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By Jim Hodges

Fans warmed to player once he began to get more physical on ice



It was the last day of September, and the Tampa Bay Lightning were in town for an intrasquad scrimmage to prep for the NHL season. Attendees inside Scope were doing their own conditioning when Vladimir Mihalik was introduced.

"Boooo!!!!!"

Plainly, the players needed more work, but Admirals fans were in midseason form as they heaped abuse on the player they have spent two years hating.

Soon after that night, Mihalik was featured in an advertisement in The Virginian-Pilot. A full-page photo of Mihalik included this bit of information on him, "Loves kittens, gardening and smashing faces."

And there was Mihalik, all 6-feet- 7, 240 pounds of him, meting out punishment to Manchester's Scott Parse for bothering Admirals goalie Riku Helenius. Fighting the Monarchs' Drew Bagnall the next night. Hammering Portland's Jeff Cowan for running into Mihalik's defense partner, Matt Lundin, from behind.

Seldom is heard a discouraging word about Mihalik these days.

"I think the fans have adopted him," Admirals coach Darren Rumble said. "Last year, they'd see this big guy out there and want him to be more involved physically. I think he's gained the hearts of a lot of the fans because he's stepped in there for a couple of teammates and really done well in his scraps."

What pleases Rumble and the Lightning brass even more is that Mihalik isn't waiting to make his annual run for on-ice respectability. After two years spent sleepwalking through half of each season after cuts from Tampa Bay, then a half-season of quality hockey, he was told by the Lightning to go straight to Norfolk if form was going to hold.

It's not the sort of message you want to hear in the final year of your three-year contract.

"I gave myself an opportunity over the summer," Mihalik said. "I worked hard in Minnesota for a month, and those coaches made me ready for the season."

Strength and conditioning coach Chuck Lobe conducted something of a boot camp in Minnesota, working him 90 minutes three times a week in the gym and another 1-1/2 hours a day on the ice.

"Then we had boxing, too," Mihalik said.

Fighting for cardio conditioning?

Along with cardio, he said, " you learn to catch a guy with his jersey on. "

It was a far cry from past summers spent in his native Slovakia, working out with friends from his old teams there. From a self-described "chubby guy," Mihalik reduced his body fat to 11 percent.

What has helped as much as the conditioning has been his learning to use his size, overcoming a tendency to play softly

because of a lack of confidence.

"I understand my potential now," Mihalik said. "I'm stronger, and I understand I have to use my strength and size. I didn't use it 100 percent last year and the year before. I didn't understand what I was supposed to be doing. Now I understand."

Those are things that fans can see. What they don't see is Mihalik's new mental approach in which he grades himself after each game, then reports the scores to Radek Sef-

cik, a "mental coach" in Slovakia. A good game might be as high as 85 percent, a bad one as low as 45.

"Before, if I thought it was a good game, OK, it was a good game," Mihalik said. "But a bad game, it just keeps you low."

When he met Sefcik, Mihalik was challenged.

Mihalik said Sefcik told him, "You are training like crazy for four hours to be strong and fast. "

But, Sefcik told him, "How much are you training to be smart?"

The question hit home, and the two struck up an Internet correspondence. Now they talk weekly.

"Many times, (Mihalik) can be too hard on himself," Sefcik said by e-mail from Slovakia. "A lot of players try to beat themselves up after a (game) because they see their performances too negatively."

The impact, Sefcik added, is that "many times, they want to increase their own or their coach's expectations, (and) if they think about it during a game, it can disturb their concentration and drastically decrease their speed, timing and reactions."

Through mental preparation, Mihalik understands that perfection is unattainable. The scores help maintain a need for improvement.

It's all helped.

"It's like he's a different guy," Rumble said. "He's being assertive, calling for pucks. All of that, to me, stems from confidence. If you're in good shape, you can be confident. It's the only way you can do it."

Teammates have noticed, too.

"It seems that he's improving every day," said Lundin, who is just back from a stint with the Lightning after skating with Mihalik for most of the season.

"He's big and makes 'skill' plays, and you don't see guys that size making skill plays. Just handling the puck when you're that big and have that big a stick can be difficult."

Mihalik has seven assists this season, and on the team's recent eight-game, two-week road trip, he was the only Admirals defenseman with a "plus" rating - he was on the ice for more of Admirals' goals than opposition goals.

The team struggled early but is playing better now. Mihalik is one reason, and he also is a beneficiary of the success.

"It wasn't fun when we were losing," he said. "I was making it hard on myself. You keep pushing and pushing and you want to push some more, but that isn't going to work. You need to relax."