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# The 88 Summit: A Swap Meet of Hockey Knowledge

The 16 players came together not knowing what to expect. When the game film started playing, the conversation and insight came out.

ALEX PREWITT • SEP 19, 2018

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The NHL players shuffled into the private room, unsure about what was happening next. Sixteen strong, the group had arrived from an afternoon round of golf to dinner at a high-end Italian restaurant outside Tampa, near the posh resort where everyone was staying during this week of workouts in late August. Sipping coffees around a U-shaped table, the players faced a 60-inch television; the restaurant's A/V setup proved insufficient, so the flatscreen had been hastily purchased at Best Buy for that night's activity, a mysterious event that had appeared on their schedules as, simply:



## PLAYER TALK.

At the front stood Darryl Belfry, a player development consultant for the Toronto Maple Leafs whose annual camp has become an invite-only hive of top talent: Toronto's Auston Matthews, Boston's Charlie McAvoy, Detroit's Dylan Larkin, and Philadelphia's Claude Giroux and Shayne Gostisbehere were all in attendance this year, testing themselves against one another before reporting to their respective teams for the season. So too was Chicago's Patrick Kane, the former Hart Trophy winner and reason why Belfry had dubbed this gathering, at least to himself, The 88 Summit.

The inspiration had come to Belfry this summer [upon reading an SI.com article about the Niners' Richard Sherman](#) and the cornerback academy that he hosted at Stanford University (which, in turn, took after the wide receiver workouts of Cardinals legend Larry Fitzgerald). Defensive backs from around the league convened in late June, conducting drills and watching film and—this was the part that really caught Belfry's eye—sharing notes about their craft.

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“Richard Sherman is not inviting the top 10 cornerback coaches in the NFL,” Belfry told the hockey players in the restaurant, offering some opening remarks after everyone sat down. “He’s inviting his peers. And he wants to hear from them. So here we are: We have 16 of you who are all peers. Why are we not doing the same thing? Or at least trying to do something like it?”

Then Belfry walked away, leaving an open floor and no further instructions. “They weren’t going in completely blind, but they didn’t know how it was going to play out,” Belfry says. At first the players seemed tentative, whether uncomfortable with opening up or hesitant to spill state secrets. “Maybe not embarrassed, but shy,” Matthews says.

“Everyone was a little nervous,” says Minnesota Wild winger Charlie Coyle.

That didn't last. Over the next hour, with fellow skills coach Adam Nicholas controlling clips from a laptop that was hooked into the TV and Belfry watching quietly from the back, the film session developed into what Larkin calls “one of the most interesting things I’ve ever experienced in my career.”

“You’re pretty spoiled,” Kane says, “being there with some of the top players in the league and everyone’s chiming in on what they see on a certain play.”

“I hadn’t done anything like it, honestly,” McAvoy says. “It was crazy.”

As the only player who had discussed the concept with Belfry beforehand—the group had received an email linking to the Sherman article, but no further explanation why—Kane agreed to speak first. On the TV, Nicholas loaded a clip from the Blackhawks’ season-opener last Oct. 5, when Chicago pulped then-back-to-back-champion Pittsburgh 10-1 and Kane had four points.

Less than seven minutes into the first period, situated along the end boards in the offensive zone, Kane settles a rimmed puck to the left of the trapezoid. As Penguins defenseman Kris Letang gives chase, Kane stickhandles onto his forehand (left) and heads for the other side of the net ... until whirling and whipping an across-the-body backhander that finds Ryan Hartman, uncovered, on the weak side, while Pittsburgh goalie Antti Niemi is caught looking the opposite way.

After the replay finished, Giroux, the Flyers captain and five-time All-Star, chimed in first. “It was along the lines of, ‘I don’t know how you would even see that type of play,’” Belfry recalls. This prompted Kane to explain his frame-by-frame decision process: In the split-second before receiving the puck along the wall, he took a snapshot of everyone’s positioning on the ice. Most notably, he saw captain Sidney Crosby in the slot to help defend if Kane tried a wraparound. And he noticed Letang—specifically that the defenseman is a righty. As Kane explained, if he could make Letang turn far enough onto his forehand, then Letang would be incapable of defending the behind-the-back pass while Crosby would be drawn away from Hartman.

