

Coyotes top prospects hoping to make a big impact in 19-20 season

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By Michael Manny

GLENDALE, Ariz. – Rookie camp is underway for the Arizona Coyotes, as the stars of tomorrow try to impress the coaching staff and fight for roster spots.

For some, rookie camp is an opportunity to show that they belong. For others, a chance to show the improvements they've made after a summer of training. For top prospects, like center Barrett Hayton, and winger Nick Merkley, it's a time to show they're ready for the NHL.

Merkley, the 30th overall pick in the 2015 NHL Entry Draft, is getting to participate in a full NHL training camp healthy, after suffering several serious injuries. These include a right shoulder injury, right AC joint injury and two right ACL tears, one in February 2016, and another in March 2018.

Merkley said the love of the game really helped him get through rehabbing injuries.

"Once you get back that feeling is like nothing else in the world, so just to have that feeling, I think that keeps you going," Merkley said.

Playing for the American Hockey league's Tucson Roadrunners last year, Merkley had 10 goals and 34 points in 45 games.

"I think I can play anywhere in the lineup, and so I'm just honestly just trying to push for a job and be the best player on the ice every time out there, and wherever they slot me in I'd be appreciated to take that," Merkley said

To prepare for camp this year, Merkley did a variety of different kinds of speed and strength training and spent three weeks in Kelowna, British Columbia skating with Coyotes' skating coach Lars Hepso.

Hayton, the number five pick in last year's draft, is also trying to make the opening day roster. The 19-year-old center began last season with the Coyotes before reassignment to the Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds of the Ontario Hockey League. In 39 games with the Greyhounds last season, Hayton had 26 goals and 66 points. Hayton said that he took away a lot from his first camp and experience with the team last year.

"I think I just know what to expect, obviously going into last year, my first camp, there's no experience really like that so I think being around here last year and being able to stick around for as long as I did, I learned a ton," Hayton said. "I think moving in this year I know what to expect and I'm really prepared."



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Coyotes' prospects Barrett Hayton (front, 29) and Jalen Smereck (behind) start a drill during the Coyotes' rookie camp on September 7, 2019 in Glendale, Ariz. (The Voice/Seth Askelson)

The Coyotes already have veteran centers Derek Stepan, Brad Richardson and Carl Soderberg on the roster, as well as Nick Schmaltz and Christian Dvorak. Schmaltz, acquired in a trade from the Blackhawks last season, had 14 points in 17 games with the Coyotes before suffering a season ending injury.

With a good showing in camp, however, Hayton could break into the center conversation. No matter what his place could be in the lineup, Hayton knows what he has to do to make the team.

"I think I've just got to show that I'm ready, I think that's the biggest thing," Hayton said. "I put the work in, and I feel ready. I'm prepared and I'm very excited."

Swedish defenseman Victor Soderstrom, the Coyotes top draft pick this year, is also with the team for rookie camp. Soderstrom is adjusting to the NHL game after playing for Brynas IF Gavie in the Swedish Hockey League, Sweden's highest level of hockey.

"It's a lot smaller rink here so the game is faster and it's a lot more (of a) transitioning game," Soderstrom said. "It's a big difference, but I've been here now for ten days, I think and (I have) got a feel for it."

Since arriving in Arizona, Soderstrom has also connected with Coyotes captain and fellow countryman Oliver Ekman-Larson.

"When I came here, he offered me to stay with him in his house, so I've been staying in his house now," Soderstrom said. "He's a really great guy. I didn't know him before, but you can really understand why he's the captain of an NHL team,"

Rookie Camp concludes with the 2019 Anaheim Rookie faceoff in Irvine, California Sept. 7-10. The Coyotes will play three games against the San Jose Sharks, Vegas Golden Knights and Colorado Avalanche.