Canucks: Richardson expected to provide plenty of bite despite missing teeth

By Ben Kuzma, The Province

Canucks: Richardson expected to provide plenty of bite despite missing teeth

As befits his grinding role, some teeth are missing from Brad Richardson’s mug.

The symbolism isn’t lost on anybody wondering how the centre, who was in and out of Darryl Sutter’s doghouse last season in Los Angeles, can add bite in Vancouver. The Canucks signed the unrestricted free agent to a bargain two-year, $2.3 million US contract on the first day of free agency to help solve their riddles in the middle as a third or fourth-line solution. His game should complement Chris Higgins and Jannik Hansen if his battle level is considerable and consistent, like it has been in the past against Hansen.

“Playing against him a lot, we’ve had some run-ins,” said Richardson, who had a scoring chance and won eight of nine face-offs in a 4-1 preseason loss to the Edmonton Oilers on Wednesday at Rogers Arena. “I said some things I shouldn’t have said to him and hopefully he doesn’t remember all of them. He brings speed and is underrated with his skill and competes on every shift.”

At his best, Richardson should be an offensive upgrade on the departed Maxim Lapierre, but being scratched in 27 of the first 29 games in the lockout season left a lot of people scratching their heads. Richardson did play the final 16 games and 11 in the postseason and was at a loss to explain the disconnect with Sutter.

“I wish I could tell you the answer to that — I ask that a lot of myself,” said Richardson, who also played left wing for the Kings. “I had a lot of chats with him and he said that’s just the way it was. It was a weird year. The first 30 games were a test of my will to be honest, but it’s over with and done with and I’m just moving on.”

Well, there’s moving on and then there’s moving into John Tortorella’s tough training camp world — including a 7:30 a.m practice Friday before Richardson brings his three-handicap swagger to the annual Jake Milford golf tournament — and the relentless daily regimen to exact more from a veteran core.

“He pushes you hard but it’s fair,” added Richardson. “It’s not like he’s asking things you can’t do. You work hard for him, he’s going to give you rest and time off, too.”

Tortorella and Richardson have won a Stanley Cup so there’s no need for the centre to be told about the arduous climb to the top — and getting back there — and it’s one of the reasons the 28-year-old Belleville, Ont., native has been on the Canucks’ radar for some time. They didn’t promise the 6-foot, 197 pound forward the third-line job, but dropped broad hints because of his experience and 2012 Stanley Cup ring.
“That run was pretty incredible,” said Richardson. “You do realize there’s another gear there when you thought it was there before — but it really wasn’t — and it’s really hard because you’ve got to have a full commitment from everyone. I think we’ve got the group here to do it.”

With Richardson, Jordan Schroeder, Brendan Gaunce and Bo Horvat in the mix to flank Higgins and Hansen, the fact Tortorella keeps bringing up versatility doesn’t hurt Richardson. Schroeder had offseason shoulder surgery and has yet to play, Gaunce has struggled but has two preseason goals and Horvat has a more complete game that could be further honed in junior. But Richardson is battle-tested and looked comfortable Wednesday in a penalty killing tandem with Hansen.

“He’s had a good camp and he’s in good shape,” said Tortorella. “He’ll be moved between centre and left and right wing because we still have question marks in certain situations and we’ll see if he he can fill them.”

When Higgins and Lapierre arrived at the 2011 trade deadline, they were at the crossroads of their careers but became integral parts of the run to the Stanley Cup final. For them, it was the right team at the right time. Richardson?

“I can say yes, but time will tell and I hope that’s the case because that’s why I signed here,” he said. “I think it’s a good fit and they did as well. The last five years, the Canucks have been the best team statistically. And I know the media here is a little crazy and gets on them when they don’t win, but being the best team in the league the last five years is a good stat to have.”

So is that golf game and low handicap.

“I played a lot as a kid and took lessons pretty much every day for about four years,” he said. “I played on our high school team and I would have loved to go further, but it’s such a global game and there are so many good players on the Canadian Tour.”

Richardson and his girlfriend have quickly acclimated to downtown living and long walks with their two dogs. If he lives up to expectations, Richardson will find those dog walks will take longer when recognized by curious fans.

