



Torts moves Kesler back to the middle

Jason Botchford – The Province

OTTAWA — Ryan Kesler said he's happy to play anywhere. He just happens to be a lot happier if it's at centre.

That's where Kesler finds himself again, after spending almost a month doing little on the wing, where some contend he's better suited.

But Kesler has gone 12 games without an even-strength goal. It's bounced him back to the middle of the ice where he'll start Thursday's game, centring the second line.

He'll definitely be motivated to prove it's where he belongs.

"It allows me to use my speed more on the rush and generate more," Kesler said. "I make my best plays when I'm moving my feet and skating and that happens when I'm in the middle of the ice."

Head coach John Tortorella has said he thinks Kesler is made for the wing, but the former Selke Trophy winner (best defensive forward) admitted it's been a learning curve. He's still not used to it.

He called his experience on the wing a "different game."

"When you get the puck, you generally aren't skating and you are facing the boards," he said. "I just haven't perfected that position. I'm still working on it. "I'm going to make mistakes." With Kesler at centre, it's bumped Mike Santorelli to the third line, giving the Canucks their best depth down the middle this season, with Henrik Sedin on the top line, then Kesler, Santorelli and Brad Richardson on the fourth line.

Canucks eyed Erat

Vancouver did have some tepid interest in Martin Erat, who said he wants out of Washington.

But acquiring him would have to be a pickle-for-pickle type deal with David Booth going the other way. It's fun to consider, but unlikely. There's a far greater chance the Canucks ride it out with Booth than bet on Erat, who has one goal in 31 games, and that's been playing in the weaker East.

Erat may be a better skater, but he's smaller and, at 32, three years older. In their past 82 games played, Erat has scored 10 goals and Booth 18.

Both Erat (\$4.5 million US cap hit) and Booth (\$4.2 million cap hit) have another year on their contracts.

There is something else to consider. Because Erat's actual salary dips to \$2.25 million next season, his compliance buyout would cost \$1.5 million spread over two years. Booth's buyout is a \$3.16-million cost spread over two.

Torts challenges Lu

For the Canucks to get some wins, Roberto Luongo just needs to be more like Ben Scrivens. Say what? That's what the coach said. "I'm not letting Lui off the hook, he needs to help us," Tortorella said. "I love our goalie. I love our goalies. I think they've played really well.

"We also need a save when there is a breakdown. You look at Scrivens (Monday). We had a chance to go up 3-1. We had four glorious scoring chances, he makes four saves.

"We need something like that to happen for us. I'm not putting all the onus on Lui, but he's part of the problem here as far as closing out games. It goes right through our team and it goes to the coaching staff, too." Luongo said the criticism was fair. "I've said it myself, I need to be better," he said. "I feel I'm playing well, but at the same time I feel I need to come up with the big saves when they are needed. That's what my job is and there's no way to get around that."

Blue-line adventures

The Jason Garrison and Alex Edler pairing has had its share of getting pulverized this season in its matchups. For the past four games they haven't had a Corsi rating above 50 per cent.

Of course, the most glaring mistake was Edler's decision to go into the same corner Garrison was occupying with three minutes left in Monday's game. It left Jeff Carter wide open to set up the tying goal.

But it seems the pairing will stay together, in part because Tortorella doesn't want to upend his other duos.

"It's not always the pair, sometimes it's the person," Tortorella said when asked about Nos. 5 and 23 sticking it out. "Sometimes you have to make the pair fight through it and get it together without destroying the other pairs who are playing really well.

"I think we've played well defensively. I like our defence. I had (Kevin Bieksa and Dan Hamhuis) together for a time this year and it was a nightmare.

"I like where our balance is with our back end."

Kesler pinpoints squad's issues

Jason Botchford – The Province

[Tortorella will have to get what he wants from the players he has now](#)

With answers to two questions, Ryan Kesler managed to cut succinctly through the myriad of problems that have haunted the Canucks during one of their most troubling stretches in four years. Take it away, Kesler. What do the Canucks need more of? “Wins.” What do they need less of? “Third-period letdowns.” Yes, Kesler nailed the two central themes for a team that has lost eight of 10, and blown third-period leads in four of the past six.

