THE **GOALIE** ISSUE

BRADEN HOLTBY MAY HAVE BEEN DESTINED TO BECOME AN NHL GOALIE. BUT STARDOM MAY HAVE ELUDED HIM IF NOT FOR MITCH KORN

BY **RYAN KENNEDY**

BEAST

CAPITAL ONE

Washington D.C. is a long way from the cattle and grain farm Holtby grew up on in rural Saskatchewan.

PATRICK MCDERMOTT/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES

THE BOSTON BRUINS HAVE HAD A BIT OF A problem recently when it comes to the Washington Capitals. Last season, the Bruins literally did not score a goal in three games against Braden Holtby and the Capitals, and on an early November night this season, Holtby is keeping the mojo going. Early on, the Bruins are putting on an impressive showing, peppering him with shots and getting a lot of traffic in front of him, but Holtby holds the fort, swatting pucks away like a samurai and dropping to his butterfly whenever the scene gets sketchy. The only blemish on Holtby's night comes when a puck deflects off Brooks Orpik's stick and bounces off Jimmy Hayes' chest for a Boston goal. In a game Washington ends up winning 4-1, this is the kind of goal Holtby can now live with. "My experience with sports psychology taught me that you control the controllables," he said. "The ones that are hard to block out are the ones you could have done something different and should have. Trying to refocus after those are the ones you have to be mentally strong with."

Holtby used to have a different definition of mentally strong, and it didn't help his progress in net. But a string of goalie coaches, dating back to his junior days, have aided his evolution. His current mentor is Mitch Korn, a man who has influenced the goaltending community in perhaps an unmatched capacity. Korn's students don't just become better goalies. They all become NHL goalie coaches themselves. So even though Holtby and Korn have just begun their second year together in Washington, Korn has actually impacted Holtby for nearly a decade already. And the potential held within their marriage is obvious: a Stanley Cup in D.C. for the first time ever.

Korn describes goaltending as a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle that needs to be assembled, and he's got a smart cookie on his hands in Holtby, who is quietly becoming one of the best netminders in the NHL. This is how that puzzle has come together.

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Holtby is a country boy, born and raised in Marshall, Sask., a place so small he had to play his youth hockey one town over. Every year, every grade, he had the same classmates at school. His parents have a cattle and grain farm, and Holtby was drafted into service, for a while. "Up to the point, my dad realized I wasn't much of a farmer," he said. "He let me explore other options. I wasn't a big fan of the minus-30 weather to tend to the cows. Some of it was fun – the summer months – but it was too much work for me."

At the age of nine, Holtby's hockey skills had outgrown the comfy confines of the area, so the family moved to nearby Lloydminster, a town of 30,000 that has the unique distinction of straddling the provincial borders of Saskatchewan and Alberta (Holtby has the outline of the two provinces tattooed on his right arm). While it may have seemed like a big step for a farming family, the Holtbys were used to travelling thanks to the country music singing career of Tami Hunter Holtby, Saskatchewan's female vocalist of the year in 1996 and Braden's mom. Tami started off as a rock and roll singer but switched to country when she realized that's where the gigs are in Western Canada. Not coincidentally, her son prefers old country – such as Garth Brooks, Alabama and Paul Brandt, an Albertan who did some shows with Tami and her band – but he has no time for new country. As for his mom, Tami became a fan favorite during Washington's 2012 playoff series against the Rangers thanks to her animated reactions to the ups and downs of what was a gut-wrenching series loss for the Caps. But we'll get back to those rival Rangers later.

From Lloydminster, Holtby's next major career step came in the WHL, when he suited up for the Saskatoon Blades. The Blades had little success during the goalie's tenure, and even when they racked up a 49-18-5 record, good for second in their conference, they were upset in the first round by seventh-seeded Lethbridge. The big positive that came out of Holtby's time in Saskatoon was getting to work with goalie coach and sports psychologist John Stevenson. "I was one of those guys that was so competitive that I would go out there and lose my focus without knowing it," Holtby said. "I always thought being intense was part of being mentally strong, but it's a little different."

