

NHL PLAYOFFS

Changing on the fly

Four players in the conference finals have remade their games to ensure career longevity—and team success BY KARA YORIO

In the playoffs, every team has to make adjustments, and, in turn, some players do as well. The 2004 playoffs have spotlighted players who have made adjustments in their games so they could contribute to their teams in the best way possible.

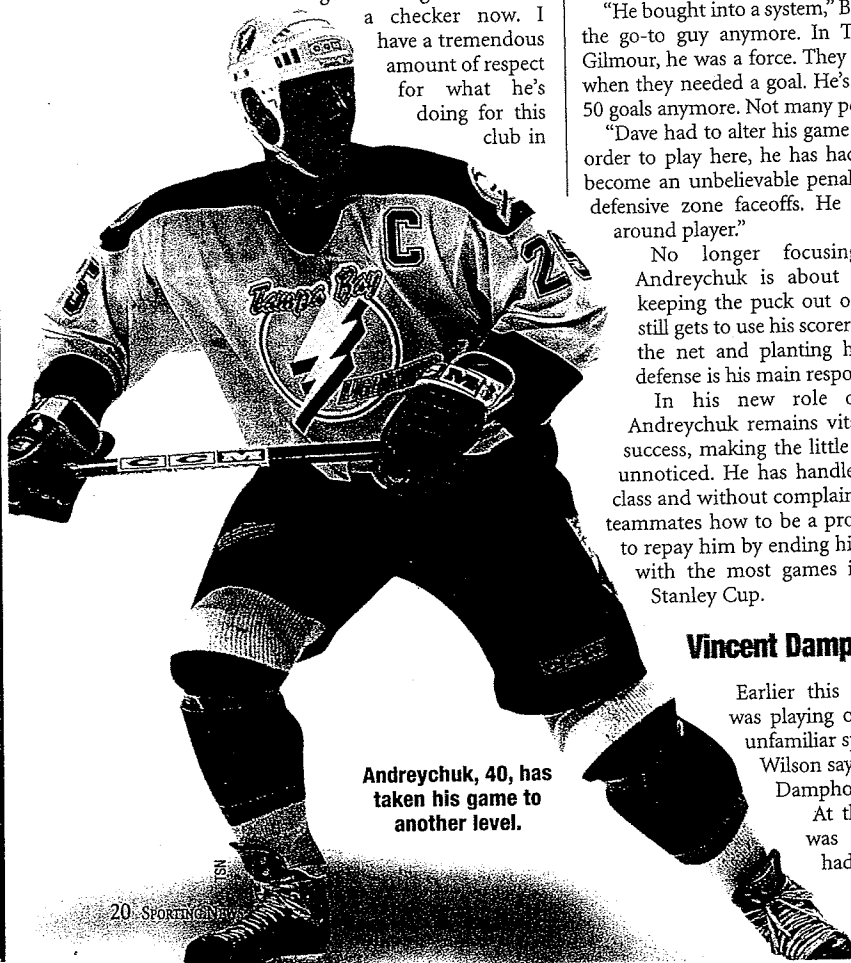
Four of them—Lightning winger/center Dave Andreychuk, Sharks winger Vincent Damphousse, Flyers winger-turned-defenseman Sami Kapanen and Flames center Craig Conroy—had to change their mind-sets as much as their approach on the ice.

"The league is filled with guys like that," says radio analyst and former NHL defenseman Bob Beers. And that's what it takes, Beers says, if aging players want to keep contributing.

Dave Andreychuk, Lightning

Three years ago, the Lightning wanted Andreychuk, but it didn't want the player who had carved a long and illustrious career scoring goals.

"Dave and I talked about what we were looking for that summer before we signed him," Lightning coach John Tortorella says. "This is a Hall of Famer we're talking about—a Hall of Famer because of goal scoring turned into a checker now. I have a tremendous amount of respect for what he's doing for this club in



Andreychuk, 40, has taken his game to another level.

really transforming his game to help this team continue to try to compete."

Says Andreychuk, 40: "I was put in a little different role. I take pride in it, in checking a little bit more than I have in the past. But I still have to be accountable for my goals."

