

Figure Skaters Answer the Call in a Faster N.H.L.

By MATT HIGGINS

BUFFALO — Sam Reinhart was at a rookie showcase in Toronto two years ago, months after the Buffalo Sabres drafted him second over all. There to have his photo taken for the sports-card maker Upper Deck, he took part in a video promotion in which a figure skating coach put him and other teenage prospects through pirouettes and pairs routines while they were wearing hockey equipment.

The setup was meant to create comedy. But when Reinhart returns home to Vancouver for the off-season, he will work with a figure skater to prepare for a more serious role as an N.H.L. leading man.

The pace of play in pro hockey is fast-forwarding, spurred by improvements in fitness, training, technique and rule enforcement meant to open the flow of the game. N.H.L. players, young and old, are turning to figure skaters to become speedier and more fluid on ice.

“Last year was the first summer I went to a skating coach, and she did wonders for my skating and made me a lot more comfortable on the ice, and obviously made a big difference this year for me,” said Reinhart, 20, who tied for third among N.H.L. rookies this season with 23 goals.

Reinhart and his older brother Griffin, a defenseman with the Edmonton Oilers, trained under Barb Aidelbaum, who also works with Tanner Glass of the Rangers and Ryan Kesler of the Anaheim Ducks. She is a consultant for the Vancouver Canucks.

Growing up in Vancouver, Aidelbaum spent hours watching her three brothers and their teammates at hockey practice and games. She recognized that they would benefit from the attention to form and technique that she had learned as a competitive figure skater.

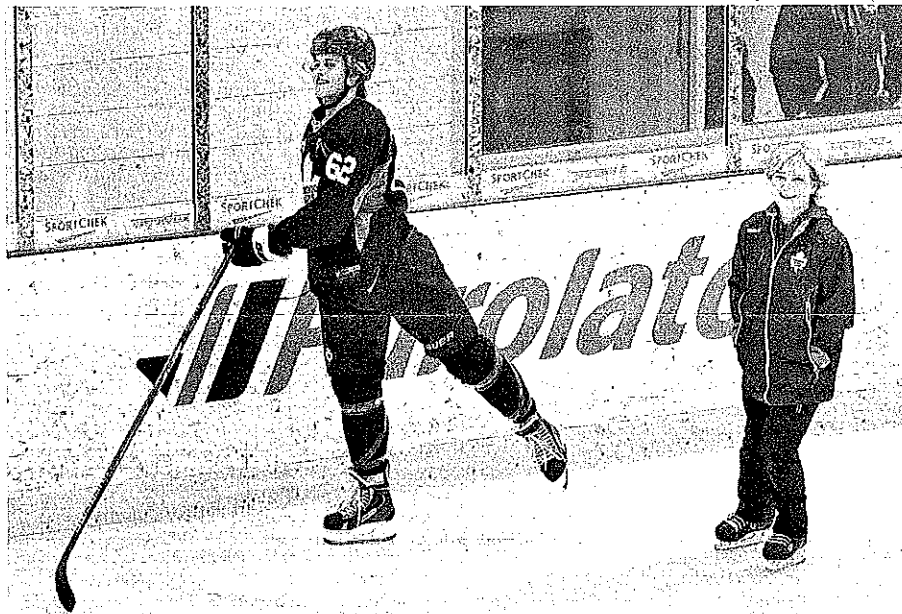
“A big part of being a high-performance skater is weight distribution, where you are on the blade, whether on the ball of the foot or the middle or just behind the middle,” said Aidelbaum, who has been teaching hockey players for 30 years.

And then there is edging.

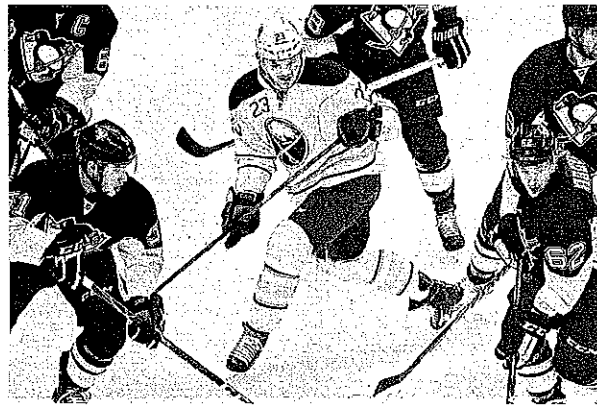
“There’s eight edges on ice skates, and figure skaters train in the edging capacity,” she said. “If a player has a strong command of all those eight edges, then the off-ice training will transfer over.”

