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Featured Article

Korn a key piece in the Predators puzzle

 Written by: [Holly Gunning](#) on 08/20/2009 [Digg](#) [submit](#)

It's been a summer of incredible turnover in NHL goaltending coaches, but one who remains secure in his job is [Nashville Predators](#) goaltending coach Mitch Korn. With the kind of success he's had over the years, it's not hard to see why.

He coached one of the best goaltenders of all time in Dominik Hasek, who won four Vezina Trophies under Korn's watch in Buffalo. Korn turned Tomas Vokoun, who was at that point an [AHL](#)-level prospect, into not just a legitimate NHL starter, but a star. He helped Dan Ellis not only become an NHLer but lead the league in save percentage as a rookie. The list goes on, and it's why he's considered one of the very best in the world.

How is Korn -- short, but loud and energetic for his 52 years -- able to bring out the best in the goalies he works with?

Miami University goaltending coach Nick Petraglia, who has worked summer camps with Korn for 10 years, offered insight into the process.

"He's very, very passionate, as hard-working as they come," Petraglia said. "I don't think anybody puts as much dedication and hard work into their craft as he does. He's educated himself and knows so much about the game, and he really takes a lot of joy in spreading that to as many people as he can."

The joy doesn't always come out as sunshine and roses though. Petraglia, the soft-spoken, polite sidekick at summertime camps to Korn's more abrupt style, agreed that there's definitely some tough love going on with Korn.

"Oh yeah. He's not your typical boss of the new age," Petraglia said. "He's very old school, not politically correct at all, and he'll tell you that right up front. It's very much a tough love. He loves to joke around and have fun, but at the end of the day a lot of the tough love, he's trying to teach kids that you have to have a thick skin, you can't let things get to you. You have to be able to take criticism. Everyone's not going to be nice to you your whole life."

An example? Korn yelled at one of the teenagers at his Nashville youth camp this June, "My dead grandmother's quicker than that!"

Funny, but a stark contrast to the polite Southern manners you normally experience in Nashville.

"That's just who he is and how he was raised," Petraglia said. "He was always short and always had challenges growing up and playing the game. He grew up in the Bronx. He calls himself 'not normal' which he isn't. He's just himself and he doesn't care what people think. If he offends you, that's something you need to deal with. It's not because he doesn't like you or he doesn't want to make you better. It's just the way he is."

The players he's coached agree.

"He's obviously got a different personality," said [Chet Pickard](#), who has worked with Korn for years before

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TOP PROSPECTS

1. Colin Wilson, C
2. Chet Pickard, G
3. Jon Blum, D
4. Cody Franson, D
5. Ryan Jones, RW
6. Antti Pihlstrom, LW
7. Patric Hornqvist, LW
8. Mark Dekanich, G
9. Cal O'Reilly, C
10. Roman Josi, D
11. Nick Spaling, C
12. Mike Santorelli, RW
13. Blake Geoffrion, LW
14. Ryan Thang, LW
15. Alexander Sulzer, D
16. Taylor Stefishen, LW
17. Ben Ryan, C

OTHER NOTABLES

being drafted by Nashville in the first round in 2008. "He makes me work hard, he really pushes me. Sometimes you want to get mad, but that's what he's trying to do. He's trying to push you and it really helps."

There are other ways he differs from his peers as well.

"I think the one special thing about him is he understands there's no one way of doing things," Petraglia said. "He's very versatile and he understands the position very well, and he's able to kind of adapt to everybody and help them be the best goaltender they can be. The best analogy he uses is the jigsaw puzzle."

In Korn's second year in Buffalo, he began trying to solve his first big goalie challenge: Dominik Hasek.

"He had great skill but no order," Korn described. "Dominik Hasek was like a 1000-piece jigsaw puzzle – he had all the pieces, but they were scattered all over the table. My job was to help him put those pieces together so his game had order."

"It was positioning, it was save selection, it was patience," Korn described. "Dom knew what was happening before it ever happened. And as a result, when he would react, the shooter would re-react, and he would get in trouble. So he had to get some more patience."

Every goalie will need help with different things. You can assemble a puzzle starting with the edge pieces, or by color, it doesn't really matter. Likewise, there is no step by step "Korn method" of goaltending.

By contrast, Francois Allaire —the long-time acclaimed Ducks' goalie coach who moved on to Toronto this offseason — teaches the same style to all his pupils. And they tend to all look the same by the end. That's not true with Korn's pupils.

"There are some who believe there's only one way to play. And as a result, they may draft or sign guys who are absolutely a certain way," Korn said. "When I look at my 18 years, we've had all kinds of goalies. Karl Goehring, 5'6, and [Pekka Rinne](#), 6'5, were on the same team in Milwaukee. It was like Mutt & Jeff! Dominik Hasek obviously was not normal. When I met Tom Draper my first year in Buffalo, he was still making skate saves."

"Philosophically I believe strongly there's more than one way to skin a cat. And it's my job to figure out the goalie, figure out what works and doesn't work, try to help them strengthen their strengths, really strengthen their weaknesses, and make the way they play the best they can be."

