The Canadiens need prospect Max Pacioretty to thrive in order to compete this season. With a first line of Mike Cammalleri, Scott Gomez and Brian Gionta averaging 5'10, 185 pounds and a potential second line of Tomas Plekanec between Andrei and Sergei Kostitsyn averaging 5'11, 195 pounds, the Montreal Canadiens badly need some size up front.

Guillaume Latendresse missed 26 games because of a bad shoulder last season. Shoulder injuries are never good for power forwards. Latendresse has developed offensively but for someone who is 6'2, 230 pounds, he has to bring more "power" to the power forward position.

That puts a lot of weight on second-year pro Max Pacioretty's shoulders. Pacioretty has the size, skill and grit to give Montreal the physical presence they so badly need in their top six. After only 11 points in 34 games in his rookie season, many expect Pacioretty to get quality minutes and top-six point production in 2009-10. That's a lot of pressure for a 20-year-old American playing in Montreal. If Latendresse has shoulder trouble, or continues his relatively soft play, only sophomore Maxim Lapierre comes close to the combination of grit and skill needed to help out Pacioretty. Lapierre is considered a third liner at this stage of his career so his help will be limited.

Adding to the Canadiens' difficulty is new coach Jacques Martin. Martin's teams play a puck possession game that relies heavily on puck retrieval. Without Pacioretty in the top six, puck possession is fine, but who's going to retrieve it? The only Canadiens top-six forward among the top 100 NHL players in takeaways last season was Gomez who was tied for 42nd. Compare Montreal to another band of Smurfs - the Buffalo Sabres - and you get a completely different picture. Derek Roy was 7th in takeaways, Jason Pominville and Tomas Vanek were tied for 51st, Tim Connolly was 64th and Jochen Hecht was 75th. The Sabres might not be very big, but they can go and get the puck. Pacioretty is a proven commodity in the corners. On this Jacques Martin team, his corner work will be sorely needed.

In the August third issue of the Hockey News, Bob Gainey reveals he's not entirely sure what to expect from his re-built Habs. Gainey couldn't say whether this team is a Cup contender or whether they would miss the playoffs. You can rest assured he's counting heavily on Latendresse to throw his weight around more and for Lapierre to improve his NHL skill game. The big hope for Montreal this season has to be Pacioretty. After almost making the team last season, he'll be given every opportnity to make the club and every opportunity to thrive. A successful season (45+ points) for "Patches" could well determine if the tiny Habs make the playoffs. Pacioretty is a character player so don't bet against it.