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Aaron Palushaj standing in wings

by Pat Hickey

Aaron Palushaj has had a taste of the National Hockey League, and that's where he hopes to be on Oct. 6 when the Canadiens open the 2011-12 season in Toronto.

"My goal is to make the team coming out of training camp," Palushaj said on a phone hookup from Toronto, where he was one of 26 players attending the NHL Players Association Rookie Showcase.

The two-day event, which ended with a scrimmage Tuesday, is a promotion for Upper Deck and Panini trading cards, and had Palushaj rubbing shoulders with the top 2011 draft choices, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, Gabriel Landeskog and Jonathan Huberdeau.

"I'm in the best shape I've ever been in," Palushaj said. "I've gained seven or eight pounds and it's all muscle. My body fat is down by two per cent."

The improved conditioning is the result of hard work and a new regime prescribed by Ben Prentiss, a hockeyfitness guru based in Darien, Conn. The two hooked up after Palushaj went to New York for the wedding of former University of Michigan teammate Max Pacioretty.

"I had been working out at home in Michigan, and Max suggested that I join him in Connecticut," Palushaj said. "It was a great experience working with players like Max, Marty St. Louis and Ryan Shannon."

This will be the second Canadiens' training camp for Palushaj, who was acquired from St. Louis in a Feb. 3, 2010, trade for Matt D'Agostini. He feels a solid season in Hamilton (22 goals and 35 assists in 57 games), a three-game stint with the Canadiens (no points and a plus-1 rating) and an improved defensive game will allow him to make a run at one of the few open spots on the roster.

"I've never had trouble putting up points, but I think the biggest challenge for a young player is the defensive game," said Palushaj, who will turn 22 next week. "I feel that's one area where I have improved since turning pro."

Palushaj said he benefitted from working with coaches Randy Cunneyworth and Randy Ladouceur last season in Hamilton, and it won't hurt his cause to have them around at training camp next month. Both coaches will be part of Jacques Martin's staff in Montreal this season.

Palushaj said he drew some inspiration from the success his Hamilton teammates like David Desharnhais, Ryan White and Pacioretty had after being called up to the Canadiens.

"It's good to know that you played on the same lines with those guys and they made it, but in the long run I have to be my own player," Palushaj said. "I have to come into camp and show people what I can do."

He'll start that process at the Canadiens' rookie camp, which opens Sept. 12 in Brossard. The main camp begins with physicals on Sept. 15, and Palushaj and the other players will get an

opportunity to display their talents as the Canadiens play eight exhibition games between Sept. 20 and Oct. 1. The survivors will gather at the Blue Mountain ski resort in Collingwood, Ont., on Oct. 2 for the final three days of practise before the season opener.

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