



CANUCKS HAVE MY ATTENTION

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-The North Pole, USA

They're the team that fly's the most air miles every year (by far) and they're tucked away neatly, nestled up in the extreme Pacific Northwest, out of sight and out of mind for many but their most ardent fans.

They're a franchise that is almost an afterthought to a lot of NHL fans, even fans who follow the league on an everyday basis.

They're an organization that's been around now for 49-years, never having won the Stanley Cup, yet having played for the silver chalice three times in the franchise's history, twice losing to New York-based clubs, the Islanders in 1982, and the Rangers in 1994, and coming in second again when they lost in their last Cup finals appearance against the Bruins in 2011.

The Canucks sweater (which one?) has been worn by some of the great players in the game over the years, and no, I'm not even counting the few years that Mark Messier fantastically somehow wound up in British Columbia.

SIDENOTE: *(Rumors are that the Canucks will be introducing a brand new look and overhauling their uniforms yet again in time for their 50th anniversary season in 2019-20)*

Pavel Bure, Daniel, and Henrik Sedin, who both played in relative obscurity during their years in Vancouver, Markus Naslund and Trevor Linden, are among the high-profile players having previously graced Vancouver's roster throughout the years. Old-time Canucks fans would also insist I place the names of Stan Smyl, Thomas Gradin, Mattias Ohlund, and maybe even Kirk MacClean and Orland Kurtenbach on the list.

The Canucks are a team that has won as many as 54-regular season games – and lost as many as 47 games during a regular season.

Following the disastrous tenure of Mike Keenan's one and a half years behind the bench, the Canucks found some stability that produced 13 consecutive winning seasons in Vancouver under the guidance of coaches Marc Crawford and Alain Vigneault, with Vigneault at the helm when they last went to the cup finals in 2011.

However, following those years the Canucks have been more wayward than anything else with a few different head coaches and GM's – including the aborted Presidency of one time Canucks great Trevor Linden.

But now the Canucks seem to be turning a corner, and while they're not yet to be considered a serious contender to do any significant damage once the post-season rolls around (*in fact they may not even make the playoffs this year*), the Canucks seem to be on the right track playing an exciting brand of hockey highlighted by a few players who should be cornerstones for them in the years to come.

When I'm not watching my favorite NHL club (New Jersey) I find myself watching a lot of Canucks games, including last night's most recent win on the road in Edmonton where they beat the Oilers 4-2.

The Canucks have now won 7 of their last 10 games and have snuck to within 4 points of the final playoff spot in the western conference. Vancouver is one of 15 teams in the league to have at least a .500 record on the road – including winning 4 of their last 5 games away from their home arena.

You won't find any Canucks listed among the league leaders and they still have a ways to go, but Vancouver under the direction of their head coach Travis Green – and their GM Jim Benning – is starting to be a tough team to play against no matter who the opponent is.

What I really like about this team is what they have going for themselves down the middle with two young players coming into their own with each passing game.

Center Bo Horvat (*the player Vancouver selected with a 1st round pick traded to them by New Jersey in return for Cory Schneider in 2013*) and Elias Pettersson, are fueling Vancouver's offense and both are a bear to play against each night.

Pettersson, in particular, is on his way to becoming a superstar. One of the leading players vying for the Calder Trophy at this season's end, Pettersson chipped in a goal last night and added an assist during the Canucks 4-2 win over the Oilers. The silky smooth Swede just turned 20 years old and is on pace for 40-goals and 90-points before it's all over in 2019. Pettersson is a breathtaking talent who is impossible to miss once his skates hit the ice.



Pettersson, who is still growing into his body, plays a cerebral game as much as he does an athletic one. He's a crafty player who can both score and distribute the puck with equal proficiency – and there's no reason to think that Pettersson can't be a top point producing player for years to come.

Then there's Bo Horvat, now in his 5th season. Horvat's game has jumped up another level this year. Horvat started to really emerge last year when he scored 22 goals. This season Horvat has

potted 17 goals in his first 40 games and he too could be knocking on the 40-goal mark before season's end.

If Pettersson is silky smooth on the ice then Horvat skates around like a bull in a china shop. Horvat is a physical and athletic player, the kind of guy who loves to head to the corners and dig out pucks in one-on-one battles – and Horvat is one of the league's better players on the dot – having won slightly over 53% of his draws this season.

Horvat won't provide as many highlight plays as his teammate Pettersson, but he's the kind of player who features a great two-way game. Vancouver is playing this season without an on-ice captain in deference to the recently retired Henrik Sedin, but don't be at all surprised to see Horvat wearing the 'C' on his sweater next season.



Pettersson is only 20, while Horvat is only 23, and Horvat was signed to a new 6-year deal by the Canucks just last year and is obviously viewed as a long-term building block by Vancouver.

Speaking of young players on this Canucks teams, many Vancouver fans thought that former first-round pick, right-wing Jake Virtanen might be a bust. Virtanen didn't distinguish himself that much in his first three years, but playing on the top line this year with Horvat centering has brought Virtanen out of the shadows and he's begun to display some of the first round potential Vancouver originally saw in him. After a high of 10-goals in 75 games last year, Virtanen has already tallied 11 goals and 18 points in only 40 games this year.