The four Predators prospects Korn worked with at [conditioning camp](#) this summer likewise were all different. Korn describes Pickard as "more standupish," while 6'6 [Anders Lindback](#) is more of a butterfly "blocker." [Atte Engren](#) relies on athleticism, and [Jeremy Smith](#) lies somewhere in between.

But while Korn generally works with what the goalie does naturally, that's not to say that he's never had to break someone completely down and start over. He had to do that with former NHLer Steve Shields.

"I might not be prouder of anybody more than Steve Shields because he probably came the furthest of any goalie," Korn said. "He probably was the least prepared -- and he won't get mad at me for saying that – for being a pro."

It was a massive overhaul of his game – stance, glove, blocker, you name it.

"Everything, including diet," Korn said. "When we met Steve, he didn't even know how to do a half butterfly. He didn't know how to leave his feet. His two greatest skills were his competitiveness and his ability to fire the puck. After that, there weren't a lot of core skills."

While his individual coaching to each pro goalie is different, there are some drills that Korn has everyone do which have some universal benefit. One of them is a using smaller than regulation pucks, so that regular pucks become easy. Another is the screen board – similar to an old-fashioned free-standing chalkboard. Shooters send pucks underneath it, which come at the goalie without the benefit of body language. It simulates reacting to a shot in traffic.

"What this is designed to do is more mental than physical," Korn said. "It's the speed at which you're able to recognize the puck. It's four, six, eight feet from you and the puck comes under the board without the ability to read the stickblade. And you've got to react to that puck. If you can do that, everything else is easy."

If his pupils reaching NHL success wasn't enough of a measure of success, many of Korn's pupils have gone on to become goaltending coaches themselves. A lot of them started in his summer youth camps.

Korn coached Steve McKichan at Miami, who went on to become the goalie coach for the [Toronto Maple Leafs](#) two years ago. Chris Economou has coached in the [USHL](#) and [ECHL](#).

1. Stanislav Balan, C
2. Taylor Beck, LW
3. Gabriel Bourque, LW
4. Zach Budish, C
5. Robert Dietrich, D
6. Mattias Ekholm, D
7. Ryan Ellis, D
8. Atte Engren, G
9. Ryan Flynn, RW
10. Jeff Foss, D
11. Teemu Laakso, D
12. Jani Lajunen, C
13. Michael Latta, C
14. Anders Lindback, G
15. Ryan Maki, RW
16. Ian McKenzie, RW
17. Nick Oliver, C
18. Peter Olvecky, LW
19. Cameron Reid, C
20. Charles-Olivier Roussel, D
21. Mark Santorelli, RW
22. Viktor Sjodin, C
23. Craig Smith, C
24. Jeremy Smith, G
25. Niko Snellman, C
26. Craig Switzer, D
27. Andreas Thuresson, C



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"A lot of people out there know the game, but communicating it and teaching it is another aspect that's often overlooked," said Petraglia.

Korn himself didn't start playing hockey until he was 10. He always wanted to be a goaltender, though he played out for a little bit because his father said he needed to learn to skate. But he was a goalie at heart.

The person with the greatest influence on him growing up was Teddy Ouimet, a minor-league goaltender with one NHL game played. He taught at Can-Am hockey school in Guelph, Ontario, which Korn attended as a camper and then counselor.

Korn started his coaching career at Kent University, where he had played college hockey. He soon moved on to rival school Miami University, located in Oxford, Ohio. Korn began as the night manager of the Goggin Ice Center at Miami and goaltending coach of the varsity team. While at Miami, he ran goaltending camps around the country, something he still does today.

In 1990, Korn was breaking down some video at a camp held at the [Buffalo Sabres](#) practice facility. Rick Dudley, then the head coach of the Sabres, walked into the classroom and took in a lesson. A year later, the Sabres called up Korn and wanted to interview him to be their goaltending coach

This chance encounter that led to his big break has become one lesson Korn stresses with young goaltenders: "You never know who is watching."

Getting the NHL job wasn't quite that easy, though. Dudley had to convince then-general manager Gerry Meehan to hire Korn.

"Even though Gerry today takes a little bit of credit, he was quite resistant back then [to hire me], because who was I? And he was right, who was I?" Korn asked rhetorically.

Korn stayed on with Buffalo for seven years, with much success, before looking for a new opportunity.

"My contract expired, Nashville was coming into the league, and I felt that I would rather go south than north," Korn said. "I wanted to go to a new team, I wanted a new challenge, and I really liked the people here – Barry Trotz was great and David Poile. They all had so much consistency. Having been in Buffalo for seven years and having worked for four head coaches, three GMs, I really was looking for consistency."

Korn knew Trotz from the [AHL](#). Trotz had coached the Portland Pirates, while Korn was often in Rochester, the Sabres affiliate at the time. They ran into each other at an [AHL](#) game in Lexington, Ky. in February 1998, as Trotz was building the new expansion club. Lexington doesn't have a lot of claims to fame in the hockey world, but this chance meeting was instrumental in getting Korn to the Predators.

