New Russian blood in the CHL

Written by Alessandro Seren Rosso Wednesday, 08 September 2010 09:00 - Last Updated Wednesday, 08 September 2010 10:37



Many Russian players moved from Russia to North America this summer and more than 15 players are going to play in the CHL system. There are also some returnees, like goalkeeper Ramis Sadikov (Erie Otters, OHL).

In the recent years there was a decent amount of players crossing the pond. The reason for their departure from Russia is 99 percent the same in all cases: "I want to get picked higher at the NHL draft." But does playing in the CHL really translate in a higher position during the NHL selections? Well, yes.

Let's take an example: Alexander Burmistrov. A very good player, I won't argue, he knows how to read the play and plays a very exciting, Russian style. But on the other hand, he is, in my own opinion, not more talented than Vladimir Tarasenko or Evgeny Kuznetsov, who opted to play at home.

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While Burmistrov was definitely first round potential, there are many players that tried this way, but didn't succeed. Many use some old examples, such as Denis Shvidky, for this argument, but such old cases aren't really the only ones. There are more recent ones. One of them is the Bashkirov twins. Both were PPG players in the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League and Ruslan was even a second rounder for Ottawa. And then they disappeared. Well, Ruslan did skate in some of the Sens' prospects camp this year, but still, he couldn't win a KHL spot let alone one in the NHL. Another example - the Guelph Storm's defenseman Evgeny Molotilov, who played two years in the OHL and now just signed with a Russian second tier league's team. The truth is that often the players who leave for the CHL, are mid level players who try improve their chances to find a regular spot.

With that being said, we can't label "mid level player" some of the guys who crossed the pond last year, like Kirill Kabanov, Burmistrov and so on. And this year it looks like the same.

The three better players who reported to their CHL team are Nail Yakupov, Alexander Khokhlachev and Vladislav Namestnikov. The 2012 eligible, late '93 born Nail Yakupov, who'll play for the Sarnia Sting, is an exciting forward with a lethal scoring touch, who can deke and dance around defensemen and knows how to finish. Also Namestnikov is a good scorer and while he needs to improve his finishing as he is keen to miss some clear cut chances in front of the goalie. The Voskresensk, Russia, native is going to play for the Londong Knights, with goalkeeper Igor Bobkov.

Alexander Khokhlachev is a different player – he's more a playmaker, with very good skating and he might be this year's Burmistrov. He's got a good shot as well, he'll be one of the players to watch for this season. Khokhlachev is going to feed Windsor Spitfires' during the 2010-11 campaign.

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A player which might be this year's surprise is Andrei Pedan, who's going to substitute Evgeny Molotilov on Guelph Storm's blue line. He's got a very good size at 6'3", 195 lbs and he is a polished defenseman who can use his good frame. If he'll have a good season we'll certainly hear his name during the 2011 selections.

Another guy who will try his best to have a good season is Andrei Kuchin. The former "Next great one" from Russia rebounded back in high level hockey last year with the Chicago Steel of the USHL, deserving a call from the Sudbury Wolves. Kuchin has definitely the skills to make it at the OHL level, and looks now more mature and ready to play at CHL level. He wasn't selected during the 2010 NHL draft, but a good season in the O might open him the doors for the pros in the next couple of seasons. And this is certainly in his possibilities.

Another player who might be a surprise is Igor Levitsky. The Moscow, Russia, native came almost out of nowhere to become Team Russia's top scorer at the recent Ivan Hlinka tournament and is going to try to repeat his success for the Gatineau Olympiques of the QMJHL.

As usual if you have questions, criticisms or comments just drop a line in the comment area and I'll try getting back to you.