

FINNISH JUNIOR HOCKEY – JUNE-JULY 2018 NEWSLETTER



Table of Contents

NHL Draft Review – Pick-By-Pick Analysis.....2

CHL Import Draft Review6

Some 2001's to Watch.....8

U16 Preseason Player Notes 11

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FINNISH JUNIOR HOCKEY – JUNE-JULY 2018 NEWSLETTER

NHL Draft Review – Pick-By-Pick Analysis

Jesper Kotkaniemi – 3rd overall – Montreal Center – Ässät – 6’2 – 181 lbs

The draft’s third overall pick has already signed his entry-level contract. Kotkaniemi is the total package and understands the game extremely well. He can find his teammates with high-level passing and has a hard, accurate wrist shot that can beat goalies cleanly. His skating needs improvement, but I don’t think it will deter him from becoming a top center for the Canadiens. His top-end speed is already pretty good when he gets going. Kotkaniemi will likely stay in the Liiga for the upcoming season.

Rasmus Kupari – 20th overall – Los Angeles Center – Kärpät – 6’1 – 189 lbs

Kupari has great speed, mobility and edge work. The native of Kotka has the potential to be an above-average skater in the NHL, à la Chris Kreider. Kupari handles the puck well at top speed and looks very confident when carrying the puck up the ice. He has a quick, accurate wrist shot. He already proved to be a responsible player defensively at the Liiga level this past season. However, I am concerned by his inability to make the right decisions under pressure, especially in the offensive zone. The Kings are looking to get quicker and Kupari will add a lot of speed to the lineup. In addition, he can play both center and wing which is a valuable asset.

Jesse Ylönen – 35th overall – Montreal Right Wing – Espoo United – 6’0 – 167 lbs

The Canadiens’ second rounder is creative and can stickhandle in a phone booth. A high-end skater who generates speed through smooth crossovers, Ylönen has an extra gear, as well as great agility and edge work. Ylönen possesses a quick wrist shot and can shoot the puck without much set up. He had a good season for Espoo United in Mestis, even though his point production was not eye-popping. He has learned to play a more pro-style game in the last two seasons. In April, he joined Pelicans in the Liiga with a two-year contract.

Justus Annunen – 64th overall – Colorado Goalie – Kärpät – 6’4 – 217 lbs

The Colorado Avalanche took the third goalie of the draft in Justus Annunen, who had a successful season with Kärpät U20 and a terrific U18 World Championship tournament as well. Annunen moves very well, he has quick legs and he moves effectively post-to-post. A mentally strong goalie who stays constantly focused, he really thrived in the U20 playoffs. Going forward, he will need to improve his puck handling skills and his rebound control also needs some refinement. Annunen, who is from Kempele, the same town as Pekka Rinne, has the potential to be a number one goalie in the NHL.

FINNISH JUNIOR HOCKEY – JUNE-JULY 2018 NEWSLETTER

Niklas Nordgren - 74th overall - Chicago

Right Wing - HIFK - 5'9 - 169 lbs

I think the Blackhawks got excellent value with this pick. I have been tracking Nordgren's development for a few seasons and his game has improved each year while playing up against older players. He possesses game breaking offensive skills – he has a great shot and finishing ability, makes plays in traffic and sees the ice extremely well. He finds open ice and is smart in possession. In addition, Nordgren is defensively reliable and works hard in puck pursuit. His skating has definitely improved, especially in terms of speed, but there are several areas he needs to work on (first few strides, explosiveness, mobility). Nordgren led the past U18 World Championship in goals which is no small feat and he has a good chance to be a Top 6 forward on the Finnish World Juniors team.

Sampo Ranta - 78th overall - Colorado

Left Wing - Sioux City - 6'1 - 199 lbs

The Avalanche picked up a big and strong-skating winger with a lot of upside. Ranta is fast and uses long, powerful strides to hit good top speed. He has a hard shot, good stickhandling skills and decent hockey sense. He scored 23 goals for the Sioux City Musketeers last season, tied for second most among U18 players in the USHL. According to *prospect-stats.com*, Ranta recorded 3.64 shots per game which was fifth most in the league last season. He does have room for development and will have time to work on his game in the NCAA at the University of Wisconsin.