For Andreychuk, the all-time leader in power-play goals and a consistent 20-goal scorer over his career, and the rest of the players who changed their games, the biggest adjustment was mental.

"He bought into a system," Beers says. "(He isn't) the go-to guy anymore. In Toronto with Doug Gilmour, he was a force. They were the go-to line when they needed a goal. He's not going to score 50 goals anymore. Not many people are. ...

"Dave had to alter his game as he gets older. In order to play here, he has had to evolve. He has become an unbelievable penalty killer; he's taking defensive zone faceoffs. He has become an all-around player."

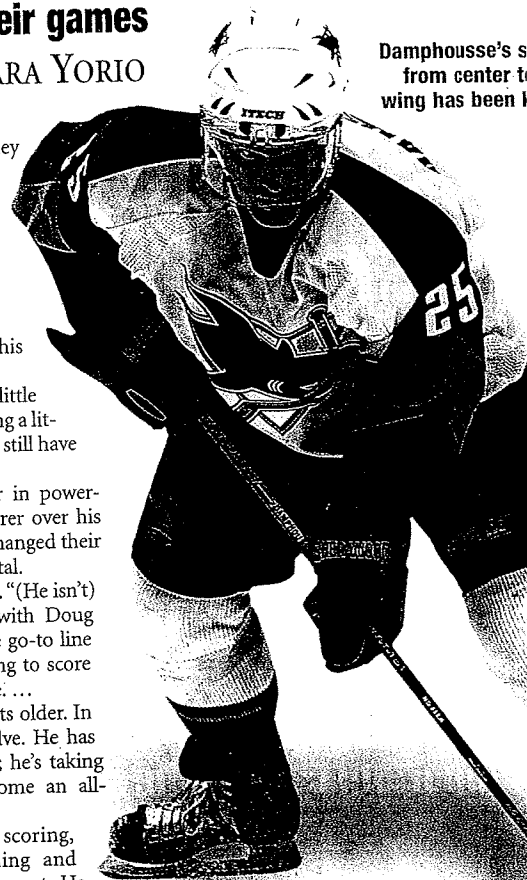
No longer focusing on scoring, Andreychuk is about positioning and keeping the puck out of his own net. He still gets to use his scorer's instincts, driving to the net and planting himself in front, but defense is his main responsibility.

In his new role on the third line, Andreychuk remains vital to the Lightning's success, making the little plays that go largely unnoticed. He has handled his new role with class and without complaint, showing his young teammates how to be a professional. They hope to repay him by ending his tenure as the player with the most games in history without a Stanley Cup.

Vincent Damphousse, Sharks

Earlier this season, Damphousse was playing on the fourth line, an unfamiliar spot. Sharks coach Ron Wilson says he was trying to rest Damphousse for the playoffs.

At the time, Damphousse was not playing well. He had moved from center to



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wing and adjusted to the differences there—more starts and stops, more work along the boards. He had sacrificed ice time. After being second on the team to Teemu Selanne in scoring last season and averaging 19:09 a game, this season he averaged 17:08 in ice time. He was still second in scoring on the team, this time to Patrick Marleau, but Al McCauley had become the second-line center averaging 16:50 in ice time.

For Damphousse, the change wasn't easy.

"That's something that's difficult," Damphousse told the *San Jose Mercury News* in discussing his new role. "I have a lot of pride (play) at a certain level. But I understood that some of our guys were playing so well they deserved more ice time. As a team it's important these guys were recognized for playing well; we got a little less when I wasn't playing well."

When the playoffs arrived, the reduced time, including that stint on the fourth line, to leave him fresh for the games that matter, and, like Andreychuk, he has led by example.

ice. Dampousse has won a Cup (with the Canadiens in 1993), so he not only patrols Marleau's wing, he also tells his teammates what it takes to win.

Sami Kapanen, Flyers

Kapanen is a speedy little winger by trade, but injuries and a lack of confidence in rookie defenseman Joni Pitkanen have put Kapanen on the blue line this postseason. He has handled the transition well, but it doesn't sound like he'd get much sympathy if he complained.

