duchene arrived. Having two weapons like that on the top line make it that much more dangerous.

Granlund, a byproduct of Minnesota's stingy system, is the defensive muscle here and should help Duchene improve his standing there. He's a strong two-way winger who's a gifted playmaker, which should fit right in with two players that love to score. His first 16 games with Nashville didn't go according to plan as he managed just five points total – only one of which was at 5-on-5 – while getting outchanced and badly outscored, but he has a lengthy history of significantly stronger results. In his previous three seasons with Minnesota he has a sterling 56 percent expected goals rate buoyed by a 1.94 expected goals against per 60 rate that would easily be the team's best mark, and a 1.91 points per 60 that falls just shy of first line territory. His best strength, though, is on the power play where he's scored six points per 60 over the last three seasons, but it appears he won't be used there to start; an odd choice for a team so anemic in that area.

Despite the Duchene addition, the Predators' very expensive center depth still ranks in the league's bottom third. The team has spent a lot of money and resources there trying to shore things up and while it's the deepest it's arguably ever been, it still pales in comparison to a lot of other teams. That's at their current projection, though, and the hope is that the addition of Duchene can spark a trickle-down

effect that gets Johansen playing his best hockey now that the focus is on another line (while Johansen may be first on the depth chart for now according to lines from Adam Vingan, I know which line I'm trying to shut down if I'm an opposing coach).

Johansen's 64 points last year were a Nashville high built off a 2.21 points per 60 at 5-on-5 that was a career high thanks to his place on a high octane top line. Johansen and company had no trouble generating offense, but last season it was at the expense of defense – a part of Johansen's game that has deteriorated over the last few seasons. Three seasons ago, the Predators allowed just 2.12 expected goals against per 60 with Johansen on the ice, leading to a strong 54 percent expected goals rate. At that point, you could consider Johansen a strong two-way center, but that's not really the case anymore. Last year, that figure ballooned to 2.89 expected goals against per 60, the worst mark of his career and the second worst mark on the team ahead of only linemate Viktor Arvidsson. It showed up on the scoresheet too where he only carried 51 percent of the goals, a sizeable dropoff from the 56 percent he was at in Nashville prior. Johansen should also consider cleaning up his penalties too as he's the team's least disciplined player with a projected minus-eight penalty differential – a difficult accomplishment for a forward. For him to be a bona fide top line center, he needs to get back to being a complete 200-foot player, especially if the new guy isn't very adept in his own end either. He'll have a better chance to do so on the second line.

That he's still paired with Arvidsson doesn't bode well for that as the gifted goal scorer is the team's worst defensive asset, though there's a chance the lesser assignments help his standing too. What Arvidsson gives up in his own end he more than makes up for on offense, though, with last year being his strongest season to date. He's been quite the find for Nashville since arriving onto the scene three seasons ago, scoring well above a first line rate in every season. Last year he became the premier scorer many hoped he could be, especially at 5-on-5. While his individual shot rates have remained unchanged over the last three seasons always hovering around 11.4 shots per 60, the relative danger of those chances have gone up as he's elevated his individual expected goals per 60 from 0.89 to 0.96 to 1.06 last season, the 15th best mark in the league. Arvidsson took full advantage of that scoring 1.85 goals per 60, a figure that not only led the league, but was also the second highest since 2007-08 behind only Sidney Crosby's ridiculous 41-game run in 2010-11. That's incredibly impressive, and though he likely has 35-40 goal upside, I'd bet he gets there with volume more than the 16 percent shooting percentage he earned last season.

Less impressive is his work on the power play. For such a gifted goal scorer, it's strange that Arvidsson hasn't been able to figure things out on the man advantage scoring just three goals and four points in 164 minutes last season. His 1.46 points per 60 was the 12th lowest among forwards who played more than 100 minutes.

It's worth noting too that last year that duo struggled mightily in its 150 minutes without Forsberg on the left side. With Forsberg likely lining up with Duchene, Turris slides onto the left side and that lessens the duo's likely impact barring a big bounce-back season. Turris was among the many stopgap solutions to the team's center problem and was the consolation prize to the team missing out on Duchene just two seasons ago. He was a worthy one at the time and was excellent in 2017-18 but experienced a steep dropoff last season. He's gone from decent second line center to third-liner who's been relegated to the wing. This switch to wing represents a rehabilitation project after his struggles last season.

Turris isn't a liability in his own end like Arvidsson, but if last season was any indication he's somehow turned into an expensive black hole on offense. Overnight he seemingly lost a lot of his puck skills, shooting less, creating shots for teammates less and carrying the puck up ice with control less. It was a mess and led to a steep drop in his on-ice expected goals rates from 3.1 to 2.4 year-over-year. In 55 games last season, Turris had an abysmal 1.1 points per 60 at 5-



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With Turris moving up and the deadline addition of Granlund, it looks like Craig Smith and his wicked shot volume will be relegated to the third line with Colton Sissons and Calle Jarnkrok. Smith looks like a player that can drive goals and has earned a first line caliber scoring rate in each of the past two seasons, but that'll be much more difficult to accomplish with two players that are more defensively minded. Aside from Granlund, who spent nearly all of his time in Minnesota, Jarnkrok and Sissons grade out as the team's best defensive forwards.

They were the team's stingiest forwards last season along with Rocco Grimaldi and Nick Bonino on the fourth line. Bonino had a renaissance 2018-19 season, but that looks largely percentages driven. I'm not sure the team will outscore opponents by 1.2 goals per 60 with him on the ice again when he's carrying a below break-even expected goals rate, but he still looks to be a decent player who is a luxury on the fourth line. A well-paid luxury who was another one of the team's center solutions that didn't quite pan out. At the very least, it gives the team four lines they can run, though hopefully they proportion the minutes between the top and bottom six better than they have in years past.

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Ekholm mans the second pair as always and though it's still a top 30 pair, it likely won't be the elite one it's long been in the past without Subban on the right side. That's the sacrifice that needs to be made to boost the offense and I think the team will be just fine having its second pair still be top pair caliber. Ekholm himself was magnificent

last year, arguably his best season to date and there's a case to be made he was the team's best last year – at least he was by GSVA. He's the underrated gem on this blueline and in terms of defensive impact he's a top 10 defenseman. He's elite there and last year he showed some offensive flair scoring a career-high 44 points.

He'll be paired with rookie Dante Fabbro, a prospect so tantalizing that the team felt he could step right into the top four making Subban expendable. The idea is that Fabbro can reasonably fill some of the void at a steep discount, giving the team flexibility to solve some of their forward issues in the form of Duchene. It's a big ask, but this team knows defensemen and the 2016 17th overall pick looks ready after tearing up Hockey East with Boston University, scoring 33 points in 39 games. He suited up for four regular season games and six playoff games last year and performed admirably, earning a stellar 56 percent expected goals share. Cale Makar and Quinn Hughes are understandably getting a lot of hype among rookie defensemen, but Fabbro deserves some love too. He should be able to provide top four value this season.

The top four is strong and is the league's fourth best, but it's partially undone by a weak bottom pair. Both Dan Hamhuis and Yannick Weber project to be below replacement level on the basis of modest play-driving numbers in very sheltered minutes while providing little offensive upside. Both are very weak at breaking out the puck, which may explain some of the weaker numbers from the team's bottom six. The duo ranks as the second worst pair by my model.

While the team ranks in the top 10 at both forward and defense, the true strength looks to be in net where Nashville is carrying a top five tandem with two of the league's best goalies.

Pekka Rinne is the present. He's just one season removed from a Vezina Trophy, a season where he saved 17.7 goals above expected, the sixth best mark in the league that year off the strength of a .927 save percentage. Those numbers both dropped last year to 9.5 goals saved and a .918 save percentage, but were still very strong with the former number ranking in the league's top 10. Over the last two seasons he ranks third in the league behind John Gibson and Sergei Bobrovsky and is projected to be firmly in the league's top 10 this season.

Juuse Saros is the future. How soon depends on Rinne's play which doesn't appear to be slowing down soon. But if he does falter Saros looks very ready to step right in and shoulder the load. Over the last three seasons as the backup his delta save percentage has actually been stronger than Rinne's in each season and over the last two seasons he's saved 20 goals above expected – an elite number for a backup. The 24-year-old has a lot of upside and with Rinne turning 37 in November it's only a matter of time before it's his net.

There may be questions about Nashville's standing as a top five team thanks in part to their lack of elite forward talent, but they belong here. That's because of a clear mandate for better balance this offseason, one they accomplished in adding Duchene and subtracting Subban. The Predators are one of just three teams in the league to rank top 10 at every position, a huge advantage that makes them a significantly more formidable opponent than in year's past. Everyone knows they have great goaltending and they're deep at defense, something that remains even without Subban. Now they're deep at forward too.

The contending window is wide open for the Predators and they should once again challenge for the division crown after winning it in back-to-back seasons. Whether they can go further and get over the hump to deliver the city of Nashville a championship is the real question, though.

Market Expectations

Nashville Predators: 97.5 points

The market is a bit lower than I am on the Predators, likely due to an aging core and questions about the way the team is trending over



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the last season. Nashville's underlying numbers last year weren't the best either, leaving room for regression as well.

What Fans Predict

Public Sample: 1,337

Fan Sample: 34

The public is right on the money with the market while my model is closer in line with Nashville's own fan base. I see the reason for both arguments, but I'm not convinced the Predators should be downgraded just yet. My model has been high on the Predators since its inception, being bullish on the team before its improbable Cup final run.

What The Athletic Insider Thinks

Adam Vingan: Admittedly, I'm not sure what to make of this team. I expect the Predators to reach the playoffs for the sixth consecutive season, but I'm not convinced that they're a legitimate Stanley Cup contender, which is what they've been constructed to be.

Duchene improves a forward corps that annually is among the least productive in the NHL. In terms of the percentage of goals scored by forwards, the Predators have finished no higher than 27th in the past five seasons. Their high-scoring defense has been a luxury but hasn't helped them win a championship.

There are too many question marks for me to be confident in their Stanley Cup chances. Is a potential move to the wing going to revive Turriss or is it simply a last-ditch attempt to squeeze value from him? Will Granlund regain his 60-point form in a contract year? Can Forsberg and Arvidsson take the next step and reach 40 goals, which no Predators player has ever done? Where are the goals going to come from in the bottom six? Can Rinne, who will be 37 when the playoffs start, hold up long enough to provide the goaltending that propelled the Predators to the Stanley Cup final in 2017?

The Predators are going to be good, but the Central Division is Thunderdome. Seven teams enter, and I don't think the Predators are going to be the team that leaves.

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In the Habs' Room: Maple Leafs' youngsters embarrass Canadiens

PAT HICKEY,

Updated: September 23, 2019

Jonathan Drouin said the Canadiens knew what to expect from a rookie-laden Toronto Maple Leafs team Monday night, but they seemed ill-prepared to deal with the situation.

The Leafs, who gave all their high-priced help the night off, defeated the Canadiens 3-0 at the Bell Centre. It was the first loss of the preseason for the Canadiens, who won their first four games.

The Canadiens' performance was as embarrassing as the lineup the Leafs brought to town.

Drouin said there's still value in reviewing the game, although most of the tape will show how not to do things.

"There's stuff you have to look at as a player, as a coach, and as a team as well," said Drouin. "Everyone can benefit from a game like this. We knew they were going to come out hard, not a lot of

veterans, but young guys who have a lot of pride and didn't have a lot of chances to play in the preseason, and they were ready from the get-go. We were caught off guard a little bit."

The Canadiens stepped up the pace in the third period when they outshot the visitors 19-5, but they were unable to beat journeyman goaltender Michael Hutchinson.

Charlie Lindgren was a surprise starter in the Montreal goal. He was pressed into service after a doctor suggested Carey Price take a few days off because of a bruised trapper (left) hand.

"We kept him out as a precaution," said coach Claude Julien. "He saw the doctor and the doctor suggested he take a few days. We hope to see him back by the end of the week."

Julien received a rude introduction to a rule change when he challenged the Leafs' second goal by Darren Archibald. Julien felt there was goaltender interference but his challenge was rejected after the video review. Under the new rule, a team is assessed a minor penalty if the challenge fails.

"It's a fine line because you want to protect the goaltender and you want to show your goaltender that you support him," said Julien. "In most of these cases, it's 50-50. I'm not saying I'm right and the referee is wrong, but things can go either way. Last year, you challenged and if it didn't go your way, you lost your timeout and you moved on. Now, you're in a position where you lose the challenge and you're down a goal and you're shorthanded. It makes you think carefully before you challenge. What they're telling me is: Don't challenge. This is the preseason and it doesn't matter, but how can I challenge those in the regular season?"

For four players, their bids to start the season in the NHL ended with this game. Riley Barber, Jake Evans, Alex Belzile and Josh Brook were all reassigned to the Laval Rocket after the game.

Evans has had a good camp, but the Notre Dame grad was in a logjam as he battled for a spot on the fourth line. Nate Thompson, who had a strong game Monday, is the incumbent and he's being challenged by rookie Ryan Poehling. There's no room for Evans, but if he continues to progress in Laval, he'll head the shortlist of forwards for call-up duty if the Canadiens run into injuries.

Brook was expected to challenge for a spot, especially with Noah Juulsen sidelined with headaches. There's no doubt Brook has offensive skills, but making the jump from junior hockey can be difficult and he has often appeared lost on defence.

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Toronto Marlies shut out Canadiens at Bell Centre

PAT HICKEY,

Updated: September 23, 2019

It was unreasonable to think that the Canadiens could win all seven of their preseason games, but there was no reason to believe they could lose Monday night's game against a group of imposters wearing Toronto Maple Leafs sweaters.

But with the clock clicking down toward next week's regular-season opener, the Canadiens turned in a listless performance as they lost 3-0 at the Bell Centre. They outshot the visitors 38-25 with a third-period push but they failed to generate many Grade-A scoring



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chances against Michael Hutchinson, a goaltender who has appeared in only 12 games over the past two seasons.

