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John Tavares brings hard lacrosse lessons to NHL

By ROY MacGREGOR

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Islanders hard-nosed centre is the talk of the league after January to remember



There is something oddly, distantly familiar with what he is doing.

John Tavares, the New York Islanders centre who was the NHL's player of the month for January, is working the corners. He spins, he rolls off two checkers, he has his head raised like a cobra in search of opportunity. He works through traffic by keeping everything in so tight to his body they cannot stop him from slipping by. He sees an opening no one else has seen, passes quickly and, instantly, a goal is scored.

He is, of course, playing The National Game ... but which one?

Tavares is only 21 years of age, and though ESPN recently ranked the "Top 25 NHL players under age of 25" and somehow left him off the list, he is today the talk of the league after scoring nine goals and 13 assists in only 13 games last month and rising into the top five in league scoring.

He is far, far from the fastest player in the game, and yet he is also unstoppable. He works corners as effectively as, but different from, the Sedin twins of the Vancouver Canucks. He has, as Ottawa Senators captain Daniel Alfredsson "incredible hands and vision."

Where does it come from? Winter or summer? Hockey rink or lacrosse box?

Both, the young rising star says. He grew up playing both sports, both exceptionally well. His uncle, also John Tavares, is one of the greatest lacrosse players of all time, a stubborn, strong man who protects the ball as well as any who have ever played the game and is, simply, deadly from anywhere around the net.

The Islanders handed the Senators a 2-1 overtime loss on Friday night with Tavares earning first star honours.

The young John Tavares believes that lacrosse gave him talents that transferred perfectly to Canada's better-known national game.

"People always talk about eye-hand co-ordination," he says, "and I totally agree with that. The one thing that I have always told people made a huge difference was rolling off checks and moving through traffic and things like that. It's really benefited me."

"People don't realize how strong he is," says Islanders defenceman Steve Staios, who thinks Tavares's skills have "been underestimated" by far more than just ESPN.

"I grew up always playing against guys a little bit older than me," says Tavares, "so I had to dig in. And not always being the strongest guy [I] try and use my smarts from my hockey and my lacrosse in being successful."

His success has largely gone unnoticed, says Islanders coach Jack Capuano, as the struggling team itself has largely flown "under the radar."

Going unnoticed is something that the youngster has never previously experienced. Once he decided to concentrate solely on hockey, he was a phenomenon, granted special status to play major junior hockey at 15. He was the most valuable player of the 2009 world junior championship held in Ottawa and the No. 1 pick overall in the 2009 NHL entry draft.

This sent him to the Islanders, long a troubled franchise in every area from the rink to the ice. There had been some thought that he would want out as soon as possible, but then last fall he surprised the hockey world by signing a six-year contract extension, now making \$5.5-million (U.S.) a year - which is approximately 200 times what a good lacrosse professional could expect to make.

"I was drafted here," he says. "They gave me a great opportunity to play as an 18-, 19-year-old. That's a unique thing and not a lot of guys get a chance to do it. They put a lot of responsibility and belief in me and I see the culture and our attitude changing every day,

"There was no hesitation in not wanting to be an Islander. I want to be part of the future and part of turning this thing around."

His remarkable third-year success - even if he fell short of the ESPN listing that has Jonathan Toews, Sidney Crosby, Nicklas Backstrom and Patrick Kane at the top and even includes the likes of Bryan Little and David Perron - is due in no small part to the fact that he has adapted skills picked up in another game.

It is not by accident that every single NHL team has a group of players - North American as well as European - who gather before each match to work on soccer skills before heading out on their skates.

Wayne Gretzky long ago credited lacrosse with giving him the idea of going behind the net and setting up his "office" from where he could send out such effective passes.

Gretzky also believes that there should be no such thing as "summer hockey" - that young athletes should play a variety of games both to teach new skills and, just as importantly, to prevent early burn-out.

And John Tavares, NHL player of the month, could be the poster boy for that argument.