



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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THE NEWS & OBSERVER

Hurricanes open training camp with fast pace, good intensity

By Chip Alexander

The Carolina Hurricanes are off and running.

There will be no slow-skating their way through training camp and playing a slew of exhibition games to prepare for a new season. The Canes hit the ice Monday for the first of their eight camp practice sessions before the 2020-21 regular season begins Jan. 14 in Detroit.

"Every game is huge this year," defenseman Jaccob Slavin said Monday on a media call. "We can't have any lapses. If we can get off to a good start that's going to set us up for hopefully a good push through the season."

"First day of camp was good. There was a high pace, there was good intensity, guys were working hard."

That's what Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour wants and expects in camp. He has divided the team into two practice groups and kept the veteran players together in the larger group at Canes' new practice facility at Wake Competition Center.

"You can't ease into this," Brind'Amour said on Monday's media call. "You just don't have the time. Right out of the gate you're full go."

Much like last July, when the Canes gathered again after the pandemic pause to prepare for the NHL's postseason Return to Play, there won't be as much team together time because of the COVID-19 threat. It's keep the masks on, stay socially distanced off the ice and be careful in any group settings, even in the training facility.

"In the past you talked about getting together and really hanging out and being around each other," Brind'Amour said. "Everything that you kind of preached and wanted to see in your guys, you actually now don't want to see. You turn the dressing room upside down. You take the lounges away. You're doing everything where you want them to hang out, you can't."

"So it is still a challenge to figure out. That's a huge component of any team, coming together. We have to use our time wisely

when we are together. It's all about that camaraderie and I think everyone's just trying to figure that out, how we're going to adjust to that."

One advantage for the Canes is that few player introductions need to be made. There are few newcomers to a group that has played together, won together and been to the playoffs together the past two seasons.

"It's a big advantage, obviously," Slavin said. "Short camp but everyone knows the systems already. Guys are ready to go."

The Canes signed free-agent forward Jesper Fast, their most important addition. He joins a veteran group with so many familiar faces -- Jordan Staal, Sebastian Aho, Teuvo Teravainen and the rest.

SVECHNIKOV ON TROCHECK LINE

During line rushes Monday, Brind'Amour had Fast at ring wing on Vincent Trocheck's line. On the left side was Andrei Svechnikov, the third-year power forward many expect to see play on the top line with Aho and Teravainen. But it was day one.

Brind'Amour had Nino Niederreiter on the left wing on Aho's line. Staal centered Warren Foegele and Martin Necas, and Morgan Geekie centered either Jordan Martinook or Ryan Dzingel and Brock McGinn.

No surprises on defense. Slavin was paired with Dougie Hamilton, Brady Skjei with Brett Pesce, and Jake Gardiner with Haydn Fleury. Joakim Ryan, another free-agent signee, and Jake Bean made up the fourth D pair.

Does familiarity breed contempt? The Canes will find out in full this season, facing each of their Central Division opponents eight times. Prediction: there will be some gloves dropped before this is over.

"I think we'll find some new hatred throughout these seven teams," Staal said. "It's unfortunate. You want to see everybody and play against everybody (in the NHL) but this is the way it's going to be, and we'll have some fun with it."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

THE ATHLETIC

Hurricanes 2020-21 training camp: Why it matters more than any past preseason

By Sara Civian

For one season and one season only, I thought we'd escaped a certain tweet format NHL beat writers cherish almost as much as our sacred em dash.

"I know it's only the preseason and nothing matters, BUT (insert line combination quirk, etc. here)."

Alas, as the Hurricanes and the rest of the NHL started abbreviated training camp this week, the concession statement tweets came rolling in same as they ever were.

We've all tweeted like this and it's usually justified, but there are a few things for the "nothing matters" crew to consider this time around:

1. There are roughly eight practices for each team before the Jan. 13 start date — a far cry from the dragging weeks of training camps past.
2. There aren't even any preseason games to obsess over this year.
3. It's 2021 and the NHL is finally back. Why can't we squeeze every last droplet of meaning out of everything that happens? All aboard team "Everything matters."
4. The inception of the taxi squad adds a layer of meaning when it comes to the fringe players.
5. Don't be a coward! Lean into those scorching takes about the third line left wing, baby. Everything will be fine.

Full disclosure: I don't know if I'm the most reliable narrator at the moment. I mean, I almost shed a tear Monday at the sight of Brett Pesce winning a puck battle during a drill and flashing a smirk (and probably a chirp) at his opponent. Hockey smirks! Right in front of my face!

It occurred to me in that moment that I was nearly moved to tears over training camp, an event I used to wish away because it didn't seem to matter.

But emotions ablaze or not, Day 1 of Hurricanes training camp felt like a comforting equalizer.

No one — not even Rod Brind'Amour — knows exactly how things are going to turn out. I asked him if no preseason games is a pro or a con, and he answered with the energy of anyone attempting to do anything these days: "Welp, ask me in about two weeks."

"Originally, I would say I like it. I hated playing preseason games as a player — at the end of the day, they don't count," he elaborated. "But I understand, as a coach, why you'd like them. You try different things and it's a freebie to kind of go out and figure stuff out. I don't know, I think eight practices is kinda, it's interesting to see if that's going to be quite enough. But I feel like our guys are in good shape, they've been doing a lot of training beforehand. The good news is no one else is

playing games, we're all in the same boat. I think in the end the players are going to like this, and it'll be interesting to see where this goes in the future. I think guys put in so much time in the offseason (these days) and they don't really need so much ramp-up time."

Nothing is going to run 100 percent smoothly. There are plenty of tedious obstacles — known and unknown — for the Canes and every other NHL club to overcome.

When I asked Jacob Slavin about the biggest differences so far compared to past training camps, he waved his mask.

"... Getting used to wearing these around the rink, in the locker room and just all those little protocols that we have to go through," he said via Zoom. "It's different, but I mean, we gotta do what we gotta do to play this season."

There's the equalizer that has everyone — players, arena workers, team employees, media — doing whatever awkward tasks it takes to not mess this up.

PR person extraordinaire Mike Brown asked me if my WiFi was working OK and I laughed like a crazy person. I didn't know and why would I care!!! As soon as I thought that, though, a memory of me complaining about the WiFi a few seasons back popped up and I cringed.

Maybe some things are changing for the better.

The WiFi flashback of 2021 got me thinking. Then Brind'Amour suggesting that all these changes might yield some permanent improvement sparked a different mental trajectory: It will be interesting to see where the hockey world goes in the future.

There are, of course, bad things we don't want to last

Captain Jordan Staal nailed a paradox many of us find ourselves in when I asked him the weirdest thing about this year's training camp.

"You want a team that's tight, a team that hangs out together, a team that's with each other all the time, that cares for each other all the time," he said. "But at the same time, they don't really want us too close, or hanging out too near to each other. You want that team spirit, you want to be close and to work with each other and to be that tight-knit team. But at the same time, not too close, and not too tight, and wear your mask. So we're learning on that, and well make do. We're already close and we got a good squad, so we're having some fun with it."

Suddenly Brind'Amour's and President and GM Don Waddell's public pleas to keep the same core group together make a lot of sense ...

"We've talked about it, but in the past you talk about getting together and hanging out and being around each other," Brind'Amour said, "It's like everything you kind of preached and wanted to see now you don't want to see. You turn the dressing room upside down and you take the lounges away and you're doing everything where — you want them to hang



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

out and they can't. That's a huge component of every team — just coming together. We gotta use our time wisely, I guess, when we are together. When we're on the ice. In our spaced out areas. It's all about that camaraderie and I think everyone's just trying to figure that out — how we're going to adjust to that."

There are neutral things to consider

What will happen to the preseason? I asked those available if they considered the preseason a pro or a con and I felt like the camera crew in "The Office."

Slavin: "I think it's a con, honestly. I think all the guys appreciate being able to play a couple, at least. Working out those little kinks. But I also know Roddy's gonna run a camp where we are ready to go without a preseason."

Angela?

Staal: "The older you get, the more boring the preseason might get."

Down Goes Brown: 22 of my most intriguing NHL names to watch this season

By Sean McIndoe

We're a week away from the start of one of the most fascinating seasons in NHL history. We've got one-time-only divisions where teams will only play each other, an old school playoff format, and a 56-game schedule, we hope. No All-Star Game, no bye weeks, and at least to start with, no fans in most of the buildings. How it's all going to play out? I have no idea, and neither do you, and that's what's going to make it great. Or horrible. We'll see.

It all makes for one of the most intriguing seasons in modern NHL history. So today, I'm going to celebrate the unknown by building a roster of the most intriguing players heading into this season. We'll go 12 forwards, six defensemen and two goalies, then add a coach and a GM, with a limit of one selection per team. That's pretty much it as far as the rules here; if you're looking for a more thought-out selection criteria than my going, "Oh yeah, that guy, I wonder how that's going to go" then I'm not sure what to tell you. It's early, manage your expectations.

We'll do this like any well-constructed roster, and build from the net out.

Goaltenders

Marc-Andre Fleury, Golden Knights

We'll start with an entry that would have surprised anyone who just time-travelled ahead from last summer — not because Fleury is on this list, but because he's there as a Golden Knight. There was a time when a divorce between Vegas and their first franchise player seemed inevitable, what with the whole "my agent is commissioning artwork of my team stabbing me in the back" story. If they were being honest, both sides might have preferred that. But with two years of a \$7 million cap hit left on his deal, there were no takers. And so, even with Robin Lehner back as the presumed starter, everyone is apparently going to turn the page and start the season as friends.

Jim?

I'm not going to call Brind'Amour Michael Scott.

Good things are still possible...

Despite my best efforts to avoid sounding like a car commercial — and despite knowing hockey and/or the Toyotathon probably aren't going to save our world — today was still a good day. I left the rink knowing the magic is still there. Maybe the magic is actually enhanced by the lengths people are going to find it.

So, you do you, but I already bought binoculars and two packs of fancy pens — there's no turning back over here. I'm not just going to tweet the lines, I'm going to write them out and I'll mail them to anyone who needs them — even DFS Twitter.

I know it's only preseason, but everything matters.

Will it stay that way? And if not, how does it play out? Fleury's been one of the most popular players in the league for the better part of a decade, and it would be kind of fascinating to see him go for the full heel turn. But even if the situation is decidedly less dramatic, there's still some volatility here for a team that starts the year among the Stanley Cup favorites.

Collin Delia, Kevin Lankinen and Malcolm Subban, Blackhawks

OK, that's three guys instead of one, so I'm already cheating. But this spot is really going to whichever one of the Hawks' goalies emerges as a legitimate starter. If any of them do.

It's been a while since we've seen a team go into a season without a single established NHL goalie on the roster, and it seems like a recipe for disaster, especially after an offseason in which goaltenders were switching teams all across the league. Then again, the closest recent comparison may be last year's Blue Jackets, and that worked out pretty well. That team had Joonas Korpisalo, who'd been in the league for four years, so it wasn't as extreme as what the Hawks are doing, but if you're a Hawks fan looking for optimism, it's a decent start. And decent starts might be in short supply in Chicago this year.

Honorable mentions: Thomas Griess arrives in Detroit to test the theory of just how much of a difference a solid goaltender can make to a bad team; the Ilya Sorokin era begins for the Islanders, even as we're not sure how much he'll play or how long it might take him to push theoretical mentor Semyon Varlamov into a timeshare, if not a role as his backup (or trade bait).

Defensemen

Zdeno Chara, Capitals

It's going to be so strange to see Chara in another uniform. After over a decade in Boston, it was even weird seeing him in old photos from his Ottawa and New York days. Washington? I'm not sure I'll be able to get my head around



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

it. But it's a great fit, and the fact that he chose a team in the Bruins' division makes the whole thing just about perfect.

Torey Krug, Blues

Let's be clear: Torey Krug was in no way, shape or form traded for Alex Pietrangelo. Those two signings were separate transactions, and each of the teams involved were acting independently. There was no trade to be seen here.

But also, he was kind of just traded for Alex Pietrangelo, right?

That's going to make it interesting in St. Louis, where Krug will at the very least have to shoulder the pressure of replacing one of the most popular players in franchise history. I don't think he takes the blame if it goes badly, because Blues fans already have Justin Faulk for that, but the heat is on for a guy whose new contract assumes he's ready to be one of the league's elite defensemen. He probably already was, but now he's got a big spotlight.

Miro Heiskanen, Stars

It was fun to watch the hockey world discover Heiskanen during the bubble playoffs. It was more fun to watch Stars fans watch the hockey world discover Heiskanen, trying to decide if they should be happy or mad and basically making this face for three weeks.

So yeah, Heiskanen is really good, and the rest of us were probably a bit too slow on the uptake there. Now the question is whether last summer was a case of a good player getting hot at the right time, or a young star making The Leap to stake his claim as a Norris frontrunner.

Dougie Hamilton, Hurricanes

He was having a career year last season before he got hurt and missed the last two months, depriving us of a classic analytics vs. old school Norris debate. Maybe we get to have that this year. Or maybe we just get to watch one of the best young blueliners in the league have a healthy breakout season.

Cale Makar, Avalanche and Quinn Hughes, Canucks

I'll start by acknowledging that Vancouver and Colorado fans are probably tired of these two being joined as some sort of two-fer option representing the future of elite defensemen. Here's the good news: After this year, maybe they won't be anymore.

That's the thing with young players, especially on the blue line: You never know quite how they'll develop, and that's what makes the next season of the Hughes/Makar show so interesting. Yes, Makar had a Calder season for the ages, and Hughes is already legitimately in the discussion as the best Canucks blueliner ever. (No, really.) They both seem like sure things. But there was a time when so did Dion Phaneuf, and Shayne Gostisbehere, and Tyler Myers. Some guys peak early and then never quite find that next gear.

Will that happen to Makar or Hughes, or both? I'm not betting on it. I think we're looking at the next decade of the Norris race, and maybe even a Bourque vs. Chelios for a new generation. But that's getting ahead of ourselves; legacies are made one year at a time, so let's see where these two can take this.

Honorable mentions: Thomas Chabot's continued transformation into a Norris candidate (and possible quest to average 30 minutes a game); Drew Doughty seems like he's one more shaky season away from officially becoming the evolved form of Brent Seabrook, a former stud who everyone agrees is now a salary cap anchor; Flyers fans would argue that Ivan Provorov deserves to be right there with Makar, Hughes and Heiskanen in the young defensemen rankings, and this might be the year he leaves the rest of us with no choice but to agree.

Forwards

Taylor Hall, Sabres

Let's start with maybe the most obvious pick in the league. Hall is a legitimate star who just switched teams but is already in a contract year, and right now it feels like there are about a dozen ways this could realistically go.

Does he win another Hart by being the guy who finally lifts the Sabres to the playoffs? Is he the supporting piece who finally gets Jack Eichel to that MVP level instead? Does he struggle to click and put up the sort of disappointing numbers he did in Arizona? Is he a massive bust who provides the latest proof that the Sabres will never dig out of this hole? Does he sign long-term? Is the offseason's hottest free agent? Is he the big trade deadline target? Wait, will we even have a typical trade deadline?

I have no idea. I can't wait to watch and find out.