That’s a Canucks team who has been healthy, and still losing. It’s a team that has played as well as it has in two years, and is still losing.

It’s also team that can’t count on any white knights galloping into the Lower Mainland this season to save the day. Or score some goals.

The Canucks, understandably, have soured on the type of trades that brought in rentals such as Derek Roy and Sami Pahlsson in recent years. Both face-planted to varying degrees while in Vancouver.

They have little to no appetite to repeat these high-risk, no-reward trades, and are loath to deal any of their decent prospects or draft picks this season. Why would they? For the first time in a long time, the Canucks have a group of young players who actually have promise.

If this looks like a transition year, it probably is, though you’ll never get the Canucks to admit it.

So, if John Tortorella wants more bite from his team, and that’s the point he chose to drive home Wednesday, he’s going to have to extract it from the current lineup. It’s something he understands.

“Everyone talks about, ‘You are going to need to bring this guy in, or that guy. Make all these changes,’” Tortorella said.

“We have to find a way to figure this out ourselves.

“(We have to) start really defining who we are. Because we have not defined that yet. We are trying to find ourselves as to what is our identity.

“I think it’s easy to say (we’ll trade for someone) ... Everyone says, ‘If you can’t do it that way, you need to get someone who can.’

“But sometimes you need to figure it out as a team, you need to do it as a group. I thought we did it the right way as a group against L.A.

“If we’re going to keep competing in our conference, we’re going to have to learn how to play.”

And by that, he means learn how to play the Tortorella way.

Of course, this raises questions that haven’t been answered since the offseason of whether the coach has enough Tortorella-type players to play his style. If he wants a ton of shots, does he have the players who are capable of doing something with the rebounds around the front of the net?

Truth is, the Canucks are a team still transferring from the Alain Vigneault era. On some nights, they still look more like that same Vigneault team than one with heavy Tortorella influences — though Tortorella suggested that has been changing.

“As I said when I first came in, I thought we needed more stiffness and hardness,” he said.

“I think we’ve grown tremendously from what I saw on tape in my interview process to where we are now as a hockey club. “But we have to continue to grow.” Tortorella is hoping the glimpse of attitude his team showed in sticking up for Henrik Sedin against L.A. Monday can work like a slingshot to drive home his point.

When Jordan Nolan came at Henrik with yet another cheap shot — he was fined for a cross check on the Canucks captain in March — the Canucks generated the type of pushback they weren’t known for in the turn-the-other cheek regime.

“I think we found some personality with our team and it’s a personality I’d like to see come out more often, so it gives me something to stand on for that to happen more,” Tortorella said.

The players said they got his message, but they will need to prove that in a game. “I think we need to start games like that,” Kesler said. “We can’t just have people run at our best players, then wake up. You have to want to play that way.

“You have to bring it every night. And you have to bring it early.”

Sinking teeth into a new identity

Iain MacIntyre – The Vancouver Sun

[Tougher losers: Tortorella wants his team to have bite, and as long as their choppers hold out, he may get it; his players insist their response to L. A.’s ‘thuggery’ is a positive sign](#)

Daniel Sedin’s front tooth is back in place. If only the Vancouver Canucks could buttress their confidence and resolve with the same dental glue.

The Canucks were exposed by their performance against the Los Angeles Kings. And not because they gave away what would have been a titanic win by surrendering two late, easy goals on basic defensive mistakes.

“I just feel they showed a little bit of personality against L. A. and it’s something we need to grow,” Canucks coach John Tortorella said Wednesday after his players practised for Thursday’s game against the Ottawa Senators. “I have something to stand on (as a coach) because we did it. Now we need to keep growing there.