Pettersson, Horvat, and Virtanen, are all Vancouver first-round selections and all are contributing to the re-emergence of this up and coming Canucks team, but so too is another former first-rounder, Brock Boeser. This speaks to the Canucks scouting staff and hockey

operations department in that they've done a good job in identifying and developing talent over the last few years.



Boeser, who finished second in last year's Calder Trophy voting, despite finishing with the most goals scored of any rookie, is just that, a natural goal scorer. Boeser's got great hands, a goal scorer's instincts, and a player who gets his lightning quick shot off in the blink of an eye. Without question, Boeser (*who was a goal scorer in college at North Dakota*) is a top-6 forward who can also play a two-way game. The only thing that could hold Boeser back from being a truly terrific player is consistency and staying away from injuries. Boeser missed some time last year with a foot injury and he's been plagued by a groin problem this season which has limited him to only 26 games to date.

No question the Canucks – while an exciting team with some terrific young players – have work to do over the next few seasons ahead, but you should be clued in that this is a team on the rise.

They need to add to their forward mix, and their defense (*like a lot of teams*) leaves something to be desired.

Speaking of their defensive pairings, Vancouver is getting some quality play out of a guy like the veteran Alex Edler who has missed a lot of time this season due to injuries. When he's healthy, Edler logs the most minutes on the ice of any Vancouver defenseman and he anchors the Canucks blueline that is otherwise prone to youth or players who are holding the fort for the time being until the Canucks can get better replacements.

Some of those defensemen like Alex Biega, likely aren't a part of the club's future, but they do possess some intriguing backliners such as Erik Gudbranson, Ben Hutton, and former Penguins first-rounder Derrick Pouliot, still only 24. Overall the Vancouver defense is a weak point at the moment, which makes me question just what kind of a goaltender Jacob Markstrom really is, or, how good he could be with a better backline in front of him?

Markstrom is now in his 8th season, yet he's only 28-years-old, and as we think back across his career which started with the Panthers in South Florida, can we conclude that the big guy hasn't exactly had the benefit of playing with many Norris Trophy winners to date?

Right now I think Markstrom just might be playing the best hockey of his career. But with that said, the question that needs to be answered is – can he be considered a number one goaltender that the Canucks may count on to play 60-games a year? I think the Canucks are in the process of trying to find that out as I type these words. While its true that Markstrom has never finished a season with a winning record it's also true that he hasn't played on very good teams either.



If I had to guess, I'd say that most Canucks fans probably feel that Markstrom is a good to decent goaltender and that he'd be a great number two. I'd guess that most Canucks fans feel that Markstrom is the best they have, for the time being, more of a placeholder if you will until the Canucks find a true number 1.

Markstrom's .909 goals against average is near the bottom of the league for goaltenders, but then again, only 5 other teams have given up more shots at this point in the season than the Canucks have (Buffalo-Anaheim-Detroit-Ottawa-Chicago) and of those teams, only Buffalo and Anaheim currently have winning records. I don't think the Canucks believe that Markstrom's backup, Anders Nilsson is the long-term answer or short-term for that matter.

When team President Trevor Linden departed the scene prior to this season beginning, that left general manager Jim Benning as the clear and final voice on all hockey-related matters in Vancouver.

Benning was brought on to the job in 2014, and ironically, Benning actually played for the Canucks as a defenseman years ago before moving into scouting. Plucked from the Bruins front-

office, Benning was tasked with rebuilding the organization, and to date, I think you would have to say he's done a nice job.

With the players I mentioned in previous paragraphs up the page, you'd have to believe that the Canucks have a devastating array of young talent on the team currently, perhaps the most impactful collection of high-ceiling young talent in franchise history?

The Canucks also have a slew of exciting young players at their AHL team in Utica (*Utica? Why not place the AHL team in Stuttgart?*) with players like Jonathan Dahlen and Olli Juolevi, as well as their #1 pick from last year's draft, defenseman Quinn Hughes, who is currently playing on Team USA's World Juniors club.



With as many exciting young players as Vancouver has in its system, the question that faces Benning and the Canucks is; are they willing to be patient and have this thing grow organically, or, are they in a rush to use some of their young players as trade chips to acquire established players?

At the time of Trevor Linden's resignation, the rumor mill was churning out a narrative that suggested that Linden was in favor of a slow rebuild, while Benning wanted to accelerate the process by possibly throwing in some chips for all-world defensemen Erik Karlsson, who of course, eventually went to San Jose. This philosophical divide may have been the root cause of Linden exiting the stage.

Personally speaking, I think that Canucks ownership needs to be patient, Benning as well, let this thing breathe on its own, allow this young core to develop, and add to the club in practical and smart ways over the next few years ahead.

Travis Green has this team playing hard, playing fast, they're hard on the puck almost every game, and the future is bright for this emerging Canucks club.



They have much work to do for sure, but right now Vancouver is one of the more entertaining and intriguing teams in the league.