At the other end of the ice, Charlie Lindgren wasn't terrible, but he didn't do anything to suggest he could steal the backup job from Keith Kinkaid. He was beaten by guys named Darren Archibald and Yegor Korshkov, who is a five-year veteran of the KHL. Korshkov scored on a power play to open the scoring and then stripped the puck from Brett Kulak to give Toronto a 3-0 lead which is how the game ended.

This should have been a cakewalk because the Maple Leafs arrived with a lineup that was embarrassingly light on NHL-calibre talent. NHL rules call for teams to dress at least eight players who have played at least 100 NHL games or appeared in 30 games last season. There were only seven players who met that criteria but the Leafs met the bare minimum because Timothy Liljegren qualifies as a first-round draft choice.

And the Leafs were also short on quality. Fans who paid top dollar to see Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner, William Nylander or even Jason Spezza were disappointed. None of the seven NHL players is in line to make more than \$800,000 this season and one of them, Matt Read, is in camp on a tryout and doesn't have a contract.

The Montreal power play, which showed signs of life with three goals in Ottawa on Saturday, reverted to form and went 0-for-4. Max Domi and Jesperi Kotkaniemi provided a spark on a power play to start the third period. The Canadiens had four shots on goal but couldn't score.

Jonathan Drouin was back at right wing on the top line with Domi and Tomas Tatar. On the plus side, he won both of his faceoffs and had two solid hits, but the team's highest-paid forward has to produce more than a single shot on goal.

Nate Thompson showed why he has a spot on this team as he won more faceoffs than he lost and had a shorthanded scoring chance. He was also credited with three hits.

Defence prospect Josh Brook produced three shots on goal but he'll need a lot of time in Laval honing his defensive skills before he's ready for the NHL. Karl Alzner made his first start of the preseason and he blocked shots and had three shots on goal, but it remains to be seen what he can do to avoid another season buried in Laval.

The Canadiens and the Leafs meet again Wednesday night in Toronto, and the Leafs are expected to have a stronger lineup.

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Canadiens' Claude Julien and Maple Leafs' Mike Babcock share a bond

STU COWAN,

Updated: September 23, 2019

Mike Babcock and Claude Julien were both behind the bench when Team Canada won gold at the 2014 Olympics, and they have remained close ever since.

Babcock was the head coach at the Sochi Games and Julien was one of his three associate coaches, along with Ken Hitchcock and Lindy Ruff. Babcock and Julien still keep in touch and were texting

each other ahead of Monday night's NHL pre-season game between the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Canadiens at the Bell Centre.

"We more or less chat about our situation and everything else," Julien said after the Canadiens' morning skate Monday in Brossard.

No two coaches in the NHL are under more pressure or work in a bigger spotlight than Julien in Montreal and Babcock in Toronto. They're also two of the highest-paid coaches in the NHL, with Babcock earning US\$6.25 million in the fifth year of his eight-year \$50-million contract and Julien earning US\$5 million in the third year of his five-year \$25-million contract.

So, it's not surprising Julien and Babcock can relate to each other.

"Some people enjoy these kind of environments and I have no issues with that," Julien said about the pressure of coaching the Canadiens. "It's a great city, fans are great, there's a lot of interest and at the end of the day you do your job and you hope that you can bring a championship to this city.

"So that's what I look at. I don't look at it as pressure or even ...," Julien added before stopping to sneeze.

"Excuse me," the coach continued with a chuckle. "Talking about that makes me sneeze.

"Those kind of things are actually great," Julien added. "Pressure, it can be handled in different ways. It can be daunting or it can be exciting and it can be motivating."

Julien and Babcock are facing different kinds of pressure this season.

The Canadiens are simply hoping to make the playoffs for the first time in three years and then "anything can happen," as GM Marc Bergevin likes to say. Nothing less than a Stanley Cup is expected in Toronto with the Maple Leafs' high-priced lineup that includes forwards Auston Matthews (\$11.634 million), John Tavares (\$11 million), Mitch Marner (\$10.893 million) and William Nylander (\$6.962 million), who will eat up more than half of the Leafs' US\$81.5-million salary cap this season.

None of those four players were at the Bell Centre Monday night as the Leafs brought a roster that looked more like the AHL's Toronto Marlies.

"We've exchanged texts when it comes to that, and we've exchanged our lineups," Julien said about the pre-season rosters. "But at the end of the day, I can't control what he brings. What I can control is what I'm trying to do here with this team. Our team has to play a certain way and that's where our focus is going to be. Not so much on who's on the other side."

The Canadiens and Leafs will meet again Wednesday in Toronto (7 p.m., TSN2, TSN4, RDS, TSN 690 Radio).

Since taking over from Michel Therrien as head coach of the Canadiens on Feb. 14, 2017, Julien has an overall record of 89-77-22, losing in the first round of the playoffs the first year and missing the post-season in each of the last two seasons. Babcock has a 164-123-41 record behind the Leafs bench, missing the playoffs in his first season and being eliminated in the first round in each of the last three years.

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Stu Cowan: Fierce competition for a spot on Canadiens' fourth line



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STU COWAN

Updated: September 23, 2019

Playing on the fourth line is not an easy job in the NHL, especially for someone with offensive talent who is accustomed to getting lots of ice time.

That was the case with Matthew Peca after he joined the Canadiens last season. The previous year, Peca posted 13-33-46 totals in 63 games with the AHL's Syracuse Crunch and 1-1-2 totals in 10 games with the Tampa Bay Lightning. Peca impressed Marc Bergevin enough that the Canadiens' GM signed the 5-foot-9, 182-pound forward to a two-year, one-way contract as a free agent worth US\$2.6 million.

After going pointless and minus-2 in his first three games with the Canadiens, Peca was made a healthy scratch for the first time — something that became a common occurrence as the season went on. The 26-year-old ended up playing only 39 games, posting 3-7-10 totals, and was a healthy scratch for 18 of the last 19 games. His minus-14 was the worst plus/minus rating on the team.

"This year coming in, I just want to kind of gain the coach's respect back and gain the staff's trust back to be able to put me out against guys and be hard to play against in the D zone and stuff like that, and create energy," Peca said after the Canadiens' morning skate Monday in Brossard. "Puck possession is huge. We didn't do a good enough job of puck possession as a fourth line last year. So those are all little things that I worked on this summer.

"The relentless part," Peca added. "Just that part of your role you need to be a line that guys don't want to play against. You want to be in everyone's face and that's just the style of game we play also, right? With the speed we have, the guys that are fighting for those last three spots there's no reason why they can't be effective."

The battle for a spot on the Canadiens' fourth line will be fierce during the last week of training camp with three pre-season games on the schedule, starting with Monday night's contest against the Toronto Maple Leafs at the Bell Centre. Peca was in the lineup against the Leafs, skating at left wing on a line with centre Jake Evans and right-winger Riley Barber.

Last season, Peca averaged only 10:31 of ice time per game. The only Canadiens who averaged fewer minutes were Dale Weise (10:05) and Nicolas Deslauriers (10:02).

"It's less touches, it's less looks," Peca said about his ice time. "It's harder to get into the game. And the guys that have been around and been doing that role are the best at it and the best at being 100 per cent for those insignificant amount of minutes, and they do such a good job. So I just kind of took that to heart and watched a lot of tape on guys that do it right and you just want to come back and be a good teammate, be a hard player to play against.

"You see skilled guys in these type of roles all the time and they contribute," Peca added. "But they also do the little things right. Once you find that happy medium, that's where good stuff happens."

Peca focused on fourth-line players while watching the Stanley Cup playoffs on TV last season and noted how they made a difference on the best teams, allowing them to roll four lines, which becomes so important as the season progresses.

Canadiens head coach Claude Julien likes to roll four lines, but had a hard time finding a consistent fourth line last season that he could trust. As a result, the fourth line became a revolving door. Nate Thompson and Jordan Weal, both acquired at the NHL trade deadline, helped solidify things late in the season and the acquisition of Weise added some depth. Bergevin signed free-agent Nick Cousins during the summer to add more depth — and more competition — on the fourth line.

"I wish I would have adjusted better," Peca said about playing on the fourth line last season. "I wasn't typically used to playing a fourth-line role. ... It takes time to learn that kind of game.

"You don't play like the coach wants you to play early in the year and that kind of stuff happens," Peca added about becoming a healthy scratch. "So you kind of just have to go back to the drawing board, work hard, keep your head down and don't take anything for granted."

As for the competition heading into the final week of training camp, Peca said: "It brings out the best in guys. You watch guys having good games, young guys coming up, having great games, and it just forces you to be ready. Be ready to go, don't take anything for granted. Take everything seriously and go out there and do your best.

"There's still opportunity and that's kind of all you ask for a player in my position," he added.

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Canadiens Game Day: A bad night for Habs and fans who bought tickets

STU COWAN,

Updated: September 24, 2019

You have to feel sorry for people who paid for tickets to Monday night's NHL pre-season game between the Canadiens and Toronto Maple Leafs at the Bell Centre.

First of all, the real Maple Leafs never even showed up. Instead, it was basically the AHL's Toronto Marlies wearing Leafs sweaters and — to make matters worse — they beat the Canadiens 3-0. Forwards Auston Matthews, John Tavares, Mitch Marner and William Nylander, defenceman Reilly Morgan, goalie Frederik Anderson and all other recognizable Leafs players stayed home in Toronto.

Fans didn't even get to see Carey Price in action for the Canadiens and coach Claude Julien explained why after the game, saying the goalie has a bruised left hand.

After the morning skate in Brossard, Julien said he hadn't decided yet who would start in goal. Charlie Lindgren ended up getting the call, stopping 22 of 25 shots.

When asked after the game if Price was injured during the morning skate, Julien said: "It doesn't matter when it happened, guys. All it is is a bruised hand and when he went to see the doctor the doctor said for precautionary reasons we're going to keep him out for a few days. So that's all it is. So we should see him back on the ice hopefully before the end of this week."

Toronto has a high-priced roster with Matthews (\$11.634 million), Tavares (\$11 million), Marner (\$10.893 million) and Nylander (\$6.962 million) eating up more than half of the Leafs' US\$81.5-million salary cap this season. The Leafs didn't have a single player in the lineup Monday night who will earn \$1 million this season.

Yegor Korshkov was named the first star after scoring two goals and goalie Michael Hutchinson was the second star after stopping all 38 shots he faced. Korshkov, 23, has been playing in the KHL since the Maple Leafs selected him in the second round (31st overall) at the 2016 NHL Draft. Hutchinson had a 14-7-1 record last season with



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the Marlies, along with a 2.70 goals-against average and a .910 save percentage.

Voici les alignements pour le match de ce soir au Centre Bell.

Here are the lineups for tonight's game at the Bell Centre. #GoHabsGo pic.twitter.com/bs8Z1Kt9bf— Canadiens Montréal (@CanadiensMTL) September 23, 2019

Thompson earns third star

Nate Thompson was one of the few Canadiens who showed up to play Monday night and earned the third star. Max Domi also played well and led the Canadiens with six shots on goal.

This wasn't the first time Thompson, a 34-year-old veteran, has seen a team of minor-leaguers win an NHL pre-season game.

"It's always a good lesson for everybody to know that you can't just flip the switch and just turn it on," Thompson said. "You have to be ready to play every game, pre-season and regular season, because guys are coming to work. I don't think any guy thought it was going to be easy. I don't think that's the case. I just think that we weren't ready to play and they were. They capitalized on some chances, we didn't. They played a good, solid, sound hockey game over there and they took advantage of us."

Thompson heard the Bell Centre fans who were booing at times during the game.

"It was pretty clear they weren't happy and we weren't happy, either," he said. "We didn't play a good game tonight. That was obvious. They outbattled, they outworked us, they won more battles than us. We had a lot of one-and-dones. We weren't really getting to the net. That was kind of it. It's pretty black and white in a game like that. They outwork you and they get results."

"I think guys have to know that it doesn't matter what lineup is in, it doesn't matter who they have over there. It's an NHL hockey game and guys are coming to work, they're coming to play. Some guys are getting a chance to play in the NHL and they're going to make the most of it. They did and we didn't."

New number for Thompson

Thompson, who wore No. 21 last season after the Canadiens acquired him from Los Angeles at the NHL trade deadline, is now wearing No. 44, which he had with the Kings.

Why didn't he take No. 44 last season since nobody else on the Canadiens had it?

"I think when I got here I was just given 21 and I just minded my Ps and Qs and just took it," Thompson said.

Now, he's happy to get No. 44, which has only been worn by nine other players in Canadiens history: Stéphane Richer (1896-98), Bryan Fogarty (1994-95), Jonas Hoglund (1998-99), Stéphane Robidas (2000), Sheldon Souray (2000-07), Roman Hamrlik (2008-11), Davis Drewiske (2013), Darren Dietz (2016) and Bobby Farnham (2017).

Thompson said he first wore No. 44 after being claimed on waivers by the Tampa Bay Lightning in 2010 from the New York Islanders.

"I kind of just stuck with it and kept with it ever since," he said.

Thompson added there was another reason why he no longer wanted to wear No. 21 with the Canadiens.

"I saw Guy Carbonneau's getting inducted into the Hall of Fame, so I imagine his (No. 21) jersey's probably going up in the rafters pretty soon," Thompson said.

"I didn't want to wear it, but then they give it to (Nick Cousins), so what are you going to do, you know?" Thompson added with a chuckle.

Lindgren excited to play

Lindgren said he found out just before he went on the ice for practice around 11:15 a.m. Monday in Brossard that he would be getting the start in goal instead of Price.

"Just like any other game, whenever you get the call to play at the Bell Centre in front of these fans, obviously very excited," he said. "I wanted to treat it like any other game and I felt pretty good out there tonight."

Lindgren spent last season with the AHL's Laval Rocket, so he knew a lot of the players in the Leafs lineup.

