



# From No-Name To Big Deal

The son of an Iranian and a Finn, Zibanejad has taken Sweden by storm and rocketed up the draft charts

BY RISTO PAKARINEN

If there's one play that perfectly symbolizes Mika Zibanejad's season, it came in Djurgarden's final regular season home game. Zibanejad, 17, took a long pass against Skelleftea, stopped the puck with his skate, flicked it up the ice on top prospect Adam Larsson's right side, went around the 18-year-old defenseman on the left and beat the goalie with a wrist shot five-hole.

Larsson has been the highest-ranked European prospect this season, but Zibanejad is closing the gap. "The first thing I noticed when I saw him last fall was that he was as strong as an ox," said Goran Stubb, the NHL's director of European scouting.

Zibanejad, the son of an

Iranian father and Finnish mother, is trying to take his ascension in stride. He expected to spend the entire 2010-11 season with Djurgarden's junior team, where he scored 12 goals and 21 points in 27 games. But when he was one of the final cuts from Team Sweden's under-20 team while teammate Patrik Cehlin earned a spot, he got his chance with the elite league team – and ran with it.

Zibanejad knows things can change quickly. "You have to remember what goes up, must come down and it can happen fast," said the 6-foot-1, 191-pounder. "Up here, playing with the Elitserien team, I learn something new almost every day."

Djurgarden coach Hardy Nilsson admitted he had no idea who Zibanejad was

## MASKED MENACE

Mika Zibanejad still must wear a cage in the Elite League, but his talent has been unmasked.

before the season began. But once he saw what he had, he hasn't been shy to throw him on the ice. In that game against Skelleftea, for example, Zibanejad played more than any forward, with responsibilities on both the second power play unit and as a penalty killer.

The rookie teenager scored nine points in his 26 games with Djurgarden and added two more in the team's seven-game first round playoff loss to Lulea. Along with his under-20 numbers and 15 points in 13 games for Sweden's under-18s, he's played a lot of hockey. "Mika is a fantastic player," said Mikael Johansson, Djurgarden's assistant coach. "You can see how his confidence builds with every game. He's very talented and reminds me of other big right-handed shooters that have played with Djurgarden in the past."

That's code for Mats Sundin. And that's high praise. Coach Nilsson calls Zibanejad "Caged Mika" to differentiate him from Mika Hannula, another forward on the team. At 17, Zibanejad still has to wear full facial protection, but the mask is about the only thing that reveals his young age.

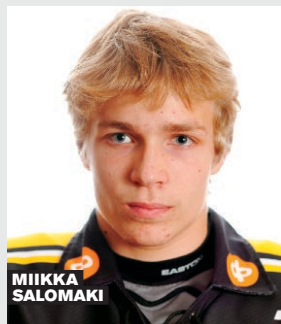
He's strong, he's got great hands and a good hockey sense. "The best part is he's an all-round player who can play all forward positions," Stubb said. "He's very good around the boards, in front of the net and in the corners. He's also responsible in his defensive play. I'd say he's the complete package."

But Zibanejad is humble about his game: "Everything is more structured than in the junior league, so I can't afford to make mistakes here," he said. "The fact that we've had a similar system in (junior) has made the transition a little easier."

## HOT LIST

### On The Rise

Mika Zibanejad's not the only European prospect stalking the draft charts



**1. MIIKKA SALOMAKI, LW**  
Karpas Oulu (Fin.)

*Feisty banger made hay at the WJC, where his role increased as tourney progressed. Good head for the game; plays well without the puck.*

**2. MAX FRIBERG, LW**  
Skovde (Swe.)

*Jumped onto world junior team when Gabriel Landeskog was injured and played well. Will make jump from Div. 1 to SEL's Timra next year.*

**3. MARKUS GRANLUND, C**  
HIFK (Fin.)

*Still a skinny kid, but Mikael's younger brother is dynamite on the power play and got experience with HIFK's top team in a short call-up.*

**4. JOHAN SUNDBLOND, C**  
Frolunda (Swe.)

*Already 6-foot-3, 196 pounds, Sundblond can also play wing and doesn't mind fighting through traffic to make an impact. Great hands.*

**5. MAXIM SHALUNOV, RW**  
Chelyabinsk (Rus.)

*Makes great opening passes and is good with the puck; needs to fill out.*

Read more of Ryan Kennedy's "Hot List" Tuesdays at THN.com

ZIBANEJAD: ANDREAS GRANDIN; SALOMAKI: COURTESY OF KARPAT