

How the Devils were able to stand out from other teams at the NHL draft combine

By Corey Masisak, *The Athletic*

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BUFFALO — Are you a dog person or a cat person?

If it wasn't clear to Oskar Back that his trip to Buffalo for the 2018 NHL Draft Combine was going to be a unique and interesting experience, being asked that question did the trick.

"I thought, 'What is this?'" Back said after being one of the first players to complete the gauntlet of physical challenges at HarborCenter on Saturday morning. While those stations measure things like agility, strength and lung capacity, the biggest tests for the players are typically a barrage of interviews with NHL teams.

There are a little more than 100 players invited to the event, and over the course of a week, teams will meet with upwards of 60 or more of them. Some might be an informal situation — a couple of team employees talking to the prospect in a hallway for a few minutes, for instance.

But the formal interviews involve a contingent of team personnel sitting down with a player, and the questions involved can get a little weird.

"It's nice to just put a face, put a personality to the player," Devils assistant general manager Tom Fitzgerald said. "Believe me, we interviewed 60-plus kids, and I may have seen 15 of them play, 20. I don't know them all.

"It's not about moving a kid up 10 spots on your list because, geez he knocked the cover off the ball. If all things are equal, you might say, 'Remember that interview? He was awesome,' compared to somebody else."

The Devils interview team includes Fitzgerald, general manager Ray Shero, and scouting director Paul Castron, but it's Aimee Kimball, the Director of Player & Team Development, who typically plays the role of lead prosecutor.

"She's got a battery of questions, and it really goes pretty smoothly," Fitzgerald said. "You get to see some of their personality. She does personality profiles, so she gives us some information and what kind of kids they are or what they wrote down. To me, it is more a personality thing. You see the mature ones, the confident ones, the insecure ones. You just take notes and it is just getting to know them better."

Many of the prospects who spoke Saturday said the majority of the team's questions were pretty similar. One interesting theme emerged — 2018 will be remembered as the Fortnite combine.

Likely spurred by a story Sportsnet's Jeff Marek told on the "31 Thoughts" podcast with Elliotte Friedman about a recent first-round pick whose team believes he has jeopardized his career because of a video game addiction, several NHL teams were asking questions about Fortnite, a co-op survival game that has become a cultural phenomenon.

One question that came up a couple of times was teams asking players if they like to "hide in the bushes," which is a popular but controversial strategy in the game. A Columbus Blue Jackets fan brought a sign to a game against the Colorado Avalanche this past season that read, "MacKinnon hides in the bushes in Fortnite."

Many of the questions were more serious in tone and application. There are NHL franchises that are clearly concerned the player Marek spoke of is not and will not be an anomaly.

“I got a lot of Fornite [questions],” Canadian defenseman Calen Addison said. “I don’t really play it too much. I think it’s taken over some guys’ lives. It’s pretty addicting for people, and they spend all day every day playing it. It’s something you don’t really want to get caught up too much, so I try not to play too much.

“You can talk to your buddies on there. You can play with them. It’s fun. You can just keep playing. You lose and you just start over again. It can be addictive.”

While some teams offer relatively standard questions, other clubs look for ways to be different. The Detroit Red Wings had a member of the military sit in on some of their interviews and interact with the players.

The Washington Capitals gained some notoriety for one question in particular.

“They gave me a piece of paper,” Tyler Madden, son of former Devils center John Madden, said. “It had a bus on it. And they asked which way it is going. It was one of those buses where you can’t really tell. I had no idea what the answer was. I threw a guess in there. I was wrong. They said if they draft me, they’ll tell me at the draft why I was wrong. I couldn’t really tell. Right seemed right to me. Then I started looking at the sidewalk and ... just couldn’t tell.”

No prospect reported any particularly outlandish questions from the Devils, but several said their interviews with New Jersey stood out.

Here’s a sampling of what prospects said about their Devils interview:

Madden

“They asked me if I would have a problem with playing somewhere where my dad had his own legacy. I said I wouldn’t mind at all. It would be awesome. I grew up there. That’s where I learned to love the game. My dad and I were treated well there with Lou Lamoriello. It was a good meeting. Overall it was probably one of the better ones.”

Swedish defenseman Rasmus Sandin

“I thought it went well. The weirdest question was just, ‘Can you tell us a story?’ That was a weird question. [I told them about] a prank that I went through, that I had done to me about a year ago.”

Finnish forward Sampo Ranta

“It was fun. Had a lot of quick questions. It was pretty similar to the others, but it was fun.”

American defenseman Bode Wilde

“It was a pretty cool interview. It was a little different than some of the others. They had some changeup questions, a couple of thinkers. It was pretty good.”

American forward Jake Wise

“They were awesome. It was one of the tougher ones, but I think it was good. All of the guys were cool, and they had a couple of women in there that were awesome.”

Many of the prospects said they didn’t spend that much time preparing for the interviews, but that could also be what their advisors prepared them to say. One general theme about the event is that teams have lamented how good the players’ representatives have gotten at coaching them up for the interview process.

That’s where Kimball’s unique background in sports psychology and mental training comes in.

“That’s exactly what her job is — to try and get these kids out of their comfort zone and not have cookie-cutter type questions,” Fitzgerald said. “There’s some questions that I kind of interview myself too as she’s asking them. Like, how would I answer them as a 49-year-old ex-player? What would I have said at 18 or 17, because they didn’t have the combine back then. It’s a great exercise. I think for the most part the kids are really mature, probably more mature than I was at that age. It’s getting to know a kid, his personality, what kind of kid he is.”

The Devils have the No. 17 pick in the 2018 draft, but currently don’t have a second- or third-round selection because of previous trades. That didn’t stop them from speaking to players projected to be drafted in those rounds.

Every team likes to speak to as many prospects as possible because they never know if the general manager is going to make a trade for different picks or if one of these players could be available via a trade or free agency in the coming years.

The number of teams who spoke to Rasmus Dahlin, the no-doubt No. 1 pick, was in the double digits.

“You still have to pretend you have 11 picks, even if you don’t,” Fitzgerald said. “You never know what can happen on the draft floor. You’ve got to be ready and have your list in order. If a team calls a timeout at the last minute and then wants to make a trade, then all of a sudden you’ve got a pick. It doesn’t really change for the scouts on staff. They’re ready, whether we have 11 picks or six.”

And the prospects never know if their answer to that particularly quirky question could be the difference.

“One team asked me which one would I choose, [Brent] Burns’ beard or [Jaromir] Jagr’s hair?” Ranta said.

His answer?

“Jagr’s hair, obviously.”

And for the record, count Oskar Back as a dog person.