Mitch Korn

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Sent: Thursday, August 15, 2024 8:01 AM
To: kornm@miamioh.edu
Subject: "Not Everybody has all 1,000 Pieces"

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LOWER BROAD HOCKEY

"Not Everybody has all 1,000 Pieces"

Building an NHL goalie is a puzzling task and shines light on Preds future in net.

BRADEN GALL

AUG 15 · PAID

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The goaltending position requires a particular type of mentality.

Who wants to be bombarded by 100 mph slap shots on a nightly basis? The only other explanation is being the youngest kid at the rink, which is how many goaltending careers have begun.

Mentally and emotionally, being a professional goalie in the NHL is a strange decision.

Nashville Predators director of goaltending Mitch Korn likens the position to another maddening endeavor — a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle.

The goal, according to Korn, is “to create order in someone’s game, to put the pieces together so they meet.”

“It’s not an easy process,” Korn said. “It takes time. It does not happen overnight.”

As the man charged with managing the Predators’ entire goaltending operation, Korn breaks the job down into three categories: physical, mental and emotional development.

The physical traits are easiest to see and easiest to change. At the NHL level, the physical gap in talent from the game’s best to the game’s worst is razor thin. Korn says the real difference in elite NHL goalies and average NHL goalies is between the ears and in the chest.

“How they process the game. How they manage the game emotionally. How they manage themselves. How they respond after a goal. How they respond after a good game. How they respond after a bad game. How good they are with their details,” Korn said.

Watch: Full interview with Nashville Director of Goaltending Mitch Korn

The NHL is constantly evolving as rules are tweaked, technology improves and data analytics are strategically incorporated. The game literally flies at a goaltender every night. But like the puzzle, mental progress is arduous work that takes time.

“You can’t improve those areas until they fall apart. You have to see them. See that a guy melts down at this point,” Korn said.

For example, prospect Yaroslav Askarov lost his starting spot for Milwaukee in the AHL’s Calder Cup playoffs two years in a row. Through the developmental lens, this should be viewed as an opportunity for Korn.

“Emotions need to help you get better,” Korn said. “When the emotions become too strong to manage mentally, that’s when we get into problems.”

The veteran goalie coach has lent his expertise to five Vezina Trophy winners and on the coaching staff of the Stanley Cup-winning Capitals in 2018. With institutional knowledge from his lengthy first tenure in Nashville and a track record of success, Korn couldn’t be walking into a better situation.

From the top of the organization to the bottom, few teams in the NHL should feel better about their goaltending position.

In addition to Korn, there is goaltending coach and protégé Ben Vanderklok, a Vezina-caliber keeper in Juuse Saros, a Vezina-winning scout in Pekka Rinne, a high-level NHL back-up in Scott Wedgewood and arguably the best goalie prospect in the world in Askarov.

It’s no wonder Korn returned to Nashville.

So after a decade away from the organization and 33 years of putting the puzzle together, what’s the most important piece?

“The right piece is the desire to compete,” Korn said. “The right piece is loving to play.”

“Not everybody has all 1,000 pieces.”

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YAROSLAV ASKAROV?

Juuse Saros is under contract for the next nine seasons and Scott Wedgewood is the clear cut back-up.

“We did not want to make a goalie change at that position. That was not an organizational decision,” Mitch Korn said of former goalie Kevin Lankinen’s decision to head into free agency.

Lankinen is currently unsigned, and Wedgewood was given a two-year contract to replace him.

Korn’s vision for the position should be illuminating but not surprising as it pertains to the organization’s plans for Yaroslav Askarov. He was clearly not an option to fill the void left by Lankinen.

Korn didn’t comment on anything specifically related to Askarov but the message feels clear: He’s not ready for an NHL job yet and needs time to finely tune his mental and emotional approach — an opinion shared by other’s around the NHL.

Baked into Korn’s core philosophy of development is mental maturity, passion for the game, nightly reps, experience and patience.

“The reason it takes so long is the goalie has to play in order to develop,” Korn said.

Askarov is an elite prospect with elite tools, has an apparent love of the game and is gaining experience, but it’s clear he doesn’t have every puzzle piece yet.

“In the minor leagues, they have fewer of those pieces put together.”

Korn says that he cannot coach the mental and emotional development until he sees it breakdown in real time. Askarov has provided two such instances in the AHL Playoffs, losing his starting spot in each of the last two postseasons for the Milwaukee Admirals.

In that sense, it could be viewed as a good thing. A passionate, talented elite athlete needs to be tested mentally and is getting those valuable challenges without any pressure to win at the NHL level.

Nightly reps and professional development will only make Askarov that much better when he does arrive in the NHL.

But barring a serious unforeseen injury, however, that time is not now.

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