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Pacioretty ready to get back on the ice in Montreal

by Scott Ericson



SUNRISE, FL - MARCH 3: Max Pacioretty #67 of the Montreal Canadiens carries the puck up ice against the Florida Panthers on March 3, 2011 at the BankAtlantic Center in Sunrise, Florida. The Canadiens defeated the Panthers 4-0. (Photo by Joel Auerbach/Getty Images) Photo: Getty Images, Joel Auerbach / 2011 Getty Images

Max Pacioretty had a pretty busy summer.

The Montreal Canadiens left wing signed a new contract with the Habs, traveled to Russia for a wedding and then got married himself.

All the while, squeezing in workouts to remain in shape for the upcoming season and working at youth hockey camps.

The distractions were quite welcome for the 22-year old New Canaan native whose offseason was made a bit longer after sustaining a season-ending injury March 8 when he was on the wrong end of a cheap shot delivered by Boston Bruins defenseman Zdeno Chara, leaving him with a severe concussion and a fractured vertebra.

"It was a busy summer, but it was a lot of fun," said Pacioretty, now back in Montreal. "I stay in Connecticut during the summer because I need a break from Montreal, which is all hockey all the time. I got married, my sister got married and wife's brother got married, so it was busy, but

it was good to focus on things other than hockey, especially after what happened last year and how the season ended for me."

During the fateful play, Chara checked Pacioretty as the two were chasing the puck alongside the Bruins bench with 15 seconds left in the second period. The hit sent Pacioretty face-first into the stanchion at the end of the bench and knocked him out cold, leaving him crumpled on the ice in front of the benches.

The resulting injury left Pacioretty on the bench as his team entered the Stanley Cup playoffs against their hated rivals from Boston.

The Bruins won that series in 7 games, eventually going on to win the Stanley Cup, with their captain, Chara, being the first to raise the Cup.

Though it stung to watch, Pacioretty was motivated knowing his team could be in that spot next year.

"I watched it on TV and it was good and bad," he said. "It showed our team was so close since we lost to the Bruins in such a tough series. I think that with a full lineup, if we avoid injuries, we can be where they were last year."

As for Chara, Pacioretty said he spoke with the defenseman after the injury.

"He apologized and that was good to hear and get out of the way, but I still had a broken neck so I'm not sure how much it did for me." Pacioretty said. "I do not want to be remembered as the guy that got his neck broken, so I hope I can get back on the ice and move past it."

Pacioretty enters this season knowing that he will have a spot on the Canadiens roster after starting his first three years in the AHL with the Hamilton Bulldogs.

In June, Canadiens general manager Pierre Gauthier announced the signing of Pacioretty to a two-year contract.

"We are very pleased to have reached an agreement with Max Pacioretty who is one of the most promising young players in our organization," Gauthier said in a press release.

"A power forward with skills, Max showed that he can help our team and make a name for himself in the NHL."

Gauthier's vote of confidence takes off a bit of the pressure in training camp, but Pacioretty still realizes he has to work hard to stay in the league.

"It helps me because this is the earliest I have come to Montreal and knowing you will not be going up and down is more comfortable," he said. "It is not that I will not work as hard, but it is good to know where I will be when the season starts. I have an apartment instead of living in a hotel for the first few weeks or months."

Playing in a hockey crazy city like Montreal was daunting at first, but Pacioretty is glad he stuck it out and found a home north of the border.

"It is like the Yankees on steroids because all they care about is what we do," he said of the fans in Montreal. "Two years ago when I was struggling I was praying to be in another organization because they are so hard on you, but I am glad I stayed and got through it. It made me stronger and made me a better player. I overcame the pressure and to do that at a young age was important."

Playing in a city where hockey players are treated as gods and free meals and drinks are easy to come by can offer many temptations to young players. Pacioretty, however, has always been focused on one thing, being the best hockey player he can be.

"I will do whatever it takes to make it," he said. "Some guys like to go out and party but I have never really gotten into that too much. I try to stay focused on my goals and my game."

Helping him stay focused now will be his new bride, Russian tennis player Katia Afinogenova, sister of former NHL player Maxim Afinogenov.

His parents, Ray and Anette, often travel from New Canaan to watch him play and Pacioretty credits that support with helping to keep him centered.

"It is awesome," Pacioretty said. "My parents are always positive, sometimes too positive, about my hockey but having their support keeps me grounded."

Pacioiretty comes back to Darien during the summer to work with hockey trainer Ben Prentiss.

Prentiss runs Prentiss Hockey Performance in Darien and over the last few years has worked with several NHL players -- including Martin St. Louis and Ryan Shannon -- on conditioning and helping players reach the next level.

Pacioiretty credits Prentiss with getting him ready for the rigors of the NHL season.

"He is the guru of hockey workouts," Pacioretty said. "He knows everything you need to do. We incorporate diet and ways to recover and he has just been a huge role in my career."

With his training complete, Pacioretty is set for camp to begin and ready to take some hits to see how his body responds to real action.

"I am a little nervous but I am going to play a lot of preseason games," I have not taken any significant hits and it was good to take time but I am ready to get going and it will be good to have some contact again and see how my body and head respond."

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