"I've played a lot of those guys about 30 times the last couple of years, so I've seen them a lot," the goalie said. "You got to give credit to them. We talked about it in the dressing room beforehand. They don't have a ton of NHL experience, so we knew they were going to come in and play hard at the Bell Centre. Obviously, a very fun place to play and they worked hard tonight and they got a lot of skills."

Four more cuts

After the game, the Canadiens announced that forwards Riley Barber, Alex Belzile and Jake Evans had been sent down to the Rocket, along with defenceman Josh Brook.

All four were in the lineup Monday night against the Leafs.

The Rocket opened their training camp on Monday morning and Laval head coach Joël Bouchard was at the Bell Centre to watch Monday night's game.

Pas de demi-mesures, Diane Bibaud joue comme si c'était la vraie saison.

It's preseason, but Diane Bibaud is playing all the hits.

Alzner in the lineup

Canadiens defenceman Karl Alzner played his first pre-season game Monday night after recovering from a groin injury suffered early in training camp.

It seems pretty certain that Alzner — who is entering the third season of a five-year, \$23.125-million contract — will start this season with the Rocket. Alzner played 34 games with the Rocket last season, posting 1-4-5 totals. The 30-year-old played only nine games with the Canadiens, picking up one assist.

"We've already chatted about the expectations and everything else," Julien said about Alzner's situation after Monday's morning skate. "Unfortunately, he had that injury early in camp because you would have seen him earlier than that. But he needs to be seen, evaluated, and he needs to have a chance. So that's what we're doing."

Alzner logged 16:07 of ice time against the Leafs while paired with Cale Fleury, was even in plus/minus, had three shots on goal and two blocked shots.

The lines

Here's how the Canadiens forward lines and defence pairings looked for Monday night's game:

Tatar – Domi – Drouin

Hudon – Kotkaniemi – Armia

Peca – Evans – Barber

Cousins – Thompson – Belzile

Chiariot – Petry

Kulak – Brook

Alzner – Fleury



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Byron skating again

Paul Byron, who suffered an upper-body injury in last Thursday's 5-4 shootout win over the Florida Panthers at the Bell Centre, skated Monday in Brossard.

"He's recovering well," Julien said about the speedy forward. "His injury was one that looks like it was just a 3-4 day injury and he's back on recovery. At the same time, I think it's OK for me to tell you guys that he could easily be playing in a day or two if we wanted to. In training camp you're better to be cautious than sorry. That's what we do with some of the guys. So Paulie's in great shape ... maybe we see him Saturday (when the Canadiens wrap up the pre-season schedule in Ottawa). We'll see as we move on here."

Julien added that Ryan Poehling is continuing to follow the concussion protocol after being checked hard into the boards in last Wednesday's 4-2 win over the Panthers in Bathurst, N.B.

Editor's note: An earlier version of this report had Byron sidelined with a concussion. In fact, the Canadiens reported he has an upper-body injury.

What's next?

The Canadiens will have the day off on Tuesday and be back in action Wednesday night in Toronto against the Maple Leafs (7 p.m., TSN2, TSN4, RDS, TSN 690 Radio). The Canadiens will then play their final pre-season game Saturday night at the Bell Centre against the Senators (7 p.m., TSN5, RDS, TSN 690 Radio).

The Canadiens will open the regular season on Thursday, Oct. 3, when they visit the Carolina Hurricanes (7 p.m., TSN2, RDS, TSN 690 Radio).

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Bubble Report: It's too early to worry about Jesperi Kotkaniemi

By Marc Dumont

Sep 23, 2019

The Canadiens' preseason unbeaten streak came to a crashing end on Monday night, losing 3-0 to a Toronto Maple Leafs team that was more Marlie than Leaf. It was an alarmingly unenthusiastic effort from the Canadiens, the hockey equivalent of that video featuring three lions lazily passing a ball around.

This is the point in the preseason when you start to pay attention to the veterans, who, for the most part, turned in an oatmeal raisin paired with diet ginger ale-like performance against Toronto. It's much too early to start panicking, but there's a rather lengthy list of established Canadiens players that have yet to find their groove.

The roster hopefuls also failed to take advantage of the weak quality of competition, though we did see a few encouraging signs from those attempting to extend their training camp stay in Montreal. It was not enough in some cases, seeing as the Canadiens reassigned Jake Evans, Josh Brook, Alex Belzile and Riley Barber to the Laval Rocket immediately following the game.

Much ado about nothing

Jesperi Kotkaniemi is having a hard time creating scoring opportunities, a frustrating situation for a playmaker. That can lead to

a lot of hesitation and a lack of confidence, which seems to be the case for the 19-year-old centre.

Yes, he's having a rough preseason, and no, I'm not worried. Though, if not for his excellent rookie season I'd be a little more concerned.

Remember when we caught our first glimpses of Kotkaniemi in action last year at development camp in late June? He barely stood out as a legitimate prospect. He then attended the rookie tournament in Laval, where he slowly started to put it all together, though he was very, very quiet. It wasn't until preseason that he really hit his stride. From there up until the time he ran out of gas in early March, he never stopped improving.

Despite my best efforts to mention his age half a dozen times per article, we often lose sight of just how young he is. Sure, he plays like a veteran, but he's still going to deal with the same peaks and valleys as every other player, because, in case you missed it, he's just 19. Sometimes those trips into the valley will last a little longer than expected.

Like a rock

Once again, Evans provided a solid two-way presence, with the Canadiens controlling almost 75 percent of the shots and scoring chances while he was on the ice. He was standing out while playing on the fourth line and the penalty kill. You can't ask for much more than that.

Thanks to his versatility and vision on the ice, he was having a very strong camp, and if it weren't for the play of Nate Thompson and Nick Cousins, he probably would have had a very good shot at securing the fourth-line centre job. However, both those players happen to be having great camps as well, which has delayed Evans' bid to make the NHL, for now.

He returns to the Rocket with the confidence and knowledge that he made a lot of noise at camp, more than most expected.

Rookie Blue

Compared to his first two outings, Cale Fleury failed to impress, although it would be unfair to categorize it as a poor performance. It just wasn't up to the same standard as he established earlier in the preseason. He was caught running around in his own zone on a few occasions, losing his defensive coverage once things got hectic in front of Charlie Lindgren.

He survived the latest round of cuts, but he must consistently stand out for the remainder of camp if he's to win that coveted third-pairing spot on the roster.

Brook continued his slow, yet steady progression. He's starting to look much more comfortable, making smart, timely decisions at both ends of the rink. As his confidence grows, so does the amount of time he has the puck on his stick, but he still has a lot of work to do when it comes to defensive positioning. He was caught out of position on a couple of occasions, which is a recurring theme for Brook. For what it's worth, these are the same kind of issues Fleury was dealing with upon his arrival in Laval last season. A year, or two, under Joël Bouchard's tutelage should do him a lot of good. He has the right skill set, now he needs to work on the details.

Bubble bobble

I can't criticize Charles Hudon's effort against the Leafs. He set up two decent scoring chances and he was clearly giving his best every shift. For whatever reason, possibly his underwhelming release, things simply aren't clicking for Hudon. He has most of the important tools to make it in the NHL, and yet he's missing the most important one: execution. He can't find that missing piece of the puzzle, the one which allows all, or at least some of his hard work to shine through.



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The same can be said about Charlie Lindgren, another vestige of the Sylvain Lefebvre AHL era. He also had a very decent game against the Leafs, but nothing more than decent, which isn't good enough at this stage in his career. With the addition of Cayden Primeau to the organizational goaltending mix, Lindgren is at risk of getting lost in the shuffle. At one point in your development, you need to take the next step, and with his injury issues hopefully behind him, Lindgren will need to have a strong season in Laval to maintain his place in the goaltending hierarchy.

Final Word

Let's start with the good news. No one got injured.

That's it. That's the list.

The Canadiens were bad and they should feel bad. As Admiral Ackbar would have pointed out, given the weakened Leafs roster and the discrepancy in talent from both teams, this had all the makings of a trap game, but that doesn't excuse the lack of effort from Canadiens young and old.

Though it was a good reminder that this young squad may struggle this season, and despite the lack of standouts among the roster hopefuls they still outplayed the vast majority of the established NHLers.

Then again, so did the Marlies.

Marc Dumont

The Athletic LOADED: 09.24.2019

1153955 Montreal Canadiens

Why the Canadiens turned to Phillip Danault and Jordan Weal to fix the power play

By Marc Antoine Godin

Sep 23, 2019

Phillip Danault admitted it with a teasing grin: sure the NHL's new faceoff rules on power plays benefit him directly, and if they incentivize Claude Julien to call on him even more often, well then all the better.

"(Jordan) Weal and I are happy!" he said when asked about this year's regulatory tweak, which will allow the attacking team to determine which side the initial offensive zone faceoff will take place on the power play.

With Danault established as the best left-shooting Canadiens player at the dot and Weal the top righty, the team has two solid options to open the power play with possession – a not insignificant advantage.

Rule changes notwithstanding, the Canadiens internalized the lesson last year. After 66 games where they generated a pocketful of nothing on the power play, pairing Danault and Weal on the top unit during a late-season swing through California allowed the Canadiens to hit an eminently respectable 18.8 percent success rate over the final month. That was good enough for 15th-best in the league over the period.

Once they became central fixtures on the power play, Danault and Weal's contributions in the circle left room for exactly zero doubt as to their effectiveness. Behold:

Even if we're talking about a small sample size (16 games), the positive net impact from Danault and Weal was undeniable when one considers the power play's production when they were on the ice.

Now, a word of caution: the mere fact of winning more faceoffs on the power play is no guarantee a team will score more goals. Some clubs are stacked with two, if not three, elite shooters and they don't need to boss the dot to manufacture goals. And in the mirror example, some teams have a dominant faceoff taker who doesn't have the requisite supporting cast for his success to translate into puck possession, chances and goals.

It was difficult to establish a clear, direct causal relationship between faceoff wins and success with the extra man last season, but it is reasonable to conclude many of the teams with pop gun power plays also had trouble with draws.

Every team has its unique flaws, and what matters for this discussion is the correlation between faceoff wins and power-play success was very real for the Canadiens. In fact, the enormous difficulty Montreal had re-entering the zone after a lost draw was perhaps the central element that torpedoed them a season ago. Given it's basically impossible to separate faceoffs and the entry challenge for the Canadiens, it stands to reason the coaches would view job one as maximizing the odds in their favour when the puck is dropped.

Danault and Weal certainly allow the Canadiens to hold their own relative to the rest of the NHL in terms of winning faceoffs, but if you separate their contributions from the other players' results, Montreal's power play slides down to the depths adjacent to their overall rank last season. They're important.

"We've put a little more focus on the faceoff and on winning that first battle," winger Jonathan Drouin said on Sunday.

This coming season, the ability to decide where the battle will take place should enhance the attacking team's competitive advantage; even if the other side deploys a centre who is well accustomed to the penalty kill, there's now a 100 percent likelihood he will have to work on his weaker side.

On Saturday night in Ottawa, Claude Julien had an inkling the Senators would send out right-shooting Jean-Gabriel Pageau, their top man on the penalty kill, to take the draw. So Weal stepped into the right-hand circle – his forehand side, which forced Pageau onto his backhand – won the faceoff and Jeff Petry opened the scoring 11 seconds later.

Weal noted that before all of this unfolded there was still a bit of artistic licence in terms of the way the rule is applied.

"There's still a little confusion with regards to if we can wait until they put their guys out and then make the call," Weal said, who hopes whatever lingering confusion there is can be dissipated by the time the season opens. "If you can wait and see what center they put out, and then you can choose the side, I think that's going to give the team the biggest advantage. I asked last game (Saturday) and he said we had to send it out first because they had the second change, we have to say what side we wanted to go first."

According to Julien, the advantages conferred by the new rule could be short-lived as pre-scouting and video analysis pull apart how each team reacts and game-plans for those situations.

"The only thing you can do is give yourself the advantage to say 'here's my centre and his strong side is this one or that one,'" he said. "Regardless of who the other team puts on the ice, at some point, everybody will get used to it. The advantage will be there, but it will be very small."

Small? Really?



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An average NHL centre will win 50 percent of his draws, whereas a very good one can expect to better that by five percent or so. Here's the thing: last year Danault was 5.1 percent better against righties than he was against lefties. Every little situational detail matters, no?

Danault and Weal are not sexy choices for the power play, other forwards on the team have been known to display a good deal more natural offensive ability. In principle, they would be better fits for a second power-play unit while the Domis, Gallaghers, Tatars and Kotkaniemis take charge of the first. But in actual reality, inserting Weal on the right half-wall, where he acts as the conductor of this previously dissonant orchestra, has had a cascading effect on the roles several of his teammates play.

First, a little background is in order to justify his existence in that job.

"Weal is really strong on the puck," Danault noted. "I've never seen a guy as strong when it comes to creating space for himself. He creates plays and he has excellent vision."

From his post on the right boards, Weal can fire passes to Danault, who is stationed on the goal line, hit a teammate for a one-timer in the slot or slide the puck back to the point to Drouin, who formerly ran things from the half-wall.

Weal says he spent a lot of time watching Claude Giroux exploit that area of the ice as a member of the Flyers and as a result he tries to keep the puck moving quickly in order to escape the penalty killers' attempts to pressure it; doing so required taking a rapid and accurate read on where his teammates and opponents are positionally.

"Everyone can make plays when you got time and space, but I watched Claude Giroux for a long time in Philly and he was so good. When pressure was coming on really quick and the pucks were bobbling, he always knew where to go with it," Weal said. "And you kind of knew before things started happening where to go with it because it was planned and structured out that way. So that's just something you can change and try to work on and build and if we can have success as a power play as a group it's going to help our team."

The fact the power play sets up on the right side with Weal has a direct influence on who will play in the central slot. If he's looking for someone to get shots off quickly and one-time passes, he'll need another righty. Brendan Gallagher practiced in that spot on Sunday, but Joel Armia is the guy who joined Weal and Danault on the first wave in the latter half of 2018-19. He was there again on Saturday in Ottawa.

