



## Ducks will play defense by committee

By Josh Brewster - NHL.com Correspondent

In recent years, the Anaheim Ducks were blessed with two of the era's great defensemen in Scott Niedermayer and Chris Pronger. The future Hall-of-Fame pair was one of the best things that ever happened to the franchise, having paved the way to its 2007 Stanley Cup championship. Now, the biggest issue surrounding the defense is whether a committee of veterans and youngsters can replicate the dominating style forged during the years when the two stars ran the show.

Last season, with Niedermayer the only defensive holdover from the championship squad, the Ducks ranked 22nd in goals-against en route to their first non-playoff season since 2003-04.

"First and foremost, you lose their leadership," Ducks defenseman Sheldon Brookbank said of the departed pair. "They're both really composed players out there who play in all the big situations at the end of the game."

This season, four of the Ducks' top six defensemen from last season are gone. Niedermayer and Aaron Ward retired. James Wisniewski was traded to the Islanders and Steve Eminger dealt to the Rangers.

Brookbank, having spent 95 of his 157 career games in Anaheim, is now the longest-tenured Ducks defenseman. The Ducks' next-longest-serving defensemen are third-year vets Brett Festerling (82 games) and Brendan Mikkelson (62), offering further evidence that a defensive rebuilding is at hand.

It's an iffy situation for a defense that comes into training camp wrought with question marks, as an all-new corps must emerge for the team to take advantage of a strong group of forwards and an emerging young goaltender in Jonas Hiller.

"We brought in some veteran guys who are going to be able to fill those shoes," insists Brookbank, who finished second on the Ducks in plus/minus (+10). "It's going to be a collective effort this year for us. We're obviously not in the situation where we have that distinctive number one defenseman like there has been in the past, so it's going to take all six of us pulling our weight in order to pull up the slack."

One veteran in particular should smooth the transition.

Lubomir Visnovsky, 34, was a bright spot on an otherwise mediocre season, the former LA King returning to SoCal at the trade deadline from Edmonton in return for Ryan Whitney. Visnovsky brings a big shot from the point and represented a nice hedge by GM Bob Murray against the retirement of Niedermayer. During the Ducks' stretch run, he scored 5 goals and 8 assists in 16 games before a broken hand kept him out of the final three games.

The most notable defensive signings of the offseason were veterans Toni Lydman and Andy Sutton.

The 35-year-old Sutton joins his seventh NHL club after signing a two-year deal. At 6-foot-6, 245 pounds, some of the size and wing span lost with Pronger's departure is regained.

Lydman, 32, was a key part of the Buffalo Sabres' post-lockout resurgence, participating in two conference finals (2005-06 and 2006-07) while drawing key assignments in all situations. He also joined Ducks star Teemu Selanne in winning silver and bronze medals for Finland at the 2006 and 2010 Olympics, respectively.

Murray further added to the backline by signing free-agent Paul Mara, 31.

On the youth front, Luca Sbisa looks primed for a breakthrough, and the Ducks feel that they have a blue chip prospect in the 20-year-old. The swift-skating offensive defenseman is a former first-round pick who's itching to break out. Eight games with the Ducks last season whetted his appetite.

"I was lucky to play in this League at such a young age, but I knew that it was not going to be easy to establish myself here," Sbisa told NHL.com after a pre-camp skate.

After his return to juniors, Sbisa couldn't have put forth a better audition. The native of Ozieri, Italy played

for Switzerland at both the World Junior Championships and Vancouver Olympics (with Hiller). He also saw action with AHL Portland as well as Lethbridge and Portland of the WHL.

"It was unbelievable to play in (the Olympics). It showed me that even though I went back to juniors, I took a big step forward. My game was a bit more mature in the Olympics than it was at the start of the year."

Sbisa says it's time to tighten up his shutdown game.

"I'm going to try to focus on my defensive play," Sbisa said. "If I have that figured out, I can chip in offensively and get my wheels going, play physical and show them what I've got."

"Luca had a taste of it last year and Festerling and (Mikkelson) have been a part of the organization so those are some guys who can take on some key roles back there," Bobby Ryan said of the rebuilt corps. "It'll be exciting to see the competition at camp and who nabs those final spots."

First-round picks Mark Mitera and Cam Fowler will get a close look, while San Jacinto, California native Jake Newton and 25-year-old free agent Danny Syvret, who came over from Philadelphia, look for cracks in the seam.

Forward Teemu Selanne says a committee can get it done.

"You can't replace a guy like Scotty Niedermayer, (it's) too big a hole to fill," Teemu Selanne told NHL.com. "(But) two or three guys together can do a lot for this hockey club. We're happy to see Lubomir Visnovsky back on our club. Getting Andy Sutton and Toni Lydman, those guys are really going to help. There are a few question marks, but I know that those guys can do it and they have to find a way to do it."