Ryan Getzlaf, Ducks

Speaking of potential trade deadline targets, Getzlaf is 35 and heading into the final year of his eight-year deal. He has a Cup ring and is still an effective player when he's healthy. Meanwhile, the Ducks aren't expected to have much chance in a top-heavy West Division. You can see where this is going.

Getzlaf has a full no-move clause, and you could forgive any player who didn't want to switch teams in the middle of a pandemic. But if we do get something approaching a normal trade deadline, Getzlaf could make for an attractive target for some team that wants a mix of experience, jam, scoring and name value. Especially if he gets off to a decent start in Anaheim.

Pierre-Luc Dubois, Blue Jackets

Before last year's playoff qualifier against the Leafs, I predicted that Seth Jones would pre-win the 2021 Norris by shining in the spotlight of a big-market Canadian matchup. Jones played well, but it was Dubois who emerged as the breakout star of the series. Blue Jacket fans already knew he was good, but now he seems poised to ascend to the next tier.

The question is whether he'll get there with the Blue Jackets, now that we know he might want out. Sometimes, having one eye on the door is a distraction. Other times, it can act as a motivator. And often, of course, it's just a temporary blip on the way to reconciliation and a long career spent in one spot. Fair or not, Dubois is going to be one of those guys where we watch him on the ice, then pay almost as much attention to what he says and how he says it.

Alexis Lafreniere, Rangers



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

This one isn't an especially hard sell. After spending a few years as the anointed top pick in the 2020 draft, Lafreniere watched one of the league's biggest markets win a weird and quasi-controversial lottery to earn his rights. Now we see if he can live up to the hype. He almost certainly will, especially on a Rangers team with some high-level talent. Then again, nothing is a sure thing, which brings us to ...

Jack Hughes, Devils

Year 1 did not go well for the 2019 No. 1 pick, who stalled out with just 21 points. Does that make him a bust?

No, because lots of franchise forwards start slow. Joe Thornton had seven points as a rookie. The Sedins didn't crack the 40-point mark until year four. More recently, Leon Draisaitl debuted with nine points in 37 games, and David Pastrnak didn't hit the 30-point mark until exploding in year three.

Then again, Patrik Stefan, Nikita Filatov and Jason Bonsignore started slow too. When it comes to blue-chip prospects, you never know until you know. We don't know with Hughes yet, but a big breakout this year — or at least some real progress — would go a long way towards reassuring Devils fans.

Nikita Kucherov, Lightning

We know he's not going to play during the regular season, because the Lightning said so. Some fans take that to mean that he's guaranteed to be back just in time for the playoffs, right when the salary cap stops being a concern.

That's a cynical view, but the NHL has earned some cynicism here. Still, there's no guarantee Kucherov makes his return in round one, or even at all — remember how we kept waiting and waiting to finally get a few shifts of Steven Stamkos last summer. Yes, the Lightning are already stacked, but this is one of the best players in the league in his prime, and if he's back at 100 percent, it's a game-changer. Expect a steady stream of vague updates as the season wears on. Or maybe radio silence. Either might not tell us much, but we'll all be trying to crack the code anyway.

Josh Anderson, Canadiens

A player coming off of a one-goal season got a \$38-million contract in a flat cap league, and it kind of made sense.

Anderson's a good player who was hurt last year, and he brings an element that means his value is more than goals and assists. You can see why the Habs gave up on the Max Domi era to get him, and once they did that you can see why they felt the need to pay up to keep him.

So yeah, I get it. So do Canadiens fans. But what happens if he starts slow, and/or Domi lights it up in Columbus. Montreal isn't exactly the most patient town, so the margin between hero and goat is going to be slim for any big-ticket addition. I really want to see how it all plays out with Anderson.

Kirill Kaprizov, Wild

Let's find out what the kid can do, as he finally arrives in the NHL as 23-year-old after several seasons of KHL highlights. Corey Pronman thinks the skill set is there, but isn't convinced we'll see an Artemi Panarin-level impact in Year 1. That's

probably reasonable, but it's hard not to get swept up in the hype after all these years. And let's face it, it's just fun to have a Minnesota Wild player to get worked up about.

Connor McDavid, Oilers

This is such an uninspired pick that I'll slip it in halfway down the forward list and hope I can get away with it. Yeah, the best player in the world is interesting, great scoop here. But he's endlessly entertaining to watch, and I remain convinced that someday soon he's going to have the sort of season where he just rolls over the league. I'm talking something close to two points per game, where he just runs away with the Art Ross, height-of-their-powers Wayne or Mario style. Maybe a shortened season isn't the right time for it to happen, but I'll be watching pretty much every Oilers game I can just in case.

Patrik Laine, Jets

What happens when you're the top name on trade rumor boards all offseason long, and then you don't get traded?

We've seen it happen before, and a lot of times the answer is that everyone just forgets about those rumors and life moves on. But in Laine's case, I'm hoping we get one of the alternatives. A ticked-off season of him lightning it up out of spite would work. Or maybe it goes the other way, and the rumors just ramp up even more. Either way, a guy who was already one of the most entertaining players in the league, at least when he's on his game, has an added element of intrigue this year. Oh, and did we mention he also needs a new contract?

Patrick Marleau, Sharks

I really don't think enough hockey fans have internalized the fact that a healthy Marleau will break Gordie Howe's all-time games played record this year.

I'll pause here so that some of you can go "Wait, what?"

It's true. Marleau goes into the season holding down fifth spot on the all-time list. But he's just eight games back of Ron Francis, and 10 behind Jaromir Jagr, so barring an injury he'll be in the top three by the first week of February. After that, it's on to Mark Messier, and then the only name left is Howe. If he doesn't miss any games, he'll tie Howe in Minnesota on April 17, and pass him in Vegas two nights later. Can he do it? Probably, given that he hasn't missed a game since 2009.

How do we feel about that?

I'm guessing most fans are good with it. Marleau's a popular player that nobody outside of Jeremy Roenick seems to dislike. But I'm guessing there will be some fans who'll cringe a little at the idea of him passing Howe and, you'd assume, locking down a Hall of Fame spot. And of course, if his play erodes at the age of 41, the Sharks could be facing some awkward lineup decisions as the season wears on and Marleau closes in on the record. Can you really bench a guy who's about to pass Gordie Howe?

We might find out, and it might even make for the sort of feel-good story we could use these days. But start getting your head around it now, because it's three months away from happening.

Joe Thornton, Maple Leafs



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

He's a slam-dunk Hall of Famer, the league's single greatest OGWAC story, and just a flat-out interesting dude. And now he gets to chase a Cup in a Toronto market that will either fall head over heels in love with him after one game, or ultimately blame him for everything that goes wrong. Or both. Honestly, it's probably both.

Honorable mentions: Eeli Tolvanen should play his first full season in Nashville, and it feels like one last chance to live up to all that "best prospect in hockey" talk that seems so long ago; Jake Guentzel continues to put up big numbers while being overshadowed by bigger names in Pittsburgh, and you wonder if he has one more tier he can climb to; After a disappointing season and even some trade rumors, the much-maligned Johnny Gaudreau tries to somehow get his game back to the MVP-caliber levels he was at all the way back in, um, 2019.

Coach and GM

Joel Quenneville, Panthers

It's amazing what one year of shaky goaltending can do to a reputation. When the Panthers shelled out to land Quenneville, just about everyone agreed it was a game-changer for a struggling franchise in need of some direction. After leaving Chicago, Quenneville was near the top of everyone's list of the best coaches in hockey, and the Panthers got him. One partial season later, we found out that even the best can't overcome a \$10-million goalie with a .900

save percentage. OK, so we'll give him a pass on Year 1. But what now?

Don Sweeney, Bruins

Well, that was an offseason. Despite what seemed like a workable amount of cap space, the Bruins mostly stood pat while watching Krug head out the door. That was odd, but the real shock came with last week's news of Chara's departure, one that apparently came because the Bruins just weren't interested in keeping their longtime captain around, at least with his usual minutes.

That could be the right call, and by all accounts the whole thing was handled with admirable honesty. But it ratchets up the pressure on Sweeney, who'll take all kinds of heat if Chara and Krug look good in new homes while the Bruins struggle. To make matters more interesting, Sweeney isn't a guy who makes a lot of moves once the season starts; he basically does all his wheeling and dealing during the offseason, with an occasional deadline-week addition, and that's it. If the Bruins get off to a slow start, Boston fans might not have the same sort of patience.

Honorable mentions: Bill Armstrong starts his first year as an NHL GM in Arizona with a nearly capped-out roster, no first-round pick, a captain who was nearly traded in the offseason, and a top-heavy division that probably only has one playoff spot up for grabs. Some people just like to play on the highest difficulty setting.



Canes Jump Right in on First Day of Training Camp

Brind'Amour: 'We'll make sure we cover everything, but there's no tiptoeing into this one'

by Michael Smith

"It's a whole new year," Carolina Hurricanes head coach Rod Brind'Amour said on Monday afternoon.

That, in many respects, is so very true and perfect in its brevity and earnestness.

It is indeed a new year, as the calendar finally and mercifully flipped to 2021. It is a new season, with 56 games on tap for the 2020-21 regular season slate. And with that comes a collection of new challenges, new protocols, a new practice facility, a new division, new opponents and new normals.

But the most fundamental aspect of it all - hockey players playing hockey - is what makes everything new, everything uncertain, everything abnormal, feel, well, normal again.

"The first day of camp was good. High pace, good intensity," Jaccob Slavin said. "Guys were working hard to make sure everyone is in game shape."

That feels normal, right? Pace, intensity, focus, purpose - by now, that's the expectation of a training camp led by Brind'Amour, who is entering his third season as head coach and is 16 wins away from 100 with the team.

This season, though, is going to be anything but normal or familiar. It's going to be weird, and it might very well be a little difficult at times. But, it's a hockey season all the same, and each season begins anew with training camp, which is being held at the Canes' new practice facility at Wake Competition Center.

This year, training camp is smaller; there are just 38 players in town, and they practiced in two groups, with Brind'Amour leading the NHL group and Chicago Wolves bench boss Ryan Warsofsky heading up the younger squad. This year, training camp is shorter; there are just eight days of practice and no exhibition games on the calendar.

"It feels a lot similar to what we went through pre-bubble, just putting your team together as quick as you can and pushing each other to make sure we're at the top of our game in a few weeks' time," Jordan Staal said.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

In a sense, jumping in headfirst might help combat the random oddities of it all. The Canes are at an advantage, too, because 21 of the 23 skaters that practiced with group C2 on Monday were in the bubble with the team in August. Forward Jesper Fast and defenseman Joakim Ryan, two of the team's offseason signings, were the only new faces on the ice.

That allowed Brind'Amour and the coaching staff to spend less time teaching and more time picking up where they left off some four-and-a-half months ago.

"I liked the familiarity of everything, to be honest," Brind'Amour said. "We jumped right into it. We'll make sure we cover everything, but there's no tiptoeing into this one."

That's true of both training camp and the season, which begins with a two-game set in Detroit in a mere 10 days for the Canes.

Brind'Amour spoke to his team Sunday afternoon about fighting for inches, the difference maker in such a competitive and balanced league. That battle for the smallest advantage is even more magnified in a regular season that features 26 fewer games.

"The start is going to be huge," Slavin said. "We can't have any lapses throughout the season. Every game is every important. We have to make sure we're ready, and I think we will be ready."

It's a new year and a new season, and the Canes are looking to make their third consecutive appearance in the postseason, which would be a first for the franchise in North Carolina.

As it is each and every season, the first day of on-ice activity at training camp was the first step in that journey.

"Roddy has done a great job of making sure guys are ready to go," Staal said. "He's a detail coach, and he demands execution and work ethic. Guys in the room are willing to buy into that."

That, if nothing much else about the circumstances of the day, was a refreshing dose of normalcy.

Here's to a whole new year.

Canes, NHL Announce Start Times for Games in 2020-21 Season

Canes open season in Detroit on Jan. 14 at 7:30 p.m.

by Michael Smith

The National Hockey League today announced start times for each team's 56-game regular season schedule.

The majority of the Carolina Hurricanes' schedule - 37 of the 56 games, or 66 percent - features the standard 7 p.m. start time. Four additional games face off at 7:30 p.m., accounting for 73 percent of the Canes' schedule beginning in the 7 o'clock hour.

All but three Canes' home games face off at 7 p.m., with 1 p.m. (Saturday, Jan. 23 vs. FLA) and 5 p.m. (Sunday, Jan. 31

vs. DAL and Sunday, March 28 vs. TBL) being the alternate start times.

Due to the Canes playing exclusively in the Central Division, which features teams in the Eastern and Central time zones, no game on the schedule will drop the puck later than 8:30 p.m. ET.

The Canes will be featured on national television on NBCSN's Sunday Night Hockey when they host the Dallas Stars on Sunday, April 4 at 7 p.m. The team's remaining broadcast schedule will be announced in the coming days.

The Canes open the 2020-21 season in Detroit on Thursday, Jan. 14 at 7:30 p.m.



SB NATION
CANES COUNTRY

Hurricanes AHL affiliate Chicago Wolves set to play in shortened 2020-21 season

After weeks of speculation, there's finally an official plan for the AHL to move forward.

By Sarah.A

After weeks of speculation, the AHL officially announced its plans for the 2020-21 season on Monday. Play is officially set to begin on Feb. 5, and run through mid-May, with 28 of 31 teams electing to participate in the season.

Much like the NHL, the AHL will see temporary division realignments to accommodate the need for Canadian teams to stay in Canada. The league will split into five divisions this year rather than the standard four. The Chicago Wolves will play in the Central Division, alongside the Cleveland Monsters (Columbus), Grand Rapids Griffins (Detroit), Iowa Wild

(Minnesota), Rockford IceHogs (Chicago), and Texas Stars (Dallas).

The Cleveland Monsters traditionally play in the AHL's North Division, although they have generally been a regular opponent of the Wolves in years past. Missing from the division this year are the Milwaukee Admirals (Nashville), who elected not to play, the San Antonio Rampage, who were purchased by the Vegas Golden Knights and relocated to Nevada and the Manitoba Moose (Winnipeg), who will play in the Canadian Division.

Aside from Milwaukee, the other two teams who have opted out of play are the Springfield Thunderbirds (St. Louis) and the Canes' former affiliate, the Charlotte Checkers (Florida).



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

Some reports indicate that the Wolves could receive players on loan from the Nashville Predators/Milwaukee Admirals, which could help fill any gaps in the current roster. The Admirals and Predators organizations have not yet confirmed these reports or announced any plans about the future for their players.

The Wolves will be playing this season out of their practice facility, the Triphahn Community Center and Ice Arena in nearby Hoffman Estates. No fans will be permitted until local

regulations and the Illinois Department of Public Health deem it safe to do so.

While the Wolves have a full television deal in Chicago, in addition to streaming their games on the AHL's streaming service, it remains to be seen what the impact their temporary relocation will have on fans' ability to watch the games.

Information on season schedules, number of games to be played, and what a playoff format could look like, is all still forthcoming.

Carolina Hurricanes top 25 under 25 #5: Haydn Fleury

Haydn Fleury finally seized a consistent role down the stretch of the 2019-20 regular season and in the playoffs, and has earned a part of the

By Andrew Schnittker

After taking him in the top 10 of the 2014 draft, the Hurricanes took the slow and steady approach with Haydn Fleury. He played two more seasons in Red Deer before making his pro debut with the Charlotte Checkers in 2016-17.