“I think our players can see how they banded together and went about their business the right way. Not in a wrong way or an undisciplined way, the right way. I think we need to grow on that and start really defining who we are because we have not defined that yet. We’re still trying to find ourselves as far as our identity as a hockey club.” For now, the Canucks’ identity is that they’re an aggressive, hardworking team that can’t score its way out of mistakes which, at critical times, cause them to lose games they should win. But what Tortorella saw in Monday’s 3- 2 overtime loss against the Los Angeles Kings — what we all saw — was a team with backbone and defiance, a physical team that could not only back down the opposition’s toughest players, but win puck battles and get to the net and exert its will. This display of fortitude occurred after Daniel Sedin had a tooth knocked out and Henrik Sedin nearly suffered much worse when run by 220- pound Kings centre Jordan Nolan. It continued after Ryan Stanton, who was only the fourth- toughest Canuck on the ice at the time, bravely fought Nolan because someone had to and he was available.

It was a forceful, emotional response so effective, it not only changed the game but appeared to have the power to change the Canucks’ trajectory and launch them from a 1- 4- 3 slump. Then they lost again, giving away goals late in the third period and early in overtime on mistakes by defencemen Alex Edler and Kevin Bieksa.

It was the fourth time in a sixgame homestand Vancouver blew a third- period lead and lost. They collected three “loser” points in these games, squandering five points and falling dangerously low in the NHL’s Western Conference standings. Last season, the Canucks were 18- 2- 3 when leading after two periods. What is this team’s identity? Ask after this four- game road trip, which includes games in Manhattan, North Carolina and Nashville.

The Canucks have done so much right — except win. And the way they have lost is unnerving, potentially undermining confidence and morale.

“I think the spirits are good,” Tortorella said. “It’s something, as a coaching staff, we need to watch. I think that’s the most important thing about our team right now — to watch that. Quite honestly, I think a lot of our game is good. But a mindset is an important thing (because) we’ve been in this little jam here for a little while.

“To win that game, after how we went about our business through the game, certainly ... it may catapult you into feeling really good about yourselves. So that’s a huge part of my job: learn from the mistakes in where we lost, but let’s make sure we understand where we were (good) in that game and some of the things we did. Hopefully, that will override everything.”

Tortorella, who so often insists he pays attention neither to opponents nor the standings, said the Canucks must play more often with the intensity they did against the Kings to survive in the Western Conference.

“Some nights we show it, some nights we don’t,” gritty winger Dale Weise said. “I think our identity is slowly coming together because we’re a hard team to play against. We’re not a high-scoring team, but it’s physical and it’s a grind and you’ve got to scrap out points against us. That’s the identity we want to bring.

“Standing up for each other there, when Hank got run by Nolan, was huge for our team. We know Kass (Zack Kassian) and Tommy Sestito are going to go to battle for our team every night, but everybody kind of stepped up and the physical play in the game was awesome.”

Added Daniel Sedin : “I really like the way we responded. After that hit, we totally took over the game. We talked after the game, too, that this is the way we should play from the get- go. It shouldn’t take Henrik getting hit for us to play that way. We were really desperate, hungry.”

When the Sedins signed their \$ 28- million US contract extensions four weeks ago, Tortorella, far off in the Eastern Conference until this season, made an unprovoked, preemptive strike against their critics, arguing how strong and tough the Swedes truly are. Not fighting tough, hockey tough. Competing tough. Leading, selfless tough.

Most of Monday’s game represented that toughness spread throughout the Canucks — probably the kind of team that Tortorella envisions.

“There’s a two- way conversation going on where players are asking questions,” the coach said “That shows me they know they need to get better.

“Quite honestl, the thing that bothers me most about this game sometimes is that after a tough loss, the coaches go and bang their heads against the wall for hours upon hours until the next game. And I think the players let it go. I think our guys, it bothers them and they want to solve it. They’re not just (drifting) game to game.”

