

Surprise at the Quad Pad

High-level summer league attracts outstanding players; games open to public



Scott RADLEY

The massive winger dips around one opponent with a move worthy of a smaller man, dekes around a second with a quick bit of stick-work and finds himself alone in front of the net. Which is when he roofs the puck over the helpless goalie to give his team the lead.

Tough to say what's more surprising, that it's Ottawa Senators' tough guy Brian McGrattan making the beautiful finesse moves, or that he's doing it in Hamilton as part of what might be the highest-quality summer league you're going to find anywhere yet that few people know about.

Because if they did, they'd probably be out watching.

Every Thursday night through June, July and the early part of August — the league's two semifinal games are tonight beginning at 7:15 — guys like McGrattan, Vancouver Canucks' defenceman Kevin Bieksa, Phoenix Coyote Joey Tenute, former Hamilton Bulldog and current Providence Bruin Nate DiCasmirro, the Peoria Rivermen's Josh Soares, Chicago Blackhawk prospect Peter LeBlanc, Buffalo Sabre draft pick Drew Schiestel, former Florida Panther Nick Smith, and former Dallas Star and Calgary Flame Ryan Christie strap it on for a good workout.

It's not just them. There are a bunch of U.S. college scholarship players like Cam Talbot, Jon Jankus and Brandon Roshko, former prospects like Ryan Kuwabara, and recently graduated Hamilton Red Wings' captain Corey Stringer. There are Jr. A, semi-pro and European pros filling the rosters. In

the past, guys like Ray Emery, Nathan Horton and Jason Spezza have also been part of it.

Simply put, if you are from this area — or are buddies with someone who is — and you can play hockey, you're here.

"If you can keep up with this, you can play," LeBlanc says.

So what's the story?

Well, four years ago, local pro Mike Burgoyne was playing in the United Hockey League during the winter and starting up a camp in the summer. The problem was, he wasn't getting enough kids to fill the ice he'd booked.

That's when he realized that while most pro players stay on the ice throughout the off-season, there was no place for high-end guys to play without stiffs like you and me getting in the way and slowing things down.

So he decided to see what would happen if he invited a bunch of guys he knew to play some games in which they'd keep score. The only criteria was that the players had to be outstanding.

"This is the first league I've heard of that's designated for these guys," he says.

It didn't take long to fill four teams, which became six, which is now eight. They're getting more competitive all the time, as guys now recruit their buddies to build stronger teams.

"There's a lot of that," Burgoyne says.

It shows. The hockey is outstanding. There's no hitting and the competition is friendly, but it's fast-paced and the players want to win. Many are shocked at how good the level is when they first show up. "It's a good pace," DiCasmirro says. "I was surprised. This is probably the best offseason ice I've had in a while."

"Over the years, it's really picked up," Tenute says. "It's definitely a good quality."



TED BRELLISFORD / THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

TAKE A LOOK. Vancouver Canuck Kevin Bieksa, who recently signed an \$11-million contract, is one of the outstanding pros playing summer league at the Quad Pad.



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**NOTE DICASMIRRO,
PROVIDENCE BRUIN**



So how have you not heard of this before, you're wondering?

Truth is, few have. It's not widely publicized. Really, the only people who find out it's on are those already at the Mohawk 4Ice Centre — the Quad Pad to most — who do a double-take when guys like McGrattan or Bieksa walk in lugging their equipment.

But it's open for the public to come watch. And in this environment away from the TV cameras and constant scrutiny, the guys are at their relaxed best.

Folks who want to chat will probably get a moment or two, along with an autograph if they want.

The best part though, is getting a chance to see their skills up close. Up really close.

Like late in Tenute's game. Sliding down his off wing, the diminutive forward takes a pass right in the sweet spot and unloads. The puck goes from ice to the top of the net in less than a blink.

Standing behind the glass within a few feet of the blast, it's all the reminder the rest of us need about why the guys on the ice are playing pro hockey and we're not.

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