Lenni Killinen - 104th overall - Carolina

Right Wing - Blues - 6'1 - 180 lbs

Carolina Hurricanes took the sixth Finnish prospect in the last four years. Killinen was one of the most interesting forwards in the Finnish U20 league last season and put up respectable point totals (13 goals and 28 assists in 38 games). Killinen has a strong offensive skill set. A powerful skater with speed and agility, he has the ability to attack to the net effectively. However, he was quite inconsistent in my viewings last season. Moreover, he will need to get stronger and learn to use his 6'2 frame to his advantage more often. The talent is undeniable, though, and I think Killinen is a good add to Hurricanes' already strong prospect pool.

Miska Kukkonen - 125th overall - Buffalo

Defenseman - Ilves - 6'1 - 198 lbs

Kukkonen played in only 12 games for Ilves U20 due to injury this past season which forced him to fall off the map, at least somewhat. However, he was named the best player at the Pohjola camp in 2015 which featured the top 2000's in Finland. The Sabres picked a skilled, mobile right-shot defenseman with good vision and puck moving abilities. Kukkonen also has good size at 6'1 and 198 pounds. One can only hope that he will have a healthy season with Tappara. Talent-wise, he remains among the top Finnish defensemen in the age group.

FINNISH JUNIOR HOCKEY – JUNE-JULY 2018 NEWSLETTER

Toni Utunen – 130th overall – Vancouver Defenseman – LeKi – 5’10 – 169 lbs

Utunen logged solid minutes for LeKi in Mestis (FIN-2) and captained the gold-winning Finnish team at the U18 World Championship. The Canucks’ fifth rounder has very good hockey sense as he reads the game well in all three zones and makes good decisions with the puck. He does not particularly stand out in other aspects of the game, but he’s got some ability to move the puck up the ice. Much like many young players, he will need to gain more muscle. It’ll be interesting to see if he manages to play regularly on Tappara’s Liiga team next season. He already appeared in 11 games last season but had very limited ice-time.

Lauri Pajuniemi – 132nd overall – NY Rangers Right Wing – TPS – 5’10 – 183 lbs

The Rangers took an interesting player with upside. Pajuniemi had a very good season and was the most notable TPS player in the Liiga quarterfinals. He’s a skilled player who can operate with the puck at a fast pace. He can be equally adept as a playmaker and goal-scorer. He also works hard and shows the willingness to fight for pucks. Pajuniemi seemed to have picked up his intensity from the previous season, making him a more multifaceted player. If he can continue from where he left the playoffs, he could be an important part of TPS’ offense next season.

Mikael Hakkarainen – 139th overall – Chicago Center – Muskegon – 6’0 – 193 lbs

The 20-year-old center put up great numbers in the USHL last season, scoring 15 goals and 31 assists in only 36 games. Hakkarainen has been playing in the North America for the last three seasons and thus I have not had the opportunity to see him play after he went across the pond. But he was a standout for Blues U18, playing a strong two-way game and displaying above-average offensive skills. He will now begin his college career at Providence College and I’d expect him to spend at least three seasons there before turning pro.

Veini Vehviläinen – 173rd overall – Columbus Goalie – Kärpät – 6’1 – 183 lbs

Vehviläinen had already been passed over three times before the Blue Jackets finally took him in the sixth round. The technically strong goalie had a fantastic season for Kärpät in the Liiga, leading the team to the champion, and he was much more consistent than during his time with JYP in the league. Vehviläinen has excellent quickness, including a quick glove, and he has a calm demeanor. He has athletic ability, however, he does an excellent job of being square to the puck to make the save. I really like this pick by Columbus.

FINNISH JUNIOR HOCKEY – JUNE-JULY 2018 NEWSLETTER

Otto Kivenmäki - 191st overall - Detroit Center - Ässät - 5'8 - 154 lbs

The small center is a very good skater with sublime agility. Kivenmäki uses fluid, quick strides to accelerate and can leave defensemen behind with relative ease. He can make tight turns with the puck. His offensive skill set is also strong, he distributes the puck well and he has great vision. Kivenmäki could end up being a nice steal in the seventh round for the Red Wings, but he does have ways to go before reaching the NHL – needs to get bigger and stronger, as well as work on his shot and overall game.