"It's tough when it's a lefty and we're set up on my side," Weal said. "They can leave that guy alone a little bit because he's got to grab the puck, turn and shoot, and in that time where he has to turn and shoot, guys could close that so quick."

The by-product from the set-up involving Weal and Danault is Drouin has been pigeonholed as the point man, at least for now. Drouin shifted between that spot to the wall last year but if there's to be a genuine effort at creating stability and continuity — important factors for success — there's a decent chance he'll be there for a while.

Assuming, of course, this type of hideous mishap doesn't happen too often.

"Weber and I have the ability to give the puck to each other and I know how to find his sweet spot; we've done it before," the 24-year-old Drouin said. "Sometimes we'll switch everything up after a weekend where things didn't go well, so I can't really say (what will happen), but in my mind, I'm going to play in that position and I'm going to try and be the best at that position."

With Weber sneaking closer to the faceoff dot to make his shot even more fearsome, we're starting to get an idea of how the first unit will look at the season's outset.

The second unit could take on different guises depending on whether Nick Suzuki earns a roster spot. On Sunday he alternated with Jesperi Kotkaniemi on the left-hand boards but the fact Armia seems to be the go-to choice in the slot suggests Max Domi, also stationed on the right half-wall, will be the guy who directs the operation.

If, for argument's sake, the coaches had their hearts set on placing Kotkaniemi and Suzuki on the same unit, it would make sense to use Kotkaniemi as the quarterback on the left side, thus bringing Tomas Tatar into play as the one-time option in the slot and Domi as the weak-side shooter (the fact he's also a lefty would create a second one-timer possibility).

Intriguing, isn't it?

As it stands, the first unit is constructed in such a way as to stack the odds for the initial faceoff. But if the puck exits the other team's end, prompting a line change, the coaches would do well to have a second unit that is designed around making clean zone entries. The presence of Petry and Domi, both of whom are excellent with the puck on their stick in transition, should help further the cause.

Petry reckons that no matter who happens to be on the ice, the power-play unit has to be able to both win possession from the faceoff and reliably create zone entries when the penalty kill succeeds in creating zone clearances. The key point, he said, is that the puck carrier not flub his initial pass, which upsets everyone else's timing.

"Last year we made adjustments to teams where I think this year it looks like we're going to make teams adjust to us," Petry said. "And I think we have a couple of breakouts that we're just working on to fine-tune and it seems like if we stick to those, everyone is on the same page."

A great many factors will determine whether the Canadiens find a path into the NHL postseason derby. But if the club isn't able to make major progress on the power play, the risk is they'll find themselves in the same position as last year. Sitting at home.

(Faceoff statistics via Puckbase.com. All other stats courtesy of NaturalStatTrick)

Marc Antoine Godin

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1153956 Montreal Canadiens

The most important Rocket training camp since moving to Laval gets underway

By Marc Dumont

Sep 23, 2019

With Canadiens cuts starting to trickle in, the most important Laval Rocket training camp we have seen gets underway Monday morning at Place Bell. There is the influx of talent and premier prospects expected to play in Laval that adds importance, but also that fans are hungry for a playoff appearance, something the Rocket has yet to do since arriving in Laval in 2017.



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Fortunately for those fans, they're set to enjoy a buffet of talent, though some dishes might take a little longer to come out of the kitchen.

Defenceman Otto Leskinen and goaltender Cayden Primeau were the latest players to be reassigned to the AHL on Sunday, joining the 14 prospects sent to the Rocket on Saturday. There's more to come, but seeing as the Canadiens are dealing with a strong push by several rookies to earn a roster spot, including Nick Suzuki, Cale Fleury, Jake Evans and even Alex Belzile, the Rocket will have to wait for some of the bigger names to arrive. To complicate matters further, the waiting line for the infirmary is growing exponentially, with potential Rocket players Gustav Olofsson, Michael McCarron, Joel Teasdale, Ryan Poehling and Noah Juulsen all listed as injured at Canadiens camp.

The jockeying for roles on the Rocket will start as soon as head coach Joël Bouchard drops the first puck at practice Monday. First impressions go a long way, as was the case last season when Evans caught the coaching staff's attention at the very first practice with his ability to listen carefully and willingness to work on his weaknesses. For what it's worth, Fleury incited the same type of reaction, and it's no surprise that both players ended up being among the most heavily used players on the team, and it's definitely no coincidence that both are now making noise at Canadiens camp.

Habs hopefuls

For players like Lukas Vejdemo and Alexandre Alain, it will be the perfect opportunity to earn some extra attention and show the coaching staff they're ready to take the next step in their development. Both had a somewhat underwhelming 2018-19 campaign, though they showed flashes of offensive flair, and their confidence, as well as their responsibilities, grew throughout the season.

Now that they have some experience and a lot more comfort in their surroundings, their main goal this year will be establishing a lot more consistency in their game, especially in their offensive production, which was rather erratic in their rookie season.

If they do manage to create a little more offense while maintaining their sound defensive game, Bouchard will undoubtedly reward them with ice time once injuries or call-ups inevitably hit. If they falter, he won't hesitate to demote them. Simply put, if they want to take the next step, they'll need to get an early start or they'll risk being lost in the shuffle once the roster is bolstered by more cuts.

As for Hayden Verbeek, he struggled to earn ice time last season on his way to a seven-point, 48-game season, although he was one of the better players at the Rookie Showdown in Belleville and he'll try to maintain the momentum he built earlier in the month upon his arrival in Laval.

Speed is Verbeek's strength and he often leaves his coverage in the dust, though his hands can't always keep up with his feet, which amounts to very little offence in the long run. Verbeek, along with Michael Pezzetta and Antoine Waked, spent some time in the ECHL last season and will likely feature in the Rocket's bottom six this season, though there will be opportunities for promotions throughout the year. They're also on the shortlist to be reassigned to the ECHL, which means once the music stops, there's a very good chance they'll all be fighting for the same chair.

On the defensive side of things, only two players who have contracts with the Canadiens are expected to be in Laval on Monday: David Sklenička and the aforementioned Leskinen. Much like Alain and Vejdemo, Sklenička is entering his second season with the Rocket, and much like the two forwards, he showed encouraging signs of growth following a rocky start to the year, but he too must take the next step if he's to be considered more than just AHL depth.

Leskinen, on the other hand, had a very good showing at Canadiens camp and has quickly established himself as a leading candidate for

a call-up among the defensive prospects. With Fleury, Josh Brook, Xavier Ouellet and Karl Alzner still in Montreal, Leskinen will have an opportunity to shine at Rocket camp. He is in line to get lots of ice time in Laval, which the 22-year-old would be accustomed to seeing as he was among the average ice time leaders in Liiga last season.

And while there'll hardly be enough warm bodies up front or on defence to ice a full roster at camp, there's already a goaltender logjam in Laval.

Or rather, the logjam only got worse over the summer when the Canadiens signed Primeau to his entry-level contract.

For now, the goaltending triumvirate will consist of Primeau, Michael McNiven and Connor LaCouvee, the latter two coming off better statistical seasons than incumbent Charlie Lindgren, who remains in Montreal as the third goaltender at training camp, and must go through waivers before being reassigned to Laval.

Early look

Once we add the players signed to AHL deals and the tryouts, it becomes abundantly clear that for the time being, there's a lack of players heading to the farm.

Keep in mind, this is just the first group of players, and there will be a lot more talent added to the mix once the Canadiens figure out who they want to bring to opening night in Raleigh on Oct. 3.

Which leads us to the question, whom should we expect in Laval over the next week or two?

Based on logic and a fair amount of educated guessing, we can whittle down the list from the 40 players currently in Montreal fighting for a job to get a better idea of who could be heading to the AHL.

First off, we can eliminate the players who are very likely to make the Canadiens roster.

We can argue as to whether Nate Thompson, Nick Cousins and Mike Reilly's spots are safe, but for now, let's assume those are the 18 players the coaching staff has down as locks to make the team.

That leaves 13 players at camp fighting for three spots. In other words, difficult decisions will have to be made.

Some of the most impressive young players at camp, arguably front-runners for the roster openings, happen to be exempt from waivers, which might ultimately seal their fate regardless of their preseason performance. But as you can see, no matter which players make the cut, there's a bevy of talent on its way to Laval.

With this incoming crop of prospects, the coaching staff will play a key part in the development and culture change in Laval, which is already well underway. Bouchard managed to establish a strong work ethic in Laval last season, which extended well beyond practice and into games, with most players, regardless of their pedigree or draft position, seeing an improvement in various aspects of their game.

However, there's still a lot left to prove. Bouchard and company have said all the right things and there's been some early evidence as to their effectiveness in the professional ranks, but the real test for those at the helm of the Rocket begins Monday morning.

Marc Dumont

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Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens veterans get wake-up call in sobering loss to barren Leafs

Eric Engels

September 24, 2019, 12:06 AM

MONTREAL — It's fair to say Monday's showing at the Bell Centre didn't provide the type of evidence you'd want in order to support an argument that the Montreal Canadiens can survive without Carey Price.

Thankfully for them, it was a one-off. An ugly duckling of a game played against a Toronto Maple Leafs side that barely met NHL pre-season requirements for veterans dressed.

Even more thankfully for them, they don't have to ponder what life will be like without Price. The 32-year-old star netminder was slated to start Monday's game but was kept out as a precautionary measure after team doctors diagnosed him with a hand contusion and recommended he stay off the ice for a few days.

Fortunately for Price, who's expected to return to play before the end of the week, he wasn't forced to play with this Canadiens team in front of him. With Charlie Lindgren in net, they lost 3-0. They were outplayed for large portions of the game—and in every zone—and afterwards Canadiens coach Claude Julien referred to it as a sobering reminder of how the team needs to play to be successful.

"We didn't play a good game tonight," he said. "We didn't skate well. When we skate well, things tend to work out. We didn't skate well enough or compete well enough. Our backchecking wasn't strong enough, our transition wasn't good, either. We weren't coming back fast. We played a mostly AHL lineup on the other side, 20 players who are hungry, who worked hard all game and gave us problems. If we had guys who thought it would be an easy game, they didn't prepare well and it's a good lesson for everyone. You can't prepare yourself after two periods, it's too late. So tonight wasn't a good game, and a loss sometimes brings everyone down to Earth and I hope that will be the case."

The timing of such a loss isn't necessarily a bad thing. With two games remaining in the pre-season, and nine days to go before they begin the regular season in Carolina, the Canadiens have enough road in front of them to patch things up and get back to the game that allowed them to win their first four exhibition matches. You know, the game mostly responsible for netting them 96 points last season.

Jeff Marek and Elliotte Friedman talk to a lot of people around the hockey world, and then they tell listeners all about what they've heard and what they think about it.

It was a style of game that saw the Canadiens score the fifth-most goals in the league at 5-on-5, a suffocating skating game that depended on quick transition, a game that didn't force Price to work miracles every time he took to the net.

"I thought we did a better job defensively—closing quick, spending a lot less time in our end," said Canadiens defenceman Jeff Petry to describe it. "I thought the big difference was taking those Grade-A slot opportunities away with everyone collapsing low. It seemed like in years past, teams would have the puck behind the goal-line and find the guy in the quiet area for a one-timer, which is always tough for a goaltender to stop. Price erases more of those than most guys, but we were able to limit them much more than in years past."

On Monday, it was a free-for-all in front of Lindgren. Granted, the Leafs were limited to just 25 shots on net, but they were gifted enough quality chances to skate away with a much more convincing win than the one they registered.

So, when the Canadiens get back on Wednesday, ahead of a game against the real Leafs in Toronto, and without Price at their disposal, they had better get back to what they do best.

Senior Writer Ryan Dixon and NHL Editor Rory Boylen always give it 110%, but never rely on clichés when it comes to podcasting. Instead, they use a mix of facts, fun and a varied group of hockey voices to cover Canada's most beloved game.

What does that entail?

"I think it's just the relentless forecheck and backcheck," said Nate Thompson after his 21 shifts in Monday's game. "I think just the way we play, it's a fast game, but it's a fast game because we're on pucks going forward and going back. And whenever you do that, it makes it hard for the other team to make plays."

It's a game that requires a full effort from everyone, which is something they haven't gotten from their best players to this point in training camp.

That was understandable over the first week and change, with young players and bubble players fighting to prove their worth and there not being much at stake for veterans who have their spots secured. But now it's time to prepare for the season.

"Every game you want to build," said Jonathan Drouin before skating a team-low 11:57 on Monday. "I haven't had the two greatest games, but it's pre-season. You want to build, you want to get better."

He needs to be much better than he's shown through his three games so far. So does linemate Max Domi, so does sophomore Jesperi Kotkaniemi, and so do a number of other players who have had ordinary outings through exhibition.

They'd be wise to treat Monday's game as a wake-up call.

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Sportsnet.ca / Elias Pettersson looking like elite NHL scorer in Canucks' pre-season win

Iain MacIntyre

September 24, 2019, 2:15 AM

ABBOTSFORD, B.C. — In a way, you can't lose in the pre-season.

Score a boatload of goals and win and everyone's happy and sees things as positive signs for the looming National Hockey League regular season. Lose and, well, it's just pre-season and the results don't matter. So be wary of what you read into it.

For the Vancouver Canucks, it was hard not to be excited about their 6-4 pre-season win here Monday against the Ottawa Senators. Considering the Canucks dressed most of their NHL lineup, it's not like they were dominant. The Senators churned out 45 shots, after all.

But there were two unmistakable positives for the Canucks: Calder Trophy winner Elias Pettersson looked like an elite NHL scorer, driving the attack with two goals and two assists; and he did it as the fulcrum of a power play that went 4-for-7 against the Senators and decided the game.



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"I think my first two pre-season games, I was feeling it but I was kind of tired in my legs," Pettersson, who had one goal from his first two exhibition contests, told reporters. "It's great to have a game like this and score two goals and two assists. . . and get some momentum for what's up next. Of course it builds your confidence."