After a full season in the AHL, he was up and down between the Hurricanes and Checkers the next two years, playing sparingly at the NHL level and a key role in the Checkers' Calder Cup Championship run in 2018-19.

At the start of the 2019-20 season, Fleury was arguably ready for a bigger role, but often found himself a healthy scratch on the Hurricanes' crowded blueline. I wrote more about Fleury's journey here.

When Dougie Hamilton and Brett Pesce were both injured late in the regular season, it was Fleury's time to shine. He finally cracked the lineup on a regular basis, and played some of the best hockey of his career for the Hurricanes down the stretch.

From January through the end of the regular season, Fleury played 24 games, averaged 16:26 per game, chipped in two goals and nine points and was a +2.

"There were some tough days," Fleury said. "At the end of the day, everyone wants to play. Everyone has confidence in themselves and thinks they should play every night. For me, that wasn't the case at the start of the year. Roddy kept saying, 'There's going to be an injury, there's going to be something happening where we're going to need you every night. Unfortunately, Dougie got hurt but that was kind of the start for me. I kind of tried to roll with that opportunity and take advantage of it.'"

Then, in the playoff bubble, Fleury really stepped up. He earned his spot in the return to play camp on a crowded

blueline, and was arguably the Hurricanes' best player against the Boston Bruins.

Fleury was a physical presence, scored two goals and showed the strong skating and defensive acumen that led the Hurricanes to pick him seventh overall.

"He was a high pick," said head coach Rod Brind'Amour. "We have a lot of high hopes for him. I think you're just starting now to see what we expected when we picked him up. I think it's been tough for him because we haven't been able to use him as much over the last year and a half. He's been a healthy scratch, just because of the numbers.

"We've had some pretty good D playing ahead of him. But he's handled it really well. When he finally did get his opportunity, he's taken it now and he's starting to really show that he belongs. I think he's just going to keep getting better."

Entering the 2021 season, fresh off signing a two-year deal with a \$1.3 million AAV, Fleury will finally head into the season with a guaranteed spot on the blue line following his playoff performance and with Joel Edmundson, Trevor van Rimesdyk and Sami Vatanen all moving on.

Fleury's arguably showed he's ready for top-four minutes but could start on the third pair behind Jaccob Slavin and Brady Skjei on the left side, likely alongside Jake Gardiner. If Skjei falters, however, Fleury could easily move up a spot.

Moving forward, Fleury's finally established himself as a consistent NHL defenseman, and his physical play, two-way ability and strong skating show the potential the Hurricanes saw in him.

At the absolute least, he projects as a good third-pairing defenseman going forward, but it's entirely possible we haven't seen the best of Fleury yet. He could earn a consistent top-four role in the years to come. The Hurricanes have a glut of talented defensemen in the organization, but, following his breakout in last year's short playoff run, Haydn Fleury has earned his place in that picture.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

Hurricanes dive in to confront unique challenges of short training camp

The Hurricanes were full speed ahead preparing for the 2021 season in their first training camp practice Monday.

By Andrew Schnittker

The Carolina Hurricanes know that this season will be unlike any other. And that starts with a training camp unlike any other.

As with every facet of life amid the COVID-19 pandemic, NHL training camps this year come with safety precautions: protocols such as wearing masks, social distancing and sanitation.

"The intensity is the same," said Hurricanes defenseman Jaccob Slavin. "What we have to get done is heightened just in the sense that we only have eight skates until puck drop, and like I said, no preseason games. So everything's just heightened and the intensity and making sure we're getting everything accomplished. It's different in the sense that we're getting used to wearing masks in the rink and around the locker room, all the little protocols that we have to go through is different, but we've got to do what we've got to do to be able to play the season."

One of the other biggest differences between this and past preseason training camps is its length, or lack thereof. After Monday, the Hurricanes now have seven scheduled practices (with one off day) before opening the season at the Detroit Red Wings on Jan. 14.

That means no time to take things slow. The Hurricanes have split their training camp roster into two groups, C1 and C2. One group, which will practice first each day, is mostly made up of prospects/likely AHL players.

The other contains the full NHL group, plus a couple extras, and is already going full bore on preparing for the season, with a fast-paced, high-intensity practice starting things off Monday.

"You can't ease into this," said head coach Rod Brind'Amour. "We just don't have the time. So I look at it, you have eight practices and there's a day off. You want to try to figure out where you can maybe fit some scrimmages in. There's just not a lot of time for the teaching aspect. We jump right into it. We'll make sure we cover everything, because I think that's important, but there's no tip toeing into this one. Right out of the gate, I think we're full go, and I don't think there's any other way to do it."

One challenge presented by this unique situation, with the COVID protocols, is the lack of opportunities for team bonding. Normally, a coaching staff would want its team spending time together away from the rink in order to bond and grow close.

Now, with large gatherings out of the picture due to the pandemic, that bonding process looks different, and the time spent at the rink becomes paramount.

"We've talked about that a little bit," Brind'Amour said. "In the past, you talked about getting together, hanging out and being around each other. Everything that you kind of preached and wanted to see in your guys, actually now, you don't want to see it. So now, you turn the dressing room and you take the lounges away. You're doing everything where you want them to hang out, but you can't. So it's a challenge to figure out. A huge component of any team is coming together. We've got to use our time wisely when we are together here, when we're on the ice, in our spaced out areas. It's all about that camaraderie. I think everyone's trying to figure that out, how we're going to adjust to that."

Fortunately for the Hurricanes, this is largely a group that already knows each other. The only notable addition during the offseason was forward Jesper Fast, and 12 forwards, six defensemen and two goalies return from last year's team.

There won't be a need for a lengthy bonding process, as this is a team that's already had those experiences in the past, and is ready to get back to work together.

"It's a big advantage," Slavin said. "It would be nice to have some preseason games in there, but everyone knows the systems already. Guys are ready to go, so it's just bringing those couple guys into the mix and making sure they understand the expectations and everything that we want to accomplish here in the couple days that we could."

The group getting up to speed on what's expected and coming together quickly over this short camp will be vital. With the NHL's regular season reduced to 56 games this year, everyone will need to be ready to go out of the gate.

Each game takes on an added importance, and there's no room for a slow start.

"Everyone's in the same boat," said forward Jordan Staal. "It's going to be the team that dials it in in practices and makes sure the group's ready that's going to have a good start. We're hoping to be that team and get the ball rolling right away."

The good news is the Hurricanes have some experience getting off to good starts over the past two seasons, starting 5-0-0 last year and 4-0-1 in the 2018-19 season.

There was a common thread guiding the team to those quick starts, one that will again look to push the team right out of the gate in this unusual season.

"I think that's partly to do with our coaching staff," Staal said. "I think Roddy's done a great job. when you look at practice today, of making sure guys are ready to go. He's a detailed coach, but at the same time, he demands that execution and that work ethic. So the guys in the room are willing to buy into that. I think that shows right off the bat. Hopefully we can do the same this year."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021



Wolves, AHL ready to play

The American Hockey League announced Monday that the 2020-21 regular season will begin Friday, Feb. 5. The Chicago Wolves are among the 28 teams ready to play a shortened season that features an adjusted divisional alignment.

The Wolves plan to play all home games at the Chicago Wolves training facility located in the Triphahn Community Center and Ice Arena in Hoffman Estates — marking the first time the team won't compete at Allstate Arena in Rosemont. The Wolves will strictly adhere to all COVID-19 protocols in order to create a safe environment for practices and games, which means fans will not be allowed to attend until the Illinois Department of Public Health declares it safe to do so.

Chicago has been assigned to the AHL's Central Division as usual, but the divisional setup features just six teams instead of the traditional eight. The Wolves are joined by the Cleveland Monsters, Grand Rapids Griffins, Iowa Wild, Rockford IceHogs and Texas Stars. The Milwaukee Admirals, a fierce rival for the last 26 seasons, are one of the three teams that opted out this season. The Manitoba Moose are shifting to a new four-team Canadian Division, which gives the AHL five divisions.

The official schedule will be released in the days to come. The regular season projects to conclude in mid-May.

"When the Wolves were founded in 1994, we built our organization on three guiding principles," said Wolves general manager Wendell Young. "We wanted to be hockey for the fans, we wanted to compete for championships and we wanted to help people in our community."

"Because COVID-19 protocols prevent us from playing in front of our fans, one of our traditional motivations to play aren't there. Despite that, we feel it's important to play — not just for our franchise, but for the Carolina Hurricanes as well. We're excited to get this season underway."

The Wolves, who have earned four league championships and 10 division titles, enter their first season as partners with the NHL's Carolina Hurricanes. New head coach Ryan Warsofsky's staff features fourth-year assistant Bob Nardella and first-year assistant Patrick Dwyer. Training camp will begin at a date to be determined.

TODAY'S LINKS

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

SportScan

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

1197930 Carolina Hurricanes

Charlotte Checkers opt out of 2020-21 American Hockey League season

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

The Charlotte Checkers will not be playing hockey in the 2020-21 season, announcing Monday they would opt out of the American Hockey League season because of coronavirus concerns.

The Checkers in September said they were ending their AHL affiliation with the Carolina Hurricanes and signed a multi-year arrangement with the Florida Panthers. The Canes will be affiliated with the Chicago Wolves this season.

The Checkers, the Calder Cup champions in 2018-19, said the decision was based on "safety and logistical concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic." The Checkers plan to resume play in the 2021-22 season, the team said.

"While we are disappointed that we cannot resume playing at this time, both the Panthers and Checkers feel it is in the best interests of all parties to opt out for this season," Checkers owner and CEO Michael Kahn said in a statement. "There are several travel, safety and player supply challenges to consider. Those, coupled with the increasing number of new (COVID-19) cases in our area, make it very unlikely that we will be able to host fans at our games in the near future."

The Checkers were one of three AHL teams opting out of the season, along with the Milwaukee Admirals (Nashville Predators) and the Springfield Thunderbirds (St. Louis Blues), the AHL announced. The AHL season is scheduled to begin Feb. 5.

Panthers general manager Bill Zito, in a statement, said the Checkers' decision would not affect their working agreement with the team.

"Despite the travel and business challenges involved with this year, we feel that this decision will not impact our player development system as we continue to provide necessary environments for growth," Zito said. "We look forward to the continuation of our partnership with the Checkers organization and the puck drop of 2021-22 in Charlotte."

The Checkers said they would be contacting season ticket holders in the next few days.

News Observer LOADED: 01.05.2021

1197931 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes open training camp with fast pace, good intensity

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

Carolina Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour talks to his team Jan. 4 on the first day of training camp.

The Carolina Hurricanes are off and running.

There will be no slow-skating their way through training camp and playing a slew of exhibition games to prepare for a new season. The Canes hit the ice Monday for the first of their eight camp practice sessions before the 2020-21 regular season begins Jan. 14 in Detroit.

"Every game is huge this year," defenseman Jaccob Slavin said Monday on a media call. "We can't have any lapses. If we can get off to a good start that's going to set us up for hopefully a good push through the season."

"First day of camp was good. There was a high pace, there was good intensity, guys were working hard."

That's what Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour wants and expects in camp. He has divided the team into two practice groups and kept the veteran players together in the larger group at Canes' new practice facility at Wake Competition Center.

"You can't ease into this," Brind'Amour said on Monday's media call. "You just don't have the time. Right out of the gate you're full go."

Much like last July, when the Canes gathered again after the pandemic pause to prepare for the NHL's postseason Return to Play, there won't be as much team together time because of the COVID-19 threat. It's keep the masks on, stay socially distanced off the ice and be careful in any group settings, even in the training facility.

"In the past you talked about getting together and really hanging out and being around each other," Brind'Amour said. "Everything that you kind of preached and wanted to see in your guys, you actually now don't want to see. You turn the dressing room upside down. You take the lounges away. You're doing everything where you want them to hang out, you can't."

"So it is still a challenge to figure out. That's a huge component of any team, coming together. We have to use our time wisely when we are together. It's all about that camaraderie and I think everyone's just trying to figure that out, how we're going to adjust to that."

One advantage for the Canes is that few player introductions need to be made. There are few newcomers to a group that has played together, won together and been to the playoffs together the past two seasons.

"It's a big advantage, obviously," Slavin said. "Short camp but everyone knows the systems already. Guys are ready to go."

The Canes signed free-agent forward Jesper Fast, their most important addition. He joins a veteran group with so many familiar faces -- Jordan Staal, Sebastian Aho, Teuvo Teravainen and the rest.

SVECHNIKOV ON TROCHECK LINE

During line rushes Monday, Brind'Amour had Fast at ring wing on Vincent Trocheck's line. On the left side was Andrei Svechnikov, the third-year power forward many expect to see play on the top line with Aho and Teravainen. But it was day one.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

Brind'Amour had Nino Niederreiter on the left wing on Aho's line. Staal centered Warren Foegele and Martin Necas, and Morgan Geekie centered either Jordan Martinook or Ryan Dzingel and Brock McGinn.

No surprises on defense. Slavin was paired with Dougie Hamilton, Brady Skjei with Brett Pesce, and Jake Gardiner with Haydn Fleury. Joakim Ryan, another free-agent signee, and Jake Bean made up the fourth D pair.

Does familiarity breed contempt? The Canes will find out in full this season, facing each of their Central Division opponents eight times. Prediction: there will be some gloves dropped before this is over.

"I think we'll find some new hatred throughout these seven teams," Staal said. "It's unfortunate. You want to see everybody and play against everybody (in the NHL) but this is the way it's going to be, and we'll have some fun with it."

News Observer LOADED: 01.05.2021

1197932 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes 2020-21 training camp: Why it matters more than any past preseason

By Sara Civian Jan 4, 2021 19

For one season and one season only, I thought we'd escaped a certain tweet format NHL beat writers cherish almost as much as our sacred em dash.

"I know it's only the preseason and nothing matters, BUT (insert line combination quirk, etc. here)."

Alas, as the Hurricanes and the rest of the NHL started abbreviated training camp this week, the concession statement tweets came rolling in same as they ever were.

We've all tweeted like this and it's usually justified, but there are a few things for the "nothing matters" crew to consider this time around:

There are roughly eight practices for each team before the Jan. 13 start date — a far cry from the dragging weeks of training camps past.

There aren't even any preseason games to obsess over this year.

It's 2021 and the NHL is finally back. Why can't we squeeze every last droplet of meaning out of everything that happens? All aboard team "Everything matters."

The inception of the taxi squad adds a layer of meaning when it comes to the fringe players.

Don't be a coward! Lean into those scorching takes about the third line left wing, baby. Everything will be fine.

Full disclosure: I don't know if I'm the most reliable narrator at the moment. I mean, I almost shed a tear Monday at the sight of Brett Pesce winning a puck battle during a drill and flashing a smirk (and probably a chirp) at his opponent. Hockey smirks! Right in front of my face!

It occurred to me in that moment that I was nearly moved to tears over training camp, an event I used to wish away because it didn't seem to matter.

But emotions ablaze or not, Day 1 of Hurricanes training camp felt like a comforting equalizer.

No one — not even Rod Brind'Amour — knows exactly how things are going to turn out. I asked him if no preseason games is a pro or a con,

and he answered with the energy of anyone attempting to do anything these days: "Welp, ask me in about two weeks."