Patrik Siikanen - 195th overall - Edmonton Center - Blues - 6'1 - 198 lbs

The Edmonton Oilers selected the fourth Finn in the last three years in Patrik Siikanen. The sturdy 6'1 forward can play both center and wing, though I have seen him play more the latter position. He has a good wrist shot that is both heavy and quick. He can score goals and he's got good puck skills and some creativity. He'll need to work on his skating as his agility, acceleration and footwork require quite a bit of work. I did notice some improvement in those areas last season, though. Siikanen has the potential to become a strong two-way player, one who can create offensive opportunities with his shot, puck skills and strength.

Eetu Päckilä - 203rd overall - New Jersey Left Wing - Kärpät - 6'0 - 167 lbs

Päckilä is a fast skater, especially in a straight line, and gets up and down the ice well on the wing. The Kärpät U20 prospect is a capable goal-scorer, has pretty good hands and offensive instincts. One of my concerns last season was that he can be invisible for long periods and thus seemed to lack the ability to have a consistent impact. However, the Devils are becoming a quicker team and Päckilä fits the mold perfectly. I don't think he has the potential to be a constant point producer in the NHL, but he could be a solid third liner who can play a fast-paced game.

Santtu Kinnunen - 207th overall - Florida Defenseman - Pelicans - 6'2 - 154 lbs

Pelicans U20 defenseman Santtu Kinnunen was the last Finnish pick in the draft. The Florida Panthers took an offensively skilled defenseman with good on-ice vision and puck handling skills. Kinnunen is smart with the puck and makes heads up passes to start the attack. He has a big frame that he needs to put more muscle on. He gets around the ice well displaying good footwork and agility. He was a standout for Pelicans U18 two seasons ago and made his way to the U20 national team this past season. Kinnunen is a little raw, but there's considerable upside in his game. He could be a really good pro in a few years.

FINNISH JUNIOR HOCKEY – JUNE-JULY 2018 NEWSLETTER

CHL Import Draft Review

The Sudbury Wolves took the first Finnish player with the third overall pick, selecting **Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen**. The Buffalo Sabres prospect had a pretty good season with LeKi in Mestis (FIN-2) and has a lot of attributes that you want to see from a top goalie prospect. Luukkonen is notably calm and very fluid with his movements. He does not get rattled when players are crashing to the net and can hold his ground well. His quickness is good, especially for a 6'4 netminder, and he stays square to the puck when moving laterally. However, he needs to work on covering the upper corners in butterfly. His play reading and puck handling skills are other areas for improvement.

JYP U20 defenseman **Valtteri Kakkonen** was the 11th overall pick as he went to the Kootenay Ice. Kakkonen is a gritty, highly competitive defenseman who does not mind playing physically. His offensive upside isn't particularly high, but he did produce some points in younger juniors. He's quite mobile. The bottom line is that Kakkonen's style of play would fit well for the WHL; however, he probably won't put a lot of points in the league.

OHL's Windsor Spitfires took the second Finnish goalie in **Kari Piironen**. The last two seasons have been very successful for the 6'0 netminder, who won the U16 and U18 championships with HIFK in consecutive years. Piironen is technically very good, he reads the play well and has good rebound control. He is also athletic. His past performances in playoffs have been strong, as he has shown the ability to succeed in pressure situations. It appears Piironen will be joining the Spitfires for the upcoming season and compete for playing time with Vancouver Canucks' top prospect **Michael DiPietro**.

QMJHL's Blainville-Boisbriand Armada selected a stable defenseman in **Jasper Rannisto**. He won't turn 18 until November but has already played 84 games for HIFK U20 over the last two seasons. The former captain of HIFK U16 has pretty good size at 6'0 and isn't afraid to play physically. He has good overall mobility but can be too stagnant in his own end at times. Good shot selection, has a quality slap shot as well as a solid wrister. He can move the puck fairly well and has decent hockey sense. He may not be an offensive force in the QMJHL if he decides to go that route, but there are some good elements in his game which makes him a fairly intriguing prospect.

The Kelowna Rockets picked up **Lassi Thomson**, who is a highly talented right-shot defenseman. Thomson emerged as a strong two-way defenseman for Ilves U20 last season and made his way to the U18 World Championship, where Finland took gold. Thomson plays with high intensity and is extremely competitive. He also has the vision and puck skills to make plays offensively. Has a quick point shot that hits the net more often than not. He moves well showcasing impressive footwork and quick first few strides. He has what it takes to be a high pick in the 2019 NHL Draft. Thomson would be a terrific add to Kelowna's defense.

