(#17 Max Lalander looks to make a move)

From the league that brought you Henrik Zetterberg, Alex Edler and Tomas Holmström, a raw young talent with superstar potential is making waves in front of his hometown crowd- when he's not in the penalty box.

It’s safe to say that a player who registers six goals and nine points in a game is an offensive talent. Left wing Max Lalander did just that during the 2010-11 season, enrotue to scoring 30 goals in 34 games for the second-tier J18 team in Örebro- a growing city some two hours west of Stockholm.

No, scoring has never been a problem for the 5’11, 154 lbs winger. In pre-season action with IFK Kumla, a men’s team in Sweden’s Division 1 league, Lalander scored at a goal-a-game pace. Size hasn’t been a drawback, either; his willingness to dig, scratch and fight for every puck has lent itself to more than a few penalties. Last season, his 79 PIM were the most amongst the league’s top sixty in scoring, and against men in Sweden’s third-highest level of professional hockey, Lalander has targeted more than a few players for big hits- and on at least one occasion, was tackled by an opposing player after nearly a full of game subtle hacks and

spears.

Therein lies the issue. Few players possess the diminutive winger's thirst for the puck- it's air, and Lalander's drowning. Every shift is an opportunity to make a difference, a chance to wrest control away and make a game-changing juke, pass or shot- the youngster's heavy release has already garnered the respect of opposing goaltenders. But as Lalander is learning, there exists a fine line between passion and the penalty box.

November 30th. IFK Kumla is playing in front of a sparse crowd; located in a suburb of Örebro, Kumla has always had difficulty drawing fans- never mind during a dire season in which the club dropped eleven of its first fourteen games. 140 people are listed as in attendance; it may very well be 25.

But as the first period plays out, a more and more familiar sight emerges. With less than three minutes to go in the frame, the top line of Carl-Johan Sjögren, Alexander Ytterberg and Lalander may as well have been the only one on the ice; Ytterberg has two goals, Sjögren has a pair of helpers, and Lalander has an assist. A member of Mariestad BoIS is sent off for tripping, and the unit comes out again. 32 seconds into the powerplay, the puck circles the zone and finds its way onto the open stick of Lalander. With a quick snapshot, it's 3-0 Kumla. With his two points, the rookie has 16 on the year- ten of them goals, the second-most on the team. It looks like a club hard up for any kind of luck is on its way to an easy win.

But Division 1 hockey is a mosaic of skill and ability, a reflection of the fact its 32 teams scatter Sweden from its warm southern tip to its border with Finland. Kumla's wrinkles gradually turn into open wounds, and in a nine-minute stretch during the second period, Mariestad ties the game up. Riding the crest of their momentum, the road team will add another just 29 seconds into the third. It's a stunning reversal, and frustration boils over on the Kumla bench.

On the top line's next shift, Lalander gets engaged in a hungry fight for the puck. As his prey turns and gains separation, an angry Lalander grabs on with the hook of his blade. It's a routine call for the referee. Lalander will barely have time to sit down and cast a wary eye at the scoreboard before Mariestad strikes on the powerplay. That goal is the last, a 5-3 loss for a team that cannot afford to lose many more.

Although few teams can expect to win when their goaltender allows four unanswered goals, that penalty is a microcosm of the type of play Kumla's coaching staff has tried to tame out of the wild forward's play. There's no reason for such infractions- although not a world-class skater, Lalander's uneven mechanics nevertheless generate dangerous bursts of speed. His hockey sense is also not in question; a typical shift involves the winger making a slick move before throwing the puck on net, scooting around the back, and slipping into open space just in time for a back-door pass or rebound. Instead, it's a willingness to always win, by hook- literally- or by crook, that has driven his career parade of penalties.

Despite his wrinkles, the youngster's contributions are almost unheard of historically. In the month of November alone, Lalander scored as many goals as Tomas Holmström at the same age. At 18 in Division 1 hockey, Zetterberg had fifteen goals, while 2011 fifth round selection

and world junior player Max Friberg had thirteen. Should Lalander maintain his torrid pace, he'll finish with almost 20.

For a club like the Detroit Red Wings, there may not be much of a choice. Although not a natural two-way player like Zetterberg or Pavel Datsyuk, Lalander has the other attributes head scout Hakan Andersson looks for in spades: an intense inner fire, world-class skill and unmatched instincts for the game. It's a shopping list that has allowed the Red Wings to identify some of the game's most unique talents. With some luck and maturity, Max Lalander has every chance to join them.