

# Hawks keeping their eyes on goaltending situation

BY LEN ZIEHM

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The Blackhawks cut eight players Friday, but goaltenders Michael Leighton and Craig Anderson are still fighting it out for the backup goaltender's job.

They combined for a shutout against the Dallas Stars on Thursday night and will split time in the nets again tonight when the Hawks face the St. Louis Blues in their first televised preseason game (7:30, Fox Sports Net).

The cuts on Friday reduced the roster to 37 players. About 12 more will go on Monday, after the Hawks face the Buffalo Sabres on Sunday in the last preseason game at the United Center.

Leighton and Anderson will probably continue their battle into next week before the final cut to 23 for the Oct. 8 regular-season opener. Their competition is that close.

In the 2-0 blanking of the Stars, Leighton faced only seven shots in the first two periods. Anderson turned back nine in a tense third.

"Craig Anderson was tested. Michael Leighton wasn't," general manager Mike Smith said. "I'm sure both will be tested next week."

One will start the season in Norfolk, but that doesn't mean he'll stay there long.

"It'd be nice if we could pick one guy and trade the other for

two first-round [draft] picks," Smith said, "but I don't think it'll happen that way. We could switch them back and forth every 20 games [in the regular season]."

Anderson and Leighton have one edge on all the netminders in the Hawks' organization, even starter Jocelyn Thibault. They're the only ones who have worked with the Vizual Edge Performance Trainer. It's a program designed by Barry Seiller, a Vernon Hills ophthalmologist. The Hawks are the only NHL team using it, though it has been tried successfully in Major League Baseball (by the Texas Rangers and Cleveland Indians), Northwestern University's football and baseball teams and the U.S. bobsled and luge teams that participated in the last Olympics.

Smith brought in vision testing as part of the Hawks' preseason physicals three years ago. Last year the testing was also conducted at Norfolk, and the related vision training was implemented there.

"Leights and I were the primary ones who used it," Anderson said. "We worked on some focusing, how your eyes react to different things and depth perception."

The training involves work on a computer, the goal being to improve hand-eye coordination and how quickly a player can see objects in motion. Ideally, players do 20-minute vision exercises

twice a week for four to 12 weeks. Anderson, who Seiller said was the Norfolk player most into the program, said he worked on it about once a month. His results have improved at each preseason testing.

"The test is just what you'd do during training," Anderson said. "You get used to it. Your eyes start adjusting to what the program offers. I can't say I did it a lot, but obviously there's a learning curve. Statistics don't lie. You might get something out of it, even if you don't realize it."

Stu Bender, the Norfolk trainer, said several other players went through vision training.

"It's still new to me," Bender said. "I think it will help them. It won't hurt them."

None of Friday's cuts was unexpected. The toughest was center Mikhail Yakubov, a first-round draft pick in 2000. He'll return to Norfolk.

"We sent him to get acclimated and get going," Smith said. "He had a much better camp [than last year]. He was better prepared and better conditioned. He just needs to go down and play. Hopefully he can be our first call-up."

Also sent to Norfolk were defensemen Michal Barinka and Vladimir Gusev and forwards Rob Millar, Yorick Treille, Matt Keith and Matt Ellison. Defenseman Alexander Barkunov will play in Russia.