

FIRE AND ICE

**IN A SLEEPY SUBURBAN
CONNECTICUT TOWN,
STANLEY CUP CHAMPIONS
ARE MADE. BY ALLAN KREDA**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK PETERSON

FREE AGENT
GOALTENDER ERIC
MIHALIK PREPARES
FOR THE SEASON

When one tries to imagine the place where Stanley Cup champions are made, Darien, Connecticut isn't

usually the first town that comes to mind. Nevertheless on a sweltering summer afternoon, far away from the cool ice of the hockey trade, over a dozen players—including former, present and hopefully future champions are hard at work at Prentiss Fitness before the puck is officially dropped this season.

In one corner, Montreal Canadiens star Max Pacioretty grimaces his way through a set of bench presses. Nearby, Buffalo Sabres forward Matt Moulson drips sweat as he completes yet another set of grueling leg extensions. In the middle of the floor, Rangers winger Chris Kreider adds mass to his speedy frame, plowing his way through a rigorous shoulder series known as the “Cuban Press.”

The tons of metal are all moved under the scrutiny and supervision of Ben Prentiss, whose workout regimens have helped turn around and prolong NHL careers.

New York Rangers forward Marty St. Louis, 39, is still playing at an elite level, leading his team to the Stanley Cup Finals last season. He has had his best NHL seasons since beginning the grueling summer routines nearly a decade ago.

“It’s great to come here, get your work done and get out,” says St. Louis, who became a Ranger last March in a trade from the Tampa Bay Lightning for Ryan Callahan. “Leave all that stress to Ben. He’s got to put all that stuff together for us.”

Prentiss has been achieving remarkable success via that “stress.” NHL players flock to exercise at his place 40 miles north of Manhattan, where routines are lauded in equal



MAX PACIORETTY OF THE MONTREAL CANADIENS PUSHES HIMSELF UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF BEN PRENTISS.

parts for their sheer difficulty and on-ice benefits such as extra strength and endurance come playoff time.

St. Louis, who lives in the nearby Connecticut town of Greenwich, choreographs his offseason to accommodate the rigorous exercise he's eager to endure.

"It's all about sustaining fitness and speed because the game is so fast now," says the forward who has played more than 1,000 NHL games and won a Stanley Cup with the Lightning in 2004. "Summer is for getting as strong as you can. Come playoff time, I appreciate all the work because it goes a long way towards preventing injuries."

For Pacioretty, who scored a career-high 39 goals last season and added five tallies in the playoffs as the Canadiens reached the Eastern Conference Finals where they lost to the Rangers, the workouts have proven to be invaluable.

"Every year I learn more and more about what I have to do to build muscle during the season," says the 25-year-old forward from nearby New Canaan. "I'm focused not on how I feel in September, but how I feel in April. I've certainly gotten better each season, but still feel there's room to improve. The key is to always be training smart."

Prentiss employs a simple ethos. "We're going to change your career," he says, "whether we take you from college to the AHL, or the AHL to the pros." Prentiss' laboratory houses autographed and framed jerseys of every professional player he has trained at the 2,000 square-foot workout space. "If you're in the pros and had a tough year, we'll make a difference. The workouts are about strength and power, plus focusing on putting you back together after a long season."

Prentiss believes his success stems from the individual attention that each player gets throughout the offseason. "Every athlete is different," Prentiss says. "They each require a different approach physically as well as mentally. First we identify what injuries each guy has and fix those. We do things to prevent them from happening again. Then, we tackle their weaknesses and make them strengths."

Pacioretty adds that the grueling workouts essentially saved his career, which was derailed late in the 2010-11 season when he suffered a severe concussion and fractured vertebra after he was checked awkwardly into the boards by Boston's giant defenseman Zdeno Chara.

After scoring 20 times in his first three years with the Canadiens, Pacioretty has notched 87 goals in the last three seasons with Montreal.

"Working with Ben turned me from a fringe player into the player I am now," Pacioretty says. "Anyone can play well



PRENTISS WATCHES SEAN BACKMAN, AS MAX PACIORETTY AND MATT MOULSON AWAIT THEIR TURN.

FRONT ROW: BRIAN O'NEILL (AHL MANCHESTER MONARCHS), SEAN BACKMAN (AHL MANCHESTER MONARCHS), JAMES VAN RIEMSDYK (TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS), COLTON ORR (TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS), BEN PRENTISS, NATHAN GERBE (CAROLINA HURRICANES), MARTIN ST. LOUIS (NEW YORK RANGERS), MATT MOULSON (BUFFALO SABRES), CAM ATKINSON (COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS), MARK ARCOBELLO (EDMONTON OILERS), BACK ROW: PAUL THOMPSON (AHL ALBANY DEVILS), MIKE SISLO (AHL ALBANY DEVILS), ANDREW MILLER (AHL OKLAHOMA CITY BARONS), CHRIS KREIDER (NEW YORK RANGERS)





“Every athlete is different. They each require a different approach physically as well as mentally.”

for 30 games but in an 82-game season, you need to treat your body differently and Ben has taught me how to do that.”

That theory is seconded by the likes of Toronto Maple Leafs enforcer Colton Orr and 5-foot-5 Carolina Hurricanes scorer Nathan Gerbe.

“Everything is very personalized and geared towards building overall strength and focus,” says Orr, 32. “I look forward to it every day. It’s unique the way that we train together. We do have fun despite the pain.”

Nathan Gerbe agrees. “I had back surgery three years ago and I didn’t know if I could continue training at such a high intensity,” he says. “Ben’s confidence in me and his philosophy led to my best season in the NHL last year. I feel as strong as I have ever been.”

The Prentiss workouts include rapid-fire weight lifting, isometrics and various jump-training routines known as plyometrics, plus modified strongman training on the scorching blacktop of the parking lot.

Once the Stanley Cup has been raised each June, players arrive en masse in Darien. They appear at designated hourly slots which many have worked years to acquire. Each is assigned an individual trainer and works with an on-site nutritionist.

The conglomeration of athletes is quietly surveyed and visited by Hammer, a 53-pound blue American Staffordshire Terrier who ambles amongst perspiring players perhaps seeking treats, but also offering silent encouragement plus an occasional bark of support. His serious canine countenance—without any accompanying words—adorns the back of T-shirts many NHLers wear as they tolerate the pain. The simplicity fits with the message Prentiss strives to relay to his willing subjects. “We’re not about any corny mottos,” he emphasizes. “Just the work.” ■

NO WORKOUT IS TOO UNCONVENTIONAL AT THE PRENTISS GYM, AS LONG AS IT IS EFFECTIVE.