



Backstrom back at point-producing best for Caps

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By Dan Rosen - NHL.com Senior Writer

NEWARK, N.J. -- Brooks Laich rimmed the puck around the end boards to Nicklas Backstrom in the far right corner. Laich was anticipating that Backstrom would give the puck a little more oomph to keep its momentum going up to Dennis Wideman at the right point, giving the Capitals a chance to set up their power play again.

That was Laich's first mistake, and he knows it. There's simply no way to anticipate what Backstrom is going to do, especially this season.

Instead of making the play that both Laich and Wideman thought he would, Backstrom fooled everybody by whipping a no-look backhanded pass through a pair of Dallas penalty killers descending on him, setting up Alex Semin at the right hash marks for a one-timer that he blasted past Kari Lehtonen.

"That's Nicky Backstrom," Laich told NHL.com Friday morning after reenacting the play from Tuesday's game inside the visitor's dressing room at Prudential Center. "That's the type of play he is making."

Backstrom has been making a lot of those kinds of deft plays this season, leading to his team-high 20 points on five goals and 15 assists through 14 games. He wasn't making a lot of those plays last season, which is why in 77 games he had a career-low 65 points, a 36-point drop-off from his career-high 101 points in 2009-10.

There are a myriad of reasons why Backstrom is back to being, as Devils coach Pete DeBoer said, "the straw that stirs the drink" for the Capitals. No. 1, of course, is he's healthy after dealing with a thumb injury for most of last season.

But if you listen to Backstrom, he'll tell you the main reason is motivation.

"I wanted to have a little revenge year," Backstrom told NHL.com.

He started working toward that shortly after the Capitals were eliminated by Tampa Bay in a four-game sweep last May. Backstrom changed everything about his offseason workouts, including the trainer that leads them.

Instead of focusing on weight training plus conditioning, which he had done since his rookie year of 2007-08, Backstrom started focusing solely on his core strength this summer. He utilized what is known as **Redcord** training, which according to a website devoted to the technique involves suspension methods that focus on improving strength, muscular endurance, balance, coordination and core muscle stability.

"Doctors usually use **Redcord** workouts for rehab and stuff like that, but I think it works really for me," Backstrom said. "I felt it right away when I stepped on the ice for the first time this summer. It's a little different from other hockey players, but I think it's been working out so far."

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Backstrom added that he feels more flexible now. "I don't feel like I was in bad shape, but I have been doing some different things off ice and that's what has helped me," he said. "Maybe that gave me a fresh start."

Backstrom's production through a little more than a month gives him the confidence that what he did during the summer works.

"You believe in the things you're doing in the summer and when it works out and the production is there, you then know you're doing something good and you get confidence from that," Backstrom said. "But it's just a start. It's still a long season."

However, barring injury, it doesn't appear likely that Backstrom will hit too many bumps in the road this season. Not only is he probably in the best shape of his career, but coach Bruce Boudreau is back to using him the way he was when two seasons ago, when Backstrom had 33 goals and 68 assists.

He's no longer a big part of the Capitals' penalty kill, which means he's playing a few less minutes per game and staying fresh to play in his usual offensive role.

"I think he's getting used properly," Laich said. "It's tough for a first-line guy that plays that many minutes to penalty kill and to try to provide 90 points of offense. We've got so many penalty killers on the team, if we can use those guys to kill and let Nicky focus on controlling the game on offense, that helps us."

Laich said he thinks Backstrom's offense suffered last season in part because he was playing nearly a minute and a half per game on the PK.

"When you penalty kill, and Nicky was in our top pairing last year, you go on the ice and you're thinking defensively," Laich said. "Now he's sitting there on the bench for two minutes saying, 'Let me out there, let me get going.' He comes out fresh and he can attack."

The change in the Capitals' system also plays a role here.

Boudreau turned the Caps into a defense-first team last season and Backstrom admits he went out there thinking that way. This season they're back to their old ways of looking to create offense, and they're averaging more than a full goal-per-game through 13 games than they did in 82 games last season.

Backstrom is also looking to shoot more this season than in the past. He's on pace for a career-high 235 shots on goal.

"Maybe I was passing it up before, but now I just want to shoot it," Backstrom said. "Maybe it'll create more confusion in the defensive zone for the other team."

According to Devils goalie Martin Brodeur, that way of thinking works for Backstrom because his shot is good enough that it demands respect.

"He has a scoring edge. He can score goals, so you have to give him the respect for that," Brodeur told NHL.com. "I remember when I played against (Adam) Oates, he could put the puck in the net but he didn't want to do it. In the end, though, if he was going to run out of room, he was going to do it. (Igor) Larionov was like that, too."

"You know they want to pass the puck, but they can still shoot it. Those are the tough players to play against."

There aren't many tougher to face this season than Backstrom.

"He looks like Peter Forsberg out there sometimes," Devils captain Zach Parise told NHL.com. "I don't know what it is, but you see guys bounce off him a lot and he does that reverse pass a lot. He's a great puck handler and can still score, too. I know it's a lofty comparison. I'm not saying he's the next Forsberg, but in certain aspects he reminds me of him."