



Hamhuis tapped to fix power- play flop

Iain MacIntyre – The Vancouver Sun

[Tinkering Torts: Smaller cannon on the blue- line raises eyebrows](#)

Dan Hamhuis won the lottery.

But it's the Vancouver Canucks' power play that needs to cash in. With a rare man- advantage goal in Tuesday's 3- 2 shootout loss to the Phoenix Coyotes, the Canucks will stick for now with coach John Tortorella's new power- play formation.

It looks a lot like one of old coach Alain Vigneault's power- play formations: four forwards and a lone defenceman, set up in the middle of the blue- line, who tries to load one-timers for Ryan Kesler.

The key difference from last season's version of this formation is that the blue- liner is Hamhuis. Best known in the National Hockey League for his shutdown role as a reliable defender, Hamhuis possesses, arguably, only the third- or fourth- hardest slapshot among Canuck defencemen. Alex Edler, last season's power- play ace, shoots it harder than Hamhuis. So does Jason Garrison, whose spectacular debut on the first unit a month ago was believed by some to be the surefire launch of a dominant season for the Canucks' 5- on- 4 unit. Garrison's opening- night blast in San Jose, where the Canucks play tonight, was also supposed to be evidence of Vigneault's doltishness for stubbornly refusing to use Garrison on the top unit last season when the Vancouver power play was 22nd in the league at 15.8 per cent efficiency.

The Canuck power play on Wednesday was still a dismal 10.9 per cent, 26th among 30 teams. We're not suggesting for a second that this is Garrison's fault. His point shot is heavy and accurate and tends to hurt opponents brave enough to stand in front of it. Garrison also leads Canuck defencemen with nine points in 17 games. But, clearly, his presence on the power play was no magical elixir.

For now, Garrison is on the second unit, opposite Edler. And defenceman Kevin Bieksa, who is having a strong season, is off the power play entirely.

"This isn't the first time in my career I've been taken off the power play," Bieksa said after Wednesday's practice in Arizona, shortly before the Canucks flew to San Jose for their second of four road games against formidable Pacific Division rivals. "I'm OK with it. I'll sit and wait for my turn and hopefully the power play can get going. They're going to try new things for sure."

Tortorella is going to try new things for sure.

His choice of Hamhuis over Garrison and Edler is interesting on several levels. Beyond the coach's willingness to tinker, it's unconventional to go with a smaller cannon on the blue-line.

It also reflects how much confidence Tortorella has in Hamhuis, the Canadian Olympic candidate who until two or three weeks ago was tripping over the puck and appeared to be playing without confidence while trying to understand the Canucks' new system.

"I'm a lot more comfortable," Hamhuis said. "It just took some time to adjust. I wasn't thinking about the Olympics or anything else. I was just trying to learn (the system). With a new coaching staff, you always want to make a good impression and maybe I was trying too hard. But I feel like I'm back to where I was and letting the game come to me."

Tortorella said before the Phoenix game: "He's a very intellectual player. We've gone over a lot of different things, especially in rush coverages and situations like that. They're a little bit different than he is used to. I think he has taken it in. I think he understands it now. I just think he's allowing himself to play and you see the marked difference in his play. It's instinctive now; he's not thinking."

Asked Wednesday about using Hamhuis on the top power-play unit when there are better shots on the Canucks, the coach said: "Better shots, yes, there certainly is. But as far as quarterbacking, settling it down, getting the middle of the ice, which is very important, I think he's one of our best. His game has grown. His confidence is there. He adds that dimension as far as composure, both in the (offensive) zone and, if we do have some breakdowns, defensively."

With four forwards on the ice, Hamhuis' defensive instincts are important.

He scored at even strength Tuesday with a wrist shot that floated unseen past Phoenix goalie Mike Smith. On the power play, Hamhuis probably doesn't need to blow pucks past goalies from 60 feet.

For now, Kesler is the focal point, positioned on his opposite wing for one-timers teed up by Henrik Sedin and Hamhuis.

As always, the power play's overriding strategy is to get pucks on net and crash for rebounds.

It is still bombs away for Garrison on the second unit.

"We needed to change something up and get a spark back," Garrison said. "It was good to get that one last night. The good thing about this group is you can substitute players and everybody is rooting for everybody else. At the end of the day, we just want to win. And we have been winning games, but we've got to make sure our power play gets goals, as well."

Nearly one- quarter of the way through their season, the Canucks are just 6- for- 59 with the man- advantage. It went 2- for- 31 over four weeks until scoring on its first of nine tries in Saturday's 4- 0 win against the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Kesler's second- period blast against the Coyotes gave the Canucks powerplay goals in consecutive games for the first time since the season's opening weekend.