“I haven’t be recognized yet,” he chuckled. “I like to wear my hat pretty low when I’m around.”

OF NOTE — Winger David Booth (ankle surgery) is expected to play Saturday in Edmonton. Forwards Brandon DeFazio and Alexandre Grenier have been assigned to Utica of the AHL. The Canucks have renewed their agreement with Kalamazoo of the ECHL.

Focus for Canucks turns to shot-blocking

DAVID EBNER
VANCOUVER — The Globe and Mail

One man in a Vancouver Canucks uniform is not particularly keen on the NHL team’s new shot-blocking ethos. His name is Roberto Luongo.
Wednesday night in Vancouver, Luongo was torched in his first preseason game, yielding four goals on just 18 shots in two periods against the Edmonton Oilers. The veteran goaltender took the blame – but fairly cited the fact his defence was in some disarray. Players, looking to impress head coach John Tortorella and his black-and-blue philosophy, made attempts to get in the way of pucks but instead caused confusion and blocked not the puck, but Luongo’s view.

Luongo is of the same mind of Martin Brodeur, another goaltender from the east end of Montreal, one who prefers his New Jersey teammates to get out of the way and let the netminder do the work. The Devils, like the Canucks, have been among those that block the fewest shots in the league.

“That’s what I prefer,” Luongo said to a small group of reporters after the typical media horde cleared after the game. “In the past, you know especially when the [other team’s] guys are far out, take away sticks and stuff like that …”

Luongo did not finish his thought, before making a conciliatory turn to the new regime and reality of Tortorella.

“But if you’re a good team at blocking shots then that’s going to cut down on a lot of chances too,” he said, ably pivoting. “So like I said, I’m open to change. If it makes our group better then I’m all for it.”

The Canucks do not have an ingrained skill in the art of the shot block. It was never part of former coach Alain Vigneault’s philosophy. Last season, Vancouver was ranked 27th in the league in blocked shots; the year before, it was the same, 27th. (Meanwhile, Tortorella’s New York Rangers were sixth and fourth, respectively.)

The value of blocked shots is debatable. In the past decade, only two teams that won the Stanley Cup ranked in the top dozen teams during the season in blocked pucks (Pittsburgh Penguins in 2008-09, fourth, and Carolina Hurriacnes in 2005-06, first). Two teams – Anaheim Sucks in 2006-07 and Detroit Red Wings in 2007-08 – were last in blocked shots.

And even Tortorella’s Tampa Bay Lightning squad in 2003-04 were only No.17 in blocked shots.

Blocking shots might be an ethos, a philosophy, a state-of-mind to absorb pain for a greater good, regardless of actual efficacy. But the strategy basically has zero correlation with winning.

The Canucks, Luongo politely said, don’t know how to do it. And training camp thus far has been one long bag skate, without any actual work on systems of play, which led to the confusion on the ice last Wednesday. The systems work begins after a day off on Thursday.

“I kind of felt the first 10, 15 minutes, guys weren’t too sure what to do out there,” Luongo said of the span of time where four goals rained in. At night’s end, the Canucks managed to block just 11 pucks, half the amount the Oilers turned away.

Hesitation by defenders caused some chaos for Vancouver, hurting Luongo on several of the goals.
“I just felt, a couple times, guys were trying to block shots but they were not sure if they should or not,” he said, adding advice: “You better block it. If you don’t, I won’t see it.”

Two games into the preseason, with a new coach who is basically the opposite of the old bench boss, confusion can be expected. Luongo knows the trick is how quickly the team adjusts.

That is, if it can. It is not fun to block shots – and even less so when a player, logically, knows it is not a winning strategy.

“If you’re going to be there, you have to be 100-per-cent committed to blocking it,” he said. “That’s going to come with time. It’s not something that happens from one day to the next, all of a sudden, you’re blocking shots all over the place. … Obviously, we want to have that shot-block mentality, but when it’s something that we haven’t done as a group sometimes there’s a little bit of hesitation or whatever there.

“It’s just going to take time.”