The WHL's Swift Current Broncos picked up two Finns in forward **Joona Kiviniemi** and defenseman **Roope Pynnönen**. While I did not have the opportunity to see them play last

FINNISH JUNIOR HOCKEY – JUNE-JULY 2018 NEWSLETTER

season, both did impress in the U16 league. Kiviniemi can really shoot the puck and has a strong combination of size and skill. As a late 2001 with a December birthday, he's basically a year younger than some of the other players selected in the Import Draft. Pynnönen is a talented blueliner who can move the puck up the ice, has good vision and head for the game. But he only appeared in 16 games with HPK U20 last season. The Broncos have a decision to make on their import players as defenseman **Artyom Minulin** could return to the team as an overager.

Joonas Sillanpää is an interesting pick by the Kamloops Blazers in the second round. The massive 6'5 defenseman developed quite significantly last season and was called up to HIFK U20 from the U18's. Sillanpää is very assertive in the defensive end and has toughness to his game. He isn't flashy with the puck, but he has improved in this area quite a bit and has become a more reliable player overall.

FINNISH JUNIOR HOCKEY – JUNE-JULY 2018 NEWSLETTER

Some 2001's to Watch

Here are ten 2001's to watch for the upcoming season, in no particular order. There are plenty of more players who could have been featured, but here are just a few of them.

RW Kaapo Kakko – TPS

My number one ranked Finnish prospect for the 2019 draft, Kakko has terrific puck skills, speed and hockey IQ. His ability to create offense with limited time and space makes him extremely dangerous and tough to contain in the offensive zone. He can be creative with the puck. Easily an above-average skater with very good acceleration. Also has a quick wrist shot and can score from a distance. Thanks to his quick stick, he can be effective and disruptive defensively. The 6'2 winger is physically strong and willing to grind for pucks along the boards. Kakko really shined at the U18 World Championship in Russia after missing several key tournaments last season.



D Ville Heinola – Lukko

Heinola has the potential to be a highly sought NHL prospect and will compete for a spot in the Liiga this season after joining Lukko from Ässät U20. Heinola would be best described as a mobile, smart and very reliable defenseman who can be counted on in any game situation. The blueliner keeps tight gaps against oncoming forwards and can break off rushes with a quick stick. Composed in possession, he has great poise and makes the right decisions almost all the time. His hockey sense is impressive.

FINNISH JUNIOR HOCKEY – JUNE-JULY 2018 NEWSLETTER

C Juuso Pärssinen – TPS

Pärssinen finished the past season on a high note which included a strong showing at the U17 Four Nations in February. His best performance was against Sweden as he scored a first-period hat trick, leading Finland to a 5-2 win. The best thing about Pärssinen's game is his versatility, he has been an offensive player in TPS juniors, while in the national team he has been a reliable fourth line center for the most part. What's more, Pärssinen is surprisingly skilled for a 6'2 forward, possessing good puck control and smooth hands. He also moves quite well and has solid skating mechanics to build on. The upside is pretty high with this prospect and I'm eager to see how he manages in his draft year.

C Jonas Båsk – KJT-Haukat

A real wild card due to the fact that he did not face the toughest competition last season at the second highest U18 level. Båsk is a fluid skater with good acceleration. His speed makes him a factor on both sides of the puck. He makes smart, subtle plays in the offensive zone. The center has good grasp of his defensive assignments and is willing to help and support defensemen. Moreover, Båsk uses his stick really well to disrupt and dispossess opponents. He will stay at KJT and play for the U20 team.

C Juuso Fagerström – Jokerit

Fagerström was the top player on the Kiekko-Vantaa U18 team last season and has joined Jokerit U18 for the 2018-19 season. Here's my take on his game from his player profile on the site. *"Fagerström is a strong-skating, smart center who consistently generated offense in our viewings of K-Vantaa U18. He has quick first few strides, allowing to catch opponents and apply pressure on defensemen. He gains speed through smooth crossovers. His top speed, agility and footwork all are very good. His reads are solid without the puck, he gets his stick on the puck and he gets in position to take away passing lanes. He has quick hands and he sees the whole ice, allowing to make quick decisions with the puck."*

RW Leevi Teissala – TPS

One of the most skilled forwards in the age group, Teissala is very dangerous in possession and can set up his teammates for scoring chances with pinpoint passing. He has very quick hands and soft touch on the puck. An agile skater with good lateral movement and transition skating, Teissala uses short strides for quick acceleration bursts. He can be occasionally prone to neutral zone turnovers and he also has some work to do on his defensive zone coverage. A potential riser in the 2018-19 season.

