

What's Gotten Into Pavelski?

The Sharks' Center, An Unlikely Playoff Scoring Machine, Isn't a Particularly Good Skater

By [REED ALBERGOTTI](#)

The hockey headlines this time of year are supposed to be dominated by the sport's biggest names—blazing fast superstars like Sidney Crosby or Alex Ovechkin, or somebody who has a nickname that includes the word "rocket."

But the guy everyone is talking about during this NHL postseason is an obscure center who insists he's still learning how to skate. "In a flat-out race from one end of the ice to another, I'm not going to win too many of those," says Joe Pavelski, the center for the San Jose Sharks. As a skater, he says, "I'm not where I need to be yet."

From seemingly nowhere, Mr. Pavelski has scored nine goals in just 11 playoff games, second only behind Michael Cammalleri of the Montreal Canadiens. Never mind that he has never scored more than 25 goals in an entire NHL season (his total in each of the past two years). Mr. Pavelski has helped his team reach the conference finals for only the second time in franchise history.

Joe Pavelski looks on after the Sharks beat the Colorado Avalanche last month in their first-round series.

Even Mr. Pavelski's agent, Dan Plante, is shocked. "Everybody always said he wouldn't go anywhere because he can't skate," said Mr. Plante. "To me, it's just humorous."

For a hockey player, Mr. Pavelski, 25 years old, has many things stacked against him. He's not big—he's listed at 5-foot-11 and 190 pounds. He grew up in Plover, Wis., a town of 12,000 that had never produced an NHL player. He wasn't a particularly sought-after talent, drafted in the seventh round in 2003.

More than that, he wasn't one of the many hockey players who seem to have been born on skates. While he was known to be out playing sports at 5 a.m. as a kid, it was often on a golf course. When other Wisconsin kids were going to summer hockey camps to hone their skating skills, Mr. Pavelski stayed home with his parents, helping out with their painting business, and more or less lived the life of a normal kid.

"I've never really been to a hockey school," he says.

Instead, he says he kept a five-gallon bucket in his backyard filled with hockey pucks. On dry land, he would shoot 100 of them a day at an old net, perfecting his sharp-shooter accuracy. When hockey season started, the other kids could skate a little better, but Mr. Pavelski would score more than any of them and win awards.

What Mr. Pavelski does have is an uncanny level of hand-eye coordination. That showed in little-league baseball, where he could pick any ground ball cleanly. It showed in golf, which he could play at age 8.

The only reason he decided not to play wide receiver on his high-school football team is that it would have interfered with hunting and trapping season. "He actually had a normal childhood," said his mom, Sandy.

It was Mr. Pavelski's coordination and puck handling that carried his team to a high-school state championship as a junior. His coach, Jack Stoskopf, remembers Mr. Pavelski showing up to the ice early for practice to practice his puck-control skills and fancy fakes that would put NHL players to shame. "I remember some of the amazing moves he made with the puck," said Mr. Stoskopf. "And he was a laser accurate shooter."

No play was more amazing than one against Mosinee High School some time during his junior year. Mr. Pavelski skated behind the net with the puck and dodged a defender. Then, he quickly lifted the puck onto the blade of his stick and carried it around the net, depositing it into the net for a goal.

Professional hockey was looking like a more distinct possibility for Mr. Pavelski, so he left his high-school team after his junior year to play for the semiprofessional Waterloo Blackhawks for two seasons. His 121 points on the Blackhawks led to a spot on the University of Wisconsin hockey team. During his second year with the Badgers, he helped win the 2006 NCAA Division I Championship. The following season, he left Wisconsin for the Sharks, which had held his rights since drafting him with the 205th pick of 2003.

After four seasons as a role player for San Jose—he always had more assists than goals—Mr. Pavelski began working in the 2009 off-season with a former figure skater in San Jose named **Cathy Andrade**, known for her work with youth hockey players in Silicon Valley.

During the frantic, frenetic game of hockey, players tend to lift their skates off the ice too often and too early, which can slow them down. Ms. Andrade's mission was to get Mr. Pavelski to keep his skates on the ice longer, which involved getting him to pull his skate closer in to his body after each thrust and keep the blade on the ice longer as he pushed out. "You can't fix it at full speed in the middle of a hockey game. You have to slow things down and break it down," says Ms. Andrade. One side-effect of his improved stride is he doesn't tire as quickly. He's also a step faster. "He's such an instinctual player," says Ms. Andrade. "Now his physical totally matches his mental."

Mr. Pavelski says his skating ability is a work in progress. "I still don't think I'm a fast player," he says.

In January, when Team USA general manager Brian Burke picked the roster for the team that would go to the Vancouver Olympics, Mr. Pavelski was picked, in a surprise. "Some of the staff got ripped for even having him on the team," said Mr. Plante, his agent.

That criticism quickly went away when the team advanced to the gold-medal game against Canada. The U.S. trailed by a goal with less than a minute left, and Mr. Pavelski, one of the six on the ice to try to tie the game, won a face-off and knocked down a Canadian attempt to clear the puck out of the zone. Mr. Pavelski then completed a pass that led to the tying goal with 24 seconds left. (The U.S. lost the game in overtime.)

The pressure cooker of the Olympics seems to have done great things for his playoff performances. He scored five goals in six games in the Sharks' first series against the Colorado

Avalanche. In the first two games against the Detroit Red Wings, he put in four goals and had two assists. Next up for the Sharks is the Chicago Blackhawks in the conference finals.

Mr. Pavelski's finally hitting his NHL groove has, more than anything, improved his nickname. He used to be called "Little Joe," a comparison to his star teammate Joe Thornton, who is five inches taller and known as "Jumbo Joe." Because Mr. Pavelski has been lighting it up in the playoffs, his teammates have begun calling him "The Big Pavelski," a reference to the cult classic film "The Big Lebowski."

Mike Ricci, a former NHL star and current development coach for the Sharks, says that compared with the rest of the NHL, Mr. Pavelski's stick handling and shot accuracy is on an "elite" level. He's even more impressed with his shooting ability when they go duck hunting.

One day, Mr. Ricci was doing all the duck calling, and they were having a great day. "He kind of looked at me and said 'don't blow the whistle anymore. I want to take a long shot.' " Mr. Pavelski waited until he saw a duck flying away, nearly out of range. "He pegged it," says Mr. Ricci. "He's an elite shooter with a gun, too," he says.

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