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At forward with Jason Arnott

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By Alex Carswell

Everyone knows that the team's best player is almost always a center, and that's especially true in Junior hockey. But when the Edmonton Oilers drafted the best player on the 1993 Oshawa Generals, they got more than just a center. They got a guy with leadership abilities; a guy who sells out for his team every night, and does whatever they ask him to do. What the Oilers got was Jason Arnott.

As an outstanding rookie center in 1993/94, Arnott notched 33 goals and finished second in the balloting for the Calder Trophy, behind New Jersey goaltender Martin Brodeur. *The Sporting News* chose Arnott, who made the jump directly from Juniors to the NHL, over Brodeur as rookie of the year. But excel as he did in mid-ice, Arnott no longer plays center. As of this season, the 225-pound, 21-year-old is a right winger.

"It's been hard," says Arnott of adjusting to his new position. "But playing with Dougie and Zdeno makes it a whole lot easier for me to go out there and play the wing."

That's Doug Weight and Zdeno Ciger for those of you unfamiliar with Edmonton's top line, two guys who have benefited equally from Arnott's presence on their right side.

"A lot of the adjustment is just stopping and going," says Arnott. "Playing center I would always keep my feet moving. Now I've got to stop and start. And it was a little bit difficult at first moving (my) 225 pounds around rather than supporting and coasting."

But like a road-heavy Ferrari, once you get Arnott out of first gear and into overdrive, he's something to behold.

"I'm adjusting to it pretty good. I love playing with Dougie and Zdeno. It's probably the best thing that's ever happened to me."

That's the kind of team-first attitude that made Arnott the seventh pick overall in his draft year. But doesn't he yearn to be a center again one day? Maybe with an Arnott-caliber sniper on *his* right side?

"Yeah, I hope so," admits the Collingworth, Ontario native. "I've always been a centerman, and I've always loved center. If I go somewhere else (on the team), or something happens with our line where someone else goes someplace else, I wouldn't mind going back to center. It's always been my love, my position."

"But for now, wing is great," declares Arnott. "As far as I'm concerned, as long as Dougie's here and Zdeno's here, I want to play wing with them and nothing's going to change that."

A different mindset

As a center, Arnott's job was to work the puck both ways, feed his wingers and cash in on rebounds—not to discount the occasional, spectacular end-to-end rush. But now he's most often on the receiving end of the puck, and concentrating on his shot. It's a totally different mindset.

“My job is just going to the net and shooting the puck. That’s my role this year. And Zdeno and Dougie are so skilled with the puck, they always get it to me.”

And Arnott’s presence on the top line seems to have had a positive effect on his linemates, both of whom are on pace for career seasons.

“I think our combination is just all-around good for us,” analyzes Arnott. Arnott’s transformation into a winger has also taught him to appreciate all the guys who played alongside him over the years.

“It’s very hard (playing wing). It’s definitely harder than being a centerman. You know, a lot of people just think wingers go up and down the boards.”

Arnott now knows there’s more to it than that. But he’s thankful that the style his line plays allows him to do more than just lug his 225-pounds up and down the right side.

“With our line we do a lot of criss-crossing, so I don’t have to do a lot of up-and-down. (And) just playing with them I’m getting more skills. I’m learning to carry the puck more; I’m learning to dish off to them more.”

And with the slick Weight as his pivot, Arnott can play the passing game and still end up with a chance to score.

“If I get Dougie the puck and go to the net, I’m sure to get it back because he’s so skilled he can beat pretty much any defenseman in the league as far as I’m concerned.”

The down side of Arnott’s switch to the wing? The inevitable wear and tear from rough-and-tumble corner work. On this night Arnott had a severely sprained thumb wrapped in a heavy bag of ice after the game. But he wasn’t about to let that stop him from getting on the ice himself.

“I hate missing hockey games,” said the man Oilers scouts once projected as a future team captain. “And in the NHL you’ve got to play through those bumps and bruises.”

That’s the kind of character every coach wants on his bench, no matter what position he plays.

— *Alex Carswell*