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Flyers asking more from Giroux and van Riemsdyk

by Adam Kimelman

When their professional world changed, Claude Giroux was getting in a workout and James van Riemsdyk was sleeping.

"I was taking a nap, woke up to a ton of missed calls and text messages," van Riemsdyk told NHL.com. "I was like everyone else, a little bit shocked at first."

"When I was done, I had a bunch of texts from my buddies saying, 'Can you believe what just happened?'" added Giroux. "I didn't know what happened, so I called one of my buddies."

The news that late June day was the Philadelphia Flyers had traded franchise stalwarts Jeff Carter and Mike Richards in separate deals. That meant Giroux and van Riemsdyk, who had been part of one of the deepest forward corps in the NHL, had been promoted from support players to leading men.

In announcing the trades, Flyers general manager Paul Holmgren cited one of the reasons he was comfortable parting with a pair of All-Star centers was the development of Giroux and van Riemsdyk into full-time, top-six forwards.

"I think Claude sort of emerged here over the last couple years," Holmgren said on June 23. "If you go back to his playoffs (in 2010), he was tremendous. (Last) season he was one of our better forwards again. And I can't say enough about how James played in the playoffs, and we're hoping that's his ascension to becoming a consistent, well-rounded player continues."

Giroux, 23, played all 82 games for the second straight season, finished 2010-11 with a career-best 25 goals and skated in his first NHL All-Star Game. He led the team with 51 assists and 76 points and topped the team in the postseason with 12 points in 11 games. In his second season, van Riemsdyk, 22, had 21 goals and 42 points, then tied for the team lead with seven goals in 11 playoff games.

Last season they were just two of nine Flyers to score at least 16 goals. But five of those players (Carter, Richards, Ville Leino, Kris Versteeg, Nikolay Zherdev) are gone, taking with them 101 goals, nearly 40 percent of the Flyers' offense. The players brought in to replace them -- Wayne Simmonds, Jakub Voracek, Maxime Talbot, Jaromir Jagr and Brayden Schenn -- combined for 36 goals in the NHL (though Jagr had 19 in the KHL).

That means more responsibility is being placed on Giroux and van Riemsdyk.

"Obviously we're counting on Claude to score more than he did last year," Holmgren said. "We're counting on James to score more than he did last year."

The organizational belief is the youngsters are ready for the challenge.

"I think we all recognize Claude has been a pretty good player for us for a couple years, one of our key players in the last two years in the playoffs," Holmgren told NHL.com. "James is a guy that really I thought stepped up his game in the playoffs for us."

Hearing how much their boss believes in them provides even more motivation.

"It's a sign of confidence from your GM," Giroux told NHL.com. "Obviously when it happened, all the guys talked together and we're pretty excited. It's going to be a challenge. It's going to be something new."

"That's a huge show of confidence there," added van Riemsdyk. "I was able to play a more prominent role on the team with the injuries we had at the end of the year, got some power-play time. With all the things, with my confidence growing, getting more experience, really get that opportunity to play that prominent role, I wanted to take that opportunity and run with it. Toward the end of the year I started to blossom, getting that confidence and that experience playing that key minutes against the best defense pairings. I learned a lot from that and can put that to use this year."

Both players admit that one key is staying true to the game that got them this far -- and not taking on too much extra work to fill in for missing pieces.

"I know what makes me successful out there and I'm not going to play outside myself or play outside the player I know how to be," van Riemsdyk said. "Just have to go out there and keep my game simple like I have been. I'm playing with some great players out there, and playing with Claude doesn't hurt. It's good and we're excited for the challenge."

"I think I have to play the same way that I've been playing," added Giroux. "I have to trust my game. I don't like to see who I play against, I just want to play my game. I don't want to adjust to them, I want them to adjust to me. I think it's important just to focus on that."

To that extent, neither player changed his offseason conditioning program at all. Van Riemsdyk spent his summer in Connecticut working out with Ben Prentiss, who also trains such NHL stars as Martin St. Louis, while Giroux again worked with renowned trainer Tony Greco in Ottawa.

"Claude is one of our most fit guys," Holmgren said. "He looks a little bit bigger, a little bit stronger again this year. I would go as far as to say he's probably going to test as one of our most fit guys, without question."

"James, I think it took him a little longer probably because of the route he took playing college hockey (but) he's bigger, he's stronger."

While Holmgren believes Giroux already has established himself as a top-level player in the League, he said for van Riemsdyk to reach that level means the 6-foot-3, 200-pound left wing needs to bring the same level of play to every game.

"It's a consistency thing with him," Holmgren said. "I think he's on the right track. ... It comes down to consistency. James has the ability to take his game to another level. Is he going to do it all the time? We're kind of counting on him being one of those guys, for sure."

Van Riemsdyk said the taste he got last season playing against top checking lines and top defensive pairings makes him hungry for more.

"I think it was huge just for the confidence level that I can play against those top (defense) pairings, those top checking lines," he said. "At the same time, you can't just rest on that. It's a difficult challenge being able to do that throughout an 82-game season. That's a challenge I'm definitely looking forward to partaking in and going from there."

It's a challenge the Flyers need their new stars to meet.

"That's why you play the game, to be out there in those key situations where your team is counting on you to produce," van Riemsdyk said. "It's up to you to go out there and do it."

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