"We'd like to score more goals," Tortorella said.

"I think we haven't had much puck luck as far as rebounds. But for 90 per cent of our power plays, we have controlled (the puck) in the end zone. Our entries have been really good. We just have not had the finish, and I think a little puck luck has to come with that. A little change like we've done here, hopefully it will spark it."

Aiming to snatch victory from jaws of defeats

Iain MacIntyre – The Vancouver Canucks

[Tired of being Shark bait, Vancouver looks to avoid 10th straight loss against San Jose tonight](#)

PHOENIX, Ariz. — You know it has been a long time since the Canucks defeated the San Jose Sharks because the last time it happened, Cody Hodgson scored the winner on a pass by Mason Raymond and the Vancouver defencemen on the ice were Aaron Rome and Keith Ballard.

None of these players, of course, are still with the National Hockey League team.

The Canucks beat the Sharks 4- 3 on Jan. 21, 2012 and have lost nine straight games since then, including four in the playoffs that ended Vancouver's season last May.

The Canucks will try again tonight in San Jose to break the cycle of losing and the Sharks' dominance, which seems especially important now that the teams are in the realigned Pacific Division.

"I can't talk for all nine games because I can't remember nine games," Canuck defenceman Kevin Bieksa said. "But earlier this season, they already beat us twice. They're a top team, well-coached, seem to match up well against us.

"I didn't know it was nine games, but it feels like it has been a lot. There's no confidence issue but I think we're sick of losing. We don't care what they think. It's nothing more than us trying to get two points. I just want to win."

Throw in pre- season games and the Canucks' futility streak is 11. Coach John Tortorella has been in charge for only two that matter: 4- 1 losses a week apart, in San Jose and Vancouver in early October.

Tortorella doesn't talk much about opponents, let alone what those teams did previously against the Canucks.

But he did say Wednesday he sees no indication that the focus of Canucks players is on anything but their next day at work.

"San Jose's the next game in the schedule," he said. "I know there's a lot of talk about that. It's hard for me to answer (for the losing streak) because I haven't been involved in it. I just know our team is focused on practice today and the next day is tomorrow."

Saturday the Canucks visit the Los Angeles Kings before ending their four- game road trip Sunday against the Anaheim Ducks, who topped the NHL standings before Wednesday's games.

"Nine games is a lot of games," Canuck winger Daniel Sedin said. "I think we have to show ourselves that we can play well in their building. That will be our goal (Thursday night)."

SORE PAW: Canuck backup goalie Eddie Lack, who is expected to play this trip, practised Wednesday with a bandage on his right hand after he was hit awkwardly by the puck in the warm- up before Tuesday's game here. He left the warm- up and watched Canuck starter Roberto Luongo lose 3- 2 in a shootout.

"I don't really know what happened," Lack smiled. "I just didn't like the music in warmup, so I went off. I'm fine, 100 per cent."

As he spoke, he held his sore hand behind his back.

"Are you hiding your hand, Eddie?"

"No."

New-look power play may spark club

Ben Kuzma – The Province

[Coach Tortorella trusting in players' creativity and instincts to help with man advantage](#)

John Tortorella looked like a New York City traffic cop Wednesday. Standing at centre ice while waving his hands and then pointing in different directions with his stick, the vocal Vancouver Canucks coach was giving a new-look power play some new practice options. With Alex Burrows joining the first unit with Ryan Kesler, Henrik and Daniel Sedin while Dan Hamhuis

manned the point, those options should allow the league's 26th-ranked power play to challenge the San Jose Sharks on Thursday.

"We just want to have the foundation of a set-up," Tortorella said. "I want them to play and I want their creativity to take over — I don't want to school them too much. Other than a couple of games, I think it's been good, but it's puck luck, and 90 per cent of the time we've controlled the zone and the entries have been really good. We haven't had the finish. A little change here will spark us.

"Kes has a dangerous shot and just getting the puck to the net with Burr in front, is going to cause some problems, too. I just want to take what they (opposition) give us."

As much as having the option of Kesler shooting from the point or unloading a one-timer from the slot — like he did Tuesday when the unit was formed in a 3-2 shootout loss to the Phoenix Coyotes — is the primary purpose, so is giving Henrik Sedin more setup options off the half-wall. The staple of Burrows getting to the net to set screens tip pucks is of paramount importance. So is a thinker in the intellectual Hamhuis.

Instead of Jason Garrison or Alex Edler unloading predictable and preventable bombs from the blueline, the Canucks are seeking a multi-dimensional attack because they've scored just six power-play goals on 55 attempts for a paltry and confusing 10.9 per cent efficiency rate.

