

Fresh Meat!

Written by Stuart McDonald

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As NCAA and Major Junior seasons wrap up, players with good seasons are usually rewarded with NHL entry level contracts of varying lengths. Over the next two weeks I'll update you on the recent signings - significant and otherwise. This week it's the Eastern Conference.

Newly signed players fit into two categories. Previously drafted players whose junior or college careers have come to an end, or undrafted players - essentially free agents who can sign with the highest bidder.

DRAFTED

Joe Finley - Washington

Finley, a 6'7, 245-pound Zdeno Chara clone, was a first round pick (27th overall) in the 2005 NHL entry draft. Finley finished his senior year at the University of North Dakota on a sour note

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missing over a dozen games with an injury. Finley has a one-dimensional, defensive game which improved steadily throughout his four years in Grand Forks. He signed a two-year contract with Washington recently who immediately assigned him to Hershey of the American Hockey League.

Stefan Della Rovere - Washington

An agitator of the highest order, Della Rovere's modest 5'11, 200-pound frame didn't prevent him from racking up two 150-plus PIM seasons for Barrie of the OHL. Della Rovere, Washington's 7th pick (204th overall) in the 2008 NHL entry draft, played on Canada's 2009 gold-medal winning world junior team. Barrie's captain stepped up offensively this season, scoring 27 goals and 51 points in 57 games. Della Rovere, recently signed to a three-year, entry-level contract, has a serious chance to be a quality NHL agitator.

Olivier Fortier - Montreal

After a weak, post-draft season, Fortier returned to form in 2008-09, scoring over a point-per-game in a set-up role to earn a three-year entry level contract with Montreal. The 6'0, 185-pound centre, was Montreal's third pick (65th overall) in the 2007 NHL entry draft. Previously a pure sniper, Fortier changed gears to accommodate the Oceanic's offence and ended the season with 27 assists in 29 games. Fortier will play in Hamilton next season.

Undrafted

Tyler Bozak - Leafs

This year's Fabian Brunnstrom, Bozak was contacted by 26 NHL teams before he signed with the Leafs recently. Bozak scored 23 points in 19 games for the University of Denver this season. His speed and two-way game mesh well with his offensive potential, giving Bozak a serious shot at top six NHL duty. Bozak had a chance to leave school last spring, but he didn't feel he was strong enough. It was a wise decision as most observers think the 22-year-old centre could step right into the NHL next season.

Christian Hanson - Leafs

Christian, the 6'4, 230-pound son of Dave Hanson, one of the Hanson Brothers from the movie Slap Shot, fulfilled a dream Friday, suiting up for Toronto in his first NHL game. Aside from his movie career, Hanson's father Dave had a 10-year pro hockey career in both the NHL and the WHA. The younger Hanson has some NHL upside as a third-liner after a solid NCAA career with Notre Dame. He signed a two-year deal with Toronto this week after a 16 goal, 31-point NCAA campaign. Hanson will likely play a year with the Marlies before seeing full-time duty in Toronto.

Yannick Riendeau – Boston

The list of overage QMJHL scoring wonders is extensive. The NHL careers of those same scoring wonders have been very short - or non-existent. Brent Aubin and Simon Gamache are two recent examples. Gamache is now in Europe while Aubin is struggling with the Marlies. With that in mind, Boston's signing of Yannick Riendeau to a 3-year entry level contract is rather strange. Sure, the 5'11, 180-pound winger led the "Q" in points, but his skating is

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weak and his size unimpressive. Riendeau is a long shot to make the NHL. He'll do so only as a top-6 forward, so it's all or nothing for the slick passer.

Brad Thiessen - Pittsburgh

From out of nowhere, Thiessen is one of three finalists for the Hobey Baker trophy given to the NCAA's best player. The goalie from Northeastern University in Boston went 25-12-4 with a 2.12 goals-against average this season. He led the Huskies to their first NCAA tournament berth in 15 years. Pittsburgh gave Thiessen a two-year contract and assigned him to Wilkes-Barre/Scranton of the American Hockey League. Pay attention to undrafted NCAA goalies. Both Curtis Joseph and Ed Belfour came out of the NCAA undrafted. Goalies have a completely different development curve and many develop late. Watch Thiessen carefully.

Johan Backlund - Philadelphia

Philadelphia went across the pond to sign undrafted goalie Johan Backlund. Backlund played 49 games and had a 2.56 GAA and a .907 save percentage playing for Timra IK in the Swedish Elite League. The 28-year-old earned his one-year contract after playing well consistently over the last four seasons. If Backlund gets off to a good start he could see a number of games with the Flyers, although he's slated to start the season with the Phantoms.

Paul Crowder - Rangers

Crowder's 14 goals and 33 points in 35 games for the University of Alaska-Anchorage were good enough for the Rangers to sign him and send him to Hartford. Crowder, 24, is 6'3, 205 pounds but doesn't use his size well. He's a marginal prospect at best.

Zach Miskovic and Trevor Bruess - Washington

Washington has been very busy signing NCAA prospects. Aside from first rounder Joe Finley, the Capitals signed defenceman Zach Miskovic and centre Trevor Bruess. Miskovic, a 6'1, 190-pound defenceman scored 16 goals in 38 games for St.Lawrence University. His goal total impressed Washington enough that they gave him a one-year contract. He was assigned to Hershey of the AHL.

Bruess, a 6'1, 195-pound forward from Minnesota State University - Mankato, is a grinding, aggressive forward, not known for his scoring prowess. He had 12 goals and 117 PIM in 35 games this season but looks to be an aggressive fourth liner at the NHL level. He was signed for two years.