"As long as they're playing, as long as they know what's expected of them and know they're going to be playing, the position they're being asked to play is not that big of a deal," Flyers G.M. Bob Clarke says. "The majority of players will do whatever it takes to win."

Kapanen, 30, is part of that majority, saying that in these playoffs his biggest concern is his team "getting four wins" in each round. He has maintained his low-key demeanor, never seeming flustered when playing up front or on the blue line. In a journal entry on the Flyers' website, he wrote he was nervous about playing defense against the speedy Lightning, but he had to remember to keep it simple.

His is not a gradual transformation, like the other three players', but a change on the fly.

"It's not the same," Beers says. "A guy like Andreychuk has had time. He entered the season thinking a different way. He evolved. Sami Kapanen is just being thrown into the fire at a position he doesn't know very well at all, but he has handled it pretty well."

Flyers coach Ken Hitchcock agrees and has been impressed with Kapanen's understanding of the situation.

"I think what is extraordinary is that it's a mind-set to pay defense," Hitchcock told reporters. "It's that you are going to get hit and you are going to get battled all the time. Sami, for me, has a clear understanding that it's a whole different ballgame as far as decision-making. You have no time; you have no space."

On defense, Kapanen uses his speed to beat forwards to the puck and his passing skills to move it quickly out of the zone. He leads a rush when it's there, but Kapanen can't take a lot of chances while playing defense. His foremost job is to make the smart, safe move. His teammates trust him and didn't seem to doubt he'd handle the transition well.

"It just makes sense that he would be able to go back there and make the adjustment," winger Tony Amonte told the Canadian Press.

Craig Conroy, Flames

Most players evolve from scoring into a more defensive role. For Conroy, it was the opposite. After they acquired him from the Blues, the Flames

Conroy's newfound scoring has been a big part of the Flames' success.



PAUL SAKUMA/AP

allowed him to develop—not strictly his defensive abilities but his offensive game. And they let him work with one of the NHL's most productive players, Jarome Iginla.

"He added more offense when he went to Calgary," former Blues coach Joel Quenneville says. "His line is the top line, and he became a go-to center. He all of a sudden found his niche. We used him more in a defensive role, and we probably could have used him more in an offensive role. . . . But he was so valuable in a checking role and had great success here, especially with a strong line 2 the season we won the Presidents' Trophy.

"... He goes to the net, and he has the good fortune to play with a talented player in Jarome Iginla, and they've worked well together. He's in a position now to either get the scoring chance or use his speed to make a play for Iginla."

The offensive mind-set got a little too strong earlier this season, however. Conroy, 32, was bumped off the top line for trying to do too much, playing east-west a little too much, and, ironically, neglecting his defensive responsibilities. He learned his lesson and adjusted his attack.

Like Andreychuk, who still scores goals, and Dampousse, who can still be a No. 1 center, and Kapanen, who leads a rush from the back like a forward—Conroy has evolved. These players took what they knew and added more to it, adapted, accepted new roles. And their teams are better for it.

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Kapanen's change likely has been the most trying.

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CHANGING ON THE FLY

1. WHAT FOUR PLAYERS IN THE CONFERENCE FINALS HAVE REMADE THEIR GAMES?
2. WHAT CHANGES DID ALL FOUR PLAYERS HAVE TO MAKE IN THE PLAYOFFS TO HELP OUT THEIR TEAMS?
3. DALE ANDREYCHUK IS THE ALL TIME LEADER IN POWER PLAY GOALS. TRUE OR FALSE.
4. WHAT TEAM DID DAMPHOUSSE WIN A STANLEY CUP WITH?
5. WHEN KAPANEN PLAYS DEFENSE, HOW DOES HE BAT FORWARDS T THE PUCK?
6. WHAT TEAM DOES CRAIG CONROY PLAY FOR?
7. HOW WAS CONROY'S ROLE DIFFERENT THEN THE OTHERS?
8. WHAT VERY TALENTED PLAYER DOES CONROY PLAY WITH?
9. WHO COACHES SAMI KAPANENAND THE PHILADELPHIA FLYERS?
10. WHICH OF THESE PLAYERS IS FUTURE HALL OF FAMER?