



“Here We Go Again”

[BY JOE WIEBE] PHOTOS BY: JEFF VINNICK/VANCOUVER CANUCKS

Just after the Canucks training camp began in September, I embarked on a long-dreamed-about trip to Germany for Oktoberfest. If you read this magazine regularly, you may have noticed that I also write a regular column about beer called “Thirsty,” so it probably won’t come as a surprise if I tell you that while I was sipping from litre steins of delicious German beer and chanting along to Bavarian drinking songs in Munich’s giant beer tents, I wasn’t paying much attention to news from home, not even about my beloved Canucks. But on my final morning in Europe, I tuned into a Vancouver sports radio station on my phone, and, thanks to the time change, found myself listening to the post-game commentary from the season-opening game. When the host declared the

phone lines open I considered calling in, pretty certain I’d get on the air if I said I was calling from 8,000 kilometres away.

But the only thing I could think of to ask was: “What was the biggest surprise of training camp?” so I didn’t bother calling in. When I returned home, I learned the answer quickly enough. There weren’t any big surprises in training camp: no big signings, no goaltender controversies, no rookies catching the coach’s eye with a stellar preseason. By all accounts, it was a fairly boring pre-season—and what a relief!

Don’t Fix What Ain’t Broke?

Last year in this magazine I pretty much guaranteed a parade on Robson Street at the end of the Vancouver Canucks’ 40th Anniversary season. Considering



they came within one win of achieving that elusive accomplishment, I feel pretty good about my prediction. They had one of the best seasons in modern NHL history, winning the President's Trophy with 117 points, 10 more than their nearest competitor. They scored the most goals and allowed the fewest (an accomplishment rarely, if ever, accomplished before), had the league's best power play and tied for second in penalty killing. Daniel Sedin matched his brother Henrik by winning the league scoring title. If the Canucks had won the Cup, the 2010-11 Canucks would have been crowned as one of the NHL's best teams, ever.

Since the team didn't change much in the off-season, we should be even more confident of their chances this season,

right? Well...not so fast. By standing pat, they may have lost ground against their closest competitors, especially when you factor in the major injuries suffered by Ryan Kesler and Mason Raymond during the playoffs.

The biggest additions to the Canucks' roster in the past year occurred at last season's trade deadline, when General Manager Mike Gillis brought in agitator Maxim Lapierre and defensive forward Chris Higgins. Both had

been underperforming elsewhere and while neither made a big difference in the regular season, they each showed their importance with strong performances during the run to the Stanley Cup.

“Since the team didn't change much in the off-season, we should be even more confident of their chances this season, right?”

Building off that strong foundation, each should play a significant role in driving the Canucks through the long 82-game season ahead, albeit in third- and fourth-line roles.

The team's only major signing this past summer was the addition of German forward Marco Sturm. Once upon a time, Sturm could skate circles around much of the league, but at 33 and with a couple of knee surgeries under his belt it's doubtful that speed is going to be much of a weapon for him.

Let's hope he can make up for it with his shot, because otherwise he might be cashing his paycheck down on the farm in Chicago.

On the flipside, GM Mike Gillis took a big risk in not re-signing defenceman Christian Ehrhoff in the off-season. A free agent, Ehrhoff was vastly overpaid by Buffalo, but the Canucks will definitely miss his offensive role. Ehrhoff exuded confidence with the man advantage, scoring more than half of his points on the power play.

If all goes well, Alex Edler will slot into an expanded role in his absence and ideally Sami Salo will play more than the 27 games he managed last season after recovering from a major injury. (He won't play all 82, but the Canucks will be happy if he manages the 60 or so he averaged over the previous five seasons.)

Elsewhere on defence, Kevin Bieksa should score a few more goals after a major resurgence last season when he finally recovered from the significant skate cuts he suffered in 2007 and 2009.

Sick Bay

The biggest challenge the Canucks face as they begin the new season is the injuries suffered by Ryan Kesler and Mason Raymond late in the playoffs. Kesler injured his hip in the final game of the conference finals against San Jose and then played through the Stanley Cup finals against Boston at reduced strength. He attempted to rehabilitate the injury without surgery in the offseason, but then went under the knife in early August.