“As soon as he collects it, he’s shoulder-checking everything, looking multiple times before the puck even comes to him,” McAvoy says. “He knows where guys are. It was pretty crazy. I don't know. It’s not even a notion like it’s taboo to ask someone what they’re thinking on that play. It’s just something ... I didn’t think anyone did it.”

Before long, others were joining the conversation. Toronto's Connor Carrick shared his perspective as a right-handed defenseman like Letang. Then goalies Jeff Glass and Jamie Phillips, the only minor-leaguers in the group, described how netminders must turn their heads at certain points when the puck goes behind the net, to keep it in their peripheries. Devils winger Kyle Palmieri jumped in with a comment about Pittsburgh's defensive structure. "Obviously you can't do what [Kane does]," Giroux concluded, "but you can take something about what goes on in [his] mind."

On and on it went. The second clip detailed Gostisbehere displaying some fancy footwork at the blue line, buying time until Giroux can find a soft spot in opposing coverage to bury a weak-side one-timer. Kane singled out the one-foot stop that Gostisbehere performed, putting himself in the perfect position to receive the pass. Matthews was impressed at how Giroux had looped above the faceoff circles in an effort to shake his coverage. "That was probably my favorite clip," Matthews says. "Not a lot of guys will do that, getting lost in the play and finding an open seam."

In the third, Gostisbehere coaxed a neutral zone turnover against Buffalo and then scored as the trailer on an odd-man rush, wiring a wrister inside the near post. Noticing how a Sabres' defenseman had dropped onto one knee to block the shot, Coyle asked Phillips whether, as a goalie, he wanted that to happen. "In that situation," replied Phillips, **a seventh-round pick of Winnipeg in 2012**, "I need to see the release of the puck." Coyle took notice. "All the time, you're thinking block-block-block," he says. "Be big. Get in the lane. But it's harder for goalies to react."

Next up was the supersonic Larkin, blowing past four Penguins in neutral zone, angling through the right faceoff circle on his backhand, cutting across the crease and tucking the puck past goalie Matt Murray. From his perch in the back, Nicholas noticed a change. "That's when the room started to let loose," he says. "Dialogue turned into hypotheticals. What if this happened? That to me was intriguing, because now they're talking about, 'If this happened, what would you do here?' That's how they started diving into each other's brains."

Two more clips remained. First Matthews appeared at his hometown rink in Arizona, grabbing a pass, dragging the puck around a defenseman and toward his body, and firing a top-shelf shot in one smooth motion; Kane immediately started asking about the mechanics behind how Matthews changes his release point to catch goalies off-guard. "You never think to ask, 'Hey, what was it about his positioning that triggered you to do that move?'" McAvoy says. "Because then that's the vulnerable position I never want to be in."

Batting last in the order was McAvoy, the summit's youngest attendee by five months who pretty well summarized why he represents the future of the Bruins' blue line in an eight-second sequence. Facing Buffalo on Feb. 25, the 20-year-old McAvoy joined the play off the bench and hit winger David Pastrnak with a slick pass across the slot; when Pastrnak's one-timer was saved, McAvoy circled through the zone and eventually positioned himself to score with a snap shot below the dot. "I love where your stick was," Larkin told McAvoy, noting how McAvoy had presented his blade and squared his feet as though he might shoot before finding Pastrnak.

As a fellow offensive-minded, right-shot defenseman, Carrick was interested to hear how Boston's system encourages McAvoy to activate inside the blue line, asking the same of Gostisbehere and the Flyers. In other words, the studious Carrick was getting his fill at a swap meet of trade secrets. "That would be the day, if it's not facilitated, Charlie McAvoy would pick up his phone and tell me what he's thinking on this clip," Carrick says with a scoff. "That's not happening. That's not how guys are. But it was good to have someone act on our better interests, and all of us had interests in improving."

Indeed, upon reporting to Leafs camp—where the John Tavares era has brought hope to title-starved Toronto—Carrick pulled Matthews aside and encouraged him to continue the open discussions that started in Tampa. They were far from the only ones who cannot wait until the next summit in summer 2019.

"You go through practice, and sometimes you're focusing on your own game, which is good," Coyle says. "But even just the littlest thing, like 'Hey, what do you think here or there?' Sometimes you're afraid to ask.

"If you don't ask, you'll never know."

