

Injuries have thrown Wolves' rotation into flux

By Jace Frederick
St. Paul Pioneer Press

The Minnesota Timberwolves looked like a fine-tuned machine in their road win over Utah on Saturday, Dec. 26. They shared the ball, they defended as a unit. It was beautiful basketball.

In the two games that followed, their play more closely resembles a car crash. Two games without Karl-Anthony Towns, two disasters.

Missing your best player isn't an excuse for those abominations, but considering the Wolves' circumstances, it makes some sense.

This is a team that was focused on establishing some semblance of on-court chemistry in an abbreviated training camp and exhibition season. But that chemistry all involved

Towns, around whom the offense and defense have been built.

Playing without him is essentially starting from scratch. The Wolves must again find their way without him, which is no easy task. It's likely why players looked lost in two Staples Center stinkers in Los Angeles earlier this week.

Roles are being re-defined, rotations are being re-shaped. It's a tear down and build up all coming in a matter of days. And no, unsurprisingly, it's not going well just yet.

Minnesota is still searching. Wolves coach Ryan Saunders moved Jake Layman out of the starting lineup and Ricky Rubio into it against the Clippers, along with Jarrett Culver taking the place of

the injured Josh Okogie.

Culver moved to power forward, while Layman played small forward. A front court of Layman, Juancho Hernangomez and Ed Davis shared the floor, undoubtedly, for the first time since the team started training camp. Naz Reid went from reserve to starter.

So an entirely re-tooled rotation that has limited experience playing alongside one another took the floor against a Western Conference favorite, and got waxed. Will it be prettier at home Friday against bottom-feeding Washington? No one knows for sure.

Through the first two games of the regular season, there was an order to the Wolves' rotation. Okogie and Culver could be staggered so Minnesota always had a strong

wing defender on the floor, as could Rubio and Russell for playmaking purposes. But because of injuries, the pieces just don't fit as nicely together anymore.

Saunders is both re-shuffling in pursuit of a new winning combination while also trying to create some semblance of continuity with a roster that doesn't have it. Jarred Vanderbilt has looked good in inconsequential minutes. Hernangomez hasn't played well through four games. Does that mean Saunders should pull another rotational switch, throwing things further into flux? Or should Hernangomez be granted an opportunity to shake off the rust after an abnormally long off-season?

"It's early in the sea-

son, so I understand some people might want some guys to play less or some guys to play more, but you're trying to give opportunities to find a rhythm, too," Saunders said. "You look around the league and there's a number of star players still trying to find a rhythm, too. So, we've got guys we've got confidence in. But you also want to get to some continuity, too."

It's tough to win in the NBA without it, as the Wolves have demonstrated this week. But it's not something that is easy to develop on the fly.

"I feel like it takes time, for sure, because (Towns is) a big part of what we do," Wolves wing Jarrett Culver said. "At the same time, we still have to go out there and play, perform and



Jeffrey Swinger / USA TODAY Sports

Minnesota Timberwolves head coach Ryan Saunders directs his team in the second quarter on Dec. 26, at Vivint Smart Home Arena in Salt Lake City.

try to win games. Trying to adjust as fast as we can without him right now, and hoping he gets better."

Briefly

Jaylen Nowell, Okogie and Towns all will miss Minnesota's home game against Washington on Friday with injuries.

Here's a look at the Wild roster with training camp opening Sunday

By Dane Mizutani
St. Paul Pioneer Press

After months of anticipation, the Minnesota Wild will report to training camp on Sunday, Jan. 3, with the first practice to follow on Monday at TRIA Rink in downtown St. Paul.

It will be a new-look team once the puck drops for the Jan. 14 season opener against the

Los Angeles Kings.

Some key offseason additions include goaltender Cam Talbot, winger Kirill Kaprizov, and centers Marcus Johansson, Nick Bonino, and Nick Bjugstad. In turn, the Wild bid adieu to household names like longtime captain Mikko Koivu, veteran goaltender Devan Dubnyk and No. 1 center Eric Staal.

It's still unclear how every-

thing is going to shake out with a number of players, most notably first-round draft pick Marco Rossi, who are vying for some of the final roster spots.