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FINNISH JUNIOR HOCKEY – JUNE-JULY 2018 NEWSLETTER

LW Marcus Kallionkieli - Sioux City, USHL

Much like Teissala, Kallionkieli has plenty of skill. I believe he is just starting to scratch the surface of his potential. A creative, somewhat lanky winger with impressive technical skills and a wrist shot featuring a quick, tricky release. A fast and smooth skater, Kallionkieli controls the puck well at full speed. An offensive-minded player, yet he was utilized on the penalty kill with HIFK U18 last season and improved his play away from the puck. Should make an immediate impact in the USHL.

G Roope Taponen - HIFK

I have considered Taponen the top goalie in the age group since I first saw him play for Jokerit U16 and for the U16 national team during the same season. Taponen is not the biggest of netminders, but he's got very good quickness and flexibility. He also possesses good reactions and can make that athletic save when required. He stops pucks properly behind the net and his puck handling skills are fairly solid. He often performs well in pressure situations. As an example, Taponen made 35 saves against USA at the U17 Five Nations in February, a game which Finland would have lost by a larger margin if he had not played so well.

D Mico Luoto - Jokerit

Luoto is a talented, offensive-minded defenseman with intriguing potential. He shows flashes of brilliance, most often by making long, accurate passes or showing great moves with the puck at the offensive blueline. He has quick hands and he can be creative offensively. Luoto is also a smooth skater with some nice agility. He'll need to become more reliable defensively and work on his decision making and overall game, though. Still, he definitely belongs to my list of players to watch next season.

C Henri Nikkanen - JYP

The tall, skilled centerman will return to Jukurit after spending the last three seasons with JYP juniors. Nikkanen has deft puck handling skills and can execute highly skilled plays. In my viewings of JYP U20, he was able to play a reliable defensive game thanks to having strong awareness and a quick stick. He has good offensive vision, but could at times show more poise and make better decisions with the puck in the final third. Has good skating mechanics and agility, but could work on his top-end speed and coordination. Nikkanen could definitely be a first round pick next year if he can put all the pieces of his game together. Whether he's able to play regularly in the Liiga is going to be a key for his draft stock.

FINNISH JUNIOR HOCKEY – JUNE-JULY 2018 NEWSLETTER

U16 Preseason Player Notes:

Jokerit @ Blues 1-2 (May 16)

Blues @ Jokerit 3-7 (May 25)



F Klaus Kaspar Jögi – Blues

Was one of the most impactful players in the first game. The winger is a quick and agile skater with the separation speed to pull away from defensemen. Impressive lateral quickness enables to evade opponents. Confident offensively, can stickhandle in traffic, soft touch on the puck. Not very physical at the moment, can be fairly easily separated off the puck and knocked off his balance. There is still lots to like about Jögi's crafty offensive skills.

D Kasper Maaranen – Blues

The physical right-handed defenseman scored one goal in the second game. Good gap control in the neutral zone, stands up opponents and does not hesitate to play the body. Makes aggressive pinching decisions and more often than not can extend possession time in the offensive zone. Point shot is a real weapon due to its velocity and accuracy. Has some puck skills and rather good mobility.

FINNISH JUNIOR HOCKEY – JUNE-JULY 2018 NEWSLETTER

D Onni Leppänen - Jokerit

A really smart and skilled blueliner. Only appeared in one game, but got on the scoresheet after scoring with a nice far-side wrister. Calm with the puck, high panic threshold, can escape from pressure. Moves the puck well, passes are constantly tape-to-tape. Uses a quick stick to poke pucks away. Superb lateral agility and backwards skating make him tough to get around. Leppänen is diminutive, yet has the ability to drive the play from the backend.

F Joona Kumpula - Jokerit

The big center is an intriguing player. He protects the puck nicely, using his size and long reach well. Has a hard shot, gets pucks on net and battles for space around the cage. Not a particularly dynamic player with dazzling skills or speed but has the tools necessary to become a strong all-around center. Kumpula's development is definitely worth tracking.