"Originally, I would say I like it. I hated playing preseason games as a player — at the end of the day, they don't count," he elaborated. "But I understand, as a coach, why you'd like them. You try different things and it's a freebie to kind of go out and figure stuff out. I don't know, I think eight practices is kinda, it's interesting to see if that's going to be quite enough. But I feel like our guys are in good shape, they've been doing a lot of training beforehand. The good news is no one else is playing games, we're all in the same boat. I think in the end the players are going to like this, and it'll be interesting to see where this goes in the future. I think guys put in so much time in the offseason (these days) and they don't really need so much ramp-up time."

Nothing is going to run 100 percent smoothly. There are plenty of tedious obstacles — known and unknown — for the Canes and every other NHL club to overcome.

When I asked Jacob Slavin about the biggest differences so far compared to past training camps, he waved his mask.

"... Getting used to wearing these around the rink, in the locker room and just all those little protocols that we have to go through," he said via Zoom. "It's different, but I mean, we gotta do what we gotta do to play this season."

There's the equalizer that has everyone — players, arena workers, team employees, media — doing whatever awkward tasks it takes to not mess this up.

PR person extraordinaire Mike Brown asked me if my WiFi was working OK and I laughed like a crazy person. I didn't know and why would I care!!! As soon as I thought that, though, a memory of me complaining about the WiFi a few seasons back popped up and I cringed.

Maybe some things are changing for the better.

The WiFi flashback of 2021 got me thinking. Then Brind'Amour suggesting that all these changes might yield some permanent improvement sparked a different mental trajectory: It will be interesting to see where the hockey world goes in the future.

There are, of course, bad things we don't want to last

Captain Jordan Staal nailed a paradox many of us find ourselves in when I asked him the weirdest thing about this year's training camp.

"You want a team that's tight, a team that hangs out together, a team that's with each other all the time, that cares for each other all the time," he said. "But at the same time, they don't really want us too close, or hanging out too near to each other. You want that team spirit, you want to be close and to work with each other and to be that tight-knit team. But at the same time, not too close, and not too tight, and wear your mask. So we're learning on that, and well make do. We're already close and we got a good squad, so we're having some fun with it."

Suddenly Brind'Amour's and President and GM Don Waddell's public pleas to keep the same core group together make a lot of sense ...

"We've talked about it, but in the past you talk about getting together and hanging out and being around each other," Brind'Amour said. "It's like everything you kind of preached and wanted to see now you don't want to see. You turn the dressing room upside down and you take the lounges away and you're doing everything where — you want them to hang out and they can't. That's a huge component of every team — just coming together. We gotta use our time wisely, I guess, when we are together. When we're on the ice. In our spaced out areas. It's all about that camaraderie and I think everyone's just trying to figure that out — how we're going to adjust to that."

There are neutral things to consider



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

What will happen to the preseason? I asked those available if they considered the preseason a pro or a con and I felt like the camera crew in "The Office."

Slavin: "I think it's a con, honestly. I think all the guys appreciate being able to play a couple, at least. Working out those little kinks. But I also know Roddy's gonna run a camp where we are ready to go without a preseason."

Angela?

Staal: "The older you get, the more boring the preseason might get."

Jim?

I'm not going to call Brind'Amour Michael Scott.

Good things are still possible...

Despite my best efforts to avoid sounding like a car commercial — and despite knowing hockey and/or the Toyotathon probably aren't going to save our world — today was still a good day. I left the rink knowing the magic is still there. Maybe the magic is actually enhanced by the lengths people are going to find it.

So, you do you, but I already bought binoculars and two packs of fancy pens — there's no turning back over here. I'm not just going to tweet the lines, I'm going to write them out and I'll mail them to anyone who needs them — even DFS Twitter.

I know it's only preseason, but everything matters.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.05.2021

1198109 Websites

The Athletic / Matt Beniers' non-stop motor has helped Team USA and his draft stock

By Scott Wheeler Jan 3, 2021 29

EDMONTON — Matt Beniers and USA Hockey's under-18 team had just finished a 13-hour trip from Plymouth, Mich., to Ralston, Neb., when they were told to get back on the team's sleeper bus because they had to turn around and go home.

Team USA was in Ralston to face the USHL's Omaha Lancers and Beniers was just about to return from a concussion he'd suffered two weeks earlier in a Feb. 27 game against the Youngstown Phantoms. But now it was March 13, the world had changed, the game had been cancelled, and USA staff had to break the news to the players: Their two-year run with the country's national team development program (NTDP) may have just come to an abrupt end.

For a while, Beniers, who'd missed the team's previous two games, found that news a tough pill to swallow.

"It was rough," he said. "We all got cut out (of the program) really quick. My last game for USA was before I wanted it to be."

But nearly 300 days after that moment, on the first day of a new year, Beniers is at Edmonton's Sutton Place hotel preparing for a quarterfinal game at the world juniors.

The year 2021, will change his life forever when he's likely to be among the first forwards picked in its NHL draft. But for now, he's back to wearing that jersey again as the player each of his teammates and coaches call their "engine."

"You never know when you're going to have to stop wearing that USA jersey forever, so it's extra special to be able to wear it again," Beniers says. "Just being here is an honour, just to be able to play again for USA."

When the under-18 team's season first got cancelled, Beniers did what he always does: He got to work.

His dad Bob, a former college football player at Cornell University, has a gym in their basement, so even as facilities near his home in Hingham, Mass., remained closed under local restrictions for a month and a half, he was able to train with dumbbells, a squat rack, a bench, and everything else he needed.

He knew this summer was going to be a pivotal one. It was the offseason before his freshman year at the University of Michigan, the summer before his first real crack at the world juniors. So no matter how it looked, or what the circumstances were, he wanted to put in more time than his draft-eligible peers.

"I tried to hit the gym hard and work on my nutrition so that I could gain some weight going into college because I've always been a skinnier guy and that's just kind of how my body is. My dad was like that and I'm like that, so that's always been my focus," said Beniers. "That comes with time. I'm one of those guys that can put on weight over a couple of months and then lose it in a week by just being on the ice every day. Some added weight and muscle will help a lot."

When facilities eventually did open, Beniers then carried progress made at home into his training with Foxborough, Mass., strength coach Brian McDonough's Edge Performance Systems, and later Stride Envy skating and skills coach Adam Nicholas.

With McDonough and Nicholas, he trained and skated alongside NHL prospects like the Wild's Matt Boldy, the Devils' Patrick Moynihan, the Ducks' Henry Thrun, the Canadiens' Sean Farrell, the Rangers' Brett Berard, and the Avalanche's Alex Newhook, among others.

In his spare time, he also started a hockey camp for kids in the driveway at his house with long-time friend and Harvard commit Bobby Landry, so that they could have somewhere outdoors to practice.

"It just kind of started as a shooting and stickhandling clinic. Kids would just come and work on that for an hour before a workout. It was fun," Beniers said. "That got me started in the summer, really. It took up some time for us."

After arriving at the University of Michigan in September, Beniers then became an immediate favourite of the coaching staff.

"He's just a pleasure to coach. He's got a twinkle in his eye. He's very respectful. He wants to get better. He's very coachable and approachable, and not every player has that. That helps separate him," said Michigan associate head coach Bill Muckalt. "I can't say enough about him."

Though he was only 17-years-old when he arrived on campus, Beniers is used to life as the youngest player on his team. A late 2002 birthday, Beniers, who will be selected in a predominantly 2003-born draft class, spent his two years at the national program playing above his draft class' age group. In 2018-2019, his first year with USA Hockey, Beniers posted 20 points in 20 games with the under-18 team, a team comprised predominantly of 2019 draftees. Last year, playing entirely with the under-18 team, he played alongside the country's top 2020 draft eligibles.

So when he arrived on campus to join the Wolverines, he already knew many of his freshman and sophomore teammates.

He was also mature enough to make the decision not to live in the freshmen dorms. Instead, he and two of those teammates longtime teammates with USA Hockey and now with Michigan, freshmen Jacob Truscott (a fifth-round pick of the Canucks) and Thomas Bordeleau (a second-round pick of the Sharks), decided to find a house together.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

"We figured that everyone would be packed into the dorms and we didn't have to be in a dorm with all of these people who aren't getting tested all the time. It worked out well because the other freshmen that went to the dorms actually ended up leaving the dorms because there was an outbreak a couple of months ago and they had to send everyone out," Beniers said.

That maturity has him excelling in the classroom, too. Though he's undeclared as a freshman, Beniers is debating between pursuing Michigan's pre-med program or its business school.

"I've always had good grades. Growing up, everyone in my family always stressed that school is right up there with hockey. It's family, school, hockey. So I've always prioritized it that way and then I also just find it interesting, especially the pre-med route. I really enjoy those classes," Beniers said.

None of it — the school, the move, the new life, the pandemic, the daunting draft year — intimidated him.

"I wasn't nervous. Once I got there, the whole team was so welcoming. And then it all just kind of just fell into place and we did the right things at Michigan by staying away from people and wearing a mask everywhere, and then we were able to play really early on because of that, which was big," Beniers said.

"And I'm not trying to worry about the draft too much. I tell people that I got to watch a lot of my good friends go through it at the NTDP and I saw the things that guys did that helped them in the draft process, but I also saw the things that happened that made them think too much about it and get in their head about it. So I'm just trying to enjoy the whole process and not put too much pressure on myself, regardless of the circumstances and the uncertainty."

The hockey didn't intimidate him, either.

"I knew I was ready," he said. "I wasn't too nervous about the hockey aspect, either, honestly. I've been playing against all of these guys."

Despite his age, Beniers thrived in his on-ice environment, assuming an important role on a loaded team from the start. The Wolverines coaches noticed his athleticism right away. After growing up playing several other sports competitively (including baseball, lacrosse and soccer), Beniers has always been one of the fast players on his teams.

"He skates very well, he can kill penalties, he's great on the power play. He's going to continue to get stronger as he physically matures in the weight room and it's just going to make him that much more effective," Muckalt said. "He has been really good for us, his practice habits are outstanding, and he makes others around him better. As a coach, you want more Matty Beniers' that's for sure."

When it came time to join Team USA's world junior selection camp in Plymouth in December, Beniers had already posted six points in eight games with the Wolverines.

Cam York, one of those Wolverines sophomores who Beniers also played with for 20 games two years ago as an underager on the under-18 team, said Beniers fit in immediately at Michigan with the team and its system.

"He works so hard, it's just a matter of time until a chance comes his way. The puck just seems to find him," York said. "He earns what he gets and that's why I respect him so much as a player."

And when Beniers started the camp centering the team's second line, alongside Boldy (one of those summer training partners) and Canadiens prospect Cole Caufield, Muckalt wasn't surprised by the recently-turned 18-year-old's role on the country's top under-20 team.

"Cole is a tremendous talent who can score and you want someone to get him the puck, so it makes sense that Matt is that guy. His biggest attribute is if he's an automobile, his motor is always redlining, his RPM is always high," Muckalt said. "He hunts pucks on the forecheck, he's very effective in all three zones, and he's very effective putting back pressure

on and retrieving pucks, whether that's helping defensive zone coverage, neutral zone transition, or the forecheck."

On the last day of camp, Team USA's world juniors general manager John Vanbiesbrouck talked about Beniers in similar automobile-like terms.

"Matty's an accelerated player. His motor is always going, he can play centre, he can play the wing, and when you're that usable you can play a lot of minutes. He's probably our most well-rounded 200-foot player," Vanbiesbrouck said. "He really cares about every detail in the game. I'm not going to compare him to a Jonathan Toews but when you look for completion in a game he's got it. And most importantly he really fits this tournament well. This is a speed tournament and he's got a lot of speed to his game."

Beniers was also the talk of his teammates throughout camp.

"He's just such a hard worker and his competitive drive in practice really puts him above the rest of the players," said Tyler Kleven, a former NTDP teammate and Senators prospect. "He's so shifty, he's got a good shot, and he's just a good overall player."

Berard pointed to Beniers as the player who had impressed him most.

"Seeing him here, he has really wowed me on the ice seeing how much he has developed at Michigan," Berard said.

Kings defence prospect Brock Faber, who'd just spent two years with Beniers, pointed to how hard it is to defend Beniers in practice.

"He's unbelievably skilled, he protects the puck, he has great vision. He's tough to go against but awesome to have on your team. Matty's been awesome," Faber said, smiling. "He's been a great friend and a great teammate. He has a really bright future."

By the time the tournament started and Caufield got to play on his line, he knew firsthand what it was like to be on the other side of the ice from Beniers after having been matched up against him in two early-season NCAA games between Caufield's University of Wisconsin Badgers and the Wolverines.

"He has impressed me a lot. He's so strong and fast. He never really gets knocked off the puck. He's a 200-foot player and he's exciting to play with. He just always knows where to be," Caufield said. "He kind of draws guys towards him which leaves me open so it's nice to play with a guy like him who is always moving and taking time and space away. It leaves me free."

Beniers picked up his first point of the tournament with a primary assist to Boldy's in Team USA's second game of the round-robin against Austria. He added a second primary assist to Bobby Brink in Team USA's third game against the Czech Republic. In the quarterfinals against Slovakia, it was Beniers who, trusted to play with the net empty, scored his first goal of the tournament to make it 5-2. When it was over, his 18:12 ice time in their first elimination game was second-most among Team USA forwards.

"I think he's very worthy of the ice he's receiving. He's got a great motor and he can really go," said Team USA head coach Nate Leaman after the game, echoing the common refrain. "He's one of our best penalty killers ... he's always going. And with him and (Alex) Turcotte always going, we've got motors driving those top two lines. He has really done well."

Beniers says he's just trying to be himself, to be the motor. That's all he can control and all he can do as he continues to receive praise.

"I wouldn't say too much has changed about my game. I've just been trying to get bigger and stronger and finish my chances. But a lot of my game has stayed the same and I'm just trying to progress that," Beniers said. "The way I think the game, the way I skate, the way I move, the way I create space and win battles, a lot of that has stayed the same."

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NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

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Sportsnet.ca / Flames notebook: Markstrom opens camp with classy gesture

Eric Francis@EricFrancis January 4, 2021, 6:06 PM

It would be tough to think of a better way for Jacob Markstrom to open his six-year relationship with the Calgary Flames and its fan base.

No, not with a handful of big saves in his camp debut Monday.

But by picking up the phone to call a Flames legend a few days earlier with an eye on asking permission to wear his beloved No. 25.

Previously worn in Calgary by Hall of Famer Joe Nieuwendyk, the number has been in circulation despite the fact the three-time Stanley Cup winner has been officially honoured as one of the franchise greats.

"You do a little research and see the history of the number with a pretty good player in Nieuwendyk wearing it - and also it's up in the rafters - so asked for permission from the team and also asked for his number," said the 30-year-old Swede, who signed a \$36-million deal in the off-season to be Calgary's go-to goalie.

"I called him and asked if it was okay with him to wear it, to show respect after coming to a new team. He said he was totally fine with it and appreciated the call. It's a number that's special to me. I've had it for a long time. It's nice for me to be able to wear it here."

Classy move.