There isn't much doubt that Pettersson can score. And will score this season. But it won't be enough to get the Canucks into the playoffs unless the power play contributes a lot more to the offence than it did a year ago, when it tied for 22nd in the NHL and generated just 43 goals.

That was 10 fewer than Vancouver scored with Daniel and Henrik Sedin in 2017-18, and if you don't think that sounds like much of a difference, consider that the Canucks played 42 one-goal games last season and lost 25 of them. No NHL team lost more games by a single goal.

Improving the power play is paramount to finding another 10-15 points in the standings.

This is why Monday was so encouraging.

With probably 14 or 15 of the skaters he'll start the season with on Oct. 2, Canuck coach Travis Green showed off his new first unit: Pettersson and 2018 Calder finalist Brock Boeser on the wings, with newcomer J.T. Miller in front of the net, Josh Leivo in the slot and Alex Edler on the point.

Edler may have been filling in for dynamic rookie defenceman Quinn Hughes, who did not dress.

Boeser finished with three assists against the Sens, while Miller scored a goal and Edler had one goal and three assists.

"I didn't watch a lot of what the power play did here last year," Miller, acquired from the Tampa Bay Lightning, said after his best game of the pre-season. "I do know we have a lot of talent. We've got two of the league's elite, young shooters on the flanks and that should make us hard to stop if we're playing hard."

"Today, we did a good job of not going through the motions just because it's pre-season. We worked hard at it and it paid off."

Deploying Miller and Leivo on the first unit allows the Canucks to use forwards Bo Horvat, Tanner Pearson and Sven Baertschi on the second power play.

"They can't cover all of us," Pettersson said. "If they cover me too much and take away my one-timer, it's open down low."

"Hopefully we'll score more goals because last season, I don't know, maybe we made it too hard for ourselves. Now we move the puck to an open guy and when we shoot. . . we don't hesitate too much. It's only one game, but of course it's a good start. We have five guys that can score."

JORDIE OR JAMIE

The goal of the night was scored by stay-at-home defenceman Jordie Benn, another new Canuck, who looked like his sniper-brother Jamie when he buried a breakaway stick side on former Vancouver goalie Anders Nilsson with 2.1 seconds remaining in the second period. Benn emerged from the penalty box and skated on to Tyler Myers' breakaway pass.

"I think I had eight seconds when I got out of the box, so I knew I had to hurry up," Benn said. "It was perfect timing."

When was his last breakaway?

"Honestly, I have no idea," Benn said. "It might have been peewee or midget (minor hockey) when I was an offensive d-man. But not in probably 20 years. Guys were giving me a pretty hard time about getting a breakaway. But they said: 'Good shot.'"

FANTENBURG INJURED

Depth defenceman Oscar Fantenberg left the game injured in the first period after being crushed behind the Canuck net by Senator forecheckers Jordan Szwarz and Scott Sabourin. Szwarz was assessed a boarding major and game misconduct for his hit from behind.

The Canucks said only that Fantenberg, in a battle to make the NHL roster after being signed as a free agent, suffered an "upper body" injury. Starting goalie Jacob Markstrom said he spoke with his teammate and hoped he wouldn't be out long.

Like his team, Markstrom was both good and bad, but made several strong saves with the Senators chasing the game over the final two periods after falling behind 3-1.

"That's why we play these games — to kind of learn," Markstrom said. "Myself, too, I've got a lot to improve. If we would have been perfect now, we wouldn't have to have pre-season games, but we do."

Imagine, an NHL season without the pre-season. Dare to dream.

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Sportsnet.ca / McDavid dominating Oilers practices as return to game action nears

Mark Spector

September 23, 2019, 7:46 PM

KELOWNA, B.C. — They may as well have just stopped the game and told everyone to go home, that April 6 in Calgary when Connor McDavid tore up his knee on Mike Smith's goal post. Even the Flames fans lost their edge, and remained a decidedly muted house through to the buzzer of that unfortunate, injurious season-ender.

"It just got quiet," recalled Oilers defenceman Oscar Klefbom.

"It made you sick," added Sam Gagner.

Fast forward nearly six months, and Gagner just shakes his head at how McDavid dominated two long, fast-paced Edmonton Oilers practices here in the B.C. interior.

"He's scoring at ease in practice, which isn't easy," Gagner said. "He looks great . . . and just continues to get better every day as we go along in camp."

The Oilers doctors and front office were to speak Monday afternoon about the possibility of McDavid playing as soon as Tuesday's pre-season game against the Arizona Coyotes at Rogers Place. If not, he'll get into one of Edmonton's final two pre-season games, Thursday at Winnipeg or Saturday, ominously scheduled for back in Calgary. His torn PCL ligament seemingly 100 per cent healed, the decision on his return is expected to be made on Tuesday morning — and with two preseason games remaining after that one, it is clear that he'll get at least one in.

Watching him in Kelowna, it seems inconceivable that McDavid would not be ready for the Oilers Oct. 2 season opener against the Vancouver Canucks.

This could have been much, much worse.

"Yeah. I guess that's fair," began McDavid. "There's lots of uncertainty with injuries. There was lots of different stuff going on in



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the summer. To feel good on the ice is something I'm really happy about. The fact that we're talking about games is something I'm real proud of. It's been a long summer. Lots of hard work. Lots of good docs. Lots of smart people. I really appreciate all that they've done for me."

McDavid busted up a drill on Sunday when he was the lone forechecker, chasing a puck that was shot in toward goalie Mikko Koskinen. He got on to Koskinen so fast, stealing a puck and firing it into the empty net vacated by the goalie, that head coach Dave Tippett ordered Koskinen to skate the width of the rink while all the players watched. It was a playful punishment for screwing up a drill, but an example of a moment that takes on a whole different timeline when McDavid's speed is involved.

"I'm trying to push myself, too," McDavid said. "Everyone's played games by now — I'm the only one that hasn't. I've gotta make sure I'm ready to go when the time comes."

This Oilers team is no lock for a playoff spot, to be sure. They'll need their goaltending tandem of Mike Smith and Koskinen to work out, new Swede Joel Persson to be able to handle top-four minutes, their re-worked bottom six to win faceoffs and kill penalties, and for a surprise player like Anton Burdasov or Joakim Nygard to give them some offence they were not necessarily counting on.

Even if all those coins land heads-up, however, it's meaningless if McDavid isn't able to be McDavid.

"There are some things that need to go right for us," agreed Klefbom. "Anything can happen ... but it's nice to see (McDavid) on the ice and having that hunger he has right now. I asked him, and he said, 'I want to play every single (preseason) game that's left.' So, the hunger is there, and he looks pretty good. Oh boy."

Oh boy, indeed. McDavid ruled the ice at Prospera Place, home of the Kelowna Rockets, like a guy trying to show management he's ready for game action.

"I think he's just feeling more confident. Thinking he can jump into (anything) and not worry about his injury," said Tippett. "He sets the pace out there, which is nice. It picks up the whole pace of practice."

Tippett has seen McDavid from behind the opposing bench. The view is not quite the same as the daily looks he's getting now.

"I remember the year I played with Mario (Lemieux) in Pittsburgh," Tippett said. "Special players do special things, and it doesn't matter if you're a fan or a teammate, you still watch those things."

"Yeah, he's a good player. A real good player."

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Sportsnet.ca / 5 takeaways from first half of Maple Leafs training camp

Luke Fox

September 23, 2019, 2:31 PM

Without taking another dive into the Jason Spezza saga, which has sorted itself out for the time being, here are five major takeaways (plus a few bonus observations) from the Toronto Maple Leafs' training camp, which has now passed the halfway mark.

Contract status only thing standing between Sandin and opening night

Rasmus Sandin — 19 years old and easily the most skilled among the candidates for opening night's third pair — has now been grouped with the Auston Matthews and Morgan Riellys of the world, as opposed to his Marlies brethren. This is just the latest sign that the young Swede is poised to make his NHL debut Oct. 2.

"He's been outstanding. He's a perfect example of a guy who worked hard during the off-season to prepare, came into camp with confidence and played really well," says Rielly, the last Leaf to successfully make the leap as teenage D-man, in 2013. "We love having him. He's a great player, and he's got a really bright future."

Sandin is expected to be paired with 27-year-old Martin Marincin, who has more NHL experience than the other hopefuls and re-upped in the summer for a cap-soothing \$700,000. Coach Mike Babcock trusts Marincin to kill penalties, and the veteran is comfortable patrolling his off-side in a lefty-lefty combo.

"Marty, for me, it's never been about ability, it's never been about skating, it's never been about reading the game. It's been about confidence," Babcock says. "He's gotten thicker and thicker and more and more confident. He sure looks like he wants to play for the Leafs."

The Leafs memorably withheld a job from a rookie Travis Dermott out of camp in 2017 strictly because his entry-level status allowed him to be freely sent to the farm club without passing waivers.

If cuts are made for reasons other than performance, the waivers-exempt Sandin risks a similar fate.

Roster contenders Ben Harpur, Jordan Schmalz, Kevin Gravel and Justin Holl would all need to slip through waivers to join the Marlies.

Babcock warns not to assume Rasmus Sandin has made the club: "Let's not get ahead of ourselves.... Nothing's decided. I mean, Matthews and Tavares are going to make the team."

— luke fox (@lukefoxjukebox) September 23, 2019

Hey, Mickey, you're so fine

Yes, Auston Matthews went ahead and invoked the name Pavel Datsyuk when describing the play of KHL import Ilya Mikheyev, a virtual lock to play the wing next to third-line centre Alexander Kerfoot.

"He plays a lot like Datsyuk," Matthews said following Toronto's pre-season win over Buffalo. "He has that reach, has a similar paddle on him. Really shifty, strong on the puck, good on his edges. I was really impressed."

Kerfoot hollers "Mickey!" when he wants the puck from the six-foot-two Russian and describes his linemate as "a complete package" who sees the game a little differently having arrived from the big ice.

"His English is pretty good. I would say he understands better than he talks right now, which is good for us because you can talk to him and he knows what you're talking about. He's picking it up real fast. He's smart on the ice," Kerfoot says.

"He's really polished all around, has good details to his game, plays hard, physical, wins a lot of battles. He can play in any role."

Another great sequence for Ilya Mikheyev. Mikheyev is on. pic.twitter.com/jEulzR5AWx

— Josh Tessler (@JoshTessler_) September 21, 2019

Kapanen impressing as Hyman's understudy

Despite playing scarce little left wing in his career, righty Kasper Kapanen is adjusting well as Zach Hyman's fill-in on the Tavares-



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Marnier line, sniping a beauty in his first pre-season game and adding a pair of assists in his second.

With Connor Brown out of town and Hyman injured, Kapanen has also been asked to assume a larger role on the penalty kill. He'll certainly earn that juicy raise, to \$3.2 million, he earned over the summer.

"I'm a fast skater. I gotta be on the forecheck. They want me to be in the right spots defensively and block shots and be on the PK, which is something our team was on and off with last year," says Kapanen.

The fleet-footed Finn is expected to slot back to the right of Kerfoot and Mikheyev once Hyman's knee is ready to go in November. He says playing the off wing has been more of a challenge in the D-zone.

"You've got to be careful when you're getting the puck on your backhand from the D-man in the defensive zone," he says. "It's just something I've got to get used to."

William Nylander got his groove back. (Apologies, Stella.)

No. 88 in your program ranks No. 1 in shot attempts (19) among all NHLers this pre-season. Auston Matthews cracked that he's just gotta hit the net.

"Willie might've had the puck as much tonight as he had last year," Babcock said after Nylander's buzzy exhibition performance Friday.

"It's great for us to see it, but it's not as important for us to see it as it is for him to feel it and know it and feel good about himself.

"For whatever reason he couldn't get going last year. He's knows he's a good hockey player, and we need him to be a good hockey player."

Good? Or one of the best in his country?

"I think he's going to go down as one of the better Swedish players to ever play," pal Kapanen raved.

The largest beneficiary of a confident Nylander will be Matthews, who never had a consistent wingman to feed off last season.

"He's flying out there," Matthews says. "When we work hard and kinda let our creativity and skill take over after that and kinda put our work ethic first, that's when when we have really good games and end up playing our best."

Matthews showing more bite — and we like it

Matthews downplayed his troll job of Senators prospect Scott Sabourin last week, saying it was good "clickbait" for us media types. But his teammates appreciate that Matthews is looking so engaged even in these meaningless scrimmages.

"I was laughing. I sent it to him. I said, 'This is unbelievable.' He was laughing pretty hard at it," Mitch Marnier said. "When he gets mad, he gets mad. He's a pretty big guy. He can handle himself out there."

"I think Matty is a pretty funny guy.... He doesn't really chirp much, but when he gets upset, he'll certainly say something. He's chirped me a bunch before. He's pretty good at it." —Kasper Kapanen on the AM34 name check <https://t.co/e9gnn0MaQO>

— luke fox (@lukefoxjukebox) September 20, 2019

Remember, AHLer Scott Sabourin was running around that night, putting a couple of core Leafs at risk.

"That guy slewfoot Mo [Rielly] before, then hit me in the head," says Andreas Johnsson, who has been showing well on that top line. "Obviously you're going to play hard, but I feel like in the game you have to have respect for other players too. I feel like that guy didn't have respect at all. I don't think we should give him attention at all."

One-Timers

- There is one wing position still available for opening night. Does it go to 22-year-old Dmytro Timashov? Or can a more experienced forward like Nic Petan, Pontus Aberg or Kenny Agostino swipe the job by excelling in their final pre-season games?

- Ben Harpur has the unique advantages of size and sandpaper, but he needs to show more.

- Babcock liked Michal Neuvirth's performance Saturday night in Buffalo, but the veteran goalie was too hurt to participate in Monday's Montreal game. Health is making it awfully tough to select him over Michael Hutchinson for the backup role, but Kyle Dubas will keep one eye on the waiver wire.