Korn's duties were part-time with the Predators, just as they had been with the Sabres. Home base remained Ohio. His then wife ran the synchronized skating program at the school. And by then, he ran the hockey school, which was a big operation.

Last fall, newly single, Korn moved to Nashville, but still split his time between Miami University and the Predators. He is set to retire from Miami and will coach just the Predators this fall, having spent last year training his replacements with the RedHawks.

The Predators had not asked him to be full-time in the past, taking the approach of 'if it's not broke, don't fix it.'

"It's never been a real issue," Korn said. "I guess if we weren't having success in the manner in which we were doing it, it might have called for change. But I don't think you could say we weren't having success."

And Korn would argue that a goalie coach shouldn't be breathing down necks in any case.

"I have never been a believer that a goalie coach should be there every day, which is one of the reasons I believe strongly I need to go to Milwaukee and Cincinnati," he said. "A goalie absolutely, positively has to manage his own game. And if the goalie coach is there every day, it ends up that the goalie coach becomes a crutch. So I think they need some time away from me. I used to like it when I was coming in 10 to 14 days a month. I hadn't seen the guy in seven to nine days, we'd talk on the phone. And then I'd show up and they were happy to see me (laughs). If I was here every day, and maybe I've been here too much, at times they are not happy to see me. That's not good.

"I do think there's such a thing as over-coaching. Goalies have become too robotic and goalie coaches have become too relied on."

Korn will go to Milwaukee, but he won't be the only coach there. The Predators brought in 32-year-old Mike

Valley last year as a part-time goaltender coach for the Admirals. Valley, who runs his own goaltending schools, was most recently the goaltending coach for the University of Wisconsin.

"What we found [in 2007-08] is that there wasn't enough attention being shown in Milwaukee," Korn said. "And we envisioned in our three- to five-year game plan that we were getting younger and we were going to go through that youth cycle."

Many organizations have a goalie coach in the [AHL](#) city, but there is not much overlap between them and the NHL goalie coach, who travels only with the big club.

"I'm so against that," Korn said. "I believe that the second goalie coach should augment the NHL goalie coach, not replace the NHL goalie coach in the minor-league system. So I still go to Milwaukee one week a month. And this season I will still go to Cincinnati ([ECHL](#)) once a month. Mike Valley will augment that by going to Cincinnati once a month and adding days of coverage. This year it worked magnificently. There is some argument that having two voices isn't always good. But it's important that both voices are on absolutely the same page, that they're communicating regularly, and they're never fighting for the goalie's admiration. We are not competing."

Korn is not aware of any other team that does it quite this way.

"I didn't look at anyone as a model, in fact I looked at teams and said 'I don't want to be like them. This is not the way it should be done.' Ultimately if you want the minor-league goalie to be a National Leaguer, then son of a gun I need to have a presence with him, but I need to have it augmented with somebody's who's on the same page."

As for the rest of Korn's time, there are occasional trips for scouting purposes, and to check on the junior-level goaltenders. When Nashville is considering a trade, they consult Korn for his opinion on a goaltender. He usually has a good read already on most [AHL](#) and NHL goalies, but has gone to look at a major junior or college goaltender a few times as well.

It's all part of the reason that the Predators are not just goaltender-rich, but are net exporters of goaltenders - developing more than they can use themselves. Certainly contracts play a part in that, but it's a good problem to have.

"I'm really happy to be in an organization like Nashville that has such a knowledgeable goalie coach like Mitch," said Pickard, the organization's top prospect between the pipes. "As much as you want to be frustrated sometimes, he just pushes you and pushes you. A lot of guys need to be pushed. Once they get kind of a wake-up call, they push themselves."

Korn on taking goaltenders high in the draft:

"In the old NHL, I didn't want to take goalies high anymore. I'd rather someone else take them high, someone else break them in, and then get them when they're 24, 25. And if you look around the league, there's been a lot of that. How many stars are with their same team? They're not. Why should I develop them for somebody else? But now what's happening with the new NHL, it seems that because of free agency, they're tying guys up earlier, longer. So now there are fewer of those available to you. And they're paid so much bloody money in Europe that you might be stuck having to develop your own. We're only a few year into this, so you don't know how it's going to transpire."

On the value of save percentage over goals-against as a measure:

"I think [save percentage] is just a little bit more realistic over an 80-game schedule. You know what else is very important? W's. At the end of the day, you're paid to win. And you can criticize [Chris] Osgood all you want for his stats, but you know what? He wins. That is what we're all paid for."

On the age a goalie is in his prime:

"They're getting younger and younger because they're getting better training. And they're getting bigger and stronger. It used to be that kids at 16 were kids! Because of the CBA, unfortunately they're forced into their prime earlier."

On nature vs. nurture as ingredients for success in goaltending:

"If you don't have any nature, you know what? You could have all the coaching in the world and you're going to fall short because other people have it.

"In order to be the best you can be, you've got to be totally, utterly committed. Your life has to surround the position, from watching games, to understanding the league, to knowing who you're playing against. You can't just survive on God-given talent."

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