To this day, Holtby's Capitals teammates say he can be fiery off the ice, even though he is much calmer in the crease. And really, there's nothing wrong with being passionate in the dressing room if you're stoic between the whistles. "After we lose a game,"

▲ REFLECTION
Holtby is a study of composure when he's on the ice. The passion comes out after games.

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JARED SILBER/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES

said teammate Evgeny Kuznetsov, "he feels the pain if he makes a mistake."

Injuries to more senior goalies opened a lot of doors for Holtby, who first rose to prominence in the 2012 playoffs when starter Tomas Vokoun went down with a groin ailment. Holtby helped the Capitals dust off the Bruins in the first round before running up against Henrik Lundqvist and the Rangers. No team scored more than three goals in any of the seven insanely contested games in that series.

Washington let Vokoun walk after that, and it seemed as though Holtby and the Caps were well on their way. The shortened 2012-13 season went well enough, but 2013-14 was a disaster that still resonates in the Capitals' dressing room. "Two years ago was a year most of us would like to forget," Holtby said. "It wasn't very fun, but it was good because we went through a lot of adversity and it made us realize we can't take anything for granted in this business. Our coaching staff, personnel and management now is top-notch, and you realize it's not like that every time."

Coach Adam Oates and GM George McPhee were both dumped after the debacle, which saw the Capitals miss the playoffs altogether. And that's where the silver lining comes in. Internally promoted GM Brian MacLellan hired former Predators coach Barry Trotz, who brought an old friend from Nashville along with him to Washington.

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Mitch Korn is a city boy, born in the Bronx. He watched the Rangers when he was a kid and eventually moved to Dumont, N.J., on the other side of the Hudson River. He didn't start skating until he was 11, but his passion for hockey was high. Eventually, he went on to the Can/Am hockey school in Guelph, Ont., first as a camper and then as a counsellor. It was also where he met Ted Ouimet, a journeyman goaltender who played one game for the St. Louis Blues in 1968-69. Ouimet gave Korn his big break. When Korn was 17, summer camp was two weeks away when he got a call. Ouimet had pulled out of the camp because he got a regular job elsewhere. Can/Am needed a new coach immediately. Korn got the gig.

This is where the legend of Korn's coaching prowess truly begins. "You can play the game all you want, but in order to develop a philosophy, in order to develop a progression, in order to make the thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle that it takes to play goal fit together for you in your head so that you can convey it, it takes time and practice," Korn said. "I was able to cut my teeth doing that, with lots of kids who would not tell you you're wrong or talk back. That was a great opportunity for me to start getting those pieces in place."

Korn went on to play goal himself for Kent State in Ohio, then coach with the Golden Flashes before heading to nearby Miami, where he would spend 30 years doing various jobs related to the NCAA team's arena, including running the summer camps and helping with the squad's goalies.

Throughout all this, Korn has run his own goalie camps in the summer. There are eight of them, spread throughout the U.S., from St. Louis to Minnesota, Nashville and New York. He personally teaches at every single stop, and, yes, he recognizes that sounds like lunacy. "People tell me I'm crazy," Korn said. "But I can't tell you how invigorating the summer camps are. They're demanding, and certainly at times I would like some time off, but we do good work. A lot of young people have learned from the way we do things, and I feel good about that. And selfishly I do the camps because it's amazing how much I learn."

▲ **A MENTAL GAME**
Korn says stopping pucks properly is like assembling a thousand-piece puzzle.

Korn believes the NHL can be a bit of an ivory tower, where habits are slow to change. For him, it's the kids who are trying new things out, and keeping tabs on the grassroots is vital.

Now, Korn, 58, has always had a few tricks up his own sleeves, as well. One of the hallmarks of his teaching comes in the innovations he sprinkles into his lessons. He'll have his goalies make pad saves while they are holding 18-pound medicine balls to teach them about the importance of core strength. He uses white pucks, mini-pucks, screen boards, deflection boards and even blindfolds to increase difficulty, so that game situations seem easier than practice.

