

Holtby: Working with new goalie coach 'going to be really fun'

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To say Braden Holtby is anxious to turn the page on last season would be one of the biggest understatements of Capitals training camp, which officially begins on Friday at Kettler Capitals Iceplex.

"It was well documented," Holtby said of his struggles under Adam Oates last season, when he went 23-15-4 with a goals-against average (2.85) that ranked 41st in the NHL and a save percentage (.915) that ranked 23rd.

"I think it was frustrating for all of us. The success wasn't there. It was a learning experience for us and something that can make us stronger."

Holtby, who will turn 25 on Tuesday, became a father for the second time in May. "Two's a lot harder than one," he says with a smile. He spent most of his summer back home in Lloydminster, Saskatoon, where his goaltending mentor, John Stevenson, told him all about Caps new goaltending instructor Mitch Korn.

"I'm very familiar with what he brings to the table," Holtby said. "From our first meeting, I realized how experienced and how prepared he is and it's going to be a really fun time to pick his brain and learn as much as I can from him."

Korn, who shares the same birthday as Holtby and will turn 57 on Tuesday, has spent the previous 16 seasons under Barry Trotz in Nashville, where he is credited with the success of Pekka Rinne and Tomas Vokoun, among others. Korn also represents Holtby's third goalie coach (Dave Pryor and Olie Kolzig were the others) in the past three years.

With that in mind, Trotz said he'd like to see Kolzig, who was retained as a goalie coach, work primarily with the Caps' younger goalies, while Korn handles Holtby and backup Justin Peters.

"With Mitch here you don't want too many voices," Trotz said. "Braden's had a lot of voices the last couple years. Olie will work with our young guys and I think with his experience and his personality he'll do a great job of that."

In less than two weeks working with Korn, Holtby already has been subjected to his quirky teaching tools. On Saturday he stopped shots from centering passes that were fed from teammates hidden behind a large screen in the corner of the ice.

Earlier in the week he moved laterally across the ice with a medicine ball -- "It keeps your body together," he said -- and faced a barrage of mini pucks and white pucks. Before long, Holtby anticipates trying to stop pucks with a mesh bag over his goalie mask, something he's done before under Stevenson.

"I'm sure Mitch has come up with something a little more creative," Holtby said. "They are all little things to make it tougher on you in practice so that it makes it easier for you in the game."

It will be interesting to see if Korn reverses the most fundamental change made to Holtby's game last season, when he was asked to play deeper in his crease and appeared more vulnerable to long shots.

Holtby said he's excited by some of the NHL rule changes that will be implemented this season, most notably widening the trapezoid by two feet on each side of the goal posts. Considered one of the league's better puck handlers, Holtby said he believes the change could help protect NHL defensemen.

"I'd rather they get rid of [the trapezoid] completely, but it makes the goalie more useful, to handle the puck, which is good," he said. "Obviously, there are positives and negatives [to the trapezoid] and I think the negative is that there are more loose pucks just sitting on the boards and defensemen are coming back and getting run. I think it's a positive to widen it."

With Michal Neuvirth in Buffalo and Philipp Grubauer in Hershey, Holtby enters this season as the undisputed No. 1 goalie for the Capitals and is expected to get the lion's share of starts ahead of Peters.

"Most teams that are successful go with one goalie more than the other just to gain that consistency and familiarity with the team," Holtby said. "As far as how many games I play, I think it's all about who gives the team the best chance to win the most number of games. Both of us have the mindset we want to be the best tandem we can possibly be."

Trotz said one thing working in Holtby's favor is the respect he has in the Capitals' dressing room.

"One of the great things I've found about Braden is that he's very likable and he's liked by his teammates," Trotz said, "and for a goaltender that means a lot. His job is to stop the puck and if he does that, instead of liking him they'll love him."

If Holtby can take advantage of the opportunity in front of him, he says his contract situation -- he's entering the final year of a two-year, \$3.7 million extension -- will take care of itself.

"I'm not worried about that," he said. "That stuff will look after itself if you look after your game and your job at hand. I'm not even thinking about it."