Figure skaters have worked with N.H.L. players for decades. Laura Stamm pioneered the practice in the 1970s, notably training Bob Nystrom of the Islanders. Barbara Williams began as the Islanders’ skating coach in 1977 before joining the Devils. During the 1990s, Aidelbaum worked with Pavel Bure, the Canucks star who was known as the Russian Rocket.

“Every single guy in this league is looking for little things to make themselves better,” said Mark Pysyk, a 24-year-old defenseman for Buffalo who has worked with Dawn Braid, a for-



ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE/TORONTO STAR, VIA GETTY IMAGES



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mer figure skater and a Sabres skating consultant. “If that something can make 1 percent difference, then absolutely every guy you talk to will say he’d be up for that.”

The nuance of skating surprised Tyler Bozak, a veteran center for the Toronto Maple Leafs. Out with a concussion for

said.

Toronto finished with the N.H.L.’s worst record and failed to make the playoffs. To prepare for next season, Bozak plans to send video of his off-season skating workouts to Underhill for tips and corrections.

Dan Marr, the director of N.H.L. Central Scouting, a league department that rates amateur hockey prospects for the draft, said changes to rule enforcement emerging from the lockout during the 2012-13 season had resulted in faster play. That in turn has put an emphasis on skating.

Hits that lead to head injuries have been targeted, and stricter penalties for obstruction, like hooking, holding and interference, have placed a premium on speed over brawn.

“That imperative trickled down to scouts, agents and junior teams,” Marr said.

Lumbering players once selected as team projects became an endangered species.

“Skating is the No. 1 criteria,” Marr said. “It’s mandatory. If you can’t skate, you’re not even going to be a draft consideration.”

The 2015-16 rookie class embodied the trend.

In February, Dylan Larkin, 19, of the Detroit Red Wings blazed around the ice at Bridgestone

The Maple Leafs’ William Nylander, above left, working with the skating coach Barb Underhill, a former world champion pairs figure skater. Left, the Sabres’ Sam Reinhart (23), a top rookie, worked with Barb Aidelbaum, who has taught skating technique to hockey players for 30 years.

Arena in Nashville, breaking a 20-year-old record for fastest lap at the N.H.L. All-Star Skills Challenge. The previous record-holder was Mike Gartner, a Hall of Famer considered a model for proper skating form. Larkin’s fellow rookies, like Connor McDavid of the Edmonton Oilers, Shayne Gostisbehere of the Philadelphia Flyers, Artemi Panarin of the Chicago Blackhawks and Jack Eichel of the Sabres, entered the league as elite skaters.

“From when I first came into the league to now, it’s gotten a lot faster,” said Bozak, 30. “I got a little slower as the years went on, because of age. But I also think everyone coming into the league is really fast, so that’s why working on it now has made me feel a little better on the ice, to be more up to speed.”

With a goal of making Sam Reinhart among the league’s fastest, Aidelbaum began by training him like a defenseman. Skating backward and balancing on different parts of his blades helped him understand where to plant his weight once he began training as a forward.

The lessons clicked once Reinhart rejoined the sessions with his brother and Aidelbaum last July after attending a camp for Sabres prospects.

“He was skating so fast and exploding off his toes for starting quickness,” Aidelbaum said. “Griffin and I stood back on the boards and laughed.”

Sometimes placing hockey players with a figure skater can lead to unintended comedy, too.

A rising premium on agility as changes speed up a sport.

most of February and March, he used the time off to work with Toronto’s skating coach, Barb Underhill, a world champion pairs figure skater in 1984 who also competed for Canada at the 1980 and 1984 Winter Olympics.

Underhill recommended that Bozak alter the rocker and the blades on his skates.

“I feel faster, quicker, stronger,” he said. “She’s awesome.”

Bozak became an evangelist for skate configuration in the Leafs’ dressing room.

“I started telling other guys on the team to change theirs,” he