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Best Pest In Show - hockey players who get under their opponent's skin

Hockey Digest, Feb, 2001 by Karl Samuelson

Whether dogging star forwards or hounding the crease, Tomas Holmstrom and the NHL's other top pests always manage to get under their opponent's skin

THE PHILADELPHIA FLYERS WON two consecutive Stanley Cups in the mid-1970s by overcoming the offensive juggernauts of the Boston Bruins and Buffalo Sabres. A great deal of credit was justifiably bestowed upon Fred Shero, one of the most innovative coaches the game has ever known. Goaltender Bernie Parent won the Conn Smythe Trophy, awarded to the best playoff per. former, both years, and the superlative play of captain Bobby Clarke, sniper Reggie Leach, and outstanding forwards such as Bill Barber and Rick MacLeish are well documented. But lost in the shadows is the work of super pest Bob Kelly. Nicknamed "The Hound" because, of this relentless play at all points on the ice, Kelly was a vital cog in the Flyers, drive to the top.

"Bobby was a great forechecker and a real agitator," says the St. Louis Blues' all-time points leader Bernie Federko, now color analyst for the Blues' television network. "He was a little guy, but he could really skate and he used his speed to hurt you. Everything changes when you've got someone coming in at 100 miles per hour. He got under everyone's skin and that's what he did best. The defensemen knew Kelly was coming so they got rid of the puck more quickly than they should have. He used his strength and his speed to try to punish other teams."

"Kelly was able to get people off their game and help change the momentum," says Blues assistant coach Mike Kitchen. "No player likes to get hit on the ice. It's embarrassing if you get knocked down, especially by a small player, and when you stand up the first thing you think of is retaliation. That's how pests draw a lot of their penalties. All they're really doing is finishing their checks. They're in on you so quickly they strip you of the puck. The embarrassment factor is just human nature and you want to get even right away instead of picking your spots."

The Edmonton Oilers dynasty of the 1980s was the direct antithesis of the Flyers. While the Philadelphia game was based on disciplined defensive play and "in your face" hockey, the Oilers developed a lightning-quick offensive attack and wore down the opposition with speed and finesse. Still, the Oilers employed one of the most irritating players to ever lace on a pair of skates: Esa Tikkanen. The contributions of Wayne Gretzky, Mark Messier, Jari Kurri, Glenn Anderson, and Grant Fuhr are legendary but the opposition was often so preoccupied with Tikkanen that it opened up the ice for his linemates. Typical of any hockey

pest, opponents hated the hard-driving winger but Tikkanen was a hometown hero and one of the most popular players in Edmonton.

"Esa was a guy the fans always loved," says the St. Louis Blues' Tyson Nash, an Edmonton native. "He created so much havoc out there and was such fun to watch. Everybody liked Gretzky and Messier. With my skill level I knew I'd never be the next NHL scoring champion so I looked at Esa and modeled my game after his."

Speed and intensity are prerequisites for the job of a pest, but the most critical factor is the innate ability to get under the opponents skin and put them off their game. While rarely if ever placed on a team's top line, the pests make the best use of every minute of their ice time to frustrate the opposition and turn the game in their favor.

"Those players add a dimension to a team that is hard to quantify but you know when it's there," explains Blues assistant general manager John Ferguson Jr. "They are very tough to play. They discourage the other team mentally as well as physically. You know in a seven-game series you want to play with them and not against them and that's what it all comes down to" Every team in the league employs at least one of them but here are the ten pests that stand out from the crowd.

1. Tomas Holmstrom, Detroit Red Wings

Ask any goaltender Milch player they detest the most and Holmstrom's name is usually mentioned. While the fouryear veteran is effective in driving to the corners and putting on a strong forecheck, Holmstrom is at his irritating best when he sets up office in front of the other team's net, throwing off the concentration of goalies and defensemen alike.

"Tomas is pesky because he's relentless," says Detroit Red Wings assistant coach Barry Smith. "He is relentless on the puck and he's relentless in front of the net and fighting for loose pucks. I don't think he's smart enough to know how to goad somebody into retaliation. He just plays hard. What happens is the other players are so ticked off because Tomas won't give up that they cross-check him or knock him down just to get rid of him and end up taking a penalty.

"What makes him different from a lot of other pesky players is Tomas Holmstrom is a power-play specialist who you can put out there with anybody. His ability to get other teams to concentrate on him, and to have goaltenders concerned about him has helped us tremendously. Sometimes it frees up somebody else for a rebound. Plus, Tomas tips a lot of pucks in front and can put it in himself. He protects the puck extremely well and it's hard to get it off him."

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2. Darius Kasparaitis Pittsburgh Penguins

This pesky rearguard is built like a fire hydrant, uses his 5'11", 212-pound frame to punish all opponents--big or small--and is just as likely to goad Chris Simon as he is Cliff Ronning. The eight-year veteran has tremendous acceleration and can close the gap quickly, which makes him even more feared because the Pittsburgh Penguins defenseman is also one of the most physical players in the league.