Tortorella adds to pressure on Luongo by calling for big saves

Iain MacIntyre – The Vancouver Sun

OTTAWA — The score was 3- 2 unless you were counting game- changing saves, in which case Roberto Luongo was lopsidedly beaten by Ben Scrivens on Monday.

As the Canucks prepared to open a four- game road trip here Thursday night against the Ottawa Senators, badly needing to stop the bleeding in the National Hockey League standings, Vancouver coach John Tortorella demanded Luongo do better.

The implied criticism seemed harsh because until Monday's overtime loss against the Los Angeles Kings, Luongo had allowed more than two goals only once in 12 starts.

But after Scrivens made a series of strong saves to keep his team in the game, Luongo went 0-for- 2 at the end on point- blank scoring chances the Canucks bestowed upon Anze Kopitar and Mike Richards.

"It's the play in front of our goalie, but I'm not going to let Lou off the hook, either," Tortorella said. "He needs to help us on those. Sometimes we may need to win 2- 1. We may need to win 1- 0. That's the way this league is.

"I love our goalies; I think they've played really well. But we need to do better things in front of them, and we also need a save when there is a breakdown.

"Look at Scrivens. We have a chance to go up 3- 1 ... we have four glorious scoring chances and he makes four saves. We need something like that to happen for us, too. I'm not putting all the onus on Louie, but he's part of the problem here, too, as far as closing out games.

"It goes right on through our team and it goes to the coaching staff, too. We're in this together and we need to try to solve it as quickly as possible."

Against the Kings, the Canucks squandered a third- period lead and lost for the fourth time in six home games.

Still, Luongo posted a 2.18 goalsagainst average and .923 save rate in those blown games.

"I'm not going to make any excuses," Luongo said. "My job is to make big saves when they're needed and, unfortunately, I wasn't able to do that the last couple of games.

"I've said it myself: I need to be better for sure. I'm playing well, but at the same time I feel I need to come up with big saves when they're needed. That's what my job is; there's no way to get around that."

Excluding a 6- 2 win last week against the Columbus Blue Jackets, the Canucks have scored only eight goals in six games for Luongo.

"That's the NHL; that's the way it is," he said. "There's a ton of close games. That's the life of an NHL goaltender.

"You've got to be able to hold down those leads, especially late in the games."

PP SOS: After scoring only once in 13: 23 of power play time against the Kings, the Canucks reverted to their four- forward, 5- on- 4 formation during Wednesday's practice. Jason Garrison, who is in a career- high 24- game goal drought, was the first unit pointman.

Tortorella kept intact his four forward combinations, which means winger David Booth, a healthy scratch the previous three games, gets a second straight start alongside Ryan Kesler on the second line. Booth had five shots on net in 13: 45 of ice time Monday, but was on the ice for the Kings' tying goal.

"He had some good shifts, had some scoring chances," Tortorella said. "Skated well, beat defencemen a couple of times wide. He's doing the things we're looking to do consistently. Having said that, that's what we need: consistency. So he'll get another whack at it." TWO FRONT TEETH: Daniel Sedin's teeth were all at practice Wednesday, two days after the winger had a front peg knocked out by Jake Muzzin's high stick. But will it survive, so Sedin can have his two front teeth for Christmas?

"Ask the dentist," Sedin said. "He's pretty good. Superglue." ERIE TODAY, GAUNCE TOMORROW: Canucks assistant general manager Laurence Gilman said the organization is excited that 2012 first- rounder Brendan Gaunce, one of Vancouver's elite prospects, was traded in the Ontario Hockey League to the championship-calibre Erie Otters from the last- place Belleville Bulls.

"We think it's an exceptional move for Brendan," Gilman said.

"He's going from a team with nothing to play for to an extremely competitive team that has a chance to win the OHL and go on to the Memorial Cup. Every game is going to be important. This experience can't do anything but help Brendan."

Gaunce, 19, a candidate for Team Canada's world junior team, has 26 points in 22 games for Belleville this season.
