Written by Ryan Van Horne Saturday, 27 February 2010 11:36 - Last Updated Sunday, 28 February 2010 09:51



The quest in Calgary to find a centre to mesh with Jarome Iginla might still be going on by the time Mitch Wahl is ready for the NHL.

The quest continues partly because of a lack of quality centre prospects in the organization, but also because finding good chemistry between linemates is sometimes elusive when you're relying on logic – no matter how sound. Sometimes, plain intuition, a coach's gut instinct or dumb luck can be the catalyst for a potent line combination.

Calgary has tried Daymond Langkow, Craig Conroy and now has Matt Stajan in the fold. There have been some successes, but Jarome Iginla should have had more 40-to 50 goal seasons. He had a couple seasons when he cracked 50, but he was underachieving in some of those 30-goal campaigns.

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In 2007, Calgary took Mikael Backlund who is progressing well in the AHL, but he might slide over to the wing.

Move ahead to the 2008 draft and you might find that playmaking centre Calgary's been looking for. The Flames took Mitch Wahl in the second round (48th overall). Although he might not make the NHL while Iginla is still in his prime, Calgary's lack of depth at centre – at the very least lack of young depth – bodes well for Wahl. Even without the promise of playing with a 50-goal winger, a prospect like Wahl is a good player to take a flyer on. He's probably flown under the radar in most keeper leagues and if your league doesn't have positional requirements, he's even more attractive.

Wahl was among the first of a growing wave of Californian kids to make a splash in hockey. He was also one of the rare ones to bolt for the Canadian major junior ranks. Like his peers from Canada, Wahl has been playing hockey since he was five years old and showed natural athletic ability at a young age. He's a fluid skater and has great hockey sense.

Even though Wahl lit it up for the Los Angeles Junior Kings as a 15-year-old, he had some adjustments to make when he arrived in the WHL with the Spokane Chiefs in 2005-06. Wahl was a bit tentative in his rookie year at first, but quickly settled in and earned rave reviews. In midseason, his coach put Wahl on the point on the power play to ignite a stagnant offence and Wahl rewarded the coach with some stellar play, finishing his rookie season with 16 goals and 32 assists in 69 games.

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It's rare for a 16-year-old to quarterback a major junior power play, but Wahl is a quick learner and hard worker – both excellent traits that scouts and coaches love to see. When Wahl arrived in Spokane, he was 5-foot-10, 160 pounds. He's grown to six feet and weights 185 pounds – maybe a little more -- and has developed his core strength very well – a good sign he's training with the right purpose. Wahl's former coach Bill Peters once said of Wahl: "He's not working on a beach body; he's training to be a hockey player, to be quicker, and stronger on the puck."

Wahl's skating was above average and his top-end speed has improved as he has gotten bigger and stronger. He has a lot of grit in his game that helps him win one-on-one battles and he doesn't get intimidated. As a 17-year-old, he made the Memorial Cup all-star team as he helped Spokane win the tournament.

Wahl played for the California Wave in his youth and appeared in a documentary called *In the Crease*

which followed him and his California Wave team to the U.S. national bantam championship. Wahl led the team in scoring and served as co-captain before being taken by Spokane fourth overall in the 2005 WHL Bantam Draft. Wahl's decision to play major junior should show how dedicated he is to realize his dream of playing in the NHL, but it was the dedication earlier on in his life that got him there.

In addition to playing with the Wave, Wahl also got some private tutoring from a former WHL player named Jack Bowkus, who once tallied 100 points for the Saskatoon Blades. Wahl would have about three practice sessions a week with Bowkus and those pointers helped push Wahl to reach his potential. That's something that can be difficult to do if a kid grows up in an area that doesn't have a lot of high-end players.

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The results speak for themselves. When you watch Wahl, you'd never think he was a California kid who is a good athlete playing hockey. He looks like a hockey player and is a smart passer with great hockey sense, vision, and offensive instincts.

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