"Darius is especially dangerous because he is also very physical," says Red Wings center Sergei Fedorov. "He plays very hard and has a lot of tricks in his bag to get you thinking in different directions. You really have to learn how to play against that kind of game and that's not easy."

3. Ian Laperriere, Los Angeles Kings

One of the most popular Los Angeles Kings players, Laperriere is an excellent defensive pivot who wins more than his share of faceoffs. His true value, however, is as an enforcer. Last season Laperriere led all Kings forwards with 181 hits and led the NHL with 21 major penalties. The 6'1", 200-pound veteran is not shy about his role as a pest and he can back up his words with action.

"Laperriere led the league in majors last year and that's incredible when you consider that he is not a big guy," says Federko. "He really irritates a lot of people."

4. Tyson Nash St. Louis Blues

You know that you've made an impact in the NHL when other clubs instruct players in their own lineup to copy your game--and that's the case with Tyson Nash. The Blues sophomore served a four-year apprenticeship in the minors before getting a chance to make the big club last season and he hasn't looked back. Every game, every shift, Nash is agitating players, finishing his checks, and putting his glove in the face of opposing players. "Tyson does his job very well," says Kitchen. "It's a hard job--it means being in players' faces and being ready every shift--and you have to give him credit. You don't have to remind him because he knows what his job is and he understands what it took for him to get into the NHL. Tyson is one of the better agitators in the league."

5. Todd Harvey, San Jose Sharks ,

Harvey is a strong, physical player with a nasty disposition. In short, a perfect compliment to the highly-skilled finesse forwards on the San Jose Sharks.

"You know Todd is going to finish his checks," says Red Wings forward Doug Brown. "He works awfully hard up and down the ice, is tenacious, and stays with the play."

"Harvey is very physical," adds Fedorov. "He is a quick player who is difficult to play against because he sometimes steps in and does his work on you when you least expect him. It's hard to find a weapon to neutralize a player like that. Perhaps the best neutralizer is not to pay attention to him. You just try to stick to your game--if possible."

6. Matthew Barnaby Pittsburgh Penguins

Barnaby has been a major source of irritation ever since he entered the NHL in 1993 with the Buffalo Sabres. As quick with his tongue as he is with his stick or hands, the seven-year veteran roams the ice with a mission: To get the other team off its game and focus their attention away from the Pittsburgh Penguins' skilled players.

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"Barnaby has proven to be effective in his role," says Ferguson. "A team's success is made up of different parts. You need to have a well-balanced club and be flexible, depending on who you're facing from night to night. You have to be able to set the tone physically in terms of quickness and grit, and Barnaby is certainly a part of that mix."

7. Kris Draper, Detroit Red Wings

Draper is an aggressive forechecker, who is quick along the boards and in front of the net. While not one to check an opponent into the cheap seats, the pesky centerman is consistently feisty and goads the opposition into penalties when he catches them with an unexpected hit.

"Draper uses his speed and tenacity to beat opposing players," says Federko. "Speedy guys such as Draper are really the best agitators. Those guys are moving on top of the puck or the puck carrier and it's very difficult [to play against them]. Speed is a commodity every team wants to have; it's a critical factor."

8. Bill Lindsay Calgary Flames

Lindsay is a model of consistency among the NHL's pests and offers the Calgary Flames the same ingredients he gave the Florida Panthers: An in-your-face attitude and an intense desire to win. The wiry (6'0", 190 pounds) winger puts his nose in every situation and will stand around after the whistle looking for any opponent -willing to do a little extra.

"Lindsay plays hard and gets under your skin," says Smith. "He is relentless. He is more of a forechecker--a disruptor who plays hard every shift. He backchecks well, can handle the puck, and score goals."

9. Jamal Mayers St. Louis Blues

Mayers is the largest of the league's top pests and, while not as irritating as Nash, the 6'1", 212-pound winger strikes greater fear into opposing players than his teammate because of his combination of power and speed.

"His combination of size and acceleration plus his physical fitness level with only 7% body fat gives Mayers the capability to really set the tone for our club physically," says Ferguson. "He

gets to an area on the ice before the other team is expecting him to and he can really do some damage."

"He does the job of agitating with his speed," adds Kitchen. "Jamal can get in there and cause a lot of havoc. He's a little faster than Tyson but when smaller guys agitate it upsets players more than a bigger guy. The one asset Jamal has is his speed. He can get in there quickly."

10. Steve Stalos Atlanta Thrashers

Stalos gives the Atlanta Thrashers a consistent effort every night whether they use him on defense or at forward. While not as quick as some of his counterparts, Stalos is thriving in an expanded role in Atlanta, doing everything possible to help make the Thrashers an unpleasant team to play against.

"Steve just irritates guys by his effort out there," says Nash, who joined Stalos at two Vancouver Canucks training camps. "He is always working hard and getting in guys' faces. He always finishes his checks and you hate playing against guys like that, rather than a tough guy who just knows how to fight. You know that Steve Stalos is coming at you and you've got to be aware of him every time he's on the ice."

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