

THE FINAL SEASON:

TRIO OF HITMEN GRAB OVER-AGE YEAR BY THE HORNS

by Andrew Schopp

Western Hockey League clubs are limited to only three of them. Over-agers are mature, experienced and more often than not, they are offensively dominant. WHL GMs must choose wisely who'll fill one of the three 20-year-old roster spots the league allows.

The Calgary Hitmen certainly did.

More than halfway through the 2014-15 WHL campaign, no other trio of 1994-born skaters produced as much offensively as Hitmen over-agers Adam Tambellini, Connor Rankin and Kenton Helgesen.

"As older guys that's what we're leaned on to do," Tambellini said of the trio's high-level production this season. "We're here to create offence. Our young guys, hopefully they can look to us and strive to be like us."

Heading down the regular season's home stretch, both Rankin and Tambellini were deep in the WHL's scoring race with the latter becoming the third Hitmen in as many seasons to hit the 40-goal plateau.

Meanwhile, Helgesen was putting up points on a consistent basis while providing exemplary leadership and maturity as team captain, switching back and forth between forward and defence.

"They look to you to produce," Rankin explained of an over-age junior's role. "When you have the pressure to produce, you want to step up because you see all the 20-year-olds that played before you do it and you learn from them."

As the February portion of the Hitmen schedule kicked off, Tambo, Ranks and Helgy had combined for more points than any over-age trio in the league.

With Helgesen displaying all the makings of a well-rounded captain, the potent scoring duo of Tambellini and Rankin proved

critical to the Hitmen's success down the stretch, which saw the team go on an explosive nine-game win streak.

For Rankin, who joined the Hitmen in a trade from the Tri-City Americans last season, putting up big numbers as a 20-year-old is all about grabbing your final season of junior hockey by the horns.

"We know it's our last year and there's no other shot to go to the Memorial Cup or win a WHL championship," said the North Vancouver product. "You want to go for it. It's a bittersweet feeling but you want to win because you know you won't have another opportunity to do it."

Tambellini also arrived a little late to the Hitmen party.

After a solid three-year career in the Junior-A British Columbia Hockey League, Tambellini played 16 games for the University of North Dakota before being recruited by the Hitmen.

On January 8, 2014 Tambellini informed his coaching staff at the UND that he would be taking his talents to the WHL and he hasn't looked back.

"Coming here was really exciting for me," he said. "I'm really happy and fortunate to come to a great organization with great staff and teammates."

Unlike his fellow 1994s, Helgesen's journey with the Hitmen started from the bottom.

Selected by the Hitmen 132nd overall in the sixth round of the 2009 WHL Bantam Draft, Helgesen slowly clawed his way up the organization's ladder to eventually become what coach Mark French called "the heart and soul" of the team.

Skating under the tutelage of former Hitmen captain Cody Sylvester, Helgesen said he does his best to fill the mold of the now 22-year-old Kelowna product, who like Helgesen, spent the entirety of his WHL career in Calgary.



After four great seasons with the Hitmen, Helgesen was thrilled to find out he'd wrap up his major-junior career where it all started following the passing of the January 10 WHL trade deadline.

"The years have just flown by," Helgesen said. "I remember in my first year, I was just kind of listening and taking it all in and learning from the older guys and now I get to give it back."

LIFE AFTER GRADUATION DAY

All three members of the Hitmen 2014-15 over-age class agree: securing a professional roster spot is the name of the game.

For Helgesen, he'll be looking to continue what he's started with the Anaheim Ducks after the NHL club inked their seventh round pick at the 2012 NHL Entry Draft to an entry-level deal last April.

"Anaheim wanted me to come back and develop as a forward," Helgesen explained. "My goal is to continue to improve and get to know the position, and come into camp bigger and stronger with another year of junior under my belt."

Meanwhile, Tambellini and Rankin hope to emulate their captain and put ink to paper on professional contracts of their own.

"We're both playing for contracts," said Tambellini, a 2013 NHL Draft pick of the New York Rangers. "With me and him both having decent offensive numbers this year, hopefully we can do that."

An undrafted forward, Rankin knows that he has to work that much harder to garner the attention of NHL scouts.

As he wraps up his most productive WHL season, he hopes he's made some noise.

"Whatever happens, happens," Rankin said. "To get a pro deal would be something pretty special." ■

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REGULAR SEASON						PLAYOFFS					
SEASON	TEAM	GP	G	A	PTS	+/-	GP	G	A	PTS	+/-
2011-12	Hitmen	58	3	11	14	7	5	0	0	0	-3
2012-13	Hitmen	70	0	20	20	22	3	0	1	1	1
2013-14	Hitmen	71	10	41	51	31	6	1	1	2	3
2014-15	Hitmen	59	20	23	43	16	TO BE DETERMINED				
TOTALS		258	33	95	128	76	14	1	2	3	1

19 | ADAM TAMBELLINI

REGULAR SEASON						PLAYOFFS					
SEASON	TEAM	GP	G	A	PTS	+/-	GP	G	A	PTS	+/-
2013-14	Hitmen	31	17	22	39	-3	6	5	4	9	5
2014-15	Hitmen	62	44	32	76	44	TO BE DETERMINED				
TOTALS		93	61	54	115	41	6	5	4	9	5

26 | CONNOR RANKIN

REGULAR SEASON						PLAYOFFS					
SEASON	TEAM	GP	G	A	PTS	+/-	GP	G	A	PTS	+/-
2010-11	Tri-City	70	19	25	44	13	9	1	2	3	5
2011-12	Tri-City	62	18	21	39	19	10	1	3	4	-2
2012-13	Tri-City	71	32	26	58	9	5	1	4	5	-1
2013-14	Tri-City	41	13	20	33	-4	-	-	-	-	-
2013-14	Hitmen	23	7	8	15	4	-	-	-	-	-
2014-15	Hitmen	63	28	43	71	35	TO BE DETERMINED				
TOTALS		330	117	143	260	76	30	4	12	16	-6

Stats as of March 1, 2015