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The only numbers retired by the Flames are Nos. 9, 12 and 30, worn by Lanny McDonald, Jarome Iginla and Mike Vernon. Nieuwendyk and Al MacInnis were honoured as part of a controversial Forever a Flame induction that kept their numbers open.

"Calgary sent me a tribute video of him, so it's nice to see - coming from Sweden you don't really know that much about him, but the things he was doing and the numbers he put up he obviously had a huge impact on the Calgary Flames," said Markstrom, who wore 25 in Vancouver where he emerged a Vezina candidate the last two years.

"He obviously loved it here. It was an honour talking to him. He said, 'go ahead.' He didn't expect the call, but appreciated it."

As should Flames fans.

OPENING LINES

Brad Treliving warned everyone not to pay too much attention to Day 1 line combinations, as they'll likely change throughout camp.

However, plenty of interesting trios and duos to start with:

Tkachuk-Lindholm-Leivo

Gaudreau-Monahan-Simon

Mangiapanè-Backlund-Bennett

Lucic-Ryan-Dube

Giordano-Tanev

Hanifin-Andersson

Valimaki-Nesterov

- Josh Leivo said Monday he was told before signing in Calgary he'd be put in a position to be an offensive-minded player, which is exactly where the right-handed free-agent signing opened camp. The 27-year-old former Leaf and Canuck has had a hard time staying healthy in his career, but insists the major surgery on his fractured knee suffered last Christmas is behind him.

- Coach Geoff Ward said Giordano and Tanev were paired together Monday to work on special teams, as the two will likely kill penalties together. "Probably by the end of camp you'll see (Tanev) with some younger guys." That younger guy will likely be Noah Hanifin, who skated Monday with Rasmus Andersson, who is expected to play alongside Giordano.

- All coaches wore masks throughout the two sessions, which both ended with rigorous skating drills. Practices also included spirited, one-on-one battle drills with an eye on trying to get players used to the upcoming contact they've been missing since the summer.

- Open only to the media, the Saddledome is filled with two-by-fours as the team frames the rinkside seats much like the NHL did in the playoff bubble in Edmonton.

JOHNNY ON THE SPOT

Two seasons ago, Johnny Gaudreau finished tied with Nathan MacKinnon for seventh in NHL scoring with 99 points. Last year he was 46th with 58 points and half of the 36 goals he had a year earlier. It has been well documented his playoffs also left plenty to be desired.

Speaking for the first time since then, he was asked if he thought it was accurate to suggest he's looking for a bounce-back season.

"I'm just going to play my game like I do every year, work hard and try to help my team win games and go from there," said Gaudreau, a man of few words.

Gaudreau got engaged in the summer to his girlfriend, Meredith, who is a nurse at the Children's Hospital in Philadelphia.

"Special time, obviously. Someone special to me. It turned out to be a good 2020 for us."

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Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens' winning mentality a strong first step toward a productive season

Eric Engels@EricEngels January 4, 2021, 9:10 PM

BROSSARD, Que. — I asked the leaders of the Canadiens this one question at the start of each of the past two training camps prior to this one: If you had to pinpoint one reason this team can win the Stanley Cup this year, what would it be?

Invariably, with the team entrenched in a reset, and with players not suffering delusions of grandeur, the answers that came back to me were somewhat predictable. Without getting too deep into them — because we're at the start of a new year and want to be looking forward instead — they were some iteration of, "Because anything can happen," or, as



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

Carey Price put it to me in the fall of 2019, "Because crazier things have happened."

Maybe a tumble to 24th place in the 2020 standings should've been foreseeable right then and there.

I digress ...

The Canadiens had come off a 96-point season — an output that had them just miss the playoffs but one that would've secured them a spot in 17 of the 20 prior seasons — and I thought that there was a slight chance I might get a few different answers from the ones I got in fall of 2018. I thought Price or Shea Weber might be able to point to some internal reason the Canadiens could pull off the improbable and win their 25th Cup.

When neither did, I thought that it was reasonable to assume they would prefer to temper expectations, and then perhaps exceed them rather than heaping unnecessary pressure onto a team that had yet to prove anything.

Still, both Weber and Price knew what the Canadiens had last season, and they knew it wasn't enough. And there was nothing they could've said that would've been perceived as genuine belief, so they answered honestly, giving me a "why not" instead of "here's why."

It's funny how much has changed since then, and how 20-odd days of surprisingly good August hockey from the Canadiens began to inspire belief.

Then Marc Bergevin traded for and signed Jake Allen and Joel Edmundson, traded Max Domi for Josh Anderson and signed Anderson to a long-term extension, signed Tyler Toffoli as an unrestricted free agent, and added high-calibre depth in Michael Frolik and Corey Perry.

"I think (the players) sent me a message, so (I) did what (I) had to do," Bergevin said on Sunday.

Sure, he was talking about Nick Suzuki and Jesperi Kotkaniemi — two emerging centre-men who played so well in the post-season against Pittsburgh and Philadelphia that Bergevin later said they'd be core pieces to build around for the next 10 or 15 years.

But he was also talking about 33-year-old Price and 35-year-old Weber, who played like the future Hall of Famers we know them to be.

The message Bergevin took from them was: "Give this team a real chance to win."

Now, it was one thing to hear Bergevin say on Sunday that he believes this group can do that, that they "mean business," that they're "here to win," and that they can "play any way you want to play." He built this team and spent every dollar available to him, and then some. If he doesn't believe, no one will.

But it was something else to hear Canadiens coach Claude Julien say after the very first practice at training camp, "I don't think there's any reason to believe we can't make it all the way."

Julien qualified that statement by saying it would depend on the team's overall health and the luck involved in avoiding major injuries to core pieces, but he still said it. He said it after mentioning that his expectations were in line with Bergevin's and with everyone else's on the team.

And here is how Price answered that same question I asked him at the beginning of the last two camps:

"We have more experience. We have young guys that learned what it's like to play in the playoffs last season, and you can't buy experience. We made some great additions in the off-season, which is going to help us move forward."

And that was just moments after Weber responded this way:

"I think that we were so close in Toronto. And even though people doubted us and might not think that we were that close, we believe we

were that close. And we've made some additions that we think are going to help going forward, and that should only better our chances. Being that close in the summer and getting those guys to come in — it should only help us."

Without overemphasizing the relevance of these statements — because winning is done on the ice and not in the press room — being a winning team does start with this mentality. It sure beats the anything-is-possible or crazier-things-have-happened mentality.

Not that anything is guaranteed for these Canadiens.

They need to integrate eight new players over an abbreviated training camp, without the benefit of exhibition and ahead of a condensed schedule that will see them play the same six teams over and over again until 56 games are in the books.

It's going to be playoff-style hockey through and through, and that's before the toughest tournament in team sports begins.

"It's going to get heated at some points," Price said.

Objectively, it's going to be scorching at most points.

But Price believes the Canadiens will persevere.

"We all recognize the challenge in front of us," Julien said before opining that the new all-Canadian North Division will be as — if not more — competitive than the Atlantic Division the Canadiens typically play in.

But the coach also talked about the Canadiens possessing the size, grit and speed to handle all of that.

Weber talked about the challenges in the way of him bringing the team together ahead of Jan. 13 in Toronto — with COVID-19 regulations impeding his ability to host team-bonding events away from the rink.

But he also vaunted the experience of the newcomers — five of them Stanley Cup winners — as an asset that will help the Canadiens clear that hurdle.

"Those guys have been there and won championships," Weber said. "They know what it takes, and they can bleed that information down to our youth and a lot of guys."

Is the pressure on? You bet.

But as Julien said, "In the situation we're in, with a good team that feels confident, instead of feeling pressure it's about being excited about the opportunity. You have to share that with the team and hope it thinks the same way."

"We're excited to have the opportunity that's been given to us," Julien added. "We're excited about the work Marc did this off-season to get players that make our team even more competitive. It's up to us to take advantage of that, and we're more excited than we are feeling under pressure ..."

"This is a great opportunity and you kinda make sure your whole team thinks the same way. I think that becomes contagious."

So does belief.

It's obvious the Canadiens have it right now, and that's a good start.

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Sportsnet.ca / Jets' Laine dances around trade talk, doesn't want to be a 'distraction'

ken-wiebe headshotKen Wiebe@WiebesWorldJanuary 4, 2021, 6:29 PM



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

WINNIPEG — Patrik Laine didn't double down and stoke the fire, nor did he pour cold water over the trade rumour flames that have been swirling around him since the offseason.

As the Winnipeg Jets hit the ice for the first session of training camp, Laine was under the spotlight as he spoke to reporters for the first time since his team was eliminated from its qualifying round series against the Calgary Flames.

Laine did some tip-toeing when members of the media tried to pin him down on the subject that has been generating interest for several months.

After a few queries didn't produce any clarity, a more direct question was posed.

Did Laine actually ask for a trade, and does he still want to be moved?

"That's not something I think about. I only care about what's going on today. I don't worry about tomorrow," Laine said. "Right now I'm here. I'm excited to play. I'm in good shape. I'm going to be a new player this year. And (I) just want to play well. That's going to be best for both parties. What happens in the future, that's not even my call. I'm going to work hard every night and that's all I can do."

That certainly wasn't close to an outright denial, nor was it necessarily a sign of trouble brewing, either.

Of course, the subject of potentially seeking greener pastures is a topic most players prefer to avoid speaking about publicly.

But good on Laine to acknowledge the reality of the situation.

This is a business and sometimes changes get made — even with high-profile players.

"Even Wayne Gretzky got traded," Laine said. "People get traded all the time. It's part of the game you need to be aware of. It's part of the business side. I'm just here. I just want to play. I'm not worried about all the talk and all the speculation, that kind of stuff. It's not my job to worry about that.

"I think we're way past that as a team. We've had those kinds of situations before and we're way past that and we're just going to worry about right now, worry about where we can improve as a team, what we want to do as a team. We're not going to let that be a distraction. I don't want to be a distraction."

Because he is driven to become a better player and help his team succeed, Laine can make good on that proclamation.

Laine skated alongside Paul Stastny and Kyle Connor on Monday, while Mark Scheifele was between captain Blake Wheeler and Nikolaj Ehlers, as the Jets tested out some new combinations.

One of the reasons Stastny was acquired from the Vegas Golden Knights was to provide a pass-first, left-handed shooting option down the middle that can help Laine flourish.

"I don't know, my job is to help whoever I play with. I've never asked to play with anybody in my career. Whatever the coaches think to slot me with certain guys," Stastny said. "Here, the top nine is pretty legit, there's a lot of different combinations you can work with and different things. The biggest thing is whoever you have chemistry with you just go out there and you work for each other. For me, you play with a lot of shooters on this team and that's really nice to have. As someone who likes to distribute the puck and find the open guy, it's really easy for me. I enjoy it."

Wheeler went out of his way to praise Laine, while suggesting the situation might not be as dire as it's being portrayed in some circles.

"What gets talked about in the media and what gets talked about in our dressing room are definitely two different things," Wheeler said. "Since

Patty's been here, we've become a contending hockey team every year. I think from a teammate's standpoint, I want what's best for Patty since the day he's gotten here. I want Patty to lead the league in goals. I want all the things that are within his capabilities. That's what I want for him. But first and foremost, I think we want all those things in conjunction with our team having success. Sometimes when there's rumours, when there's things talked about (with) individual players, it gets lost that the team gets put first in front of all those things. I think we're all in the same boat here that we're trying to win hockey games, and Patty's a big part of that and we're obviously lucky to have him here.

"We need to operate and think about everything that we do is in the best interest of us as a team. Does losing Patrik Laine make us a better team? Probably not. So it's unfortunate that things happen and maybe sometimes you're in a small Canadian market and there's nothing else really to talk about other than things of this nature.

"The position that we're in is one that we can have a really special year. That's where our focus is: on the amount of talent that we have on our team, how do we deploy that in the best way to get the most out of everyone so that we can be effective every game. Not too long ago, this team was knocking on the door for a Stanley Cup. This is the nature of big business and NHL and pro sports. We're not alone in this and trade rumors and high-profile players, and with a flat salary cap, these things are just going to continue to happen. We're in a better position today with Patrik Laine on our hockey team and I think we'll just leave it at that."

Jets head coach Paul Maurice is no stranger to dealing with situations like this one, and he didn't seem overly concerned about it.

Especially not after the way Laine handled himself on Day 1 of training camp.

"I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time.

"You see a lot of young players, it seems, these days where it gets out there and it may not be directly from the player, but the hint or the insinuation is that it might be time for a change, a different role, a different opportunity," Maurice said. "I don't spend a whole lot of time thinking about it, to be honest with you. We have conversations with the player, but I find it's far more valuable just to watch. He's committed to being a great player and that's almost the only thing I weigh."

This storyline is likely to have a few twists and turns before it reaches its conclusion.

Laine has a clear picture of what the next step in his development curve looks like — and that's either going to boost his stock in nailing down his next contract or increase his trade value as he looks for another opportunity elsewhere.

"I'm on a good path," Laine said. "I can even be better defensively. I took some good steps last year. I think I've been kind of improving every year. (I'm not) an 18-year-old anymore, so I can't go behind that anymore. Just try to be even more defensively responsible and just do my job.

"I can't do anybody else's job out there. It's just about being worried about my position and what I can do better. Hopefully other guys can follow, and try to be an example on the ice, how to play."

Laine brought out his trademark humour when asked what was a reasonable expectation for goals scored during this 56-game truncated season.

"We'll see. I don't know. Hopefully start with one and kind of go from there. But hopefully more than one," said Laine, who echoed the sentiments of Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff that this could be his best season yet. "Yeah, I always think it's realistic. You can always have the best year of your career. You always want to have a good season.

"The most pressure is coming from myself, from inside of me, to want to be the best. That's the thing that pushes me forward every day."

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Sportsnet.ca / Oilers' Kassian must be productive, physical to reclaim spot on McDavid line

Mark Spector@sportsnetspec January 4, 2021, 8:48 PM

EDMONTON — Zack Kassian showed up in his old spot on Connor McDavid's right wing at the first true practice of the Edmonton Oilers training camp on Monday. Hey, who wouldn't want to play there?

"If there are 700 players in the NHL, I guess whoever gets slotted on his right side is going to be happy about it. He's the best player in the world," Kassian said. Ryan Nugent-Hopkins played the left side on what would be the Oilers No. 1 unit.

The bruising Kassian had some success in that spot in the past, but he was uncharacteristically quiet in the four-game qualifying round ouster by Chicago. He'll get a chance to reclaim his spot, but Kassian knows there has to be more happening in his game if he is to stay up with McDavid.

"For me to stay there and be productive, I've got to be physical, I've got to be skating," he said. "But I've got to play between the lines and I've got to make plays. It's that simple: playing with him you've got to get him the puck at the right times, and do your part to make sure we're clicking not only as a line but as a team."

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Kassian is the kind of player whose game can be heard. Either he's hitting people, being hit, yelling at someone or being chirped at himself. All in all, quiet isn't a good thing for Kassian.

So the theory would be that playing the Canadian teams nine or 10 times each should work in his favour, right? The more times he plays against Matthew Tkachuk, the more times you can be guaranteed that Kassian will be uber-engaged.

Is that how he sees it?

"It's the media's job to portray, and get a build-up going," he said. "All the Canadian teams will be fun. Calgary, there is obviously tension between the two teams. But a 56-game season against all Canadian teams, every game is going to have its unique little twists. It's all going to be high intensity. Every game's going to be fun; every game is going to mean something.

