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On defense with Chris Pronger

By Bob Cunningham

Chris Pronger was the second player taken in the 1993 NHL Draft, mainly because the Hartford Whalers felt the 6'6", 215-pounder had the tools to become another Paul Coffey.

At Peterborough, Pronger tore up the Ontario Hockey League, tallying 139 points in 125 Major Junior games. And with his extraordinary size, the Whalers believed they had the type of player who could dominate at both ends of the ice.

But Pronger is human. He entered the NHL last season and, by his own admission, was less than himself in his first few weeks at hockey's highest level. He knew he belonged in the NHL, but simultaneously believed he needed to crawl before walking.

"I was a little hesitant because I didn't know what to expect," says Pronger, who indicated that his reluctance to showcase his own skills caused him to endure a less-than-ideal first half of his rookie campaign. "Once I started to relax, I began to play better."

The common error many young defensemen, and even some forwards, make is to play scared. Rather than concentrating on aspects of the game that will help their team win games, these intimidated youngsters work instead at avoiding stupid mistakes that lead to losing.

It applies at any jump in level, whether it be from Juniors to the NHL or from the 10-and-11 year-old division to the 12-to-13 class.

Confidence a "must"

"You don't want to be cocky, but you definitely have to be confident in what you're doing out there," Pronger says. "When you're a young player, or a rookie, bad games are a given. What you have to do is learn how to work your way through it."

Pronger played in 81 games last season, amassing 30 points along with 113 penalty minutes. Those numbers are certainly nothing to be ashamed of, but Pronger knows he's capable of much higher production. And he entered his sophomore season bent on reaching the level Whalers management had in mind when they picked him ahead of Paul Kariya and Jason Arnott, among other promising youngsters.

"I believe your first priority should be to take care of your own end first," he says. "But when the (scoring) opportunities are there, you have to go after them. In my rookie year, I didn't feel as confident as I would have liked on the offensive end. There was no reason for me to think that way."

Still, Pronger did have a positive effect on his new team. The Whalers allowed almost 60 fewer goals last season than they did in 1992-93.

"I did a lot of work on the basics. I worked hard to help out at both ends, especially in the second half of the season," he recalls. "I worked a lot on foot speed."

The frantic pace of the NHL leaves most rookies in awe. Pronger said that he thought he had a grasp of the Bigs until he played in his first NHL game.

"Not only is the tempo so much faster, but everybody gives 110 percent on every shift of every game," he says.

That's a feeling most players experience whenever they're promoted to a new level of the game; it's not a scenario that's restricted to the NHL.

"It's kind of like a little cycle," Pronger adds. "You reach a level and there comes a point where you can take a shift off now and then and it won't hurt you. Then you go to the next level and you realize you can't do that."

Size vs. smarts

Pronger's game is often keyed by using his size, but he feels that playing smart is much more important than playing big.

"Size has some advantages. Being a rookie, I used my size to help out sometimes," he says. "I could use my reach to poke check the puck away if I got beat to the side. I mean, you're not very often going to run a big guy over."

"But playing smart is what you have to do. Get in the right position to begin with, and that guy won't get around you. Then you don't have to rely on your reach."

Another trait Pronger says aids in the "breaking-in" period for a young defenseman is intensity. Pronger cautions against all-out aggression, and is instead in favor of a win-or-nothing approach. Winning, says Pronger, is always the most important thing—at any level.

"I've never been too happy when we lost. If we don't win, I'm not a good guy to be around. Sometimes, that doesn't win you too many friends."

It's a tough balance to maintain—keeping the intensity to win while understanding that a level head is required to effectively contribute to the team despite a lack of experience. And to balance aggression with intelligence.

And it can be murder defensively, where individual mistakes always seem to catch the spotlight. With forwards, the play is more team-oriented. Mistakes result in missed opportunities—which is preferable to outright goals against.

But by the looks of things, Pronger's all-out approach to winning should carry him through this difficult period of adjustment.

— **Bob Cunningham**