The talent is there, but something is missing when you don't have a power-play goal in 11 of 18 games.

In the improving Hamhuis, the Canucks get an underrated quarterback and calming influence who's adept at picking out the best passing options or letting his own shot fly.

"I've been trying to work on my offensive game, and when those things come along, your confidence grows the more time you spend in the offensive zone," said Hamhuis, who scored his third goal of the season Tuesday.

"I feel I've got a role out there to work the puck and control the top end. It gives us a little bit of a different look, and Kesler is another weapon and a trigger point on the power play."

The fact that Hamhuis is now playing on instinct rather than thinking about adjusting to new rush coverages has made him that much more valuable. It has allowed Tortorella to go with Mike Santorelli between Chris Higgins and Zack Kassian on the second power play with Edler, Garrison and Kevin Bieksa as point options. Hamhuis doesn't have the hammer from the point, but that's really a moot point.

"As far as quarterbacking and settling it down and getting the middle of the ice — which is very important for a power play — he's one of our best," Tortorella added. "He's really helped us in getting it set up and puck control. He fits the bill. And he adds that dimension as far as composure in the zone and if we have some breakdowns defensively."

What's happening up front is also a new wrinkle. You know where Burrows is going, but not taking advantage of Kesler's rejuvenated wrist shot and simply having him act as a screen or at top of the crease to tip pucks is counter-productive. Two of his team-high nine goals have come on the power play and there's potential for more.

"We have a quarterback at the top and the most dangerous (power plays) are those that are interchangeable," said Kesler. "I like it."

Then again, it's not rocket science. Burrows knew when he was summoned to the top unit what awaited.

"As soon as we saw Kes on the flank and me in front, I got the message," chuckled Burrows.

"It's pretty obvious for me and pretty obvious for Kes to shoot. I just have to battle with the net-front D-man and work for position and keep my skates outside the blue — because the referee keeps yelling about it."

Burrows and Co. pumped for rivalry game

Ben Kuzma – The Province

[San Jose's home loss to lowly Buffalo likely to leave team angry](#)

GLENDALE, Ariz. — Did you hear the one about the San Jose Sharks actually losing another home game? To the lowly Buffalo Sabres? In a shootout with Cody Hodgson pulling the final trigger Tuesday?

As if the Vancouver Canucks don't have enough to contend with in trying to end a nine-game losing streak to the Sharks — including a pair of 4-1 setbacks last month — they could become chum in the Shark Tank if their Pacific Division rival does what most good teams do after a bad loss. They revert to form.

Sloppy play and lack of playing on instinct are by-products of complacency, but that won't occur Thursday because there's usually blood in the water when the two tangle. And it wouldn't be a stretch to suggest that the Sharks might be in the heads of the Canucks — especially after they were swept in the Western Conference quarterfinal series last spring.

"I don't think so," said Canucks winger Alex Burrows. "They've got our number, but a lot of our new guys haven't been a part of the history. It's core against core and that's the key. Every time we seem to give them six or seven power plays.

“And as soon as they got (assistant coach) Larry Robinson, they’re much better in their D-zone than when we beat them in 2011 (conference final). Their defence is tougher to play against and they’re breaking out the puck cleaner, and he’s a big reason why.”

Burrows laboured through the season-opening loss in San Jose. After hitting the post in a 1-1 deadlock, he blocked a second-period Patrick Marleau shot during a Sharks’ two-man advantage and would then miss a dozen games. His first crack at the Sharks comes with extra motivation.

He put them third on his personal rivalry list that’s topped by Chicago and Boston. And that’s good.

The swagger Burrows has been showing — his brief scrap with Phil Kessel on Saturday was a testament that his irritating game is intact — must be evident Thursday. Despite back-to-back homeice losses, the Sharks were leading the league in goals (56) and goals per game (3.73) heading into league play Wednesday. Joe Pavelski, Logan Couture and Marleau were in top-20 scoring and Antti Niemi was fifth with a 1.88 goalsagainst average. You’d think all that might be a tough psychological hurdle.

“It depends on the team and the personnel,” said Canucks coach John Tortorella.

“That’s hard to answer, because I haven’t been involved. I know the way we’re going about our business. We just need to keep growing our game.”

Tortorella was more of an observer in the season-opening loss in San Jose but that won’t be the case Thursday. If anything, he’ll be more of a motivational wild card.

“He really wants to win,” said winger Ryan Kesler.

“When he comes in the room he’s fired up and passionate and it really gets instilled in us. If you’re not feeling it on any given night, he gives you an extra push.”