- Assistant coach Paul McFarland's revamped top power-play unit will try John Tavares in the bumper (Nazem Kadri's old spot), Andreas Johnsson net-front (Tavares's old spot), and Matthews and Marnier switching flanks, while Rielly runs the point.

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Sportsnet.ca / Analyzing the NHL's skill players: Who is the best shooter?

Andrew Berkshire

September 23, 2019, 11:34 AM

After breaking down the best offensive zone passers in the NHL using last season's data, it's time to move on to shooters. On the surface, identifying the best shooters in the NHL should be relatively easy, since they score goals at high rates on a consistent basis.

However unlike passing, where playmakers pass to a variety of players and are more reliant on team strength to convert the plays they make, shooting comes from the same player over and over.

This means that while we can measure how dangerous a player's shots are in a general sense, individual shooting talent can vastly change the results and render a lot of the data moot. Patrik Laine for example, doesn't take many shots that would qualify as dangerous, but he scores anyway due to his exceptional shot.

So we can look at which players create the most quality looks, or which players have the highest quality looks, but goal scoring will always have some very significant outliers due to the persistence of talent that can't, at this stage anyway, be entirely captured by statistics. Because of that, the cleanest way to look at this would be a dissection of the most dangerous volume shooters at even strength, not necessarily the best scorers.

With all those caveats out of the way, let's try to figure out which forwards create the most scoring opportunities in the NHL at 5-vs-5. First, let's do the same thing we did with passes and put shot attempt volume alongside the percent of total shot attempts that are on net.

Once again the axes are set to the league averages for forwards last season.

That one marker way over on the right side of the chart is Brendan Gallagher, the shot volume king in the NHL last year by a wide margin, with Filip Forsberg, Viktor Arvidsson, and Timo Meier being the only other forwards to notch over seven shot attempts per 20



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minutes of ice time. Of that elite shot producing group, only Arvidsson is able to get his attempts on net more often than league average, with Forsberg last year getting fewer than half of his shot attempts on net, which is crazy when you realize he scored 28 goals in just 64 games.

The spray and pray method with shooting can be effective, but so can the more exacting strategy of searching for higher quality shots, so let's look just at shots on net — and where they come from — first by volume of overall scoring chances then ordered by quality.

Looking at the top-30 scoring chance producers in the NHL, then ordering by how many of those chances come from the high danger area, the surprising name at the top of the list is Brady Tkachuk, whose entire game seems to be modeled to get him to the net front.

Lots of other net-front specialists make appearances on the list like Arvidsson, Meier, Gallagher, John Tavares, Andrew Shaw, and Patric Hornqvist, but there are some names like Tomas Tatar or Mitch Marner that are less expected.

We can also see the difference between players like Alex DeBrincat, Alex Ovechkin, and Vladimir Tarasenko, who set up in the high slot to rip shots with a bit more space, compared to those like Shaw and Brayden Point who pick their spots more exclusively in tight.

We can add another layer to this data by dissecting which players are adding extra qualities to their scoring chances that drive more goals. How often are they shooting off the rush? How often are their scoring chances preceded by a cycle pass? How often are they capitalizing on broken plays due to forechecking plays? If we re-organize the scoring chance data again by sorting for these extra factors that make things dangerous, how does that shake out?

When adding these layers of context to the shots, Arvidsson rockets to the top of the list, which shouldn't be a huge surprise considering he just scored 34 goals in 58 games last season, knocking on the door of a 50 goal pace.

Arvidsson attacks any way you want, with a huge number of chances off the rush, and nearly as many off the cycle. Also moving up the list is Ovechkin, who jumps from 23rd spot in the last graph to seventh in this one. Ovechkin's shooting talent is special, but he's able to augment his shots by attacking off the rush more than anyone else aside from Arvidsson.

Tarasenko makes an even bigger jump than Ovechkin does, while Gallagher, Meier, and Auston Matthews hang around at the top no matter how we sort things.

Finally, we want to not only factor in puck movement prior to the shot, but see how quickly that puck movement is happening, so let's look at one timers on the shots these players are putting on net from the slot.

Here we have an entirely different look for players at the top, and as you might guess from watching him play, it pays to play on a line with Johnny Gaudreau. That isn't to take anything away from Sean Monahan; you need to have a nose for the net to receive these sorts of passes anyway, and that takes talent, not to mention getting the shots off in traffic.

A second consecutive down scoring year from Max Pacioretty might make some believe he's no longer the player he once was, but the volume is there, the quality shots are there, and last season he was ripping one-timers like crazy. With a healthy Paul Stastny and Mark Stone likely on his line for a full season, this could be a renaissance year for the former perennial 30-goal man.

Gallagher, Forsberg, and Jeff Skinner slide all the way to the bottom of the list by this metric, showing how much more they had to do on their own to get scoring chances, and how much difficulty their teams had moving the puck. That lack of pre-shot movement in quick succession with a shot was consistently noticeable with the

Predators last season, and it was one of the reasons they disappointed in the playoffs.

Surprisingly Matthews and Marner are both at the bottom end of the group despite the Maple Leafs being one of the better passing teams in the league last season, but that could be due to rarely playing with Nylander last year for Matthews, and usually being the one passing for Marner.

Overall, like I expected, things are less conclusive on the shooting side than the passing side, but at 5-vs-5 I think we can safely say players like Arvidsson, Gallagher, and Meier can be relied on to nearly singlehandedly drive scoring on lines once again this season, and Ovechkin's sport-defining goal scoring doesn't appear to be drying up any time soon.

However if anyone is going to challenge Ovechkin's supremacy as the king of goals, at even strength at least, it might be Matthews. Creeping near the top but never at it in all but one of these, Matthews is someone I can easily see scoring 50 this year.

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Sportsnet.ca / Five reasons why the Winnipeg Jets are still Stanley Cup contenders

Sean Reynolds

September 23, 2019, 6:02 PM

Since the start of the 2018 calendar year good news headlines have been hard to come by for the Winnipeg Jets. That's around the time the team began a downward spiral that ended in a first round playoff exit in a year many favoured them to win it all.

Things only got worse in the summer as the Jets watched a large contingent of their veteran presence leave for other markets with the losses of Jacob Trouba, Tyler Myers, Brandon Tanev, Ben Chiarot and Kevin Hayes.

Now training camp has been dominated by headlines of a cornerstone defenceman pondering retirement and RFAs remaining unsigned.

So it's no surprise many pundits are predicting the Jets to take a big step backwards this season. But here are five reasons why news of their death may be greatly exaggerated.

1. Embarrassment of riches

It can be easy to focus on the talent that's headed out the door. Easier still to forget just how many horses remain in Paul Maurice's stable.

Mark Scheifele and Blake Wheeler remain two of the most offensively skilled players on the face of the earth. Nik Ehlers is still a speed demon who pulls off clean zone entries like a man with halitosis pops Tic Tacs. Adam Lowry is quietly one of the league's best shut down players. Andrew Copp is the definition of a pro who adds value wherever he plays in the lineup. Ditto Mathieu Perreault. Jack Roslovic is a speed demon waiting for a bigger stage, and was named the NHL's first star of the week last season after a brief audition on that stage.



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Add the likely return of both Patrik Laine and Kyle Connor and the Jets can once again boast two of the best young goal scorers the league has to offer.

Can you say stacked?

2. Growth

Because they've been so good for some time now it can be easy to forget just how young the Jets are. Scheifele is just 26 years old. Josh Morrissey is 24. Kyle Connor is 22. Patrik Laine, 21. There is a lot of room for growth and maturation in these players and, therefore, the organization as a whole. Should Wheeler continue to thumb his nose at Father Time, there's really no place to expect age-related regression in this lineup.

3. Team defence

Here's the big one. If you can point to one specific thing that derailed the Jets' promising run at the Cup in 2018-19, it would be keeping the puck out of their net.

The Jets rode the league's No. 5 defence to the conference final two seasons ago, but dropped to 15th in the league last season. Maurice believes the blame for that should be distributed across the entire team. That's why defence has been the main focus at training camp so far.

Every drill has included an element of backchecking and back pressure. The theory this year is simple: the Jets aren't going anywhere without a return to former defensive prowess. Goals-for will come, but success won't without the goals against coming down.

Senior Writer Ryan Dixon and NHL Editor Rory Boylen always give it 110%, but never rely on clichés when it comes to podcasting. Instead, they use a mix of facts, fun and a varied group of hockey voices to cover Canada's most beloved game.

4. Connor Hellebuyck

Should the Jets achieve their vision of a steep climb back up the NHL's defensive rankings, expect Connor Hellebuyck's game to follow.

When the Jets were at their best defensively two seasons ago Hellebuyck was a Vezina candidate. Talking to both he and backup Laurent Brossoit when the Jets' system was executed properly, shots funnel into easily predictable areas, while cross-ice passes and back door tap-ins are all but eliminated. That allows the Jets goalies to focus on the shot without the distraction of the chaos around them.

The Jets' defensive slide made life more chaotic for the goaltenders last season and it showed. Fix one problem, you likely fix both.

5. Next man up

No doubt the Jets have holes to fill this year. Luckily they have a number of prospects who've been knocking on the door, ready to prove their worth at the NHL level. Defenceman Sami Niku has already proven everything he can at the AHL level, winning that league's defenceman of the year in 2018. Tucker Poolman has impressed on the farm and his pre-season performance has him looking ready to make the jump.

You can also add 18-year-old defenseman Ville Heinola to the list of youngsters making a push. Heinola's looked at ease playing against NHL-calibre competition this pre-season, earning him a spot in the Jets' NHL group at camp. You may just find him in the Jets' locker room come October but if not, Winnipeg looks to have a long-term solution waiting in the wings.

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs winger Dmytro Timashov quietly inching closer to NHL job

Chris Johnston

September 23, 2019, 2:43 PM

TORONTO — The discussion about roster-spot battles at Toronto Maple Leafs training camp have rarely included much time for Dmytro Timashov.

Perhaps we should have asked the 22-year-old winger about his intentions here sooner.

"For me, I'm just thinking that I will make it. There is no [thought] that I'm not going to make it or what's going to happen after that," Timashov told Sportsnet. "For me, I'm making the team."

There is still a week and four pre-season games to go, but he's clearly on the right track.

It was not by accident that Timashov found himself skating with the NHLers following a reshuffling of the groups on Monday morning. "It's a step in the right direction," he said after getting paired with Jason Spezza and Frederik Gauthier for what could be a preview of the Leafs fourth line come opening night.

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Consider that a more appealing assignment at this stage of camp than the one given to Kenny Agostino, Nick Shore, Nic Petan and Jeremy Bracco. Each of those bubble boys was part of the AHL-flavoured group sent to Montreal to face the Canadiens.

"What we tried to do tonight is put a bunch of people under a serious amount of duress," said Mike Babcock. "In other words, you're going to be playing against NHL players and there is no guys on your team there to help you. You're by yourself."

The coach has long been a fan of Timashov — a fifth-round pick by the Leafs in 2015. He and Trevor Moore were essentially the final forwards cut last fall, with Moore earning the next-man-up designation and ultimately skating in 32 games for the Leafs.

There appears to be a similar carrot hanging over Timashov's head now, even after a summer where the organization added five or six experienced forwards to fill either a depth role with the Leafs or a bigger job with the AHL Marlies.

"I say to Timo all the time: 'Why not you?'" said Babcock. "He protects the puck, he's smart defensively, to me he's not a tall body but he's a thick body. He can play with real good pace. His biggest area of concern is when he gets it, sometimes he turns it over too much.

"What the young guys got to realize is the big guys don't turn it over because they don't want to play defence. So they take care of it so they get to play on offence. That's what he's got to learn.

"If he can do that he can play."

Timashov already has three AHL seasons under his belt and spent a lot of extra time in coach Sheldon Keefe's office last year, reviewing tape and trying to work on his play away from the puck.



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Those hours were logged with the NHL in mind.

The job description he's auditioning for with the Leafs is fairly lunch-bucket in nature: Help drive play in limited minutes at even strength, and be ready to contribute on the penalty kill, if needed.

"They want me to be strong on the pucks, good forechecks, be fast. I think like I started to be at the end of last year's playoffs in the Marlies," said Timashov. "Be heavy in the O-zone, try to hold on to the pucks, be physical, play physical and still be a skill guy, too, to make plays and do stuff like that."

The one thing he shares in common with most of the guys battling for the 12th and 13th forward spots is that he'd need to pass through waivers in order to be assigned to the Marlies.

Only Bracco is exempt among that group.

It means the decision is likely to be based on merit rather than contractual considerations, which makes this last week of auditions important. Timashov is happy with the two pre-season games he's played so far, but knows he needs "to be really good" to separate himself when he gets the chance to play again.

"Competition's always good," said Moore. "Good for the organization, good for me. It pushes us and it makes us all better hockey players.

"If you don't like competing then you're in the wrong line of business, right?"

Whether you find it surprising or not, Timashov is clearly in the thick of the battle.

After spending a month back home in Stockholm and some time training at altitude in Aspen, Colo., he's returned to Toronto with one objective in mind.

"I felt like I was ready even last year because I was pretty close," said Timashov. "I think this year I have no choice. It's about time to take the job."

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TSN.CA / Five Takeaways: Senators @ Canucks

Jeff Paterson

TAKEAWAYS

1) The Canucks power play was the difference in Monday's 6-4 win over Ottawa in Abbotsford. It struck four times on the night including a five-on-three goal in the third period. As he was so often last season, Elias Pettersson was the driving force behind the Canucks offense as he scored a pair of the goals with the man-advantage and set up the other two. He put his stamp on the hockey game when he pulled the trigger on a one-timer from his off-wing that blew past former teammate Anders Nilsson in the Senators net. Pettersson and Alex Edler (1+3) each collected four points on the night while Brock Boeser chipped in with three assists. Bo Horvat and JT Miller had the other power play goals and Miller was a force in the net-front position -- a spot he'll likely see plenty of when the Canucks start playing for keeps on October 2nd.