Kesler was still recovering as the season opened, but he was expected to return to

action by the time this magazine hits the stands. The big question is if he will be able to play at the same level as last year, when he scored 41 goals and won the Frank Selke Trophy. In the meantime, his absence is giving young Cody Hodgson a chance to show if he can contribute offensively at the NHL level.

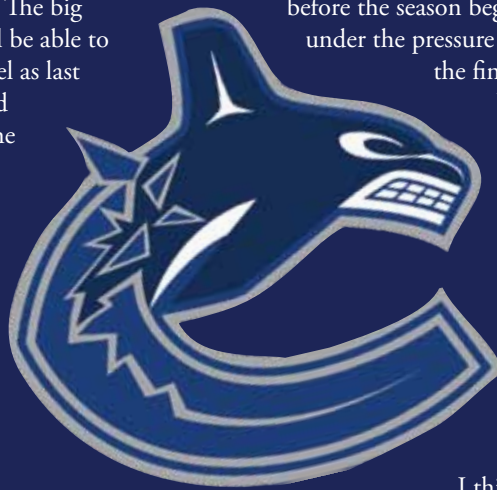
Mason Raymond, meanwhile, suffered a major injury in game six of the finals versus Boston when Bruins defenceman Johnny Boychuk shoved him into the boards in an awkward, folded-over position, resulting in a broken vertebra. Raymond wore a back brace until late July and hadn't even started skating by the start of the season. While the Canucks have said that he should be back in the line-up by Christmas, that seems doubtful. Raymond will not be rushed back.

The other big question mark in terms of injuries is whether Manny Malhotra will recover from his major eye injury. His return during the Stanley Cup finals last season was a major boost to the team, but it's yet to be seen if he will be the highly effective grinder and playoff specialist he was when the Canucks signed him.

Stanley Cup Hangover?

Much has been made of the apparent physical and emotional hangover teams suffer after achieving the ultimate goal of competing in the Stanley Cup finals. Last year's Chicago Blackhawks were a prime example, barely squeaking into the playoffs after winning it all in 2009-2010.

But the Detroit Red Wings and Pittsburgh Penguins have shown that the hangover can be overcome after facing each other in consecutive finals in 2008 and 2009. And, apart from Kesler and Raymond's injuries, the Canucks are healthy and strong across the board. I also think the team's character was proven to be highly resilient last season when they



were picked by everyone to win the Cup before the season began and didn't wilt under the pressure (except perhaps in the final itself).

Under the Sedins' steady leadership and with support from strong character guys like Kesler, Malhotra and Bieksa, I don't see this squad faltering under the pressure of returning to the finals. If anything, I think they will push themselves even harder, having come so close only to fall short.

Fearless Prediction

If that last section reads like I'm betting the Canucks will win it all this season, well, gulp, that is indeed what I predict. But it isn't going to be easy. I don't think they will sweep into the playoffs with the best record in the league, although winning the Northwest Division shouldn't be difficult thanks to the poor competition there.

The teams that scare me the most in the Western Conference are the LA Kings, who stocked up in the offseason and look much improved and the Chicago Blackhawks, who aren't far removed from their Cup-winning performance two seasons ago and showed in the first round of the playoffs that they still have what it takes. In the Cup finals, I expect to see either Pittsburgh or Washington on the other side of the rink—and both of those teams line up well against the Canucks.

Here's hoping we'll be celebrating a parade next June, rather than the sort of troubles we endured after game seven last season. Hey, I went this whole article without using the 'R' word, and I'm not going to bring it up now! **W**

Joe Wiebe is a Vancouver writer who loves to say "I told you so!" to all those people who used to complain that the Sedins were overrated. Read more of his writing at www.joewiebe.com.



ROBERTO LUONGO



RYAN KESLER



ALEX BURROWS, KEVIN BIEKSA



DANIEL AND HENRIK SEDIN