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Canadiens camp a ?surreal? moment for ex-Saint Hillis

By Jake Courtepatte

Just one day before his eighteenth birthday, Cameron Hillis' NHL journey began as a member of the Montreal Canadiens.

Last weekend, the ex-York-Simcoe Express and St. Andrew's College Saints forward stepped into action in the bleu, blanc, et rouge for the first time at the Canadiens' rookie camp.

?It's obviously a very storied organization,? said Hillis. ?To be able to spend this journey with my friends and family has been surreal.?

Drafted in the third round, 66th overall in last June's NHL Entry Draft, Hillis' rise up the Canadiens' depth charts has been meteoric in his few months with the club: a gamble that has paid off since changing his path three years prior.

During the midpoint of the 2015-16 Express season, Hillis had committed to a scholarship at Providence College in the NCAA's top division, a common route these days for elite Canadian athletes.

It was after putting up an astonishing 72 points in just 33 games with the Minor Midget AAA Express that he put his academic goals on hold to follow his dream, going the traditional route in joining the Guelph Storm of the OHL.

A highly-successful following season with the St. Andrew's College Saints in Aurora, leading the varsity program in scoring, landed him a full-time role with the Storm.

Fifty-nine points in sixty games as a seventeen-year old was all Montreal needed to see to put a jersey on the 5'10? centreman, whose first taste of professional hockey came at last weekend's rookie tournament, an annual parade of newcomers between the Canadiens, the Toronto Maple Leafs, and the Ottawa Senators.

While the Habs bitterly fell to their rivals in both matchups, Hillis said he is hoping to impress Canadiens brass as a ?complete player.?

?I've got to work on my personal game myself, and everything else will take care of itself,? said Hillis. ?Heading back to Guelph for a really strong year this year and working on my complete game, getting better in the d-zone and working on my offensive side too, just becoming that complete player that can really help the Habs out in the future.?

Drafted as a somewhat undersized centre in June, Hillis has been putting in work at his alma mater of St. Andrew's College with ex-NHLer Gary Roberts over the summer to bulk up: something he thinks will help him crack the big club's lineup sooner than later.

?I carpool into Aurora every day with a couple of guys, working out with (Steve) Stamkos, (Chris) Tierney, (Mike) Smith?you see the work those guys put in and they're always the first ones in the gym. It's something I noticed right away, and I'm just kind of taking little tidbits from them, anything I can learn from them.?

For the Oshawa native who spent his youth as a member of the Express, being on the other side of ice from the Maple Leafs' blue and white was a rather odd one for Hillis.

?It's who I grew up rooting for, to be honest,? said Hillis, who added that he ?quickly converted to Montreal.?

?My parents have gone over as well.?

For Hillis, and assumedly many other rookie NHLers, it was walking into the dressing room for the first time on Friday that marked the final step in his transition into a Montreal Canadien.

?Just walking into the dressing room and seeing my jersey there, you almost kind of have to pinch yourself. It's finally happening, and you're able to put that jersey on?it comes with a lot of pride, so I think that putting on that jersey on Friday night and playing that first game was pretty special for me.?