"You can pinpoint Calgary, but there are a lot of good Canadian teams."

Remaining Time -0:48

Kassian's thoughts on Oilers competing in all Canadian division

Day 2 lines

Here are you lines and defensive pairings from Day 2 of camp. Listed as "unfit to play" were forwards Dominik Kahun, James Neal, Gaetan Haas and Devin Shore.

Nugent-Hopkins -- McDavid -- Kassian

Ennis -- Draisaitl -- Yamamoto

Archibald -- Turris -- Puljujarvi

Nygard -- Khaira -- Chiasson

Benson -- McLeod -- P. Russell

Quine -- Marody -- Cracknell

Nurse -- Bear

K. Russell -- Barrie

Jones -- Larsson

Koekkoek -- Bouchard

Lagesson -- Lennstrom

Niemelainen -- Stanton

Remaining Time -1:08

Would you rather the Oilers have one or two defencemen on powerplay?

Not a Khaira The World?

Juhar Khaira is the opposite of Kassian, in that he was that rare Oilers player who played some of his best hockey against Chicago. The line of Khaira (six-foot-four) between Neal (six-foot-three) and Alex Chiasson (six-foot-three) was hard and effective, and gave head coach Dave Tippett hope of returning a heavy, grinding line with two wingers who can score.

But that series was so short, and August was such a long time ago. Can Khaira really carry anything over from then 'til now?

"It's definitely possible," said the 26-year-old Surrey, B.C., native. "It's a mental game at that point. Being confident, and trusting the game that I play and coming back to it. For me, that's going to be what I'll have to do in the early scrimmages here. Getting back to that mentality right away."

Inconsistency — Khaira has been awesome, and he has been invisible. What he needs is to spend more time just being good.

"He's a big man who has to play with that strength," said head coach Dave Tippett, who liked Khaira's work on the penalty kill last season. "Just trying to find some extra minutes where he can contribute more five-on-five. He's got to find ways to contribute."

Khaira was part of an Oilers bottom six that got caved in at five-on-five last season. He knows there's a job here for him, but he also knows the Oilers are deeper at forward — especially bottom six guys — this season.

"At every training camp there are guys looking to take jobs, and guys looking to keep jobs," he said. "For myself, I want to continue where I was at in the bubble — I thought I played well. If I can play like that on a consistent basis that's going to be huge for me."

Remaining Time -0:41

McDavid believes Oilers have done a 'great job' with new acquisitions

Pulju Party

Monday's workout was Jesse Puljujarvi's first NHL practice since February of 2018. It was also the first time Tippett has been on the ice with the wayward Finn, who returns to Edmonton after a season in Oulu and the Finnish Liiga.

Tippett's first impression?

"He's a monster of a man. He's a big man," marvelled Tippett, of the six-foot-four, 201 pound right winger. "I love that he's (always) smiling — he looks like he loves to play. And highly skilled for a big man."

No Oiler has had more publicity without having played a game last season, which of course was Tippett's first in Edmonton. Then the captain's skates started prior to camp, and Tippett heard even more.

"There were a lot of comments how good Jesse looks on the ice," Tippett said. "He's engaging with his teammates, which is a good first step. He



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

was a good player out there today. Hopefully I can get to know him. He looked pretty good for the first day."

Day games gone

The NHL released the start times for the 2020-21 season on Monday, and the one glaring omission for the Oilers is that they will not play a single afternoon game all season long.

That is music to the ears of Oilers fans, who have watched their team lose 1 p.m. ET starts in Boston, Washington, Philadelphia and other Eastern cities since the inception of the Oilers franchise. Overall, the Oilers were 78-107-12-11 (.430) in afternoon games heading into last season, with just less than one quarter of those games being played in Edmonton.

But last season they went 6-1-1 in games played at 2 p.m. local or prior. So the Oilers finally figure out how to play day games, and the day games disappear. It figures.

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1198114 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Virtanen experiences more deja vu as Canucks open camp

Iain MacIntyre@imacSportsnet January 4, 2021, 7:07 PM

VANCOUVER – Jake Virtanen has had so much experience with training camps that he seems able now to get demoted without actually doing anything.

When the Vancouver Canucks officially opened Monday their third camp in 16 months, Swedish rookie dynamo Nils Hoglander skated in the spot that was supposed to be Virtanen's to lose: on the second line beside Bo Horvat and Tanner Pearson.

"As far as Jake goes, it'll be up to him to decide where he plays, whether it's first line, second, third, fourth," Canuck coach Travis Green said. "And for us, it's not about what's best for Jake, it's about what's best for the team, and how that looks. He knows that as well. It's all about winning.

"I'm not worried about where Jake plays. I'm just worried about how our team looks and I'm worried about the players here."

After five years of NHL struggle, when Virtanen often followed a step forward with one back, this is supposed to be the 24-year-old's big opportunity. Top-six winger Tyler Toffoli left as a free agent. The Canucks used most of their precious cap space to replace starting goalie Jacob Markstrom and upgrade the defence.

Virtanen, who would have been voted the Canuck least likely to return after starting last summer's playoff tournament as a healthy scratch, was actually re-signed for two years at \$2.55 million in October and told he'd be given the chance to earn a job in the top six.

But on Monday, there was the five-foot-eight Hoglander, a 20-year-old second-round pick who has 14 points in 23 games for Rogle this season in the Swedish league, practising with Horvat, darting around the ice and making plays with the puck.

"Yeah, when I first saw it, I was a little bit nervous," Hoglander said of his practice deployment. "It's two really good hockey players and good guys and it just feels good to be out there."

Virtanen skated on what looks like a potential third line with Brandon Sutter and winger Tyler Motte.

"I think you can read into them; I know you will, anyway," Green said of his camp-opening line combinations, before deadpanning: "You probably saw Petey (Elias Pettersson) with (J.T.) Miller and (Brock) Boeser. You might see that at times during the season.

"Yeah, you can read into it. We've got to make decisions, we're not just out there to skate and condition; we're out there to see how combinations look."

Virtanen was dropped by Green from Vancouver's top four lines a couple of days into July's summer camp. The previous September, he was demoted on the opening day of training camp for missing off-season conditioning targets.

Despite the reprimands, Virtanen went on to score 18 goals in the 2019-20 season.

"I'm just going to go and work hard and I'm not really paying attention (to line combinations)," Virtanen said Monday. "I'm just going to try to work hard and earn a spot in the top six. I know there's a lot of good competition out here you know you've got to work hard, and you know every guy is going to be out here trying to earn spots."

LINE COMBOS

Green configured his top forward lines and defence pairings like this:

Miller-Pettersson-Boeser

Pearson-Horvat-Hoglander

Motte-Sutter-Virtanen

Antoine Roussel-Adam Gaudette-Zack MacEwen

Alex Edler-Nate Schmidt

Olli Juolevi-Tyler Myers

Quinn Hughes-Jalen Chatfield

Jack Rathbone-Jordie Benn

This left notable NHL veterans Jay Beagle and Loui Eriksson in depth positions. Defenceman Travis Hamonic, still early in his seven-day travel quarantine, will be among the top-six defencemen next week.

READY OR NOT, TIME TO SHINE

With only an eight-day training camp and no exhibition games before the Canucks open their season in Edmonton on Jan. 13, Green said he can't wait for young players to get comfortable competing for an NHL job if they aren't already. Prospects like Hoglander and Rathbone better be ready to go.

"It's important for us, it's important to the player," Green said. "We're not going to have a lot of time to make decisions. We don't really have time for guys to dip their toe in the water.

"Every young player is a little bit different. Some of them come in and they feel comfortable right away and some of them, they need some time, they need some seasoning just to feel comfortable in their surroundings on the ice."

The scarcity of patience isn't fair to young players, but then a lot of things have felt unfair since the global pandemic began.

SMALL DOSES OF SCHMIDT

There were a couple of audible on-ice "whoops" from Nate Schmidt to mark his first practice since the Canucks acquired him in October from the Vegas Golden Knights. But the effervescent defenceman said he's trying to not to overwhelm unfamiliar teammates with his enthusiasm.

"Getting to see the coaching staff, the rest of the guys, that's what you're most nervous about," he said. "You're nervous about... how you're going to fit in the room, how are you going to work into a new city, and it's gone off without a hitch here so far. Having Holts and Beags (former



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

Washington teammates Braden Holtby and Jay Beagle) here was an awesome start for me because you have guys who kind of know the true, real Schmidty. And sometimes, I've got to make sure I give it to the guys in doses because I don't know how much they can handle at first. I didn't know how much to bark and yell today because I don't want guys to get overwhelmed."

Holtby, the Canucks' new goalie who shared a post-practice Zoom call with Schmidt, agreed that his friend and teammate was being careful about his integration.

"It's been awesome," Holtby said. "I think he showed us energy already. I think it's a positive energy that is going to be infectious to this group."

Schmidt: "Ah, thanks, man."

HUGHES VS. HUGHES

Several Canucks were asked about the all-Canadian division and playing the same teams nine or 10 times. Hughes, the Calder Trophy runner-up, was asked about not getting the chance this season to play against little brother, Jack, a centre with the New Jersey Devils.

"I haven't thought about it, but I probably won't miss it," Quinn said. "I'm 0-3 against him, so we'll just let that one slide."

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Sportsnet.ca / NHL Training Camp Day 2: Joe Thornton feeling at home with Maple Leafs

Emily Sadler@EmmySadler January 4, 2021, 2:25 PM

The NHL is back, and with the opening of training camps comes the familiar flurry of updates, quotes and lineup notes, and the sound we've been craving since the Tampa Bay Lightning hoisted the Stanley Cup: skates on ice, sticks on pucks.

As we look ahead to the start of the shortened 2020-21 NHL season, we're collecting news and notes from training camps around the league. Day 2 is underway league-wide on Monday (non-playoff teams opened up on Dec. 31, with the other 24 first reporting on Sunday), so check back throughout the day for more updates as we monitor the goings-on in rinks around the NHL.

Laine addresses trade speculation

With Patrik Laine at the mic for the first time since the summer, it didn't take long for the elephant in the room to be addressed.

A few months ago, Laine's representation floated the idea that a trade might be the best option for both player and team. When asked about it Monday, Laine told reporters, "I'm here, aren't I?"

"That's the only thing I'm worried about right now. I'm not in charge of what other people are saying. I don't worry about that stuff," Laine said Monday. "Even Wayne Gretzky got traded. People get traded all the time. It's part of the game you need to be aware of and right now I'm just worried about working hard here, being the best player I can be, and help these other guys to be at their best. That's the only thing I'm worried about right now."

The talented winger has long been the subject of discussion in Winnipeg — whether for trade speculation, scoring slumps, verbalizing a desire for more top-line minutes — and he's also not been one to shy away from speaking up publicly about any issues that arise.

Remaining Time -3:19

Wheeler addresses Laine situation, says Jets are better with him

Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff said last month he expects big things for the Finnish star:

"I assume he's probably going to have one of the best years of his career given the group of players that we have and the professionalism that is there," he told reporters. "And the maturity level that all players gain year over year over year, I think just helps us move forward."

Marchand plans to be ready for season opener

The Boston Bruins could be opening the 2020-21 season without their biggest players — and we're not just talking about Zdeno Chara, whose signing with the Washington Capitals last week shocked the hockey world. After undergoing surgery earlier this off-season, the status of Bruins leading scorers Brad Marchand and David Pastrnak to open the season have been called into question. Marchand brought a little clarity to the situation on Monday, telling reporters during a media availability that he's planning to be ready when the Bruins open the season on Jan. 14.

Marchand: "I plan to be" ready for the season opener. "That's what we're shooting for."

— Amalie Benjamin (@AmalieBenjamin) January 4, 2021

Brad Marchand on his surgery: "I needed it big time."

Felt the injury for the last two years.

— Fluto Shinzawa (@FlutoShinzawa) January 4, 2021

Marchand underwent sports hernia surgery on Sept. 14. His recovery timeline was set at four months — which just happens to be Jan. 14. Pastrnak's procedure — a right hip arthroscopy and labral repair on Sept. 16 — brought a longer recovery time set at five months. Boston GM Don Sweeney said on Dec. 31 that it's "unlikely" the Czech forward will be ready before that, and repeated that sentiment Monday.

Krug settling into St. Louis life

Former Bruins defenceman Torey Krug is getting comfortable in his new digs after making the move to the midwest and joining the Blues.

Early camp notes have him paired with Colton Parayko — a gritty duo that could quickly become one of the toughest in the league.

Thornton's got 'no stress,' feels right at home at Leafs camp

Stressed about the upcoming season? Take a page out of Joe Thornton's book. The veteran NHLer and latest member of the Toronto Maple Leafs is starting camp — his first not in teal since 2005 — with a fresh, positive outlook for the New Year on his new team and some excellent sound bites.

The longtime San Jose Shark and St. Thomas, Ont., native told reporters he's feeling at home in his new surroundings.

Thornton signed a one-year, \$700,000 deal with the Toronto Maple Leafs back in October. The 41-year-old playmaker is already slotted into what will likely be the Maple Leafs' top line alongside young guns Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner.

This is going to be fun.

Remaining Time -0:32

Thornton feeling at home already with Maple Leafs teammates

Barzal at camp, but remains unsigned

After being notably absent from Day 1 on Sunday, Barzal Watch is on at New York Islanders camp. Following a number of prominent RFA signings around the league in the days leading up to camp, Mathew Barzal remains unsigned on Day 2 of training camp, though he's listed on the club's camp roster as an attendee.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

According to The Athletic's Arthur Staple, conversations between player and management have been "pretty steady." But, in typical Lou Lamoriello fashion, mum's the word on any details.

Islanders head coach Barry Trotz said Sunday that Barzal's absence "doesn't complicate" things at camp.

"We know going into this no matter, you have to make sure that you're adaptable, either through testing protocols or injury or anything like that," Trotz told reporters. "It's nothing unusual for us if we're missing a person here or there. That's part of NHL hockey and the world today."

Ovechkin okay starting season without new deal

The Washington Capitals made some interesting moves this off-season — they hired a new head coach in Peter Laviolette, bid farewell to longtime starter Braden Holtby, brought in and lost veteran netminder Henrik Lundqvist, and capped it off by signing longtime Bruin Zdeno Chara — but a major talking point heading into the 2020-21 season is centred around the move they have yet to make: re-signing captain Alex Ovechkin.

Ovechkin, whose 13-year deal is set to expire at the end of this season, has been very upfront about his intentions to stay in Washington. He reiterated that same stress-free approach to his contract status on Monday, telling reporters he's comfortable heading into this upcoming campaign without an extension in hand.

A few other notes on the team's other off-season developments, courtesy of The Washington Post's Samantha Pell:

Also! Ovechkin finally got to have a meal with Laviolette -- the two got lunch together after Laviolette had to turn down Ovechkin's initial ask due to quarantine protocols.

— Samantha Pell (@SamanthaJPell) January 4, 2021

Lafreniere makes strong first impression

Alexis Lafreniere hit the ice with the New York Rangers at camp for the first time on Monday, and he made a really strong first impression.

