

Tatar Waiting in the Wings

Written by Jeffrey Renaud

Friday, 28 January 2011 13:01 - Last Updated Friday, 28 January 2011 20:37



While owner Mike Ilitch made his fortune delivering HOT-N-READY® pizzas, the management of the Detroit Red Wings prefers a far slower approach with its incoming talent.

Take Tomáš Tatar for example. If the 20-year old Slovak was flying under fantasy radars at all prior to this season, you couldn't have missed him November 30th if you visited any hockey-related website worth its salt. That's because the night before, Tatar unleashed a staggering seven-point performance for the Grand Rapids Griffins in a 10-8 win over the Chicago Wolves in AHL action.

Most NHL franchises would rush a player with that sort of scoring prowess to the NHL, but not the Red Wings. That's just not the way they do it. Drafted 60th overall in 2009, Tatar is being groomed for a front-line scoring role at the AHL level instead of being thrown to the sharks (or Sharks for that matter) like a number of other faltering freshman.

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Grand Rapids Head Coach Curt Fraser, who ranks first among active AHL coaches in NHL head-coaching experience with 279 games, told **PROSPECT PRESCRIPTION** that Tatar has all the skills to become a star in the NHL but that he's likely a few seasons away from making a real impact.

Fraser, who coached the Atlanta Thrashers from 1999 to 2003, says prior to the 2009-10 season everyone expected that Tatar would return home to play another season with HKM Zvolen but he earned a spot on the Griffins' opening night roster, making him the youngest player in the AHL last season and the first Detroit draft pick to begin the season with the Griffins in the same season he was drafted.

Tatar led Grand Rapids' rookies in scoring with 16 goals and 32 points in 58 games, and also represented Slovakia at both the World Junior Championship in Canada and the World Championship in Germany. This season, he's scored 10 goals and 30 points in 37 games.

"He's done some really good things for us since he got here and he's way ahead of his development curve," says Fraser. "Then he had a chance to go up to Detroit for a couple of games and he really earned some valuable experience, which has really helped him at our level too."

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Tatar recently played nine games with the big club (scoring his first NHL goal against Dwayne Roloson) out of necessity due to injuries to forwards Pavel Datsyuk and Danny Cleary but as the Red Wings prepared for the veterans' return, he was sent back down to the Griffins on January 15th.

Fraser says Tatar is "one of the better players" in the AHL and has an incredible ability to "handle the puck, low, from the top of the circles down." He also calls Tatar "a pure goal scorer," explaining, "Tomáš is very competitive in high traffic areas, has a really good shot and can finish around the net."

And while how pretty those goals are doesn't matter on the score sheet, Fraser says Tatar likes to do things with a bit of flash.

"He's got these stutter step moves and he can go from 0 to 60 in one second," quips Fraser. "He's very quick and he's one of those guys that scores goals at key moments of the game. When you really need a goal, he wants to be on the ice. And that's what you look for in a young prospect."

Fraser says Detroit likes their players "ripe." So fantasy owners may want to wait a season or two before picking up Tatar unless you're in a deep keeper pool with a farm system.

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“They like them to be here in Grand Rapids for a while. They’re an older group in Detroit and they’ve had a great deal of success with that formula,” explains Fraser. “So the players coming in, it doesn’t matter, who you are or what type of player you are, they like you to go through the learning experience and take your time. They want players that are prepared, ready to contribute. And that takes a little time.

“Players coming out of junior, college, they’re not ready to step into the NHL. This is a great place to learn and let their skills grow and gain some experience. And then when they get up to the next level after a couple of years or three years, they’re more capable of helping Detroit win.”

E.P.T.A. (ESTIMATED PROSPECT TIME OF ARRIVAL): 2012-13 NHL Season

Here’s a simple rule of thumb, in March Madness pools, I always pick Duke to win because they are a program built to win. Same goes for hockey pools. I always watch Detroit prospects extra close because far more often than not, the Red Wings find gems like Datsyuk (171st overall,

th

overall, 1999) when other teams are wasting Top 10 draft picks with players like Rico Fata (6

th

overall, 1998) and Patrik Stefan (1

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overall, 1999). For those scoring at home, Zetterberg is the lowest NHL Draft pick to ever win the Conn Smythe Trophy.