Top four status beckons beefed-up blue-liner Tanev

Elliott Pap  Vancouver Sun

Vancouver Canuck defenceman Chris Tanev will never be confused with the Incredible Hulk, or the Montreal Canadiens’ wide-bodied defenceman Douglas Murray, who is hockey’s version of the fictional behemoth.

Tanev is tall and slim, but at least he is no longer a total string bean. When he signed with the Canucks as an NCAA free agent three years ago, he was a featherweight “170 pounds or something.” Now he has worked his way up to middleweight status.

“I weighed in this year at 195, so I’m slowly climbing the ladder,” the 23-year-old from Toronto said this week. “I think I can put on another five to 10 pounds, but it’s going to take a while. I’m still growing and still maturing. I think I am a young 23-year-old. I started developing later than most. But, ha, there is not a chance I could ever be as big as Douglas Murray.”

Tanev’s story has been well documented. He was a 5-foot-2 runt in Grade 10 and playing high school hockey because he couldn’t make a midget team. (No pun intended.) Now he’s a 6-foot-2 regular on the Canucks’ blue-line with a one-way contract for $1.5 million. He had to wait all summer before signing on Aug. 22, but never thought he wouldn’t be back.

“I love it here and wanted to be here,” he said. “I knew eventually something would be worked out, although it obviously took a little longer
than expected. It was the first time my contract was up and it was a little bit difficult."

Now he is looking to move up the Canucks’ blue-line depth chart. If the new coaching staff opts for three pairings of right shots and left shots, the rightshooting Tanev could find himself in the top four, behind veteran Kevin Bieksa but ahead of Yannick Weber and rookie Frank Corrado.

The extra weight to battle for pucks will certainly come in handy.

“Obviously you want to be moved up the depth chart, but whether that happens or not is up to the coaches and how I play in the games,” he noted. “Everyone wants to play against the other teams’ best guys, play more minutes and put up more points.”

Tanev was not impressed with his pre-season debut in Wednesday’s 4-1 loss to the Oilers.

It was his first live action since last April 6 when he suffered an ankle injury against the Calgary Flames. He missed the final 10 games of the regular season and all four playoff losses.

By his own admission, he had an awful start against the Oilers before settling down. He finished the night with three shots on goal and a minus-1 rating in 19:25 of ice time.

“I didn’t feel too good at all in the first period and I had a few tough shifts,” he said. “I tried to get up in the play, but I made a poor decision on one of them and turned it over at the blue-line. After the first 10 to 12 minutes I felt good but, the first part, I was terrible.”

Tanev had plenty of company in that regard. WAKE-UP CALLS: The Canucks, who were given Thursday off, will skate at 7:30 a.m. today before heading to Surrey’s Northview course for the annual Jake Milford Charity golf tournament. New Canuck Brad Richardson attempted to recall the last time he practised that early.

“Well, I was a lot younger,” he said, smiling.

“I dressed at home and wore my skateguards to the rink. I think everyone had those 6 a.m. practices when they were kids so 7:30 is a breeze. It’s no big deal for us.”
Daniel Sedin, with three children, is accustomed to rising early, so he won’t even have to set an alarm.

“I’ll be awake, it won’t be a problem for me,” said Daniel. “The kids are usually up by 6:30.”

Zack Kassian, meanwhile, knew what time he would be getting up. “Early!” he laughed. The 7:30 a.m. skate was made necessary by new CBA rules which mandate two days off during the training camp period, one in the first half and one in the second half. It was scheduled before the poor outing Wednesday so it’s not a punishment practice. Canuck head coach John Tortorella has had some of those, however. WAIVE GOODBYE: The Canucks placed three forwards on waivers Thursday for the purpose of assigning them to the American Hockey League’s Utica Comets. Zach Hamill, the Port Coquitlam native, is being dispatched to the farm along with centre Pascal Pelletier and left-winger Colin Stuart. All three appeared in one of the first two pre-season games. The Canucks also sent wingers Brandon DeFazio and Alexandre Grenier to Utica, N. Y. The Comets face the Heat Sunday at 7 p.m. in Abbotsford in an AHL pre-season game.