Here's a look at the full training camp roster (players listed in alphabetical order, by position):

Forwards (22): Nick Bjugstad, Nick Bonino, Mitchell

Chafee, Joseph Cramarosa, Connor Dewar, Brandon Duhaime, Gabriel Dumont, Joel Eriksson Ek, Kevin Fiala, Marcus Foligno, Jordan Greenway, Ryan Hartman, Marcus Johansson, Luke Johnson, Kirill Kaprizov, Gerald Mayhew, Zach Parise, Victor Rask, Marco Rossi, Kyle Rau, Mason Shaw, Nico Sturm

Defensemen (12): Calen

Addison, Matt Bartkowski, Louis Belpedio, Jonas Brodin, Matt Dumba, Brad Hunt, Ian McCoshen, Dakota Mermis, Greg Pateryn, Carson Soucy, Jared Spurgeon, Ryan Suter

Goalies (5): Dereck Baribeau, Andrew Hammond, Hunter Jones, Kaapo Kahkonen, Cam Talbot

Injured (2): Alex Stalock, Mats Zuccarello

HAWKS

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support system," said Gordon. "Being surrounded by good teammates and a good coaching staff, I could never drop my head. I could never have a day off. I wanted to keep grinding and putting in the hard work so I could get back on the court for them."

UND coach Mallory Bernhard said Gordon's return has helped.

"There is no doubt that having Juliet back

in the lineup for us has been huge," said Bernhard. "I said it two years ago that she had one of the best spring development sessions we've had in a long time. She improved dramatically. Then, unfortunately, she had the injury."

"But there is no doubt that her work ethic has put her back in the position she is in. I don't think I was surprised how she started. I think others outside the program might have been surprised but there is no doubt she's capable

of doing what she has shown so far."

As it has been for many programs, UND faced a challenging nonconference schedule due to the pandemic. The Hawks had one home game — against Marquette (6-1) of the Big East. UND racked up 5,200 bus miles during the nonconference season.

Now, however, the normalcy of conference play begins.

"The nonconference season brought some very unique things," said Barnhard. "We played

six games but prepped for eight. We told our team two days before that we're playing Wisconsin. There were some situations that no one will ever have in another year. The conference does bring a little bit of normalcy."

UND has never faced Kansas City, a former league member. The Roos spent the past seven seasons in the Western Athletic Conference before rejoining the Summit this season.

Kansas City is 3-3. It's lone Division I win came

against Southern Illinois-Edwardsville.

UND is led by 6-2 senior Julia Fleecs, who averages 16.0 points and 8.2 rebounds. Sophomore Maggie Manson, who has become UND's top 3-point threat, averages 9.2 points and is averaging 37 percent on 3-point attempts.

The Hawks, like past seasons, remain a physical team and are averaging 41 rebounds per game.

Despite looking for its first win, UND's attitude has remained positive.

"I think we've walked away from every game saying we had a chance if we do this or do that better," said Bernhard.

"Of course, 0-and-6 is not the record any of us dreamed of going into the Christmas break."

"But we know that we have a clean slate here. The goals we have are still out in front of us. We weren't going to raise any banners or lift any trophies in the nonconference schedule."

That's the reality of it. All of it is to get ready for conference play."

MANAGER

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the team store, which was turned into one for the Pod.

Equipment managers were constantly moving in and out of locker rooms, packing and unpacking gear. They shuffled between dressing rooms and a storage space that was converted into two makeshift zones where teams could hang and dry their gear, an idea conjured up by Johansson and St. Cloud State equipment manager Jeremiah Minkel during the Pod's first week.

Days off didn't exist for the equipment managers. Early wake-up calls followed late nights day after day for three weeks.

"We'd be going to bed, and they'd be getting their coats on and going to the rink to move some equipment," UND forward Gavin Hain said.

Although Omaha was allowed to use its home locker room for every game, it did have to move out to the storage area a handful of times on non game days so others could move in.

UND moved about 10 times during the Pod, including one four-day stretch where it moved four times.

"You never really got set up," Johansson said. "Everything was day by day."

The players noticed.

UND forward Jasper Weatherby said: "Dan, Nate and Kobia were our MVPs of the bubble. To every equipment staff in the NCHC, thank you guys so much."

Johansson said other schools had it even tougher than UND, because not everyone was allowed to bring students to help.

"I'm thankful Erik Martinson and Bill Chaves let me travel with them, because it would have been a mess without them," Johansson said, referring to UND's athletic directors. "Some

teams didn't have that."

Adventures at times

It was a situation like no other.

Players were seldom able to shower at the arena. They'd walk back in their hotel rooms — all of which were located in a four-block radius of Baxter Arena — in their sweat-drenched track suits to shower.

They'd leave half of their laundry in the loading dock for a service to come pick it up. Omaha equipment manager Jason Smits did the rest, frequently staying at the rink until the wee hours of the morning to get other teams' gear washed and dried.

