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Flyers Have a New and Improved van Riemsdyk

by Tim Panaccio

You don't want to even say the words "sophomore jinx" to Flyers' forward James van Riemsdyk.

Not at this training camp. Not after how hard he's worked over the summer to bulk up and look more like a power forward in the NHL this season.

JVR is not thinking jinx. He's thinking bigger, better things on the ice.

"As much as you don't want to admit it, experience goes a long way," van Riemsdyk said, who had 15 goals and 35 points in a roller-coaster rookie season as a Flyer. He said he placed a lot of mental pressure on himself to make the roster last fall and then proved he belonged.

Truth is, he started out on fire then tailed off before gaining some late-season balance in his game.

"It knocks you down a few times during a year," van Riemsdyk said. "You learn a few things. I've learned. It showed me what I had to do in the summer. I want to make sure I maintain my strength.

"Having a full year and playing experience is huge. Obviously, you want to push yourself, but coming into camp last year was different. I didn't know what to expect."

JVR finished the season at 200 pounds, yet lacked muscle definition up top. At one point, his body fat content was 13 percent. Now, he's noticeably bigger in the chest. He came to camp at 206 pounds and his body fat is down to seven percent. That's a huge difference.

"They put a program together for me," he said. "I got leaner and still put on a few pounds of muscle. It was good. I feel great on the ice right now and ready to get going."

He trained in Darien, Conn. with Marty St. Louis on a program designed jointly by Flyers' trainer Jim McCrossin and personal trainer Ben Prentiss, who operates Prentiss Hockey Performance.

"It was a little bit different approach," van Riemsdyk said. "I felt fresh throughout the summer. His workouts are a little different. I wanted to try something new. After a while, you're body gets used to the same workouts. I wanted to try a fresh approach to see more results. I feel better right now."

When van Riemsdyk trained with the U.S. National program, it had a heavy emphasis on weights and nothing was body-specific to players. His new routine is more varied and geared strictly to him.

"Everything with Ben was personalized and hands-on," van Riemsdyk said. "Like, St. Louis may have had different things to work on than me. So in that regard, I liked it, and felt it was really good program for me."

And JVR looks quicker on the ice. Several Flyers said so.

"My game has always been built on speed," van Riemsdyk said. "For my size, I have always skated pretty well. That is something I wanted to use to my full advantage. I like how I skate, but I want to get faster and get more dynamic and explosive out there."

On Saturday, during Peter Laviolette's first training camp practice as a Flyers' coach, JVR was on Jeff Carter's line with Nikolai Zherdev. That was a line the organization had penciled in for camp back in August.

"I played with just about everyone last year," van Riemsdyk said. "Lines are always going to change. The lines were this way today but you never know what it will be tomorrow or later in the season ... We have a lot of skill. You just have to find your niche."

He was impressed with Zherdev.

"You can tell he's skilled; he has a lot of confidence with the puck," van Riemsdyk said. "He has a good grasp of what we're doing out there."

Laviolette expects to see a more mature player in van Riemsdyk this season.

"You'd like to think and hope that JVR also takes the next step," Laviolette said. "He came in, got his feet wet and it was an up and down year. Now he comes [back] and he's older, stronger and more experienced after a year in the league. You like to think he comes in and takes that next step."

He is certainly looking more like a power forward. How he uses his body, how he muscles defensemen down low in the slot, will determine whether he has strength where needed.

"I know my body is going to mature and get stronger naturally and get bigger," van Riemsdyk said. "You want to put weight on the right way and not just go and put on fat and be slow out there."

"I am gradually putting on weight the right way and not water weight. I feel bigger and stronger every year ... On the ice, I definitely feel quicker. Just skating wise I feel good out there."

He also said he'd like to add a few more pounds.

The big thing for JVR in camp is the competition for ice time, not just from players who were already on the roster, but also from rookies/prospects such as Mike Testwuide, who was impressive in the rookie scrimmage against the Washington Capitals, and another ex-junior player, Eric Wellwood.

“Obviously, you want to focus on yourself getting better,” van Riemsdyk said. “There are a lot of good guys in the system here. You have to do what it takes and step it up a notch.”