Starting new chapter in Detroit a dream come true for Namestnikov

The opening of Red Wings camp has marked the beginning of an extra-special chapter of Vladislav Namestnikov's hockey career: the opportunity to play for his beloved childhood team.

Namestnikov, who grew up in Michigan, watched his uncle, Slava Kozlov, play alongside Steve Yzerman and win the Stanley Cup. Now, he'll see a reminder of that family connection every day:

Jack Hughes impressing early

The New Jersey Devils were among the seven teams that did not qualify for the NHL's return-to-play last summer, resulting in an extended break upon last March's season stoppage. It sounds like Jack Hughes, 2019's first overall selection, used that time wisely:

Flyers' Patrick suits up after long absence

A welcomed sight in Philadelphia this morning:

It's been a long road to get to this point for Nolan Patrick, the Flyers' second-overall pick in 2017. The 22-year-old was sidelined for the entire 2019-20 season (including training camp) after being diagnosed with a migraine disorder in September 2019. The centremen wore a regular practice sweater — not a non-contact one — and skated with Travis Konecny and Carsen Twarynski on Monday.

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Sportsnet.ca / Leafs, Lightning among favourites on NHL division odds

With NHL training camps now in full swing the Toronto Maple Leafs have emerged as the strongest favourites on the NHL divisional betting lines, sporting short +140 odds to win the North Division at sportsbooks monitored by OddsShark.com.

The Maple Leafs have been a fixture near the top of the NHL standings over the past three seasons, but have been regularly overshadowed by Boston and Tampa Bay in the highly competitive Atlantic Division. However, with the temporary realignment for the upcoming season grouping Toronto with the six other Canadian teams, the Maple Leafs enjoy a golden opportunity to claim their first divisional title since 2000.

Toronto, though, will not be without stiff competition in the North Division. The Edmonton Oilers sit second to Toronto as a +300 wager, just ahead of the Vancouver Canucks at +500. The Oilers enjoyed a return to respectability last season, finishing the abbreviated campaign with 37 wins, one more than Toronto, and the most among Canadian teams.

The Canucks struggled down the stretch, but their youthful lineup continued to make gains in the postseason, coming within one win of a trip to the Western Conference Final. Rounding out the North Division odds, the Montreal Canadiens sit at +650, ahead of the Calgary Flames and the Winnipeg Jets at +700, while the Ottawa Senators lag as distant +8000 longshots.

Elsewhere on the NHL divisional odds at online sports betting sites, the Stanley Cup champion Lightning lead the way as +150 favourites to win the Central Division, while the Bruins have risen to narrow +250 chalk to win the East Division.

Like the Maple Leafs, the Lightning are expected to benefit from realignment this season, as Tampa Bay closed out last season with a double-digit point edge over its closest Central Division rival. And while a salary cap crunch emerged as a concern for Tampa Bay during the offseason, the club has so far managed to address those issues without dismantling their championship lineup.

The Bruins closed out last season with a league-leading 100 points, but were forced to make some hard personnel decisions in the wake of an early playoff exit. That included allowing rearguards Zdeno Chara and Torey Krug to leave town as free agents. Boston also finds itself atop arguably the toughest division in the NHL this season, and is closely trailed by the Philadelphia Flyers at +300 on those NHL odds, and the Pittsburgh Penguins at +450.

And over in the West Division, the Colorado Avalanche lead the way as +150 betting favourites, just ahead of the Vegas Golden Knights at +188. The St. Louis Blues closed out last season as the top seeds in the Western Conference, but open the new campaign as a lengthier +500 wager to win the West Division.

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1198117 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs give Joe Thornton vote of confidence with prime lineup spot

Luke Fox@lukefoxjokebox January 4, 2021, 10:47 AM

TORONTO -- Three days ago, when the Toronto Maple Leafs began their pre-camp line drills at Ford Performance Centre, Mitch Marner didn't even bother looking at the assignment sheet.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

Marner spotted ol' linemate Zach Hyman wearing the same shade of practice sweater and tapped the club's favourite forechecker to join Auston Matthews.

"I'm assuming it's us three," Marner said.

"No," Hyman replied. "You're playing with Jumbo."

And with that, the first mini bombshell of this utterly unobserved yet highly scrutinized training camp was dropped.

Joe Thornton: Minimum-wage earner, future Hall of Famer, oldest forward in the league, and -- yep -- top-line winger.

With a point-per-game pitstop in the picturesque Davos in between, Thornton has gone from third-line status on a poor Sharks squad to flanking a pair of all-stars screaming into their prime in Toronto.

Consider: Thornton's most frequent linemates with San Jose in 2019-20, Marcus Sorensen and Kevin Labanc, combined for 21 goals. Matthews and Marner combined for 63.

Quite the job promotion at age 41.

Remaining Time -1:28

Why Thornton, Simmonds will bring invaluable experience to Maple Leafs

"Oh, he looks good. We spent quite a bit of time together the last couple of weeks at the Ford Centre skating," says Matthews, a fellow Swiss A League alum.

"He looks sharp. He just looks like Jumbo out there."

An excited Marner concurs.

"I've watched Jumbo for a long time. How he controls the puck in the O-zone, it's very impressive to watch. It's going to be fun to play with a very talented playmaker. For me, it's trying to find holes in the middle of the ice and get to open spots so I can be more of a shooter and more of a threat," Marner says.

"I'm super excited about it. We've been practising together now for a couple of days. The chemistry's getting better every day."

Thornton's new coach, 40-year-old Sheldon Keefe, relished in the spoiler alert. After questions for the coach's Sunday media session were cut off, Keefe chose to announce his overhauled top 12.

"So you guys have a little more to talk about," Keefe smiled.

Line rushes get official on Monday:

Thornton – Matthews – Marner

Vesey – Tavares – Nylander

Mikheyev – Kerfoot – Hyman

Barabanov – Spezza – Simmonds

Thornton's slotting in and setting up a couple of superstars will snatch the headlines, but there is plenty to chew on here, as all four forward units that bowed out to Columbus in 2020's summer post-season bubble have been tweaked.

Newbie Jimmy Vesey is blessed with a golden opportunity to not only bounce back but flourish alongside a pair of elite offensive talents in John Tavares and William Nylander.

KHL import Alexander Barabanov has an apparent leg up on fellow fringe forwards (Nick Robertson, Travis Boyd, Pierre Engvall, Joey Anderson) on a revamped checking line. "Really competitive on the puck and never seems to quit on it," Tavares praises the Russian's game.

And Hyman's repositioning on the Leafs' formerly problematic third line has Keefe particularly excited about showcasing his depth and injecting some much-needed balance and identity to the bottom six. It also gives a

bulked-up Alexander Kerfoot (now 184 pounds) a second crack at establishing his value up the middle.

A @MapleLeafs Merry Christmas with Jumbo Joe Claus.

(: @wmnylander) pic.twitter.com/Ggf2YAoMZV

— Sportsnet (@Sportsnet) December 25, 2020

In theory, jobs could be won or lost over the nine days before the season opener. But with zero exhibition games and only two intrasquad scrimmages before the Leafs' home opener on Jan. 13, this is Keefe's likely starting 12. (With the understanding that tryouts and chemistry experimentation will roll into the regular season.)

The organization believes Thornton can hang with the kids and is giving him every opportunity to do so. Toronto is doubling down on the low-risk, high-intrigue gamble that is Jumbo. Moreover, the Leafs are sandwiching its supreme sniper between two of the best passers outside of Green Bay's city limits.

Wait. What if Ovechkin was supplied with two Backstroms?

If it works, the secondary assists should stack like Pringles, and Matthews' tape job will be in for a beating.

This is a roster decision that aligns with Keefe's view of the game. He fashions himself a possession-minded coach. Why dump-and-chase when you can pass-and-create? And few can cling onto a puck like the six-foot-four, 220-pound Thornton, who should be an asset in Toronto's bid to add a cycle threat to its deadly rush attack.

"He's a big frame," Matthews notes. "It's nice to know whenever we're in trouble that we got an outlet because he hangs around the net -- in front of it, behind it.

"He's so big and strong and can protect the puck so well. So, little give-and-gos, just trying to get open for him because you know he's got great vision -- even with guys draped all over him."

Marner zeroes in on Thornton's magic below the goal line and those soft hands that have racked up 1,089 assists in the NHL. If Jumbo can spot and thread seams down low through traffic, he'll contribute to Matthews' race for the Rocket Richard Trophy and give Canadian division netminders fits.

"That's very hard for goalies to see the puck coming through those players," says Marner, who made a new year's resolution to shoot more in 2021. "For us, I think it's just being ready for shots and second chances."

Adds goalie Frederik Andersen, thinking back to his California days: "Definitely had some trouble with him and his playmaking abilities. He's as good as anyone."

Even the most star-studded trios don't possess the puck 100 per cent of the time, however.

Inevitably, some will question whether an ageing Thornton can defend the opposition's top lines. A legitimate concern when you see Connor McDavid and Kyle Connor speeding into the Leafs' schedule over and over again.

Marner says he and Matthews don't always get enough recognition for their defensive efforts, how dogged they are on the backcheck and how often they steal pucks. He believes Thornton can complement their two-way play, and recent numbers hint that this could work:

At the very least, it's an option worth exploring right away. And it presents Thornton with a vote of confidence and every chance to make an impact with his first new squad in 15 years. And shifting a natural centre to the flank lessens the risk of exposing Thornton's declining footspeed.

"It's been great so far having him here. He's been a great addition, brings great energy to the rink every day," Matthews says.

"Everybody's super excited to have him on the team."



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NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

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1198118 Websites

TSN.CA / Game-changer Laine focuses on new season with Jets

By Frank Seravalli

On his first day back with the Winnipeg Jets, Paul Stastny did a double take when he found out Patrik Laine was still just 22.

"My jaw kind of dropped," Stastny said. "I'm getting old, but I thought he was 24 [or] 25 because I feel like he's been in the league for four or five years."

Nevermore was Laine's veteran savvy on display than during Monday's media availability.

After a tumultuous off-season in which his agent agreed it would be "mutually beneficial" for the Jets and Laine to part ways, Laine had an opportunity to lob a hand grenade into an already volatile training camp with Jack Roslovic since publicly requesting his own ticket out of town.

He didn't.

Instead, after appearing tense to start, Laine played it as cool as a mid-winter Manitoba night.

"I'm here, aren't I?" Laine said. "That's the only thing I'm worried about right now. I'm not in charge of what other people are saying. I'm not worried about that stuff. Right now, I'm just worried about working hard here and being the best player I can be, helping these guys be at their best."

That Laine chose not to pour gasoline on the fire at the podium was far from a guarantee.

Remember, Laine has been one of hockey's most brutally honest quotes since breaking into the league four and a half years ago as an 18-year-old.

Stick a microphone in front of Laine and you're never really certain what you're going to get.

He has been full of one-Lainers - from "I don't care about assists" to chirping the Vancouver Canucks and their video game use to "I didn't eat s--- food" when asked how he dropped 14 pounds one summer.

But kicking off camp on Monday, Laine vowed to not let his future in Winnipeg get in the way of the Jets' focus on an all-Canadian North Division.

The Jets have been through worse. Roslovic and Laine would be far from the first players to ask out of Winnipeg - and the team is just one season removed from Dustin Byfuglien walking away from the game on the eve of training camp. Laine said his teammates are "well past that" where his own situation could cause angst.

"We're not going to let that be a distraction," Laine said. "I don't want to be a distraction. I just want to play hard, as a team, as individuals, want to improve our game and try to play well this year."

Laine declined to specifically address whether he wanted to be traded, or whether he endorsed agent Mike Liut's characterization over the off-season.

"That's not something I think about," Laine said of a trade. "I just try to think about what's going on today. I'm not worried about tomorrow. Right

now, I'm here. I'm excited to play. I'm in good shape. I'm going to be a new player this year."

Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff admitted last week that he looked at "all options" while trying to improve the team, seemingly including moving Laine, and believed he scratched that itch. A trade never materialized.

Until then, Cheveldayoff said he expects Laine to have one of the best seasons of his career - which captain Blake Wheeler said Monday will be much needed. Laine added another dimension to his game last year and still scored at a 34-goal pace over a full 82-game season.

"Does losing Patrik Laine make us a better team? Probably not," Wheeler said. "So it's unfortunate that things happen and maybe sometimes you're in a small Canadian market and there's nothing else really to talk about other than things of this nature, but Patty makes us a better team.

"We're not alone in this and trade rumours and high-profile players, and with a flat salary cap, I think these things are just going to continue to happen. I think we're in a better position today with Patrik Laine on our hockey team and I think we'll just leave it at that."

Laine is an NHL unicorn, one of the handful of authentic snipers who get the puck off in a split second with little time or space. That Paul Maurice put him with a distributor in Stastny and another pure scorer in Kyle Connor - who led the team in goals last season - is a window into how dangerous Winnipeg's top six forward group can be in the [True] North Division.

It's also part of what made dealing Laine so difficult for Cheveldayoff. Winnipeg needed a game-changer back in return, because it's arguable that the Jets' 1.0 franchise still has not recovered in Arizona from trading away the original Finnish Flash in Teemu Selanne back in 1996.

"There's few guys in the league that are like him," Stastny said of Laine. "He makes it look easy and people don't realize that, the way he can handle a pass, whether it's a hard pass or a soft pass, kind of cradle it and shoot it all in one motion."

Laine cradled and shot both the hard and soft dishes from the media on Monday. This is a messy situation. An uncertain future remains, along with a season with immense pressure to perform, and a lingering new contract that might even make it more difficult for the Jets to deal him should he shoot the lights out again.

But that's for another day.

"I just want to play well this year, that's going to be the best for both parties," Laine said. "What happens in the future, that's not even my call. I'm here, I'm playing well, going to work hard every night, and that's all I can do."

TSN.CA LOADED: 01.05.2021

1198119 Websites

TSN.CA / Thornton already feeling 'at home' with Maple Leafs

By Kristen Shilton

TSN Hockey Reporter Kristen Shilton reports on the Toronto Maple Leafs, who held their first day of on-ice training camp activities for the 2020-21 season at Ford Performance Centre on Monday.

Leave it to the always-affable Joe Thornton to turn mandatory quarantine into a bonding experience.

That's more or less what played out when Thornton, Auston Matthews, William Nylander, Rasmus Sandin and Mac Hollowell hunkered down



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

together outside Toronto to serve their mandatory 14-day isolation before entering the Leafs' facilities, a couple weeks that allowed Thornton a smooth transition from his 15-year stint with San Jose.

"To be honest with you, it's been pretty easy," Thornton told reporters on a Zoom call Monday of joining the Leafs. "I was quarantining with some of the guys for 14 days so I got to know guys right off the hop. I felt comfortable, even though I was in San Jose for so long. The guys really made me feel comfortable here, they got a good staff, and a great group so really I feel at home again."

And what an impression the 41-year-old Thornton has already made, especially on the Leafs' younger contingency.

"He was unbelievable," Nylander said of sharing a house with Thornton. "Spending two weeks with a Hall of Famer is pretty special and getting to know him is also very special. He's an unbelievable guy and he works hard every day."

"He's definitely a larger-than-life figure," added Zach Hyman. "You know when he's in a room, and he brings a great presence. He demands a lot from his teammates and I think that he's in great shape and he's a great player so I think that he's going to be a great addition for our team, not just on the ice but especially off the ice with his demeanour."