JOHN MCDONNELL/THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

THE KORN DIET

Numbers show goalie guru's tangible effect on Holtby's puck-stopping ability

PRE-KORN		POST-KORN	
.919	2.60	.923	2.19
SAVE %	GAA	SAVE %	GAA

HOLTBY: JEFF VINNICK/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES; KORN: MATT MCCLAIN/ THE WASHINGTON POST

Since coming to Washington with Trotz in 2014, Korn's mission has been to make Holtby great. Fortunately, Holtby has known many of Korn's techniques since junior. Stevenson, Holtby's goalie coach in Saskatoon, worked with Korn in Edmonton during the 2004-05 lockout, so screen boards and white pucks were nothing new to the Caps netminder. There was also the fact the three men who preceded Korn in Washington were all good friends – Dave Prior, Olaf Kolzig and Arturs Irbe – and all of them spoke highly of Holtby.

Korn made sure he and his new pupil hit the ground running. Soon after Korn was hired in Washington, Holtby had to go to Minnesota for an eye test. The two used the trip as an excuse for a higher purpose. "It was more about getting to know each other, just the two of us," Holtby said. "Being able to talk quickly and efficiently about what we're trying to accomplish instead of worrying about hurting each other's feelings. We know each other well, and that's because he made a strong effort to do so."

What Korn found was a goaltender with a tremendous work ethic and the proper temperament to get better every day. But Holtby still had work to do.

In his video research, Korn noticed that Holtby was making all of his saves with his gloves and his pads. He rarely stopped a puck with his body. He was very athletic, but he might have been too athletic. "The mission was for him to gain a little more body control," Korn said. "Have his limbs work together, rather than individually apart, in terms of reaching. To use his body more, because that lends itself to way more consistency, because I've never seen a puck go through a guy's belly button. And he did learn that. He learned to corral that athleticism to only when it is needed."

Holtby began to shift his body more, and despite playing the puck well he learned he doesn't have to handle every single dump-in that comes near him. These developments calmed his game to the point he could have control of everything going on around him. "I've watched 'Holts' since he was drafted and the progress he has made is unbelievable," said Washington backup Philipp Grubauer. "He plays simple. He reads the game pretty well and doesn't do too much crazy stuff – just

Combining these techniques with Korn's direct style of teaching has won him legions of followers and accomplished students, six of whom are currently goalie coaches in the NHL and others who used to hold such posts. "I always say he should eventually go in the Hall of Fame as a builder," Trotz said. "He's had a big impact on the NHL, very quietly, for close to 30 years now."

Korn's first NHL job came in 1991, working with the Buffalo Sabres (while still commuting from Oxford, Ohio). Not long after that, the Sabres traded for a young Czech named Dominik Hasek. With Korn as his goalie coach, Hasek would become an NHL legend, racking up four Vezina Trophies by 1998. Korn loved his time with Hasek (and eventually Grant Fuhr, who won a Jennings Trophy with Hasek in 1994), but Buffalo was not exactly a bastion of stability in the 1990s. The Sabres had four coaches, three GMs and three presidents during Korn's tenure, and he wanted a little more continuity in his life, not to mention an easier commute from Oxford. So after 1997-98, Korn left Buffalo for Nashville, where he continued his wizardry with goalies, developing Vokoun and Pekka Rinne, one of his most accomplished students. It was also where Korn met Trotz, and the two have been together ever since. Korn calls Trotz his "brother from another mother," and in Trotz he found a coach who complemented his work. "The way he coaches gives the goalies a chance to be good," Korn said. "And then it's up to the goalies to be great. And I hope the way I help the goalies gives them a chance to be great, which helps the team that Barry coaches."

HE SHOULD EVENTUALLY GO IN THE HALL OF FAME AS A BUILDER. HE'S HAD A BIG IMPACT FOR 30 YEARS NOW – Barry Trotz

MITCH KORN

simple. His body control is unbelievable."

And when things get hairy, as they did several times in that November win against Boston, Holtby can rely on a mantra instilled in him by Korn: "Default Tight."

The idea behind Default Tight is that Holtby's butterfly technique can erase a lot of the chaos that comes with a typical NHL shot attempt, assuming there are no gaps left open. "When you do drop in that uncertain moment," Korn said, "and maybe there's two sticks in front and it's going to get tipped, or it's coming through traffic and you know it's coming but you don't know where, it is amazing how many times Murphy's Law comes into the game of goal. If you provide a four-inch hole between your pads – which is really small – and you're not tight, that three-inch puck will find that hole at the most inopportune times, not when the score is 5-1."