2) While it's only preseason, it is encouraging that the Canucks best players have emerged as their best players in the exhibition season.

After a quiet night in Salt Lake City on Saturday, Pettersson looked driven to ensure that he produced on Monday. And he delivered. Brock Boeser showed flashes in his preseason debut on Saturday, but looked far more confident with the puck in his second game and that translated into points on the scoresheet. Bo Horvat was good in Edmonton in his last outing last Thursday and has now scored in each of the three games he's suited up for in preseason play. While the slate gets wiped clean after Thursday's preseason finale, it's a promising sign that the Canucks top scorers have factored in the scoring and won't be left wondering where their offense is when the regular season begins. There's no guarantee that a big preseason will translate into a strong regular season schedule, but there's certainly nothing wrong with carrying good vibes into the games that matter.

3) Special teams dominated the first period on Monday night. The Canucks were on the power play for nine of the first 13 minutes of the hockey game with a pair of Sens minor penalties and then a five-minute major to Jordan Swarz for a check from behind on Oscar Fantenberg. Fantenberg left the game and did not return after suffering what Travis Green termed an upper body injury. That left the Canucks with five defensemen for the final 52 minutes of the game. While the remaining defenders were thrown into a blender as far as pairings were concerned, the Canucks depth forwards had to be patient early in the hockey game. All that power play time meant very few shifts early for players like Brandon Sutter, Jay Beagle, Tim Schaller and Jake Virtanen. The Canucks dominated the special teams battle on the night striking four times on the power play and keeping the Sens at bay on four power plays of their own.

4) Jordie Benn won't be counted on to score a lot of goals for the Canucks this season, but the team will certainly welcome any offensive contributions he can muster. And on Monday, with time winding down in the second period and the Canucks clinging to a 4-3 lead, Benn stepped out of the penalty box after serving a holding minor. Tyler Myers alertly spotted his fellow blueliner exiting the box and quickly head-manned the puck. Benn picked it up, skated in all alone on Nilsson and smartly picked his spot low on the stick side and snapped it home. The goal came with 2.7 seconds remaining in the period and gave the Canucks a little breathing room up 5-3 at the break. While Bo Horvat extended the Canucks lead to 6-3 early in the third, a Chris Tierney goal made the final 6-4 which meant Benn's goal went into the books as the game winner. Last season, Benn contributed a career-best five goals to the Montreal attack.

5) After a solid night in Edmonton last week, Sven Baertschi had a quiet night on Monday despite playing at even-strength on the wing with Pettersson and Boeser. He was held off the scoresheet and registered just a single shot on goal. With two games to go in the preseason, it'll be interesting to see how the Swiss forward is deployed the rest of the way. He remains an option for a top-six spot, but he certainly hasn't locked one of those spots down in the preseason. With Micheal Ferland recovering from illness that has kept him off skates the past three days, Baertschi may be forced to skate lower in the line-up when he next suits up. Ferland has appeared in just one preseason game so far (vs Edmonton at home last week) and will need game action to get back up to speed this week. At this point, Tanner Pearson (who himself was fairly quiet on Monday night) has had a more prominent and productive preseason than Baertschi. But that battle likely isn't over just yet.

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TSN.CA / Sandin sticking with Leafs' NHL group



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Kristen Shilton

As the Maple Leafs entered their final full week of training camp on Monday, head coach Mike Babcock had separated his players into two groups – one primarily made up of NHL players, and one primarily made up of bubble players. Rasmus Sandin was slotted into the former group, which is the best indication yet that the 19-year-old defenceman is making the right impression on the Leafs' brass.

And with only 10 days to go before Toronto's regular season opens, Sandin can fully appreciate the opportunity he's been given to excel.

"[I have to] just play hard," Sandin surmised on Monday of his strategy going forward. "Not be very shy out there, take a little bit of space and be myself, play how I've always been playing. That's why I'm here and I'm going to keep doing that and try to improve that."

Drafted in the first-round, 29th overall, by the Leafs in 2018, Sandin had a breakout season for the American Hockey League's Toronto Marlies last year, registering 28 points (six goals, 22 assists) in 44 games.

He spent the summer in Sweden training with Leafs winger William Nylander and the fruits of that labour have shown up early and often in Leafs' camp.

"He's been outstanding," said Morgan Rielly. "He's the perfect example of a guy who worked hard in the off-season to prepare, came into camp, had confidence and played really well. It's nice to see a guy like that really compete and play well. We love having him, he's a great player, he's got a really bright future and we'll just try to support him."

"I [do] feel a little bit more confident," Sandin added. "I know what's going on a little bit outside the rink. I know where I'm going to play this year, at least I'm going to stay in Toronto, and that feels very good. I'm more confident coming into this camp knowing what's going on."

Having someone like Rielly, who first suited up on the Leafs' blueline at age 19, looking out for him has been a huge boost for Sandin as well.

"He's a really good guy that talks to us to give us tips on where we can improve, so obviously I'm trying to learn from him," Sandin said of Rielly. "I'm trying to look and see what he's doing on the ice and how he's taking care of himself. He's one of the best defensive players right now I would say."

In addition to Rielly, Sandin has been bonding with defence partner Martin Marincin. For the more mobile 5-foot-11 Sandin, playing opposite the 6-foot-5 Marincin is proving to be a great match.

"First off, he's a big, big guy, so he's helping me on the ice," Sandin said. "He knows what drills we're doing on the ice, so he's helping me like that. [I'm] talking a lot with him off the ice too and he's just a great guy, so he's been helping me for sure."

Babcock has heaped praise on Marincin recently, saying on Monday the veteran looks like "he wants to play for the Leafs." Toronto brought the 27-year-old back on a one-year contract in June after he was a healthy scratch for large portions of last season, his fourth with the organization.

"It's never been about ability. It's never been about skating. It's never been about reading the game. It's been about confidence," Babcock said. "And he's got thicker and thicker and more and more confident."

With Travis Dermott (shoulder) slated to miss at least the first 12-14 games of the regular season, Marincin and Sandin could end up getting a look as Toronto's third pairing to start the year. But before

that happens, Babcock cautions there is more evaluation still left to be done of Sandin.

"When you're around good players, it helps you get better for sure," Babcock said. "The pace in practice today, it takes another jump. There are a lot of steps, and we're going to watch him as he goes."

Before his standout performance in Saturday's 5-3 preseason loss to the Buffalo Sabres, Trevor Moore hadn't done much to draw Babcock's attention in camp. But just one game (and one nice goal) can change a lot.

"He didn't [impress me] first at all," Babcock admitted. "Him and I talked about that. I welcomed him back after last game. He was so good last game. That's what he is."

In defining what exactly makes Moore go, Babcock referenced another of his young wingers, Dmytro Timashov, and how he can learn from what Moore does at his best.

Timashov has yet to make his NHL debut after being drafted in the fifth round, 125th overall, by Toronto in 2015, but Babcock sees his potential to do so if he can emulate how Moore has made his jump from undrafted free agent in 2016 to NHLer.

"They haven't scored a lot at this level. I don't know if they ever will," Babcock said. "But they can penalty kill. They can transport the puck. They can be heavy down low. They can get it back for the good players. They can play against really good players. They play with pace and they seem to always be ready to go. So if [Timashov] can do that, he just improves himself and can move up in the lineup."

Both Moore and Timashov skated with the Leafs' NHL-heavy lineup in Monday's practice. Moore was promoted to Toronto's projected third line with Ilya Mikheyev and Alexander Kerfoot, while Timashov skated on the fourth line with Frederik Gauthier and Jason Spezza.

For the second time in less than a week, Michal Neuvirth is missing time with the Leafs.

Scheduled to play in Montreal on Monday in tandem with Michael Hutchinson, Neuvirth wasn't present at the team's morning skate, and Babcock said after Joseph Woll would be taking his place for the exhibition game.

"Neuvy wasn't feeling up to it, so he's not going today," is all Babcock would say about Neuvirth's status.

Neuvirth is signed to a professional tryout with the Leafs, and meant to be competing with Hutchinson for the club's backup job behind Frederik Andersen. But last week, while the team was in St. John's, N.L., to open training camp, Neuvirth participated in just two days of on-ice activities before an undisclosed injury sidelined him from practice until the club returned to Toronto.

After getting in a full session with the team, Neuvirth finally made his preseason debut in Saturday's loss to Buffalo, posting 20 saves and a .909 save percentage. It was the 31-year-old's first NHL action of any kind since Jan. 3, after which injuries derailed the rest of his season with the Philadelphia Flyers.

Despite the long layoff, Neuvirth said on Saturday he went into the game "calm" and "confident" and didn't betray any hint of issues to come.

"It was good to play periods. Body felt good. I'm excited for another opportunity," he said. "There are still some mistakes I made, but I thought it was a solid effort."

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TSN.CA / Rule change could spur growth in faceoff trend

Frank Seravalli

The National Hockey League, like most every pro sports league, is a copycat enterprise. Any slight or even perceived advantage will be replicated.

The Toronto Maple Leafs dabbled on Saturday night in a faceoff trend that the Philadelphia Flyers executed so well over the past two seasons.

The idea is simple: the centre taking the draw will always be a forward on his dominant hand (usually his backhand) – even if he regularly plays as a winger.

On Saturday, the Leafs rotated between Fredrik Gauthier (left-shooting) and Jason Spezza (right-shooting) on their strong sides of the ice. The Flyers have garnered attention over the past two years going back and forth between Sean Couturier (left) and Claude Giroux (right), with Giroux assuming traditional duties on the wing once the play resumes.

It's the same dynamic Mike Babcock has used in previous seasons when Auston Matthews (left) and William Nylander (right) are playing on the same line.

Coach Dave Hakstol was the one who made the change in Philadelphia and Hakstol is now an assistant under Babcock in Toronto.

The Flyers led the NHL in faceoff win percentage last year at 54.7 per cent, a whole 1.7 per cent higher than the second-place team, the Maple Leafs. That's a significant margin, with the rest of the NHL bunched so close together.

It's a trend that may garner more attention this season given the NHL's rule change that will allow teams to choose which side of the ice they want to take the faceoff on at the start of power plays and following an icing.

A few players admittedly weren't aware of the rule change earlier this month at the NHL Player Media Tour in Chicago. But Kings centre and two-time Selke Trophy winner Anze Kopitar said that the changes are going to have a "big" impact.

"Faceoffs are very important to begin with," Kopitar said. "Now having the chance to pick your side is going to be huge. I think everyone is going to have more set plays based on your chance to pick. It's an easier game when you have the puck – you don't have to chase it."

Couturier predicted that the new rules will "for sure bring a few more goals per year."

It's just that it might not make as big of a difference for the Flyers, because they've been dealing from a position of strength no matter which side the faceoff was on previously.

"We split the draws, but some other teams don't have that luxury of having a lot of centremen that are good at faceoffs," Couturier said.

With Couturier exclusively taking faceoffs on his strong side, he won draws at a career-best 57.1 per cent clip last year. His career average in his previous seven NHL seasons was just 49.4 per cent.

Giroux has experienced a similar bump. Since moving to the "wing," each of his last two seasons has been north of 58 per cent, putting him in the class of the NHL's elite faceoff winners. His career average prior to the switch was 54.4 per cent. He is also taking roughly half the number of draws he was before.

None of the 20 or so players polled at the Media Tour knew or could hazard a guess as to what their faceoff splits would be comparing strong side to weak side.

"I have no clue," Conn Smythe Trophy winner Ryan O'Reilly said. "I don't have a preference. For us, it will be more of a matchup and who we're going against."

"I think for everyone the difference would be pretty big," new Flyers centre Kevin Hayes said.

A member of one NHL team's analytics staff projected that teams can expect to win somewhere between three to six per cent more of the faceoffs on their player's strong side, but he cautioned that the overall win percentage in a game will not be drastically different because the ability to choose your faceoff spot is limited to only two scenarios.

Nonetheless, the wins that do happen in those circumstances could become critical in terms of deciding the outcome of a game.

"If you don't win the faceoff to start a power play, you can lose almost 30 seconds of power play time," Couturier said.

There will be math on the fly for coaches, who will likely have the matchup numbers at their disposal on the bench. The home team will have final say, of course, with a line change – unless it is after an icing when they won't have any choice but to keep their current players on the ice.

"It's probably going to be a little bit more [work] for the coaches and video [staff] and stuff like that," Sidney Crosby said. "I think there's a lot that goes into it. I think it's important for the power play team just as much for the team that's killing. You've got to be aware of different scenarios and what teams will be looking to do."

In the case of icings, the goal invariably will be for coaches to choose a side where the opposing centre will be on his weak side. Then it will depend on who is taking it.

"If you're going against a guy like [Patrice] Bergeron, I'm not sure it's going to matter what side you get him on," Couturier said.

Couturier, now 26 with already 578 regular-season games under his belt, said he's definitely gotten more comfortable taking faceoffs in the NHL. Part of it, he said, is just getting stronger – and part of it is experience.

"I'm more confident in the dot for sure," Couturier said. "Any veteran will tell you, the more years you play, the more loose you get in the dot, and the refs let you cheat a little more. I think that helps as well."

Couturier's comfort has also been aided by the fact that he is almost always entering the circle with an edge on his strong side – a trend which will no doubt be copied by more teams.

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TSN.CA / Spezza looking to win Babcock over in limited role with Leafs

Mark Masters

How can Jason Spezza convince Mike Babcock he's willing to embrace a limited role with the Toronto Maple Leafs this season?



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"Oh, I just have to play the game," the 36-year-old said. "I've played one exhibition game so far so it's important I go out and have a good game today. Our line wants to try and build a little bit of chemistry and it's important for us to have a good game today."

Babcock raised eyebrows early in training camp by suggesting the veteran centre needed to prove he could be a good fit in Toronto. The coach is doing his part to make sure the pair is on the same page.

"He's different than other guys here, in my opinion, because I'm going to have a conversation every day, see how he's doing," Babcock said. "I think he's earned that just by the kind of person, the kind of player he is and we'll just keep talking."

