

Looking Forward: Carter Ashton

Written by Tim Lucarelli

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When Brian Burke makes deadline trades, they are often smaller fish. For example, in 2007, while teams were targeting names like Peter Forsberg, Keith Tkachuk, Gary Roberts, and Todd Bertuzzi, Burke made one move – he sent goalie prospect Michael Wall to the Colorado Avalanche for Brad May. That year, Burke’s Anaheim Ducks would win the Stanley Cup.

The thing to take away from this example is that Burke is willing to make a move, but he wants to make the right move. This year, aside from acquiring Mark Fraser for Dale Mitchell, Burke acquired one player of note in Carter Ashton, giving up Keith Aulie in the process.

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For those who don't remember, Ashton was drafted 29th overall in the 2009 NHL Entry Draft by Tampa. Ashton, who is now 6'3" and 215 lbs, was just coming off a 30-goal and 50-point campaign with Lethbridge. In the 70 games he played that season he also accumulated 93 penalty minutes, most among forwards on his team. Over the course of the next two seasons, Ashton would play for three different WHL teams, never playing more than 37 games for the same squad in a single year. He would also finish both years in the AHL, getting an important glance at the professional tempo.

As his 2010-11 WHL season was coming to a close, Ashton expressed his desire to play for the Lightning, admitting that he would be fine playing in a lesser role rather than a scoring role, if it meant he would be part of the Lightning. Not too bad of an attitude for a kid who was now scoring above a point-per-game clip and added over 100 penalty minutes in just 62 games.

Finally came the 2011-12 season and the training camp Ashton had been waiting for. He was a bubble player who was eventually sent to Norfolk, where he dominated the beginning of the season. In his first AHL game of the season, Ashton notched two goals including the OT winner in a 6-5 win over Charlotte. At the close of the month of October, Ashton had 13 points in 10 games and was named the AHL Rookie of the Month. He would continue the tear through November and December, but eventually hit a wall. Tampa was losing a lot of hockey games (especially the seven game skid to start January) and Ashton still wasn't getting a cup of coffee.

Eventually the team chose to move on and Ashton, a Winnipeg native, was given a second chance. In the two games he played for the Toronto Marlies, the rejuvenated Ashton notched a goal and an assist. Then opportunity came in another form. Joffrey Lupul had separated his shoulder and was expected to miss the lineup for at least 3-4 weeks. Ashton finally got his chance, but in his first NHL game he saw only 9:30 of ice time. In the next game, Ashton was on

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the ice for 15:25, a promising sign of Carlyle's trust in the youngster. Although he skated on a line with Dave Steckel and Joey Crabb, Ashton had the most ice time of any of the players on his line in a big game against Philadelphia. He also led all Maple Leaf players with three takeaways on the night. In the past he has been praised for bringing a sound defensive presence mixed with budding offensive skill and he's ready to show what he can bring to the NHL.

Although two games is an extremely small sample set, the opportunity is quite large and motivation is high for Carter Ashton. He is coming to a team who expressed their interest in him, and he is leaving the hot climate of Florida and returning to a hockey-rich Canadian culture and climate. He is currently in the first year of his three-year entry level contract, but the fact that he has already seen NHL time will just further boost his motivation if he is eventually sent down. Toronto is not currently in a playoff position though, which may have the organization utilizing the remainder of the season to provide NHL exposure to players like Ashton or perhaps Joe Colborne. As the NHL season comes to a close, more prospects are going to be receiving NHL exposure, especially from teams who are already eliminated or are on the verge of elimination. For those fantasy owners looking toward next year as well, Ashton is certainly a prospect to keep an eye on.

I hope to have one or two more articles dedicated to players meeting this criterion by season's end to give you that inside edge or remind you of prospects you may have already forgotten about. Who else do you want to hear about? Feel free to leave your comments or suggestions below.