This was a beautiful notion for Holtby, who had been well aware for years that his athleticism was a blessing and a curse. As Holtby worked his way up the ranks, the weaknesses that came with his physical abilities were getting magnified. "You're making the big saves, but some goals are going in that shouldn't," Holtby said. "I knew the problem was there, but I didn't have a good game plan for fixing it until Mitch came along with different drills, video looking at different areas and teaching muscle memory in a way I had never really done before."

Holtby is a visual learner, so video was crucial last season, when the bulk of this work was done. He may not have felt like

▲ **CHAOS CONTROL**
When things get a little out of hand, Holtby reverts to the Default Tight mantra.

HOLTBY: PATRICK SMITH/GETTY IMAGES; FUHR: B BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES; HASEK: DENIS BRODEUR/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES

CHILDREN OF THE KORN

Mitch Korn has worked with many goalies over the years, including some of the best ever. Here are his thoughts on a few:

GRANT FUHR

"Awesome guy, happy. We got Grant at the end of his career. His knees were going, his shoulder was going and I said 'Grant, you're a baseball pitcher. You break in at 19 and throw smoke, 102-mph fastballs. Now you're 32. You can't throw smoke anymore but still want to play. What do you do?' He says, 'Get other pitches!' And I said 'Fuhrsy, you gotta get other saves.' "

DOMINIK HASEK

"I am a guy who is outside the box. I didn't come from inside the hockey world, I do things that are not normal. Well, so is Dom. Writer Mike Ulmer was the one who made the correlation that in a lot of ways, we were outside guys brought together that turned out to be good for each other. I believe he's the best goalie that has ever played, with all due respect to Roy and Brodeur."

his body was in the wrong position when he was on the ice, but the tape didn't lie. From there, Korn could use his direct personality and decades of experience to hone his student's game to a diamond tip. "He sees everything from the stands, which is amazing," Holtby said. "I'm always expecting to explain what happened on a certain play, but he already knows. He's a step ahead. He sees it as we see it, which is extremely efficient. You're not overthinking things, and you're not wasting energy trying to figure things out. It's a very easy game plan."

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That brings us back to the future and the New York Rangers. Specifically, the late spring of 2016, when, if all goes according to plan, the Washington Capitals will be battling through the East en route to the Stanley Cup final. That route will at some point likely go through the Rangers, who have dispatched the Capitals in the playoffs three times in the past four seasons. In those three series, all of which went seven games, Washington never gave up more than 16 goals. The difference between heartbreak and elation was often one goal, and whether it's against the Rangers or another tough Metropolitan Division opponent, it's a situation Holtby and the Caps will likely face again this post-season. "They're a very good hockey team," he said. "Last year we gave ourselves the best opportunity to beat them. Our team was built for the playoffs. Before, we relied a little too much on our skill, we didn't have the same feeling of wanting to accomplish something as we do now."

For his part, Holtby shrugs off the fact the only goalie he has ever lost to in the NHL playoffs is Lundqvist. Holtby's eye is set squarely on bringing a Cup to Washington. The franchise has been to the end just once, getting swept in the 1998 final by the Detroit Red Wings, but expectations have been high ever since Alex Ovechkin became one of the most dangerous scorers in the history of the game. Ovechkin's supporting cast was already impressive before the team brought in T.J. Oshie and Justin 'Mr. Game 7' Williams, while the D-corps is in a great place, led by John Carlson. But it's all going to come down to Holtby. "You can't win without trusting your goalie," Trotz said. "If you're not getting the saves you're expecting, your team plays a little tentative at times. They erase all our mistakes. They set the confidence level. No matter what your lineup is, you know you're OK that night. That's a pretty comforting feeling."

So when the game is on the line and opponents are scrambling and gnashing like wolverines in front of Holtby's crease, hoping to find that four-inch gap, that is when the student will remember his teacher's simple mantra: Default Tight.

RINNE: ANDRE RINGUETTE/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES

PEKKA RINNE

"Maybe the best goalie playing today. And a phenomenal person. He's a great goalie and he's a better person. And that's pretty awesome."