Spezza and Frederik Gauthier rotated between centre and the wing at Saturday's morning skate.

"We got him and Goat both playing centre on that one line and they'll figure it out," Babcock explained. "I'm going to give them lots of D-zone starts and he'll play on the power play and the penalty kill and we'll just keep going."

The dual centre-winger spot isn't new to Spezza. After 16 NHL seasons, not much is.

"I've kind of played that way my whole career," he said. "In Ottawa I played with (Milan) Michalek for a long time, we just didn't talk about it, but he played down low at certain times. In Dallas, last year in playoffs, I played with Justin Dowling, we played the exact same way. I think it's a pretty common thing, actually, that goes on. Some of my best years with Alfie (Daniel Alfredsson), he played low a lot. It's something that's maybe coming to light a little more with the analytics and the face-offs on the proper sides and all that, but it's really something I've done for a long time."

Spezza liked the way he and Gauthier worked together in Friday's practice putting together some longer cycle shifts.

"It's just a matter of getting up to speed with the guy you're doing it with, because there's little switches throughout the game that you want to work on," Spezza said. "So, Freddie seems to have great hockey sense and the quicker we can get on the same page the faster we will look as a line and the more we'll play in their end."

As for the special teams side of things, Spezza didn't kill penalties consistently during five seasons in Dallas, but is ready to embrace that task in Toronto.

"It's something I did a lot of before so it's just kind of getting the roots down and figuring out the details of what the coaching staff wants and then just playing and getting your timing back," he said. "We're one exhibition game in and the timing and everything isn't where you want it to be so it's important to get yourself up to speed."

Spezza's high hockey IQ should allow him to learn the intricacies of Babcock's system quickly. During the summer BioSteel Camp, Tyler Seguin described Spezza as a "hockey nerd."

"I like the game," the Toronto native said. "I enjoy it. It's fun for me to come out here. I love the challenge of trying to be an older player playing in the league. I just enjoy getting out here with the guys."

"It means everything to him," said John Tavares. "He obviously chose here, which should say a lot to our group, because of his belief in our talent and the opportunity we have in front of us with a strong team that can contend. I know this is a great opportunity for him and he wants to maximize it."

Tavares trains with Spezza in the summer.

"No question he's had a great career and he wants to cap it off the right way," Tavares said. "I know he still loves the game as much as he did when I started training with him a number of years ago and wants to play as long as he can. He lives and breathes it and it's fun to be around that."

Spezza on winning over Babcock: 'It's important I go out and have a good game'

Even a veteran player like Jason Spezza knows the importance of showing up and leaving it all out on the ice, even during exhibition games. Building up line chemistry with his teammates and getting his reps in is crucial before the season get underway and Mike Babcock is taking notice of his hustle.

Spezza's contribution this season is expected to extend beyond the ice as he takes on the mantle of oldest player on the team from Patrick Marleau.

"He's a great guy," said 22-year-old Mitch Marner. "I've talked to him a lot. Kind of reminds me a little bit of Patty as that veteran presence, that guy who's been around for a while and knows how hard it is to win and I think that's something he's preaching to all of us, 'Come in every day and make sure you're ready to work.'"

Marner grew up a Leafs fan and cheered against Spezza and the Senators in the heated Battle of Ontario rivalry.

"I just remember how good he was in those games and how much of a threat he was constantly on the ice," said Marner. "I remember just how fun it was watching him and he controlled the play and how he just put fear into other people's eyes and it's kind of crazy still seeing him doing it today."

Spezza, one of the better face-off men in the league throughout his career, gave Marner a crash course at the dot after the morning skate wrapped up, winning six of seven puck drops.

"He destroyed me," said Marner, who took only 11 face-offs last season. "I got one of them. He was impressed with my one win. I want to get more used to taking draws. I want to be more useful in D-zone, O-zone at taking draws so I'm just trying to learn and that's a guy you can definitely learn from. His percentage over the years speaks for itself so he's a guy that I'll try and get some pointers off of."

Spezza won 58% of face-offs last season, tied for first among those who took at least 100 draws. That ability to win face-offs could be a big asset to the Leafs late in games and on the penalty kill, especially with Zach Hyman out for the first month of the season.

"He's always had so much leverage and strength and being a right-hand shot, which is a little more rare, just makes it so much harder to battle and compete against a guy like that," said Tavares. "So, it's just getting to know the way he uses his leverage, how he puts his stick down, his timing, how he plays the angles and how he approaches his opponents too, because a lot of it is a chess game."

Leafs Ice Chips: Spezza gives Marner a crash course on face-offs

With Jason Spezza heading into his 17th season in the league his roll is expected to extend past what he brings on the ice and hopefully can fulfill a mentorlike roll for the younger guys, much like how Patrick Marleau took some of the rookies under his wing the last couple years. Mark Masters has more.

Saturday night will be the second chance for Kasperii Kapanen to build some in-game chemistry with Tavares and Marner. The fleet-footed Finn has switched sides from right wing to left wing to fill the void left by Hyman in Toronto's top six.

"Right now it's just getting used to it, to be honest," Kapanen said. "I just got to get used to playing on that left side and entering the zone and making plays. You got to be careful when you're getting the puck on your backhand from the D-man in your defensive zone, but it's still hockey and I'm trying to get used to it and every day feels a bit better."

Kapanen, who played his off wing infrequently with the AHL's Marlies before securing a full-time job with the Leafs, did score a goal in Tuesday's exhibition opener in St. John's.



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"These pre-season games are really important for me, especially now that I'm on the left side, kind of getting a feel for it, so it's very important," Kapanen said.

The initial reviews from his new linemates are positive.

"He plays a very predictable game," observed Tavares, "not to say that he's not a creative player, but with that speed and his ability to put so much pressure on the opponent it gives me a really, really good understanding of the way he plays."

"He brings a lot of speed," said Marner. "He scares a lot of defencemen with that ... we got to play with Kappy and (Andreas Johnsson) a little bit last year when Hyman was out so we got a little bit of chemistry with those guys."

How is speedy Kapanen fitting in with Tavares and Marner?

John Tavares and Mitchell Marner shared their thoughts on what Kasperii Kapanen brings to their line and Kapanen talked about adjusting to playing on the left wing.

As the Leafs hit the midway point of the pre-season schedule, the battle for jobs is coming into focus.

"When you think about it, camp starts to get long," Babcock said, "and usually what happens is the guys who feel like they should be here keep getting better and the guys that think they shouldn't be here, they start to fall off. It's fatigue time now, there's no question about it, both mentally and physically, and so it will start to separate itself, I think it has already."

Rasmus Sandin has earned big-time praise the last couple of days from Babcock and seems to have an inside track for a job on defence. Up front, KHL import Ilya Mikheyev has impressed and appears destined for a top-nine role.

"He plays a lot like (Pavel) Datsyuk," said Auston Matthews following Friday's game. "He's got that reach and he's kind of got a similar paddle on him, uses a long stick and he's really lanky. He's really shifty, strong on the puck, really good on his edges so I was really impressed, especially that third period."

Babcock pointed out there's a reason why it takes time for Mikheyev to find his way in games.

"He's still trying to figure out the size of the rink and each game he's played (he) hasn't been quite as good in the first, but he's gotten better and better," Babcock said. "He can really skate, he's very intelligent, heavy on the puck, he can shoot it, make plays."

Mikheyev, 24, registered 45 points in 62 games with Omsk Avangard last season.

Matthews on KHL import Mikheyev: "He plays a lot like Datsyuk"

The Leafs have high hopes for KHL import Ilya Mikheyev, who is projected to start in Toronto's top nine this season. "He plays a lot like (Pavel) Datsyuk," Auston Matthews observed following Friday's preseason game. "He's got that reach and he's kind of got a similar paddle on him, uses a long stick and he's really lanky. He's really shifty, strong on the puck, really good on his edges so I was really impressed, especially that third period."

Cody Ceci (maintenance day) missed practice.

Projected Leafs line-up for tonight's game in Buffalo:

Kapanen-Tavares-Marner

Moore-Gauthier/Spezza

Petan-Brooks-Korshkov

Engvall-Elynuik-Bracco

Muzzin-Barrie

Harpur-Schmaltz

Gravel-Holl

Neuvirth

Hutchinson

Power play units at Saturday's morning skate:

Barrie

Marner-Tavares-Spezza

Korshkov

Schmaltz

Petan-Brooks-Bracco

Engvall

Leafs lines at Saturday's practice:

Johnsson-Matthews-Nylander

Mikheyev-Kerfoot-Timashov

Agostino-Gaudet-Aberg

Clune-Shore-Read

Rielly-Duszak

Sandin-Marincin

Rubins-Liljgren

Kivihalme-Hollowell

Andersen

Woll

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TSN.CA / Canucks vs Sens: Preseason game day preview

Jeff Paterson

ABBOTSFORD – The Vancouver Canucks and Ottawa Senators square off in the first of two games this week when they meet tonight at the Abbotsford Centre in the Fraser Valley.

Jake Virtanen grew up in Abbotsford and played midget hockey in this building while Sven Baertschi turned pro with the Abbotsford Heat while it was Calgary's American League affiliate.

Baertschi gets a great opportunity tonight to skate with Brock Boeser and Elias Pettersson.

Other Canuck forward lines include Bo Horvat between JT Miller and Tanner Pearson while Brandon Sutter centres Loui Eriksson and Josh Leivo. A trio of Virtanen with Jay Beagle and Tim Schaller rounds out the Canucks forward ranks.

Newcomer Micheal Ferland is still battling an illness and will not play tonight. He has appeared in just one of the club's preseason contests so far. Ferland, Chris Tanev, Quinn Hughes, Adam Gaudette, Nikolay Goldobin and Zack MacEwen are among the notables not in uniform tonight.



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Jacob Markstrom will make his second start of the preseason with Thatcher Demko serving as his back-up. Markstrom allowed one goal in a 6-1 win in Edmonton last Thursday.

On Monday morning, the Canucks assigned four players to Utica: Zane McIntyre, Ashton Sautner, Reid Boucher and Francis Perron.

POSSIBLE CANUCKS LINE-UP

Baertschi-Pettersson-Boeser

Pearson-Horvat-Miller

Eriksson-Sutter-Leivo

Schaller-Beagle-Virtanen

Edler-Myers

Benn-Stecher

Fantenberg-Biega

Markstrom

Demko

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TSN.CA / Suzuki looking NHL ready in impressive preseason

Travis Yost

The first two-plus years of the Vegas Golden Knights franchise have been, in one word, surreal.

They cleaned up during the 2017 expansion draft, and since then it's been mostly sunshine and rainbows. George McPhee, Kelly McCrimmon and the rest of the Golden Knights front office have done a masterful job, which is one of the reasons why the team is again a favourite to advance out of the Western Conference this season.

But even Vegas – a team that's seemingly done everything right since its inception – has made mistakes. At the top of that list is the Tomas Tatar trade. Vegas acquired him for three draft picks (a first-round pick in 2018, a second-round pick in 2019 and a third-round pick in 2021) during their first playoff push in the 2017-18 season, but he never assimilated himself into the lineup and was eventually shuffled into healthy scratch territory.

Those misfires will happen from time to time, but it surely has haunted Vegas that Tatar has felt exceptionally comfortable in his new home in Montreal. Tatar became part of one of the league's most dominant lines last year, playing alongside Philip Danault and Brendan Gallagher. The unit territorially dominated games for most

of the 2018-19 season and Tatar ended the year with his best scoring season of his career, racking up 25 goals and 33 assists.

Of course, Tatar wasn't traded for nothing. Montreal, in a bind with longtime winger Max Pacioretty, flipped him to Vegas in September of 2018. And for at least the first year, the trade felt like a win-win. Pacioretty helped Vegas form perhaps the best second line in the entire league, playing predominantly with Paul Stastny and Mark Stone. Pacioretty had 22 goals and 18 assists in an injury-shortened season, and then added five goals and six assists during their first-round series against San Jose.

But a new wrinkle has emerged. The third piece of last year's trade was forward prospect Nick Suzuki, Vegas' first-round pick (13th overall) in the 2017 NHL Draft. Suzuki spent most of last year dominating the OHL with Owen Sound and Guelph, and seemed on the cusp of winning an NHL job. Montreal has consequently spent most of the preseason trying to get as many minutes out of Suzuki as possible, testing the 20-year-old to see if he is truly NHL ready.

Early returns have been encouraging. Montreal has played Suzuki with expected NHL regulars – he's already played about 27 minutes with Jordan Weal, but has rotated in with Phillip Danault, Charles Hudon, and Tatar as well. In his 50 preseason minutes, he's already delivered 15 shots at the net, three assists, and a highlight-reel shootout goal.

The underlying numbers have been the real story, though. Remember how much of a pain Montreal was to play against last season? They offset a lot of their talent deficiencies – notably a lack of shooting talent – by dominating the puck through relentless forechecking and a return to the speed and transition game that made them such a monster in the earlier parts of the decade.

Suzuki has fit in seamlessly. Over the first three preseason games, Montreal has outshot and outchanced their opponents at a nearly 2-to-1 ratio with Suzuki on the ice.

Yes, you can qualify some of this by merely denoting that this is just a three-game sample in the preseason where games can be sloppy, low energy, slow paced, and the like. But for teams with limited opportunities to watch their players compete against the best professional talents in the world, performance in these games is critical. It's another data point that helps foster confidence in the player and his transition from developmental territory to the highest level of professional competition.

Suzuki was always going to be a factor as part of this trade, but if he's going to be another cog in an increasingly competent lineup under the watch of head coach Claude Julien, Montreal could have the inside edge on a playoff spot come April. Remember, this is a returning 96-point team that was probably one mediocre power-play unit from making the postseason in 2018-19.

Can a player like Suzuki help put the Canadiens over the top? If he's remotely as good as what we have seen this preseason, the answer may be yes.

It's a lot of pressure for a 20-year-old, but that's what the NHL is all about.

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