Thornton's positivity has been so infectious that head coach Sheldon Keefe lamented on his own Zoom call that reporters weren't there to witness the first day of Leafs' camp Monday, where Thornton's sunny disposition was evident from start to finish.

"With Joe, it's a shame you can't be around and just see how tangible [his passion] is when he's here," Keefe said. "It was a very difficult day for our guys to start training camp, we really demanded a lot of our group. And a), Joe worked extremely hard and pushed himself extremely hard on the ice [while] he still maintained his smile, and off the ice you see his smile and he's happy and excited for the next day. We really think that that brings a lot of value to our team and we saw a lot of benefits here today."

Those early returns squash any notion that Thornton is feeling extra pressure to perform in Toronto, particularly now that he's slotted at left wing on a line with Matthews and Mitch Marner. Thornton said he was a "rover" previously for the Sharks, toggling between centre and the wing, and is perfectly happy being where he is now beside Matthews.

"I got no stress man, honestly," Thornton said. "I feel good, I feel comfortable. I tend to play with no stress, have a smile on my face and stay hungry. I think that's when I perform the best. And at my age, I'll just continue that."

If anything, skating alongside the likes of Matthews and Marner should help keep the veteran young, although Keefe cautioned Thornton won't see nearly as many minutes overall as his counterparts.

"Just the talent level these guys have, these guys grew up on skills coaches and things like that, so they can do things I could never imagine doing," Thornton admitted. "But just being around this youthful energy, I think it just gets me excited. And they got a lot of it here so I'm just soaking it all in. I feel like I'm young again. It's a good feeling to be in."

There were times last season that Keefe entrusted Travis Dermott with a top-pairing role on the Leafs' defence. But for the first day of camp activities this year, Dermott had slid all the way down to a fourth pairing slot with Sandin, while newcomers Mikko Lehtonen and Zach Bogosian made up the third pairing.

Ahead of them, T.J. Brodie and Morgan Rielly sat atop the depth chart, with Jake Muzzin and Justin Holl once again partnered together.

"With Bogosian and Lehtonen, we have two guys coming in here that we really like," Keefe explained. "And we want and expect our defence to be better [than last season]. So we'll give them that opportunity to pair together. And at the same time, we've got Dermott and Sandin, two guys

that have been here and know what our expectations are and we expect those guys to push and not go quietly in terms of just accepting that those guys might be ahead of them here right now."

Defensive depth hasn't often been called a strength of Toronto's in recent years, but Keefe feels the tide has turned there with the off-season acquisitions of Brodie, Lehtonen and Bogosian.

"I just look at our defence, and we feel like it has gotten better," Keefe said. "I think it's really deep. But when you're a depth player on a team [that] has gotten better around you, your goal is probably not going to be the same as what it was before and you're going to have to really work to get it back. But whether it's Dermott or Sandin or any of the other defencemen that [we have], these guys are going to be factors for us and we need to make sure that they continue to push to be ready when those opportunities come."

Perhaps the most important factor in blueline success this season though will be the health of Rielly. He missed eight weeks last season with a broken foot, and said on Sunday that he's feeling better and healthier than he has in some time. Instead of returning to his native Vancouver in the off-season, Rielly stayed in Toronto to train, and it's already paying dividends for him on the ice.

"There's no coincidence that [Rielly's] feeling the best he has, because he's put in great work," Keefe said. "He was in here every single day pushing himself with our strength coaches and on the ice with skill development coaches. You can just see that he was feeling good today, he had lots of pop, lots of jump. And then to have someone like Brodie I think gives him lots of confidence. But I know that in Morgan's case, he's very committed to finding a great partnership with TJ but at the same time knowing that he wants to get better himself. He doesn't want to just use that crutch of having a great partner, which we think is really going to benefit him and our team, but he himself is motivated to to be great this season."

Speaking of getting healthy, count Wayne Simmonds as another player who claims to feel better than ever. The Toronto product signed a one-year contract with his hometown team in the off-season and has been hard at work preparing to be a big part of its success.

"I'm fully back to health and I'm ready to go," Simmonds said. "I'm not just looking to be another passenger, I'm looking to be an impact player and play the role that I'm given here and push the boys along. I've been a leader on every team that I've been on so I'm going to look to instill that into the guys and then hopefully keep pushing and let my work ethic speak for itself."

This summer was different than any Simmonds had experienced recently, not just because of the COVID-19 pandemic but because he was fit enough to actually make progress in his game. After years of being hampered by injuries and plowing through subsequent recoveries, Simmonds felt himself actually taking steps forward.

"I think the last couple years for me were kind of crappy, just for the fact that I wasn't able to train in the summer and the majority of everything I did was just maintenance and in rehab," he said. "I was able to do a full summer program [this time], plus pretty much an extra summer program within those 10 months there so I feel awesome, the best that I felt probably in the last three or four years, and I can't wait to actually get out there against some other opponents besides our own guys."

Keefe has Simmonds slotted onto the fourth line for now with Jason Spezza and Alexander Barabanov, but has high expectations for what all the veteran will be able to provide.

"He's going to start down with Spezza and Barabanov there, but we know he's not going to take a shift off or a practice rep off and he's going to be pushing to move up the lineup," Keefe said. "We expect that he will move around and get opportunities. He's going to be prominent on our power play."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

Before the Leafs get around to playing some games, Simmonds will keep getting to know his new teammates, and honing what he does best on the ice.

"I think the skill level of this whole group is just ridiculous so I hope to bring my physicality and the traits that I bring as a net-front presence," he said. "[And with my] leadership, just trying to integrate myself within this group and I'm going to help the boys out. I don't change my game too much; it's get in, muck it up, loosen up pucks and let those guys work."

Keefe was forthright in his opening press conference on Sunday about dividing the Leafs into two distinct training camp groups immediately, with the goal of quickly establishing his NHL team and focusing on their habits.

Once those decisions were made, Keefe wasted no time putting his projected roster through a punishing first day of on-ice training that began with a bruising conditioning skate.

"Through this off-season, we've prepped the players that our goal was to make them uncomfortable here today and push them hard and have them prep for it," Keefe explained. "I think that they responded to that, first of all in their preparation for a day like this today and then they pushed through it. Any time you start training camp, and for the first 20 minutes they don't see a puck, it's tough mentally for them. But I thought they dealt with it extremely well. And then we were able to regroup and focus and go out and have a really good, hard, competitive and fast NHL-calibre practice right from Day 1. So that was really great to see. The energy was great."

Those players not in the first group had to go through their own session as well, all the while trying to show why they belong with those NHL-bound skaters. Notably part of the second team were Pierre Engvall and Nick Robertson, two guys that will have to make serious strides in order to earn some ice time this season.

"I've met with all these guys individually and been really upfront with them about their situations," Keefe said. "Each of them was a little bit different and unique from the next. The decisions aren't final, and we can change our mind and move things around at any point here, even throughout the camp. But we had to make some decisions. In Nick's case, it's really pushing and proving that he's ready to play full time in the NHL and in Pierre's case, he's played well when he's played for us and played very well at times but I still think he has a whole other level to get to, in terms of the way he engages physically and the way that he uses his size and strength in all areas of the ice."

Having his likely roster separated out has allowed Keefe to experiment with line combinations he had wanted to use last season but wasn't able to, mostly because of injuries. He's especially liked having Alex Kerfoot with Hyman and Ilya Mikheyev, a third unit that in Keefe's mind could help put Toronto over the top.

"It's just three guys that are relentless on the puck, that skate really well, have good defensive habits, and that are real strong penalty killers for us and relied on in those defensive situations," Keefe said. "Once we really clearly identified a role for Kerfoot on the penalty kill, he really displayed his defensive abilities. He's got a great stick, he's smart, he skates and works extremely hard. So we really looked at our team and thought we could put together a line like that, and that it could really make us harder to play against in a lot of ways with matchups and things like that you need to be hard on good players, and then opens things up with some other options for us."

Leafs lines at training camp Monday:

Forwards

Thornton-Matthews-Marner

Vesey-Tavares-Nylander

Mikheyev-Kerfoot-Hyman

Barabanov-Spezza-Simmonds

Defencemen

Rielly-Brodie

Muzzin-Holl

Lehtonen-Bogolian

Sandin-Dermott

Goaltenders

Andersen

Campbell

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TSN.CA / 'Stud' Cozens 'dominating the game physically' for Canada

By Mark Masters

TSN Hockey Reporter Mark Masters reports from the World Junior Hockey Championship. Team Canada held an off-ice workout on Monday inside the Edmonton bubble.

With captain Kirby Dach injured, Dylan Cozens and Bowen Byram have taken turns wearing the 'C' for Team Canada at the World Juniors and the pair of returning players have certainly led the way.

Tonight, they'll look to do it again in a semifinal showdown with rival Russia.

"We've definitely got a lot of history with them so everyone's pumped up and ready to go," Byram said.

"They're going to come out hungry tonight," said Cozens, who expects the Russians to have last year's gold-medal loss on their minds. "Both teams are going to be hungry, but they'll come out with an extra gear and we have to be ready to match that."

It was Cozens, who set the tone immediately for Canada in Saturday's quarterfinal win over the Czech Republic scoring the opening goal and assisting on Byram's goal later in the first period.

"He's a stud," said forward Peyton Krebs. "He's not a flashy guy, he just gets it done."

"We trust him," said goalie Devon Levi. "We know he's going to come up big every game."

Cozens is second in tournament scoring with 13 points and has been impressive in so many ways. What stands out the most to Byram?

"He's just dominating the game physically," the defenceman observed. "He's so good at protecting the puck, so fast and so strong. You see how tough it is to get the puck away from him."

"The biggest thing this off-season was just getting myself bigger and stronger to compete against NHL players," said Cozens, a Buffalo Sabres prospect. "I do feel real good out there. I feel strong. I do feel like I've got a lot stronger on the puck, stronger on my stick and in winning battles."

Cozens: Canada needs to channel nerves, be ready to match Russia's 'extra gear'



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2021

Ahead of tonight's tilt against Russia, Dylan Cozens spoke about how Canada will need to be ready to match their opponent's energy, how he has been pleased with his performances at the World Juniors and what has impressed him the most with Bowen Byram's play at the tournament.

Cozens leads the team in points, but Byram leads the way in ice time logging 21:51 per game. Last year, no one on Team Canada was over 20 minutes per game.

"He's just so poised with the puck," said Cozens. "His ability to see the ice and make plays and hold onto the puck in scary situations is unbelievable ... He's been the best D in the tournament by far."

Byram is an outgoing guy, who likes to joke around, but he's altered his approach this year.

"He's still that same energy guy," said Cozens, "but I think he's brought more of a serious tone this year as a second-year guy and leader on this team. He's able to dial it in before games and make sure all the guys are dialed in."

Jamie Drysdale, Byram's defensive partner and another returning player, is picking up on the same thing.

"More of a leadership style and role this year that he's taken upon himself," Drysdale observed. "You really notice it both on the bench and in the locker room. He knows the line between when to joke around and have fun and when to dial in and he makes sure us as a team realizes that. He's a vocal guy and speaks his mind on what he sees and it's almost always the right thing."

Byram seems to understand the gravity of what he can accomplish here.

"I don't think there's too many guys that have won back-to-back gold medals so to be part of that group would be pretty cool, pretty humbling," he said, "but we have a lot of work ahead of us so that's what we're focusing on."

Byram on what Canada learned from Russia in pre-tournament, confidence ahead of semis

Bowen Byram spoke to TSN's Mark Masters about what the Canadians learned about Russia during their pre-tournament game, discussed why he believes he is playing at a high level right now and what has impressed him the most about Dylan Cozens' dominating game.

On Dec. 23 Canada faced Russia in a pre-tournament game coming out on top 1-0. That was an important experience, because it gave the players a first-hand look at Russia's new system under coach Igor Larionov.

"They play more skilled," said Cozens, "more puck management, less hunting us down and hitting us so it is a different team, different style, but we're confident in our game plan and that we'll win this game."

Russia owns the best penalty kill (16/17) at the World Juniors and scored a shorthanded goal against Germany in the quarterfinals.

"They do stretch for breakaways sometimes," noted Cozens. "They try and score when they're on the PK. We got to be careful with that. We got to watch for that and watch for those guys blowing the zone."

Larionov believes his team is up for Canada test: We're ready for the big challenge

Russia head coach Igor Larionov spoke to TSN's Mark Masters about what's at stake for Monday's semifinal match against Canada, what the keys to the game will be and admitted that his players undoubtedly have last year's loss on their minds.

Levi is locked in on game days.

"Honestly, we don't see too much of him before the game," said Byram. "I don't know where he goes, but I don't see him until he's on the ice so it's funny."

"I don't think really too many guys talk to him," said Cozens with a chuckle. "He's kind of on his own page a lot on game days. He's got his headphones on and gets really focused and dialed in and the way he's playing he can do whatever he wants."

Team Canada's starting goalie has an elaborate three-and-a-half hour pre-game routine, which includes visualization exercises. Then, during the game, the 19-year-old relies on breathing techniques to keep his composure as the pressure builds.

"It's not that complicated," he explained. "I'm just concentrating on my breath and concentrating on the puck so I don't have to focus on anything else ... I just stay in the moment and enjoy it and feel grounded and keep my focus."

Levi is so determined to maintain focus that he doesn't even go to the bench during commercial breaks.

Even after the buzzer sounds for an intermission, Levi doesn't let his guard down.

"He's got his music in and he's dialed in at his stall there," observed forward Dylan Holloway. "During intermissions he takes his top half off and puts Beats headphones on and stays dialed in at his stall."

'Goosebumps, can't wait': Levi hyped up for clash with Russia

Canadian netminder Devon Levi discusses the excitement of taking part in the Canada/Russia rivalry as he gets set to face the Russians in the semifinals.

Wheat Kings defenceman Braden Schneider billets with the Wallin family in Brandon.

"I was a young kid, just 15, when I got to Brandon and they made the transition so easy for me," he said. "They welcomed me with open arms and made me feel like I was at home. They're my family, pretty much. I'm so thankful I'm able to be a part of their lives."

The Wallins have twin sons and Schneider is close with both. He has formed a particularly special bond with Zander, who was born with cerebral palsy. Zander learned how to walk when he was three and a half, which wasn't something the family was sure would happen.

Zander has always been a huge hockey fan and badly wanted to skate, but could never experience that sensation. Until yesterday.

"I couldn't be more happy for him," said Schneider. "He's a special kid and he's overcome challenges his whole life. It doesn't surprise me that he's able to do that. It put a smile to my face. I can't wait to get back there and get on the ice with him."

"Zander was determined to learn how to skate before Braden came home from the tournament so that he could go skating with him," father Chad Wallin wrote in a Facebook post.

Zander had special skates made by Wheat Kings equipment manager Scott 'Scooter' Hlady.

"Given his limitations and mobility issues, we thought that it was a long shot to ever see him fulfil his dream," Wallin wrote. "Prior to the holidays, I had an idea to make some 'boot-like' bob skates. Scooter turned this vision into reality by manufacturing special skates just for Zander."

"He's an inspiration to me every day," said Schneider. "He always overcomes the odds and it always puts a smile on my face seeing what he's able to do."

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