"I give Smitty a lot of credit for all he did," Johansson said. "He'd be there late at night and then again early in the morning."

And it wasn't without adventure.

Once, Miami's equipment manager misread the schedule and didn't know he had to be out of a storage space, because Minnesota Duluth needed to move in.

But those who were at the rink jumped in to help. Minnesota Duluth equipment manager Chris Garner, Bulldog players, UND's equipment staff, Omaha's strength coach and Smits all made the move happen quickly.

"There were Duluth players carrying Miami players' bags," Johansson said, laughing.

Through it all, UND coach Brad Berry said Johansson never complained about the setup, and that his positivity and work ethic rubbed off on the players.

"We're very fortunate to have a guy like Dan Johansson here," Berry said. "He's an every-dayer, just like our players and staff. He's got the mentality of being open-minded and positive. I think the very first thing you could

do as an equipment manager is complain about it or drag your feet a little bit over the course of the Pod. There wasn't any ambivalence in his work ethic. He was a worker. He was open minded. He was positive. And that kind of just relayed to our group here."

"Our guys are around him all the time. And he was a bright, shining star as far as we're concerned in the Pod. He had some workers who helped him, too. They were outstanding, too. They had to move a ton of times. They were outstanding. Our success doesn't happen by chance. You have to have everyone digging in. Him and his staff did that."

A difficult phone call

Johansson received a crushing phone call on UND's last off day at the Pod.

His grandfather, Tony Ange, was hospitalized in Rochester, N.Y., and doctors didn't expect him to make it through the night.

Johansson tried to process the news on Friday afternoon and evening.

He thought about summers at the lake cottage with grandpa and the way his grandpa used to give him grief any time he passed up going fishing with him. Johansson wishes he had never said so.

He remembered the joy his grandfather had any

time he was around his grandchildren, his love for the New York Yankees and how much he was enjoying the Buffalo Bills' return to prominence.

Johansson confided in UND captain Jordan Kawaguchi, who lost his grandfather two years earlier, on a home hockey weekend.

But Johansson still had to work, too.

UND had a noon game against Minnesota Duluth on Saturday, which meant an early wake-up call.

Knowing his grandfather could pass away at any time, he went to work anyway and manned the bench like usual.

The game, between two of the top-five ranked teams in the country, came down to the wire. UND won it when Grant Mismash deflected Jacob Bernard-Docker's point shot with 48.2 seconds left. It was a big win over a longtime rival, giving UND an opportunity to finish the Pod in first place if it won Sunday's finale.

The team filed into the locker room to celebrate.

Berry and Kawaguchi grabbed Johansson out of the hallway, where he works after games, and brought him into the locker room.

Kawaguchi gave a speech in front of the team. He mentioned the work Johansson put in during the Pod. He talked about the difficult time Johansson was going through with his grandfather's health.

Kawaguchi, the team's captain, held up the game-winning goal puck and said, "I want to give this to Dan in honor of his grandpa."

"I was crying," Johansson said. "I know Guch went through the same thing. Him doing that, it's the true definition of family and that's why this place is so great."

The next morning, Johansson's grandfather died. He was 78.

Closing time

UND still had one last game left in the Pod at 8:05 p.m. that night against Miami.

Johansson stood on the bench, his grandpa's game puck in his pocket, as UND beat the RedHawks 6-2 to take over first place in the NCHC standings.

The Pod was complete and it was time to go home.

The players and coaches tossed their suitcases on the bus and departed Omaha at 11:30 p.m. But Johansson, Zgong and Bordson weren't on it. They had to go back to the rink and pack up as much as they could, so it would be ready to be loaded into the semi truck Monday morning. By the time they completed that and got back to the hotel, it was 1:37 a.m.

They took a moment to unwind in the lobby, but soon turned their attention to another night of incomplete sleep and another far-too-early wakeup call in the morning.

They finally left Omaha the next day after loading the semi, made the seven-hour drive back to Grand Forks and met the hauler in the loading dock at Ralph Engelstad Arena. They unloaded everything, unpacked it and returned it to its normal place. It was past midnight by the time they finished, one last day that bled into the next one for the equipment staff.

Johansson finally walked into his apartment at 12:39 a.m.

He texted Zgong and Bordson to thank them for their work over the past three weeks and decided unpacking his own clothes could wait another day.

There was just one thing he needed to grab.

Johansson reached into his duffel bag and pulled out his grandpa's game puck.

He set it on his nightstand and went to bed.



Provided photo

UND equipment manager Dan Johansson (right) with his late grandfather, Tony Ange.

do as an equipment manager